



A Visit to Don Otavio

Sybille Bedford , Bruce Chatwin (Introduction)

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Before returning to the Old World after World War II, Sybille Bedford resolved to see something more of the New. I had a great longing to move, she said, to hear another language, eat new food, to be in a country with a long nasty history in the past and as little present history as possible. And so she set out for Mexico--and, incidentally, to write what Bruce Chatwin called the best travel book of the twentieth century, a book of marvels, to be read again and again and again.

A Visit to Don Otavio Details

Date : Published March 21st 2003 by Counterpoint (first published 1953)

ISBN : 9781582431710

Author : Sybille Bedford , Bruce Chatwin (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 370 pages

Genre : Travel, Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir

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Susan says

I think Noel Coward really wrote this.

Sybille and her friend "E" act like they're in a drawing room comedy. I couldn't read the conversations without hearing the plummy tones of upper crust Brits, usually something I would enjoy. I really expected to like this, but found them difficult to travel with.

Tony says

A VISIT TO DON OTAVIO: A Traveler's Tale From Mexico. (1960). Sybille Bedford. ****.

Ms. Bedford (1911-2005) was an interesting person of many talents. She was born in Berlin, Germany, as Freiin Sybille Aleid Elso von Schoenebeck. When she was fourteen, she went to live in Italy and later studied in England. In the 1920s, she and her mother settled in the south of France – living near Aldous Huxley. During that time, many German writers also settled in the area, including Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht. She was later encouraged to take to writing by Huxley, and this was her first published book. It originally came out in 1953, under the title, “The Sudden View: a Mexican Journey,” but was reissued in 1960 under the title above. It is one of those books that fall between genres. It is, ostensibly, a travel book; but it is also a novel of sorts. Both genres are well dealt with. When she describes the Mexico that she and her companion visit over the course of a long vacation, she not only talks about the sights, but also includes a sociological overview of the people she encounters on the way, including Mexico's tattered history. It was interesting to compare her views of the various parts of Mexico that she visited with those same parts that I had been in over the years. I think that that is why we read travel literature: did the writer see the same things we saw in the same way? Ms. Bedford didn't miss much. She wasn't actually a typical tourist, but was seeking a Mexico that was a place that could offer an “Other” for a world-weary traveller. Along the way, she managed to meet several people with whom she stayed for various periods of time. This is where the book becomes autobiographical and more novel-like in its presentation. In all, I think that this is one of the most interesting studies of Mexico that I have read, and would make a welcome addition to any traveller's library – though certainly not as a guide book. Recommended.

Raquel Martin says

I'm reading this for the second time and it is still a delight. This is the best travel book I've ever read. Sybille Bedford is incredibly intelligent, extremely witty, and really GOT Mexico. Her insights are as true today as they were in the 40's when she visited Mexico and wrote this book. A must-read for anyone who loves Mexico.

Michael says

It is an account of a journey of about one year by two women in Mexico. A house at the quite big lake

Chapalas a small community of people finds together. A microcosmos community in a part of the world that has hardly ever been mentioned in literature. Apart from this the travellers visit various well known places, they encounter dangerous, shocking, and funny situations, taste and describe food in Mexico and report on the pre-Diaz history. & Lawrence stay, in particular also tell the drama Habsburgian emperor Maximilian. I enjoyed reading the book as an authentic long travel account enriched by historical narratives.

Denis says

Deliciously entertaining, funny, intelligent travel book about Bedford's adventures in Mexico. Her style here is as perfect as in her novels, and she describes the country she discovers with a fascination that is compelling. It actually reads like a novel - her description of the landscapes and the culture, the characters she meets, the places she goes, the adventures and misadventures she encounters: everything makes for a terrific read, and it makes you wish you had been travelling with her.

Peg says

I had higher hopes for this one. Two privileged women go to a 3rd world country and complain about everything except their stay at Don Otavio's, where they are treated like queens. They don't like the food, they don't like the traveling, they aren't interested in the lives of the people. Sorry, I'm not impressed!

Jaggerjag says

I first read this book years ago, and on reading it again I still enjoyed it. Certainly Sybille Bedford came from a privileged class, but I find so many of her 'complaints' about Mexico to be very tongue in cheek and funny, proving beyond doubt that the disasters of travelling make for the most entertaining anecdotes.

More than this, though, her travels were done in a time that was just ending completely. When most people still crossed the Atlantic by liner, and continents by train. A time before cheap package holiday were available to everyone. When you turned up in a city armed with introductions to people you had never met, who would then throw a cocktail party for you. And so on.

From that point of view alone I love this book, the history of Mexico and its people on top of all this provides the backdrop to the country, as if you are with Sybille, reading the tour guide while the vastness of the countryside moves away from your train window, elusive, not so easily nailed down by print.

I recommended it my book club, several couldn't finish it, and the ones that did, utterly hated it. . . Ah well!

Elaine says

First of all, a travel writer of yesteryear who is entirely obsessed with food! A woman after my own heart.

Second of all, a frequently laugh out loud book, even as you were learning quite a bit about Mexican history.

Third, a wonderfully idiosyncratic and erudite look at a pre-mass tourism Mexico. A bit reminiscent of that

English chap who tromped around Europe on the eve of World War II (Patrick Leigh Fermor, it took me a minute) but where Fermor felt show offy, Bedford just seems smart, wry and like the kind of person I, at least, would have loved to take a long ago trip with.

To be clear, I think you have to like this genre-the highly idiosyncratic travelogue that gives a glimpse into a world we can never see because it is further away in time than it is in distance. But if this kind of thing fascinates you, as it does me, Bedford's cast of eccentrics, catalog of travel mishaps, awe at the hearty cheap Mexican meals (described lovingly course by course) and occasional pointed historical lecture will not fail to charm.

Katerine says

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but not cool, touches my arm and sometimes my averted cheek.”

The book moves between pure travelogue, descriptions of Mexico’s bloody history (from Cortes to the nineteenth and twentieth century dictators), detailed descriptions of food and meals (always a plus), the vicissitudes of travel, the varying quality of hotels and of course, Don Otavio and his extended family and servants. Bedford, in an interview late in her life described it thus; “It is a travel book written by a novelist. I wanted to get across the extraordinary beauty of Mexico, the allegro quality of its climate, with the underlying panic and violence inherited from a long and bloody history.”

Don Otavio is a slightly down at heel aristocratic type with a colourful family and some interesting neighbours who are similarly middle class with a smattering of those escaping Europe. Bedford has a sharp wit and excellent sense of humour. It does have to be noted that the travellers were middle class as were most of the people they stayed with and the lives of ordinary people are at a distance. That may have been inevitable, but there are many good vignettes and descriptions of customs and tradition (especially relating to the Catholic Church). All in all and excellent read by a very good writer.

Tuck says

utterly funny, informative, historical, picaresque travelogue of two women traveling alone in Mexico in 1953. it is Sybille Bedford's debut and she never looked back don't think.

they start by boarding the train in NYC, training and busing to DF, then by train, plane, bus, taxi, foot and car sweating freezing biting and getting bitten to central highlands, over to Colima to Acapulco and Lake Chapala (where they spend many months in idyll and near death) to Oaxaca to Pueblo back to Chapala disasters and delights and wonderful writing.

Chrisl says

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sybille...>

In the book's beginning, Sybille and her friend are on a train traveling from New York to St Louis.

"In the plains of Indiana, nature certainly has it. We have been going through the wheat fields for hours; miles upon miles of fat, yellow alien corn visibly ripening under a wide-awake sky. A spread of cruel wealth. Of human life and habitation there are few signs, no farm houses, no animals by the roadside.

"What part does man play in the farming of these fields? Does he work the earth or does he operate it? Is he peasant, mechanic, or businessman? Perhaps here is the scene of his last defeat: eating tinned vegetables in a frame house, setting out in a tractor to cultivate his one-crop harvest mortgaged to the banks, he has been undone by a monstrous mating of nature with the machine.

"Corrective: if the fields of Canada, the Middle West, the Argentine and the Ukraine were run like so many farms in the Home Counties, we'd all starve. Oh, double-faced truth, oh, Malthus, oh, compromise--there are too many sheep in the pen."

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(In Mexico City, a source of museum memories) "One of the happiest places in this town is a room of early

nineteenth-century Creole genre paintings in the Chapultepec Museum. These graceful pictures ... are quite unlike anything one has ever seen, luxuriant but domestic, naïve and worldly, fresh, faintly absurd, wholly delicious ...

"But here too, the other note is sounded. There is a picture of a small boy led by a governess through a most peculiar garden of sugar can and coffee bush, followed by a curly lap dog and an Indian boy carrying his doll, a neatly dressed and bonneted baby skeleton."

One of the places in Mexico I most remember is Monte Alban. "S" as she calls herself writes

"They are misnamed ruins: no decay has softened, no restorer's hand has touched, no wars have chipped a splinter off those monoliths, those walls, those flights of stairs ... They were not meant to please.

"The medium is stone and space ... Everything is repeated, hard, grey ... they imply crushing size ... It appears colossal ... entirely successful, entirely frightening--

"If the Nazis had not been so cheap, had their taste been better and their instinct for self-dramatization less Wagnerian, this is the way they would have built. They would have found in the Zapotec architecture the expression and the setting of all they stood for. They would have constructed Monte Alban at Nuremberg ..."
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monte_A...

Because I've been to and through the country a dozen times and have read many books about it, much of "A Visit ..." is a revisit for me, a dated perspective, but one I recommend for explorers of that country's convoluted complexities. The writing is classical, fine.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQgpl...>

Buck says

After açai berries and recycling, travel's one of the most overrated things around. It's just one long pain in the ass. There's the expense, the indignities of airport security, the further indignities of economy class, crowds, sand in your crotch, very large people with very small fanny packs, and *Two and a Half Men* dubbed into Portuguese. And what do you get out of all this? A gnawing sense of disappointment and the realization that there's just no escaping yourself, that your sagging spirit is tied to your weary flesh, like a deflated tetherball to a rusty pole, forever. Oh, and maybe some knickknacks. *Caelum non animus mutant qui trans mare currunt.*

As with so many things in life, then, travel is best enjoyed vicariously, through books. A book won't steal your passport or kidnap you or give you a drug-resistant strain of gonorrhea (unless it's a library book and you rub it against your privates, but why would you do that?)

Actually, *A Visit to Don Otavio* is almost worth risking gonorrhea for. It's not only the best book I've ever read about Mexico; it may be the best travel book I've ever read, period. An odd, clever woman collides with a big, baroque country, and the result is a minor classic that's better than a lot of major classics. In it, tequila is described as 'raw alcohol with an underwhiff of festering sweetness as though chrysanthemums had rotted

in gin.’ (Unfair, I think, but possibly true of the 1940s vintage.) A man has ‘one of those inherited handsome faces of Goya’s minor courtiers, where the acumen, pride and will of an earlier mould have run to fatuity and craft.’ (She adds: ‘He turned out one of the kindest men I ever met.’) A derelict hotel has ‘a thick smell of dead-town, faded splendours and present bankruptcy.’

Sybille Bedford is the author’s name. She died a few years back, in her 90s. The wiki version of her biography hints at the sheer fabulousness of her life. She loved Mexico, by the way, the land that has swallowed so many foreign writers. She saw it whole, the beauty and brutality of it, and came away composed, and wrote this quirky, gorgeous thing about it. I don’t encourage you to travel—that’s your business—but you should probably read the book.

CarolineFromConcord says

How to describe this book? A history of Mexico? A travel book? A novel? A biography? First published in 1953 and reissued in 1986 with an introduction by Bruce Chatwin, it’s been called all those things. I will call it a comedy of manners because that suits the sections I liked best.

The writer Sybille Bedford was a great traveler. Born in Germany before WW I, she lived in many countries. The book, which she playfully called a novel, recounts her travels through Mexico with an American friend in a quirky, often telegraphic, style.

There is a great deal of history in the book -- history of Mexico and also of Europe -- and her staccato romp through the highlights often left me confused. The reader is apparently supposed to know a lot more than I do about history, not to mention how to read bits of French, Latin, German, and Spanish. The author’s long digression on the tragic life of Mexican Emperor Maximilian (originally an Austrian prince) was puzzling. The history of Mexico is so loaded with violence and revolution, why dwell disproportionately on the fate of Maximilian? Perhaps it’s because he was a European like the writer.

The heart, soul, and charm of the book lies in the scenes with Don Otavio at his country home. The characters and situations depicted there are truly amusing, and when the travelers depart for various excursions, one cannot wait for them to return to the comforts and entertainments of San Pedro Tlayacan.

I did not care for Bedford’s way of talking about the natives, but in spite of her condescension, I’d promised a friend I’d read the book, and I’m rather glad I did.
