

## Our choice for Secretary of State

# How Rick Steves Sees the World

Rick Steves is a travel guide and writer who lives in Edmonds, Washington, and spends about 100 days abroad each year. His “*Europe Through the Back Door*” books and TV shows on PBS are familiar to millions of readers and viewers.

Two years ago Allen St. Pierre of NORML noticed Steves’s name on the membership list and invited him to join the advisory board and to talk at the annual meeting.

“Every time I come home I’m reminded that I’m coming back to the land that has the shortest vacations in the rich world,” Steves told NORML in 2003. “And the highest prison population. It’s really quite an adjustment. There’s been a mass dumbing down of our society. We’ve been made to see things in a simplistic, us-versus-them, Evil-empire way.”

At this year’s NORML meeting in San Francisco, Steves restated his humane views in a keynote talk, excerpted below. Steves is in his late 40s — a sandy-haired, bespectacled, intelligent, pragmatic man, so calm that he seems slightly bemused even when he’s expressing outrage. His experience as a travel guide makes him especially well suited to begin guiding this country back towards sanity. Rick Steves for Secretary of State!

What Steves said to the marijuana-reform activists was implicitly critical of single-issue narrowness, ostentatious patriotism, and communicating in soundbites. But the way he said it was so gentle, friendly, and respectful that nobody took offense.

—Fred Gardner

**Rick Steves:** To me travel is accelerated living. You make more friends and you learn more per day when you’re away from home than you do at home. Everything becomes very vivid. When I’m in Europe for a month I can recall every meal. Can’t do that when I’m at home, it’s just not that vivid...

Travel really challenges truth. You’re raised thinking certain truths are self-evident and God-given, and then you get over there and you realize that people do things differently. Travel rearranges your furniture. I mean, you go to Bulgaria and this means yes (*shaking his head*) and that means no (*nodding*). And you go to France and slow service means good service. Slow service is respectful service — you’ve got the table all night, take your time...

You go to Belgium and they dip their French fries into mayonnaise, they look at you strange if you ask for ketchup. I go to Japan and I’m in a ryokan in the middle of the night and it’s cold. They don’t heat their houses. And you slip on your slippers and you put on your kimono and you shuffle down the hallway you can see your breath, you’re not looking forward to sitting on the toilet, but the seat is heated. That’s a nice jolt...

Travel carbonates your life. It makes things different, it sort of refreshes your perspective and in a lot of ways, that’s like marijuana, I would say.

When I started teaching I wondered if it was a noble thing to teach rich Americans to do. My image of travel when I was a kid was rich, white Americans on big cruise ships in the Caribbean throwing coins, photographing black kids diving for those coins. It was a way to flaunt your affluence. Nobody thought twice about it. That’s what travel was all about.

Even today that notion of travel persists. For a lot of people, travel is:

see if you can eat five meals a day and still snorkel when you get into port. And that’s not something I wanted to promote. I wanted to promote thoughtful travel. In the last few years, thoughtful travel has become more important than ever for Americans.

I’m really committed to the notion that travel is a constructive, healthy thing to do. That’s nothing new. Fourteen hundred years ago Mohamed said “Don’t tell me how educated you are, tell me how much you’ve traveled.”

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Thomas Jefferson said, “Travel makes a person wiser, but less happy.” Mark Twain traveled, and he said “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness.”

I travel and I think of it as one of the last great sources of legal adventure.

When you travel you realize there’s things to get excited about. I grew up thinking cheese was the same size as the bread — and it’s orange. Then you go over there and they’ve got a different cheese for every day of the year.

You go into a cheese shop in Paris it’s like a festival of mold. I love hanging around with my restaurateur friends in Paris. I’m their little American bumpkin and they can help me appreciate the fine points of life. She takes me into the cheese shop and picks up the moldiest one. (*As if taking a deep whiff*) “Oh, Rick, smell this cheese it smells like ze feet of angels.” Now, imagine thinking that cheese smells like ze feet of angels! It just changes your perspective on things.



RICK STEVES TO NORML: “Travel puts you in your place.”

I was in Kabul, in Afghanistan. A professor sat down next to me and said, “You’re an American, aren’t you?” I said “Yeah.” He said, “I want you to know that a third of the people on this planet eat with spoons and forks like you do, a third of the people eat with chopsticks and third of the people eat with their fingers like I do and we’re all just as civilized.” I was thankful for that. He had a little chip on his shoulder and he wanted to tell every American he could meet that he’s not less civilized because he eats with his fingers.

I was in Eastern Turkey in a land that might be called Kurdistan some day and met a carver who was famous in his corner of the country, everybody wanted a prayer niche carved by him. And we visited with him, and he was so proud to be showing his work off to these American travelers, he lifted his chisel up to the sky and said, “A man and his chisel, the greatest factory on earth!” Wow! There’s a fulfilled guy. He may not know how to turn on a computer, but he can define his own success, and I thought that was pretty cool.

When you travel you just meet people, you meet people all over the place. A little while ago in Germany a little kid, like a 5-year-old kid, was just staring at me. And finally his mom said, “Excuse my son, he stares at Americans. You see, last week we were at MacDonal’d’s and he asked me ‘Why do Americans have such soft bread?’” And the mother told the kid, “Because they have no teeth.”

Travel puts you in your place. I’m as inclined as the next American to brag about how well our athletes do at the Olympics, and I grew up marveling at how great we were, it was always USA on top of that Olympic medal list. Well, then my Dutch friend said, “Well, you’ve got a lot of Olympic medals, but per capita, we’re doing eight times as well as you.” We’re not used to thinking of Olympic medals in terms of per capita.

It’s important to broaden your perspective and it’s important to bring it home — to bring it home and share it with people that way. We’re trying to bring it home with our kids. Grandma and grandpa came over when my son was about four years old or three years old and after table prayers I taught him to say “Allah... Allah... Allah...” Just

to freak out my dad. You’ve got to put people a little outside their comfort zone to share what you’ve learned from your travels.

*They celebrate in Europe when we commute a death sentence in the United States.*

One thing I’ve learned from my travels is how Europeans are a little more progressive than us in dealing with social problems. Every time there’s a death sentence commuted in the United States, there’s a light show at the Coliseum in Rome. They celebrate in Europe when we commute a death sentence in the United States... And of course when you travel in Europe you realize that there is a non-criminal approach to marijuana that could be quite inspirational to American policy makers if they would just learn about it.

When you think about taking a trip, you can take a trip with your marijuana or you can take a trip with your passport. It’s kind of fun to take a trip without having to travel. Just put me in a nice location with a *National Geographic* and a joint and I’m climbing Mt. Everest. That travel is really quite cheap if the dollar’s too low... And you can do your actual travel and mix some appreciation of marijuana into that and it becomes kind of super-travel.

A lot of Americans are not edgy enough to smoke here, where it’s illegal, but it’s enjoyable for them to have an opportunity to enjoy some recreational use of marijuana without the paranoia that comes with doing that publicly in the United States.

First time I ever smoked was in Afghanistan. As a kid I didn’t want peer pressure to make me do something my parents said I shouldn’t. Over there it was just like going local. “When in Rome,” you know. And when in Afghanistan, this is what you do. The bus stops and everybody stands around and watches a goat get slaughtered and passes around the bong.

I mean, you stand on the rooftop of your hotel and there’s chariots going by, torchlit, and the lightbulbs are all breathing and people are eating soup with their hands and they don’t drop a bit. And you travel on over to Nepal and

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A CANAL IN AMSTERDAM: TWO BOATS AND A DUCK



Rick Steves *from previous page*

you can look right into the eyes of the living virgin goddess the Kumari Deva, you've got these slow-motion leech attacks and everybody is going "namaste, namaste (I salute your virtues)..." and you write in your journal trying to catch all this stuff and you get home and you hardly remember where you were high and where you weren't. But when you read it, there's a certain dreaminess that comes into your journal writing that you can kind of derive, it couldn't have been that great, I must have been high.

When I teach a writer's workshop a lot of times people will ask me "What's a trick? How can I be a better travel writer?" One of the tricks of travel writing is to be able to experiment with your perspective — smoking pot if you want to sharpen your ability to be a good travel writer. Like photographers will experiment with light. Any good photo-grapher's going to play around with existing light, it's a fascinating thing. Well, as a travel writer you want to experiment with different perspectives on things. When you're a keen observer you realize —you can try and kill flies forever on the bed in Cairo but if you realize that when they're rubbing their little front feet together, they're toast! You can get 'em when they're doing this... (*rubs his hands*).

*It helps to see these skyscrapers as stilettos just sticking up through this fertile soil of a billion people.*

When you're in Shanghai you see these skyscrapers. They're throwing up the equivalent of a skyscraper every day in Shanghai, surrounded by a sea of poverty. When you write about that, it helps to see these skyscrapers as stilettos just sticking up through this fertile soil of a billion people. You've got to make your observations from a different angle so people can better enjoy them.

You're looking into the eyes of Michelangelo's David and you're actually seeing him sizing up the darkness of medieval superstition right there, five hundred years ago when Florence was pulling Europe out of the Dark Ages.

For 25 years I've been taking groups around Europe. We take five thousand people around Europe every year on 200 different tours...

Trying to get my travelers engaged to travel thoughtfully —not just fun in the sun, not just bingo and not just shopping but thoughtful travel. Going to Europe is going to a continent where people realize that society has to make a choice. You can tolerate alternative lifestyles or you can build more prisons. But you've got to make a choice. In Europe they'd rather tolerate alternative lifestyles. In our society we'd rather build more prisons.

We live in a country where the hottest thing in real estate is gated communities for the wealthy and prisons for the poor. And we're oblivious. I don't know why we don't see this as a political issue, but it's a scary thing. Europeans are quick to remind me that my country has 4% of the world's population and 25% of its prisoners. That's not a good statistic.

Europe has learned that you cannot legislate personal morality. It's futile. It's counterproductive. The Dutch say "We're businessmen. If there's a problem, we deal with that person as if he's a future customer or partner.



MICHAELANGELO'S DAVID

The Dutch have so many creative ways to solve problems. You can complain about junkmail all you want. In the Netherlands they have stickers on their mailboxes that say yes or no, so they don't get junkmail unless they want it. Americans say "We can't have pedestrian streets because then cars can't get to my shop." In Europe they have pedestrian streets with little swipe things for a credit card and you swipe it if you're a resident and the gate goes down but otherwise it's traffic free. In the Netherlands 40 percent of the traffic is on two wheels. There are entire communities in Europe that are going to be wind-powered. There's a race going on right now for that.

They deal with their problems by thinking outside the box. And as Europe unites, what they're doing gets more impressive. It's easy to write Europe off as the "old world," but they've got a bigger economy and a bigger population than we do right now. 400 million people with 11 trillion dollar GDP and they're not spending half of their disposable income on the military, they're investing it in their own infrastructure. It's breathtaking what's going on there.

Our society is making some hard choices right now to cover our government's military needs —cutting right into people's programs that weaken our communities. In Europe those are the last things they'd be cutting.

United States applies pressure on them. I had people in Copenhagen tell me they had to arrest a couple of pot-smokers every year just to maintain favored trade status with the United States of America. That's a pathetic thing.

*We pride ourselves on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but we have the shortest vacations in the rich world.*

Coming home for me is always a little bit of a jolt. The first person that meets me at the airport is a dog. I can't help but think: "One nation under surveillance." We pride ourselves on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but we have the shortest vacations in the rich world.

We've got an uptight situation about sex where even my travel shows on PBS are rated for mature audiences only —if you can imagine that. David's going to be pixilated here pretty soon. TV programmers around the United States have a list of how many seconds of marble penis and canvas breast are showing as I show art from Europe.

Programmers can't inflict a Titian painting or a Michelangelo statue on their viewership in some conservative communities without taking heat.

In a lot of regards we're going in the wrong direction in this society and that's why it's good for us all to get together and encourage each other and break from this huddle [the NORML meeting] and go back into our communities.

Jailing people for pot in Europe would be laughable. But that's not the case here in the United States. In so many ways I think we're living a lie.

And that's one reason why I got involved with NORML. I just don't think if you're a successful, affluent, free country you need to embrace lies to con your electorate into this or that. We just heard that the intelligence on weapons of mass destruction was mistaken. And they all pretend they didn't know...

We are routinely outvoted in the United Nations by 140 to four on environmental issues, development of the third world, the criminal court, on Cuba, on Israel. Who stands with us? Israel, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia. That's what I call a rogue nation.

If there's something going on to help solve the problems of desperately poor people, there's one country that gets in the way, the U.S.A. It's us! If Canada wants to give discounted medicine for AIDS to Africa, who gets in the way of it? We do. If Americans knew this, if it could be communicated effectively, I think it would be not a very tough sell to get our country a little more tuned into the needs of the people on this planet.

But we are embracing these lies. We buy this stuff. "No child left behind." "Clean skies." "I love trees." "The party of life." "Tax relief." "Death tax." All of this terminology we just embrace. They call it the "defense" department. Nobody should ever let that word go by without a challenge. It's not a "defense" department.

We spend as much as the rest of the world put together on the military and you can't get elected without promising more. There's a mania in that regard; it's a big problem. We hear that we're for peace and we've got these 'Christian values,' but we're pounding plowshares into swords these days at a record pace. Somebody's got to just stand up and just say —you know, when Bush talks about freedom and liberty, he's talking about freedom to other people's natural resources and liberty to use their cheap labor. That's what they're talking about!

I was down in El Salvador last week. I just wanted to see what was going on in the developing world. They've got their struggles between the left and the right down there and the leftwing party in El Salvador was almost going to win the presidential election last year and President Bush had to send his brother Jeb down there to stand by the rightwinger and tell the Salvadorans "If you vote for the leftwing, we're going to stop remittances coming down from all the refugees working in the United States." Which is a third of the money in El Salvador's economy. So most of the people voted for the rightwing, against their interests, because of this threat from the United States. That's democracy these days.

A leading Jesuit priest, an educator in El Salvador, says whenever he hears the term "democracy" these days, his bowels move. I've got a journal about that. If you're curious about what I learned down in El Salvador. It's at ricksteves.com,

*Nobody tells us that every week there's a tsunami worth of innocent children that die of starvation on this planet. It's just structural poverty, and America is the flag-bearer of this structural poverty around the planet.*

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One thing I'm concerned about is the mass dumbing down of our society. The stuff I've been talking about, we go "yeah, yeah, yeah," but the average person doesn't get it. It's because of fear, I think, and because powerful forces in our society have been dumbing us down. They would find it convenient if we all become just mindless producer-consumers. We've got to not let them dumb us down. Because when we're dumbed down, that's the only way political initiatives against the interest of the people in general can have a chance.

The news is not news. Reality tv is not reality. When you see steroids on TV, and Michael Jackson and Terry Schiavo and so on, nobody's talking about the big issues. I mean every day, if you care about people if you're into sanctity of life, every day three times as many people who died on 9/11 die in Africa. Every day because of AIDs. That's a real problem that can be dealt with. We hear about the tsunami, and then it's gone out of the news. And nobody tells us that every week there's a tsunami worth of innocent children that die of starvation on this planet. It's just structural poverty, and America is the flagbearer of this structural poverty around the planet. As good people we can encourage our neighbors and so on to become a little more progressive.

The problem with marijuana is, if they're trying to make us just mindless producer-consumers, marijuana is not good on either account. It doesn't make us want to produce more and the only thing we would consume more is cheetos.

The thing this society doesn't like about marijuana is it turns people who wouldn't otherwise be poets into poets. Think of Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs. First you get your clothes and your car and your house and then you can do things that are more creative and then at the top you get "selfless actualization," helping other people.

It's more convenient in our society to have barbed wire strung around Maslow's hierarchy about midway, so that we continue to consume on the bottom end, out and out and out, not realizing that we can step over the barbed wire and live more fulfilling lives. One of the reasons why philosophically I'm into marijuana is that it's a good way to cut that barbed wire and be true to yourself and be what really is successful.

To sell this propaganda of our government's war on drugs requires using the big-lie technique. Hitler learned that you can tell a big lie over and over again, and people believe it if you tell it enough times. We've got to recognize the propaganda. The propaganda erodes the credibility of the government, of schools, of families when it comes to marijuana.

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**Rick Steves** *continued*

We've got a White House that spends millions of dollars advertising in the Super Bowl trying to tell people that marijuana causes teen pregnancies. And it's surrounded by beer ads! Now what's causing the pregnancies?

I've got friends who are teachers and the DARE program by any teacher's assessment is somewhere between ineffectual and counterproductive. When you get a DARE officer in the teachers lounge, teachers who are free spirits — Dead Poets Society types— are cowed into silence. You can hear a pin drop in the teacher's lounge when the DARE officer is there. No one will question DARE because it's bad news for your job security if you are known as somebody who is a little bit open-minded about creative ways to deal with drugs and children. It is so exciting to go to a DARE meeting at school and question it. I mean, many parents there want to do it but they're just too chicken. Many parents know this is bogus but they just are afraid and this fear is what's keeping us down.

At home, I have two teenage kids. My wife is a nervous wreck. Parents are taught that this is a gateway drug and it's 20 times as powerful back when we did it innocently when we were kids and all this kinds of stuff. I'm excited about having credibility with my kids. One of the perks I get for being on the advisory board here at NORML is I can invite Keith Stroup over for dinner and introduce my teenage kids to a lawyer who has dedicated his life to an ideal rather than people with a lot of money.

There's a nobility in our struggle that I think can be explained a little better. My daughter just wrote a paper. She got to choose whatever topic she wanted and she chose "Why marijuana should be decriminalized. I just read the teacher's response to it two days ago. She got an 'A' but the teacher said, "We don't all have to agree with you, but it's a good paper."

I think the underlying thing about this propaganda war on the part of our government against marijuana is that even

more than stopping kids from drug use, what's motivating them is instilling fear in parents. Because fear is the only way they're going to keep us down.

*It's sort of bad news to make Hitler parallels but it's getting more and more like that.*

Normally, I'm not talking about the decriminalization of marijuana, I'm talking about foreign policy and 9/11 stuff and terrorism. That relates to my travel stuff more directly. But it is the same thing! Our government wants us to be afraid and the fear enables them to manipulate us this way.

For goodness sakes, we've got doctors and scientists and medical experts that have to be politically correct to give our government advice. It's sort of bad news to make Hitler parallels but it's getting more and more like that. Our environmental policies, our health policies, our AIDS policies, are shaped by people who are driven by ideological agendas. I mean, tears cause AIDS now... Our government is embracing this. It's amazing to me.

I was very impressed when I read on the NORML website a bulletin the Drug Czar sent out to all the prosecuting attorneys listing 20 reasons why marijuana is the devil's weed. Each one of these points is refuted very solidly on the NORML website. But that our government would be giving this trash to prosecutors with the implication that you better be running with this sort of standard....That's just really —somebody's got to stand up to that.

Travel teaches you a respect for history. We should learn from history. We had this 13-year experiment with Prohibition and I think by any sober as-

essment, it just made a lot of criminals, filled a lot of prisons and cost our society a lot of money back in the '20s. It was big government at its worst.

Today, more and more people are waking up to this prohibition that's keeping Americans who shouldn't be criminals criminals. It's causing so many people to be arrested every year. If one person arrested for marijuana is contributing to the congestion of our prisons right now, that's one person too many.

We need to balance our activism. I think your marijuana activism will be more effective if you're also into the PTA and homelessness and the schools and public television or whatever. It makes me more credible because people know I'm into other causes, also. It makes me feel more effective as an advocate of decriminalizing marijuana.

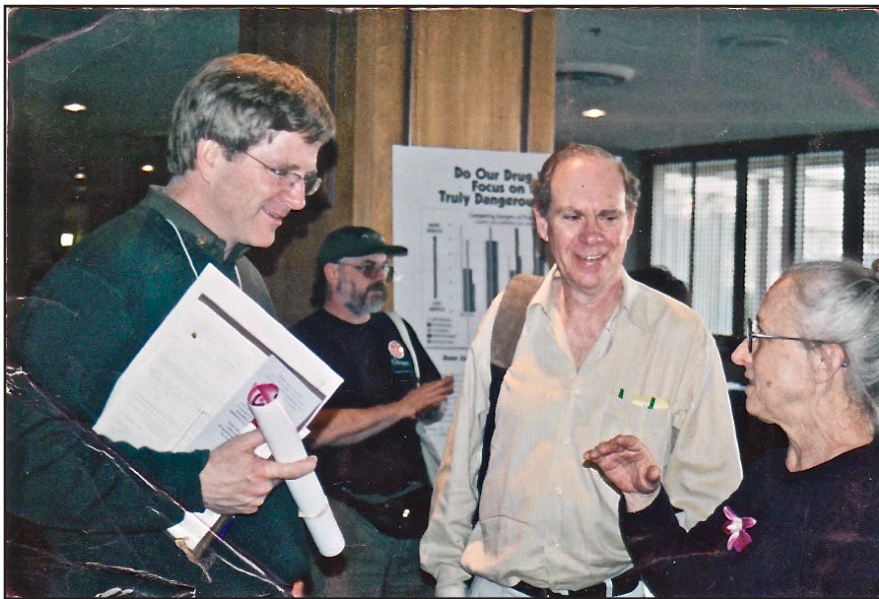
We have a clear message and you've just got to have these figures: 750,000 Americans were arrested last year because of marijuana, 88% of them for simple possession. Our country blew seven billion dollars on this.

This should be a conservative issue. We can talk about the European solution. Fifteen years they've been experimenting with treating marijuana as a medical concern rather than a criminal one. Even crusty, conservative law enforcement types like it this way.

We need to pre-empt the discredit. They're going to say: "You're for children abusing drugs?" "No, we're not for children smoking pot, we're not for hard drugs, we're not for driving when you're high, none of that stuff!" But you need to pre-empt that because they'll try to discredit you right away.

Responsible adult use is okay, but nobody's talking about kids getting easy access to pot. We need to shoot off that torpedo before they torpedo us with it.

People think advocating for NORML



**RICK STEVES, ED ROSENTHAL, AND ROSIE THE RIVETING at the NORML conference in San Francisco, April 2005.**