

THE TRAVEL CLUB

E-ZINE #16: AUGUST, 2021

The power of adventure

How a 1,000km trek inspired a
national women's movement

A bird's-eye view

Getting the best out of your
avian photography

Horses, hawks and hot- spring dolls

On the craft trail in Japan's forgotten north

From Surrey to the Serengeti

Brian Jackman on a life of travel

Bradt GUIDES

TRAVEL TAKEN SERIOUSLY



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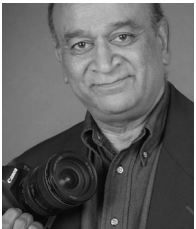
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Typesetting by Ian Spick, Bradt Guides

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Delve into the rich craft culture of Japan's forgotten north on page 36 © JNTO

FROM SURREY TO THE SERENGETI

To celebrate the release of his new autobiography, Brian Jackman reflects on his favourite of the world's wild places: the Serengeti.

In 2014 Bradt Guides kindly published *Savannah Diaries*. Distilled from four decades of notes and press clippings, it was envisaged as a celebration of Africa's wildlife and wild places and the extraordinary individuals I had met there during my travels.

Somebody at *The Telegraph* asked me how many times I had been on safari. 'I got to a hundred and lost count,' was the answer, and I remember thinking what an incredible privilege it was and how lucky I had been, having visited all the parks and game reserves I used to dream about. The only glaring gaps were Uganda and Malawi, and Zakouma National Park in Chad.

Over the years I had covered so much ground in the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem that I knew it almost as intimately as Dorset; but there remained one favourite area that my wife Annabelle and I had never explored together.

'Of all the world's wild places, the Serengeti is without equal'

Back in the 1980s I was introduced to Baron Hugo van Lawick, one of the foremost wildlife film-makers of his day. For ten years, until they were divorced in 1974, he had been married to Jane Goodall, the primatologist renowned for her work in Tanzania with the chimpanzees of Gombe Stream. When I met him, he was dividing his time between his London apartment in Hampstead and a luxurious camp known as 'Hugo's Hilton', situated just outside the southern end of the Serengeti National Park near Ndutu Safari Lodge.

In 1992 he was shooting a film called *Cheetahs: The Blood Brothers* – screened to great acclaim on ITV the following year. He had asked me to write the commentary script, and so I joined him at his camp for two unforgettable weeks in the Serengeti. We got up every day before dawn to sneak into



© BRIAN JACKMAN

the park without having to pay entry fees and then drove eastwards across country to the Gol Kopjes, where the gazelles gathered in their thousands to browse on the short-grass plains. In turn their presence attracted the cheetahs that preyed on them, including the two brothers who featured in Hugo's film.

Here, drinking endless cups of coffee, Hugo and I would sit in his Land Rover, waiting for the golden hour, that magical time in Africa when the sun sinks towards the horizon, drenching the plains in amber light as the heat subsides and the gazelles awake to chase each other across the grass as if for the sheer joy of being alive.

This was also the prime time for filming the cheetahs as they emerged from the shade of the kopjes to hunt. Seen from afar, these brooding islands of granite boulders rise from the Serengeti's endless skylines like broken battleships turned to stone; and in the emptiness of the plains, they were the stars we steered by.

After that safari, I returned several times to the Serengeti. Usually this involved a long and tiring drive from Arusha; but descending at last towards Olduvai there came a moment that never failed to lift my heart: the first glimpse of the plains, a sunlit ocean of grass and cloud shadows rolling away past the Gol Mountains to the ends of the earth.

For me, of all the world's wild places, the Serengeti is without equal. At upwards of 5,000 feet the light is dazzling. The air smells of dust and game and grasses that ripple for mile after mile in the dry highland wind with seldom a road and never a fence and nothing to break the distant



skyline except for the lonely kopjes and the horned heads of the animals that lift their heads to stare at your approach.

Across this stage moved the annual migration, a million wildebeest and 200,000 zebras – the greatest wildlife spectacle on earth – pursued by the carnivores as the herds chased the rains from Tanzania to Kenya and back on their endless journey.

In his novel, *The Roots of Heaven*, Romain Gary saw the African elephant as a giant symbol of liberty; but for me the wildebeest migration is a far more potent metaphor. To watch that living mass of animals swarming over the eastern plains, to live under canvas in the sun and the wind, to fall asleep to their sonorous grunting and wake at dawn to the song of the lion is to know you are truly alive.

A long-awaited return

The memory of that open rolling country and the feeling of freedom it induced had stayed with me ever since, and in September 2019 I finally achieved my dream of returning there with Annabelle. Lying up against the endless plains of the Loliondo Game Controlled Area, this part of the eastern Serengeti had long been renowned as a cheetah stronghold. For 20 years it was set aside exclusively for big-cat conservation and was

consequently off limits to the public until a safari company, Asilia Africa, were given permission to build Namiri Plains Camp there in 2014. Since then, it had acquired an unrivalled reputation for sightings of the Serengeti's most sought-after predators, not only cheetahs but lions, leopards, servals, and caracals.

In just seven days we saw 20 cheetahs, more than 60 lions and, uniquely, a rare serval cat with a glossy black coat which had established its home range not far from camp. The camp itself – the first to be built on the remote eastern plains – is unashamedly high-end; but Namiri's main attraction was the exceptional quality of its game-viewing. The nearest camp is at least an hour's drive away, meaning that when you come across the resident carnivores there is seldom another vehicle in sight.

Around the camp lay a classic Serengeti parkland of dappled glades and majestic acacias with their iconic flat-roofed canopies. But once we drove beyond the woodlands there was nothing but endless savannah in which fleets of kopjes drew the eye, measuring the yawning distance.

In every direction the land reached out to a horizon so wide and far away I could sense the

curve of the earth as it rolled through space to meet the rising sun. These were the hunting grounds of the lions and cheetahs we had come to see; but in searching for them we found ourselves falling under the spell of the plains themselves.

Their remoteness unwittingly takes hold of you, a kind of madness, like the beginning of a love affair, until you feel you could drive for ever and never want the days to end. These eastern plains have a swell to them, like the rise and fall of a heavy sea, and beyond every wave lay some new delight: a pair of Kori bustards – the world's heaviest flying birds – or a golden jackal, its tail streaming out behind, trotting so lightly its feet hardly seemed to touch the earth.

For all their emptiness the plains are never silent. Our nights echoed to the rumble of lions whose cavernous groans could be heard five miles away before subsiding with a rhythmic coda of deep-throated grunts that never fail to thrill me to the core; and from dawn to dusk every hour was filled with the thin cries of larks and pipits, the demented shrieks of crowned lapwings and the shrill voices of zebra stallions calling to their mares.

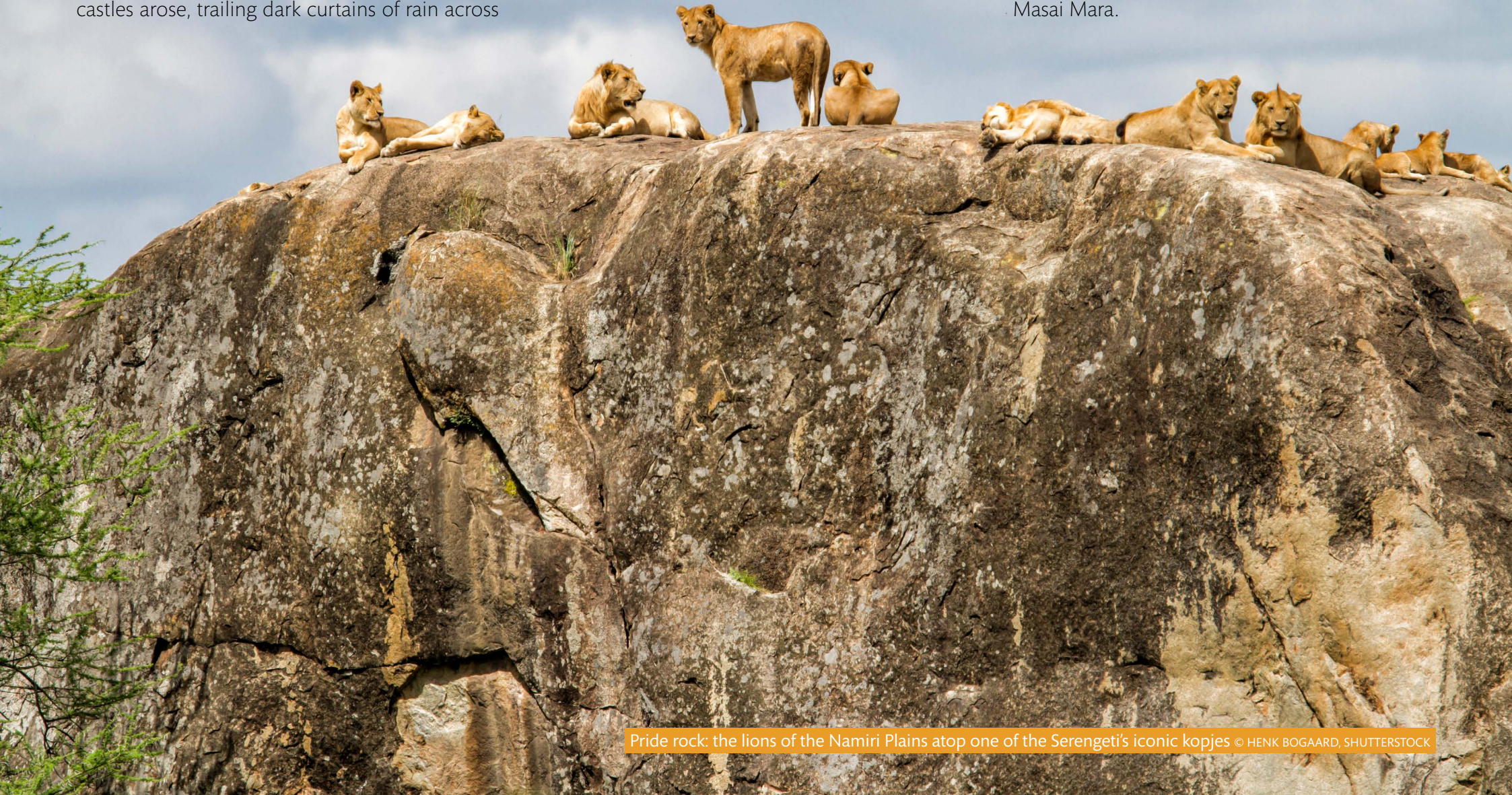
***“To wake at dawn
to the song of the
lion is to know you
are truly alive.”***

The lions of the Namiri Plains

A week or so ago there was not a zebra in sight, forcing the lions to stay alive by catching warthogs. But this was October. The seasons were changing, and the short rains had begun. In the late afternoons, great anvil-headed cloud castles arose, trailing dark curtains of rain across

the plains. Wherever the showers touched the earth, a flush of green grass appeared. Morning glory flowers raised their pale pink trumpets to the sky, and swallows that had gathered on the telephone wires of home now hawked for insects above browsing herds of Grant's gazelles.

The rain washed the dust from the air, enhancing its diamond-bright clarity in which the blue faraway outlines of Ngorongoro and the Gol Mountains stood out sharply to the south, and in the wake of the rains the first zebras had come, moving down from their dry-season refuge in the Masai Mara.





Brian and his wife Annabelle in 2018

From their vantage points on the kopjes, the lions of the Namiri Plains watched their arrival as they lay outlined on the rocks, manes rippling in the wind as they sensed their season of plenty was at hand.

We drove across a shallow valley in which five cheetahs rose out of the grass – a mother and her four subadult youngsters. Their slim bellies showed they had not yet eaten as they stared intently at a distant herd of gazelles, but we did not stop. Instead, we continued our journey across the Namiri pride lands until we came to a lonely kopje where an old male lion lay fast asleep on a whale-backed rock. As we drove closer it was clear he had been in the wars. His body was a map of scars. His haunches were still bleeding

from a recent battle, and he lay with his head on one side, slack-jawed and panting in the heat as if weighed down by the weight of years.

Patena, our keen-eyed Maasai guide, pulled out his camera and began to check his previous photos. 'Wow!' he exclaimed. 'It's Ziggy.' When Namiri Plains Camp opened in 2014 the local prides were dominated by a magnificent pair of male lions. One sported a luxuriant mane of black dreadlocks, for which he became known as Bob (after the reggae music star, Bob Marley); and his blond-maned companion was named Ziggy, after Marley's son.

Together they had reigned unchallenged across the plains until driven out by a powerful coalition of six nomadic males, after which Bob had died and nobody knew what had happened to Ziggy – until we found him.

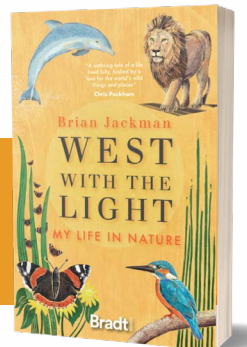
Watching that grizzled old warrior with his blunt canines and weary eyes, I thought of the cubs he had fathered and the battles he had won, sharing his glory days with Bob at his side. Fourteen times in his life he would have witnessed the arrival of the great migration when the plains were black with wildebeest. Now his race was almost run.

Banished to this lonely spot, he had been forced to survive like a fugitive, scavenging scraps from the kills of others as his strength ebbed away. But for a while yet, having been born around 15 years ago, he was still the oldest male lion in the Serengeti.

Afterwards, back home again in Dorset, I could not forget the sight of him, hauling himself slowly to his feet to lap rainwater from a puddle at the foot of the rocks. It was yet another of those milestone moments that measured the course of my life, as poignant in its own way as when I had crossed the Pyrenees for my 50th birthday, and when, in the softly fading light of a Suffolk spring evening, I had first seen the girl I would marry.

What a long road it had been, from Surrey in wartime to the Serengeti. I was now 84 and the sand in the hourglass was running out. How many more times, I wondered, would I watch the wildebeest flooding across the savannah as Ziggy had done? And for how much longer would lions continue to walk through my life and my dreams?

This extract was taken from **Brian Jackman's** autobiography, *West with the Light*, which is out this month – The Travel Club members can get their copy for just **£4.99** with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**. For more on the book, see page 59.



THE POWER OF ADVENTURE: FROM NERVOUS HIKER TO LEADER OF A NATIONAL ADVENTURE COMMUNITY

Bex Band is the founder of Love Her Wild, an award-winning women-only adventure community in the UK, which provides support and opportunities for women and advocates for greater diversity in the outdoors. Since its inception, Love Her Wild has taken thousands of women on expeditions around the world. Bex shares her story and the inspiration behind the movement.



‘Come on lads!’ one of the other attendees on the expedition course shouted out. The rest of the team immediately jumped up, throwing their bags on their backs. I quietly followed. I wondered if it had been said as a dig – ‘as the only woman you are not properly part of the team’. Or was it simply that I was invisible to the others?

I would have guessed the latter if it hadn't been for all the other times during the course when I'd been made uncomfortably aware of my gender in

this male-dominant environment – singled out as a weak link (though I went on to pass the course, and not everyone else did), ignored and at times even ridiculed.

I'd signed up to do an expedition course to build confidence (of which I was greatly lacking) and to better prepare myself for taking on what would be the biggest adventure of my life – hiking the Israel National Trail, a 1,000km trek stretching the whole length of the country. I was feeling petrified, out of my depth, and thought that doing a course would

help boost both my skills and my belief in my own abilities.

Yet I left the course feeling deflated. Worried that my concerns about the hike, that I wasn't good enough, were perhaps true.

Hiking the Israel National Trail

When I committed to doing the Israel National Trail, shortly after reading about it for the first time in an online article, I'd been looking for a change in my life. I felt lost, that I'd been stuck in jobs



I wasn't enjoying, frustrated with the commute, and unable to find work that was fulfilling or ways to fill my free time that I found satisfying.

Eight months later, after convincing my husband that packing up our lives in London and taking on

this challenge was a good thing for us to do, I took my first steps on the trail.

The Israel National Trail is a walk of three parts. In the north are rolling green hills and mountains, forests and many towns. The middle section mostly

follows the Mediterranean coastline, passing Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, before cutting inland for the third, most daunting, section: crossing the vast Negev desert, a place where many have lost their lives due to the extreme temperatures there, flash-flooding and falling.

Hiking the trail was the toughest thing I'd ever done. It was hot and dusty. The weight of the heavy bag on my shoulders, which carried everything we needed for walking and camping, made moving a constant battle. I fought continuously to put one foot in front of the other.

In time, I fell into the kind of unique rhythm you find on an adventure. Life on the trail was simple: all I had to worry about was walking, eating and finding somewhere to pitch the tent each night. It was quiet and peaceful. And away from the usual pressures of daily life, I had time to ponder and reflect, to think about what I really wanted to do with my life.

Love Her Wild

As I was nearing the end of the hike – which took 52 days to complete – my thoughts kept returning to the expedition course. It was not the only time in my life that I'd experienced overt sexism. I'd joined a number of outdoor courses and clubs before doing the trail, in an attempt to gain more experience, and had often found, being the only

© BEX BAND



Waymarker on the Israel National Trail

woman, I was treated differently to the other participants. And while on the trail I'd met only a handful of other female hikers and none who was intending to do its full distance.

From these experiences was born the idea to launch Love Her Wild – a women-only adventure community – to try and address the apparent lack of women involved in outdoor activities. Love Her Wild started as a Facebook group. Within a year it had grown to a community of thousands, and I began organising and leading women-only expeditions.

The power of adventure

Love Her Wild is now an award-winning social enterprise and one of the biggest adventure communities in the world, run by a dedicated team of volunteers and staff who are responsible for taking thousands of women on outdoor adventures. We recently carried out a survey of the women in the community, asking what the biggest barrier was to them getting outdoors. I wasn't surprised by the results. Lack of confidence came out as one of the top reasons! And that's exactly what Love Her Wild aims to tackle.

Confidence is like a muscle. It needs to be nurtured, stretched and used in order to grow. There are many ways to build confidence, but looking back on my own journey, it seems there



Love Her Wild members taking on the 'Everest Adventure' – hiking the height of Everest over five days in the Lake District

was one quick, sure-fire way to get there – going on an adventure! It had all started with a hike. A hike and time in nature that allowed me to reboot and develop the confidence I needed to launch and run a national community – the confidence finally to live my best life, on my terms.

Some people have enough confidence to go on adventures on their own, but most don't. So Love Her Wild is there to provide a space without judgement or competition; a place where being in a supportive team and having a good time along the way always wins over reaching any goal;



Hiking in the Negev Desert

where women can have adventures of a lifetime and regain confidence to embark on adventures of their own or start taking big steps in other areas of their life.

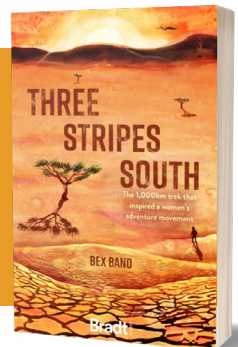
We still have a long way to go before we see greater diversity in the outdoors, but groups like Love Her Wild are making big waves. The more women get out on adventures, the more attitudes will change, and the more female role models there'll be – alongside calmer, less-stressed and

happier individuals, just some of the benefits of getting active outdoors.

Fighting for equality in the outdoors can sometimes feel daunting, like a big battle. But,

like any adventure – including my own, hiking the length of Israel – it's just about taking lots of little steps in the right direction, knowing that, eventually, you'll get there.

Read about **Bex Band's** adventure hiking the Israel National Trail, and how that inspired the creation of Love Her Wild, in her debut book, *Three Stripes South* – out this month. You can also follow Bex on her [blog](#) or visit the [Love Her Wild](#) website. The Travel Club members can buy their copy of the book for just **£4.99**, using the code **TRAVELCLUB50** at checkout.



PHOTOGRAPHING BIRDS: A TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

*Award-winning wildlife
journalist **Mike Unwin**
shares his best advice for
getting the most out of your
avian photography.*



First, a disclaimer: I am *not* a professional bird photographer. Yes, I sell some snaps with my writing, but the many talented individuals who merit that title belong in a different league; I can only drool over their work. However, I *have* been photographing birds for a few decades and all over the world, so I can at least claim some kind of trial-and-error learning curve. This article reflects that curve, illustrated with a small collection of my favourite images.

I'm avoiding the technical stuff here. There are plenty of places elsewhere for that – and besides, I know very little about it. What I do know about, however, is birds, which have enthralled me since I was a toddler. And I've learned that understanding them is at least as important as understanding your camera.

I don't mean that you must be able to ID a sub-adult cisticola at 50 paces. But you do need to pay close attention to your subject: how it moves, where it perches, at what time of day – and year – it appears. The more you know, the better you can anticipate and exploit good windows for photography.

Much of this comes down to 'fieldcraft' (a khaki-clad name for common sense). Birds are

timid creatures, so don't charge towards them. Think first about where you can get the best shot, with good light and no obstructions. If you need to get nearer, do it slowly and quietly. Patient observation often brings the best results. Birds are creatures of habit: if you know what they do, they may return to do it again. Always make their welfare your priority. And don't be too hung up on chasing A-listers: trophy 'record shots' seldom make good pictures. Today, increasingly, I look not for rare birds but for rare *opportunities*: moments when light and setting are perfect and you should snap whatever they frame, be it grebe or greenfinch.

“Birds are creatures of habit: if you know what they do, they may return to do it again.”

Gear-wise, you do need a few essentials. It is hard to photograph birds without a telephoto or zoom lens; I'd recommend a focal length of at least 250mm. Smaller lenses take lovely pictures but their limited reach might leave you frustrated. Binoculars can help you both find birds and work out what they're up to before you approach. My first 'proper' camera was a second-hand, manual-focus film model. Today I use a digital SLR with a 100–400mm zoom lens, and stay largely in 'aperture-priority' mode (Av on your dial) to maximise light intake. True pros use prime lenses, plus tripods, portable hides



© KAREN BOWERMAN

On a boat just off Campbell Island, subantarctic New Zealand, with an albatross overhead

and other gear. As a travel writer, I prefer to travel light. Better gear would probably get me better pictures, but hey, we all have our limits.

My observations here apply to most wildlife, not only birds. But if you've never turned your lens on a bird before, give it a try. Not only are they uniquely photogenic creatures, with their colour, form, movement and fascinating behaviour, but they also have the advantage of being pretty much everywhere. In fact, with nearly 11,000 species in the world, I'm pretty sure there's one within snapping distance of you right now. So what are you waiting for?



Birds sitting still

Taking a simple portrait of a bird is harder than you might imagine. Birds seldom sit still. Even perched, their constant tiny movements can be enough to blur your picture. And among foliage, especially, shadows or background detail often break up their form. It's easy to miss these disruptions when peering through the viewfinder, but they leap out once you get the image on your screen.

For an effective portrait, aim to frame your bird in the open, making sure to keep its head clear, but keeping some colour behind to avoid silhouetting. And try to get the light directly upon it (ie: with the light behind you). More light allows a faster shutter speed, to avoid motion blur, plus a wider aperture and thus a shallower depth of field, which helps soften distracting detail in front or behind. Direct light also puts a glint in your bird's eye, which can make the difference between it looking alive or stuffed. Low light is better for colours – overhead light can overexpose the upperparts and cast underparts into shadow – so shooting towards the start or end of the day often works best.

I captured this **dunlin** on a summer evening in northwest Scotland. It was one of a small flock drawn to a freshwater stream trickling across the beach. Once I realised what they were up to, I could plan my position. I settled down on a rock, with the stream in front and the sun behind me, and kept low. This individual approached to within a few metres. The low angle allows us into its world as it takes a brief breather, creating a sense of intimacy. The evening light brings life to the eye and colour to the background, and illuminates the exquisite plumage details of a bird often dismissed as just another 'little brown job'.



The **wire-tailed swallow** was taken from a boat in the Luangwa Valley, Zambia. Boats offer great wildlife photography opportunities, especially if you allow the current to carry you quietly towards your subject. Generally, you have to be quick – if you don't find the shot on your first pass, you may not get a second – so it pays to keep scanning ahead and anticipating opportunities. This shot is very static, but I like how the bird's position on the tip of the branch emphasises its attenuated elegance. It also illustrates how a shallow depth of field, achieved by shooting through a long lens at a high aperture, eliminates background clutter – in this case, the tangled roots of a river bank – to achieve a 'clean' image.

Seconds after this shot, the swallow darted off after some flying insect. But as we continued downstream, it was soon back on the same stick. Swallows are among various fast-moving, insect-eating birds (others include flycatchers and bee-eaters) that habitually return to the same perch. They are hard to capture when dashing around but by identifying this perch, and being patient, you can improve your chances. While they're on the move, you have a chance to discreetly reposition yourself for the optimum angle and lighting.



The **rufous motmot** was taken in the rainforests of Panama. Rainforests present real challenges, with the interplay of light and shadow breaking up the subject, and foreground foliage often snagging your autofocus. (Tip: use the spot focus setting and aim for the bird's face – or, if tricky, try manual focus.) Motmots often call for ages from a favourite perch, so I was able to track this one down.

This is a backlit image – which, I'm aware, contradicts my advice about keeping the light on your subject. Backlighting can produce a pleasing halo effect, though overuse can turn this towards cliché. Here, I like it: partly because the gilding of the bird's contours accentuates its striking shape, especially that amazing tail; and partly because that spotlight effect is so evocative of forests, in which a random beam often illuminates something you'd otherwise overlook.

I took this shot early, before the sun overhead produced too much contrast. In these sombre conditions, raising your ISO setting enhances colour – though too high gives you a 'noisy' (grainy) image. Try shooting on several different settings then decide later which one worked best.



Birds being busy

Portraits can be beautiful but, let's face it, also a bit dull. It's often more rewarding to show birds actually *doing* something, especially given their amazing range of talents. In this respect, understanding how birds behave – and thus anticipating what they might do – can be just as important as understanding how your camera works. And if you don't know much about birds, you can learn a lot through patient observation. Successful images often come down to sitting quietly, watching and waiting.

This **red-billed oxpecker** was taken in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park. These birds spend much of their lives clambering around their hosts, foraging for ticks, and are often so preoccupied that you have time to capture interesting shots. Here, the sharp focus on the bird's face turns the giraffe's mane into a kind of savannah; mammal as habitat, if you like.



At the other end of the scale (and of Africa), this **goliath heron** in South Africa's Kruger Park was doing something I'd never before witnessed: repeatedly dropping a stick as bait to attract fish. The early morning light produced perfect reflections in the mirror-calm water. I spent an hour with this heron. It dropped, lunged and repeated, but never caught anything.



This **osprey** was at a coastal lagoon in Oman. I have photographed ospreys elsewhere but this image tells a different story from the usual: how a bird that is routinely depicted catching or clutching its fishy prize must also bathe regularly to clean off those slimy scales. It struck me that those burnished mantle feathers, when fluffed out, resemble the scales of a pangolin. I had spotted this bird from a distance and approached carefully, in stages, looking away so as not to alarm it. When I eventually retreated, it was still splashing away.



Birds' breeding behaviour is endlessly fascinating. The **golden-backed weaver** (next page, left) was busy building its nest in Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park. Here it posed perfectly, as though showing off its architectural skills. The **jackdaw** (next page, right), a more limited architect, was collecting hazel twigs for its nest in my own back garden. Compositionally, the diagonal of the bird works nicely against the diagonal of its branch. I also like its dynamic posture: the open bill and drawn-back head suggesting imminent action.

Like many seabirds, **Australasian gannets** (left) nest in large, noisy colonies. I took this picture on New Zealand's North Island. Confronted with a melee of birds, the temptation can be to point and shoot, assuming that you're bound to capture something good. Often this ends in disappointment, so instead try choosing a target and composing a picture in your mind (and view-finder). Here, I chose one amorous pair performing their bill-fencing display. A tight focus on this pair emphasises their individuality among the throng.





Bird interactions are not always so friendly, of course. This vicious scarp between two **superb glossy starlings** (above) took place in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park. Here, the focus on the birds' interlocking feet at the very centre of the image brings drama, as does the supplicatory pose of the bird on the right. Of course, their vivid colours also help.

I captured the **American kestrel and chalk-browed mockingbird** (below) in Argentina's Iberá Wetlands. Songbirds habitually mob raptors and I had heard the mockingbird's alarm calls, so I suspected that it was likely to have a pop and was ready when the little falcon landed on a convenient perch. With more time, I would have adjusted for greater depth of field, thus getting both birds in focus, but I was right to stay on the kestrel – the static target – rather than trying to track the flying mockingbird, and the blur of the latter's wings conveys the speed of action. I shot on rapid exposure, so this image was the best of several. I like the pleasing shapes made by both birds' wings, and how these shapes interlock in the image without overlapping. Pure fluke, of course.





Birds flying about

Rapid exposure also helps with birds in flight. Birds' wings beat very fast and it is tricky to tell through your viewfinder what exactly they are doing – whether, for instance, they are obscuring the bird's face or casting unwelcome shadows across its body. Take a rapid burst of shots and you're more likely to get one that works. Where possible, focus on the face. Having the birds flying into your picture creates a sense of expectation and thus a more successful image than birds flying out of it. (Arrival, in life, is invariably more exciting than departure.) Try to anticipate and get in position – though never spook birds into flight, which can cause an energy-costly disruption of their routine and, in any case, is likely to send them flying away from you.

Flying birds are often seen against the sky. This bright empty space makes it easier for your autofocus but can also turn your subjects into silhouettes. You'll get better colour when the sky has some definition or is a deeper shade (ie: towards the beginning or end of the day), or if you shoot against a backdrop of land. With the latter, it can be hard to keep the focus on your flying bird when the autofocus picks up on passing background detail, such as trees. Sometimes it can help to track the bird on manual focus. Experiment.

This female **ruby-throated hummingbird** was taken in New Brunswick, Canada, and presented the challenge of capturing a bird whose wings beat at 50 times per second. It was following a regular circuit between flowers in the garden of my chalet, so I had time to get into position. Hummingbirds often hover stationary for a second or two before moving forward to the flower. This is your chance. Here I used a very fast shutter speed, though not so fast that the wings are pin-sharp – which is fine, as the blurred tips convey the breathtaking speed. The key thing here is the focus on the face.



A good way to catch a bird in flight is at take-off or landing. The **great egret** (above) was arriving at its nesting colony in the Iberá Wetlands, Argentina. Birds were coming and going constantly so I had plenty of time to think about the shot. I like the brutal sharpness of bill and claws against those otherwise angelic snow-white wings.

The **lilac-breasted roller** (below) was hunting from an acacia bush in the Makgadikgadi Pans, Botswana, continually darting down after insects. Low early morning light revealed the full spectrum of its gorgeous plumage, without silhouetting. The perfect lyre-shape of the tail plumes was just luck.

The **greylag geese** (next page) were in a field on the Scottish coast. They had been taking off in small, regular parties, so I knew the direction the next group would take and was able to find a good position, with that lovely west coast evening light behind me. I like how each bird is in a different position, with wings at a different point of the up- or down-stroke, and how their straining necks express the sheer muscular effort of take-off. I also like the line of treetops, which keeps a connection with the land. Note the light in the eyes.







The bigger picture

So far, I've discussed capturing the bird itself, with its background an afterthought. But backgrounds often create the most exciting images. Not only do they convey a sense of place, they also illuminate the bird's story, opening a window on to the world for which it is so beautifully evolved, and which it can evoke so powerfully. It's all about putting your subject in context. Success comes down to composition – critically, where do you place the bird? Keeping it off-centre is often effective, allowing its backdrop to breathe. Look for diagonals that lead the eye. If interested in the theory, find out about the 'rule of thirds.'

This **golden eagle** was high in the Himalayas of Ladakh, India. It appeared while I was scanning the mountainside for an elusive snow leopard and my fingers were almost too cold to control the shutter. The bird may be just a tiny silhouette but, if you know golden eagles, the shape is unmistakable, and the context – a soaring speck against a forbidding backdrop – is the essence of this species. Many perfectly lit golden eagle close-ups are either of captive individuals or of birds attracted to bait at a hide. In reality, wild goldies are very shy and sightings are typically distant and fleeting (and often follow a knackered climb). For me, this image conveys all this. 'See my world?' it says. 'It's not for you!'



By contrast, the **turnstone** was on Brighton Beach, a short stroll from the holiday crowds in my hometown. Shingle is seldom celebrated for its beauty – always a poor cousin to sand – but here we see it from the bird’s perspective: not only a treasure trove of tasty titbits, but also a rich colour palette, within which every tint of its plumage finds an echo.

This picture showcases the miracle of camouflage (how many turnstones have you walked past and not seen?). But to me, it also tells another story. Turnstones migrate thousands of kilometres between breeding grounds in the Arctic and wintering grounds in Africa, finding pit-stops along the UK coastline en route. Here, the bird’s gaze out to the breaking surf, with its limitless tracts of ocean beyond, suggests the epic journey that lies ahead.



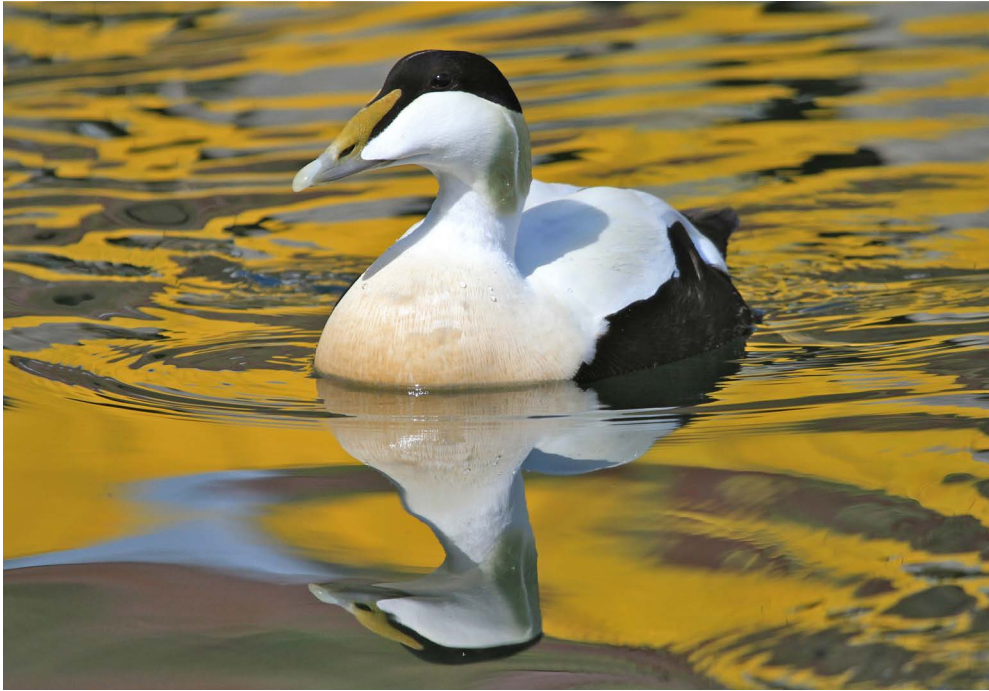
Here, two more context shots show how birds can illuminate very different backdrops. The **keel-billed toucan** (above) is heralding daybreak over the forest canopy of Chiquibul National Park, Belize, flaunting its outrageous bill as first light burns off the mist. The image is a bit noisy (the dawn darkness had me overdoing the ISO) but the composition is pleasing.



By contrast, the **brown pelican** (below) is flying in front of an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, off the Texas coast. There is a hint of sci-fi dystopia – *Bladerunner*, perhaps? – in the brooding hulk behind. I like how the bird is passing from light into darkness, and how it shows that wildlife can thrive in human landscapes too.



Finally, these **Australasian pelicans** in Bremer Bay, Western Australia, show how you can have some compositional fun with a full moon.



Getting arty

The beauty of birds also lends itself to pure aesthetics. Beyond merely capturing a bird or its environment, you may find more abstract images in form, colour or movement. Success in this respect is often serendipitous: pleasing patterns spotted on your screen, after you've downloaded your snaps. But keep an open mind when peering through that viewfinder. Look for details, textures and shapes that might have a visual impact independently of the bird.

Two images of **common eider** illustrate how water offers boundless artistic possibilities. The first (above), from Iceland, uses the reflection of a boat's yellow hull to frame its subject in liquid gold. The second (below), taken off the northwest coast of Scotland (again!), reveals Dali-esque reflections created by a flight of these sea-ducks over the limpid waters of a bay.





By contrast, the **gentoo penguin** (above), captured from the deck of my ship in Antarctica, is swimming *below* the surface. It appears preserved in aspic, with the play of light above suggesting milky swirls in a cup of coffee.

Sticking with penguins (and why wouldn't you?), the upstretched throat of this displaying **king penguin** (left) on the Falkland Islands seems hardly bird at all: more a fashion designer's fantasy.

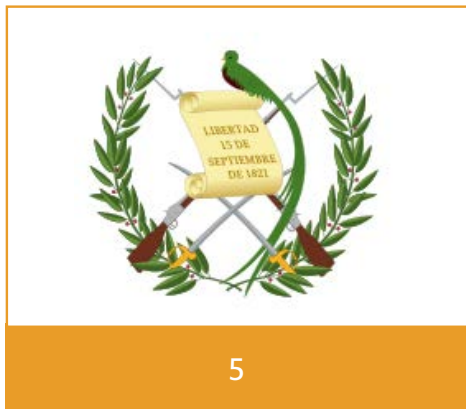
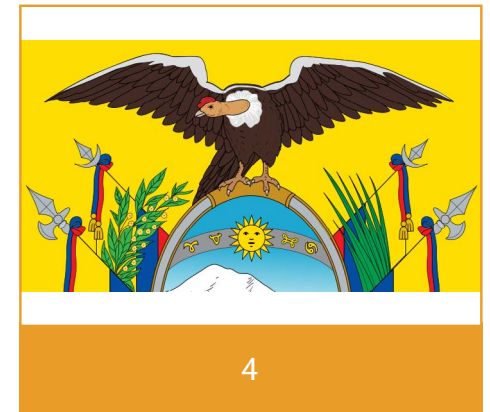


Finally, if in doubt, try black-and white. If the light is too poor for colour, the tonal subtleties of monochrome can draw attention to form, as in this aerial ballet of two **arctic terns** (left) in Iceland, or texture, as in this **eastern screech owl** (right) poking its head from its palm stump nest hole in Texas. And the beauty of digital is that you needn't decide this in advance. One click on the keyboard and hey presto, instant art!

Mike Unwin is the author of several books for Bradt, including *Swaziland* and *Southern African Wildlife*, plus some 35 other books for both adults and children. A multi award-winning wildlife and travel journalist, he was voted UK Travel Writer of the Year 2013 by the British Guild of Travel Writers. Mike lived and worked for eight years in southern Africa, and has travelled to every continent to find, photograph and write about wildlife. Today he lives beside the seaside in Brighton, UK.

THE BRADT TRAVEL TEASER: FLAGS OF THE WORLD

Can you name the country from the birds on their flag? Answers on page 59. Bonus points if you can name the bird too!



ON THE TOHOKU CRAFT TRAIL

From papier-mâché priests to kites the size of beds – Jo Davey explores the longstanding craft traditions of Japan's forgotten north.

A life-lined face peers over the plate, nose nearly brushing the black lacquer. The extra time I've taken to produce this *maki-e* masterpiece sits heavy in the hush as the artisan tilts it to the light. His face is entirely inscrutable, in a way old Japanese men seem to have perfected above all others, but finally he produces a soft grunt.

A class of curious eyes follow him to an inconspicuous set of drawers where he retrieves a worn cardboard box. Careful hands lift its lid to reveal lucent leaves of gold and silver – a far, exquisite cry from the dishes of glittery dust we were originally given. With nimble fingers and a small brush, he stipples shards of silver to the crest of Mount Fuji, gilds the crane's belly with gold, and hands it back for me to finish with a meaningful nod. It feels like I've just been blessed.

The Suzusen *maki-e* workshop is in the Nanukamachi craft quarter of Aizu-Wakamatsu, a culturally and historically rich city in Fukushima prefecture. *Maki-e* – literally 'sprinkle painting' – is the art of drawing on lacquerware with adhesive

before dusting with metallic powder, and it's been passed down here for generations. Like all Japanese crafts, it requires patience, perseverance and perfectionism: all somewhat difficult to achieve in a single class. Still, it's one of the

finest ways to spend an hour in Tohoku, Japan's overlooked land to the north.

This remote region is considered the great forgotten area of Japan, seeing only 2% of the country's international travellers. But before



©JNTO

Maki-e (meaning 'sprinkle painting') is the painstaking art of dusting lacquerware with metallic powder

Covid hit, Tohoku had been touted by many as *the* destination of 2020, its untouched, untamed outdoors – not to mention wild scenery, grand shrines and flourishing cities – finally gaining international attention. In Japan, though, Tohoku is renowned for its traditional arts and dedicated craftsmanship.

Most are rather humble, made with cheap materials like papier-mâché. They started life as the side-jobs of farmers and samurai, who needed something to supplement their income during bleak winter months. It's an image delightfully at odds with the cinematic vision of Japan's warrior class: swords swapped for brushes and warfare for whittling, moulding and painting.

Their customers were equally modest in means: impoverished Tohoku locals couldn't afford expensive ceramic dolls and textiles, but could buy those made of *washi* paper, wood or even soil. These crafts created by clan-affiliated samurai became characteristic to a region, instilling a strong sense of local ownership and attachment still thriving centuries later.

Though they traverse hundreds of miles and a multitude of materials, Tohoku crafts keep a lot in common. They engender deep, local connections, preserve regional history and making your own isn't just entertaining: it's all-consuming. Tohoku might be marketed on its myriad outdoor charms,



Okiagari koboshi are renowned for their adorable faces ©JNTO

but once sore feet and bad weather scupper your plans, there's hours of indoor charm and cheer to be had.

From humble to haute-couture

Aizu-Wakamatsu is a hub for such handicrafts, and my favourite is another of the stunning

city's specialties: the delightfully tongue-twisting *okiagari koboshi*, or 'getting up little priest'. Made using authentic Aizu papier-mâché, the dolls are weighted so that they right themselves when tipped over. The fastest to stand up are considered the luckiest, so you'll often catch shoppers making them compete.

These fingertip-sized figures have been smiling benevolently from stands and shops all over the city since at least the 14th century. They're believed to be Aizu's oldest folk craft, but their draw hasn't diminished: recently they've been reinvented as a symbol of Fukushima's resilience after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

The Okiagari Kobōshi Project for Fukushima – founded by Japanese fashion designer Kenzo, who died from Covid in 2020 – gets celebrities and public figures to decorate a *kobōshi*, which is then auctioned for charity. Visitors can follow their lead, with less fanfare, and paint their own at the craft shop, Kōsen Kobōshi, but best get busy: it is tradition for each family member to have one and an extra for luck.

An hour's train ride west of Aizu, the papier-mâché trail continues in Yanaizu, where the famous Enzōji Temple peers down from a dark crag overlooking the broad Tadami River. For much of the year, the view from its rocky outcrop is bright with green foliage, blue skies and the two great scarlet arcs of its bridges. On my visit in February 2020, the bridges barely made it through the mist – the rest lost to brumous tones of white and grey.

The old wooden temple, beautifully stained with age, was supposedly built with the help of a cow, which carried materials up the hill. Legend has it that the cow refused to leave the temple afterwards, turned to stone and became a symbol of devotion and luck to locals. Created in the 1590s, *akabeko* –

meaning 'red cow' in Aizu dialect – quickly became popular charms to ward off plague and illness, as well as bring good fortune, and are now one of Fukushima's best-known crafts.

You'll spot them dotted across Yanaizu in various sizes, their heads and tails nodding separately from the rest of their bodies. Each *akabeko* takes about ten days to complete, and only a handful of family-owned Fukushima workshops still make them today.

Hot-spring dolls and hand-carved hawks

Across the Ōu Mountains northeast of Aizu, the craft route turns from papier-mâché to wood. My first glimpse of Tsuchiyu-onsen in the range's



Kokeshi (left) and Sasano-ittōbori (right) © TOHOKU STANDARD

foothills was of a family of monkeys, huddled in a lone tree in the middle of town; much like humans, they're lured in by the hot spring's restorative waters. I was here not for my constitution, however, but for *kokeshi*, Tohoku's celebrated limbless doll that wards off fire, safeguards children and brings good health.

Made in Tsuchiyu and other remote Fukushima onsen (hot spring) towns since the early 1800s, the dolls are whittled by hand before being hooked up to what can only be described as a small spit. This rotates the doll so that smooth bands can be painted around the figure – a task that I soon realised sounds far easier than it is.

The *kokeshi* painting experience at the Tourism Exchange Centre provided a more-than-welcome break from the weather, but proved far less promising than my *maki-e*. It's said that Japanese people find the demure *kokeshi* expressions comforting, but mine was at best unnerving and at worst, downright creepy.

If one legend is to be believed, however, my unwitting interpretation isn't entirely inappropriate. A folk etymology claims that the word *kokeshi* was originally made up of the Japanese symbols for

'child' (*ko*) and 'erasure' (*keshi*), rather than the 'little poppies' reading used today. According to this, the first *kokeshi* dolls had their origins in *mabiki*, a dark practice in Japan's history where poor families would commit infanticide if they couldn't feed and keep all their children. As boys were seen as more valuable, the victims were nearly always girls. The folktale suggests that *kokeshi* were created to commemorate the daughters the family had 'erased'. True or not, it's a tale I was glad to have learned *after* my visit to the *kokeshi*-crammed centre.

A hop over Fukushima's northwest border, Yamagata prefecture is the home of *Sasano-ittōbori*, an amulet hand-sculpted from a single piece of local wood using a specialised knife called a *sarukiri*. These animal figures have been around for thousands of years and range from rough-and-ready to remarkably elaborate; predictably, they require immense skill to carve.

Thankfully, they come pre-whittled at the Sasano Folk-Craft Museum in Yonezawa, where you can decorate your own in the form of a hawk, the most popular design for *Sasano-ittōbori*. This is a nod to the feudal lord who first supported such craft-making and whose name

began with the symbol for 'hawk'. The birds also represent strength in Japan, so have long been emblems of their original creators, the *sarukiri*-wielding samurai.

Northern horses and high-flyers

Trekking further north, the crafts grow more colourful as the landscape becomes greyer. Hachinohe, a northeast coastal city in Aomori prefecture where the stiff sea breeze whips through lantern-lit alleys and snow-piled streets, is known for its wooden horse called a *yawata-uma*. Horses have been at the heart of Hachinohe culture for centuries: from 1100 the area was known for breeding warhorses and horse meat remains popular today.

Hachinohe's 700-year-old toy was originally made by farmers and is painted with elaborate patterns, replicating how horses used to be decorated at the region's rural weddings. Traditionally, the horses are given at celebrations in pairs – one black, one red – to bring good luck, but, unlike the more prescriptive *kokeshi*, *yawata-uma* are uninhibited. Your designs can be as colourful and creative as you like.

The prefecture is actually better known for its paper crafts: Aomori city is famous for its *nebuta* festival, a 300-year-old event featuring thousands of individually decorated illuminated paper

“The expression on my kokeshi was at best unnerving and at worst, downright creepy.”



The wooden *yawata-uma* horses were originally made by farmers

lanterns, made by individual villages and each with their own design. In Aomori's west, Tsugaru – known for its numerous folk crafts – has taken the humble kite to new heights.

Traditional *Tsugaru-tako* are enormous. Usually the size of a double bed, they're handcrafted using local *hiba* cypress trees, as bamboo doesn't grow in the harsh Tsugaru climes. They're painted in

a bold, bright style that echoes Hokusai *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints and have an extra sheet of paper on the back, which rattles and rolls in the wind like a snare drum.

In the 1800s, *Tsugaru-tako* would often be seen flying in Hirosaki, where the feudal lord's castle stood – but despite being made by samurai, it took many years before they painted themselves on the kites. Now it's tradition to depict legendary Japanese heroes and warriors and the *Tsugaru-tako* have become a symbol of a parent's wish for their child to grow up as strong and steadfast as samurai.

Creating a *Tsugaru-tako* is quite the process: painting alone takes 90 minutes, but a from-scratch kite class at Tsugaru-han Neputa Village lasts 3½ hours. It sounds interminable until you're there, hesitating for the hundredth time, brush in a *hiba*-splintered hand, wavering between divinity and disaster. It's easy to forget these crafts started out life in equally untrained hands, but spending an afternoon following in their footsteps – however frustrating – reminds you what this region was built on, and by whom.

Jo Davey is a freelance travel writer and photographer who specialises in Japan, culture and food. She's also the author of Bradt's upcoming guidebook to Okinawa and Japan's Southwest Islands.

SPOTLIGHT ON THE INDEPENDENT: LUPINE TRAVEL



*Founder of Lupine Travel, **Dylan Harris**, shares why a lifetime of travel inspired him to guide others into adventure.*



My love of travel and adventure has been with me for as long as I can remember. As a child I was obsessed with an atlas I was given for Christmas. I would study the pages for hours, transfixed by the weird and exotic names of towns and cities around the world. My dad would regale me with tales of explorers such as Shackleton and Mallory, while my mum would rent National Geographic videos for me from the library. Despite my obsession, I never even dreamed I'd one day be able to travel to many of these places. Instead, I'd look forward to our annual family holidays where we'd travel to campsites and caravan parks around the UK. I'd spend the drives pouring over the AA road map marking off everywhere we visited and the rest of the time I'd be looking for new hills or mountains to climb.

After I finished university in 2000, I got a job and saved for two years for my first real foreign travel experience. I bought an Interrail pass and travelled across to eastern Europe, an area of the world that had always fascinated me. Growing up in the 80s, every time the news was on it felt like there was another huge story from the region: the Soviet Union, Chernobyl, Ceausescu, the Berlin Wall.

“The journey was so enriching, I felt others would benefit by enjoying the same experiences.”

The constant mention of the ‘iron curtain’ made it sound like a forbidden zone. To finally be able to travel there and see the sights of very recent history was so rewarding. From that trip onwards, I knew that I'd never be happy with a traditional package holiday again.

Any chance I had over the next few years, I would hop on a flight to the continent and travel to as many different places as I could, until, finally, I'd visited every country in Europe. From there, I began to venture further afield and in the mid 2000s I decided to plan an epic train journey across Europe, into Russia and Mongolia and then finally China and North Korea. It took several months of painstaking planning and risky Western Union payments to various individuals in Siberia and China, but the effort was worthwhile – it was a truly life-changing trip. There were so many highlights: the incredible beauty of Olkhon Island in Siberia and Gorkhi-Terelj National Park in Mongolia, the bizarre experience of travelling around North Korea, and of course the train journey itself. I still remember the conversations I had with the ever-changing cast of Russians, shamans in Siberia and nomads in Mongolia. I

think previously I'd always subconsciously had quite a Eurocentric view of the world, but the people I met on this trip really helped to open my mind.

The journey was so enriching that I felt others would really benefit by enjoying the same experiences I'd had. I tried but failed miserably to persuade friends and family to take the same trip. Most people found it too daunting – to put something like this together was, at that time, so difficult and time consuming. The more I thought about it, the more I realised I'd built up a lot of knowledge and a large network of contacts and guides around the world during my years of travelling. And so a thought hit me: why not set up my own travel business and offer these tours myself? If I could take the hassle out of booking trips to those harder-to-reach places, then I was certain that people would want to travel there.

“Why would anyone want to go there?”

The company's main aim would be to offer the possibility of travel to destinations that were either impossible, or at least very difficult, to travel to independently. But I also knew from my experience in a low-paid job that budget and annual leave are also major issues for many people, so I wanted to make sure the trips were



At the Arirang Mass Games, North Korea

always affordable and packed as much as possible into a maximum two-week period.

Lupine Travel launched in 2008 with three initial tours: North Korea, Chernobyl and a journey along the Trans Mongolian railway. Over the next 13 years, we expanded to more and more places, and today offer trips to more than 50 countries. The two questions I'm always asked when I talk to people about the destinations we cover are: "Why would anyone want to go there?" and "Is it

safe?". I can't speak for everyone as people have their own reasons for their travel preferences, but – for me – visiting really off-the-beaten-path areas is the most rewarding type of travel experience. Away from the hordes and well-worn tourist routes, the places you visit and experiences you have feel more genuine. Instead of hawkers trying to sell you souvenirs, you meet inquisitive locals happy to see people visiting their country. And then there are the sights to see and activities to

do. Wildlife safaris in Chad, gorilla trekking in Central African Republic and staying with remote tribes in South Sudan. Trekking to the Tiger's Nest monastery in Bhutan and to Africa's two volcano lava lakes; Erta Ale in Ethiopia and Nyiragongo in DR Congo. Visiting the ancient sites of Persepolis in Iran, Leptis Magna in Libya and Palmyra in Syria, through to the modern ruins of Chernobyl and so much more.

The safety aspect of our tours is something we take very seriously. For destinations such as North Korea, problems only arise by not following the local rules so before travelling we ensure our clients are educated on the behaviour expected from tourists visiting the hermit kingdom. We provide reading material prior to the trip as well as an in-person briefing in China, so everyone is prepped before crossing the border. We also work with experienced tour leaders who know the country inside out to ensure visits run smoothly. For some of our other destinations such as Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, there's no getting away from the fact that parts of these countries are extremely dangerous and not suitable in any way for tourists to visit. My job is to find the areas that are safe.

We have an excellent security-monitoring system in place for every destination for which we run tours. Although general government

advice such as that from the FCO is important, it doesn't always give an up-to-date picture of what the current situation is. So we use a variety of sources to determine this: everything from private security advisors, local government, military, journalists, village chiefs and more. We tailor the system for each destination – for some places it's only necessary to know when a situation is developing, as it can take a while before things go from that point to becoming unsafe, but for other countries such as Afghanistan, we spend real time monitoring. While on the ground, we make calls before moving on to the next stop on the tour as we need to know exactly what the situation is at that exact moment – things can change so quickly there. En route to Aqcha three years ago we got a call to inform us of a possible Taliban presence being spotted in the town, and so we turned back immediately. The info proved correct and their presence increased over the coming months – so much so that it has been off limits to tourists ever since.

It's not always plain sailing

Our clients often comment on how surprised they are at how safe they feel while on a tour, and how it is totally different to how they imagined. I have to remind them that it took years of trial and error to find itineraries that work safely. I've had more



The Great Mosque of Damascus, Syria

© DYLAN HARRIS

than my fair share of hair-raising incidents over the years while carrying out research. Back in the mid 2000s, before I set up the company, I was arrested while travelling through Iran, falsely accused of having an affair with a married woman. It was a truly terrifying experience. I was interrogated and then put under house arrest at my hotel while an investigation took place. The death penalty would

be very likely for a foreigner found guilty of a crime such as this so, until I was able to leave the country, I was genuinely in fear of my life. Going through such an ordeal really helped to harden and prepare me for my future life of travel through less-visited regions.

It stood me in good stead a few years later when I was arrested in Uzbekistan near the



Dylan (right) with *Top Gear's* Richard Hammond and James May

Afghan border and falsely accused (again!) of drug smuggling. I was held for a week and had to go to court but was able to keep calm which is vital in these circumstances. Other occasions have seen me in a bus that was ambushed close to the Iraq border, and being caught in the middle of anti-government riots in Nicaragua where

I had to escape in the middle of the night with balaclava-clad paramilitaries roaming the streets, gunshots ringing out with cars upturned and on fire. Although frightening, these types of incidents have helped me greatly in planning future trips and knowing exactly what red flags to look for and what to avoid.

But these experiences are the exception rather than the rule. Most of the time while tour-leading, the trips go off without a hitch. Meeting so many different characters in our groups is by far one of the highlights of the job. They range widely in age, nationality and background, but they all have their own really interesting stories to tell and it's great to be on a tour with like-minded people passionate about travel.

I've also been lucky enough to find myself involved with a variety of different projects away from the group tours. I worked on *Top Gear's* Chernobyl episode, acting as location scout around Ukraine and obtaining all the relevant permissions that were needed to film within the exclusion zone. I also worked with Damon Albarn (of Gorillaz and Blur fame), taking him to Guinea in search of the 'sacred balafon' (a xylophone used in West Africa) as part of research he was doing on a musical project. More recently our brand of 'alternative travel' acted as inspiration for a series of Adidas Originals trainers. As part of the launch

I set up marketing shoots in Jordan, Vietnam and Greenland, and in the latter I spent an unforgettable afternoon trekking up a mountain by myself in a blizzard, attempting but failing owing to the horrendous weather to scout out the perfect backdrop.

Covid has undoubtedly been our biggest challenge to date, but the time away from travel has given us chance to refresh and plan for the future. We can now finally see the light at the end of the tunnel and are desperate to get back out on the road again! I was desperately looking forward to going back to Afghanistan but we've just had to fully suspend our tours there owing to the declining security situation since the withdrawal of foreign troops. I was also due to take a research trip to Haiti in August, but with the recent assassination of the president the situation over there is too unpredictable so I've had to put that on the back burner until things settle. Other than that though, all being well, I'm really looking forward to going back to Mali later in the year and can't wait to lead our first ever group tour to South Sudan this November.

Lupine Travel specialise in unique and off-the-beaten-track destinations, from Chernobyl to Congo and beyond. For a 10% discount on their tours, see page 60.

IN PICTURES: THE SYMBOLS OF BHUTAN

*Meaning 'Land of the Thunder Dragon' in Bhutanese, this great kingdom prides itself on its commitment to peace, equality and sustainable tourism. Indeed, in 1972 the fourth King of Bhutan famously declared that Gross National Happiness was more important than Gross Domestic Product. Though it is one of the world's most expensive destinations when it comes to travel, Bhutan really is like nowhere else – something that photographer **Bharat Patel** came to realise while on a tour from Paro to Thimphu. Here he shares some of his most memorable experiences learning about the country's unique culture, traditions and spirit.*





Previous page
A masked dancer performing at the Tsechu festival in Paro

Left
Tsechu festivals are an important part of the Bhutanese religious calendar, held in each *dzongkhag* (district) during the tenth month of the lunar calendar (which varies according to place). The Bhutanese people consider these sacred Tsechus a time for members of the family to come together to celebrate their faith, socialise, receive blessings and wash away sins.



Left and following page
One of the most famous and most esoteric dances at Tsechu festivals is the *zhanag* or black hat dance. As with most other dances, it has a deep spiritual significance and is performed as an act of religious ritual, not as a piece of entertainment.
Zhanag dancers wear a long silk robe tied around the hip so that it whirls smoothly and elegantly while performing the traditional whirling movements. On their heads are black hats, each with a flat, circular base on top of which are tantric diagrams or mantras. On the two sides of the central stakes are motifs of snakes, dragons, foliage and flames. The shoulder cover has a wrathful motif; a presentation of the tantric ritual of slaying the unruly demonic forces.





Left
All dances are accompanied by rhythmic beats from drums, cymbals and – the most prominent of them all – longhorns which, in a mountainous region like Bhutan, can be heard for miles around. The slow-paced music is deeply spiritual and intended to take the dancers into a trance.

Following page
It is inevitable that, in country that is profoundly Buddhist, there would be a Buddha statue large enough to represent their devotion.

It is found on a hill just outside the capital, Thimpu. Made from bronze, gilded in gold and standing 54m tall, Great Buddha Dordenma was built in 2006 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck – although construction wasn't completed until 2015.

Under the hollow statue and along the inside walls of the plinth, there are 125,000 smaller 8- and 12-inch statues also made of bronze.





Left

One of the most prominent features of Bhutan are the prayer flags seen fluttering across the kingdom. Considered sacred and holy with deep religious and cultural significance, they are found on mountain tops, bridges, monasteries, stupas, temples and by the roadside. It is believed that good karma will come to the person who mounts the flags – and that said blessing will also be carried to others by the wind.

Each colour has its own meaning. **White (air)** brings good fortune, **blue (sky/space)** brings health and longevity, **red (fire)** offers fulfilment, **yellow (earth)** gives victory over obstacles, and **green (water)** brings compassion.





Previous page and left

This small, unassuming monastery of fertility, Chimi Lhakhang, was built in 1499 in honour of Lama Drukpa Kunley, a Buddhist monk who was popularly known as the 'Divine Madman' for his unorthodox and blasphemous teachings. He is credited with introducing the practice of phallus paintings in Bhutan and placing statues of them on rooftops, inside homes and on the outer walls of houses (see following page).

But that wasn't his only nickname. Drukpa Kunley was also called the 'Fertility Saint', and many rural women from all over Bhutan would go to the monastery to get blessings for themselves or for their young. The residing Lama would tap the women on the head with a phallus made of wood or bone as a blessing to beget children.





Left

Tsa tsa are little memorials to the dead. After the cremation and ceremony, the deceased's ashes are moulded into 108 mini conical-shaped stupas by monks - 108 is an auspicious number for both Buddhists and Hindus for many reasons, both mathematical and spiritual.

Painted white, gold or just left as their natural colour, the tiny stupas are then placed in a location dear to the deceased - though these are usually sheltered, to offer some protection from the elements.



Left and following page
Thimphu's most prominent landmark is the Chorten Stupa, which is completely different from Bhutan's other stupas as it does not enshrine human remains. For many locals (particularly Thimphu's older residents), it is the focus of their daily worship and throughout the day people can be seen circumambulating in a clockwise direction around the chorten, keeping it on the right - which, in Buddhism and Hinduism, is considered purer than the left.

As in all Buddhist places of worship, one feels a sense of peace and calm here.



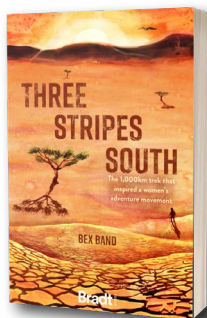
You can follow Bharat Patel on [Instagram](#) or visit his [website](#) to stay tuned on his latest exhibitions and books.

OUT THIS MONTH!

Three Stripes South

Bex Band

£9.99



In 2016, desperate for a drastic change, Bex Band decided to walk the length of Israel with her husband:

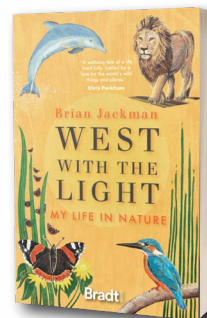
a 1,000km trek including a dangerous crossing through the vast Negev Desert. She'd never done anything like it before and the experience changed her life, building back her confidence and self-esteem.

Three Stripes South tells the story of this transformative adventure – battling heat, exhaustion, self-doubt and prejudice – and the new life Bex built for herself when she got home, founding the Love Her Wild women's adventure community. Fast forward to today and Bex has transformed her life, tackling gender inequality in adventure travel, and championing women in the outdoors through regular talks, blogging and leading women on adventures all over the world. Nominated for multiple awards for her work advocating women in adventure, her story is an inspiration.

West with the Light

Brian Jackman

£9.99



After decades spent travelling and writing about the places and wildlife that have inspired him, Brian Jackman – one of the world's most experienced naturalists – has turned his focus on to the story of his inspirational life. *West with the Light* sweeps through Jackman's wartime evacuation, grammar school, Soho jazz clubs of the '50s and the navy to a career in travel journalism to which his first marriage gave way before he found a new, true and more lasting love that abides to this day in his beloved rural Dorset. Beginning with memories of Edwardian London and the growth of suburbia, it provides a vivid portrayal of post-war travel and the rise of a new sort of tourism – ecotourism – set against the background of the most turbulent decades the world has ever known. Rippling across continents with Jackman's natural charm and hallmark stylish prose, his recollections include lively first-hand encounters with pioneering wildlife conservationists like George and Joy Adamson,

Iain and Saba Douglas-Hamilton, Richard Leakey, Gavin Maxwell and Jonathan Scott. Travellers, wildlife enthusiasts, writers and anyone with a love of adventure will adore this book.

Answers to the Bradt Travel Teaser



1. Uganda (Grey crowned crane)



2. Dominica (Imperial Amazon parrot)



3. Zambia (African fish eagle)



4. Ecuador (Condor)



5. Guatemala (Resplendent quetzal)



6. Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Bird, a national emblem representing a bateleur or African fish eagle)



7. Mexico (Crested caracara or Mexican eagle)



8. Papua New Guinea (Bird of paradise)

THE TRAVEL CLUB MEMBER BENEFITS

Our aim for The Travel Club is not only to entertain and inspire, and to bring together like-minded travellers, but to save our members money!

5% off tours with Lupine Travel

[Lupine Travel](#) are a UK tour company specialising in unique destinations and travel ideas at affordable prices. Launched in 2008 with tours to North Korea, Chernobyl and on the Trans Mongolian Railway, the company now runs trips to over 30 off-the-beaten-track destinations.

For your 5% discount, just email info@lupinetravel.co.uk and mention that you are a member of The Travel Club when booking.

Save on Sicily with ISHKAR

[ISHKAR](#) brings a more nuanced side to destinations typically viewed through a single lens and covered with one-sided narratives. They travel to remarkable destinations such as Yemen, the DRC and Pakistan, all rich in natural beauty and culture and steeped in fascinating history – but rarely visited by foreign tourists.

On top of this, they also run a [photography tour](#) to Sicily, exploring a different side to the island and

delving into its fascinating history with the expert help of award-winning local photographer, Glauco Canalis. The Travel Club members can get a 7% discount on this trip (departing September 2021) – just use the code **BradtSic21ISHKAR** at checkout.

Aardvark Safaris: 5% off all tours

Aardvark Safaris specialise in tailor-made, high-quality African safaris away from the crowds. Just email mail@aardvarksafaris.com and mention that you are a Travel Club member when booking.

The Adventure Creators: 10% off all Pyrenees tours

This [adventure outfit](#) based in the Pyrenees specialises in tailor-made, outdoor holidays in the region. To claim, quote **Bradt10** when enquiring.

Adventurous Ink: get your first month free

[Adventurous Ink](#) is a unique subscription service. Each month you'll receive a new book or journal featuring writers, photographers and illustrators who really 'get' the great outdoors.





Adventurous Ink is a unique subscription service

Get your first month free with the code **BRADTINK** (valid when purchasing a two-month subscription).

Bidroom: Free Plus membership

Founded with the mission to make the hotel industry fair for both travellers and hotels, [Bidroom](#) is the first membership-based marketplace for travel lovers. Hotels get bookings with no commission, and instead they offer discounts and added perks to members

such as free room upgrades, complimentary welcome drinks, free parking and discounts on spa treatments and dining experiences. The Travel Club members can get a one-year Plus membership for free (normally £49) to unlock bigger discounts and a wider selection of hotels and partner extras. [Click here](#) to sign up.

The Cook's Place: 10% off cooking courses

Based in North Yorkshire, [The Cook's Place](#) is an independent cookery school offering a range of courses. Enter the code **BTG21** at checkout (valid on all half- and full-day courses until 30 November 2021).

Dog-Friendly Weekends: Free subscription

There's a new title coming to the Bradt list in 2022: *Dog-Friendly Weekends: 50 breaks in Britain for you and your dog*, written by award-winning travel writer and canine lover Lottie Gross. Lottie is in the process of carrying out her research, and has launched a regular newsletter with trip ideas, hotel recommendations and shout-outs to lovely pubs and restaurants worth travelling for – all suitable for dogs, of course. The Travel Club members can get their subscription for free (normally £40); just click this [link](#) to sign up.

Feast Box: 30% off plus a free bottle of wine

Taste the world in your kitchen with [Feast Box](#), the UK's top-rated recipe box specialising in over 50 of the world's tastiest cuisines. Enjoy 30% off your first two boxes plus a free bottle of wine; just use the code **BRADTFEAST** at checkout.

HÔRD: 10% off everything

Yorkshire-based [HÔRD](#) create meaningful and high-quality gifts and apparel for the adventurous and wild among us. Just use the code **HORDXTRAVELCLUB10** at checkout.

Inertia Network: 5% off any booking

[Inertia Network](#) run immersive expeditions that support local communities in remote and threatened regions. Enter the code **Bradt2021** in the 'How Did You Hear About Us' box when making your enquiry.

Muddy Boots: 10% off Discovery Walks

Launched in 2020, [Muddy Boots Walking Holidays](#) run self-guided walking holidays and guided 'Discovery Walks' in the Yorkshire Dales. Walks

range from 2½ to 8 hours, with routes suitable for all ages and abilities. To claim your 10% discount, use the code **THETRAVELCLUB** at checkout.

National Geographic Traveller (UK): three issues for £3

With a reputation for compelling storytelling and a focus on off-the-beaten-track travel, *National Geographic Traveller (UK)* is a favourite with intrepid travellers. [Click here](#) to get your first three issues for just £3.

Native Eye: 5% off tours

[Native Eye](#) specialise in small-group tours to some of the world's most adventurous destinations from Chad and Congo to Saudi Arabia and Iraq. For 5% off any bookings made until 31 December 2021 (for tours in 2021 or 2022), contact them on 01473 328546 or info@nativeeyetravel.com and state you're a member.

Natural Britain: 10% off

[Natural Britain](#) are a new UK-focused tour operator with a focus on slow and sustainable travel, and are the first operator in the country to introduce carbon labelling for every trip. Enjoy 10% off two brand-new tours, [Hidden Hampshire](#) and [Champing in Natural Northants](#); just use the code **BRADTNB** at checkout.

Safari Drive: 10% off vehicle and equipment hire

[Safari Drive](#) are a UK tour operator who have specialised in creating bespoke self-drive safari holidays in Africa since 1993. Just mention that you're a Travel Club member when booking.

Sunvil: 5% off Alentejo bookings

Award-winning holiday specialist [Sunvil](#) is offering The Travel Club members a 5% saving on any new booking to Portugal's Alentejo for travel before 31 December 2021. This is in addition to the two free PCR tests per person for stays of five nights or more (saving £120pp). To book, visit their website or call 020 8758 4722.

Tonic: 10% off subscriptions

[Tonic](#) is a brand-new biannual drink and travel magazine. Simply use the code **BRADTTC10** at checkout to redeem your discount, which currently also includes free UK and EU shipping.

Travel Africa: 20% off subscriptions

Founded in 1997, *Travel Africa* remains the only international magazine dedicated to



Tonic! is a new biannual drink and travel magazine

exploring Africa's attractions, wildlife and cultures. [Click here](#) and enter the code **BRADT2020** at checkout.

Untamed Borders: 10% off group tours

Adventure travel company [Untamed Borders](#) runs bespoke trips and small-group adventures to some of the world's most interesting and inaccessible places. Use code **BRADT10** to receive 10% off any 2021/2022 group departure.

Wanderlust: £10 off subscriptions

This legendary travel magazine is still going strong after nearly 30 years, offering issues packed full of articles on wildlife and cultural travel. [Click here](#) and enter the code **WLMAG20** at checkout.

COMING NEXT MONTH...

In SEPTEMBER's issue of The Travel Club...

A sneak preview of our new guide to Britain and Ireland's dark skies, how Estonia has transformed from a Soviet backwater to the tech giant of Europe, and Hilary Bradt reflects on 20 years of our travel-writing competition.