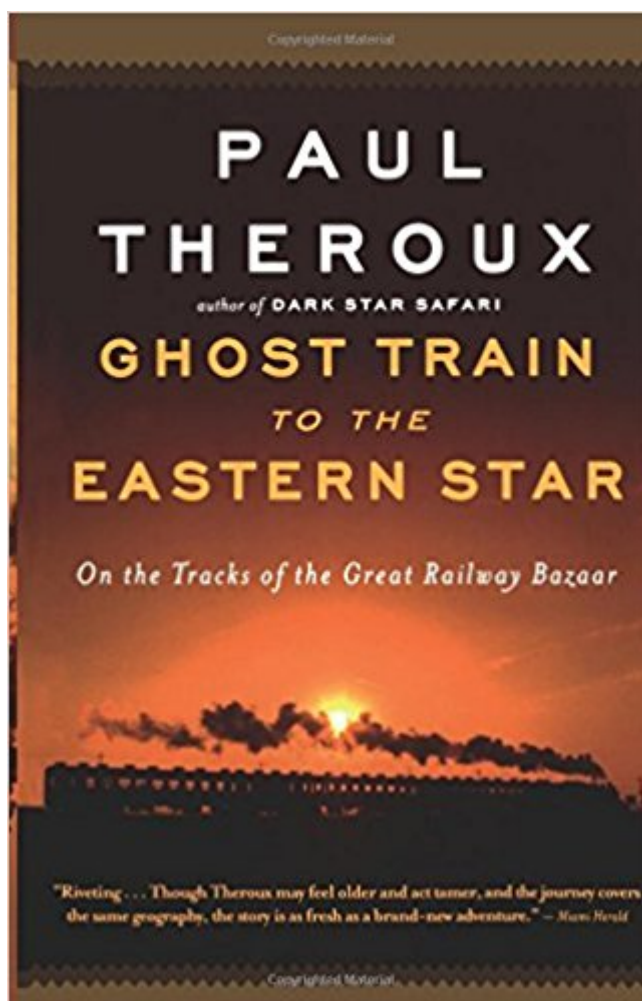


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Ghost Train To The Eastern Star: On The Tracks Of The Great Railway Bazaar



Synopsis

Paul Theroux returns to the transcontinental expedition that made *Great Railway Bazaar* a classic of travel literature and realizes—•in rich, anecdotal detail—•how much the world has changed. A Half a lifetime ago, Paul Theroux virtually invented the modern travel narrative by recounting his grand tour by train through Asia. In the three decades since, the world he recorded in that book has undergone phenomenal change. The Soviet Union has collapsed and China has risen; India booms while Burma smothers under dictatorship; Vietnam flourishes in the aftermath of the havoc America was unleashing on it the last time he passed through. In *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, Theroux re-creates that earlier journey. His odyssey takes him from eastern Europe, still hung-over from communism, through tense but thriving Turkey into the Caucasus, where Georgia limps back toward feudalism while its neighbor Azerbaijan revels in oil-fueled capitalism. Theroux is firsthand witness to it all, encountering adventures only he could have: from the literary (sparring with the incisive Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk) to the dissolute (surviving a week-long bender on the Trans-Siberian Railroad). Wherever he goes, his omnivorous curiosity and unerring eye for detail never fail to inspire, enlighten, inform, and entertain.

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Customer Reviews

Best of the Month, August 2008: Way back in the dark pre-Internet, limited-air-travel world of 1975, the way to get from Europe to Asia was by train. A young and ambitious writer named Paul Theroux made his literary mark by taking the 28,000-mile intercontinental journey via rail from London to

Tokyo and back home again. His book, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, became a travel-lit classic. Thirty years later, an older, wiser, and even less sanguine Theroux decided to retrace his steps. The result is *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, a fascinating account of the places you vaguely knew existed (Tbilisi), probably won't ever go to (Bangalore), but definitely should know something about (Mandalay). Get on board Theroux's fast-moving travelogue, which features some of the most astute commentary on our distorted notions of time, space, and each other in the age of jet speed, broadband connections, and cultural extinction. --Lauren Nemroff --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Paul Theroux has polarized critics with his latest travelogue. His sense of adventure, candid descriptions, and evocative prose notwithstanding, some critics took issue with the unbridled narcissism suffusing the narrative. Others lavished praise on the best-selling author, and the Los Angeles Times, summarizing the two sides neatly, called Theroux “a compelling writer who is essentially unlikable.” Despite this opinion and complaints of unimaginative generalizations and a tendency towards repetition, Theroux immerses readers in the alleys and shadowy corners of squalid cities that many are unlikely to see for themselves. He is a close observer of the unfamiliar and the strange while charting the simultaneous evolution and degeneration of the world itself. “Theroux’s real work is not about travel,” reveals the Rocky Mountain News, “it’s about the progress of the soul.” Copyright 2008 Bookmarks Publishing LLC --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I always enjoy Paul Theroux's books. I love his take and his insights into other cultures and his thoughts about traveling in desolate and unconnected places. He really enjoys the journey, even at times if it's rough or bleak, much more than the arrival. He writes about his enjoyment of those special times when one has no internet and no telephone and no one knows where he is. In this cluttered and madly connected times we live in he's a breath of fresh air. I especially enjoyed his insights into Japanese culture.

I read a lot of Paul Theroux in the 1980's and enjoyed returning with him to this large swath of the East. As a not too adventurous older female, it's good to see things from a perspective that I'd never be likely to experience firsthand. He draws my attention to certain things I'd failed to notice, such as the fact that Vietnam today is about as capitalistic as it could be. Who would have predicted that 40 years ago? Theroux is often the hero of his amusing little anecdotes, but in a way that I find

convincing and usually appealing. I might not want to travel with him indefinitely, and perhaps his wife enjoyed the nice long break that his trip provided for her. At least he's doing something that expands his mind. Plenty of people get no farther than the local golf course and leave their spouses with just as much time on their hands in a typical year. I only bothered to type on this topic because other reviewers seemed to be surprised by it, and at least one of the people in my book club saw fit to mention it in our discussion. Not all of us have the same idea of how much togetherness is necessary or even desirable in a marriage.

This book is out of date by 7-8 years, but still rich with description and analysis. The changes Theroux notes in his re-visit to the nations of Eastern Europe and Asia let us know there have not been many changes/modernizations in some areas. He is often critical of the U.S., particularly our foreign policy. True, we have not always been perfect, but I would remind him that he is allowed to say such things only because we enjoy freedom of speech. He did mention briefly one of the world's biggest problems: overpopulation. Some feel this one ecological factor will be the world's undoing. Not enough writers or scholars bother to touch on this subject, so I commend him on this. Yes, I did read the whole book (I am on vacation) and was disgusted as well as fascinated by the state of affairs he reveals to the reader.

I'm a rail buff who has strong interests in travel and culture, just the kind of person for whom Paul Theroux is a guiding star. This book does not disappoint; it makes every train and every conversation come alive and illuminate the adventures and the challenges of global rail travel. He compares and contrasts this trip with one he wrote about decades earlier, noting the economic and cultural changes in Eurasia during that time frame. Theroux understands that adventure is a part of travel and makes the inconveniences of overcrowding, undependable food service and missed connections a part of the adventure. He treats the characters he meets as potential friends and brings to mind my trip on the crowded hard sleeper from Hanoi to Saigon on an anniversary of the Vietnamese victory in the American War -- we can communicate with little language in common, can feel friendship in sharing an experience and can arrive at the destination as friends despite our cultural and language differences. The only negative I associate with this book is envy that I'm unlikely ever to experience the trip myself.

I loved that Paul Theroux, a man whose name is recognized by everyone in the fiction and non fiction fields, decided to basically recreate a journey he took when he was in his twenties and had

no money. For criticism I have to say it is a huge amount of territory to cover, going from London to Japan by train, basically. A person can only observe so much of each country, and so there are bound to be natives of that country who disagree with the snapshot taken on that day(s). The book was written in 2006 when Bush was President and the war with Iraq was going on. It was brave of Paul Theroux, who was a literary "darling" for a while there-- Mosquito Coast definitely made his name-- to even travel to these areas where there is unrest, terrorism, instability and face it-- real danger. In a way all of us sitting back in the comfort of mostly safe America are living vicariously through these observations. Theroux has always had an edge to his writing, some elements of danger and sexuality, that keep his novels and articles interesting. He's simply a divinely gifted storyteller. He does not fail here, although the task of this extremely hard journey sometimes gets a tad tedious. For an older guy who is already world famous to mostly bunk in shared compartments on trains with --whoever!-- share bathrooms, eat native cuisine, and fake it till you make it with language barriers-- well it's amazing that he even took on this task. He is mostly good natured, but he hates missionaries, he hates but expects hustlers (taxicab rip-offs, for instance) and he likes to take the native stance of disliking his own country, (the ugly American)sometimes. When you read about the bombings of Japan and Vietnam, you feel their side of the story. Even though Japan "started" it-- my words, not Paul's-- you feel a terrible disgrace at war itself and how history, architecture, spiritual temples, and humankind, can be just forever lost because of this brutality (no matter whose "side" you were on.)Of course my favorite parts were vignettes about specific people. I like knowing what Zoroastrians were like, or rickshaw operators, or Siberian prisons, or the new Vietnam. I love the monk who shared his compartment. I love his descriptions of Istanbul and Singapore, and the serenity (mostly) of Japan. I love the comic book culture part of Japan. Despots and dictators are exposed for what they did to their countries. The book makes you thank your stars that you live in a democracy (at least I do) even though many think our system is flawed. In other words, yes, read the book to know how damn lucky you really are !! As a woman I could not identify with as many sexual come-ons he received. But I imagine a Westerner man would receive this many in countries like Thailand which are known for a sexual Disneyland atmosphere. The children in the sex trade-- where Theroux walks down a dark road to a secret hiding place, is a heartbreaking story. The author, who is married and wants to remain faithful to his wife, tells these stories for the sake of knowledge, and does not ever accept solicitations from the various available women around the world. I enjoyed reading the book on Kindle because some of the Eastern references could be easily looked up with the instant Kindle dictionary. Sadly, this applied to other words which I had forgotten the meanings of, but Mr. Theroux has an excellent and not pretentious vocabulary. In short

I loved the book because it is specific in details about countries, has excellent stories and conveys a basic sense of the countries he visited. In reading the other reviews I saw that some people think he is a hypocrite for "riding the rails" and then calling a famous friend to chat with or arrange to give a talk. I am glad he took advantage of his contacts and I think it makes the book more interesting that he sometimes has translators available or someone to show him around, rather than just arrive and be at the mercy of a tour guide book. He has earned the right to show off a bit, but I think he keeps to the spirit of the original back packer he was back in the seventies. I am a fan. I rate it five stars.

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