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.

Questions to consider:

1. Who is the intended **audience,** and how can you tell? Try to identify as many characteristics as you can—their world view, values, age(s), socio-economic class, education level, political slant, experience with the subject, etc.
2. What is the **kairos,** that is, what is going on in the world of the audience when this was written that would make it timely and important for the readers, or at least influence how they read it?
3. What is the author’s main point (**thesis** or central claim), and where is it? (Hint: it’s probably stated more than once)
4. How does Rick Steves establish his credibility (**ethos**): good sense, good morals, good will toward the audience?
5. What evidence does Rick Steves offer to support his claims? (**logos**)
6. What values does Steves appeal to in his audience? Where might he be stirring their emotions (and which ones)? (These are questions about his **pathos** appeals.)