



Travels: Collected Writings, 1950-93,
by Paul Bowles,
edited by Mark
Ellingham (Sort Of
Books, £14.99)

As well as a composer and novelist, Paul Bowles (1910-1999) was a fine and prolific travel writer. Of the 40 pieces in this excellent collection, mostly written for American journals, the majority have never been reprinted. His career as a “footloose American” began with an impulsive (and penniless) flight to Paris aged just 17: “I went for months without a bath . . . was gnawed by bedbugs every night . . . and loved it all, because I was in Paris.” Bowles saw travel writing as “the conflict between writer and place”. But you will not find detailed descriptions of famous monuments or cathedrals in these essays. As he says in “Windows on the Past” (1955), “the culture of a land . . . is the people who live in it and the lives they lead, not the possessions they have inherited”. His descriptions of the people and the places they live in are pared down to the bare essentials of language. Of all the cities and landscapes he experiences from Thailand to Fez, the Sahara made the greatest impression. It was a “vast, luminous, silent country”, “a mineral landscape lighted by stars like flares”. **PDS**