



TOPOGRAPHIES

by Stephen Benz

A wild ride on the madcap streets of Guatemala City. A twilight walk through old Havana with a Cuban mailman. A canoe trip in search of a lost grave in the Everglades. A late-night visit to a border-town casino. These are some of the experiences Stephen Benz describes in this witty, insightful, and evocative collection of personal essays and literary journalism.

Benz takes readers to locales both familiar and remote, introducing unusual characters and recounting little-known historical anecdotes. Along the way, he contemplates the meaning of road signs, describes the hardships of daily life in the former Soviet Union, reflects on the lives and deaths of forgotten people, and listens to a bolero during a Havana blackout.



AUTHOR PROFILE



STEPHEN BENZ

With great humor and elegance, Stephen Benz takes the landscapes and their histories we thought we knew and transforms them into surprising and immediately relevant stories. Detailing a country stripped down to the bone, Benz traces the vicissitudes of plunder and restoration as only someone with such an acute eye and ear can. *Topographies* makes these places live again.

—Nicole Walker, *Sustainability: A Love Story*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Along with two books of travel essays—*Guatemalan Journey* (University of Texas Press) and *Green Dreams: Travels in Central America* (Lonely Planet)—Stephen Benz has published essays in *Creative Nonfiction*, *River Teeth*, *TriQuarterly*, and other journals. Two of his essays have been selected for *Best American Travel Writing* (2003, 2015). Formerly a writer for *Tropic*, the Sunday magazine of the *Miami Herald*, he now teaches professional writing at the University of New Mexico.

ADVANCE PRAISE

Places as diverse as rural Wyoming, the Florida Everglades and post-Soviet Moldova may not have much in common—except that Stephen Benz has paid them a visit and taken their full measure. In this sparkling collection of travel essays, Benz uses a strong command of history and lively wit to tease out his extraordinary tales of soldiers and pioneers, mad friars, the charms of Route 66, and the odd present-day travelers he meets along the way. From tracking a mysterious murder in Florida to climbing Cuba's San Juan Hill, Benz enlightens us with his account of how history is often peddled to the public, how it actually happened, and the extraordinary road he travels to know the difference.

—Philip Burnham, *Song of Dewey Beard: Last Survivor of the Little Bighorn*

SAMPLE FROM THE BOOK

Open House at Trinity Site

On the morning of July 16, 1945, a tremendous explosion shook the widely scattered towns of central and southern New Mexico. People in cities as far apart as Gallup and Las Cruces felt the rumbling. In Roswell, the pre-dawn sky lit up as though seared by a divine bolt. In Socorro, windows broke from the tremor. Nationally, the big news that day was the impending meeting of Churchill, Stalin, and Truman at Potsdam. But in Albuquerque, the evening Tribune made the explosion its lead story under the headline, "Munitions Explode at Alamo Dump." According to an army spokesman, an ammunition magazine had exploded "in a remote area of the Alamogordo Air Base reservation."

A month later, the residents of New Mexico and the rest of the world learned the truth about the explosion. The "remote area" referred to in the article was known to the military by the secret code name of "Trinity Site." The "brilliant flash and blast" were in fact caused by the first successful test of an atomic bomb.

Today, Trinity Site remains the most remote and restricted National Historic Landmark. Accessible only by rough roads and isolated in an extreme sector of the White Sands Missile Range, Trinity is open to the public only twice a year—the first Saturdays in April and October—when the Public Affairs Office of the White Sands Missile Range leads a convoy from Alamogordo, New Mexico out to Ground Zero. The army calls the occasion an "open house."

One Easter weekend, I drove out to Alamogordo to join the convoy. Despite vast vistas, Alamogordo feels isolated and insular, as if the edge of the earth were a few miles outside of town in any direction. Its founders envisioned an oasis to serve railway passengers, but passenger trains no longer go through town. Only three roads access the Tularosa basin, in which Alamogordo lies between the eerie rippling gypsum dunes of White Sands to the west and the stark Sacramento Mountains to the east. Windswept, dusty, and sun-broiled, Alamogordo epitomizes the sleepy Southwestern town that progress has passed by. Even so, the town considers progress, especially technological progress, central to its identity. Alamogordo is home to the International Space Hall of Fame, a five-story golden glass building at the foot of the Sacramentos that glows in the afternoon sun like something fallen from orbit. Rockets stand erect in the town's parks and street medians. Model missiles crop up here and there. Aerospace-themed images adorn signs and façades.

BOOK INFORMATION

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