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TO SPECTACULAR WILDLIFE
— WELCOME TO THE LAND
OF THE RISING SUN

GUATEMALA

Volcanoes, giant kites
& Maya blessings in the
Western Highlands

ISRAEL

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May/Jun
2020

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Fukito Katsuno, a volunteer at a teahouse in the Kiso Valley, Japan.

IMAGE: Ben Weller

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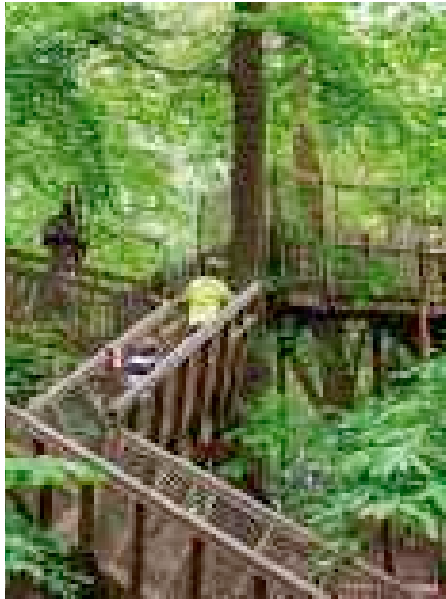
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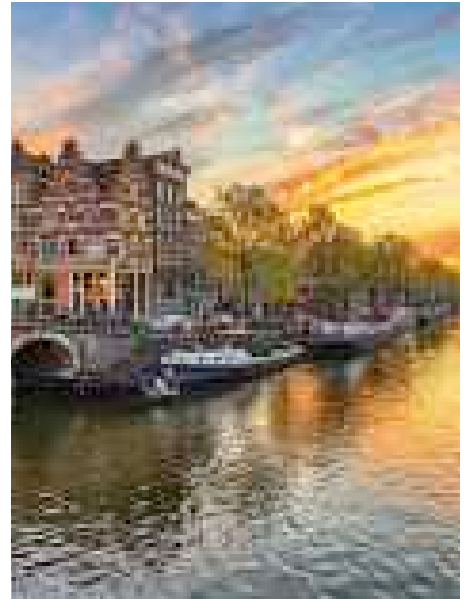
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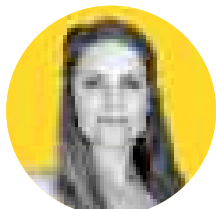
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Contributors



David Whitley

It's easy to write Prague off as just another European city with a pretty Old Town, but venture further out from the centre and the Czech capital shows that it is much more multifaceted. And the beer, of course, is still excellent. **PRAGUE P.44**



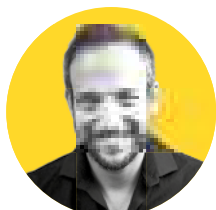
Amelia Duggan

Guatemala is known for its Maya ruins, but this ancient culture lives on in the indigenous communities of the Western Highlands. Here, I camped by a live volcano, partook in fiery blessings and flew kites for the Day of the Dead. **GUATEMALA P.72**



Emma Thomson

Snaking across the Upper and Lower Galilee, the regions through which Jesus roamed, is Yam le Yam — the sea-to-sea hiking trail that's the perfect introduction to everything that makes this compact country so unique. **ISRAEL P.82**



Aaron Millar

Living in Denver is like the ultimate urban adventure — all the best food, arts and culture of one of America's hottest up-and-coming cities, but with the mountains, skiing, hiking and outdoor bliss just a few miles from your doorstep. **DENVER P.124**



Tamsin Wressell

Zambia and Zimbabwe's wildlife plays a vital role in its economy, so the effects of poaching are far-reaching. I met the conservationists dedicating their lives to battling the impact poaching has on this precious ecosystem. **ANTI-POACHING P.150**



TRAVELLER



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Editor's letter

For many of us, travel is integral to who we are — it's in our hearts, our minds, our souls. And yet, here we are, in unprecedented times. Travel is, for the time being, stalled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of going to press, borders are closed, airports are silent, planes are grounded and people worldwide are severely curtailing their movement. Health and wellbeing, rightly, are at the forefront of our minds.

But, like all crises, this will pass. And the hope is that we'll emerge united — and perhaps more resilient, too. Despite the challenges posed, for many of you, the desire to travel will remain. And if there's one thing we strive for at *National Geographic Traveller*, it's to ensure this magazine offers as much to those readers who aspire to travel as it does to the ones who are already committed globetrotters.

So if you're an armchair traveller for the time being, you've picked the best place to be. Journey with us from the Guatemalan Highlands to the newest hiking route in Israel, enjoy Japan's natural wonders, and get an inside perspective on Lima's artistic renaissance.

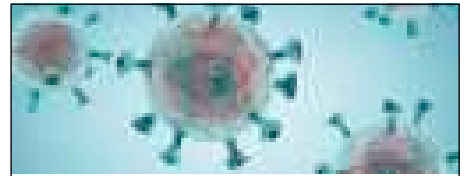
Travel is, at its heart, as much about fascination and learning as it is about physical exploration. Now it's temporarily on hold, this is a time to stoke your imagination for all the journeys yet to be made.

PAT RIDDELL, EDITOR



AWARD-WINNING NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER

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Covid-19 pandemic

The ongoing coronavirus situation continues to affect travel. For more information, visit fco.gov.uk

Stay up to date on the science behind the outbreak at nationalgeographic.co.uk/coronavirus

DON'T MISS



Travel Writing Competition

Our quest to find the best new travel writing talent has begun. Enter today for your chance to be published in the magazine (p.156)

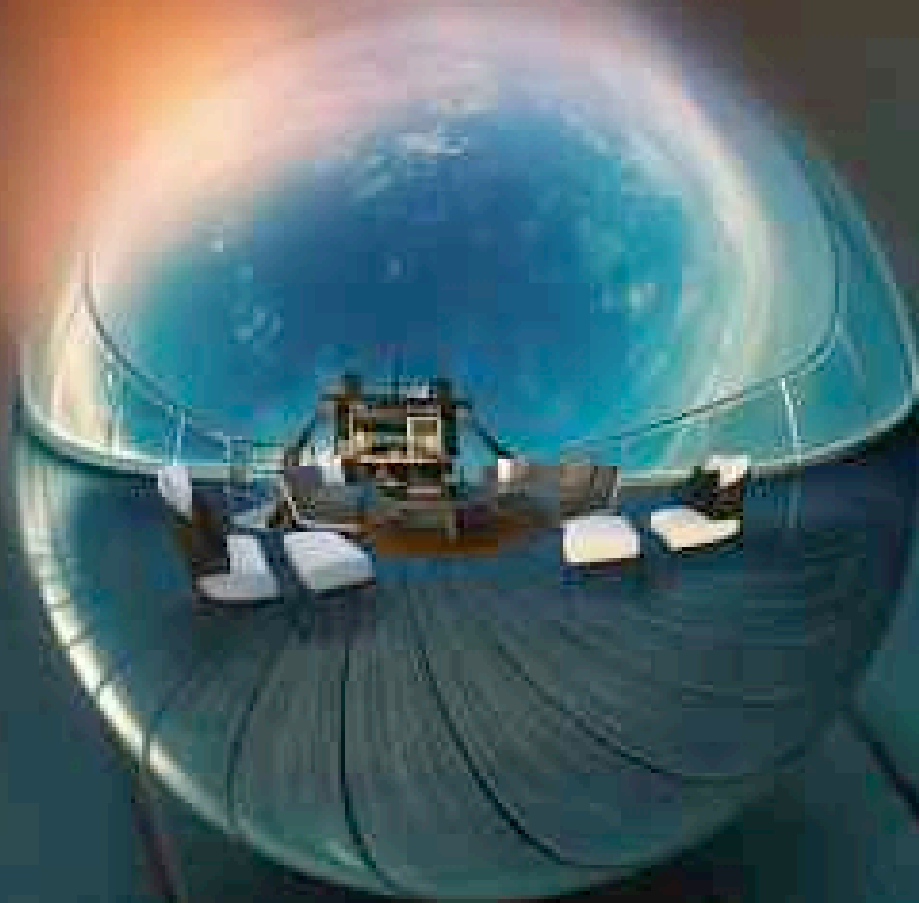
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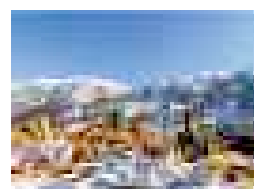
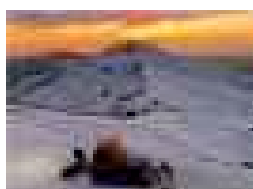
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SMART TRAVELLER

What's new // Food // On the trail // Family // Inside guide // Stay at home

SNAPSHOT

Toni Cătălin, Pogonești, Romania

Toni, aged 16, dons a vibrant goat costume at the colourful Festival of Winter Customs in the small village of Pogonești in northeastern Romania. Villagers dress up as a goat, called 'capra' in Romanian, by wearing a dazzling, multicoloured costume adorned with mirrors, tinsel, beads, tassels, ribbons and bells, and even some goat or rabbit fur. It also comes with a wooden head, whose lower jaw bone is loose so it can clatter and make plenty of noise. Around Christmastime, the goat is accompanied by a group of singers; together they call at every house in the village and sing and dance in exchange for money, fruits and sweets. But as striking as it is, the costume's main aim is to disguise the wearer as they set off on their tour of the village. There are many such winter festivals all over Romania, mostly in the regions of Bucovina and Moldova.

ALECSANDRA RALUCA DRĂGOI // PHOTOGRAPHER

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BIG PICTURE

*Lemurian Salt Lake,
Ukraine*

After an arduous, eight-hour drive on poor local roads through the Kherson region, I arrived at the 'Dead Sea of Ukraine', but felt as though I was looking at another planet. With this image, I wanted to capture the lake's extraterrestrial appearance as well as its hypnotic pink hue, which is caused by microscopic algae in the water. I used a drone, which revealed a number of striking results from above — the sheer size of the lake, as my friends and I walked along the water's edge, as well as the abstract shapes of animals and people created by the swirling, smudged layers of salt on the shoreline. It's one in a series of shots that truly convey the drama of this unusual place.

YEVHEN SAMUCHENKO // PHOTOGRAPHER

 q-l-n.com

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

A winner of the 2020 Sony World Photography Awards. An exhibition featuring all the winners runs until 4 May at Somerset House, London.

THE ARCTIC

COLD CULTURE

The land of the midnight sun takes centre stage in a major new exhibition at London's British Museum

The Arctic is changing dramatically. Often imagined as a timeless, frozen landscape, scientists believe the region could in fact be ice-free in 80 years. Temperatures there are increasing at twice the world average and last year was the second-warmest summer since records began in 1910. The impact of this is being seen in shrinking ice coverage, thawing permafrost and extensive wildfires.

The Arctic's staggering transformation is at the heart of a new exhibition set to take place at the British Museum this year. Arctic: Culture and Climate has been curated in partnership with indigenous communities from across the region and is the first show to look at the Arctic from the perspective of its people. As well as exploring how contemporary groups are responding and adapting to climate change, the exhibition will also take visitors through the region's fascinating anthropological history.

Four million people live in the Arctic — including 40 different ethnic groups — and evidence of human settlement goes back millennia. Far from being an empty

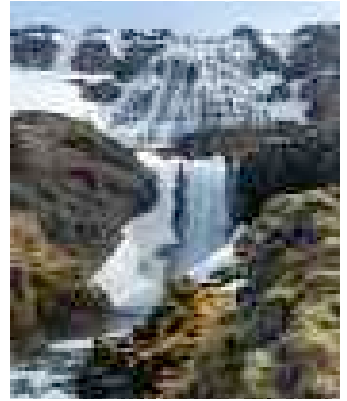
wilderness, the Arctic has a rich cultural tradition. Highlights of the exhibition include 28,000-year-old jewellery made from mammoth ivory and sewing needles carved from walrus tusks, which were discovered at an archaeological site in north-east Siberia. While providing a fascinating insight into a prehistoric community, the site was, rather poignantly, only discovered because rising temperatures have melted the permafrost.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, new artworks including an Inuksuk (an iconic Arctic monument of stacked stones) will be on display as well as immersive photography of the captivating landscapes. The imagery has a dual purpose: to bring the Arctic's breathtaking beauty to life, while also serving to show us exactly what we stand to lose.

britishmuseum.org **GAIL TOLLEY**

DON'T MISS
The Inughuit (Greenlandic) sled made from narwhal, reindeer bone and driftwood. It was traded with explorer Sir John Ross on his expedition to the Northwest Passage in 1818.

NEW ARCTIC TOURS



ICELAND & GREENLAND

This summer, glide through Iceland and Greenland onboard the luxurious liner *Le Boreal*. Offered by Abercrombie & Kent, this two-week excursion will be accompanied by mountaineer Alex Pancoe, fresh from completing the Explorers Grand Slam (climbing the Seven Summits and trips to both poles). Excursions include kayaking Tunulliarfik Fjord in Greenland and summiting Iceland's magnificent Dynjandi Falls. 15 days from \$15,995 (£12,425). 13-27 August. abercrombiekent.com

SWEDEN

Here's a new way to see the Northern Lights — from the dizzying heights of a hot air balloon. Starting this winter, Off the Map Travel is launching the very first ballooning trip into the Arctic night sky. The experience will take you some 130ft in the air as the Aurora Borealis dances around you. You'll stay at the Aurora Safari Camp, a collection of heated tipis nestled among the trees in remote Swedish Lapland. Three days from £2,275. offthemap.travel

RUSSIA

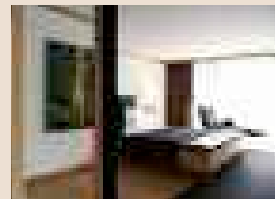
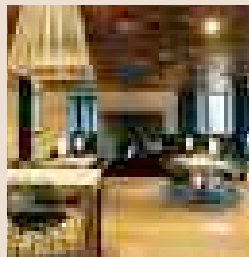
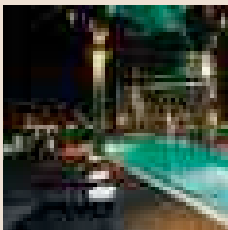
Next year, the *National Geographic Endurance* will take to the seas for the first time. The state-of-the-art vessel has been designed to navigate the polar seas year-round without compromising on comfort. The ship heads to the remote Franz Josef Land archipelago and the Kara Sea for an Arctic trip that truly is at the edge of the world, taking in captivating Arctic wildlife and some of the remotest islands in the world. 24 days from \$26,680 (£18,160). 28 June to 21 July 2021. nationalgeographic.com/expeditions

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NEW ROUTES

CROSSING PATHS

A new series of routes across Wales and Ireland will celebrate a shared Celtic heritage and offer a range of off-piste adventures close to home

Uniting West Wales and Ireland's Ancient East, the new Celtic Routes project offers the chance to discover a side of the UK and Ireland that's seldom explored, with an emphasis on long-neglected history and culture.

This collection of coastal trails and underexplored destinations throws up myths, legends and stories that have long permeated the region's landscapes and cultures — and that's before you even consider the natural beauty of these wild, windswept countries.

The Welsh coastal counties of Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire and their Irish counterparts Wicklow, Wexford and Waterford have put together their best travel experiences revealing must-see destinations and roads less travelled. Culturally curious travellers can discover the 'Celtic Beacons' collection, which highlights historic sites, like Hook Head in County Wexford, where one of the world's oldest operational lighthouses has stood for over 800 years, or the Devil's Bridge in Ceredigion — three separate bridges over the River Mynach, with one built on top of another between the 11th and 19th centuries.

For those looking for seasonal travel experiences, the 'Celtic Moments' are a series of places to visit at specific times throughout the year for a chance to experience unique festivals and occurrences. These range from dolphin-spotting off New Quay in Ceredigion in the summer, whales breaching at Hook Head in November to the spectacular Aberaeron Mackerel Fiesta in late August. Finally, there's also a range of 'Celtic Discoveries' for history buffs, with castles, ruins and sacred stones unveiling tales from a shared past that binds these two nations. celticroutes.info **LAURA PRICE**



Courtown Woodland walk, Wexford, Ireland

RIGHT ON TRACK: NEW CULTURAL ROUTES

BRAZIL

A trail of more than 2,500 miles is being set out through Brazil's Atlantic Forest. In São Paulo state, visitors can hike the Caminhos do Mar, which opened in February and mark several important moments in Brazil's history. ingressosparkespaulistas.com.br

AUSTRALIA

With rock art dating back more than 20,000 years, the Grampians National Park is a prime spot to delve deep into Aboriginal Australian culture. A 22-mile section of the Grampians Peaks Trail is now open; the rest will be completed by the end of 2020. visitgrampians.com.au

SWEDEN

Stretching some 45 miles from Gothenburg to Alingsås, the recently opened Gotaleden trail has options for nine different legs of varying lengths and difficulty levels. For history and culture, try the easy Floda-Tollerod route. gotaleden.se

NEW ZEALAND

The country has just unveiled the 10th of its Great Walks, a series of trails showing off its most iconic spots. Developed for mountain bikers as well as walkers, the Paparoa Track on South Island has significant indigenous history. thepaparoa.co.nz



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SOUTHERN LIGHTS

ELECTRIC DREAMS

Best seen between March and September, the Southern Lights can be equally as dazzling as their northern counterparts

More elusive than the Northern Lights, the limited amount of land from which to view the skies — and the fickle nature of the aurora itself — means glimpsing the Southern Lights (the Aurora Australis) is significantly more difficult. However, aurora-hunters willing to make the effort are often rewarded by stunning ribbons of colour lighting up the night sky, in displays arguably more impressive than their boreal counterparts. May is peak aurora-viewing season as the southern winter draws in, so journey south for the chance to catch sight of nature's most electrifying show.

New Zealand

Light pollution is close to zero in the South Island's Lake Tekapo area, and the summit of Mount John is possibly the best place to head. Book a late evening, two-hour tour of the University of Canterbury Mount John Observatory to look through some of the most powerful telescopes in the country and, if luck's on your side, admire the colourful display of the aurora. Group tours cost around NZ\$185 (£90), but for a private guided experience here and at other locations in the country, Black Tomato can tailor-make an itinerary. blacktomato.com darkskyproject.co.nz

Australia

It's possible to spot the aurora year-round on Tasmania — the best viewpoints are places without light pollution and with unobstructed views to the south. The Tasman Peninsula, Fortescue Bay, Lime Bay and White Beach are great spots, but for a true off-the-beaten-track experience, join Par Avation's three-day Southwest Wilderness Camp tour for the chance to explore Bathurst Harbour Marine Nature Reserve and the waterways of Port Davey — and hopefully see the Southern Lights in all their glory. From AU\$2,495 (£1,290). paravion.com.au

Antarctica

With virtually no light pollution, the White Continent is perhaps the best place on the planet to catch the Lights. A good time for sightings is towards the end of the cruise season (around April) — incidentally a great time for whale-spotting too. Wildfoot Travel offers the 13-night Crossing the Antarctic Circle tour, which ventures as far south as Adelaide Island, with plenty of opportunities to admire the continent's wildlife and otherworldly natural beauty. Departs 15 February 2021. From £8,000 per person. wildfoottravel.com
SAM LEWIS

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School in Galway



Rightly or wrongly, Irish food is often associated with the potato. Yet, the potato came to Ireland relatively late, only becoming a staple for the poor in the 18th and 19th centuries. Dishes heavily associated with Irish food, such as lamb stew and boxty (potato pancake), only emerged after the famine of 1846-1849. This isn't to say they're less relevant to an enquiry into Irish food, but they can't be the only story told.

When the first people migrated here around 10,000 years ago, they ate things we still encounter today: oysters and seaweed, nuts and berries, sea and river fish. Irish food culture has always centred around what's to hand, what's growing on and in the ground. There's a wonderful tradition of using wild food, despite it being something of an undercurrent to the main tradition of

meat and vegetables. Shellfish, since ancient times, has also held a central place in Irish food culture. It was a vital food for the earliest inhabitants of Ireland, and there's very little we don't do with it now.

The 21st century sees our food and its culture growing, in terms of chefs, restaurants and producers who grow the fine produce Ireland has always been noted for. For the first time, I think it's fair to say 'Irish cuisine' exists. With a focus on the sea and the land, we can start to craft a food for the future. That being said, our future needs to stay cognisant of the past; to the waves of migration that changed Irish cooking again and again. The next food wave, whatever it will be, will come from the outside again.

*This is an edited extract from *The Irish Cookbook*, published by Phaidon (RRP: £35)*

Jp's top three Galway restaurants

KAPPA-YA

This is a small Celtic-Japanese fusion restaurant and sake bar located on Middle Street. Expect beautiful sushi and a range of Japanese noodle dishes.

WHAT TO ORDER: The bento box — a beautiful assortment of local food cooked in a sophisticated Japanese manner. kappa-ya.com

HANDSOME BURGER

These are some of the finest burgers in Galway, if not in Ireland. Fast and casual with great service, my daughters and I often go here for burgers and fries.

WHAT TO ORDER: The 'handsome burger' (with cheese) and loaded fries — because sometimes you have to be bold. handsomeburger.com

THE KING'S HEAD

This historic pub and restaurant is located in the heart of the medieval quarter. The pub also serves a range of fish, shellfish and meat dishes.

WHAT TO ORDER: A dozen native oysters. Close your eyes and imagine you're by the sea as you eat them. thekingshead.ie

THE INGREDIENT

Seaweed is essential in our larder. Some varieties, like kelp and sugar kelp, are great in broths and stocks, while others are more delicate, such as pepper dulse and sea lettuce. We use the more delicate one to garnish fish, vegetable and meat dishes



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ON THE TRAIL

OXFORD

Alice, Aslan, Lyra and Lord Voldemort — literary tales abound on a walking tour of the City of Dreaming Spires.

Words: Sarah Barrell

1 THE STORY MUSEUM

Start off at this new addition to Oxford's museum scene, which celebrates the telling of tales in all forms. Author Phillip Pullman co-narrates *City of Stories*, an audio-visual journey through the city's literary history, with fellow University of Oxford alumnus and author Kevin Crossley-Holland. Meanwhile, in *The Shed*, audiences can watch stories being brought to life through puppet shows and theatre and spoken-word performances. storymuseum.org.uk

2 CHRIST CHURCH COLLEGE

Take a tour of the college where *Alice in Wonderland* creator Lewis Carroll lectured in maths and keep an eye out for the little door in the Cathedral Garden said to have inspired the entrance to *Wonderland*. Go punting on the nearby Isis, where Carroll spun a surreal tale to entertain the college dean's daughter, Alice Liddell — supposedly the inspiration for the titular heroine. chch.ox.ac.uk

3 BODLEIAN LIBRARY

Although New College's cloisters and Christ Church's dining hall are Oxford's most iconic Harry Potter film locations (the latter not actually featured but recreated in the films), don't forget to visit the Bodleian; one of its wood-panelled reading rooms, Duke Humfrey's Library, doubled as the Hogwarts library. The gothic vaulted ceiling of the Divinity School, meanwhile, was Harry's hospital ward in the first film. visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk

4 EXETER COLLEGE

Phillip Pullman set much of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy in the city, having studied at this beautiful college. Exeter itself takes a lead role in the recent TV adaptation, as it doubles for Jordan College — Lyra's first home in *Northern Lights*. Can you spot the gabled attic window from which she escapes dreary academic life? Within dashing distance: the Covered Market, another favourite Lyra haunt. experienceoxfordshire.org

5 ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM

The author J R R Tolkien was both a student and professor at the University of Oxford, so it's no surprise the city is littered with artefacts and addresses said to have influenced his most famous works, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit*. Well worth a look are the gold Posie rings at the Ashmolean; the inscriptions on the inside of the hoops are said to have been the inspiration for the all-powerful One Ring. ashmolean.org

6 THE EAGLE AND CHILD

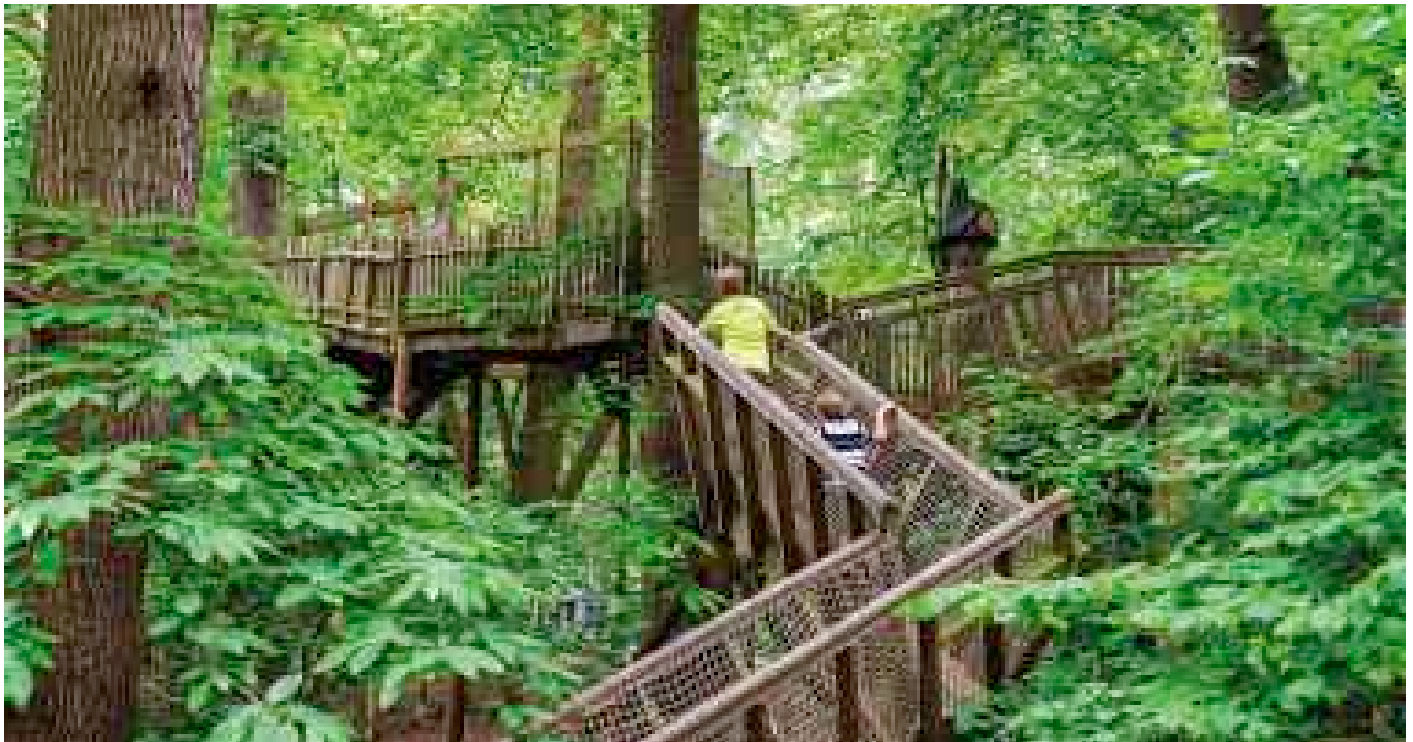
By now you've earned a drink at The Eagle and Child pub, where Tolkien and C S Lewis met with other members of the Inklings literary discussion group (a document, signed by the authors, praising the pub's ham hangs above a fireplace). Then head to Magdalen College, where animals carved into the cloisters are said to have inspired a scene in Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. nicholsonspubs.co.uk magd.ox.ac.uk



FAMILY

TAKE IT OUTSIDE

From floating aqua parks to Peppa Pig-inspired experiences, there's a host of new adventures to discover across England



Go wild in Cheshire

England's second BeWILDerwood is set to open on a 70-acre site in the grounds of Cholmondeley Castle, Cheshire, on 23 May. The £5m forest attraction is based on the original theme park in Norfolk, itself the brainchild of Tom Blofeld, author of *A Boggle at BeWILDerwood*, and features sustainable wooden play structures, aerial ropewalks, climbing walls, balancing logs and muddled mazes for all the family to run, whiz, clamber or wobble on. Plus, there are loads of activities too: from face-painting to arts and crafts and storytelling. bewilderwood.co.uk

Make a splash on the Isle of Wight

The Isle of Wight's first outdoor floating aqua park is set to open at Tapnell Farm this May, measuring a sizeable 50 metres by 80 metres. The park has an inflatable course with more than 20 obstacles joined together to create a series of fun challenges designed to suit varying standards of ability. A section of the lake will also be kept obstacle-free for some more classic aquatic pursuits, such as kayaking, paddleboarding and free swimming. tapnellfarm.com

Discover birdlife in Gloucestershire

As part of a project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, 12 new visitor attractions are opening in stages at Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust on the Severn Estuary, including The Estuary Tower Hide, a fully accessible hide, which opened at the end of 2019. A new open-air Living Wetland Theatre and Waterscapes Aviary will open from Easter 2020, followed by the fully wheelchair-accessible Severn Estuary Walkway and Mission Impossible; the latter looks at the survival success story of the world's rarest goose. wwt.org.uk

Climb trees in Yorkshire

Set within the grand surrounds of Castle Howard near York, Skelf Island is a new treetop adventure, just across the Great Lake in the castle grounds. There's no age restriction on the activity, just the need to be brave. Steely youngsters can expect ingenious treetop nest structures connected by rope bridges, slides, nets and climbing equipment that guarantee a thrilling adventure through the canopy. castlehoward.co.uk

Cause for celebration in Sussex

This spring saw the opening of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve's new Discovery Centre in East Sussex, which features an exciting and innovative programme of activities, education, training and conservation projects to mark its 50th birthday. The 1,110-acre reserve is one of the most biodiverse places in Britain, with 4,200 plant and animal species recorded, and more than 200 rare or endangered bird and mammal species. It's also home to historic buildings such as Henry VIII's Camber Castle. ryeharbourdiscoverycentre.org.uk

...and 25 of the best, country-wide

Check out the new list of must-have experiences for preschoolers and their families inspired by Peppa Pig, part of a new team-up with VisitEngland. The aim is to help young families plan their next adventure, with a children's activity sheet available to download focused on themes such as The Seaside and The Great Outdoors. These include activities such as going on a steam train, rockpooling and building a sandcastle. visitengland.com **MARIA PIERI**



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INSIDE GUIDE

STUTTGART

Be floored by contemporary art, futuristic architecture and life in the fast lane in southern Germany's capital of cool

Stuttgart can rival the likes of Berlin and Munich with its distinctly urban beat, progressive art and architecture, phenomenal galleries and rapidly evolving food-and-drink scene. Inner-city adventures aside, it's also the perfect base for getting out into the countryside, with trails threading into vineyards, and the Black Forest practically on the doorstep.

Big-name attractions here include the futuristic **MERCEDES-BENZ** and **PORSCHE MUSEUMS** (both firms are headquartered in the city). But first, join the locals for a cortado or chai latte at retro-hip **MISCH MISCH** near Marienplatz. From humble coffee van origins, the cafe has carved out a reputation for freshly roasted coffee and delicious homemade cakes. [facebook.com/mischmisch.de](https://www.facebook.com/mischmisch.de)

After a caffeine fix, there's no better place to get acquainted with Stuttgart than at its beating heart: **SCHLOSSPLATZ**. The square is fringed by gardens and backdropped by the baroque **NEUES SCHLOSS**, the city's answer to Versailles. In one corner of the square, you'll spot a huge glass cube housing the impressive **KUNSTMUSEUM STUTTGART**, whose prized collection includes work by Otto Dix and Dieter Roth. Head to the slickly minimalist **CUBE RESTAURANT** on the top floor for expertly mixed highballs, Pacific Rim cooking and wraparound windows affording stellar city views. [neues-schloss-stuttgart.de](https://www.neues-schloss-stuttgart.de) [kunstmuseum-stuttgart.de](https://www.kunstmuseum-stuttgart.de) [cube-restaurant.de](https://www.cube-restaurant.de)

Across the square is the **STADTPALAIS**, housed in a former 19th-century palace. As well as recounting Stuttgart's history, the museum displays exhibitions on themes like graffiti art and urban photography — and the free entry is a bonus. [stadtpalais-stuttgart.de](https://www.stadtpalais-stuttgart.de)

Just off Schlossplatz is **SCHLOSSGARTEN**, former palace gardens are liberally sprinkled with fountains, ponds and sculptures and overlooked by the grand **STAATSTHEATER STUTTGART** theatre. When the sun's out, locals make their way to the shade and benches at

the 2,000-seat **BIERGARTEN IM SCHLOSSGARTEN** for a refreshing kristallweizen beer. [staatstheater-stuttgart.de/biergarten-schlossgarten.de](https://www.staatstheater-stuttgart.de/biergarten-schlossgarten.de)

Walk through the gardens and you'll emerge at the **STAATSGALERIE STUTTGART**, bearing the trademark curvaceous lines of British architect James Stirling. Devote a couple of hours to the collection, which leaps from Picasso's cubist creations to Lichtenstein's pop art. Don't miss recent addition Banksy's *Love is in the Bin* (formerly *Girl with Balloon*, before its infamous shredding at auction in October 2018). For yet another creative fix, don't miss the street art and graffiti at **URBAN ART GALLERY**, tucked away on Rotebühlstrasse. [staatsgalerie.de](https://www.staatsgalerie.de) [urbanartgallery.eu](https://www.urbanartgallery.eu)

A quick U-Bahn (light rail) trundle north of the centre brings you to the **WEISSENHOF ESTATE**, designed by the Swiss-French modern architecture pioneer Le Corbusier and built as housing units under the direction of Bauhaus titan Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. One of the houses is now a museum and presents an innovative series of models, plans and prototypes. [weissenhofmuseum.de](https://www.weissenhofmuseum.de)

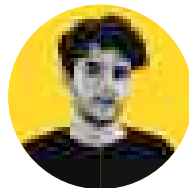
While you're in this neck of the woods, squeeze in a stroll in the charming **KILLESBERGPARK**, bordered by landscaped gardens and pockets of woodland and topped off with the 137ft-tall **KILLESBERG TOWER**, which offers views across the city to the hills beyond.

The Stuttgarter love to while away their free time in the city's excellent array of bars. The **KRAFTPAULE** microbrewery has a post-industrial look, chilled atmosphere and interesting beers on tap, while **PALAST DER REPUBLIK** serves drinks in a former public toilet. And, from April to September, there's the **SKY BEACH STUTTGART** pop up: a happening roof bar atop Galeria Kaufhof department store, with sand, deckchairs, cabana beds, cocktails and DJs. [kraftpaule.de](https://www.kraftpaule.de) [facebook.com/palaststuttgart](https://www.facebook.com/palaststuttgart) [skybeach.de](https://www.skybeach.de) **KERRY WALKER**

LIKE A LOCAL

Tim Bengel's arty hangouts

A social media sensation, Tim is an artist whose work takes in everything from intricate gold-leaf sand paintings to floral cemetery art. [@timbengel](https://www.instagram.com/timbengel) [timbengel.com](https://www.timbengel.com)



PLATTFORM11

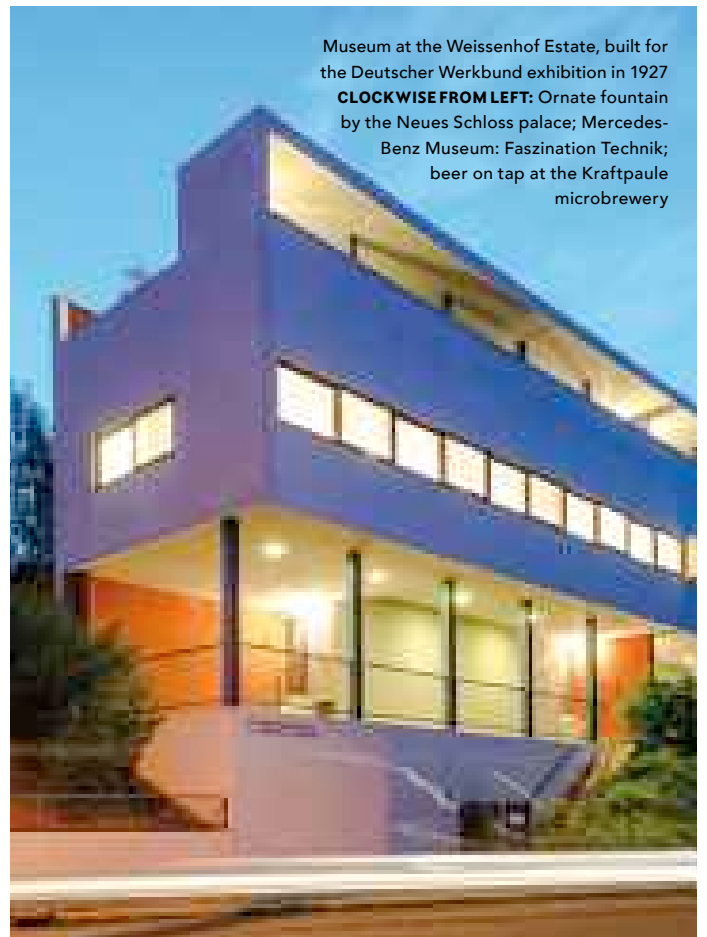
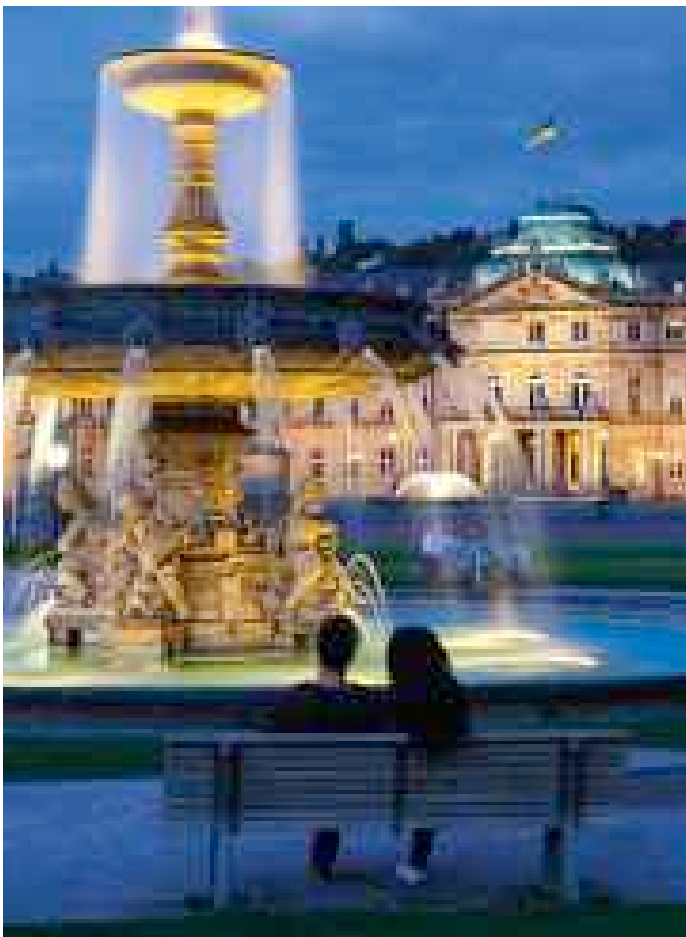
Each year, this collective of local artists organises an exhibition of works including photography, installations and paintings. The events feature music and performance art, and are among the highlights of the cultural calendar. [plattform-11.com](https://www.plattform-11.com)

STUDIO BERKHEIM

This is the best place to discover the rising stars of contemporary art. View art from the likes of painter, sculptor and performance artist Jonathan Meese, artist Conny Maier and cartoonist and illustrator Joan Cornella. [studioberkheim.com](https://www.studioberkheim.com)

STADTBIBLIOTHEK STUTTGART

With its glass skylight, geometric forms and tiered layout, the Eun Young Yi-designed city library is a must-see for architecture-lovers. Entrance is free and it's a great place to relax. [stuttgart.de/stadtbibliothek](https://www.stuttgart.de/stadtbibliothek)



Museum at the Weissenhof Estate, built for the Deutscher Werkbund exhibition in 1927
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Ornate fountain by the Neues Schloss palace; Mercedes-Benz Museum: Faszination Technik; beer on tap at the Kraftpaule microbrewery

Little efforts. Big breaks.

Wave hello to your new favourite island. Feel your heart beat faster in Jersey, Europe's best-kept surf secret, which doubles in size at low tide to uncover hidden worlds to explore. Probably why we walk around with a spring in our step. Want to learn how we roll? Dive in and discover the little island with a big spirit.

DISCOVER

what makes a
little island so
big on spirit.

[Jersey.com/big-spirit](https://jersey.com/big-spirit)
#theislandbreak

The logo for Jersey, featuring a stylized white 'J' with a curved top and bottom, set against a dark background. Below the 'J' is the word 'Jersey' in a white, sans-serif font.

Jersey

STAY AT HOME

NORFOLK COAST

With seaside towns and miles of windswept coastline, the north Norfolk coast offers a wild escape on the edge of England

Why go

Strung with vast and often-deserted beaches, the Norfolk Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is one of the county's primary draws. Base yourself in the heart of the AONB and you'll find plenty to while away a weekend: flint houses and medieval churches in villages like Wells-next-the-Sea and Burnham Market, bracing walks by the sea, and a fantastic food scene, with fresh, locally caught fish popping up on menus all along the coast. visitnorfolk.co.uk

What to do

Thanks to the Norfolk Coast Path, you can explore a large part of the coastline on foot. The nine-mile stretch from Salhouse to Cromer is perhaps the most dramatic section: the path snakes through marram grass, shingle beach and up onto windy bluffs, with the North Sea as a backdrop. Birdwatching opportunities are plenty and, in the spring, it's common to see thousand-strong skeins of pink-footed geese. nationaltrust.org.uk

Where to stay

On the Holkham Estate, five minutes from the beach, The Victoria Inn brims offers an intimate 20 rooms that are all bright and

high-ceilinged, with views across the open parkland. In the drawing room, guests can help themselves to port and whisky before sinking into armchairs — a welcome end to a long day's walk. holkham.co.uk

Where to eat

The White Horse Inn looks out towards the lobster pots and saltmarshes of Scolt Head Island, so it's little wonder the likes of scallops and mussels are the main event at this restaurant in Brancaster Staithe. For a slightly more relaxed setting, head to The Globe Inn in Wells-next-the-Sea for a huge bowl of king prawn squid ink linguine. whitehorsebrancaster.co.uk
theglobeatwells.co.uk

Don't miss

Taking a sailing boat into Norfolk's salt marshes, which feels like one of the UK's last true wildernesses, with the Coastal Exploration Company. As you navigate the maze of tiny waterways, keep an eye out for the seals around Scolt Head Island — Norfolk has the biggest colony in the UK, with pups born around November. coastalexplorationcompany.co.uk

CHARLOTTE WIGRAM-EVANS

WE LIKE

Holkham Hall is a magnificent example of 18th-century Palladian architecture. Home to the Earls of Leicester for more than 400 years, the house is decked out with artworks by the likes of Rubens and Van Dyck. It also sits in a 25,000-acre agricultural estate complete with boating lake and sweeping parkland, where herds of fallow deer roam freely. holkham.co.uk

ABOVE: Remains of an ancient wooden pier at high tide, Thornham Harbour

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One site

The logo features the text 'AVXLIVE' in a bold, yellow-to-white gradient font, followed by a stylized globe with a blue and yellow color scheme, and then 'ICU' in a bold, yellow-to-white gradient font. The entire logo is underlined with a thin white line.

AVXLIVE ICU

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We have everything for all of your needs. Just open <https://avxlive.icu>



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IN THE MIDDLE
OF THE DANUBE**

NOTES FROM AN AUTHOR // MATTHEW WOODWARD

SIBERIA

Crossing one of the world's remotest borders by train proves to be a challenging experience — not least when faced with a language barrier

After waiting around for several hours in a snug cafe at the Russian frontier station of Zabaikalsk, Sergei, the *provodnik* (guard) for my carriage appears from the icy platform and insists I get back on our train immediately. He's changed into his full-dress uniform and is also now wearing punishingly strong aftershave. On the table in my compartment I find a small pile of forms to complete in preparation for the border. This all makes me wonder quite what sort of a crossing it's going to be.

You have to be a relaxed kind of person to not feel a mild sense of anxiety at an international border. Of course, you know the purpose of your travel is legitimate and that your papers are in order, but at the back of your mind, there's a lingering self-doubt that you might look a bit suspicious. In fact, you feel that you might look even more guilty by trying not to look guilty.

The Russian officer who visits my compartment takes a lot of time examining my passport. She looks closely at me for some time, saying absolutely nothing, as if waiting for me to crack under the pressure of the silence. She stares right into my very soul while tapping my passport in one hand and considering what to do with me. Conferring with a colleague, they talk about me at some length in the corridor. She returns and points at the photo page. "Wrong date," she says. Does she think it's a forgery? Perhaps I'm going nowhere today, stuck between the regions of Siberia and Manchuria in the depths of the winter.

Sergei is conspicuous by his absence, and without his translation services, I speak slowly and slightly loudly. The officers look at each other like I'm talking gibberish and decide to seek advice from a higher authority on how to deal with the man in carriage four with a counterfeit passport. They return with reinforcements. Rather worryingly, some carry assault weapons and they also now have a large dog, which clearly isn't a pet. The best English speaker in the unit translates my explanations. They look at me like it can't be true that I have a passport valid for more than 10 years, but eventually concede that it might be possible, just that they've never seen



one before. It takes more than an hour to sort things out, but eventually, it's stamped and returned.

Five hours after we arrived at Zabaikalsk, the Vostok trundles out of the station, complete with its new narrower-gauge bogies (transport trailers). It's getting dark and I turn the lights out so I can see better outside, to find out what happens where Russia meets China.

The Chinese like to make a statement with their borders: in the distance are the colourful bright lights of Manzhouli with its big business hotels, casinos and concrete follies. As my eyes adjust, I notice the cameras. Hundreds of them, pointing in all directions. Cameras looking at cameras. Even cameras angled to look directly into the carriages of our train. Soldiers are standing to attention in little sentry boxes. Then no buildings; just fences, more cameras and searchlights. This must be no man's land. On the opposite line, a train arrives with a fresh delegation of officials who climb on board our train in small detachments. When the officer who appears at the door of my compartment sees my British passport, he briefly admires the Christmas decorations I've hung up before wishing me a "Happy New Year!" with a warm smile and a vigorous handshake.

Life would be rather dull if everything went smoothly all the time. And this is especially true when you're travelling. I've taught myself to use the time to talk to people. Conversation with fellow passengers is an essential part of any rail adventure and there's always a shared bond from the train border experience. You might only have a few words in common, but a smile (and sometimes a bottle of vodka) often reveals more of life than you might imagine. You meet incredible people on trains. Sometimes a little crazy, but always memorable.

“*The Russian officer who visits my compartment takes a lot of time examining my passport. She looks closely at me for some time, saying absolutely nothing, as if waiting for me to crack under the pressure of the silence*

The Railway to Heaven: From the UK to Tibet on the longest and highest railways in the world by Matthew Woodward is published by Lanna Hall, RRP £8.95

 @onthetrails



WHAT'S ONLINE

SWITZERLAND'S CRESTA RUN — WHAT'S CHANGED?

The legendary Cresta Run has now opened up to women, but what's the experience actually like for a female skier? Words: Abigail Butcher

I'm digging my toes into the ground harder than ever before; my body doing a desperate 'plank' for all its worth. I'm straining to look ahead, yet part of me doesn't want to: the ice tunnel looms menacingly, the walls passing fast, and with every drop in altitude, I'm picking up speed; the metal teeth attached to my boots doing little to slow my plunge.

Through Rise, Battledore and Shuttlecock I fly, wondering when this torture will end; ricocheting off one ice wall, sending me drifting uncontrollably into the other side, bashing my wrist and hips in the process. Finally, after a death-defying race down the Bledisloe Straight, under Railway Bridge and through Cresta Leap, I spy three blue lines in the ice that signify The End. Not a moment too soon. As my toboggan slows, I realise I've

held my breath for what seems like the whole 88 seconds of my first 'dart' down the famous Cresta Run in the ski resort of St Moritz in Switzerland. But I'm alive.

I make my way up to a warm portacabin where others await — my 40kg metal toboggan removed on a meat hook by an 'arbiter' (course helper), one of many strange terms I'm learning in this world of Cresta craziness. I sit down, wondering how I'll manage to ride the run again. I'm usually fearless, yet I admit to myself that over the past minute and a half, I've been absolutely terrified. The 'death talk' (aka, safety video) we had an hour before the run did little to explain exactly what riding the Cresta Run was like.

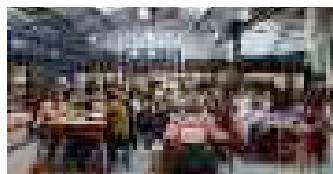
Soon, my fellow beginner riders Sean and Mark appear in the cabin, both in much the

same state as me, which emboldens me to ride again. You see, as a woman I'm in a privileged position. Until December 2018, women were only permitted to ride the Cresta Run for one day a year — the last day of every season. A 98-year rule prohibiting them from practising and competing was finally overturned in a narrow vote at the 2018 AGM.

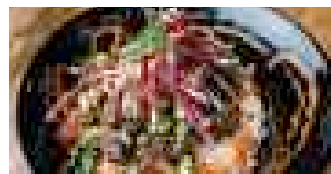
The iconic run has been the preserve of men for so long that a sign on the changing room door proclaims ladies are strictly prohibited from entering. But now they can, thanks to the British military, which told the St Moritz Toboggan Club that it could no longer justify holding its Inter-Services Championship here unless the sport became more inclusive. **READ MORE ONLINE NOW AT [NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.CO.UK/TRAVEL](https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/travel)**

TOP STORIES

Here's what you've been enjoying on the website this month



FRANCE
How culinary capital Lyon is looking to the future
A look at the city's ambitious new gastronomic attraction



USA
What they're eating in Tampa Bay
We round up the dishes making heads turn in the Florida city



EUROPE
Europe's best cities for architecture
From brutalist to baroque, six of Europe's architectural beauties

KOMBUCHA: HOW TO MAKE THE POPULAR FERMENTED BREW

That slightly fermented tea from the east, kombucha, remains firmly on-trend thanks to claims that it's great for gut health. What's more, it's not too difficult to make, as a trip to London's Cookery School proves. Words: Maria Pieri

No one really knows what a scoby is or where it comes from — that's what I've gleaned from the first 15 minutes of this course.

"Yes, it does look like something from *Stranger Things*," says Alice MacKinnon, who's heading today's Ferments & Pickles Course for our group of nine.

And you can't make kombucha without the scoby: kombucha is made from black tea and a symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast — hence the name 'scoby' — which is key to the fermentation process. Scobys, which can be bought online, "loves sugary, black tea — like an English person!" Alice jokes.

"The scoby is known as the 'mother', or 'mushroom', which gives you an idea of its appearance," she adds. "It's usually dense, round, rubbery and opaque with a mild, vinegar-like smell." Alice likens kombucha to other fermented foods and drinks, such

as kefir or sourdough, which require similar symbiotic cultures. "Kombucha is gnarly. When you make it in your environment, it'll be made from bacteria in your area."

The first recorded use of kombucha was in 221 BC in China, although it didn't acquire its name until AD 415 — in Japan.

Kombucha is simple enough to make. We brew up some black tea, add sugar, then allow it to cool in a sterilised glass jar. The scoby is added (Alice has one she made earlier and gives a bit of it to each of us). It's then left at room temperature to ferment for one to four weeks, covered with a cloth gauze.

Alice recommends drinking around half a cup a day, to avoid becoming "gassy", and suggests a range of flavour combinations, including ginger-turmeric, lime-cola, pineapple-chili and beetroot-carrot.

READ THE FULL STORY ONLINE NOW

BEYOND THE TRAVEL SECTION



| PHOTOGRAPHY |

We learn about what it's like to travel through time in Nat Geo's archives

One writer's journey through history in the photo archives in the National Geographic headquarters highlights the importance of mindful travel

| ADVENTURE |

These women were trailblazing explorers — why did history forget them?

Meet the female explorers behind National Geographic and learn about their lasting impact

| SPACE |

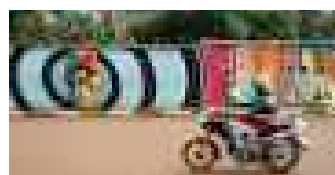
Mars is humming. Scientists aren't sure why

The quiet drone pulses with the beat of quakes rippling around the planet, but the source of this alien music remains unknown



Homemade fermented Kombucha tea
LEFT: Competitors at the start of the 1908 Cresta Run, St Moritz

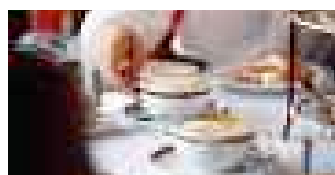
IMAGES: GETTY; REBECCA HALE; PUXAN; WWW.PETERRIGAUD.COM; EMMA GREGG



RWANDA

14 hours in Kigali

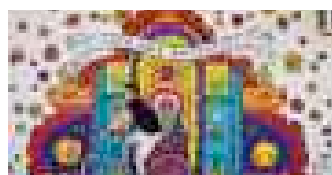
Often a gateway to discover the country's gorillas, the Rwandan capital is well worth exploring



EUROPE

Celebrating 20 of Europe's greatest cafes

Tuck in to some of the greatest coffee houses on the continent



USA

A neighbourhood guide to San Diego

Discovering the Californian city's diverse 'hoods

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WEEKENDER

TICINO

Swiss charm meets la dolce vita in Ticino, Switzerland's southernmost, sole Italian-speaking canton. Words: Sarah Gilbert



Home to historic lakeside cities and a strong tradition of farming and gastronomy, Ticino's cultural sights, scope for outdoor pursuits and culinary gems are an open secret in Switzerland — and yet its name is unfamiliar to many Europeans.

Ticino's regional cuisine is shaped, in part, by its high-altitude tea plantations, rice fields and vineyards — the most famous of which are those around Mendrisiotto in the south, which produces white Merlot. Come in May, when the Open Wine Cellars days offer the chance to be bussed between vineyards for tastings and musical events. The canton's castle-rich capital, Bellinzona, has an unmissable morning market on Saturdays.

Further afield, in the historic lakeside cities of Lugano, Locarno and Ascona, restaurants range from Michelin-starred wonders to simple taverns. There are lots of ways to burn off Ticino's gastronomic treats, however, from hiking, biking and kayaking to climbing and canyoning. For the brave, the area is also home to one of the world's highest bungee jumps — a 721ft leap off the Verzasca Dam.

Ticino has a busy calendar of events, too, including international film festivals; harvest celebrations dedicated to grapes, strawberries and chestnuts; and the Holy Week processions in Mendrisio, which hold UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status.



IMAGES: GETTY

DAY ONE LUGANO

MORNING

Nicknamed the Monte Carlo of Switzerland, Lugano is famed for its Mediterranean-meets-Alpine lakeshore location, the Estival Jazz festival and a museum dedicated to the German writer Hermann Hesse, set in his former home. Start in the grand Piazza della Riforma, and explore the maze of cobblestone streets that fan out around it, lined with boutiques, restaurants and pavement cafes. Have lunch at the opulent Grand Café Al Porto or grab a picnic at family-run Gabbani, which has been selling culinary treats since 1937, including its own salami.

AFTERNOON

Stroll down to Lake Lugano, flanked by forested slopes and dominated by the twin peaks of Monte Brè and Monte San Salvatore, popular with hikers and mountain bikers. Drop in to the Church of Santa Maria degli Angioli, with its frescoes by Bernardino Luini, a pupil of Leonardo da Vinci. Then take the funicular to the top of Monte San Salvatore for epic views before hiking for six miles down through idyllic fields and chestnut forests to the pretty lakeside village of Morcote, before returning to Lugano by boat or bus.

EVENING

Round off the day with a visit to the striking LAC cultural centre for an art exhibition or a concert in its beautiful hall, right on the lakeshore. Or have dinner at buzzy Bottegone Del Vino, a small restaurant with a daily changing menu — such as tuna carpaccio, pumpkin tortellini or mushroom risotto. There's a lengthy wine list, communal tables and terrace seating in summer. Save room for the divine chocolate tart, or head to nearby Vanini Dolce e Caffè and join the queue for ice cream.

TOP 5

Active adventures

TRAIL HIKING

Ticino has over 700 way-marked trails, from leisurely rambles to more challenging hikes and multi-day routes, including an easy loop around Mendrisiotto's vineyards, and the seven-day circular hike up and around the Blinnenhorn.

MOUNTAIN BIKING, BLENIO VALLEY

Whizz down Nara Mountain's scenic Black Wood Line, with plenty of twists and turns, jumps and flat-but-fast trails. The route drops around 1,640ft over two miles.

TANDEM PARAGLIDING, LOCARNO

Taking off from Cimetta, 5,482ft above sea level, soar on mountain thermals and enjoy vistas across the Maggia Valley, the rooftops of Locarno and the sapphire waters of Lake Maggiore. It's possible to hike up and glide down too.

BUNGEE JUMPING, VERZASCA VALLEY

Named after the legendary bungee leap in the opening scenes of *GoldenEye*, make like James Bond and hurtle headfirst over the 721ft-high Verzasca Dam on the 007 Bungee Jump.

ROCK CLIMBING, PONTE BROLLA

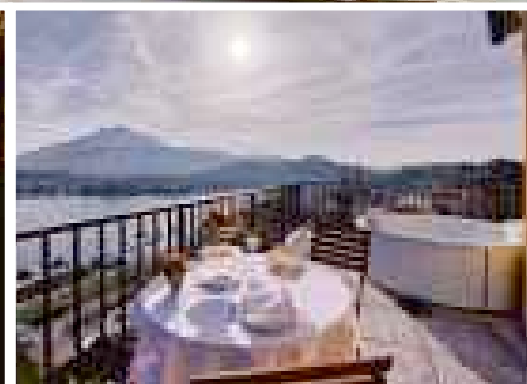
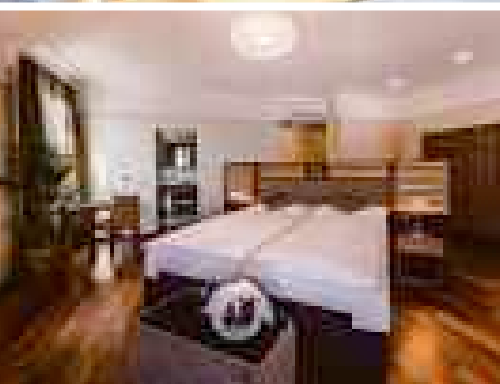
One of Ticino's most popular spots for climbers and boulderers, Ponte Brolla is an imposing granite dome a 15-minute bus ride from Locarno, offering plenty of routes for novice and experienced climbers alike.

ABOVE: Al fresco dining in Lugano's main square, Piazza della Riforma
LEFT: Bell tower of Lugano Cathedral



ART DECO HOTEL MONTANA

SWITZERLAND'S BEST FOUR-STAR CITY HOTEL



The hotel is in a unique location, offering breathtaking views over Lake Lucerne, the city of Lucerne and the mountains of Central Switzerland.

Guests at the MONTANA are enchanted by its gourmet cuisine, which has been awarded 15 points by Gault & Millau, as well as by the charming hospitality. Each of the 61 art deco hotel rooms is a true gem and some even have a whirlpool bath on their private roof terrace.



Pastel-coloured buildings lining
Ascona's waterfront promenade



DAY TWO ASCONA & LOCARNO

MORNING

Just 30 minutes from the Italian border, Switzerland's lowest-lying town, Ascona, has a laid-back feel. Take a stroll along the picturesque waterfront, lined with pastel-coloured buildings, and enjoy an espresso overlooking the glittering blues of Lake Maggiore. Get closer to the water on a standup paddleboard or on a sailing lesson with Asconautica or take a boat trip to Ticino's treasured botanical garden on the twin Brissago Islands, thick with subtropical trees and blooms.

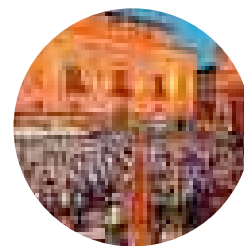
AFTERNOON

Grotto restaurants are a key part of Ticinese food culture, and lunch at Ascona's Grotto Baldoria means feasting at communal tables on simple but delicious dishes, including charcuterie, polenta, risotto and stews. Work it off with a hike up Monte Verità ('mountain of truth'), home to a tea plantation, a Japanese-style tea house and Casa Anatta Museum, dedicated to a group of anarchists, vegetarians, nature enthusiasts and free-love advocates who set up a co-operative here in the early 20th century.

EVENING

Back at Ascona's lakeshore, drink in the sunset with an Aperol spritz or glass of local wine at the Sea Lounge in the old port. Pair it with a sandwich or salad, or for a splurge head to La Brezza, Hotel Eden Roc's Michelin-star restaurant. The four- to seven-course tasting menus offer delicious dishes such as Mediterranean red mullet with fennel and couscous, and ravioli with braised roe deer shank and Jerusalem artichoke. If time, plan an evening treatment at the hotel spa — the ideal spot for R&R.

TICINO'S BEST Festivals



FOR MUSIC LOVERS

Lugano's Estival Jazz festival sees famous and up-and-coming jazz musicians — along with pop, rock, blues and world music artists — from around the globe performing in free, open-air concerts in Piazza della Riforma. (9-11 July).



FOR FILM BUFFS

The Locarno Film Festival has a focus on offbeat themes and global, young and female filmmakers. Alfresco screenings take place every night in the magnificent Piazza Grande, which can hold approximately 8,000 spectators. (5-15 August 2020).



FOR PARTY ATMOSPHERE

At Bellinzona's Rabadan — Switzerland's second-largest carnival — expect lots of parades, brass bands, street theatre and late nights. It all kicks off on Maundy Thursday, when the (symbolic) keys to the city are handed over to the 'king' (the carnival leader) for five nights. (February 2021 dates TBC).

Saturday morning
market in Bellinzona



A TASTE OF TICINO REGIONAL TREATS

TO MARKET

Bellinzona's must-visit Saturday morning market, which extends from Piazza Nosetto to the lanes of the Old Town, is an opportunity for small producers to showcase their wares. Look out for cheeses such as *zincarlin* (a curd cheese); soft, creamy *büsción*; and *formaggio d'alpe*, made with milk from high-altitude cows. Other specialities include *mortadella di fegato*, or pork liver salami, plus pepper mixed with herbs from the Maggia Valley and chestnuts prepared in all manner of ways. And don't miss out on *torta di pane* — a cake made with bread soaked in milk and eggs, pine nuts and dried fruit.

TICINESE GIN

Four friends from the Muggio Valley created organic gin Bisbino, whose botanicals include seven herbs and a secret ingredient — all plucked from the distillery's garden in the village of Sagno, on the slopes of the gin's namesake

mountain. Dry and mellow with light citrusy notes, it's perfect in a Ticinese G&T, made with locally made sparkling water. A tour of the gardens and distillery, including a tasting, costs from CHF25 (£20) per person. wp.bisbino.ch

ONE-OF-A-KIND CHEESE

Surviving against the odds, age-old *zincarlin* cheese is only made by one person, Marialuce Valtulini in the Muggio Valley. Using a recipe handed down by her mother, almost every day for two months she kneads each cheese into its upside-down cup shape, bathing it in white wine to keep the rind soft. Marialuce has also given this flavoursome cheese a modern twist, creating '*gincarlin*' using Bisbino gin.

DOWN ON THE FARM

Terreni alla Maggia, a farm founded 90 years ago in the fertile River Maggia delta near Ascona, is home to the country's only rice

paddy, producing Riso Nostrano Ticinese, used in risotto and beer. It also produces award-winning wines, including Bondola, using a native red grape dating back to the 18th century, and La Lepre, a fruity white Merlot that's perfectly paired with *aperitivi*. Shop for the region's culinary specialities and enjoy a tour and wine tasting from CHF23 (£18) per person. terreniallamaggia.ch

FABULOUS FLOUR

In the village of Vergeletto, tucked into the velvety green folds of the Onsernone Valley, Ilario Garbani has not only restored the ancient watermill but also revived *farina bona* (corn flour). The former teacher researched the historic recipe before installing a coffee roaster, which he says is the secret to the flour's distinctive flavour. It finds its way into everything from pasta and amaretti biscuits to craft beer and ice cream. farinabona.ch ▣

ON THE MENU

Ticino is a slow food hub, from secret-recipe salami and artisan cheeses to nocino, a bittersweet liqueur made from green walnuts, and white Merlot.

MORE INFO

Grand Café Al Porto. grand-cafe-lugano.ch
LAC. luganolac.ch
Asconautica. asconautica.ch
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Monte Verità. monteverita.org/en
Sea Lounge. seven.ch/en/lounges-and-bars/sea-lounge-ascona
Hotel Eden Roc. edenroc.ch
Terreni alla Maggia. terreniallamaggia.ch/en
Mountaingliders. mountaingliders.com
007 Bungee Jump. trekking.ch
Locarno Film Festival. locarnofestival.ch
Lugano Estival Jazz. estivaljazz.ch
ticino.ch/en
myswitzerland.com

HOW TO DO IT

British Airways, Swiss and EasyJet fly to Zurich Airport direct from the UK. From there, you can take a train to Bellinzona (1h50m) and Lugano (2h20m). Another option is to fly to Milan and get a direct train to Lugano (1h20m). ba.com. easyjet.com/swiss.com
Alternatively, the train from London to Lugano takes around 11 hours with a variety of routes and connections.

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NEIGHBOURHOOD

PRAGUE

From the edgy bars cropping up along the regenerated riverfront to the historic monuments of the former Jewish Quarter, getting off the beaten track reveals another side to the Czech capital. By David Whitley



The fall of the Iron Curtain and the rise of budget airlines was a transformative twin hit for Eastern European city breaks, and nowhere felt the benefit more than Prague. The Czech capital already had the fairytale castle, medieval streets and an A to Z of architecture — and from the mid-1990s onwards it enjoyed an explosion of visitors eager to lap it all up. But while the tourist hotspots can become overwhelmingly busy during July and August, genuine local character still remains in neighbourhoods a few footsteps away. That character may be changing as the city settles into the 21st century, but in the likes of Karlín and Vinohrady, it's the locals that are driving the change. In Josefov, on the other hand, the influx of travellers has helped preserve fragile traditions once almost lost forever.

IMAGES: LIBOR SVÁČEK; EVENUE PHOTOGRAPHY

Karlín

The riverside stretch of Karlín feels like it should be the sort of soulless dockland development that cities all over the world try and fail to pitch as cool. The office complexes of River City are showpiece stone-and-glass affairs; and the residential blocks next to them are carrot-like with their deep orange walls giving way to ostentatious green roof gardens. The park here is a scrappy, scrubby affair, with occasional bizarre sculptures, like a tower formed of upturned bathtubs. And yet there's a welcoming vibe to the whole area. As I explore, the loud guitar crunch of a stoner rock band acts as a siren call.

It turns out to be the nightly turn at Příklad 18600, a delightfully ramshackle scrapper of an open-air bar, where beer is served out of a shipping container, there's a big queue for hotdogs, and tyre swings are strung up from the trees. In the playground, a young couple sits on concrete pipes that, for some unfathomable reason, have had periscopes attached to them. Dogs and pushchairs are in liberal supply, a sign of what Karlín is becoming.

Karlín used to be deflated and forgotten, never quite achieving the status of being edgy. And when the great floods of 2002 caused carnage, it should have been a death knell for the neighbourhood. Instead, the disaster kick-started a rejuvenation. River City is the most obvious example of this, but old industrial sites got a makeover too. Forum Karlín, a former steam boiler factory turned concert venue, is one of the most dramatically impressive.

There's now a renewed appreciation throughout Prague for Karlín's long-overlooked merits. Its location, next to the New Town and the Vltava river, helps. The streets are lined with proud-but-elegant art nouveau buildings, and the twin-spired Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius in lawn-covered Karlínské Square is an absolute stunner. As a result, cool cafes, bistros and wine bars have popped up. Luckily, the neighbourhood is still more soul than scene-y, and nowhere is this more apparent than Kasárna Karlín.

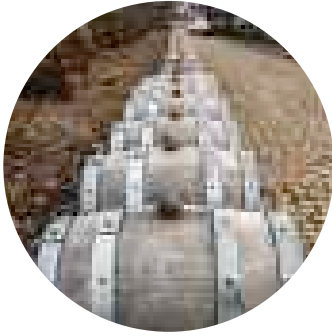
This gigantic former barracks has been transformed into an impressive cultural hub, with galleries and studios in the upper tiers. The huge courtyard is home to outdoor movie screenings, photography exhibitions, a beach volleyball court and some tremendously weird art installations — including one of a podgy unicorn on a rusty plinth. This place symbolises the battle for Karlín's future: the three-year lease was up in March. Will it be allowed to continue, I wonder, or will the barracks be sold for big money development?



Art nouveau architecture in Karlín
BELOW: Eska, a trendy restaurant-cum-bakery located in Karlín
LEFT: Bridges over the Vltava river, the longest in the Czech Republic



When in Prague



1

TANK & CRAFT BEER

Tank beer — poured unfiltered and unpasteurised from copper tanks — is as fresh as it gets. Look for the words ‘z tanku’ on menus and pub exteriors. Craft beer has taken a little longer to catch on, but an increasing number of bars stock them.

2

ICE HOCKEY

Football is the main sport in the Czech Republic, but ice hockey runs it a close second. During winter, top local team Sparta Praha plays at the Tipsport Arena, with tickets very reasonably priced. tipsportarena-praha.cz

3

GARNET

If you want trashy souvenirs, then you’re in luck — Prague has plenty. If you want something genuinely good with a local twist, then jewellery made from garnet is a strong bet. Look for jewellers just off the main tourist route through the Old Town.

4

GARDENS

In the busier chunks of Prague, there’s often glorious respite to be found in small, often walled-off gardens. They’re particularly prevalent in Malá Strana.

5

CZECH WINE

A surprising amount of wine is made in the Moravia region in the east of the country. Very little makes its way over the borders, but key varieties include Svatovavřinecké and Frankovka (red) plus Müller-Thurgau and Grüner Veltliner (white).



Vinohrady

“I was here two days ago with some very picky eaters and we ordered your chicken — it was the best meat we’d had in Prague. I wonder if you also sell cuts?” an eager customer says, bursting into Mikrofarma bistro. That’s the sort of unprompted recommendation you want to hear when you sit down to eat. Mikrofarma, I discover, is an oddity. You can point at any cut of meat on display and a chef in the small adjoining kitchen will cook it for you. It started life some years back as a butcher’s, and now also has shelves full of chutneys, pickles and other deli products. It’s a tiny place, but so are many of the other joints in Vinohrady. They defy the pork-and-dumplings stereotype of Czech cuisine: small ramen, pho and craft beer places have found a home amid Vinohrady’s more characteristic sea of coffeeshops.

It’s those sprinkles of innovation that prevent Vinohrady slipping into moneyed-but-idle pastiche. The area was absorbed into Prague in 1922, during a boom period for the city. The upper middle classes chose to live there, and this continued under communist rule when Vinohrady was eyed with suspicion as a bourgeois hotbed.

Walking in from neighbouring districts,

the change is immediately obvious. Trees suddenly line the streets and buildings go from mousy affairs given a lick of paint to showily proud. Balconies become big, jutting statements, and the decorations on the walls and roofs become fiercely competitive.

Most of these late 19th-century status symbols were built in the Romantic style, which pilfered the best bits from trends of centuries gone by. The same block can have elaborate neo-gothic, neo-Renaissance and neo-baroque efforts, each fighting for attention with frippery. None are more brazen than the Vinohrady Theatre, though, which is topped by two angel statues boasting extravagant wings. It’s a perfect symbol of the district — a thirst for culture married to a lack of concern about displaying wealth.

Rich but broadly tasteful is the vibe, and that also applies to the cafe around the corner. Dolcemente oozes presentational drama. Inside, dried hams hang from the ceiling; outside, the door and window arches are outlined with flowers. But its focus is precise: stunning Italian-style cakes, porchetta sandwiches and blackberry or tiramisu gelato. Again, it’s a brave concept idea that probably wouldn’t work elsewhere in Prague. But Vinohrady embraces the finer things in life.



Josefov's Spanish Synagogue, so-called for its distinctive Moorish architecture
LEFT: Vineyards above Vinohrady at Havlíček Gardens

Josefov

The Spanish Synagogue doesn't look much like a synagogue — the Moorish arches and keyhole windows feel like they belong to an Andalusian mosque. It's completely out of place — but that's in keeping with what the city does best. "Prague is an encyclopaedia of European architectural styles, even through to the 1970s brutalist hotels," says Bonita Rhoads, co-owner of the Insight Cities tour company, "and this district proves this."

To the untrained eye, the neighbourhood of Josefov seamlessly blends into the Old Town. There are no longer walls hiving off the former Jewish ghetto. They were removed in the mid-19th century as the area's dishevelled laneways were replaced by wider, prouder city streets, and Prague's Jews were integrated into city life.

But the historic Jewish burial hall, cemetery and several synagogues remain, and for bleak reasons. While systematically wiping out the Jewish population, the Nazis decided to keep Josefov as a museum to an extinct race. In doing so, they brought in Judaica from across Europe. Much of it — more than 100,000 books, silver treasures, embossed Torah mantles and other artefacts — is still there. Today there's a

museum covering several key buildings — a monument to the horror of the atrocity and the lives of the victims.

A small Jewish community lives in Prague today and the hugely atmospheric, 13th-century Old-New Synagogue is still the main religious centre. Other places of worship in the area have been repurposed. Of these, the Pinkas Synagogue provides a thoroughly haunting gut-punch. Its walls are covered with the names of the 77, 297 Czech Jews killed in the Holocaust, all listed with date of birth and the last known date they were alive. Upstairs, a room is covered in pictures drawn by children while inside the Terezin concentration camp and ghetto.

But despite the glut of souvenir stalls, kosher restaurants and clutch of monuments, the big surprise of Josefov is how little it feels defined by its previous ghetto status. It provides an impressive concentration of Prague art nouveau wonders, with the grand five-storey apartment blocks covered in ever more elaborate statues, swirling plant motifs and orientalist fantasies. Visitors come to Josefov for a simple, dark and well-known narrative, but discover the story is full of complicated tangents. □

MORE INFO

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 Mikrofarma. mikrofarma.cz
 Vinohrady Theatre. divadlonavinohradech.com
 Dolcemente. dolcemente-vinohrady.cz
 Insight Cities. insightcities.com
 Prague Jewish Museum. jewishmuseum.cz
 Prague Post, an English-language newspaper. praguepost.com
 Living Prague, a city guide blog. livingprague.com
 Taste of Prague, a food blog. tasteofprague.com
 The Rough Guide to Prague (2018), by Marc Di Duca. RRP: £13.99.
 Prague City Tourism. prague.eu
 Czech Tourism. czechtourism.com

✈ EasyJet flies to Prague from several UK airports, including Bristol, Gatwick, Manchester and Edinburgh. The quirkily decorated Hotel Amadeus offers affordable rooms in a handy location roughly half way between Karlín and Vinohrady. Rates start at £32, room only. easyjet.com
amadeushotel.cz

SLEEP

AMSTERDAM

Look beyond the canal belt to the Dutch capital's lesser-known neighbourhoods, where regeneration and sustainability are resulting in exciting new hotels. Words: Gavin Haines



Amsterdam still holds strong as one of Europe's most exciting city-break destinations, but with great popularity comes great responsibility. Managing overtourism is no easy feat, but one of the city's winning strategies has been to encourage tourists to think beyond the thronging canal belt. Instead, visitors are seeking adventures in lesser-visited districts, many of which are now connected by the Metro. Neighbourhoods like Noord are seeing start-ups, restaurants and hotels rising from the ashes of industry, while Westergas, a power plant-turned-cultural district, continues to ignite interest in leafy Westerpark. Sustainability is a theme in Houthaven, where an old timber harbour is being transformed into the city's first carbon-neutral neighbourhood, complete with a fancy new riverside hotel. Elsewhere, Amsterdam's bridge houses are being upcycled into quirky apartments — it's all a testament to the city's ability to respectfully reinvent itself.

IMAGE: GETTY



Best for splurging

£££ HOTEL TWENTYSEVEN

A lavish oasis in the heart of Dam Square, next door to the Royal Palace, this exclusive, suites-only hotel is a synonym for sumptuousness. Its 16 individually decorated suites all come with their own steam room, whirlpool bath and butler, and look out across the buzzing centre. The hotel also doubles as an art gallery, displaying an ever-changing selection of works curated by a local gallery. The restaurant and cocktail bar, meanwhile, are among the finest in city.

ROOMS: Suites from £330, room only.

hoteltwentyseven.com

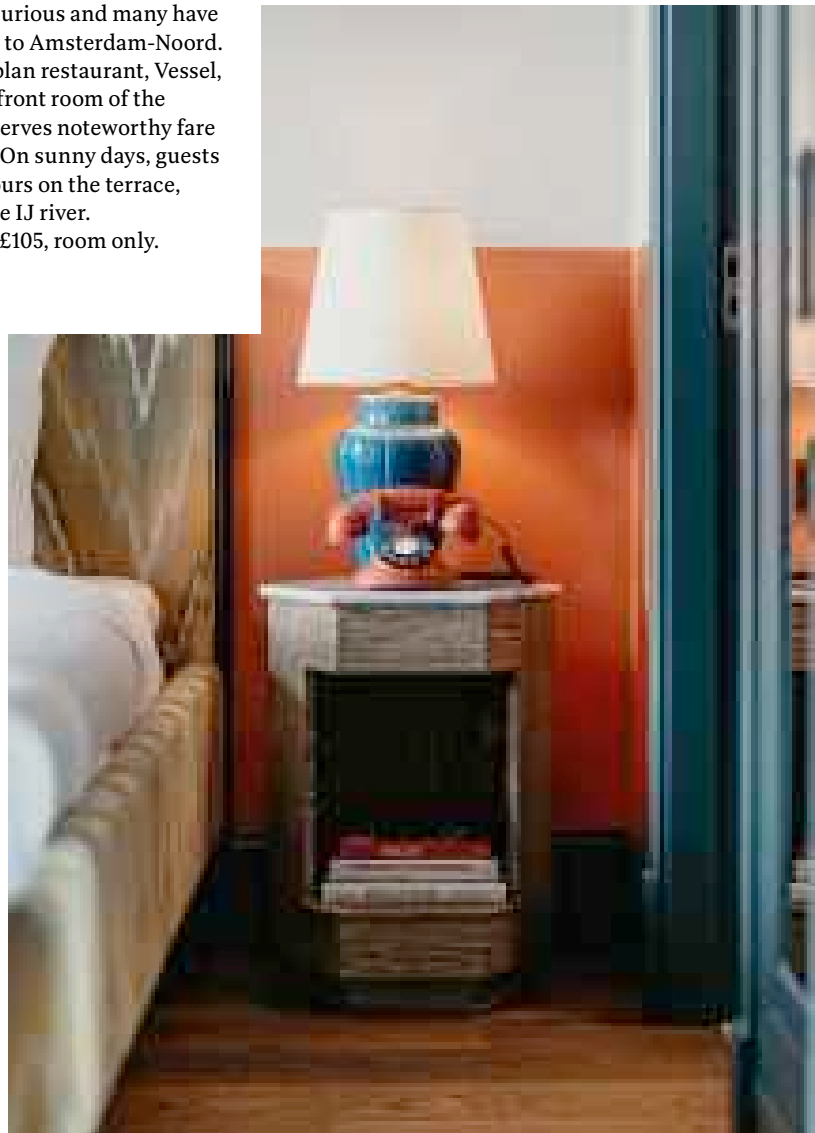


Best for views

BOAT&CO

Built in the traditional Amsterdam School style, BOAT&CO is one of the flagship developments in box-fresh Houthaven, Amsterdam's first carbon-neutral neighbourhood. Located in the west of the city, about 20 minutes on foot from Amsterdam Centraal, the riverside aparthotel is refined but unpretentious. Rooms are quietly luxurious and many have views over the IJ river to Amsterdam-Noord. The cavernous open-plan restaurant, Vessel, is intended to be 'the front room of the neighbourhood' and serves noteworthy fare in elegant surrounds. On sunny days, guests can while away the hours on the terrace, watching ships sail the IJ river.

ROOMS: Studios from £105, room only.
boatandco.nl





Best for kicking back
£££ PESTANA AMSTERDAM RIVERSIDE

Housed in a striking building — formerly Amsterdam’s City Hall — this 154-room hotel overlooks the city’s main river, the Amstel, on the edge of uber-trendy De Pijp. In contrast to the elaborate exterior, the interior is contemporary with occasional flashes of art borrowed from museum depots. Unusually for Amsterdam, the hotel has a good-sized swimming pool and there are excellent spa facilities. Peter Lute, a Dutch celebrity chef, heads up the in-house restaurant.
ROOMS: From £120. pestanacollection.com

Best for Sinophiles

🏨 HOTEL MAI

MAI pulls off the enviable trick of being in the heart of the city, without feeling like it. Formerly a warehouse that stored imported goods from the Far East, this historic Chinatown property is sympathetic to the neighbourhood’s heritage with frequent use of gold and red, which symbolise wealth and luck in Chinese culture. A short walk from Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam Centraal and the Red Light District, there are plenty of distractions on MAI’s doorstep, too.
ROOMS: Doubles from £70. hotelmaiamsterdam.com

Best for futurists

🏨 YOTEL AMSTERDAM

The reasons to visit Amsterdam Noord become more compelling by the year. The latest hotel to pop up in the old industrial district is the quietly eccentric Yotel. The modular hotel is stacked like LEGO and its adaptable rooms (beds fold out) are supposedly inspired by business-class cabins, though they’re mercifully much roomier. The hotel is 10 minutes on foot from A’DAM Tower, the trendy NDSM district and the free ferry to Centraal.
ROOMS: Doubles from £65, room only. yotel.com

Best for nostalgia

🏨 SWEETS HOTEL

Hiding in plain sight across the capital, Amsterdam’s cosy bridge houses used to be the domain of the city’s bridge operators, who now work remotely from an office. In their absence, the 28 vacant huts, some of which are suspended above the canals, have been reborn as the SWEETS Hotel. While drifting off to the sound swooshing barges, guests can contemplate what life was like for the old bridge masters.
ROOMS: Doubles from £105, room only. sweetshotel.amsterdam





Best for flower power

🌿🌿🌿 HOTEL JAKARTA

Hotel Jakarta in the Eastern Docklands, a short tram ride from the city centre is built on a man-made island in the middle of the IJ — from which ships used to depart for the East Indies, hence the name — Jakarta is dominated by an indoor subtropical garden. Focusing on its sustainability credentials, the building meets much of its energy needs through solar panels and geothermal heat pumps and the rooms are bedecked in fast-growing bamboo. There's also a buzzing bar and restaurant located within the garden.

ROOMS: Doubles from £140, B&B.

hoteljakarta.com

Best for history buffs

🚢🚢 HOTEL ASILE FLOTTANT

Consisting of six boats saved from the breaker's yard and converted into sumptuous tourist accommodation. In their previous lives, some of the vessels were used for fishing or to transport cargo, but all have interesting stories. The largest accommodate up to six guests and some even have bathtubs. All boats are docked near De Ceuvel, a shipyard-turned-eco-hub in Noord, where old boats have been dragged ashore and converted into offices for social enterprises. The hub is also home to Café de Ceuvel, a snack bar and late-night pub.

ROOMS: Boats from £230 for two nights, room only. asileflottant.com





Best for vegans
🌱🌱 QO AMSTERDAM

The idea behind QO was to build the most sustainable hotel in Europe. Constructed partly from reclaimed materials, including second-hand concrete, the new-build property has been installed with a biofuel boiler; shutters that close when rooms are empty in order to keep them cool and limit the use of air-con; and a rooftop greenhouse that supplies the hotel's two vegan-friendly restaurants with fruit, veg and herbs. Rooms have a chic post-industrial aesthetic and are comfortable, albeit not particularly cosy.

ROOMS: Doubles from £97, room only.
qo-amsterdam.com

Best for park life
🌱 CONSCIOUS HOTEL WESTERPARK

Conscious Hotels is on a mission to 'make sustainability sexy' while keeping prices low. It's a model that seems to be working — the burgeoning chain has opened hotel number four in the Westergas complex, a power plant-turned-cultural district located in leafy Westerpark. Supposedly the Netherlands' first all-electric hotel, handsome and unfussy rooms are kitted out with smart cradle-to-cradle furniture and look onto Westerpark. Downstairs, Bar Kantoor has become a popular local haunt.

ROOMS: Doubles from £80, room only.
conscioushotels.com 🏠



THE NATURAL WONDERS OF

Japan

The Land of the Rising Sun shines with a wealth of natural treasures, from blossom-strewn gardens and steaming onsens to formidable volcanoes, show-stopping wildlife and more than 6,000 islands.

Go beyond the glittering metropolises and immerse yourself in nature...

Welcome to the wild, wild East

WORDS **JAMIE LAFFERTY, OLIVER SMITH,
CHRIS THARP & CHARLOTTE WIGRAM-EVANS**



IMAGE: JORDAN BANKS



Hokkaido

Call of the wild

Japan's northernmost prefecture, Hokkaido, is also its wildest. As the brown bears enter hibernation and the locals get out their overcoats, the laid-back cities and volcanic landscape are coated in a blanket of snow and ice — perfect for adventurous snowshoeing, hearty dining and, for one week in early February, visiting the legendary Sapporo Snow Festival. Words: Chris Tharp

Everyone says the snows have come late, but as we pull out of Asahidake, Hokkaido's second-biggest city, everywhere is coated in a glistening white. A storm has been brewing in the heavens above us and, as we drive, it unleashes millions of flakes, which pile up on the rooftops and weigh down the tree branches. The road is now a compact pancake of glossy ivory, but my guide, Ido Gabay, drives like it's just another Monday morning.

"It's been the worst snow season in more than 25 years," he says, gripping the wheel. "But it looks like, finally, you've brought some weather with you."

Ido, who's rangy and gregarious, is the proprietor of Hokkaido Nature Tours, which specialises in the natural splendour of Japan's northernmost island prefecture, Hokkaido. Today, he's taking me into Daisetsuzan National Park — Hokkaido's largest — to discover the mountains.

We stop at a pure, icy spring to fill our water bottles, then strap on our snowshoes and hit the trail. The snow continues to swirl, at times enveloping us and obscuring the landscape, as we shuffle up Tenninkyō Gorge. A crystalline river flows to our right, and snow hare tracks punctuate the pristine powder along our trail.

"I sometimes catch them by surprise when snowboarding," Ido says. "Though here they feel our footsteps through the ground and are gone long before we can see them."

Soon, we reach our destination: Hagaromo Falls, which spills down the rock face in misty, sensuous streams. Ido pours us tea from a flask and we sip the brew in reverential silence, soaking in the beauty of the undulating cascades. Hagaromo, Ido explains, means 'angel's flowing robes' — a name that fits the falls perfectly.

Our next stop is at the base of the dormant volcano, Asahidake, which, at 7,515ft, is the island's highest peak. We take a ropeway cable-car (filled with European skiers who've come to plough through the island's famous powder) and step out onto a wide plateau.

It's a scene to drink in: the whole of the landscape is smothered in a deep, unblemished white, and a frigid wind scours the mountainside, kicking up clouds of powder. The skiers slide by and shoot down their runs, while we deploy our snowshoes and trudge towards Asahidake's stony rise. We soon arrive at the mouths of two fumaroles, volcanic vents that spew forth sulphuric smoke and steam. Acrid vapours sting my nostrils as I stand there in the driving snow, staring into these hissing, otherworldly portals. I'm witnessing nature in its purest, most unpredictable form, and I'm gripped with a kind of heady electricity.

This is why I've come here in winter.

"People in Sapporo are known for being laid-back," says Yuichi Kudo, a local guide, as we make our way along the ice-slicked pavements of Hokkaido's capital, later in my trip. "We're open-minded and tolerant, though the rest of Japan thinks we're kind of slow, which is true, really: we like to drive slow, we walk slow, and we even talk slow."

The Sapporo Snow Festival is in full swing, and we amble around, taking in an ice sculpture exhibition that stretches for a good four city blocks. The sun lingers behind the low haze of grey, and snow blows down in sharp, diagonal blasts. I bundle my jacket and throw up my hood, but Yuichi braves the onslaught without covering his head.

"I'm a local," he laughs. "I'm used to it."

After a visit to the seafood market, Yuichi escorts me back to my hotel, where I soak

away the cold in the steamy waters of the onsen. Warmed and re-energized, I head back out to the Festival's main venue: Odori Park.

A gumbo of languages bubble around me, reflecting the event's international appeal, as I marvel at giant snow sculptures of subjects as varied as cutesy anime characters, Hokkaido's native wildlife and ancient cultural symbols from the island's indigenous Ainu people. All are illuminated by floodlights and feature multimedia projection shows. There's also a snowboard exhibition, wine- and sake-tasting, music performances and a whole smoking lounge constructed from glistening blocks of ice.

While I'm dazzled by the snow art, I soon realise food is the real star of the show. The whole of the concourse is lined with stalls offering up local specialities: ramen, grilled meat, veggies, sweets and fresh seafood of every stripe. Over the course of the evening I try skewers of venison, crab and fried chicken, washing it all down with hot sake.

Red-cheeked and tipsy, I finish the night in front of a snowy replica of Warsaw's Łazienki Palace, celebrating Poland and Japan's diplomatic centennial. A pianist sits at the lip of the stage, plinking out Japanese pop songs and classical pieces. As I take my final sip of sake, I feel its warmth blossom in my chest. Outside, the temperature continues to plummet and the snow continues to fall.

InsideJapan offers a 14-night Winter Highlights small group tour costing from £4,295 per person, taking in the Sapporo Snow Festival, spotting sea eagles off the Shiretoko Peninsula and ice flows off Abashiri. Includes accommodation in hotels including OMO7 Asahikawa, transfers and the full-time services of a tour leader. Excludes international flights. insidejapantours.com omo-hotels.com/asahikawa snowfes.com



Mount Asahi, Daisetsuzan National Park
CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: Japanese spider crab claws on sale at a fish market in Sapporo; red crowned crane, in Tsurui Mura, eastern Hokkaido; snowshoeing in Sounkyo Gorge, Daisetsuzan National Park
PREVIOUS PAGES: Mount Fuji reflecting in Lake Kawaguchi at sunrise

Kogarashi

A wind that shakes the leaves from trees and is said to herald the onset of winter





MORE WINTER ADVENTURES

Cruise through drift ice

Ice from Russia's Amur River flows southward to Hokkaido in the winter and it's possible to witness this phenomenon from the deck of an icebreaker. The best spot for this is the port of Abashiri on the Sea of Okhotsk, just 40 minutes by bus from Monbetsu Airport. Take a sightseeing cruise on the *Aurora*. ms-aurora.com/abashiri

Meet the snow monsters

In wintertime, the snow-smothered fir trees overlooking the ski resort village of Zao Onsen in Honshu transform, taking on beautiful, otherworldly shapes. Marvel at these natural snow sculptures as you ski, snowboard, ride a cable-car, or take a night cruise in a specially constructed snow vehicle. zao-spa.or.jp

Go ice-fishing

An hour outside Hokkaido's capital, Lake Shinotsu is the perfect spot for some ice fishing. Nearby, a calming hot-spring soak awaits before you return to the bustle of the city. Chuo Bus offers full-day tours to Shinotsu from Sapporo. uu-hokkaido.com

Try dog-sledding

Hokkaido's raw splendour and winter traditions are highlighted on a dog-sledding experience in Takasu, a city near Asahikawa. After an hour's training session, you're ready to pilot a sled pulled by a team of happy, well-cared-for canines across a snow-covered, four-mile course. moonlightladies.info

Visit the Yokote Kamakura Snow Festival

Located in northwestern Honshu's Akita Prefecture, this centuries-old festival (which is held between 15-16 February each year) features hundreds of snow domes called *kamakura*. Visitors enter the candlelit structures and sample sweet sake and rice cakes. There are also food stalls, snow sculptures and special events, lending a modern vibe to this most traditional of celebrations. japan.travel **CT**



Animal magic

Hokkaido's Shiretoko

Peninsula is one of the most sparsely populated areas in Japan — at least by humans. The area's woods, rivers and mountains are home to an impressive roster of fauna. Guide Tyler Palma, from InsideJapan Tours, explains more

BROWN BEARS

The best time to see brown bears — which number around 3,000 on Hokkaido — is during summer. Perhaps surprisingly, the safest way to view them is by boat. When hiking in areas with bears, you'll hear the constant jangling of bear bells coming from the rucksacks of Japanese hikers since brown bears can be aggressive. **HOW TO DO IT:** Take a bear cruise in Utoro with operator Gojiraiwa Kanko. Alternatively, guided walks through bear country are available at Goko Lakes Trail, Shiretoko National Park. kamuiwakka.jp/cruising goko.go.jp

EZO ANIMALS

Ezo is a term with its roots in Japan's feudal history; it's used to refer to the lands north of Honshu, Japan's mainland. Hokkaido is home to Ezo deer and Ezo red fox. Also look out for are Ezo momonga (flying squirrel) and the Ezo crying rabbit, a type of pika that's said to have provided inspiration for the Pokemon character, Pikachu. **HOW TO DO IT:** The conservationists at Picchio Wildlife Research Center in Utoro offer educational wildlife tours. shiretoko-picchio.com

BLAKISTON'S FISH OWL

While the iconic Japanese cranes get a lot of attention in winter, for any birdwatcher, Blakiston's fish owl is reason enough to journey to the wilds of Hokkaido. Not only is this the largest species of owl in the world, it can regularly be seen on the Shiretoko Peninsula despite the fact that only about 150 owls currently remain in the wild. **HOW TO DO IT:** Head to the small Washi no Yado (Eagle Inn) guesthouse near Rausu, which the owls visit nightly. fishowl-observatory.org

WHALES & DOLPHINS

Orcas, sperm whales and Baird's beaked whales are all attracted by the nutrient-rich waters around Hokkaido and can regularly be seen on summertime cruises. **HOW TO DO IT:** Whale-watching boats, such as those operated by tour company Shiretoko Rausu Lincle, depart daily from Rausu. shiretoko-rausu-lincle.com JL

For more information about InsideJapan Tour's wildlife tours, visit insidejapantours.com

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Skiing in Niseko, Hokkaido; Blakiston's fish owl, an endangered species of which just 150 live in Hokkaido; a mother Ezo deer and her fawn, in Kamuiwakka Falls in Shiretoko National Park; Ezo foxes near Mount Tokachi, Hokkaido



Komorebi

The way sunshine streams through the leaves of a tree



Mono-no-aware

Literally 'the pathos of things'; appreciating the transience of the world

JAPAN IN BLOOM


The samurai poet Watsujin once wrote the following haiku: 'The cherry blossoms/ Put the whole world/ Under the tree.' He'd have had no idea that a couple of centuries later, the poem could feel quite literal in Kyoto, Osaka and Tokyo each spring. So popular has the *sakura* (cherry blossom) or *hanami* (flower-viewing) season become that the cities often see their hotel occupancies filled long before the blossoms peak in April. Cherry blossom fever infects every part of life, with *sakura* KitKats, *sakura* Starbucks lattes, even a *sakura* beer. Whether any of it tastes nice hardly seems to matter during the height of *hanami* mania.

If that all sounds a bit much, it might be worth casting your eyes further afield. To avoid the crowds, head to Mito in Ibaraki Prefecture. The home of Kairaku-en — one of the three official Great Gardens of Japan — Mito has become famous for its sensational plum blossom, which precedes the cherry trees, in February.

Alternatively, if you prefer your colour wheel to have a little more variety, come for Japan's magnificent leaf-peeping opportunities in autumn. While *hanami* season starts in the south and edges north, it stands to reason that the opposite is true of autumn, which begins on far-flung Hokkaido in late September and sinks like a cooling thermometer all the way down to Kyushu in early December. JL





Chidorigafuchi Park during cherry blossom season, Tokyo 



Pilgrimages & peaks

From its spectacular coasts to its dramatic volcanic interior, Japan is scored with hiking trails, both ancient and modern. Walk Japan CEO Paul Christie — a resident of Japan for two decades — has explored the length and breadth of the country and shares five of his all-time favourite rambles

FOR CULTURE-SEEKERS & SAMURAI NAKASENDO WAY

ROUTE: Kyoto to Tokyo
LENGTH: 74 miles (shorter sections available)
 The trail's history goes back to the days of the samurai, but it's also a great introduction to modern Japan. Not only are you walking through the diverse geography between the cultural cradle of Kyoto and the metropolitan modern capital of Tokyo, you're also experiencing Japan's history, culture and society close-up. Passing through little-visited regions, you can enjoy hearty, rural meals and overnight in picturesque communities like Sekigahara, Magome, Tsumago, Narai and Karuizawa. It's a great way to discover just how fascinating — and welcoming — the country can be. The trip can last between eight to 12 days, depending on the route.

FOR BRIDGES & BUDDHISM THE KUNISAKI TREK

ROUTE: Fukuoka to Yufuin
LENGTH: 44 miles
 I lived on the Kunisaki Peninsula for 18 years, so maybe I'm a little biased, but I think it's one of the most beautiful areas of Japan. It's one of the oldest and greatest centres of Buddhism in Japan, with fascinating trails once followed by monks in prayer and meditation. The eight-day Kunisaki Trek visits some exquisite temples and quiet hamlets set in a serene landscape, as well as passing along craggy ridges and over towering cliffs. This does demand a decent level of fitness and a reasonable head for heights. Once on the peaks, you're rewarded with breathtaking scenery and the thrill of negotiating the narrow ridges. If you're after an authentic taste of Japan, look no further.



FOR GOING OFF THE BEATEN TRACK
THE HOKKAIDO HIKE

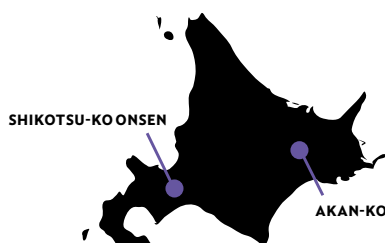
ROUTE: Akan-ko to Shikotsu-ko Onsen
LENGTH: 42 miles
 This is serious hiking, trudging up and down peaks in Japan's last major wilderness. Even the tour leaders only tend to do one of these a season. It's a 10-day trek, and you can be walking up to eight hours a day and up to 6,500ft above sea level, overnighing in small, comfy hotels. There are bears in these parts, too, so a trained guide is essential, and the best time to go is between July and September. You'll find rare alpine flowers in mountain passes, hike through forests and wetlands, and face explosions of water vapour from dramatic volcanic vents. There's the chance to spot wildlife too — sightings can include foxes, deer and eagles.

FROM LEFT: Hikers on the Yoshida Trail on the way up Mount Fuji; Mount Fuji from the north side of Lake Motosu as it appears on the Y1,000 note; Hayashi Naoki on the Yoshida Trail; sign on the Yoshida Trail

Takane no hana
 Literally 'flower on a high peak'; beautiful, but out of your grasp

FOR SHOWSTOPPING COASTAL GEOLOGY
THE IZU GEO TRAIL

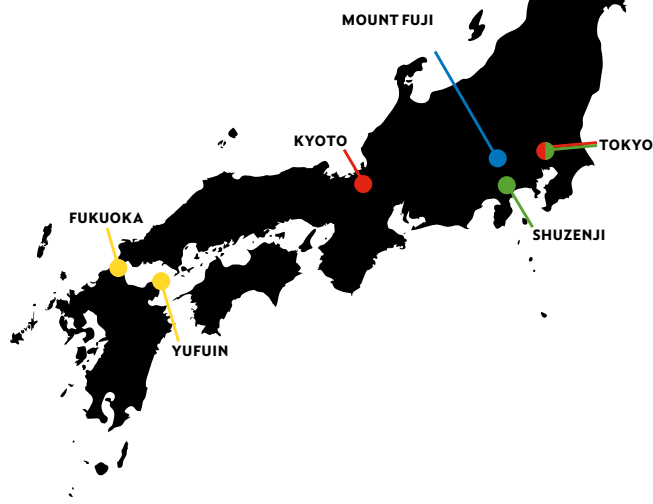
ROUTE: Tokyo to Shuzenji
LENGTH: 26 miles
 The Izu Peninsula, a UNESCO Global Geopark, is only 94 miles southwest of Tokyo, but feels worlds away. Either side of the peninsula are some of the deepest seas in the world, which serve as fertile fishing grounds. Shimoda, on the peninsula's southern extremity, is where Commodore Perry's Black Ships first came to Japan in the mid-1880s, portending the end of samurai Japan. This six-day coastal walk follows the east and west shoreline — although another option is to follow the peninsula's spinal mountains, made famous in Kawabata's novel, *The Dancing Girl of Izu*. On clear days, Mount Fuji fills the skyline to the north.



FOR CONQUERING AN ICON
MOUNT FUJI

START & END: Fuji-Subaru Line 5th Station
LENGTH: Eight miles
 Fuji is Japan's highest and most elegant peak, a dormant volcano rising to a height of 12,390ft. It can be hiked between July and September, and the most popular route is the Yoshida Trail, which starts out from the 5th Station (7,545ft). From here, it can take around six hours to reach the top. An average of about 30,000 people tackle Fuji each day and it can feel crowded, particularly during Obon festival in August, but it's still a great adventure. There's good camaraderie between those climbing, plus the reward of reaching the very highest point in Japan. **JL**

For more information about Walk Japan's tours, visit walkjapan.com



FIT FOR ROYALTY

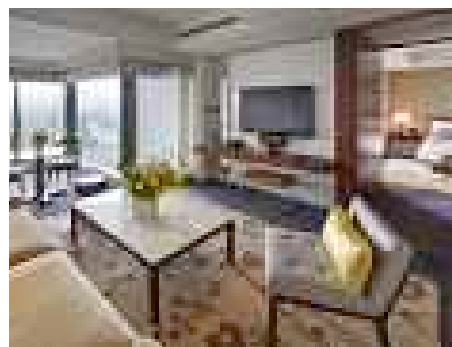
Focusing on distinctly Japanese experiences, as well as top-notch wellness and dining, Palace Hotel Tokyo offers a regal experience



Situated opposite the ancient Otemon Gate of the Imperial Palace, overlooking its gardens and moats, Palace Hotel Tokyo has been making waves since it debuted in 2012.

The hotel — a magnet for travellers in search of Japan's legendary hospitality — showcases the best of the country's culture. Its 'Palatial Pursuits' are a series of packages featuring bespoke experiences such as 'ramen hunting,' behind-the-scenes glimpses of sumo wrestling or kabuki theatre, and tailor-made adventures.

Palace Hotel Tokyo's 290 guest rooms and suites evoke a sense of warmth and sophistication, with luxurious touches such as private balconies overlooking the Imperial Palace gardens and moats as well as the surrounding city skyline. At evian SPA TOKYO, an Alpine-inspired setting and Japanese sensibilities combine to offer an ultra-refined experience. The hotel's vast array of restaurants and bars, meanwhile, offer 10 distinctive dining experiences, including exquisite Japanese at Wadakura, Michelin-starred Chinese at Amber Palace and Japanese-style afternoon tea at The Palace Lounge. And at Grand Kitchen, dining al fresco on the terrace will tempt guests to linger amid its blissful, picturesque setting.



Essentials

Getting There: For more information on Palace Hotel Tokyo, or to book one of the Palatial Pursuits, contact reservations on reservations@palacehotel.jp or +81 3 3211 5211. en.palacehoteltokyo.com


PALACE HOTEL TOKYO

Inokashira Park, which was a gift from the Japanese emperor to his subjects

Kawaakari

Translated, it means 'the last light reflected on the river at dusk'

Tokyo

A quiet guide to Earth's biggest city

Tokyo is a city with a soundscape like no other — it seems everything here with an electrical circuit can sing a song. This is the largest urban area on Earth, and silence is as scarce a commodity as space, so do like the locals do and seek out green and serene spots to savour the silence

YOYOGI PARK

The green expanse of Yoyogi Park is all the more remarkable when you consider its location in Tokyo: there's hedonistic Shinjuku to the north, Shibuya Crossing to the south, and the teenage hangout of Takeshita Street to the east. The setting for the 1964 Olympics, today Yoyogi is the principal playground for citizens of central Tokyo. Crowds descend at the weekends for picnics, frisbee and cosplay gatherings. Arrive early on a weekday for maximum serenity, to see locals practicing tai chi and yoga on its rambling lawns.

MEIJI JINGU

To the north of Yoyogi Park is the shrine of Meiji Jingu, dedicated to the eponymous emperor who transformed Japan into a modern, industrial nation in the 19th century. One of the main Shinto shrines in the capital, it's entered through giant *torii* gates, which symbolise the threshold between the mortal and spiritual worlds. Walking through the surrounding gardens is also like crossing into another realm; its meandering woodland

trails, at the very heart of the city, are quiet enough in places to allow visitors to hear the sound of a falling leaf. meijijingu.or.jp

HAPPO-EN GARDEN

This tiny pocket of greenery was once the private garden of a Japanese nobleman, enduring as a serene and green sanctuary for three centuries as a megacity erupted around it. Today, it's connected to a modern conference centre and is a popular haunt for wedding photographers, but it remains a great place to get to grips with the Japanese formal garden tradition. Branches of maple and cherry trees lean out over a little pond, with teahouses perched on the shore. The garden occupies a sunken hollow, so the sounds of the city are muted; instead, you can hear churning waterfalls and the ripple of koi in the ponds — and the occasional click of wedding a photographer's camera. Try a green tea experience here, from £8. happo-en.com

INOKASHIRA PARK

Inokashira Park was first opened in 1917 — a gift from Emperor Taishō to his subjects.

Today, it's western Tokyo's primary green lung, huddled around a long, thin lake. A shrine to the goddess Benzaiten is set on a little island — legend has it that if a couple hires a swan pedalo for a trip around the lake, they'll soon break up, as the deity is notoriously jealous. Visitors can also wander beneath the cherry trees lining the shore.

YANAKA CEMETERY

The Yanaka district is a vestige of bygone Tokyo, an unscathed survivor of the 1923 earthquake and Second World War bombing that destroyed so much of the city. Catch an echo of Tokyo's Edo era among its narrow alleyways, especially when lanterns illuminate at dusk. Amble among its temples and shrines, and pass fishmongers and butchers, teahouses and stands serving sizzling octopus tentacles. Its quietest corner is probably Yanaka Cemetery — famous for its resident cats — where tombstones rise against a backdrop of skyscrapers and all is quiet but for the ding of cyclists' bells. **os**

For more information, visit gotokyo.org

JAPAN



Shinrin-yoku

'Forest bathing' — a wellness therapy that involves spending time in the woods

Kanto

Chasing waterfalls

Whether you're a believer or not, the Shinto ritual of waterfall bathing offers a chance to reset — and immerse yourself in the spiritual beauty of Japan's mountains. Words: Oliver Smith

"Sure, I'll do it," I say to my guide, giddy with bravado. "I'm from England — it's a cold country. I'll take to this like a duck to water."

This is a lie. I've never done anything like *misogi* before. The word translates as 'water cleansing'; in the Shinto faith (one of the major religions of Japan), standing under a waterfall is a way to purify your soul. I'd wanted to try it out so I could immerse myself in one of Japan's key spiritual traditions. I imagined it being like waterfall bathing in shampoo adverts, where the current is balmy, tropical birds swoop and someone plays the steel drums.

But when we arrive at the waterfall, set beneath Mount Shichimen, the torrents are icy, crashing down from frosty heights. At this time of year — mid-winter — the water has a polar temperature, my guide tells me with surprising relish. I spot an inflatable Santa on a nearby windowsill. A worrying thought takes hold: perhaps I've been too hasty in committing to this.

Shichimen is in Kanto, a region west of Mount Fuji on Japan's largest island, Honshu — a world of hanging valleys, mountaintop temples and sacred pathways winding through forests of maple and oak. Here, as elsewhere in Japan, holiness is rooted in the natural world. For Shinto followers, the divine moves in the passing of seasons, the falling of autumn leaves, in water ebbing through the landscape.

Earlier in the morning, at the guesthouse near the waterfall, I'd met Tamaki Harayama, a pilgrim who'd come to Shichimen for a week of waterfall cleansing. She'd offered

to initiate me in this rite, first handing me a man's *misogi* costume to change into — a loincloth tied with a knot. Now I wonder if I can fasten it properly. I have a premonition of horrified onlookers, a wail of sirens, calls to the embassy. To preserve the sanctity of Shichimen, I opt for a woman's robe instead.

I fritter away minutes rearranging my clothes in the changing room. And then I pause to admire the pond near the waterfall. "Like a duck to water," I think. I step in, right under the thunderbolt of cold water. The adrenalin feels like drinking a thousand Red Bulls. Hours of fearful anticipation melt away in a minute of heady exhilaration. My skin burns, endorphins fizzle. Stepping out again, I experience quiet euphoria — a feeling that will linger on throughout the rest of the day.

I dart to the guesthouse and sink into its hot spring — feeling like a ready meal moved from the freezer to the oven — and simmer happily, emerging in high spirits, with glowing cheeks.

Whether you have faith or not, *misogi* can offer a true transformation, pressing Control-Alt-Delete on your body. "Your face has opened up," says Tamaki later. "You're transformed. When you go home, I think you'll be a little different."

Misogi takes place at the discretion of local guardians of the waterfall. Heartland Japan, which specialises in tours around the Kanto region, offers the three-day Mount Minobu Spiritual Tour, taking in the Buddhist temples and landscapes close to Shichimen. heartlandjapan.com

Worshippers brave the cold temperatures of Kiyotaki Falls near Otaki for a traditional 'water cleansing' ceremony

Oita

Boiling water, billowing steam

Onsens are woven into the fabric of society in Oita, a Japanese region where the red-hot water bursting from the ground is harnessed into pools of all shapes and sizes, and the mountains that provide it are revered and respected. Words: Charlotte Wigram-Evans

Steam rises slowly from Mount Garan, billowing from holes in its side as if a seething, fire-breathing beast lurks just beneath the earth. It's early, and our only company on this weathered path has been a couple of Japanese nightingales, their plumage grey, the colour of rain.

"They herald the coming of spring," my guide, Yume, explains. "Listen to their call, it's iconic." I train my ear for the sound, and as if aware of an audience, a cacophony of birdsong bursts from a nearby cedar. Yume laughs, clapping her hands together: "The sound fills everyone here with joy," she says. "But come, we're not here for the birds."

In fact, we're heading to Tsukahara Onsen, one of the most famous in Oita (for a region known as Japan's hot spring capital, that's saying something). Located in the north east of Kyushu island, Oita is dotted with active volcanoes. Fault lines running beneath these mountains form channels of boiling magma that heat subterranean water to over 1,000C, before pushing it upwards to explode from the Earth's surface.

"We have the highest number of hot spring sources in all of Japan," Yume reveals proudly, "and this one has the thickest mineral content of them all." We smell the pool before we reach it — a pungent odour of gone-off eggs, but one that, I'm assured, only proves the healing powers of the water. The minerals in onsens, it's said, can alleviate health problems as varied as asthma and arthritis; they're

so concentrated in this particular spring that bathing for more than 20 minutes is forbidden. After just a few minutes, my skin starts to tingle. I towel myself dry, admiring the simple stone pool and wondering aloud when man learnt to harness these red-hot eruptions of water and steam.

"No one knows exactly," Yume tells me, "but records show the idea of bathing may have been introduced by Buddhist monks from China in the 17th century, and it didn't take long before it became a huge part of local life."

Sitting at the base of the mountain, Beppu is an excellent example of the extent to which hot springs have been woven into the very seams of society. A small city of sloping roofs and billowing steam, there are onsens everywhere, from foot baths hidden beneath restaurant tables to private pools in hotel gardens. Wastewater running through underground pipes here is so warm that tropical fish have made a home in them — unwanted pets that thrived after being freed, so the story goes.

In the city's leafy Kannawa district, Asako greets us at the entrance of her traditional Japanese lodge, Futabaso, where guests occupying the 10 rooms often stay for many months, taking daily onsens to help with various ailments and enjoying her excellent cooking. An enormous well dominates a central courtyard, pumping mineral-rich water to several small pools, and an elderly man wearing a perfectly pressed *yukata*

(robe) nods to us as he passes by, heading for his afternoon bathe.

Asako has worked here for 50 years, and the lodge is twice as old again, the worn furniture and cracked walls only adding to its charm. Between boiling eggs (in onsen water, naturally) and stripping bananas for her evening dessert ("the water makes them sweeter"), she tells us a bit about herself. "I believe in the power of mountains," she says. "It's why my work has always revolved around onsens; they're a constant reminder what Mother Nature can provide."

Asako practises Shugendo, a blend of Shintoism and Buddhism; it's a faith in which mountain worship is fundamental. Whether religious or otherwise, this power is tangible in Oita, a pulsing energy rising from deep below the Earth's surface evident in the hot springs scattered across the region.

"They're an ancient force far beyond any of us and must be respected," Asako continues, gesturing towards the row of peaks just visible through her rice-paper screens. Among them, high above the scurrings of human existence, Mount Garan steams broodily, just as it's done for centuries, oblivious to the people on its paths, to the seasons' change or to the nightingale singing for spring.

Trailfinders offers a self-guided seven-day tour of Kyushu, including onsen visits and the 'Hells of Beppu' in the Oita region, from £1,353 per person, based on two sharing. trailfinders.com/discover-oita.com



Ichi-go-ichi-e

With its roots in the traditional tea ceremony, this concept refers to the treasuring of unique moments

Steam rising over the rooftops of Beppu **FROM TOP:** Wooden walkways extend over an onsen in Beppu; Asako's traditional steam ovens at Futabasa



A GUIDE TO ONSEN ETIQUETTE

Birthday suits only

While this may sound a little disconcerting, don't be put off by going in naked: no one bats an eyelid and it'll soon become liberating. If it really isn't your thing, some inns offer private onsen hire, and upmarket hotels do sometimes provide special bathing towels you can wear in the water.

Wash before taking a dip

Washing in the bath is a no-no in Japan, and all onsens will have showers and stools around their perimeter. Be advised that it's important to be sitting down while you do so; having a scrub down standing is considered very bad manners.

Follow towel etiquette

All onsens will provide patrons with both a small and a large towel (either free or for a small fee). Don't confuse the two; the larger is for drying yourself with after you've bathed and must stay in the changing room; the smaller is more like a flannel and can be taken into the onsen with you. These can be useful for covering your modesty, just don't hold them underwater. In fact, many people balance them on their heads while taking a dip.

Cover up tattoos

Tattoos are a taboo in Japan — partly due to their association with the *yakuza* (organised crime syndicates). It's generally not a problem if they can be covered by a plaster, but if not, renting a private onsen may be the way to go. en.visit-oita.jp/onsen **CWE**

Wa

Japanese society hinges on the social harmony achieved by adhering to the status quo.

The wa should not be disturbed



Naminoue Beach and Naminoue Shrine, Naha, Okinawa
LEFT: Umi Jigoku, the blue-hued volcanic spring in Beppu

The best island escapes

Japan's 6,852 islands offer everything from salmon-filled rivers in the far north to world-class diving in the south. The four main islands — Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu and Shikoku — are home to the vast majority of the nation's population, but away from those behemoths, there are some fascinating options

BEST FOR: CYCLING **SHIMANAMI KAIDO**

Linking Honshu and Shikoku, the Shimanami Kaidō is a 48-mile road and bridge network that stepping-stones its way over the Seto Island Sea. Most people choose to drive or take the train across this impressive feat of engineering, but those looking for more adventure and a considerable amount of legwork can cycle instead. Several bike hire companies offer one-way options for anyone undertaking the route, while each of the seven islands along the way has accommodation and dining options.

BEST FOR: BOND FANTASIES **GUNKANJIMA**

Fans of 007 will instantly recognise abandoned Hashima Island. Of course, it was never originally built to be a supervillain's lair but it did the job admirably in the 2012 film *Skyfall*. A genuinely spooky place, it was once a hive of activity — as a seabed coal mining facility, it was home to over 5,000 miners and their families — until being abandoned in 1974. Today, it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site and makes for a fascinating day trip, a rocky, half-hour boat ride from the city of Nagasaki, on the island of Kyushu.

BEST FOR: CONTEMPLATION **TESHIMA**

A dozen islands in the Seto Island Sea host the Setouchi Triennale art festival. While some stage temporary exhibitions, a few also have permanent art installations and exhibitions. The latter include the Teshima Art Museum. Resembling a droplet of water, the one-room concrete space has been designed for contemplation and meditation. Be sure to save at least half a day for a visit, perhaps after seeing the more traditional artworks on permanent display on the neighbouring island town of Naoshima.

BEST FOR: HAWAIIAN VIBES **OKINAWA**

Visiting the sun-soaked, divers' paradise that is Okinawa today, it's hard to believe it was the site of some of the Second World War's most ferocious fighting. Comprising more than 150 islands in the East China Sea between Taiwan and Japan's mainland, it was once its own separate kingdom. Today, it's often compared to Hawaii, with a similarly laid-back, ocean-focused vibe. From its super-early cherry blossom to its fixation with pork, everything is just a little bit different down on Japan's southernmost territory.

BEST FOR: FAIRYTALE FORESTS **YAKUSHIMA**

The legendary Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki was inspired to create his 1997 classic *Princess Mononoke* — a cautionary tale of man versus nature — after visiting Yakushima. Many of the island's trees were felled during the timber-hungry Edo period. Today, however, the island is carpeted with forests, which can be explored via a network of misty trails dotted with giant, moss-covered trunks. These are *yakusugi* — the island's most ancient cedars (by definition over 1,000 years old). The oldest and largest is Jōmon Sugi. 卍



EARTH, WIND & FIRE

Framed by a necklace of puffing volcanoes and the glassy Lake Atitlán, Guatemala's Western Highlands are the stronghold of modern Maya culture. Here, indigenous communities are steeped in faith, and traditional rites draw on the elemental beauty of the land. From lava light shows and wild camping trips to bonfires and shaman blessings, a trip to Guatemala is a baptism of fire — in the very best way

WORDS **AMELIA DUGGAN**
PHOTOGRAPHS **PETE GODING**





There's an unnerving tranquillity to Guatemala's cloud forest, arrayed as it is here across the slopes of a towering volcano. Its beauty is delicate, ripped from the pages of a fairytale: boughs drip with tangled beards of moss; thick, glassy droplets hang from pine needles; and fingers of ferns are glossy-wet. Shifting mists blot the sky and half-obscure my path, forcing the foreground into focus; amid the black soil at my feet, I spot minute white blooms, like pinpricks of light. There's a stillness and silence in this glade that belies the molten lava seething somewhere deep, deep beneath the earth — and the chaotic scene lower down the steep mud road.

I hear a distant shout — “*Vamos!* Let's go!” — and retrace my steps out of the wood to where our 4x4 is still wedged, at a tilt, in a pothole. Members of our camping expedition are wiping sweat from their foreheads and throwing dirt-caked shovels into the trailer; I hurriedly wedge the branches I've gathered under the tyres and jump in.

At the wheel, my guide, Vinicio Peña (Rambo, to his friends), revs the engine. “Come on, my son,” he whispers affectionately to the truck, eyeing the rutted incline ahead. A crucifix dangles from the rear-view mirror.

The wheels spin and then we shoot forward, the truck careening over the track's ditches like a wild thing possessed. “*Yeehaw!*” Rambo shouts, shifting through the gearbox. The forest's outstretched limbs batter the bonnet and scrape at the windows, as if warning us to turn back. I spy a hairpin bend ahead, and acres of open sky over the verge, and screw my eyes shut.

When I open them again it's because he's switched the engine off. The forest has spat us out onto a rubbly plateau, wrapped in clouds and crowned by skeletal vegetation. “You have to be a little mad to come here,” Rambo laughs. And then, clutching his chest: “It's like I have two hearts! Do you feel that?” I don't know if he's referring to the thrill of the ascent or the effects of high altitude. The air is noticeably thinner: we're around 10,500ft up. From here we'll hike to the trailhead and pitch camp; at dawn, we'll make our ascent to the summit of Acatenango, Guatemala's third-highest peak.

There's a flash of light, an air-splitting peel of thunder and the first drops of rain. We grab our kit bags from the truck; Emeralindo and Fernando, the porters, using a forehead strap to balance giant bundles on their backs. Raphael Chicojay Diaz, another guide and the trip's

mountaineering expert, falls into step with me at the rear as the storm breaks in earnest. The path beneath our feet is black: ash and pumice. “This is Guatemala,” he says. “Fire and water.” There's another distant rumble, but this time it travels through the earth; I can feel the percussion in my bones. Raphael raises an eyebrow and grins at me. “I don't think that one was thunder,” he says.

We've been unlucky with the weather — typically, between late October and April there'd be nothing but warm days and clear vistas. But our team makes the best of it, cheerfully gathering inside the kitchen tent to share stewed chicken, hot chocolate and stories. Rambo has been guiding for 30 years, he tells us; before that, he was in the Guatemalan army during the country's brutal civil war (1960-1996). “In that life, I was a soldier, a paramedic, a paratrooper, and I worked on anti-narcotics projects too,” he says. “But becoming a guide, learning more about our history and culture, has been the best thing that ever happened to me. I understand better both sides of the conflict, and what happened to the people caught in the middle.” Raphael, in turn, speaks about expeditions and adventures across Guatemala. “Acatenango is my favourite volcano — I like a challenge. I've climbed 12 of Guatemala's 37,” he says. “None of the three active ones, though,” he adds, ruefully.

When we exit the kitchen to return to our own tents, the sun has set and the clouds have cleared. The villages of the valley below are lit up like Christmas but the night seems unusually dark. There's not a star in sight — the sky is concealed behind a hulking volcano. Fuego, Acatenango's noisy neighbour, just three miles to the south, fires off a flaming volley of rocks. Neon-red ash and boulders spew into the sky, tinting the remaining clouds apocalypse rouge, then tumble earthwards, illuminating the upper cone. The sound of the explosion — just like the rumble heard on our walk — reaches us a moment later. “That was a big one!” Raphael cheers. “Try to get some sleep before the climb, if you can.”

The ‘climb’ turns out to be an undignified two-hour scramble in volcanic scree. For every stride I manage — heart-pounding, leg muscles screaming — I slide two back. As dawn breaks, Raphael and I switch off our headlamps, soak up the view and catch our breath. (We'd left a poorly Rambo behind. “The volcano wasn't the only one exploding in the night,” he'd joked, clutching his stomach and nodding to the latrine pit apologetically.) The undulating landscape of Guatemala's

CLOCKWISE FROM

TOP: Sunrise from Acatenango; Fuego erupts; guide Raphael Chicojay Diaz takes in the view through binoculars

PREVIOUS PAGE: A

lone hiker stands atop Acatenango, part of a chain of volcanoes that stretches through the Western Highlands



Western Highlands is laid out beneath us like a map. Raphael points out Antigua, a romantic colonial city of tumbledown cathedrals and cobblestone lanes, glittering below us; and, behind a cluster of peaks, the half-moon of the freshwater Lake Atitlán. There are neat patchworks of coffee plantations, too; miles of misty ridges and valleys, dotted with indigenous villages; and then, at the edge of all this, the Pacific Ocean, stretching to meet the sky. “It’s even better from the top,” Raphael says, nodding to the final, near-vertical slope.

When we finally reach the summit — a heady 13,000ft high — and circumnavigate Acatenango’s wide caldera, we can see our place at the centre of a corridor of volcanoes. They stretch away from us, ancient and indifferent, in each direction. “They all have stories, they all have characters,” Raphael says, rapturously. On one side, Fuego (the Spanish word for ‘fire’) puffs away, blowing ash clouds into the morning blue like a committed pipe smoker. On the other is the fearsome isosceles of Agua (‘water’). In the middle, atop Acatenango, there’s us: tiny mortals who’ve dared to climb onto the shoulders of a titan, caught between the elements.

The house of masks

The spectacular geography of Guatemala’s Western Highlands is matched by its cultural importance. Under Spanish rule, with little to plunder, this remote, mountainous region remained a backwater, and the traditions of the Maya were able to flourish — eventually binding with those of the Catholic church. Today, the area is considered a stronghold of indigenous culture.

“You see, we have two types of Maya culture — that in the stones, in archaeological sites like Tikal or Uxactún in the Petén lowlands to the north. And then there’s this: living culture,” Rambo says in a reverential whisper, as a troupe of costumed dancers fill the courtyard.

We’ve come to the house of Diego Ignacio, a renowned mask carver and shaman in the market town of Chichicastenango. Diego died four years ago, leaving his widow, Juanita, and their adult children to continue the family business in his name, which includes performing cultural dances. Rambo is a close family friend; he’d saved Diego’s life during the civil war, and is godfather to many of the children playing at our feet. “I’ve spent many nights in this house. Many memories,” Rambo says sadly.

The Dance of the Deer begins. Decked out in brocaded finery and painted animal masks, five dancers hop

and weave between each other. The music is reedy and rhythmic; to one side, men beat drums, shake maracas and play the mournful, oboe-like *chirimía*. “This is traditionally performed on 21 December to celebrate the winter solstice and the feast day of Saint Thomas. The Highlands have so many traditions you just don’t see in the cities,” Rambo says.

When the dancers have bowed and our applause has finished, Diego’s son, Miguel, takes us on a tour of the property. First, there’s the 200-year-old *temazcal*, a type of sauna used to treat spiritual and physical ailments through massage and communion with ancestral spirits. Inside the low, brick dome there’s fragrant pine on the floor and lingering heat from a recent ceremony. Here, Miguel blesses me with rose water and “brushes negativity” from my head and shoulders with a garland of herbs.

Next is the *morería* (mask workshop). The walls and ceiling are lined with carved lions’ heads, large-beaked birds, gargoyle faces and other, indeterminable creatures — all sold to passing travellers or hired out for local ceremonies. A large framed photo of Diego rests on an altar among Catholic Madonnas, Maya carvings and a Stetson-wearing effigy of the local trickster spirit Maximón. “Diego would be sitting there, with his leather apron, whittling masks,” Rambo says, his mind caught in an eddy of the past.

For a country still healing from war, Guatemala is surprisingly attached to grenade-like fireworks and crackers that sound like rifle fire. The rockets start going off at first light. When Rambo and Raphael meet me at breakfast, they seem thrilled to have had their sleep interrupted: “This means the Maya brotherhoods are honouring a feast day,” Rambo says. “Hopefully we’ll catch a parade.”

We’ve arrived in Chichicastenango in the run-up to All Souls’ Day (2 November), a celebration more commonly known here as the Day of the Dead. Crowds are moving towards the cemetery with candy-coloured paint and bundles of golden marigolds to spruce up the family plot. Moving against them is a long procession of costumed Maya holymen carrying instruments, fireworks and feathered floats bearing Catholic icons. Adding to the mayhem: it’s also market day. The cobbled streets are a riot of colour and movement, packed with makeshift stalls hawking fruit, antiques and the hand-stitched *huipil* blouses favoured by indigenous women.

FROM TOP: The mask workshop of Diego Ignacio’s family, Chichicastenango; Juanita, shaman Diego Ignacio’s wife, lights a blessing bonfire atop the sacred hill of Pascual Abaj, Chichicastenango

For a country still healing from war, Guatemala is surprisingly attached to grenade-like fireworks and crackers that sound like rifle fire. The rockets (*bombas*) start going off at first light. When Rambo and Raphael meet me at breakfast, they seem thrilled to have had their sleep interrupted





We climb the stone steps of Santo Tomás Church for a better view; all around us is the hullabaloo of families swinging incense barrels, lighting small pyres of tobacco and kindling, and praying urgently in Maya languages. “Do you notice anything funny about these steps?” Raphael asks. “It was an ancient Maya temple — see, there are 18 levels, one for each month of the Maya calendar. The Spanish razed the building in 1540 and built on top of the platform, so it’s now a holy site twice over.” Rambo chimes in: “There was some damage done by the church in the early days. But we learned to accept each other, to weave the traditions together. What matters, ultimately, is belief, trust, faith. And that’s what these people have: faith.”

Back at the *morería*, we catch up with Juanita, who’s made time to offer us a blessing. We follow her up a hill to a sacred forest clearing. Fire pits mark the cardinal points. After sinking to her knees in prayer in front of a stone idol, Juanita gets to work constructing our offering. First, she sketches out an ornate cross in sugar, then piles on kindling, *copal* (tree resin), tobacco, chocolate and multicoloured candles. “Each colour signifies a different petition: for money, protection from envy, love, warding off evil,” Rambo whispers. “And see how she ties her *tzute* (shawl) around her head; this helps contain your essence and harness your wisdom.”

The flames rise. Behind the smoke, Juanita chants in Maya Ki’che’. “Look how the fire behaves. If you know how, you can visualise messages in the flames,” says Rambo. “She’s talking to the spirit of the mountain.”

We’ve each been given a candle to cast into the fire. Juanita waves us forward. “She says we’re to say a prayer for those we’ve lost,” Rambo translates. He lingers for a few moments, looking searchingly into the fire, before dropping in his candle and turning away.

Up in the air

Tourism in Guatemala is far from booming, although its star is rising. For many years, the headline-grabbing crime statistics coming from the capital city deterred many; its jungle-swathed Maya ruins on the Mexican border and the cultural riches of the Highlands were the preserve of only the intrepid. “It’s safer than you think,” Monica, a manager at the chichi Lake Atitlán boutique hotel Casa Prana, tells me, laughing. “I moved here from the city — that’s where the crime is. Now I don’t have to lock my door. Guatemalans are well known for being

friendly and welcoming, and around this lake people are especially kind.”

In front of the hotel’s breakfast terrace, Lake Atitlán is pearlescent in the morning light, the shadow of two volcanoes etched on its surface. Not far from the hotel’s jetty, a few fishermen are at work in wooden canoes.

Around the lake’s edges sit villages: San Antonio Palopó, famous for its pottery; Santiago Atitlán, the birthplace of the colourful cult of Maximón; and Santa Cruz, renowned for its backpacker vibes. I paddle over to the latter in a kayak, past a shore dotted with the summer houses of wealthy politicians, and then whizz uphill in one of the village’s signature red tuk-tuks to Café Sabor Cruceño.

The views are spectacular — behind us is a thickly-forested zigzag of hills, gorges and waterfalls, and below, falling away to the glittering shore, is a chaotic jumble of roofs, washing lines and lanes. Turning away from the scenery, attention is fixed on the menu: “These are all really local dishes. Look, *tayuyos*,” Rambo exclaims. “They’re corn dough wrapped around black bean paste. Guatemalan food like this is cooked in homes. But restaurants usually go for international dishes. This is quite a special place,” he says, waving the waitress over.

The same is true of Antigua, the elegant colonial capital of the Spanish from the early 16th century until the earthquake of 1773. Today, it’s the centrepiece of Highlands tourism. “We have more ingredients than Mexico — so many ethnic groups, so much richness,” Rebeca de León, founder of the local Guatemalan gastronomy tour operator Kukul Tales, tells me. “Why aren’t we showcasing this in our restaurants?” We’ve met in the restored, colonial-era kitchens of Antigua’s Casa Popenoe museum to sample some real Guatemalan cuisine. She’s got me grinding black salt and white *chiltepe* peppers into roast tomatoes with a pestle and mortar. “If you want to imagine how the original Mayans ate, look to *chirimol*,” says Rebeca. “The sauce you’re making has been the basis of our cuisine for centuries.”

We move on to taste stuffed corn dough *tamales*, and a spicy, shredded-beef stew called *hilachas*, washing them down with *tiste*, a drink made of ground cocoa and toasted corn. “Our food is seasonal and historic; some of these dishes are even ceremonial,” Rebeca explains. “People learn about culture through what they eat. I’m proud to show this to travellers. But it’s a real problem that new generations of Guatemalans would rather buy sushi than cook. Our cuisine is at risk of being forgotten in our

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A fisherman in a traditional canoe, Lake Atitlán; a tortilla cart in the colonial city of Antigua; kites are flown in the main cemetery of Santiago Sacatepéquez on 1 November

Some of the kites are so tall they’ve been propped up with house-height bamboo struts and moored to the earth by thick ropes. In the rising wind, they strain against these shackles like caged animals



grandmothers' recipe books." Dinner concludes with *dulce de ayote* — pumpkin boiled in spices and sugar. "I wanted you to try this," says Rebeca. "In the north, they'll eat it this week to celebrate Day of the Dead."

In Guatemala, the iconography of this festival is different to that celebrated in Mexico — there are no grinning skeletons here. Rather, festivities are distinct and regional: in the Highlands village of Todos Santos, men engage in a day-long, death-defying drunken horse race back and forth along a short dirt track; and outside Antigua, in the communities of Sumpango and Santiago Sacatepéquez, locals spend all year building towering paper-and-bamboo kites that are judged on 1 November, All Saints' Day. "The tradition for kite building started because there were bad spirits here," Raphael tells me as we join the hordes moving towards the main cemetery of Santiago Sacatepéquez. "For us, when you fly a kite you release the spirit of the dead — you communicate with your ancestors."

The Giant Kite Festival is in full effect; between the tombs, families are enjoying picnics, serenaded by folk bands, and parents are teaching children to fly little hexagonal kites. The air is full of fluttering shapes and streamers. Along the perimeter of the cemetery are the show-stoppers — kites so tall they've been propped up with house-height bamboo struts and moored to the earth by thick ropes. In the rising wind, they strain against these shackles like caged animals. "They're too large to fly," Rambo explains. "The medium ones, they'll try to get them airborne later. But with the giant kites, it's more about the message they're conveying." In recent years, the delicate collages pasted across the kites have spoken of deforestation, indigenous rights and the scourge of domestic violence. This festival honouring the dead has become tangled up in issues of the living; it looks to the future as much as the past.

Raphael climbs a mausoleum, paper kite clutched in hand. There's a boyish grin on his face as he throws it upwards and unspools the line. The kite doggedly rises through the aerial network of strings until it's a speck in the sky. The views from up there must be incredible: a mass of volcanoes and virgin forests stretching to the ocean. "We'll let it take our messages to heaven," he says, handing me the line to release. It sags and pools for a moment, then whips into the air. We watch it go. Our kite — along with our missives to the beyond — is now at the mercy of the elements. □

RIGHT: Guatemala's Giant Kite Festival, celebrated here in Sumpango, is a jubilant and political affair — the kites often depict Maya symbols and indigenous rights messages





ESSENTIALS



Getting there & around

Flights from the UK to Guatemala City typically transfer through hubs in the American south east — including Atlanta (with Delta) or Houston (with United Airlines) — or Madrid (with Iberia). delta.com united.com iberia.com

Average flight time: 15h.

During the rainy season (May-October), roads in the Western Highlands are subject to mudslides; it's best to organise transfers with a driver or guide.

When to go

The dry season is November to April. The wet season is sunny with frequent showers. Year round, the weather is mostly warm during the day and cool in mornings and evenings, averaging 26C.

Places mentioned

Casa Diego Ignacio. [facebook.com/casa.diegoignacio](https://www.facebook.com/casa.diegoignacio)
 Café Sabor Cruceño. [en-gb.facebook.com/cafesaborcruceño](https://www.en-gb.facebook.com/cafesaborcruceño)
 Casa Popenoe. casapopenoe.ufm.edu

Where to stay

Mayan Inn, Chichicastenango. mayaninn.com.gt
 Casa Prana, Lake Atitlán. casaprana.com
 Finca in the Clouds, outside Antigua. fincainthecLOUDS.com
 Posada del Angel, Antigua. posadadelangel.com

More info

visitguatemala.com
lata.travel

How to do it

AUDLEY TRAVEL offers 11 days in Guatemala from £5,630 per person (based on two sharing), including one night camping on Acatenango, two nights at Lake Atitlán and three nights in Antigua, plus one night in Guatemala City, one night camping at Uaxactún and one night near the ruins of Tikal. Includes all flights, private transfers, accommodation with some meals and privately guided excursions. audleytravel.com/guatemala

WALKING

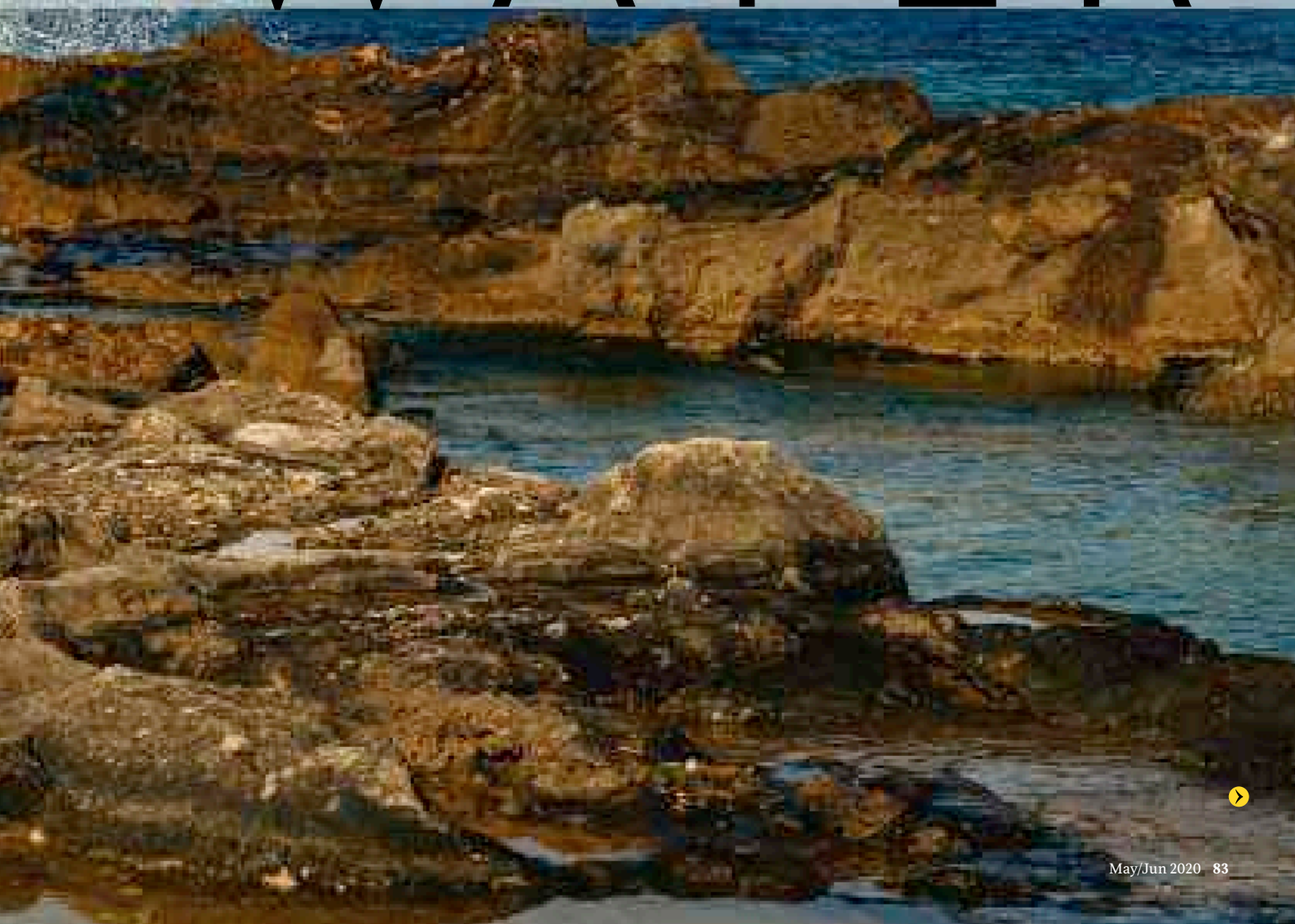


ON

Following Israel's long-distance Yam le Yam ('sea to sea') hike from the Mediterranean to the Sea of Galilee is to undertake a journey through the ages, crossing Biblical valleys, past sacred mountains and Crusader landmarks — and to be welcomed into remote Druze villages where life continues much as it has done for millennia

WORDS **EMMA THOMSON**
PHOTOGRAPHS **DAVID VAAKNIN**

WATER



“You can’t love without sweat.” Bold words from a man I’ve just met. I glance across at the bearded Daniel Gino, ready to be met by a sultry gaze. But his eyes are looking elsewhere: at the undulating hills of Israel’s Upper Galilee region.

I can’t blame him. These lush jackal- and boar-haunted woods are a world away from the arid desert of the south, and through them runs Yam le Yam, a 47-mile ‘sea to sea’ trail that starts on the Mediterranean coastline and arcs south to the Sea of Galilee; a route that’s finally on the verge of international attention.

“I was 14 the first time,” continues Daniel. He, like many other Boy Scouts have done for decades, trekked it during Passover as a sweaty rite of passage that binds the boys to the country of their birth. “It’s a short trail, but it connects you to the land emotionally,” he says, as we make our way to the start.

In Hebrew, *halach* — the verb ‘to walk’ — encompasses many meanings: to grow and go forward; to flow or be poured out as water (about which I later learn more); and to walk hand in hand with God. It would be just the two of us — Daniel, my guide and a former forest ranger — on this four-day pilgrimage of sorts. We probably wouldn’t be holding hands.

Israel has long been a destination for pilgrims. Movement flows through the bloodlines of its people, not least in the lore of the ancient exodus out of Egypt led by Moses. Today, most pilgrims — nearly a million of them every year — make their way to the holy city of Jerusalem, but this would be a journey of a different kind. One through nature. For out of all Israel’s 6,000 miles or so of hiking trails, Yam le Yam is the greenest. It weaves through the far northern valleys of Upper and Lower Galilee;

its ripples forged by the Great Rift Valley that starts in Lebanon and cleaves ever southward to Mozambique.

The night I arrive, a third of the country’s annual average rainfall plummets from the sky. Huge, plump raindrops flood the streets, causing parked cars to float and swelling the rivers. Forget cats and dogs, this was rain on a biblical scale. But the next morning, the sky is blue and combed free of clouds. I grin at Daniel, full of hope. “Bad news,” he counteracts, dourly. “Big chunks of the trail are flooded.” I point to the sunny sky in confused protest. “Doesn’t matter. Look.” He leads me across the road and points to a reed-studded lake. “That’s meant to be the start of the trail.”

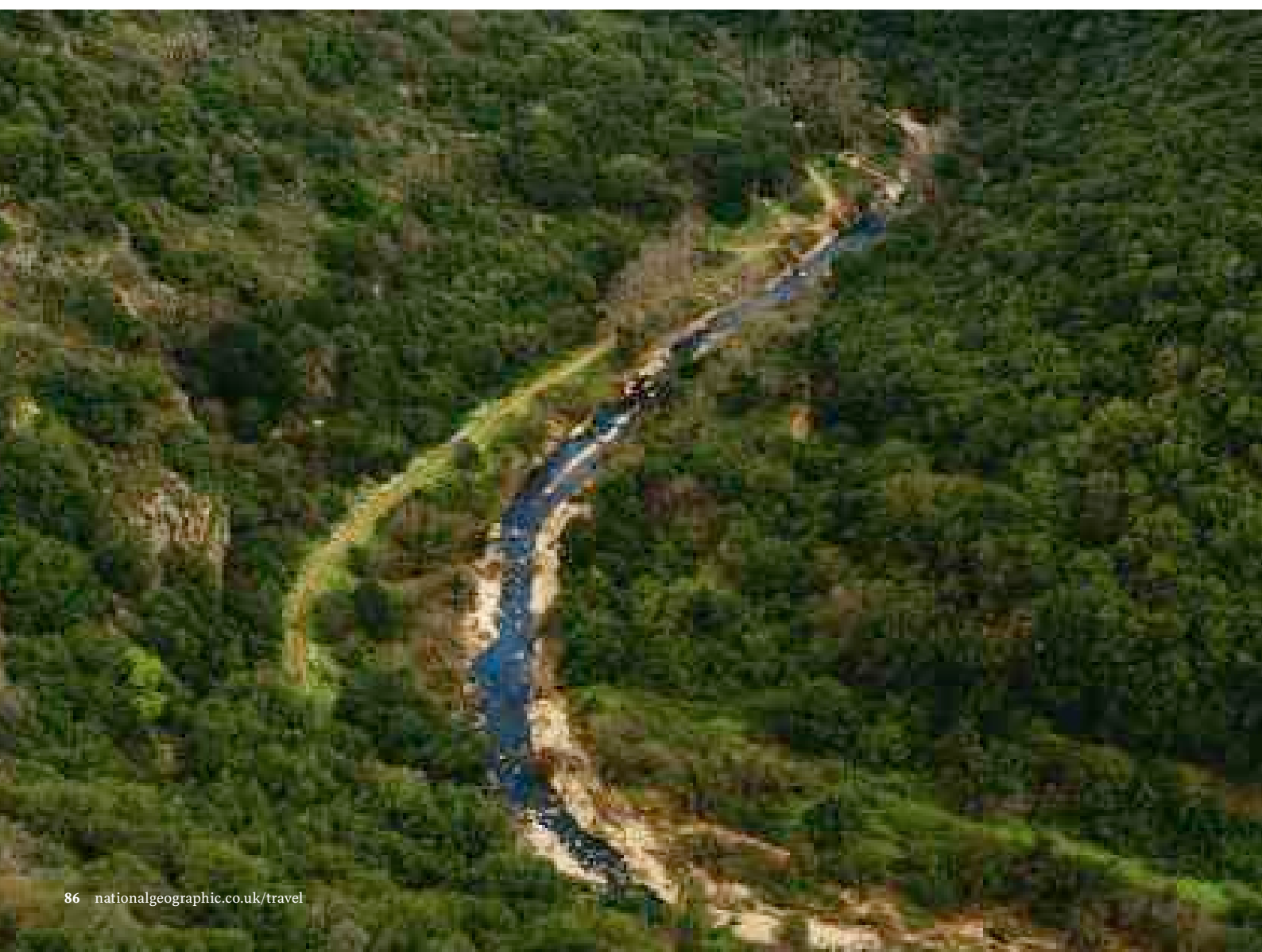
We retreat back across the road and down onto the sand. Canterng toward us are the feisty rollers of the Mediterranean. A few early fishermen stand with their lines in the muddy-as-cocoa waters. Right on the shoreline are the remnants of a dwelling.

“A Phoenician fishing village,” explains Daniel, scraping away a thin layer of soil from a nearby mound. Out tumbles the handle of an ancient jar. A bit more clawing and he unearths a fragment of a clay pot and even a shard of skull. Not a single protective barrier guards these lightly buried treasures. There’s so much archaeology under foot in Israel, the experts only investigate the bigger findings, such as the rubble of the village buildings 20 metres from where we stand, which balances on a thumbnail of green called Achziv National Park, where the trail starts.

RIGHT FROM TOP: A group of horse-riders on the trail below the Amud, a striking limestone pillar rising from a stream of the same name, Upper Amud Stream Nature Reserve; a hiker passes a trail marker, Upper Amud Stream Nature Reserve

PREVIOUS PAGE: Fishermen cast lines into natural lagoons and sea pools at Achziv National Park on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea







LEFT FROM TOP: The remains of the Crusader era Montfort Castle, Kziv Stream Nature Reserve; a view of the eponymous waterway seen from an observation point at Goren Park, Kziv Stream Nature Reserve

ABOVE: Shai Koren, district manager of Upper Galilee Israel Nature and Parks Authority, standing on the Mediterranean shoreline of Achziv National Park

“The Mediterranean is smaller now; today the shoreline is a 100 metres further back,” he says, explaining why the fishing village seems further away from the water today. He starts scanning the ground and, a few metres later, swipes up a shell. “These hunting snails secrete the mucus that’s used in indigo dye. See the shelves in the rocks the Phoenicians carved to grow and harvest them?” And just like that he melds present and past.

We hop across the rocks, which are as pitted as loofahs, towards the water’s edge. Daniel magics a camping stove and percolator from his rucksack and starts brewing coffee. “You know, there’s a tradition of collecting water from the Med, carrying it with you and depositing it into the Sea of Galilee at the other end,” he says, without looking up. I gulp down the contents of my water bottle and hobble towards the sea that throws itself angrily against the shore. Gingerly, I lower the bottle towards the foaming mass, leaning just a little too far. Wham! A rogue wave dumps a cascade of freezing sea water over my feet and legs. I let out a shriek so shrill the fishermen look to the sky, scanning for seagulls. I squelch back towards Daniel, full bottle held triumphantly aloft. We drink the dregs of our coffee and drive upriver; stowing my hard-won sea water behind the seat of our driver, Meir.

By the banks of the swollen Kziv stream, beneath a canopy of shivering golden maple leaves, we meet Shai Koren, district manager of the Upper Galilee region. His eyes and khaki shirt are both wrinkled, both due to

the birth of his new son. The majority of the trail passes are through reserves and parks, and he knows their outlines as keenly as the lines on his own hands.

“People started hiking Yam le Yam in the 1950s, but it didn’t become an official route until a decade ago — and we’re finally on the cusp of promoting it abroad. We’ll have official signage and new *zimmers* (B&Bs) outside the reserves for hikers; owners will even pick you up and drop you off back on the trail. In a few months, I’m going to hike it in its entirety with my daughter and son. We’re pushing them to get away from computers and back to camping — to see the night stars, not five stars!”

Managing areas of outstanding natural beauty sounds like a cushy job, but as it turns out, it can be a bit ‘Wild West’. “A hunter once shot a foot above my head. I asked for his gun — it was a mistake,” he shrugs, philosophically.

Hunters come for the wild boar and fallow deer, which were reintroduced from Iran in the 1970s. “Israel is a bridge between three continents and we have the wildlife to prove it: gazelles from Africa, porcupines from Asia and salamanders from Europe. And when the birds migrate south, it’s the Great Rift Valley they follow.” Throw in the striped hyena, jackal and wolves and you’re in for a really wild show.

We hitch a ride in Shai’s four-wheel-drive vehicle and rumble upward to one of the trail’s highlights: Montfort — a castle with a crumbling watchtower that clings to the

hillside. It belonged to French Crusaders until it was besieged by Mamluk slave soldiers in 1271. Starting higher, we clamber down to the ruins; the occasional misplaced boot sending wafts of wild sage up into the air. From here, the valley is a sea of broccoli-bulb treetops. “Nature is mixed with the fate of humanity. Hundreds of years ago, there were no trees left on these hillsides,” says Shai, scanning his finger along the slopes furred with perennial oaks. “It had all been used for timber and firewood.”

The afternoon sun warms the mammoth stones of the old fort, where daisies sprout amid the cracks. One of the stones bears a crudely graffitied Crusader cross, and past and present collide once more. Shai points across the ravine. “Back in 1965, a hunter killed Israel’s last Anatolian leopard on that hill over there. His grandchild still wears the creature’s teeth as a necklace.” I jump as, right on cue, the primal wails of jackals resound from the valley below.

By the time we arrive at Hefer Ranch in the village of Aberim, night has drawn a dark veil and the creeping cold causes us to wrap our coats tighter around us. Ranch owner, Eyal Hefer, feels none of it. His broad back is clothed only in a thin oilskin gilet. With a sun-cracked smile, he pumps my hand as firmly as if it were a water piston. He leads me into the goat shed. Pinned to the barn door are old family photos; among them, one of his now grown-up-daughter when she

was a baby, lying in her hay-lined playpen surrounded by quizzical goats. Eyal hands me a bucket. “You can milk that one,” he instructs, pointing to a feisty white female. She stamps her hooves huffily and I hastily push the pail into Daniel’s hands.

Eyal and his wife Edna offer walkers 22 fixed tents beneath shady trees, communal showers and his three horses — Amigo, Luna and Nesh — for riding. But it’s the honesty-box system for wine and their moreish homemade cheeses that keeps guests coming back. Eyal invites me into their house to sample them. Fridge magnets from around the world cover every inch of the kitchen. Dogs and cats fill the floor, fluffy as rugs. With hands wrapped around mugs of herb-infused tea, we talk until late.

Morning brings buffeting winds atop Mount Zvul. Below us, the hillocks and ravines of the Galilee valleys unfurl like a creased green carpet. Waiting for us is Tareq Shanan, director of the Amud Stream Nature Reserve, who gives us the all-clear to walk this section of the waterlogged trail. Tareq lives in Hurfeish, a Druze town that crowns this hilltop through which the Yam le Yam passes. A small Arabic-speaking minority (with communities in Syria and Lebanon too), the Druze fled persecution from mainstream Muslims in Egypt around 1,000 years ago. They believe in a combination of Islamic monotheism, Greek philosophy and elements of Hinduism, including reincarnation.

The afternoon sun warms the mammoth stones of the old fort, where daisies sprout amid the cracks. One of the stones bears a crudely graffitied Crusader cross, and past and present collide once more

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Edna and Eyal Hefer milk their goats at Hefer Ranch, an agricultural farm in the village of Abirim; hikers sit on a bridge above a small waterfall along Amud Stream, which pours into the Sekhvi Pools in Upper Amud Stream Nature Reserve; a newborn horse and its mother at Hefer Ranch





“When my daughter was three years old, she had many emotions about the war in Syria, so I took her to the border, and only then did she relax,” relates Tareq, rotating his blue-bead rosary around his thumb and explaining his belief that his daughter was possibly the reincarnation of a soul born in Syria, and getting close to her homeland again had calmed her.

We’ve taken shelter from the wind’s freezing gusts inside the Druze’s second-most holy site: the cave where prophet Sabalan lived atop the mount. Today, it’s covered with a sleek colonnaded shrine.

“People think of the Middle East as predominantly Muslim, but this trail covers a mosaic of religions. Here you have Bedouins, Jews, Druze, Circassians, Christians and Muslim Arabs — in the north we all live together. The trail is special because it passes through authentic villages that are home to both Christians and Druze — they’re good examples of comfortable coexistence.” Daniel had already pointed out Tarshicha, a town where Arabs and Jews live together. In a country fraught with religious tension, this is no small thing.

Rather than trespassing through their backyards, this trail has the potential to become a binding thread. “Will the promotion of Yam le Yam change your lives?” I ask. He rubs his black beard. “We’ll all gain something — it’ll help us all to learn and collaborate with each other more.”

We call in at the local bakery to pick up a pair of *sambusak* — Druze-style savoury

turnover pastries filled with spinach or minced lamb — for our picnic. The husband-and-wife team take turns shaping the dough before shovelling them into the glowing brick oven. Swathed around her head is a distinctive Druze white headscarf.

We pull into a car park, as instructed by Tareq, ready to start walking. Right beside the gravel space, as unnoticed as if it were a bus stop, are the remains of an Iron Age settlement. Beside that, an ancient Roman wine press and, a little further on, an Ottoman corral for sheep. It was probably men shepherding these fleecy creatures that forged the trails we’re walking.

We stride beneath oaks strewn with Spanish moss, their sun-lit leaves dancing like shadow puppets on the ground. Occasionally, the rustle of a rodent stirs the bushes or the trill of a blackbird breaks through the conversation. Walking is never just placing one foot in front of the other. There’s a meditative repetition; something intimate that connects sole, soil and soul. Especially here. “In Israel, almost every rock has a story,” says Daniel.

I’m snapped out of my musings. Coming down the hill is Jonathan, a swathe of grey hair and wind-pinked cheeks. In his mid-50s, he walks these woods every week.

“Lots of forests planted in the 1940s and 1950s were made up of pine trees. I prefer the indigenous forest and this trail is special for that,” he tells us, before striding off.

We reach Mount Neria and the trees thin out enough to reveal 180-degree views.

Walking is never just placing one foot in front of the other. There’s a meditative repetition; something intimate that connects sole, soil and soul. Especially here. “In Israel, almost every rock has a story,” says Daniel

ABOVE FROM LEFT: The Druze Israeli town of Hurfeish, seen from Mount Zvul; Ultra-orthodox Jews at the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai at Mount Meron



"Where the green ends, so too does Israel," points Daniel, gesturing past the shadow of the disputed Golan Heights region. These are the valleys of Jesus's intensive roaming. "When you're travelling in Israel, you can pick up the Bible, read just about any story, and see the landscape it played out on," says Daniel. Israel is the seat of stories — and as we walk, we tell each other our own. "I didn't cut my hair for two years after I left the army, having done my national service," Daniel shares, pacing a few metres in front of me. "I finished university and then rode my motorcycle around the world."

We walk on a little further and finally summit the pylon-crowned Mount Meron, Israel's highest peak. "Do you see what I see?" asks Daniel. In the distance, the Sea of Galilee, the lowest freshwater lake on the planet, shimmers like a sheet of metal. But chasing in from the north is a muslin veil of mist and rain that draws up the valley, obscuring the villages and views. Raincoats on, we start downwards, eventually tracing the Amud Stream. From the bushes comes a flash of jackal, dappled brown and gold. A few steps further and we disturb three wild boars, almost as big as brown bears; they canter past us with a snort and snuffle.

The rain intensifies and, once again, we have to spread the map out and re-route. Eventually, we admit defeat and jump into the car to drive towards the Sea of Galilee. "My uncle owned a farm on the shore over there, near the village of Migdal — it's where Mary Magdalene came from," Daniel tells

me. "For two years, I lived on the beach, picking his mangoes and riding my horse."

When we pull over, I reach for the bottle I'd stowed in the back pocket of the driver's seat. It's not there. "Meir, have you seen my bottle with the Mediterranean seawater in it?" Panic fills his eyes. "I threw it away. I thought it was old drinking water," he stutters.

Daniel and I collapse into laughter. We decide to go through the motions anyway. So, at North Beach, between stacked sun loungers waiting for summer bodies, I slowly pour some bottled drinking water symbolically into the sea, its surface already jumping with the patter of rain. "I once caught more than 30 fish from here," Daniel mentions, quietly but proudly.

Our walk, or *halach*, hadn't quite gone to plan. However, it had encompassed going forward and plenty of water, but as for walking hand in hand with God, I wasn't sure. That night, Daniel and I sat on the edge of the pier at Nof Ginosar kibbutz hotel, beers in hand. Off to the left, lights glimmer along the Golan Heights, to the right spreads Jordan, and behind looms the shadowy masses of the Upper and Lower Galilee valleys we'd partly traversed. The inky waters of Galilee swayed the high reeds near us, releasing soft whispers, and in that moment, I felt a soulful presence. I paused; the beer bottle halfway to my mouth. Suddenly, it all started adding up. Daniel was in his early 30s. Used to have long hair. Fished and lived on the shores of Galilee. Had I been walking with someone else all along? □

ESSENTIALS



Getting there & around

British Airways, EasyJet, El Al, Virgin Atlantic and Wizz Air fly non-stop between the UK and Tel Aviv. ba.com easyjet.com elal.com virginatlantic.com wizzair.com
Average flight time: 5h.

Israel is compact: a 90-minute drive east-west, nine hours north-south. All major rental companies operate here. Just be aware that certain Orthodox neighbourhoods close during Shabbat (Friday to Saturday evening).

Taxis are plentiful, but overcharging of tourists is common; *sheruts* (minivans) operating on fixed routes for a fixed price can be better option.

Wild camping isn't permitted on the trail, but there are plenty of B&Bs.

When to go

Yam le Yam is best walked in spring (March/April, average temperature is 20C) and especially in May when the wild lilies are in full bloom. Alternatively, hike in autumn (September/October average temperature is 25C), when the summer heat has lost its sting.

Places mentioned

Hefer Ranch. meshekehefer.com
Israel Nature and Parks Authority. parks.org.il
Treasures of the Galilee. ozrothagalil.org.il

Further information

touristisrael.com
info.goisrael.com

How to do it

POMEGRANATE TRAVEL offers small-group, four-day Sea to Sea trek tours from £2,320 per person, including all accommodation, guide, transport and most meals. Excludes flights. pomegranate-travel.com

A JOURNEY INTO JAPAN'S CULTURAL HEARTLAND

From the bright lights of Osaka to the born-again city of Hiroshima, West Japan is home to a plethora of cultural offerings. With its cities and countryside all serviced by an extensive rail network, exploring this beguiling region has never been easier

Taking in the Sea of Japan, the Pacific Ocean, Osaka Bay and the Seto Inland Sea, any visit to West Japan comes with a guarantee of spectacular maritime views. There are mountains, too; cutting across this part of the country are the vast volcanic Japanese Alps, home to thick green forests filled with waterfalls, dramatic gorges, pretty glades and hiking trails shared with bears, eagles and red-faced snow monkeys. Visitors can also explore a wealth of historic attractions, from imperial cities and Buddhist pilgrimage towns to a wealth of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Throw in an array of exciting cities and memorable cuisine and you've got the full West Japan package. Despite the dramatic scale of the region, Japan's superb rail network makes it a breeze to get around, both geographically and economically. Many sightseeing trains, such as the Belles Montagnes et Mer service, which travels along the Himi and Johana lines, are operated by JR-West, meaning travel is handily covered by the JR-West Rail Pass. Honing in on just two of the many passes JR-West has to offer, here are two itineraries to help you plan your next adventure.





Kansai-Hiroshima Area Pass

Famed for its fantastic street food, friendly nature and electric nightlife, Osaka is where your journey begins. You'll arrive from Kansai Airport into the enormous JR Osaka Station in the heart of the city. From here, you can see the robot-like 558ft-tall Umeda Sky Building, which has a circular observation deck on the 39th floor, offering eye-popping views of western Osaka's skyscrapers and the meandering Yodo River. After getting your bearings, fuel up on some of Osaka's sensational street food. Lit up like a jukebox and packed with stalls, restaurants and cafes, the canal-side Dotonbori is a favourite place to fill up on *kani* (crab), *fugu* (pufferfish), and crunchy-squishy takoyaki (batter balls typically filled with octopus). End the night with some late-night shopping and drinking in the Souemoncho party zone.

While Osaka is a modern metropolis, it has a key historic building that's not to be missed: Osaka Castle, an elegant pearl-white fortress dating back to 1583, set in a 106-acre plum tree park. Its beauty is only rivalled by that of the hilltop Himeji Castle, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located 30 minutes on the Hikari line from Osaka-shin Station — an outing which teams perfectly with a tour of the dreamy Edo-period gardens of Okayama.

Then there's Kobe, just 15 minutes from Shin-Osaka station by Shinkansen. Perched between the Rokko mountains and Osaka Bay, it's considered one of Japan's most attractive cities, as well as the producer of its best beef. Take a historic cable car to the city's highest peak for views of the Seto Inland Sea and islands; dip in the Arima Onsen hot springs, the oldest in the country; tuck into a top-quality beef burger folded over rice and topped with a fried egg; and visit the emotive Kobe Earthquake Memorial Museum, which commemorates the Great Hanshin-Awaji disaster of 1995.

The following day, take the Sanyo Shinkansen line 90 minutes west, passing the Chugoku Mountains, and into the ruggedly beautiful Chugoku region. Hiroshima, the biggest city in the area, features wide boulevards, six beautiful rivers, a range of galleries and a buzzing food scene. It also, of course, has a tragic past, having been the first city in history to suffer a nuclear attack. Spend the morning learning about the immediate and long-term impact the A-bomb had upon the city with visits to the Atomic Bomb Dome, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park,



ABOVE: Canal Boat in Kurashiki Bikan Historical Quarter

RIGHT: Sagano Romantic Train, Kyoto

PREVIOUS PAGE: Tea house interior at Kenrokuen Gardens, Kanazawa

the Hiroshima National Peace Memorial Hall for Atomic Bomb Victims and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Follow with an afternoon river cruise and an evening sampling the local treat *okonomiyaki* (a fat, savoury pancake stuffed with some variation of meat, seafood, vegetables and shredded cabbage).

From Hiroshima Station, it's also just a 25-minute rail journey to Miyajimaguchi Station, where you can catch a ferry to the temple-studded island of Miyajima; both the train and ferry are covered by the JR West Pass. Miyajima, considered one of the three most scenic spots in Japan, is home to the 1,400-year-old Itsukushima Shinto Shrine, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. From here, head to Kintai Bridge, one of the country's most iconic landmarks.

Take a historic cable car to the city's highest peak for views of the Seto Inland Sea, or go for dip in the Arima Onsen hot springs

Kansai-Hokuriku Area Pass

Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan, has long been a crowd-pleaser with its beautiful shrines, gardens, tea houses and geisha flitting in the shadows. Any visit should include marvelling at the orange torii gates of the Fushimi Inari-taisha Shrine, the sparkling Kinkaku-ji temple and the hilltop Kiyomizu-dera temple. Later, lose yourself in the cobbled streets of Gion, where artisans sell hand-made lacquerware, copper chazutsu tea caddies, pottery and delicate washi paper.

Kyoto is also awash with top-notch dining, from super soba noodle spots to Michelin-starred restaurants serving traditional multi-course kaiseki. There are also cool cafes, sushi joints, craft beer bars and hidden speakeasies. Don't leave without sampling at least one steaming bowlful of tonkotsu pork broth ramen, a local favourite.

Next is Nara, just 45 minutes on the Miyakoji Rapid service from Kyoto. This is another wonderfully preserved ancient city, with no fewer than eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including the sprawling Horyuji Temple, one of the world's oldest surviving wooden buildings. Nara is also home to more than 1,200 wild sika deer. Considered to be messengers of the gods in

the Shinto religion, the animals are allowed to wander freely around Nara Park and will happily eat from visitors' hands. Lovers of the great outdoors should board the scenic Limited Express Thunderbird train and head north towards Kanazawa, a city backed by mountains and fronted by the Sea of Japan. Once there, purchase a one-day pass from Hokuriku Railroad and hop on the Kanazawa Loop Bus and Kenrokuen Shuttle bus, making stops at the Kenrokuen gardens, the Nomura Samurai House and the teahouse district of Higashi Chaya. Alternatively, there's the Hanayome Noren tourist train, which makes two round-trips a day through some of Japan's most striking mountain scenery, travelling from Kanazawa Station to the hot springs resort of Wakura Onsen. The train's design was inspired by the area's traditional arts, with a shiny red livery and pretty interiors incorporating Wajima-nuri lacquerware, Kaga Yuzen dyed fabric and Kanazawa gold leaf.

Toyama is well worth a visit. Alongside history, art and temples, the area is known for its 9,000ft-high peaks, part of the Japanese Alps. The best way to absorb majesty of these is on a train journey along the Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route.

Essentials

Getting there: British Airways flies non-stop from Heathrow to Osaka Kansai on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. ba.com

Getting around: JR-WEST has an intricate network of train and bus routes criss-crossing West Japan, providing an efficient way of getting around. Before you travel, order a JR-West Pass, offering unlimited travel on JR-West trains. westjr.co.jp





Scotland

The wild Aberdeenshire peninsula — and, further north, the isles of Orkney — is windswept and, for large swathes, coated in golden barley fields. This ancient crop, with its roots in Neolithic times, is used to produce Scotland's legendary whisky. From the farmers' harvest through the time-honoured distillery process, this is the story of barley

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **PETE GODING**

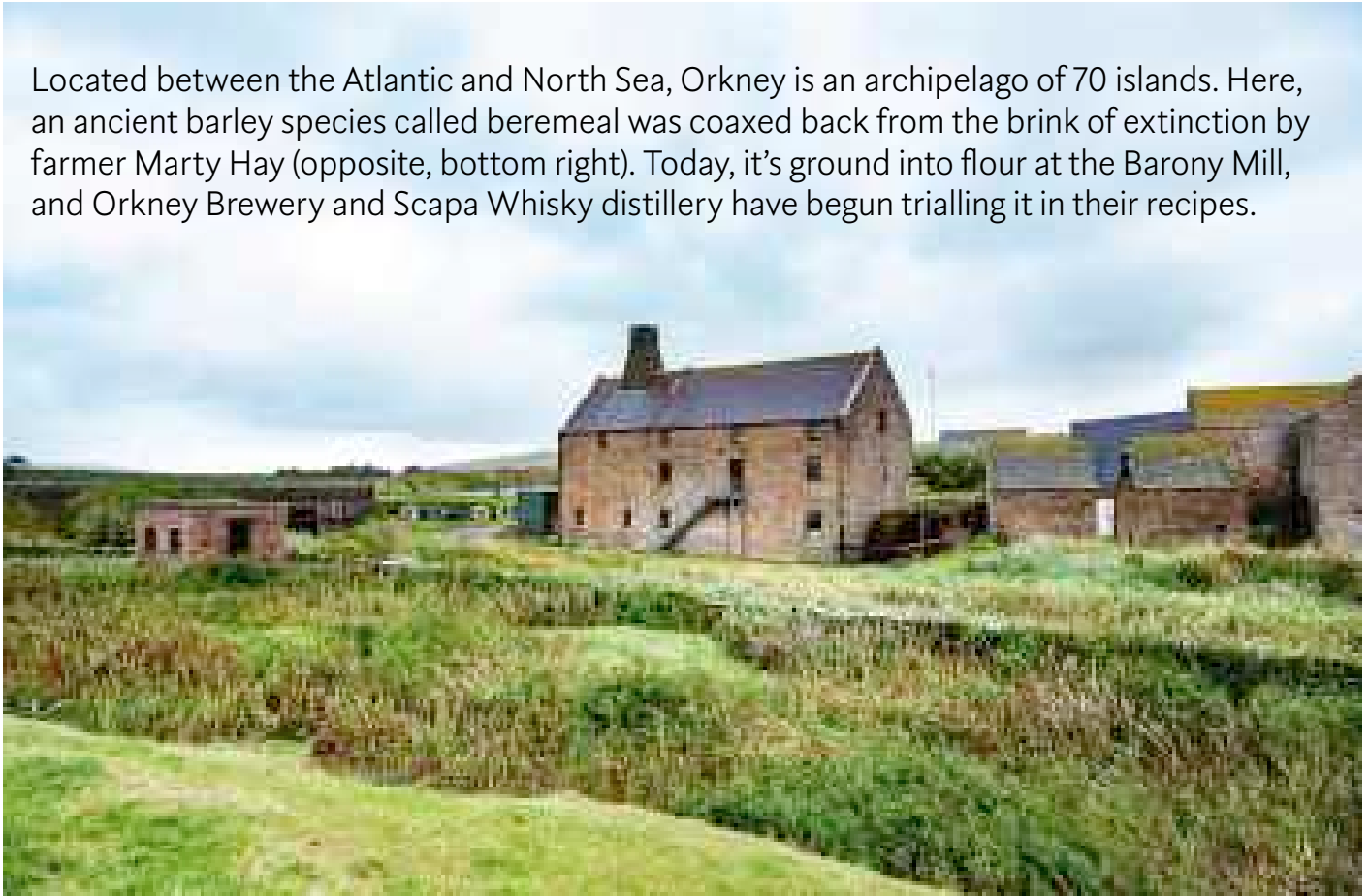




The Fergusons' 550-acre farm, outside the town of Turriff, comes alive for the autumn harvest: the combine harvesters weave their way over the rolling Aberdeenshire terrain, creating a rich patchwork of groomed, golden fields. Andrew Ferguson harvests in line with the strict guidelines of the whisky- and beer-producing malt houses he sells to.



Located between the Atlantic and North Sea, Orkney is an archipelago of 70 islands. Here, an ancient barley species called beremeal was coaxed back from the brink of extinction by farmer Marty Hay (opposite, bottom right). Today, it's ground into flour at the Barony Mill, and Orkney Brewery and Scapa Whisky distillery have begun trialling it in their recipes.









Knockdhu Distillery, in the small village of Knock, not far from the Fergusons' farm, has been making whisky in the same way for more than a century. The oak barrels neatly aligned in the warehouse are former bourbon and sherry casks, shipped in to add flavour to the whisky after the distillation process. Distiller Fraser Legge, who has amassed a small collection of vintage distilling artefacts at Knockdhu, says, "Distilling is like an orchestra: every instrument comes together to make the final concerto."



Once the barley grain is threshed from the chaff, the grain is sent to large offsite malting houses, arriving at the distillery as malted barley. The malt is ground, then added to the mash tun and soaked in hot spring water. To make an Cnoc Whisky, Knockdhu Distillery uses giant copper stills for the process of vaporisation and condensation. The nutritious spent grains are then carted off to be used as fodder for Aberdeen cattle. ▣

Loganair flies to Aberdeen and Orkney from a number of major and regional airports. Camping pods at Wheems Organic Farm in Orkney start from £30, while rooms at Netherdale House, near Huntly in Aberdeenshire, start from £90. Tailor-made tours are available from Select Scotland Tours. loganair.co.uk wheemsorganic.co.uk netherdalehouse.co.uk selectscotlandtours.com visitabdn.com orkney.com visitscotland.com



THE WILD WEST

Set off on an epic road trip around the USA with Flight Centre, the official provider of reader offers for *National Geographic Traveller*

One of the best ways to bring the mythical Wild West to life is with a road trip. Start in Cheyenne, Wyoming, learning about the region at the Capitol Building and State Museum, before crossing the border into South Dakota and heading to Wind Cave National Park. The park is home to wildlife such as bison, elk and prairie dogs as well as the Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

Then it's on to Deadwood, home of Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok. Attractions run the gamut from old-timey gaming halls and saloons to outdoor activities such as rock climbing and hiking.

En route to the city of Cody, make a pit stop at the mighty Medicine Wheel, a National Historic Monument just off US Alt-14.

Watch the walls of the immense Shoshone Canyon rise up on either side of you at the eastern entrance of Yellowstone National Park. Park your motorhome at the Grant Village Campground and spend time

exploring the waterfalls, geothermal pools and geysers — including iconic Old Faithful.

Grand Teton National Park is just next door, offering spectacular scenery and glimpses of wildlife such as elk, moose, bison bears and bighorn sheep.

The frontier town of Lander is the jumping-off point for the Wind River Indian Reservation, home of the Shoshone and Arapaho tribes. Participate in a pow wow, check out the museums and visit the grave sites of Sacagawea and Chief Washakie.

Finish up in Fort Collins, a city with a historic Old Town, 50 parks and more than 280 miles of hiking and biking trails.

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Grand Teton National Park: Mix stunning scenery with hiking, biking and boating.

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TALES OF THE TIGER CRIES OF THE WILD

To travel across Madhya Pradesh is to taste India's untamed heartland, where national parks teem with wildlife and stories of Bengal tigers are on everyone's lips. Expertly versed in the art of stealth and secrecy, however, it's a beast that proves hard to seek

Words: Charlotte Wigram-Evans





He must be joking. The tiny wooden structure looks like little more than a shed, balanced on the cliff's edge with a 500ft drop in place of a porch and 40sq miles of jungle for a garden.

But no. Ramavtaar is gesturing emphatically towards the hut, happiness etched in the lines around his eyes, a smile clear beneath his balaclava. I find myself leaning forwards in the safari truck, waiting for his tale.

Ramavtaar used to call this cabin home. He began patrol work in Madhya Pradesh's Bandhavgarh National Park when he was 19, using the watch-post as a base from which to protect the park. More than 45 years on, he guides rather than guards, but when the monsoon hits and the reserve closes to tourists, he returns to this hut, deep in the heart of the jungle.

"I prefer tigers for neighbours," he shrugs, pointing out fresh tracks in the roadside. Each paw is saucer-sized and I stare, awestruck, as Ramavtaar reminisces about a time when a 500lb beast leapt from a thicket, snatching the scarf from around his neck before melting back into the bush. "Perhaps he was cold," he chortles. "I can move so silently through the forest that people call me 'the ghost', but nothing is stealthier than the tiger."

A cold winter dawn is breaking on Bandhavgarh: blood-red stains are seeping into the sky and, all around us, wildlife is stirring. Babblers begin the morning's symphony, white-bellied minivets adding their short, sharp burst to the tune. Soon the canopy's orchestra is in full swing, with quails cooing and rollers calling — Mother Nature conducting a wild jungle song.

This is India's untamed heartland, where the looming, pine-crested Satpura Range dissolves into Kanha's grasslands to the east and the dense forests of Bandhavgarh to the north. There are 11 national parks in Madhya Pradesh, more than any other Indian state, and these pockets of wilderness are fiercely protected, their flora and fauna wonderfully diverse.

We turn away from the watch-post and rattle up another rocky peak. Bamboo thickets become denser, and the

eyes of unknown creatures follow us from the undergrowth before the track spits us out at an ancient stone ruin. Piece by piece, nature is devouring the structure, the once-mighty columns cracked and crumbling, the floor subsiding and slick with moss.

This palace was once a holiday home with a very different purpose, a place from which the maharajas of Madhya Pradesh could stalk big cats. Although it hasn't been inhabited since the 14th century, Bandhavgarh was used as a hunting ground as recently as the 1960s.

Local folklore has long deemed the killing of tigers auspicious — a display of strength and dedication to Shiva, god of destruction. The creatures were almost completely wiped out in Bandhavgarh, with numbers falling to as low as 11 by some counts, and it wasn't until 1968, when the last maharaja of Rewa became racked with guilt over killing a pregnant tigress, that the park was gifted to the Indian government.

Bandhavgarh now has a healthy population of 79 tigers, and its remarkable success story has been mirrored across the state, including in Kanha National Park — my next stop. The reserve served as Rudyard Kipling's inspiration for *The Jungle Book* and, on our first drive, I spot Baloo. He ambles slow and soft-footed past the car, long black hair gleaming, eyes the colour of coal, with a comical white muzzle as though he's broken into a larder and helped himself to some cream.

"He's after gooseberries," says Uday, one of the park's naturalists. "It's that time of year. He'll then move onto black plums and, in August, when the monsoon hits, it'll be termite time." I look past the sloth bear, out across the vast expanse of rippling grassland, punctuated by termite towers rising 6ft tall. Kanha's topography couldn't be more different to Bandhavgarh, its steep ridges replaced with open plains where barasingha deer glance up from their breakfasts, startled, as we rumble past.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Rock pool, Satpura National Park; sloth bear, Bandhavgarh National Park; grey langur male keeping an eye out for danger

PREVIOUS PAGE: Male tiger, Bandhavgarh National Park





FROM LEFT: Spotted deer, Bandhavgarh National Park; Rangers looking for Bengal tigers; Young tiger stalking through the undergrowth



Light reflecting off their antlers glows halo-like, and groups of grey langurs sit like fat old men around their feet, bellies out, legs splayed, basking in the sun.

“Where you find monkeys, you find deer,” Uday tells me. “They’re the scouts of the wilderness, and the tigers’ mortal enemy.”

I watch as a large male closes his eyes and gives his crotch a good itch. It doesn’t scream lookout, but before I can comment, Uday pulls the car to a skidding stop and examines an ebony tree. Deep slashes run like open wounds up its trunk — the work of a tiger marking its territory.

“The dominant male in this area is very protective,” he says, stroking the scarred tree. “Last year, he killed two trespassing cats and ate their bodies.”

Suppressing a shiver, I listen as Uday recounts a comical tale of trundling after his father through Kanha’s bush as a boy, plastic binoculars hanging from his neck, a book on birds clutched in his hands. Images of tiger hunting tiger linger in my imagination, but I remind myself it’s something to be thankful for. These territory disputes come about as a result of rising population numbers — this is survival of the fittest.

Wild and wondrous

The cry echoes sharp and urgent through the canopy. It bounces off the oak trees and reverberates through the underbrush, setting hairs on the back of my neck tingling and goosebumps running up my arms.

“Tiger,” Vineith hisses. “Up ahead. The langurs have sounded the alarm.”

Until now, the tiger has stalked my travels from the shadows, existing tantalisingly in paw prints, claw marks and local’s tales, but when I see one for myself, stories evaporate and all I can do is stare, transfixed by the flames that seem to ripple up his flank, the eyes that promise infinite patience and the muscular limbs so versed in the art of stealth and surprise.

We’re in Satpura National Park, where Vineith works as a naturalist, and the magnificent nine-month-old male is less than 50 metres away. He sits perfectly still in the long grass, watching us as we watch him. Then, an eternity later, or 10 minutes, or somewhere inbetween, he yawns an enormous, exaggerated yawn. “You’re boring me,” he seems to say, and, stretching luxuriously, turns and slinks out of sight.

India’s wildlife is extraordinary and diverse, but it’s the Bengal tiger that truly defines this country, ever-present in its art, architecture and religious symbolism. However, for the Gond tribe, living in villages on the fringes of Madhya Pradesh’s forests, it’s also an animal that has a huge

impact on day-to-day life. The hope of glimpsing a tiger draws travellers to India from across the globe and, as the tourism industry grows, many Gonds now work as guards or guides — like Ramavtaar — or in safari lodges close to the parks. For centuries, they’ve coexisted harmoniously with the jungle, harbouring an innate knowledge of the plants and animals with which they share this space. “It’s their forest,” Vineith says simply.

This is the final stop on my tour of India’s wild, wondrous heartland, and as we leave the park, it becomes apparent that Vineith’s love of the wilderness is matched only by his desire to become a racing driver. The jeep launches over bumps and flies across potholes, passing the Gond’s squat blue-and-white houses in spiralling plumes of dust and sand.

I’m invited for lunch in one of these homes the following day, the smoky aubergine chulha, creamy daal, catfish curry and warm, fresh-baked bati (dough balls) all spiced with centuries of tradition. Beyond the garden, a small boy laughs as he rolls a tyre down a dusty path, women raise water from a stone well and farmers sit on stilted platforms to protect their crop from boar, bears and deer, their cattle from big cats on the prowl.

For Madhya Pradesh’s Gond tribe, the wild isn’t something viewed from the comfort and safety of a safari truck. It’s a reality, a force to respect and to reckon with. When I head into the jungle for the last time, it’s on foot and, suddenly, the trees seem taller, the air closer and the possibility of coming face-to-face with a tiger is spine-tinglingly real.

“A young male is just establishing his territory here,” Vineith says cheerfully. “He uses that grassland over there to stalk. Oh, and try to stick to the track — we have a good population of saw-scaled snakes here. They’re deadly, and one of the fastest striking reptiles in the world.”

Thankfully, no matter how much I scan the forest floor, I see only gnarled roots and dead leaves, and fungus growing in strange, supernatural shapes. We pause to examine a pile of fresh dung: “Spotted deer,” says Vineith. “See how it’s cylindrical? Sambar deer poo is round — tastes sweeter, too.”

Laughing a deep, chin-wobbling laugh, he strides on, the jungle swallowing him up in an instant. I linger behind, lost in wonder at this intricate ecosystem, my fingers brushing past coarse teak leaves and the silky smooth bark of a ghost tree. I peer at some speargrass swaying innocently in the afternoon breeze. Perhaps a tiger walked there this morning; perhaps he’s napping in there now; or perhaps he’s watching my every step, coveting my scarf, and contemplating his next move.

Essentials

Getting there & around: Various airlines offer direct flights to Delhi from Heathrow or Gatwick, including Air India. It’s then a two-hour hop to Jabalpur, the gateway to Madhya Pradesh’s parks. Average flight time: 14h
It’s possible to traverse the state by train, but a driver may be easier. Prices are around £500 a week, and cars can be organised through the Transport Department of the Madhya Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation. *E: transportsectionbpl@mp.gov.in*

When to go: October–February is dry, with temperatures around 25C (dropping to as low as 5C at night). By April, temperatures can get to 40C; this is the best time to see wildlife, as animals gather around waterholes to keep cool. Parks close during the monsoon, typically from July–September.

Places to stay:

Kings Lodge, Bandhavgarh
Blending into the surrounds, this beautifully designed lodge is all dark wood and earthen tones. Lantern-lit pathways lead to the 18 cottages, where walls are hung with Gond artworks. From £121 a night. *kingslodge.in*

Courtyard House, Kanha
For those after luxury on a smaller budget, this is an excellent option. The hotel has a homestay feel, albeit one with a pool, fire pit and sun-drenched courtyard. There are only four rooms, meaning getting to know the other guests is a given. From £121 a night. *courtyardhousekanha.com*

Forsyth Lodge, Satpura
All eight rooms at this lodge are beautiful and enormous, with several featuring an upper level allowing guests to sleep under the stars. The nightly-changing menu is delicious, inventive and locally sourced. Nighttime and walking safaris are offered, plus there’s the option of a three-day camping trip through the Satpura Mountains led by Vineith, the head naturalist. From £205 a night. *forsythlodge.com*

For more information on lodges visit *mptourism.com*







CITY LIFE

LIMA

A culinary renaissance has revitalised the Peruvian capital, leading to buzzing beach barrios and industrial spaces reborn as creative hubs. **WORDS:** Michael Parker Stainback

PHOTOGRAPHS: Karolina Wiercigroch

I've gone deep into the Lima buzz in Barranco. Crowds pack tightly around tables at Isolina, arguably the neighbourhood's top dining spot (among too many contenders), celebrated for sublime tastes that come from working-man recipes, haute technique and impeccable, locally sourced ingredients.

The packed dining room embodies a Lima revival that has transformed a capital city once dismissed (even by some residents) as dusty, early-to-bed and provincial. Acclaim for Lima's influential chefs and adventurous food scene is now legion. And perhaps that energy — creativity, newfound civic pride — has kicked off a wider cultural renaissance that today makes Lima one of the Americas' edgiest, most compelling cities.

Wannabe scenesters, crowding the door, jockey for hostess attention. Everyone — from scruffy-bearded, uncombed kids to imposing señoras in neoindigenous finery, and silver-fox gents with shaggy manes wearing poet-worthy turtlenecks — is immersed in deep conversation, emphatic gestures flying. The restaurant's soft woods and dim lights do little to abate the roar. Sidelined to a bar stool (party of one; no reservation) but with a commanding view of the pageant, I feel the pulse of a great Latin American city; a place where human connections are paramount and chit-chat morphs into something deeper and richer.

"For years, people thought Lima was the place to change planes for Cuzco," quips manager Rafael Parra over an early-morning coffee in the misty, romantic garden at Casa República Barranco hotel. "But the city has started to take pride in what it is; now we need people to come." The busy yet tranquil hostelry (as well as plush rival Hotel B, on the same ceremonious yet shabby-genteel street) is another part of the Barranco buzz: people

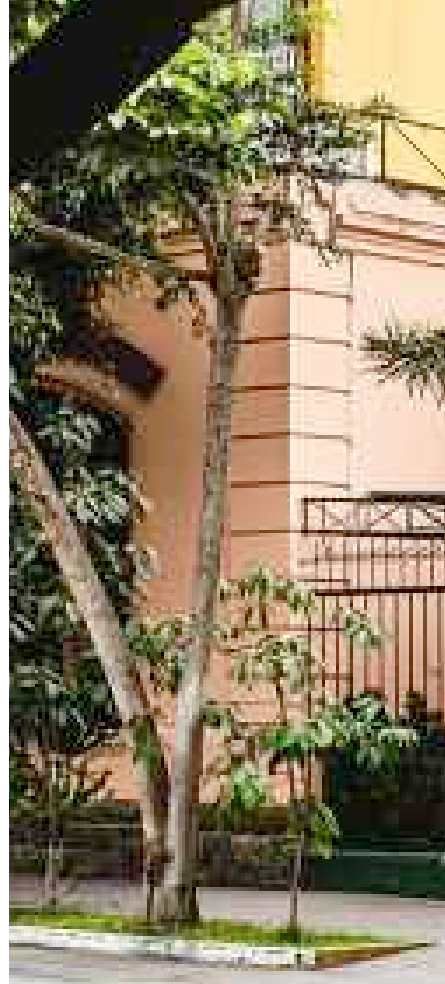
are restoring grand, historic structures and filling them with edgy, eye-catching artworks, kicky boutiques and galleries, plus spectacular dining rooms.

The neighbourhood lies 7.5 miles south of the city centre, clinging to Pacific cliffs on the far side of upper-class San Isidro and Miraflores. In previous decades, those districts constituted most Lima visitors' entire theatre of action. But recent years have seen Barranco — originally a seaside resort for the capital's best families — take on a key role in a city that's now stirring.

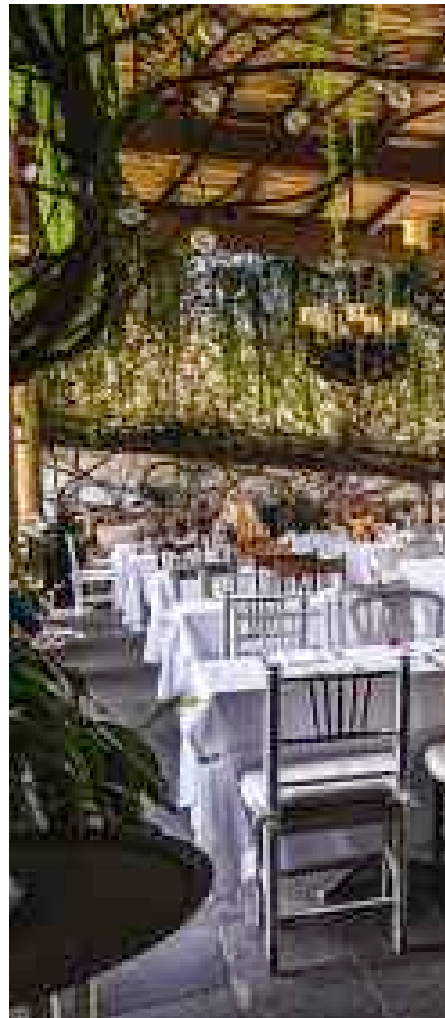
The MAC Lima contemporary art museum — the district's cultural gateway, on Avenida Miguel Grau — beckons. Beyond walls given over to striking, colourful murals, I duck into loft-like galleries and high-impact exhibits that often result in some head scratching; here, at what is a forum for many of the hemisphere's most avant-garde proposals, it's dialogue, as well as controversy, that's being provoked. A few blocks in, Barranco's walkable, tree-lined streets and quaint town plaza reach an urban zenith, with families, old folks and newly minted bohemians crowding onto sidewalks to see friends, watch the ocean, smooch, or stop for a drink. A hop down Avenida San Martín toward Chorrillos leads to more of the city's most fascinating art spaces, including the historic, sacred collection at the Pedro de Osma Museum, and high-gloss photography on view at MATE - Museo Mario Testino. The mix is chic, but real, alive and authentic — not too posh, just yet.

"We came here to be artists," says flower-seller Gabriela Sánchez Morbeli, as she assembles a pretty, affordable bouquet. "The only work in our pueblo was to be a cop." Gabriela reached Lima and now she and her grown-up children are singer-songwriters, picking up gigs. "Here we have freedom to be who we are," she says.

Andean expression // "There's a particular style that's very Peru that you don't see anywhere else ... When you mix Incan minimalism with the heavy, ornate Spanish baroque, it's very interesting." Mario Testino



FROM TOP: Street scene in Barranco, a neighbourhood that's home to an increasing number of boutiques and galleries; the garden restaurant at Larco Museum
PREVIOUS PAGES: Setting the scene for al fresco terrace dining at a cafe in Barranco





CULTURE CONSTELLATION

Barranco makes for a comfortable jump-off to Lima's constellation of culture. First-stop: nondescript, workaday Pueblo Libre. South of Centro and north west from San Isidro. Larco Museum, established here in 1926, is a dazzling focal point of city pride. A spiffy showcase for 45,000 pre-Columbian treasures amassed by Peruvian archaeology pioneer Rafael Larco Hoyle, generations of artists, scholars and aficionados, eager to go deeper into Peru's rich heritage, esteem it as a temple. Arranged on 6ft-high shelves, the museum's vast collection of ceremonial vessels — crafted to contain everything from water to fermented beverages and sacrificial blood — overwhelms me in a thrilling way, as do *chiaroscuro* galleries showcasing jewellery, armour, ceramics, precious metals and rich, ancient textiles.

"There's got to be excitement in art — and art museums," says Larco spokesperson Samantha Encalada. We're seated in the museum restaurant, an exquisite jewellery box in what must be Lima's most impeccable botanic garden. Bougainvillea floods over stately hacienda walls; gnarled, age-old cactuses rise metres high; every corner harbours fascinating horticulture, winsome statuary. As a museum promoter, Samantha favours sensations over data, plus a focus on the overall cultural experience. Referring to outcomes from Peru's violent 20th century and current political wrangling, she asserts that the "old-school Lima" of select elite families — taking cues from Europe and the US and all but hostile to the nation's ethnic and artistic diversity — is giving way. A museum that began life as a solemn reliquary is now a dynamic cultural centre attracting wider audiences; part of Samantha's charge is finding ways for Larco to bring marginal populations into contact with the emotion and joy the museum affords. "We're expanding our vision of the Peruvian," she says.

After so much refinement, it's time to slide down into grittier Centro streets, around iconic Plaza San Martín. For hundreds of years they served as the city's commercial hub, populated by handsome, colonial-revival office buildings, banks and the venerable, if tatty, Gran Hotel Bolívar.





Q&A with visual artist Christi Zorrilla

WHAT PATHS LED YOU TO THE VISUAL ARTS IN LIMA?

I was born in Peru, but my ancestors are from China. They emigrated to South America sometime in the early 1900s. Most of my young life I lived in the US. But, fascinated by the two strongest lines in my heritage, I came back to Lima to 'learn Peruvian'. It included a season living in the forests between Loreto and Iquitos. No indoor plumbing, I bathed in the river — but I loved it.

YOU RECENTLY SHOWED AN ARTWORK, LAZOS ANCESTRALES ('ANCESTRAL TIES') AT MAC LIMA. CAN YOU SHARE THE THOUGHT BEHIND IT?

My piece was part of a collaborative exhibition among Peruvian-Chinese artists. All the works addressed movement between China and Peru, then back to China — a journey I've personally made. My artwork's red network is composed of knots — an element of importance in China as well as Peru, related to the Inca *quipu* (ancient stringed recording device). It also ties into my interest in textiles, a major medium in both cultures.

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO LIVE IN LIMA WITH CHINESE HERITAGE?

After a hundred years here, the community is strong and established, maybe even privileged. The city's racial mix is one of its best parts. I like Lima. But I'm also going back to the jungle.
instagram.com/christi.z





FROM LEFT: Streets of Callao, an artistic hotspot in the Lima metropolitan area; graffiti at Monumental Callao, an area of Lima dotted with street art, performance spaces and food stalls



By the end of the 20th century, the quarter had been disdained in favour of more affluent, seemingly ‘modern’ precincts.

Now I see new signs of life. Retail space — home to haberdasheries or prim cafes in the old days — has been repainted with eye-popping urban art that presents everything from acid-hued national heroes and no-holds-barred political critique to Catholic iconography, now rehashed via indigenous vindications. A congress of young hipsters — artists, rockers, nonconformists and those that love them — are crowding out legacy drunks at old-school dives like Queirolo, and ear-splitting rock ‘n’ roll joint Piano Bar Munich. Adjacent streets explode on weekend nights with raucous beer halls and hole-in-the-wall dance clubs that come, thrill, bore, then go. It’s that sweet moment when people with an eye begin fixing up wonderful old places, installing creative venues; and developers have yet to spoil the party.

The night before, a walk (well, taxi ride) on the wild side had seen me venture into the neighbouring city of Callao, an artistic outpost in the Lima metropolitan area. A colonial-era sea port, 7.5 miles west of downtown, the area declined and hardened

in the decades following a 19th-century industrial boom. Today, the creative work it nurtures gives rise to a vital, edgy and passionate scene that artsy travellers ought to see. It’s made impressive strides towards rehumanising what for decades was dismissed as the city’s roughest, most incorrigible slum, one whose residents were rendered invisible.

This transformation began in 2015 with the creation of Monumental Callao, a community organisation focused on the visual and performing arts and design that provides a platform for local, often marginalised creators. The upshot has been a renewed sense of purpose and appreciation for the area’s history, architecture and residents. At its centre stands the Ronald Building, now known as Casa Fugaz: a five-story, 1920s skyscraper that towers over the surrounding terrain. Restored to industrial-rococo perfection, its filigree and pomp find a cool urban complement in funky, ground-floor boutiques, galleries and restaurants. Upper floors house artists’ studios — for neighbourhood creators and a growing roster of international names in residence — that often receive the public; their elegant stone balconies and wide sash windows

INSIDER TIPS

Uber in Lima is efficient but quickly grows expensive. If possible, organise days around a single neighbourhood's must-sees and -dos; travelling by bus between Barranco, Miraflores and the Centro is nearly always faster than by car.

Peruvians may be a wee bit formal as first-nighters, but when you find a restaurant or tavern you really like, visit more than once. You'll be a regular before you know it.

must surely inspire. The centre's exemplary presence trickles into surrounding streets that invite daytime strolls.

Here, fresh coats of paint in bold, compelling graffiti-art depict noteworthy neighbourhood characters and the fierce creatures of a new urban mythology, and, not least of all, residents' electric-hued demands for dignity and empowerment. You can't leave unmoved.

Weekends mean great live music on the Casa Fugaz rooftop, often reggaeton or hip hop, at low cost to the general public; tonight, it's salsa by Mambo Glacial. Even amid the revelry, talk turns to culture. Gil Shavit, Monumental Callao's founder, is in the crowd, alongside an imposing posse of young musicians and rappers — guys who grew up in nearby, warring barrios but have buried the hatchet for music's sake and are now collaborating at an on-site recording studio. Talent and a chance at stardom have electrified their relationships. Both the candid Shavit (a self-professed "not-squeaky-clean" veteran of Lima's high-end real estate racket) and band members (who perform under stage names including Silencio, Jey Army and Salsa) surprise me

with their spirit and sentimentality.

"I don't care how successful you are," the founder declares, apropos of life lessons. "You have to have a heart, have to want to change things, have to love." Fugaz administrative assistant Fabiola Rentería grew up poor, just a few blocks away. She has her share of neighbourhood horror stories but affirms the centre's influence "taught us to show our dignity and work for our own successes".

Back to the gig: what the headliners lack in polish (the lead singer is fond of from-the-bottle slugs of rum) they make up for in raw power: some 15 youths blasting horns, drums and rhythm, plus another singer — a master of maracas and hypnotic fancy dance. Fans, friends and visitors come together from all stations. From the roof's edge, I take in the terrible, fabulous city, in widescreen, from the old Centro to the modern industrial port, Pacific beaches to Callao's crumbling belle époque. Lima's perennial fog-veil blurs a million lights, on shore and at sea; candy-pink fireworks explode from an anonymous quarter, no special occasion required.

Changing perception

// *"The majority of North Americans visiting Peru ... fly direct to Lima, tour Cuzco, visit the ruins and return straight home, not believing that anything else is worth seeing." Ernesto 'Che' Guevara*





FROM LEFT: Plaza de Armas, Centro Historico; one of many simple eateries at Surquillo Market; ceviche at Surquillo Market, which also sells a dazzling array of fruit and vegetables, dry goods, meat, poultry and spices

24 hours IN LIMA

8AM

PARQUE EL OLIVAR

Spanish colonists laid out olive groves that still flourish in San Isidro's beloved and tranquil public park. In addition to the trees — which merit your sincere admiration — El Olivar is great for jogging, strolling or just plain meditation. Lima's misty climate is part of the fun, swathing specimens in romance, tempting you to stray. All around lies a gracious, old-money neighbourhood and its swank, pseudo-baronial architecture.

9AM

SURQUILLO MARKET

Across a hellacious expressway from Miraflores (once an Inca road to the sea) lies this traditional market. A scrappy, much-loved, happy hunting ground for top restaurateurs, it's filled with tropical produce you've got to try, plus head-still-on butchery. Vociferous lady fishmongers tend counters at its rear, serving up half-a-dozen ceviche varieties plus yummy fillets cooked as you like them; generous portions of off-colour humour and questions about your foreign provenance served on the side.

11AM

PACHACAMAC

The 40-minute trip south from Barranco is worth the hassle to reach the Pachacamac archaeological site: the ruins of a city variously occupied by Lima, Wuri, Ychma and Inca peoples after AD 200. Traditionally home to an oracle, it attracted pilgrims from all over the Andean region and reached its zenith just before the Spaniards hit in 1533. Remains from stunning courts, palaces and pyramids attest to antique greatness and punctuate the now-silent, otherworldly desert surrounding it. pachacamac.cultura.pe

12PM

CHIFA WA LOK

Start out before lunch and gird your loins for a dive deep into Lima's Barrio Chino, a frenetic and congested Chinatown. Sweat not the queue — tables turn fast — then settle in for mass portions of the Chinese comforts locals crave, especially much-adored *chaufa* fried rice. Or slog through the bible-like menu for every possible Sino-Peruvian veggie, pork, beef, chicken, duck or seafood iteration. Good local beer is available, but almost everyone will be drinking a sugar-shock, sunshine-yellow Inca Kola. walok.com.pe



Lunch at Huaca Pucllana, in Miraflores, a restaurant that serves a mix of contemporary and classical Peruvian dishes

2PM (SUNDAYS)

ALFONSO UGARTE ANTIQUES MARKET

Every Sunday, around a dozen peddlers gather on quiet Avenida Alfonso Ugarte for this sidewalk showcase of vintage dishware, furnishings, artworks, tchotchkes, books, vinyl and other treasures. Wheeling, dealing and genteel haggling abound but the sale is closed with lots of friendly banter from merchants.

8PM

HUACA PUCLLANA

It's in every guidebook, but the experience is exquisite. A five-star restaurant splurge in Miraflores, right next to the namesake Lima-civilisation archaeological site. A terrace adjacent to its adobe pyramid and surrounding plazas, patios and chambers serves as a brilliant dining room for stellar people-watching and haute Peruvian cuisine. The latter includes impeccably turned-out quinoa salads, tiraditos and ceviches, plus fish and shellfish from the Pacific and nearby rivers. More adventurous palates savour delicacies like alpaca and guinea pig. resthuacapucllana.com

10PM

COCKTAILS AT BAR INGLÉS

After a full day of Lima intensity, shake off any dust (physical or psychological) with a stiff, old-school cocktail in the Bar Inglés at the Country Club Lima Hotel. That bone-dry martini, heart-warming manhattan or piquant negroni, mixed to five-star standards, is the perfect attitude adjustment, especially in a fine, wainscoted barroom that rides the line with genuine Britannia fakery. countryclublimahotel.com

4AM

LATE-NIGHT SUPPER AT SIETE SOPAS

A soaring industrial space, awash in neon and favoured by post-nightlife refugees, the Surquillo branch of Siete Sopas (open 24/7) has diners clustering at long, shared tables that quickly lead to bonhomie. Nightly limited fixed menus (sandwiches, pasta, chicken) showcase one of seven soups that are Peruvian regional classics, including a *sui-generis* minestrone, a stick-to-your-ribs beef and bean potage, or *sancocho*, an originally Caribbean stew that's packed with meat, potatoes or cassava and corn on the cob. ☐

ESSENTIALS



Getting there & around

British Airways offers the only direct flights from London to Lima. ba.com
Average flight time: 12h35m.

Although buses connect central Lima, Miraflores and Barranco a car is the best way to explore the sprawling city. Inexpensive taxis abound (negotiate fares before boarding) and Uber is well established.

When to go

Lima's climate is temperate and dry, with negligible rainfall (less than 6cm annually). Winter (June-October) temperatures range from 15-20C; summer (November-May) temperatures from 16-27C.

Places mentioned

Hotel Casa República. casarepublica.com
Hotel B. relaischateaux.com
MAC Lima. maclima.pe
Pedro de Osma Museum. museopedrodeosma.org
MATE – Museo Mario Testino. mate.pe
Larco Museum. museolarco.org
Queirolo. bodegaqueirolo.com
Piano Bar Munich. facebook.com/pianobarmunichoficial
Monumental Callao. monumentalcallao.com

More info

peru.travel
visitlima.pe

How to do it

CHIMU ADVENTURES can arrange travel around Lima, accommodation at Hotel Casa República (Barranco), and airport transfers. chimuadventures.com

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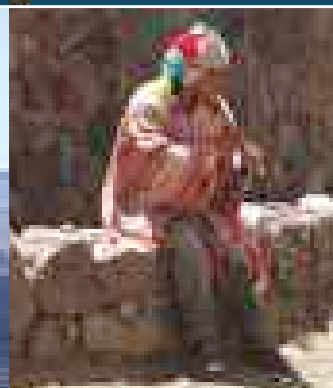
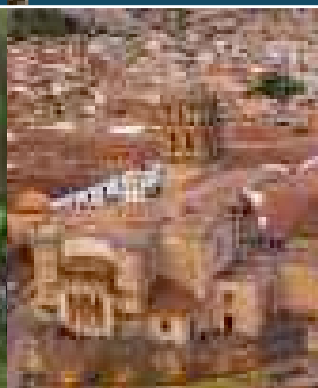
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HÖGA KUSTEN

LIFE ON A HIGH

The great outdoors, unique cuisine and cultural heritage come together in this coastal Swedish region, a destination that's truly on the up

Situated on the Gulf of Bothnia, some 300 miles north east of Stockholm, Höga Kusten ('High Coast') encapsulates the rich heritage, adventure and natural beauty of rural Sweden. During the last ice age, the region was compressed under glacier, but today it's rapidly rising from the sea – hence the name. The awe-inspiring landscapes include rocky cliffs, red-granite islets, caves and deep ravines, all of which have helped the archipelago earn its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. There's a raw beauty to the coastline, too, indented by bays and carpeted in forests that offer all manner of active pursuits, including hiking and via ferrata. Travellers looking to unwind after a day's adventure will also discover a unique food scene and world-famous distilleries that make Höga Kusten a truly dynamic place to discover. From tasting the local cuisine to exploring island life, discover seven of the best experiences the region has to offer.



Forested islets in Sweden's Höga Kusten archipelago
RIGHT: Cooking a meal on a break from exploring



1 Watch for wildlife

There's a primordial allure to Skuleskogen National Park, with its flat-topped mountains, boulder fields and bucolic countryside. The absence of roads encourages wildlife to roam — keep an eye out for lynx, roe deer and brown bears, the park's elusive residents. The mighty Slättdalsskrevan is a must-see: a 650ft-long, 130ft-deep canyon carved by the elements. sverigesnationalparker.se

2 Take a hike

Spanning the length of Höga Kusten, the 80-mile High Coast Trail takes in soaring cliffs and protected parkland. Hardy walkers should dedicate several days to completing the trek, beginning at Hornöberget in the south and finishing near the city of Örnsköldsvik in the north. Rustic lodges along the way are perfect for resting weary legs. highcoasttrail.com

3 Soak up the island life

Red-and-white clapboard cottages fringe the crescent

bay at Trysunda, a serene fishing village on an islet of the same name. Accessible by boat all year round, the village's biggest draw is its wooden chapel with painted interiors. Summer days are best spent on the golden sands of Björnviken, on the island's eastern coast.

4 Reach new heights

Even novice climbers can conquer Skule Mountain, where anchored cables, rungs and footholds create a thrilling via ferrata around the cliff edge. Hire a helmet and harness before hauling yourself along one of four routes. It's well worth the effort — the sweeping vistas from the summit are breathtaking. viaferrata.se

5 Taste local delicacies

A must-try for adventurous eaters is the local delicacy surströmming, a fermented herring notorious for its pungent aromas. The dish dates back to the 1500s when fisherman could spare only a little salt to preserve their catch, thus causing it to sour. Late August is when brave

locals start tucking into the whiffy fish, best served in the open air on *tunnbröd* (flatbread) with a generous dollop of sour cream.

6 Get in the spirit

Hernö Gin distillery, in the village of Dala, has scooped countless awards for its craft gins, and visitors can tour the copper stills before sampling botanical blends. Further north lies High Coast Distillery, a former power station next to the Ångerman river. There's a restaurant and tasting bar on site, and a spirited whisky festival in summer. hernogin.com highcoastwhisky.se

7 Embrace your artistic side

In a remote corner of Höga Kusten, a treehouse hangs above ground and a walkway leads over an abyss — these installations are the remnants of ArkNat, an annual architecture festival that showcases designers pushing the boundaries between architecture and the great outdoors. There's a total of nine landmarks to spot. arknat.com

DID YOU KNOW?

Outerwear brand Fjällräven comes from Höga Kusten. As the story goes, a 1960s schoolboy created an alternative hiking bag with his mother's sewing machine. Today, the Känken rucksack is beloved by creatives and adventurers alike. fjallraven.com

Essentials

Getting there: Various airlines fly from the UK to Umeå with a connecting flight in Stockholm. From there, public transport services reach Höga Kusten. Alternatively, it's a six-hour drive.

 Region
Västernorrland

HÖGA KUSTEN 
EUROPEAN UNION
European Regional
Development Fund

CITY LIFE

DENVER



Colorado's laid-back capital is the mountainous gateway to the West, but dig deeper to discover craft beer and cocktail dens, indie boutiques, design hotels and street art

WORDS: Aaron Millar **PHOTOGRAPHS:** Rebecca Stumpf

The Rocky Mountains rise from the Great Plains like a mirage of granite, ice and snow. Seeing them for the first time feels like a dream, jagged peaks jutting suddenly 14,000ft to the sky, too vast to be real. But they are, and even better: they built a city on that view. Austin may have the live music, Portland might be the capital of cool, but Denver has something even better — Rocky Mountain bliss.

Long viewed through the filter of its Wild West heritage, when gold was found here in 1858 and pioneers rushed in to make their fortune, that filter has now changed. Today, Denver consistently ranks among the most liveable, walkable, healthiest cities in the country. And as one of America's hip urban centres, it's young, creative and up for fun.

It hasn't forgotten its roots, either; it's just that the city's roots have just grown. There's rodeo, country music and cowboy boots if that's your thing, but walk the streets of Denver today and you're more likely to find tattoo parlours and trendy trainer shops than anywhere touting Stetsons and spurs.

Cowboys may be good at lassoing steers, but it's the young urbanites, who have flocked here in their thousands in recent years, that are good at what Denver stands for now: art, food, music and craft beer. Lots of beer: a staggering 148 breweries at the last count to be precise. But a good pint is one thing. A good pint with a jaw-dropping view of the Rocky Mountains is the stuff of dreams for many.

Especially when that view is waiting for you to jump in. Just a few miles west of the city proper, but within its jurisdiction, there are hundreds of miles of trails, some of the highest peaks in the lower 48 (all US states but Alaska and Hawaii) and even a ski train to take you straight from the city to the slopes. Adventure by day, cocktails by night.

Denver is surprising people, which is why, perhaps, it's already won two top international travel accolades for the best place to visit in 2020. The secret is simple and the secret is out: Denver doesn't just have the mountains and it's more than just the gateway to the West. It has the music, the culture and the cool too.





SEE & DO

RINO ARTS DISTRICT: This square mile of hip galleries and graffiti murals is known as the street art capital of America. Come in early September for Crush Walls, Denver's pre-eminent urban art festival where the world's best graffiti artists create giant murals on the streets. crushwalls.org rinoartdistrict.org denvergraffititour.com

DENVER BEER TRAIL: They don't call this city the 'Napa Valley of beer' for nothing: on any given day, more beer is brewed here than anywhere else in the country. The Denver Beer Trail explores four boroughs and close to 40 tap rooms, including Wynkoop Brewery's infamous Rocky Mountain Oyster Stout, brewed with Colorado's old cowboy delicacy, bull's testicles. denver.org

RED ROCKS AMPHITHEATRE: Just 15 miles west of Denver, in the foothills of the Rockies, Red Rocks is surely the most beautiful concert venue in the world. An open-air amphitheatre, it's surrounded by sweeping red rock cliffs, lit up on all sides; and has

perfect acoustics under sparkling mountain stars. The Beatles and Jimi Hendrix both played here. redrocksonline.com

CHERRY CREEK BIKE PATH: Denver has more than 5,000 acres of parks and open space, and over 80 miles of pedestrian and cycle paths. The highlight is the Cherry Creek Bike Path, which runs for 40 beautiful miles from the city centre to the small town of Franktown. Spend some time at Confluence Park, where the trail begins, and maybe try your hand at a spot of urban kayaking on the manmade rapids. denver.org

BUFFALO BILL: Bison once roamed the Great Plains in their millions. Today, there are only about 500,000 nationwide including Denver's own official small herd, just west of the city in Genesee Park. Stop off at the grave of Buffalo Bill, the legendary 19th-century frontiersman and entertainer, while you're there. buffalobill.org

BAGA 14ER: Colorado is home to 58 14ers (local lingo for mountains higher than 14,000ft), more than any other state. Most

you have to hike, or climb, but Mount Evans lets you drive all the way to the summit. Topping out at 14,264ft, the Mount Evans Scenic Byway, which begins just a few miles west of Denver, is the highest paved road in America: and offers 360-degree views without even breaking a sweat. 14ers.com

THE INTERNATIONAL CHURCH OF CANNABIS: Denver legalised marijuana in 2014, and whether you're a toker or teetotal, the International Church of Cannabis is definitely worth a visit. The inside of this 114-year-old former church has been painted head to toe in psychedelic murals and hosts regular gigs, talks and community events. Make a beeline there, if nothing else, just to see the 'vicar' lighting up. elevationists.org

THE SOURCE MARKET HALL: Featuring two market halls and 24 artisan restaurants and boutiques, The Source is, perhaps, the city's coolest place to eat. Check out Acorn for award-winning modern Americana cuisine and Safta for unbelievable Middle Eastern mezze. denveracorn.com eatwithsafta.com

Sunny side of life //
Denver has 300 days of sunshine a year; that's more than San Diego or Miami Beach. Come in winter and you'll find blue skies and a relatively toasty average temperature of 7C

FROM LEFT: Tribal Murals (aka Alicia DeOlivera Cardenas) stands in front of her mural at Denver's Crush Walls 2019; Ratio Beerworks, RiNo District; Rockmount Ranch Wear's flagship store, a landmark in Lower Downtown Denver
PREVIOUS PAGE: Uc Sepia (aka Seymon Gurule) works on her mural as part of Denver's Crush Walls 2019, while her daughter watches on

**BUY**

CHERRY CREEK NORTH: This is 16 blocks of outdoor pedestrianised shopping and al fresco dining, filled with a selection of trendy boutiques. Check out the Artisan Center's range of local artists' products for that perfect souvenir. cherrycreeknorth.com
artisancenterdenver.com

HIGHLANDS SQUARE: Funky, independent and laid back, this is where the locals head when they want to hit the shops: hip boutiques, locally made crafts and a cool restaurant, bar and coffee shop scene. The Inspyre Boutique is a magnet for well-dressed women. visitdenverhighlands.com
inspyreboutique.com

ROCKMOUNT RANCH: This iconic Western clothing store has been serving up authentic hand-crafted cowboy gear since 1946 and has been worn by everyone from Elvis and Bob Dylan to Paul McCartney and Jack White. Papa Jack, the store's founder who died aged 107 in 2008, said: "The West is not a place, it's a state of mind." rockmount.com



LIKE A LOCAL

SKI TRAIN: Take the Winter Park Express all the way from Union Station, in Downtown Denver, direct to Winter Park Resort. This spectacular ride is probably the longest ski-in, ski-out in the world, with great views of the Rockies from the observation deck. winterparkresort.com

MILE HIGH CITY: Denver is nicknamed the Mile High City because its elevation is exactly one mile above sea level (that's 5,280ft, which is more than 800ft higher than the top of Ben Nevis). The altitude means exercise is harder, the sun burns fiercer, golf balls fly farther, and alcohol goes straight to your head.

ON THE ROAD: Jack Kerouac lived in the city and wrote about it in his Beat Generation classic, *On The Road*. Soak up some of that local literary greatness at My Brother's Bar, where he, Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady would often hang out. The decor has barely changed since the 1960s, but the burgers have improved. mybrothersbar.com



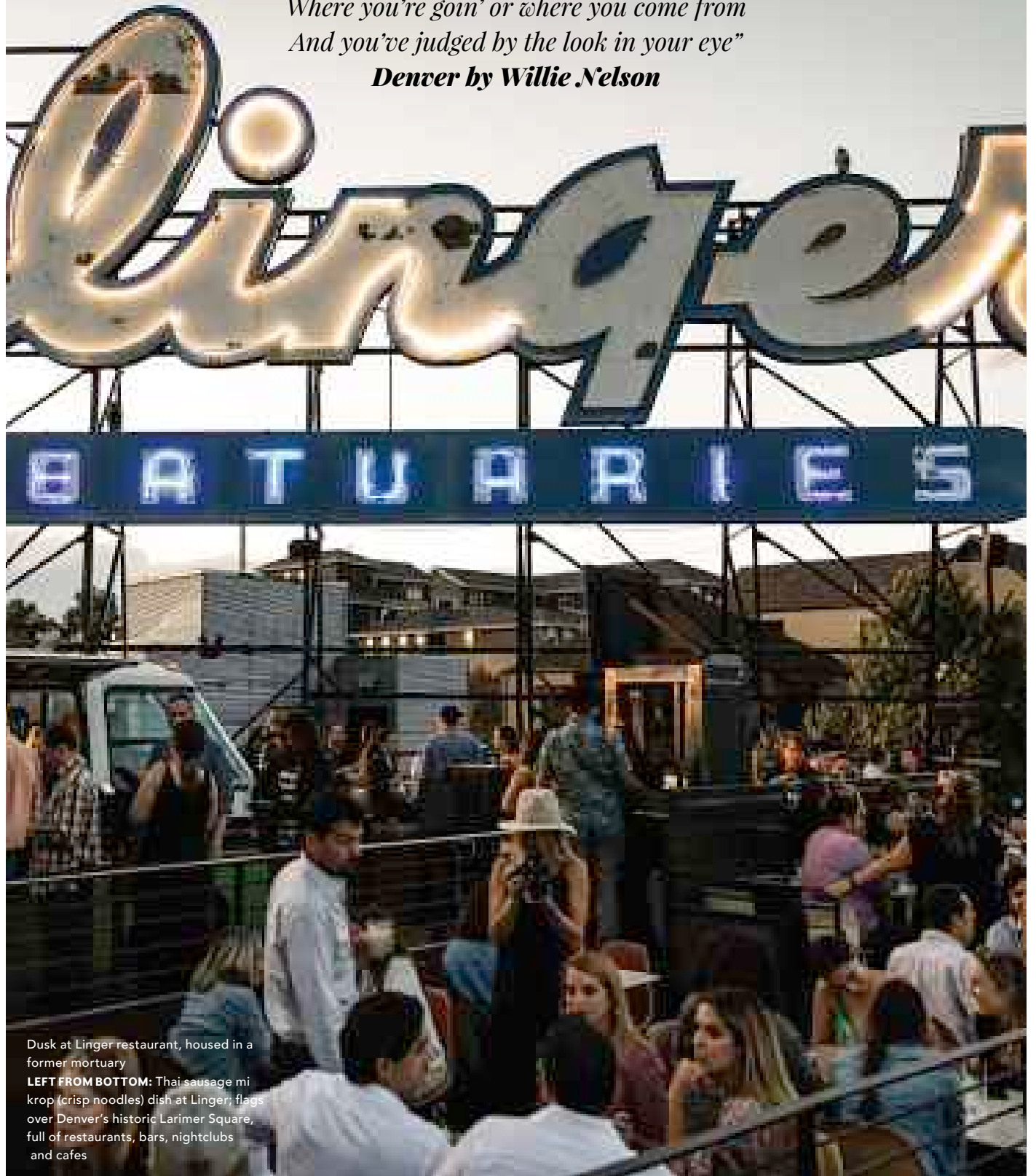
EAT

CASA BONITA: How about some cliff diving with your burrito? This Denver institution — which can seat more than 1,000 diners — pairs family-friendly Mexican food with actual human beings flipping and spinning off a 30ft recreation of the Acapulco cliffs. Only in America. casabonitadenver.com

LINGER: If you think having dinner in a former mortuary sounds creepy, you're dead wrong: not only does this global street food restaurant have a menu to die for, it also has one of the coolest rooftop bars in town. Dishes include potato masala dosa from India, Korean barbecue tacos and Thai sausage *mi krop* (crisp noodles), served with edible black ants and crickets. lingerdenver.com

THE FORT: One for history buffs and carnivores, this full-size replica of a 19th-century fur trading outpost serves up authentic recipes resurrected from the diaries of Colorado's early settlers, trappers and pioneers. The menu features meaty classics such as buffalo sirloin, elk medallions and grilled quail. thefort.com

*“The bright lights of Denver
Were shining like diamonds
Like ten thousand jewels in the sky
And it’s nobody’s business
Where you’re goin’ or where you come from
And you’ve judged by the look in your eye”
Denver by Willie Nelson*



Dusk at Linger restaurant, housed in a former mortuary

LEFT FROM BOTTOM: Thai sausage mi krop (crisp noodles) dish at Linger; flags over Denver’s historic Larimer Square, full of restaurants, bars, nightclubs and cafes



Patrons at Grizzly Rose, a famous country music venue open since 1989



AFTER HOURS

SOCO DISTRICT: This area is home to four of Denver's biggest clubs — The Church, Bar Standard, Club Vinyl and Milk — each with their own distinct vibe. On weekends, one cover charge gets you in to all four, so bounce between them for a mix of Latin, techno, house and hip-hop. coclubs.com
LARIMER SQUARE: If you want a big night out, but aren't quite ready for a full-on rave, Larimer Square is a good bet. There's the speakeasy-style Crimson Room for jazz, stylish Green Russell for cocktails and sophisticated Cru for food and wine. larimersquare.com thecrimsonroom.com greenrussell.com cruwinebar.com
GRIZZLY ROSE: Once you've got that Rockmount cowboy hat, head over to the Grizzly Rose, a world-famous honky-tonk, for live country music six days a week. Everyone from Taylor Swift to Willie Nelson has played here and if you fancy yourself as a bit of a rodeo star, make sure you have a go on the mechanical bull too. grizzlyrose.com



SLEEP

THE SOURCE: Annexed to The Source Market Hall's delicious spread of restaurants, with a lively rooftop bar and swimming pool as well the best views of the Rocky Mountains in the city, this cool, design-forward hotel is an excellent base for a city stay. thesourcehotel.com
THE RAMBLE: Located in the trendy RiNo art district and inspired by the lavish French salons of the 17th century, the interiors of this hotel are sensual and elegant. And so are the cocktails: the marquee lobby bar is headed up by New York City's legendary mixologists Death & Co. theramblehotel.com
THE ART: Home to more than a dozen cultural attractions, staying in The Art is like bedding down in a gallery. Each floor showcases a particular artist's work, including big names like Sam Francis and Sol LeWitt, plus there's a good outdoor terrace bar, ideal for resting weary legs after those museum miles. thearthotel.com 📍

ESSENTIALS



Getting there & around

British Airways offers a direct service from Heathrow. From April to October, outside ski season, Norwegian flies direct from Gatwick four days a week. ba.com norwegian.com

Average flight time: 9h40m.

Denver is an easy city to navigate, and much of it is walkable. RTD runs bus services and light rail, but most people either drive or use ride-share apps. Outside the city, a rental car is essential to get the most out of your visit, and for day trips to the mountains. If you're coming for the skiing, there are dedicated bus services to all the big resorts. rtd-denver.com

When to go

Ski season is December to early April (average 10C), with the best snow usually from January to March. Avoid public holidays, weekends and spring break if you want to beat the crowds, plus April and May, which have the most rain and the odd freak snowstorm. Summer lasts from June to August (average 31C) with occasional thunderstorms in the afternoon. September and October (average 24C) are perhaps the best time for outdoor adventures: the weather is warm and sunny, and the crowds are fairly thin.

More info

denver.org
visittheusa.org.uk

How to do it

AMERICA AS YOU LIKE IT offers a 15-night Colorado As You Like It self-drive itinerary, with stops in Denver and many of Colorado's best mountain towns, including return flights, accommodation and car hire from £1,717 per person. americaasyoulikeit.com

WHAT TO DO IN LJUBLJANA

Slovenia is home to a trove of cultural gems, and any trip to the country should start in its thriving capital Ljubljana. Here are five things not to miss

1 **FOR...** **Culture vultures**

With its photogenic Old Town, museums, galleries and live music scene, Ljubljana offers endless culture — plus it's largely accessible on foot. Pick up a Ljubljana Card for free access to most of the city's museums and galleries as well as a guided tour, public transportation, bike hire and a funicular ride to the castle. Try the Moustache Tour, a cycling adventure around Ljubljana's beautiful streets in homage to three famous moustachioed Slovenians — architect Jože Plečnik, writer Ivan Cankar and painter Rihard Jakopič.

2 **FOR...** **Green champions**

Named European Green Capital 2016, many of Ljubljana's central attractions are accessible on foot or by bike, so visitors can navigate the city without leaving an environmental impact. There are plenty of eco-friendly tours to sign up for, too. The centre has been traffic-free since 2008 and has largest no-vehicle zone in the European Union.

3 **FOR...** **Luxury lovers**

From a range of high-end hotels to world-class fine dining spots, there are many ways to do Ljubljana in style. It holds the title of International City of Vine and Wine, so why not try the Ljubljana Wine Experience to taste nine different wines from three wine-growing regions. Other unique experiences include dinner prepared by a top chef on a boat along the Ljubljanica river.

4 **FOR...** **Outdoor fanatics**

Ljubljana offers mountain biking experiences at the bike park in Podutik, tree-covered Golovec Hill and Krvavec Summer Park. For hiking, there are highland trails with impeccable alpine views for every ability. Golfers can find beautiful courses around an hour's drive from the capital, while fishing is popular in the many rivers and streams of the Ljubljana region.

5 **FOR...** **Hungry gastronomes**

Start at the Ljubljana Central Market, which offers everything from cherries to cheese. Every Friday from March to October, local chefs prepare dishes with abundant wine and beer at the Open Kitchen pop-up in Pogacar Square. Join the Yummy Market Walk tour to get to know the market's secret corners, or the Taste Ljubljana food tour to visit a traditional inn and try local dishes.

Essentials

Getting there: EasyJet and British Airways both offer direct flights from London to Ljubljana.
easyjet.com britishairways.com



www.visitljubljana.com

For more information, visit visitljubljana.com



EAST JAPAN

INTO THE UNKNOWN

A rail journey through Japan's relatively under-explored Tohoku region provides a unique perspective on the area, enabling travellers to stop and engage with spectacular mountain scenery, vibrant culture and adventure activities. This vivid photographic portrait of Tohoku, shot on a five-day train odyssey, features steaming hot springs, towering 'ice monsters', heaped bowlfuls of ramen and colourful kabuki theatre.

Words: Oliver Smith. Photographs: Ben Weller





TOP 5 TOHOKU EXPERIENCES

1 Snow festival

The Japanese answer to the igloo is the *kamakura*, a snow shelter originally built to honour the Shinto water god Sujin — they've been a fixture in Akita Prefecture for more than 400 winters. The best place to see them is Yokote Kamakura Snow Festival (held every year in mid-February), in which *kamakuras* spring up across the city. Some are barely bigger than a snowball, others are large enough for adults to sit inside while sipping warming sake and eating *mochi* (rice cakes) beneath frosty ceilings. pref.akita.lg.jp

2 Follow the river

Oirase-gawa is a mountain river that tumbles eastward from the spectacular crater lake of Towada towards the Pacific Ocean in Aomori Prefecture. You can follow its current on a well-maintained nine-mile path, hiking through

some of the most beautiful countryside in Tohoku — there are steep ravines, crashing waterfalls and deep forests of maple, beech and cedar. en-aomori.com

3 The perfect beach

Jodogahama Beach is one of the most sublime sights on Japan's entire Pacific coast. Translating as 'Pure Land Beach', it's a vision of pure beauty: backed by pine forests, with a pebbly shore extending out to jagged rock formations. It's set on the edge of the little port city of Miyako in Iwate Prefecture, which is bouncing back after the 2011 tsunami. It's perfect for a day of sunbathing and paddling in the gentle waves. visitiwate.com

4 Hot spring heaven

For Japanese visitors, Ginzan Onsen presents a rich slice of nostalgia, with Taisho-era wooden inns flanking a

gurgling river in Yamagata Prefecture. It's especially beautiful during winter nights, when the streetlights are glowing, icicles dangle from the bridges, snowdrifts gently pile up on rooftops and visitors can seek respite from the chilly winds in the hot spring baths within the inns. yamagatakanko.com

5 Lake of many colours

The Bandai Plateau in Fukushima Prefecture owes its appearance to Bandai-san, a volcano that erupted in 1888, destroying villages, blocking rivers and causing widescale destruction. One curious side-effect was the creation of Goshikinuma — the 'five coloured lakes' — a cluster of pools, with waters variously hued blue, green and brown, due to the volcanic deposits within. A two-mile scenic trail winds along their shores — perfect for an afternoon hike. fukushima.travel

Local flavour

The true test of any establishment in a tourist town is whether the locals go there. At Kajimaya Ramen in Zao Onsen, you'll find locals and travellers dining together, a motley mix of snowboarders and pensioners communing over good food. The Deluxe is a bowlful of flame-broiled cuts of pork, bamboo shoots, sprouts, a boiled egg and miso. The proprietors are four friends who work together in the open kitchen, then hit the slopes after serving lunch.



A TASTE OF TOHOKU

Yonezawa Beef, Yamagata Prefecture

Kobe may be Japan's most famous wagyu, but up in Tohoku it's Yonezawa beef that's foremost in its field. Cattle here are fattened for as long as 32 months, making for a marvellously marbled meat. The city of Yonezawa has no shortage of places to try it — Tokiwa is famous for its 'sukiyaki' menu: loin with rice, miso and pickles; or else head to Uesugi Hakushakutei, a former earl's residence, where you can dine amid the still ponds of a Japanese garden. hakusyakutei.jp

Kitakata Ramen, Fukushima Prefecture

This hearty dish consists of thick, tangled noodles in a fragrant broth of fish, chicken and pork. While locals will argue heatedly over where to find the best version, Genraiken is the no-frills restaurant where it was invented. Walk off your lunch exploring the '*kura*' of Kitakata — mud-walled storehouses dating as far back as the 18th century, now used variously as sake breweries, galleries and private homes.

Oma Tuna, Aomori Prefecture

The cold fathoms of Shimokita Peninsula make for big, fatty fish, caught the traditional way with pole, line and elbow grease, reeled into boats only fractionally bigger than the tuna themselves. The town of Oma is the place to try it fresh: you can even see the tuna being prepared outside Omanzoku restaurant during the season (from July to December). oomanzoku.com



HIGH LIFE

Zao Onsen

Spread over undulating mountains on the eastern cusp of Yamagata Prefecture, Zao Onsen is Tohoku's best-loved ski resort. Its 25 runs are mostly fairly gentle, but what they lack in steepness they make up for in length — the longest extends for nearly six miles, slaloming through dense forests and alpine meadows. zao-spa.or.jp

Skiers and snowboarders can also swoosh past the local population of 'juhyo' — meaning 'ice monsters'. Less of a hazard than you might expect, these are actually conifers, coated with snow and ice and contorted into surreal shapes by the raging mountain winds.

Come spring and summer, Zao Onsen exchanges skiers for hikers, with a web of trails winding across the mountain. Cheat by taking the ropeways to the summit of Zao-san (Mount Zao), then bear south to the crater lake of Okama, set amid forbidding volcanic slopes. It's an easy walk downhill through shadowy woodlands and wildflower-strewn glades back to the resort. zaoropeway.co.jp

Whether you're weary-limbed from the trails or the piste, Zao's hot springs are a welcome sight at the day's end. There are a few to choose from — Kawarayu and the luxurious Shinzaemon no Yu are both popular. Summer visitors should, however, make for Zao Onsen Dai Rotenburo — an open-air pool set in a little valley, where bathers stew in steamy waters, idly gazing up at the forest canopy. zaospa.co.jp





High drama

Kabuki is a traditional form of Japanese theatre. The acting is characterised by exaggerated delivery and stylised movement to help express meaning to the audience, as the Japanese spoken can be somewhat archaic. Kuromori Kabuki is an outdoor folk kabuki performance held each February at Kuromori Hie Shrine. The annual performances began around 1730 as offerings to the gods for bountiful harvests in the year ahead. It continues to this day, with local performers staging 'plays in the snow', as they're called.



Snow and steam

Zao Onsen is named for Mt. Zao, a cluster of volcanoes straddling Yamagata and Miyagi prefectures. The volcanic activity feeds the hot springs of the resort, and has created a natural playground for hikers, skiers, snowboarders, and photographers. The smell of sulphur fills the air in Zao, steam billows from channels and pipes that carry hot spring water throughout the town, and on cold days the entire village seems shrouded in mist. Most hotels and inns in the town have onsen on site, and there are also public baths scattered throughout the town. Some of these are simple affairs, two rooms segregated by sex, where you bring your own towel and drop ¥100 (73p) in the box at the door. Genshichiro is a mountainside onsen with indoor and outdoor baths. Luxuriating in steaming hot spring water amid the cold mountain air is an indelibly joyous experience.



**PHOTOGRAPHER
BEN WELLER**

This was a dream assignment. It was a challenge because I had a lot of distance to cover and couldn't always wait for the best light or the nicest weather. But that's all part of the fun of photography — working with what you have. I came away with a strong set of images that I hope will inspire people to visit Tohoku.

Trains are the way to do this trip. You can relax and take in the scenery. It enabled me to cover far more distance and see even more of the region. If you're travelling from outside Japan, you can get the JR EAST PASS, which will save you a significant amount of money on train travel.

Essentials

Getting around: The JR EAST PASS is a versatile regional pass especially designed for overseas visitors. It facilitates a two-to-four-hour bullet train ride from Tokyo to Tohoku, and provides five days of unlimited travel around areas such as Tohoku, Yamagata Zao, Akita Shirakami, Shinjuku, Akihabara and many others. It costs from £142 per adult when buying in Japan. jreast.co.jp/e/ To book ahead of travelling to Japan, visit JR EAST Train Reservation at eki-net.com

The Welcome Suica e-money card enables travellers to take the subway, trains and buses with a single tap, and can also be used in many affiliated shops across Japan. JR-EAST HOTELS offers unique discounts to rail travellers. Collected points can be used for discounts on accommodation or exchanged for points with affiliated partners. jre-hotels.jp/e/



TRAVEL GEEKS

ASK THE EXPERTS

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



Q // I'd like to plan a weekend break to Rome next year. For a solo traveller, on a budget, how can I have a fully immersive like-a-local experience?

For the latest advice on Covid-19 visit [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)

Planning a trip to Italy might seem improbable just now, but being optimistic the first thing I'd suggest is to stay a little off the beaten track: The Corner Townhouse is a gorgeous boutique hotel in a belle époque villa just outside the ancient city walls at Piramide (the 2,000-year-old white pyramid wedged into the walls). Its location — a 10-minute walk from the Colosseum or a five- to 10-minute bus ride into town — is the reason why it's so affordable. Out here, you're in a residential area — and past the Piramide is one of Rome's most fun areas, Ostiense.

Via Ostiense itself has plenty of bars, such as T Bar, where an early evening buffet is the perfect start to a night out. While you're in Ostiense, take the opportunity to visit the Centrale Montemartini, where (supposedly) second-rate statues from the Capitoline

Museums are arranged around an old power plant. It's incredible — and rarely visited by tourists.

On the other side of the Piramide is Testaccio, another great neighbourhood. Go around lunchtime to see a team of locals feeding the stray cats by the Piramide as you walk to Monte Testaccio — a 'hill' made from a Roman terracotta dump. Afterwards, make for the Mattatoio — a modern art gallery — and finish with a trail of Roman remains in the neighbourhood.

On your last night, head to the Jewish Quarter in the centre of Rome. It's touristy, but locals pile into Sora Margherita, a rowdy restaurant where the tables are shoved close together, the menu's spoken not written and plates are slammed down, but the food is divine. [thecornerrome.com](https://www.thecornerrome.com) [tbarostiense.it](https://www.tbarostiense.it) [soramargherita.com](https://www.soramargherita.com)

JULIA BUCKLEY

FROM LEFT: Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi (Fountain of the Four Rivers), Piazza Navona, Rome; Vaxholm, Stockholm archipelago

Q // I'd like to explore the islands of the Stockholm archipelago. What's the best way to do it?

East of the city is a vast archipelago with thousands of islands and islets fanning out towards the Baltic Sea. The largest islands are easily reached from the city, with public transport boat services departing from the Strömkajen ferry terminal on the Norrmalm waterfront, run by Waxholmsbolaget. Single fares range from £5 to £15, depending on how far you're travelling. Departures are year-round, with a greater choice over summer. Some islands, among them the popular Vaxholm, can also be reached by bus.

So where to go? Vaxholm is home to an atmospheric harbour town and the classy Vaxholms B&B, although its proximity to the city means the island can get busy. Heavily wooded Grinda is another good choice, while neighbouring Viggssö is notable for being where ABBA wrote several hits. Then there's Svartsö, a large island that's perfect for cycling and also has glamping at Svartsö Logi. Further afield, Finnhamn and Utö are both great. waxholmsbolaget.se vaxholmsbedandbreakfast.se svartsologi.se **BEN LERWILL**



Q // I'd like to get into wildlife photography and am considering going on a trip to learn the basics. Where would you recommend for a beginner?

Seeing wildlife in its natural habitat is one of life's most exhilarating experiences. Of course, there's no guarantee the animals will turn up, but there are loads of operators running trips that aim to give participants the chance to see everything from whales to polar bears. Decide what kind of wildlife really excites you, and join a small group with at least one good tutor. You'll need a decent long lens too, so it might be worth renting one for your first trip before splashing out.

Close to home, Shetland Nature offers a variety of wildlife photography holidays and day tours, focusing on otters, gannets and puffins. Owned and operated by native Shetlander Brydon Thomason, the tutors really understand the seasonal behaviour of local fauna, so know the best places to see

wildlife. A UK-based trip is a less expensive way to learn the basics of photography too.

Exodus Travels runs photography tours to Antarctica, the Arctic and Africa. Its skilled photography guides are passionate about getting out into the field, and its Maasai Mara Kenya Photographic Safari gives participants the chance to snap a variety of exotic wildlife.

Further afield, Steppes Travel is known for its range of luxury wildlife tours. From photographing orangutans in Borneo to grizzly bears in Canada, alongside big-name tutors, the company also supports a number of worldwide conservation projects. Sustainability and animal welfare is as important to them as you getting fabulous snaps. shetlandnature.net exodus.co.uk steppestravel.com **NORI JEMIL**

Q // How do I know if a visa site is genuine?

The most common giveaway is misspellings. Your average scammer doesn't always have a thorough grasp of written English, so if you see a website with poor spelling or grammar, it's likely you're looking at a scam. Pay attention to the URL as well — scam visa websites can sometimes appear high up in search engine results.

Most, although not all, official government websites for visa applications include .gov in their URLs. If in doubt, use the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, which has links to the visa application sites of individual countries. And don't use social media; the US state department recently warned that criminals were posting links to scam websites on official US embassy Facebook pages.

Some websites aren't outright scams, but instead rip people off by charging an extra 'administration' fee for a visa application. These are most common for Australia, Canada and USA electronic visa applications, and the EHIC card. We found one website listed on the first page of Google search results charging \$74 (£58) for a US Electronic System for Travel Authorisation (ESTA) application. The actual cost is \$14 (£11). Always head for the official website using the advice above. gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

RORY BOLAND

THE EXPERTS



JULIA BUCKLEY //
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



RORY BOLAND //
EDITOR, WHICH? TRAVEL



BEN LERWILL //
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



NORI JEMIL // AWARD-WINNING TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER

THE INFO

GOING UNDERGROUND

FROM THE OLDEST TO THE BUSIEST, WE GET THE LOWDOWN ON THE WORLD'S SUBTERRANEAN METRO SYSTEMS. WORDS: NICOLA TRUP

1863

The year in which the London Underground, the world's oldest underground railway system, opened.

IN NUMBERS

NEW YORK CITY SUBWAY

472

The number of stations on the system, around 60% of which are underground.

180ft

The distance beneath street level of 191st Street — the deepest station on the network.

31 miles

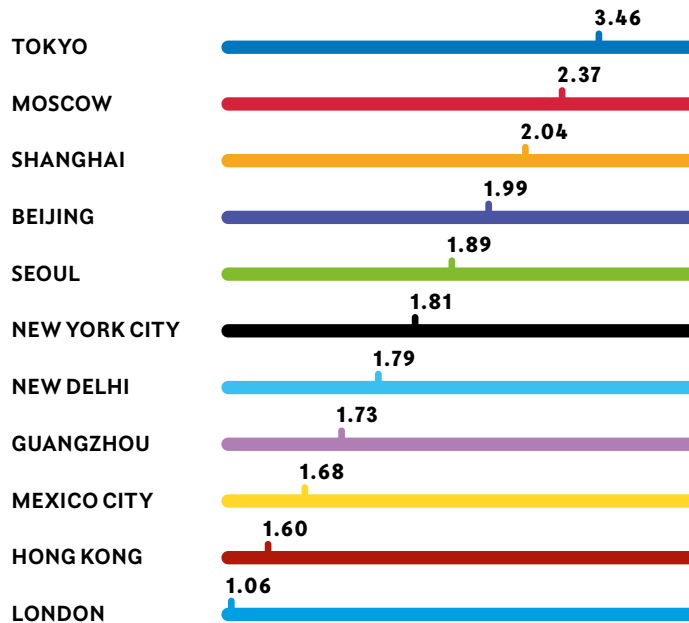
The longest possible journey with no change of trains, from 207th Street in Manhattan to Far Rockaway in Queens.

£17.5bn

The cost of building Saudi Arabia's new Riyadh Metro system, which is due to launch this year.

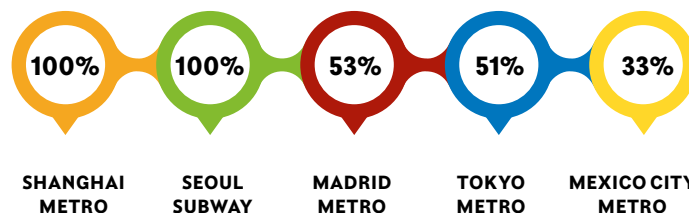
WORLD'S BUSIEST METRO SYSTEMS

FIGURES FOR ANNUAL NUMBER OF PASSENGERS, IN BILLIONS



Most accessible subway systems

percentage of stations with step-free access



SOURCES: ATLAS OBSCURA; VISITSTOCKHOLM.COM; MTA.INFO; WEFORUM.ORG; TFL.GOV.UK

TAKE THREE

beautiful stations

T-CENTRALEN, STOCKHOLM

More than 90 of Stockholm's 100 metro stations are decorated with unique artwork. T-Centralen was the first to be styled this way when it opened in 1957; today, its cave-like Blue Line platform is painted in a pretty blue-and-white motif.

KOMSOMOLSKAYA, MOSCOW

First opened in 1952, Komsomolskaya is one of the most dramatic stations on the Moscow Metro, with a vaulted yellow baroque ceiling, marble columns and chandeliers.

TOLEDO, NAPLES

Decorated in a different colour on each level, with a glistening blue ceiling mosaic and LED light boxes displaying images of rolling waves, Toledo Metro Station is a sight to behold.



THE NUMBER OF STATIONS ON THE CARMELIT IN HAIFA, ISRAEL — ONE OF THE WORLD'S SMALLEST SUBWAY SYSTEMS. IT HAS JUST FOUR CARS, SIX STATIONS AND ONE 1.1-MILE TUNNEL.

HOT TOPIC

HOW IS COVID-19 AFFECTING TRAVEL?

WE ROUND UP THE FACTS AND FIGURES TO HELP YOU EVALUATE YOUR TRAVELS DURING THE GLOBAL CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK.
WORDS: SARAH BARRELL



WHAT IS THE CURRENT FCO ADVICE?

The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) is advising against all but essential foreign travel. The ongoing coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has seen a number of countries impose unprecedented international border closures and other restrictions. For travellers already in a foreign destination, it's important to remember that all countries may restrict travel without notice. For FCO updates, go to: gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

WHAT DO TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS LOOK LIKE?

In an effort to contain and delay the spread of the virus, an increasing number of countries are closing their borders and many airlines have reduced their services or grounded their fleets. Numerous borders and transport hubs have introduced screening measures and entry restrictions, including temperature checks and questions on travel and health history. If you've recently been to a country affected by the coronavirus, entry or

transit to certain regions may be problematic and you may be required to enter a period of quarantine. The World Health Organization (WHO) has regular updates on recorded virus cases at: who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019
For UK government travel advice, go to: gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus

WILL TRAVEL INSURANCE COVER CANCELLED TRIPS?

This will depend on where you're travelling to, when you booked and what the official FCO advice is for that destination. If the FCO has advised against all but essential travel to the area, you may be able to make a claim, but, as always, it'll depend on your specific insurance policy. Many insurers are restricting cover for new agreements. As ever, make sure your policy includes medical evacuation and repatriation, in case you fall ill while travelling. If you've booked a package holiday, your tour operator and /or insurer should be able to assist

with rebooking travel and covering costs. Check for a 'disruption to travel' clause, which could also come into play if you find yourself having to enter quarantine while travelling. Your rights can depend on airline choice and policy small print, so read carefully. ABTA, the UK's largest travel association, has regular updates for those travelling with its member operators. For more details, see: abta.com/news/coronavirus-outbreak

WHAT ABOUT REBOOKING FLIGHTS AND HOTELS?

Some airlines are waiving the usual rebooking fee and allowing customers to rebook flights to and from certain affected destinations. Many hotels are allowing rebookings, too, although reservations terms make some bookings non-refundable, particularly if done through a third-party operator. It's always worth contacting the hotel directly to see if they can assist.

WHAT IF MY AIRLINE GOES BANKRUPT?

Times are tough for the aviation industry, and the International Air Transport Association (IATA) has warned that Covid-19 could cause airlines to suffer a loss of up to \$113bn (£87bn) this year. After the recent collapse of Flybe, it seems other airlines may follow suit. If your flight booking has ATOL protection (mostly applicable to package trips or linked hotel-and-flight bookings), you'll be refunded if your airline collapses and offered an alternative if stranded abroad.

Airline failure is rarely covered by insurance policies. However, if you've brought flights worth more than £100 on a credit card directly from an airline, you should be able to claim a refund under section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act. *This advice was correct at the time of going to press.*

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE VIRUS?

- While we're still learning more about how the virus behaves, it's most likely spread through respiratory droplets.
- Covid-19 can cause symptoms similar to pneumonia. The most common signs are a new, continuous cough and a fever of 37.8C or higher. People who have fallen ill have also reported breathing difficulties.
- People of all ages can be infected. Older people and those with pre-existing medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease) may be more vulnerable to serious complications.
- According to the WHO, the fatality rate for Covid-19 is around 3.4% — higher than seasonal flu (0.1%) but lower than SARS (9.6%).

WHAT ARE THE RECOMMENDED PROTECTIVE MEASURES?

Keep clean: Wash hands regularly, for at least 20 seconds, with soap and water, then rinse thoroughly and dry with disposable paper towel where possible. If soap and water aren't available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser. Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth as this can transfer the virus.

Keep your distance: Cover your face when you cough or sneeze, avoid crowded areas and keep 6ft away from others. Stay at home if you begin to feel unwell.

KIT LIST

WILD CAMPING

GEAR FOR A WILD CAMPING TRIP HAS TO BE LIGHTWEIGHT AND COMPACT WITHOUT COMPROMISING ON DURABILITY. WE ROUND UP SOME STAPLES

1 FJALLRAVEN ABISKO LITE 2 TENT

The Abisko Lite is lower than most tents to keep the weight down, so it's ideal for trekking. It sleeps two, can be used in all seasons and has a fully rollable flysheet to save space. Includes a vestibule and two super light poles. RRP: £595. fjallraven.com

2 GO TRAVEL HYBRID UNIVERSAL PILLOW

A plush memory foam top allows for a more comfortable place to rest your head, while an inflatable base keeps this pillow compact and provides an extra boost. Packs down to a quarter of its size. RRP: £9.99. go.travel

3 JACK WOLFSKIN KALARI TRAIL 42 PACK

Made using recycled materials, this pack is designed to carry kit for multiday hikes. The pack sits on the back close to the body to maintain weight distribution and freedom of movement, while an air channel keeps you cool. RRP: £110. jack-wolfskin.co.uk



4 VANGO COBRA 200 SLEEPING BAG

New to Vango's 2020 collection, the Cobra has been distinctively shaped to be as lightweight and compact as possible. It's filled with down for extra insulation that's evenly distributed from head to toe. RRP: £160. vango.co.uk

5 ROBENS FIRE BUG STOVE

A free-standing lightweight stove that can be attached to a gas canister is the simplest and most compact solution for meal times. This titanium stove provides stable support for pots and can be balanced on uneven ground. RRP: £74. cotswoldoutdoor.com

6 NEOAIR TOPO SLEEPING PAD

This mid-range, three-season pad is slightly heavier than pricier models (62g), but it's more durable on rough terrain. It measures 7.6cm when inflated using the fast new WingLock valve and compact pump/stuff sack. RRP: £120. thermarest.com

Three to try: Lightweight luxuries



MSR STAKE HAMMER

For driving pegs into tougher terrain, with an integrated bottle opener, too. RRP: £29. cotswoldoutdoor.com



SNOW PEAK MINI HOZUKI LANTERN

Compact and bright with a dimmer and magnetic fastener. RRP: £46. snowpeak.co.uk



QUECHUA HIKER'S CAMPING COOKING SET

A non-stick collection of two folding pans, four plates, mugs, cutlery, strainer and frying pan. RRP: £39.99. decathlon.co.uk

TECH TRAVELLER

DON'T GET IN A TANGLE

THERE'S PLENTY OF KIT TO OFFER A HELPING HAND ON THE ROAD, WHETHER IT'S UNTANGLING YOUR CABLES OR KEEPING THINGS SAFE AND DRY



Everyone hates having to untangle a nest of cables and peripherals when opening up a suitcase or travel bag, so why not invest in a cable organiser to keep things neat and easily accessible?

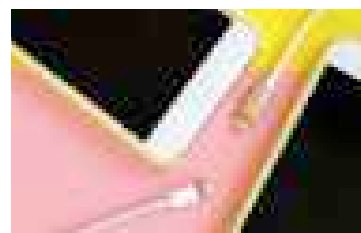
Bellroy has a great range of protective cases with internal

cable pockets, catering to laptops, tablets and phones. I love the Tech Kit at £49, with space to store cables, headphones, mouse and charger in a neat zip-up pouch. It's made from recycled woven fabric, so is better for the environment too.

With so many things needing to be charged, sort your cables with Fuse Reel's range of cleverly designed plug and headphone winders for Apple tech. These neat cable organisers attach to your existing chargers and power cables so you can 'reel' them up for storage. The MacBook power supply is particularly annoying as it has two cables with a transformer in the middle and the Side Winder does a great job of storing it neatly for travel.

Technology doesn't like to get wet, so when planning a snow or beach trip, make sure you pack plenty of protection for your delicate devices. This could be as simple as a roll of zip-lock bags to seal things up in between uses. LifeProof.co.uk sells a range of cases and backpacks that will keep your gadgets safe and dry in style. Starting at £80.99, the waterproof backpacks aren't cheap, but if you're going to be hiking through wet weather, it's worth remembering that a regular backpack won't keep your technology safe in a sustained downpour.

TOP TIPS FOR...
*powering up
on the go*



Often, one of the first things I notice about a hotel room is how few plug sockets there are — and I've got lots of devices. Here are some tips on charging on the go

TIP 1

A universal power adaptor, as the name suggests, can connect to most sockets. Look for one with multiple USB and even USB-C sockets, allowing you to charge several devices at the same time even when limited outlets are provided.

TIP 2

Charge your phone more quickly with 2.4V USB sockets. For even speedier charging, look for a universal plug that has Quick Charge 3.0 (QC 3.0) technology.

TIP 3

If you're travelling outside the EU, you might need to check what voltage your devices run at. Not all adaptors transform voltage, but 'travel voltage transformers' are inexpensive and widely available.

GET THE GADGET

Adata SD600Q 240GB

The Adata SD600Q 240GB is a rugged and compact solid-state drive (SSD) that has plenty of capacity for both backing up and storing content to watch while you're away. An SSD will give you the fastest transfer speeds possible and will stand up to the rigours of travel much better than a mechanical drive (HDD). The pocket-sized SD600Q comes at a great budget price, but you'll

need to check you have the right cables as it doesn't ship with the most current USB-C cable or transformer in the box. However, these can be picked up cheaply from any good electronics retailer. RRP: £55. adata.com

Kate Russell is the technology reporter for @BBCClick

[@katerussell](https://twitter.com/katerussell)

katerussell.co.uk



FREQUENT FLYER

WHAT HAPPENS IN A PLANE EMERGENCY?

THE VAST MAJORITY OF FLIGHTS PASS UNEVENTFULLY, BARRING THE ODD BIT OF TURBULENCE. BUT VERY, VERY OCCASIONALLY, AN EMERGENCY SITUATION KICKS IN. SO, WHAT HAPPENS WHEN IT DOES? WORDS: DAVID WHITLEY

Emergency!

Quite a lot can go wrong on a flight, whether it's a passenger falling ill, an engine giving up the ghost or the plane being on fire. However, all but the most serious can usually be handled without passengers knowing anything has gone wrong.

So, someone's fallen ill...

Flight attendants aren't nurses or doctors, but they do undergo enough medical training to administer CPR and spot when respiratory problems or faintness mean something is seriously wrong. When a passenger falls ill, they'll do what they can, perhaps asking if there's a medical professional on board who can volunteer to help.

There's also medical kit on board, but it's only designed to stabilise someone until landing.

Meanwhile, the captain is going to be in touch with ground consultation services, which have doctors on their teams, to work out the best plan of action. The captain will ultimately make the decision on whether to divert for an extremely costly emergency

landing. Which way the decision goes will depend on whether nearby airports are appropriate and available, as well as the condition of the passenger.

What if an engine dies?

As long as it's just one engine, everything's probably going to be alright. Modern planes are designed for this eventuality. The Boeing 777, for example, is certified to fly for up to five-and-a-half hours with a solitary functioning engine. Pilots will, in conjunction with ground crew, arrange to divert for an 'emergency' landing at the nearest practical airport.

If all the engines fail, it's glide time. It's often possible to glide to a nearby airport and land relatively safely after air traffic control has cleared the way.

Otherwise, the pilot will be scouting for places to land and trying to get the engines to kick back in once at a lower altitude.

And if cabin pressure is lost?

A puncture to the exterior or a fire can be much more serious than the loss of an engine — mainly

because people will pass out very quickly without supplementary oxygen at the sort of altitude where jet planes cruise.

This is when the oxygen masks drop down from above — but they'll only give you enough oxygen for about 20 minutes maximum. The plane, at this point, will be in a steep descent — that's because the pilots are trying to get it below 10,000ft, where the air is breathable again, as soon as possible.

What happens in an emergency landing?

Pilots will switch the transponder to 7700, which tells all air traffic control stations in the area that a plane needs prioritising. Air traffic control and the captain will then come up with a plan of action.

Many relatively remote airports are much bigger than they need to be to accommodate such emergency landings. These include Halifax Stanfield in Canada, Santa Maria in the Azores and Wake Island in the Pacific. Meanwhile, other airports are set aside for security emergencies. In the UK, this is Stansted.

BREAKOUT

Emergency success stories



US AIRWAYS FLIGHT 1549

Disaster struck on the afternoon of 15 January 2009, when an Airbus A320 struck a flock of Canada geese around five minutes after taking off from New York's LaGuardia Airport. Captain Chesley Sullenberger successfully ditched the plane on the Hudson River and all 155 people on board survived.



BRITISH AIRWAYS FLIGHT 9

Heading from Kuala Lumpur to Perth in 1982, all four engines on a Boeing 747-200 failed after it flew through a volcanic ash cloud. The flight crew worked out they had 23 minutes of gliding time and aimed to ditch on the Indian Ocean. However, at a lower altitude, they managed to restart the engines and land safely in Jakarta. Everyone survived.



AIR TRANSAT FLIGHT 236

In 2001, a Lisbon to Toronto flight sprang a fuel leak while carrying 293 passengers and 13 crew. The captain and first officer diverted for the Lajes Air Base in the Azores before the engines flamed out. An air turbine provided enough electrical power to keep the cockpit sensors and instruments going, and the pilots were able to glide the plane to a successful landing.

THE BERNINA EXPRESS FROM GLACIERS TO PALMS

The highlights of Rhaetian Railway's Bernina Express encompasses a dramatic variety of landscapes

Running from Chur in Switzerland to Tirano in Italy, the Bernina Express is one of the world's most unforgettable rail trips. Crossing the Bernina Pass at 7,392ft above sea level and negotiating 55 tunnels and 196 bridges, Rhaetian Railway's meandering 75-mile path consists of

mesmerising landscapes that transition from glaciers glinting in the sun and tranquil Alpine villages to the verdant valley floor. Panoramic windows and an onboard commentary ensure that none of the highlights along the four-hour journey are missed.



HIGHLIGHTS

Albula/Bernina UNESCO World Heritage route:

Constructed in the early 20th century, the Albula and Bernina sections of the track were named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. These lines aren't so much built as woven into their surrounds, merging almost organically into the rugged valleys.

Landwasser Viaduct:

Spanning the Landwasser Valley in six dramatic arches, the limestone Landwasser Viaduct juxtaposes impressive architecture with open expanses before disappearing into a tunnel hewn into the cliffside. The 213ft-high and 445ft-long limestone viaduct is an outstanding architectural feat, especially considering that the three main pillars were built using only two cranes and no scaffolding.

Ospizio Bernina:

Passengers alighting in Ospizio Bernina will find their lungs filled with crisp mountain air. The station, which lies on the shores of the Lago Bianco reservoir, marks the highest point of the journey at 7,392ft above sea level. The station's charming Bistro Albergo was renovated in 2013, luring guests with teatime treats and postcard-worthy vistas.

Essentials

Getting there and around: Most major airlines fly to Zurich Airport from London. The Swiss Travel Pass facilitates travel all around Switzerland. sbb.ch



IN THE NEXT ISSUE



Featuring // *Canada, Cappadocia, Cyprus, Indian Ocean, Marrakech, Mumbai, Osaka, Palma, Saint-Tropez*

**JUL/AUG ISSUE
ON SALE JULY 2020**

*For more information on our subscription offer,
see page 160*

GO ON A LUXURY GREEN GETAWAY IN

SRI LANKA

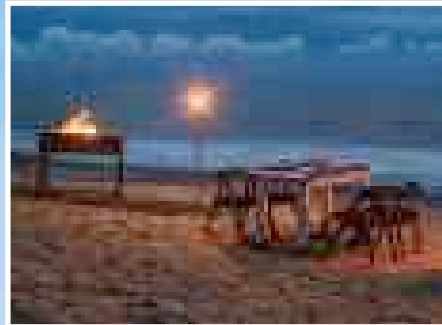
Head to this island's rugged southern coastline for a high-end, eco-conscious adventure

Vast beaches, ancient temples and verdant expanses: Sri Lanka is a varied and beguiling destination. But like any place of natural beauty and cultural diversity, it needs to be preserved and protected. With a pristine beachside location, boutique hotel Ravana Garden champions a sustainable approach to travel. Guests will have the opportunity to discover the country, improve familial bonds and reconnect with nature, all while enjoying every comfort and leaving a minimal footprint behind.

STAY

Ravana Garden

Ravana Garden's original plan for 15 suites was reduced to nine, ensuring no tree would be lost during construction. The air conditioning-free rooms promote cross ventilation and are equipped with private gardens, pools and outdoor bath tubs to champion connectivity with nature. Preservation is in the little touches, too, from electronic business cards to television-free suites that encourage communication.



LEARN

Local food practices

The healthy dishes at Ravana Garden are freshly made with unprocessed, locally sourced, organic and semi-organic ingredients. Visit the hotel's organic garden, where spices and seasonal produce are grown, or learn about local recipes in a session with the in-house chef. Curious guests can also join traditional Madel fishing excursions or take an educational tour of the nearby Agro Technology Park.

HIKE

Ussangoda National Park

This park's Mars-like landscapes propagate a wealth of myth and folklore: some believe a meteor strike transformed this patch of land, while a legend says it's where King Ravana landed his peacock chariot over 5,000 years ago. Scale the Ussangoda Mountain to reach cliffs overlooking the beaches; here, children can fly kites provided by Ravana Garden while the rest of the family refuels with a picnic.

EXPERIENCE

Kalametiya Bird Sanctuary

Tranquil lagoons and dense mangroves make Kalametiya a safe haven for some 150 bird species. In these lush surrounds, Ravana Garden guests can enjoy a sunrise breakfast at the water's edge. Fans of al fresco dining can also eat under the stars on the hotel's beach, enjoy intimate meals in a private garden or take a tea cruise along the Walawe River — and most of these experiences are energy neutral.



Essentials

Getting there: SriLankan Airlines flies direct from London to Colombo in over 10 hours. From there, it takes around three hours to get to Ravana Garden by car. Airport transfers can be arranged for guests of the hotel.



Premier Sustainable Boutique Hotel

To find out more, visit ravanagarden.com or call +94 474 935 515



CAN WE REVERSE THE IMPACT OF POACHING?

THE EFFECTS OF POACHING AND CLIMATE CHANGE ARE KEENLY FELT IN ZAMBIA AND ZIMBABWE. THIS ECOLOGICAL FRONTLINE IS MANNED BY INNOVATIVE, BUT UNDER-FUNDED CONSERVATION UNITS AND TOURISM IS PLAYING A VITAL ROLE IN THE SURVIVAL OF SOME OF AFRICA'S RAREST SPECIES. WORDS: TAMSIN WRESSSELL

The sun yawns over the land, vast savannahs stretching until they blur into the horizon. I can see elephants stomping up dust storms and hippos smacking their tails on muddied banks. I'm in a hot air balloon with Eric Heseman, owner of Namib Sky Balloon Safaris, watching a new day come to life. It's a peaceful morning on Zambia's Busanga Plains: the only sounds come from the fire bellowing above our heads and the distant growls of hyenas.

"Look at all this land and not a single person in sight," Eric says, echoing what's in my head. "This is the wildest safari I've led in Africa. If

this was the Okavango in Botswana, we'd have passed at least three camps by now."

Below us, antelopes leap over a trickle of a river, a barely perceptible waterway clawing its way through parched earth. In the 11 years Eric has worked here, this is the most brutal drought he's witnessed. The resulting lack of vegetation has made it difficult for conservationists like Eric to safeguard the wildlife: poachers can now spot patrols a mile off and thus evade capture.

Busanga Plains in the north of Kafue National Park, which is Zambia's oldest and largest park, stretches out for 8,500 square

miles. Yet with growing funding concerns, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) has just three cars to patrol it. Eric runs these balloon tours to support the organisation. "People come and pay \$200 (£150) for a ride and that all goes back into conservation. Plus, the more tourists we can get here in the sky, the more eyes we have on the poachers," Eric says.

"All parks are struggling," Ben Goodheart, field ecologist in the Luangwa Valley Team at the Zambian Carnivore Programme (ZCP), tells me over dinner that evening. "People come to Busanga because they can see lions,

IMAGE: GETTY



wild dogs, cheetahs, hyenas and leopards,” he says, adding that these plains have 21 species of antelope — the highest diversity of antelope anywhere in Africa. One mammal the area doesn’t have, however, is white rhino: poaching on Busanga was so intense between the 1960s and 1980s that every last one was killed. “Once you start losing animals to poaching, travellers lose interest in the area and the economy suffers.”

A lot of the poaching here, Ben tells me, is for the bushmeat trade. It’s a big commercial operation and, for conservationists, a big problem. Wire snare traps are hidden in the bushes and hooked on trees to catch animals like buffalo and wildebeest. In some cities, like Lusaka and Solwezi, bushmeat has become a delicacy. “I hear it tastes terrible, but there’s a demand for it,” Ben continues. “Guys come in, illegally, six at a time, shoot everything they see and set hundreds of snares. They can end up with hundreds of kilos of meat.”

But the traps are catching more than just prey species. On a game drive, I spot Queen, leader of a 16-strong pride of lions. My guide, Lazarus, tells me about her: Queen got trapped in a snare in 2013. Every lion on this

plain is descended from her, and without anti-poaching efforts to free her from the trap, the plains would be a very different place: with no lions, the entire ecosystem could crumble.

“Kafue is the second-largest national park in Africa — it should be a crown jewel, but because of traps, it’s severely depleted,” Ben later tells me. We’re eating dinner at Shumba Camp and have the place to ourselves. “Without big herds of prey, there’s a lack of carnivores, and tourists just aren’t coming. That’s why anti-poaching is such an important operation. More tourists would be the solution to more infrastructure and income for locals,” he adds. “And there would be more eyes on the poachers and more funding to stop them.”

Return of the rhino

The next morning, I travel south to Toka Leya, a camp that sits on the banks of the Zambezi in the diminutive Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park. Turning off the main road, I drive between spindly parched trees to meet Bazel, one of the four rangers assigned to watch over the rare white rhinos in this park.

“We protect these rhinos 24/7,” Bazel tells me as we carefully approach a four-month-old

white rhino. The youngster stands statue-still next to its mother while she grazes on small patches of sprouting green grass. “We even plant grass for them because of the drought.”

Rhinos were completely wiped out in Zambia in 1989 as a result of poaching (the keratin from their horns is erroneously considered to be an aphrodisiac in a number of foreign markets, including China). Four were reintroduced in 2008 by the DNPW, and the herd today numbers 10. They’re not in their best habitat: while black rhino are searchers and feed off trees, white rhino are grazers who like to roam, and the grass here is in short supply. The rangers tell me they’d like to introduce them to more areas, but it’s once again a question of funding and having the bodies to watch and look after them. Local organisations and farmers support the rangers’ efforts, and Wilderness Safaris — one of Africa’s foremost ecotourism operators, which has been bringing travellers to this area since 2006 — provides additional supplies, fuel and logistical support.

I leave the rhinos and head to catch the sunset on a boat ride along the Zambezi with Arnold Tshipa, the Zambezi Environmental

REINTRODUCING ENDANGERED ANIMALS

BLACK RHINO

Black rhinos were reintroduced into Chad in 2018. Wild black rhinos had been wiped out by poaching 50 years earlier, but a collaboration between the governments of South Africa and Chad, as well as conservation non-profits SANParks and African Parks, enabled six rhinos to be securely translocated from South Africa to Zakouma National Park. africanparks.org

AFRICAN WILD DOG

The first ever African wild dog introduction happened in Mozambique's Gorongosa National Park in 2018, after 25 years of local extinction. The project was spearheaded through conservation group partnerships, including KwaZulu-Natal Wild Dog Advisory Group and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. The South African state of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) has protected the largest population of wild dogs outside of Kruger National Park and is now a key player in redistributing the species into their historic range. gorongosa.org

WHITE RHINO

White rhino became locally extinct in Zambia in 1989. In 2008, the Zambia Wildlife Authority successfully reintroduced four white rhino from South Africa into a secure section of Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park (Victoria Falls), creating a protected population on the north side of the Zambezi. After a number of births, the herd's population was up to 10. Tragically, in February 2020, two were killed after being hit by a truck. zambiatourism.com

PANGOLIN

With increasing demand for its meat and scales on the black market, the pangolin is believed to be the world's most trafficked mammal. A reintroduction programme in South Africa, announced in February 2020, aims to reverse Phinda's local extinction. &Beyond has partnered with the African Pangolin Working Group, Johannesburg Wildlife Veterinary Hospital and the Humane Society International-Africa to launch the programme. andbeyond.com

ADDAX

Once roaming in their thousands in North Africa, poaching and industrialisation pushed the African population of the critically endangered antelope to just a handful by 2016. In 2019, 15 addax were brought over to Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Achimal Wildlife Area in Chad from Abu Dhabi where they were acclimatised before being reintroduced into the wild. africageographic.com



Officer for Wilderness Safaris. The eyes of numerous crocodiles linger on a hippo carcass; nearby, an elephant bathes in mud on the shores. We pause to soak in the scene before conversation turns to the topic at hand.

“I believe poaching is fuelled by three things: corruption, greed and poverty,” says Arnold. “The people who poach, their food security isn’t as high as yours in the Western world. The cost of living is increasing, so they’re more willing to put themselves in danger to feed their families. In Zambia and Zimbabwe, you get nine years in prison for stealing a cow, but for crimes against wildlife, people are getting away with bail or community service. That’s something the DNPW is hoping to change.”

Africa’s population is projected to double in size by 2050, and with growing habitat fragmentation, habitat loss and poaching, the future for wildlife looks bleak when conservation is taken out of the equation. Effects are far-reaching: with the gene pool depleted, animals’ genetic structures are changing. But Arnold can see progress.

“One solution is for tourism to be conscious rather than voyeuristic,” he says. “Any tourism that doesn’t include locals will quickly be undermined by locals.” Wilderness Safaris, he tells me, has developed an effective model that combines conservation with park collaborations and community work. All these cogs are working together to create change that will, Arnold hopes, stick.

Tourism for change

A thousand pearl black eyes are on me, unsettling my stomach. I’m in a car in the pitch black of night in Hwange National Park, having crossed the border into Zimbabwe, and we’re surrounded by a herd of buffalo.

“They say buffalo look at you as if you owe them money,” Livingstone, my guide, says. “A lone buffalo is more dangerous than an angry crowd. When they get old, they separate and parasites set in. They see humans and think we’re the cause, so they attack.” We’re not the cause of this particular problem, but we’re causing other issues: namely, climate change. “I haven’t seen the ground this dry in a long time,” Livingstone laments.

In 2019, Hwange saw its worst drought in nearly 30 years. “The Western world wants to have all these big talks about climate change, but if I ask for funding to remove snares, I’m not going to get it — it doesn’t sound sexy enough. But we need to be acting on the day-to-day issues facing conservation, away from trending topics and buzzwords, if we’re really going to address climate change and conservation on a larger scale,” Arnold tells me.

He’s brought me to the Scorpion Anti-Poaching Unit, an eight-person response team set up in 2011 to tackle increases in bushmeat and ivory poaching in Hwange National Park. The results of their efforts are notable. Columns of gnarled and rusted snares

decorate their base camp, some of the 2,500 the team have found in the park. They’ve noticed the use of snares drop massively since the project began. Now, they tend to find older snares rather than fresh ones.

“The situation is currently under control, but we can’t relax,” Tyrone, one of the Scorpions, tells me. The unit spends a lot of time telling nearby communities that keeping animals alive, rather than resorting to illegal poaching, is good for tourism, which in turn creates jobs. “It strains us, but with passion in our heart, we keep going and we try hard.” They also work with Children in the Wilderness, a programme that educates young students about conservation. “They go home and spread the message to their family and friends. It’s definitely changing perspectives,” Tyrone explains.

“We’re thinking of our future leaders. We want to see them be eco-conscious and responsible,” Moyo, head teacher at Ngamo Primary School, explains to me later. “They see the world is using up its natural resources, but we still have our wildlife here — and that’s a resource we can use. For one person to poach an animal, only they benefit from that. But to keep it alive means the whole community can build on an economy from tourism and create funding to build schools and farm crops.”

The importance of conservation has never been something locals have disregarded, as Mr Johnson, a resident in Ngamo village, argues: “Some people say our ancestors were the roots of this problem but, if you know our history, hunting bushmeat was careful and seasonal. It was only for the winter months when the meat wouldn’t rot, and they knew when these animals were breeding and gave them time in order to keep numbers high. The knowledge of conserving is within us. It was only when the white men came that they took that away; they didn’t have the same mindset and came with greed,” Mr Johnson explains.

It was this style of hunting that caused an imbalance in the ecosystem, to the point where it’s now so fragile, Mr Johnson continues to tell me.

As I go to leave, Mr Johnson adds a final comment: “The eco-safari camps here have made local people and tourists connect in a healthy way. If it wasn’t for the wildlife, we wouldn’t have tourism. And because of that we now have good schools and community development. We’re better off than any other area in Zimbabwe, so all the credit goes to our wildlife. That’s something worth saving.”

Arnold tells me how it’s really about enabling locals and giving them the tools they need. In this case, he feels, that’s investment. Money from eco-safaris, like those run by Wilderness Safaris, funds both units on the ground battling to protect wildlife and the education of future generations. “If it wasn’t for the wildlife, we wouldn’t have tourism in this area. That’s something worth saving.” □

LEFT FROM TOP: A white rhino in Victoria Falls National Park, Zimbabwe; a pangolin in Kafue National Park, Zambia.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: A safari vehicle passes a pair of elephants at sunset in South Luangwa National Park, Zambia

HOW TO DO IT

AFRICA ODYSSEY and WILDERNESS SAFARIS offer two nights at Wilderness Safaris’ Shumba Camp, Zambia, and three nights at Linkwasha Camp, Zimbabwe, with a night in between at Toka Leya at Victoria Falls, from £6,200 per person. Includes all flights, transfers, game drives and activities including a tour of Victoria Falls, all-inclusive. africaodyssey.com wilderness-safaris.com

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UNCHARTED TERRITORY

A new cruise on one of Ponant's high-tech, state-of-the-art ships promises close encounters with the Weddell Sea and Larsen Ice Shelf in one of the most remote areas on the planet

You're a long way from anywhere once you reach the Weddell Sea. This remote body of water lies off the seldom-visited eastern coast of the Antarctic Peninsula. To call it magical would be no understatement: it's a silent, almost dreamlike world of glaciers, ice floes and alpine peaks — a binary world of blue sky and white that stretches to the horizon in all directions, making for unforgettable sailing.

Ponant's 11-night Weddell Sea and Larsen Ice Shelf expedition cruise showcases this most spectacular of regions to unrivalled effect. The Larsen Ice Shelf, on the edge of the Weddell Sea, has produced some of the largest tabletop icebergs ever seen. It also marks the ship's ultimate destination, and as the vessel heads into deep Antarctica, those on board become immersed by the great white continent.

The ship departs from Ushuaia, in Argentina's southern Tierra del Fuego region, before sailing across the fabled Drake Passage via the far-flung South Shetland Islands. Over the next week and a half, as well as history and wildlife lectures from Ponant's team of expert naturalists, passengers have the chance to kayak between ice floes, ride on hovercrafts and electric snowmobiles, try scuba diving and even rise above the Antarctic landscape in a hot air balloon.

Numerous shore visits in rigid-inflatable boats provide the ideal opportunity to see the region's extraordinary wildlife up close, from leopard seals and wandering albatrosses to Adélie penguins and humpback whales. Few voyages can lay genuine claim to being the trip of a lifetime, but visiting the Earth's lower-latitudes on an intrepid, educational expedition is emphatically one of them.

ABOVE: Pleneau Bay, Port Charcot
RIGHT: Emperor Penguins

THREE MORE POLAR SAILINGS

1 Pristine Spitsbergen with National Geographic

Ponant has partnered with National Geographic Expeditions for this nine-day trip from Tromso to the polar island of Spitsbergen. First passing Bear Island, home to hundreds of bird species, the vessel then sails via Norway's fjord-laced Sor-Spitsbergen National Park. Spitsbergen, which forms part of the Svalbard archipelago is spectacular. With on-board luxury, and wildlife ranging from whales to Arctic foxes, this is a journey to be savoured.

2 At the Genesis of the French Polar Expeditions

Follow in the wake of the great explorers on this new 11-day cruise, focusing on the rugged east coast of Greenland. Departing from Reykjavik, you'll sail west to reach Greenland's icy coast. The voyage explores the mountainous Ammassalik region, where Captain Jean-Baptiste Charcot sailed, before moving north to the Blossville Coast, named after the explorer Jules de Blossville. As well as meeting local Inuit people, the trip offers the chance to spot polar bears.

3 Emblematic Antarctica

This 12-day expedition cruise is the classic way to experience Antarctica. Departing from Ushuaia, in Argentina, the ship spends two days crossing the Drake Passage before arriving at the Antarctic Peninsula. What follows is the chance to revel in the region's epic landscapes, as well as the opportunity to see first-hand the extraordinary animals that make this continent their home. Expect mind-bending numbers of penguins, while stylish on-board hospitality adds even more to the experience.



THE SHIP

The trip to the Weddell Sea takes place on board the latest addition to Ponant's fleet, *Le Commandant-Charcot*. As the first hybrid electric polar exploration ship to be powered by liquified natural gas, it's a game-changer. The state-of-the-art vessel is designed to have minimal environmental impact. On-board comforts include an indoor pool, panoramic lounge, lecture theatre, restaurants and a Sothys spa, as well as just 100 cabins and suites. Shore excursions, meanwhile, take place on easy-to-board, 10-person rigid-inflatable boats. With its revolutionary design and luxury mindset, *Le Commandant-Charcot* is a polar exploration ship with a difference.

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TRAVEL WRITING COMPETITION 2020

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A cruise through the Northwest Passage, a safari in Tanzania, or even a weekend away in Paris — whatever the focus of your travel tales, this is your chance to dazzle us with your prose. Not only will you be in with a chance of appearing in our October issue, but you could also set off on the trip of a lifetime to Vietnam.

We're looking for no more than 500 words on an inspiring travel story. It could be on any destination, but remember to capture our ethos: a strong sense of place and immersive, authentic experiences. Need some pointers? Check out some of our top travel writing tips before you get started.

WHAT WE'RE LOOKING FOR

- Your article should have a beginning, middle and end, and the opener should be one of the strongest paragraphs to pull the reader in. You can open with the most exciting part of your trip, then put it into context.
- Don't try to cover too much in one article. Too many angles can create a feeling of chaos — it's better to focus on a smaller number of incidents and to let your story develop.
- Use quotes — they add personality and are often useful for making broader points.

THE PRIZE

Courtesy of TUI Tours, the winner will set off on a 14-day trip of a lifetime* to Vietnam, taking in the highlights of the country from north to south. You'll explore peaceful paddies, emerald-green mountains, limestone islands and talc-soft beaches, as well as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which fizz with energy. tui.co.uk



Entries close at 23:59 on 30 June 2020. Terms and conditions apply. See more and enter online at nationalgeographic.co.uk/competitions

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Explore the cuisines of far-flung destinations and sample locally sourced ingredients as you try food and drink from around the world. Among the offerings is an immersive Welsh food experience within an interactive dome, Parmigiano Reggiano cheese tastings as well as Georgian wine.

Hear

Catch your favourite food writers at Speakers' Corner, where celebrated cookbook authors will discuss their work. Join us on a journey that takes in Romy Gill's vegan Indian recipes, the influences behind MiMi Ayes' Burmese food to Georgina Hayden's Greek-Cypriot roots.

See

Watch big-name chefs such as José Pizarro, Olia Hercules, Theo Michaels, Asma Khan and Claude Bosi make their signature recipes on the Main Stage. Plus, learn how to make dishes at our masterclass venues, the Tarragon and Cinnamon Theatres, and come away inspired to make your own versions at home.

Do

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IMAGES: CHARLIE RICHARDS; TEGAN MCCANN; FOOD STYLING: ANGELA ROMEO

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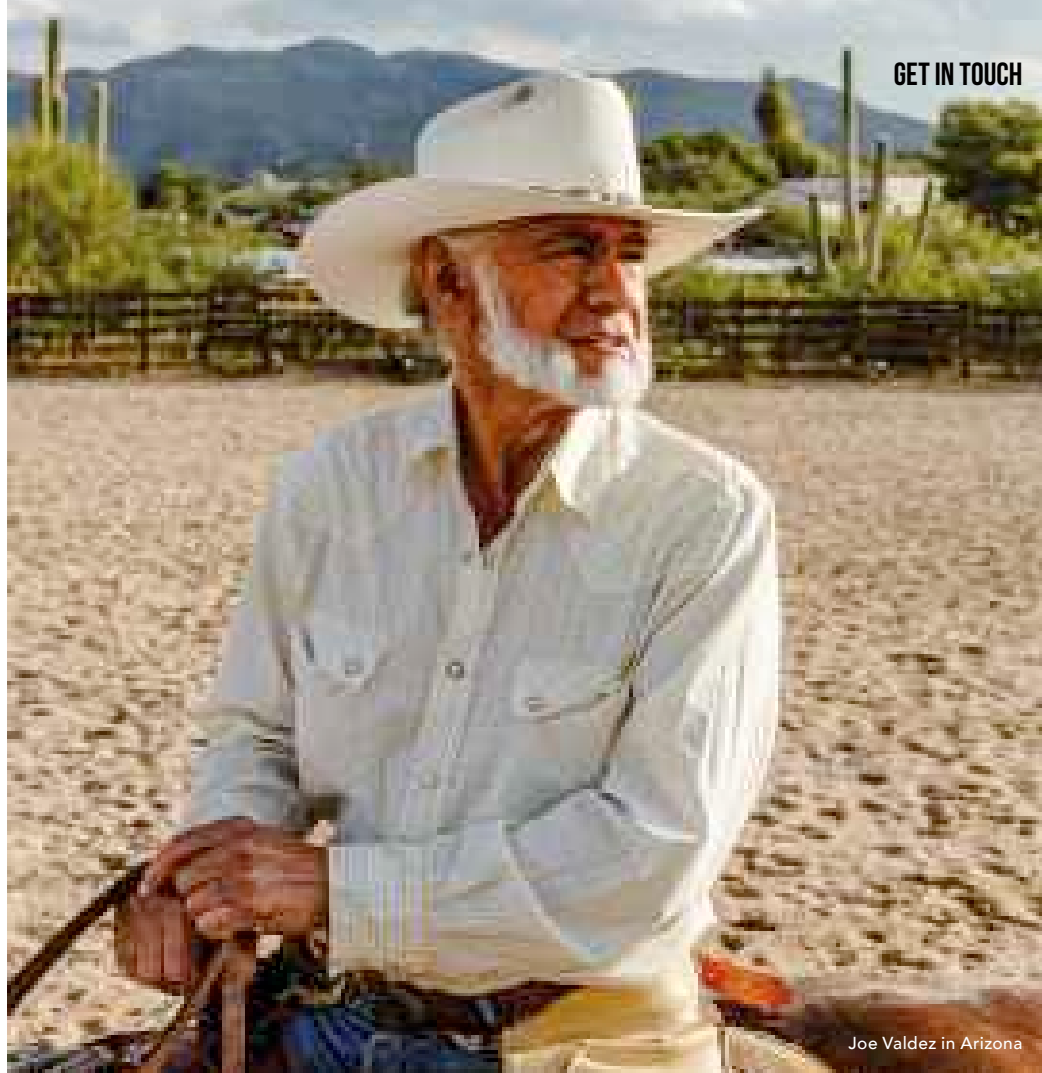
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Joe Valdez in Arizona

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A Smith The Roll Pack 25L from Millican worth £140!



Part of the Maverick Collection by Millican, the Smith The Roll Pack is designed for every kind of journey, from mountain trail to city commute. Lightweight and minimal, these bags are made from only a few panels of weatherproof Bionic Canvas — 65% recycled and 30% stronger than regular canvas. Sustainable travel goods brand Millican is based in the Lake District. homeofmillican.com

IMAGE: LUCY HEWETT

★ STAR LETTER

A familiar face

I turned to page 11 in the March issue and there, to my utmost surprise, was a face I thought I recognised — cowboy Joe Valdez, in Arizona. Memories came flooding back, so I rooted in the cupboard and found the photo album of my visit to the Tanque Verde Ranch in November 2005. And there I was, standing with the man himself! I found the Western style of riding quite difficult to master and I'm sure that they secretly called me the 'mad woman who wore a very English-style black velvet hard hat'. All the staff at Tanque Verde were so lovely and friendly, nothing was too much trouble and the riding was amazing — not to mention all the other activities available. So 'hi' to all at the ranch and thank you for an unforgettable holiday all those years ago! **VICKY TOONE**

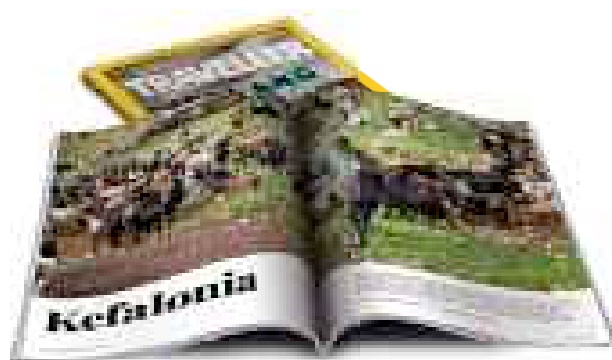
Due west

As I was looking through magazines at a shop in Birmingham New Street station, your April issue caught my eye. Like many travellers, I've made a pledge to fly much less this year, so your wonderful Ireland feature came at the right time. As well as road trips through the beautiful green countryside, I've now been inspired to discover Limerick's foodie scene and really explore the dramatic west coast. Let's just hope the weather plays ball! **AMANDA KING**

All Greek to me

After the dreary headlines and the miserable winter we've been having here at home, it was a real joy to set eyes on Jeremy Flint's Kefalonia photo feature (April 2020). Greece has always been one of our family's favourite places to travel — Kefalonia, in particular. I flicked through it one rainy afternoon and it brought back so many happy memories of summers spent by the sea, exploring the streets of Argostolion, hiking up into the hills and feasting on the freshest seafood I've ever eaten, all drizzled with incredible olive oil. I loved getting a glimpse of the local life and customs (featuring a very robust goat population, it seems!) and it was good to see ouzo got a mention, too — it's been the lifeblood of one too many of those summer holidays.

PETER MIDDLETON-JONES



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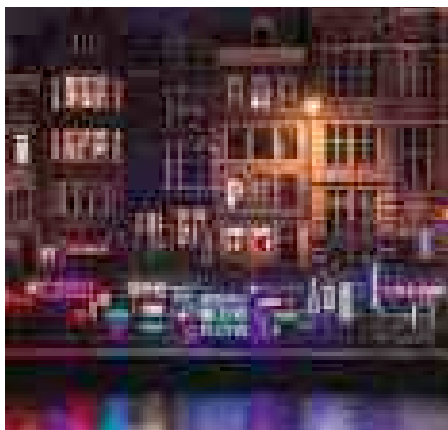


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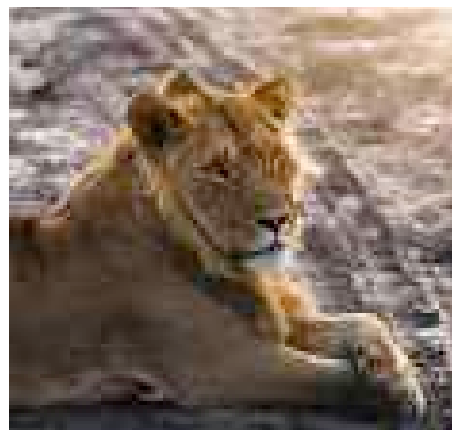
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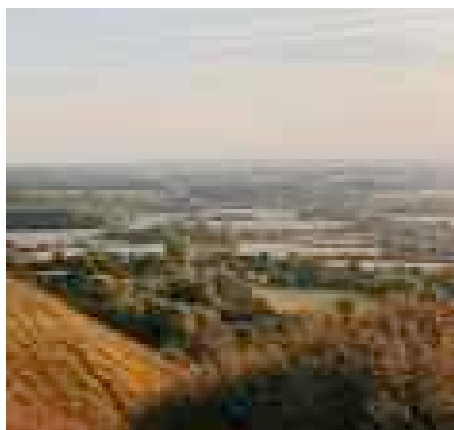
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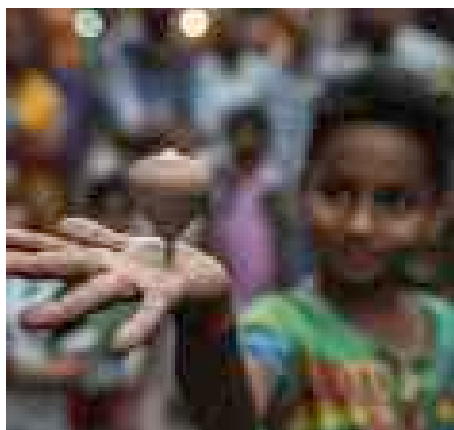
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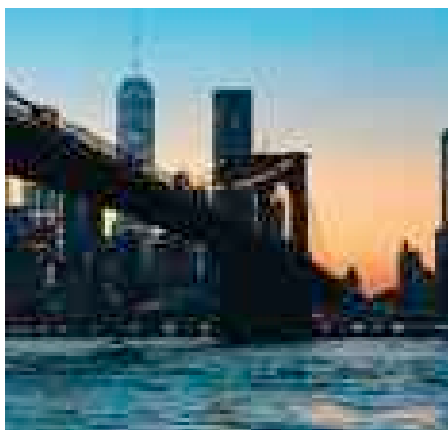
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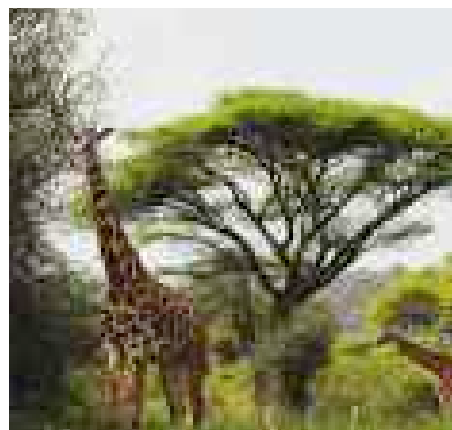
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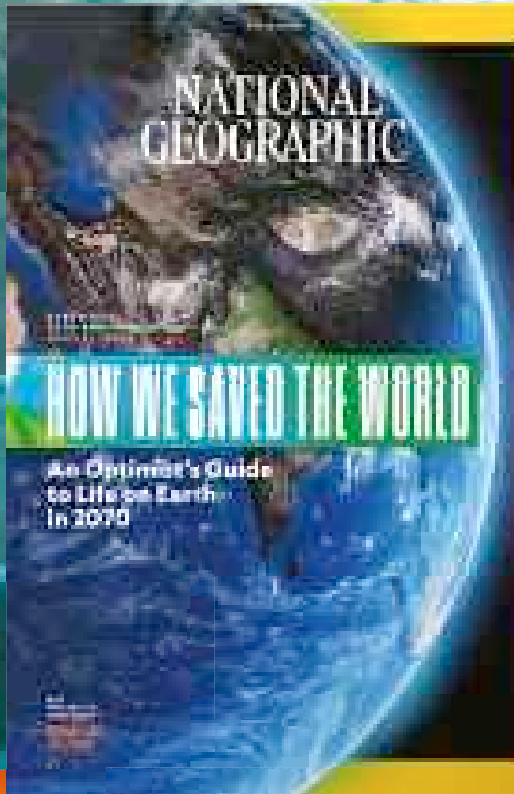


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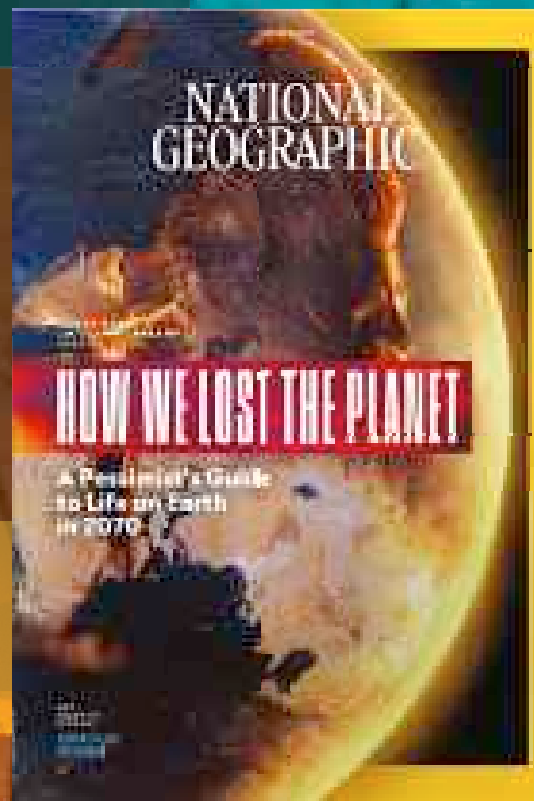
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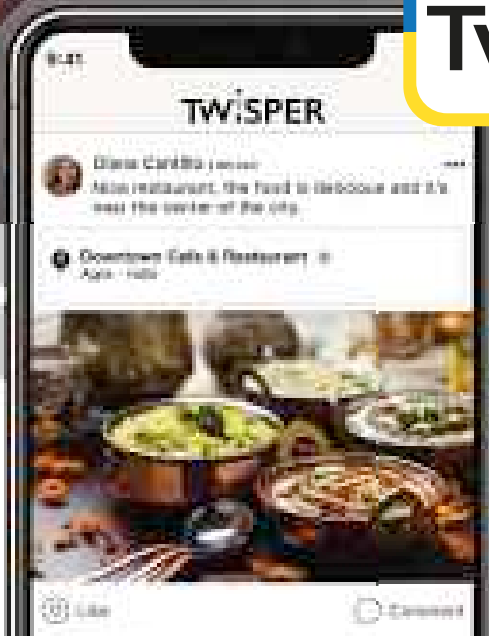


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