

TRAVEL

Back to Africa

By Peter Chilson

Age slows us all, but a few rare types sail through the years somehow unimpeded.

Paul Theroux, in his latest book, "The Last Train to Zona Verde," writes, "It occurs to me that someone else should be doing this, someone younger perhaps, hungrier, stronger, more desperate." He tells us this before trekking the slums of Cape Town, South Africa, then traveling north by train and bus into the deserts of Namibia, detouring for an elephant safari in Botswana, and finally, after a horrific border crossing, traversing the exhausted landscape of postwar Angola.

Theroux made the journey three years ago, at just shy of 70 years of age. At the outset, he teases us with the notion that this might be his "valedictory trip," time to take stock on the continent where he was a Peace Corps worker in 1963, in Malawi, and where he began writing.

If this book is proof, age has not slowed Theroux or encouraged him to rest on his achievements: 29 works of fiction and this, his 17th book of travel, including "Sir Vi-

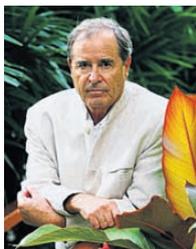
The Last Train to Zona Verde

My Ultimate African Safari
By Paul Theroux
(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 353 pages; \$27)

dia's Shadow," the memoir of his difficult and global friendship with V.S. Naipaul.

Theroux goes it alone, ignoring the easy routes, which would undermine the value of travel and writing about it. For his debut travelogue, "The Great Railway Bazaar," published in 1975, he circled the globe by train, experiencing Vietnam in the crazy closing months of the American war. Years later, he rode trains across the Americas from Boston to Argentina for "The Old Patagonia Express," and in the 1990s kayaked the South Pacific to write "The Happy Isles of Oceania."

"Zona Verde" — literally "green space," from the Portuguese, reflecting Theroux's love for the bush — is a sequel to "Dark Star Safari," which came out in 2002. He traveled Africa from Cairo to Cape Town "down the right side," the continent's eastern flank, by train and cargo



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Paul Theroux

canoe, on buses and "chicken" trucks. Now, from Cape Town, he continues "up the left hand side until ... the end of the line ... on the road or in my mind." The destination: Tsimbuktu, in Mali.

He's still gutsy, alert to Africa's struggles, its injustices and history, and attracted because it "is still so empty, so apparently unfinished." Part of what makes him a worthwhile guide is his knowledge of place. Of the Cape Town slums he reveals that "slumming," the verb, goes back to 1884, when wealthy Londoners "headed to the slums of the East End for the thrill of the gutter."

Theroux can be hard on hosts, like the Cape Town taxi driver who showed him, at his request, where an American student was dragged

from her car and beaten to death by a mob in 1993 as South Africa's apartheid rule was ending.

"Africa for Africans — it was their thinking," the driver says of the mob.

"That's not a philosophy," Theroux replies. "It's racism."

In the tourist-heavy south he reflects on Namibia's German colonizers and the "myth of the Bushman" of eastern Namibia and Botswana. The Ju/'hoansi people have been immortalized and damaged by popular culture, like the film "The Gods Must Be Crazy," and by academics and do-gooders. Once agile hunters, Theroux writes, they became "plagued by drunkenness and hunger."

In this way, "Zona Verde" walks us through history and people, guided by Theroux's disdain for colonialism, foreign aid and celebrity activists who have weakened Africa's identity. Then he heads to northern Namibia and Angola — where life gets ugly and he is most at ease as a writer.

Near the border he finds "a world of roadblocks and mobs," building to what may be one of the funniest, most nerve-bending border crossings in contemporary travel literature. Guards bark at travelers they shake down for money. Theroux, toting a duffel and briefcase and hounded by predatory teenagers, smiles and waves. Perfect

strangers help him negotiate the border and leave him on the other side, Angola, with a drunken bush taxi driver.

Theroux's Africa offers wealth and kindness, poverty and chaos. Angola, a former Portuguese colony bleeding from war and colonial treachery, is mired in starvation while flush with billions in oil profits. Even Mali — home to the ancient city of Timbuktu and until last year a model democracy — has crumbled, hollowed out by coups and holy war, events that were unfolding during Theroux's travels. This blunts his plan of pushing north into West Africa and Mali, across lands of "warlords, mercenaries ... hostile tribes ... and religious fanatics." At Luanda, Angola's capital, he stops. To continue would be "a travel stunt, like riding a pogo stick through the desert ... to what end?"

Death? Theroux confesses his fear, but insists, "I am not too old." On the final page, the reader may feel relieved by the words "Not the end of travel, or of reckless essaying — there is no end to those for me."

Peter Chilson is the author of "Riding the Demon: On the Road in West Africa." His writing has appeared twice in the Best American Travel Writing anthology. E-mail: books@sfchronicle.com

MEMOIR

A solitary journey

When Eve Ensler was diagnosed in 2010 with cancer of the uterus, and subsequently had nearly all her "mother parts" removed, the irony was not lost on her. As her doctor calmly suggests she consider radiation, she thinks, "Insert beans or beads in my vagina. Radiate my vagina. Do you know who I am?"

She is, of course, the author of "The Vagina Monologues," the no-holds-barred play that

In the Body of the World

A Memoir
By Eve Ensler
(Metropolitan; 221 pages; \$25)

examines women's relationship to that most famous mother part of all. She is also a fervent activist against sexual violence. Given this, "In the Body of the World," a memoir that chronicles her cancer diagnosis and treatment, feels



Brigitte Lacombe

Eve Ensler

like an eerily appropriate culmination of her life's work to date. When it comes to trauma and female bodies, she knows what she's talking about.

The female body always feels malleable and raw in Ensler, like Play-Doh in a child's hands. This trait is well suited to an exploration of the physical violence cancer does — she writes candidly about ileostomy bags and farting, chemotherapy ports implanted and torn out. Occasionally the language feels overmuch and the metaphors forced, as if she is grasping to tie all her life's experiences together in a way that makes sense, adds up. This style may irritate some; others might feel that grasping is a perfectly suitable response to learning you may not live out the year.

Overall, the book is undeniably moving, especially when Ensler discusses her fear of death. Early on, she undergoes surgery to uncover how far the cancer has spread. "As I climb onto the gurney," she writes, "I understand why you don't walk into the operating room. Your bare legs just wouldn't take you there. There is no one going with me on this trip. This one's on my own. This is the one is the big one." And this is Ensler at her best: taking us to a place of unimaginable vulnerability — indeed, giving us a taste of it — but in a way that lets us know we are not alone.

— Ashley Nelson