Latest From Fodor: The U.S. in 8 Volumes

By ROY BONGARTZ

EUGENE Fodor is this year celebrating three decades of publishing his famous travel guides. The dean of guidebook editors, at last count he had covered in minute detail more than 100 countries. In his 46 volumes, most of them updated annually, only a few South Pacific islands, China, parts of Africa and—surprisingly—Canada, have so far eluded him. Lifetime sales of his works are nearing 10 million copies.

Fodor's latest effort has an epochal quality: eight volumes covering every part of the United States save Hawaii. (He has a special guide for that state.) They offer the traveler a service the major competition (Mobil and A.A.A. guides) don't provide—a detailed description of the people, landscape, attractions and cultural fabric of the regions discussed. What is more, they do the job well—no mean feat. (This is a special literary genre since it treats sometimes familiar material as if it were news. The writing, say, about New York City, has to sound as if the place had just been stumbled upon—surprise!—on a voyage from Paterson to New Rochelle.) Where the Fodor guides are less effective is in the food and lodging area: The listings are far from complete, and the treatment of prices seems capricious.

The Fodor volumes are paperbacks based on revisions of the guides he did for the Shell Oil Company in 1966 and 1967. They range in length from 318 pages ("Rockies & Plains") to 668 pages ("The South"), but they all cost the same—$4.75. And they all have that instinct for the feeling of a place. Fodor, a cheerful and insatiably curious traveler himself, says, "The American is hungry to get in touch with other people." Thus he emphasizes "the mentality of the people."

Each book starts out with an essay on the region. In his introduction to the New England guide ("Well-bred New England: A Hallowed Past—A Brilliant Future"), Caskie Stinnett, editor of Travel & Leisure magazine, says the New Englander is "plain-spoken and knows that he has nothing to fear from his neighbor if he speaks his mind. It is the man who agrees too readily who is looked upon with suspicion."

There follows a section headed "Facts at your Fingertips," which covers about the same ground in each of the eight volumes. In the New England one, for example, you learn about Planning Your Trip, Packing, What Will It Cost? How to Get There, Hints to the Motorist, Hotel and Motel Categories, Dining Out, Business Hours and Local Time, Summer Sports, Roughing It, Tipping, Hints to Handicapped Travelers and the Heritage Trail.

Next come sections on individual states, each with a separate introduction by a local resident. The titles to the essays have a kind of old-time National Geographic solidity to them: Connecticut is "Front Door to Yankeeland," and Rhode Island is "America's Smallest Bundle of Surprises." Major cities such as Hartford and Boston rate their own "exploring" information, followed by descriptions of itineraries that take the reader to every point of visitor interest in the state. Then each state is written up again for "general and practical information," which involves such categories as How to Get Around, Tourist Information Services, Museums

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ROY BONGARTZ is a freelance writer who lives in Foster, R.I.

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and Galleries, Shopping, Drinking Laws, What to Do With the Children, and Indians. How well the guides succeed from the viewpoint of the traveler we will see. But, first, a word about how they are made.

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In a luxuriously remodeled barn next to his Colonial farmhouse near Litchfield, Conn., two assistants and Fodor, a dapper, energetic native of Hungary and a naturalized American, direct an army of about 250 writers and researchers. Besides the United States-based authors who will continually be updating the American series, this army includes the legmen who produce the annually rewritten versions of 32 of the foreign-country guides. The latter are mostly Americans living abroad who combine an American viewpoint, which Fodor wants in his books, with objectivity and first-hand knowledge.

Fodor is partial to American women who are married to foreign nationals, especially after they have children, because then they are likely to stay put, and he can count on them to update their work every year.

Fodor began as a ship's interpreter for the French Line in the early nineteen-thirties. His first American experience was a coast-to-coast 40-state bus trip. "The drivers adopted me and everybody talked to me," he recalls. "It was real shirt-sleeve hospitality—the best way to see a country." In the United States Army during the war Fodor was assigned to the Office of Strategic Services and took part in the liberation of Prague—"We had a hotel room in the center of the city two days before the Russians arrived," Fodor says, belying the Russian claim to having got there first.

When the war ended, many of Fodor's buddies went to work for the newly established Central Intelligence Agency, and a report in 1973 to Watergate investigators by Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt that Fodor was himself once a C.I.A. spy in Austria raised some eyebrows in travel-writing circles. At the time of the Korean war, Fodor was publishing his guidebooks in Paris,

The dean of guidebook editors, Eugene Fodor, marks his 30th year in the trade with an eight-volume work on the United States. His philosophy: Tourists care more about new experiences than creature comforts.

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and the C.I.A. asked him to take on some of their agents as guidebook writers for "cover." Fodor agreed. "But I told them to make sure to send me real writers, not civil engineers. I wanted to get some writing out of them. And I did, too." Fodor will not discuss the missions the agents may have been working on and he denies he was an agent himself. "I wanted to help my adopted country," he says. "Anyway, it's ancient history now."

For his American series Fodor uses native writers who know the regions they write about. "Although creature comforts are important," he says, "that is not mainly what people travel for. I try to cater to the variety of travelers' motivations — curiosity about other peoples, a desire for cultural action of various kinds. My books give much more interpretation than the others." He thinks that such guides as the A.A.A. and the Mobil volumes fulfill different functions. "They are essentially restauarnt and hotel listings, where ours are more descriptive of the land and its people."

Fodor is now working on a one-volume guide to the United States intended mainly for foreign sale—"the most fascinating work I ever did," he calls it. "How to condense this vast country into 1,000 pages is the challenge. I have to eliminate towns and areas devoid of tourist interest." He will emphasize gateway cities, major metropolises, usual tourist musts, resorts and uniquely American vacations such as dude ranches, riverboat trips, space project visits and wilderness camping.

Fodor hires newspaper travel and food editors to do much of the legwork in preparing his guides. He does not give specific prices for hotels or restaurants but merely uses such tags as "super de luxe," "de luxe," "expensive," "moderate" or "inexpensive." He says all listed hotels are inspected personally by his writers, but he admits, "We don't try to imitate the Michelin guides of France. That would require the dedicated honesty the Michelin inspectors are famous for —a sort of lifetime service." Fodor prefers using a combination of sources of information, comparing notes of his writers and revisers who live on the scene with letters from readers and information sent out by state and local tourist agencies.

Fodor tells tourists the most important step "is to prepare mentally for your trip." He says he considers it absolutely vital—whether the traveler is partial to reading or not —to read "everything you can about the place you're going to."

In the current period of inflation and reduced incomes, he says, "I think the thing is not to stop traveling but to re-evaluate your requirements for travel. The fact that travel must become leaner can make it more profitable in the long run."

Too many Americans, he says, "take it for granted that travel is possible only on a luxury basis." They will be better off, he says, if they get rid of that perspective from the taxi or rental car and get out and walk, or ride the bus. "You can profit, in the same way," he says, "in modest hotels and inexpensive restaurants—it will bring you much closer to the true lives of the people who live in that place." The British middle class, he says, contains the most knowing tourists in the world because "they have learned to travel on an austerity budget with only a small travel allowance. Americans can do the same thing."

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A perusal of the eight U.S. guides reveals that they are successful in what Fodor himself likes best about his guiding: getting a feel of the place. As I went through them I looked up places I know to see how Fodor treated them. In the New England guide (No. 1) the entries for two of my favorite Rhode Island destinations, Point Judith and Block Island, are complete enough —we learn that the Point Judith lighthouse was built in 1816 and that Mohegan Bluffs on Block Island look like the white cliffs of Dover. Newport is covered well enough for a walking

tour of the famous "cottages," mansions along Bellevue Avenue, and there is equally good walking-tour information on the recently restored houses of Benefit Street in Providence. Maps are sadly lacking, however, for the most part—a small one of Boston is not really very useful.

Another place I like is Mount Katahdin, in Maine's Baxter State Park. After a brief description, Fodor sensibly suggests asking the Maine Department of Commerce to send you Vacation Planner 24, which covers this 40-mile-long rectangle of hiking-area peaks and valleys. Nor does Fodor skip mention of especially good sporting goods stores, such as L.L. Bean in Freeport, Me., or Sanders in Greenville, Me., which is misspelled by Fodor as Sanger's.

A single volume (No. 2) that attempts to cover all of New York State and New Jersey, including New York City, has a good deal of work to do in a short space, especially when all the obvious items—the Central Park Zoo for children and Radio City Music Hall, for example—have to be given notice. The Staten Island ferry, another favorite of mine, rates a separate paragraph, and there is some provocative writing, brief though it has to be, on "the primitive forests of Van Cortlandt Park" and "Pelham Bay Park's breeze-swept beaches." Upstate the beautiful Finger Lakes are covered briefly, but the local wine tours are not forgotten, nor is the wine museum near Hammondsport.

Although the workaday style of writing puts over a great deal of useful information—which is what we want a guidebook to do—Fodor books are occasionally confusing in their organization. In the New York-New Jersey book, for example, the wine museum is noted in the "exploring" section while other museums—the National Baseball Museum in Cooperstown, for one—is listed beneath "Museums and Galleries" under a separate "Practical Information" heading. Such arbitrary scattering of material is characteristic of the editing in all eight volumes.

In the "Mid-Atlantic" (No. 3) book I looked up Obrycki's restaurant in Baltimore, a noisy seafood house specializing in steamed crabs doused in black pepper, where hundreds of Marylanders pound merrily away with wooden mallets at their blackened crabs while

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Eugene Fodor, the dean of guidebook editors.

consuming many pitchers of draught beer. Sure enough—"a ritual in Baltimore" is the descriptive line here. Brief though he has to be. Fodor misses hardly any destination of any kind that's even slightly famous locally, and to get all this within covers of volumes that in 4,000 or so pages cover almost the entire country is something of a writing and editing feat.

Another restaurant I like, Chez François, in Washington, is, alas, about to disappear under the wrecker's ball, but its Alsatian menu is duly noted by Fodor. The restaurant is set to close on June 28, but reservations are not being accepted after next Saturday. (Sometime in the fall, Chez François will reopen in Virginia at Great Falls of the Potomac about 15 miles northwest of Washington.)

Another destination noted is Fort Washington, a ruin on the Potomac in Maryland's Prince Georges County. Missing from the listing, however, is the fact that this park, with its picnic grounds, has become the object of weekend invasions by motorcycle cultists and hi-fi rock-and-roll fanatics who ride in vans equipped with huge loud

speakers, oversized tires and fluffy upholstery.

When you pick up "The South" (No. 4) and find an explanatory chapter entitled "The Changing South," you know that the sun is in its heaven and all is well. The South has been changing ever since it was first invented by the Indians or the Spaniards but, even though the rest of the country has been changing, too, nobody ever writes chapters on "The Changing East." After an editor of The Raleigh News and Observer informs us that in his part of the land "there is still a premium on politeness . . . Sir and Ma'am remain first items in vocabulary," we are free to check out the details of no fewer than 10 states covered in this book. Fodor caught one of my favorite out-of-the-way spots, the Country Doctor Museum, in Bailey, N.C., in a brief line under the heading "Special Interest Museums," but the way the material is presented gives no clue as to where Bailey is in relation to other points in the state. Again, unwieldy presentation of material is a criticism that applies to all eight books. Nevertheless, the sheer amount of information is impressive. When I checked another restaurant about which I have fond memories, Dee Dee's, in Opelousas, La., which is known locally for its roast duck, there it is — along with extra tips to try the gumbo and the crawfish bisque. By contrast, the A.A.A. book doesn't even list Opelousas in its restaurant section.

Paul Engle, the writing teacher, introduces "Mid-West" (No. 5) with this advice to the tourist: "Do not hesitate because they are strangers, but drive into the farmyard and simply say you want to learn about the country. You will find both people and place open, expansive and friendly." Engle is probably right, but as a Midwesterner myself I would include a tip to watch out for dogs that bite. This book covers territory that Fodor must know is pretty dull tourist material, but it's all listed anyway: "Downtown Indianapolis has the state's tallest building," "U.S. 40 passes over the famous Y bridge in Zanesville, first of four such structures in the world," or "Grand Detour (Ill.) where in 1837 John Deere invented the self-scouring steel plow. This may not sound like much, but . . . the site is a registered National Historic Landmark."

Some information does come hit-or-miss. Of 62 state parks in Ohio, for example, Fodor lists but eight, with brief descriptions, evidently just to give a sampling. Of hundreds of private campgrounds he lists only six. The trouble is that if you are looking for a good place to set up camp for the night you'll want to be able to choose the nearest and best from a complete listing. Fodor's skimpy selection is not much help.

In "Rockies & Plains" (No. 7) I looked up Korczak Ziolkowski, who three decades ago bought himself a South Dakota mountain and says he's been carving the whole thing into the shape of an Indian on horseback ever since. He charges a few dollars per carload of tourists, who come by the hundreds of thousands to watch him dynamite his peaks and are sometimes allowed to set off a blast themselves. Fodor notes him concisely in four lines.

In a random check of places I've been to, I spotted only one Fodor missed, in "Far West" (No. 8) — Dana Point, Calif., the surfing center. I once spent a pleasant month in a good apartment-motel smack on a first-rate beach; the cost was low and there was always, anytime between dawn and dusk, a herd of young surfers to watch in their shiny rubber suits and flapping surfboards. Fodor's sole mention of the place is to "drive on past Dana Point" to Mission San Juan Capistrano.

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The books are, on balance, remarkably full of good information, and it all appears fresh and newly corroborated. If the organizing is sometimes awkward, perhaps there is no other way to organize so much material on the sprawling American scene. Except for restaurants, little is missed, and of these Fodor says, "We just have to be selective. We have 450,000 restaurants in the United States and we are trying to cater to every level of traveler, from the gourmet to the family hoping to feed the kids cheaply. The most we can list in all the volumes is 10,000." As to hotel listings, those that include prices, such as are available from Chambers of Commerce, will be more helpful than Fodor's compilation, probably. But for all the rest—for the places you'll want to visit that you don't even know you'll want to visit—you'll find almost every one of them tucked away somewhere in one or another of these eight guidebooks.