

July 08 - SUMMARY – DARK STAR SAFARI by Theroux

Well, we made it through Africa without any major mishap or illness. This is in sharp contrast to the experiences of Paul Theroux on his Dark Star Safari as lead by Keith Adams at the Travel Lovers' Book Club!

I don't think that there was one person who had read the book that did not feel that Mr. Theroux was an excellent writer. That being said, most of the group was not eager to pack a bag and trace his pilgrimage. His mode(s) of travel including cars and buses used for target practice, willingness to eat close to the ground and his acceptance to barely tolerable sleeping accommodations, did not spur us into action. While he did splurge on food and lodgings at times and they sounded wonderful, it was obvious to us that he actually preferred living rough to the luxury and abundance found at the better locations.

His attention to detail and thoroughness of approach was applauded, and yet many felt that his writing style slowed down the reading and enjoyment of the book. His details ranged from history, recent politics, books he read along the way or an incredibly detailed explanations of what he did on a certain day. Most readers found that Mr. Theroux is not an author you can put down for long periods of time and then be able to quickly return to the story. The one's that had finished the book said that marathon reads were the best way to keep the momentum going. If you read him for a consistent period, you became familiar with his rhythm and could see the less interesting sections approaching. I would have suggested boxing or highlighting the historical parts of his work so that people could peruse or ignore by choice. I also longed for an index and a bibliography of books, contacts and details so readers could research issues on interest on the side.

It was obvious that Mr. Theroux had a deep and long lived appreciation for the uniqueness and idiosyncrasies of Africa. His yearlong trip to revisit the old and take in the new had many ups and downs. I think everyone felt his disappointment when he returned to his former school and found that it had been abandoned. He found Malawi incredibly depressed both financially and entrepreneurially. I personally was amazed when a Malawian said he felt that they were better off because "Everyone will soon have a cell phone". I was not able to see how that compared to GNP, employment, and access to health care or graduation rates. Leslie pointed out that with technology, perhaps more people with cell phones will take the developing countries into a society where they are better connected and less likely to blindly follow or tolerate abusive or corrupt leaders. Leslie has a point.

One of the things that surprised most of the readers was his repeated and consistent disdain for the work of NGO's in Africa and the misappropriation of funds and resources that seemed to be ubiquitous across the nations. (i.e. sparkling white Land Rovers with the name of the NGO on the side and aid workers who would not stop to help a stranded traveler). Not a very happy thought about the resources sent by well-intentioned donors that never make it to the people that really needed the help. The group had a discussion about how to avoid this in the future. The main solution discussed was to forego outright charity and empower with micro-loans or pass-it-on programs such as Kiva.org or Heifer International. It appears that agencies that begin at the ground level seem to have a better chance of getting local buy in and on-going monitoring which seems to be key to the success and sustainability of these efforts.

Some of the group mentioned being tired of his repeated discussions of the racy book that he was working on and how he valiantly sidestepped any physical entanglements with ladies of the evening. Me thinks the man might "protest to much?"

For myself, I was drawn to the sections where he described in careful detail, the sights, sounds, tastes and experiences that filled his senses and thrilled his heart. His love for the continent and most of the cultures was obvious. He was a man with a decent command of the African languages and this I feel helped him make friends faster. He was not expecting the journey to be easy or uncomplicated and was agile when it can to making do and seeing a silver lining within thunderheads.

His discussions about the attitudes of the big cities versus the small villages drew many of us in. He has an obvious respect for the Good Samaritan principle where people with nothing themselves helped people in need no matter who they were. What was harder to understand was the racism to other cultures (the Indian's) and their work ethic. According to Theroux, the African couldn't wait to get rid of the Indian and take over their stores. While the African attempted to make a go of the businesses, there seemed to be an overall feeling of entitlement and a general unwillingness to put in the hard work necessary for success.

I think the last sentence in the book summarizes Mr. Theroux's feelings, even after all he went through. "The kindest Africans had not changed at all, and even after all these years the best of them as bare-assed."

Thank you Keith for such a wonderful suggestion and for leading us through the discussion. We look forward to your next pick!

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