

It's a funny world

Humorous travel books



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Book Selector

Early travelers' tales were full of hardships, dangers and adventures, and they provided the stay-at-home's only source of information about far-away places. Today few places are truly remote, inaccessible and unknown. Personal travel narratives are now seen more as a source of pure entertainment, and one way of entertaining readers is to make them laugh. Of

course there are still gripping tales of adventurous journeys and good, serious travel books, but alongside them has developed the humorous travelogue, often light-hearted and quirky, sometimes more caustic and satirical, occasionally quite bizarre.

Bill Bryson is one of the well-known exponents of the genre and has had several bestsellers. He combines background information on history and culture with humorous personal anecdotes. In **Down under**, he looks at Australia in this way. Some

earlier titles considered aspects of the United States (**The lost continent: travels in small town America**, **Notes from a big country**), Britain (**Notes from a small island**), and Europe (**Neither here nor there: travels in Europe**). However, not all his works have been received enthusiastically by critics and **A walk in the woods**, his book on the Appalachian Trail, was decidedly disappointing.

Australian Peter Moore travelled back to Sidney via Europe, the Middle East and Asia - without once setting foot on an aeroplane. He gives an amusing account of this in **The wrong way home**. He followed it up with **The full Montezuma: around Central America and the Caribbean with the girl next door**, about a six-month trip with a new girlfriend, full of sharp observations, oddities and wry humour. He has recently produced **No shitting on the toilet: the travel guide for when you've really lost it**, which combines some practical advice for backpackers with gruesome but funny traveller's tales of things going wrong.

Many travel on business, though only a few write entertaining books about it. British businessman Peter Biddlecombe has travelled all over the world. He tells of

people and places, airlines and airports, ways of doing business and other details of his experiences in hilarious style. His books include: **Never feel a stranger, A nice time being had by all, Very funny - now change me back again, I came, I saw, I lost my luggage: et tu, Royal Swazi Airlines?** Two earlier titles were **Travels with my briefcase: round the world - on expenses** and **French lessons in Africa: travels with my briefcase through French Africa**. George Courtauld writes about his travels as a Queen's Messenger in witty and interesting fashion in **The travels of a fat bulldog, The fat bulldog roams again,** and **The last travels of a fat bulldog**.

The tongue-in-cheek travel maxim 'Never pass a bar that has your name on it' provides plenty of scope if your name's McCarthy and you're visiting Ireland. Pete McCarthy's travels take him to the west part of the country, where he wanders around observing the quirks of modern-day Ireland and musing about his Irish heritage. He seems to have an unerring knack of encountering eccentric people and unlikely situations. He describes it all with affectionate humour and a touch of the blarney in **McCarthy's bar: a journey of discovery in Ireland**. He has recently followed up this bestseller with **The road to McCarthy**, in which he pursues far-flung and unlikely Irish connections all over the world.

In 1856 intrepid Victorian aristocrat Lord Dufferin voyaged to Iceland and the Arctic Circle and wrote a book about it. Inspired by reading this travel classic, Tim Moore decided to do a modern-day version of the journey. Neither aristocratic nor intrepid but clumsy, complaining, prone to seasickness and mortally afraid of polar bears, Moore found his experiences very different from Dufferin's. His self-deprecating account, **Frost on my moustache: the Arctic exploits of a lord and a loafer**, is richly comic, highly entertaining, and full of interesting trivia. Moore has also cycled the full route of the Tour de France, before the actual event. He describes this in the humorous, insightful and informative **French revolutions: cycling the Tour de France**.

Moving to warmer climes, Will Randall writes of the time he spent on a remote South Sea island in **Solomon time: adventures in the South Pacific**. It is a delightful look at the place and its people, and at Randall's own adventures and misadventures, all told with a mixture of comedy and

evocative description. **Sliced iguana: travels in unknown Mexico**, by Isabella Tree, is off-beat, perceptive and funny. In **Show me the magic: travels round Benin by taxi**, Anne Caulfield looks at the inhospitable but diverse and colourful country of Dahomey in engaging and humorous style.

Some are all at sea, literally and metaphorically. In **Eight men and a duck: an improbable voyage by reed boat to Easter Island**, Scottish journalist Nick Thorpe relates his experiences as part of the (decidedly inexperienced) crew of eight men who sailed a boat made of reeds from Chile to Easter Island with their mascot, a duck. This is a lighthearted sea adventure, told tongue-in-cheek. **A Viking voyage: in which an unlikely crew attempts an epic journey to the New World**, by W Hodding Carter, describes an attempt to re-create Leif Erikson's journey to the New World, starting with the building of an authentic replica of a Viking ship. There was real skill and danger involved, but the emphasis is on eccentricities, mistakes and humorous details. Sailing professionally, Christopher Lee spent some two years as a young apprentice aboard a tramp steamer in the 1950s. He re-creates both the era and his time at sea in an evocative, funny and poignant book, **Eight bells and top masts: diaries from a tramp steamer**.

Some seem to travel for sheer pleasure. Nelson Craig is an overweight, middle-class, middle-aged American who loves to travel. In **Let's get lost: adventures in the great wide open** he describes his trips to China, Indonesia, Egypt, the South Pacific, South America and Africa. Each account is like listening to a very entertaining and witty friend talking about his travels. Simon Mayle and his two companions were all out for a good time as they took a trip from New York to Rio - in a hearse. **The Burial Brothers**, the story of this oddball journey, has been compared to Kerouac's **On the road**, and is cleverly written and entertaining.

For **Funny signs: hilarious messages from Africa and beyond** readers of a travel magazine sent in photographs they had taken of signs seen along the road, mainly in southern Africa, but some from further afield. While the photographs may not be of high quality, the signs themselves are often hysterically funny (usually quite unintentionally) or extremely weird. Just the right signposts, perhaps, to guide one on a humorous armchair journey.

