Books

How to Travel as a Political Act *By* [*Rick Steves*](http://www.alternet.org/authors/rick-steves) *February 11, 2015*

There's more to traveling than just lounging on a cruise ship.

***Excerpted from*** [***Rick Steves Travel as a Political Act***](http://search.perseusbooksgroup.com/book/paperback/rick-steves-travel-as-a-political-act/9781631210686)***(Second Edition) by Rick Steves, with permission from Avalon Travel, a member of the*** [***Perseus Books Group***](http://www.perseusbooksgroup.com/)***. Copyright © 2015.***

As an idealistic young adult, I struggled with what I’d do with my one life. I wanted to work hard at something worthwhile and contribute to society. I wondered if it was really noble to teach wealthy Americans to travel. As a child, my earliest image of “travel” was of rich Americans on fancy white cruise ships in the Caribbean, throwing coins off the deck so they could photograph what they called the “little dark kids” jumping in after them. They’d take these photos home as souvenirs of their relative affluence. That was not the kind of travel I wanted to promote.

Even today, remnants of that notion of travel persist. I believe that for many Americans, traveling still means seeing if you can eat five meals a day and still snorkel when you get into port. When I say that at a cruise convention, people fidget nervously. But I’m not condemning cruise vacations. I’m simply saying I don’t consider that activity “travel.” It’s hedonism. (And I don’t say that in a judgmental way, either. I’ve got no problem with hedonism…after all, I’m a Lutheran.) Rather than accentuate the difference between “us” and “them,” I believe travel should bring us together. If I’m evangelical about the value of travel, it’s the thoughtful and challenging kind of travel—less caloric perhaps…but certainly much more broadening.

And so, since that first trip back in 1969, I’ve spent a third of my life overseas, living out of a backpack, talking to people who see things differently than me. It makes me a little bit of an odd duck.

For the last 35 years, I’ve taught people how to travel. I focus mostly on the logistics: finding the right hotel, avoiding long lines, sampling local delicacies, and catching the train on time. But that’s not why we travel. We travel to have enlightening experiences, to meet inspirational people, to be stimulated, to learn, and to grow.

Travel has taught me the fun in having my cultural furniture rearranged and my ethnocentric self-assuredness walloped. It has humbled me, enriched my life, and tuned me in to a rapidly changing world. And for that, I am thankful.

**How to Travel as a Political Act**

**Travel like a Medieval Jester**

I’m a travel writer. According to conventional wisdom, injecting politics into your travel writing is not good for business. Isn’t travel, after all, a form of recreational escapism? Yes…but it can be much more.

For me, since September 12, 2001, the role of a travel writer has changed. I see the travel writer of the 21st century like the court jester of the Middle Ages. While thought of as a jokester, the jester was in a unique position to tell truth to power without being punished. Back then, kings were absolute rulers—detached from the lives of their subjects. The court jester’s job was to mix it up with people that the king would never meet. The jester would play in the gutter with the riffraff. Then, having fingered the gritty pulse of society, he’d come back into the court and tell the king the truth. “Your Highness, the people are angered by the cost of mead. They are offended by the queen’s parties. The pope has more influence than you. Everybody is reading the heretics’ pamphlets. Your stutter is the butt of many rude jokes.” The king didn’t kill the jester. In order to rule more wisely, the king needed the jester’s insights.

Many of today’s elected leaders have no better connection with real people (especially outside their borders) than those “divinely ordained” kings did centuries ago. And while I’m fortunate to have a built-in platform, I believe that any traveler can play jester to their own communities. Whether visiting El Salvador (where people *don’t* dream of having two cars in every garage), Denmark (where they pay high taxes with high expectations and are satisfied), or Iran (where many willingly compromise their freedom to be ruled by clerics out of fear that otherwise, as they explained to me, their little girls would be raised to be sex toys), any traveler can bring back valuable insights. And, just like those truths were needed in the Middle Ages, this understanding is needed in our age.

**Choosing to Travel on Purpose**

Ideally, travel broadens our perspectives personally, culturally, and politically. Suddenly, the palette with which we paint the story of our lives has more colors. We realize there are exciting alternatives to the social and community norms that our less-traveled neighbors may never consider. Imagine not knowing you could eat “ethnic.” Imagine suddenly realizing there were different genres of music. Imagine you loved books…and one day the librarian mentioned there was an upstairs.

But you can only reap these rewards of travel if you’re open to them. Watching a dervish whirl can be a cruise-ship entertainment option, or it can be a spiritual awakening. You can travel to relax and have fun. You can travel to learn and broaden your perspective. Or, best of all, you can do both at once. Make a decision that on any trip you take, you’ll make a point to be open to new experiences, seek options that get you out of your comfort zone, and be a cultural chameleon—trying on new ways of looking at things and striving to become a “temporary local.”

Assuming they want to learn, both monks and hedonists can stretch their perspectives through travel. While your choice of destination has a huge impact on the potential for learning, you don’t need to visit refugee camps to gain political insight. With the right approach, meeting people—whether over beer in an Irish pub, while hiking Himalayan ridges, or sharing fashion tips in Iran—can connect you more thoughtfully with our world.

My best vacations have been both fun and intensely educational. Seeing how smart people overseas come up with fresh new solutions to the same old problems makes me more humble, open to creative solutions, and ready to question traditional ways of thinking. We understand how our worldview is both shaped and limited by our family, friends, media, and cultural environment. We become more able to respectfully coexist with people with different “norms” and values.

Travel challenges truths that we were raised thinking were self-evident and God-given. Leaving home, we learn other people find different truths to be self-evident. We realize that it just makes sense to give everyone a little wiggle room.

Traveling in Bulgaria, you learn that shaking your head “no” means yes, and giving an affirmative nod can mean no. In restaurants in France, many travelers, initially upset that “you can’t even get the bill,” learn that slow service is respectful service—you’ve got the table all night…please take your time. And learning how Atatürk heroically and almost singlehandedly pulled Turkey out of the Middle Ages and into the modern world in the 1920s explains why today’s Turks are quick to see his features in passing clouds.

Traveling thoughtfully, we are inspired by the accomplishments of other people, communities, and nations. And getting away from our home turf and looking back at America from a distant vantage point, we see ourselves as others see us—an enlightening if not always flattering view.

About the author: Rick Steves is the host of a public television series, and a public radio travel show, and the author of many travel guidebooks and autobiographies.

<http://www.alternet.org/books/how-travel-political-act>

About the forum, the AlterNet site (excerpt): **AlterNet's Mission**

AlterNet is an award-winning news magazine and online community that creates original journalism and amplifies the best of hundreds of other independent media sources. AlterNet’s aim is to inspire action and advocacy on the environment, human rights and civil liberties, social justice, media, health care issues, and more. Since its inception in 1998, AlterNet.org has grown dramatically to keep pace with the public demand for independent news. We provide free online content to millions of readers, serving as a reliable filter, keeping our vast audience well-informed and engaged, helping them to navigate a culture of information overload and providing an alternative to the commercial media onslaught. Our aim is to stimulate, inform, and instigate.

Book review of Travel as a Political Act by Rick Steves

Travel can change the world? Get over yourself

**Review by** [**Nathalie Rothschild**](http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/author/Nathalie%20Rothschild)26 June 2009

At a time of so much doom and eco-gloom about foreign travel, Rick Steves puts an impassioned case for exploring the world. But his belief that travel is a political act means he ends up debasing both tourism and politics.

Rick Steves must have one of the best jobs in the world. For 35 years he has been ‘showing Americans how to travel on a budget’, running a tour company and writing travel guides, as well as hosting a string of radio shows and the unfortunately named *Europe Through the Back Door* TV series.

His job has taken him across the world – from the fjords of Norway to the shantytowns of El Salvador and the villages of Anatolyan Turkey. The Seattle-born Steves is somewhat of an American institution; his shows have been broadcast on hundreds of radio and TV stations nationwide.

Now, Steves has published the book ‘he always wanted to write’: *Travel as a Political Act*. In it, he shares his thoughts on how to make travel more meaningful for you and the people whose countries you visit, as well as impressions from some of his favourite destinations.

In a time when many are down on travel and world exploration – today, tourism is widely interpreted as a codeword for ecological destruction and cross-cultural encounters are seen as corrupting ‘indigenous’ cultures – it is refreshing to read a book about why we should all travel *more*. Steves thinks Americans can benefit from moving beyond their own cultural comfort zones and believes that those lucky enough to be able to afford to travel can inspire those without the means to do so with stories and insights gained from their journeys.

While his book at times reads like a recipe for cheesecake on cheese toast and his appeals to decent, American Christian values will sometimes make you cringe, Steves comes across as positively progressive and humanist compared with today’s gloomy save-the-world-stay-at-home advocates.

Spreading conspiracy theories – stories about a world warped by evil forces – remains the pastime of marginalised groups. But conspiratorial *thinking*, the idea that someone, somewhere is to blame for every misfortune, has become respectable.

‘We travel to have enlightening experiences’, he writes, ‘to meet inspirational people, to be stimulated, to learn, and to grow’. He talks of the need to humanise people who might seem strange or dangerous to us. Steves argues that instead of caving in to fears of faraway places and perceived threats we should be less risk-averse and instead remember Franklin D Roosevelt’s assertion that ‘we have nothing to fear but fear itself’. While he celebrates the ‘American Dream’, Steves also recognises that ‘one of the ugliest things one nation can do is write another nation’s textbooks’ and he feels that people around the world have the right to aspire to raising their living standards.

Yet for all his liberal non-judgementalism, even the ever-smiling, chino-wearing, blond-tufted Steves has his prejudices. He does not like Fat Americans (though he wouldn’t dare use that phrase). I’m not suggesting that Steves is overweightophobic, but he regularly makes not-so-subtle references to flabby, scoffing American tourists to conjure up an image for his readers of a less worthy type of traveller who, in fact, is not a *traveller* at all, but a *tourist* or *holidaymaker*.

The search for ‘authentic experiences’ through travel can lead to partial, even blinkered, views of a society

‘If I’m evangelical about the value of travel’, he writes, ‘it’s the thoughtful and challenging kind of travel – less caloric perhaps… but certainly much more broadening’. Elsewhere, he writes that ‘for many Americans, travelling still means seeing if you can eat five meals a day and still snorkel when you get into port’. However, ‘if you make your travels a political act, your vacation can be the most intensely educational time of your life. Rather than coming home fatter, you can come home smarter…’

Heaven forbid people should travel simply to have fun, relax, lie in the sun until they’re as crisp as roasted shrimps or to eat to their arteries’ discontent.

According to Steves, ‘we can’t understand the world without experiencing it’. Of course nothing can replace first-hand experiences. For me, not even the most stunning photographs of natural or man-made wonders like the Grand Canyon or the Taj Mahal could match the feeling of being there and seeing them for myself. I hadn’t grasped what Third World rural poverty really looked like until I came across it in Ethiopian villages, and I didn’t know what it felt like to float on water until I visited the Dead Sea in Israel.

Still, there are three main reasons why I take issue with Steves’ idea that you need to ‘go there’ in order really to understand a place or a people and that travelling should be approached as a political act.

First, going somewhere doesn’t necessarily guarantee you deeper insights into a people’s plight. You can often learn more about a people or a part of the world by engaging with their history through literature, political theory or meaningful debate and conversation. You don’t need to hug a leper in order to grasp the perversity of the fact that some people in the developing world still suffer from diseases eradicated in the West 200 years ago. And you don’t need to spend time with the Zapatistas in order to understand the motivations of separatist movements.

The search for ‘authentic experiences’ through travel can, in fact, lead to partial, even blinkered, views of a society. How else could you explain that the globetrotting Steves views Europe as a socialist continent?

Second, travellers often speak of ‘finding their true selves’ or being in search of ‘self-fulfilment’; to muddle up such goals with political activism would be to turn politics into a narcissistic project. Not only, then, are we left with a debased view of politics, but travel – which for most people is simply a form of recreation – becomes imbued with all sorts of duties, and anyone who fails to take those duties seriously is made to feel guilty about their ‘selfishness’.

Third, if travel is the highest source of political awareness and solidarity, then that means only those with enough money and time on their hands to see the world can be fully enlightened. The travelling political vanguard, as envisioned by Steves, will inevitably be relatively rich people.

The view of travel as a political act fits in neatly with today’s fashion for ethical consumption: the idea that what you buy and eat or where you spend your holidays shapes not only yourself, but the world. The notion that our shopping choices or travel itineraries are the most potent force for political activism is, in reality, a source of estrangement and inequality rather than unification or solidarity. After all, the poor don’t have ‘consumer power’.

Fair enough, we would all do well to be more conscious of how our actions and interactions affect others, but, ultimately, travelling is something we do for our own benefit and enjoyment – and there’s no reason we should feel either worthy or guilty about it.

**Nathalie Rothschild** is commissioning editor of *spiked*.

<http://www.spiked-online.com/review_of_books/article/7083#.VqaQeVLii0F>

About the forum (from the site): **Launched in 2001, as Britain’s first online-only current-affairs mag, *spiked* is a metaphorical missile against misanthropy.**

It’s the publication that puts the case for human endeavour, intellectual risk-taking, exploration, excellence in learning and art, and freedom of speech with no ifs and buts, against the myriad miserabilists who would seek to wrap humans in red tape, dampen down our daring, restrain our thoughts, and police our speech. ***spiked*** is a fan of reason, liberty, progress, economic growth, choice, conviction and thought experiments about the future, and not so big on eco-miserabilism, identikit politicians, nostalgia, dumbing down and determinism.We echo Saint-Simon, who said: ‘The golden age, which a blind tradition has always placed in the past, is really in front of us.’ ***spiked*** is all about laying the ground for, and having a pop at the enemies of, that still-to-come golden age for humankind. Edited by Brendan O’Neill, and run by a tiny team of underpaid staff, ***spiked*** publishes Monday to Friday, covering everything from politics and war to sex, sport and art.