

A Rough Guide to the World

25 years after Rough Guides began, founder Mark Ellingham looks back - and ahead

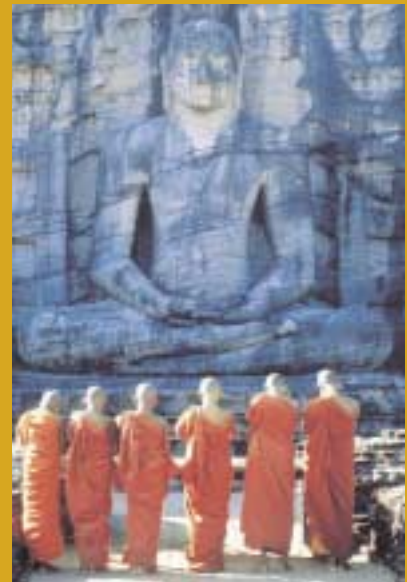
By Mark Ellingham

Almost 25 years ago, three friends set out to create a new type of travel guide, aimed at the independent traveller seeking a new perspective on destinations near and far. Today, Rough Guides are probably the most famous and well-respected travel publications in the world. Founder Mark Ellingham charts the rise of Rough Guides and explores the influence and impact destinations can have on people, and people on destinations.

Galle, Sri Lanka. Photo by Gavin Thomas



Herodius Atticus Theatre, Athens.
Photo - Rough Guides



Snakecharmer, Morocco. Photo - Rough Guides



Unawatuna, Sri Lanka. Photo by Gavin Thomas

When Rough Guides was launched in 1981 – by myself and a couple of friends – we had a clear idea of what we wanted to avoid. Travel writing at the time, and travel guides in particular, were a woeful collection of clichés, depicting their chosen destinations as “lands of contrast” where the locals, if they appeared at all, were either a touch of colour, or servants. By contrast, we wanted Rough Guides to be real, to help our travellers get closer to the country and its people, to look beyond a circuit of the most marketable sights. We imagined our readers as insatiable polymaths, eager to know about modern politics and ancient ruins, traditional music, football, contemporary art, environmental issues, speciality beers ... about a culture in the very broadest sense.

More than that, we wanted to give them this information in a journalistic fashion: one that exchanged good quality journalism for bland travelese. And we wanted our books to be fun, witty companions – books with opinions and personalities – just like someone you might want to have along on the trip, someone with an inside knowledge, a bit of nous, a dose of humour. Someone who knows how to have a good time, wherever you rest your head.

It was a dream that could perhaps only have been conjured by writers in their early-20s, for whom there were no rules except those we could invent for ourselves. And the 1980s was the perfect time to realise it. The travel shelves were empty – there were, literally, no guides in English to countries like Peru or Poland. Even, believe it or not, China. And no guides of our kind even to mainstream destinations like Spain or Greece (our first two titles).

But everyone was travelling. The Iron Curtain was about to drop, opening up a whole swathe of Europe scarcely visited by outsiders since the war. And the cost of flights was halving, and halving again, making New York a possibility for a week, and putting Southeast Asia – India, Thailand, Indonesia – on the agenda for travellers with a few weeks to spare, rather than a few months and the commitment required for an overland expedition.

Almost a quarter century on (has it really been so long?), things are very different. We now have more than 200 Rough Guide travel titles, and we are just one of many players. Travel guide standards have risen enormously, and our books – which were once genuinely ‘Rough’ in the sense of being short, typewritten manuals – are sophisticated tomes, produced by an editorial team of eighty. We feel pressure to out-do our rivals, and our coverage has become at times almost over-comprehensive. We really do go everywhere and write about it.

People often ask if we hold places back to ‘protect’ or ‘preserve’ them, or (this seems a popular suspicion) ‘keep them to ourselves.’ The answer to all of these questions is no. And we have no real need to do so. Travel guides tend to spread people around, to give them the confidence to go to places a bit less obvious. In Sri Lanka, for instance, which we are publishing for the first time this Autumn, we will have extensive coverage of Jaffna and the Tamil and Muslim areas, including such splendours as Wilpattu National Park, that have been off-limits for the duration of the twenty-year-old conflict. We expect to get a lot of letters from our readers – one of the best things about Rough Guides is the sense of

involvement our users feel – on these areas, sharing their experiences and making suggestions for new places to include in the next edition.

Is it a good thing to have travellers roaming around so widely? Again, I have few qualms. Obviously, travel guides have a responsibility to provide accurate information and a degree of advice, especially on safety concerns. But we are serving an independent-minded readership, who can take those decisions. And, as far as the local populations are concerned, independent tourism seems to me – with lots of caveats – a good thing.

The benefits of tourism, as a whole, I'm less convinced about. If you have a large British or American company sending its customers to a resort hotel that it owns, or in effect leases through block-bookings, where it pays minimum rates for labour and takes all of the profits for everything from drinks to excursion trips, then the local benefits can be slim. Indeed, it can be depressing to see the level of dependence, and meagre pickings, that this kind of tourism can bring. But independent travel has a degree of economic anarchy about it. Whether you are in Greece or Thailand, you buy your food from a locally-owned café, you sleep at a family guesthouse, you buy your bus or ferry ticket, or hire a car from a local concern. It doesn't take a genius to see that this is a genuine and properly-functioning slice of the free market.

Or at least, it can and should be. The missing link is of course our own attitudes as we travel around. Do we behave as we should, with sensitivity to local mores? And do we maintain a decent generosity of spirit, or do we (and this is one of the most depressing facets of travel) retreat into ourselves and bargain down rates – for a room or a tuk-tuk, or for a Coke halfway up a mountain – just as cruelly as the conglomerates, for some misguided sense of personal know-how and smartness?

An openness to culture, and a generous approach to life, are, it seems to me as I get older in this game, the most important qualities of all. More so, even than the multiplicity of knowledge that we set out to create. And I think these are qualities that a good travel guide can help to foment: we can give people a confidence and a respect, help them to treat a country as itself, rather than as a consumer item.

That seems a goal worth aiming for.

Mark Ellingham is Founder and Series Editor of Rough Guides.

