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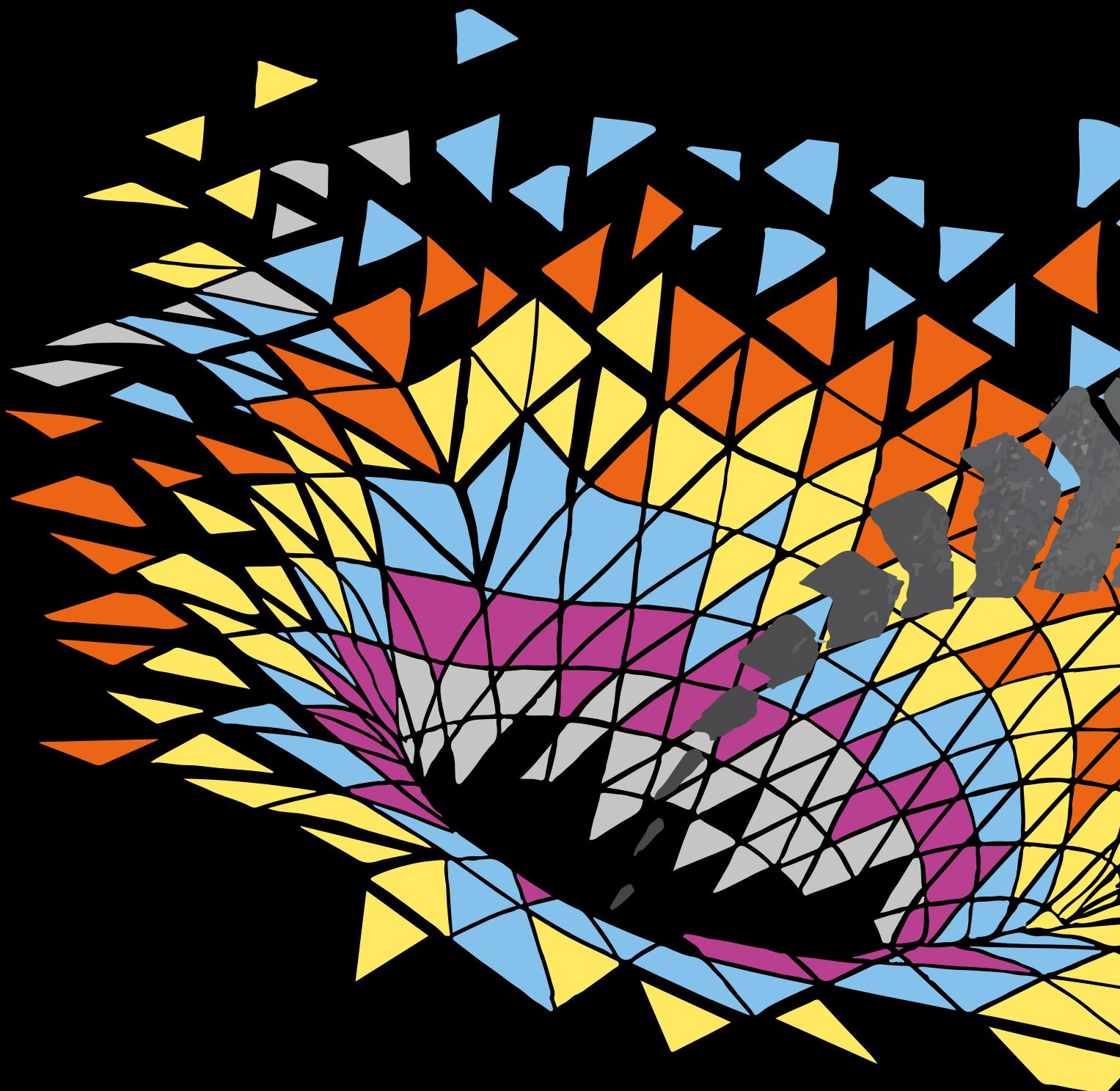


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March
2018

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Skomer puffins photographed at sunset, Skomer, Pembrokeshire
IMAGE: Matthew Cattell/Picfair

March
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Vote for your favourite hotels to win prizes

Competition**Win a four-night break to San Sebastián, p.45**



Korea continues to receive accolades

For 2018 Korea features as one of Lonely Planet's top ten countries to visit and in Wanderlust magazine's 'Hot List'.



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Contributors



Lee Cobaj

Hong Kong may be small but it's endlessly fascinating. I've lived here for nearly 40 years and still regularly make fresh discoveries. All the new bars shoot up here quicker than bamboo, so get out there and explore. **HONG KONG P.67**



David Whitley

My wife and I went on a barely planned self-drive holiday through South Africa that turned into one of our most joyful adventures; a resounding triumph for the DIY ethos and all those incredible animals we saw. **SOUTH AFRICA P.98**



Jamie Lafferty

Papua New Guinea's rejection of modernity leaves room for plenty of speculation. I wanted to fill my own knowledge gap by visiting the interior, where I found life at once strangely familiar and totally alien. **PAPUA NEW GUINEA P.110**



Gavin Haines

Despite its winter downpours, Vancouver is one of the world's most liveable cities — and you can see why. It's also changing thanks to a growing Chinese influence, nascent arts scene and (nearly) legal pot industry. **VANCOUVER P.134**



Connor McGovern

Surrounded by forest and volcanoes, and perched up in the clouds, Quito seems like a tucked-away backpackers' roost. But the reality is quite the opposite — beguiling and at times beautiful, the Andean capital is sleepy no more. **QUITO P.144**



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GSTAAD PALACE
SWITZERLAND



Some fairytales
do come true





Editor's letter

What can you do in a weekend? Go to the pub, have a lie-in, read the papers, take a walk in the park, watch a play, attend to some mundane life admin or, even better, domestic chores? Most weekends are typical. But what about the atypical? What about when you want a change of routine? To get away?

Now it's spring — well, almost — it's time to break out of that self-imposed hibernation. And what better way than to take an impromptu trip somewhere close(ish) to home?

No need for flights, too much planning, or even expensive accommodation; if you know where to look, the UK and Ireland have some of the best landscapes, experiences and activities on the planet.

From wild swimming and wild camping to gin making and whisky tasting, coasteering and zip-lining, hiking and scenic driving, we've rounded up 35 of the best weekends on offer across our blustery North Atlantic islands.

By all means plan your European jaunts, book your long-haul flights, but in the meantime pack yourself off somewhere for a weekend closer to home and remember what travel's all about — spontaneity, new experiences and shaking off that wintry state of apathy. Your Monday self will thank your Friday self.

PAT RIDDELL, EDITOR

 @patriddell
 @patriddell

AWARD-WINNING NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER

British Travel Awards 2017: Best Consumer Holiday Magazine • British Guild of Travel Writers Awards 2017: Best Travel Writer • ATTA Media Awards 2017: Best Cultural Article on an African Destination, Best Blogger on Africa & Best Online Coverage on Africa • British Guild of Travel Writers Awards 2016: Best Travel Writer • LATA Media Awards 2016: Online Blog Feature of the Year • British Travel Awards 2015: Best Consumer Holiday Magazine • British Travel Awards 2014: Best Consumer Holiday Magazine • British Guild of Travel Writers Awards 2013: Best Overseas Feature • British Travel Press Awards 2012: Young Travel Writer of the Year

HIGHLIGHTS



The Masterclasses — 1 July

After the success of last year's first Festival, we've got a whole day of sessions for budding travel writers and photographers (p.46).



Qinghai Guide

This month's free guide explores Qinghai, China's dramatic land of mountains, vast open plains and splashes of rich culture.



Competitions

Be in with a chance to win four nights in Spain's foodie mecca of San Sebastián, p.45 natgeotraveller.co.uk/competitions



National Geographic Food

Our sister title is in shops now, exploring food in all its guises, from recipes and produce to trends and nutrition. natgeofood.co.uk



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Be sure to keep your piece focused, capture the essence of the destination you're writing about and ensure you consider *National Geographic Traveller* (UK)'s defining features: immersive travel coupled with authentic storytelling.

DEADLINE: 15 May 2018. Terms and conditions apply. See more and enter online at natgeotraveller.co.uk/competitions

THE PRIZE

This two-week Thailand Hike, Bike and Kayak Adventure will give you a completely different perspective on the destination. Join a small group of like-minded travellers to hike through forests and rice paddies, cycle through remote community villages, and experience Thailand's intriguing combination of culture and the great outdoors. You'll kayak the turquoise waters of the Andaman Sea, and discover white-sand beaches and coral coves perfect for snorkelling. With a local guide on hand to give you the lowdown on local language and customs, and your accommodation and transport taken care of, this trip delivers

a hassle-free but physically rewarding experience. Highlights include cycling around Bangkok, as well as in and around Kanchanaburi and Ayutthaya, an overnight stay in a raft house, and a three-day hill tribe village trek to a rural community where tourism is helping to give back to locals. Most main meals are included, as is transportation between the various stops on the trip. gadventures.co.uk



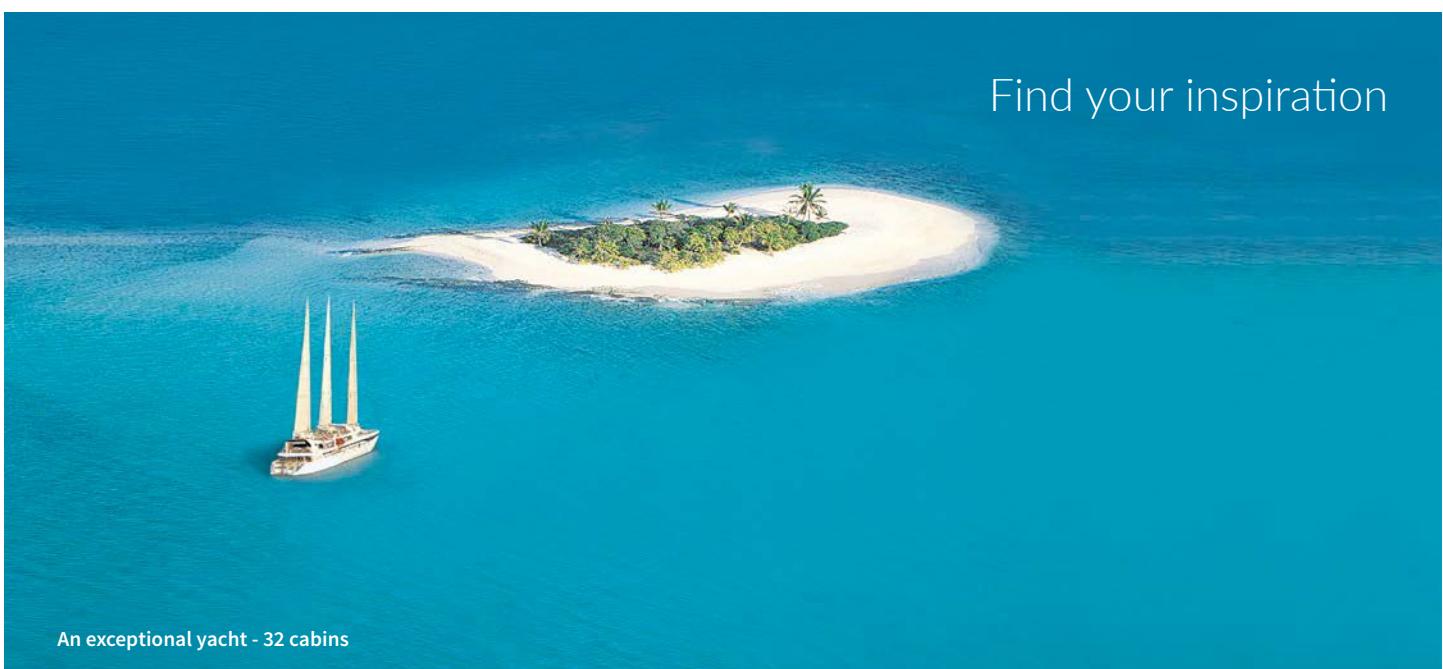
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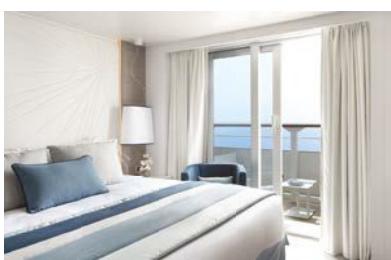
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SNAPSHOT

Suri girl, Ethiopia

From the capital, Addis Ababa, it takes three days of hard travel to reach the isolated village of Kibish, in the Omo Valley. I stayed with the Suri people — one of the region's ancient tribes, where piercing, scarification and lip plates are a strong part of the culture. I lived in my tent, under the protection of the tribal leader, and, over time, gained the community's trust and was able to take portraits.

One day, several women and girls came by. One of them was very shy and stood aside. I went to her and said "challi", which means "hello, how are you?" and took the picture. I didn't ever find out her name, yet in my mind, I still call her Challi.

MIRO MAY // PHOTOGRAPHER

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GOING WILD**WHAT:** Chile's Route of Parks**WHERE:** Running 1,500 miles from Hornopirén in central Chile, south to the Beagle Channel, through 17 of the country's national parks**TELL ME MORE:** It's the largest donation of privately held land in history, adding 11 million acres to Chile's national parks. Part of the land was gifted to the government by Kristine McDivitt Tompkins, former CEO of Patagonia clothing.gob.cl **AMELIA DUGGAN**

Editors' picks

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

IMAGES: GETTY, ALAMY

**SLEEP EASY**

The ancient inns of Japan seem to be having a moment. Historically a place for nomadic samurai and traders to rest up, *ryokans* look set to become the most popular type of place to bed down across the country. Airbnb is claiming a 600% rise in *ryokan* bookings for 2018.

JOSEPHINE PRICE**WHICH MUSIC FESTIVALS ARE ON OUR RADAR FOR THIS YEAR?**

Wonderflip, Udaipur //

JOSEPHINE PRICE

Littlelig, Stellenbosch //

ZANE HENRY

End of the Road, Wiltshire //

AMELIA DUGGAN

NOS Alive, Lisbon //

FARIDA ZEYNALOVAMeadows in the Mountains, Bulgaria // **STEPHANIE CAVAGNARO****IN NUMBERS**
PICASSO'S GUERNICA UNPACKED**27/03 – 29/07**

when you can catch a new exhibition on the masterpiece at Paris' Musée Picasso

81

years since it was painted

1937

year of the bombing of the Basque village of Guernica by Nazi and fascist Italian warplanes

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the width and height in feet of the vast, monochrome mural

museepicassoparis.fr

CONNOR MCGOVERN**JUMP AROUND**

Get high at ZAPspace, a new trampoline park in London's Stratford. It's packed with drop slides, a dodgeball court and a tumble lane for fearless flippers. Once you feel suitably wobbly, find your legs at the venue's speakeasy, The Curious Fox. From £12. zapspace.co.uk **STEPHANIE CAVAGNARO**

**WHAT:** Chile's Route of Parks**WHERE:** Running 1,500 miles from Hornopirén in central Chile, south to the Beagle Channel, through 17 of the country's national parks**TELL ME MORE:** It's the largest donation of privately held land in history, adding 11 million acres to Chile's national parks. Part of the land was gifted to the government by Kristine McDivitt Tompkins, former CEO of Patagonia clothing.gob.cl **AMELIA DUGGAN****TOP 4**
Silver screen hotels**1 THE PLAZA, NEW YORK**

// ALMOST FAMOUS

Trivia: Famous guests include the late John Lennon and Yoko Ono

2 DEGLI ORAIFI, FLORENCE

// ROOM WITH A VIEW

Trivia: The room with that view is 414

3 RELAIS BOURGONDISCH CRUYCE, BRUGES

// IN BRUGES

Trivia: One of the most liked unmade scripts of the year in the Blacklist 2006 (it was made two years later)

4 HOTEL DES MILLE COLLINES, KIGALI // HOTEL RWANDA

Trivia: 1,268 people took refuge here during the Rwandan genocide

Source: Expedia's new Ultimate Movie Buff Hotel guide **MARIA PIERI**

BIG PICTURE*Hudson Bay, Canada*

I've always found the arctic fox to be one of life's most fascinating survivors, and have spent many years photographing them. On this occasion, I headed to Canada's Hudson Bay in late autumn to focus on these ever-hungry vulpines' preparation for the depths of winter. Of all the creatures I saw, this one took the prize for perseverance. While his peers were scouring the tundra for an unwary ptarmigan or slumberous lemming, he'd opted to try and pound his way through several inches of thick sea ice to grab a piece of frozen kelp. Over a couple of hours, he continued to pounce on this inanimate source of frustration until, ultimately, he simply gave up and went in search of something simpler.

ANDY SKILLEN // PHOTOGRAPHER

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Ancient Egypt THE KING TUT TOUR

From the opening of the world's largest archaeological museum to a showcase of artifacts from King Tut's tomb, ancient Egypt has been given a new lease of life

All hail the king — ancient Egypt's golden poster boy is going on tour. In the run-up to the centenary of Howard Carter's discovery of the fabled tomb in 1922, over 150 personal artifacts found buried with the boy king will be showcased as part of the roving 'Treasures of the Golden Pharaoh' exhibition. The collection, featuring 60 pieces that have never left Egypt before, will be the largest collection of King Tutankhamun accoutrements to be exhibited internationally. It'll kick off at Los Angeles' **CALIFORNIA SCIENCE CENTER** before heading to Europe in 2019.

If you can't catch King Tut on the road, then head to his hometown of Cairo, where a trove of some of his unseen treasures recently went on show at the **EGYPTIAN MUSEUM**. They included sheets of fabric adorned with gold found in King Tut's tomb.

Missed it? Fear not — these, along with thousands of other priceless artifacts, are making their way to Egypt's new *pièce de résistance*, the **GRAND EGYPTIAN MUSEUM**, in Giza. The vast museum opens its doors later this year, and, once filled, will house over 100,000 ancient pieces, including Tut's golden funeral chariot and deathbed. kingtutexhibition.com egypt.travel **CONNOR MCGOVERN**

TAKE IT TO THE GRAVE

Two 3,500-year-old tombs were recently discovered at the Dra' Abu el-Naga necropolis, near Luxor. Never accessed before, the tombs are believed to be the final resting places of two high officials, and were found with elaborate murals, well-preserved artifacts and a linen-clad mummy.



KING TUT

QUICK FACTS

BORN: Around 1341 BC

DIED: Just 18 years later

TOMB FOUND: November 1922

DID YOU KNOW: King Tut's heart is missing. Experts aren't sure what happened to it, but it was replaced with a scarab amulet inscribed with a spell

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The St Helena Air Service has begun operation from OR Tambo International Airport (JHB). Ticket prices start at £804 (including taxes) for an economy return fare. Book flights to this unspoilt destination and keep updated at flyairlink.com

MICHELIN MUNCHIES

Strange stars

A Bangkok street food stall is the latest low-key venue to be awarded a Michelin star — work up an appetite for these other Michelin-starred restaurants in unusual places

Street food legend, 70-year old Jay Fai, has just seen her eponymous restaurant in Banglumphu, close to Bangkok's Khao San Road, awarded a Michelin star — but don't expect cheap eats here. This tiny restaurant is famed for serving crisp, seafood-stuffed omelettes costing 1,000 Thai baht (£23) and drunken noodles, which are a couple of pounds less. Expect long waits for sit-down service: there are barely any tables and the kitchen seems to focus on serving the constant hailstorm of take-away orders.

327 Maha Chai Rd, Khwaeng Samran Rat. **SARAH BARRELL**



IMAGES: FAVIKEN; GETTY; ALAMY



FÄVIKEN, JÄRPEN, SWEDEN

Is this the world's most isolated fine-dining restaurant? Set in a 19th-century clapboard farmhouse estate in Sweden's remote Åre Municipality, chef Magnus Nilsson serves up locally grown produce, which includes plenty of pickled and cured goodies. There's also a B&B upstairs. faviken.com



Starry Singapore street food

The only other street food eats to make Michelin's one-star list are both in Singapore: Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle, and Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice and Noodle (serving Hong Kong-style soya sauce chicken noodles). A starry supper at these modest venues costs around £1.60. visitsingapore.com

THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Hidden above an unassuming clothes shop in Leeds, this concrete box of a restaurant serves foie gras donuts, and an 'emancipation of black cod' against a backdrop of splatter paint and sprayed graffiti. themanbehindthecurtain.co.uk

Dim sum star

At the Hong Kong branch of celebrated dim sum chain, Tim Ho Wan, chef Mak Kwai Pui dishes up steamed egg cake and baked buns with barbecue pork for less than the price of a pint. 9-11 Fuk Wing Street, Sham Shui Po.





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DARK SKIES

Call it a night

Calling all stargazers – this is the year to protect our skies and join in the celestial celebrations

Dark sky at night, traveller's delight? Well, it certainly looks like that will be the case this year. As urban sprawl and light pollution increase, we're becoming increasingly aware of how precious our skies are — so a growing number of Dark Sky Reserves are reclaiming the skies and showing us the stars. Alongside this, the first European Dark Sky Places Conference took place in 2017 with aims to promote rural development, tourism and tackle light pollution. Whether you're new to astro-tourism or a roving telescope-touting traveller, there's plenty to discover. From March, Dark Skies Tenerife is launching new private tours where you'll be whisked off into the El Teide National Park with an experienced astronomer, binoculars and even a hamper of tapas to nibble on while you gaze at the famed skies. If that doesn't whet your appetite, try these cosmic calendar events.

darkskiestenerife.co.uk JOSEPHINE PRICE

THE COSMIC CALENDAR**BOOK AHEAD**

Many US states host 'star parties' throughout the year. From the Grand Canyon to the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, the events gather speakers, food trucks and activities around the telescopes. nps.gov/rmss.org

GO NOW

Cancel all February plans and head to the UK's National Parks Dark Skies Festival. From 9-25 February, celebrate the nation's bejewelled skies in Northumberland, North York Moors, South Downs and Yorkshire Dales national parks. Think night-time zip-wiring paired with educational sessions. darkskiesnationalparks.org.uk

HOW TO DO IT

Stargaze in style in Northumberland at any time of year. Check into luxury lodges in the Kielder Water & Forest Park — the largest protected night sky in Europe and the fourth-largest in the world — where you'll have private stargazing pods and outdoor hot tubs galore. landal.co.uk

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Dark Sky Reserves

- Aoraki Mackenzie, **NEW ZEALAND**
 - Brecon Beacons National Park, **WALES**
Central Idaho, **USA**
 - Exmoor National Park, **ENGLAND**
Kerry, **IRELAND**
 - Mont-Mégantic, Québec, **CANADA**
 - Moore's Reserve, South Downs, **ENGLAND**
 - NamibRand Nature Reserve, **NAMIBIA**
 - Pic du Midi, **FRANCE**
Rhön, **GERMANY**
 - Snowdonia National Park, **WALES**
Westhavelland, **GERMANY**
- darksky.org



Best for beginners SMOOTH SAILING

From round-the-world races to charting a yacht with a chipper skipper, there are plenty of ways for beginners to sail the ocean blue

In at the deep end

Many of us dream of setting sail and exploring the world but don't have the time to become a fully qualified skipper. Those who want to throw themselves in at the deep end can apply for the 2019-20 Clipper Round the World Yacht Race. No previous sailing experience is necessary to join the 40,000-nautical-mile journey as each of the 12 identical 70ft racing yachts has a fully qualified skipper. Participants, who undergo short yet intense training, can choose to complete the full circumnavigation or specific sections — the race is divided into eight legs and 13-16 individual races. clipperroundtheworld.com

WHAT ELSE? Alternatively, sign up to Crewseekers International, which lists amateur and professional yacht crewing positions from day sailing to trans-ocean voyages — some take complete beginners. Registration costs £75 for six months.

crewseekersinternational.co.uk

SAM LEWIS



SKIPPER AHOY!

The RYA qualification is organised by UK sailing's governing body and is recognised globally — the RYA Day Skipper certificate enables you to charter bareboats.

HOW LONG? Five days in a classroom (shore-based) followed by five days practical (onboard), plus an exam.

WHERE? The Med for calm waters, however serious sailors should learn to sail in tidal waters. If you can't face the weather in the UK, head to South Africa's Langebaan Lagoon, around 75 miles north of Cape Town, with tides, sandy beaches and crystal clear waters.

rya.org.uk atlanticyachting.co.za

TAKE 3 Learn the lingo

BAREBOAT

THE UPS: You charter a 'bare' yacht, without skipper or crew, and sail wherever you want at your own pace.

THE DOWNS: You need an RYA Day Skipper qualification or International Certificate of Competence (which can be gained in just five days) plus navigational experience.

SKIPPED

THE UPS: No experience necessary as your skipper is in charge and you can help when you please.

THE DOWNS: You may have to get used to following orders.

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THE UPS: You sail as part of a mini-fleet of yachts on an agreed route. It's stress-free sailing with social events.

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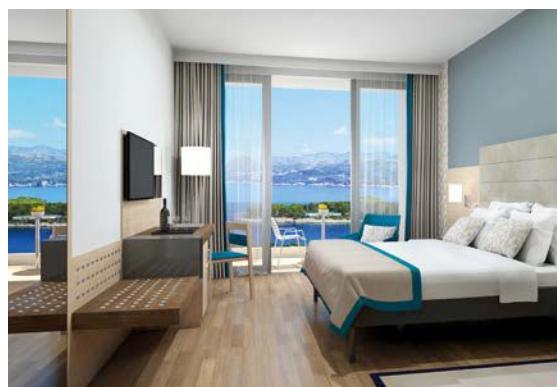
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** Photos are for illustration purposes only.

A TASTE OF Copenhagen

Top British chef Leon Smith, a regular visitor to Copenhagen, reveals his favourite dining spots in Scandinavia's most Michelin-starred city, where Nordic cuisine pioneer Noma has just reopened



I ate my way through Copenhagen on my last visit, ending up at chef Bo Bech's restaurant, Geist, for a meal I remember vividly — notably, the herb salad with smoked bone marrow and tomato. The Danish mentality of foraging, and natural ingredients, has also stuck with me. Many kitchens now use herbs and plants such as woodruff, verbena and sorrel, inspired by the landscapes of Denmark. And, of course, this year, all eyes will be on the epicentre of this tradition: the new Noma restaurant. Could this be where René Redzepi wins his third Michelin star? noma.dk

Restaurants in Denmark

Danes eat both small and large plates, tapas-style, putting them in the correct order to ensure the right balance throughout the meal. Geist is the place to go for this kind of modern Nordic fare; diners can even watch the chefs create the intricate dishes. Restaurant Radio is another favourite. The set menu is very affordable, great quality and wholly seasonal, with home brewed beers to complement each course. restaurantgeist.dk restoranradio.dk



LEON SMITH
As head chef at Mr Hanbury's Mason Arms in Oxfordshire, Leon keeps it natural — foraging for fungi, flowers and herbs, growing fruit and veg in the garden, and sourcing local meat and dairy. hanburysmasonarms.co.uk

Sweet stuff

Eating good bread in Copenhagen is close to compulsory — baked goods play a huge part in the city's history and food culture. I recommend going to Brød, the little-sister outlet to hip Vesterbro bakery Kihoskh, to grab a breakfast of Danish pastries or stock up on rich rye to make a lunchtime *smørrebrød* (open sandwich). Don't want to DIY? Then head to a street food market; Papirøen has stacks of exotic goodies, including an array of little pastries and chocolates. Don't miss the *flokdeboller* (chocolate-coated marshmallows) from the Sweet Food stall. copenhagenstreetfood.dk

NORDIC NIBBLES

Two to take away

DANISH PASTRIES

For the best *kanelnegle* (cinnamon buns), head to the flagship Lagkagehuset bakery, opposite Christianshavn Station (in the boho Christiania hood that's home to the new Noma restaurant). lagkagehuset.dk

HOT DOGS

Copenhagen takes its dogs (*pølse*) so seriously there's an unofficial annual hot dog world championships, where the city's top chefs man food trucks and stalls and vie to create the best flavour combinations. Every mouthful has to be perfectly balanced. A perennial favourite are the organic dogs from DØP. dop.dk



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MALT WHISKY

Scotland

On a tour of the Scottish Highlands' winding roads, meet the masters of malt and taste the Speyside whiskies they produce. Words: Tamsin Wressell

3 CARDHU

This is the first distillery to be officially pioneered by a woman. Founded in 1811 by Helen Cumming, Cardhu started its life as an illicit distillery until it was licensed in 1824. In between those years, Helen would walk 20 miles a day to Elgin, smuggling her whisky to its eager consumers.

4 COPPER DOG PUB

New on the map, Copper Dog, so named after the cylinders the workers would use to steal whisky, is a cosy basement-level pub with a whisky that's a blend of eight of Speyside's single malts. Pop upstairs to Craigellachie Hotel's whisky bar to try a Copper Dog sour. craigellachiehotel.co.uk



"Adding a dash of water to your whisky unleashes aromas, giving both the stronger and more subtle flavours a chance to come out."

Jennifer Robertson,
The Malt Whisky Trail

ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN HAAKE

1 BENROMACH

One of the smaller distilleries, Benromach is family-owned and one of the few that makes whisky by hand. It's bringing back the tradition for Speyside whiskies to have a touch of smoke by using cuts of local peat with earthy tones of heather in the distillation. benromach.com

2 GLEN GRANT

If sprightly master distiller, Denis Malcolm, isn't the highlight of a tour at Glen Grant, the surrounding grounds come a close second. Walk around the gardens with Denis and he just might treat you to a dram of his favourite tipple from a hidden whisky locker. glengrant.com

5 SPEYSIDE COOPERAGE

Witness the ancient art of cask making. Old casks arrive before being refurbished and are fired in order to release the flavours from their previous life, be it of bourbon, sherry or peated whisky. The casks are then sent to distilleries across Scotland. speysidecooperage.co.uk

6 THE GLENLIVET + TREK

The first legal distillery in the Highlands, it also produces one of Scotland's most popular single malt whiskies. The Glenlivet backs on to Cairngorms National Park and runs a smugglers' trail experience, travelling up the hills in an argocat. glenlivethilltrek.com

WHERE TO STAY

Perth

New non-stop flights from London to Perth have made it easier than ever to explore the West Coast's islands, beaches and most inventive places to spend the night



1 MILE END GLAMPING

Near Margaret River, 150 miles south of Perth, this pair of geodesic domes overlooking the bush is a futuristic couples' retreat. The studio domes each have a kitchen, bathroom and hot tub on the adjacent patio. From £167, minimum two-night stay. mileendglamping.com.au

2 OLIO BELLO LAKESIDE GLAMPING

On an organic olive farm near the Margaret River, these six safari-style tents are a cut above — the luxury tent fittings (kitchenettes, viewing decks, 'windows' either side of the huge beds) make them perfect for a couple's retreat.

3 NORTH HERITAGE BUNGALOWS

On car-free Rottnest Island, a 25-minute ferry ride from the Perth coast, these 1920s canvas-sided bungalows are what the island's first tourists stayed in. For something a little fancier, there are cedar-built cabins and a range of modern bungalows. From £80. rottnestisland.com

4 FREMANTLE PRISON YHA

A UNESCO-listed 19th-century jail in Fremantle, just half an hour from Perth, has been converted into a chic hostel. As well as dorms there are six-bed cottages, which were once guard accommodation.

Doubles from £68. yha.com.au

JULIA BUCKLEY



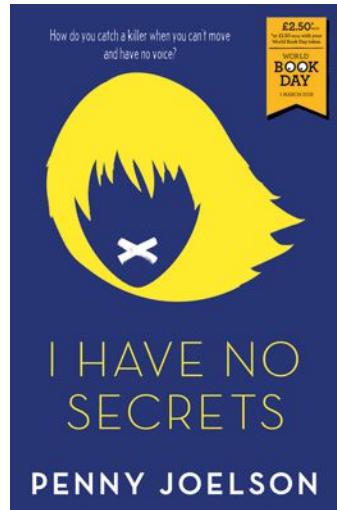


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World Book Day.

1 March: 'The Biggest Book Show on Earth' (26 February-3 March) will see 35 authors and illustrators (including Cressida Cowell, Tom Fletcher, Andy Griffiths, Derek Landy and Dermot O'Leary) visit six UK locations. worldbookday.com

A DAY OUT WITH HARRY POTTER *Into the trees!*

The Forbidden Forest provides a magical new reason to visit London's Warner Bros Studio Tour

Drawn by the latest attraction — the Forbidden Forest — our family booked yet another trip to London's Warner Bros Studio Tour. Given that only one of us is a true believer, this seemed a big ask of the remaining three muggles but once again, this former film studio cast its spell. Amid those trees, we were served up shocks and surprises, atmospherically supported by dry-ice mist, hidden hippogriffs and some animatronic Acromantula (big scary spiders) that sprang to life at scream-inducing intervals.

The adults were in awe of intricate set designs and artwork. The vast model of Hogwarts is a spectacular showstopper, the fine craftsmanship and attention to detail impressive; even the kids lingered for more than a glance.

From the displays of costumes to the life-sized Great Hall and Diagon Alley, it's easy to immerse yourself in this weird cultish world, with the chance to check out ingenious film props, learn how to make snow, and ride a VR broom. Like the souvenir photos of the latter experience, on-site food and drink is pricey, but as a captive audience, you won't be able to leave without at least trying a sickly sweet butterbeer. Or exiting through the gift shop (we went for a £30 wand: the 'cheap' option. Triple that sum for Hogwarts robes).

The tour knows its audience — believers or not — adept at adding slick seasonal sideshows (Hogwarts in the Snow was truly beautiful), and innovative new experiences, such as the imminent Goblet of Fire special features. wbstudiotour.co.uk MARIA PIERI



A FAMILY IN NUMBERS

Are you the average British family? Then be prepared each year for **452** arguments, to kiss each other **1,492** times, watch **489** hours of TV, spend almost **14** hours waiting for the kettle to boil — and order **60** takeaways.

Source: Virgin Money Life Insurance survey of 2,000 British families.



HIGH SEA ADVENTURE

Create a wind-powered car and learn about alternative fuels; design and build a mini plane before testing its performance in a wind tunnel; construct your own weather station — and do all this aboard a ship as it cruises the seas. The Anturus Explorer Academy is the newest innovation from Celebrity Cruises, designed to nurture the next generation of inventors and innovators. celebritycruises.co.uk/family



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Saitkoria Gorge is home to some of the most wonderful flora, fauna and wildlife you're ever likely to encounter elsewhere. From endangered Gharials and Crocodiles to thriving Indian Gaur, Sambar Deer and Elephants to Resident and Migratory Birds, all kinds of species have made Odisha their home. Why don't you pack your bags and get there? They are eagerly waiting to greet you.

GOOD MORNING DOLOMITES

PH Filippo Frizzera AD Brand&Soda



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www.molveno.it - info@molveno.it

FIVE TO TRY

My Prague

Discover the architectural styles of the Czech capital – through the eyes of a local guide – spanning everything from a Renaissance palace to striking cubist structures



TEREZA LVOVA

is a Kudu Travel tour leader and native of South Moravia. A graduate of Brno's Masaryk University, Tereza spends her time travelling, guiding and creating tour itineraries. kudutravel.com



1

MUNICIPAL HOUSE

Clad in stucco, decorated with mosaics and topped by a glass dome, this is a magnificent example of Czech art nouveau. Completed in 1912, it was subsequently the location of the Czechoslovak Declaration of Independence in 1918. Don't miss the excellent grand cafe, beer hall and restaurant. obecnidum.cz/en

2

PALACE GARDENS UNDER PRAGUE CASTLE

A stunning horticultural display, this group of five gardens runs along terraces connected by decorative staircases. Developed in the 18th-century baroque style, this floral oasis on the southern slopes of Prague Castle features grottos, fountains and statues. Open daily in summer, 10am to 7pm.

3

QUEEN ANNE'S SUMMER PALACE

With its columns, arcades and reliefs, this is a fine example of Italian Renaissance. Located in the Royal Gardens of Prague Castle, this palace was commissioned in 1538 by Ferdinand I for his wife, Anna Jagiellon. The palace currently serves as a space for art exhibitions. hrad.cz/en

4

HOUSE OF THE BLACK MADONNA

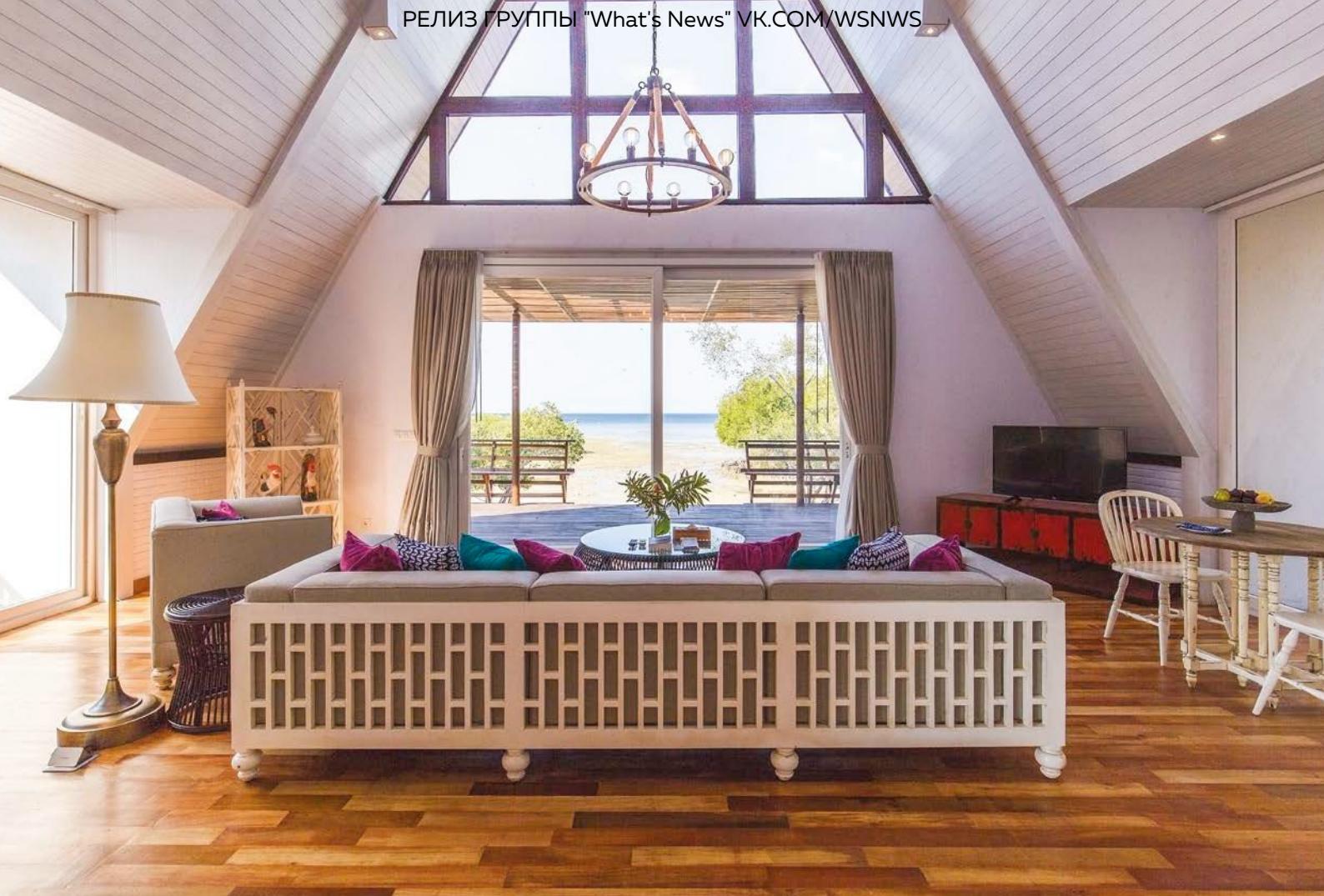
This building — now the Czech Museum of Cubism — is perhaps the most important centre for Cubism outside of Paris. Built between 1911-12 as a department store, the first floor is home to the restored Grand Cafe Orient, which dishes up tasty traditional Czech cakes. grandcafeorient.cz czkubismus.cz/en

5

DANCING HOUSE FRED AND GINGER

This Deconstructivist house certainly stands out. Designed by Czech-Croatian architect, Vlado Milunić, in cooperation with Frank Gehry, it's home to the Ginger & Fred restaurant, which serves dishes like Coca-Cola marinated beef ribs topped with Abondance cheese. ginger-fred-restaurant.cz/en





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A serene hideaway located within the tranquillity and beauty of Plataran L'Harmonie – West Bali National Park, home to the endangered White Angels of Bali, also known as Bali Starling, and many other exotic faunas and floras, Plataran Menjangan Resort & Spa offers an escape to nature at its most beautifully raw and untouched in Bali.

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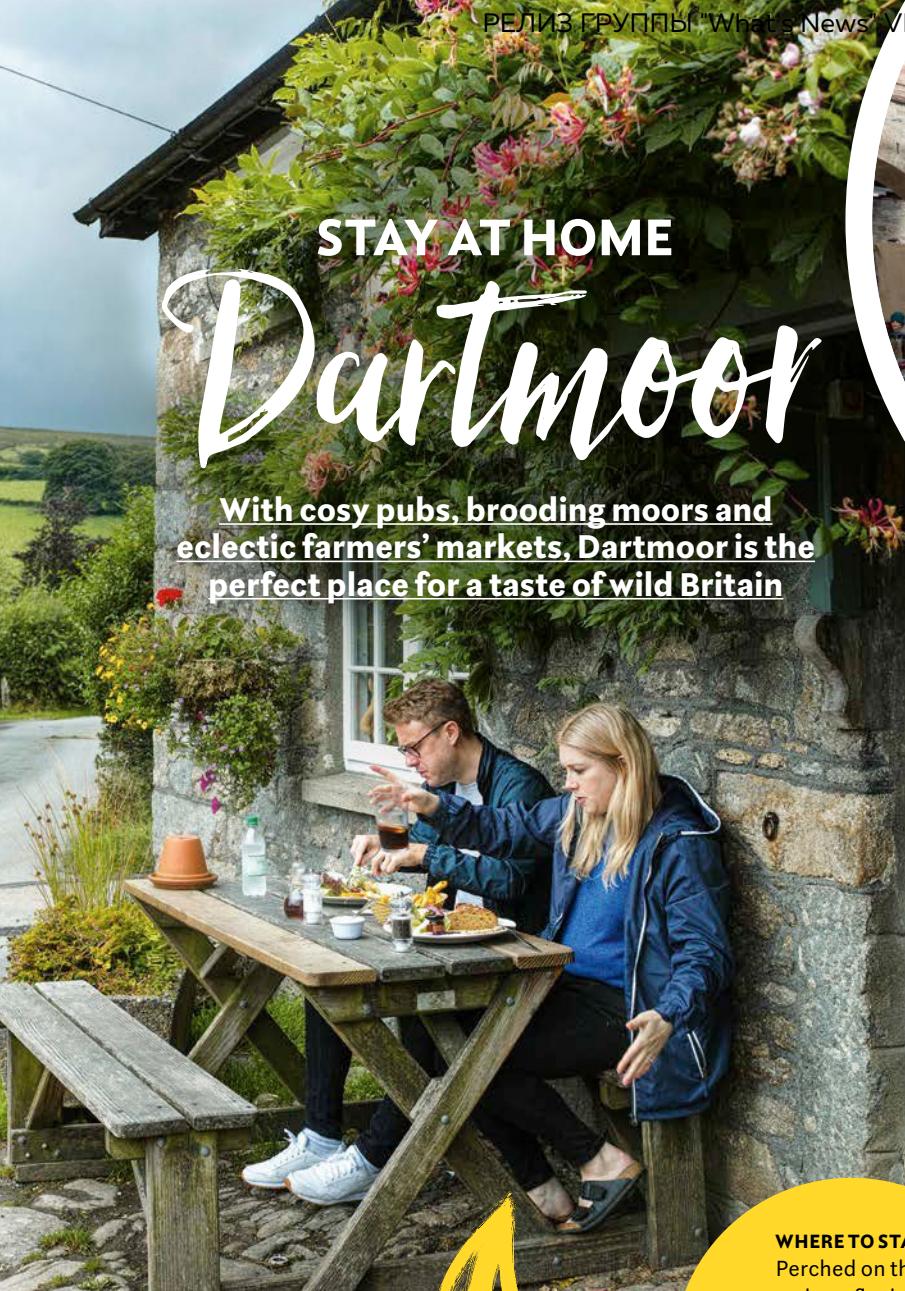


Plataran
True Indonesian Icon

STAY AT HOME

Dartmoor

With cosy pubs, brooding moors and eclectic farmers' markets, Dartmoor is the perfect place for a taste of wild Britain



WHERE TO EAT

The Rugglestone Inn, tucked away down a hill in Widecombe-in-the-Moor, ticks pretty much all the boxes for a great pub: open fire, local ales, fine wines, decent and well-priced menu, plus a friendly mix of locals and visitors. rufflestoneinn.co.uk

Don't miss

Wistman's Wood — a haunting leftover of dwarf oaks from the Stone Age forest that once covered Dartmoor. Whatever time of year you visit, the trees seem to bubble with a bioluminescent green concocted from ancient lichens and ferns. It takes 45 minutes or so to walk there from the hamlet of Two Bridges. Afterwards, pop into the eponymous pub for tea by the roaring fire. twobridges.co.uk

What to do

Hike up one of the high tors, such as High Willhays, for magnificent views. Or explore the hamlet of Postbridge with its delightful clapper bridge over the East Dart River. When it comes to culture, food and drink, Dartmoor was doing localism long before it became trendy. Follow the Artisan Trail to get a flavour of what the moors have to offer. dartmoor-artisan-trail.co.uk **MARK ROWE**



WE LIKE

Tavistock's Pannier Market dates back more than 900 years and is currently housed in a magnificent Victorian market hall. It's crammed with an eclectic mix of booksellers, soapsellers, chocolatiers and artists. There's also a mouth-watering farmers' market, selling Dartmoor beef, West Country fish and artisan bread, which is held outside on Bedford Square every other Saturday. tavistock.gov.uk

WHY GO

The national park is remote, often brooding and severe but with gorgeous valleys and top-of-the-world viewpoints. Dartmoor also feels lived in. If you stay a while, you'll become beguiled by a very different way of living, where self-sufficiency and blacksmiths, shoemakers, and weavers are commonplace. visitdartmoor.co.uk

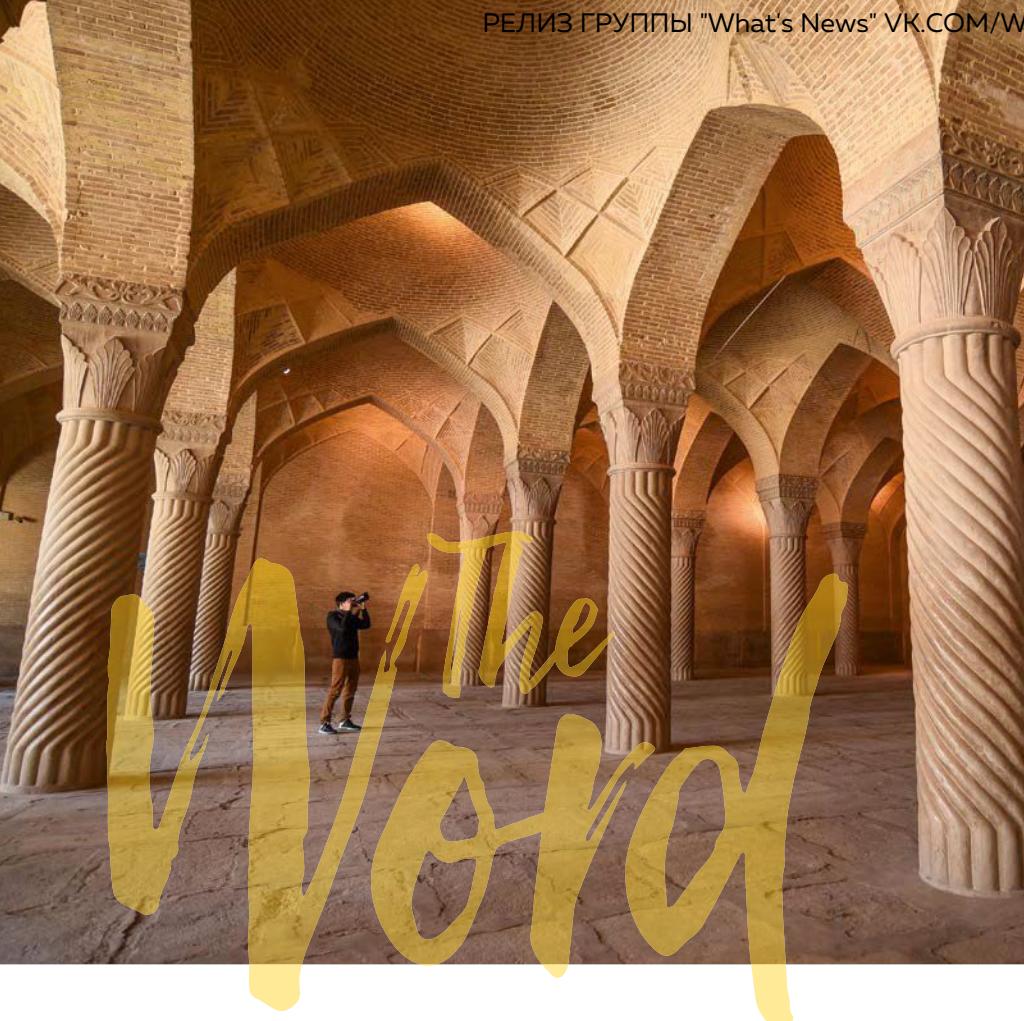




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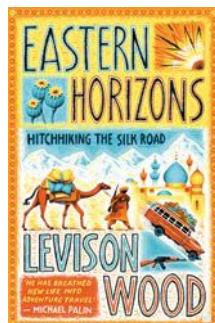


EASTERN HORIZONS

Levison Wood was just 22 when he hitchhiked 10,000 miles from England to India via Russia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. He recalls how this trip cemented his life as an overland traveller

EASTERN HORIZONS WAS WRITTEN FROM A MANUSCRIPT that had been sitting on my computer for around seven years, about a journey that I completed before joining the army, 12 years ago. It was kind of strange reading my words from then, but I didn't want to edit it too much and remove that sense of youth and wide-eyed enthusiasm.

THE OVERLAND ROUTE EAST (THE SO-CALLED HIPPIE TRAIL) has been made famous by lots of different people. It's always been populated with explorers. Before the hippies came the soldiers and spies of the Great Game — among them my hero and inspiration, Arthur Conolly. I followed in his footsteps on my hitchhiking route from England to India. Before that, the great traders of the Silk Road were the likes of Marco Polo and he was preceded by Alexander the Great travelling overland with his armies to conquer the lands of the east.



*Eastern Horizons:
Hitchhiking the Silk
Road* by Levison Wood.
RRP: £20 (Hodder & Stoughton)

GETTING ARRESTED SEVERAL TIMES IN SOUTHERN RUSSIA AND the Caucasus was probably one of the most challenging aspects of the trip. It was unnerving at first but quickly became tedious. The police repeatedly mistook me for a Chechen rebel.

THE MOST MEMORABLE MOMENT OF THAT TRIP CAME ONCE I'D finally made it to India. One night I slept in a cave in the foothills of the Himalayas, terrified the whole time of wolves and bears. Generally, though, I was quite happy to travel alone and was always meeting people.

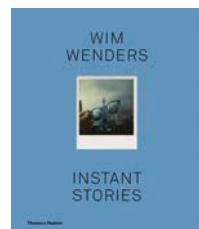
OVERLAND TRAVEL ALLOWS A GRADUAL CHANGE THAT'S INSPIRING. WHEN TRAVELLING at a slow pace, you're forced to interact with people, talk to them and learn more about their culture. Rather than just landing in a place by plane, you go through the borderlands and see all the intricate differences.

SNAPSHOT STORIES



NEW YORK RESIZED

In *New York Resized*, photographer Jasper Léonard has employed skyscrapers, helicopters and drones to get the best vantage for a 'tilt shift' technique that creates bird's-eye perspectives on New York City scenes. Manhattan as a teeny model village: mesmerising. RRP: €15.99 (£14) (Lanoo Publishers)



WIM WENDERS: INSTANT STORIES

The distinctive world vision of German filmmaker, Wim Wenders, revealed through a series of Polaroids taken during the 1970s and '80s. It's billed as 'a photographic road trip through the life of the artist' but is also a love letter to this instant medium. RRP: £40 (Thames & Hudson)



STREETS OF THE WORLD

Dutch photographer Jeroen Swolfs travelled to 95 countries over seven years, snapping a single street in each place he visited. Each of the 200 streets reveals the spirit of a destination, with accompanying facts, figures and infographics; a world atlas of sorts. RRP: £35 (Lannoo Publishers)

SARAH BARRELL



Tenerife South - Costa Adeje



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★★★



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A FOUR-NIGHT BREAK TO SAN SEBASTIÁN

National Geographic Traveller (UK) has teamed up with Brittany Ferries to offer two people four nights in San Sebastián

City life

San Sebastián, one of the coolest cities in Spain, boasts long sandy beaches — perfect for relaxing, surfing and swimming — plus a huge choice of restaurants from the finest Michelin star establishments to fantastic backstreet *pincho* (snack) bars. Explore the city's fine architecture or hit the shops. By taking your own car, you can head further afield and visit the Balenciaga Museum in nearby Getaria and the iconic Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

Smooth sailing

With Brittany Ferries, your holiday starts the moment you step aboard. Experience top-notch service and award-winning facilities aboard the company's modern, comfortable fleet, sailing from Portsmouth or Plymouth. Get ready to disembark in northern Spain feeling refreshed and ready to explore the sights, flavours and culture of stunning San Sebastián.

Holiday experts

Brittany Ferries has been providing sail and stay holidays in France and Spain for over 30 years with a choice of hotels, cottages, apartments and chalet camping. There's even a range of car tours available. brittanyferries.co.uk



The prize

A return overnight cruise to Bilbao or Santander with your car and a cabin, plus two nights at a four-star hotel in San Sebastián in a twin or double room, including breakfast.

TO ENTER

Answer the following question online at natgeotraveller.co.uk/competitions

WHERE'S THE GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM?

Competition closes 31 March 2018. The winner must be aged 18 or over and the trip is subject to availability. Full T&Cs available at natgeotraveller.co.uk

Brittany Ferries



After the roaring success of last year's first-ever Festival, we're bringing back our ever-popular masterclasses. If you long to see your landscapes gracing the pages of a travel magazine, or aspire to inspire with your tales of adventure, then look no further. This full day of masterclasses and workshops will arm you with all the practical advice you could ask for to get one step closer to getting your work published. The *National Geographic Traveller* (UK) team, along with leading travel writers, authors and award-winning photographers, will be on hand throughout this jam-packed day of expert-led sessions to offer their own tips, tales, advice and anecdotes, from everything to how to find inspiration for a story to a first timer's guide to pitching.

LED BY THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER (UK) TEAM



MARIA PIERI //
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Family travel specialist and food lover, Maria will be bringing a touch of order to proceedings.



PAT RIDDELL //
EDITOR

A travel editor for over 15 years, Pat has a long-standing love of Australia, Italy and New York.



GLEN MUTEL //
DEPUTY EDITOR

Experienced travel writer Glen appreciates all things French and a well-worded intro.



SARAH BARRELL //
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Newspaper trained, Sarah has been a travel writer, editor and lecturer for 20 years.

NATGEOTRAVELLER.CO.UK/EVENTS



"The practical advice from our expert photographers and writers were evidently the most popular and in-demand sessions at the Festival last year, so it made sense to expand and offer the opportunity for everyone to fully embrace the *National Geographic Traveller* ethos. From conception to realisation, the Masterclasses will fuel your passion and your knowledge of the industry."

PAT RIDDELL, EDITOR,
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
TRAVELLER



TIME:
9.30am-5.30pm,
Sunday 1 July 2018
WHERE: University of
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TICKETS: Special offer of £40,
or two for £70. For more info,
head to natgeotraveller.co.uk/events

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TRAVELLER Photography COMPETITION 2018



Come and take a closer look at the awe-inspiring shortlisted shots of this year's competition. Keep your eyes peeled for the winners, too — they'll be announced online on 28th February, and in the April edition of the magazine (out 1 March).

TIME: Tuesday 20th-Tuesday 27th February 2018, weekdays 10am-12pm, 2pm-4pm

WHERE: Wallacespace Covent Garden, 2 Dryden Street, London WC2E 9NA

TICKETS: Free entry, but pre-booking essential at natgeotraveller.co.uk/events

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Love our casual, after-work get-togethers? We'll have plenty more of our ever-popular panel discussions this year, covering such topics as Family, Adventure, Japan, Safari and Italy, all set to feed your travel bug.

Keep an eye out on the website for more details soon: natgeotraveller.co.uk/events

BIG SLEEP AWARDS 2018

HAVE YOUR SAY

Nominate your favourite hotel or place to stay in our three Readers' Categories and you could win an iPad Mini as part of our annual Big Sleep Awards. The winners, picked by our panel of experts, will be revealed in the Jul/Aug issue

Home from home

UNITED KINGDOM

Whether it's curled up in a cosy Cornish bolthole or living it up in one of the capital's grande dames, we want to hear about your favourite hotels on home turf. Was there a country guesthouse that pulled out all the stops? Or perhaps there was a city sanctuary that dazzled with its service. Last year it was Atlantic Hotel, Jersey — who will it be this year?

Euro stars

EUROPE

A day's sightseeing is done. Room service is on its way and you're kicking back with your favourite tipple. Whether it's a city break, a beach getaway or an escape to the country, this place has surpassed all expectations. Will it be Belmond Reid's Palace in Madeira again? Who's got your vote?

Far-flung fancy

BEYOND

It's the cherry on top of your perfect holiday. It makes waking up a joy and going to sleep so much easier. Everything stands out at this exotic escape: the food, the service, the ambience — and the perfect night's sleep. Sounds familiar? You picked Mumbai's Taj Mahal Palace in 2017; let us know about 2018.

NATIONAL
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[Big]
Sleep
AWARDS 2018

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"*Free wi-fi*"

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Hotel Thalasso & SPA
★★★★★
Isola Rossa



What to do on Gran Canaria

march

Carnival is an event which snakes its way southward; passing from municipality to municipality. One of the best and biggest is February/March's Carnaval Internacional de Maspalomas, a rainbow of colour and a riot of noise.



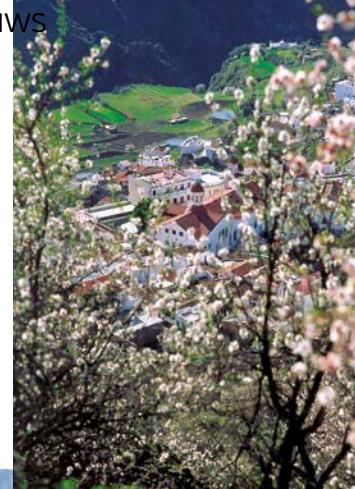
may

May is a particularly popular month for the LGBT community to visit the island with Maspalomas Gay Pride the hottest ticket in town.. Most events including drag performances and pool parties take place in and around the world-famous Yumbo.



january

As January turns to February and winter to spring, the Fiestas del Almendro en Flor mark the flowering of the almond trees in the rural San Bartolomé de Tirajana, Tejeda, and Valsequillo municipalities. Natives dress up in traditional Canarian costumes and dance to folk music.



february

With Gran Canaria's favourable climate, like spring on repeat with an average monthly temperature of 22 degrees, it's possible to get fit rather than fat on holiday. February's Transgrancanaria is a cross-island race which puts 125km distance between the starting and finishing line.



april

Sporty types will appreciate the ocean breeze as they take part in the three triathlons which comprise the south west of Gran Canaria's Gloria Challenge Mogán in April. Showers are conspicuous by their absence in one of the best spots for weather on the island.



june

Feeling hot, hot, hot in June? Cool down with a night dip at the Noche de San Juan on the 23rd under a sky lit up by a colourful fireworks display at the capital's Las Canteras, one of the world's best urban beaches.

NOTES FROM AN AUTHOR // JULIA BUCKLEY

HAITI

Searching for a cure to chronic pain, Julia Buckley visited a country notorious for witch doctors and black magic — and found it utterly captivating

Everyone told me not to go to Haiti. By which I mean, well, pretty much everyone. The Foreign Office's official guidelines warned against travelling alone and flagged the risk of kidnapping. The GP said, "Don't worry, I'll get you out of this." The doctor at the travel clinic told me, "I can't decide if you're very brave or very stupid."

Then there was the woman in the Post Office who asked me: "Why are you going? Isn't that where they do black magic?" It didn't stop once I arrived, either. "Why are you here?" asked a man at my hotel on my first morning. "What are you running away from?"

Why was I there? To get to know the side of Haiti that makes everybody shiver: Vodou. The religion that's seen an entire country ostracised by the rest of the world since 1804, when the enslaved Africans ousted their French rulers and created the world's first black republic. The colonial powers were terrified and promptly set about demonising a nation with labels: devil worship, black magic.

Having suffered chronic pain all my life — and spent three years crippled by it — I was seeing what different cultures could offer me and was willing to sell my soul for a cure. Not that I believed that's what I was going to do; I didn't buy the devil worship stories. But I'd studied the placebo effect and its reverse — the nocebo effect, which makes you 'feel' drug side effects even if you're not experiencing them, convincing you that you've been hexed even if you haven't — and thought that since my doctors hadn't been able to reset my misfiring brain, if anyone could help, it'd be a *houngan*: a Vodou priest.

I was expecting the worst: skulls, animal sacrifice, zombies. And then I got there.

Have you ever been somewhere that doesn't just belie your expectations, but upends them, confronts you with them and rubs your scarlet-with-shame face in them? That was Haiti for me. "Welcome to my country," said the guy at immigration as he stamped my passport. I walked out of the airport and found myself in a place unlike anything I'd read about: buses ('taptaps') painted all the colours of the rainbow, every shop and vehicle given some kind of Christian name, from a bus called 'Merci Jesus' to a water lorry called 'Eau de Vie'.



66 *Why was I there? To get to know the side of Haiti that makes everybody shiver: Vodou. The religion that's seen an entire country ostracised by the rest of the world since 1804, when the enslaved Africans ousted their French rulers*

We drove along the coastal road to my hotel, Kaliko Beach Club, a collection of octagonal bungalows, right on the beach. Instead of sand, there were rounded pebbles ('free foot massage', as a sign read), but otherwise it was textbook Caribbean: a hammock slung between palm trees, a perfect crescent beach, an island in the distance.

Over the next five days I'd see the beauty of Haiti: the lush waterfall at Saut-d'Eau, which is sacred to the Vodou faith; the brightly coloured houses of Port-au-Prince; the sense of community at a Vodou ceremony I attended, which bore more resemblance to a church service than a black mass; and the artists selling their wares on the street which, anywhere else, would be in a gallery but here were painted on the backs of curtains, and sold for \$10 (£7.50) on the roadside.

But there was horrendous poverty too, of course, not least thanks to the hangover from the 2010 earthquake. Buildings in central Port-au-Prince were still devastated, five years on; a homeless mother politely asked me for any change as I wandered round the rubble of the collapsed cathedral. Going back now, I'd find more damage from the 2016 hurricane.

But Haiti captivated me. Two years since I got back and I still think about it most days, planning my next visit. Next time, I want to see the touristy stuff: the Sans-Souci Palace, once the 'Versailles of the Caribbean', now gently mouldering away on a mountainside; Cap-Haïtien; the boho town of Jacmel. All I did this time was search for a Vodou priest willing to treat me, to exorcise me.

Haiti didn't cure me — that would come later — but it changed my life. My experience of Vodou shook my world order. Its proud history taught me about perseverance. Most of all, going there showed me that all too often, reputations are wrong. We fear to travel when we've heard the worst but sometimes that 'worst' is just 200 years of noise. Haiti taught me to break away from the herd mentality and strike out on my own. And that, for me, is what travel is all about.

Heal Me: In Search of a Cure by Julia Buckley is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson. RRP: £16.99
[@juliabuckley.me.uk
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VIEW FROM THE USA // AARON MILLAR

CALL OF THE WILD

Reintroducing the wolf to Yellowstone doesn't just replace a missing link in the park's food chain, it could also rekindle the wild spark we humans are missing

It's dawn and freezing in Yellowstone's Lamar Valley, the best place in the world to see wolves in the wild. Snow blankets the hills all around, steam rises from the frozen tundra and, in the distance, I hear the high-pitched cackle of coyotes closing in on a kill. "When you look a wolf in the eyes," Doug Smith, the park's lead conservationist, tells me, "it starts a fire in you." Then I see them: a pack running on the horizon; black shadows silhouetted against the white plains of winter. Suddenly, a howl reverberates through the valley and the hairs on the back of my neck bristle.

This is why I'm here. Yellowstone National Park is a land of wonders: the spectacular travertine sculptures of Mammoth Hot Springs, the largest geyser basin on Earth, and the clockwork eruptions of Old Faithful herself. But its greatest wonder, perhaps, is what's happening to the land as a whole, and that story begins and ends with the wolf.

There's a lot of baggage: the mythology, the fear. Wolves used to run free across the entire North American continent, but by the early 1900s they were nearly extinct, thanks to hunters and predator control programmes. In Yellowstone, the last wolf was killed in 1926. It was to prove disastrous. Without a natural predator, the elk ate everything, decimating vegetation across the park and transforming it, in many places, into a barren wasteland. It had been assumed that human hunters would step in and take the place of the wolves, culling the herds to manageable numbers. But despite their best efforts, the problem intensified. Yellowstone was dying.

Then Doug had a brainwave. Between 1995 and 1997, he led a programme to relocate 41 wolves from Canada to Yellowstone. The effect was immediate. They killed some elk, of course, but more importantly they changed the elks' behaviour. They stopped grazing in places where they knew they'd be vulnerable, like the valleys and gorges. As a result, those places began to regenerate. Forests of aspen, willow and cottonwood shot up, songbirds returned, beavers used the new trees to build dams, creating habitats for otters, fish and reptiles and helping to restore rivers and floodplains. The numbers of small mammals also increased, bringing more hawks, eagles

and foxes into the park. In a few short years, a handful of wolves achieved what an army of men with rifles couldn't. "Everything is connected to everything else," Doug says. "When you take that top layer out of the food chain, it ripples across the entire ecosystem."

The ongoing wolf experiment has changed the way the world thinks about wilderness conservation. The prevailing view, until the wolves arrived in Yellowstone, was that landscapes need to be preserved. Protect this marsh, restore this woodland, return this meadow to some previous idyllic state. But nature doesn't work like that. Nature is dynamic; it ebbs and flows. Conservation, the wolves are teaching us, shouldn't be about maintaining things; it should be about letting go. Tear down the fences, replace what you've stolen, then walk away. Nature will do the rest.

But the wolves are teaching us something about ourselves too. Later that day, I went snowshoeing on my own through the park. Dusk was falling, and I was still a couple of miles from home, when I came across a 2,000lb bull bison blocking my path. Usually docile, but potentially deadly too — like a combat-ready cow. I shouted, banged things, talked nicely, even pleaded vegetarianism (why Yellowstone serves bison burgers after a bison safari I'll never know), but he refused to leave.

Then, suddenly, without warning, he started walking towards me, nostrils flaring, dark eyes locking me in his stare. There was nowhere to run and no way around. People die every year by underestimating these bovine tanks; a 12-year-old boy was impaled a few weeks before I arrived. It was, I realised in horror, the first time I've ever been truly at the mercy of a creature bigger and angrier than me. It was terrifying, but thrilling too.

We've evolved to fight sabre-toothed tigers; but our lives are spent grappling social media feeds. We need to rewild our parks, because we need to rewild ourselves. Modern life may have dampened the fire, but the spark is still easy to find. Just look into the eyes of a wolf.

British travel writer Aaron Millar ran away from London in 2013 and has been hiding out in the Rocky Mountains of Boulder, Colorado since.

 @AaronMWriter



ILLUSTRATION: JACQUI OAKLEY



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Information and booking:

www.caminitodelrey.info/en/

**General admission is priced
at 10 euros and guided tours
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The Blog



“*Passing through the temple gates is like walking through a waterfall. The deafening pandemonium of the street subsides and suddenly, calm descends. Everywhere I look monks go about their daily lives*

THE DALAI LAMA'S DOORSTEP

A ritual walk around the residence in India gives a glimpse into the lives of one Tibetan family living in exile



McLeod Ganj teeters precariously on a mountainside, its multicoloured houses stacked like playing cards as if one day, a sharp gust of wind will simply blow them away. It's early, but already the streets are a frenzied whirl of activity — horns blaring, *chai wallahs* (tea sellers) hollering. It smells of incense, spices and sweat.

Youdon passes easily through the pell-mell of people, one hand holding onto her five-year-old son, Numphtha, the other gesturing for me to follow. She skips over cowpats and picks her way around potholes and roadside stalls with the assurance of someone who knows these streets well. And she does. McLeod Ganj has been Youdon's home since she ran away from Tibet 15 years ago, aged 18 — sneaking out in the middle of the night as her parents, brothers and sisters slept. She hasn't seen them since.

High in the Himalayan foothills, it's my home too for the next two months, and Youdon is showing me around. We head downhill towards the Dalai Lama's home and temple. It's May, the month of *Saka Dawa*

(merit) and a day Tibetans dedicate to helping the poor. The streets are flanked with Indian families sitting on threadbare shawls, three, four, five people deep. “Most have walked miles to be here,” Youdon tells me, passing her son a handful of small coins. “The same thing happens every year.” It's a sad scene, and a strange one, for here are Tibetans — technically homeless — handing out money to those who's country they're guests in.

Numphtha is having a whale of a time, though, temporarily disappearing from sight only to return empty-handed, his arms outstretched, palms cupped. He's beautiful — rosy-cheeked and ebony-haired, with eyes the shape of almonds. I hand him more money and he dashes off again, squealing with delight.

Passing through the temple gates is like walking through a waterfall. The deafening pandemonium of the street subsides and suddenly, calm descends. Everywhere I look monks go about their daily lives, their faces serene, faintly smiling, as though the ghost of some past joke still lingers on their lips.

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They move slowly, deliberately, their robes falling around them in crimson waves.

We begin to walk the *kora*, a ritual circular route around the temple. I watch in wonder as a lady in traditional Tibetan dress prostrates herself ahead of me before standing, taking one step forward and then doing it all over

again. Sitting on a bench, three elderly Tibetan gentlemen are engrossed in lively conversation, while up in the trees it sounds like the resident monkeys are having an equally animated debate. Everywhere, strings of iconic Tibetan prayer flags flutter in the breeze.

As we stroll, Youdon tells me her tale. Her journey across the Himalayas took 22 days; walking all night, snatching a few hours' sleep when the sun rose, and praying continuously that the Chinese guards wouldn't spot her, or their dogs smell her. It sounds terrifying, but Youdon assures me she was one of the lucky ones. She reached Nepal before the weather turned — frostbite claimed the fingers of those three days behind her.

"No one sees McLeod as home," Youdon continues.

"The Indian government is very kind, but even those who were born here, even those who fled Tibet as long ago as 1959 with the Dalai Lama look at this as a temporary set-up. Of course, I still hope to go home, but while the country is occupied I couldn't, even if I wanted to. When I left, I did so knowing I would never be allowed back."

Temporary or not, I can see the lives that Tibetans have built for themselves here. When Youdon first arrived in McLeod, fresh produce was almost impossible to find. Now, mounds of rainbow-coloured fruit line the streets. Schools and temples have been built, they have their own government-in-exile, and a five-minute stroll down the hill takes you here, right to the Dalai Lama's doorstep.

CHARLOTTE WIGRAM-EVANS

Ihasocialwork.org

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ROMANIA

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TOP 5

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Weekender

ALPE D'HUEZ

One of France's premier skiing resorts feels fiercely alive in summer, with outdoor pursuits and spectacular mountain views that stir the soul. WORDS: Charlotte Wigram-Evans



A ski resort in summer — it seems a bizarre concept at first. Arriving at Alpe d'Huez, the snowboards still lined up in shop windows and empty chairlifts knock you off-kilter for a moment. But then, above, a wall of silent mountains. In the muted colours of morning they're partially in shadow, as though they've been stencilled onto the horizon. Some are sharp and craggy, others soft like the folds of a quilt. They stretch on and on, seemingly forever, making insignificant specks of hikers and bikers. The smell, manure and edelweiss mixed with crisp air, is so fresh it's tangible. Alpe d'Huez in summer feels fiercely alive.

The resort itself — all quaint chalets, fancy restaurants and kids zooming around on quad bikes — sits in the

lap of Pic Blanc, the region's highest mountain at almost 11,000ft. You can ski on the glacier at its summit as late as July, for as little as £37 a day, all the while soaking up views that stretch out over a fifth of France. Higher still, four-seater planes take sightseeing trips so close to the ice that its sheen is visible as it melts, bits breaking off and skittering down the slope. And water is everywhere; a cool, glassy backdrop to hiking, biking and every outdoor pursuit in between. Within ambling distance of Alpe d'Huez, 12 pristine lakes lay undisturbed, save for tiny ripples, as though they've been pierced with a million microscopic needles. It's a soul-stirring scene, the kind of backdrop that makes you want to burst into song, arms in the air, face to the sky.

Take a day trip

Drive for an hour and a half to Villard-de-Lans, a town in the Vercors Massif mountain range that offers the charming squares and chequered tablecloths you'd expect from a holiday in France. The centre is pedestrianised from 8 July to 23 August, a music band is an almost constant feature and wooden games reminiscent of a 1900s village fete line the main street. Some restaurants, like Le Vieille Forge and Chez Ange, offer Mediterranean cuisine but head to Le Clariant and you're plunged back into the mountains. This chalet-style restaurant was built using reclaimed wood, and the dining room is hung with fairy lights and vintage photographs. The imposing fireplace, meanwhile, comes complete with a stuffed pig's head wearing a woolly hat and sunglasses, naturally. en.villarddelans.com



WALK THIS WAY

The valley surrounding the resort has 143 miles of marked trails suitable for all abilities. Hikers wanting to reach the higher routes can take a chairlift up the mountain or, for those after a challenge, guides are on hand all summer.



THREE TO TRY

Restaurants

L'ALTIPORT

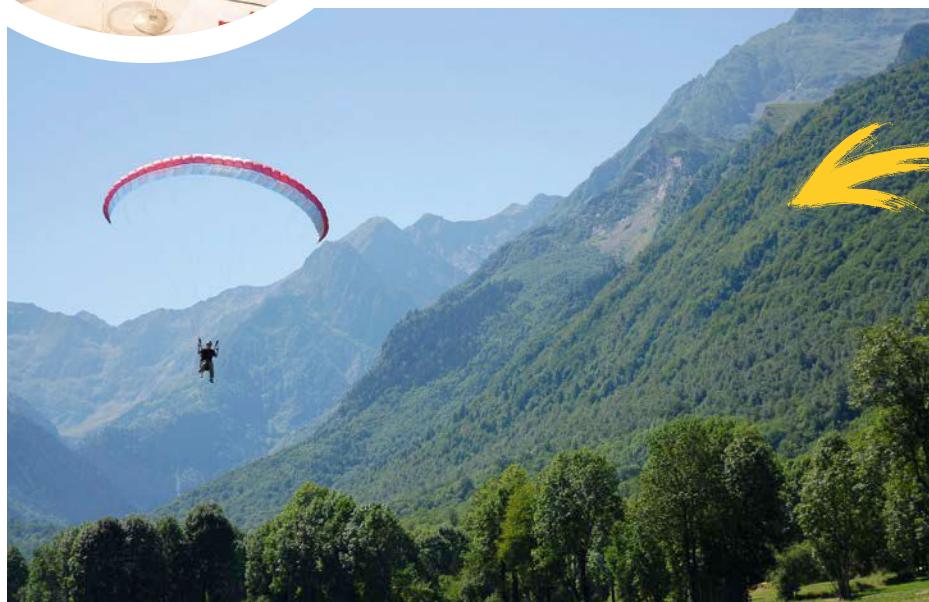
Every day, head chef Philippe Piloz fishes in his own private pond for trout to serve that evening. He's a passionate advocate of local produce. Sumptuous dishes are made even better by the restaurant's views. restaurant-altiport-alpedhuez.com

CHALET DU LAC BESSON

Before going to eat, take a 10-minute detour to see Lake Besson at sunset. It's spectacular. From gargantuan steaks served with dauphinoise potatoes to tartiflette, this restaurant delivers classic mountain fare at its best.

AU PUITS DES SAVEURS

Creative cooking that achieves a happy medium between modern and classic makes this restaurant in the centre of Alpe d'Huez a must-visit. Try the *croustillant d'agneau* (filo lamb parcel) served with mushrooms and thyme. aupuitsdessaveurs.fr



Take to the skies

Several companies offer tandem paragliding throughout summer and winter, taking off from an altitude of 6,916ft and slowly spiralling down to the Bourg-d'Oisans valley 4,630ft below. While there's the option of trying your hand at steering, you can always just sit back in the harness and soak up the view. Alternatively, the tiny planes that take off from the airport in the centre of Alpe d'Huez soar over the Alps' spectacular peaks, stretching out as far as the eye can see. Flight times range from 20 minutes to an hour. alpesportsloisirs.com aeroclubdudauphine.fr



WEEKENDER

EYEWITNESS

TOUR DE FORCE

The 21 hairpin bends of Alpe d'Huez, a legendarily tricky section of the Tour de France, tower above me mockingly. But I feel supremely confident. I'm on an e-bike, a huge monster of a machine that looks like a road bike but has an in-built engine complete with four speeds, from eco to turbo. Under the instruction of our distractingly blue-eyed guide, Charlie, we've agreed to get to turn six before going to anything above eco.

Fine, I think. Easy. I set off, and almost immediately I'm gasping like a fish out of water, my legs start seizing up and my head swims. I'm furious. I went to three spin classes this week solely so I could glide effortlessly up the mountain. I had visions of me as Lance Armstrong, having to slam on the breaks to turn corners. He had performance enhancing

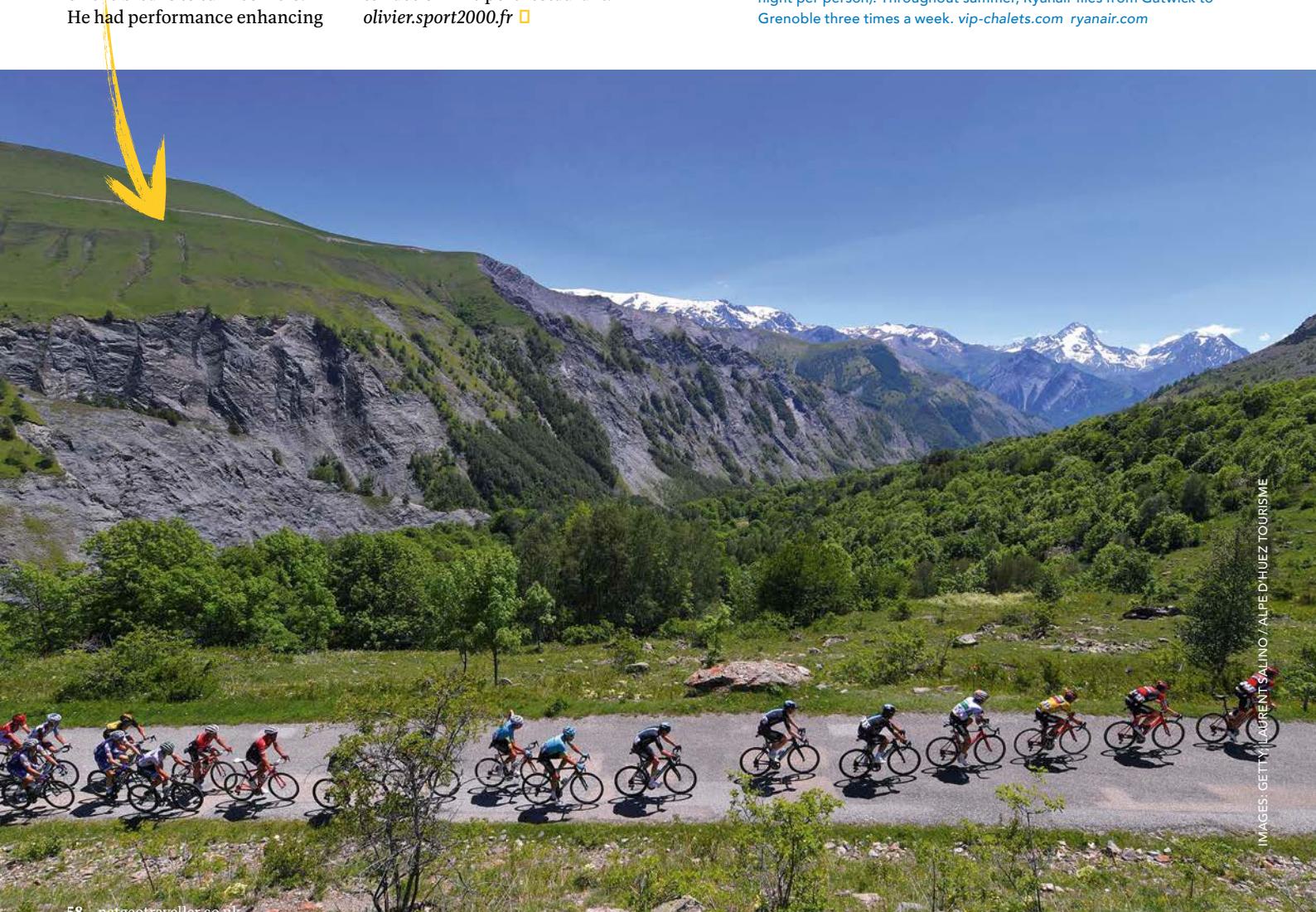
drugs, I have an engine — I figure we're on par. I'm outstripped by a passing butterfly and make my decision, switching my motor up to sport mode.

I jerk forwards, careering into the middle of the road and completely giving the game away. But then, suddenly, I'm flying. It's immensely satisfying, speeding up the slope overhung with huge Tour de France banners. I streak past cyclists in what appear to be varying levels of distress, from uncomfortable to running-on-empty, and whose looks of disdain only bring me back down to earth a bit.

It's just me, the mountain and my (motorised) bike. In parts, the views are stupendous. The higher you get, the more the Romanche River below looks like nothing more than a glistening strand of spaghetti, the cars like beetles. I finish the eight-mile, 11,840ft ascent with my legs aching just enough to know I've exercised, to feel I deserve the tartiflette on the terrace of L'Altiport restaurant. olivier.sport2000.fr



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Eat

VIENNA

Traditional coffeehouse culture still thrives in Austria's capital but modern, worldly flavours are starting to steal the spotlight. Words: Audrey Gillan

I can hear a thwacking, a sonorous thudding rhythm that puzzles me as I sit at my table in a restaurant in Vienna. It takes a few moments to tune into it, then I get to my feet and follow the beat. It transpired that the sound is a big plastic mallet hitting fillets of veal laid out on a marble counter in what turns out to be the echo of the first step in the making of Wiener schnitzel. This may be a city where some of the world's best operas and classical pieces were composed and performed, but one of the sweetest sounds to be heard in the Austrian capital is the tenderising of cutlets. This symphony ends in sizzling: the meat is drenched in flour, beaten egg and breadcrumbs before it's fried (here at Meissl & Schadn, you can choose to have your veal bubbled in butter, lard or oil).

Vienna is the seat of the former Habsburg empire, once the home of Franz Joseph and the assassinated Ferdinand, of Mozart and Wagner, of Schiele and Klimt, of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung; the place where dictators and despots such as Hitler, Stalin, Trotsky and Tito came to live in their formative years. With such a cluster of artists, intellectuals and fanatics who loved the sound of their own voice, a vibrant cafe culture — *kaffeehauskultur* — emerged in the last quarter of the 19th century. With this *fin-de-siecle* scene came the creation of some of the world's greatest and most famous cakes — Sachertorte, Mozart torte, zwetschkenfleck (plum cake) and more.

At Café Landtmann, Freud's favourite, I come for *apfelstrudel* (apple strudel), a whirlpool of pastry, baked apples, cinnamon, raisins and icing sugar, and *mélange*, the Viennese equivalent of a cappuccino. I glory in heritage-protected booths, inlaid walls, mirrors from the 1920s and customers reading the newspapers, I ogle at people done up to the nines, meeting for an afternoon catch up or a business chat. At Hotel Imperial, on the city's glittering Ringstrasse, Friederike Kozelsky-Schara introduces me to the exquisite Imperial torte, which was created to celebrate the hotel's opening in 1873. Made from crispy layers of ground almonds, wafers, whipped egg whites and sugar, this most regal of cakes is wrapped in marzipan and left for a few days before being covered with chocolate.

"The real details of the recipe are a secret," explains Kozelsky-Schara. "But I can tell you that a key element is keeping the marzipan soft so the cake doesn't dry out. And letting the cake rest before being glazed with chocolate. All of it's done by hand."

In Vienna, tradition is treasured. *Tafelspitz*, boiled cuts of beef, is hallowed (I find it a bit too like school dinners), so too are meaty consommés with dumplings. And the number of *würstelständes* (sausage kiosks) dotted across the city speaks of the adulation of Wieners. Chocolate shops are elaborate altars to cacao: I love Demel, crowded because of its beauty, all tiles, cornice, dark wood, mirrors and sweet things. Another old-school

ABOVE: Meissl & Schadn; and Wiener schnitzel with side and beer, Lugeck



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A TASTE OF Vienna



LUGECK

Austrian cuisine in a 14th-century building; the restaurant's own sourdough is served with goose lard, caramelised sweet butter or pumpkin spread. Alongside changing seasonal dishes you'll find stalwarts: consommé with dumplings, Wiener Schnitzel with a potato salad, and glazed veal liver with mashed potatoes. There's a great selection of Austrian wines (pictured above) and craft beers.

HOW MUCH: Three-courses from around £18 per person. lugeck.com

TIAN

Tian in Chinese means nature and heaven; it's also a layered vegetable dish and the place chef Paul Ivic comes from in the Tyrol. We tried a stunning starter of romaine lettuce and radish, a tea made from mushrooms and leaves of artichokes and salsify, served with pickled chestnuts and sloe berry jus.

HOW MUCH: An eight-course menu is around £115 per person. tian-restaurant.com/wien

KONSTANTIN FILIPPOU

Bringing his Greek heritage and wealth of experience, Filippou uses the pick of the Austrian larder. "A city doesn't only need someone who keeps the fire burning, but also people who make it move on," he says, and this is reflected in his menu. There's unagi eel with suckling calf, mustard and fennel, brandade of cod with Grüll caviar and the chef's special, quail 'Morocco'.

HOW MUCH: A two-course lunch is around £26 per person and a six-course dinner is around £110 per person. konstantinfilippou.com

IMAGE: INGO PETRAMER

classic that wooed and wowed me was Zum Schwarzen Kameel, an art nouveau pearl that isn't just a restaurant, but a bar, delicatessen and patisserie. The sandwiches here — fingers of bread topped with hand-cut ham, spicy egg, herring with apple — are worth the pilgrimage alone. Perch at a high table with your plates and a glass of chilled Grüner Veltliner. Be aware that smoking is allowed in a section here, as it is in the gorgeous American Bar, known locally as Loos Bar, a tiny gem of modernism designed by Adolf Loos as a kick against the baroque, gothic and renaissance architecture studding the necklace that's Ringstrasse (ring road).

The past is everywhere in Vienna, but its gastronomy isn't stuck there. At Konstantin Filippou, on the outer edge of the first district, the cooking is modern with a focus on texture — the contrast between softness and crunch. I have a starter of Norwegian langoustine, veal tongue, *cochayuyo* (Chilean seaweed) and citrus, and realise how essential crunch is to Filippou's cooking.

The Michelin-starred chef tells me: "My cooking reflects my multicultural background [his father's Greek] and allows for a unique approach to food from both of my worlds. Vienna is the perfect city to showcase these worlds. It's vibrant and open, modern yet careful about tradition. Apple strudel and

schnitzel can live happily together with modern cuisine. Vienna is — and always has been — a melting pot of old and new, of local ingredients and international views on things. More and more international guests have Vienna not only on their visiting wishlist, but also on their gourmet wishlist."

This culinary modernity is epitomised at Tian, a Michelin-starred vegetarian eatery. Plate after plate brings extraordinary tastes, some with unexpected intensity, a high hit of umami or subtle simplicity. Beluga lentils are cooked in Austrian black mustard and birch water, and dotted with fermented onion and sea buckthorn pearls, all of it adorned with small branches made from lentils and onion sugar. Chef Paul Ivic says that in Austria vegetables are usually boring, but they certainly aren't here.

In a converted town house and stables, I meet Johannes Lingenthal, the producer of Vienna's only fresh cheese. With a gourmet shop stocking a range of 200 cheeses, he makes his own small batches in a dairy out the back, some of it from the milk of his own water buffalos. "We're producing a very

ABOVE: Sunny Side Up, Tian

FOLLOWING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Gulasch & Champagne restaurant, Grand Ferdinand; Imperial torte; view over Vienna to St Stephen's Cathedral



EAT



simple fresh cheese," he says with a smile on his face. "I love to make cheese. It's one of the most amazing things. We do it all by hand and it's all about smelling, tasting and watching." I taste the oozy, lush Camembert — 50% buffalo milk and 50% goat's — but my favourite is the goat's cheese; fresh, with notes of greens that change according to the season: it's served with burnt chicory and braised pear. This is the kind of cheese I'd walk miles for, simply made from milk and rennet.

Out in the 10th district, I meet a man dubbed 'the vinegar pope', who many say makes the world's best vinegar. Erwin Gegenbauer is flamboyant, gregarious and brilliant. He pipettes drops of his vinegars onto the pad of my finger and each little lick is a revelation: asparagus, raspberry, apple balsamic, cucumber, tomato, black quince.

"My vinegars are a definition of flavour; they're there to support a flavour. They're not for souring dishes, they're for emphasising what's already there," he explains. "With our asparagus vinegar, I take white asparagus,

press it, ferment it to get asparagus wine, then on the second fermentation it becomes asparagus vinegar. Here, I'm interested in only one flavour — asparagus."

On the roof of the building that houses his factory, creative workshops, vinegar ageing cellars, family home and guesthouse, Gegenbauer keeps the barrels that store his apple balsamic vinegar, which grows in depth for five years on the roof — his bees feed on the sugars that seep through the wood.

"My chickens eat the husks of the raspberry seeds I use for my vinegar and oil. You can taste it in their eggs. I love circles," he tells me. Gegenbauer, his wonderful vinegars and his magic circles, makes an apt end to my visit to a city with a jewelled ring running round it. □

 Rooms at the Grand Ferdinand cost from around £180 per night without breakfast. grandferdinand.com
British Airways flies to Vienna from Heathrow and Gatwick from £78 return. britishairways.com
vienna.info

Five foodie finds**1****CAKE**

Vienna is a capital of cakes: Sachertorte, Imperial torte, apple strudel, and dozens of other creations, are displayed like jewels in glass cases in shops and coffeehouses throughout the city.

2**WINE**

Vienna is the only capital in the world with vineyards within its city limits — and they can be reached by taking public transport. Try Grüner Veltliner, Riesling or Zweigelt.

3**WIENER SCHNITZEL**

Protected by law, this must be made with veal that's tenderised then fried in breadcrumbs. It's usually served with potato salad and sometimes lingonberry jelly.

4**SAUSAGE (WIENER)**

Stands sell all kinds of sausages, served many different ways including *kasekreiner* (cheese sausage) or a traditional wiener in a roll with fried onions. At Albertinaplatz, stands also sell glasses of champagne because it's next to the State Opera.

5**NASCHMARKT**

This food market features stalls from local producers, as well as shops and restaurants. Tiny Urbanek is a great spot for a platter of meats and cheese, all washed down with a chilled *sekt* (sparkling wine).

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Neighbourhood HONG KONG

Hong Kong is best experienced by simply soaking up its colourful culture during an amble around, walking up an appetite for the city's incredible array of ethnic eats as you go. Words: Lee Cobaj



Hong Kong may welcome over 44 million overnight visitors each year, more than any other city in the world, but it really only has a handful of obvious attractions.

Whizz across the harbour on the Star Ferry, ride the 120-year-old funicular to Victoria Peak for that vertiginous shot of the city, take a jolly over to Lantau Island to marvel at Big Buddha and lose all your inhibitions on a ruinous night out — an unforgettable few days. Yet Hong Kong is far from a one-trip wonder. As one of the most populous places in the world, it boasts inventive architecture, sociable public spaces and tight-knit neighbourhoods. And Hong Kong's obsession with eating means that wherever you wander you're bound to find fantastic food.

NEIGHBOURHOOD

**King's Road**

At 25p a ride, Hong Kong's charming old trams, which rattle east to west across the length of the island, have got to be one of the world's best-value tourist attractions. Most visitors hop on somewhere around Central, to gawp through the wooden windows as they pass Sir Norman Foster's HSBC Building, I.M. Pei's Bank of China Tower and the colonial-era Old Supreme Court, before hopping off 10 minutes later to get lost in the shops around Wan Chai or Causeway Bay.

Continue riding the rails east along King's Road, however, and a grittier, noisier even more colourful version of Hong Kong emerges. Locals haggling over fruit and vegetables; piles of £1 tops and T-shirts spilling onto the pavement; flashing foot-shaped neon advertising reflexology parlours; street cobblers and key cutters; and speciality shops selling everything from spanners to phone covers. Apartment blocks are of the old-school variety — brightly coloured with washing hanging out of the windows on bamboo poles, reminiscent of the Hong Kong I grew up in some 30 years ago.

There are two tram routes heading east. The North Point tram ends at Chun Yeung Street, a hyperactive wet market where baskets and boxes have to be luggered off the tracks to allow the trams to clunk past. Alight here then wander down to the waterfront and along the pretty Quarry Bay Promenade for super city views without the crowds. Tack back to King's Road and pick up the Shau Kei Wan tram to the 'Monster Building' at 1026 King's Road. Built as public housing in the 1960s, this gargantuan E-shaped edifice, which featured in Michael Bay's 2014 *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, looks like a humongous game of Tetris.

And there are plenty of fantastic, reasonably priced places to eat en route, too. Fuel up at Michelin-starred dim sum specialist Tim Ho Wan (timhowan.com) where baskets of prawn dumplings, barbecue pork buns and fried turnip cake come in at just a few pounds a pop — but expect to queue. Try juicy, crispy roast goose at Heping Restaurant ([facebook.com/hepingrestaurant](https://www.facebook.com/hepingrestaurant)), moreish fried rice noodles topped with silky beef at Mui Fa Chuen (2-8A Tsat Tsz Mui Road), or garlicky black ink squid washed down with Tsingtao beer, before having a boogie to some Canto-pop, at rowdy Tung Po (99 Java Road). Leave space for some airy egg puffs at Lee Keung Kee (76 Shau Kei Wan Main Street East), waffles that you can take to the next level by smearing them with peanut butter, sugar and condensed milk.

FROM TOP: 'Monster Building' at 1026 King's Road; crowds crossing King's Road on Hong Kong Island

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: A reflexology shop's flashing neon sign; whitewashed interior of Catch, one of Hong Kong's hippest restaurants



When in Hong Kong

1

TOOTSIE

End a day of pounding the streets by sinking your body into a soft armchair and your feet into a bucket of hot herbal water. Regulated massage studios are on almost every corner — look for signs with flashing neon feet.

2

GREEN & CLEAN

Although Hong Kong may be best known for its skyscrapers, more than 70% of its land is dedicated green space. Among the sensational hiking options is the stunning MacLehose Trail.

3

KUNG FU FIX

The Bruce Lee exhibition at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum (until 20 July 2018) is well worth the journey to Sha Tin. Exhibits include the iconic Game of Death yellow jumpsuit. heritagemuseum.gov.hk

4

A NIGHT AT THE GEE-GEE'S

One of Hong Kong's best-loved institutions, Happy Valley horse racing takes place every Wednesday evening, September-July, and entry is just HK\$10 (£1).

5

BECAUSE I'M HAPPY

Happy hours are a big deal in boozy Hong Kong — you'll find special offers everywhere from five-star hotels to rooftop bars and nightclubs every night of the week.

6

HOW TO DO DIM SUM

Dim sum is served for breakfast and lunch, although you can find the odd late-night spot such as Dim Dim Sum in Wan Chai. Order by ticking a menu card at your table then pay at the cashier desk when you leave. dimdimsum.hk

Kennedy Town

Hands on his Speedo-covered hips, Mr Chow stands at the end of the pier, a rickety finger of wooden planks pointing into the South China Sea. Across the water, glowing peacock green in the glorious autumn sunshine, the 108-storey International Commerce Centre stands sentry over Victoria Harbour. Every few minutes a passing tanker, tug boat or ferry churns the water to froth. Mr Chow waits. And waits. And waits some more. He knows when to make his entrance. Toned and tanned, only 80 years old, he's been swimming here for the past 50 years.

Until recently, Mr Chow and his spring-chicken septuagenarian friends had the bamboo-shrouded Sai Wan Swimming Shed to themselves. Then came the Mass Transit Railway (MTR). The launch of the West Island MTR subway line in late 2014, connecting west coast Kennedy Town — aka K-Town — to the city centre in eight minutes, immediately opened up this working-class neighbourhood to gentrification. Three years on and rents have rocketed, estate agents have pushed out many of the independent shops and ageing wild swimmers share their space with selfie-takers and Pomeranian walkers.

For now, this newly connected version of K-Town simmers nicely between being too local to attract tourists and polished

beyond all recognition. Wander its broad streets and you'll hear the clack of mahjong tiles and the click of laptops, the warbles of Cantonese opera on the radio mixing with the sound of coffee percolators. There are traditional bonesetters, acupuncturists and herbal medicine stores, alongside craft beer specialists, organic cafes and yoga studios. Sure, within the wafts of ginseng, egg tarts and XO sauce, there's the odd whiff of pretension (what's a progressive lifestyle platform? A restaurant, apparently), but on the whole, it all feels invitingly cool.

No more so than on weekends when the pavements bubble with brunchers sampling some of Hong Kong's hippest restaurants. Catch (catch.hk) on Catchick Street has whitewashed interiors, wicker lamps and folding doors overlooking the passing trams. The menu evokes a Melbourne cafe; so lots of sunny flavours — think organic eggs, avocado, chorizo, halloumi and stacks of seafood. Then there's the Praya Waterside Eatery (praya.com.hk) which offers the perfect dose of refined HK living with such homely dishes as porridge with pears and walnuts, sourdough bread topped with mushrooms and poached eggs, and pancakes with whipped butter, lemon and sugar, all served amid woody interiors and terrific views of the tree-lined waterfront.

6

Wander K-Town's broad streets and you'll hear the clack of mahjong tiles and the click of laptops, the warbles of Cantonese opera on the radio mixing with the sound of coffee percolators



NEIGHBOURHOOD

Kowloon City

This sunny little corner of Hong Kong was once a much darker place — it's the site of the notorious Kowloon Walled City, around six acres of land which, due to a quirk in history, fell outside the jurisdiction of both British and Chinese law. A hotbed of criminal activity and a haven for illegal immigrants, over the years one building after another — most without foundations or running water — squeezed inside its old stone ramparts, filling every gap, covering every path and road, until its anarchic architecture housed more than 33,000 residents.

Demolished almost 25 years ago and replaced with a jogging, cycling and a tai chi-friendly park, all that remains are a couple of the original granite entrance plaques and a wing-tipped *yamen* (an Imperial government administration hall) with a few fun interactive displays on the Walled City's extraordinary history. Entry is free and it's worth 20 minutes of your time. Nowadays, though, this low-rise neighbourhood — a colourful melange of locals Indians, Thais and Indonesians — is best known for its fabulous food.

Pull on clothing with an elasticated waistband and head to Islam Food on Lung Kong Road (islamfood.com.hk), a Formica-covered eatery that's been serving up aromatic Chinese Muslim Uighur dishes for around half a century. From its eight-page menu choose veal goulash served in a crisp, glistening patty (which squirts when you bite into it); the chicken sesame, served cold with an unappealing-looking yellow skin but packed with a heavenly rich buttery flavour; the light, flaky, cardamom-spiced mutton spring rolls; the satisfactorily salty pot pan scallions; and a beef brisket curry, so tender it falls apart between your chopsticks. Afterwards, walk to Prince Edward Road for some peach-, rose- or green tea-flavoured jelly at Golden Hall Dessert (6 South Wall Road).

The area's Thai food is one of the top draws. Swing by trendy Chao Phraya (19 Lung Kong Road) for fried pumpkin curry with soft-shell crab. Or hit the deafening Kowloon City Wet Market (102 Nga Tsin Wai Road). Downstairs, butchers in white plastic boots and aprons haul halved cows onto hooks, seafood is plucked from tanks and weighed on hanging scales, with payments thrown into hanging red plastic buckets used as tills. Upstairs, meanwhile, in the Cooked Food Centre, Amporn Thai's lettuce-wrapped mincemeat and chilli-coated red snapper sashimi has queues forming outside the door every night. Need a lie down? The neighbourhood is also packed with Thai massage joints, with a one-hour rub down costing less than £20. □

FROM TOP: Seafood stall, Kowloon City Wet Market; Kowloon Walled City Park

MORE INFO

discoverhongkong.com
hk.localiz.com

Lonely Planet Hong Kong Travel Guide. RRP: £14.99

Cathay Pacific operates direct flights from London and Manchester from £460. Hong Kong's boutique The Fleming Hotel, in Wan Chai, has doubles from £154, B&B. cathaypacific.com thefleming.com





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Sleep

REYKJAVIK

Once just a jumping-off point for tours of Iceland's geological freak shows, Reykjavik is a destination in itself, boosted by innovative new places to stay. Words: David Whitley



For a long time, Reykjavik stood as the cutesy gateway to Iceland's madcap cavalcade of fjords, glaciers, volcanoes and moonscapes. But things are changing, as apartment blocks, showy glass buildings and new hotels spring up with seemingly indecent haste. Global attention after the 2010 Eyjafjallajökull eruption, *Game Of Thrones* location filming, plus cheap flights taking advantage of proximity to Europe and North America have turned the country from backwater to bucket list. New hotels are sprouting up rapidly, and Airbnb likewise. The latter is certainly worth looking at in a country that is tear-jerkingly expensive. But there are some indications that local prices might be on the cusp of getting a little more bearable, not least judging by residents' giddy excitement at Costco's arrival in Iceland. The theory is that a little extra competition could force power players to reduce hefty mark-ups on goods, which can only spell good things for the city's traditionally budget-busting accommodation offerings.







For cheap(ish) eats

CENTERHOTEL MIDGARDUR

The Midgardur has a likeable buzz about it. Rooms are warmer-feeling than most in the city (partly due to taking the revolutionary step of adding carpets), with big walk-in showers and some quirkily shaped furniture. The ISK600 (£4) happy-hour beers are about as cheap as you'll get in the city, but the location just across the road from the new Hlemmur Food Hall is a godsend. Inside a former bus terminal building, this brings together several small outlets, from a Vietnamese banh mi stall to wine bar/grill hybrids, all selling good grub at admirably affordable prices.

ROOMS: From ISK18,469 (£132), including breakfast. centerhotels.com/hotel-midgardur

For families

SWAN HOUSE

Icelandic receptionists can be a little on the brusque side, but not here — eager helpfulness seems to be the order of the day. There's a touch more design flair than most apartments in the city, too, with its odd mix of Scandi minimalism, country cutesy and industrial chic. Headboards look suspiciously like wooden pallets, ceilings are bare concrete, and the outdoor area goes from severe grey slabbing to a sprawling wooden deck with bird boxes. But the key factors are the sofa beds and the kitchenette. Which means self-catering becomes a viable option for those stretching the budget.

ROOMS: From ISK20,891 (£150), room only. reykjavikapartment.is

For a swim

REYKJAVIK CAMPSITE

Huddling in a tent in a field is always going to be the cheapest — if not the warmest — way to stay in Iceland. Reykjavik Campsite also has decent shower and cooking facilities. If camping's a stretch too far, though, there are basic wooden cabins with bunk beds. But Reykjavik Campsite suddenly becomes approximately a million times more appealing when you realise it's next to the Laugardalslaug, Reykjavik's best thermal pool complex. Here, there's a lagoon section for kids, plus an Olympic-sized lane pool, naturally heated to between 27–29C.

CABINS: From ISK11,500 (£82), a night, or ISK2,200 (£16) to pitch a tent. reykjavikcampsite.is



For bang for buck

**ICELANDAIR HOTEL
REYKJAVIK NATURA**

The location by the domestic airport is off-putting, but it's only a mile-and-a-half from the heart of Old Reykjavik. And what you get for that trade-off is excellent value. The Natura is a big joint, with a lot going on. Icelandic artists are showcased around the central spiral staircase, the lobby area is dotted with sheep sculpted from scrap wood and there's a bizarre exhibition of stuffed Icelandic birds near the conference rooms. Bedrooms are themed around flora, poets, artists and nature. Next to that, is a mini-museum about chess legend Bobby Fischer.

ROOMS: Doubles from ISK13,760 (£99), room only. icelandairhotels.com/en/hotels/natura

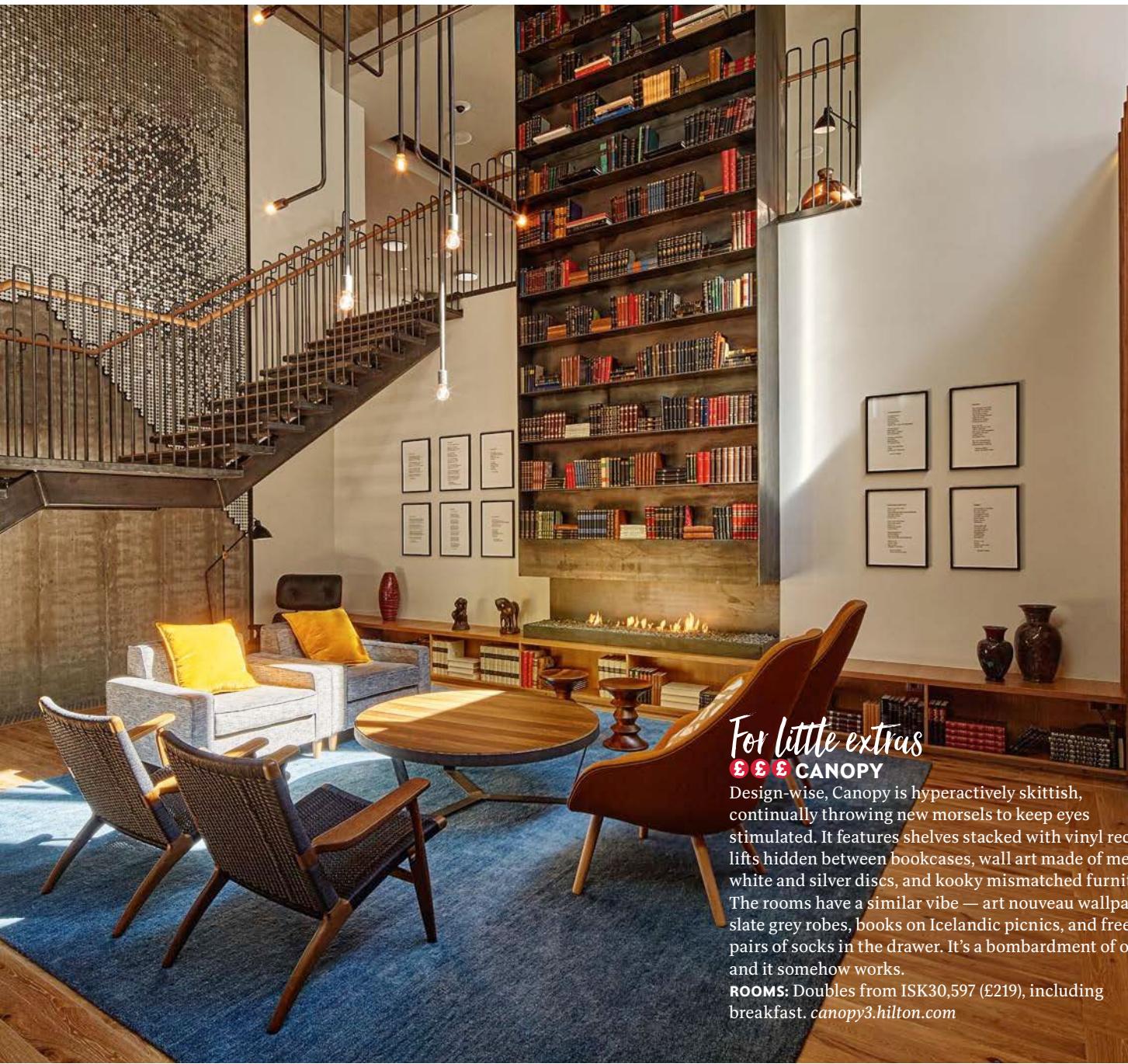


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For little extras

£ £ £ CANOPY

Design-wise, Canopy is hyperactively skittish, continually throwing new morsels to keep eyes stimulated. It features shelves stacked with vinyl records, lifts hidden between bookcases, wall art made of metallic white and silver discs, and kooky mismatched furniture. The rooms have a similar vibe — art nouveau wallpaper, slate grey robes, books on Icelandic picnics, and free pairs of socks in the drawer. It's a bombardment of odd, and it somehow works.

ROOMS: Doubles from ISK30,597 (£219), including breakfast. canopy3.hilton.com

THREE TO TRY

For couples

£ £ 105 A TOWNHOUSE HOTEL

While many of Reykjavik's hotels plump for ice — light wood and crisp white paint jobs — this new entrant on the scene opts for fire. The country's volcanoes, rather than its glaciers, seem to be the inspiration. It's a big red building, and the rooms go for a beginner goth effect: black padded headboards, a big ring of bare, unshaded light bulbs theatrically hanging down from the ceiling, black tiles around the rain shower. The Champagne flutes among the cutlery and crockery above the oven seem to be a nod that guests are here for a good time.

ROOMS: From ISK 17,006 (£122), room only. 105hotel.is

For practicalities

£ £ CITY PARK HOTEL

Lots of hotel rooms in Reykjavik appear to have been furnished straight out of the IKEA catalogue, and this absolutely applies to the City Park Hotel. But if you're here to see Iceland rather than Reykjavik, it's a mighty handy crash pad. It's just close enough to the appealing parts of the city to walk to, but has a good selection of places to eat on the doorstep, and there's plenty of free parking around for self-drivers, too. Also handy after a long day's exploring is the ISK2,900 (£21) buffet dinner.

ROOMS: From ISK15,316 (£110), including breakfast. cityparkhotel.is

For backpackers

£ £ GALAXY HOSTEL

Standard issue hostel dorm beds have been cast aside here, in favour of fully kitted-out capsule pods. Each has a TV, USB ports, international plug sockets, a headphones slot, safes and mirrors. There are some double capsules, too. As a hostel, it gets some things right — vaguely affordable happy-hour drinks, a cute TV room with projector screening on the wall. Others not so much. The kitchen facilities are poor, and charging ISK1,500 (£11) for luggage storage is pointlessly mean.

ROOMS: From ISK7,000 (£51), doubles from ISK15,000 (£107). Breakfast not included. galaxypodhostel.is

SLEEP



For sea views
★★★ REYKJAVIK
MARINA RESIDENCE

Looking out on to the harbour, these waterside suites are the sort of place it's easy to imagine Hollywood stars staying when they're in the country filming. They're sprawling apartments, with massive bathrooms split into three sections — one of which has a high roll-top bath for long soaks. A loose maritime theme is adhered to, with bits of ships being turned into furniture, and barometers on the walls, while there's a deliberate focus on Icelandic beers and chocolates in the minibars. Everything seems that little bit more plush than in other Reykjavik hotels, and the surround sound speaker system is geared up to hook your phone or iPod into.

ROOMS: Suites from ISK64,710 (£463), including breakfast.
reykjavikmarinaresidence.is □



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1 HOSTEL TO HOSTEL

Peak District, England

It gets breezy on top of Win Hill, but if you've got a warm hat and a well-filled sandwich there are few better lunch spots in Britain. The views are spectacular, not least because the hill stands bang in the middle of the Peak District. It's a national park of two halves: to the north are the moody gritstone moorlands of the Dark Peak, to the south the limestone contours of the White Peak. And in the centre of it all, on any given day, sits a smattering of self-satisfied summit hikers devouring rounds of cheese and pickle sarnies.

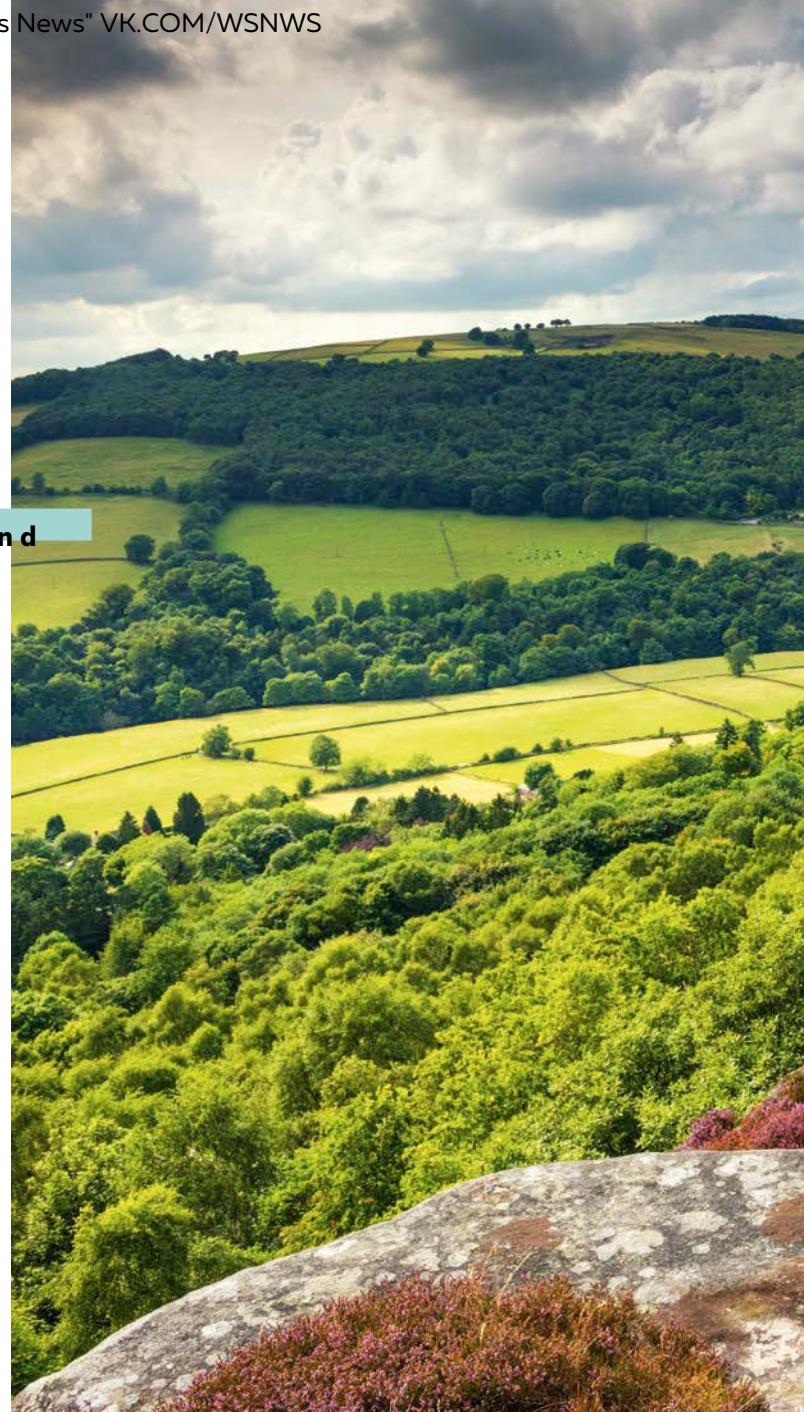
Aptly, the hilltop also marks the approximate midway point of the three-day hostel-to-hostel walk I'm making. There's something immensely gratifying about a multi-day loop walk; that sense of returning to the place you started from, your legs heavier, your boots muddier but your mind more open and alive. And in the Peak District — less eulogised than The Lakes, more manageable than Snowdonia — you find a slice of British countryside brilliantly suited to the task.

My route is straightforward on the map but a diverse proposition on the ground. From YHA Ravenstor, set on a bank above the River Wye, the trail winds its way through high-sided dales and open fields to YHA Eyam. From there, a moorland crossing and a riverside path precede a climb up Win Hill and a descent to YHA Castleton Losehill Hall. The third day's route snakes back down to the White Peak plateau before rejoining the start point. The distances covered each day are 7.5 miles, 11 miles and 9.5 miles. Nothing to trouble hardcore hillwalkers, but more than enough to get the blood pumping.

The walk does a fine job of showcasing not only the physical beauty of the national park — I take joy in crossing Eyam Moor on a sun-washed spring morning, and later tracing the green bends of Monk's Dale among busy woodpeckers — but also the area's human history.

Bronze Age settlers, Romans and medieval royals have all left their mark on the Peak District, and the valleys are still dotted with mansions erected from the profits of the lead-mining industry. So much mining occurred here that Arthur Conan Doyle suggested that were the ground to be struck 'with some gigantic hammer, it would boom like a drum'.

But if there's one place on the route that really speaks of the past, it's Eyam. The village famously chose to isolate itself in the mid-1660s — no one in, no one out — to stop a plague outbreak spreading further afield. Several cottages remain from the era, and you can still visit the spot on the



outskirts of the village where food deliveries would be left by outsiders. There's a great little museum too.

For all its diversions, however, a walk like this is always going to be more about appreciating the roll and flow of the land. There are enough climbs and downhills for it to feel like a proper outdoor undertaking (beware the will-sapping incline of Parkin Clough) and the trail serves up a countless succession of broad, sheep-and-wildflowers panoramas. All three hostels, for their part, provide private rooms, evening beers and morning fry-ups.

I'm weary but upbeat when I get back to my car at YHA Ravenstor, about 55 hours after setting off. The weather has been kind and — a personal triumph — over three days I've only lost my way on the OS map once.

It's true what they say: Britain's oldest national park has a way of casting a spell. When life gets too much, you'll find me with a packed lunch on Win Hill.

BEN LERWILL

 peakdistrict.gov.uk

ENGLISH ESCAPES

**2 GO SEAL-SPOTTING ON THE NORFOLK COAST**

Seal-watching cruises run year-round off Blakeney Harbour. Alternatively, there's beachcombing at West Runton, rock-pooling at Sheringham or top-notch fish and chips with views to match at Cromer. visitnorfnorfolk.com

3 WALK A STRETCH OF THE THAMES PATH

The Thames offers up some great weekend walks. Try the Lechlade-Oxford two-dayer, stopping at tiny Newbridge, with plenty of canal boats and remote meadows to discover on route. nationaltrail.co.uk/thames-path

4 JOIN A WEEKEND FORAGING COURSE

Mushrooms, wild herbs and edible flowers all feature on Wild Food UK's expert-led foraging courses. They span locations from Surrey and Suffolk to Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Cheshire. wildfooduk.com

5 GO TREE-CLIMBING ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT

Get back to nature with a tree-climbing break on the Isle of Wight, where you'll learn how to reach the canopy of a colossal centuries-old oak. Budding climbers will need to be eight or over. goodleaf.co.uk

6 EXPLORE THE RIVER DART

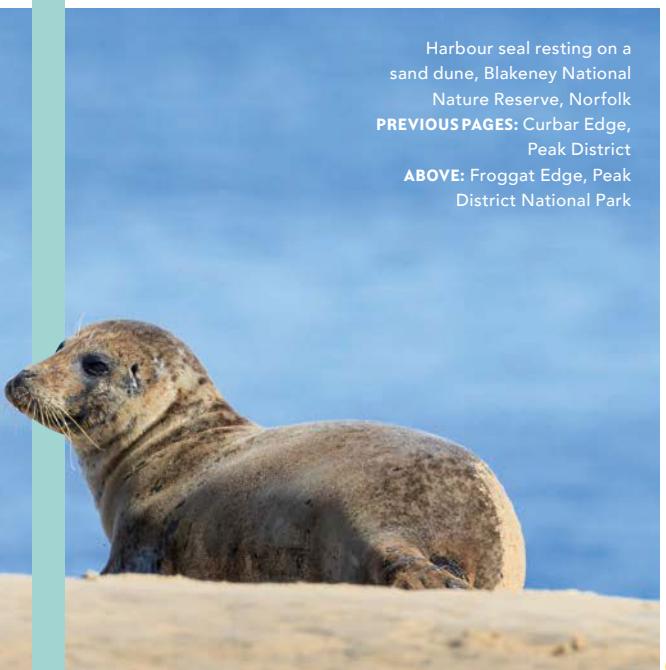
Explore historic Dartmouth's winding lanes, then catch a boat service (March-Oct) upriver to Agatha Christie's one-time home, Greenway or, further inland, to the alternative-minded town of Totnes. visitsouthdevon.co.uk

7 FIND ADVENTURE IN THE YORKSHIRE DALES

To make the most of the spectacular limestone ravine of How Stean Gorge, look no further than the action-packed Big 5 multi-activity day — abseiling, gorge walking, canoeing, via ferrata and caving. Phew! howstean.co.uk

Harbour seal resting on a sand dune, Blakeney National Nature Reserve, Norfolk

PREVIOUS PAGES: Curbar Edge, Peak District
ABOVE: Froggat Edge, Peak District National Park



8

Pembrokeshire, Wales

CALL OF THE COAST

The Sirens' roar rushes across St Bride's Bay. Their deafening call is hard to ignore. From the Treginnis Peninsula — the westernmost point of mainland Wales — I squint in their direction, but a heavy mist means they're playing hard to get. These Sirens — more formally known as The Bitches — are a series of rocks between Ramsey Island and West Wales that form a tidal race of treacherous waves and whirlpools. The thunderous tide rushing through them has wrecked many a ship and is providing an ominous soundtrack to my hike.

I'm walking a portion of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, which is almost entirely contained within Britain's only coastal national park, and curves its way across 186 miles of coves and harbours, tiny towns, steep slopes and sandy beaches. It also forms a portion of the staggering 870-mile Wales Coast Path, which opened in 2012 and traces the country's entire shoreline. Having been to Pembrokeshire many times with my partner, who grew up here, I've walked over half its length.

And today I'm adding a 9.5-mile section from Whitesands to Caerfai to my hiking repertoire.

I begin the day in St David's, at the Twr y Felin Hotel — originally built in 1806 as a windmill — flinging open the shutters of my Windmill Tower Suite to find a thick fog has descended like smoke across the peninsula. Sea and sky merge, blotting out the horizon. Conditions aren't ideal, but it's the winter solstice, and I want to see this landscape on the verge of transition.

When I reach Whitesands, two surfers are just visible plying the waves as I join a path mantled by dark heather, gorse and fern. Gone is the summer's sweep of gold and purple wildflowers; gone the puffins and Manx shearwaters; and gone the crowds who came to see them. Instead, there are cobwebs, defiant against a whipping wind; pockets of gorse sprouting delicate yellow flowers; and cormorants skimming the moody surface of the sea.

It doesn't take long to reach Porthselau, a small beach littered with kayaks, seaweed and colourful limpet shells, some knocked from their rocky foundations.

Whitesands Beach,
near St David's,
Pembrokeshire
RIGHT: World
Bog Snorkelling
Championships,
Llanwrtyd Well,
Powys, Wales

by Storms Ophelia and Brian. There's another sign of the storms' devastation in Pembrokeshire — I haven't yet seen a seal in an area where they're often spotted, lending credence to reports that two-thirds of the Atlantic grey seal pups on the outlying islands perished in the rough waters.

The path takes me over a waterfall, which cascades onto a small beach and slices through the sand. I follow steps down and head towards a series of rocky outcrops, covered in places by a seaweed forest; exposed stones provide shelter for tiny snails, who are huddled together in deep crevasses. Pebbles of purple and red quartzite, jasper and ash pepper the beach, while the surrounding flora mirrors it in glorious shades of rust, charcoal and green.

Climbing again, to 200ft, I reach a unique vantage point over the brooding landscape: cliffs crafted over millennia by water, some so smooth and sheer it seems unbelievable they were sculpted by nature's hand; others bent into dramatic folds. A blue-grey sea pulsates below, erupting with fury on the cliffs. Further along, in a secluded cove,

the relationship is more genteel: a constant ebb and flow, a reaching and retreating that creates a slow whittling away.

Just past the ruins of St Justinian's chapel is small harbour, home to the St David's Lifeboat Station. Its three boathouses are assembled on the cliffs — the oldest dating back to 1869. I head into the newest incarnation, which opened in October 2016, to find a wall covered with notice boards detailing the services rendered by the lifeboat, including assisting surfers, yachts, kayakers and fishing vessels, as well as injured people on cliffs and even stranded dogs. A humble sign below tots up the number of lives saved by the St David's lifeboats during their lifespan: 328; some weren't so lucky. It's a reminder of the precarious nature of these unpredictable waters and wind-lashed cliffs. I head back outside to walk through the gloom as the Sirens beckon me — the howl of a wild place. **STEPHANIE CAVAGNARO**

 visitpembrokeshire.com pembrokeshirecoast.wales twryfelinhotel.com

WEEKENDS



9 SUBTERRANEAN ZIP-LINING

Zip World's 11 adventures, at three sites in North Wales, include Velocity, the fastest zip wire in the world; and Bounce Below, set in a cavern the size of a cathedral. zipworld.co.uk

10 FORAGING IN PEMBROKESHIRE

A restaurant with rooms, Llys Meddyg offers foraging courses, game shooting, fish smoking and fishing. The chefs will also cook up a fine-dining storm with your spoils from nature's larder. llysmeddyg.com

11 CYCLE THE WALES COAST PATH

Stretches open to cyclists include Swansea Bay, gateway to the Mumbles and the Gower Peninsula. Plus epic mountain bike trails in the Afan Forest Park are nearby. walescoastpath.gov.uk

12 COASTEERING, HOLY ISLAND

There are few prettier spots to scramble-navigate deep clean water, hidden beaches, and sea cliffs than Holy Island, home to the country's largest sea cave. snowdonia-adventures.co.uk

13 WILD SWIMMING, NORTH WALES

Wild swimmers are spoilt for choice here. Try Fairy Glen, an idyllic gorge in Betws y Coed, with large rocks, a deep channel down the middle and a junction pool for longer, leisurely swims. wildswimming.co.uk

14 LLANWRTHYD WELLS FESTIVALS

This Welsh town's roster of festivals ranges from the Real Ale Wobbles (cycling and beer) to bog snorkelling and the Man Versus Horse Marathon. visitmidwales.co.uk

15

GIN SCHOOL

Glasgow, Scotland

A great deal of alcohol has been processed by hundreds of thousands of livers at Glasgow's legendary Barrowlands, the 84-year-old ballroom that most locals agree is still Glasgow's best live music venue. The surrounding area may be dilapidated in places, and a little shady in others, but if you come to The Barras you can expect to have a good time.

You can also expect to leave with more alcohol than you arrived with, although, thanks to Crossbill Gin, it doesn't all have to be sloshing around in your belly. At the start of last year, Jonathan Engels moved his distillery to Glasgow from the outskirts of Aviemore, in the Highlands, to Barras Art and Design, a multipurpose venue and creative hub. He launched The Hatchery Laboratory & Gin School in the summer, which offers a three-hour course on which total novices — like my friend Callum and I — get to learn about, and briefly participate in, the gin craze sweeping Britain.

Crossbill Gin could hardly be simpler: the only botanicals are Scottish juniper and rosehip. As gin school pupils making our own, we're told we'll have a lot more freedom. Jonathan explains that so long as juniper is the chief component, we can call it gin. So, if we want to have, say, four grams of rosemary, we'll need to have at least five of juniper. There's no limit on the number of botanicals we can include, either — some gins have dozens. For example, Monkey 47, a German gin, is so

named because of its number of ingredients (none of them is monkey).

Pouring each of the class a large glass of his gin, Jonathan explains that he originally made vodka but switched to gin after being inspired by the success of Scottish producer Hendrick's Gin. As he researched the subject, he learned that early Dutch pioneers used to source their juniper berries from Scotland — until then, he had no idea it was grown in his homeland. With the help of the Forestry Commission, Jonathan has now revived Scottish juniper production, harvesting from a small crop of trees in the Highlands. He named his launch product after a little, oddly beaked bird that feeds on conifer cones.

Pupils are free to bring their own botanicals to the school, but there are dozens of ingredients in jars on site, too. I decide to keep things simple, following the logic that established food pairings will likely work well together in booze. To that end, I reach for lemon verbena and some kaffir lime leaves, weighing them and popping them into my still with some fresh juniper. To my mind, I've created something that'll have vaguely Thai flavourings, a sure-fire winner.

Callum, meanwhile, decides to cram his with macerated strawberries and rosehip, seemingly for no other reason than because he plans on giving his final product to his wife as a present.

As my brew drips from the still, it's an eye-watering, throat-constricting 80% alcohol. Using tiny copper cups, we're told to sample this firewater, an experience something like being tear-gassed. Although it's undoubtedly potent, mine doesn't taste great. Worse: through my watering eyes, I can see that Jonathan has been thoroughly impressed by Callum's perfunctory effort. Later, he'll describe it as the best any student has so far made in one of his classes. Leaving the class, bottle in hand, I feel like I could do with another drink — just not my own, of course. **JAMIE LAFFERTY**

 crossbillgin.com/ginschool





IMAGES: MARIA MENZEL; CROSSBILL

FROM LEFT: Juniper collecting; creating bespoke gin at The Hatchery Laboratory & Gin School, Glasgow



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16 SURVIVAL SKILLS ON SKYE

If you're planning on getting some survival skills under your belt, where better to head than the spectacular Isle of Skye, the largest and northernmost of the major islands in the Inner Hebrides. Here, Skye Ghillie teaches fire building, foraging, and cooking on open fires. For those with a strong stomach, it can organise deer hunts, too.

skyeghillie.co.uk

17 HUSKIES IN AVIEMORE

The Cairngorm Sleddog Centre is Britain's only daily working sled-dog facility. Here, visitors can join a single safari run, meet the dogs, or sign up to a two-day certified course designed to introduce you to the barking-mad world of husky-drawn transport. sled-dogs.co.uk

18 NORTH COAST 500

The North Coast 500 is a scenic 516-mile route around north Scotland, taking Inverness Castle as its start and end point. Arguably Britain's most scenic drive, motorists who take it on will encounter few motorways, many sheep, and even more lochs and mountains.

northcoast500.com

19 DARK SKY PARK

That Europe's first Dark Sky Park was located in Scotland perhaps wasn't a surprise, but the fact it's located in the heart of the Lowlands certainly was. Aside from gazing at the heavens, there are great trails for hiking, lochs for fishing, and an increasing number of gastro pubs for the days when it's too rainy to do any of that.

scotland.forestry.gov.uk

20 COASTEERING

For most people, jumping into the North Sea is something to avoid at all costs. For coasteers — who jump on and off of coastal rocks, and explore caves and cliff faces — it's a dream come true. Vertical Descents offers outings from Arbroath. verticaldescents.com

21 ARDNAMURCHAN

A small spit of land on Scotland's west coast, the Ardnamurchan Peninsula is one of the wildest places in the UK. How wild? Well, it's home to one of the last surviving populations of endangered Scottish wildcat, as well as pine martens and golden eagles, while whales, dolphins and porpoises swim in its waters. ardnamurchan.com



22

Suffolk, England

SURVIVAL SKILLS

If you're going to hug a tree, it's surely best to snuggle up to a species that can return some well-rounded affection. And there's none better than a giant redwood. Encircling my arms around its vast circumference, the spongy bark yields, the trunk's orangutan-orange fluffy coating almost warm under my autumn-chilled fingers. It's so... alive.

I didn't come to the forest to get arboreally affectionate, but faced with acres of giant redwoods, towering Monterey pines, magnificent blue Atlas cedars, and a solitary Chinese tree of heaven — whose branches curl skyward, as if in reverie — I find myself moved to a spontaneous squeeze. Being in the company of local mindfulness teacher and walking guide Amanda Flood, I'm perhaps more meditatively disposed than usual. Amanda's guiding me around the arboretum at Brandon Country Park — the perfect place, she says, to master this modish technique of switching off, being in the moment, and allowing the mind to unwind. Amanda smiles beatifically: "Close your eyes, feel the leaves under your feet, breathe and just... be."

Barely a couple of hours ago, I'd been cheek by scowling commuter jowl, on a rush-hour Central line Tube, now I find myself in the Brecks. This little-known, 386sq-mile stretch of Suffolk-Norfolk borderlands, just beyond Bury St Edmunds, incorporates heathland, wildlife-rich wetlands, and UK's largest lowland forest. Made up of nature reserves and — as is the case with Brandon Park — the sprawling private estates of former 19th-century industrialists who took a fancy to forestry, the area has, of late, set itself up to be an outdoor playground — one with a remote vibe that belies its proximity to London. What roads there are see more wild bunnies than bottlenecks, and either skirt the forest or cut through oceanic swathes of orchard and farmland.

Deeper into Brandon's forest, I get a crash course in fire-building from bushcraft expert Jon Tyler, who earned his survival stripes living for 10 days in the Guyanese Amazon. "Yes: a challenging environment," he smiles. "But knowing how to build a fire is key to surviving anywhere — not least for the psychological comfort it provides." I ignore the roar from two fighter jets on routine manoeuvres from nearby RAF Lakenheath, and imagine myself lost in the woods.

RIGHT: Bushcraft expert, Jon Tyler, blows into embers

A steel, a flint, some dry bracken and a slice of King Alfred's Cake mushroom, plus guidance from Jon, and, to my great satisfaction, my little fire is soon illuminating the dense rows of gnarled pine trees peculiar to the Brecks' forests.

That the Brecks is on the tourist map at all is thanks largely to its towering Douglas firs. You can monkey about in their branches, 40ft above the forest floor, at Go Ape's canopy adventure park, a landmark in Thetford Forest since it opened in 2002. Less well-known is Bike Art: around 30 miles of cycle trails in an adjacent tract of woodland with dips and ruts that is — for spirit-level-flat Suffolk — as close to mountain biking as it gets. And, as is the case on the local roads, there's barely anyone in sight.

Nearby Elveden Estate, meanwhile, offers a real off-road challenge: the chance to hoon through trees, trenches and muddy ruts in a Land Rover, no driving license required (a perk of being a private estate).

Now synonymous with growing vine and veggy varieties that thrive in the Brecks' dry soil, Elveden has grander origins than Brandon Park, namely as the hunting grounds of Duleep Singh, the last Maharaja of India's Sikh Empire. Today, it's still a mecca for field sports — in my case, training a rifle over terrain where four species of deer roam. I'm after clay pigeons — and bag several — but deer, and game, are still hunted across the Brecks, with much of it finding its way onto local restaurant menus, helping Suffolk to retain its foodie hotspot status.

"Game is the first thing visitors ask for," says Stuart Drake, chef at nearby Tuddenham Mill, a hotel set in a Doomsday-era former watermill. "We've got roe deer on tonight, fresh in from a local hunter," he grins, clearly brokering no discussion about what to order. It arrives served with Brecks mushrooms and onions. Done in from two days of fire-starting, zip-lining, biking, Land Rover manoeuvring and rifle shooting, I'm just about left with enough muscle power to leaf through the weighty wine list, to select a stellar Suffolk vintage; a survival skill worth mastering. **SARAH BARRELL**

 visitsuffolk.com tuddenhammill.co.uk



In the forest, I get a crash course in fire-building from bushcraft expert Jon Tyler, who earned his survival stripes living in the Guyanese Amazon



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**23 PIGS AT LARGE, NEW FOREST**

Pannage season in the New Forest (11 Sept-12 Nov) is when droves of domestic piggies are released to roam free. This overlaps with the annual pony 'drifts' (horseback roundups), making it a particularly atmospheric time to be in Hampshire's forest. As an added bonus, premium, pannage pork dishes appear on local restaurant menus. thenewforest.co.uk

24 GET STUCK INTO LIFE ON A FARM

Tucked away amid the Lake District's fabled landscape, Stay Lambing Live (of BBC2 fame) offers the chance to get to grips with life on a working farm in the Eden Valley. Further south, Polean Farm Cottages, near Looe, Cornwall, is ideal for families, with animal feeding, plus pony and tractor rides. farmstay.co.uk

25 BIRDING AT BEMPTON CLIFFS

Join an RSPB puffin patrol, and witness vast seasonal migrations at RSPB Bempton Cliffs, in East Yorkshire. In spring-summer, clifftop viewing platforms on a headland jutting out into the North Sea offer VIP birdwatching opportunities. rspb.org.uk

26 GO COASTAL IN SOUTH DEVON

Gain a unique, watery perspective on South Devon's Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, with a weekend of sea kayaking and wild camping surrounded by some of England's most idyllic coastline. Families and groups can take two-day guided tours to explore coast and hidden coves, with all kit and bedding provided. seakayakdevon.co.uk

27 OVERNIGHT IN A NATURE RESERVE

Elmley, on Kent's Isle of Sheppey, pegs itself as the only nature reserve in the UK where you can spend the night. And what a place to bed down: a chic little shepherd's hut overlooking the Swale Channel and marshes. On your doorstep: pristine wildlife trails. canopyandstars.co.uk/samphire

28 BIKE THE WALL

Cycle through some of England's wildest countryside, taking in dramatic coastal views and Roman forts along Hadrian's Cycleway. The moderately flat, scenery-rich, 84-mile route, between Carlisle and Newcastle, can be done in a weekend. sustrans.org.uk



WILD WEEKENDS

Wicklow, Ireland

29

DRIVING RANGE



Wicklow is the wildest place I know in Ireland.

I've lived here for over 10 years, in Greystones, the last stop on the DART commuter train from Dublin. When I want to get off the grid, it doesn't take long. I can hop on the cliff walk to Bray, or tramp through valleys gouged out by the last Ice Age. I can head out in blazing sunshine and end up pelted with hailstones on the Sugarloaf — a short, sweet quartzite stump with stunning views of Dublin Bay.

Or I can just get in the car and drive.

You don't need the Wild Atlantic Way to see Ireland at its most elemental. In County Wicklow, nature and space echo in place names like Poulaphouca ('hole of the ghost'), Devil's Glen (site of a cool woodland sculpture trail) and Avoca, where the BBC's *Ballykissangel* was filmed. Skip the city, but stay close. Four wheels and two nights will give you a reboot right on Dublin's doorstep.

Start by heading south on the M50, the capital's orbital motorway, before taking Exit 12 onto the R115. It doesn't take long for the roads to narrow, as they twist and turn and rise gradually before delivering you to the Sally Gap, a mountain pass close to the source of the River Liffey. Here, the temperature drops and phone signals waver. Boggy browns are dotted with deep, springy clumps of purple heather, the home colours of the Wicklow Mountains.

Drive on until you come to Glenmacnass Waterfall. Pull in to marvel at its form, its silver locks gushing down the granite rocks, before continuing south towards Glendalough, the Early Christian site at the heart of Wicklow Mountains National Park (in Irish, the name means 'glen of two lakes'). It gets busy at peak times here, but off-season or midweek, you can mosey around the monastic husks in relative peace, or take one of several waymarked trails. Its founder arrived in the sixth century and slept in a cave. 'St Kevin's bed' can still be seen today.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Kayaking alongside
the South Devon
Steam Railway

FROM LEFT:
Glendalough Forest
Park, Wicklow,
Ireland; Fitzgeralds
Pub, Wicklow, Ireland
NEXT PAGE: Gobbins
clifftop path, near
Islandmagee, County
Antrim, Northern
Ireland

Boggy browns are dotted with deep, springy clumps of purple

If you detour on the R759 until you glimpse dramatic views of Lough Tay — at the foot of a valley — look for the contrast between its peaty black depths and shoreline of white sand. It's a dead ringer for a pint of Guinness.

There are peachy places to stay squirrelled away in the terrain. I'm thinking of retreats like BrookLodge & Macreddin Village, home to the first certified organic restaurant in Ireland, or Wicklow Head Lighthouse, an 18th-century tower restored by the Irish Landmark Trust (imagine staying during a storm). There are five-star resorts like Druids Glen and Powerscourt Hotel Resort & Spa, or storied boltholes such as Hunter's Hotel, in Rathnew, a former coaching inn with a ravishing little garden, old-school Sunday lunch and centuries-old memories etched into the windows. Literally.

In places like these, it feels like the wilderness has been tamed. Wicklow is also home to a smattering of mansions and gardens that contrast sweetly with its ruggedness — places like the Elizabethan-Revival Killruddery House; Mount Usher Gardens, along the River Vartry; or the Richard Cassels-designed Powerscourt House, with its posh shops, cafe and Italianate gardens.

We moved here because we couldn't afford to buy in Dublin. Now I wouldn't move back. We've one foot in the city, one in the country — the same reason it works for a weekend break. When you settle down for the evening, sup a Wicklow Wolf craft beer, or a Glendalough gin, with its local, seasonally foraged botanicals. Savour it. City life feels far away. **PÓL Ó CONGHAILE**

30 SLEEP BENEATH THE STARS IN FERMANAGH
Stay in a bubble dome at Lough, in Fermanagh, close to Fermanagh Lakelands, the Marble Arch Caves and the 'Stairway to Heaven', a 4.5-mile hike ending in a walkway up Cuilcagh Mountain. finnlough.com fermanaghlakelands.com

31 ON YER BIKE IN MAYO
Mayo's Ireland West Airport is an hour from Westport, the start/finish of the Great Western Greenway. This 26-mile cycling/walking trail follows an old railway line to Achill Island. greenway.ie wildatlanticway.com

32 GET YOUR GAME OF THRONES ON
Much of GoT was filmed in Northern Ireland, with 26 accessible locations near Belfast, including Ballymoney's Dark Hedges (King's Road), Winterfell (Castle Ward) and Fair Head (Dragonstone). discovernorthernireland.com

33 MOONLIT PADDLE IN WEST CORK
Atlantic Sea Kayaking runs moonlight tours from Reen Pier, 1.5 hours from Cork Airport. The 2.5-hour outings involve a gentle paddle beneath the stars. atlanticseakayaking.com

34 CAUSEWAY COAST WITH THE MOST
Highlights of Northern Ireland's Causeway Coast include the Giant's Causeway, Carrick-A-Rede rope bridge and The Gobbins, a clifftop path on the Islandmagee peninsula. thegobbinsclifffpath.com

35 HORSES FOR COURSES IN MONAGHAN
For a horsey weekend, head to the Castle Leslie Estate for country hacks, a spa, two-AA-Rosette dining and the chance to stay in either the lodge, a Scots-Baronial castle or converted stables. castleleslie.com



IMAGE: ALAMY



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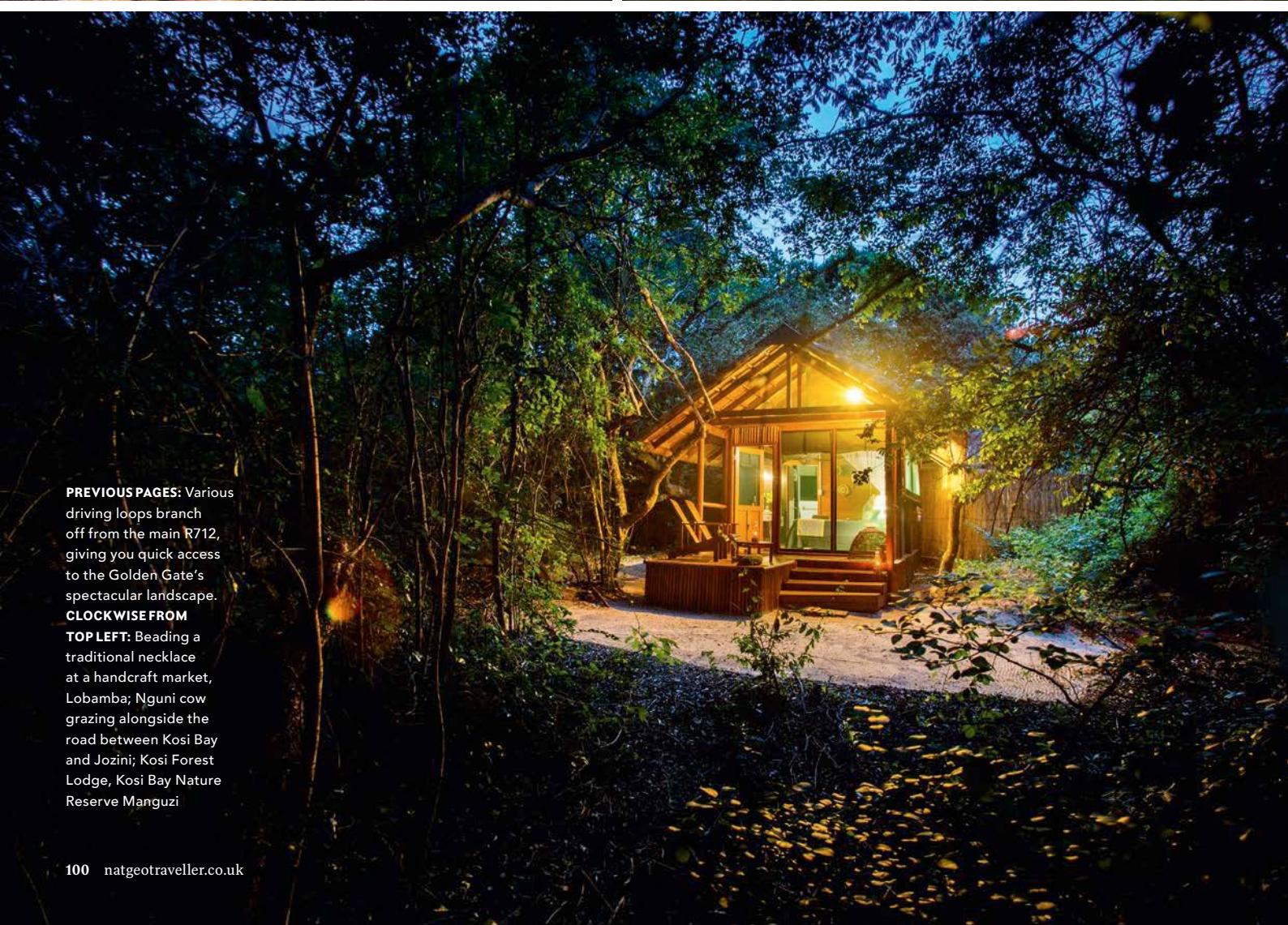
the long road to freedom

WORDS DAVID WHITLEY
PHOTOGRAPHS TEAGAN CUNNIFFE

A SELF-DRIVE TRIP FROM SWAZILAND THROUGH THE WILD
PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL REVEALS WHAT CAN BE
DISCOVERED WHEN THINGS DON'T EXACTLY GO TO PLAN



SOUTH AFRICA



PREVIOUS PAGES: Various driving loops branch off from the main R712, giving you quick access to the Golden Gate's spectacular landscape.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Beading a traditional necklace at a handcraft market, Lobamba; Nguni cow grazing alongside the road between Kosi Bay and Jozini; Kosi Forest Lodge, Kosi Bay Nature Reserve Mangazi

The querulous call comes from the temporary custodian of the laptop sitting next to me in the passenger seat. “You know when we leave Swaziland to get to Kosi Bay, which border crossing are we using?”

This should be obvious: the one on the nice, long eastern border.

“Because there aren’t any crossings on that eastern border,” my wife adds.

And with this, an essential ingredient of any good road trip — the howling planning error — has been stumbled upon. It follows several other ingredients: panic because the satnav isn’t working for the first five minutes while driving out of Johannesburg airport; hapless misreading of said satnav leading to a tetchy wild goose chase down a country lane; a dreadful fast food lunch after driving past a lovely looking cafe because “there’s bound to be something similar” in the next town.

Freedom is undoubtedly the most alluring component of a road trip, but it also encompasses the freedom to make mistakes.

Swaziland is far from a mistake, however. Swaziland — chosen because it’s more or less on our route from Johannesburg to KwaZulu-Natal — is wonderfully attractive. From the predictably chaotic border post near the capital, Mbabane, in the north west, it provides a rich series of panoramas that teeter on that dividing line between pleasant and spectacular. Categorising the rocky green lumps stretching across the horizon on the way to the Ezulwini Valley as either a hill or a mountain is a tricky call. And the small towns passed through as we head to the southern border town of Lavumisa seem to have a different vibe to those encountered on the road from Johannesburg. Everything is more shambly and unhurried, the sense of urgency dialled down to an absolute minimum. Ridge-top craft stalls have no sense of hard sell, the staff at the Swaziland National Museum, in Lobamba, seem genuinely delighted that someone might want to have a look round, and the lack of things that might eat you is seen as a key selling point of the nature reserves.

Chronically misjudging the driving time, along with where the border crossings are located, resulting in having to leave Swaziland a day early? That’s a mistake. But a hastily arranged journey-breaker stop, at the Ghost Mountain Inn in Mkuze, leads to a serendipitous afternoon bumping along dirt tracks. From here, the shortcut road

to the uMkhuze Game Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal seems like another wrong turn. It is shambolically potholed, not signposted and feels like a glimpse into a village life that’s usually kept behind the curtains. Goats amble through the roadside puddles, children gleefully splash in watering holes, donkeys act as free-spirited roadblocks and thatched-roof *rondavels* show that traditional Zulu architecture is a long way from being wiped out.

Once inside the reserve, the road doesn’t get any smoother, but the wildlife ramps up a few extra notches on the exoticism scale. It only takes a couple of hundred metres for the amateurish cry of “What sort of antelope is that?” to go up. It might be an impala. It might be a springbok. But, more

The reality of safari is that it costs a mere £10 or so to enter a vast park and drive around, giddily trying to spot big cats

importantly, those things on the other side of the road are most definitely zebras.

Here lies the attraction in a South African road trip — the wide-open spaces, the steeping mountain roads and the wind-through-the-hair sense of epic. But you also never have to go too far before you’re furtively trundling around at 10mph looking for the sort of animals that were the staples of children’s picture books when you were growing up.

The concept of safari has been buffed and mythologised into being something that has to be outrageously expensive and guided. But the reality is that it costs a mere £10 or so to enter a vast park and drive around, giddily trying to spot big cats in the long grass and sidling up to rhinos.

Hazards ahead

“Giraffe! Giraffe, giraffe, giraffe, giraffe!” There are few sensations in the world that compare to the first sighting of a Properly Good Animal. And, while a giraffe may not be the trickiest of creatures to pick out from the surrounding acacia trees, the elation felt when it comes into eyeshot is a darned fabulous drug.

But if there’s one beast that’s the true mascot of Zululand, it’s the cow. Outside of the game reserves, it’s a staple roadside hazard. It’s also the milk supply, often the main source of income, and the currency of dowry payments. Cows lumber at will, an ever-present warning not to drift into a mental cruise control. When combined with the speed bumps, which frequently pop

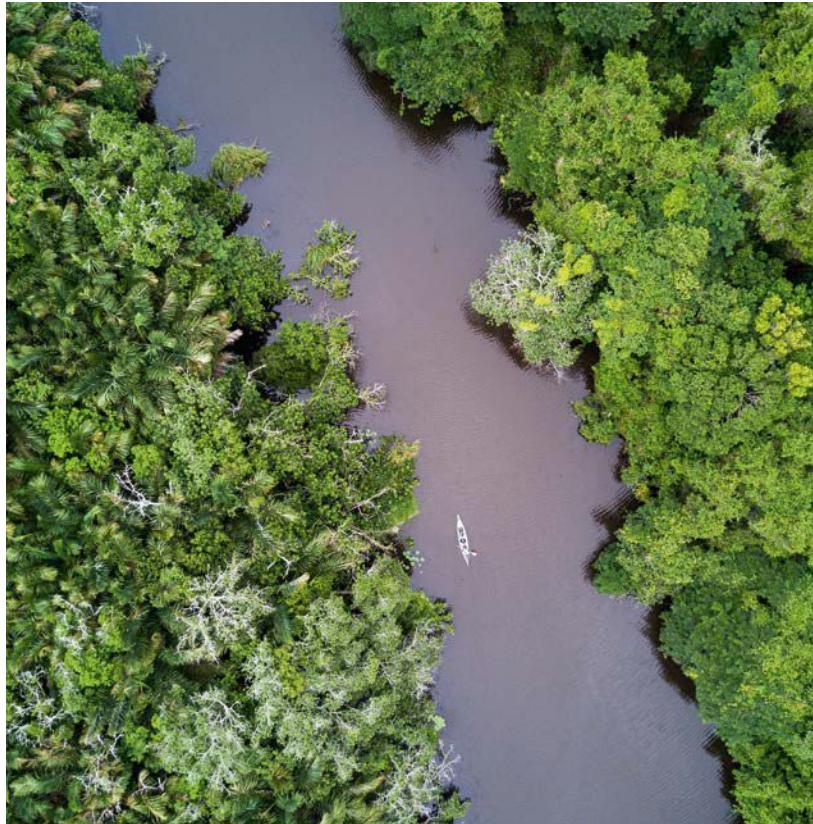
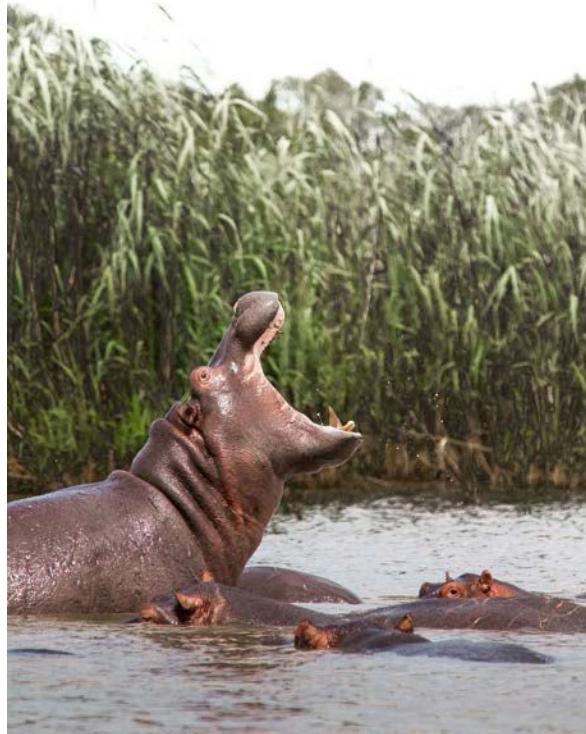
up unannounced, unpainted and brutally unrounded at the edges, the final stretch to Kosi Bay Nature Reserve requires a fair bit more concentration than anticipated.

Tucked just under the Mozambique border and part of the sprawling iSimangaliso Wetland Park, Kosi Bay is bewilderingly misnamed. Surrounded by mangroves and various bands of forest, it consists of four lakes and a series of interconnecting channels that drain, via a sandy estuary, into the Indian Ocean. The Kosi Forest Lodge — all swaying hammocks, raffia palm leaf furnishings and poolside sunset views over one the lakes — perches on its edge and runs both canoe and boat trips into the languid semi-wilderness.

The latter kicks off with a satisfying squelch along a muddy forest track amid a racket of birdsong. One sounds like a submarine sonar, another like a squeaky gate, another like an old lady tutting, but the chansonnieres stay out of sight. At the rudimentary jetty, Phaqa, the boatman, starts rattling through the unwieldy official names of the lakes, before admitting everyone refers to them as “the first lake, second lake, third lake and fourth lake”. They’re connected by narrow channels, and crisscrossed by local fishermen punting themselves on square wooden rafts.

The fishing is done using an age-old method. Phaqa pulls up alongside what looks like a half-subsumed fence. But it’s more complex than that — it’s a fish *kraal*, designed to funnel fish towards a narrow gateway as they’re brought seawards with the tide. A one-way mechanism is built into that gateway, trapping the fish in a small, circular holding pen. They can live there for days, making for a ready source of fresh fish. “You can get 7kg of kingfish in here,” says Phaqa,

SOUTH AFRICA



almost licking his lips. “And you can also go to the market, ask what people want, then come back and spear it.”

Weighing in considerably heavier than prized kingfish are the other, much grumpier residents of the lake. The hippos pop their heads out, but as they can’t sweat, they submerge their bodies underwater for the vast majority of the day to keep cool. Phaqa, quite understandably, doesn’t want to get too close to them. “They’re the most dangerous animals in Africa,” he says, parroting every tour guide on the continent who comes into regular contact with them. Hippos are extremely aggressive, highly territorial and instinctively inclined to fight rather than flight. They’re also creatures of habit, which makes the town of St Lucia, at the bottom end of iSimangaliso, rather unconventional.

Every evening, the hippos here leave the water to go to their grazing grounds, instinctively following the same pathway. Unfortunately, in St Lucia, that pathway goes straight through the town. So, an otherwise classic holiday resort has a touch of the wild: monkeys on street corners, boks and mongooses in back gardens, and grouchy, hungry hippos trudging through after the sun goes down.

Shoreline Boat and Walking Safaris skipper Stacey gives a pretty damning assessment of the hippos’ temperament, as she sidles up next to them. “It’s not just

the boats they despise,” she explains. “They despise pretty much everything.”

The three families in the estuary are, by hippo standards, relatively tolerant of human gawpers. But jump in, and they’ll kill you without waiting to hear mitigating evidence. The crocodiles and the sharks that share the waters keep a safe distance, not wanting to cause any trouble. Hippos are nature’s equivalent of the steroid-abusing meathead who’ll start a fight with anyone who accidentally nudges him on the way to the bar.

They unleash great honking grunts, they attack family members who accidentally tread on their feet, and they peer out of the water with looks of furious contempt for the world at large. They’re the bastards of the shallows, and utterly magnificent.

A beast of a drive

Hippos aren’t South Africa’s biggest beast, though; that title belongs to the African elephant. And judging by the deposits left on the dirt road as we drive through the Hluhluwe-imfolozi Park, one or two have been through relatively recently. Hluhluwe is KwaZulu-Natal’s wildlife megastar, and the slickly designed Rhino Ridge Safari Lodge sits on a hillside looking down on its epic hills and watering holes. A major part of its appeal is the game drives run for guests every morning and afternoon, with guides who know what to look for and where.

But there’s no such professional guidance as we make our way there. The initial drive through the park is one of glorious amateurism, peppered with half-remembered insights from old wildlife documentaries. “This looks like the sort of place leopards live”; “If there aren’t any antelopes around, there’s probably a big pussy cat nearby”; “Giraffes and zebras usually hang out together, don’t they?”

Such speculation stops with sightings, though. Buffalo sloshing in a muddy pool, hairy-necked nyals looking like the tramps of the antelope family, scampering warthogs somehow managing to seem adorable, despite, objectively, being grotesquely ugly.

And then comes the involuntary intake of breath. “Elephant!”

“Where?”

“Behind the tree.”

“Which tree?”

“That one. The one over there.”

There’s one thing more frustrating than not being able to see an animal that someone else can see, and that is trying to point said animal out to the person who can’t see it.

“Oh. It’s gone now....”

A few hundred metres down the track, though, and the miraculous invisible elephant’s pals are not so elusive. The big patch of grey in the bushes ambles into the road, and it has company. Suddenly, a whole herd is crossing, and there’s little to do but sit still and enjoy. There’s an extra level of

Phaqa rattles off the official names of the lakes, before admitting everyone refers to them as “the first lake, second lake, third lake and fourth lake”



Phaqa, from Kosi Forest Lodge, cruising between the lake channels of Kosi Bay, pointing out birds and fish, while tracking hippos.

OPPOSITE FROM LEFT:
Hippos take to the waters to rest during the day, St Lucia; canoe navigating the lake channels around Kosi Forest Lodge



Here lies the attraction in a South African road trip — the wide-open spaces, the steeping mountain roads and the wind-through-the-hair sense of epic



Aloes are a common sight in the rural valleys of Swaziland



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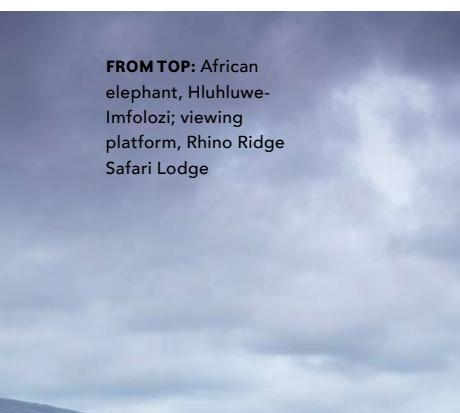
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FROM TOP: African elephant, Hluhluwe-Imfolozi; viewing platform, Rhino Ridge Safari Lodge



The adolescent male right next to the car looks quite willing to sit on it. At such junctures, regrets over lack of advanced research kick in



spellbinding about elephants. They somehow manage to lumber with supreme grace. Their joints move with a slow, oddly seductive rhythm, their footsteps are eerily silent and their sheer heft bestows upon them an irrevocable majesty. Other creatures inspire admiration, but with elephants, it's awe.

Then comes the baby, a giddiness-inducing bundle of cuteness, with a relatively jaunty skip. Mum is close by, and turns to look at us, just to let us know that she won't hesitate to protect her little one if push comes to shove.

It's hard to overstate how much of a privilege this feels. This isn't the sort of thing that should happen when pootling along unescorted in a hire car. But with the joys come the responsibilities. The next elephant encounter is of a different kind

— an adolescent male, right next to the car and looking quite willing to sit on it. At such junctures, regrets over lack of advanced research kick in. The car hire company may have explained which side the petrol cap is on, but it offered shamefully little advice on what to do in a standoff with a bull elephant.

If we slowly reverse, will it give chase? If we stay still, will it just crush us? And, after a good five minutes of staying still with it showing no inclination to move, can we just hit the accelerator and drive off? Doing the latter, it seems, just spooks it enough for us to make our escape. Sorry, mister.

The emotions are summed up on the game drive from Rhino Ridge the next day, when our guide has no hesitation when asked which creatures he's most afraid of. "The elephants," he says in a heartbeat.

And which cause the most trouble? "The elephants."

And which do you love the most? "The elephants."

The Drakensberg dassie

Take the wildlife spotting away, and the character of the drive changes. Soon, the road trip morphs from 10mph furtive shuffling in the hope of spotting a lion to steady ground-eating through the self-consciously artsy towns of the Midlands towards the foothills of the Drakensberg mountains. The pleasure now comes from the wide-open space, from inventing silly games to pass the time while cups, cans and chocolate bar wrappers get thrown onto an ever-more disgraceful pile on the back seat.

It's doubtful that there's a mountain range in the world with a better name than the Drakensberg. They butt up against Lesotho like teeth — some stumpy, some sharp, and flossed through by the most terrifyingly vertiginous of mountain passes.

SOUTH AFRICA

The Drakensberg curves round into the Free State, where they're renamed as the Maluti Mountains and the Golden Gate Highlands National Park threads through. It's here that one of the most underrated aspects of a road trip blossoms. When driving long distances between a series of star attractions, it's inevitable that there'll be the odd night of hunkering down somewhere less exciting, as a journey-breaker. And these zero-expectation fillers can sometimes bring pleasant surprises.

The Golden Gate Highlands National Park isn't what people come to South Africa for. The Big Five don't roam here. But it is what people go to the American West for. The road through it is flanked by dramatic, sandstone cliffs and bulging outcrops. The scenery feels huge. Instead of rushing through to the hotel, a unilateral driver decision is made to pull over and go for a stroll, staring down at the valley below.

"Are you sure nothing dangerous lives out here?" the more leopard-conscious member of the party queries.

At that moment, something scurries across the rocks. It's brown, and furry, like a giant, portly hamster, and it stops to pose. If ever a creature sums up unexpected South Africa, it's the rock hyrax — known in these parts as a dassie. It's probably fair to say that most visitors have never heard of a dassie before they see one, but they're inquisitive little delights that punch above their weight in the fight for memory space. Astonishingly, their closest living relatives are the elephants coaxed over a few days back.

This is the counterweight to the inevitable great road trip planning error — the gorgeous moment when plans are torn up simply because something better has come along. And freedom means nothing if it doesn't include the freedom to sit giggling at animals you never knew existed. ☺



Rock hyrax, aka dassie



ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Virgin Atlantic, South African Airways and British Airways have direct flights from Heathrow to Johannesburg; the latter two offer connecting internal flights to Durban, if required.

virgin-atlantic.com flysaa.com ba.com

AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME: 11h 30m.

All major car hire firms have offices at Johannesburg and Durban airports (ask for a letter of permission if heading to Swaziland).

When to go

With a temperate, subtropical climate, KwaZulu-Natal is a year-round destination, with hot, humid summers reaching 32C from October to April and mild winters averaging 20C between May and September.

Where to stay

Mantenga Lodge. mantengalodge.com

Ghost Mountain Inn. ghostmountaininn.co.za

Kosi Forest Lodge. kosiforestlodge.co.za

Serene-estate Boutique Guesthouse.

serene-estate.co.za

Rhino Ridge Safari Lodge. rhinoridge.co.za

Malachite Manor. malachitemanor.co.za

Golden Gate Hotel. goldengatehotel.co.za

More info

southafrica.net

zulu.org.za

heritagetoursandsafaris.com

How to do it

AFRICA COLLECTION has 14-day self-drive itineraries in KwaZulu-Natal, including three nights around Hluhluwe and St Lucia, and three in the Drakensberg. Prices start at £2,250 per person, including flights, accommodation and car hire. africacollection.com



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BEHIND THE MASK



IN THE TRIBAL HEARTLANDS OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA, MODERNITY MERGES WITH THE GHOSTS OF COLONIALISM AND CANNIBALISM

WORDS JAMIE LAFFERTY PHOTOGRAPHS CELIA TOPPING





t begins with a sickening snap. The Mud Men of Pogla emerge, moving like mechanical marionettes: juddering, shuddering, dancing; their huge masked heads and bodies painted deathly white. Theirs is a dreadful spectacle.

Snap! While some hold spears, others have wicked-looking bamboo talons, which they crack together to provide a terrible beat for their awful advance. All of this is unnerving, but hardest to bear is the cruelly amused looks on their clay faces as they creep from the undergrowth.

The original Asaro Mud Men performed this trick to frighten their enemies — to avoid fighting them — and today's show is a homage to that sneaky horror story. This is one of a series of cultural demonstrations I'll watch over a week in the interior of Papua New Guinea. I'll meet pensionable spirit dancers, adolescent medicine men and experience a confrontational 'warrior welcome', but nothing leaves a psychological scar quite like the Mud Men.

My group is told such performances help sustain practises and traditions that were commonplace in Papua New Guinea until about a century ago — the songs, dances, and stories don't just entertain tourists, they help keep the past relevant for the current generation.

The Mud Men belong to the Melpa, a tribe based around the unlovely city of Mount Hagen in central Papua New Guinea's Western Highlands Province. Melpa customs are unique; what happens here differs from life in the next valley, or along the coast. There are 842 languages in the country, and at least as many interpretations of the right way to live life and manage death.

My education in these social mores starts a few days earlier, and it begins with an end. Along with his young

family, a beast of a man improbably named Simon is demonstrating what happens when someone dies in his village. I'm quite certain he would thrash me at arm-wrestling, or indeed almost any physical pursuit.

I wouldn't mess with Simon, but his loud wailing and faux-mourning is so convincingly pained I feel compelled to intervene; even his three children are confused. The presence of foreigners must already be pretty weird, and the kids seem unsure what to do. Are we causing the upset, one seems to be thinking. No? OK, I'll go back to sucking my finger. Another uses the end of a bow to jab his brother in the ear. After recomposing himself, Simon explains, through a translator, the lengthy and elaborate Melpa funerary process. Among other things, he tells us that at celebrations and other major occasions in Papua New Guinea, a death requires slaughtering a pig (this, mercifully, isn't demonstrated).

In these first days in Papua New Guinea, I find displays like Simon's fascinating, if a little awkward. There's an uncomfortable intimacy and, initially, I have a nauseating concern that I'm *that* white tourist. You know, the one being fanned on a lawn at empire's edge, soaked with gin, while indigenous people perform for their entertainment. My hand-wringing only stops when I remember a different Highlands — those in my native Scotland. Last summer, I watched a small troop of local youngsters dance for a large, loud group of American tourists. Were the kids wearing tartan because they wanted to? No. Did they enjoy jumping over swords in the rain because they love their country? I doubt it. But was it a lucrative part-time job? Absolutely.

PREVIOUS PAGES: Pogla Mud Men; Pogla Mud Man wearing bamboo talons and clay face mask

BELOW: Arrowheads at Tokua village (the tips would once have been dipped in poison)

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: View from Karawari Lodge; spirit dancers, Kaip village, near Mount Hagen





PAPUA NEW GUINEA



Remembering this gets me through the weirdness of spectating in Papua New Guinea — which is a large part of the country's tourist offering. Besides, I need all the help I can get understanding this country: one about which I'm spectacularly ignorant.

In that I'm not alone. Europeans have a comparatively short history on this island — and contact with the interior happened more recently still. Missionaries and gold prospectors were among the first people to reach communities like the Melpa, all offering promises of a better life in exchange for cooperation and the chance to export their worldview. By the time the Melpa were contacted by the outside world, the First World War had been fought and the first television show broadcast. Despite the proximity of Australia, which claimed Papua New Guinea as a colony from 1920-45, the modern world has come slowly to this island — and, I was soon to find out, it feels as though some parts are still resisting it.

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

So far as I know, there isn't a Kurtz figure in the Karawari area of Papua New Guinea's interior, but there's no shaking the Conradian intensity of the place. *Heart Of Darkness* it's not but there's an unnerving, throbbing humidity, rampant foliage, the natives at once right there and a million miles away. And while Conrad's lunatic renegade collected skulls during some sort of psychotic episode, in this part of the world, heads were harvested with a good deal more clear-eyed rationality.

Before coming to Papua New Guinea, you're likely to hear jokes about cannibalism. You may even make some

yourself. It's easier to laugh about horror than consider it too closely, and easier to make believe than face a hideous truth: until recently, headhunting and people-eating were widespread across Papua.

I'd expected this to be a mutually embarrassing taboo subject but here, on the banks of the remote Karawari River, people don't shy away from it — if anything, they're proud of their cannibalistic heritage.

Our guide, Paul, seems happy to talk about headhunting in the newly built spirit house in the village of Yimas. He grew up here and remembers seeing the first white people arrive on boats, when the Karawari Lodge was built in 1974. Back then, there was no spirit house in Yimas, the original having been razed to the ground by Allied forces hunting Japanese soldiers in the Second World War. It took until 2017 to build a new one.

The construction and the decoration are men's work — they're responsible for the heavy lifting, but also the detailed painting on terracotta bark inside. The hot, thick air and the silent reverence with which the priests toil lends the place a serene, holy atmosphere. Just a few decades ago, however, buildings like this would also have been depots for freshly decapitated heads. The newly orphaned bodies were butchered outside.

"We have a payback system," Paul tells our group. "You do good to me, I do good to you. You do bad to me..." This reciprocal attitude applied in the headhunting era, too. If members of your village were killed and eaten, you could only placate the spirits by seeking vengeance. Where the bloodshed began or how it might end, no one knew.

Paul explains this as he passes me a *tambain*, a wooden strip with what looks a little like a row of coat hooks attached — only this would've been used for displaying human skulls. As he talks, it dawns on me that if we see an elder over 60 years old in this faraway part of the

ABOVE: Joanna, the resident hornbill at Karawari Lodge

OPPOSITE FROM TOP: Medicine man and other villagers sit around a fire in a Tokua hut; villagers gathered on the river bank, Karawari area



country, there's a chance they'll know what it's like to taste human flesh.

In every sense, we're a long way from home. The only way to get here is by charter plane — landing on a grass airstrip (as we did) — or by the slow boat along the Sepik and Karawari Rivers.

From the vantage point of the Karawari Lodge, a great green sea of jungle stretches to every horizon. To maintain this eternal canopy, it rains frequently and heavily, often without warning. The precipitation runs across the red-clay soil and into the Karawari, turning the water a permanent milk chocolate brown.

For the electricity-free villages and tribes of this remote region, the river is everything from larder to laundrette to lido. Most importantly, it's also a highway, the only viable way for people to travel between communities. As we pass hamlets and moored canoes, we slow the engine to prevent our wake damaging the riverbanks. The locals mostly appreciate this, but on the outskirts of one settlement, three naked boys encourage us to go as fast as possible so that we send waves curling up their muddy beach. Delighted, they leap in, body-surfing back to shore. Riding waves, it seems, is universally popular.

There's a purity to the subsistence living here that I want to believe is superior to our lazy modern existence: hunt when hungry; sleep when tired; bathe in the river; sleep under the stars; wear clothes to cover your modesty, or don't; feel the sun on your bare skin; appreciate the value of a good rain. Life itself is a full-time job. From the optional clothing to the slithering serpents to the jungle's bounty, it's not inaccurate to describe life as Edenic, even if that blithely ignores the ugly realities of disease, malnutrition, and infant mortality. When things go seriously wrong here, expert help is very far away.



HEART OF DARKNESS IT'S NOT BUT THERE'S
AN UNNERVING, THROBBING HUMIDITY,
RAMPANT FOLIAGE, THE NATIVES AT ONCE
RIGHT THERE AND A MILLION MILES AWAY



Supplies are also delivered infrequently, so at the heart of life is sago, a gooey starch harvested daily from palms of the same name. Up in Mount Hagen, the Melpa's fertile land yields an abundance of sweet potatoes, but there's neither the soil nor the know-how for serious agriculture here. Instead, for the Karawari River folk, sago is the go-to carbohydrate, used to make pancakes and porridge, and covering everyone who touches it in a strange dust. It has the texture and culinary appeal of edible glue.

We watch the surprisingly convoluted harvesting and cooking process while children babble, entranced by our blue eyes and monstrous cameras. We're clearly a distraction, although it's not enough to stop one child dashing off to launch insults and a coconut shell at an inquisitive pig. Introduced by early Western traders, the pigs thrive here in the bush. Implausibly, there are also imported tree species along the riverbanks, unnecessarily added to this infinite green like a pint of water to an ocean. Some of the timber, at least, finds its way to the local carpenters, to be carved into totems, *garamut* drums and masks to be placed in spirit houses.

That night, a thunderstorm explodes across the jungle sky, its din eventually replaced by the ambient hum of frogs and bugs and birds. This prehistoric soundtrack lulls me to sleep, but I'm woken in the profound dark by another noise — a wailing, mournful sound rolling up from one of the Karawari's hamlets: the unmistakable, universal sound of grief. The spirits are receiving another soul. Someone, somewhere hasn't made it through the black night.

PREVIOUS PAGES, FROM
LEFT: Mother and child at Yimas village; Yimas village viewed from the Karawari River
BELow: Timber intricately carved into totems
OPPOSITE: Yimas spirit house

THE YELLOW MOUNTAIN

As our plane takes off, the Karawari Airstrip appears beneath us — a bright slash in the deep green of the jungle soon swallowed by the canopy. We're heading over 100 miles south to the Tari-Pori District — home of the Huli people — where we'll spend two nights at the Ambua Lodge. At 7,500ft above sea level, its cold, thin air will make us feel like we're on another planet.

This is the preferred domain of many of the country's 800 avian species, including over 40 bird of paradise varieties. Weather permitting, the lodge runs bird-watching trips every morning and afternoon, through ancient woodland, along mulchy and mossy trails — each with a virtual guarantee of seeing the flamboyant birds. Their calls are so bizarre, so non-bird-like that it's impossible not to fall into simile and metaphor when describing them. The friendly fantail has a mysterious five-note tune you might hear in a 1960s sci-fi thriller; the wonderfully named King of Saxony has a complex crackle of many sounds, something like a rainstick. All the while, invisible cicadas sound like relentless cellos in a horror film.

The birds of paradise mostly stay up on the high slopes, but just 20 minutes downhill lies the town of Tari. First contact with Europeans came late here too, in 1934, when Australian gold prospectors arrived. They fell into immediate confrontation, and as the first gunshots heard in these parts rang out, 50 Huli tribesmen were killed.

Despite that bloody beginning, visiting Caucasians today are still a tremendous novelty for locals. There's no more visceral demonstration of this than the fixation with waving. After almost a week in Papua New Guinea, I'm relaxed waving to complete strangers without breaking conversation with those around me; while out with the cameras, we're inundated with requests to take





PAPUA NEW GUINEA



folks' photos. When I finally get home, it takes several days to accept the universal apathy to my presence.

In the local language 'ambua' translates as 'yellow'. As well as the lodge, there's a Mount Ambua, but the ambua that really matters around here is the one on the faces of Huli men. Their face paint is the most intense yellow. If you multiplied a banana by a sunflower, it wouldn't match this, the yellowest yellow imaginable.

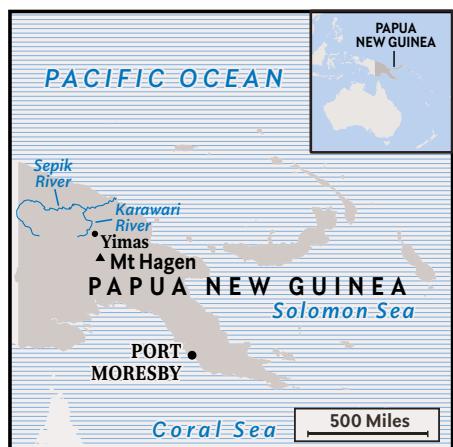
As well as the remarkable paint adorning their chestnut skin, they are famous for creating sensational wigs made with human hair and birds of paradise feathers. Boys are sequestered to wig-making school as teenagers, where they spend 18 months separated from their parents, learning how to create their tribe's bombastic headwear. The modern and ancient worlds are tugging in opposite directions in Papua New Guinea, but although the Huli have begun to modernise in some areas, the wigs remain sacrosanct.

We've been invited to a village to learn about this and other Huli customs (men and women live separately; ageing medicine men are still important), but mostly we're there just to gaze at their extraordinary outfits and that fabulous yellow. Camera memory quickly fills up, but before we move on to meet women dressed as widows, the men have one more party piece: the art of bamboo fire-lighting.

This isn't the first time we've seen it on this trip, but I summon my most convincing impressed face, all the same. And it is remarkable how, with just a little tinder and elbow grease, smoke quickly creeps skywards. Within seconds there are flames, and moments after that, two of the Huli use the fire to light bamboo bongs, great plumes of tobacco smoke soon tumbling from their mouths.

To my left, another Huli man has seen it all before. He's manning a little stall in the hope of selling some of us some post-show souvenirs, but now he fancies a smoke himself. He reaches for a cigarette, and for a Clipper lighter, puncturing the Stone Age facade. While his clansmen puff on their antique pipes he clicks the lighter. And clicks it again. He gives it a shake and looks at it sideways. He tries once more, holding it closer still, but the thing just doesn't work. □

ABOVE: Huli tribesman painting his face in the traditional intense yellow



ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

With no direct flights between Britain and Papua New Guinea, the most efficient route is via Singapore with British Airways then on to Port Moresby with national carrier, Air Niugini. Visas are free on arrival. ba.com airniugini.com.pg

Papua New Guinea's interior is best accessed via air. To make transport a little smoother, lodges such as Ambua and Karawari Lodge include charter flights as part of their bookings. pngtours.com

Port Moresby, the capital city, has a deserved reputation as a dangerous city. For information on travel safety and places to visit gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice and papuanewguinea.travel

When to go

With its tropical climate, travel is best in the dry season (March–October). Some lodges in the interior close in the other, rain-prone months.

How to do it

COX & KINGS has a 14-day private tour from £8,495 per person, including international flights via Singapore and domestic flights, full-board accommodation, excursions and transfers. coxandkings.co.uk



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PAPUA NEW GUINEA



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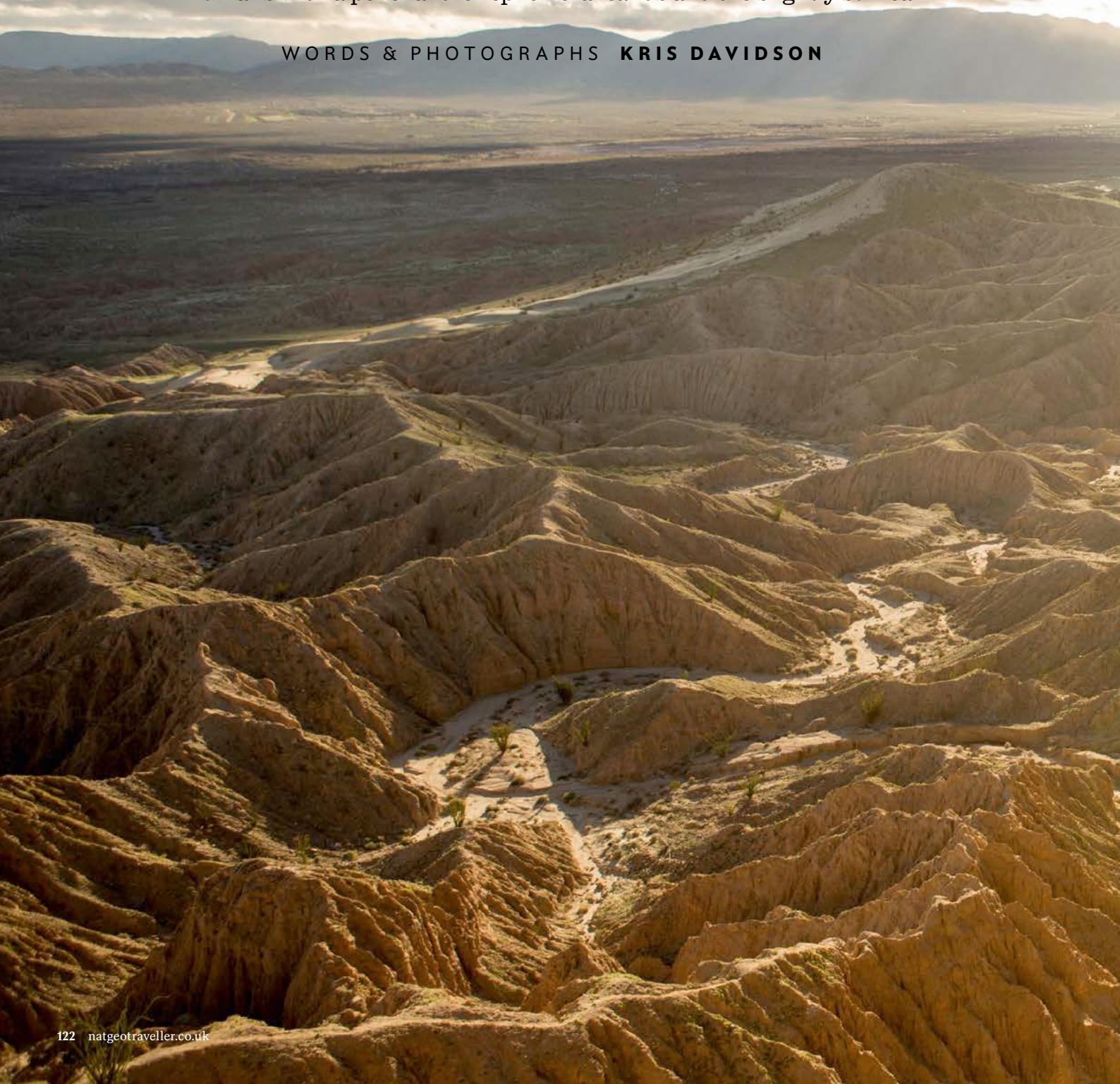
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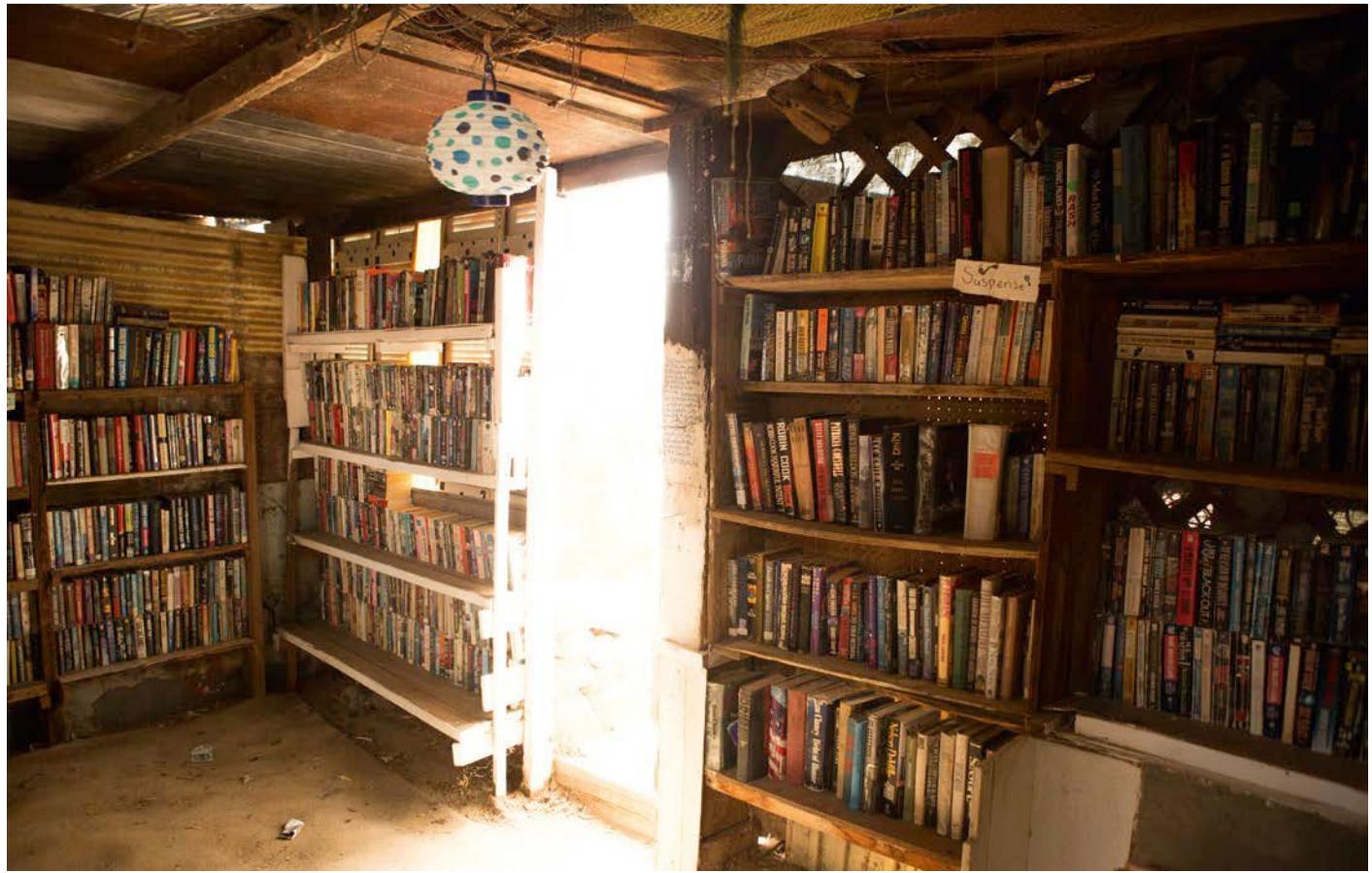
CALIFORNIAN DESERTS

Vestiges of early American history – the storied Wild West – linger in the Southern Californian deserts, home to resilient animals and humans with a penchant for ephemeral sands and the slightly surreal

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS KRIS DAVIDSON







Time seems suspended in this otherworldly desert environment. The ramshackle library – open 24/7 – in Slab City provides the familiar touchpoint of stories and knowledge, readily prescribed by the one-legged proprietor. And if words won't cure you, then perhaps the Mad Max-style art down the dusty lane in East Jesus will.



PREVIOUS PAGE: View over Borrego Badlands from Font's Point
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
 Slab City library; Kelso Dunes, Mojave Desert; artwork, East Jesus; palm date farm, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park; southern desert horned lizard

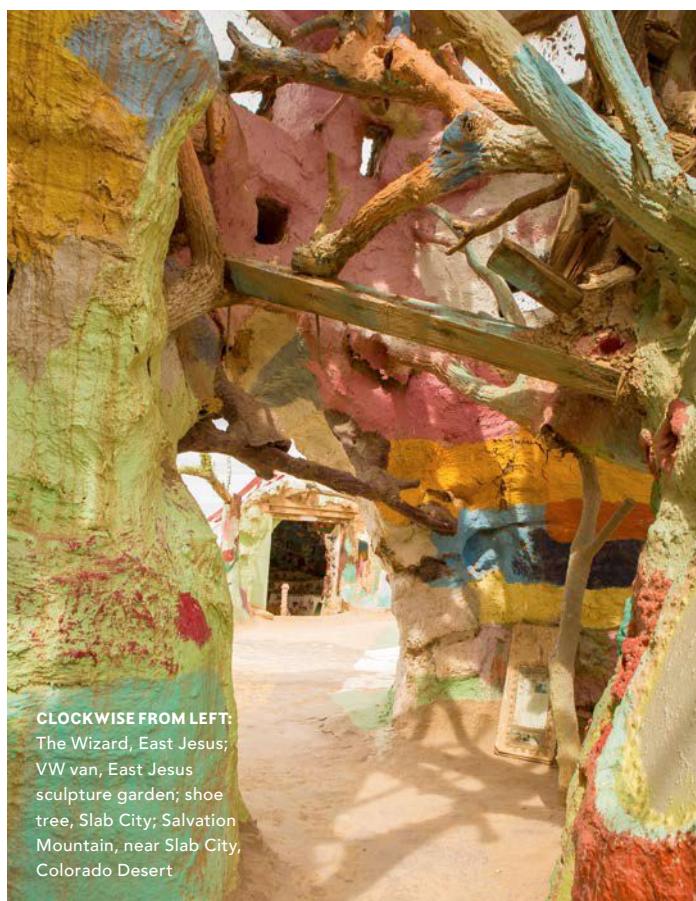


CALIFORNIA





In the mid 1980s, Leonard Knight began building a mountain in the desert out of adobe and straw, painted with colourful messages of love. A bright beacon of hope in a barren landscape, Salvation Mountain gradually drew other creatives to the area and, over time, the experimental, sustainable art communities of East Jesus and Slab City were formed.



CALIFORNIA



'Carhenge' near East
Jesus, Imperial County

An unexplained 'carhenge' rises from the sands near Niland, Imperial County, at once both ominous and whimsical. The desert has its own cadence, unfolding like a dreamscape in which the bizarre becomes commonplace.



CALIFORNIA

Campfire, Anza-Borrego
Desert State Park
BELOW: Billboards along
the Gene Autry Trail
in Southern California
feature photos of the
surrounding mountains



Strange, beautiful and slightly dangerous, the desert catapults us inward, in the manner of a dream, more than any other landscape. Timeless stars twinkle in the night sky. It feels like being on another planet until a plane soars by, heading for Los Angeles which glows faintly on the horizon. □





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City life

VANCOUVER

These are interesting times for Vancouver, where a growing Chinese influence, soon-to-be legal cannabis industry and nascent arts scene are helping transform one of the world's 'most liveable' cities. WORDS: Gavin Haines





Guerrilla logic dictates that it's easier to seek forgiveness than permission, but try telling that to the street artists of Vancouver. When these guys strike, they do it with the full consent of the authorities and all the necessary paperwork. It's so considerate, so Canadian.

"It might not be as organic as somewhere like Berlin," admits Andrea Curtis, who helps plan Vancouver's public art. "But there's a thriving creative community here and it's natural for us to come together like this."

Andrea is taking me on a tour of the city's many colourful murals, which have splashed some artistic flair onto more than 100 buildings around Mount Pleasant, a hilly, low-rise neighbourhood overlooking the glass and steel of Downtown Vancouver.

The paintings are a legacy of Vancouver's annual Mural Festival (6-11 August), a six-day jamboree that sees artists unleash spray paint onto walls and locals gather for street parties.

"It's a great way to engage the local community," explains Andrea, adding that some residents have become fiercely protective over the murals. "People have been really concerned that they'll be painted over or wear off. We have to explain to them that it's okay for street art to be ephemeral — that's what it's all about."

Mount Pleasant's murals explore various themes, from indigenous inequality to environmental degradation, which is poignantly addressed by the giant painting of a polar bear trapped inside a plastic bottle.

Though most of the murals aren't overtly political (there's a limit to how political

you can be when you're working with the authorities), the festival itself, like most artistic movements, has political undercurrents. It was founded not only to illustrate the power of public art, but also to highlight the importance of putting people ahead of profit when it comes to urban planning; an ethos that's been absent in other parts of Vancouver, where homogenous high-rises stand as monuments to the bottom line.

Vancouver's rapacious development has been fuelled partly by China's nouveau riche, many of whom took advantage of Canada's Investor Immigration Program, which essentially allowed wealthy foreigners to buy their way to citizenship. The programme has closed but estimates suggest it drew more than C\$2.4bn (£1.6bn) from China and Hong Kong alone, leading some to nickname the city 'Hongcouver'.

"We're a city of 2.6 million people and 800,000 of them are Chinese," explains Bob Sung, whose Wok Around Chinatown tours explore Vancouver's Chinese heritage.

I meet Bob at Dr Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden, an oriental oasis on the edge of Chinatown. He's just returned from an extended trip to the motherland. "A month was enough," he declares, earnestly.

It's raining — it rains a lot in Vancouver — but we stroll defiantly around Chinatown, whose streets are lined with bustling restaurants, traditional herbalists and fragrant grocery stores, which sell anything from skewered geckos to dried shark fin, demand for which is robbing the oceans of its apex predator.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Granville Street, Downtown
FROM LEFT: Thomas Nichini and Andrea Curtis from Vancouver Mural Festival; Faces of Vancouver mural



VANCOUVER



Yeast Vancouver // *Storm is one of Vancouver's craft beer pioneers and its fairly ramshackle premises — which feels like a cross between a brewery, a metal workshop and a rock bar — encapsulate the DIY ethic of small-scale brewing*

Vancouver's Chinese history dates back to the late-19th century when Canada was experiencing a gold rush and China was reeling from the Opium Wars with Britain.

"After the Opium Wars there was a great deal of famine in China, so many people emigrated to Canada to work in the gold mines and later on the railroads," explains Bob. "Companies had to pay C\$1.50 a day for white labour, but they could get Chinese workers for just 75 cents."

There was a catch, though; businesses employing foreigners had to pay a head tax of up to C\$500 per worker, a massive sum that was passed onto employees, who couldn't return home until it was paid.

Consequently, many Chinese workers were forced to stay and service their debts in Vancouver, where they opened restaurants, shops and laundries. Chinatown was born, and today it remains one of the city's oldest and most vibrant neighbourhoods.

The controversial Exclusion Act of 1923 put the brakes on Chinese immigration until 1947, but the population of Chinatown expanded once again in the 1960s when Mao launched his brutal Cultural Revolution, forcing many to flee China.

Another wave of immigration followed in 1997 when the UK handed Hong Kong back to the Chinese, which spooked the city's high rollers into relocating their wealth abroad.

"The latest wave of Chinese immigration is happening now and they have — if you'll excuse my language — a shit-load of money," explains Bob, as we dine on dim sum and chicken's feet at a local restaurant. "They're creating a lot of real estate speculation."

One such speculator is Scott Menke, a Las Vegas business tycoon who recently opened a C\$640m (£376m) 'urban resort' in the False Creek area of the city. His sprawling Parq Vancouver complex features a multilevel casino where small fortunes are squandered (and sometimes made) day and night.

The resort is also home to two hotels, a spa and six restaurants, including a lavish Chinese eatery called 1886; a reference to the year Chinatown was founded. And the complex certainly seems to be attracting a special kind of clientele: Chinese-owned supercars are a regular sight outside Parq Vancouver and it's surely only a matter of time before the resort features on *Ultra Rich Asian Girls*, a reality show that chronicles the lives of the daughters of Vancouver's wealthy Chinese Canadians.

THE 'GREEN RUSH'

There's plenty happening in Vancouver — particularly if you like drinking. It seems almost a cliche nowadays for a city to have a craft beer scene, but Vancouver's is quite exceptional (some commentators are declaring it the 'craft beer capital of North America').

"It's an amazing time to be drinking craft beer in Vancouver," coos Rachel Riggs, a guide for Vancouver Brewery Tours, as she leads me on a crawl around the city. "New breweries are opening all the time."

These upstart brewhouses are breathing new life into neglected neighbourhoods such as East Vancouver, which, in homage to its craft beer credentials, has been nicknamed 'Yeast Vancouver'.

"This is one of my favourites," says Rachel, as we pull up outside Storm Brewing, which occupies a small unit on a light industrial estate in East Vancouver; a building that would be decidedly dull were it not for the massive mural plastered across its facade; it appears to depict cartoon rats hard at work brewing beer. Storm is one of Vancouver's craft beer pioneers and its fairly ramshackle premises — which feels like a cross between a brewery, a metal workshop and a rock bar — encapsulate the DIY ethic of small-scale brewing.

But beer isn't the only social lubricant in town, as I discover in Downtown Vancouver, whose gridded streets and high-rise buildings are vaguely reminiscent of parts of Manhattan. But this is, unmistakably, not New York; it's too calm for a start and the people are too polite.

Perhaps this has something to do with the marijuana market, which I stumble upon down Robson Street, where glass jars full of various strains of weed are displayed on tables beneath a gazebo.

"We try to appeal to everyone's taste," explains Jesse Slater, who mans one of the stalls. While passing around a spliff the size of a chipolata, Jesse and his colleagues talk customers through the numerous strains, offering free samples to interested parties. Their customers are a pretty diverse bunch; everyone from well-dressed office workers to soap-shy students seem to stop by. "Where were you guys 30 years ago?" shouts one passerby, also sporting a suit, as he strides past the market.

Cannabis isn't currently legal in Canada, but that's set to change in July when the

VANCOUVER



country becomes the first G7 nation to legalise marijuana for recreational use. Economists reckon a legal pot industry could be worth up to C\$23bn (£13.5bn) a year to the Canadian economy and investors are queuing up to get a slice of the action, leading some to draw comparisons with the 19th-century gold rush.

Tourism is likely to play a key role in the nascent industry. In fact, it already does; the city's cannabis dispensaries and Dutch-style smoking lounges count holidaymakers as some of their best customers. A worker at the Vancity Bulldog Cafe, where pre-rolled joints sell for C\$5 (£2.95), claims cruise passengers provide the bulk of their trade during the summer months.

"[Marijuana] is already a massive draw for tourism," explains Mitchell Flann, night manager at Farm Dispensary, a cannabis shop on the edge of Gastown. "Pot tourism will only expand further as the government becomes able to openly push it."

Although smoking lounges, marijuana markets and dispensaries selling recreational cannabis aren't currently legal, the authorities turn a blind eye to their illicit trade as they have done for years.

It remains to be seen how British Columbia will interpret legalisation (questions remain regarding points of sale, points of consumption and pricing, for example), but some insiders believe Vancouver could become the next Amsterdam.

Others fear commercialisation could take the craft out of what's currently a cottage industry; the monopoly men, they reason, will put profit before pride. The stallholders at the market, meanwhile, which was founded as a protest movement, are worried the authorities will impose limits on the amount of cannabis individuals can legally possess and strictly enforce those limits; hence their location outside the Provincial Court of British Columbia.

ENDURING APPEAL

Still, you don't have to indulge in the local herb to find yourself in a daze in Vancouver; when you least expect it, the city blows you away with a vista so spellbinding it stops you in your tracks.

It happens to me at the end of an eventful walk between the chalk-and-cheese neighbourhoods of Gastown and Downtown Eastside: the former an upmarket district packed with boutique

PREVIOUS PAGE FROM TOP: Dr Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden, Chinatown; Sunrise Market, Powell Street, Downtown Eastside

ABOVE FROM TOP: Rachel Riggs of Storm Brewing; steam clock, Water Street, Gastown

RIGHT: False Creek, Downtown

FOLLOWING PAGE: Vancouver Harbour Flight Centre, seaplane terminal, Downtown



VANCOUVER

shops and trendy restaurants, where yoga mats are the must-have accessory; the latter one of Canada's most deprived postcodes, where hundreds of homeless people live in tents and the authorities face an uphill battle with Fentanyl, a devastatingly addictive opioid.

I see the stuff being dealt in broad daylight down East Hastings Street, where addicts walk around with thousand-yard stares that are haunting but rarely threatening.

Not all the drama is real, though, and I watch as a film crew shoots a movie nearby. Generous tax breaks lure many US film companies to Vancouver, particularly to older neighbourhoods like Gastown and Downtown Eastside which closely resemble cities south of the border.

An eye-opening walk, then, and one that ends with the most staggering spectacle of all: the view from Vancouver Harbour, which looks out over pellucid

waters to the snow-capped peaks of the North Shore Mountains.

An hour later and I'm climbing one of those peaks with Seb, an old school friend who recently migrated to Vancouver from the West Midlands; he'd had enough of Blighty and thought he could have a better quality of life over here.

And he's come to the right place; according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's latest Global Liveability Ranking, Vancouver is the third-most 'liveable' city in the world after Melbourne and Vienna. Its proximity to snowy mountains and sandy shores contributes to this status, and is one of the reasons Seb chose to move here.

"The great thing about Vancouver is that within an hour of finishing work, I can be doing things like this," he says, as we tackle the BCMC Trail, a popular hiking route that wends its way up the vertiginous flanks of Grouse Mountain.

It's a challenging climb of nearly 3,000ft which takes us through pine forests where rain slowly turns to snow; before long we're walking in several feet of the white stuff.

At the trail's end we go ice skating, sink a couple of beers in a bar and watch skiers push off down floodlit slopes, before piling into a cable car that takes us back to the bottom. The steamy gondola is packed with skiers and snowboarders for whom hitting the slopes on a Tuesday night is no big deal. I feel a pang of envy.

We drive back through Stanley Park, a 1,001-acre urban oasis where towering fir trees face off against the shimmering skyscrapers of neighbouring Downtown Vancouver; nature and her quiet beauty, man and his lofty ambitions. The latter often finds itself at odds with the former, but as we cross the threshold between these two very different jungles, there seems to be something resembling harmony. □



ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Air Canada and British Airways fly direct to Vancouver from Heathrow; WestJet offers a non-stop service from Gatwick. Prices start from around £367 return. aircanada.com ba.com westjet.com

Vancouver is a cycle-friendly city with a well-established community bike-sharing programme called Mobi (mobibikes.ca), which is easy to use. Longer distances can be tackled on the SkyTrain, a metropolitan rail system that crisscrosses Vancouver. Walking is also a good option.

When to go

It rains a lot in Vancouver during the winter months, but rain in the city usually means snow on the mountains, so if you want to hit the slopes for a bit of skiing then come in the winter. Otherwise, the best

time to visit is during the summer when Vancouver's beaches come into play.

Places mentioned

Vancouver Mural Festival. vanmuralfest.ca
Wok Around Chinatown. awokaround.com
Storm Brewing. stormbrewing.org
Vancouver Brewery Tours. vancouverbrewerytours.com
Parq Vancouver. parqvancouver.com

How to do it

VIRGIN HOLIDAYS offers seven nights in Vancouver from £858 per person based on two sharing. It includes return flights, car hire and accommodation in a centrally located hotel. virginholidays.co.uk

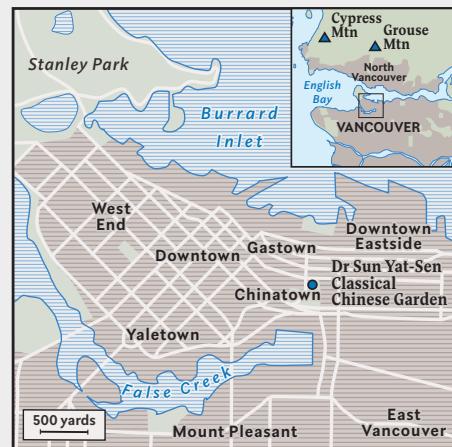


IMAGE: ALAMY; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER



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City life

QUITO



With a UNESCO-listed city centre, gilded churches and vibrant novo-Andean cuisine, the high-altitude Ecuadorian capital is breathtaking in more ways than one

WORDS: Connor McGovern

“I s he asleep?” I ask. My guide, Freddy, shakes his head. “No,” he replies. “The last time was two years ago. There was ash this thick on all the cars.” He holds his fingers an inch or so apart. We’re talking about Cotopaxi, the almost perfect, snow-capped cone in the distance. “But he’s not the worst,” Freddy adds. “There are others that erupt much more often. And people’s lives are at risk when they do.”

But the Ecuadorian capital is unperturbed. In fact, this extreme geography is all part of Quito’s make-up. In the cloudy shadows of its volcanoes, the long, narrow city is wedged untidily into the furrows and folds of the Andean foothills, spilling up their slopes at a lofty 9,350ft — the world’s second-highest capital after Bolivia’s La Paz. As we edge closer to Quito, Cotopaxi’s ghostly white tip — now tainted with tales of danger — dips behind the houses and high-rises of the approaching city. Silently, almost spectrally, the volcano has disappeared.

Blessed with dramatic urban-meets-rural panoramas, I wonder how Quito has remained one of South America’s best-kept secrets for so long. Visitors have long used it as a mere jump-off for the Galápagos Islands, and its bashfulness on the world stage has meant tourists have opted for the continent’s more hedonistic cities instead. But with a shot of new-found confidence running through its veins, the city’s finally stepped out from behind its clouds to reveal a spectacular colonial centre — it was, along with Kraków, one of UNESCO’s first World Heritage Centres — its myriad Andean traditions unbuckled for all the world to see.

Acquaintances with Ecuador’s capital city made, we head to El Panecillo, a suburban hill crowned with the halo-topped Virgen de Quito statue. Here, the city unfurls beneath us. The clouds have parted, the chequerboard of buildings glowing in the high-altitude sunshine. Behind us, in the distance, looms the silvery zenith of Cotopaxi. But Quito still remains blissfully unruffled.



Calle La Ronda,
Quito Old Town



QUITO



SEE & DO

QUITO BOTANICAL GARDEN: Enormous ferns, gunnera plants with parasol-like leaves, cycads sprouting crowns of needles — there's a touch of Jurassic Park about Quito's beautiful botanical garden. If you want a taste of Ecuador from the Andes and beyond, this lush spot, hidden in Carolina Park, heaves with exotic plant life from across the continent, from carnivorous pitcher plants and delicate orchids to cacti and an impressive bonsai collection. Arrange a guided tour — with explanations, facts and figures, the superlative vegetation becomes all the more impressive. jardinbotanicoquito.com

LA CAPILLA DEL HOMBRE: Perched high in the quiet Bellavista neighbourhood, this is no actual 'chapel', as its name ('The Chapel of Man') suggests. Rather, it's an artistic homage to mankind, and the magnum opus of the late Oswaldo Guayasamín. The gallery, which houses works by the Ecuadorian painter and sculptor, explores a number of themes, from the oppression of indigenous peoples to poverty and suffering. Next door is the artist's well-preserved home, decked out with Guayasamín's private art collection and lavish religious icons. capilladelhombre.com

CHURCHES: Quito's ornate churches give their Old World counterparts a run for their money. Presiding broodingly over the paved expanse of Plaza San Francisco, the 16th-century Church and Convent of San Francisco is one of the finest and largest examples of colonial architecture in South America. Inside, it's unashamedly flamboyant and bathed in gold. Nearby, the La Compañía de Jesús church is touted by locals as the country's most beautiful — one look at its near-perfect symmetry, extensive artwork and glinting gold motifs and it's hard to disagree. fundacioniglesiadelacompania.org.ec *La Compañía de Jesús, Cuenca 477.*

YANACOCHA NATURAL RESERVE: Quito's closeness to the great outdoors makes it perfect for nature lovers. In less than an hour, the hectic city gives way to the cloudy, leafy heights of Yanacocha Natural Reserve — a joy to walk through, taking in the misty greenery and twittering birds of the cloud forest. There's a good chance of seeing the striking hummingbirds that call the reserve home, including — if you're lucky — the black-breasted puffleg: tiny, endangered and endemic to this small patch of Ecuador, it's Quito's official emblem. fjocotoco.org

CITY MUSEUM: This museum in the Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana cultural complex explores Quito's long, riveting history through a sizeable array of art, relics and archaeological artifacts dating back several thousand years. The museum's prized treasure: a gold Inca sun mask in the aptly named Sala de Oro ('Gold Room'); its craftsmanship and lustre are truly dazzling. museociudadquito.gob.ec

TELEFÉRICO: Ride on the Teleférico cable-car to the Pichincha Volcano, reaching heights of nearly 13,000ft. From its ear-popping summit, the city gloriously spreads out below, with the silent silhouettes of volcanoes a dramatic backdrop. Take a warm jacket and breathe lightly — it's chilly at the top and the air is thin. teleferico.com.ec

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: La Compañía de Jesús church; Church and Convent of San Francisco; chef at Urko; shots of ceviche; shrimp, crab, black shells and squid, as part of the tasting menu at El Esmeraldas; vendor selling souvenirs, Plaza Santo Domingo

**SLEEP**

PATIO ANDALUZ: This handsome, peach-coloured bolthole in the heart of the Old Town bubbles with colonial charm, with plenty of original features and traditional touches. Breakfast in the bright, airy atrium is not to be missed, with local fruits and pastries laid out on colourful cloth. Look out for the giant turtle made of bread. hotelpatioandaluz.com

HOTEL SHERATON QUITO: Located just a stone's throw from the glittering Quicentro shopping mall, the Quito outpost of this American giant feels surprisingly intimate, with bright, comfortable rooms and diligent staff. Expect all the mod cons and an extensive choice at breakfast. sheraton.com

CASA GANGOTENA: A local institution commanding a prime spot on Plaza San Francisco, Casa Gangotena impresses from the off with its elegant rooms finished with grand flourishes, including art deco furnishings and intricate paintings. The restaurant is another highlight, offering a sophisticated take on Ecuadorian cuisine. casagangotena.com

With its white-washed terrace filled with locals, El Esmeraldas feels like a beachside shack — even more so when the likes of zesty crab ceviche and coconut-coated prawns arrive at the table





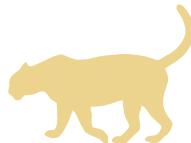
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**EAT**

CAFETERIA FABIOLITA: This inconspicuous little cafe in the shadow of the cathedral serves up hearty fare, including hefty roast pork sandwiches and a pork stew with corn — all of which lures in queues of locals for lunch. Grab a table under one of the green parasols with a guava juice watch the leafy Plaza Grande tick along. facebook.com/CafeteriaFabiolita1

EL ESMERALDAS: Fresh seafood is one of the true joys of Ecuadorian cuisine, and few places do it as well as this. Its white-washed terrace filled with locals feels like a beachside shack — even more so when the likes of zesty crab ceviche and coconut-coated prawns arrive at the table. Order the *encocado*, too — a vibrant dish of fish in a lightly spiced coconut sauce that'll have you begging for the recipe. *Isabel La Católica* N24-560, Quito 170143. T: 00 593 2-222-6616.

URKO: If the traditional local delicacy of roasted guinea pig doesn't tickle your fancy, fear not — Quito's novo-Andean cuisine scene is thriving right now, with inventive menus such as Urko's at the forefront. The cool, charcoal-toned kitchen takes traditional mountain and coastal ingredients and gives them a cosmopolitan makeover. Standout dishes include goat stew croquettes and pork in spicy *ají* sauce. Whatever you order, it's best accompanied with a zingy passion fruit pisco sour. urko.rest

**AFTER HOURS**

BANDIDO BREWING: Let the excellent home brews flow in this former chapel-turned-pub. There's a tipple for every taste — produced at the Bandido microbrewery across town — from treacly stouts to nicely balanced, American-style pale ales. bandidobrewing.com/home-en

EL POBRE DIABLO: Moody lighting, bunting and colourful wall hangings set the tone at this popular restaurant, bar and live music venue. Locals turn up in their droves most nights, drawn by the eclectic mix of music — often jazz and local folk — although the cocktails are worth sticking around for. elpobrediablo.com

CAFÉ DEMOCRÁTICO: There might be too much choice for places to go in the Mariscal District, Quito's vibrant after-dark neighbourhood, but the buzz coming from this alternative hangout is hard to resist if you're after a good time. Soak up the music with a pisco sour before salsa-ing 'til the wee hours. cafedemocratico.wordpress.com

Name game // *The city takes its name from the Quitus, a local indigenous tribe that resided here until the time of the Spanish conquest in 1534*

The Virgin of Quito statue overlooking the city



QUITO



LIKE A LOCAL

LA FLORESTA: This neighbourhood's streets, humble bars and grocery stores offer up an authentic slice of Quiteño life. Come dusk, all manner of locals stop by for a hearty meal at Parque Genaro Larrea, where a night market serves up bubbling pots of spiced stew, tripe, and pillow-y empanadas dredged in sugar.

COLACIONES DE LA CRUZ VERDE: Luís Marcelo Banda Smith and his family have been making *colaciones* (tiny, colourful bead-sized sweets) for generations at their shop near Plaza San Francisco. It would be easy to miss if it weren't for the noise from the pan he makes them in. Luís is usually found standing at the open shop front in an old T-shirt, patiently shaking a giant pot of the little confections every few minutes, sending tempting wafts of sugary steam into the street. *Calle Bolívar OE8-97*.

HERBAL HEALERS: Tucked away in a corner of the rather unassuming San Francisco Market, in San Roque, is a small group of women in white overcoats. Pharmacists? Not quite — the ladies are practitioners of the art of diagnosing and curing ailments with plants. Whether a rubdown with stinging nettles and rose petals will actually cure your aches and pains is open to debate, but the whole ritual is fascinating — bizarrely relaxing, even — and a much-respected part of local culture. Come on a Tuesday or a Friday if you're after a check-up; these are supposedly the best days for a diagnosis.



BUY

CALLE LA RONDA: The candy-coloured buildings and hanging baskets of this cobbled street are worth a detour in themselves, but it's what's behind them that people come for. These old city centre townhouses are home to the workshops of artisans who've been honing their skills in Quito for generations. Take a look at intricate wooden cabinets being made, or ornate metal artwork hammered out by hand, destined for churches all over Quito. Indulge in a bar of organic 80% cocoa chocolate at Chez Tiff Artesanal, before calling at Luis López, at Humacatama, where the walls are adorned with his beautifully made panama hats — which are, of course, actually a product of Ecuador. □



FROM TOP: Shop selling panama hats; herbal healer, San Francisco Market

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

Fly from Heathrow to Quito via Amsterdam, Bogota or the US with carriers including KLM, Avianca and American Airlines. klm.com avianca.com aa.com

The Old Town is walkable, but crossing the city may be easier on four wheels. Locals hail yellow cabs; tourists may find it easier to book via their hotel or apps like Easy Taxi. The sprawling transport network can be daunting, but north-south routes on the efficient Trolebuses are straightforward. trolebus.gob.ec

When to go

Equatorial Quito has a consistently mild climate year-round, although May–September is a little warmer

and less wet. A highlight of the Quito calendar is Easter's Semana Santa festivities, where the streets are flooded with streams of purple-clad participants.

More info

quito-turismo.gob.ec lata.travel
The Rough Guide to Ecuador & the Galápagos Islands.
RRP: £16.99

How to do it

RAINBOW TOURS has a 12-day Ecuador Explorer Private Tour, with four days in Quito, from £3,785 per person including flights, accommodation and all transfers. rainbowtours.co.uk



“Ecuador was a fantastic adventure: welcoming friendly people, beautiful landscapes and amazing wildlife. To fit in two cities, the Andes and the Amazon, the cloud forest and the Galápagos Islands into a 16-day trip on a seamless itinerary was a fantastic solution.”

GE, Glasgow



feefo  
4.8 / 5 Service Rating

Ecuadorian cloud forest

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TRAVEL GEEKS

ASK THE EXPERTS

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



Q // Do you have any ideas for an adventurous two-week family summer break, on a budget of £1,500, travelling with children aged seven and 12?

How about southwest France? Driving there's the hardy holidaymaker's option, but direct rail services from London to Avignon or Montpellier allow the whole family to be passengers, and put you in dashing distance of adventurous summer holiday terrain from just £121 return per adult, £108 per child (via.loco2.com; or book now to avoid paying over the odds for no-frills flights). Stay at Château de Boisson, a serviced campsite not far inland set around a 15th-century castle, complete with swimming pools, reasonably-priced shops and restaurants, kids' activities and little cottages to rent, from around £400 per week in August (plus much cheaper camping pitches if you carry your own kit; possible on the train with no baggage restrictions). yellowvillage.co.uk

Or, from Montpellier railway station, hire a car (from around £10

a day with various operators), and drive a couple of hours inland to Trébas-les-Bains in the Tarn Valley. Kayak, swim in mountaintop lakes and sunbathe around the beaches of this deep river gorge. Stay at the basic but stunningly set Résidence La Marquisié, where chalets sleeping four cost from £159 per week. madamevacances.co.uk

The Tarn Valley is famed for its milk, cheese, beef and veal, and local restaurants feature these superlative products in hearty menus. Returning to Montpellier, you could explore the beautiful beaches just south of the city before hopping on the train home. tourisme-tarn.com

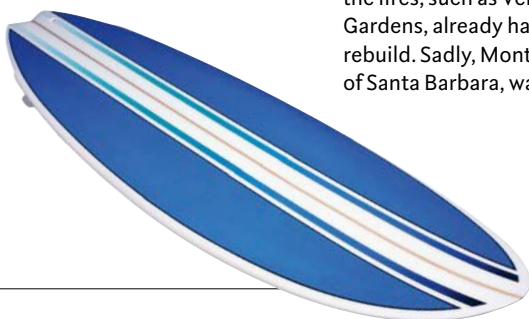
SARAH BARRELL

Your children are the ideal age for a family activity holiday — a great chance to bond and for you all to learn new things together in the great outdoors.

Check out Real Family Holidays, which runs holidays for those with children aged 3–16 years in UK locations ranging from the Devon coast to a Scottish island. At Dale Fort in Pembrokeshire, for instance, organised activities include crabbing, map skills, campfire socials, night walks and team challenges. A week in August 2018 for a family of four costs £840 including accommodation, all meals and one activity per day.

Going abroad is more of a challenge on this budget, but if you take your own tent to France, Eurocamp Independent offers a choice of campsites with pitches from around just £550 for two full weeks. You also get advantageous rates on ferry crossings, leaving you plenty of spare change for petrol, food and activities. eurocampindependent.co.uk real-family-holidays.org coastalstay.co.uk

Q // Is a city break and hiking trip in southern California still possible in the wake of the recent wildfires and mudslides?



Q // I have a smart suitcase. Have airlines decided to ban them?

Absolutely. December saw a number of wildfires throughout Southern California, and the largest, Thomas Fire, sadly burned through many acres of forest and hillside in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties. Most of the neighbourhoods in both Santa Barbara and Ventura town remain untouched, with local businesses and hotels open for visitors. Smoke is no longer affecting the air quality and areas that were impacted by the fires, such as Ventura Botanical Gardens, already have plans to rebuild. Sadly, Montecito, just east of Santa Barbara, was also hit by

flash floods in January, and the area is currently recovering with help of the local community.

Spring is a great time to head to the region as grey whales are beginning to drop by along their winter migration. While in Ventura, visitors can catch the waves at Surfer's Point or enjoy the music scene in Downtown. In Santa Barbara, I'd recommend an urban wine-tasting tour in the Funk Zone while staying at the newly opened Hotel Californian. If travellers are planning to hike in the Los Padres National Forest, which was unfortunately affected by the fire, check the USDA Forest Service (fs.fed.us) for the latest news.

For more information and to plan a trip, go to visitcalifornia.co.uk

EMMA WESTMAN

Anyone with a funky new case boasting a motor, power bank, GPS tracking or other electronics should consult their airline before turning up at check-in. So far this year, Delta, Alaska and American Airlines have banned suitcases with built-in lithium-ion batteries from being checked into the cargo hold in case they spark a fire. It hasn't happened yet, but they're erring on the side of caution, and

the International Air Transport Association (IATA) has said it expects other airlines will follow suit. The carriers will still check smart bags if the battery can be removed and put in hand luggage — but this rules out a lot of bag models. However, at present all smart bags are permitted as carry-ons, just as long as they're powered off during transit.

AMELIA DUGGAN

health corner

Q // I'm going on a round-the-world trip. Where should I get vaccinations?

Hepatitis A, typhoid and combined diphtheria, tetanus and polio vaccines are free on the NHS.

It's essential you do some research before travelling to see which vaccinations you need to get, especially if you're going to Southeast Asia, South America or Africa. Further to the vaccinations offered free by the NHS, the 'standard travel vaccinations', all of which have to be paid for, are: hepatitis B, cholera, rabies, meningitis, Japanese encephalitis and yellow fever. Yellow fever can only be given at accredited yellow fever vaccination centres and some countries will require proof of vaccination, the so-called 'yellow passport'.

Deciding which vaccinations you'll need, however, is dependant on your past medical and vaccination history, where you are going, and what you'll be doing when you get there. **DR PAT GARROD**

Q // I loved the BBC's *Big Cats* documentary. Where can I go for guaranteed sightings of tigers in their natural habitat?

Seeing an animal in the wild can never be guaranteed, even in places where population numbers are high. However, unlike the elusive snow leopard, tigers are cats that do show themselves, and nowhere more so than in India. With its impressive network of national parks and reserves, India's wildlife corridors allow these creatures to thrive. November to March is the ideal time to visit, though pack a jacket for chilly morning safaris. For a mixture of tropical forests and ruined temples, there are few places more atmospheric to see tigers than in Ranthambore, in Rajasthan. Karna, in central India is the country's biggest park, with affordable camping options along with the usual lodges, plus a good population of leopards, too. This is a good one to pair with neighbouring Bandhavgarh, which has a healthy population of royal Bengal tigers. All of these can be visited using Delhi as a hub. Responsible Travel has info on self-guided and packaged tiger tours: responsibletravel.com

THE EXPERTS



SARAH BARRELL //
ASSOCIATE EDITOR,
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RHONDA CARRIER //
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VISIT CALIFORNIA
VISITCALIFORNIA.CO.UK



DR PAT GARROD //
THEWORLDOVERLAND.COM

HOT TOPIC

SHOULD I WORRY ABOUT CHEMTRAILS?

IS THERE A WORLDWIDE GOVERNMENT CONSPIRACY TO POISON US ALL BY SPRAYING CHEMICALS OUT OF THE 15,000 AIRCRAFT CRISSCROSSING THE GLOBE AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT? NO, ALMOST CERTAINLY NOT. WORDS: JAMES DRAVEN

My father's ears prick up and he dashes from the lounge into the garden, casting his eyes heavenward. I'm seven years old and I follow him, assuming I'm about to witness the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse dive bombing our house. Instead, I'm disappointed to see an airliner flying overhead, leaving a white trail across the sky.

My dad is something of an aviation enthusiast and this compulsive aircraft-spotting was a regular occurrence throughout my childhood.

I asked my father what these white lines that hung in the air long after the plane had vanished from sight were, and he told me they were contrails: condensation trails. They're formed when humid jet exhaust condenses into ice crystals in the cold, dry, high-altitude air.

This was back in 1987. I was satisfied with that explanation then, and I am now.

Not everybody is so easily placated, though, and over the past couple of decades — ever since the US Air Force published a paper in 1996 about the hypothetical harnessing of weather for military objectives — ‘truthers’ in

their thousands have taken to YouTube, forums, talk radio and hundreds of websites to share ‘evidence’ for a shadowy global aviation conspiracy.

Some people believe that, since the mid-1990s, the government (usually the US government, colluding with others around the world) has been using aircraft to secretly spray the globe with chemical agents, with a range of supposed purposes including weather modification; mind control; chemical/biological weapons testing; stock price manipulation by damaging crops; and even causing illnesses for massive pharmaceutical companies to exploit.

It's often claimed that these ‘chemtrails’ are distinguished from normal contrails because they remain in the sky for longer than they did prior to the mid-90s, and dissipate into cirrus clouds.

It's a load of codswallop, but in this age of ‘fake news’, the conspiracy theory seems to have moved beyond American far-right circles and gone mainstream.

Back in 2011, a survey of the US, Canada, and UK showed that an incredible 16.6% of respondents believed in chemtrails. More recent data exists for our American



Q&A

SO, CONTRAILS ARE NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT, RIGHT?

While the EPA report concludes, ‘contrails pose no direct threat to public health,’ it does add: ‘Contrail cloudiness might contribute to climate change. Climate change may impact on public health and environmental protection.’

I'VE SEEN A PICTURE OF A PLANE CABIN WITH THE SEATS REPLACED WITH CHEMICAL TANKS!

No, you've seen an image of a plane filled with water tanks. These flight test ballast barrels are there to simulate passenger weight, and are interconnected so the water can be pumped to different parts of the cabin allowing engineers to assess the planes' performance under a variety of load conditions and different centres of gravity.

WHAT ABOUT AEROTOXIC SYNDROME? IS THAT THE SAME THING?

No. Aerotoxic Syndrome is another theory that toxic substances linked to aviation — engine oil and other contaminants — are entering airliners' cabin air supply and making passengers ill. There's no proof that cabin air has ever been unsafe, and the syndrome isn't recognised in medicine.

cousins: a 2016 poll found that 30-40% of the US population subscribed to the theory.

With government agencies swamped by complaints, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) re-released the Hazardous Waste Report in 2015 in conjunction with NASA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), to reassure the public.

Following this, in an August 2016 peer-reviewed study by the Carnegie Institution for Science, 76 out of 77 leading atmospheric scientists said they could find no evidence whatsoever to support the theory of a government chemtrail programme.

This clearly did little to convince hardcore believers; in 2017, solar geo-engineers at Harvard reported to VICE News they were receiving death threats and hate mail accusing them of being in on the conspiracy.

So, with such scientific proof to the contrary, why do these theories persist? If the government refutes them and scientists disprove them, then why are some people so adamant we're being lied to?

No amount of evidence will dissuade a die-hard conspiracy theorist, because any evidence to the contrary is inevitably dismissed as part of a massive cover up. Hey, maybe my dad is part of it as well.

AND ANOTHER THING... MILLENNIAL CRUISES

U BY UNIWORLD

A new concept where over-45s are banned. It's targeting young professionals keen to tick off multiple European destinations, and activities include graffiti lessons in Paris. ubyuniworld.com

G ADVENTURES

G Adventures is the first travel company to offer a sailing tour along Sri Lanka's southern coast. Highlights on the seven-day trip include Galle Fort and the chance to see blue whales. gadventures.co.uk

PEREGRINE ADVENTURES

A dozen sustainable adventure cruises for the eco-conscious among Gen Y. Trips like Cruising Croatia's Central Coast style themselves as ‘immersive’ and ‘local’. peregrineadventures.com

CARNIVAL

Wooing time- and cash-poor millennials with a raft of shorter, affordable itineraries to remote ports, plus DJ nights, IMAX cinemas and a pharmacy-themed Alchemy Bar. carnival.com

PRINCESS CRUISES

Regal Princess has the ‘Ocean Medallion’, a wearable device that acts as a digital compass, so guests can locate fellow passengers, as well as unlock cabin doors. princess.com

CHECKLIST: INSTANT CAMERAS

**POLAROID POP**

RRP: £199.99

amazon.com**LOMO'INSTANT GLASS EDITION**

RRP: £169

lomography.com**LEICA SOFORT**

RRP: £250

leicastore-mayfair.co.uk**FUJIFILM INSTAX MINI 9**

RRP: £69.95

johnlewis.com

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1 // DUTCH DIRECT

Hop aboard the new direct Eurostar route from London to Amsterdam which, when it reaches full service this month, whisks passengers from the UK, straight to the Netherlands' capital in just under four hours (price to be announced). eurostar.com

2 // MAINLINE TO THE MED'

Since launching in 2015, Eurostar's London-Marseille service means it's possible to ride the rails from London direct to the shores of the Med. Trains run five times weekly during peak holiday months, less often in spring and autumn, and infrequently in winter. Travel via Lille is easier, with a same station change, while Paris involves a cross-town transit, between Gare du Nord and Gare du Lyon — it offers a better choice of fares and departures, plus travel on impressive double decker TGVs. London-Marseille from around £120 return. Book from anywhere in the UK in one ticket (you can usually print it at home) via: loco2.com

3 // THE TRAIN TO SPAIN

Many bemoan the demise of the Elipsos TrenHotel sleeper train from Paris to Barcelona but the speedy new TGV from Paris direct to cities in eastern Spain is a joy. To maximise holiday time, take a morning Eurostar to Paris, a two-hour 20-minute journey costing from £58 return, switch stations to Gare du Lyon, then hop aboard an afternoon TGV Duplex service to Figueres, Girona, or Barcelona from as little as £36 each way. It's worth noting there are still a few sleepers from Paris, via the French Intercités de Nuit service, which is, by a small margin, the most time-efficient way to get to the Spanish border, with local trains to stations beyond. For further information, visit: seat61.com

4 // RAIL AND SAIL TO IRELAND

Travel from West Coast Mainline stations to Holyhead, then hop aboard the ferry to Dublin, all in one ticket, courtesy of Virgin Trains, Irish Ferries and Stena Line (or from Welsh mainline stations, with Arriva). Advance one-way from London starts at £39. virgintrains.co.uk

5 // ANDIAMO ALL'ITALIA!

Tickets on Thello's sleeper trains between Paris and Italy (Milan-Verona-Venice) include sleeper or more economical couchette (all seats convert). Journey time Paris-Milan is around 11hrs and costs from €35/£95 (£31/£84 one-way). Or book a high-speed TGV from Paris to Turin/Milan, journey time six/seven hours, from €29/£26 one-way. loco2.com

6 // SCENIC SWITZERLAND

There's arguably no grander scenic rail ride in Europe than the Bernina Express (pictured), a narrow gauge railway train with iconic red panoramic viewing cars that make the most of the epic Alpine scenery between Chur in Switzerland and Tirano, Italy. Take the Eurostar to Paris then travel across town to Gare du Lyon to catch the high-speed TGV to Zurich (four hours). From there, catch a regional train (one hour) to Chur for the Bernina Express. rhb.ch/en/panoramic-trains/bernina-express

{ ISLAND escape }

Majorca

Travel from Toulon, France, to Majorca (newly launched by corsica-ferries.co.uk) to arrive in the pretty port of Alcúdia for Majorca's trans-island railway and vintage 'orange express'. London-Toulon (Eurostar; 7hrs) is almost as pretty, cutting through Provence.

7 // ON TO PRAGUE

Czech Railways offers some very cheap deals to Prague from Brussels (from as little as €29/£26 one-way), with connections that mean with the earliest Eurostar morning departure, and a fingers-crossed-quick-change in the Belgian capital, you can get to the Czech Republic by tea time. For more info, consult the oracle that's The Man In Seat 61: seat61.com

SARAH BARRELL



Tech traveller

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

CROWDFUNDING YOUR TRAVELS

Appealing to friends' and relatives' generosity to help fund your dream trip isn't just a savvy move — it's remarkably easy and popular in the tech age

Every year people receive presents for Christmas or birthdays that they just don't want. Get a gift that counts by using one of the many crowdfunding platforms to ask for contributions to your dream trip instead of tacky trinkets and wacky socks.

Most personal crowdfunding sites, like Gofund.me and Fundly.com, charge a fee of around 10%. But I found a great site, Youcaring.com, with zero fees except the payment processing charge from PayPal. The set-up is very simple. Give your page a title and description, and add an image from your linked Facebook account. You can choose to make the page private, so it won't be searchable on Google or the main site, meaning only people you share the link with will see it.

Both you and the donators will need a PayPal account, and the funds will go directly into your account as they're received,

regardless whether or not you hit the total goal. Donators are prompted to add a small tip for the website, as it's a no-fee service. If they're feeling stingy they can just zero this out before paying. It's a great way to finance a honeymoon or wedding abroad, asking guests to donate instead of bringing gifts.

Another option for crowdfunding services with no handling fee is to go directly to the airline. Last Christmas, Virgin Atlantic launched its crowdfunding platform under the banner of WhereIWantForChristmas.com. It allows you to build your dream trip with pictures and destination details, so people can see exactly what they're paying for, with the money going straight to the checkout for you to buy the holiday. With the power of the crowd now very much a part of popular consumer culture, many more tour operators will probably launch this kind of service in the year ahead.



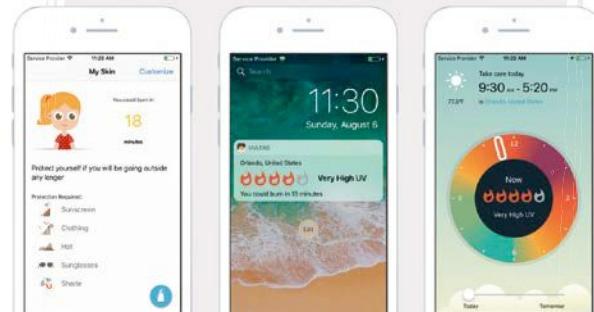
GET THE GADGET GoTenna Mesh

If you're travelling well off the beaten track it can be hard to get a mobile signal. GoTenna Mesh is a neat little device that allows you to create a communications network between phones without having to connect to the mobile grid. With two or more phones each connected to an antenna you can send text messages and

GPS location data to each other, even if there's zero coverage. The end goal for the developer is for enough devices to be in use to create a completely off-grid network, but we're a long way off the critical mass for that. I've tested the product extensively and without mass adoption the range is pretty poor in built up

cities. However, it works great up to three miles from one antenna to another in open terrain. It's perfect for keeping in touch at music festivals or when camping out in the wilds. RRP: £199 for a pack of two gotenna.com

TOP APPS FOR... Travel safely



UV-LENS

IOS/ANDROID FREE

Enter your skin type and this app uses location data to tell you how long you can stay in the sun before you run the risk of burning. uvlens.com

GREEN ZONES APP

IOS/ANDROID FREE

With more cities around the EU adding traffic management 'green zones', use this guide to where and when you can drive, and in what type of vehicle (covers Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France and Germany). green-zones.eu

SAFETURE

IOS/ANDROID FREE

Receive security information — including serious crime reports, fires, rail strikes, road closures and flight delays — to stay safe in 200 countries.

RUNGO

IOS/ANDROID FREE

Before heading out for a run in a strange place, check for local, verified routes so you don't wander into unsafe places. Comes with voice navigation, too. rungoapp.com



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katerussell.co.uk

HOW I GOT THE SHOT

DESERT FIRESIDE PORTRAIT

KRIS DAVIDSON, THE PHOTOGRAPHER FOR OUR CALIFORNIA IN PICTURES FEATURE ON P.124, EXPLAINS HOW SHE CAPTURED THIS SELF-PORTRAIT IN THE ANZA-BORREGO DESERT



The Anza-Borrego desert in southern California is magical, especially as night falls. A sense of stillness and solitude prevails, even as planes soar past towards Los Angeles, the megacity glowing in the distance.

Generally, the best way to illustrate how a human experiences the world is to include a person in the composition. Since there was no one else about in the desert that night, I opted for a self-portrait.

With dusk shots, timing is everything; the time frame in which the sky colour and the fire will look best is fleeting, perhaps a few minutes at most. After building the fire, as dusk was approaching, I set up the composition. I was using a Canon 5D Mark III with f/2.8 24-70 lens, positioned on

A travel photographer's primary goal is twofold: to create images that are deeply informative while also conveying an evocative sense of place

a low-sitting tripod. Test shots showed that the ideal exposure would be at ISO 1600 at f4.0 with a shutter speed of 0.5 seconds. The exposure was made in RAW mode, allowing for additional exposure manipulation in post-production. To achieve the self-portrait, I used a Vello FreeWave wireless remote.

The slow shutter speed is a crucial component to this particular image. At half a second, the flickering embers become graceful lines dancing across the frame. With the Vello transmitter hidden in my right hand I used my left to nudge the fire with a log, creating a stream of embers.

Not looking through the viewfinder can present various challenges, including inaccurate focus. During the course of

the session, I checked the images a few times on the back of the camera, making slight adjustments for exposure. I also zoomed into the image to gauge the focus, finally locking in the correct plane of focus on myself. In low-light photography, a wide aperture is often required in order to expose the image properly. In this case, since the shutter speed of 0.5 seconds was specific, there was very little wiggle room with the aperture and depth of field.

Finally, the last step in this shoot was to sit back, breathe the clean desert air, and just let the wonder and beauty of dusk in the desert wash over me.

@hellokrisdavidson
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IN THE NEXT ISSUE



Strewn like pearls through the Aegean Sea, the Greek islands are much-lauded pockets of paradise. From Milos to Mykonos, we hone in on the islands making up the stellar cast of the Cyclades

Plus // *Tunisia, Lisbon, Istanbul, Miami, New Zealand, Russia, Mumbai, Bordeaux, Montreal, Korea*

**APRIL ISSUE
ON SALE 1 MARCH 2018**

*For more information on our subscription offers,
see page 176*



Champagne Bar, Venice
Simplon-Orient-Express

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE TRAIN

A JOURNEY ABOARD THE VENICE SIMPLON-ORIENT-EXPRESS IS A JOURNEY INTO THE PAST — TINGED WITH GLAMOUR, LUXURY AND INTRIGUE
WORDS: PAT RIDDELL

Resplendent in its pristine blue-and-gold livery, our faces reflected in its polished-to-perfection paintwork, the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express greets us in all its glory. The immaculately uniformed staff line up in welcome — chefs, cabin stewards, waiters, porters... One of the world's most alluring travel experiences lies ahead of us.

A glass of sparkling Blanquette de Limoux arrives next, as we marvel at this spectacularly restored train: an invitation to travel back in time on what's effectively a living, breathing homage to the past.

The most famous train in the world. The most glamorous train in the world. The most luxurious train in the world. The superlatives come thick and fast on the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, and little wonder, given its long history — not to mention its impressive cinematic and literary stature, thanks to a certain Agatha Christie.

Created back in 1883 as the Orient Express, by the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits — and originally running between

Paris and Istanbul via Vienna and Budapest — the service's glamorous heyday was during the interwar period. This was the era of the Simplon Orient Express, a more southerly route from Calais and Paris to Istanbul via the Simplon Tunnel — under the Swiss Alps — and Venice. This incarnation ran until 1962, when it was replaced by the Direct Orient Express — a slower service, withdrawn in 1977.

A version of the Orient Express continued until 2009, when the route was decommissioned, but the story of the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express was far from over. Just five months after the withdrawal of the Direct Orient Express, American shipping magnate James Sherwood bought two of the original first-class carriages at a Sotheby's auction in Monaco, not long after acquiring Venice's iconic Hotel Cipriani. He went on to acquire a further 23, helping him to achieve his outlandish goal of restoring and refurbishing the original 1920s and '30s carriages to their former glory.

It soon dawned on Sherwood that the train would be unable to cross the Channel on a ferry.

A suitably elegant and period-correct means of conveying passengers from London to Folkstone was needed. And so, another mammoth restoration project began, involving the acquisition and restoration of Pullman carriages dating from the 1920s to the 1950s. Out of this, the British Pullman emerged.

On 25 May 1982, the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express was born, with London the new starting point. Within a year, the Arlberg Tunnel was substituted for its titular Swiss counterpart, although the Simplon name stuck.

The hors d'oeuvre

On arrival at Victoria station, we check in with staff bearing old-fashioned clipboards — naturally — and our 'hold' luggage is checked through to Venice, our final destination, while our cabin baggage is set aside, destined to meet the grand dame herself, the VSOE, in Calais.

As the British Pullman's cream-and-umber carriages glide into platform two, the sense of occasion is palpable. Guests are dressed to impress and staff immaculately attired. From



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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The original Orient Express brand name was licensed from the French train company SNCF, and James Sherwood's company later expanded it across the globe with Orient-Express Hotels (rebranded as Belmond in 2014). The Venice Simplon-Orient-Express licence remains with Belmond, but SNCF struck a deal with French hotel group Accor last year to develop a chain of hotels under the Orient-Express name — which have nothing to do with the original Orient Express hotels, now operating as Belmond. Got it?

ABOVE: Steward, in front of the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express at Calais

the outside, the train looks as grandly impressive and nostalgic-inducing as you'd expect; but on the inside it's all that and more. Each of the 10 carriages — painstakingly restored and refurbished — has a name, a distinct style and design, and a history. The bespoke detailing of features like wood panelling, luggage racks and bathroom floor mosaics — most with an art deco flavour — are testament not just to the craftsmanship of a bygone era but of a certain industrious Frenchman. In his book, *Orient Express: A Personal Journey*, Sherwood explains: 'We had hired Gérard Gallet, the French designer, to oversee the decoration of both trains and he had to recreate or source literally hundreds of objects and fittings, from chairs and fabrics to authentic art deco lamps.'

'He copied the original Wagons-Lits cutlery and the china was an 1820s design modified with our own logo. Even the towels and linen were replicas of the original. When it was complete, passengers would be surrounded by glittering mirrors and crystal, polished woods and brasses, exquisite marquetry and "Sapelli Pearl" inlay, all flawlessly restored or replaced.'

Most of the carriages have hosted illustrious figures — the likes of Churchill, de Gaulle, our own Queen and other heads of state. We take our seats in 'Lucille', built in 1928 as a first class parlour car for the Queen of Scots Pullman. Kicking off with a bellini — invented by the founder of the hotel at our final destination, no less — we embark on a brunch of fruit salad, pastries, and crumpets topped with scrambled egg and smoked salmon. So far, so expectedly plush; what comes as a surprise, though, is the warmth of the staff — many with decades of service experience behind them. There's none of the pomp or stuffiness I've been half-expecting.

Before we know it, the Kent countryside has flashed by. We arrive in Folkestone to be serenaded by a brass band on the platform, and we depart for the only modern part of the journey — the coach that will take us through the Tunnel. The transfer

breaks the spell briefly — although 35 years ago the ferry would no doubt have had the same effect.

The main course

Exiting the coach on the French side of the Channel, it's not long before we're once again ensconced within the wood-panelled golden age of rail — no less glamorous here, aboard the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, than aboard the British Pullman. But here, cabins — rather than dining cars — dominate. There are 11 sleeper carriages altogether, along with three restaurant cars, two service cars and one for the bar. Stretching for a quarter of a mile, it seems a thing of endlessly snaking elegance; a place to live in luxury, at least for a while.

My wife and I are shown how our bijou cabin works by our cabin steward. Everything is exactly as it would've been almost a century ago, complete with numerous ingeniously compact solutions to deal with the lack of space. A sink, for instance, is cannily concealed within a closet, while the banquette seating, we're told, will be converted into bunks while we're at dinner. Sadly, there's no Houdini-esque reveal of a hidden toilet; there are just two — one at either end of the carriage.

The attention to detail is immaculate; rest your gaze on pretty much any surface, even in the smallest room, and you'll see original designs and logos, restored brasswork and wooden panels that must have been varnished at least 15 times.

In a bid to remain as true to the original train as possible, there are no private bathrooms (the patchy wi-fi and wheezy air-con seem like grudging nods to the 21st century). That said, passengers unwilling to forgo their mod cons but willing to splurge will, from March, be delighted to find the world's most famous, glamorous and luxurious train has become even more opulent. The three new Grand Suites will be three times the size of a regular cabin and offer double beds, a private shower room, and a living area.

Dessert

Departing Calais at 5.20pm, we opt for the second sitting at 9.30pm in the Côte d'Azur restaurant car ➤

ORIENT EXPRESS

— one of three, each with a unique decor — and arrive into Paris as we await our second course. We dine on blue Brittany lobster with fennel fondue and cuttlefish sauce lasagne; slow-roasted beef fillet with a truffle caviar mousse; and chocolate salted butter caramel ‘pebble’. All exquisitely balanced, richly flavoured yet delicate.

It is, make no mistake, an exceptionally expensive experience but, justifiable perhaps as a one-off. A couple next to us are celebrating their 10th wedding anniversary, there’s a party of four behind us toasting a 70th birthday, and many of the other guests are evidently ticking the journey off their bucket list while marking a significant occasion.

They say you can never be overdressed on the VSOE, and while black tie and evening dress aren’t compulsory, everyone is dressed to the nines. Having indulged in gin and tonics before dinner, and Champagne during, we head back to bar car 3674, where the resident pianist is now tickling the ivories. Decked out in luxuriant blue and gold, it resembles an exclusive members’ club — which, in many ways, it is.

Mindful of waking for the views, we retire before midnight to remarkably comfortable bunks and the soporific sway of the train.

Breakfast arrives at 8.30, just as the Swiss Alps start to unfold around us, canopied by a bright blue sky. Lush meadows soon give way to lakes, snow-capped mountains, valleys, tunnels, pretty villages, fir-tree-covered hillsides... Admiring the majestic landscape from our cabin is a full-time job.

At midday, while dining in the L’Oriental restaurant car, there’s an abrupt change of scenery — the Alps suddenly replaced by the shores of Lake Lugarno: all exotic palms, Italianate villas and blue waters shimmering in the sun.

Staring out the window is tricky while eating but the food is, again, a memorable distraction. A turban of sautéed salmon and spinach comes with a carpaccio of saffron scallops and artichoke cream. This is followed by roast duckling breast with an escalope of foie gras and redcurrant. For a finale, we get cherry puff pastry, pineapple with syrup and a syringe full of Granny Smith jelly. I could get used to Mondays like this.

We head on to the Italian border and skirt around the bottom of Lake Garda, the train then meanders at a dignified pace through the verdant farmlands of northern Italy — Verona, Brescia, Vicenza and Padua. Finally, around 4pm, we reach the lagoon on the

approach to Venice, and resign ourselves to departing this moving museum. Before we know it, we’re whisked from the platform to a sleek, lacquered mahogany water taxi that delivers us into the heart of La Serenissima. If you want to feel like royalty, this is surely the only way to arrive.

Venice’s timeless beauty is, obviously, best seen from the water, and the Belmond Hotel Cipriani’s position on the island of Giudecca, across the Grand Canal from St Mark’s Square, provides a vantage point away from the crowds. The tranquillity here is one of its main attractions, and no doubt a key reason for James Sherwood buying the hotel in 1976, which kick-started his rail odyssey. It seems hard to fathom now, but back then the whole enterprise was a high-stakes gamble. “When I bought those two old carriages in Monte Carlo, people thought I was slightly crazy. They said it was a fun idea but it wouldn’t work.” Sherwood told *The Telegraph* in 2012, “The common wisdom was that luxury rail travel was dead. Now it’s fully booked every year and the carriages, every one different, are in better condition than they have ever been. Concorde has come and gone and the Orient-Express is still here. It was a good hunch.” □



HOW TO DO IT

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LEFT: Venice Simplon-Orient-Express heads through the Alps

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FROM ABOVE: Three on Canton, Gateway Hotel; Harbour City with Marco Polo Hotels; Deluxe Harbour Room



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Just a short walk away, the **Gateway Hotel** exudes chic with its contemporary suites and elegant design. Perfectly placed for exploring the sights of Hong Kong, it's just a short walk from the China Ferry Terminal and MTR station. And, with a new club floor and suites set to open on the 17th floor later this year, it's a standout choice for some city sophistication.

With 394 spacious rooms and suites, **Prince Hotel** on the Canton Road is in a prime spot for making the most of Hong Kong's attractions. A new lobby, unveiled last year, sets the tone on arrival, where round-the-clock dining and free Wi-Fi await guests. For a more exclusive stay, check into The Continental Club, commanding spectacular views over the city.

Guests of each hotel also get a handy smartphone upon arrival, offering complimentary local and international calls to 10 regions. What's more, there are exclusive privileges at Harbour City with a stay at Marco Polo hotels, too. There's no better place to bed down after a day's retail therapy.

WHEN TRAGEDY MEETS TOURISM

THE LIKES OF AUSCHWITZ, GROUND ZERO AND CHERNOBYL ARE SEEING INCREASING NUMBERS OF VISITORS, SPARKING THE TERM 'DARK TOURISM'. BUT IS IT VOYEURISTIC OR EDUCATIONAL? WORDS: SIMON USBORNE

Days after 71 people died in a London tower block fire last June, something strange started to happen in the streets around it. Posters, hastily drawn by members of the grieving community of Grenfell Tower, appeared on fences and lamp posts in view of the building's blackened husk.

'Grenfell: A Tragedy Not A Tourist Attraction,' one read, adding — sarcastically — a hashtag and the word 'selfies'. As families still searched for missing inhabitants of the 24-storey block, and the political shock waves were being felt through the capital, people had started to arrive in North Kensington to take photos. Some were posing in selfie mode.

"It's not the Eiffel Tower," one resident told the BBC after the posters attracted the attention of the press. "You don't take a picture." Weeks later, local people were dismayed when a coachload of Chinese tourists pulled up nearby so that its occupants could get out and take photos.

Grenfell Tower, which still dominates the surrounding skyline (it's due to be demolished in late 2018), had become a site for 'dark tourism', a loose label for any sort of tourism that involves visiting places that owe their notoriety to death, disaster, an atrocity or what can also loosely be termed 'difficult heritage'.

It's a phenomenon that's on the rise as established sites such as Auschwitz and the September 11 museum in Manhattan enjoy record visitor numbers. Meanwhile, demand is rising among those more intrepid dark tourists who want to venture to the fallout zones of Chernobyl and Fukushima, as well as North Korea and Rwanda. In Sulawesi, Indonesia, Western tourists wielding GoPros pay to watch elaborate funeral ceremonies in the Toraja region, swapping notes afterwards on TripAdvisor.

Along the increasingly crowded dark-tourist trail, academics, tour operators and the residents of many destinations are asking searching questions about the ethics of modern tourism in an age of the selfie and the Instagram hashtag. When Pompeii, a dark tourist site long before the phrase existed, found itself on the Grand Tour of young European nobility in the 18th century, dozens of visitors scratched their names into its excavated walls. Now we leave our mark in different ways, but where should we draw the boundaries?

Questions like these have become the life's work of Dr Philip Stone, perhaps the world's leading academic expert on dark tourism. He has a background in business and marketing, and once managed a holiday camp in Scotland. But a fascination with

societal attitudes to mortality led to a PhD in thanatology, the study of death, and a focus on tourism.

"I'm not even a person who enjoys going to these places," Stone says from the University of Central Lancashire, where he runs the Institute for Dark Tourism Research. "But what I am interested in is the way people face their own mortality by looking at other deaths of significance. Because we've become quite divorced from death yet we have this kind of packaging up of mortality in the visit economy which combines business, sociology, psychology under the banner of dark tourism. It's really fascinating to shine a light on that."

Historical roots

The term 'dark tourism' is far newer than the practice, which long predates Pompeii's emergence as a morbid attraction. Stone considers the Roman Colosseum to be one of the first dark tourist sites, where people travelled long distances to watch death as sport. Later, until the late 18th century, the appeal was starker still in central London, where people paid money to sit in grandstands to watch mass executions. Hawkers would sell pies at the site, which was roughly where Marble Arch stands today.

It was only in 1996 that 'dark tourism' entered the scholarly



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lexicon when two academics in Glasgow applied it while looking at sites associated with the assassination of JFK. Those who study dark tourism identify plenty of reasons for the growing phenomenon, including raised awareness of it as an identifiable thing. Access to sites has also improved with the advent of cheap air travel. It's hard to imagine that the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial and museum would now welcome more than two million visitors a year (an average of almost 5,500 a day, more than two-thirds of whom travel to the Polish site from other countries in Europe) were it not for its proximity to Krakow's international airport.

Peter Hohenhaus, a widely travelled dark tourist based in Vienna, also points to the broader rise in off-the-beaten track tourism, beyond the territory of popular guidebooks and TripAdvisor rankings. "A lot of people don't want mainstream tourism and that often means engaging with places that have a more recent history than, say,

a Roman ruin," he says. "You go to Sarajevo and most people remember the war being in the news so it feels closer to one's own biography."

Hohenhaus is also a fan of 'beauty in decay', the contemporary cultural movement in which urban ruins have become subject matter for expensive coffee-table books and a thousand Instagram accounts. The crossover with death is clear. "I've always been drawn to derelict things," the 54-year-old says. As a child in Hamburg, he would wonder at the destruction of war still visible around the city's harbour.

That childhood interest has developed into an obsession; Hohenhaus has visited 650 dark tourist sites in 90 countries, logging them all and more besides on his website. He has plans to put together the first dark tourism guidebook. His favourite holiday destination today is Chernobyl and its 'photogenic' ghost town. "You get to time travel back into the Soviet era but also into an apocalyptic future," he says. He

also enjoys being emotionally challenged by these places. "I went to Treblinka in 2008 and heard the story of a teacher at an orphanage in Warsaw who was offered a chance to escape but refused and went with his children to the gas chambers. Stories like that are not everyday, you mull over them. Would you have done that?"

But while, like any tourism, dark tourism at its best is thought-provoking and educational, the example of Grenfell Tower hints at the unease felt at some sites about what can look like macabre voyeurism. "I remember the Lonely Planet Bluelist book had a chapter about dark tourism a while ago and one of the rules was 'don't go back too early,'" Hohenhaus says. "But that's easier said than calculated. You have to be very aware of reactions and be discreet when you're not in a place with an entrance fee and a booklet." Hohenhaus said he had already thought about Grenfell Tower and admits he would be interested to see it up close. "It's big, it's dramatic, it's black and

5 DARK TOURISM SITES

NORTH KOREA

Opened to visitors in the late 1980s, North Korea now attracts thousands of tourists each year for a peek behind the headlines.

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

The former Nazi death camp became a memorial in 1947 and a museum in 1955. It's grown since and in 2016 attracted a record two million visitors.

9/11 MEMORIAL AND MUSEUM

Built in the crater left by the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the museum, opened in 2014, has won plaudits for its portrayal of a disaster and its impact.

RWANDA

Visitor numbers to genocide memorials have grown in Cambodia and Bosnia as well as in Rwanda, where there are several sites dedicated to the 1994 massacre of up to a million people. The skulls of victims are displayed.

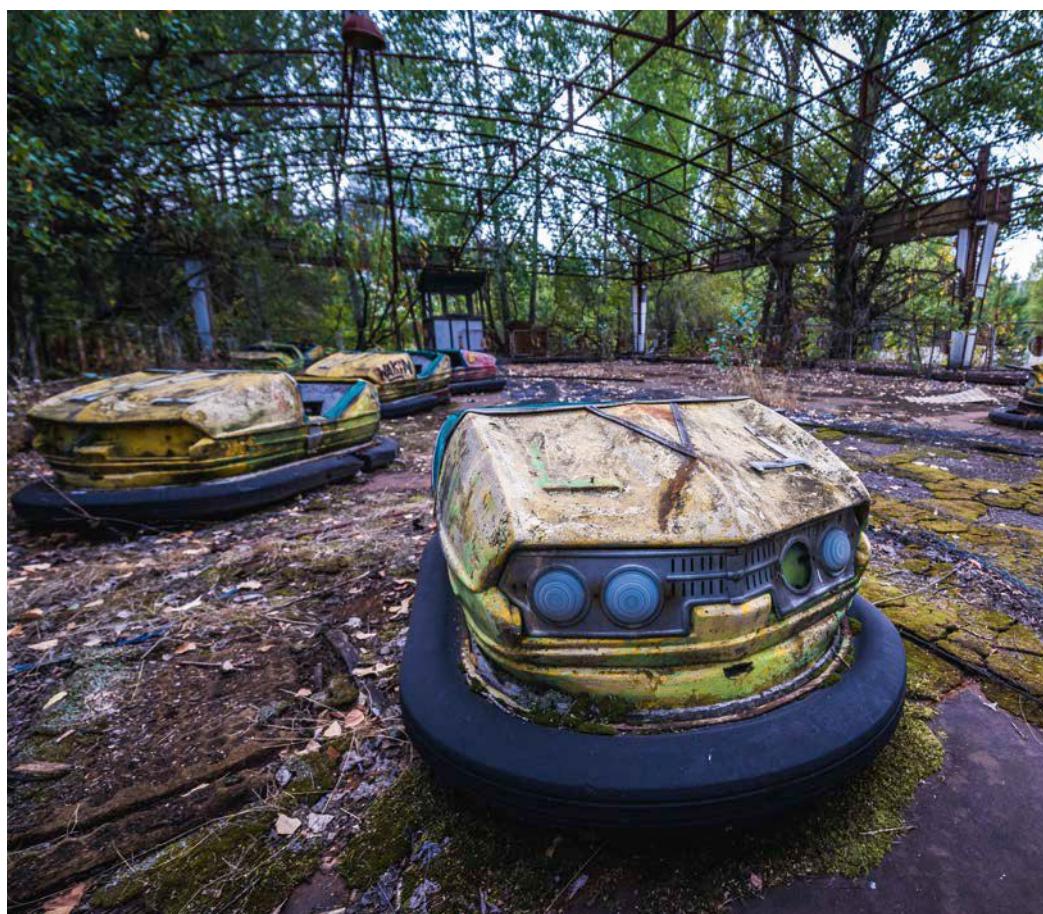
CHERNOBYL & PRIPYAT, UKRAINE

Several tour companies exist to send visitors to the exclusion zone and ghost town left otherwise empty after the nuclear accident in 1986. All are scanned for radiation as they leave.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Front view of block 10 at Auschwitz concentration camp, Poland

LEFT: Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Zone

FOLLOWING PAGE: A propaganda mural at Pyongyang main train station, North Korea



DARK TOURISM

it's a story you've followed in the news," he says. "I can see the attraction. But I would not stand in the street taking a selfie."

A mirror to mortality

An urge to see and feel a place that has been reduced to disaster shorthand by months of media coverage is perhaps understandable, but Stone is most interested in the draw — conscious or otherwise — of destinations that hold up a mirror to our own mortality. "When we touch the memory of people who've gone what we're looking at is ourselves," he says. "That could have been us in that bombing or atrocity. We make relevant our own mortality." That process looks different across cultures — and generations — and Stone says we should take this into account before despairing of selfie takers at Grenfell Tower or Auschwitz.

"I've heard residents at Grenfell welcoming visitors because it keeps the disaster in the public realm, but they didn't like people taking photos because it's a visual reminder that you're a tourist and therefore somehow defunct of morality," he explains. "We're starting to look at selfies now. Are they selfish?" Stone argues that the language of social media means we no longer say "I was here", but "I am here — see me". He adds: "We live in a secular society where morality guidelines are increasingly blurred. It's easy for us to say that's right or wrong, but for many people it's not as simple as that."

"Travel itself is innately voyeuristic," argues Simon Cockerel, the general manager of Koryo Tours, a North Korea specialist based in Beijing. Cockerel, who has lived in China for 17 years and joined Koryo in 2002, says demand has grown dramatically for trips to Pyongyang and beyond, from 200 people a year in the mid 1990s, when the company started, to more than 5,000 more recently. He has visited

the country more than 165 times and says some clients join his tours simply to bag another country, and some for bragging rights. But the majority have a genuine interest in discovering a country — and a people — beyond the headlines.

"I've found everyone who goes there to be sensitive and aware of the issues," he says. "The restrictions do create a framework for it to be a bit like a theme park visit but we work hard to blur those boundaries. More than 25 million people live in North Korea, and 24.99 million of them have nothing to do with what we read in the news and deserve to be seen as people not as zoo animals or lazy caricatures."

More challenging recently has been the US ban on its citizens going to North Korea, imposed last summer after the mysterious death of Otto Warmbier. The American student had been arrested in Pyongyang after being accused of trying to steal a propaganda poster. Americans made up about 20% of Koryo's business, but Cockerel argues the greater loss is to mutual perception in the countries. "The North Korean government represent Americans as literal wolves with sharpened nails," he says. "At least a few hundred Americans going there was a kind of bridgehead against that. Now that's gone."

At Grenfell Tower, responsible tourism may yet serve to keep alive the memory of the disaster, just as it does, after a dignified moratorium, at Auschwitz and the former Ground Zero. Hohenhaus says he will resist the urge to go until some sort of memorial is placed at the site of the tower. At around the time of a commemorative service at St Paul's Cathedral six months after the fire, there were calls for the site eventually to be turned into a memorial garden. The extent to which Hohenhaus and other dark tourists are welcomed will be decided by the people still living there. □

MORE INFO

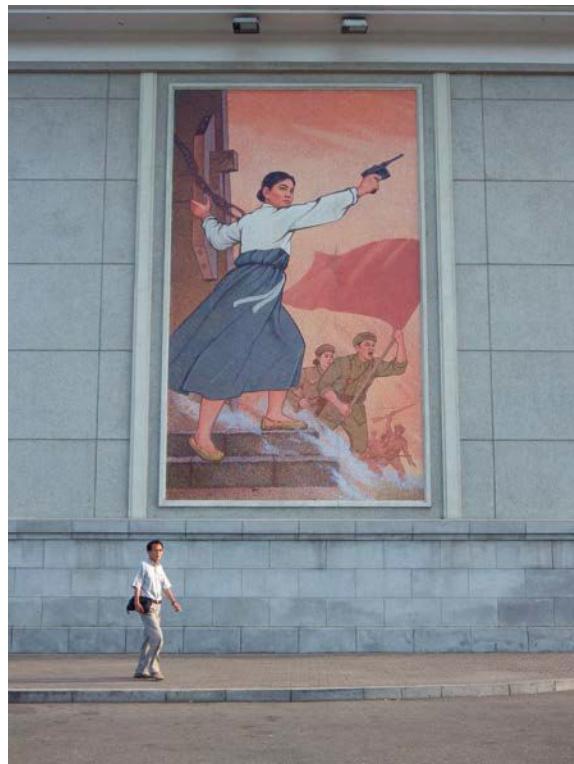
Philip Stone's academic resource: dark-tourism.org.uk
Peter Hohenhaus' blog: dark-tourism.com
Koryo Tours, North Korea specialists: koryogroup.com

THE 'DARK TOURISTS'

Peter Hohenhaus, 54 // The appeal is to try to understand places and events. We'll never fully understand why a genocide happens but we can get close by going there and reading about it. I think dark tourism is more popular now partly because it isn't mainstream. People are looking for what's current and real when they travel.



Rena Sasahara, 24 // In our hotel in Pyongyang I chatted to a man who said he'd never seen a Japanese person in a group like ours. I started talking to him in Korean. He referred to the hard times in the 1990s, when many died of hunger, and how it had questioned his faith in the leader. I felt relieved that I was able to meet someone speaking so honestly.





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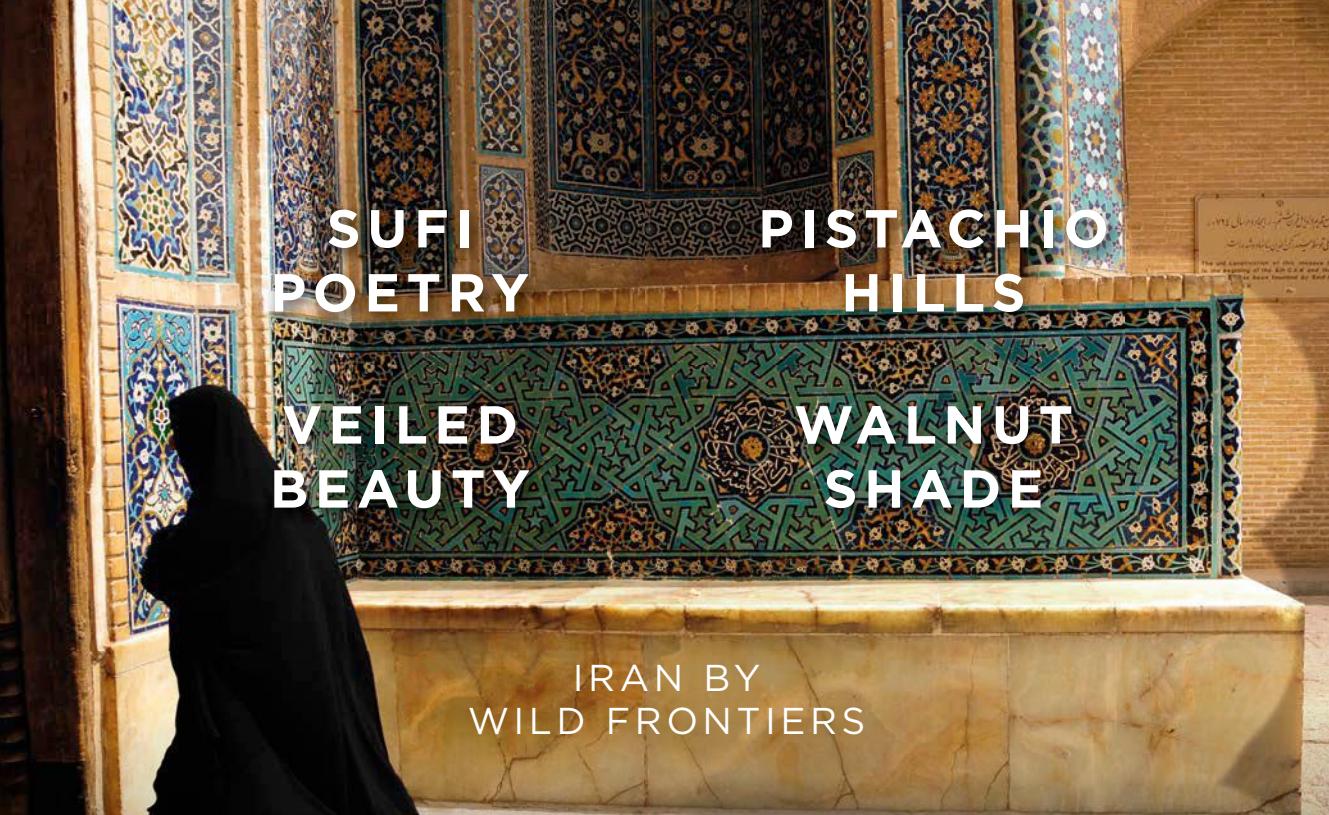
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IMAGE: GETTY



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★ STAR LETTER

Purple reign

I enjoyed reading Aaron Millar's column on Prince's Paisley Park (View from the USA, December 2017). However, what confused me was Aaron stating that Prince out-funked James Brown. This is absolutely impossible. I can only assume Aaron knows little of James Brown's work, so I'd like to suggest he listens to Cold Sweat, Soul Power and Sex Machine. As good as Prince was, he never out-funked The Godfather of Soul, The Minister Of New New Super Heavy Funk! Keep up the good work. **JEFF FORD**

Spark of inspiration

Around this time of year I plan my annual adventure. I often think I enjoy the planning stage nearly as much as the trip itself. This year, though, I found myself stuck. Imagine my glee when the December issue dropped through my letterbox with an excellent, comprehensive feature on Namibia (Life on Mars). This gave me the push I needed and I'm now eagerly awaiting my G Adventures tour in January from Victoria Falls, through Botswana, Namibia and finishing in Cape Town. I'm so excited — thanks for the inspiration! **JONNY HOPPS**



Where the magic happens

Your review of Edinburgh hotels (Sleep, Jan/Feb 2018) reminded me of the many sights to be seen in that city. For example, you can combine lunch and sightseeing at the Elephant House on George IV Bridge. The eatery is decorated with ornaments of the eponymous pachyderm and, if you're lucky enough to get a window seat, there's a view of the castle and Greyfriars Kirkyard graveyard.

The cafe gets busy — there's usually a queue and an international crowd on the pavement outside photographing the facade. The reason? This is said to be the place the first Harry Potter novel was written. Indeed, Greyfriar's is the last resting place of Thomas Riddell, who's said to have inspired the birth name of JK Rowling's Voldemort. It's also the site of the gravestone of Scotland's poet laureate of doggerel, William McGonagall — the inspiration for Professor Minerva McGonagall, head of Gryffindor House.

In truth, Joanna wrote in many cafes (and parks and buses). You can beat the frantic queues of muggles at the Elephant House at Spoon on Nicolson Street where, when it was called Nicolson's, JK could often be seen at the corner window seat, with her baby daughter, scribbling away. It's a more authentic Potter experience in my view. With a little imagination, you can see Ms Rowling sitting there with her notebook. **KEN WILSON**

Chat back

Twitter Facebook NatGeoTravelUK

Where's the best place in the UK for an adventurous weekend away? #NGTUK

@MISSPALLEN I'd say either Cornwall (surfing, sailing, crabbing, coastal paths) or Edinburgh (urban walks, discovering wynds and closes off the Royal Mile, Arthur's Seat, the castle) //

@PEEPS_SPEAK The Peak District or Belfast and the Antrim coast in Northern Ireland //

@CALJAMIESON Snowdonia for the zip-wire or Pembrokeshire Coast National Park for watersports



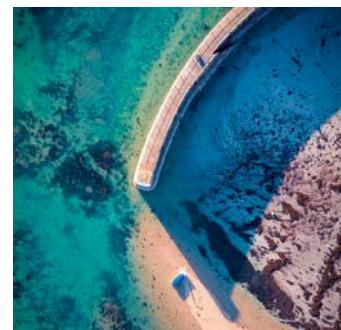
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GET IN TOUCH

Your pictures

We give you a theme, you give us the photos, with the best published in the next issue. This month is 'Australia' — a feature from our Jan/Feb 2018 issue

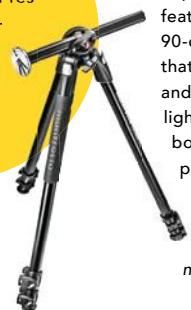
It's a standoff! Capturing Australia's beautiful nature and landscapes, Hamish McKay shows great composition and skill shooting into the light to produce this image of a kangaroo grazing at sunset.

NOW OPEN

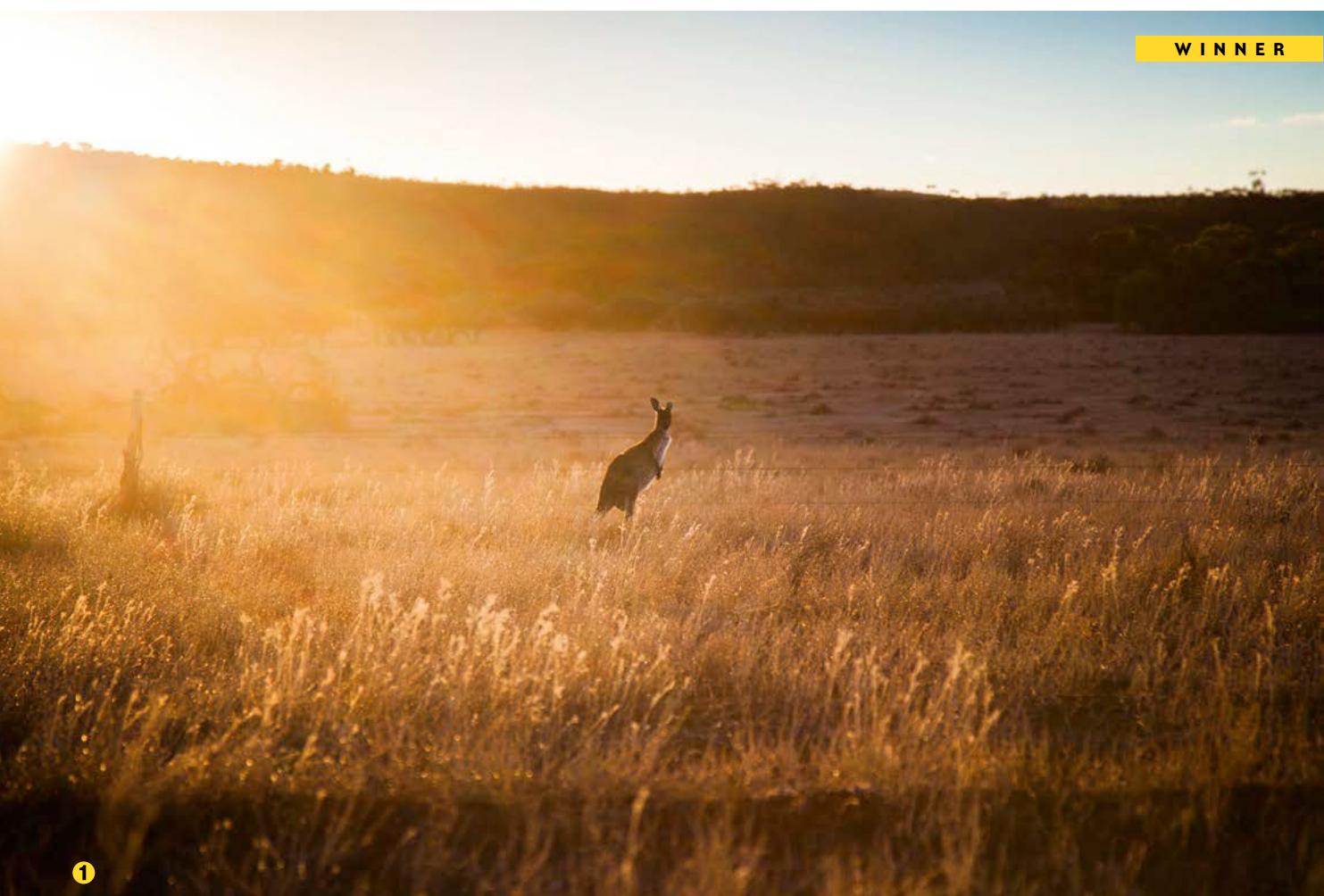
The theme: 'Greece'. Upload your high-res image, plus a one-sentence description, to ngtr.uk/yourpictures by 9 March 2018.

THE PRIZE

Manfrotto's 290 Dual Tripod is packed with features including: a 90-degree centre column that extends vertically and horizontally; a lightweight aluminium body; four leg-angle positions; and a rubber leg warmer for an extra sturdy grip. RRP: £139.95. manfrotto.co.uk



WINNER



1

1 HAMISH MCKAY // ANDOVER, HAMPSHIRE: Taken in the Gawler Ranges National Park, I feel this image encapsulates some of the great aspects of Australia's beautiful nature and landscapes.

2 JUSTIN CLIFFE // WEST BYFLEET, SURREY: The curving lines on the tiled roof of the Sydney Opera House contrasting with the wisps of cloud in the vivid blue sky inspired me to capture this image.

3 ALEXANDRA HANLON // CHELTENHAM, GLOUCESTERSHIRE: I was on Manly Beach in Sydney — a spontaneous picture opportunity materialised as a light storm came in over the Pacific.

2



3



To find out more about the next theme, enter and for T&Cs visit NATGEOTRAVELLER.CO.UK

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