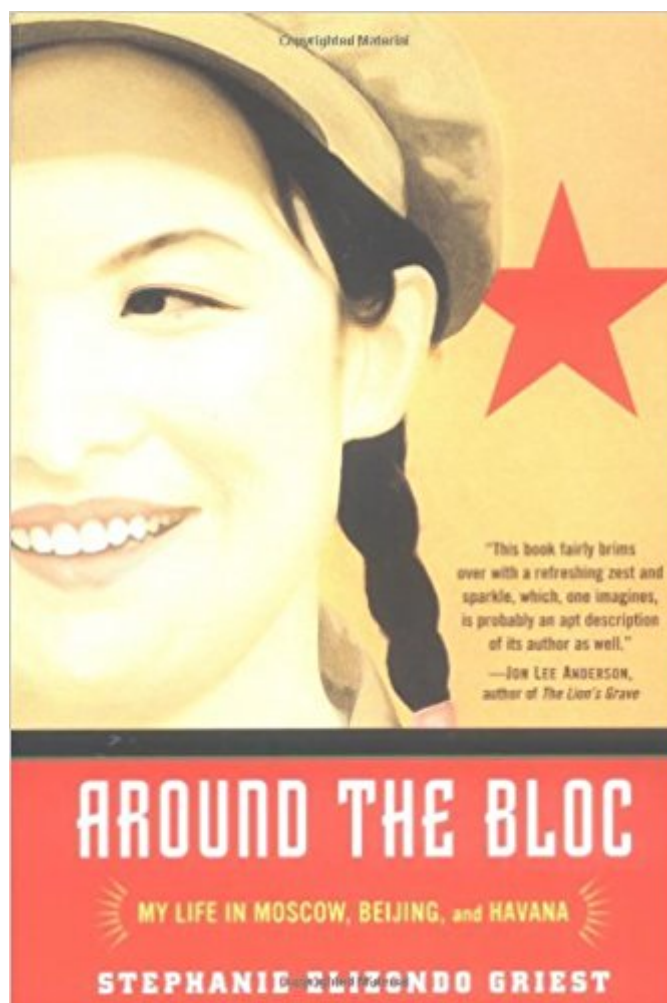


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# Around The Bloc: My Life In Moscow, Beijing, And Havana



## Synopsis

Desperate to escape South Texas, Stephanie Elizondo Griest dreamed of becoming a foreign correspondent. So she headed to Russia looking for some excitement—commencing what would become a four-year, twelve-nation Communist bloc tour that shattered her preconceived notions of the “Evil Empire.” In *Around the Bloc*, Griest relates her experiences as a volunteer at a children’s shelter in Moscow, a propaganda polisher at the office of the Chinese Communist Party’s English-language mouthpiece in Beijing, and a belly dancer among the rumba queens of Havana. She falls in love with an ex-soldier who narrowly avoided radiation cleanup duties at Chernobyl, hangs out with Cuban hip-hop artists, and comes to difficult realizations about the meaning of democracy. *Around the Bloc* is the absorbing story of a young journalist driven by a desire to witness the effects of Communism. Along the way, she learns the Russian mathematical equation for buying dinner-party vodka (one bottle per guest, plus an extra), stumbles upon Beijing’s underground gay scene, marches with 100,000 mothers demanding Elián González’s return to Cuba, and gains a new appreciation for the Mexican culture she left behind.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When Griest was a high school senior in Texas, a CNN correspondent told her that if she wanted a globe-hopping career like his, she should learn Russian. Four years later, she went to Moscow and spent a semester at a linguistic institute, beginning a four-year period of travel (1996-2000) to 12 nations, including much of the former Soviet bloc and Communist China and Cuba. Readers will

quickly intuit just how little of Griest's adventures made it into this account, as a two-month Central Asian trek gets a single sentence and Eastern Europe falls completely by the wayside. But there's little opportunity to regret what's missing because of the captivating stories that Griest does choose to tell. From the sight of an old woman stealing canned goods from a shopper who'd passed out in a Moscow grocery to the aggressive banter of Havana black marketers, Griest has a journalist's eye for compelling detail. Her youthful romantic attraction to "the Revolution" is slightly less attractive, at times treating the largely defeated Communist movement as almost exotic, and naive daydreams about matters like the "damn good loving" she might find from angst-ridden Beijing men can occasionally induce wincing. But she doesn't flinch from depicting the brutal effects of authoritarianism and economic decline, or how her experiences hastened her political and emotional maturity. Though still raw in places, Griest's writing shows great promise; she may wind up joining Tom Bissell (*Chasing the Sea*) in the vanguard of a new generation of travel writers.

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Griest begins her travel memoir with a promising theme: at 21, she set off for Moscow with some fellow Texas college students in an attempt to strengthen her Russian language ability and deepen her understanding of Russian culture. Griest accomplishes the goal of changing her misconceptions not only about the Russians but also about the Chinese and Cubans, by spending the next four years traveling and living among them. Along the way, she has many surprising, bizarre, and even touching experiences. Yet, despite her informal journalistic approach (which is wonderfully accessible and conversational), there are moments of immaturity in her accounts that make the book seem more like a collegian's diary than a poignant journalistic endeavor. Her travelogue is, therefore, "in your face," for better or worse, and because of this may well appeal most to twentysomething readers. However, Griest is a fine observer, open to experiences and frank in expression, and she certainly is entertaining.

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I enjoyed the authors journalistic attention to detail, enthusiasm and personal descriptions, infused with honesty and feeling

Stephanie Griest managed to spend a year abroad for school, obtain grants and jobs, and travel to several countries in the communist bloc. In this book, she writes about her year in Moscow, Beijing, and a few weeks in Havana. She was inspired to these things when she heard a talk by a journalist

describing what she perceived as a pretty exciting life. She asked him what she had to do to get a job like his. He said to study journalism and learn Russian, so that is what she did. I found this to be a wonderful and fun travelogue describing a young woman's experiences in communist or post-communist countries in the 90s. It certainly gives a good idea of what life was like and how it was lived during these times. However, for me the most enjoyable part was watching the author's cognitive growth as she compared her own culture to other cultures. Some of the things she had to wrestle with to understand were small, e.g. her difficulty finding a volunteer position. She wanted to more deeply experience the life around her and thought becoming involved in a local organization would be helpful and keep her away from the temptation of the easy way of hanging around with ex-pats. There is difficulty in getting people to understand what she would like to do because they don't get the concept of volunteering. Finally, they say, "Ohhhh! That's communism! We don't have to do that anymore!" However, she finally finds an orphanage that is willing to take her on. She is not happy with the way the children are treated and learns a lot about preparing children to live in a society unlike her own. Another thing she experiences is coming across a dead man in a grocery, just lying in the aisle, his purchases around him, no one paying any attention. Then another customer appears and begins taking his purchases of food for herself. Griest does not know what to do and finally flees. This causes her great remorse. It reminded me of when I was in Panama, in the countryside outside of Colon, being shown around with a group of GI's with a Panamanian citizen and friend serving as a guide and driver. We came upon a body in a ditch and didn't know if he was alive or not. We wanted to investigate, but our Panamanian friend/driver said we needed to get the hell out of there before we were involved in a nightmare. As Griest wrestles with this horror, she, as usual, makes comparisons to her own culture. It is so easy to be horrified by "the other". Her thoughts reminded me of times in the U.S. when witnesses have failed to come to the aid of rape victims, murder victims, assault victims. Is that worse than ignoring someone who is already dead? Griest continued to make comparisons on a trip to the countryside with a local friend. She was struck by the generous hospitality, to the point of having difficulty eating all of the food that she was expected to eat or hosts would be insulted. She also noted "As we drove deep into the countryside we seemed to transcend a year a mile." Gone were the more modern accouterments of city life, such as bathrooms. She also noticed the effort people put into making their homes beautiful, with hanging rugs, art, etc. She noticed that each home she entered was decorated in a very similar manner, and realized she was looking at people using what was made available to them such as certain types of rugs. She thought about the fact that in the U.S. it was similar in that we decorate in similar manners also, but that in Russia it was about supply, whereas in the U.S. we demand our

decor. Not sure I agree with that - I get her point, but I get pretty cranky about the things offered in our stores here in the U.S. also. If you aren't wanting the current styles, good luck finding anything different. Perhaps this is one reason vintage items are so popular here now. Griest is also a little obsessed with revolutions, wanting people to continue to be politically active and push for more. She wonders why she keeps seeing old Russian vets laying flowers on Lenin and Stalin's graves and doesn't understand why they still honor them. She wonders if it is for the same reason her own country reveres Christopher Columbus, a man who obliterated entire populations of indigenous people so that his own kind could steal their land and riches? Do human beings inherently need to make heroes out of their nations and founders? In Beijing when she wonders what happened after Tiananmen Square, what happened to that spirit and again, why aren't people still fighting for more? She learned from her friends that they are focused on the economy and living a better life, which they are doing. They tell her that her systems is corrupt as well and it isn't the system so much as human nature - there will be corruption no matter which system so they don't care which system, they just want to live as best they can. Griest manages to make many deep friendships with locals who help her to understand what she is seeing, and to see the commonalities in our human nature and needs across cultures as well as the differences. She struggles mightily with all of these issues and comes to appreciate both these cultures as well as her own. She develops the ability to hold and accept multiple perspectives and appreciate them rather than judge, which is a wonderful thing to watch! She agrees with one who said that if you live in Moscow a week, you will write a book. If you live there a month, you may write an article, but if you live there for a year, you won't write anything. Five stars

I had the good fortune of taking a travel/memoir workshop from the author in 2011 at the Mendocino Writers Conference. The blurb on the front of this book says that it "fairly brims over with a refreshing zest and sparkle which one imagines is probably an apt description of its author as well." I can only testify that both statements are true. Stephanie gave a reading from this book that turned out to be the most entertaining performance I've ever encountered from an author. So I bought her book, got it autographed, and started it right away -- delighting in the descriptions of her experiences in Moscow (which resonated with my own when I stayed there with a Russian family for ten days) and in Beijing where I've always wanted to go. I could only admire her gutsy risk-taking in her life, combined with solid journalistic writing and good humor to boot. Then I misplaced the book, and just recently found it tucked away in one of my suitcases. It was like finding an old friend. I stopped reading my current book to finish her adventures in Havana. A book of great fun and great

interest.Dana Bagshaw, Santa Cruz, CA

Around the Bloc by Stephanie Griest was a book I had to read for one of my classes. Throughout the weekend it was assigned, I found myself carrying it wherever I went trying to read whenever I had the chance. I absolutely loved it and wanted to find out what her next adventure would be. This book tells the stories of Stephanie's trips to Moscow, Beijing and Havana while she tries to find her true identity. In Moscow, she deals with poverty and a very different lifestyle while working firsthand in an orphanage. In Beijing she deals with censorship in her journalism internship. In Havana she learns about the differences in their government in comparison to the United States. The stories she chose to write about were funny, entertaining, and very well written. She connects each place with the next in ways that make you think, but also leaves you wanting to read more. Many characters come and go in this novel since she does so much traveling. Though, when you are reading about each country I could easily envision the people she became friends with (or crazy bosses) and it made the story that much more alive. I definitely didn't expect an assigned book to be one of my favorites. I highly recommend this book to anyone looking for an adventure without having to get on a plane and go travel yourself.

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