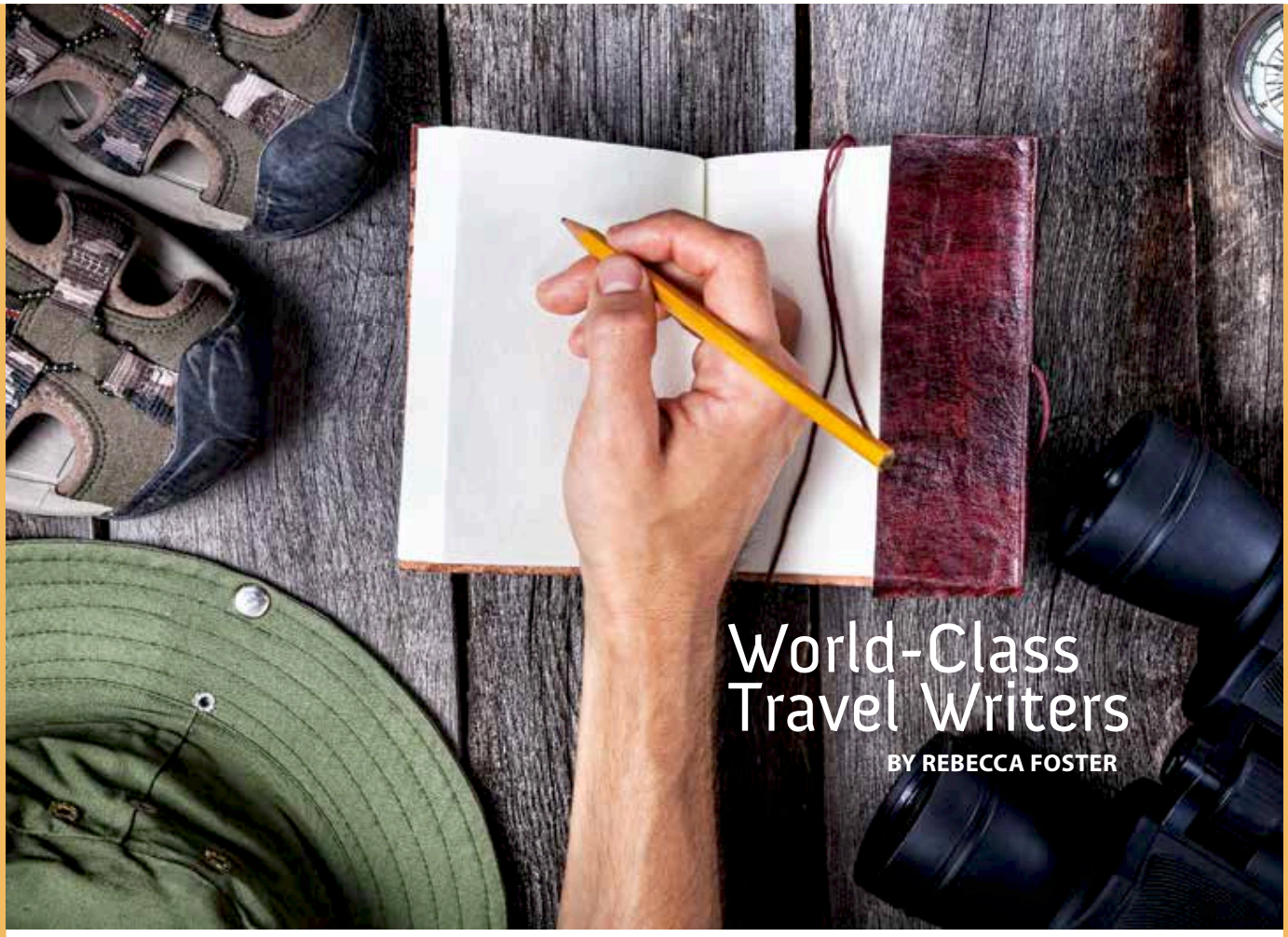


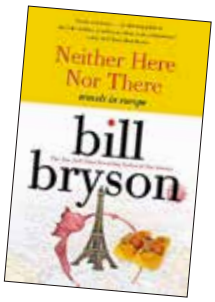
World-Class Travel Writers

BY REBECCA FOSTER

It's never too early to start planning an around-the-world adventure (don't worry, you need not do it in 80 days). Below we profile a handful of celebrated travel writers from the last half century or so who have traveled parts of the globe. This selection of escapist travel books by world-class writers will whet your appetite for new experiences as you dream about the trips you'll take next. Even if you don't get there anytime soon, these books will make you feel as if you've experienced a place completely new without ever leaving the comfort of the sofa.

BILL BRYSON

Bryson (1951–), the acclaimed author of varied works of science and social history, is best loved for his witty travel writing—especially about his adopted home of England (featured in 1995's *Notes from a Small Island* and its sequel, *The Road to Little Dribbling* ★★★★ May/June 2016) and his native United States. Robert Redford starred in a recent movie adaptation of Bryson's Appalachian Trail hiking memoir, *A Walk in the Woods* (1997).



Among Bryson's most popular travel books is *Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe* (1991). As a student in the early 1970s, Bryson backpacked around Europe with Iowa high school friend Stephen Katz (who makes an appearance in *A Walk in the Woods*), constantly on the lookout for beer and women. In 1990, after deciding to recreate that hedonistic trip, Bryson traveled from the Northern Lights of Norway to the cusp of Asia in Istanbul, usually on trains and buses. Other stops included Copenhagen, Paris, Florence, and even Liechtenstein. By providing details of both trips, Bryson offsets his youthful reactions with his more worldly-wise opinions. Sarcastic and occasionally raunchy, *Neither Here Nor There* is a fine example of Bryson's iconoclastic travel writing.

BRUCE CHATWIN

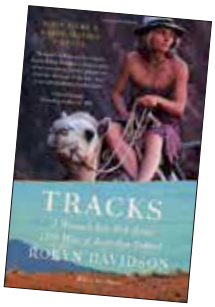
Chatwin (1940–1989) was a travel writer, novelist, and journalist. Born near Sheffield, England, he amassed a vast knowledge of art and architecture through his work at Sotheby's auction house in London. While working for the *Sunday Times Magazine*, he traveled the world, eventu-

ally leaving the magazine to visit Patagonia in 1974, which led to his first book. Chatwin published another five books during his lifetime, including the award-winning novel *On the Black Hill* (1982) and *The Songlines* (1987), about Australian Aboriginal culture.

In Patagonia (1977; ✦ HAWTHORNDEN PRIZE, E. M. FORSTER AWARD FROM THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS), Chatwin's first book, instantly established him as a travel writer of note. He spent six months journeying throughout South America and collecting anecdotes about his visit; he framed his travels as a quest to find his own "piece of brontosaurus" (his grandparents' cabinet had contained the skin of a giant sloth from Chilean Patagonia). As in his later books, however, Chatwin fictionalized certain characters and encounters. Thus *In Patagonia* is both "an actual journey and a symbolic one … the narrator goes to a far country in search of a strange animal: on his way he lands in strange situations, people or other books tell him strange stories which add up to form a message." The book, illustrated with Chatwin's black-and-white photographs, contains 97 short sections. That experimental style mirrors the author's recurring theme of nomadism.

ROBYN DAVIDSON

Like Chatwin, Davidson (1950–), an Australian adventure writer, is primarily interested in the lives of nomadic peoples, whom she studies as a self-taught social anthropologist. Her first book, *Tracks: A Woman's Solo Track Across 1700 Miles of Australian Outback* (1980; ✦ THOMAS COOK TRAVEL BOOK AWARD), began as an article for *National Geographic* (one of the publication's photographers, Rick Smolan, met up with her three times) but soon evolved into a book. Davidson spent two years working with camels and learning how to survive in extreme conditions before undertaking her nine-month journey—a trial by fire in which she spent much time soul searching—across the unforgiving Australian desert. In 1977 she set off with four camels and a dog. She encountered blistering heat and poisonous snakes, but she also made a positive impact on the indigenous Australians she met. A 2013 film version starred Mia Wasikowska and Adam Driver. After the success of *Tracks*, Davidson published a novel and another four nonfiction books, including *Desert Places* (1996), which recounts her experience traveling with nomads in India in the early 1990s. She lives in Melbourne and frequently travels to the Himalayas.



PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR

A BBC journalist once described Fermor (1915–2011), a prominent British scholar, author, and soldier who fought in the Cretan resistance during World War II, as a mix of Indiana Jones, James Bond, and Graham Greene. Fermor's first book, *The Traveller's Tree* (1950), about the Caribbean, won the Heinemann Foundation Prize for Literature and brought him wide acclaim. However, he may best be known for his trilogy describing his youthful journey across Europe.

In 1933, at age 18, Fermor set off to walk the length of Europe, from the Netherlands to Istanbul. He took little with him beyond clothing, a few letters of introduction, and two poetry volumes. Along the way he slept mostly in barns or shepherds' huts, but occasionally monks or aristocrats offered him hospitality. He thus had a rare opportunity to contrast Europe as experienced by peasants and the landed gentry. Much later on, Fermor adapted his diaries of the that portion of the trip into the first two books of a trilogy, *A Time of Gifts* (1977; ✦ WH SMITH LITERARY AWARD) and *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986). The third book, *The Broken Road* (2013), published posthumously and based on Fermor's diary and a draft, covered his journey through Bulgaria onwards.

JAN MORRIS

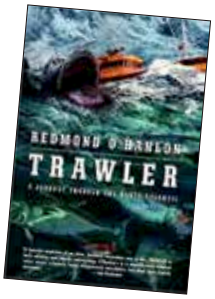
From her home in Wales to the peak of Mount Everest, the 89-year-old Morris (1926–), a Welsh transgender historian and writer, has seen it all. For an introduction to her varied writing, start with *The World: Travels 1950–2000* (2003). *Conundrum* (1974) offers a poignant account of her sex reassignment surgery, while the Pax Britannica trilogy (1968–78) provides a thorough history of the British Empire. Widely considered one of the best books about the capital of northern Italy's Veneto region, *Venice* (1960) combines meditations on personal experience with historical and sociological observation. Morris, then a young soldier named James, was sent to Italy at the end of World War II. Her book is therefore "Venice seen through a particular pair of eyes at a particular moment—young eyes at that, responsive above all to the stimuli of youth," Morris writes in an introduction to the revised 2008 edition. Nonetheless, her lyrical descriptions of the city's alleys, fish markets, waterways, and architecture have stood the test of

time, giving a taste of a mysterious and labyrinthine city rich with cultural history. See also Morris's arresting, occasionally melancholic portraits of Trieste, Hong Kong, New York, Sydney, and Oxford, among other places.

DERVLA MURPHY

Murphy, born in Ireland in 1931, cared for her arthritic mother for years, during which she took short breaks to cycle throughout Europe. Her 25 works of nonfiction include travel books set in Ethiopia, Madagascar, Cuba, and Palestine, as well as an autobiography, *Wheels Within Wheels* (1979). Her best-known work, *Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a Bicycle* (1965), chronicles an overland cycling trip through Europe, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Murphy started her trip in 1963, during one of the worst winters in recent memory. Based on letters she wrote home and the diary she kept of the trip, this travelogue focuses on the passage through Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Murphy (who traveled with a pistol) details the meals she ate and the people with whom she stayed as she clocked 80 to 100 miles a day. Hospitality customs meant locals wouldn't let her pay for anything, so she usually benefitted from free accommodation and bicycle repair. Murphy cites insects, wild animals, poor sanitation, and sunburn as frequent woes, but nothing stopped this plucky traveler from reaching India. At the end of the trip documented here, Murphy volunteered in Delhi to help Tibetan refugees for a year, an experience chronicled in *Tibetan Foothold* (1966).

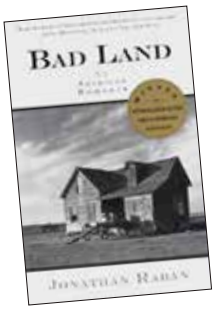
REDMOND O'HANLON



A British natural historian and adventurer, O'Hanlon (1947–), for 15 years the natural history editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, has written acclaimed books about his treks into three of the world's most remote jungles—Borneo, the Amazon River basin, and Congo: *Into the Heart of Borneo* (1984), *In Trouble Again: A Journey Between the Orinoco and the Amazon* (1988), *No Mercy: A Journey Into the Heart of the Congo* (1997).

When O'Hanlon was in his 50s, the landlubber joined the crew of a Scottish commercial fishing vessel in the icy winter waters of the North Atlantic, determined to work with crew members surveying and inventorying the strange creatures trawled from the deep waters. In *Trawler: A Journey Through the North Atlantic* (★★★½ Mar/Apr 2005), O'Hanlon chronicles the terrifying hurricane that incapacitates him for a spell, but he's soon back on his feet, befriending biologist Luke Bullough and cataloguing bizarre ocean denizens like jellycats, hagfish, and rat tail fish. Extraordinary (or nauseating, depending on your perspective) firsthand accounts of the ship, the close quarters, the smells, the fear, and the seasickness bring his experiences to life.

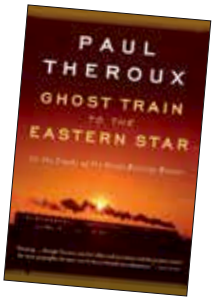
JONATHAN RABAN



Raban (1942–), a British travel writer and novelist now based in Seattle, has long been preoccupied with the human connection to the sea, prompting the *Guardian* to dub him "the captain of seagoing literature." His honors include a 1982 Heinemann Award and the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award in 1981 and 1991. Among his most celebrated works are *Coasting* (1986), which describes his single-handed, 4,000 mile voyage around Britain in a small ketch, and *Passage to Juneau: A Sea and Its Meanings* (1999). In *Bad Land: An American Romance* (1996; ✦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD), Raban explores the social history of settlement in southeastern Montana and North Dakota in the early 20th century. He focuses on the town of Ismay, Montana, which drew settlers thanks to the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act's promise of 320 acres of land available for farming. Instead, disillusioned pioneers found drought conditions, plagues of giant grasshoppers, and bitter winters. Many of them abandoned their homesteads, a sign of failure to today's tourists. It's no surprise this inhospitable landscape has cultivated loners and religious zealots rather than crops. Touring rodeos as well as derelict farmyards, Raban reexamines traditional myths of the West.

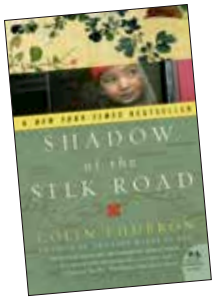
PAUL THEROUX

Theroux (1941–), an American travel writer and novelist who currently resides in Hawaii and Cape Cod, kicked off the boom in modern travel literature with the classic *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia* (1975), which recounts his four-month journey via train in 1972 from London through Europe, the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia. Theroux followed this best seller with another 15 travel books, most recently *Deep South: Four Seasons on Back Roads* (★★★ Jan/Feb 2016). In addition, he has written 34 works of fiction.



In *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star: On the Tracks of the Great Railway Bazaar* (★★★ Nov/Dec 2008), Theroux retraces the epic 28,000-mile, London-to-Tokyo railway odyssey he chronicled in *The Great Railway Bazaar*. He catalogues the changes he encounters in landscapes irrevocably altered by war, tyranny, and unrestrained progress, all while charting his own personal transformations over three decades. "The decision to return to any early scene in your life is dangerous but irresistible," he notes. From Khmer Rouge torture chambers in Cambodia to brothels in Singapore and bustling Indian call centers, Theroux describes the people, cultures, religions, foods, and sex shops he discovers while lamenting "how gracelessly the world is aging and all that we have lost."

COLIN THUBRON



Thubron (1939–), considered one of the greatest postwar British writers and, since 2010, the President of the Royal Society of Literature, has penned 4 novels and 16 travel books—most recently *To a Mountain in Tibet* (2011). His travels have taken him through Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Russia, Siberia, and China. In his ninth book, *Shadow of the Silk Road* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2007), Thubron tackles a near mythical subject, the Silk Road—not a single passage but a vast network of trade routes that have conducted merchants, goods, explorers, and armies since 1500 BCE. Tracing the 7,000-mile, officially unmarked route from Xian, China, to Antioch, Turkey, took the 60-something Thubron two years. He traveled rough, connecting with strangers along the way: hitchhiking, drinking with beggars, and staying in villagers' mud huts. This is a story of continuity and change, of what is lost and what is gained in the encounter between the ancient and the modern.

SARA WHEELER

A British journalist and travel writer, Wheeler (1961–) spent seven months exploring Antarctica for her 1998 book, *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica*. In *The Magnetic North: Notes from the Arctic Circle* (★★★★ May/June 2011; ✦ BANFF MOUNTAIN BOOK COMPETITION FOR ADVENTURE TRAVEL), Wheeler, starting and ending in Russia, spent two years trekking east through Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Scandinavia in an attempt to "shed some dim light on the enigmas of the Arctic." Marveling at the region's austere beauty, she explores its history, scientific significance, and the lives it has shaped—from polar explorers and aviators to the 4 million inhabitants who have fallen victim to poverty, pollution, and industrial exploitation. "Just as the Arctic shows what we are good at—individual endurance, initiative, and dogged investigation," observes Wheeler, "it also reveals what we are bad at, which is collective, preventive action" to combat climate change. (★★★★ May/June 2011)

Wheeler's other topics include Chile; women writers who journeyed to America; and biographies of Apsley Cherry-Garrard, an explorer to Antarctica, and Denys Finch Hatton, a British aristocrat who spent part of his life in Africa.

Further Reading

THE BEST AMERICAN TRAVEL WRITING (ANNUAL) WANDERLUST: REAL-LIFE TALES OF ADVENTURE AND ROMANCE (2000) | ED. DON GEORGE

THE VIRAGO BOOK OF WOMEN TRAVELLERS (1994) | ED. MARY MORRIS AND LARRY O'CONNOR

DEAR BILL BRYSON: FOOTNOTES FROM A SMALL ISLAND (2015) | BEN AITKEN

LOST IN MONGOLIA: RAFTING THE WORLD'S LAST UNCHALLENGED RIVER (2003) | COLIN ANGUS

VIVA SOUTH AMERICA!: A JOURNEY THROUGH A RESTLESS CONTINENT (2009) | OLIVER BALCH

A VISIT TO DON OTAVIO: A TRAVELLER'S TALE FROM MEXICO (1953) | SYBILLE BEDFORD

ALONG THE ENCHANTED WAY: A ROMANIAN STORY (2009) | WILLIAM BLACKER

BLOOD RIVER: A JOURNEY TO AFRICA'S BROKEN HEART (2007) | TIM BUTCHER

CITY OF DJINNS: A YEAR IN DELHI (1993) | WILLIAM DALRYMPLE (✦ THOMAS COOK TRAVEL BOOK AWARD AND SUNDAY TIMES YOUNG WRITER OF THE YEAR AWARD, 1994)

THE ART OF TRAVEL (2002) | ALAIN DE BOTTON

HOKKAIDO HIGHWAY BLUES: HITCHHIKING JAPAN (1998) | WILL FERGUSON

TRAVELS IN SIBERIA (2010) | IAN FRAZIER (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2011)

continued on page 63