

Book Review

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**NATURE'S PROTECTION
FROM A STUNTED
WORLDVIEW**

By Brooke Allen

TRAVEL writing has traditionally been an escapist genre, with a mandate to seduce; its natural subjects are pleasure, beauty, food, wine. All the senses are appealed to, and inconvenience and discomfort are purely vicarious. But in today's international climate, the tried-and-true staples of travel literature — Provençal cuisine, Americans in Paris, the hill towns of Tuscany — have come to seem not just irrelevant but boring. Fame. A handful of recent travel books, featuring subjects that range from the only slightly off-beat (revisionist looks at Germany and modern Greece) to the truly mind-stretching (Kyrgyzstan, the Gobi Desert, wartime Afghanistan, peacetime Iraq), have thoroughly trumped the standard travel literature this summer.

In **THE BELLS IN THEIR SILENCE: Travels Through Germany** (Princeton University, \$24.95), Michael Gorra wonders why no one in the Anglo-American world writes travel

Brooke Allen's "Artistic License: Three Centuries of Good Writing and Bad Behavior" will be published in September.

Another Gen X traveler, equally astute but far lighter-hearted, is the Texan Stephanie Elizondo Griest. As a teenager, Griest already knew she "had to get the hell out of Corpus Christi," so she took the advice of a CNN correspondent she met at a journalism conference and learned Russian. **AROUND THE BLOC: My Life in Moscow, Beijing, and Havana** (Villard, paper, \$13.95) is the often hilarious tale of this female Candide's voyage through Communist and formerly Communist countries: in Moscow as a student during the 1990's, later in Beijing as a journalist under the Luce Scholars program and finally in Cuba as a clandestine tourist.

Griest is a charming guide, easily making friends and blending into the local scene — so effectively that she even finds herself assuming some of her new companions' less appealing characteristics, as she herself readily admits. Her stint as an editor at *China Daily*, a newsmagazine that is the official English mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, is typical. At first excited by this "prime opportunity to experience censorship firsthand and observe a state propaganda machine at its source," she is outraged by her colleagues' cynicism and obstructionism. But after a year on the job, she realizes that she has become as obstructionist as they are.

Griest provides an eye-opening glimpse of the reality behind American headlines that can themselves be propagandistic. Her description of Havana at the height of the Elián González hysteria offers a bizarre, through-the-looking-glass reflection of the furor, and her discussion of Muscovites' common fears and worries shows that the new post-Communist "democracy" is as shaky as the old system, perhaps even more so. "Instead of worrying about the K.G.B. knocking on their door at midnight, Russians now feared *huligani* kicking it down or — if they were *biznesmeni* — *Mafozi* gunning it down."

"Around the Bloc" is not only superb travel writing, it is also a beautifully written story of self-discovery. As a college student, Griest was "a militant-vegetarian-Chicana-feminist," but in Moscow she makes little headway against the "primped and preened" Russian women. "Moscow felt a lot like Dallas," she observes. "No respectable woman would dare run down to the neighborhood kiosk without base, concealer, blush, eyeliner, eye shadow, mascara and lipstick." Her vegetarianism ends in Beijing, where shish-kebabed scorpions and snake blood turn up on the menu. And her Chicana pride turns to humiliation in Havana when her Spanish won't sustain even the most basic conversation.

Although it's full of serious reporting, "Around the Bloc" is a delightful book, imbued with the high spirits, good will and openness of youth — and strangely reminiscent of that travel classic about the Jazz Age, "Our Hearts Were Young and Gay." In contrast, Elinor Burkett's **SO MANY ENEMIES, SO LITTLE TIME: An American Woman in All the Wrong Places** (HarperCollins, \$24.95) is obviously the work of an older woman, a child of the 60's who has had decades for disillusionment to set in. Yet Burkett shares many of Griest's characteristics: robust pragmatism, blunt humor, a sense of fun and an eagerness to have her own prejudices and preconceptions shattered.