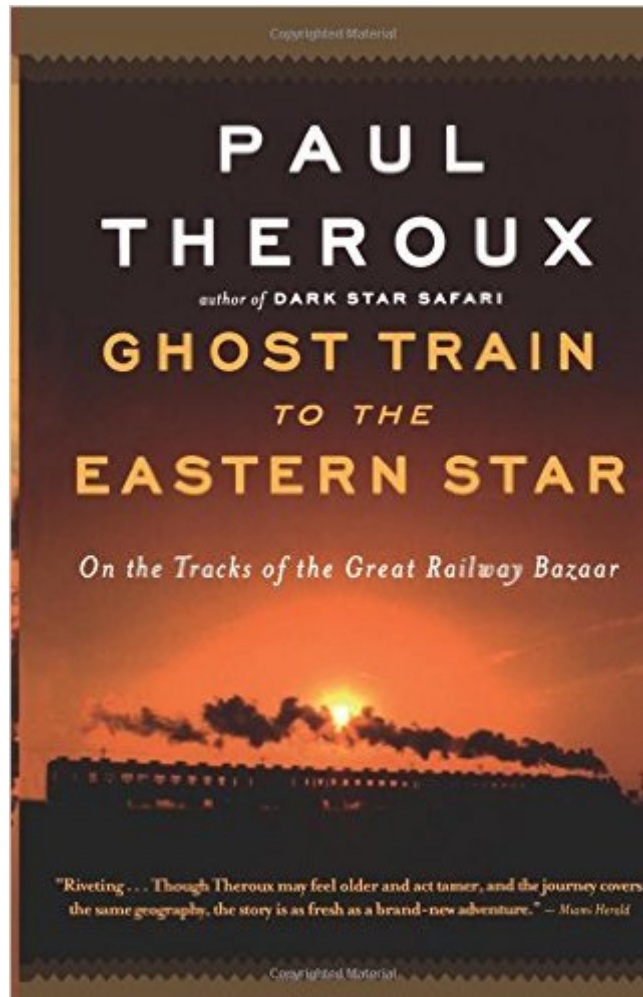


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Ghost Train To The Eastern Star: On The Tracks Of The Great Railway Bazaar



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. 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

I assume everyone reading this is familiar with Theroux's latest premise, to retrace the trail he took over thirty years ago when he wrote "The Great Railway Bazaar." His latest is classic Theroux - observant, infinitely inquisitive (almost nosy), insatiably curious. Few can afford the time, money or emotional strain it would take to complete a journey like this. Consequently, it's wonderful to have a

traveler (the author's familiar reference to himself) of this caliber to do it for us. Mostly by land from London, through Eastern Europe, the Subcontinent, Southeast Asia, Japan and home across Russia. I, for one, don't know how he manages to leave his loving wife for that long. Some have called the author a misanthrope. I don't think that at all. One particular act, which I won't spoil by revealing, distinguishes the man from your average humanity-hater. I appreciated how he usually searched out the oldest rickshaw-wallahs and taxi drivers, people his age who haven't been as fortunate. I take his observations of annoying people as part of the landscape of a trip of this magnitude. It was inevitable that he'd come across slovenly, boorish, clueless tourists that deservedly reaped the wrath of his rapier wit. I particularly enjoy Theroux's slicing and dicing of holier-than-thou missionaries. When he begins a description of someone he runs into with sly, almost vicious adjectives, look out. You know the game is about to begin. I share a lot of the author's opinions, especially when he compares lawyers to prostitutes and expresses nothing but disdain for weak-handed politicians and substance-less celebrities. He seems to explore an inordinate number of sex trade sites around the world, shining the light of day on the cockroaches that reap profits from the suffering of others. As a single Western man, I suppose he's bound to be a target for the profiteers trying to separate him from his money. For those of us curious about how such things work in these far-off places, thankfully we have Theroux to describe them for us. Look out, Japan! Your weird fascination with school girls and French maids has been captured in print by one of the best travel writers in the biz! Theroux seems to reserve special animosity for Singapore. Despite the city-state's facade of prosperity and glamor, wrapped in a mantle of super-security, the author manages to delve below the surface and reveal that here too there is an underworld, seedy sex trade and community of low-life individuals who deal in flesh, including that of the very young. It seems that Theroux is accomplishing a bit of payback here - as he was sacked from a teaching job there way back in the 1960s. From what I can tell, the despotic prime minister and all the mealy-mouthed underlings deserve everything they get. Paul doesn't seem to hold back on descriptions of people he meets, including some famous writers. I often wonder what they think when they read what he has written about them. He is a bit of a name dropper, managing to rub elbows and spend time with some of today's most famous authors, including Orhan Pamuk, Sir Arthur Clarke and Murakami Haruki, as well as Prince Charles and Camilla. Oh, well. At least we get a bit of insight as to what they're like. I'll never get to talk to them so I'm glad he did. I admit that some I'd never heard of before reading the book so the author has provided another service - to broaden horizons. I've been to many of the places Theroux describes (Eastern Europe, India, Burma, Southeast Asia, Russia) and it's interesting to read his take on things. He has a habit of

looking at places differently, describing and visiting little known sights that, though I was there, never got to. I suppose that's another of his differences between tourists and travelers. In summary, I'd very highly recommend "Ghost Train." It reveals more of the author than anything he's written thus far; mulling regrets about past mistakes and the inevitable disasters we are all confronted with at some point in life. His sentimental journey, like "Dark Star Safari," allows the reader to understand a lot about why he is the way he is - and where he's coming from.

Paul Theroux delivers in *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star* what the Theroux fan expects: entertaining travelogue laced with acerbic wit, cultural context and social commentary. And, it maintains Theroux's high literary standard; keep a dictionary by your side. The "plot," if one could call it that, is to retrace his steps of 30 years before, when he wrote *The Great Railway Bizarre*. But, just as you can't really go home again, you can't really go away again, at least on the same path. Fortunately, this obvious point is not a main focus of *Ghost Train*. Theroux's result this time is closer in style and content to his *Dark Star Safari* than to any of his other travel works. Coincidentally, the same device of going away again to a place he'd been 30 years before was employed in *Dark Star Safari*. However, his commentary for *Ghost Train* is a bit thinner, since it does not benefit from a prolonged earlier stay as he had in Africa. Readers of his *Elephanta Suite* will benefit from following a subplot: finding the inspirations for the three *Elephanta Suite* novellas in the Indian portion of his travels. Small portions of *Ghost Train* are a bit trite: a place is developed or more populous, so it is not as nice as in the good old days; another place is still great (for the traveler) because it hasn't been modernized. Some of Theroux's favorite villain types appear as in earlier works: the shallow young backpacker, the boorish inconsiderate traveler, the overconfident ignoramus; on the political level the villains include dictators, Chinese government exploitation of third world countries, and soulless bureaucrats. There are wonderful, dark broodings on the nature of travel and specifically Theroux's kind of travel, especially at the beginning where they serve like Dante's warning at the gates of hell. The warnings to young whippersnappers not to try to follow him or one-up him are also pretty amusing. The ambivalent commentary on the nature of solitary travel is successfully carried through the whole book, along with commentary on his experience of aging. Readers in Theroux's approximate age cadre - the 60 to 75 year olds who still get around - will find this aging theme particularly worthwhile; he will serve as your foil, or more likely you will find plenty of material to apply to yourself. As with other Theroux travel works, you are not encouraged to go, and you will not want to use this book as a travel guide. Instead, it prompts the moderately experienced traveler to think, "I'm glad I didn't step in that.... but I'm glad I read about it."

Paul Theroux published his classic travel book the Great Railway Bazaar in 1975. He had traveled by train across Europe and Asia in 1973. That book gave notice that Theroux was a literary force. The success of that book made Theroux the comfortable writer that we have known ever since. This new book re-traces that epic adventure. Theroux is older, wiser, more affluent but still like a small boy in many ways. His observations regarding what is different now and what has stayed the same are thorough and entertaining. His interactions with the people he meets along the way are little treasures. As Theroux passes from place to place we get a sense of the world that informs us at the deepest level. The devastation the tsunami brought to Sri Lanka becomes real to us. Cambodia is truly a country of ghosts. Vietnam is vibrant and youthful. Laos is primitive. Singapore a repressive zombie state. The country formerly known as Burma is simply repressive but Theroux is delighted to meet people there who remember him from his first time through. He tracks down his peers, writers like Orhan Pamuk in Turkey, Arthur C. Clarke in Sri Lanka, Haruki Murakami and Pico Iyer in Japan. And he sees people reading his books. He watches with voyeuristic delight as a fellow passenger peruses "The Mosquito Coast." He can't resist informing this young female backpacker that I WROTE THAT. An amazing adventure - Theroux is at the top of his game here. He devotes only a half page to China. This omission is by design. Theroux doesn't conceal his feelings or his opinions.

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