

Desert Sun.

Rancho Mirage Writers Fest: Travel host Rick Steves shares lessons from hippie trail

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It's not hyperbolic to say Rick Steves, the beloved travel host and writer, has seen the world and has shared his adventures with viewers everywhere.

But now, he's sharing his most intimate journey yet: Notes he took as a 23-year-old while traveling along the "hippie trail," a trip that was popular from the mid-1950s through late-1970s that stretched across the countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Thailand. His new book, "On the Hippie Trail: Istanbul to Kathmandu and the Making of a Travel Writer," out Feb. 4, provides an "anthropological dig into his past," Steves said in a recent interview with The Desert Sun.

The writer will also be presenting two talks at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival: European Travel Skills at 2 p.m. Feb. 5 and Travel as a Political Act at 3 p.m. Feb. 6 (the festival, taking place Feb. 5 through 7, is sold out).

Ahead of his Coachella Valley appearances, Steves shared insights into the trip that changed his life and ways people can still travel smarter today.



Travel personality Rick Steves autographs books and programs beneath the marquee of Abilene's Paramount Theatre after his show there Tuesday Feb. 13, 2024.

Rancho Mirage Writers Festival has an 'old 19th century salon' feel to it

Given how excited Steves appears on his travel shows — during which he provides viewers with several details and fun facts about the place he's visiting — it might be a little surprising to hear that he doesn't remember if he's been to the Palm Springs area in the past.

"It's funny, I'm not very tuned into traveling in this hemisphere," Steves said.

He has, in fact, been to the desert city. Back in 2019, he delivered a talk about travel as a political act, in support of his book of the same name, at Palm Springs High School.

"When I'm on the road in the United States, I'm usually focused on the venue and doing a good job, and I've always got work to do in my room and then I just go home," he said. "I've got what I call ASB, attention surplus disorder, in Europe, where I really love being so tuned in and learning every turn. And then when I'm here, I just kind of float around."



Rick Steves teaches a travel skills class at the Edmonds Center for the Arts. Provided By Dominic Arizona Bonuccelli.

This latest trip to the desert will mark his first visit to the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, which he's eager to attend.

"I've got this romantic notion about an old 19th century salon where people get together and they don't have the TV playing or electronic entertainment. They've got just each other to share ideas around a convivial table, and I really like to create that in my travels ... when I host a party at my house," Steves said. "I feel like what they've got at the Writers Festival is kind of a salon for people that love to write and love to read and think and share ideas."

Life lessons learned while on the hippie trail

Steves' latest book, "On the Hippie Trail," is his most unique and personal one yet. When he was 23 years old, Steves went on the ultimate backpacking trip, the "hippie trail," stretching from Istanbul to Kathmandu. Like a travel writer in training, he wrote about everything he saw and did — including jumping off a moving train, making friends in Tehran and getting high for the first time in Herat — and he took lots of photos along the way.

The book essentially came about by accident. Steves said he discovered his journal during the COVID-19 pandemic and initially self-published it just for kicks.

"It's just crazily intimate, candid and a travel writer in the rough," he said. "To me, it's the essence of travel written by a 23-year-old vagabond, a backpacker, who was right there sitting on the floor lunching with the locals."

The 1978 trip came at the right time in his life and history. The Iranian revolution would happen the following year, along with the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan, and it "wasn't really a practical trip anymore," he said. It also served as a coming-of-age journey for Steves, who is still in awe of what he wrote back then.

Rick Steves in Asia in 1978.

"I wrote about it like I don't even know who is this guy. I wrote a 60,000-word journal when I could have been smoking pot and drinking with fascinating people from all around the world," Steves said. "Well, I was, but I was taking notes, and every night I would write it all down and then I documented it with photographs. Back then, people didn't take a lot of photographs, and for some reason, it all survived."

Steves recalled he would take out his 200-page journal whenever he was stuck at a border crossing and jot down experiences from the day before.

Those notes would serve as the beginning of a lifelong career in travel, as Steves taught travel classes, worked as a tour guide and wrote the first edition of "Europe Through the Back Door" in his 20s.



Rick Steves in Asia in 1978. Provided By Rick Steves.

Though it had been 40 years since he looked through his notes, Steves said he always thinks about his hippie trail trip and draws lessons from the experience. He ate lunch with a man from Afghanistan one day, who wanted to "tell a privileged white Western that people who use spoons and forks are not the norm." The man told him a third of the world's population uses cutlery, a third uses chopsticks and a third eats with their fingers, but "we're all civilized just the same." That was a "powerful lesson" for the young man, he said, and he looked at people who eat with their fingers more respectfully.

Also on that trip, he saw a stark gap between the rich and poor in Iran and ungovernable territories around the Khyber Pass (near the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan), hung out like a maharaja in Kashmir and enjoyed marijuana "like you cannot believe." It all opened his mind in so many ways and gave him a new perspective through which to view life.

Though the world is quite different than it was in 1978, Steves believes young travelers can still have enriching experiences like the one he did.

"If everybody just traveled a little bit, you don't need to make a lifestyle out of it, but just have a gap year trip, I think the world would be a much better place," he said.

Travel tips from a pro

Over the years, Steves has helped travelers worldwide through his guidebooks and travel program "Rick Steves' Europe," which provide information on city- or country-specific public transportation options, museum and restaurant offerings and traditional customs.

He's become so synonymous with travel that people will often come up to him to sing praises about his books and his television series — sometimes thanking him for writing about or filming episodes from places he hasn't actually been to.

Even his sister has asked him about places to explore in Iceland, to which he pointed her to one of his many broadcast specials.

"I love the thought that I can inspire people to travel better. That's why I started teaching. I saw people screwing up in Europe. They were making the same mistakes I learned from the previous year, and I'm no genius, but I learned from my lessons," Steves said. "So when I see people getting all excited about something, thanks to something they read of mine, I love it. When I see people having a mind-opening trip, I love it. That's my goal. I measure my profit not by how much money do I make, but how many trips do I impact."



Rick Steves takes a break from filming in Italy's Dolomites. Provided By Rick Steves' Europe.

Some major pointers he has for those planning trips soon include:

- People often want to see too much and stretch their travel dollar on vacation, but Steves said our time is worth a lot, and it's important to factor that in when you make a budget decision. A \$30 taxi ride may be a splurge, but it can save you a lot of time and hassle, instead of spending \$10 trying to figure out a public transportation system
- Anybody can travel smart if they equip themselves with good information. "Guidebooks are \$25 tools for \$3,000 experiences," he said, "and if they're any good, they pay for themselves on the first day."
- Don't order something you're comfortable with and know is good. Take risks, get out of your comfort zone and try something new. You may not like it, but at least you learned you don't like it

More travel tips are available not only at Steves' Rancho Mirage Writers Festival talk, but on his website, which includes the one-hour lecture called "Experiencing Europe," blog posts, links to his guidebooks and more.