

# THE TRAVEL CLUB

E-ZINE #13: MAY, 2021

## Doing it for the 'gram

Is Instagram ruining travel?

## From cocoa to coconuts

Exploring São Tomé's burgeoning organic scene

## As the eagle flies

On the road with Mongolia's eagle hunters

## Pedal to the metal

The best of Flanders on two wheels

**Bradt** GUIDES

TRAVEL TAKEN SERIOUSLY



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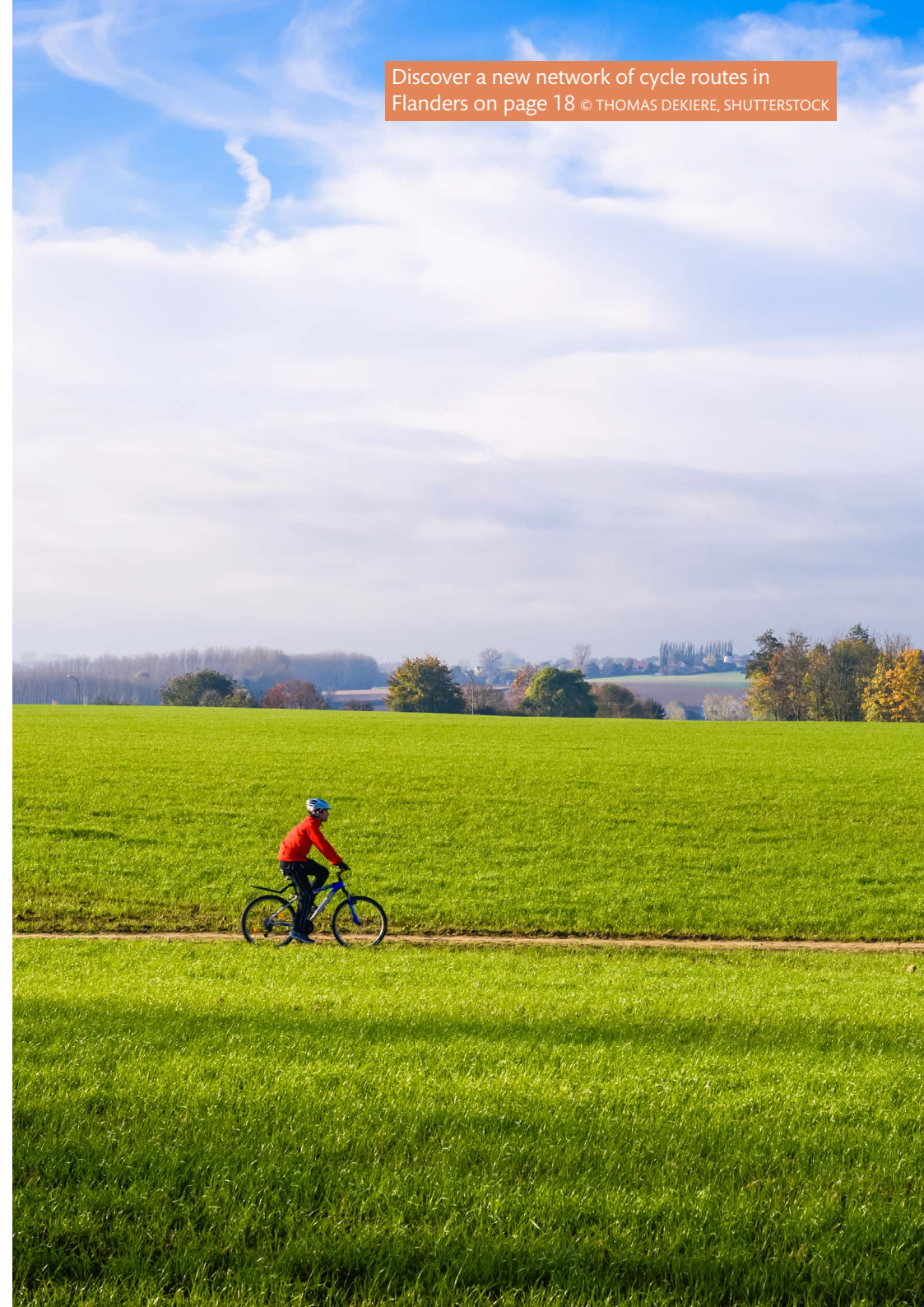
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Eagle hunting in Mongolia © Julian Elliott

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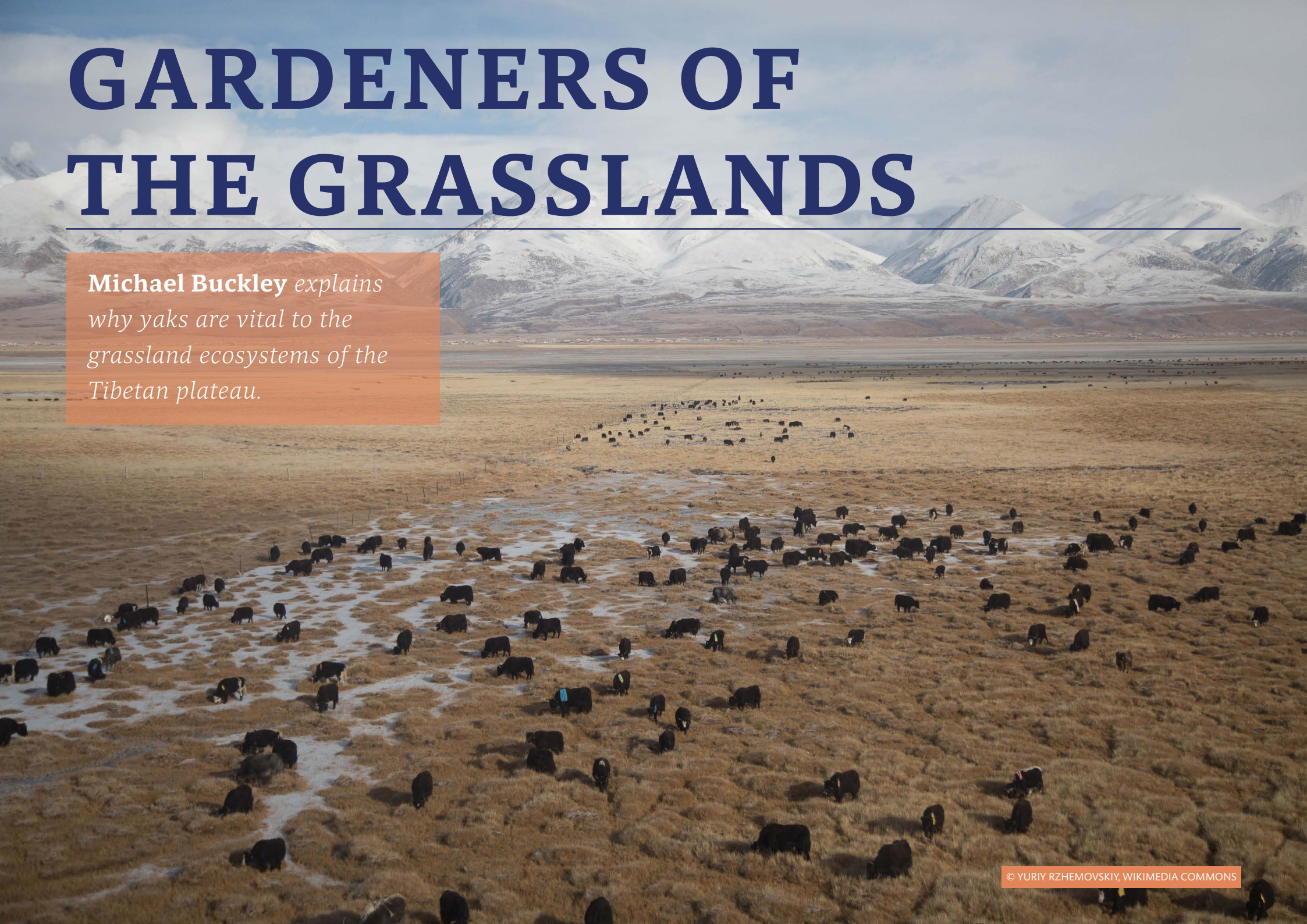




# GARDENERS OF THE GRASSLANDS

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**Michael Buckley** *explains*  
*why yaks are vital to the*  
*grassland ecosystems of the*  
*Tibetan plateau.*





**F**or more than 20 years, maverick Russian scientist Sergei Zimov and his son have been populating a 160km<sup>2</sup> piece of land in Chersky, in Russia's far northwest, with a motley collection of hardy animals. The beasts include yaks, muskoxen, bison, horses, sheep and other grazers. His logic is that these grazers will trample over shrubs, moss and larch trees to help create the kind of fertile grasslands that prevailed during the Pleistocene era, a long-lived epoch that lasted until around 12,000 years ago.

Dubbed 'the prophet of permafrost', Zimov says he is building an 'ark' with animals that will slow down the thawing of Arctic permafrost (an underground layer of frozen soil and ice), thus preventing the release of greenhouse gases such as methane that will accelerate climate change. Trapped in the permafrost, methane is thought to be at least 30 times more potent as a greenhouse gas than CO<sub>2</sub>. While it doesn't linger as long as carbon dioxide, methane absorbs heat – and consequently warms the atmosphere.

Zimov is not the only one experimenting with this idea. Allan Savory, a former park ranger from South Africa and TED Talk author of *The Grazing Revolution: A Radical Plan to Save the Earth*, developed a system of reviving grassland savannah through controlled grazing of domestic animals. To reclaim land that was turning into

desert, he introduced holistic grazing of domestic animals that replicated the movements of wild herd animals to increase carbon sequestration in the soil and thus reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. After some setbacks and false starts, Savory came up with the right 'formula' for success, and methods are now practised on

vast tracts of land across four continents, taking scrubby wastelands and reverting them to robust ecosystems. But not so in Tibet.

### **The importance of the yak**

Yaks have evolved with the grasslands of Tibet over four millennia. This is not a natural landscape:



Tibetan nomads depend on yaks for milk, butter and cheese



it is a cultivated one, and yaks are the gardeners. Unlike other ruminants like sheep and goats, yaks nibble at the grass, not uprooting it. They trample down grasslands to compact them. Their hooves allow for oxygenation, and their dung makes soil more fertile.

Why is this process so important? Because desertification is sweeping through Tibet like a plague, threatening to turn the place into one vast wasteland. Grasslands act as a carbon sink, keeping carbon in the ground and keeping permafrost where it should be – as permanent frost. Without grasslands, carbon releases into the air – and most likely methane with it.

In some remote pockets of Tibet, such as Kham and Amdo, nomad culture clings on. Though today using solar panels and riding motorcycles, Tibetan nomads still rely on many parts of the yak for survival. Yak dung is used for fuel, and yak milk, yoghurt and cheese can be bartered for other goods much-needed by farmers, such as barley. (Incidentally, yak cheese is among the most nutritious of all cheeses in the world. Why? Because unlike cows, yaks dine on a wide range of grasses and herbs and other fodder, and they frequently move

***“Grasslands act as a carbon sink, keeping carbon in the ground and permafrost where it should be.”***

pasture.) Yak hide can be used to fashion boots or bound together to make a coracle, a vessel for river crossings. Yak hair is used for clothing, ropes and tents, despite its harsh texture.

### **The silence of the grasslands**

But in China’s rush to plunder Tibet, the intimate bond between the Tibetan nomads and the grasslands has been shattered. The grasslands have suffered one catastrophe after another at the hands of the Chinese occupiers, who know nothing about their management and continue to trial experiments that devastate the ecosystem.

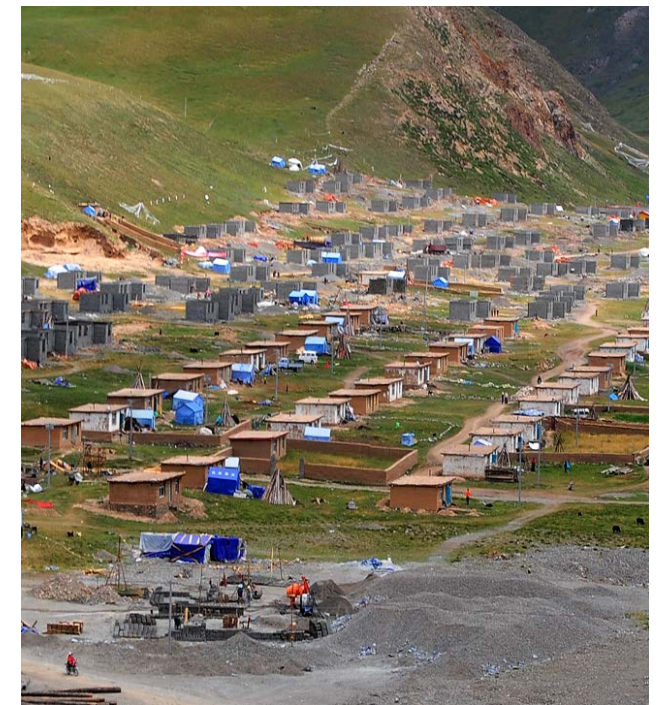
In pre-1950 Tibet, before Chinese invasion, there were vast herds of wild herbivores on the grasslands, and the thundering hooves of wild yaks were heard widely across the plains. Immense herds of Tibetan

antelopes, Tibetan wild asses and Tibetan gazelles were often sighted too – after all, this was the Serengeti of High Asia. Tibetan nomads largely left the wild grazers to do their thing, though sometimes wild yaks would try to mate with domestic ones, which caused

problems. The resulting crossbred yaks are not docile like domestic yaks, instead wild-tempered and very difficult to control.

It is extremely rare to find a wild yak in today’s Tibet. Tibetan delegations of the early 1980s were horrified at what they saw inside Tibet among the impoverished people, but they were also horrified by what they did not see – any wildlife. They remarked on the total silence of the grasslands, where not even the honking of bar-headed geese was heard.

So what happened to all that magnificent wildlife? To put it bluntly, the Chinese invaders ate it. With the rise of a wealthy Chinese middle



Nomads have been forced to resettle in concrete ghettos



class came an exponential increase in the consumption of yak meat. Yaks were hunted for sport or use in traditional Chinese medicine, and their fine-haired bushy tails are still sought after today by wealthy Indians and Nepalis as fly-whisks and dusters. In the entertainment industry yak hair is valued for making opera and circus clown wigs, and in the pre-synthetic era, yak tails were considered the best material for making Santa Claus beards.

Over the last few decades, the grasslands have been dealt another terrible blow. Tibetan nomads, who for thousands of years have acted as custodians of these plains, have been removed en masse by the Chinese government, forcing them into concrete ghettos and selling their yaks to slaughterhouses – an idea that is abhorrent to Tibetan nomads. An anti-slaughterhouse movement has grown since 2000, originating at Larung Gar in Sichuan where prominent (now deceased) monk Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok encouraged Tibetans to embrace vegetarianism. In June 2020, ten Tibetans, including two monks, were handed sentences of between eight and 13 years for trying to block construction of a commercial slaughterhouse in Gansu province.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rationale behind these moves is that nomads were overgrazing and thus damaging the grasslands.

But in reality, it is the Chinese occupiers who are destroying the plains – first, by introducing extensive wire fencing on the plateau, which prevents rotational grazing of domestic yaks. And then, much worse, by allowing mega-mining companies to plunder the grasslands and dig deep to exploit Tibet's previously untouched stores of precious minerals. Over 100 minerals have been discovered by Chinese researchers; earlier Chinese surveys of the Tibetan plateau indicate mineral and oil deposits worth over US\$125 billion, but the real value could be ten times that amount: over US\$1 trillion. The valuable minerals that China covets include large deposits of lithium, copper, lead, zinc, gold and silver. Northeast Tibet holds huge oil and gas deposits, as well as oil-sands and shale-gas deposits.

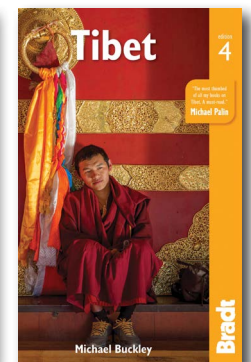
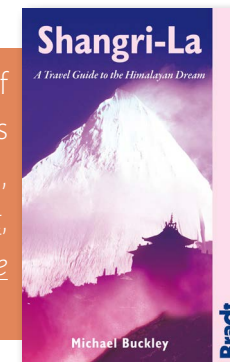
The yak is an amazing beast – one that offers so much to the ecosystems it populates. With its demise, those grasslands are in peril – and when that happens, desert will advance across the Tibetan plateau and permafrost will thaw faster,

allowing for the release of deadly methane as a greenhouse gas. The way China's disastrous policies on the grasslands are going, Tibet may be left with a situation like Zimov's Ark – where only a handful of yaks and related grazers remain trying to maintain and restore these grassland ecosystems, the rest being devoured by desert.

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*Author's note: Material in this article has yet to be verified by extensive research. The opinions and hypotheses expressed here are purely theoretical. However, consider this: Tibetan nomads have herded yaks, goats and sheep on the grasslands of Tibet successfully for millennia. That would indicate the grassland ecosystem with grazing animals has worked well – until the Chinese occupiers of Tibet severely disrupted that grassland ecosystem, starting in the 1960s, and continuing to the present day.*

**Michael Buckley** is a keen environmentalist and author of *Meltdown in Tibet*, a major expose of China's devastation of Tibet's natural resources, as well as a companion digital photobook, *Tibet, Disrupted*. He is also the author of the *Bradt Guide to Tibet*, and the first and only edition of *Shangri-La: A Travel Guide to the Himalayan Dream*, recently reissued as an ebook.





# LOCAL PRODUCE IN SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

*To celebrate the release of the third edition of our guide to São Tomé and Príncipe, author **Kathleen Becker** shares her favourite local businesses that place an emphasis on local, often organic, produce.*



The vast majority of São Tomé and Príncipe's produce is organic © VALÚDO



I've always had a thing for edible souvenirs and presents, whether for friends who have only a hazy notion of São Tomé and Príncipe as an exotic destination, or for Portuguese acquaintances who have a personal connection to the country. Gifts you cannot get anywhere else are hugely appreciated: coffee beans from the misty hills surrounding Monte Café; cocoa nibs from the 'chocolate islands'; or lovingly wrapped dried tropical fruit. Jackfruit jam anyone? Cocoa liqueur? Or a medley of aphrodisiac herbs brimming with the exuberance of the jungle? The vast majority of São Tomé and Príncipe's produce is organic, as the use of pesticides mostly stopped when the country became independent; lack of money became an opportunity and USP. And with every purchase you help a burgeoning sector, provide employment to local people, and show your appreciation of their culture and land. A true win-win situation.

## Chocolate

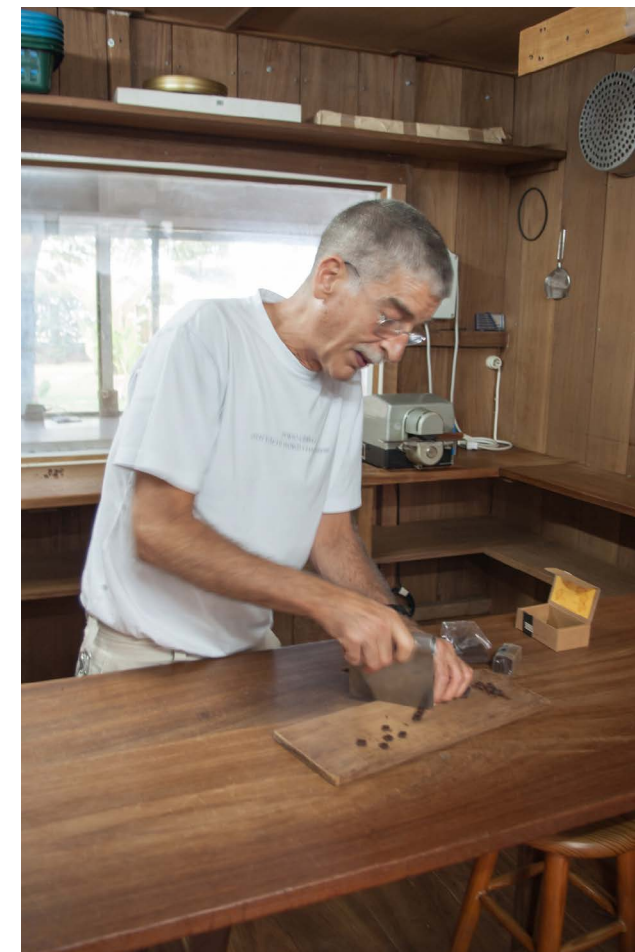
Chocolate production started in São Tomé for the first time in the 1990s. For a long time, the only producer actually making chocolate on the islands was the Italian Claudio Corallo, who arrived in 1992; now the Diogo Vaz plantation in the north has opened a chocolate café (with factory) in the capital. With the trend towards

single-estate, vintage and craft chocolate, 'São Tomé' chocolate bars are beginning to appear in shops all over the world.

In 2011, the Italian *Corriere della Sera* newspaper called [Claudio Corallo](#) chocolate 'the best in the world' – and it is kind of true. Even those who swear they don't like dark chocolate are rapidly converted. On the islands, the best place to pick up chocs is after a visit to their factory located on Avenue Marginal in the capital. In-depth tasting sessions are held three times weekly (sample around a dozen types of chocolate, after which you'd have to have an iron will not to buy anything). Prepare for an epiphany: this chocolate can be truly mood-altering, in the best sense of the word.

Nearly half a century of passion and care about the exact calibration of the ingredients are much in evidence here, and new flavours and new products are continually being developed. Claudio is passionate about providing a counterpoint to 'sick' industrial chocolate, where the beans are roasted to cinders and buyers are brainwashed into believing good chocolate has to be black and bitter. Tours run in alternating Portuguese and English and include a presentation on the history and workings of the chocolate factory, followed by the tasting.

[Chocolateria Diogo Vaz](#) is the new kid on the block! This beautiful shiny temple to chocolate



A visit to the Claudio Corallo chocolate factory

opened in 2018, serving sophisticated 'tree to bar' artisan chocolate delicacies alongside coffee and tea in a stylish indoor-outdoor space with sea views. Maybe it was not the most delicate move for the island's second chocolate factory to pitch up on the same stretch of the Marginal as world-





famous Claudio Corallo, but it is a very different concept and you should make time for both. Diogo Vaz is more a sophisticated tasting and café space. They kindly allow visitors to try each of the four varieties of certified organic chocolate made with cocoa from the plantation in the north of the island; the 70% Unroasted is intriguing.

Other highlights available in the café include the brownies with pistachios and the coffee/cocoa blend. You can buy chocolates, chocolate spread, drinking chocolate and bonbons to take home and there are workshops about once a month.

## Delicias das Ilhas

[Delicias das Ilhas](#) is a family business founded in 2009. Their base, and location of their workshop, is off Rua 3 Fevereiro in São Tomé, but they sell in shops all around the city, including in some

hotel gift shops – many of the locally made food products you'll find on sale are theirs. Aiming 'to publicise what São Tomé and Príncipe has to offer: a nature rich in flavours and aromas', they produce an impressive variety of dried fruits, tropical jams, fruit liqueurs, local herbs and spices, teas, sauces,

soaps and oils. The workshop itself is a buzzing place, with all sorts of drying, grinding, cooking, packing and bottling going on. One-hour tasting tours run on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Owners Bastien and Delicia speak Portuguese, French and English, and they'll happily explain



Family-run Delicias das Ilhas offers an impressive range of local produce



their different processes with visitors and share their passion for local produce.

Just above Praia Vá Inhá at São Tomé island's southern tip they have their own 5ha plantation, where they cultivate some of the organic materials used for their products: fruits and herbs of all sorts, including lemongrass, micocô leaves, cinnamon, ginger and vanilla.

## Fluta Nón

This [developmental initiative](#) is located in the town of Neves on São Tomé's northwest coast. Locally run by Italian-born long-time resident Giovanna, Fluta Nón produces minimalist energy bars made from local fruits and spices – a great gift for hiking friends at home, or to take on hikes in the surrounding hills. The enterprise is also 'committed to the enhancement of agroforestry in São Tomé and Príncipe by supporting the production and processing of products into dehydrated flours': an array of exotic flours – cocoyam, banana, cassava, jackfruit – that are perfectly suited to a gluten-free diet are therefore also on offer here.

The visiting structure is still to be formalised, but expect to give a small fee or donation. Coming

from the capital, Fluta Nón, housed in a striking building of stone and wood, is reached by taking a left before you reach the Contador River.

## Efraim

[Efraim](#) (also known as Alei Coffee Shop), is located in Monte Café, the roça that used to produce most of the island's coffee before independence. Founded in 1858 by pioneer planter Manuel da Costa Pedreira from Brazil, Monte Café once had ten dependencies and employed thousands of workers. The big house fell down and had to be demolished in 2017, but the bell that marked the labourers' workday is still here – ringing at 05.30, and then again for the 06.00 *formação* line-up – along with other photogenic industrial ruins.

More recently, and for a number of years,

Efraim's charismatic English-speaking owner Catoninho (Amedy Pereira) has been producing excellent organic coffee as a family business here. Their smooth arabica is a highlight and is great value for money. (Santomean

coffee is usually expensive, not least because it is so rare.) Amedy can show you how coffee is made, while the processing facility (*tecnologia*) has excellent bilingual panels about coffee and cocoa

***“More recently, Efraim has been producing excellent organic coffee as a family business.”***



© JI-ELEWIKIMEDIA COMMONS

cycles. If you're looking to learn even more about coffee while you're here, the roça is also home to the Museu do Café, where exhibits are spread throughout several rooms.

## Valúdo coconut factory

This flag-festooned, award-winning [coconut factory](#) is located next to Quinta da Favorita, en route to Trindade. It is named for the 'dry kernel



of the coconut' in Santomean creole. Under French-Belgian ownership, the factory produces a variety of organic, Fairtrade coconut products, including oil, flour, soap, dried fruit, and more, sustaining more than 300 families in the process. They are also committed to preserving the biodiversity of São Tomé and Príncipe and are working to rehabilitate the country's abandoned coconut groves.

On site, there's a shop and showroom, and visitors can observe the production chain from outside. Customers are offered free coconut water. The products are also for sale at shops around the country. At the 2020 Gourmet Oils competition in Paris, Valúdo coconut oil won the gold medal.



© VALÚDO

Valúdo produces a variety of organic, Fairtrade coconut products

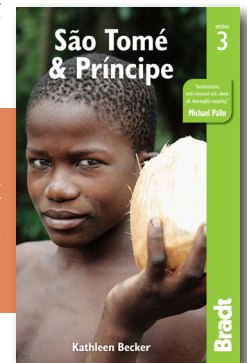
## Roça de São João

This roça is the place to head to for cookery classes – the lessons are educational, and it is enormous fun to pull out manioc by the root, cut some okra shoots, piri-piri and Taiwanese lemons, and then to prepare a *feijoada a modo da terra* (meaty bean stew), salted mangoes, coconut slivers with cinnamon, pineapple rice and maybe a filled breadfruit. Moreover, it serves some of the best, if not the best, food in São Tomé and Príncipe, cooked with fresh local ingredients using lots of herbs and spices and all lovingly presented.

The head chef is the local 'Mr Culture', João Carlos Silva, presenter of a successful TV programme on RTP Africa, *Na Roça Com Os Tachos* – literally 'On the Plantation with Cooking Pots'. The tasting menu, including a palate-cleansing exercise with wine and ginger, has become one of São Tomé's must-do experiences. The cool airy veranda

where meals are taken is great for relaxing, with hammocks, comfy bamboo furniture, art books and local produce for sale such as wooden cookery spoons, jungle pepper (if you liked it during the lunch get some here as you won't find it elsewhere) and fantastic mango jam.

**Kathleen Becker** is a German-Irish travel writer, tour leader and translator. She is the author of our guide to São Tomé and Príncipe, the third edition of which is out this month. The Travel Club members can get their copy for just **£8.99** with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**.





# IS INSTAGRAM RUINING TRAVEL?

*Powerful marketing tool or the root of all evil? **Portia Jones** looks at the power of Instagram and whether it is detrimental to the travel experience.*

**D**estinations have always relied on beautiful images to sell us holiday dreams, but perhaps never more so than in the Instagram age. Over the last decade, the social media platform has become one of the most powerful tools in the marketing arsenal, as well as being a useful starting point for travellers seeking inspiration or planning trips. If you know where to look, you can unearth underground bars, remote viewpoints and lesser-known beaches, all just by looking at your phone.

But one of the more divisive travel trends to emerge in recent years has been the meteoric rise of 'Instagram travel' – where one travels not for discovery but for photographic perfection, preferably via a series of elaborate photoshoots where the destination acts as a mere backdrop to the person in shot. Instead of any kind of meaningful connection with a destination, the goal is to turn the spotlight back on to the visitor for a heavily edited, 'twirling off in the sunset' photo. There's rarely any interaction with locals, unless of



© PORTIA JONES



course they need to be loudly directed out of your on-location photoshoot. 'Christ on a unicycle, what are all these people doing at my waterfall?'

## Doing it for the 'gram

I think the first time I became aware of 'travelling for the 'gram' was in 2015. I was precariously perched on a rocky outcrop with my husband, overlooking Comino's not-so-hidden gem, the Blue Lagoon. Our budget boat trip to this super popular spot in Malta included several stops in tiny, urchin-covered coves that heaved with sunburnt day-trippers.

Sat above the striking turquoise waters, we sipped potent rum cocktails served in hollowed-out pineapples as we watched an amusing mini photoshoot unfold below. Bronzed Insta-babes in wide-brimmed vacay hats were taking it in turns to get their sun-drenched selfie with said pineapple on the rugged coastline.

For a good 45 minutes these girls pouted, preened and posed to get the perfect, faux-spontaneous, living-my-best-life shot of their summer break before boarding the boat to the next spot, pineapples hastily discarded on the shore.

I remember feeling shocked that not one of the girls had dipped a toe in the crystal-clear waters, much less taken a moment to appreciate the surrounding landscape with their actual eyes.

My husband was more surprised that they hadn't even bothered to drink their pineapple prop.

But this was just the beginning. Similar eyebrow-raising scenes are now commonplace on beaches, in cities and atop mountains across the world. We've all seen them, whether in real life or on Instagram itself: bearded travel bros doing headstands on cliff tops, couples kissing while hanging out of moving trains, immaculately dressed girls posing with mimosas in pools. The same #blessed scenes repeated over and over again.

Don't get me wrong, I love a good holiday-humble-brag photo as much as anyone. Taking high-quality travel photos is a large part of my job as a travel writer, and Instagram has quickly become part and parcel of this. I just can't wrap my head around the orchestrated photoshoots, or queuing for hours for a photo, or travelling specifically to get a particular snap. The older you get, the more you prioritise naps I guess?

Although I document many of my work and personal trips on social media, I try to avoid falling



© PORTIA JONES



into the usual Instagram clichés and instead look to offer some real insight into the destination by what I share in the captions. Having said that, I have been known to pose on a flamingo lilo after a few cocktails. Guilty as charged.

### **The growth of a social superpower**

What started as a simple photo-sharing platform with a few quaint filters in 2010 has mushroomed into a staggering machine, with 1 billion monthly active users sharing images with their followers. And for travel lovers, Instagram is now your personal holiday slideshow. You can merrily snap, filter and share in real-time with your followers, in the hope they'll smash that like button. Pics or it didn't happen, right?

As Instagram grew, so did Insta-tourism. Thanks to its geotagging function, travellers could search for white-sand beaches, snazzy street art and hip brunch spots and plan their entire holiday in one fell swoop. Large-scale influencers suddenly all started posting the same overly filtered, 'walking away to nowhere' shots in the same locations. The perceived 'Instagrammability' of a destination was suddenly a deciding factor in where we chose to visit next.

All of a sudden, queuing for an hour in a gentrified part of town to get an angel-wing mural selfie was considered perfectly normal

holiday behaviour. Influencing became a lucrative business, with tourist boards catching on to the power of a like. Hotels, cafés and attractions also joined in and clamoured to make their businesses photogenic, everything now designed and styled to look as Insta-friendly as possible, even if it's wildly impractical. Have you ever tried to eat a £28 plate of avocado toast off a piece of driftwood?

It all sounds fairly harmless on the surface. So what if some someone wants to spend hours getting the perfect jungle-swing snap or petal-bath selfie in Bali? Isn't everyone in Bali on some kind of insufferable 'Eat Pray Love' express tour anyway?

The problem is that visitors are now flocking to these Instagrammable destinations in huge numbers, eager to recreate the unrealistic shots they see on social media. The more people post about destinations, the more snap-happy tourists arrive, eager to recreate their favourite Instagram shots. This in turn attracts more visitors and the 'inspiration' cycle continues. Travel, ultimately, will eat itself.

'The phenomenon of Insta-travel has been a curse for many destinations,' says Catherine Livesley, founder of sustainable travel company, No Fly Travel Club.

'Hidden photo spots that become popular on IG are not prepared for the massive influx of visitors that follows. There's often no management system in place, and visitors may not be spending any money in the location to help pay for its upkeep. They just want their photo.'

Livesley points out that an influx of selfie-seeking tourists can contribute to a whole host of issues for a destination such as soil erosion, pollution, littering, destruction of wildlife and exploitation of local people and cultures. 'It's a way of travelling that puts your "personal brand" ahead of the needs of the land and its people.'

Award-winning responsible travel blogger Teresa Gomez also believes that attitudes towards travel have changed a lot in recent years. 'For a lot

of people, travel has become more about getting pretty photos than exploring.

Gomez explains that in many cases, people have been known to behave disrespectfully and caused huge destruction and chaos to under-resourced destinations – all to get a pic for the 'gram. She cites the example of when visitors caused a public safety emergency in Lake Elsinore, southern California in 2019. The canyon was overrun by crowds who arrived in their thousands for the

***"It puts your 'personal brand' ahead of the needs of the land and its people."***



perfect shot of the rare poppy ‘super bloom.’ ‘They trampled over the very flowers they went to photograph,’ Gomez explains.

But, just as many destinations were at breaking point, Covid-19 came along and halted mass tourism overnight. Gone were the giant cruise ships and tour groups as tourism hotspots rapidly emptied and once-busy streets fell silent.

With travel halted, the industry has been reconsidering the value of mass tourism, with popular destinations questioning how they can encourage more sustainable tourism moving forward. Only last month, Venice finally approved a ban on cruise ships entering the historic centre after years of pressure from locals. Elsewhere, Thailand is to close 150 national parks for three months a year to let wildlife and ecosystems recover. Peruvian authorities are also considering how to restrict access to Machu Picchu and divert tourists to other areas.

Post-pandemic, I’d like to see less idealistic content and more of the uncomfortable realities of being a world citizen. We should document experiences from behind the Insta-veil, including the less-than-perfect elements: missed trains,

cancelled flights, bouts of explosive diarrhoea, stolen wallets and rat-infested hostels.

### **A powerful marketing tool or the root of all evil?**

Naturally, the rise of Insta-tourism and the lack of accountability has caused much drama and discussion in the travel community. The debate over whether Instagram has ruined travel still rages on through social media and op-eds much like this one.

The general consensus seems to be that if people are taking the same pictures in the same locations, travel becomes unbearably homogenised and destinations will ultimately be ruined by our rampant narcissism.

A quick poll on my Twitter account revealed that most of my followers consider the idea of Instagram travel abhorrent.

‘I never use Instagram to find my next destination. The over-filtered, fake look of most places posted on there doesn’t entice me to visit at all,’ tweeted Nicola Leigh Stewart.

Others share their disappointment of travelling to a destination they had seen on social media, only to find it looked nothing like the over-

saturated representation seen online. Filter apps, heavy editing and luxurious travel sponsored by a tourism board all helps to create an unrealistic picture of a destination. If you keep seeing floating breakfast feasts on the gram, you’re going to be disappointed with your lukewarm buffet breakfast at Ibis.

But for some destinations, Instagram has been helpful to their cause.

‘For a visually appealing but little-known destination like Uzbekistan, Instagram is a godsend,’ advocates Sophie Ibbotson, Uzbekistan’s Tourism Ambassador to the UK.

Sophie explains that tourists who visit this Silk Road destination are understandably mesmerised by the impressive architecture, dramatic landscapes and colourful handicrafts and naturally want to share the images with their social media followers. ‘In doing so, they immediately become ambassadors for Uzbekistan’s tourism industry, helping promote the destination.’

Armed with nothing more than an iPhone, everyone is now a potential ambassador of the places they visit. You don’t have to be a 100k influencer to highlight smaller destinations that crave a little double-tap love.

‘Smaller DMOs [destination marketing organisations] don’t really have huge budgets,’ explains tourism PR specialist Megan Allen. ‘They

*“We should document experiences from behind the Insta-veil, including the less-than-perfect elements.”*





Uzbekistan is one destination that has benefitted from popularity on social media

rely on social media to not only reach wider tourism markets, but the local tourists too.'

By partnering with influencers, lesser-known destinations can expand their potential audience and gain more visitors than ever before. The numbers speak for themselves – in 2015 the small town of Wanaka in New Zealand started hosting influencers with large followings in exchange for posts about their experiences. The result of this partnership was the fastest tourism growth in the country with visitor numbers up 14% over the year.

Initially New Zealand appeared thrilled with the visitor increase, with many glowing articles on the positive effect of Instagram on tourism. But fast forward to 2021 and Tourism NZ did a much-publicised U-turn, with a campaign directed at influencer wannabes to 'skip the typical social media shots and share something new'.

'We noticed that the same pictures or poses kept coming up, time and time again,' the NZ tourism

office explained. A stark reminder of the power of Instagram, and the fine balance when it comes to sustainability.

I'm still largely undecided as to whether Instagram has indeed ruined travel. Whilst mass tourism, fuelled in part by social media, can be destructive, it's a primary source of income for many destinations. I'm also aware that shaking my fist at those darn influencers makes me sound like a shrill old woman and doesn't really solve the problem.

Education, rather than prevention, is key. You can't stop the unoriginal selfie seekers heading to Amsterdam, but what you can do is encourage them to visit other destinations in the Netherlands too.

Ironically, Instagram is probably the best tool for the job. This platform, when utilised correctly, has the power to spread tourists out to under-the-radar destinations. Send the influencers to Slough to document their raw urban adventures and within 5 minutes it will be on every 'hidden gem' listicle in the land. We'll all be queuing up for a coveted snap at 'Europe's largest industrial park' in no time. Just don't forget to pack your straw hat.

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



# ON YOUR BIKE: EXPLORING THE ICONS OF FLANDERS

*It's not surprising that a region like Flanders lends itself to some of the world's best cycle routes. Its relatively flat terrain provides the perfect conditions for cyclists of every level, whether you're a weekend 'pootler' happy to enjoy a slower pace or a confident rider familiar with long distances.*

*Flanders has long enjoyed an established cycle-route network, but last month Flanders By Bike launched nine brand-new 'Icon' cycle paths designed to take in the very best of what the region has to offer. Ranging from half-day jaunts to week-long rides, each route explores various aspects of the Flemish identity, from art cities and the Great War to natural wonders, industrial heritage and, of course, beer.*





## The 14–18 Western Front Route

Flanders is probably most famous for its World War I sites, but to discover the area on two wheels offers a new perspective over the Flanders Fields. Starting in the coastal resort of Nieuwpoort, this 100km path zig-zags across both German and Allied sides of the front lines, each marked by

memorial trees. En route are a number of the region's most important military cemeteries and landmarks, including Diksmuide's 84m-tall Yser Tower, the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 and, of course, the Ypres Salient. It is an exceptional cycle route, both picturesque and poignant, and as you pass the bunkers, trenches, bomb craters and

underground tunnels, the strategic significance of the landscape becomes clear.

## Scheldt Route

Flanders is known for its art cities, and this 181km route along the mighty Scheldt River combines some of its finest. Following the towpath, the ride begins on the Dutch border in the northern reaches



of Antwerp, a handsome city with its fair share of museums and Michelin-starred restaurants. Continuing southwest, it passes some of the region's most beautiful castles and fishing villages before reaching Ghent, described by Victor Hugo as 'a kind of Venice of the North'. The river loops just outside through the Oudenaarde, a city not well known by tourists but famous with locals for its breweries and Adriaen Brouwer, a 17th-century painter, both of which are celebrated during a festival in June.

## Meuse Route

Another river that dominates Flanders is the mighty Meuse, which meanders for 1,000km from Langres in France to Hook in the Netherlands. Skirting the Dutch border, this 63km ride explores a string of historic villages as it follows the river's

wildest section, where your only companions are likely to be migratory birds and grazing cattle. Particularly picturesque points include the market town of Maaseik, home to some magnificent medieval architecture but rarely visited by foreign tourists, and arguably the most beautiful village in Flanders: Oud-Rekem.

## Coastal Route

In the north of Flanders lies the beautiful expanse of the Belgian coast, its sandy dunes and wide beaches running for a total of 67km along the North Sea. In the early 20th century it was the holiday destination for northern Europe's rich and famous, and this scenic 85km route traces its heritage – from stylish resorts like De Haan home to stunning Belle-Époque mansions, to more traditional fishing villages such as Oostduinkerke where the world's last shrimp fishermen trawl the shallows on horseback. If you like museums, galleries or contemporary street art, the city of Ostend has plenty to offer.

## Green Belt Route

This 126km loop around the Belgian capital explores a landscape characterised by beer and

Bruegel, the country's master painter. Ancient castles and manor estates bear witness to this region's former wealth, while the fertile valleys of the Pajottenland are dotted with vineyards, chicory farms and breweries – the ideal place to enjoy a cold Lambic, a sour beer unique to this area of Flanders. The route is also home to Belgium's answer to Kew Gardens, Meise Botanic Garden, home to some 40 types of iris – the Brussels Capital Region's official flower.

## Kempen Route

Nature lovers will be in their element on this 203km ride from Antwerp to the Dutch border, following an old coal track through forest, heathland and the region's only national park at Hoge Kempen. The path skirts the city of Genk, not often visited by English-speaking tourists but well worth a stop to explore its mining history and industrial heritage. An undoubted highlight is the section through Bosland, where the route follows a 10m-high cycle path through the treetops! And if you fancy a swim, there are plenty of opportunities to take a dip in the Kempen Lakes or swap your bike for a canoe on the Kleine Nete River.

*“Take a dip in the Kempen Lakes or swap your bike for a canoe on the Kleine Nete River.”*

© TOERISME OOSTDUINKERKE, WESTTOER



The shrimp fishermen are an icon of Oostduinkerke



## Art Cities Route

To see the best of Flanders's art heritage, this is the ride to take. Connecting Brussels, Leuven, Mechelen, Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges and Ostend, this 332km route provides a window into centuries of Flemish history as it follows a network of canals, rivers and old railway lines past forts, churches and galleries. You can start and end anywhere, and all cities demand at least

a few days' exploration – soak up the student atmosphere at lively Leuven, explore Mechelen's many UNESCO-listed sights or get lost among the fairytale canals in Bruges.

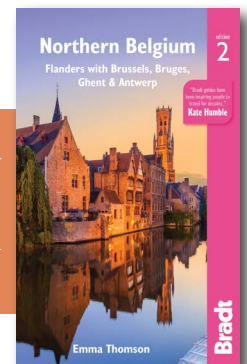
More information about the new 'Icon' cycle routes is available on [flandersbybike.be](https://flandersbybike.be), including route maps and GPX files to download on to a smartphone or GPS device. For more on Flanders, go to [visitflanders.com](https://visitflanders.com) or check out our *Northern Belgium* guide, available for half price with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**.

## Hill Route

Although Flanders is for the most part relatively flat, there are some exceptions – and this epic 459km route is one of them. Taking in a diverse cross-section of regions, the ride traverses the hills of the Flemish Ardennes, winds through Limburg's colourful fruit orchards and explores the rural countryside of Brabant, where you'll certainly want to stop for a refreshing pint of Hoegaarden or Gueze. In Heuvelland (Flemish for 'hill country'), you'll come face to face with the iconic Kemmelberg, a dramatic ascent famous among road cycling fans worldwide.

## Flanders Route

If you can't decide which route to take, then this blockbuster 952km loop pretty much combines the lot: sea views and cityscapes, castles and cemeteries, winding waterways and verdant forests. Definitely best cycled over a longer period of time, there are plenty of opportunities to drop in and out – with countless bicycle cafés and cosy B&Bs en route.





# WORLDLY APPETITES: ASPERGES À LA FLAMANDE

**A**sparagus season is a highlight of the Flemish foodie calendar as it is often nicknamed 'white gold' owing to the short growing season (late April to early June) and local demand. Milder and slightly sweeter than its green counterpart, Flemish white asparagus is grown covered in soil to prevent photosynthesis, which stops the asparagus from turning green.

Only young, tender asparagus shoots are commonly eaten because once the buds start to open, older shoots turn woody and become quite strong in flavour. Once picked, they are prepared and served in a number of ways around the world, typically as an appetiser or a vegetable side dish. The following dish is popular on spring menus across the region – à la Flammande meaning 'Flemish style'.

## Ingredients

2kg asparagus	4 eggs
2 tbsp chopped parsley	Salt and pepper,
3 tbsp melted butter	to season

## Method

1. Hard boil the eggs and peel from shells when cool. Chop finely and set aside.
2. Peel the white asparagus from the head to the foot and remove the hard outer shell of the stem. Rinse and drain.
3. Boil the asparagus in lightly salted water for 20 to 30 minutes until tender. Remove and drain thoroughly.
4. Arrange the asparagus on a serving dish while hot. Mix the hard-boiled eggs with the melted butter, and spoon over the asparagus.
5. Season, garnish with the chopped parsley and drizzle with Hollandaise sauce (optional).





# A SPOTLIGHT ON THE INDEPENDENT



*UK-based tour operator Native Eye specialise in the unusual. Rather than focusing on mainstream destinations, they redefine what adventure travel is all about – taking small groups to places where traditions remain paramount. We spoke to founder **Jim O'Brien** about his favourite destinations, memorable experiences as a tour leader and the struggles of running an independent travel company during a pandemic.*





### How did you come to start Native Eye?

Native Eye was set up in 2013; I'd spent most of my adult life working in the travel industry and by that point, felt that starting the company was a natural step. My passion has always been for the more remote destinations, with a particular focus on Africa, and I wanted to be able to offer others a way to explore these less-visited parts of the world. And of course, have more of an excuse to go myself...

### What is your favourite country to visit?

Without a doubt, my favourite of all our destinations is Chad. It's an incredibly wild place and travelling here feels like more of an expedition than a conventional holiday, with almost no infrastructure at all outside the capital, N'Djamena. Like many countries in the region, it's a nation of two halves, split among the geographic and cultural fault lines that run through central Africa. The north is dominated by the vast deserts of the Sahara, and Chad has some of the most breathtaking examples of desert scenery you could hope to encounter, with orange sandstone structures, huge fields of dunes and scattered oases, home to the fiercely independent Tubu people.

In contrast, the south is a softer Sahelian landscape and much more populated – it's



© JIM O'BRIEN

Southern Chad is home to the nomadic Wodaabe people

also home to the nomadic Wodaabe people, best known for their elaborate courtship rituals in the Gerewol festival, where young men dress in their best finery and make-up and dance to attract partners. For wildlife enthusiasts, it has Zakouma National Park – home to the Big Five but barely known. It's not the sort of place where

you'll see ten Landcruisers lined up around a lion. Indeed, the last time I visited we were the only tourists there.

Chad is an enormous adventure and travelling here still has a rather pioneering feel to it, if that doesn't sound too clichéd. You don't feel like you're following any sort of trail or list of



prescribed highlights, and you can travel here for weeks without seeing another tourist. There aren't too many places left like that these days.

Having said that, it's not for everyone, and requires a spirit of endurance at times – there are few luxuries here, and bed is usually a tent and mattress rather than a hotel room. If you like creature comforts then I'd say leave Chad well alone, but if your idea of heaven is a remote campsite with nothing else around for miles, it ticks all the boxes.

**Ok, so where would you recommend for those seeking somewhere more accessible?**

I'd go somewhere like Ghana – geared up for tourists, but still off the beaten track. As an English-speaking country it's a little easier to get around than many others in the region – most of which are Francophone – and the infrastructure is fairly decent for this part of the world. The coastal belt is dotted with old European castles, many of which date back three or four hundred years to the slave trade era. Further inland you have the old Ashanti capital of Kumasi – a modern city now, but one that is very much in touch with its traditions, holding a colourful festival every six weeks to venerate the king of the Ashanti, the Asantehene. This is quite something to see, with the Asantehene sitting on his throne and

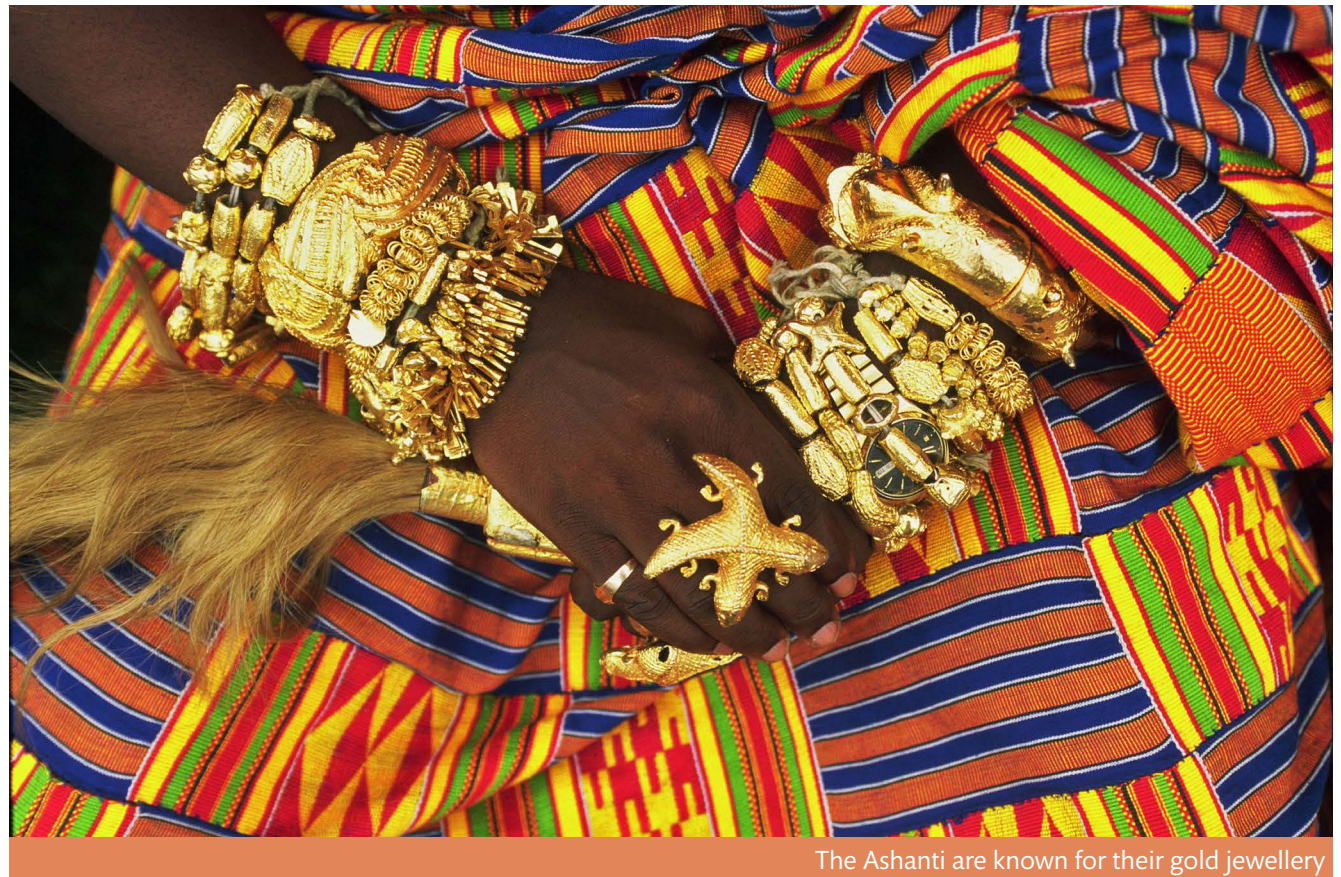
surrounded by his courtiers, all in traditional dress and wearing the gold jewellery that the Ashanti are known for.

In the north you have Mole National Park – one of the best in West Africa, and a great place to get close to elephants on a walking safari. If you have time, combining Ghana with Togo and Benin and exploring the voodoo culture that predominates there makes for an incredible trip – in fact, it was a

trip through these countries many years ago that first gave me a great passion for West Africa.

**What has been your most memorable trip with Native Eye?**

One of my most memorable trips was a rather epic and highly experimental journey we made in 2015 from Cameroon through Gabon and then down into Republic of Congo. One night was spent in



© JIM O'BRIEN

The Ashanti are known for their gold jewellery



a tiny village in southern Cameroon attending a Bwiti ritual – this is a religious ceremony which lasts all night and involves the whole community. It was one of the most spectacular ceremonies I've ever seen. It's centred around the use of a psychoactive root, iboga, which allows participants to enter the spirit world, and the ritual is accompanied by intense drumming and dancing. When we attended, virtually the whole village turned out to take part, from children not much older than seven or eight to elders, their faces painted white with kaolin and wearing red and white robes. The ceremony culminated in a goat sacrifice to dispel the demons that had been plaguing a teenage girl in the village.

We left at 07.00, exhausted, then had to cross the border into Gabon. The numerous roadblocks were staffed by puzzled police, wondering what on earth ten Westerners were doing on these very remote roads, and consequently we had to make it through a frustrating series of passport checks every couple of hours or so. Getting into some towns involved separate checks by the police, the gendarmerie, customs and on some occasions the health authority – all of whom made us disembark

and then manually copied our passport details each time, refusing the photocopies we'd made for this purpose.

We spent time camping with pygmies in the forest, seeing traditional mask dances and looking for gorillas, but my overriding memory of that trip will always be the endless police checks. The highlight of these came when we were stopped at a logging camp and the two rather drunk men in charge of taking down our details started fighting each other, at which point we made a discreet exit and headed on our way. Luckily, we had a great group of clients who thought it was all rather an adventure, but needless to say we've made some changes to that trip since then.

*“Luckily, we had a great group of clients who thought it was all rather an adventure.”*

### **In those destinations that are not used to Western tourism, how do you make sure that such trips are carried out with sensitivity?**

We have a special responsibility to behave sensitively and appropriately, and it's crucial to convey this to our guests. We know that for many people photography is a big part of their travel experience, but this is one area in particular that can quite easily cause offence – a bunch

of Western tourists going into a remote village and pointing cameras at the inhabitants has the potential to upset people.

Our approach comes down to simple and basic manners, really – as with anywhere you visit, it's polite to greet people and talk to them when you arrive. Greetings are incredibly important in most cultures, particularly in Africa, and getting the basics right goes a long way. We always tell our groups to put their cameras away when we enter a village, and it's only after sitting down with the locals and chatting to them, explaining what we're doing, and how interested we are in their culture and customs, that it's appropriate to take any photos – and of course, only when we've asked, and been granted, permission.

It really is quite simple – think of how you'd feel if a load of tourists turned up in your local pub and snapped away at you as if you were some exotic object. You probably wouldn't mind if you'd sat and had a drink with them first, but for this to be the first encounter – and this is something that I think we've all seen during our travels – is pretty ugly, in my opinion.

It's also important to ensure that local people are benefitting from our visit – the exchange shouldn't be one way. This takes different forms depending on where you go, but it can for example involve employing local guides from each place you



visit, buying something if there are any goods for sale, or supporting a community project. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, our group tour spends many nights staying in local homestays, which are part of the excellent community-based tourism association that works there. It's a great way for travellers to enjoy a more in-depth view of typical rural life outside towns and cities, and in exchange it funnels income directly to communities that otherwise might not have much chance to see any economic benefits from tourism.

Most of our group tours are accompanied by a local guide and, in addition to this, if we're spending a day or two in a rural area, we'll often enlist the services of someone from that community. In some African destinations, it's appropriate to offer something to the village chief as thanks for allowing us to visit – he (and more often than not it is a 'he') will then use that to fulfil his traditional obligations in providing for his community.

### **How have you adapted to the pandemic?**

Like any travel business, Covid has hit us hard – in the last 12 months we've sent only a handful of people overseas. We're lucky in that, as a small business with few overheads, we've been able to sit tight and ride it out, although it certainly hasn't been pleasant. We've also had an overwhelming

number of supportive customers who have had faith in us and chosen to defer their trips until travel becomes possible again rather than cancel, giving us a bit of light at the end of the tunnel.

It's been a rollercoaster – up until mid-December we were very optimistic about 2021, then the various tier announcements and subsequent lockdown in the UK led to a huge sense of anxiety among travellers, which was reflected in no-one thinking about travel plans. But I have to say, with the positive rollout of vaccines in the UK, we're now seeing a lot of people with renewed confidence getting in touch about travelling later this year. So fingers crossed.

We're a small company – there are just five of us – but I'd like to think that, in many ways, that's a good thing. We know our travellers, and we take great pride in giving personal service. We've been able to be really flexible with people during the pandemic and take into account their preferences and personal situations – we don't have to implement rigid policies. Often our regular travellers just call for a bit of a chat, which is really nice – there are some I've travelled with time and time again, and a great many of them I'd consider to be friends.


### **Do you think travel habits will change as a result?**

One thing that will happen, at least for the foreseeable future, is the introduction of some form of vaccination proof as a pre-requisite for entry to certain countries – much in the same way as you need a yellow-fever vaccination certificate to enter much of Africa. The UK government has just announced that they will be implementing this to enable overseas travel (although I'd say watch this space, as things seem to change very frequently!), and we're seeing this already with a few frontrunners among the European countries, but this will become more widespread. My fear, though, is that when the Foreign Office finally does relax its rules about international travel, it completely ignores Africa and other less-developed parts of the world. We saw in 2020 how air corridors were opened with many European countries, yet until November the UK government still advised against travel to the entire African continent – despite it faring far better during the pandemic than some of the more 'traditional' British holiday destinations. I hope that in 2021 they'll take a closer look at this, and base their decisions a little more closely on evidence. We'll see.

**Native Eye** specialise in small group tours across Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and beyond. Go to page 48 for an exclusive member discount.



# AS THE EAGLE FLIES



*In Mongolia's far west lies Bayan-Ölgii – a vast, wild and mountainous province famous for its remarkable eagle hunters, a way of life considered so precious that it has been inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Join photographer **Julian Elliott** as he recounts his most memorable and eye-opening experiences across this barren but magnificent landscape.*





*Left*

Mongolia's average altitude is around 1,500m, which means that when it gets cold, it gets *really* cold. During my six-day stay, the average temperature was around -18°C although given the lack of humidity in the air, it felt rather balmy compared with sub-zero temperatures in the West.

*Following page*

We stayed with a hunter called Bashakhan in the valley of the mighty Hovd River, but at this time of year (mid-March) the flowing waters were completely frozen. In fact, to get over to Bashakhan's house we had to drive across the ice – it had to be pretty solid to take the weight of a three-ton Russian Furgon van!









*Left*  
Bashakhan and his family are herders, spending the winter and early spring months in their clay house in the Mongolian steppe. In the summer and autumn, they head out to various pastures with their herd and swap the house for a *ger* (Mongolian yurt). They welcome tourists from time to time to supplement the income from their animals. Over two nights we were welcomed into the family and made to feel at home, playing with Bashakhan's grandchildren and witnessing his eagle-hunting skills first-hand.



*Right*

The golden eagles that Bashakhan trains are female, as they are bigger and stronger than their male counterparts. There are two different ways in which the eagles are captured, and the one that has become known to most people through various films and documentaries is that they are captured from the nest. But the traditional way is to capture an eagle from the wild before it reaches maturity, but already knows how to fend for itself and hunt. They are then kept for anything from 12 months to several years before being released back into the wild. The time period depends on how strong a bond is created between hunter and eagle.

The hunter has a cry that is recognised by the eagle, so that when sent off to hunt they can be called back to land on their master's right arm. The eagle is considered part of the family – in the early days of training it lives inside the house so it can get used to the sights and sounds of daily life.



*Following page*

During our second day with Bashakhan's family, we were taken on a horse trek to a rocky outcrop. It was here that I realised this would be the best landscape for what I considered to be the classic shot of an eagle hunter alone in the wilderness.

In order to get what I needed, a four-way conversation took place. We had two guides during our trip to help facilitate our day-to-day needs: Zaya who spoke English and Mongolian, and Baurjan who spoke Mongolian and Kazakh. I asked Zaya – who in turn spoke to Baurjan who then asked Bashakhan – if it was possible to go back up to where we had trekked earlier in the day to do a photoshoot. Happily, Bashakhan agreed to this and, along with his son (pictured) who is also an eagle hunter, I was able to get those classic shots.

The juxtaposition of the hunters' traditional handmade clothing against the mountainous backdrop was mesmerising, with the fox and rabbit furs and colourful, intricate embroidery standing in stark contrast to the bleak and barren surrounding landscape.









*Left*  
Bidding farewell to Bashakhan, the next part of the journey was to the famous Nauryz Eagle Festival, held over two days as part of the New Year celebrations. It is a riotous display of colour, sounds and, at times, scenes that some Westerners might find disturbing. The festival itself is a photographer's dream as you get to meet a number of eagle hunters all in one place, all of them exquisitely dressed with stunning eagles by their side. In fact, part of the festival sees the hunters judged on their clothing along with their eagle and horse's harness and bridle.

One of the first events I attended was a demonstration of the communication between hunter and eagle. The handler takes the eagle up to a high rock and then calls the bird down. There were varying outcomes – some of the birds landed perfectly on the hunter's right arm, but others went way off the bat.

*Following page*

Each year the location is different, but we were lucky enough to stay with some local celebrities. Back in 2016, the film *The Eagle Huntress* – narrated by Daisy Ridley – took the world by storm: the tale of 13-year-old Aisholpan who became the first female eagle hunter to compete in the Golden Eagle Festival. Although Aisholpan is often referred to as the first eagle huntress, there have in fact been many others before her. We stayed with her family.

While there I met another eagle huntress, Ahkelik (pictured), and I have great memories of sitting on the porch of Aisholpan's house teaching her how to fly a drone. To see her flying a drone and, for the first time, witnessing what her eagle sees when it flies high in the sky, is a memory I will treasure. The sheer joy on her face was indescribable.









*Left and following page*  
Another event was *shyrga tartu*, where the hunter drags a lure behind their horse for the eagle to try and catch. However, just like the first event, each competitor enjoyed varying degrees of success with their eagle.









*Left*

Mongolians are known for their horseriding skills, something which is evident during the *kumis alu* event – riders must pick up a coin from the ground while on horseback. To watch them gallop and then skillfully reach down to sweep the coin or target off the ground is an absolutely jaw-dropping moment. The mastery of their horses is plain to see.





*Left*

Another horse-led event is *kyz-kuumai*, or 'catch the girl', in which the man has to try and catch the woman while both are on horseback. If successful he is rewarded with a kiss; if not then his other half gets to whip him. We definitely saw a few of the men getting whipped, much to the amusement of the crowd.

*Following page*


The last event I witnessed was a game called *kokpar*, where two hunters mounted on horseback attempt a tug-of-war with a goat's carcass. The hunters go all out to show just who is strongest, sometimes hanging on for dear life as they try to wrestle the carcass away from their opponent.

This might seem barbaric to some, but what you have to remember when travelling is that not all countries have the same rules and customs. When I present my travels in Mongolia, I always explain to people they're likely to see things they don't necessarily agree with. But after all, we don't travel to stay in our comfort zone – rather to see things out of the ordinary, to open up and broaden our minds.







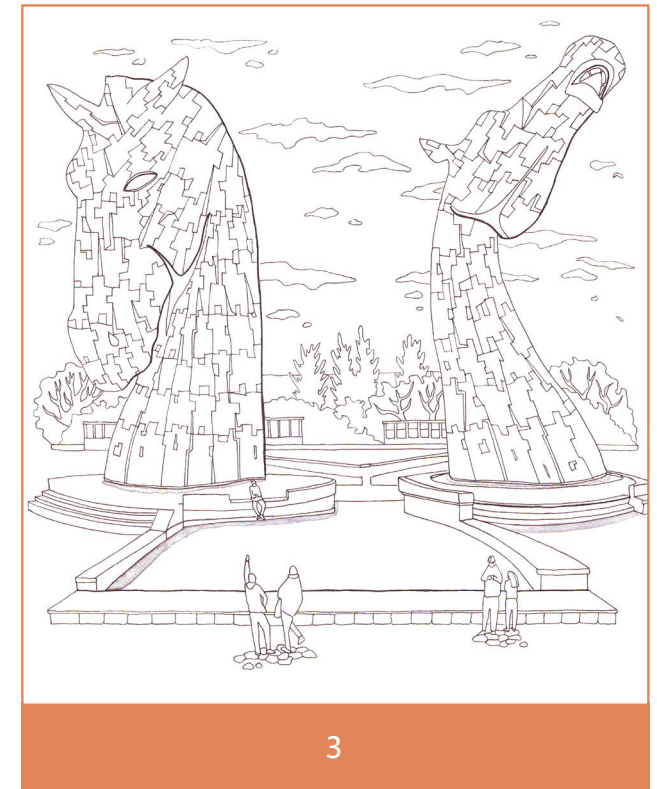
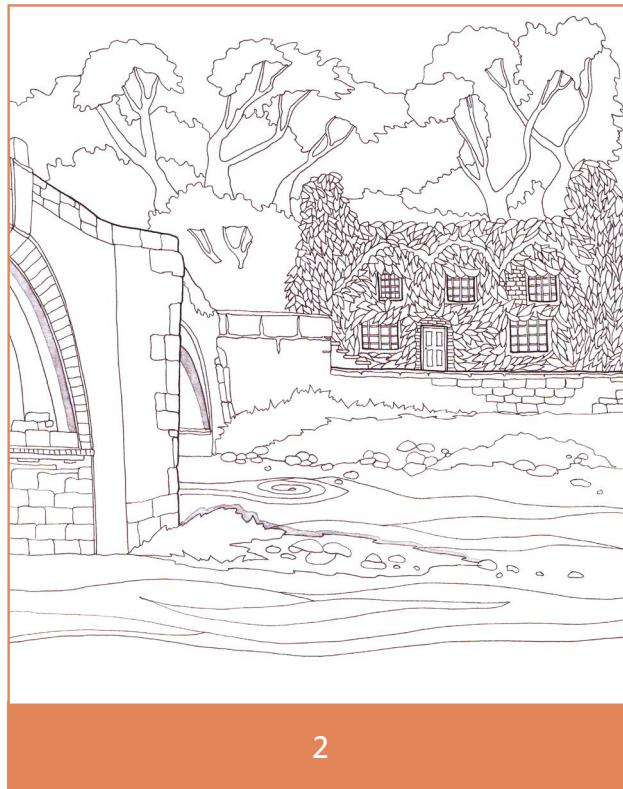


Julian Elliott is a professional travel photographer whose work has featured in numerous magazines. You can see more of his photos on his [website](#) or follow him on [Instagram](#), and if you've been inspired to experience the eagle hunters yourself then you can join Julian on a photographic tour to [Mongolia](#) in March 2022.

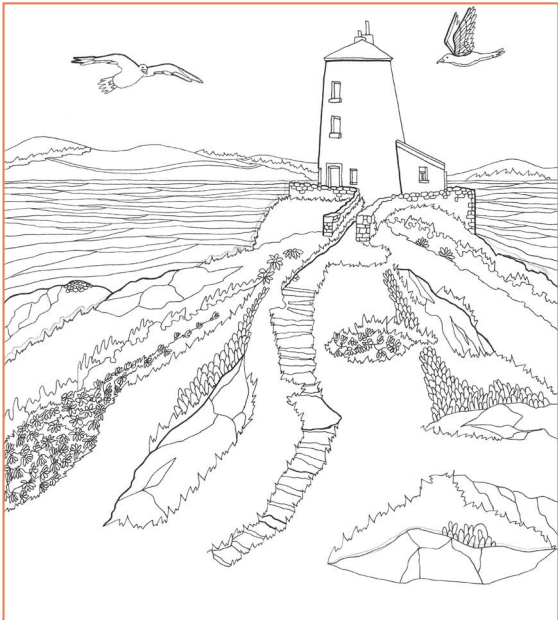


# THE BRADT TRAVEL TEASER: WHERE IN BRITAIN?

To celebrate the release of our new [Slow Travel Colouring Book](#) to Britain's exceptional places, we're giving you a sneak peek inside! But the question is – can you name the place in each illustration? Answers are on page 51.



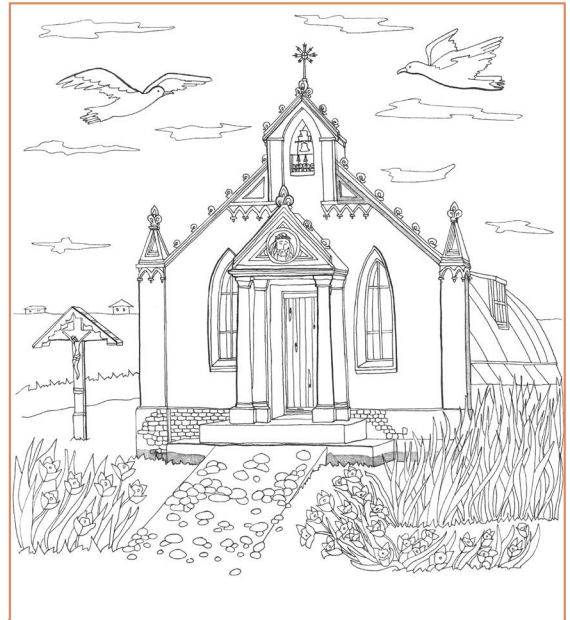




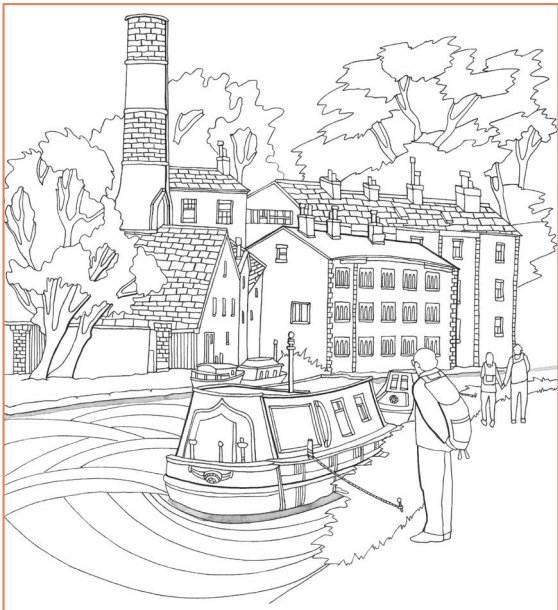
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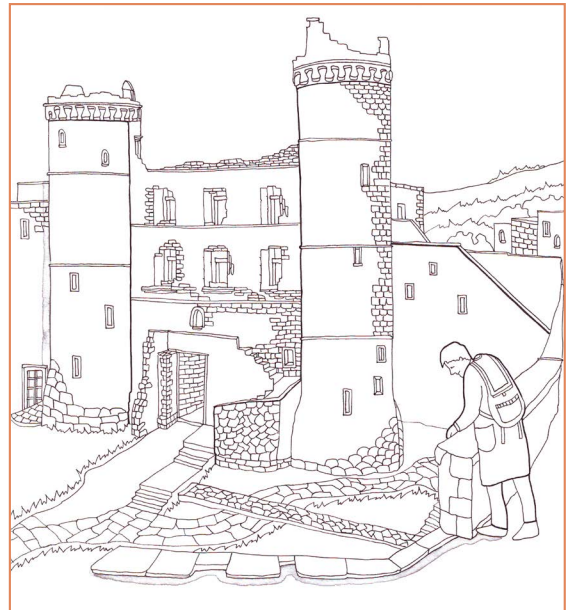
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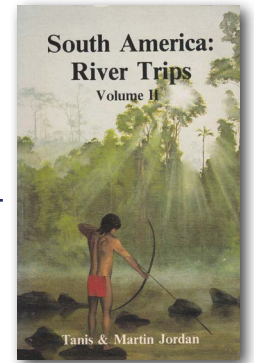
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# FROM THE ARCHIVES: SOUTH AMERICAN RIVER TRIPS



In 1982, Bradt Enterprises published one of the more remarkable books from the company's early years. Tanis and Martin Jordan's **South American River Trips** is part guidebook, part illustrated account of trips through Venezuela and Suriname and down the Amazon on an inflatable boat.

In her introduction to the second edition in 1987, Hilary Bradt wrote:

*'Tanis and Martin are not like ordinary travellers: they pose as ordinary people. Few women would imagine that their hairdresser had recently returned from a four-month trip up some obscure tributary of the Amazon. Few men would think of discussing the variety of piranha fish found in Suriname with the fellow working on their house extension. The folly of typecasting people according to their job is exposed by meeting the Jordans – in fact, the folly of prejudging people in any way. Who would have thought that this couple, who met when Tanis was 15 and who give every impression of being ordinary Londoners, are two extraordinarily adventurous*

*travellers? If you total the time they have spent on the rivers of South America in their inflatable boat it comes to two and a half years. And not just two and a half years of alternatively battling the currents and lounging in the sun, but time spent making scientific studies and reports (both are self-taught naturalists and were invited to speak at the Royal Geographic Society) and – for Martin – absorbing the green magic of the rainforest which inspires his gigantic and surrealistic oil-paintings.'*

We caught up with Tanis on her memories of writing the guidebook.

\*\*\*

It was the South American alligators (called caimans) that started it. We lay in our hammocks, sleeping peacefully under the moonlight, deep inside Manú National Park in southeastern Peru. Suddenly we were awake.

*Thwump!*

'Did you hear that, Tan?' Martin asked. 'What was it?'

*Thwump!*

'Sounds like rubber being whacked.'

'RUBBER!' we both exclaimed as we leapt from our hammocks.

In the glimmering moonlight, our rubber inflatable boat was floating in the deep water where we'd moored it. Then it bounced out of





the water. Eleven caimans surrounded it, eyes glowing like coals in the torch beam. They submerged and surfaced some distance away to watch us. Only one remained, a huge reptile at least three metres long; clamped between its jaws was the painter, the rope that secured the boat and our equipment to a tree. The caiman shook its head and one side of the boat flipped out of the water and the engine shuddered on the transom. In all the months we'd been on the rivers, swimming, washing, pulling the boat, we'd never had a problem with caimans.

'Make it let go of the rope, Martin,' I said.

'How?'

It seemed obvious to me. 'Go and hit it on the head with something.'

We found a chunk of wood and, with me shining the torch, Martin began clambering down the bank. As he drew near, the creature swished its body out of the water and viciously walloped the boat with its tail. We gasped. The three metres we'd estimated hadn't included its two-metre-long tail. Martin hurled the lump of wood straight at it, then ran back up the bank like a madman. Meanwhile there was a massive splash as the caiman submerged

and surfaced near the others. The boat was safe but we were forced to spend a sleepless night guarding it.

### **Wanted: publisher seeking adventurous authors**

Back in the UK, a friend told us about an invitation for submissions for a new book to be called *South American River Trips*. The above anecdote was included in our submission to Bradt Enterprises in 1981. Almost immediately we received a reply from Hilary, and that was the start of a friendship with her that's remained strong for the last 40 years.

At that time I was a hairdresser and Martin a builder, both of us self-employed. Every couple of years we'd take off on expeditions. They began in 1969 when we spent a couple of months driving a Morris Minor in the Sahara Desert. Our first expedition into the South American jungle was in Suriname in 1970. Surprisingly for us, after several days of river travel we were among tribal people of West African origin living in small settlements on the river banks, the descendants of people enslaved by the British, Dutch, French, Portuguese and Spanish who colonised these

**“Converting our experiences into a ‘travel guide’ seemed a big responsibility.”**

lands in the Guianas. Our arrival at a village would cause a sensation among the children who had never travelled to towns and never seen white people before. Once over their initial nervousness they would close-in to investigate – were we really this colour or were we covered in some kind of paint? Was my long, fair hair really real? They tugged it gently to see.

After that experience we were hooked. Our idea of a good expedition was always to travel up remote jungle rivers in our own small boat, without guides or boatmen, and stay away from modern civilisation for months at a time.

### **The makings of a book**

*South American River Trips* was to be our first book and the possibility of becoming published authors was an exciting project. With the research we'd carried out prior to our expeditions, we had copious notes, and my habit of writing pages and pages of letters home about every single thing we did meant we had plenty of material to refer to. I dusted off my Adler Tippa, bought a new ribbon and set to work.

Soon the challenges of writing a guidebook became clear. A lot of the travelling we'd done at this time, nearly half a century ago, could genuinely be described as exploration since we selected areas about which there was scant



information – unnamed rivers, uncontacted tribes and so forth. Converting our experiences into a 'travel guide' seemed a big responsibility. We didn't want people going off on a 'fun' trip and not coming back!

It was very enjoyable writing it all up and revisiting lots of adventures. Our travelling was done in the days before much of the adventure kit you can buy today had been invented. Before our first jungle trip, and worried about snake bite, I phoned the British Army headquarters to ask where I could buy puttees (long strips of thick material you wind around your shins). There was a long silence, then muttering, followed by peals of laughter.

'Madam,' he said, when he could stop laughing, 'We haven't worn puttees since the Great War!'

Tents didn't have sewn-in ground sheets or mosquito-net doors and windows. There was very little lightweight clothing for use in the tropics, and we'd formed the weird idea that our normal clothes –

jeans and T-shirts – would be unacceptable in wild South America. Instead, we wore baggy sludge-coloured trousers and big ugly leather sandals. We improved on this for subsequent expeditions when we reverted to shorts and T-shirts!

**“Our travelling was done before much of the adventure kit you can buy had been invented.”**

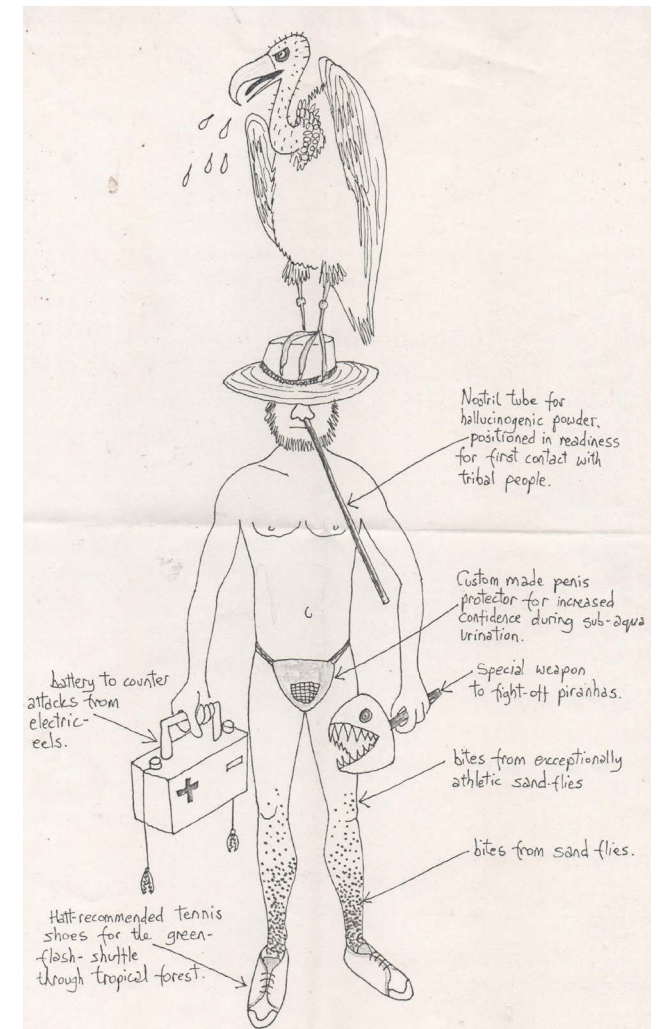
Eventually the book was finished. We didn't have photos of the first expedition as we hadn't taken a camera, so Martin illustrated it. It was thrilling to see it in print with his painting on the cover. I remember when we got the first batch and laid them all face up on the carpet – they took up half the room!

We don't know how many copies it sold but it went into a second edition. It did get some very good reviews including one from Byron Rogers who said in the *Sunday Times*: 'It's a little masterpiece, you can read it for joy, without entertaining the slightest desire to go up rivers in South America.'

Since then, we've made more trips to South America and West Africa, done several cruise-ship lecture tours, written another travel book together

called *Out of Chingford* and four lavish children's picture books together on South American wildlife that won awards in the UK and the US. Martin has a successful career as an artist (you can see more

of his work at [www.martinjordan.co.uk](http://www.martinjordan.co.uk)), and I've had seven novels for younger children published. In 2003 we moved from London to Shropshire and established a nature reserve with a hedgehog rehabilitation sanctuary on our land.



One of Martin's drawings of author Redmond O'Hanlon when his book *In Trouble Again* was published

It's been a pleasure having Hilary as a friend and watching Bradt grow to become such a success. Long may it continue.



# GET CREATIVE FOR CONSERVATION

Conservation charity [Explorers Against Extinction](#) want you to get creative for conservation. They are inviting submissions featuring endangered species and at-risk wild spaces from budding artists, writers and photographers.

Selected pieces will be exhibited alongside others donated by professional and celebrity supporters at the gallery@oxo on London's South Bank and other venues this autumn. The collection will help to raise vital awareness about a range of issues from climate change to the illegal wildlife trade, as well as raising funds for 21 small conservation projects around the world, many of whom have been devastated by the collapse of ecotourism following the Covid-19 pandemic.

There are three categories and each is free to enter:

## Sketch for Survival

[Art competition](#) with two categories, Wildlife and Wild Spaces, at both an Adult and Junior (under 16) level.

## Focus for Survival

[Photo competition](#) with two categories, Wildlife and Wild Spaces. Up to three entries per photographer permitted.

## Stories for Survival

New for 2021, a [creative writing competition](#) on the theme of 'A World Without'. Three age categories: Adult (300–1,000 words), Junior (13–19; 250–500 words) and Children (12 and under; 30–300 words).

**Entries close on 30 June. Good luck!**





# THE TRAVEL CLUB MEMBER BENEFITS

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

## 5% off tours with Native Eye

Based in Suffolk, [Native Eye](#) specialise in small-group tours to some of the world's most adventurous destinations from Chad and Congo to Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Founded by Jim

O'Brien following nearly 20 years of independent and professional travel experience, they aim to redefine what adventure travel is all about with their challenging and exciting itineraries. In the words of one recent customer: 'It's like adventure travel was 30 years ago.'

The Travel Club members can claim **5% off any bookings** made until 31 December 2021 (for tours in 2021 or 2022). Contact them on 01473 328546 or [info@nativeeyetravel.com](mailto:info@nativeeyetravel.com) and state you're a member when booking.

## Aardvark Safaris: 5% off all tours

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

## The Adventure Creators: 10% off all Pyrenees tours

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

## Adventurous Ink: get your first month free

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

© JIM O'BRIEN



Native Eye offer tours to some of the world's most adventurous destinations, including Chad





Bring a taste of your travels to your kitchen with Feast Box

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

**Byway: 10% off Slow travel holidays**

[Byway's](#) Slow travel holidays through the UK and Europe help you explore the world by travelling through it, instead of flying over it. To claim your 10% discount, use the code **BRADT10** when booking (expires 31 May 2021).

**Craghoppers: 20% off**

Founded in Yorkshire in 1965, [Craghoppers](#) is a global leader in sustainable technical outdoor and travel clothing. Use the code **BRADT20** at checkout (valid on full-priced items only until 2 June 2021).

**The Cook's Place: 10% off cooking courses**

Based in North Yorkshire, [The Cook's Place](#) is an independent cookery school offering a range of courses. Enter the code **BTG21** at checkout

(valid on all half- and full-day courses until 30 November 2021).

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

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

**HÔRD: 10% off everything**

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

**Inertia Network: 5% off any booking**

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

**Lupine Travel: 5% off all tours**

UK-based Lupine specialise in unique and off-the-beaten-track destinations, from Chernobyl to





The Shrine of Hazrat Ali in Mazar, one of the highlights of Lupine's Afghanistan tour

North Korea. Just email [info@lupinetravel.co.uk](mailto:info@lupinetravel.co.uk) and mention that you are a member of The Travel Club when booking.

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

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

### **Natural Britain: 10% off**

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

### **Safari Drive: 10% off vehicle and equipment hire**

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

### **Tonic: 10% off subscriptions**

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

### **Travel Africa: 20% off subscriptions**

Founded in 1997, *Travel Africa* remains the only international magazine dedicated to exploring Africa's attractions, wildlife and cultures. [Click here](#) and enter the code **BRADT2020** at checkout.



Stay in a yurt on Natural Britain's Hidden Hampshire tour

### **Untamed Borders: 10% off group tours**

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

### **Wanderlust: £10 off subscriptions**

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

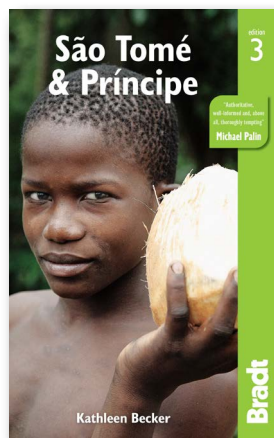


# OUT THIS MONTH!

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

## São Tomé & Príncipe

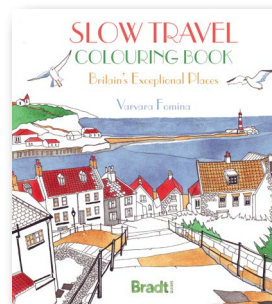
Kathleen Becker  
£17.99



Fully updated for this third edition, Bradt's *São Tomé & Príncipe* remains the only standalone guidebook to Africa's second-smallest country. This indispensable guide to one of Africa's most important biodiversity hotspots is packed with information on wildlife and conservation as well as priceless insider information to the best spots for sleeping, eating and drinking. Let expert author Kathleen Becker guide you around this diverse and largely undiscovered archipelago.

## Slow Travel Colouring Book

Varvara Formina  
£9.99



Following on from *The Traveller's Colouring Book*, this brand-new colouring book takes a Slow journey to some of Britain's most exceptional places. Get your pencils at the ready for over 50 illustrations of people, buildings, wildlife and landscapes from across Britain, including world-famous sights such as the Glenfinnan Viaduct and lesser-known treasures like Devon's Gnome Reserve. Whether you're on the road or stuck at home, *The Slow Travel Colouring Book* is the perfect cure for wanderlust. Mindfulness has never been so enriching, inspirational – or colourful.

## ANSWERS TO THE BRADT TRAVEL TEASER

1. Roman Baths, Bath
2. Tu Hwnt I'r Bont Tearoom, Llanrwst
3. The Kelpies, Falkirk
4. Anglesey Lighthouse
5. Castle Combe, Wiltshire
6. Italian Chapel, Orkney
7. Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire
8. Chester
9. Harlech Castle



# COMING NEXT MONTH...

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**In the June issue of The Travel Club:**

We chat to the winner of the BGTW's Travel Photographer of the Year award, there's another delve into our archives and a sneak preview of our new guide to cycling in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

