

## Behind The Back Door: Meet the traveling ringmaster of Europe's cultural carnival

By [Carol Pucci](#)

Fighting a cold sore, Rick Steves collapses in a chair on the terrace of his hotel in Beilstein, a medieval town along the Mosel River, and girds himself for the home stretch of his 29th straight summer of travel in Europe.

Before him lies the storybook Germany of castles, cozy villages and wineries made for lingering on lazy Sunday afternoons. But there will be no time for the relaxed kind of travel his guidebooks and television scripts evoke — no river cruises, bike rides or forest hikes.

Tomorrow he and his crew begin filming as they race to complete three new episodes of his public-television series, "Rick Steves' Europe," in three weeks, this one on "Germany's Romantic Rhine and Rothenburg."

The day will start at 7:30 a.m. with Steves, wrinkled khakis under his arm, searching for an iron. The 30-minute show will be shot over six days, and he'll be filmed wearing the same green shirt and pants all week.

Between gulps of apple juice and bites from a sandwich he made from breakfast-table fixings, he'll spend part of the day wandering through Burg Eltz, his favorite European castle, as his cameraman films a dozen takes of him repeating a two-sentence explanation on why a 500-year-old bed was built high off the ground (because it was cold in the castles and heat rises).

The episode will show him traveling by boat and train, but he and the crew will spend most of their time in a rented VW van, hustling to catch the afternoon light on the ruins of a Roman fortress or a barge floating down the river.

Sleep will come sometime after 11 p.m. when Steves, stretched across his bed in his stocking feet, finishes making changes to a script he wrote months ago in Seattle.

For Steves, 47, the rewards these days come not from savoring the kind of relaxed, drink-it-all-in budget-travel philosophy he promotes, but from having a national audience listening as he touts Europe as a cultural carnival in which the best acts are free and the best seats are the cheap ones.

He's recognized nearly everywhere he travels. Students with backpacks and retired couples with carry-on suitcases ask him to autograph torn-out pages.

As Steves pauses to grab some dinner on the hotel terrace his first night in Beilstein, he's noticed by Marjana and William Thomas, a Philadelphia couple traveling with their two children.

"To Rick," says a note Marjana scribbled on a napkin and sent to his table.

"Thanks for a wonderful vacation. Your books have made our trip a success."

"You're going to learn it sooner, or you're going to learn it later. Let's say it together: Pack light!"

The 900 people gathered in an Edmonds auditorium repeat the phrase as Steves paces across the stage, preaching the gospel of budget travel with the zeal of a Jimmy Swaggart and the marketing savvy of a Martha Stewart.

Steves was paid \$5,000 earlier this year to speak to the American Association of Retired Persons, but this lecture is free, part of a March travel festival staged by Europe Through the Back Door, the company he started in 1976, and every seat is filled.

"Don't settle for places everybody goes; find others," he urges the audience. "Find a way to BE there. Go to church. Pick grapes. Shop at a market. Don't just look. Plunge in!"

Talking for nearly two hours without a break, he mixes traveling tips and slides with pitches for his books and tours, and rants on the war on terrorism and Bush administration policies.

"You don't mind," says a woman from Iowa here with her daughter from Seattle. "He's giving you all this good information, and after all, it's free."

A few weeks later, the results are in: Six months after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, 3,000 people attended the festival. In between the free classes, they bought 433 money belts, 2,675 books and 1,035 bags; they booked 25 seats on Steves' European tours.

"On Sept. 10, we had the world by the tail from a business point of view," he says in his office a few weeks later. "You needed a new desk, you got a new desk. You needed a faster computer, 'Let's get you one with a thin screen.' Then all of a sudden, we realize, we've got to be like every other business."

It was a wake-up call for the man who gave up a career teaching piano to follow his passion for travel, parlaying his "back door" philosophy into a \$20 million-a-year business with 60 employees.

Debt-free — without even a mortgage on the travel center he built two years ago across from his father's piano store in Edmonds — he prides himself on achieving a financial independence that lets him call his own shots. He's built a following of travelers who trust him to tell them what to skip as well as what to see.

On Sept. 11, for the first time, he started to realize the fragility of it all. Filming in Italy that day, he didn't return to Seattle until Oct. 5. "We had \$1 million worth of tour cancellations," he says. "I don't think I understood the gravity of it until I got home."

A millionaire who says he still thinks like a piano teacher, Steves came back determined to work harder than ever.

"I've got a treadmill at home and I never push the incline," he says. "Somebody just raised the incline on my business, and I still have to run."

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STEVES CALLS IT "guerrilla TV." Those who have watched his public-television shows over the past 12 years have tagged along as he's danced with the locals in Slovenia, eaten barnacles with a fisherwoman in Portugal and buzzed through Sicily on a motor bike.

He's been filmed washing his clothes in the sink, picnicking on the dashboard of his car, even using a curbside urinal in Amsterdam. He and his wife of 18 years, Anne, have been taking their children, Jackie, now 12, and Andy, 15, to Europe since they were infants. All have made cameo appearances.

Depending on your point of view, it's a little like traveling with your best buddy, your old history teacher or Mr. Rogers, monikers he doesn't dismiss.

Steves sees himself as the training wheels of travel adventure. "If there's an ideal, I want people to broaden their perspective through travel. If there's a practicality, I want them to do it without going broke or wasting their time and having needless frustrations."

The shows, airing on more than 200 stations, have evolved to include more off-the-beaten-path destinations (next year he'll film in the Baltics, Russia and Morocco). Today they are as much about exposing viewers to European cultural attitudes and Steves' own liberal views as they are about teaching the how-tos of travel.

"The perception of a lot of people is that he is this born-again, squeaky-clean kind of guy, but he has another side, and he's bold enough to speak out about it," says his producer, Simon Griffith.

A Christian and member of Trinity Lutheran Church in Lynnwood, Steves stood up for America's Vietnam policy and voted for Ronald Reagan in 1980, but his politics began to shift around the time he married Anne, a nurse and a Catholic active in social causes.

Steves began taking a stronger hand in his shows' content two years ago after splitting from Small World Productions, the investors that gave him his start and produced "Travels in Europe with Rick Steves" for 10 years.

Given away free to public-television stations, the shows generate sales of books and videos (a cut of which went to Small World). They also boost Steves' tour bookings, a fast-growing and large part of his business.

"Ultimately he wanted to do shows that were about places that didn't make economic sense to us like Bulgaria and Turkey," destinations that might prompt people to book tours with Steves but might not generate sales of videos or books for Small World, says John Givens, Steves' former producer.

Steves left when his employment contract ended, bringing to a close a series of 52 episodes. Repeats still air on Seattle's KCTS and other stations.

Steves hired Griffith, a former producer for "Bill Nye the Science Guy," and began financing the current series, "Rick Steves' Europe," out of his own pocket for about \$40,000 a show. Sixteen new shows premiered in 2000; 14 more, including one on Amsterdam, which Steves calls his most provocative, began airing this fall.

Steves says he talks more than he takes these days, but he supports the legalization of marijuana and uses the show to make points about European attitudes on pot and other social issues.

"Throughout The Netherlands," he explains as the camera follows him peddling past a coffee shop, "pubs selling marijuana are called coffee shops. Amsterdam has over 300. The Dutch, like many Europeans, view marijuana as a soft drug, like tobacco or alcohol." Later, the camera pans across blurry scenes of women in teasing poses in the Red Light district. "The Dutch have the same pragmatic approach to prostitution as they have to the recreational use of marijuana," he explains.

Stations don't have to air the episode, but chances are they will. Steves is one of public television's major fund-raisers, pulling in more than \$1 million a year for stations across the country.

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FRIENDS AND colleagues describe Steves as a confident, sometimes cocky workaholic driven by his growing influence as a budget-travel expert and his obsession with finding new ways to build his business. He has surrounded himself with a staff of friends and people hired from banking and high-tech, but still handles most of the creative parts of his job — writing his scripts and most of what's in his 22 guidebooks — himself.

The books and TV shows are blueprints for laid-back adventures, with Steves encouraging time out for writing a poem over a glass of wine or savoring a cappuccino. His own traveling style, in fact, has always been like his piano playing, recalls Gene Openshaw, a friend since seventh grade and his companion on their first solo trip to Europe in 1973. "When he plays a song, he plays it at a little faster tempo than everyone else does."

Steves travels to Europe three to four times a year, which leaves little time for personal travel. His favorite country is India, but he can't justify the time it would take to go back. Even when he goes with the family, work is often involved. This year, they helped with filming in Ireland and joined a tour in France.

"We're in step," says Anne, 47, who met Steves when she attended one of his travel lectures at the University of Washington in 1983.

Steves first saw Europe at age 14 when he toured piano factories with his parents. A visit to Ede, an untouristed town near Amsterdam, whetted his appetite for off-beat destinations. Steves made a pact to return on his own with a rucksack and rail pass.

"Europe Through the Gutter," as Steves calls his trip with Openshaw, was a 70-day backpacking adventure that cost \$758 each.

"He just wanted to see everything and see it very quickly," Openshaw recalls. "Travel with him in that sense was an adventure, but a whirlwind."

After attending a class on Istanbul and Katmandu, Steves decided he could do better teaching himself. He signed on to teach "European Travel — Cheap!" at the UW's Experimental College in 1975.

Graduating in 1978 from the UW with degrees in European history and business, he opened a piano studio in Edmonds, and in 1980, led his first tour and self-published his first book, "Europe Through the Back Door." A primer now in its 22nd edition, it's filled with chapters like "Outsmarting Thieves" and snapshots of his family and friends.

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ON HIS OFFICE wall, next to a Clinton-Gore poster, is a photo of Steves sitting on a bed in a bare room in eastern Turkey in 1977.

"I use it as a bad joke to say that's when it dawned on me that there's more to good travel than bad hotels," he says. "I just decided that I had to be realistic about who my readership is, and they won't want those kinds of hotels."

Steves no longer stays in youth hostels or leads tours, and has shifted his image to appeal to his older, more affluent public-TV audience. But with the exception of an occasional splurge on a fancy hotel for his film crew, he sticks to a budget-traveling style, one he believes is as much about the experience travelers are likely to have as it is about frugality.

"His needs are basic," says Anne Kirchner, his general manager and head of a five-person business team that runs Europe Through the Back Door. "He still believes you can eat in Europe for \$30 a day, \$10 for lunch, \$20 for dinner," and expects his staff to do the same.

He gives many thousands away to charities and causes. His major luxury is an expensive German piano in his Edmonds home, where he relaxes by playing the Beatles, Schubert and Scarlatti. On the road, his enjoyment comes not from dining in fancy restaurants but from tracking down information with detective-like determination.

"The marching orders were clear," recalls Jacquie Maupin, a former editor and researcher who spent a week with Steves in London in a kind of research boot camp.

"The work starts when you get off the train and continues when you're walking to your hotel or B&B — no minute wasted. At the train station, you check the bathrooms, the time schedules, the bike rentals." At one point, she made a note in the book she was updating. The color of a building had changed because it had been painted between editions.

IT'S NEARLY 7 p.m. when Steves, Griffith and photographer Karel Bauer wrap up another day of filming along the Rhine. Frustrated with trying to shoot castle scenes against overcast skies, they call it a day and check into the Hotel Kranenturm. Their rooms are up several flights of stairs in a 400-year-old building, 16 feet from the train tracks in Bacharach.

Word had gotten out that he and his crew would be here, and fans have been waiting. Among them is Mac Simms, 9, from South Carolina, and his mother, Charlie. Simms says he's read most of Steves' books, and when the crew sits down for dinner, the boy is shaking with excitement.

"The Venice book is my favorite and I really like your jokes, especially the one about the gummi bears," he tells Steves. The next day, Heidi and Dan Kriz, students from Spokane, approach Steves as he's filming. They end up agreeing to pose as tourists in a segment on beer steins. Later they admit to mixed feelings about the back doors that sometimes feel like front doors to which Steves' followers have the keys.

"It's hard," says Dan Kriz, "because he gives you great places to go that you'd never know about. Yet when you get there, they're overrun with Americans."

It's a refrain Steves hears often. In "Europe Through the Back Door," he points out, one section encourages people to be inspired by his finds, not follow him in lock-step. "That's my hope. I know the reality is that they will go right to that spot."

It's a dilemma for Steves the TV host/writer vs. Steves the traveler, but in the end, the businessman in him wins. "If I were just still a piano teacher and a real traveler, I'd go to Rue Cler (a street near the Eiffel Tower in Paris one travel writer recently dubbed "Rue Rick Steves"). I would not like Rick Steves because I don't need Rick Steves.

"But I go there as a travel writer and I see all these happy travelers and I see all sorts of smiling merchants and I just say, 'This is win-win.' It's a wonderful problem to have. I never thought I'd have that problem."

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STEVES WAS teaching piano, working for a commercial tour operator and lecturing at the UW when Patty Price, a friend of his parents, persuaded him to organize his first European tour in 1980. "I said, 'I want to do the way you do and stay in youth hostels and

carry a backpack,' " Price recalls. "He came back a few weeks later and said, 'If I get a van, will you go?' "

Seven women toured Europe with Steves for three weeks. They paid \$350 each and gave him extra money when he ran out.

"We'd never know where we were going. He'd never make plans in advance," says Price. "At times it was frustrating to tears, at other times, exhilarating." But in the end, she says, she saw a different Europe than she would have without him. Price worked briefly for Steves before starting her own tour business. "He was very caustic," she remembers. "He would come up with things and I'd say, 'Rick, you can't say that.' He liked to shock people, and in some ways, still does."

Last May, Steves called a staff meeting to talk about the future.

"There's going to be terrorism," he said. "There will be a plane blow up sometime in the next year, and everyone's going to die. That's the way it is when you have an aggressive country operating in a poor world. That's not going to change."

The thing to do, he told his staff, is to look at the facts. More than 60,000 planes take off and land safely in the U.S. every day. Steves spent this past Sept. 10 on a flight to Amsterdam, his fourth trip to Europe since Sept. 11, 2001.

As he was filming in Italy in the weeks after the attacks, the decision became clear.

"I came home and said, 'We're going to just work harder than ever. We're going to be a giddy flagship of confidence.' "

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