

The Roma Journeys by Joakim Eskildsen and Cia Rinne  
by James Casper  
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One of the best photo books of 2008. Photographer Joakim Eskildsen has created a stunningly rich portrait of contemporary Roma Gypsy life as it is played out in seven different countries.

This book is wonderful for its abundance of truly great, intimate, revealing photographs -- and for its intelligent and insightful brief texts about a Gypsy culture that has been little understood for centuries.

The book is arranged in seven main sections, each representing an in-depth insider's perspective of the daily lives of Roma Gypsies who live in communities in seven very different countries. We are able to soak up the visual richness of the Roma's personal surroundings and unique ways of living while they adapt to (and resist) the influence of the dominant cultures of Hungary, India, Greece, Romania, France, Russia and Finland.

Overall, The Roma Journeys is an important document and exploration of a unique group of people as they live their lives in the midst (or on the fringes) of seven distinctly different cultures. At the same time, it is a beautiful photo book.

We are made to understand the level of prejudice and hatred that the Roma suffer almost universally in the world. We bear witness and begin to understand, too, how and why they refuse to adapt too much to outside cultural influences. We are also able to see the daily celebrations of the simple things in life, and the love and joy they share along with the hardships they endure.

We are told: "Throughout their history, the Roma have been subjected to persecution, expulsions across Europe, slavery in Romania, prohibition on the use of the Romany language, and other creative attempts to misuse, assimilate or extinguish their people. Many Roma still have to deal with discrimination on various levels, and in all European countries, the general attitude towards them is at least suspicious."

This book is the result of seven years (2000-2006) of travel and living within each of these communities in an attempt to understand the people and their culture.

Joakim Eskildsen took the photos (all remarkable, and with a lovely mix of color 4x5s and black-and-white panoramas). His traveling partner, Cia Rinne, wrote all of the texts, which read like an engaging mix of journalism, sociological study and personal diary notes.

The book is big, heavy, beautiful, and not a bit too long. It is equally pleasing to read it straight through from cover to cover (over several days or weeks), or to flip through it at random and soak up the richness of the imagery. The differences in lifestyles within each national culture is quite surprising, too. The gypsies in Finland seem very, very different from their cousins in Hungary or Greece.

The book also includes a CD of a "sound collage" of music and daily life which is perhaps the only weak element in this project -- but it's worth listening to one time while looking through the book.

Hats off to everyone involved with this book. It is the kind of book you can enjoy and treasure for a lifetime.