



GOLDEN COSMOS

Travel

BY JOSHUA HAMMER

on's travel books are marked lit. Three footloose writers in be the back alleys of Ho' Child streets of Amsterdam and es of northern Afghanistan ice for their curiosity. At the stand three recently minted e than a century's worth of . Yet their own stumbles and oesn't always mean wiser.

ONA VERDE: My Ultimate Afric- Harcourt, \$27), Paul Theroux ourney through the continent epelled him since he worked in Malawi in the 1960s. A se- his 2003 account of a troubled Cape Town, Theroux's latest Africa's southwest coast. The tter camps of the Cape Flats, ide of newcomers thwarts ef-'s lot: "No sooner had a solu- solution was needed."

e foreign correspondent based

In sparsely populated Namibia, Theroux finds poverty and desperation lurking behind the pretty, German-flavored resort of Swakopmund, and joins a tattered remnant of the Ju/'hoansi, an ancient tribe of hunter-gatherers who have "gone from a fleet-footed bush-dwelling people who chased down game to sedentary town-dwellers plagued by drunkenness and hunger."

Theroux saves the worst for last, a drive through Angola by bus and bush taxi. Here he encounters xenophobic border officials, furtive Chinese businessmen and construction workers — and some of the beaten-down survivors of both three decades of civil war and the destructive legacy of the region's Portuguese colonizers. "The crooked aristocrats and desperate peasants who planted themselves far from home, and finally fled," he observes, "left nothing behind but derelict slave quarters, empty vinho verde bottles and gloomy churches."

Theroux's peevish mood lifts occasionally — on an elephant-back safari in the Okavango Delta and during a serendipitous meeting with three "birdlike and beautiful" teenage girls who have just finished an *efundula*, or initiation ceremony, in rural Angola. Yet much of this trip is a dispiriting slog through squalid bus stations and urban slums, enlivened by Theroux's vivid evocations of misery

elected, megalomaniacal head of state with the morals of a fruit fly . . . is an obscene feature of African life that is not likely to disappear," he writes at the end of this grim journey, which Theroux, now 72, makes clear will be his last through Africa. Advancing age seems only to have intensified his cantankerousness: "Often, in an overcrowded bus in Africa, I thought of nothing but death," he admits, "and hating the trip I let out a ghastly laugh when I thought of anyone saying over my battered corpse, 'He died doing what he loved.'"

Another septuagenarian, the novelist and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Philip Caputo, ventures into more hospitable climes in **THE LONGEST ROAD: Overland In Search of America, From Key West to the Arctic Ocean (Holt, \$28; available in mid-July)**. Restless and reflective in the twilight of a distinguished career, Caputo rents a vintage Airstream trailer, hooks it to a truck and, with his wife and their two English setters, takes off. "The United States is too big, too complicated a mosaic of races and nationalities and walks of life to have a single pulse or even two or three," he writes at the outset of his trip, taken in 2011 amid political divisiveness and recession. "But I thought I'd ask people, when possible, the question I'd put to myself: What holds us together?"

To find the answers, Caputo follows America's back roads, retracing part of the route Lewis and Clark forged on their 1804-6 expedition. He joins the Natchez Trace, "spooling past beds of bloodroot and clover bordering deep forests" and crosses the Great Plains on the century-old Lincoln Highway before heading up the Pacific Coast to Alaska. Along the way he meets refugees from the burst housing bubble living off the grid in Tennessee, post-tornado do-gooders in Tuscaloosa and a Lakota Sioux chef-turned-TV-star in the Dakota Badlands. He also grapples with the challenges of trailer life.

Some of Caputo's stopovers seem overly familiar, but he keeps the narrative moving with his observant eye and mordant sense of humor. In the dismal oil-company town of Deadhorse, north of the Arctic Circle, he notes one hotel's efforts to make a virtue of its ugliness: "'Overnight in camp-style rooms consistent with the industrial heritage of the region,' reads its ad in The Milepost. Translation: Your room looks like a Dumpster with a window."

Caputo and his wife reach the end of their journey on a "rocky brownish shoreline, where chunks of bleached driftwood were scattered like bones." By the time they get home, he has heard plenty of theories about the glue that binds Americans together, including the "dynamic disequilibrium" of its federal government and a single word suggested by the Airstream's owner back in Texas — "hope."

In **HERE, THERE, ELSEWHERE: Stories From the Road (Little, Brown, \$29.99)**, 73-year-old William Least Heat-Moon serves up an anthology of short essays culled from three decades of globe-trotting. The book includes several of the Missouri-born Heat-Moon's overseas rambles: a trip to Nagano, where he fraternizes with Japanese World War II veterans, as well as an exploration of Mayan temples in the Yucatán jungle. But as he demonstrated in "Blue Highways" and "PrairieErth," his finest writing is inspired by journeys close to home.

In "A Little Tour in Yoknapatawpha County," Heat-Moon recounts a 1961 trip he took to rural Mississippi in hopes of meeting William Faulkner. Instead he finds the great writer's stepson, Malcolm Franklin, who takes him on a tour of Faulkner's haunts and introduces him to some of the old man's relatives and friends. "Here was a man who had told stories while the fire sparked and dogs howled and the hunters raised tin cups of shine," he writes of an encounter with Faulkner's Uncle Buddy. "Out of him . . . had come tales that got turned into some