

Travelers' blessings: An interview with Rick Steves

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [February 9, 2010](#) issue

Rick Steves got into the travel business by teaching travel classes at the University of Washington in Seattle and working as a tour leader in the summers. His 1979 book Europe Through the Back Door emphasized how to cut costs and encouraged travelers to avoid prepackaged tours and encounter local cultures in a more authentic way. His TV shows about European destinations have aired frequently on public television. Steves, a Lutheran, whose business is based in Edmonds, Washington, just published Travel as a Political Act, a series of "field reports" from Europe, Central America, Asia and the Middle East.

What motivates you to teach people about traveling?

To me, travel is a spiritual thing, and I try to create an environment in which people will feel free to consider the effects that travel has on their spirituality. It is a challenge to do that while working in a secular environment.

My desire has always been to inflict on comfortable Americans situations that they have never encountered before in the hope that they will gain an appreciation of their place in the world. I decided on forming a secular tour company, however, because I like to act as a Trojan horse in that regard.

What effect does travel have on people's spirituality?

People have a lot of fear. The flip side of fear is understanding. When you travel to places new to you, you understand more, so you fear less. And then you can love people, as a Christian should. The less you travel, the more likely that media with a particular agenda can shape your viewpoint. Those of us who travel are a little more resilient when it comes to weathering the propaganda storms that blow constantly across the U.S. media.

What recent insights have you gained from traveling?

In Europe I am always meeting people less driven than I am. For example, I met a man in Greece who spent 20 years working in the U.S. and then went back to the old country to retire. When he returned to Greece, it occurred to him that not once did he take a nap while in the U.S. Culturally, it just wasn't OK to do that. Europeans know how to enjoy a moment, and that's something almost subversive for many people in the U.S.

What traveling experiences would you especially recommend for American Christians?

I love to take American Christians to Muslim countries, especially Turkey. One of my favorite moments as a tour guide took place in a village in Turkey. Our group was in the mayor's living room. He showed me a place on his wall where he hung his Qur'an bag—the most holy place in a Muslim home. He said to me, "In my Qur'an bag I keep a Bible, a Torah and the Qur'an, because Christians, Jews and Muslims are all people of the Word, children of the Book and of God."

How amazing it would be if we could all share the same "bag"—share the same planet and be thankful to our Creator. Those are the kinds of eye-opening experiences that I try to bring to people through our program.

What are some common travel mistakes that Americans make?

Americans are so proud of their patriots like Nathan Hale, who wished they had more than one life to give for their country. I like to afflict the comfortable a little bit and tell them that the Nathan Hales and Patrick Henrys are a dime a dozen on this planet. That's not to diminish the importance of such heroes but to say that many groups are waging a struggle every bit as valiant as the one our patriots waged.

For example, every year, nine languages become extinct, and that means that nine ethnic groups have lost the battle to preserve their language. Their patriots who wished they had more than one life to give are gone, and no one speaks their language any more.

Americans are also often guilty of economic prejudices. We tend to think that people who are dirty and don't have nice clothes have less value and are more expendable. By now so many dirty, miserably dressed people have impressed me with their strength and spirituality that I am not going to discount them.

What about American Christians?

Frankly, many Christians are embarrassingly ethnocentric. They wear their Christianity on their sleeves and think everybody should be like them. I wish I could be their tour guide. I'd put them in a lousy hotel, make them talk to people who don't speak their language, give them some history to read and hope they can recognize that other people have dreams other than theirs. They might have the Bulgarian dream or the Sri Lankan dream or the Pakistani dream. Many Americans think that everybody should have the American dream.

What are the differences between being a tourist and being a pilgrim?

The system encourages you to be a tourist, because the system is an economic engine. You are led to believe that you need to be a consumer, that you need a fancy hotel, that you need to take a fancy tour. You will go home having done some predictable things—just what the advertising told you would happen.

To advocate something different is an affront to the system. If you are a travel editor, you're encouraged to promote helicopter skiing and three-day weekends in Reno and jet skiing in Maui—all of which will endear you to advertisers.

You could go to Africa and take in all the finest golf courses and come home having learned nothing. Or you could go to Africa and drink tea with local people, help them out in different ways and gain empathy for them. You'd come home changed. That's being a traveler. Travelers and pilgrims are people who are connecting, learning, challenging themselves and not doing what's predictable.

What do you think about mission trips?

If I were planning a mission trip, I would make a point of tackling people's ethnocentrism. There are a few books that can be helpful. *Reading the Bible Through Third World Eyes* is one I would recommend. *War Against the Poor* is another that I have purchased by the hundreds. We've got to acknowledge that we in the First World downplay Jesus' preferential option for the poor. We play up the notion that we should be industrious; we think, "Blessed are those who invest smartly." When you venture to the developing world you are challenged to interpret the Bible from other people's perspectives.

Too often, when Christians visit a place where the people are poor, they bring along quilts that members of their congregation have sewn to help the poor stay warm, but they don't ask, "Why are these people in such squalor?" Mother Teresa was a loving person motivated by her Christian faith, but I think she was so beloved in part because she never asked "why?" When you ask why, that's when things get really interesting.

Archbishop Oscar Romero saw structural poverty and economic injustice in El Salvador and asked why. And he was assassinated. Thirty years after his death, the power of Romero in El Salvador is just mind-blowing.

Our goal as thoughtful travelers is to see things from an economic-justice point of view. Economic justice is the hard issue. You can travel and then come home and consume with impunity in a way that keeps poor people poor. Or you can travel as a political act and come home inspired to live your life in empathy and solidarity with all of God's people.

Recently I was one of the judges for a video contest sponsored by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "God's Work, Our Hands" was the theme. All the videos showing mission efforts were commendable, but they were mostly about acts of charity, with not much edginess. Nobody was willing to ask about economic justice. Poverty is structural. It is a matter of people's buying power.

I understand that you personally are trying to make a difference in the area of affordable housing.

My work has always been involved with affordable housing. That's what I do: I look for places people can have a decent roof over their heads while they are traveling.

I have traveled enough in the developing world to know that land issues are driving a lot of the strife and squalor. If I own land and can make more money by growing fancy flowers to sell to America than by growing rice and beans for local consumption, what am I going to do? It's a slam dunk—I'm going to grow flowers for export. That's a land issue in simple terms.

I've also had friends and relatives who have been one paycheck away from homelessness. I understand what structural poverty is. The rules are structured to keep landless people down. It's true both in America and in the developing world, though in the latter you see homelessness in a much more extreme form. So it is a

natural thing for me to be excited about affordable housing.

So what have you done?

My wife and I had a little retirement nest egg, like anybody would who runs a good business for a couple of decades. And I thought: This money is just sitting there in the bank giving me taxable interest but not doing anybody else any good. I didn't want to be a landlord because I don't have the energy or the temperament for that. This money could provide housing, and there are groups like the YWCA that could use it to house more of the people who are in transition and tough straits. What a great opportunity to put our equity to use. Just buy a rundown apartment building, make it a community effort with a church to spiff it up, and give it to the YWCA to use to help single moms get back on their feet.

I just say, "YWCA, there is a huge need. You are very capable. You need more apartments to house people. Take these 25 units—and bless you for doing all of that." So every night I go to bed not checking my portfolio to see how my investment has done, but knowing that 25 moms and their kids have a nice home. There's no risk on my part, no stress. I still own the building. It's a win-win-win situation. My hope is that other people would see that example and partner with the YWCA or churches or whomever and do something similar in their communities.

This Web version of the interview contains some minor modifications of the print version.