

books of the year

Around the world in an armchair

Travel

Tom Chesshyre travels from Tooting to Tennessee, with a detour to Timbuktu

The Road to Little Dribbling: More Notes from a Small Island

by Bill Bryson Doubleday, 384pp; £20

It's 20 years since Bill Bryson published *Notes From A Small Island*, his observations collected during a tour of Britain that became one of the biggest-selling travel books ever. In this follow-up, Bryson, who arrived in the UK from America in 1973 and married an Englishwoman, is back on his old beat, casting his outsider's eye over British idiosyncrasies with his trademark dry wit. He zigzags from Bognor Regis to Cape Wrath, grumbling — sometimes growling — about slow service in pubs, iffy hotels, litter-bugs, green-belt development, Heathrow expansion and HS2. He's grouchy, but he doesn't care.

Deep South by Paul Theroux

Hamish Hamilton, 441pp; £20

In this offbeat travel book, Paul Theroux avoids the "obstacle course" of airports by driving from his home in New England to North and South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama and Arkansas to cover remote places where America's "submerged 20 per cent" live. He's interested in existence on the edge, so he goes to small, huddled towns with Baptist churches, cheap motels, gun shops and



diners. His driving instinct is to report the unreported, rather than be "voyeuristically stimulated by travel". Despite the many hardships he sees, local "kindness [and] generosity" shine through.

Elephant Complex: Travels in Sri Lanka

by John Gimlette Quercus, 478pp; £25

Intrigued by the large Sri Lankan community living in Tooting near his south London home, the travel writer John Gimlette takes three months off to explore the Indian Ocean nation. He is fascinated by politics in the aftermath of the Tamil Tigers' 2009 defeat in the civil war, and by the British colonial past. The "elephant complex" of the title refers to ancient paths that the creatures have always followed on the island. Gimlette believes he must trace similar historical paths to get beneath the skin of Sri Lanka. He does so

with wit and the occasional scrape with the authorities.

Heat: Extreme Adventures at the Highest Temperatures on Earth

by Ranulph Fiennes

Simon & Schuster, 394pp; £20

Veteran explorer Ranulph Fiennes captured the imagination with *Cold*, his book about his exploits in the polar regions. Now he's back with tales of derring-do in some of the world's hottest places, told in a memoir beginning with his early childhood in South Africa. With heat in his blood, he becomes a soldier in the Persian Gulf before travelling up the Nile (dodging "green-eyed crocodiles") and visiting Timbuktu. His latest feat is to have become, aged 71, the oldest Briton to complete earlier this year the Marathon des Sables over 156 miles in the Sahara desert.

TRUNK ROAD Ancient elephant paths through Sri Lanka explored

by John Gimlette

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A Traveller's Year: 365 Days of Travel Writing in Diaries, Journals and Letters

compiled by Travis Elborough and Nick Rennison Frances Lincoln, 528pp; £25

Concentrating on the "classic era of European exploration and diary-writing" of 1750-1950, although allowing some later entries, Travis Elborough and Nick Rennison have scoured the pages of travel literature for snippets to cover each day of the year. More than 200 writers include Graham Greene, Mary Shelley, Mungo Park, Jack Kerouac, Wilfred Thesiger, Dervla Murphy, George Orwell, Gustave Flaubert and George Eliot. The "natural beauties" of Biarritz are "transcendent", says Eliot in an 1867 letter, with "spray on the horizon like a suddenly rising cloud".

Tom Chesshyre is author of *Gatecrashing Paradise: Misadventures in the Real Maldives* (Nicholas Brealey, £10.99)

In perfect taste

Food

Tony Turnbull fills up on great Italian cooking and 25 classic cocktails

My Simple Italian by Theo Randall

Ebury, 224pp; £25

Theo Randall, formerly in charge of the River Café kitchens and now at the London InterContinental, is this country's best non-Italian Italian chef. His feel and instinct for ingredients is unrivalled, as he shows in this beautifully illustrated book. You might at first take issue with his definition of "simple", but delve deeper and you see that he achieves great looking and richly flavoured results with minimal fuss, which is the joy of great Italian cooking. Worth the price for the secret of his celebrated Amalfi lemon tart alone.

A Bird in the Hand by Diana Henry

Mitchell Beazley, 224pp; £20

If you are going to major on a single ingredient, you might as well make it a common one — and chicken is the only meat eaten in every country in the world. Henry's intriguing recipes go well beyond the Sunday roast (although she has a foolproof version of that too, of course) and takes in voguish dishes such as poussin with za'atar and roast pumpkin hummus, or pomegranate and honey-glazed skewers, as well as the more quotidian. A real gem.

A Modern Way to Cook by Anna Jones

Fourth Estate, 352pp; £25

Out of a bumper crop of "clean eating" advocates, Anna Jones stands out as the one whose recipes you'll want to follow for reasons of taste rather than fashion. She may subscribe to spiralised courgette madness, but this is intelligent vegetarian cooking for anyone who wants to eat nourishingly without making a show of it. Give me her butternut and tamarind curry or cavolo nero pie any day over grated couscous and bone broth soup.

Twelve Recipes by Cal Peternell

William Morrow Cookbooks, 304pp; £17.99

What do you pack your children off to university with? An Ikea saucepan and voucher for Nando's or a lovingly written



SIMPLY DELICIOUS Theo Randall's pizza with prosciutto and mozzarella

recipe book to help them on their first steps of self-sufficiency? If you are a chef at Chez Panisse in California, you choose the latter. The 12 recipes grew, of course, to become part-autobiography, part-kitchen manual, part-guide to life. The dedication says it all: "To Mom and Dad, who showed me, night after night, the subtle, profound, and lasting value of gathering around the table for a family meal."

The Spirits by Richard Godwin

Square Peg, 320pp; £16.99

Given the lubricating nature of their subject matter, it's weird what a dry read most cocktail books make. Godwin thankfully doesn't dwell on tedious arguments about the origins of the daiquiri or lists of recondite bitters but focuses on what matters: how to have fun making cocktails at home. The first chapter describes how just six bottles are needed to make 25 classics, which shows he's coming from exactly the right place.

Honey & Co: The Baking Book

by Sarit Packer and Itamar Srulovich

Salt Yard Books, 304pp; £25

"Our day is marked by what comes out of the pastry section, and there's always something good on the way." Anyone fortunate enough to have eaten at Packer and Srulovich's tiny Middle Eastern restaurant in London will know the truth of that. From merguez sausage rolls to coffee, cardamom and walnut cakes, this is the perfect balance of sweet, sour, salt and spice.