



Nomad's Hotel: Travels in Time and Space

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After making his first voyage as a sailor - to earn his passage from his native Holland to South America - Cees Nootboom has never stopped travelling. This is a collection of his most remarkable travel pieces.

Nomad's Hotel: Travels in Time and Space Details

Date : Published February 1st 2006 by Harvill Secker (first published October 11th 2002)

ISBN : 9781843430421

Author : Cees Nootboom

Format : Hardcover 232 pages

Genre : Travel, Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Biography

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Joel says

A book of travel essays by a noted Dutch novelist and traveler, written over a period of many years; concerning trips to various European cities, a couple post-independence African nations, Iran in the 1970s, and so forth. At his best, Nootboom is capable of dotting his prose with observations of poetic beauty. Take, for instance, his description of the delays at an inefficiently-run airport in Africa:

"African airports call for a degree of serenity fit for the Vatican- it is perfectly useless getting worked up, and at the end of it all you emerge outside anyway, and it turns out that everyone still loves you."

But Nootboom isn't a writer who just writes about what he finds in foreign countries; he also uses travel as a mirror to hold in front of himself. As such, the book is laced with veins of introspective philosophizing which were often not to my taste. Where those veins run thickest- the essay "Musings in Munich" is the worst example- I found the book nearly unreadable.

The book's saving grace is the fact that it's a book of essays. An entire book along the lines of "Musings in Munich" would have been a disaster; but, whenever the writing becomes too turgid, it's only a handful of pages before you come to a fresh, more interesting subject, written at a different time and in a different frame of mind, where everyone still loves you.

A reader's reaction to this book is going to be very personal. If the writer's voice and musings resonate with you, you might very well love the book. It wasn't that way for me. I still found enough to like here that I don't regret reading it; but I won't particularly recommend it.

Sherry Gallagher says

This was a recommended work, translated from Dutch to English, of collected reflections of travel tales by this sometimes humorous and at other times deeply reflective Dutch author, currently living in The Hague.

I would say that the sections of different travels hold snippets of pearls amidst lines that in my opinion can be deleted from the overall work. Regardless, his travels are more journeys into the soul than a descriptive travelogue of differing lands and cultures. In this I am left with the feeling that Cees sees the world of varying cultural perspective undeniably full of the selfsame race of uniquely human beings--good/bad, enjoyable/annoying, helpful and not.

Jonfaith says

Especially in contrast to Facing The Congo, Nootboom's efforts should be regarded as file of travel observation; this haunted perspective views matters in a timeless (and seemingly effortless) manner, the arresting details are so gripping, one loses the cuddling orientation of time: most of the pieces included are 30-40 years old, but the images remain outside of history, both shared and marvelled.

Vivienne says

What an interesting read. It's a series of essays, that are travelogues but much more, with the author reflecting on all kinds of philosophical issues and thoughts and associating places with literature far more than geography. His musings really made me feel as if I was there!

Lindu Pindu says

I got this book for its cover- different than the one posted here- and because of the author's persona. Setting out into the world without anything to lose. I do not doubt Nooteboom's wisdom, gathered with his many travels, but he is not a charismatic writer. He is also not a practical writer, as many terms are left unexplained- and when your travels concern the Middle East and Africa among others, it makes me think of either a sloppy or a snobbish writer. That being said, there are many fine points and insights- especially with regards to Isfahan (in Iran) which is also my favourite chapter. It's both easy to read and filled with historic and religious meaning- a feat hard to pull off. Yet that charming style eludes the greater part of the book. It was interesting, but not exciting.

Marion says

This book of travel essays, some of which were published originally in the early 1970s, inspires reflection on the Who of our travel experiences--that is who are we when we travel? How does our understanding of ourselves change as we travel? How does travel itself change us?

The essay on Gambia, reminded me of the idealism in which development issues were presented in the 1960's with the founding of the Peace Corps, through which there was to be a forging of human understanding through development of agricultural practices and sanitation systems that would assist the people in helping their own self sufficiency. I am not sure it all worked out that way, but the same innocence is evident in this essay, reflecting a travel experience that is, I think, no longer possible today.

This is an incredible book that I purchased on a lark while in NYC this past February.

Karlo Mikhail says

Exceedingly erudite, the travel essays direct their gaze on the minutiae of gestures and street life, descriptions of buildings and paintings, and anecdotes on literary figures. As Alberto Manguel pointed out in his introduction, "Nooteboom is less a traveling writer than a well-traveled authorial presence."

"His baggage consists less of socks and toothpaste than of Dante and Virgil who, like Nooteboom, undertook their journey with a bundle of remembered readings and beloved authors."

In Nooteboom's reminiscences of Venice, for instance, a thirteenth-century church brings back the presence of the dead and encourages a conversation with them:

"Proust, Ruskin, Rilke, Byron, Pound, Goethe, McCarthy, Morand, Brodsky, Montaigne, Casanova, Goldoni, Da Ponte, James, Montale, their words flow around you like the water in the canals, and just as the sunlight causes the waves behind the gondolas to fragment into myriad tiny sparkles, so that one word, Venice, echoes and sparkles in all those conversations, letters, sketches..."

Describing the paintings of the old Italian city, he talks of how "Ovid, Hesiod, the Old and New Testament have accompanied you the whole way, that you are being pursued by the Lives of the Saints and Christian heathen iconography, that Catherine's wheel, Sebastian's arrows, Hermes' winged sandals, Mars's helmet, and all lions of stone, gold, pythpry, and marble are out to get you."

A trip to Gambia churns out a little known book called the Official Handbook of the Gambian Colony and Protectorate, published in 1906:

"It is all there. Every name, every amount, every procedure, everyone's salary, everything. Under the heading Letter Boxes: "There are no letter boxes in the colony and the Protectorate." It makes incredible reading. So this is how an empire is run. Nothing has been left to chance. Someone, once, worked it all out."

Observing what seemed like the faint movement of those statues of angels with "idiotic-cherubic faces" on the balustrades of one of Munich's churches he remembers Goethe's line from a Schubert song: "What does that movement signify?"

Traveling to the islands of Aran, he comments on how in Ireland "literature and poetry were held in higher esteem than anywhere else in Europe... all the seats on my Aer Lingus plane were upholstered in facsimiles of the handwriting of Joyce and Beckett, Wilde and Swift on a green background..."

He eventually arrives to a discussion of Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran*:

"The island on which I find myself is created for a second time, but this time from words. I do not believe there is another book in the world like it. In this first volume it is as if every meter of the coast, with its types of stone, plants, birds, stories, names and shapes has been described. The map at the back of the book was drawn by the writer himself..."

Nooteboom enthuses: "he has achieved the impossible; by taking a geographical reality, describing it so meticulously and embedding it in a past of folk tales, legends, and history he has thwarted the transience of at least one small part of the globe."

"The author seems to have slipped through the mesh of time's net in order to put the unbelievable convolutions of human society in such a small area under a microscope."

In Isfahan, the hotel he stays in is described as having "the allure of an old film, but not to live in. After a few days you feel as though you yourself are well on the way to becoming an extinct species..." Modern-day Iran, Ancient Persia.

"City of wine, roses, and verse, where the great poets Hafiz and Sadi lie buried in regal splendor, and where Persian farmers come to have their photographs taken next to the graves of these poets of centuries ago, and also to recite their poetry out loud to one another. Where else could you still find that?"

The piece on Mantua, Italy is capped by the lines of poetry in Dante's *Inferno* wherein the origin of the town is described:

"The poet [Virgil] tells his fellow poet [Dante] how Manto (she who covers her breast / which you do not see) after much wandering comes across a plain where the water of Mincio "spreads out and forms a marsh."

She remains there and when she dies leaves her “empty body” behind and the people who lived in those parts came together at that spot, protected by the marsh that completely surrounded it.

"Upon those dead bones they built the town and named it Mantua, without hesitation, after she who had first chosen that spot."

The voyage for Nootboom, like for any other petty bourgeois cheerleader of the so-called post-everything condition, is essentially an individual endeavor:

"Anyone who is constantly traveling is always somewhere else, and therefore always absent... although it is true that you are “somewhere else,” and that, consequently, there is somewhere you are not, there is one place where you are constantly, all the time, namely with “yourself.”"

It is also an occasion to encounter the exotic Other in the peripheries of Asia and Africa:

"They speak in tongues you cannot comprehend, stand next to you on a ferry or sit next to you on the bus, they sell you food at the market and send you in the right or wrong direction, sometimes they are dangerous, but usually they are not..."

But far from simply exemplifying the standard Derridean formula of how everything is a text, Nootboom's Nomad's Hotel is also the ultimate example of its opposite: of how all texts are ultimately rooted in the material world and all its multifarious aspects in the social, economic, cultural, and political fields.

<http://karlomongaya.wordpress.com/201...>

Kendall Van Horsen says

A really interesting read! It's a pretty quick read about Cees's travels around the world. Some of the essays are from before my time and some are not all that far in the past. I've read a few travel essay books and this one is by far the most unique in his approach, but it was interesting to see his vision of the world.

Would I read this book again? Maybe. Perhaps its the age of the essays or his style, I guess there's enough here that I just couldn't relate to, either because I haven't been to any of these places he writes about or because they are mostly before my time.

Don't let your age or anything stop you from reading this book. The language is great and each story has its own little story to tell about this tiny little planet we call home. Read it and see if you agree.

John says

Consistently high writing quality throughout, although as with most essay collections, some interested me more than others. Though many are a generation old, the details didn't seem dated at all. Definitely recommend!

Lukasz Pruski says

"Time differences are the prerogative of the living, at least they are when it concerns the past."

Having read several novels by Cees Nooteboom - and having fallen in love with some of them, particularly with the sublimely beautiful *The Following Story* - I have finally read one of his non-fiction writings, *Nomad's Hotel*, a great collection of travel pieces. While the notion of travel usually involves moving in space, Mr. Nooteboom emphasizes the temporal dimension of travel. The set is subtitled *Travels in Time and Space*, and it is not an accident that the time dimension is listed before the spatial one as in many stories in the collection the author focuses on traveling with us through the past of a given location.

One of the pieces I love the most is *Forever Venice*. Mr. Nooteboom uses the 1906 Baedeker to navigate this city some 80 years later. He stands in the place where Petrarch and Boccaccio used to stand, trying to see what they were seeing over six hundred years ago, in this unique city that has now entered the second millennium of its existence. He visits the island of San Michele, the burial place of famous artists, and writes about the stunning fragment of Alejo Carpentier's *Concierto Barrocco*, where the early eighteenth-century masters, Handel and Vivaldi, visit Igor Stravinsky's grave.

In another wonderful piece Mr. Nooteboom describes his 1975 stay in the Gambia, an African country named after its main river. Attempting to interview the Gambian president, he gets arrested for "failing to dismount from [his] bicycle briskly enough when Sir Dawda Jawara passed by". He also sails up the Gambia river on a riverboat called *Lady Wright*; the description of the trip is totally hilarious. Consider this portrayal of an English lady: "She is sturdy, enveloped in a flowery frock, and with a sort of face that can move mountains. English dog breeders have often striven to reproduce such faces, but they still look better on people."

The piece titled *That Earlier War: the Memorial in Canberra* brings other emotions: sadness and deep anger at the barbarity of human species. Mr. Nooteboom writes about the Australian soldiers who perished in the 1915 Gallipoli campaign; rarely can one read such a ferocious and powerful condemnation of the politicians and generals who - on a whim - send young men to die. When one person's senseless death is a tragedy, what about deaths of 7,500 young men, simple pawns in the human slaughter chess game played by Churchill and others, comfortably seated in their London clubs, sipping brandy and smoking cigars? Mr. Nooteboom saves a profound reflection for the end: "There are lots of children at the memorial. I notice how the girls have a different way of looking from the boys." For the girls it is not the adventure, he notices; it rather "has to do with destruction." This reinforces my proudly sexist belief that women should be politicians and military leaders, while men should keep playing with plastic guns and other toys.

As usual, I am experiencing another failure in trying to be concise in my reviews, so very briefly: in *An Evening in Isfahan* Mr. Nooteboom guides us through the 3000-year history of Persia, in other pieces he writes about his journeys to Munich, the Aran Islands, to the "edge of Sahara", Mantua, Zurich, and Mali. In all stories, he is a traveler who "is searching for the extraordinary within the everyday environment of others", in addition to moving through time and space. A great read!

Four stars.

Melanie Hilliard says

For better or worse I sometimes wonder what it would be like to travel the world before the ubiquitous

interwebs. In this collection of travel essays, Nootboom shares his experiences from around the world, mostly from trips in the 1970s & 80s. I imagine he is one of the last of a dying breed of European adventurers decked out in khaki to explore this great, big, beautiful world. It is not without merit that he is able to see the post-colonial world with fresh eyes that seek a future solution and does not dwell on what might have been. As a traveler myself, I also found his theories on why we travel relatable and the odd experience of seeing real people living their daily lives through the eyes of a westerner on holiday.

Stewart says

“Nomad’s Hotel” (2006) by Cees Nootboom, translated from Dutch by Ann Kelland, is a collection of travel pieces by the Dutch novelist and travel writer. The places he visited in this book range from those most familiar to Europeans and Americans (Venice and Mantua, Italy; Munich; Ireland; Iran; and Zurich) to lesser-known countries (Gambia, Mali, and Morocco).

All of the chapters provided insight, but a few especially resonated with me.

The chapter “Lady Wright and Sir Jawara: a Boat Trip up the Gambia” tells of Nootboom’s stay in the country of Gambia, situated on either side of the river of the same name. The country is 30 miles wide at its widest point. The official language is English, and the chief tourists come from Sweden. Who knew?

In “The Stones of Aran,” Nootboom went to Ireland for the first time, in 2002; I made my way to Ireland for the first time in 2007. He wrote, “I thought of Ireland as a country where literature and poetry were held in higher esteem than anywhere else in Europe. But only recently were these notions confirmed when I discovered that all the seats on my Aer Lingus plane were upholstered in facsimiles of the handwriting of Joyce and Beckett, Wilde and Swift on a green background, and that nothing in Ireland was ever quite like anywhere else.”

Also of special interest to me was a 26-page chapter “An Evening in Isfahan,” in which Nootboom spent weeks in Iran in 1975, inspecting Teheran, Isfahan, Yazd, and Persepolis. In Teheran, Nootboom saw the modernizing Iran. In Persepolis, 655 km (405 miles) away, he stood in awe before the ancient Persia: the temples and graves of the great Persian emperors Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes of 2,500 years ago.

Nootboom’s visit came about four years before the Iranian revolution. Did he have any inklings of what was to come? He remarked that the Shah and Iran were doing well, but that could change. Nootboom wrote, “won’t the opponents within the country, invisible right now, and those workers and academics who for a variety of reasons remain abroad, all at once become highly visible?” Indeed.

In the chapter “Musings in Munich,” written in 1989, Nootboom ventured beyond travel writing to present a few intriguing musings about time. “Time itself, that weightless thing, could only go in one direction, no matter how you define it or tried to step on its tail – that much at least seemed certain. Nobody knew what time was, but even if you placed all the clocks in the world in a circle, time would still run straight on, and should there be a finite end to time it was not one that could be imagined by human beings without a severe case of vertigo.”

Nootboom’s travel writing here combines acute observation, often quirky historical background, personal reflection, and sentences of great poetry. The book is a fountain of insight.

Diana says

¡A viajar!

Jeffrey Keeten says

"Anyone who is travelling is always somewhere else, and therefore always absent. This holds good for oneself, and it holds good for the others, the friends; for although it is true that you are 'somewhere else,' and that, consequently, there is somewhere you are *not*, there is one place where you *are* constantly, all the time, namely with 'yourself.'"

I first encountered a mention of this book while I was reading Alberto Manguel's book *The Traveler, the Tower, and the Worm: The Reader as Metaphor*. One of the many books casually referred to in his text by one of the great readers of modern times. I had a bit of trouble finding a hardcover edition of this book at a reasonable price. The copy I found shows all the signs that it once travelled with someone in her backpack. There is a mysterious, cloying stain to the front cover that can not be removed without also destroying the uniquely interesting dust cover art. The top and bottom of the spine have been pushed against the text block and pieces; the size of small rodent bites are missing from the dust jacket. The spine is slightly cocked, probably from heavy handed reading, but also probably from how it was wedged into a bulging backpack.

There are also dirty thumbprints throughout the text. If I were to get out my chemistry set, I could probably discover what this traveler was eating and where they were eating it while they were reading this book. Maybe I can even secure a clear thumbprint, to identify this traveler, that had been impressed upon the page in sauce only found in Tangier. I couldn't help, but clean the book as I read it. I carefully dabbed at the food particles staining the pages and in many cases was able to fade their presence without adding to the further desecration of the book. I did feel some of the apprehension of an archivist that I was erasing the history of an objet d'art, a specimen of book as traveller.

Of course, I've read Cees Nooteboom, but many years ago when the Dutch writer was first being translated into English in the mid-80s. I drifted away from him to explore other writers, but Manguel reminded me of how much I enjoyed reading Nooteboom, so I was compelled to reacquaint myself with him. Like Manguel, Nooteboom doused me as if he were emptying a bucket full of slips of paper bearing the names of writers on my head. Though unlike Manguel's recommendations, I've never heard of a lot of the writers Nooteboom was sharing. For example, he visited the home of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (who the heck?) outside of Zurich. ***"And on the wall a portrait of the master of the house dating from 1887, a stout old party in a hat, his eyes in shadow. Just for a moment he seems to be poking his tongue out at this curious posthumous colleague who is wandering uninvited through his house. 'You'd be better off reading me, ' he seems to be saying. 'If it's me you're looking for, I'm in my books.'"***

I travel to meet history, so wherever I go I fill my travelling days with visits to historical sites, and one of my favorite things to do is to visit writer's homes or museums. Most recently, I was travelling through Southern Missouri and decided to visit Laura Ingalls Wilder's house. Now sometimes historical homes are really just shells with a few pieces of objects once owned by the historical figure or pieces of furniture from the same era, but in the case of Wilder, they have preserved the home almost exactly as it was the day that she passed. The experience is truly like visiting her home and feeling that at any moment she is going to walk through the door to greet us.

Nooteboom is an extremely thoughtful writer and traveller. For such a short book, I ended up with a long list of notes of interesting passages. Like this image from his stay in Isfahan: ***"A cracked celluloid sheen hangs over everything, panels of old marble cover the pillars, rubber plants are sunk in morbid reverie, and guess what: Persian carpets!"*** I don't know about you, but that makes me want to dig up my old friend Humphrey Bogart and head for Isfahan hopefully with some microfilm hidden in the heel of my shoe.

Or how about when Nooteboom has some permit issues to go into a contested part of the Sahara, so he ends

up travelling to Gambia on a whim. *"This morning at six I was in Madrid and I realise that none of my friends or relations know I am at this extraordinary spot, and feel rather elated. There is a lot to be said for a touch of 'non-being.' Reclining in a taxi, like a fatigued gentleman, in a country where no one knows anything about you, is like acting a part."* I am blessed with a wide circle of family and friends. The problem, of course, is that if I were to go missing or say I were misplaced for more than a few hours, several people would be trying to figure out where I am. Being completely untethered is an experience that I have rarely experienced, so I too felt some tingles of boyish glee at the thought of being somewhere where no one knows me to be.

Nooteboom will take you to Venice, Gambia, Munich, Aran, Isfahan, Mantua, Zurich, Mali, and the Sahara...to name a few. He will show you these places through his own travel weary eyes. He will share with you the thoughts and memories that each of these exotic and familiar locations evokes from his vast pantheon of experiences. You will come away from this book feeling a need to approach travel on a deeper level so that you, too, can share better stories with those who are not so privileged as you have been to encounter what there is to see in the most far flung parts of the world.

"And then from far away I hear the call of my lonely suitcase. Heading towards the sound I arrive at where I was already, room 523. It is high-ceilinged, this room, pale green, hushed. On the gleaming table stands my typewriter, and together we do what we always do in places like this--we write a story for other people."

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Pamela (Lavish Bookshelf) says

Nomad's Hotel was recently published in 2009, but actually the book is a collection of essays stretching over the past 40-something years of Cees Nooteboom's traveling life. This point is crucial to understanding some of the events being described. For example, Nooteboom beautifully describes a visit to Iran, but the visit was in 1975. Nooteboom vividly describes an exotic location which no longer exists given the historical events in that region in the past 30 years. In doing so, Nooteboom's traveling expertise and writing talent have preserved a world we may never be able to explore.

At times a few of the essays were a tad bit long and poetic for my liking. Since the book isn't written chronologically, I simply skipped one oddly poetic chapter in particular and jumped right back into the traveling forays of Cees Nooteboom.

Nothing about the book is terribly adventuresome as Nooteboom never tackles high-endurance pursuits such as a climb to the top of Mt. Everest. Rather, Nomad's Hotel is filled with quiet sophisticated backpacker travel. Nooteboom's writing style is what sets this book apart from many other travel narratives, though. On Ireland's Aran Islands, Nooteboom reports "the grass is idiotically green, but as I climb on toward the fort I squelch through brownish mud full of the cloven-hoofed imprints of cattle." All of Nooteboom's essays are descriptive, insightful and entertaining.
