THE TRAVEL CLUB

E-ZINE #09: JANUARY, 2021

Tipsy travels
A tour of Eurasia's favourite drinks

The L word
A personal story of animal obsession

Spotlight on the independent
Love at first sight in the Pyrenees

Growing up in Yemen
Childhood memories from a divided country

Utter baloney
Exploring Bologna's world-famous delicacies

Plus...
Stories from a wildlife photographer: Heather Angel

Learn how to make a classic Italian ragù

Bradt GUIDES
TRAVEL TAKEN SERIOUSLY

CONTENTS

Mike Unwin shares his personal obsession with this elusive cat on page 8

IT'S NO BALONEY IN BOLOGNA: NOTES FROM ITALY'S 'FOOD VALLEY'

by Dana Facaros

'When it comes to food, the Italians are fussy, obsessed and – annoyingly – always right.'

24

STORIES FROM A WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER: HEATHER ANGEL

'I aim to take photos of wildlife that are more than a static portrait – they need to tell a story by the way they behave.'

28

FROM THE ARCHIVES: THE MAPS OF HANS VAN WELL by Hugh Brune

'"Never lucrative, but always interesting" is how Hans describes his work for Bradt Publications, a description that will ring bells with Bradt authors today.'

37

DESIGNER & TYPESETTERS
Design by Pepi Bluck, Perfect Picture
Typesetting by Ian Spick, Bradt Guides

SUB-EDITORS
Anna Moores & Laura Pidgley

COVER IMAGE
Hiking in the Ariege Mountains
© Penny Walker

Join **Dana Facaros** on a tour of Bologna's delicacies on page 24 © BOLOGNA WELCOME SRL

TIPSY TRAVELS: A TOUR OF EURASIA'S FAVOURITE DRINKS

From fermented horse milk to plum brandy, drinks writer **Jonathan Campion** *explores this region's finest beverages*

For most of my travels I have been under the influence of alcohol. In my defence, I had to be: by a very fortunate twist of fate, I once worked as an analyst in the wine and spirits industry. Covering the Eurasia region I travelled to several countries to discover what – and how much – the people in this part of the world drink.

I learned that a country's choice of tipple always reveals something great about their culture. Behind the data and numbers in my reports were hundreds of stories – not to mention some delicious memories.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria's national spirit is *rakia* – a delicate, clear brandy (although quite different from the English meaning of the word), made by distilling grapes or other fruits, such as plums or apricots, in large barrels topped up with sugar and water. With a high alcohol content – anywhere between 40%

Vineyards in the shadows of Mount Ararat, Armenia

and 95% – rakia is interesting in that it is usually drunk at the beginning of a meal rather than at the end), and normally accompanies traditional *shopska* and *ovcharska* salads.

In a nation of connoisseurs, restaurants are as proud of their rakia selections as they are of their wine lists. But the most special Bulgarian drinks aren't found in restaurants, for this is the only country in Europe where more than half of the alcohol consumed is made at home.

Rakia production is taken very seriously, and reputations in every family and village rest on who can make the best. The highlight of any gathering at my brother-in-law's home in Sofia is when he brings out the white peach rakia, which his wife's father sends to their family for special occasions. It has led to some very late nights: we can never bring ourselves to go to bed while there is still something in the bottle.

The same goes for wine: Bulgaria has a long history of winemaking, with evidence suggesting it stretches back to Thracian times. Today's vineyards make lovely styles with Mavrud and Traminer grapes, but households usually have litres of homemade wine stashed away, which tastes just as good.

"Restaurants are as proud of their rakia selections as they are of their wine lists."

When in Bulgaria, drink... a chilled glass of homemade plum rakia. If it comes from the local rakia master, it will be much more memorable than anything you can buy from a shop. If you do go to a shop, then a plastic bottle of Bulgarian rum or whisky will also be memorable, but for rather different reasons...

Georgia

Georgia's national drink is another clear spirit – a fiery liquid called *chacha*, which is made by fermenting the skins of grapes left over from making wine. Not so long ago chacha was found only in mountain villages, but in the last few years word of the head-splitting moonshine has reached the country's visitors, and Tbilisi's bars and restaurants now sell expensive artisan or herb-infused varieties.

The Georgians have a saying, 'All chacha is the same – it's just the adventures that are different', and this could well be true. My first adventure with chacha, in a tavern high up in the Caucasus Mountains, left me lying on my back on a frozen road gazing up at the stars. After my second experience – some of the posh stuff flavoured with tarragon – I found myself stumbling around underneath Tbilisi's Narikala Fortress, convinced that my hotel had disappeared. No matter the type of chacha, it always leads to a hazy memory the next morning...

A shot of tarragon *chacha*

Georgia prides itself as being the birthplace of wine. The country's historic winemaking traditions – using the local Rkatsiteli and Saperavi grapes, the practice of fermenting wines underground in clay *qvevri* pots, creating the famous 'orange' wines – are a huge part of the country's culture.

Spend a little time in Georgia and you are sure to be invited to a *supra* – a feast that takes the Georgians' legendary generosity to crazy extremes. Guests are fed through the day and night, all the while being toasted with wine and chacha, until no-one can move.

When in Georgia, drink... something different. Look for a walnut brandy called David, which is made by the Sarajishvili brandy company. It's the perfect liquid to fortify you after a mountain hike.

Armenia

Armenia's most celebrated drink is its Ararat brandy, named after sacred Mount Ararat – nowadays just over the border in Turkey – where Noah's Ark is said to have come to rest. The brandy has long had fans far beyond the Caucasus, among them Winston Churchill, who, having been plied with the stuff by Stalin during the 1945 Yalta conference, is said to have declared it better than French brandy, and had several cases of the most expensive Ararat sent to him every year.

These days, wine bars are springing up all over the capital, Yerevan, and wines from the country's new vineyards are by far the trendiest tipple. Armenians say that it was they who invented wine, not their boastful neighbours in Georgia, and it is starting to mean just as much to their culture. On one of my work trips to Yerevan I got caught up in the mass protests that deposed their former prime minister. When the news broke that he had resigned, the waitress at the cafe I was sitting in brought everyone a glass of sparkling Armenian wine (not brandy) to celebrate with.

Another iconic Armenian drink is mulberry vodka, made by Armenians living in the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, but sold with pride throughout the country.

When in Armenia, drink... a reserve bottle of Karas wine. The Karas vineyard, located in the shadow of Mount Ararat in Armenia's Armavir province, is tended by a team of Argentinians, descendants of the Armenians who left their homeland for South America over a century ago.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's warm climate makes its countryside an ideal place for cultivating fruits. Much of these go into sweet wines and brandies, as well as liqueurs made from pomegranates and apricots. These can be dangerously easy to drink. A contact of mine in Baku once invited me to a meeting at a rooftop restaurant, and as the sun set over İçərişəhər (the Old City) we spent so much time

© JONATHAN CAMPION

Azerbaijan is known for its pomegranate wine

© CHRIS PACKHAM

Kazakh *kumys* isn't to everyone's taste...

drinking Azeri wine and talking about our families that we both completely forgot why we had decided to meet in the first place.

Azerbaijan's location on the Caspian Sea also makes it a destination for smuggled alcohol, although the government is cracking down on the black market so there are not as many counterfeit bottles of foreign spirits sloshing around as there used to be. Still, there are still plenty of fake vodkas and Scotch whiskies on supermarket shelves, next to the growing number of local wines.

When in Azerbaijan, drink... a carafe of pomegranate wine. Or, if you are feeling brave, try to track down an elusive remaining bottle of 'Jack Walker' – a counterfeit 'whisky' rumoured to come from Azerbaijan, which achieved the impressive feat of being sued by two different drinks companies at the same time.

Kazakhstan

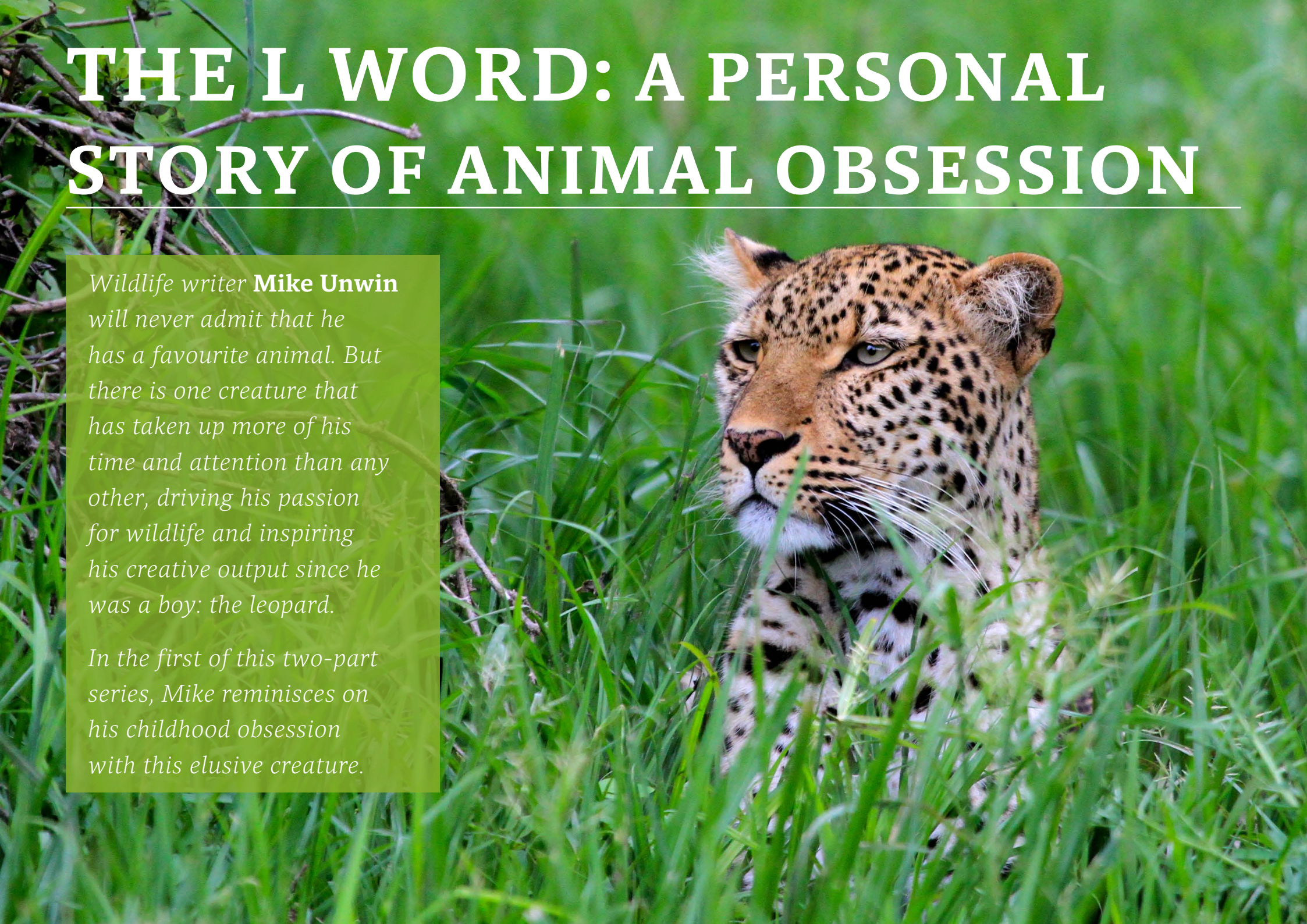
Kazakhstan may be the perfect place to come for a detox. Alcohol is fast going out of fashion: Kazakhs are defiantly moving away from the country's Russian legacy in many parts of their lives, and this includes giving up vodka. Young people are engaging much more with Islam than previous generations, and with these cultural changes many alcohol companies are starting to sell soft drinks instead.

Of the Kazakhs who still drink alcohol, many are doing it in healthier ways. Wine tastings are becoming popular, and there is even a scene for Kazakh wine. A few years ago one of the country's most powerful people, a former finance minister and advisor to the president, discovered an abandoned vineyard in the Assa Valley, between Almaty and the border with China. In his retirement he has made it his mission to bring it back to life through the creation of Arba Wines, who now also have a boutique in Almaty, and sell their wines throughout Kazakhstan.

When in Kazakhstan, drink... one of Kazakhstan's national drinks, a fermented horse's milk called *kumys*. It is ever-so-slightly alcoholic, and because it is sometimes fermented in leather sacks, it can have a smoky taste similar to peated Scotch whiskies. Kazakhs swear that the mare's milk does wonders for their health. In any case, it would be very hard to get drunk on it. The first time I smelled kumys, it took me all evening to summon the courage to take a single gulp.

Jonathan Campion writes about his travels in Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe at jonathancampion.com. He tweets @jonathancampion.

THE L WORD: A PERSONAL STORY OF ANIMAL OBSESSION



Wildlife writer **Mike Unwin** *will never admit that he has a favourite animal. But there is one creature that has taken up more of his time and attention than any other, driving his passion for wildlife and inspiring his creative output since he was a boy: the leopard.*

In the first of this two-part series, Mike reminisces on his childhood obsession with this elusive creature.

'Hold on. I think I saw... Was that some kind of... Can you go back a second?'

It's around 7.45am on Friday 18 August, 1989. The words, or something similar, are my mother's. They herald a moment that I have been trying to imagine for much of my life. Forget space travel or scoring the winner in the FA cup final. Forget Siberian tigers, blue whales, polar bears and other fantasy animal A-listers. One childhood dream has long crowded out all others and its realisation is now just seconds away.

First, some context. This is day four of a safari in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe. I'm sitting behind the wheel of a battered Mazda 323, my father beside me and my mother in the back seat. My parents and younger brother Nick are here for a holiday, my first visitors since I arrived in the country a year ago. I am working as an English teacher at a high school in Bulawayo – as is my wife: we got hitched last summer, when our contracts were confirmed. A year on, and I've thrown myself into all things African, shedding my English, Home Counties skin – or so I imagine – and reinventing myself. Now, my family is here to witness the new me. It feels like a significant rite of passage.

But back to the story. This morning it's only the three of us in the car. After an early start, we're returning to camp via a dusty backroad called the Salt Springs Loop. Mum, hampered by her position in the back, has so far spotted little. Now, however, her urgency demands attention. I look around to see her gesturing right towards a flash of water half concealed behind the verge.

As I slip the car into reverse, we all simultaneously lay eyes on what Mum has spotted: the lowered head and raised elbows of a large cat, drinking. Backlit by the early sun, the colours are hard to make out but the shape is unmistakable. At the crunch of tyres, it looks up. We have just seconds in which to fumble with binoculars before it slinks back into the long grass, but this is time enough for me to bring into focus the spotted hide and white curl of tail tip. 'Leopard!' I say, first to get the word out. 'Shit!' A pause. 'Sorry Mum.'

So that's it, then. My life's ambitions fulfilled in about six seconds and at the tender age of 23. Not a great view – certainly no time for photographs – but a leopard, indisputably. What now? After this, things can surely only go downhill.

***

That morning was now nearly thirty years ago. Since then, I have seen many other leopards, not to mention plenty of other big cats around the globe. I've had ample time to contextualise that childhood obsession within broader frameworks of knowledge and experience.

As part of this maturing process, I've learned to rail against our anthropomorphic distortion of the natural world into some value-laden hierarchy: the good, the bad and the ugly of wildlife. How can we expect to understand nature, let alone make a decent stab at conservation, when we continue to stereotype the likes of leopards as 'magnificent' and hyenas, say, as 'disgusting'? Can't we accept that every animal is simply adapted to meet the challenges of survival in its own way?

On a personal level, I've also discovered that liking leopards is nothing very original. The cat is near the top of most wildlife bucket lists, after all, universally admired as beautiful, enigmatic and so on. In taste terms, it's the animal equivalent of admiring David Bowie or Roger Federer: impeccable, but hardly niche. Indeed, when asked to name my favourite animal, I seldom fess up. Either I purport to reject the very notion, explaining how I prefer to appreciate the natural world in all its holistic glory or, when I see eyes glazing over, trying to defy expectations with a more left-field candidate: dwarf mongoose, perhaps, or dunnock.

What's more, the leopard has another life as imagery, co-opted into popular culture as shorthand for the slinky and sexy. Leopard print fashion – on, say, shoes or underwear – suggests the wearer shares the cat's supposedly alluring

qualities, while images of the cat itself are used to sex up anything from an insurance advert to some dubiously erotic movie (Paul Schrader's *Cat People*, anyone?). Either way, this popular commercial appeal has always felt vaguely embarrassing to the wannabe naturalist; not something to be associated with.

In short, you'd think that by now I might have got over my leopard obsession; that I'd have rationalised away this romanticising of one animal species above the countless others that are equally deserving of attention and respect. And yes, I've done my best. I've waxed lyrical about the weird critters and played it cool about the 'iconic' ones. But still it comes back to leopards. Try as I might, I can't get enough of them.

***

I can't pinpoint the precise spark that first lit the leopard flame, but I know it happened young. The influences are easily identified: a junior passion for wildlife, fed by a family interest in nature and nourished by a houseful of books, acquired a more aspirational dimension through my grandparents, whose diplomat postings in Africa produced a rich crop of safari stories. Thus, while collecting caterpillars in the back garden or seeing my first great spotted woodpeckers on the local common,

I was simultaneously inhabiting a dreamworld of game rangers and the African bush.

The first real-life leopard story I heard was, indeed, from my grandparents. It was an archetypal encounter: the big cat up a tree in the Serengeti. The story didn't come with photos but the image in my mind was indelible. For years, this was the only leopard encounter I heard described at first-hand and, to my knowledge, it was the only leopard my grandparents ever saw during their early Africa days. Tellingly, my parents, who had also lived in Africa before I arrived, had *never* seen a leopard. Thus, from the cat's first appearance on my fantasy horizon, it carried an aura of elusiveness. Back then, seeing one for myself seemed no more realistic a prospect than setting foot on the moon.

Then there were the books. Early favourites include the preposterous Willard Price *Adventure* series, in which American teenagers Hal and Roger Hunt roamed the world collecting animals for their father's zoo and getting into various improbable scrapes. Even at the age of eight I knew the stories to be nonsense. For a start, the dimensions of the animals were always needlessly inflated – crocodiles were thirty feet long, elephants weighed ten tons, and so on – and I was a stickler for accurate statistics. Nonetheless, I devoured the animal action as the gallant duo battled giant pythons or enraged gorillas, and the leopards in these tales were especially compelling: not as big as lions or tigers, but deadlier. 'As every visitor to Africa knows, you may come within fifteen feet of a lion,' Price informed us in *Gorilla Adventure*. 'But you take your life in your hands if you come that close to a leopard.'

Price's hyperbole simply embellished a popular image of the leopard already established via *The Jungle Book*. 'Everybody knew Bagheera, and nobody cared to cross his path,' wrote Kipling, about Mowgli's leopard guardian. 'He was as cunning as Tabaqui, as bold as the wild buffalo, and as reckless as the wounded elephant. But he had a voice as soft as wild honey dripping from a tree, and a skin softer than down.' Clearly, leopards were the coolest animals in the jungle.

Jim Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* was even more thrilling because his accounts of shooting rogue leopards during the Indian Raj were indisputably factual. I took the famous hunter's words as gospel. 'Those who have never seen a leopard under favourable conditions in his natural surroundings,' he wrote, 'can have no conception of the grace of movement and beauty of colouring of this, the most graceful and the most beautiful of all animals in our Indian jungles.'

To the boyhood naturalist, of course, cunning and savagery trumped grace and beauty. In *The Spotted Devil of Gummalapur*, by Kenneth Anderson, I read how the leopard is 'an engine of destruction quite equal to his far larger cousin, the tiger,' and that 'in veritable demoniac cunning and daring he has no equal.' I lapped up this stuff – and I especially loved the idea that a leopard could do you in. It was thrilling to learn, for example, that one of Corbett's victims, the Panar Leopard, had killed over four hundred people. I fear the human tragedy behind this horror was lost on me.

I cringe now to remember this lust for death and glory, and can explain it only as part of the confused testosterone rush of early adolescence. In our family, my younger brother Chris had already cornered the market in juvenile machismo by excelling at football and collecting toy soldiers. My attempts to compete involved bigging up my knowledge of deadly animals – as though by reeling off, say, the bite radius of a great white shark or the speed of a charging black rhino, I acquired some of these animals' powers.

In this respect, leopards ticked all the boxes. Though smaller than lions and tigers, they were more stealthy and agile, and seemed always to punch above their weight. 'Pound for pound,' I would read, 'the leopard is the most dangerous animal in Africa.' I was never entirely sure what this meant but somehow it made leopards a sexier thing by which to be torn apart and eaten. I would warn Chris, as he arranged his miniature plastic

paratroopers across the patio, that a single leopard could take out any of his soldiers, neck broken and guts ripped out before they knew what hit them. Obviously, somehow, that leopard was me.

***

During my childhood, photographs of wild leopards were much rarer than they are today. This increased the animal's mystique: if it is really the most widespread of the big cats, I wondered, why is it so hard to photograph? I treasured the few, well-thumbed images in my bookcase, pick of the bunch being the black-and-white leopard in Hugo Van Lawick's *Savage Paradise* standing in a tree fork with an African wild cat dangling from its jaws. Film footage was even harder to come by and, for me, any leopard on screen was an event. It didn't have to be wildlife programmes: even Grant and Hepburn romping with their pet leopard in the old Hollywood classic *Bringing Up Baby* was worth a pause and rewind – or would have been, had such a thing then existed.

"I would gawp through the bars on a cold February morning at Chessington World of Adventures as their single male leopard padded the perimeter fence, hypnotised by his see-saw shoulders."

All this fodder inspired my own creative output. For me, wildlife had always gone hand-in-hand with drawing, and leopards quickly became my default subject as I scribbled away, working out how to tackle snarling faces, folded back legs and so on. Leopards led to other cats: ocelots, lynxes, you name it. I even produced a Top Trumps 'cats of the world' pack, with cards featuring each of 37 species competing with one another on such grounds as weight, length of spring and 'ferocity factor'. A photograph from this period shows our family gathered in the sitting room with the face of a leopard just visible outside the window, as though peering in from the darkness. I had cut out the image from a poster and stuck it to the glass. It was the closest I could get to a real-life encounter.

Leopards also stalked my juvenile prose. School compositions would describe some fantasy African scenario, in which I tracked down the cat by its pugmarks or call, warning my companions that 'pound for pound, it's the most dangerous animal in Africa'. In one, I rescued a girl named Jenny ('pretty, but shy') from an escaped circus leopard that appeared in a school playground. As snarling cat advanced on helpless girl, and staff and pupils stood transfixed with fear, I stepped in, looked the beast straight in the eye and talked it down in low, reassuring tones. It stayed there, tail twitching, until the game rangers (in Epsom?) arrived.

For the real, living animal, I had to rely on zoos. Whatever qualms I may have today about keeping large predators in captivity, my younger self was not about to pass up any opportunity to eyeball them in the flesh. I would gawp through the bars on a cold February morning at Chessington World of Adventures as their single male leopard padded the perimeter fence, hypnotised by his see-saw shoulders, bristling whiskers and occasional rumbling growl. Though I tried to meet his eye, he always seemed to look right through me at some world far beyond. 'Over the cage floor the horizons come,' wrote Ted Hughes in *The Jaguar*. It's a shame he chose the wrong species.

Meanwhile, I had a small leopard of my own back home: a white-pawed tabby named, imaginatively, Catkin. Sprawled over the boiler in our kitchen, his tail dangling beside the fridge, I would imagine a scaled-up version of him draped over an acacia branch beside a half-eaten impala. Pound for pound, I reckoned, Catkin was the most dangerous tabby in the whole of Epsom.

***

My childhood obsession with leopards was not based purely upon bloodthirsty derring-do, fictional or otherwise. Inside me, a would-be naturalist was also struggling to get out. I pored over encyclopaedias and would regale anybody who'd listen with chapter and verse on the leopard's taxonomy, distribution, habitat preferences and so on. I was a fund of data – weight, shoulder height and tail length; for both male and female, and of each recognised subspecies – and I would explain, ad nauseam, that the black panther of Bagheera fame was simply a melanistic variant of the leopard, while, conversely, the snow leopard, clouded leopard and leopard cat – Asian species – were not leopards at all but had acquired their names purely on the basis of their spots. These last three I considered rank imposters.

Some of what I learned brought me back down to earth: for instance, that only fifty per cent of leopard cubs survive their first year; that four out of five hunting attempts fail and that despite all that 'pound for pound' power, a leopard will cede its kill to a single hyena rather than risk injury in a scrap. I accepted these deflating realities in the name of science. But the fact that leopards weren't magic, that their fight for survival was as hard as every other animal's, also made them more real.

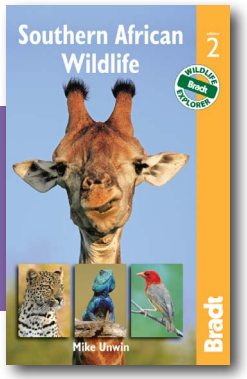
It wasn't only leopards, of course. As a junior wildlife fanatic, I devoured information about animals of all sorts, from the territorial calls of howler monkeys to the reproductive strategies of hawk moths. Birds were particularly important, being the most readily accessible wildlife in my suburban existence. It was through birds that I entered the world of field guides, binoculars and lists.

As my interest and knowledge grew, so I began to downplay my interest in big cats. It seemed to me that the 'charismatic megafauna' – the likes of tigers, polar bears, dolphins, etc – were not for true wildlife lovers. They had become public property, swooned over by ignorant people who, in the same breath, reviled the snakes, vultures and stag beetles that I also loved. The wildlife snob in me sought more exclusive outlets: if I had to talk cats, then it was the likes of margay or marbled cat – small, obscure species, unknown to most people – that I would witter on about; with birds, I'd eschew vulgar flamingos or toucans, say, for more subtle charmers such as Dartford warbler or smew.

But, although leopards may have taken a back seat while I worked through my adolescent identity issues, they never went away. Somewhere in the tangled acacia thicket of my imagination, the predator was still prowling around. Any passing mention of the big cat in books or the news had me pricking up my ears, while even the tackiest image on a greeting card or T-shirt would always warrant a quick once-over. (Is it a male or female? Asian or African? How big is it, roughly?) The mystique and allure remained intact, as did the safari fantasies.

And so, when I left for Zimbabwe at the age of 22, and my head may have been brimming with other weighty matters – the iniquities of apartheid; the lyrics of the Smiths; my doubts about travelling halfway across the world for a job I knew nothing about and with someone who, I suspected, didn't want to be there – I was still guarding a secret agenda. I wanted to see a wild leopard. Just one. Was that too much to ask?

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.



A SPOTLIGHT ON THE INDEPENDENT

Last year, MD Adrian Phillips visited the French Pyrenees to write a lead feature for National Geographic Traveller. *It has just been published in their December/January issue, and describes his experiences walking with shepherds, searching for bears and much more. What it doesn't describe is the effort that went on behind the scenes. The trip was organised by Penny Walker, a local operator whose passion for the region played a significant part in making the visit the success that it was. The care and expertise that she brought served as a reminder of the value that good independent companies can bring. This is Penny's story.*

THE ADVENTURE CREATORS

The French call it a *coup de foudre*. An unforeseen event, most notably love at first sight.

The moment it happened to me is etched on my memory, standing there transfixed to the spot in the Pyrenees mountains, the estate agent looking on as I mumbled like an idiot. 'Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow!'

And so began my love affair with this incredible mountain range.

Scratching the itch

So how did I end up in the Pyrenees?

As a child, the fells of the English Lake District, where my father was the warden of an outdoor pursuits centre, were my playground. However, it wasn't until I was in my 30s that adventuring really got under my skin and it was all thanks to my seven-year-old son.

I was living in Sheffield at the time, on the doorstep of the Peak District. After attending a kid's birthday party at the local climbing wall, he got the bug for climbing and I found myself roped in (excuse the pun!) to belay him on what would become regular weekly sessions. From there, I too became hooked (!) and quickly found myself drawn into the local outdoor climbing scene. From here, I went on to dabble in trail/fell running on the gritstone edges, as well as mountain biking and occasionally road cycling, too. The urge inside me to get outdoors grew.

Some ten years later, once my son had flown the nest, the time felt right to investigate the possibility of buying a property in France. I was a lifelong Francophile and had always had a strong pull towards the country. My husband and I knew

we wanted to live in a mountain environment but quickly dismissed the Alps, and not just because of the ridiculous property prices and high cost of living. We were looking for somewhere that offered more authenticity, more mountain wilderness and fewer people.

That was when I visited the Pyrenees for the first time and experienced that unforgettable *coup de foudre*.

The love affair takes hold

We ended up buying a property in the foothills of the central French Pyrenees and my incredible love affair with the mountains began to blossom. And when it came to outdoor activities, the region exceeded all our expectations.

One of the huge attractions of this part of the world was obviously the possibility for indulging our love for all things outdoors. Mountain hiking became a major part of our lives – and we have the billy bonus of being able to explore two countries for the price of one! We can enjoy a packed lunch on a ridge line with literally one foot in Spain and the other in France, and are spoilt for choice between tapas or crêpes for an afternoon treat.

I remember, during our early mountain-hiking forays, being surprised at just how few people we encountered on the trails, even in the peak summer months. Once away from the busy car park and café at the trailhead, there were occasions when we wouldn't see another soul during a 5-hour hike. Bliss!

And if I'm not on two feet, you can find me on two wheels. You'd be forgiven for thinking that the Pyrenees is all about the big cols that feature every year in the Tour de France. But I have spent many a glorious day exploring the gently undulating, peaceful country lanes in the foothills, which span the length of the mountain chain. I have also witnessed the evolution of the area into a world-class XC and Enduro mountain-biking destination, a fabulous and lesser-known rival to the likes of Morzine in the French Alps.

When it comes to winter sports, the ski resorts in the Pyrenees are low-key, friendly, great value and more 'family' than 'après-ski'. But, to be honest, piste skiing doesn't rock my world. Instead, I am an aspiring back country skier (still very much a work in progress), preferring the peace and quiet of untracked mountain sides to the hum and bustle of the resorts. Thankfully, the mountains of the central French Pyrenees are the ideal environment for novices such as myself, with plenty of wide open and gently rolling powder fields on which to hone my technique while staying firmly within my comfort zone.

Keeping it wild

One of the biggest thrills over the years has been to discover the incredible wildlife that thrives in the wilderness areas of the Pyrenees. Few people are aware of the ongoing reintroduction programme of brown bears in the mountains, a project that commenced in 1996 with the aim of bolstering the population of native Pyrenean brown bears – of which the last one was unfortunately shot by a hunter in 2004. The project is backed by the French government and part funded by the EU, and today there are around 50 brown bears concentrated in the central area of the mountain range.

> ***"We were looking for somewhere that offered more authenticity, more mountain wilderness and fewer people."***

Over the years I have forged close ties with Pays de l'Ours ADET, an association responsible for educating not only the general public but also members of the pastoral community about how to co-habit with the bears. As a result, I have gained a fascinating insight into these misunderstood animals.

We're also incredibly fortunate to have both the bearded vulture (Europe's rarest vulture) and the


© NOAA, UNSPLASH

A handful of brown bears have been reintroduced to the area in recent years

distinctive Egyptian vulture nesting in our area of the mountains. It's such a thrill to see them in the skies when we're out hiking!

Then there is the expanding population of reintroduced ibex and even some transitory wolves that are quite likely to settle in our area of the Pyrenees over the coming years. Such diversity of wildlife really is testament to how unspoiled these mountains are.

Dump the diet

I learned very quickly that attempting to lose weight is a ridiculous idea in the Pyrenees. There is just way too much deliciousness to be had here, from the incredible variety of cheeses to the charcuterie, chocolates, cakes and pastries. Resistance is futile.

I'm not sure that taking out a loyalty card with the local farm that produces ewe's milk cheese is really helping my 'habit' but at least I'm supporting a local business, right?

Visiting the local market in the nearby village of Aspet is always a highlight of my week as it not only offers a chance to pick up the freshest seasonal fruit and veg direct from small producers but is also an opportunity to enjoy a café crème and a cheeky pain au chocolat while indulging in my favourite pastime – people watching. I was very grateful that the market was allowed to continue throughout the two lockdowns in France – a small mercy!

Over the years I have also taken great pleasure in investigating the numerous restaurants, which are, without fail, heavily focused on supporting local producers and using only the freshest, seasonal produce in their diverse and imaginative creations. The region's chefs are seriously passionate about their craft, and meeting them always makes for a truly unforgettable dining experience.

I have a number of favourites but I always advise our guests to enjoy at least one meal on the scenic terrace of La Chapelle, a fabulous restaurant up at the Superbagnères ski resort, which past clients maintain sell the best burgers in the world! In July and August and throughout the ski season, you can reach the Superbagnères plateau via the bubble lift from Luchon town centre, which is an experience in itself.

Business matters

I've always been an entrepreneur, establishing my first business over 20 years ago. Having discovered the Pyrenees and all that they could offer the outdoors enthusiast, in 2016 I decided to found my latest venture, The Adventure Creators.

The views are almost as good as the food at La Chapelle

In short, we offer adventure holidays for time-challenged individuals and nature-loving families across the region, in both France and Spain. At the very heart of the business is a team of carefully curated local experts through whom we're able to provide a truly personal and tailor-made experience. The idea is to provide people with a totally stress-free holiday, in which we like to think we've considered even the smallest of details.

Starting the businesses has been the perfect excuse for me to seek out the very best of every element of life in this part of the world so I can share this with our clients. We're talking not only about the endless possibilities for outdoors activities, but the flora and fauna, gastronomy, history and culture too. It's fair to say that The Adventure Creators has turned into a business of pure self-indulgence!

Of course, this year has been tough for the business. The lockdowns in both the UK and in France – and especially the introduction of the quarantine requirement on people returning to the UK from France – meant many were prevented from taking up their holidays in 2020, and most of our bookings were cancelled. The few that were able to make it down to the Pyrenees, however, had an amazing time!

As one of our guest families this summer commented, 'Having fun outdoors in the wonderful mountain air, and with such fantastic planning, was such a treat – and as near to feeling normal as we have in months.'

The Pyrenees offer exactly what many of us are seeking from travel right now – clean air, wide open spaces, no crowds – and so I expect the area to become popular this year once the vaccine has started to be rolled out. It's shaping up to be a cracker of a year already – those who chose to postpone rather than cancel their holiday plans last year have already rebooked, we have filled two weeks' worth of women's mountain-biking holidays, have bookings for our five-star-rated family multi-activity holiday and plenty of enquiries for various snowshoeing, hiking and horse trekking trips.

The feedback we're receiving suggests people really do appreciate the reassurance of booking with local experts who have got their backs, who've done all the research and due diligence to make sure they will be safe and properly looked after on their much-needed holiday.

I'm proud of the personal service that we offer and believe it's this that truly sets small travel businesses such as The Adventure Creators apart from the bigger and better-known adventure travel operators. Travelling locally is the way forward.

As for my love affair? The more I explore and the more I discover on both the French and Spanish sides of the chain, the more my love for the Pyrenees deepens.

Come and experience it for yourself and you too will be struck by that inevitable *coup de foudre*.

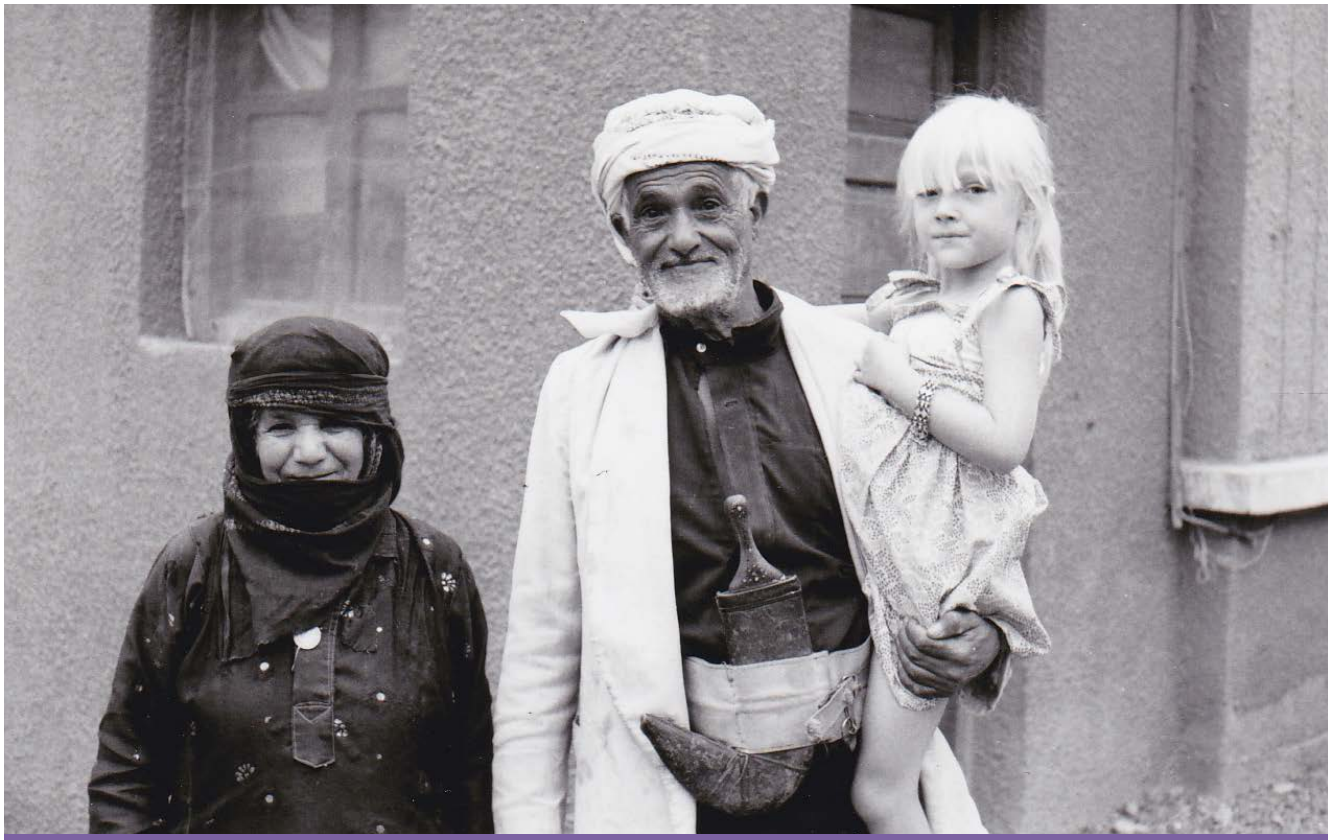
Penny Walker is the founder of The Adventure Creators, a niche tour operator specialising in tailor-made activity and adventure holidays in the Pyrenees mountains. See page 39 for details of your exclusive offer to book a tour with them today.

YEARNING FOR YEMEN: A CHILDHOOD MEMORY

Kirsten Hamilton-Sturdy *shares her fondest memories of spending her formative years in a divided country*

We could see only as far as the headlights reached into the darkness as we drove over the ridge and into the wadi bed. We thought it would be dry, but as our guide opened his door he slipped out into a swirling black hole of water, taking with him a wave heavy with our belongings, shoes and – most importantly – my doll. We drifted sideways down the river, waist deep in water, as my father assessed the situation, telling us that we weren't moving very fast while he tried to steer. I was four years old.

In the summer of 1975, my parents drove from Larne, Northern Ireland to Sana'a, Yemen following a map drawn on the back of a cigarette packet. The journey took the best part of seven weeks – I don't remember much, except for the star-roofed souks of Damascus and driving though the deserts and mountains of Saudi in convoy with six huge Pakistani trucks. Sometimes



Four-year-old me with Nasser, the night watchman, and his wife, Ditta

we ate with them, my mother and I sitting to one side of a circle of men. We parted company along the Christian highway (bypassing Mecca) as we continued onwards to Yemen.

This wasn't the first time we'd travelled like this. When I was 18 months old, we travelled by boat from Southampton to Nigeria – but, of course, I was too young to remember that journey. This was my first memory of our many adventures overseas as a family, and of a childhood of travel. And Yemen will forever hold a special place in my heart.

On friends and family

Sana'a was to be our home for two years. We lived in a nice villa with an L-shaped garden brimming with huge pomegranate trees, and a night watchman, which was essential at the time.

Previously, north Yemen had been under Ottoman control and south Yemen a British Protectorate, but in 1967 the British finally withdrew from the south. The two sides officially became separate countries, with the south adopting a communist government – the only Arab country in the world to do so. With over 400 tribes in the region wanting power or aid, there were always tribal disagreements and a possibility of a dangerous incident – hence the need of a night watchman.

Nasser lived in a small house attached to ours with his wife Ditta, daughter Khairiyah, and her

I used to love playing with Nabil (right) and his cousins

nine-year-old son, Nabil, who was to become one of my closest companions. I used to love hearing him knock on our back door and shout '*Taal*!' (come!) when the cartoons were on – they had a TV in their house, but we didn't. I'd go out and sit with the family, eating from huge plates of rice and meat, often with potatoes and spice. (Khairiyah loved to use fenugreek in pretty much everything). I'd watch *Scooby-Doo* in Arabic or some black-and-white puppet show, and as a result my Arabic became quite good. There was laughter and cuddles and Khairiyah used to play with my hair. Sometimes we would sit on the back steps and chat while our cats (Caesar and Bubbles) prowled around.

One particular weekend we went to Nasser's home village in Bani Hushaysh, 25km east of Sana'a. Nabil and I were thrown into the boot of the Range Rover with some cushions – this was the '70s after all, not really the era of health and safety – and we tumbled around happily with every bump and bend in the road. The rest of the family were squeezed into the back seat like badly packed assorted vegetables – different shapes and sizes all competing for space. We made the trip so my father and his friend Rudi could fix the family's well, but I also think Nasser wanted to show us his home and a different side to life in Yemen – not the city, but the farms and the villages. This area is famous for its grapes: huge deep purple orbs of juiciness. He had a wonderful stone house with a donkey and fantastic vineyards, and before long we all had wet chins as we gorged ourselves on grapes sitting under the canopy as the warm dry breeze came up the valley. Nabil's cousins, wearing brocade hoods, watched us like suspicious birds, worried perhaps that we might eat the whole crop. We laid the grapes out in the sun to be dried into fat raisins, and came home laden with bags full of the sweet, flattened discs.

On Sana'a

I recall the tight alleyways of Sana'a's old town: the houses all leaning on each other and skyscrapers

The beautiful mosques and mud skyscrapers of Sana'a

made from mud with coloured windows and painted doorways. Cars and bikes used to whizz by, and little shutter doors would open showing a tiny shop with a person almost embedded within, selling knives, nuts, cloth and wheelbarrows of *qat* (khat). This mild narcotic plant is popular with Yemenis, who stuff it into one cheek and hold it there, letting the juices slip down their throats. As a child I thought they looked like hamster people. And they weren't the only animals I remember – the meat market had goat heads hanging over the shop fronts, their tongues sticking out in a gruesome warning with flies dancing on their lashes. In fact, flies followed you everywhere... and children followed me, hoping to touch my blonde hair. Often people stopped my father to ask, 'Why have you dyed her hair the colour of an old lady?'

The streets were always busy with people. Women would walk together, their hair covered with huge multicoloured clothes, and some girls wore hoods buttoned under their chins. The Tihamah ladies were distinguished by their high conical woven hats that perched precariously and provided shade and an area of cooler air above their heads. Men wore *futas*, lengths of material a bit like a sarong, folded around and tied at the waist usually with a belt, and an ornate curved dagger placed at the navel.

When the mosque calls started, it was one of the most amazing sounds – a haunting domino effect. One mosque would start, and then another and another and before long, the whole of Sana'a seemed to sing out, voices spiralling between the mud houses and out across the mountains. It was almost like the sound would bounce around and fold back on itself... comforting and emotional, like waves on a beach moving backwards and forwards, pulling you in. It still brings tears to my eyes when I think about it.

On animals

During Ramadan we had sheep in the garden – they lived here for a month or so to be fattened up, munching complacently on the grass. That's if you could call them sheep – they looked more like a caricature, the sheep that you imagine from the Bible with fat shaggy tails and skinny necks. We would eat them during the Eid celebration, and the next day their skins would be hanging up on the washing line like towels. I don't ever remember being upset by this – to four-year-old me it seemed perfectly normal.

I had a pet guinea pig while we lived in Sana'a, but it started killing his babies (which is apparently

quite common), so we gave him to Nasser to eat. Sure enough, the next day the little skin was on the washing line. My mother thought she could make a pair of gloves from it, until an eagle swooped down and snatched it away. It must have been very disappointed with its catch.

On holidays

A favourite place for us to visit and camp was Hokka (also spelt Al Khawkhah), situated on the Red Sea Coast about 200km southwest of Sana'a. I loved our camping trips – we'd drive down from the heights of the capital (which sits at about 2,250m) and wind our way past the terraces to the coast. Yemen has some of the most extensive terrace-farming systems in the world due to the steepness of the mountains and poor soil quality, but I remember thinking the fields looked like green ribbons hugging the slopes.

Down on the coast, the sand was so deep that half the fun was to see who would get stuck. Sadly, that was rarely us – our Range Rover was too strong for the sand and my dad loved rally driving. I remember one time we pretty much dragged our friends' Volkswagen Beetle – handle-deep in sand! – to the beach.

For me, Hokka was a great place to visit as a child, as I was free to roam and play among the palm trees. Occasionally fishermen or villagers would venture out to speak to us, usually women and children. They were bewildered by my boy doll as it came complete with working parts – the kind that needed its nappy changed. My father didn't know the Arabic word for doll so, to my tears and their horror, he decided to kick it to show that it wasn't a real child.

We would sleep out under the stars, so bright and clear as there were no towns or light pollution to block their rays. I remember once being woken at about 2am, taken out of my bed and carried in my white nightdress down to the water's edge. A few of my parents' friends were there, splashing about wildly and flapping their arms, making butterfly wings as the water dripped off them. To me, it looked electric – blues and greens flickered off their skin and sequins of water tumbled down their bodies. They danced and swirled around

It's about 6am and I'm waiting patiently for my parents to get up!

in the shallows and with every kick the water sparkled. I was totally mystified and a little scared to join in, so I sat on the beach and watched the colours. Of course, it was just bioluminescence – the chemical reaction that releases light energy from marine plankton – but magical nonetheless.

On memories

Flashes along the synapses of my mind bring up other images that play like a few seconds of a film: cutting down a pine tree in a huge forest for Christmas; washing our fruit and vegetables with sterilising tablets; dust hanging like fat golden spheres in the evening air through my window. I remember it being so hot that the tarmac would bubble and melt – one time I lost my favourite clogs in a sticky mess. I can also recall the moment I met explorer Freya Stark, who to me was just an old woman in a floppy hat!

Memories are the fragile threads that connect us to the past, and of course as a child, I saw all this as a magical land of frosted gingerbread houses and slightly dust-covered, friendly people. I was happy within a Yemeni family and my parents never showed any fear or worry. But, unbeknown to me, it was a time of tribal wars. Every male wore a *jambiya* (a curved dagger) and most carried a Kalashnikov or some type of old rifle. It was commonplace for foreigners to be 'kidnapped' by tribes and used as ransom to the authorities to get medicine or a working well in their village. The government would relent and the hostage would be released (after being very well looked after), but as soon as the hostage was freed, the government would blow up the well or stop access to medicine. It was an ongoing situation of desperation.

Me with my mother, Elaine, and father, Bill

Despite this, Yemen holds a wonderful dear memory for my family. And one day I hope to return and see Khairiyah and Nabil and say *As-salamu alaykum*... I have missed you.

Born in Northern Ireland, **Kirsten Hamilton-Sturdy** spent most of her childhood years in other countries, including Nigeria, Libya and Bangladesh. She's since been to 70 countries and has spent 14 years teaching overseas, dragging her own children around with her. She enjoys writing about her travels, and has been runner up in our New Travel Writer of the Year Competition on three separate occasions.

IT'S NO BALONEY IN BOLOGNA: NOTES FROM ITALY'S 'FOOD VALLEY'

A trip to the capital of Emilia-Romagna offers some of the country's greatest delicacies, writes **Dana Facaros**

After spending three years living in Italy, my family and I moved to France and sent our children to the local school. On the first day, we asked our 10-year-old son how it went. All good, he said, until I asked about the school lunch, imagining budding Gallic gourmets feasting on a *daube*, a fluffy omelette, or maybe some cassoulet? Instead, I was met with a look of horror. 'Mamma, they put the pasta in the water before it was boiling!'

Italy makes gourmets out of even the youngest children. Because when it comes to food, the Italians are fussy, obsessed and – annoyingly – always right. Nowhere more so than Emilia-Romagna, the Po Valley region renowned for art cities such as Piacenza, Parma, Modena, Ferrara and Ravenna, but nicknamed 'Food Valley' for the delicacies it produces: Italy's finest pasta, Parmesan, Grana Padano, provolone and balsamic vinegar. And that's before we mention the host of cured meats: Parma ham, pancetta,

© BOLOGNA WELCOME SRL

Tortellini is said to be modelled on a woman's navel

The Quadrilateral is the place to go for food in Bologna

coppa, *fiocchetto*, *strolghino* and most prized of all, *culatello*, in spite of its name, 'little arse'.

With such superb local ingredients, there's little fancy about Emilia-Romagna's cooking. Above all, it seldom changes. And why should it need to, ask the locals? It's perfect as it is – refined and democratic, with its feet in the muck and its head in the stars. The small farmers doing things the old-fashioned way means just as much to it as the famous chefs and venerable culinary academies.

And Bologna! If the capital of Emilia-Romagna didn't have to share a country with divas like Rome, Florence and Venice, the city's *palazzi*, churches, museums, opera and its wonderful pair of wonky leaning towers, the Asinelli and Garisenda, would be swamped with tour groups. Instead, Bologna deftly combines fascinating art and architecture with the atmosphere of a real working city. Its symbols are the endless porticoes that provide shade in summer and shelter from the winter rains. Its centuries-old *osterie* (inns) are filled with students from Europe's oldest university, founded way back in 1088. This preponderance of youth, along with a head start in Italy's industrial revolution (it's no accident that Emilia-Romagna is also Italy's 'Motor Valley', home to Ferrari, Lamborghini and Maserati) has traditionally made it one of the country's most left-wing regions. Hence Bologna's trio of nicknames: La Dotta ('the learned'), La Rossa ('the red') and La Grassa ('the fat').

All the crooked little streets between the leaning towers and ginormous main square, Piazza Maggiore, fall under the rule of La Grassa. This area, known as the Quadrilateral, has been the city's stomach for millennia, lined with some of the finest food shops in Italy. It's irresistible and always my first stop in Bologna. I especially love it on early winter evenings, when the illuminated porticoes give the city the air of an enormous urban palace, arch after arch disappearing into shadows. The Quadrilateral's little food shops radiate contentment and well being, wafting tantalising aromas, amid the happy chit-chat of folks heading home from work, stopping for something to take home for supper or an aperitivo. Also in winter, indulging in the 'fat' part of the deal feels more or less guilt-free: you need it to stay warm on those nippy nights.

Fattest of all is Bologna's own contribution to the regional pork-o-rama, *mortadella*, the noble ancestor of baloney. The confusion began with the late 19th-century American habit of calling all Italian sausage 'Bologna sausage', but mortadella is nothing like those rubbery pink discs of lunchmeat you see in the supermarket. The real deal resembles a red cannon, half a metre in diameter and two metres long, set up on trestles. The recipe – prime cuts of pork, ground fine in a mortar (hence the name), sprinkled with small cubes of fat (*lardarelli*) and spiced with whole grains of pepper and sometimes pistachios – was codified by the Corporazione dei Salaroli ('Sausagemakers' guild) in 1367. Back then, mortadella was so prized that it was used as currency.

"To be called 'tagliatelle' their width must be 1/1,270th of the height of the Torre Asinelli."

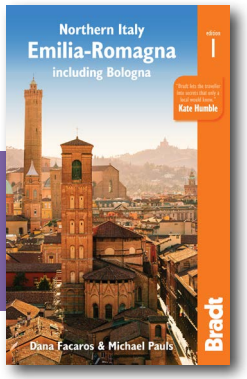
Mortadella is also a key ingredient in tortellini, plump rings of egg-rich pasta arranged like jewellery in the Quadrilateral's shop windows. As the old Bolognese saying goes, 'If the first father of the human race was lost for an apple, what would he not have done for a plate of tortellini?'. The first tortellini were allegedly modelled on a woman's navel, a navel so beautiful that it could only have belonged to Venus herself (the story goes she arrived incognito in Bologna, checked into an inn and was spotted while undressed by a cook). The Bolognese have even fought for the honour of their beloved pasta – in the 1920s, when a visiting Venetian disparaged tortellini, a postman beat him up so badly that one ended up in the hospital and the other in jail for six months, without tortellini.

Although tortellini have been made since the Middle Ages, it wasn't until 1821 that a certain Adelaide came up with the canonical filling of minced veal, ham, mortadella, Parmesan cheese and nutmeg. In 1963, the Accademia del Tortellino (yes, there is such a thing) was founded to perfect and preserve Adelaide's recipe. The locals love them best swimming in a rich capon broth.

Feminine pulchritude also led to the creation of tagliatelle, the third star in the Bolognese culinary firmament, laid out in tempting golden skeins next to the tortellini in the Quadrilateral's shops. Lucrezia Borgia, daughter of Pope Alexander Borgia, was famous for her long blonde hair, and the story goes that these long ribbons of golden egg pasta were invented by a local chef named Zafirano in honour of her wedding in 1487. Since then, the Bologna-based Academy of Italian Cuisine has decreed that to be called 'tagliatelle' their width must be 1/1,270th of the height of the Torre Asinelli (ie: 9mm) – no more, no less. The precise measure is kept closely guarded by the city's Chamber of Commerce. The dough has to be rolled out so thin it's almost translucent, and they say it takes about 15 years of practice to get it right.

And the classic sauce to complement those gorgeous silky strands? Ragù bolognese. Comparing *tagliatelle al ragù bolognese* to its descendent, British spag bol, probably won't land you a fist in the snoot these days, although I personally wouldn't risk it. It's always the first dish I order after my prowl through the Quadrilateral, the confirmation nothing has changed, that Bologna is still Bologna. Inevitably too I'm reminded of the religious silence that greets a plate of pasta as it arrives from the kitchen, even at a table of the most garrulous Italians; it's not only because it tastes better when it's hot, but it's a sign of respect, acknowledgement for the art that went into its creation.

Dana Facaros has written more than 20 guidebooks to Italy and its regions, including the Bradt Guide to Emilia-Romagna, which The Travel Club members can get for **half price** using the code **TRAVELCLUB50**.



WORLDLY APPETITES:
RAGÙ BOLOGNESE

Chef Elisa Rusconi took over her grandfather's restaurant, the Trattoria Da Me – 1937, in 2015, and three years later it was awarded first prize as the best osteria in Bologna. 'Tagliatelle are the great love of the Bolognese,' Elisa explains. 'The food you crave when you are away, the food you eat as a family. We roll the dough out, cut it by hand and top the pasta with this fantastic sauce, which cooks over a very low heat for hours with lots of love.'

Ingredients

500g beef, diced
300g pancetta, diced
300g coppone (pork neck salami)
200g celery, finely chopped
200g carrot, finely chopped
200g brown onion, finely chopped
100g tomato passata
1tbsp olive oil

Method

1. Heat the olive oil in a large pan. Fry the chopped celery, carrot and onion together for a few minutes, until the onion starts to brown.
2. Add the pancetta and cook for 2–3 minutes minutes, and then add the rest of the meat a little at a time.
3. When the meat is almost cooked, add the tomato puree. Cook with the lid on over a medium heat for at least 10 minutes, and then leave to simmer over a low flame for 2 hours.
4. Remove the lid and cook for a further hour. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and serve over freshly made tagliatelle.

STORIES FROM A WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER: HEATHER ANGEL

For almost 60 years, wildlife photographer **Heather Angel** *has been shooting flora and fauna across all four corners of the globe. We caught up with her to chat about her favourite destinations and experiences from a life on the road.*

An orange-breasted sunbird sips nectar from an Erica, Cape Town, South Africa © HEATHER ANGEL

Losing balance, a giant panda slides down a snow-covered slope in Sichuan, China

How did you get into wildlife photography?

My interest in wildlife developed during summer holidays spent on my grandparents' farm in Suffolk, when my grandmother would tell me the names of wildflowers and insects. Back home on the RAF Coltishall base near Norwich in Norfolk, I nurtured caterpillars in my bedroom, and observed how a crayfish moved and fed in an aquarium, and eventually went on to study zoology at university. At this stage I had no ambition to be a photographer; indeed the family Box Brownie rarely came out of the cupboard.

Once my final exams were over, I headed off to Norway with seven fellow graduates on an underwater expedition. I recorded colourful marine life with my first camera – an East German Exakta – that my father gave me as a 21st birthday present. Having never used a camera before, I hadn't a clue how to load my first film until a photo dealer showed me!

Back in the UK, I began to research the distribution of marine life in the core samples we collected in Norway. On my days off I gravitated to coastlines to photograph marine life between the tides. This led to my first article on sea anemones, for which I was paid a princely sum of 21 guineas (it was the mid-1960s, after all). A series of articles followed whilst completing my research.

A female white-cheeked gibbon with her two-week-old baby pause high up in a rainforest, Yunnan Province, China © HEATHER ANGEL

After marrying Martin, the expedition scientific leader, we moved to Surrey – not a county known for its jobs in marine biology. Martin suggested I try working as a freelance wildlife photographer. For several years I gave natural history lectures during the winter months, which paid for my photography for the rest of the year. In under a decade, my first book was published and I never looked back. Some photographers I know hate the thought of writing, even though it is easier to sell images as a text and photos package. For me, writing and photography form a symbiotic relationship – one fuels the other.

What wildlife do you specialise in?

I began with marine life, because it was easily accessible and few people were photographing marine organisms in 1960s Britain. It did not take long to spread my wings to capture iconic wildlife that would always be in demand for magazines and books, including penguins in Antarctica, polar bears in Canada, giant tortoises and iguanas in the Galapagos, snow monkeys in Japan and pandas in China.

My preference has always been for mammals rather than birds, unless they show interesting behaviour. Quite simply, mammals have more pliable and expressive faces. I have invested more time on giant pandas than any other

A male fiddler crab with large pincer on a beach in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt

A brown bear mother stands up to check no male bears threaten her cub, Katmai National Park, Alaska, USA

animal, but it paid off because I have written three books on pandas and countless articles. My best-selling image is a grab shot of a giant panda sliding down a snowy slope with all four limbs pointing skywards.

Wherever I travel, plants are never ignored. Invariably my first stop after landing in a country is the botanical garden. I was thrilled when my shot of a vanilla orchid in flower was reproduced on a Seychelles coin. Years later, an eye-to-eye shot of a red panda appeared on a stamp for the 2011 WWF Wild Animals set.

What is your favourite type of flora or fauna to shoot?

Size is immaterial – I can tackle anything from a water flea to a whale – but what determines my choice is largely the content of the current book I am writing. I aim to take photos of wildlife that are more than a static portrait – they need to tell a story by the way they behave. Even better if they raise a smile.

For the last decade I have been concentrating on taking pollinators in action, which combines wildlife with plants. I have always loved macro photography, because you have complete control of the light within a small area. Flash is used to boost the light and freeze movement of insect visitors to flowers; whereas LED light

A common frog rests on a lily pad in a garden pond © HEATHER ANGEL

panels are used to light potted plants and fruits inside or a tiny LED light as a spotlight to highlight part of a larger flower. Focus stacking has revolutionised macro photography by enabling enhanced depth of field with small three-dimensional subjects.

What are some of the most rewarding places you've visited?

Having asked several publishers what images they found difficult to source in the early 1970s, I learnt it was endemic species on oceanic islands. That gave me the impetus to visit the Galápagos, and in 1972 I joined a schooner with five other passengers and loved every minute. I doubt I would relish the necessary restrictions that are now imposed. When I first visited the Galápagos, there were not many boats and tourists were sparse, so there were no strict regulations about having to stick to the paths with a professional guide.

Antarctica is stunning, but at its best without a gale blowing when the penguins aren't huddled together. And Madagascar's lemurs and chamaeleons were rewarding. But, without any doubt, my favourite country is China, which I have visited 32 times, embracing all the seasons. Quite apart from the charismatic endemic giant pandas, colourful pheasants and bizarre giant salamanders, the country has some spectacular

King penguins on Macquarie Island in the Southern Ocean, an image used as a jigsaw puzzle for fanatics!

Amur or Siberian tigers sparring in winter, Heilongjiang, China © HEATHER ANGEL

A harp seal pup on pack ice after an overnight blizzard, Gulf of St Lawrence, Canada

landscapes and a vast diverse flora that continues to attract plant hunters. It's impossible to extol its beauty in a couple of sentences!

How do you work on the road?

For plant hunting I join small specialist botanical groups with superb leaders that can find most plants I want to photograph. Most of the later trips made to China were arranged by brilliant fixers on the ground – one in Kunming (Yunnan) and the other in Chengdu (Sichuan). They supply a car, driver and interpreter, and I draft a rough itinerary with the key sites and goals I want to achieve. Sometimes I misjudge the distances on the roads, resulting in either the itinerary being extended or the car setting off a couple of days before me so we can rendezvous at a local airport.

What simple tips would you give to people looking to improve their nature photography?

- **Research a new location before visiting**. Contact a warden/ranger for advice about the prime time for a likely window of opportunity for specific species.
- **Never miss a shot** by always carrying a spare battery plus plenty of memory cards.
- **Use a field notebook** to describe the sounds of animals and floral fragrances that embellish writing about a location long after the trip.
- **Be patient;** those who wait reap the reward.
- **Get inspired** by viewing annual wildlife photography exhibitions such as the Natural History Museum's Wildlife Photographer of the Year.

What is your next project?

I spent most of last year working on a book about the best plants to grow to ensure every month of the year has some in flower, providing nectar and pollen rewards for insect pollinators. All new plants were ordered online; a few were delayed for over a week in transit due to Covid, and arrived so limp I had to throw them away. After nurturing the rest until they flowered, I could photograph pollinators in action – a wonderful combination of flora and fauna!

The plan is to complete the book early this year. I also hope to shoot more wildlife video clips, which I began in 2020. The snag is that I cannot shoot stills and video at the same time, so inevitably stills win, by which time the insect has departed!

Heather Angel's work has appeared in many books and magazines, as well as information panels for zoos and aquaria. You can follow her on Twitter and Instagram, and see more of her photos on her blog.

FROM THE ARCHIVES:
THE MAPS OF HANS VAN WELL

From the early 1980s to mid '90s, **Hans van Well** *– an engineer with a passing interest in geography but no formal training – was Bradt Publications' official cartographer. Though, as Hilary Bradt says, he quickly became far more than that: 'Hans was an integral part of the business for that decade or so – far more than a colleague, a real friend who, like me, would work whatever hours were necessary to get a book finished.' Here we look back at his work.*

The problem with guidebooks is they need maps, and the problem with maps is they tend to be expensive and, in some parts of the world, hard to find. Pre-Google, pre-open source mapping, you either had to rely on officially produced local maps, which as well as being expensive to license could be notoriously inaccurate, or you had to make your own.

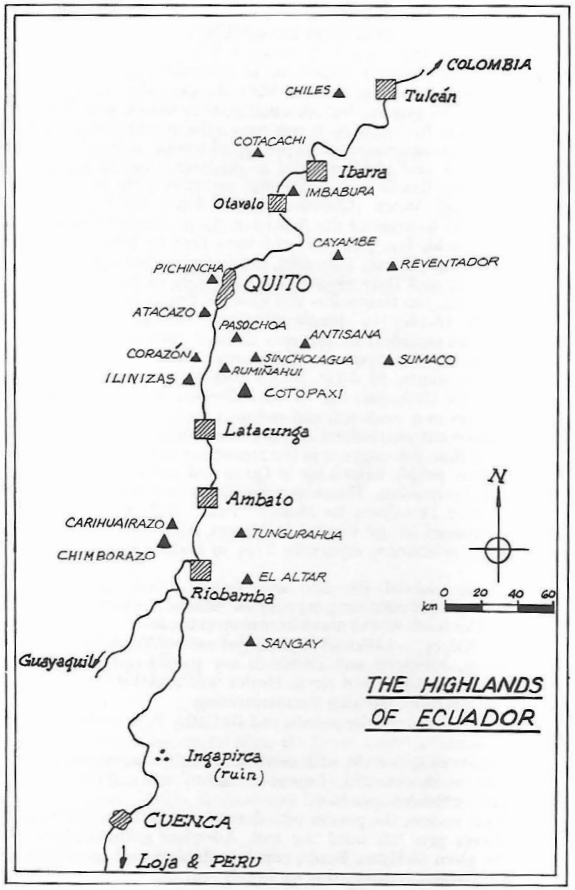
Cartographer wanted

In 1983, with a deadline looming for her *Climbing and Hiking in Ecuador* guide, Hilary was let down by a cartographer who'd worked on previous Bradt books. Unsure where to turn, she placed a 'Cartographer Wanted' postcard in her local post office in Bourne End, Buckinghamshire, which was seen by local resident Hans van Well. But the thing was – Hans wasn't really a cartographer. In fact, he'd just finished a job as an engineering design manager. Nevertheless, he did have a keen interest in travel, he could draw, and – most importantly – he needed the work.

He quickly produced 20 maps from author Rob Rachowiecki's handwritten notes, mostly sketch maps of routes across Ecuador's highest peaks. 'To be honest,' he says now, 'those first maps aren't all that good, and I was surprised that Hilary used them. They looked as if they'd been scrawled in the field. I think it might simply have been too late to find an alternative!'

But the 'scrawled in the field' quality is exactly what Hilary – and her readers – loved about Hans's maps and they became mainstays of the early Bradt guides. They were personal and

Hans van Well



authentic, just like the guides they illustrated. But, unlike maps actually scrawled on the back of cigarette packets by authors who can't draw, they were also usable. In fact, Hilary maintains to this day that Hans's hand-drawn maps are rather more legible and practical than the digital versions that eventually replaced them.

The next collaboration was Robert Strauss's *Trans-Siberian Railway Guide*. This required a complete route map from Moscow to Harbin station, which snaked across the tops of 40 pages of the guide, as well as Moscow and Beijing street plans and a 'European Gateways' map showing the major rail routes of the continent.

Around the world in a shed

More countries and guides followed in quick succession. Hans says that Hilary had a happy knack of getting in touch just as his work elsewhere was drying up. From a rickety desk in his shed, he travelled vicariously to five continents in as many years: Vietnam, Spitsbergen, Madagascar, Cuba... Authors would send in sketch maps or annotated pages torn from other books, along with their text. In the absence of other source material, street maps for a new destination would be paced out by the author, notebook and compass in hand. This wasn't without its risks – one author was arrested for suspicious pacing near the American Embassy in Porto Novo, Benin, and had his notes confiscated.

Hans would then dust down his drawing board and refill his pens. By the early 1990s the maps contained typeset place names, rather than Hans's handwriting, and eventually just numbers linking to keys in the text, but they were still recognisably his work. Drafts would scurry back and forth between author, publisher and cartographer – initially by post, later by fax. 'Never lucrative, but always interesting' is how Hans describes his work for Bradt Publications, a description that will ring bells with Bradt authors today.

Gradually, however, the clarity and ease of reproduction of digital mapping began to sideline Hans's work. Bradt guides were no longer pasted together by hand on Hilary's table, they were typeset on computers, and, much to Hilary's regret, hand-drawn maps went the same way as hand-typed manuscripts.

But Hans van Well was not just a cartographer: he also translated Andreas Umbreit's *Spitsbergen* guide from the German, he made forays into editing and proofreading and, at Bradt's 21st birthday party in 1995, he brought along his guitar and sang a couple of songs. Fortunately for posterity, these musical tributes survive in home-recorded versions and have been uploaded to YouTube (here and here). We recently shared the Madagascar one on Facebook, but if you didn't see it there do give it a watch now.

All together now... '*annnd.... Madagascarrrr*!'

Hugh Brune is Head of Sales and Marketing at Bradt. Thanks to Hilary Bradt and Hans van Well for sharing their memories.

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!

Off the back of the existing deals with the likes of *Travel Africa* and The Cook's Place, this month we are excited to bring you more fantastic membership discounts from our favourite travel partners. For a full list of member benefits, click here (password: TravelClub2020).

10% off with The Adventure Creators

The Adventure Creators are a niche tour operator specialising in tailor-made, year-round, outdoors and adventure holidays in the Pyrenees mountains. They focus heavily on sustainable tourism principles, which include using only local guides and instructors, showcasing local food producers and craftspeople and raising awareness of the unusual mountain wildlife in the Pyrenees, which includes the brown bear!

The Travel Club members can enjoy a **10% discount** on all tour bookings – just quote **Bradt10** when enquiring.

© PENNY WALKER

COMING UP NEXT MONTH...

In February's issue of THE TRAVEL CLUB:

Climbing Mount Kenya through the eyes of a local, a look at our brand-new guide to the best road trips in France and Germany, and some magnificent photo stories from photographer Ross Mastrovich.

The slopes of Mount Kenya © GALLEY, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS