LEFTIST PLANET
Why do so many travel guides make excuses for dictators?

BY MICHAEL MOYNIHAN
IN OTHER WORDS

N 1933, AS JOSEPH STALIN was busy purging his enemies and building a murderous cult of personality, the New York-based left-wing magazine the Nation advised readers interested in traveling to Moscow that Intourist, the Soviet Union's official travel agency, employed as tour guides “very interesting and attractive young women without hats,” skilled in correcting misinformation spread by the capitalist media. Although the hateless apparatchiks from Intourist limited sightseeing to approved destinations—Ukraine, at the apogee of its brutal famine, was off-limits—they were nevertheless adept at obtaining “special permits” from the predecessor of the KGB, which, the Nation noted, “far from being a band of terrorist police, is an extremely able and intelligent organization, always glad to help tourists.”

Even long after Stalin's crimes were revealed in Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech, the migratory “fellow traveler” persisted, shuffling between failed utopias and dropping in at model collective farms and labor camps. During the Cold War, this sort of ideological tourism was almost exclusively a progressive domain; the sugar-cane plantations of Cuba heaved with vacationing European and American compañeros, but few free market acolytes turned up in Augusto Pinochet's Chile to witness pension privatization or marvel at his market liberalization program. Even in the Soviet Union's final days, Hungarian-American academic Paul Hollander noted, a number of companies still offered educational trips to Cuba, Vietnam, Grenada, and Nicaragua. And years after the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, ideological dead-enders could still join expensive “reality tours” of Fidel Castro's Cuba or Hugo Chávez's Venezuela.

These days, the young and progressive book travel online, eschewing tour groups and specialized travel agents. This leaves the task of a travelers' political education to guidebook empires like Lonely Planet and Rough Guides, both of which—while offering what Lonely Planet calls “honest and objective” advice on where to find the perfect pisco sour in Peru or that slice of beach paradise in Cambodia—provide detailed, polemical asides on the political history and culture of the countries under review.

Lonely Planet was started in 1973, when the British hippie husband-and-wife team Maureen and Tony Wheeler self-published a guide to cheap travel in Southeast Asia. Mark Ellingham, also British, founded the competing Rough Guides in 1982 after finding existing guidebooks too thin on the “politics and contemporary life” of travel destinations. Both companies have been astonishingly successful. Rough Guides has sold more than 30 million books over the last 25 years, transforming itself from a publisher of travel guides into a global business empire, producing television programs, music albums, and dozens of other titles (like The Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories). In 2010, Lonely Planet, now wholly owned by BBC Worldwide, sold its 100-millionth book. It too has branched into television, radio, and magazines.

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Both guidebook empires have also made their founders very rich—Lonely Planet was sold for well over $100 million—though this has induced a certain amount of introspection. Lonely Planet's Wheeler now says he feels guilty about it's useful to begin by skimming their guidebooks for undemocratic countries like Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria.

There's a formula to them: a pro forma acknowledgment of a lack of democracy and freedom followed by exercises in moral equivalence, various contorted attempts to contextualize authoritarianism or atrocities, and scorching attacks on the U.S. foreign policy that precipitated these defensive and desperate actions. Throughout, there is the consistent refrain that economic backwardness should be viewed as cultural authenticity, not to mention an admirable rejection of globalization and American hegemony. The hotel recommendations might be useful, but the guidebooks are clotted with historical revisionism, factual errors, and a toxic combination of Orientalism and pathological self-loathing.

For instance, readers of Lonely Planet: Libya—published before the recent unpleasantness—are told that Libya's murderous dictator, Muammar al-Qaddafi, was likely framed for the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103. In fact, the book relates, “One of the most credible theories was that the bombing had been ordered by Iran in retaliation for the shooting down of an Iran Air Airbus by a U.S. warship in the Persian Gulf on 3 July 1988.” Qaddafi is cast as a misunderstood figure (“A recurring theme throughout Colonel Qaddafi's rule has been his desire for unity with other states, all to no avail”), unfairly maligned by Western governments (“ordinary Libyans suffered [under sanctions] and the world rebuffed repeated Libyan offers to hand over the Lockerbie suspects for trial”), and the victim of media unfairness (“Western reporters, keen for any opportunity to trivialise the eccentricities of Libya under Qaddafi, referred to [his bodyguards] as the 'Amazon Women'”).

It's not just the wacky colonel who got the benefit of the doubt. Has the media convinced you that the burqa is an instrument of oppression? Lonely Planet: Afghanistan, in a rare bit of what appears to be Taliban nostalgia, explains: “The burqa can be seen as a tool to increase mobility and security, a nuance often missed in the outside world's image of the garment. Assuming that a burqa-clad woman is not empowered and in need of liberation is a naïve construct.”

Western media outlets have misinformed us on Iran as well. Lonely Planet: Iran assures travelers to the Islamic Republic that “99% of Iranians—and perhaps
even [President] Ahmadinejad himself aren't interested in a nuclear conflict with Israel. In fact, ignore all the hyperventilating about nuclear weapons, because it's "hard to argue with" Iran's claim that its uranium-enrichment program exists only for peaceful purposes.

The West's misreading of Cuba is an old staple for this crowd, and a new generation of lefty guidebooks doesn't fail to disappoint on this score. The Rough Guide to Cuba, for example, even has a kind word for the draconian censorship implemented by the Castro regime, lecturing us that it's "geared to producing (what the government deems to be) socially valuable content, refreshingly free of any significant concern for high ratings and commercial success." Sure, the guidebook says, one can read dissident bloggers like Yoani Sánchez, but beware that opponents of the regime can be "paranoid and bitter" and are "at their best when commenting on the minutiae of Cuban life [and] at their worst when giving vent to unfocused diatribes against the government."

We've also apparently got it all wrong when it comes to Cuba's notorious Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), a Stasi-like network of neighborhood-level informers that monitors and informs on troublesome dissidents like Sánchez. Lonely Planet: Cuba thankfully assures tourists that the group is, in fact, a benign civic organization: The CDR are "neighborhood-watch bodies originally formed in 1960 to consolidate grassroots support for the revolution [and] they now play a decisive role in health, education, social, recycling and voluntary labor campaigns."

Almost completely cut off from the maw of McDonald's, Madonna and other global corporate-cultural influences, Cuba retains a refreshing preserved quality. It's a space and place that serves as a beacon for the future—universal education, health care and housing are rights people the world over want, need and deserve.

Writing in the Ecologist, a venerable British environmentalist journal, Brendan Sainsbury, co-author of Lonely Planet: Cuba, contends that there is purity in Cuban penury:

Falling into step alongside pallid, overweight and uncoordinated Western wannabes out on two-week vacations from Prozac and junk food, the
Cubans don't just walk; they glide, sauntering rhythmically through the timeworn streets like dancers shaking their asses to the syncopated beat of the rumba. Maybe the secret is in the food rationing.

There is an almost Orientalist presumption that the citizens of places like Cuba or Afghanistan have made a choice in rejecting globalization and consumerism. From the perspective of the disaffected Westerner, poverty is seen as enviable, a pure existence unsullied by capitalism. Sainsbury refers to Cuban food as “organic” and praises the Castro brothers’ “intellectual foresight [that] has prompted such eco-friendly practices as nutrient recycling, soil and water management and land-use planning.” Meager food rations and the 1950s cars that plod through Havana’s streets, however, don’t represent authenticity or some tropical version of the Western mania for “artisanal” products, but, rather, failed economic policy. It’s as much of a lifestyle choice as female circumcision is in Sudan.

At the same time, formerly totalitarian countries that have undergone market reforms and economic growth are often upbraided by guidebook writers for betraying their revolutionary ideals. As living standards rise in Asia, the authentic travel experience is harder to come by. Writing on the Rough Guides website a few years ago, Ron Emmons, co-author of The Rough Guide to Vietnam, expressed his disappointment at the diminished power of the communist economy in Hanoi, sighing that his “first impression of Vietnam was a Pepsi advert splashed across the side of a shuttle bus. After centuries of valiantly fighting off invaders by land, sea and air, Vietnam had finally succumbed to western influences.”

Even more surprising is the existence of guidebooks for walled-off North Korea, where government chaperones hover over every aspect of a traveler’s itinerary. Lonely Planet, which offers a small section on the Hermit Kingdom in its South Korea book, saw in the late North Korean leader Kim Jong II (who routinely announced his intention to engulf Seoul in a “sea of fire”) a “pragmatism and relative openness to change.” And Bradt, a British publisher that offers the only dedicated English-language tourists’ guide to North Korea, positively effuses about the desolate, gray capital of Pyongyang as “a city without parallel in Korea, or Asia.”

In sunlight, the streets and squares, without a fleck of dust, can literally dazzle... Pyongyang reputedly has 58m² of green belt per citizen—four times the amount prescribed by the United Nations, and in spring its hills heave with green.

Perhaps it’s no surprise then that Bradt also has a unique take on North Korea’s successful quest for nuclear weapons at a time when millions of its people were starving: “The most common arguments in the Western media are that the aggressive little dictatorship sought
all along to build a nuke and use it as a bargaining chip for more aid—which sidesteps the fact that the DPRK was being threatened by a nuclear mega power with which, someway by mutual consent, it was not at peace.” Regardless, there is little cause for concern, according to Bradt, because the “allegations about the uranium enrichment” are most likely a figment of overheated American imagination, from the same people who “cooked up the WMD intel against Iraq.”

So what gives? The travel-guidebook writers employed by publishers like Lonely Planet and Rough Guides aren’t “cleanskins,” dropped into a country and instructed to familiarize themselves with the local culture and report back their findings, but rather professional travelers, enamored of the places they’re tasked with cataloging. (Well, except Thomas Kohnstamm, perhaps, who admitted in 2008 that he had written Lonely Planet: Colombia without having ever set foot in the country. He was, however, dating “an intern in the Colombian Consulate.”) These besotted individuals possess a remarkable ability to be forgiving of those they love, and scathing about those they hate. While Rough Guides enthuses about Cuba’s health-care system and equivocates about Havana’s totalitarian government, it has no problem defining American culture as a “combination of a shoot-from-the-hip mentality with laissez-faire capitalism and religious fervor [that] can make the USA maddening at times.” One could see this sort of knee-jerk leftism as archaically charming, if it weren’t so insidious.

After all, beyond tacitly endorsing the countries they visit, tourists also pour money into them. Take Lonely Planet’s guide to Burma, a country that languished for almost four decades under a military junta known for imprisoning thousands of dissidents and leaving millions of citizens in poverty. In 2008, Britain’s Trades Union Congress (TUC), which represents 6 million British workers, threatened a boycott of Lonely Planet if it didn’t withdraw its Burma edition; according to the TUC’s petition, the book sent a “strong message of validation to the brutal military regime” by encouraging tourists to visit. Lonely Planet pointed out that the guide warned readers of the ethical dilemma by noting that forced labor was used to develop tourist sites and that “activists claim that tourism dollars help directly fuel government repression.” But it refused to pull the guide. With the Burmese junta now relaxing its grip on power and Nobel Peace Prize-winning activist Aung San Suu Kyi encouraging tourism again, Rough Guides, which said in 2008 that it felt “wrong” to publish a Burma edition, is currently reconsidering.

The problem with guidebooks to countries like Cuba, Iran, and North Korea is not that they encourage travel to rogue regimes (the American travel ban to Cuba and the lack of tourism in North Korea have done little to unseat either government), but that they consistently misinform tourists about the exact nature of those countries. The solution isn’t to stop traveling, but to travel wisely, not mistaking grinding poverty for cultural authenticity or confusing dictatorship with a courageous rejection of globalization.

So go to Cuba. Try to get that visa to North Korea. Visit the former U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Just make sure to throw your Lonely Planet and Rough Guides in the trash before you do.

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