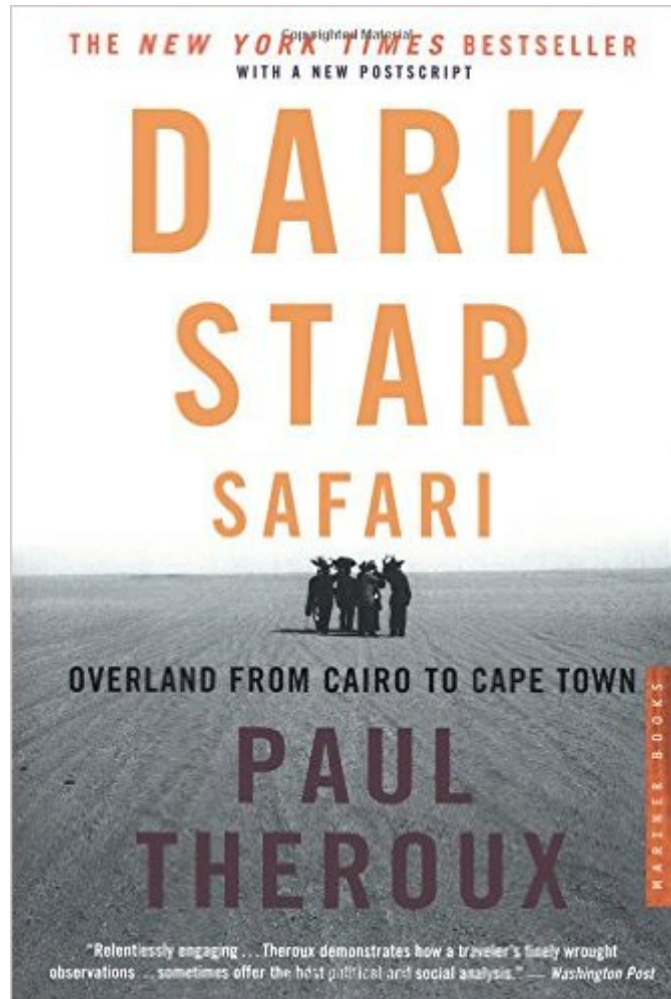


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Dark Star Safari: Overland From Cairo To Capetown



Synopsis

In *Dark Star Safari* the wittily observant and endearingly irascible Paul Theroux takes readers the length of Africa by rattletrap bus, dugout canoe, cattle truck, armed convoy, ferry, and train. In the course of his epic and enlightening journey, he endures danger, delay, and dismaying circumstances. Gauging the state of affairs, he talks to Africans, aid workers, missionaries, and tourists. What results is an insightful meditation on the history, politics, and beauty of Africa and its people, and "a vivid portrayal of the secret sweetness, the hidden vitality, and the long-patient hope that lies just beneath the surface" (*Rocky Mountain News*). In a new postscript, Theroux recounts the dramatic events of a return to Africa to visit Zimbabwe.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have lived in Africa for over 20 years, and recently completed a similar overland journey (Morocco to Cape Town). I am busy writing my own book, so was a little disappointed when the pre-eminent travel writer of our times released his own account. In any event, as a prelude to my own literary ambitions, I decided to read every book on the topic that I could find - and this one stands head and shoulders above the rest. (For those interested, 'Running with the Moon' by Johnny Bealby, and 'Africa Solo' by Kevin Kertscher were runners up). Theroux travels with Africans in conditions which are unspeakable for those of us accustomed to jet travel, high speed trains and air-conditioned vehicles. He meets with many of Africa's literary icons, numerous dignitaries, and contacts from time spent in Africa 40 years previously. He is also not afraid to use his renown to gain access and audience where the rest of us would have no chance. Combine these factors with his considerable literary skill, and the result is an unrivalled publication. His descriptions (notably the sunset on the

East African plains) are breathtaking without being long-winded. He is able to contrast this with descriptions of squalor, hardship, the disintegrated infrastructure of the towns, and the transport used to travel between them. The various colleagues and friends he visits along the way, including the vice-president of Uganda, represent Africa's intellectual and political elite. Mostly, these people are enlightened, pro-active and deeply aware of the problems facing their countries. It is encouraging to read their discourse, as it is so easy to dismiss Africa as the stereotype of disenfranchised paupers governed by despotic tyrants. His time spent in Africa during the 1960's was a time of liberation. Nationalist movements were gaining momentum, and Africans were giddy at the prospect of independence from their colonial overlords. Theroux is almost certainly unique in that he witnessed the Africa of then, and the Africa of now (but nothing of the in between) and is able to communicate his observations to a large, receptive audience. This perspective adds another level to the book which sets it apart. Much is said about charities, missionaries and NGO's, both by Theroux, and the various others who have reviewed this book. I agree entirely with Theroux's observations. I found that the personnel working with these agencies seemed disdainful towards those of us who were really enjoying Africa, and often arrogant towards those they were professing to help. Their efforts nurture some of the most contemptible qualities of the African condition, turning them into subjugated beggars rather than empowering their independence. The deployment of aid does not improve lives, but merely provides the necessary resources required for reproduction - more aid recipients, all now living at the previous, lowest common denominator. Much of the aid is taken by the local chiefs, and is traded in the markets (lest we forget, America fought a battle in Somalia over this very issue, see the movie 'Black Hawk Down'). It may seem anathema to our sensibilities that Theroux is so scathing of these worthy men and women who have given up so much to go and help the dispossessed, but if the aid is counter-productive, even if only by Theroux's estimation, then he has the right (obligation?) to communicate it to us. Theroux is particularly scathing of one missionary whose efforts involve reforming the 'sinful' ways of African prostitutes. In the USA prostitution may be a crime, but in Africa, he points out, it is the only channel of independence and financial freedom for women. It should be considered criminal that we are going there and preaching some dogma based on our value system, which is intended to deprive them of their livelihood. And this goes to the root of the issue, Theroux says. We are trying to solve their problems from our perspective, while driving around in a fancy white Landcruiser, the value of which is the entire life's earnings of a whole African family. African problems need African solutions run by Africans (with help from outside if necessary). They need dignity, empowerment and education - not grain, medicine and preaching. I think Theroux does a great job of communicating this - even if it

does ruffle some philanthropic feathers in the process. Why didn't I give the book five stars? Well, I feel that Theroux didn't give sufficient credence to the majority of proud Africans who lead the free and happy existence to which we all aspire. As a white traveler in Africa one is continuously exposed to the 'Give me money' syndrome. But this represents only a minute percentage of the population - those who await foreign travelers at bus stations, hotels and markets. These hustlers are a by-product of most societies - there were 8 million in Los Angeles by my last estimation. It took me at least two months of cultural immersion before I was able to transcend this exposure, and meet real Africans who were interested in my travels and reasons for being in Africa - people who I had to seek out. Indeed, most Africans are contented, hard-working individuals unaffected by the tribulations of modern western society, let alone of their own autocratic governments whose influence over their own population is token compared to what we are used to in the west. African society thrived for millennia before the ancestors of western society even left the continent. It is cultural arrogance to assume that we need to impose our new-found values on them. Sure there are pockets of famine, abusive dictators and colonial fall-out - but for the vast majority of the continent's population, life goes on unabated. It is mostly their exposure to our society (fancy white landcruisers, satellite TV etc.) that might give them cause to kowtow. It is Theroux' failure to acknowledge this, or at least comment upon it, that I feel is the only shortcoming of an otherwise outstanding account.

Forty years after being a Peace Corps worker in Malawi and a teacher in Uganda, Paul Theroux returns to Africa and finds things changed--for the worse. Now approaching his sixtieth birthday and wanting to escape from cell phones, answering machines, the daily newspaper, and being "put on hold," he is determined to travel from Cairo to Cape Town. He believes that the continent "contain[s] many untold tales and some hope and comedy and sweetness, too," and that there is "more to Africa than misery and terror." Traveling alone by cattle truck, "chicken bus," bush train, matatu, rental car, ferry, and even dugout canoe, he tries to blend in as much as possible, buying clothing at secondhand stalls in public markets, carrying only one small bag, and avoiding the tourist destinations. He is an observant and insightful writer, and his descriptions of his travails are so vivid the reader can experience them vicariously. His interviews with residents are perceptive and very revealing of the political and social climate of these places, and his character sketches of Sister Alexandra from Ethiopia (a nun who "has loved") and of two charming Ethiopian traders, a father and son, who take Theroux to the Kenyan border, are delightful. For most of the countries of Africa, however, he has no kind words. Kenya is "one of the most corrupt...countries in Africa," everything

in Kampala, Uganda, has changed for the worse, and in Tanzania "there was only decline--simple linear decrepitude, and in some villages collapse." At the U.S. embassy in Malawi, he finds an "overpaid, officious, disingenuous, blame-shifting...embassy hack" and, in pique, he wonders, "Had she, like me, been abused, terrified, stranded, harassed, cheated, bitten, flooded, insulted, exhausted, robbed, browbeaten, poisoned?" Theroux has become curmudgeonly over time, and it is difficult to "travel with" a man who sees himself as a hero for making the trip at all, but who also refuses to give a half-eaten apple to a hungry child when she begs for it. He is very critical in his comments about other writers. He admires Rimbaud, who lived in Ethiopia in the 1880's, he visits Naguib Mahfouz in Egypt, and he spends his sixtieth birthday with Nadine Gordimer, an old friend. But Hemingway ("bent on proving his manhood"), Isak Dinesen ("a sentimental memoirist"), Kuki Gallman (a "mythomaniac of the present day"), and V.S. Naipaul ("an outsider who feels weak") are abruptly dismissed. When he ultimately refers to his own "safari-as-struggle," it is hard not to compare his temporary and entirely voluntary struggles to those of the African people he meets along the way. "Being in Africa was like being on a dark star," he says. His book reflects this darkness.

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