



Travellers' Century Synopses

British have always had an obsessive interest in travel. But why? It's our huge Empire, perhaps, or something to do with living on a small island - just for our own survival, we've needed to understand what those foreigners are up to. Or perhaps, coming from such an overcrowded land, we simply need to escape suburbia from time to time. To find out more, who better than explorer Benedict Allen, whose the author of ten travel books himself. He heads off in the footsteps of the three defining travellers of the last century - this, he explains, was the golden age of the traveller, between the age of exploration, when the world was mapped by professional expeditions, and the current age of mass tourism.

Ep 1 Eric Newby

The quintessential British amateur traveller, Eric Newby was born in suburban Hammersmith between the Wars. Dismissed by his public school as "not clever" his life was a catalogue of one challenge after another. As a teenager he went to sea to serve as a deck hand, sailing around Cape Horn. During the war he joined the Special Boat Squadron - was captured and escaped from an Italian POW camp during which time he met his wife of 60 years, Wanda.

Newby itched to discover the world for the sheer hell of it and it was in this spirit that, in the mid '50s Eric abandoned an unhappy career in the rag trade and headed off with diplomat Hugh Carless into remotest Afghanistan to climb Mir Samir. The journey was immortalised in, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*.

50 years on, Benedict Allen finds this lost corner of Afghanistan little changed - and comes away full of admiration for the author. Newby failed to reach the summit, but for all his sardonic understatement and self-deprecation, he was just a hair's breadth away. And all with the aid of a map drawn on the back of an envelope.

Ep 2 Laurie Lee

Laurie Lee's timeless and powerfully evocative account of his youthful journey, *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning*, has become a classic of the travel genre. But Lee thought of himself first and foremost as a poet, and the book, which describes his walk across Spain as a penniless, uneducated 20-year old in 1935, reveals a poet's sensibility in its meticulous, distilled observations of the country and people he quickly came to love.

But can a poet write a convincing travel book? Shouldn't a travel writer bring us the 'real' experience of foreign lands? The explorer, writer and broadcaster Benedict Allen retraces

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some of Laurie Lee's journey across Spain to find out whether his evocative prose actually works as travel writing. In the process, Lee himself is revealed as an enigmatic, mercurial figure, in the tradition of the wandering minstrel or troubadour, with a huge array of talents and an astonishing facility to charm. He appears as something of a pied piper, with an ability to fascinate the Spanish he encountered - and his readers alike.

Ep 3 - Patrick Leigh Fermor

In 1931, his academic career punctuated by numerous school expulsions, the young Patrick Leigh Fermor put aside his troubles and set out across Europe to reach Constantinople in Turkey. It was the original backpacker journey, but also a quest in the romantic tradition of Lord Byron - that of the Man of Action and the intellectual combined. His two accounts of that journey, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and Water* - are a masterly portrait of a Europe about to be swept aside by war. They are also an insight into the brilliant, classically-educated mind of the author.

Benedict Allen traces that epic quest across Europe - putting Fermor's extraordinary tale (and formidable memory) to the test as he traces the inns, haystacks and castles the young adventurer stayed in, as he foot-slogged his way through Holland, Germany, Hungary and Romania towards Byzantium. A fizzing hybrid of Graham Greene and Fleming's James Bond, Leigh Fermor had an exploit filled war which included the kidnap of a German general. Benedict heads on to the scene of the abduction in Crete and, in remotest Greece, finally tracks down the great man himself to discuss the nature, purpose and future of travel writing.