



Viva South America!: A Journey Through A Restless Continent

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Simon Bolivar once inspired a continent to rise from its serfdom and throw off the shackles of Spanish rule, setting the course for independence, freedom and equality. "Viva South America!" sets out to discover if that dream lives on. Is it fair to describe a land as 'independent' while poverty still enslaves millions, where violence lurks in the shadows and where lawlessness gnaws away at progress? Did the Liberators fail? Or are leaders such as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales resurrecting those long-ago ideals? Armed with a reporter's notebook and an open mind, the author hits the road in search of answers. With the ghost of Bolivar as guide, the quest takes the reader off the tourist trail and into the weird and wonderful worlds of South American culture and society. By stepping into people's homes and into inmates' prison cells, by climbing onto dance floors and over road blocks, Oliver Balch unearths untold stories from the front line of South America's contemporary fight for freedom.

Viva South America!: A Journey Through A Restless Continent Details

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Stephanie Matthews says

I can't decide if I like this book or it appalls the bejaysus out of me. It pulls no punches and manages to reveal the violence and horror of life in South America - it covers most of the countries, I think it misses a few teeny ones - yet there is a beauty and humour in it that shines through. It could do with updating, as my copy was about 10 years old, but I somehow doubt very much has changed, which is a great pity. A wonderful and fascinating read, but not for the fainthearted.

Cameron says

Not the most in-depth book on the continent (considering he only dedicates about 30-40 pages on each country). However, he does provide a quick summary of the current state of a certain topic for each country. For example, the section on Peru is about religion, while the section on Brazil is about racial equality. An easy and fun read, but it leaves you wanting more...

Geir Ertzgaard says

Det er ikke lett å finne god reiselitteratur fra Sør-Amerika, og de to første kapitlene av denne reisen gjennom 9 av de 13 landene i Sør-Amerika og en svipp innom Cuba er en av de få jeg klarte å spore opp før jeg dro dit sist sommer. Jeg likte ikke de første to kapitlene, det virket som om Balch slet med å finne en god vinkling på boken, og historiene han fant fram var mørkere og mer depressive enn det jeg var klar for - til tider virket det helt unødvendig. Men etter at boken tok tak løftet boken seg, og nå sitter jeg igjen med en opplevelse av at skal du forstå Sør-Amerika, så er dette en av de bøkene du MÅ lese. For lese må du, Sør-Amerika er så komplisert og fassetert at første- og andreinntrykk ikke hjelper.

Boken er som sagt en reise gjennom de fleste landene i Sør-Amerika, hvert land får et fokus på ett spesielt tema, samtidig er dette temaer som gjelder for alle landene reisen foregår gjennom. I Chile er det kvinnesynet og kjønnsroller, i Argentina arbeiderklassens rettigheter, i Brasil raseproblematikk, og i Peru nye religiøse strømninger. Disse analyseres gjennom personlige møter med mennesker utsatt for urett i relasjon til temaene, og et er denne personlige vinklingen og de varme møtene som gjør boken så lesbar. Samtidig er reisen gjennom Sør-Amerika en reise gjennom livet til Simon Bolivar, kontinentets frihetskjempe som ledet kampen mot det spanske imperiet.

Den femte stjernen mangler av én grunn: Begynnelsen var ikke spesielt god. Men les den hvis du har interesse av kontinentet.

Fraser says

An interesting concept and to one I have to admit I had little previous knowledge.

Balch takes us on a socio/economic/political tour around South America from the stand point of current

events. He uses Bolivar and the liberation and independence of the various countries as a touchstone to how those nations have changed, progressed or even regressed. This part was slightly lost on me though overall it was very interesting and I would benefit from further reading before making fuller comment.

I give four stars however for sheer ambition and a certain tenacious style. The book's theme didn't always work for me, but the personal testimonies and stories that Balch manages to draw upon certainly gave the book a real punch and this is where it comes alive.

Certainly worth a read from my perspective.

Chris Steeden says

I admire the author for all his work in getting round South America. It must have been very challenging and tiring. You will learn a lot from this book (I certainly did) on different aspects of South American life within the different countries be it race, environment, politics, domestic abuse, displacement, guerilla warfare etc. The author did not endear himself to me completely which is why the book gets 3 stars from me and not 4. He does not have the wit of other travelogue authors which makes the book a little dry. Still worth a read if you would like to know more about South America.

Sigrun says

The book is interesting enough, it's following a journalist through various countries in South America. A combination of travel journal and sort of essay on socio-economic and political hot topics (poverty, corruption, domestic violence, gender rights, race etc.) it's falling short on creating a coherent narrative. Each chapter, although well written and presenting vivid local voices, is touching on a different country and topic only problem is that it feels that there is no common thread linking them and no direction or conclusion.

Kevin says

Packing a continent's worth of countries into a single book does not allow for a lot of nuance, though journalist Oliver Balch's journey through South America is a satisfying foray into some of the general ills plaguing the region. Those who already follow Latin American politics will not find a great deal that is new here, though Balch's keen eye and sharp wit still make this an interesting read.

Subvert says

I'm happy that I've read it and it certainly wasn't a waste of time. There was quite some stuff in it that I didn't know much about. But the book is rather flawed. It never gets truly in-depth, as every country just gets on chapter of 30-40 pages or so, this problem is sort of solved by having one topic for every country (indigenous people, women's rights, religion, violence/crime, racism, parliamentary politics vs experiments in participative democracy). But then meshing all this with Simon Bolivar constantly gets really weird, including the jumps at the end of every chapter to the next (you actually really don't have to read it

chronologically).

The book assumes a basic knowledge of Latin America and also of Simon Bolivar. I don't know too much about him, but enough to read the book. It's just that the way he uses the writings and life of Simon Bolivar for this travelogue with all the contemporary topics that doesn't really work. I remember reading two books that used a historic character as an excuse for a travelogue and in both books it worked much better (Finding George Orwell & The Trouser People, both about Burma). I feel like that if he would've wanted to make the Simon Bolivar thing work he should have focused much more on just a couple of topics/countries, or just on the "Leftist" turn of Latin America in general and how Bolivar is used by people like Chavez. That could've made an interesting read in itself. Now it's just sort of strange to see every chapter introduced with some quote of Bolivar and his life-story sometimes suddenly inserted somewhere every chapter. Not knowing all that much about Simon Bolivar, I really don't feel like I now know all that much more about him.

I also completely agree with some of the other reviewers here that criticize how he writes about women and queer issues. If you're not really interested in feminist struggle, then don't fucking write an entire chapter about it. Oliver Balch is really clueless about queer and feminist struggle and it doesn't seem he really wants to understand. Also the "rape-story" in the jungle really isn't very funny at all. Perhaps it's a bit of a difficult topic though, because Oliver Balch writes the entire book about his own personal observations, every person he ends up meeting is being described of how he observes the person (manners/dress etc) and what feelings he has at the time. So if Oliver Balch feels awkward about meeting a trans-person in a park and leaving to her house together, then of course it's just his own personal observation, if his mind drifts off after listening to another personal story of abuse and rape, than well, yeah, that's his experience. But having to read it is just rather painful and annoying. You'd wish an editor would've stopped him from including it in the book.

Anyway, there was plenty that I did sort of like. I guess the experiments in participative democracy in Argentina and the 'revolution' in Venezuela are to me the most interesting. But it doesn't really get in-depth, it doesn't really get analyzed all that far, and it's all through the lense of what you could call typical liberal "Guardian Leftism". Especially about Cuba and Venezuela things are written down in a certain way, that are to some extent supportive to the cause, but at the same time written in a derogatory manner without any arguments for doing so. I'm really not all that positive to Chavez and Castro myself, but besides making some (interesting) observations there, he doesn't really analyse the stuff that is going on there in any thorough way. So why then this sarcastic way of writing as if we "Westerners" know it all so much better.

Ah well, not a bad book, it gets three stars from me.

Chris Turnbull says

Some chapters better than others. Have a good insight to the huge variation of culture across the continent which was useful when I actually visited the countries.

Amélie says

Ce qui arrive quand un jeune monsieur British & blanc décide d'écrire un livre sur l'Amérique du Sud au grand complet (ou à peu près) & les enjeux qui, selon ledit monsieur, secouent le continent : quelque chose qui oscille entre le récit de voyage & le journalisme de second ordre, truffé de généralisations, d'anecdotes

plus ou moins punchées, de simili-reportages de surface &, de temps à autre, de capsules biographiques sur Simon Bolivar.

La structure du livre est assez simple : pour chaque pays parcouru, Balch choisit un enjeu vaste & vague, qu'il explore avec plus ou moins de succès. On a ainsi droit à des titres de chapitres terriblement ambitieux, comme "l'Argentine & la politique", "la Bolivie & l'économie" & (mon préféré) "le Chili & les femmes". J'ai bien aimé la section sur le Paraguay, qui lie assez adroitement la question des droits humains à celles de la corruption généralisée & de l'état des prisons nationales -- mais en général, Balch livre plutôt des chapitres maladroits, qui partent dans tous les sens & se démarquent surtout par une posture assez troublante (voire offensante) vis-à-vis les femmes, les peuples autochtones & les membres de la communauté LGBT. (On aurait envie de dire au monsieur de ne pas essayer de parler de violence domestique, de la préservation de terres ancestrales ou d'homophobie s'il n'est pas capable de faire autrement que de ressasser des clichés dignes des années 50 en les présentant comme des exemples de *gros bon sens*.)

Sinon, le livre n'a pas que des défauts : il réussit à mettre le doigt, non sans un humour parfois particulièrement délicieux, sur les joyeuses (& moins joyeuses) contradictions qui traversent l'Amérique du Sud. Mais il aurait été cent fois mieux s'il avait été écrit par quelqu'un qui, je sais pas, est juste un petit peu plus conscient des avantages que lui confèrent sa race, & son genre, & sa nationalité, & toutes ces jolies choses qui passent dix pieds par dessus de la tête de Balch.

Juliane says

Great book, just the right balance between journalism, history, a travel story etc. He picks out one topic in each country he travels to (e.g. religion in Peru, native tribes in Ecuador...) and digs deeper into it. That's a great concept since you can't possibly write everything on every country without writing an encyclopedia. Or better than just touching on 10 topics without going deeper into it in each country.

His style of writing is entertaining yet intelligent. Recommended to read for people who are into politics, human rights, anti-imperialism etc.

Katy says

In this book a British journalist travels around South America, examining a different issue in each country he visits (e.g. Bolivia and economics, Paraguay and human rights, Peru and religion). He is also apparently following in the footsteps of Simón Bolívar, a revolutionary and important figure in the history of the continent. While both of these viewpoints are interesting, they don't necessarily mesh well, and in some chapters the author appears to forget about one or the other of his themes.

Although I found a lot of the information in this book interesting, the author's sexist remarks were off-putting. Some example quotes:

[On trying to find common ground with a Huaroani man from Ecuador] "'the one unanimous subject of male interest: women." This was followed by a "hilarious" anecdote about how a woman from his same tour group was upset and freaked out by a stranger trying to get into her tent in the middle of the night.

[At a class on domestic abuse] "'Gluttons for punishment, if you ask me,' an unsympathetic student remarks.

I'm tempted to agree."

[Interviewing a victim of domestic abuse] "As she describes the litany of abuse she's suffered, I find myself drifting off.""

He is also very dismissive of the responses of a woman he interviews at a gay rights march in Chile; the interview went along the lines of "But aren't things getting better for women these days?" "No, not really." "Well... I think they are."

While I did learn a lot about the political situations in various regions of South America, I don't plan on reading anything else by this author.

Asta Nyysönen says

Cis men shouldn't attempt to make points about the struggles of trans people Especially not when they don't even bother to research which terms are offensive, or respect their pronouns.

Men shouldn't attempt to make overgeneralized points about the struggles of women. Especially not when they are continuously dismissive of the concerns and input of abuse victims and feminists alike.

Straight People shouldn't attempt to make overgeneralized points about queer people. Especially not when they think camp gays are funny and don't like it when those pessimistic butch lesbians won't just accept that homophobia is basically over anyway.

White Europeans should not attempt to make overgeneralized points about racism in an entire continent consisting mainly of people of color. Especially not when they clearly think themselves to be more civilized than the poor as well as the indigenous people of that continent.

Oppressors should not attempt to make overgeneralized points about oppressed people.

Bad writers shouldn't publish books.

Ioana says

I've not actually finished it - really badly written.

Thomas says

A concise introduction to some of the politics and tourist spots of South America. The chapters are nicely split up and its easy and mostly enjoyable to read. For a 400 page book it takes a pretty good stab at describing some of the major issues in most of the South American countries (missing Uruguay, French Guiana, Guyana and Suriname but including Cuba), describing interesting places and tying this all together with the history of Simon Bolivar. It definitely leans more on the politics side of things (which I liked) and sometimes introduced groups or Spanish words without giving an explanation of what they mean or represent, which could have easily been sorted out in the editing process. I found it got a little dry at times and had to abandon it for a few weeks in the middle, which is why I'd score this a low 4/5.
