



NATIONAL
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AUSTRALIA GUIDE

TRAVELLER

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9,000
STREETS,
40,000
DEAD ENDS

GETTING LOST
IN MOROCCO

WALK THIS WAY

Hiking
tours in
France,
Italy &
Spain

MEET THE
BORDERERS

WHERE ENGLAND
& SCOTLAND
COLLIDE



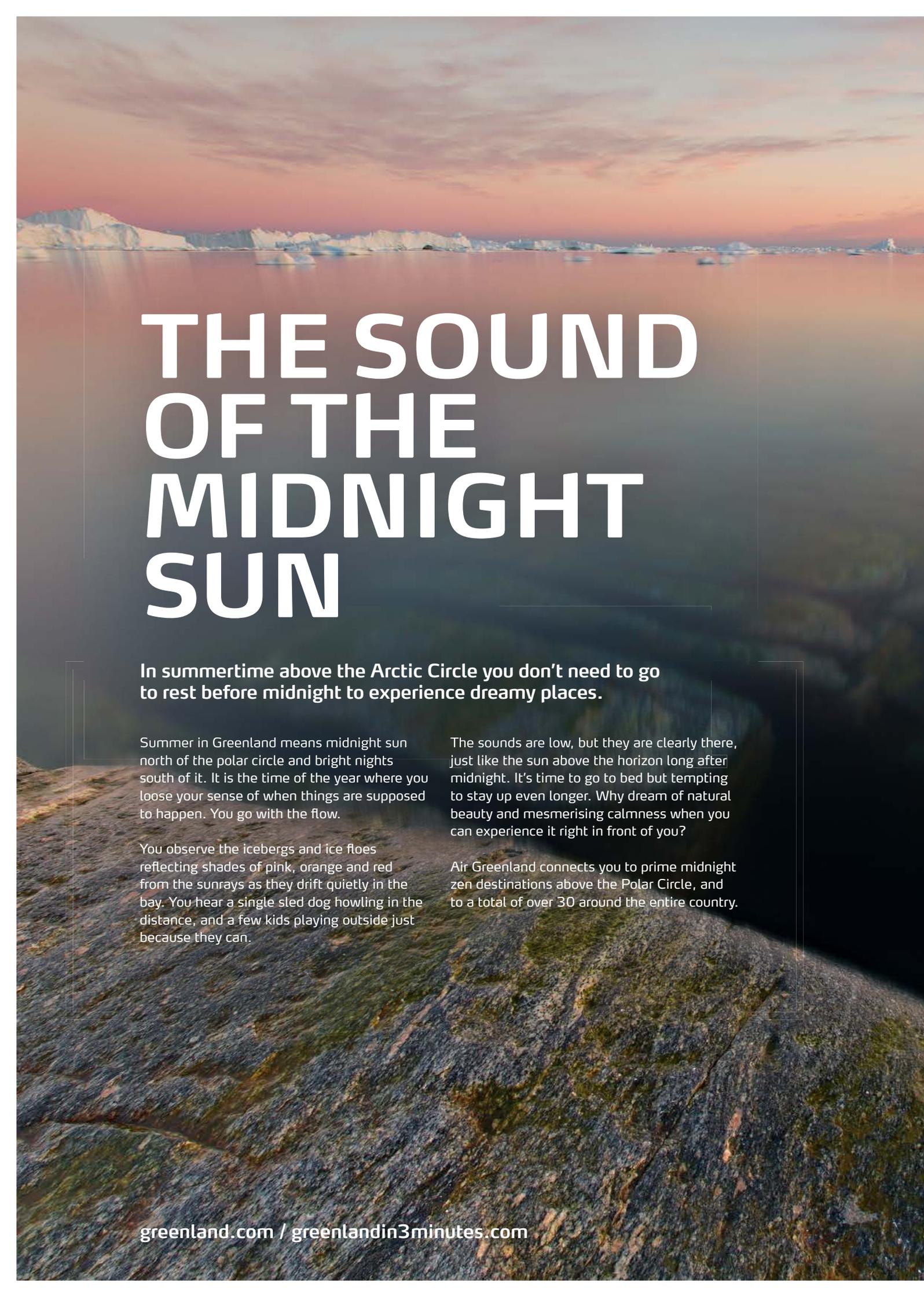
Arts, culture &
Leonard Cohen in



Delving deep into the
Mayan underworld of

Montreal Mexico





THE SOUND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN

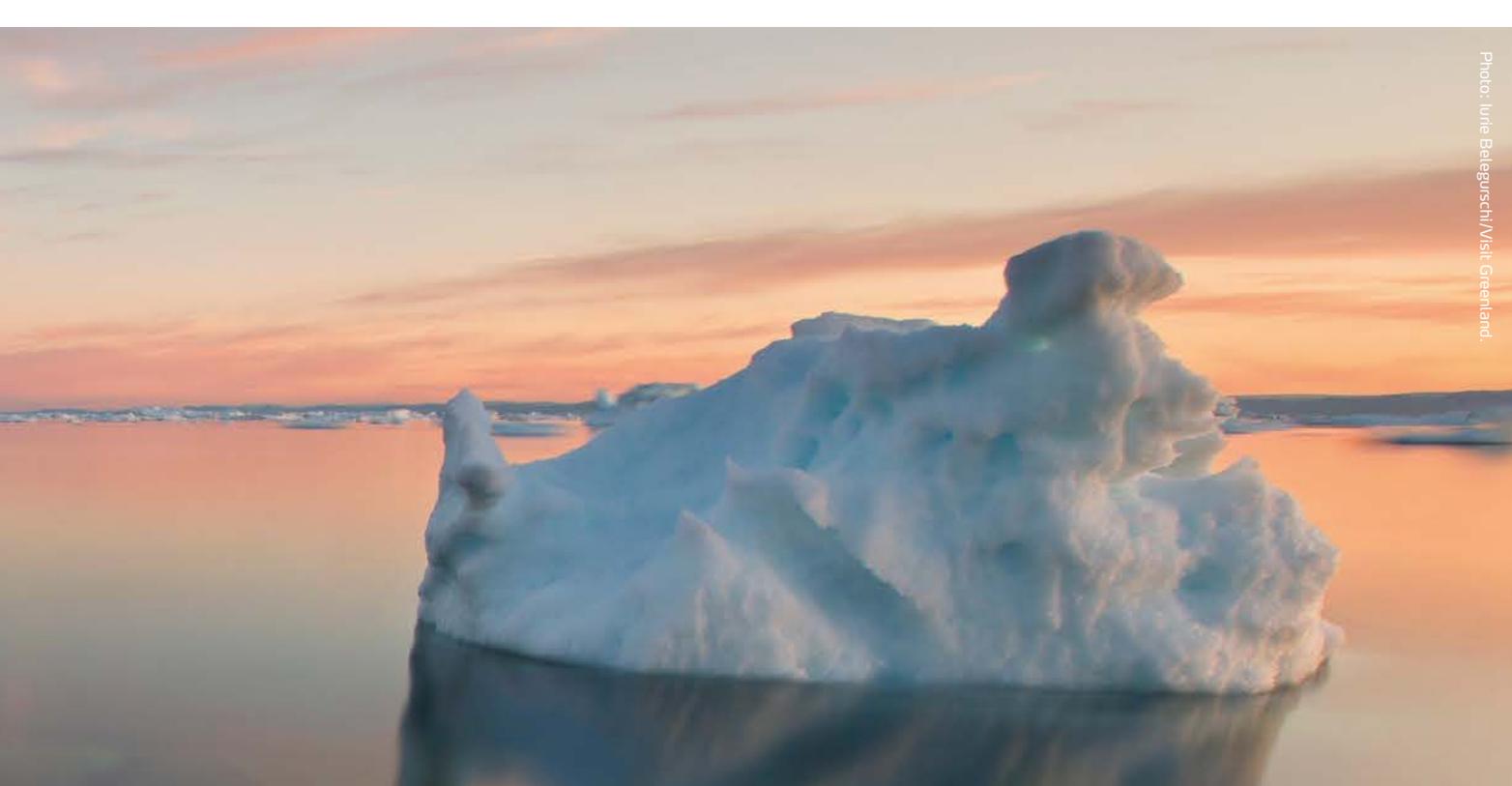
In summertime above the Arctic Circle you don't need to go to rest before midnight to experience dreamy places.

Summer in Greenland means midnight sun north of the polar circle and bright nights south of it. It is the time of the year where you lose your sense of when things are supposed to happen. You go with the flow.

You observe the icebergs and ice floes reflecting shades of pink, orange and red from the sunrays as they drift quietly in the bay. You hear a single sled dog howling in the distance, and a few kids playing outside just because they can.

The sounds are low, but they are clearly there, just like the sun above the horizon long after midnight. It's time to go to bed but tempting to stay up even longer. Why dream of natural beauty and mesmerising calmness when you can experience it right in front of you?

Air Greenland connects you to prime midnight zen destinations above the Polar Circle, and to a total of over 30 around the entire country.



Hiking from Ilulissat to Oqaatsut

With a trail of about 20 km from Ilulissat to Oqaatsut, this hike is a classic that can be done in a day with your own tent or with an overnight stay in the settlement of Oqaatsut. If you like it shorter, consider hiking around Ilimanaq instead and stay in the brand new Ilimanaq Lodge with a world-class view of the Disko Bay.



Kayaking the Disko Bay

The weather in summertime is generally very calm in the Disko Bay. As the sun moves down towards the horizon, the winds disappear making it even calmer and peaceful to paddle kayaks. The waters around Aasiaat are known for having many humpback whales from June to August.



Plugging off in Nuuk

Though Nuuk is located less than an hour's flight south of the Arctic Circle it still enjoys bright nights from May through August. Who would think you could come to a capital to plug off? But in the Arctic you can! Sail into the fiord to the cabins at Qooqqut to get totally off-grid and enjoy life in the fjords like the locals live it.

The Disko Bay after midnight



More th
Meets the

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Hiker on a trail around the Forcella de Furcia, Val di Funes, in South Tyrol, Italy
IMAGE: Getty

May
2017

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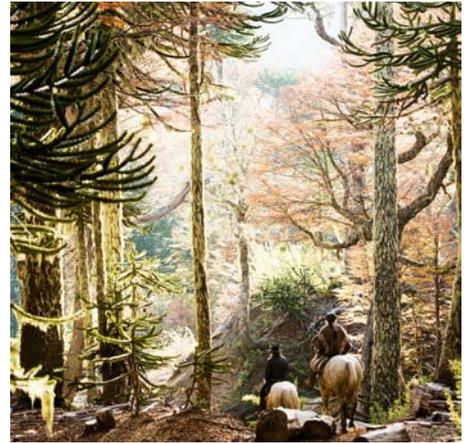
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Contributors



Amelia Duggan

A quest to unpick Mexico's pre-Hispanic past took me to the rugged borderland of Chiapas. Exquisite vine-strangled temples lurking deep in the lowlands were just the start: the Mayans, I found, have a foothold in contemporary culture, too. **MEXICO P.98**



Pól Ó Conghaile

Morocco's true magic lies beyond the sketchy souks and squares of Marrakech and the camels and deserts of the Sahara. Heading north, into market and mountain towns, I got what I asked for — and more. **MOROCCO P.110**



Mark Rowe

We keep being told the UK is heavily populated, yet the borderlands between England and Scotland are the UK's Empty Quarter, full of big skies, hills and moors and not much else other than the odd cottage and pub. **BORDER COUNTIES P.122**



Sarah Barrell

In 20 years of visiting Montreal, I'm still seeking answers. How has the city stayed so youthful, despite celebrating its 375th birthday this year? Equally, what makes this island in the St Lawrence River such a creative powerhouse? **MONTREAL P.144**



Sam Lewis

Setting out on horseback to explore one of the world's last remaining wildernesses, I was unprepared for the monumental beauty of Patagonia — and the stalwart spirit of the horses and gauchos that roam it. **ARGENTINA P.174**

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

TRAVELLER



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1776

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Editor's letter

You don't have to be an experienced hiker to tackle some of the world's most famous walks. All you need is an urge to explore the great outdoors — and a sturdy pair of boots.

Take the epic Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route, for instance. In the ninth century, devout Catholics began walking hundreds of miles across Western Europe to the Spanish city of Santiago de Compostela. Some of the routes, branching out from France and Portugal, took months to complete. But today, 13 bite-size variations mean there's no need for travellers to martyr themselves.

You can get a taste of this historic undertaking in a week and have your luggage transferred along each section. These types of trips, offered by specialist walking companies, allow you to amble with ease. Of course, one of the best things about walking is the chance it offers travellers to really get to grips with a place — discovering, literally, its high and low points — whether that's in Australia's Outback or Cumbria's Lake District.

This month, we've focused our gaze on three of Europe's most walkable countries: France, Italy and Spain. We trace some of their most scenic walks — winding past historic sites, along coastlines and through mountain ranges and vineyards. The latter, I find, make good rest stops. Weary walkers deserve a reward, after all.

PAT RIDDELL, EDITOR

@patriddell
 @patriddell

HIGHLIGHTS



Australia guide

From Darwin to Adelaide and the Outback in between, Australia is a continent of wild surprises. Your guide is free with this issue



Festival

It's time to announce our headline speakers! Find out who'll be inspiring festival-goers on 17 September and how you can get tickets, p.16



Travel Geeks

Fancy after-work drinks and expert-led travel discussions? This month's London meetup focuses on Japan. More information on p.48



Travel Writing Competition

Enter our annual competition and you could win a place on a 10-day polar expedition to Greenland, p.50

AWARD-WINNING NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER

British Guild of Travel Writers Awards 2016: Best Travel Writer • British Society of Magazine Editors Awards 2016: Editor of the Year, Lifestyle (Shortlisted)
• Ecoventura LATA Media Awards 2016: Online Blog Feature of the Year • British Travel Awards 2015: Best Consumer Holiday Magazine • British Annual Canada Travel Awards 2015: Best Canada Media Coverage • Germany Travel Writers' Awards 2015: First Prize • British Travel Awards 2014: Best Consumer Holiday Magazine
• British Guild of Travel Writers Awards 2013: Best Overseas Feature • British Travel Press Awards 2012: Young Travel Writer of the Year

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Facing the Pacific Ocean on the east coast of China, Ningbo City has long been renowned for its cuisine, culture and climate, but more recently it has emerged as a hub for new technology and creative industries in Asia.

As a destination, its stunning seascapes and pristine natural scenery juxtapose with vibrant cultural festivals, award-winning restaurants and non-stop nightlife making it an ideal stop on a tour of Eastern China. Come. See for yourself. You won't regret it.



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TRAVELLER

Festival

· 2017 ·

**SUNDAY 17 SEPTEMBER 2017
THE BREWERY, 52 CHISWELL
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It's time to unveil the headline speakers for our Festival! Join us at our live reader event to hear talks from National Geographic explorer Paul Rose and adventurer James Cracknell. They'll be reliving moments from their expeditions and pinpointing what helped them conquer some of the toughest places on Earth

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INTRODUCING OUR HEADLINE SPEAKERS

PAUL ROSE BBC PRESENTER AND NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER

A man at the front line of exploration, and one of the world's most experienced science expedition leaders, BBC's *Inside Out* presenter Paul Rose knows the challenges — and beauty — of the polar regions like no one else. Paul has led Greenland ice cap crossings and ascents of previously unclimbed icy mountains. He even has a peak named after him in Antarctica. Paul is also the expedition leader of the National Geographic Pristine Seas project, and has in recent years presented popular BBC series about marine exploration and UK walking trails. Hear first-hand about his incredible career, and be inspired by his infectious enthusiasm for the exploration and preservation of the natural world.



Paul Rose



James Cracknell

JAMES CRACKNELL OBE ADVENTURER AND OLYMPIAN

With two Olympic gold medals, six World Championship titles and an awe-inspiring collection of endurance feats to his name, James Cracknell is a force to be reckoned with. In 2010, he recovered from a near-fatal road accident to complete a 430-mile race through the Canadian Yukon, facing blizzards, moving ice, perilous waters and freezing winds along the way. He's the star of television programmes including *Unstoppable: The James Cracknell Trilogy* (Discovery, 2011), *World's Toughest Expeditions with James Cracknell* (Discovery, 2012) and *Ben & James Versus the Arabian Desert* (BBC, 2013). We're thrilled to be welcoming James to our Festival stage, and we're brimming with questions to ask about his travels and trials across the globe!

IMAGE: GETTY

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MASTERCLASSES

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AND your holiday snaps into stunning photo stories*

TRAVEL WRITING

Ever wondered what it takes to make it as a travel writer? The editors behind the award-winning *National Geographic Traveller* (UK) will be joined by some of the country's most successful freelance travel journalists for a series of masterclasses. The panel will take an in-depth look at the art of storytelling, sharing advice on improving your travel writing and getting published. Questions welcomed!

Topics include...

Beginnings & endings • Long-form or short-form • How to pitch
What makes a good story • Who is your audience • Writing dos and don'ts
Print vs digital • Structure • Finding your voice



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PHOTOGRAPHY

With sessions running throughout the Festival covering everything from wildlife to street photography, these expert-led workshops explain how to create inspiring images. Launched in 2015, the regular *National Geographic Traveller* (UK) Photography Masterclasses have welcomed world-renowned photographers, art directors and brand ambassadors to mentor audiences of budding and semi-professional photographers in London, in sold-out sessions worth £75. Learn how to improve your photography at the Festival’s series of Photography Masterclasses — all part of the ticket price!

Topics include...

- Wildlife photography • Shooting landscapes • Street photography secrets
- The right kit for you • Setting up a killer shot • Action photography
- Technical tips • Optimal camera modes
- How to navigate the industry

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SMART TRAVELLER

What's new // Do it now // Food // On the trail // Rooms // Family // Stay at home // The word



SNAPSHOT

Lo's Tea House, Fiji

Forget your Austrian coffee houses, your old-world Parisian cafes and hipster baristas brewing turmeric lattes in the lanes of Melbourne. Located on Nanuya Lailai Island in Fiji, Lo's Tea House is one of the most memorable places I've been lucky enough to enjoy a cuppa, visiting as a cruise passenger on Blue Lagoon's *Fiji Princess* last March.

Overlooking the reef on the eastern side of the island, the tea house has been serving lemon and coconut cake to visiting passengers for years. The menu may be simple, but what makes this place special is the proprietor, Lo. Pictured here, her resourcefulness, warmth and good humour are characteristic of the Fijian people — and one of the best memories from my trip.

CHRIS VAN HOVE // PHOTOGRAPHER

 chrisvanhove.com



GROSSGLOCKNER HIGH ALPINE ROAD

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Alps!

Austria is known worldwide for its unique mountain landscape.

So why not visit Austria's highest mountain? Just over an hour away from Salzburg Airport, the Großglockner High Alpine Road is one of the most beautiful mountain roads in the world and offers an unbeatable Alpine panorama in the middle of the highest mountains in Austria. Experience nature in all its vivid glory: colourful fields of flowers, jagged mountain edges, waterfalls, ice and snow. Listen to the marmots as their whistles reverberate around the mountains, take in the view of the Pasterze, the longest glacier in the Eastern Alps, and savour the best of Austrian cuisine – an experience for all the senses.



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3.796 m

GROSSE WIESBACHHORN
3.664 m

JOHANNISBERG
3.459 m

EDELWEISSPITZE
2.871 m

PASSHOHE HOCHTOR
2.804 m

FUSCHERTORL
2.428 m

KÄISERFRANZ-JOSEPHS-HÖHE
2.363 m

PIFFENR
1.320 m

HEILIGENBLUT A.H.
GROSSGLOCKNER
1.011 m

FUSCHEN DER
GROSSGLOCKNERSTRASSE
815 m



Editors' picks

We've been here and we've been there, and our team have found a few things we thought we'd share

HAIR OF THE DOG

BrewDog — the Scottish craft beer company responsible for a chunk of my income — has laid its paws on US soil for the first time, opening DogTap Columbus. In autumn 2018, the company plans to open a beer-themed hotel, also in Ohio, with Punk IPA on tap in all rooms. brewdog.com
TAMSIN WRESSELL // CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

WHAT WE'RE LISTENING TO... PODCASTS

THE ALLUSIONIST // JOSEPHINE PRICE
 WOMEN OF THE HOUR // SARAH BARRELL
 S-TOWN // STEPHANIE CAVAGNARO
 ATHLETICO MINCE // PAT RIDDELL



CONFESSIONS OF A CAFFEINE ADDICT...

What I've learned about Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee

1 Cultivated mostly above 3,000ft, it's one of the world's most expensive gourmet coffees

2 Made with Arabica beans, it's known for a mild, smooth taste and lack of bitterness

3 The coffee is only certified Blue Mountain if it's within the Coffee Industry Board of Jamaica's map

4 Outside the Blue Mountain zone, coffee must legally be called High or Low Mountain

5 Around 80% of Blue Mountain Coffee is exported to Japan

STEPHANIE CAVAGNARO // SENIOR EDITOR



T-rex factor

Kids can dig for replica bones and meet life-size dinos. These raptors are on the march as part of the Jurassic Kingdom's UK tour. jurassickingdom.uk

JO FLETCHER-CROSS // CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

LIFE IS SUITE

Qatar Airways' new QSuite offers Business Class passengers 'party of four' seating — move a panel here and a TV monitor there, and voila! — groups of friends can transform their seats into a private suite for four. qatarairways.com
GLEN MUTEL // DEPUTY EDITOR

Fit for a King

Graceland in numbers

200,000

Square-foot size of the new expansion

40

Years this August since Elvis's death

\$57.50

Price of a ticket

3.8

Acre estate

137

Millions of dollars invested in the expansion of the King's Memphis home

450

Rooms in the new guesthouse

JOSEPHINE PRICE // ONLINE EDITOR



BIG PICTURE

Marigold Flowers in the Himalayas

Last year, I set off on a journey to the Himalayas to seek striking images above the clouds. On the way to Annapurna Base Camp I stayed overnight in Pokhara, the second-largest city in Nepal and a well-established starting point for many expeditions. As I was eating breakfast, I was lucky enough to witness a unique scene by Pokhara Lake. When the sun rises above the mountains, water evaporates off the lake, condensing as it cools. Marigold flowers blossoming on the hillside captured the morning rays.

BOGUSLAW MASLAK // PHOTOGRAPHER

 [bobbyart.com](https://twitter.com/bobbyart)

 [@boguslaw.maslak](https://www.instagram.com/boguslaw.maslak)





All aboard

Having revolutionised high-speed rail travel with the bullet train, the Japanese are at it again — launching next-level luxury sleepers and even promising an invisible locomotive



Commuting dreams // *In Japan, napping on the train on your commute home is commended — it's a sign that you've worked yourself to exhaustion. The word for it is 'inemuri', meaning 'sleeping on duty'*

DOUBLE SPEED

MAGLEV IN NUMBERS

Japan's state-of-the-art maglev train, which runs on levitating magnet technology to create an almost-frictionless journey, smashed its own world speed record in 2015 during a test run. It will be getting its first commercial route between Tokyo and Nagoya in 2027.

373mph

Its record-breaking top speed — 12mph faster than the one set in 2003

310mph

The average speed of the new route

900

Number of passengers it will carry

10cm

The height it hovers above the tracks

£54 billion

The cost of the new route

40 minutes

The time it'll take to travel the 178-mile journey between Tokyo and Nagoya

IMAGES: GETTY

The 'invisible' train

Representing neither a leap forward in particle physics nor the discovery of magic, Seibu is working with Pritzker-winning architect Kazuyo Sejima to deliver, by 2018, a mirrored train that blends into its surroundings by reflecting them.

Head for Hokkaido

Japan's newest cruise train is a luxury hotel on wheels. In May, the 34-passenger Shiki-Shima, with its sleeper suites, dining car and panoramic observation decks, will track northeast from Tokyo, through shrines and hot springs towards the wilds of Hokkaido island. japanspecialist.co.uk

The Twilight Express

Launching in June is the Twilight Express Mizukaze, the most stylish — and leisurely — way to see the seascapes and historic sights of Japan's southwest. The country's most Michelin-starred chef is even rumoured to have crafted the menus. twilightexpress-mizukaze.jp **AMELIA DUGGAN**





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Lake Molveno, surrounded by the Brenta Dolomites, a Unesco World Heritage site, for a unique and unforgettable experience in the heart of Trentino. Lake Molveno is described as the most beautiful lake in Italy as it ranked first among all Italian lakes according to Legambiente report in 2014, 2015 and 2016.



www.molveno.it - info@molveno.it

Wilderness FESTIVALS

Pitch up at one of these music festivals this summer to experience European countryside at its best

MEADOWS IN THE MOUNTAINS, BULGARIA

9-11 JUNE

The misty Rhodope Mountains are a breeding ground for free spirits at this scenic weekender. Set at nearly 3,000ft, this far-out festival has a party atmosphere with a Burning Man-style vibe of experimental music and art. meadowsinthemountains.com

G FESTIVAL, FAROE ISLANDS

13-15 JULY

(Sound)waves wash over the beach at this unlikely spot for a music festival. The windy, remote town of Sydrugota — population 400 — swells to accommodate the thousands that move to electropop and hip-hop beats by bands like MØ, Teitur and Suspekt. There are also Finnish hot tubs and saunas to get toasty in after plunging into the icy Atlantic. festival.fo

WILDERNESS FESTIVAL, ENGLAND

3-6 AUGUST

Deep in the woods of Cornbury Park, hedonists feel at home with a lineup that includes Two Door Cinema Club and Grace Jones — plus boho wellness options such as wild swimming, a lakeside spa and hot yoga. Come hungry — food is by Petersham Nurseries and Ottolenghi. wildernessfestival.com

FESTIVAL N°6, WALES

7-10 SEPTEMBER

Portmeirion is plonked in North Wales straight out of the Italian Riviera. Complete with piazza and Romanesque colonnades, it's a bewildering contrast to its rugged Snowdonian setting. When Festival N°6 descends upon this quirky town, catch acts like The Flaming Lips and Bloc Party before cooling off in the pool. And for shut-eye, you can bed down in a boutique tipi. festivalnumber6.com

STEPHANIE CAVAGNARO



SURVIVAL KIT



CORKCICLE CANTEEN

Warm white wine is a travesty — keep it cool for 25 hours. RRP: £20. root7.com



COLEMAN KOBUK VALLEY

Sleep past sunrise with blackout rooms. RRP: £104.99. worldofcamping.co.uk



AMPWARE IPHONE CASE

Ten minutes of cranking gives two hours of power. RRP: £69.99. thefowndry.com



NORRIS FIELD ADJUSTABLE BOOTS

Mud and wet-weather essential. RRP: £95. hunterboots.com





Islands of the Atlantic

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A year after we first set foot in the Azores, we were eager to return, exploring new islands and seeking further adventure.

We were on foot for the final few miles to the cabin, our base from where we explored our rich surroundings, from vacant beaches to wetlands and cascading waterfalls, all the while keeping an eye on the impending swell.

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In a collaboration between artists Sami Musa, Dominique Petrin and Banksy, the latest art hotel to debut isn't in Milan or New York — but Bethlehem

From the vandalised oil paintings and statues choking on tear gas fumes in the Piano Bar to Elton John playing for the opening party (remotely, broadcast over a modest TV screen), this new West Bank hotel has Banksy's dystopian stamp all over it.

Bedrooms overlook Israel's infamous separation wall; its neighbour is the Aida refugee camp. The artist paid for the 'installation', which will function as a bona fide hotel during what it's calling the Centenary Year (2017 marks 100 years since the British took control of Palestine, with its ensuing century of conflict). It has since been handed over as an independent local business, with the aim of breaking even and putting any profits back into as-yet-unnamed local projects.

Revenue could be significant. Banksy's last tourist endeavour, the Dismaland theme park in Weston-super-Mare, generated £20m in its five-week run. Not unsurprisingly, this



new project hasn't pleased everyone, with some bemoaning Bethlehem's conflict being used to generate income — though it's a business model long-preceded by local tours that take in the wall, its history and rich graffiti, including a now-iconic stencil work by Banksy, painted over 10 years ago.

Voyeurism or essential revenue stream, opinions are divided. The Walled Off Hotel states that it isn't aligned to any political movement or pressure group, saying, "The aim is to tell the story of the wall from every side and give visitors the opportunity to discover it for themselves. We offer a warm welcome to young Israelis — absolutely no fanaticism is permitted on the premises."

walledoffhotel.com
SARAH BARRELL



HOTELS IN
unlikely places

THE ABANDONED AIRPORT

Plans for the redevelopment of Eero Saarinen's once futuristic TWA terminal at JFK are finally underway. Built in the 1960s and empty since 2001, the site will include a 505-room hotel scheduled to open in late 2018 with restaurants in former lounges, while a 1950s Lockheed Super Constellation aircraft will serve as what will surely become New York's hottest bar/dining ticket. twhotel.com

THE FRYING PAN

A hotel on the decommissioned 'Frying Pan Tower', a coastguard station off the coast of North Carolina. The views from the 'terrace' are spectacular, but you can rarely go outside due to the prevailing winds. fptower.com

THE 'CRASHED' PLANE

Hotel Costa Verde, in Costa Rica, transported the fuselage of a 1960s Boeing 722 to the jungle, and set it in the treetops to appear as if it'd landed there. Part treehouse, part business class accommodation. costaverde.com





MAKE A
Splash

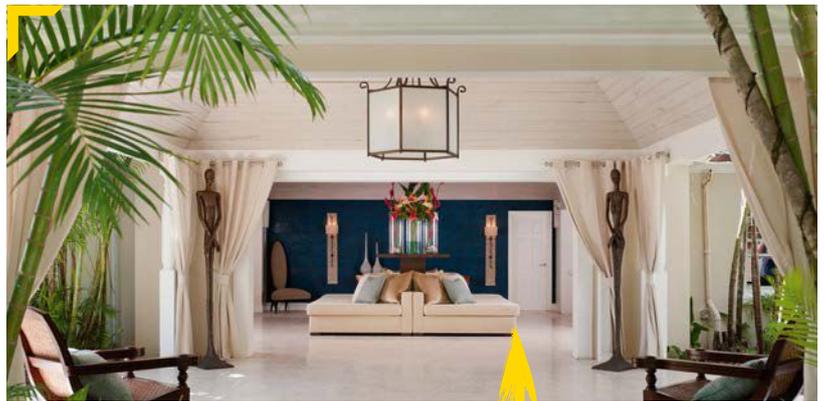
Rising demand for open-water swimming holidays means it's easier than ever to swim in loads of exotic destinations — even in the Arctic

You don't need to be as fit as Michael Phelps to join an open-water swimming holiday. Demand for swim breaks means some have reduced the average distance covered to sizes as tiny as Tom Daley's speedos.

"On most of our tours you'll swim 4-6km a day," says SwimTrek's founder Simon Murie, an ex-water polo player who started the company 14 years ago. "For most of our trips we expect people to be able to swim 1km in 40 minutes," he adds.

SwimTrek has added three new destinations this year: the Maldives, the Inner Hebrides and, for stronger swimmers, the Isles of Scilly/Cornwall. "Sea conditions can be changeable there so participants must be experienced open water swimmers capable of swimming 1km in 24 minutes."

A tour hosts 12-15 swimmers led by two coaches. Prices from £1,380 for a week in the UK to £2,900 in the Galapagos. swimtrek.com
SAM LEWIS



SOME LIKE IT COLD

For the hardy among us, SwimQuest's tour of the Lofoten Islands in the Arctic Circle might be tempting. Brave souls will swim 5km a day, gliding through seas and staying in cabins just a chilly skip from a sauna. 12-18 August. £2,500 per person. swimquest.uk.com

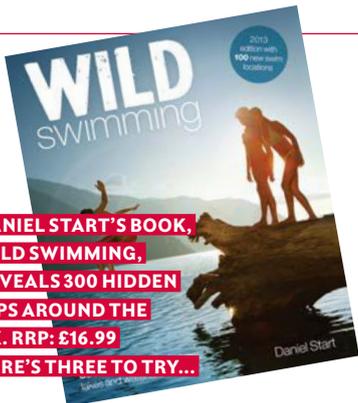
CHAMPION BREAKS

Improve your swimming at a bootcamp in St Lucia, hosted by Olympic swimming medallist Keri-Anne Payne and former Olympic swimmer David Carry. 7-10 and 14-17 November. From \$550 (£443) a night with a double room, all-inclusive. thebodyholiday.com

DIFFERENT STROKES

Sawdays' Wild Swimming collection features a range of quirky accommodation (including yurts and boats) all near lakes, ponds, waterfalls or the ocean where you swim without a whiff of chlorine — or perhaps even your swimsuit. canopyandstars.co.uk

DIVE IN: WILD SWIMMING SPOTS



DANIEL START'S BOOK, WILD SWIMMING, REVEALS 300 HIDDEN DIPS AROUND THE UK. RRP: £16.99. HERE'S THREE TO TRY...



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2 // LOWER DDWLI FALLS, WATERFALL WOODS, BRECON BEACONS



3 // FAIRY POOLS, GLEN BRITTSLESKY

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A Taste of THE INDIAN OCEAN

Chef Willibald Reinbacher travelled across the Indian Ocean gathering recipes for his new book. Here he reveals his fusion food favourites from the region

With rich soils and a tropical climate, the Indian Ocean's islands gave birth to a number of spices that have changed our world. And food on the islands — from Australia to Madagascar — differs depending on the traders and immigrants who settled and introduced their products and cooking techniques.

The warmest of the world's oceans, these waters are teeming with fish and seafood. Around Madagascar, for example, you'll find a vast amount of prawns, crayfish and crabs, while Mauritius is home to some of the best yellowfin tuna I've ever cooked with. And the region's tropical climate ensures a vast variety of fruits and vegetables; coconut, tamarind, lychee and mango feature heavily in both sweet and savoury dishes.



Chef Willibald Reinbacher

Having cooked in kitchens worldwide, Willibald is now executive chef at Shanti Maurice, in Mauritius. His book, *Aquacasia: Culinary Jewels of the Indian Ocean*, developed with Shanti Maurice, features photos by Lukas Lienhard. aquacasia.com

Seychelles

The *soup de tectec* (top left) is a traditional Seychellois soup. *Tectec* is a type of clam found around the reef and in shallow, sandy places in the Seychelles. At low tide, local women and children can be seen collecting them along the shore. The white wine used in the dish shows the French influence on Seychellois cuisine.

Sri Lanka

Watalappam is a custard pudding made with Sri Lankan coconut, *jaggery*, cashew nuts, cardamom and cinnamon, was first introduced to Sri Lanka by the Malays. It remains a much-loved sweet today.

Comoros & Madagascar

The *langouste de vanilla* (left) is, for me, a perfect representation of the cuisine from Comoros and Madagascar. These islands are renowned as the producer of some of the world's best vanilla and, in combination with garlic, ginger and lime, it offers an amazing flavour to complement the lobster. Some of islanders add local green peppercorns.



Shanti Maurice

Top 3: Must-dine restaurants

BUMBU BALI

For authentic Balinese cuisine, there's nowhere better than Bumbu Bali. Opened in 1997 by Heinz von Holzen, the restaurant has won several awards and is recognised as one of Bali's leading restaurants. balifoods.com

CHEZ JULIEN

I'm always impressed with Chez Julien, on Mahé (Seychelles). It's a small place, with an amazing setting on Anse Soleil Beach. Julien, the owner is well-known by locals for his Seychellois cuisine like whole fish, straight off the boat.

SHANTI MARUICE

Finally, on Mauritius, Stars restaurant, at Shanti Maruice, is the first place in the Indian Ocean to have incorporated recipes and flavours from *Aquacasia* into menus. shantimaurice.com



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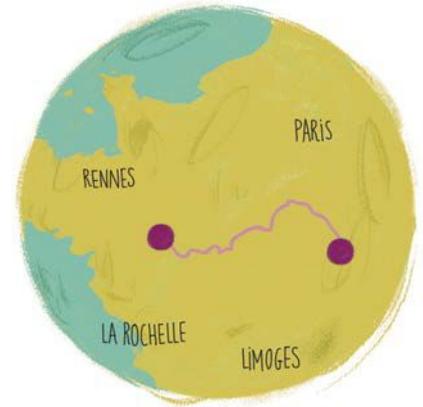


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The price quoted is per person based on 2 adults sharing a room, including return flights. Price correct at the time of printing.

DRIVING TOUR OF THE Loire Valley



With castles, culture and good wine, the Loire Valley is best discovered by car, says Connor McGovern

1 // SANCERRE

Kick off your romp around the Loire Valley in Sancerre, perched above the river. The historic town is an ideal place for a spot of lunch, accompanied, of course, by a bottle of the town's most famous eponymous export.

2 // ST-BENOÎT-SUR-LOIRE

As the Loire arches north, stop at St-Benoît-sur-Loire. Marvel at the seventh century Benedictine Abbey, one of France's oldest. Relax with a picnic on the river's banks with a cold bottle of white.

3 // ORLEANS

Pull over at the charming city of Orleans, immortalised by Joan of Arc. The soaring cathedral is the highlight, but don't miss Orleans' historic heart with its quiet squares and timber-framed houses.



4 // CHAMBORD

Châteaux don't come much grander than this. A hulking behemoth of a castle, Chambord was a mere hunting lodge for the flamboyant King Francis I, who often decamped here from nearby Amboise. While the interior is bare, it's hard not to be bowled over by the sheer majesty of the largest château in the Loire Valley.

5 // VILLANDRY AND AZAY-LE-RIDEAU

After a stop in the bustling city of Tours, take in the châteaux of the nearby Touraine region. Villandry has a dazzling display of gardens and fountains, while tranquil, waterside Azay-le-Rideau is straight out of a fairytale.

6 // SAUMUR

Saumur is among the Loire Valley's leading wine centres. Beneath it, a network of wine cellars weaves through tunnels once created to excavate building stone. Try a bottle of Saumur Mousseux: one of the best sparkling wines in the region.

7 // ANGERS

Angers was once the capital of the historic Anjou region, but now dances to a thoroughly youthful beat, thanks to a thriving student population. Head to the castle to marvel at the enormous Apocalypse Tapestry, before enjoying a sip of zesty Cointreau, made here since 1875.



WHERE TO STAY

RIGA

Whether in the city or national parks, Latvia's capital region has truly novel, bargain places to stay

1 TWO WHEELS

It's a hostel and a hotel, biker-friendly yet more hipster than a Harley; Two Wheels almost has to be seen to be believed. Its dorms and en suite rooms are within walking distance of Riga's old town. You can even rent Harleys on site. Dorms from £14, doubles from £55. twowheels.lv

2 ARKHOUSE

Near Gauja National Park (90 minutes from Riga) is this giant log cabin, on the outskirts of Cesis. It's equally authentic inside — all log-panelled walls, wooden tables and armchairs beside roaring fireplaces. Doubles from £43. arkhouse-cesis.com

3 KEMPINGS MELNSILS

Beachside on the Gulf of Riga, and close to Slitere National Park, Melsils offers varied options. However, glamping right on the shore in one of the 16 oversized barrels is the main draw. Cabins from £46. melsils.lv

4 OZOLKALNS

Ozolkalns' six two-bedroom chalets and modern 'forest house' lie at the foot of a mountain on the bank of the Gauja river. It's family-friendly, too, with a summer adventure trail and ski pistes for kids. Chalets from £55. ozolkalns.lv

JULIA BUCKLEY

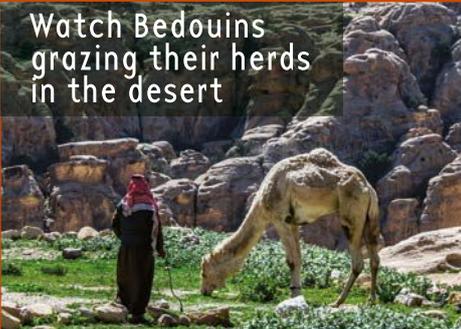


Break the walls that box you in. Transcend the limits drawn for you. Listen to a nomadic rhythm that draws you to an open horizon, where the sky meets a desert of mountains.

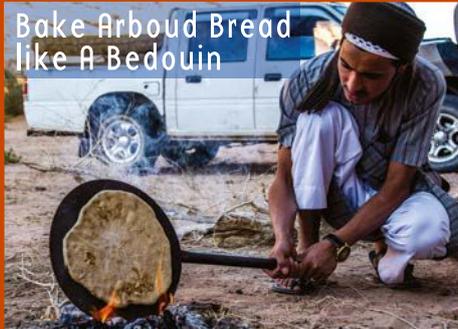
Enter the desert beyond the oasis and follow the paths of the ancients. Then as the night falls, the sky will reveal itself to you. Find your own star. Let it orient you to Aqaba; the oasis by the Red Sea.

BE YOURSELF BE A BEDOUIN

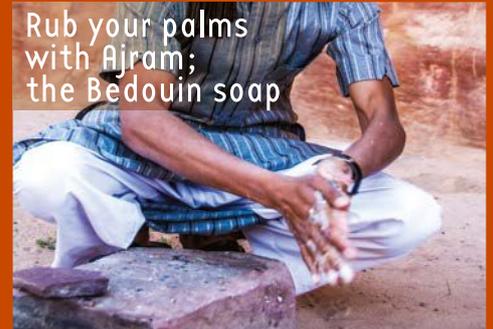
Watch Bedouins grazing their herds in the desert



Bake Arboud Bread like A Bedouin



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Spend a night in an authentic goat-hair Bedouin tent



Taste the spicy tingle of a Bedouin's coffee.





ELEPHANT: LUANGWA, ZAMBIA

It's not unusual to see elephants walking through reception at Mfuwe Lodge in Luangwa in November to gorge on fresh mangoes. Audley Travel offers seven nights in South Luangwa National Park with three nights at Mfuwe Lodge from £4,650 per person. audleytravel.com

LEOPARD: SABI SAND GAME RESERVE, SOUTH AFRICA

Head to Singita Sabi Sands Reserve, and book on a Mini Rangers Course and you'll be spotting the elusive leopard in no time. Families have private guides, cooks and trackers for the whole trip. From £9,802 per lodge, per night, for up to eight guests. sabi-sands.com



The big 7

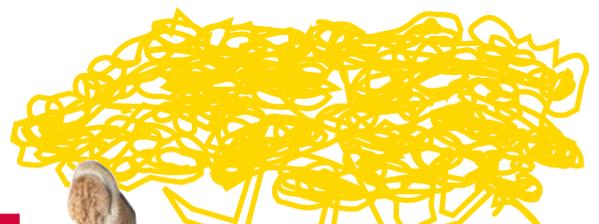
Crazy on big cats? Giddy for giraffes? We suggest some of the best child-friendly destinations in Africa to spot your favourite animal

A lion roars. A zebra legs it. A leopard pounces. Nature can be cruel — especially when the ending is ruined by your child, who can morph into a beast more feral than any of the creatures roaming around you. Choosing a child-friendly lodge or operator is key if you want a trouble-free family safari and there's a growing number that cater to this market (and are good at keeping two-legged wild ones tame).



HIPPO: MASAI MARA NATIONAL RESERVE, KENYA

Watch the Kenyan hippopotamus bathe in the Talek River from your tent at Mara Explorers Camp. Kids can book onto the Adventurers and Rangers Club. Prices from £350 at Mara Intrepids and £480 at Mara Explorer. heritage-eastafrica.com



CHEETAH: ETOSHA, NAMIBIA

Older kids (12+) can visit the Cheetah Conservation Fund's education facility, before embarking on a wildlife drive to see cheetahs in Etosha National Park. G Adventures' 10-day Wonders of Namibia trip costs from £1,849 per person. gadventures.co.uk



GIRAFFE: LAKE NAKURU KENYA, SAMBURU, KENYA

Keen to share a meal with a giraffe? One might appear while you're eating at Giraffe Manor in Nairobi. From £430 per person, excluding flights with The Safari Collection. thesafaricollection.com

RHINO: NGORONGORO CRATER, TANZANIA

Track the endangered black rhino before bedding down in a dome-shaped family unit at The Highlands with Natural World Safaris. From £1,885 for a family of four, per night. naturalworldsafaris.com



Lion: Serengeti, Tanzania

Hear the roar of lions from your room with Yellow Zebra Safaris, which offers eight nights in Tanzania, with four at Lamai Serengeti from £5,471 per person. yellowzebrasafaris.com



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STAY AT HOME

Brecon Beacons

The dramatic peaks and valleys of the Brecon Beacons National Park — celebrating its 60th anniversary this year — are best explored via foot, horseback or bike



WE LIKE

Use a restored 18th-century water mill to make flour at the volunteer-run Talgarth Mill. And on weekends from April, fuel up on meals with ingredients sourced from within one mile of the mill. The 1,000 Footsteps project is in collaboration with the mill's cafe, The Bakers' Table, local author Adele Nozedar and chef Liam Fitzpatrick. Three courses cost an affordable £12-15. talgarthmill.com

What to do

Pedal the peaceful Brecon Canal to Cantref Adventure Farm — the only stables in the National Park with access to the mountain paths. Trot past pleasing vistas of the Beacons' patchwork green pastures on a horse ride into the hills. cantref.com
bikesandhikes.co.uk



Where to eat

Sample the Welsh larder at The Felin Fach Griffin, which holds Wales' only Bib Gourmand. Tuck into dishes like Welsh beef with oxtail, watercress and bone marrow; and cod, creamed leeks, crab, cauliflower and capers. felinfachgriffin.co.uk

DON'T MISS

Take advantage of a stellar stargazing experience with Dark Sky Wales — the National Park is one of the UK's only International Dark Sky Reserves. Learn about astronomy and mythology as you spot star clusters, constellations and nebulas. darkskywalestrainingsservices.co.uk



WHERE TO STAY

An honesty bar packed with local tipples, fresh milk set out for tea, and games piled next to a wood-burning stove are just part of what makes the Grade II-listed Ty Helyg Guest House so charming. My four-poster room features green plants and vegetarian cookbooks, while a full English with locally-sourced ingredients the next morning is the perfect fuel for an active day. tyhelygguesthouse.co.uk
STEPHANIE CAVAGNARO

Book return trains to Abergavenny with GoEuro, which compares rail, air and bus fares across the UK and Europe. goeuro.co.uk breconbeacons.org





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Das Almdorf chalet village located in the Southern Alps in Austria is a special place. Located on two sunny, slightly staggered plateaus in the UNESCO National Park "Nock Mountains", our accommodation is reminiscent of an old village but with the modern amenities you'd find in a luxury hotel. In rustic alpine chalets or exclusive luxury cottages surrounded by breath-taking nature, you will experience true community, local food and drinks and an atmosphere of art, exchange and visionary ideas. You will be spoiled, inspired and motivated.

You can retreat or participate as you like, always in the comforting knowledge that everything here is done regionally and sustainably, which can only make things better. Come and experience this unique haven.

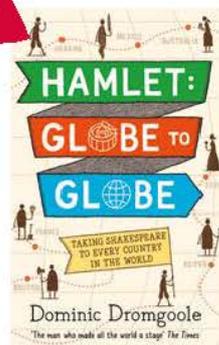
The Way

HAMLET: GLOBE TO GLOBE

The Globe's artistic director, Dominic Dromgoole, on taking the Bard's greatest play around the world

To mark last year's 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, the artistic director of The Globe theatre, Dominic Dromgoole, decided to share his beloved playwright with the world. Virtually the entire world. And what better work to choose than the Bard's best-known play, *Hamlet*? Of course, what with life tending to imitate art, some might say Dromgoole's obsession with touring the world with a play about, er, an obsessed man's descent into madness was tempting fate. But, when all the world's a stage...

So, on 23 April 2014, 16 members of the Globe theatre set off on a two-year tour taking in 190 countries. There are trials — food poisoning in Mexico City almost wipes out the entire cast, a biblical-scale



Hamlet: Globe to Globe. Taking Shakespeare to Every Country in the World, by Dominic Dromgoole. RRP: £16.99 (Canongate Books)

sandstorm in a refugee camp in Jordan — but perhaps the most compelling part of this story (recounted in gripping detail in this book) isn't the hardships, but the way the play itself travels. You'd be forgiven for thinking a wordy 16th-century play about a Danish prince may not speak to a desert-dwelling Sudanese village, or that the plight of Ophelia wouldn't move a contemporary Costa Rican. But it did, proving, as Dromgoole had hoped, that this powerful tragedy not only has the ability to transcend time but to cross borders as well.

And for die-hard literary travellers, there are *Hamlet* quotes aplenty, reeled off with the assuredness of a man at ease with the world of Tarantino as that of the Bard. **SARAH BARRELL**

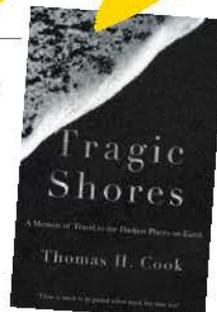
WISE WORDS

Ice Ghosts: The Epic Hunt for the Lost Franklin Expedition

Terror, the last of two 19th-century Franklin expedition ships buried in Arctic ice, was discovered last year. Written by Pulitzer Prize-winner Paul Watson, who was on one of the ships that led the discovery, this is a fast-paced detective story. RRP: £20 (Norton)

Tragic Shores: A Memoir of Travel to the Darkest Places on Earth

Tom Cook's search for sad sites leads to chance light. From Lourdes, to an Hawaiian leper colony, a deeper insight into human history emerges. RRP: £20 (Quercus)



Navigation: A Very Short Introduction

Jim Bennett's book is an exploration of navigation, from Bronze Age mariners to today's satellite-enabled sailors, with historic astrolabes and navigation charts to illuminate the route. RRP: 7.99 (OUP)

Get the guides

THE WORLD TEA ENCYCLOPAEDIA

A compendium of teas written by Will Battle, a chap who's lived and worked in plantations in Asia and Africa for some 20 years: a gloriously obsessive work that will help tea lovers navigate terminology and refine their tastes. RRP: £29.99 (Troubador)

AMAZING FAMILY ADVENTURES

Fun days out and action-packed weekends away, from buggy-friendly short hikes to sea kayaking, woodland walks, mountain climbs and more, with National Trust venues to explore en route, whatever the weather. RRP: £12.99 (National Trust)

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'Pure frustration' was the motivation for this book, penned by Daniel Tabbush who spent four years living in hotels worldwide, and found their design flaws to be so myriad and mind-boggling that he saw fit to catalogue them. A black comedy of errors. RRP: £9.99 (Troubador)

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Tips from the experts

PHOTOGRAPHY MAGAZINE APP

The National Geographic Traveller Photography Magazine is available now: with previously unpublished images, along with tips, tricks and tutorials from industry experts, it covers everything from equipment to post-production touch-ups

1 SHARPENING SOFT EDGES IN POST-PRODUCTION

A lens that renders the sharpest possible image can be costly, but when travelling, you'll probably be shooting on something versatile and light, and not necessarily super sharp. This can result in images that lack the distinct clarity capable of drawing in the eye. It's possible, however, to correct these soft edges with a powerful and versatile sharpening tool, the High Pass filter. *More details can be found in Issue 7 of the Photography Magazine*

2 CURATING A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER (UK) PHOTO STORY

We try to mix our pieces up with a selection of close-ups, details, landscapes and street scenes. People carry a lot of weight in our picture stories, too — just like our written stories, it's all about the people we meet and the stories they tell, and this is of utmost

importance in our photo features; the connection and the eye contact are essential. If we visit, say, a Texan cattle ranch, we want to meet, interact with and learn all about the cattle farmer through the photography on show.

More details can be found in Issue 6 of the Photography Magazine

3 SHOOTING AND EDITING STAR TRAILS

There are essentially two ways to shoot star trails. Either lock the camera shutter open for an extended amount of time (upwards of 10 minutes), or shoot a series of 30-second exposures and use some simple software to stack them together. Photographer Steve Davey prefers the latter strategy — if something goes wrong during one or two of the exposures, it's easier to discard any affected shots.

More details can be found in Issue 6 of the Photography Magazine

Inside the app

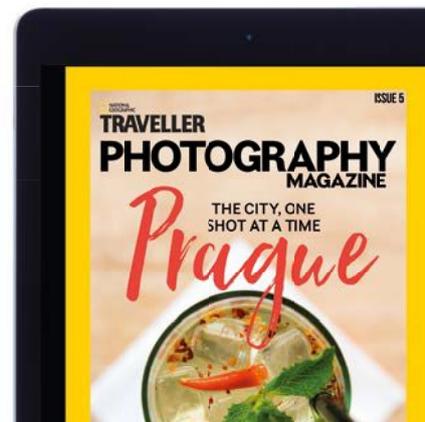
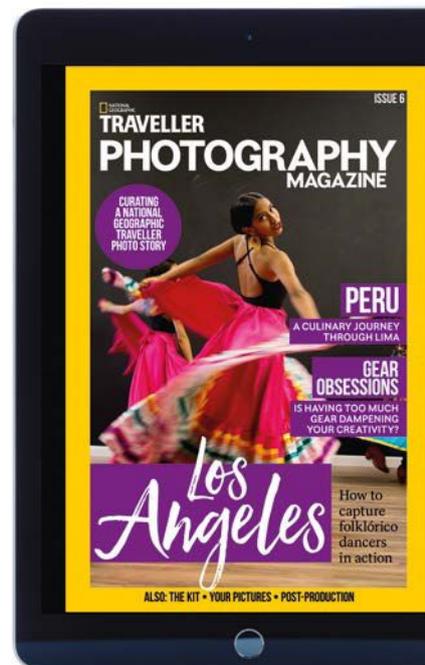
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THE PANEL



MARIA PIERI
Editorial Director of National Geographic Traveller, Maria will be presiding over our panel



KYLIE CLARK
Having worked, travelled and studied in Japan, Kylie is opening a cultural centre, Japan House



TOM BRAY
Intrepid Travel's sales team leader, Tom spent six months working and travelling across Japan



OLIVER HILTON-JOHNSON
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NICOLA TRUP
Journalist and former deputy travel editor of *The Independent*, Nicola is a big fan of Tokyo

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6 JUNE 2017

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11 JULY 2017

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TIME: 18.30–19.30

PRICE: £10 (includes a drink plus nibbles)

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NOTES FROM AN AUTHOR // L.A. LARKIN

ANTARCTICA

British-Australian thriller writer L.A. Larkin gets inspiration from the black beaches and abandoned whaling stations of the great white continent

A black-and-white chinstrap penguin, no taller than my knee, pecks at my boots expectantly. Clearly he hasn't read the rulebook. Much as I've tried to stay at least five metres away from Antarctica's wildlife — as visitors are asked to do — this inquisitive fellow is intent on investigating me and my camera bag.

I'm on Deception Island: a volcanic caldera, shaped like a ring doughnut with a bite taken out of it. Its centre hides a deep harbour and an abandoned whaling station. This is one of the few places on the Antarctic Peninsula where the beaches are clear of ice — at least in summer — thanks to heat from the dormant volcano beneath us. No wonder my feathered friend has chosen this thermally warmed island to nest on.

I'm standing on a beach of black volcanic sand at Bailey Head, looking out at an inky sea, and, in the distance, a turquoise iceberg that resembles a huge teapot. Penguins, like fat little torpedoes, launch themselves out of the surf and waddle inland, wings out wide for balance. Despite the flurry of activity, there's order to the chaos. On one side of the beach, chinstraps head for the water. On the other, they head inland. I'm in the middle of a penguin superhighway.

Half a mile inland, the rocky nests of over 100,000 breeding pairs stretch as far as the eye can see. The ammonia-tinged stench of krill-pink guano is pungent enough to singe nostril hairs. Grey, downy chicks screech for food, adults bicker and ward off raiding parties of brown skuas and giant petrels. The noise is one of Antarctica's profound contrasts; barely hours earlier I was enjoying a silence I've only ever experienced here. No people, no voices, no machines. Just a few crabeater seals, lazily basking in the sunshine on floating sea ice, as I sit atop an icy ridge.

I'm here researching my next thriller. I've already interviewed scientists at the British Antarctic Survey in Cambridge, and the Australian Antarctic Division in Hobart. But to bring such an alien land to life in my novel, I want to experience it myself. I discover first-hand the dangers of Antarctica's volatile weather: one minute pristine skies, the next, raging blizzard. I learn how the intense cold hinders me physically and mentally,



and that somebody must always know my whereabouts: that's why turning a small numbered tag every time I leave, and return to, the ship, is critical. But I don't expect Antarctica to claim my heart in the profound way it does, or to be inspired to write not just one but two thrillers set here.

Forget, for a moment, our multicoloured world. Imagine one that's only blue, white and grey. A continent as big as Europe, covered in ice. A land that growls and cracks as ice shelves calve and crevasses rend open, where you'll find statuesque emperor penguins, sleek and deadly leopard seals and wandering albatrosses. A place where you can be so truly alone it's terrifying. There's no permanent population, only a few thousand souls who come and go, to and from the isolated research stations.

Antarctica has many abandoned stations. Some are famous, such as Scott's hut on Ross Island. Others are hardly known. It was only when I visited the abandoned Base W on Detaille Island that I understood the extreme isolation experienced by early researchers, who didn't enjoy the modern, heated stations of today, with internet access and phones.

As I tramp across the ice, I see a wooden hut that looks like a village hall, with green-and-white check curtains, except the wood is bleached silver and the door is warped and scrapes across the floor as I open it. I discover it's a time capsule. A copy of *World Sports* magazine, dated August 1953, lies open; and a pair of long johns hang on a line over a rusted pot-bellied stove. Tins of Scotch oats and herrings, though rusted, sit in a cupboard, intact. I begin to comprehend why the inhabitants had bothered with check curtains — they needed a little bit of England with them to preserve their sanity.

Antarctica is the most alien and beautiful place I've ever been to. It's an icy Garden of Eden, a place that retains its innocence and unspoiled beauty. As long as the Antarctic Treaty that protects it is upheld, it can continue this way. Long may it last.

“Grey, downy chicks screech for food, adults bicker and ward off raiding parties of birds. The noise is one of Antarctica's profound contrasts; hours earlier I was enjoying a silence I've only ever experienced here. No people, no machines”

L.A. Larkin's latest novel, *Devour*, is published by Constable. RRP: £8.99.

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NOT-SO-MAGIC KINGDOM

The cult-like world of Disney means queues and costs, but the parades, fireworks and Mickey ears are so infectious you might find yourself joining in

I'm a Disney cynic. There's just something about the combination of a cappella singing and fake Mickey ears that makes me want to do unspeakable things with mousetraps. Surely in this great country of pristine mountains and golden beaches there are better things to do than queue and bleed money? Apparently not. Disney is still one of America's most popular travel destinations and I have a theory why: it's not a theme park, it's a religion. I call it the cult of the mouse.

But my kids disagree, which is exactly how I ended up here in the first place. They cuddled, cried, begged and bribed, and eventually, for the mere price of a peaceful Saturday afternoon on the sofa, the entire family was going to Disney. This is how the evil works.

There were, admittedly, nice moments. The parades are like raves for primary school kids; the shows are fluffy and surreal, and walking around Disneyland with a three-year-old girl dressed as a princess is like being part of Taylor Swift's entourage — I've never high-fived so many people in all my life.

But then there's the other side. The major activity is standing in line. "It builds anticipation," said one season-ticket holder. Does it? Unless you're rolling around in bed, waiting 60 minutes for 30 seconds of screaming just isn't worth it. And everything costs money. Where's the magic in a kingdom built on overpriced junk food and useless tat? "It's a fairytale," my wife said. "Get over it."

But if it really was a fairytale, what would the moral be? The Seven Dwarfs would've charged Snow White rent and Prince Charming would've had to queue for hours to kiss Sleeping Beauty. If it was a fairytale, Disneyland would be the Ball, and Cinderella could go all right, but only if she scrubbed those floors all year to cover the ticket prices.

And that's the thing: Disneyland is a caricature of American happiness. There's the good — walking into the park is like double-dropping Prozac. You don't have to work at it at all; everyone's smiling, brass bands are playing, there is, literally, dancing in the streets. It's infectious.

America can be like that too. Where I live in Colorado, strangers smile and say hello. For a reserved Brit like me, it was unnerving at first, like walking into a scene from *The Stepford*

Wives; the only way I could cope was by imagining all the hideous things these people must do behind closed doors. But now I love it. Happiness, I've since realised, isn't so much a state of mind as a piece of real estate. Your world becomes you; make it a happy one.

But then there's the bad. American society is utterly phobic of negativity. Where the British have embraced the art of being miserable, if you're not smiling in America something's gone horribly wrong. But the pressure to pursue happiness is counterproductive. Americans spend a billion dollars on self-help books a year and take more antidepressants than any other country in the world — 11% of people over the age of 12 are on them — yet according to the latest World Happiness Index, the country is more miserable than ever. That idyll of American life — an unattainable, perpetual state of happiness where everything you could ever need is right at hand and joy can be bought as easily as chewing gum, is like a fart of the American dream; it might make you smile at first, but eventually it smells bad.

But this doesn't apply to kids. On our last night, we went to The Parade of Lights — a spectacular stream of glitzy dancers and sparkle-covered cartoon mascots. My daughter, Elise, screamed like a Belieber throughout; every character she'd ever watched, read about and loved was there. And then, as fireworks exploded in the sky and songs filled the air, inexplicably, I joined in. I boogied to *The Jungle Book*, belted out ballads from *The Lion King* and felt genuine chills as Princess Elsa took to her throne.

"Thanks for bringing us, daddy," Elise said. It was the first time she'd properly thanked me for anything; I was overcome with emotion. "Of course," I blurted out. "We'll come back every year!" I couldn't believe the words had left my lips. They might be selling manufactured happiness, but perhaps there's some magic in the cult of the mouse after all. Or maybe that's just how the evil works.

British travel writer Aaron Millar ran away from London in 2013 and has been hiding out in Colorado ever since. His latest book, *50 Greatest Wonders of the World*, is published by Icon Books. RRP: £8.99.

🐦 @AaronMWriter



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The Blog

UNITED KINGDOM

ON SAFARI IN SUFFOLK

It may not boast baboons or buffalo, but the English countryside is as worthy of exploring



“I walk along a rain-washed beach picking up Werther’s Original wrappers, roll muntjac deer poop between my fingers and find myself developing a deep, abiding love for bird-watching

It’s hard to be cynical while holding a pygmy shrew. It’s small, covered in velvet-soft fur and has a questing little snout like the cutest shrunken elephant you can imagine. You find yourself wanting all the universe’s moving parts to align to ensure that this little shrew’s life is constructed of interlocking cogs of joy. It’s lovely.

My cynicism was still firmly intact when the prospect of a wildlife conservation holiday in the feral outlands of Suffolk first came up. As a native South African, my understanding of wildlife is slightly different to that of the average British person, but I was curious to find out what conservation means in a Northern

Hemisphere context devoid of the likes of baboons and buffalo.

Through Wild Days Conservation, I had the chance to spend a couple of days in the UK countryside, getting my hands dirty engaged in practical conservation work alongside nature experts. The emphasis is on learning by doing, teaming up with others to get a sense of how humanity is affecting the planet and what we can do to be better.

To that end, I find myself crouched in long damp grass in the frozen Suffolk dawn, checking on small mammal traps we laid the evening before to help survey the rodent population. We created cosy little nests by



stuffing the small cylindrical traps with straw and food, and set them underneath logs and in thickets where the critters would emerge for nocturnal expeditions.

Three of the four I laid turn up empty, while my colleagues in conservation have picked up two voles and a field mouse that are summarily weighed, measured and

noted before being released back into the underbrush. I gamely open the last trap and poke around in the straw for a few seconds before a glorious, wriggly pygmy shrew tumbles into my hand. Our guide begins to tell me the facts (it's quite rare, weighs four grams, lives for around 15 months and has a turbo-charged metabolism that requires it to eat constantly lest it starve to death in a matter of hours) but I'm lost in its beautiful, beady eyes.

That goddamn little shrew melts my heart and I find myself swept up in the general, wholesome enthusiasm of the weekend. I walk along a rain-washed beach picking up Werther's Original wrappers, I roll muntjac deer poop between my fingers, creep upwind of a squirrel as if it were a lion, meditate while counting species of plant life, yank

out invasive plants with my bare hands, discover there's more than one kind of moth and find myself developing a deep, abiding love for bird-watching.

Searching for Dartford warblers and European stonechats while breathing in clean air, flavoured by sea salt and gorse, feels zen. At one point, we crest a ridge to see a lone harrier threading between beams of winter sunlight along the coast like a burglar dodging laser detectors. I find myself caring in an entirely un-ironic fashion.

And I owe it all to shrew love.

ZANE HENRY

wilddaysconservation.org

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Weekender

POLAND

An ancient, untamed enclave in the Polish east, Białowieża is a fairytale forest hosting a colourful cast of creatures

Words: Nicky Trup

To travel the country roads from Warsaw to Białowieża is to head deep into Poland's far east. By the roadside, the regimented rows of snow-topped pines are interrupted by dramatically lit-up onion-domed churches — here Orthodox is the main religion, Lithuanian restaurants abound, and those whose ears are attuned to the difference might hear Belarusian being spoken.

Białowieża is Europe's largest stretch of primeval forest, straddling the border with Belarus. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, it's billed as the continent's answer to the Amazon for its age and biodiversity. But while it's home to plenty of fascinating creatures, the star of the show is undoubtedly the bison.

The European bison died out in the wild in 1921, as a result of over-hunting and poaching. However, thanks to a breeding programme using captive animals, they were reintroduced to this area in the 1950s. Now there are some 900 bison in these parts — though 20 or so are culled each year to keep numbers stable — and today Białowieża is the best place for spotting them.

Visitors tend to stay in nearby Białowieża village, in accommodation such as Wejmutka, a cosy wood-panelled lodge with a huge bison head mounted on the wall of the dining room. Here, the welcome is as warm as the wood-burning fire, with hearty Polish dishes and bottles of local Żubr (Bison) beer — the perfect fuel for a Polish safari.



Polish safari // The 900-odd bison in Białowieża make up around 25% of the world's total population

City stop

A contrast to the wilds of the forest, Białystok is the region's largest city, with a colourful old town (think a compact version of Krakow), a grand palace and Poland's biggest Orthodox church. Music lovers should stop by in June, when the European Centre for the Arts hosts Halfway Festival, featuring up-and-coming alternative acts from around the world. halfwayfestival.com

Wildlife watch

Bison and wolves aren't the only mammals that call Białowieża home. If you're lucky you might spot red deer, lynx, beavers and the made-up-sounding raccoon dog (which looks a little like a cross between a cat and a badger). However, the once ubiquitous wild boar is now becoming increasingly rare due to African swine fever.



Be active

Summer is ideal for exploring the forest on its network of well-marked cycle trails. Most hotels have bikes you can borrow, or else there's a hire shop in Białowieża village — just pick up a map from the PTTK tourist office. In winter, try cross-country skiing instead.

THREE TO TRY

Polish delicacies



SĘKACZ

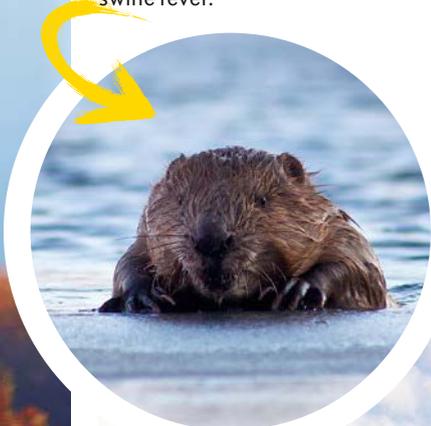
Instead of being baked in the oven, sękacz cake is cooked on a rotating spit by an open fire. A sponge-type mixture is poured over the spit in layers, forming icicle-like peaks — the finished product resembles a pine tree. The arboreal connection continues when it's sliced, with the layers creating tree-trunk-style rings inside.

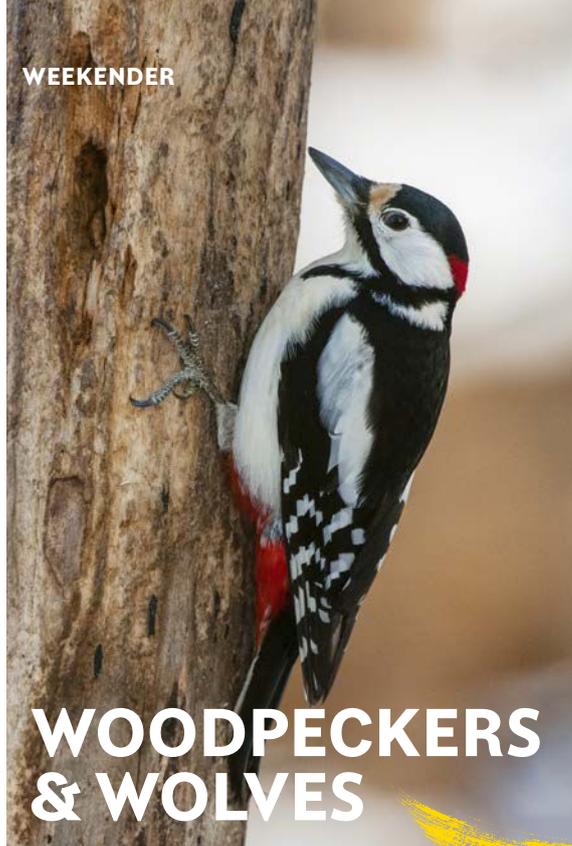
BABKA ZIEMNIACZANA

You won't go hungry in this part of Poland; meals are filling and portions generous. One of the tastiest traditional dishes is *babka ziemniaczana* (potato cake). Made with potatoes, onions and eggs, and baked in the oven, it's a bit like a giant rosti. For meat-eaters, pieces of bacon or sausage are usually thrown in as well.

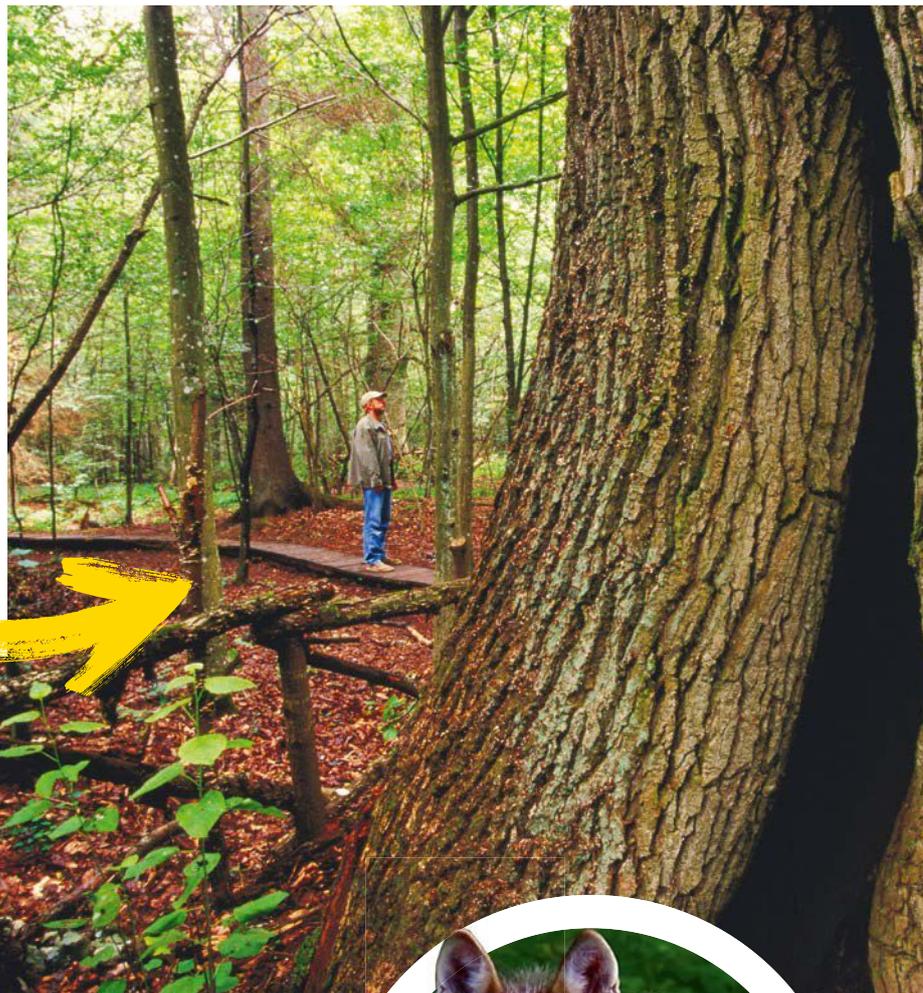
KARTACZ

If you don't like spuds, you're in the wrong place. Another Eastern Polish speciality is *kartacz*, a heavy, stuffed potato dumpling. Topped with lardons or fried onions, it's usually filled with minced meat, but you might also come across versions containing wild mushrooms or sauerkraut.





WOODPECKERS & WOLVES



Silence. Pure silence of the kind I've never experienced as a lifelong city-dweller. Then, a sharp popping noise, a short distance away.

"Frost crack," says Irek, pointing to a nearby tree that's suffered the same fate due to the cold; a large gash runs down its trunk.

We're in the national park's Strictly Protected Area, which can only be visited with a specialist guide — in my case, Irek. This is the oldest part of the forest, and while it's not been left entirely untouched by humans, it's never been managed — fallen trees are left to decompose on the forest floor, to keep the unique ecosystem going. Today, the trees are cloaked in snow, but underneath are mosses and fungi that sustain insects, which in turn serve as food for the forest's diverse bird population.

A gentle drumming sound starts up, then another, then another. Woodpeckers. I can't pretend to know the different species by sight (thanks Irek), but beginner's luck leads me to what turns out to be a rare white-backed woodpecker.

My feet are now frozen after several hours in the woods, so I head back to the village. This area was once a hunting ground for Russian tsars, and Nicholas II liked it so much he built his own train station in 1903. While it's no longer in operation, the old terminal is now a high-end restaurant with rooms (carska.pl), complete with a Russian-style sauna. Perfect for defrosting toes.

The following morning, from a field on the edge of the forest, I'm watching three bison munching on hay bales, about 30 metres away. Andrzej, my guide, hands over his binoculars and I zoom in on the animals' thick, shaggy coats, crusted with ice and glistening under the rising sun. They're quite used to being stared at, and they all stare



Tsar Nicholas II liked it so much he built his own train station here — the old terminal is now a high-end restaurant and Russian-style sauna; perfect for defrosting toes

right back, until one tires of the game and wanders off into the woods.

We spend the rest of the day driving and walking, keeping an eye out for Białowieża's more elusive inhabitants, from lynx to red deer. Andrzej points out more bison, along with the tracks and droppings of creatures we've narrowly missed. It's not dissimilar to an African safari, just a little colder.

The van stops abruptly. "Wolves," says Andrzej, pointing. I hop out and take a few tentative steps towards the pair of silver-haired animals. In a flash, they're gone, back to the safety of the trees. This is a rare sight. "We only see them maybe once a season, or once every two years," says Andrzej. "Last year I took out 30 groups and didn't see any." □



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WILD POLAND offers three-night Wildlife Weekends in Białowieża from PLN2,540 (£505) per person, with the chance to spot animals including bison, elk and beavers. The price includes transfers from Warsaw, accommodation, all meals, permits and guiding. wildpoland.com poland.travel



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Eat HONG KONG

From its legendary dim sum to braised chicken feet, roast goose and custard tarts, Hong Kong's cuisine relies on many influences but is defiantly homegrown. Words: Audrey Gillan

The soft yellow ball has googly eyes and when you pierce it with a chopstick, it oozes salted egg-yolk custard.

Barbecue pork buns come in the form of pink and white pigs. This playfulness might seem trite to some, and an outright abomination to others, but the plates at Yum Cha in Hong Kong's Central aren't only full of fun, they're really rather good. This is an evolution in dim sum that takes tradition as its base and punks things up a bit. There are chicken wings, deboned and glazed like a toffee apple, and winter melon that's been soaked in orange juice for two days.

Dim sum literally translates as 'dot heart' or, if one were being a little more lyrical 'heart's delight'. The idiomatic equivalent is, appropriately, 'hit the spot'. Eaten as part of a *yum cha* (morning tea), dim sum originates in Guangdong in mainland China, but by the early 20th century Hong Kong became the 'dot heart' capital and chefs here began to create their own delicate pieces to add to what was already an exquisite series of delicacies.

To discover dim sum that takes itself a little more seriously than squidgy faces, I

climb a few culinary levels up to the dizzy heights of the three-Michelin-starred T'Ang Court, across Hong Kong's 'fragrant harbour' in Kowloon, where chef Kwong Wai Keung has been cooking since 1988. The *char siu* pork is the best I've ever tasted — delicate, moist and fragrant. It comes with pan-fried rice-flour rolls and a spicy XO sauce made from dried shrimp, scallops and chilli. But it's the crab meat puff — two ethereally thin slices of pork fat stuffed with threads of white crab then deep fried — that blows me away. It takes technical skill to master this dish and chef Keung demands that everyone

on his team learn how to do it when they first come into his kitchen.

For a completely different dim sum experience, I join the queue at Tim Ho Wan, where I somehow strike it lucky and don't have to wait the two hours of myth. This place began as a hole-in-the-wall shop in Mongkok, but chef Mak Kwai-pui is a dim sum master and soon the accolades — including a Michelin star — rolled in and he rolled his franchise out, while keeping the prices down. I have beautiful pork and shrimp *siu mai*, prawn dumplings and more than one *cha siu bao* (baked bun with

FIVE TASTES OF HONG KONG

EGG TARTS

The Hong Kong version of this tart includes a set custard. They're served in *cha chaan teng* (tea houses) across the city.

ROAST GOOSE

A speciality of Guangdong, roast goose came to Hong Kong with migrants from the mainland and is widely revered.

HONG KONG-STYLE MILK TEA

Ceylon black tea, evaporated milk and sugar, sometimes served on ice, often in a glass. Usually part of lunch.

PINEAPPLE BUNS

No actual pineapple, just sugar, eggs, flour and lard combined to make a sweet bread roll with a crispy sugar crust.

EGG WAFFLES

Gai daan zai are made from a batter of egg, flour, sugar and are formed into balls (or sometimes the shape of a goldfish).

Temple Street Night
Market in Kowloon

LEFT: Noodles and a
variety of dim sum





Chef preparing a cooked goose
RIGHT: Wagyu bavette steak at Fish School

barbecue pork). My Hong Kong Chinese friend Kam persuades me to try braised chicken feet with abalone and I wonder why I've been so ridiculously squeamish about them before.

Hong Kong is a culinary crossroads of a place. A former British colony, it stood apart from mainland China, but much of its food came from that country's many regions. It came to be heavily influenced by its Western occupation and also by the cuisine of Japan. With space at a premium — almost eight million people live on this small landmass — people dine out more than they eat at home, where 'the wok is large but the sink is small'.

I queue up, then squeeze in at a communal table in Mak's Noodle on Wellington Street in Central to try the wonton noodles. I can immediately taste why some people come to slurp at these bowls every day. Up a flight of stairs in Tsim Sha Tsui, at Spring Deer, I watch the flashing of the cleaver and the fast carving of a whole roast duck that glistens like it's been thickly varnished. I realise that it's here with this knife that the skill lies — slicing the bird so we can taste the skin, the fat and the meat all at the same time.

Using an Octopus card — a bit like London's Oyster but instead for convenience stores, fast-food restaurants and cake shops — I crisscross the city on the easy and efficient MTR underground system, in search of slippery *ju cheung fun* (rice rolls) with spicy sauce, pineapple buns and custard tarts.

Over in the New Territories, I explore the town of Tai Po, where old streets still have character and locals ride around on bicycles.

There's a fabulous multistorey food market with a wet fish and seafood section, stalls selling fruit, vegetables, meat and *san cho yeuk* (medicinal mountain weeds). Upstairs, there's a cooked food centre. But my Tai Po pilgrimage is largely motivated by roast goose and a restaurant called Yat Lok. This is the sister of the Michelin-starred Hong Kong island branch, but since it has no star rating it's cheaper and, many would argue, serves better food. Again there are queues, again they're worth it. This is the home of a justly famous roast goose, made even more famous following a visit from chef Anthony Bourdain for his television programme *No Reservations*, during which he stated: "That's worth flying all the way to Hong Kong for."

The goose is marinated in 20 different ingredients including soy sauce, ginger, cloves, star anise and sesame oil. The taut, crispy skin looks almost laminated and it's here that you'll find the most concentrated flavour — below this is a layer of melty fat, juicily sitting on top of rich, heavy goose meat. We eat this with rice but also ask for a bowl of noodles, which come in a broth made from goose juice. Bourdain is perhaps guilty of hyperbole when he states how far he'd travel for Yat Lok goose, but I'm not exaggerating when I say it's worth going from Hong Kong island to Tai Po for. discoverhongkong.com □

HOW TO DO IT: The Langham offers double rooms from £258 while Cathay Pacific offers return economy fares from Heathrow to Hong Kong from £716. langhamhotels.com cathaypacific.co.uk

A TASTE OF *Hong Kong*



HONG KONG FOOD-TASTING TOURS

A guided tour of the old streets of Sham Shui Po, a working-class area that manages to retain history and tradition. Start with milk tea and a pineapple bun, and hop around stalls and restaurants trying roast goose and snake soup. Check out the handcrafted duck egg noodles stretched on a bamboo pole.

HOW MUCH: A tour for one, including food and drink, costs £77. hongkongfoodietours.com

FISH SCHOOL

Modern Hong Kong cuisine in a hidden alley in trendy Sai Ying Pun, created by chef David Lai, celebrating local culture. Fish is sourced daily, and salads and vegetables are local. For examples, try the fragrant foraged herbs and heirloom vegetable 'garden' with hot vinaigrette.

HOW MUCH: A chef's selection of eight dishes is £67. fishschool.hk

SING KEE SEAFOOD RESTAURANT

Head out of the city to Sai Kung and walk along Seafood Street on the waterfront before turning back to this well-priced, Michelin-starred restaurant serving traditional Hong Kong-style seafood. Deep-fried abalone is the signature dish and razor clams, lobster and scallops all feature.

HOW MUCH: There are great-value set menus; a basic set menu for two is £62 while a 'Michelin menu' for four, including abalone, mantis shrimp, steamed grouper and other dishes is £174. G/F, 33-39 Sai Kung Tai Street, Sai Kung, New Territories. T: 00 852 2791 9887.



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The fine-dining Brasserie & Atrium and Far Eastern Rickshaw restaurant provide the best choice for gourmets. The Neo-baroque style Grand Ballroom is an exquisite setting for hosting unforgettable social events and celebrations.

Neighbourhood

BUDAPEST

In a city stuffed with attractions, find your own favourite pocket of Budapest — be it the lively Jewish Quarter, the gleaming battlements of Buda or Hungary’s very own Champs-Élysées. Words: Adrian Phillips



Budapest has come a long way in a short time. The Iron Curtain fell just over 25 years ago, but Budapest has since emerged as one of the world’s favourite city-break destinations. Hotels abound, service is excellent, vibrant festivals provide year-round celebrations, and vegetarians can finally find more than fried cheese or battered mushrooms on restaurant menus. Behind all this, though, is a history of highs and lows, the pride and anguish of a country that’s faced occupation and terror but has repeatedly found the strength to pick itself up. It’s a past indelibly scored on the national consciousness, and — if you reach for it — can be felt in the very bricks and mortar of the city’s varied neighbourhoods, from the lofty Castle District and the grand environs of Andrásy út to the transformed Jewish Quarter.



Castle District

“Man, this place has been beaten up over the years!” comments an American-sounding tourist to his girlfriend, his nose deep in a guide book. “You wouldn’t know it,” she replies as she gazes around the square. And she’s right; it’s spick and span. The neo-gothic arches of Matthias Church give way to a harlequin’s hat of a roof, the patterned tiles a multicoloured celebration of the spring sunlight. Opposite, a golden dove shines impossibly bright atop Trinity Column, while the coned turrets of the Fishermen’s Bastion almost glow they’re so white.

The Castle District is the Budapest of picture postcards: dreamy and romantic. But looks can deceive. Looming on its hill above the Danube, the district has suffered more than 30 bruising battles through the centuries. At the end of the savage Siege of Budapest in 1945 — when Hitler ordered his troops to defend the walls to the last man in the face of Russian bombardment — only four buildings remained unscarred. Fire brought down Matthias Church’s celebrated roof. There’s been much blood and rubble in these streets.

Today, there’s wine and music. A violinist serenades visitors while a stallholder does a roaring trade in drinks and salty snacks. The clink of cutlery on porcelain drifts from the door of Cafe Ruszwurm, just as it has since 1827. Nearby, giggling tourists peer at the under-carriage of a greening equestrian statue. “Students like to rub that, er, part of the horse for luck before exams,” stutters their embarrassed guide. “I call him Golden Balls,” grins Mark, my companion for the day.

Mark takes me down streets with names my English tongue struggles to pronounce. The pretty burghers’ houses are monuments to resilience. Plaques record a rebellion plotted at number 53, a famous novelist born at number 19. Mark points out elaborate gothic niches set into the walls, features once lost behind plaster but revealed in the post-war clear-up.

The latest renaissance is taking place in Dísz tér, where the former Ministry of Defence building, bombed heavily in 1945, has been renovated to once again house government officials. “Fortunately, a Jamie’s Italian has opened nearby, so they won’t go hungry,” Mark observes with heavy sarcasm. Clearly not every renaissance meets with his approval.



WHEN IN BUDAPEST...

1

COFFEE & CAKE

Opulent coffee houses with gilded columns and marble tables have long been part of Budapest society; places where plots were hatched and great literary works penned. For a bit of real glamour, try Gerbeaud or the New York Cafe. gerbeaud.hu newyorkcafe.hu

2

THERMAL BATHS

Since Roman times, Budapest has been a city of wallowers. It sits on a geological fault-line, and three million litres of hot water gush up each day, feeding dozens of spas — including Széchenyi Baths, the largest complex in Europe. szechenyispabaths.com

3

FESTIVALS

There’s rarely a time when a festival isn’t going on. Spring Festival is a three-week celebration of music and dance, while this year’s Sziget Festival — think Glastonbury, on an island in the Danube — will feature a line-up of Kasabian and alt-J. btf.hu/szigetfestival.com

4

TOKAJ

Hungarians are fiercely proud of their wine. Under communism, it was mass-produced for a Soviet market (and much derided in the West), but things have changed. Dessert wine Tokaj Aszú is hailed as one of the best in the world.

5

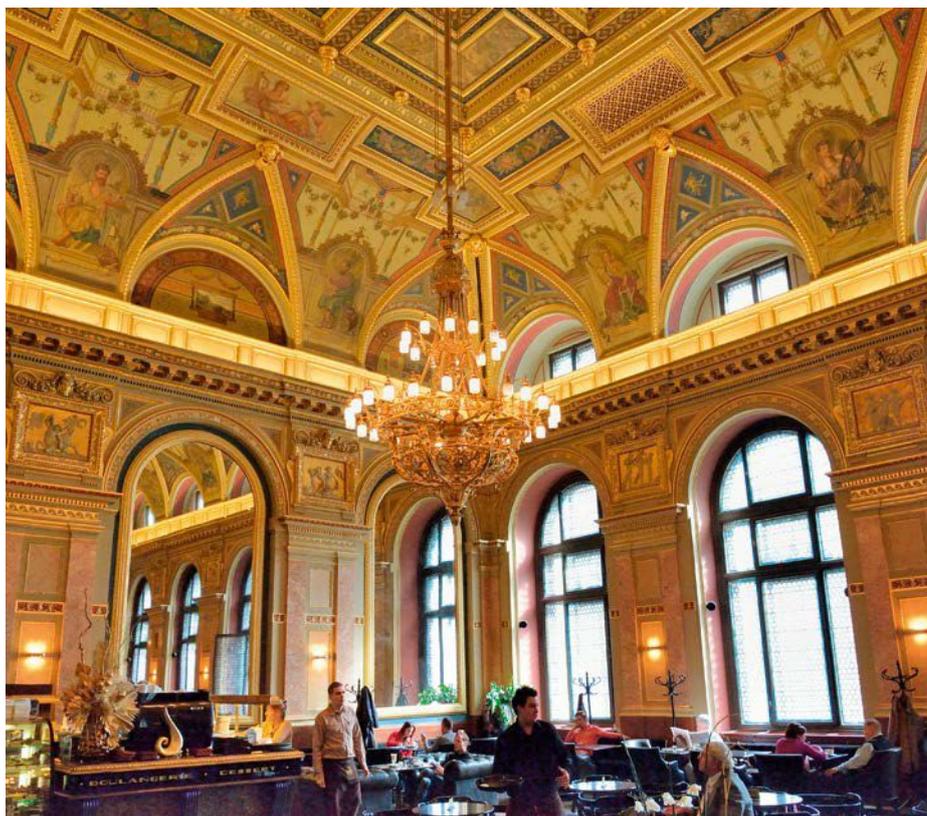
PORCELAIN

Hungary isn’t just about paprika and fruit brandy — Magyars can do delicate too. The country’s leading porcelain maker, Herend, produces figurines and tableware. It made a dinner set for Queen Victoria in 1851, and the design is still popular today. herend.com

OPPOSITE FROM LEFT:

Fisherman's Bastion;
traditional cake
at Gerbeaud

BELOW: Meat stall,
Central Market Hall;
Alexandra Bookstore,
Andrássy út

**Andrássy út & City Park**

Andrássy út is Budapest's grand dame, its widest and straightest avenue, running out to the city's main park nearly two miles away. The road's origins were as noble as its looks. Aristocratic statesman Count Gyula Andrássy had long championed the idea of a Hungarian Champs-Élysées, a dramatic statement of a street to reflect the pride of a country on the up. And in 1876 it was inaugurated: a thoroughfare lined with neoclassical mansions for the great and the good. One writer called it 'the hope of the city, lying in the body of Budapest like the Danube within Hungary'.

He remained silent on the subject of beer bikes. As we admire a pair of marble sphinxes outside the State Opera House, we're overtaken by a stag party of eight cheering revellers on a beer bike,

pedalling furiously and raising their plastic glasses of lager to pedestrians and cars alike. It's a noisy, carnivalesque little cameo — Andrássy would doubtless have called it 'a brouhaha' — and very much at odds with the formal nature of the surroundings. But the street has always made room for disruptive elements.

"The radical poet Endre Ady fell off one of those sphinxes when he was drunk, and cracked his head open," says Monika, my guide. There were several turn-of-the-century coffee shops on Andrássy út where anti-establishment literary types gathered for drinks and high jinks. "Ady died of syphilis in 1919," Monika adds pointedly. Further up the avenue, statues of four freedom fighters (against the Ottomans and then the Habsburgs) are stationed around an elegant circus of towering palaces. By contrast, the mansion at number 60 — now a chilling museum — is where enemies of the state were once tortured by the communist secret police.

Gradually, the exclusive boutiques and terraced mansion houses give way to villas with manicured gardens, before the road finally emerges into the vast sweep of chessboard paving that is Heroes' Square. "There was a huge statue of Stalin here under communism," Monika tells me. "But during the 1956 Revolution, it was pulled down and smashed to bits. Many elderly residents still have pieces of it."

In City Park behind, it's clear the spirit of rebellion still burns strong. As we round the boating lake, we reach a scattering of 10 tatty tents and a hand-scrawled sign reading 'Ligetvédők — Defenders of the Park'. "It's a protest against plans to build three new museums in the park," explains Monika. "They've been camping for a year now." "And we'll be here for another year if we have to!" declares a man with a defiantly bushy beard. Power to the people, as Count Andrássy may, or may not have said.

66 *There was a huge statue of Stalin here. But during the 1956 Revolution, it was pulled down and smashed to bits. Many elderly residents still have pieces of it. And it's clear the spirit of rebellion still burns strong in Budapest*



ABOVE: Szipmla Kert, Jewish Quarter

Jewish Quarter

This bar is bonkers. In the main courtyard, three ladies chat over drinks in a roofless, rainbow-coloured Trabant. Another reads a book in a dentist's chair, while elsewhere a man settles himself in a claw-footed bathtub to eat a plate of chips. No two chairs or tables are the same. Bicycles, mannequin legs and guitars hang from the ceilings; the walls of one of the rooms are strung with coloured lights and broken computer monitors.

You wouldn't dream such an upcycled jungle lay behind nondescript front doors on a grey residential street; it's real Alice in Wonderland stuff. "Szipmla Kert is the original ruin pub," says Balázs, as we finish our beers, eyed all the while by a garden gnome. Balázs is a long-time resident of the neighbourhood and has seen several of these places come and go. "They take over empty, decaying apartment buildings, and can be quite short-lived — just a season or two. But Szipmla Kert is here to stay."

The ruin pub phenomenon typifies a creative, non-conformist energy that's transformed the Jewish Quarter recently. A neglected district has become the hottest spot in town, a hub not only for nightlife with a more bohemian flavour, but for edgy art and live music. "I can't believe how quickly the atmosphere has changed," says Balázs. "It's like Clark Kent switching to Superman."

Of course, the revival has only been possible because of the void there was to fill. In the past, Dob utca was a lively street of Jewish artisans, of watchmakers, stocking repairers, goldsmiths and engravers. Today it's lively still, but I can find only one old-fashioned craftsman — a maker of brushes, his window crowded with broom heads — among tattoo parlours, cafes and the Foxtrott Gentlemen's club.

Further up, a gold angel marks the former ghetto entrance. Budapest has a population of around 80,000 Jews, the largest in Central Europe. But there used to be so many more, before Adolf Eichmann arrived in 1944. I move past the angel into Klauzál tér, an unremarkable square with a children's playground; about 70,000 people were forced to live in this small area, ravished by disease and malnourishment, the dead stored in fridges at Klauzál tér market until space was found to bury them.

In a memorial garden behind the Great Synagogue on Dohány utca there's a weeping willow tree made from silver, and on its leaves are the names of some of the 600,000 Jews who died in Hungary during the Holocaust. An old man stands in front of it, silent and still, staring at the metal branches. For all the current changes, this is a neighbourhood that will always remember its past. □

MORE INFO

Buda Castle. budacastlebudapest.com
 Ruszwurm. ruszwurm.hu
 Hungarian State Opera House.
opera.hu/programme
 Szipmla Kert. szipmla.hu
gotohungary.com
Budapest: The Bradt City Guide.
 RRP: £9.99.

✈ Several airlines, including British Airways, EasyJet, Wizzair and Ryanair, operate flights to Budapest from London, Bristol and Manchester with prices from £80 return. The Continental Budapest is a good accommodation option in the Jewish Quarter, with its own rooftop pool — doubles start from £90 per night. continentalhotelbudapest.com



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Sleep

COPENHAGEN

Floating hotels, boutique townhouses, hipster hostels and a former sailor's retreat, plus a stay that accepts 'art money'. There's nowhere quite like the Danish capital for visitors to check-in and hang out. Words: James Clasper



View over Amagertorv at Strøget, the main pedestrian shopping street in Copenhagen

Style guides deem it the world's most liveable city, but the Danish capital has plenty to please travellers, too. Copenhagen manages to combine Danish design, new Nordic cuisine and award-winning architecture seamlessly with greenways and cycle paths that lead to harbour swims and cream-coloured beaches.

Its playgrounds and legendary fairground attractions at Tivoli Gardens make this one of Scandinavia's most family-friendly destinations.

But, it isn't cheap, especially for travellers navigating with sterling. Luckily, the city has hotels for every budget, many of which provide a great base for sightseeing. Far smaller than neighbouring Oslo or Stockholm, Copenhagen's chief attractions are clustered around the higgledy-piggledy city centre (Indre By) and pretty harbour, but don't miss the canals and cobblestones of historic Christianshavn. For buzzy bars, shops and restaurants, head to Vesterbro and Nørrebro, the city's hippest quarters; not forgetting Frederiksberg, with its green spaces and grand old buildings. Cycling is usually the quickest way to get around town and, thanks to miles of segregated bike lanes, is very safe.

And, when that takes its toll, you're guaranteed a good night's sleep bedding down at any of these carefully curated hotels.





For luxury
£££ D'ANGLETERRE

Dating back to 1755, d'Angleterre is the city's ritziest hotel. With its lavish decor, dapper bellboys and cosy fireplaces, it oozes charm, and commands a prime location, too, overlooking one of Copenhagen's grandest squares, just a stone's throw from its high-end shops. Plus, with a Champagne bar, stunning spa and a Michelin-starred restaurant — Marchal, named after its founders — you can see why d'Angleterre attracts rock stars and royalty. But, despite its posh pedigree and festive facade (augmented by the annual illumination of its Christmas lights, a much-loved tradition), d'Angleterre never seems stuffy. A 2013 makeover gave it plenty of pep, and its 92 rooms and suites have a refined, modern feel — think marble bathrooms and Bang & Olufsen televisions. **ROOMS:** From £370 per night, room only. dangleterre.com





For foodies

£££ NIMB

You certainly won't starve at Nimb. The five-star hotel has no fewer than six bars and restaurants, including a brasserie, steakhouse and a rustic, well-stocked wine cellar. Then there's its location. Nimb sits before Copenhagen's main railway station, putting the airport just 15 minutes away, and hugs the western flank of Tivoli Gardens. In fact, all but one of Nimb's 17 rooms and suites offers views of the gardens, including the main stage, giving guests front-row seats for Tivoli's summer concerts — this season's headliners include Brian Wilson and Erykah Badu. Showcasing Scandinavian design, the rooms feature Arne Jacobsen chairs and lots of natural materials, such as Douglas fir and Swedish granite. November sees the launch of a northern extension, giving the hotel a spa, pool and 23 extra rooms.

ROOMS: From £285 per night, B&B. nimb.dk



For water babies

££ CPH LIVING

You'll find the best rooms at CPH Living on the ground floor. That's because it's built on an old barge docked on the eastern side of Copenhagen harbour, on the fringes of up-and-coming Islands Brygge. As you'd expect from a floating hotel, it bobs soothingly with the waves. But, forget about poky cabins and portholes: its 12 rooms are clean and uncluttered, and feature chrome fittings and maritime colours. You'll get great views of the city skyline and harbour, courtesy of floor-to-ceiling windows, as well as from the hotel's rooftop terrace. Besides the spectacular city architecture on view, including the shimmering granite of the Black Diamond library, you'll spot cyclists traversing a nearby bridge, plus the odd swan or two swimming past your window. The breakfast buffet includes fresh fruit and Danish pastries.

ROOMS: From £123 per night, B&B. cphliving.com

For artists

IBSENS

A retro neon sign isn't the only thing that distinguishes Ibsens from its rivals. It's also the world's first hotel to accept 'art money', an alternative currency used by artists to purchase goods and services. The dining-room-cum-gallery displays the paintings that creatives have used to get discounts on stays. Renovated in 2011, Ibsens' rooms are well-appointed with minimalist tones and designer furniture. The dormer windows of the timber-framed, top-floor accommodations provide pretty views across the rooftops, while the breakfast buffet offers seasonal ingredients sourced from local suppliers. Visitors can also stroll over to the nearby Torvehallerne food market, or take advantage of discounted access to the spa at Kong Arthur, the upmarket sister hotel next door.

ROOMS: From £82 per night, room only. arthurhotels.dk/ibsens-hotel





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SLEEP

For couples

☺☺☺ CENTRAL HOTEL

You won't have to worry about overhearing guests in adjacent rooms at Central Hotel. That's because there aren't any. The first-floor hotel on the fringes of Frederiksberg has just one room — a bijou space straight out of a Wes Anderson movie. Eschewing Nordic minimalism, hotel owner Leif Thingtved scoured eBay for period pieces, including a vintage lavatory with an elevated cistern and chain, and a folding table and chair from the telephone booth of an English railway station. Throw in polished wooden floors, a globe and, making good use of space, a craftily concealed television, and the room is utterly charming. Guests can also enjoy a complimentary breakfast at Granola, a popular restaurant round the corner, or order top-notch coffee from the cafe downstairs. And yes, room service is available.

ROOMS: From £240 per night, B&B. centralhotelogcafe.dk



THREE TO TRY

For design devotees

☺☺ HOTEL ALEXANDRA

Dive headlong into Danish modernism at Hotel Alexandra — 'probably the only spot on Earth where you can sit in, rest in, sleep in and admire so many pieces of Danish mid-century vintage furniture,' its website reads. It's worth springing for a deluxe room, which all pay tribute to various craftsman, such as Arne Jacobsen, whose Swan chairs are still so coveted. The hotel is close to Central Station and trendy Vesterbro.

ROOMS: From £131 per night, room only. hotellalexandra.dk

For hipsters

☺☺ HOTEL SP34

Hotel SP34 has drawn a cool crowd ever since its 2014 launch. A trio of townhouses in the lively Latin Quarter, the boutique hotel mixes contemporary style with a collection of Danish modern furniture. Its 118 rooms celebrate Scandinavian design: muted accents, stripped floors and curved wooden headboards that have proved a hit on Instagram. Enjoy complimentary wine in the lobby bar, or catch a movie in its 24-seat cinema.

There's also an excellent organic buffet breakfast. **ROOMS:** From £159 per night, B&B. brochner-hotels.com

Best for families

☺ HOTEL BETHEL SØMANDSHJEM

You may spot a salty seadog at Hotel Bethel Sømmandshjem, a former slumber house for sailors. Today, it's an exceptional budget hotel smack in the middle of Nyhavn, the picture-perfect harbour district. Its 30 rooms get snapped up quickly, thanks in part to its family-friendly focus: children are permitted to play in the dining room and guests may bring in their own food. The hotel charms with traditional touches, such as real room keys that must be left at reception.

ROOMS: From £96 per night, B&B. hotel-bethel.dk



For budget travellers

📍 GENERATOR COPENHAGEN

Let's get one thing straight: Generator Copenhagen isn't a hotel, it's a hostel. But, don't let that fool you. It has the design chops of many a fancy boutique. Think funky furniture, quirky art, a buzzy bar and indoor games galore, including a pétanque court because, well, why not? As well as its top-notch location in the middle of town, the premium doubles are smart and the shared dorms (including some for women only) are outstanding value. And you won't struggle to make new friends. Befitting for the world's happiest country, Generator has not one but two happy hours every evening. *Skål!*

ROOMS: From £64 per night, room only.
generatorhostels.com

For night owls

📍 ANDERSEN BOUTIQUE HOTEL

With its vibrant colour scheme, Andersen Boutique Hotel offers a refreshing alternative to the muted accents much loved by Scandi hoteliers. Its uniquely decorated rooms and suites feature fabrics by Designers Guild in arresting hues of ocean blue and lime green, or cerise and purple. Befitting the bold style, Andersen has a casual vibe. Begin the day with organic produce at the breakfast buffet and, later, enjoy a complimentary glass of wine in the lobby. Located in hip Vesterbro, Andersen is perfectly placed for having fun; it's at the end of edgy Istedgade, with the bars and restaurants of meatpacking district Kødbyen nearby.

ROOMS: From £130 per night, room only.
andersen-hotel.dk 📍

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An aerial photograph of a volcanic landscape. The ground is dark, jagged, and covered in volcanic ash and rocks. Several tall, slender pine trees with green needles are scattered across the terrain. A person wearing a blue jacket and light-colored pants is walking on a path in the lower right quadrant. Long shadows are cast across the landscape, indicating a low sun position.

**LOFTY PASSES THROUGH VOLCANIC LUNAR
LANDSCAPES; ANCIENT PILGRIM PATHWAYS STREWN
WITH CHURCHES AND RUINS; SUMPTUOUS FORESTED
TRAILS OPENING OUT ONTO VINEYARDS. A RAMBLER'S
REWARD IS CULTURE, AMBIENCE AND WILD SCENERY
ON THE WALKING ROUTES THROUGH ITALY, FRANCE
AND SPAIN. COMPILED BY: MARK ROWE**



WALK THIS WAY

IMAGE: SUPERSTOCK





IMAGE: GETTY



estern Europe has borne witness to some of the most epic walks of all time, from Hannibal's crossing of the Alps to the expeditions of authors like Patrick Leigh Fermor and Nicholas Crane. In fact, when it comes to walking in Spain, France and Italy, epic is something of a watchword, with many routes seemingly designed for endurance.

A bewildering number of E-Paths (European long-distance paths) crisscross the Continent, each several thousand miles in length — the E1, for example, runs from south of Naples to Northern Norway. There are also the GR routes, which are, with only a few exceptions, challenging excursions.

This is the key difference from walking in the UK: the rest of Europe has traditionally always had fewer of those accessible, medium-distance way-marked routes so beloved by British ramblers, such as the Cotswold Way, where fingerpost signs shadow your every step. Generally, walking routes in France, Spain and Italy have been oriented to the mountains, with public footpaths at lower levels harder to come by.

Fortunately, things are beginning to change, and today hikers in France, Spain and Italy have never been better catered for, with attractive, bespoke routes springing up, making some of those hardy iconic routes more accessible. As Simon Scutt, managing director of On Foot Holidays, explains: "It's only in the past few years that these countries have come to realise that mountains aren't the only places Northern Europeans want to walk in."

On the whole, British walkers tend to tackle European walks with the help of walking companies offering tailor-made routes, usually between two attractive locations, with hand-held directions and even signposting provided along the way.

"Walking in those countries is as much about the culture as walking per se," says Simon. "Some people do it for health reasons but the majority want to experience the whole thing — the walking, the views, engaging with their hosts, and almost certainly drinking a bottle of wine or two. These things are equally as important for walkers abroad. Walking is a vehicle for getting under the skin of an area or country."

In France the standout walking tends to be in the south and south west, with routes following forest tracks and high passes. In Spain, walking trails are concentrated in the north and east, distinguished by hilltop churches, grape vines and olive trees — in contrast to the arid centre. Catalonia's hills are also well trodden. Walking in Italy tends to be a much more cultural experience;

you are, after all, often walking through history. Popular regions include the Dolomites, Cinque Terre (five fishing villages on the Italian Riviera), Tuscany and the Amalfi Coast.

On a practical level, France's walking maps are generally better than those in Italy and Spain, while Spain's trails tend to have the best signposting and way-marking on the ground. But on the all-important matters of scenery, culture and ambience it's hard to think of three better countries to explore on foot.

Some people do it for health reasons but the majority want to experience the whole thing — the walking, the views, engaging with their hosts, and almost certainly drinking a bottle of wine or two





ITALY

ON THE HOLY TRAIL

Join the pilgrims on the Via Francigena to Rome, one of Italy's five new Wonder Ways

Words: Daniel Allen

Looking down from the ramparts of Itri Castle, I see an expanse of honeyed sandstone and terracotta that extends toward the craggy foothills of the Aurunci Mountains. Bathed in warm, early-morning sunlight, the undulating roofscape of this pretty Lazio town is quintessentially Italian.

Taking the chance to catch my breath, I stop to admire a view that's long enchanted both locals and visitors. Charles Dickens, making a stop in Itri in the 19th century, likened the intricate architecture here to a 'device in pastry', while the town was also a popular waypoint on the European 'Grand Tour' undertaken by young English aristocrats.

Yet voyagers and vagabonds had been passing through Itri for centuries before Dickens arrived. The Appian Way, the Roman Empire's most important paved road, once carried legions through the town on route to the Adriatic port of Brindisi. All in all, it seems as good a place as any to start my modest homage to Italy's travellers of yesteryear.

Navigating the backstreets of Itri, I pick up a surviving section of the Appian Way on the outskirts of the town, as it enters the wizened olive groves of the Natural Park of Aurunci Mountains. An unswerving line of moss-encrusted flagstones stretches toward the middle distance, as my seven-mile hike to the town of Fondi begins under a cloudless sky.

It's here outside Itri that the Appian Way briefly follows the Via Francigena, a much longer medieval walking trail that in its heyday ran all the way from Canterbury to



Rome, and then on to Jerusalem. Last year, the southern section of the Via Francigena became one of Italy's new Wonder Ways, a quintet of restored pilgrimage routes that take walkers through some of the finest scenery in Lazio, Umbria, Tuscany and Marche.

From Itri, the Via Francigena will take me to Rome in under a week. Within minutes of my arrival at Fondi's Monastery of San Magno — in rather jaded condition — head monk Francesco Fiorillo hands me a welcome glass of water from the local spring. "Everyone is welcome here, irrespective of their religion," says the genial, heavily bearded Italian. "The Wonder Ways are all about travelling with your heart and soul, and discovering something about yourself you never knew before."

After washing and drying my feet by hand — a deeply moving gesture of humility — Francesco and his helpers serve up a sumptuous meal of homegrown vegetables, freshly baked bread, *finocchiona* (a type of salami) and mozzarella. Any soporific after-effects are staved off with a couple of heart-poundingly strong espressos.

Those who choose to explore the Italian Wonder Ways have the option to walk for a few days or a few months. After lunch, I chat with Michel Goletti, who's just arrived at the monastery with his dog, Laika. Having prepared for five years, the Belgian is hiking all the way from Inverness to Santa Maria di Leuca in Southern Italy. Taking in most of the Via Francigena, his 3,350-mile, 200-day hike will raise money for charity.

"It sounds like a cliché but my journey has already been a life-changing experience," says Goletti. "The encounters I've had with strangers have restored my faith in humanity."

Bidding farewell to Fiorillo, I set off for Terracina, the next ancient town on the Via Francigena. It's only been a few hours, but the Wonder Ways are already living up to their name. italianwonderways.com

FROM LEFT: head monk Francesco Fiorillo; Appian Way; Via Francigena Sign



ST FRANCIS WAY

A whopping 620 miles separates the Great St Bernard Pass on the Swiss border — the beginning of the Italian leg of the St Francis Way — from its conclusion in Rome. Consequently, all but the most determined hiker will be in search of a bite-sized chunk. The finale — from Assisi to Rome — is the most popular section of the Via Francigena but you may find it more rewarding to follow other stretches, such as the Great Plains and the Po Valley (you cross the river by boat) and its medieval farms; or from Sienna south through the landscapes of Tuscany, taking in the volcanic cone of Mount Amiata and the small, attractive town of Radicofani. Further south, you can climb up the hill of San Martino for a view of the dome of St Peter's in Rome.

HOW TO DO IT:

viafrancigene.org has useful maps and route guidance.





TRIUMPH

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CINQUE TERRE

Cinque Terre is a chain of five historic villages on the Ligurian coast, linked by rail and one of the most beautiful coastal footpaths in Europe. Walkers enjoy epic views over the sea and terraced hills smothered in vineyards, olive groves and lemon orchards.

The route runs from Monterosso to Deiva Marina, following ancient cobbled paths and mountain passes and meandering through pine forests. Walking can be tough with some long steady climbs and descents, although the most you'll be expected to walk in a day is eight miles.

HOW TO DO IT: Hooked on Walking has a seven-day Cinque Terre trip for £455 per person with accommodation, luggage transfers, maps and walking routes. walking-europe.co.uk



THE DOLOMITES, SOUTH TYROL

Jagged peaks and stirring views are the signature of the Dolomites. Staying in comfy mountain huts adds to the elemental experience.

This six-day route is tucked up against the Austrian border north east of Bolzano and combines two easy three-mile round-trip walks from the huts with longer, more arduous traverses along the lofty Alta Via mountain pass.

HOW TO DO IT: Macs Adventure offers The High Dolomites from £805 per person, including most lunches and dinners, baggage transfers, detailed route descriptions and maps. macsadventure.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Grape harvest in Manarola, Cinque Terre; Route of the Gods, Amalfi Coast; Pale di San Martino, Dolomites

BOLOGNA TO FLORENCE

A section of this 10-day hike — which follows a trail of drovers' roads and mule tracks — is known as the Route of the Gods. The walk involves some lengthy days, covering between 10 and 15 miles. It tracks the River Reno for much of the way, taking in Tuscany's Mugello Hills and delivering stirring views from several ridgelines. Accommodation is usually at a series of wayside inns.

HOW TO DO IT: Inntravel offers a 10-night walk from £1,395 per person, including B&B accommodation, six dinners, six picnics, luggage transfers, walking notes and maps. inntravel.co.uk

SPAIN



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Parque Nacional del Teide;
hiker in the Caldera de las
Canadas, Teide National
Park; *Echium wildpretii*,
found mainly in Las
Canadas del Teide

LIFE ON MARS

The lofty Martian landscapes of the volcanic Teide National Park make for an unforgettable walking experience. Words: Emma Gregg

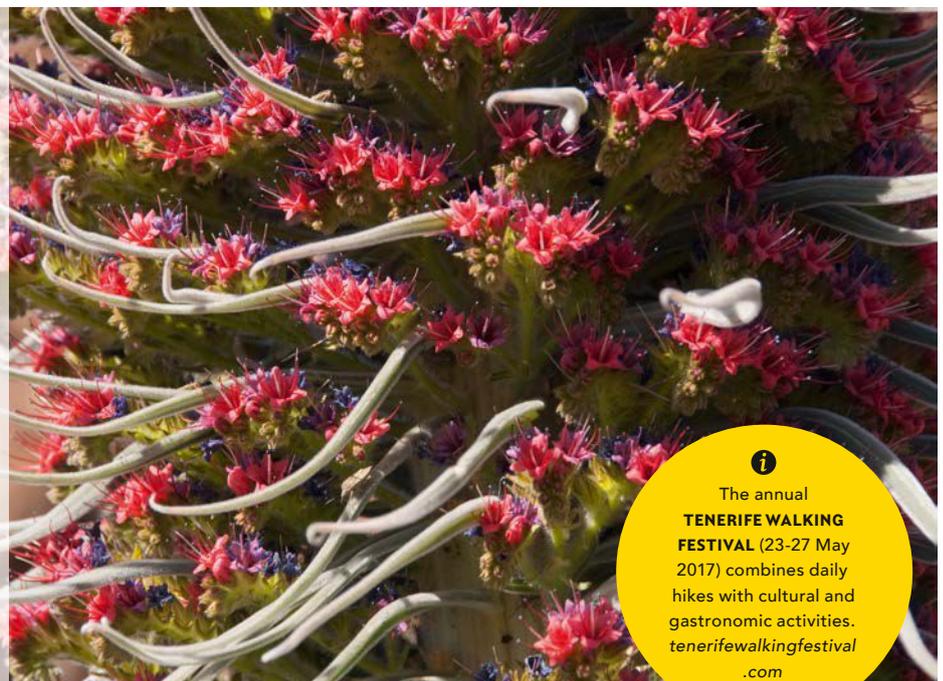
It's no wonder that sci-fi film crews love Teide National Park, I think to myself, as my hiking boots scrunch along the Roques de García Trail. Androids and monsters would look totally at home in this unearthly landscape, galumphing across the *malpaís* badlands or duelling among the twisted, timeworn towers of burnt rock that give the trail its name.

The park's Martian qualities, volcanic origins and gin-clear skies draw space programme technicians, volcanologists and astronomers, too, who test equipment on its jagged contours, monitor its subterranean tremors and scan the heavens from Tenerife's Teide Observatory, the largest solar observatory in the world.

But you don't need to be a filmmaker, a scientist or even a hardcore adventurer to enjoy this unusual place. Over 30 hiking trails loop through the park, none of them overly technical, and the two-mile round-trip route I'm sampling is so accessible you could tramp it with young kids.

That said, even a short walk in a high-altitude volcanic region is not to be taken lightly. The Parador de Las Cañadas del Teide hotel, which sits in solitary splendour in a lava-strewn crater, is around 7,220ft up — 64% higher than Ben Nevis. Mount Teide, the dormant cone at the heart of the park, is the highest peak in Macaronesia (the Azores, Madeira, the Canaries and Cape Verde) and over 650ft higher than Mulhacén in mainland Spain. Soaring 12,198ft, with a snowy cap in winter, it casts an imposing, triangular shadow and creates climate effects that impact the entire island. The sun up here is piercing. And the air is thin.

The tarmac roads leading up from the coast make the ascent to the Parador hotel a breeze. But when I step out of my car, my head spins a little. It isn't just the rapid jump in altitude; there's something about Teide that sends your sense of scale haywire. Freckled with boulders and low-slung plants, this sprawl of ancient, russet-coloured lava is so vast, it's hard at first to comprehend exactly what you're looking at. As I scan the scene, I spot a pair of hikers in the distance. They seem impossibly



The annual **TENERIFE WALKING FESTIVAL** (23-27 May 2017) combines daily hikes with cultural and gastronomic activities. tenerifewalkingfestival.com

tiny, like action figures viewed through the wrong end of a telescope.

After settling into my own hike, the dizziness fades and I'm ready to focus on the details surrounding me. Despite its barren appearance, Teide supports rare flora and fauna, adapted to the aridity and fluctuating temperatures. In early summer, the gravel blooms with broom, mustard-yellow flixweed, thrift-like *rosalillos de cumbre* and delicate Teide violets, while the rocks and crevices hide over 1,400 species of invertebrate.

Then there's the lava. Beneath the monumental Roques de García — one shaped like a cathedral, another like a sculpted head — the trail passes some beautiful solidified basalt lava flows: *pahoehoe* (smooth enough to tackle barefoot) and

a'a (chunkier and spikier). The vistas are so open that Mount Teide's mighty cone is a constant, brooding presence. "To the Guanches, it was the home of Guayota the Destroyer, the god of fire," says Ancor Robaina, my guide.

The Guanches, who migrated to the Canary Islands from North Africa around 1000 BC, were right to treat Mount Teide with respect. The island of Tenerife is packed with evidence of the cataclysmic geothermal events that have and shaped it since the Miocene; the most recent eruption, in 1909, lasted nine days. When I ask if the present-day residents are expecting another one soon, Ancor is quick to reassure me. "Our experts don't think so," he says. "The Volcanology Institute of the Canary Islands keeps a constant watch for seismic activity. For now, I can assure you, this giant is fast asleep — and snoring peacefully." volcanoteide.com

Volcanologists, astronomers and space programme technicians, are all drawn to the park's Martian landscape



SIERRA DE ARACENA, ANDALUCIA

The Sierra offers insight into traditional farming life as well as glorious, quintessential Andalusian scenery, from whitewashed villages to chestnut forests and free-roaming Ibérico pigs. The hiking usually begins from the town of Aracena and its Moorish castle, passing through a succession of pretty villages, alongside waterways and over the watershed of the Sierra through a landscape crisscrossed with stone walls. Spring and autumn are the best times, as they avoid the worst of the heat, although shorter dawn walks in summer can be glorious. A decent climb up Peña de Arias Montano is rewarded by views from the summit deep into Portugal. **HOW TO DO IT:** While the Sierra is offered by walking specialists, it can also be easily tackled unassisted, with routes and advice available at andalucia.com

GARROTXA VOLCANIC ZONE NATURAL PARK, CATALONIA

Beginning high in the hills and forested slopes of the park, this is a fairly rigorous hike with some long days that descend to the Mediterranean via lakeside villages and beech, cork and oak woods. Highlights include the Guixerres range, not to mention hilltop hamlets and fishing coves and the Empordà region. Night stays include Girona and the village of Madremanya, which is known for its medieval architecture. The hike involves six days of walking, ranging from four to 14 miles a day. **HOW TO DO IT:** Pura Aventura offers the seven-night Catalonia Inn to Inn tour, from £1,365 per person based on two sharing, half-board, some picnics, luggage transfers, walking notes and maps, and a GPS preloaded with the route. pura-aventura.com

ST IGNATIUS WAY, BASQUE COUNTRY

Less well-trodden than the Camino de Santiago, the St Ignatius Way is a classic pilgrimage route with superb scenery. Running 420 miles from Loiola, near the north coast, to the Catalan town of Manresea, near Barcelona, it takes about a month to complete. More manageably, part of the route runs through Basque country where some of the most appealing parts can be covered, between the Sanctuary of Loiola and the medieval walled town of Laguardia. This involves a 69-mile hike, usually taking six days, mostly on decent paths; the high point being the 3,937ft Biozkonia Pass. The route takes in spectacular countryside, from the limestone landscapes of the Aizkorri-Aratz National Park to oak forests, wildflower meadows, the Cantabrian Mountains, desert, plains and a stretch of Roman road. There's also Basque art in many religious sanctuaries, while thirsty walkers will be glad to know the route ends at the Rioja Alavesa and Laguardia vineyards. **HOW TO DO IT:** Ramblers Walking Holidays has a guided walk through the Basque leg of the trail from £1,275, including flights, half-board accommodation, guide and baggage transfers. ramblersholidays.co.uk

FROM LEFT: Hikers walking along the River Cares route between the towns of Poncebos and Cain in Picos De Europa National Park, Cantabrian Mountains; evening view of Cadaqués

PYRENEES TO THE SEA

The six-day route (around 10 miles a day) takes in volcanic hills, the Catalonian fishing village of Cadaqués and the Cap de Creus, olive groves, vineyards, rocky coves and sandy bays. You can also hike through Port Lligat to Salvador Dalí House (his former home, now a museum).

HOW TO DO IT: Inntravel has a seven-night package from £785 per person, including B&B accommodation, some meals and picnics, luggage transfers, maps and notes. inntravel.co.uk



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FRANCE



WALKING THE RAILS

Running along a defunct railway line, the Axe Vert de la Thiérache offers a glimpse into the bygone, bucolic age of steam. Words: Chris Leadbeater

In the hamlet of Ohis, there's a viaduct of the type that prompts passersby to pause and acknowledge the skill of the engineers who created it. So I do as I'm told, admiring the stone legs of a 19th-century wonder. It's an arrogant joy, straddling the Oise River with such ease that — even though the railway line it once carried, from Hirson to Busigny, closed to passengers in 1959 — it seems to view the river as a footnote, stepping across it as if it were a stream.

I'm underneath the viaduct, by the water — hiking along another, separate ghost of Northern France's once-labyrinthine rail system. And in this moment, I feel sorry for it. For while the Hirson-Busigny route above us was a busy one in its prime, there was no broad-arched majesty to what is now the Axe Vert de la Thierache. Just the rumble of a branch line in mundane motion.

Of course, the Axe Vert doesn't need my sympathy; it's been dead for almost 40 years. And its tracks have long since vanished, pulled up to make fence posts for farmers and support struts for barns and outhouses. It was hardly a superstar in its lifetime — a 24-mile link between Hirson and its nearish neighbour, Guise, in the Aisne department. If ever there were a railway that knew its place, it was this. Built in 1909, it was commandeered for the First World War almost as soon as it was operational. Still, it struggled back to the light, resurrected once the guns fell silent — and chugged unfussily through the mid-20th century, carrying rural travellers and dusty coal trucks. In fact, it survived all the way to 1978, when raw economics finally demanded that it cease activity. Few mourned it. In 1980, it was stripped back to a grass trail. It wasn't until 2014 that it earned the

tarmac, which means that, finally, cyclists and walkers can follow it without muddying their feet.

I'm one of these visitors, chasing the memory of steam engines and carriages past fields and furrows. And I'm alone. I'm not surprised either. Neither Hirson nor Guise could be described as close to anywhere — hidden in the green blankness of the Gallic countryside. They sit marooned — some 50 miles north of Reims, 30 miles south of the Belgian border.

Yet, having stumbled upon this vague ribbon of yesteryear, I'm keen to trace it from one end to the other. And I find that, as I go, I have flashbacks for company — signal posts stranded in hedgerows, dislocated tunnels echoing my footfall where once they resounded to the bluster of locomotives. Then there are the redundant stations; sturdy phantoms that still look like halting points — haunting the path in the villages of Etreapont, Gergny, Saint-Algis. Each has the name of its village and its year of birth, 1909, inscribed in the brickwork. Each has been repurposed as a house, a cottage. In Autrepes, the building is now a family home, slides and swings in the garden — although the raised level of the platform is still visible behind the fence, awaiting a train that's eternally late.

In the tiny settlement of Sorbais, I lose the thread. The exact arc of the line has been lost, erased by cattle sheds and grain stores, and I have to detour by road for half a mile. It feels a good spot to rest for the night, and so I do — at Le Bocage, a family-run bolthole that's both comfortable and inexpensive. I'll continue in daylight, on to Guise, through a realm of cows chewing pasture in silence. I'll meet no one and nothing except the past. ➤



CLOCKISE FROM LEFT: Roman ruins of Pont du Gard; Aubrac village on the Via Podiensis, St James's Way; door knocker in the old French town of Montreal, in the Gers



ROUTE ST JACQUES

This is a classic walk through France Profonde, from Aubrac to Figeac. Part of the route follows the Sentier de St Jacques (a segment of the Camino de Santiago), following the Allier River through a series of striking gorges. It crosses the plains of the high and wild Aubrac plateau, where summer grazings have fed cattle since Roman times to produce milk for Cantal cheese. The area is even said to be home to the mythic Beast of Gévaudan, the Gallic equivalent of the Beast of Bodmin, who lurks amid forests of oak, beech and chestnut.

This is a demanding trail, with 11 days of walking, ranging from eight to 18 miles and several days with ascents of over 2,460ft. The ground can be rough but the paths are reliable. Another highlight of the route is medieval Conques, officially one of the Plus Beaux Villages de France (france-beautiful-villages.org/en), with its Abbey Church of Saint Foy — historically one of the most popular stops on the Santiago de Compostela, its monks were known for the encouragement they gave to passing pilgrims. From there, it's a two-day walk to the route's end at Figeac. Unlike the pilgrims that went before, you can stay in comfy hotels, pensions and *gîtes*.

HOW TO DO IT: Ramblers Walking Holidays covers the 130-mile route described above on a 14-day trip, with 11 walking days. Prices start at £1,380, with half-board accommodation, including flights, transfers from the airport, baggage transfer and the services of a walking leader. ramblersholidays.co.uk/route-st-jacques

PONT DU GARD

A walk in the area around Roman aqueduct Pont du Gard, in the west of Provence, will inevitably take in some classic Mediterranean landscapes — the air scented with herbs, the hills sun-scorched and the tiny villages made of stone. You'll also get to interact with the famous old bridge, tracking the River Gardon as it slips between the arches. Late spring is a good time to walk here, when the rosemary is in flower, attracting huge numbers of butterflies. Plans are afoot for the local authorities to stitch together a 205-mile network of trails across the entire region. **HOW TO DO IT:** Walking option and route variations can be found at pontdugard.fr/en/walks-and-hiking



WINDY MOUNTAIN, NORTHERN PROVENCE

A looming presence during this walk, Mont Ventoux ('Windy Mountain') will be grimly familiar to Tour de France cyclists (mercifully, walkers don't need to ascend it). The route covers eight to 11 miles a day for seven days and is bookended by two clifftop villages, Venasque and Vaison-la-Romaine. In between, it explores the lush foothills east of Avignon. If possible, visit Vaison's excellent Tuesday market.

HOW TO DO IT: From On Foot Holidays for £1,025 per person. Includes most evening meals and picnics, luggage transfers, full walk pack and local support. onfootholidays.co.uk

CAMINO LE PUY WAY, GASCONY

Starting in Aire sur l'Adour and lasting six days (the longest covering 18 miles), this round trip takes in pretty towns, such as Lectoure, and *bastides* (fortified villages), including Larressingle and Montreal du Gers. Near the end, vineyards give way to maritime pines.

HOW TO DO IT: Macs Adventure offers the Camino Le Puy Way from £675 per person, including all dinners, baggage transfers and maps. macsadventure.com



CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

Bite-sized variants of the epic pilgrim trail to the northwestern Spanish city mean there's no need to martyr yourself. Words: Mark Rowe

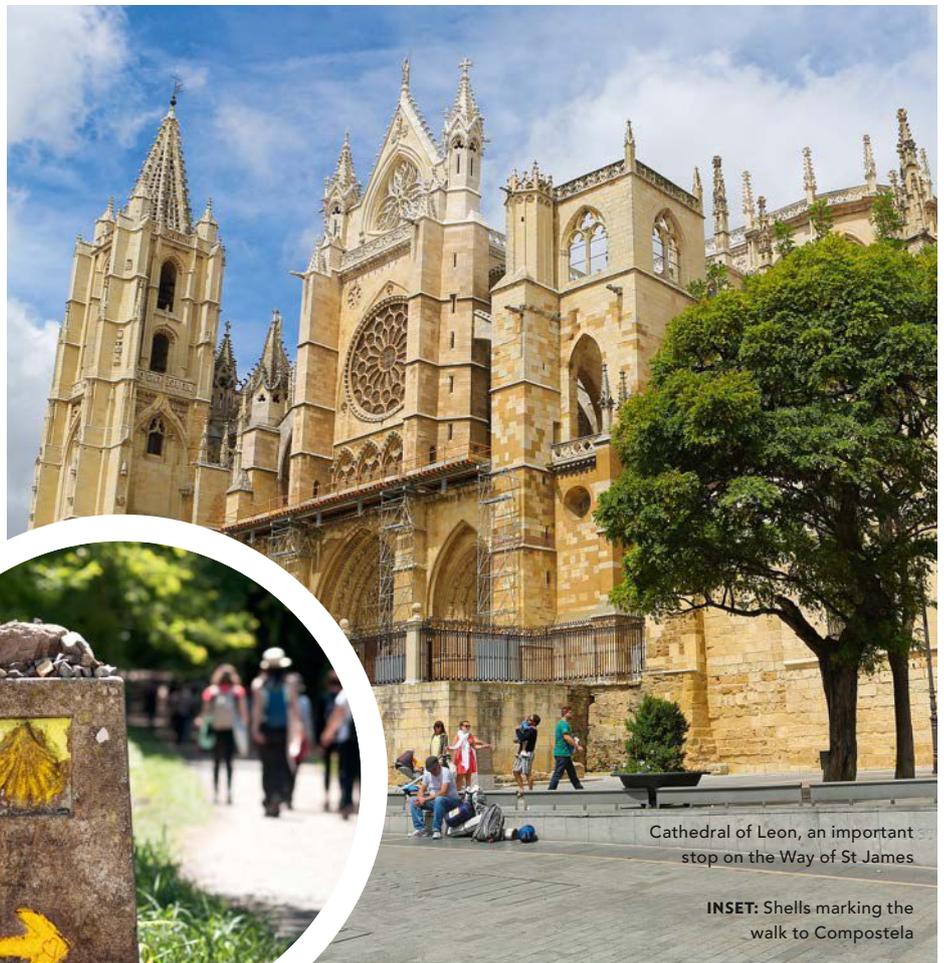
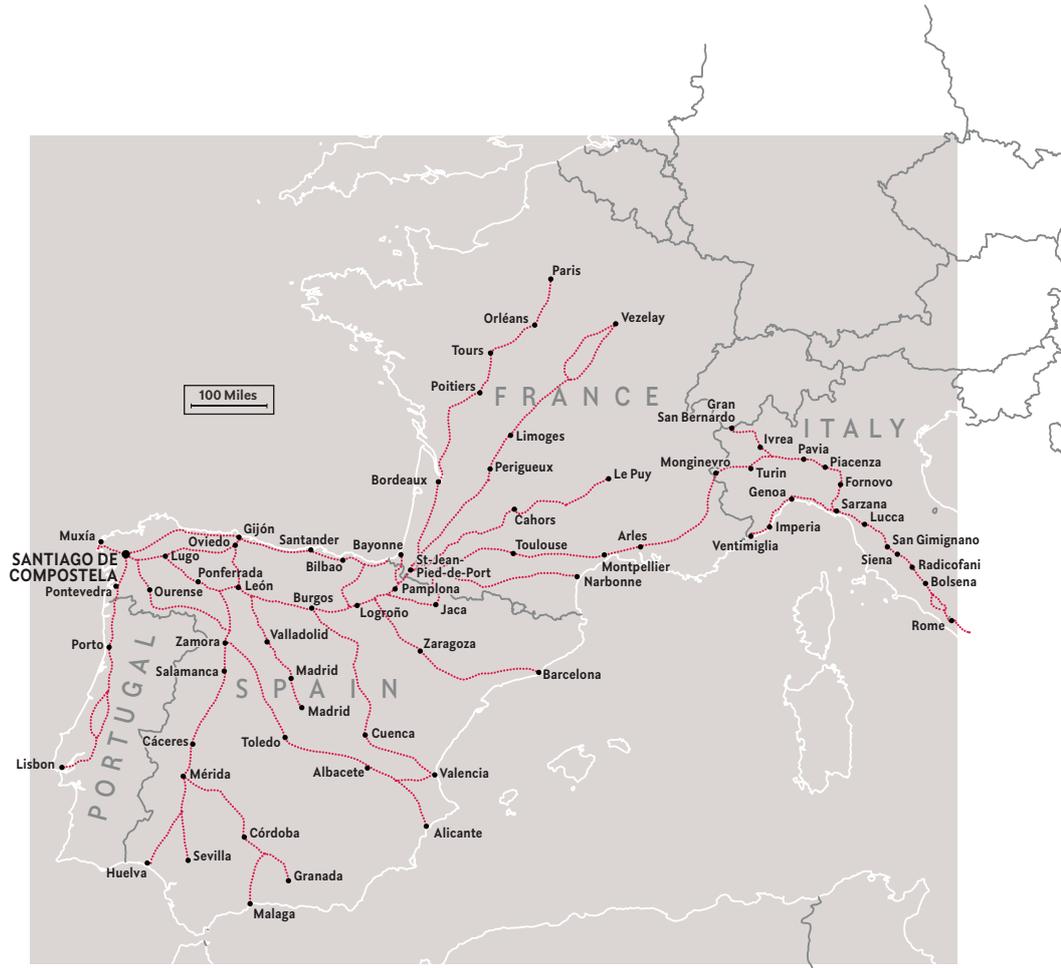
Also known as the Way of St James, the Camino de Santiago (*santiago-compostela.net*) has been one of Europe's most iconic routes since ninth-century pilgrims began making their way to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela to venerate the remains of St James (one of the 12 apostles, and the patron saint of Spain).

There are 13 main variations on the route, including five originating in France, seven in Spain and one from the Portuguese coast. The popularity of the walk is enduring, with the best part of 200,000 people a year presenting themselves as pilgrims in the cathedral and securing a *compostela*, or pilgrim's certificate, written in Latin, confirming the completion of at least 100km of the route.

Walking the entire length of any of the main routes is a huge undertaking. Some of the shorter variations can be completed in around 10 days, but most are substantially longer and impossible in the standard fortnight most of us would be able to spare. So, unless pilgrimage and *compostela* are your goals, consider taking a tailor-made approach to the Camino, organising your trip through a specialist walking company that will transport your bags while you walk, organise accommodation and even drive you to your daily starting point.

HOW TO DO IT: Pura Aventura offers the 11-night Camino Inn to Inn, from £2,265 per person, based on two sharing in three- to four-star hotels. Includes most meals and luggage transfers, plus daily car rides. pura-aventura.com

Marly Camino offers seven nights on the final 112km of the Camino de Santiago from Sarria to Santiago for £1,714, including a pilgrim's kit and an English-speaking guide. marlycamino.com □



Cathedral of Leon, an important stop on the Way of St James

INSET: Shells marking the walk to Compostela

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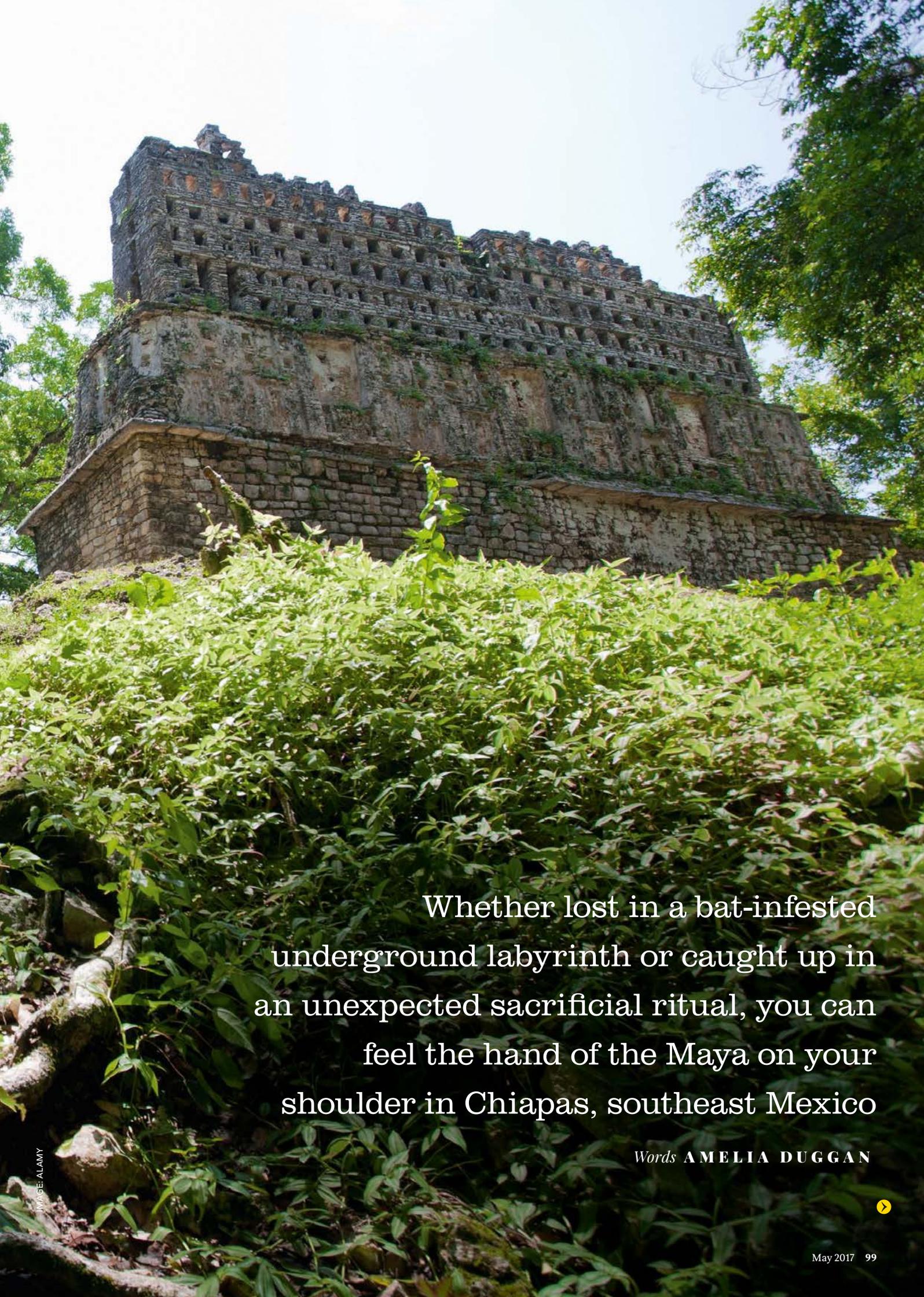
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A
MESSAGE
FROM
THE
GODS



Whether lost in a bat-infested
underground labyrinth or caught up in
an unexpected sacrificial ritual, you can
feel the hand of the Maya on your
shoulder in Chiapas, southeast Mexico

Words AMELIA DUGGAN

I'VE DESCENDED INTO THE MAYAN UNDERWORLD,

A SWEATING, CALCIFYING MAZE BUILT DEEP WITHIN
THE LACANDON JUNGLE, DARK AS OBSIDIAN AND
THICK WITH TAILLESS WHIP SCORPIONS.

“Keep moving!” Mildred Lucas hisses, her usual Mexican lilt replaced by a more urgent tenor. Up ahead, the feeble beam of my budget torch has stirred life into a canopy of bats. Their sinewy wings unfurl to reveal crumpled faces and parted jaws convulsing in rubbery squeaks. “Take this left... No, wait; go straight.” The air is putrid, the fauna terrifying, and it occurs to me, not for the first time, that my guide may be lost. I’m truly in hell.

“We know from carvings and deciphered glyphs that this labyrinth — one of the largest of its kind ever discovered — was built to symbolise the underworld. It was a place for Mayan royalty to commune with the gods.” Mildred’s voice reverberates along the stone passageway. “They would pierce their tongues, their flesh, their genitals, and burn the blood-splattered tissues, re-entering society with messages from the gods.”

Petite, polished and raised amid the urban chaos of Mexico City, Mildred Lucas may not be an archetypal tomb raider, but in the days we’ve spent together she’s introduced me to some of Mexico’s most precious guarded treasures: the vine-strangled, ancient Mayan cities of its southernmost frontier state, Chiapas.

It feels like Mexico at its purest; there’s something so distinct and purposeful about the tapestry of this region it feels almost distilled. Its canyon-pitted, pine-crested highlands dissolve east to sultry jungle and south to fertile Pacific plains in bold strokes — its biodiversity outranks nearly every other state. The people are gregarious and warm hearted; their cuisine is hearty and spiced with centuries of tradition. Towns are pristine: paintbox-coloured, colonial and sleepy. And while travellers have cottoned on to these delights, Chiapas

attracts but a fraction of the international attention its charms merit.

The maze tapers and spits us out at the edge of a bright jungle clearing. A gust dislodges yellow buds from some lofty epiphyte ecosystem, dusting a sunbeam. And towering over ground-level temples and lower terraces, and receding into the forest canopy, is a vertiginous, menacing acropolis — the centrepiece of Yaxchilan.

Sitting in a teardrop bend of the crocodile-rich Usumacinta River, this important Mayan city dominated the local region from around AD 580 until its collapse, along with large swathes of the Mayan civilisation, in the early ninth century. “From the glyphs, scholars think the original name of the city was Pa’ Chan. It means ‘cleft sky’,” Mildred says as we poke around the lower-level buildings, admiring the kings carved into the lintels. One of Mildred’s gifts is storytelling; as we explore, she repopulates the tumbledown ruins. A priest baring sharpened teeth skins a sacrificial victim on a cracked altar; armoured *pok-a-tok* players bash a flaming ball through the hoops of the stone court; a 19th-century explorer chisels out exquisite carvings, taking them away on a mule caravan for the British Museum...

I’m in a reverie, strolling in my mind’s eye through a re-gilded temple, when I realise Mildred and I aren’t alone. I’ve somehow propelled a Mayan through the centuries. This man has long, wild, ebony hair and regal, high-set cheekbones, and is wearing an ankle-length white robe. But Mildred is greeting him like an old friend. “This is Elias. He’s an important leader of the Lacandon people and a guide.” He shakes my hand warmly. It’s then that I notice his entourage: five camera-wielding tourists.

RIGHT:
Yaxchilan

IMAGE: ALAMY





“His people are the descendants of the Mayans; the Halach Winik — the true men,” Mildred translates, at his insistence. Chiapas has one of the largest indigenous populations in the country: a quarter of all inhabitants identify with one of 12 recognised groups. Fewer in number than the state’s largest indigenous groups — the Tzotzil and the Tzeltal — the Lacandonones have, despite encroachments on their ancestral territory, somehow held on to their way of life, living in small communities in the jungle, some of which have started to embrace eco-tourism.

Leaving Elias to recount the history of his ancestors to his group, Mildred and I approach the acropolis, contemplating the steep ascent with eyes locked on the summit. The elaborate roof comb of a temple juts into the cloudless sky. “From the top, they pushed the losers of ball games, their bones breaking on the polished steps,” she says, grimacing. It’s a very, very, long way to fall.

The ruins of Yaxchilan aren’t as grand as the state’s most famous Mayan site, Palenque, nor their booty as sensational. But their remoteness commands a certain mystique. In 1952, while overseeing the restoration of Palenque, Mexican archaeologist Alberto

say that every 10km there’s a Mayan site waiting to be excavated. This is the heart of the Mayan world.” And to prove it, we’d pulled over at Camino Verde, a nondescript roadside guesthouse, whose restaurant’s trestle tables are heaped not with food but with ancient pottery and stone utensils.

I follow Mildred up Yaxchilan’s acropolis, praying not to twist an ankle. Nature is clawing at the structure, the once-uniform steps mossy and subsiding; the snarled roots of mottled *ceiba* trees having dislodged anything in their radius with the slow, crushing power of boa constrictors. We arrive, dishevelled, at the upper terrace. I stand where Yaxchilan’s rulers once stood, looking out over the jungle. I can see the greenish band of the Usumacinta; towering, vine-knotted trees bend under the fecundity of their own canopies. The jungle is singing, toucans chattering to each other over the rhythmic trill of cicadas. As I turn to examine the temple, a soul-rattling roar ricochets through the forest. Howler monkeys.

Sunlight filters onto an elaborately decorated structure, with sculpted figures and friezes depicting gladiators tumbling to their deaths. In the cooling gloom of its interior, where faint curlicues of terracotta

home in 1950 and, along with his formidable Swiss photographer wife, Trudi, devoted his life to helping the Lacandon people.

“She was a jaguar,” José recalls, as we move into Trudi’s bedroom — a ruby-red boudoir decorated with photographs of long-haired Lacandon men and women. “She would rap people with her cane,” he chuckles. “But the Lacandonones loved her. They called her *shona*; it means ‘lady queen.’” José knew Trudi at the end of her life; a whip-sharp, white-haired widow who could captivate audiences with tales of resisting — and eventually fleeing — European fascists, and whisky-fuelled revelries with an exiled Leon Trotsky and artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. Tales, too, of throwing together ambassadors and royalty with indigenous leaders and travelling hippies for dinner parties in the 1970s, when — due to the Blom’s work — their grand, antique hacienda, Na Bolom, began attracting visitors to San Cristóbal. The intrepid couple beat the path that many travellers now follow.

Na Bolom — a two-storey, multi-courtyard affair painted sunburst yellow and nurturing perfumed climbers — is more than a museum; it’s a living, breathing monument to the couple’s passion for indigenous rights and culture. But their battle is far from won:

FROM THE TOP OF THE ACROPOLIS, THEY PUSHED THE LOSERS OF BALL GAMES, THEIR BONES BREAKING ON THE POLISHED STEPS

Ruz Lhuiler heaved aside the lid of a stone sarcophagus to reveal the body of King Pakal, wearing a death mask of jade mosaic. In doing so, he sealed — or rather, unsealed — its reputation, inspiring generations of tourists. Meanwhile, Yaxchilan, sitting hard against the Guatemalan border, remained smothered in the impenetrable folds of the jungle, forgotten to all but a handful of archaeologists.

This all changed in the early 2000s. Today, a third of the site has been restored — a new wooden jetty welcomes travellers sailing in on *lanchas* hired downstream in the small town of Frontera Corozal; it can be visited in a day, along with the nearby ruins of Bonampak. Frontera Corozal is a three-hour drive from the cluster of hotels on the outskirts of the town of Palenque, a drive that had taken us past numerous grassy mounds that were suspiciously pyramid-shaped. “You’re not imagining it,” Mildred had told me. “They

and jade paintwork are still visible, sits a stocky, decapitated statue of eighth-century ruler Yaxun B’alam IV, aka Bird Jaguar IV — his crowned head resting in a separate niche. Soot streaks indicate the recent presence of candles: the remains of a shamanic Lacandon ceremony, venerating ancestral spirits. Modern Mayans, too, it seems, believe in a reality with many layers.

THE BLOMS OF SAN CRISTÓBAL

“Life puts you in a place for a special reason; that’s what happened with Frans and Trudi,” José Gerádo Santiago says deferentially, ushering our tour group into a high-ceilinged room lined with cabinets of anthropological curios and hung liberally with aged, hand-drawn maps of the region. In the centre, a desk supports a typewriter and an open cigarette packet; on the back of a weighty, studded chair hangs a suede jacket with tasselled epaulettes. This is the study of Frans Blom, the trailblazing Danish archaeologist who made the highland colonial city of San Cristóbal de las Casas his

Mexico’s indigenous communities typically occupy the country’s least productive land, and are often subject to institutional prejudice and privations.

Run by the Bloms’ descendants, the estate hums with the atmosphere of a base camp. It’s home to devoted volunteers like Chiapan native José, who helps with tours and local initiatives; post-grad scholars huddled around the library’s fire; resident artists; paying guests; indigenous artisans; and those seeking specialist medical treatment, which Na Bolom funds.

While the journey from sweltering Palenque to the cool highland locale of San Cristóbal would’ve meant an arduous month’s donkey ride for the Bloms, my drive takes five hours, winding through mainly Tzeltal-populated communities — many of which (road signs proclaim) are run by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). Led by the pipe-smoking Subcomandante Marcos, the political group grabbed world headlines on 1 January 1994 by staging a short-lived military coup across Chiapas. “It set off a bomb in the national consciousness,” José tells me. “All of

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Avenida Belisario Domínguez, San Cristóbal; girl weaving in Zinacantán, Chiapas; shelling runner beans at the market



COME NIGHTFALL, POSTCARD-PERFECT SAN CRISTÓBAL UNSTAYS HER CORSET AND THROWS CAUTION TO THE MOUNTAIN WINDS



IMAGE: GETTY



SPEAKING the same language

+Babbel

Elizabeth Mundy upgrades her trip to Southern Mexico by learning the local lingo

I've always hated stereotypes. But there's a British one I've been perpetuating on my travels: an inability to speak any language other than my mother tongue. For years, I'd travel to fascinating places populated by friendly people, and if they didn't know my language I'd find myself shaking my head or, worse, speaking English slowly at them. Occasionally, I'd resorted to miming. These weren't proud moments, and I missed out on making genuine connections and gaining local insights.

A few months before my trip to Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, I decided enough was enough. No more English menus for me — I was going to go native. I picked language-learning app Babbel, developed by expert linguists. Courses fitted into my commutes and lunch breaks, and I found that useful expressions started to stick. There was even a 'Sightseeing in Mexico' course,

which included region-specific phrases, and lessons devoted to pre-Columbian cuisine. Afternoons at my desk were spent dreaming of *pollo con mole* (chicken, chocolate and chilli) and swimming in *cenote* sinkholes.

Several months later, I'm sipping a *cerveza* in a rowdy bar in Southern Mexico. "¡Qué padre!" I shout to my table companions over the applause accompanying the musicians' bows. There's giggling. I know that Mexican slang doesn't sound quite right coming from me, but I'm sure they appreciate the effort. In my week by the beach in Tulum, I'd learned that a little Spanish goes a long way when making friends, asking for recommendations or requesting directions. Minutes later, a plate of *tacos al pastor* appears, three glasses of *mezcal* are ordered, and my neighbours strike up conversation.

And I can actually reply, in their language. I'm speaking Spanish like I've always wanted to.

The slang

¡Qué padre!
¡Es padrísimo!
Cool!

The dish

Tacos al pastor
Maize wraps filled with pork, pineapple, onion & coriander

The drink

Mezcal con gusano
Agave spirit bottled with a red worm



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TRAVELLER

Festival

• 2017 •

Mexico was, for the first time, paying attention to Chiapas." Since then, the Zapatistas have remained largely dormant, their sphere of influence limited to rural strongholds. There is talk, however, that they might put a candidate forward for next year's general election.

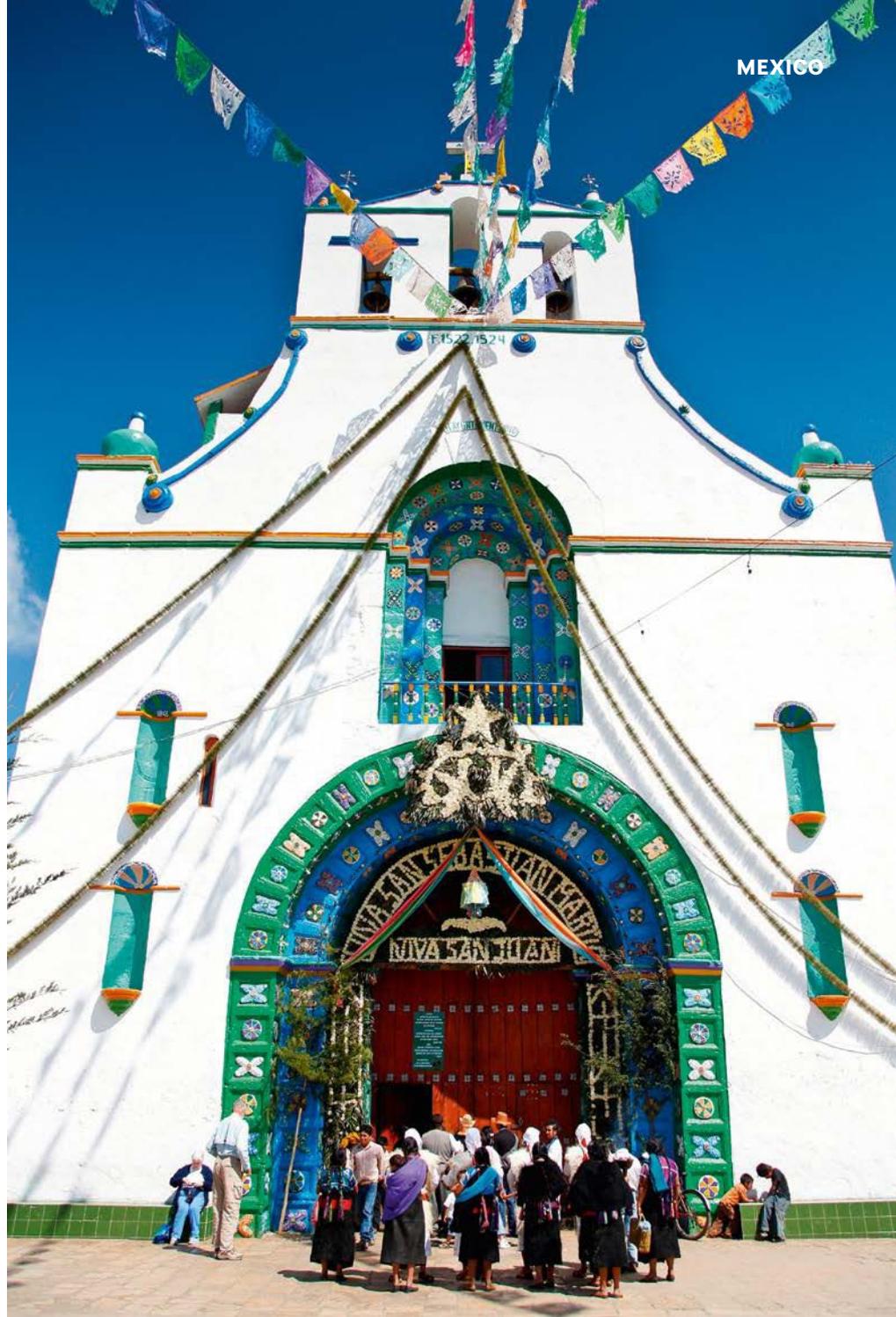
My respects paid to the Bloms, I stroll back towards the centre of San Cristóbal, navigating a cobblestone grid of richly pigmented pastel villas. The city is blooming in the dying light; the baroque facade of its standout church, the Templo de Santo Domingo, glows peach above the cream-tented artisanal market, while inky birds urgently explore the trees of Plaza 31 de Marzo and a crisp half-moon hovers in the east. I pass a row of rustic-chic coffee shops, their raw material, harvested in the nearby Soconusco region, scenting the air with a heady perfume, before browsing in an amber jewellery emporium, strung with the petrified fire of nearby mountain village Simojovel.

From either of its two church-crowned hills, the city appears serene — all quaint, red-tiled roofs, wonky steeples and glowing orange pinpricks of light. But down amid the thronging bars and restaurants of Calle Guadalupe, it's another story; come nightfall, postcard-perfect San Cristóbal unstays her corset and throws caution to the mountain winds. The competing riffs of mellifluous jazz and rabble-rousing *cumbia* are a siren-call to thirsty tourists, and it's not long before I'm in the ambiently lit courtyard of TierrAdentro, tapping my foot and nursing a tumbler of mezcal.

Part diner, part late-night music venue and part bazaar, TierrAdentro is run by Zapatista supporters. To one side, a cosy bookshop sells left-wing texts and Mayan history books, while, next door, indigenous women wearing embroidered *huipil* blouses and full skirts run a colourful stall celebrating the Chiapan village craft of weaving. But TierrAdentro's real USP is its espousal of all things — and all people — revolutionary: posters, fliers and even the placemats quote Marcos and subversive 20th-century writers, while Che Guevara and the Virgin Mary, shouldering bullet-straps like Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa, look down from the walls.

Early the next morning — my last in Chiapas — I travel six miles north from San Cristóbal to the mountain township of San Juan Chamula, home to a fiercely proud community of Tzotzil Maya. The weather has turned biblical. With no protection against the lancing torrents, the locals — clad in their traditional fluffy wool skirts and *chuje* tunics — abandon their vegetable stalls, zigzagging through the main plaza for cover at the local courthouse. I'm all for running, too, but my guide, Hector Mojia, is made of sterner stuff.

We duck into Cathedral San Juan Bautista — from the outside, a rustic, whitewashed church — and find ourselves standing on a



loose carpet of pine needles before a sea of lit candles. Hundreds of tapers flicker on the floor of the nave and along the walls, casting an ethereal glow on dozens of Catholic effigies in glass cases.

Hector takes me over to get a closer look at one of these statues, navigating around a group of locals who appear to be picnicking on the church floor. As I look at the effigy, I'm struck first by the flowers — an improbably exotic arrangement of fresh white lilies and fat, yellow daisies — and then by its odd attire. Saint Jude Thaddeus, his glossy white face tilted heavenwards, is swaddled in multiple ponchos and festooned with chunky hawthorn-fruit necklaces. A vanity mirror pinned to his chest reflects my bemused expression back at me.

PREVIOUS PAGES: Cathedral of San Cristóbal de las Casas

ABOVE: Cathedral San Juan Bautista



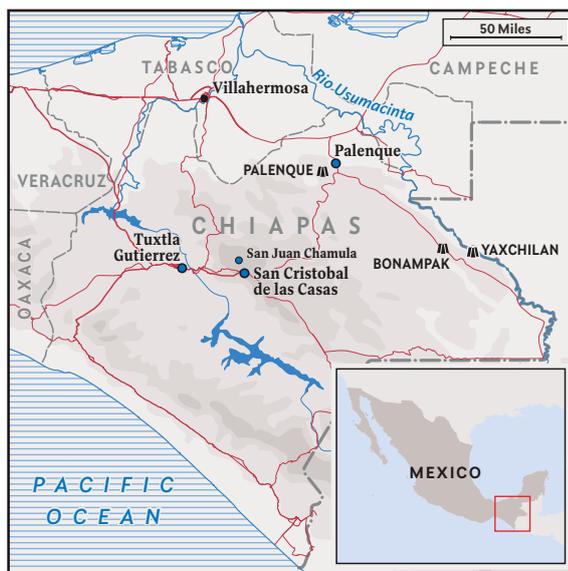
Market, San Juan Chamula

“The first thing the Spanish did when they conquered the area was to kill the spiritual leaders. But the old Tzotzil religion lived on, and each of the saints came to symbolise a different god,” Hector whispers to me. I look again at the group of locals. What had at first appeared to be a picnic is actually a shaman-led ritual; a docile black chicken is being cradled by a plump woman; various herbs, bones and, confusingly, a litre of Coca-Cola, are laid out beside her. As she chants and rocks, it occurs to me the chicken’s minutes are numbered.

Hector continues quietly: “John the Baptist is revered above Jesus here. Because his feast day falls around the summer solstice, he became an embodiment of their sun god.” What started as a way to conceal their polytheism from Dominican priests became, as the population converted, something more complex, he says: a nuanced braiding of indigenous and Catholic beliefs.

For someone familiar with traditional Christian iconography, experiencing Chamula’s cathedral is like stepping through the looking glass. And yet it’s also organic. The region’s landscape and biodiversity have a starring role in the decoration — in the leaf-strewn floor, the jaguar painted on the ceiling, the arcs of jade cloth standing in for the highlands’ peaks. It seems, too, that the countless candles echo the star-flecked heavens on a cloudless, highland night.

I ask about the mirror fixed to the chest of our saint. “They’re powerful things, for the Tzotziles. They’re able to deflect away bad spells,” Hector says, as, nearby, a muffled cluck signals the end of the chicken. Like their descendants here in Chamula, the ancient Mayans believed mirrors to be potent spiritual tools, he tells me. They could open portals



into the ‘other world’, through which ancestors and gods could communicate. I think back to that headless statue of Bird Jaguar IV I’d seen in the temple of Yaxchilan, and imagine him summoning visions from a slab of highly polished stone — as blood loss and cloying incense conspire to rob him of his faculties.

And once more, I’m struck by the sense that here, in Chiapas, Mayan culture isn’t just for archaeologists. Nor is it something defunct, discovered only in history books. It exists — albeit filtered by time and outside influence — in the cosmologies and customs of indigenous Mexico. These ways of life are under threat: long-held practices are slowly being abandoned. But, for now at least, in Chiapas, the echoes of this history resound. Here, Mayans can be seen and heard. No portals required. □

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

British Airways and Aeroméxico fly to Mexico City, while British Airways, Virgin Atlantic, Thomson Airways and Thomas Cook Airlines fly nonstop to Cancun. ba.com aeromexico.com virginatlantic.com thomson.co.uk thomascookairlines.com

From there, take a domestic flight on to Chiapas’ state capital, Tuxtla Gutiérrez. The city’s small Ángel Albino Corzo International Airport is 21 miles south east of San Cristóbal de las Casas.

AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 15h 30m with connection.

There are few car rental opportunities in Chiapas, although Tuxtla has a number of agencies in town, including Alamo (alamo.com) and Europcar (europcar.com), as well as at the airport, while San Cristóbal has Optima (T: 00 52 967 674 54 09).

Fortunately, bus links within the region and to other states are very good. For regional routes, OCC minibuses, combis and colectivo taxis are a good option. Roads between tourist attractions are well maintained, although often subject to small protests and roadblocks; it’s a good idea to factor in some extra journey time.

When to go

Blue skies are most common in the dry season (November to April), although evenings can be chilly in San Cristóbal and the surrounding highlands between November and February. The lowlands and coastal regions, however, are warm year-round. June and September see heavy rains, with moderate showers occurring in the months between.

Where to sleep

Chan-Kah Resort Village (Palenque). chan-kah.com.mx
Hotel Mexicanos (San Cristóbal de las Casas). casavieja.com.mx

Places mentioned

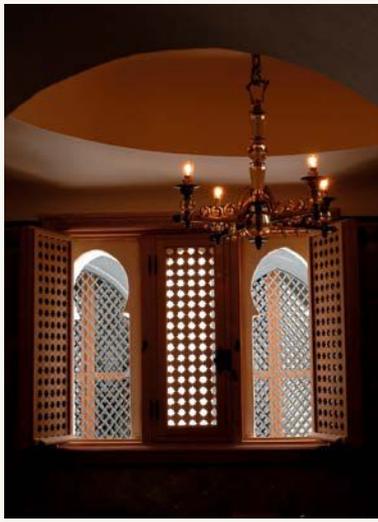
Palenque. visitpalenque.travel
Na Bolom. na-bolom.org

More info

visitmexico.com
The Maya, by Michael D Coe and Stephen Houston (Thames & Hudson). RRP: £16.50.
Incidents of Travel in Yucatan, Vols I and II, by John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood (Cosimo Classics). RRP: £16.99.
Lonely Planet Mexico. RRP: £14.99.

How to do it

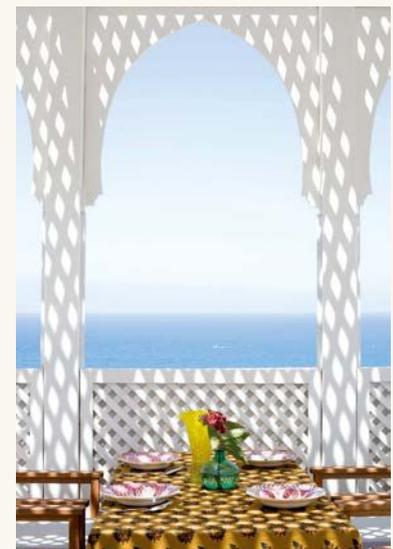
COX & KINGS has a 14-day escorted tour of Mexico from £2,795 per person, including British Airways flights, transfers, excursions and accommodation with breakfasts and some other meals. coxandkings.co.uk



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Words & Photographs PÓL Ó CONGHAILE

9,000 STREETS & 40,000 DEAD ENDS

From the labyrinthine Medina of Fez, and the sparkling blue city of Chefchaouen to the mysterious holy town of Moulay Idriss – if you want to get to know Morocco, take a road trip in low season, and get talking to the locals



I'm pinned to the floor of a centuries-old hammam in the foothills of Mount Zerhoun. A bald and bearded attendant in shorts is holding me down like a toddler, scrubbing my skin with a bristly *kessa* (exfoliating glove) and rinsing the soap off with sloshing buckets of hot water. Just when I think we're done, he starts stretching me into positions that would make an MMA (mixed martial arts) fighter blush. At one point, my spine pops, chiropractor-style. A steaming group of local men and boys, washing themselves in the small chamber, observe with glee.

If I'd asked for Morocco like a local, this would've been the moment I got it. The hammam lies underground in the holy town of Moulay Idriss, northern Morocco. Its chambers are heated by burning thick chunks of aromatic olive wood. The scrub-down peels away embarrassing amounts of dead skin, leaving me the colour of smoked salmon. Steam continues to rise from my head as I return through the medina alleyways to my homestay. It feels like a hazing ritual is complete; that momentarily, this bruising baptism has made me part of the village.

Forget camels and carpets. I've come to Morocco in the off-season, seeking to dive deeper than sand dunes and sun resorts. I'd flown into Marrakech, but didn't stay long. The following morning, I rose early and struck out with a guide and driver towards the Atlas Mountains, starting an itinerary that would also include the hive-like Medina of Fez and the blue-washed walls of Chefchaouen. It's winter, and tourism is barely a trickle.

"If you want fresh news in Morocco, you need to talk to two people," says Majid Rouijel, my guide in Moulay Idriss. "The baker and the barber."

Majid is a honey-voiced local man, born and bred in the tangled-twine alleyways of this hill town ("I spent five years working in insurance in Casablanca," he tells me. "I didn't like it. I did an about-turn.") Majid wears a creamy *djellaba* (the long, hooded cloak traditionally worn by Moroccans) and seems to know every single soul we pass. When we find the baker, he's sitting watching a tiny TV perched among shelves loaded with bread. Many families make their own mix in the morning and bring it here for baking, Majid explains. "If a person who usually brings two loaves comes in with four, then something is going on," he winks.

My walk with Majid is magical because it is so ordinary. Moulay Idriss is a holy place, named for (and home to the remains of) the Prophet Muhammad's great-grandson. Every August, a religious festival packs out the town, with pilgrims dancing in the streets. It's just a few miles from the ancient Roman ruins of Volubilis, but few Westerners get



"If you want fresh news in Morocco, you need to talk to two people," says Majid Rouijel, my guide in Moulay Idriss. "The baker and the barber."

PREVIOUS PAGES: Medina of Fez, viewed from Borj Sud Fortress

ABOVE: Majid Rouijel, a guide in Moulay Idriss

RIGHT: Taking time out to pray in the Medina of Fez

this far — in fact, non-Muslims weren't even allowed to stay overnight until 2005. We see a tailor, twirling threads together from an old nail outside his shop. We listen to the call to prayer, and stand aside to let a young man riding a donkey while engrossed in his smartphone go past. We chat about Islam, Morocco's young population, its European flavours. 'Bonjour' is a common greeting here.

At one point, Majid pauses by a studded townhouse door. He points out its modesty, the lack of frills, and hinges containing the Hand of Fatima to ward off the evil eye. Medina houses rarely give much away about who or what lies within, he says. "You never really know until you step inside."

Luckily, I get to do just that at La Colombe Blanche, a modest riad converted to a guesthouse by Mohamed Zaimi and his wife. That night, we chat in the kitchen as a couscous, chicken and chickpea stew steams and *taktouka* (a salad of chopped tomatoes and peppers) simmers on the stove. "Moroccan bread is one-day bread," Mohamed says, when I describe my visit to the baker. "You can't have it the next day. We like things fresh and in season." When dinner is ready, we gather around a table surrounded by mosaic tiles, tucking into a hearty feast, followed by a plate of fresh oranges with stems and leaves attached.

After the meal, Mohamed confers with my guide. "Would you like to go where we're







going?” they ask. “Where’s that?” I ask. “The hammam. We’re going for a bath.”

It was back in Fez that I’d first asked to meet the owner of a riad (traditional Moroccan house arranged around a courtyard). Mohamed Merri, my guide and translator, took me to Rachid Azami’s home — a 200-year-old building just inside the medina walls. Several generations of Rachid’s family used to live here, he told us over a cup of sweet mint tea, but in recent years they’d converted it into a guesthouse, and had just finished developing another — a ritzier riad just a short walk away. True to Moroccan form, we were soon touring Riad Marjana, with its sparkling tilework, artisan-crafted wood carvings, glittering pool and lush cushions and drapes. The epitome of exotic Moroccan luxury — all it needed was floating flower petals.

“You can go to a hotel anywhere,” Rachid said, proudly posing for a photograph. “But in a riad, you get to feel history as well as see and hear it.”

Bit by bit, my sense of Morocco was filling out. Holidaymakers have been wariest of North Africa since the Arab Spring and recent terror attacks, but the Moroccans I spoke to were keen to distinguish their country — as a gateway between East and West, a place with Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts, rich in Arabic and Berber heritage, but also with French, Andalusian,

The mutton is grilled and arrives at our table with bread, tomatoes and onions. We sprinkle salt and cumin over the meat. It’s messy, finger-lickin’ Moroccan street food

LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Snails for sale, Medina of Fez; looking towards Chefchaouen’s medina; goat’s cheese, Bab Ssour, Chefchaouen; riad, Medina of Fez

ABOVE: Hamid Filali, a coppersmith at work in the Medina of Fez

Jewish and other threads of influence. Of course, there are niggles — jarring clashes of poverty and wealth, litter in the countryside, Morocco’s infamous faux guides, and the need for a thick skin in souks (particularly for women). Common sense, regular tea breaks and a firm ‘no, *shukran*’ (no, thanks) should help you keep your cool, however.

The drive from Marrakech to Fez takes nine hours, with stops. From there, it’s almost four hours to Chefchaouen, 3.5 hours looping back to Moulay Idriss and another three to Casablanca. All bum-numbing, but fascinating. The dusty, ochre-tinted outskirts of Marrakech give way to a landscape dotted with olive farms and shepherds tending flocks. In Azrou, storks nest atop of a minaret. In M’Rirt, a man walks an ostrich down the street. Banged-up old Mercs, Peugeotts and Renaults trundle along and roadside shacks are commonplace, with fresh flanks of mutton and beef hanging in the open air. We stop at one, ordering a few chops to have grilled over charcoal at the cafe next door.

“My father did this,” the butcher tells me, thwacking the meat so hard with his cleaver it sends specks of bone into the air. His belly is big; his yellowing teeth looking like the last pieces on a chessboard. But he speaks almost perfect English. I ask about the sprigs of mint and coriander tied to the cuts beside us. “The meat is killed and we refrigerate it for about two days,” he says. “Then it’s ready. Moroccans don’t like frozen meat.”

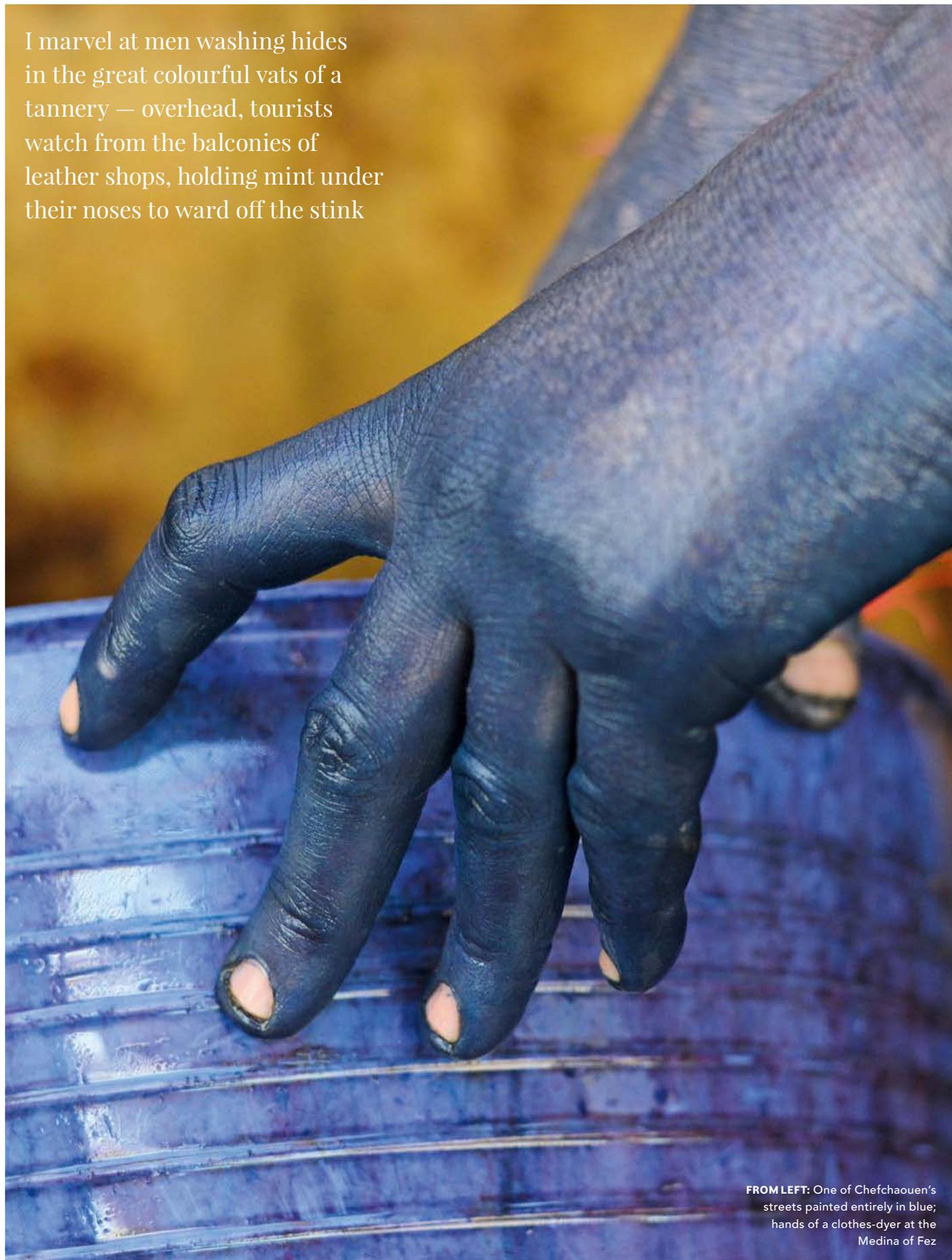
Within a few minutes, the mutton is grilled and delivered — along with a loaf of bread, tomatoes and onions — to our table. We sprinkle pinches of salt and cumin over the meat. It’s messy, finger-lickin’ Moroccan street food.

In Fez itself, all roads lead to Fez el Bali (listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site under the name Medina of Fez). Dating from the ninth century (‘New’ Fez followed in the 14th century, with a later wave of French development completing the mix), the medina is reputedly one of the largest car-free urban zones in the world. “Inside are 9,000 streets and 40,000 dead ends,” quips my guide, Ghazali Hicham, who grew up and went to school inside this maze. “It’s the biggest labyrinth on the planet.”

Fez, a former capital of Morocco, has other attractions — not least the Royal Palace; a busy Jewish Quarter where we stop to taste *sfenj* (fried Moroccan doughnuts); and Art Naji, where I watch artisans shape, paint and bake their meticulous mosaic tiles and ceramics. But its medina is the highlight. Viewed from the surrounding hills, the old quarter is a dead ringer for Granada’s Albaicín — albeit much, much larger; its chino-coloured houses stacked so densely you can’t see the alleys between them. Inside, it’s like stepping into medieval times. ➤



I marvel at men washing hides in the great colourful vats of a tannery – overhead, tourists watch from the balconies of leather shops, holding mint under their noses to ward off the stink



FROM LEFT: One of Chefchaouen's streets painted entirely in blue; hands of a clothes-dyer at the Medina of Fez



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Two or three turns is all it takes for me to get lost. “What about that one?” Ghazali smiles, gesturing to the dimly-lit laneway ahead. “Is it a way out, or a dead end?” Gradually, we wind our way towards the markets. I marvel at the blue hands of a clothes dyer; at a camel’s head suspended from a hook; at men washing hides in the great colourful vats of a tannery — overhead, tourists watch from the balconies of leather shops, holding mint under their noses to ward off the stink. If Djemaa-el-Fna, in Marrakech, can seem like a carnival, this is pure street theatre. Wasps buzz around sticky treats. Antique shops glimmer. Keyhole doors lead to centuries-old schools and mosques. You might catch the whiff of goat’s cheese, or hear the whirr of a loom. School kids brush by with satchels; men wander past, Jedi-like in their *djellabas*. Every now and then, there’s a cry of ‘*balak!*’ (‘watch out!’) as a worker barges by with a cart or a mule. There are hidden riads and restaurants like Cafe Clock — established by Mike Richardson, the former *maitre d’* of London’s The Wolseley and The Ivy (I stop by, and am persuaded to try the camel burger). All of human life seems packed into this ancient honeycomb.

On Place Seffarine, coppersmiths hammer pots and pans, as they have done for centuries. I ask one of them, Hamid Filali, what his apprenticeship was like. “The

kiss was as sweet as the bite was tough,” he replies cryptically, beating out the metal to a hypnotic rhythm — bam-bam-ba-bam, bam-bam-ba-bam...

I feel like a time traveller, but wonder how long it’ll all last. Ghazali’s father was a shoemaker here, but he didn’t want his children to be. “It was just too hard a life,” his son tells me.

Chefchaouen, three hours north in the Rif Mountains, is similarly exotic. The old town here is an Instagrammer’s paradise, almost completely painted blue. Why? There are several theories — one that the limewash helps keep mosquitoes away; another that it originated with Jewish residents, who believed the colour echoed the sky, encouraging a more spiritual life. Whatever the origin, it’s enchanting — Morocco’s ‘Blue Pearl’ is like the *pueblos blancos* of Andalusia taken to another, almost psychedelic level. Brightly coloured flower pots, shady vines, lazing cats, bunches of mint and hanging rugs punctuate the backdrop.

Of course, Chefchaouen is no longer really a ‘secret’ — in warmer months, Moroccan visitors and travellers taking the ferry from Spain clog the streets (there’s no shortage of souvenir shops or laminated menus). But visiting in low season skips both the heat and the crowds — as does getting up early.

At 5.30am, I’m woken by the twin alarms of cocks crowing outside the Dar Echchaouen

You might catch the whiff of goat’s cheese, or hear the whirr of a loom. School kids brush by with satchels; men wander past, Jedi-like in their *djellabas*

ABOVE: Workers dyeing hides in a tannery in the Medina of Fez



MOROCCO

hotel and calls to prayer moaning from the minarets. I grab a quick breakfast, before hiking a 20-minute trail up a mountain behind the hotel for a view over the town. 'Chaouen', as locals call it, takes its name from the Berber word for 'horns', sitting as it does between two peaks. Walking back down through the medina, I chance on a Thursday market where women from Berber villages have laid their wares out on blankets — tiny turnips ("very small, but very delicious," as Mohamed says) and milk in reclaimed plastic vessels. Some wear traditional straw hats and red-and-white-striped aprons. I ask what kind of milk they're selling. "Moo!" replies an older lady, and we share a chuckle. With Mohamed translating, we swap little details about our children and the weather, and we exchange blessings. As we take our leave, I ask one of the ladies if I can take her photo. She demurs. "*Mafi mouchkila*," I say — using one of the most adaptable Arabic phrases I've learned on my trip. "No problem."

One place the women's turnips won't end up is in the belly of Mustafa Bakkali, whom I find flitting between the kitchen and dining rooms of Bab Ssour. Three years ago, this intimate clutch of rooms — which we enter via a small grocery shop — was a family home. Today, the same food is being cooked by the same women in the same kitchen, only now it's served to a mix of locals and tourists sitting elbow-to-elbow in a restaurant. Voices snap from a kitchen visible through an arched gap in the wall ("It sounds like they're arguing, but they couldn't be happier," Mustafa says), and I gobble up a goat tagine that arrives sizzling in a skillet and costs all of 35 dirham (£2.70). "It's the same food we eat at home," Mustafa adds. I wonder which dish is his favourite. "I eat it all," he replies with impressive gesticulations for such a small space. "Except turnip."



Some of the women wear straw hats and red-and-white-striped aprons. I ask what kind of milk they're selling. "Moo!" replies an older lady, and we share a chuckle

ABOVE: Mint tea in Casablanca

After a week exploring the cities, towns and villages of the north, driving into Casablanca feels like a return to the real world. Snarling traffic marks the entrance to Morocco's biggest city, and any romantic notions based on the 1942 movie are quickly scotched (there's a replica Rick's Bar, a gin lounge and restaurant dating from 2004, but the Humphrey Bogart classic was shot on a Hollywood sound stage). I stay for a night, moseying around the medina, Hassan II Mosque, corniche and art deco strips, stopping for a final mint tea, poured from a silver teapot near Place 16 Novembre.

It's all well and good, but I'm surprised how quickly I begin to pine for Fez, Moulay Idriss and Chefchaouen. "Hello, friend! *Bonjour!*" a hustler hisses. "Berber market? Berber market, this way!"

"No, *shukran*," I reply. □

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Royal Air Maroc flies from Heathrow to Casablanca. TAP Portugal also flies via Lisbon; as does Iberia via Madrid. A range of airlines, including British Airways, Ryanair and EasyJet, fly from the UK to Marrakech. royalairmaroc.com ba.com ryanair.com easyjet.com flytap.com iberia.com
AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 3h 15m.

Trains, buses, and *grands* (collective) and *petits* (local) taxis cover most of Morocco. Self-driving (on the right) is an option, with regular police checkpoints and a decent network of motorways.

When to go

Avoid the peak-season (July-September) heat and mayhem; spring and autumn are less crowded with fresher weather. Winter can be cold, but you'll be one of very few tourists. Ramadan is 16 May-14 June.

Places mentioned

La Colombe Blanche. maisondhote-zerhoune.ma
Riad Marjana. riadmarjana.com
Cafe Clock. cafeclock.com
Art Naji. artnaji.com
Dar Echchaouen. darechchaouen.com

More info

visitmorocco.com

How to do it

INTREPID TRAVEL offers a nine-day North Morocco Adventure, starting from Casablanca and travelling to Moulay Idriss, Fez, Chefchaouen and Tangier before finishing in Marrakech. From £530 per person, including accommodation, transport, guides, activities and selected meals (flights extra). intrepidtravel.com



ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER



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MEET THE BORDERERS

Desolate, dramatic and at times dazzling, the area around the English-Scottish border is a land of dormant volcanoes, fortified towns, vast saltmarshes and some rather horrid history

Words MARK ROWE
Photographs ANNAPURNA MELLOR

“**T**he weather’s decent. Let’s pop up to the border and look at the volcano.” It’s not really a proposal you expect to hear in Britain.

An hour later, having hiked from the small Northumberland town of Wooler to the summit of Humbleton Hill, we arrive at a cairn and are greeted by two cackling black grouse and the hunched silhouette of our volcano: the Cheviot. It’s the highest peak in an eponymous range of mountains that forms part of the border between England and Scotland.

Dr Ian Kille, who specialises in geology walks (and also happens to be an outstanding potter), patiently explains exactly what we’re looking at. Around 400 million years ago, he tells me, the Cheviot was a full-on volcano, the size of Mount Etna and busy spewing out magma; the hill we’re standing on is made up of ancient lava flows.

The landscape certainly fits the job description of a border. After our volcano calmed down, periodic ice ages left a legacy of enduring glacial hardware. Among these hills lurks intriguing rock art, such as cup and ring designs. It’s hard not to imagine the clanking ghosts of Picts, Romans, Scots and English soldiers, as well as smugglers and other ne’er-do-wells. “This is a landscape that’s been fought over in many different ways, both by nature and man,” says Ian cheerfully. “The landscape has governed the people and how they behave.”

Ian points out that, while we’re currently in England, we’re actually looking south into Scotland. “In places around here the border is almost straight north-south.”

My journey is taking me north-east to south-west — from the River Tweed to the Solway Firth — along a border that’s remained largely unchanged since it was agreed in 1222 by English and Scottish knights.

I’d begun the previous day in Berwick-upon-Tweed, maybe best known as the English town whose football team plays in the Scottish leagues. But Berwick should be better known as a mini York or Chester; it enjoys a superb setting on the mouth of the River Tweed — those who arrive by train will sweep across the Tweed on the magnificent Royal Border Bridge.

Having explored the fortified city walls (Berwick is the only completely walled town in Britain), I climb up Meg’s Mount, a gentle rise at the west end of town. The river Tweed squeezes underneath two attractive road bridges — the Royal Tweed Bridge and the 17th-century Berwick Bridge. The latter appears to be sinking into the water as it makes for the southern bank, the result of quirky engineering designed to counteract a sloping riverbed. Most gracefully of all, the view down the coast opens up to Lindisfarne, 15 miles away as the oystercatcher flies.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Northumberland
National Park

ABOVE: Local guide,
Derek Sharman

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE:
Berwick harbour and
quay walls; fishing nets
in the Berwick harbour;
ageing Victorian
architecture of Berwick;
Berwick’s steep streets



BERWICK & BEYOND

Berwick-upon-Tweed is a Georgian wonderland, extremely easy on the eye with cobbled, steep streets boasting evocative names such as Foul Ford and Easter Wynd. I wander the walls high above the quayside. The houses along Quay Walls are all graceful, all differently sized and dominated by a beautifully restored customs house.

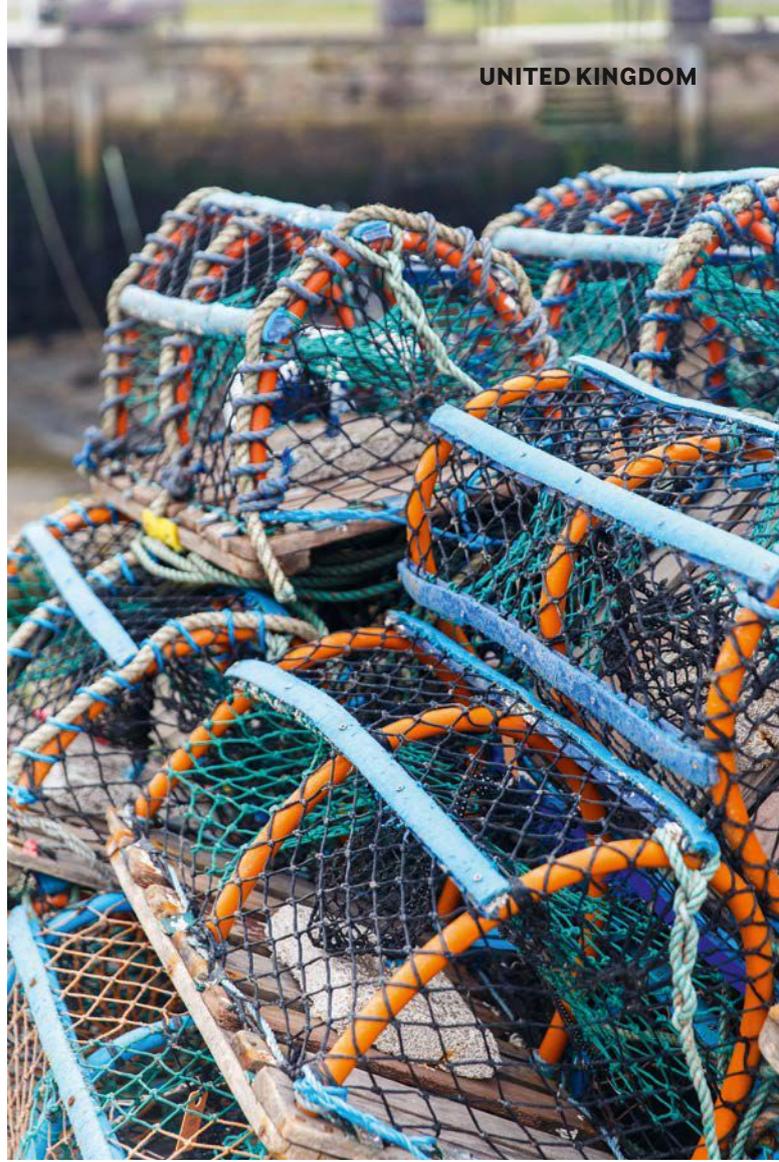
The town captivated LS Lowry, whose paintings of Berwick form an unexpectedly sizeable part of his oeuvre. Along a Lowry trail, plaques compare today’s little-changed view with the artist’s impressions of places. I stumble upon Bridge Street, a sleepy, eclectic lane dominated by Victorian fixtures and fittings. Here, a small but captivating ensemble of coffee houses, galleries, antique and interior design shops await discovery.

“The best way to understand what makes Berwick tick is to realise that it existed before England and Scotland,” explains Derek Sharman, my guide. Once part of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, it was hived off by Scotland in the 11th century. Berwick soon became Scotland’s richest town, exporting wool from monastic centres. This didn’t go down well with the English kings and in 1296 Edward I besieged the town. Known as the ‘Hammer of the Scots’, Edward hammered Berwick more than anywhere else. The town became English but was to change hands 13 times before becoming English once and, one assumes, for all in 1482.

Not all the border points are quite so dramatic. Five miles west of Berwick near the village of Paxton, I seek out an innocuous grassy lane, a dead-end that runs into the Tweed. Barely four yards from hedge to hedge, this is the Bounds Road, the west verge Scottish, the eastern English. It’s a border you can jump across. Should a hard border ever be established between England and Scotland — an idea not quite as preposterous as it may have seemed even two years ago — this spot is the sort of place that will simply disappear.

A few minutes later I cross the Tweed and the border again, this time by the diminutive Chain Bridge. Just above the bridge, in England, is the Robson family’s Chain Bridge Honey Farm, which deserves a place in the pantheon of the world’s great little visitor attractions. The farm has 2,000 hives scattered across both sides of the borders. The photographs of bee beards, where members of the Robson family attract vast numbers of bees to settle upon their chins, is a highlight.

Border and Tweed are conjoined as they head west, passing underneath another bridge of honeyed stone at Coldstream. Here I make a brief diversion to nearby Branxton, where a monument pays tribute to the defeat of Scottish forces at Culloden in 1513. Returning to my car I pass a redundant red telephone box full of leaflets and maps; it proclaims itself the world’s smallest tourist information centre.







Just above the bridge is Chain Bridge Honey Farm, which deserves a place in the pantheon of the world's great little visitor attractions

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Steven, the beekeeper at Chain Bridge Honey Farm; carefully handling honey bees; Ambrosia bee feed; just some of the 2,000-odd hives in Berwick-upon-Tweed; collecting honeycomb to make Chain Bridge Honey Farm's many products 



Otterburn Ranges

RIGHT, FROM TOP: Soup and homemade bread at The Cobbles; pulling a pint of Tempest ale from its microbrewery at The Cobbles in Kelso

KELSO TO THE OTTERBURN RANGES

Next stop: Scotland. Kelso is an immediately likeable town, at its heart a cobbled Flemish-style square lined with shops specialising in country clothing, fishing tackle and Tweed interiors. The butchers look the part too, selling black pudding, white pudding and haggis parcelled up in bacon. Nearby, The Cobbles pub produces excellent Tempest ale from its microbrewery, while a few paces away lie the modest but impressive ruins of Kelso's 11th-century abbey, its sandstone tinged with the malachite green of lichens.

Now it's time to head south. I cross the exhilarating border crossing of Carter Bar — 1,370ft-high, big skies, bog, little else — and head for the Otterburn Ranges. Pushing up hard against the Scottish border, Otterburn is England's Empty Quarter, a region of staggering isolation, home to ravens, peregrine falcons and the British army.

Otterburn happens to be the UK's second-largest military training area and up to 30,000 British and NATO troops train here each year. Despite frequent pummelling this remains a land of great beauty, brimming with nature reserves. The Ministry of Defence claims Otterburn's wildlife is more



Otterburn is England's Empty Quarter, a region of staggering isolation, home to ravens, peregrine falcons and the British army

special because the public has limited access; environmentalists aren't so sure, pointing out that areas of heather have been ignited by ordnance.

When the red flags are up you can't enter the interior of Otterburn but instead must stick to the Upper Coquetdale valley. I follow a sensational single-track road from Harbottle to Redesdale that doughtily contours alongside the river and the northern rim of the training area. Steep hills rise at the angle of repose to unseen summits. In summer, internationally rare upland hay meadows are transformed into sparkling colour, bursting with wildflowers.

The red flags are up and rather surreal interludes follow. Military helicopters whirring at disconcerting angles above



razor-sharp crags; soldiers on manoeuvres who nod politely; notices that caution me to 'drive slowly, children playing' (a reference to the super-remote hill farm families that rear sheep here); and a sweetshop in the Star Inn at Harbottle. Another sign, a MOD one this time, invites visitors to 'enjoy your visit'. On closer inspection this turns out to be a useful interpretation board, which not only explains the dos and don'ts of access to military land but invites me to walk it, highlighting trails and Iron Age and Roman camps.

At the old Roman camp of Chew Green, I hike uphill for 10 minutes to reach the border ridge and come across the Pennine Way. This feels, and looks, how the edge of two nations should.

Whoever said that Britain was densely populated? They clearly haven't stood here. I continue to wind my way west, past the emptiness of Kielder water, with nothing but conifer forests, wild fells and gentle farmland for miles around. At a wildly winding and pot-holed road in the hamlet of Deadwater I cross the border for the umpteenth time, and soon afterwards am confronted by the M6. I feel like a member of a first-contact tribe emerging from the Amazon rainforest.

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Photo Credit: Hadrian's Wall (Graeme Peacock)

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CARLISLE TO THE SOLWAY FIRTH

Unable to resist an urge to become reacquainted with my fellow human beings, I spend the day in Carlisle. Like Berwick, the town has changed nationalities a dozen or so times and my guide, John Robson, believes this historic schizophrenia remains in the town psyche. “Carlisle has always been a Royalist town with loyalties to England,” he says, “but speak to people who have lived here all their lives and many will say they feel neither English nor Scottish, but see themselves as borderers.”

Carlisle pre-dates Hadrian’s Wall and is Roman to the straps of its sandals, with a straight-as-a-dye Roman lay-out to its streets: there’s a pint-sized sandstone cathedral of pleasing symmetry and a painted, starry ceiling; a castle once fortified against constant perils by not one but two moats; and two Tudor towers encompassing a citadel. A decent Roman exhibition at the Tuille House Museum and Art Gallery includes one of only three Romano-Celtic vessels in the country. Across the road from the museum I lose track of time at the antiquarian Bookscape, where 300,000 books are sprawled over five storeys, before following the smell of roasting beans to John Watt & Son coffee shop on Bank Street.

While negotiating an underpass I bump into a rounded stone the size of a small car. This is the Cursing Stone, on which is written

Carlisle pre-dates Hadrian’s Wall and is Roman to the straps of its sandals

a monumental and coruscating 16th-century curse — it’s really worth seeking the full version out online — bestowed by the Archbishop of Glasgow upon the Border Reivers, a lawless crew who laid waste to the region for the best part of 350 years. The curse invites ill-will on just about every single part of the anatomy of the reivers and with good reason: reivers (a term for raiders of cattle, sheep and anything else they could plunder) were an intimidating hotch-potch of warring clans and families who brought chaos and misery wherever their baleful influence fell. They often murdered the victims of their thieving, and in so doing gave rise to the word ‘bereavement’. “I’m of reiver stock,” admits John. “Even when there was peace between England and Scotland, the reivers would find a way to fight among themselves.”

I head out of Carlisle towards the Solway coast. After so much ruggedness, the scenery changes and I tumble down into wild, watery flatlands where England and Scotland seem to dissolve into the sea. Of the many remarkable fortified buildings my favourite is the stout Cistercian remains of Holme Cultram in Abbeytown. With its eight-foot thick walls (building began when the village was in Scotland, and completed 75 years later, by which time it had turned English).

The skeletal remains of a viaduct poke out across the sands. This collapsed border crossing once enabled local children to go to school in Scotland, and Scots in search of a tippie on the Sabbath to nip the other way. Vast flocks of swans and geese swoop and soar as far as the eye can see. You certainly don’t have to be a birder to enjoy a spectacle like this.

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: John Watt & Son coffee shop; Bookscape bookshop keeper, Carlisle

JOURNEY'S END

I follow Solway's Cardrunk peninsula to its most westerly point where the view across to Skiddaw, the northern summit of the Lakes, is positively cinematic. At the Solway Wetlands Centre at the RSPB's North Plain Farm I take a stroll out across Campford Marsh. I climb a small rise to survey what feels like the whole of the western reaches of the borderlands. There's bog to the horizon in every direction; even so there are endless colours provided by mosses and flowers. I get talking to Naomi Hewitt, from the Solway Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB status means the area is designated by law as an internationally important landscape). "It's more raw out here; not chocolate box country and not to everyone's taste," she says. "The thing about the Solway

is the light changes all the time, depending on if the tide is out or in. You do get that in many places, but you feel it very sharply here." I come away thinking that bog can indeed be beautiful.

At the village of Burgh by Sands stands an impressive statue of Edward I, brandishing shield and clutching crown. Him again. I feel the old brute's gaze follow me down a lane towards the sea. At a field edge I strike out across open ground — boggy, naturally, but manageable — to a monument some 500 yards away, gloriously isolated and gated, the only intrusion in a vast expanse of salt marsh. A rather austere plinth marks the place where Edward I died. The Solway Firth was used by Edward I as a base for his Scots hammering, but even he finally met his match in the marshes, where malaria finished what the Scots never could.

A couple of miles further on, I reach my own journey's end: the appropriately named Drover's Rest at Monkhill. The pub offers an open fire and proudly proclaims it has served 553 different beers in the past three years. My kind of pub. It's a remarkably peaceful end to a journey through a landscape that at times has been silently, violently beautiful, and whose history has so often been simply violent. ▣

BELOW: Solway Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Both CrossCountry and Virgin Trains serve Berwick-upon-Tweed, and Virgin Trains serves Carlisle. The 67 bus follows the River Tweed from Berwick-upon-Tweed to Coldstream and Kelso — but the easiest way to explore the Borders is by car, as some places aren't served by public transport. If you want to enjoy the coastal scenery, you can arrange car hire with Enterprise, who are based in Morpeth but will collect you from the station at Berwick-upon-Tweed. Driving can be slow, however, with few direct routes heading east-west. crosscountrytrains.co.uk virgintrains.com enterprise.com

Where to stay

Walls B&B, Berwick. thewallsberwick.com
 Redesdale Arms, Otterburn. redesdale-arms.co.uk
 Lindisfarne Inn. lindisfarneinn.co.uk
 The Halston Aparthotel, Carlisle. thehalston.com
 Crown Hotel, Wetheral. crownhotelwetheral.co.uk

More info

golakes.co.uk
visitnorthumberland.com
solwaycoastaonb.org.uk
northumbrianearth.co.uk
greatguidedtours.co.uk

The Marches, by Rory Stewart (Jonathan Cape). RRP: £14.99

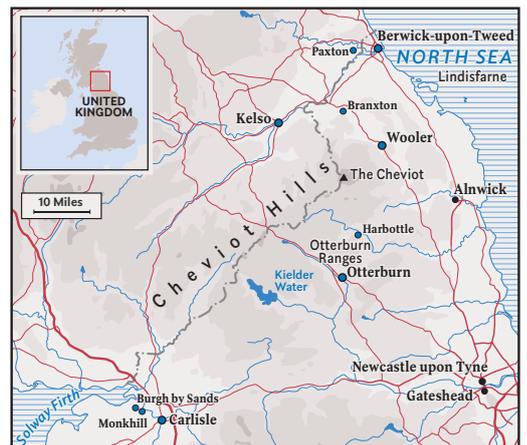


ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER



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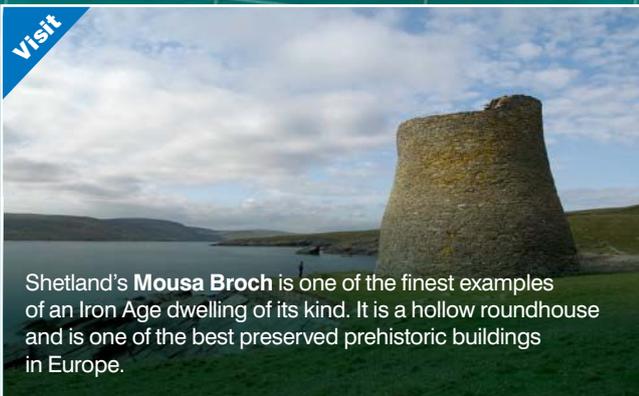
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A blurred photograph of a train interior, showing passengers and the structure of the train. The image is dark and out of focus, with some colors like green and blue visible. The text is overlaid on this background.

'I sought trains, I found passengers.'

THE MANDALAY EXPRESS

*The trip from Yangon to Mandalay on the Mandalay Express has changed little since Paul Theroux took an evocative journey through Myanmar, documented in his 1975 homage to train travel, *The Great Railway Bazaar**

Photographs **TRISTAN BEJAWN**



“The notion of travel as a continuous vision, a grand tour’s succession of memorable images across a curved Earth — with none of the distorting emptiness of air or sea — is possible only on a train.”

PAUL THEROUX,
THE GREAT RAILWAY BAZAAR



My journey on the Mandalay Express begins in the bustling capital of Myanmar, Yangon City, at 4am, in the ticket office of the Grand Central Station — talking through rusty bars, pointing at foreign symbols. Along the platform, the train herself, seemingly unchanged for half a century, lies in wait. Breathing bellows of steam — and sweating beads of water in the morning fog — she rests before the 18-hour journey ahead.



*“I’d never seen such
heaps of belongings
in my life, or so
many laden people;
they were like
evacuees who’d been
given time to pack,
lazily fleeing
a catastrophe.”*

PAUL THEROUX,
THE GREAT RAILWAY BAZAAR



Around the city, locals heave their lives onto dusty carriages, carting heaps of belongings from one place to the next. Despite the energy of Yangon, there's a calm about the train. Even as it rocks to the rhythm of the track, there's an air of quiet contemplation. A man watches life go by on the outskirts of the city, and a woman smiles, baby in arms, as she passes fleetingly on a neighbouring train.





“Anything is possible on a train: a great meal, a binge, a visit from card players, an intrigue, a good night’s sleep, and strangers’ monologues framed like Russian short stories.”

PAUL THEROUX,
THE GREAT RAILWAY BAZAAR

Aboard the Mandalay Express, life is slow — a tranquil haven in comparison to the hysteria of the city. The train is relentless in its journey northward.

Food comes to you — all manner of food — brought forth on large trays, carried upon skillful heads. Each stop, too, brings a new cast to the weathered benches.





As the train approaches Mandalay, I realise I've been treated to a glimpse of this vast, untouched land. I was greeted with the most magical faces, a genuine look at the real people of Myanmar, their warm smiles and inquisitive eyes complementing the beautiful country racing past. 'I sought trains, but I found passengers', wrote Theroux. I couldn't be happier; I found them too. □



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City life

MONTREAL

Although geriatric by North American standards, Leonard Cohen's home city is driven by a youthful, creative spirit that's coming to the fore as Montreal kicks off its 375th anniversary celebrations. **WORDS:** Sarah Barrell



I'M looking for Leonard. There's a good chance he might be here, lurking in his favourite haunt, but I can't see a thing; it's sheeting with rain, the kind of Montreal rain that seeps into the sidewalk then steams up onto windows and into trees, reducing views of the forested mountain after which the city is named — usually crisply framed at the end of side streets — to a blurry pointillist landscape. Mount Royal looms above the city — at this time of year, a sharp, fiery peak of poster-paint-bright reds, oranges and yellows, although all I can see on the horizon is rusty mist.

I'm standing outside the Main Deli Steak House on The Main (officially Saint Laurent Boulevard), one of Montreal's major thoroughfares. My attempts to ascertain whether Mr Cohen is inside are rendered impossible by the humidity-fogged windows. Seeking out arguably the city's most famous son at this spot has been something of a preoccupation on trips here ever since a Montrealer friend told me this tantalising fact about the singer-songwriter's dining habits on my first visit in the 1990s. (Sadly, I wasn't to know that this trip represented my last chance.)

Born in the comfy, middle-class district of Westmount, Cohen later decamped to a more fittingly boho apartment nearby, on The Main. Here, in this former working-class Portuguese 'hood, in bars and diners such as the Main Deli Steak House, Leonard could, according to Canadian music journalist David Sax, "watch the gangsters, pimps and wrestlers dance around the night".

In the '60s, seeking his musical fortune, he hopped across the border to New York, then onwards to LA, but the Steak House remained a frequently returned-to hangout. "He was in there pretty much every time I was," David had shrugged. "At 3am, after clubbing, we'd find him smoking cigarettes and drinking with his friends." This revelation felt thrillingly egalitarian, somehow signifying a city that truly embraced its arts and artists. Even in the '90s, Cohen's former hippy enclave, the Plateau (centred around The Main) was still thick with artful, outsider industry.

Here, where Montreal's distinctive wrought-iron staircases spiral up the facades of Victorian houses, several artists' collectives could still be found, set above thrift



IMAGES: FITZ & FOLWELL CO; CANADIAN TOURISM COMMISSION

stores where army surplus gear was racked collar-to-cuff with acid smiley T-shirts and rainbow-coloured Kickers.

Back then, The Main's Plateau and Mile End areas were home to laundromats that doubled as literary cafes and recording studios that morphed into clubs at select hours. As a 20-something seeking alternative R&R, I loved this street and it's a love that's endured; its versatile venues welcoming the young, the old and pretty much all walks of life. Running west from the docks through the city, this boulevard has traditionally been a place for outsiders. Its strip clubs and jazz bars drew Americans across the border during a Prohibition era that was largely ignored here in Quebec. These establishments gave Montreal — and The Main, in particular — something of a licentious heritage.

At Saint-Laurent's easternmost end, one of these legendary red-light venues still stands: Café Cléopâtre, the so-called 'Queen of The Main'. Today, its kitsch, Egyptian-exotica signage, advertising 'Danseuses a gogo' looks wildly incongruous flanked by abandoned warehouses and a construction site/car park. "There was a big clean-up for Expo 67," explains my guide, Amelie Rolland. "Most of the dive bars and strip clubs were razed for parking lots — which later turned into spaces where most of Montreal's outdoors music and arts festivals were born." But Cléopâtre held firm, a beacon of burlesque. More recently, when the Queen of The Main faced bulldozers to make way for municipal offices, she was saved by petitions and sit-ins by her loyal retinue of patrons, partiers and drag queens.

Tempting though it is to lose a few layers of soggy clothing, it's too early for striptease, so Amelie and I turn our backs on Cléo's and head across the road to the Montreal Pool Room to sample another city staple. Pool is no longer played in this tatty, lino-floored landmark but they're still serving up the poutine. Quebec's famous working man's dish of chips, cheese and gravy has lately been gentrified with foie gras and lobster at such gourmet city spots as Garde Manger and Au Pied de Cochon. But here it's served just as it should be: piled high on a cardboard carton, steaming like a sidewalk in the rain.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

For all its unifying, nocturnal energy, The Main is also Montreal's original dividing line. Not only does the boulevard — one of the lesser-known national historical sites — bisect the Island of Montreal from the Prairies River down to the St Lawrence River, it also traditionally divided the city's original Francophone residents from later Anglophones. It's a social division that can be seen across the province, led largely by a Francophone separatist movement that's spawned two knife-edge referendums. "Each time we voted 'no' to Quebec separating from Canada, but the movement for independence will likely never go away," says Amelie. "I have French heritage but I'm not a separatist. I'm not against it as a concept but I've never seen the benefit. I've never heard a compelling reason or convincing economic plan; a bit like your Brexit, no?"

Quebec's most recent vote, in 1995, produced a photo finish 50-49% win for Federalists. But the reign of the PQ (Partie Québécoise) during that decade saw Anglophone and international investment flee the province for Toronto. The subsequent economic slump hit Montreal hard. During my visits in the '90s, seemingly every shop

front and condo was plastered with signs that read 'à louer' (for rent). But this landscape of cheap rent, squats and free studio space — plus a longstanding government commitment to providing grants, funding and tax breaks for artists, saw a generation of creative Montrealers bloom.

Montreal musicians, for one, became an international marker for creative innovation, with artists such as David Bowie frequently border-hopping from his home in New York to plunder local recording studios for inspiration. Arcade Fire, The Dears, Grimes and Godspeed You! Black Emperor are among the seemingly never-ending crop of local bands that have lately dominated the world stage. Indie thrives and so too does electro, with Montreal now a must-do extension to the New York-London-Ibiza tours of big-name DJs. The city also finds itself at the epicentre of Canadian job creation, led in part by a thriving tech and multimedia sector whose roots reach back to the pioneering start-up culture of the post-referendum '90s.

"Most of them can't afford to live in the Plateau any longer," says Anne-Marie Pellerin, my guide through the blossoming Mile-Ex neighbourhood, just to the west. "So this is where many artists and architects have migrated. Montreal is a creative city — mostly because you can still make the things you're passionate about without being too scared about paying the rent." Anne-Marie's tour outfit, Spade & Palacio takes visitors beyond the Plateau, to explore Mile-Ex's coffee houses, street art and incredible ethnic eats. "We don't visit the big art galleries or do tastings of bagels, smoked meat or poutine. People can find these classics themselves."

Today, The Main and Mile-Ex represent something far more cosmopolitan than a French-English frontline.

***In the know** // For a great, seasonal round-up of rooftop bars, terrace cafes, city beaches and lake swimming spots (and all things cool Montreal), check out buzzy city blog mtlblog.com*

PREVIOUS PAGES,
FROM LEFT: Montréal Convention Centre; Leonard Cohen

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Artists' Row, Old Montreal; poutine, Saint Laurent Boulevard; Marché Jean-Talon covered market, Saint Laurent Boulevard



AIR CANADA 

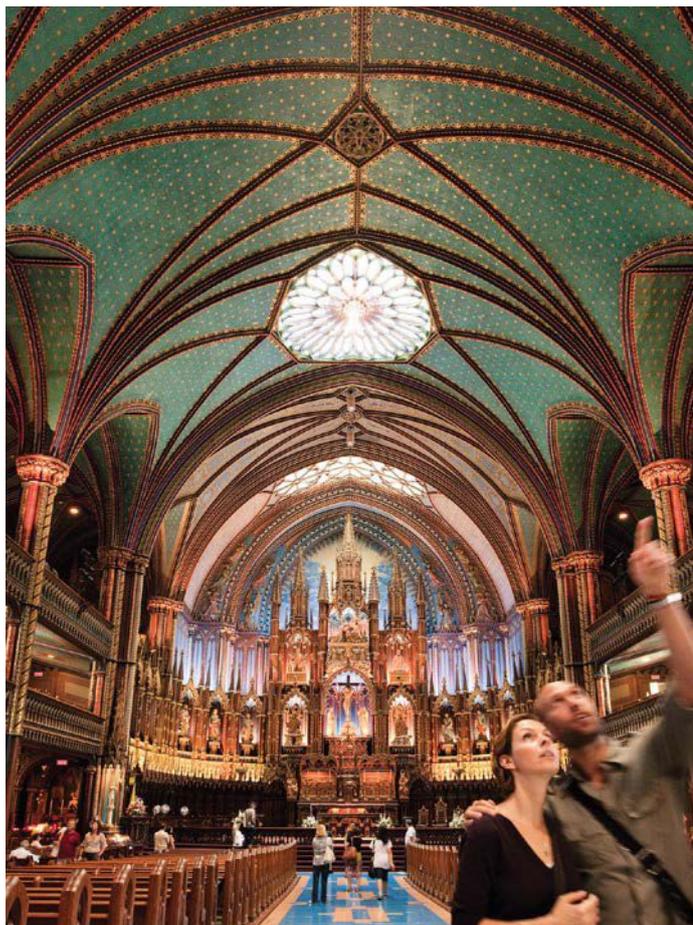
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IMAGES: CANADIAN TOURISM COMMISSION; KELLY JACOB

And while the waves of Chinese, Italian, Spanish, Latino, African and Southeast Asian settlers who came here may have moved on from their original postcodes, landmark restaurants still act as cultural markers of former ethnic neighbourhoods. Although perhaps only in Montreal will you find a restaurant in the Little Vietnam area offering menus in Vietnamese, Spanish, English and French. At landmark Salvadorian restaurant Los Planes, we snack on *horchata* and *pupusa* (stuffed tortillas), then walk off the excess admiring the hundreds of murals that adorn the walls along The Main as it passes through Mile-Ex: a gallery of immigrant, LGBT and political statements.

Fuelled by a cold-press coffee from food-truck-turned-cafe of the moment Dispatch Coffee, we dig deeper into the backstreets. Free of the strict heritage laws designed to preserve the Plateau's wrought-iron staircase-clad landscape, Mile-Ex is an architect's blank canvas. "They can really start from scratch and build the house of their dreams," says Anne-Marie, as we wander past modern loft apartments, '50s bungalows, boxy '60s duplexes and auto repair shops. And then — ping! — up pops a vision of mid-century California or modern-day Scandinavia, all picture windows and polished cement. It's a refreshingly bold North American vision, softened by the *ruelles vertes* (green alleyways) that back most blocks.

Originally allowing access for refuse trucks, these green alleys now act as community gardens, bolstered by forward-thinking city funding. I miss the chance to try out one of Mile-Ex's most happening bars, Alexandraplatz Bar, as I walk right past this no-sign former warehouse unawares — all too transfixed by the lurid murals on surrounding walls. One of them depicts scandal-afflicted former prime minister Stephen Harper as a *War of the Worlds*-style machine, complete with laser-blasting eyes and a pet cat in his arms. I suppose when you've got the seemingly untouchable Justin Trudeau as PM, satirists have to look to the past for material.

DOWNTOWN FUNK

"We really have so many creative companies at our fingertips here in Montreal," says Amahl Hazelton, of Montreal's Moment Factory. This multimedia entertainment studio has brought its arty video, lighting and architectural vision to Broadway shows, massive stadium rock concerts and even the new LAX terminal, as part of America's largest immersive multimedia airport art installation. But it's very much a Montreal company, and one selected to help paint the town red, along with myriad other colours, for the city's Big Birthday this year.

This May, Montreal reaches the grand old age of 375, making it one of the most geriatric of North America's European-settled cities. Nonetheless, this habitually youthful metropolis is intensifying its already jam-packed programme of arts festivals, to celebrate its founding. This year, Canada also marks the 150th anniversary of becoming a country, so 2017 promises a pretty momentous knees-up. One highlight of the celebrations will be the lighting of the Jacques Cartier Bridge. "It was all but invisible at night," says Amahl of the cantilevered 1920s construction that spans the Saint Lawrence River and adorns most city postcards. "So we've fitted its skeleton in LED lights that change

FROM TOP:
Christ
Church
Cathedral;
Mile-Ex
food tour

according to the mood of the city.” Quite how this interactive illumination works is a complex bit of tech mystery, fed by data sources as diverse as social media, barometrics, traffic flow, and even the Montreal Canadiens hockey team’s standing in the Stanley Cup (if their current 20-year low is anything to go by, we’re looking at a deep, depressive blue).

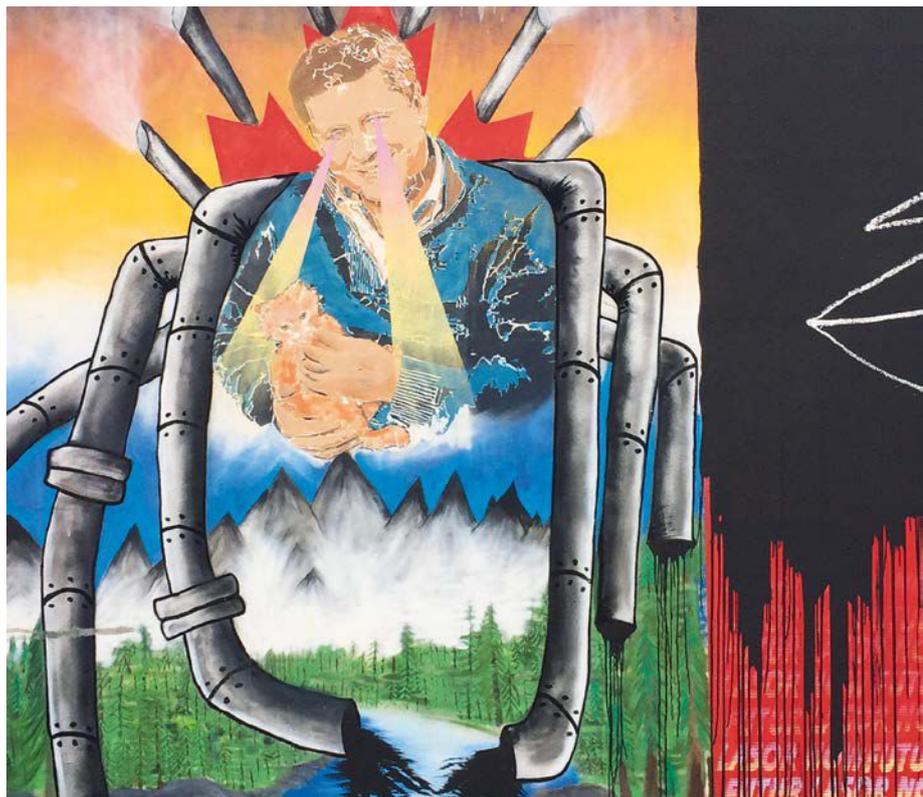
For far less conspicuous birthday renovations, Amahl points me underground. Famed in the ’60s as a futuristic ‘underground city’, Montreal’s miles of concrete subway and subterranean shopping malls can be life-saving on -20C-averaging winter days, but as tourist attractions are something of a damp squib. But this is set to change.

Amahl and I are at Youville Pumping Station, a Scottish-brick building in Old Montreal, a landmark from the city’s industrial era, where visitors learn about the city’s turn-of-the-century plumbing. It’s technically an obscure annex to the city’s superb Pointe-à-Callière Museum (archaeology and history), which sits across the street on the spot where Montreal was founded in 1642 as an outpost of France — a riverside site where First Nations peoples had been gathering for centuries before.

The tunnels between Youville and the Pointe-à-Callière Museum have been renovated and augmented by Moment Factory’s storytelling projections, and when finished will lead visitors through strata of archaeological history. And it looks like it won’t stop there, with the next project being to unearth the site of unified Canada’s first parliament building from beneath a parking lot, a few blocks up. All I can see now, though, are big holes in the road; the bearded and blue-haired denizens of surrounding warehouse hotels and digital studios going about their business, oblivious.

I pop in for a rosemary-topped cocktail at the new Hotel William Gray, whose hipster aspirations are as far-reaching as its seriously wow-factor panoramic roof, overlooking port and city. A bartender recommends the nearby Björk Digital exhibition, complete with groundbreaking virtual-reality technology added especially for the Montreal leg of this show’s world tour. But it’s time-specific tickets only, so to kill time I wander down to the docks — where I finally find Leonard.

Part of the City’s 375th celebrations include the Cité Mémoire — a sound and light show in which a tableaux of events from Montreal’s history is projected onto



ABOVE: Street art in the Mile-Ex neighbourhood

buildings, trees and silos; the displays activated on demand by phones and tablets via a free app. As I pass, a sweeping projection of a barefoot girl curls and twirls up the side of the port’s clock tower, in front of which a crowd has gathered. I’m handed some headphones by a kindly fellow spectator and realise the girl is dancing to Cohen’s words:

*Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river,
You can hear the boats go by, you can spend the
night forever
And you know that she’s half-crazy but that’s why you want
to be there*

And we do. ☐

ESSENTIALS

Getting there and around

Airlines offering nonstop flights from Heathrow to Montreal include Air Canada, Air Transat and British Airways. ba.com aircanada.com airtransat.com
AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 7h 30m.

The city’s underground system, Montreal Metro, covers most of the city, with buses filling the gaps.

When to go

Year-round, although summer (arts festival season) is glorious, with the mercury regularly hitting the 30Cs.

Places mentioned

Main Deli Steak House. maindelisteakhouse.com
Garde Manger. gardemanger.ca
Au Pied de Cochon. aupieddecochon.ca
Spade & Palacio. spadeandpalacio.com

Los Planes. losplanesrestaurant.com
Dispatch Coffee. dispatchcoffee.ca
Alexandraplatz Bar. alexandraplatzbar.com
Pointe-à-Callière. pacmusee.qc.ca
Hotel William Gray. hotelwilliamgray.com
Cité Mémoire. montrealenhistoires.com

More info

tourisme-montreal.org
uk-keepexploring.canada.travel
375mtl.com

How to do it

Le Saint-Sulpice Hôtel Montréal, in Old Montreal, has doubles from C\$189 (£115). lesaintsulpice.com
Canadian Affair has four nights, including hotel and flights, from £566 per person. canadianaffair.com

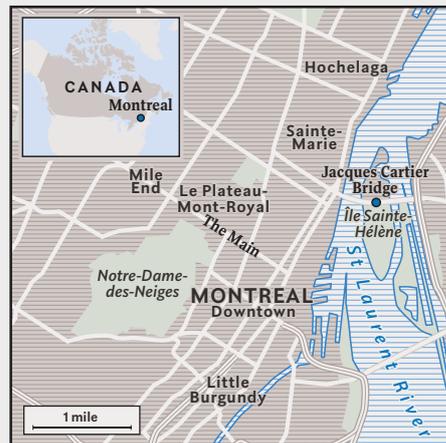


IMAGE: SARAH BARRELL. ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

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City life

ANTWERP



A pretty Flemish city that's wholeheartedly embraced the modern day, Antwerp is a trend-setting, diamond-flashing, bustling port showing Belgium at its absolute best

WORDS: David Whitley **PHOTOGRAPHS:** Pascal Mannaerts

Few great European cities fall under the radar as much as Antwerp. So, arriving here and finding it to be a properly outward-looking, bona fide world city comes as something of a surprise. And a pleasant one, at that. It's remarkably small to fit into that category — the population is just a smidge over 500,000 — but all efforts to take it down a grade seem to fail. It's the second-biggest port in Europe, the centre of the world's diamond industry and among the globe's fashion capitals.

It also has an unapologetically international population, representing 174 countries, while being simultaneously historic and industrial. And crucially, it doesn't get chippy about not being lumped in with the big boys — it has enough self-confidence to know which tier it belongs to, even if the rest of the world refuses to acknowledge it.

Antwerp's boom time came in the 16th century, when it blossomed as a trading port. But, unlike other once-mighty Belgium cities, it has constantly rebooted to stay relevant, rather than accept an inevitable decline and hustle a living as a giant open-air museum.

That's not to say it doesn't have pretty Flemish architecture — its historic centre is replete with tiered roofs. And it has more than its fair share of old master art to fall back on, with Rubens — who called the city home — furnishing just about every historic building with fulsome, buxom paintings.

But Antwerp doesn't stick to Ye Olde for long. It has an edge that slashes at any bimbly cosiness appearing. Shabbiness laps at the fringes, and the furiously contemporary is welcomed more than the dodderingly antique. To the north of the centre, the striking Museum aan de Stroom complex soars upwards among the centuries-old docks, while Zaha Hadid's shimmering topping to the Port Authority building offers splendidly daring iconoclasm.

All the hallmarks of exquisite Belgianness are here — chocolate shops, pubs serving the best beers in the world, fries being wolfed down on every corner as though they're some sort of divine life force — but Antwerp doesn't sit back on that. It's not a lazy city, and in 50 years from now, it'll probably have found a completely new field in which to punch well above its weight.



PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Antwerpen-Centraal
station hall

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Hiring boots to walk De
Ruien; Brabo statue in
Grote Markt; view of the
city from inside MAS



SEE & DO

GROTE MARKT: The city's centrepiece square isn't a patch on Grand Place in Brussels, but boasts plenty of charm with the imposing town hall and ziggurat-topped old guild houses. The racy yet gory Brabo statue in the middle is Antwerp's traditional meeting point.

THE CATHEDRAL: This soaring, 404ft-tall gothic beast has a distinctly un-gothic lack of austerity inside. That's partly due to lavish stained glass windows, Rubens paintings and OTT side chapels, but mainly because it houses the religious art masterpieces of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts while it refurbishes until 2019.

CENTRAAL STATION: If it wasn't for the train announcements, Antwerp's main railway station could be mistaken for another cathedral. One of the most visually stunning stations in the world, the hulking stone exterior gives way to a vast domed and arched interior that defies easy style categorisation.

THE PORT: As Europe's second-largest port, vast banana warehouses, chemical works, oil refineries and loading docks line the River Scheldt. It's not an obvious tourist attraction, but the sight of giant cranes unloading shipping containers is strangely absorbing. Flandria runs unexpectedly interesting afternoon cruises that show how it all works. flandria.nu

DE RUIEN: The canals that once flowed through Antwerp are now underground and home to the sewer system. But hold your nose, and you can head along De Ruien first by boat, then on foot. It's uncompromisingly squelchy and unglamorous (wellies are a must), but provides an oddly fascinating perspective on the city. ruien.be

ZURENBORG: A largely residential area to the south east of the centre, Zurenborg has one of the world's great concentrations of art nouveau architecture. Waterloostraat offers wrought-iron balconies, natural motifs and sumptuous curves, while Cogels Osylei veers into other styles, but almost every building has the wow factor.

MAS: The Museum aan de Stroom became an instant landmark upon opening in 2011. The permanent collection inside employs sweeping themes — life and death, or power — to display its anthropology-heavy artefacts. The presentation is impressive, and the views from the top of the building are the best in town. mas.be
THE RED STAR LINE MUSEUM: Over two million Europeans passed through Antwerp on their way to a new life in the US after 1800. This museum tells the stories of the mass migration, the gambles taken and the often shattered dreams at the other end. It is, quite frankly, brilliant. redstarline.be

Handy history // *The name 'Antwerpen' allegedly derives from 'hand werpen' (hand-throwing). This relates to the story of mythical Roman soldier Silvius Brabo who was said to have slain a giant and thrown his hand in the river. Grote Markt's Brabo statue depicts this story*



TABLE FOR TWO

Experience two world-class restaurants in one of Hong Kong's most exceptional hotels, Kowloon Shangri-La



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At Angelini, Italian cuisine takes centre stage. With just 69 covers, guests are promised an intimate but thoroughly Italian affair, with the skilful cuisine of **CHEF**



FROM TOP: Panoramic views from Angelini, Kowloon Shangri-La; Hokkaido scallop carpaccio with exotic fruit & organic garden vegetables; Steamed French Brittany blue lobster with konjac and garlic trio

ALESSANDRO ANGELINI. His simplistic and authentic recipes are inspired not just by his native Rimini, but Italy's national larder as a whole, and his dishes feature fresh produce shipped from Italy every week, including herbs and a variety of olive oils. A dedicated sommelier oversees over 100 labels of red and white wine, ensuring expertly chosen accompaniments to the exquisite plates. Stylish and contemporary, the **AWARD-WINNING** restaurant seduces with its warm ambience and elegant decor — and the sublime views of Hong Kong's skyline are hard to beat.



SHANG PALACE and **ANGELINI**, Kowloon Shangri-La, 64 Mody Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong T: +852 2721 2111 shangri-la.com/kowloon



The barmen at Dogma cocktail bar

BELOW: Feestzaal shopping centre on Meir

AFTER HOURS

KULMINATOR: This shambles of a place, almost subsumed in clutter — glasses and bottles — is all about the beer. It feels like a big garden shed with tables crammed in, but offers pretty much every beer in Belgium. *Vleminkveld 32. T: 00 32 32 32 45 38.*

BARAVIN: An unassuming wine bar with terrace tables on a street ideal for people-watching. The restored stucco ceilings and wall paintings give it 19th-century character and there's a mini art gallery at the back. *Minderbroedersrui 31. T: 00 32 474 22 75 86.*

DOGMA: Candlelit and with big leather seats, this is an A-grade cocktail bar. The menu includes low-alcohol options, fruity tikis and some seriously whisky- and vermouth-heavy efforts. *dogmacocktails.be*

SLEEP

There's a mix of business-leaning and design hotels, clustered near Centraal station.

THE PARK INN: This three-star hotel is comfortable and reasonably priced. You also get free use of the pool at the nearby Radisson. *parkinn.com/hotel-antwerpen*

THE ELZENVELD: Set inside an old church and convent complex, it feels tranquilly cut off from the world. Rooms are a little spartan, but the peaceful courtyards and atmospheric creaky floorboards make up for it. *elzenveld.be*

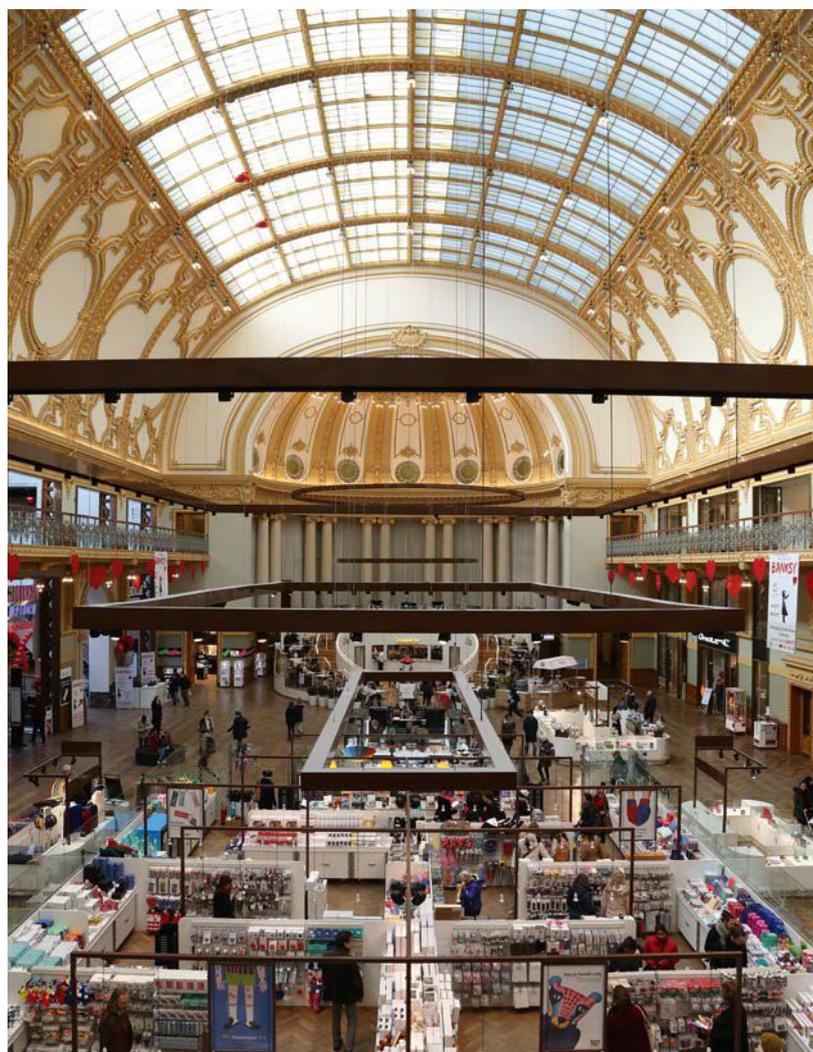
HOTEL JULIEN: Church-like ceiling paintings, airy rooms with Serge Gainsbourg prints and a basement spa all add to the Julien's cool feel. It looks great without ever feeling calculatingly cold. *hotel-julien.com*

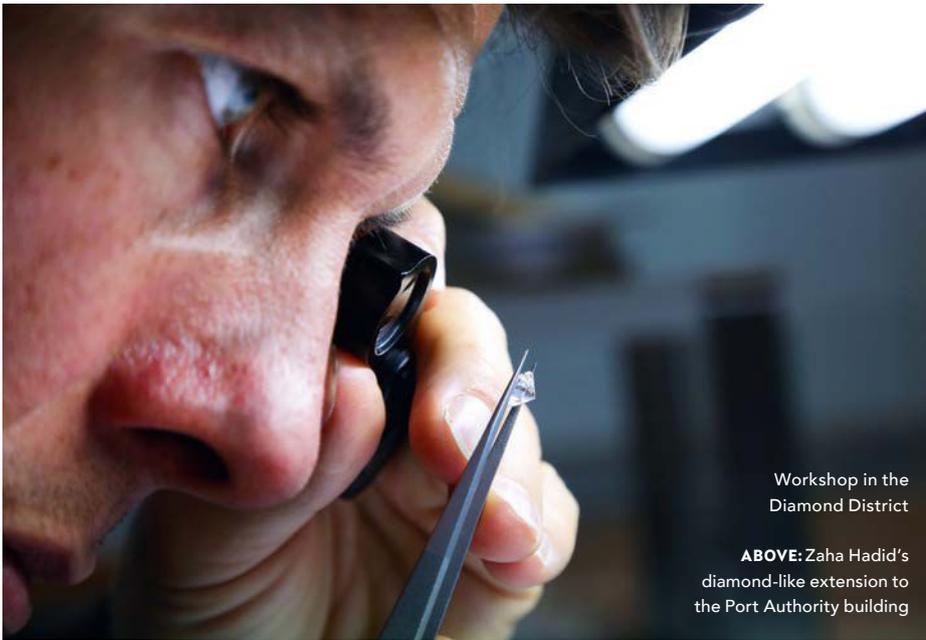
EAT

LOA: The concept — street food from around the world, whether pad Thai, meatball-stuffed Moroccan pancakes or pulled-pork sandwiches — is great. The setting, with little metal chairs on a lively square, ain't bad either. *loa.be*

DE GROOTE WITTEAREND: A former convent with a marvellous, arch-lined central courtyard. Come here for trad Flemish stews washed down by excellent beers. Very atmospheric too. *degrootewittearend.be*

THE JANE: Book well in advance for this Michelin-starred, tasting menu-only treat. It's become the pride and joy of the Green Quarter project — a heartening park-ification transformation of a gigantic military hospital complex. *thejaneantwerp.com*





Workshop in the Diamond District

ABOVE: Zaha Hadid's diamond-like extension to the Port Authority building



LIKE A LOCAL

DAGERAADPLATZ: At the heart of Zorenblum, this is one of those squares every traveller wants to stumble upon. It's tourist-free, but surrounded with restaurants and bars; everything from Egyptian to Japanese cuisine, from casual cocktails to white-tablecloth dining. The perfect place if you're not quite sure what you fancy.

SUNDAY TRAUMA: It's a big shopping city, but don't save that shopping for Sunday as almost everywhere will be closed. On the first Sunday of every month, however, there's an inexplicable special dispensation.

LINKEROEVER: The left bank of the Scheldt is quieter, greener and often used as somewhere to have a picnic with a great view of the city skyline. Good luck hunting down a bridge to get over there, though — the only way across is via the Sint-Anna pedestrian tunnel that dips underwater from the city centre.



BUY

MEIR: Antwerp's main shopping street is where the department stores and international chains cluster. The likes of Zara, Uniqlo, Levi's, Urban Outfitters and H&M make it the place for a one-hit shopping spree.

HET MODEPALEIS: The most interesting shopping district, though, is just to the south in Sint Andries; many of the internationally recognised local designers have their flagship stores here. Het Modepaleis is one — Dries van Noten's uncompromisingly bold designs are great to window-shop, even if beyond the wallet's boundaries. *driesvannoten.be*

THE DIAMOND DISTRICT: Around 84% of the world's uncut diamonds and half of its polished diamonds are traded in Antwerp. But the focus is wholesale, rather than direct to customer. This makes the Diamond District rather dowdy. If you're after bling, seek out the 'Most Brilliant' logo — marking out the city's most reputable dealers.

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

The Eurostar from London St Pancras is the easiest option. It stops at Brussels with connections to Antwerp included in the price. Cityjet flies from London City to Antwerp. Brussels Airlines flies there from Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh and Belfast-City. *brusselsairlines.com eurostar.com cityjet.com*

AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 1hr 5min.

AVERAGE TRAIN TIME: 3hr 30min.

Both Antwerp's tram network and buses are covered by the same tickets, which are cheaper if bought before boarding. Go for the Antwerp City Card for free public transport and museum entry: €27 (£23) for 24 hours, €35 (£30) for 48 hours or €40 (£34) for 72 hours. Taxis are rather scarce, and expensive.

When to go

It's warmest between May and September (boat cruises only run then, too) but winter city break deals are worth looking at; the city is about much more than the weather.

More info

visitantwerpen.be

visitflanders.com

thisisantwerp.be

Lonely Planet Belgium and Luxembourg. RRP: £14.99.

How to do it

SUPERBREAK has three nights at the Diamond District's Leonardo Hotel with return Eurostar tickets from London from £200 per person. *superbreak.com*

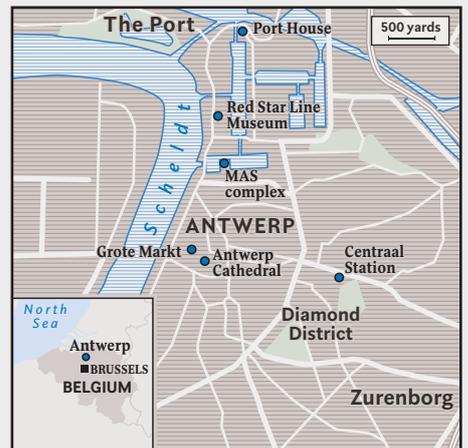


ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

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DETAILS: A 14-night holiday including three nights' accommodation in Melbourne and nine nights in Tasmania (plus car hire in Tasmania), and free full-day Yarra Valley Wine Experience. Year-round UK departures. Price after discount from £1,797 per person.



CITY, REEF & RAINFOREST

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DETAILS: A 15-night holiday with flights and accommodation. Enjoy four nights in Sydney, five nights in Cairns and four nights in Melbourne with free selected tours throughout. Various UK departures. Price after discount from £2,067 per person.



ADELAIDE, THE GHAN & DARWIN

Enjoy the forests, outback and coastlines of authentic Australia as you ride The Ghan from Adelaide to Darwin. See gold rush ghost towns and visit coastal Esperance. View the Stirling Ranges, take the Valley of the Giants tree-top walk, then tuck in at Margaret River.

DETAILS: A 10-night trip with flights and hotels; three nights in Adelaide, two nights at the Gold Coast and three nights in Darwin. Free selected tours throughout. Various UK departures. Price after discount from £2,967 per person.

READ MORE IN THE AUSTRALIA 2017 SUPPLEMENT — FREE WITH THIS ISSUE

Our reader offers provider, Barrhead Travel, was established in 1975 and specialises in all types of travel, from far-flung worldwide adventures and cruises to city escapes and summer getaways.

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TRAVEL GEEKS

ASK THE EXPERTS

NEED ADVICE FOR YOUR NEXT TRIP?
ARE YOU AFTER RECOMMENDATIONS,
TIPS AND GUIDANCE? THE TRAVEL
GEEKS HAVE THE ANSWERS...



Q // I'm going to Jamaica and want to immerse myself in local culture. What do you recommend?

My advice is to steer clear of gated hotels and resorts. Exploring coastal idylls such as Ocho Rios or Negril — or heading inland to the stunning Blue Mountains or to authentic towns like Frankfield — and staying with locals is what travelling to Jamaica is all about.

Having said that, you do have to be on your guard because Jamaica does have a crime issue. However, the authorities have taken huge steps towards allaying people's concerns and are nowadays strict when it comes to monitoring and grading accommodation.

A while back, the authorities recognised that chain hotels — which had a stranglehold on the island — were actually putting off visitors keen to experience the real culture of Jamaica. A conscious decision was made

to encourage intimate hotels, privately owned guesthouses and B&Bs (including those on websites like airbnb.co.uk), eco-lodges and charming beach cottages. In fact, the Jamaican Tourist Board has wholeheartedly embraced these new accommodation options.

Staying at a private home gives you the opportunity to learn the regional patois while sipping on coconut juice straight from the fruit, or, better still, drinking from a tankard of local rum. You'll also get to eat food from the surrounding area, which is far tastier than the bland jerk chicken you'll find at most hotel beach bars. Jamaican homes almost always have a porch, and it's here you'll sit with the owners and swap stories.

Private homes in Jamaica range from palatial colonial-style buildings with gardens, such as

Calypto Villa, in Montego Bay (airbnb.co.uk; from £66 a night), to fairly basic cabin-style cottages in rural locations, where you might find yourself lodging with a lizard or two. Try Bamboo or Papaya, two farm stays in laid-back Port Antonio (also airbnb.co.uk; from £45 a night). The latter is a good jumping-off point for anyone looking to experience the lush forests and lagoons of Portland parish.

If you still hanker after the hotel experience but want to mix with the locals, you could try smaller places like GoldenEye, where a clutch of Creole-style beach cottages surround the former home of James Bond creator Ian Fleming, in picturesque Oracabessa Bay (goldeneye.com; from £650 a night). visitjamaica.com

CAROLE FRENCH

Q // I'd like to explore a remote UK island, ideally somewhere with lots of wildlife. Where would you suggest?



How about Fair Isle? This tiny patch of peaty land constitutes what has to be one of the UK's last genuinely wild places. You'll find it halfway between Shetland and the Orkney islands, home to a small crofting community and huge breeding colonies of seabirds.

Getting there is a wild experience in itself, involving a two-hour boat trip or a short, blustery flight in a seven-seater plane from Tingwall Airport on Shetland mainland. Once you've arrived, you can explore teeny coves by hiking hills grazed by windblown sheep. There are also a few archaeological sites to discover, as well as

the remnants of a Second World War German plane.

Fair Isle is a real haven for migratory birds, including colonies of Atlantic puffins from April-July. You can learn about their declining numbers from RSPB scientists. Seals, whales, porpoises and dolphins are another regular feature of the summer months, the near 24-hour daylight making them easier to spot.

Stay at the Fair Isle Bird Observatory & Guesthouse and make the most of a ranger service and wildlife talks and events.

fairisle.org.uk
rspb.org.uk
SARAH BARRELL

Q // I got a cold call asking if I'd been ill on an all-inclusive package holiday in the last three years. Apparently I could be owed money. What's this about?

This is a growing problem in the travel industry. You may have heard of unscrupulous firms encouraging bogus whiplash claims, adding hundreds of pounds to everyone's car insurance. The law was changed to try and prevent fraud and reduce costs for genuine claims, so these firms have looked for new business. They can still charge sky-high fees for sickness claims abroad, so they have

settled on these cases to make money. ABTA Members inform us that while getting ill on holiday is reportedly becoming less common, the number of claims is going through the roof.

If you can prove you were genuinely ill, talk to your tour operator. If not, be aware that there are legal penalties for fraud both in the UK and abroad.

abta.com
SEAN TIPTON

Q // I'd like to cycle through the French countryside this summer, pitching my tent as I go. What are the rules surrounding wild camping?

Unlike in Norway and Sweden where wild camping is enshrined, French law doesn't look favourably on ramblers pitching up on private land. That said, it's commonly done. Regular campers recommend using a small tent, avoiding fields with crops or livestock and not lighting a fire. If you think you'll be noticed, seek permission from the nearest farm or town hall — you're unlikely to be refused. Trying

your luck does not, however, apply to sleeping in National Parks or along the coast where fines, if caught, can be hefty. Overall, I suggest seeking out municipal campsites, which in rural areas can feel akin to wild pitches. Newly launched website *homecamper.com* may be of use — hundreds of French landowners have registered their gardens and land as rentable camping plots.

AMELIA DUGGAN

THE EXPERTS



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THE GRAPHIC

WORLD'S TALLEST WARRIOR

THE FOUNDATION STONE OF THE SHIVAJI MEMORIAL HAS BEEN LAID ON A MAN-MADE ISLAND OFF THE COAST OF MUMBAI. WHEN COMPLETED, IT WILL BE THE WORLD'S TALLEST STATUE. BUT JUST HOW TALL IS IT?

Due in 2019, memorial will depict Chhatrapati Shivaji, a 17th-century warrior and founder of the Maratha Empire who's revered in his home state of Maharashtra. It's the work of sculptor Ram Sutar, 92, and his son Anil.

The statue will be built off Mumbai on an artificial island located two miles from Girgaum Chowpatty beach, in the Arabian Sea. Other proposed facilities include four jetties, a theatre, library and food court.

A similarly ambitious project is underway in Gujarat. The Statue of Unity is a 597ft bronze statue of Indian independence hero Sardar Patel, which, if completed before 2019, will itself be the world's tallest — for a short time at least.

SHIVAJI MEMORIAL

630ft

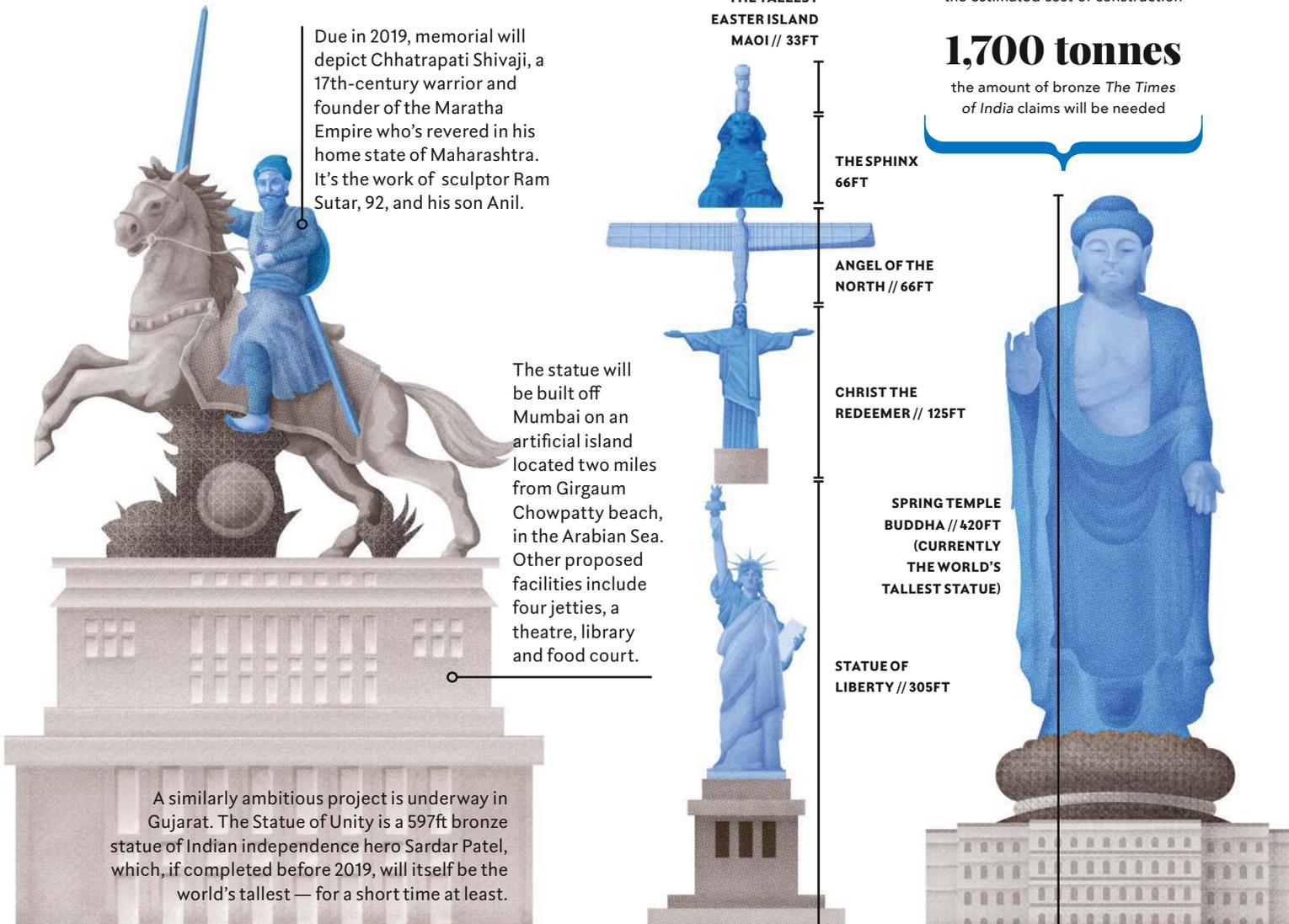
the expected combined height of the statue and its platform

36bn rupees

the estimated cost of construction

1,700 tonnes

the amount of bronze *The Times of India* claims will be needed

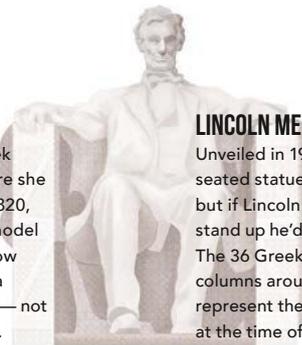


THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS STATUES



VENUS DE MILO

Named for the Greek island of Milos, where she was discovered in 1820, the 6ft 8in marble model in Paris' Louvre is now thought to be of sea goddess Amphitrite — not Venus, deity of love.



LINCOLN MEMORIAL

Unveiled in 1914, the seated statue is 19ft tall, but if Lincoln were to stand up he'd be 28ft high. The 36 Greek-influenced columns around him represent the union states at the time of his death.



DAVID

Michelangelo's 17ft biblical giant slayer is visited in Florence's Galleria dell'Accademia by over eight million tourists a year, a footfall that sends tiny tremors through the oft-restored statue.



THE MOTHERLAND CALLS

Memorialising the Battle of Stalingrad, Russia's 279ft concrete memorial was modelled on a local Volgograd girl. A hasty construction in 1967 and rising water levels have since caused it to lean.

HOT TOPIC

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE 'TRUMP SLUMP'

CLUES THAT DONALD TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY AND POLICIES ARE NEGATIVELY IMPACTING US TOURISM ARE STARTING TO SURFACE. BUT WHAT EXACTLY IS THE 'TRUMP SLUMP' AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOU? WORDS: JAMES DRAVEN

Have you been California or New York dreaming but are worried that America's strong dollar, combined with our plummeting pound, means a holiday to the USA is now off the table?

Fear not, your old friend Donald J, clearly honouring our 'special relationship', is making political moves that may result in some US travel bargains for us Brits.

Since the POTUS' controversial travel ban (designed to block citizens of six Muslim-majority countries from entering the US for a temporary 90-day period) was announced, there have been reports of a significant global drop in interest in travel to the States.

Patrick Surry, from travel booking website Hopper, released data showing that international flight searches to the USA dropped 17% on the day Trump initially announced the travel ban. Overall, Hopper has seen a 22% global decline in flight searches to the US (with the notable exception of Russia, for which demand has steeply risen by 66%).

Similarly, travel comparison site Kayak reported that UK searches to US destinations have 'fallen off a cliff'. The site released data showing an over-50% drop in searches for flights to Tampa, Orlando, Fort Lauderdale and Miami when compared to last

Q&A

HOW DOES THE TRAVEL BAN AFFECT ME?

The travel restrictions only block citizens of Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen from visiting the USA. The majority of these six countries' citizens are Muslim, which is why many, including the attorney general of New York, are calling the restrictions "a Muslim ban by another name."

IS THE BAN REALLY THE CAUSE OF DWINDLING USA TOURISM?

If UK visitor numbers to the US are proven to be in decline, it could be as much about Brexit, which has seen the pound lose value against the US dollar, making Stateside travel more expensive.

ARE TRUMP HOTELS DOING ANY DEALS?

Trump's titular chunk of the tourism industry isn't officially running any promotions, either in celebration of Donald's presidency, nor as a result of his policy.

year, along with similar seismic drops in interest for San Diego (-43%), Las Vegas (-36%), and Los Angeles (-32%).

The Global Business Travel Association has estimated that in the first week Trump's original travel ban came into effect, the US lost \$185m in revenue from visitors. Meanwhile, New York City tourism agency, NYC & Company, reversed its pre-election prediction of a 400,000 increase in international visitors in 2017, and is now forecasting 300,000 fewer tourists than 2016 — the first drop in travellers since the 2008 global recession.

So what does all this dry data matter to you? Well, dear readers, it means there could be cheap holidays ahead.

Kayak has stated that hotel prices in New York City, Las Vegas and Los Angeles have decreased more than in any other

destination on Earth, as the US tourism industry goes into panic and scrambles to attract visitors. Arthur Frommer, founder of Frommer's travel guides, is

singing from the same hymn sheet, writing on

his blog in March 2017 that tourists can now find '...airfare bargains resulting from the decline in transatlantic travel by foreigners discouraged from visiting the US by the general anti-foreigner rhetoric of the Trump administration.'

And why wouldn't British tourists seek to visit the country? Well, Roger Dow, president of the US Travel Association, fears many international travellers have interpreted Trump's policies as "wanting to discourage international visitors generally." Which means that, despite the dollar's current strength against sterling, thick-skinned Brits could take advantage of a US tourism industry on red alert... if they decide they're still happy to go.

Official US tourism figures are yet to be released, but it's clear that many travel experts are realising the States' new commander-in-chief's policies and abrasive public profile could be damaging the tourism industry.

Nevertheless, imploring British holidaymakers to keep coming, Jonathan Sloan, chair of Visit USA, insists "the variety, beauty, diversity, and friendly people of the US hasn't changed. There has simply been a management change at the top; that shouldn't impact your holiday choice."



AND ANOTHER THING... NEW ROUTES TO THE SUN

BRISTOL-THE BALEARICS

Bristol is returning to the British Airways network with summer flights to the Spanish island sunspots of Ibiza and Palma, both starting 20 May. britishairways.com

LONDON LUTON-ZADAR

Adding to its 40-strong routes into Croatia, easyJet is starting a new summer service to the quirky Dalmatian city of Zadar. Flights commence on 27 May. easyjet.com

BORDEAUX BY EUROSTAR

A new high-speed route from Paris to Bordeaux launches on 2 July, cutting the existing journey by six hours. Through tickets from London start at £110 return. eurostar.com

BIRMINGHAM-NAPLES

From 23 June, Monarch is linking Birmingham and Naples — birthplace of the margarita pizza and gateway to the stunning Amalfi Coast. From £39 one way. monarch.co.uk

GATWICK-RHODES

From June 17, Norwegian will run a weekly service direct to Rhodes. It also serves the Greek islands of Corfu, Crete, Kefalonia and Santorini from its Gatwick hub. norwegian.com

CHECKLIST: COFFEE KIT



PORTABLE COFFEE MAKER
Cafflano Klassic. RRP: £79.99
thefowndry.com



1L POUR-OVER COFFEE KETTLE
Coffee Gator. RRP: £31.87
coffeegator.com



INSULATED TUMBLER
Corkcicle. RRP: £22
root7.com



ICED COFFEE MAKER
HyperChiller. RRP: £32.99
thefowndry.com



PORTABLE ESPRESSO MACHINE
Minipresso. RRP: £48
bearandbear.com



7 ways to BREW COFFEE

WITH OVER 400 BILLION CUPS
DOWNED EVERY YEAR, IT'S NO
WONDER YOU CAN ORDER
THE DARK STUFF ACCORDING TO
HOW IT'S BREWED

1// CAFETIÈRE

Simple and stylish; there's a reason the popularity of the French press has endured. This is a fast and simple way to serve medium-bodied coffee. Presses work best with coarser grounds, which are squeezed down to the bottom of the cylinder before pouring. For maximum flavour, steep for around four minutes before plunging.

2// COLD BREW

Despite its hipster mystique, cold brew coffee is pretty self-explanatory. There are various methods, but in short: the drink is prepared at lower temperatures to traditional brewing. Grounds are steeped for longer periods in cold water, which preserves certain compounds that are lost in hot water, and then usually served cold, creating milder, less acidic flavours.

3// TURKISH COFFEE

One for the purists, a heady Turkish coffee sees coarse, strong grounds heated in a cezve, usually a long-handled copper pot. Once boiling, the coffee is poured slowly into a cup forming a layer of silky froth — the mark of a well-brewed cup — and ideally served with a sticky slice of baklava. Once finished, don't wash out the grounds; the dregs are supposed to tell the drinker's fortune.

4// ESPRESSO

Any Italian will tell you there's no other way to punctuate the day. Hot water is fired through a tightly packed filter of grounds and allowed to trickle down into small porcelain cups, resulting in

a strong, intense coffee with plenty of aroma. Pulling a good espresso takes training, precision and, some even maintain, inherent barista intuition.

5// FILTER

Forget bland American diner 'coffee', the filter method has had a much-needed renaissance. Today's elaborate, technical coffee filters can produce an excellent, rich brew. Grounds are doused in hot water, which drops through the filter producing clear, strong coffee with a generally high ratio of the caffeine extracted. It's the go-to brew for a morning wake-up.

6// AEROPRESS

As its name implies, the AeroPress uses air pressure to brew the coffee and has proven to be an affordable, simple and efficient way to get a reliably good cup. It works similarly to the French press, but differs in that the device, made of plastic, relies on finer, disposable paper filters that remove a number of the coffee solids, resulting in a smooth, strong beverage. Lightweight and easy to clean, it's a traveller's friend.

7// VACUUM PRESS

With its flask-like shape, the vacuum press looks like something that belongs in a chemistry lesson. And, it behaves no less cleverly. The vacuum — or siphon — relies on atmospheric pressure in the two chambers, pushing water up to the top chamber, before dropping the pressure to pull the coffee down to the bottom. In fact, it works in much the same way as the iconic Italian stove-top moka pot, but the vacuum press has a decidedly more 'mad scientist' aesthetic. **CONNOR MCGOVERN**

{ the fable of THE FLAT WHITE }

1980s Australian and New Zealand coffee culture gave rise to this fashionable, micro-foam pressed coffee with milk. And, no, it's not just a small latte. Milk and foam are blended evenly with the coffee (double shot), to create a velvety, strong drink that's less milky than a latte and which has none of the dense foam of a cappuccino.



Tech traveller

TECHNOLOGY REPORTER FOR @BBCCLICK AND AUTHOR OF *WORKING THE CLOUD*, KATE RUSSELL PICKS THE LATEST INNOVATIONS

DIVE IN

Swot up before you dive down, and you can maximise your time underwater using the latest smart kit and savvy divers' blogs

Scuba diving isn't cheap, but you can maximise your dive time by booking an affordable live-aboard boat trip. Diving two or three times a day can take its toll on both your kit and your body. For one, it makes continuously monitoring your nitrogen saturation levels really important, so check your tour operator provides a dive computer if you don't own one yourself.

Standard regulator mouthpieces can rub gums uncomfortably during sustained use, so try an inexpensive heat-moulded mouthpiece, such as the SeaCure (*seacuremouthpiece.com*), for a much better fit.

Living on a boat means things inevitably get wet, and most technology hates salty water. Overboard (*over-board.co.uk*) has a great range of dry-bags and waterproof phone and tablet cases that'll keep your gadgets safe and accessible once you're up on deck. If you're going to take a lot of photos it's worth remembering to bring a back-up drive and cables to offload footage from your camera. Battery packs will also prove



useful to keep your camera juiced up.

Between amazing dives it's vital you keep hydrated. The Ulla Sweetheart (*ulla.io*) is a simple egg-shaped gadget you drop into your drinking bottle or cup to monitor how frequently you take a swig. If you're neglecting your rehydration duties, an LED light blinks to remind you it's time to drink. There are no batteries to charge or apps to check.

If you love the oceans, there are lots of ways you can help maintain them for future generations to enjoy. Wicked Diving has a fantastic blog with a couple of recent posts describing numerous ways you can become more low-impact, including choosing reef-friendly sun-creams and bathing products to use during your time on the boat.

TOP APPS FOR... *Instagram add-ons*



LAYOUTS FROM INSTAGRAM

IOS/ANDROID, FREE. Instagram is a great way of sharing photos from your trip and there are some really nice add-ons available to enhance your picture-posts. Download Layout to make beautiful collages out of multiple images.

HYPERLAPSE

IOS, FREE. Capture those stunning sunsets and other time-lapse videos with Hyperlapse. This add-on uses Instagram's built-in stabilisation so you can record smooth clips without need for a tripod.

BOOMERANG FROM INSTAGRAM

IOS/ANDROID, FREE. Some moments are worth repeating — over and over again. Boomerang lets you make fun, short video loops to post on Instagram. Combine this feature with Hyperlapse and you'll be creating some really amazing clips.

SPLIT PIC

IOS/ANDROID/WINDOWS, FREE. Take the selfie to whole new levels with Split Pic. This app lets you merge multiple photos to create really interesting posts only limited by your imagination.

GET THE GADGET

Nautilus Lifeline

When diving in remote locations, safety is absolutely key. A GPS unit can provide that extra layer of security should your dive run into trouble and you lose touch with your boat. When activated, this handheld VHF radio GPS locator will broadcast your position — accurate to 1.5m (5ft) — together with a 'man-

overboard' distress signal to all vessels within a 34-mile radius and equipped with the automatic identification system (AIS). This is global standard emergency technology used by commercial vessels to avoid collisions, so this will also ensure you don't get run down if you accidentally surface in a shipping



lane. You can also link it to your own boat's marine radio, so it'll send a signal to the skipper telling them where you are, should big waves mean your marker buoy isn't easily visible. RRP: £175 uk.nautiluslifeline.com

@katerussell
 katerussell.co.uk

HOW I GOT THE SHOT

THE MANDALAY EXPRESS

TRISTAN BEJAWN, THE PHOTOGRAPHER FOR OUR MYANMAR PHOTOGRAPHY STORY ON P.134, EXPLAINS HOW HE USED FOCUS TO CAPTURE A PERSON DEEP IN THOUGHT ON THE MANDALAY EXPRESS

LIKE THIS? READ MORE

This feature can be found in our free, digital-only Photography Magazine. Issue 7 sponsored by Summer Island Maldives. iOS/Google Play/Amazon



My ultimate aim for this shot was to fulfil a narrative; which meant that I was on the search for a sense of tranquillity aboard the carriage contrasting with the mayhem beyond the train. Aboard all the locomotives of Myanmar, there was an unexpected natural state of calm, even amidst the noise and the chaos that arrived with every stop. To get this particular shot, I waited for subjects in a spot that I found interesting, but also suitable to the story that I wanted to tell. This meant riding trains for most of the day, and I waited at this spot long before the boy in focus showed up.

There was very heavy light falloff from the window, so the boy was naturally lit dramatically.

To get this correct in these conditions, you really have to shoot in manual mode. Automated metering could misjudge the scene due to the extreme shadows and highlights

To get the most out of this light, I exposed for the highlights of his face, which leaves the exterior slightly overexposed and the interior slightly underexposed. This was really pushing the dynamic range of the Nikon, but I wanted the boy, as the subject, to be perfectly exposed. To get this correct in these conditions, you really have to shoot in manual mode. I feel like it's good practise, despite being inconvenient at times, because it helps you think more about light levels, while increasing your awareness of how your camera will read that light.

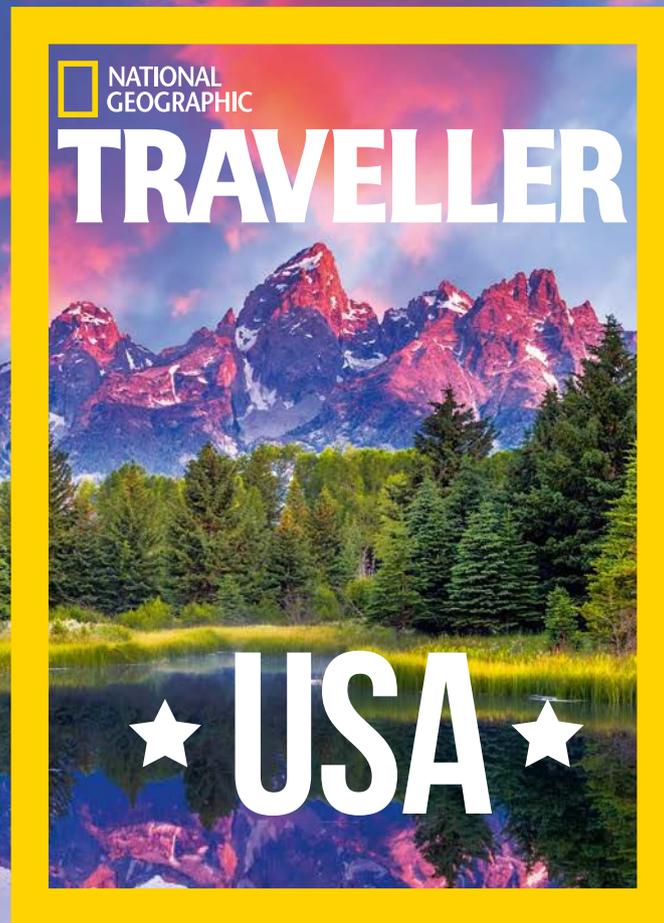
The final thing I wanted to achieve was a dynamic composition that portrays two worlds. I used a 35mm lens to give

me the width that I needed, found the framing I liked, and again, just waited for the subject to come into frame and for the right 'decisive' moment. I composed for half the frame being inside the carriage and half outside, with the dark line down the very centre.

Technically I wanted to isolate the subject within the scene, so shot at f/2.5. I also didn't want the outside to be motion-blurred, so I shot at a moderately high 1/100sec. In this case, the shallow depth of field works with the light and composition. The shot came off as I'd visualised it in my head, which is always a great feeling.

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 📷 [@tbej1](https://www.instagram.com/tbej1)

COMING IN THE JUNE ISSUE



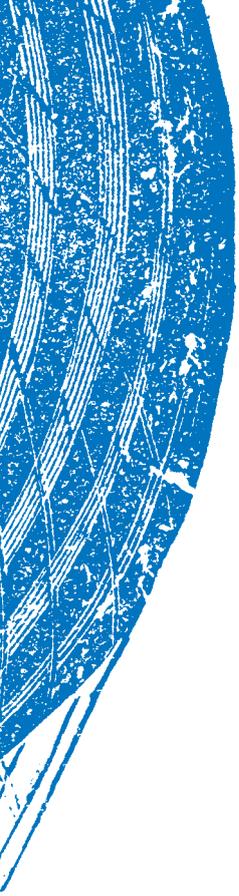
Steamy geysers billowing like bonfires. Meadows glowing red with bracken. Mountains unfurling like waves in a storm. America's natural wonders are the stuff of poetry — and grand adventures. This issue, we look at where to go wild in the USA

*Plus // Italy, Uganda, Moscow, Aarhus,
London, Portugal, Sydney & Vienna*

ON SALE 4 MAY 2017

*For more information on our subscription offers,
see page 184*





ISN'T IT TIME YOU WENT AROUND THE WORLD?

COVERING EVERYTHING FROM PUFFED UP AUSTRALIAN HOLIDAYS TO COMPLEX, MICHAEL PALIN-STYLE ADVENTURES, ROUND-THE-WORLD TICKETS ARE, AT THEIR BEST, AN AFFORDABLE WAY TO SEE A HUGE SWATHE OF THE PLANET. WORDS: DAVID WHITLEY

Things have moved on a bit since the days of Phileas Fogg. Jules Verne's fictional Victorian adventurer took 80 days to travel around the world, whereas someone feeling so inclined today could embark on a gruelling set of flights, dipping into both hemispheres and making a full circumnavigation in around 48 hours.

Doing that, of course, would be an exercise in self-punishing pointlessness. Which is why, when embarking on a round-the-world adventure, most travellers tend to give themselves much longer than Phileas did.

The 'round-the-world' has been part of the travel industry for decades, and it's slightly hazily defined — a lot of so-called

round-the-world tickets aren't circumnavigational. In general, the term is used as shorthand for a trip that involves multiple flights, taking in multiple countries and continents. At the simple end of the scale, that may mean going to Australia via Hong Kong and coming back via Thailand. At the more head-scratchingly complex end, it can involve pulling together flights with several airlines, factoring in overland sections, tagging on domestic flights and stopping off in a dozen or so countries.

Traditionally, round-the-worlds have been closely linked with gap years. Young people with more time than money can spend months hopping from place to place, perhaps working on the

way to boost their funds. The main advantage of specialist round-the-world tickets has generally been the price — bundling it all into one invariably works out cheaper than buying each flight leg individually — and partly their flexibility. Travel agents specialising in round-the-worlds have leverage with the airlines, which they use to ensure flight dates and routes are changeable for a far lower cost than usual.

For all this flexibility, however, certain established routes have formed. For many, crafting a round-the-world means little more than choosing where to stop off on the way back from Australia and New Zealand, both of which have well-trodden backpacker

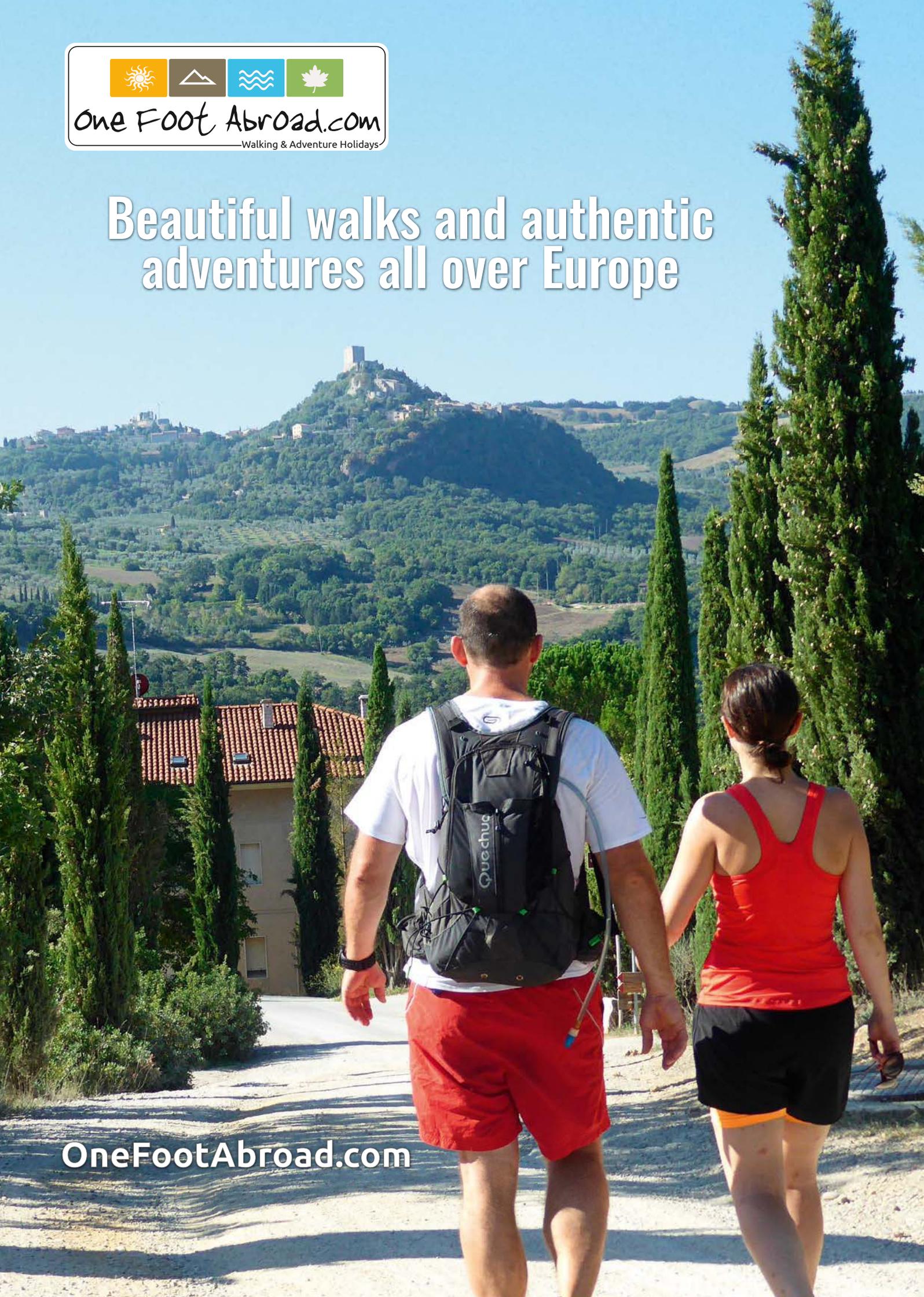




One Foot Abroad.com

Walking & Adventure Holidays

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OneFootAbroad.com



routes and working holidaymaker schemes that allow under-30s to earn money while in the country. The banana pancake trail in Southeast Asia, with ever-changing hotspots focused around the hub of Bangkok, is similarly popular. And the likes of Singapore, Hong Kong and Los Angeles regularly work their way onto itineraries simply because they're where the relevant airlines fly to.

According to Stuart Lodge, director at specialist travel agent Roundtheworldflights.com, the company's single biggest selling route is London–Bangkok–Sydney–Auckland–Los Angeles–London. But things are beginning to change. This is partly due to new routes opening up.

"There are a lot more flights out of Bangkok to the rest of Asia," says Lodge. "Budget airlines like Air Asia and Jetstar have come in, meaning people will mix and match a bit. Bali, Burma, Vietnam and Japan have been big in the last year or so."

There are also plenty more options flying from the UK, with the likes of Vietnam Airlines and Philippine Airlines joining an already crowded list of options increasingly dominated by Chinese and Gulf carriers.

In the other direction, the links from the UK to Latin America are rapidly improving, with British Airways launching routes to Peru and Costa Rica.

But in round-the-world terms, it's often the connecting routes that make the most notable differences.

"Air New Zealand introducing Auckland to Buenos Aires was big," says Lodge. "And it plays a major part in why South America just keeps on growing as a round-the-world stop."

Even the established Pacific crossings covering the section of round-the-worlds with, traditionally, the biggest paucity of options have seen increased competition, with new connections turning the likes of Dallas, San Francisco and Vancouver into plausible alternatives to Los Angeles. And the number of airlines offering other flight opportunities

than Heathrow is increasing too, with Singapore Airlines now joining Cathay Pacific, Etihad, Emirates and Qatar Airways going non-stop from Manchester.

"We also do a surprising amount of business on Norwegian," Lodge says of the low-cost carrier operating to several US cities. "A lot of our customers are in Kent and Sussex and they want to fly from Gatwick."

Tim Fryer, country manager at STA Travel, says destinations that are cheaper on the ground have been more popular this year, partly due to the devaluation of the pound. "Thailand is still very important, but places such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines and Sri Lanka are growing at a much higher rate," he says.

"Africa, as a continent, has had the strongest year in five years, while we've seen Nepal begin to come back after the earthquakes. That younger market always tends to be more adventurous and more resilient."

But the demographics of those who go on round-the-world trips are changing too. "Over the last couple of years, we've seen customers looking to get more out of destinations," says Fryer. "It's not about how many countries they can bag; they're after cultural exposure and looking to spend longer on the ground. We're doing more and more tailor-made itineraries and fewer standard ones, and these two things are probably linked."

"And the motivation for travel has changed somewhat — there's a less and less hedonistic view. Travellers are looking for cultural immersion; giving something back. They want to work and live, and are looking for increased flexibility. They don't want a rigid itinerary for 12 months."

Roundtheworldflights.com's Stuart Lodge believes those opting for circumnavigational adventures are getting older, with some taking career breaks and others going for shorter periods — say, four to six months — without working along the way.

This is related, he believes, to the growth in premium economy round-the-world tickets being offered by increasing numbers of airlines. "This is the first year that travellers have been able to enjoy



The new wave //
Round-the-world adventurers are getting older, with some taking career breaks and others going for four to six months, on comfy premium economy tickets

proper premium economy round-the-worlds,” he says. “Singapore Airlines, Virgin Atlantic and Air New Zealand now all have premium economy cabins, and they link together.

“I’ve seen premium economy tickets going for around £2,800, whereas they were often £4,000 in the past. They’re now roughly 50% — rather than 100% — more than economy tickets, and that makes a big difference.”

But Lodge says customers are more inclined to mix and match. “They’ll do longer legs in premium, but don’t think it’s worth the extra on shorter legs. So, they’ll do the smaller hops in economy. They’re prepared to do shorter flights on domestic airlines, too.”

All change

Big changes are expected in the future, with the growth of trans-Pacific routes likely to bring down overall prices, and an increased use of Boeing 787 Dreamliners escalating the number of route options — though availability on major routes may be cut.

Historically, Australia has tended to be the biggest driver

of round-the-world trips as it’s by far where most working holidays are taken. Changes here have a huge knock-on effect elsewhere, although its popularity waxes and wanes with the fortunes of sterling against the Australian dollar.

Travel agents selling round-the-worlds agree that Qantas’ recent announcement of a direct route from Heathrow to Perth in Western Australia, due to launch in March 2018, is a game changer. No longer is a stopover necessary, and those whose primary aim is getting to Oz may well ditch the Southeast Asian appetiser altogether.

Australia is also relaxing its restrictions on foreign airlines flying to its airports — with limits on the number of landings no longer applying to the smaller regionals. Hence, this year Singapore Airlines has started flying into Canberra and connecting on to Wellington in New Zealand. It’s reasonable to assume other unlikely routes will start cropping up — Qatar Airways is believed to be going ahead with Canberra, while the likes of the Gold Coast, Darwin and Cairns could start to see the

big birds arriving in greater numbers soon.

But the biggest change of all is awaiting a rubber stamp from the Australian parliament: the upper age limit for the working holiday visa is likely to be raised from 30 to 35, in conjunction with relaxations on the amount of time such holidaymakers can work for any single employer, plus a lower tax rate. Special visas are already available to 30 to 35 year olds in New Zealand. The shift from university gap-year travel to taking a year out mid-career could become more pronounced.

Then there’s the Brexit factor. If the pound doesn’t start climbing soon — or if it drops even further — an already budget-conscious group of travellers is likely to become even more so. STA notes that holidaymakers want to spend more time in destinations where ground costs are low, and they’re increasingly taking organised tours. These trends could continue.

But the whole point of a round-the-world trip is the myriad options. Which ones you take and what order you string them together in, well, that’s a large part of the fun. □

HOW TO GET A GOOD VALUE TICKET

DO IT YOURSELF

At the very simplest level, booking a return ticket with stop-offs on both legs is reasonably effective online. Airline sites and comparison engines, such as Kayak (kayak.co.uk), have multi-city options. But they’re limited dates-wise: you usually have to put the exact date in for each leg — when going one day either side may prove considerably cheaper.

CHECK THE PARTNERS

The three main alliances — Star Alliance (staralliance.com), OneWorld (oneworld.com) and Skyteam (skyteam.com) — have tools on their sites that allow you to put together your own route. However, these tend to be only minimally effective. This is largely due to the sheer complexity and number of options, but a big part of it is that many of the major

round-the-world players, such as Emirates, Etihad, Virgin Australia and Virgin Atlantic, aren’t members of the alliance. There’s also some disparity as to how well the partners work together. Some, like British Airways and Qantas, have been collaborating on round-the-world tickets for decades. But, combining British Airways flights with those from supposed partners Malaysia Airlines and Qatar Airways, for example, is a darned site trickier.

THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS

Getting a good deal requires knowing which airlines do work together well. Singapore Airlines and Air New Zealand (with a bit of Virgin Atlantic) is one such combo — and an especially handy one if you’re planning to go to the Pacific Islands. Etihad and Virgin Australia codeshare, as do Emirates and Qantas. British

Airways, Qantas and American Airlines are also happy bedfellows — and good for the Americas. Routes that combine the airline hubs, or destinations that both fly to, are likely to work out cheaper. The individual airline websites have practical route maps.

GET GUIDANCE

Of course, this is an area where going through an expert will almost work out far better than doing it yourself. They know how to get the special fares, can see how to make it cheaper by altering a day or a flight time, and can use their muscle to build in flexibility. But, having a rough idea of where you want to go can make things a lot easier.

Specialist travel agents include Roundtheworldflights.com, STA Travel (statravel.co.uk) and Travel Nation (travelnation.co.uk). Discussing your plans over the

phone will almost always work out better than playing email tennis.

TIME IT RIGHT

Prices vary massively depending on availability and time of year, with the best bargains from just after Easter to the middle of June, or October and November. They ramp up at Christmas to a tear-jerking degree. The best times to book are during the sales, usually in January, May/June and September.

KNOW THE STARTING PRICES

Deals tend to change every few weeks but, at the time of writing, a four-stop trip taking in Thailand, Australia, Fiji and Singapore could be bought for £1,099. Meanwhile, a 10-stop deal taking in multiple destinations in the US, South America, New Zealand, Australia and Southeast Asia could be bought for £1,599 in low season.

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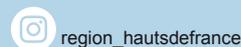
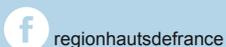


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RIDING WITH THE GAUCHOS

EXPLORING ARGENTINA ON HORSEBACK ISN'T JUST ABOUT GETTING CLOSER TO NATURE, IT'S ALSO THE BEST WAY TO UNDERSTAND THE INIMITABLE GAUCHO SPIRIT AND THE PLACE THESE LEGENDARY HORSEMEN OCCUPY IN THE COUNTRY'S PSYCHE. WORDS: SAM LEWIS. PHOTOGRAPHS: ISAIAS MICIU

The river is cold, the current quick, but my pony, Ferrari, doesn't falter, even with the water licking at her stomach. *Jote* birds sing, a vulture soars above and in the distance the 12,388ft Lanín volcano glistens, its icy conical summit piercing Patagonia's vast blue skies. It towers over the surrounding peaks of the Lanín National Park as we trek around the family-run, 50-acre working *estancia* of Caballadas, set in this wild and secluded area of the Patagonia Lake District, near the Chilean border.

Today, we're attempting to traverse one of the Lanín's smaller volcanic siblings on horseback with the help of our guide, a gaucho called Eladio. We're aiming to picnic at Lake Quillen, riding around 15 miles from our eight-bed lodge, which can be rented by groups keen to explore this wilderness frontier.

A sawmill was once the main source of employment here but when the creation of the national park forced its closure most people left, leaving only a handful of *estancias* dotted around its

forests, rivers and valleys. Now, the handful of locals who remain mainly tend to the farm's 1,000-odd cattle, using a team of 60 *Criollo* horses.

Eladio and his fellow gauchos have been up early, selecting a handful of steeds suitable for our group's mix of abilities. While some of us are experienced, others haven't ridden since childhood, but this doesn't prove a problem — the *Criollo* breed is known for its gentle, dependable disposition as much as its strength and endurance. We sit on comfy Chilean saddles, covered with sheepskin rugs and pads handcrafted by local Mapuche Indian women. Bridles are handmade from rawhide leather and we ride with intricately woven reins in one hand, Western style, tying them to trees for breaks when necessary. The ponies are short and stocky, a melange of colours and markings, all with hogged (shaven) manes and short tails (so nothing is likely to get tangled).

Fast and responsive, Ferrari lives up to her sobriquet. While happy to jog or gallop, she also

treads surefootedly over rocks, boulders, and the steepest terrain — zigzagging through the foliage, often leaping over fallen logs without a moment's hesitation.

It's November, springtime, and there's not a cloud in the vast Patagonia sky. While many gauchos wear a *boina* (beret), Eladio favours a *sombrero*, which shields him from the intense sun. Nonetheless, his face is etched with lines — clearly lines of wisdom, as, without map or compass he effortlessly navigates us through a labyrinth of hidden valleys and enchanting forests, where *coihue* trees are draped in clematis, and past *notro* bushes, whose flowers are a blazing shade of scarlet. Like many gauchos, Eladio is a man of few words, although he finds his voice after spotting the paw prints of a puma.

Throughout the excursion, a fellow traveller, Diana, plays translator. Having grown up on a farm on the Pampas not far from Buenos Aires, she's able to explain why Argentina has such a long tradition of horsemanship. Its fertile soil made many landowners wealthy, through

the export of wheat and meat. They used their money to build fine *estancias*, relying upon the gauchos — many the descendants of Indians — to look after the horses and cattle.

The interminable hours the gauchos spent in the saddle made them great horsemen, and excellent trackers. Many also became skilled cavalrymen, who defended the frontiers against European invaders, their indomitable spirit playing a decisive role in several battles, most notably during the Argentine War of Independence (1810-1818). Revered and romanticised, they became an emblem of independence and nationalism in the 19th century, and while still held in high regard, few are wealthy — a gaucho's most prized possession is generally his horse.

I'm unsure of Eladio's past but I can see he's an adept rider and like many other gauchos he looks the part in his *bombachas* (baggy breeches) with his *facón* (a long knife) tucked into his belt behind him. It's said a gaucho values this almost as much as his horse, and



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I watch as Eladio clears our path, deftly using the *facón* to cut back the undergrowth.

After several hours we make a steep descent, the lake glistening, a silent expanse that reaches as far as the eye can see. We scoop clear, icy water into our camping mugs to quench our thirst, while Agustina, our host, takes a bracing dip. Her sister, Isabel and staff prepare lunch — an *asado* (barbecue) with generous portions of beef and freshly caught trout perfectly paired with Argentine Malbec and Chardonnay. Isabel's husband, Santiago, has a speed boat at the ready to give us a tour of the lake, surrounded by dense virgin forest. The Lanín volcano reappears on the horizon — its enormity is entrancing.

For all its beauty, Santiago swears the next valley is better still. Like an excitable child, he gushes about his plans to build an outpost there in April. It would enable guests to travel here from the lodge and sleep out under Patagonia's night skies, where vividly bright constellations are easily

This new generation of gauchos is living a real life, not trying to live up to a legend; they speak English fluently, having travelled as grooms on the polo circuit to the fields of Surrey

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Trekking through monkey puzzle trees
ABOVE: Traditional tack and sheepskin covers

discernible, thanks to the absence of any light pollution.

After a quick siesta, we set off for home, followed by the family's rather eccentric old dog, Poncho. Back at the lodge — a spacious yet cosy wooden house — we sip G&Ts by an open fire, looking out the windows at a vast expanse of land.

Sisters Isabel and Agustina, whose family have lived here since 1908, regale us with tales of growing up in this bucolic landscape — free to roam alone and dive into rivers, and able to ride without stirrups, often helping the gauchos with the livestock.

Cattle drive

Keen to see the horsemen at work, the next day we accompany two new gauchos — again dressed in *boinas*, *bombachas* and *facóns* — as they attempt to move 180 head of Hereford cattle across the plateau and assemble them into a pen.

I'm given the nod to gallop over the plain and open the gate and, feeling like the lead actress in a cowboy film, I excitedly oblige. Ferarri sweats up, excited at the prospect of real work, and jig-jogs

along as we join the rest of the group, which is moving slowly to prevent lone cattle darting off in different directions. The gauchos say little, whistling and deftly manoeuvring their horses to push the steeds along, with a little assistance from their dog. The mustering goes pretty much to plan, although a blind calf proves a little more problematic.

With the cattle safely penned, Diana explains the steers will now have their horns removed, to prevent them from injuring each other. Still mounted, Eladio herds them into a corridor made from timber, from where their horns are severed using either *facóns* or saws. Before long, plumes of blood are spurting through the air. And while the cattle aren't hurt, it's not a sight for the faint-hearted, with the dusty ground, and pretty much everything else in the immediate vicinity, tinged in a gruesome shade of scarlet.

Job done, we retire to a nearby barn. Huge hunks of beef are being grilled on a fire pit and the gauchos cut it up and stuff it into their mouths using the same knives that just severed



LEFT: Sam (right) trekking with the group

the horns, pausing to sip hot *yerba mate* tea. Made from holly leaves and stems, this bitter, caffeine-rich infusion is passed around the group, as is customary here. I take a sip but pass it on quickly. Clearly, it's an acquired taste.

After a long, leisurely lunch, I follow the lead of Santiago and grab my sheepskin saddle cover and pick a shaded spot under a tree. Nearby, someone's clearly slipped into a deep slumber, their snoring syncopated with the sound of horses' tails swishing.

We're soon on the move again, this time traversing a steep-sided ravine where boulders tumble and the dust flies. Some riders are anxious but the *Criollo* horses are undaunted, faithfully following in the footsteps of the lead gaucho.

As I work with horses at home, I'm keen to discover more about the incredible bond between gauchos and their animals and to see how these modern cowboys are surviving. I visit La Bamba de Areco, one of the oldest *estancias*

in the Pampas, around an hour from Buenos Aires. Recently refurbished, it's surprisingly glitzy, with a pool, spa, polo fields and horse-drawn carriage rides and, although La Bamba is no longer a working ranch, I'm pleased to discover its location, San Antonio de Areco, is a centre for Argentine gaucho culture, with museums, shops and an annual fair dedicated to these famous horsemen.

La Bamba organises a demonstration by Martin Tata, who's famed for 'breaking' horses using whispering not whips. During his remarkable display, he balances bareback on his horse and even stands and performs handstands on its tummy as it lies upside down, its legs protruding into the air.

Later, in San Martín de los Andes, a quirky Patagonian ski town a few hours from Caballadas, I'm able to see the gauchos at work again, this time on the polo fields at El Desafío Mountain Resort. A group of

young gauchos hard at work, grooming the players' horses, warming them up, fetching fresh mounts after each *chukka* (a period of play in polo). This is a new generation of gauchos living a real life, not trying to live up to a legend; they speak English fluently, having travelled as grooms on the polo circuit to the fields of Surrey. Some may progress to become polo professionals themselves, bankrolled by wealthy patrons. While some of their traditions may have been lost, their skill with horses remains, and it's incredible to watch.

I'm given the opportunity to have a short lesson and within 15 minutes I'm cantering and hitting the ball, largely thanks to the quality of my instruction. Like the others in my group, I'm amazed at what I've accomplished in just one week. But the real heroes are our horses, of course — and the gauchos who've bred and trained them. ▣

WHERE TO STAY

Caballadas. caballadas.com
 La Bamba de Areco.
labambadeareco.com
 Palacio Duhau - Park Hyatt
 Buenos Aires.
buenosaires.park.hyatt.com

HOW TO DO IT

British Airways flies direct to Buenos Aires from Heathrow. ba.com
 Onward connections are offered by Aerolíneas Argentinas and LAN Argentina to San Martín de los Andes, a two-hour drive from Caballadas. lan.com
aerolineas.com.ar

Dolomite Mountains offers 'Beyond the Dolomites: Argentina – Caballadas in Northern Patagonia' horse-riding experiences in Argentina from November to mid-December, and March to mid-April. From \$600 (£495) per person a night, with optional add-ons via Argentinian agency Mai 10. caballadas.com mai10.ar

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Win

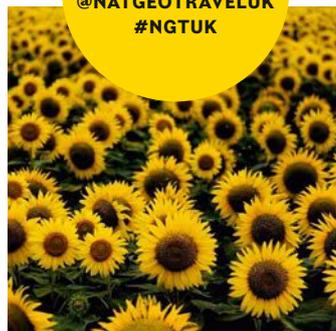
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IMAGE: GETTY



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★ STAR LETTER

Visions of Vietnam

The patience of Job springs to mind when I admire Alan O'Riordan's stunning image of a person sewing amid acres of fishing nets in Hon Ro (Big Picture, March 2017). Whether standing in waders during water puppet performances in Hanoi, or carrying out routine farming tasks or intricate handicraft, the locals' ingenuity and resilience charmed me during my time in Vietnam. Nowhere is such resourcefulness more evident than at the Cu Chi tunnels in Ho Chi Minh. Our guide told us that specially constructed tunnels had to be made for the tourists, who couldn't squeeze down the narrow tunnels used by the slender Viet Kong during the war. In the Mekong Delta we observed the threshing of rice by hand, rice-paper manufacture, tile making, tofu production and plough knife manufacture, all carried out with painstaking attention to detail. I even tried my hand at sewing reeds for roofs — but drew the line at coffin manufacture! Animals, too, show the same patience. My lasting memory is of harnessed pairs of water buffalo standing to attention amid the fields they were ploughing, while they waited until their masters finished their midday snack. **JULIA MITCHELL**



Unsung Ohrid

I literally jumped for joy when I came across your Weekender article about Ohrid, Macedonia, in the April issue. Last year, I found myself there, not really knowing anything about it; I just went because I wanted to get away. It was the best combination of cheap flight and unknown destination available, and I'm so glad that I went. I'm even happier now that it's received coverage in your magazine. It's such a wonderful, authentic, undiscovered place. On my visit, I stayed in a small hotel run by a warm and welcoming family who, I found, were representative of the many lovely Macedonians I met. From a cultural perspective, the area is fascinating, and I would recommend anyone to take the long and bumpy bus to Skopje — the scenery between the two cities is stunning, with scores of beautiful mosques dotted among the mountains. **JAMES-ALEX VICKERS**

Armchair traveller

I've seen star trails in Jordan. I've smelled the sweetness of pure, fresh cocoa beans from Africa. I've felt the thrills of the roller coasters at Cedar Point in Ohio. I've visited Japan, Australia, France, South America... The airlines should know me well, but they don't; I sit here, cosied up to the radiator, cup of tea in hand, and I can be anywhere in the world. Thanks to your magazine, I'm well travelled. **ELIZABETH SIRRELL**

Chat back

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Your Pictures

We give you a theme, you send us your photos, with the best published in the next issue. This month is 'Greece' — the theme of our April 2017 cover story

Matt Parry's take on a much-photographed scene reveals an alternative side to the Greek island of Santorini. It captures the frenzy associated with the famously romantic sunset at Oia.

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1 MATT PARRY // SANTORINI: Behind the scenes during the famous Oian sunset, where people line the walls to capture the sun dipping below the horizon.

2 ELAINE CROWLEY // ATHENS: Every Sunday in Syntagma Square, the Evzones (guards) march to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where they're inspected by their comrades before taking their positions below the Hellenic Parliament.

3 ELENA SLOTTKO // CRETE: The weather was generous in Greece and gave us plenty of days to soak in the blue skies and sea from our beachfront hotel, where we could watch the breathtaking sunsets.

For more about the next theme, details on how to enter, and T&Cs, visit NATGEOTRAVELLER.CO.UK



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