

REVIEWS

Fellow Travelling

A survey of guide books

Passport - tick. Travellers cheques - tick. Guide book - tick. Sun-tan lotion. . . Guide books are as essential a part of the holiday-maker's armoury as the means of reaching the destination. The range of guide books on the market for the more popular holiday areas is bewildering, and rich enough even for more remote or less visited parts. But the dozen or so guides to, say, Normandy or Northern Italy, are not so many indistinguishable products, but proffer quite different interpretations of the area, suggesting quite different ways of holiday-making. Given that the Left is beginning to come to terms with the politics of leisure and pleasure, it seems right that we should look at the ways in which writers and publishers would guide us through that precious couple of weeks which, for those of us in work, are supposed to be a distillation of the year's pleasures.

Guide books come in series - there is a recognisable housestyle which distinguishes the *Michelin Guide* from the *Blue Guide*. Holiday-makers tend to stick to a particular series - once you've found your way round the *Michelin Guide* to Brittany, it makes sense to buy their guide to Normandy the following year. Each region of France is covered by a *Michelin Green Guide* to tourist sites, as are a number of foreign lands, regions or cities - Italy, New England or London - while the massive *Red Guides* to restaurants and hotels work on a country-by-country basis. A growing number of Green Guides are now available in English, but beware - these are sometimes shorter than the French originals, so check, and if your French is up to it, buy the original.

The *Green Guides* are written anonymously, and offer a strictly hierarchical approach to site-seeing. Some places are picked out as 'Worth a Journey' - Mont St Michel and Venice - some as 'Worth a Detour' - Bayeux and Bologna - while others are just 'Interesting'. Once you've reached your destination the Michelin people will keep you at it - starting with their extraordinary evaluation of how long you need to visit a place - Bologna, 3 hours; Venice, 3 days! Then you start going down the star scale; in Venice from St Mark's Basilica which scores three, to *il ghetto*, the old Jewish quarter which gave its name to the world, and gets none at all. It's worth

pointing out that while the Red Guides do highlight establishments which are fabulously expensive, they will also, with their bright red 'R', point you towards invariably excellent restaurants where you can eat for five or six quid a head: essential for anyone who believes that a nation's cooking can be as revealing as its art treasures.

The *Companion Guides* published by Collins adopt a much more conventional, bookish approach. They are written in continuous prose rather than being broken up, site-by-site, into staccato, heavily coded packets of words. What's more, they're signed - each one is written by a named author, and after a few pages you can detect his or her prejudices or foibles and make your own judgements accordingly: here, unlike in the Michelins, the values are out in the open. Adopting this more traditional literary style - though losing nothing in terms of clarity as *guide* books - the *Companion Guides* are often a straightforward pleasure to read. Nesta Roberts on Normandy, for example, is informative, witty and stylish; anyone who describes building concrete as 'a material which weathers so ungracefully that it is rotten before it is ripe' deserves to be read both as a traveller's guide and as a writer.

Benn's Blue Guides, pocket format like Michelins, but much fatter, fall half-way between the *Companion* and *Michelin Guides*. Absolutely stuffed with historical and artistic information, they are arranged around a series of journeys - from Verona to Venice, Rouen to Caen - just like the *Companion Guides*. Broken up by street maps and ground plans of churches and castles, they jump between a *Michelin* - style approach to packaged information and a more discursive style in which the authors display their own likes and dislikes. With their wealth of detail they are probably the most useful of the commonly available guides for serious site-seers, but, unlike the Michelins, they won't point you towards a good sandy beach or a forest that is pleasant to walk in. Never allowing themselves the more relaxed approach of the *Companion Guides*, they can hardly be termed a pleasure to read.

Most satisfying of all the traditional guide books are probably those which really belong to the tradition of travel literature, but which can be read as guides. Freda White's *Three Rivers of France*, just reprinted, and James Morris's justly famous *Venice* are obvious examples; the latter, telling you the membership of the Venetian Association of Hairdressers in



1797, tells you as much about the city's decline and decadence as any po-faced historical introduction in a conventional guide.

An important absence from the guides mentioned so far is simple information about a more living form of tourism than the admiration of great works of art or beauty spots - when market day falls in a particular town, or where you'd do as well to stroll around and have a slow drink in an old neighbourhood as to visit the cathedral or art gallery. What is lacking is information which helps the reader to appreciate day-to-day life in the area concerned, and pointers to popular traditions and lifestyles rather than quaint folkloric customs, as often as not preserved specially for the tourist trade.

RKP's new and rapidly growing series of *Rough Guides* is rather self-consciously aimed at the youth market, with information about the advisability of sleeping

rough on beaches, and cheap hotels and eating places. Parts of this 'radical' image are genuinely useful - pointing to the differences that women visitors can expect between aggressive Spanish *machismo* and the more restrained behaviour of the Portuguese male; others - radical chic run-downs on local politics - are best skipped.

In highlighting the enormous market at Barcelos in Northern Portugal, and advising those interested to visit it before entry into the EEC destroys the peasant economy which sustains it, the authors direct their readers towards a quite unique living spectacle. In celebrating the *atmosphere* of Barcelona, a city to visit for the vitality of its streets and plazas as well as for its Picassos and Mirós, the Rough Guide takes a tentative step towards a new type of guide book, indicating some of the parts that other guides don't want to reach.

The truly political guide book, when published, will not just point the visitor towards the site of a house where a long-dead radical once lived, but towards the living traditions which distinguish one city from another, a nation from its neighbours. Bologna's Piazza Maggiore is not only beautiful, but seeing it early on a warm evening, swarming with people discussing the events of the day and the state of the world is an enormously instructive sight. It says much more about Italy, past and present, red and white, than a bed Garibaldi slept in. The first guide to point you there will be the one to buy.

Stephen Hayward