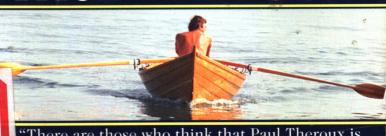
By the author of RIDING THE IRON ROOSTER



TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

THE SELECTED TRAVELS OF

PAUL THEROUX



"There are those who think that Paul Theroux is the finest travel writer working in English. This collection can only enhance that reputation." —The New York Times Book Review

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The Selected Travels of

Paul Theroux

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To Anne Theroux, who made it possible for me to go on these journeys.

"My father was full of Sayings," the Hawaiian said. "He told me once, 'Kaniela, remember this. No matter where you go, that's where you are.'"

Introduction

HAD BEEN TRAVELING FOR MORE THAN TEN YEARS—IN Europe, Asia, and Africa—and it had not occurred to me to write a travel book. I had always somewhat disliked travel books: they seemed self-indulgent, unfunny, and rather selective. I had the idea that the travel writer left a great deal out of his or her book and put all the wrong things in. I hated sight-seeing, and yet that was what constituted much of the travel writer's material: the pyramids, the Taj Mahal, the Vatican, the paintings here, the mosaics there. In an age of mass tourism, everyone set off to see the same things, and that was what travel writing seemed to be about. I am speaking of the 1960s and early 1970s.

The travel book was a bore. A bore wrote it and a bore read it—I could just imagine the sort of finger-wetting spud in carpet slippers who used his library card as bookmark, and called himself an armchair traveler. As for the writer, it annoyed me that a traveler would suppress his or her moments of desperation or fear or lust. Or the time he or she screamed at a taxi driver, or was picked up by a plausible local, or slept until noon. And what did they eat, what books did they read to kill time, and what were the toilets like? I had done enough traveling to know that half of travel was delay or nuisance—buses breaking down and hotel clerks being rude and market traders being rapacious. The truth of travel was unexpected and off-key, and few people ever wrote about it.

Now and then one would find this reality in a book— Evelyn Waugh being mistaken for his brother Alec in *Labels*, or the good intentions and bad temper in parts of Naipaul's An Area of Darkness, a superbly structured book, deeply personal and imaginative and informative, but wayward, too. I saw it in the humor and the dialogue in Trollope's The West Indies and the Spanish Main.

An unlikely source, Nabokov's Laughter in the Dark, vividly illustrates this sort of travel writing. One of the characters says, "A writer for instance talks about India which I have seen, and gushes about dancing girls, tiger hunts, fakirs, betel nuts, serpents: the Glamour of the Mysterious East. But what does it amount to? Nothing. Instead of visualizing India I merely get a bad toothache from all these Eastern delights. Now, there's the other way, as for instance, the fellow who writes: 'Before turning in, I put out my wet boots to dry and in the morning I found that a thick blue forest had grown on them ("Fungi, Madam," he explained) . . .' and at once India becomes alive for me. The rest is shop."

When something human is recorded, good travel writing

happens.

The trip—the itinerary—was another essential; and so many travel books I read had grown out of a traveler's chasing around a city or a little country—Discovering Portugal, that kind of thing. It was not travel at all, but rather a form of extended residence that I knew well from having myself lived in Malawi and Uganda and Singapore and England. I had come to rest in those places, I was working, I had a local driver's license, I went shopping every Saturday. It had never occurred to me to write a travel book about any of it. Travel had to do with movement and truth, with trying everything, offering yourself to experience and then reporting it. And I felt that television had put the sight-seers out of business.

Choosing the right itinerary—the best route, the correct mode of travel—was the surest way, I felt, of gaining experience. It had to be total immersion, a long deliberate trip through the hinterland rather than flying from one big city to another, which didn't seem to me to be travel at all. The travel books I liked were oddities—not simply Trollope and Naipaul but Henry Miller's The Air-Conditioned Nightmare (America, coast to coast, by car), or Mark Twain's Follow-

ing the Equator (a lecture tour around the world). I wanted my book to be a series of long train journeys, but where to?

All this speculation took place in the autumn of 1972, when I was teaching for a semester at the University of Virginia. I was working on a novel, The Black House, and awaiting the publication of Saint Jack. In those days I began a new book as soon as I finished the one I was working on. My wife, Anne, was in London with our two children, and she was working-indeed, earning a good living-but I still felt I was the breadwinner and that I was not earning enough. My British advance for Saint Jack came to about \$500, and I assumed I would not get much more for The Black House. I kept thinking to myself, Now what?

Money is rather a clumsy subject, but it was a crucial factor in my decision to write my first travel book-simply, I needed the money. And when I mentioned the possibility of such a book to my American editor, she was delighted. She said, "We'll give you an advance for it." I had never before received an advance at this stage. Normally, I wrote a book and submitted it and then was paid; I had never asked for, nor been given, money or a contract on an unwritten book.

It is often the case that only when someone asks you very specific questions do you begin to think clearly about your intentions. In my mind this travel book had something to do with trains, but I had no idea where I wanted to goonly that it should be a long trip. I saw a thick book with lots of people in it and lots of dialogue and no sightseeing. But my editor's questioning made me think hard about it, and I thought, Trains Through Asia. I was determined to start in London, and to take the Orient Express, and when I looked at this route, I saw that I could continue through Turkey, into Iran, and after a short bus ride in Baluchistan. I could catch a train in Zahedan, go into Pakistan, and more or less chug through Asia.

My original idea had been to go to Vietnam, take the train to Hanoi, and then continue through China, Mongolia, and the Soviet Union. Much of this, on closer examination, proved impractical or impossible. The man at the Chinese Embassy in 1972 abruptly hung up on me when I said I

wanted a visa to take trains through China. I had to wait fourteen years before I was able to take the trip I described in *Riding the Iron Rooster*. Then I discovered there was a war in progress in Baluchistan. I rerouted myself through Afghanistan. I decided to include Japan and the whole of the Trans-Siberian. I didn't mind where I went as long as it was in Asia and had a railway system and visas were available. I saw myself puffing along, changing countries by changing trains.

Meanwhile, I was finishing my novel *The Black House*. It was set in rural England and it was rather ghostly and solemn. I wanted my next to be a sunny book. I had just about decided on my travel itinerary when I delivered my novel to my British publisher. He suggested we have lunch. Almost before we had started eating he told me how much he disliked *The Black House*. "It will hurt your reputation" was how he put it. "But I want to publish your travel book." I had told him that I had signed a contract for this with my American publisher. I said that if he brought out my novel he could have the travel book. "If you twist my arm I'll publish your novel," he said. That did it. It made me want to leave him immediately.

For dropping me from his list—after all, what was I costing him?—he became rather a laughingstock. But that was later. I think of the circumstances surrounding my first travel book, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, rather than the trip itself. I hated leaving my family behind in London, I had never taken such a deliberate trip before, I felt encumbered by an advance on royalties, modest though it was; and my writer friends, stick-in-the-mud English writers, generally mocked my idea. I never got around to worrying about the trip itself, though I was beset by an obscure ache that was both mental and physical—the lingering anxiety that I was doomed: I was going to die on this trip.

I had always had the idea and still do that my particular exit would be made via an appointment in Samarra: I would go a great distance and endure enormous discomfort and expense in order to meet my death. If I chose to sit at home and eat and drink in the bosom of my family, it would never happen—I'd live to be a hundred. But of

course I would head for the hinterland, and pretty soon there would be some corner of a foreign field that would be forever Medford, Mass. And I imagined my death would be a silly mistake, like that of the monk and mystic Thomas Merton, who at last left his monastery in Kentucky after twenty-five secure years, and popped up in Singapore (while I was there), and accidentally electrocuted himself on the frayed wires of a fan in Bangkok a week later. All that way, all that trouble, just to yank a faulty light switch in a crummy hotel!

I left London on September 19, 1973. It was a gray day. I had a cold. My wife waved me good-bye. Almost immediately I felt I had made an absurd decision. I hadn't the slightest idea of what I was doing. I became very gloomy. To cheer myself up and give myself the illusion that this was real work I began to take voluminous notes. Every day, from the time I left until the moment I arrived back in England four months later, I wrote down everything I saw and heard, filling one notebook after another. I recorded conversations, descriptions of people and places, details of trains. interesting trivia, even criticism of the novels I happened to be reading. I still have some of those paperbacks-Joyce's Exiles, Chekhov's stories, Endo's Silence, and others—and on the blank back pages are scribbled small insectile notes, which I amplified when I transferred them to my large notebooks. I always wrote in the past tense.

The trip recorded in *The Great Railway Bazaar* was the trip I took, and the manner of my journey and my way of writing about it became my method in all my future travel books. I changed the names of some people I wished to protect, but many of the names I left as was. My problem in writing the book was finding a form for it—a structure. In the end I simply hung it on a series of train journeys. I had never read a book quite like the one I was writing. This worried me, as well as making me hopeful. The writing of the book took the same amount of time as the trip itself, four months.

That was more than seventeen years ago. The book is still in print and still sells well. Some people think it is the only book I have ever written (which annoys me) or is my

best (which is equally untrue). I think the writing in The Old Patagonian Express is more fluent, The Kingdom by the Sea funnier and more knowledgeable, and Riding the Iron Rooster more prescient. For example, in The Great Railway Bazaar, my train passed through Nis in Yugoslavia. I mentioned this but I never bothered to discover anything about Nis. I have just located a copy of The Blue Guide to Yugoslavia and found that it was the birthplace of Emperor Constantine. Reading on, I came to the sentence "Though not a pleasant place in itself, Nis has several interesting monuments" and I realized, perhaps, why I did not linger in Nis.

It has been a satisfaction to me that my Railway Bazaar (I got the title from a street name in Kanpur, India) and the rest of my travel books have fared well. I did not realize when I wrote my first one that every trip is unique. My travel book is about my trip, not yours or anyone else's. Even if someone had come with me and written a book about the trip, it would have been a different book. This is true of life in general. It bothers me, as it bothers the Borges character Ireneo Funes, "that the dog at three fourteen (seen from the side) should have the same name as the dog at three fifteen (seen from the front)."

Another thing I did not know was that every trip has a historical dimension. Not long after I traveled through those countries there were political changes. (It seems to happen every time.) The shah was deposed and Iran became very dangerous for the traveler. Afghanistan went to war with itself. India and Pakistan restored their rail link. Laos shut its borders to foreigners and exiled its royalty. Vietnam fixed its railway, so that now it is possible to travel by train from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) to Hanoi. Many of the individual trains were taken out of service, most notably the Orient Express. The train that plies from London to Venice under that name is for rich, idle people who have selfish, sumptuous fantasies about travel that bear no relation to the real thing. However awful my old Orient Express was, at least I can say that all sorts of people took it-rich and poor, old and young, rattling back and forth between East and West.

It was cheap and friendly, and like all great trains, it was like the world on wheels.

Attempting to write my travel experiences for the first time, I was groping in the dark-although I was careful to disguise the fact. I am told that I often seem self-assured in my travel writing, but that is usually my way of whistling to keep my spirits up. I know that I have hijacked a venerable form, the travel book about a grand tour, and am steering it my own way, to suit myself, and my peculiar trip and temperament. Whatever else travel writing is, it is certainly different from writing a novel: fiction requires close concentration and intense imagining, a leap of faith, magic almost. But a travel book, I discovered, was more the work of my left hand, and it was a deliberate act-like the act of travel itself. It took health and strength and confidence. When I finished a novel I never knew whether I would be able to write another one. But I knew, when I finished my first travel book, that I would be able to do it again.

Someday I hope to complete a shelf of travel books, which, between bookends, will encompass the world. In the meantime, this selection, drawn from six of my books, can

stand as a set of traveler's tales.

—Paul Theroux East Sandwich May 1991

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