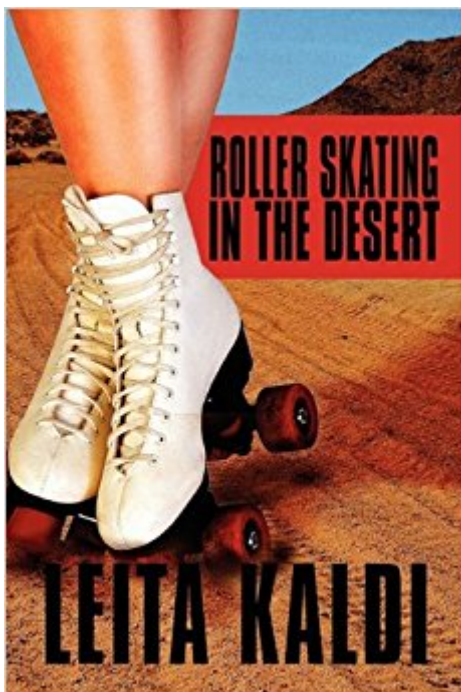


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Roller Skating In The Desert



Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Readers will find themselves on roller skates, careening through amazing true stories from Leita Kaldi's three years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal. In this honest, provocative memoir, Kaldi hones in on the cultural differences that pose obstacles for North Americans who try to adjust to life in a nation where poverty is ubiquitous. Although the author writes of the people of Senegal and the cultural norms there, much of life that may be attributable to poverty is cross-cultural. Mothers die in childbirth; infants die of malnutrition-related diseases; lives are lost because clinics are inaccessible; clean water, now considered a human right, is a luxury. So this is not just a book about Senegal, it's a book about the human spirit that survives and even prevails under crushing conditions. Although Kaldi spends time on such hardships, she focuses on the indomitable spirit of the Senegalese--their courage in the face of want, their humor, generosity, and resilience. Having left a modern, Miami Beach apartment for a hut in west Africa, Leita Kaldi, beset by self-doubt in those early months of Peace Corps life, becomes a respected member of her community, despite her whiteness and her attention-grabbing white hair (plucked from her head for good luck charms). At 55, she leaves a comfortable life and the sons she adores for an unknown world. Ms Kaldi's role was that of facilitating small business development among the folk in the rural area where she lived. She assisted Senegalese women in the marketing of their unique baskets, for example. On one of her initiatives, she visited women who were gathering salt in the most arduous of methods: "My heart constricted the first time I saw women by no means young laboring at the bottom of deep pits, digging with heavy hoes to fill straw baskets with sea mud full of salt. The abrasive salt left their feet

and hands raw. Their backs were stiff and aching from shovelling, bent over, for hours at a time, and from lugging baskets to the top of a slippery incline, where they would arrange them on the sand and leave the dark goo to crystallize in the sun. They would earn a few cents for a basket of salt. I got down into the pits with them and, after a few minutes of shoveling the heavy mud into baskets, my feet burned and itched, my back ached. When I asked what they needed most, they asked for rubber boots, even though the salt would quickly eat through the rubber. Boots seemed to me a futile solution and, as I contemplated more effective alternatives, days passed, then weeks and, in the torrent of other needs and projects, I forgot about the women in the salt mines. I would regret not buying those boots."Leita Kaldi is the opposite of an "ugly American" because she realizes when she uses her own efficient, practical reasoning to judge the women with whom she works; although proud, she knows when she's misjudged. She uses self-deprecating humor throughout the book, and, in so doing, lightens the load of cultural shock for the reader. As a former Peace Corps volunteer who served in Peru, I found Leita Kaldi's book to be unabashedly honest, generous, wise, funny, and a great read.

Leita Kaldi's memoir takes the form of stand-alone short stories, which she weaves into a compelling whole. I served in the Peace Corps in Senegal myself, so I can say from experience that her descriptions of the people, places, and events are spot on. I often found myself getting lost in the intimate details of people's lives, the small everyday actions that brought me right into the story and made me feel as if I were living it again. Some of these stories are bittersweet, others tragic, and many heartwarming. Several characters are so compelling, I remembered them long after their stories were over, and went back to read them again later. Ms. Kaldi writes with true affection for Senegalese people and culture, making this book an insightful pleasure to read. I recommend it to anyone who enjoys travel through the pages of a well-written and detailed memoir - I certainly enjoyed it.

I have so enjoyed reading about a woman who would take such a great adventure when most are searching for security. I loved her acceptance of others and her learning of another culture and accepting although not always likening their differences. I can see my intolerances and don't like what I see but now I know where I need to change. An eye opening book!

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