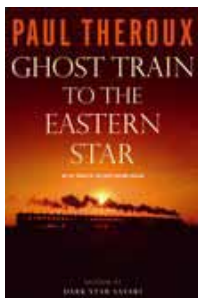




## The veteran travel writer shares his thoughts on a changing world

In 2006, after nearly half a century living in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Pacific, American author Paul Theroux travelled 45,000km by rail, retracing his epic 1973 journey from London across Asia and back through Russia, resulting in his new book *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*. Reflecting on a life of writing and travel, Theroux considers the state of travel in the 21st century.

**I first went to Africa with the Peace Corps in 1963.** There was no direct flight so I flew from New York, stopping in Rome, Benghazi, Nairobi, Salisbury (Harare), and then Malawi. Air travel was very cumbersome and expensive and no one in the countries where I worked thought much about emigrating. The great mission was nation-building. Then, in 1970, while living in Singapore, I saw my first jumbo jet. I couldn't believe how big it



was. Suddenly people began to see the world as a place where anyone could travel. With the jumbo jet, places such as Bangkok, Delhi and Singapore became heavily visited. Mass tourism inspired people to emigrate. People figured, I can leave and find a better life, particularly if I have an education.

**Today there are Somalis living** in central Maine. There are 40,000 Ethiopians in Seattle. What's the cultural connection between Ethiopia and the Pacific Northwest? I would say slender, yet still they are prospering there. Today, more people have money that didn't before. People in China and India are travelling and emigrating. But it's impossible to know where travel is going. No one foresaw the rise of Shanghai, and now this economic recession, how could we possibly know what is coming next?

I do think people will always travel because human curiosity is so strong. There's such

pressure to travel, to leave, people will always find a way. It will become more expensive and crowded, more like the model of the Greyhound bus, but modes of travel won't change much, they'll just become worse.

**Since 1950, the population of the US has doubled.**

This has become a much more crowded country and we are going to have to accommodate ourselves in less space. In China and India where they have reached critical mass, they have a standard of politeness we don't have. We have a kind of American good humor - 'hello, how are you,' but not in the programmatic way that people are polite in India, China or some other places. We're going to have to become more polite.

**In America there's a conceit** of being the wealthiest nation and we don't necessarily look outwards at other countries. Young people will say, I have a computer, I can find out anything. But the internet, like a vast library, is for many people simply a toy. With it you can know anything, but most people don't bother. They look at the lower shelves - pictures, porno, pop music, movies. They're not looking at the upper shelves where they can find out where countries are, who the people are.

**Technology like Google Earth is a great thing, amazing.** Who would have thought? But it's also highly selective with industrialised, well-populated places better documented than somewhere in Africa, South America or Asia. It has to be updated, yet it is amazing. But these things, like the Internet, are encyclopedic. None of this can take the place of being in a country, being among the people and living the life. Travel is personal experience, going out and



discovering for yourself, and nothing can replace that.

**You can teach people languages,** educate them better, but it's up to a person to be motivated, outward-looking, and care about the world. The US is an inward-looking country with a stereotypical view of the world. You can see it in our politics. No one alludes to a book, no one quotes a poem, no one talks about reading. People just talk in a very superficial way about the world with rhetoric and slogans. We're not mental midgets, but we're not very ambitious intellectually and our leaders aren't either.

**Travel in the future** will be affected by air fares and the size of planes. It's our foreign policy that determines how welcome we might be or if we can get a visa. Two years ago I couldn't get a visa to visit Iran. That's because of foreign policy and is true in many places. I don't think the 'War on Terror' has made us safer, but people are more afraid, more anxious and people have surrendered their rights of privacy and a lot of basic freedoms, but is this making us safer? We're living in a world of great uncertainty and social dislocation. We don't know what's going to happen next.

*Ghost Train to the Eastern Star* by Paul Theroux is published by Houghton Mifflin Books. [www.hmco.com](http://www.hmco.com)

**'Mass tourism inspired people to emigrate.'**

