



Stephen Fry in America

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Britain's best-loved comic genius Stephen Fry turns his celebrated wit and insight to unearthing the real America as he travels across the continent in his black taxicab. Stephen's account of his adventures is filled with his unique humour, insight and warmth in this beautifully illustrated book that accompanies his journey for the BBC1 series.

'Stephen Fry is a treasure of the British Empire.' - The Guardian

Stephen Fry has always loved America, in fact he came very close to being born there. Here, his fascination for the country and its people sees him embarking on an epic journey across America, visiting each of its 50 states to discover how such a huge diversity of people, cultures, languages, beliefs and landscapes combine to create such a remarkable nation.

Starting on the eastern seaboard, Stephen zig-zags across the country in his London taxicab, talking to its hospitable citizens, listening to its music, visiting its landmarks, viewing small-town life and America's breath-taking landscapes - following wherever his curiosity leads him.

Stephen meets a collection of remarkable individuals - American icons and unsung local heroes alike. Stephen starts his epic journey on the east coast and zig-zags across America, stopping in every state from Maine to Hawaii. En route he discovers the South Side of Chicago with blues legend Buddy Guy, catches up with Morgan Freeman in Mississippi, strides around with Ted Turner on his Montana ranch, marches with Zulus in New Orleans' Mardi Gras, and drums with the Sioux Nation in South Dakota; joins a Georgia family for thanksgiving, 'picks' with Bluegrass hillbillies, and finds himself in a Tennessee garden full of dead bodies.

Whether in a club for failed gangsters (yes, those are real bullet holes) or celebrating Halloween in Salem (is there anywhere better?), Stephen is welcomed by the people of America - mayors, sheriffs, newspaper editors, park rangers, teachers and hobos, bringing to life the oddities and splendours of each locale.

A celebration of the magnificent and the eccentric, the beautiful and the strange, Stephen Fry in America is our author's homage to this extraordinary country.

Stephen Fry in America Details

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Author : Stephen Fry

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From Reader Review Stephen Fry in America for online ebook

Wendy says

I thoroughly enjoyed this--not just as a product of Mr Fry's natural wit and humor, although it was that, too. But the foreigner's perspective on my homeland is usually negative, judgmental and dismissive. Americans are dismissed out of hand as frivolous, stupid, naturally bullheaded and aggressive, and (always, always, always) one of two things: too rich for their own good, or inbred hicks from the sticks. As anyone even remotely familiar with Mr Fry and his work would expect, he doesn't make any such assumptions. In fact, he scolds (gently but firmly) his fellow countrymen for doing so in the opening passages.

So I enjoyed his writing and his thoughts. But a few things did bother me. One was that Mr Fry explained in the introduction that his intention was to observe but not to pass judgment on Americans and their doings. For the most part, he remained objective, but there were points where I bit my tongue to avoid arguing with the book (a supremely silly thing to do, as it can hardly answer back, can it?). I suppose that such moments couldn't be avoided, as Mr Fry is only as human as the rest of us and couldn't possibly be completely objective, like a robot or something. So maybe that was a silly thing to be a little upset about.

The second thing that bothered me also had to do with something Mr Fry said in the introduction. He said he wasn't looking for the weirdest, most bizarre aspects of American life he could find...and sometimes I felt like he *was*. This was made for TV, originally (I haven't seen it, unfortunately), so I guess that can't be avoided, and he really wasn't in charge of the places he went and the things he did. Still, I think we all could've done without the trip to the Body Farm, yes? A trip to a Tennessee Civil War battleground or something would've done fine.

The third thing *also* has something to do with something Mr Fry said in the introduction, because I just haven't learned to let these things go. He said he wasn't going to try to identify America by its cities. Well...in Michigan, he only went to Detroit. Detroit has its own subculture that is unrelated to most of the rest of the state, and it's the biggest city we've got. But as I am from Michigan, this is a personal issue, no one's problem but my own. I just can't shut up about it, but I know it's no one's fault or problem, and eventually the annoyance will fade.

Which brings me to my fourth point. Now, I'm not from these states, but I imagine people looking forward to the segment on their state were bitterly disappointed when they discovered he merely *drove through* Delaware and Ohio. Idaho didn't get much, either. There may have been others slighted, but they escape my memory at the moment and I'm just too lazy to go get the book and look it up. But since this is a written account of a only-made-so-we-can-air-it-on-TV journey, and they only allowed themselves, what, six weeks? Something like that? (Mr Fry is the busiest guy on the planet, so this is kind of understandable) then that would be why those states got nothing more than a passing wave. But still, it bothered me. When you've said you're going to see all fifty states, driving through them counts as cheating. Yes, you *saw* them, technically, but only from the expressway, so...no, you didn't.

But it's still a worthy book. As with all things Mr Fry touches, it's funny and witty at the same time as it's thought-provoking. I liked it, and I think you will, too. I know I focused on the negatives here, but that's just me, Miss Debbie Downer, and a horrible nitpicker--really, the things I complained about were very minor and I actually liked it a lot.

Kirsty says

This book was really interesting. I've always been fascinated by America and after reading this book I have even more of a desire to spend time there exploring.

Each state is covered, some in more detail than others. I liked the fact that he focused on things that readers may not have known about each state rather than going for the obvious things. I do feel that some of the states were a little short-changed. I know that he had a timescale to stick to in getting around all the states, but for the sake of a few extra pages in the book he could have written more.

The photographs throughout the book are interesting and some of the landscapes captured are beautiful. Also running through the book is Stephen's dry humour, which made this book feel much more than just a travelogue.

This was a really interesting read and, for me, was the perfect introduction to the USA.

vylit says

I wanted to love this book, I really did, and I think in a lot of ways the miniseries is actually more charming and entertaining.

I was interested to see his impressions of the different states and the variety one encounters while traveling across this country. I knew that the impressions would likely be superficial simply because of the amount of time he had to travel and the sheer space that he had to traverse. However, even given that, I just don't think the book was very good.

Yes, he did skip over some of the most notable places in the U.S., but that's understandable given the time constraints. However, he doesn't visit all 50 states. He visits 48, I believe, since I don't count stepping over a state line or quickly driving through a state as actually visiting it. And while I understand that timing and the speed in which he needed to accomplish everything was quite small, I think he should have budgeted his time better. But that is fairly nit-picky and not my major issue with the book.

No, my major issues stemmed from two things. One, I feel as though Fry counted on the kindness of some people when it came to showing him around, and seemed very polite to them in person (which you can see if you've watched the show), but in the book I find his attitude of having someone help him and then sneering at them in his very cultured, upper-class way to be pompous and in bad taste. His take on the issues of the Lakota Native Americans in this country and their struggles was so cursory that it made him come off like an ass. I didn't expect him to break into some long, complicated thing about it, but I don't see why some English guy who probably has little in depth knowledge of the issues concerning Native Americans in this country, let alone acquaintance with many Native Americans, feels the need to inject his opinion into the matter.

And honestly, I'm agnostic, and I found his arrogance and derision on the subject of religion to be completely and totally off-putting. It wasn't a matter of not believing, it was a matter of him needing to go on at length in several parts of the book about how foolish and ignorant it was to have faith.

A completely disappointing read.

Esmerelda Weatherwax says

I love Stephen Fry, really well educated, well spoken and super funny listening to him is always a joy. I actually read this book and then watched the tv show and liked them both quite a bit.

I actually learned quite a bit from the documentary, he went through every state in America and found small towns and pointed out bits of American history that aren't well known and it was a really charming read.

I recommend this for anyone who likes Stephen Fry, and like travel logs - some travel logs can be rather dull but with Stephens sense of humor and the types of places he explored it made the read very enjoyable and interesting.

Caroline says

I did not get on well with Master Fry in this instance.

Partly it's because I like things covered in reasonable depth...and this did not happen on Fry's trip to America in 2007/8. Here he covers 50 states in about 26 weeks - therefore giving about 2 weeks to each state, and the book is full of snips. In Massachusetts there is a snip about whaling, then we are whipped off to meet the historical role-playing inmates of *The Mayflower*, and from there off to Salem, where we are given a snip about the trials and hangings of witches in the 17th century, followed with a chat with a modern witch.

My response is no, no, no! Too much, way too quickly, and not nearly enough detail. That old joke about "Today is Thursday, this must be Chicago", has real resonances here, as Fry hops and skips through America, taking a pick and mix approach to each state - and its people, culture and history.

I also didn't like the pix. Considering the book is based on a TV series, and Fry must have had in tow some exceptional cameramen, I don't understand why the pix are so cruddy. It could have been a gut-busting mix of street photography, stunning portraiture and superb landscapes (for goodness sake, the continent of America has landscapes to die for!) But no. Most of the pix looked like they were taken by an amiable aunt with a point and shoot.

So, I am going to give this one a miss.

Santhosh says

Taken strictly as an accompaniment to the popular documentary of the same name catering to a British audience, this book is a decent enough read. My complaint is that things aren't covered in any depth as the emphasis is on setting foot in all 50 states to cover things that are either accessible only to a BBC shoot or would show up well on TV. You know, stuff like attending primary meets with Mitt Romney, horse trading, bourbon brewing, touring a coal mine, Americanisation talks with Hmongs, personalised tours of ranches, visiting the Body Farm, meeting Jimmy Wales and Jonathan Ive, patrolling with sheriffs, flying a B-17

"Flying Fortress", whaling with Inupiat, etc.

Kathleen says

This beautiful book allows the reader to travel around all fifty states with Stephen Fry, friendly foreigner. Full of wit, history, points of scientific interest, points of regional interest, and just generally interesting facts, this is so much more than the accompaniment for a television series. A few pages for each state may seem like too little, especially for places like Missouri where most is given over to the homeless of St Louis, but Fry finds something to love almost everywhere. Of course, it is almost more entertaining when he hates something and rends it with the rapier of his wit, but that happens surprisingly infrequently.

Happily, this book makes a point that I wish would be expressed in the media more often. Namely, that America is *vast*. In Fry's words, "it is almost as meaningless to call someone American without specifying their state as it is to call them European without specifying their country." Which is so very, very true, and something that I don't think people often appreciate. I like to hope that Americans are unlike enough that painting us with the same brush is a disservice. Here Fry makes that point without setting out to make any particular point and documenting as he goes. It is very entertaining. Excuse me, I need to try to find the television series now.

Cynda says

3.75 Enjoyable Travelogue.

Review to Follow.

Linda says

I liked this book so much that I didn't want it to end. I rationed myself just a couple of states per day, and ended up with Alaska and Hawaii left unread when our book group met to discuss it. Oops.

It reminded me a lot of the Michael Palin travel books, except with a bit more Fry and a little less Python.

Everyone has a beef about how their state was treated by Mr. Fry, and I am no exception. Honestly, a dozen theories of how we came to be called Hoosiers? And then he dismisses **all** of them? I'm sort of glad he chose Elkhart to visit. Much better than a trip to the (yawn) Indianapolis Motor Speedway. But I got the feeling the only reason he chose it (and indeed, the only reason he visited Indiana at all) was because it lies between Chicago (which he was very excited about visiting) and Detroit (ditto). We need to change that state motto to "Annoying Land Mass Preventing Easy Access to Michigan from Illinois".

Another disappointment: He didn't even poke his nose into Yellowstone National Park, claiming it was closed. It's never closed; it's simply more difficult to find your way in at certain times of the year. He seemed to prefer dry, rocky vistas, anyway, so maybe he wouldn't have been impressed.

Come back and see us, Stephen, when you have more time.

Chris G Derrick says

First let me say that I enjoyed the read.

However, factual travel books (such as Rough Guides, Lonely Planet) are one thing. They set out the sights to see, the accomodation and you make your choice if you wish to follow their advice.

A personal travel book is, in my mind, vastly different. Going by the last paragraph of his introduction it seems this is what he's set out to write.

It comes back to the 'One man's meat is another man's poison' saying.

In 2011 we drove 8500 miles across the US - from Washington DC to San Francisco. We visited 18 states, took 5 weeks and went as far north as Montana (Billings). We've also been fortunate enough to spend several holidays in the New Mexico, Arizona, Utah area over the recent years. Each one we've enjoyed beyond measure.

Consequently we've seen a lot of the places Stephen Fry visited.

He says Santa Fe NM 'depresses and distresses him in equal measure' - I've been there twice and think it's a wonderful, colourful, vibrant city. Sitting on a seat on the Plaza and watching the world go by is a glorious way to pass some time.

On the other hand there are many points Mr. Fry has made I do agree with whole heartedly.

For example when he compares Ayers Rock in Australia to the glory of Monument Valley ('too small, feeble and uninteresting'). Definately got my vote there!

When he refers to spending the 'evening of his life' somewhere west of Tucson within sight of the mountains and the cactus. Now that is a sentiment I could very well have written myself!

So there we have it.

The book's a great read but my advice is don't simply read about the experiences within its pages. If you're at all able then visit the US, make that road trip you've been talking about. Drive Route 66 across New Mexico and Arizona. Drive Highway 50 across Nevada (The Loneliest Highway In The World).

Problem is, the way I see it, once is never enough!

Enjoy!

Keryl Raist says

Maybe I should start by saying that I am an American? Or maybe the fact that I'm also a long term Stephen Fry fan? Possibly the fact that I'm a major anglophile is relevant?

That all of these things are true definitely formed my opinion on this book. I enjoyed it immensely. It was a light, quick, little jaunt through the USA with a friendly and fond citizen of a country much like us, but still very much not us.

For the US reader, Stephen Fry is very, very British. His language, British English, will cause the US reader occasional pause. (What's a fringe? Why would it be on someone's head? Oh, that's Britspeak for bangs! The book is kind enough to have a glossary in the back.) And though he is very British he is not the stereotypical Smarter-and-more-cultured-than-thou Brit. (Though, in addition to Hugh Laurie, if any living Brit has earned the right to that title, he's it.) Likewise, he was looking to write a book that went well past the Loud-rude-idiot American stereotype.

So, join me fellow Yanks, and take a look at our country through the eyes of a very well educated and traveled Brit.

Fry is a very competent writer and usually a very interesting person, as he's demonstrated over and over again in his other works, but this particular book is just embarrassing. It's almost like watching a Western otaku write about Japan. All it needs is random emoticons.

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Trish says

I've loved Stephen Fry ever since I saw a debate with him on youtube (he teamed up with Christopher Hitchens). Shortly after that I started looking into the documentaries he has made over the years and thus discovered **Stephen Fry in America**. Now, many years later, I have finally found out about the book and managed to find a used copy.

The idea was for Stephen Fry to take a famous black London cab (just because he can and it is quirky) to the US and travel through all of the 50 states to find the defining characteristics. I cannot think of a more British, a more well-suited person for this endeavor. The man can be extremely funny and observant, is intelligent as all hell and generally interested in all manner of cultures.

This I had to show you guys just to emphasize what the book is truly about and how Fry incorporates his own thoughts on current affairs seamlessly:

Anti-Americanism is said to be on the rise around the world. Obviously this has more to do with American foreign policy than Americans as people. In a democracy however, you can't quite divorce populace from policy. Like any kind of racism there are the full-frontal and the casual kinds.

I have often felt a hot flare of shame inside me when I listen to my fellow Britons casually jeering at the perceived depth of American ignorance, American crassness, American isolationism, American materialism, American lack of irony and American vulgarity. Aside from the sheer rudeness of such open and unapologetic mockery, it seems to me to reveal very little about America and a great deal about the rather feeble need of some Britons to feel superior. Alright, they seem to be saying, we no longer have an Empire, power, prestige or respect in the world, but we do have 'taste' and 'subtlety' and 'broad general knowledge', unlike those poor Yanks. What silly, self-deluding rubbish! What small-minded stupidity! Such

Britons hug themselves with the thought that they are more cosmopolitan and sophisticated than Americans because they think they know more about geography and world culture, as if firstly being cosmopolitan and sophisticated can be scored in a quiz and as if secondly (and much more importantly) being cosmopolitan and sophisticated is in any way desirable or admirable to begin with. Sophistication is not a moral quality, nor is it (unless one is mad) a criterion by which one would choose one's friends. Why do we like people? Because they are knowledgeable, cosmopolitan and sophisticated? No, because they are charming, kind, considerate, exciting to be with, amusing... there is a long list, but knowing what the capital of Kazakhstan is will not be on it. Unless, as I repeat, you are mad.

The truth is, we are offended by the clear fact that so many Americans know and care so very little about us. How dare they not know who our Prime Minister is, or be so indifferent as to believe that Wales is an island off the coast of Scotland? We are quite literally not on the map as far as they are concerned and that hurts. They can get along without us, it seems, a lot better than we can get along without them and how can that not be galling to our pride? Thus we (or some of us) react with the superiority and conceit characteristic of people who have been made to feel deeply inferior.

Having said that this book presumes to draw no conclusions, I will offer this: the overwhelming majority of Americans I met on my journey were kind, courteous, honourable and hospitable beyond expectation. Such striking levels of warmth, politeness and consideration were encountered not just in those I was meeting for on-camera interview; they were to be found in the ordinary Americans I met in the filling-stations, restaurants, hotels and shops too.

If I were to run out of petrol in the middle of the night I would feel more confident about knocking on the door of an American home than one in any other country I know – including my own. The friendly welcome, the generosity, the helpfulness of Americans – especially, I ought to say, in the South and Midwest – is as good a reason to visit as the scenery. Yes, Americans are terrible drivers (endlessly weaving between lanes while on the phone, bullying their way through if they drive a big vehicle, no waves of thanks or acknowledgement, no letting other cars into traffic), yes they have no idea what cheese or bread can be and yes, strip malls, TV commercials and talk radio are gratingly dreadful. But weighing the good, the kind, the original, the enchanting, the breathtaking, the hilarious and the lovable against the bad, the cruel, the banal, the ugly, the crass, the silly and the monstrous, I see the scales coming down towards the good every time.

That was very important to me. You see, it is easy (in any country) to go and find the nutters so you can spend hours ridiculing a nation. Instead, Fry acknowledges the differences without self-aggrandisement and simply points out typical things to be found in the respective state.

What I also loved about the book was that for all the briefness of information, there was a nice overview on a large variety of subjects such as art, industry, clothing, food, history, traditions, architecture, the fauna and flora ...

So the book is divided into these chapters:

Stephen meets with wannabe gangsters in NYC, visits Arlington (on Veteran's Day no less), learns about legalized prostitution in Nevada (yes, despite me not liking prostitution in general I think this is a fantastic idea that is also a win-win), is shocked by the scale of a normal football match between two schools (there were even jets flying overhead although it was not the NFL), is allowed to use the periscope of a submarine, learns to deal Black Jack cards in a casino, encounters witches and hunters of Big Foot, talks to artists

(Morgan Freeman amongst them) as well as entrepreneurs (the founder of Wikipedia and the chief designer of Apple for example) and people trying to preserve their native heritage (Native Americans as well as the descendants of former slaves), swims with sharks, looks at human cadavers in various stages of decomposition (the "Body Farm" in Knoxville), creates his own flavour of Ben & Jerry's ice cream, goes on a drug bust, shoots Dirty Harry's gun, rides a horse, and so much more!

We get to travel with him and enjoy his dry sense of humour, his clumsiness, his sharp observations - and we marvel with him at the great sights this truly enormous country has to offer. Also, there are some encounters in this book that never made it into the mini-series (some for obvious reasons) so that is an added bonus for all the readers. The book is basically one big smash-book of a travel memoir that brings us closer to realizing the US is basically 50 countries and therefore every American is different - though they seem to almost all come together when it counts. It shows the similarities as well as the differences, the unity and the contradictions, the happy and the sad (he did travel through Louisiana after Katrina after all), the good, the bad and the bat-shit crazy. All of which is wonderfully illustrated by poignant photographs.

It also has to be pointed out that Stephen Fry made some culturally and politically important observations like the fact that neither Clinton nor Obama were willing to let him and his film crew observe behind the scenes of their primaries while Mitt Romney and other Republican candidates (the traditionally said to be more closed-off side) had no problem with it whatsoever.

Or the fact that two *publicly funded schools from the poorest state in America, predominantly attended by African-American children* have indoor sports facilities that put European schools to shame. *From Eton College to the most favoured and subsidised giant comprehensive you will not see better facilities in better condition.*

Every time you think you have the place figured out, it surprises you.

Moreover, it was enormously funny to read his private opinion of Trump, now President but back then "just" another rich American:

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAHA!

I, myself, fell in love with the US in 2005, two years before Stephen Fry started his epic journey. I did not get to see even only a quarter of what he did although I spent almost three months there (we started in Baltimore, spent 4th of July in DC, saw a musical on Broadway following which I was equally flabberghasted by Times Square at night and moved to tears by Ground Zero, got showered by the Niagara Falls, visited relatives of my travel companions in Minnesota, took pictures at Mount Rushmore, did some river-rafting in Yellowstone after watching Old Faithful, thought I'd have to die when walking the petrified forest in what felt like 500°C, marvelled at the "ghost trees" on the coastal road, enjoyed the first and only real bread in San Francisco, and had my first real milk shake in LA). Nevertheless, I know what he means. This feeling of wide-eyed wonder, this allure of the vastness, this longing to go back and see more more more. It is well worth remembering that while probably every country has many aspects and interesting vistas, I've never come across a diversity such as the US has to offer. And yes, all the people I've ever encountered (even the weird ones) were exceedingly friendly and accommodating.

Thus, the final note from Fry is very apt and uplifting:

Fifty states. Fifty cultures, societies, accents, cuisines, landscapes and more. I shall never be able to think of America in quite the same way again. I cannot claim to have done more than scratch the surface of this enormous land, but the scope of my adventures and the variety of people I have met have convinced me that

it is almost as meaningless to call someone American without specifying their state as it is to call them European without specifying their country. The great metropolitan areas stand on their own as unique entities, but journeying through the rest of the United States I found that statehood mattered and that locality and terroir, as the French would say, seared its brand into everything and everyone.

I loved America before this trip and I love it now more than ever. The obvious characteristics that we celebrate and bemoan – the brashness, the vulgarity, the worship of money, the gun obsession, the distressing religiosity, the ignorance of the rest of the world, the deafness to linguistic nuance, the lack of banter, the whining self-regard, the blame culture, the junk food and the strip malls – yes, these are all to be found, but alongside we encounter the hope, the self-belief, the optimism, the warmth, consideration, kindness, sharpness of wits, will power, pride, wry self-awareness, independence, openness, generosity and charm. There is nothing you and I can observe about America that most Americans haven't observed for themselves. I met very few fools on my travels, save perhaps the British I encountered who thought themselves naturally superior: I still shiver with embarrassment at the memory of their imbecile arrogance. America is not perfect, and I do not love Britain any less for loving America more. As all travellers know, the experience of a foreign country teaches you about your own.

I couldn't have phrased it better.
