

# Travel Tales

It's his way or the highway  
when it comes to Rick Steves' take on Europe



**Y**ou have great news. Finally, after all these years of talking about it and saving your tips, you're going to Europe! Now, all you've got to do is pick your countries, make a budget, plan your route, buy some luggage, pack . . . . There's no doubt about it—traveling is equal parts exciting and stressful. And in this day and age, one person's travel anxiety is another person's cash crop. Just look at Rick Steves and his personal line of guide books. Since 1980, Steves has been holding the hands of North American travelers as they take that first big step off our continent with his *Europe Through The Back Door* series. He's got country guides, city guides, phrase books, even a European art guide and a fancy web page. He has a lot, no question, but does he really have what you need?

Let's see. You're going to Europe, so you pick up *Europe Through The Back Door 2006*. No, wait, maybe you should get his *Best Of Europe 2006*. What's the difference?

According to Steves, *Back Door* is a "travel skills handbook." Weighing in at a hefty 641 pages, almost 400 of them are dedicated to telling you how to travel. I mean, tips are great, but it can get a bit ridiculous. With chapters ranging from packing and itinerary suggestions (helpful) to how to buy a digital camera and why not to be afraid of terrorism (excessive), *Back Door* is definitely for brand new travelers with absolutely no common sense. If you have any sort of self-sufficiency at all, *Best Of* is a better choice. Here, the how-to section is reduced to a more palatable 30 pages, leaving the rest for actual information on the continent you will be visiting: things like hotels, restaurants, museums, trains . . . you know, the stuff you can find in any European guide book.

Except, instead of being useful to travelers of all nation-

alities, both *Best Of* and *Back Door* seem to be speaking specifically to Americans. Now, Canadian and American culture are undoubtedly similar, so I wouldn't have thought it would matter much. But I was picking up a vibe from the books that was both distracting and a tad condescending. Talking to Steves helped identify the feeling. He explains that his books are written for ethnocentric Americans. "People from the United States need the exposure to the rest of the world much more than Canadians," says Steves. "My passion is to get Americans to travel so that we can fit into the world as well as Canadians do." That's sweet, but you have to wonder why he's promoting his books in Canada. (Alas, Steves wasn't very interested in discussing that with me—or much else. In our short and not-so-sweet interview, I was hard pressed to get more out of him than the address of his website.)

So why should you pick Steves for your trip? One thing I'll give him is that his books are updated yearly, so they're probably as accurate as you can get. And the man spends four months in Europe every year, so if you're looking for advice, he does know his stuff. Yet you have to wonder if he knows it all too well. His titles say it all: Steves' books don't just take you to Europe, they take you specifically to Rick Steves' Europe. And that Europe, I'm afraid, is different from my Europe and your Europe. It's not even a continent. It's a business.

—Sarah Gignac

Rick Steves  
7 pm Tuesday, November 8  
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Tickets \$10 at Bolen Books  
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