June/July 2012

WildJunket

Travel Light, Travel Far

Philippines

Remote beaches and virgin jungles: the country of 7,107 islands

Georgia

Caucasus Hospitality

Belize

Inside the Mayan world

Spain

Walking the Camino de Santiago

Turkey

Ancient ruins, traditions and bizarre landscapes

10 Diving Trips!

Great Barrier Reef, Red Sea, Maldives and more...

ISSN 2251-3477

+ Morocco | Biking Death Road in Bolivia | Colombia in Photos

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ON THE COVER Underwater Mountains (Frantisek Hojdysz - Fotolia)

WildJunket Magazine is a bi-monthly digital travel magazine with a focus on outdoor adventures and sustainable travel. Our mission is to inspire readers to travel light and travel far.

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Peru
Alaska
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Poland
10 Culinary Trips

On sale 16 July 2012

EDITOR'S LETTER

Plan Your Summer Escape with *WildJunket*

Temperatures are rising as summer quickly approaches - it's that time of the year when everyone is dying to escape somewhere hot and exotic. To help you plan your jaunt, we've packed this **Summer Special** issue with inspirational stories from sizzling destinations: island-hopping in the Philippines (p18); exploring Mayan Belize (p46); and walking the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage (p72). We've also got an adrenaline-charged story on mountain-biking the 'Death Road' (p30), a droolworthy food story on Marrakech (p66), and a feature on ex-Soviet Union nation Georgia (p38).

This issue was compiled as we traveled from Vietnam to Myanmar and Thailand, with our contributing editor Candace in Morocco and Erin, our new editorial assistant, exploring Prague. Unlike most magazine staff who are desk-bound, we're constantly out and about, bringing you stories from the road.

This month, we're extremely excited to announce that our magazine is now available in print via **Magcloud**. They are having a spring sale now, with a 25% discount on production cost! Simply order it online and you'll get it delivered straight to your doorstep.

As always, we want to hear from you! If you have any questions, comments or tips to share, get in touch at nellie@wildjunket.com.

Nellie Huang
Editor-in-Chief & Publisher

Contributors

Interested in contributing? Refer to our website for details.

Erin Ridley

Our new editorial assistant, Erin Ridley, left a marketing career in Silicon Valley to live in Spain and take a chance on love. After four years, she's now a freelance writer and blogs at **La Tortuga Viajera**. In this issue, she brings us to Georgia (p38).

Lisa Lubin

Lisa Lubin is a three-time Emmy* Award winning television writer, producer/director, photographer, and video consultant. She documents her (mis)adventures on her blog, **LLworldtour**. See her photo essay of Colombia on p56.

Mike Dunphy

Professional writer and editor **Mike Dunphy** began traveling in the Peace Corps. For ten years, he taught English in Estonia, Czech Republic, Italy, Slovenia, and Turkey. In our Travel Guide section, he shares his expert knowledge on Turkey (p92).

Mike Sowden

Freelance writer/blogger **Mike Sowden** is our 'Travel Rant' columnist (p106). His work has appeared in Mashable, EcoSalon and San Francisco Chronicle. His spare time is spent suffering on lonely British hillsides in the hope he'll live to write about it.

Sarah Gibbons

Sarah Gibbons is a UK-based travel journalist, blogger and editor of **Travelbite**. She loves to travel off the well-trodden tourist path and in this edition, she shares an adrenaline-fueled account of mountain-biking down the 'Death Road' (p30).

Sarah Reid

Sarah Reid chased celebrities for Australian Cosmopolitan and Grazia before switching heels for hiking boots to indulge her love of travel as a freelance travel writer. In this issue, she shares her experience sailing the Darién Gap on p84.

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SNAPSHOTS

Lake Louise, Canada

"The dogs erupted from the woods in a blaze, eager to race back home. The emergence into the wintery glade, frosted with still virgin snow was almost a religious experience for me; the beauty was that intense. Led by Megan, the owner of Kingmik Dogsled Tours I spent the morning exploring the backwoods around Lake Louise in Alberta, Canada from a sled, pulled by loving and able bodied Alaskan Huskies. The run was great, but that magical moment in the glade is the reason I travel."

- Matthew Long

Send us your photos and the stories behind them to **editor@wildjunket.com**

Isle of Lunga, Scotland

"Within a few minutes of crouching down near the edge of the drop, a little black and white head with a bright orange beak popped up from the side of the cliff and continued to walk right past us. It was obviously on a mission. Hundreds of them live on the small, uninhabited Isle of Lunga, in Argyll and Bute, Scotland. The puffins didn't seem to pay any attention to us and we spent our time sitting quietly while the little birds wandered around us."

- Andrew and Devon Howitt

Wahiba Sands, Oman

"The sun was rising and spilling its warm, golden hues over the dunes as I explored the sandy hills with my camera and tripod looking for some images that might inspire. Sand dunes are towering mountains of loose sand built by the movement of the ceaseless shifting winds. This one caught my imagination, it appeared especially interesting. It is not pristine but the waves and 'pinching' caused by the wind seem to give it more character. The dunes of Oman may not be the largest but they they definitely retain a romantic appeal."

- Iain Mallory

Tokyo, Japan

"I ran into some friends who were on their way to the Nogawa Park after work. Having no other plans, I followed them on their expedition. Just as I was wondering how much longer we were going to walk, I turned to find myself completely surrounded by cherry blossoms. The light pink flowers against the contrast of the black sky were breathtaking. The drooping branches enveloped us in an embrace of serenity as we exchanged quiet smiles, afraid to disturb the peace of the delicate blossoms."

- Erica Jordan

Peanut Farmers, Mali

"Mali is a country that has been on the news for all the wrong reasons. Despite this, the optimistic and vivacious disposition of the people shines through and because of that Mali has been one of my favourite countries to visit as a photographer. This photograph shows best friends Baro and Korika collecting peanuts on their farm after benefiting from a small loan from one of the Methodist Relief and Development Fund's (MRDF) Malian partners. It reminds me of how much we have to learn from people who may be poor materially but rich in their attitude towards life."

- Laura Cook

INTO the BLUE

10 Diving Expeditions

1 Isle to Isle, Maldives

Boasting a plethora of stunning marine life, dive sites in Maldives are well-known as the best in the world. With visibility of up to 50 meters, they appeal to all divers of different levels. Some of the best dive sites include Kuredhu Kandu, famous for its grey reef sharks and barracudas; and Kudarah Thila, featuring steep drop-offs. **Maldives Dive Travel** offers all sorts of liveaboard cruises, ranging in price and comfort level. Itineraries are not fixed, and are decided according to prevailing weather and current conditons. Island visits are included, with a special dinner served on an uninhabited island.
Tour operator: **Maldives Dive Travel**
Departures: year-round
Duration: 6-13 days
Cost: $1,295 - $3,730

2 Retrace Darwin's Footsteps, Galápagos Islands

The *Full Liveaboard Diving Cruise* tour offered by **Galasam** takes you around the northern Darwin and Wolf islands for 17 different dives. Get close to large schools of hammerhead sharks, blow bubbles with playful sea lions and admire the gracefulness of the rays and sea turtles — the array of endemic marine animals in the Galapagos is impressive. The luxury catamaran cruises provide an intimate experience with up to 16 passengers, with all meals, diving equipment and transportation included.
Tour operator: Galasam Tours and Cruises
Departures: Jun 1 - Dec 31 and Jan 1 - May 30 (low season)
Duration: 8 days
Cost: $3,995 to $4,295

3 Cavern Adventures, Solomon Islands

Sail around three main groups of islands (Florida Islands, Russell Islands, and Marovo Lagoon in the New Georgia Group) with supreme conditions for underwater photography and muck diving. With up to five or more dives per day, you'll get to see sharks and turtles, and in the shallow depths, octopus and anemones. Highlights include channel and cavern diving, the chance to swim through an island on the surface inside a jungle canopy, wreck dives and arranged visits to the villages.
Tour operator: Bilikiki Cruises
Departures: April-December
Duration: 7-14 days
Cost: $2,849 to $5,698

4 Dive the Great Barrier Reef, Australia

Stretching more than 2,300 km along the coast of Queensland, the Great Barrier Reef is a complex ecosystem of around 2900 reefs. In the remote northern sector 10 string shaped coral reefs, 'The Ribbon Reefs', provide some of the most stunning tropical reef diving in the world. Hundreds of kilometers beyond that, the Coral Sea harbours the remnants of ancient volcanoes. Diving the remote regions of these two areas requires you to join a liveaboard scuba diving tour and **Spirit of Freedom** is a great option for its luxurious facilities and safety standards.
Tour operator: Spirit of Freedom
Departures: year-round
Duration: 3-7 days
Cost: $1,560 to $4,560

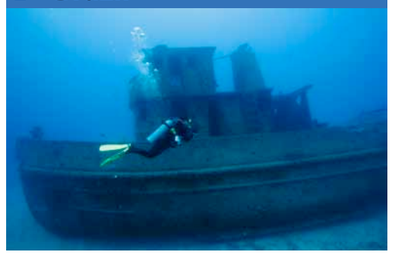
5 Underwater Volcanic World, Hawaii

Cruise the coast of Kona on the Big Island of Hawaii onboard the luxurious *Kona Agressor II* and enjoy an unlimited number of dives (as per PADI safety standards). What draws scuba-divers are the lava arches, volcanic tunnels and submerged craters - such as the 200-feet 3 Room Cave and Au Au Crater boasting dramatic topography inhabited by nudibranches and white-tip sharks. At night, huge manta rays congregate off the Kona Surf Hotel to feed on plankton, so be sure to get your flashlights ready for the spectacle. All meals, local alcoholic drinks, airtanks and equipment are included.
Tour operator: US Dive Travel
Departures: year-round
Duration: 7 days
Cost: $2,435 - $2,635

6 Wreck Glory, Cayman Islands

Many diving trips in the Cayman Islands are offered a la carte, meaning that they are usually day-trips dependent upon the tank. But **Divers Down** offers a small-group dive package that includes 2 boat dives per day - a guided wall dive in the morning and a shallow dive or wreck in the afternoon. Packages also include a dive in the recently sunken de-commissoned naval ship, the Kittiwake, located off the coast of the Seven Mile Beach. You'll have the chance to explore the engine room and dive locker, or check out the bridge only 20 feet below the water's surface.
Tour operator: Divers Down
Departures: year-round
Duration: 3 to 5 days
Cost: $355 - $525

7 UNESCO Wonders, Brazil



This South American archipelago of 21 islands off the coast of Brazil is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Home to resident pods of spinner dolphins, the waters of the Fernando de Noronha marine preserve are also filled with sea turtles, spotted eagle rays, stingrays, spiny lobsters, and nurse sharks. **Atlantis Divers** has three main itineraries for its 7-day liveaboard: northern route (through the Rio Grande do Norte coast), southern route and western route. Other special itineries including photography dive trips and 3-day liveaboards can be arranged.
Tour operator: Atlantis Divers
Departures: October to April
Duration: 7 days
Cost: $2,100

8 Beneath the Red Sea, Egypt

Not only will you get to tour the Giza pyramids and Sphinx, you'll be visiting some of the top dive sites in Dahab, with **On the Go Tours**. You'll be doing mostly shore-diving, where coral reefs and lagoons fringe the coastline of the Red Sea. Some of the classic sites include the Blue Hole, blessed with a rich sloping coral reef garden. Experienced divers can take a cliff dive at The Bells, a true vertical wall, full of overhangs and fissures, with several swim-throughs and cavelets. This value package includes 10 dives over 5 days as well as diving tanks, guide, accommodation and transportation.
Tour operator: On the Go Tours
Departures: year-round
Duration: 10 days
Cost: $859 (min. 2 passengers)

9 Lagoons and Atolls, Belize

With a program that offers 18 dives per person, you'll be spending quite a bit of time underwater in the Atolls, islets that linger around the central lagoon near Belize. There are over 60 dive sites to choose from for their weekly dive packages. Included in your tour is a day-trip to the famous Blue Hole site and Lighthouse Reef. Amidst the sandy ledges and sheer walls of the Atolls, you'll spot eagle rays, sharks, turtles, dolphins, and moray eels. The **Turneffe Flats** dive team is led by Belize's Tour Guide of the Year, Alex Edwards, who guarantees top quality service and safety.
Tour operator: Turneffe Flats
Departures: year-round
Duration: 7 days
Cost: $1,945-$2,095

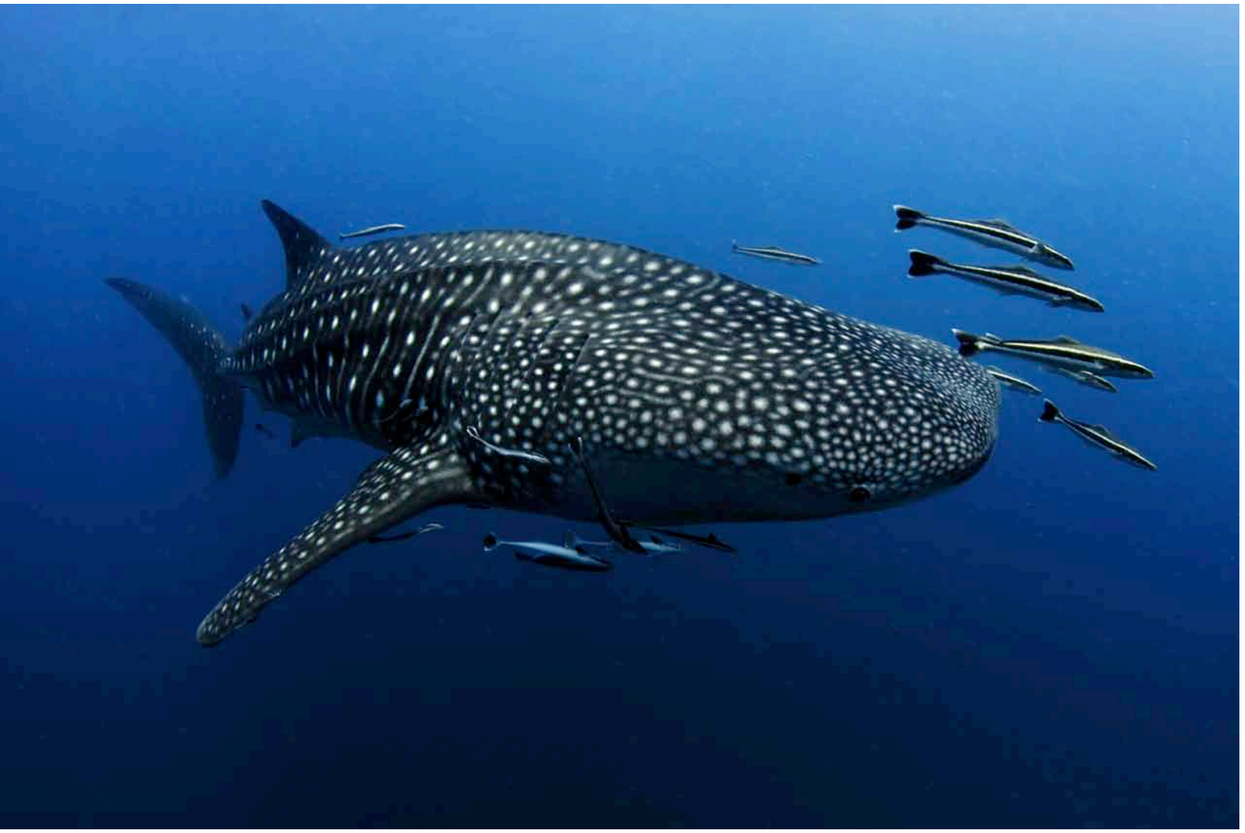
10 Explore the Coral Triangle, Philippines

Visit the marine protected areas of the Visayas with this **Expedition Fleet** tour. As part of the Coral Triangle, the Philippine waters are filled with a rich diversity of more than 2,000 fish species and 500 types of coral. This route in the Visayas brings you through the most successful marine sanctuaries in the country, from Mactan, to Dauin, Apo Island and Cabilao. Fast gaining worldwide attention is Malapascua Island, the best place to spot thresher sharks. One popular spot is the Dona Marilyn ship that was sunk by a typhoon decades ago that has since become overtaken by plant life.
Tour operator: Expedition Fleet
Departures: July-February
Duration: 5-8 days
Cost: $800-$1,900

Island Magic

Forget the well-trodden backpackers' trail in Southeast Asia – we veer off course and head to the 7,107 palm-fringed, tourist-free islands of the Philippines.

WORDS NELLIE HUANG **I PHOTOGRAPHS** ALBERTO MOLERO & LIA BARRETT



Underwater photos: Lia Barrett | Scuba Ventures

In the far distance came a spray of water and the faint outline of an enormous marine animal. We watched in awe as it glided gracefully by the bow of a fishing boat, revealing its wide mouth above the water surface.

As we approached the animal, my husband and I gently slid off our *bangka* boat into the translucent water below us. I dipped my mask beneath the surface, and there it was: all of its flat, wide head, massive grey and white dotted body, and shark-like dorsal fins. A whale shark, the largest fish found in the sea – averaging around 32 feet (9.7 meters) in length – was swimming within an arm's length from us.

Earlier that morning, I had listened intently as our guide, Robert, explained the basic rules: keep at least 15 feet (5 meters) from the whale shark, avoid swimming below it and steer clear of its tail. As long as we kept these in mind, Robert assured us that swimming with *butandings* (in local language) is about as safe as swimming with turtles since they feed only on plankton.

But then, just minutes after jumping into the water, my gung-ho attitude completely vanished when the behemoth creature suddenly appeared out of the deep blue before me, and in a single slick motion, whipped its sharp, jagged tail, missing me by mere inches.

Few wildlife experiences get as intimate as this – not to mention that the animal in this case was 10 times the size of a human being.

Off the Radar

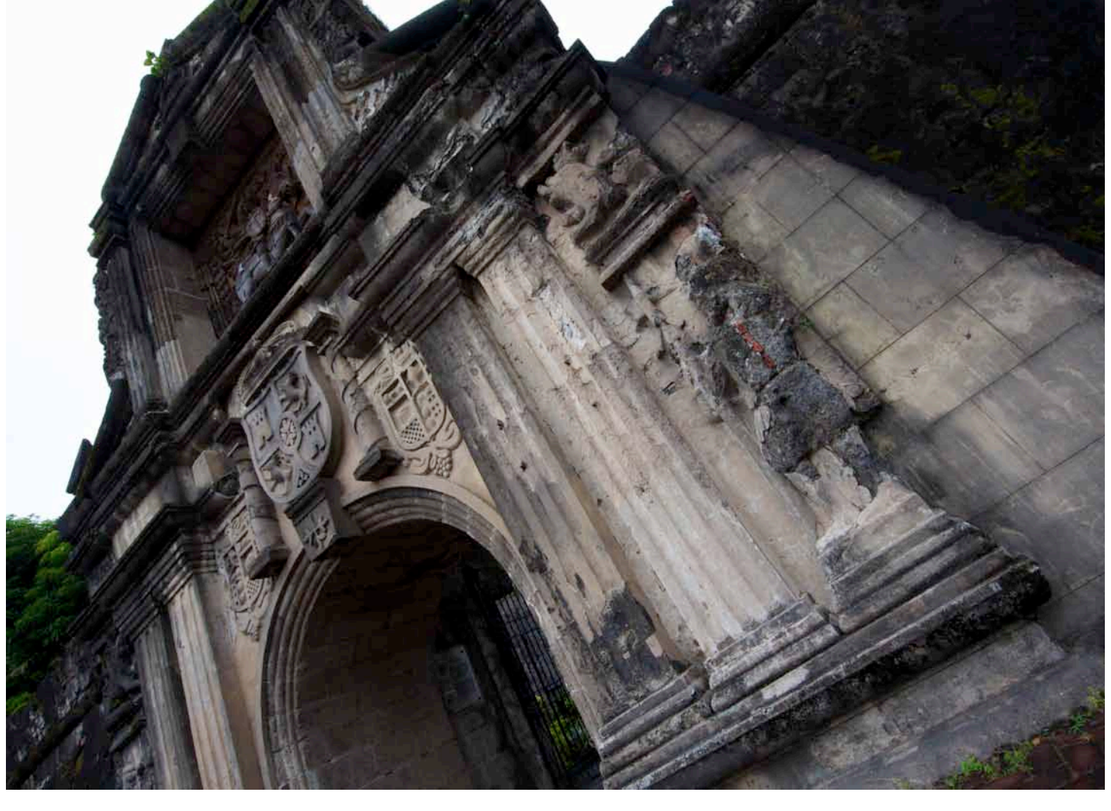
Here in Oslob, a quiet beach town off the southeastern coast of Cebu Island, whale sharks are the stars. Since its introduction in late 2011, the whale shark interaction program has attracted many Philippine tourists but hasn't yet found its way onto the radar of foreign tourists. That morning, we shared our whale shark experience with just a few local visitors – which made it all the more rare.

Cebu Island may be one of the most visited out of the 7,107 isles that make up the archipelago of the Philippines – but just like the rest of them, it remains a secret to the outside world.

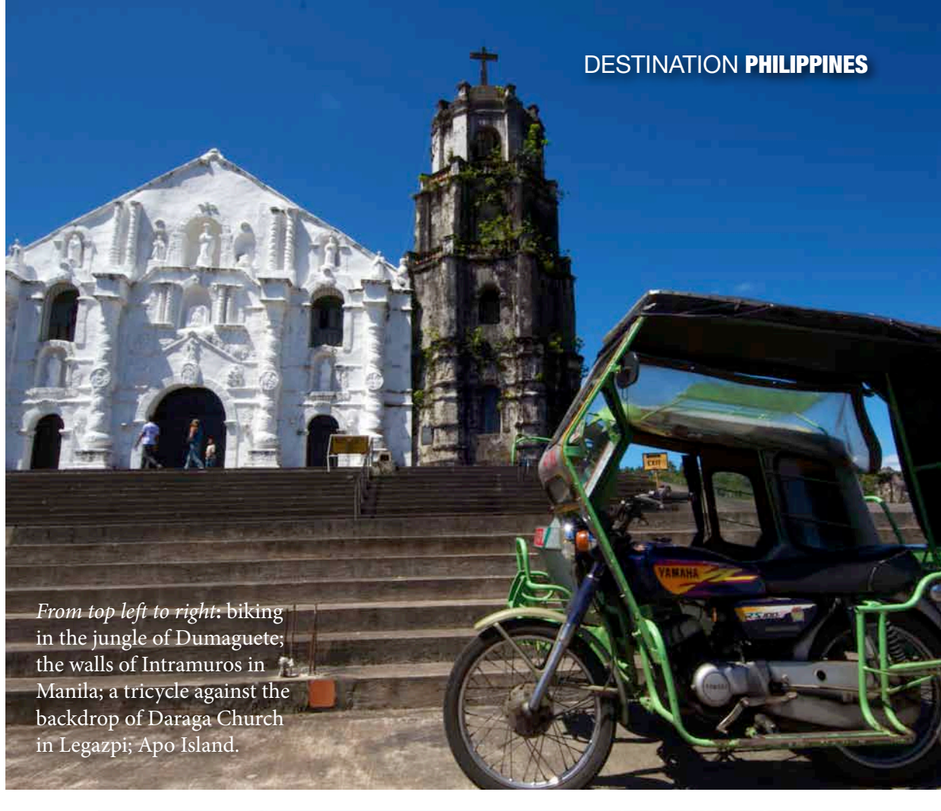
The Philippines is home to castaway beaches, coral reefs and virgin jungles teeming with rare endemic wildlife, as well as crumbling colonial architecture and monstrous volcanoes – yet almost all of its islands have slipped off the well-trodden trails across Southeast Asia.

It could be the negative news of political corruption and isolated terrorist activity; or the natural disasters that strike the Philippines from time to time; or the country's location across the South China Sea

Mercury Rising: Mount Mayon, an active volcano, erupts from time to time.
Opposite: A whale shark glides in the blue sea,.



DESTINATION **PHILIPPINES**



From top left to right: biking in the jungle of Dumaguete; the walls of Intramuros in Manila; a tricycle against the backdrop of Daraga Church in Legazpi; Apo Island.

"The Philippines is home to castaway beaches, coral reefs and virgin jungles - yet almost all of its islands have slipped off the well-trodden trails across Southeast Asia."

from continental Asia (which makes it necessary to fly instead of traveling overland).

But my theory is that the Philippines – with its many thousands of islands spread out across a huge tract of the Pacific Ocean – has never been easy to grasp as a whole. In our month-long journey, we set out to explore several islands in the archipelago, in a bid to capture a representative character of this multifaceted country.

Gold, God and Glory

We started our journey in the country's capital, Manila: a hodgepodge of Spanish colonial buildings, uproarious traffic and ramshackle districts. Located on Luzon, the biggest island in the Philippines, Manila is a turbocharged metropolis, its engine geared up to explosive measures.

In Makati district, monstrous shopping malls and glass-windowed skyscrapers towered over us, while traditional cockfighting pits and *dampas* (seafood markets) criss-crossed the Malate neighborhood. "I want to show you the different sides to Manila; the modern and the rich but also the old and the dirty," said Dustin, our city guide.

Underneath the layers of modernization lies a deep-rooted culture proudly clinging onto its past. Dustin gave us a crash course in Filipino history within the old walled city of Intramuros, an old district built by the Spanish in the 14th century

"You are standing on what molded the Philippines for over 400 years," Dustin shared as we stood at Fort Santiago. This spot had witnessed centuries of battle and hardship: over 330 years of Spanish colonization, 14 years of American occupation and decades of revolution.

Centuries of colonization had definitely left its marks on the country: on its architecture, culture and even language. Listening to the young *Pinoys* (as they call themselves) conversing in modern Tagalog, it was easy to catch a few Spanish words intertwined with English slang.

Along the grey walls of Intramuros, we weaved through one old chapel after another, stopping at the oldest church in the Philippines: the San Agustin Church that dates back to 1607.

"The church had withstood numerous earthquakes because of its sturdy elliptical foundation," said Dustin, "but many religious Pinoys believe that God was the reason San Agustin survived till today." Whether it was God's work or not, religion is clearly a big part of life in the Philippines, Asia's only predominantly Catholic country.

Wild Legends

"Although the heart and mind of the Philippines is Manila, the soul of the country lies in the provinces," revealed Dustin. With that in mind, we headed off to Bohol, a rugged island set right in the middle of the Visayas region. Our first glimpse of Bohol from the air was of lush green

DIVING THE PHILIPPINES

Scuba-diving in the Philippines is extremely rewarding and relatively cheap. Whether your interest lies in macro diving or coral reefs, the range of dive sites sprinkled around the country will impress even the most experienced divers.

Negros Island is one of the best places to dive in the Philippines as it is home to world-class dive sites such as the Dauin Marine Sanctuary and Apo Island. There are numerous dive operators on the island who can arrange dives around the area.

The author was on a 4-day diving trip organized by **Monarch Sands**. The trip included two dives at each of these locations: Dauin, Apo Island and Tambobo Marine Sanctuary. Costs start at 3,800 Pesos (US$89) for three dives. For more details, contact Monarch Sands at monarchsands@gmail.com or (+63) 917 416 2670.

mountain chains running along the entire stretch of the island, spearmint blue water fringing its coastline and comical chocolate cones poking out from flat rice paddies.

From land, the cones took on a more imposing feel. Over 1,200 rounded, green-brownish knolls, aptly named Chocolate Hills, sprawl across the rice fields and tropical jungles of Central Bohol. We were surrounded by coach-loads of Philippine tourists and speckles of Korean holidaymakers but other than that, western travelers were few and far between.

"There are two theories on how the Chocolate Hills were formed," said Megan, our bubbly local guide. "Scientifically, they were part of the seabed over 2 million years ago, but were pushed up by tectonic movements and then eroded by the rain and tide.

"But according to a local legend," she paused for effect, "they are the tears of a giant who killed his mortal lover in a fit of passion."

On the southern edge of the island,

"Over 1,200 rounded, green-brownish knolls, aptly named Chocolate Hills, sprawl across the rice fields and tropical jungles of Central Bohol."

we went in search of another myth: the *maomag,* or Philippine tarsier. At the Tarsier Sanctuary, we crept through thick mountain foliage after the endemic creature found almost exclusively on Bohol. Our park guide led us through the luscious molave forest, her eyes scouring the tree branches overhead for signs of the elusive animal.

Our walk had only just begun when she spotted two of the resident tarsiers hiding beneath a leaf. With their frog-like webfeet, the furry critters stared curiously at us with their saucer-wide eyes. Our guide giggled, "Their eyes are actually bigger than their brains".

The Philippine tarsiers have existed for almost 45 million years and now face the danger of extinction as their natural habitat slowly disappears. Megan explained that the Philippine Tarsier Foundation (PTF) was set up to protect and conserve the animal and that only one man in the world knows how to breed them.

Mr. Lito Pizarras, a down-to-earth native in his fifties, was the pioneer conservationist and has contributed largely to conservation projects throughout the past few decades. Now the field manager of PTF, he monitors the animals on a daily basis and ensures the population of over 1,000 tarsiers in the sanctuary stays stable.

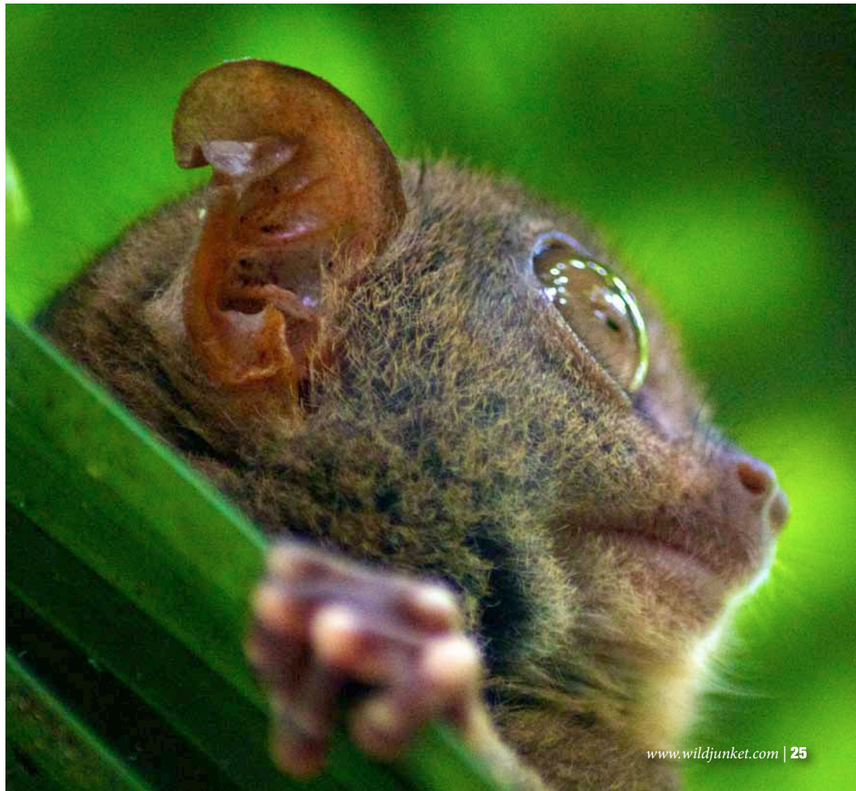
When asked how he had developed such a strong connection with the tarsiers, he said, "I grew up in the jungles of Bohol and lived amongst these animals for decades. They are like family to me."

With a child-like sparkle in his eyes, Mr Pizarras blew a loud wolf-whistle and instantly we heard rustling in the tree branches overhead and eventually two pairs of gleaming eyes amidst the thick foliage. The tarsiers had developed such a close relationship with Mr Pizarras that they now understood his signals and sounds.

Although the visitors' center is restricted to only one hectare, the rest of the sanctuary runs for over a few hundred hectares out into the wild jungle, where tarsiers roam free. It is thanks to people like Mr Pizarras that these endemic animals continue to live on, and hopefully, for many centuries ahead of us.

Underwater Gardens

"Don't worry," said an old wrinkled



Quirky Bohol: The cute Chocolate Hills sprawl across rice fields and plains; *Right:* a tarsier seen upclose.

OTHER ISLES TO EXPLORE

1 Luzon
The Philippines' biggest island is home to diverse landscapes: from the Banaue rice terraces to the active Mount Mayon volcano.

2 Boracay
Quickly racing up the tourism charts is Boracay, famed for having the country's best nightlife.

3 Palawan
Popular amongst intrepid adventurers, Palawan is one of the country's last ecological frontiers: with stone cliffs dotting its coast.

4 Malapascua
This tiny island off the northern tip of Cebu is a diver's mecca, with thresher sharks as its biggest attraction.

man as we raced across the Bohol port, close to missing our ferry to Negros Island, "the ferry leaves on Filippine time."

The pace slackened even more as we wound through the rural island of Negros to reach our beachfront lodge, Monarch Sands. Wooden huts with straw roofs gave way to an empty beach overlooking the Tañon Strait. Behind us, the jungle gathered itself and surged skyward towards the towering Mount Calaon. Our rustic bamboo cottage sat high above the secluded crescent-shaped bay, along with the vast sea and surrounding fishing villages.

"You have to go scuba diving when you're in the Philippines - it's the best place to dive," said American dive master Gary Finney. Sporting an army-style crew cut, the expat is evidently passionate about his adopted country even after living in the area for over a decade.

We were on Negros Island to do just that – immerse ourselves in its underwater world. The eastern coast of Negros is home to some of the best dive sites in the country; some even dare say the world. It was one of the reasons that had originally drawn Gary here.

Having chocked up over 7,500 dives in the last 50 years or so working as a commercial diver in Mexico, Gary is probably the most experienced diver in town – yet during our dive in Dauin Marine Sanctuary, he was as excited as us to see a giant hawksbill turtle.

Off the shore of the rugged Apo Island, we spotted fluorescent-pink sea anemones, lettuce-like fan corals, and throngs of psychedelic fish shimmering in the water. Swimming with the current, we glided alongside a vertiginous coral wall that plunged away below us to unfathomable depths of nothing – to my right, giant marble groupers weaving around neon coral gardens; to my left, an ethereal expanse of blue.

Apo is most famous for the hawksbill turtles that inhabit its shores – even snorkelers get to see them in the shallow clear waters away from the beach. We spotted five of them, along with giant lobsters that crept beneath the coral plates and blue manta rays flying gracefully past us, as well as schools of angel fish and sweetlips that all merged together to form a tornado of rainbow colors.

Gary's child-like enthusiasm easily rubbed off on us, as we all tapped our tanks and cheered, divers' style, struck by the spectacular seascapes. "This is my favorite place to dive, it always surprises me. No two dives here are the same," he shared.

As we cruised home to land, I looked back over my shoulder to see the deserted Apo almost glowing in the tropical sunlight. Perhaps even more incredible than its marine life was that we had enjoyed the island all to ourselves. There were no queues, no boat-loads of tourists, not even a meager postcard stall. If paradise existed, this would be the closest thing to it.

Secluded Retreat

After three weeks of traveling, we simply wanted to kick back for a few days in Crusoe-esque splendor – and on Sumilon Island we did just that. Located 6 miles (10 km) from Oslob, it might be just a hop away from civilization but it sure felt like a world apart.

Landing on the island's sandbar, we stepped foot on the fine bone-white sand and clear-as-glass water; while the smiley and relaxed staff greeted us by our first names and handed us fresh fruit punch – it was as though we had arrived on our very own private island.

We spent our days eating fresh fish and snorkeling with live ones, collecting shells on the empty beach, and swaying on the hammock right by the stunning blue sea. By day, we sipped mango juice on our verandah and spent the afternoon on the beach, while by night, we dined under starry skies with sand running between our feet.

We had been treated to a country with every ounce of the allure of its more popular Southeast Asian neighbors yet which remains mystifyingly free of visitors. I'd skipped through five islands during my journey, which left exactly 7,102 for a lifetime of adventures in the Philippines. *WJ*

"Perhaps even more incredible than its marine life was that we had enjoyed the island all to ourselves. No queues, no boat-loads of tourists, not even a meager postcard stall."

Postcard Perfect: The empty beach at Monarch Sands.

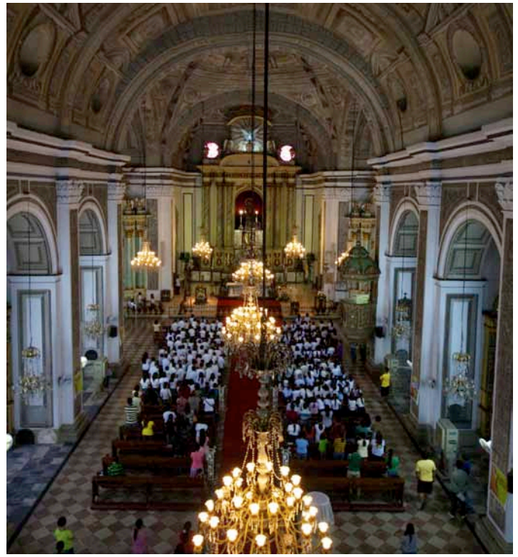
ISLAND LIFE

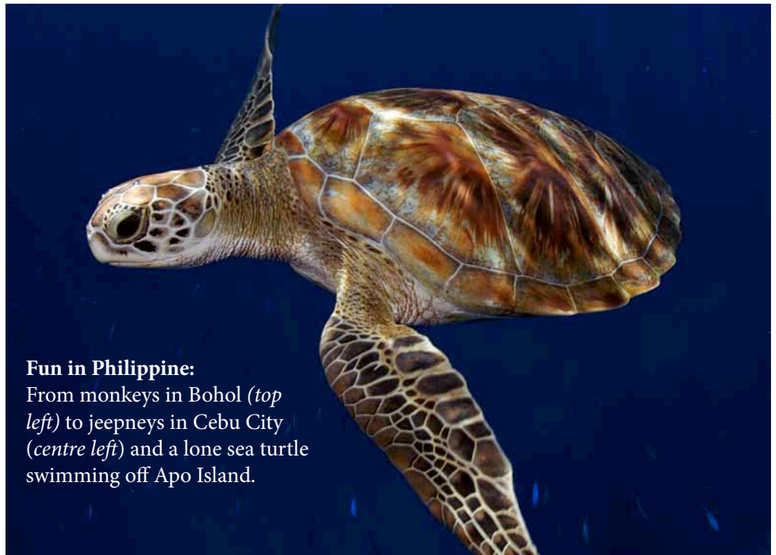
If action is not your cup of tea, then hide out on the private island of Sumilon. As far as private islands go, Sumilon definitely does a great job of making such privacy affordable. Stay the night at Bluewater Sumilon Island Resort, or just book yourself on a daytrip to relax on the beach and enjoy the seclusion.

Swing on daybeds and hammocks scattered throughout the island. At sunset, sit out on the *payag-payag* (bamboo gazebo) and watch the colours of the sky transform from gold to bright vermillion. After nightfall, enjoy dinner out on the beach with sand between your feet.

Snorkel in the surrounding marine sanctuary, trek through the virgin tropical forests on the island's interior, go kayaking in the lagoon or sail out on a catamaran at sunset – there's always something for everyone here.

How to get there: **Bluewater Sumilon Resort** provides free transfers by boat from Oslob, a beach town in Southeast Cebu. It is approximately three hours from Cebu City by public bus. Room rates start from 12,000PHP (US$280) per night and a daytrip starting at 1,500 PHP (US$35).





Fun in Philippine:
From monkeys in Bohol *(top left)* to jeepneys in Cebu City (*centre left*) and a lone sea turtle swimming off Apo Island.

Essential INFORMATION

PHILIPPINES

When to Go

Most parts of the country experience a tropical climate, with the best time to visit in January and February as temperatures are milder. The rainy season runs from June to September and typhoons are common during this period, all the way to December. In the Central Visayas (Bohol, Cebu and Negros), rainy season is less pronounced, making it a good region to visit all year round.

Getting There

The main gateway of the Philippines is the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) in Manila, which is well-connected to the rest of the world. Philippine Airlines and Delta fly daily from US to Manila (19-hour journey; return airfares from Los Angeles at US$900). Air China and British Airways fly regularly from London (23-hour journey; return airfares from US$900). Cebu City's Mactan International Airport is also a great hub if you're flying in from other parts of Asia. Cheap airfares are easily available to both airports on budget airlines such as Cebu Pacific, Tiger Airways and Jetstar Asia.

Getting Around

The best way to travel around the Philippines is by boat – all islands are linked by an excellent network of ferries and services are affordable. They range from simple *bangkas* or pumpboats to long-haul luxury ferries. Book in advance for long-distance ferry rides.

The mode of transportation within cities differs from place to place, ranging from horse carriages to *habal-habal* (motorcycle taxi) and the ubiquitous jeepneys. Generally, it is very easy to get around in the Philippines, whether within a city or from one island to the next.

Accommodation

There is a wide variety of accommodation choices throughout the country, from basic wooden cottages to high-end luxury resorts.

Hotel Manila has been a landmark of the capital since its construction in 1909. Overlooking Manila Bay, its remodeled rooms feature classic colonial designs and state of the art facilities. Room rates start from 6,900 PHP (US$163).

Panglao Island Resort is one of the most upscale hotels on Bohol Island, with lavish teak wood bungalows, a luxury spa, a beachfront infinity swimming pool and even an islet connected to the resort during low tide. Room rates start from 10,175 PHP (US$240).

Monarch Sands is a budget beachfront resort with a stunning setting and laid back vibe, boasting great food and friendly staff. Room rates start from 1,200 Pesos (US$28).

Cost of travel

The currency used in the Philippines is the Peso (PHP). Currently the exchange rate is at US$1 to 42.5 PHP. Prices are relatively higher in the Philippines than most parts of Southeast Asia but they are still generally affordable. Hotel room rates are reasonable in most parts of the country, ranging from US$10 to $200, with a beach cottage on certain islands as cheap as $5 per night. Restaurant prices are also affordable, with a filling lunch approximately $6 in a restaurant and $2 at a street side stall.

Packing

If you're planning to spend most of your time on the beach, it is safe to pack summer clothes, with a light jacket and raincoat for emergency. For those venturing up into the mountains (especially on Northern Luzon), it can get quite cold, so be sure to pack a fleece and thick coat. Take sunglasses and sunscreen, as well as insect repellent.

Websites

Here are some helpful links:

Department of Tourism Philippines
Lonely Planet Philippines
Bohol Philippines Guide

Biking the Death Road

Once the only route connecting Bolivia's capital of La Paz to Coroico in the Amazon basin, the North Yungas Road – dubbed 'death road' – is now a haven for adrenaline-junkies seeking adventure on two wheels.

WORDS SARAH GIBBONS | **PHOTOGRAPHS** GRAVITY BOLIVIA & ALBERTO MOLERO

With a deep breath, I allowed my shaking hands to release their vice-like grip on the brakes.

Fixing my eyes on the next hairpin turn, the bike bounced and juddered across the steep, uneven ground; rocks the size of oranges sent reverberations up my body. As I squeezed the brakes around the tight curl of the twisting track, causing a billow of ochre dust to cloud my vision, I caught a glimpse of the agonizingly close 3,280 feet (1,000 meter) drop beyond the grassy edge and wondered why on earth I had allowed myself to do this. There is a reason this joke of a highway is called 'death road'.

Few highways have quite as intimidating a reputation as the North Yungas Road – a narrow, snaking track, which spirals down through the misty cloudforest for over 11,800 feet (3,600 meters), culminating in the lush farmlands of Coroico. Chiseled out of the sheer, craggy mountainside, the road was originally built by Paraguayan prisoners who were captured in the 1930s, when the two countries were at war. The highway achieved its global notoriety in 1995 when the Inter-American Development Bank dubbed it the 'world's most dangerous road' after a statistical survey. It's not hard to see why.

The many wooden crosses scattered down the 40-mile (64-km) stretch of road are a somber reminder of the route's dangers: it is estimated that 'death road' has claimed over 300 lives in one year alone – usually the result of bulky trucks passing each other on perilously narrow stretches. Although there's still some truck traffic, a new multi-million dollar bypass was built in 2006 around the most hazardous parts of the highway. Today, it is the realm of adrenaline-seekers – including the Top Gear team who recently attempted the road as part of a Bolivia Special in battered, second-hand 4x4s, which proved to only add to the dangers of the journey (this is a road you definitely don't want to break down on...).

Like skydiving and bungee-jumping, mountain-biking down 'death road' has become a sought-after extreme sport, attracting over 25,000 backpackers a year. But, unlike other adventure activities, you're responsible for your own safety – there are no safety ropes or harnesses and the challenging descent combined with the high altitude and varying weather conditions can be a deadly combination. Inevitably, there is

Clockwise from left: Riding along the edge of the cliff in single file; a Bolivian lady sells roasted sweet potatoes in Coroico; cobbled streets of La Paz, Bolivia.

DISPATCH **BOLIVIA**

Bolivan Altiplano:
A panorama of La Paz from above *(top)*; Clinging close to the mountain slopes.

"The highway achieved its global notoriety in 1995 when the Inter-American Development Bank dubbed it the 'world's most dangerous road' after a statistical survey. It's not hard to see why."

real danger when deciding to join a mountain-biking tour; a danger which still claims lives to this day.

This was perhaps the reason why, prior to our own mountain-bike trip, my friends and I decided to keep the fact that we were going to hurtle down 'death road' to ourselves...

Into Thin Air

We had begun our day at La Cumbre, 15,400 feet (4,700 meters) above sea level, amidst the snow-capped peaks of the Cordillera Real Mountains. Following an hour's drive from the hustle and bustle of La Paz, the thin air only added to the light-headed sensation of anticipation and adrenaline pumping through my body.

Before we committed to the ride, our tour guide Robert gave us a run through of the journey which would take around five hours to complete. "Keep your eyes on the road and do not look at the 'death birds' and butterflies," he exclaimed. Apparently, your body naturally follows the direction of your eyes and in one poor rider's case, a beautiful blue butterfly had caught his attention, causing him to veer in the direction of the vast drop below. He was one of the lucky ones as he fell onto a ledge – but suddenly I had other butterflies to worry about other than the ones already fluttering around my stomach.

Robert then made the traditional offering of (seriously strong) local liquor to Pachamama, the Andean spirit of Mother Earth, to pray for a safe journey. Meanwhile, I prayed that I still knew how to ride a bike.

But before I knew it we were off. With the wind whistling past me and my eyes streaming from the cold, we hurtled down the twisting asphalt, icy peaks dominating the views either side of me. This was the 'easy' part of the road – a smooth stretch of tarmac leading to the beginning of the *real* 'death road'.

In a matter of minutes the scenery – and weather – changed dramatically. The cool, mountain air became thick and heady; the barren, rocky landscape replaced with dense, steamy cloudforest, alive with lush greenery and trickling waterfalls which ran down to the rumbling Yolasa River below. A layer of mist hovered over the steep, winding ribbon of road ahead. I knew we had reached the start of our challenge.

Living on the Edge

"The rules for this part of the road are slightly different," Robert said. "There's still some traffic, so if you see a car or truck approaching – let them

Rough Rumble: Treading on the rocky dirt track that wends dangerously close to the edge. *[Flickr photo by Project Helping Hands]*

"Apparently, your body naturally follows the direction of your eyes and in one poor rider's case, a beautiful butterfly had caught his attention, causing him to veer in the direction of the drop below."

pass you from the rock-face side." The mere thought of having to pass a truck along the sheer cliff edge terrified me. My previous enthusiasm was replaced with total dread. As if on cue, a rabble of striking, sapphire-blue butterflies fluttered past me, teasing my eyes. Remembering Robert's story, I vowed not to look at them.

I took the road turn by turn, allowing my bike to pick up speed over the jarring, rock-strewn track and relying on the sturdy, powerful breaks to slow down for hairpin turns. I got into a rhythm of squeezing and releasing the brakes as we wound our way round the mountainside and even started to allow myself to enjoy the beautiful scenery of rolling hills ahead of me. As we descended, the weather grew more hot and humid and it felt ages ago that we'd left the fresh mountain air of La Cumbre behind us.

About half way down, the road ahead shimmered like a mirage. As I got closer I heard the gentle splash of the San Juan waterfalls, cascading down the craggy rock face onto the road ahead. As I got closer I saw that it was far more than the trickle I was expecting. The gulley of water had shot out from the rock onto the squelching track, creating a whole section of road that was entirely submerged. I looked at the saturated ground underneath my feet, then to the killer drop to my left where the Yolasa River weaved through the undergrowth beneath. Trying to ignore what I knew was below, I picked up some speed, the spray from the cascade hitting my helmet with a refreshing splash.

From then on the road got straighter and the sun got hotter. My body relished the feeling of the smoother ground and I sped along the dusty track, exuberant that all that was left was a few more miles of sun-baked road. After several stops to strip off layers of clothing under the dappled shade of trees, I saw a smattering of buildings ahead – we had finally reached Coroico, the end of 'death road'.

Mentally and physically exhausted, I eased my aching body off the bike that had been my best friend for the last five hours and made my way to the nearby bar with the rest of the group, sharing tales of the day's trials and tribulations. The ride had certainly lived up to our expectations – a descent full of adrenaline, thrills, sheer terror and gleeful relief. But with every sip of ice-cold beer, the dangers and moments of alarm evaporated; all that remained was the warm glow of knowing I'd made it down the 'world's most dangerous road'. *WJ*

Getting there:

At 13,000feet, La Paz's El Alto International Airport is one of the highest commercial airports in the world. For this reason, many carriers fly to Santa Cruz where you can get a smaller, connecting flight to La Paz.

The easiest way to get to La Paz from the US is via American Airlines who fly direct to La Paz from Miami (return fares from US$850). Aerosur also fly direct from Miami to Santa Cruz, where you can get a connecting flight to La Paz (return fares from US$700).

You can also travel by bus from Peru, Argentina and Brazil if you are traveling to La Paz as part of a larger trip. The most popular international route is from Puno in Peru to Copacabana and/or La Paz in Bolivia (approx $10).

When to go:

The best time to go is during winter, between May to October, when weather is cool and dry. The rainy season of November to April can make traveling difficult. August is the peak period for travel, so you might not be alone on the bike trip. Along the Death Road, you'll be experiencing just about every climate, so be sure to wear layers and prepare for the both the cold and heat.

Riding the Death Road:

The author traveled with Gravity Bolivia. The ride costs 750bs (US $110) and includes transportation, snacks, an experienced tour guide, US-made KONA hard-tail mountain bikes, gear and Gravity Bolivia t-shirts. You will need to bring 25bs in change for a small charge at the police checkpoint at Unduavi which goes to the Municipality of Coroico.

GEORGIA'S NEW HORIZON

The former Soviet country's hospitable people wait with open arms to share their land– from the soaring green mountaintops to the pebbled beaches of the Black Sea.

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY ERIN RIDLEY

"Are you American?" The teenage boy asks me as I scale the front steps of Georgia's largest Orthodox church, in Tbilisi. Fatigued from the sticky summer air, I muster up a smile and a confused yes. In return, his eyes beam, registering the urge for a fist-pump of sorts.

It isn't the first time someone in the post-Soviet nation has asked me this simple question. On countless occasions, Georgian strangers have curiously inquired: "Where are you from? Do you like it here? Tell us your favorite thing!"

And it makes sense. Warm and hospitable, the Georgians have waited for centuries to share their country, which is now gradually making a name for itself in guidebooks around the globe. From the alpine Caucasus Mountains of the north, to the semi-desert south, Georgia is rich with history and its citizens even richer with national pride.

Peace Reigns

I learn the true meaning of hospitality as a Georgian friend of a friend graciously escorts me around Tbilisi, the nation's nearly 1,500-year-old capital. Distressed art nouveau-style homes in pastel hues line the often-crumbling streets. Towering banyan trees shade every avenue. Vendors selling watermelons from cars, kiosks and carts crop up at every turn.

"In this neighborhood, we have a synagogue, a mosque and an Armenian church, all within a kilometer," my new Georgian friend, Gocha Sakhltkhutsishvili, proudly explains. Passing through one of the city's oldest districts, the 35-year-old father talks about his country, with sparks in his child-like eyes-- a reflection of the nation's eagerness to open its once closed doors to the world. "We are peaceful people and we want everyone to know they are welcome here."

After spending almost the entire 20th century under Soviet rule, the Republic's nationals indeed long for peace above anything else. Before that, and since the beginning of time really, Stalin's birthplace existed as a virtual ping-pong ball, flung back and forth between its neighbors, all looking to benefit from the country's opportune placement between the East and West.

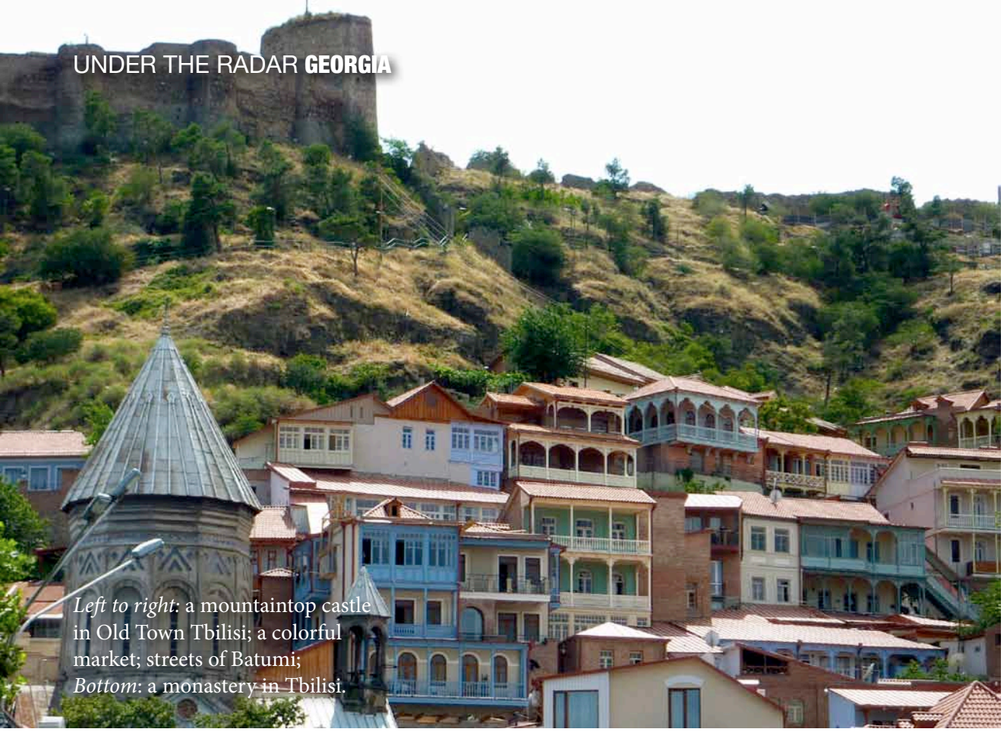
God's Land

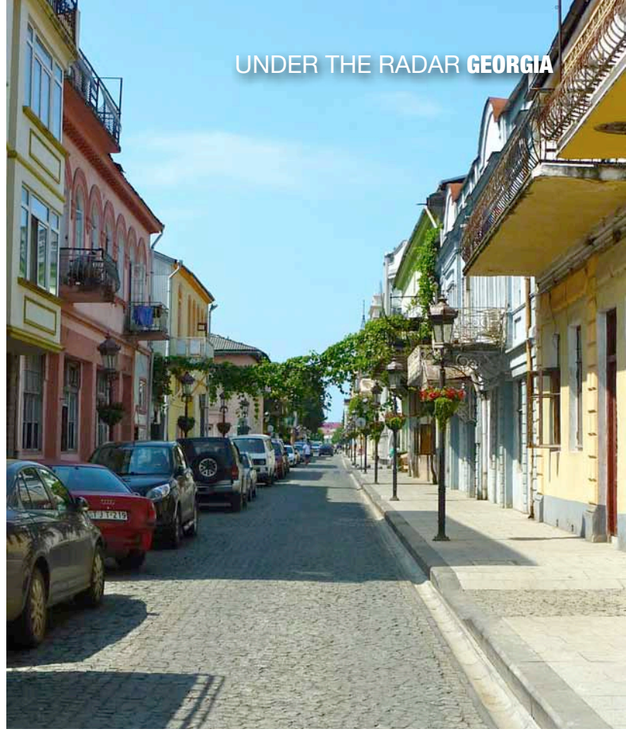
More than just prime Silk Road real estate, Georgia's swoon-worthy landscapes tempt outsiders too. A local legend says that God arranged a meeting in which he divided up all the territories on earth, saving one special spot just for himself. The Georgians of course arrived late, excusing their tardiness by telling God they had been toasting to him with their treasured wine. Impressed, God gave his own reserved piece of land - the best piece of land - to the Georgians.

I'm not surprised by this lofty tale, either, as I begin my cross-country tour, first venturing north toward the Russian border. Thumping over an unpaved highway, our car zips past gushing springs and herds of grazing sheep, all against the backdrop of craggy moss-blanketed mountains soaring into the sky. Then, esconsed beneath one of the country's highest peaks, Mount Kazbegi, the Gergeti Trinity Church rises out of the hovering clouds like a stepping stone to the sky.

Heading south, I take an equally border-challenged journey to another majestic mountaintop. Passing through the rocky outcroppings of the David Gareja Monastery, I arrive at the summit, which literally straddles the dividing line between Georgia and Azerbaijan. To the north, striations of jagged rock puncture arid terrain. To the south, rolling dry hills extend for miles into the Middle East. Having traversed the nation's landscape from top to bottom, I start to think that the story about God's land might just be true.

Georgia's Snapshots: spices in local market; neighborhoods of Tbilisi *(middle right)*; monumental walls near Kazbegi *(bottom right)*.





Left to right: a mountaintop castle in Old Town Tbilisi; a colorful market; streets of Batumi; *Bottom*: a monastery in Tbilisi.

"After spending almost the entire 20th century under Soviet rule, the Republic's nationals indeed long for peace above anything else."

Westward Bound

Trading hiking trails for urban streets, I travel west by taxi to Georgia's second largest city, Kutaisi. Strapped in by a phantom seatbelt, I say a silent prayer as the car races up curvy mountain roads, dodging livestock and oncoming traffic.

Arriving in Kutaisi, I reunite with my dear Georgian friend, Sophia Nikoleishvili, who generously invited me to stay at her family home. At 35, she has lived outside of the country for 15 years. With each return home to visit, she discovers aspects of the nation she never really knew: sidewalks paved, crime down, tourism on the rise. It's not the Georgia of her childhood – one that required her to speak Russian and cut her off from the outside world.

Despite Soviet stifling, Georgia's rich history holds proud. Sophia takes me to one of the predominantly Orthodox country's most-prized sights: the Gelati Monastery. Inside, floor-to-ceiling murals on the nearly 1,000-year-old walls radiate such vibrant color they are blinding. As the location of Sophia's wedding and the resting place for the legendary leader David the Builder – who, among other things, reunited Georgia's lands – these grounds couldn't be more sacred.

But more than monuments remain. Georgian lettering - arguably one of the most artistic of scripts - swirls, swoops and dances on storefront windows, magazine covers and even on the walls of centuries-old monasteries. And then the food, so irresistible that they even captured Russian occupiers' stomachs, From *khachapuri,* a pizza-like pastry, to dim-sum-style *khinkali*, it's no wonder that such delights continue to stand the test of time.

A New Age Begins

I leave Kutaisi and Sophia behind as my journey continues west. My destination is Batumi; a beach town near the Turkish border. Unlike my previous stops, the entire city center glows with signs of a recent makeover implemented by the country's president, Mikheil Saakashvili. Intent on creating an enclave for Eastern European vacationers, he funnels money into the seaside town like a good Georgian does wine into their belly at dinner.

While mass renovations may be few, Georgia's future has never seemed more promising. Obstacles may still abound, such as the Russian occupation of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions, but for the first time, citizens feel as though they are entering an age of stability and prosperity. This optimism fuels a passion to finally share their precious country and culture with the rest of the world.

I see this dream come to life while walking Batumi's new boardwalk, zigzagging between construction zones and newly erected beach clubs buzzing with tourists. Paint still seems to be drying on the walls of the Radisson Blu skyscraper – opened in summer 2011 – and yet every room has been booked. Passing Soviet-era apartments, I even notice colorful decorative panels livening up the monotonous traces of a century that Georgians try to forget.

Watching the sun set on the Black Sea's white-pebbled beach, I finally have the answers to those burning, ubiquitous questions: *Do I like it here?* Georgia's captivated me so much that I can't bear to leave.

And my favorite thing? The Georgian's infectious love for their country that has unknowingly rubbed off on me. WJ

GEORGIA's Other Highlights

Raise a glass in Kakheti

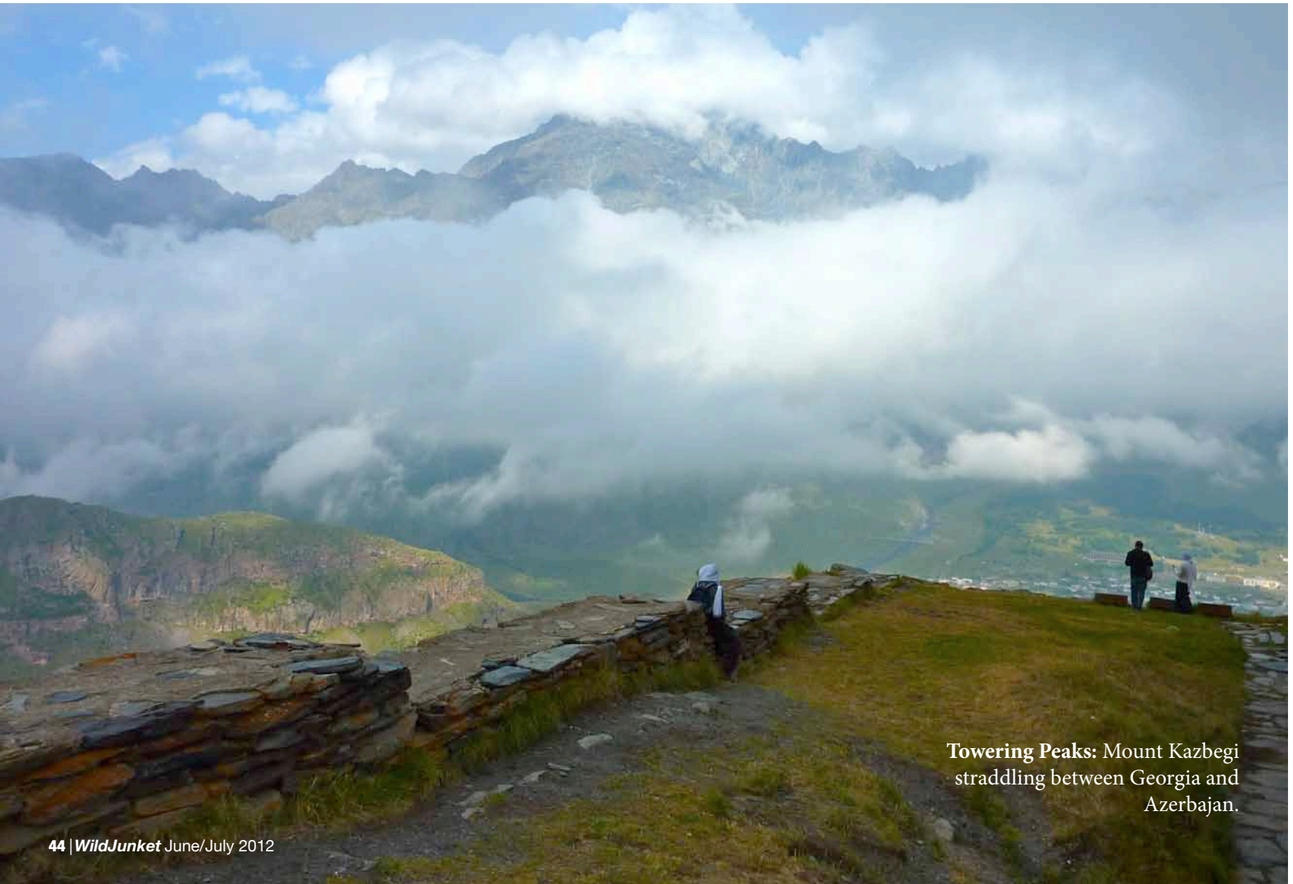
Few things are more important to the Georgians than their wine, so much so that any meal will, without a doubt, involve ongoing toasts given by the designated *tamada*, or toastmaster. Embrace Georgian wine culture by touring the Kakheti region, considered the birthplace of viticulture and winemaking. Between glasses, visit the royal town of Signagi, the nearby 4th century Bodbe Monastery, and the 11th century Alaverdi Monastery.

Hydrate in Borjomi

Second only to wine, Georgian's other beverage of choice is their prized mineral water. To quench your thirst, head to the spa town of Borjomi – source of the nation's most beloved bottled brand. Boasting spectacular mountain landscapes, you can hike in Borjomi National Park or, during winter, ski in nearby Bakuriani resort, just 45 minutes away.

Eat like a Georgian king

Eating Georgian cuisine is an experience on its own, particularly the *supra* (feast) which involves so much food that by the end of the meal, most plates still appear nearly untouched. Fill up on favorites like khachapuri, khinkali, bean-stuffed Lobiani, and Georgian-style kebabs. When about town, just pop in a bread shop for a slab of fresh-from-the-clay-oven tonis puri.



Towering Peaks: Mount Kazbegi straddling between Georgia and Azerbajan.

Essential INFORMATION

When to Go

Expect Georgia's climate to vary due to its vast range of landscapes. Central cities, like Tbilisi, face sticky summers, wet springs, and brisk winters, so September and October will likely offer the most comfortable weather.

Getting There

Various direct flights head to the country's capital, Tbilisi, from Europe – most commonly out of hubs like London, Paris and Amsterdam. The best way to get from North America to Tbilisi is via London.

Getting Around

While minibuses – along with public buses and even trains – probably offer the most convenient access to towns across Georgia, getting around can be difficult (or impossible) without knowing the language. To avoid the communication debacle, sign up for private tours, or arrange for a relatively cheap taxi. If you're traveling between Tbilisi and Batumi, train or plane would be your best and easiest bet.

Accommodation

Between the budding tourism industry, limited lodging options, and the majority of tourism coming only from nearby countries, don't expect to find a vast resource of reviewed and rated hotels. Prices in the capital can run high, but expect savings in other locations across the country to compensate.

While the hilltop hotel itself might not knock your foreign socks off, the views of Tbilisi from Hotel Betsy will make the hike worth it. Room rates at the clean but quirky boutique hotel start at $145 (breakfast included).

Considering Kutaisi's travel industry is still in its infancy, modern and charming Hotel Rcheuli, located ten minutes from the city center, is a pleasantly surprising find. Room rates at the Kutaisi location start at 105 GEL (US$64).

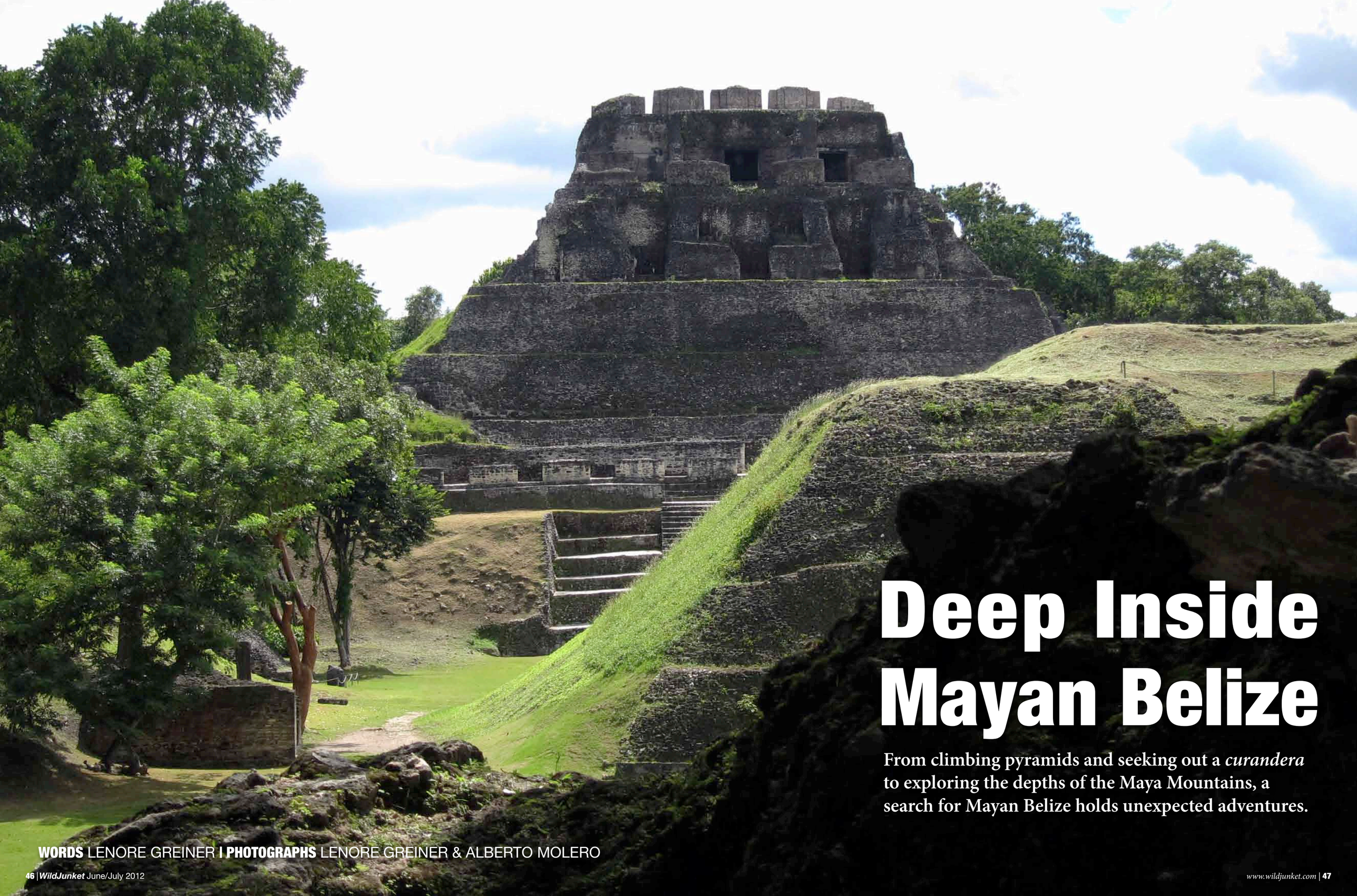
Located in the heart of Batumi's pristine old quarter, Hotel O Galogre offers modern amenities, minus the bells and whistles of the few existing larger chains. The complimentary rooftop breakfast, with views of the city, is just an added bonus. Rooms start at 140 GEL (US$85).

With two recently opened hotels – one in Tbilisi, the other in Batumi – consider Radison Blu a reliably fancier option. Boasting 360-degree views of the city, the rooftop bar and restaurant in Batumi is at least worth a visit. Prices start from 183 GEL (US$115).

Websites

Here are some helpful links:

Georgian National Tourism Agency
Caucasus Travel
Lonely Planet



Deep Inside Mayan Belize

From climbing pyramids and seeking out a *curandera* to exploring the depths of the Maya Mountains, a search for Mayan Belize holds unexpected adventures.

WORDS LENORE GREINER | **PHOTOGRAPHS** LENORE GREINER & ALBERTO MOLERO

Ancient World: The majestic Mayan ruin at Xunantunich. *Opposite:* Azure waters off Caye Caulker.

Through the clear water, I stared into the eyes of the nurse sharks swimming fin to fin in an adrenaline-fueled frenzy. Outfitted in snorkel gear, I splashed straight into the maelstrom and found myself immersed in the Belize Barrier Reef, the second largest reef in the world. Beyond the swarm of sharks, rainbow-colored coral gardens bloomed across the pristine white sand, stretching into the deep blue.

Belize was founded on adventure ever since pirates and privateers used the labyrinthine reefs as hideouts during the 1700s. Declared a British colony in 1862, Belize finally became a republic in its own right in 1981 and is the only English-speaking country in Central America, sharing a Caribbean coastline with Mexico and Honduras.

But I did not come to Belize for its pristine waters and world-class dive sites. I wanted to see a different side to the country. And to do this, I turned inland, heading into the heart of the Maya Mountains.

Into the Mayan World

In the western Cayo District town of San Ignacio, about 80 miles (130 km) from the coast, Maya is still spoken in an area rich in Mayan history and culture hard on the border of Guatemala. I found a unique way to explore local Maya ruins - a trek on horseback to the great Maya ceremonial center of Xunantunich (pronounced shoo-nan-too-nitch).

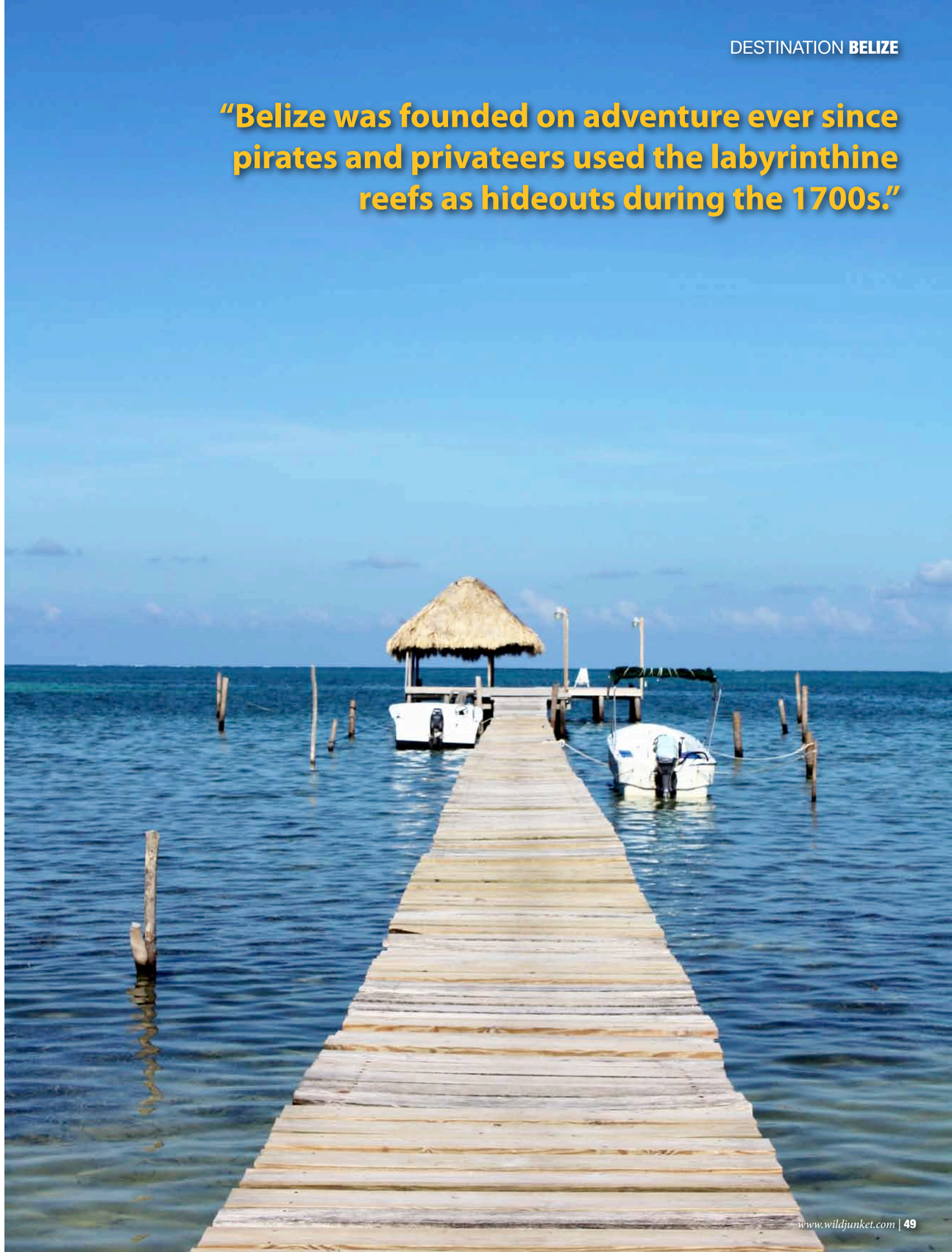
I met Santiago Juan at his stable in upcountry Cayo. Santiago is a mixture of Lebanese and British blood, educated in Britain. He speaks English with an American accent, as do most Belizeans, and he can handle a horse as well as any Spanish vaquero. Today his family runs cattle on their 400-acre ranch and it's from there that we set off on horseback to Xunantunich on a crystalline morning.

We crossed his land, passing verdant fields where Arabian mares and their foals displayed shiny coats from grazing the thick grass. Pastures soon transformed into a jungle trail as we rode into a fairyland of butterflies, orchids, and chattering birds.

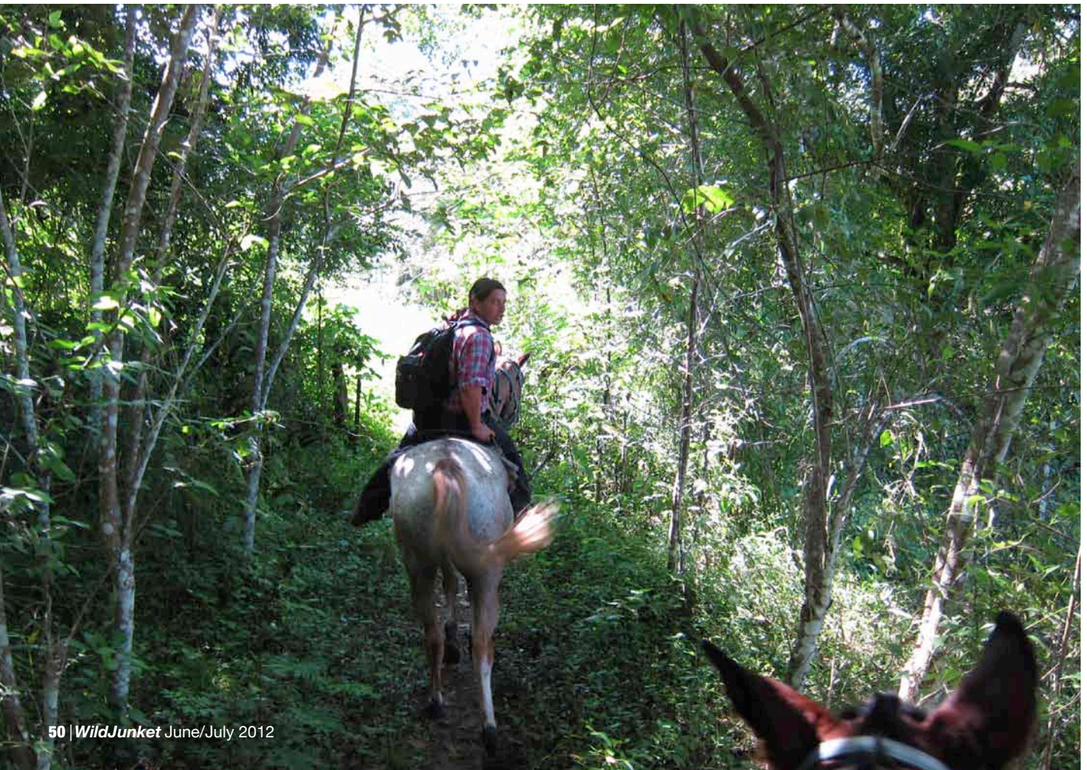
The trail eventually led us to a Maya village, San Jose Succotz, on the banks of the Mopan River. Here we found children of Maya ancestry – dark-haired, tanned skin with native American features – very much different from the Rastafarian Belizeans found on the laidback cayes. After a quick chat with them, we crossed the river with our horses aboard a hand-cranked ferry.

Shaded by mahogany and teak trees, we then followed a track for one mile (1.5 km) up to a limestone ridge where Xunantunich stands, howler monkeys roaring in the canopy overhead.

"Belize was founded on adventure ever since pirates and privateers used the labyrinthine reefs as hideouts during the 1700s."



Water World: Belize's biggest asset
Bottom left to right:
On horseback in Xunantunich; a Mayan lady in San Jose Succotz.



This important religious center has stood on this flattened hilltop since 400 B.C., built during the Maya Classic Era which spanned from 200 B.C. to 900 A.D. Here, we were humbled by the immensity of El Castillo, Belize's second highest pyramid and the country's second tallest structure. A national icon, El Castillo stars on every postage stamp, tourist postcard and classroom poster.

My steep ascent up the 130-feet (40-meter) pyramid rewarded me with panoramic views of the Mopan River Valley, the Guatemalan border cutting across the rainforest. Atop El Castillo, Xunantunich's one square mile (2.6 square km) of six plazas and twenty-six temples and palaces sprawled beneath my feet. I could almost picture the Mayan leader addressing thee public from this elevated spot where the extent of the ancient city was visble.

No one knows why Xunantunich became an important sacred center. No one knows its true name – Xunantunich's modern name means 'Stone Woman' in the Mopan and Yucatec Mayan languages. And no one knows who had the power to build it, or why its population of 7,000 abruptly abandoned the city in 1,000 AD.

But what we do know is that the Mayans chose this spot for a reason – and experts speculate that thousands more Mayan sites are buried beneath jungle vines and river silt throughout Belize. Listening to the vibrant buzz of bees and crickets in the grass below El Castillo, I could only hope that what mysteries do remain hidden will one day come to light.

"Experts speculate that thousands more Mayan sites are buried beneath jungle vines and river silt throughout Belize."

Spiritual Healing

My time atop El Castillo had me curious to dive deeper into the Mayan world. I met up with an elusive Maya *curandera*, or healer. Dr. Rosita Arvigo, an American herbalist and Doctor of Naturopathic Medicine, was an apprentice for ten years with one of the last great Maya *h'men*, Don Elijio Panti, who died in 1996 at the age of 103.

Dr. Arvigo single-handedly brought lost Maya healing secrets to modern medical scientists. I first heard of her when a friend insisted I read her book before my trip to Belize. *Sastun: My Apprenticeship with a Maya Healer* intrigued me so much that I arranged to meet her.

On her porch over the Mopan River valley, I learned about Dr. Arvigo's adventures with the Mayan healing herbs found endemically in the local rainforest, many of which she imports to researchers in the U.S. as they're highly effective in killing parasites or reducing fever.

"This is a small country with an incredible bio-diversity. It's our planetary heritage. I'd hate to see it die." To salvage Belize's rainforest bounty, Dr. Arvigo created an archive of 3,000 preserved and recorded plants located in the capital city of Belmopan.

It's a mystery how the Maya developed a form of acupuncture, called pinchar. Over 80% of the pinchar points that Don Elijio showed her are Chinese acupuncture points. In fact, she's convinced that Mayan medicine co-relates with 70% of Chinese medicine and that it originally traveled over the land bridge during ancient migrations.

To apprentice with the last living link to ancient Mayan healing, Dr. Arvigo endured years of bushwalking

in brutal rainforest conditions, ascending trees or sliding down washes to gather the right medicines.

Don Elijio treated every type of ailment, from diabetes and alcoholism to tapeworms and dysentery.

As with Chinese medicine, he diagnosed conditions by feeling the pulse and then prescribed herbal steams, tinctures, teas or massage. He performed chiropractic-like adjustments, prescribed natural birth control and was legendary among local midwives.

"Mayan medicine is very scientific but it's also spiritual, fifty/fifty," Dr. Arvigo said. Ix Chel, the Mayan goddess of medicine, is the queen of the forest spirits, making the healing plants grow and guiding the healers to them. Don Elijio taught her to pray to the Mayan spirits and build altars wreathed with the rich, spicy smoke of copal incense.

"I spent a full decade researching the science behind what he was teaching," she said. "I loved finding the scientific secret under the traditional healing knowledge."

"And what would your teacher, Don Elijio, say to us today?" I asked.

"Most people think too much," she laughed. "Get them to laugh and half their trouble and sickness will go away. The blessed herbs will do the rest."

"I spent a full decade researching the science behind what he was teaching," she said. "I loved finding the scientific secret under the traditional healing knowledge."

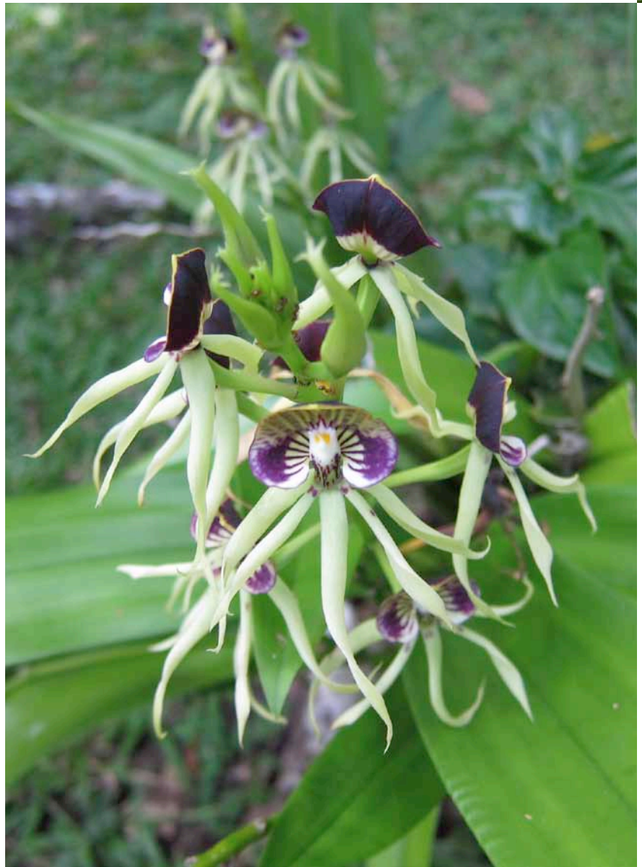
Caving for Answers

The next day, I negotiated a rough back road of crushed limestone past the Old World Mennonite homesteads of Lower Barton Creek, about an hour out of San Ignacio. Passing men and boys guiding horse-drawn plows, I felt as if I was traveling back in time. And in a way, I was.

I was going to canoe deep into sacred Barton Creek Cave with my guide, a Belizean of Mayan descent with the Anglicized name of John Hammond. For thousands of years, the cave hid Mayan artifacts of blood rituals, pottery, skulls and skeletons.

Over the cold black water, we paddled for half a mile (1 km) inside the tall limestone cave as John's powerful spotlight illuminated crystallized formations. His beam fell upon a lone pot which had outlasted hundreds of years of looting, crystallized to a ledge, survivor of a long ago sacrificial ceremony.

Mayan Peak: Climbing up to the top of El Castillo.
Bottom left to right: Dr. Arvigo, the curadera, and her medicinal collection.



"While gliding back towards daylight, my strange feelings lifted. What I had experienced felt surreal. Was that a run-in with Don Elijio's Mayan spirits?"

Big drops of water landed on us, drops that the Maya had collected in pots and considered holy water. As bats swooped above our heads, John spoke of the rituals attended by Mayan royalty, priests, and sacrificial virgins.

"The King had to maintain power over the people. So when the priests, who were good astronomers, came to him saying that there was going to be an eclipse, the King used that information to control the people. He'd tell them that the gods were angry and a sacrifice had to be made."

Virgins came forward to volunteer for the ritual. "It was a great honor," he said. "When the eclipse came and went and nothing happened, that was proof that the King's human sacrifice had saved his people."

During these elaborate rituals, spells were cast in clouds of wafting copal incense and offerings overflowed from ceremonial pottery. On ledges bedded with palm leaves and flowers, the priests left ritual relics behind, along with abandoned, decapitated bodies and severed heads.

Inside the inky darkness, I began to feel intense fears, as if I was suffocating. A second later,I felt completely bereft, as if floating in deepest outer space. I had to ask John to turn back.

John understood, replying, "You've made it further than a lot of people." To him, I became yet another casualty of the cave's intense energy and the powerful Mayan spirits within.

While gliding back towards daylight, my strange feelings lifted; I could hear birdsong resonating through the cave. What I had experienced felt surreal. Was that a run-in with Don Elijio's Mayan spirits?

Even though we've lost much of our knowledge about the Mayans in Belize, what I did discover I would not soon forget. With the small pockets of Mayan traditions and architecture left in Belize, I'm rather sure that Mayan Belize would also not be soon forgotten. WJ

Mayan Magic: from the entrance of Barton Creek Cave *(top right)* to Belizean vaqueros *(middle left)* and the walkway into the pyramid *(bottom left)*.

Essential INFORMATION

BELIZE

When to Go

Travel during the dry months of March through May; the high season runs from November to April. The rainy season is from June until November, meaning short afternoon cloudbursts, and hurricane season occurs from July through October. Year-round temperatures on the coast and cayes average 80°F (27°C) and the Cayo District tends to be slightly cooler.

Getting There

Most travelers arrive into the Philip Goldson International Airport in Belize City on direct flights from Newark, Miami, and Houston (return fares from $600 up to $1200 on United Airways or American Airlines). From there, reach the cayes on domestic airline, Tropic Air, or by water taxi at the Belize City terminal. Other travelers enter by car, bus or water taxi from Chetumal, Mexico, in the north or overland from Guatemala in the west.

Getting Around

Public buses and taxis are plentiful and cheap. Car rentals are pricey. Due to rough roads, four-wheel drive vehicles are recommended. Well-maintained, one-lane highways cross the country and convenient domestic flights are available, if your budget can handle it. It is advisable to avoid Belize City due to severe crime; but the area running north of the marina to east of the main canal should be safe.

Accommodation

Accommodation ranges from simple hostels to small-scale beach hotels and diving resorts on the atolls. Inland, you'll find plenty of options from bed and breakfasts to eco-resorts. Rates can be slightly less than those in the U.S. or Europe.

De Real Macaw, Caye Caulker's thatch-roofed guesthouse, offers basic rooms, water and reef views, WiFi, and plenty of hammocks and bikes to rent around a friendly courtyard. Room rates start at BZD$30 (US$15).

Casa Maya Eco Resort is located outside San Ignacio on 60 acres where you sleep with the sounds of the jungle creatures all night. Their 400 square foot cabanas start at BZD$200 (US$100); for breakfast and dinner add another BZD$100 (US$50) per day.

Cost of Travel

Prices in Belize are similar to those in other parts of the Caribbean. The local currency is the Belizean dollar (BZD), which is worth exactly half of the US dollar, although US dollar is also used commonly here. All prices are listed with the '$' symbol. Restaurant prices are reasonable, especially if you stick to local reef fish on the cayes; a lobster meal costs US$12. A four-star hotel can run around US$120 per night. Airport shuttles to the Cayo District average around US$100 each way.

Packing

Pack tropical-weight clothing rugged enough for bushwalking. Also include items such as binoculars, hiking boots, mosquito repellant, hat, sunglasses and sunscreen. Bathing suits and snorkel gear are de rigueur if hitting the Caribbean atolls and, if planning to dive, diving gear is easy to rent.

Websites

Here are some helpful links:

CayeCaulkerSchool.com
RainforestRemedies.com
TravelBelize.org

A Leap of Faith

Photo Essay

A photo essay of a changing nation and its welcoming people.

"Corre! Corre! Corre!" shouts a voice behind me. He is very close, practically breathing down my neck. Within seconds, he glides us both into the skies and we are soaring, floating amidst the clouds, above a patchwork of green fields, brown rivers and towering hills.

I am paragliding near San Gil, a city quickly becoming Colombia's adventure tourism hub due to its proximity to untouched mountains, canyons, and rivers.

I suppose I took a bit of a leap here, in more ways than one. For years, Colombia had been associated with drug lords and crime –deterring many travelers from visiting this beautiful South American country. Even some local residents give me warnings to be careful. "Cuidado," they say as I wander around Medellín with my camera swinging around my neck. And I do have to be careful, just like visiting any other city really. There are a few bad elements and still some crime in the wrong neighborhoods, but the same can also be said for my hometown of Chicago.

From colorful Caribbean Cartagena to Medellín, once known as one of the most dangerous cities in the world, and eventually to Bogotá, I continue to push myself out of my comfort zone, only to find a country working hard to overcome its muddled past.

Since the early 2000s, the crime rate has fallen, murder rate has dropped by nearly 50%, and there's been a huge jump in security and social development.

These days, peaceful parks, green spaces, and bike lanes abound. I am welcomed into homes, I drink coffee in lively squares, I cycle around the capital city, and all the while I am greeted with warm smiles. Colombia is dusting itself off to reveal a colorful and stunning place and it's evident that the country has taken a giant stride towards a better future.

In a very short time, the leap I have taken has me floating like a feather and I'm not so sure I want to land. WJ

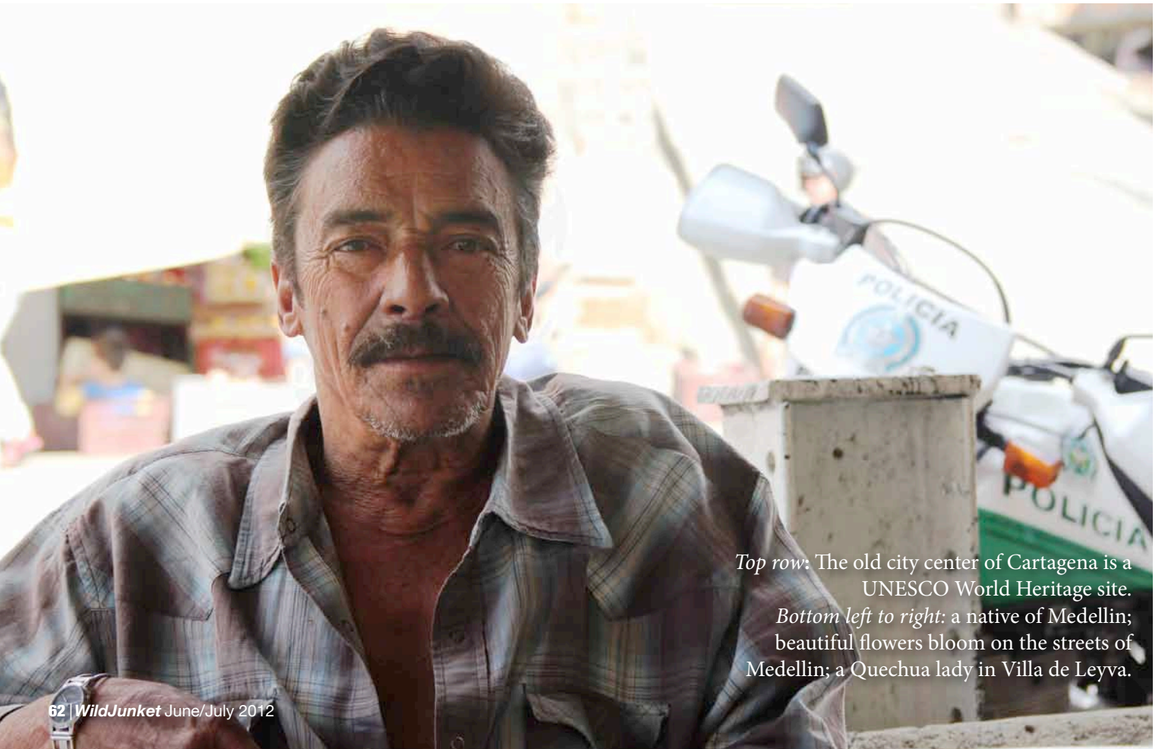
WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA LUBIN

DESTINATION **COLOMBIA**

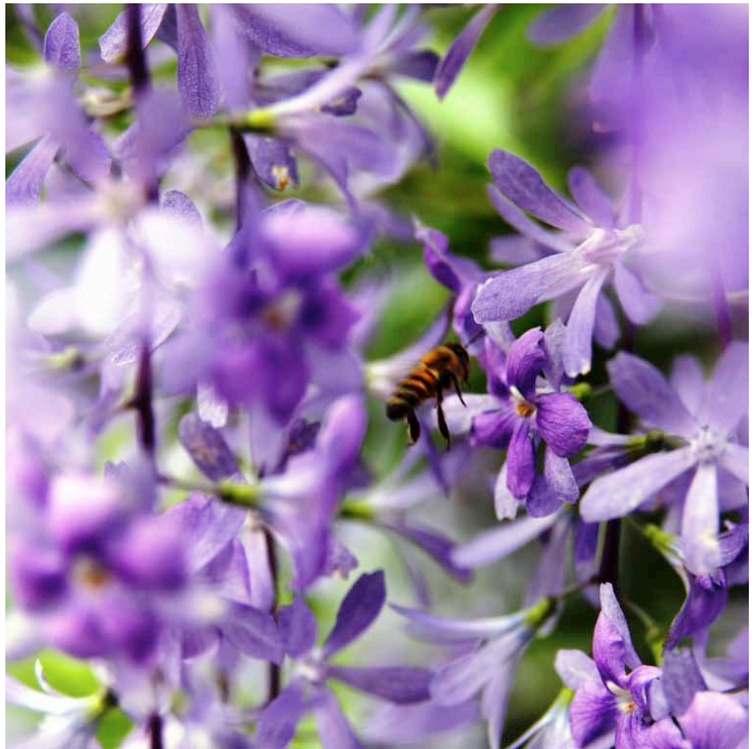
Clockwise from top left:
Colorful Nation: Bright yellow architecture abound in Cartagena.
La Bandera: The Colombian flag has three bands of color: yellow represents the gold found in the country; blue is the sea off Colombia's shores: and red, for the blood shed during the country's fight for independence.
Bienvenidos: Welcome to Cartagena, Colombia's Caribbean jewel.
Got Coffee? Colombia's biggest export is coffee, recognized world over for its superior flavor.
Bohemian charm: The walled city of Cartagena is an enclosed maze of cobbled streets and colorful stucco buildings.

Colonial flavor: The orange walls of Cartagena, a beautiful colonial city.
Faces of Colombia (opp page clockwise): An elderly fisherman sits by the port of Cartagena; a smiley police officer patrolling the streets of Villa de Leyva; a local in Bogota.

DESTINATION **COLOMBIA**



Top row: The old city center of Cartagena is a UNESCO World Heritage site. *Bottom left to right:* a native of Medellin; beautiful flowers bloom on the streets of Medellin; a Quechua lady in Villa de Leyva.



June/July 2012 Calendar of Events

Ratha Yatra: Puri, India

21 June

To commemorate the journey of Hindu god Krishna from Gokul to Mathura, the city of Puri transforms into a fairground during this huge Hindu festival. Meaning 'Festival of Chariot's, the fesival sees pilgrims pulling chariots that resemble temple structures through the streets of Puri. A glimpse of Lord Jagannatha on the chariot is considered to be very auspicious and saints.This holy festival is a great time to visit Puri, the temple town in Orissa.

Duanwu Festival: Taiwan 23 Jun

During the Iron Age, a statesman and poet named Qu Yuan jumped into the Miluo River to show his stance against the growing corruption of imperial power. His supporters raced in boats, beating drums to keep the fish at bay, feeding them rice dumplings. Today, the Duanwu festival marks his patriotism with a mix of religious and sporting traditions such as the dragon boat races while enjoying *zongzi* (rice dumplings).

Also known as Folclórico de Parintins, this Brazilian carnival is a 3-day festival of folklorical dance and music. There are many similar festivities in Brazil, but Parintins is home to the biggest and most impressive of all. Each nightly performance is based on local Amazonian folklore, but also incorporates contemporary Brazilian rhythms and themes. The "Bumbódromo" supports over 35.000 people in the audience.

Boi-Bumba: Brazil 29 Jun–1 Jul

Tour de France: France 30 Jun–22 Jul

This is the biggest bicycle race in the world, where cyclists all over the world compete in a race around the country, over more than 2,200 miles (3,500 km) during a period of three weeks. The race draws spectators all along the cycling route and this year, there are nine new stage towns. Fans and visitors can follow along as the Tour de France race breaks up into segments and ultimately ends in Paris.

Photo credits: Flickr | Pat Ferro; Toby Oxborrow; boibumba.com; Gideon (Malias); Jon Worth; Steve Jurvetson; Paul; Tammy Frieseu; Edwinylee; hojusa

Independence Day: United States 4 Jul

This classic American holiday commemorates the day when the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776. Most Americans spend the day with their families and friends at a lake or on the beach to cool off as summer starts to heat up. The day usually starts with grilling hamburgers and hot dogs and ends with a firework show at night. Local parades are often held in major cities and towns.

Back in the 19th century, the Finnish city of Sonkajärvi used to have to deal with bandits who took off with precious loot: their local women. To commemorate this period, locals recreate the act of abduction during their county fair with a 253-meter wife-carrying race. The winning couple are the ones to finish the fastest. The victor's prize is worth it's weight -- literally, you get the weight of the lady in beer.

Wife Carrying Championship: Finland 6–7 Jul

Mango Festival: India 7–8 Jul

The entire country comes together to celebrate what is deemed the "king of fruits": the mango. For two days, the festival is celebrated with events centered around the mango, such as quizzes, eating competitions, mango carving and folk performances. Attendees have the opportunity to try more than 500 different types of mangoes for free during the festival, hosted at the Talkatora Stadium in Delhi.

San Fermin: 7–14 Jul Pamplona, Spain

The highlight of the San Fermin has got to be the world-famous running of the bulls. It is a long-standing tradition from the 16th century, drawing thousands of participants who seek out an adrenaline rush as they race, stumble and flee the ferocious horns. Plenty of single-day events are held in honor of Saint Fermin - including parades and bullfights, with the procession on 7 July being the most important event.

Naadam Festival is the biggest festival in Mongolia, and it commemorates the 1921 revolution when Mongolia declared independence. It's also known as *eriin gurvan naadam*, meaning "the three games of men": Mongolian wrestling, horse racing and archery. The biggest celebration is held in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar during the National Holiday from July 11 to 13, in the National Sports Stadium.

Naadam Festival: Mongolia 9–16 Jul

Mud Festival: 14–24 Jul Boryeong, South Korea

Get down and dirty on Daecheon Beach, just 200km from Seoul, where millions of Koreans and tourists whisk down mud slides, wrestle, paint each other's bodies and create sculptures out of sludge. The mud here is rich in minerals believed to be good for the skin. The mud festival was originally conceived as a marketing strategy for Boryeong mud cosmetics but has now evolved into a massive party that lasts for ten days.

Sensory Overload in Morocco

Amidst a whirlpool of spices, smoke and tajines, we put our taste buds to the test in Morocco's culinary capital.

WORDS NELLIE HUANG **I PHOTOGRAPHS** ALBERTO MOLERO

Street flavors: A vendor stirs big bowls of cooked foods at the Djemma el Fna open-air food market.

A Berber man dressed in a red tunic, with a monkey on his shoulder, approaches me, "Photo, Miss?" I politely decline with a smile and snake my way through the labyrinth of food stalls and hordes of persistent vendors.

In the chaotic square of Djemma el Fna, a whirlpool of herbalists, snake charmers and henna painters converges, erupting into a cacophony of shouts, honks and bells-ringing. Bright neon light illuminates the chaos into a sea of reverberations.

It reminds me of an open-air circus, except that this sets the scene for everyday local life. This is where locals - whether vendors or market-goers - gather in the day and dine by night. I am here in Marrakesh to soak in the much talked-about culinary scene and explore its stimulating bazaars with a bunch of food-loving friends.

Assembly of the Dead

Like a magnetic centrifugal force, Djemma el Fna is the core of all activities in Marrakesh's medina (old city). Standing before the city's iconic Koutoubia Mosque, the massive souk (Arabic market) is a jumble of interweaving alleys and artisan shops. Literally translated to mean 'Assembly of the Dead' – the hive of activities that make up North Africa's busiest square is not the least bit gloomy.

For the uninitiated, Djemma el Fna is an overwhelming sensory overload. My mind is aroused by bouts of raucous sounds and sights, but it is the heady smoke and exotic aroma of herbs that catches my attention: Sprawled across the outdoor food maze, a cook is brewing an intoxicating pot of snails.

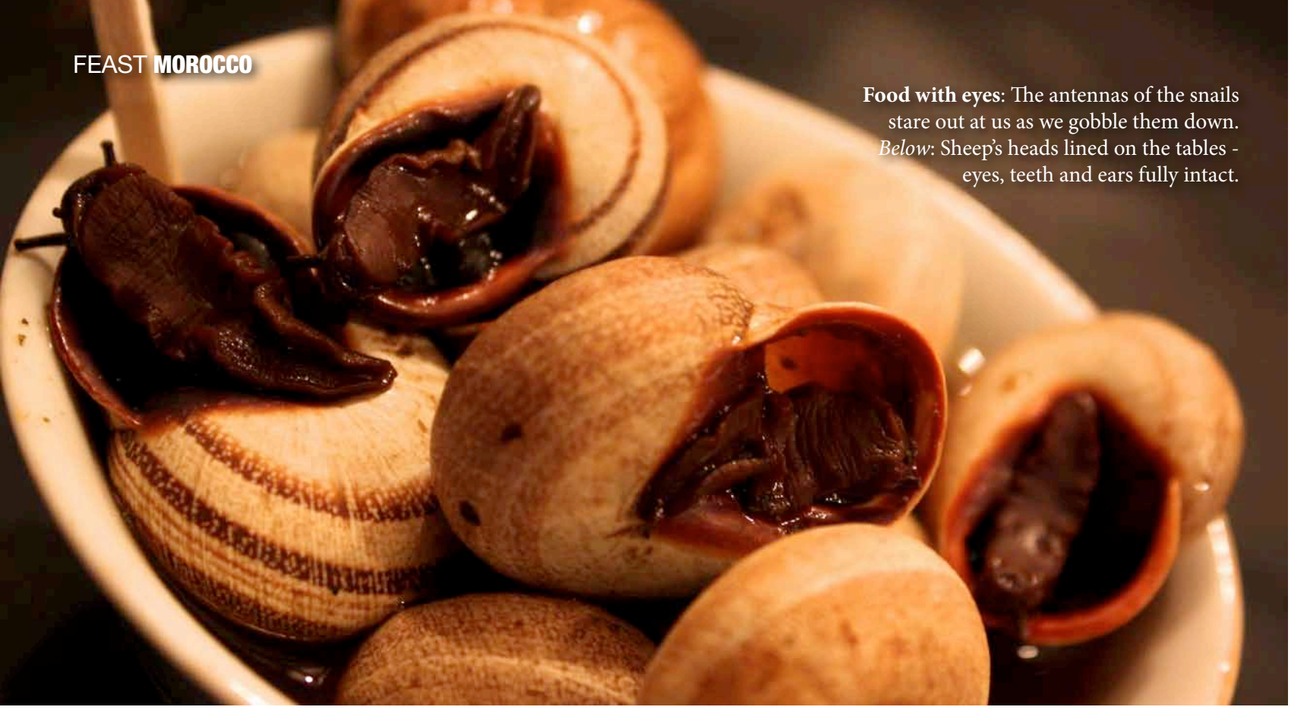
"*As-Salaam Alaykum*. Hello." The chef greets me in Arabic. "I'll have a bowl please." I answer with much enthusiasm. After all, I'm no stranger to bizarre eats – growing up in Southeast Asia has prepared me for odd food. My group of travel mates, on the other hand, prefers to steer clear.

Several forceful strokes of stirring later, a bowl of sluggish, wriggly snails in dark gravy is served. The scent is arousing, heavy with spices. Tugged under their heavy shells, the snails stare out at me with giant antennas for eyes. They are bigger than the European escargot, also juicier.

Dragging the squirmy brown creatures out of their shells with a toothpick, I wolf them down one at a time, slurping the flavorful gravy simultaneously. "Is that seriously good, or are your taste buds just not working?" Ivar, my less gallant Icelandic travel mate remarks sarcastically.

This is merely a gentle introduction to our intrepid gastronomic journey. No stomachs will be spared – I warn my mates.

Moroccan food galore: from the array of mezzes *(top right)* to the stacks of colorful spices *(middle left)*, and the ubiquitous tajine of chicken and olives *(bottom right)*.



Food with eyes: The antennas of the snails stare out at us as we gobble them down. *Below*: Sheep's heads lined on the tables - eyes, teeth and ears fully intact.

Culinary Underworld

As the last ebb of sunlight fades in the distance, the food bazaar takes on a life of its own, rumbling with even more fervor than before. We continue navigating the maelstrom of push carts and blazing smoke to hunt down more exotic fare.

Each makeshift food stall is numbered with a handwritten sign above our heads. Ahmed, our friendly chef at the snail stand, is number 6.

Rows upon dizzying rows of grills blind us with a mishmash of colors. Stacks of yellow, green and red spices are piled sky-high, alongside red-and-green marinated meat skewers. Purple and brown olives swim in giant plastic bowls. Thick, lathery meat stews simmer slowly in traditional clay pots.

The ubiquitous clay pot, *tajine*, is an essential Arab culinary tool, specially designed for slow braising. Its flat and circular base is topped with a conical-shaped cover, powering up the natural condensation process.

The day before, at the famous restaurant Chez Chegrouni, we had sampled authentic kefta tajine (beef-balls stew) and a popular local offering - pigeon pie. Crusted in light, brittle pastry puff skin, the pigeon pie packed in all sorts of flavor: from a tinge of spice to a rainbow spectrum of salty sweetness.

Back in the rambling food maze, slabs of fresh silver grouper and tuna fish strewn on ice are thrown onto the sizzling grill upon request. "Our seabass are the freshest! Nihon jin desu ka? Are you Japanese?" Competition is fierce as vendors contend for customers, each sprouting a different foreign language to cajole tourists.

Djemma el Fna - literally translated to mean 'Assembly of the Dead' - the hive of activities that make up North Africa's busiest square is not the least bit gloomy.

Much has changed over the decade with the development of tourism in Marrakesh, but the fascinating colors, aroma and vivacity, are unequivocally Moroccan. Djemma el Fna is dominated by camera-toting tourists, yet the rudimentary food stalls are rarely frequented by foreigners. Hygiene might be one of the reasons, but few restaurants can rival such authentic fare.

Beyond Convention

Slithering our way into the market, we come face to face with the ultimate bizarre food: Stewed sheep's heads lined unruly on metallic tables – eyes, teeth and ears fully intact. There's no sight of the sheep's fur, but cartilage, bones and tongue jut out from the animal's cranium. We stare at the outlandish sight for what seems like eternity, as if waiting for the sheep to bleat loudly in pain.

"You have to try some! Sheep brains are very good for men!" The chef at stall number 12 jostles us towards the row of decapitated heads. He even scoops up a spoonful of black gravy with brainy bits swimming in it, for us to sample. Sheep brains as aphrodisiacs? We shake our heads in unison, taking off in all directions.

Stomachs growling, we decide to stick to the conventional comfort food. At Stall 34, blazing flames are clouding up the sky in smoke - this should be good. I order several brochette de viande ('meat skewers' in French) right off the sizzling barbecue.

We start our meal with a bowl of harira soup - an essential item in any Moroccan meal. Bubbling with the smell of pepper and coriander, the lentil and chickpea broth rallies up our appetite. Soft baked pita bread is served with the soup, a culinary practice introduced by the French.

The chef works his magic, his kitchen sprawled in front of us. The brochette is smothered with a constellation of condiments and roasted on charcoal-fueled grill. We watch him skillfully turn up the fire by showering the brochette with oil, sending the flames roaring. Within minutes, the meat is cooked inside out, slightly charred on the outside but delicately tender inside. As I dig in, thousands of contrasting flavors explode in my mouth.

For our last treat, the cheeky waiter dishes up an extra platter of minced meat. "But we didn't order this." It's for free – he says with a smile. He keeps his lips locked though; we are left to decide for ourselves what it is. I ecstatically devour the tender viande: no, not beef. Neither is it lamb. It's got a subtle hint of herbs. It's juicy, red meat, with a soft and tofu-like texture.Bull testicles? Sheep brains? Who knows?

The night ends with a question mark. I'm sure the answer will be revealed some day, but until then, I'll be savoring the memory and keeping the mystery sunken in my taste buds. WJ

Top 5 Foods to Try in Morocco

1 Tagine

As Morocco's national dish, tagine is enjoyed throughout the country, with variations in different regions. Named after the special conical-shaped earthenware pot in which it is cooked, tagine takes on different shapes and flavors – with the most popular tagine dishes being lamb stewed with fig.

2 Harira

Traditionally served on special occasions, the hearty harira can be a meal on its own. The tomato-based lentil and chickpea soup is cooked with a dollop of spices and herbs, and some versions include lamb or beef.

3 Couscous

Perhaps the most famous dish in Morocco, the couscous is a staple amongst the Berbers. These little grains of semolina wheat are usually served with a plethora of meat and vegetable stew.

4 Bastilla

Have a sweet tooth? Then this flaky layered pastry of savory meat fused with sweet almond filling would be right up your alley. Traditionally made with pigeon meat, the bastille is now usually made with chicken filling and served as an appetizer.

5 Merguez

Injected with plenty of chilli pepper or harissa, this red, spicy mutton or beef sausage is a popular dish often grilled or eaten with couscous. Djemma el Fna's open-air food market is a great place to try this sizzling, piquant dish.

See You on the Way

Stretching 500 miles from the French Pyrenees to the coast of Galicia, the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage trail across northwest Spain is the ultimate mind, body and soul experience.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS BY CANDACE ROSE RARDON

Before the sun even has a chance to peek its head over the Spanish horizon, the pilgrims awaken. Sleeping bags are quietly, expertly rolled up. Hiking boots are pulled on, as are layers of t-shirts and fleeces and rain jackets. Backpacks are snapped shut, expectant of the day ahead.

My first morning on the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage trail has only just begun and I can tell there's much I have to learn. While I fumble about the *albergue* (or hostel) in a groggy haze, many have already left, the clicks of their walking sticks echoing against the silent sidewalk below.

I carry my backpack and shoes downstairs and find a seat in the lounge. I'm eager to join the other walkers, but hesitant at the same time. My fingers linger over the shoelaces of my new boots, like a child searching for excuses to put off bedtime.

Now that I'm here, the question I've been asking myself for a month presents itself yet again. It isn't so much do I want to do this, but *can* I do this? Can I walk an average of 15 miles (25km) a day for two weeks, with only my pack on my back and the road before me?

"*Buen camino*," walkers call out to each other as they head out of the *albergue* and into the quiet streets of Sahagún. "See you on the way," another says, and I can feel my excitement grow right alongside my nerves.

Slowly the sky outside lightens to a crystalline blue and I realize there's only one way to find out if I'll make it to Santiago.

Ready or not, it's time to hit the trail.

DAY 1
Full steam ahead to Reliegos – 32 km

El Camino de Santiago (which translates to mean "The Way of Saint James") is a network of centuries-old pilgrimage trails running across Europe, all leading to the city of Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain. Rumor has it that after the apostle Saint James was beheaded in Jerusalem in 42 AD, his remains were carried to the coast of the Iberian peninsula (some even say in a stone boat) and buried where Santiago is now located.

It wasn't until his tomb was discovered in the 9th century that Christians across Europe began to travel to see it. This journey quickly became the most important pilgrimage in the Middle Ages,

Guiding Star: There are no roadsigns or maps, just yellow arrows and scallop shells (*opposite page*) to lead the way.

"I pause just before crossing the threshold, feeling the soreness in my shoulders and feet. As I'll hear many pilgrims say along the trail, it's an exhaustion that leaves you exhilarated."

especially once the present cathedral was constructed in the 12th century. A thousand years later, and this same path is still walked.

Routes begin in cities such as Seville, Paris, and Porto, but arguably the most popular is the Camino Francés, which stretches nearly 500 miles (800km) from Saint Jean Pied de Port in the French Pyrenees. Those who complete the entire trek take on average five weeks to do so, but as I only have time to walk for two weeks, I start my journey farther down the line, in a small town at the center of the Camino called Sahagún.

When I finally find the courage to leave Sahagún my first morning, I'm nearly alone but for a solitary pilgrim a few yards ahead of me. Walking east to west means the rising sun is to our backs and our shadows grow impossibly long in front of us.

The early morning air is crisp and filled with birdsong and to every side I'm surrounded by pastoral landscapes. Ochre colored furrows fold seamlessly into shamrock green fields, the patchwork pattern they create interrupted only by a few trees, their branches still barren from winter.

After three hours, I come to a tiny village called Calzada del Coto, where a few others from the *albergue* in Sahagún have stopped for a coffee. We've only gone 9 miles (14km) so far, but two pilgrims decide to stay for the night. To reach Santiago in time, I'll need to cover at least 15 miles (25km) each day, so I decide to carry on to Reliegos.

"I think I'll come with you," says a British man named Ian, a counselor with a thick northern England accent. After saying goodbye to those staying behind, we stock up on necessities such as baguettes, chorizo, chocolate and oranges from a local *tienda* and are soon back on the road.

"I don't like planning what route you're gonna take, what *albergue* you're gonna stay in at night," Ian tells me as we walk. "I came here to feel like a free spirit. I'm just going to focus on putting one foot in front of the other and see what happens."

I keep his words in mind as the sun grows warm above us and just the right amount of a breeze blows across our path. In a way, Ian becomes a guide for me my first day on the Camino, having us stop for regular water (and chocolate) breaks and advising me to take my shoes off at times to let my feet cool down.

"Well, Candace," he says when we reach the *albergue* in Reliegos that night, "That's what 30 kilometers on the Camino feels like."

I pause just before crossing the threshold, feeling the soreness in my shoulders and feet, but also filled with a strange energy at having covered so much ground by my own momentum. As I'll hear many pilgrims say along the trail, it's an exhaustion that leaves you exhilarated.

DAYS 2-5
Following the yellow arrow road – 110km

The sky over Reliegos my second morning is tinged with a pre-dawn glow—golden orange at the horizon, a deep sapphire blue where the sun has yet to reach. The streets are empty when I set out; other pilgrims, including Ian, nowhere to be found. Part of me wonders if I'll ever see him again.

Just outside the village lies the path. Gone is the dirt track from yesterday; in its place, two straight lines of crushed white stone. The only

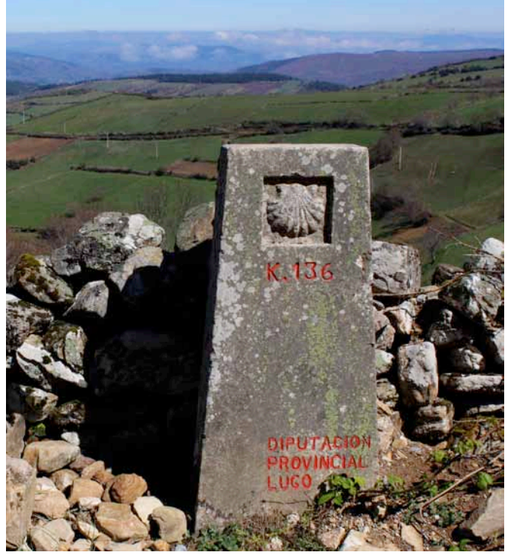
ALL ROADS LEAD TO SANTIAGO

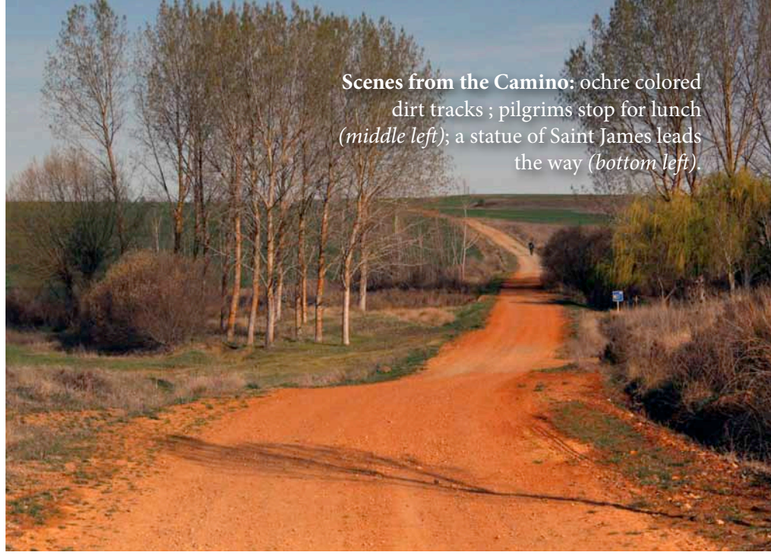
After completing the Camino Francés, many pilgrims go on to walk the other routes which lead to Santiago de Compostela. These also make excellent alternatives as the route from Saint Jean grows increasingly popular and busy:

Camino del Norte
This route begins just on the other side of the French border in Irún, Spain, and continues along 500 miles (825km) of stunning northern coastline.

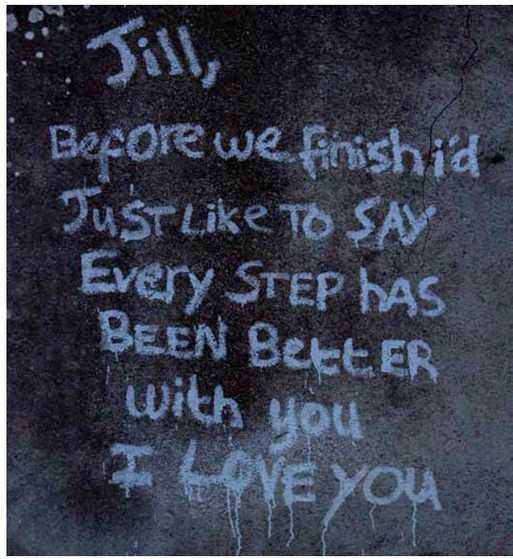
Camino Portugués
Famously walked by Queen Isabel in the 13th century, this Portuguese route covers 140 miles (230km) from Porto, but can be extended to 380 miles (610km) if you head out further south from Lisbon.

Vía de la Plata
Known as the Silver Route, this 620-mile (1,000km) path leads up from Seville in southern Spain and takes about 6-7 weeks to complete.





Scenes from the Camino: ochre colored dirt tracks ; pilgrims stop for lunch *(middle left)*; a statue of Saint James leads the way *(bottom left)*.



DESTINATION **SPAIN**

Life on the Road: Pilgrims bond on the camino; walking into medieval towns *(bottom)*.

"Each day brings new stamps in my *credencial* - a kind of pilgrim's passport. And each day brings me that much closer to Santiago."

thing required of me is to walk it. This isn't something I'm used to when traveling—not having a map or a guidebook, not having to worry about which direction I'm heading in.

All I've got is a list of the *pueblos* and villages I'll pass through, along with the distances between each of them. Three miles (5km) from Reliegos to Mansilla de las Mulas, four more (6km) to Puente de Villarente.

Instead of a map to get from town to town, yellow arrows point the way. At times it's impossible to miss them, clearly marked on the sides of houses or on pieces of wood stuck in the ground on stakes. At other times they're barely noticeable, little more than a few quick lines spray-painted on flat rocks. Even still, my eyes are quickly trained to look for them.

I hunt for the scallop shell as well—the universally recognized symbol of the Camino. Out in the countryside, they most often appear carved into stone markers or on official signs posted along the way. When I reach the city of León at the end of my second day, bronze shells have been embedded in the sidewalk. And everywhere, actual real versions swing from people's backpacks, identifying them as pilgrims.

Yet another set of yellow arrows and shells leads me out of León my third morning to a tiny *pueblo* called Villar de Mazarife; the next day it's on to Astorga and from there to the mountaintop hamlet of Foncebadón. Each day brings new blisters, sore muscles, and paths dampened by rain. Each day brings new stamps in my *credencial*—a kind of pilgrim's passport keeping track of *albergues* stayed in and towns passed through.

And each day brings me that much closer to Santiago.

DAY 6
A snowy descent to Ponferrada – 26km

"What do you mean it's snowing?"

I ask two fellow pilgrims on the morning of my sixth day.

I'm just about to finish the last of my coffee and crusty *pan de pueblo* toast when they walk back into the *albergue* and start pulling out ponchos, covering both themselves and their packs in a giant swathe of neon plastic.

I press my face against the window, trying to see out into the darkness. What greets me is a world turned white overnight; every branch, every bough seemingly outlined in silver.

The hike ahead of us today was already going to be brutal. Foncebadón sits at 4,500 feet (1,400 meters) above sea level, and before reaching our destination of Ponferrada, we'll have to scale over 300 more (100m) before starting a descent of nearly 3,300 feet (1,000m).

"Going up a mountain is one thing," said a sharp-witted Australian named John at breakfast. "Going down is a totally different kettle of fish."

I can only laugh when I set out on the frosty trail, wondering what John would have to say now about not only going down the mountain, but descending one concealed by several inches of snow.

What I find, though, is that the descent actually quickens my step, the weight of the pack pushing me forward and I can't help running, almost skipping downhill. Another pilgrim comes up behind me, says a quick hello and then, "I got a rhythm today, I go fast."

"Go, go," I say, urging him on, his brisk speed even inspiring me to pick up my own. The day before, all I could feel was my heavy feet and still heavier backpack; today, despite the snow and the unexpected cold, I feel light and ready for anything, my pack pulled tight against my waist as we weave our way down the steep, pebbly slopes.

At 3,000 feet (920m), the snow turns back to rain. As suddenly as it appeared, the glimmering cover of white is rolled away and in its place, a heavy mist descends. My boots crunch once more against the path.

Useful Items for Pilgrims

After you've packed more obvious items such as your hiking shoes, sleeping bag and maybe a pair of trekking poles, still wondering what's left to bring? Here are a few ideas:

1 Friction block stick

While there's debate over whether products such as Vaseline or petroleum jelly help reduce blisters, a friction block stick can be rolled on specific toes without getting all over your socks and shoes.

2 Needle and thread

Apart from a lucky few who escape them, blisters are inevitable and advice is generally to pop them. Use a sterilized needle, leave a bit of thread in to prevent the blister from growing, and disinfect it with iodine (known as Betadine in Spain).

3 Swiss army knife

Many *albergues* have kitchens, but they aren't always fully equipped. You never know when you'll want to slice some chorizo on the road, cut an onion for dinner that night, or open a bottle of wine.

4 Hat with a brim

Some pilgrims bring a woolen cap to fight early morning chill (depending on the time of year), but also consider something like a baseball cap or henschel hat—not only to block the sun, but to keep rain away from your face.

5 Expandable shopping bag

Once you reach the *albergue*, this item proves useful to carry your money, camera, valuables, etc. with you when you go out, and means you can leave your backpack behind and give your shoulders a rest.

DAYS 7-13
Step by step through Galicia – 180km

I'm joined in Ponferrada by my friend Erin, a fellow travel writer from San Francisco. Despite having lived in Spain for four years, it's her first time on the Camino and her adrenaline is a much-needed boost of energy at the halfway point of my walk.

Six miles (9km) outside Ponferrada, we pass by the village of Camponaraya just before breaking away from the *carretera*, or highway, and heading through rolling hills of vineyards. This is the point I've come to wait for every day—the point of leaving paved roads for dirt paths, when smells of the city and traffic are replaced by lavender and freshly turned soil, thick red mud sticking to our shoes.

The next day brings my second big climb, a steady trek uphill to an elevation of 4,300 feet (1,330mts). Just before reaching the summit, we cross into Galicia, the final region we'll walk through before arriving in Santiago. It also happens to be Spain's wettest region, and the rain that falls throughout the following week comes down cold, fast, and hard.

But still we walk, sometimes covering as much as 22 miles (35km) in one day, or stopping early at 11 miles (18km) when we can sense our feet need the rest. And as we move—with the number of miles to Santiago growing ever smaller—we find ourselves falling more and more into step with life on the Camino.

"I don't feel like I'm in Spain anymore," Erin says as we follow forested streams and cow-filled pastures, the melodious low din of their bells sounding across the trail. "This is like a completely different world."

It isn't just the feeling of pushing our bodies harder than we thought we were capable of; it's the camaraderie and bonds we quickly form with other pilgrims. Each night I look forward to reaching the *albergues*; as much to see those I've come to know on the way as for a hot shower and the chance to put on flip-flops.

We don't always see the same people every day. It's inevitable that as we find our own rhythms, we break apart, sometimes moving ahead only to be passed two miles down the road. We leap ahead, we fall back, weaving in and out of each other's journeys. But I'm starting to see we all get there in the end.

"*Poco a poco*," knowing locals will say when we stop and speak with them, and it's this phrase that I repeat to myself as I walk.

Little by little, step by step.

A Sight to Behold: Heavy mist sets in at Foncebadon.

"This is the point I've come to wait for every day — the point of leaving paved roads for dirt paths, when smells of the city and traffic are replaced by lavendar and freshly turned soil ."

DAY 14
One last push to Santiago – 23 km

Our last morning comes and we're not waiting for the sun. Flashlights on, we start early, finding our way through dark wooded paths, fueled by anticipation. The twelve miles (20km) to Santiago seem to pass in a blur, and suddenly, after two weeks and 230 miles (370km), the Cathedral—where the Camino officially ends and the relics of Saint James are kept—is no more than a few steps away.

The range of emotions among pilgrims is extraordinary. Some sprint around the corner and fall to their knees as soon as they enter the plaza. A group of high school students holds hands and walks in their backs to the church. They stand in a straight line, count down from ten—*diez! nueve! ocho!*—and on the count of one, turn around at the same time, cheering loudly and looping their arms together in a dance.

But for me, and for many other people I've been walking with, we can't help but feel a certain sadness. For weeks now, we've walked with purpose, our steps directed towards a specific destination each night. To find we've reached the end, that our days will no longer be defined by the number of miles walked, will take some getting used to.

After we enter the Cathedral, it's time to receive the final stamp in our credentials. We make our way along the old cobbled streets of Santiago to the *Oficina do Peregrino*, or the Office of Pilgrims. It's here that the details of our journey will be examined and we'll obtain the *compostela*, or certificate of our completion.

As I fill out the office's form, jotting down such details as where I started the Camino, how I completed it (on foot, bicycle or horse) and what my motives were, I suddenly hear a familiar voice. I turn to my left and am amazed to see Ian standing next to me.

It's been two weeks since I last saw him, since we last walked the countryside from Sahagún to Reliegos together, and now here we are, reaching the end at the very same time.

Part of me is in disbelief, and yet another part of me isn't surprised at all. My journey on the Camino has been about more than backpacks and blisters; it's taught me to trust in how the trail works—how it can lead you to certain people, then take you in separate directions, and finally, at just the right moment, bring you back together again.

Every time I've said, "see you on the way," to other pilgrims, it turns out that I really meant it. *WJ*

Every time I've said, "see you on the way," to other pilgrims, it turns out that I really meant it.

End of the Line: Reaching the Cathedral marks the end of the camino.

Essential INFORMATION

When to Go

July and August are not only the months when the weather will be the hottest (around 75 °F or 23°C), but the path will be most crowded. If your schedule allows it, consider walking either between mid-April to June or September to November, when both the number of pilgrims and the temperatures will be lower (around 60°F or 15°C). The American Pilgrims on the Camino organization has an interesting **page of statistics**, with charts and graphs to give you an idea of how many people walk and when.

Getting There

The Camino Francés begins in Saint Jean Pied de Port, a small village in the French Pyrenees that isn't easy to reach directly. From Pamplona, Spain, take a bus to Roncesvalles (which costs €6 or US$8 with **Autobuses de Navarra** and takes one hour), and from there a taxi, which can often be shared with other pilgrims. From Biarritz, France, take the airport bus to Bayonne station, where you can then catch a train to Saint Jean (€9 or US$12 with **Voyages-sncf.com** and takes just under 1.5 hours).

If you choose to start elsewhere along the Camino, places such as Pamplona, Sahagún and León are easy 3-hour train journeys from Madrid (see **Renfe** for timetables and prices). Other cities such as Burgos and Ponferrada are better reached by bus (see **Alsa**). If you want to obtain the official *compostela*, which is only given for pilgrimages of over 100km, plan to start no later than Sarria, about 70 miles (112km) from Santiago.

Getting Started

No matter where you choose to start on the Camino, you'll need to obtain a *credencial del peregrino*, or pilgrim's passport, on your first night. This is where you will collect your stamps (or sellos) from each albergue, as well as from churches, restaurants, bars and other establishments along the way. You can also **apply beforehand**, but note that this isn't necessarily required.

Accommodation

The most traditional accommodation option along the Camino is to stay in albergues (Spanish for "shelter), which are hostels specifically open to pilgrims and that only allow one night's stay. Municipal or public albergues tend to charge on average €5 (US$6.50) a night for a bed and provide basic sleeping and bathroom facilities. Private albergues will cost more (anywhere from €7-12, or US$9-16), but are worth stopping at occasionally for the increase in quality. You could also book hotels in larger cities, but you might miss the spirit of friendship and community that comes from staying with other pilgrims every night.

Cost of Travel

Many websites and forums suggest budgeting for an average of €25-30 (US$32-40) a day. This includes accommodation in the albergues, meals, and additional expenses such as laundry and internet. If you choose to pack lunch and cook many of your own dinners, cost can easily be reduced to €15 (US$20) a day. Breakfast of coffee and toast in a café ranges from €2-3 (US$4), sandwich materials and fresh fruit normally cost no more than a few euros, and a *menú del día* ranges from €8-12 (US$10-15).

Packing

It is important to keep your backpack as light as possible. Bring no more than two t-shirts, a pair of quick-dry outdoor pants, a sleeping bag, and decide whether hiking boots or trainers are best for you. No matter which type of shoe you choose, they should be well broken in before you start the Camino.

Items such as a light rain jacket, waterproof track pants, moisture-wicking socks, microfiber towel, sunscreen, earplugs, flip-flops to wear at night, and a medical kit including band-aids, gauze and tape are also worth including. Overall, it is suggested that your backpack weigh no more than 10% of your body weight, or ideally around 18lbs (8kg).

Websites

Here are some helpful links:

The Confraternity of Saint James
American Pilgrims on the Camino
Camino de Santiago Forum

Dodging the Darién Gap

Sailing across the Darién Gap from Colombia to Panama offers a unique opportunity to explore the idyllic San Blas Islands – but it's not a journey for the faint of heart.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARAH REID

Awaking to an almighty crash, I open my eyes just in time to see forks flying through the yacht cabin, the cutlery drawer having flown off its runners and smashed into the wall beside me. Someone moans as melons rain down from kitchen shelves.

"That was one hell of a rogue wave!" the captain yells after being nearly swept off deck by an inky wall of water surging through the Caribbean basin. I hadn't planned a date with Davy Jones tonight, but it appears I'm headed to his locker.

The Daunting Darién

I've never been much of a sailor. Having battled motion sickness since I was a child, I take to the seas only as a necessary evil. So it was with trepidation that I signed up to sail from Colombia to Panama. There's no road, you see. Known as the Darién Gap, a near-impenetrable expanse of swampland and forest separates Central and South America. This missing link in the Pan-American Highway has long provided a sanctuary for terrorists and tropical diseases. And I needed to cross it.

Infinitely more adventurous than flying and arguably less dangerous than braving the jungle, sailing around the Darién presents an opportunity to explore the San Blas Islands, an archipelago punctuating the waters off Panama's southeastern coastline like a line of emerald green Braille.

But the six-day voyage is risky: the tour is offered privately by a handful of mostly European captains, and business is unregulated. Rumors of shifty, cost-cutting captains run rife – and that's not the half of it. A former tourist boat captain from Spain is currently facing trial for the murder of a French captain and the disappearance of an American, inspiring the CBS special, *The Dark Side of Paradise*.

In spite of myself, I can't deny the threat of danger is alluring.

Caribbean Dreaming

My journey begins in Cartagena, the afro-Caribbean jewel of Colombia's north coast. It's tempting to linger in this colorful colonial city, but with only three days' grace on my tourist visa, I need to lock in my passage to Panama. *Pronto*.

Boats only leave when full, so I didn't hesitate to sign up for a next-day departure on a 50ft motor yacht captained by an aging British gent touting for business at my hostel. As we coast out of the Cartagena marina on a muggy Monday evening, I'm buzzing with adrenaline. But my excitement wanes a little when I realize what I'm really in for.

Lugging my backpack into the cabin, I find there are only six sleeping berths, despite there being eleven passengers plus the captain. *El capitan* doesn't have a first mate, either, which has me worrying what will happen if our man falls sick or becomes injured.

Our first night on the open ocean will be remembered as the longest of my life. Following the rogue wave incident, drama continued with a passenger stepping in - while the captain slept - to change our course in order to avoid colliding with a

Sailor's Life: Cruising into the horizon. *Left:* lounging by an unhabited island

freighter.

By morning, despite my best attempts to prevent it, I'm so seasick I can't move. My fellow travelers aren't faring too well either, judging by the state of the bathroom. But things are about to start looking up.

Castaway Islands Revealed

After 40-something hours at sea, a series of green specks appear on the horizon.

As we draw closer, the San Blas Islands begin to take shape and the menacing black ocean cools to an inviting, turquoise blue. Dropping anchor in a protected lagoon at the southern end of the archipelago, I peel off my sundress and dive into the glorious water, the trying Caribbean crossing fast becoming a distant memory.

Comprised of nearly 400 islands, San Blas – or Kuna Yala – is home to Panama's Kuna Indians, who have held autonomous control over the archipelago since the 1920s. Having maintained their own customs, culture and language since fleeing to the islands while the Spanish colonized the mainland, little has changed here in half a century.

"A giant, tropical cliché, San Blas has it all - aquamarine water, powder-white sand, and coconut palms lolling in the breeze."

Relaxing in the shallows of an idyllic, Crusoe-esque island, it's easy to see why Lonely Planet named San Blas one of the top ten paradises on earth in 2012. A giant, tropical cliché, San Blas has it all — aquamarine water, powder-white sand, and coconut palms lolling in the breeze. Only around 40 islands are inhabited by the Kuna – the rest are *au natural.*

As the afternoon sky dims to a soft, cotton candy pink, a Kuna family paddles alongside our yacht in a dugout canoe. The men hold up fresh-from-the-sea king crabs and wriggling lobsters, some as big as cats. We pool our US dollars and buy the whole collection of seafood for the bargain price of $20. Eaten on deck beneath the sunset, they're a worthy feast.

Land of the Kunas

The following days are blissfully spent island hopping, stopping at a different palm-thatched Kuna bar for a cold Balboa beer each evening. Tourism, alongside coconut production and fishing, is the primary industry for the Kunas. But business is small-scale in the San Blas, having avoided tourism development beyond the odd eco-lodge and beach bar. In an effort to conserve their culture, the fiercely independent Kunas prohibit many touristic activities including scuba-diving. In a way, this has helped maintained the San Blas pristine and pleasantly tourist-free.

It's this fiercely independent character of the native Kunas that has me intrigued. Communicating with the Kunas is a challenge, as few speak Spanish. Duleigaiya, the Kuna language, is not traditionally written, but is still spoken by the 70,000 Kunas spread across the San Blas islands, mainland Panama and Colombia.

With their skins tanned and wrinkled from the sun, the Kunas have always been islanders and seafarers. Sporting striking, geometric-patterned beads and colorful, hand-made *molas*, the Kunas continue to dress and live as their ancestors have over the past few centuries.

I gently ask for permission to photograph some of the Kuna women, but they wave me away with a hint of shyness. Kuna children, however, are adorably curious. After swimming ashore one afternoon, a gaggle of runny-nosed kids run into my arms for a cuddle as their diminutive parents look on quietly from sandy doorways.

It's an absolute privilege to gain insight into the lives of one of the few remaining pure races in the world, but, like many indigenous cultures, Kuna traditions are increasingly threatened. Marginalized by mainland Panama's development initiatives, waste management in San Blas is very poor. Tidal refuse destroys many otherwise pristine beaches and the

SAILOR'S CHECK-LIST

- » Meet your captain and crew before you commit – you're going to be living in close quarters for several days.
- » Opt for a vessel that sleeps at least eight – the ride is bumpier (and less social) on a smaller boat.
- » View the boat and inspect the condition of dinghy.
- » Ensure there is more than enough food on board to sustain the crew.
- » Insist on paying a deposit upfront, and the balance upon completion of the service.
- » Wear insect repellent containing DEET – mosquitoes are known to carry dengue fever in this region.
- » Bring small denominations of USD (the official currency of Panama) to trade for Kuna produce.
- » Pack plenty of sunscreen, a water bottle, wet wipes, snacks and travel sickness tablets – even if you think you won't need them.

Catch of the day: fishermen selling fresh fish and lobsters from their boats *(top left and middle right)*; enjoying barbecued fish *(bottom left)*.

Essential INFORMATION

When to Go

Yachties ply the Panamanian coastline year-round, but conditions are best during the rainy season, roughly from May to November. Hurricanes aren't common in this region, but keep an eye on weather forecasts.

Getting There

From Panama: organise your voyage in Panama's Casco Viejo (old city) through **Luna's Castle** or **Mamallena Backpackers** nearby. Tours can also be arranged in Bocas Del Toro.

From Colombia: head to Cartagena's backpacker district, Getsemani. Mamallena Backpackers have just opened a new branch here, and **Casa Viena** can also help with bookings.

Expect to pay between $400 and $600 for a five or six-day budget tour.

If you don't fancy sleeping on a boat, consider traveling with the **Darien Gapster**. Their three-day itinerary between Panama and Sapzurro, Colombia offers accommodation in tents.

Accommodation

Panama: There are sleeps to suit all budgets in Casco Viejo, one of Latin America's most beautiful colonial cities. It's well worth spending a few days exploring this UNESCO World Heritage Site, which is slowly being gentrified.

Colombia: For upscale accommodation, head to the elegantly restored boutique hotels lining the cobbled alleys of Cartagena's historic old town. Backpackers will find value beds and great street-eats a few blocks away in Getsemani. Opt for air-con where possible – Cartagena's humidity levels top 90 per cent year-round.

Kunas' habitat.

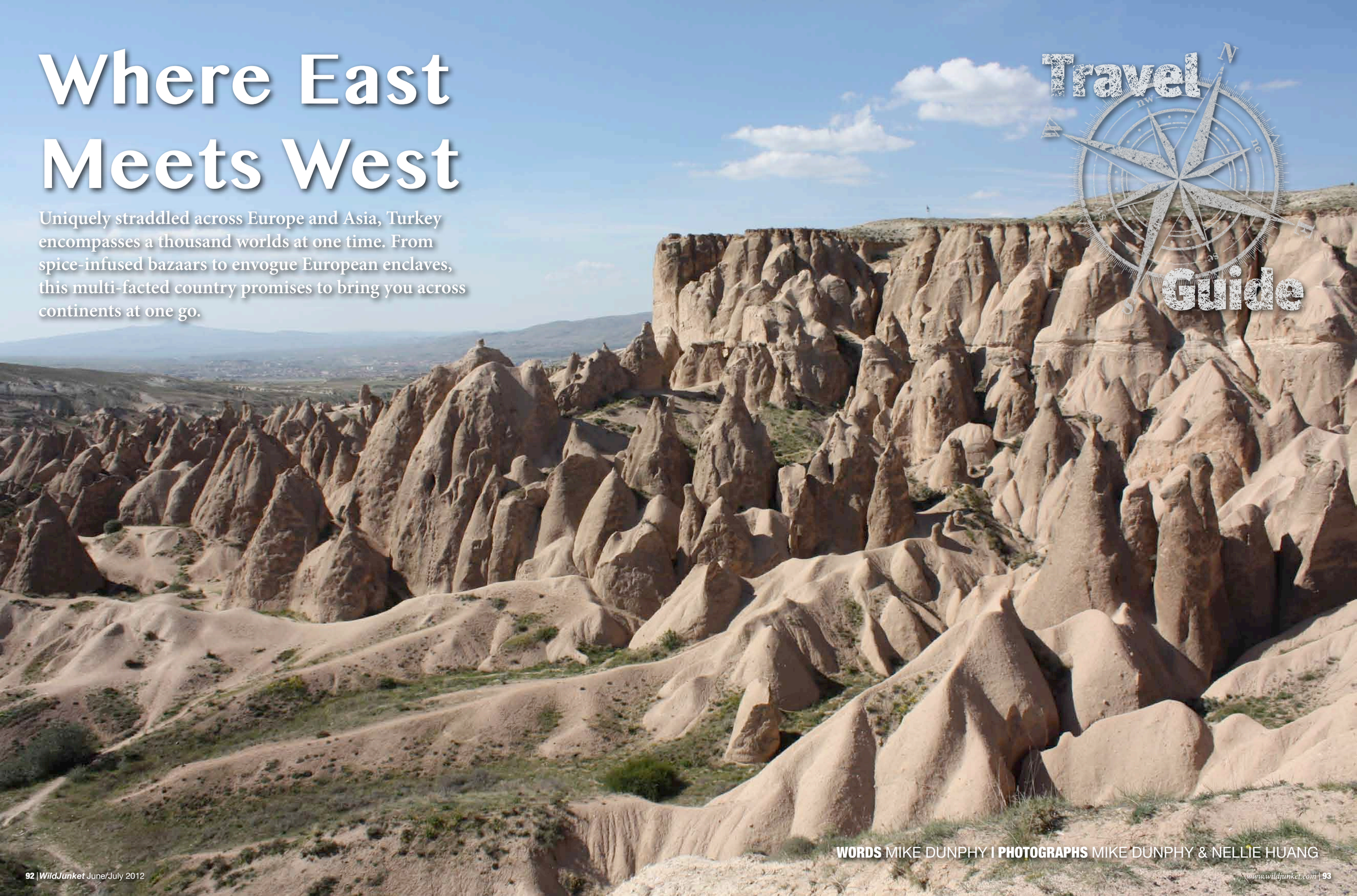
Fortunately, the Kunas have begun to form alliances with the **Panamanian Tourism Institute**, various NGOs and multilateral organizations in an effort to create sustainable, eco-tourism strategies. But with the bulk of visitors arriving on private charters, it's up to every individual to make an effort to minimize their San Blas footprint.

Congregating on deck for one last meal of freshly-caught fish, I'm salty, sunburned, and happy. But there's only so much time you can spend in close quarters with eleven hygiene-challenged strangers, and the following morning I'm relieved to anchor at our destination – the Panamanian port town of Portobelo.

As I step ashore, I cast a final glance behind me towards our boat and the wide blue sea beyond it. Our Caribbean crossing had been tough, but the islands we encountered – and the people that call them home – were worth every rogue wave. *WJ*

Flickr photo by Marc Veraart

Life's a Beach: Sailing in clear, turqoise sea studded with star fish;
Left: An old Kuna lady with a red mola wrapped around her head.



Where East Meets West

Travel Guide

Uniquely straddled across Europe and Asia, Turkey encompasses a thousand worlds at one time. From spice-infused bazaars to envogue European enclaves, this multi-facted country promises to bring you across continents at one go.

WORDS MIKE DUNPHY I **PHOTOGRAPHS** MIKE DUNPHY & NELLIE HUANG

Few countries have a location as unique as Turkey, and even fewer crosses continents - from Europe to Asia - in just one big landmass. Turkey is simultaneously the east and the west, a country where career-minded women pray piously in mosques then shed their headscarves and zip to work on high-speed subways. Such is life in Turkey, an intriguing jumbled of advanced, forward thinking intertwined with faith and integrity.

However, the fusion of cultures in Turkey is modest compared to its geographical diversity. From the edge of Eastern Europe, Turkey spreads across the Bosphorus into Asia, along the Mediterranean shores and over the Anatolian plateau to the mountainous borders with Iran and Iraq. Landscapes transform dramatically from the lush green hills along the coast to the rugged, deserts and canyons of the interior and the steep sky-piercing mountains of the east.

And nothing reflects this diversity more so than the country's world-famous cuisine. From the quintessential kebabs to tiny platters upon platters of *mezes*, the sheer array of Turkish food is enough to tickle your taste buds with a different flavor each day. For sea-bound Turks along the coasts, the perfect meal includes three essential ingredients: *roka* (arugula), *balik* (fried fish), and *rakı* — the anise-flavored liquor and unofficial national drink. In the hinterland, the classic beef and lamb kebab splinters into endless varieties.

It's easy to see why Turkey has something for everyone: ancient ruins, natural wonders, white beaches - often at a fraction of the cost in Western Europe.

Tourism is fast becoming one of Turkey's leading industries – in 2011, it received a record-breaking number of 31.5 million visitors according to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, making it one of the ten most visited destinations worldwide.

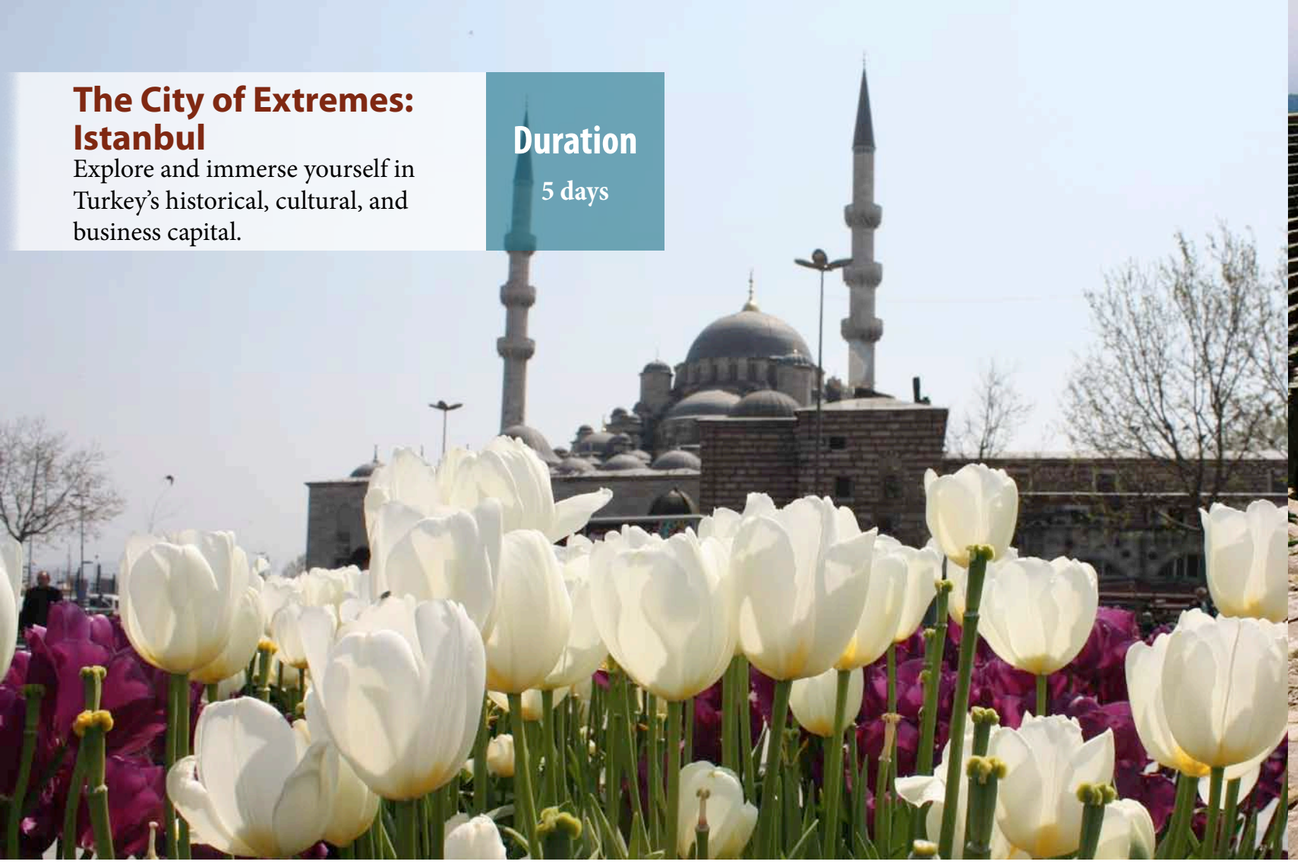
It's easy to see why as it has something for everyone, and at epic magnificence: ancient ruins, natural wonders, white sand beaches, arts and crafts, and cuisine — often at a fraction of the cost in Western Europe.

The best way to approach a country as large and diverse as Turkey is to first determine where you interest lies. If it's the iconic land you've seen in pictures, opt to base yourself in Istanbul, and wander through spice-infused bazaars and majestic mosques and palaces.

Archaeology and history buff should make for the Mediterranean coast, where well-preserved Greco-Roman remains continue to thrive. If it's the postcard-perfect natural sights you're seeking, the Aegean is blessed with the white travertines of Pamukkle and the ancient city of Esphesus.

Those with a bent for the truly exotic should spend time in the central region, where a collection of bizarre landscapes, magical fairy chimneys and underground cities abounds. WJ

Mountaintop Mystery: Giant statues and remains strewn across the top of the 7,000-feet Mount Nemrut - but nobody knows how they got there. *Left:* A beautiful lagoon in the Kaçkar Mountains along the Black Sea coast.



The City of Extremes: Istanbul

Explore and immerse yourself in Turkey's historical, cultural, and business capital.

Duration
5 days

As the only city in the world on two continents, Istanbul is an itinerary on its own. With a population of around 15 million, this dynamic metropolis is jam-packed with centuries-old mosques and Ottoman buildings alongside glass-windowed skyscrapers and stylish malls. The massive Bosphorus River slices through the city, dividing it into the Asian and European sides: one end bustles with time-warped souks and palaces, while the other grooves to an upbeat contemporary rhythm.

The most visited area in Istanbul is Sultanhamet on the European side where Constantine first laid the cornerstone of New Rome in 330 A.D. Today, the neighborhood holds the majority of historical attractions including the iconic Hagia Sophia, Tokapı Palace, Basilica Cistern and Blue Mosque as well as the must-see Grand Bazaar and Spice Market. If time allows, proceed up the Golden Horn to Fatih neighborhood for the dazzling gold Chora Church (Kariye Camii) and Theodosian Walls, which kept out invaders until 1453.

To get a taste of the Istanbulite's hedonistic culture, hang out at Taksim Square, with the extending İstiklal Caddesi serving as Bourbon Street. Morals swing, music pumps, booze flows, and young Turks dance the night away on rooftop terraces. Spend an afternoon exploring the ritzy neighborhoods along the Bosphorus from the seaside promenade.

A boat ride along the Bosphorus is a quintessential experience that gives new perspectives of the city. Catch a ride to one of the Asian neighborhoods of Istanbul, such as the hipster Kadıköy district, best known for boho Arabic teahouses and eclectic restaurants including the outstanding Çiya Sofrası.

As the cultural hub, Istanbul is also the best place to sample and immerse in Turkish arts and traditions – visit a *hammam* (Turkish bath) and experience what it's like to be scrubbed down from head to toe by an attendant; spend your afternoons in a teahouse sipping up sugary sweetness with the locals; and spend the evening smoking *nargilay,* or water pipe, as a sultry belly dancer twirls before you.

Photo by Judd Donnelly

Spellbound by the Aegean

Turkey's shortest coast is its richest in archeological sights, agricultural bounty, and works of nature.

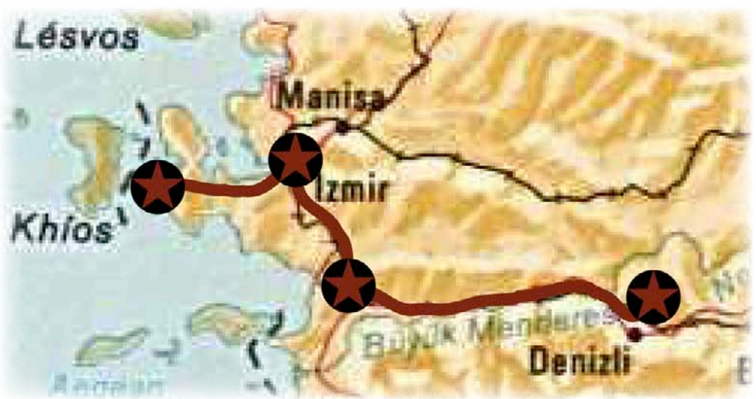
Duration
1-2 weeks

A great side-trip from Istanbul, the Aegean coast of Turkey offers an itinerary nearly every five miles, with a seemingly endless supply of ancient Greek, Roman, and Ottoman ruins, pristine coastline and world-famous UNESCO sites.

The Aegean's most famous attraction is the biblical city of Ephesus, which has some of the most complete Roman ruins in the world - including the great library of Celsus and a massive 24,000-seat amphitheater. Ephesus is also where St. John brought Virgin Mary after the crucifixion of Jesus to spend the rest of her days. Her purported cottage is an important pilgrimage site for Christians and Muslims. Ephesus is located 50 miles (80 km) from the city of Izmir, but most people choose to stay the night in nearby town Selçuk.

An outstanding natural wonder lies a couple hours east: translated as "cotton castle," Pamukkale features a large, terraced hill permanently covered in snow-white crystal travertines formed from cascading calcium-rich hot springs. Start at the bottom and follow a carefully marked trail (barefoot) up to the top, where the ruins of the ancient Roman city of Hierapolis and a dip in its sacred pool await.

The best seaside area on the Aegean coast is found on the Çeşme peninsula. In summer, thousands of tourists crowd its resorts, marinas, and restaurants – and for good reason. The beaches are naturally sculpted and blessed with long stretches of golden sand, especially in Ilıca and Çiftlik.



The Exotic Interior

Explore the fairy chimneys and whirling dervishes of magical Cappadocia.

Duration
1 week

Some of the world's most bizarre landscapes are found in Cappadocia, Central Anatolia - home to fairy chimneys, conical-shaped rock formations and whimsical cave houses. Formed by volcanic activity and thousands of years of erosion, the cave-littered plains of Cappadocia resemble scenes out of *Star Trek*. A constellation of frescoed churches – where 3rd century Christians used to seek refuge – still remain, with the best examples in the Göreme Open Air Museum.

The ancient inhabitants also went underground for protection, where they built entire cities. Twenty miles (30 km) south, Derinkuyu could accommodate as many as 30,000 people on eleven levels up to 280 feet (85 meters) deep with stables, storage rooms, churches, wineries and homes.

There are numerous towns that are easily accessible by taxis or rented car, but to explore the area thoroughly, strap on your hiking shoes and take to the hills through the red-rose valleys.

Outdoor lovers will enjoy the plethora of activities available here: from climbing to mountain-biking and canyoning. For a bird's eye view, book yourself on a hot-air balloon ride and float amidst the whimsical rock formations for an awe-inspiring experience. Beautiful cave hotels are aplenty in the region - most retain the original nature of the caves, with modern furnishing added, including the stylish Yunak Evleri.

From the town of Göreme, the Ihlara Valley lies two hours southwest. The stunning natural beauty of this gorge is enhanced by sixty Byzantine churches, chapels, monasteries, and hermit hovels from the 12th century.

The population center of the area is three hours away by car at Konya, known for its apricots, piety, and Seljuk architecture. It's also home to the Whirling Dervishes, who perform at the Mevlâna Cultural Center every Saturday evening. Nearby is the mausoleum of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi – the great Sufi mystic. Inside, the golden tomb is accompanied by antique prayer carpets, illuminated Qurans, and the rose smelling strands of the Prophet Mohammed's beard.

Secrets of the Black Sea

Meander along the least-traveled coast and uncover

Duration
1 week

Flickr photo by Ran Yaniv Hartstein

Turkey's north coast is significantly less visited (and appreciated) than the others. The weather is cloudier, attractions fewer, and landscapes more rugged - but it also offers a different side to the country, one that's sprinkled with lush, green terrain and charismatic, hospitable people.

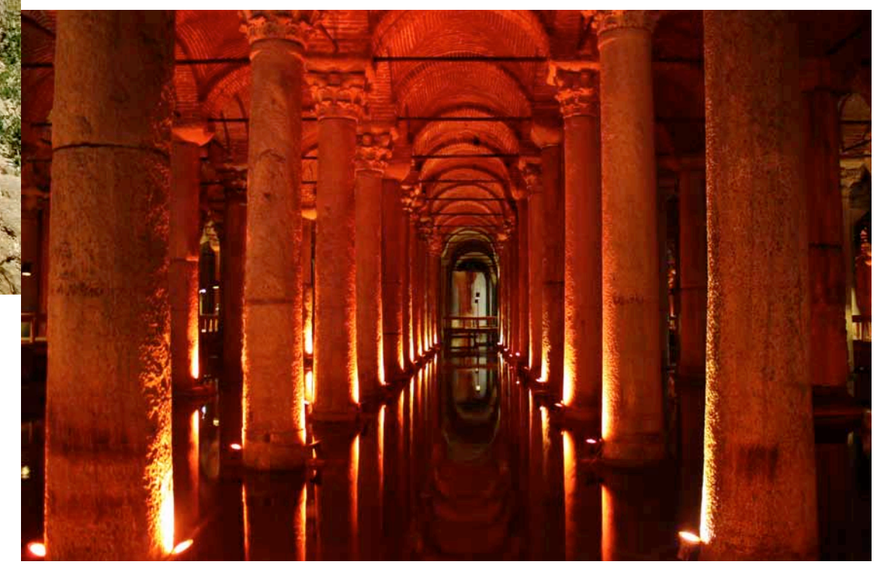
Trabzon, on the eastern end, is the most popular base for exploring the region. Inhabited since 746 B.C., the city has several Byzantine churches of note including the heavily frescoed Hagia Sophia from 1263. But the main draw to the area is the 4th-century Sümela Monastery, cut into a cliff face at 3,900 feet about 30 miles (50 km) from the city.

East of Trabzon, the landscape elevates dramatically into the alpine Kaçkar Mountains but not before passing through acres of hillside tea plantations that serve as the main economy of the region. The village of Ayder, at 4,265 feet (1,300 meters), is a good stop for hiking, a dip in thermal baths, and gorging on the renowned pastries. Adventure seekers might like to try whitewater rafting down the Firtina River from the town of Çamlıhemşin. For history buffs, the village of Yusufeli is surrounded by ruins of Georgian churches, monasteries, and castles up to 1,500 years old as well as Savangin – a pre-historic cave with inscriptions in an unknown language.

The Mystical Southeast

The birthplace of Prophet Abraham, Turkey's southeast corner remains biblical in character and attractions.

Duration
4 days



Suffering from occasional severe ethnic strife over the past few decades, the southeast gets few tourists in comparison with the rest of the country. Fortunately, things are calmer these days and the region is welcoming visitors to its numerous astounding historical sites.

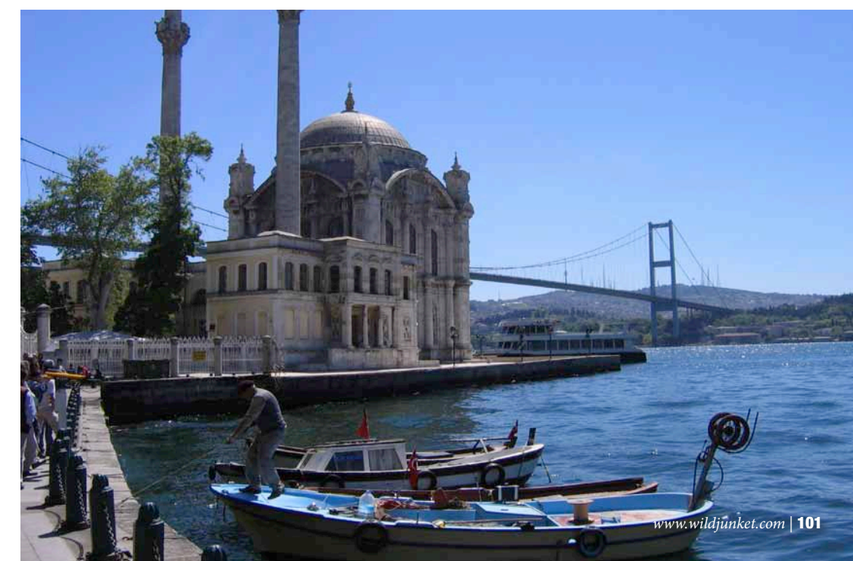
The monumental Mount Nemrut is what draws most people to this region. The summit of this 7,000-foot mountain is filled with the impressive remains of King Antiochus's royal tomb, originally adorned with seated, 30-foot statues of pagan gods and animals alongside the king himself. This site remains one of the country's greatest mystery - how were the massive statues transported there? Nobody knows for sure.

The village of Kâhta is the most convenient base for the overnight trek up Mount Nemrut - accommodation and restaurants are available here.

Another major attraction is Urfa, the most historic (and interesting) city of the region. Formerly the crusader state of Edessa, the city dates back 3,500 years and is the reputed birthplace of the Prophet Abraham. The cave that witnessed the birth is a major pilgrimage site for Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike and today has a 13th-century mosque surrounded by a pool of sacred carp. Don't try to catch one or, legend has it, you'll go blind.

For a true biblical feel, make a quick trip south to Harran, a village mentioned in *Genesis* as and still living (at least partly) in beehive mud huts.

The hub of the region, Diyarbakir, may be gritty and not very charming, but it is the transportation center and a good starting point for the region.



Highlights of Turkey

Sultanahmet Neighborhood in Istanbul

Experience 1,800 years of history on the southeastern tip of Europe.

Sümela Monastery

Cut into the cliff face near Trabzon, the 4th century monastery requires devotion for the climb.

Ephesus

One of the best preserved cities of the ancient world also remains a top destination for religious pilgrims.

Mount Nemrut

Lord of the Rings' grandeur meets real history at this mountain top tomb to King Antiochus.

Cappadocia

Like an alien world from Star Trek, this region's fairy chimneys elicit wonder and mystery.

TURKEY Essential INFORMATION

When to Go

Turkey has a vast range of climates and temperatures, but one thing is true for most of this big country: summer can get extremely hot. Unless trekking the cooler mountain regions in the east, avoid visiting Turkey during July and August when temperatures are over 100°F (40°C) and tourists reach into the tens of thousands.

Aim for spring (mid-April to mid-June) to avoid both – temperatures are milder and beaches are still great for swimming. You also might catch the many spring tulip festivals throughout the country.

Getting There

The main gateway to Turkey is the Atatürk International Airport in Istanbul, which serves over sixty airlines around the world. From the United States, Turkish Airlines and Delta operate direct flights daily, with return tickets beginning at US$1,300 for the ten-hour journey.

Numerous airlines operate cheap and direct flights from Europe – Turkish Airlines and British Airways fly direct daily from London to Istanbul for around US$200 (4-hour journey). Budget airlines such as Easyjet and Pegasus Airlines fly regularly from various European cities such as Paris to Istanbul for around US$170 (3.5-hour journey).

Getting Around

Turkey's limited rail system makes bus travel the cheapest and most convenient way of getting around the country. They are comfortable and make frequent stops. Don't try to purchase tickets at the bus station, but instead at the offices of the company. The bus usually picks up from there as well. From Istanbul, trips to most major sites take 8–12 hours, and cost US$30-50. It's best to opt for an overnight trip and save a hotel fee.

For longer distances, consider flying which is affordable and hassle-free - most domestic routes cost US$75-$150 each way. Turkish Airlines operates numerous routes around the country and has a good reputation for high standards and reasonably priced airfares.

Accommodation

As one of the top ten tourist destinations in the world, Turkey has no shortage of accommodation options, from five-star beach resorts and opulent heritage hotels to backpacker pensions and hostels.

In Istanbul, the peak of luxury can be found at the **Hôtel Les Ottomans** in the Kuruçeşme neighborhood. This stunningly renovated 18th-century seaside mansion features ten individually designed suites filled with antique furniture, intricate crown moldings, ivory inlay, Iznik tiles, and purple marble — fit for a Sultana (from whom each takes its name). Rooms begin at 1,850 Liras (US$1,050) per night.

A more affordable option that still keeps an Ottoman flair is located adjacent to the Blue Mosque at **Mavi Ev** (Blue House). Rooms start at 175 Liras per night (US$100) and are decorated in traditional Ottoman tiles, carpets, and stained glass. The main decision is between views of the iconic landmark or Marmara Sea.

Nearby, the award winning **Cheers Hostel** offers multi-bed dormitory rooms at 30 Liras per night (US$17) and private rooms at 230 Liras (US$130). The lounge area has a television and free Wi-Fi, but the real gem is the rooftop bar with up-close views of the Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque.

Cost of Travel

The currency is the Turkish Lira (TRY); the exchange rate is currently at US$1 to 1.75TRY. Make use of the many local pastry shops, bazaars, and street sellers and you can eat rather well for 10–20 Liras (US$8) a meal. But it would also be foolish to not invest in the truly stunning cuisine of Turkey and uniquely cultural experiences such as the hammam (Turkish bath) or a boat ride along the Bosphorus.

Public transport is a great way to explore the country, especially in Istanbul. The city's system covers most of the urban area, with interconnecting lines of trams, trolleys, subways, buses, and boats. The most cost-effective way is to purchase an *akbil*, a punch card available at kiosks around stations. A single ride costs about 3.5 Liras (US$2).

Websites

Here are some helpful links:

Turkey Travel Planner
Go Turkey
Mymerhaba

Barefoot Luxury

Nikoi Island, Indonesia

Just off tourist destination Bintan Island is a 15-hectare private islet teeming with shell-strewn beaches, extraordinary rock formations, colossal banyan trees, pristine reefs and mangroves.

Blending into this tropical landscape are 15 exclusive beach houses handcrafted from local driftwood, vernacular 'alang alang' grass roofs and tastefully decorated with linen and pebbles. Breezes and fans rather than air-con cool its two-storey houses; the bedrooms linked by elevated walkways and open-concept decks just steps away from the beach.

When Australian owners Andrew and Julia Dixon stumbled upon the island eight years ago, they'd found it completely deserted. Today, the raw beauty and pristine nature remain very much in tact – with only a fraction of the jungle occupied by the resort.

But Nikoi Island had been conceived by its owners as a private island, not a resort. A place of utter seclusion and perfect peace, for people who like the idea of going back to nature and spending all day barefoot on the beach and who appreciate good food and wine.

In a location off-limits to everyone except for a few other guests and staff, the private island promises a retreat from the world beyond - where even Robinson Crusoe would have indulged in.

Rates for each beach house start from US$263 for double occupancy. Nikoi Island

Fighting CRIME with CRAP

What the ugliest travel camera in the world taught me about travel safety

by Mike Sowden

My rucksack top is open. I didn't leave it that way, so...someone else has. They've pulled my bag from out under the chair I've been sitting on, and they've gone through my bag. Mere curiosity? Alas - my travel wallet is gone, along with my passport, boarding pass and credit cards. I slump against a wall. I have 5 hours before my plane leaves. Ah, travel.

But this isn't about how I ran around Dusseldorf for five hours like a hyper-caffeinated Forrest Gump. This isn't about how I made it onto that plane with minutes to spare and at least 10 years taken off my life. This isn't about fury, self-recrimination or getting home at 4am and falling asleep face-down on the stairs.

This is about how the thief missed my camera.

See, I have a new camera. Or maybe "new" isn't the word. A better one is "craptastic". It's a Panasonic Lumix, one of those fancy new things you can slip into your pocket. My last camera required two hands and a knee to lift it to your eye. If you wanted to change the exposure, you carefully unscrewed the back, took the film out and put it into a new camera. It was that kind of camera.

But then it died. And I needed a new camera, one that wouldn't require a friend to help with the focus. I needed something portable, practical, technologically advanced and enormously idiot-friendly. A friend pointed me to the bottom end of the Lumix market. It arrived a week later. I'd steeled myself - but I wasn't ready for the scratched, scuffed, sad little item that tumbled out of the parcel addressed to me. To a geek like me, a lover of shiny things, it looked more than disappointing. My heart sank - but my brain said "that looks perfect". I grabbed a knife and started scraping more of the paint off it.

In a post on her blog A Little Adrift, longterm globetrotter Shannon O'Donnell 'fessed up her best MacGyver-style travel tricks. Want to secure your belonging to the chair you're sitting on? Always carry a carabiner clip. Hole in your pants and a sudden need to eject your iPhone's Sim card? A sewing needle is just the ticket. And so on.

But the piece of advice that sunk deepest into me is the quirkiest, and it's this: look like crap.

I don't mean to suggest Shannon habitually looks anything less than elegant, of course, or that she's suggesting the next generation of travelers lurch round the world looking like extras from 'The Walking Dead'. What she means is that if you have valuables, it's a really great idea to make them look less than worthless - literally, "less than". Make them look like a really stupid, burdensome thing to steal. Turn them into visual embarrassments. Crappify them to high heaven. Or in my case, buy them second-hand in the worst state available, and then worsen them.

There are two ways to crappify: you can either deface, or you can fake. The latter is wise if you can see yourself selling it on the way to a better model - for example, Shannon suggests wrapping duct-tape around your SLR to make it look sketchy. You could use masking tape and write things on it that would scare off any normal human being, such as "Property of the FBI" or "I'm a Belieber". And if you never plan to sell your trusty equipment on - why not make it look like something *nobody* can sell on? Who steals useless-looking junk?

When I was robbed, I was working on my laptop. My camera's memory card was in my card-reader, but I'd popped the camera body back into my rucksack...which was just as stupid a move as putting my travel wallet in there. However, thanks to some enthusiastic cosmetic vandalism on my part, my camera looked like it was broken - and the thief passed it by. Coincidence? Perhaps - but it was a minor blessing on a very bad day, and so I'm regarding it as a valuable lesson with wider implications...

If you meet me somewhere in the world, and you're immediately rendered rigid with horror at my dreadful, truly appalling fashion sense, don't worry - it's deliberate. I'm actually trying to avoid being stolen. Just so you know. WJ

The Power of Return

by Candace Rose Rardon

"Is this your first time in Sweden?" the immigration officer asked me on a blustery March morning.

As she waited for my answer, the stamp in her hand hovered in mid-air, just inches above a fresh page in my passport, as though whether or not I'd been here before might determine if she let me in again.

And normally, my answer would be a definitive no. I hardly ever return to a country I've already visited, especially if I'm traveling within Europe. When a flight as short as an hour can find you in a completely different country, where a different language is spoken and different customs observed, it's hard to justify going back to the same place twice.

But this time was a little different. This time I said yes.

Because I had been here before, in 2008, when my arrival from the US in Stockholm Arlanda airport marked my first day in Europe. Four years later, I was now back in the same terminal, having been invited on a ski trip to the Swedish resort of Åre.

I'd accepted the invitation without question, but I won't deny feeling a twinge of regret at the same time—why couldn't it have been to Norway, or Austria, or Switzerland? Anywhere, really, that I hadn't been before.

Thankfully, there's a name for this strange reluctance to visit the same country twice. Travel blogger Andy Jarosz calls it the return visit dilemma and explains it like this: "However much we have enjoyed our visit I know that when we're planning that next trip, the very fact that we have been to a country before will be held massively against it."

Like Andy, I can't help wanting to try somewhere different. There's just something about newness, about a lack of familiarity, about fumbling your way from the airport to the city center, only to get lost a hundred times as you learn your way around.

And who am I kidding? There's just something about a new stamp in the passport, something that says you're actually getting somewhere on your path through the world. Returning to the same countries doesn't always feel like progress.

But as our plane drew close to Stockholm, I found myself looking out the window feeling oddly excited, even if I had been here before—and I began to wonder if maybe there isn't a kind of power in returning after all. Unlike arriving in a country for the first time, I discovered I had an unexpected travel companion with me that morning: my memories.

There were the little things, of course—the acres of tall pine trees, the taste of warm pancakes—and I remembered how fun it was to pretend to know Swedish, greeting shop attendants or waiters with a confident hej hej, only to give a sheepish grin after they started chatting away and confess, "Pratar inte Svenska."

But there was another layer, too—my visit to Sweden in 2008 had been my first time abroad alone, and I could remember the thrill of anticipation, the adventure that was only just beginning. Like a couple might return to where they met or got engaged, the places where we first fell in love with the world hold their own kind of significance for us.

Far too often in the race to expand the width and breadth of my experiences, I forget that there's a certain depth that can only come from spending an extended amount of time in a place. That maybe there are other reasons to visit a country than a passport stamp.

When our flight back from Sweden landed in London, I was soon in front of yet another immigration officer, being asked why I'd come to the UK. It took me a second to explain my situation to him—how my visa was nearing its end and I was here for a few days to collect my things before leaving.

There it was again, that familiar pause as he listened and waited with the passport stamp in hand. He seemed to give it some thought before saying, "I'll just put you down as a returner."

And for the first time, the thought of being a returner didn't sound so bad. WJ

Water Sports Gear

By Lenore Greiner

With summer quickly creeping in on us, the heat is blazing: time to splash out in the great outdoors and get wet and wild. For water sports enthusiasts, here are our recommendations that will make your summer a great one!

Ocean Kayak Malibu Two XL Sit-On-Top Kayak

Hardy and handy, the Ocean Kayak Malibu tandem kayak is the recreational kayaker's workhorse for paddling lakes, rivers, and and in mild ocean conditions. This kayak has:

- Great maneuverability
- A 34" width making it extremely stable out on the open sea and less prone to capsizing
- A 61 pound weight making it a breeze to fish out of the water and handle on land
- A 13-foot length that prevents two paddlers from interfering with each other's paddling

I've paddled this model to the Mokulele Islands off Oahu and felt very stable in Hawaii's intense currents, but it can be slow because it's a sit atop kayak. What's really great about this kayak is that you can easily convert this tandem into a single kayak by removing a seat and centering the other. Comes in red only with, retails for $889 at **REI.**

Aeris Velocity X3 Open Heel Fins with Spring Heel Straps

These power-enhancing split fins have slots cut into them so you can slice through the water with ease. You're supposed to get better propulsion with less effort, saving energy and increasing your water time. However, I didn't feel that much propulsion difference from other fins of this type. But then I flunked physics.

What I really liked about these fins is the open heels with spring heel straps that pop on quickly - no adjustment needed! And I liked how the comfortable, ergonomic foot pocket can handle a scuba boot or bare foot, making the fins practical for both scuba and snorkeling. The fins come in black with yellow, blue, and red accents and cost $129.95 at **Leisurepro**.

Roxy Split Rashguard with SPF 50

Rashguards, a form-fitting t-shirt, is the gear of choice for surfers to protect chests and stomachs from rubbing against surf wax. Now this practical wetshirt is taking off as the ideal sunblock for water fanatics. The Roxy Split Rashguard has these impressive qualities:

- 50 SPF sun protection built into the t-shirt
- Fabric made of 80% nylon and 20% spandex blend
- Weighs only 6 oz. even though the short-sleeved t-shirt has a quality thickness

I especially liked the gathered drawstring on the back hem to ensure a good fit in the water. It's comfortable in the water and doesn't ride up during water sports, but can get too hot under the heat when kayaking or paddle boarding. It comes in neon berry and black and white; retails for $38 at **Zappos**.

Teva Churno Evo Shoes

If you're looking to pack just one pair of shoes for an action-packed trip, this is an excellent solution. Lightweight, comfortable and extremely weather-proof, it's designed for every type of outdoor activity you can imagine – canyoning, kayaking, rock-climbing, or just hiking through wet terrain.

- Spider Original rubber is made to grip like crazy in wet environments
- Drainage channels in the forefoot allow water to escape
- A soft, fold-down heel with Shoc Pad to give serious shock absorption and cushioning
- A bungee lacing system allows for a snug fit

I tested out the shoes in the wet jungles of Thailand and found them to be extremely comfortable, light and easy to peel off. It comes in Algiers blue, geranium and mint green, retails for $85 on **Teva**.

Surftech Marisa Miller Stand Up Paddleboard

Paddle boarding is the latest trend in the watersports world. Designed specifically for women paddlers, this stand-up paddleboard (SUP) is a collaboration between designer Randy French and model Marissa Miller. Its features include:

- A deck pad with an excellent grip for your feet,
- Weighs 22 pounds so a woman can easily haul it in and out of the water using the center handle
- 10-foot length so a woman paddler can deftly maneuver on the waves or cover flat water
- Built for performance and durability because the Tuflite epoxy board has a sandwich construction

It comes only in purple and black, retails for $1715.00 at **REI**.

Sony MDR-E225G Sports Water Resistant Stereo Dynamic Earphones

Water resistant and rugged, these stereo earphones come equipped with a compact winding case. Within these earphones, a powerful bass and treble are reproduced using Sony Acoustic Turbo-Circuit technology.

- Extremely lightweight, at 5 grams (0.18 oz.)
- Exceptional sound quality underwater with Turbo-Circuit technology
- Supplied with an ear adaptor and case – it's up to you to figure out how to encase your MP3 player underwater.

Surprisingly, these earphones cost the same as plain, land-based earphones, selling for $29 at **Zalmar.**

Luminox Navy SEAL Colormark 3050 Dive Watch

Is a dive watch in a carbon-reinforced case with a hardened watch crystal tough enough for you? The Luminox Navy SEAL Dive watch was developed with the U.S. Navy SEALS, making it tough enough for the C.I.A., the D.E.A. and other international elite units. Perhaps it will meet your standards too.

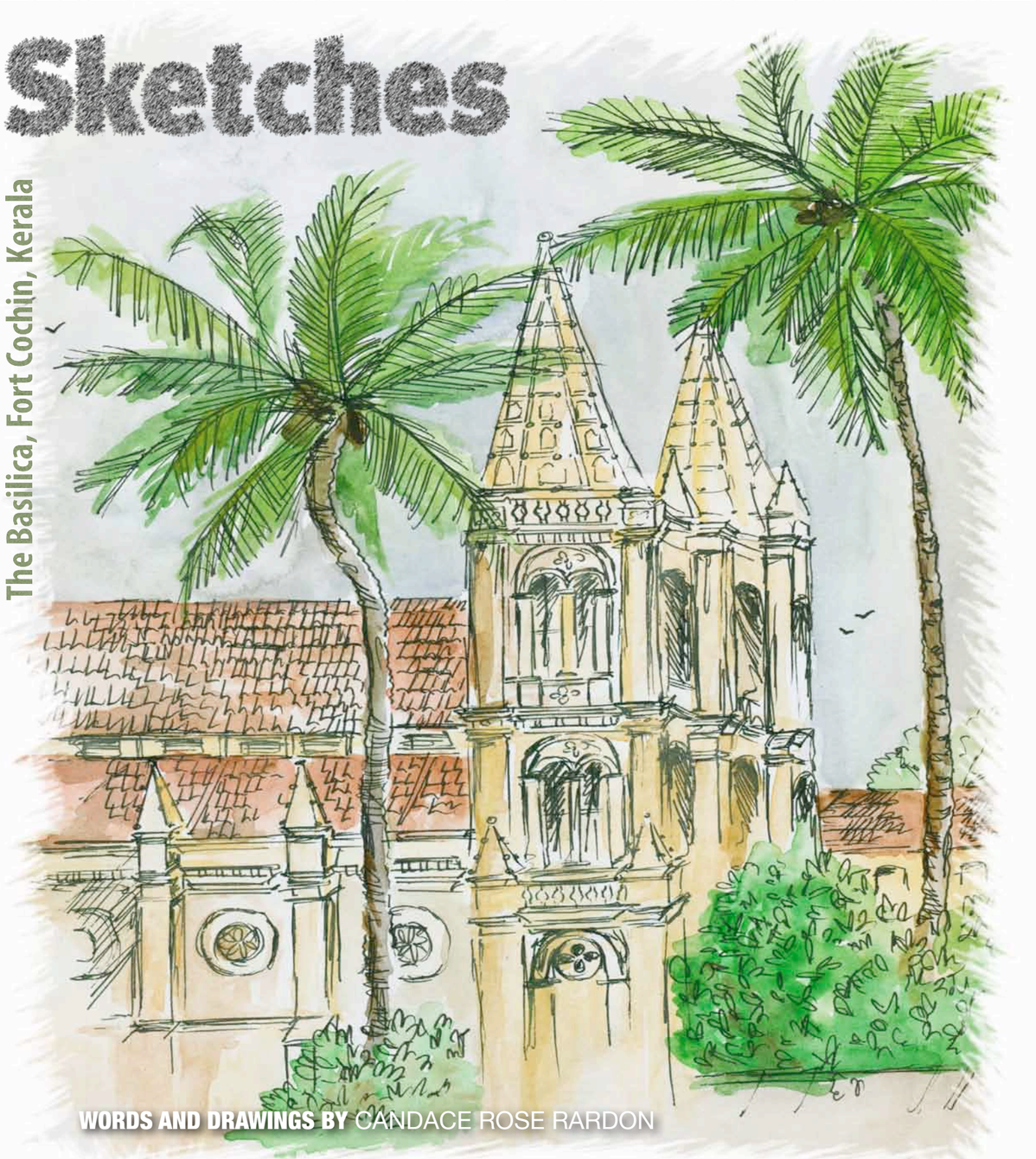
- Hands and numerals that glow underwater, with a 25-year guarantee
- Unidirectional turning bezel for time-tracking
- Water resistant up to 200 meters deep

Underwater or on land, I found the black rubber straps extremely comfortable; the buckle has double perforated holes so the watch stays securely on your wrist as you explore the ocean's nether regions.

This Swiss-made timepiece retails for $175 at **Luminox**.

Sketches

The Basilica, Fort Cochin, Kerala



WORDS AND DRAWINGS BY CANDACE ROSE RARDON

It wasn't my first time at the Basilica--I'd passed it earlier on a guided tour of Fort Kochin in Kerala, one of India's southernmost states. But I found myself returning again that afternoon, this time viewing it from a second-story cafe across the street, from where I could sit down and draw the details of its facade and towers. That morning, the church had felt like just another sight I needed to see; sketchbook in hand, it became something more. And perhaps that's what I've come to love so much about travel sketching -- the chance to make a place my own. WJ

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