

NEW

HIDDEN TRAVEL *Gems*

100+

UNSPOILT
PLACES
TO VISIT

GO OFF THE BEATEN PATH
AND ADVENTURE AWAITS

Digital
Edition

FUTURE

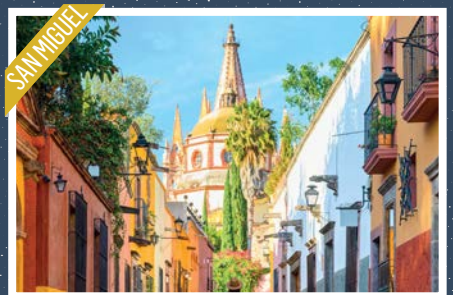
SECOND
EDITION



SCENIC SIGHTS



STILL SHORES



COOL CITIES



ovid-19 may have stopped international travel, but it hasn't stopped us from dreaming about it. The pandemic has given us pause to reminisce on our favourite travel memories. But one aspect of travel we bet you don't pine for is the claustrophobia-inducing crowds, endless queues, and people jostling to capture that perfectly lit and composed photograph. Perhaps you wonder if there's a way of exploring the world without swathes of tourists all around you.

Put simply, yes. Yes, you can enjoy gorgeous landmarks without queuing for hours. Yes, you can go on hikes without meeting another soul. And yes, you can discover your own tranquil slice of paradise. It's a more interesting (and arguably more ethical) way to travel. But to find the path less trodden you'll have to be willing to put some work in – and that's where this bookazine comes in.

With over 100 off-the-beaten-track destinations inside, this bookazine is the perfect way to satisfy your wanderlust. From Ethiopian churches at the peak of a perilous mountain climb, to lively South American cities few have heard of, thumb your way through nearly 150 pages of niche travel inspiration.

And that's not all. We'll show you how to reach destinations at the end of the Earth, recommend some delicious dishes to try on your travels, and even help you plan your next city break.

Packed with useful maps, pro travel tips, and gorgeous imagery, you'll be on your next adventure as soon as it's safe to do so.

HIDDEN TRAVEL *Gems*

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START YOUR JOURNEY

08 WORLD MAP

10 DISCOVERING
HIDDEN GEMS

14 NAVIGATE PUBLIC TRANSPORT

16 WORLD'S COOLEST
ACCOMMODATION

20 EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY

24 CITY SECRETS

THE AMERICAS

32 FERNANDO DE NORONHA

33 KAIETEUR FALLS

34 SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

35 QUITO

36 VALPARAÍSO

38 COPPER CANYON

39 CHOQUEQUIRAO

40 PURMAMARCA

41 COCORA VALLEY

42 CERRO CASTILLO

43 MENDOZA

44 LAS LAJAS

45 PARAMARIBO

46 LOGAN

47 QUEBEC CITY

48 DENVER

49 ROCK CITY

50 ST. JOHN'S

51 HIGHWAY 99

52 NORTHEAST GREENLAND

AFRICA & THE LEVANT

56 ADDIS ABABA

57 ABIDJAN

58 ABUNA YEMATA GUH

59 MOMBASA

60 THE KALAHARI

61 SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

62 LESOTHO

63 TAMERZA

64 KAKUM NATIONAL PARK

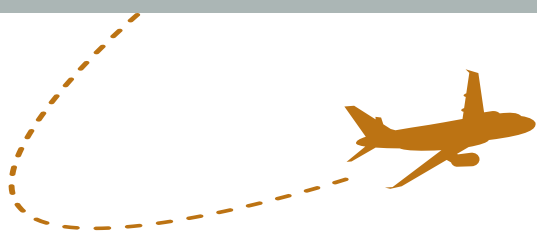
66 SAINT LOUIS

67 CHEFCHAOUEN

68 BAALBEK

69 DAHAB

70 KING'S HIGHWAY



*"Travel is fatal to prejudice,
bigotry, and narrow-mindedness"*

– MARK TWAIN –



ASIA

- | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 74 CENTRAL HOKKAIDO | 84 RYUKYU ISLANDS | 92 XI'AN |
| 76 PUNAKHA DZONG | 85 KUCHING | 93 POKHARA |
| 77 KEERIMALAI | 86 SI PHAN DON | 94 NUSA LEMBONGAN |
| 78 GATES OF HELL | 88 BADSHAHI MOSQUE | 95 SHIRAZ |
| 80 TUBBATAHA | 89 KOH MUK | 96 GOBI DESERT |
| 81 SALALAH | 90 ÇIRALI | |
| 82 KARAKORAM HIGHWAY | 91 AURANGABAD | |

EUROPE

- | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 100 TATEV MONASTERY | 111 ISLA GRACIOSA | 123 KALININGRAD |
| 101 AGISTRI | 112 NÎMES | 124 SAN MARINO |
| 102 MOLDOVA | 114 KOSOVO | 125 KAVALA |
| 104 WIED IL-GHASRI | 115 MINACK THEATRE | 126 PORZHENSKY POGOST |
| 105 MAZURY | 116 SHEKI | 127 STIRLING |
| 106 BILBAO | 117 KEMERI NATIONAL PARK | 128 CREMONA |
| 107 VALBONA NATIONAL PARK | 118 BRISTOL | 130 TBILISI |
| 108 LAUGAVEGUR | 120 SVALBARD | 131 TURKU |
| 109 HÉVÍZ | 121 BURG ELTZ | 132 SARAJEVO |
| 110 MOURNE MOUNTAINS | 122 COIMBRA | 133 EIBSEE LAKE |

OCEANIA

- | | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| 136 PERTH | 139 NEW CALEDONIA | 142 DUNEDIN |
| 137 TASMANIA | 140 BRIDAL VEIL FALLS | 143 NAN MADOL |
| 138 LAKE HILLIER | 141 HOKITIKA | |

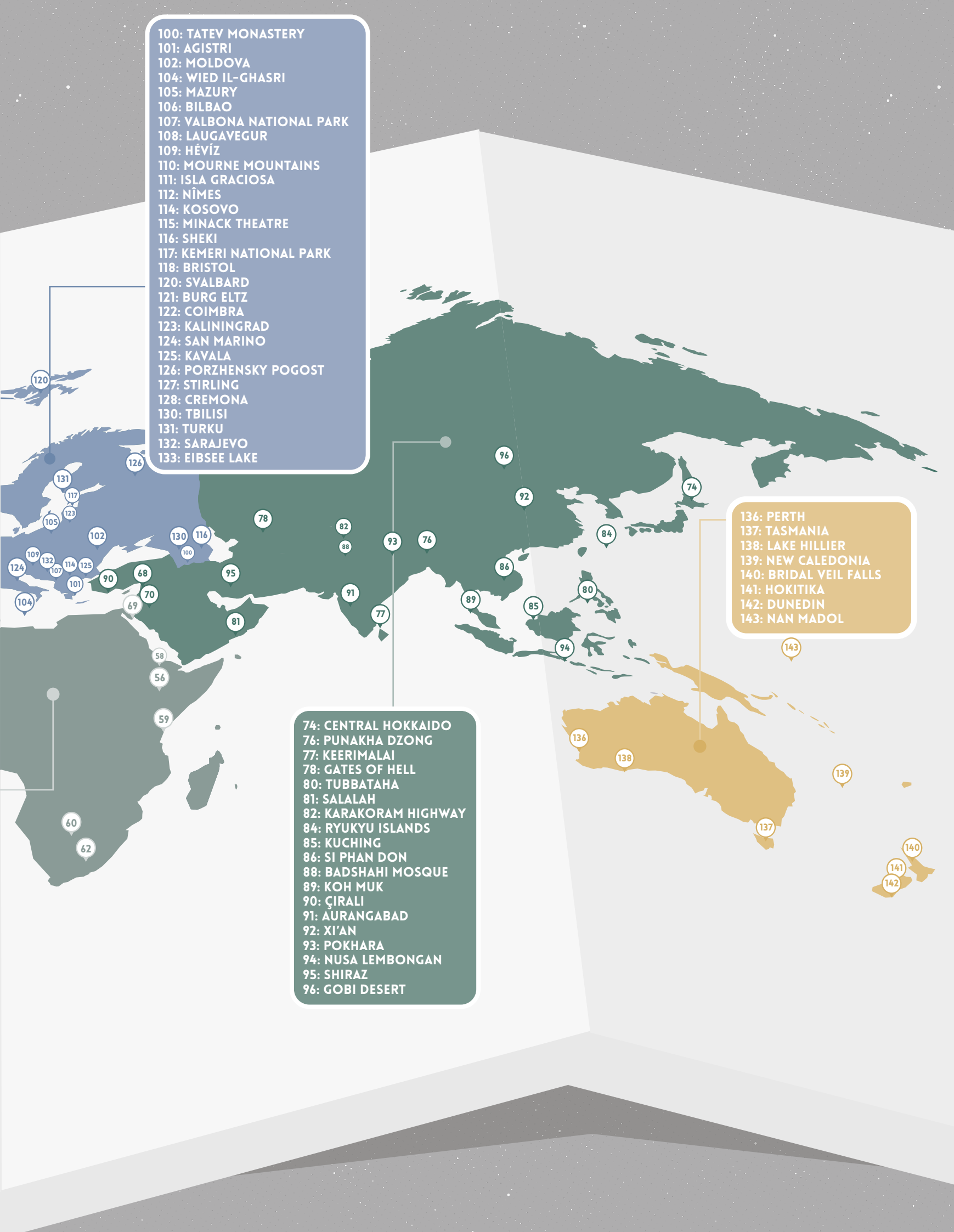
32 FERNANDO DE NORONHA
33 KAIETEUR FALLS
34 SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE
35 QUITO
36 VALPARAÍSO
38 COPPER CANYON
39 CHOQUEQUIRAO
40 PURMAMARCA
41 COCORA VALLEY
42 CERRO CASTILLO
43 MENDOZA
44 LAS LAJAS
45 PARAMARIBO
46 LOGAN
47 QUEBEC CITY
48 DENVER
49 ROCK CITY
50 ST. JOHN'S
51 HIGHWAY 99
52 NORTHEAST GREENLAND

56: ADDIS ABABA
57: ABIDJAN
58: ABUNA YEMATA GUH
59: MOMBASA
60: THE KALAHARI
61: SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE
62: LESOTHO
63: TAMERZA
64: KAKUM NATIONAL PARK
66: SAINT LOUIS
67: CHEFCHAOUEN
68: BAALBEK
69: DAHAB
70: KING'S HIGHWAY

- 100: TATEV MONASTERY
- 101: AGISTRI
- 102: MOLDOVA
- 104: WIED IL-GHASRI
- 105: MAZURY
- 106: BILBAO
- 107: VALBONA NATIONAL PARK
- 108: LAUGAVEGUR
- 109: HÉVÍZ
- 110: MOURNE MOUNTAINS
- 111: ISLA GRACIOSA
- 112: NÎMES
- 114: KOSOVO
- 115: MINACK THEATRE
- 116: SHEKI
- 117: KEMERI NATIONAL PARK
- 118: BRISTOL
- 120: SVALBARD
- 121: BURG ELTZ
- 122: COIMBRA
- 123: KALININGRAD
- 124: SAN MARINO
- 125: KAVALA
- 126: PORZHENSKY POGOST
- 127: STIRLING
- 128: CREMONA
- 130: TBILISI
- 131: TURKU
- 132: SARAJEVO
- 133: EIBSEE LAKE

- 136: PERTH
- 137: TASMANIA
- 138: LAKE HILLIER
- 139: NEW CALEDONIA
- 140: BRIDAL VEIL FALLS
- 141: HOKITIKA
- 142: DUNEDIN
- 143: NAN MADOL

- 74: CENTRAL HOKKAIDO
- 76: PUNAKHA DZONG
- 77: KEERIMALAI
- 78: GATES OF HELL
- 80: TUBBATAHA
- 81: SALALAH
- 82: KARAKORAM HIGHWAY
- 84: RYUKYU ISLANDS
- 85: KUCHING
- 86: SI PHAN DON
- 88: BADSHAHI MOSQUE
- 89: KOH MUK
- 90: ÇIRALI
- 91: AURANGABAD
- 92: XI'AN
- 93: POKHARA
- 94: NUSA LEMBONGAN
- 95: SHIRAZ
- 96: GOBI DESERT





DISCOVERING HIDDEN GEMS

DODGE THE CROWDS AND FIND YOUR OWN SPOTS AWAY FROM THE TOURIST TRAIL

By Sophie Hines

If you have ever found yourself jostling for space amid a throng of tourists, trying to snap a photo without another camera-wielding sightseer walking through the frame, then you'll probably agree that some of the world's attractions have become a bit too popular.

The effects of over-tourism are certainly becoming more prevalent. Just look at Venice, which is literally sinking beneath the weight of its 25 million annual visitors. And, with cheap flights and social media fuelling the tide of tourists to certain 'must-see' destinations, worldly wonders are becoming so overcrowded

and stressful that visiting can feel more like a trial than a treat.

There is, however, another way. For every packed city square, the intrepid explorer will find another equally beautiful, totally ignored plaza a few streets away; for every hotel with an oh-so Instagrammable pool, a more peaceful boutique bolthole round the corner. Indeed, while certain locations are drowning under a flood of well-meaning globetrotters, their neighbours lie totally undiscovered, despite offering a blend of culture, history, scenery and hospitality that make them the perfect holiday fodder. It's time, then, to start looking beyond the obvious

destinations and attractions, and discover the best-kept secrets travel has to offer. Make unique memories that you'll treasure for years to come. Here are just a few suggestions for making sure you enjoy trips with a difference.

Although social media can cause a flurry of visitors to particularly on-trend destinations (we're looking at you, Santorini), it can also prove invaluable for digging out secluded spots. These networks offer a great way, for example, to tap in to the collective wisdom of your friends and acquaintances. While many of us are familiar with sharing plenty of holiday snaps online after our travels, requesting tips via a social media post before you arrive may well unearth several brilliant recommendations from previous visitors (after all, people love to show off their travel credentials). Even better, turn to Twitter or Instagram to glean knowledge from those you've never met, including travel writers,

"Having a tightly packed itinerary won't leave you any time to wander"



bloggers and local experts. Post a question and bring it to people's attention by using hashtags such as #ttot (which stands for 'travel talk on Twitter' if you didn't know), #traveltips, #travelbloggers and #travelmassive.

Generic, grand-spanning guidebooks are a brilliant way to get your head around a new city or country, and provide a valuable overview of the main attractions. However, to find the less-visited places, you need to drill down into your specific interests and seek out guides and local magazines dedicated to them. For example, a visitor to New York can discover books on any subject, from the best independent clothes shops to atmospheric literary haunts – it all depends on your individual interests. Travel books rounding up local walks will often pinpoint small but interesting details that might not make it into more general area guides. What's more, local publications are a great way to find out what's current – **Le Fooding**, for instance, is an up-to-date guide to Parisian cuisine available from the city's newsagents in French or English. Even searching for recommendations online with your own desires in mind is helpful – think about who you are and how your interests intersect with the place you're visiting, rather than looking at a very generalised overview. Whether you're a wine buff, a film fanatic or an adventure sports nut, it pays to get niche when visiting a new place.

Would-be navigators rejoice, because there's nothing like a good old-fashioned map to help you explore the world. Or, if you prefer, a

digital version, which can be found on your smartphone. When you're planning a trip, take a look at the area on a map. You might find something quirky just round the corner from where you're staying, or a street filled with backstreet bars. You can also see which towns or villages are nearby, then research these places to see if they could make a good day trip or stop-off point. If travelling through a rural landscape, take time to examine topographical maps or trawl your navigation system for peaks, lakes, rivers and tracks that could lead to unspoilt, spectacular scenery. Okay, so you might end up driving down a few dead-ends, but being willing to divert from the well-trodden tourist path can also lead you to some blissfully quiet spots and stunning viewpoints.

Many of us feel quite shy about talking to strangers when we first touch down in a new location, especially if we don't feel confident with the language. Break the ice, however, and you're likely to unleash a treasure trove of local insight – after all, who knows a place better than the people who actually live there? Talk to the staff at the hotel's reception and ask where they'd go for dinner – they'll probably recommend somewhere packed with locals rather than the bog-standard tourist fare. Book onto a free walking tour, available across hundreds of towns and cities, and ask the guide if they have any extra recommendations not covered on the route – they're likely to be enthusiastic explorers of the city themselves, and keen to share their discoveries. Be open-

TRAVEL BLOGGERS

Avid explorers help you discover secret spots across the globe



OUR TRIBE TRAVELS

Susannah Cery started this blog while travelling around Southeast Asia with her husband and baby. It's now a top family travel website, covering less obvious destinations from Zambia to Lebanon. Great for those worried that having a baby means an all-inclusive resort for the next 18 years.

www.ourtribetravels.com



BE MY TRAVEL MUSE

While founder Kristin's focus is female solo travellers, there's information for everyone.

The level of detail she goes into makes all the difference; instead of a generic post on the whole of Hawaii, for example, she'll drill down into everything from each island's best beaches to top spiritual experiences.

www.bemytravelmuse.com





“There’s nothing like a good old-fashioned map to help you explore the world”

TRAVEL BLOGGERS

Avid explorers help you discover secret spots across the globe



GLOBAL GRASSHOPPER

Founded by Becky Moore, she brings together contributions from a number of travel writers, and aims to focus on the road less-travelled. Especially good are the ‘under the radar’ round-ups from various destinations, perfect for those who want to enjoy their holiday away from the crowds.

www.globalgrasshopper.com



EMILY LUXTON TRAVELS

British blogger Emily Luxton focuses on slow travel. She seeks to provide her readers with opportunities to immerse themselves in the culture of a place, and to enjoy all the wonderful sights, sounds and smells it has to offer. She also blogs about food.

www.emilyluxton.co.uk

mind and take time to chat to shopkeepers, waiting staff, bartenders, taxi drivers or (if they look friendly) the couple at the table next to you; it’s a brilliant way to pick up tips and get beneath the surface of a destination.

You’ll be amazed how many of your travel questions are answered once you delve into online forums. Type a specific request into a search engine – anything from where to sample speciality dishes in a given location, to the best towns to stop off when driving between two cities – and you may well find that your question, or at least one very similar, has been answered already. Tripadvisor, Quora and Lonely Planet have excellent platforms for such discussions, where locals and travel enthusiasts can share invaluable knowledge. And, if you find your query hasn’t already been discussed, then ask away – not only will you find yourself gaining brilliant insight, but you’ll probably help many future searchers who are pondering over precisely the same thing.

When you visit a new place, it can be very tempting to fill all your precious time visiting only the most famous landmarks and attractions. But having a tightly packed itinerary won’t leave you any time to wander. Instead of marching at top speed from one place to another, eager to tick off every tourist hotspot on your list, make it a priority to relax and explore your destination. Whether that’s mooching around the local market, stopping off to enjoy a great view on a long drive, or settling in for a lazy coffee at a cute little bar packed with locals, these less premeditated ramblings will help you to create your own holiday memories. Think back to previous trips; it wasn’t necessarily the big-hitter tourist attractions that were your highlights, but the smaller, more leisurely moments you took to soak up the atmosphere, sounds and scenes of a new place.

There’s nothing to help you discover new depths to a place quite like seeing it through new eyes, and reading a novel set in the location you’re visiting can be an excellent way to help uncover its hidden layers. Take, for example, the widely lauded Neapolitan novels by Elena Ferrante – who can visit Naples after reading *My Brilliant Friend* and not feel entranced by those buzzing streets full of old-fashioned apartments, the housewives hanging washing over balcony windows and energetic conversations in local dialect? Reading fiction set in the area encourages you to wander down new streets; in the case of Ferrante’s novels, even visit new areas, such as the island of Ischia, which is celebrated in her work but has long been overshadowed by neighbouring Capri. There’s a book to bring new life to wherever you go, and help you imagine the local history and community. Even if fiction’s not your thing, there are plenty of travel writers who can help you to see a different side to your destination. Bill Bryson, for example, is brilliant at picking up on the quirky, oddball sights worth visiting along your way, and discussing them in their wider cultural context.

Feel like you’ve covered the main sightseeing opportunities in your destination? Then it’s time to create your own experiences, whether that’s grabbing a picnic and heading to the local park, renting a rowing boat to paddle across a lake, or going for an early morning run along the seafront in a new place. By focusing on enjoyable experiences rather than smacking eyes on a particular attraction, you’ll create amazing memories, and end up feeling much more fulfilled than you would from the standard tourist experience. From taking on a cookery class with an Italian nonna in Rome, to enjoying a classical concert in the Sydney Opera House, there’s nothing quite like immersing yourself in a fun activity to bring a destination to life.



TRAVEL SLOW

Slow and steady may not win the race, but you'll experience a much more interesting journey. Travelling by train or bus is also cheaper and more eco-friendly.

DON'T LOSE THE PLOT

Once you've researched the less-touristy spots you want to visit, mark them on a map – either on paper, or using your smartphone.

GO INDEPENDENT

You'll never find a gem if you stick to chain hotels. Visit independent eateries, family guest houses and boutique hotels for authentic experiences.



BE OLD-SCHOOL

Many don't visit Tourist Information centres anymore, but they're worth popping into on arrival for unrivalled local knowledge and advice.

REMEMBER, REMEMBER

When you discover a lovely restaurant off the tourist trail and don't have time to write the name down, take a photo on your phone.

FLY RIGHT

Flick through your in-flight magazine, as these often contain details on new bars, restaurants and activities in the destination you're visiting.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

NAVIGATING OFF-THE-BEATEN-TRACK DESTINATIONS IS TOUGH, BUT WORTH IT

By Jamie Frier

The popularity of well-known holiday destinations is a non-vicious circle. People go there, they recommend it, more people go there. As their popularity increases, there are more ways to get there and better infrastructure is put in place, and so the cycle continues. However, if you're an adventurous soul who fancies a little more variety than a week in Benidorm, you may have to go the extra mile, quite literally, to enjoy the lesser-spotted wonders of the world.

Popular holiday sites often have multiple flights going to them all year round, but the less frequented ones don't. Check whether you can travel at the time of year you want, because some remote locations are inaccessible in winter, for example. Your local airport might not service your desired location, so you may need a connecting flight or you may need to go to a bigger airport in your home country. This could

also save you money, so keep your eyes peeled for deals.

You might need to hire a car if you're travelling to particularly out-of-the-way locations, and it's recommended to shop around early for a good deal. Check price comparison and individual sites to get the best deal. Airport hires are often more expensive, so if you can get a transfer to the nearest town and hire there, you could save some money. They may also be willing to throw in some free extras, such as a sat-nav. Make sure you've hired the right vehicle for the terrain, observe local laws, such as carrying snow chains, and remind yourself which side of the road to drive on!

If using public transport, forward planning is essential, especially if you don't speak the local language. Research online and find timetables and routes to become familiar with the local system. If you have an itinerary then write down

numbers and stops in advance so you don't have to struggle with incomprehensible tables while you're abroad. Even if your trip is more ad-hoc, it's a good idea to memorise the stop or station closest to where you're staying, in case you get lost and need help.

If you can't easily find resources online, there is normally a local or national transport website that you can contact for advice or literature that can help you plan your journey. Check prices and find any multi-journey deals you can get your hands on to save a bit of cash for the more enjoyable parts of your holiday.

Local ticketing systems can also be a confusing minefield. Have a look on review websites to find how other tourists found the public transport system and discover any quirks, such as card-only payments or whether journeys have to be paid for in advance.

Remote locations are less likely to have English

GRAB A GOOD DEAL

Stand your ground and be on your way for less in many countries

In most popular tourist destinations and cities, taxi drivers have a set price they charge per journey or per mile. However, once you start heading to out-of-the-way locations, that all changes. Often there is less regulation and less business, so drivers are both allowed and willing to haggle over prices. First, always make sure that any car you are getting into is safe and registered. If necessary, speak to your hosts to ensure you use a reputable driver. Then get to the business of negotiating a price. Always go lower than what you're willing to pay. That way you can meet in the middle and everyone comes out happy. And, one last thing: always ask for the meter to be turned on.





SIM CARDS

Buying a local SIM is a good way to get the cheapest and best local travel apps. Getting SIM cards as a foreigner in some places can require planning.



"You may have to go the extra mile, quite literally, to enjoy the lesser-spotted wonders of the world"

translations or English speakers to help out, so the more work you put in, the fewer nasty surprises you'll be faced with.

If you choose to enjoy your adventure on foot, you'll need directions. Buy a guidebook containing a map or borrow one from your local library. If you don't want to lug a guidebook around, print off maps of the area or your route. Your phone's GPS can be turned on without using your data, but be warned. You may struggle to get a phone signal in remote locations, so it's not advisable to rely on it. However, some maps apps do have an offline

mode, which can load up pre-saved maps, so that could prove a useful resource.

Essentially, most of this boils down to three things. Do your preparation and research, and book as much in advance as possible to make life easier on your arrival. Make sure you're prepared when you get there, so you don't have to rely on locals and breaking down language barriers. And always ensure you know how to get home again, whatever method you travel. Taking the road less travelled can be fun and rewarding, as long as you're prepared, knowledgeable and safe.

TRAVEL RESOURCES

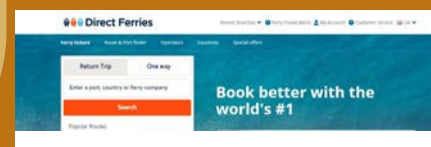
Check out these websites that help facilitate your off-the-beaten-track adventure



ROME 2 RIO

Put in your start and end destinations and Rome2Rio will check planes, trains and automobiles in order to find the best way to get from A to B.

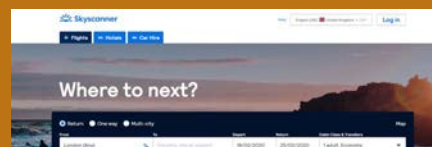
www.rome2rio.com



DIRECT FERRIES

If boat travel and being on the water is more your thing, Direct Ferries compares dozens of routes and cruise ship operators to find your ideal trip.

www.directferries.com/.co.uk



SKYSCANNER

Skyscanner compares hundreds of flights, allowing you to sort by price, speed and changeovers, and specify what flight time you're looking for.

www.skyscanner.net



INTERRAIL

If you're planning to see as much of Europe as possible, Interrail helps you plan your trip and gets you directly to thousands of locations that airports may not service.

www.interrail.eu/eurail.com

The WORLD'S COOLEST *Accommodation*

IF YOU WANT YOUR STAY TO BE MORE THAN JUST A BED FOR THE NIGHT,
SPICE IT UP BY CHOOSING SOMEWHERE TRULY DIFFERENT

By Alice Barnes-Brown



The Kakslauttanen Hotel in Finland is the perfect place to catch the Aurora Borealis



IGLOO HOTEL LAPLAND, FINLAND

FROM £450 PER NIGHT

If you'd love to watch the Northern Lights dance across the sky from the comfort of your bed, look no further. Scandinavia's famous igloo hotels are made entirely of glass, and their domed ceilings let you gaze up at the beauty of the night sky without being out in the cold.

You'll find them in the heart of arctic forests, away from the light pollution so it doesn't disrupt the view. Most igloos can sleep two to four people – perfect for that romantic break you've always dreamed of, or the culmination of an epic road trip with friends. Each igloo usually contains a toilet, and the larger ones even have showers, so you don't have to sprint to the shower block through a snowdrift.

The most famous glass igloo hotels can be found in Lapland, Finland, where Santa is said to live during the year. But if you want to go all in, you can stay in actual ice igloos all over Scandinavia. It will be chilly, but thermal sleeping bags and in-hotel saunas will ensure you stay warm. Inside these gargantuan ice hotels you'll find intricate ice sculptures right next to your bed, which is also made from blocks of – you guessed it – ice.

YURT CAMPING KYRGYZSTAN

£12-13 PER NIGHT

The nomadic tribes of Central Asia are famous for their unique living quarters: yurts. These circular tents provide a warm and spacious home, and if camping is your thing, you'll absolutely relish the opportunity to live like a local.

Kyrgyzstan has many yurt stays, where a local family hosts guests in a mini campsite filled with yurts. They're a cheap alternative to a hotel, and definitely more fun. Inside each tent, furnishings are minimal – you'll have a stuffed mattress instead of a bed, and seating mats instead of proper chairs. Toilets and showers are outside, but we promise it's an experience you'll remember for the rest of your life. However, the tents often contain cooking facilities, so you can try your hand at cooking up some of the local delicacies from the comfort of your yurt.

Sometimes, you'll be lucky enough to get taken on an adventure with your hosts. Whether they want to show you the sights, or get you to help them herd animals, every day will bring new surprises. Get away from the polluted streets of the city and take in the fresh air of the steppes – there's nothing quite like it.



Despite their appearance, yurts are incredibly wind-resistant and toasty



Each bungalow provides guests with a little taste of island paradise

BEACH BUNGALOWS BORA BORA, FRENCH POLYNESIA

FROM £500 PER NIGHT

We've all dreamt of staying in a cosy wooden bungalow, suspended over a clear blue lagoon, watching the fish pass beneath our feet. Such tranquillity can be found at many paradise destinations around the world, but one stands above the rest: Bora Bora.

Boasting a turquoise lagoon, which surrounds a verdant, dramatic mountain, it's as close to heaven on earth as you can get. The island boasts a huge variety of accommodation options, but you'll want to stay in an over-water bungalow to make the most of your stay. While these cabins may look cosy and perhaps a little too quaint, don't worry – they come

with all the mod cons the 21st-century traveller could ever possibly want.

Most are en-suite, so you don't need to worry about finding a toilet in the middle of the night and falling into the sea. The bungalows are often decorated in a traditional Polynesian style, with woven mats adorning wooden floors, and vibrant flowers decorating comfortable beds.

The pièce de résistance of staying here are the balconies, which allow you to step straight into the transparent lagoon when you fancy taking a dip in the warm waters. It's a real dream come true.



CAVE HOTELS CAPPADOCIA, TURKEY

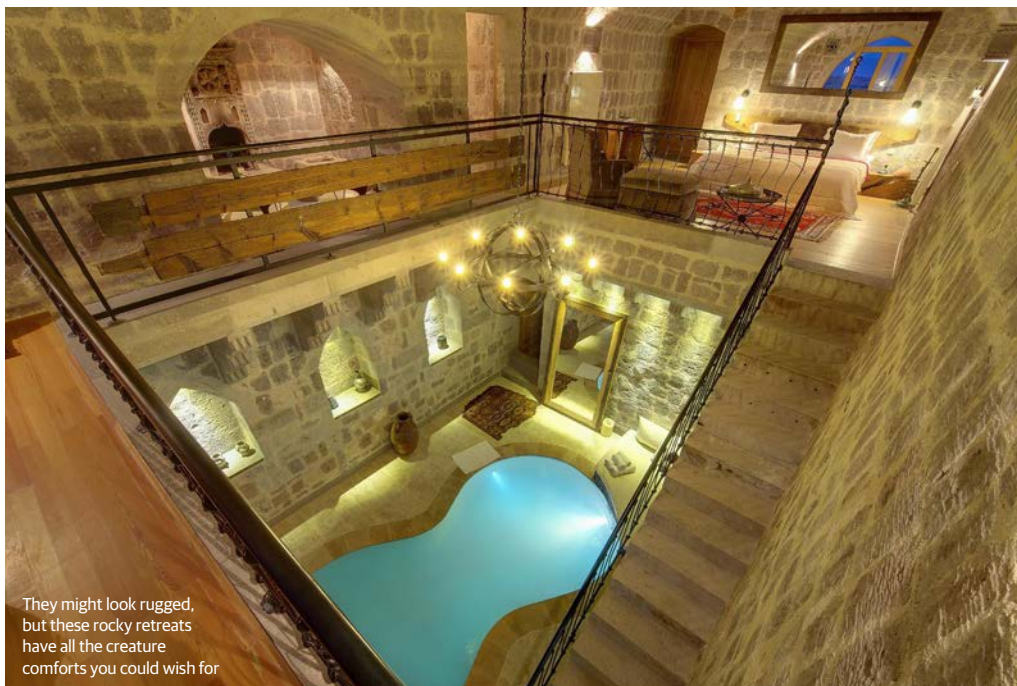
FROM £150 PER NIGHT

Cappadocia in central Turkey is known for its stunning natural landscape, most notably its 'fairy chimneys'. These were formed when volcanic eruptions rained down ash, which turned into rock, then eroded into irregular shapes depending on the hardness of the rock - leaving the chimneys poking up on the horizon.

Ever-resourceful creatures that we are, humans adapted to carve out entire lives inside these cosy caves, and Turkey has even built a tourist industry around them. For those looking for a night's stay unlike any other, visitors can opt to stay in a cave hotel. Some of these have been carved

directly out of the rock, others have included the caves as part of a larger building around it.

Many of these hotels boast terraces with fantastic views of the surrounding plains and fairy chimneys, and offer activities from Turkish cooking classes to hot air balloon rides over the area. The accommodation options range from fairly basic B&B-type hotels to the full works - luxury, five-star service. In some of the priciest establishments, you can stay in a suite with your very own swimming pool inside your cavern. It's perfect for those who really want to make the most out of Cappadocia's most famous attraction.



They might look rugged, but these rocky retreats have all the creature comforts you could wish for

COSTA VERDE

MANUEL ANTONIO
NATIONAL PARK,
COSTA RICA

FROM £275 PER NIGHT

This high-flying hotel is perfect for those who have always wanted their very own private jet.

Costa Verde Hotel in Costa Rica is no ordinary beach resort. Set close to the shoreline and immersed in the jungle, you'll awaken to the sound of exotic birds and monkeys going about their daily business. It prides itself on being eco-friendly, and alongside the wooden buildings, you'll find a pool deck with a view to die for.

But their eco-friendly stance goes a step further. Costa Verde's premier suite is actually set within the fuselage of a rescued-from-scrap Boeing 727, giving the former South Africa Air plane a new lease of life. Dressed head to toe in teak furnishings, this fully air conditioned, two bedroom suite is truly one of a kind.

The plane sits 50 feet above the rainforest canopy, so if you imagine hard enough, it's as if you're really flying. If you want to continue your aviation adventure, the hotel's restaurant a little way up the road is made from a salvaged American military plane, so you can dine in style - and trust us, the meals are much better than regular plane food.



The bright red airliner really sticks out against the rainforest canopy

The Taj Lake Palace in Udaipur requires guests to take a special boat service to reach it



PALACE HOTELS

RAJASTHAN, INDIA

FROM £340 PER NIGHT

India's palaces are unlike any other - their beautifully ornate, Mughal architecture contributes to their definitively Indian feel. With beautiful geometric patterned windows, domed towers and turrets with fantastic views, and symmetrical courtyards to rival the finest French gardens, they're a sight not to be missed. Inside these vast and ostentatious complexes, the Maharajahs and aristocrats of north India once lived - and now you can too.

In the state of Rajasthan (literally meaning 'land of kings'), there's a selection of grand, history-rich palaces that have been converted into luxury heritage hotels. As soon as you check in, you're given the full VIP treatment. Marvel at the decorated Mughal archways, decorative chandeliers and palm trees inside the lobby, before ascending grand staircases to your room.

Rest your head in a sumptuous four-poster bed, adorned with embroidered curtains in the local style. The luxury at these palaces doesn't stop there - many have pristine, photogenic swimming pools and spas for you to relax in. Their bars and restaurants give an exquisite taste of local cuisine, serving up delicious, spicy Rajasthani food and a selection of high-class cocktails.

Having featured in films such as *Octopussy*, and played host to a variety of celebrities, India's palace hotels are definitely something to check off your bucket list.

EAT, DRINK & BE MERRY

GASTRONOMIC GREATNESS, FROM BACKSTREET BOLTHOLES TO MICHELIN STAR SANCTUARIES

By Joanne Al-Samarai

Ishikawa

Tucked away down a cobbled backstreet of Kagurazaka, Tokyo's former geisha district, a three Michelin star restaurant hides behind discreet black doors. Those struggling to locate Ishikawa's entrance are assisted by courteous Kimono-clad staff, and led past a pond teeming with bright orange fish and across the stone threshold, which, in keeping with Shinto tradition, has been sprinkled with water. Inside, the traditional restaurant opens out into a soothing sanctuary of pale wood, minimal decor and clean lines. A slick, seven-seat, cypress-wood counter anchors the space while four small dining rooms offer guests a slice of privacy.

Following the tradition of kaiseki restaurants, Ishikawa serves up a series

of small, intricately prepared and beautifully plated dishes. Chef Hideki Ishikawa's 10-course tasting menu is his magnum opus, though several other fixed-course options are available, including a nine-course degustation menu. A feast for all the senses, dishes are a celebration of simplicity and fresh, seasonal ingredients. Stand-out delicacies include delicate sea turtle croquettes, deep-fried baby ayu fish, perfectly crisp snapper and clay-pot rice studded with scallops and sea urchin, which is presented tableside by the chef himself. Guests hoping to experience the gastronomic genius of Chef Hideki Ishikawa should book six to eight weeks ahead (when Japan reopens to international visitors).

TOKYO, JAPAN



© WIKI/City Foodsters

PERTH,
AUSTRALIA



© Image courtesy of Wildflower

Wildflower

Tucked within one of Australia's most beautiful buildings, Wildflower gazes out over Perth's vibrant Cathedral Square, and beyond to its iconic Swan River. The restaurant is centred around a thoughtful indigenous philosophy, reviving aboriginal farming and foraging practices with seasonal menus. Set within a former state building, renovated to stunning effect as the COMO The Treasury hotel, Wildflower celebrates the ebb and flow of Western Australia's natural environment.

Each dish is handcrafted to perfection with a meticulously considered selection of natural ingredients, telling the story of Australia's historic diet. The seasons

cycle from the breezy April-May period of Djeran, to the heavy rain of Makuru, transitioning from a time for fishing, to hunting kangaroo and emu. As the flowers bloom through the wet season of Djilba, Kambarang is when freshwater crayfish, fruit and yams are out in abundance. Finally, through the hotter seasons of Birak and Bunuru, fish, crab and mussels are paired with roots and flowers.

The menus are a spellbinding odyssey across the Aussie foodscape, each mouthful evocative of an eternal moment in time, all of nature rolled into one singular moment. Paired with delightful Australian wines and a view to die for, Wildflower is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.



Bern's Steak House

Just off the coast of Tampa's pristine Hillsborough Bay is one of America's most remarkable restaurants, Bern's Steak House. Its stucco exterior is deceptively stark – within lies a red velvet wonderland, dripping in gold, mahogany and chandeliers.

Founded in 1956 by New Yorkers Bern and Gert Laxer, the steakhouse serves up stunningly aged cuts, accompanied by 'Bern's greens', sourced from the family's two-acre farm – where all servers must first

train before being elevated to the ranks of restaurant staff.

The restaurant prides itself in its 20-strong caviar menu and stunning wine cellar, housing more than half a million bottles, spanning 6,800 varieties – often cited as the world's broadest and largest wine collection.

Upstairs is another wonder – the Harry Waugh Dessert Room. Here, visitors take delight in private booths crafted from wine casks and indulge in 50 varieties of decadent desserts.

FLORIDA, USA



© Bern's steak house

MUMBAI, INDIA



© Getty

Kyani and Co.

One of the oldest restaurants in Mumbai, Kyani and Co. oozes old-world charm. A time capsule, this Parsi café was founded in 1904 by an Iranian émigré. More than a century later, the walls are still adorned with dark wood panelling, the rickety ceiling fans still turn, and the tiled floor still hosts mid-century Bentwood chairs and round tables clad in red-and-white chequered cloths.

Located on a lively street in south Mumbai, Kyani and Co.

serve up quintessentially Parsi dishes – their recipes unchanged for decades – alongside some more recent additions, such as burgers and French fries. Freshly baked bread rolls dripping in butter, known as bun maska, are a heavenly treat, best served with cardamom-rich Irani chai.

Come lunchtime, fragrant aromas waft through the air, as mutton keema and chargrilled chicken seekh kebab are served with mountains of buttery rice.

LIMA, PERU



© Alamy

Al Toke Pez

Hidden away in Lima's Surquillo neighbourhood lies Al Toke Pez, a six-seat huarique, or hole in the wall, that serves up some of the boldest fusion fare in the city. Casual and unpretentious, the street-side spot offers busy punters quick, delicious food at affordable prices. The simple chalkboard menu is full to the brim with traditional Peruvian plates like ceviche, choritos a la chalaca and tiradito, all served up with a subtle Asian twist – the lime-infused ceviche is served with a side of fresh seaweed.

While the offerings remain largely unaltered, the ingredients vary depending on what chef and owner Tomas 'Toshi' Matsufuji is able to source

from the local market each morning. The son of Japanese-Peruvian chef, Dario Matsufuji, Toshi is of gastronomic pedigree, and cut his teeth at his father's acclaimed Nikkei restaurant, Matsuei in Miraflores. At Al Toke Pez, he cooks up a storm in front of the tiny counter and a fervent take-out line often stretches around the block.

Lucky punters are able to snag coveted counter seats wash down salty chicharrón – crispy pork belly – with glasses of chicha morada, a sweet, purple corn juice, which are refilled by Toshi's mother. Meanwhile, combination plates offer the perfect taster and include ceviche, seafood rice and freshly fried fish.

"Al Toke Pez is a hole in the wall that serves up some of the boldest fusion fare in the city"

Solas Tapas & Wine Bar

Known for its wild yet romantic landscapes, the Irish town of Dingle is fast becoming a food-lover's paradise. The jewel in the seaside town's crown has to be Solas Tapas & Wine Bar. Serving up delightful Irish interpretations of Mediterranean-style small plates, the cosy restaurant sources its ingredients almost exclusively from the Dingle Peninsula. From the tangy Wild Atlantic seaweed and mushroom croquettes to the popcorn squid served with peppered West Kerry honey, and from crisp pork belly to the seared duck and pickled beets, every plate thrills. Immaculately conceived

and authentic, the menu dreamed up by head chef Nicky Foley is both familiar and exciting.

The small plates are surprisingly satisfying but dessert is not to be missed. Poached pear arrives beautifully plated, accompanied by a classic dark chocolate mousse. However, the surprises don't end there. The carefully curated wine list offers an unexpected but brilliant selection of reasonably priced grape. The casual, wood-panelled restaurant has earned its spot in McKenna's guide to Ireland's top 100 restaurants, offering a truly special, fine-dining experience at reasonable prices.



DUBAI, UAE

Bu Qtair

Serving up simple, super-fresh seafood, Bu Qtair has stood the test of time in a place where few things remain unchanged for long. Since opening its doors in the 1980s, this no-frills fish joint has moved from a Portacabin with plastic chairs by Jumeirah Beach to a modest, air-conditioned restaurant near the luxury Burj Al Arab skyscraper, half a mile (0.8km) down the road. Despite the move, the team have remained true to their original formula – there's no menu, diners need to queue to order and it's cash only.

Maintaining the spirit of the old fish shack, Bu Qtair's options remain limited, but perfectly formed – fish or shrimp, marinated in a secret

mix of spices and flawlessly fried. The type of fish depends on the day's catch, but options usually comprise sheri, hamour, pomfret and snapper, while kingfish makes an appearance during the winter months. Basic sides of paratha or rice are ordered separately, so too is the tangy Kerala-style fish curry of coconut, turmeric, coriander and salty sardines, which serves as a spicy dip.

Word has spread of this jewel in Dubai – American TV chef Anthony Bourdain featured it in one of his gastronomic trips. Orders can be placed from 5:30pm, so diners should get there early, or prepare to wait – this spot is riotously popular and queues often stretch out the door.





Pho Gia Truyen

Nestled in Hanoi's Old Quarter is the family-owned restaurant Pho Gia Truyen. Unfussy and modest, the utilitarian interior features brisket suspended from the ceiling, and steaming cauldrons of ginger-spiked broth. Despite appearances, this unassuming eatery is considered by many to serve the best Pho in all of Vietnam.

Bowls are handed over full to the brim with rich bone broth that bursts with complex

flavours. Buried within lies a slithery nest of silky-soft rice noodles, while tender slivers of beef are heaped on top. With three different cuts of beef to choose from, there's something for every taste and budget.

A side of fried dough is highly recommended. Light as air, it's delicious dunked into the soup. With long queues and limited seating, travellers should go early and be prepared to share a table with the friendly locals.

HANOI,
VIETNAM



© Alamy

MENORCA,
SPAIN



© Getty

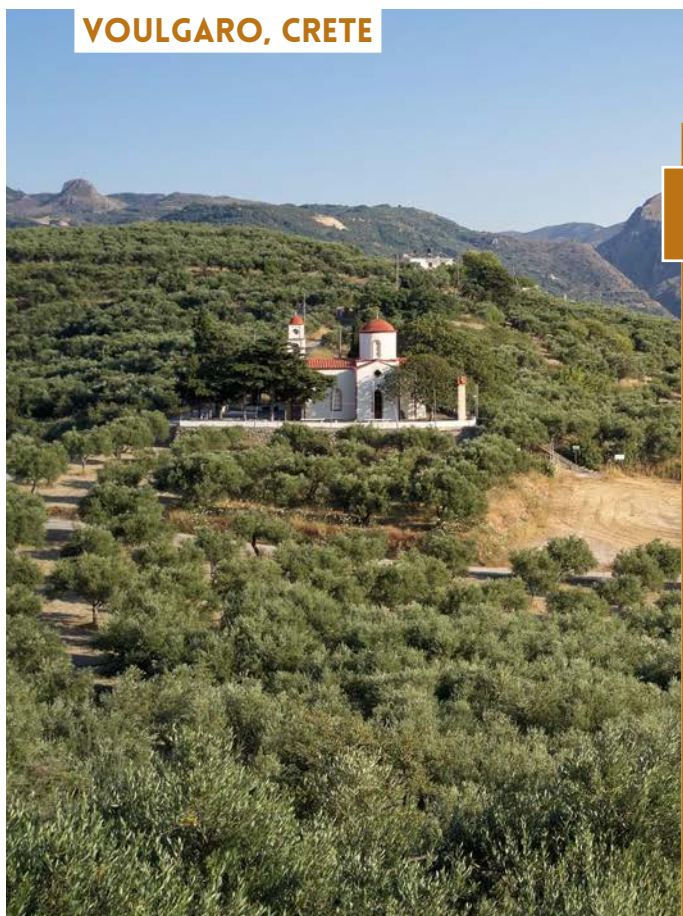
Cova d'en Xoroi

Carved from rock 25 metres above the startlingly blue Mediterranean Sea is Cova d'en Xoroi. Known to locals as 'The Caves', this laidback bar features a string of cosy caverns connected by dimly lit corridors and vast outdoor terraces that wrap around the cliff face and jut out above the ocean.

Open from midday, the bar's sprawling outdoor spaces offer views out to the horizon, which can be enjoyed with one of Cova d'en Xoroi's signature cocktails,

or a glass of fruit-infused sangria. Studded with day beds and sofas, the wooden terrace is also the perfect spot to relax as the tangerine sun slowly dips behind the horizon, to a soundtrack of mellow tunes courtesy of the live band. But, it's after dark that Cova d'en Xoroi really comes to life, as national and international DJs take to the stage and the space transforms into a chic club, pulsating with dance, house and electro beats.

VOULGARO, CRETE



Taverna Neratzoula

Lying five miles (8km) southeast of Kissamos, and a 45-minute drive from popular Elafonissi Beach, the idyllic village of Voulgaro is home to Taverna Neratzoula. Humbly furnished with long wooden tables and aromatic plants overflowing from huge terracotta pots, this unmissable family-owned eatery delivers hearty and genuine Cretan fare alongside a delicious selection of local wine.

Meals at Taverna Neratzoula begin with grilled feta, herb-speckled tzatziki and gold-green olive oil. Simple and classic, each dish is pared back to allow the flavours and local ingredients to shine through. The homemade Boureki pie is greaseless and light as a whisper, with perfectly flaky sesame-sprinkled phyllo, while the lamb chops are served

succulent and smoky. Homemade sausage and traditional moussaka also grace the menu, alongside a wonderful pork dish that's served up with locally produced honey and herbs. As with all good Greek meals, mains are accompanied by garden-to-table salads, replete with enormous homegrown tomatoes, pungent red onion and divine black olives.

With appetites satiated, shots of fiery raki – a local grape liquor – or anise-flavoured ouzo are an almost-obligatory ritual ('cheers' is 'yamas' – you'll need this!). A slice of delicious banoffee pie is the perfect way to end the meal, though bite-sized morsels of baklava served with triangles of juicy watermelon present a lighter and more traditional – but just as satisfying – option.

© Alamy

CITY SECRETS

BEHIND EVERY GREAT CITY IS A HIDDEN GEM, JUST WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED

By Hareeth Al Bustani

LONDON: *Highgate Cemetery*

IF YOU'RE ANYWHERE NEAR LONDON, MISSING OUT ON A VISIT TO THIS FAMOUS CEMETERY WOULD BE A GRAVE MISTAKE

Sprawled across one of London's highest points, Highgate Cemetery was one of seven graveyards commissioned in the 19th century to alleviate the strain that overpopulation had put on the capital's cemeteries. With bodies stuffed into any and every hole in the city, and undertakers dressing up as clergy to perform illegal funerals, overflowing corpses began to pose a risk to public health. Built over 17 acres of land and rising to 114 metres high, the cemetery paired exotic landscaping with epic architecture, such as Egyptian Avenue (a sweeping avenue of 16 vaults marked by a grand arch), the Gothic Terrace Catacombs and the Circle of Lebanon, built around an ancient cedar that

predated the cemetery. Sadly, it was recently condemned and had to be replaced with a new tree.

Having accrued more than 10,400 graves, an additional 20-acre plot was allocated to serve as the East Cemetery, where, in 1883, the cemetery's most famous resident, Karl Marx, was buried. Other notable graves in Highgate include those of the *Hitchhikers' Guide To The Galaxy* author Douglas Adams, musician Bert Jansch, Catherine Booth-Clibborn (founder of the Salvation Army in France and Switzerland) and bare-knuckle boxer Tom Sayers, whose funeral has gone down as the cemetery's best attended, with his faithful dog, Lion, serving as chief mourner.

HIGHGATE



MANHATTAN

NEW YORK: *The Explorers Club Headquarters*

GOT AN UNQUENCHABLE THIRST FOR ADVENTURE? WE KNOW WHERE YOU'LL FEEL RIGHT AT HOME...

On 28th May 1904, 50 of the world's foremost explorers gathered for dinner in New York to form an organisation devoted to celebrating and promoting their spirit of adventure – The Explorers Club. They even established their own headquarters, a place where they could socialise, share stories and display their books, documents, trophies and artefacts. Adventurers and scientists alike would stop by to share their experiences, or latest findings, and they even sublet part of the space to the Arctic Club of America, which was established by the Explorers Club founder, Henry Collins

Walsh. Walsh's ship later hit an iceberg and sank off the coast of Greenland.

The Club went from strength to strength, eventually moving into its current headquarters, a Jacobean townhouse at 46 East 70th Street, before eventually (finally!) opening its rolls to women for the first time in 1981.

Today, the Club has approximately 3,500 members from more than 60 countries, all devoted to fields as varied as polar exploration, zoology, aerospace exploration, oceanography, archaeology and conservation mountaineering. From June 2021, guests can again attend tours and lectures every Monday.



ROME: *Baths of Caracalla*

WHEN IN ROME... VISIT THE RUINS OF THESE COLOSSAL PUBLIC BATHS. WATER WAY TO SPEND A DAY!

Caracalla is best remembered as the tyrannical son of Septimius Severus ruler of the Roman Empire. The start of his reign was marked with the construction of a remarkable public work, the colossal Baths of Caracalla. It took 13,000 Scottish prisoners, 6,000 tradesmen and 21 million bricks to build the structure, with the central building measuring 214 by 114 metres. Meanwhile, 600

marble workers were employed to produce 6,300 cubic metres of marbled masterpieces. Striking mosaics of Hercules, Ajax and aquatic life decorated the pools.

The baths were abandoned after the 537CE siege of Rome destroyed the water supply. Although only ruins remain, they remain a testament to the might of Rome, and the colossal vision of its greatest builders.

SAN SABA



© Getty

YUEN LONG



HONG KONG: *Kat Hing Wai*

THIS LOVELY LITTLE VILLAGE WILL WELCOME YOU WITH OPEN ARMS... UNLESS YOU'RE A PIRATE OR A BANDIT

Kat Hing Wai is a time capsule of China's past. Housed behind blue-brick walls, the village was built by the Tang clan 500 years ago and is the best preserved of Hong Kong's walled villages. Designed to keep out bandits, pirates and invaders, cannons were mounted atop the village's 5.5 metre-high battlements and it was sealed with a heavy wrought iron gate.

In 1899, in a defiant defence against the new British colonial authorities, the people of Kam Tin took refuge behind the walls. When the Brits took the village, they sent its gate home as a trophy, only returning it 26 years later. The 400 residents have taken steps towards modernisation, but the outside walls, grid design and some original structures remain.

© Getty

MEHRAULI

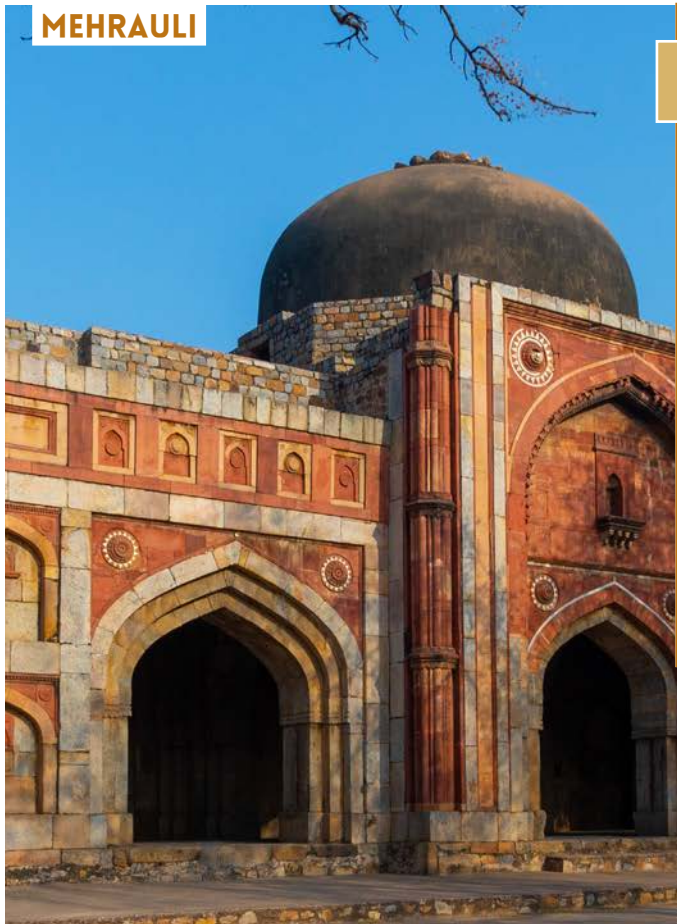
DELHI: *Jamali Kamali Mosque and Tomb*

**A TOMB WITH A VIEW IN BEAUTIFUL DELHI.
VISIT THE RESTING PLACE OF A REVERED SUFI SAINT**

Set in a beautiful park filled with roses and families playing cricket, the Jamali Kamali Mosque and Tomb (built in 1528) remains the final resting place of the Sufi saint Shaikh Fazlu'llah, also known as Jalal Khan, or Jamali. Jamali was a tutor and court poet to Sultan Sikandar Lodhi, and remained prominent after the Moghuls overthrew the Lodhi dynasty. Jamali's tomb also hosts a second person, called Kamali. Kamali has variously been speculated to be Jamali's son, brother, and even lover. Though small in size, its walls and ceiling

feature magnificently ornate patterned tiles, in vivid hues, accentuated by several of the saint's own verses.

The adjacent mosque is more typically Mughal in nature, with red sandstone walls punctuated by a white stone outline. Four central arches encircle a magnificent central arch, intricately decorated and flanked by fluted pillars. Quranic inscriptions adorn the walls, while staircases at either end rise to a narrow gallery with a series of oriel windows. A warning, though – it's said to be haunted!



© Getty

TOKYO: *Bunraku at Tokyo's National Theatre*

**WE'RE NOT STRINGING YOU ALONG WHEN WE SAY
THIS MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE IS ON ANOTHER LEVEL**

While Japan's distinct noh and kabuki theatre styles are instantly recognisable, the country's lesser-known bunraku puppet plays are an experience unlike any other. Each puppet is operated by a principal and two assistants, who manipulate the puppet's limbs, facial features and bodies, to dazzling effect. Dressed in all-black, they fade into elaborate backgrounds, allowing the audience to lose themselves in the meticulously detailed puppets. Just off stage, a shamisen player provides a consistent soundtrack, while a narrator speaks, shouts and sings,

voicing all the characters alone – be they men, women or children.

The plays are largely adaptations of classic stories and scripts, centred around tragedy and honour, such as *The Fight Over The Carriage At The Yoshida Shrine*. Though bunraku began as a commoner's form of entertainment in Osaka during the Edo period, it has worked its way into the heart of the capital's National Theatre. Non-Japanese speakers are in for a treat, with audio guides accompanying the stories so they can follow the narrative without issue.

© Getty

CHAI DARI

ATHENS: *Diomedes Botanical Garden*

**ESCAPE THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF THE CITY AND
EMBRACE NATURE IN THIS STUNNING OASIS**

Hidden away from the lure of the Acropolis is a secluded paradise, the largest botanical garden in Greece. The Botanic Garden of Julia and Alexander Diomedes opened in 1975, named after its benefactor, Diomedes, who used part of his fortune to establish a botanic garden for the study and protection of plants, trees and flowers. It was Athens, after all, that housed the world's first botanic garden, established by Aristotle's disciple, Theophrastus.

Spanning 186 acres at the feet of Mount Egaleo, it houses 500 species of

plants from across the world. From delightfully scented roses to tobacco and cork, there's a trove of gardens, historic plants, medicinal herbs, flowerbeds, pools and lakes to explore. The garden opens up to one of Attica's oldest natural pine forests and serves as a base for research, with a collection of 19,000 dried plants and 800 seeds. However, for most guests, it's just perfect for relaxing in the coffee shop and taking in the view, or spending an afternoon with a picnic beneath the shade of its eucalyptus and acacia trees.

© Alamy



BARCELONA: *Carmel Bunkers*

**YOU'LL FEEL ON TOP OF THE WORLD AT
BARCELONA'S BEST VIEWING POINT**

Barcelona is one of Europe's most beloved cities, but one of the best places to soak it all in often fails to make it onto itineraries. Built during the Spanish Civil War atop Turó de la Rovira, a 262-metre hill, The Carmel Bunkers once served as an anti-aircraft fortification.

After the war, the bunkers were overrun by the nearby shantytown and left to decay. However, the area was spruced up for the city's

1992 Olympics, allowing the bunker to step forward as one of the city's most stunning viewing points. A short hike rewards adventurers with views stretching out over Tibidabo Park, the ultra-modern Torre Agbar and Gaudi's masterpieces, such as the Sagrada Família, all the way down to the beach. On some evenings, bands and musicians play in the sunset, while dancers welcome the night.

CARMEL



© Getty

DARLING HARBOUR



© Getty

SYDNEY: *Chinese Garden of Friendship*

**DISCOVER A MAGICAL SECRET GARDEN IN THE HEART
OF SYDNEY AND WANDER THROUGH THE WILLOWS**

Hidden behind Darling Harbour is the Chinese Garden of Friendship, designed by landscape architects and gardeners from Sydney's sister-city, Guangzhou, to mark Australia's bicentenary in 1988. It's based on the Taoist principles of Yin and Yang – a harmony of opposites – and Wu-Xing, the balancing of the elements – fire, earth, water, metal and wood.

The gardens offer up a stunning slice of solitude. Rather than being laid out meticulously, they are curated to look perfectly wild, with a series of waterfalls, lakes and forests. Striking surroundings are interspersed with pavilions and sculptures, built around lagoons and a koi-filled lake, and a tranquil teahouse serves up contemporary Chinese fare.

BARRA DE GUARATIBA. WEST ZONE



RIO DE JANEIRO: *Sítio Roberto Burle Marx*

**A TROPICAL DREAM HOME HOUSES AN EXTRAORDINARY BOTANICAL
COLLECTION AND MORE ARTWORK THAN YOU COULD SHAKE A LEAFY STICK AT**

Widely recognised as a creative genius, architect Roberto Burle Marx may have studied in Berlin, but he was born and raised in Brazil. After returning home, he embarked on a storied career as a landscape architect, studying and drawing on the plants of his homeland – infusing his architectural language with patterns inspired by his paintings. As he ventured into the rainforest, he brought plant specimens back to his home, inspiring his groundbreaking work into tropical garden designs. Today, his West Zone home has grown into a landscape of 3,500 plant species,

immaculately curated to accentuate the region's natural mangroves, sandbank and Atlantic Forest.

Beyond the UNESCO World Heritage gardens are five reflecting pools and seven buildings, with a museum housing thousands of Marx's creations. Comprising prints, serigraphs, drawings, sculptures, tapestries, ceramic panels, paintings, jewellery, scenes and theatre costumes, it's the most significant collection of his work in the world. You can also view his collection of furniture, sacred art, pre-Columbian pottery, shells, design objects and folk art.

© WIKI/ Halley Pacheco de Oliveira

OSSEMENTS DE L'ANCIEN
CIMETIÈRE DE LA MAGDELEINE
(RUE DE LA VILLE LÉVÊQUE N^{OS} 1 et 2)
DÉPOSÉS EN 1844 DANS L'OSSUAIRE
DE L'OUEST ET TRANSFÉRÉS DANS LES
CATACOMBES EN SEPTEMBRE 1859.

PARIS: *The Paris Catacombs*

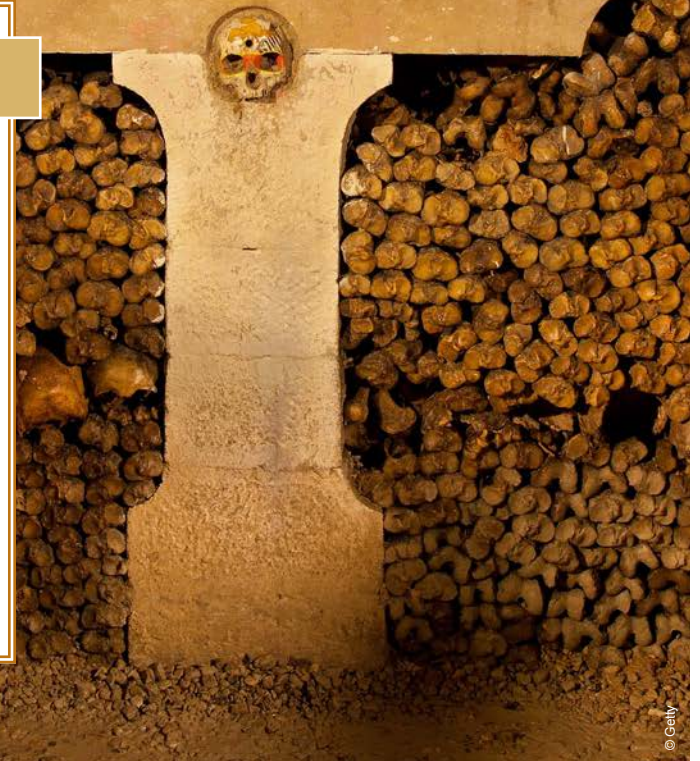
MAKE NO BONES ABOUT IT, THIS IS A TRULY MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE, DEEP BELOW THE STREETS OF PARIS

Buried 20 metres beneath Paris is a vast underground network of bones, neatly arranged en masse – stretching more than a mile (1.5km) and sprawled over four square miles (11 sq. km). The Paris Catacombs were founded in 1785, when local authorities decided to excavate a set of ancient abandoned quarries to make room for more graves.

Under the cloak of night, bones were removed from the tombs, common graves and charnel houses of Saints-Innocents cemetery and moved to the new catacombs, consecrated as the

Paris Municipal Ossuary. Bones were first hauled into a pair of quarry wells and then redistributed and haphazardly piled into galleries.

After the catacombs were opened to the public in 1809, its bones were reorganised into walls of alternating tibias and skulls, complemented with Antique and Egyptian-style columns, altars, steles and tombs. Despite a brief hiatus in activity, the site remained a popular place to reflect on death, for everyone from Charles X to the Austrian emperor, Francis I.



© Getty

OLD TORONTO

TORONTO: *Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre Centre*

LOVE THE THEATRE? YOU'LL FALL FOR TORONTO'S SPRAWLING, DOUBLE-DECKER COMPLEX IN A BIG WAY

As Toronto continues to put itself forward as the coolest city of tomorrow, it remains the home of one of the world's most curious creative institutions. More than a century old, the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre Centre is the last surviving stacked theatre complex on the planet. The theatres trace their roots back to 1913, when the Winter Garden Theatre was built seven storeys above what was then known as Loew's Yonge Street Theatre, later dubbed the Elgin. The Elgin was the very image of opulence, dripping in gold leaf and

cherubs. The Winter Garden, on the other hand, was a picture of pastoral perfection, with its ceiling clad in beech boughs and the twinkle of lanterns.

Despite playing host to everyone from George Burns to Sophie Tucker, the decline of vaudeville eventually drove the theatres out of business.

They were derelict until a \$29 million rejuvenation project in 1984. With an additional 6,040 square metres of lobbies, lounge areas, dressing rooms and rehearsal halls, the theatres have risen to new heights.



© Alamy



MARRAKESH: *Amal Center*

FEED YOUR SOUL AS WELL AS YOUR BELLY AT THIS BRILLIANT NON-PROFIT CENTRE

There is no shortage of tempting restaurants in Marrakesh, but Amal Center is about so much more than just the food. Dishing up a bevy of Moroccan delicacies, the restaurant features an array of veggie options, all served in its lovely courtyard. The secret to its heart-warming environment? It's a non-profit association dedicated to providing opportunities for underprivileged women.

Amal Center takes in women aged between 18 and 35 – often orphans, widows, divorcees or single mothers – and offers them four to six months' free training, preparing them for a job in the food industry. Trainees learn how cook and bake – including preparing delicious salads, sauces and desserts – and also study hygiene, Arabic literacy, French and English, alongside other skills.



GUELIZ

© WIKI/Picassa

DUBAI: *Hatta*

TRAVEL BACK IN TIME TO EXPERIENCE LIFE IN DUBAI BEFORE THE DISCOVERY OF OIL

Dubai is known for its futuristic skyline, but beyond the glitz lies a reminder of the UAE's humble past. An 80-mile (130km) drive into the Hajar mountain range lies Hatta, an historic farming community dating back to the Bronze Age. Here, the preserved and reconstructed Hatta Heritage Village revives traditional village life, and the Hatta Fort, built in 1896, overlooks the area, with

walls of stone and mud bricks, and a roof of palm fronds and mud.

Falaj irrigation systems breathe life into palm trees, a green carpet rolled out towards the star of the show, the wadis. As heavy rain falls, these barren valleys are transformed into an adrenaline junkies' wonderland, perfect for exploring on foot, jeep or bicycle. The centrepiece is Hatta Dam, best enjoyed via kayak or paddleboard.



HATTA

© Getty

SEA OF MARMARA



ISTANBUL: *The Princes' Islands*

A CHAIN OF NINE ISLANDS ON THE TURKISH COAST WHERE MOTORISED VEHICLES ARE BANNED? SIGN US UP!

A short ferry trip south of Istanbul are nine isles – the Princes' Islands. Known in Turkish as Adalar, or the Red Islands, they were once the home of exiled Byzantine nobles and banished Ottoman royalty. After being kicked out of the USSR, Leon Trotsky lived on the largest island, Büyükada, for a while.

Today, visitors to Büyükada can study the islands' history, geology,

flora, architecture, culture and food at the Museum of the Princes' Islands. Also on Büyükada, high on a hill, is the Church & Monastery of St George, a delightful little sanctuary with an adjoining restaurant and glorious views. Meanwhile, on the second-largest island of Heybeliada, horses pull carriages among the sweeping pine groves and beautiful beaches.

© Getty

HOUGANG



SINGAPORE: *Kampung Lorong Buangkok*

AN IDYLIC VILLAGE THAT SINGAPOREANS ARE FIGHTING TO PRESERVE, VISIT THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

Amidst the soaring property prices of Singapore is a sanctuary, where kids fish in the river and chickens wander freely. The village of Kampung Lorong Buangkok was founded in 1956, when a Chinese medicine seller bought a plot of rural land and began leasing it to Malay and Chinese families, who built small houses on their plots. Today, just 28 families remain in

the village. The last traditional kampong village in Singapore, it's actively fighting redevelopment.

The village is run by the original owner's daughter. Her land is now worth £18 million but she refuses to sell, and keeps rent low – £4-£17 a month. Those unable to pay can make up the difference in rice or homegrown jackfruit, banana, tomatoes, chilli and lime.

© WIKI/GRPS





AMERICAS

32 FERNANDO DE NORONHA

33 KAIETEUR FALLS

34 SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

35 QUITO

36 VALPARAÍSO

38 COPPER CANYON

39 CHOQUEQUIRAO

40 PURMAMARCA

41 COCORA VALLEY

42 CERRO CASTILLO

43 MENDOZA

44 LAS LAJAS

45 PARAMARIBO

46 LOGAN

47 QUEBEC CITY

48 DENVER

49 ROCK CITY

50 ST. JOHN'S

51 HIGHWAY 99

52 NORTHEAST GREENLAND



Image source: Getty Images

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Some beaches are closed on certain days, so check what's open with your hotel before heading out.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

August to January
(the dry season)

TIME ZONE

UTC-2

USEFUL SITES

noronhabookers.com/index.html

visitbrasil.com/destinations/fernando-de-noronha.html

parnanoronha.com.br

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly to the islands from Recife or Natal, or take a chartered cruise.



BRAZIL

FERNANDO DE NORONHA

FIND YOUR OWN PIECE OF PARADISE IN THIS REMOTE BRAZILIAN ARCHIPELAGO

Almost 2,500 kilometres (1,500 miles) away from the busy beaches of Copacabana sits Brazil's true tropical dreamscape: the 21 islands that make up Fernando de Noronha. Dramatic, almost vertical mountains (think Sugar Loaf in Rio) meet gentle, crystalline waters, bordered by dazzling white sand and verdant palm trees. You won't find the tourist crowds and their coconut cocktails here, either – the islands are a Maritime National Park, dutifully protected by Brazilian law.

The archipelago is comprised of the summits of submerged mountains, which explains its unusual landscape. But because they are so far away from the South American mainland, these jaw-droppingly beautiful islands have remained largely uninhabited – even today, only about 5,000 people live there. Because of the lack of human activity, all kinds of plants and animals have been able to thrive in the island's climate and rich ecosystem. If you're a budding David Attenborough, you'll be able to identify sea turtles, whales, albatrosses and many more, some of which are totally unique to the area.

In fact, Charles Darwin himself stopped at the islands during his famous Beagle voyage, and was astonished by what he found. "The whole island is one forest and this is so thickly intertwined that it requires great exertion to crawl along. The scenery was very beautiful, and large magnolias and trees covered with delicate flowers ought to have satisfied me." The great naturalist's opinion is just one of many favourable reviews of Noronha.

Nearly 200 years later, the natural beauty that entranced Darwin is still to be found. Immerse your senses in the teeming jungle, and always be on the lookout for the exotic animals and plants you may find along the way.

Or, head out onto one of many perfect praias (beaches), such as Sancho or Conceição, and discover the marine life swimming about in the shallows – if you don your snorkel, you're sure to see a rainbow of fish and plants. Go deeper with a dive tour of the islands, and you might be lucky enough to get close to rare dolphins and turtles. You shouldn't even need a diving suit – the waters are warm, and visibility can reach as far as 50 metres (164 feet).

If you'd prefer to simply sit back and soak up the tranquillity, you'll find there's plenty of space on the sand for your towel and reef-safe sunscreen. Because tourist numbers are heavily limited to preserve the fragile ecosystem, people are few and far between – it'll be like your own desert island retreat.

Getting to Fernando de Noronha is an adventure all by itself, so it's only for the intrepid! Tourist numbers are limited to just 500 people per day, so you need to do your research to find out how you can become one of these lucky few. Be sure to get permission and flights in advance. You'll have to fly from the cities of Recife or Natal, and while Noronha's hotels are stunning, they are expensive. It's also worth mentioning that tourists have to pay a daily tax to be on the island (about £11/\$15 per day), as well as a tax to enter the national park (roughly £30/\$40 daily) so the costs can mount up.

However, if visiting this dream destination is top of your list, then money won't matter when you're walking barefoot on the sand, free to act like no one else is around you – because they really aren't.



GUYANA

KAIETEUR FALLS

THIS STUNNING WATERFALL IN THE DEPTHS OF THE AMAZON IS WELL WORTH THE TREK

Views, adventure, scale... Guyana's Kaieteur has it all. As the world's largest single drop waterfall, one of its most powerful, and set in the picturesque Amazon rainforest, a trip here is guaranteed to leave you speechless at one of nature's greatest and most profound wonders. With a total drop of 251 metres, it's five times the height of Niagara Falls.

The waterfall's name, according to lore, comes from an ancient chief called Kai who sacrificed himself to protect his tribe from a vengeful mountain spirit. Rediscovered by the British geologist Charles Barrington Brown in 1870, the Falls are now a part of the Kaieteur National Park, which was created in 1930 to preserve the local scenery, fauna and flora – and, of course, the Falls. Kaieteur has something for everyone, from its many famed and rare wildlife and ecological species to its stunning photo opportunities.

En route to Kaieteur Falls is the exquisite Baganara Island Resort. Combine the feeling of calm that comes with its remote location with an exciting kayak trip down the Essequibo River, or paddle-board along the water's gentler stretches.

From here, you can fly from Cheddi Jagan International Airport into Kaieteur Falls Airport.

There's a number of lodges near the Falls, and after all the other visitors head back to civilisation, it's an enchanting experience staying the night and enjoying the solitary experience in the jungle. If you're looking for more adventure, why not try abseiling further down the river, or, if you're even less fearful, abseiling down the side of the waterfall!

The lodges and local airports serve the delectable cuisine that Guyana is known for. Curry can be served with chicken, lamb, duck and seafood as well. Do try a plate of Metagee during your stay – a delicious dumpling dish that's cooked in coconut milk and flavoured with grated coconut, a popular meal with the locals. Guyanese cuisine also borrows from the ethnic groups and immigrants that have made Guyana home. For instance, sample a local spin on the classic Chinese chow mein. Make sure you also try the garlic pork, a traditional Guyanese spin on a Portuguese delicacy.

It might be distant and well tucked away, but Kaieteur's charm demands a place on any intrepid traveller's bucket list.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

You'll need to book a local tour or charter a plane, but book early to avoid price rises.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September to November is the high water season, when the Falls are at their best.

TIME ZONE

UTC-4

USEFUL SITES

baganara.net

guyanatourism.com/kaieteur-falls

dagron-tours.com/hotels/kaieteur-guest-house.htm



HOW TO GET THERE

There aren't any regularly scheduled flights to Kaieteur, so you'll need to book with a Georgetown tour operator and hope they get enough passengers for the flight to go ahead. Or, for real adventure, spend a few days hiking to the Falls with a tour group!



MEXICO

SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

A PICTURESQUE CITY WITH CHARM, ROMANCE, AND EYE-POPPING ARCHITECTURE

One of the most beautiful cities in Mexico, if not the world, is nestled in the state of Guanajuato. Recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, the city is known for its stunning colonial architecture, cobbled streets and cosmopolitan feel.

Wandering the old streets of San Miguel's historic centre, which has remained almost unchanged for 250 years, you can't help but stumble across architectural marvels. But make sure you don't miss the city's most famous building – its parish church, the Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel. This 17th-century church is famous for its characteristic pastel pink towers and its incredible neo-Gothic facade, added in 1880. This is far from the only church worth

a visit in the city. Oratorio de San Felipe Neri showcases a mix of Baroque and indigenous styles and dates from the 18th century. Inside the church, you can find an extravagant chapel from 1735 called the Santa Casa de Loreto and a series of 33 oil paintings depicting the life of San Felipe Neri, who founded the Oratorio Catholic order.

Return to the city's historic centre and its main square of El Jardín in the evening to see its architecture illuminated and hear mariachi music floating through the air as you immerse yourself in the city's romanticism and enjoy the many great bars and restaurants in the area.

It's worth taking a trip north of the city for one more church, which features stunning murals, chiefly created by Antonio Martínez de

Pocasangre, earning it the moniker of Mexico's Sistine Chapel. The Sanctuary of Atotonilco plays an important part in Mexican history, with icon of the Mexican independence movement Ignacio Allende marrying in the church in 1802 and later taking the shrine's banner as the flag of the independence rebels.

There are a great selection of museums to choose from in the city. On the one hand, you can take in the fine arts at Escuela de Bellas Artes, a former monastery which features murals from Pedro Martínez and rotating temporary exhibitions featuring local artists. For something a bit different, we'd recommend Museo La Esquina. The museum features a collection of toys from across Mexico that offers a picture of Mexico and its culture through play.

©Getty/ferrantraite

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If you're lucky enough to get an invitation to a Mexican's home, know that being on time is considered rude.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

February (to ensure you don't miss out on Carnival)

TIME ZONE

UTC-6

USEFUL SITES

visitsanmiguel.travel
elcharco.org.mx
museolaesquina.mx

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly to Leon, just over an hour away. Public buses can be taken from Mexico City.





Image source: Getty Images

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

A free walking tour leaves from Community Hostel, Pedro Fermin Cevallos at 10:30am Monday to Saturday.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

January to June

TIME ZONE

UTC-5

USEFUL SITES

whc.unesco.org/en/list/2
pps.org/places/capilla-del-hombre-chapel-of-the-man
freewalkingtourecuador.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly in from all over the world, but the tourist train is a more epic experience.



ECUADOR

QUITO

STUNNING HISTORICAL ARCHITECTURE ON THE INSIDE,
A DRAMATIC MOUNTAIN RANGE ON THE OUTSIDE

Dramatically set high in the Andes, with the volcano of Pichincha providing a jaw-dropping backdrop to the city, Ecuador's capital, Quito, is a city that will delight you with a variety of stunning sights.

To get yourself a great view of the city, you've got a couple of options. One is to visit an important symbol of Quito, the winged Virgin Mary, located at the top of El Panecillo. Alternatively, jump on to the TelefériQo cable car for a ten-minute ride to the top of Cruz Loma. From that 4,100-metre (13,000-foot) vantage point, you can stare in awe at the surrounding mountains and the city nestled far below.

Get stuck into the city itself by exploring Quito's historic district, one of the oldest and best preserved old towns in the world. Consider

starting off in the Plaza Grande, where you'll find the Presidential Palace. From here, you can roam off into cobbled streets to enjoy the Old Town's incredible colonial architecture. Make sure you stop off at Calle de la Ronda, a street packed with cafes, art galleries and shops.

There is a bounty of beautiful churches vying for your attention in Quito – make sure you visit at least some of them. From the aforementioned Plaza Grande, you're a short hop from the 17th-century Compañía de Jesus. The Spanish Baroque style of the exterior is already something to behold, but just wait until you get inside. The church's interior is lavishly decorated, with gold covering almost every centimetre of the place.

The Basílica del Voto Nacional is also not far from the historic Old Town, showcasing a Gothic

style where gargoyles have been substituted for Ecuadorian wildlife. Here, you can enjoy the spectacle of its huge stained glass windows, or the view from the top of its tower.

If you're looking for interesting museums, Quito won't disappoint either. Capilla del Hombre is a creation of Ecuadorian artist Oswaldo Guayasamín, dedicated to the people of Latin America and the suffering they have had to endure. The art exhibit features murals and sculptures and is located next to a museum with a larger collection of Guayasamín's work. The Museo Nacional is also well worth a visit, defined by its modern architecture. It is a huge repository of Ecuadorian art and contains many fascinating pieces going back as far as 12,000 BCE, giving you a fascinating look at Ecuador's culture and history.



CHILE

VALPARAÍSO

A COLONIAL MASTERPIECE AND BOHEMIAN HIDEAWAY

Curving its way around the Chilean coast, the melting pot of Valparaíso conjures up its own unique brand of magnificence, overflowing with art and imagination. Long the muse of many an artist, poet and musician, the 'Jewel of the Pacific' is a dizzying labyrinth of mural-covered alleyways, colonial plazas and bohemian haunts.

The city's UNESCO-recognised historic quarter is a remarkable example of 19th-century Latin American architecture and urbanism. It wraps itself like an amphitheatre across the coast and hills, spewing out multicoloured houses and dainty church spires. Once one of South America's most important seaport cities, since the opening of the Panama Canal in

1914, it has reinvented itself as a bastion of cultural diversity.

Climbing casually up the hills are the city's 16 iconic funiculars, ancient-looking boxes that serve as elevator-cum-cable cars, creeping up railway tracks. Characteristically colourful, the El Peral route unfolds over the cityscape, unveiling spectacular views rolling all the way down to the Pacific coast, where surfers snap their wetsuits ready for the next wave and lovers lap up ice creams, racing against the sun.

The city's oldest lift, Ascensor Concepción, delivers passengers to the graffiti-washed walls of Paseo Dimalow, dripping in wacky graffiti murals, and the Disneyesque green-roofed Iglesia Luterana de la Santa Cruz church. Alongside the urban art, bars and restaurants

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Be careful of your belongings when exploring the port district – it's well known for pickpockets and petty criminals

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to April for shoulder season weather and crowds

TIME ZONE

UTC-4

USEFUL SITES

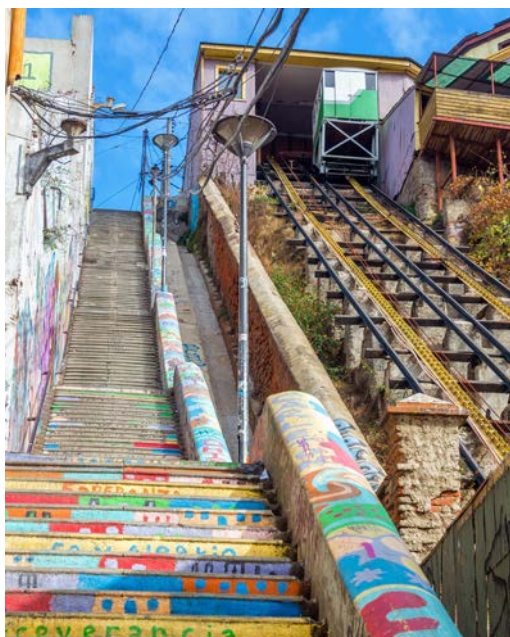
chile.travel
thisischile.cl
myvalparaiso.cl

HOW TO GET THERE

Regular buses ferry passengers from Santiago's Pajaritos Bus Terminal.



"The historic quarter is a remarkable example of 19th-century urbanism"



Street art adds more colour to the rainbow rows of houses

serve up ceviche, tickling menus with foreign flair, with food accompanied by some seriously creative cocktails.

Elsewhere, the cafes of Plaza Sotomayor offer a moment's pause. Overlooking the city's bustling port, the Monumento a los Héroes de Iquique pays tribute to the Chilean sailors who died at the Battle of Iquique, with its subterranean mausoleum housing their remains. Dominating the rest of the square is the baby-blue colonial naval command centre, Edificio Armada de Chile.

Across the city, scores of boutique galleries and art collaboratives worm their way through alleyways and up the hills. Spaces like Espacio Rojo and Bahía Utópica showcase the best of Valparaíso's home-grown talents, highlighting the role their mutual muse – the city itself – plays in the creative process. One of the most curious entries is Palacio Baburizza, the Art Deco and Art Nouveau former home of a Croatian resident, and now a school of fine art.

Meanwhile, the city's former prison is a shining beacon of Valparaíso's impressive metamorphosis. Once the place where Pinochet held and tortured political prisoners, it was reinvented and reopened as an art and culture centre, Parque Cultural de Valparaíso, in 2013. While murals enliven the old exercise yard, other spaces host art exhibitions, educational talks and live performances. Just across the sculpture-studded garden stands the ultra-modern concrete theatre, with a spirited schedule of shows.

Merely a stone's throw away, two old cemeteries sprawl across the city's undulating, picturesque hilltops. The final resting place of many of the city's most respected residents, Cementerios 1 and 2 are replete with row upon row of baroque tombs which rise from the ground like miniature palaces, adorned with angels, wreaths and crosses. Close by, the Cementerio de Disidentes, which is

decidedly less grand, marks the spot where 800 Protestants, mainly English and European immigrants, were buried.

For a change of pace, travellers can head downtown to Barrio Puerto, the lively port district. Amid the bars, waterfront restaurants and craft stalls, some architectural gems remain intact, including the former Banco de Londres – a grand structure adorned with bronze and marble-work – and the elegant Turri Clock Tower, which stands opposite. For a view of the city from the sea, boat tours depart regularly from Muelle Prat, soaking in all of the port's historic sights.

Back on dry land, travellers head east in search of fresh seafood. At Caleta Portales, local fishermen hawk the day's catch while hungry pelicans watch in envy and sea lions sunbathe belly up on the wooden pier. Close by the La Mercado Cardonal buzzes as locals tout fruit, vegetables and seafood. Here food stalls serve up fresh, lemony ceviche and empanadas de marisco, all washed down with pisco sour.

Back in the historic heart of Valparaíso, the gastronomic experience is no less exciting. Housed in a 19th-century building, Café Turri serves up a mouth-watering selection of Chilean dishes, like shellfish doused in whisky and cumin, juicy pork loin balanced by raspberry sauce and super-fresh octopus carpaccio. Nearby the terrace of renowned restaurant La Concepción offers the perfect spot to reflect with crab-meat stuffed ravioli, fillet steak and a host of other traditional plates.

Meanwhile, perched atop La Sebastiana is the former home of the city's most beloved alumni, Pablo Neruda. Every New Year's Eve he enjoyed watching South America's largest fireworks display from the comfort of his own home. Though there's much uphill walking to be done, as Neruda once wrote, "If we walk up and down all the stairs of Valparaíso we'll have walked all round the world."

Castle Wulff was built in 1910, and is a romantic spot to watch the sunset



VIÑA DEL MAR

Just 10km away from Valparaíso's old heart is Viña del Mar. Literally translated as 'Vineyard of the Sea', this verdant suburb is a world away from the gritty urban chic of Valparaíso.

Water fountains and flower displays replace street art and hawker stalls. Afternoon strolls in the park are a popular pastime for locals, and there's no better place to join them than in Quinta Vergara. Besides fragrant wildflowers and crunchy gravel paths, there's a large amphitheatre (where the famous International Song Festival is held every February. Think the Latin American version of Eurovision). You can also visit the Palacio Vergara, a Venetian gothic building that once housed Viña del Mar's founders, the Vergara family.

If extroverted castles are your thing, check out Castle Wulff, a turreted seaside retreat built by a wealthy German immigrant. Hilltop, Disney-esque Brunet Castle is also one to explore.



MEXICO

COPPER CANYON

THRILL SEEKERS AND NATURE LOVERS ALIKE KNOW AND LOVE THIS BEAUTIFUL AREA

Northern Mexico's most spectacular attraction, the Copper Canyon is a series of massive canyons in the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains in the state of Chihuahua. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it's immensely popular with hikers and mountain bikers, as the canyons are said to be four times larger and deeper than those of the Grand Canyon across the border.

Most of Copper Canyon's attractions are in and around the town of Creel. The most common access point to the canyon, Creel is also home to the Recoahuata Hot Springs. There are many springs in the area, but these are famed for their riverside vista and brightly coloured pools.

The area is home to three valleys, imaginatively known as the valley of the Frogs, the Mushrooms and the Monks, the latter of which features towering rock formations resembling the valley's namesake monks. All three valleys are in Creel, and it is well worth taking a moment to admire Mother Nature's masterful sculptures. Mother Nature continues her great work a little further on, as the area is well known for its jaw-dropping waterfalls, the largest being Piedra Volada (which, at a staggering 453 metres high, is the 11th tallest in the world). Located deep in the

Copper Canyon, it is only accessible on foot. It's definitely worth the hike there.

For experienced climbers, the Peña del Gigante is not to be missed. The highest vertical rock face in Mexico (and according to some estimates, the greatest peak in all of North America), it is certainly a sight to behold. It's probably best avoided if you suffer with vertigo, though!

Lodgings are plentiful throughout the towns located around the canyon, of which Divisadero and Creel are the most popular. Camping is also an option and there are many sites that will allow you to pitch a tent so you can enjoy the atmosphere of the natural surroundings. Should you be in the area in July, you'll catch the cycling festival and race series popular with Mexico's thriving mountain and road biking scene.

There really is something in this region for everyone. When most people think of Mexico, they imagine the white beaches of the south, but for those in search of some adventure, the less-travelled valleys of the north are ideal for both independent explorers and families alike.

"The canyons are four times larger and deeper than those of the Grand Canyon"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Barrancas del Cobre Adventure Park has one of the world's longest ziplines. It can reach terrifying speeds of up to 84mph!

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The dry season – December to April. The cooler months are December to February, but temperatures can still reach 28°C.

TIME ZONE

UTC-7

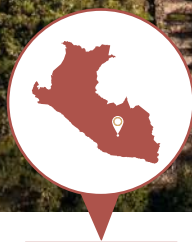
USEFUL SITES

chepe.mx
parquebarrancas.com
wikitravel.org/en/Copper_Canyon

HOW TO GET THERE

The region is easily explored by train, which crosses the country's rugged terrain.





PERU

CHOQUEQUIRAO

TREK INTO THE ANDES TO VISIT MACHU PICCHU'S 'HIDDEN SISTER'

Where Machu Picchu draws in thousands of people each day, the remarkable ruins of Choquequirao barely see a dozen, making this a true hidden gem of the Andes. The route presents travellers with an alternative and more challenging adventure to the popular Inca Trail.

Harder to reach yet just as scenic, the path to Choquequirao takes you alongside vast valleys and mountain ridges through the Andes, with expansive views over rivers and forests that eventually fade as you ascend into the mist. Climb to over 3,000 metres (9,842 feet) where you uncover the settlement's historical importance, which dates back nearly 500 years. Built on a flattened ridge and ringed with stones to stop it sliding down the mountain, most of the buildings at the Choquequirao site were either designed for ceremonial purposes, residences for the priests, or used to store food.

There has never been a better time to travel to Peru to tackle the Choquequirao trek, as there are plans in place to construct a cable-car system that will transform this tranquil settlement forever. Once it's up and running, the Peruvian government is expecting to see more

than 200,000 visitors a year to the site. As it stands, construction is still in its infancy, but it's still best to go before it's discovered by the rest of the world.

On foot, it's a three- to five-day round trek to the Choquequirao settlement and totals 58 kilometres (36 miles), but it can be extended and combined with an eight-day onward journey to Machu Picchu. There are three trails that can take you to the Incan settlement, with the first, and most popular, starting at Cachora. There's also a starting point at Huanipaca and another at Yanama.

Once you reach Choquequirao, expect to spend a night camping there to experience the solitude and amazing views from the ruins out into the Andes. As only about 40 per cent of Choquequirao has been excavated, this is still a relatively untouched archaeological site. Don't leave these ruins without facing the famous, endurance-testing llama terraces; a set of steep steps situated outside the main complex to test even the most hardened hiker.

"There has never been a better time to travel to Peru to tackle the Choquequirao trek"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Prepare for high altitude by acclimatising in Cusco for at least one day before trekking to Choquequirao.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

During the dry season, between May to November

TIME ZONE

UTC-5

USEFUL SITES

tinyurl.com/5epjpvw
peruhop.com/choquequirao-trek
wikitravel.org/en/Choquequirao

HOW TO GET THERE

From Cusco, take a bus to Abancay and get off at Ramal de Cachora.





ARGENTINA

PURMAMARCA

RICH CULTURE AND BREATHTAKING VIEWS IN A QUAIN NORTH ARGENTINE VILLAGE

Purmamarca translates to 'Town of the Virgin Land' in the indigenous Aymara language of the Andes highlands. This tiny town is home to one of Argentina's pueblos autenticos (or Authentic Peoples), whose heritage the government is working to promote. Recent road connections have opened up the village to tourists, but it's still largely unspoiled by modern development.

Purmamarca is nestled at the foot of the Cerro de los Siete Colores (the Hill of Seven Colours), a multicoloured geological spectacle in Argentina's Jujuy Province. Its stripes are a result of 600 million years of marine and continental sediments. Stop at the outskirts of Purmamarca on your way there to get the best panoramic view of the hill. Keen climbers can brave the more rocky paths of the Siete Colores, but the Paseo de los Colorados is a 1.8 mile (3km) trail that allows you to walk around the hill and

appreciate the rock formations. Llama tours are available – at the discretion and timing of the llamas! Be sure to donate to the local efforts to maintain the viewing paths, and opt for llama tours that care for the welfare of the animals.

Just off the main town square of Purmamarca is the Iglesia de Santa Rosa de Lima, a simple cathedral built in the 17th century with adobe and cactus wood. Masses take place on Sundays, which both the faithful and curious observers can attend. In addition to the village's Catholic tradition, you may witness celebrations such as misa-chico (the dead worship), Carnival or the Pachamama (Mother Earth) festival in August. The village cemetery offers some insight into the unique way that local Andean beliefs have mingled with Catholic spirituality.

The Purmamarca Craft Fair is probably the busiest market in North Argentina and features ponchos made of alpaca, llama and vicuña wool, carpets, masks, ceramics and other goods

made by local artisans. Things are priced on the higher side but don't be afraid to bargain with the sellers, especially if you're buying multiple items. Inquisitive collectors can also venture into the side streets for rarer finds. After a hard day's shopping, enjoy a tasty meal in one of the many restaurants in the village. Alongside regional treats such as empanadas and tamales, you can actually sample llama meat!

"Llama tours are available – at the discretion and timing of the llamas!"



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Arrive early – the colours of the hills look especially spectacular just after sunrise.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

January to March and September to December – it's not too hot or too cold.

TIME ZONE

UTC-3

USEFUL SITES

thecrazytourist.com/
15-best-things-to-do-in-purmamarca-argentina
welcomeargentina.com/purmamarca
andesnomads.com/en/argentina/purmamarca/



HOW TO GET THERE

Tours and buses to Purmamarca via Jujuy leave from Salta every day (about five hours each way). Alternatively, rent a car.



© Gaty

COLOMBIA

COCORA VALLEY

EXPERIENCE THIS PICTURE-PERFECT NATURAL AND PHYSICAL WONDER

If you like natural wonders, horticultural marvels and valleys as far as the eye can see, you really need to book a trip to Cocora Valley immediately! Located near the Quindio River, within the Los Nevados National Natural Park, the valley is home to a splendid adventure – a South American secret paradise.

Cocora takes its name from the daughter of a local Quimbayan Chief, Acaime, and means 'star of water'. It is home to the iconic national tree of Colombia – the 60 metre tall Quindio wax palms. There's also a variety of plants and animals that are protected by Cocora Valley's national status. The climate is quite cool when rainy, but also very hot when the sun is strong. The park provides a nice communal experience – a growing number of enthusiasts make the journey to hike in the area.

You can drive right up to the valley car park, which is just a five-minute walk to the main attraction. But if you're really keen on the hike, there's a five-hour round-trip hiking route from the charming town of Salento, which gives you an incredible view of the entire valley. The

anticlockwise route is more difficult but easier on the knees on the descent. Also check out some of the incredible activities on offer, such as bird watching, mountain biking, horse riding, rafting, scenic flights, cable car riding, coffee farms, waterfalls and swimming in the rivers. Make sure to check out the Acaime Hummingbird Sanctuary when here – an absolute delight filled with buzzing birds.

Before your trip, grab some lunch. Try the large packed lunch with a chicken sandwich from Brunch de Salento, which includes their signature peanut butter brownie. You might prefer to make the pilgrimage to the El Portal de Cocora for lunch overlooking the valley, taking in the stunning views as you eat, or to the Bosques de Cocora in the middle of the park itself. If you go for El Portal de Cocora or Bosques de Cocora, sample the locally farmed trout, which they both serve. It's delicious, especially baked and accompanied by a variety of sauces and patacones (plantain fritters).

The world is getting wise to Cocora Valley, but if you hurry you can still make the trip before it gets too busy.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The weather here can change quickly – come prepared with boots, sunscreen and a raincoat.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to March is the driest season.

TIME ZONE

UTC-5

USEFUL SITES

<https://tinyurl.com/goatscocora>
wikitravel.org/en/Salento
medellinguru.com/cocora-v

HOW TO GET THERE

You can opt to drive all the way to the park entrance, take the bus from Medellin to Salento (the journey takes around six hours), or fly to Matecana International Airport in the nearby city of Pereira.





CHILE

CERRO CASTILLO

GLACIERS, MOUNTAINS AND VAST WOODLAND... THIS IS AN ADVENTURER'S PARADISE!

Cerro Castillo's caves, glaciers and mountains make this a spot where heaven and earth meet, and its 34-mile (54km) trek is one of the finest little-known hikes in the world. Located at the tail-end of Chile along Carretera Austral, Cerro Castillo is one of Patagonia's most staggering landscapes. Castillo, meaning castle in Spanish, certainly lives up to its name – the spiky peak sits inside its own bubble, with a world of lakes, woodland and rocky walls surrounding it.

Las Horquetas Grandes is the awe-inspiring walkway around and up the base that rivals Canada's Bruce Trail and Australia's Great Ocean Walk, but the South American expedition is not for the faint-hearted. Tricky river crossings without bridges, water wading and some icy conditions with the erratic Patagonia weather can make the location a challenge.

Still, there are many ways you can enjoy the area around Cerro Castillo. Take yourself on a gruelling hike and be rewarded with spectacular views all around. If your feet need a rest, ride a horse through the forest, feeling the cool wind rushing through your hair.

Cerro Castillo is located in Aysén, the third largest region in Chile. The nearest large town is modern Coyhaique. You can stay in hotels or hostels here, but backpackers, hikers and travel bloggers alike claim pitching a tent in the region's designated campsites is the ultimate way to experience the destination. One of the advantages of staying in Coyhaique is that you can then make trips to the General Carrera Lake and the Queulat Park, located on the southern North highway.

Coyhaique is one of Chile's newest cities, and has only recently been considered as a potential hub for tourism. The best way to experience the region is by booking onto a tour led by a local. They offer visits to its Marble Chapels, the National Park Queulat and ice-trekking on Cerro Castillo (available with experienced guides).

"Patagonia's erratic weather can make the location a challenge"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Bring clothes for all seasons, as the weather in the Chilean mountains can change like the wind – you could experience four seasons in one day!

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to February.

TIME ZONE

UTC-3

USEFUL SITES

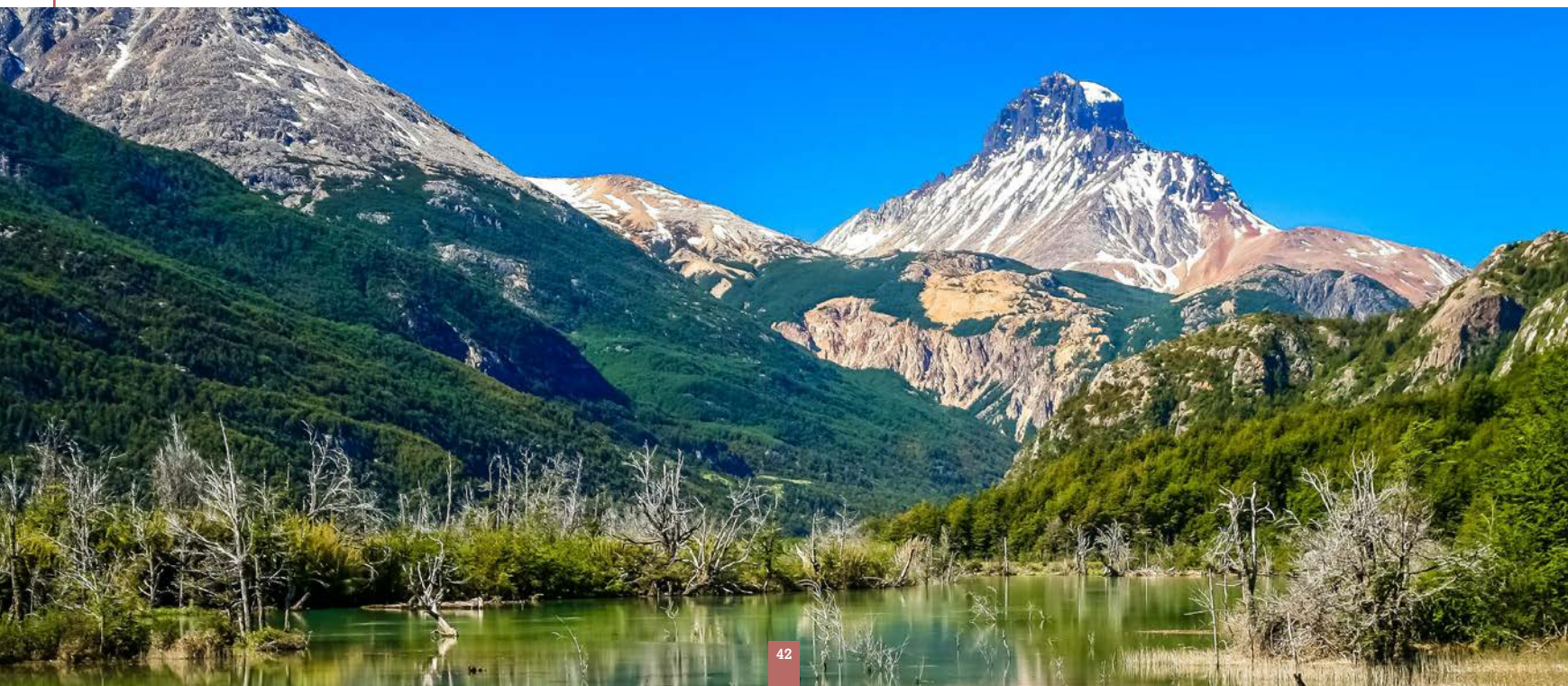
parquenacionalcerrocastillo.cl/?lang=en
gochile.cl/en/cerro-castillo-national-reserve/
<https://tinyurl.com/cerrocastillo>

HOW TO GET THERE

Drive into Coyhaique via Route 7. Alternatively, long-distance buses into town are available from Puerto Montt. It's well worth the journey.



© Alamy





ARGENTINA

MENDOZA

ARGENTINA'S WINE COUNTRY AND ADVENTURE CAPITAL AWAITS

The pretty tree-lined streets of Mendoza are quite the contrast to the urban canyons of busy Buenos Aires. The laid-back city receives just a fraction of the tourists that visit the Argentine capital each year, but those that do venture here are rewarded with world-class wines, stunning natural wonders and countless opportunities for adventure.

Mendoza is something of an oasis in the surrounding desert. It rarely rains here, but an innovative network of irrigation canals distributes meltwater throughout the city, feeding the thousands of trees that line every street and plaza. These green canopies provide shade, particularly convenient in a region that boasts over 300 days of sunshine a year. With such pleasant surroundings, Mendoza is best explored on foot. At its centre, the pedestrianised Paseo Sarmiento is the perfect place for a stroll, or to watch the world go by while enjoying coffee and pastries al fresco.

Mendoza is best known for its wines, and the wider province is home to hundreds of bodegas. You don't have to be a connoisseur to appreciate the winery tours on offer though. Spend a relaxing day sampling delicious Malbecs, Cabernets and Chardonnays, and watch the sun set over the Andes from one of the valley's award-winning restaurants. If you're not a fan of wine, or just fancy a little break between bodegas, Mendoza is also a leading

producer of top-quality olive oils. Take a guided tour of an olive oil factory to see the presses in action and try the flavoursome oils, tapenades, balsamics and other local specialties.

For meat-eating foodies, it would be a crime to visit Argentina and not try the country's renowned steaks. Be sure to dine at one of Mendoza's many steak houses to see what all the fuss is about. And for the ultimate asado (barbecue) experience, you can take a trip to a local ranch where gauchos will prepare a traditional steak feast for you after a day's horse riding in the Andes.

Heading further into the mountains, adrenaline junkies can find plenty of activities to get their hearts pumping, from white-water rafting on the Mendoza River to paragliding over the peak of Cerro Arco or skiing down the powdery slopes of Las Leñas to the south. Those in search of a greater challenge may tackle the highest peak outside of the Himalayas: Aconcagua. Experienced climbers can summit the peak, provided they acclimatise properly. For more casual hikers, the surrounding park features fantastic routes.

"Gauchos will prepare a traditional steak feast for you after a day's horse riding in the Andes"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Avoid a whistle-stop tour; aim to spend at least five days here to really soak up the region's 'tranquilo' atmosphere.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May to enjoy vineyard harvesting season and gorgeous autumn colours.

TIME ZONE

UTC-3

USEFUL SITES

experiencemendoza.com

tinyurl.com/4rc43w2m

mendoza.travel/en/lugares-para-visitar



HOW TO GET THERE

Mendoza is two hours from Buenos Aires by plane, or you can catch an overnight coach service (with comfy reclining seats) which will take just over 13 hours.





COLOMBIA

LAS LAJAS

AN EXPLOSION OF GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE IN A COLOMBIAN CANYON

There are many unusual things about Las Lajas Sanctuary – it's built in a gorge, there's a bridge over the gorge to the entrance and it's a Gothic-style church in a continent dedicated to the Baroque – but the key to the building's mysteries lies inside, at the far end of the church. There's no wall. It's built directly out from the cliff or, to be precise, from a grotto in the cliff. And on that wall is an image of the blessed Virgin Mary with her son in her arms. That's the reason for the church being built into the side of a cliff a hundred metres above the Guáitara River.

The story goes that in 1754, a local indigenous woman, Maria Meneses de Quiñones, was travelling with her deaf-mute daughter Rosa to the next village when a storm forced them

to seek shelter in a rock cutting in the cliffside. While sheltering from the storm, Rosa suddenly pointed into the grotto and miraculously spoke, telling her mother that there was a woman there with a boy. Maria fled, taking her daughter with her, thinking the place haunted. But when Rosa went missing a few days later, the mother tracked her down to the grotto, where she was calmly playing with a little boy while his mother looked on.

Maria and Rosa began to visit the grotto regularly. When neighbours asked Maria to explain Rosa's new-found speech, she took them to the grotto to find there an image of the lady, dark haired as an Amerindian, with a boy in her arms. The grotto became a pilgrimage site for local people, with a simple shrine already in place a few years after these appearances.

In 1802 a larger shrine was built, and the first version of the bridge across the river.

The current Basilica of Las Lajas – 'lajas' meaning 'slabs' as in 'slabs of rock' – took 33 years to build, from 1916 to 1949, the construction funded by donations from local people. The path down into the gorge is lined with plaques giving thanks for prayers answered. The church itself is intense with prayer, its setting – emerging from the living rock above the fast-flowing river – enough to produce a shiver of doubt in even the most determined of sceptics. To learn more about the history of the church, it's worth paying to descend into the basement museum. Then cross the bridge over the river and turn left for the best viewpoint before returning and riding the new teleférico (cable car) up out of the gorge.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

While there are taxis at the top of the teleférico, the walk back to Ipiales is straightforward and quite breathtaking.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The climate is mild throughout the year, with November, December and April the rainiest months.

TIME ZONE

UTC-5

USEFUL SITES

colombia.travel
uncovercolombia.com
bit.ly/2TLEEbp

HOW TO GET THERE

Las Lajas is near the border with Ecuador, and Quito is much closer than Bogotá.





ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Walking tours are quite affordable and an enjoyable way to see the city.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September to November is the driest time, but the temperature is relatively consistent throughout the year.

TIME ZONE

UTC-3

USEFUL SITES

surinametourism.com/dosee.html
en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Paramaribo
whc.unesco.org/en/list/940/



HOW TO GET THERE

Johan Adolf Pengel International Airport connects with flights from Amsterdam, Panama and Cuba among others.

SURINAME

PARAMARIBO

SURINAME'S CAPITAL MAY BE A SMALL CITY, BUT IT'S A BIG ADVENTURE

Suriname may be South America's smallest country, but its capital, Paramaribo, is an incredible city full of history and a hospitable community. The city is named after the tribe living at the mouth of the Suriname River, essentially meaning 'large river inhabitants' in the native Tupi-Guarani language. But Paramaribo itself, influenced by numerous cultures – African, Amerindian, Asian, Jewish and Dutch – is testament to the diversity of the area. Paramaribo dutifully watches over the Suriname river, and also serves as its port.

From its charming, colonial wooden houses to elaborate mosques and temples, the city really is a photographer's paradise. For a day filled with contrasts, combine a trip to the packed-out Central Market with the Brownsberg Nature Reserve in Brokopondo. The photogenic Central Market sells everything from fresh food and clothes to witches' concoctions and mysterious herbs. Be sure to get here well before noon, though, as the vendors start

packing up shop around lunchtime, and you'll want to capture the action.

Then, for a breath of fresh air, head to the Nature Reserve, where you can enjoy the dozens of rare species of animals unique to Suriname. It has some of the best birdwatching on the continent, and endless opportunities to view and snap photos of the local wildlife. Stretch your legs on this full-day hike and visit beautiful waterfalls to boot. There are also quaint lodges to hire for groups, and even hammock sites for brave travellers (as well as campsites) if you want to really experience the great outdoors

Make sure to visit Fort Zeelandia, a star-shaped, 18th-century fort built where the first colonists arrived. It was home to the various occupiers of the territory – the British once

called it Fort Willoughby – and it now houses the incredible Stichting Surinaams Museum and the famous Baka Foto Restaurant with its mouth-watering food and incredible views over the river. The views are especially stunning at night, so be sure to reserve a table.

No trip to Paramaribo would be complete without a visit to the waterfront and the stunning Saint Peter and Paul Cathedral, a wooden Catholic cathedral in the centre of the city (the largest wooden structure in the Western Hemisphere in fact). It's an amazing view inside and the architecture is – if you'll pardon the pun – divine.

Paramaribo is a truly distinct and enjoyable city, and, with increased flight routes from Europe, it's fast becoming one of South America's worst-kept secrets.

"With its wooden houses and elaborate mosques, it's a photographer's paradise"



UTAH

LOGAN

NESTLED IN THE CACHE VALLEY, THIS ALL-AMERICAN TOWN IS AN IDEAL RETREAT

With its red-brick buildings, spacious sporting grounds and green university campus, Logan feels like the quintessential American city. It's on the road between Salt Lake City and Yellowstone National Park, and has the appeal of both – it combines the friendly urban feel of Utah's capital with the mountainous, rugged beauty of the Wild West.

Logan's skyline, like its history, is dominated by the Mormons, exemplified by the white towers of the Latter-Day Saints Temple. Take in the scent of the freshly cut grass and flowers that surround it before driving through broad boulevards to the Historic District, which focuses around the cowboy-style shops of Center Street. Stop into a cafe to enjoy a brunch of buttery waffles with maple syrup, then burn it off with a round of baseball in Willow Park. If you're in the mood for movies, the Utah Theatre offers a neon 1950s experience, while the Lyric is perfect for a classy live show.

This is a town for all seasons. If you're here in summertime, the Cache Valley Gardener's Market outside the pretty Courthouse is a big event. Gourmets will love the local produce, artisan breads and free-range eggs on offer, and the handcrafted gifts make for perfect trinkets

to take home. Autumn brings a burst of colour, as the trees transform into golden and crimson hues. Winter covers Logan in a thick blanket of white snow, and you can entertain yourself inside the Book Table, one of only a handful of truly independent booksellers left in the US.

Outside of town, the Wasatch range is an unsung part of the Rockies, but it's home to some fantastic campgrounds, hiking trails and ski resorts. At its feet, the Logan River snakes its way through a rocky canyon, offering crystal clear and fresh waters that provide ideal fishing grounds. Clamber (or bike) up to the top of the mountains for a breathtaking experience, or drive along Highway 89. As you sail over the peaks, you'll be greeted with the azure vista of Bear Lake; race a speedboat along its waves, or simply go for a dip.

With its stunning setting, thoughtful city planning and tranquil atmosphere, Logan is like a town out of *The Sims* – but we promise it's much more three-dimensional than that.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Go to Angie's Restaurant and order the famous 'Kitchen Sink' – it's an ice-cream dream, literally served in a (small) sink.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May for warmer weather, spring blooms, and the start of the Gardener's Market

TIME ZONE

UTC-7

USEFUL SITES

utah.com/logan
visitutah.com/places-to-go/cities-and-towns/logan
visittheusa.co.uk/destination/logan

HOW TO GET THERE

It's an 85-mile drive from Salt Lake City on Highway 89, or you can catch a bus.



"Autumn brings a burst of colour, as the trees transform into golden and crimson"





CANADA

QUÉBEC CITY

UNCOVER ONE OF NORTH AMERICA'S OLDEST CITIES IN THIS LIVING MUSEUM

Perhaps more than any other place in Canada, Québec City is by far and away the French cultural hub of the country. While the nearby Montreal may share in the region's Franco heritage, Québec City has a distinctly French feeling to the place thanks in large part to its decidedly European look. It's perhaps not a surprise, though: at a third of the size of its metropolitan neighbour, the Canadian city is rather more removed from the need for an international, skyscraper-filled lifestyle. You'll spot this first in the streets of Old Québec, a UNESCO World Heritage Site of 17th and 18th-century buildings that wouldn't look out of place in any major continental French city.



Montmorency Falls is a 20-minute drive out of Québec City and stands at 84m (276ft) tall

With that in mind, you'll likely want to start by heading towards Le Château Frontenac, the walled castle that dominates the view from practically any corner of the city below. In fact, it's almost ridiculous how picturesque the Old Town and port are – doubly true when they're draped in fresh snow. As you wander the cobbled and winding streets of Old Québec, you'll find yourself cast back to the fairy tales you were read as a child and wonder where you might find Prince Charming – or at least a Frog Prince – among the quaint boutique stores and restaurants, which still hang wooden plaques as though the 18th century never ended. Eventually, you'll reach the funicular, which saves the hike to the top for around £2 (roughly \$2.50 USD). This 45-degree cogwheel railway trip is a must, allowing you to watch the rooftops of the Old Town grow smaller to earn you a different perspective of this idyllic city.

The history doesn't end there, however. Within the walls of the castle itself, you may be lucky to witness the Royal 22s and the changing of the guard. The colloquially named 'Van Doos' – from the French for 22, vingt-deux – are the pride of the city, a regiment that goes back to World War I. The citadel itself is home to two museums dedicated to this history of Québec City and the war between the English and the French. Be sure to check them out.

Don't miss the natural wonders that surround the city. Day trips to national parks for kayaking,

fishing or hiking are a must, key among them being Montmorency Falls, which is 30 metres (98 feet) higher than Niagara Falls. Like so many Canadian destinations, the outstanding natural setting only a stone's throw away makes this historic city a great place to return to.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Old Québec is better suited to walking, but if you've had enough of that for a day then there's always a more romantic manner of transport – horse-drawn carriage.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to August (for sun and festivals) or December to February (for the snow)

TIME ZONE

UTC-5

USEFUL SITES

quebec-cite.com/en
feq.ca/en
aventurequebec.ca/en

HOW TO GET THERE

Daily trains run from Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto. You can also fly to the airport from many North American cities.





COLORADO

DENVER

FROM HIPSTER TO HISTORICAL, COUNTRY TO CLASSY, THIS CAPITAL HAS GOT YOU COVERED

Given that Denver is surrounded by The Rocky Mountains, and is the gateway to some of the US's best skiing, it'd be easy to overlook it as a holiday destination in itself. So, what's the draw? Could it be its 300 sunny days a year? Or the 140-mile mountain panorama visible from the city? Or the plethora of restaurants, bars, breweries, museums, parks, theatres, galleries and shops – not to mention all the concerts, sporting events, festivals and comedy nights – on offer? The line-dancing lessons at the honky-tonk country bar The Grizzly Rose must have something to do with Denver's appeal!

Like any other American city, Denver is a mishmash of skyscrapers and historic buildings. That's not what makes it worth visiting – it's the gastronomy, mixology and geology that'll keep you coming back. The food scene is phenomenal. From food trucks to fancy restaurants, diners to gourmet hot dog joints (meat lovers must try the rattlesnake and pheasant sausage at Biker

Jim's Gourmet Dogs) – whatever you plump for, you'll be left satisfied... yet still hungry for some more. Did somebody say 's'more'? To get your marshmallowy, chocolatey, biscuity fix, head to Snooze for its famous S'mores Pancakes. Another gem that your dentist would disapprove of is The Inventing Room Dessert Shop. It's inspired by Willy Wonka's colourful chocolate factory, and sweet-seekers can watch the whimsy creations being whipped up right before their eyes.

If a sophisticated libation is what you're after, head to the clandestine underground bar Boys and Girls Club Denver, where the cocktails are classy and a reservation is essential. For a more relaxed tippie, visit one of Denver's 100-plus breweries, where craft beers flow with hipster abandon. Denver Beer Co. has good beer, good vibes and good views of downtown Denver. A Pedal Hopper Pub Tour is also a real hoot, as is Banjo Billy's Bus Tour (where you're driven around in a 'hillbilly shack').

After all that, your body may be crying out for exercise. There are loads of hiking and biking trails in the mountains around Denver, but if you don't want to venture far from the city, there are plenty of places to get your stomp on. Try the Red Rocks Trail, a park and amphitheatre that hosts concerts. It also hosts Yoga on the Rocks and Film on the Rocks – you'll be hard pushed to find an event with a more stunning backdrop.

“Whatever you plump for, you'll be left satisfied... yet still hungry for more”

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Driving from the airport to downtown can take up to an hour. The A Line rail service will cut this travel time in half.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to August for the festivals and events, although it's also the more expensive time.

TIME ZONE

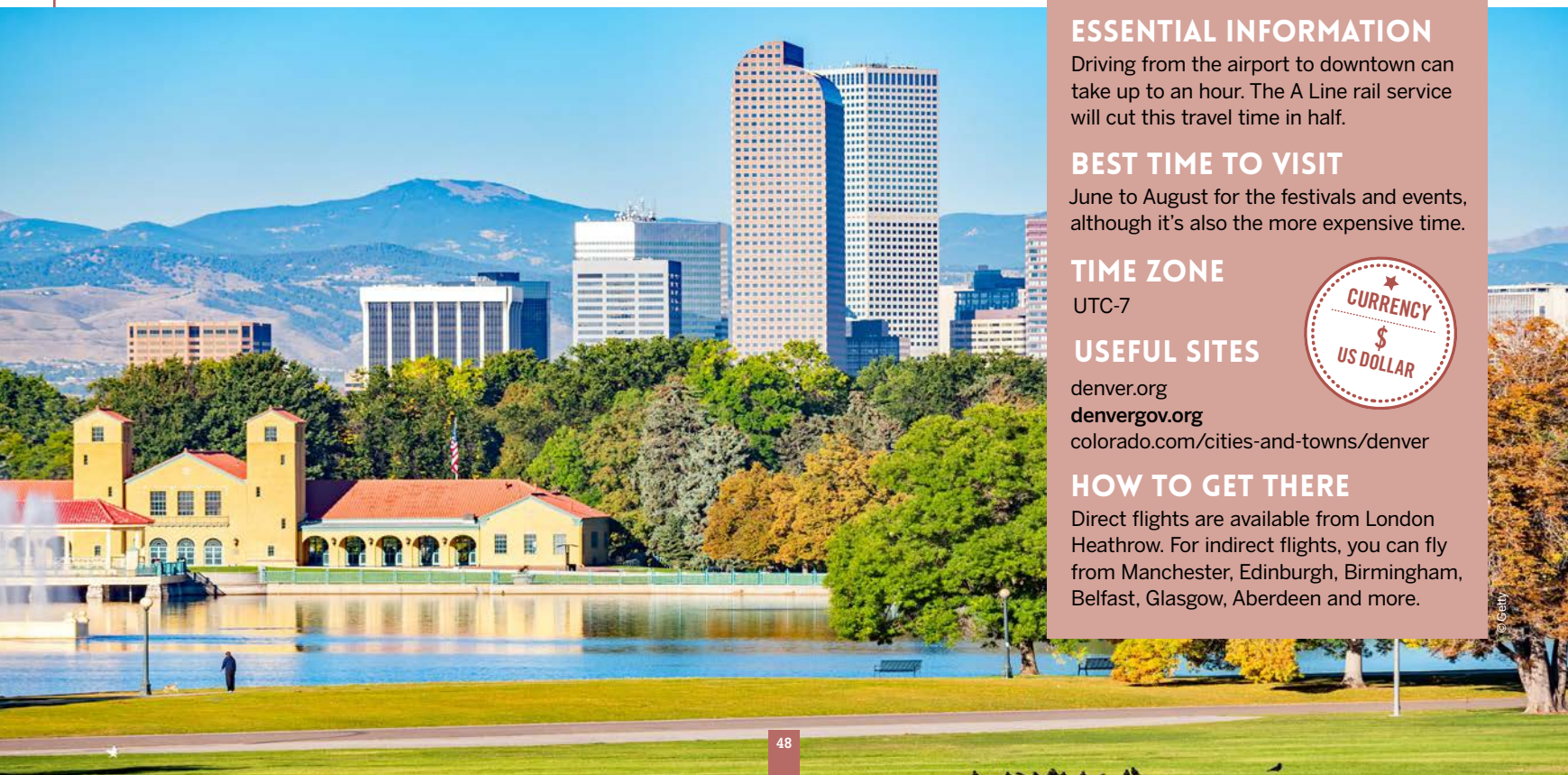
UTC-7

USEFUL SITES

denver.org
denvergov.org
colorado.com/cities-and-towns/denver

HOW TO GET THERE

Direct flights are available from London Heathrow. For indirect flights, you can fly from Manchester, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Belfast, Glasgow, Aberdeen and more.





GEORGIA

ROCK CITY

WE BUILT THIS CITY ON ROCK AND GREAT VIEWS

The grand vista from the summit of Lookout Mountain in the northwest corner of Georgia was known as early as the Civil War, when soldiers from both sides wrote of its natural wonder before slogging it out in a bloody battle in the shadow of the slopes. In the more peaceful 20th century, entrepreneurial landowners turned Lookout Mountain into a tourist attraction when they commissioned a painter to daub signs advertising Rock City on the roofs of more than 900 barns from Missouri to Texas between 1935 and 1969.

Those who were intrigued enough to travel to Rock City found the Enchanted Trail, a walking route just over 1.2 kilometres (0.75 miles) in length that snakes through stone formations including the dramatically named Hall of the Mountain King, Fat Man's Squeeze and Needle's Eye. Beside the path are cleverly designed gardens that include over 400 different species of plants, trees and shrubs that give a splash of colour all year round, although the flowers are inevitably at their best in spring and summer. Scattered around the gardens are gnomes, sculptures and installations from local artists.

The highlight of the trail, accessed by the shaky Swing Along suspension bridge, is the much-vaunted view from Lover's Leap. The sky

needs to be crystal clear to have any chance of ticking off all seven states that are supposedly visible – something made more difficult since the early days with the rise of the automobile and air pollution – but even if Virginia and South Carolina remain stubbornly out of sight, the majestic High Falls tumbles 27 metres (90 feet) down the sheer rock face and makes the trek very worthwhile indeed.

Like much of Rock City, High Falls is actually an artificial construction carved out of the sandstone. The trail ends at the Fairyland Caverns, in which dioramas of fairy tales have been hand-crafted and colourfully painted. Rock City's earliest owners also wanted to build a golf course on the summit, but had to downsize due to a lack of space. The result was the US' first miniature golf course, and the resulting patent for 'Tom Thumb Golf' helped fund the rest of Rock City's construction. Having completed a mountain hike like no other, don't forget to pick up a souvenir nest box with a retro Rock City advert on the roof to prove that you've visited one of the quirkiest places in the US.

"Scattered around the gardens are gnomes, sculptures and installations"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Don't wear your finest clothes since you'll need to squeeze through a couple of narrow places.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March or October for the fun Shamrock City or Rocktoberfest Festivals respectively.

TIME ZONE

UTC-5

USEFUL SITES

seerockcity.com
lookoutmountain.com/rock-city
bit.ly/38tqAc7



HOW TO GET THERE

Rock City is six miles from downtown Chattanooga so is well served by public transport. It is also easily drivable.



CANADA

ST JOHN'S

A COSY SMALL-TOWN FEEL IN A CITY SURROUNDED BY BEAUTIFUL DESOLATION

The rugged shoreline of an Atlantic island isn't where you'd expect to find a city with a bustling street culture, but that's exactly what you'll discover in St John's, situated off the east coast of Canada on the island of Newfoundland.

St John's provides a great base from which wilderness lovers can head out for invigorating hikes along rocky cliff tops, or to sea to spot whales before returning to the convenience and comfort of a modern but laid-back urban area and the friendly locals that live there. That's if you want to leave the city at all.

St John's' most famous sight is Signal Hill. At the top of the hill, you'll find a small castle called Cabot Tower. The visitor centre at the site will walk you through the area's fascinating history, including the last North American battle of the Seven Years' War, which took place there in 1762. Aside from the history, you'll also be treated to an incredible view of the coast and the city.

While visiting Signal Hill, you should make time for a detour to Quidi Vidi, a beautiful old village where you can visit the 1750s Mallard Cottage, now serving authentic Newfoundland food. Or why not enjoy a scenic drink on the village wharf at the 1762 Quidi Vidi Battery?

From the Hill, it's also a short hop to the Johnson Geo Centre, a science museum with exhibits on geology, space exploration, natural resources and more, that caters well for kids.

Once you're back in the city itself, you need to check out the eclectic collection at The Rooms, which is part art gallery, part museum and part cultural space. You'll find historical exhibitions on the Trail of the Caribou, aviation and costumes; natural history exhibits that include fossils and a giant squid; and contemporary art that could include paintings, video and photography, depending on which fascinating exhibits happen to be on when you visit.

You can find another quirky sight at the Fluvarium. This is a glass-enclosed section of the Nagle's Hill Brook. Take a unique look into the life of a living river – spotting fish, eels and other wildlife. For another water-themed attraction, head to the Royal St John's Regatta Museum on the edge of Quidi Vidi Lake to find out about the history of this famed rowing race.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Tourist destinations are well-served by public transport, but there's no public transport to and from the airport.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to August (unless you're looking to do some winter sports)

TIME ZONE

UTC-3.5

USEFUL SITES

therooms.ca
pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/nl/signalhill
geocentre.ca

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into St. John's airport, or drive the Trans-Canada highway to get in. You can also take a ferry to Newfoundland, and drive to St. John's.



"Take a unique look into the life of a living river – spotting fish, eels, and wildlife"



CANADA

HIGHWAY 99

DRIVE BRITISH COLUMBIA'S GLORIOUS SEA TO SKY HIGHWAY

Highway 99 has long been dubbed the Great Canadian Road Trip due to its sea-to-sky winding roads. This incredible stretch was initially built in the 1960s to boost tourism around Whistler Mountain – and boy, did it do that. Fast-forward some 50 years to the 2010 Winter Olympics, and the stunning location welcomed thousands of athletes.

The two-lane highway became four lanes 10 years ago, creating wider roads and hard shoulders for further enjoyment of the region's mountains, waterfalls and forests. The iconic 254-mile (409km) journey along Highway 99 begins in the seaside location of Horseshoe Bay, near Vancouver and can take around two hours, with it ending at Highway 97 near Cache Creek.

Leaving the bright lights of Vancouver behind, Highway 99 winds spectacularly around the fjords and coastal inlets of Canada's West Coast.

Heading up the Howe Sound, there are plenty of places to stop and take photos of the dramatic scenery. You'll then begin to climb through the Canadian Rockies on your way to Whistler, a pretty ski resort and mountain retreat.

Hotspots among the scenic British Columbia route are the 70 metre-high Brandywine Falls, which have their own viewing platform, and the dizzying Lynn Canyon Suspension Bridge. The walk along the creek bed to the foot of the spectacular Shannon Falls is another, with the infamous twisting waterfall being the third highest in British Columbia.

Squamish, a charming old mill town along the route, just north of Vancouver, is also worth a visit. Enveloped by three mountain peaks, its 885 metre-high Sea to Sky Gondola offers spectacular views of Shannon Falls and Howe Sound, which is surrounded by a scattering of beautiful islands. The town also has its very

own Britannia Mine Museum, and boasts an exciting underground tour for adventurers. Probably not so great if you suffer from claustrophobia, though!

Your last stop on your Highway 99 adventure is Whistler. Home to some 11,000 friendly Canadians, it sits on the base of the Whistler and Blackcomb mountains. Though it's renowned for its skiing and snowboarding, amateurs can try their hand at tobogganing, and extreme sports fans can experience the thrill of ski jumping at the Olympic Park – one of the venues for the 2010 Winter Olympics.

If sport isn't your forte, don't worry – you can simply enjoy the town's Alta Lake by sitting in the park, or go on a shopping spree in the town centre. There are also some interesting museums to visit, should the Canadian chill get too much. A stay at a luxury resort is the perfect way to finish your Highway 99 trip.

"Squamish's 885 metre-high Sea to Sky Gondola offers spectacular views"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Bring lots of layers as the temperature can quickly plummet at night.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September to November – this route is especially beautiful in autumn.

TIME ZONE

UTC-8

USEFUL SITES

hellobc.com/road-trips/sea-to-sky-highway-route/
tourismvancouver.com/activities/itineraries/sea-sky-highway-weekend/
whistler.com

HOW TO GET THERE

You can fly into Vancouver directly from many places across the globe. Then hire a car in the city and head north.





The park's winding coastline covers 18,000km (11,185mi), containing many fjords and icebergs

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Ittoqqortoormiit serves as the park's gateway. There's a small airport, one guest house, and no restaurants.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September and October, so you can see the northern lights

TIME ZONE

UTC-2

USEFUL SITES

visitgreenland.com/the-national-park
en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Northeast_Greenland_National_Park
naalakkersuisut.gl/en

HOW TO GET THERE

Helicopter shuttles are the easiest way to get about in Greenland.



GREENLAND

NORTHEAST GREENLAND

THE WORLD'S LARGEST AND NORTHERNMOST NATIONAL PARK IS ALSO ONE OF THE MOST ELUSIVE

You might assume that a park almost as large as France and Spain combined would be hard to miss, but Northeast Greenland is unknown to most. If you're looking for an adventurous escape to explore a truly untouched wilderness, there are few better destinations for a getaway than this.

Northeast Greenland National Park is largely uninhabited – less than 50 people live in the near-million-square-kilometre park over winter to monitor the region's weather and research stations. The closest settlement is Ittoqqortoormiit, Greenland's most isolated town. In this picturesque outpost of brightly painted buildings, you can learn about the local Inuit culture and try your hand at traditional dog sledding and ice fishing.

To travel in the park itself, as with other remote parts of Greenland, a permit is required from the Ministry of Nature, Environment and Justice. If you travel with a tour operator, permits will be arranged for you. The park is best reached via dedicated expedition cruises, which often include stops in Iceland and/or Norway as well. These voyages aren't cheap – expect to spend several thousand pounds or dollars for the experience, not including flights. However, the price is justifiable given the fact that you'll be travelling aboard a specialised (and usually rather luxurious) vessel capable of tackling the icy conditions in the Arctic Ocean, typically for two or three weeks. You'll also be accompanied by expert guides, and tour groups are often small so there will be opportunities to tailor trips to your particular interests.

Some tour providers offer the chance to go ashore for guided hikes and wildlife watching. In this truly untouched wilderness you might spot musk oxen, Arctic foxes, hares and wolves, walrus, and if there are ice floes, you may also see polar bears. Lucky sightseers may see narwhals as well as humpback, fin and minke whales. Besides the local fauna, Greenland's rugged northeastern coastline features some spectacular geography, with towering striped cliffs reflecting in the mirror-like waters below as icebergs drift by. At night, with the weather on your side, you can admire the full glory of the starry sky without the interference of light pollution. If the conditions are right you may find yourself enveloped by the aurora borealis, as the sky lights up with breathtaking waves of glowing greens, reds, purples and blues.



The Arctic waters are home to several magnificent whale species



If your expedition takes you to Daneborg, you may meet members of the Sirius Patrol as the headquarters are based there

©Alamy

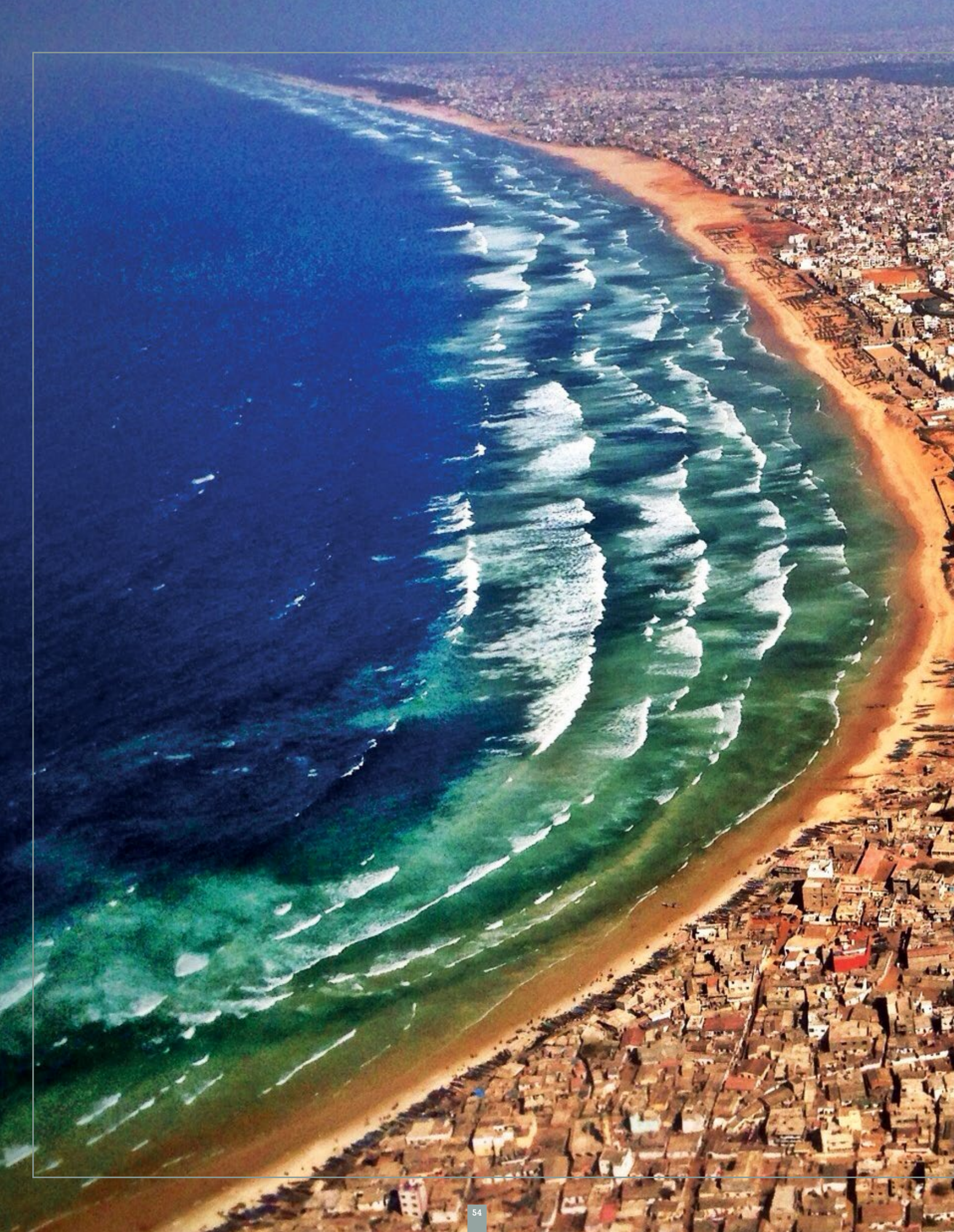
UNIQUE PARK RANGERS

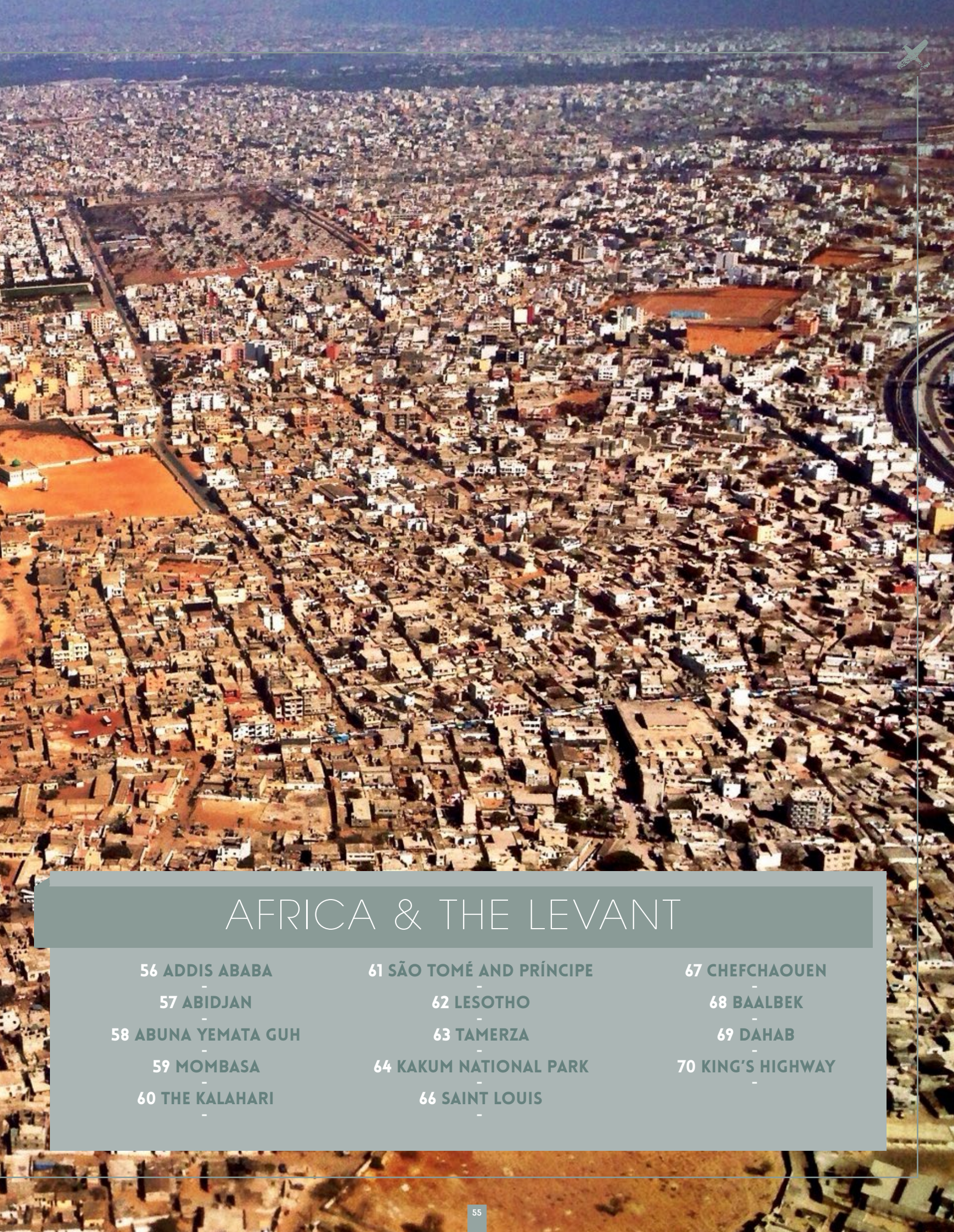
Some tours to Northeast Greenland National Park will offer the exciting chance to meet members of one of the world's most unusual military units. The Sirius Patrol are an elite squad of dog sledders from the Royal Danish Navy who patrol the frozen wilds of northern Greenland, making sure everything is exactly as it should be.

There are six teams of two soldiers, accompanied by their sled dogs, who traverse the Arctic wilderness for up to six months at a time (more often than not, without any other human contact). It's an extreme occupation – only applicants who demonstrate the most physical and psychological resilience are accepted – but the Sirius Patrol play an important role in maintaining Denmark's sovereignty over Greenland.



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AFRICA & THE LEVANT

56 ADDIS ABABA

57 ABIDJAN

58 ABUNA YEMATA GUH

59 MOMBASA

60 THE KALAHARI

61 SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

62 LESOTHO

63 TAMERZA

64 KAKUM NATIONAL PARK

66 SAINT LOUIS

67 CHEFCHAOUEN

68 BAALBEK

69 DAHAB

70 KING'S HIGHWAY



ETHIOPIA

ADDIS ABABA

UNIQUE CHURCHES MEET BUSTLING MARKETPLACES IN ETHIOPIA'S OFF-THE-RADAR CAPITAL

Rich in history, culture and fantastic food, Addis Ababa is full of hidden treasures. When you arrive, allow time to adjust to the high altitude – and high energy – of this vibrant city.

Start from the very beginning at the National Museum of Ethiopia. It's believed that humans originated in this fertile part of the world, and you can view one of the oldest hominid skeletons ever found, over three million years old. For a less primitive experience, the museum also houses some Abyssinian art, from Ethiopia's days as a powerful African empire.

Indeed, it was Emperor Menelik II who founded Addis Ababa in 1886. In Menelik II Square, you can see a grand statue of this great king on horseback. It commemorates a momentous win over Italian invaders, and Ethiopia remains the only African country that was never colonised.

Across the square from the Menelik II statue is St George's Cathedral, an interesting octagon-shaped church and museum. Here, Ethiopian

emperors and empresses – such as Haile Selassie and Zewditu – were once crowned. The ceremony involved seven priests, a golden sword, and seven different types of aromatic oil. The elaborate ceremony, and glinting crown jewels, were flashy proof of Ethiopia's great wealth and power. There are other religious sites in Addis Ababa worth visiting, too – try the second-largest cathedral in Africa, Medhane Alem, for size.

Last but not least, you'll want to go to the hectic Merkato to stock up on souvenirs, clothing, jewellery, homewares and, most importantly, food. You can browse the stalls for hours in search of the finest fresh produce, including Ethiopian coffee beans, which are frequently said to be the best in the world. When you've shopped until you've dropped, sit in a local restaurant and fill up with a delicious plate of wat and injera. Wat is the name for a variety of stews – both meat and veg. It simply must be paired with injera, a bubbly, tangy flatbread you definitely won't find back home.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Addis Ababa is a very safe city, but watch out for pickpockets in the Merkato, who target distracted tourists.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September – October, after the rainy season

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

USEFUL SITES

goaddistours.com
ethioembassy.org.uk/
tinyurl.com/pz6azcxk

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into Addis Ababa from many places around the world. Alternatively, a train from neighbouring nation Djibouti opened in January 2018.





ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Resign yourself to getting a lot of taxis – Abidjan isn't well connected.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November – April

TIME ZONE

UTC

USEFUL SITES

cecilefakhoury.com

afrotourism.com/city/abidjan

abidjan.com/v/exhibitions

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into Abidjan from destinations across Europe, the Middle East and Africa.



IVORY COAST

ABIDJAN

FROM BRUTALIST ARCHITECTURE TO RAINFOREST TREKS, ABIDJAN IS A MULTI-FACETED CITY

Ivory Coast's economic capital is a place of contrasts. Shimmering skyscrapers exist alongside labyrinthine markets and energetic neighbourhoods, while the natural world that surrounds it – composed of national parks, lagoons, rivers and the Atlantic Ocean – counterbalances the city's modernity.

Le Plateau is a popular business district in Abidjan and you'll find some of the city's most visually interesting buildings here. La Pyramide is a striking brutalist structure designed by Rinaldo Olivieri, completed in 1973. It juts high into Abidjan's skyline, with cascading concrete balconies tapering down to street level. Another Modernist classic is to be found in the form of the Cathédrale Saint-Paul. Its austere exterior

is complemented inside via stunningly vibrant stained glass windows. From here, it's not far to the city's beloved Hôtel Ivoire, which became famous as a venue for ice skating and movie-going. The ice rink has gone since the hotel's construction in 1963, but the cinema remains. Inside you'll find stunning African decor that pays tribute to the decade of the hotel's birth.

A short walk from the Hôtel Ivoire is the Marché de Cocody, a maze of stalls selling traditional decorations, sculpture, jewellery and all manner of other souvenirs. If you're looking for fabrics and tailors, try Treichville, a market where you can also buy food and handicrafts.

If you're visiting Abidjan, you should ensure that you exploit its close proximity to the

rainforest. The Parc du Banco is a national park that allows you to step into a completely different world as you immerse yourself in the sights and sounds of the rainforest. You can enjoy short trail walks or long hikes, depending on your ability and preference. Guided tours from park rangers are also available.

If you're looking for more of Abidjan's contrasts, take a trip to the Galerie Cécile Fakhoury and the Musée National. The former pays tribute to contemporary African art, and you'll find incredible paintings, sculptures and photography. The Musée National, on the other hand, offers a more historic perspective. Here you'll find traditional wooden masks, hand-carved statues, ivory craftwork, and pottery.

"The natural world that surrounds Abidjan counterbalances the city's modernity"



ETHIOPIA

ABUNA YEMATA GUH

THE CLIMB TO REACH THIS CHURCH WILL TEST EVEN THE MOST ARDENT OF BELIEVERS

Abuna Yemata Guh stands a striking 2,580 metres (8,460 feet) high in the Gheralta mountains of northern Ethiopia's Tigray region. Looming over the stark valley below, this seemingly inaccessible church has remained hidden within a jagged sandstone pinnacle for more than 1,500 years. It's named after Father Yemata, who is said to have painstakingly carved it from rock in the 6th century CE. While the journey to reach the 'Church in the Sky' may at first seem daunting – with sheer cliff faces to navigate, this is not a pilgrimage for those with a fear of heights – but once conquered, the reward is unparalleled.

Northern Ethiopia is home to more than 100 rock-hewn churches, but this stony sanctuary is by far the most perilous to reach. Abuna Yemata

Guh is as much about the journey as it is the destination. The awe-inspiring ascent begins with the removal of shoes and, perhaps, a little prayer. Despite the helpful grooves that have been sculpted into the rock by thousands of worshippers, each climber should have a guide – to show them exactly where to place their hands and feet. After a sinuous hour-long climb comes a final test of faith: a precarious walk along a one-metre-wide (three-foot-wide) ledge, which looms high over a vertiginous 200-metre (650-foot) drop. Once safely across, spectacular views of the mountains finally come into focus, as does the scale of what has been achieved.

Inside the exquisite chapel, it becomes apparent why hardy travellers are determined to overcome such a pulse-raising route. Even for those who aren't religiously inclined, reaching

Abuna Yemata Guh will feel miraculous. Exquisite frescos of Ethiopian religious iconography climb across the ceiling and walls. Meanwhile, paintings of the apostles, saints and monks, dating back to the 15th century, are surprisingly well-preserved.

Devotees can gently thumb through a beautiful Orthodox Bible made of goatskin before meeting the resident priest, who has looked after the church for nearly 50 years, and makes the climb every day. He, like the generations of priests who have come before him, will probably be buried in an open-air tomb along the rock face one day. On the descent, their skeletal remains can be spotted adorning the cliff, like guardians watching over the faithful who dare to make the journey. It's impossible to visit Abuna Yemata Guh and not feel the transformed by the power of nature, history and faith.



"This stony sanctuary is by far the most perilous to reach"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Make sure to use sunscreen before you start the climb, as the rays can hit hard on the rock.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The dry season, between October and June.

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

USEFUL SITES

tinyurl.com/7hmsbfpm

stoa-ethiopia.org

ethiopiantourassociation.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Short domestic flights link Addis Ababa to Mekele, where most tours of Abuja Yemata Guh start and end – tours usually include visits to the beautiful churches of Maryam Korkor and Daniel Korkor, too.





KENYA

MOMBASA

EXPLORE KENYAN CULTURE ALONG THIS SEASIDE CITY'S BEAUTIFUL WATERWAYS

You might recognise Mombasa from the popular film **Out Of Africa** or, more recently, **Inception**. While it's often overshadowed by Nairobi, Mombasa is a pearl of East Africa. Its history as one of the continent's most important trading ports aside, there's a lot to explore and discover in a city fast becoming a hub for tourism.

This city is the oldest in Kenya, and the second largest. Mombasa straddles two eras – the ambitious trade of today, and the storied past, as seen in the Old Town. Look out for the yellow houses that mark out this area, as opposed to the white and blue that are prevalent around the newer parts. The legacy of Portuguese, Omani and British rule can be seen in the Old Town's architecture – visit the Portuguese-built Fort Jesus, or the 16th-century Mandhry Mosque, which mixes Swahili design with Omani stylings.

Mombasa's food scene is also a diverse blend of influences, and the best starting point is the Market Hall, which looks like it belongs in Lisbon. Pick up East African spices and ingredients here – be sure to haggle! If you don't feel like cooking, you'll be able to eat at a variety of restaurants, which are a product of Mombasa's multicultural nature. Sample the local seafood at the waterfront Forodhani, or go international with Indian, Lebanese and even Italian options.

Kenya has a tropical climate, so if you want a sunny trip at the start of the year, the glorious

resorts around Mombasa are ideal. There's an abundance of lovely beaches, many of which are famed for their evening parties, so make the time to enjoy the local cuisine and culture and have a dance (or two). If you're up for a more adventurous experience, there are several safaris on the island, some of which can be covered in just one day for those short on time. Another site well worth visiting is Jumba la Mtwana, which has some of the city's more interesting ancient archaeological relics.

You can explore Mombasa Island via the easily accessible taxis, matatus (minibuses) or tuk-tuks. Alternatively, rent a boat or book a boat trip to see Mombasa Island from the sea. Set out early in the day though, when the views are incredible and less disturbed, or just before sunset, when the beaches are illuminated with a subtle glow.

In Mombasa, there really is something for every kind of traveller. But you'd better get here before the world discovers that.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Book safaris in advance, especially during the summer and beginning of the year.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to October – fewer mosquitoes and the wildlife is easier to spot on safaris.

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

USEFUL SITES

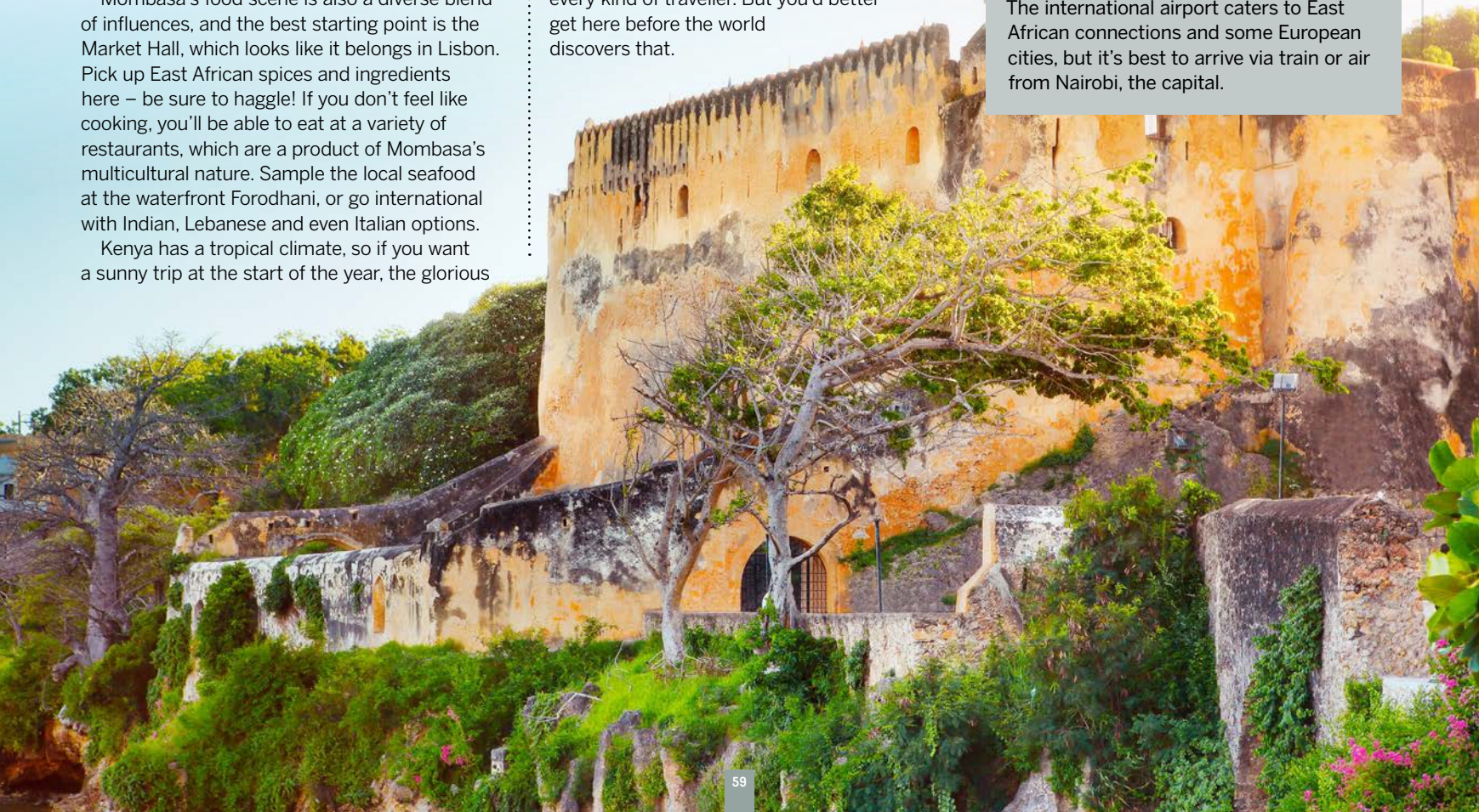
lonelyplanet.com/kenya

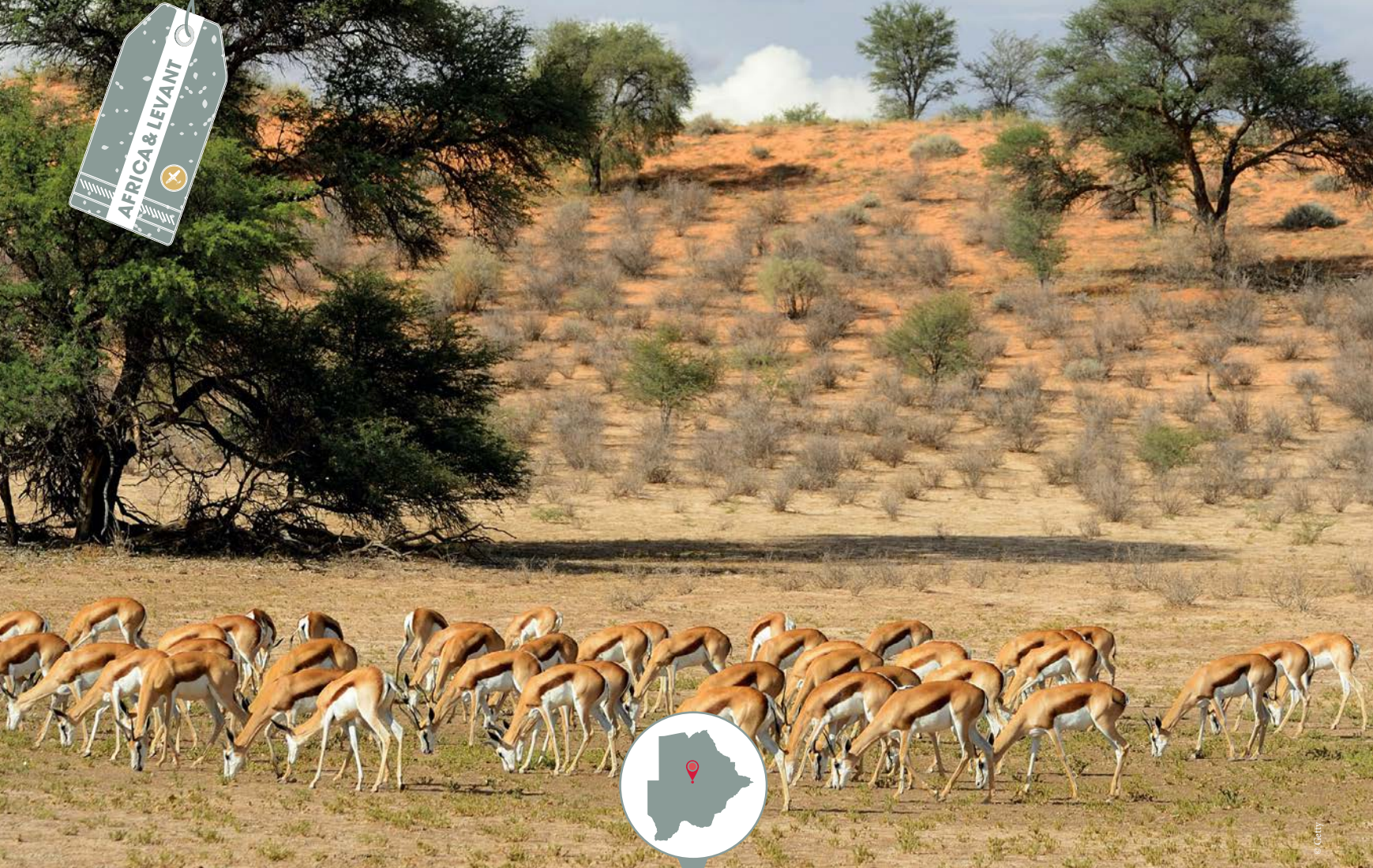
<https://tinyurl.com/magickenya>

discoverafrica.com/safaris/kenya/mombasa-and-surrounds/

HOW TO GET THERE

The international airport caters to East African connections and some European cities, but it's best to arrive via train or air from Nairobi, the capital.





BOTSWANA

THE KALAHARI

EXPLORE A BARREN DESERT IN ONE OF THE LARGEST NATURE RESERVES ON EARTH

Stretching on for miles across southern Africa and home to the indigenous San people, a variety of wildlife and flora and striking salt pans, the Kalahari is a once-in-a-lifetime destination and a wonder to behold.

The 900,000 square kilometre desert stretches across Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. However, it's the Central Kalahari Game Reserve that spans Botswana which has the most to offer. Book a spot at the Tau Pan camp, an eco-friendly, comfortable haven perched on the ridge of a sand dune overlooking the remote Tau Pan lake, from which the excellent camp gets its name.

Spend the day with experienced guides on game drives as they take you to locations such as Deception Valley – named for the mirage experience that causes the blue-clay pan to look like it is filled with water – and Piper, Sunday and Passarge Pans, where you'll be able to get a firsthand look at the famous

black-maned Kalahari lions, cheetahs, wildebeest, the rare brown hyena and so much more.

Learn about a distant and new culture as you undertake a guided walk with the indigenous San people. Experience their unique way of living and discover how they interact with their harsh environment to create a sustainable lifestyle. If you're lucky, you may be taken to a nearby village to meet the locals.

At night, head to the 'sleep-out deck' – kitted out with a double bed, sink and toilet – and marvel at the clear, unpolluted sky that hangs above the Kalahari, experiencing stargazing like never before.

"Spend the day with experienced guides on game drives"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If you intend to go on a safari, it's best to book a tour with a local company.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to March for the best wildlife.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

safaribookings.com/kalahari
kalaharinationalpark.com
botswanaturism.co.bw

HOW TO GET THERE

Most camps are accessible by road, but require a 4x4 vehicle to reach – contact your accommodation beforehand.





© Thinkstock

WEST AFRICA

SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

GET ADVENTUROUS ON AN UNSPOILED ISLAND GETAWAY

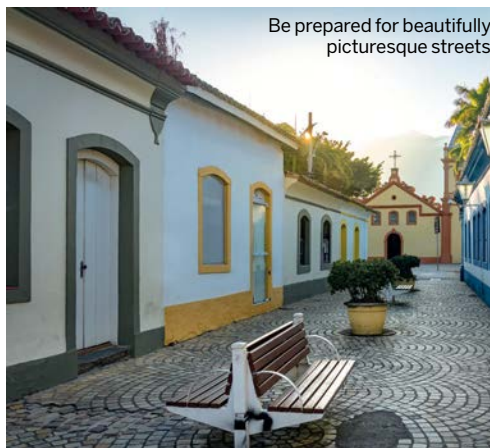
Just off Africa's west coast you'll find a world that time forgot: the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe. They are two Jurassic-esque wonderlands boasting expansive rainforests, bountiful wildlife and sandy beaches, perfect for those looking to embrace their adventurous side.

Spend an afternoon at one of São Tomé's beaches – they include Praia Museu (great for interacting with the locals), Praia Messias Alves (an ideal spot for diving and snorkelling), and idyllic Praia Piscina. Finally, there's Praia Jalé, a slice of paradise where you can have the chance to spend the night on the beach and watch giant sea turtles lay their eggs in the sand.

As you wander through the colourful city of São Tomé, stop by the Claudio Corallo Chocolate Factory for a tour and the São Sebastião and National Museum for an overview of the country's entire history (but bring a guide as it's in Portuguese), before tucking into some local delicacies like flying fish, sea snails and a bat stew often served during festivals.

Make sure to head to the Bom Bom Island Resort, a tiny forested islet located off the

north coast of Príncipe, where you'll be able to undertake a range of thrilling excursions from snorkelling to gorge swimming, kayaking and even dolphin watching. For those who prefer to take things a little slower, the resort also offers opportunities for birdwatching, rainforest (marvel at the hundreds of unique plant and animal species that call the island home) or coastal strolls and nature photography walks.



Be prepared for beautifully picturesque streets

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The islands have two seasons of dry and wet weather, thanks to being almost directly on the equator.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Mid-June to Mid-September (to avoid the wet season)

TIME ZONE

UTC+0

USEFUL SITES

bit.ly/2JaPeUW
visitsaotome.com
bombomprincipe.com



HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into São Tomé International Airport from Portugal or West Africa. You can then fly on to Príncipe, or get a ferry. Taxis are the best way of moving about the islands.



SOUTHERN AFRICA

LESOTHO

IN A COUNTRY SURROUNDED BY SOUTH AFRICA, A REAL ADVENTURE AWAITS YOU

With its picturesque views and friendly hospitality, Lesotho is a hidden treasure, nestled away from the world. But it won't remain secret for long, with director Ryan Coogler already borrowing from Lesotho's traditional architecture and temperate landscapes to inspire scenes in the hit Marvel movie *Black Panther*. Lesotho might be landlocked and surrounded by South Africa, but it has its own experience that's well worth taking in.

Lesotho's geography is quite unique – it's the only independent state that lies entirely above 1,000 metres in elevation. This means the weather is quite mild, and in the winter it's home to some scenic and incredible snow-dusted views. It also gives credence to one of its common descriptors – it is the aptly named the 'Kingdom in the Sky'.

To learn about the story of this sky-high kingdom, visit the Cultural Village in Thaba Bosiu, a revamped and well-maintained village with guided tours that explain the area's culture and history. You should also check out the Ha Kome Cave Dwellings – indigenous San families lived here in prehistoric times, and the caves are still inhabited by their descendants. Ha Kome lies 37 miles (60km) northeast of the capital Maseru, and makes for a lovely day trip. It even has space for camping. Bring food, though, as there's no restaurant.

Lesotho is ready for you whenever you want to visit. In spring and autumn, the sun shines through and the famed mountainous terrains are filled with hikers and those here to see the hardy Basotho pony. The best place for this is the Malealea Lodge, where guided tours take you on an incredible six-night cross-country trek to the famed Semonkong

and Maletsunyane Waterfalls. For the more daring among you, a nearby lodge operates the longest commercial single-drop abseil in the world – a 204-metre thrill. Other areas of exploration include two of Lesotho's national parks – Sehlabathebe and Ts'ehlanyane.

Pay a visit during Lesotho's winter and the lush areas are transformed into snow-capped vistas for great skiing with frozen waterfalls. You can also head to the Afriski Mountain Resort in the Maluti Mountains to enjoy views from Africa's highest restaurant.

While in Lesotho, be sure to try the Lekhotloane (bashed beef with Morongo potatoes), a delicious local delicacy. If you want to get your hands on some incredible souvenirs, including the now-popular Basotho Blanket from *Black Panther*, check out the LNDC Centre in Maseru as well as the many craft villages near the parks.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

It's well worth renting a car to enjoy the views moving from town to town.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Head there from June to August for the winter season, or during Lesotho's spring (September to October) if you'd prefer the trek season.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

<https://tinyurl.com/lesothoinfo>

visitlesotho.travel

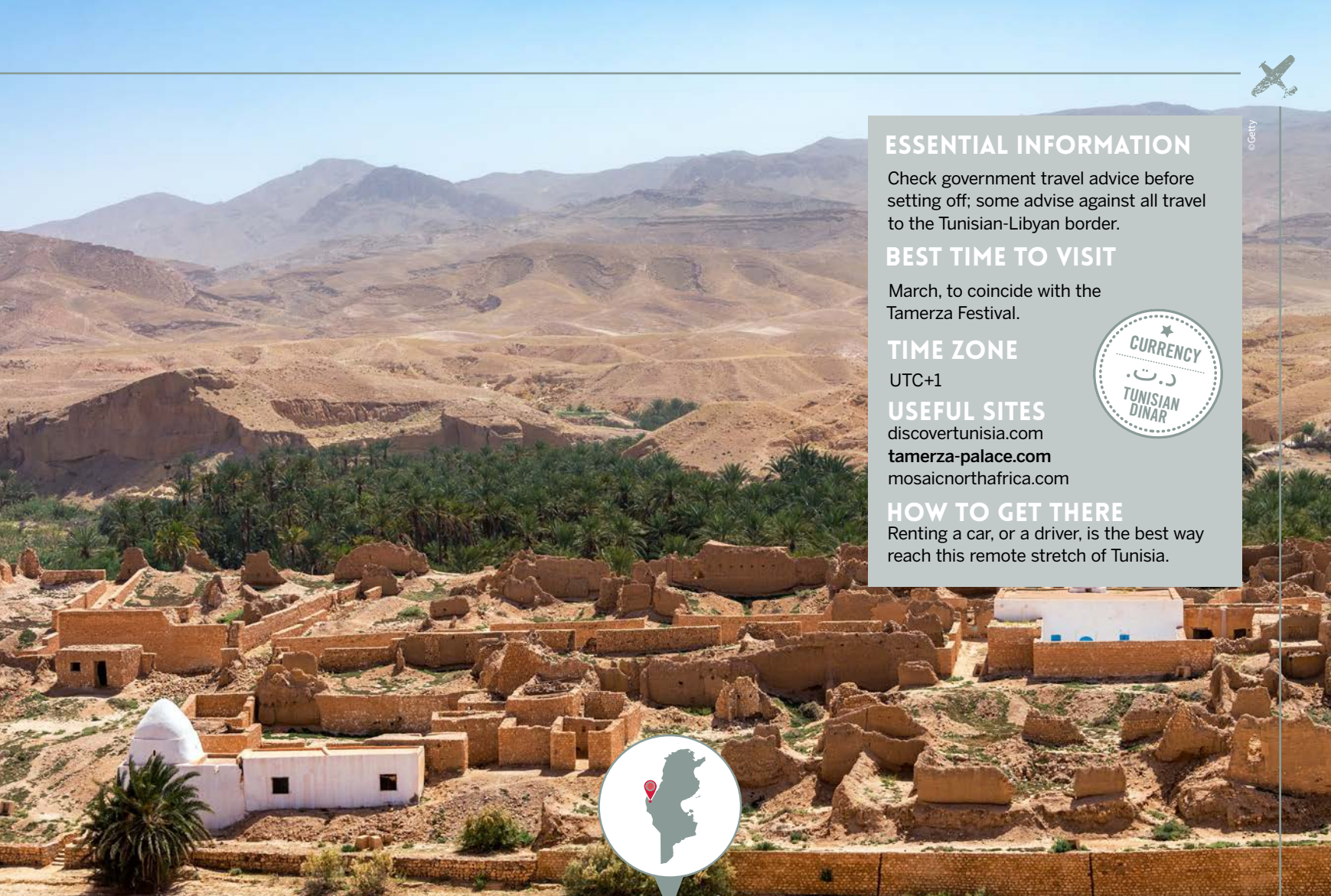
gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/lesotho

HOW TO GET THERE

Moshoeshe I International Airport, a short distance from the capital Maseru, is served from Johannesburg.



"Lesotho is a hidden treasure, nestled away from the world"



eGatty

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Check government travel advice before setting off; some advise against all travel to the Tunisian-Libyan border.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March, to coincide with the Tamerza Festival.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

discovertunisia.com

tamerza-palace.com

mosaicnorthafrica.com



HOW TO GET THERE

Renting a car, or a driver, is the best way reach this remote stretch of Tunisia.

TUNISIA

TAMERZA

THIS STUNNING MOUNTAIN OASIS LOOMS OVER THE REMAINS OF AN ABANDONED VILLAGE

Remote, rugged and other-worldly, the mountain oasis of Tamerza emerges from the desert Badlands of northern Tunisia like a mirage. Far-flung and largely inaccessible, few travellers are brave enough to break into these secluded reaches close to the Algerian border, especially given the current political climate. But, those who do are rewarded with a slice of beautiful, unspoilt wilderness.

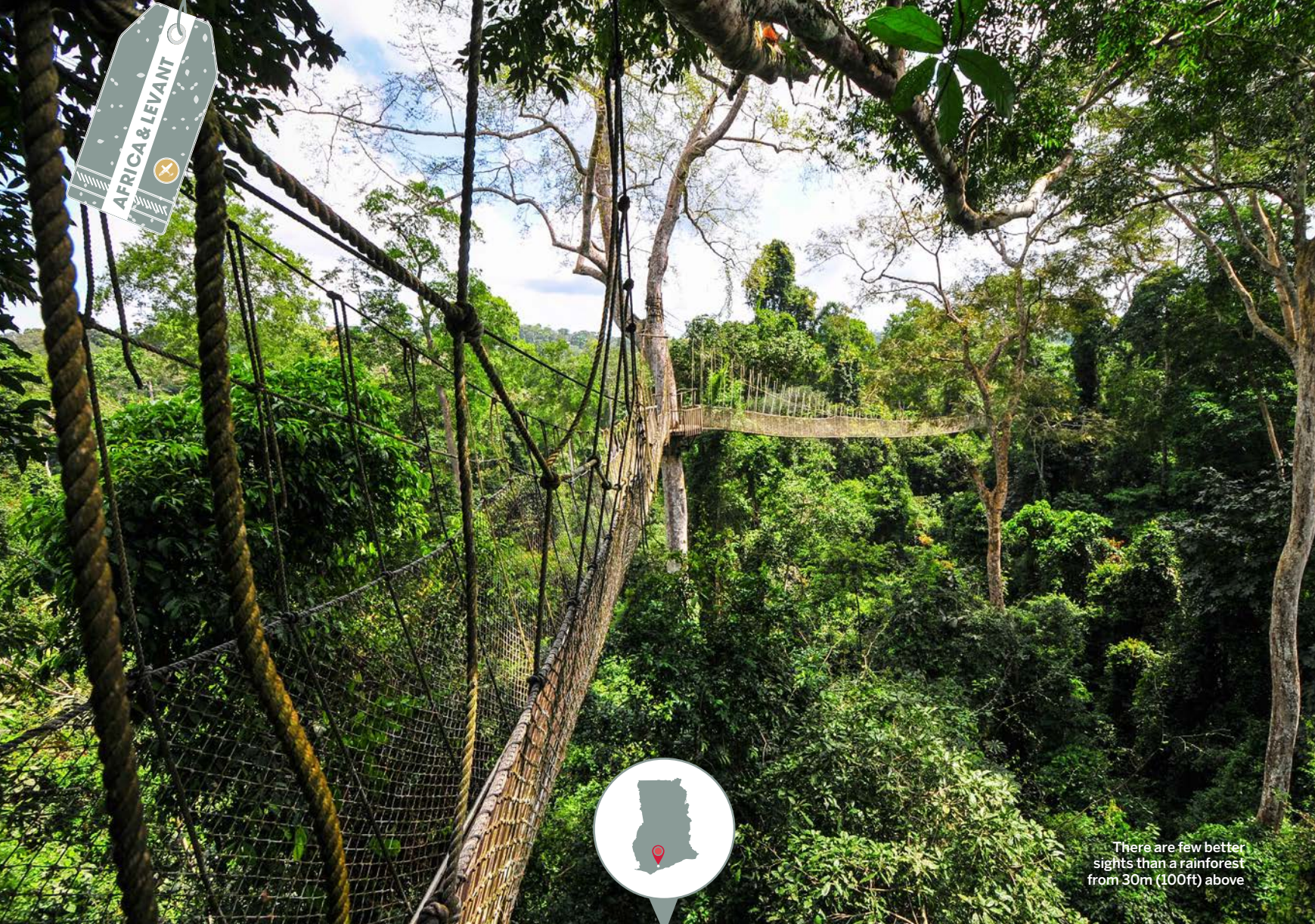
Hemmed between the banks of the Oued Horchane river and an eroded desert gorge lie the remnants of an old Berber village. Inhabited since the 5th century CE, it was abandoned in 1969 after a biblical 22-day flood. When the river burst its banks, most of the village's mud-and-stone adobe houses were swept away. Today, only the white-washed dome of the local mosque rises above the ruins.

At the heart of Tamerza lies a maze of towering pink canyons. Exploding from the dry, arid ground, the jagged monoliths twist and curl like waves – sculpted over the centuries by water. Breaking new ground, hikers can navigate the area's rocky ravines and never-ending gorges, which were once covered by the ocean. As a result, the ground is rich with fossils and sparkling minerals, like gypsum, mica, chalcedony and quartz.

Hidden deep within the twisted belly of the gorge are two waterfalls, which erupt unexpectedly from the parched landscape, spewing fresh water. Standing at eight metres (26 feet), the tallest feeds a crystalline pool that sprawls out below. Come dusk, the canyon turns purple in the dying evening light, before a flurry of stars emerge, studding the clear night sky. Travellers in the know head to Tamerza

Palace, an unpretentious four-star hotel set high on a bluff, overlooking the ruins. Magnificent, far-reaching views can be enjoyed on the hotel's terrace, while the rest of the property is dressed in traditional Berber rugs, artisanal accents, hand-made ceramics and paintings.

For those keen to wander a little further, the mountain oases of Chebika and Mides are both accessible by foot. Chebika lies south of Tamerza, at the foot of Jebel el Negueb, a mountain known as the Castle of the Sun. Meanwhile, about four kilometres (2.5 miles) further northwest of Tamerza, the oasis of Mides remains hidden, tucked away inside a dizzyingly high, dramatically serrated canyon which grinds into Algeria. Myriad trails snake along the gorge bed, luring hardy hikers past monoliths carved by the elements, and shaped by the centuries.



There are few better sights than a rainforest from 30m (100ft) above

GHANA

KAKUM

SEE GHANA FROM THE AIR IN A TRUE HAVEN FOR WILDLIFE

You may not initially associate Ghana with lush, green rainforest, but you really should. Kakum National Park truly is an oasis compared to the scorching hot and dry landscape of the country's northern regions. Some 35 per cent of Ghana's land is under threat from desertification, which is one of the reasons why Kakum was upgraded from a reserve to a protected national park in 1992. The 350-square-kilometre (135-square-mile) park is teeming with trees, animals and plants, which encouraged the Ghanaian Government to make it the country's first protected area. The national park is found 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of the fascinating, historic town of Cape Coast.

So what is it about Kakum that makes it so special? Firstly, Kakum boasts over 200 species of bird and 550 species of butterfly, as

well as forest elephants, leopards, antelope, flying squirrels and many other monkey species. Kakum is one of the few places in the world where you can enjoy spotting two of safari's Big Five (elusive elephants and leopards) at the same time as seeing some of the more traditional jungle inhabitants. It is recommended that you get to the park as early as possible; that way, you'll have the best chance of encountering animals with an entire day of critter watching.

Risk-takers may be inclined to head out of the park after your day of fun to Hans Cottage Motel – 22 kilometres (14 miles) south of Kakum. There you can enjoy a spot of lunch while petting crocodiles. Yes, that's right – tame crocodiles like to hang around the hotel and allow you to give them a stroke... provided they've had something to eat first.

What better way to enjoy the sights of Kakum's glorious greenery than by taking a stroll along the treetop canopy walkway? There are over 300 metres (1,000 feet) of elevated bridges that span the park, made up of seven sturdy bridges built 30 metres (100 feet) in the air. The walkways blend beautifully into the natural surroundings so you feel enveloped by flora as you stroll along. The hardwood trees can stretch up to 65 metres (213 feet) into the sky – an awe-inspiring sight.

There are so many reasons to visit the stunning country of Ghana, with its rich culture, underrated beaches and Atlantic surf, but Kakum National Park should really be up there too. It is beautiful, peaceful, stuffed with wonderful wildlife and pretty plants and should definitely be a key destination on any nature lover's itinerary.



The lesser spotted monkey is one of many monkeys in Kakum



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Kakum is well-equipped with a visitor centre, restaurant, and treehouse lodge.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to March

TIME ZONE

UTC

USEFUL SITES

kakumnationalpark.ghana-net.com/index.html

ghct.org.gh/kakumpark/en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Kakum_National_Park

HOW TO GET THERE

It's a 4 hour drive from Accra, or 40 minutes from the town of Cape Coast.



There are just a few places where African forest elephants live



SPOT ENDANGERED ANIMALS

The Kakum rainforest is so dense and thick, it provides a superb, safe environment for a number of otherwise endangered or vulnerable animals. The African forest elephant, smaller than the savanna elephant, roams freely around Kakum and is an essential part of the circle of life here – many trees rely on the elephants eating their seeds and depositing them elsewhere in order to germinate. Kakum is also home to the bongo, the largest forest antelope. These magnificent creatures are on the near threatened list, as they are a big target for illegal hunters due to their horns that can grow up to one metre (three feet) in length.

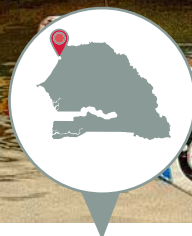
Crocodiles are everywhere in Kakum – but not all are pettable



© All Images Getty



"Head to Saint-Louis in May for the annual jazz festival"



SENEGAL

SAINT-LOUIS

THE 'VENICE OF AFRICA' COMES TO LIFE AT EVERY TURN

Steeped in history, Saint-Louis is one of the oldest, most incredible cities in Senegal, and probably West Africa. Known as the 'Venice of Africa' and wedged between two arms of the mouth of the Senegal river, the city's look is reflected in the winding water and in its dynamic zest for life.

Saint-Louis, or Ndar to the locals, was a hub for the French during their colonisation of Senegal, as well as other French West African states. It was the capital until 1902, when that title moved to Dakar, and served as capital of nearby Mauritania until 1957. As a result, the city is a melting pot of influences and cultures.

You can visit the Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie, home to many water birds and a lovely place to view the sunset. There are also some gorgeous, colourful old colonial houses along the waterfront. Along the Langue, take the time to visit the Musée Jean Mermoz, which focuses on the 'Golden Era' of aviation in the 1920s and 1930s. Stroll back to the Senegalese mainland across the Faidherbe Bridge, which is

named after the former colonial Governor and features marvellous metal arches.

If you're headed to Saint-Louis in May, you'll be in luck for the Saint-Louis Jazz Festival. There are fringe events all over town, with open-air stages near the Place Faidherbe and in the Quai des Arts. If you miss the festival, you can always check out the Meyazz Club in Sor. The music is easy on the ear, the ambience is electric and the crowd are always having a good time. During the day, music lovers should browse the Ndar Ndar Music & Café, a delightful little shop with a coffee bar and CDs for sale. And for seafood, look no further than Le Reveil, which serves Senegal's impeccable coconut shrimp curry.

Senegal's entry into the West African contest of 'Jollof rice wars' is thieboudienne, a tasty dish that's served in most restaurants. Try it at La Linguere on the Rue Blaise Diagne, or at La Kora, which also occasionally hosts concerts.

Tastefully old, but with a seldom-matched energy, Saint-Louis is truly a must-visit city secreted away on the African continent.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Saint-Louis is threatened by rising water levels, so go now, before it's too late.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May, for the dry season and jazz festival.

TIME ZONE

UTC-0

USEFUL SITES

<https://tinyurl.com/spiritsaintlouis>
saintlouisdusenegal.com/english/
newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Saint-Louis,_Senegal

HOW TO GET THERE

It's best to travel to Leopold Senghor airport in Dakar, then hire a driver for the four-hour trip to Saint-Louis.





MOROCCO

CHEFCHAOUEN

ERUPTING IN A CACOPHONY OF BLUE, THIS DREAMY VILLAGE REMAINS FROZEN IN TIME

Nestled high in the rippling Rif Mountains between two horned peaks, Morocco's picturesque blue city is steeped in quirky tradition. Modern Chefchaouen is a rich cultural tapestry inspired by the Berber tribes, Muslims, Jews and Moorish exiles that have called the blue-and-white-washed village home.

Fusing Moroccan and Andalusian influences, Chefchaouen's labyrinthine 15th-century medina brims with undiscovered artisanal gems. Brass teapots, silver plates and hand-woven carpets sit alongside sacks of rainbow paint powder beneath a terracotta roof. A short walk through snaking cobblestone backstreets, the town's small-but-charming kasbah looms large. Behind its ochre-hued fortified walls hide a leafy garden, small museum and art gallery. The tower walls offer picture-perfect views, particularly at sunset when the blue sky gives way to cotton-candy clouds and the call to prayer vibrates through the still evening air.

To the north the Spanish Mosque crowns a hilltop carpeted in prickly pear and agave cactuses. Built in the 1920s, it fell into disrepair, but was carefully restored in 2010 and opened to the public. From the soaring minaret, grandstand views of the sprawling town

unfold in a rainbow of blue – from cerulean to cobalt and azure to periwinkle. Those seeking adventure head to Akchour, where forested valleys, bottomless gorges and picturesque peaks unravel to reveal waterfalls and crystalline pools. A 45-minute climb heavenward



culminates in Pont de Dieu, or God's Bridge, a natural 80-foot-high stone arch spanning the river below. Alternatively, several multi-day treks, which wind through Talassemtane National Park, begin just outside Chefchaouen.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Chefchaouen is perhaps best visited from Tangier or even Spanish Ceuta, as it's so close to the Mediterranean.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May or September to November.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

visitmorocco.com
infotourismemaroc.com
linaryad.com



HOW TO GET THERE

One way to get to Chefchaouen is to fly into Fes and hire a driver to tackle the four-hour journey.



LEBANON

BAALBEK

THIS OFT-OVERLOOKED CITY HOSTS SOME OF ROME'S MOST MAGNIFICENT WONDERS

A living, breathing monument to ancient Rome, the Phoenician city of Baalbek – also known as The City of the Sun – has endured endless reincarnations. Emerging from the fertile Beqaa Valley north of Beirut, Baalbek's sprawling temple complex rises beneath the fiery Lebanese sun.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the colossal acropolis is considered by many as the finest example of imperial Roman architecture in the world – though few travellers actually venture to this remote corner near the Syrian border.

Inhabited as early as 9,000 BCE, pilgrims flocked here to worship Baal, the Phoenician sky god, and Astarte, the queen of heaven. Later, the Romans built

temples to Jupiter, Venus and Mercury atop the ruins, which were periodically extended and expanded, before the Christians and Muslims left their marks. Today, the site is a patchwork of monolithic ruins, Roman temples and long-forgotten mosques.

The jewel in Baalbek's crown, the Temple of Bacchus, is often described as the most beautiful in all the Roman world. Constructed in the 2nd century, it was dedicated to its namesake, the god of wine. Astonishingly well preserved, 19 Corinthian columns still stand to attention on the outer wall, topped by carvings of alternating bulls' and lions' heads. Elsewhere, walls are abloom with floral patterns and depictions of gods.

What the Temple of Bacchus has in beauty, the colossal Temple of Jupiter makes up for in size. Completed in the 1st century CE during the reign of Nero, it dwarfs everything around it. Hidden within its ruinous insides, an unusual

hexagonal courtyard leads to the vast inner sanctum, before the main temple reveals itself, flanked by six columns almost 23 metres (75 feet) tall. Just below lie two basins once used to bathe animals during sacrificial rituals.

Elsewhere, a circular section of the Temple of Venus remains intact, alongside vestiges of a temple dedicated to Hermes and extensive Arab fortifications. Below the ground, a subterranean museum houses a selection of sarcophagi and sculptures. Close by, two gigantic monoliths lie half-buried. The largest block ever carved by human hands, the Stone of the South, weighs a staggering 1,650 tons, while the Stone of the Pregnant Woman tips the scales at 1,240 tons. Despite being destined for the temple, neither made it – instead, they linger as odes to the might of this once-powerful city.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

It's important to check the security advice before travelling to Baalbek, as the situation often changes.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July to August for the Baalbeck International Festival of music.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

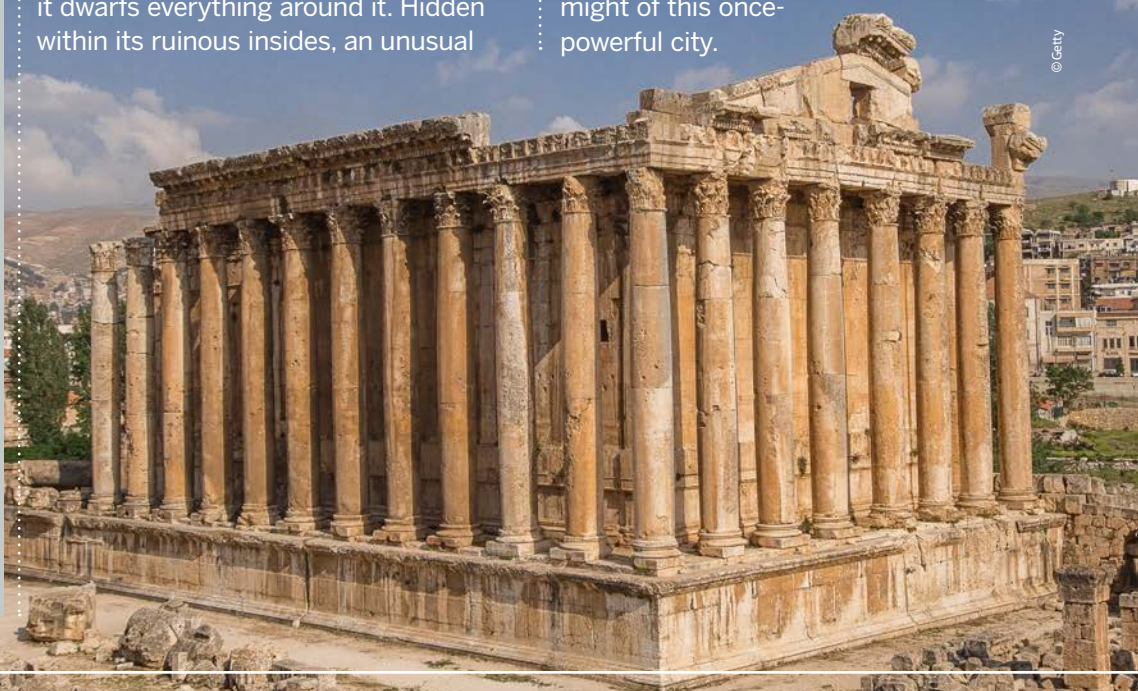
baalbeck.org.lb

destinationlebanon.gov.lb

whc.unesco.org

HOW TO GET THERE

Baalbek is a two- to three-hour drive from both Beirut or Byblos.



© Getty



EGYPT

DAHAB

AFTER A CHOPPY PERIOD, THIS JEWEL OF THE RED SEA IS READY FOR VISITORS AGAIN

The laidback backpacker town of Dahab lies around 50 miles (80km) north of Sharm el-Sheikh. This former Bedouin fishing village sits on the desert Sinai Peninsula of Egypt and is home to some of the best dive sites in the Middle East. In the last few years it's been tricky to get to, after a flight ban was introduced following a terrorist attack. However, the ban has been lifted and (after the pandemic subsides) it will soon be easily accessible for visitors wishing to swim in its beautiful seas and bask in some much-needed winter sunshine.

Part of the attraction to Dahab is its low-key vibe and the miles of sweeping beaches, graced

with a backdrop of the distant Hejaz mountains. Situated on the Gulf of Aqaba, Dahab is ideal if you want to experience the nomadic culture of the indigenous Bedouin tribes. There are also historical sites nearby that are well worth visiting – for instance, 80 miles (130km) away is St. Catherine's Monastery, one of the oldest monasteries in the world. Its 6th-century complex includes an ossuary (for the skulls of deceased monks) and brilliantly preserved golden iconography.

Action fans will also find plenty of activities in Dahab. Windsurfing and kitesurfing lessons are abundantly available. The enclosed blue lagoon, reliable winds and flat conditions make it perfect

for people new to windsurfing. Already an avid surfer? Further away from the shore you can find strong winds to challenge you.

A trip to Dahab wouldn't be complete without a visit to its most famous dive spot, The Blue Hole. This unique diving and snorkelling site can be easily reached by car or by boat, as it's just a few miles north of the city. The giant sinkhole is just as mesmerising from the shoreline as it is from underwater – its staggering depth of around 120 metres gives it its deep blue hue. Other local dive sites such as Lighthouse and Eel Garden are teeming with underwater life, too. If you're born to be on the water, you'll never run out of things to do in Dahab!

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If you have the time and the money, make sure you embark on a quad bike safari through the desert.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to April is ideal for consistently good (but not unbearably hot) weather.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

dahab.net

gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/egypt

travel.padi.com/d/dahab/

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly to the neighbouring resort of Sharm El Sheikh.





JORDAN

JERASH TO AQABA

THE SCENIC KING'S HIGHWAY JOURNEYS DEEP INTO JORDAN'S STORIED PAST

Snaking across the spine of Jordan's Rift Valley, the King's Highway follows the ancient Levantine trade route. Vertiginous switch-backs and hairpin bends wind north to south through Jordan's ancient villages, red-rock wadis and ochre-hued desert, following the path taken by Islamic warriors, Roman legionaries and zealous Crusaders. It weaves past the spot where it is believed Moses first laid eyes on the Promised Land, a saint lost his head and the Nabataeans built their capital, taking travellers back to the heart of the country's ancient heritage.

Today, Highways 35 and 15 dip and dive along the ancient route, connecting Jerash in the north to Aqaba in the south. Beginning in Jerash, home to some of the best-preserved Roman ruins outside of Italy, Highway 35 snakes past Amman's urban sprawl. Once the capital's hilly suburbs fall away, the horizon is dotted with wheat fields, olive groves and farming villages.

Just over 75 kilometres (46 miles) south, the rocky pinnacle of Mount Nebo rises, the road

anxiously hugging its curves. Soaring over 800 metres (2,625 feet) high, the summit offers unobstructed views of the Jordan Valley. On clear days, you can see all the way to Palestine. The mountain is crowned by the remains of a 4th-century Byzantine monastery, built upon the reported burial site of Moses, and the spot where he first saw the Promised Land.

A short detour leads to the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Bethany Beyond the Jordan. Believed to be the place where Jesus was baptised and where the first five apostles met, it's a nexus of the earliest threads of Christianity. From Mount Nebo, Highway 35 veers east to the pretty market town of Madaba, where the call to prayer mingles with church bells. Known as the 'City of Mosaics', it's home to some of the world's best-preserved Byzantine mosaics.

The King's Highway continues south past red-roofed villas and tiny towns, before a short detour takes you to the ruins of Machaerus – the once-fortified hilltop palace of Herod the Great, where Salome is said to have danced in

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Jordan is a very safe place to visit, but some scams persist. Be cautious of strangers approaching your rental vehicle.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September to November, for warm seas and ideal sightseeing weather.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

visitjordan.com
jordancar.net
touristjordan.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into the capital Amman, or resort town Aqaba, from many international hubs.





The seaside town of Aqaba draws scuba divers and snorkellers from the world over



Known as the 'Valley of the Moon', Wadi Rum stretches across southern Jordan

exchange for the head of John the Baptist. From here, the Great Rift Valley tumbles dramatically down into the Dead Sea, 400 metres (1,300 feet) below. While the views are picture-perfect, the remains of Herod's crumbling fortress are strangled by overgrown weeds.

After rejoining the King's Highway, fields of wildflowers give way to barren gorges. Navigating the twists and turns, Highway 35 propels travellers from one viewpoint to the next, until it descends into the mouth of Wadi Mujib via a series of hairpin bends. Travelling ever deeper, the weatherworn sandstone canyon walls rise like skyscrapers of craggy rock.

Adventurous souls can be drawn from the car and onto the hiking and canyoning trails of the protected Mujib Biosphere Reserve, which weave through serrated peaks, warm waters and rushing falls. Back on dry land, the King's Highway navigates 50 kilometres (30 miles) south, to the crusader castle of Kerak. Built in 1140, this fortress is where the legendary leader Saladin fought the invading Frenchman, Reynald of Châtillon.

From Kerak, the King's Highway rises, before descending into the Dana Biosphere Reserve –

the largest of its kind in Jordan. The sprawling nature reserve tumbles down, through barren cliffs to a palm tree-fringed plateau – where buzzards and eagles freewheel through the thermals. Heading south, the highway meanders into the country's isolated Badlands, until the 12th-century Crusader castle, Shobak, suddenly emerges above a sea of fruit trees, atop a rocky mountain. From here, the modern town of Wadi Musa – the gate to the 'lost city' of Petra – is but a stone's throw away. Carved directly into colossal rose-hued cliffs, the ancient Nabataean capital is testament to the ingenuity of a civilisation that rose to glorious heights, only to fade into obscurity.

After exploring Petra, Highway 35 gives way to Highway 15, the 'Desert Highway'. A short detour propels travellers into the heart of Wadi Rum, a beautifully desolate region made famous by the film, *Lawrence of Arabia*. Barren, Mars-like and unforgiving, it's home to colossal red rock formations, razor-toothed mountains and Stone Age petroglyphs. Finally, the road rolls into Aqaba, Jordan's most famous dive spot with 23 sites and a unique red coral, believed by some to have given the Red Sea its name.

Dating back to around 300 BCE, Petra was the capital of the powerful Nabataean Kingdom



Image source: Thinkstock

EXPLORING PETRA

Built over 2,000 years ago as a tax collection point, Petra became a thriving trading centre and the capital of the Nabataean Kingdom from 300 BCE to 106 CE, before being abandoned and left to ruin. Covering almost 100 square kilometres (38 square miles), the ancient city takes two or three days to explore fully. The entrance is through the Siq, a narrow, mile-long gorge carved from pink and orange rock, and at the end, the Treasury's decorative façade looms tall.

Elsewhere, the Street of Facades houses the tombs of 40 merchants, though the Royal Tombs are the most impressive. Temples and baths pepper the rest of the city, but a hike up to the Monastery should not be missed. Nor should the trails to the High Place of Sacrifice or Al Khubtha, which offers up spectacular bird's-eye views of the Treasury, best enjoyed at dawn.





ASIA

74 CENTRAL HOKKAIDO

76 PUNAKHA DZONG

77 KEERIMALAI

78 GATES OF HELL

80 TUBBATAHA

81 SALALAH

82 KARAKORAM HIGHWAY

84 RYUKYU ISLANDS

85 KUCHING

86 SI PHAN DON

88 BADSHAHI MOSQUE

89 KOH MUK

90 ÇIRALI

91 AURANGABAD

92 XI'AN

93 POKHARA

94 NUSA LEMBONGAN

95 SHIRAZ

96 GOBI DESERT



JAPAN

CENTRAL HOKKAIDO

JAPAN'S NORTHERNMOST ISLAND IS A DRAMATIC LANDSCAPE FOR YOU TO EXPLORE, FILLED WITH CURIOUS BEASTS AND VIBRANT CITYSCAPES

Hokkaido, Japan's second largest main island, is a stunning landscape that is largely undeveloped. Dressed with rich foliage, it is where the brown bears roam among the forests, and orca navigate the sea. The journey through the centre of this majestic island begins on its southern tip, at the city of Hakodate. Its namesake, the forested Mount Hakodate, towers 334-metres (1,095-feet) high, offering up one of the country's finest views at night, where you can look out over the twinkling city lights, enveloped by the ocean. One of Japan's first ports to open up to Western trade, it features a unique European-style fortress and some red brick warehouses. The morning market, meanwhile, is a hotspot of activity, overflowing with fresh seafood and restaurants.

North of the city, the coastal highway skirts around Uchiura Bay, where tree-lined mountains waltz up and down. In autumn, a palette of yellows, oranges and reds sweep across the horizon, as the trees erupt into fiery hues. An eggy aroma dominates the approach to the onsen, or hot spring, town of Noboribetsu, enveloped on all sides by forest. The town derives most of its water from Hell Valley, which sits just above it, where fumes and steam spew out from hot pools and mud ponds. The hot

river, Oyunumagawa, flows through the forest, even feeding into a natural foot bath.

After crossing the industrial city of Tomakomai, the road continues north to Hokkaido's prefectural capital, Sapporo – home to the country's famous beer and its original red brick brewery, coated in ivy. One of the country's younger cities, it unveils a distinctive manifestation of Japanese urbanism, overflowing with buzzing bars, neon-dressed streets and quaint cafes. In winter, it becomes home to the country's annual Snow Festival, where the city and its surrounding mountains become dressed in a cloak of white. During the festival the city transforms into an exhibition of staggering snow and ice sculptures, crafted by people from around the world, elaborately decorated and lit.

As the journey travels through the heart of Hokkaido, a brief detour to Biei unveils a majestic mosaic of wildflowers, painting the country fields in a rainbow of striking hues. An array of country lanes enables drivers, walkers and cyclists to soak in the magnificence of Patchwork Road and Panorama Road, wrapped in rolling hills.

Further east lies Daisetsuzan National Park, Hokkaido's largest park and a vast wilderness of mountains, meadows and forests, replete with

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If you don't want to drive, trains stop at many of the places detailed here. There are buses that go to most landmarks.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Winter (November to March) for the Snow festival, and the best ski slopes

TIME ZONE

UTC+9

USEFUL SITES

japan.travel/en/destinations/hokkaido
en.visit-hokkaido.jp
japan-guide.com/list/e1101.html

HOW TO GET THERE

Boats regularly go between Hakodate and Honshu, the main island of Japan. You can also take the bullet train, which goes under the sea to reach Hakodate.





Even snow monkeys can appreciate the simple joy of bathing in Hakodate's onsen

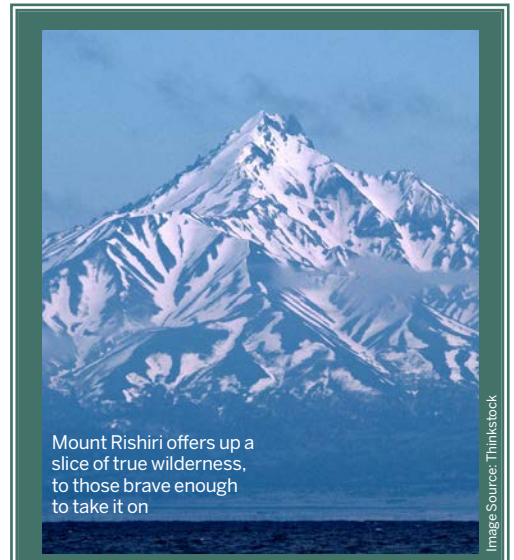
deer and brown bears. It is Japan at its most geologically magnificent, with 2,000-metre (6,560-foot) high mountains, an abundance of onsen, alpine foliage and rare animals. Active volcanoes billow smoke, while ponds sprout cloud-like marshlands. Lake Shikaribetsu, the island's highest, is home to an array of curious critters, like the pika, an adorable little mammal dating all the way back to the Ice Age. The slice of idyllic beauty is interrupted only by the slow rowing of canoes.

Towards the eastern end of the island is Akan Mashu National Park, centred around Japan's largest caldera lake, the spectacularly clear Kussharo-ko. Visitors flock to the crater lake to enjoy a spot of quiet fishing, trekking and kayaking, before moving on to its various outdoor hot spring baths. All around it the land erupts from the forest into a hellish sulphuric wasteland, before unveiling the luminous Kaminoko Pond, and the alien-like underground moss balls of Lake Akan. The hot waters from the town of Kawayu flow down from Mount

Iwosan, and run straight through the town, set within a forest of white birch and other trees.

Route 334 winds its way across the coast, where awe-inspiring views unfold over the Shiretoko Five Lakes and the Sea of Okhotsk – breathtakingly set against a backdrop of jagged, snow-laced mountains. The road ends at the warm waterfall of Kamuiwakka-yu-no-taki, where ramblers can climb the first 100 metres (328 feet) up to a secluded soaking pool.

Travelling past Mount Rausu, the coastal road veers down and around the Nemuro Strait to Cape Nosappu – the island's easternmost point, looking out onto Russia. Route 44, meanwhile, cuts into Kushiro, where the elusive Japanese red-crowned cranes, once thought to be extinct, dance among Japan's largest marshlands. Meanwhile, the tranquil Kushiro River spreads its tentacles across the landscape; the marshlands' viewpoints are a painter's dream. The nearby port city of Kushiro is the end of the line, a perfect place to reflect, after a quick meander through the local fish market.



Mount Rishiri offers up a slice of true wilderness, to those brave enough to take it on

THE NORTHERN COAST ROUTE

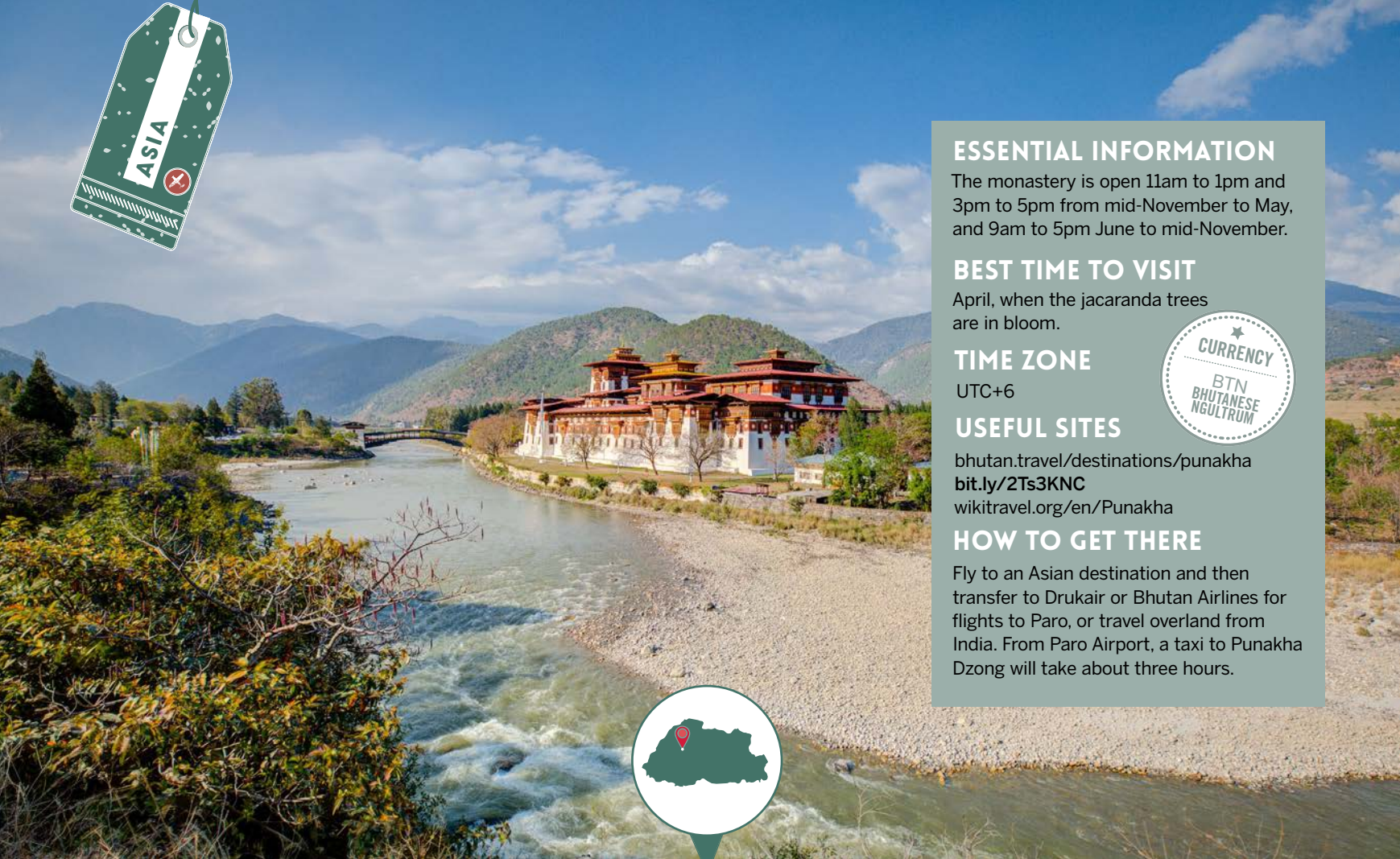
After reaching Sapporo, travellers seeking a little solitude can immerse themselves in the spectacular Northern Coast Route, which works its way all along the western coast to the fishing town of Wakkanai.

At the Heartland Ferry Terminal, ships travel not only to the picturesque islands of Rebun and Rishiri, but also to Korsakov, on the Russian isle of Sakhalin. Few travellers make it this far, and Mount Rishiri itself not only takes six hours to hike up, but offers a touch of high-stakes to any skier willing to risk it all for some truly sublime off-piste slopes. The payoff comes in the form of the famed Rishiri seaweed and urchins.

The region also has its own onsen (natural, public hot spring), with the nautical-themed Domu hot spring and the public outdoor baths of Minato-no-yu overlooking the harbour. Meanwhile, Guest House Hyosetsuso offers a foot bath for those in a hurry, before heading southeast towards Shiretoko.



The wildflowers of Biei provide a colourful contrast to some of Hokkaido's more dramatic landscapes



BHUTAN

PUNAKHA DZONG

THE SPIRITUAL AND POLITICAL HEART OF A MYSTICAL HIMALAYAN COUNTRY

Imagine a country without towns or cities: that was Bhutan until the late 1960s. There were no settlements larger than villages. But this lack of urban centres did not mean a lack of civilisation. Monasteries were the centres of learning and culture. Dzongs, as monasteries are called in Dzongkha, remain that in Bhutan to this day. That the very language of the country is named for these fortress monasteries underlines their significance in Bhutanese history and culture.

The second oldest and second largest dzong in Bhutan, Punakha was founded in 1638 by Ngawang Namgyale, the unifier of Bhutan, at the strategic confluence of two rivers, Pho Chu and Mo Chu. Namgyale also instituted the dual administration of Bhutan, where authority is divided between a religious and a secular leader. So important was Namgyale to Bhutan that his aides concealed his death, saying instead that he had entered into spiritual retreat at Punakha Dzong, remaining there for more than 50 years while edicts were still issued in his name.

For the traveller, Punakha Dzong presents an imposing front as a spiritual and temporal fortress. Indeed, Namgyale defeated the invading Tibetans here in 1639, with the weapons of the defeated kept in the monastery. But in April, when the jacaranda trees come into bloom – along with rhododendrons at the shrub level and primulas on the ground – the monastery and its grounds become suffused with flowers, the colours offsetting the white, ochre and red of the building. Its central utse (tower) rises to six storeys, dominating the surrounding countryside. Access is via a Bhutanese cantilevered bridge dating from 2008 – the previous bridge, built in the 17th century, was destroyed by floods in 1958.

Apart from its position on the tongue of land between the two rivers, the fortress monastery

is protected by its towering white walls that slope slightly inwards in traditional Tibetan style, entry stairs that can be raised and a stout wooden door that is still closed at night. The dzong has three docheys (courtyards) rather than the traditional two, with the first containing a bodhi tree and a shrine to the queen of the naga (snake spirits); the second dochey has the monks' quarters and the third dochey has the incorrupt remains of Namgyale, although only two lamas tasked with looking after the 'sacred embalmed body', the king and Bhutan's religious leader may enter the room containing the relics. For centuries Punakha Dzong was the religious and political centre of Bhutan, and while political power may have moved to Thimphu, the capital, Punakha Dzong remains the country's heart and soul.

"The fortress monastery is protected by its towering white walls"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The monastery is open 11am to 1pm and 3pm to 5pm from mid-November to May, and 9am to 5pm June to mid-November.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April, when the jacaranda trees are in bloom.

TIME ZONE

UTC+6

USEFUL SITES

bhutan.travel/destinations/punakha
bit.ly/2Ts3KNC
wikitravel.org/en/Punakha

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly to an Asian destination and then transfer to Drukair or Bhutan Airlines for flights to Paro, or travel overland from India. From Paro Airport, a taxi to Punakha Dzong will take about three hours.





SRI LANKA

KEERIMALAI

THE SRI LANKAN SEASIDE TOWN IN THE MIDST OF A RENAISSANCE

Shrouded in myth and legend, the seaside town of Keerimalai is one of Sri Lanka's holiest. Sitting on the country's northernmost tip, facing out to the swell of the Indian Ocean, it's studded with sacred sites, ancient temples and beachfront churches.

Lying 25 kilometres (16 miles) north of the ocean facing city of Jaffna, it isn't easy to access. After being closed off for decades during the country's fierce and bloody civil war, it swung open its doors to local and international tourists in 2009.

In Tamil, Keerimalai translates to Mongoose Hill, and pays homage to a local legend. Many years ago, a sage, who was unfortunately cursed with the furry face of a mongoose, is believed to

have bathed in the healing waters of Keerimalai Pond. After being submerged in the glittering water, his face transformed back into that of a human, and he was healed. Other myths suggest it was a 7th-century Chola princess with a horse's face who first discovered the water's magical qualities.

Fed by an underground cave, the freshwater pond juts up against the ocean. The stepped men's pool offers views of the crashing waves below and each day, local men dive into its mineral-rich waters. The smaller women's pool is separate, and enclosed by tall walls. Every July, during the Aadi Amavasai festival, Keerimalai becomes a pilgrimage site as Hindus flock from across the country to bathe and carry out rituals to honour their ancestors.

Next door lies the ancient Keerimalai Naguleswaram temple. One of the oldest in the region, the modest Hindu shrine is the northernmost of the country's five ancient Pancha Ishwarams – temples dedicated to Lord Siva, the destroyer of evil. Believed to date back to the 6th century BCE, folklore suggests it was built by the healed sage as a sign of gratitude for the pond's powers.

After thriving for centuries, it was largely destroyed by Jesuit missionaries before being restored in 1894 – only for it to be occupied by the Sri Lankan army in 1983 and bombed a decade later. Fringed by the gates of former rest houses, the restored temple is awash with colour and adorned with carvings of Hindu gods and sacred cows.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

When bathing, both women and men should make sure to wear something modest.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

January to March, for dry days and warm weather.

TIME ZONE

UTC+5:30

USEFUL SITES

srilanka.travel

sltb.express.lk

lanka.com/about/attractions/keerimalai-hot-springs/

HOW TO GET THERE

From Jaffna, Keerimalai is just a short tuk tuk ride.





Image source: Getty



TURKMENISTAN

GATES OF HELL

EXPERIENCE UNDERWORLD FIRE AND BRIMSTONE IN TURKMENISTAN

In this occasion the Kremlin hasn't denied responsibility for setting the world on fire, although the exact date when this Hadean pit was punched into the ground is still up for debate. Around 40 years ago (50 if you're a local Turkmen geologist) during the Soviet occupation of modern Turkmenistan, the Russians were drilling at what they thought was the site of a large oil field near the village of Darvaza when their rig, camp and a huge circumference of desert around it collapsed into a deep crater. While peering over the edge and considering whether this would be a good time to defect, a careless worker flicked a cigarette

butt into the pit and ignited the flammable gases escaping from it. Of course, the Soviets said they did it on purpose to burn off any poisonous gases and thus prevent a natural disaster. Engineers thought it would take just a few days for the inferno to die down and yet here we are, nearly half a century later, writing about one of the only reasons you might visit the middle of the Karakum Desert.

The Gates of Hell is a 70-metre wide, 20-metre deep conflagration with livid orange flames that lick up the sides, and mud that boils out of its centre. Located 162 miles into a barren desert, this incandescent orange hellmouth is hard to miss, especially at night.

Canadian explorer George Kourounis recently descended into its 1,000-degree-Celsius depths in a tinfoil suit to collect extremophile bacteria that live on the bottom. But most people who visit simply like to stare into this glowing abyss, or fry some eggs in a pan using Mother Nature's largest natural gas hob. It's a once-in-a-lifetime camping opportunity, and you'll probably have to, because there aren't any hotels around. You also need to get permission from the Turkmen authorities to visit.

As 'one of the world's most repressive countries', according to Human Rights Watch, it's not as if you can just hop on a plane to Turkmenistan tomorrow. The country is only



Ashgabat is the largest city in Turkmenistan

Image source: Getty



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

You can stay in a homestay in Darvaza village, or if you're going with a tour group, you can stay in a yurt near the crater

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to June and September to November to avoid extreme temperatures

TIME ZONE

UTC+5

USEFUL SITES

atlasobscura.com/places/the-gates-of-hell-turkmenistan
unusualtraveler.com/how-to-visit-the-gates-to-hell-darvaza-gas-crater-in-turkmenistan
advantour.com/turkmenistan/darvaza-gas-crater/tours.htm

HOW TO GET THERE

You can take a bus from Ashgabat or Dashoguz to Darvaza, then hike the 7km to the Gates of Hell.

marginally less locked down after the former 'president for life' Saparmurat Niyazov died – the same head of state who erected a golden statue of himself that rotated with the Sun in the country's capital – and President Berdimuhamedow took over. Foreign journalists get treated like lepers; independent travellers are at risk of being sent back home. The only way you get to visit the Gates of Hell is via a visa process months ahead of your trip, which stands a chance being rejected on a whim, and by signing up for one of the officially sanctioned tour groups.

But if we've learned anything about modern travellers, bragging rights to unusual and exclusive destinations trump regular road trips along well-trodden paths every time.

Ancient cities like Merv show that there's much more to Turkmenistan



Image source: Getty

OTHER SIGHTS WORTH SEEING

It has the reputation of being the most unexplored, least accessible of the five 'Stans', and as such Turkmenistan has found its way on the bucket list of any intrepid traveller. But independent travellers who haven't jumped through bureaucratic hoops to obtain the appropriate visas may find themselves turned away at the border.

Many that successfully enter Turkmenistan and visit its major cities, including Turkmenbashi and the capital Ashgabat, regard it as a kind of totalitarian Disneyland: ultra-modern ziggurats and towering gilt effigies of its esteemed rulers dot the urban landscape, while much of the country lives in relative poverty. The vast wealth of its natural resources, bigger than US oil and gas reserves, has not filtered down from the top despite Niyazov's lavish spending spree on urban glamourisation. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent cladding buildings in gleaming white marble, erecting monolithic art installations and gold statues in city centres, yet the streets are virtually empty, reserved for tourists and the country's elite.

Turkmenistan's lack of accessibility is mirrored in its landscape, covered in one of the driest deserts in the world. Through this runs the old Silk Road, an ancient conduit of free trade and wealth. The road passes through Ancient Merv, one of several UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Turkmenistan, alongside the old abandoned capital of Khwarazm in the north. If you plan on visiting these incredible sites you'll find getting into Turkmenistan is only half your problem, as leaving Ashgabat to venture into the Karakum desert is strictly controlled. Permission is required to go beyond the city borders and you'll need to declare any stay longer than a weekend. Complying with your visa conditions is advisable and losing yourself in the desert is a bad idea: if you do make it back, you'll get no sympathy from government officials.



PHILIPPINES

TUBBATAHA

EXPLORE ASIA'S GREATEST CORAL REEF, AN INCOMPARABLE MARINE SANCTUARY

Spread over almost 100,000 hectares in the Sulu Sea, the sunken rust-coloured atolls of Tubbataha attract divers from around the world who wish to commune with the reef's spectacular aquatic life. One of the Philippines' oldest ecosystems, it's home to more than 350 species of coral and nearly 500 species of fish, and is also a haven for sharks of every size. Tubbataha's two main features are the North and South reefs, and the highlight of any dive is to cross paths with either a stealthy manta ray or a vibrant whale shark.

Tubbataha's North Islet is a renowned nesting site for birds and marine turtles. Visitors must take care not to disturb the inhabitants or leave any waste – not so much as a cigarette butt. A recurring favourite among Tubbataha's several dive sites is the

'Washing Machine', where a gash in the coral feeds an irresistible current, helping along a pageant of aquatic life. Thanks to the efforts of the Philippine government to protect Tubbataha for the past 30 years, it's forbidden to poke about the reef for souvenirs, or disturb the fragile ecosystem in any way. So, you'll need to be sure you visit the reef with a responsible tour company.

Reaching Tubbataha follows a set route from Puerto Princesa City. Puerto Princesa is accessible with any local airline, and the city is the place to book onto a thrilling liveaboard tour. Typical itineraries cover the Visayas region, where so many other breathtaking locations are found, along with Tubbataha dive packages that can be paid for with Pesos or even US dollars (although the exchange rate won't be great). Liveaboard arrangements are far from spartan and

offer private cabins, sumptuous meals and professional crews who'll go to great lengths to make their guests' trip as comfortable as possible. Dining options lean towards healthy and nutritious. It's also possible to book night dives with specific diving operators, usually spanning a few visits over a week.

Exploring Tubbataha's entirety can be a challenge since a single day will not suffice for serious divers, given the size of the area. There are established sites, however, including locations where divers are allowed to spy sharks while they are at rest, or prowling round immense gatherings of fish. Other species worth watching out for are the chilled-out turtles, who have grown accustomed to human visitors, and the resident jellyfish.

Don't get stung by one of these lurking, fiendish floaters!

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The only way to reach Tubbataha is by joining a liveaboard diving tour. There are dozens to choose from.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May or June is the best, with clear skies, calm seas and plenty of sun.

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

USEFUL SITES

liveaboard.com

marine-conservation.org/blueparks/awardees/tubbataha/

whc.unesco.org/en/list/653

HOW TO GET THERE

With reservations made, book a flight to Puerto Princesa and meet your liveaboard hosts at the airport.





OMAN

SALALAH

OMAN'S SECOND CITY IS AN OASIS, TOTALLY UNIQUE ON THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

A crucial point on the ancient frankincense trail, Salalah is steeped in mystery and grandeur. To the north lies the Dhofar mountain range, which fills with springs and waterfalls in the monsoon season. The mountains and valleys are clad in a tapestry of green, interspersed with goats, donkeys and camels. At Wadi Darbat, clear blue waterfalls erupt into pools, with one thundering down from 300 metres (984 feet) high.

Towering 2,100 metres (6,890 feet) heavenwards is the range's highest peak, Jebel Samhan. Home to an Arabian leopard sanctuary, it also has a network of sinkholes, mountain passes and limestone caves. A stunning panoramic viewpoint looks over a landscape

filled with acacia and frankincense trees, as well as Arabian gazelles, foxes and Nubian goats. The spring of Ain Razat, one of the region's main sources for the local falaj irrigation system, is a particular favourite, with water lilies sprouting beneath the foot of a striking cave.

In the city, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, built by the country's late leader, is a stunning piece of Islamic architecture. A modern marvel, it can accommodate 20,000 worshippers and features the world's second-largest Persian rug, which took 600 women four years to craft.

Just off the coast is Al Baleed Archaeological Park, the UNESCO-listed ruins of a 12th-century trading port called Zafar. It was a vital point on the frankincense trail, and today features the Museum of Frankincense Land, exploring the

region's history. The site also has several miles of pristine walking trails and a restaurant with a second deck, perfect for sighting spotted thick-knee birds among the reeds. Frankincense plays a starring role at the old town's Al Husn market, wafting past traders hawking silver handcrafted goods, and fragrant ittar oil.

At Mughsayl Beach, mountains meet turquoise sea, with a pristine shoreline punctuated by caves and coves. Not far from Marneef Cave are a set of blowholes, spurting seawater out like the dolphins that frequent the coast. Finally, visitors can ask locals about the 'anti-gravity' point between Salalah and Mirbat. Here, there is a hill where if drivers park their cars in neutral, they will appear to make their ways back uphill.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Hire a car so that you can explore the city and its surroundings at your own leisure.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July to September for the 'khareef' monsoon season's cool breezes and luscious foliage.

TIME ZONE

UTC+4

USEFUL SITES

omantourism.gov.om
experienceoman.om
beautifulsalalah.com



HOW TO GET THERE

It's a ten-hour drive from Muscat to Salalah, but those short on time might want to take the hour-and-a-half flight.



© Getty



Image Source: Getty

PAKISTAN

KARAKORAM HIGHWAY

THE MOUNTAINS, MEADOWS AND LAKES OF THE KARAKORAM HIGHWAY OFFER BREATHTAKING VIEWS FROM THE ROAD

The Karakoram Highway, or KKH, between Pakistan and China, offers one of the most jaw-dropping, hair-raising and heartwarming routes across the Himalayas. Along the way, you'll be wedged between sharp mountains, follow winding rivers, and meet some of the planet's most hospitable people. If you don't think Pakistan has anything to offer the foreign traveller, it's time that you think again!

Firstly, you'll need to decide how you will set off on your KKH adventure. There is some debate as to where the highway begins – technically, it originates just outside the capital Islamabad, but most road trippers begin in the city of Gilgit. That's because the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advises against all travel on the KKH between Islamabad and Gilgit, as security cannot be guaranteed. By contrast, the area between Gilgit and the Chinese border is one of the safest in Pakistan.

That doesn't mean you should skip Islamabad. Many airlines offer direct flights to the Pakistani capital, and it's worth spending a couple of days here to acclimatise. It's a haven of greenery,

planned streets and modern architecture – Faisal Mosque is one of the highlights. Islamabad's neighbour Rawalpindi is classic Pakistan, a mix of Mughal glories and a modern megacity. Opt to visit Taxila, one of the centres of the ancient Indus River Valley civilisation, as it's just 30 kilometres (18.6 miles) away.

Fly on to Gilgit, a flight that offers an amazing bird's eye view. You'll glide elegantly through the grey and white peaks of the Himalayas. Staying in Gilgit for a couple of nights is definitely worthwhile, as there's plenty to see. Stop at the bazaar to pick up some traditional Pakistani clothing, which makes for comfortable travelling gear. Fill up on spicy curries and plenty of warm doodh pati chai – you'll need the extra calories when you experience the chill mountain air.

Then it's time to venture into the mountains, taking some time to admire the route as you go. Keep an eye out for the colourful, musical and cheerful dump trucks that overtake you. These ornately decorated vehicles are Pakistan's iconic 'jingle trucks', and you'll want to keep a mental note of all the colours and patterns you see – it makes for a fun road-trip game.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The Pakistani Rupee is a closed currency, so take out cash before you arrive, and convert it at a local bureau de change.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April-May or September-October, for passable roads and bearable temperatures

TIME ZONE

UTC+5

USEFUL SITES

en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Karakoram_Highway_againstthecompass.com/en/karakoram-highway

travelandleisure.com/trip-ideas/road-trips/road-trip-guide-karakoram-highway

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into the capital, Islamabad, then take an internal PIA flight to Gilgit.





The next city you'll reach is historic Karimabad. Make sure to visit the Baltit Fort – a 17th-century fort that looks as though it would be more at home in Tibet than Pakistan. You can also go for walks in the valley, as it's supremely quiet and excellent for hiking. Just a short distance away is the village of Ganish, on the banks of the Hunza River. This was the first Silk Road settlement in the region, and it has recently been restored to its former glory, winning a number of UNESCO awards in the process. There are a few beautifully carved wooden mosques to explore.

Next up is Attabad Lake, a lake that was created by a landslide in 2010, blocking the Hunza. It flooded the Karakoram Highway, so to cross it you can take a local boat to the other side. It's an hour's ride, and the colour of the water is as aquamarine as the sky above your head. A new network of tunnels has opened beneath the lake, so you can now drive, but the ferry ride is a more memorable experience.

In a few hours, passing through the Khunjerab National Park, you'll reach the highest border crossing in the world – the Khunjerab Pass. At 4,693 metres (15,397 feet), it's a desolate



Image Source: Getty

FAIRY MEADOWS

The Himalayas have a reputation for being harsh, hostile and possibly deadly. In Pakistan, the mountain Nanga Parbat has even been nicknamed 'Killer Mountain', such is its fearsome reputation. With steep slopes soaring into the air and spiky peaks, you can see why.

But from the base camp at Fairy Meadows, you'll see only pure beauty. Its rolling green pastures and perfectly still lakes seem like another world to the snow-capped, rocky mountains it lies directly under. You can take in the crisp air, the refreshing

scent of pine tickling your nostrils. The only thing that disturbs your peace? The sheep, cows and horses that idly graze at this beautiful vista.

However, it's not easy to get here. You'll need to stop off the KKH at Raikot Bridge, where you need to register with the police. Then, a local driver will take you 15km (9.3mi) up to the village of Tattu, on one of the world's most dangerous stretches of road. Finally, there's a 5km (3.1mi) hike on foot to the Fairy Meadows. It can be terrifying, but the trip is well worth it.

moonscape, but seeing the world's highest ATM should bring you right back down to earth.

The Chinese side of the KKH can be a bit complicated, as Chinese law requires all visitors to have a local guide to take you the 130 kilometres (80 miles) from the border to the city of Tashkurgan. The town itself is interesting, as it is a real melting pot of cultures. You can see Tajiks dressed in their beautiful national costume, grab a bite to eat at an Uyghur street food stand, before popping into a Pakistani shop. There's also a photogenic stone fort that's worth seeing.

A six-hour drive into the Taklamakan Desert takes you to your last stop. Kashgar is different to the rest of China – it was a major Silk Road city, and its Uyghur inhabitants have a markedly distinct culture. Mosques pepper the city's sandstone streets, and the food is much richer here than in the far eastern parts of China.

If you're looking for a more typical Chinese experience, you can visit the modern parts of town, including the gigantic Mao statue.

The Karakoram Highway is a breathtaking journey through human history. As you travel through dramatic landscapes, isolated cultures and fascinating sights, you'll feel the pulse of the ancient Silk Road coursing through your veins. When you reach the top of the world, savour the once-in-a-lifetime rush of excitement and adventure the KKH brings.



Image Source: Getty



Image Source: Thinkstock

"The colour of the water is as aquamarine as the sky above your head"



JAPAN

RYUKYU ISLANDS

JAPAN'S SOUTHERN ISLANDS ARE A SERIES OF EVER-QUIETER SUBTROPICAL HIDEAWAYS

The Ryukyu Islands stretch from Japan's southern island of Kyushu to Taiwan. In the north, the largest of the Ryukyu Islands, Amami, is a stunning subtropical paradise with white-sand beaches, perfect for snorkelling and swimming. On its eastern coast lies Japan's second-largest mangrove forest, where visitors can kayak down estuaries. No visit to the island is complete without a piping-hot portion of keihan, a heart-warming dish of chicken and rice, coated in ginger, onion, omelette, shiitake mushroom and dried seaweed, embraced by a salty broth.

Further south is the second-largest (and busiest) island, Okinawa – the historic heart of the Ryukyu Kingdom. From the northern Cape Hedo, forested mountains rise and fall,

eventually reaching the bustling capital of Naha – home to the UNESCO-listed Shuri Castle.

Originally built in the 14th century, the fortress immortalises the unique architecture and aesthetics of the Ryukyu Kingdom. Another UNESCO site, Shikinaen Garden, once the second residence of the Ryukyu kings, features red-tile-roofed Okinawan houses, alongside a landscaped pond and Japanese garden. Buried among the island's wilder mountains, waterfalls and forests is the indigenous Okinawan shrine to nature itself, Sefa-Utaki.

While Okinawa is surrounded by several smaller islets, 300 kilometres (186 miles) south lies Miyako Island, part of the secretive Sakishima island group. This flat isle is coated in farms and sugar cane fields, and features some

of the country's most stunning beaches and coral reefs.

Even further south lie the Yaeyama Islands, Japan's southernmost point, centred around the immaculate Ishigaki and Iriomote islands. Ishigaki makes for a fantastic leaping-off point, while Iriomote is deserted, mostly covered in mangrove and jungle, best explored on foot or kayak. Scuba divers will enjoy Manta Way, which turns into a veritable manta ray highway in spring and summer. The island is also home to the rare wild cat, the Iriomote Yamaneko.

Elsewhere, the tiny Taketomi Island preserves traditional Ryukyu village life, with a scattering of traditional bungalows. The isle is car free, and residents sweep their own streets – perfect for a truly hidden homestay unlike any other.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If stung by a Habu box jellyfish, pour vinegar on the site, remove wayward tentacles and seek medical help.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Visit between the months of June and August for the very best swimming conditions.

TIME ZONE

UTC+9

USEFUL SITES

japan.travel

visitokinawa.jp

kagoshima-kankou.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Visitors can either take a ferry from Kagoshima to Naha or Amami, or fly from Tokyo or Osaka into Amami, Okinawa, Miyako and Ishigaki.





MALAYSIA

KUCHING

DUBBED THE CITY OF CATS, THERE'S NOTHING TAME ABOUT THIS MALAYSIAN CITY

Hot and humid all year round, Kuching is an East Malaysian hubbub and the capital of the Sarawak region. Situated on the rainforest-covered island of Borneo and strategically positioned on the Sarawak River, Kuching is one of the world's most exciting cities. Culture fans will be in their element – Malaysia is a melting pot of Chinese, Malay and Tamil influences. As it's more wild and remote than the rest of Malaysia, Kuching is also home to several tribal groups, such as the Dayaks.

Quirky is a theme in Kuching, as visitors will find out in its many cat-themed spots. Kuching, which literally means 'cats', is known as the City of Cats. Statues of kitties small and large are scattered around the city. Nobody knows what connects the city to cats, but the sporadic and eccentric decorations show residents have taken it upon themselves to keep the mystery alive. Some say there was a misunderstanding when the Europeans who landed there asked a local tribesman the name of the settlement. They watched in bemusement as he pointed to a cat, not comprehending them due to the language barrier.

History fanatics will love the array of museums, as well as tours around the

city's unusual buildings. Visitors can marvel at the Sarawak Cultural Village, where creativity tops the agenda, offering an education on ancient techniques such as weaving, bamboo carving and bead making in classic jungle surroundings of huts and longhouses.

The huge Kuching Mosque is heaven for Instagrammers thanks to its pink exterior and gold domes that wink under the sunset. The incredible building was built in 1968 to replace a wooden one constructed in the 1850s, and locals affectionately call it 'Masjid Lama' (Old Mosque). Non-Muslim visitors are welcome except during prayer times.

No trip here is complete without a trip to the Cat Museum. It teaches about the historical and cultural significance of the animals via more than 2,000 exhibits. Surrounding the museum, which has a modern spaceship design, is a stunning garden – an ideal spot for lunch.

The Bazaar is definitely worth a look, too, with its shop houses facing the water. The market stalls boast souvenirs and traditional arts and crafts. Finally, the Tua Pek Kong Chinese Temple is another sight to visit, offering a place of worship to the many Chinese inhabitants in Malaysia. The temple dates back to 1770, which makes it the oldest of its kind in Kuching.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Kuching is wonderfully multicultural and its residents usually take English as a second or third language.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May, as the blossom trees are out.

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

USEFUL SITES

[wikitavel.org/en/Kuching](https://www.wikitavel.org/en/Kuching)
[sarawaktourism.com/kuching](https://www.sarawaktourism.com/kuching)
<https://tinyurl.com/borneokuching>

HOW TO GET THERE

Kuching does have an airport, but international visitors will likely have to fly into Kuala Lumpur or Singapore first, and then fly here.





Image Source: Getty Images



LAOS

SI PHAN DON

DISCOVER THE 4,000 ISLANDS OF THE MEKONG RIVER IN SOUTHERN LAOS, WHERE TIME STANDS STILL

Drifting slowly down the muddy, brown Mekong River, it is easy to forget the world beyond. The 'rice bowl' of Asia, the Mekong breathes life into the otherwise landlocked nation of Laos. It brings with it not just fresh water, but an outstanding array of aquatic life, with more than 1,100 species of fish – second only to the Amazon River. The Irrawaddy dolphin, Mekong giant catfish and giant freshwater stingray all call these waters home.

One side of the riverbank is lined with wooden huts, the other rich foliage. In the distance, a Laotian fisherman stands atop his boat, casting his net. He pulls it out and pauses; water bursts softly from the river, as freshwater dolphins surface for air. Such is the pace of life in Si Phan Don, Laos' '4,000 Islands' – a dense archipelago of islands, mostly tiny and inhospitable in Champasak Province.

At Nakasang village, small ferries line up, preparing to set off for Muang Khong, the eastern town on Si Phan Don's largest island, Don Khong. On the other side, the coast of Don Khong reveals cosy clusters of stilted houses above the waterline, looming banana trees, wayward cows and waving fishermen.

With bags thrown in one of the island's many guesthouses, the best way to explore is by foot,

tuk tuk, bicycle or motorbike. The island, 18 kilometres (11 miles) long and eight kilometres (five miles) wide, hosts around 20 villages. Those who do not sustain themselves from the river live off the land, with farms producing palm sugar, palm-leaf hats and lao khao – fermented rice whisky. Twice a day, sugar farmers in Ban Hin Siew Tai, the heart of Laos' sugar industry, scale their trees and collect juice to boil into sugar. Their produce makes its way to the local market at Ban Kang Don, where the fishermen hawk their hauls.

Among Don Khong's 100 mountain tops, there are many nooks and crannies to explore. Half a mile north of Muang Khong, just a short, shaded walk off the beaten track, via banana plantation, is Tham Phu Khiaw, or Green Mountain Cave. A humble collection of Buddhist iconography, many make regular pilgrimages to the sanctuary.

The island's oldest temple can be found in the Ban Xieng Wang community. A cycle through the bamboo groves and farms north of Muang Khong, Wat Jom Thong is marked by a triple-gated entrance. This opens up to a cruciform temple hall of brick and stucco, topped with tiled roof and woodwork engraved with beasts.

Among the 14 other temples on the island is Wat Phu Khao Kaew. The shrine provides a

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Withdraw cash from Nakasang village before taking the ferry, as most islands don't have ATMs.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to January
(the dry season)

TIME ZONE

UTC+7

USEFUL SITES

visit-laos.com/hotels/champasak
tourismloos.org
salalaaboutique.com/saladonekhone

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into Pakse airport, then get a taxi or drive to the area. The launching-off point is Nakasang village. Small ferries set off for Muang Khong, the town on Si Phan Don's largest island, Don Khong.





With more than 1,100 species of fish, the Mekong provides a much-needed lifeline to landlocked Laos



Image Source: Getty

surreal juxtaposition to the unruly terrain, with a small red and gold stupa, alongside a large reclining Buddha. The temple is believed to have been built on holy ground, pre-Khmer ruins, atop the nest of a Naga river serpent.

Alongside the island's indigenous history, it bears mementos of its French occupation. Don Khong History Museum occupies a former colonial building. The local governor who built it in 1935 lavished it with the name Sathanavoudthi, or 'Garden of Eden' – more commonly referred to by locals as 'Brick House'. Restored in 2010, it is now a museum, with a small curation of musical instruments, antique furniture and photos of the Don Khon railway.

Perhaps the most touristy of Si Phan Don's islands is Don Det, whose northwest bar district has earned it 'party island' status. Though some sell hallucinogenic cocktails and snacks, it hardly rivals the debauchery of Vang Vieng, with most establishments shutting shop before midnight. Whether soaking in the sunset from the swaying embrace of a hammock, or throwing back rice at a family-run restaurant in the south, Don Det is the perfect place to slow down. The island allows tired visitors to explore the Mekong River, in perhaps the laziest way possible: tubing. Alternatively, more adventurous types can battle the currents by kayak. There's plenty of shoreline to explore, and the western coast watches over some spectacular sunsets.

Ferries also set off from Don Det port to the nearby islands of Don Loppadi, Don Sang Pai and Don Phi Man. The journey soaks in the ambience of the archipelago's uninhabited clusters of paradise, kept greedily from the outside world by the flowing Mekong. Cycling the three islands is an opportunity to immerse yourself in nature; to watch the sun dance over the flies, and the wind stroke the paddy fields.

The last major island of Don Khon can be reached by foot, over the old French railway bridge linking it with Don Det. Just four kilometres (2.5 miles) long and 2.89 kilometres (1.8 miles) wide, the forested island is marked by its banyan trees and sandy beaches.

It is also home to Tat Somphamit, sometimes referred to as 'Li Phi' or 'Spirit Trap', a network of waterfalls and rapids the locals believe catch evil spirits. Undeterred, mortal fishermen mimic tightrope walkers, edging along bamboo scaffolds to collect their fish traps.

North of the falls is the island's colourfully painted Buddhist monastery, Wat Khon Tai. Built over an ancient Hindu site, it features a modern temple and steeple, alongside an old ordination hall, a crumbling stupa, with exposed red brick, and ancient stones – including an old Khmer shivalinga (abstract representation of Shiva).

A hiking trail follows the old French railroad, bookended by rusting trains, which was built in the 19th century to navigate supplies around the rapids from Don Khon to Don Det. The tracks have been replaced by roads, but placards outline the history of the railway. At one point, the trail passes an overgrown Christian cemetery, and the tomb of a French family, who all died on the same day in 1922.

The local fishermen who frequent Xai Kong Nyai Beach are happy to take visitors to see the waterfalls, and even the dolphins, in their longtail boats. With the sun melting over the horizon, to the clicks and soft splashes of Irrawaddy dolphins, Si Phan Don feels like a world where time regresses back into an abstract concept – and the moment is all that matters.



Image Source: Getty Images

PITSTOPS

The best way to reach Si Phan Don is from the small Pakse International Airport, just over 2 hours' drive away. No trip to the province is complete without a stop at Don Daeng, a short detour along the way. Just off Champasak village, Don Daeng is a perfect introduction to Laotian island life, with its towering palms, sleepy villages and rolling farms.

Across the river, the 1,000-year-old, UNESCO-protected Vat Phou temple complex sits at the base of a mountain. Preserving the architectural wonders of the Khmer Empire, the intricate development emphasises the Hindu relationship between human and nature; with temples, shrines and waterworks stretched in geometric patterns across ten kilometres (six miles) of mountain top and river bank.

The launching-off point for Si Phan Don is Nakasang village, which is just a short drive away from Khone Phapheng – the largest waterfall system in Southeast Asia. Here, daredevil fishermen tiptoe across precarious bamboo scaffolds, hopping alongside the waterfall. Visitors can watch them in action from a safer distance from one of the park's various viewing platforms.

Si Phan Don is a gorgeous archipelago on the Mekong River. It also marks the boundary between Laos and Cambodia



Image source: Getty Images



PAKISTAN

BADSHAHI MOSQUE

ON THE EDGE OF LAHORE'S WALLED CITY, YOU'LL FIND THE LAST GREAT MUGHAL TREASURE

Lahore has long been considered the cultural capital of Punjab, the home of Mughal emperors, Sikh rulers and, later on, British colonisers. Now Pakistan's second city and historic hub, Lahore retains much of its grandeur, and the Badshahi (Emperor's) Mosque presides over it all. One of the world's biggest mosques, it's built from red sandstone and features four minarets, three white marble onion domes, plus a vast square marking the entrance. Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb built the place in the 1670s, in order to commemorate his military victories over a Hindu king further south. His project was strongly influenced by the Jama Masjid mosque in Delhi, built by his predecessor Shah Jahan – the man behind the world famous Taj Mahal.

After various invasions of Lahore, the mosque was used as an army garrison – first by the Sikhs, then by the British – yet it still fell into disrepair. But the mosque has been fully restored in the past 100 years, and it's become one of Pakistan's most prominent symbols.

While it's often overshadowed by its more tourist-friendly neighbour, India, there are plenty of reasons to visit Pakistan. Recently voted the best 'unspoilt' place for backpackers to visit by a number of prolific travel outlets, tourists are beginning to recognise the latent potential in this South Asian nation. Lahore is a fantastic starting point for your trip, as it is one of the safest areas in the region, and many of its residents welcome foreign tourists with open arms.

When you cross the Badshahi Mosque's threshold, you'll pass through a grand entrance gate, heavily influenced by Persian architecture. Walking through the courtyard (which can apparently hold up to 100,000 faithful), you'll notice it is bustling with Pakistani locals and domestic tourists. You might even find that some of the more curious local children ask to take selfies with you!

Proceed to the portico, where you can admire intricately decorated white marble – it's said to be some of the finest in the world. It's carved with endlessly climbing flowers, many of which

are painted vividly in pink, green, red and orange. Take a note of the gilded chandeliers dangling from the ceiling, too. Everything is perfectly symmetrical – a hallmark of Mughal design.

The prayer hall can accommodate tens of thousands of worshippers. It's particularly busy on Friday lunchtimes, as that's the time for jummah (Friday prayers). Be sure to respect the prayer rituals and dress codes.

If you can't get enough Mughal architecture, you're in luck. In the adjacent Hazuri Bagh garden – where the emperor would watch his army parade – is an ornate pavilion, bright blue fountains, and plenty of green, grassy spaces. You'll also find the tomb of poet Allama Iqbal, one of Pakistan's most definitive writers.

For the best view of the mosque, get a rooftop table in Lahore's famous 'food street' and enjoy a hearty Pakistani meal while watching the sun go down over the domes and minarets. The mosque, along with the neighbouring Lahore Fort, is beautifully lit up at night, and makes for a truly stunning evening vista.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Pakistan has introduced a new e-visa system, so it's much easier to visit.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to December
(the weather will be ideal
for sightseeing)

TIME ZONE

UTC+5

USEFUL SITES

pakistanoursguide.com/badshahi-mosque.html
gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/pakistan

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into Lahore, then hire a driver for the duration of your stay.





THAILAND

KOH MUK

AN IDYLIC THAI GETAWAY ON AN ISLAND FAR AWAY FROM THE CROWDS

The most famous destinations in Thailand (beach resorts like Phuket, Koh Samui and Koh Phangan, as well as the cities of Bangkok and Chiang Mai) get overrun with holidaymakers during the high season, which for many dilutes the paradisiacal charm of the beautiful country that Thailand is.

Thank the gods for Koh Muk, then. Instead of travelling to one of the super-developed tourist havens, Koh Muk is a small island off the western coast of southern Thailand in the Andaman Sea. Hidden in plain sight, the island of Koh Muk is a dream destination for the active traveller, with caves, beaches and stunning clear seas to explore over several lovely days. The island's beach resorts are fairly small, which lends the place a relaxed, laid-back, exclusive

atmosphere, and you can stay in small huts and even locally-run homestays, giving you an authentic Thai experience.

The island's best-known sight is Sivalai Beach, which forms a mini-peninsula into the Andaman Sea. Its golden sands extend impressively far into the ocean, and even more during low tide. Breathe in the ocean ahead and Koh Muk's tree canopy behind you. With shallow waters, it's great for families. At Farang Beach, you can hire a kayak to take you out on the gentle, transparent waters. Its name, in Thai, means 'Foreigner', so you might see a few more tourists here. Still, you'll have plenty of room.

One of the most exciting things to do in Koh Muk is explore its beautiful caves. Emerald Cave, also known as Morakot Cave, is accessible by boat, but for the full immersion – literally –

you'll have to swim. At low tide, you can swim into the cave, and even spot a small beach at the outer entrance. This cave used to provide a hideaway for pirates to conceal their loot, but there's no such threat today. Close to the cave, you can also travel by boat to the stunning Sabai Beach.

You can also go snorkelling in the pearl-blue seas off the Koh Muk coast, and while no one travels to Koh Muk for a metropolitan shopping experience, you'll find lovely local restaurants and street-food stalls in the village of Baan Koh Muk, as well as very decent dining at the island's resorts.

Compared to its busy neighbouring islands and towns, Koh Muk offers travellers a truly tranquil haven to take in the full beauty of southern Thailand.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

There are not any ATMs on idyllic Koh Muk, so make sure you withdraw money before you go.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Visit Koh Muk between November and March in order to avoid the monsoons.

TIME ZONE

UTC +7

USEFUL SITES

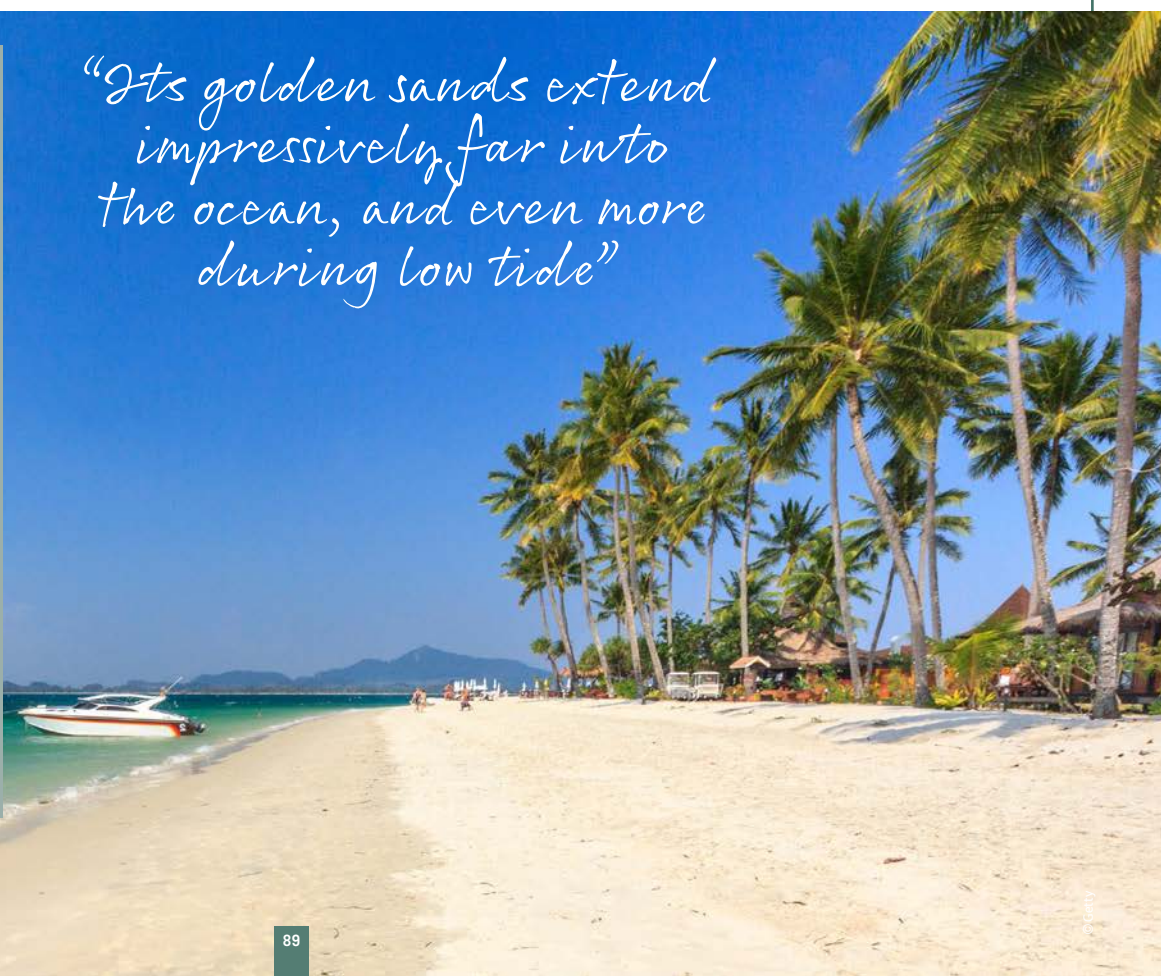
tourismthailand.org
nationthailand.com
komooksivalai.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Krabi International Airport is just a two-hour drive from the town of Trang. From there, take a half-hour ferry to Koh Muk.



"Its golden sands extend impressively far into the ocean, and even more during low tide"





TURKEY

ÇIRALI

DANCE WITH THE FLAMES OF CHIMAERA IN ÇIRALI, TURKEY'S SECRET BEACH RESORT

Chilled-out Çirali is one of many unsung beach resorts in Turkey. With long stretches of sand and calm waters, it's ideal for families. Children will marvel at the loggerhead turtles that inhabit the region, with tours on offer to swim with the docile and curious creatures that measure up to 1.5 metres (five feet) long. Holidaymakers are met by the turtles on the beach, where they lay their eggs every summer. You can meet some of Çirali's other aquatic residents by going snorkelling, a must considering Çirali's crystal clear waters and scenic coves.

Another selling point of Çirali is its agricultural nature, making it a place of beauty and purity untouched by development. This is all thanks to protection by the Turkish

Forestry, Culture and Tourism ministries, who are keen on preserving the south-west Turkey resort. Çirali remains a dead-end to vehicles, characterised by dense stands of orange, lemon, mulberry, plane, pine and eucalyptus trees where roads would normally run.

The resort is also home to a fascinating natural phenomenon called the Chimaera. This fascinating wonder sees natural vents spit out fire. It remains unknown exactly what causes the flames, though many believe it could be a buildup of gases beneath the surface. The flames have been dancing in the sands for so long however, that the ancient Greeks were the ones to name them after a fire-breathing monster.

Çirali has a scattering of cafés and restaurants, all with the charming laid-back

vibe that makes this place unique. Beach-side eateries serve Mediterranean cuisine and seafood all day. Prices are slightly higher in Çirali than elsewhere, with a main-course meal totalling £10/\$12.40 on average, but the views from your table make the price worth paying. Staff are friendly and welcoming to tourists, with meal recommendations being Turkish pizza, kofte and a shot of strong Turkish coffee to finish. A selection of pastries are usually on offer to have with a coffee.

Another option for wanderers is the ancient Greek city of Olympos, which is home to a number of tombs. The expansive ruins of Olympos sit at the edge of a steep gorge, straddling the Akçay River. Olympos boasts two entrances, with locals opting for the beach opening for ease.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The Chimaera dancing flames only come out in the summer months, so time your visit well.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to May, as well as September, for good weather yet fewer crowds than in the summer.

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

USEFUL SITES

goturkeytourism.com
turkishtravelblog.com/cirali
turkeytravelplanner.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Get a direct flight to one of many local airports – Bodrum, Dalaman and Antalya.





INDIA

AURANGABAD

THIS MAHARASHTRIAN TOWN OFFERS VISITORS A TASTE OF AUTHENTIC INDIA

If you want to see the Taj Mahal, the chances of getting an uninterrupted snapshot of the iconic monument are slim. But it doesn't have to be that way. Expand your horizons a little, and visit Aurangabad, which has history, culture and delicious food in spades – without hundreds of tourists to get in your way. The most striking attraction in town is the Bibi Ka Maqbara, the younger sister of the Taj Mahal. It was constructed by Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (the town's namesake) for his beloved wife.

Emperor Aurangzeb took inspiration from the Taj – his mother's tomb – and ran with it. The white marble construction is the very image of elegance, and the interior carvings are even more intricate than those of the Taj Mahal –

though the Bibi Ka Maqbara is more a diamond in the rough than its more famous sibling.

There's also the 17th-century Soneri Mahal, or 'Golden Palace'. It's now a museum, where you can explore the area's history, and admire ancient Hindu and Jain statues. It also hosts the annual Ellora Caves Festival (check to see if it's running post-Coronavirus), where artists, musicians and dancers revive the opulence the Soneri Mahal once possessed.

Built during the 6-7th century, the rock-cut Ajanta Caves overlook Aurangabad. They were built over two centuries, and hark back to the early days of Buddhism in India. That they were preserved points to the growing importance of Buddhism, and economic prosperity in the

region. This prosperity climaxes in breathtaking architectural brilliance 30 kilometres (18.6 miles) northwest of Aurangabad, at Ellora.

The Ellora Caves are a UNESCO World Heritage Site consisting of 34 Hindu, Jain and Buddhist temples. Ellora is where you'll find the Kailasa temple, the largest single monolithic rock excavation in the world. The Ellora caves were built over four centuries (600-1000 BC), with carvers working their way down through the soil. For people interested in religion, culture and especially architecture, the caves near Aurangabad are a must. With Lord Vishnu as a man-lion battling a demon, the ten-headed demon king Ravana, and several carvings of Lord Shiva, you'll find much visual stimulation.



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Booking a taxi tour for the day would be the quickest and most convenient option.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to February, as the temperature will be cooler.

TIME ZONE

UTC+5:30



USEFUL SITES

transindiatravels.com/maharashtra/aurangabad/aurangabad-caves/
whc.unesco.org/en/list/243/
ancient.eu/article/874/ellora-caves/

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into the local airport from most of India's major cities, or take a train into town from Mumbai, Pune and many more.



CHINA

XI'AN

CHINA'S HISTORIC IMPERIAL CAPITAL IS A LIVING TIME CAPSULE



Once the end of the Silk Road, Xi'an was formerly known as the Eternal City. It served as the imperial capital for 2,000 years, enduring eleven dynasties. A trove of historical treasures hide in the shade of its imposing Ming-era city walls, enveloped by a modern Chinese technopolis.

Just north of the city lies Xi'an's biggest calling card: the tomb of Qin Shi Huang, China's first unifier. Dating back to the 3rd century and unearthed in 1974, the mausoleum is protected by life-sized statues of eunuchs, horses and, most famously, the 8,000-strong Terracotta Army. Facing east and ready for battle, row upon row of warriors stand guard.

And while the immortal army attracts one million tourists each year, few explore the rest the city has to offer. Those who do, head for the old city walls. Rising 12 metres (39 feet) high, they were built in 1370 CE to safeguard the city, but today mark the unofficial border between old and new. Travellers can walk the 13-kilometre-long (8-mile-long) walls for stunning panoramic views stretching out to the horizon. Inside the city walls, the 8th-century Great Mosque (the oldest in China) fuses Chinese architecture with Islamic details – spirit screen walls and fierce dragons are balanced with turquoise tiles and Arabic calligraphy. Outside, the gardens are a distinctly Chinese affair, with relaxing rockeries and pagodas

providing respite from the frenetic, warren-like streets of the Muslim Quarter beyond. Stretching from the Great Mosque to the Drum Tower, the area heaves with traders selling everything from halal meat to sesame oil, as well as food stalls hawking roujiamo, freshly-baked buns stuffed with meat, or bowls of slurpy, cold noodles.

Venturing beyond the city walls, the seven-storey Giant Wild Goose Pagoda rises high above the Daci'en Temple. Completed in 652 CE, today the angular tower leans to the west, but can still be climbed. Nearby, shops, galleries and restaurants abound and each evening a musical fountain show, the biggest in Asia, draws the crowds to North Square.

"Facing east and ready for battle, row upon row of warriors stand guard."

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

When viewing the Terracotta Army, visit the site in reverse, saving the most impressive pit for last.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May, for good weather and fewer crowds.

TIME ZONE

UTC +8

USEFUL SITES

cnto.org.uk

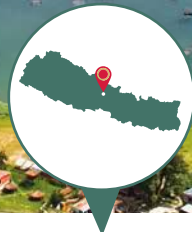
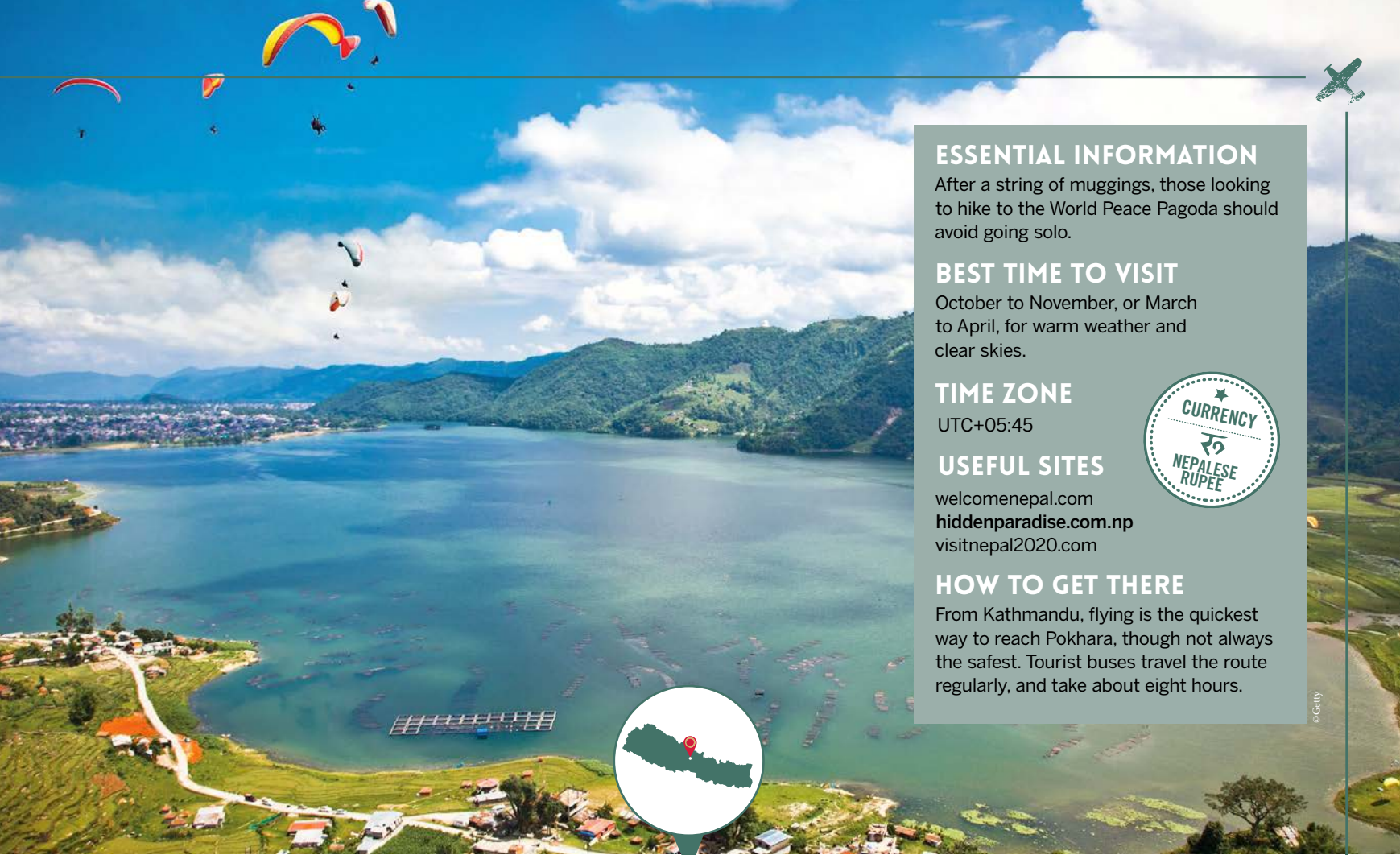
travelchinaguide.com

en.xa.gov.cn

HOW TO GET THERE

Internal flights from most Chinese cities are available, and bullet trains run from Shanghai and Beijing.





NEPAL

POKHARA

BURIED AMONG THE GLASSINE LAKES OF THE HIMALAYAS IS NEPAL'S OWN SHANGRI-LA

Known as the City of Lakes, Pokhara's spellbinding beauty lies in its varied landscapes, from the snow-dusted peaks of the mighty Himalayas to the subtropical forests that hug the city's lakes. Though crumpled, icy summits dominate the skyline, Pokhara is so much more than a gateway to the popular Annapurna Circuit – it's a Shangri-La all of its own.

Each morning, the sky bursts into colour, as rainbow-hued parachutes freewheel silently on the wind, carrying adrenaline junkies over lakes, rivers and terraced mountains for unrivalled views of the great Annapurna mountain. But adventure isn't confined to the heavens; the Upper Seti River is bursting with thrilling class three and four rapids.

A slower pace can be embraced on a four-hour hike to Sarangkot. The mountainous lookout reveals breathtaking panoramas of the cloud-splitting Dhaulagiri, Machhapuchhare, Annapurna II and Lamjung ranges – especially at dusk or dawn, when the sun paints the peaks

purple, and then pink, before showering them in gold. For those keen to avoid the leg-work, taxis ferry passengers most of the way.

From here, Phewa Lake glistens below as colourful doongas (small wooden boats) glide slowly across its emerald surface. From the watery depths, the two-tiered Barahi Temple rises, dedicated to Hindu goddess Ajima, in the boar incarnation. Though Phewa's south-eastern shore, known as Lakeside, is replete with restaurants and hotels, the south-western coast is carpeted with dense forest and teeming with birds, offering up a slice of solitude.

Overhead, the white-washed World Peace Pagoda perches atop a mist-laden ridge. Adorned with four statues of Buddha, the dome-shaped temple was built by Buddhist monks from Japan. The pagoda can be

reached by taxi, or via forested hiking trails up the mountain.

For a glimpse of traditional life, the red-brick streets of Pokhara's Old Bazaar lie north of the city, and the market sells everything from ceramics to fruit and even gold. Hidden within its labyrinthine bowels is the 200-year-old Bhimsen Temple. Dedicated to the Newari god of trade and commerce, it's adorned with intriguing erotic carvings. A little further north sits the ancient Bindhya Basini temple. Founded in the 17th century, and dedicated to Durga, the goddess of war, pilgrims flock here every Tuesday and Saturday to offer sacrifices.

Come nightfall, travellers are spoilt for choice, but the family-run Hidden Paradise guesthouse provides a peaceful haven with a spectacular Himalayan backdrop like no other.

"Rainbow-hued parachutes freewheel silently on the wind"

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

After a string of muggings, those looking to hike to the World Peace Pagoda should avoid going solo.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to November, or March to April, for warm weather and clear skies.

TIME ZONE

UTC+05:45

USEFUL SITES

welcomenepal.com
hiddenparadise.com.np
visitnepal2020.com



HOW TO GET THERE

From Kathmandu, flying is the quickest way to reach Pokhara, though not always the safest. Tourist buses travel the route regularly, and take about eight hours.

© Getty



"Swim with the most mystical residents of the island – the manta rays"



INDONESIA

NUSA LEMBONGAN

THIS TRANQUIL ISLAND, A STONE'S THROW FROM BALI, IS INDONESIA'S BEST KEPT SECRET

In recent years tourism has boomed in Bali, a place where temples blend with rainforests and tropical beaches. If you're looking for a more hidden treasure, look no further than Nusa Lembongan.

Just off Bali's south coast, Nusa Lembongan is a slice of paradise at a fraction of the cost, and lives at a much slower pace. It is one of the three islands that make up the Nusa Penida district. One of the greatest assets of the island is its size, maxing out at eight square kilometres (three square miles), which makes it easily explored on foot, motorbike or rickshaw. There are virtually no vehicles on the island, and any business or resident wishing to purchase a car for use on the island must have special permission from the village elders. The lack of transport makes Nusa Lembongan the perfect destination for those who are eco-conscious and looking to escape the restlessness and haste of modern Western life.

Take a stroll around the coastal path of the island, barter with locals for handmade goods,

and indulge in a nasi goreng (Indonesian fried rice) in a colourful beach shack.

Nusa Lembongan's biggest draw is the beautiful blue ocean that tirelessly beats its shoreline. Many people come to the island for the unspoilt beaches and perfect barreling waves to surf, but if you leave without taking a deep dive underwater, you're missing out on the chance to meet the most mystical residents of the island – the manta rays. Snorkelling and diving trips can be organised from Nusa Lembongan to the nearby island of Nusa Penida. The 20-minute boat ride will take you to three different dive sites: Manta Bay, Mangrove Point and Crystal Bay. All give you the unique experience of swimming among the most majestic creatures of our underwater world.

With the rise in global sea temperatures and mass tourism, coinciding with the collapse of many coral reefs, there is no way of knowing how long some of these animals, corals and landscapes will exist on our planet, so don your wetsuit and pay a visit to Nusa Lembongan.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Various tour operators offer trips from Bali to Nusa Lembongan. It's worth paying the extra money for a fast boat.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to September for the dry season.

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

USEFUL SITES

lembonganisland.com/nusa-lembongan/
mantasnorkelingtriplembongan.com/
indonesia-tourism.com/bali/nusa-lembongan.html

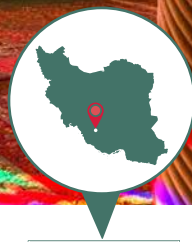
HOW TO GET THERE

It's a 30-minute boat ride from many ports in Bali including Serangan, Sanur and Padang Bai.





The Nasir al-Mulk Mosque is unlike anything you've ever seen, with stained glass in the walls and Persian carpets on the floor



IRAN

SHIRAZ

YOU MAY KNOW IT AS A RED WINE, BUT IRAN'S CITY OF SHIRAZ IS RICHER THAN ANY GLASS

Iran might not feature high up on your travel bucket list, but it really should. This beautiful country has gained an unfair reputation since the outbreak of the 1979 Iranian Revolution – it's seen as a dangerous and lawless place, where women are oppressed, with everything that was once worthwhile reduced to dust. But this would be a huge over-simplification. While the Iranian government is notoriously theocratic, Iran has been a relatively stable place in recent years, and it's now possible for tourists to visit.

Iran has some of the oldest historical landmarks in the world, and the city of Shiraz is right at the heart of it all. Even if you think you're accustomed to the stunning beauty of Islamic art and architecture, wait until you come to Shiraz; it will still wow you. If you look for it, you'll find beauty around every corner.

Perhaps the most iconic image from Shiraz is the rainbow glass found in the Nasir al-Mulk Mosque. Standing by its glorious stained windows, with the light shining through, is just like being inside a jewellery box. Built in the late 19th century by the decadent Qajar ruling dynasty, the decoration certainly befits its creators' lavish tastes.

Stroll down the road a little bit to get a glimpse of another gleaming treasure – the Shah Chéragh, a tomb of two important figures in Shia Islam. It's said the two brothers took refuge in the city during a persecution of Shias, and this funerary monument to them was built

in the 12th century. Inside the blue dome, an emerald chamber filled with tiny mirrors glitters when it catches the light – and we promise it's one of the most jaw-dropping sights to be found in the entire Islamic world.

Shiraz is also the nearest major city to the ancient Persian site of Persepolis, built by Darius I and Xerxes the Great. Definitely one of the most impressive sights of the ancient empire, Persepolis gives you a taste of the might of the ancient Persian Empire, which once spanned from Greece to Pakistan.

In addition to its historic and religious sites, Shiraz was an artistic city, known for its poets and landscape artists. The Tomb of Hafez was built to commemorate one of Persia's most famous poets, and inside the garden and its wonderfully adorned pavilions, locals congregate to chat and watch the sun go down over their stunning city.

If you're looking for your own Garden of Eden, Shiraz may be the closest you ever get to it. Known as Iran's garden city, the streets wind their way around bountiful green spaces and parks. Built by the fabulously wealthy shahs and merchants, many of these slices of paradise surround the former summer houses of the rich and famous.

The Qavam House is a great example of this. It was built for a merchant family in the 19th century. In its luxurious and cool interior, you'll see rooms intricately tiled from floor to

ceiling, decorative glass all around, and many comfortable chairs that are perfect for taking a break from the heat. Step outside into its Eram Garden, and dip your feet into the perfectly symmetrical fountains bubbling with turquoise water. The news might say you shouldn't come to Iran, but your smile will tell you otherwise.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

It's mandatory for women to cover their heads in public, so bring a headscarf. Loose-fitting clothing is also advisable.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May, but make sure you know when it's Ramadan

TIME ZONE

UTC +3:30

USEFUL SITES

iranvisitor.com/city-guides/shiraz-guide

letsgoiran.com

gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/iran

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into Shiraz International Airport, but be sure to check visa restrictions for your nationality before you travel.





Now a museum, the Bogd Khan Winter Palace consists of seven temples and is decorated in bright red, green, blue and gold



MONGOLIA

GOBI DESERT ROUTE

THIS EPIC ROAD TRIP DELVES DEEP INTO THE SECRETS OF MONGOLIA'S GOBI DESERT

The journey begins in Mongolia's sprawling capital Ulaanbaatar, which pulsates with luxury shops, working temples and wild nightlife, a place where sharp-suited businessmen cross paths with robed monks and mustachioed nomads. Here, the National Museum of Mongolia offers a revealing overview of Mongolian life and culture with exhibitions of stone-age petroglyphs, 12th-century armour, handcrafted jewellery and traditional ceremonial costumes. Across town, the green-roofed and elaborately decorated Bogd Khan Winter Palace is where the country's eighth living Buddha, and last king, resided for 20 years. Before leaving Ulaanbaatar, travellers should visit the colourful, Soviet-era Zaisan Monument and Sukhbaatar Square, before stocking up on supplies for the rest of the trip.

The route darts out of the city and around the Bogd Khan protected area, before diving south along the AH-3. After rolling past satellite towns and into vast stretches of desolation, the Ikh Nart Nature Reserve makes a welcome detour. The sprawling 670-square-kilometre (260-square-mile) nature reserve is home to three natural springs and an abundance of wild animals, including ibexes, gazelles, wolves and the endangered argali sheep. Overhead, Old

World vultures stalk the skies for carrion. The park is also studded with several ancient burial mounds and a string of glacial rock formations.

Back on the road, the route bounces through open, arid steppe stretching out to the horizon. At the tiny industrial city of Sainshand, it veers west. From the flat plains, the crumpled, snow-dusted peaks and craggy canyons of Yolyn Am erupt from the valley floor unexpectedly. From here, hiking trails snake between narrow walls past hulking yaks and white rock art before opening into Yolyn Am Gorge. Sheltered from the sun, it's often filled with huge, blue-tinged ice sheets well into summer and is home to the notoriously shy snow leopard, though sightings are rare.

From here, the 27,000-square-kilometre (10,400-square-mile) Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park is ripe for exploration. Home to an exceptional collection of petroglyphs, believed to date from 8,000 BCE to 3,000 BCE, its trails wind across paths adorned with ancient rock art, including depictions of camels, antelope, ibexes, hunters on horseback, mating wolves and men stalking deer.

Further into the park, the steppe gives way to orange-tinged desert before the 300-metre (980-foot) high Khongoryn Els sand dunes begin bubbling on the horizon. About 100

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Hiring a driver is essential, though adventurers can follow the driver in their own vehicle.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to September (for the best weather)

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

USEFUL SITES

visitmongolia.com
caravanistan.com/transport/driving/mongolia/
discovermongolia.mn

HOW TO GET THERE

Take the Trans-Siberian Railway into Ulaanbaatar Main Station from Moscow, or a Chinese Railways train from Beijing. Alternatively, fly into the Mongolian capital.





Wild horses roam much of the Gobi Desert, from the dusty steppes to the towering dunes

kilometres (62 miles) long, and 12 kilometres (seven miles) wide, these never-ending sandy peaks are best explored on foot, though camels can be chartered to carry belongings.

Leaving the park, the route scratches its way north through rock, red sand and scrub, towards Bayanzag. Also known as the Flaming Cliffs, thanks to their incredibly intense fiery tangerine hue come sunset, they erupt from a surprisingly green valley below. It was here that palaeontologist Roy Chapman Andrews, believed to be the real-life inspiration for the dashing Indiana Jones character, first discovered dinosaur eggs in the 1920s. Decades later, fossils of a plant-eating Protoceratops and a ferocious Velociraptor locked in combat were excavated, making this prehistoric Mongolian wonder one of the greatest dinosaur fossil sites in the world.

Continuing north, the route wiggles through the desolate desert, past roaming camels and nomads navigating ancient paths in search of greener pastures. After about 200 kilometres (125 miles) lie the ruins of the Buddhist Ongiin



Khiid monastery and its two temple complexes straddle the Ongi River. Once home to thousands of monks, the monastery was destroyed in 1937 by communist soldiers and over 200 monks were murdered.

The route pushes further north, arriving at Kharkhorin, the final stop before returning to Ulaanbaatar. Here the monastery of Erdene Zuu Khiid lies behind huge walls adorned with 108 stupas. Founded in 1586, it was the first Buddhist monastery in Mongolia and, at its peak, housed around 60 temples and 1,000 monks. Though the monastery was shut down and much of it destroyed during the Stalinist purges of 1937, a number of original statues and paintings survived – buried in the nearby mountains.

The 40m (130ft) stainless steel statue looks east, towards Genghis Khan's birthplace

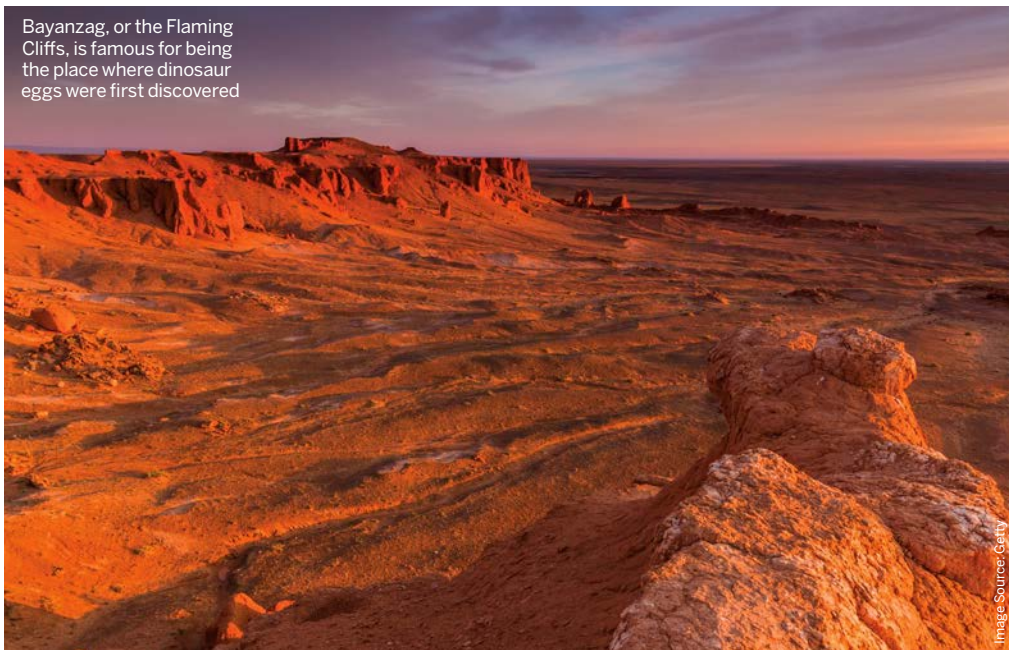


THE GENGHIS KHAN STATUE COMPLEX

The greatest conqueror of all time, Genghis Khan united the nomadic tribes of the Gobi Desert, and launched an unstoppable tidal wave – one that would unite 3 billion people, turning the Silk Road into the largest ever trade zone, stretching from Korea to Baghdad.

In the 20th century, the Soviets took the region north of the Gobi Desert and censored any reference to Genghis Khan. However, since the collapse of the USSR, Genghis has made a comeback, perhaps most spectacularly with a 40-metre (130-foot) statue. Erected in 2008 atop a 10-metre (33-foot) platform, surrounded by 36 pillars representing the 36 Khans, it is the world's largest equestrian statue.

The statue sits on the site where he supposedly found a golden whip, in Tsonjin Boldog, 54 kilometres (34 miles) from Ulaanbaatar. It hosts a restaurant, Mongolian art gallery and an observation deck in the horse's head – accessed by walking through its neck – overlooking the endless Mongolian steppes, towards his birthplace.



Bayanzag, or the Flaming Cliffs, is famous for being the place where dinosaur eggs were first discovered





EUROPE

100 TATEV MONASTERY

-
101 AGISTRI

-
102 MOLDOVA

-
104 WIED IL-GHASRI

-
105 MAZURY

-
106 BILBAO

-
107 VALBONA NATIONAL PARK

-
108 LAUGAVEGUR

-
109 HÉVÍZ

-
110 MOURNE MOUNTAINS

111 ISLA GRACIOSA

-
112 NÎMES

-
114 KOSOVO

-
115 MINACK THEATRE

-
116 SHEKI

-
117 KEMERI NATIONAL PARK

-
118 BRISTOL

-
120 SVALBARD

-
121 BURG ELTZ

-
122 COIMBRA

123 KALININGRAD

-
124 SAN MARINO

-
125 KAVALA

-
126 PORZHENSKY POGOST

-
127 STIRLING

-
128 CREMONA

-
130 TBILISI

-
131 TURKU

-
132 SARAJEVO

-
133 EIBSEE LAKE



Image source: Getty

Tatev Monastery against the setting sun



ARMENIA

TATEV MONASTERY

ESCAPE FROM THE WORLD AS YOU FIND PEACE, TRANQUILLITY AND HISTORY IN ARMENIA

Nestled in a green canyon, this 9th-century Armenian Orthodox monastery continues to attract tourists and worshippers from all over the world. The site is comprised of a number of interesting buildings, which depict Medieval rural life and history. There are three churches that form the Tatev Monastery: Poghos Petros Cathedral, St Astvatsatsin Church and St Grigor Church, but the area hosts much more than religious institutions.

The Devil's Bridge, located below the monastery, is one of Armenia's most astonishing natural wonders. There are also several eerily abandoned villages nestled within the ravine. There is so much to discover here, from miraculous waterfalls to the homes of cave-dwelling communities.

The journey to Tatev Monastery itself is unusual and breathtaking in equal measure. The Wings of Tatev is a modern cable-car system that was installed in 2010 to encourage visitors across the valley, allowing them to fly over the luscious natural reserve and impressive mountain range. What's more, ticket sales for this thrilling ride are put towards the restoration and improvement of the monastery.

In the 13th and 14th centuries, Tatev was the centre of philosophical and scientific study in Armenia. The subjects on offer were varied, from humanities and grammar to music, scripture and the artistic design of miniatures and murals. When Grigor Tatevatsi (from whom the town got its name) became the abbot, studies expanded to include Armenian literature and science.

Tatev has been invaded several times in its history, making the current buildings and elements of the site even more remarkable. The first invasion by Mongol forces was swiftly followed by Shah Rukh's invasion in 1434. After a lengthy restoration process, it was attacked again by Persian forces in 1796 and by Czarist Russians in 1836.

The final blow came in 1931 when a serious earthquake shattered the church domes and bell tower. Much has since been reconstructed, but the bell tower remains untouched as a reminder of Tatev's turbulent history.

Religious and secular alike have found peace among the calm of the Tatev Monastery and its surrounding verdant paradise. Religious practice in this way becomes ever more unusual as Orthodoxy declines as a mainstream Christian doctrine. This makes visiting the Tatev Monastery even more special; not only are you able to witness the beauty of the natural world and a plethora of historical moments, but tourists are perhaps able to experience a slice of history in the making.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If you visit on a Sunday, you might be able to attend a Mass with the monks.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to October – sites are primarily outdoors.

TIME ZONE

UTC+4

USEFUL SITES

tatever.am/en/tatev-monastery-complex
travelarmenia.org/tatev-monastery/
atlasobscura.com/places/gavazan-column-at-tatev-monastery

HOW TO GET THERE

Tatev is five hours from capital Yerevan by road. You can do it in a day trip or tour if you leave the city early in the morning!



"Religious and secular alike have found peace among the calm"



GREECE

AGISTRI

THIS SLEEPY GREEK ISLAND OFFERS A TRULY AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE

Leaving the bustling port of Piraeus behind, landing on the shores of Agistri will feel like an entirely different world. This small Saronic island replaces people with pine trees, and towering apartment blocks with antique monasteries atop hills. Whitewashed churches and their trademark blue domes stand on the boundary between hillside and seaside. It's Greece exactly as you've dreamed, but without the crowds.

Most of the tourists get off the boat at the more famous island of Aegina, a ten-minute boat ride away. But those extra few minutes aboard will be rewarded with lovely views aplenty. You'll disembark at the tiny ports of either Skala or Megalochori on the northern side of the island, but they're only a 20-minute walk apart. In fact, the ambitious can walk all over the island – it's so small, there's no need to hire

transport at all. The locals get about by scooter, and so can you, but the eco-conscious and active could consider renting a bicycle.

If you're looking simply to relax by the beach, the ports themselves have pretty, family-friendly beaches just steps away. Cool off in the Aegean Sea or chill with a cold drink in one of the beachside tavernas. Aponisos, on the other side of the island, is a real find – it's sandy, with shallow, calm and crystal-clear waters, and has a lively island bar and restaurant. More secluded beaches include Chalikiada, Xekofti and Mariza, but none of these are organised, so bring your own beach gear.

Don't be afraid to venture inland – there's only one main road on the island, running from Megalochori to the village of Limenaria, so it's difficult to get lost. Unless you wander off the paved road and into the forest, of course, but being lost here is far from unpleasant. Birds

sing to each other as the intoxicating aroma of pine fills the air, and the shade they provide is a welcome respite from the summer sun.

Agistri's people are as warm as the weather. Be sure to try your hand at a few Greek phrases to experience the real meaning of 'Filoxenia' – Greece's famous hospitality. In Limenaria, everyone seems to know one another, harking back to the days when family and community were the pillars of Greek life. As foreign visitors (or even Greek ones, for that matter) aren't that common, the locals tend to be quite friendly. If you see a priest doing his rounds, he will likely greet you, so be sure to reply politely.

Though millions of people flock to Greece every year, there are small pockets that remain largely untouched by tourism. It's hard to believe somewhere as gorgeous as Agistri is one of them.

"The island is so small, there's no need to hire transport at all"

Despite being just an hour away from Athens, Agistri has a peaceful and laid-back feel

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

There's one taxi on the island – call the driver on +30 6977662004. He speaks a little English, and is very friendly.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July and August, when everything is open.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

agistrigreece.com
agistri-island.gr/index_en.php?l=en
stayingagistri.gr

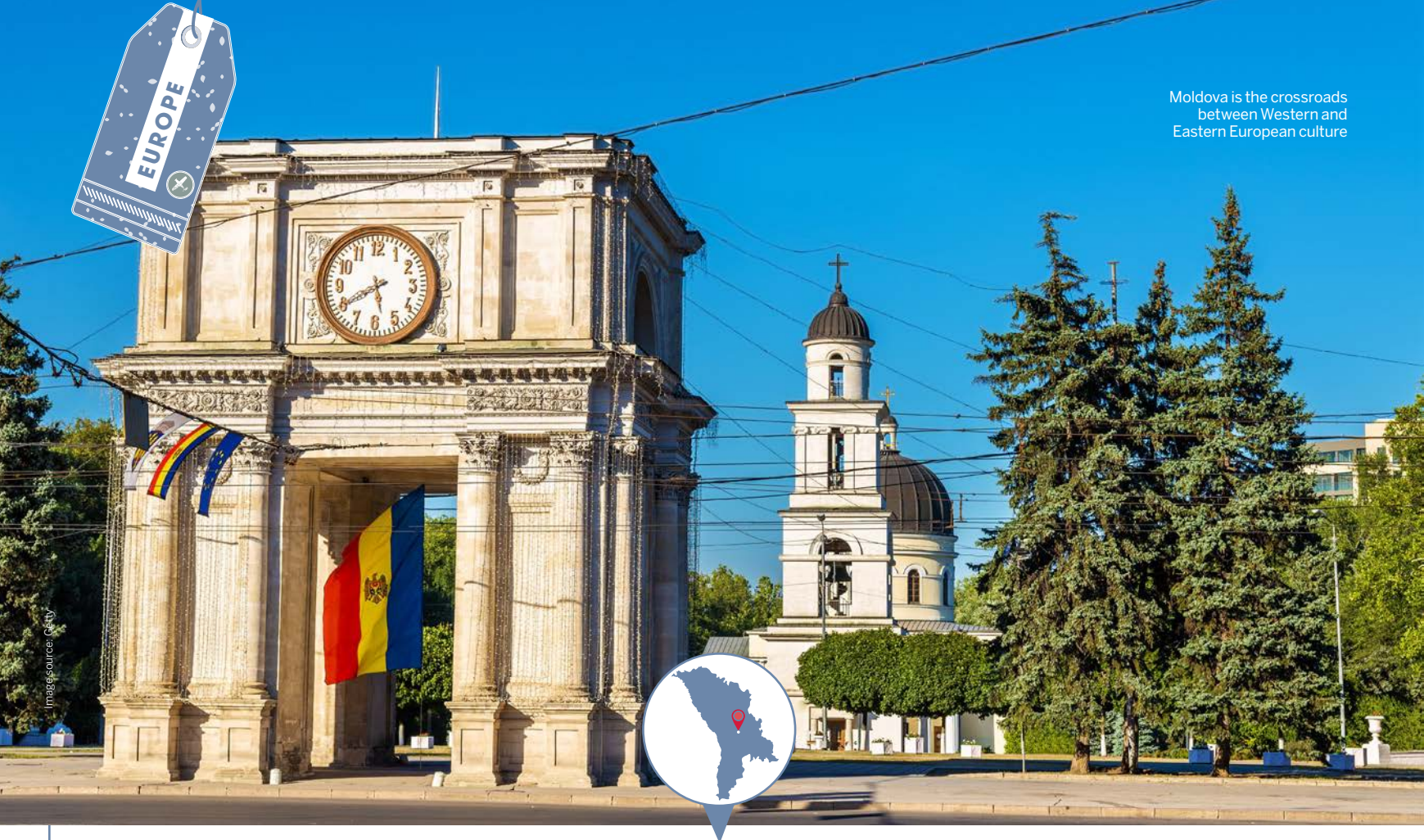
HOW TO GET THERE

Board the Flying Dolphin hydrofoil at Gate 8 in Piraeus Port, which takes you to Agistri in just one hour (via the larger island of Aegina).





Moldova is the crossroads
between Western and
Eastern European culture



MOLDOVA

MOLDOVA

BE TRANSPORTED TO CLOUD WINE IN THIS INTRIGUING LITTLE COUNTRY

Fancy a bottle of wine? How about 2 million? If so, head to the underground cellars of Mileștii Mici in Moldova. This 201-kilometre (125-mile) network of winding tunnels is the largest wine cellar in the world, housing almost 2 million bottles of the good stuff. Yes, really! Moldova, a tiny Eastern European country sandwiched between Romania and Ukraine, has only in recent years been recognised as a major player in the international wine industry. Cited as one of the world's least-visited nations, this is set to change as more and more travellers are recognising it as one for the (wine) bucket list.

With more than 365,000 acres of vineyards, Moldova has a larger proportion of its land covered with vines than any other country. As such, visitors are spoilt for choice when choosing a winery to visit. For award-winning

wine head to Château Purcari, where you can pair your pour with a gastronomic delight in one of its two restaurants. Take a trip to Château Vartely, where you can sample a host of various wines, including ice wine, sparkling wine, liqueur wine and distillates. Take a tour around Moldova's original wine castle, the uber-grand Castel Mimi, which will take you around its manicured gardens, charming courtyard, wine cellars and the winery's production area. Or simply make like the locals and pop into Carpe Diem Wine Shop & Bar to select one of the 160 different wines on offer.

But what does Moldova have going for it other than wine? Plenty! About 48 kilometres (30 miles) north of Chișinău, Moldova's capital city, is Orheiul Vechi, an archaeological complex best known for its Cave Monastery. This extraordinary sight was built inside the cliff

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Chișinău's trolleybuses are a great way to get around the city, and they're super cheap. A one-way ticket will set you back a mere two MDL – that's eight pence!

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October for Moldova's National Wine Day, which is celebrated with a wine festival.

TIME ZONE

UTC +2

USEFUL SITES

moldova.md/en
britannica.com/place/Moldova
gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/moldova

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into Chișinău International Airport from across Europe, or take a train in to the capital from Odessa or Bucharest.



*"Visitors are spoilt for choice when
choosing a winery to visit"*



above the Raut River in the 13th century by Orthodox monks, where it remained a place of worship until the 18th century. In 1996, a few devoted monks returned to restore it to what you see today. The other monasteries and churches that pepper Moldova are similarly impressive, each displaying its own unique architectural style and wow factor. To name but a few there's Moldovita Monastery, where the exterior walls are adorned with almost floor-to-roof frescoes of religious depictions, and the opulent, blue St Theodor Tiron Convent, about a 20-minute walk from the centre of Chisinau.

While in Chisinau, you'll want to check out what this curious city has to offer. Explore a rich history at the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History, where you'll find all manner of 'logical' exhibits – from geological to paleontological, zoological, entomological and archaeological.

If you just want to chill out for a few hours, switch off in Valea Morilor Park, which is one of the biggest parks in Chisinau, and home to hoards of different kinds of plants. Wander past and smell the roses, meander through the forest, stroll along the lake or sit and people-watch. A warm, sunny day will bring ball players, kite fliers and even newlyweds having their post 'I do' photographs taken. Say cheese!

Speaking of cheese, make sure you sample the regional delicacy, brânza, a brined cheese, along with another local delight, ghiveci, a hearty vegetable stew. While you're at it you may as well head to Piata Centrala, the city's bustling market, where there's a dedicated cheese hall selling all manner of locally made sheep and goats' cheeses. There's also a meat hall, fresh fruits and vegetables piled high and fish stalls, where the slippery suckers are kept alive in buckets of water until they're sold. You could also pick up clothes, jewellery, electronics and even power tools such as chainsaws while you're taking in the sights, sounds and smells of this slice of local life. Most produce is local, and most prices are negotiable, so be sure to brush up on your bartering banter. Hectic but fun.

If you prefer your retail experience a little more civilised, you may prefer Malldova – not

just a clever play on words but a shopping centre that also has a cinema, bowling alley and 'Foto Cabine', where you can shun your selfie stick and pose in an old-school photobooth.

However, if culture is your calling, make your way to Stefan cel Mare Central Park and walk along the Alley of Classics, which has 28 busts of classic literary figures and political leaders from Moldova. Originally there were only 12 sculptures, but after the fall of the Soviet Union, busts of nationalist Moldovan and Romanian writers and poets that were banned during the Soviet regime were added. Soaking up the literary vibes along this leafy lane, it may be a time to ponder famous novelist Robert Louis Stevenson's musing when he said that "wine is bottled poetry". And, thank goodness, wine is one thing that Moldova isn't short of. Pass the corkscrew!

Moldova's Soviet past is quite prevalent in Chisinau's architecture

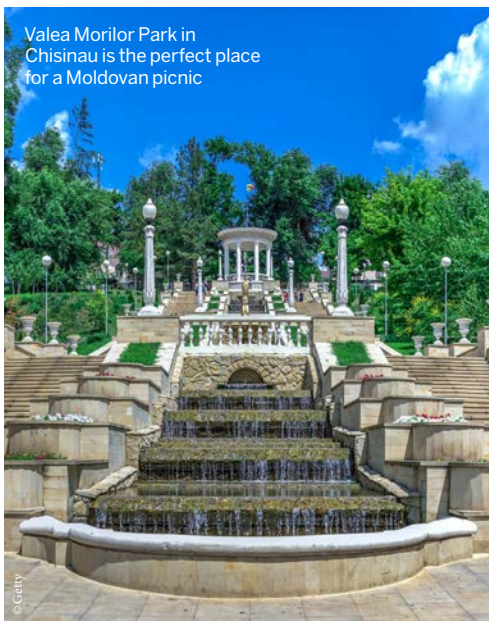


COMMUNIST CHISINAU

The Soviet Union may have collapsed in 1991, but its legacy is still visible on the Eastern European landscape. If you're a dark tourist looking for a Soviet time capsule, look no further than the Moldovan capital of Chisinau. The city is filled with Communist-era blocks of flats, wide and straight boulevards – perfect for tank manoeuvres and military parades – and vanity projects built by Moldova's power-mad rulers.

The City Gates, pictured to the right, are perhaps the most famous example of this. These Brutalist twins were born in the late 1970s, on the road between the city and its airport. Intended to welcome visitors into the city with their concrete embrace, the buildings have outlasted Moldova's Soviet supremes and are still inhabited by die-hard Chisinau residents.

Valea Morilor Park in Chisinau is the perfect place for a Moldovan picnic



The countryside around Orhei is embraced by a steep, bowl-shaped cliff





ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Walk up from Marsalforn rather than drive — you'll pass the Xwejini Salt Pans, and people selling salt from a hole in the wall.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

February for warm weather and fewer tourists; April for the full spring beauty.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

visitgozo.com

tinyurl.com/wdhyvky8

guidememalta.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Catch a bus from Gozo's capital Victoria to Zebbug, a 30-minute walk away.



MALTA

WIED IL-GHASRI

THE MALTESE SLICE OF OCEAN NO ONE KNOWS ABOUT

Sitting on the northern coast of Gozo, Malta's little sister, Wied il-Ghasri is a difficult place to locate. With so many wave-washed coves and inlets to explore, it would be easy to end up at the wrong one. Or, you might end up three villages away, wondering why you can't see the sea anymore. But the navigational difficulty is worth it, for Wied il-Ghasri is indeed hidden — and truly a hidden gem.

To put this into perspective, the entirety of Gozo is the size of Aberdeen. The island appeals to our sense of curiosity, the human desire for exploration — you can easily strike out and straight away find country roads (the John Denver kind), no people and the ocean. This gorge, hewn deeply out of this rocky tropicana, is a half-hour walk from the village of Marsalforn, to the very north of the island. With the little town of Zebbug on the almost-vertical hill behind you, and dusty tracks winding south and west, Wied il-Ghasri is the opening to the sea.

When you walk down the rubbly track, with the blue sky-ocean wash to your right, you'll notice something that's hard to find on densely populated Malta: it's silent, beautifully silent. The road is steep, the path is long, but the sun is shining, and the sea is calling. A few locals and visitors who come here disturb your peace by driving their vehicles down to the car park, but the chances are you'll envy them as you see them cruise by.

Until you get right to the edge of the cliff, you can't tell it's coming. The rocks drop away in a waterfall of green. Scattered big pink petals bob, among little yellow flowers, and daisies sway in the breeze. The caper plants are getting ready to bloom. Climbing down a narrow path with a very low wall, you'll reach the cove in a minute or

two, and the shadow of the gorge brings peace and respite from the heat.

Why should you visit? Because the turquoise water is clear enough that you see the sea floor, until it winds out to the open ocean, so it's perfect for snorkellers and aquatic escapades. Since the bay is sheltered and protective, it's ideal for photography and sunny relaxation. Because it goes unnoticed, two worlds apart from the bustling beaches of Marsalforn and Xlendi, and the hubbub of Malta itself. Prickly pink pears find crannies in the rock, reminiscent of the Wild West. Birds and crickets chirrup, and the air is soft and clear. Wied il-Ghasri is another kingdom, a grotto, a beauty unmatched.

Just make sure you're well rested before you climb back up.

"Wied il-Ghasri is another kingdom, a grotto, a beauty unmatched"



POLAND

MAZURY

LAKES AND LAND COME TOGETHER IN MASURIA – A POLISH LAKE DISTRICT LIKE NO OTHER

Just three hours from Warsaw, Masuria is the ultimate adventure experience. Farmland, woodland and waterways provide a wealth of opportunity for those looking to get back to nature. Relax in the stunning tranquil surroundings, or hike, sail, fish, windsurf, cycle, dive, canoe... the list is endless.

Masuria (Mazury in Polish) covers thousands of square miles. Famous for its 2,000 lakes, canals and rivers, it also offers rolling hills, making it the perfect hiking adventure. Friendly locals are eager to help tourists by showcasing their charming region, particularly between June and August when the Masurian Lake District becomes Poland's summer paradise.

But scattered around the area are stunning landmarks and sights that really capture the true beauty of Poland as a whole. The Swieta Lipka Sanctuary is a gorgeous Baroque church and place of pilgrimage that dates all the way back to the 17th century. Its colossal organ, staggeringly huge altar and dazzling hand-

...painted ceiling will be a memorable aspect of a trip to the region's monastery complex.

The Fields of Grunwald is another landmark worth visiting, regardless of whether you're a history buff. It's where Poland teamed up with Lithuania to defeat the Knights of the Teutonic Order in 1410 in a remarkable battle that took place in the Middle Ages. Every 15th July the battle is reenacted on its anniversary.

Hitler's Polish base, the notorious Wolf's Lair, is where he spent most of World War II, and is a devastating reminder of Poland's horrific experience of the conflict. There are 250 hectares to explore, so make use of the maps in the forest that surrounds the 20th century relic.

Barns and farmhouses are considered the most authentic places to stay in Masuria. Rustic lodges also offer traditional Polish food, large communal kitchens and a friendly atmosphere. Spa resorts are also available in Olsztyn or Glendoria, with outdoor wooden jacuzzis among the pine forests to lure in lovers of luxury.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Bring your swimsuit with you – after all, you never know when you might fancy a dip in one of the gorgeous lakes.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July, for the anniversary battle of the Teutonic Order.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

mazury.travel/en/
polandtrips.co.uk/lake-and-countryside-holidays/mazury-lake-region/
<https://tinyurl.com/skimazury>

HOW TO GET THERE

Indirect buses run into Olsztyn from Warsaw and Gdansk. You can also fly into Olsztyn airport from some European locations.



"With beautiful hills and 2,000 lakes and rivers, it's a hiking adventure"



The famous Guggenheim Museum is an architectural marvel, drawing in the crowds to the world of contemporary art

Image source: Getty Images

SPAIN

BILBAO

SET YOUR SAT NAV TO BILBAO, AND EXPERIENCE NORTHERN SPAIN'S BEAUTIFUL AND SCENIC BASQUE COUNTRY BEFORE SETTING FOOT IN A CITY OF ART AND CULTURE

Named European City of the Year 2018, Bilbao is a city of development and change, transforming itself from an industrial port city exporting ironworks, to a modern, artistic and lively hub serving as a tourist hotspot in the Basque Country.

Take one look at the Guggenheim Museum and you'll witness how, in the 1990s, Bilbao's tourism changed forever. The museum of modern and contemporary art has put Bilbao back on the global map, featuring art from the 20th century to modern day, inside an incredible building that stands out in the city.

The medieval Casco Viejo, also known as Seven Streets because of its parallel roads, forms the Old Quarter. Sights include the grand Santiago Cathedral, displaying a mix of architectural styles, from its Gothic spire to the 15th-century cloister. While visiting Casco Viejo, don't miss the beautiful Teatro Arriaga, a venue for performing arts and concerts.

Semana Grande, or Aste Nagusia, is a nine-day festival held every August. It celebrates the Basque culture while honouring the Virgen de Begoña. Celebrate in one of the street concerts, firework displays, parades, food fights and even bullfights. With more than 100,000 people attending the event, there's no better way to get stuck into the Basque culture.

Your journey to Bilbao should include a stop at the Santander train station. Situated along the estuary, this is an ideal spot to sample scrummy Basque cider. And you can't visit Bilbao without eating the local speciality, pintxos. These little tapas-style snacks form the backbone of Basque cuisine, and there are plenty of places to grab a bite while exploring the city's alleyways. Take a stroll over the Zubizuri footbridge, cross the Nervión river and walk southwards to where you can find the Teatro Arriaga opera house. Bilbao's continued development and creativity will forever change the future of this hidden European gem.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Siesta happens at around 2pm, with shops closing then reopening three to four hours later.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to September

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

bilbaoturismo.net
guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en
euskoguide.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Catch the train into Bilbao from Barcelona or Madrid. You can also sail into the city from southern Britain and Ireland.



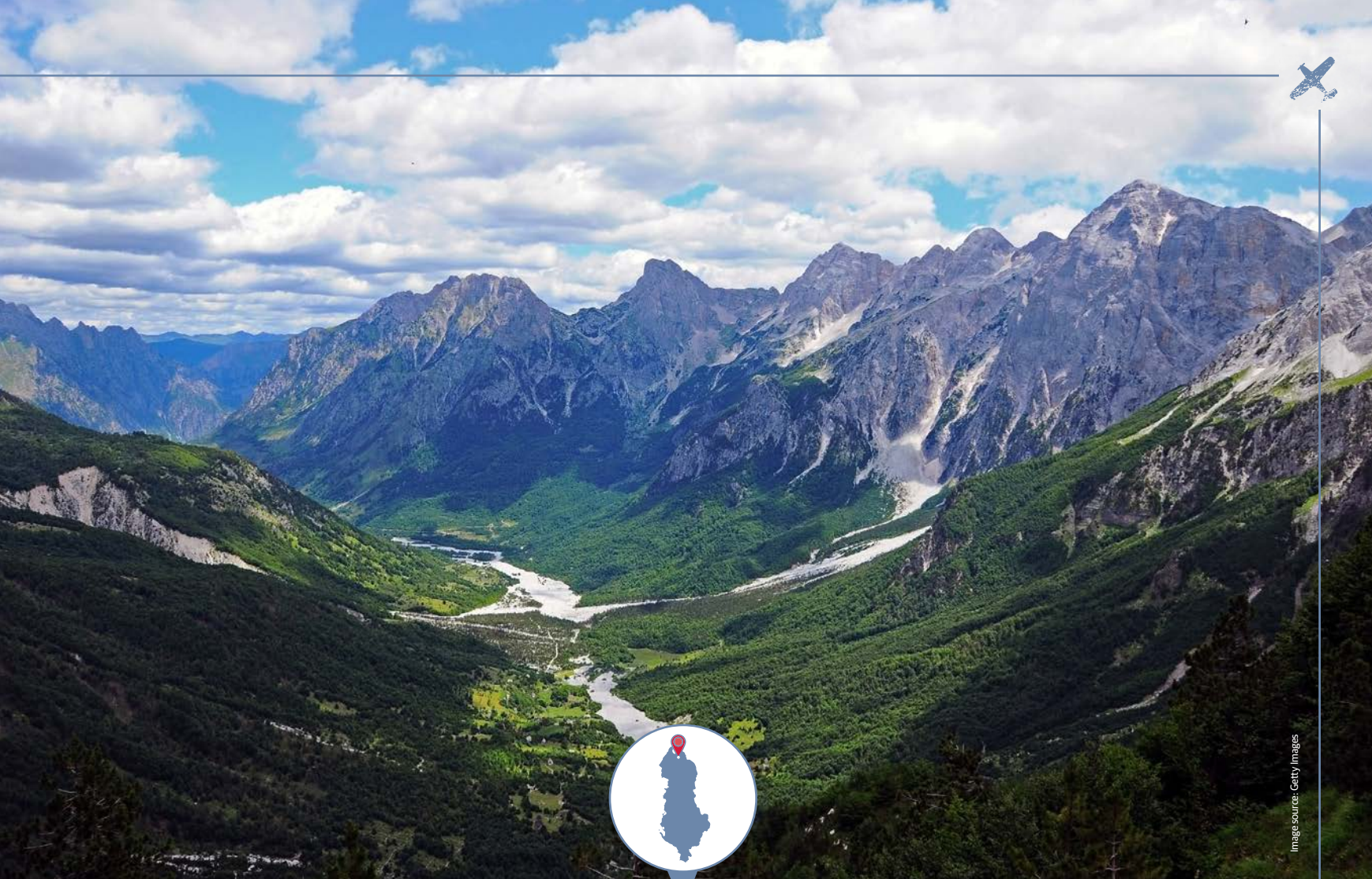


Image source: Getty Images

ALBANIA

VALBONA VALLEY

EXPLORE THE UNTOUCHED MOUNTAINS OF ALBANIA'S NORTHERNMOST NATIONAL PARK

If you're looking to get well off the beaten track, there are few places in Europe that are more far-flung than the Valbona Valley. Tucked away in the mountains in northern Albania, the river valley is slowly growing more popular with hikers and other visitors. Those seeking stunning views and tough routes will find plenty of options, and because the valley is so remote, the landscape has barely felt the impact of human contact. As such, the park is rife with wildlife.

The valley is home to brown bears and wolves – so watch out if you're going far off the designated path – but if you reach the higher altitudes, you'll find alpine meadows that bloom beautifully in summer and welcome dozens of butterfly species. For the most part, the wildlife and plant life in the valley has gone undocumented by scientists, which makes it perfect for anyone with dreams of exploring an almost untouched land.

The main draw of the valley is hiking, and there are over 200 kilometres (125 miles) of hiking trails around the town that shares the valley's name. Ambitious trekkers will find the Peaks of Valbona route a test – a seven-day journey that takes you to the highest peaks in the area. You'll need to pack a tent, though, as the distances between the remote villages will mean camping in the wild.

For slightly less adventurous explorers, the three- or four-day Gjarper Mountain Loop will take you first from Dragobi to the village of Cerem, then down south around Gjarper, via an impressive viewpoint. You'll stay the night at Stani i Arif Kadris, a working sheep farm, before following the river back to Valbona.

However you plan to explore the park, it's a good idea to contact one of the local hotels for advice. Most of these are rural guesthouses, with hospitable owners. Brush up on your Albanian – you're going to Valbona.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The park is best explored by foot or by bike, but you'll have to bring your own.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May, for the best bloom

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

bnadventure.com/valbona-albania/
journeytovalbona.com
intoalbania.com/attraction/valbona-valley

HOW TO GET THERE

From capital Tirana, or Prizren in Kosovo, you'll have to catch a bus to Bajram Curri, from whence you can take inexpensive minibuses to Valbona Valley.





*"The reason it remains hidden is simple:
it's a hard day's work getting there"*



ICELAND

LAUGAVEGUR

GET OFF THE BEATEN PATH – LITERALLY

Iceland has become extremely popular with tourists in recent years. Its unique, largely unspoiled nature has a magnetic draw for many, but with more popularity comes less tranquillity. However, the Laugavegur hiking trail in the southern highlands still offers well-prepared travellers the chance to take in the stark majesty of the Icelandic wilderness, free of the clusters of orange parkas surrounding many other attractions. The 55-kilometre (34-mile) long path stretches across a breathtaking variety of landscapes, across valleys and through mountain passes, between the hot springs of Landmannalaugar to the natural haven of Þórsmörk valley, which was carved out by a glacier several millennia ago.

The reason Laugavegur remains fairly hidden is simple: it's a hard day's work getting there. The trail usually takes two to four days to hike, and you'll need preparation, proper hiking gear and plenty of provisions before you set off, too. There are no supermarkets – or indeed much human presence at all – along the route, which

despite its beauty can be treacherous should the weather turn. There are four mountain huts to rest along the way, at Hrafninnusker, Áltavátn, Hvanngil and Emstrur. While staying in these huts is free of charge, the respect principle applies here: treat everything as if your grandmother lent it to you, and do leave it as tidy as you'd expect to find it.

The route is challenging, but rewards the well-prepared and resilient with a bigger variety of views than you're likely to find anywhere else. And if 55 kilometres (34 miles) of Icelandic wilderness isn't enough, you can combine the Laugavegur route with Fimmvörðuháls, a 25-kilometre (16-mile) hiking route that takes you through a stunning mountain pass between two glaciers to Skógar in the south.

As with any journey into the perilous Icelandic highlands, if you're not on a guided tour, it's imperative you notify people of your exact travel plans with a strict checking-in schedule. The weather can look idyllic as you head off, but can (and frequently will) turn on a dime.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Prepare well in advance. Study the route, and agree on a checking-in schedule with someone who's not going.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to August for the best weather, and passable roads.

TIME ZONE

UTC

USEFUL SITES

guidetoiceland.is
grapevine.is
trek.is



HOW TO GET THERE

Take a bus or super-jeep to Landmannalaugar, either from Reykjavík or the towns Hella or Hvalsvellur. Return from Þórsmörk via bus or super-jeep.



HUNGARY

LAKE HÉVÍZ

RELAX AMONG THE WATER LILIES BEFORE IMMERSING YOURSELF IN HUNGARIAN CULTURE

Hévíz is a small Hungarian town with a big following due to its medicinal thermal water and quaint spa resort. Locals and tourists alike enjoy relaxing among the colourful lilies and wildlife in the warm water. The lake can heat up to 30 degrees Celsius, but it never drops beneath 23, meaning it is pleasant to visit all year round.

The natural thermal water is rich in carbonic acid, sulphur, calcium, magnesium and hydrogen carbonate, which are all believed to have medicinal properties. The amenities and facilities also offer practical assistance so that anyone can enjoy the healing waters. The central bathhouse, with its quirky spires and floating platforms, is mostly unchanged since it was built in the 18th century.

Recently, Lake Hévíz has committed to ecological protection and over the last few years has made vast improvements to the local area to preserve the wildlife. A canopy observatory has been erected on the main site and lawns have been laid around the local area. Hévíz health spa has also been monitoring the water quality and is devising a system that protects the water quality in the lake so that it continues to have medicinal benefits, as well as being a home to nature.

If you are looking to enjoy the lake in a more luxurious sense, the spa has a range of treatments on offer including hydrotherapy, movement therapy, a weight bath, medicinal mud, massages and more. These treatments are also very affordable. If you get peckish, there is traditional Hungarian fast food sold throughout the lake complex. This includes sausage and

potatoes, as well as lángos; a type of Hungarian fried, sweet bread.

Although locals in Hévíz have enjoyed the thermal waters since the Stone Age, the arrival of the Romans really brought its usability to the fore. In the local town, you can still see the ruins of a 1st-century Roman villa, which was excavated and restored in 2003.

While the warm lake is the main attraction in Hévíz, there is still plenty to see and do in this little spa town. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, you can get lost in the traditional market, selling the hearty local produce of the Keszthely area. It is a perfect place to pick up souvenirs as well as experience Transylvanian traditional music. Nearby Egregy is home to many beautiful vineyards where you can enjoy tours, tastings or an evening meal overlooking the luscious green countryside.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The sulphurous water has natural healing properties, but also a pungent, egg-like scent. You'll soon forget it once you are in!

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The thermal water never drops below 23 degrees and so can be enjoyed all year round.

TIME ZONE

UTC +1

USEFUL SITES

heviz.hu/en

budapest.com/hungary/cities/heviz/

history.en.html

west-balaton.hu/en/heviz

HOW TO GET THERE

Hévíz is a two-hour drive from Budapest or Vienna. You can also fly to Hévíz-Balaton Airport from Germany.



“Locals and tourists alike enjoy relaxing among the water lilies and wildlife”





Image source: Getty

It's easy to see how the Mourne Mountains have inspired generations of writers, painters and musicians



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Use the Mourne Shuttle Service minibus to avoid having to walk a circular or out-and-back trail

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to September for the best weather

TIME ZONE

UTC

USEFUL SITES

visitmournemountains.co.uk

nationaltrust.org.uk/the-mournes

walkni.com/mourne-mountains-destination



HOW TO GET THERE

There are plenty of car parks across the region, but for a good start aim for one of the information centres at Downpatrick, Kilkeel, Newcastle or Newry. Alternatively, take the train to Newry.

COUNTY DOWN, NORTHERN IRELAND

MOURNE MOUNTAINS

EXPLORE THE RICH VARIETY OF NORTHERN IRELAND'S MOUNTAINOUS COAST

“I have seen landscapes which, under a particular light, made me feel that at any moment a giant might raise his head over the next ridge.” The fantastical scenery of Northern Ireland's Mourne Mountains helped inspire the writer of those words, C. S. Lewis, when he put pen to paper and came up with the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Located 65 kilometres (40 miles) south of Lewis' birthplace, Belfast, the Mourne Mountains are Northern Ireland's premier candidate for its first national park. The granite range stretches from the coast of Carlingford Lough to the peak of Slieve Croob, a distance of 40 kilometres (25 miles) in length, with countless ascents and descents as the tips of several of Northern Ireland's highest mountains are crested.

Slieve Donard – Slieve deriving from the Irish word for mountain – is the highest point in the country at 850 metres (2,790 feet), although reaching its summit is surprisingly achievable since it is less than five kilometres (three miles) from the car park. For those who don't fancy the steep sections of that climb, there are countless alternatives – there are nearly 100 named peaks, after all. Peace and solitude can be found in the accessible trails around Silent Valley's reservoir, and some follow sections of the dry-stone wall that runs for 31 kilometres (19.5 miles) across the peaks. If you really fancy testing your thighs, take on the Seven Sevens Challenge – 29 kilometres (18 miles) in length and 2,495 metres (8,185 feet) of ascent to conquer all seven peaks above 700 metres.

There are plenty of places to explore that don't require walking boots if you're not the hiking type, from playing a round of golf at Royal County Down's championship course to indulging in the spa at Slieve Donard Resort. Other recommendations include exploring the maze at Castlewellan Forest Park and following the boardwalks over the fragile coastal dunes at Murlough Nature Reserve.

With such a rich variety of landscapes and experiences to behold, it wasn't just C. S. Lewis who took inspiration from the Mourne Mountains. You'll find several atmospheric locations that were used during the filming of HBO's *Game of Thrones*. For a cuddlier experience, look out for the furry mammals that call Altavaddy Bridge in Tollymore Forest Park home. You may even find the elusive pine marten and rare red squirrels.

The Mourne Mountains might be the region's worst-kept secret, but you can easily discover your own little part of them, taking much inspiration from their natural beauty.

“There are plenty of places to explore that don't require walking boots”



CANARY ISLANDS, SPAIN

LA GRACIOSA ISLAND

THIS IDYLIC ISLAND OFF LANZAROTE OFFERS WHITE SANDY BEACHES, AQUAMARINE WATERS AND WATERSIDE FISH RESTAURANTS

Part of the Chinijo Archipelago, La Graciosa is a series of islets and islands much smaller than the main Canary Islands. Thanks to the Parque Natural del Archipiélago Chinijo, it has been granted World Heritage status, with UNESCO calling it an “authentic outdoor museum”. The geopark helps preserve the flora and fauna on the island. La Graciosa, a half-hour ferry from Lanzarote, is made up of a curious creation of volcanic basaltic materials. The tallest peak is Las Agudas, which rises to a staggering 266 metres (872 feet) and is a popular destination for hikers.

Aside from the walkers, animal lovers will be treated to a fantastic diversity of sea fauna. At just over 70 square kilometres (17,470 acres), the island’s marine reserve is the largest in Europe. Due to the rich protein sources present in these clear waters, it is the eatery of choice

for birds in search of a meal, and attracts bird enthusiasts who like to watch them.

The island is particularly renowned for the large number of secluded coves and beaches. La Francesca Beach is by far the most unspoiled on the island, boasting 500 metres (547 yards) of the purest white sand, turquoise sea and absolute tranquillity. There is also an anchor area that allows boats to moor on an island away from the rest of world. For the more adventurous, surfing, kite surfing and diving are very popular with locals and visitors alike, although it is advised that due to large waves and strong currents, only experienced surfers should enter the water.

There are no paved roads or cars on La Graciosa. Measuring approximately 28 square kilometres (11 square miles), the island can be traversed by mountain bike, hiking and jeep. It is an ideal location for trail running and has

a circular route of 32 kilometres (20 miles) for visitors to explore.

Although many visitors are day-trippers who come to enjoy the almost deserted sandy beaches, you can stay on the island. However, the accommodation is concentrated in Caleta de Sebo, which is where the ferry docks and is the only inhabited town, with approximately 600 locals. Guest houses, self-catering apartments and camping sites provide a range of accommodation options.

It is said that La Graciosa inspired Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel *Treasure Island*. Pirates are said to have used the island for shelter from the tempestuous ocean. The story goes that in the 1760s a British crew was followed to La Graciosa by a pirate galleon and, fearing their treasures would be seized, buried it on the island. Some say it remains buried there today, but perhaps the treasure is the island itself.

“Surfing, kite surfing and diving are very popular with locals and visitors”

The harbour of Caleta de Sebo sports 215 berths for boats and a nautical shop

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

4x4 taxis are a great way to see the island and can be found by the harbour. Tours last an hour and cost around €40.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The Canaries can be visited all year round, but summer is busiest.

TIME ZONE

UTC

USEFUL SITES

turismolanzarote.com/en/la-graciosa-island
canarytripbooking.com/en/visitagraciosa.com/en

HOW TO GET THERE

The island can only be reached by a 30-minute ferry from Orzola in Lanzarote. It’s not possible to pre-book, so just turn up on the day.



Image source: Getty



Image source: Getty

OCCITANIE, FRANCE

NÎMES

THE SOUTHERN FRENCH CITY WHERE EUROPE'S ROMANTIC CULTURES MEET

Nîmes is a meeting point of cultures, history and cuisine, due to its handy location in the south of France. It isn't just the Romans that enjoyed trips to this interesting city, but there is certainly plenty to see in terms of Roman architecture. You will feel as though you are in the heart of the Roman Empire as you approach the wonderfully intact amphitheatre. It is still used today for concerts and local celebrations. In May, the amphitheatre is used for six days of Spanish-style bullfighting (which is controversial, as the bull is often killed. Head to other parts of Southern France to witness indigenous, bloodless bull contests). Another spectacularly undamaged piece of Roman history can be found at the Maison Carrée. Originally a temple dedicated to Gaius and Lucius Caesar, it has since been a house, granary, church and even a tomb.

Since the Roman era, Nîmes has had a turbulent relationship with religion. Place aux Herbes is now a bustling square of coffee shops,

restaurants and chocolatiers. However, behind this tranquil setting there lies a story of Nîmes' dark past. There is evidence here of a bloody massacre of Catholic priests and monks that took place during Huguenot rioting in 1567.

As well as Roman history, Nîmes is a fantastic place to experience southern French cuisine and culture. Visit Les Halles de Nîmes and immerse yourself in fresh French food. You will find local people doing their weekly shop, as well as stalls upon stalls of local produce: picholine olives, bream, oysters, and of course wine. Les Halles is also home to food and wine bars, so go with an empty stomach!

The cuisine in Nîmes is very reflective of its location. There are several unique yet typical dishes that are worth trying when visiting the

many restaurants and cafes of the town. One dish that you will find all over Nîmes is the brandade de Morue. A purée like substance, made with salt cod, olive oil and a little milk, it's served hot alongside an olive tapenade. You can also snack on some petit pâté nîmois – small pastry parcels filled with veal and pork stuffing. With bullfighting also a local pastime, Nîmes residents take pride in the beef that they eat. Gardianne de Taureau is often a family delicacy. This dish is made by marinating meat in Costières de Nîmes wine, which is then grilled and served with either anchovy butter or a caper, onion and anchovy sauce. It is always served with rice.

Occitanie, in which Nîmes is situated, is a region famous for high-quality vineyards that

"However, behind this tranquil setting there lies a story of Nîmes' dark past"



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Can you think of a famous material that might be 'de Nîmes'? Find a museum dedicated to denim near Les Halles.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May for the Feria de Nîmes.

TIME ZONE

UTC +1

USEFUL SITES

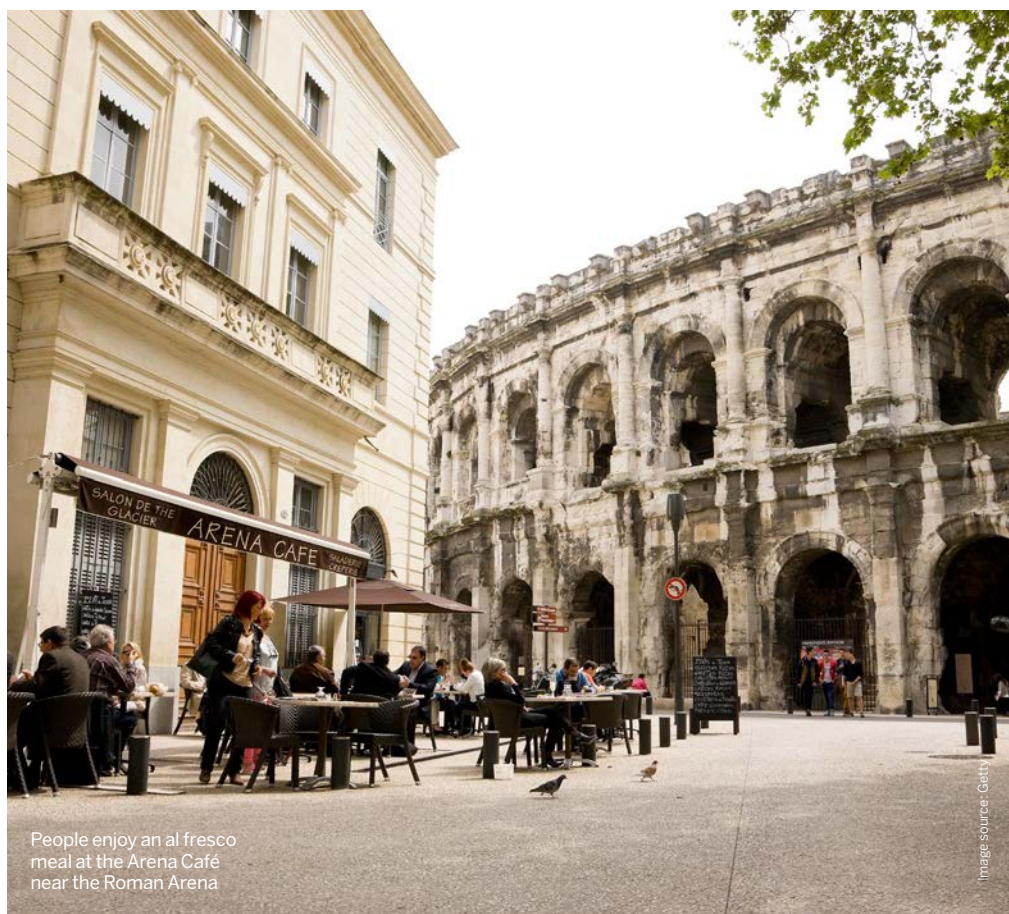
about-france.com/cities/nimes.htm

nimes-tourisme.com

visitfrenchwine.com/en/vineyard/visit-the-languedoc-vineyards-wine-tourism

HOW TO GET THERE

Some low-cost airlines have routes from the UK to Nîmes. Alternatively, the city is around 80km (50mi) from the larger Marseille Provence Airport.



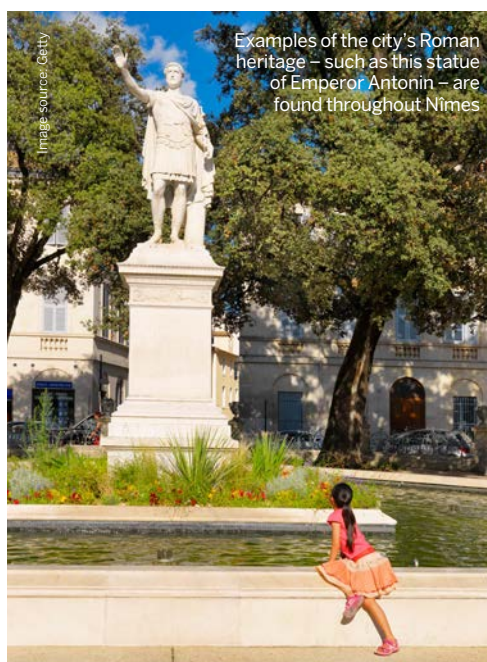
People enjoy an al fresco meal at the Arena Café near the Roman Arena

Image source: Getty

produce wine for all over the world. Costières de Nîmes, while being part of this illustrious region, has a flavour all unto itself. The place known as the Rhone Delta is the meeting point of the Rhone, Gard and Durance rivers, resulting in pebbly soil and therefore an unusual flavour. When the land is not planted with vines, it is home to rosemary, lavender and thyme. There are plenty of opportunities to take wine tours and get involved in wine tasting both in and around Nîmes. In some cases a car is necessary, but enquire locally to find tours that provide their own transport.

While Nîmes is situated among the beautiful vineyards of the Gard region, there are other local towns and cities that are easily visited from Nîmes. Uzès is a medieval market city located around 25km (15mi) away. With small markets and antique shops, it is a real opportunity to immerse yourself in rural life. The Camargue Nature Reserve is also a manageable day trip from Nîmes and worth the journey to catch a glimpse of the pink flamingos and wild white horses living there. Montpellier is a little further out but remains accessible, with a journey time of around an hour. The town's Gothic and neoclassical architecture is a world away from Roman Nîmes and a fantastic way to explore the next steps in France's colourful history. You can also easily reach several sandy beaches from Montpellier, which will entertain both older and younger travellers.

The Feria de Nîmes is one of the largest annual festivals in France. It is truly a celebration of Nîmes' hybrid French and Spanish culture, where you can watch bullfights, listen to brass bands (peñas), dance the Sévillane, eat paella and watch jousting in the fountain. The celebrations are based around the Christian festival of Pentecost, which is celebrated in



Examples of the city's Roman heritage – such as this statue of Emperor Antonin – are found throughout Nîmes

Image source: Getty

the churches and cathedrals around the town. Over 2 million people descend upon the town at this time of year, creating a party atmosphere wherever you go.

While the Feria de Nîmes is a fun festival for the family, there is something to see all summer in this sunny southern city. Whether you are looking for a tour through history or a wander around the luscious Languedoc wine region, there is plenty to see, do and taste in this ancient city.

The Maison Carrée at night. At over 17m (56ft) tall it's a striking sight



MAISON CARRÉE

Standing aloft atop an almost three-metre-high podium, the Maison Carrée is one of the best-preserved examples of ancient Roman architecture anywhere in Europe, and is Nîmes' most famous landmark.

Once bearing an inscription dedicating it to the grandsons of the great Emperor Augustus, this fine example of Vitruvian construction would have loomed over the Roman forum of Nîmes, the city a vital outpost for its former rulers, who finished building it in 2 CE.

Since its illustrious beginnings the Maison Carrée has undergone regular and extensive maintenance. The most significant change was the demolition of the buildings once linked to the temple in order to restore it to its original, solitary state. No trip to Nîmes would be complete without a tour of this cavernous monument to Roman ingenuity.



KOSOVO

PRISTINA

KOSOVO'S MOUNTAINS AND MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE HAS SEEN IT RISE FROM THE ASHES

As far as hidden gems go, Kosovo is one of the most elusive. It's a country many find difficult to find on a map; a territory that declared independence from Serbia in 2008, it is still unrecognised by just under half of the United Nations member states.

Scarred by the armed conflict that saw it battling against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia between February 1998 and June 1999, Kosovo has found it difficult to shake off associations with the war. Yet you ignore Kosovo at your peril. For this is a safe and hospitable country that, while still remaining off the typical tourist trail, will always welcome visitors. There are the delightful Ottoman influences in its capital Pristina, for starters, where it's hard not to marvel at its four historically protected mosques, the 15th-century baths and the Kosovo museum built in 1889.

The city changed hugely following a decision by the ruling communists in 1947 to "destroy the old, build the new" (check out the unusually

styled National Library). But go for the culture, the nightlife and the restaurants serving a mix of traditional dishes and international cuisine and you'll never leave disappointed.

Venture further out and you can enjoy the picturesque mountain towns nestled amid lush countryside. Make time for Prizren's old town, the most obvious location for ancient sight-seeing that includes the former base of the Albanian Defence League (a group of nationalists who fought for freedom from the Ottomans). Religious landmarks include its 15th-century Bajrakli Mosque, as well as the 14th-century Serbian Orthodox church, Our Lady of Ljeviš, built amid beautiful cobbled streets.

For those who love the great outdoors, be sure to visit the hiking haven of the Rugova Valley, which offers plenty of activities for the adventurous, including skiing and zip-lining. Greater tranquillity can be found at the wine-growing village of Velika Hoča where there are 13 Orthodox churches to explore, many dating to the Serbian Middle Ages.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Do as the locals do and enjoy a nightly xhiro – a ritual evening walk through a town's main streets.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Spring, when the country is green and less busy.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

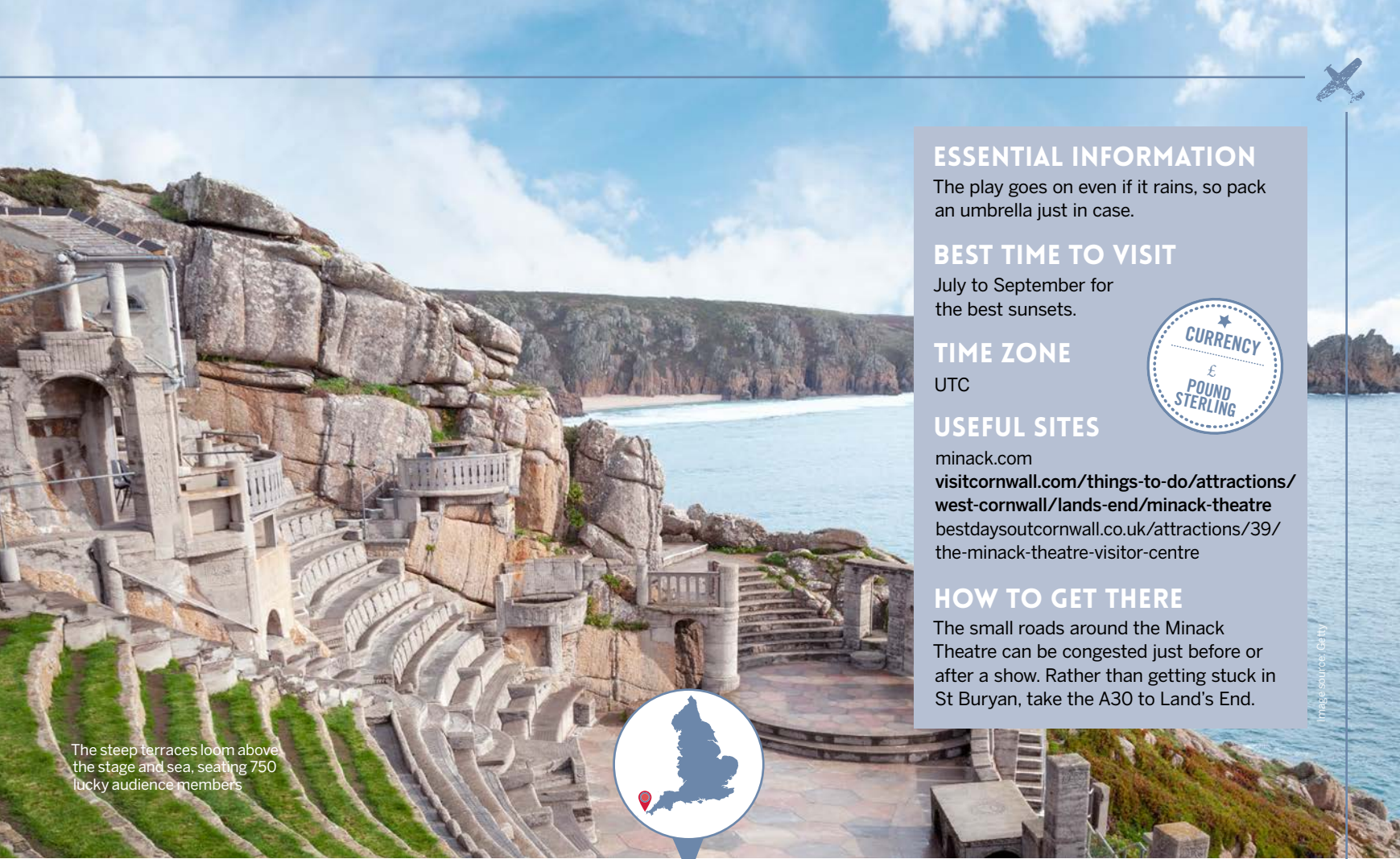
USEFUL SITES

beinkosovo.com
viewkosova.com
kosovo-info.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Flights can be taken into Pristina International Airport from many of Europe's main hubs, or you could catch a bus or train from neighbouring countries.





The steep terraces loom above the stage and sea, seating 750 lucky audience members

Image source: Getty

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The play goes on even if it rains, so pack an umbrella just in case.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July to September for the best sunsets.

TIME ZONE

UTC

USEFUL SITES

minack.com
visitcornwall.com/things-to-do/attractions/
west-cornwall/lands-end/minack-theatre
bestdaysoutcornwall.co.uk/attractions/39/
the-minack-theatre-visitor-centre



HOW TO GET THERE

The small roads around the Minack Theatre can be congested just before or after a show. Rather than getting stuck in St Buryan, take the A30 to Land's End.

CORNWALL, ENGLAND

MINACK THEATRE

THE WORLD'S A STAGE, BUT THIS CORNER OF CORNWALL IS HOME TO ONE OF THE BEST

Few people have demonstrated such passion for the arts as Rowena Cade. When her local acting society wanted an open-air location to stage *The Tempest* in the summer of 1932, she offered up her garden – the perfect spot for Shakespeare's island comedy since it overlooked the sea. Cade and her gardener then spent the next six months shifting granite and earth to create a level stage and terraced seating, hauling materials by hand from the house or up the winding path from the beach below.

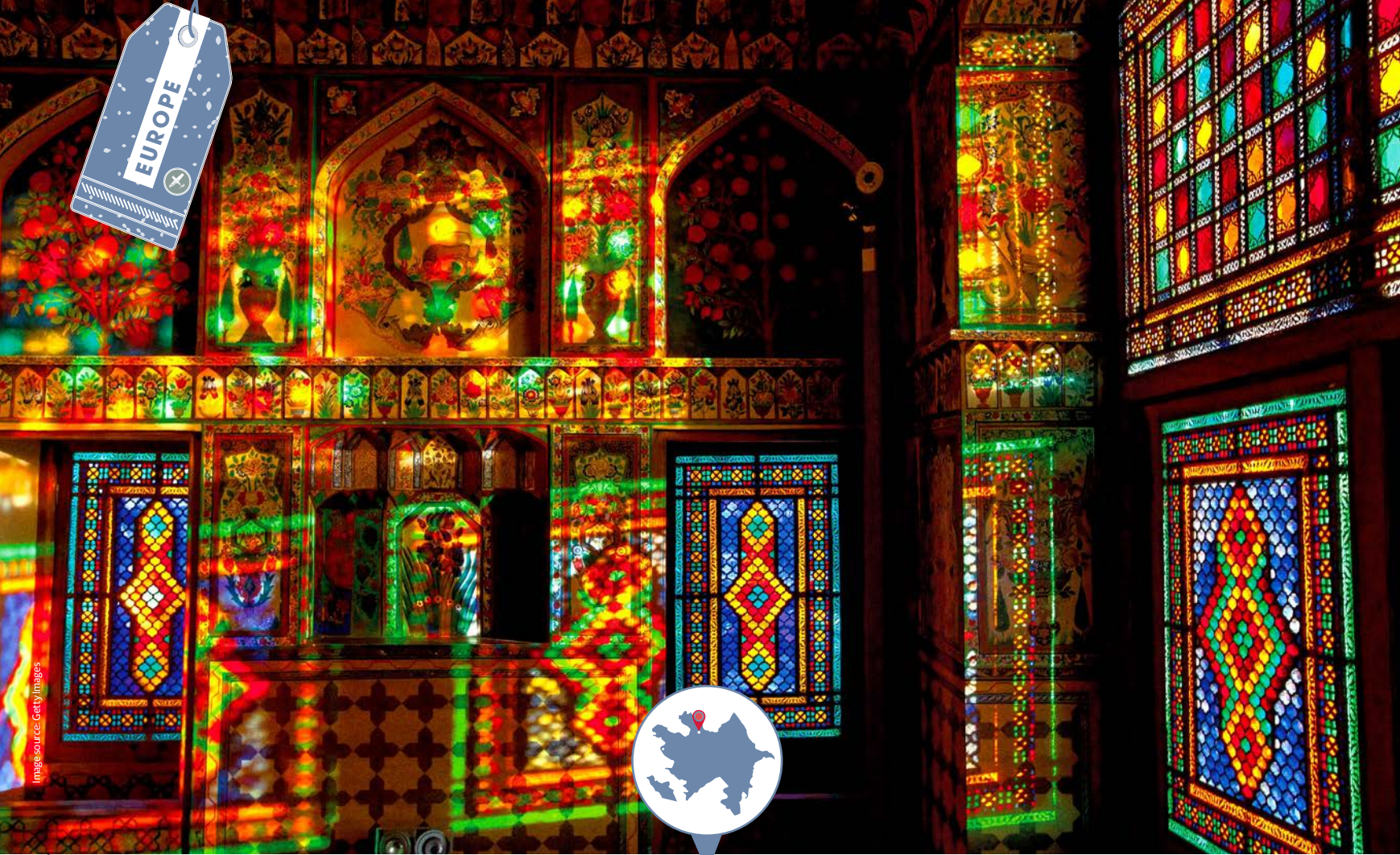
Opening night, on 16 August 1932, was a raging success, despite the stage being lit by battery-powered car headlights and the cast having to change in her house. Cade had

found her calling, and spent the next 50 years improving her garden theatre; the grass stage was replaced by a concrete floor, with pillars and arches forming a dramatic backdrop. The terraces were extended further, high up the hillside, and lighting rigs and prop storage meant that more impressive productions could be staged. When a dozen wooden beams washed up on the beach after the wreck of a Spanish freighter, they were hustled up the beach by hand and used to build the first dressing rooms. The theatre closed for the duration of the Second World War, but when it reopened the audience found that the military had left its mark – a pillbox would be a handy place for the box office for the next 50 years.

The theatre is now a tourist attraction whether a performance is in progress or not. Currently home to more than 20 shows a year between Easter and September – the winter months proving just too wild, even for hardy Cornish folk – around 80,000 people are lucky enough to witness actors treading the world's most spectacular stage. Doors open an hour before the show begins, so those in the know arrive early to secure the best view – as all tickets are for unreserved seating – and to take in the dramatic backdrop.

Around 150,000 additional visitors turn up every year to snoop around the theatre during the daytime when there is no performance on; just be sure to check there is not a matinee on to avoid disappointment. Time it right and you might be able to watch thespians at work during a rehearsal, otherwise explore the history of the site in the exhibition centre and simply marvel at Rowena Cade's theatrical passion project.

“The theatre is an attraction whether a performance is in progress or not”



AZERBAIJAN

SHEKI

TRAVEL THE SILK ROAD TO THIS PICTURESQUE MEDIEVAL MOUNTAIN TOWN

Nestled in the Greater Caucasus mountains, Sheki brings to life the exciting journeys of Silk Road tradespeople from the past.

There are several silk factories still functioning, with some dating as far back as 1861. Go a step further and immerse yourself in the historic trader culture by spending the night in a traditional caravanserai.

There are plenty of opportunities to get involved in local activity. You can visit the workshops and craftspeople who create beautifully elaborate Shebeke glass – painstakingly traced and slotted together to create the beautiful palace façades.

The Summer Palace is Sheki's most prized architectural jewel. Built in 1763 for Sheki's

ruling family, the 36-metre (118-feet) long façade is delicately decorated with Islamic-motif mosaics and patterns, and intricately carved wooden windows. Conversely, you can also visit Sheki Khan's Winter Palace, which is located outside the town walls. The plain exterior hides a stunning kaleidoscope of paintings, mirrors, stained glass and crevices inside.

Sheki's local cuisine cannot be easily found across wider Azerbaijan. Piti is a chunky meat stew with chickpeas and vegetables that is served with bread. There is an art in the eating of this dish, so pursue a host who is willing to demonstrate! For a sweet treat, you can enjoy Sheki's version of halva: pakhlava. Legend states that this specific recipe was devised for the sweet-toothed Khan himself.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Sheki is located in more rural Azerbaijan, and so modest clothing is recommended.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Visit between April and June to avoid 40+ degree Celsius temperatures.

TIME ZONE

UTC+4

USEFUL SITES

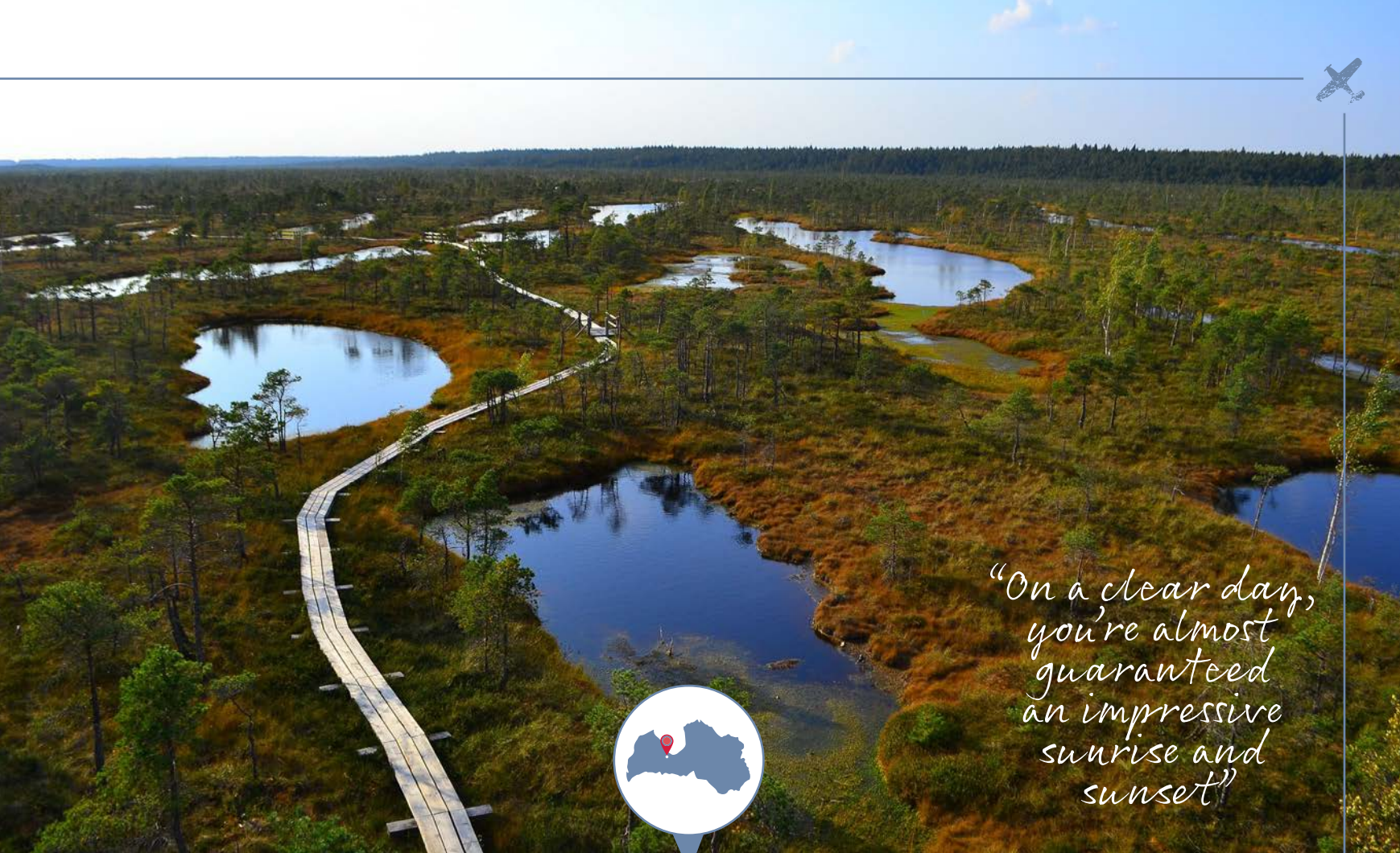
wander-lush.org/sheki-azerbaidjan-guide/
advantour.com/azerbaidjan/sheki.htm
azerbaidjan.travel/en/place/121-sheki-khans-palace



HOW TO GET THERE

The journey is six and a half hours from Baku by bus. There is also a sleeper train.

“There are plenty of opportunities to get involved in local activity”



*"On a clear day,
you're almost
guaranteed
an impressive
sunrise and
sunset"*



LATVIA

KEMERI

YES, THAT'S RIGHT – BOGS CAN BE BEAUTIFUL

A bog might not be the first thing that comes to mind when you're planning a trip, but don't overlook the mystical Kemeris Bog. Less than an hour's drive from Riga, Latvia's capital, the area is a striking example of the country's Baltic geography, and a fantastic chance to take a break from the high energy of the city.

The Great Kemeris Bog is the largest wetland of its kind in the country. The lakes are a mix of green and blue hues, and the ground a rich brown, making for an unusual photo opportunity. Formed when vegetation took over a series of low-lying lakes, the ground is squelchy, and the water acidic and sulphurous. A boardwalk sits above ground level and enables visitors to view the wetland without sinking or ruining their shoes. The beginning of the Kemeris Bog Boardwalk presents a choice. There's the 'great arc', a 3.5-kilometre (two-mile) route that leads walkers around the bog via an observation platform, and a shorter option about 1.5 kilometres (0.9 miles) long. If you're after more

excitement, you can hire bikes and cover the bog and surrounding forest.

Kemeris doesn't boast bright flowers or big animals, but it has its own quiet wildness. On a peaceful journey around the boardwalk, you can hear the calls of cranes and sandpipers, spot carnivorous plants known as sundews, and enjoy the refreshing scent of wild rosemary. It's a place that encourages you to be completely present and still, all while keeping an eye out for the little things that might be hiding in the bush. If life feels hectic, a day at Kemeris could be the perfect opportunity to slow down and reset. No matter the time of year, on a clear day, you're almost guaranteed an impressive sunrise and sunset. Arrive early or stay into the evening (perhaps with extra layers to hand), pick a spot and get your camera ready.

The boardwalk re-opened in 2013 after many years in disrepair. The ethereal appeal of the national park is likely to draw increasing numbers of visitors in the next few years, so go now if you want to enjoy the sunrise in peace.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

You must wear sturdy shoes if it has been raining – the boardwalk gets slippery when it's wet.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to September to avoid the Baltic winter.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

latvia.travel/en
kemerunacionalaisparks.lv
inyourpocket.com/jurmala/Kemeris-National-Park_55704f

HOW TO GET THERE

From Riga, you can get to Kemeris by train or car. Take €2 for the car park if driving.





ENGLAND

BRISTOL

THE CULTURAL CAPITAL OF THE BRITISH SOUTHWEST

The city of Bristol in England's proud West Country has a history ranging back over 1,000 years as a trading hub, its network spanning all the way from French Gascony to far-flung Iceland during the Middle Ages. A vital port and industrial centre for a long time, it quickly reinvented itself as a cultural hub in the late-20th century as its heavy industry faded. In the 21st century, without much fanfare, Bristol has become a centre for creative arts, music and theatre, with an impressive number of live-music venues, museums, galleries and theatres for a city of its easily walkable size.

After years of operating under the radar, today Bristol is an up-and-coming destination for any travellers looking for a variety of activities, events and days out. You can go down to the old docks and board the innovative SS Great Britain steamship. The brainchild of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the godfather of the Industrial Revolution, the SS Great Britain was the first great ocean liner when it was launched

in 1843. In the 1970s it was saved from becoming scrap metal, restored to its former glory and turned into what's now Bristol's most popular attraction. Board the boat to experience life above and below deck, or watch one of the many interactive performances happening in the dry dock.

Another fantastic, unique museum experience is Aerospace Bristol, which highlights and celebrates Bristol's world-leading aerospace industry. Aerospace Bristol's crown jewel is an actual Concorde jet on display, the first-ever supersonic passenger jet that ferried travellers between the UK and the USA in style.

You'll see links to Bristol's industrial past everywhere you go, but it doesn't mean the city dwells there. Over the last four decades, in the spirit of its previous industrial innovation, Bristol has made a name for itself as a hotbed for trail-blazing musical and artistic creation, from world-famous, genre-defining musical acts in the 1990s like Portishead, Roni Size and Massive Attack to innovative emerging acts

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The water's edge (i.e. the Harbourside) is your best bet for a fun-filled day full of experiences.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July has good weather and something happening most days, or August for the annual Balloon Fiesta.

TIME ZONE

UTC

USEFUL SITES

visitbristol.co.uk
ssgreatbritain.org
bristolmuseums.org.uk

HOW TO GET THERE

A two-hour train ride from London, Bristol also has its own international airport.





Works by the elusive Banksy are a common sight on the streets of Bristol



Home to busy markets and bustling bars, the Harbourside has plenty to offer

of today like Idles and Blanck Mass. Finding a memorable night out in Bristol to see great original live acts is easy, and so is finding live performance of other kinds.

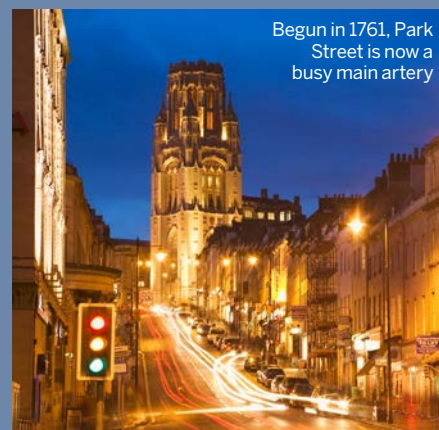
The Bristol theatre and dance scene is bigger now than ever before. Established theatres like the Bristol Old Vic always have ambitious productions on, and a number of venues host independent artists. Some of the most interesting include The Tobacco Factory, where everything from child-friendly family shows to progressive dance-theatre productions are on offer, and the Arnolfini, which hosts a fantastic art gallery. Then there's the Watershed located on the Harbourside, a digital media centre that hosts independent film screenings, music and theatre performances and design and visual art installations.

One of the biggest events every year in Bristol is St. Paul's Carnival, which has been held yearly since 1968 and grown into a cross-cultural coming together of Bristol's diverse population. Established to celebrate Afro-Caribbean culture and its influence on modern Bristol, today St. Paul's Carnival is held on the first Saturday of July and incorporates a massive musical procession where people enjoy an upbeat, vibrant community spirit. In fact, Bristol has live outdoor events going on throughout most of the

year. From public parks to the Harbourside and even cemeteries, you'll be able to find pop-up performances, live music events and interactive attractions to suit any taste.

Days out can include excursions to historic castles on the outskirts of the city, busy Bristol Zoo and to see Bristol's historic bridges across the Avon, including the engineering marvel that is the Clifton Suspension Bridge. The Clifton neighbourhood, in fact, is ideal for history lovers – its golden buildings represent the city's wealthy past (many of which were built on the backs of slavery and colonialism), and there are lots of cobbled streets and green squares to enjoy walks in. Royal York Crescent is a great alternative to the Georgian city streets of Bath, and it offers panoramic views over the entire Bristol area.

The city centre has been massively renovated in recent years. Gone are the days of 1960s squalor – you'll find shiny new shopping centres, towering office blocks, and quirky side alleys. Climb up the Christmas Steps to explore niche boutiques and bookshops, or enjoy a meal at the Harbourside's plethora of restaurants. To experience an edgier part of town, take a walk through the infamous Bearpit subway and stroll up Stoke's Croft – there are vintage shops, curry houses and Banksy artworks galore.



Begun in 1761, Park Street is now a busy main artery

PARK STREET

If you're mooching around the City Centre, chances are you'll be able to look up and see the fire-hose shaped Wills Memorial Building of Bristol University. This grand, golden tower is a true landmark, sitting on a vantage point atop a hill. You can get even higher by taking a tour to the top of the tower every Saturday.

To get there you'll want to wander up one of the city's best shopping streets: Park Street. Start at College Green, where you can enjoy a delicious gelato and brioche sandwich. It faces onto the historic Bristol Cathedral, which is worth a look if you have the time.

As you go uphill, you can browse vintage clothes shops, stop off in a chocolate cafe, or even buy some eco-friendly homeware from one of the many quirky furniture retailers.

When you reach the top, you'll be able to look down towards the city, admire Bristol University, or continue on to one of the lively bars of Whiteladies Road.

"Bristol has become a hotbed for trail-blazing musical and artistic creation"



NORWAY

SVALBARD

THESE ARCTIC ISLANDS ARE A POLAR PLAYGROUND FOR NATURE LOVERS

You might wonder what could entice anyone to visit a remote cluster of islands in the Arctic Ocean, where the average summer temperature is 5°C (41°F), where months go by without any light (or darkness), and where the permanent population is about a tenth that found on the Scottish isle of Orkney. But don't let the barren domain of rock and ice deceive you: Svalbard has plenty to keep you occupied.

Wildlife fans will have a field day (or better put, a fjord day) here – it's living proof that safaris aren't the preserve of tropical climes. Forget the traditional 4x4 and instead hop on a snowmobile or a dog sled to go in search of Svalbard reindeer (diminutive cousins of their Scandinavian relations that have adapted to

island life), Arctic foxes and dozens of birds, including an endemic subspecies of ptarmigan and the pink-footed goose. But for Svalbard's star attraction, you'll need to take to the water.

Polar bears outnumber the human residents here by around 30 per cent, making this chilly destination a hotspot for observing these much-loved mammals. They're in good company, with pinniped and cetacean numbers on the rise after a marine protected area the size of Switzerland was sanctioned in the early 2000s. One species frequenting these icy waters more regularly in recent years is the blue whale – and who wouldn't want to catch a glimpse of the largest animal ever to have lived on Earth?

It's not all about the fauna, though. The rugged landscape – almost two-thirds of the

archipelago is covered by glaciers – offers some of the last true wilderness in Europe and indeed the world. With icescapes to rival even Patagonia, it's a worthy alternative for those looking to skip both the crowds and the air miles. There's something to satisfy anyone's inner adventurer, with ice caving under glaciers, cross-country skiing and kayaking in the fjords to name just a small selection of the outdoor action up for grabs. Urban explorers might be interested in a trip to Pyramiden, an abandoned Soviet coal mining town with creepy vibes and Instagrammably Russian relics.

Admittedly, Svalbard isn't the easiest of places to reach, but there's a big plus side to that. It's only once you're there, perhaps lodging for a night in a blissfully remote cabin (or even an igloo) without a coffee shop, a mobile phone signal or even another human in miles that you realise the true meaning of escapism.

"Polar bears outnumber the human residents here by around 30 per cent"

Its extreme northern latitude means that Svalbard is one of the best places to see stunning aurora displays

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If your top priority is to see the northern lights, you'll want to time your visit during the winter (November to February).

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to September for milder conditions and more wildlife.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

en.visitsvalbard.com
visitnorway.com/places-to-go/svalbard-islands
routesnorth.com/northern-norway/visiting-svalbard-the-ultimate-guide

HOW TO GET THERE

It's a three-hour direct flight from Oslo to Longyearbyen (the world's most northerly town) or about half that if you fly from Tromsø in northern Norway.





"The castle contains fantastic treasures and rooms painted top to bottom in murals"



GERMANY

BURG ELTZ

IN A SECLUDED GERMAN WOODLAND LIES A FAIRYTALE FORTRESS

There's a storybook castle nestled on the banks of Germany's Eltzbach river. In a land famed for its Disney-esque palaces, castles and cottages, the family-owned Burg Eltz is often overlooked, but that's what makes it great. The visitor can experience all the magic of a European castle, without the timed tickets or overcrowded public transport that plague other tourist sites.

The 850-year-old castle's turreted tops are reminiscent of Prague, while the colourful criss-crossed decorations make it quintessentially German. Hard work has gone into preserving this national treasure, as you'll discover when you climb the dainty steps to the entrance.

The surrounding forest is perfect for hikers, nature lovers and picnic fans, but the fascinating history within the castle grounds means Burg Eltz appeals to art lovers and historians, too. The castle contains fantastic treasures, as well as rooms painted top to bottom in murals.

The largest hall in the castle, the Knights Hall, sits beneath a heavy oak ceiling and displays

many jesters' masks plus an array of suits of armour. The Eltz family would gather in these lively quarters for festivities and discussions.

The higgledy-piggledy inner courtyard of the castle reflects Burg Eltz's 500 years of bustling activity, resembling the market square of an old German village. It transports visitors to the middle of the 12th century, when the castle was at the peak of its glory days.

The thick forest around Burg Eltz ensured the safety of the hidden castle, which was originally built to secure a trade route. Nowadays, the woodland makes for enchanting walks, with many tour operators also offering horseriding. The Panorama trail covers eight miles (12.6km), takes around five hours and is a favourite with experienced walkers. There are plenty of restaurants and cafés inside the castle grounds that serve traditional German pastries and meats to pack for lunch on the trails.

You can hop on a bus to the castle from the nearby town of Moselkern, or there's a car park a 15-minute walk away if you've hired a car.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Visit before 11am or after 3pm to beat the queues. Tours run every 30 minutes.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Spring or autumn – the forest looks stunning.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

burg-eltz.de/en
eifel.info/en/a-burg-eltz
<https://tinyurl.com/burg-eltz>

HOW TO GET THERE

Frankfurt and Düsseldorf airports are the closest. The German train system is excellent, and Moselkern station is only three miles (5km) away from the castle.





PORTUGAL

COIMBRA

YOUNG AND OLD CAN DISCOVER COIMBRA'S HISTORY, HERITAGE AND ROMANCES

Coimbra is a university town like no other. As well as being Portugal's oldest university and a World Heritage Site, it is full of romantic tales, boisterous japes and unique music.

The University of Coimbra has a rich history that is relayed through its beautiful library. If you are a bibliophile, then the Biblioteca Joanina is sure to surpass your needs. With 250,000 volumes along its gilded shelves, one can find out anything on subjects such as history, geography, medicine, law and science. If reading reams is not your scene, you can scale the 180 steps into the university tower for a fantastic view of the city. You can also explore the student's prison, which was intended for drunk and unruly students!

No Medieval European town is complete without a monastery, and Coimbra is no

exception. As well as hosting a range of decorative architectural styles, from Manueline-designed cloisters to a classic Renaissance pulpit, the Monastery of Santa Cruz is host to two very special characters; Portugal's first two kings, Afonso Henriques (known as 'the Founder') and Sancho I, were transferred and entombed here in the 12th century.

Coimbra also has more modern marvels to explore. The Pedro e Inês bridge is a depiction of the doomed love story between the 14th-century king-to-be Pedro I and his wife's lady-in-waiting, Inês de Castro – in bridge form! The bridge does not meet in the middle but instead joins at a wide viewing platform, from which you can view the university from afar. The bright, geometric design highlights the colourful characters of the city, both old and new.

If you are looking for a destination for all the family, then Coimbra is the place. Although

many sites have child-friendly tours and facilities, Portugal dos Pequenitos is the ultimate Portuguese holiday destination for little ones. Over eight zones, children can explore scaled-down models of Portugal's most famous landmarks as well as others from Africa, South America and Southeast Asia. Children are able to dress up, get interactive and even ride a miniature train.

The first week of May is by far the best time to enjoy Coimbra due to the festivities of the Queima das Fitas. The festival (which is translated as the 'burning of the ribbons') is a celebration of the end of the academic year, which originates from students of Coimbra's university burning their tassels to mark the end of their studies. It is a vibrant time for the city, with parades, dancing, music and dressing-up. With balls, bull fights and tea dances, there is sure to be something to get involved in.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Discover Coimbra's own take on traditional fado music and be serenaded at Fado ao Centro (booking required).

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Visit in the first week of May for the Queima das Fitas.

TIME ZONE

UTC (winter)
UTC+1 (summer)

USEFUL SITES

[myportugalholiday.com/
coimbra-portugal.html](http://myportugalholiday.com/coimbra-portugal.html)
travel-in-portugal.com/coimbra
centerofportugal.com/destination/coimbra/

HOW TO GET THERE

The nearest airport is Lisbon. Trains from Gare do Oriente or Sete Rios take about two hours. Alternatively, there is an overnight train from Madrid to Coimbra.



"The Queima das Fitas is a vibrant time, with parades, dancing and music"



A gorgeous view over the rooftops of Coimbra



"Catholic churches stand proud next to former Soviet Union buildings"

RUSSIA

KALININGRAD

THIS HISTORIC RUSSIAN CITY IS LOCATED DEEP IN THE HEART OF EUROPE

Fascinating Kaliningrad is a Russian exclave, located closer to Prague than to Moscow. Its location gives the visitor a wonderful mix of both European and Russian culture for the price of one. Architecture is the city's main attraction due to its incredible history and positioning, where elegant Catholic churches stand proud next to former Soviet Union buildings.

At the end of World War II, the former German city of Königsberg was annexed by the USSR and renamed Kaliningrad in honour of Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin, the first Chairman of the Presidium of the USSR. History buffs will marvel at its mixed heritage. The city's owners have included Prussia, Poland, the German Empire, the USSR and now modern Russia.

You won't be surprised to learn that Kaliningrad's food scene is as diverse as its history. You can tuck into European, Middle Eastern, Russian and even Asian delicacies, including German bratwurst, Russian meatballs and Lithuanian dumplings. Fish and vegetarian options are rife throughout the city, as is strong Russian coffee. And, of course, there's vodka – but don't drink too much of the stuff!

Kaliningrad's sights and attractions include the island of Kant (previously Kneiphof), which is easily accessible from the Pregolya River and features a beautiful park with sculptures that surround a colossal gothic cathedral – perfect for a picnic lunch. Built in 1333, the cathedral appears German in design. Forty-minute organ concerts are held here on a daily basis and can often be heard from the mainland.

The gothic Berlin Gate, which was erected in 1657, is another popular tourist attraction, which sees trams and cars pass through it daily. In keeping with the gothic theme is the neo-gothic Amber Museum, opened in 1979. The building boasts a large fortress tower from its construction in 1853. Its name is derived from impressive pieces of amber found in the Baltic Sea, and you can peruse the museum shop for gorgeous amber jewellery to take home.

Kaliningrad may well be a quaint city but it has a wide variety of accommodation options, most of which are found in the centre. Hotel Kaiserhof is a popular choice as it provides a wonderful view of the Pregolya River. A number of hostels are available in the area for tourists on a tight budget, as well as homely B&Bs.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Why not take advantage of a free walking tour of the city? Tours start at 10am every Friday on the steps in front of Kaliningrad Hotel on Leninsky Prospekt.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to September.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

wikivoyage.org/wiki/Kaliningrad

<https://tinyurl.com/russiakaliningrad>

<https://tinyurl.com/trekkaliningrad>



HOW TO GET THERE

You can cross into Kaliningrad via the land borders with Poland or Lithuania, but make sure you have your Russian visa ready before you go. You can also fly into Kaliningrad airport from select places.



SAN MARINO

SAN MARINO

THIS MICROSTATE IN THE HEART OF ITALY HAS SO MUCH TO OFFER

Football fans know San Marino as the country that gets thrashed regularly. Trivia fans know it as the fifth-smallest country in the world. But San Marino is much more than that, as this 60-square-kilometre (23-square-mile) microstate packs an astonishing amount into an area smaller than Leicester. It is entirely enclosed within Italy and often neglected due to its small size and proximity to the more glamorous areas of Bologna and Florence. However, that is a huge mistake given there is so much to do inside the world's oldest republic.

San Marino is a bygone relic of the old city-state system, when Italians were more commonly known as the Romans, Genoese or Venetians. The City of San Marino, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, sits in the dramatic shadow of Mount Titano, which rises 762 metres (2,500 feet) above the town. Walk or drive up the mountain to see the picture-perfect Three Towers of San Marino at the summit: Guaita, Cesta and Montale. These ancient guard posts date back to the 10th century, and you can enjoy spectacular views from Guaita and Cesta that stretch over the entire, beautiful country.

The stunning neoclassical San Marino Basilica, a neo-classical mid-19th-century Catholic

church, houses the remains of the chapel's founder, Saint Marinus, after whom the country is named. From there, it's a short walk to the Palazzo Pubblico, or Public Palace. This is the seat of San Marino's government, adorned with spectacular murals. There's a quirky clock tower, which you can admire from the laid-back setting of the piazza. The stone for the Palazzo Pubblico, which was restored in the late 19th century, was quarried just a stone's throw away. The quarry is now a huge tourist attraction in itself, as it is the location for the annual crossbow competition as well as the city's medieval festival.

This odd country is also home to a number of unique museums, from the Vampire Museum to the Museum of Agricultural Culture, where you can take a cooking course in one of the oldest farmhouses in the country. And with the gastronomic regions of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany not far away, you can be assured the cooking in San Marino is of the highest quality.

Perhaps the greatest thing about San Marino is that you can enjoy all the delights of Italy for a lower price than you would in Italy itself. And with all its own merits, it seems incredible that San Marino is such an overlooked destination for travellers who enjoy its culture, history and culinary delights.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Bring your hiking boots to enjoy a beautiful, enchanting walk along The Witches' Path between Guaita and Cesta – San Marino's two iconic towers.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Visit in June and July for motorcycle, music and medieval festivals.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

sanmarinosite.com/en/
visitsanmarino.com/en
wikitravel.org/en/San_Marino

HOW TO GET THERE

There is no airport or train network in San Marino, so you'll need to fly into Federico Fellini Airport in Miramare and drive to San Marino, which is around 16 kilometres (ten miles) away.





ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Sail out to Thasos island for its gorgeous beaches and natural wonders.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September and October, for the food and drink festivals.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

visitkavala.gr/en/
visitgreece.gr/en/main_cities/kavala
kavalagreece.gr/en/



HOW TO GET THERE

Fly directly into Kavala airport, or fly into the larger airport of Thessaloniki and drive the 175km (109mi) to Kavala.

GREECE

KAVALA

VISIT THE CITY WHERE ANCIENT ROME MEETS ANCIENT GREECE

Northern Greece is an underrated part of this gorgeous country, and Kavala is a great place to start exploring it. Halfway between Thessaloniki and the Turkish border, this hodgepodge city is jam-packed with atmospheric sights, a unique vibe, and absolutely delicious food.

Through the ages, Kavala has been occupied by people from across Europe – the Romans, the Byzantines, the Venetians, the Ottomans and even the Crusaders have all left their mark on the landscape. Kavala's historic heart is its old town, the centrepiece of which is a Byzantine fortress that looks like it comes straight out of a fairytale. With its hilltop vantage point and storybook battlements and turrets, it's a great photo opportunity as well as a fascinating place to visit. You can look out over the city and breathe in the salty sea air, the wind providing welcome relief from the sun.

Travel forward in time to experience the Ottoman side of town. Marvel at the iconic 16th-

century aqueduct, which like a vein through the city carried water to the homes, businesses and bathhouses of Ottoman Kavala. Step into the grounds of the colourful Halil Bey Mosque and run your hands over its blue, green and terracotta-painted walls. Inside the main prayer hall you can walk the glass floor to peer over the remains of the Christian church on the site, and go out to the courtyard to explore the well-preserved madrasa (Islamic school).

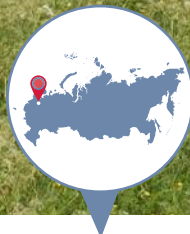
If the madrasa takes your fancy, you're in luck – amble 170m (558ft) down Ali Mehmet street and you can stay in a luxury hotel that was converted from a theological college. Water was a key tenet of Ottoman design, and the hotel's courtyard is home to an inviting pool. The cistern, meanwhile, has been converted into a cosy, sensual spa.

No matter where you go in Greece, the sea is never too far away, and Kavala sits right on it. You'll find some of the best seafood in town along Erithrou Stavrou promenade, which after dark transforms into a lively nightlife district.

If authenticity is what you're after, however, you can check out the mezedopoleia (Greek tapas restaurants) and ouzo bars in the narrow backstreets located slightly inland. They frequently host live music nights, where you can truly immerse yourself and experience Kavala in its full kefi (fun-filled) spirit.

Greece is renowned across the globe for its beautiful beaches, exciting towns, incredible food and friendly people. Kavala has all that to offer and much more. It really is a wonder why the rest of the world hasn't discovered it yet. Be sure to visit before it does.

"The Byzantine fortress looks like it comes straight out of a fairytale"



RUSSIA

PORZHENSKY POGOST

VISIT THIS MYSTICAL ABANDONED VILLAGE AT THE HEART OF RUSSIA'S WINDY PLAINS



One can only ever dream of silence and seclusion in today's modern world, but Porzhensky Pogost has just that. Set in a vast

Russian national park that boasts hauntingly beautiful lakes, it's the perfect spot for those seeking to reconnect with nature.

Kenozersky National Park is a stunning lakeland that features a few abandoned villages, including Porzhenskoye. On the outskirts of the village, in the western part of the park near the Porzhenka River, lies the intriguing Porzhensky Pogost. It comprises a church – St. George's – with a bell tower, in a log enclosure, guarded by turreted towers. This mystical walled settlement is set in a picture book yellow grass field.

Porzhensky's hermitage was built in the 1780s, atop a pagan shrine, and has a chapel and three surrounding churches in a straight line. The remote area is also home to an eerie graveyard, which attracts its fair share of visitors.

There's no road to Porzhensky Pogost, or indeed any of the abandoned villages – it's only

accessible via a pedestrian trail. Abandoned cars can be found along the route, giving the place an almost apocalyptic edge.

The beautiful Kenozersky National Park is located in the Kargopolsky and Plesetsky Districts of Arkhangelsk Oblast. The park was established in 1991 and has been given UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status to protect its trails and architectural monuments. Visitors typically come for the wildlife, with grizzly bears, elk and wolves occupying the park forestry.

The park has two access points, one of which is near the gorgeous Lake Lyokshmozero, one of the largest freshwater lakes in Arkhangelsk Oblast and the second biggest in the entire district. The oval lake, surrounded by woodland, is perfect for lazy boat trips.

To make your experience a traditionally Russian one, why not stay in one of the many log cabins scattered around the national park? They come equipped with old-fashioned Russian stoves and tapestries, giving them a truly rustic yet comfortable feel.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Don't go without a guide as the area is surrounded by dangerous swamps.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July and August, to avoid the infamous Russian winter.

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

USEFUL SITES

<https://tinyurl.com/porzhensky>

<https://tinyurl.com/prcfzyxt>

<https://tinyurl.com/4rz2k5j8>

HOW TO GET THERE

Take the train from Moscow to Nyandoma, then take the bus to Kargopol. From there, take another bus to Maselga, and hike the last 10 miles. We didn't say it'd be easy!



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Pack your anorak and walking boots, as impromptu hikes are essential to any Scotland visit.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July and August – Scottish winters are chilly!

TIME ZONE

UTC

USEFUL SITES

yourstirling.com/see-do/top-attractions/
stirlingcitypass.com/
stirlingcastle.scot/

HOW TO GET THERE

Hop on a train from Edinburgh or Glasgow right to the centre of Stirling.



SCOTLAND

STIRLING

THIS SMALL CITY IS STEEPED IN SCOTTISH HISTORY, AND IS WELL WORTH THE TRIP

When you think of Scotland, you'll likely conjure up images of Edinburgh Castle, but many forget about the city of Stirling, its castle and the crucial part it played in the history of Scotland.

Stirling is home to many secret Scottish gems not to be missed. The city is roughly equidistant between Edinburgh and Glasgow, so you have no excuse not to go.

To the untrained eye, Stirling Castle looks like Edinburgh Castle's younger sibling. Like Edinburgh, Stirling Castle sits proudly at the centre of the city on a rocky cliff. Inside the castle walls, you'll find the Royal Palace, which now frequently hosts an exciting world of plots, passion and intrigue with costumed performers bringing history to life. You'll also find a new exhibition focused on the castle's archaeology, which includes the fascinating, mysterious 14th-century Stirling skeletons. Other highlights include the Great Hall, Chapel Royal, Regimental Museum, the great kitchens as well as dress

up, games and musical instruments to keep younger visitors entertained.

The next thing you shouldn't leave without seeing is the National Wallace Monument, a tower built in memory of the Scottish hero, Sir William Wallace. Inside you'll find The Hall of Arms that shows how the battle of Stirling Bridge against the English king was fought and won, as well as information on the life of William Wallace. The Hall of Heroes, also found inside, is home to the Wallace sword and is a celebration of famous Scots who were inspired by William Wallace. You'll also find the facts and figures behind the building of the monument in The Royal Chamber.

If none of that has enticed you, then simply go for the views. Seriously. On one side you'll see the city itself, Stirling Bridge, the Forth river

and the castle perched in pride of place on a hill. When it's been snowing the hills around the city make the most stunning backdrop. On the other side you'll see Stirling University Campus, which is a campus like no other. In the centre of the university grounds there's a beautiful loch that freezes over in the winter months and glistens for the rest of the year, and is home to swans, ducks and other wildlife.

Behind the campus is Dumyat Hill, a rocky little hill of the Ochils range, which is worth the climb if you have time. You might hear stories about the Sherifmuir Inn (off the hill path) that used to be home to a friendly grizzly bear... but we're not sure how credible these tales are.

Other highlights include the Old Town Jail, The Church of the Holy Rude, The Battle of Bannockburn Experience, and Argyll's lodging.

"Stirling Castle sits proudly at the centre of the city on a rocky cliff"



Piazza del Comune, Cremona (you can see the duomo and its baptistry)



ITALY

CREMONA

THE IDEAL CITY FOR VIOLIN AND MUSIC LOVERS TO RELAX

Founded by the Romans in 218 BC, but better known for its medieval architecture, Cremona is a rare thing – a quintessential Italian town without the crowds. With a population of 70,000, Cremona genuinely offers peace and quiet. Many travellers visiting Lombardy won't include it in their itinerary, and prefer to stop in nearby Milan or Brescia. But music lovers will know Cremona thanks to its violin-making tradition and its many luthiers' shops. It was, in fact, the home of those who detained the finest secrets of the luthier's trade since the 15th and 16th centuries: the Amati, Stradivari and Guarneri del Gesù families.

Even now, aspiring luthiers from all over the world come to Cremona to study at its violin-making schools and become internationally renowned artisans. Cremona is therefore a must-visit for classical music connoisseurs. It's home to the Violin Museum, where the history and tradition of the instrument meets the modern architecture of its auditorium.

Every Saturday, one of the antique violins of the museum's collection is played for an audience, to keep the instruments in use and in tune. Theatre lovers will also appreciate the spectacular 19th-century Teatro Ponchielli, where they can see opera, ballet, concertos and plays.

The town is rather small and easy to walk around. You can go anywhere on foot, strolling through the atmospheric streets of the old district. Walk down Via Palestro to find some of Cremona's most beautiful buildings. Some of them are now schools, and you are able to walk inside and visit them. Don't miss Palazzo Stanga and its astonishing cloister. Art lovers also can't miss the picture gallery in the Ala Ponzone Museum nearby, where they'll see the iconic painting by Arcimboldo – *The Gardener*. When viewed upside down, it looks like a rather rude human face. Be sure to crane your neck to see it for yourself.

When visiting any ancient town in Italy, you will notice art, nature, culture, food and drink live

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Make sure you go down by the Po river at sunset. The view from under the bridge is absolutely breathtaking.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May for good weather.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

turismocremona.it/en
in-lombardia.it/en
enchancingitaly.com/regions/lombardia

HOW TO GET THERE

If travelling by plane, fly into Milan then reach Cremona by train. The train station is centrally located. If driving, Cremona is less than an hour away from Milan.





The gorgeous interior of Cremona Town Hall



Cremona from above, as seen from the Torrazzo bell tower



“Cremona is a must-visit for classical music connoisseurs”

in harmony. By peeking into the local shops you'll see Cremona's artisan traditions also include the making of cured meats, cheeses, Cremona's 'mostarda' (a pickled fruit preserve) and the local nougat, torrone. Cremona has been making torrone since 1441, when it was served at the wedding of Duke Francesco Sforza and Bianca Maria Visconti. Try it at Pasticceria Lanfranchi in Via Solferino – it's said to be the best in town. If you're looking for an authentic cup of Italian coffee, have it at Tubino, one of Cremona's most historical cafés.

Cremona's beating heart is the medieval Piazza del Comune, better known as Piazza del Duomo. Here, both the medieval political and religious powers are represented, the former by the town hall and the latter by the cathedral. In the town hall, Palazzo Comunale, culture vultures will be able to visit beautifully decorated rooms, and then go on to Palazzo dei Militi next door, which is one of the town's oldest buildings.

The duomo, in the Romanesque style, was begun in the 12th century and eventually finished in the 15th century. Such is its genius that it has been dubbed by critics 'the Sistine Chapel of the Po Valley' for the intricacy of its frescoes. The octagonal baptistry, in a mixed

Romanesque and Gothic style, is external. At 34 metres (112 feet) tall, its façade is covered in white marble and, together with the duomo, it provides a great contrast with Cremona's warm red brick buildings. The bell tower, known as 'Torrazzo', standing at 112 metres (367 feet) tall, is the tallest brick bell tower in Europe. By huffing and puffing up its 500 steps, one can see the whole town, with its red rooftops and the verdant countryside just beyond them. The Torrazzo is also said to have provided the inspiration for the shape and the name of the town's beloved torrone. Another great example of religious architecture is 15th-century San Sigismondo. It's located just outside the town centre, a short walk away. Its best feature is the adjacent monastery with its pleasant cloister.

Nature lovers will certainly find an ideal setting for restorative bike rides. Cremona's luscious countryside is surrounded by four rivers: Po, Adda, Oglio and Serio. Ride your bicycle along the river banks and in the area's natural parks. After a long bike ride, relax in the evening with a drink at Molo 57 and join the night life in Piazza della Pace. Visiting in spring will enable you to find great weather: just the right time for a break in this stunning little town.



Don't be put off by the nondescript exterior!

PIAZZA LODI

If traditional Cremonese architecture takes your fancy, you'll want to stop in sleepy Piazza Lodi to see the 17th century red brick 'Palazzo Lodi Zaccaria'. The exterior might not look instantly impressive, but don't be fooled – inside, you'll find a palace full of Doric columns and beautiful Baroque frescoes.

When in the area around lunch or dinnertime, you could stop and eat at the charming Trattoria Cerri, where the gnocchi is very popular with locals. Another popular spot is Antica Osteria del Fico, which frequently hosts lively music and dance nights. Both serve very traditional Lombardian fare.



Image source: Getty Images

GEORGIA

TBILISI

THIS MEDIEVAL CITY IN THE HEART OF THE CAUCASUS IS READY FOR THE FUTURE

Tbilisi, a city whose fiery spirit was once brutally repressed by its Soviet occupiers, is blooming. Georgia is a truly fascinating country, which until a few decades ago, was shut away from the rest of the world. Nowadays, Tbilisi is one of the fastest-growing tourist destinations in Europe. Along the Kura (or in Georgian, Mtkvari) River, fancy hotels, lively nightclubs and world-class restaurants attract locals and tourists alike. Get a feel for Georgia's unique culture and beautiful language as you walk its streets, and listen to the Georgian music coming out of each bar.

The old town is a colourful and exuberant neighbourhood, small enough to explore by foot, but large enough to get serendipitously lost in. Its 19th-century wooden mansions – many featuring elaborate balconies for their owners to people-watch from – are all painted in an array of colours. They might look a little on the 'distressed' side, but it's part of their charm.

In fact, it almost looks like something out of a Disney film – and nowhere is this more apparent than at the Clock Tower. This leaning, higgledy-piggledy tower and its adjacent puppet theatre were built in 2010 by Rezo Gabriadze. Every hour, an angel comes out of the clock to ring the bell, and twice a day you can catch a show in the puppet theatre – we promise it's better than Punch and Judy.

Head out of the Old Town to Rike Park and then look up to the sky. Directly above you, you'll find the imposing Narikala fortress, which has protected the city and the Kura (Mtkvari) River valley since the 4th century. Inside its stone battlements, you can look around a newly restored Eastern Orthodox Church, complete with lavish dome paintings. If you're feeling a touch adventurous, you can walk all the way to the top of the hill – but it's much more fun to take the cable car from Rike Park, which was installed in 2012.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Taxis can try to charge extortionate rates, but public transport is generally efficient, safe and cheap.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May (so you can enjoy the annual Flower Festival)

TIME ZONE

UTC+4

USEFUL SITES

visitgeorgia.ge/about-georgia/tbilisi/
georgia.travel/
georgiaabout.com/tag/tbilisi/



HOW TO GET THERE

You can fly into Tbilisi from many bases in Europe and Asia. Alternatively, take the train in from the Armenian capital, Yerevan, or from Azerbaijan's capital Baku.

"They might look distressed, but it's part of their charm"



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Be sure to bring decent thermals if you're travelling in winter – underestimate a Scandinavian winter at your peril!

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Spring, for the snow melt and blooms, or June to August if you like warmer weather.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

visitturku.fi/en

visitfinland.com/article/turku
turku.fi



HOW TO GET THERE

Board the train from the Finnish capital, Helsinki – the journey takes two hours. The bus takes the same amount of time.



FINLAND

TURKU

AN AGE-OLD RIVER SEPARATES THIS FINNISH CITY'S MIX OF OLD AND NEW

With a surge in flights announced by Air Baltic to this enchanting Finnish region, it's no wonder avid travellers are keen to drive tourism to Turku. Located on the southwest coast of Finland, about two hours from Helsinki by bus or train, Turku was founded in the 13th century and was in fact the Finnish capital until Russia took over the land in the early 1800s. This gives the city a rich mix of communist and European architecture, one of its main selling points.

The River Aura's waterside path is the perfect way to get to know the city by foot, as it offers unparalleled snapshots of the remarkable buildings along the route. The Aura is typically scattered with canal boats and tour operators offering reasonable prices for trips up and down its frigid waters.

In fact, the river itself plays a major role in city life. The local custom in Turku is to say that something is found 'on this side of the river' or 'the other side of the river'. This is because

Turku is a city split into old and new. The older side features the city's grand Cathedral and Old Great Square, whereas the so-called new side features a modern city centre, market square and shopping malls.

Foodies will be delighted with the plethora of cafes and restaurants along the Aura's banks. Each serves real authentic Finnish cuisine, such as cinnamon rolls and Karelian pasties, as well as the more daring pickled herrings, sautéed reindeer and salty liquorice. Fish is as popular as meat in Finland, given the location of the nation near the Baltic Sea. Kalakukko is a regional delicacy – a fish pie made from rye bread, made moist by the bread soaking in the bones of the fish, giving it exquisite flavours.

Turku Cathedral is a stunning sight known locally as the Mother Church of the Evangelical

Lutheran Church of Finland. Its spectacular name suits the building, which at summertime boasts an array of colourful tulips at its door, while in winter the trees that enclose the church are lit up to make it look all the more Christmassy. The cathedral is widely considered to be Finland's most valuable historical monument, and inside it features sculptures of saints as well as fine silverware from the Middle Ages.

Active folks can partake in a more adventurous side to Finnish culture. Ice swimming may sound terrifying but it gives those brave enough the chance to see Turku's beautiful forests and lakes on the outskirts of the city. Alternatively, there are many steamy saunas scattered around the city, for those less fond of the freezing temperatures.

"The River Aura's waterside path is the perfect way to get to know the city"



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Sarajevo can be very traditional in places, so be careful to respect any local conventions you encounter.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to October.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

visitsarajevo.ba/?lang=en
sarajevo.travel
sarajevofunkytours.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Many low-cost airlines within Europe offer direct flights to Sarajevo.



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

SARAJEVO

AT THE FOOT OF A BALKAN MOUNTAIN LIES A BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

Dubbed the city where east meets west, Sarajevo's mountain setting and Ottoman bazaars make it a cultural hotpot for visitors who long for a diverse travelling experience. The capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, tourism in the city is on the rise after word of its magic and intrigue got around – and fast.

Sarajevo is tucked away in a long, narrow valley with woodland and mountains on either side, giving visitors a glimpse of its stunning backdrop. Thankfully, the surrounding mountains are easily accessible due to Sarajevo's expansive cable car system, making it the perfect introduction to the city. A return ticket costs around £10, or 20 Convertible Marks, and it takes approximately nine minutes to get from the bottom to the very top. The breathtaking views from the summit will make it impossible to leave, particularly when sunset falls and drenches the city in twilight.

The city is decorated with beautiful mosques and Catholic churches, but the main pedestrian

walkway, Ferhadija, is where the city really takes on a distinctive character of its own. Visitors are often seen taking photos from the middle of the street, looking down towards either end. This is the point where western shop signs, pubs and bars meet the Turkish bazaar. At one end of the street, traditional coffee houses and hookah pipes reign supreme and no alcohol is to be served, and at the other, men and women can be seen lining bars with a pint of beer or glass of wine in their hands. If you have a sweet tooth, you can pick up a delicious ice cream for as little as £1 by an array of vendors.

If the city's Ottoman architecture makes you want to know more about this fascinating period of Bosnian history, you must go to Seher-Cehaja bridge, over the Miljacka river. It's a sight to behold. The stunning piece of construction can

be translated as the 'Mayor's Bridge' from the original Turkish. The 15th-century bridge is one of 13 in Sarajevo. Its initial design consisted of five arches, but it's since been renovated and changed dozens of times, and one of the arches has been walled up and covered with a road.

The city is also scattered with thought-provoking museums that shed light on the tragedy of recent war in Bosnia, and the two decades of healing it has taken to make its capital a tourist hotspot.

To end your day in the most relaxing way possible, pay a visit to the hamam, which can be found along the river. Opt for a massage or aromatherapy treatment, and let the therapists take you back to the city's Ottoman glory days, making you feel like a sultan (or sultana) living the high life in Bosnia's mountainous capital.

"The breathtaking views from the summit will make it impossible to leave"



"From the top of Zugspitze you can spot mountain peaks in five different nations"



GERMANY

EIBSEE LAKE

VENTURE INTO THE BAVARIAN ALPS FOR A LAKE THAT REALLY SPARKLES

Nestled at the foot of Zugspitze – the tallest peak in Germany – is Eibsee, a pristine lake considered to be one of the most beautiful in the country. In the correct light, the clear water appears a deep green, matching the dense trees around its edges and several tiny islands along its north bank.

Eibsee is just over 3km (2mi) long and measures about 0.5km (0.3mi) across at its widest point. Close to the car park are restaurants and bathing spots, so you can take in the scenery without walking more than a few metres, but a trip around the lake shows off its beauty to the fullest.

The trail looping around the lake is 7km (4mi), taking an hour and a half to two hours. With bays and viewpoints dotted around the route, you should always be able to find a quiet spot. Eibsee makes for a charming day trip, but there's no need to rush if you want to linger in the peaceful surroundings. There are campsites nearby for a night closer to nature.

For the best views of Eibsee you'll want to head up the mountain. If you're a keen hiker you can make the journey on foot – most people take two days to reach the summit and come down again, stopping at an alpine hut overnight. Mountaineering isn't for everyone though, so there's also the option to take the Zugspitze cable car. The aerial tramway isn't cheap, but it runs all the way to the peak and lets you look out across the Alps. From the top you can spot mountain peaks in five nations: Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy and Liechtenstein.

Summer is an ideal time to visit if you're after clear skies, sunshine and the chance to enjoy the activities on offer. Kayaks, bikes and paddle-boards are available for hire, or you can just wade in for a swim. With the good weather, though, come the crowds. May and September are less busy but still likely to be a comfortable temperature, or you could opt for winter if you're after tranquillity. In the colder months the trees are covered in snow and the water freezes over, bringing a real hush to the area.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Bring your swimming costume or trunks in case you fancy a dip.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to September are the best months for warmer weather.

TIME ZONE

UTC +1

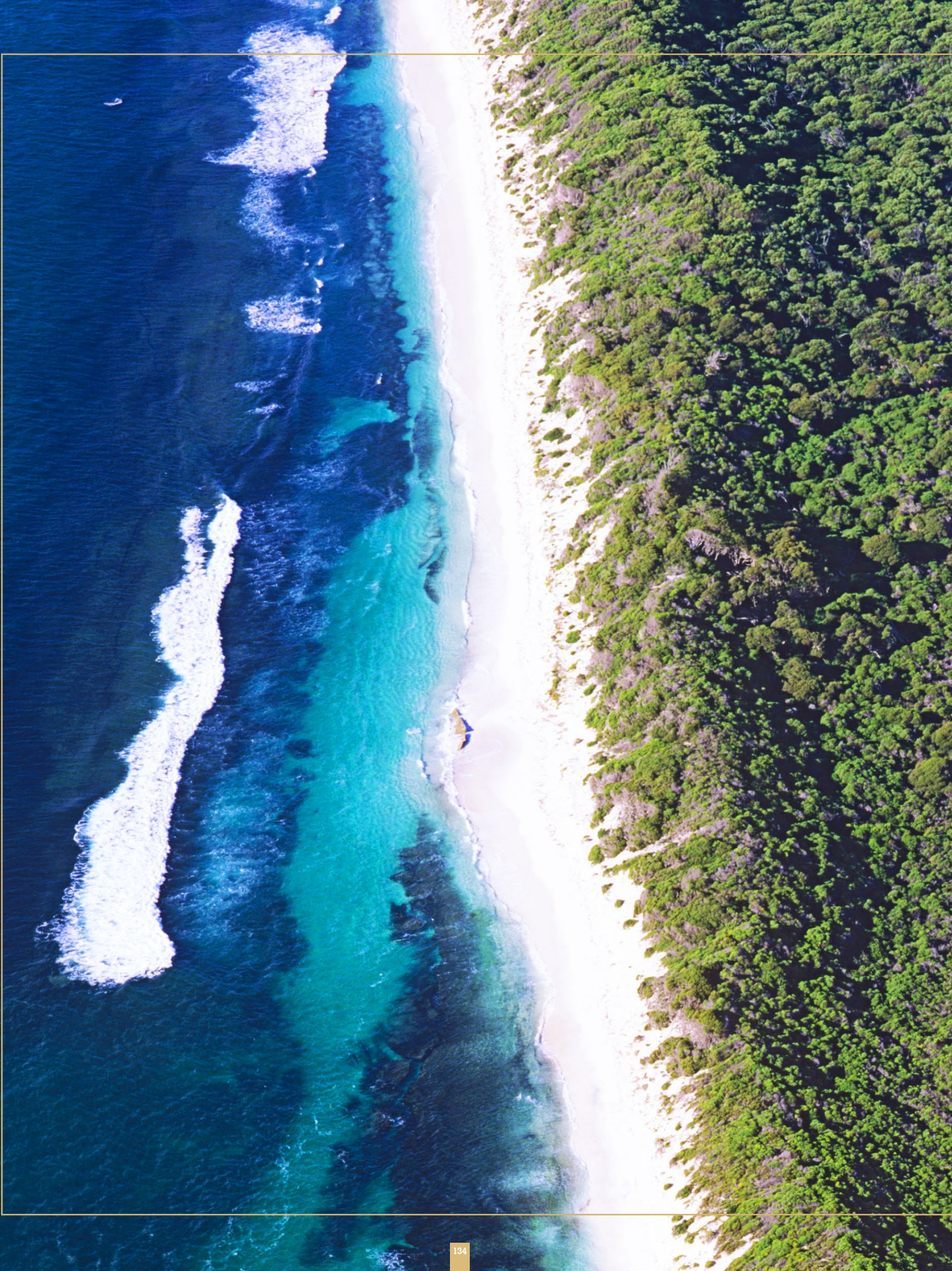
USEFUL SITES

grainau.de/en/lake-eibsee-en
eibsee-hotel.de/en/
komoot.com/guide/198060/hiking-around-eibsee

HOW TO GET THERE

Eibsee is about two hours from Munich by car. If you're travelling by public transport, head to Untergrainau on the train and then look for the Eibsee buses.







OCEANIA

136 PERTH
-
137 TASMANIA
-
138 LAKE HILLIER
-

139 NEW CALEDONIA
-
140 BRIDAL VEIL FALLS
-
141 HOKITIKA
-

142 DUNEDIN
-
143 NAN MADOL
-



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Those travelling to Fremantle via ferry should secure seats on the right-hand side of the boat for unbeatable views.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May for good weather and fewer crowds

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

USEFUL SITES

australia.com
westernaustralia.com
visitperth.com



HOW TO GET THERE

Fly directly into Perth from across the world, or take an epic long distance train from Sydney or Adelaide

PERTH

PERTH DISHES UP A FEAST OF NATURAL BEAUTY AND FASCINATING HERITAGE

Isolated in the badlands of Western Australia, laid-back Perth emerges under a cloudless blue sky. Blessed with sweeping beaches, cultural credentials and Michelin-star restaurants, the flourishing west coast capital is an oceanfront paradise with big-city attitude.

One of the largest inner-city parks on the planet, Kings Park and Botanic Garden is home to native bushland and white-trunked trees that erupt from manicured lawns like skyscrapers. The 750-year-old boab and canopy tree bridge are not to be missed. Come September the park bursts into colour

as bright wildflowers take over as part of a month-long festival.

West of the city, the freewheeling port town of Fremantle beckons. Reached via boat, the scenic journey sees the city skyline give way to sprawling mansions, while dolphins make an appearance. With its serpentine streets, historic architecture and artisanal stalls, Fremantle is a patchwork of colour and life where history buffs can chase the Convicts and Colonials Trail, taking in the UNESCO-listed prison.

With beaches aplenty, Perth's pine tree-fringed Cottesloe remains a crowd-pleaser.

However, those in search of solitude flee to Mosman or Swanbourne. Inland, Cathedral Square houses the City of Perth Library, St George's Cathedral and the 19th-century Treasury Buildings in addition to a slew of stylish bars and restaurants, including the subterranean velvet-clad Halford Bar and Wildflower, which showcases seasonal, indigenous flavours. While the culturally curious head to Perth Cultural Centre, a vibrant hub of museums, galleries and theatres, a slower pace can be found in Swan Valley, dotted with rolling vineyards and chocolatiers.



Image source: Getty Images

AUSTRALIA

TASMANIA

AUSTRALIA'S ISLAND OFFERS A RUGGED LANDSCAPE, BEFITTING ITS ROUGH PAST

Every day, the Spirit of Tasmania whisks visitors from Melbourne to Tasmania's northern coastal city of Devonport. The city offers a hearty welcome, with a casual beachside stroll to the red and white Mersey Lighthouse. By the bluff, Aboriginal rock carvings hint at the region's indigenous heritage, dating back tens of thousands of years before its more recent colonisation and influx of convicts.

After a day of fishing, rowing and sailing, and a trip to the stunning Tasmanian Arboretum, Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park calls. Here, the epic week-long Overland Track takes hikers through the bushland, where glacial water drips down mountainsides into steady lakes, and cold waterfalls spit into thick rainforests. Its trees date back thousands of years, providing shade to the park's platypus, echidna and, of course, Tasmanian devils.

To the west, the coastal town of Strahan is true frontier territory – a veritable Wild West, where convicts and settlers pushed themselves to their natural limits. Though nowadays it's rife with on-trend restaurants and quaint shops, it sits just south of the soaring Henty Dunes, shaped by winds roaring all the way from South America. The West Coast Wilderness Railway,

meanwhile, is a comfortable way to explore the region's extremely uncomfortable past – complete with a rainforest stroll, gold panning and honey tasting.

On the opposite coast lies Hobart, the state capital, and a hub of art, food and culture. Framed by mountains and sea, and an hour from the stunning Mount Field National Park, the city overflows with fresh food and artisanal markets. Mona (Museum of Old and New Art) curates a striking blend of modern art and ancient heritage, set within a deliciously contemporary building, driven into the cliffs.

An hour and a half away, originally built as a timber station, Port Arthur grew into one of the country's most notorious prisons. Dubbed 'inescapable', despite its beautiful surroundings, it was the bane of 12,500 convicts' lives from 1830 and 1877. Fittingly, the World Heritage Site has its own Ghost Tour, for those who dare to explore its ruins by lantern light.

After a short stop at the state's second city of Launceston, with its colonial and Victorian cityscapes and parks, the Tamar River flows through vineyards, orchards, forested hills and scores of riverside villages. In Tasmania's far northeast, the Bay of Fires spans 50 kilometres (31 miles) of coastline, from Eddystone Point to

Binalong Bay. Multi-day hikes traverse sandy beaches and heathland, over boulders and through eucalyptus forests, with plenty of time for snorkelling and birdwatching.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Those hiking the Overland Track from October to May should book in advance.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to February (for festivals) or March to May (for hiking)

TIME ZONE

UTC+11

USEFUL SITES

parks.tas.gov.au

tasmania.com

taswalkingco.com.au

HOW TO GET THERE

The ferry from Melbourne to Tasmania takes about 10 hours, so it's best done overnight. Alternatively, fly in.





"Where else can you see nature's daiquiri?"

AUSTRALIA

LAKE HILLIER

THE PRETTY-IN-PINK AUSTRALIAN LAKE THAT STUNS TOURISTS AND SCIENTISTS ALIKE

Think of a lake. You're probably imagining a cool, blue expanse of water. Maybe even turquoise or aquamarine. You certainly won't be imagining water the colour of a flamingo, but that is the sight that would greet you if you visit the unique and spectacular Lake Hillier. Situated on Middle Island, just off the coast of Western Australia, the lake is a bright-pink colour all year round, for reasons scientists still can't quite agree on. Some believe it is due to a bacteria found in the water, while others think it's caused by *Dunaliella salina* microalgae. One thing everyone can agree on, however, is that it looks both bizarre and incredible – especially as it's just metres from the Pacific Ocean that remains determinedly and traditionally blue, resulting in an amazing contrast when viewed from above.

Lake Hillier isn't the only pink lake in the world, but it is unique as the one that retains its colour even when the water is removed and bottled. Discovered by British explorer Matthew Flinders in 1802, Lake Hillier was named after William Hillier – one of Flinders' fellow HMS Investigator sailors who had sadly died of dysentery. Lake Hillier, which is on the small side at around 600 by 250 metres (1,968 by 820 feet), was mined for its salt for six years,

but mining stopped when it was discovered that the salt was too toxic for human consumption. Middle Island is now a nature reserve, with only a limited number of tourists allowed onto the island. One of the best ways to see Lake Hillier in all its glory is by helicopter, as it is at its most vibrant from the air and you can fully appreciate the contrast with the Pacific.

Another option is a cruise from Esperance – the closest town to Middle Island. Now, the big question that all once-in-a-lifetime-experience seekers will want to know: can you swim in a bubblegum lake for the ultimate holiday snap? You can, but the Esperance Visitor Centre says you probably wouldn't really want to due to the high salt levels and shallow depth. The water has been tested and it is perfectly safe to swim in. The microalgae is harmless; there aren't any creatures that will try and have a nibble on you, and the pink won't stain your body. The salt levels are comparable to the Dead Sea in the Middle East, which is also perfectly safe to swim in, but it wouldn't make for the most satisfying swim ever – so probably just dip in for the photo opportunity and out again.

Whichever way you experience Lake Hillier – via land, sea or sky – this is a sight that no self-respecting traveller can miss out on. Where else

can you see nature's daiquiri nestled among the trees of an Australian nature reserve, and get your friends scrabbling to find what filter you used to create that unbelievable shot?

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Middle Island can only be visited using a licenced tour operator.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May
(for the best weather)

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

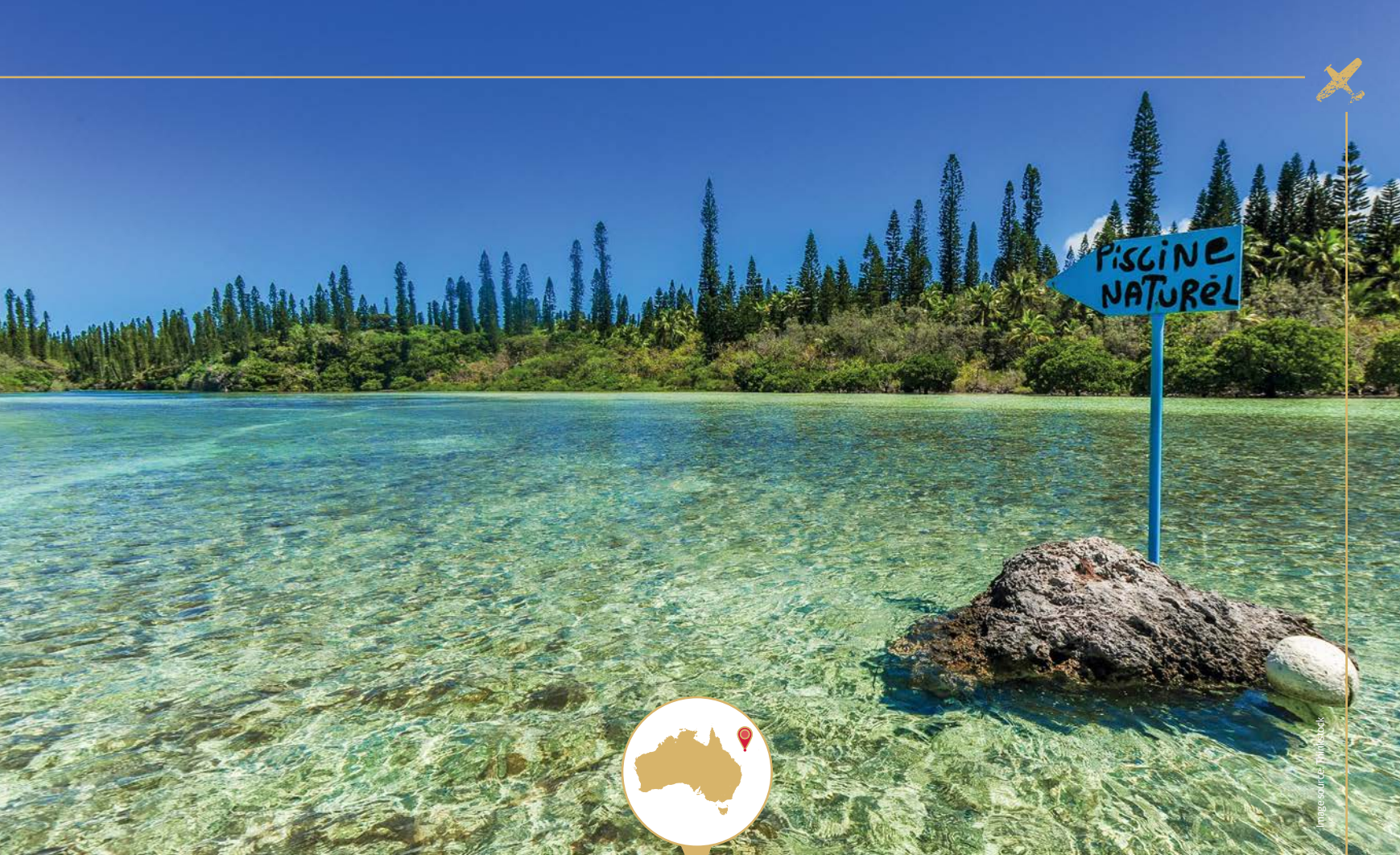
USEFUL SITES

tinyurl.com/28ruach7
hillierlake.com/
esperancecruises.com.au/lakehillier

HOW TO GET THERE

The nearest town is Esperance, 700km from Perth. There's a long-distance train (10 hours 30 minutes), but you can also drive (8 hours). From here, take a scenic flight over Lake Hillier.





OCEANIA

NEW CALEDONIA

ENJOY A FRENCH WAY OF LIVING IN A STUNNING TROPICAL SETTING

For a Pacific holiday with a difference head to New Caledonia. Culturally, the tropical island feels very French, and the capital, Nouméa, is rather cosmopolitan. Here you can find fine-dining, amazing shops and fantastic natural beauty spots that include a World Heritage Site lagoon, lush river valleys, white sandy beaches, cool rainforests and tumbling waterfalls.

In the morning, stroll around the Port Moselle markets (which are on daily except for Mondays) where you will find Kanak women selling fresh pineapple, papaya and passion fruits. Complete your petit déjeuner by visiting the French sellers, who offer buttery croissants and fresh coffee.

Restaurant Le 1881 is a restaurant with a rich history as it is located in the grounds of

the former penal colony on the island, which dates back to the late 19th century. It's one of Nouméa's most exciting restaurants, with a previous Michelin-star chef in the kitchen.

Head to the centre of Nouméa and explore Place des Cocotier, watching the world go by. With botanical gardens, a pétanque pitch and a giant chessboard as well as frequent markets and concerts to enjoy, you'll be able to while away the hours with ease.

Other sights to visit include the Heart of Voh, a mangrove swamp that has developed some unusual natural designs – including, of course, a heart. You can also opt to explore Fort Teremba, Le Parc des Grandes Fougères and Anse Vata. Catch a boat to L'Île-des-Pins, a turquoise atoll filled with verdant conifer trees – you can swim in a unique natural aquarium there.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Australian Dollars are accepted in some places, but it's best to use the CFP Franc.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to April for hot weather, May to September for cooler weather.

TIME ZONE

UTC+11

USEFUL SITES

newcaledonia.travel/en
visitnewcaledonia.com
wikitravel.org/en/New_Caledonia

HOW TO GET THERE

It's a two-hour flight from Brisbane and Fiji, or three from Auckland. You can also now fly in from Japan.



"Culturally, the tropical island feels very French"



The Bridal Veil Falls are situated within a scenic reserve on the North Island



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Nearby Mount Karioi, a 2.4-million-year-old extinct volcano, offers stunning views over the Tasman Sea from its summit.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Autumn (March to May) is much quieter, and a fantastic time to enjoy the changes in colour.

TIME ZONE

UTC+13

USEFUL SITES

waikatonz.com

inawe.nz

raglan.net.nz



HOW TO GET THERE

The Waikato region is a two-hour drive from Auckland International Airport.

NEW ZEALAND

BRIDAL VEIL FALLS

ACCORDING TO LOCAL LEGEND, WAIREINGA'S WATERFALL TRULY IS MAGIC

Just off the Te Mata road, a stunning sight awaits you: plunging falls accessible from a track cutting through the surrounding woodland. This peaceful spot is a mere 15-minute drive or ten-minute walk through bush from the nearest town of Raglan, and is one of the most popular hiking and walking tracks in the area, as it is suitable for all abilities and offers multiple viewpoints along its boarded paths.

Some of the many attractions to New Zealand are its scenery and natural wonders. There are said to be more than 1,500 waterfalls spread between the two islands, although some are transient and appear only after heavy rain. Not so Bridal Veil; close to the Pakoka River, this fall roars on throughout the year, captivating visitors with its beauty and power.

Bridal Veil Falls is located in the Waikato region of New Zealand's North Island within the Waireinga Scenic Reserve, which was created in

the late 1800s to preserve the flora and fauna. A permanent feature on the landscape for more than two million years, these falls are popular with visitors and locals alike. Maori tradition claims that the area is protected by fairies, and in their language, the name Waireinga means 'water of the underworld'.

Standing at the top of the fall, you can see where the water plummets off the basalt rock lip and cascades down into a pool of sandstone, which has formed over many years. The water spray from the falls creates a perfect environment for native plants, including mosses and ferns, but also spider orchids, which grow in the rocks and trees. Due to the threatened status of these alluring flowers, rock climbing

and swimming are banned (unless you're one of the local fairies of course).

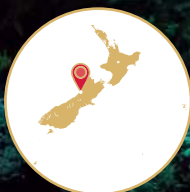
The pool is surrounded by a forest of tawa trees. A broadleaf tree common across central parts of the country, the trunk of a tawa tree can span over 1.2 metres (four feet) in diameter and reach up to 30 metres (98 feet) in height, providing a sheltered canopy around these magic falls. You can walk to the base of the falls on a well-maintained path through lush vegetation, and the 261 steps provide you with a good workout on the way back up.

With the cooling spray from the waterfall and the lightly scented winds blowing around you, Bridal Veil Falls truly is a breath of fresh air.

"A permanent feature for more than two million years, these falls are popular with visitors and locals alike"



"No visit would be complete without seeing the mesmerising Hokitika Gorge"



NEW ZEALAND

HOKITIKA

FROM ART TO ADVENTURE AND GORGES TO GLOW WORMS, THIS FUNKY TOWN HAS IT ALL

Hokitika is known locally as the 'Cool Little Town', and with its centre situated next to the beach you can see why. Located in New Zealand's South Island, it was first settled in 1864 after gold was discovered on the West Coast. It soon became an important river port, but many ships found themselves stranded on Hokitika bar, a notorious, ever-shifting sandbar.

Entering the sea just north of Hokitika is the Arahura River, a great source of pounamu, or New Zealand jade, the green stone that can be found in many local art galleries. Scour the driftwood-strewn beach for some of your own!

There's heaps to do in this petite town, from walking to scenic drives, mountain biking, rafting, kayaking, boating and even golf. Hokitika offers easy access to many outdoor activities, and with two lakes, a river, a beach and mountains, there are plenty of options for every visitor.

Perhaps the most breathtaking of Hokitika's many natural features, Hokitika Gorge is just over 20 miles (33km) outside of Hokitika, but no visit would be complete without seeing this mesmerising ravine. As you walk along the track through bushland and over the suspension bridge, you're greeted with the incredible turquoise waters of the Hokitika river, rushing through the gorge. The waters get their colour from eroded

mineral-rich schist rock and sandstone, which remains suspended in the water as it flows down from the mountains. If you'd like to see another unusual natural phenomenon, stop into the Glow Worm Dell just off the main road – after the sun sets, a glow worm colony transforms a dark patch of woodland into a magical fairy paradise with their turquoise luminescence.

Lake Kaniere is another must for your itinerary. One of the most serene and beautiful lakes in the country, a swim here is a fantastic way to spend an afternoon. Afterwards, trek to the picturesque Dorothy Falls, which are just a few minutes away via a track through the bush.

After a day spent absorbing the scenery you can hit the town, where an inspired culture and arts scene offers a wealth of creative spectacles. Pounamu and bone carvers, painters, glass blowers, sculptors, and wood, metal, stone and textile artists all come to ply their trade in Hokitika. When you've finished watching these artists at work, why not wander the town's impressive galleries and studios?

In the centre of Hokitika you'll find the National Kiwi Centre. Here you have the opportunity to see the country's endangered national icon, the Kiwi bird. The Centre offers information about the country's native species and many conservation projects, and is also

home to the Tuatara, a Jurassic Age reptile endemic to New Zealand.

When it comes to hitting the hay at the end of a long day, there are a range of places to stay, catering to backpackers and luxury lovers alike.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Visiting mid-March? Try huhu beetle grubs at the Hokitika Wildfoods Festival!

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to March

TIME ZONE

UTC+12

USEFUL SITES

hokitika.org
theroadtrip.co.nz/visit/top-10-things-hokitika
accommodationwestcoast.co.nz

HOW TO GET THERE

You can fly to Hokitika from Christchurch via Air New Zealand. Alternatively, the TranzAlpine from Christchurch is one of the best train journeys in the world.





A view from atop the sandstone cliffs above Tunnel Beach



NEW ZEALAND

DUNEDIN

EXPLORE A UNIQUE KIWI CITY WITH A STRONG SCOTTISH HERITAGE

Set in and around what was once a volcanic crater, Dunedin might be small, but it's packed with fascinating things to see and do. It is surrounded by native bush land and dramatic hills that overlook the Pacific Ocean, and boasts a charming harbour.

Built on the riches of the gold rush, Dunedin displays some of the very best Victorian and Edwardian architecture in the Southern Hemisphere. As you weave your way through the city, you will appreciate the beautiful gardens, gothic church spires and ornate buildings. Dunedin is also the home of New Zealand's only castle, and the steepest street in the world. At 350 metres (1,148 feet) long, with a slope of around 19 degrees, a walk up Baldwin Street is certainly not for the faint

hearted! It's a fantastic experience, though, that shouldn't be missed.

A cultural city, Dunedin – known as the Edinburgh of New Zealand – wears its Scottish heritage with pride; even its name is derived from the Scottish Gaelic for Edinburgh, Dùn Èideann. The city also has historic ties with China, links that manifest in the Chinese Gardens designed in the traditional Kuan Lin style. These dazzling botanical gardens are home to a vast array of plants and flowers, with a plethora of rhododendrons bursting into life in springtime.

Dunedin and its surrounding area is a haven for some incredible wildlife, including both the world's rarest penguin – the yellow-eyed penguin – and the feisty New Zealand sea lion.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

This quirky city boasts some outstanding street art with particularly good murals in the Downtown area.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to February

TIME ZONE

UTC+13

USEFUL SITES

dunedinnz.com

dunedinbotanicgarden.co.nz

larnachcastle.co.nz



HOW TO GET THERE

You can take a connecting flight to Dunedin from Auckland International Airport, but for a more scenic route, travel to Dunedin by train.

"Dunedin and its surrounding area is a haven for some incredible wildlife"



“Tour the islets on board a craft operated by the current landowners”

FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA

NAN MADOL

UNCOVER A LITTLE-KNOWN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ENIGMA IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PACIFIC

It's easy to see how Nan Madol has remained a hidden gem, unknown to all except the most intrepid of travellers.

Basking on Pohnpei in the South Pacific, visitors to Nan Madol will find themselves on a picturesque island-hopping flight to what is now part of the Federated States of Micronesia, but was ruled by the Saudeleur dynasty from the 12th to the 17th centuries.

It was during the time of the Saudeleurs that the enigmatic city on a coral reef was constructed. Thought to be a base in which feuding tribal chieftains were forced to live to keep an eye on them, Nan Madol was a complex of nearly 100 man-made islets spread over 200 acres. The canals that separate the islands have given rise to Nan Madol being described as the Venice of the Pacific. Countless legends have arisen, each attempting to explain how Nan Madol's columns of black basalt up to six metres (20 feet) long were quarried, transported and erected to build walls and elevated platforms.

Most of the islets were residential, but there were specific islets for industrial and religious activities. With no source of fresh water or ability to grow food, all supplies had to be transported by boat, and it was quite an endeavour to feed the population of 1,000 when barely 25,000 lived on the entire island of Pohnpei. Boats are the best way for modern visitors to access Nan Madol, too. It's possible to tour the islets on board a craft operated by the current landowners; the boat ferries tourists around the city wall to the stunning Nandauwas temple and royal mortuary with its seven-metre (23-foot) high walls, then beyond to the houses of the priests, servants and soldiers who called Nan Madol home. At low tide, it's possible to wade through the water to the islands, although be prepared for the water to still reach your waist.

Jungle and swamp may have retaken Nan Madol when it was abandoned after Saudeleurs were deposed in 1628, but nature's reclamation adds to its air of mystery. If you make the long journey, you'll likely have the place to yourself.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Keep a stash of small notes since you'll need to pay separately for parking, and twice to access the archaeological site.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

All year round due to stable weather.

TIME ZONE

UTC+11

USEFUL SITES

nan-madol.com
whc.unesco.org/en/list/1503
nps.gov/places/nan-madol.htm



HOW TO GET THERE

An island-hopping plane from Guam or Palau stops several times before Pohnpei. Nan Madol is an hour's drive on paved roads from the island's capital, Kolonia.

A scenic view of a mountain range with a prominent plateau and a winding river valley, overlaid with a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson. The image shows a vast landscape with a large, flat-topped mountain in the foreground, surrounded by lush green forests. In the background, a river winds through a deep valley, and more mountain ranges are visible under a clear blue sky. The quote is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters, centered in the upper half of the image.

**"DO NOT GO WHERE THE PATH
MAY LEAD, GO INSTEAD WHERE
THERE IS NO PATH AND
LEAVE A TRAIL."**

Ralph Waldo Emerson



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