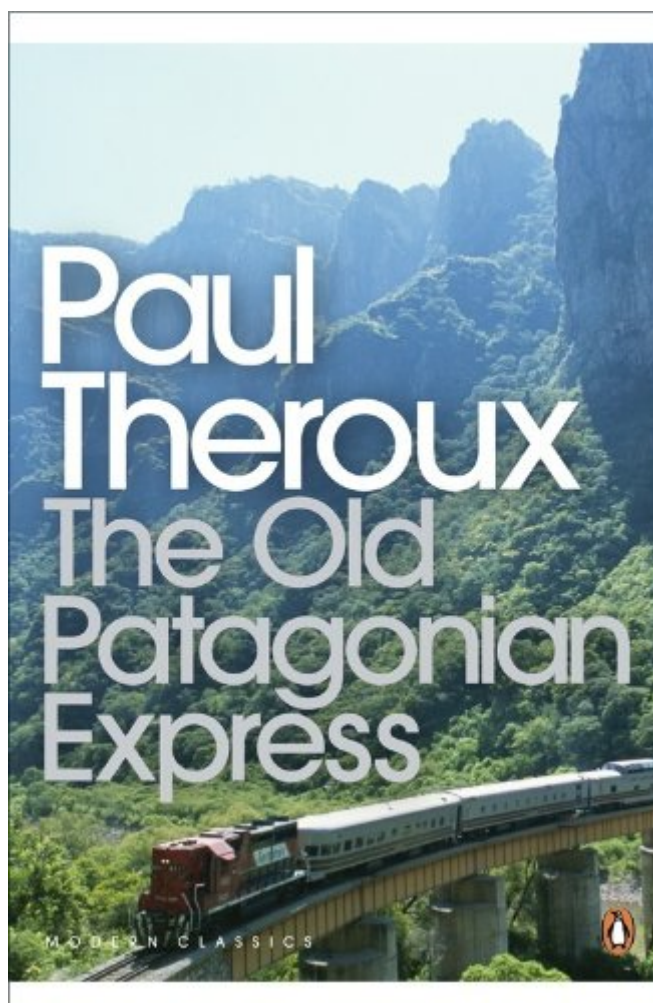


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The Old Patagonian Express: By Train Through The Americas (Penguin Modern Classics)



Synopsis

The Old Patagonian Express tells of Paul Theroux's train journey down the length of North and South America. Beginning on Boston's subway, he depicts a voyage from ice-bound Massachusetts to the arid plateau of Argentina's most southerly tip, via pretty Central American towns and the ancient Incan city of Macchu Pichu. Shivering and sweating by turns as the temperature and altitude rise and plummet, he describes the people he encountered – thrown in with the tedious, and unavoidable, Mr Thornberry in Lima and reading to the legendary blind writer, Jorge Luis Borges, in Buenos Aires. Witty, sharply observed and beautifully written, this is a richly evocative account of travelling to the end of the line.

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Customer Reviews

The cranky Paul Theroux may be an acquired taste, but my mom and I both shared a love of travel and the writings of Theroux. I am not sure if this is my favorite of his travel journals, but I think it may be a top contender. Theroux, who lives on Cape Cod, decided he could take a train out of Boston

and end up in Patagonia--the utter end of the earth, the tip of South America where Chile and Argentina meet at the point of the continent. Part of the charm of the book are the quick, sharp sketches of people Theroux meets on the way (not usually favorable) and the musings on the essence of the land he is traversing--its geography, its mood as well as the general condition of the local economy. Central America is phenomenally impoverished, down to the Stone Age level of heaps of huts and a few stray animals. His unvarnished view of the pitiable condition of these lands and their people gives you a better feeling for what life is like outside a developed nation, even Mexico, whose slums are posh compared to Nicaragua or Guatemala. South America is not well known by Americans--did you know there is a Welsh settlement in Patagonia? It's amazing to take this train trip even with such a grouchy companion as Theroux. He's a marvelous writer and like all good journal writers, doesn't spare anything, even if it makes himself look less noble. I read this before I ever traveled to Chile and then after and it really adds a lot of insight.

Yes, he is a curmudgeon - but I still love his books. This one in particular fed into my wish to "someday" travel. I was a poor student who thought travel was only for the rich. I didn't realize you could do it cheaply - if you don't mind a few discomforts. It gave the information I needed to take journeys that expanded my world view. The book reads like a diary of his travel from Boston to Tierra del Fuego, most of the time by train. Along the way he meets both ordinary & famous people - most of whom he dislikes. At the beginning of his train trip he meets a self-centered young woman who gives him a rundown of her dietary needs and "sensitivities." She is the first of many people who will annoy and confound him. He also manages to meet luminaries like Jorge Luis Borges. Even Borges doesn't distract him from train "schedules", breakdowns, people, and misunderstanding that - he thinks - exist only to thwart his enjoyment. He hates everyone and everything but manages to describe it all in hilarious prose. I know many people dislike his grouchy persona - they wonder why he even travels. Give him a break - he is like one of those old - fashioned uncles (at least in literature) who fill your head with wonderful images of far away places while complaining about the most trivial problems. You know he's finicky, so all you take in is the wonder of discovering new places. I will always love this book and Mr. Theroux for leading me out of small, Midwestern-town-USA. How else would I have found myself hitching a ride to Otoval market (ECUADOR) on top of a precarious truck carrying vegetables & chickens? Two Japanese sisters made the trip even more fun as we screamed & laughed all the way. A trip of a lifetime on a shoe string budget. Luckily I was young enough to ignore discomfort so that I could enjoy new vistas and people. I will always keep my worn copy of this book. I give it 5 stars for inspiration, hilarity, and

practical advice.

The book is very entertaining. But Theroux's attitude towards the people he meets along the way gradually becomes irritating. He pours scorn on the typical time-constrained tourists, for their seeming disregard for the locals and for their exclusive focus on the famous hotspots (these bring his assumptions). On the other hand, the long term travelers of the backpacking sort invite his contempt in other ways; he ridicules their seeming obsession with frugality and -again - the disinterest in interacting with the locals. All in all, it seems that of all the myriad travelers in South America, he alone has noble motives and the correct way to travel. Contrary to other commenters here, I didn't sense any humility. There is some self-criticism here and there, but I get the feeling that they are mostly for effect and to charm the reader.

It's not his best work by my tastes but it is Paul Theroux's only account of traveling through North and South America. It has all the challenges of a travelogue written in the late 70s such as disparaging remarks about people of colour, endless commentary on the dilapidation of non western cities and towns but the character studies are there of the people he meets on trains and the delight is his description of time spent with Borges. It's a worthwhile read for armchair travellers eager to experience the Americas.

And what did you do last summer? This is the best train trip I've ever been on. (Well maybe that Stripper in the smoker car on the Santa Fe was more fun, but this lasted longer. :))

Theroux travels and sees things in a jaded light. His views of Oklahoma and Texas are tee totally out to lunch. His trip to Nuevo Laredo and Mexico City are warped views. I made that trip myself many times and he is a poor observer and quite biased. Of course he is trying to be funny and making fun of Mexico and Texas is all well and good, only he doesn't know diddly about the subjects. I like his writing but after reading this book I think he is way over rated and I have come to the conclusion he isn't worth the effort.

Even though his trip is now decades ago, Paul Theroux's account of traveling the Americas (mostly) by train still paints a vivid picture. Notably, he does not hesitate to admit his discomforts and discouragements along with the fascination he describes. This is a book for the actual or prospective traveler, not for the armchair tourist. It is challenging, eye-opening, and grittily realistic.

Great Peru prep book

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