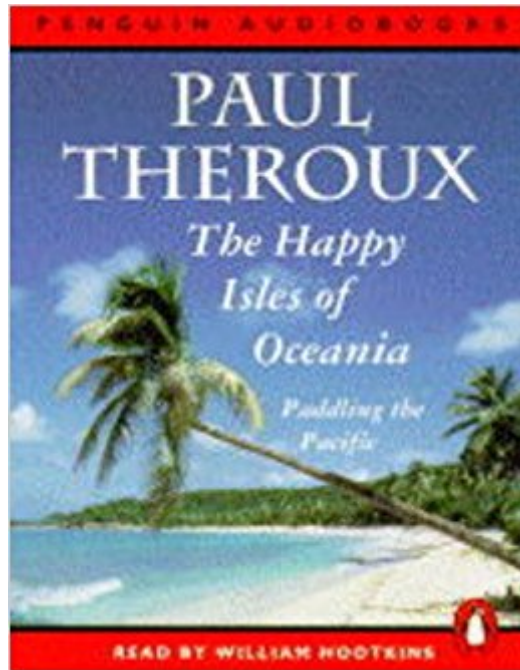




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# Happy Isles Of Oceania : Paddling The Pacific



## Synopsis

At a low point in his life, Paul Theroux packed a tent, a collapsible kayak and a sleeping bag, and set off for the Pacific Islands. Paddling his canoe from New Zealand and Australia to the Solomon Islands, Polynesia and Hawaii, he discovered a melting pot of cultures and contrasts, and happiness.

## Book Information

Series: Penguin audiobooks

Audio Cassette: 2 pages

Publisher: Penguin Putnam~trade (June 27, 1996)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140862560

ISBN-13: 978-0140862560

Product Dimensions: 4.2 x 0.7 x 5.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 5 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 139 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #10,654,892 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #70 in [Books > Travel > Australia & South Pacific > Micronesia](#) #4164 in [Books > Travel > Australia & South Pacific > General](#) #19459 in [Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Writing > Travel](#)

## Customer Reviews

Despite the euphoric title, Oceania as Theroux ( *Riding the Iron Rooster* ) experienced it was only occasionally a carefree paradise. In the Trobriand Islands, celebrated by anthropologists for their supposed sexual freedom, the novelist and travel writer found prostitution and fear of rape. Samoa struck him as noisy, vandalized, with American-style conspicuous consumption. The intrepid Theroux discussed world politics with the king of Tonga, encountered class consciousness in Honolulu, mingled with street gangs in Auckland, and lived in a bamboo hut in Vanuatu (formerly New Hebrides), where he investigated a cargo cult and rumors of cannibalism. In Australia he braved the Woop Woop (remote outback) to camp with Aborigines. This exhilarating epic ranks with Theroux's best travel books. It is full of disarming observations, high adventure and memorable characters rendered with keen irony. First serial to New York Times Magazine; BOMC featured alternate; QPB alternate. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

The best-selling author of *My Secret History* ( LJ 4/1/89) and *Riding the Iron Rooster* ( LJ 6/15/88) spent 18 months in a one-man collapsible kayak exploring such exotic Pacific islands as New Zealand, Australia, the Solomon and Cook Islands, Fiji, Samoa, Tahiti, Easter Island, and Hawaii. Never a kind-hearted chronicler of place, he sets out on this voyage in an especially dour mood, leaving behind a failed marriage and expecting to be diagnosed with cancer at any moment. Soon after he escapes the crowded towns of Australia, however, he starts to lose some of his harsh edge and enjoy his travels, which ultimately heal him. A brilliant storyteller with an eye for the absurd, Theroux takes the reader to little-known places where time seems to have stood still and people lead simple lives totally unrelated to 20th-century America. Highly recommended for all libraries. Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 2/1/92.- Lisa J. Cochenet, Rhinelander Dist. Lib., Wis. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

This was a great book...beware it is not uplifting. But then you read Theroux to get at the truth and there is probably no more aburdly hyped area of the world than the South Pacific Islands. I also knew very little about this part of earth...I knew New Guinea was extremely primitive and knew there were black melanesians along with lighter skinned polynesians and had heard of the big names like Fiji and Tahiti Samoa but that was about it. What Theroux describes is a very low brow culture who use the ocean as a garbage dump and toilet--there is little organization except where religion from missionaries has prevailed. There is a constant background torment from biting flys and mosquitoes. These people have completely lost their original talents of coping with the environment...They don't make boats anymore (for the most part) don't fish in deep waters... They are reduced very much like Indian reservations in the US to gov't handouts where they are lucky enough to get them and getting drunk or high on kava. Violent rude inhospitable for the most part...again like an Indian reservation. You come out concluding they are probably less intelligent than the Indians of Fiji--unmotivated and living for the day to get drunk or show up in church. The only part of the book that gets boring is once he arrives in Hawaii where there is a totally incongruous chapter on a luxury bungalow---you can only conclude he was paid for that as an advertisement. I encourage you to read it to see the problems New Zealand and Australia are dealing with. Theroux does not give these 2 countries any credit but then he is a dyed in the wool liberal former peace corps type. Which makes the horror of the islands all the more believable.

I read this as I like travel logs about small boats. Theroux is an excellent writer, and it's fun to get

lost in the details of this trip that covers all of the major stopping points in Oceania. The only reason I have left off the fifth star is that as a traveler and an ethnographer, he tends to form a negative view or at least a narrative that focuses on the negatives of each culture he encounters. After a while, the book starts seeming like a catalog of "what is wrong with these people and this place". A great deal of that is appropriate, however, and the book is a definite knockdown of any dreamy ideas of "Gauguin's Paradise" in favor of the brutal realities of how the modern world is affecting or has affected the places and cultures of Oceania as of the late '80s. It also presents some pretty good evidence as to why Thor Heyerdahl's theories about migration are dead wrong.

Many reviewers of this book cited the author's melancholy in the early chapters. Divorce is depressing!! I have visited many of the islands covered in this comprehensive overview of Oceania and found the descriptions to be remarkably consistent with my experiences. If you've never been to the Pacific Islands, this will give you a true feel for the varied and exotic peoples and locations. Mr. Theroux spent a good deal of time in the Solomons, which are not nearly as developed and accessible as the better known chains (Cook Islands, Society Islands, Hawaii). I found his description of American Samoa particularly interesting as I was married to a Samoan and visited family on the island. The comments about Pago Pago are spot on. The opening chapters on Australia and New Zealand were fascinating.

If your into reading stories by a hypocrite then feel free. Otherwise, it reads as though he plagiarized, a lot. I visited the some of the same islands he did, at the same time he did. His descriptions do not match up with what I saw. I realize everyone will have a different perspective, but you start to wonder if he was sober, or just staying at resorts, or even there at all.

I have read many books by this author, but this one I did not enjoy. It had a negative bent to it and was a bit depressing. I have loved all of his other books...sorry Paul Theroux

Before reading this book, I read through some of the reviews on here. Needless to say, I had the preconceived notion that this book was going to be the diatribe of a misanthropic, bitter wanderer. Although there are some moments where Theroux gets carried away with unkind portraits - his descriptions of Tongans and Samoans, for example - he is not the monster that many of the reviews here paint him as. Not everybody can be happy all the time, and that's more or less how he tells the story. If you have never read Paul Theroux, then perhaps you will be a bit shocked at his raw

cynicism. I, for one, am a big fan. This is the blood and guts of world travel. Nobody can be completely open to a new culture or worldview, and certain things are bound to be annoying. The entire adventure of his literary tour in Australia, for example, points out the nagging, dragging questions of people unfamiliar with his work yet trying to conduct journalistic interviews. It isn't until he is rumbling over the outback that he meets a rural Australian who knows and admires his work - rather unexpectedly, at that. Also, one must remember that Theroux puts it right on the table that he is going through some serious issues in his life - a rough marriage break up, health issues, and feelings of alienation - and is removing himself from the mundane to paddle away his problems. I, for one, feel like this is one of Theroux's finest books. It is devoid of a real theme and lets you paddle alongside Theroux and his emotional travails. I've traveled a bit in Melanesia, and I find his descriptions to be quite apt. Trouble is everywhere in paradise. Murky, trashed lagoons and quarreling kin networks. Bugs, nagging children, and hustlers. But also, there is the hospitality, the betel nut, the amazing conversations, the unique and unexpected characters and, of course, the bleeding sunsets and turquoise, coral-studded seas.

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