THE TRAVEL CLUB

E-ZINE #10: FEBRUARY, 2021

On the road again

Touring France and Germany by campervan

The L word: part two

Looking back on 30 years of memorable encounters across Africa

The 'secret' debate

Should little-known beauty spots remain hidden or open to all?

The White-Capped Mountain

How climate change is impacting Mt Kenya

Bradt GUIDES

TRAVEL TAKEN SERIOUSLY

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An elephant in Loisaba Conservancy, Kenya © Ross Mastrovich

Ardent campervanner **Caroline Mills** shares some of her favourite road trips in France and Germany on page 9 © ROMAN BABAKIN/SHUTTERSTOCK

THE WHITE-CAPPED MOUNTAIN: HOW CLIMATE CHANGE IS IMPACTING MT KENYA

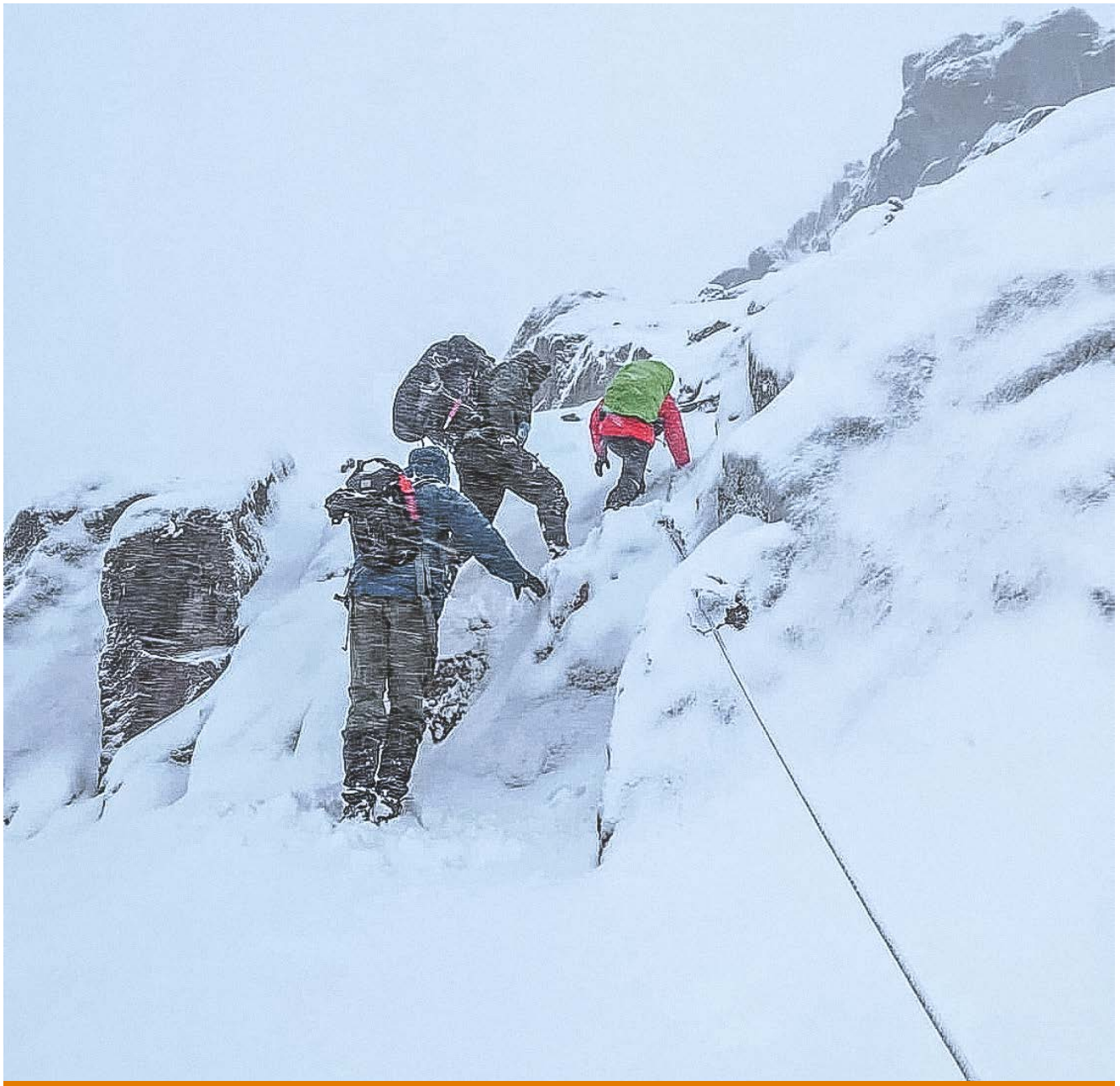
With a small window open for travel during the pandemic and a lusting quest for adventure, writer **Geri Moore** *set off for a month to explore one of her favourite countries. What she never expected to find was a blizzard on the Equator.*

Surrounded by the three peaks of Mt Kenya, Austrian Hut is the highest mountain hut in the country © GERI MOORE

Etched into the wooden bedframe above me are the words: 'only a hill, but all of life to me, up here, between the sky and the sea'. These sentiments tie into my thoughts of how lucky I am to be here, climbing a mountain, when almost all travel has been banned for the last eight months.

I attempt to fall asleep in an effort to gain as much energy as I can for our summit push in a few hours, but find it difficult at a core-chilling -10°C. In the meantime, I'm enjoying one of the most spectacular shows that I have ever witnessed. The wooden hut that I'm lying in, built by the Austrians in 1973, sits on a small plateau at an altitude of 4,790m (15,715ft) surrounded by a fortress made up of the three highest peaks in Kenya. Batian, the second tallest peak in Africa, stands majestically against a clear, midnight carpet of an infinity of stars. These cloudless skies aren't unusual in Africa but below us, giant, towering cumulonimbus grow so high the tops reach our level, lighting up the snow-capped peaks above with their lightning storm.

It has taken us and a team of seven, led by our 25-year-old guide Andrey Josephs – known as Joe – five days to reach this point. Joe has Mt Kenya ingrained within him. He tells me that, as a child, he'd walk to and from school, his eyeline pointed upwards daydreaming over the dramatic peaks. Joe's father, Paul, is also part of the team, himself a lead guide of the mountain for decades. On



Knee-deep snow and a horizontal blizzard – not ideal climbing conditions!

this trip he's designated team cook and produces delicious meals from food and equipment carried by the rest of us – with the odd trout that he catches from the glacial lakes found above 4,000m.

The plan is to reach the summit before sunrise, so it is necessary to start the 300m ascent in the pitch black of the early hours. I open the door of the Austrian Hut at 4am, in shock to be greeted not by the clear starry skies of a few hours ago but by knee-deep snow and a horizontal blizzard. Paul appears from around the corner with a grin on his face, 'I haven't seen conditions like this since the early 90s!' It takes me a few moments to realise that we are still going, right now, and shortly after four head torches point towards the ridgeline, piercing through the shower of white, falling from all directions.

The route that we could clearly make out the day before is now completely indistinguishable below the mass of snow. Unperturbed, Paul heads in front carefully testing each step, navigating the terrain like the back of his hand. Every now and then his foot sinks thigh-deep into the snow, which he reacts to with a chuckle of enjoyment, clearly revelling in the morning's conditions.

"Paul heads in front carefully testing each step, navigating the terrain like the back of his hand."

The fixed ropes have disappeared well beneath the snow, making the climb incredibly challenging – having to haul ourselves up steep cliffsides with nothing to hold on to, balancing on sheets of snow that continually slip away from under us. I would never have dreamt of being in these sorts of conditions so close to the Equator. The snow was falling so hard that each flake stung my face – the only way to continue was to keep looking downwards with the odd glance up to make sure we were heading in the right direction. Every footstep was hard work, but I found myself smiling and couldn't help but think, this is awesome!

After two hours we reached the Lenana summit. Last night, Joe told us that on a clear day we would be able to see Kilimanjaro in Tanzania from here. Today I could see only about 10m in front, but for some reason I felt even luckier than those who had gazed upon Africa's highest point. Yesterday, as we hit 4,500m and the snow started falling, Daniel – one of our porters, 60 years old and self-professed technology illiterate – sat trying to work out how to take a selfie with his old Nokia phone, attempting to capture himself with the snowy background. 'I've never once seen him take a selfie in almost 20 years,' says Joe. 'He can't believe he's seeing Mt Kenya like it was before – no-one thought it was possible to see snow like this anymore.' I was just beginning to really appreciate sharing this moment with the team.

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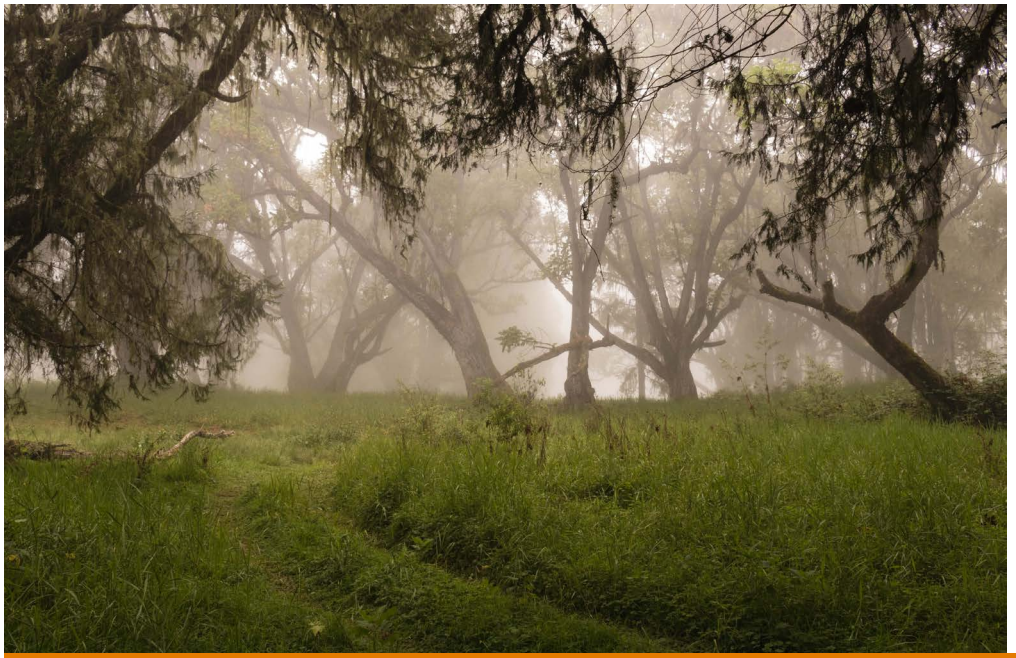
I have trekked many mountainous regions, including the Himalayas and the Alps, but never have I come across anything like Mt Kenya, the topography of which changes dramatically even with the slightest increase in altitude. Millions of years ago, the dense rainforests that stretch across the DRC and Uganda reached Mt Kenya. These have since retreated thousands of miles, leaving just a small area around the lower levels of the mountain. This is exactly what I imagine a prehistoric jungle to look like: colossal African redwood trees grow so tall, their snake-like vines drape from a canopy so thick that only a handful of sun beams can penetrate.

Elephants and leopards still live here but, with a decreasing population, they're extremely difficult to find. Joe shows me a photo of a leopard that he caught on camera in March, much larger and more muscular than its slender, savannah cousins. Only a few days later we pass through Alpine tundra, where no trees grow but peculiar



Mt Kenya's topography is extremely varied, home to both African redwoods and Alpine tundra

cabbage groundsel – a spiky, shrub-like plant – takes the stage. The plant's thick leathery leaves close up to protect its inner bud during the sub-zero night temperatures.

Joe is from the Nanyuki tribe, who have lived on the lands surrounding Mt Kenya for thousands of years. Although ancient traditions and ways of life still exist, the last half a century has seen a dramatic change to the landscape of the mountain. From the 1970s, Mt Kenya suffered almost three decades of deforestation to pave settlements for the rapidly growing population. This altered the climate of the area (along with global climate change), and the mountain once known as 'white-capped' Mt Kenya – marketed by the British in the early 1900s as an 'exotic ski destination' – permanently changed.

Most of its glaciers have now completely melted. The largest, Lewis Glacier, is currently 90% of its original size and is predicted to disappear within the next ten years. Nowadays Joe can't even safely tell his clients what to expect. The rainy seasons sometimes go for weeks without rain and the non-rainy seasons can rain non-stop for days. The amount of snow we experienced hadn't occurred for decades. On our second day we fell victim to the unpredicted continuous rain, which consisted of a heavy downpour over several hours. Rivers had overflowed to the extent that we had to pull down trees to make crossings usually jumped across, and dry dirt paths used to climb up the mountain turned into a succession of streams and small waterfalls.

There was one positive from the unexpected rain, however: it forced us to camp for two nights on the shores of Lake Michelson to give our drenched kit time to dry off. We couldn't have been more fortunate. This stunning glacial lake, sat just above 4,000m, is framed by volcanic rock precipices, hundreds of metres high, dating

A tale of two terrains: the snow caps of Batian Peak tower over the flora of Mackinder Valley

back three million years. The lake is so deep that a helicopter is said to be lying on the bed, too far below the surface for divers to even gauge the depth. Our day off was spent exploring the nearby caves that formed natural and refreshing showers, fishing trout for lunch, hiking waterfalls and sat around the campfire. One of the team even swam in the lake, shortly emerging a rare human shade of purple – one stage away from hypothermia.

Joe loves the mountain and it's easy to understand why. He's seen the continuing effects of climate change, both caused by local and global factors, and he's passionate about educating others about the importance of the delicately balanced two-way relationship between humans and our ecosystems. 'The rainfall caused by deforestation has been so heavy and continuous this year that it's caused flooding, landslides and subsequently displaced numerous families from their homes,' he tells me.

The Covid-19 pandemic hasn't helped, with tourism in Kenya dropping by over 90% in 2020. As a consequence, money coming into conservation has also decreased. The one silver lining, however, is that for the first time Kenyans are beginning to visit the mountain in large numbers, and are witnessing first-hand the importance of climate change in their own country. As Joe continues to explore himself, he lectures and works with charities to teach people, especially children, on how their small actions can have a huge impact.

Just nine hours after summiting we're back in the thick warmth of Kenya's lower altitudes – down jackets swapped for t-shirts and waterproof boots for flip flops. We're all sat around a table enjoying barbecued lamb kebabs. I look around at the beaming faces of the team, emotions that I know are unusually elated. Each of them can't wait to get back to their families to tell them about the last few days, and – more importantly – that we should be doing everything that we can to protect our planet.

Geri Moore is an airline pilot and avid traveller. She regularly contributes to various travel publications focusing on remote travel, with a special interest in ethnic culture, wildlife and conservation. For anyone interested in climbing Mt Kenya, contact Joe at andreyjosephs@gmail.com.

CAMPING ROAD TRIPS:

THE BEST OF FRANCE AND GERMANY

To celebrate the release of her inspirational new book, ardent campervanner **Caroline Mills** *shares some of her favourite routes across France and Germany aimed at seasoned road trippers and absolute novices alike.*

Views over Col d'Aubisque, Pyrenees, France © CAROLINE MILLS

Looking out over Col d'Iraty, France

There cannot be a child that hasn't, at some stage in their childhood, draped a duvet cover over a couple of chairs and 'camped'. That hasn't created a den in their bedroom or garden, had a picnic – pretend or otherwise – or a midnight feast and devoured an entire packet of Wotsits and Jammie Dodgers by torchlight or attempted to sleep in a makeshift tent. That was me. That was my children.

Camping, in all its guises, became a part of my life and defined many moments throughout childhood and has continued to remain a focal point. Since my three children successively arrived, we have ventured on many camping road trips as mother and son/daughter(s), with all three children, or I alone, touring across the entirety of Europe from France and Germany to Spain and Scandinavia. Most of the time, we've 'wild camped' legally, stayed in *aires* and *Stellplätze* or pitched in permissive private spaces, all in addition to campsites. We never book ahead; rarely do we know where we're likely to be or stay until we choose to pitch up for the night. We don't think anything of it; it's what we do, but plenty of people have commented on the mettle to get-up-and-go, to camp, to drive a motorhome in a foreign country 'without a man'. It's simply the man in our lives unfortunately can't come with us.

As you'll see in my new book, France and Germany have no shortage of spectacular routes, offering everything from sensational views to sublime food and wine. So buckle up and join me on a tour of a few of my favourites.

Best for: epic views

Bavaria & Baden-Württemberg; Berchtesgaden to Lindau; 280 miles, 5 days

What is it about the smell of freshly mown grass? Especially when it's on a gently sloping mountain pasture and you can hear the sound of cowbells merrily tinkling as their brown and white-patched owners tear at luscious green turf. There's an emerald lake that sparkles in the sunshine, its cool water fed by precipitous waterfalls that tumble from a craggy mountain backdrop.

This is, in effect, Germany's Alpine Road all rolled into one. The signposted tourist

route gently meanders through blissful Alpine countryside between Königsee (Germany's highest lake) and Lindau, on the northeastern edge of the massive Bodensee that divides Germany from Switzerland and Austria. In between we pass pine forests, electric-blue reservoirs and a panorama of peaks, all the while stopping off to explore charming Baroque villages like Bad Tölz and Füssen. Quintessential Bavaria at its finest.

Best for: gardens

Île de France; Chantilly to Vaux-le-Vicomte; 240 miles, 4 days

If you like gardens, you'll love Île de France. This northern region is brimming with magnificent compositions of celebrated landscape gardener, André le Nôtre – France's answer to Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, although you could say it is the other way around given that le Nôtre was born 100 years earlier.

The starting point: Berchtesgaden, set against the towering backdrop of Watzmann

Circling Paris, this rather grand route visits some of the country's most spectacular homes and gardens, beginning at the historic Château de Chantilly (birthplace of Chantilly cream) and finishing at Vaux-le-Vicomte – often regarded as le Nôtre's finest garden. Along the way we stop off at other big-hitters, including Château de Sceaux, with its glorious parkland, and the most famous of them all – the Palace of Versailles.

Best for: beer

The Ardennes; Stenay to Dinant; 304 miles, 4 days

When Belgium and France joined forces to promote a new Beer Route in the cross-border region of the Ardennes, it moved up my list of places to go. But don't expect to turn up in the region and follow a brown-signposted tourist trail; this 350-mile route is of the modern age, downloadable on to a smartphone, where you create your own itinerary.

The four-day journey explores the captivating towns of this region of river valleys, with its mountain-high sides and shiveringly tight bends. And in among are springing up dozens of microbreweries, adding to the weighty collection of well-established Trappist beers and village brasseries. Highlights include Stenay, home to its very own Beer Museum, Haybes, with its microbrewery that makes a 'Stockport' beer

tribute to the English town that helped it to rebuild after the German destruction in World War I, and Dinant, birthplace of the well-known Leffe Abbey beer. *Santé*!

Best for: beaches

Pays de la Loire/Nouvelle-Aquitaine; Saint-Nazaire to Saint-Pée-sur-Nivelle; 780 miles, 6 days

The southwest coast of France has long been a popular destination for beach-goers, with the likes of La Rochelle and Les Sables-d'Olonne drawing a cosmopolitan crowd for years. But there are many other smaller seaside towns to enjoy here, and this coastal route takes in some of the best – traversing marshlands, pine forests and Europe's biggest sand dune along the way.

Bordeaux and Biarritz are high points of the journey (the former for its wine, the latter for its glitz and glamour), as is the town of Fouras, with its plethora of oyster restaurants, and charming Saint-Jean-de-Luz, where tapas is the dish of the day. And every few kilometres there's another sun-drenched beach to enjoy, each with its own beauty and character.

Best for: food

Provence; Apt to Aigues-Mortes; 160 miles, 4 days

Silvery green olive trees are baked in parched soil, their stunted snake-like trunks blackened with age. Opening the door of the motorhome as we pull up beside argentine slivered rocks drenched in sunlight at the summit of Les Alpilles, a wave of scent hits me with such potency, it's like a beguiling linctus. Rosemary, thyme, lavender, marjoram, pine, all mingle together in a heady concoction that explodes among the senses. Earlier, riotous coloured cloths in customary Provençal patterns had covered the tables of open-air cafés in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, each groaning with a plentiful supply of mouth-watering platters.

This is just a typical scene in Provence, and this 160-mile, four-day route across the region

The vibrant town of Dinant, Belgium, where our beer tour ends © PAJOR PAWEL, SHUTTERSTOCK

Freshly picked strawberries are a common sight at roadside stalls across Provence

explores some of France's freshest produce Starting in the small town of Apt, the self-proclaimed glacé fruit capital of the world, we pass through France's premier melon-growing centre, Cavaillon, before traversing a patchwork of vineyards, lavender fields and olive groves in the shadow of Les Alpilles. As we cross the Camargue, a regional natural park that covers much of the Rhône delta, small sheds appear on the roadside every few miles, each offering a variety of regional specialities: Camargue rice, salt and olive oils, Vins des Sables (Wine of the Sands) and Saucisson Taureau, a charcuterie sausage made from Camargue bulls. For me, this is what touring is all about.

Best for: history

Lower Saxony; Celle to Bad Iburg; 263 miles, 6 days

It's a story that would rival any script from a soap opera. There's scandal, murder, illegitimate children and political drama, and all this in a pre-modern era when society was not so liberally minded. It's no wonder the Georgians aren't part of the school curriculum.

The region around Hannover offers plenty of windows into this dramatic past: the architecturally rich town of Celle, with its half-timbered houses and striking palaces; the fairytale *schlösser* of Marienburg and Ahlden (one built as an act of love, one used as a prison); and, of course, Hannover itself, where love affairs and suspicious deaths seem to pervade every palace. Fans of *The Crown* can eat their heart out on this route.

THE L WORD: A PERSONAL STORY OF ANIMAL OBSESSION

In the second of this two-part series, **Mike Unwin** *looks back on 30 years of memorable encounters across Africa and reflects on how the nature of his experience has changed over time.*

After my first leopard sighting, others followed. Over my nine remaining months in Zimbabwe I saw the cat on five more occasions: four in Hwange and one in the Lower Zambezi Valley. Each remains engraved on my memory with a precision absent from many arguably more important moments in my life.

The first two Hwange encounters were in the company of an old family friend who was backpacking around Africa with her boyfriend and had fetched up at our flat over Christmas. Both took place near a waterhole called Caterpillar Pan: first, an evening glimpse of a cub at the base of a camelthorn tree; then, the following morning, a longer look at a female and, presumably, the same cub as they padded down to drink in front of a line of unhappy giraffes. The latter was my first opportunity to ogle a wild leopard at leisure. My guests, I felt, were not sufficiently impressed, having already

'done' big game in East Africa. They'd also made a right mess of the flat.

The next three sightings came in June 1990, when my old school friend Simon joined me for a holiday in the last month of my contract. Hwange was our first stop, and on the first night we met a huge male leopard padding down the road just outside Main Camp. He sniffed our tyres and spray-marked the verge before sauntering into the bush. Neither of us dared breathe. Then, near Sinamatella Camp in the north, we watched a female half-heartedly stalking a much-too-big waterbuck along the shore of Mandavu Dam. And finally, a week later, while canoeing the Zambezi in the country's wild northeast, we watched the trip's third leopard dash up the river bank in a blur of spots. Simon almost lost his paddle as he grabbed, too late, for his camera.

By the time I returned from Zimbabwe, I had the 'see a wild leopard' box decisively ticked. Now, at last I had some first-hand authority on the subject: I knew how the animal moved, behaved and appeared in the wild. I also knew how it felt to see one. Today, reflecting on these early experiences, the intensity that they still evoke, I realise that they were more than simply wildlife sightings. They were deeply personal moments: pegs upon which I now hang entire episodes of my life – the people, the places, the ups and downs. Rather as some may measure their life in jobs or cars, I appeared to be calibrating mine in leopard sightings.

"They were deeply personal moments: pegs upon which I now hang entire episodes of my life."

Three years later, things had moved on. My marriage was over (it turned out I was right about her not wanting to be in Zimbabwe – among other things), and back in London I had meandered from teaching into publishing. In September 1993, I found myself heading out to Africa again. This time my destination was the tiny, quirky kingdom of Swaziland (now Eswatini), where I embarked on what would become a five-year stint producing school textbooks for the Ministry of Education. The experience was rather different from Zimbabwe. Back then, on a local teacher's salary and largely without my own vehicle, safari opportunities had been limited. Now, my new job brought a house, a car and a reasonable salary. With the money and the freedom to do exactly what I wanted, I took every chance to get out into the bush.

Swaziland itself did not offer realistic hopes of seeing a wild leopard, although a handful wander the mountainous border regions and I did once find old tracks along a trail in Malolotja Nature Reserve. A mere forty minutes' drive north into neighbouring South Africa, however, was Kruger National Park. This was Leopard Central, and I racked up a steady drip-feed of sightings. Excursions elsewhere, including longer safaris to Namibia and Tanzania, brought a few more. By the time I returned to the UK in December 2008, I'd managed another seventeen encounters. This, added to my six in Zimbabwe, brought a respectable lifetime total of twenty-three.

As with Zimbabwe, I can still describe each of these latest encounters in exhaustive detail. Suffice it to say for now, they expanded my leopard know-how considerably. I watched leopards hunting, leopards up trees and leopards at night. I could identify their four-toed tracks – distinguishing them from a lion's – and recognise the alarm calls they provoked among other animals, from the clucking of guinea-fowl and scolding of squirrels to the snort of impala and shrieking pandemonium of baboons.

And, of course, there was the voice of the leopard itself. That resonant, rhythmic rasping, like a heavy saw cutting through timber, seemed at odds with the animal's modest size. As deep and menacing as a lion's, it always seemed to start more unexpectedly and cut off more abruptly, often

going unrepeated and leaving that spine-chilling sense of an assassin moving unseen through the darkness. For me, just the sound of a leopard was often more powerful than an actual sighting.

Best of all, though, was meeting leopards on foot. This twice happened on guided wilderness trails in the Kruger, and the first time was a real thriller. Our small party was taking a break overlooking a dry riverbed when the crunch of bone alerted our guides to something on the other side. Convinced the noise came from lions on a kill, they led us down to take a look. We were crossing the sandy watercourse and clambering up the bank via the roots of a big sycamore fig tree when the foliage rustled horribly close overhead. There followed a low growl, a snarling face at point-blank and then a thud, as the leopard dropped out of the back of the tree and vanished. One guide, with admirable reflexes, had even swung his rifle off his shoulder. Once our heart rates had slowed, we looked around and spied the half-eaten bushbuck slung over the branch. It was a veritable Jim Corbett moment.

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Today's safari goer might wonder why I preserve the memory of those early leopard sightings in such loving detail. After all, leopards are pretty standard fare on any modern safari package to the likes of Masai Mara or Okavango. Rarities like aardvarks would surely make for more interesting anecdotes.

At that point in my life, however, all my leopard sightings had been my own. With the exception of the guided walking safaris, it was I, or whichever friend of family member I was with, who had found and seen the leopard. This intensified the sense of discovery – and also of good fortune: leopards were a needle-in-the-haystack find, I was told, so how lucky was I when a particular individual opted to cross the road right in front of me?

Yes, there were ways of improving the odds. I'd go out at dawn and dusk, take night drives, explore the locations of recent reported sightings and comb all the standard hideaways: the granite kopjes, riverine loop roads and so on. But leopards always seemed to break the rules: often a sighting came when least expected, in open country or during the middle of the day.

Looking back, my hit rate was not especially good. The lists I still keep from the Kruger reveal that I saw a leopard roughly once in every three and a half visits. And there were many more misses than hits. I'd meet people back in camp who'd just had a mind-blowing encounter along a road I'd taken earlier that very day, and would insist on showing me their photos. This punctured any delusion I harboured that my leopard knowledge gave me some kind of special leopard-detector sixth sense.

The hit-and-miss nature of my experience just amplified the leopard myth: that these capricious animals obey no known laws of animal behaviour; that sightings come entirely on *their* terms. It was easy to become superstitious. I would agonise over a fork in the road: do I turn left, where I missed a leopard yesterday, or right, where I haven't been before? Perhaps it knows I've just been watching wild dogs so will feel I don't deserve any further reward for the day. Or perhaps it admires my dedication in stopping to watch a nest-building cisticola and will thus deign to reveal itself.

Either way, I followed my nose and learned as I went along. In the end, my sightings – and those of fellow safari-goers I met – came down to chance: you put in the hours, scrutinised the bush until your eyeballs ached and sometimes you got lucky. This, I had concluded, was the leopard lottery.

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Towards the end of my time in Swaziland, however, something changed. I learned that another kind of

safari exists: one on which you are driven around by guides who know where to find the leopards. Often, these guides are intimately acquainted with individual cats – a territorial male here, a female with cubs there – and can lead you straight to them; or if they can't, will get on the radio to ask a colleague. What's more, the animals are often habituated to people, so you can spend hours with them: watching them hunting, mating, raising cubs and perhaps, if you ask nicely, even playing scrabble. Seeing leopards, I discovered, is not so difficult.

I was taken aback. Isn't that cheating? I thought leopards had to be earned; that you had to put in the hard yards – over years, if necessary. The sense of exclusivity behind my own history with the animal, that long journey from childhood dream to hard-earned reality, evaporated. Living and working in sleepy Swaziland, looking for wildlife on my own terms, I simply hadn't appreciated how the safari industry had bloomed; how it now offered ever more impressive wildlife-watching opportunities to an ever-greater market.

Back in England, I found that leopards were everywhere: not only the decorative ones that had always adorned T-shirts and greeting cards but also tantalising images of real ones splashed across brochures and websites for new wildlife travel companies. Every other person I spoke to had now been on safari, it seemed, and yes, they had seen a leopard. ('At least I think so. Or was it a cheetah?') Meanwhile, *Big Cat Diary* piped a leopard soap opera into our homes on prime-time TV. And coffee table books such as *The Leopards of Londolozi* were crammed with stunning pictures of the cats in action, doing things I'd once thought unphotographable. Leopards were now truly for everybody. To my shame, I hated it.

"Leopards were now truly for everybody. To my shame, I hated it."

This reaction was, of course, selfish and small-minded. I knew, deep down, that the democratisation of my favourite (OK, I admit it) animal could only be a good thing. Not only did it allow more people to share in the excitement I felt, but it also opened more eyes to the wider wonders of the natural world. The more we see of leopards, I knew, the more we learn about them. And the more we learn about them, the more we value them and want to protect them. In conservation terms, the newfound accessibility of this animal could only be a positive thing.

I appreciated, also, that my take on watching leopards was a very personal one. I could hardly expect others to follow the journey I'd taken. It was not my business how people got to see a leopard, and whether that sighting meant the same to them as it might have done to me. Others probably got things out of their experience that I didn't; appreciated other things that I overlooked. It's each to their own, I realised. We can't all be obsessed.

My ambivalence back then feels especially hypocritical now when I consider the direction that my life has taken since my early leopard-watching days. Four years after returning from Swaziland, married for a second time and with a young daughter, I left publishing to become a freelance wildlife travel writer. This has enabled me to join guided safaris and wildlife adventures all over the world. It's been wonderful – of course! Private guides have shown me animals that, as a child, I couldn't even find in photographs: snow leopards in the Himalayas; harpy eagles in the Amazon. What's more, I now go home and make a living writing about it.

And yes, I've seen more leopards. Plenty. Those magical first twenty-three sightings have long since been overtaken, and I've now watched the cat in ten different countries across Africa and Asia. Zambia's Luangwa Valley has been especially

fruitful. Here, both on assignment and during a volunteer stint with my family, I have – thanks to guides – been able to follow the cat at leisure by both night and day. I have watched one hunting guinea-fowl through the branches of a raintree and another choking the life from an impala. I have seen the savage tryst of a mating pair and have sat beside my four-year-old daughter as a young male spray-marked his territory around our open vehicle. I have spent three hours with a single leopard and I have seen three separate leopards in a single night.

I realise, however, that my relationship with leopards has changed. Much as I treasure each new encounter, I confess that I no longer keep count. Sightings no longer burn in the memory with quite such pin-sharp clarity – indeed, a few recent sightings have even begun to blend into each other. Call it age, if you like. Yet those first twenty-three remain undimmed. They made their mark during another life, when, for better or worse, a leopard meant something to me that I know I can never recapture.

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Today, I have a more balanced relationship with leopards. Seeing one is no longer the be-all-and-end-all of a safari. And when I become diverted by some other wildlife interest and forget about leopards for a while, I no longer feel as though I'm betraying some childhood crush.

Like any addict, though, I'm struggling to get clean. These days I fritter away an unjustifiable amount of working time seeking out leopards on YouTube, where I find the rough-and-ready amateur video clips more thrilling than any slick BBC documentary as they more clearly evoke my own early experiences. And when I see a leopard in the flesh – most recently a young female padding through the night in Khwai Private Reserve, Botswana, the surrounding darkness exploding with impala alarm snorts – it still hits the spot. That same rush.

As for my creative output, I don't draw as much as I once did but when a few years ago I painted a mural in my daughter's bedroom there was only one contender for its subject. And you can guess what featured on the cover of my first published book, the *Bradt Guide to Southern African Wildlife*, and what is now staring at me from the screen saver of this very laptop.

Meanwhile, I continue to ponder that central question: why leopards? Some answers are self-evident. Clearly, we humans are excited by killing – just look at what we consume by way of entertainment, from Agatha Christie to, yes, *The Killing* – so it's not hard to understand why the likes of eagles, sharks, tigers and wolves continue to top the wildlife charts. Then, among all these predators, there's that particular cat aesthetic: the seductive combination of grace and power with an apparently playful and capricious nature. And, finally, even among cats, there's the leopard's own uniquely alluring suite of qualities: the gorgeous patterning; the perfect physique – not as worryingly slender as a cheetah nor as over-muscled as a jaguar; and the teasingly enigmatic character.

Any scientist can deconstruct all this in seconds. A leopard's physical attributes merely reflect how natural selection has equipped it for survival. Its spots have not evolved to be gorgeous but are simply camouflage. Its slinky motion is not about style but is an adaptation for stalking prey undetected. Its luxuriant lazing around is not the languor of a super-model but the vital downtime of an animal that must preserve all its energy for those life-or-death moments in a brutally competitive natural environment. All these

© MIKE UNWIN

qualities occur in many forms throughout the animal kingdom. The human values that we load on them – beauty, grace and so on – don't exist outside our own heads. To a warthog, a leopard is no more graceful than a hyena – and certainly not as beautiful as another warthog.

It seems to me that we know two leopards: one, the actual flesh-and-blood animal; the other, an idea. The first of these is easy to grasp. It's classified as *Panthera pardus*: a large feline in the order Carnivora that evolved in Africa about half-a-million years ago; is adapted for hunting, with binocular vision and a predator's dentition; feeds largely on the ground but habitually caches prey in trees; maintains a territory of anything from 45 to 400 square kilometres, according to resources; produces two to four cubs after a gestation period of 90–105 days; is the most versatile and widest distributed of any wild cat species, occurring in at least 67 countries; and is today listed by the IUCN as Vulnerable.

The second leopard – the idea one – is a trickier beast to pin down. It has evolved from a combination of our fascination with killing, our admiration of form and movement, our taste for decorative patterning and our fear of the dark. And it seems to hold us in thrall. Even those communities who have cause to revile leopards as livestock predators – sometimes even as a

threat to themselves – have long celebrated the animal in their culture, its hide a signifier of everything from nobility to fashion; its form enshrined in emblems and idols.

Somewhere between these two leopards lies the concept of wilderness. Where I grew up, in leafy suburbia, we've never had to worry about prowling big cats. The greatest threat from wild predators comes from foxes raiding the wheelie-bins. The likes of bears and wolves disappeared centuries ago, along with their forests. As the land has been divided, subjugated and anaesthetised, so we've lost any concept of wilderness and dangerous wildlife. And yet a wilderness of the mind remains; a hankering to tear off the bubble-wrapping of civilisation and confront the untamed. Why else do we spend serious money on travelling to the back of beyond in order to chase wild animals? What is it in ourselves that we are trying to re-awaken?

For me, I like to think that version one is now the leopard that I recognise and that I appreciate it dispassionately, as a vital component of the natural world. But however much I learn about that world – about evolution, ecology and so on – I know that somewhere deep in my psyche, slipped down the back of my mental sofa, there's a hidden box labelled 'wilderness'. Open it up, and inside you'll find an idea leopard prowling around.

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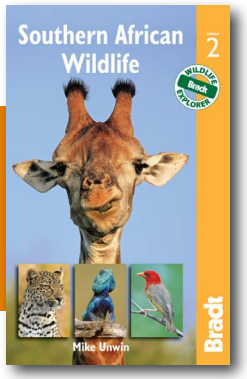
Ultimately, my take on leopards is as subjective as anyone else's: a ragbag of feelings, thoughts and memories that says more about me than it does about the animal. So I'll end with another of those memories: a moment where the real leopard met the idea leopard, and I couldn't tell which was which.

It's August 2006, 17 years since that first Hwange sighting. I'm now 800km to the northeast, in Zambia's Luangwa Valley, where my wife, my daughter and I are living as volunteers in the staff quarters of a safari camp. A male leopard shares our territory. I haven't seen him yet but we hear him at night and often find his tracks. Staff sometimes catch a glimpse. It's exciting to know he's around.

Late one afternoon, after knocking off early, I'm birdwatching around camp when I hear our leopard close by: *urgh, ugh, ugh, ugh, ugh*, he calls. Blimey, I think, he's wandering about in broad daylight! Perhaps, at last, I'll catch a glimpse. I head towards the sound, following a path behind the workshop. Another call follows, from further to the left: it seems he's circling the camp on his territorial rounds. I continue in his direction. He calls again, but now from nearer the entrance road. If I'm quick, I may be able to intercept him. Leaving camp behind, I step out along the dusty track, camera ready, peering ahead, waiting for the next call.

The next call never comes. I stop in the middle of the track and wait. Silence. Five more minutes pass. Still no sound – except for the insects, now changing up a gear as dusk approaches. The camp is out of sight. The comforting noise and voices from workshop and reception have died away. I'm alone on the road among the dense mopane trees and the light is fading fast. The hairs rise on the back of my neck as excitement turns to menace. Where is he now? Has he doubled back behind me? Is he watching me? 'Whatever you do, don't run,' says the Jim Corbett voice in my head. I retrace my steps slowly, scrutinising the gloom, until, rounding the bend, I spy the vehicles at reception and speed up. Not quite a run, but not really a walk.

Mike Unwin is a writer who specialises in natural history and travel. He is the author of *Southern African Wildlife*, and writes regularly for numerous newspapers and magazines, including the *Telegraph*, *BBC Wildlife* and *Travel Africa*, in which this article was originally published.



THE 'SECRET' DEBATE: SHOULD HIDDEN BEAUTY SPOTS REMAIN OFF THE RADAR?

Access to the outdoors should be for all, not just those in the know, writes **Portia Jones**, *whose posts promoting a little-known mountain in Wales provoked an unexpected reaction.*

Pumlumon Fawr, in the Welsh Cambrian Mountains © PORTIA JONES

With isolation, remote working and social distancing becoming ever more part of our lives, it's no wonder that people want to connect with the great outdoors. After all, there's only so much Netflix you can watch in a week.

Across the UK, popular national parks and previously untouched pockets of wilderness have been flooded by first-time visitors, all looking to escape the anxiety, loneliness and uncertainty of the pandemic, if only for a little while.

Here in Wales, interest in our beauty spots has soared since restrictions began last March. There have been numerous reports of national parks, beaches and popular hiking trails being overrun with crowds, litter and queues. There was even a fight on the top of Snowdon in North Wales, as people queue-jumped for a coveted summit selfie.

Local police forces have been forced to increase patrols and issue penalty notices as crowds from both Wales and England descended on favoured beauty spots, despite lockdown rules stating that people should stay within their local area.

© PORTIA JONES

The sunsets at Pumlumon Fawr are nothing short of spectacular

The loneliest mountain in Wales

Over in the wilds of the Cambrian Mountains, however, one remote mountain has managed to escape the attention of day-trippers – that of Pumlumon Fawr (known as Plynlimon in English). Located in Ceredigion near Ponterwyd, at 2,468ft it is the highest point in Central Wales, though you won't see any road signs or any marked trails. You really have to be in the know for this isolated hike.

Summiting from the northern side involves trekking through deep valleys, boggy patches and boulder-strewn slopes to the *copa* (Welsh for summit). It takes around 4 hours to complete, but the views are absolutely worth the trek – you can see as far as Cadair Idris, Snowdon and Aran Fawddwy to the north, and the full sweep

of Cardigan Bay is also visible, from Pen Llŷn in the north right down to Pembrokeshire in the south.

I grew up in Wales but had never heard of Pumlumon Fawr until speaking to Dafydd Wyn Morgan, a local guide who leads hikes in the Cambrian Mountains. So, during a brief window between lockdowns I decided to tackle the summit with him, and discovered first-hand what a wild and scenic beauty it is.

'Pumlumon Fawr has great sunrises and sunsets,' enthused Dafydd, who has been climbing the mountain since 1979. 'A 360-degree view of Wales is possible from the Bronze Age cairn on the summit, as it is near the geographical centre of the country.'

Myself and my husband-cum-adventure-partner, Luke, at the summit

It's a rather remote trek to the summit that rivals Snowdon and Pen y Fan in terms of scenery, but there is one major difference: you're very likely to have this route entirely to yourself.

One reason for this might be because it's definitely not a 'have-a-go' kind of mountain. There are no marked trails, cafés, toilets or gift shops here. It's truly one of the last wildernesses in Wales.

This solitude is both awe-inspiring and eerie. If you're a hiker that finds comfort in crowds, then this is not the trek for you. But if you enjoy unspoilt scenery and almost-perfect tranquility, Pumlumon Fawr ticks both those boxes.

Sparking a debate

As a travel writer, I was eager to share this rare hiking find on social media so that others could experience the 'secret' mountain. I shared my photos to Instagram and earnestly documented my wild adventure on my website, eager to encourage others to make the trip safely.

In hindsight, though, I should have known that highlighting a hidden place was bound to be divisive.

Although many keen hikers were delighted to be informed of a new trekking challenge, others accused me of contributing to its inevitable demise. For a good five internet minutes, I was either a champion of the outdoors or a hiking pariah, depending on who you follow. Needless to say, I went through a considerable amount of wine that day.

But it got me thinking about accessibility outdoors, especially in the midst of a pandemic. Should people be hiking in well-known areas or off-the-radar locations? As reports grew of queues in beauty hotspots, I imagined that calling attention to lesser-known places like Pumlumon Fawr was the responsible thing to do.

Nia Lloyd Knott, mountain leader and owner of Wild Trails Wales, believes that it's not that straightforward: 'On the one hand, it's absolutely fantastic that more people are getting outside and connecting with nature.

'On the other, there is a delicate balancing act required. Locations can get completely overwhelmed and, if there isn't sufficient infrastructure, visitor management or environmental education, these areas face huge pressure from erosion, littering and a loss of the tranquillity they are so treasured for.'

Nia believes that spreading out to lesser-known areas is acceptable to a certain extent: 'As long as people can safely and responsibly look after themselves and the more remote places they're visiting. Otherwise, it just spreads the problem wider.'

Another question I asked myself was, if lesser-known mountains like Pumlumon Fawr should remain exclusive, who should they be exclusive to? Access to the outdoors should be for all, not just to those in the know.

Olie Wicks, Walking Spaces Officer for Ramblers Cymru, is keen to note the positives of people discovering new walking locations. 'We've been really pleased to see the Welsh public embracing the rights of way network and our outdoor environment through what has been a difficult year.

'People experience a massive difference in both their physical and mental wellbeing when they get outside, and we're fully behind encouraging everyone to do this.'

Olie also advocates a responsible approach to outdoor enjoyment during Covid-19. 'During this pandemic we are aiming to remind everyone that there are amazing places to walk locally and people should be embracing these places before thinking of travelling far and wide.

'Alongside this we're always emphasising a "leave no trace" approach. If we want to enjoy these outdoor experiences then we also have to be responsible for minimising our impact on nature.'

Balancing access with respect for the outdoors is more vital than ever. Thanks to social media, geo-tagging and travel guides, clandestine paradises can no longer be sustained. Instead, we must look towards better managing resources, crowds and problematic visitor behaviour, rather than discouraging outdoor access and exploration.

"Access to the outdoors should be for all, not just to those in the know."

Guide Dafydd believes it might be a while yet before Pumlumon becomes a popular day trip in Wales though, 'A lot of work and investment would be needed to make it more accessible. More and more people are discovering it, but 75% of the time I'm up and down having not seen a soul.'

For now, at least, the secret of Pumlumon Fawr remains with a select few, who have conquered the loneliest mountain in Wales.

Portia Jones is a UK-based travel writer and host of the Travel Goals podcast. Check out her two websites, Pip and the City and Wales Bucket List, for more of her adventures.

THE BIRDS AND THE BUTTERFLIES:

THE BEST OF BULGARIA'S WILDLIFE HOTSPOTS

Thanks to its rich tapestry of landscapes and position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia Minor, Bulgaria is one of the continent's best destinations for birds and butterflies. Join expert author **Annie Kay** *as she explores the country's wetlands, mountains and national parks.*

The magnificent Apollo, one of hundreds of butterflies found in Bulgaria © BILDAGENTUR ZOONAR GMBH, SHUTTERSTOCK

Bulgaria's long been a popular destination for outdoor lovers. Its soul-stirring mountains, glacial lakes and verdant forests are popular with locals and visitors alike, with plenty of well-marked trails for hiking, climbing and skiing.

What many people don't know, though, is that Bulgaria also has one of the richest ranges of birdlife in Europe. Though it makes up only 1.1% of the continent's territory, the country is home to about 47% of its bird species thanks to its rich landscapes, with habitats ranging from sea dunes to towering rocky peaks. Its geographical position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia Minor – at the joining point of the continental, steppe and Mediterranean biomes – is also important, as is the Black Sea coast, one of the major migratory flyways on the continent.

While the country's economy suffered during the second half of the 20th century, this was good news for the self-preservation of its wildlife. Even now, in spite of the rapid development of recent years and changes in farming practices, most of the country remains unspoiled. At the right place and at the right time of year, it is easy to see over 200 bird species on a two-week trip. And birds aren't the only thing you'll see in the sky – Bulgaria's scrubby hillsides, forested hills, tree-lined rivers and lowland wetlands are the perfect habitat for many butterflies. During the spring and summer, flower-rich meadows appear at almost every turn, each one alive with insects.

Below are a few of my favourite wild spaces for spotting birds and butterflies, but there are definitely countless more.

Burgas Wetlands

Situated at the westernmost point of the Black Sea, this complex of coastal lakes, lagoons and marshes is truly a birder's paradise. Access is easy

Pelicans on Burgas Lake © STEFAN KUNCHEV KUNCHEV, SHUTTERSTOCK

as they are near Burgas, one of Bulgaria's biggest cities, well connected by rail and road, and with an airport. The large variety of wetland habitats (as well as nearby rocky and steppe habitats), the position in the middle of one of Europe's busiest migratory flyways, the Via Pontica, and the existence of a system of protected areas may satisfy even the most discriminating birding tastes.

Top winter species are the white-headed duck, Dalmatian pelican, and sometimes red-breasted and lesser white-fronted goose, while during the migration period you can see spectacular flocks of white pelican, white stork (up to 20,000 birds in a single flock) and lesser spotted eagles (more than 1,000 in just an hour in September). Almost all European wader species can be seen together with a rich variety of terns and gulls, roller, wryneck and big numbers of passerines of different species, including large numbers of red-breasted flycatcher. It's a truly remarkable complex.

Pirin National Park

This UNESCO World Heritage Site is one of Europe's top biodiversity hotspots, boasting an ecosystem that is home to more than 1,300 plant species and 150 species of bird. Covering some 40,000ha, the park crams a wide range of habitats – from low to high altitudes – within a relatively short distance, making it easy to see a wide range of species without too much driving.

While in the winter the area is a popular skiing destination (Bansko sits on the edge of the park), after the snow has melted the meadows and spruce forests come alive with butterflies. Notable species include green hairstreak, Duke of Burgundy, chequered skipper and Balkan copper, as well as the spectacular Apollo, which cruises low over ground vegetation, and Balkan fritillary, a local speciality.

Eastern Rhodope Mountains

In these dusty mountains, a programme of 'rewilding' is being carried out by the Dutch

The Rhodopes are one of Bulgaria's two breeding sites for griffon vultures

Freyer's purple emperor

charity Rewilding Europe. Rewilding starts from the idea that ecosystems can govern themselves through natural processes with little or no human intervention – but only once habitats have been sufficiently restored and 'keystone' large herbivore and predator species are in place.

The Eastern Rhodopes are particularly rich in such animals. Bison (only recently reintroduced), brown bears, wolves and jackals are increasing in numbers here, as well as raptor species like the saker falcon, eastern imperial eagle and Levant sparrowhawk. The Rhodopes are also one of the country's two breeding sites for griffon vultures, and one of the most important areas in the Balkans for the black vulture. Butterfly lovers will want to head to the town of Madzharovo, not far from the Greek border and enclosed by rocky peaks all around. Among the most spectacular species to be found here is Freyer's purple emperor, an elusive butterfly that flutters among the willows that line parts of the Arda River.

The Struma Valley

Bulgaria's far southwest corner is the country's richest area for butterflies, with about 80% of its butterfly species having been recorded here. Along the border with Greece run the Belasitsa Mountains to the west of the Struma Valley, and the Slavyanka Mountains to the east; both were in the so-called No Man's Land border region during the Cold War, which allowed wildlife to flourish.

The Mediterranean influence is reflected in the butterfly fauna, which includes several species not found elsewhere in the country: eastern greenish black-tip, powdered brimstone and the inky, Mediterranean and pigmy skippers.

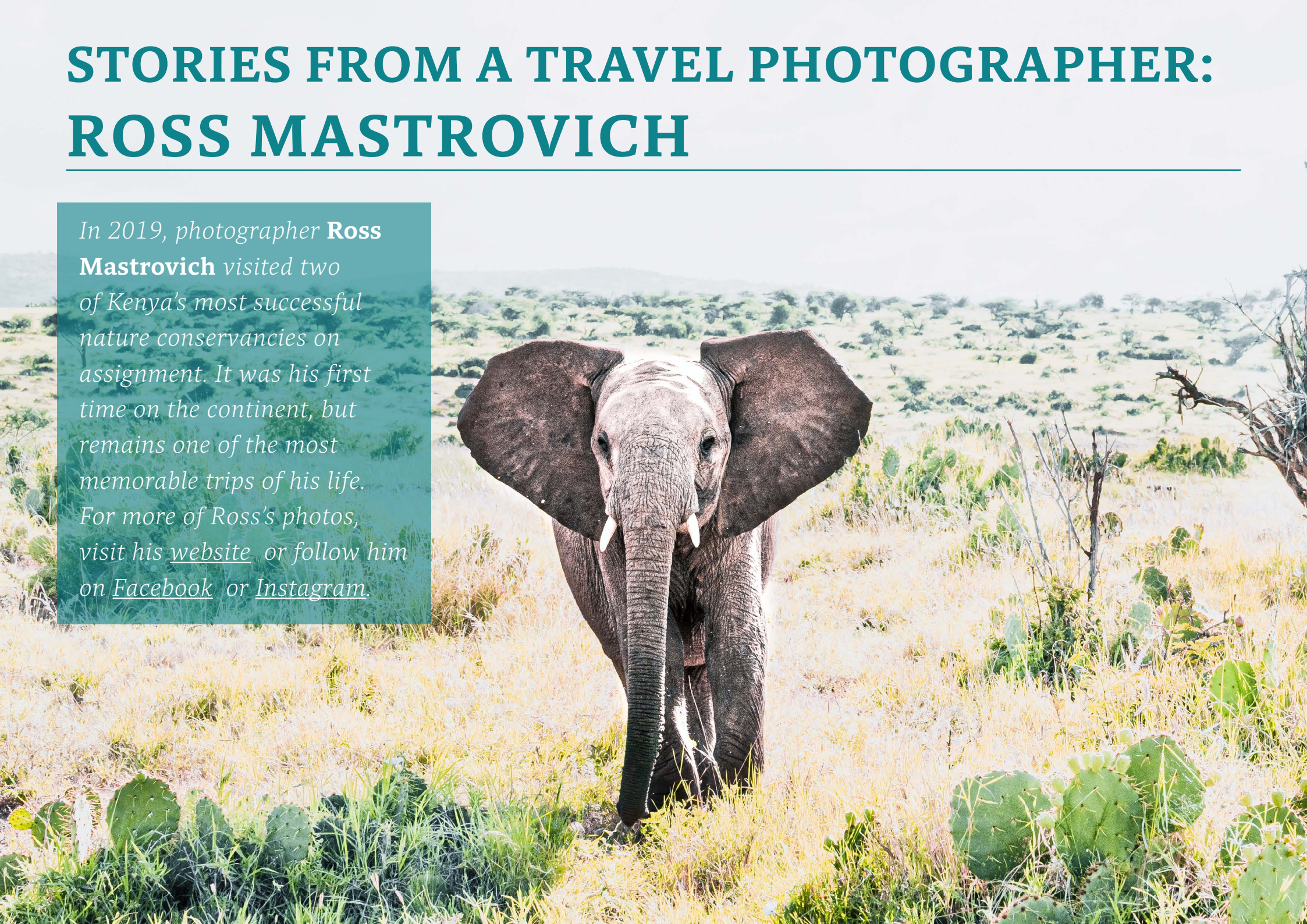
The Struma Valley is also situated on a secondary, but interesting, migratory flyway, where habitats are strongly influenced by the proximity of the Mediterranean. A very rich variety of birds can be seen during both the spring and autumn passage, especially at the marshy areas along the Struma River near Rupite. Common breeders include blue rock thrush, Sardinian warbler and scops owl, while white-winged terns and pied flycatchers are regularly seen on spring migration.

Central Balkan National Park

This is the Bulgarian Noah's ark, not only because of its very elongated shape, but also because it has carried some of the oldest European beech forests through the centuries. Designated by BirdLife International as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area because of its significant numbers of the bird populations, the park is home to Globally Threatened species like imperial eagle and corncrake, while its incredible rocky massifs are home to vital populations of golden eagle, alpine chough and peregrine. It is also one of a number of sites in Bulgaria where the successful Green Balkans project for the reintroduction of the griffon vulture in the Balkan Mountains has taken place.

STORIES FROM A TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER: ROSS MASTROVICH

In 2019, photographer **Ross Mastrovich** *visited two of Kenya's most successful nature conservancies on assignment. It was his first time on the continent, but remains one of the most memorable trips of his life. For more of Ross's photos, visit his website or follow him on Facebook or Instagram.*



The first thing we did upon arriving in Kenya was go for a quick drive through Nairobi National Park, which sits just on the outskirts of the city. It's a serene escape from the busy streets of the Kenyan capital, and offers the opportunity for encounters with plenty of the quintessential African wildlife species – such as this giraffe, which was blocking the road ahead on our visit.

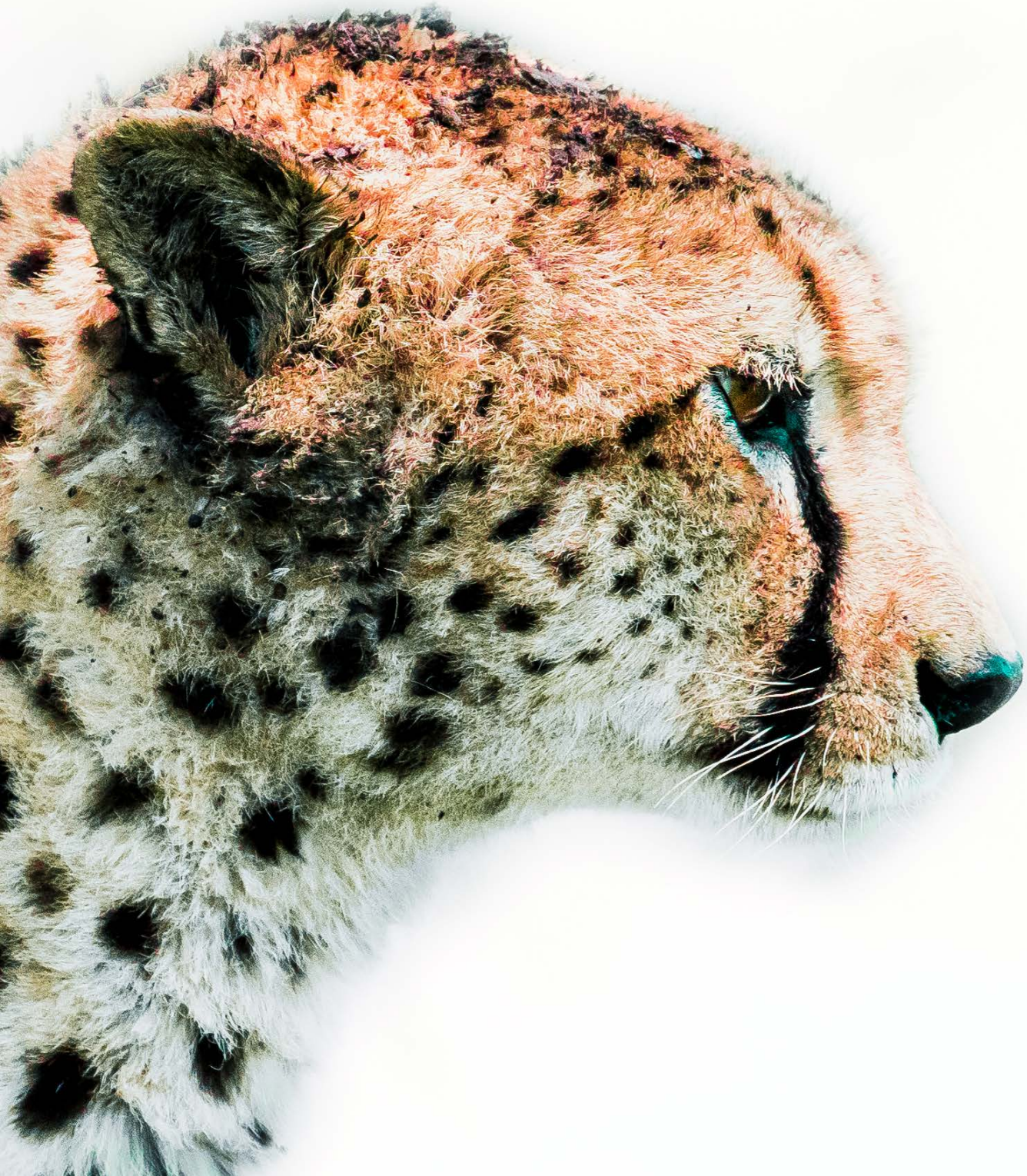
Left
Ostriches have to be the most un-birdlike looking birds in the world. I'm from New Zealand where birds are small and relatively timid, so to see these giants wandering bravely through a landscape full of lions was very strange.

Following page
On our first evening in Loisaba Conservancy, we headed up a hill to enjoy some sundowners and stumbled across a large male leopard devouring an impala. The sound of my camera shutter drew his attention momentarily, and I remember letting out an audible gasp when we locked eyes. A tense moment.

We were enjoying campfire drinks at a waterfall when the call came over the radio: 'Lions have been spotted on the move nearby!' So we jumped in the jeep. Speeding past shadows of hyenas, we caught up with two male lions lurking in the darkness. This shot was made possible by the headlights of our jeep, coupled with the spotlight of our guide, Tessa.

Left
While staying at Loisaba Tented Camp, I made sure I got up before dawn every day to catch the best light for photography. This hornbill was there each morning, chattering and hassling his female companion. He was so fast moving, however, that it took a couple of mornings to get this clear shot of him looking majestic.

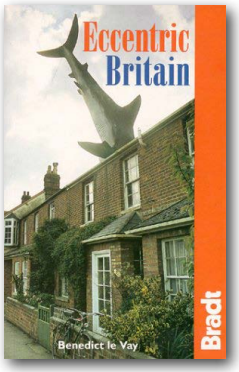
Following page
In Loisaba Conservancy, we seemed to come across large groups of elephants routinely. You could be forgiven for thinking elephant populations are doing fine in Kenya and East Africa, but the reality is that conservancies like Loisaba are the last strongholds of these amazing creatures.



Left
While staying in Lewa, we joked with our guide that the only animal we hadn't seen so far on our trip to Kenya was a cheetah. So, on our last afternoon, he dutifully produced a large male resting in the shade. To be that close to one of Africa's most enigmatic characters is something that I still think about often.

Following pages
Our time in Kenya also gave us the opportunity to meet local people. From Lewa, we took a trip to visit a Samburu village and learn about their interactions and relationship with the surrounding wildlife. We were welcomed with an explosion of cheerful colours and wide smiles, culminating in the Samburu warriors performing their *adamu* (jumping dance), traditionally used to show off their physical strength to potential partners.

FROM THE ARCHIVES:
ECCENTRIC BRITAIN



In 1999, an unusual proposal arrived at the Bradt offices written by a Fleet Street sub-editor who had been hoarding stories about the odder people, places and customs of the British Isles. Not a travel book in the strict sense, **Eccentric Britain** *went on to become Bradt's bestselling book of its day and led to a short series of other 'Eccentric' guides. We spoke to author* **Benedict le Vay** *about his love of all things eccentric.*

What made you want to write about eccentrics?

My newspaper background made me insatiably curious about what seriously strange things people do – what makes oddballs tick. When I was working for a national newspaper in the early 1990s, we often needed a little bold short story in the corner of a feature article to fill empty space, and there were never enough of them. So I'd write little bits about the man who collects road cones, or air raid sirens, or sick bags, or the people who hurl themselves off hills chasing cheese, or the man who has a Tube train in his garden – that kind of thing.

An editor stopped by once and said, 'You're a sub, you can't write things, you're banned!' I ignored him and have since had 142 articles of various lengths published in the paper (even though still not my job!).

A vicar's wife from Lincolnshire wrote about how she loved the stories about eccentric vicars who rode motorbikes up the aisle, or dressed as mermaids, or ate daffodils (the flowers, not the bulbs). She asked if there was a book that collected these bizarre tales, which set off the concept of *Eccentric Britain*. And five years later, there it was – a collection of the crazy things we Brits like to get up to, like lawnmower racing, toe wrestling, dwile flonking, as well as features on eccentric aristocrats, collectors, churchmen, etc, and really weird buildings: follies, towers and whimsical lodges. Little of it was covered by mainstream media back then.

This was your first book. Was it hard to get published?

No. I know you're supposed to go through ten years, at least, of agony. But I approached four publishers with *Eccentric Britain* and all four said yes. However, the other three were not what I wanted. For example, one said we should publish the book as though written by Quentin Crisp, an eccentric former civil servant who was enjoying (quite rightly) being openly gay after living through years of persecution and wittily making a career out of it (he liked to refer to himself as 'one of the stately homos of England' at a time when that wasn't widely accepted). I would receive a fat cheque – a phrase which always reminded me of Mirror boss Robert Maxwell – as long as I agreed to shut up. A great many celebrity books are ghost-written

by Fleet Street hacks in this way, but I come from a book-writing family (responsible for about 50 titles that I can trace), so it wasn't for me.

Bradt, on the other hand, got the concept straight away, even though it wasn't their usual type of book. They suggested things that improved it (and still do with my books) – like leaving out some of the jokes!

What makes someone eccentric?

Many people perceive 'eccentric' to mean 'loveable', but this isn't always the case – 'eccentric' just means 'out of the centre', not necessarily nice. They don't even have to be alive. A truly great folly or weird bequest or tradition tells you a lot about the person behind it, even if that person is no longer around.

But they do have to be interesting and unusual. And as the book explains, Britain's long tradition of championing eccentrics is linked to our amazing record in inventing things, and our off-the-wall humour from Edward Lear to Mr Bean. No other people are quite as sanely mad as we Brits.

It's noticeable how many of these endearingly daft ideas started life in the pub...

Isn't it just! The hilarious story of Huw Kennedy's trebuchets, for example, which began with the casual remark: 'You know those giant siege catapult things in history books? Do you reckon they really work?' Or: 'I bet I can carry a sack of coal up the hill to the next pub faster than you can' (said over a pint in dialect), which led to the World Coal Carrying Championships. Or: 'If you made Yorkshire puddings big enough, and varnished them, do you reckon we could paddle them down the river like coracles...?'

How did Kellogg's get involved in the book?

After *Eccentric Britain* came out, Kellogg's approached me for a promotional tie-up. I never found out why they thought my little book would be a great fit for Fruit 'n Fibre cereal – perhaps because both contain nuts! – but it was great fun.

The World Black Pudding Throwing Championships in Ramsbottom

A bright young lady from a PR company turned up whose surname was Hawker. I told her one of the greatest eccentrics in my book was Rev Robert Hawker of Morwenstow (it's hilarious what he got up to) and she said, yes, she was descended from him. So that was a good start!

They paid me a great deal and sent me to all sorts of events where I was guest of honour. I was the judge at the World Black Pudding Throwing Championships in Ramsbottom, for example, held in memory of an event during the Wars of the Roses, where (so they say) they ran out of weaponry, so the locals lob Lancashire black puddings at a stack of Yorkshire puds on a pub roof. I had to award the prize to a drunken Australian in a giant pink rabbit suit (him, not me) who couldn't remember what he was doing there but always hit the Yorkshires bang on. While I was making a little speech live on telly, as no-one had provided the promised golden pudding prize, someone behind the camera was nailing a black pudding to a plank, spraying it with the landlady's gold paint left over from Christmas, and then I handed it over while the paint was still dripping.

And it ended with a star-studded awards ceremony...

Yes. At the end of the whole promotion – we were also looking for Britain's 100 greatest

eccentrics – I got to host an event for the top ten finalists in London. I misheard the invitation. I thought I was a guest – I really am often slow on the uptake – and it wasn't until I got there, after a leisurely breakfast at the luxury hotel provided by Kellogg's (the hotel and the cereal), that I realised I was the presenter.

My co-presenter was none other than Norman Wisdom and the event was being partly broadcast live on TV. I didn't have a list of the top ten finalists in order, but somehow winged it. I even did a live to camera news slot with our worthy winner – crackpot inventor Lyndon Yorke of Marlow Bottom, Buckinghamshire, still a friend today – posing with his river-going wicker bathchair complete with wind-up gramophone by the Serpentine. It was one of those broadcasts where you're fitted with an earpiece and they feed you questions. Only ten million people watching live, no pressure! It looks easy, and oddly it was – but only because I had no choice but to keep going. I needed a stiff drink with Norman afterwards!

Do you consider yourself eccentric?

It's an understandable question, but no. Being a reporter (or a writer to make it sound grander!) doesn't work like that. If you want to write about eccentrics, it's a good idea to be fantastically boring so you notice when other people aren't.

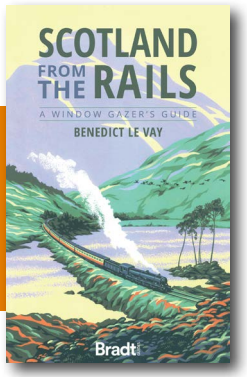
My only vaguely eccentric activity is that I'm the Hon Sec of The Friends of the A272, which is a wonderful, very English rolling road going from nowhere in particular to nowhere else in particular through the most wonderful countryside – the Kent and Sussex Weald – and lovely towns such as Petworth, Midhurst and Petersfield. We don't agree with speed so have campaigned for all sections of dual carriageway to be removed from the road, all giant modern signboards to be replaced by fingerposts (the pukkah ones with a Polo-mint-like thing at the top, which you can only read if you are doing about 40mph or less), and all the parallel railways lines to be reopened with steam. We don't seek new members, partly because if members are employed, pay tax and raise their own children we pay them a subscription (whereas all the usual concessions pay double). Internet presence is frowned upon – we simply write to each other. Not tweets, twerks, twits, whatsuppers, zoomies or whatever – letters. With fountain pens and stamps.

A marvellous Dutchman called Pieter Boogaart completely got what is wonderful about this road and wrote a book called *A272: An Ode to a Road*. It's like a linear *Eccentric Britain*. So he was made our Life President. Although 'Life' isn't really the right word – under our rules membership is immortal. So my late dad, a surgeon who lived on the A272, is still a member, and as active as he ever was – ie: not even faintly.

Does the great British eccentric have a future?

Oh yes. Lockdown or not, this country is wired on mains eccentricity. As we speak, somewhere someone is planning a wacky event or a bonkers creation – like the shark sticking out of the roof of an Oxford house, on my first book's cover. The sort of thing that most people will absolutely loathe when it first goes up, then after ten years they will fight to the death anyone who tries to remove their much-loved local landmark!

Benedict le Vay's *Eccentric Britain*, *Eccentric London*, *Eccentric Oxford* and *Eccentric Cambridge* are all published by Bradt. His latest book, *Scotland from the Rails: A Window Gazer's Guide*, is out this month – The Travel Club members can get their copy for **half price** with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**.



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! We have three exciting new offers to bring you this month, alongside our ever-growing list of other discounts.

5% off any booking with Inertia Network

Inertia Network run immersive expeditions that support local communities in remote and threatened regions, including forthcoming trips to Socotra and the DRC. They are offering The Travel Club members a **5% discount** on all bookings. To claim your discount, enter the code **Bradt2021** in the 'How Did You Hear About Us' box when making your enquiry.

A much-needed Tonic

Tonic is a brand new biannual drink and travel magazine. Its founders pooled their passion – and life savings – to send award-winning writers from *The Guardian* and *The Spectator* around the world to find the most interesting stories for its readers. The result is a 144-page journal packed with long-form travel-drink-adventure tales.

It's a heady cocktail. Imbibe author Claire Dodd sips vodou rum in a Haitian temple. *The Spectator* contributor Henry Jeffreys navigates Lebanon's sectarian thoroughfares in search of

historic cellars. *Times* writer Juliet Rix indulges in *soju* – a North Korean acorn spirit that makes East and West dance as one. *Tonic's* highly collectable first issue will leave you thirsty for more.

The Travel Club members can enjoy a special **10% discount** on both individual and subscription options. Simply use the code **BRADTTC10** at checkout to redeem your discount, which currently also includes free UK and EU shipping as a new year boost. Visit thetonicmag.com/shop for more information, or follow them on social: @thetonicmag. Cheers!

10% off with HÔRD

Born in the bleak rolling moors of Yorkshire, HÔRD create meaningful and high-quality gifts and apparel for the adventurous and wild among us. They specialise in illustrated and personalised leather and cork goods, rugged hip flasks, wallets and more, all inspired by the outdoors.

HÔRD are offering The Travel Club members **10% off** their first order (free UK shipping over £35); just use **HORDXTRAVELCLUB10** at checkout.

Aardvark Safaris: 5% off all tours

Aardvark Safaris specialise in tailor-made, high-quality African safaris away from the crowds, with an ever-growing catalogue of small, locally run camps and lodges. To claim your 5% discount, email mail@aardvarksafaris.com and mention that you are a member of The Travel Club when booking.

The Adventure Creators: 10% off all Pyrenees tours

Run by local Penny Walker, this adventure outfit based in the Pyrenees specialises in tailor-made, year-round, outdoor holidays in the region. The Travel Club members can enjoy a 10% discount on all tour bookings – just quote **Bradt10** when enquiring.

Craghoppers: 20% off

Founded in Yorkshire in 1965, Craghoppers is a global leader in sustainable technical outdoor and travel clothing. To claim your 20% discount, use the code **BRADT20** at checkout (valid on full-priced items only until 2 June 2021).

The Cook's Place: 10% off cooking courses

Based in Malton, North Yorkshire, The Cook's Place are an independent cookery school offering

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a range of half- and full-day courses. To claim your 10% discount, enter the code **BTG21** at checkout (valid on all half- and full-day courses until 30 November 2021).

Lupine Travel: 5% off all tours

UK-based Lupine specialise in unique and off-the-beaten-track destinations, from Chernobyl to North Korea. To claim your 5% discount, email info@lupinetravel.co.uk and mention that you are a member of The Travel Club when booking.

National Geographic Traveller (UK): 3 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. They offering Travel Club members the chance to subscribe to the magazine and get the first 3 issues for just £3. Click here for full details.

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. To claim your discount, just mention that you're a Travel Club member when booking.

Travel Africa: 20% off subscriptions

Founded in 1997, *Travel Africa* remains the only international magazine dedicated to exploring Africa's attractions, wildlife and cultures. To claim your 20% discount, click here and enter the code **BRADT2020** at checkout.

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. *Wanderlust* are offering Travel Club members an annual print subscription for £25 (usual price £35). To claim, click here and enter the code **WLMAG20** at checkout.

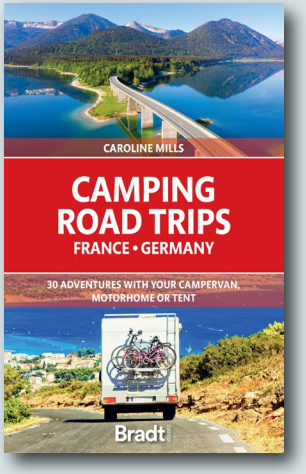
OUT THIS MONTH!

The Travel Club members can claim their exclusive **50% discount** on ALL our books by using the code **TRAVELCLUB50** at checkout. This month's new titles are:

Camping Road Trips

Caroline Mills

£16.99

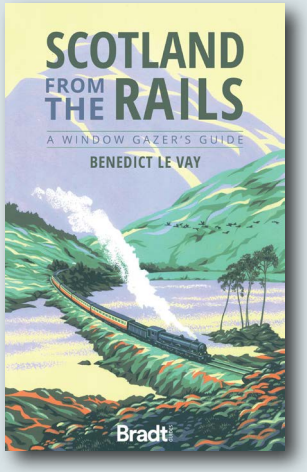


Suitable for campervanners, motorcaravanners or really anyone with a set of wheels, this full-colour handbook offers inspiration for 30 brilliant routes across France and Germany. Whether you're a novice caravanner or experienced road tripper, these self-guided tours will provide the inspiration to set out and explore – as slowly and leisurely as you like – this beautiful area of Europe.

Scotland from the Rails

Benedict le Vay

£14.99

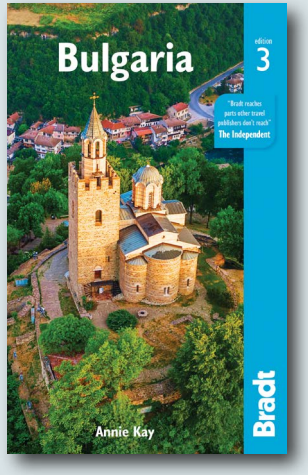


From the author of the acclaimed *Britain from the Rails*, an entertaining armchair read and practical guide rolled into one. Engaging, eccentric, informative, inspirational and only very occasionally trainspotter-ish, *Scotland from the Rails* is the perfect guide to some of the most romantic rail journeys not just in Britain, but the world.

Bulgaria

Annie Kay

£15.99



Now in its third edition, this comprehensive guidebook remains an essential companion for any visitor to this spectacular country, combining practical detail with a plenty of local insight and recommendations. It also offers better coverage of the country's compelling natural history than any other guide.

COMING UP NEXT MONTH...

In the MARCH issue of
THE TRAVEL CLUB:

Simon Urwin explores the real Jurassic Park, we join Nori Jemil on a journey through Tierra del Fuego, plus a first look at Hilary Bradt's new travel narrative, *A Connemara Journey*.