THE TRAVEL CLUB

E-ZINE #14: JUNE, 2021

Uncovering Alentejo

Exploring Andalucía as it used to be

Rwanda: 20 years on

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Much ado about mothing

Putting the spotlight on Britain's most misunderstood insect

Cycling country

The best routes for enjoying Cornwall by bike

Bradt GUIDES

TRAVEL TAKEN SERIOUSLY

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Nowhere in Portugal's Alentejo is more redolent with history than its capital, Évora (page 16) © MIGEL, SHUTTERSTOCK

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Exploring Vatnajökull's ice caves, Iceland

© James Rushforth

On the 'Via Myriam', an iconic climbing route in the Italian Dolomites; see more of James Rushforth's award-winning photos from page 21

CYCLING COUNTRY:
THE BEST BIKE RIDES IN CORNWALL AND THE ISLES OF SCILLY

To celebrate the release of his new book on cycling in the region, **Huw Hennessy** *shares his favourite rides from one of his favourite regions.*

Cycling along the Camel Trail, one of the UK's most popular routes © M STEVENS, FLICKR

Cycling in Cornwall is something special, especially when you feel the breeze on your face and (hopefully) the warm sun on your back. The area offers the perfect setting for cyclists of all ages and abilities: in just one short ride you can explore spectacular cliffs and sandy beaches, wild moors and rugged valleys, with the rugged remains of its historic heritage dotted across this varied landscape. And what better way to round off a ride than with a well-earned pasty and a glass of cider?

I love making lists almost as much as I love cycling. So, I've compiled a list of my favourite rides in the region based on what you're looking for, be that wildlife or wondrous views. Grab your helmet, choose a route and savour the joys of exploring this county on two wheels. Happy cycling!

Best for... sea views

Cornwall's knobbly peninsula has nearly 700km of coastline so you're never that far from the sea wherever you go, and with so many magnificent views to choose from it's a challenge to pick the best. But, for its range of craggy headlands, sleepy villages and superb beaches, the **Lizard Peninsula** gets my vote. With a few heaving hills along the way, the 63km loop from Lizard Point – the most southerly point in the UK with some truly amazing sunsets – is not an easy ride for everyone, but for those up for the challenge it's truly spectacular.

Following an anti-clockwise route, whizz through villages including St Ruan and Kuggar to Coverack, a historic fishing port and sheltered beach. Then ride cross-country over Goonhilly Downs, passing the space-age satellite dishes of Goonhilly Earth Station to reach the west coast, with the surf and sands of Poldhu Cove. Saving the best till last, on the way back I'd recommend a detour to Kynance Cove; with its rocky stacks, blowholes and sandy coves, the cove has earned a well-deserved reputation as one of the best beaches in the country, if not the world.

Best for... wildlife

One of the many appeals of cycling through the countryside – or indeed the city for that matter – is that it's great for spotting wildlife, being out in the

© TONY MILLS, SHUTTERSTOCK

RSPB Marazion Marsh is famous for its starling murmurations

open and making little noise. From dolphins, seals and lately even whales and sharks off its coast, to delicate wildflowers nestled in its wetlands and heaths, Cornwall is rich with outstanding flora and fauna.

But for the chance to see birds from coast to coast in Cornwall, I'd have to plump for the **Marazion to Hayle** route as the pick of the bunch. The trail is bookended by two wonderful RSPB reserves: firstly, Marazion Marsh, close to stunning St Michael's Mount on the south coast, which has recorded some 250 bird species in its dense reedbeds, and in season puts on spectacular starling murmurations at dusk. At the end of the route, as you approach the sandy beaches on the north coast, is the wide Hayle Estuary, another RSPB reserve regularly visited by huge wintering flocks of migratory seabirds, as well as curlews, egrets and oystercatchers.

Best for... mining heritage

Behind its picture-postcard image as an idyll of sandy beaches and quaint fishing harbours, there's another side to Cornwall: as one of the UK's leading centres of the mining industry, from prehistoric times to the present day. Inland and dotted along the north coast, mining remains have been preserved as part of the UNESCO-listed Cornish Mining World Heritage Site, with aging

The Great Flat Lode offers an insight into Cornwall's mining heritage

brick chimneys as much a part of its landscape as churches and castles. Many of the former mines have been regenerated, with cycling and walking trails created following former routes from mine to port. The **Clay Trails** are a network of nine such trails, ranging from 3km to 8km and exploring the scarred hillsides, clay pits and former quarries of this dramatic landscape.

My favourite of the bunch is the **Great Flat Lode** near Camborne, a moderately challenging ride that loops around the flanks of Carn Brea, topped by the Bassett Monument: a vanity symbol of mine owners' wealth and power, which inspired Poldark's creator. The highlight is the King Edward Mine Museum at the start/end, which offers fascinating tours of the mineworks. Tucked just behind is the Croust Hut, to me a leading contender for best gastro-café in Cornwall (their gourmet fish-finger butties are worth the ride alone).

Best for... families

If you're looking for a fun ride with the kids without working up a sweat on those Cornish hills, there are plenty of safe and easy options. The **Bodelva Clay Trail** is a great cross-country route around the 'Cornish Alps', ending at the world-famous Eden Project. And the **Pentewan Valley Trail** is a lovely riverside ride, with the lush Lost Gardens of Heligan as an enticing detour midway.

But for the ultimate family cycle trip, the gentle **Camel Trail** from Padstow ticks all the right boxes. Following the former Bodmin and Wenford Railway line, the route runs for some 29km but can be easily broken into more manageable sections of about 8km each – firstly

The gentle Camel Trail is perfect for families with little ones in tow © GARY PERKIN, SHUTTERSTOCK

© M STEVENS, FLICKR

Cardinham Woods is one of the UK's best mountain-biking hubs

from Padstow to Wadebridge, next from there to Dunmere, and finally onwards to Wenford Bridge. From Padstow, the level trail runs alongside the Camel Estuary, whose reedbeds and marshes are rich with waterbirds, as well as the odd otter or two. For avid trainspotters, remnants of former stations have been preserved along the middle section, and scenic steam trains still run from Boscarne Junction to Bodmin Parkway meaning you can cycle one way and get the train back!

Crucial to any successful family outing, there are ample refreshments along the way such as the Atlantic Coast Express café serving snacks in a converted buffet carriage. And once you've made it back to foodie Padstow, don't forget to try one of chef Rick Stein's outlets, from harbourside fish and chips to fine gourmet dining. Finally, if you haven't brought your own bikes, no problem: there are several hire shops in Padstow and Wadebridge, right by the Camel Trail.

Best for... mountain biking

With its deep, wooded valleys, abandoned quarry pits and wild open moors, Cornwall's interior has plenty to offer mountain bikers. But for a purpose-built challenge in a stunning natural setting, it's hard to beat **Cardinham Woods**. Managed by Forestry England, this diverse woodland just south

of Bodmin boasts a network of winding trails headlined by the famous Bodmin Beast which, despite its mythical name, is not a life-threatening monster of a trail, but a fantastic fun ride through the woods.

Widely considered as the best mountain-biking site in the southwest, if not the UK, Cardinham has something for both the expert and beginner MTB rider. As one of the latter category, I took on the blue-graded Bodmin Beast on my trusty old hybrid bike, bumping gingerly along its gnarly tracks and hairpin bends, dodging roots and boulders. The whole trail is some 12km long, with technical features including sharply bermed bends, step downs and rollers – hopefully the jargon hints at the teeth-rattling reality of the trail, but don't be put off. On a mountain bike, it's jolly good fun!

If you want to get some practice in before tackling Cardinham Woods, however, check out **Lanhydrock**, just a short way to the south. In the gardens of this glorious National Trust estate is a network of short, gentle trails, as well as a 'balance-bike' track for kids.

Best for... a long-distance challenge

If you're looking for a good day's workout taking in a cross-section of Cornish countryside (ie: hills), the region has plenty of options to choose from. But the cream of the crop has to be the loop of

Mousehole is a quintessential Cornish village

the **Penwith Peninsula**. What I love most abou this stunning 55km route is how you work your way up gradually from Penzance to Land's End, with increasingly dramatic landscapes and uphill climbs. Skirting along the south coast to begin with, through arty Newlyn and cute Mousehole, the ride climbs up and over the Penwith Peninsula, passing weather-beaten prehistoric standing stones and Celtic crosses en route. I can still remember the moment when, somewhere beyond St Buryan, the sea appeared on the horizon to my left and then also a silvery sliver ahead on my right. It was an almost scary feeling that the land was petering out as the peninsula narrowed to Land's End's towering cliffs.

From Land's End you can drop in on the broad sands of Sennen Cove, and then cut cross-country via the evocatively named farms of Joppa, Numphra and Dowra. Cycling through this unspoilt farmland, far from the day-tripper coaches, is a true highlight. Unexpected small-scale gems can be discovered here too, such as St Uny's Well near Sancreed, and the historic church in the village of Paul, which you pass through just before re-joining the route at Mousehole and back to Penzance.

Best for... beaches

You could hop from beach to beach through the whole of Cornwall: surfing at Bude in the north before soaking up the sun in Sennen Cove on the Penwith Peninsula. However, for something truly special, the **Isles of Scilly** have sparkling sands to rival the Caribbean.

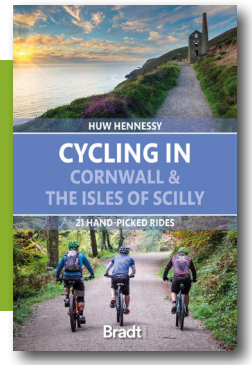
The islands are only about 40km off the coast, a couple of hours by ferry, a short hop by twin-propped Airbus (see Isles of Scilly Travel), or, if you really want to ride in style, you can even charter a helicopter. Flying in low over the sea to St Mary's gives a foretaste of the glorious beaches ringing the five inhabited islands, not to mention the 140 others in the scattered archipelago.

"For something truly special, the Isles of Scilly have sparkling sands to rival the Caribbean."

Cycling around St Mary's and nearby Tresco is a dream: both are low lying, with very little traffic and small enough to get around by bike in a couple of hours. On **St Mary's** you can follow the main road, but there are dozens of offshoot paths leading to powdery-white beaches, where the sand really does sparkle, possibly from grains of the granite that forms the islands themselves. The seas are pristine too, glowing turquoise and with calm waters in the sheltered bays. Top beaches include Porth Hellick, Pelistry Bay and Bar Point – though to be honest, they all have their own charm: peaceful and unspoilt. Do also take the time to explore the island's prehistoric ruins: around Halangy Down and Innisidgen at the north end.

Privately owned **Tresco** is even smaller than St Mary's and effectively only has one road running around its shores, which are similarly blessed with stunning sandy beaches, in particular Appletree Bay, Pentle Bay and Gimble Porth. You can safely leave your bike unlocked anywhere and walk down to the beach. Last tip for Tresco, but the main one: don't forget to stop off at Tresco Abbey Garden. The island loop route passes right by the main entrance; it's one of the loveliest botanical collections in the UK, bursting with sub-tropical species from around the world. A blissful place to unwind after a morning's ride.

Huw Hennessy is a lifelong cycling nut who has cycled all over the world, from the southwest of England to the Andes. All of these routes and more can be found in his new book, *Cycling in Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly*, which is out this month. The Travel Club members can get their copy for just **£6.49** using the code **TRAVELCLUB50** at checkout.



MUCH ADO ABOUT MOTHING?

We caught up with Bradt author and naturalist **James Lowen** *to learn about his new book and recently discovered obsession with one of Britain's most misunderstood insects.*

It may look like a hornet, but isn't! The hornet moth is actually a moth that mimics the stinging insect

You've got a new book out – and it's not with Bradt! What's it about?

After the success of my last two Bradt guides (*A Summer of British Wildlife* and *52 European Wildlife Weekends*, each crowned Travel Guidebook of the Year), I wanted to try my hand at longer-form writing. My new book *Much Ado About Mothing* is a travel narrative – a year-long exploration of Britain, albeit one experienced through a novel filter: that of moths.

Why moths?!

I fancied a challenge! After all, a YouGov survey in 2019 found that three-quarters of British people think negatively of moths. I used to be a moth-hater too, reckoning them uninteresting and irritating – particularly when they nibbled my suits. But an unexpectedly precious encounter with an arrestingly beautiful poplar hawk-moth changed all that. This gloriously argentine, sweetly furry insect revolutionised the way that I engage with nature.

The moth that started it all: the poplar hawk-moth

The more I learned about moths – for a start, only two of the UK's 2,500 species actually munch clothes – the more I sensed them to be unfairly chastised. Moths, I came to appreciate, furnish a rich variety of remarkable tales – about ecology and evolution, camouflage and conservation.

I gradually gleaned the importance of moths for our countryside: they are vital pollinators for wildflowers and agricultural crops, and play key roles in the food chain, with blue tits alone thought to eat 35 billion moth caterpillars each year. I found out that – far from moths being exclusively creatures of the night – Britain has four times as many day-flying moths as it does butterflies. And, talking of butterflies, I garnered that they and moths are essentially the same, evolutionarily speaking – which rather makes a mockery of the difference in our attitudes towards the two. Moths are actually just butterflies in need of better PR.

So I set out to champion these underdogs of the animal kingdom through telling their stories – aiming to challenge preconceptions, correct misunderstandings and reboot collective attitudes. And there seems worth in doing so. Because of moths' unexpected accessibility, unanticipated beauty and welcome placidity, I now think that there are no animals better placed to inspire the environmentalists of the future – by which I mean children.

The almost inconceivable elephant hawk-moth is like a piece of winged bubblegum

Where do moths live and how can you see them?

Moths live pretty much everywhere – from sandy shorelines to the tops of Munros. Accordingly, my year of travels extended from Cornwall to the Cairngorms. But, above all, moths live *here*: in and around our gardens. So as a counterweight to the intoxicating journeys nationwide, my daughter Maya and I spent 150 nights at home, discovering a kaleidoscope of 400 types of moth living covertly around our suburban fiefdom.

You may not think it, but it is actually surprisingly easy to see moths. More than 200 British species fly by day, so you can bump into them along hedgerows or in meadows, as you would do butterflies. By night, the usual way to see moths involves harnessing their mysterious addiction to illumination. Shine a light and they materialise – thereby revealing the apparent emptiness of night to actually be replete. At its simplest, you can attract moths by pointing a torch towards a white sheet. Better is to make or buy a harmless moth 'trap', which is basically a lightbulb placed above a tub filled with egg-boxes on which moths can rest. Let the light weave its magic overnight, then wander over the next morning to see what has come visiting.

Which are Britain's most remarkable moths?

Crumbs! With so many fascinating moths to choose from, that's a hard one. I particularly love those with wacky stories to tell. Clearwing moths, for example, which mimic wasps to escape being eaten: entomologist Vladimir Nabokov lauded clearwings for exhibiting 'mimetic subtlety far in excess of the predator's power of appreciation'. I'm a fan of the pale tussock, which is one of several moths able to jam bats' radar by emitting noises or ultrasound. I gawp at the scarce silver-lines, which actually sings from the top of oak trees.

My daughter might want me to say the Chinese character, which avoids being eaten by being disguised as a splat of bird poo. But actually her favourite moth (and mine) is the elephant hawk-moth. This large, impossibly pink moth enchants every child who has seen one. It's like a piece of winged bubblegum or, as author Simon Barnes characterised it when he first encountered one, 'a bird of paradise'. It should be in tropical rainforests – but lives in your garden.

The Chinese character avoids being eaten by disguising itself as a splat of bird poo © JAMES LOWEN

Moths such as this transparent burnet were an excuse to explore some amazing British landscapes and locations, such as Benderloch in Argyll, Scotland

What particularly exciting British places have moths taken you to?

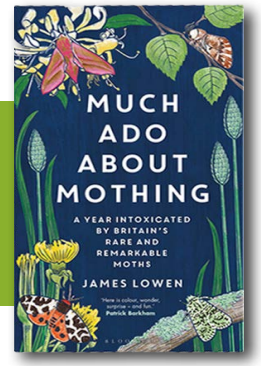
Moths provided a wonderful excuse to deepen my familiarity with so many of Britain's spectacular or otherwise rich landscapes. I spent several nights on the shingle strand of Dungeness in Kent – where the ostensibly barren landscape transpired to riot with rare moths. I yomped for hours along the seacliffs of Argyll's Ardnamurchan Peninsula. In Dorset, I turned nocturnal among the heavenly heathland of Purbeck's new 'super nature reserve'. I scaled Avon Gorge, glooped my way through Lancashire's saltmarshes, sloshed around the Norfolk Broads, followed the footsteps of Victorian moth-hunters in montane Wales and spent countless nights in ancient wildwoods countrywide, from the Wye Valley to the Scottish Highlands. Magical, all of it.

How are British moths faring overall? What can we do to help them?

A recent report by the environmental charity Butterfly Conservation shows a pretty complicated picture – but essentially things are rather gloomy. One-third fewer moths are flying in Britain than 50 years ago – so there's a lot less plant pollination going on. Four times as many species are enduring long-term declines as enjoying long-term increases. About one in eight of our larger moths are threatened with national extinction, or nearly so. And nearly 50 species have already gone extinct. On the plus side, we've gained 140 new colonists since 1900 and some southern moths are becoming more widespread.

Fortunately, there's plenty of ways to help moths. In our gardens, we can reduce chemical use and grow foodplants favoured by moths – such as jasmine, honeysuckle, hazel and garden privet. We can join environmental charities, such as Butterfly Conservation and county wildlife trusts. We can explain to friends that just two of Britain's 2,500 moth species actually eat our clothes, then encourage them to not tar all moths with the same pestilent brush. We can take our children or grandchildren to 'moth mornings' at nature reserves – and watch wonder inscribe their faces as they examine the night's catch. And, if that hooks them (or us), we might buy cheap a moth trap to run at home – then become citizen scientists by sharing sightings with Butterfly Conservation's network of county recorders to deepen understanding of these underappreciated animals.

For **25% off** James Lowen's new book, *Much Ado About Mothing* (Bloomsbury; £18.99), use the discount code **BRADT25** at bloomsbury.com/muchadoaboutmothing. The Travel Club members can also enjoy **50% off** his trio of Bradt guides using the code **TRAVELCLUB50**.



ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY: EXPLORING PORTUGAL'S ALENTEJO

Dramatic castles, whitewashed alleys, Roman temples and world-class wine – you'll find it all in this unspoilt region.

Since being announced as one of the only accessible countries on the UK's Green List (before being downgraded to Amber a few weeks later), Portugal has received its fair share of attention in the travel media. But a stone's throw from the capital is a region oft-overlooked by the press and little-visited by foreign tourists, although it's hard to understand why few people choose to holiday here.

The food and wine are as tasty as in Tuscany, the hill-walking as fabulous as any in France. There are two UNESCO World Heritage Sites – the old Moorish capital of Évora, topped by a temple built by a Caesar, and the dramatic fortress town of Elvas whose winding, whitewashed Arab alleys and Baroque bell towers cluster around a castle within massive star-shaped walls. There are hotels fit for a king, quite literally: half a dozen of them sit within refurbished medieval mansions or castles

Monsaraz is one of the Alentejo's most atmospheric hill towns

where monarchs made their homes or talked over treaties that sealed the borders of early Europe.

Where are we talking about, you ask? Why, the Alentejo of course; one of Portugal's finest regions, where streets are cobbled, towns remain underdeveloped and tourists are few and far between (although Madonna does have a farm here). The following destinations are all situated in the Sothern Alto region, within a 2-hour drive from Lisbon (and with decent bus and/or train connections too), making them ideal day trips from the capital or stops as part of a wider Alentejo tour.

Évora

Nowhere in Portugal's Alentejo is more redolent with history than its capital, Évora. Rising in narrow, winding Moorish streets to a central *praça*, crowned with a magnificent ruined Roman temple, ringing with the peal of bells from an array of Portuguese Golden Age churches and littered with stately mansions and monuments, the city has been protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1986. Its listing as such owes as much to its architectural unity as it does to its churches and small museums, for while Lisbon was levelled by the 1755 earthquake, Évora retains its medieval and Renaissance buildings. Nowhere in the Alentejo better preserves the country's architecture of Empire.

Évora is large enough to lose yourself in over a long summer day – idly wandering the cobbles, pausing to visit the Roman Temple, the cavernous cathedral and the beautiful churches of the Convento do Carmo and the Igreja de São Francisco (with its grisly Chapel of Bones). There are myriad fine restaurants dishing up traditional cooking from the area and cafés and bakeries serving local cakes, cheeses and wonderful coffee. The shopping is the best in the region – not just for souvenirs, but for fine food and drink, including wonderful Alentejo wine.

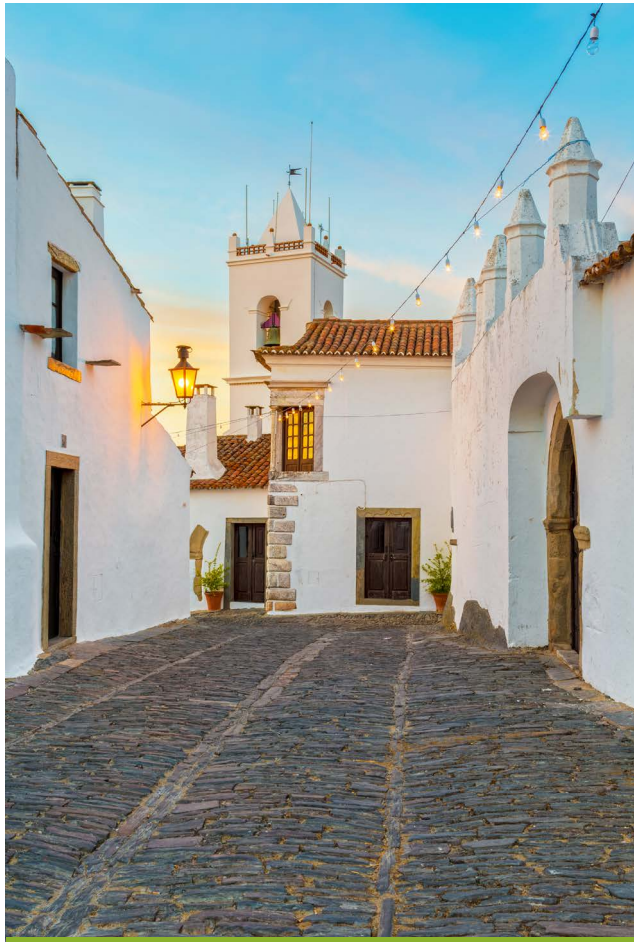
Montemor-o-Novo

With a population approaching 30,000, Montemor-o-Novo is a metropolis by Alentejo standards.

© FILIPE B. VARELA, SHUTTERSTOCK

Évora's Roman Temple is the only remaining significant remnant of the old Roman settlement of Ebora

It has a dramatic ruined castle right out of a Gothic novel, a crumbling convent and a Baroque church covered in fine *azulejos*, while the *fazendas* of its hinterlands are famous for their fine wines and olive oils, and the skeleton-filled Grutas de Escoural caves are Portugal's most impressive. If it were anywhere else than the Alentejo, where ruined castles and convents are two-apenny, it would no doubt receive plenty of visitors. Yet very few people even pass through Montemor. It's worth doing so if you have an hour or two to spare, even if you are only in the area to dine in the Alentejo's only Michelin-starred restaurant, the wonderful L'and Vineyards, and sample the fine wines in the *adegas* that lie within the region.



Cobbled streets and whitwashed buildings are the order of the day in Monsaraz

Evoramonte

Perched romantically on a barren hill in the Serra de Ossa, high above the surrounding plains, the massive round towers of the Castelo de Evoramonte are visible for tens of kilometres. The castle has been an eyrie watching out for attack and invasion since the time of the Reconquest. The views from the battlements are breathtaking, and wandering around the tiny village that spreads around the castle's feet within the secondary walls is a delight. Look out for the houses painted on to the cobbled street by local artist Inocencia Lopes.

Monsaraz

Ringed by a perfectly preserved medieval wall, criss-crossed with cobbled streets and with whitewashed bell towers brilliant under the burning sun, Monsaraz is the kind of fortified hill town that should come with an Ennio Morricone soundtrack. It's all about atmosphere here. Try and come early, off-season and on a bright sunny day, when it's so quiet that your footfalls echo along the streets and you can hear the braying of donkeys kilometres away across the plain. There are no outstanding sights; Monsaraz itself is the destination. And the views of the tiny town are the reason for coming here: from below, looking up at its rocky hill; from its highest point, white against the golden plain; and from its castle battlements out over the Alqueva Lake and the grasslands of the high Alentejo. There are also dozens of prehistoric ruins in the surrounding countryside and a few wineries open for visits.

Estremoz

Built around one of the Alentejo's most romantic palaces, bristling with fine churches and perched prettily on a hilltop, Estremoz would be one of the most delightful towns in the upper Alentejo were it not for the untidy sprawl of suburbs and marble slag heaps which surround it. Don't let these put you off. Close your eyes as you pass through, enter old Estremoz through one of the magnificent medieval gates and forget all but the perfectly formed historical centre. This is focused on a regal castle keep and *praça*. Stepped streets drop down the steep hill from here to the new part of town, built around a large 18th-century square, the

Rossio Marquês de Pombal, a mosaic of Estremoz marble dragon's tooth paving around which you'll find the town hall, tourist office and market stalls selling everything from cakes to leather belts.

Borba

Borba is famous throughout the Alentejo for wine, olives and marble – all of which are of the highest quality. And in Borba pretty much everything is orientated towards the pursuit of one of the three. The town seems to be made entirely of marble, from the dragon's tooth paving to the marble in the bus station urinals. And most of the townsfolk work in the quarries, on the wine *adegas* or in the olive farms that surround Borba, the most celebrated of which is Dom Borba itself – manufacturer of multi-award-winning olive oil and wine, and whose production centre on the edge of the town can be visited.

Yet Borba is an attraction in itself. A stay here offers a glimpse of real Alentejo life. And Borba's location as a base from which to explore the region is hard to beat. The town lies within 20 minutes' drive of Estremoz and Elvas, 40 minutes from Évora and fewer than 10 minutes from the great Braganza palace at Vila Viçosa.

Picture-perfect Estremoz © SOPOTNICKI, SHUTTERSTOCK

Practicalities

There are regular direct flights from the UK to Lisbon, from where there are excellent train and bus connections with the rest of the Alentejo. Accommodation-wise there are plenty of options in the area, but for something truly special stay at the Baroque Convento do Espinheiro, a 15th-century Hieronymite convent nestled in rolling countryside 10 minutes' drive from Évora's historic centre.

© SOPOTNICKI, SHUTTERSTOCK

Vila Viçosa's spectacular Ducal Palace was the birthplace of Catherine of Braganza

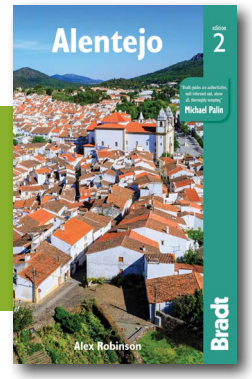
Vila Viçosa

Today Vila Viçosa is a sleepy, unassuming little marble-producing town whose pretty streets are lined with orange trees. But between the 13th and 19th centuries it was one of the most important locations in the Alentejo, as the site of an imposing castle and a magnificent ducal palace, both built by the powerful Braganza dynasty, whose scions sat on the throne of Portugal and England. Both can be visited today, and are worth a few hours each.

Elvas

This spectacular garrison town (and UNESCO World Heritage Site) crouches behind massive star-shaped fortifications a stone's throw from the Spanish border. Wandering the winding, whitewashed alleys, which run like mycelia around the old Moorish castle, is a delight. Old men in cloth caps snooze on doorsteps, cats meow as you pass, then rush up walls coloured with bougainvillea and scurry across the hot terracotta tiles. Washing sways gently in the hot summer air, next to peeling doors, which lead to the dark and cool interiors of gilt and *azulejo*-covered Baroque and Gothic churches. There are terrific views from the battlements of the old city over the plains and a succession of little forts built between the 17th and 19th centuries towards the city's fortified counterpart, Badajoz in Spain.

For more on Alentejo, check out Alex Robinson's comprehensive guidebook to the region, available for just **£7.95** with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**. Portugal specialists Sunvil are also offering The Travel Club members a discount on all bookings to the region – go to page 47 for more.



STORIES FROM A TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER: JAMES RUSHFORTH

James Rushforth *is an experienced climber, mountaineer, skier, travel writer and guest speaker. An internationally acclaimed photographer and author, James was recently named the British Guild of Travel Writers' Photographer of the Year for the third year running, while other accolades include being the GTMA Global Travel Award winner and British Drone Photographer of the Year in 2020, a double category winner at the International Photography Awards in 2018, and Epson Digital Splash Photographer of the Year, also in 2018.*

His work frequently appears in national newspapers, guidebooks and magazines around the world; while on social media he is part of the National Geographic Your Shot *photography team. Here he shares some of his favourite captures from his travels.*

Left
Exploring one of the many temporary ice caves created as the vast expanse of the Vatnajökull ice cap recedes. These subglacial meltwater channels create spectacular exits as they leave the glacier and can be explored during the winter, when the cold temperatures make the caves safe to enter. The upper hole seen here is known as a relict portal, created by a previous, higher meltwater channel.

Previous page
After I spent two hours getting soaked while exploring one of Iceland's many canyons, the rain eventually stopped and some magical light finally started filtering through the clouds. I took hundreds of frames trying to capture the many fulmars inhabiting the ravine, with a particularly exciting moment when I thought I had spotted a sea eagle flying overhead. Unfortunately, on closer inspection, it was actually a great skua, a notoriously aggressive seabird found inhabiting Iceland's coastal regions.

Following page
The rising sun illuminates the fortified church at Biertan in Transylvania, Romania. Recently designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the strategically positioned church was built as an alternative defensive structure by the Saxons to defend themselves against Mongol invaders.

Left
Passo Sella is the highest mountain pass in the Italian Dolomites, reaching its summit at 2,240m as it winds across the west side of the Sella Massif. It is best known as one of four passes of the famous Sella Ronda, the circuit of roads encircling the Sella.

Just west of the summit lies a picturesque chapel that provides a fairytale foreground to Sassolungo (Langkofel), one of the most beautiful mountain groups in the Dolomites. This shot was taken just after a spectacular thunderstorm as the clouds cleared to reveal the moon hanging above Sassopiatto, the westernmost tower of the group. The chapel is lit by a mountain *rifugio* just off-frame to the right.

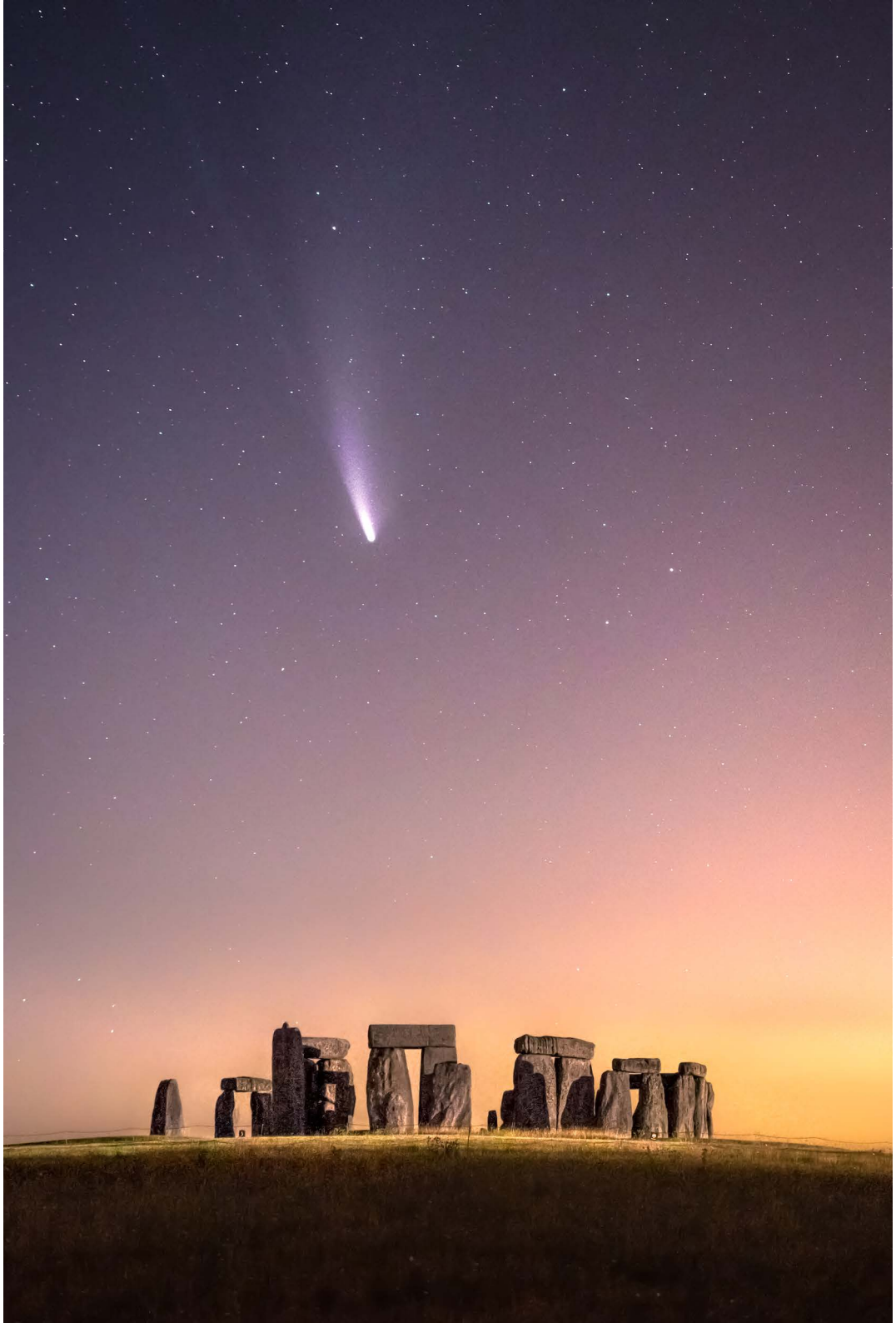
Following page
Another of the Sella Massif passes is the Passo Gardena, which winds across its northern side to connect Sëlva di Val Gardena with Corvara in Badia. This photo was taken from the pass's summit as the autumn sun sets over the Val Gardena, the intimidating sheer rock walls of Sassolungo visible in the background.

Using a narrow aperture gives a more distinct sunburst when shooting straight into the sun like this.

Previous page
The southern hawker is one of the more common dragonfly species found throughout Europe. Generally they are inquisitive, allowing you to get quite close. But as anyone who has tried photographing them in flight will testify, they are incredibly difficult to focus on with their small mass and erratic flight patterns. Capturing this male at a pond in the north of England caused much hilarity with a local picnic group, who could see me running around with a 400mm lens cursing without being able to identify what I was trying to photograph.

Right
Comet NEOWISE passes over Stonehenge in England. It's fascinating to think that this historic site did not exist when NEOWISE last passed the Earth. The comet is due to return in approximately 6,800 years. I wonder if the stones will still be standing?

This is a single-exposure photograph taken early on a July morning. The orange glow is light pollution from the nearby villages of Durrington and Larkhill, and a passing lorry very kindly painted the rocks with light.



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Bjarnarey and Elliðaey are two of some 15 islands and 30 skerries or stacks that make up Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands). Situated just 8km from Iceland's southern coast, this volcanic island group has a very different ambience to that usually associated with the mainland, displaying almost tropical characteristics in good weather. The solitary hunting lodge can be seen on Bjarnarey, while a rainstorm partially obscures Eyjafjallajökull in the background.

Previous page
A lone vehicle travels along the Ring Road in southern Iceland. The road – running parallel with the coast, soft sky and blanket of fresh snow – presented the opportunity for a wonderfully minimalistic scene comprised of many horizontal lines, with some excellent symmetry.

Left
While sailing around Scoresby Sound in eastern Greenland, we discovered this beautiful iceberg formation as we made the return trip to Constable Point. We circled the iceberg with the vessel's sister ship, *Opal*, a traditional two-masted oak schooner built in Germany in 1951. Travelling together allowed us to photograph each other through the central arch each time we completed a circuit; the key was timing.

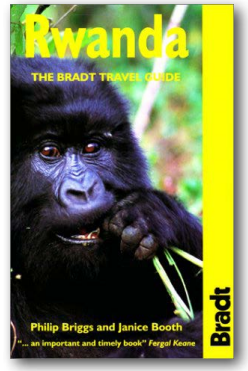
Following page
A crow's-nest perspective taken from the mast top. Despite the calm waters the height of the mast accentuated every movement of the boat, ensuring a good stomach was required. The vantage point was more than worth any discomfort, however, as it provided a superb and unusual perspective of the patterns created by the drifting ice. The crew can be seen enjoying lunch up on deck.

Left
A highliner battles strong winds while attempting to walk the one-inch-wide piece of nylon webbing at Monte Piana in the Italian Dolomites. The town of Misurina and the Cadini di Misurina mountain group can be seen in the background. Once the site of vicious trench and tunnel warfare during World War I, the table-top plateau is now frequently visited by highliners from around the globe who travel here to take advantage of the many exposed buttresses.

Over the last ten years, James has published books on climbing, ski mountaineering, via ferrata and photography – while the last few years have been spent compiling a comprehensive two-volume set of photo-location guidebooks to Iceland, available to buy on his website.

For more of his incredible photos, follow him on Instagram and Facebook.

RWANDA – 20 YEARS AND COUNTING



Bradt's guide to Rwanda is just 20 years old, but Janice Booth – who initiated it and co-authored the first two editions – first became involved with the country back in the 1970s. She tells a very personal story.

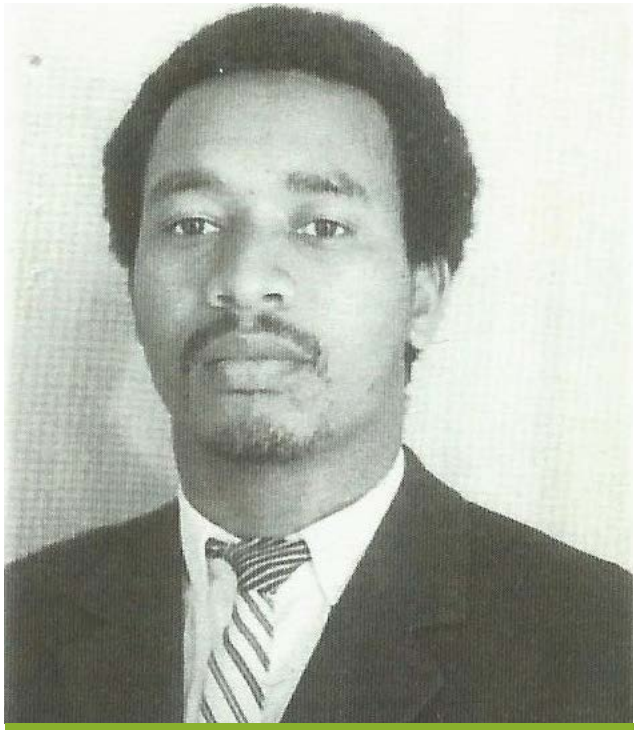
The East African cost 300 Rwandan francs but I only had a 1,000-franc note. The scruffy little news vendor handed me a copy, grabbed my money and ran quickly away. I waited. Last night's rain glinted in the ruts and pot-holes, and some buildings still had bullet scars in their faded paintwork. Only a bank, a petrol station and a café-bar were open; other places were heavily shuttered or semi derelict. A couple of passers-by glanced at me curiously: there weren't so many white-haired Englishwomen on the streets of Kigali back in 2000, barely six years after the genocide.

Eventually the boy scampered back, my change clutched proudly in his grubby hand. He looked about eight, but Rwanda's post-genocide kids, often orphaned in the violence, needed to grow up quickly. It hadn't occurred to me not to trust him.

This was my first visit to Rwanda but I'd 'known' it at a distance for much longer. Back in the 1970s I had worked for a Belgian charity that arranged sponsorships and paid school fees for Rwandan children exiled in southern Uganda, whose parents (Tutsis) had left strongly pro-Hutu Rwanda in the early 1960s as it lurched into independence. One such exile was the young Paul Kagame, now Rwanda's president; an English teacher friend of mine who worked in Uganda and liaised with Belgium to administer the sponsorships described him many years later as 'always a very clever little boy'.

The story begins... with a letter

In 1978 I received a letter from a Rwandan student, Peter; he and his brother Augustin had smuggled



A passport photo sent to me by Protais in 1988

themselves into Uganda for better secondary schooling than they (Tutsis) could get in Rwanda, and then stayed on for further education. Both had sponsors, Peter's in Australia and Augustin's in London. Having copied my address from the back of someone else's envelope, Peter announced firmly that we were going to be friends.

Cynically I expected a follow-up request for money, but I was wrong. Roughly half my age, at 20, he kept his promise, and once or twice a year would write with scraps of news – which showed me that refugee life in Uganda was a constant struggle, and he badly missed his home. Apart from the poverty and rudimentary living conditions, he was studying in English – a language he hadn't known in francophone Rwanda.

After qualifying in electrical engineering he returned to Rwanda in 1984, writing delightedly 'Janice, I have a *family* again!' Ditching the name Peter, which he had used only in anglophone Uganda, he told me his Rwandan name was Protais. He found work as an electrician and set about paying his younger siblings' school fees. Proud of his country, he sent me a faded postcard of Akagera Park, promising to take me there one day. Then his mother died and I felt myself becoming a kind of honorary aunt, as he wrote about his family and sometimes asked advice.

The situation for Rwanda's Tutsis was worsening. As he said, 'Janice, this is Africa and we are the wrong tribe'. In 1990 he (with many others) was herded into prison for several weeks, and wrote afterwards 'So many died, of the hunger and the beatings'. Much later I learned that one had been his partner; their baby daughter Sandra was cared for by family members and survived.

After prison he needed to 'disappear' for a while and asked me to write to his sister, Grâce, as encouragement while she was sitting her final secondary exams. She had painstakingly embroidered me a Christmas card, an exact copy of one I had sent the previous year. Later a photo came of her at graduation, with Protais, two brothers and a teenage sister, Chantal. I was meeting the family.

The carefully embroidered Christmas card from Grâce

In the summer of 1993 he wrote that he planned to get married, asking 'How do you see that, Janice?', and I replied that I saw it very well indeed. In a fuzzy wedding snap that he sent, his bride Jeanne was beautiful. We exchanged letters as usual that Christmas, while tensions in the country increased. Fear was spreading. Then, on 6 April 1994, Rwanda exploded in the nightmare of genocidal slaughter that we saw on our television screens – and Protais fell silent. No more letters came.

With the country in ruins and one-tenth of its inhabitants massacred, getting news about Protais's family was hopeless. I'd always used his work address and I didn't know where they lived, except that it was in the eastern province. My letters of enquiry were either unanswered or returned by the post office. Beyond urging the UK government to intervene (they didn't) and pursuing any potential leads (they petered out), there was nothing I could do. I raged with anger at the brutal waste of so many human lives and I told Protais's story whenever I could, to portray the genocide's victims as recognisable individuals rather than faceless masses in an unknown country.

In fact, telling his story helped me to win a travel-writing competition run by the Wexas *Traveller* magazine in 1999 – and this gave me the nudge I needed. Travel to Rwanda was possible now, and gave me a better chance of tracking down news, although the media still portrayed the country as unsafe, damaged and volatile. Possibly it wasn't the best time for a 60-year-old woman to wander round alone asking questions so, as a precaution, I told the Rwandan ambassador in London, Dr Zac Nsenga, that I was going (he said 'Don't forget to visit the gorillas!') and wrote to the vice-presidency in Kigali, from which an assistant named Patricia phoned me to offer help. She booked me a room in a church guesthouse for a week, and I asked her to contact one of the masters from the old refugee schools in Uganda where he had known my teacher friend. Such a labyrinth of contacts! I'd heard he was back in Rwanda and thought he might have news of former students.

Rwanda at last

So, I arrived. From Kigali airport I begged a lift into town in an American aid worker's large shiny Land Rover and found the guesthouse. Patricia came to check that I was comfortable and brought me the teacher's phone number; I rang him and explained, asking if he could help. He thought so, but asked if I could give him three days. Of course I agreed, but I wasn't going to spend the time in a war-scarred city so I switched temporarily into tourist mode.

Surprisingly the tourist information office was open, so I remembered Ambassador Nsenga's advice and bought a gorilla permit. Of course I was utterly captivated, as anyone is who visits these iconic creatures. (On a subsequent visit, one of the females, ambling past, rested her knuckles gently on my shoulder as if I was a tree-stump, but that's part of a different story.) I and two Swiss aid workers were the only visitors that week, and the staff on site and in the tourist office feared that tourism might never reignite.

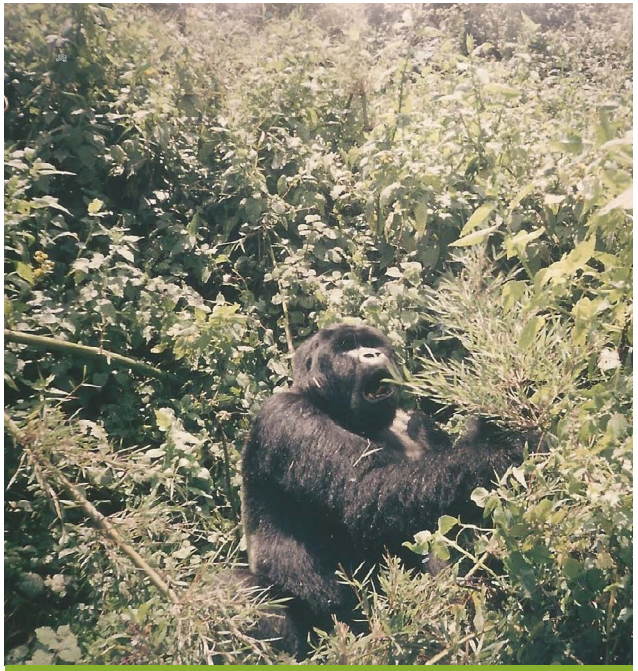
"My true love affair with Rwanda began the next day when I started to explore the country."

My true love affair with Rwanda began the next day when I started catching battered, bone-shaking local minibuses to explore the country (it's less than half the size of mainland Scotland, so you can cover a lot of it in a day) and became aware of its stunning, breathtaking beauty. Every ride was a delight, the views switching from mountains to lakes to forest to savannah to rural villages at the blink of a camera's shutter as roads swooped and hairpinned through the amazing landscapes. No wonder Protais had loved it. People were reserved but friendly and I felt

completely safe; memories of the genocide were inescapable and there was still deep sadness, but life was moving forward.

From Kigali's cavernous Central Post Office (a relic of the country's time in Belgian hands), I faxed Hilary Bradt to say that Rwanda thoroughly merited a guidebook – to which she responded that I'd better write one. In fact 'merited' wasn't strong enough: it absolutely vitally *needed* one, because reinvigorating the country's tourism was going to be essential to its recovery. I'd been copy-editing Bradt guides for a few years so knew the basics, but I'm no naturalist which is where Rwanda's main attractions lie. Very fortunately, Philip Briggs – already so strong on Africa and author of some of Bradt's most popular guides – managed to fit Rwanda in between work on other books. I returned there a few months later to research the practical details and we jointly wrote the first edition, with Ariadne van Zandbergen providing the photos.

I found researching and writing the history section really tough, particularly the genocide, because of its exposure of absolute human evil. And grief, the deep lingering grief on such a massive scale. But of course it's true that to prevent a recurrence it must never be forgotten, and I was proud when Rwandans approved of my account.



My first gorilla encounter, February 2000

Back on the tourist map

The book was published in July 2001, with its launch in Kigali attended by the tourism minister and the First Lady. Hilary came over and we presented a copy to the president, Paul Kagame, who has been unobtrusively supportive throughout. He has always known the backstory, and that I was involved with the old refugee sponsorships in Uganda.

Having a guidebook immediately boosts a country's tourism potential, giving confidence to travel companies and visitors alike. In the same year *BBC Wildlife Magazine* offered a gorilla-viewing trip to Rwanda as the prize in its annual travel-writing competition, and tour operators started to reinstate Rwanda in their programmes. A promotion in *Travel Africa* magazine in winter 2003–04 paved the way for the second edition, published in 2004, which again I co-wrote with Philip. Then he took the book over completely, and for subsequent editions (it's now in its seventh) I've contributed only occasional information.

Researching the second edition in Rwanda in 2003, I saw a Rwandan family (parents and two adult children) reading and discussing the first. They were at an outdoor table in one of Gisenyi's restaurants overlooking Lake Kivu. I went over and tentatively introduced myself, unsure whether to speak French or English. English, as it turned out: they had been in exile in Kenya for the children's lifetime, so they'd never seen Rwanda and were now learning about their country from our guide. I couldn't have asked for more.

Epilogue

And yes, I found Protais's family. After my three-day exploration of the country, the schoolmaster phoned to say that he had located his brother, Augustin, living in the north near the Ugandan border, as well as his sister, Chantal, who was in Kigali. He didn't go into details, just gave me Chantal's number and said I should phone her.

Janice & Chantal in 2009

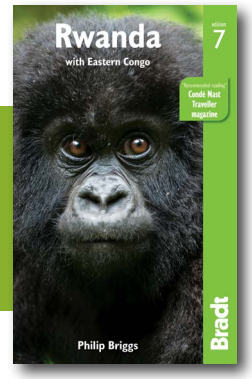
She had a gentle voice and spoke good French. No, Protais was 'no longer with us', nor his wife Jeanne and their newborn baby. They had been killed in Kibuye (now called Karongi), the beautiful lakeside town where he was working. She knew about me, and said Protais had valued our correspondence. The small gift I'd sent for his wedding had arrived safely. She was so courteous and so controlled – but it felt cruel probing by phone so I asked if she would come to the guesthouse. And thus I met this beautiful 23-year-old, thin, fragile and utterly indomitable, plugging away determinedly at life despite unimaginable genocide memories. Her father had been killed, and her sister Grâce, and some younger cousins – the list was long. I paid for her to go to university and we've remained friends, in touch by email. She's clever, funny, articulate, successful and one of the bravest people I know. During my visits to Rwanda, it has been such a pleasure spending time with her and her husband (I went to their wedding in 2007), and their three lively daughters.

I visited Augustin too: a thoughtful and deeply religious man, whose children have all completed university. In 2001 I took him a copy of the first edition and we agreed that Protais, so proud of his country, would certainly have approved. I value our contact. Chantal also took me to meet another brother, Marcel; he and his wife were looking after Protais's daughter Sandra, then ten years old, whose tranquil smile belied the genocide machete scar on her head. She hardly remembers her father so we've talked about him; I've been able to pass on some scraps of our correspondence and the passport photo that he once sent me. Sandra looked after me at Chantal's wedding and now has produced Protais's first grandchild; her little son, Orion, is nine months old. And Patricia, the kind, helpful 'fixer' from my first visit, still takes an interest in them all.

Tourism has blossomed in Rwanda and we know how much our guide has helped with this. Kigali has changed immeasurably in 20 years, with old buildings swept away and new ones gleaming in their place. I miss the ramshackle second-hand book market that used to stretch along Avenue de Commerce and the lively pavement vendors, but it's a clean, safe, modern capital nowadays whose new conference hall is all geared up to host the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting once Covid-19 restrictions allow.

My dedication in the first edition of the guide was 'To Chantal and Sandra, who are a part of Rwanda's future'. Indeed they are!

Since Rwanda, **Janice Booth** has co-written (with Hilary Bradt) four Slow Travel guides to different parts of Devon plus the brand new guide to Socotra. For more information on Rwanda, check out Bradt's guide to the country or the Visit Rwanda website.



THE BRADT TRAVEL TEASER

How well do you know the African continent? Head to page XXX for the answers.

1. Timbuktu is frequently used as a metaphor for a distant place – but what country would you be in if you went there?

2. Which is Africa's busiest airport (by passenger numbers)?

3. Which country lies between Tanzania and Somalia?

4. Which one of these African countries was never a French colony? Algeria, Chad, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger, Senegal.

5. Serengeti National Park is in which country?

6. Driving from Namibia to Kenya, what is the minimum number of countries you must pass through in between?

7. Of the dozen or so subtropical deserts in the world, three are located in Africa. What are they called? (Hint: their names begin with S, K and N.)

8. In an alphabetical list of African countries, which would you find between Tunisia and Zambia?

9. Africa's highest mountain is in Tanzania. What is it called?

10. The Nile River is the longest river in the world. But which one of these countries does it not flow through? Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda.

A SPOTLIGHT ON THE INDEPENDENT

In 2017, artist **Shawnee Mills** *quit her day job in search of something more meaningful – and so Letters From Afar was born.*

We once lived very normal lives. My husband Palmer and I resided in our college city of Lexington, Kentucky, USA and we were both thankful to have steady jobs that paid the bills and the mortgage. Life was really good, and we felt like we were starting to really get the hang of adult life. The first few years of our marriage flew by. We fell into a routine of working very hard, saving our money and then 'upgrading' certain aspects of our lives: there was the first car loan, then the second car loan, the new sofa, better patio furniture, wardrobe updates... work, save, spend, repeat. Somewhere along the way, we began to notice the pattern, and we started to feel very deeply that something was missing.

Since a very young age, I've been an artist. And I've also travelled a lot. My sisters and I were home-schooled, and we spent our youth in the back of a Chevrolet pickup tagging along on my parents' adventures through the American southwest. My family even had a very memorable RVing phase, in which we sold our house, piled all pets and belongings in a barely big enough rig, and hit the road for nine months exploring the eastern states. These experiences shaped me and would inevitably be an inspiration for my future endeavours.

So one day in 2017, Palmer and I abruptly made the decision to start living differently. We packed up our two pups and a few necessities and drove to the east coast to start a new life. I quit my job in cosmetology, and made the move without another lined up, only hoping that I could use my artistry in some way to make a living. Sell paintings at coffee shops? Sure. Graphic design freelancing? Maybe. I had no direction... and while those first several months were monetarily frightening, they

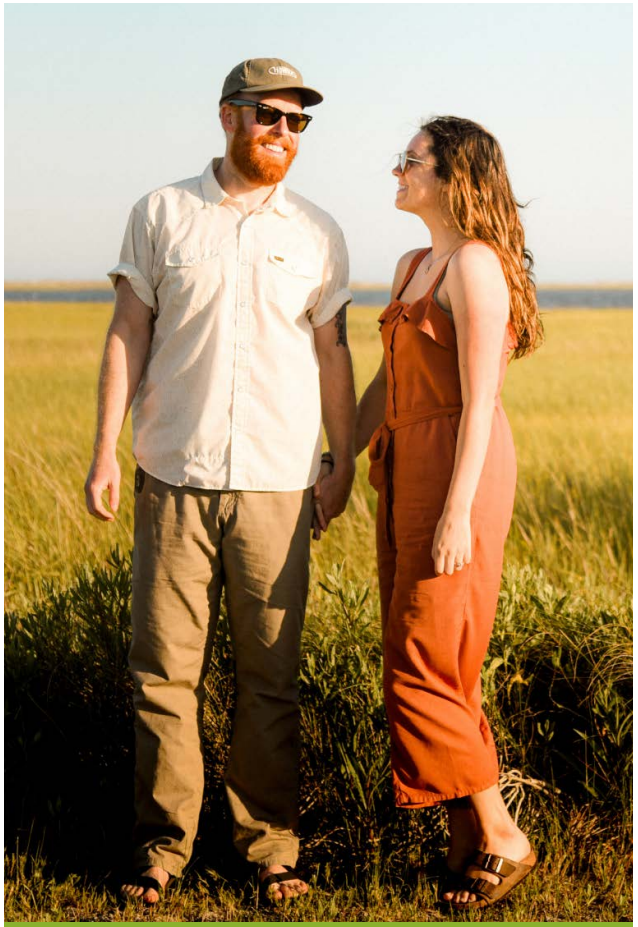
were also mentally nourishing because I was allowed the head space to finally dream up what would soon be a life-changing business.

It started with a pipedream

I had always loved the notion of 'doing what you love until someone pays you for it'. A philosophy I probably read in a motivational book somewhere. And that was certainly the dream – to jump wholeheartedly into something that brings you joy and truly, undoubtedly, taking a risk. For me, creating art and using the money and freedom from that to travel the world would be my ultimate happiness. A pipedream, perhaps. But I had to try... and so I did.

I began making lists. What sort of business could I create that was unique, combined all my passions and had no start-up costs? I focused on the idea of a subscription model, as this felt like the best way to produce passive income. And after countless lists, many weeks of research and ten too many coffees, the idea of Letters From Afar was born. I've always been drawn to the nostalgia and old-world feel of mail. I had pen pals as a child from all over, and I always drew a picture to include in my letters to them. One thought led to another, and before long I'd crafted this idea of taking pen pals and elevating them to the next level.

For the price of US$6 per month, I was going to write illustrated letters to people about different places around the world. My plan was to stay up late researching countries, cultures, recipes and landmarks of the places I most longed to see by scouring the internet, watching YouTube videos and burying my head in books borrowed from the library. I'd then take the highlights of each destination and craft a letter from Isabelle, my fictional protagonist. Her adventurous character was inspired by the famous 19th-century British explorer Isabella Bird – the first woman to be elected as a Fellow by the Royal Geographical Society in London. I wanted a female protagonist, and her story of defying the social norm and following her passions (especially unusual for that era) was very fitting. Each letter was written on 100% recycled paper and accompanied by hand-drawn illustrations of the region, along with a map, created to inspire further learning and wanderlust – a jumping-off point for readers wanting to know more. To me, it was a perfect, simple and unique way to learn about another part of the world that didn't involve technology.



Shawnee (right), with her husband Palmer

I expected a laugh from my husband when I told him the idea, but he, along with the rest of my family, was wholeheartedly on board. In fact, I remember Palmer distinctly telling me, 'If it just pays the water bill, then I say go for it'.

Cultivating a community

As all the pieces of the idea started to come together, that left just one obstacle. Who on earth was going to subscribe to my new business?

I had no idea. All I knew was that I was doing something that excited me. It was fun! I started

an Instagram account and began sharing daily photos of my letters and explaining the concept to my slowly growing following. Day after day, I created, photographed and shared. Before long, I got my first customer – and a week later, I had 50. A year on I had 3,000, and today I have 12,000. Families in all corners of the globe have subscribed with the love of one common thing... travel.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Palmer and I were extremely worried our business would not survive. We did everything we could to ensure continued growth – we upped our social posts, started advertising on Facebook advertising and offered relief discounts for families struggling with lost jobs. As the months went on, we were elated to wake up each day to more and more subscribers, from every corner of the world. Even though post was delayed due to the pandemic, often for weeks, our readers proved to be kind and patient, eager to continue receiving their monthly letters. And, with schools around the world closing their doors, many families were in search of a fun, affordable, home education resource. We've always had a large following of home-schoolers that use my letters as a geography and cultural studies resource, but it quickly became a worldwide addition to new home-schooling curriculums.

We received email after email from various people thanking us for helping them to feel connected to the rest of the world during a time of extreme isolation. This only fuelled my desire to keep going, to keep creating. I finally realised that Letters From Afar inspired others, not just me.

Over the last few years, my husband and I have used the earnings to travel to as many countries as possible. We've cared for elephants in Thailand, walked the black-sand beaches of Iceland, sipped wine in hillside Tuscan villages, zoomed across Japan in a bullet train and much more. Where possible, I write my letters on location, using my own travel photography to refer to when drawing. Pre-pandemic, we were traveling internationally every one to two months and we're looking forward to the world opening up again so we can continue our journey.

I wanted a change. I wanted to feel fulfilled and excited about not only the future but also today. I created the life that I wanted. While it was difficult, and for the most part, I had no clue what I was doing, I did not give up. My advice to anyone reading this is that you can do it too – whatever 'it' might be. Do what you love until someone pays you for it.

Letters From Afar is the brainchild of **Shawnee Mills**, who has been sending out handcrafted monthly letters since 2017. Go to her website for more; The Travel Club members can get **10% off** their first subscription using the code **TRAVELCLUB** at checkout.

JUST WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED: A DOSE OF LAUGHTER YOGA

Budding yogini **Elizabeth Gowing** *swaps child's pose for chuckling on her first foray into the world of Laughter Yoga.*

The air smelt sugary. And fried. Like doughnuts, or candyfloss, or toffee apples. Like transgression, like instant gratification; this was kiss-me-quick nutrition.

I had arrived in out-of-season Blackpool to try a session of Laughter Yoga. This was Blackpool even out of party-conference season; there were no parties here. It was raining.

The weather was so bad that the top of the iconic 158m tower was shrouded in mist. Nevertheless, even being able to see the base was enough to tell you that you had arrived on holiday. Like its older brother on Paris's Champ de Mars, the structure is designed to dominate the city's skyline; it defines the Blackpool brand. It may also have been designed to make you believe you were in Paris – if you'd never been to Paris.

As the clouds swirled around the tower's tip, I hurriedly made my way to the venue where I'd

© ELIZABETH GOWING

Elizabeth Gowing (left) with Laughter Yoga founder, Lotte Mikkelsen (second left) and the other trainees

been told that a group of Laughter Yoga leaders was being trained. There was no reception desk and as I wandered through fire doors in anonymous corridors in search of the course, it was only when I heard the sound of giggling from one of the rooms that I knew I'd found it.

The five women here were being trained to be able to lead some of the more than one hundred Laughter Clubs that have been set up around the UK over the last ten years. Their trainer was Lotte and when I pushed open the door I found her chortling to an appreciative audience.

'Ho ho ho ho ho!' she went, and 'Ho ho ho ho ho!' replied her group.

I smiled politely, but Lotte stopped to introduce me and to explain what they were doing. This was the second day of these leaders' training, and for the purposes of the training, Lotte had already established with the group that when she gave a laugh, they had to copy. It led to behaviour that seemed bizarrely sycophantic, when the teacher gave a fake laugh (she called it 'unconditional laughter') and then the whole group mimicked it.

'I was just explaining,' said Lotte, 'that there's a difference between ho-ho-ho laughs, which are from the belly, and ha-ha-ha laughs, which come from your centre, and he-he-he laughs which come from your chest or throat and are superficial. If you repeat this kind for too long you can damage your larynx.'

I felt like I did when I first started yoga and learned about breathing, and how something I'd taken for granted was more complicated, and more important, than I had ever realised; I was Monsieur Jordain discovering that he's been speaking prose all his life.

'We call this Laughter *Yoga*,' Lotte went on, 'because it combines deep-breathing techniques with laughter. Social laughter lasts from three to five seconds and is shallow; just generated in the chest. But Laughter Yoga prepares you to do ten to fifteen minutes of laughter to reap the physical benefits of laughter that engages the diaphragm.'

Ten to fifteen minutes! It seemed a lot of laughter, even though I knew from my reading that I was not going to be expected to wait until I found anything funny before I laughed. The founder of Laughter Yoga, Dr Madan Kataria, says that at first when he got people together he brought a selection of jokes to 'make' them laugh. As the joke supply ran out, the jokes people shared became increasingly risqué and sometimes hurtful. The movement was in crisis until he discovered that our bodies can't tell the difference between faked laughter and real. Thus saved from hours of knock-knock, people started to feel like smiling, so today would be about forced, 'unconditional' laughter as a regime.

'But people still find it hard to find ways of laughing for that long each day,' Lotte said, 'so that's why we've started our Laughter Yoga telephone call every day. You can dial in every morning to laugh with about ten other people.'

Lotte continued with her deadpan taxonomy of laughter: the shoulder-shaking laugh and silent laughter, and then the chemical implications of laughing. 'Laughter is powerful. It increases blood supply, and that's why I don't like people doing Laughter Yoga when they've had alcohol as it pushes the alcohol round the system faster and gives it greater impact on the body.

'Laughter also produces dopamine and endorphins,' she said. 'Endorphins boost the immune system, and this is how I got into Laughter Yoga, because I was diagnosed with MS and knew my immune system was weak.'

Suddenly the fake laughter didn't sound quite so silly; it sounded rather courageous.

We began our laughter exercises, using techniques Lotte has refined during her years of training: she reckons she's trained over a thousand Laughter Club leaders, and now does two or three corporate Laughter Yoga sessions a week. We started with speeding up our laughter, at first giving a slow, unconvincing (unconvinced) laugh that we took up to chuckle before breaking into a full titter. In early riding lessons I remember

learning the names for the pacing of horses – from *trot* to *canter* and on. Soon we were all positively galloping through ecstatic peals of laughter.

There's a practical problem here that will be spotted by any teacher who's led PE for an excited group of primary school pupils. How do you get their attention back when you've just set them off on an all-absorbing and high-volume activity? Lotte had thought this through and the group had already established a tribal call:

'Very good! Very good! YAY!'

Lotte called enthusiastically, clapping once on each of the 'very's and raising her hands in celebration on the 'yay!'. Obediently the group stopped laughing and repeated in time:

'Very good! Very good! YAY!'

Throughout the day the call was used to bring us to order or to break up discussion, punctuating the session like 'Amen' or 'Allelujah' at a religious revival.

Then we did an exercise which paired us off and where we gave our partner a handshake, first with one hand, then with the other. Then holding both hands as if we were country dancing, we spun each other around, giggling all the time. Next Lotte described a little scenario where we had to imagine preparing to go on holiday, getting out our passport from the drawer and laughing at the photo of ourselves that we find there. We all mimed the scene, as well as the following one where we arrived on holiday in Hawaii and were greeted 'Aloha-haha' – our hands waved up and then rained down on the 'ha ha ha'. We bowed 'namaste' to one another with hands in prayer position to each person while doing what I'd call chuckling.

With the increased laughter I was doing I was feeling very self-conscious. Like saying a word over and over until it loses all meaning and seems ridiculous, the repeated guffawing didn't feel funny; it felt animal. I started to notice how it also sounded a lot like orgasm.

I was also reminded of a feature of my laugh that I had been teased about as a teenager – the self-deprecating or embarrassed inhalation hissed under my tongue at the sides of my mouth almost as if I'm trying to suck back the fountain of mirth that had just sprayed (hopefully not often literally) forward. For years I hadn't thought about this except when I'd seen myself on television or heard myself interviewed on the radio. Now I was laughing so much I was hearing it repeated and magnified and I was becoming increasingly sensitive to it. With all the giggling in the room it was not the only thing giving me the sense of being returned to adolescence.

'How are you feeling?' Lotte asked me; and I said honestly,

'Surprisingly tired.'

It's the sort of flip comment that might usually raise a polite smile, an exhaled single-syllable chuckle of agreement. But here everyone laughed and then they wouldn't stop. At first I felt like I'd said something very clever, but as the honking, snorting cackles resounded around me I looked at the group – the woman in her bright yellow top with a huge M&M Smiley on it and another with a cap and glasses with bright frames – and felt that there was a touch of the circus about our little troupe.

I'd say I laugh quite often and that I make small jokes as ways to make connections with people. But here that felt like saying that you buy drinks to make friends – or that you distribute crack cocaine: every time I offered some lame witticism this lot were getting their fix. My out-sniff of a quiet laugh was picked up and used as material for more until the place had exploded. I worried then that I was actually the material, and it didn't make me feel funnier; it made me profoundly uncomfortable.

For the final activity of the morning, Lotte got us lying down, heads touching, bodies radiating out like the spokes of a wheel. She invited us to laugh with our eyes closed.

'But the laughing now is optional,' she said.

I am a good girl – give me rules and I will follow them. If we'd been told to laugh then, as in the other exercises, I would have done so. But since it had been offered, I took the option and didn't

join in this laughter. Around me the room rang and shuddered with hoots and gurgles and snickers. I started to regret my decision not to take part, but once you've set yourself apart from laughter it's hard to join in, and even though I knew that no-one but Lotte could see that I wasn't participating, I felt self-conscious in my silence. With my eyes closed, and for the benefit of no-one but myself (and possibly Lotte) I adopted an amused – or perhaps bemused – smile. It was like being the only teetotaller at a party, or the only sane one at the asylum. Or like being in the corner of the playground surrounded by the sounds of jeering; the feeling that the joke is on you. It was a final reminder of the power of laughter, and the importance of using it wisely.

After the session, slightly unsettled by my experience, I had the chance to talk to the other women (Lotte said that more women come to her training, though men are starting). As conversation unfolded I was reminded of the brave painted smile of the clown, the town's fireworks going ahead even in the rain.

'I've had depression since I was young,' said Jenny (now sixty-two). 'I've had suicidal thoughts. And then I read about Laughter Yoga in a magazine and thought I'd like to try it. This is only the second day I've been doing it, but when I went home last night I realised that at last I was laughing not from here,' she pointed at her chest, 'but from my belly.'

Jools added that she knew the power of Laughter Yoga from having done a session with someone else. 'After a class you feel exhaustion, exhilaration; but that a weight's been lifted off you,' she said. She was a teacher of regular yoga who wanted to incorporate Lotte's techniques, which include seated yoga teaching for older people whom she thinks can really benefit from unconditional laughter.

H was another of the participants and told me about the 'serious bereavement' she had experienced and the support she'd had from Laughter Yoga. 'You've got to stop relying on others to make you laugh,' she said. 'That's what you learn from Laughter Yoga. It's better not to rely on jokes or other people's humour but instead just choose to laugh for no reason every day.

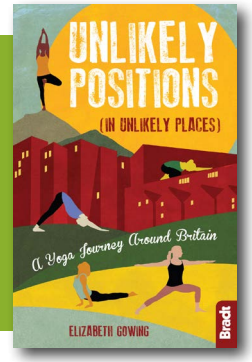
'When I was going through that bereavement, it was because we were laughing for no reason that I felt I could do it,' she explained. 'For nine years I've been doing Laughter Yoga most days. Of course I do lapse some days but I notice the effects when that happens.'

As I walked through the town to the station I learned a new way of listening to the people around me. I spotted the 'ha ha ha' of the men smoking outside one of the gay bars on Queen Street, the 'hee hee' of a mother with her child, the polite chuckle of a shopkeeper to a customer's pleasantry; I could sense the endorphins flowing. I thought about illness, about bereavement, about flying the flag on Blackpool Tower even when it was obscured by cloud and I knew that not everyone's laughter is because they're healthy and happy; but that we can all laugh because that is how we want to be.

***

Note: the above piece was written prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Laughter Yoga workshops and classes are currently happening online and over the phone, though they hope to reopen later in the summer as UK lockdown restrictions ease.

Elizabeth Gowing has been practising yoga for 12 years but is still not a likely yogini. She has done yoga in a cramped carriage on the Trans-Siberian Railway, on a jetty off the Montenegrin coast, in a Kosovan house fortified against blood feuds and as an ice-breaker with a suspicious landlady in Cuba. Read more about her experiences in *Unlikely Positions in Unlikely Places: A Yoga Journey Around Britain*, available for **£5.49** with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**.



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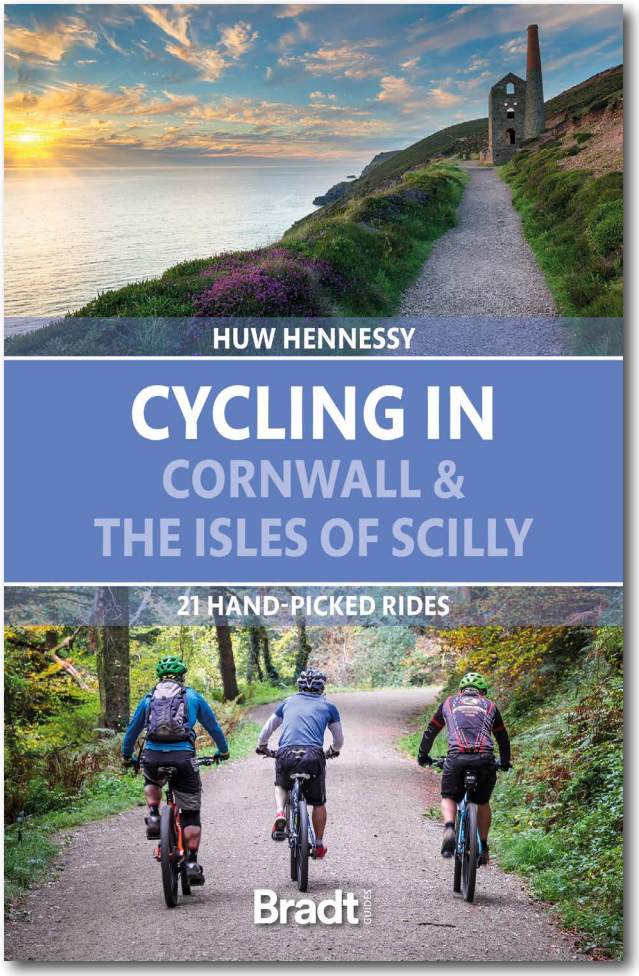

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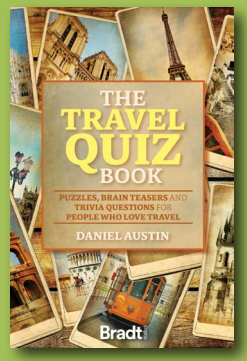

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