

WHITTLESEY TRAVEL  
Independent Travel Specialists

# The Explorer

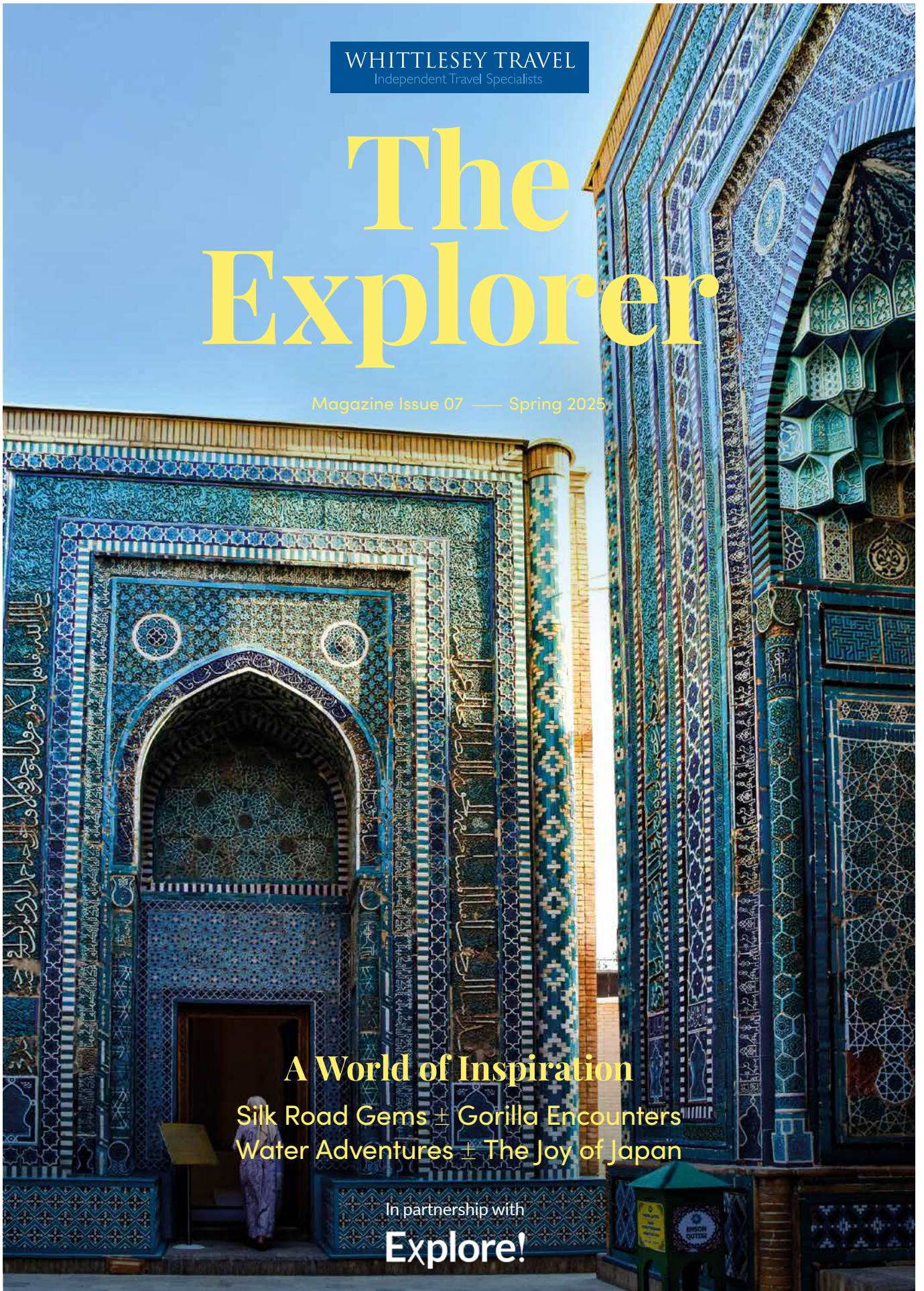
Magazine Issue 07 — Spring 2025

## A World of Inspiration

Silk Road Gems ± Gorilla Encounters  
Water Adventures ± The Joy of Japan

In partnership with

**Explore!**



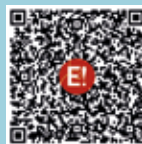


Explore!



# Ice to meet you

Majestic icebergs, curious wildlife, and awe-inspiring vistas – the Antarctic Peninsula may be remote, but it delivers a frozen feast for the senses. Embark on a polar voyage, cruising through icy waters to uncover this otherworldly wilderness. From watching playful penguins to spotting breaching whales, navigating towering glaciers to setting foot on the White Continent – an unforgettable adventure awaits!



# Hello

Welcome to the seventh issue of *The Explorer*, in which we delve into some of the enticing travel experiences that await us all this year.

Tales from the Silk Road have captured our minds and our hearts in recent months with the British Museum exhibition shining an international spotlight on this fascinating region. Caroline Eden's evocative piece on Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan really brings these countries to life on pages 10–13.

If you're inspired by this sense of journey and discovery, just check out Elise Wortley's account of following in Henriette d'Angeville footsteps on the ascent of Mont Blanc, even recreating her Victorian expedition clothing. Prepare to be awed.

Also coming up in this issue are the wonders of Japan, from bullet trains to the importance of etiquette, coming face to face with Ugandan mountain gorillas, and how we'll be travelling this year, from radical sabbaticals to astro tourism.

Sign me up!



**Michael Edwards**  
Managing Director,  
Explore Worldwide

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An aerial photograph of a wide river meandering through a vast, green landscape. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a golden glow and long shadows. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds, some of which are illuminated by the setting sun. The river's surface reflects the light, and the surrounding vegetation is dense and vibrant green.

# WATER WORLD

There are scientific reasons that we're so drawn to lakes, rivers, and oceans. It turns out being near water really does make us happier, so it's no wonder as travellers we seek the waterways. Here are just some of the incredible ways Explore adventures connect us to Mother Nature's blues.



**T**here's something truly magical about holidays on the water. Whether you're gliding along tranquil canals, cruising open seas, or paddling along coastlines, the world takes on a different perspective from the water. It's a chance to slow down and embrace a rhythm shaped by the waves.

On a water-based getaway, each moment feels connected to nature. A simple sunrise, an encounter with marine wildlife and the sound of the water against the hull of your ship – all become unforgettable highlights. The water itself becomes part of the adventure, whether you're swimming, diving, or simply lounging on deck.

BOTSWANA

## Explore the Okavango Delta on a houseboat

Travelling on the Okavango River is a memorable journey through one of Africa's most unique and untouched landscapes. Meandering along waterways, you'll be immersed in this UNESCO World Heritage Site, surrounded by lush vegetation, winding channels, and an incredible amount of wildlife. On the houseboat you'll get a front-row seat to observe hippos, crocodiles and a range of birdlife in their natural habitat, all while drifting peacefully through the Delta's tranquil waters.

[explore.co.uk/BW](https://www.explore.co.uk/BW)

Did you know that the Okavango is one of few interior delta systems that do not flow into a sea or ocean, with a wetland network that is almost intact





GREECE

## Sail the Greek Islands

**A** unique cruise is a relaxed, authentic way to discover the beautiful Greek islands. These traditional wooden boats, once used by fishermen, are perfect for drifting through crystal-clear waters and you'll reach quiet coves, hidden beaches, and local villages that bigger boats can't access. As you cruise, you'll take in the stunning sights that inspired ancient Greek myths, hop into the water for a leisurely swim or snorkel, and feast on delicious food.

[explore.co.uk/GC](https://explore.co.uk/GC)



**Top**  
Anchoring at Evia – Greece's second biggest island

**Above**  
Thanos has been captaining and tour leading for us for over 35 years!



BRAZIL

## Journey up the Amazon River

**T**aking a boat up the Amazon River you'll witness the incredible biodiversity that thrives in this unique ecosystem. The boat allows you to access remote villages, floating markets, and hidden trails that few others can reach, and, as a bonus, you'll also get to stargaze from the comfort of your hammock on deck at night.

[explore.co.uk/BAM](https://www.explore.co.uk/BAM)

Delve into the Brazilian part of the Amazon river





MALDIVES

## Relax on a dhoni cruise

**A** *dhoni*, the traditional wooden boat used for centuries by Maldivian fishermen, becomes your gateway to exploring the turquoise waters and pristine islands of this tropical paradise. As you sail across the Indian Ocean, you'll discover the Maldives' postcard-perfect landscapes on a tour that perfectly blends adventure and relaxation, whether you're watching a sunset, snorkelling with tropical fish, or simply chilling on deck.

[explore.co.uk/MC](https://explore.co.uk/MC)

The word *dhoni* derives from Sanskrit *dr̥oṇa*, meaning "wooden trough"



## GALAPAGOS

## Discover the Galapagos Islands by boat

Visiting the Galápagos by boat is a truly unique adventure, offering unparalleled access to the archipelago's extraordinary wildlife and volcanic landscapes. As you sail between the islands, you'll encounter the rare species that inspired Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, from giant tortoises to playful sea lions. Exploring by boat allows you to reach remote shores and hidden coves, where you can snorkel (and might be joined by a curious seal) or go on guided wildlife walks. The Galápagos' wild beauty has captivated explorers for years. A boat journey here feels like being part of a documentary where nature takes centre stage.

[explore.co.uk/GA7A](https://explore.co.uk/GA7A)

### Below

Visiting the Galapagos Islands by boat allows you to access places that few others do

### On the right

Meet one of the curious seals on a snorkelling trip







# ALONG THE OLD SILK ROADS

A JOURNEY THROUGH UZBEKISTAN  
AND KYRGYZSTAN





**Left**  
Rishtan is well known for its incredible ceramics

**Opposite**  
The road to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

## Join author **Caroline Eden** as she travels through old Silk Route gems in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Words — Caroline Eden

It is early autumn, harvest time in Uzbekistan, and I am sat in a café in the small city of Rishtan with master-ceramist Alisher Nazirov.

Over a plate of carved up melon, Nazirov tells me that there are two main centres of pottery and ceramics production in Uzbekistan: Rishtan, here in the Fergana Valley – a geographical knot shared by three countries, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – and Gijduvan, near the old Silk Road city of Bukhara. In Rishtan the work is usually turquoise, dark blue and brown on a cream background whereas in Gijduvan, ceramics tend to have a characteristic greenish-brown hue.

“Teapots and plates are decorated with pomegranate and flowers, and the legendary Huma bird, emblem of Uzbekistan. Every artist has their own style to draw this fantastical bird,” Nazirov said. There are many masters here but the true masters are few. “There are maybe six out of two-to-three hundred others. The tradition has now become a bit mixed up as so many try to do it.”

One of the best things about travelling in Central Asia is peeling back the region’s ancient history which collectively takes in Alexander the Great, powerful khanates, nomadic empires and, of course, the Silk Roads.

Rishtan is no exception. One of the oldest centres of ceramic art in all of Central Asia, its resident ceramicists follow an 800-year-old tradition, dating back to the era of the Silk Roads (stretching from roughly 200BC to AD1400).

With a dedicated worldwide following, I wasn’t entirely surprised to find out that Nazirov’s work is on display at the grand Khan’s Palace in the nearby city of Kokand, which is where I was headed next. Leaving by road, the taxi passed beautiful canopies of pink-ish and green grapes, arching and dangling over everyday life that went on below them.

One of the oldest cities in Uzbekistan, and a former trading hub on the Silk Roads, Kokand was once a powerful 19th-century khanate, along with Khiva and Bukhara, and its palace reflects that with its dazzling blue-tiled exterior. After wandering through a network of rooms – there are 113 in total though not all are accessible – rich with murals, carpets and painted ceilings, and admiring pomegranate trees in the courtyard, I bought some Kokand halva, a fudge-like sweet dotted with nuts and dried fruit. Each one was a morsel of edible art. Halva is an ideal Silk Road snack and therefore perfect for the onwards road trip to Osh, an ancient city in the heart of the Fergana Valley, across the border in Kyrgyzstan.

Driving in, the view is immediately dominated by the Throne of Solomon, a jagged pile-up of grey rock, shadowing pilgrims 150 metres below. At the top is a prayer-room that a teenaged Babur, founder of the Mughal dynasty, diarist and devoted lover of melons, had built for himself in 1497. It is one of the holiest sites in Central Asia because some say the Prophet Muhammed prayed here, while others believe that it was here biblical Solomon ruled from his throne. ➤



**“An aroma distracted us,  
one that a Silk Road traveller from  
the 14th-century would recognise:  
the toasty smell of ‘non’ bread –  
round, golden, chewy and ubiquitous  
throughout Central Asia –  
baking somewhere.”**

**Right**  
A lady selling  
Lepyoshka (Tandyr  
non) in Bishkek

**Below**  
Yurts have been  
used for centuries  
by Kyrgyz nomads.  
The circular dwelling  
structures are made  
from felt, insulated  
with sheepskins



The city of Osh sprawls about the Ak-Buura River which meanders right through the ancient market. At the bazaar, I drank green tea in an old rose-garlanded *chaikhana* or traditional teahouse. During the era of the Silk Roads, traders and travellers would arrive at such places to refresh themselves, and while quenching their thirst with chai, they'd deliver tales of conflicts, swap political opinions and gossip. Tea is never rushed in Central Asia and there are various spice route teas to taste. Black tea infused with cumin or green tea rich with saffron, are both worth a try.

Leaving the Fergana Valley behind, I went on to Issyk-Kul, the world's second largest alpine lake after Titicaca in Bolivia. This is Central Asia's mountain-ringed 'beach' where, in the warmer months, Kazakhs, Russians and Kyrgyz go to sunbathe and swim. A branch of the Silk Roads once ran from the lake, across the border to Kashgar in Xinjiang, China, homeland of the Muslim Uyghurs.

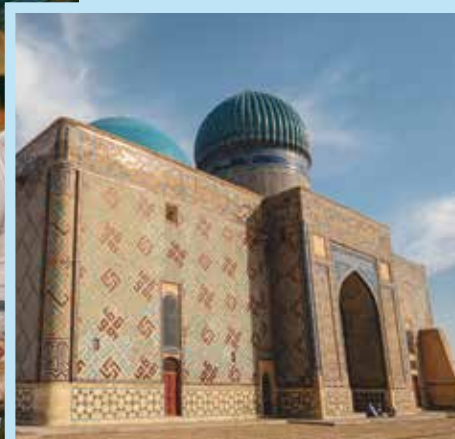
The water though was freezing, goosebump-inducing, and as the cold water hit my chest I tried to recall the local lore that states this inland sea is warm as it reaches down to the Earth's molten core. On an earlier trip, I had stretched my beach towel by the lapping waves next to a woman who told me that she had never tasted fresh peaches before coming here. "In Siberia we only have cans, they are nothing like these fresh ones." Fruit in Kyrgyzstan is indeed delicious. Enjoying lakeside life here is nothing new. Rumour has it that in the 14th-century, the ruthless conqueror, Tamerlane – who now rests in Samarkand's Gur-e-Amir – had a castle overlooking Issyk-Kul.







**Left**  
An outdoor market in Bishkek



**Below**  
Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan both let you discover incredible architecture, such as this Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Turkestan

From the lake it is an easy drive to Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Gone are the dusty camel caravans of the old Silk Roads but bazaars such as Dordoi, a sprawling market covering the equivalent of 160 rugby fields and forged entirely from shipping containers, is very much an example of modern Silk Road trade with goods for sale from China, Russia and the Caucasus. A giant commercial labyrinth of shoes, honey, car parts, you name it. My local friend Jalil Mukanbetov calls it “the Dordoi Republic”. As he led me past thousands of these steel boxes, an aroma distracted us, one that a Silk Road traveller from the 14th-century would recognise: the toasty smell of ‘non’ bread – round, golden, chewy and ubiquitous throughout Central Asia – baking somewhere.

Bread baking is a time-honoured process and it is famously hard to imitate. Back across the border in Uzbekistan, in the capital Tashkent, the Soviets tried to mechanise bread production in the 1970s, but people spurned the state-made bread for their beloved tandoor ovens. Right across Central Asia these golden discs of bread are served at every meal still today, along with steaming cups of chai. ■

➤ Would you like to follow in Caroline’s footsteps? Join our Silk Road Journey through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan on [explore.co.uk/KR](http://explore.co.uk/KR)



**Caroline Eden** is the author of several books on Central Asia including Samarkand, Red Sands and her latest, Cold Kitchen.

[www.carolineeden.com](http://www.carolineeden.com)



## NEW – The three Stans of the Silk Road

Embark on a two-week journey through three of the most popular Stans on this brand-new tour. Explore the stunning gorges and remote villages of Kyrgyzstan, admire the blue and aquamarine mosaic-covered madrassas and mausoleums of Uzbekistan, and visit quirky Turkestan city, Kazakhstan’s best kept secret. An unforgettable journey that will take you through the highlights of the Silk Road.

[explore.co.uk/KKU](http://explore.co.uk/KKU)





# “IGNORE THE DEMONS THAT SAY ‘YOU CAN’T.’

Meet **Elise ‘Lise’ Wortley**, an adventurer unlike any other. She tells her extraordinary story to Explore.



YOU CAN!"

**F**or over seven years, founder of 'Woman with Altitude' Lise Wortley has been following in the footsteps of history's forgotten female explorers, bringing their stories back to life and inspiring a new generation. She treks the same path and even recreates their clothing to help her truly understand life travelling as a woman more than 100 years ago. No modern-day tech. No specialist kit. No home comforts. She has hiked thorough Iran in a vintage Burberry mac and trekked through the Himalayas with a wooden backpack. Her latest expedition? Climbing Mont Blanc in a bonnet and bloomers. We caught up with Lise, fresh from her adventure in the Alps.

**Your travel goals are not for the faint-hearted. How did all this start?**

When I was 16, I read a book about a female adventurer called Alexandra David-Néel, who, in 1942, made a 14-year trek, against the odds, through Asia to the forbidden city of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Her story never left me.

By the age of 20, I'd moved to London and was experiencing panic attacks and anxiety which meant getting out for a walk in the park was my biggest challenge. That time taught me that setting a goal for yourself looks different for everyone. You don't have to trek across the world or climb the highest mountain to feel a sense of achievement.

I still had Alexandra's story in the back of my mind years later. When I was feeling stronger, I had this mad idea to recreate a part of her journey in Asia, as closely as she would have done it. So, I did. It was my first expedition, and a life-changing one. My all-female team had been near impossible to pull together, with only one female guide to be found in the area. History was repeating itself and I returned home inspired to bring back to life more stories of female explorers in history and celebrate the incredible women in this field who continue to be underrepresented. Even today, only 2% of European mountain guides are women.

**Whose footsteps have you followed so far?**

After travelling to Asia on behalf of Alexandra, my next adventure was to the Cairngorm Mountains in Scotland, to follow in the footsteps of hill climber Nan Shepherd, one of the UK's best known nature writers in the 1940s. My third trek was to Iran and the Valley of the Assassins in honour of Freya Stark, the British explorer who was one of the first non-Arabs to travel throughout the southern Arabian Desert. I returned to Scotland to climb Ben Nevis in the style of mountaineer Jane Inglis-Clarke, who in 1906 was refused entry into a climbing club, so started up her own – and it's still going strong today! And I'm just back from the French Alps, my fifth expedition, to honour Henriette d'Angeville, who conquered Mont Blanc in 1838. ▶





### What was it about Henriette d'Angeville that inspired you?

Henriette was the first woman to climb Mont Blanc unaided in September 1838 (her male guides carried her supplies; they didn't carry her). Reading her biography, it was clear she had a massive personality and was so funny. She was 44, had a huge love of the mountains, an unwavering determination, and she proved her doubters wrong. She made a statement that women could demonstrate courage and strength in extreme circumstances.

Her clothes played an important role in terms of practicality and functionality. In her climbing journal she detailed exactly what she wore to climb, which helped me recreate an accurate outfit. The main driver behind my trips has always been to make sure these extraordinary women are fairly represented, but the research into the way they dressed has become a real passion for me too.

### Was Mont Blanc the experience you had planned for?

I'd never climbed a mountain like Mont Blanc before with no other reason than to reach the summit. I'd joined a gym (I'd experienced my first panic attack in a gym some years back so the fact I'd given it another go and began to enjoy the training is another reason I do these brilliant projects – they push me out of my comfort zone and show me I can do new stuff!) but I was still daunted by my lack of experience.

My outfit research really paid off, and I had the help of some amazing people. My bonnet was a work of art – made by a proper milliner who'd been responsible for the hats in the new *Wicked* movie! My all-female team of three (mountain guide Karen, filmmaker Grace, and myself) had bonded well from the start, and planned to take it steady – over four to five days.

## “I vow to show what the will of a woman can do!”

Alexandra David-Neel

We were the only women in the huts we stayed in on our route. Karen was the only female guide at a kick-off meeting around a table of male guides, but by the end of the meeting, she was holding court, and had them eating out of her hand, listening to her every word, with her knowledge and her experience – bloody brilliant!

I felt close to Henriette in many ways. At the time of her climb, a woman wearing trousers was unconventional, and she would have had quite a reception from the crowds at Chamonix. I had an equally bemused reception from the people I met on the way, dressed in my wool layers, bloomers and bonnet! The bonnet, as beautiful as it was, did make life difficult. It was hot to wear, the huge cap made looking down hard, and the wind would catch the brim and pull me back. My feet were on fire, and post-trek they were in bits – they always are, but with so much walking I'd have been in pain wearing specialist walking boots too. And my body? It always feels good! Putting it through its paces is a great feeling!



It was the weather we weren't so prepared for. We specifically set out to climb at the same time of year that Henriette climbed, but climate change has clearly had an impact on conditions. It was hotter than we expected – and the glacier was melting. It meant the climb was rockier, and I wasn't dressed for this! Back in 1838, Henriette's shoes would have given better grip on the snow, and it would have made for an easier climb. The day before we set out there had been a fatality, and two days after there were four more. The mountains weren't making it easy. Parts of our route proved inaccessible. And then a storm ended our chances just as we tackled the last rocky section of ascent, after four hours of climbing on slippery granite. We reached the summit in a cloud of mist, unable to see our surroundings, but it was ok. Maybe none of this was about getting to the top to admire the views.

My highs? For many hours it is simply about putting one foot in front of another, but as the one who is always in front, I saw some great sunrises over Chamonix. I felt grateful to be part of nature before it changes. The more I immerse myself in nature, without the distraction of screens, phones, people, the more I'm addicted to it. It's tough and crazy but it gives your brain a break, you switch off, you do the hard stuff and it's the best feeling because you can.

#### What advice would you give your 16-year-old self?

Ignore the demons saying, 'you can't!'. Keep thinking of things you want to do. You can start small, and push yourself in gentle ways, but just believe that you can do it. Because there will be a way you can. And let these women explorers have their well-earned space in history. They existed then and they exist today. I think we can all be explorers in our own way.

#### Who's next?

I have a list of more than 150 women, so I've only just begun! Firstly, we will go back to climb Mont Blanc in June, and this time will take the authentic route that Henriette took, without the weather risks. Then I have my sights set on Annie Londonderry, the first woman to cycle round the world in 1874. And 'Pirate Queen' Grace O'Malley who sailed a boat from the West Coast of Ireland to Greenwich to meet Queen Elizabeth in 1593. That's just for starters... ■



**‘To aim for the highest point is not the only way to climb a mountain.’**

Nan Shepherd



## Challenge yourself!

Looking for an adventure to get your heart pumping and your senses tingling? We've got endless exciting journeys for you to embark on.

#### A cycling challenge in Morocco

Swap your morning bike commute or leisurely weekend cycle for a two-wheeled adventure you won't forget. Pedal through the remote Hamada Desert of the Sahara and take on the exhilarating High Atlas descent through Berber heartland. We dare you!

[explore.co.uk/CSO](https://explore.co.uk/CSO)

#### A wildlife challenge in Kenya

No more excuses—it's time to experience the thrill of Kenya's iconic Big Five. From majestic lions to towering elephants, you might spot them all in their natural habitat on a safari adventure of a lifetime.

[explore.co.uk/KQ](https://explore.co.uk/KQ)

#### A walking challenge in Spain

Ready to take on an expedition that feeds the soul and challenges the body? Make next year the year you walk the legendary Camino de Santiago in Spain. Trace centuries-old pilgrim paths, immerse yourself in breathtaking landscapes, and discover the magic of the journey. Whether for reflection, connection, or pure adventure, this is your sign to lace up and go.

[explore.co.uk/CDS](https://explore.co.uk/CDS)

#### A food challenge in Japan

Your tastebuds deserve an adventure too – and Japan is the perfect place to send them. Travel by bullet train through this land of contrasting flavours, from the quirky cafés of the capital to bustling fish markets and cosy ramen joints. Go beyond the familiar to uncover Japan's authentic tastes, savouring everything from street food carts to *izakaya* dinners. Don't miss local delights like *Kushikatsu* and *Takoyaki* – pure joy on a plate.

[explore.co.uk/XJF](https://explore.co.uk/XJF)

#### A self-care challenge in Costa Rica

Adventure and indulgence can go hand in hand, and Costa Rica is the perfect destination to experience both. Explore lush rainforests, spot vibrant wildlife, and embrace the thrill of discovery. Then, unwind like royalty in a luxurious eco-friendly hotel, where sustainability meets serenity. Let nature recharge your soul while you savour well-earned comfort.

[explore.co.uk/DCW](https://explore.co.uk/DCW)



Let us tell you a bit about what we've been up to in recent months.

# Chapter by Chapter

## Must-reads for your next adventure

We've gathered some of your top suggestions from the Four Corners Book Club into this fantastic collection of must-reads. Curated by our travel-loving and book-loving community, these recommendations just might inspire your next great escape—whether it's through pages or places!

# Our World

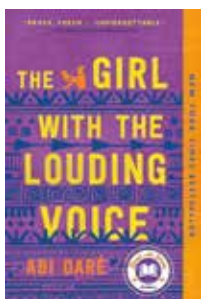


NORWAY

### **The Arctic Curry Club** by Dani Redd

Not only was the story so enjoyable, but the difficulties of living in a harsh environment like Svalbard came shining through. I learnt so much about a little visited place.

*Recommended by Erica*



NIGERIA

### **The Girl with the Louding Voice** by Abi Daré

A remarkable and captivating story of Adunni, a girl from a small Nigerian village whose character and resilience shine through in her struggle to realise her dream of being heard. This book resonated with my passion to enable and empower women and girls in developing countries to have a voice and be released into their full potential.

*Recommended by Janet*



ALBANIA

### **The File on H.** by Ismail Kadare

This tells you a lot about attitudes in Albania in recent history. It's also very funny.

*Recommended by Trish*



JAPAN

### **The Phone Box at the Edge of the World** by Laura Imai Messina

This is a book that I found absolutely amazing in its description of the area in which it is set. (...) And even more so and importantly, it has made the desire to go to Japan and find this phone box high up on my wish list. It was so descriptive, emotional, poignant... a WONDERFUL WONDERFUL book - I could read it again and would certainly recommend it to others.

*Recommended by Mary*

Are you looking for some more reading inspiration or have a recommendation of your own? Check out the Four Corners Book Club! [explore.co.uk/bookclub](https://explore.co.uk/bookclub)



# Africa is calling!



The African continent is a truly captivating place to visit, with its range of cultures, wildlife, and incredible landscapes. Our Africa product team has been busy over the last couple of months, and we're excited to let you know about three new additions to the Explore collection.

## BEST OF GHANA

Located between Togo and Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Ghana is one of West Africa's most culturally diverse and colourful destinations and is famous for its warmth and hospitality.

Travelling to Ghana will see you connect with local communities, seek out rich wildlife and learn about the country's incredible culture (we also offer two special Akwasidae festival departures).

[explore.co.uk/GN](https://explore.co.uk/GN)



## UPGRADED – HIGHLIGHTS OF KENYA

Our tried and tested itinerary in this East African gem encompasses the world-famous Maasai Mara, Lake Nakuru National Park renowned for its herds of rhino.

Kenya is an absolute must for wildlife enthusiasts and with our new Upgraded tour you can track the Big Five during the day before sleeping like a king or queen in our premium accommodation.

[explore.co.uk/DKQ](https://explore.co.uk/DKQ)

## UPGRADED – NAMIBIA LODGE SAFARI

New for 2025, Upgraded Namibia Lodge Safari showcases the wonders of Namibia, from the awe-inspiring dunes of Sossusvlei to the abundance of wildlife in Etosha National Park, while staying in premium lodges throughout for that extra bit of comfort after a long day of exploring.

[explore.co.uk/DNL](https://explore.co.uk/DNL)



## Recipe

# Kaisendon

This Japanese dish, with sliced sashimi on top of a bed of rice, comes recommended by our Asia Programme Manager, James Adkin. James is a big food lover who's been to Japan many times.

Makes three generous portions.

### Ingredients (serving 4)

100 g (3.5 oz.) sashimi / tuna  
100 g (3.5 oz.) salmon\*  
70 g (2.5 oz.) squid\*  
80 g (2.8 oz.) salmon roe\*\*  
300 g (10.6 oz.) cooked rice (warm)  
4 leaves shiso / perilla  
as desired kaiware / daikon radish sprouts  
as desired soy sauce  
as desired wasabi paste  
2 Tbsp rice vinegar  
1/2 Tbsp sugar  
2 tsp salt

\*sashimi-grade  
\*\*sushi-grade

### Instructions

**1.** Mix rice vinegar, sugar and salt into the still warm rice vertically in a cutting manner (to prevent mushiness) and use a hand held fan (*uchiwa* in Japanese) to fan and cool to prepare the sushi rice.

**2.** Slice the tuna and salmon into about 7mm (0.3 in.) thick pieces and julienne the squid.

**3.** Serve the ingredients from step 1 into rice bowls, top with the perilla leaves, add the ingredients from step 2 and the salmon roe. Garnish with the daikon radish sprouts and serve with a side of soy sauce and wasabi paste.

**“You can find the best Kaisendon on Hokkaido Island. Known for their incredible seafood, the locals have perfected this dish”**

James Adkin



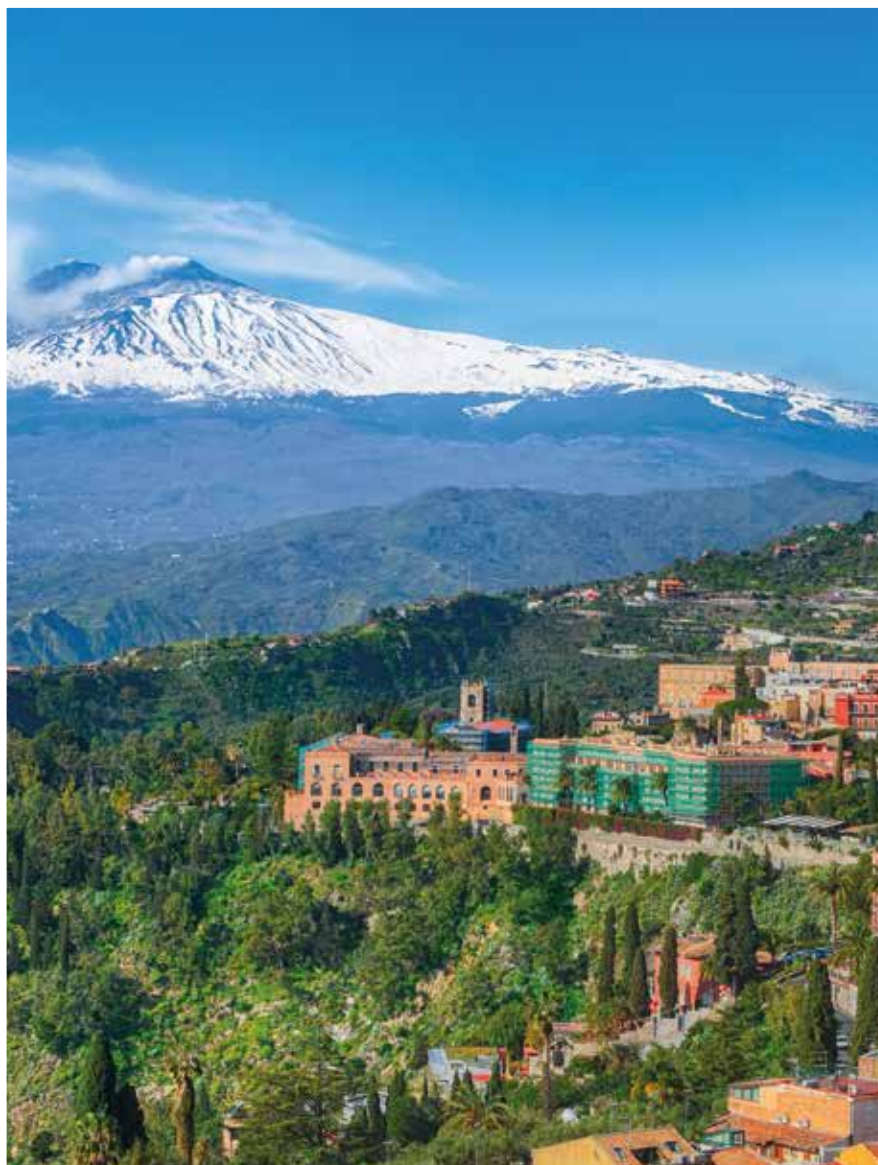


# WHAT'S cool NOT FOR 2025?

Our travel experts have delved into search data, booking patterns and customer insights to find out what the world of adventure travel looks like in the year ahead. From cool-cations to radical sabbaticals, astro tourism to literary-inspired holidays, we spill the beans on the latest trends.







**Far left**  
Go where the Icelandic horses roam. Iceland is one of the main destinations for cool-cations in 2025

**Left**  
Visit the setting of 'The White Lotus' in Taormina, Sicily

## 1 The rise of the cool-cation

With repeated record-breaking temperatures over the last three years, Google Trends has shown a 300% increase in searches for 'cooler holidays' in the last 12 months. Traditionally colder destinations – like Iceland, the Baltic States and Scandinavia – are selling fast, as well as polar expeditions, which are up 32% in the last six months.

Meanwhile, traditional summer destinations like Turkey, Greece and Croatia are temperate well into the winter months which offers new opportunities for off-season exploration.

## 2 Set-jetting

Another emerging travel trend for 2025 is 'set-jetting', with travellers excited to visit a destination because of a book, movie or TV series they've enjoyed. From *Paddington in Peru* and *Gladiator 2* to *White Lotus* (Series 3) to *Letters from Everest* by George Mallory and Tom Newton Dunn, recent and upcoming releases are sure to inspire future travel.

A NatRep survey carried out by Explore also found that 70% of us are also more likely to read while on holiday, while 72% have visited or considered visiting a place after reading a novel set there. >



### 3 The radical sabbatical

We're seeing more and more mid-lifers opting to take extended breaks from work in the middle of their careers to travel, instead of the more traditional pre- or post-university Gap Year travellers or post-retirement adventurers. With the average career now 40+ years, people are less inclined to wait four decades to take those big adventures.

Workplaces are increasingly offering sabbaticals and workations as perks, cementing the 'perfect storm' for the mid-life trips.

### 4 Astro Tourism

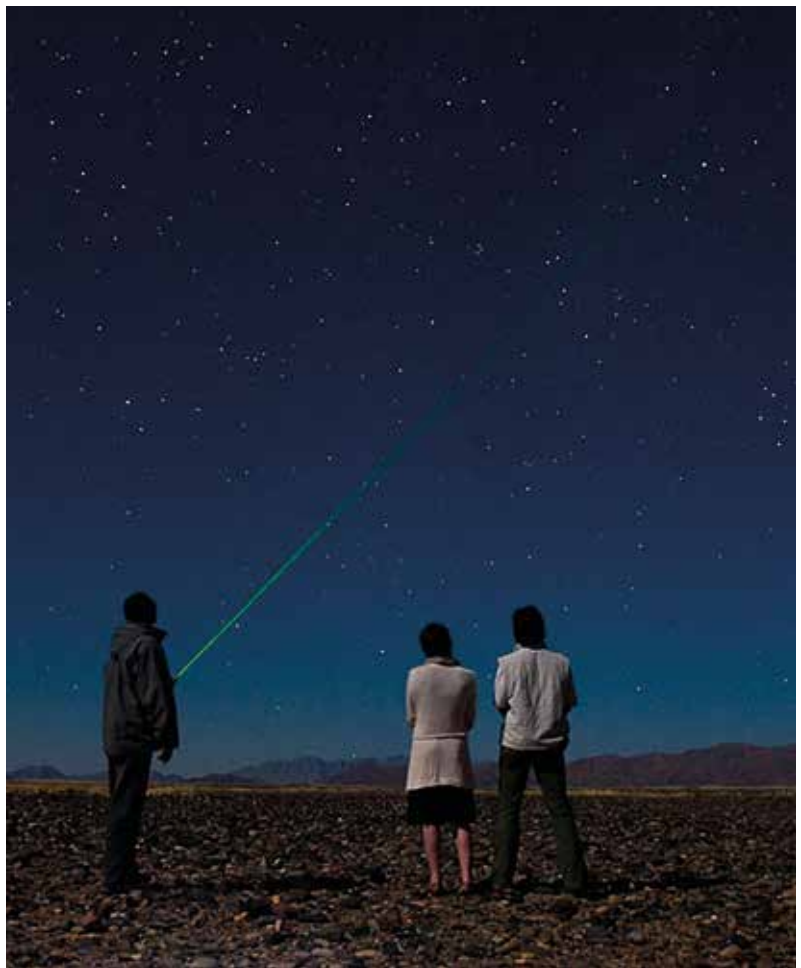
The unique opportunity (whether realised or missed) to see the Northern Lights in the UK last summer has sparked increased desire to witness this natural phenomenon. Iceland and Finnish Lapland are two destinations offering great chances to see the Aurora for yourself.

Elsewhere, stargazing moments continue to delight – with desert camps in Jordan and Oman and stargazing opportunities in Canada and Argentina among sought-after dark skies experiences for 2025.

Psst! Keep an eye out for upcoming new tours as we are in for some epic solar eclipses in 2026...

**Below**  
Step out of your comfort zone and try new food – like this traditional Cassoulet dish served at a restaurant in Toulouse, France

**Right**  
Mankind has always been fascinated with the bright lights in our night's sky



### 5 A change = a rest

We know that changing our routine can be as good as a rest, but in this world of busy schedules, 'always-on', overthinking brains and seemingly endless newsfeeds of doom, finding time to relax and reflect isn't always the tonic we hope for.

Instead, engaging in something completely removed from our day-to-day routine can enable us to break free of unhelpful thinking patterns and leave us feeling refreshed and reinvigorated. In 2025, find that joie-de-vivre by trying a new skill or activity. A food focussed holiday, or an activity-based trip make for a great change from the classic beach 'fly and flop'.

### 6 Elevated experiences

According to Vertical Leap, more travellers are searching for budget-luxury travel through 'elevated, impactful experiences'. It isn't where you are but what you experience while you're there. In case you're asking yourself what that could be? Well what about a scenic train ride from Lake Titicaca to Cusco (complete with a three-course lunch onboard) or try bird watching on the decks of a house boat on the Okavango River in Botswana?

**“We’re expecting Hallyu (‘the Korean Wave’) to reach new heights in 2025.”**

### Trending Destinations

Every year, there are new destinations that pop to the top of travellers must-see places to go. This year we’d place bets on the following:

#### South Korea

Wanderlust Magazine’s Destination of the Year for 2024, South Korea is really hitting the zeitgeist right now, and influencing everything from cuisine, K-dramas and K-pop sensations to world-renowned skincare. This is a country that is as much about buzzing modern culture and delicious food as it is about the ancient temples and stunning natural landscapes. We’re expecting Hallyu (‘the Korean Wave’) to reach new heights in 2025.

#### Albania

Explore’s bookings to Albania are up 68% in the last six months compared with the same period last year, with active tours to the country (walking and cycling itineraries) selling particularly strongly.

Explore’s Product Manager for Europe, Nadine Cullen, says: “Albania really has something for everyone. For a while it’s been dubbed ‘the new Croatia’ and it certainly has the scenery, coastlines and delicious food, but it has its own unique charm too – not to mention fewer crowds and lower prices!” We suggest you go in 2025 before everyone else does.

#### West Africa

West Africa saw a 42% growth this year with Explore’s tours in Senegal & the Gambia, the Ivory Coast and Benin & Togo all selling strongly. Benin and Senegal make up two of the five fastest-growing destinations of the last six months, up 68% and 52% respectively.

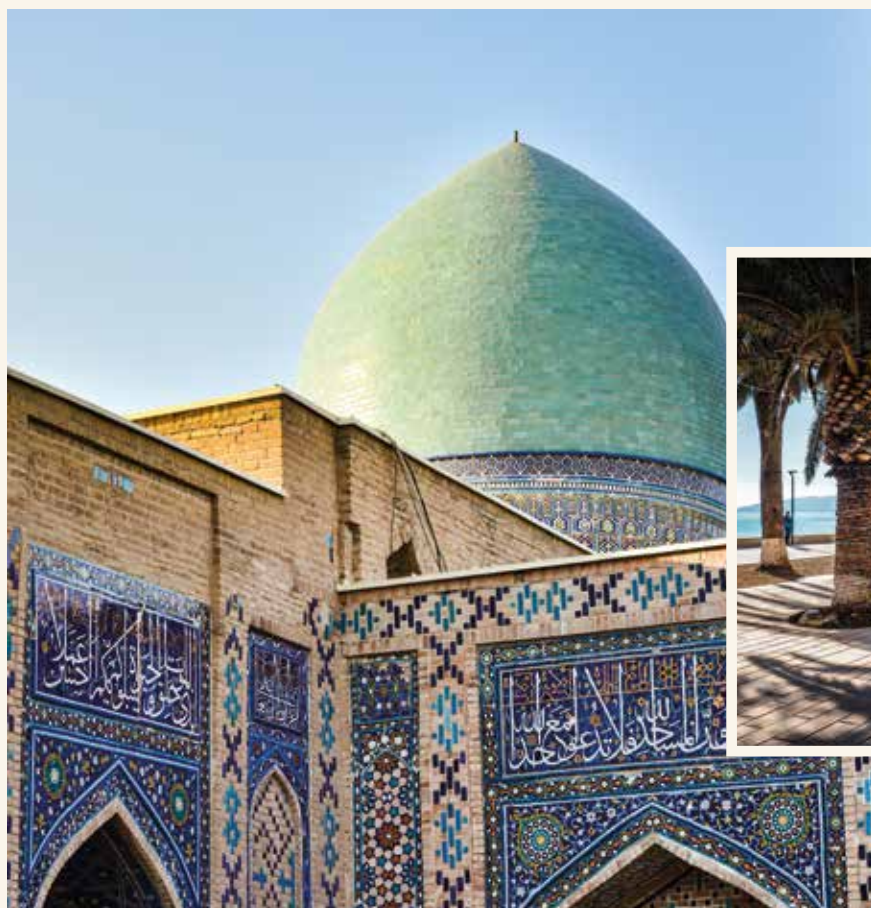
Explore’s Product Director, Rachael Stone, forecasts further growth for this fascinating region of Africa in 2025: “Ghana is a really captivating and underrated destination, so vibrant and rich in culture, and so warm and welcoming. There are very few operators currently selling Ghana, but it’s a country with huge potential.”

#### Central Asia

The British Museum’s blockbuster Silk Road exhibition (running until February 2025) inspired Explore’s biggest ever digital event in October 2024, with over 1,000 people attending from around the world.

“It’s clear that there’s a huge amount of interest in Central Asia and the Silk Road at the moment” says Explore’s Asia Programme Manager James Adkin. “This is a region that holds a lot of interest, culturally and historically, and it’s an area that really grabs hold of people – once you’ve visited a pocket of Central Asia you just want to go back and see more, and more.”

Bookings to Uzbekistan are up 52% on last year, while Georgia bookings have increased by 31% in the same period. ■



#### Left

Samarkand in Uzbekistan is an architectural gem that just waits to be discovered

#### Below

Soon on everyone’s wish list – Saranda in Albania





# THE JOY OF TRAVEL PLANNING

Recent studies have shown that anticipating a trip can make you as happy as the trip itself, and early bookers are on the up. Last-minute traveller **Lucy Dunn** wanted to know what all the fuss was about.

## 'I once turned up in Edinburgh on New Year's Eve only to discover there was no room at the Hogmanay Inn.'

**W**hen it comes to travel, I'd long been a fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants sort of girl. Whether it's the annual family summer holiday booked a few months before or a last minute, grab-your-passport kind of trip, I loved to wing it. I'm the same when it comes to the itinerary; I'd always do a quick Google before booking – ensure the hotel isn't next to a major motorway and check it's not monsoon season – but generally I was happy to arrive at a destination and grill the first taxi driver I met for their recommendations.

But these days I am finding I'm in the minority. Research has

shown that the Covid-cautious days of hedging our bets are over and instead of last-minute trips, travellers are now embracing the joy of plan-ahead holidays. Early bookers are on the up – where once most of us would wait for the new year to plan our annual summer break, we're now booking 12 months ahead or more.

It seems that planning holidays ahead is good for you. Studies have shown that spending time before a trip researching and looking forward to a holiday can boost your wellbeing – indeed, a 2020 survey by the Institute for Applied Positive Research found that 97% of respondents reported that having a trip planned makes them happier.

Okay, I'll admit an on-the-hoof holiday can backfire. I once turned up in Edinburgh on New Year's Eve only to discover there was no room at the Hogmanay Inn. I flew to Verbier with a friend on Christmas Eve for skiing thinking we could find a room when we arrived – not a cat in hell's chance, of course; in the end a hotel took pity on us and gave us a bed in their staff chalet for the night. I also have a terrible habit of arriving in places only to find they're closed for a public holiday.

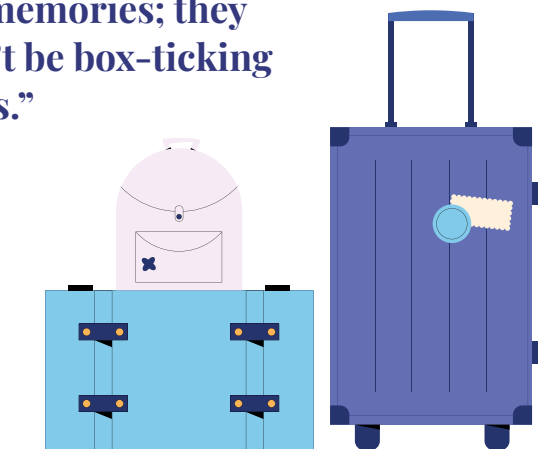
I know, I know, planning makes sense on paper. You can read books, travel guides, watch documentaries, read up on the delicacies to try. You can learn a few words of the lingo so you can speak to people, find your way around more easily and feel more savvy and in control. ▶







**“Holidays should create special memories; they shouldn’t be box-ticking exercises.”**



And you can really enjoy it in full technicolour: I have lost count of the number of times I’ve skidded round a city and not even scratched the surface of what I could have seen. There’s also the practical side: if you plan, you won’t make the same mistakes as me – like realising you should have hired a car but didn’t bring your driving licence, or turning up to a major art exhibition, where tickets needed to be booked months in advance. But whatever happened to spontaneity?

Of course, it had to be a Gen Z to put us lackadaisical Gen X-ers to shame and make me come to my senses about trip planning. This year my husband and I booked a two-week tour of Australia to see our son who was studying out there. Having just two short weeks to get around a massive country meant every day mattered and so my son’s girlfriend, who was tagging along, made a colour-coded itinerary a couple of months ahead and sent it round so we had plenty of time to really think about what we did and did not want to do.

While not everyone will have a 20-year-old student with oodles of time on their hands, there are ways to ensure the planning goes smoothly by using apps, or travel companies that will do most of the hard work for you. And I must admit, knowing what we were doing meant we could pack accurately and only took carry-on suitcases, making hopping on and off planes so much easier. (Normally I find it impossible to pack lightly for long haul, the distance makes me anxious and ‘comfort-pack’ – the last time I went to Australia I took a 28 kg suitcase and abandoned it four days into the trip.)

But most of all I must credit my best friend Paula and her partner Rob for making holidays special again. Two years ago, we made a spur-of-the-moment decision to go away for a weekend together and on the plane heading home decided we were going to make it a regular thing. After all, our kids had flown the nest, so we were now free agents...

A few weeks later Rob got diagnosed with cancer and our worlds came crashing down. Since then, there have been some pretty bleak times, and we weren’t sure what was

“This trip will be a special one – after all, all good things come to those that wait.”



## The best book-ahead trips to look forward to:

### **The Long One: Ross Sea Odyssey to Douglas Mawson in Antarctica, New Zealand**

A 25-day tour cruising the Antarctic Circle, navigating through pristine pack ice and observing sea lions, rare yellow-eyed penguins, Weddell and leopard seals, and more.

### **The Iconic one: India's Golden Triangle**

An 8-day tour that traces India's famous Golden Triangle of Northern India from Delhi to the Taj Mahal to the pink city, Jaipur. A truly bucket-list destination.

### **The Enriching One: Volcanoes and Galapagos**

A 15-day tour that follows the footsteps of Darwin, taking in the spectacular wildlife and fascinating cultural blend of mainland Ecuador before exploring the pristine paradise Isles of Galapagos.

### **The Different One: Japan Sapporo Snow Festival**

An 11-day trip that starts with an ice-breaker cruise in the Sea of Okhotsk before a visit to the magical snow sculptures at the annual Sapporo Snow Festival. The itinerary includes stop offs in both Tokyo and Kyoto.

### **The Adventurous One: Borneo Wildlife Highlights**

This 15-day trip through the jungles of Sabah features a visit to the famous Sepilok Orang-utan Sanctuary and a trek to a mud volcano in search for clouded leopard, pygmy elephant and gibbon.

### **The Memorable One: Upgraded Botswana Wildlife Safari**

A 12-day safari through Botswana and Zimbabwe staying at the finest hunting lodges and a chance to see the Big Five: lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and buffalo.



going to happen. Seeing such dear friends going through such turmoil was beyond awful, there were times they went 'dark', and we didn't see them for months. Our travel plans were relegated to the backburner... although they remained an unspoken dream, a goal.

So then, finally, we got the text we'd been praying for: "Prague next Spring?"

And that's where we are right now: Rob has the all-clear, a date has been set, plane tickets have been bought, and we're savouring every boozy dinner where we get together under the auspices of 'planning'.

Holidays should create special memories; they shouldn't be box-ticking exercises. In this connected age when you can be anywhere in the world at the click of a button, I realise I have been guilty of doing this. Our trip will be over two years in the planning, but I already know it will be a very special one – after all, good things really do come to those who wait. ■



**Lucy Dunn**

has been a lifestyle writer for many years, working for magazines and broadsheets including GRAZIA, The Telegraph, The Times and the Guardian. She is currently Content Director for BOAT International.







# LAND OF THE RISING SUN

Japan's ability to celebrate its history while pushing unapologetically forward into the future makes it one of the most fascinating places in the world. It's a country where ancient temples stand alongside neon-lit skyscrapers, where timeless meets cutting-edge. Whether you're soaking in its natural beauty, diving into its rich history, or embracing its modern culture, Japan is a place that sparks wonder like nowhere else.





**“A respect for balance and tradition is reflected in everyday Japanese life.”**

arrived, introducing firearms and Christianity, briefly opening Japan to outside influence. But by the 1630s, Japan had shut its doors under the Sakoku policy, isolating itself from the world for over 200 years.

This changed in 1854, when Japan was reopened to the West. The Meiji Restoration (1868) moved the Emperor to Tokyo and kickstarted rapid modernisation. Though the country faced challenges during its imperial expansion and World War II, post-war Japan rebounded to become an economic powerhouse and today it captivates travellers from all corners of the globe.

### **Culture and Architecture: Where Tradition Lives On**

Japan’s cultural roots run deep, influenced by Shinto and Buddhism, with shrines and temples serving as spiritual and architectural treasures. Landmarks like Kyoto’s Golden Pavilion (Kinkaku-ji) and the famous floating Torii Gate on Miyajima Island beautifully showcase Japan’s reverence for beauty and harmony.

This respect for balance and tradition is also reflected in everyday Japanese life, where values like modesty, politeness, and social harmony shape how people interact and live together. Japan’s dedication to excellence shines through in the concept of the *shokunin* spirit, which is deeply ingrained in Japanese society. It embodies a commitment to mastery, craftsmanship, and a profound connection to one’s work. At its core, it emphasizes continuous learning, innovation, and creativity. Japanese artisans take immense pride in perfecting their crafts over a lifetime, whether it’s pottery, tea ceremonies, or sushi-making.

Festivals, or *matsuri*, are vibrant celebrations often rooted in Shinto traditions and Japan’s history. From colourful parades to traditional dances, these events are a joyful spectacle of

**Page before**  
A lady in traditional Japanese clothes at the Fushimi Inari shrine in Kyoto

apan is an island nation in East Asia made up of over 6,000 islands, but only a handful are inhabited. The four largest—Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku—make up nearly all of Japan’s landmass, and are home to the iconic cities of Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto.

The landscape is dramatic, with towering mountains like Mt. Fuji, rugged coastlines, and very little flat land. This lack of farmable land, combined with a lack of natural resources, has driven Japan’s dependence on trade. Over the centuries, its geography has both isolated Japan and inspired its creativity, shaping its distinctive culture.

### **A Walk Through History**

Japan’s story is long and layered, starting with its unification in the 8th century during the Heian Period (794–1185). Centred in Kyoto, this era saw a blossoming of Japanese arts, literature, and music, establishing a unique cultural identity.

Next came the feudal era, lasting 700 years, when Japan was ruled by samurai warriors and powerful shoguns. One of the most dramatic periods, the Sengoku (Warring States) era, saw fierce battles and shifting alliances among clans. In the 1500s, Portuguese traders

## Before you go



### Read:

Japan Through The Looking Glass  
by Alan Macfarlane

### TV Series:

Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories  
on Netflix

### Podcast:

Hardcore History ep. 62–67  
Supernova in the East by Dan Carlin.  
Focuses on the Asia-Pacific War of 1937–1945, Japanese society and culture, and the historical origins of the war.

### Below

Shinjuku City is well known for its neon-lit clubs and karaoke rooms but we think this area of Tokyo is also worth a visit during the day

### Below right

When visiting Japan, a local ramen bar is a must-go

communal spirit. One particularly striking festival is the Fire Ceremony at the Fudo-do Temple. A fire is lit as monks chant ancient sutras, drums beat rhythmically, and conch shells sound. This traditional ritual aims to empower Fudo-myō, the wrathful Buddhist deity tasked with cutting a clear path toward awareness and understanding. An unforgettable experience for those lucky enough to witness it.

## Modern Culture

Modern Japan is a cultural powerhouse, shaping everything from manga and anime to pop fashion and contemporary art with its bold, creative energy.

Themed cafes, now popping up all over the world, started here. You can step into the world of ninjas, visit an Alice in Wonderland-inspired spot, or even check out a train-themed cafe where maids serve you the latest bubble tea or mochi flavours. You'll find the highest concentration of these in Tokyo, Japan's bustling capital.

Another shining example of the country's forward-thinking vibe is its incredible train network, especially the Shinkansen (bullet train). It's a point of national pride, known for its speed, reliability, and cutting-edge technology.

## Food & Drink

Food is at the heart of Japanese culture, deeply tied to nature and inspired by the changing seasons and the bounty of land and sea. Even up to 1872 the Japanese mostly avoided eating meat for religious and resource-based reasons, which explains why seafood still takes centre stage in so many dishes here. Beef, in particular, was taboo—eating it could even require more than 100 days of fasting as penance at certain shrines!

These days, meat is a regular part of the Japanese diet, and the country is famous for producing some of the best beef and fried chicken around. From world-class sushi and sashimi to cosy bowls of ramen, Japan has something for everyone. But there are many layers to Japanese cuisine – here are a few lesser known dishes that are well worth a try:

› **Shabu-shabu:** A hotpot dish in which thin slices of meat and vegetables are boiled in water at your table, then dipped in flavourful sauces.

› **Onigiri:** Also called *omusubi* or *nigirimeshi*, these rice balls are shaped into triangles, wrapped in nori seaweed, and traditionally filled with salty or sour ingredients like salted salmon, *umeboshi* (pickled plum), or *katsuobushi* (dried fish flakes).

› **Kaiseki:** Known as Japan's haute cuisine, this multi-course meal celebrates the freshness of ingredients (called *shun*). With beautifully simple presentations, *kaiseki* isn't just about taste – it's an artistic experience.

› **Curry rice:** Japanese curry is thick, slightly sweet, and served over sticky short-grain rice. It became a household staple in the 1960s and has been a firm national favourite ever since. There is even an annual festival celebrating each region's take on the dish. ›





## Did you know?

**1** The Japanese value practicality and tidiness, so you'll find square-grown, stackable watermelons and trees pruned into seemingly impossible shapes.

**2** Japan's islands lie where four of the Earth's tectonic plates converge. The country is home to about 10% of the world's active volcanoes, which means it experiences more earthquakes than almost anywhere else—around 1,500 per year. But don't worry, Japan is built to safely withstand these.

**3** Public toilets are everywhere, but bins are surprisingly rare. People don't litter in Japan, so it's always a good idea to carry a small bag for your rubbish.

**4** There's a vending machine on almost every corner (even on Mt. Fuji!). They sell a wide range of items, from hot and cold foods and beverages to mystery boxes and even cars!

› **Kaisendon:** A seafood rice bowl packed with local fresh fish, especially popular in Otaru, a city on Hokkaido Island that's famous for its seafood (see the recipe on p.19).

And of course, we can't forget *sake*, Japan's iconic rice wine. Its flavours range from crisp and dry to rich and aromatic, making it the perfect partner to almost any meal. With its popularity growing around the world, there's no better time to raise a glass and say *Kanpai!*

## Japanese Etiquette: 8 Key Tips to Keep in Mind

### Shoes Indoors

Don't forget to take your shoes off when entering someone's home or places like traditional restaurants or galleries. There's usually a spot at the entrance for them. Wearing matching, hole-free socks is a good idea in case you need to remove your shoes unexpectedly.

### Blowing Your Nose

In Japan, sniffing is preferred to blowing your nose in public. If you must blow your nose, find a private spot, like a restroom. Always dispose of tissues properly in a bin.

### Train Etiquette

On the train platform, line up at the markings and wait for others to exit the train before boarding. Once inside, keep noise low—avoid talking on the phone, and send messages instead. Eating and drinking are acceptable only on long-distance trains.

### Street Etiquette

Avoid eating while walking or standing; sit down to show respect for your food. Smoking is illegal on the streets—use marked smoking areas instead.

### Chopsticks and Dining Rules

When eating, don't use your own chopsticks to grab food from communal dishes unless everyone agrees. Use communal chopsticks, serving utensils, or the non-pointed ends of your chopsticks. Avoid passing food between chopsticks or sticking them upright in bowls—both are funeral customs.

### Respecting Traditions and Contradictions

Japan's technological advancements coexist with deeply rooted traditions. For instance, office workers often stay late just because it's customary, even if they're not busy. As a traveller, you'll encounter traditions that might not make sense. Accept them as part of the culture—it's simply the Japanese way.

### Composure in Emotion

The Japanese value composure and maintaining harmony. Even if emotions are running high, it's customary to handle frustrations privately. Public outbursts like shouting or raising your voice are considered rude and immature. ■

› You'll find all our tours to Japan at [explore.co.uk/Japan](https://www.explore.co.uk/Japan)



**Above**  
Don't forget to check out Japan's unique vending machines. There are one for every 22 inhabitants!

**Right**  
Stop by Omoide Yokocho, a landmark alleyway in Tokyo. It has its roots in the open-air market that formed in the burnt-out ruins of the city in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War



The knowledge and experience of our Explore leaders make for extra special adventures.

## Meet Dean Gottliffe



Originally from the UK, **Dean Gottliffe's** passion for Japan began with a school project over 20 years ago. Now he's living his best life as a Tour Leader in his favourite place in the world.

### **I studied Japanese by myself as a hobby.**

My love affair with Japan started during the football World Cup that was held in Japan and South Korea in 2002. The more I learnt about this country, the more fascinated I became with its culture, history and society so I took it upon myself to learn the language. Over the years I've worked as an English teacher in Nagasaki, Toyama as well as Nagano, a place famous for its snow monkeys. However, my ideal job was one that would enable me to share this beautiful country so working as a Tour Leader is a dream come true.

### **There are some things you cannot miss.**

*Meiji Jingu Shrine* in Tokyo is a special place for me. It's close to the areas of Harajuku and Shibuya and is surrounded by 70 hectares of forest, so it's a respite from the metropolis that is Tokyo – it's a tranquil oasis in the middle of the big city! In Kyoto, I recommend *Sanjusangendo Temple*. It houses 1001 unique statues of

**“Try as many dishes as possible, like *okonomiyaki* and *teppanyaki*.”**

Kannon, the goddess of mercy in Japanese Buddhism. It's not as famous as some of the other temples and shrines so more peaceful. And I like to visit *Fushimi Inari Taisha*, Kyoto's famous Shinto shrine, at night, when it's quieter and more atmospheric. There is so much to see in Kyoto just by walking.

### **The food? Try everything!**

Have an open mind and taste as many types of Japanese food as possible. Sushi and ramen are the most famous, but there are so many other dishes to try, such as *okonomiyaki* (a savoury pancake made from wheat flour batter, cabbage and a variety of other ingredients) and *tempura* (deep fried meat, seafood and vegetables). And try *teppanyaki* if you have the chance! *Teppanyaki* refers to dishes such as steak, shrimp and seafood cooked on a flat grill in front of you. It's a little more expensive because of the quality of ingredients but it's wonderful to watch the skills of the chef as they prepare your food.

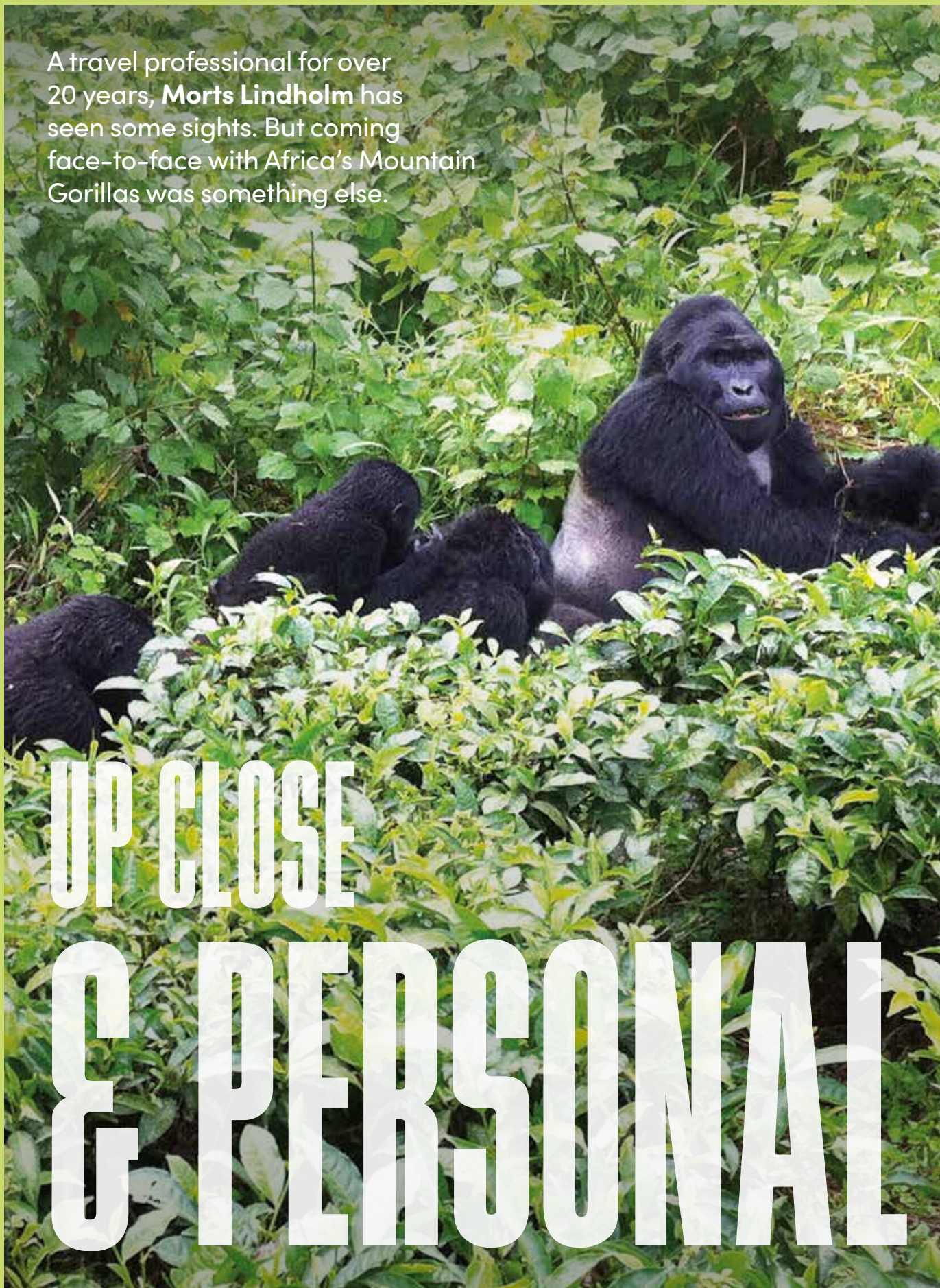
### **There is nowhere quite like it.**

It's the contrasting aspects of its culture that make Japan such a fascinating country. When you're riding on a Shinkansen bullet train, you get a sense of Japan's advanced technology, but it's also still a largely cash-based society. It's at the forefront of industries such as robotics and the automotive industry, yet there's still a very strong respect for tradition, and a desire to protect it. It's beautiful all year round – the cherry blossoms in spring, the hydrangeas in summer, autumn views and snow-capped mountains in winter. Japan is a lifetime destination for many, and I know I'm not alone having fallen in love with it! ■

► The annual Explore Leader Awards recognise our top leaders; their hard work, passion and dedication to your holiday's success. Have you had an outstanding Tour Leader on an Explore trip? Nominate them at [explore.co.uk/leader-awards](https://explore.co.uk/leader-awards)



A travel professional for over 20 years, **Morts Lindholm** has seen some sights. But coming face-to-face with Africa's Mountain Gorillas was something else.



# UP CLOSE & PERSONAL



**“To be in the presence of these majestic creatures is life changing.”**

**Opposite**

The mountain gorilla has been listed as an endangered species since 2018

**Below**

The rainforest in Bwindi National Park, Uganda

**B**y his own admission, Morts Lindholm has been around. After years spent overseas as a walking guide, tour leader, journalist and photographer, it was the mountains of Africa that ultimately captured his heart. “Africa just got under my skin. It’s one of those places that you either love or you don’t. I feel at home, I feel comfortable, safe, and like a proper explorer when I’m there. It’s important to me to feel like a traveller, and not a tourist – there’s a big difference. I want to enjoy a country from the inside.”

Morts may have more first-hand experience of Africa than most, but it was a mountain trek in search of one of the worlds’ most endangered species that has had the biggest impact on him. “There are only about a thousand mountain gorillas left on Earth. That’s it. The expression ‘a once-in-a-lifetime trip’ couldn’t be more accurate. It gives you a different perspective on life.”

About 50% of the world’s remaining mountain gorillas live in their natural habitat in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, a national park in south-western Uganda, where they’re found at an altitude of between 1,520m and 3,650m. These gentle vegetarian giants (who share 98% of our DNA) are normally peaceful, unless provoked. Destruction of their habitat is their main threat, and so it is the entrance permits and trekking fees generated by visitors to parks such as Bwindi that offer them their only chance of survival. It also helps that the locals employed in this sector have a stake in the gorillas’ welfare and are no longer tempted to poach. ▶





These permits, are like gold dust – only 96 are issued a day, and these will be booked way in advance. The tightly controlled visitor system, facilitated by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) focusses on conservation and sustainability. There are 30 troops of gorillas in Bwindi, but they are carefully circulated so that only 12 of these troops will be visited in a day, seeing no more than 8 visitors each. That's 12 groups of 8 visitors trekking a day. And the time

each group of visitors get to spend with the gorillas is strictly limited to just one hour.

"The hour you get to spend with the gorillas is guaranteed by the UWA," explains Morts, "but the journey into the forest to

locate the troop can take anything from an hour to four hours, which may involve a long drive and some strenuous walking. The rangers don't carry invasive radio devices, and no collars or antennae are used, so they rely on forest noise, like the sound of branches being broken, or leaves crunching. I think the trekking is part of the prize too and feels like climbing a mountain!

Once your troop has been located and you are about to start your viewing session, you get a briefing with your ranger, outlining more detailed guidelines. Everyone must wear masks – this was happening even before Covid.

Given they share our DNA, gorillas are vulnerable to human diseases and have been known to even die from the common cold. All bags are left with the rangers – you walk in on foot at this stage – and no snacks are allowed. You are told to keep a minimum of seven metres between yourself and a gorilla. Which is not a lot! And it's not unheard of to be brushed by or even trodden on by a moving creature.

Rules and regulations aside, what does it feel like to come face to face with these iconic primates?

"It's so hard to put a label on it," says Morts.

"Overwhelming. Intimate. Intimidating. An emotional rollercoaster. A privilege.

"The age range of the group I travelled with was between 30 and 50," he recalls. "They all had varied life situations and travel experiences, but when it came to how people reacted, all that was irrelevant. I mean, I expected to feel fascination, but getting up close and personal to these extraordinary creatures was mind-blowing. People were drowning in emotion.

"We were blessed with some classic family moments – the characters of each gorilla so apparent. The silverback was proud and protective of his brood. The mum? Nurturing and full of tenderness towards her children. The babies were cheeky and adventurous – everything you had imagined but never in your wildest dreams expected to see for real. And so human you expected them to remove their costumes halfway through and come over for a chat.

## "The expression 'a once-in-a-lifetime trip' couldn't be more accurate."



### What you'll need

- › Walking poles\*
- › Lightweight raincoat
- › Solid footwear (not trainers or crocs!)
- › Small camera
- › Facemask\*
- › Yellow fever certificate

\*Usually provided



**Right**  
The lush rainforest is the perfect hiding spot for these elusive primates

**Left**  
Uganda hosts more than half of the world's mountain gorilla population

**Below**  
Morts and the mighty silverback. Masks are mandatory when visiting the gorillas as we don't want to transmit diseases to them



### Gorilla facts

#### 1. Community

Gorillas can climb trees but are usually found on the ground in troops, communities of up to 30 individuals.

#### 2. Hierachy

Troops are led by one dominant, older adult male, called a silverback because of the silver hair that adorns his dark fur. Troops also include young males, some females, and their offspring.

#### 3. Behaviour

Challenge the alpha male and he may stand upright, throw things, make aggressive charges, and pound his huge chest while roaring or hooting. Despite these displays, gorillas are calm and non-confrontational (unless they are provoked).

#### 4. Family

Female gorillas give birth to one infant after a pregnancy of nearly nine months. Newborns are tiny—weighing four pounds—and only able to cling to their mothers' fur. They ride on their mothers' backs from four months to two or three years old.

#### 5. Communication

Gorillas' emotions are communicated through body language and facial expressions. They consider staring a sign of hostility.

"How did it make me feel? Well, I don't think I have the right words to encapsulate the feeling of complete disbelief and amazement. These graceful giants didn't care where we were from, they didn't care about the colour of our skin, about our faith, our politics, our beliefs. None of that mattered. This was bold, bare authenticity in all its glory. My bond with Africa was forever sealed.

"It's worth noting that gorillas don't care much for borders either, which is why they straddle the volcanic slopes of Rwanda and Uganda, two countries that have been through a lot. Even more poignant that both countries have now joined forces on something so precious.

"As a photojournalist, I felt torn. After years of being behind the lens, it felt like a barrier, and even a little disrespectful, and so I had

intentionally not bought a big camera. And I'm so glad I didn't. Sitting quietly in the bushes, I had the honour of being within five metres of a majestic 6 ft 3 silverback as he pushed his way through the greenery. Yes, it was intimidating, but absorbing his features with my own eyes, all I could think was "How fantastic nature is if we just leave it alone!". Doing it the right way is the only way." ■

**"It's so hard to put a label on it. Overwhelming. Intimate. Intimidating. A privilege."**

► Would you like to see Gorillas yourself?  
Visit [explore.co.uk/UGR](https://www.explore.co.uk/UGR)



# Explore Travel Photography Competition 2024: The Winners

We're thrilled to announce the winners of our Travel Photography Competition 2024. Join us to celebrate the stunning destinations captured on camera.



Congratulations to **Deborah Mathews**, the overall winner in our travel photography competition! In this mesmerising image, we're transported to Benin, West Africa, where we witness an Egungun dancer during an Egungun mask performance. This local tradition is a powerful ritual which both represents and embodies the spirits of ancestors.



WINNER



**Nick Holmes** was the first runner-up in our competition. His picture shows a cascade of candles leading to the sacred River Ganges in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. Varanasi, revered as the heart of Hinduism, is believed to be the eternal home of Shiva. This ancient city is one of the most sacred sites in India, drawing millions of pilgrims each year who come to cleanse themselves in the holy waters of the Ganges.



RUNNER UP



RUNNER UP

**Karen Sells-Brown** was the second runner-up with her imaginative photograph that she snapped in the Sahara Desert, Morocco, where adventurers experience an overnight stay at a Berber camp, nestled on the edge of the magnificent sand dunes.

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