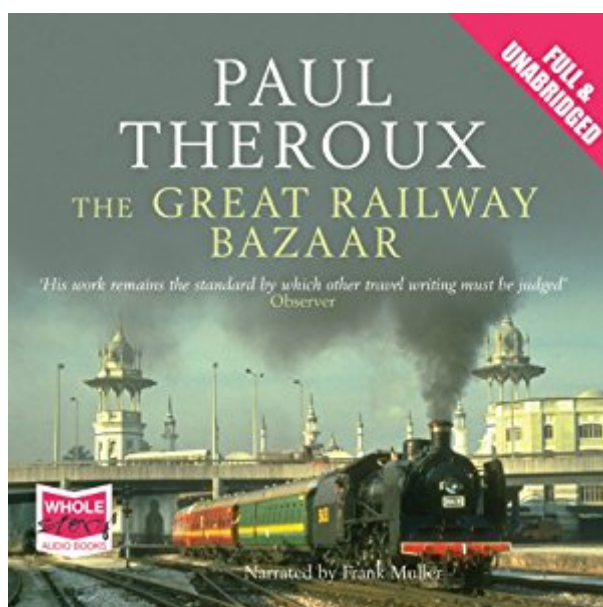


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The Great Railway Bazaar



Synopsis

The Great Railway Bazaar is Paul Theroux's account of his epic journey by rail through Asia. Filled with evocative names of legendary train routes - the Direct-Orient Express, the Khyber Pass Local, the Delhi Mail from Jaipur, the Golden Arrow to Kuala Lumpur, the Hikari Super Express to Kyoto, and the Trans-Siberian Express - it describes the many places, cultures, sights, and sounds he experienced and the fascinating people he met. Here he overhears snippets of chat and occasional monologues, and is drawn into conversation with fellow passengers, from Molesworth, a British theatrical agent, and Sadik, a shabby Turkish tycoon, while avoiding the forceful approaches of pimps and drug dealers. This wonderfully entertaining travelogue pays loving tribute to the romantic joys of railways and train travel.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I recently re-read Theroux's Great Railway Bazaar and immediately was awash in memories of innumerable train journeys across the length and breadth of my native India. This is an excellent read both for train lovers (whom the exotic trains Theroux rides will captivate) as well as readers who enjoy travelogues. To be fair, this is less a travelogue than a series of vignettes covering Theroux's journeys through various Asian countries. Theroux makes no attempt to develop an understanding of the cultures he travels through but is content to describe the train itself along with a handful of anecdotes about the people he meets on each leg of his journey. Fair enough, this is not after all a sociological text but a travel diary of sorts. And it is in description that Theroux's strength lies. He has the ability to make an anecdote seem so real as to make the reader a part of

the scene. The pace of the book varies with the stop and start of each journey and I guess every reader will prefer some parts to others. Plus of course, it is a bit jarring when one reads this book today, since the tide of history has greatly changed many of the countries Theroux traversed. Still, culture is slower to change than politics and that keeps much of the book relevant even today.

This fabulous account of getting on the train in London and riding trains (including the decrepit Orient Express) through Europe, across Asia as far east as Japan, then looping back to Europe on the Trans-Siberian, is not a bit dated, even though it was first published in 1975. Theroux is sometimes cross and prickly, but he doesn't miss a thing, and he ventures into places (and eats things) that most people never would. Because he is also a novelist, he's deft at limning the appearances and characters of the people he meets, and these people, who are variously vain, odd, smelly, crazy, foolish, bigoted, or just eccentric, give this travelogue--and indeed all of Theroux's travel narratives--the quality of a Dickens novel. I've read and enjoyed several of his other rail narratives, including "The Old Patagonian Express" (Central and South America), "Kingdom by the Sea" (United Kingdom), and "Dark Star Safari" (Africa). I'd start with this one, though, with its wonderful section on Vietnam in the last year of the war and its melancholy voyage across Leonid Brezhnev's sclerotic Soviet Union. As with all good books, it will transport you to places you did not know existed, even in this era of Google Earth. As for those who don't care for Theroux's sometimes cranky persona, well, there are always the twittering ecstasies of Peter Mayle ("A Year in Provence," etc.) or--worse--Frances Mayes ("Under the Tuscan Sun," etc.). Theroux's sojourns will never inspire busloads of tourists or the astronomical appreciation of the local real estate. Once you've read "The Great Railway Bazaar," be sure to follow it up with "Ghost Train to the Eastern Star," his recent (2009) account of his retracing (with some new stops) of the trip he took in the seventies. It's equally compelling, and it illuminates the story of the first trip.

One of the off-putting things about traditional travelogues is the litany of thing-descriptions (buildings, markets, clothes, hills) which just don't make for compelling brain food. Theroux focusses on people, and more specifically personalities. As an Indian, I can say that he captures the essence of different ilks of Indians with an incisiveness that I have not seen in any other American writer. I wish I had gotten my red, white and blue wife to read this before we visited. Many of her questions are answered episodically. Questions such as Why are some Indians so free with information about their digestive state? Why is an ailment worn like a badge of honor by some? Why do Indian travel guides always mention how far a book store is from your hotel? Isn't it admirable that somebody of

such high stature is so unassuming? The incomprehensible extremes of know-it-alls versus humility amongst those with great erudition..He makes equally astute observations about Afghans, Burmese, Ceylonese etc., but I'll leave you to read the book to enjoy these. Some may find this book insulting, as it is fairly blunt about the people's idiosyncrasies. I for one do not expect literature to be politically correct (and vice-versa).

This was my first Theroux novel and I'm already hooked. Theroux's descriptions of the fascinating people he encounters on the trip--from prostitutes to statesmen--are truly captivating. Even better are his vivid descriptions of the incredible scenery he takes in on his trip from London to the Far East. Be forewarned: once you read this book you will be tempted to quit your job, grab a backpack, and head for rails. If you enjoy the likes of Bill Bryson and Tim Cahill, you will certainly enjoy this novel.

This was the very first travel book I ever read. My parents had early on inspired in me a love of travel. Reading this book increased that desire to explore the world. Coincidentally, I also shared a love of traveling by train, though as the author frequently mentions, this can often be somewhat difficult, and at times downright unpleasant. While some people consider Paul Theroux to be cynical, I prefer to think of him as a realist who does not feel the need to sugar coat any of his writing. Part of embracing travel is to deal with the good and the bad, the same as many life experiences. I feel that the author was a pioneer in his belief that the journey is sometimes more rewarding than the destination itself. If you've never read any of Paul Theroux's works, you got some great reads to look forward to !

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The Cape to Cairo Rail Journey: overseas rail adventures (Railway adventures and historical
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