Four years ago, then 38-year-old Dean Jacobs embarked on his dream to experience the world on a 22-month, low-budget journey through 28 countries. This month his globetrotting photos will be on display at the Unitarian Church.

Dean Jacobs was living the American Dream: boy from Fremont, works hard, earns biology degree, moves to the west coast, makes good friends, attains a successful career at Pfizer Pharmaceuticals with sky's-the-limit potential, and has money in the bank. But four years ago at age 38, Jacobs stopped away from the conventional life he was leading to experience the world on a 22-month, low-budget journey through 28 countries.

It was not a spontaneous decision to give up one lifestyle for another and write a book about it. Instead, it began as a process to reduce life's complexities juxtaposed with a need for self-understanding and desire to comprehend the world on an everyday level. His self-published book, Wondrous Journey: The World is Waiting for You, was completed at the urging of friends and family.

This month, 50 of his photos — they best capture the essence of his journey — will publicly hang in the Unitarian Art Gallery at the Unitarian Church at 6300 A Street. On June 26, Jacobs will discuss his journey at the 10 a.m. church service. The public is welcome to attend.

Simplifying Life

"During my last years at Pfizer, I was simplifying," he explains, "How many phones or TVs or cars or whatever did I really need?"

He describes feeling a hunger.

"You know when you're hungry but not even your favorite food sounds good? Don't get me wrong; I had a good life and everything that goes with it that should have made me happy. This would've been easier to understand if things had not been so good. But I was still hungry. I knew there was more to life than what was going on. The only thing that seemed right was to take this trip. That feeling was so strong that I couldn't not go."

Top left: Safari sunrise in the trees in Serengeti, Tanzania. Left: Dean Jacobs sporting typical travel gear. Above: Jacobs on the bus with Ethiopian cement workers.
The tricky part was discovering the courage to do something about it. “Are you crazy?” was a common reaction from family and friends when Jacobs announced his life-altering plans. “My folks had given up on me a long time ago,” he says with a chuckle. “I’ve been described as a free spirit, going through life to the beat of my own drummer... I always took those as compliments. People in my inner circle struggled with my decision. It’s interesting, though, the farther I went out [in my circle], the more supportive people were.”

Jacobs still remembers the inner panic he felt departing the US in the spring of 2001. “Believe me, I wondered more than once what I’d gotten myself into.”

CONTINUE OR GO HOME?

He recalls being in Australia on 9/11 and his inner turmoil of whether to return home or continue the journey. His next stop was Indonesia. Rumors were flying about sweeping Westerners from that predominantly Islamic nation. Jacobs refused to let fear dictate what he would or would not do on his journey. More than ever, he felt the need to understand the world. He went to Indonesia.

Dean’s journey confirmed what he always thought was true — most of the world is just like us — trying to get from point A to B.

“Those didn’t mean I didn’t use common sense and exercise caution,” he says. “It was an amazing time to be there because 1.3 million people cancelled their holidays. Sometimes I’d be the only person in the hostel. I’d walk down the streets and people would come up to me and say ‘aren’t you afraid of the war?” They’d say, “no, it was always happening in the next village’ and when I got to the next village, it was always happening in the next village... All was driven by word-of-mouth and news reports.” To Jacobs’ knowledge, nothing happened to Westerners while he was in the country.

COMING HOME

The wedding of friends in Philadelphia brought Jacobs back to American soil and then home to Fremont. “While I was in Egypt, I heard from friends who wanted me to participate in their wedding and had been putting it off so I could be there. They’d finally decided to go ahead whether I was there or not — no hard feelings. I wanted to honor our friendship, so I made the decision to come home six months down the road.”

He arrived in the US on April 1, 2003. The wedding was a few days later in Philadelphia.

On April 6, he returned to Nebraska. “Three weeks later, my dad died. He got sick one day and was gone the next. I thought I was coming home for a wedding, but a bigger force was making sure I had a chance to spend three weeks with my dad that I wouldn’t otherwise have had. That’s just one example of many throughout my entire journey where I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be.”

Time and time again, Jacobs said he got these little messages. “This is where you’re supposed to be, or what you’re supposed to be doing,” he said. “Even if I was sick or struggling, I knew each day was a lesson designed as an opportunity to lean and grow. Even today — and I’m not always successful — I try to live my life that way.”

Jacobs regularly speaks at schools and other venues about his personal experiences. The reaction is almost universally very positive. “People come in with a notion that this is just some guy who’s going to show travel slides. When they leave, they leave inspired, reflective, jazzed. I just share myself, and what this experience was for me... these were the highs and lows, the shocks and triumphs... from walking through a base camp at Mt. Everest, learning to scuba dive even though I don’t swim, to stumbling upon the killing fields in Cambodia.”

A SIMPLE LIFE

Today, his life in Fremont is simple, but busy. Jacobs likes being the full-time photographer for the Fremont Tribune. He drives a $500 pickup truck — he’s always wanted a pickup. Soon, he’ll take his first bike ride across Nebraska (BRAN).

ROSE OF PARIS

Jacobs, who has never been married, met Rose, 33, at a hostel in Egypt. She’s French and a photographer — or better known as a starving artist. They had instant chemistry. Despite Jacobs’ skepticism about soul mates, it turns out Rose is his. He adores her. You can see it in his face, hear it in his voice. Distance hampers the couple’s relationship but the paperwork for her visa is in progress and she may be in Fremont by summer’s end.

Rose has an interesting story, he says. “At age 14 she went into an orphanage because she had no loving relatives. I have a saying, ‘when people grow up in difficult situations, they either get better or bitter.’ She chose to get better.”

They tested their relationship. For five months last year, they traveled together through Central and South America. If there’s ever a test, living and traveling with someone under stressful conditions is it. Now, they’re engaged.

SHARING HIS JOURNEY

Once Jacobs decided to put together a book — a compilation of his travel journals and photos — he turned to award-winning nature photographer Michael Fordberg for professional photographic advice on the difficult task of choosing the right photos for his book.

“When Dean came into the gallery and introduced himself, he made an immediate impression,” Fordberg said. “He was someone with a good heart and a kind soul that had been on this amazing journey and was busting at the seams to share it with the rest of the world. And not for fame or fortune sake, but because he had something to say that he thought could help humanity.”

What Jacobs did was much bigger than taking a trip around the world. It was about fulfilling dreams, and that certain joy that only the person who is willing can experience. Jacobs’ nine-month journey confirmed what he always thought was true — most of the world is just like us — doing the best they can while trying to get from point A to B.

The majority of the world has this huge degree of dignity and respect and an amazing graciousness to it. It gives me great hope.”

For more information about Dean Jacobs and his book, log on to www.travellife.org.