

GEC 131: Rolf Potts' Recommended Travel Writing Reading List:

Texas Lutheran University
Department of English and Communication Studies
General Education Curriculum Course 131
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They are in alphabetical order; some might be more appropriate than others for college freshmen. I've added my subjective commentary to each.

1. Ibn Battuta -- *Travels in Asia and Africa*

Battuta, a Moroccan, was the Arab Marco Polo, and in many ways his narrative is more human and interesting than Polo's. Also an interesting glimpse at travels during Pax Islamica -- and like travelers today, Battuta sought out fellow travelers like him (Muslims, as was his case).

2. Alain de Botton -- *The Art of Travel*

A very popular philosophical look at the act of travel. It was published a couple years ago. Very quotable, yet I found it somewhat irritating because it's obvious de Botton is a chronic short-term traveler, and he spends more time in his library than going out and meeting people

3. William Dalrymple -- *In Xanadu*

This recounts Dalrymple's trip as a college student following the footsteps of Marco Polo from Jerusalem to China. Young, irreverent, and funny, yet scholarly in its approach. A good read for college students.

4. Geoff Dyer -- *Yoga for People Who Can't Be Bothered to Do It*

Another good read for college students, this one is an anthology of Dyer's travels to places like Libya, Burning Man, Angkor Wat, Amsterdam, and Koh Phangan. Dyer is in his forties, but he has the travel sensibilities of a twenty year-old -- to the point of being irritating at times. He's an awful traveler, he invests a lot of time in banal activities such as smoking dope, but he's funny and he has a very keen narrative voice. Dyer's "Paris Trance" is another good book -- a novel that is an interesting take on young love and expat life in Paris.

5. Gustave Flaubert -- *Flaubert in Egypt*

Bawdy and quite funny accounts of Flaubert's travels as a 28 year-old in Egypt. I used it as my guide to Cairo in a Salon.com story called "Backpacker's Ball at the Sultan Hotel".

6. Paul Fussell -- *Abroad*

Academic and perhaps not ideal for freshman, but very readable and an interesting look at British travel writing between the world wars.

7. Alex Garland -- *The Beach*

I hardly need to explain this one. A Lord of the Flies-style take on the hypocrisies of backpacker culture.

8. Katy Gardner -- *Losing Gemma*

A backpacker novel in the tradition of Alex Garland; this one is set in India. There are a couple of other backpacker pop novels out there: Emily Barr's "Backpack", and Simon Lewis's "Go". None of them match up to *The Beach*, in my opinion, but they are all pretty good, and Gardner and Barr's

books might appeal more to female students. Sometime I'm going to write a satirical critique of backpacker pop novel, though, since they all have similar elements: drugs, death, and impossibly stupid young travelers. I'm still waiting for a pop novel that treats backpackers with Nick Hornby-style affection, while still commenting on the subculture.

9. Adam Gopnik -- *Paris to the Moon*

The New Yorker writer's take on Paris is one of the best in recent years. Loosely related essays revolve around he and his wife raising their young son in Paris for a few years.

10. Richard Halliburton -- *The Royal Road to Romance*

An old classic from the 1920's that inspired many a young person with wanderlust. A bit wild and exaggerated in the storytelling, but it's a nice evocation of an energetic guy in his early twenties wanting to get out and passionately explore Europe and Asia.

11. Peter Hessler -- *River Town*

Hessler is about my age, and he writes for the New Yorker and National Geographic. *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* is about his experience in the Peace Corps teaching English in a small town in China. A very good and earnest evocation of being a young teacher in East Asia.

12. Tony Horwitz -- *Baghdad Without a Map*

A collection of essays about Horwitz's time with his journalist wife in the pre-Gulf War (I) years of the Middle East. Very funny and evocative; recommended. He also recently wrote a book called *Blue Latitudes*, in the footsteps of Captain Cook around the South Pacific -- but I haven't read it.

13. Pico Iyer -- *Video Night in Kathmandu*

Written in 1989 -- but aging well -- this is a great introduction to Asia. The first chapter, "Love Match" is in itself worth assigning as supplemental reading to the BATW 2000 stuff.

14. Peter Matthiessen -- *The Snow Leopard*

A Zen-flavored travel classic. Maybe a bit dense for freshman (it took me a long time to read at age 30), but excellent spiritual travel reading.

15. George Orwell -- *Burmese Days*

This is a novel, but it's a brilliant take on expat life in Burma, and the contradictions of living as a Westerner in the East. Along with Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises" it's one of those novels that is a truer evocation of expat and travel life than most non-fiction accounts I've read. Orwell's "Down and Out in Paris and London", while not explicitly a travel book, is also a great piece of well-reported non-fiction.

16. Tony Perrottet -- *Pagan Holiday* (hardcover version entitled "Route 66 A.D.")

Tony writes for a lot of the same magazines as I do. This book follows the footsteps of the ancient Roman tourists, and is a wonderful evocation of how people traveled 2000 years ago. Heavy on history and research, it covers Italy, Greece, Anatolia, and Egypt.

17. Tanya Shaffer -- *Somebody's Heart is Burning*

This book came out just this year, and recounts Shaffer's experiences as a traveler and volunteer in West Africa. Less of a journalist than a storyteller (Shaffer is a one-man-show actress in San Francisco), her book is a good example of how you don't have to rely on sober reportage or scholarship to tell a good nonfiction travel tale.

18. William Sutcliffe -- *Are You Experienced?*

Another backpacker pop novel. The main advantage of this book over the ones mentioned above is that it is screamingly funny and there are no cheap plot devices to kill off characters -- though by the end of the book you wish you could strangle the main character.

19. Jeffrey Tayler -- *Facing the Congo*

Tayler wrote for Salon back when I did, and his books are very straightforward and well-written. This book is about a pirogue trip down the Congo, and it really makes you feel the fear and horror of such a venture. You want to slap away the bugs as you read it.

20. David Tomory -- *A Season in Heaven*

This is an oral history of the Hippie Trail across Asia in the '60s and '70s. Not great literature, but a fascinating examination of bygone era in independent travel.

21. Other books that I haven't read but that I've heard well of recently are Robert Byron's classic "Road to Oxiana" (travels through Central Asia -- supposedly has a strong emphasis on architecture); Mike Tidwell's collection "In the Mountains of Heaven"; Lily Burana's American strip-club road trip, "Strip City"; and Taras Grescoe's "End of Elsewhere: Travels Among the Tourists", released this year, wherein a Canadian writer travels to the most heavily touristed spots of Europe and Asia and reports on the people who go there.

Oh, and I forgot to mention Evelyn Waugh's "Labels", written in his twenties, which is a quotable, readable, and oft-funny account of travels in the Mediterranean in the 1920's.