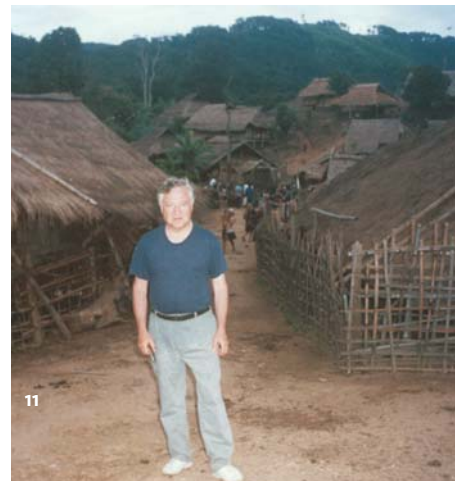
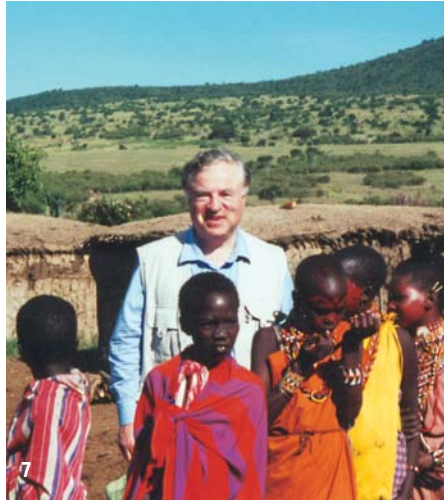


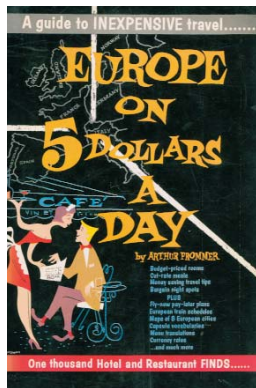
***I HAVE BEEN VIRTUALLY
EVERYWHERE
IN THE WORLD.***

Arthur Frommer

See page 47 for legend



Arthur Frommer



The Traveler at Home

As Arthur Frommer's *Europe on 5 Dollars a Day* approaches its fiftieth birthday, it is credited with changing the way a generation of Americans traveled to Europe. The book launched *Frommer's*, the largest travel book line in the United States, and will soon be re-released in a commemorative edition. Meanwhile, Frommer '53, the author of a classic, is still dispensing travel advice.

The story of Arthur Frommer's first trip starts with heartbreak. He grew up in Jefferson City, Missouri, and by the time he was fourteen had never left his home state. "I regarded Jefferson City as the Athens of America," he says.

He adds, "In 1944, my father got a better job in New York City and suggested that we were going to move. At that time it was the most crushing blow I had ever suffered. I couldn't believe that any human being would ever want to live anywhere other than Jefferson City."

Arriving in New York, he was overwhelmed by culture shock. "I had the feeling when I saw people in the streets that they were constantly talking. It was so unlike Jefferson City, where everyone was silent and quiet and dignified." The day after he arrived, Frommer set out into the metropolis not yet knowing the layout of the streets. He took the subway to Times Square and walked into the offices of the *New York Herald Tribune* to inquire for a job as a copy boy. He had read about copy boys in a novel, and it sounded exciting, but the non-fictional *Herald Tribune* didn't use any. "I walked out and I looked at the corner, and there was a sign that read 'Newsweek.' And I went into *Newsweek* magazine, and I got a job as an office boy. My second day there." So, the story ends with Frommer unexpectedly finding his way, as he often has.



JONATHAN T. WEISBERG

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ARTHUR FROMMER



Frommer still lives in New York, and he tells this story from his apartment near Lincoln Center. The views from his twenty-seventh story windows look west, far enough over the Hudson River that they seem to stretch to somewhere far away.

“I’ve been to virtually everywhere in the world,” says Frommer. He lists some of the destinations that come to his mind in the first few moments: Cuba, China, Bali, Florida, Cambodia, New Orleans, Amsterdam, Kenya, the Seychelles. And in perhaps the best statement of qualification for his vocation, he adds, “I don’t think there’s any place where I’ve not enjoyed myself.”

Frommer’s peripatetic career started because he wanted to help his fellow G.I.s see Europe.

In the 1940s and the early 1950s, Frommer says, most Americans never expected to travel as far as Europe. “In those days, if you didn’t have much money, you didn’t travel. And, of course, you never even remotely thought that you would travel internationally.” Frommer himself hadn’t seen much beyond the train tracks that led him from Missouri to New York and up to New Haven. He made it through college and law school without getting as far as Philadelphia. Europe was as good as a fantasy: “You would hear of somebody who had a rich uncle who gave them a trip to Europe as a graduation present,” Frommer recalls.

Then Frommer was drafted and rode an army transport plane to the Old World. “I couldn’t believe my good luck,” he says. Stationed at several bases, but primarily in Munich and Oberammergau, he took advantage of every pass, every leave, and every weekend to explore the cities of Europe, from Madrid to Copenhagen. The puzzle was how to travel within Europe on an army private’s salary. And, as when he was a teenager in New York, he learned by just heading out.

As his term was winding down, Frommer wanted to share his excitement over traveling in Europe, especially his discovery that one could actually live very frugally by applying a few simple rules. “I resolved that someone should tell my fellow G.I.s about this,” he says. “I had done it; I knew how easy it was.” He hadn’t taken any notes while traveling, but he sat down in his last three weeks in Europe and wrote down everything he could remember about the cities he’d

visited. Sometimes he could only describe visually where a particular affordable hotel or restaurant was, because he didn’t know the address. He borrowed some money from his parents and other soldiers and printed *The G.I.’s Guide to Traveling in Europe*.

When he returned to New York, Frommer worked in the litigation department at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, where he had already worked for a few months after law school and before entering the Army. “It was an exciting form of law, and something that I wanted to continue doing,” he recalls. Meanwhile, his little book was selling like hotcakes on European military bases, requiring a second printing after its first month.

“In the back of my mind I kept thinking to myself, maybe I should do this for civilians,” Frommer says. “On my first vacation from Paul, Weiss, about a year after I had been there, I went back to Europe.” He rushed through twelve cities in thirty days, taking down exact addresses and searching out new value accommodations. He wrote *Europe on 5 Dollars a Day*, again having the book printed, rather than going through a publisher, and then

found someone to distribute the first 5,000 copies. It came out in 1957.

Within weeks, Frommer says, “I discovered that this little book that I had written was becoming a monster.” Every week he got a call from the warehouse, saying they were out of books, and needed ten thousand more copies, fifteen thousand more copies. “I immediately became just inundated by correspondence from readers,” he says.

“What’s important to remember about *Europe on 5 Dollars a Day*,” says Frommer, “is that it was never seen by any other pair of eyes than mine before it went to press.” He credits the personal style of the book with allowing his own excitement about Europe to beam through, and, thus, for its success. “It’s an intensely personal book; it’s all enthusiastic and wild eyed.” He points to his introduction to the chapter on Venice:

Venice is a fantastic dream. Try to arrive at night when the wonders of the city can steal upon you piecemeal and slow. You’ll step from the railway landing into a sea-going streetcar, and



chug softly up the Grand Canal. Out of the dark, there appear little clusters of candy-striped mooring poles; a gondola approaches with a lighted lantern hung from its prow; the reflection of a slate grey church, bathed in a blue spotlight, shimmers in the water as you pass by. This is the purest beauty, and it is an experience no one can miss.

Eventually ten percent of Americans traveling to Europe were bringing a Frommer along. “I would stand in line at American Express offices, and there would be people in front of me arguing about the book, or saying, ‘Do you go with Frommer?’ Once I heard someone say, ‘Do you sleep with Frommer?’” He chuckles. “By which they meant, ‘Do you use Frommer for your hotel accommodations?’”

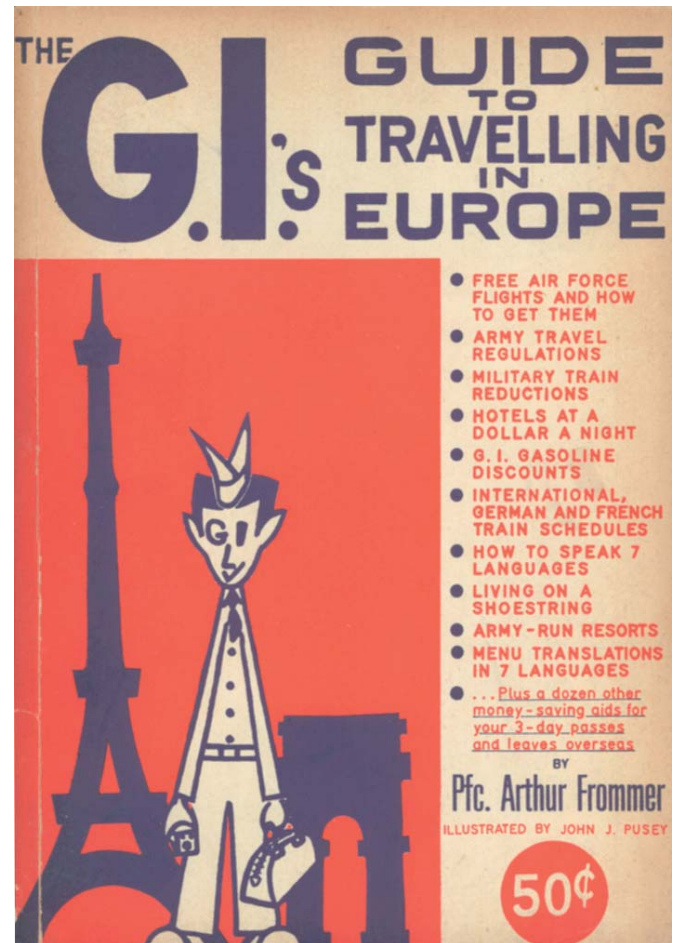
The “five dollars a day” formula wasn’t a gimmick—much as it seems like one today. Frommer’s book described ways for travelers to get lodging and three meals for that amount in twelve European cities. He listed particular hotels and restaurants, and also outlined an overall strategy (never ask for a private bath in Europe, for instance). But he was further committed to value as an ethic in his travel.

“There was a day that I was at a sidewalk café in Paris,” Frommer recalls. “I was reading, and I had been there for about four hours on one little glass of wine.... I saw a sightseeing bus passing in front of me, and inside the sightseeing bus were forty Americans all with their noses pressed to the window, looking at the life of Paris from inside their isolated, soundproof bus. And I thought to myself that the difference between me and them was that they had money and I had no money. And that if you have money, you don’t have as good a time as if you don’t have any money.”

Frommer found that being forced to stay at small hotels where he ate breakfast each morning at the proprietors’ table, or dining at workingmen’s restaurants brought him into contact with the real city. “I was having the time of my life; I was meeting people, I was talking to them, I was arguing with Europeans.”

In *Europe on 5 Dollars a Day*, he was not only proposing a cheaper way to travel, but a better way to travel.

As the years passed, Frommer revised and expanded his guide. But, inflation kept tugging at prices, and eventually, in the 1970s, Frommer begrudgingly changed the title to *Europe on 10 Dollars a Day*. “I was so depressed,” he recalls. “I was literally worried that it would lose its magic at ten dollars a day.”



A G.I. traveling in Europe: Frommer in Berlin in 1954 (opposite), shortly before he conceived his first book (above).

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There's a hotel in Amsterdam called the Hotel Mercure Arthur Frommer. It used to be just the Hotel Arthur Frommer, named during a time when Frommer was running hotels and charter tours along with publishing books, and though the hotel was bought by a larger chain it keeps his name as one small sign of the impact he's had on European tourism.

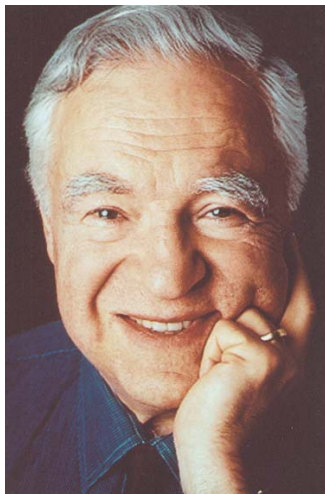
However, before he could build up his many-vectored travel enterprise, he reached a point when he had to decide whether he would be a travel publisher or a lawyer. By the 1960s, his dual life was becoming unsustainable. "I would be at Paul, Weiss until ten or eleven o'clock at night, and then I would come home and literally stay up until four in the morning working on the books, and getting them published, having then to go back to work the next morning with four hours of sleep."

Frommer says he sometimes regrets giving up the law after six years at Paul Weiss, but in order to manage his growing business and keep his guides up to date he had little choice. He had started publishing books by other authors in the Dollar a Day series, covering Mexico, Japan, Greece, and the Caribbean.

He gave his authors the freedom that he thought was essential to create a personal connection with the reader. In one case this meant letting the author of the Mexico book, who hated Mexican food, fill pages describing how to find a tuna fish sandwich in Mexico City.

Frommer founded and ran the \$5-a-Day Travel Club and \$5-a-Day Tours. In time he was running hotels and charter flights to places like Rio de Janeiro and Cairo. He wrote more guides himself, including ones to Amsterdam, New York, and Branson, Missouri. Eventually he started a magazine, *Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel*.

Frommer's original excitement about traveling proved powerful enough to launch an immense business. He also had to cope with the influence that *Europe on 5 Dollars a Day* had. "I could never in a chapter say that this guest house was the single best guest house in all of London. If I did something like that I would destroy that establishment, they would be just so inundated with business." He tried to scatter readers by providing many recommendations in each locale. To find the right places, Frommer spent three or four months a year in Europe, "pestering people, probing, trying to make really good discoveries," he says.



As Frommer became a professional travel writer, he found he had trouble vacationing, whether in Bali or Yosemite. "Wherever I went, my eye was looking around to see what the prices were, what the facilities were," he says. The boy whose first trip broke his heart was now on the road nearly constantly. "There was a time in my life when I went some-

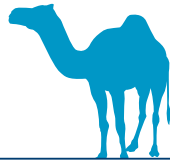
where every single week, although wherever I was, I tried to get home for the weekends. I could be in Thailand on a Thursday, but I'd get on a plane and get back so that Friday evening I'd be home having dinner."

However, being a travel writer also taught him to approach adversarial situations with equanimity. "I've been in places where coups d'etat were occurring in the center of town while I was coming in from the airport, or where general strikes have happened." But, he adds, "Even the mishaps are grist for the mill, and are something I want to write about."

The release of *Europe on 5 Dollars a Day* coincided with the development of the jet plane. And as more people could travel conveniently over the Atlantic, they needed more guidebooks. Similarly, as travel to Asia, Africa, and Australia became easier, Frommer guides emerged for those places—and Frommer himself traveled there. In trying to get to every tourist destination and every emerging hotspot, he lashed himself to a gargantuan industry, as it grew and paced the world.

After three full decades in the travel industry, however, Frommer "felt a sharp malaise about the state of American travel," seeing too much trivial sightseeing and mindless duplication of familiar comforts through large chain hotels. He called much of standard tourism "bland, devoid of important content, cheaply commercial." He also questioned his own role in the industry, seeing that traveling on a budget, while still preferable, did not necessarily bring one into contact with the cultures one visited. In response, he sought out alternative, mentally and spiritually engaging forms of travel and, naturally, he wrote a book, *New World of Travel*, to share what he'd found.

Frommer describes *New World of Travel* as his most important book, as it lays out his mature philosophy of travel. The book describes hundreds of alternative trips—such as a week at a yoga retreat, a trip to an adult university session, a trek through the Himalayas. He wrote in the introduction:



“WE LEARN FROM THEM, THEY LEARN FROM US. YOU SHOULD TRAVEL IN A STATE OF HUMILITY, ASKING MORE QUESTIONS THAN MAKING POINTS.”

“The key objective is to experience events, lifestyles, attitudes, cultures, political outlooks, and theological views utterly different from what you encounter at home.”

In some ways, his new world points back to the world of fresh discovery that he first encountered in Europe. But it struggles to circumnavigate the shoals of mass tourism—something *Europe on 5 Dollars a Day* helped promote and that the Frommer enterprise profited from—to find unspoiled, genuine experiences.

According to Frommer, there’s good reason to make the effort to travel the right way. “The problem with travel is that too many publications, especially the newspapers, regard travel as trivia, as simply recreation,” he says. “Travel is the best of learning activities. You can read hundreds of magazines and books about a particular country, but to actually go there and experience it with your own senses impacts the mind in a way that nothing else ever does.”

Indeed, Frommer argues that government has “no more right to tell us where we have the right to travel to than they have the right to stop us from attending a lecture or reading a book.” And he has argued that the ban on travel to Cuba is unconstitutional. But travel also reaches beyond concerns of individual self-improvement. “You see how other people react to their urban and social problems; you see innovative things that they do that open your eyes to what might be considered in the United States. We learn from them, they learn from us. You should travel in a state of humility, asking more questions than making points.”

Since *New World of Travel* was first published in 1988, Frommer notes that his ideas have picked up traction, and alternative travel has become a significant sector of the industry.

Indeed, Frommer has helped steer the skiff of American travel for so long that some people can’t believe that “Frommer” is something more than a name on a bookshelf.

“A lot of people who meet me are surprised,” he says. “They’re positive I’m dead because they remember when they were students forty years ago, and were already using the book.”

In conversation, Frommer effortlessly falls into giving travel advice, either by disposition or habit. While describing his own recent trip to China, for instance, he quickly veers to recommending a trip to China for others, because “It is of immense world significance what is happening in China right now, and people should go there.” Frommer discusses the length of the plane flight, the visa and customs requirements, the ease of traveling within the country, the language barrier, and, of course, its affordability.

Frommer has been spending more time at home recently, though he still sees enough airplanes, hotels, and cruise ships to dizzy an amateur. And his pen hasn’t slowed—he has to meet a twice-weekly deadline for a newspaper column. “Everything I do, all my travels, are immediately reflected in the column.” He is an active consultant with the publishing company that owns the Frommer’s books and is also developing a new magazine venture. And after this new venture is well launched, he plans to turn to political writing. “Much to my wife’s dismay, I’m not retiring yet,” he says. He does manage to spend part of every summer in the Hudson Valley—a place he says he’ll never write about, and, thus, where he can rest his travel writer’s eye.

Final questions for the man who’s been almost everywhere:

His favorite destination? “I think that Paris is just on the frontier of every discipline—of art, of music, of cuisine, of political theory, of literature. I cannot get enough of it.”

One place he hasn’t been yet but wants to go? “I haven’t been to Tibet.... But my wife and I are continuing to plan trips of that sort.”

Perhaps we’ll soon see *Tibet on 5 Dollars a Day*. ▼

A few places Arthur Frommer has been (see page 42):

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 Northeast Thailand | 7 Maasai village, Kenya |
| 2 Great Wall of China | 8 Havana, Cuba |
| 3 Tanzania | 9 Holland |
| 4 Beijing, China | 10 Yosemite National Park |
| 5 Shanghai, China | 11 Thailand |
| 6 Indonesia | |