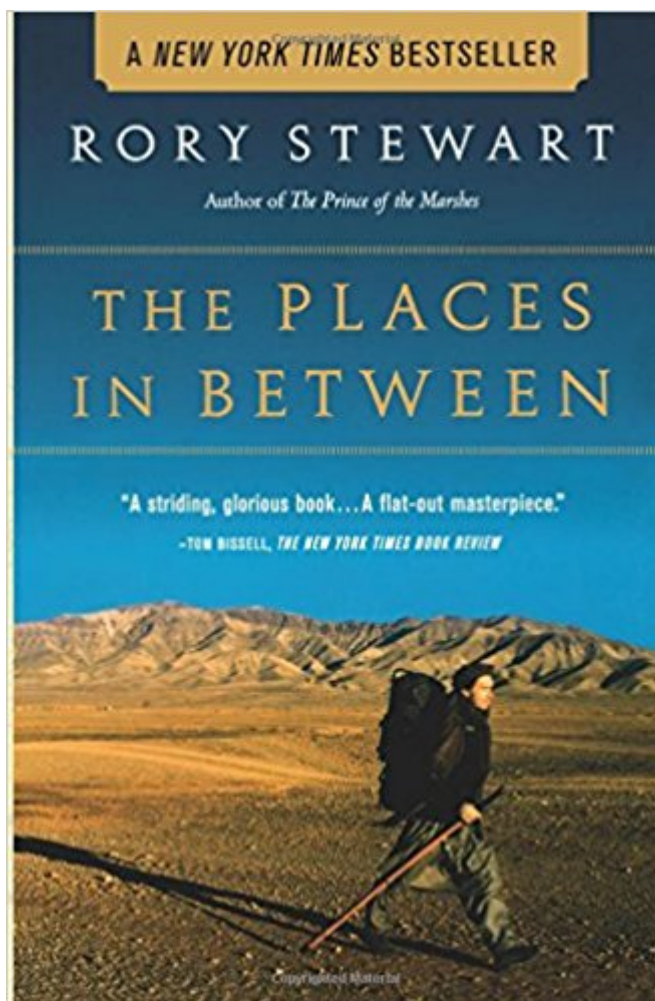


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# The Places In Between



## Synopsis

In January 2002 Rory Stewart walked across Afghanistan-surviving by his wits, his knowledge of Persian dialects and Muslim customs, and the kindness of strangers. By day he passed through mountains covered in nine feet of snow, hamlets burned and emptied by the Taliban, and communities thriving amid the remains of medieval civilizations. By night he slept on villagers' floors, shared their meals, and listened to their stories of the recent and ancient past. Along the way Stewart met heroes and rogues, tribal elders and teenage soldiers, Taliban commanders and foreign-aid workers. He was also adopted by an unexpected companion-a retired fighting mastiff he named Babur in honor of Afghanistan's first Mughal emperor, in whose footsteps the pair was following. Through these encounters-by turns touching, con-founding, surprising, and funny-Stewart makes tangible the forces of tradition, ideology, and allegiance that shape life in the map's countless places in between.

## Book Information

Paperback: 297 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; 1st edition (May 8, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0156031566

ISBN-13: 978-0156031561

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 313 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #244,142 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #8 in [Books > Travel > Asia > Afghanistan](#) #72 in [Books > Travel > Middle East > General](#) #102 in [Books > Travel > Asia > India > General](#)

## Customer Reviews

We never really find out why Stewart decided to walk across Afghanistan only a few months after the Taliban were deposed, but what emerges from the last leg of his two-year journey across Asia is a lesson in good travel writing. By turns harrowing and meditative, Stewart's trek through Afghanistan in the footsteps of the 15th-century emperor Babur is edifying at every step, grounded by his knowledge of local history, politics and dialects. His prose is lean and unsentimental: whether pushing through chest-high snow in the mountains of Hazarajat or through villages still under de facto Taliban control, his descriptions offer a cool assessment of a landscape and a people

eviscerated by war, forgotten by time and isolated by geography. The well-oiled apparatus of his writing mimics a dispassionate camera shutter in its precision. But if we are to accompany someone on such a highly personal quest, we want to know who that person is. Unfortunately, Stewart shares little emotional background; the writer's identity is discerned best by inference. Sometimes we get the sense he cares more for preserving history than for the people who live in it (and for whom historical knowledge would be luxury). But remembering Geraldo Rivera's gunslinging escapades, perhaps we could use less sap and more clarity about this troubled and fascinating country. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Stewart, a resident of Scotland, has written for the New York Times Magazine and the London Review of Books, and he is a former fellow at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. In January 2002, having just spent 16 months walking across Iran, Pakistan, India, and Nepal, Stewart began a walk across Afghanistan from Herat to Kabul. Although the Taliban had been ousted several weeks earlier, Stewart was launching a journey through a devastated, unsettled, and unsafe landscape. The recounting of that journey makes for an engrossing, surprising, and often deeply moving portrait of the land and the peoples who inhabit it. Stewart relates his encounters with ordinary villagers, security officials, students, displaced Taliban officials, foreign-aid workers, and rural strongmen, and his descriptions of the views and attitudes of those he lived with are presented in frank, unvarnished terms. Nation building in Afghanistan remains a work in progress, and this work should help those who wish to understand the complexities of that task. Jay Freeman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

This was a captivating, very unusual book. I read it a couple months ago, and am still thinking about it. I learned a lot about Afghanistan and Rory Stewart. The weaving of history with the inclusion of bits of the historical diary of Afghanistan's first Mughal emperor whose steps Stewart followed, added another level of fascination and depth. Stewart is not only an articulate, gifted writer, but also an unusually spirited person with an almost uncanny sense of survival. However, his need to push on at times, dangerously exhausted, in the face of life threatening danger presented a psychological dilemma that I grappled with on several occasions, trying to figure out this most unusual man. I was also moved by his relationship with the dog he adopted early in his journey.

In 1972 I did the "Overland" trip from Sydney, Australia, to London including the Malay peninsular, Penang-Madras boat, India, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran etc. Afghanistan was

considered pretty dangerous then and we travelled in convoy with another couple, also in a VW Kombi, from ghastly Pakistan and the graveyard of British regiments, the Khyber Pass ( the Kabul pass is far more spectacular), south-west to Kandahar (vineyards on the hills) and north-west to Herat. What Mr Stewart did, to walk directly east from Herat to Kabul would have been considered insane then. It is a sad measure of the continued failure of the human race that it seems even more dangerous now. His book is tremendous. It is not meant to be anti-religion. But its brilliant insights into Islam are just as scary as looking into the pig-ignorance of the modern day Bible Belt in the US (where I now live) or the smug Vatican or the Israel-Palestine impasse, in general. As long as we have religion, there is no bright logical future for humans on earth.

I remember reading this book a decade ago and it changed my view of the Middle East. I lost the book in a move, but I just reordered a copy for my husband to read. That's how deeply it has touched me. Even today, I can still close my eyes and see the imagery of Rory's travels. It has made me believe in the kindness of people, despite a raging duality -- even cruelty -- brought on by a harsh reality. It is a wonderful read for anyone who wishes to discover the area... through someone else's eyes, as I did given the fact that current affairs have made it impossible for me to ever experience it firsthand. This is not a "soft" read and it is at times gut wrenching, but it is well worth it.

Enjoying every step of the journey. Rory Stewart's perceptive acceptance of a foreign world, leaves me shaking my head in admiration. I'm reading the book slowly, a chapter every few days. The author's desire to understand and experience things around him, overtakes his sense of self preservation. The book gives us an insight into the journey of an incredibly kind, brave and intelligent human being. His book has given me a window into the way things are in Afghanistan, and showed me a little of the structured hierarchy within village life.

If you like adventure books and want to learn something about the numerous villages and Afghanistan people from a micro level, I think you will enjoy this book about a young Scott who desires to walk the width of Afghanistan. It is a more a micro version because although there are broad references to the Russian occupation, Talaban, the Northern Alliance and the Karzai; the book is more about Stewart's personal interactions with individuals along the way. You'll find more references to the preceding travels of the Muslim conqueror Babur who traveled Stewart's intended path than the overall state of Afghanistan; however you get a genuine picture of the home life of

many of the Afghan's whose Muslim religion encourages them to welcome strangers and share what they have. There are descriptions of many villages destroyed/damaged by the Taliban, including mass executions, and the effects of Russian attacks. There are interesting uncertainties concerning the loyalty of some village/area leaders who were once Taliban and could still be in some cases. many switched sides based on what benefited them realistically, Stewart is periodically challenged but carries on through letters of introduction. I do wish he had provided more detail on the lifestyles of the Afghans of different villages and their customs and family interaction but it was a fast paced travelogue more focused on his physical challenges to the environment and his own tolerance to limited food many times offered by very poor families. I did find his interaction with a large mastiff engaging although the animal was not conditioned for the journey, he apparently filled a void for companionship that Stewart avoided during his walkathon. it is a fast paced read and a more narrow view than some readers would expect but I was impressed that Stewart was fluent enough in the language to converse readily across the country and that he had the physical endurance to complete the travels. What was a depressing picture of this war torn country was a encounter with land mines is when Stewart asks a village if the land mines they were avoiding were left by the Taliban and the villager says "no they are ours but we forgot their locations".Ppppp

This is a story of a journalist / historian walking on foot across Afghanistan, and an homage to a past trek done by an ancient ruler. An amazing account, that you wont believe. The things Stewart had to go through are mind boggling, from 6 feet of snow, to dysentery, to near starvation. This account will keep you guessing what will happen next. It also gives one insight into the cultural perspective of then Modern Day Afghanistan (2003), how he dealt with stubborn elders and xenophobic villagers will really give you a socio cultural perspective of the world he was traveling in. A great read.

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