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 NATIONAL  
GEOGRAPHIC

SPECIAL EDITION:  
HOW TRAVEL TRANSFORMS US

# TRAVELLER

OCTOBER 2020 • ₹150 • VOL. 9 ISSUE 4  
NATGEOTRAVELLER.IN

INDIA

ONE HUNDRED

REASONS WE

L  V E

100<sup>th</sup>  
Issue

T R A V E L



# A LUXURY STAYCATION TO WASH AWAY THE PANDEMIC BLUES

Avail of exclusive deals on dining and accommodation on your post-pandemic staycation with Marriott International

After six months, restrictions on movement are slowly being lifted in India and across the world, bringing much relief to holiday-makers and travellers who are planning their next getaway to beat the pandemic blues. If you are one of them, Marriott International invites you to experience unparalleled luxury at pristine locations on your next staycation, in the country and beyond. Take your pick from a range of specially curated holiday experiences at [www.staycaywithmarriott.com](http://www.staycaywithmarriott.com)

Goa is home to some of the most popular beaches in the country, making it a quintessential holiday destination; lounging in the sand with a book and a refreshing drink is as tantalizing a prospect as spending an evening at the iconic Goan beach shacks. Explore the other facets of Goa's exciting culture through two luxury offerings in India's sunshine state. While **Goa Marriott Resort & Spa** at Miramar Beach boasts of North Goa's premier gaming destination in Casino Carnival, **Le Meridien Goa, Calangute** is the perfect home base for a culture trail that takes you through the Chapora and Aguada forts, and the famed Arpora Saturday Night Market. No matter what your fancy, Goa is a destination that promises a wide range of experiences, each more exciting than the last!

Just across India's eastern border, enjoy a riverside staycation at **Le Méridien Paro, Riverfront** in Bhutan on your next holiday. Set along the lush, fertile banks of the river Paro, a hike along the course of the river is the perfect nature outing with your family. Add to that the delightful local Bhutanese cuisine and picture-perfect views of the Eastern Himalayas, and you have the makings of a luxurious getaway in the midst of nature.

A short drive from New Delhi, **The Westin Sohna Resort & Spa** in Gurgaon is the perfect spot to get away from the chaos of the capital. Nestled in the shadows of the mighty Aravallis, and flanked by dense forests, the resort features a distinct architectural style that blends tradition and modernity. Take a cool dip in the Damdama Lake, try your luck at fishing or enjoy a lakeside family picnic – simple pleasures never disappoint!

In the Land of the Kings, there are few places more jam packed with cultural heritage than the capital Jaipur. From your base at **Le Méridien Jaipur Resort & Spa**, explore architectural marvels like the Hawaa Mahal, Amer Fort and Jantar Mantar on a trip that takes you through the ages, spanning centuries of valour, sacrifice and grandeur. Do not forget to pause and sample the delectable local cuisine on the streets of Jaipur, and shop till you drop in the chaotic lanes and by-lanes of Bapu Bazaar. A heritage trail with an exciting flavour of the modern, Jaipur beckons for your next family getaway!

Along Sri Lanka's southern coastline, Marriott International promises ultimate luxury at the **Weligama Bay Marriott Resort & Spa**, for your next staycation. Dig into a wide array of fresh seafood dishes, or even better, catch a glimpse of the region's fishermen as they go about their daily business perched atop slender stilts, cutting a curious figure against the setting sun. For the heritage geek, the historic fort town of Galle is not too far away; its fortified walls contain within them secrets of an important chapter in Sri Lanka's colonial history. Alternatively, take a day off to unwind at the Mirissa Beach, and try your hand at surfing!





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ON THE COVER

This issue, we've gone back to the start. Tickling taste-buds in Jordan's deserts or thrill-swims in an Indonesian cave (embarafootage), here's a reminder—nay, a whole 100—of why you love travel. 100 reasons, for our 100th issue. Read away!

EMBARAFOOTAGE/SHUTTERSTOCK (COVER)

Here are India's Favourite THAI PICKS!

AT THE END OF A THREE-WEEK CAMPAIGN, READ ON TO FIND OUT INDIAN TRAVELLERS' MOST CHERISHED THAI DESTINATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The year 2020 marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). Though travelling is not possible at the moment because of the Covid-19 pandemic, TAT launched the India's Favourite Thai Picks campaign on September 5, inviting Indian travellers to vote for their most cherished Thai destinations and experiences, across six different categories.

The campaign was launched with an exciting FB Live session with travel influencer Ankita Kumar, diver Sarvesh Talreja and the Director of TAT, Mumbai, Khun Cholada Siddhivarn joining us for an insightful session on Thailand's unexplored gems.

Over a span of three weeks, the campaign garnered more than 2000 responses from participants. Of them, Bani Dhillon, Dhruvia Shetty and Naman Aggarwal are the three lucky winners of the grand prize, an expense-paid trip to Thailand!

To celebrate the end of the campaign, travel influencer Nas Daily joined National Geographic Traveller India and TAT on World Tourism Day, September 27 for an IG Live, wherein he

spoke of the future of travel in a post-pandemic world, and let the audience in on his Thai travel recommendations!

At the end of the campaign, we are excited to announce the winning destinations and experiences that you voted for:

The most popular Thai delicacy is **Mango and Sticky Rice**, a dessert that is as satisfying as it is simple. While the capital **Bangkok** was voted India's favourite Timeless Destination in Thailand, the northern province of **Chiang Mai** received the most votes in the Unexplored Destinations category. Within the accommodation category, we have a tie for the winner's spot between the stunning tropical setting of **Krabi's Rayavadee** and the cosmopolitan charm of **Lebua in Bangkok**. In terms of quintessential Thai tourist experiences, the campaign revealed that **Island Hopping and Water Sports** are by far the most popular recreational activity among Indians and that the **MBK Shopping Centre** in Bangkok, their favoured shopping haunt!





# LOVE KEEPS TRAVEL ALIVE



**S**pirited voyagers, as we have been reminded in this special 100th edition of *National Geographic Traveller India*, are driven by a poetic madness. History is littered with tales of crusty seamen weathering choppy tides with saucy tunes and low-grade tippie, mountaineers with the zeal of preachers or roadsters who map the world, one grease-stained tyre track at a time. There has not been a better moment to tell the world what makes a traveller tick: who they are and why they are; never a better year for a grand declaration of their passions.

For our October issue, travellers rummaged through a lifetime of adventures to share their favourite and most cherished anecdotes, stories that best illustrate why travel is so curious, moving or surprising. From personal transformation (a confidence-restoring Siberian expedition) to lucky encounters (crashing Vietnamese weddings, a fated cabbie connection in Dallas), these accounts are rooted in deep appreciation for the quest, for exploration and for discovery of people and places. Sentiments that we can all identify with.

Until 2020, we had taken our fidelity to travel for granted. Then this romance, the course of which ran smooth so far, was thwarted by an agent of chaos. Now a reaffirmation of our feelings is in order. Like a lover offering her heart in a sonnet, we counted all the ways in which we could praise our one true love, and found 100. In truth, we could have just kept going. ■

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## TOP ONLINE PICKS



### I VIEW THE WORLD AS MY HOME: NAS DAILY

From navigating hot-button issues to championing human stories over destinations, the 28-year-old viral vlogger travels with an open mind and a big heart.



### SIX WAYS TO FEAST IN PUNE

Homey sandwiches, unlimited Maharashtrian thalis, and a misal stall as old as Independent India—these must-visit joints reveal Pune's endless appetite.



### HOW TO TOUCH THESE ICONIC TOURIST ATTRACTIONS AGAIN?

From Ireland's Blarney Stone to Seattle's Gum Wall, some "germy" attractions face a unique COVID-19 tourism challenge.

SERGEY 402/SHUTTERSTOCK (PENGUINS) PHOTO COURTESY NAS DAILY (NAS) PHOTOS COURTESY PAASHI (FOOD), GIOVANNI G/SHUTTERSTOCK (BLARNEY)



## Launch The Rediscover Paradise Campaign

The initiative aims to boost India's domestic tourism and hospitality industries through a novel 'book now, travel when safe' approach

**A**fter months of being confined to our homes, most of us are waiting with bated breath to satisfy the wanderlust within. With Corona India's Rediscover Paradise program, you can definitely get started with planning your post-pandemic holiday!

In a bid to inspire Indians to reconnect with the outdoors and help the local tourism industry, the Rediscover Paradise campaign gives consumers the opportunity to book a range of holiday experiences now, and travel when it is deemed safe to do so. To that end, Corona has pledged to provide aid to over 1,000 hotels across the world with over 14,000 room bookings globally. Closer to home, this platform has been launched in collaboration with Thrillophilia which will not only help those planning their future travels, but will also lend a helping hand to the tourism industry, which has been adversely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the initial stage of the campaign, the brand has pre-purchased rooms at independently run homestays and resorts that have been severely affected by the pandemic around Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore to offer immediate financial relief.

While a cool hillside retreat to the Coorg Cliff Resort or to the forests of Wayanad at Parison's Plantation is a tantalizing prospect, luxurious resorts like The Haveli in Dharampur, and the Sambhar Heritage Resort in Jaipur afford visitors the chance to explore lesser-known heritage trails in the country! Alternatively, opt for the quintessential beach holiday at the Caravela Beach Resort in Goa, or indulge in a novel island staycation experience at the Jalsrushti Island Resort in Mulshi. Take your pick from a wide range of luxury deals by visiting the Rediscover Paradise platform today!

Safe travels!





# TRAVELLER

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## WINNER OF THE SATTE AWARD FOR BEST TRAVEL PUBLICATION IN INDIA

# LIFE BEYOND

# T R A

# VEL

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Chris Burkard and his crew mapped 975 kilometres of Iceland's uncharted territory on a bikepacking expedition.

# “Iceland and I Have a Relationship”

ACCLAIMED PHOTOGRAPHER CHRIS BURKARD'S PENCHANT FOR ADVENTURE REPEATEDLY BECKONS HIM TO FORMIDABLE PLACES AND UNFAMILIAR ROUTES

By Pooja Naik

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY: JORDAN ROSEN (TRANS-ICELAND BIKEPACKING), CHRIS BURKARD (REMAINING LANDSCAPES)





Early in August, accomplished American photographer Chris Burkard and his crew of three Canadian friends—which included two-time Olympic mountain biker Emily Batty, former professional mountain bike athlete Adam Morka, and adventure sports photographer Eric Batty—set out to bike across Iceland’s farthest eastern point in Dalatangi to the farthest western point in Bjargtangar. The itinerary looked straightforward, but never-before-attempted routes seldom are so. Burkard’s brainchild was put to test after a year of planning. Over the course of nine days, the team traversed 975 kilometres with nearly 40,000 feet of elevation gain, while slicing through the heart of the Nordic island nation. They encountered impassable river crossings, gravel- and sand-filled rocky roads, glaciers, hot springs, volcanic ashes, lava fields and even a moon-like terrain that was once the site of NASA’s astronaut training ground—all while lugging with a 40-kilo bike each. The adventure enthusiasts charted the uncharted, and it was no mean feat.

Much like Burkard’s 3.6 million Instagram followers, I watched the journey unfold in real time, and caught up with the photographer soon after he returned to his base in the U.S. The 34-year-old was 18 when he first started documenting California’s coast on a camera he had borrowed from his then girlfriend, now wife. Since that time, his body of work includes multiple exhibits, nine books and his latest film project, *Unnur*, an Icelandic surf saga that is an official selection at the Tribeca Film Festival 2020—all of which portray dramatic expanses



En route to Bjargtangar—their final destination and the westernmost point of Iceland—the photographer and his crew stopped by the Garðar BA 64 (facing page), the country’s oldest steel ship built in 1912.



## “IN ANY EXPEDITION, THERE ARE A LOT OF UNKNOWNNS. AND IN MANY WAYS, IT’S THE UNKNOWNNS THAT TRULY KEEP THE JOURNEY FUN AND INTERESTING”

from different parts of the globe as captured through his artistic lens. In an hour-long telephonic conversation, the photographer discusses his Icelandic feat, the world’s best surfing destinations, and why Pismo Beach—where he is raising his two sons and a family of alpacas on a five-acre farm—will always be a place to call home. Edited excerpts:

### WHAT IMPLANTED THE IDEA OF THE TRANS-ICELANDIC BIKEPACKING TRIP?

Iceland and I have a relationship. I have been there 43 times. About a year ago, I had raced along the famous Ring Road. It was something I had trained for, but I never thought I could actually do it. And then I did. I covered the 1,358-kilometre length while setting a new record for the fastest known time by completing the trip in 52 hours, 36 minutes, and 19 seconds. It was beautiful and the ride took me to some of the most gorgeous parts of the country. But the entire time, I kept thinking there has to be another route that takes you through the remote landscapes as opposed to staying on the national road. I started talking to friends and I got in touch with an Icelandic cartographer. I asked him if there was a route that one could hike, drive or ride along that would take them to the interiors, while allowing them to stay close to the glaciers. He put together a map for us. But ultimately, it was unproven and untested. He didn’t know if it would come through.

### WHAT WERE SOME OF THE TOUGHEST CHALLENGES YOU AND YOUR CREW ENCOUNTERED ON THE JOURNEY?

Before we could even get there, we hired expedition guides to scout the place. They did all that they could, and they went to the sections we had been questioning. This is the scary part—there were a couple of rivers that were so deep and fast flowing that even super jeeps, which are designed to cross such terrains, couldn’t get past. How were we supposed to do it with 40-kilo bikes on our backs? That’s when we realised we had to build some workarounds and come up with a Plan B. The goal still remained to keep the route in the purest form.

Eventually, we completed the route we had set out to

Burkard’s journeys have taken him to surreal places such as the mulberry-washed landscape of a beach in Russia’s Kamchatka Peninsula.

do. But it created a lot of anxiety. There were mornings when we would wake up without having slept well because we didn’t know which path we were going to take and if we were going to be able to do the line that we set out to do. But I think, in any type of expedition, there are a lot of unknownns. And in many ways, it’s the unknownns that truly keep the journey fun and interesting.

### THE IDEATION-TO-EXECUTION STAGE TOOK A WHOLE YEAR. HOW DID YOU TRAIN YOURSELF MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY?

You know, luckily this year the pandemic has created one beautiful thing, which is time. In the past, I’ve done cycling events, where you’re riding 650-800 kilometres at a time. But this trip was different. It was all about going fast, and trying to conserve energy. There were a lot of decisions to be made and we didn’t want to ride at night. And so we weren’t pushing beyond 130 kilometres a day.

So, when it came to training, I was riding for about two hours a day, but I was riding with much less intensity, less speed and more weight. I was teaching the muscles to operate







Burkard believes  
Norway is one  
among the  
world's most  
overlooked surfing  
destinations.





The aerial sight of Na Pali (“high cliffs” in Hawaiian) Coast’s dramatic terrains made for a memorable family holiday for the Burkards.



Burkard’s love for the ocean drew him to the blues of Patagonia, where he shot *Come Hell or High Water*, a motion project that pays tribute to the art of bodysurfing.

in what we call the Zone 2, which is the fat burning stage. You don’t really want to push super hard because you do not want to burn out. And you don’t want to burn up all your glycogen. I would also do a lot of yoga and an hour of strength training. That was mostly for the upper body and it was far more intense. Unlike riding on a smooth road, the terrain in Iceland is rugged. You never know what you’re going to get.

**THE NATURE OF TRAVEL IS CHANGING IN THESE UNPRECEDENTED TIMES. HOW CAN YOU GET OUTDOORS AND ENSURE YOUR SAFETY, ESPECIALLY ON AN INTERNATIONAL TRIP?**

To be honest, I had no clue if we were going to get into the country. We had started planning this trip a year and a half ago and then the pandemic hit. We had applied for a film permit. And because of my work with the Icelandic government, the projects with the environmental ministry and the tourism, and because of the time I’ve spent there in the past, they honoured it. I was blown away.

Before we left, we all took a COVID-19 test. And I think social responsibility is just the first step. If I had received access to another country, I don’t think I would’ve gone. But Iceland being as isolated and safe as it is, I decided to go a week early and quarantine myself there. I was aware of the testing protocol upon arriving in the country. They have apps to track where you go and then do another test six days later. I relied upon their protocols. I made sure those tests

had cleared and I think that’s all we can do. Life and work is not going to stop. This is how I put food on the table for my family. Knowing that I could manage the risk was really helpful overall.

**IN ONE OF YOUR INSTAGRAM POSTS, YOU TALK ABOUT GROWING UP AS A SMALL TOWN KID WITH A SINGLE PARENT WHO NEVER OWNED A PASSPORT. CUT TO TODAY, THE WORLD HAS OFFERED YOU PLACES THAT SOMETIMES FELT SO SURREAL THAT YOU THOUGHT THEY MIGHT FADE AWAY. HOW DID THE JOURNEY COME ABOUT AND WHICH DESTINATIONS HAVE BEEN THE MOST HUMBLING, TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES FOR YOU?**

*(Laughs)* You know, it’s funny. I had started my career as a photographer with the intention of just collecting a paycheck and getting stamps on my passport. There was no altruistic pursuit. I grew up right here in Pismo Beach, which is about halfway between San Francisco and L.A. in California, and all I knew was that I wanted to get out of this small town and see what was out there. Seeing my mom trying to make ends meet, I knew what struggle looked like. And I think that gave me a sense of drive, passion and compassion. I took that and I ran with it. My mom instilled a sense of work ethic in me and it is the greatest gift I could ever receive.

Speaking of humbling experiences, I’m going to steal a quote from Yvon Chouinard. “You have a whole life in the outdoors, you realise you have a sense of responsibility to



protect these wild places.” And that’s exactly what Iceland has been to me. It’s a beautiful relationship to be able to offer a service in return. The older I get, the more responsible I feel to share deeply meaningful stories of these places. Over the last seven years, one of the things I’ve really put my time into is to protect Iceland’s glacial river systems and its interiors. I made a book about it called *At Glacier’s End*, for which I have closely worked with the country’s Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources. It aims at showing people what is beyond the six-hour stretch of the coast and why it needs conservation. It is what I am fighting for and something I have tried to add my voice to.

Alaska is another place that I feel strongly feel connected to. It has a really unique environment that feels like it is from another planet. I know it’s in the United States, but it might as well not be.

**YOUR ALASKA-BASED SHORT FILM, *NORTH TO THE FUTURE*, DEALS WITH THE CONSTANT STRUGGLE AND PAIN OF LEAVING BEHIND THE ONES YOU LOVE IN ORDER TO EXPERIENCE SOMETHING NEW. HOW HAS TRAVEL CHANGED WITH KIDS?**

Travel is always a topic of conversation in my house. Early in my career, I realised I could have moved and made more money. But once I started travelling, I knew Pismo Beach was the only place I could call home. It’s where I wanted to raise a family. Having kids and wanting to be there for them is where things have really changed for me. I realised that I needed to prioritise my time with them. I made that film because I wanted people to understand my thought process when it came to deciding to leave (for trips). We have this thought, where when we leave our kids behind, we have to tell them we are sorry, and we don’t really want to go to work. But the reality is far from it. I’m not sad when I leave. I’m excited. And I want for my kids to find something for themselves that they’re so passionate about, that when they leave, they love it.

What I realised with my kids is that being able to spend time together as a family, whether it is by our favourite little river or beach in the neighbourhood is enough. And when you’re little, everything is new and exciting. Introducing them to the world does not need to be an expensive process.

**ACCORDING TO YOU, WHICH ARE SOME OF THE MOST EASILY OVERLOOKED DESTINATIONS FOR ADVENTURE AND OUTDOOR PHOTOGRAPHY?**

I don’t know if they’re easily overlooked. But what I crave for are places with a lot of vertical relief. And what I mean by that is I’m drawn to environments where the mountains meet the ocean. It has a certain degree of intensity which I love. Whether that’s Norway, Alaska, Iceland, or even the coastal mountains of California—I look for that drama, which tends to create such an impact.

**WHERE WOULD YOU POINT PEOPLE TOWARDS FOR SOME OF THE BEST SURFING DESTINATIONS?**

If you’re looking for your classic, warm water, beautiful surf trip, there’s really nowhere better than Indonesia,

Mexico or Chile. But for me, in order for it to be a successful trip, you need to be going somewhere that truly provides a sense of adventure. It’s going to require a little more drive and effort to get the good waves. New Zealand and parts of Europe such as Spain, the Basque Country, France, and Scotland are excellent. Norway is perhaps one of the most overlooked places in the world for incredible surfs. The farther north you go—especially around October and November—the more rugged and beautiful it gets. You’re underneath huge granite cliffs that have been carved by the waves, and it is formidable and so dreamlike. As a photographer, there is something about the surfing experience that is really unique because what it does is it forces you to feel so insignificant. You’re at the mercy of the ocean, which, of course you cannot control in any capacity.

**YOU HAD VISITED INDIA A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO. HAS AN INSTANCE FROM THE TRIP STAYED WITH YOU?**

Yes. I had been to Hampi, and had also spent some time in Kerala’s backwaters. And then just off the coast, I had visited the remote Minicoy Island in Lakshadweep. I had never before in my life been anywhere where one religion dominates the culture of that place. The local Muslim community there helped us understand how they built their boats, and it was just fascinating to observe how they lived their daily lives. The one shared experience that I probably won’t forget from that trip was playing with the local kids and surfing in the ocean with them.

**IS THERE A PLACE THAT YOU FIND YOURSELF RETURNING TO?**

I’ve been to Iceland 43 times. It is mainly because of the environmental issues and my relationships with some of the local people, and because I feel like I can make a difference there. I have been to Norway multiple times and to Alaska six or seven times. While I love the idea of going someplace new, I crave the ability to return to places that I know. It feels like you’re leaving some sort of a legacy behind.

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A BUDDING TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER?**

Anyone who tries to convince an editor that they can do everything well, often ends up alienating their strengths. As a budding travel photographer, what I would look for is how can I hone my skills into something where I’m a specialist and really good at one particular thing, you know? Because when you’re hired by most magazines, you are hired for your skill set and because you’re the best at something. Find and exploit that niche. That is how I have been able to excel in my career very quickly.

**SO WHAT’S NEXT ON THE TRAVEL FRONT FOR YOU?**

A lot of the work that I have is on hold because travel is up in the air. Although I’m limited to where I can go to now, doesn’t mean I’m allowing the stories to become any less meaningful. I’m focusing on the western U.S., the Sierra Nevada range, and Alaska. ■



Closer home in the U.S., Burkard has put his lens on varying expanses, be it Utah’s deserts (top), or Alaska’s volcanic Aleutian Islands (bottom).





# Is the Office Obsolete? Many Travellers Hope So

AS THE PANDEMIC DRAGS ON, REMOTE WORKERS SEE  
UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITIES TO BECOME DIGITAL NOMADS

By Jackie Snow

Arthur Deane never imagined that the digital nomad lifestyle—travelling the world while working remotely—was for him. As a senior manager for tech giant Google, he thought being in an office was essential for the job. But the pandemic changed that.

Four months of working from his apartment in Washington, D.C., had him going stir crazy and needing to get out. After researching places where Americans were allowed to travel and reasonable safety precautions seemed to be in place, he jetted to Aruba for a week in July.

“I wanted to dip my toes into the water, literally and figuratively,” he says.

Now, he’s looking at returning to Aruba or one of the other destinations open to Americans for a longer trip. There are still details to sort out, but he has time:

Google’s U.S. offices aren’t reopening until July 2021—at the earliest.

Freelancers, entrepreneurs, and the self-employed have made up the majority of the digital nomad crowd, but this could change as more companies reevaluate work culture after six months of remote log-ins. The number of people who might remain out of office is staggering.

For Deane, the chance to work remotely for a few months each year while maintaining a home base in the U.S. could be an ideal setup—and a reality sometime soon.

“I don’t see returning to an office full-time being the way of the future,” he says. “The pandemic has taught us that we can be productive without being in the office, Monday to Friday, nine to five.”

The coronavirus pandemic has taught the world that it is possible to be productive outside the office.

ASMIANA/SHUTTERSTOCK



Bali has become a popular destination for digital nomads, even offering a range of co-working spaces with high-speed internet and espresso bars.



ONEINCHPUNCH/SHUTTERSTOCK

### A GROWING TREND

Remote work was gaining steam before the pandemic, with companies experimenting with work-from-home days and investing in hardware to ensure safe off-site log-ins. Now that millions of employees have months of experience proving they don't need to work from an office, some want to take it a step further and find out if they even need to work from home.

The term “digital nomad” dates back to at least 1997, when the book *Digital Nomad* argued that technology would allow humans to work from anywhere and return to the wandering ways of our ancestors. It took another 15 years before widespread Internet and budget carriers like AirAsia allowed the dream to become reality for a distinct group of travellers. By 2019 one report found that 7.3 million American workers consider themselves digital nomads.

Places such as Bali, Chang Mai, and Mexico City have become popular destinations, and they offer co-working spaces with high-speed Internet and high-octane espresso bars. Most digital nomads, however, rely on tourism visas, which technically don't allow any work. While many nations are more focused on local jobs and have turned a blind eye to digital nomads, this will not be enough for companies worried about liability.

Some countries now see opportunities to lure workers—and assuage employers—with official programmes for extended stays. In July, Barbados started to take applications for the Welcome Stamp, which offers a 12-month visa. Applicants must prove they make at least \$50,000/₹36,90,000 per year and have health insurance. Then they need to fork over \$2,000/₹1,47,500—or \$3,000/₹2,22,000 for a family—for the visa fee. Once accepted, visa holders can come and go as they please, gain access to the local school system, and forgo the country's income tax.

Estonia, already known for its e-residency programme that allows foreigners interested in setting up a business to access the country's services, has announced a new digital nomad visa. It will permit visitors to work there remotely for 12 months with an application fee of €100/₹9,000 and proof of at least €3,504/₹3,00,849 per month in income. Americans, however—still banned from travelling to European Union countries—will have to wait.

Bermuda launched its Work From Bermuda programme recently, allowing travellers to stay up to a year, income tax free, after securing a \$263/₹20,000 visa. New Yorker Kiwan Michael Anderson isn't applying for the visa but has been surprised to find himself working from the British territory. He goes there every summer to visit family and was worried the pandemic would end the tradition. But the island reopened to Americans on July 1, and he went, intending to stay for two weeks of vacation. When it came time to leave, his aunt asked him if he really had to go.

“I thought about it and was like, ‘Actually I don't,’” he says.

Anderson cancelled his flight home and has been in Bermuda for the last nine weeks. Maintaining his work as a manager at the PR firm Nike Communications has not





Places like Chiang Mai (top) and Mexico City (bottom) act as massive draws for those looking to work remotely from exciting and accessible destinations.



been a problem, he says. “My Wi-Fi is better in Bermuda than in my apartment in Brooklyn sometimes.”

Since he’s an hour ahead of his office in New York, he feels like he gets a head start on work. And at the end of the day, he’s in the ocean doing water aerobics with his aunt or jet skiing. He plans to take up paddleboarding next. “It’s not about where you are anymore,” Anderson says, “but how hard you work and how productive you are.”

#### KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

The pandemic, of course, complicates travel. Both Bermuda and Barbados require recent negative coronavirus tests and conduct health checks on arrival. But those protocols don’t stop people who get infected in transit or spot the asymptomatic carriers, according to Lisa Lee, an epidemiologist and public health ethicist at Virginia Tech University.

Ideally, Lee says, these countries would add a quarantine for 14 days, the incubation period of this coronavirus. Lee points to Jordan, which enforces a quarantine with electronic bracelets, and Canada, which sent police to check on people in quarantine, as examples of countries successfully pulling off the task. “It can be done, but you have to have a lot of resources,” she says.

While this 14-day period is longer than most vacations, it would be doable for extended stays. Even if there’s no mandatory quarantine, Lee recommends doing a self-imposed one and continuing to social distance, wear masks, and avoid indoor gatherings afterward. So far, neither Bermuda nor Barbados has seen a spike in cases, but digital nomads should still take care, especially as epidemiologists expect another surge of infections this fall.

“It would literally take one person that infected two others to set off an epidemic on an island,” Lee says. “No one wants to be the one that brings a disease and devastates a population.”

Traditionally the biggest hurdle for digital nomads has been finding fast and reliable Wi-Fi. While Internet connections have improved in many places, new digital nomads are running into other issues.

Besides getting visas, some employees need to meet regularly with teammates or clients, making different time zones tricky. Ensuring the security of work data is also a concern, though many companies now have virtual private networks, or VPNs, and provide regular training on topics such as how to spot phishing emails.

Still these practices won’t be enough for everyone wanting to go abroad. For those working with sensitive information, a company’s legal department may not allow offshore access. David Cusick, chief strategy officer for House Method, a North Carolina-based company that provides research on home service providers, has seen these types of problems emerge since the start of the pandemic.

## COUNTRIES ACROSS THE WORLD ARE PREPARING FOR A BOOM OF DIGITAL NOMADS

“Employees come ensuring us that time zones won’t be an issue and that tourist visas are no sweat,” he says. “But when it comes to legal liability, our hands are often tied—we’re a U.S. company at the end of the day.”

Cusick said the company is still sorting out what work looks like in the long-term but is leaning toward making a remote option permanent. Employees like it, and there is a chance to save money on office space. If employees want to go abroad, he’s happy to consider it.

There are also personal considerations for digital nomads. For example, in Barbados, like much of the Caribbean, same-sex sexual activity is illegal. While LGBTQ vacationers have always had to think about this, the calculus might change when considering living there long-term with a loved one.

It can also go the other way. For African Americans and other minorities, going abroad can be an escape from racism in the United States. For Anderson, who had to deal with his personal feelings about the Black Lives Matter movement and help clients to address it, being in majority-Black Bermuda has been a reprieve. “It’s recharged me,” he says. “It’s given me hope and energy.”

#### MAKING IT SUSTAINABLE

Countries were asking how to attract more digital nomads before the coronavirus, and they still want these travellers, says Michaela Murray, head of marketing for Hacker Paradise, a company that has organised trips for groups of digital nomads since 2014.

“Countries around the world are preparing for a boom [of] digital nomads,” she says.

Some places, such as Bali and Venice, were already dealing with overtourism and considering a tax to curb the number of visitors. But Murray says she’s seen growing interest in trips to spots like Kilifi, Kenya, and other off-the-beaten-path locales as the idea of sustainable tourism has gained hold.

Slowing down is also a way to make travel more sustainable, giving visitors time to see a place in-depth and reducing carbon emissions from flights. Gerry Isabelle quit her office job in 2017 and went full-time digital nomad, supporting herself by organising trips and writing travel articles. She wanted to have authentic experiences while being conscientious about her journeys, documenting what she learned on Dominican Abroad.

A key lesson she’s learned is that travel guides aren’t made for digital nomads. While a family on a 10-day vacation might not want to risk going to a place during the rainy season, digital nomads can be there long enough to wait out bad weather and skip the crowds. They can also boost communities’ tourism revenue in the slow season, obtain cheaper rates on travel, and enjoy the authentic experiences that longer trips can provide.

“If you can slow down,” Isabelle says, “you can make those local connections and get the richness of the heritage of the space.” ■

BLUR LIFE 1975/SHUTTERSTOCK (MARKET), INGUS KRUKUTIS/SHUTTERSTOCK (BAR)



# COMICS

## TO THE RESCUE

A BOOKSHOP IN NEW YORK CITY ASKED PEOPLE TO IMAGINE A UTOPIAN WORLD AFTER COVID-19. HUNDREDS OF COMIC ARTISTS ACROSS THE WORLD GOT BACK, FORMING THE INSTAGRAM ART PROJECT, 'RESCUE PARTY'

By Kareena Gianani

Hong Kong-based cartoonist Kaitlin Chan's (@chen\_jiaxian) future—more specifically her post-pandemic utopia—is peppered with these images: a vow to not judge PDA-ing couples on the metro, to make time to ogle hot waiters who smoke outside, and a world where her fellow Hongkongers can go back to having their enemies cursed (in a traditional local ritual). Once again.

On the other side of the world, Peruvian illustrator Jolos Carsé (@jolos\_) draws a future full of huggers, where we hug so frequently and fiercely that it'd be common for our arms to be afflicted with a condition called 'hugsored.' "People will start hugging with any limb they can grab," he wishes, "until everyone becomes a twirly mass—of care and affection."

Chan and Carsé are among 300-plus artists from over 30 countries who answered an open call for short comics

about an imagined utopic future after COVID-19. Their panels are part of a whimsical, wonderful Instagram art project, Rescue Party (@rescueparty2020), curated by a Brooklyn-based comics bookstore, Desert Island.

### ART, SHARED FREELY

"In April, I was alone in my quarantine cabin, feeling somewhat despondent, missing other people and wishing for connection and positivity," says Desert Island's founder, Gabe Fowler. He hoped the prompt he sent out into the world would return with comforting thoughts through art, shared freely on the internet. At first, entries trickled in slowly, but a week later Fowler's inbox was flooded daily with 10 or more wishful, cheeky, heartwarming comics. Like little haikus of hope, they brought to him stories of a shared reality that regular folk living in Goa, Lisbon,

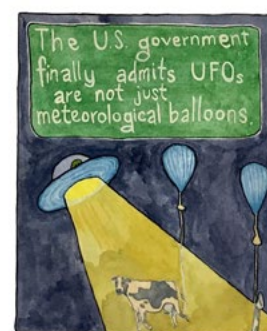
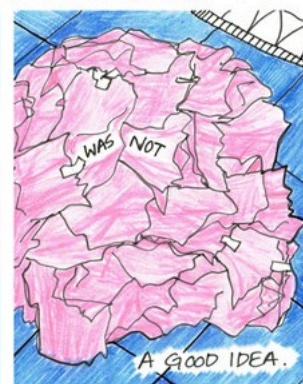
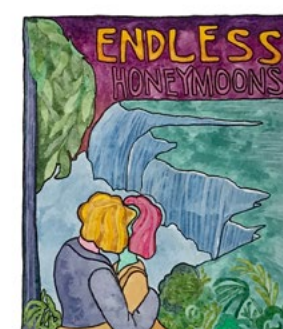


Argentina, Indonesia, Tokyo, and beyond were experiencing; and a feeling that they were all holding the same wishbone for the future.

I begin scrolling through Rescue Party's Instagram page, an Aladdin's cave of ideas and endearing quirks of people

trying to find their balance as the world pirouettes out of control. Keeping in line with the theme, many comics are about hope—Jane Demarest's (@little.boy.blueeee) bold, jaunty characters yearn for "stuff to go back to normal" already, like when people bumped into each other at the





**MANY COMICS ARE CRITICAL OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND CAPITALISM: TWO FACTORS THAT DETERMINE HOW WE COPE IN THIS PANDEMIC**

sidewalk and swore, bad dates with bad kisses, or times when we felt tongue-tied when someone knocked on our bathroom stall. Some 'hopes' are a hoot. Noah Pierce (@theinkisthelife) imagines a future where birds rejoice the death of humans, those "flightless dopes who think they're so cute and clever, but really they're f\*\*\*in everything up." The Earth belongs to the birds—they can finally write their memoirs in peace, grow trees on highways, and burn cities down as they see fit.

I chuckle at the ways in which Rescue Party's theme branches out in the hands of different people, how some strips let you crawl into wacky inner worlds of artists. Somewhere in Germany, Amelie Stute (@am\_1\_e), with her scratchy neon blue-green lines, mulls over dressing her house plants in spiffy jumpers and hats like that of the friends she can't meet. Tana Oshima (@tanaoshima) revels in a world gone quiet, because she can now hear "the smack of a distant kiss... the squeak of a loving bed on the other side of town."

KAITLIN CHAN (LEFT), AMELIE STUTE (MIDDLE), SOFIA MENA-BELL (RIGHT)

### COMIC RELIEF, AND CRITIQUE

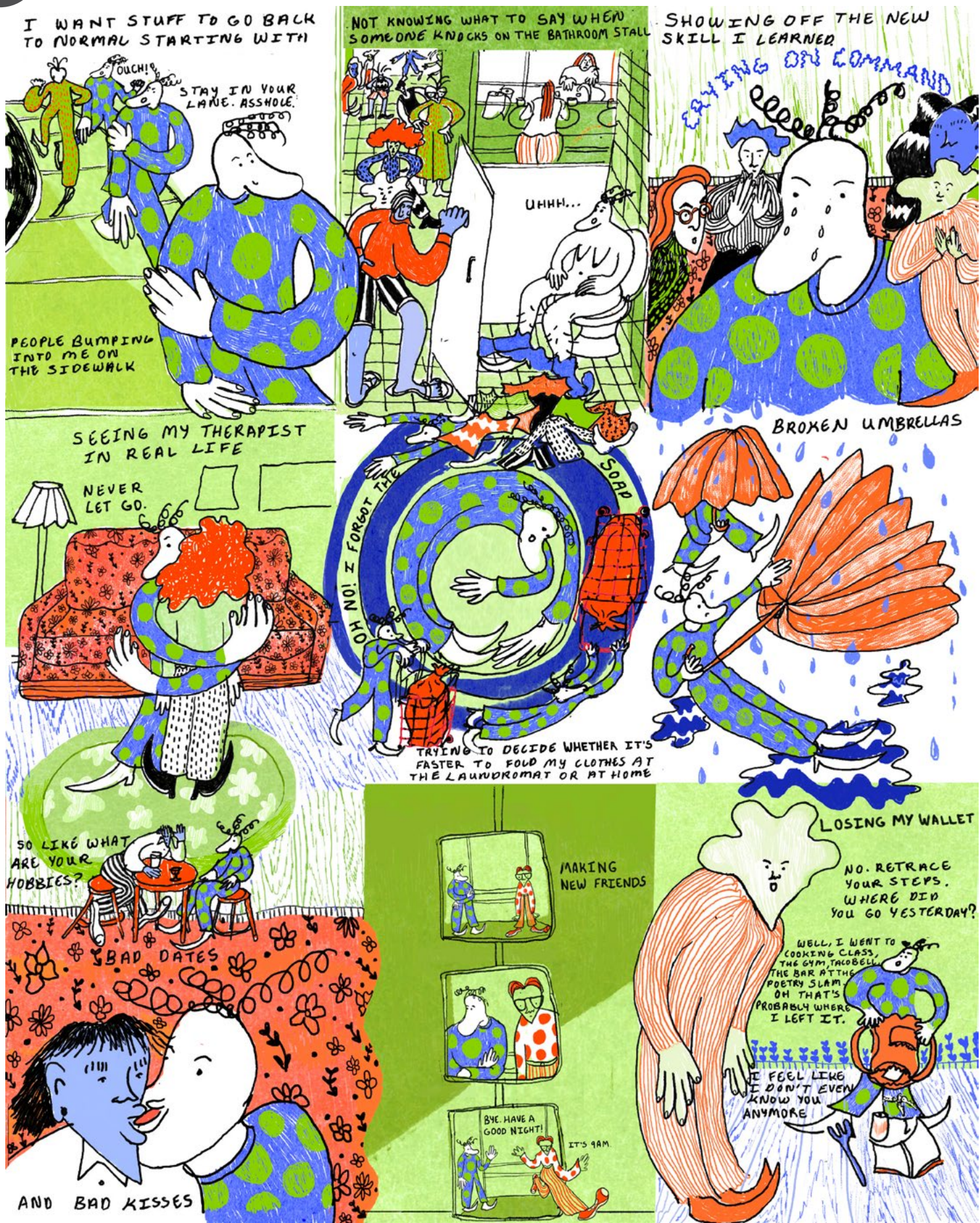
A large number of comics hold a mirror up to the flaws in our society. For all their warm colours and eclectic styles, they're penetratingly critical of climate change and capitalism—two factors that continue to determine our fate in this pandemic. Gabrielle Bell's (@ms.gabriellebell) comic is emblematic of this anxiety. Distressed about a dying friend, she hopes that people will realise how governments are failing them. Her utopia involves change at all levels. Wars would end, empathy would prevail, and people would realise how pointless it was to hoard toilet paper when all they could have done is help each other.

Rescue Party is an exciting space precisely because it is so democratic—anybody from anywhere in the world, at any stage in their art-making, can participate; you don't pay a fee to showcase or view the artwork. Fowler doesn't play gatekeeper: an ethos very much in line with how he views the relationship between comics and readers.

"There has always been a cultural divide between art people and comics people, and I wanted to bridge the gap and bend art people towards comics and comics people towards art," he explains. Fowler founded Desert Island in 2008 to help provide access to difficult or obscure material in comics and illustrated books, published by artists and small publishers around the world. He is an adventurous stockist who likes to "mix things up, dig deep, find work that is being made outside of the familiar pathways of brooding post-apocalyptic vigilante superhero comics."

Little wonder Desert Island is most beloved for its zines—small-press publications made in limited quantities. Fowler welcomes *any* illustrated publication by *any* artist. "Just today, for instance, Brooklyn artist Wren McDonald brought his new risograph book, *Resort on Caelum*, which is a good example of a random acquisition, and an incredible artwork in its own right," he says.





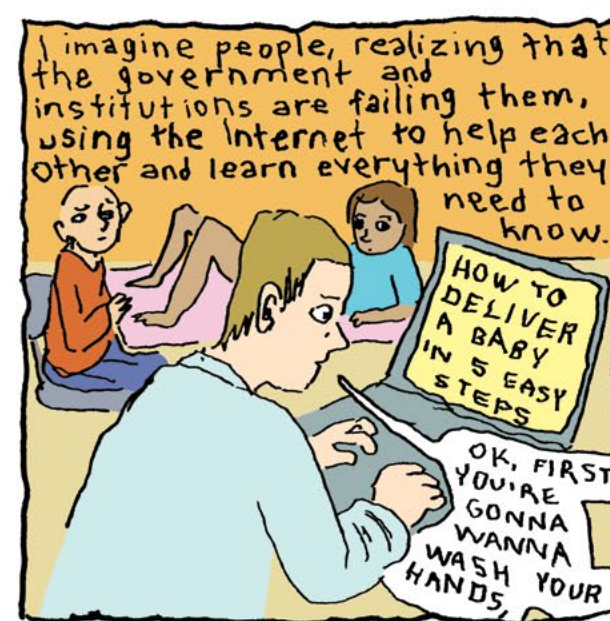
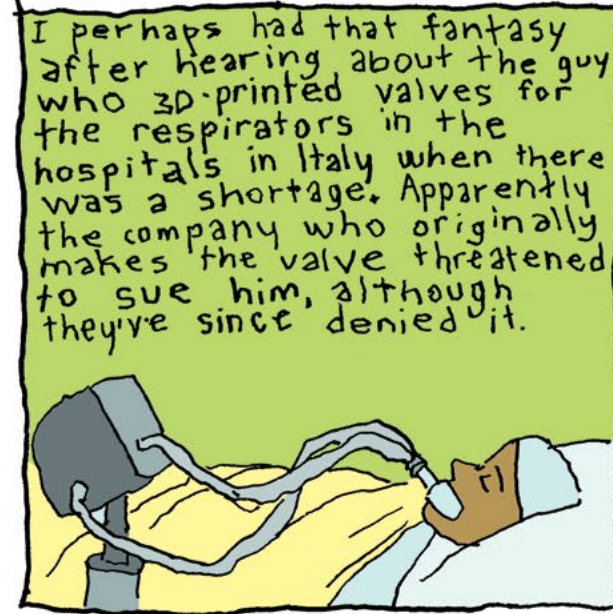
IDA HARTMANN, JANE DEMAREST (FACING PAGE)

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE

Over a couple of days, I re-read at least 250 Rescue Party comics to understand their allure (many are also on the Desert Island's Instagram page, @desertislandcomics). There's the truism that art is an exceptionally gentle salve in trying times, but with these comics that feels just the start of it. A copy of my favourite graphic novel, *My Favourite Thing is Monsters* by Emil Ferris, catches my eye. It has lain on my bed for a straight year, never seen the inside of

a drawer. Sure I've loved other books before, but the reason I cling to this one as if it were some talisman is because Ferris's crosshatched drawings have an urgency that dunks you deep into where *she* wants you to be. Chicago of the late 1960s, sociopolitical tumult, amid families full of secrets. But most remarkably, inside the mind of a monster-loving 10-year-old out to solve the murder of her neighbour who had survived the Holocaust. Ferris's figures are a hat-tip to B-movie horror imagery and pulp monster magazines. A beast of a treat.





LIKE LITTLE HAIKUS OF HOPE, THE COMICS BRING STORIES OF A SHARED REALITY FROM OVER 30 COUNTRIES



GABRIELLE BELL (LEFT), TANAKA OSHIMA (RIGHT)



RESCUE PARTY'S COMICS OFFER  
DIAGNOSES OF OUR TROUBLES,  
BUT ARE ALSO JOYOUS PROOF  
OF ALL THINGS WE DEEM VITAL

Rescue Party's comics—perhaps like all good comics—exert a similar visceral force that shapes and shifts perspective: its panels are kaleidoscopic roadmaps into a collective inner journey at a time we feel we have nowhere to go. Forceful brushstrokes and nuanced writing place our reality in context. There are detailed diagnoses of our troubles, but also joyous proof of all things we deem vital while living through a pandemic. I particularly love Sasha Hill's (@lo\_tech\_art) comic where a woman in an orange polka-dotted jumpsuit hands her 'Boss Office' over to someone else so she can tap into other skills and be of service; 2021 goes down as "the year humans revolutionised work and society." Jim Schuessler's (@shoenami\_art) panels feature a man covered head-to-toe—mask, goggles, gloves—re-emerging into the world after a long time, only to find empty streets and proof

that "nature had begun to reassert itself...technology had adapted to work in harmony with nature." He meets a lone kitten, takes off his mask and goggles, and the panel reads: "In the end, it wasn't technology that moved humanity forward...it was compassion."

**DYSTOPIA OR REALITY?**

Some comics are dystopic, but I can barely pin them as imaginary because they uncannily resemble aspects of life under some authoritarian governments. Oliwia Ziebinska's (@oli.comic) imagines that borders will close permanently and the government will track our temperatures through chips implanted in our bodies. Life will move online. People will take decades to earn enough to buy their escape to live with the "last free people." Another one that haunts me is by Kana Phillip (@radioethiopia),

whose first panel features a round-faced child's sketch, with the words, "Only Kids Will Be Left." It sees the post-Covid world as one where the adults don't make it, which strikes me as a grim reference to how cavalier many people and governments have been about Covid guidelines. It also reminds me of the politicised debates over reopening schools in parts of the world.

There seems to be no aspect of life in a pandemic that Rescue Party's comics don't touch upon—sourdough experiments, protests, vaccines, existential dread—and to read them is to feel utterly cathartic. For Fowler, this visual diary is an act of larger hope. It's never too late to visualise a positive future as a goal, he tells me. "And the first step is to first conceive the preferred outcome... I'm interested in conceiving positive futures so we can then travel there together." ■





T.S. Eliot had his reasons, so does the Dalai Lama—and you can bet Oprah Winfrey has spoken about her's. Everyone has their distinct, delicious reason for loving travel. Like grandma's jar of pickles that changes tang and texture over time, but remains a thrilling fix to the oft-mundane meal of life, travel keeps on giving. For our 100th issue, we asked diverse travellers to share experiences that best exemplify their reason for being wayfarers, spread across 14 categories and many bewitching places. Perhaps you will relate to the photographer who found his calm in a seaside Thoothukudi church or being overwhelmed by a stranger's kindness on the road? Read on and let your fellow-travellers remind you of the joys that await you beyond the dark lane of a pandemic.

# 100

## REASONS TO LOVE TRAVEL





1

## FOR THE LOVE OF INNER JOURNEYS A BALKAN SABBATICAL

It was the year 2019. Out of nowhere I found pieces of my heart splattered on the floor after cracks emerged in my perfect love story and some well-timed chaos ensued at work. The antidote? A sabbatical that let me disappear into the Balkans—an European region on its journey of self-discovery akin to mine. Letting my hair loose at Belgrade’s floating river clubs, making friends while hitch-hiking along Albania’s untouched coastline, flying above the clouds in Montenegro’s hills, and finding myself a home in Sarajevo—my heart stitched itself back together as my eyes devoured riveting sights. If the Balkans could bury the ghosts of its past, so could I.

—VIKAS PLAKKOT

A DAILY ODYSSEY/SHUTTERSTOCK



2

FOR THE LOVE OF SIMPLE DELIGHTS

## BRAZIL’S DRAMATIC STREET ART

Brazilian street art is deeply political, rebellious and a strong voice of the people. One of the most artful murals can be found at The Olympic Boulevard in Rio, which was made in preparation for the 2016 Olympics by the famed Eduardo Kobra. The work depicts a Tapajóboy from Brazil, a Mursi woman from Ethiopia, a Kayan woman (Tibeto-Burman ethnic minority) from Thailand, a Supi man from Northern Europe, and a Huli man from Papua New Guinea. It is a depiction of humanity’s common ancestors, the indigenous people from America, Asia, Europe, Africa and Oceania, all representing the different ethnicities of the world through a united work. Kobra studied the features of people from five continents that represent the black, blue, green, red, and gold rings on the Olympic flag. It’s meant to reflect the core values of the Olympics, specifically the adage “We are One.”

—ANKITA KUMAR

KANOKRATNOX/SHUTTERSTOCK





3

FOR THE LOVE OF EDGY ESCAPES

## A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

In Ethiopia's northeastern badlands, life has often been found frozen in pure acid, yet I had already begun my walk to the gates of hell—the Erta Ale volcano. There was no turning back now. With only a torchlight to guide me, I hiked through lava-cooled rocks for four hours straight to reach the rim of a volcanic crater, one that had erupted as recently as 2017. The edge of the crater froze me to a pulp, even as I was ironically aware that a single misstep could burn me to a crisp. The lava lake down below turned the sky into apocalyptic red, and I just stood there, gasping at this wonder of unforgiving nature.

—VIKAS PLAKKOT

MICHAEL VOROBIEV/SHUTTERSTOCK  
FACING PAGE: LASZLO MATES/SHUTTERSTOCK

4

FOR THE LOVE OF SERENDIPITY

## BREAKING BARRIERS IN BOLIVIA

I met a Canadian guy on my travels in South America in 2017; we hit it off, and decided to travel together. As it happened, we wound up undertaking a rather intense three-day Amazon Survival Challenge in the Bolivian rainforest. I was informed that I was the first Indian to have ever been to that part of the rainforest. We had to build our own shelter from soggy leaves and branches, catch our own food and source our own water from rivers and water-bearing plants. We also ate live termites from a rotting bark—a great source of protein (and crunchiness!) according to our guide.

—ANKITA KUMAR





FOR THE LOVE OF FAMILY

## A SAFARI TO REMEMBER IN AFRICA

My parents, brother, and 72-year-old grandfather joined me on a rugged romp across east Africa in 2009. We spent two weeks roving across Maasai Mara National Reserve and Serengeti National Park in a mud-slapped jeep. The landscape was awash with glorious fauna, a kingdom of cheetahs, hippos, elephants, flamingoes, giraffes and zebras. Each new creature spotted brought a genuine dazzle to our eyes, especially to my granddad's. When we first saw a pride of lions napping under a savannah tree, I leant out the jeep to get a better shot with my handycam; the lion I focused on suddenly woke up, his big eyes pierced through the lens, peering into a window of my soul. My hands began to tremble, he lurched forward, circling our jeep, and finally sitting right on top of it. My grandad, now 82, is fuzzy on recent memories, but still remembers that experience as the most terrifying and special moment of his life.

—ANKITA KUMAR







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FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES

## TIME STOPS IN POMPEII

One morning in the autumn of AD 79, time stopped in Pompeii. Wealthy Campanians were all too familiar with frequent earthquakes in the region, but Mount Vesuvius was akin to God. It was revered, never feared. The devastation lasted two full days, wiping out entire cities and burying people with their most precious belongings—pets, jewellery, grains. Today, the streets of Pompeii defy time. To me, the plaster casts of its fleeing citizens and ruins of palatial *domus*, bathhouses and brothels seemed to stand as a silent reminder to how life as we know it can change beyond recognition in one defining moment.

—SWAGATA GHOSH

A-BABE/SHUTTERSTOCK



7

FOR THE LOVE OF INNER JOURNEYS

## HEALING HEARTS IN COLOMBIA

I'd been to quite a few hostels before, but never one floating on the azure Caribbean. Tucked on the edge of Colombia's territorial waters, *Casa en el Agua* or "House on the water" is fittingly named. One evening there was nothing for company except the water sparkling with bio-luminous planktons and a Danish boy. It turned out we were both going through terrible break-ups, so we ended up sharing our stories as we watched the sun come up. It was cathartic to talk to someone who I was probably never going to meet again, a person who came from a place of no judgement and no knowledge of my past.

—ANKITA KUMAR

LEMARIE PIERRECK/SHUTTERSTOCK

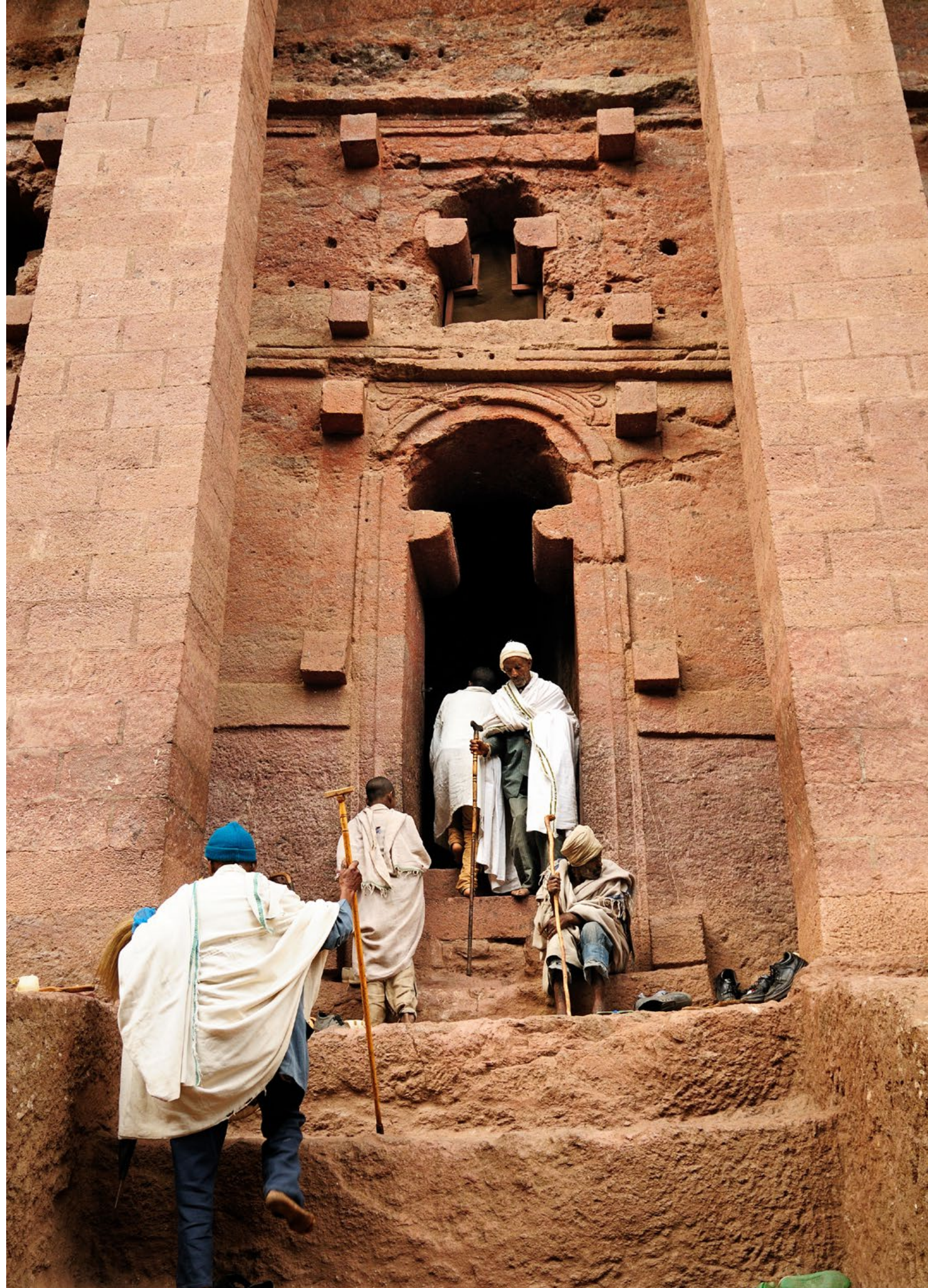


8

## FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES LALIBELA'S SACRED LIGHT

In Lalibela, one is instantly engulfed by a mysticism, especially within the complex maze of eleven monolithic churches carved out of soft volcanic rock and interconnected by tunnels and trenches. It was King Lalibela's dream to create a 'New Jerusalem' in Africa during the 12th century. Getu, our guide, led us into a 200-foot-long tunnel connecting two of the churches. That near-crawl through a pit of absolute darkness, a blackness that makes it difficult to visualise light even in the mind's eyes, symbolises a redemptive journey through hell. As we emerged into the light, surrounded by the stark greenery of the Ethiopian highlands and an air heavy with devotion, it was not difficult to imagine that we had arrived in heaven.

—PALOMA DUTTA



9

## FOR THE LOVE OF SUBLIME FOOD NIKKEI CUISINE IN PERU

While bartending at a Peruvian hostel in 2016—preparing local staples such as Pisco Sours and Chilcanos—I was introduced to a new breed of cuisine emerging in the country: Nikkei. In Lima, the restaurant Maido has been a regular on the world's top restaurants lists, showcasing the beautiful lovechild of Peruvian ingredients (diverse varieties of peppers and potatoes) melded with Japanese culinary techniques. It's not simply a 'fusion'. Tiradito is a great example: a dish inspired by sashimi where fish is kept raw, but served with a drizzle of spicy pepper sauce preserving the integrity of both taste and experience—but with a kick.

—VARUD GUPTA







SASIN PARAKSA/SHUTTERSTOCK

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## FOR THE LOVE OF KIND STRANGERS COMPASSION IS THE TICKET

The day before Friday the 13th ought to have been safe for rail travel, but a thief boarded that train from Assam to Delhi in the late 1990s and, while I was engrossed in a novel, said thief grabbed my backpack, which held my passport, VISA card and money, among other items. All I had left was Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* which, as readers know, can make the jolliest man suicidal. But as I reported the crime to the ticket collector, he offered me rice and curry on the house. A co-passenger gifted his pack of bidis that I gratefully chain-smoked to steady my nerves. A student gave me guavas from her family's orchard. Finally getting off in Delhi, at a lodge I'd often stayed in, the manager remembered me and, after I narrated my ordeal, said: "No advance required." That evening, he offered me pegs of whisky while we sat on the roof waiting for the heat to subside, and life felt good again.

—ZAC O'YEAH

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## FOR THE LOVE OF INNER JOURNEYS A TRANS- SIBERIAN SURVIVAL

People will tell you about the dangers of travelling alone. But let me point out the perils of never venturing out solo. Looking back, my Trans-Siberian sojourn spanning 10,000 kilometres between Saint Petersburg and Vladivostok wasn't only a bucket list adventure across Russia, but also a road map to the self-esteem I had lost to an abusive relationship. When you spend that kind of time with nobody but yourself, it recalibrates your confidence. The calm of the Taiga, the depths of Lake Baikal, even the nothingness of Siberia gave me the distance I needed to recognise something I had come to forget: the power of walking away.

—AANCHAL ANAND



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FOR THE LOVE OF SIMPLE DELIGHTS

## MUSEUM-HOPPING IN LONDON

From the stamp seals of Mohenjo-Daro (2600 B.C.) and Tippoo's semi-automaton Tiger (1793) to Darwin's first edition of the *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Warhol's Monroe* (1962), London offers the world within an hour's drive of each other. The Natural History Museum, V&A, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, British Museum, Tate Modern and many more strive to keep alive the wonders and truths of our universe. From the ends of earth to the beginning of time, you can hop, skip and jump through entire civilisations in an afternoon. All you need is a Tube ticket and a pocketful of curiosity.

—SWAGATA GHOSH



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FOR THE LOVE OF KIND STRANGERS

## A BUENOS AIRES BARBEQUE

I'd moved to Buenos Aires—my first stop on a culinary tour in 2015—to learn about the fabled *asado*, or Argentinian barbeque. To aid me in this quest, I reached out to my fellow nerds on the internet, Redditors. With their help, I spent weeks learning the techniques and preparations of the trade, which culminated at a local park where fellow travellers and online barbecue fiends ventured to experience a meat feast hosted by yours truly. My first foray into the world of *asado* didn't just teach me about cooking *morcilla* (blood sausage) or *mollejas* (sweetbreads), it helped me understand that sometimes a meal is less about the food, and more about the company that surrounds it.

—VARUD GUPTA



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FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES

## OCEAN'S ALTAR IN MANAPAD

About 60 kilometres from Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu lies the small fishing village of Manapad, and on a cliff edge of the beach stands the St. Francis Xavier Church, containing what is said to be a piece of the True Cross from Jerusalem. Tuned out of city bustle, the Manapad beach itself feels like a place wedged in time, with the serene white-and-blue church overlooking its sandy arms. Perhaps it was the intersection of nature and faith, perhaps the meditative silence, or perhaps even the awareness that on a clear day my eyes might be able to see as far as Kanyakumari—but standing there some four monsoons ago, I managed to hold hands with some elusive thoughts that usually remain unchallenged.

—SAMBIT DATTACHAUDHURI



15

FOR THE LOVE OF TIME TRAVEL

## AT ANNE FRANK'S IN AMSTERDAM

I read *The Diary of Anne Frank* in school and it affected me powerfully, so naturally, when I travelled to Amsterdam in 2017, I had to visit the house where she and her family hid from the Nazis for two years. The diary paints a vivid picture of their life in hiding; once I went past the (original) moveable bookcase into the Secret Annex, I could clearly imagine scenes described in it. Anne's room is restored with the original wallpaper bearing her picture postcards and movie star posters—a poignant reminder that she was a young teen whose life was brutally cut short by hate.

—PRACHI JOSHI



ALEX ALDERIC JERO/SHUTTERSTOCK (CHURCH), © ANNE FRANK HOUSE / PHOTOGRAPHER, CRIS TOALA OLIVARES (DIARY)

16

FOR THE LOVE OF NATURAL WONDERS

## MOONLIT NIGHT AT JURA HILLS

One night in February 2019, as we drove from Geneva we noticed the moon—full, round and enormous—follow us. Over Lac Léman it hung, eclipsing the city lights, a dual vision of a silver disc reflected in the dark waters of the lake. When we reached the base of La Dôle in the Jura hills to begin hiking, the supermoon had bathed the snowy trail and the hills in light so bright that we could see our shadows. The pine trees stood in a silhouette against the moon. The night was no longer what I had known it to be all along. But an illuminated picture of navy blue and silver meshed together forming an illustrious, enchanting otherworld.

—DEBASHREE MAJUMDAR



ELENARTS/SHUTTERSTOCK (TREE), KAREENA GIANANI (FROZEN CHILD)

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FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES

## PERU'S FROZEN CHILD

Little prepares you to see the frozen body of a 12-year-old girl who, in a ritual sacrifice, was buried almost 600 years ago in a volcano in Peru. Juanita, as the Inca child is fondly called, was found by Johan Reinhard (in picture) in September 1995 around the summit of Ampato in the city of Arequipa. I saw her sitting in a glass box in the Santuarios Andinos museum, and was stunned to note how intact she was: dark shoulder-length hair, hands folded on her knees, little gaps in her teeth. The starkest detail however was the depression on the right side of her head, from the blow that killed her moments before she was buried, in the mid-1400s. Juanita isn't a mummy: She still has her internal organs, and the remains of coca leaves and corn—her last meal—are still in her stomach.

—KAREENA GIANANI





FOR THE LOVE OF EXTRAVAGANCE

## ICELAND'S MISTY INDULGENCE

The Blue Lagoon is an indulgence like no other. Dug out of lava fields and just shy of the Arctic Circle, its milky blue waters take you to *Narnia*-land and leave you there for as long as you may wish. This misty geothermal resort attracts 4,000 visitors a day, yet every experience is unique. Once inside, you can 'walk' the lagoon waters, swim or just float around as little swirls of mist rise around you. We covered our faces in matte silica masks, sipped our cloudy cocktails and played hide-and-seek. Then it started to snow.

—SWAGATA GHOSH



19

FOR THE LOVE OF EDGY ESCAPES

## WHERE GENGHIS KHAN RODE

Gorkhi Terelj National Park is right near Mongolia's rapidly developing capital Ullanbaator, but it feels like it's worlds away. In the summer of 2015, me and my friends stayed in traditional gers (yurts) on the outskirts of the park, as we packed for a 14-day ride across the same lands Genghis Khan had once crossed on horseback. We rode across lime meadows and through rivers, with surrounding views of the park's distinctive rock structures. Camping outside every night with no other people in sight, this was probably the most relaxed I've ever felt on an adventurous trip, though our horses were feisty and we did find bear tracks on the ground on route.

—MADHURI CHOWDHURY



CW BY SHUTTERSTOCK

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FOR THE LOVE OF SUBLIME FOOD

## SALT, FAT, ACID, HEAT IN GEORGIA

Would you buy a plane ticket for bread? I did for *khachapuri*, the delightfully decadent stuffed cheese bread from Georgia. On a binge excursion to Tbilisi in 2013, I picked up essential vocabulary on the streets: *imeruli* (cheese bread), *megruli* (extra cheese bread), and *ajaruli*, the 'cheeseboat' instantly recognisable for the egg yolk cooking in the heat of melted cheese. Imeruli became my takeaway meal for day trips to the historic realms of Mtskheta and Gori, whereas ajaruli remained a cherished restaurant affair. Years later, the memories of these indulgent meals come knocking, with a kiss of Kisi or a touch of Teliani—those unforgettable Georgian white wine pairings.

—AANCHAL ANAND



TAI DUNDUA/SHUTTERSTOCK



21

## FOR THE LOVE OF SIMPLE DELIGHTS SPOTTING DWARVES IN WROCŁAW

When I visited the place in 2016, I found one casually reclining outside the train station, another in academic garb near the University. More than 400 tiny bronze dwarf statues dot the Polish city of Wrocław: a pair of firemen rushing towards St. Elizabeth's Church, a female apothecary at a pharmacy, drunken party dwarfs outside a vodka bar, and so on. In the 1980s, activists of the Orange Alternative Movement protested the prevailing authoritarian regime by dressing up as dwarfs. In 2001, the movement was honoured with a dwarf statue placed on the corner of Ulica Świdnicka (the high street), after which hundreds popped up all over the city. Find a map online to go dwarf hunting or take a free walking tour, which gives you a deeper historical perspective.

—PRACHI JOSHI



ANDRII ANNA PHOTOGRAPHERS/SHUTTERSTOCK

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## FOR THE LOVE OF NATURAL WONDERS IRELAND'S SANDSTONES FROM THE SKY

As the glaciers receded after the last Ice age, huge sandstone boulders got left behind by the melted water, far away from the lakes, rivers and the water bodies where they formed over millennia. On the border of Ireland and Northern Ireland, in Cavan Burren Park, you'll find such ginormous sandstones, seemingly dropped from the sky, alongside ancient stone settlements—some over 4,500 years old!

Amidst a prehistoric forest, the sheer scale of these 'erratics' (as the stones are called) force one to examine their place in the world. Not much else has managed to compare to my awe at the sight, and I suspect not much else will.

—AATISH NATH



PHOTO COURTESY: BRIAN MORRISON/FÁILTE IRELAND / TOURISM IRELAND



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FOR THE LOVE OF SERENDIPITY

## WINE AND WOMEN IN ETHIOPIA

On my first day in Ethiopia in 2018, I landed in Dorze, a small village on the edge of the Omo Valley. After a day of exploring villages that wound through green valleys and around an expansive lake, I found myself in the town centre of Dorze. By chance, I wandered into a dimly lit, dirt-floor bar, where I found a group of elderly women drinking orange-tinted honey wine while clapping their hands and stomping their feet to rhythmic tunes. Upon seeing the lone *faranji* in the bar, they pulled me into their circle. Sleep-deprived and bleary eyed, I joined in the cheer. My glass of deceptively strong wine was refilled as each woman took their turn showing me the steps of the traditional Dorze dance. Stumbling out of the bar as the sun was setting, I smiled, trying to remember the last time I had laughed so deeply and danced so freely.

—ALICIA ERICKSON

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FOR THE LOVE OF SIMPLE DELIGHTS

## AT THE OPERA IN VIENNA

On my first trip to Vienna in 2013, I wanted to watch an opera at the Wiener Staatsoper but tickets were pricey. Then, I discovered standing-only tickets for as little as €3 (₹260). These become available an hour before the performance, however the queues start much earlier. I managed to snag a ticket and find a spot with a good view; the Staatsoper thoughtfully provides upholstered supports to lean on, plus discreet monitors displaying English subtitles. Remember to dress appropriately—smart casuals will do but if you turn up in shorts or flip-flops you may be denied entry. What did I watch? A particularly flamboyant rendition of *Romeo & Juliet* that made me forget about my aching feet!

—PRACHI JOSHI

POSZTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK





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## FOR THE LOVE OF ROAD TRIPS A SOUTH INDIAN ODYSSEY

At 19, I was sure of three things: I was a travel enthusiast, motorcyclist, and I wanted to go to the southernmost tip of India. Routes were studied, bags packed, and the motorbike group assembled; so began the 1,600-kilometre journey south, two full days of hard riding and soft breezes. It was a journey measured out of chai cups, each sip different from the last stall or state—one as sweet as syrup, the next a no-nonsense punch to the system. Still, each glassful was a refreshing, humbling reminder of the vast tastes of our nation. Though, if I talk of India's intrinsic charm, waking up the Triveni Sangam (no, not the rivers of Allahabad, but the oceans of the country's southernmost point) framed by an unabashedly, peachy sunrise, was one of the most beautiful moments I have ever experienced. It didn't need supporting characters like jagged mountains or perfectly placed coconut trees, just the edge of the world in all its mysterious glory.

—AASHISH CHANDRATREYA



PUHAIPADAM FILMS/SHUTTERSTOCK (STATUE), POSZTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK (PETROGLYPH)

26

## FOR THE LOVE OF NATURAL WONDERS AZERBAIJAN'S ANCIENT TRAILS

Azerbaijan's fire and oil connections are well-documented, but few know it is home to relics from the Upper Paleolithic age, at least 40,000 years old. To discover more, my husband and I landed up at Gobustan preserve, a UNESCO Site near Baku, which houses an impressive collection of more than 6,500 petroglyphs made by our ancestors. We deep-dived into millennia-old history at the interactive museum at the entrance of the reserve, and armed with newfound knowledge on interpreting the petroglyphs, walked ahead. It felt surreal to be amid the dramatic landscape: rocks, boulders, and caves in tumbledown disarray from the earthquakes that rocked the region, all vestiges of past civilisations. On these are drawings of extinct animals, hunting rituals and pregnant women, of boats and warriors, affirming our humanity through the most primordial instincts.

—LUBNA AMIR







27

FOR THE LOVE OF SUBLIME FOOD

# THE BEST BRISKET, IN TEXAS

It was 10.30 a.m., two-hours since my buddy and I queued outside Franklin's in Austin, Texas. We still had to wait 30 minutes till they opened up, and 40 hungry people stood ahead of us. Franklin's oak-smoked brisket is lauded as the world's best: perhaps why Obama cut the line when he visited, though he graciously picked up everyone's tab. We sure didn't look presidential, especially since we purchased two cans of Shiner Bock— from a waitress far too cheery to be pedalling early morning beer. At the cash register, after ordering a pound of lean brisket, pork ribs, dang pie, potato salad and pinto beans, I was fuming; nobody should ever wait three hours for good brisket in Texas, I thought. Then, the trays came out. The meat's quality didn't need to be over-dressed, as Bourdain put it, "it's the finest brisket I've ever had."

—JULIAN MANNING

PHOTO COURTESY: WYATT MCSPADDEN/FRANKLIN BARBECUE

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FOR THE LOVE OF KIND STRANGERS

# TWO WOMEN IN ITALY

In May 2013, I was in the lobby of a backpackers' hostel in Bologna, Italy, when a man asked me if I could guide him into a tight parking spot. In my experience, people helped each other out in hostels regularly, so I didn't hesitate. Once he was parked and I was headed back in, I noticed a lady, following me. Turned out, she'd been worried about this man's intentions, and wanted to make sure that he didn't—as she put it reasonably—bundle me off into the trunk of his car or take me captive. It was one woman looking out for another, even as strangers. Helen and I struck up a friendship and spent the next couple of days together, and remain dear friends to this day. Meeting her taught me so much about the importance of female friendships—on the road and elsewhere.

—VAISHALI DINAKARAN





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## FOR THE LOVE OF SIMPLE DELIGHTS LAZING IN ST. JAMES PARK

London's St. James Park is charming and compact, yet I find it is often eclipsed by its illustrious neighbours with better PR: Hyde Park, Green Park, and Kensington Gardens. This, however, adds to its tranquility, as it is often less crowded than the city centre's other famed green spaces. During the day I leaned against the idyllic Blue Bridge, gazing at the lake that frames the park's Duck Island nature reserve. From this vantage point there are also incredible views of the London Eye and Buckingham Palace. Thankfully, I remembered to say hello to the pelicans who are fed every day between 2.30 and 3 p.m. I returned to the park in the evening and it was just as enchanting under the dark sky, the paths lit by kerosene lamps—just as they were in the 19th century—casting a decidedly softer glow on this royal gem.

—SARVESH TALREJA

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## FOR THE LOVE OF KIND STRANGERS WARMTH IN A SIBERIAN MUSEUM

The last day of my partner and I's month-long journey around Russia in 2018 was spent in the Siberian capital of Novosibirsk. A couple of hours before our flight we chanced upon the Nicholas Roerich's Museum, a mint-green structure celebrating the 20th century master painter, who spent close to two decades in India. The sudden appearance of the museum featuring one of my favourite painters contained, no doubt, his gorgeous works on the Himalayas, a prospect that made me homesick and happy. Yet we were disappointed to find out that the museum did not accept card payment—we didn't have enough roubles for tickets. When the matronly lady behind the counter found out we were Indians, she let us enter anyway to honour Roerich's India connection. It was a fitting act of kindness from Siberia's first museum of Roerich's works (Indian and others), built entirely on public donations by people who were just as enchanted with his work as we were.

—PALOMA DUTTA

ANASTAS\_STYLES/SHUTTERSTOCK





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## FOR THE LOVE OF TIME TRAVEL PETRA WRIT IN PINK

Carved into the pink sandstone cliffs and desert canyons of Jordan, Petra was a city lost to time until it was discovered rather serendipitously in 1812. Today, the erstwhile capital of the Nabatean empire is one of the Seven Wonders of the Modern World.

On my trip to this ancient terrain back in 2017, I may not have stumbled upon any treasure chests, but what my eyes arrested over a two-day hike was no less. Be it the glow of the mystical Al-Khazneh building under a starlit sky, or the intricacy of its rock-cut architecture, the memories, rose-hued like the city, linger to this day.

—VIKAS PLAKKOT





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FOR THE LOVE OF SERENDIPITY

## WEDDING BELLS IN VIETNAM

While I was on a motorbike tour through central Vietnam, my guide invited me to his friend's daughter's wedding, which just happened to be on our route. I immediately said yes, when else would I go to an impromptu matrimony in Vietnam's heartland? My crew for the ceremony winded up being an entire table of enthusiastic, Vietnamese uncles. They didn't understand a word of what I was saying, I didn't understand a word of what they were saying; all we knew was that we were unequivocally smashed out of our wits at 11 in the morning. There's nothing like a bit of 'happy water' before you have the honour of dancing with the happy couple.

—ANKITA KUMAR



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FOR THE LOVE OF TESTING YOUR SPIRIT

## MYTHICAL CAVE OF INDONESIA

Clutching on to my life jacket, I sat on the edge of the 16-foot-deep natural pool inside Rangko Cave in Gusung Island—part of the larger Flores Island in east Indonesia. A childhood boating accident had put me off swimming lessons forever, and the eerie cave wasn't helping. Rangko felt timeless and wrapped in secrets; a cavern whose waters shine electric blue-green when sunlight hits them. Centuries-old stalactites ring the ceiling, and bats are glued to the roof. I watched wee toddlers splashing below, unable to muster their confidence. Finally, a few failed attempts later, I shed my inhibitions—with the life jacket—and plunged. I circled around the pool's edge in bliss, floating on my back, drowning out every other murmur. Except the one of my own beating heart.

—POOJA NAIK

DUONG HOANG DINH/SHUTTERSTOCK (BEER), THRIFTHOT/SHUTTERSTOCK (CAVE)



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FOR THE LOVE OF PRIVATE PURSUITS

## CAFÉ TERRACE AT NIGHT

As a teenager, I'd fallen in love with Vincent van Gogh and made up my mind to someday bask in the presence of "Café Terrace at Night"—his painting that resonated with me the most. The arrival of my 30th birthday along with two strands of grey meant the time was right for booking that ticket to Amsterdam, and to the Kroller Müller Museum, just outside the city. I walked through the rooms only half taking in the other exhibits, until finally my face was a few inches away from van Gogh's energetic brushstrokes imploding into *that* painting, that not even the best of prints can prepare one for. Absorbing that image of a street-side cafe in Arles that van Gogh painstakingly handcrafted on the day I turned 30 remains the most transcendent experience I've ever had.

—VAISHALI DINAKARAN

PHOTO COURTESY: KRÖLLER-MÜLLER MUSEUM/FACEBOOK (PAINTING), CANADASTOCK/SHUTTERSTOCK (BOAT)



35

FOR THE LOVE OF SIMPLE DELIGHTS

## GROOVE FREE IN GENEVA

Geneva may well be among the most expensive cities in the world, but it's the freebies that are invaluable. The city's free transport card for tourists allows you unlimited rides on trams, buses and water-taxis called *mouettes* (French for seagulls), that run between the left and right banks of Lake Geneva. Have a hot chocolate on this side, grab some ice-cream on the other, and repeat. No major touristy to-dos, no marquee attractions; just you, on a yellow boat sailing on the bluest waters you've ever seen. Like that drawing you made as a child just came to life.

—KUSUMITA DAS



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FOR THE LOVE OF PRIVATE PURSUITS

## STAMPING THROUGH THE SOVIET

I was six when the Soviet Union collapsed, throwing my young mind into a panic. Would the map have a hole now; would the globe look

like an eaten-out apple? The now-hilarious mental images birthed my lifelong pursuit:

a treasure hunt trailing the 15 former

Soviet Republics, which first manifested as a gap-

year in Russia. Kicking up dust on horseback

in Kyrgyzstan, touring the KGB

building in Latvia, and exploring Silk Road sites in Uzbekistan, the memories stacked up.

The deliciousness of my discoveries were also flavoured by succulent kebabs in Azerbaijan,

potato pancakes in Belarus, and Armenian

cognac. But I'm not done yet; two

more stamps to collect before

I can rest my obsession.

—AANCHAL ANAND



KOSORUKOV DMITRY/SHUTTERSTOCK

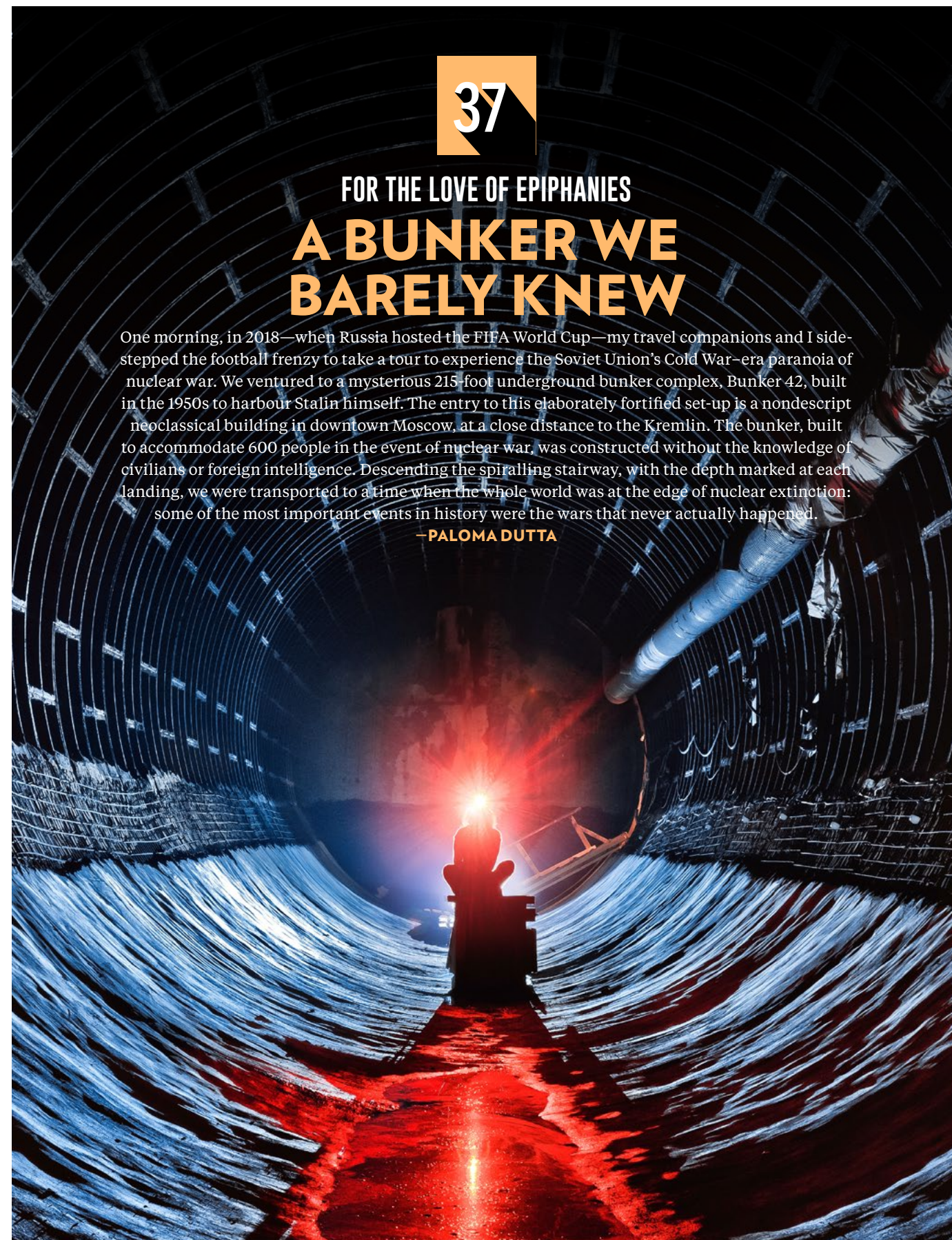
37

FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES

## A BUNKER WE BARELY KNEW

One morning, in 2018—when Russia hosted the FIFA World Cup—my travel companions and I side-stepped the football frenzy to take a tour to experience the Soviet Union's Cold War-era paranoia of nuclear war. We ventured to a mysterious 215-foot underground bunker complex, Bunker 42, built in the 1950s to harbour Stalin himself. The entry to this elaborately fortified set-up is a nondescript neoclassical building in downtown Moscow, at a close distance to the Kremlin. The bunker, built to accommodate 600 people in the event of nuclear war, was constructed without the knowledge of civilians or foreign intelligence. Descending the spiralling stairway, with the depth marked at each landing, we were transported to a time when the whole world was at the edge of nuclear extinction: some of the most important events in history were the wars that never actually happened.

—PALOMA DUTTA



ANNA ARINOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK



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FOR THE LOVE OF EXTRAVAGANCE

## SWANKY JUNGLE DIGS IN KENYA

My bed faced a large picture window overlooking a watering hole that attracted a steady stream of giraffes, elephants, zebras, and impalas. The massive boudoir-like bathroom was done up in white marble laced with 18-karat gold, and came with a Jacuzzi and Hermès amenities. Located on a 58,000-acre conservancy in Laikipia, Kenya, I found Ol Jogi to be hands-down the most luxurious safari experience. The entire ranch (which used to be the private home of a French-American art dealer family) comprises seven residences with exquisite, bespoke décor. It's available for group hire only, so guests have exclusive use of the space, not to mention private safaris in the attached game reserve.

—PRACHI JOSHI



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FOR THE LOVE OF SIMPLE DELIGHTS

## LYON'S MEDIEVAL-ERA PASSAGES

Wandering the narrow cobbled streets of Lyon in 2017 flanked by 15th-17th century townhouses was a delight, especially since many of them house bars, café, and *bouchons* (traditional, homely restaurants). But these townhouses also hold a charming secret—*traboules* or medieval-era covered passages that run between the streets and through building courtyards, and that served as shortcuts down to the riverfront. There are more than 200 *traboules* in Lyon and several of them are open to the public; take a guided tour or find a free map online. Make sure not to miss the *traboule* at 16 Rue de Bœuf where the inner courtyard features an impressive staircase inside a six-storey pink tower.

—PRACHI JOSHI

SANDER VAN DER WERF/SHUTTERSTOCK



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## FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES FINDING ROOTS IN LAHORE

On a visit to Lahore in 2014, I found myself obsessed with finding the house in which my grandmother grew up before the Partition. Walking through the streets of Anarkali Market, where she lived as a young girl in the 1930s, it was clear that a lot had changed. Yet so much was the same. The streets still coughed up dust, and the older two-story brick buildings still stood alongside new, ACP-and-glass structures. There, narrating my story to near-strangers in a bid to locate the hallowed house, I was met with mouth-watering *paya*, kebabs and the *shammi* burger, and even offers to discuss Bollywood over chai. I chalked up the strange glow in my heart to a warmth that can only come from shared history.

As for the house, I never did find it. Instead I carried home a deep sense of community.

—AATISH NATH





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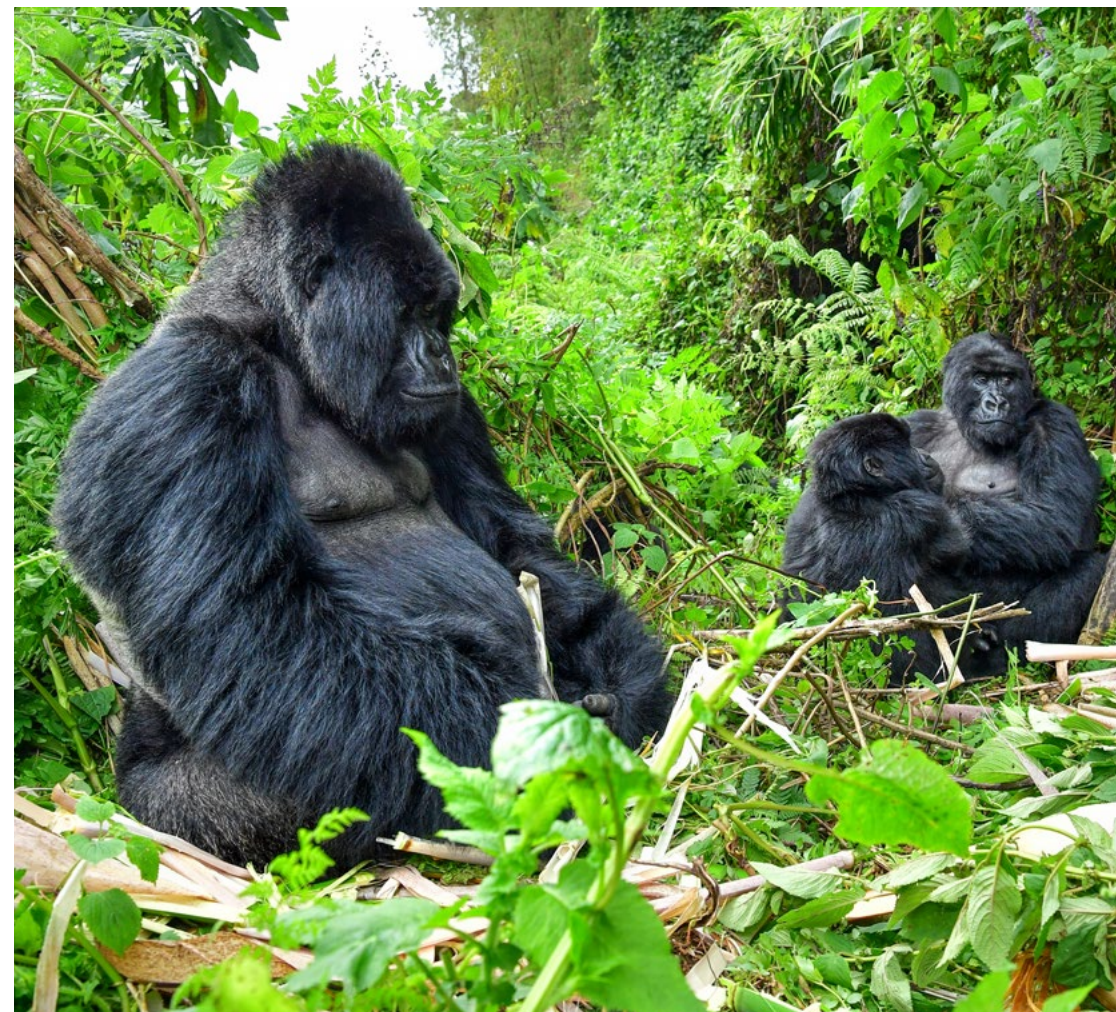
FOR THE LOVE OF ROAD TRIPS

## ALL ROADS LEAD TO A CHÂTEAU IN FRANCE

A week or a lifetime, no amount is ever enough for a drive through the Loire Valley. Nicknamed the ‘Cradle of the French,’ this is Europe’s finest châteaux country. Here, at Château d’Amboise, arrived an aged Da Vinci in 1516 and lived out his remaining years. At Château de Chambord, the open double-spiral staircase that resembles the DNA double-helix, bears his unmistakable stamp and a story. And over at Château de Cheverny, Hergé fell in love and immortalised the château as Marlinspike Hall in *The Adventures of Tintin*. This road trip has a plot twist at every turn, and each one is well worth taking.

—SWAGATA GHOSH

WON52/SHUTTERSTOCK



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FOR THE LOVE OF NATURAL WONDERS

## UGANDA’S ENIGMATIC GIANTS

As the rose gold sun peeked over the surrounding hills in 2017, we descended into the shadowy depths of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. We trekked across a hollow jungle floor laden with layers of rain-soaked leaves and ducked beneath twisted, low-hanging branches. After about two hours of hiking through the dense, green forest, my eyes landed upon what I had been anxiously anticipating: a mighty silverback. The statuesque gorilla stood majestically on the trail, his silver-tinted fur catching the morning sun, while he casually consumed handfuls of leaves. I was mesmerised by the beauty. And then, as if on cue, the bushes behind me began to rustle and a second silverback leapt from the trees. Equally terrified and exhilarated, I darted out of the way and watched as the two silverbacks beat their chests, a display of masculine dominance that capped this unforgettable encounter.

—ALICIA ERICKSON

ONYX9/SHUTTERSTOCK



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## FOR THE LOVE OF TIME TRAVEL NIGHT- TIME AT THE COLOSSEUM

“Are you not entertained?” The *Gladiator* quote echoed in my ears as I stepped out into the arena. Bathed in a golden light, the Colosseum stood (nearly) empty at night, a far cry from the daytime when it was packed with tourists. But this was a VIP after-hours tour, back in 2014, providing exclusive access below the arena where the gladiators awaited their turn for gore or glory. If those stones could talk, they would tell gruesome stories of the slaves who toiled here to provide ‘entertainment’ for ancient Romans. Perhaps it was a trick played by the eerie silence or my imagination, but I felt I could ‘hear’ the roar of 50,000 spectators reverberating from gladiator battles that took place lifetimes ago.

—PRACHI JOSHI



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## FOR THE LOVE OF SERENDIPITY HEY SOUL SISTER

I’m sitting in a Guatemalan eatery, ready to dig into a plateful of chicken pepián with rice, when I realise I need a fork. I try to catch the waiter’s attention in Spanish, but Russian tumbles out of my mouth—and the girl sitting behind me exclaims, “You speak Russian?!” Enter Yuliya: a Russian national and fellow travel addict. In no time, we are kayaking on Lake Atitlán and downing tequilas. Fast forward six years and you’d find us chugging beer at the 2018 FIFA World Cup Fan Zone in Saint Petersburg, hatching plans of future adventures. Travel buddies are great, but only fate will deliver you a travel soulmate.

—AANCHAL ANAND



DOMINONART/SHUTTERSTOCK (COLOSSEUM), BRESTER IRINA/SHUTTERSTOCK (KAYAKS)



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## FOR THE LOVE OF SUBLIME FOOD A CHILEAN FEAST

Passing north through Chile's Patagonian region in December 2015, I learned about a curious island (the Chiloé Archipelago) off the coast that continues to use a millennia-old, pit-cooking technique known as *curanto*. With the help of a *fogon*, a rustic restaurant in the heartland of this isle, I was able to recreate the ancient preparation style. A healthy fire was started in a crater-like hole in the ground, and flat stones were layered onto the flame, followed by all manner of seafoods and meats. The heat and moisture were then trapped by a final covering of wide leaves and dirt. After a few hours, a feast ensued: juicy clams, fatty sausages, falling-apart-tender pork, and fluffy potato pancakes.

—VARUD GUPTA



LARISA BLINOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK

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## FOR THE LOVE OF NATURAL WONDERS SPELUNKING IN BEIRUT

Forget trekking through impenetrable rainforests to find hidden caves, just 40 minutes out of Beirut, Lebanon, is Jeita Grotto, a subterranean cave system that is easily accessible via a short cable car ride. When we visited in July 2018, we walked past extraordinary stalagmites and stalactites on the structure's upper level, some dating back to the Stone Age and some that are still growing. Eerie shadows shimmered on the cave walls and the temperature dipped further as we descended to the lower level. The real secret though was an ethereal underground river that seemed straight out of a fantasy novel. We got into a small row boat and went deep into the heart of the caves, which were an ammunition warehouse in the 1970s. Now it's the kind of treasure that makes you believe in magic.

—CHAITALI PATEL



PHOTO COURTESY: JEITA GROTTTO



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FOR THE LOVE OF EDGY ESCAPES

## WHIZZING THROUGH FINNISH LAPLAND

One of the most adrenaline-fuelled adventures I have ever experienced was a decade ago inside the Arctic Circle: deep in Finnish Lapland. Snowmobiling was on the agenda, atop thundering Ski-Doo machines. Ari, a gargantuan Finn in a black snowsuit, showed us the ropes, demonstrating how to handle the throttle and the brakes. I opted to be Ari's pillion rider, which seemed like a smart decision. We moved forward in a convoy, and just as I started to relax on the noisy beast, Ari suddenly revved the Ski-Doo dramatically, and zoomed through the barren, Lappish emptiness like a maniac, whizzing past snow-clad trees that looked like sculptures. I tried to scream at Ari to slow down, but he could not hear me through his helmet! Thankfully, the return ride was more sedate, and I gazed fondly at the twilight casting mysterious shadows on the snow. I will never take Finland's natural beauty or snowmobilers for granted after that.

—KALPANA SUNDER

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FOR THE LOVE OF NATURAL WONDERS

## SMOOTH BUSTARD SPOTTED IN THAR

The last of the storm was vanishing as I settled down on a wee hillock overlooking the Thar desert. The sun was melting away into the horizon, and I pivoted my gaze on the vast expanse ahead of me. Binoculars focused, heart pounding, I waited. Suddenly, one of the 200 odd Great Indian bustards populating the Desert National Park of Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, came into view. The critically endangered bird's white gular pouch expanded, and it started calling out for a mate in that characteristic low booming voice I'd heard so much about. Smooth, I thought, cherishing the moment with the world's heaviest flying bird.

—SUTIRTHA LAHIRI

EKATERINA KONDRATOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK



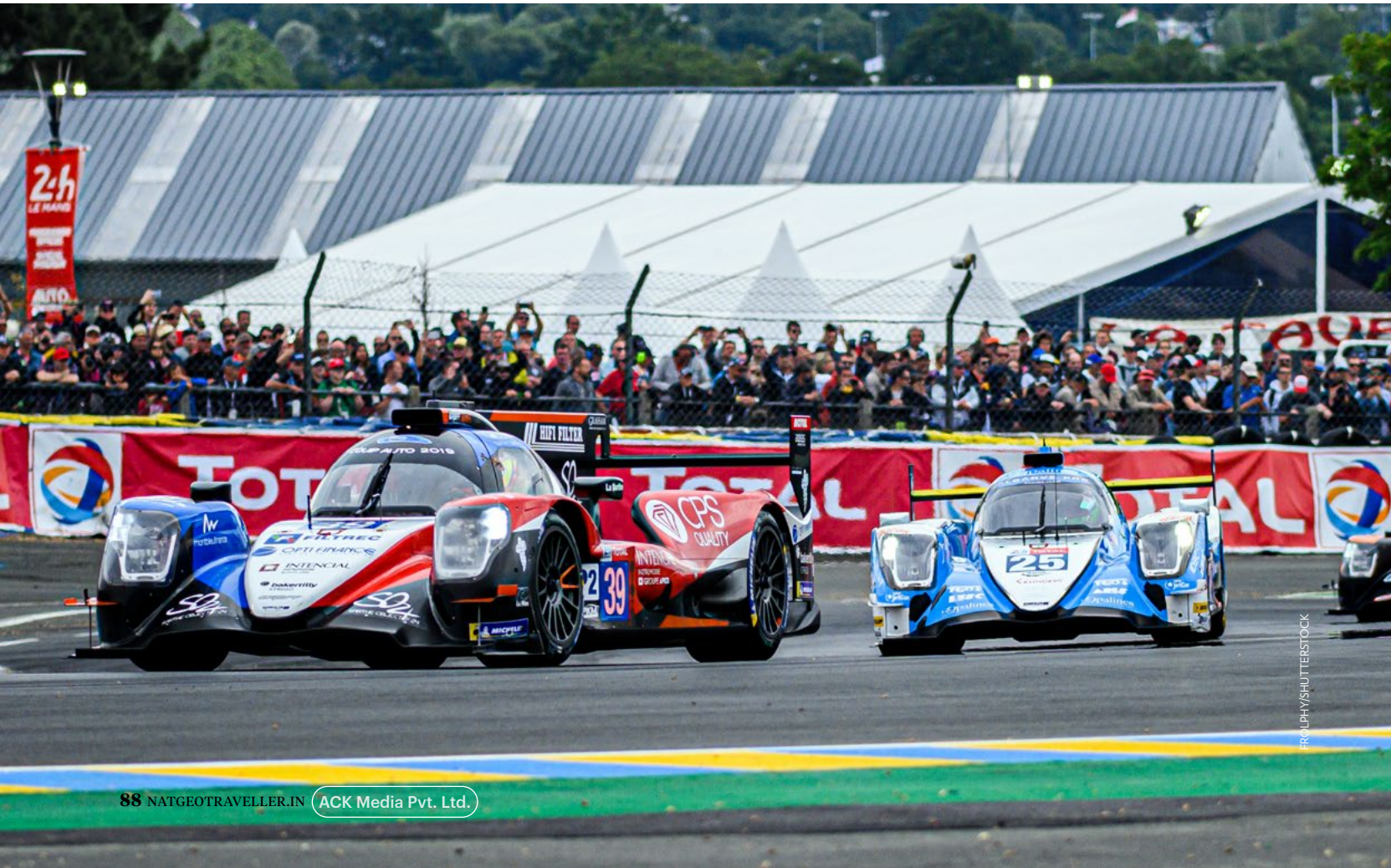
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FOR THE LOVE OF PRIVATE PURSUITS

## MAN AND MACHINE IN LE MANS

Attending my first 24 Hours of Le Mans in 2012 helped confirm what I had long suspected—that if I could pick a single race to attend each year, this would be it. After all, the world's oldest active car endurance race involves a glorious and gruelling test of man and machine, with 24 hours of non-stop racing on the 13.6-kilometre-long Circuit de la Sarthe, in Le Mans, France. Mad Friday, the day before the big race, allows fans to get close to the teams and drivers in the pit lane, and even walk down a certain length of the circuit! The parade that blazes through the centre of the town sees vintage cars, marching bands, and the who's who of motorsport royalty. Le Mans' fans are also famous for turning damp campsites into all-night raves, and French treats for the gastronomes are not uncommon.

—VAISHALI DINAKARAN



FRANCOIS/SHUTTERSTOCK



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FOR THE LOVE OF NATURAL WONDERS

## SALTY WONDERS IN POLAND

The enormous, smoky-grey salt deposits of Poland's Wieliczka Mines are natural wonders etched out of human ingenuity. Back in the 13th century a monastery was allowed to mine the area, the beginning of an enterprise that continued here until the early 21st century. During the 17th century the miners were such craftsman they began to make underground works of art in their spare time, creating a subterranean kingdom that highlights the inherent beauty of these magnificent crystal-cut caverns: art, statues, and chapels all hewn out of salt. As I walked through the labyrinth in the autumn of 2010, I admired the talent and faith of these miners—the pièce de résistance a ballroom with polished floors and a chandelier made of dangling salt crystals.

—KALPANA SUNDER

KANUMAN/SHUTTERSTOCK



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FOR THE LOVE OF SIMPLE DELIGHTS

## PARKS AND RECREATION IN ZURICH

I was ambling aimlessly after checking out of my hostel in Zurich one chilly October noon, when I chanced upon a park that looked deserted. Soon I lay down on a bench under a maple tree, clutched my coat close, and dozed off without quite meaning to. I woke up when a leaf fell on my face. I had just lived one of those slow-motion, cinematic clichés. But as an Indian woman tuned to being protective of my physical space in public, what felt most surreal was waking up safe after an hour-long nap outdoors, in complete silence. I was still me, and nothing was amiss. I hadn't felt this free in a long time.

—KUSUMITA DAS



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FOR THE LOVE OF ROAD TRIPS

## SIKKIM MONASTERY RUN

For those with a soft spot for serene stops on a roadtrip, the Pemayangtse Monastery, Norbugang Chorten, Rabdentse ruins, Sanga Choeling Monastery, Khecheopalri Lake, and Tashiding Monastery together make up a history-rich Buddhist pilgrimage circuit in Sikkim. Each of these places play an integral role in the history of the beautiful mountain state and its deep relationship with Buddhism. Located in some of the oldest villages of Sikkim, the sights are straight out of *The Lord of the Rings*, with stone thrones in old forests and giant statues and monasteries gleaming from the top of the hills.

—SAMBIT DATTACHAUDHURI



TRABANTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK (MAN), MIHIROSHI/SHUTTERSTOCK (MONUMENT)

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FOR THE LOVE OF EXTRAVAGANCE

## LIFE EXOTIC ALONG THE ADRIATIC

The thing I'll always associate with Croatia is shooting stars. Out on a five-day cruise in July 2017, sailing between islands in the Adriatic Sea, night-times were always special. With an entire yacht to four couples, complete with a captain and an assistant, the ocean was our playground. One night we decided to dock away from the signs of human habitation to enjoy hundreds of shooting stars lighting up the clear night sky. Lying on the deck under a blanket, silent tears rolled down my cheeks. It was a sight that reaffirmed by belief in blessings and magic, and I was grateful for both.

—CHAITALI PATEL



BILETSKIYEVGENIY/SHUTTERSTOCK (YACHT), RADOWITZ/SHUTTERSTOCK (PAPERS)

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FOR THE LOVE OF TIME TRAVEL

## GERMANY'S BIG BROTHER YEARS

The constantly watchful Big Brother was a literary invention coined in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but 1984 came and went without me feeling particularly surveilled. Decades later, when I visited the post-Wall eastern parts of Berlin (it nowadays lives off Cold War nostalgia) I checked out the rebuilt Checkpoint Charlie, the last bits of wall preserved in Mauerpark, and the Stasi headquarters from where a secret police, employing over 2,90,000 spies, kept an eye on "dissidents". The espionage museum now holds propaganda materials and concealed cameras in coat buttons and tape-recorders in thermos flasks. Citizens were incarcerated for years in the nearby Stasi prison and tortured until ready to confess anything and everything. Suddenly Big Brother seemed less literary fiction than a prophecy fulfilled.

—ZAC O'YEAH





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## FOR THE LOVE OF EXTRAVAGANCE GET, SET, MONACO

Once a year, the world's rich and famous board opulent yachts and set sail for Monte Carlo, to witness the Monaco Grand Prix. The fact that I am neither rich nor famous is just one of the many reasons I never believed I'd make it there. But in 2018 an opportunity presented itself, to visit the Historic Monaco Grand Prix, and I found myself craning over the pit wall at the Monte Carlo Circuit, watching the very Ferrari 312T that Niki Lauda had piloted to victory at the 1975 Monaco Grand Prix being raced! The azure Ligurian Sea with bobbing sailboats and the snazzy city where every second vehicle seemed to be a luxury sports car made for an unforgettable experience.

—VAISHALI DINAKARAN





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## FOR THE LOVE OF NATURAL WONDERS WWE AT YELLOWSTONE

On the edge of Yellowstone's Hayden Valley, as the sun recedes and the wind speeds up, the bison are rutting. Like military tanks on toothpicks, they are impressive up close and faraway. My binoculars spot a lone male against whom two wolves coordinate an attack. In response, he just gets up, his size intimidating them to retreat. A herd of elk huddle to the same effect. A great day for herbivores! The show isn't over: One wolf sneaks up on a grizzly! My heart races but my binoculars remain fixed on the two spectacular predators in a game of chicken.

—AANCHAL ANAND



BLUEBARRONPHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK

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## FOR THE LOVE OF SUBLIME FOOD THE GRAND BUDAPEST BAKERY

On a hot summer evening my family and I wandered around the cobblestone lanes of Budapest's Buda district, on a quest to find the oldest confectionery in the city. Ruszwurm Confectionery's *pista*-green exterior felt like a time portal into the 19th century. Dating back to 1827, the quaint bakery had retained the original cherrywood and mahogany display cases which were lined with all sorts of decadent cakes and desserts. We ordered five, including a tart cherry strudel and the Hungarian staple Dobos torte—a layered cake with chocolate buttercream and caramel. But what I still dream about is Ruszwurm's signature cream cake—pillowy, vanilla-scented cream sandwiched between crumbling puff pastry, which melted in the mouth with every bite. Heaven.

—LUBNA AMIR



MOO FILMS/SHUTTERSTOCK





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FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES

## THE HORRORS OF HIROSHIMA

When I first arrived in Hiroshima in September 2008, the city did not seem like it had been razed to the ground decades ago by an atomic bomb, but then again, what other frame of reference is there aside from Nagasaki? But as I diligently explored the area, evidence of the tragedy that shook this city to the core presented itself with solemn matter-of-factness: the ghostly A-Bomb Dome (a skeletal structure of a 1915 building that miraculously survived the explosion), and Peace Memorial Park's chilling monument dedicated to Sadako Sasaki (an infant who survived the explosion, only to develop radiation-induced leukemia a decade later), and the thousands of other children who were murdered. At the Hiroshima Peace Museum I was moved to tears by the charred lunch-box of a high school student, the imprint of the pattern of a kimono burnt onto a victim's back, and wrist watches that had stopped at 8.15 a.m., the exact time of the explosion.

—KALPANA SUNDER

IRYNA MAKUKHA/SHUTTERSTOCK

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FOR THE LOVE OF PRIVATE PURSUITS

## NO CAT LIKE THE SNOW CAT

Living in the cold desert highlands of our country, the 'ghost cat' or snow leopard is elusive to human eyes. Spotting one in its natural habitat is an experience of a lifetime. The journey itself is an expedition; sub-zero temperatures in peak winter is the ideal time to see this near-magical animal. It's hard for all six senses, but the infinitely rewarding possibility is also one I pursue obsessively every winter. My mad zeal paid off this year in February when I was able to spot a mother with three cubs at the Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary in Himachal Pradesh.

—SAMBIT DATTACHAUDHURI

LARISA BLINOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK



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FOR THE LOVE OF SIMPLE DELIGHTS

# FREE, SOLO IN MOROCCO

One morning in 2017, I set off hiking into the Rif mountains in northern Morocco with no planned route. The only intention I had for that day was to wander through the rolling green hills wherever my curiosity led me. I meandered through pastures, stopping to greet farmers at work. I scrambled up cliffs to catch glimpses of the blue-tinted buildings of Chefchaouen cradled in the valleys below. When I tired from hiking, I lounged in fields speckled with chamomile flowers, warmed by the glow of the afternoon sun. I indulged in the sweet juice of ripe oranges and fed them to goats while their young herders napped in the distant fields. My feet continued to carry me through grassy fields and to distant villages as I indulged in the freedom to walk into the silent mountains, penetrated only by the distant echoes of sheep and the call to prayer.

—ALICIA ERICKSON



KATE SPRIKONOVASH/SHUTTERSTOCK



DENIS MOSKINOV/SHUTTERSTOCK

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FOR THE LOVE OF FAMILY TIME

# BALI BRINGS IT HOME

My family of four touched down at Bali airport armed with three bulging suitcases, two cameras and vastly different ideas of what a family trip should be. One dreamed of beach adventures at Kuta, another of old temples in Ubud. Our stay's hosts, the Maliks—a big fat family of nine—were quick to invite us to the Kuningan Festival (the day ancestral spirits return to heaven after 10 days on Earth). We skipped down to the street outside the stone temple that's been in the Malik family for five generations, decked in sashes, *udengs* (headdresses) and sarongs (my father particularly proud in his). Hundreds of men came in white shirts and green-checked sarongs; women in lime-yellow shirts and pink sashes carrying offerings on their head and beating down on *gamelans*, holding papier-mâché figurines. The streets thrummed in celebration, and for once, me and my little family agreed that we felt right at home.

—SANJANA RAY



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FOR THE LOVE OF FAMILY TIME

## HUNTING FOR FOSSILS IN DORSET

Ribhu held a grey pebble in one hand, a hammer in the other. “You see these white lines on the rock, that’s where you strike. This one has possibilities.” His back was arched low, his little fingers flushed from incessant hammering, he raised his hand to strike again. I looked around. Hundreds of Ribhus, grannies, and grandpas dotted the windswept shingle beach, their backs to the sea, hunting fossils. This is Jurassic Coast, a 153-kilometre broken coastline shielding 185 million years of history. Best times to visit are rough mornings when the sea and cliff conspire, leaving an ecstatic Ribhu clasp an ammonite in his bare palms.

—SWAGATA GHOSH



JORDON SHARP/SHUTTERSTOCK

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FOR THE LOVE OF SERENDIPITY

## MY FRIEND LEILA, FROM LEBANON

At a tiny border airport in Nepal, I caught a stranger’s smile from across the waiting room. She pulled up an empty chair, and I propped myself next to Leila Turki. Her gesture signalled the start of an unlikely connect and a mutual admiration for each other’s culture. On the short flight and taxi ride we took together to Darjeeling, we discussed all things India and Lebanon. In this decade-long friendship formed in 2008, Leila and I have travelled across the deserts of Kutch and Rajasthan, got swindled in Vietnam, road tripped in Canada, and exchanged Lebanese cinema for Indian cooking classes. Most of all, we’ve kept up with each other despite the distances.

—SHIKHA TRIPATHI



ABIR ROY BARMAN/SHUTTERSTOCK



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FOR THE LOVE OF SUBLIME FOOD

## SILK ROAD TO SATISFACTION

Many venture to Xi'an to visit the glory of the countless terracotta soldiers packed like sardines underground. I went there in 2017 (as with most things in life) for the food. Xi'an once marked the entrance to the legendary Silk Road. Propelled by Arab traders who traversed these routes with fine silks, pungent spices, and blistered feet, the Muslim Quarter today is an ode to the blending of dishes that came about through this proverbial highway of commodified ingredients: cumin-crusted skewers, fragrant lamb broths and pita soups, and chili oil-lathered, flat noodles. Xi'an is as much a feast for the senses as it is for the belly.

—VARUD GUPTA



JINNING LI/SHUTTERSTOCK (LAMB BROTH), RADU BERGAN/SHUTTERSTOCK (MONUMENT)



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FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES

## TRAILING VASCO DA GAMA IN LISBON

Lisbon is a city I often visited in my head long before I ever set foot in it. Four years ago, I took Tram No. 15 in the morning rush hour and got off at Belém. There, by the river Tagus, rose *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*, marking the very spot from where everyone who was anyone in the Age of Discoveries set sail for the Orient. Nearby, at the Jeronimos Monastery, pilgrims queued at all hours. Inside lies Vasco da Gama, buried a second time. Here, in an earlier chapel, Da Gama and his crew prayed one last time before their first voyage in 1497. Today, it's an UNESCO World Heritage site and immortalised as the resting place of the celebrity explorer.

—SWAGATA GHOSH





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FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES  
**FLOORED BY  
THE RED SEA**

Silence and stillness take on fresh depth when diving off a gently bobbing yacht in the Red Sea. My first live-aboard experience in June 2018 was a mellow, meditative fairytale. Days were spent under the deep blue sea, playing with dolphins and exploring the shipwreck site of the SS Thistlegorm, an English Navy ship sunk in 1941. Evenings were spent reading Faiz, looking up to distant vistas of expansive desert, the soft sound of the ocean melding to the chatter of my Danish roommate, Scottish diving companion, and the friendly group of Belgians on their annual boys' trip. The absence of WiFi perfected the journey, the quiet too rich and complex to be captured on an Instagram story.

—SARVESH TALREJA





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FOR THE LOVE OF KIND STRANGERS

## KISMET CONNECTION IN DALLAS

September 2019: Tropical storm Imelda roared over Dallas Love Field Airport, its eerie skies keen to wreak havoc across Texas. All flights were cancelled; the weather was so intense a local Sheriff said it made Texas's most recent hurricane look like 'a little thunderstorm'. Thankfully, we overheard an older lady, on her cell, talking about driving to Houston, the same city we were headed. Taking a chance, we asked if we could ride along—she immediately agreed! At the Car Rental Center we met her son, John, and soon discovered that he had been adopted from India as an infant. He was now a trucker with a hearty laugh and beautiful eyes. Since his profession was driving, he was able to provide us a smooth and safe ride while Imelda lashed the highway. They dropped us off at the doorstep of our host's home, asking us for nothing except that we stayed safe.

—ABHISHEK HAJELA

ROSCHETZKY PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK (HIGHWAY), MICHEL ARNAULT/SHUTTERSTOCK (COUNTRYSIDE)

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FOR THE LOVE OF TESTING YOUR SPIRIT

## LESSONS FROM MONGOLIA

In the spring of 2019, I found myself in some desolate swathes of Mongolian land, weary of spirit. Skipping a fixed itinerary, I strutted out into the vast Steppes, camping kit in tow—determined to make myself one with the topography populated by none but nomadic tribes. With a stream playing my North Star, I kept walking on like Johnnie Walker asked me to, for a hundred hours. As I plonked down in the middle of nowhere to sleep, and greedily gobbled up tinned tuna, my fears of comfort, or the purported lack of it, wilted away. When rains flooded my tent or goats chased me, my fears of safety vanished. Turns out we only need a free spirit to befriend a place.

—VIKAS PLAKKOT







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FOR THE LOVE OF ROAD TRIPS

## THE CHARMS OF CZECH COUNTRYSIDE

Back in 2011, I took a road trip through the Czech countryside, driving out of Prague, and ambling through pint-sized towns full of intricate churches and thick, nearby forests. The rustic journey allowed me to visit places like Cesky Krumlov, a fairytale town in full regalia, showing off its stunning Gothic castle through which the Vltava River flows. Karlovy Vary was equally as enchanting, where hot springs dot the town, lines of tourists walking from one to the other, eager to bask in the therapeutic water. Each morning held a new adventure, we joined a group of mushroom pickers one day, and the next we chanced upon a small, rural school and played around with the rosy-cheeked children. The highlight reel also included a trip to a wine festival in the beautiful castle town of Karlstejn, where everyone was dressed in medieval costumes, completely enthralled by the revelry, live music, dance, and theatre.

—KALPANA SUNDER

YASONYA/SHUTTERSTOCK

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FOR THE LOVE OF KIND STRANGERS

## BERTH OF A MEMORY

Six months into my first job at a publishing house almost 13 years ago, I knew the cubicle life wasn't for me. A spontaneous resignation and a decisive plunge later, I found myself aboard a train headed to New Jalpaiguri in West Bengal from Mumbai. My last-minute ticket was unconfirmed, and the Ticket Collector couldn't care less about my dream tryst with Northeast India, and I couldn't get a confirmed seat. It was two factory workers headed home to Bihar who gave up their berth and ensured my comfort throughout, and also quelled any apprehensions I had about travelling with migrants. I've been treated to plush dinners by kind strangers, but nothing matches the generosity of those with the least to offer.

—SHIKHA TRIPATHI







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## FOR THE LOVE OF NATURAL WONDERS HIGH AND HOLY

Lying at a staggering altitude of 17,815 feet above sea level, Gurudongmar Lake in North Sikkim is one of the highest in the world. Some would say that the drive to access its enchanted presence is equally hypnotic. Nestled in a valley surrounded by six-thousanders, the landscape will remind you of Kargil, with yaks and Tibetan gazelle dotting the otherwise arid highland. Considered holy by the Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs, the lake freezes over in winter, leaving *Narnia*-like visuals in your wake.

—SAMBIT DATTACHAUDHURI

JAYANTA BASU/SHUTTERSTOCK



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## FOR THE LOVE OF SERENDIPITY IT'S A BIRD'S LIFE IN ARUNACHAL

Last year, Day-2 of the Pakke Paga Hornbill Festival dawned bright and sunny. Salil, one of the founders of Earthbeat, an eco-conscious theatre group performing at the festival venue in Seijosa, Arunachal Pradesh, was preparing a motley crew of kids to act as Pakke's denizens. Think costumed tigers, hornbills, monkeys, and all. "Would you like to be the father hornbill?" he asked me out of the blue. "You are kidding? Of course!" Donning a beautifully made hornbill dress, I joined the team of amateur actors, and we pulled off a skit to great success. I was no longer just a spectator at Arunachal Pradesh's famed conservation festival, but truly a part of it. With baby hornbills running helter-skelter across the stage, us 'parents' tried to our best to retain some order while raising awareness about the incredible icon that the Great Hornbill is for Pakke and its people.

—SUTIRTHA LAHIRI

PHOTO COURTESY: PAKKE PAGA HORNBILL FESTIVAL/FACEBOOK



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FOR THE LOVE OF KIND STRANGERS

## A NOSH SPEAKS VOLUMES

After hiking for hours in the remote highlands of northern Ethiopia, I spotted some straw-roofed *tukul* huts in the distance. As I approached the village, I was greeted by a tall and slender woman wearing a blue-flowered skirt. “Salam!” she greeted me, welcoming me into her home. I ducked into the dirt-floored tukul home, where I met members of Mariam’s family. We spent the afternoon roasting coffee and cooking injera, two Ethiopian specialties. I sipped on the smooth, earthy liquid as Mariam’s family passed around cups of sorghum beer and a communal plate of stew and injera. We exchanged knowing smiles with one another, limited to a few words of broken English and Amharic, though language proved not to be a barrier. Our smiles, gestures, and sharing food and drink, expressed more than words ever could.

—ALICIA ERICKSON



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FOR THE LOVE OF EGGY ESCAPES

## SHOOT OUT IN AÇAÍ SALVADOR

I went out for a late-night in Açaí Salvador, one of the most dangerous cities in Brazil, which unfortunately is saying something. Suddenly, my friend Paulo took my hand and started running across the street. Horns blared from the oncoming two-way traffic, and I was most confused why he had suddenly decided to play Russian roulette with Brazilian vehicles. Perhaps he was being adventurous, I thought—the perils of sometimes not understanding Brazilian humour. But then I saw his face, and it had turned ghostly. He explained there were cops busting drug lords on the street in front of us, and if we got caught in the crossfire, that was it. Simply put, we would be dead and no one would bat an eye. We soon saw two cops standing above a couple guys who were lying face down on the floor. The experience was unforgettable to say the least.

—ANKITA KUMAR



ARTUSH/SHUTTERSTOCK (DESERT), LEOKLEEMANN/SHUTTERSTOCK (BUILDING)

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FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES

## A BORDERLESS DAWN, LADAKH

After nearly five hours of climbing slowly to the top in the dark, dawn broke over the Ladakh Himalayas. It was the summer of 2015, we were still a bit short of reaching the summit of Mount Golap Kangri, but climbing a 100-foot ice wall had drained us. We stopped for water, checking our crampons and gear. The rising sun lit up the expanse of the valley we had left far below, and the void of the crimson horizon was streaked by a line of silver that was the Karakoram range across the frontier in Pakistan. I stood transfixed watching the stunning massif, full of gratitude for this moment at 19,000-odd feet where no borders exist.

—SHIKHA TRIPATHI



PORNCHALAR/SHUTTERSTOCK (MOUNTAIN), PHOTO COURTESY: KIRSTEN SIMCOX PHOTOGRAPHY/TOURISM NEW ZEALAND

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FOR THE LOVE OF SUBLIME FOOD

## A MAORI MENU FOR THE AGES

In 2017, I met Hinewai and her husband Cameron, a Māori couple who run eco-cultural tours in Napier, New Zealand, and we headed to the protected Ahuriri Estuary. After a warm *pōwhiri* (Maori welcome ceremony featuring singing, dancing, and *hongi* or pressing of noses), we fished in the lagoon’s shallow waters. Cameron grilled the catch of the day while Hinewai laid the table with lobster, clams, sea urchins, and vegetables—all either grilled or cooked in a *hāngi*, a pit oven with heated rocks that is a traditional Maori method of cooking. In rapidly changing times, it was wonderful to see a young couple be the *kaitiaki* (guardians) of their natural world, proudly following ancestral practices.

—PRACHI JOSHI





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FOR THE LOVE OF TESTING YOUR SPIRIT  
**NO VERTICAL  
LIMIT IN JAPAN**

‘A wise man climbs Mt. Fuji once, only a fool climbs it twice’, goes an old saying. I have to say I disagree. An active volcano, and Japan’s tallest peak at 12,390 feet, Fuji has intrigued the world for centuries, drawing admirers of all cultures and ages. Climbing it, however, is not for the faint of heart. With gradual walks through forests near its base to a near-vertical climb close to the summit, the mountain throws a delicious challenge to ‘fools’ like me. Would I do it again? For that sunrise, yes!

—SAMBIT DATTACHAUDHURI





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FOR THE LOVE OF EDGY ESCAPES

## USHUAIA TO ANTARCTICA

On the southernmost tip of Argentina, in an archipelago known as Tierra Del Fuego, or the Land of Fire, rests Ushuaia. It is a sleepy town marked by dramatic cliff sides, rocky plains, and counter to the name, lots of ice. By happenstance, my proximity to the almost literal edge of the world led me to hop onto a mini-cruise ship as part of a last minute budget package across the Drake Passage to Antarctica in 2015. When I wasn't shivering, the experience brought forth a surreal landscape, the delicate, blue hues of imposing glaciers, the constant mischief of penguins, the majesty of whales, and the tear-inducing beauty of the solitude found in this kingdom of ice.

—VARUD GUPTA

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FOR THE LOVE OF TIME TRAVEL

## A SOLITARY PORT IN EGYPT

It took a bit of searching to find, because the Egyptian desert has few landmarks—every sand dune looks much the same—but Google satellite images indicated that Myos Hormos was somewhere outside the tiny Red Sea port of El Quseir. The harbour peaked during the Roman era, when 120 ships crossed to India each year to fetch pepper, a favourite condiment in Rome, and other exotic produce such as tigers, coconuts, yogis and ivory. So, this is where globalisation reached its ancient apex, I think as I eventually stumbled upon ruins on the banks of a dried-up lagoon in the spring of 2011. The most breathtaking moment followed when I climbed down to the lake-bed to inspect heaps of rubbish that turn out to be thousands of broken amphorae—in which wine would have been exported to India—that belonged in museums. But here they lie, right where they were discarded two millennia ago.

—ZAC O'YEAH

TETIANA DOTSENKO/SHUTTERSTOCK



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FOR THE LOVE OF FAMILY TIME  
**DUSTY ROADS IN  
A MARUTI 800**

As my father, my grandmother, my help and I, squashed bits of our home and ourselves into our Maruti 800 in 1990 and began the 1,450km road trip from West Bengal to New Delhi, little did we know that 21 flat tyres would be just one of the highlights. The lush Dooars made way for dusty Bihar and Uttar Pradesh villages. Mosquitoes the size of locusts nearly had us for dinner at a government guest house in Muzaffarpur where we got to stay because my dad's flourishing moustache led them to believe he was an army man. Near Ayodhya, we stopped to check for a flat. It was dark, and within minutes a police jeep approached, shouting and telling us to quickly move and only stop at the next town, lest we were jumped by robbers. Delhi came soon enough but this was a family trip for the memory books.

—GEETIKA SASAN BHANDARI



SONNATH C/SHUTTERSTOCK

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FOR THE LOVE OF TESTING YOUR SPIRIT  
**FINDING COLOMBIA'S  
LOST CITY**

There's nothing like a four-day trek in the Colombian jungle to *Ciudad Perdida* or "The Lost City"—600 years older than Machu Picchu—to stretch the mind and challenge the spirit. It poured hard, so the muddy paths became waterfalls. We had to wade through rivers, sleep in hammocks and use all our limbs to climb up slippery escarpments. Lots of rain came in tow with loads of injuries: a guy broke a finger, someone else a hand, a girl cut her chin on a slick rock face and a guy got bitten by a snake. I was just glad to make it back alive and in one piece.

—ANKITA KUMAR



MATEO RUDD/SHUTTERSTOCK



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## FOR THE LOVE OF SUBLIME FOOD DESERT DELICACIES IN WADI RUM

Under the scowling afternoon sun in the desert valley of Wadi Rum, Jordan, the chefs from my tour camp dug a hole in the ground, and lowered a giant aluminium container filled with chopped lamb and potatoes, marinated in lush spices. Buried in the sand, it remained there for the next six hours. Close to dinner time, I saw them dig out the container, and our travelling troupe was served the most tender lamb in the whole wide world. The sand is so hot, that the meat gets slow pressure-cooked. No Michelin techniques here. Just zero fuel, and maximum taste.

—KUSUMITA DAS



ALEXANDER PVATILETOV/SHUTTERSTOCK (KETTLE), JAREK PAWLAK/SHUTTERSTOCK (LANDSCAPE)



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## FOR THE LOVE OF INNER JOURNEYS ALL YOU NEED IS ITALY

Two months after my husband's heart attack in December 2017, we decided to go ahead with our holiday to Rome, Florence and Tuscany. We were skeptical of travelling so soon, but Italy was just the balm we needed as a family to bounce back. As we got a crash course on the exploits of the formidable Roman empire and discovered some of the gems of the Renaissance, each of us healed. I don't know if it was the toasty winter sun, the extraordinarily charming local people, the sweeping Tuscan countryside or the soul arousing aroma of coffee that filtered out of cafés and onto street corners, but life seemed alright. Gradually, we releart to live, laugh and savour being together.

—CHAITALI PATEL



FOR THE LOVE OF INNER JOURNEYS

## SWEETHEARTS IN RAJASTHAN

When my wife and I whisked away on our honeymoon, we ditched our prior notions of a decadent five-star carousal for a more modest road trip in my favourite state, Rajasthan, where I had spent my early years. It was our first official holiday together as man and woman, and unlike the elaborate ruses concocted for my mysterious disappearances previously, this one had the blessings of both families. And we cherished that time with each other even more because of that freedom. My wife saw glimpses of my childhood, places that were formative; we shared an evening outside Jaipur's Hawa Mahal and dined in candlelight at Udaipur's Lake Pichola. Ten years have passed, and more exotic vacations have come true, but nothing will sandpaper the tenderness of our Rajasthan journey.

—NITIN CHAUDHURY





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FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES

## HOW WORLD WAR I BEGAN, IN SARAJEVO

The Latin Bridge in Sarajevo looks like any other bridge, and the shallow waters of the Miljacka like any other river. But a spot at one end of this bridge changed the course of the history—precipitating events that led to WWI. It was here that Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sofia were assassinated by Gavrilo Princip on June 28, 1914.

I visited the bridge on a sunny morning, not unlike the actual day of the murder. My guide told me pulse-racing stories—how not one but seven men stood on the route to kill. The first lobbed a grenade towards Ferdinand's car but it hit the wrong vehicle. To avoid capture, the killer gulped cyanide and threw himself in the river, but it was just four feet deep and the cyanide was way past its sell-by date to have an effect. He was arrested and Ferdinand was hurried away.

Princip, a weakly fellow, was the seventh killer in line because he was believed to be least successful. He walked over to a delicatessen near the bridge after the commotion died down. After some time, against all advice, Ferdinand stepped out again to visit the grenade blast's victims. As fate would have it, his chauffeur took a wrong turn, bringing him right to the spot where Princip stood. The Bosnian Serb found his moment, fired the shots, and set in motion the war that killed 20 million people.

—KAREENA GIANANI



86

FOR THE LOVE OF NATURAL WONDERS

## KAYAKING THROUGH CAMBODIAN RAINFORESTS

After a month of backpacking across Cambodia in April 2011, we had been 'cultured out,' and even the grand sunrise at Angkor Wat couldn't save our souls. Down the Tatai river that cuts through Koh Kong's Cardamom rainforest, we struck gold when we found out about a floating lodge approachable only by boat. The highlight of this nocturnal adventure, we were told, was a glowing tree. In the middle of the night, we strapped on our headlamps and set off on kayaks, following our guide closely through mangrove infested waters. After a thrilling bout of fear and confusion in the dark, we found our El Dorado—home to thousands of fireflies, a glowing tree that mirrored the night sky above.

—SHIKHA TRIPATHI



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## FOR THE LOVE OF TIME TRAVEL SPITI'S RARE RELIC

Deep in the heart of Himachal Pradesh's Spiti Valley, close to the Indo-China border, lies Gue, a tiny hamlet perched at an altitude of 10,500 feet. Gue is famous for the 450-year-old naturally preserved mummy of Sangha Tenzin, a monk who was said to be meditating in a cave to rid his village of an infestation of locusts.

At least that's how the story goes. The mummy itself is one of the most well-preserved in the world, with teeth, hair, and fingernails intact. Standing there outside the small shrine dedicated to this mummified monk of yore, it can be hard not to surrender your skepticism.

—SAMBIT DATTACHAUDHURI



DHAVAL R PRAJAPATI/SHUTTERSTOCK

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## FOR THE LOVE OF EXTRAVAGANCE PALACE STAYS IN ISTANBUL

My most memorable stay in Istanbul was in 2017 at the Çırağan Palace Kempinski, the grand structure is the only Ottoman-era palace on the Bosphorus that is a hotel. Think polished marble, Turkish carpets, exotic flower arrangements, elegant tapestries, and a manicured garden framed by palm trees. The stay offered a barrage of exclusive experiences, be it a cruise on a private yacht bubbling with champagne, a Turkish coffee and baklava master class, fine dining galore, or an indulgent, traditional Turkish hamaam. If that isn't the life of a princess, I don't know what is.

—KALPANA SUNDER

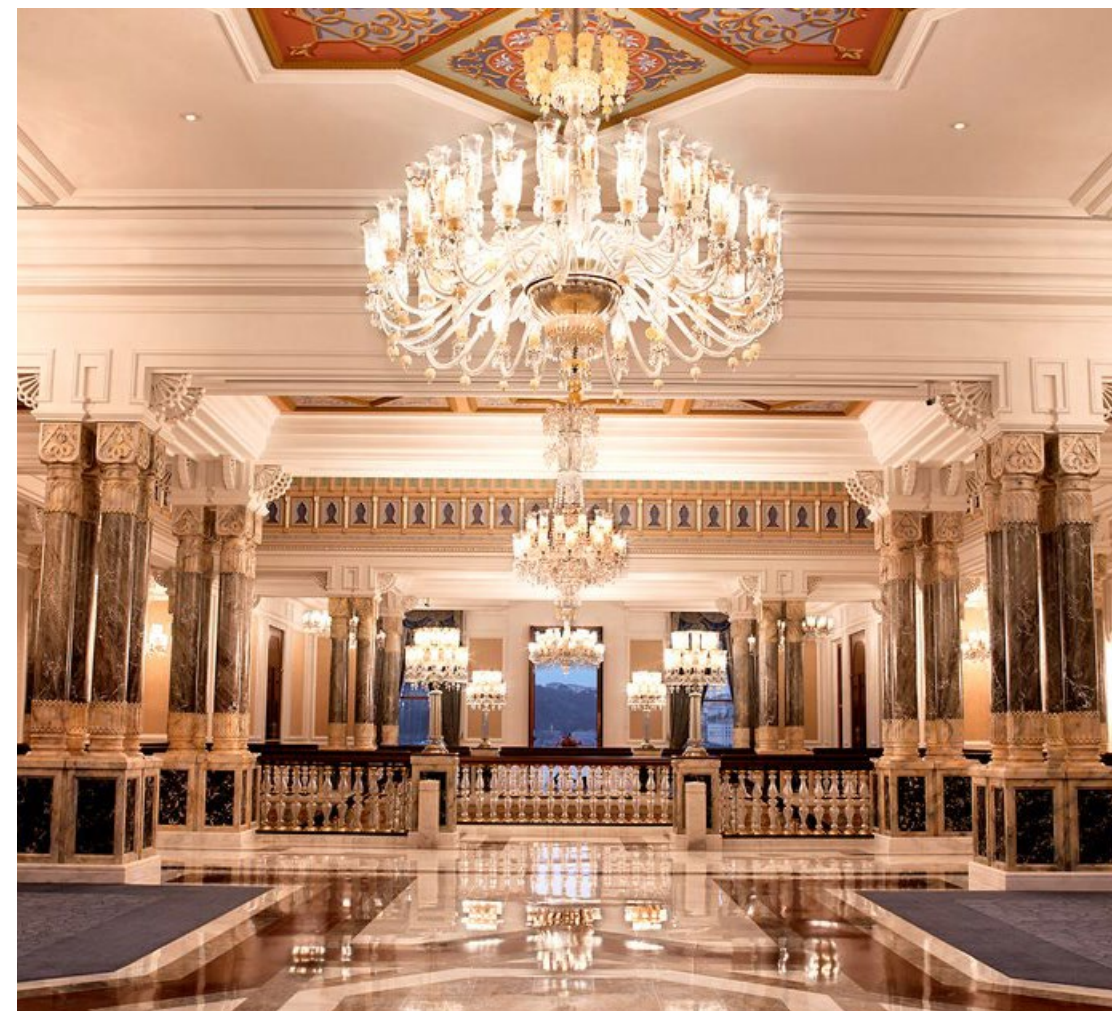


PHOTO COURTESY: ÇIRAĞAN PALACE KEMPINSKI ISTANBUL





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## FOR THE LOVE OF EDGY ESCAPES ROADBLOCKS IN SPITI

We were in Spiti's Pin valley in the monsoon of 2013, when news of a massive landslide close to where we were reached us, blocking our way forward. The morbid thought of being stuck in a tiny village with no clarity of exit and endless potato meals was disheartening, so we decided to risk the three-hour crossing. Moving across the rubble, the trickiest part was hauling oneself across in a metal basket strung by a pulley. Taking cue from the locals, I followed suit, breathless as the still-moving debris came gushing down. When I was scooped up by the earthmover on the other side I was still shaken, but the PWD engineers I hitched a ride back with to Kaza were visibly impressed.

—SHIKHA TRIPATHI

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## FOR THE LOVE OF EIPHANIES A BENGALURU CHAPTER

The lodge I checked into wasn't the best, but at ₹85 a night I wasn't complaining. I decided to break journey for a bit but ended up spending months in Majestic in 1991. I dwelt in bookshops and when browsing left my throat parched, the nearest pub was rarely more than steps away. I also discovered a thriving migrant food culture—the alleys featured anything from Kerala eateries to Bengali canteens. Only after settling down in the city in 2000, I learnt that Majestic is considered a bad place: reading the memoir *My Days in the Underworld* by Agni Sreedhar, I found out that gangsters planned gang wars over vada-sambar in the very Kamat Hotel that I habitually breakfasted at. One day, I sat in my favourite seedy bar Talk of the Town and penned the first lines of the 'Majestic Trilogy' which, unexpectedly, made me a famous writer.

—ZAC O'YEAH

HARENDRA HARSHI/SHUTTERSTOCK (MOUNTAIN ROAD), LAKSHMIPRASADA S/SHUTTERSTOCK (TOWN)



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## FOR THE LOVE OF SUBLIME FOOD ALCHEMY IN MAURITIUS

The best meal of my life was plated before me in the middle of a sun-kissed sugar plantation, at L'Alchimiste, in La Rhumerie de Chamarel, a rum distillery in Mauritius. First up was the pan-fried foie gras, whose light-as-cloud escalope melted in my mouth like butter. The sautéed mushrooms, scented with truffles and soft boiled eggs, were a lesson in delicate flavouring. I could barely wait for the restaurant's star dish—pork braised with the classic Chamarel rum and a drizzle of pineapple puree. It did a real number on my palate. The meat: succulent. The rum: boozy and fine. The puree: tart with the taste of the tropics. At last, a warm tiramisu slice came topped with coconut ice cream, bubbling with a faint fizzing sound as I poured coffee liqueur on it. It may as well have been the sound of my satisfaction.

—POOJA NAIK

URTIMUD PRODUCTION/SHUTTERSTOCK (BOTTLED), DAPHNUSIA/SHUTTERSTOCK (HOLE)

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## FOR THE LOVE OF TIME TRAVEL AMAZED BY A VIETNAM MAZE

I entered the tunnel—dingy, dark and claustrophobic—but when I realised I needed to go further below to experience what life was like for the Vietnamese guerillas who dug and lived in the Cu Chi tunnels on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, I chickened out. To crouch in complete darkness, through a 660-foot tunnel was scary. During American air strikes in the Vietnam War, this place was a lifeline—what the rebels couldn't match in resources, they countered with ingenuity. They dug narrow tunnels (so the American soldiers couldn't get in), and developed a complicated labyrinth covering 250 km. The tunnels were an ecosystem unto themselves—I saw rooms, kitchens, hospitals, even recreation areas when I visited early this year. Vietnam's defiance still echoes through this complex and clever labyrinth.

—GEETIKA SASAN BHANDARI



## FOR THE LOVE OF PRIVATE PURSUITS OFF-GRID OBSESSION

When a class on fragile states introduced me to the concept of ‘ghost states’—unrecognised territories that are difficult to find on most maps—I became obsessed. Mere slivers of earth, they tend to be breakaway regions of countries. So when the chance presented itself to hop on a bus to Nagorno-Karabakh or jump into a taxi to Transnistria, I didn’t resist. What ensued was a surreal experience. The crisp mountain air of Karabakh or the reflections in Transnistria’s Dniester river almost tricked me into a sense of normalcy, even as the reality of hyper-charged politics crept into conversations with locals, or made its presence felt in the flutter unrecognised flags. Once I left, there were no visa stamps to look back on, just that feeling of having been entirely ‘off the map.’

—AANCHAL ANAND





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FOR THE LOVE OF EXTRAVAGANCE

## A TASTE OF SCOTLAND'S ARISTOCRATIC SWAG

I once lived the aristocratic country life at the luxurious Gleneagles Hotel, an Art Deco classic that dates back to 1924, spread over 850 lush Scottish acres. My cozy double room boasted large bay windows looking over the pastoral landscape. The accommodation was charming, complete with a coal hearth, bound novels on the mantelpiece, and heated bathroom floors. I tried my hand at old-fashioned country pursuits—clad in Wellingtons and a waterproof Barbour jacket—taking on aristocratic pastimes such as falconry, skeet shooting, fly fishing, horse riding, and gun-dog training. Dinners at the Strathearn restaurant were the epitome of royal treatment, with a trolley of freshly baked bread wheeled in with dramatic élan, the steak flambéed right before my eyes, and a traditional pudding called Clootie Dumpling prepared tableside with a dollop of plum purée and a dash whiskey. Yet nothing oozed luxury as much as the spa, which offered saunas, steam baths, a warm vitality pool, and an outdoor jacuzzi, all best followed with a heavenly massage.

—KALPANA SUNDER

PHOTO COURTESY: THE GLENEAGLES HOTEL



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FOR THE LOVE OF TESTING YOUR SPIRIT

## THE MANTRA FOR ALL SEASONS

Having ridden from Mumbai to Ladakh twice on my motorcycle during the summertime, I always wondered what it would be like in the winter. I had to return to sate my curiosity, and I was totally astonished by its changed appearance. It wasn't the same place, just a bit cold: the terrain, in its entirety, was laden with snow, and the Pangong lake, frozen. Each day felt like an endurance test, to be out there when -15° C temperatures would be the warmest of the day, and at night the weather plunged into a frigid abyss as low as -33° C. While exploring Leh City, Merak Village, Hanle, and Chumathang in these extreme conditions, I realised that if we set our mind to it, we can adapt and survive in even the harshest of circumstances, a life lesson I cherish to this day.

—AASHISH CHANDRATREYA

HAPPY TOGETHERSHUTTERSTOCK





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## FOR THE LOVE OF AN EDGY ESCAPES UŽUPIS, A BOHO REPUBLIC

Just a stone's throw from Lithuania's medieval town square of Vilnius lies one of the world's smallest, quirkiest and unrecognised republics, Užupis. This self-declared utopia, covering less than one square kilometre, has its 'own' flag, currency, president and 500 ambassadors worldwide. However, the bohemian philosophy upheld by this vibrant artist-colony best shines through in its constitution, with clauses such as 'A dog has the right to be a dog', and—not to disappoint cat lovers—'A cat is not obliged to love its owner, but must help in time of need.' The marvelous document is displayed in mirror boards along Paupio Street in several languages, including Hindi and Sanskrit. Užupis's residents celebrate April 1 as their Independence Day (a celebration on which beer flows from the main square's fountain) and Frank Zappa just happens to be their patron saint!

—PALOMA DUTTA

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## FOR THE LOVE OF SUBLIME FOOD RUSTIC FARE IN PORTUGAL

Adega O Fumerio in Portugal's Montalegre town is a low-ceilinged establishment, with a fixed menu, and hams and smoked codfish hanging above the bar. My husband Ronny and I chanced upon it hoping for sustenance after a long journey, but ended up enjoying a bountiful meal: Melon wrapped in ham, sautéed mushrooms with ham, fried green peppers and ham, whole potatoes with ham (yes, that's a lot of ham), stewed rice, *feijoada*, and thick cut potato wafers—all made with local produce. As a dish piled high with perfectly cooked pork steak arrived, I discreetly undid a button to give my stomach more room. Our bill, for such abundance, was the princely sum of €30 (₹2,500), including wine and dessert!

—VAISHALI DINAKARAN

ELENA ROSTUNOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK





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FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES

## BRAZIL'S HOSTEL PARADISE

I ended up living in a Brazilian community hostel—snuggled in a small, northeastern beach town called Pipa, on a chance recommendation by a fellow traveller. I went for two days, and ended up staying for 10, a similar trait shared by the other globetrotting internationals that had become transfixed by the brilliance of the space. Every morning we would have breakfast together, feed small monkeys fruit from our hands, spend the day at the beach and come back in the evening for amazing workshops. The workshops ranged from quantum physics and finding-your-inner-child sessions to moon meditations and salsa.

It was so truly transformative I hope to create a space like that in India, someday.

—ANKITA KUMAR

PHOTO COURTESY: LAGARTO NA BANANA HOSTEL/FACEBOOK

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FOR THE LOVE OF FAMILY TIME

## BONDING EN ROUTE TO BHUTAN

Embarking on a road trip with my parents was always at the top of my travel bucket list, and in 2016—for my parent's wedding anniversary—it finally happened. We weren't going to take it easy, instead we set out to Bhutan from Mumbai: a three-day, one-way journey of over 2,000 kilometres. A flat tyre, perilous highway fog, and several other hurdles later, we entered the border town of Phuentsholing and everything felt worth the trouble. With limited time in our hands, we only made it to Thimpu, the Royal Palace, and the grand Buddha Dordenma; but the essence of our journey wasn't just a few sights in a foreign land, it was about quality time with my folks, long chai breaks set to the soundtrack of Kishore Kumar hits. Sharing this experience with my parents ensured that this endeavour will always be my most memorable trip.

—AASHISH CHANDRATREYA



SHARVAKRISHN/ISTOCK



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FOR THE LOVE OF EPIPHANIES

# TIBET: A MOMENT OF ZEN

Dhamo nunnery is perched 10,000 feet high on a mountain in the rugged eastern reaches of Tibet. Around 40 nuns live there, in modest homes with extraordinary views. Wispy cloud cover and the surrounding green hills make the nunnery feel like a haven away from the fast paced world I'm used to. The sense of community and the generosity at this sanctum sanctuary is palpable.

Looking back on my week-long stay there in 2018, I realise I learnt so much from the friendly nuns—who live without cell phones, truly believe in world peace, and welcome strangers into their homes with steaming momos and tea. ■

—MADHURI CHOWDHURY



# THE ADDRESS



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PHOTO COURTESY: HYATT REGENCY DHARAMSHALA



# A FIVE-STAR SANCTUM ATOP DHARAMSHALA

Surrounded by  
swaying deodars,  
Hyatt Regency's  
resort promises  
all the splurge of  
an expensive stay  
with the serenity  
of mountains

BY JULIAN MANNING



**T**here's fresh air, and then there's the pristine whiff of the Dhauladhar mountain range overlooking Dharamshala: so crisp and cool that each breath feels more rejuvenating than the last. It might seem peculiar to think of fresh air as an amenity, but if these pandemic times have taught us anything, it might be the most desirable detail for those considering vacations—and the 5-star Hyatt Regency Dharamshala is in no short supply. The resort is perched on a steep knoll that is spread across 6.5 acres: look up and you see imposing vistas

of snow-capped peaks, look down, and you see the idyllic bustle of McLeodganj.

The atmosphere is not one of smothering luxury; sure, the hotel is intent on pampering its guests, but the real charm is when the well-pressed doormen open up the grand double doors, unwrapping a landscape traversed by the likes of the Dalai Lama, whose letter to the hotel is proudly framed in the lobby. As you go exploring under the deodars, you'll hear the babble of a Himalayan-fed stream playing melody against the chants of the hotel's resident monks; the property melds itself to its environs, not

the other way around, a comfort that is almost as refreshing as the air.

## SPOILT FOR CHOICE

No matter which tier of lodging you choose—the hotel has about 80 rooms of varying comforts—each offers nods to elegant Himachali motifs: be they carved in the woodwork or weaved in the curtains. In the lobby, over complimentary high tea at McLeod & Co. Bakery—best taken in the library nook full of Kipling and atlases—you'll see honeymooners, family vacationers, solo explorers, and students

The Hyatt Regency's heated pool reflects the tranquil green of the outside deodar forest.

PHOTO COURTESY: HYATT REGENCY DHARAMSHALA





of Buddhism, all eager for recommendations from the staff. Just as the hotel bends to meet its environment, the staff, from the waiters to the managers, are remarkably well-versed in all there is to do inside and outside of the resort, a trait that guests openly recognise and appreciate.

### ROAD TO RELAXATION

Now, not everyone has the time to let that city stress immediately dissipate into the tranquil setting, as quite a few weekend travellers visit the hotel for much-needed respite. So the hosts are quick to recommend ways guests can fast-track that bliss. “The weather outside is a bit chilly, may we recommend the sauna following your morning walk?



The HPCA cricket stadium (top) and the Hyatt's Regency Suite (bottom) both frame the majesty of the region's mountains.

## A COMBINATION OF NEWFANGLED MIXOLOGY AND OLD-WORLD FLAVOURS INHERENT TO THE REGION ARE JOINED WITH A WIZARD-LIKE TOUCH AT 2082.

Many of our guests opt for a swim in our heated pool after a morning yoga session at the pavilion, would you like us to show you where it is?” And that’s just the tip of the proverbial snow-cap. Some guests choose to meditate with the hotel’s resident monks (when they aren’t on pilgrimage), book rustic picnics, or schedule a private movie night at the theatre.

### A FORAGED FIESTA

THYM, the hotel’s flagship restaurant, serves up a variety of continental and Indian fare, well-executed plates for less adventurous eaters; but the real treats are the à la carte Pahari dishes replicating local tastes with meticulously sourced ingredients. Before the Hyatt Regency’s Head Chef took up this post, he made sure to scour the region for authentic ways of presenting regional produce and specialties. The result of this dedication is best elaborated by the Chhaa Gosht, a succulent, buttermilk-brined curry; Auriya Kaddu, Himalayan pumpkin simmered till tender with notes of mustard and jaggery; and Siddu, Kullu-style bread stuffed with poppy seeds, almonds, walnuts, green peas, and roast peanuts, then steamed to a pillowy texture. These are the types of dishes that simply refuse to be ordered once,

JULIAN MANNING (STADIUM), PHOTO COURTESY: HYATT REGENCY DHARAMSHALA (ROOM)

lingering on your palate seductively.

The bar is no different. A combination of new-fangled mixology and old-world flavours inherent to the region are joined with a wizard-like touch at 2082—eponymously named after the property’s metre-height above sea level. Many of the in-house creations have their own signature scents derived from provincial herbs and flowers native to Himachal, offering an extra spritz of flavour to already inventive cocktails. Try the Himalayan Orchard, French cognac infused with fresh pear and distillate of vetiver (*khus khus*), kicked up a knock with traditional, fortified wine; or perhaps the Khawalag, apricot-steeped whiskey soured with roasted barley, Kangra black masala tea, and ghee charged with *centella asiatica*. Before the pandemic guests could snuggle up to the fire place adjacent to the bar and listen to live music, but now the crackle of flames will have to suffice until the virus is adequately contained.

### HEADING FOR THE HINTERLAND

While the hotel has no dearth of distractions, there are a number of convenient day trips that can be planned from the property. Those interested in exploring the culture of Dharmashala’s Tibetan community can visit craftsmen at Norbulingka Insitute, participate in a fire puja at Gyuto Monastery, or study ancient Tibetan lore and history at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. Public ceremonies and sermons hosted by the Dalai Lama at the Tsuglagkhang complex are rare (typically around three times a year) and highly sought after. Those able to attend should arrange a translator. Any travellers interested in the rich history of Tibetan medicine should schedule an appointment at Men-Tsee-Khang, the largest manufacturer of such medicine in the world.

A well-known nearby attraction is the HPCA cricket stadium, nestled deep in the Kangra Valley, which might be the most picturesque sporting field in the country. The stadium can typically be rented out to large groups eager to play with the stoic, shimmering Himalayas as their audience, but this pastime is temporarily suspended due to the pandemic. If you’re in the market for souvenirs, the pottery available at Andretta Pottery is outstanding. They produce some of the best terra cotta work in the country and classes here come highly-recommended.

These times have taught us a new meaning of comfort, and while the Hyatt Regency ticks many boxes from the old mould, its rustic surroundings look even better positioned to help travellers relax in the era of pandemic travel: a getaway as fresh as the air that drifts through its deodar trees. ■

VOLOROTTI/SHUTTERSTOCK (STREET), PHOTO COURTESY: HYATT REGENCY DHARAMSHALA (HOTEL)



Whether you wander the streets of McLeodganj (top) or the hotel’s surrounding forest (bottom), true repose is just a stay away.

## Essentials



The Hyatt Regency offers 80 guest accommodations including four private villas, three suites, and 17 club rooms (*doubles from ₹14,000; [hyatt.com/en-US/hotel/india/hyatt-regency-dharamshala-resort/dhmmr](https://www.hyatt.com/en-US/hotel/india/hyatt-regency-dharamshala-resort/dhmmr)*) According to new COVID-19 guidelines, the hotel has increased its frequency of cleaning and sanitising high-touch surfaces and high-traffic guest and colleague areas such as elevators, gyms, spas, and restrooms. In addition, visitors undergo stringent temperature checks, and are expected to adhere to hygiene and social distancing guidelines, including wearing face masks or coverings in indoor public areas and when moving around outdoor areas.





# THE BUCKET LIST

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TNSHUTTER/SHUTTERSTOCK



# THE NATURAL MARVELS 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

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

Mount Fuji  
reflecting in  
Lake Kawaguchi  
at sunrise.

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 **By 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 Tenninkyo 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: Hagoromo 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. Hagoromo, 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 7,515 feet, 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-energised, 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 Lazienki 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 ₹4,05,000 per person (approximately), 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](http://insidejapantours.com) omo-hotels.com/asahikawa [snowfes.com](http://snowfes.com)

GETTY



Snowshoeing (top left) in Sounkyo Gorge, Daisetsuzan National Park; Mount Asahi (top right), Daisetsuzan National Park; Japanese spider crab claws (bottom right) on sale at a fish market in Sapporo; Red crowned crane (bottom left) in Tsurui Mura, eastern Hokkaido.

## Kogarashi

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







Skiing in Niseko, Hokkaido. Facing page: Blakiston's fish owl (top), an endangered species of which just 150 live in Hokkaido; A mother Ezo deer and her fawn (middle), in Kamuiwakka Falls in Shiretoko National Park; Ezo foxes (bottom) near Mount Tokachi, Hokkaido.

## 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](https://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](https://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](https://uu-hokkaido.com)

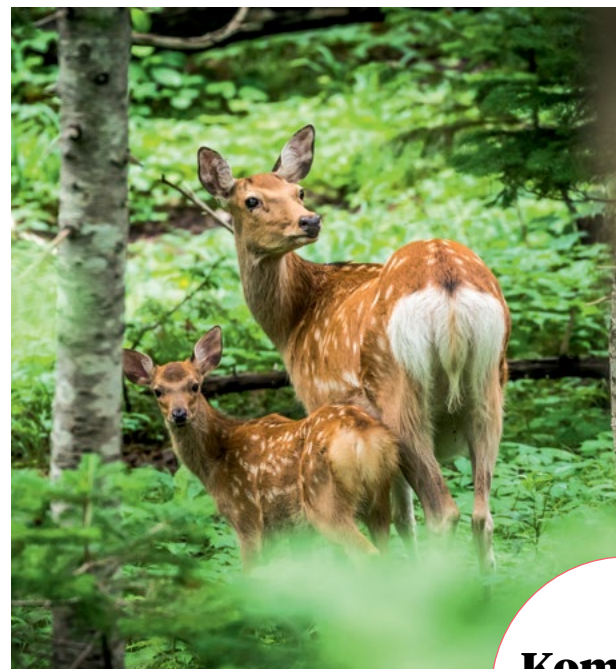
### Try Dog-Sledding

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, six-kilometre course. [moonlightladies.info](https://moonlightladies.info)

### Visit the Yokote Kamakura Snow Festival

Located in northwestern Honshu's Akita Prefecture, this centuries-old festival (which is held between February 15-16 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](https://japan.travel) **CT**

GETTY



## Komorebi

The way sunshine streams through the leaves of a tree



## 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](https://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 wildlife tours. [shiretoko-picchio.com](https://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](https://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](https://shiretoko-rausu-lincle.com) **JL**

For more information about InsideJapan Tour's wildlife tours, visit [insidejapantours.com](https://insidejapantours.com)



# 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**

## Mono-no-aware

Literally ‘the pathos of things’; appreciating the transience of the world

AWL IMAGES

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 & SAMURAIS  
NAKASENDO WAY

**ROUTE:** Kyoto to Tokyo  
**LENGTH:** 120 kilometres (shorter sections available)  
While the trail’s history dates back to the samurai, it’s also a great introduction to modern Japan. Along with walking through the diverse geography between the cultural Kyoto and metropolitan 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:** 70 kilometres  
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:** 68 kilometres  
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 6,500 feet above sea level, overnighting 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.

## 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:** 42 kilometres  
The Izu Peninsula, a UNESCO Global Geopark, is only about 150 kilometres 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:** 13 kilometres  
Fuji is Japan’s highest and most elegant peak, a dormant volcano rising to a height of 12,390 feet. It can be hiked between July and September, and the most popular route is the Yoshida Trail, which starts out from the 5th Station (at 7,545 feet). 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**



Mount Fuji from the north side of Lake Motosu as it appears on the ¥1,000 note (left); Hayashi Naoki (middle) on the Yoshida Trail; Sign (right) on the Yoshida Trail. Facing page: Hikers on the Yoshida Trail on the way up Mount Fuji

For more information about Walk Japan’s tours, visit [walkjapan.com](http://walkjapan.com)





### Kawaakari

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

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

### 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](http://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. [happo-en.com](http://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](http://gotokyo.org)



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 **By 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 *misog zi* 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 adrenaline 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](http://heartlandjapan.com)

BEN WELER

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

## Shinrin-yoku

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



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 **By 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 1,000°C, 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 onsen 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 of 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.

GETTY, OITA TOURISM, CHARLOTTE WIGRAM-EVANS



## 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 (bottom right): Wooden walkways extend over an onsen in Beppu (top); Asako's traditional steam ovens at Futabasa (bottom left).



## 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 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](http://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  
Facing page: 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 KAI DO**  
Linking Honshu and Shikoku, the Shimanami Kaidō is a 77-kilometre 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 travel options for anyone undertaking the route. Each of the seven islands along the way offer both accomodations as well as a variety of 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 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. **JL**

IRWIN WONG, AVL IMAGES



# BEST #OUTSIDEINSIDE PICKS

From palaces in Rajasthan and mosques in Abu Dhabi, to ancient temples in Greece and Bali, readers sent in photographs of unique architectural delights from across the world. Here are our top picks.



1<sup>st</sup>

2<sup>nd</sup>



3<sup>rd</sup>



1 Mihir Patilhande's aerial shot of Auroville's golden Matri Mandir captures a unique perspective of the 12 petals signifying the Mother's (a community founder) virtues and the four pillars named after her personality traits.

2 In April 2019, Rupali and Arka visited Jordan's Temple of Artemis, which is flanked by 12 elaborately carved Corinthian columns, and is believed to be one of the best-preserved Roman ruins outside of Rome.

3 When Raghav Sethi visited the iconic Arc De Triomphe in Paris, he made his way up the stunning spiral staircase leading to the viewing platform and photographed a shot of perfect symmetry.

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