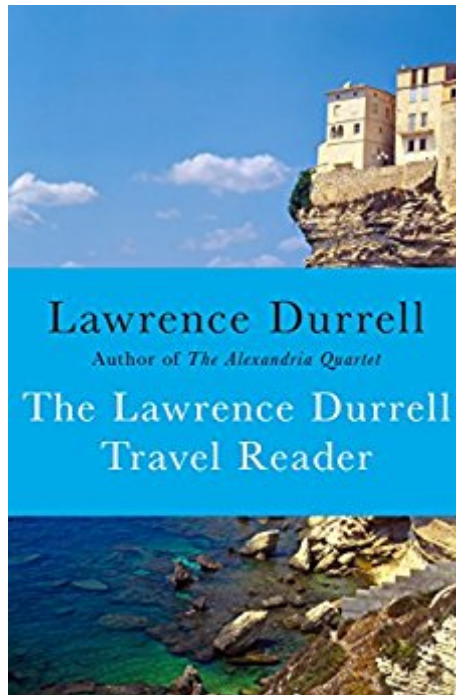




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The Lawrence Durrell Travel Reader



Synopsis

Notes on travel from the Mediterranean – his sharpest observer Few men have traveled as wisely as Lawrence Durrell. Born in India, he lived in Corfu as a young man, enjoying salt air, cobalt water, and an unfettered bohemian lifestyle. Over the following decades, he rambled around the Mediterranean, making homes in Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece. Each time he moved, he asked himself why he felt compelled to travel. In this book, he gives his answer. Durrell knew that the wise traveler looks not for pleasure, education, or landmarks, but is hungry for a sense of place – the element of a landscape, city, or nation that makes its people who they are. In this anthology, passages from Durrell's classic Mediterranean writings are paired with observations on other lands. His writing is poetic, lush, and achingly clear, for this was a man who truly saw the world.

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Customer Reviews

Have been his fan since I discovered Alexandria Quartet in High School. Does not disappoint. No one does descriptive text better.

I can't make any headway with Durrell's Alexandria Quartet but I really enjoy his travel writing. He has many stories about the local residents and the history of the places he visits or where he was living. Most of the travel took place during the 1930s to '50s.

Lyrical and dreamy reflections on travel in Greece and elsewhere with focus on the landscape.

Lawrence Durrell, the British author who is best known for his four novels comprising "The Alexandria Quartet," also composed a series of 'landscape books' about his pre- and post-war experiences in and around the Mediterranean. The books in this series are "Prospero's Cell," "Reflections on a Marine Venus," "Bitter Lemons," and "Sicilian Carousel." Most of the excerpts in "The Lawrence Durrell Travel Reader" are taken from these four 'landscape' books, plus a series of essays on his life in Provence. The first book, "Prospero's Cell" was written in the years preceding World War II. The setting for Shakespeare's "Tempest" is the Greek island of Corfu, argues one of the characters in this book, expounding on a deeply held belief of its author. The 'presiding genius' of Corfu, or as it was once called, Corcyra, is none other than Zeus Pantocrator. Durrell's foreshadowing of that grim future cast his landscapes and dazzling Greek villages of Corfu into intense relief. In his second book, war still clings like a gray film to the bright fabric of "Reflections of a Marine Venus," which was begun in 1945 and takes place on Rhodes. The 'marine Venus' of the title is a statue which was found by sailors in their nets at the bottom of Rhodes harbor and which much appealed to Durrell, who thought of her as the 'presiding genius' of the place. He began this book while assigned to Rhodes as an information officer in 1945, and finally finished it in Belgrade in 1952 while working as a press attaché for the British Embassy. In his third island book, "Bitter Lemons," the author moves away from World War II, and into his experiences dodging gunmen and bombs during the postwar 'unrest' on Cyprus, which was then a British protectorate. Durrell's great obsession during his years on Cyprus was the purchase and restoration of an old Turkish house at Bellapaix. This is the best part of the book in spite of the stereotypical 'boisterous' Greeks and 'indolent' Turks. The author employs his best, most beautiful descriptions on his house, his village, and the surrounding territory. The fourth book in the series, "Sicilian Carousel" was published almost two decades after "Bitter Lemons" and Durrell is a much more mellow writer--perhaps because of his retirement from various posts within the British Foreign Office. Or perhaps because no one was shooting at him on Sicily. Martine, who was a friend of Durrell's on Cyprus ("Bitter Lemons") is a ghostly presence on Sicily, the largest and

perhaps the most beautiful of the Mediterranean islands. She had tried to persuade Durrell to visit her in life. Instead, he brings her letters to Sicily and shares Martine's favorite places with her in death. He compares her "to a sea-bird who has floated out of sight" and spends the book trying to lay her ghost. I had not yet read Durrell's collection of essays about Provence, his home during the last three decades of his life and was happy to find a few of them in this 'Travel Reader.' They are truly a delight, most especially his plumber's search for a wife in "Laura, a Portrait of Avignon." Here is the table of contents, which I've annotated to include the titles of Durrell's four 'landscape' books:

Editor's Note
 SPIRIT OF PLACE-- Landscape and Character
 CORFU ("Prospero's Cell")-- Divisions upon Greece-- Ground Ionian Profiles-- Landscape with Olive Trees-- A Landmark Gone-- Oil for the Saint; Return to Corfu
 RHODES ("Reflections of a Marine Venus")-- Of Paradise Terrestre--The Little Summer of Saint Demetrius-- The Three Lost Cities
 CYPRUS ("Bitter Lemons")-- How to Buy a House--The Tree of Idleness-- The Vanishing Landmarks-- Troubadour
 SICILY ("Sicilian Carousel")-- Arrival-- Agrigento-- Erice-- Taormina
 PROVENCE-- In Praise of Fanatics-- Laura, A Portrait of Avignon-- Across Secret Provence-- Old Mathieu
 DELPHI-- Delphi

Ignore the negative review. Lawrence Durrell is nothing like Gerald Durrell (who I also admire), and this is a book of travel essays and his travel books. It isn't a guidebook, so you can hardly complain about it not being a guidebook! That's like buying pork and complaining it isn't chicken. I find Durrell's fiction heavy-going, though I do know many people enjoy it, including my wife. But his travel writing is very accessible, beautifully lyrical, and really does invoke that spirit of place. I write a lot about Greece myself, and so have read a great number of books about Greece. Lawrence Durrell's are among the most enjoyable that there are, particularly the ones about Corfu and Rhodes. To get everything together in one collection like this is a real treat.

The Lawrence Durrell Reader is a compendium of his best travel writing. All the entries concern the Mediterranean World and particularly its islands--Corfu, Rhodes, Cyprus and Sicily, with Provence and Delphi thrown in for continental balance. The collection celebrates what Durrell liked to call "Spirit of Place." It may seem occasionally dated as we move into the final decadence of condominium development. It may seem nostalgic in an age where beachfront hotels supply "animation" for its patrons. But from the exuberance of Prospero's Cell to the sadness of Bitter Lemons, Durrell will tell you everything you need to know about the places he looked for in himself.

Less Than a Shadow

I have read most of the books from which this volume was taken, but not for decades. It was fun revisiting them. I don't agree with Durrell's outlook on development and tourists. I have met wonderful, intelligent people on tours. Not everyone can make a livelihood of travel. Some of us have to be doing the kinds of things that made it possible for Durrell to live the way he did. At least he's not as bad as some too, too refined travel writers. I find it ironic that Durrell criticizes modern manufacturing but needs not one, but two cars to support his trek across one of the islands, but then we all have our little things. He's still one of my favorite authors. Reading this book is a wonderful opportunity to see some places from the eyes of a poet, and a man that enjoyed life as he lived it.

islomania is the word Durrell uses to describe the mental excitement some people feel when on an island. This book, a collection of sundry travel writings by Durrell, many of which are about the Greek islands, is a perfect read when on an island, a long cruise or journey, or just at home dreaming. It offers a sampling of some of his signature pieces. Lush descriptions of places, interesting information about them, engaging encounters with locals, and beneath it all a philosophical enquiry as to why we the spirit of place speaks to us more from some places than others.

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