

BOOKED for TRAVEL

GUIDE TO THE GUIDES

THE greatest emigration of American tourists ever to leave home in one year will be able to choose from perhaps the longest shelf of travel books ever accumulated. One of the unworldly wanderer's biggest problems, aside from how to keep from getting stung in Saragossa, is how to choose the book that's going to talk to him in a way he finds enjoyable, and tell him the things he really needs and wants to know.

The trouble is that reviews of travel books appear on the book pages, a section of the newspaper frequently not frequented by the bulk of the literate population. Moreover, the reviews are sometimes assigned to chair-borne reviewers who have no way of knowing how the book works in the field. Or they are given to professional travelers, men who spend half the year tracking across the desert in tan shorts searching for a buried tomb, and the other half of the year chugging around the lecture circuit at home telling about it. This species of burnished Quixote couldn't care less whether the second-class hotels in Rome usually furnish soap, a fact of dire importance to a dowager about to wing eastward from the fastnesses of Montclair, N. J. Finally, the vending of travel books is both slow and seasonal, and the bookseller is usually much more anxious to unload whatever is on hand rather than tailoring the type of travel book to the customer's personality.

For the benefit of those leaving the homestead during the coming weeks, there first is the out-and-out guidebook, typified in the old days by the red-bound, fact-plump Baedeker. These books are virtually catalogues of the museums, inventories of the standard views and excursions. A hallmark of the out-and-out guide was the maelstrom of abbreviations which splattered its pages like caviar thrown on a fan. The new Baedeker, of which four titles have been published by Macmillan, cheerfully avoids this traditional pitfall. Unfortunately today's tourist moves around to many places and the titles are not going to be too much use to anybody: "Frankfurt and the Taunus," "Munich and its Environs," "Bavaria," and "London." Few trips today are that specialized.

The old Baedeker-style guides are available here in two versions, one

called the "Blue Guide," edited by Russell Muirhead and distributed by Rand-McNally, and the other called Guide Bleu (English Series) put together by Nagel and distributed by Crown. The chief drawback is that both series are expensive in the United States.

Secondly, there is the readable-and-informative guide, a new type which has emerged since the war, based largely on the theory that facts don't have to be dust-dry and that Americans might not be altogether as interested in Europe's old stones as the Baedeker brethren tacitly suggested they should be.

Thirdly, there are the background books that tell of the people, the heritage, the history, the tradition, the customs, sometimes even the food without going into such specifics as hotels, restaurants, and downright tourist information. Typical of the genre is the World in Color series (McGraw-Hill) of which the latest, on Scandinavia, is a delightful, lovely-to-thumb-through book full of color plates and topped off with a whimsical dictionary of peculiarities of the northern lands.

Finally there are the accounts of personal travels of which Dane Chandos's "Journey in the Sun" (Doubleday), recently reviewed in these pages, is a prime example. If you would rather read, narrative style, how someone else did it, then this type is for you. While giving no how-to information, personal chronicles do have a way of instructing the reader by a method that is frequently painless and sometimes pleasant.

Reviewers and periodicals have not always discharged their responsibility to the reader (i.e. the potential traveler) by failing to evaluate travel books on the basis of their usability

or readability. Several weeks ago *The New York Times* printed what I took to be a seasonal assessment of travel books titled "Baedeker Again Points the Way." Written by Robert Payne, the piece took a page of the paper's *Book Review* to intone against: 1.) "today's perverse demon who demands that guide books be amusing . . ."; 2.) "harassed husband and wife teams"; 3.) youth and artless excitement in travel books; 4.) modern guide books.

At first it seems that Mr. Payne likes Baedeker best of all. Speaking of the gentleman from Leipzig, he writes, "If he approved of the hotels, restaurants, and roads, then you knew that his approval derived as much from his scholarship as his excellent taste." But midway along in the treatise a new contender appears. "Perhaps, after all, the best guidebooks are those which are no more than enthusiastic and 'unpretentious accounts of a journey into a beloved country,'" says Mr. Payne, author of "Journey to Persia" (Dutton), an unpretentious account of beloved Iran.

He chooses as a notable example Bernard Wall's "Italian Life and Landscape" (British Book Centre). "The book is full of quotations from the poets, and subtly evocative. He has the English sense of the past living into the present," says Mr. Payne, an Englishman living in the United States.

"There are probably deep-seated reasons why good guide books on foreign countries are rarely produced," Mr. Payne states. "In the end we may find that the best guides of all are books of photographs. . . ."

BY THIS time we have come full circle, from Baedeker, mass-producer of facts, to the picture book which has not only no facts, but virtually no text. It may seem as if Mr. Payne's circle is an aimless one, but in effect the out-and-out guidebook and the picture book have one thing in common: neither requires a reader. The Baedeker-style book is for consulting, as one consults an encyclopedia; the picture book is for browsing, for inciting dreams, and stirring nostalgia—effortlessly. Mr. Payne, who has said that his favorite places are Bali, Athens, Peking, Paris, Sikra, and Windermere, is a man who turns out about four books a year. For a man with such a busy schedule picture books and reference books are made to order.

Strangely, Mr. Payne likens a new series called Fodor's Modern Guides (David McKay) to the old Baedekers, and says that with more careful editing they may yet take Baedeker's place. Fodor has edited a series of



sectional guides to Europe, printed in Holland on inexpensive paper, and sold here at prices substantially below the retail cost of the home-grown item. Various chapters are contributed by journalists who are living abroad. At least three contributors are themselves the authors of recent guidebooks competing with the Fodor effort. Some of the Fodor books, notably the one on Benelux, is supported by advertising. All of them are loosely edited, permitting the price of a hotel in Maastricht, Holland, to be given in shillings; another in florins is dutifully translated into pounds. Somebody named Nel Slis tells of the purchase of "really Dutch souvenirs" including a genuine Chippendale table. Some of the books, especially those with short chapters by George Mikes, manage to be amusing, a fact which would have disenchanted Mr. Payne had he run across the passages.

Of all the traps to which a travel writer is vulnerable the most important and least discussed by the reviewer is the maintenance of the writer's objectivity. A clever governmental tourist office which rolls out the long red rug will often produce printed castles where only slums exist. Conversely, a snub will bring down the wrath of invective. The New York correspondent for the London *Daily Express* recently made the front pages of his paper at home with a story about the new edition of "Fielding's Travel Guide to Europe" (Sloane). The book, a sort of "Europe Confidential" for tourists, states that the London headquarters of the British Travel Association "vies with its Italian counterpart as the least alert and most badly managed on the Continent." The blast derives largely from the ineptness of an individual who occupied himself fouling up correspondents, this one included, until he was relieved two years ago. Either Fielding hasn't cooled off, or the section went unedited, but whichever, it is no concern to the tourist.

Fielding's is getting fatter by the year, having grown from a handy 427 pages in 1948 to an unwieldy 716 pages in 1952. Some of this added weight is new material, but too much of it is a wordy index to the personalities of the governmental tourist bureau officials and public-relations personnel of airlines.

THE only other up-dated, all-inclusive guidebook in the stalls this season is Richard Joseph's "World-Wide Travel Guide," (Doubleday), which skims through all the countries anybody is likely to visit. Joseph's all-country guide and his new "Your Trip to Britain" have been weighed by other reviewers in this space during

the preceding weeks and both were found to be reliable, detailed, and often pleasant works. The opinions were not sustained by Mr. Payne, who found Mr. Joseph possessed of a "monumental capacity to wisecrack," and was moved to question the authority which travel writers assume in undertaking the creation of a guide book. "Insensitive to the moods of the countries they visit, determined to complete their travels within the margin of the publisher's advance, taking their cues from the advertisements of steamship companies and the airlines, they flood the market with their works," wails Mr. Payne.

At press time there was no move from Washington suggesting that the writers of travel books shall hereafter be licensed. Some writers reached by this department said they were going to keep on taking their cues from steamship companies and airlines, because the most reliable surveys indicated that it was by these means that the majority of travelers were reaching foreign shores. As for Mr. Payne, he has headed west to prepare the first of three travel books which shall shortly flood the market. They shall be called "The Splendor of America," followed by Europe and Asia. They will discuss not only scenic beauty, but little people who are doing great things. For news of the soap situation in the second-class hotels of Rome, the matron from Montclair will have to look somewhere else.

—HORACE SUTTON.

Travelers' Tales

TIBETAN SKYLINES. By Robert Ekvall. Farrar, Straus & Young. \$3.50. By the Sacred Books of Tibet!—as vow the Tibetans—this is a worthy and a noteworthy narrative. It is more informative than Suydam Cutting, Theos Bernard, Lowell Thomas, and Alexandra David-Neel laid end to end, and vastly more entertaining. It is written by an American missionary run wild, a good man and devout, but with a touch of piracy to offset the piety in him.

The good deeds of missionary Ekvall are accomplished without fanfare. He patches wounds, arbitrates feuds, teaches his braves (many of them monks) to box. He is the true explorer-missionary that David Livingstone might have been, had he had more tolerance, a sense of humor, and a lot more derring-do.

Mr. Ekvall spent seven years in Tibet with his wife and son, spoke the language, mediated between invading Chinese armies and the fierce lamas. As a very active partisan with

bonzes of rival lamaseries he went riding hell-bent across the 12,000-foot mountains to investigate an incidental murder. Up they went, "where the sorcerers were chanting curses and casting spells to perplex the men of Rzakdumba," spinning prayer wheels, drinking buttered tea with yak hair in it.

His Tibetan friends are cut sharply in bas-relief above his pages. The peasant romances, the pilgrim marches of sworn silence to Lhasa, the slicing of the dead for the vultures, the grim businesses occurring in the "blackness of blackness" when winter killed even the stars, the ragged bandits on the ridge, the dainty purchasing of protection, the torture and charity of this strange land, are graphic.

CHINA TO CHITRAL. By H. W. Tilman. Cambridge University Press. \$4.75. If ever better travel books are written in the lifetime of H. W. Tilman, it will probably be he who will write them. This is his best book since the "Ascent Of Nanda Devi," which was consummate good writing. "China to Chitral" has neither the bold innocence of Thor Heyerdal nor the exquisite prose of Isak Dinesen, but it is a fine, galloping account of a scientist's very serious and very humorous adventures in country unknown to most explorers, Chinese Turkistan.

Tilman states in his preface: "My theme is mountains, unsullied by science, and alleviated by Chinese brandy." There is little question of his being one of the master mountaineers of our time, an old Everest addict, followed closely by Shipton who again accompanied him on the journeys of this book to two unclimbed peaks north of Kashmir.

His modesty is shocking, his true wit, page by page, ebullient and delightful. Mr. Tilman crossed China by bus, which really scared him—the hardy mountaineer—stopped at the "Inn of the Overlapping Teeth" at Camul where, according to Marco Polo, "men are made wittols of by their wives," climbed his azure mountains among hostile Kazaks, Kirghis, Turkis, shared his knowledge with them, since they were dwellers at a mere 10,000 feet and he, the alien, had brought them to 17,000, where they nearly perished.

Occasionally he descends to wondrous and appalling Oriental meals where there was probably "death in the pot." He describes appetite, emotion, mountaineering, with scientific exactness, dramatic heave-ho, and the best sheer writing and spirit of any explorer in many a day.

—HASSOLDT DAVIS.