

Charlotte Du Cann is taking to the road

## Escape Routes

In the 80s nobody travelled but everyone went shopping. In the culture that weighed a person's worth in terms of their credit, their hardware and their house, there was scant regard for the voyager who sought for a universal meaning unencumbered by material things.

The consumer generation did go on holiday, of course. It went away to fabulous places of which its parents had only dreamed: Thailand, Turkey, Goa, the Caribbean. Exotic locations where overworked minds and bodies could be rested and pampered. And where there was no shortage of souks. Destinations in the 80s would always be appraised in terms of their markets and their restaurants. Look, the travellers declared, look at this jewellery we bought, this rug, these strange and rare peppers. They were so cheap!

At one time the most popular city in the world was Bangkok because the sweatshops could turn out imitation Japanese labels for a fraction of the price. When they returned, these travelling salesmen would proudly display their spoils around their homes. The world had become one vast emporium: a global Conran.

But you could not call this travel. There was no attempt to understand the countries that were visited, certainly no attempt to talk to their peoples. If there was communication, it was to steal their music to fuel the jaded songs of the West. There was no yearning to live or experience the world in a different way. Everyone stayed firmly inside their hotels. Nobody went native, stayed on, dropped out. Although some bought villas.

But as the 80s have drawn to a close and the serious money has begun to run out, travel is taking on a new significance. The material goods that once appeared so glittering and so desirable have lost their shine. The credit card, the hardware and the house that everyone is now fighting so hard to keep, no longer seem enough to sustain us. Everyone has begun to look abroad, literally and metaphorically.

In the 90s we have begun to realise the legacy that our greed has left us: an empty

casket. 'Our civilisation is all about means presented as ends, like health and money,' said the designer Vivienne Westwood. 'But what can you do with health and money if you have no brain?'

The 80s produced many things but it produced no philosophy, no ideology, no spirituality, no quest. Not only were its people still but their hearts, minds and souls stayed at home too. All the radical thinking of the 80s came from the new Right, those who championed a locked door and a closed mind. Ideas were perceived as some new concept for shiny magazines or post-modern architecture. Art was given value only if it triumphed in the marketplace. The archetypal explorers, the students and bohemians, never went on the road. There was, as Margaret Thatcher rightly pointed out, no alternative.

There are signs that this is now changing. And changing fast. The beginning of the new decade has seen the erstwhile consumer playing with alternative thinking like a clumsy child: the new hippydom, the green movement, the mysticism of the new age, the hedonism of acid house. But all these phenomena are still expressed in the old language of buy and sell. Concern for the planet is expressed by the purchase of ecological washing powder, new age by an expensive crystal. The new hippies are those who pay for alternative cures, acid housers are those who wear fashionable track-suits. The only language that now seems appropriate to explain the Zeitgeist is an older lexicon still: the vocabulary of beat.

There are obvious (and old-fashioned) style pointers to the re-emergence of beat as the nostalgia for the 90s: the opening of Jazz FM, the reissue of *On The Road*, the return of the bohemian striped top. Each age chooses its own nostalgia, some for its goods and chattels and some for its attitude. The beat attitude of the 90s comprises a geographical searching for revelation (typified by the reappraisal of the prophetic-hobo songs of Bob Dylan) and a spiritual searching (typified by the reappraisal of religious Eastern and sha-





manistic writing). It is also fuelled by the return of the bohemian as role model, the intellectual of the *demi-monde* whose existence was dismissed in the last decade.

In the 90s, the choice of destinations has changed, away from lush escapist shopping centres to disturbing mind-altering landscapes: deserts with hallucinogenic light, big alienating cities. It is no accident that Tangier, resort for old bohemia, sex, drugs and existentialism, is the location for every glossy magazine, nor that acid, the drug of a thousand trips, has replaced cocaine, drug of the powertrip.

The most potent symbol of this new restlessness is, of course, the road. The road has always signified change and a new beginning, from *The Grapes Of Wrath* to *Easy Rider*. As the culture of the 90s threatens to become more deeply circumscribed by home and family, the strict suburban conformity depicted by films such as *Parenthood*, so the aesthetic of the outsider will become more powerful. Although the film *Drugstore Cowboy* was set in the 70s, its attitude was entirely modern. Its characters were grown-ups (including an ancient William Burroughs) who had deliberately chosen not to belong to the status quo, who liked living in the twilight zone, who liked to keep on travelling.

For it is not kids who are rethinking what was once called lifestyle but the generation who have worked throughout their 20s. The new beatniks are the enemies of *thirtysomething*. Their departure is not a coincidence of youth but a decision made with all the pragmatism learnt in the 80s. *Drugstore Cowboy* was the first road movie of the 90s.

I don't imagine that every disillusioned consumerist is now going to start hitching like Sal Paradise, or pile into a new version of Ken Kesey's bus, but some will. Not everyone will quit their jobs or leave home, but in their imaginations they will. And it will not be to reach a pre-determined destination but for the sheer joy of moving, of discovery, of starting again, not only physically but mentally and spiritually as well. •

## Road Map

Roadies  
 Jack Kerouac  
 Bob Dylan  
 Dervla Murphy  
 Michael Palin  
 Don Juan  
 Bruce Chatwin  
 Lee Marvin  
 Wim Wenders  
 St Paul  
 Dorothy  
 Road Reading  
 Howl  
 The Songlines  
 Treasure Island  
 Robinson Crusoe  
 Siddhartha  
 The Outsider  
 The Adventures Of  
 Augie March  
 Granta Travel Writing  
 A compass  
 Palms  
 Where To be Seen  
 Greyhound bus stations  
 Bucket shops  
 The desert  
 City Lights Bookshop  
 Jumping trains  
 In the distance  
 Destinations  
 'America'  
 Alaska  
 Morocco  
 Alice Springs  
 Destiny  
 Damascus  
 Nirvana  
 Oz  
 What To Wear  
 Fluorescent On White  
 Timberland boots  
 White jeans  
 Leather jacket  
 Stripes  
 A hood  
 Walkman  
 Accessories  
 Maps  
 Swiss army knife  
 St Christopher Medal  
 Wooden crosses  
 Hip flask  
 Worry beads  
 Herbal cigarettes  
 Condoms  
 Road Talk  
 Poetry  
 Spontaneity  
 Honesty  
 Be-bop  
 Bisexuality  
 Buddhism  
 Existentialism  
 Meaning  
 Don't Mention  
 Return tickets  
 Travel insurance  
 Your mortgage  
 The poll tax  
 Kansas  
 Last year's package  
 tour to Spain  
 The access card in  
 your back pocket