

THE TRAVEL CLUB

E-ZINE #17: SEPTEMBER, 2021

From art to astrotourism

48 hours in Kirkcudbright

Travel Write!

Celebrating 20 years of Bradt's
travel-writing competition

Wild thing

The best of Britain's woods and forests

In Bruges

How to get the most out of your
photography in the 'Venice of the North'



Bradt GUIDES

TRAVEL TAKEN SERIOUSLY

CONTENTS



A TOAST TO THE LAST GRAND DUCHY: EXPLORING LUXEMBOURG'S SECRET WINE ROUTE Tim Skelton

'The wines of Luxembourg are one of Europe's better-kept secrets: always worth trying and occasionally sublime.'

4



FROM ART TO ASTROTOURISM: 48 HOURS IN KIRKCUDBRIGHT, DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY Vicky Smith

'It's clear to see why this is one of Scotland's most alluring towns.'

8



TRAVEL WRITE: CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF BRADT'S TRAVEL-WRITING COMPETITION Hilary Bradt (with Celia Dillow)

'If you look at the diminishing number of pages of a book with regret, the author has done their job.'

13



WILD WOODS: THE BEST OF BRITAIN'S WILD SPACES Alvin Nicholas

'An outdoor life is a happier one, and time spent in woodland rewilds the human spirit faster and more completely than anything we know.'

16

Discover the dark skies of Dumfries & Galloway on page 8 © SIMON ROBERTSON, ISTOCK



SPOTLIGHT ON THE INDEPENDENT: WILD WITH CONSENT

'The luxury of wild camping is in the back-to-basics approach, and I always find returning to daily life from a campervanning trip really puts things in perspective.'

22



IN PICTURES: REFLECTIONS OF BRUGES Astrid McGechan

'A visit to Bruges is as much a lesson in history as it is a feast for the eyes for those who seek to explore with a camera in hand.'

26



FROM THE ARCHIVES: ESTONIA Neil Taylor

'What persuaded me that I could write a book? The answer is simple and is the same one I give when people ask why I helped to establish a travel company. Two words: boundless arrogance.'

37

DESIGNER & TYPESETTERS

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

SUB-EDITORS

Anna Moores & Laura Pidgley

COVER IMAGE

A stag in Richmond Park
© Alec Adam, Shutterstock



St Nectan's Glen, just one of the many wild spaces celebrated in *Wild Woods* (page 16) © VALERY EGOROV, SHUTTERSTOCK

A TOAST TO THE LAST GRAND DUCHY: EXPLORING LUXEMBOURG'S SECRET WINE ROUTE

Join **Tim Skelton** on a leisurely journey along the banks of the Moselle to discover some of Europe's finest secret tipples.

A lazy trip along the banks of the Luxembourg Moselle could be made by car in a shade over 40 minutes. Travelling from where it flows across the border from France at Schengen to the point where it veers east into Germany at Wasserbillig, less than 40km later, is a gentle journey by any reckoning. It is easily covered by bike, with a riverside cycle path that is essentially flat.

Yet not to make any stops en route would be to miss out on one of Europe's lesser-known gems. This is a world, no more than 20km from the capital Luxembourg City, packed with beautiful and serene landscapes, not to mention historical winegrowing villages where locals do wonderful things with fermented grape products.

A little history

The wines of Luxembourg are one of Europe's better-kept secrets: always worth trying and occasionally sublime. The Moselle Valley's siting protects it from the wind, creating a mild microclimate particularly suited for winegrowing. Sunny slopes and terroirs with mostly limestone soil provide the growing grapes with an ideal home.

The Romans planted vineyards here almost 2,000 years ago, and although their wine-making secrets departed with them, the industry revived with the founding of the first monasteries in the Middle Ages and the arrival of congregations of

thirsty monks. And, while most early estates were owned by the church, Napoleon's occupation in 1795 brought with it notions of egalitarianism that gave local farmers control of land they'd previously worked for others.

Luxembourg's still wines are mostly white and made from single grape varieties. At the cheaper end of the scale, Elbling and Rivaner appear in the greatest volume, but Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Auxerrois and Gewürztraminer are all popular. Riesling is considered the king.

Also worth raising a glass to are the country's dangerously quaffable sparkling wines, mainly sold as Crémant de Luxembourg. Unlike their still cousins, they are made by blending several grape varieties using the classic *méthode traditionnelle* to induce secondary fermentation in the bottles and create sparkle. Crémant is lighter and has softer bubbles than French Champagne, which leads many people to prefer it. The price tag – often below €10 per bottle – is also less eye-watering.

Time for a glass

For an area so geographically close to the UK, the Luxembourg Moselle can seem oddly remote.

Such a feeling of isolation is accentuated by its relatively sparse population – besides a few pinch points near border crossings, the roads are pleasingly empty. It is often quiet among the vines, an idyllic world where birdsong dominates, only challenged by the sound of crickets when the summer sun is at its most sizzling. An irresistible call to head for a glass of something grapey.

But where to begin?

Why not start just north of Schengen – a place almost everyone has heard of, but few could find on a map. **Remerschen** nestles among the vines, and [Caves Sunnen-Hoffmann](#), a fifth-

generation family business in the village, is a great place to commence any Luxembourg wine tour. In 2000 it became the country's first fully organic winery.

Also in Remerschen is [Caves du Sud](#). Opened in 1948, this is one of

several outlets of Domaines Vinsmoselle, a co-operative representing 300 small wine growers who together account for half the country's production. The cellars here store 6.5 million litres, and the tasting room bar is shaped like an old wooden wine boat, of a sort that once plied the waters of the Moselle transporting barrels.

“Also worth raising a glass to are the country's dangerously quaffable sparkling wines.”

Working it off

There are plenty of distractions that offer alternatives to bacchanalianism. **Haff Réimich**, a nature reserve near Remerschen, is set around a series of manmade lakes, former gravel pits with boardwalk trails around the water's edge and hides for birdwatchers. Beside the southern shore, the Biodiversum nature centre highlights the local flora and fauna, while across the road is a lake where you can swim in summer.

Just 2km from Remerschen, picturesque **Schwebsingen** bills itself as an open-air museum, and the streets are lined with wine presses. During the village's annual wine festival on the first Sunday in September, wine flows from a Bacchus fountain beside the church – be there at 11.00 if you want to see the tap turned on!

Further north in Bech-Kleinmacher, '[A Possen' Wine and Folklore Museum](#) is a little treasure trove occupying a 400-year-old house and its marginally younger neighbours. The eclectic collection within features toys, table skittles, period rooms and, of course, winemaking equipment. And worth the effort for anyone reasonably fit is a hike up through the vines behind the museum to the remains of a Roman funerary chamber. OK, so the bulk of this '3rd-century' building is really a 1990s reconstruction, but the true reward for your efforts is a sumptuous view north to

the town of Remich and across the river into Germany. Arguably as beautiful as the beads of condensation on a chilled glass of Riesling.

The wine capital

Remich is the regional tourist hub, home to its highest concentration of hotels and restaurants. It's also an attractive place stretching along the riverbank, where the waters are patrolled by a regatta of resident swans.

Two of Luxembourg's largest independent wineries lie just north of central Remich. [Caves Desom](#) produces some excellent Pinot Noir reds, and its Crémants are zingy showstoppers. You

can taste both and more in the adjacent Pavillon Desom, a chic modern bar with a large terrace that is perfect for taking in the river view, or simply contemplating the tiny bubbles as they rise gracefully to the surface of your fizz.

Nearby [Caves St Martin](#) has guided tours of its cellars (April–October), which are cool and damp and cut deep into a limestone cliff. The terrace of its restaurant – more traditional but no less elegant than Desom – is yet another grand spot to sip and savour local produce, and to try the regional specialities such as *friture de la Moselle*: various deep-fried river fish, best tackled using your fingers.



© LFT/JONATHAN GODIN

Caves St Martin offers guided tours of its cellars



Enjoying a glass among the vines at the Riesling Open

Continuing on from Remich, the small town of **Stadbredimus** was founded by the Celts, but is now most famous for being the headquarters of the [Domaines Vinsmoselle](#) – Luxembourg’s first Crémant producer. Its An der Tourelle restaurant and tasting room, located within a 15th-century round tower, is all that remains of Stadtbredimus Castle.

North again, the tiny hamlet of **Ehnen** is home to **Ehnen Wine Museum**, set in a lovely 18th-century mansion and former winery. Its collection comes from hand-me-down historical winemaking equipment donated by local viticulturists as they upgrade their kit. Another delightful stop up the hill behind the museum is [Viticole Kohll-Reuland](#), a small winery with a to-die-for panoramic terrace at the back, which produces decidedly above-average Rieslings.

Several villages in the valley have marked walking circuits that take you out into the vines. Arguably the prettiest starts in central Ehnen and follows a 5km route through vineyards, deciduous forest and along the banks of babbling brooks.

Festival time

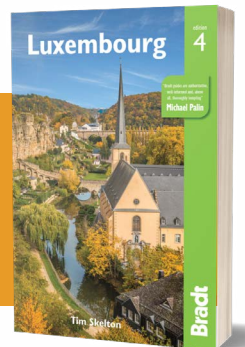
Occupying an imposing mansion on the edge of **Wormeldange**, Crémants Poll-Fabaire is Domaines Vinsmoselle’s sparkling wine specialist. The tasting room is open year-round, but from May to October you also can tour the cellars.

As tasty as the Crémant is, however, this area is best known for Riesling, and the [Riesling Open](#) held across the third weekend of September celebrates that fact. It centres on four adjacent villages: Ehnen, Wormeldange, Ahn and Machtum, where many small wineries not normally set up for visitors throw open their doors and anyone is welcome to drop in. The best way to get between them on the festival Sunday is aboard the MS *Princess Marie-Astrid*, a large pleasure cruiser that makes a round trip a couple of times and is free for one day only. On the Sunday there are street

parties and wine stalls everywhere – the locals here certainly know how to have a good time.

At the far end of a short but fruitful journey, **Grevenmacher** is home to Luxembourg’s largest independent winery: [Caves Bernard-Massard](#). Established in 1921, its cellars contain six million bottles of fizz, four million of which are sold per year – albeit their flagship brut and *demi sec* can’t be called Crémant because they contain imported Chardonnay grapes. Grevenmacher also hosts Luxembourg’s biggest wine celebration: the **Fête du Raisin et du Vin**, which occurs throughout the second weekend in September (although sadly cancelled for 2021), during which time street bars dispense wines from bottles kept cool in huge beds of shaved ice, while other stalls dispense the nation’s favourite festival snack: barbecued sausage. On Saturday evening there’s even a firework display over the river and, during a carnival parade on the Sunday, people walking alongside the floats dispense free wine to anyone with a glass handy. Could there be a better way to toast the little-known wines of the world’s only Grand Duchy?

For more on travelling in Luxembourg, take a look at Tim’s comprehensive guide to the country – available for half price with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**. For the current entry requirements for people travelling to Luxembourg, please check the [government website](#).



FROM ART TO ASTROTOURISM: 48 HOURS IN KIRKCUDBRIGHT, DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY

*With a distinctive artistic heritage, a new planetarium and stargazing prowess, Kirkcudbright is a visitor's delight, and the ideal location to spend a long weekend. **Vicky Smith** shares the town's highlights.*

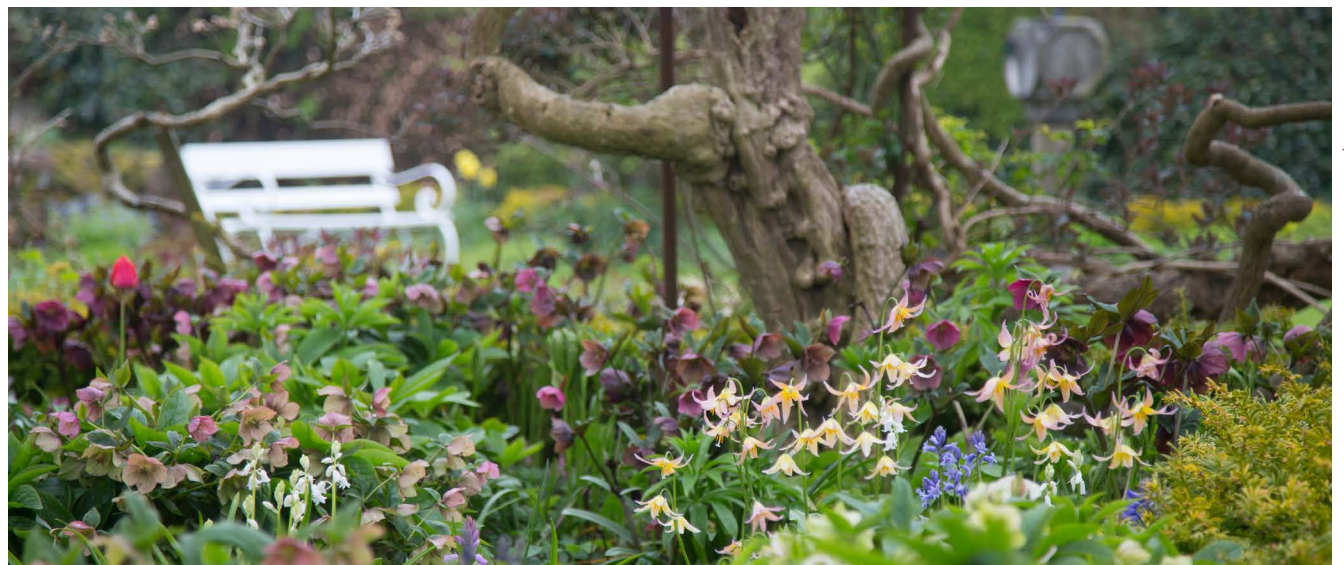
Kirkcudbright (pronounced 'kir-coo-bree') packs a picturesque punch, with its pastel houses and busy fishing harbour, evocatively overlooked by the 16th-century ruins of MacLellan's Castle. Mix in a wealth of attractions, superb community-run information services and festivities galore, and it's clear to see why this is one of Scotland's most alluring towns.

Artistic heritage is perhaps Kirkcudbright's greatest draw. The self-titled 'artists' town' inspired one of Britain's first artist colonies (circa 1880 to 1980), owing to its unique light and close-knit community, and attracted leading figures from the Glasgow Girls and Boys and Scottish Colourists, among many other creative icons. This special legacy is now preserved through major venues, such as the £3.1 million Kirkcudbright Galleries, which launched in 2018. Meanwhile, a plethora of studios and galleries, alongside events like the annual [art and crafts trail](#) and [year-round art tours](#), showcase a thriving present-day artist population.

More recently, Kirkcudbright has become something of an astrotourism hotspot, thanks to the July 2021 launch of a state-of-the-art planetarium, which builds on the renown of nearby Galloway Forest Park – first in the UK to be awarded Dark Sky Park status. You can even enjoy stargazing breaks at the Selkirk Arms Hotel.

Can't-miss Kirkcudbright Broughton House and Garden

Owned by the National Trust for Scotland, this striking pink [Georgian town house](#) was where artist E A Hornel lived from 1901 until his death in 1933. Hornel was a leading member of the influential Glasgow Boys, who represented the



The gardens are a true highlight of Broughton House

© TOM PARNELL, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

beginnings of Modernism in Scottish painting, and settled in Kirkcudbright at the height of his fame – helping establish the town’s reputation as an artists’ colony.

Combining both original Edwardian interiors and exhibition space, the house features a large display of Hornel’s own work alongside that of his Scottish contemporaries; visitors can also discover his vast library, which includes one of the world’s largest collections of works by national bard Robert Burns. Another highlight is the garden, which blends eastern and western horticulture to enchanting effect.

Kirkcudbright Tolbooth

This [characterful building](#), which you might recognise from 1973 cult horror *The Wicker Man*, was completed around 1629 and is renowned for its use as a prison until the early 19th century: inmates included American naval hero John Paul Jones, Covenanters (17th-century supporters of a Presbyterian Church of Scotland, who were in conflict with government forces), and those accused of witchcraft. Many original features remain, including a set of joughs – a metal collar used to publicly shame offenders. The venue is

“The garden blends eastern and western horticulture to enchanting effect.”

now a gallery-museum, and includes a shop selling gifts and art supplies, display space showcasing local artists, and an exhibition on the building and surrounds.

Several prominent artists depicted the Tolbooth, including Glasgow Girl Jessie M King, who is best known for her Art Nouveau illustrations, but was one of a group of women active in Glasgow during its artistic golden age at the turn of the 20th century. King and her husband E A Taylor, a fellow teacher and artist, later moved to Kirkcudbright. With many associates visiting and working at their studio home, the couple are credited with bolstering the town’s creative reputation further. Don’t miss a peek at their house, The Greengate, just a few doors down from the Tolbooth and marked with a tiled plaque. The house is thought to have inspired *Blue Gate Close* in Dorothy L Sayers’ detective novel *The Five Red Herrings*, which she based on Kirkcudbright’s artist community.

Kirkcudbright Galleries

Described as a ‘regional gallery of national significance’, [Kirkcudbright Galleries](#) is situated in a handsome sandstone building that was formerly the town hall.

With more than 600 objects ranging from paintings to silver, the permanent Kirkcudbright collection recounts the town’s fascinating artistic story – from its beginnings with the Faed family in nearby Gatehouse of Fleet to the many esteemed artists that have lived and worked in Kirkcudbright over the last two centuries. Notable names span E A Hornel and Jessie M King to Samuel John Peploe – one of four painters known as the Scottish Colourists, who were inspired by French artists’ free brushwork and bold colours – and English painter Charles Oppenheimer, whose palette is exhibited in the charming Stewartry Museum across the road.

The building’s upper floors feature changing exhibitions, and there’s also an airy café which overlooks Kirkcudbright Parish Church and the beautiful Soaperie Gardens.

Dark Space Planetarium

Kirkcudbright welcomed its own [planetarium](#) in July 2021, thanks to a multimillion-pound renovation of the Johnston School. Accompanying a gin distillery and pottery in the renamed Johnston Centre, this builds on the region’s impressive stargazing credentials, as nearby Galloway Forest Park was the first in the UK to be awarded Dark Sky Park status. Further afield, but also in Dumfries and Galloway,



The Dark Space Planetarium opened in July 2021

Moffat was Europe's first Dark Sky Town; Neil Armstrong's forebears hailed from Langholm.

The planetarium's main room includes over 25 interactive exhibits, designed for all ages but especially popular with youngsters. An adjoining cinema offers an immersive virtual-reality-like experience, with its 360°-domed screen – currently this shows a rotating slate of films spanning rocket launches to aliens, but there are plans to host presentations soon. As the venue is still in its

nascent stages, other developing schemes include stargazing sessions in Barhill Woods behind the building (also a popular place for spotting red squirrels, for which a hide is provided), and adult-only experiences that additionally feature the Dark Art Distillery.

Dark Art Distillery

Alongside Dark Space Planetarium (and paint-it-yourself studio, The Wee Pottery), [Dark Art](#)

[Distillery](#) completes the trio of new Johnston Centre attractions. Inspired by the area's stargazing acclaim ('the Dark') and artistic heritage ('the Art'), this was founded by Andrew Clark Hutchison and features a magnificent copper still named after his grandma Peggy, who hailed from Kirkcudbright. The site – which still sports wooden panelling and chalk boards from the Johnston's days as a primary school – includes a shop and visitor centre, with gin tours offering a glimpse into the creation process and, of course, a sneaky tasting.

Beyond the suburbs Galloway Forest Park

Although it's over 25 miles away from Kirkcudbright, this is a must for astrotourists. The Milky Way and more than 7,000 planets and stars are visible from the [park](#), which has been given a Gold Tier rating by the International Dark-Sky Association. There's plenty to entertain by day, too, in this melange of forested hills and glimmering lochs: from biking and walking, to wildlife spotting (red deer and wild goats are but two local residents). Owing to its distinct offerings, a campaign is currently underway to help Galloway become Scotland's third national park.

Sadly, its observatory was recently destroyed in a suspicious fire; however, three visitor centres

provide optimal stargazing conditions as well as facilities and information for daytime visitors.

Kirkcudbright Bay

Kirkcudbright Bay is where the 'Dee meets the sea': from here, the river (which begins in the Galloway Hills) flows into the Solway Firth, famed for its sweeping beaches. This location has long been fortuitous for the town – leading to centuries of international trade, Royal Burgh status in 1455, and the fact Kirkcudbright boasts the region's busiest commercial fishing harbour

today. But it also makes for some engaging walks, as highlighted by the [Kirkcudbright Bay Views](#) project. Spanning four to nine miles, starting either at the town's harbour or nearby Doon Beach, these descriptive routes highlight the best of this varied landscape and the area's many compelling tales.

Castle Douglas

Nestled between the Galloway hills and Solway Firth, the self-proclaimed food town of [Castle Douglas](#) is packed with independent businesses,

from specialist shops to enticing delis. The surrounding area bristles with attractions; most notably [Threave Garden and Estate](#), which has been training horticulturists since 1960 and is home to the Scottish Baronial Threave House. The wider grounds also feature Scotland's only bat reserve and a nature reserve that's part of the [Galloway Red Kite Trail](#) – other birdlife here includes osprey, for which there is a viewing platform, and wildfowl. Yet another Threave landmark is an atmospheric [island castle](#), built in 1369 for the delightfully named Archibald the Grim, Lord of Galloway.

© VICKY SMITH



Walks highlighted by the Kirkcudbright Bay Views project begin at the harbour

PRACTICALITIES

Shopping

Kirkcudbright's lively farmers' and producers' market (every fourth Sunday of the month) provides an excellent opportunity to buy local wares, from arts and crafts to food and drink. There's plenty of indie shopping to be had in town; from award-winning food purveyors like J Hall & Sons Butchers to, naturally, an abundance of studios and galleries.

Eating and sleeping

Selkirk Arms Hotel

Dating to 1777, the [Selkirk Arms Hotel](#) was once frequented by Robert Burns, and many believe it was here the poet penned his famous *Selkirk Grace*. Situated on Kirkcudbright's pretty High Street, its tasteful lodgings can also be booked as

part of activity packages (including stargazing). The hotel's acclaimed restaurant primarily serves modern British cuisine, featuring regional produce such as Galloway venison loin and Kirkcudbright's prized scallops.

Masterpiece

A little off the main drag, this [local favourite](#) sells great-value sandwiches loaded with all manner of fresh fillings (including haggis) along with homemade soup, salads and a tempting array of tray bakes and cakes.

Thai Kitchen

This [unassuming restaurant](#) at Kirkcudbright Golf Club sells top-notch Thai fare at a steal (main courses are just over a fiver), but remains something of a hidden treasure when it comes

to tourists. Locals have cottoned on, however; due to unprecedented demand it's take-away-only this year, and pre-ordering is strongly recommended.

Travel

Buses are the only public transport to serve Kirkcudbright, but services are fairly frequent. [Traveline Scotland](#) offers an easy UK journey planner, taking in all forms of public transport.

More information

[Vicky Smith](#) is a freelance writer and photographer, specialising in travel and arts. For more on astrotourism in the UK, check out [Dark Skies](#), which is out this month, or for more on the region see our Slow Travel guide to [Dumfries & Galloway](#). The Travel Club members can get 50% off all books with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**.



TRAVEL WRITE: CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF BRADT'S TRAVEL-WRITING COMPETITION

To celebrate the release of Travel Write – a new anthology bringing together the most colourful and fascinating entries from our travel-writing competition – Hilary Bradt reflects on 20 years of submissions, and what it is that makes good travel writing.

Bradt's travel-writing competition has a long history. The seed was probably planted when I managed to get shortlisted for a travel-writing competition in the 1980s and was absolutely ecstatic, probably even more so than when I won one a few years later! I know how much it means to the aspiring writer, so when the company had its 21st birthday back in 1995, I wanted to mark the occasion with a writing competition. I was lucky enough to forge a relationship with *BBC Wildlife Magazine* for a few years for travel stories with a natural-history slant. One of our best nature writers, Brian Jackman (who published his autobiography with us last month), was one of my fellow judges. Then, in 2004, our 30th anniversary, we found a new partner in *The Independent on Sunday*, and relaunched the competition with the theme 'We've come a long way' – as indeed we had! And there it stayed until the Indy ceased its print edition in 2016.



© HUGH BRUNE

Celia (left) with Hilary at the 2019 awards ceremony

Fortunately, the demise of the Indy coincided with the launch of the Edward Stanford Travel Writing Awards, so for the last five years our competition has been an integral part of the book trade's most prestigious travel event, and our winners have shared the stage with the likes of Michael Palin and Colin Thubron.

Looking back at Bradt's near-50-year history, I'm struck by how little we cared about good writing in the early books. George and I just wanted to get the information down and printed. It was only once we started commissioning other writers that we realised that a good guidebook should also be a pleasure to read. Actually, although sloppy, my early writing was vivid because I'd honed my skills by writing letters home during the nearly six years that we spent on the road or working abroad. Friends and family want to know what a place is actually like, rather than a list of buses that go there. And a good slice of humour always went down well.

This is now the advice that we give to aspiring travel writers in our workshops: practice makes perfect, and it's only by writing that you can learn the craft. All the contributors in *Travel Write* have done just that – and it's repaid us and them magnificently. Our annual travel-writing competition is always one of the highlights of my year. It's true that only about 10% of entries make

it to the final, but what pleasure those outstanding pieces bring me! Every story published in this anthology carries a memory of the first time I read it during the judging process, when it elicited a delighted smile and a muttered 'Oh **yes!**'. Some reduced me to tears, some to laughter, while others had me wide-eyed in horror at a nerve-racking adventure.

For many people, lockdown has provided more time to read and, I hope, an increasing appreciation of what constitutes good writing. If you look at the diminishing number of pages of a book with regret, the author has done their job. *Travel Write* provides the ultimate pleasure: consistently brilliant writing with a new story to be enjoyed each night – in bed or in the bath.

Of course, the anthology would not have been possible without the sterling organisation of editor Celia Dillow, who has worked incredibly hard to put everything together. So it felt very fitting to share her piece from our 2019 competition, on the theme of 'Out of the Blue'. I'm sure you'll agree that it was a thoroughly deserved winner.

Reflections on Dubai

'Why on earth are you going there? You'll hate it.' Friends were not encouraging but I was going to an important meeting.

'Hello,' dark blue eyes locked with mine and I felt reality tilt and reset itself. I was not expecting that.

Dubai takes you by surprise. It is a city where there shouldn't be a city. Some of it is glamorous. It is a gilded building site, a sandpit full of expensive cars and shiny toys. Like a modern

paradise garden, everything is reflected in still pools or mirrored tiles. But in the land of mirage, which view is real?

Famous for its skyline, it is all about the building. Think of a shape and build it. Go higher.

Twist it like barley sugar and

cover it in stardust. Make it glitter. Dream the impossible and make it happen. Put a ski slope in the desert, with real snow and penguins – no problem. Build the earth, or the solar system, in the Gulf and sell it off – done. Bring the nations of the world to this sliver of ancient desert to gawp and gaze and get rich. In that shuddering region, see how safe and tolerant it really is. Defy politics; defy geography; defy belief. Create rain, air-condition the bus stops and put phone chargers

“Some reduced me to tears, others to laughter, some had me wide-eyed in horror.”

in the palm trees – of course. There is plenty of oil but no fresh water, so let the people drink the sea.

Come and party! Move from beach to bar to bed. Ignore the Arabian Desert which licks at your heels, threatening to reclaim the city with every sandstorm. The Dubai Museum tells another story, of nomadic herders, gold traders and pearl fishers who made quiet lives in the *empty quarter*. Simple homes had wind towers with canvas sails to catch the breezes from the creek; the desert was able to support some life. But the medieval settlements have been overwritten in a generation. Out of the blue of the Arabian night, a futurescape has materialised. The wooden dhows on the creek are for tourists now, not fishermen. Celebrities, engineers, financiers and entrepreneurs have come. And they need teachers, hoteliers, diplomats, doctors and nurses. The pace of change is a whirlwind which slices and splices a thousand and one lives into a surprising and uncomfortable storybox.

‘I’m just going outside to warm up,’ I stepped on to the tiny balcony of a modest apartment to escape the fierce air conditioning. There was the hum of traffic from the highway, the soft

“The pace of change is a whirlwind which slices and splices a thousand and one lives into a surprising and uncomfortable storybox.”

stew of the drains and the heat, of course, like something solid. But there was also the sound of half a thousand hammers from the building site below. Hundreds of square feet of pool deck were being landscaped. Sand was shovelled, palms were planted and pools were tiled in every shade of blue. I watched the walls being prepared for the rolls of mosaic. At the beginning of June, it felt dangerous to be outside during the middle of the day; the pavements had melted my shoes. But more than a hundred men, in blue overalls, worked on regardless. Clink, clink, uncomfortable clink.

Rumours are rife. Ten years ago, when the money stopped flowing, Dubai’s development stuttered. If the oil runs out, or we stop needing it, how will they keep the desert at bay? If the earth continues to heat up, life in the futurescape will be intolerable and the people will retreat. What will happen to the glittering toys in the sandpit?

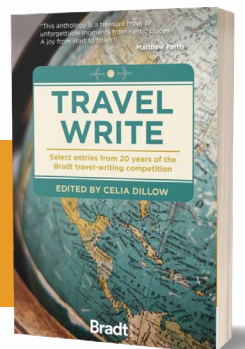
Travel Write: Select entries from 20 years of the Bradt travel-writing competition is out this month. The Travel Club members can get their copy for just **£5.49** by using the code **TRAVELCLUB50** at checkout.

Will the desert gradually creep back when no one wants to play anymore?

‘This is more like it,’ it was dawn and we were at an oasis outside the city. Birds gasped in the buzzing heat. Sand grouse hid. There was the flicker of shrike and a dazzling bee-eater. Flamingos gathered on shimmering pools and, not far away, the tawny dune rippled into the heat haze. Natural Dubai pre-dates us and it will outlive us.

I felt splintered by impossible Dubai. My expectations had been overturned. It is a place of hope and no hope, of spinning ideas and spiralling dreams, nightmares and fairy tales. It reflects the best of us and the worst of us.

‘Goodbye,’ the meeting was over and I staggered home to a new version of normal. At the beginning of the desert summer, in one of Dubai’s glittering towers, my first grandchild was born. So, I too have joined the storybox of that sapphire city. Connected now, in a most unexpected way, I left a bit of my heart there. They said I would hate Dubai, but I will go back very soon.



WILD WOODS: THE BEST OF BRITAIN'S WILD SPACES

*Whether you're looking to witness red-deer ruts or want to sleep beneath the stars, Britain's woods and forests offer a wealth of fantastic wild experiences. Hundreds of these are celebrated in Wild Woods, a new book showcasing life-affirming ways to connect with wild places through adventure. Here, author **Alvin Nicholas** shares some of his favourite sites from up and down Britain.*



An outdoor life is a happier one, and time spent in woodland rewilds the human spirit faster and more completely than anything we know. Britain's woodlands offer great variety: there are woods you can walk, paddle or pedal through, imagining you're stalking big game, and there are woods where you can sleep beneath the stars – nothing beats the hypnotic crackle of a campfire while you gaze from a hammock at the glow of flickering embers. In others, you might encounter dormice and deer, owls and bats, hedgehogs and foxes, maybe even a badger or a boar. Or you may be presented with the opportunity to seek wild ruins and sacred stones, and swim in secret lakes, while on the lookout for witches, fairies and magic springs.

The following showcase just a small selection of Britain's best woods, forests and wild spaces, depending on what type of adventure you're seeking. So, go on and get out there – it's time to explore.

Best for: untamed waters

Coed y Rhaeadr, Brecon Beacons

Forests are good for you. Well established in Japanese medicine, Shinrin-Yoku or 'forest bathing' – the healing power of simply being in a woodland – has been shown to boost the immune system and lower blood pressure. These



© TONY BAGGETT, SHUTTERSTOCK

Sgwd y Bedol (Horseshoe Falls) is one of the area's most impressive waterfalls

beneficial effects are increased by spending time around cool, sparkling woodland waters – a natural negative ion generator – and, in particular, wild swimming, which has well-documented physical and mental benefits.

One of my favourite places to swim is at Coed y Rhaeadr – ‘Wood of the Water’ – in the Brecon Beacons, which offers a glorious mix of temperate rainforest, fern-filled gorges and the most spectacular cluster of waterfalls you will find. Dense conifer forests on higher ground only add to the feeling of remoteness, with plenty of wild camping possibilities above. It has two main woodland areas to explore, both north of Pontneddfechan. The western block follows the rivers Pyrrddin and Nedd Fechan, while the block to the east tracks the rivers Mellte and Hepste. Bivvying spots abound. Up in the forests, hidden among the trees, are Bronze Age cairns, Iron Age hillforts, sections of the Sarn Helen Roman road, Roman camps, and interesting industrial ruins.

Best for: primeval ambience

Ballachuan Hazelwood, the Highlands

Our ancient woodlands really are extraordinary. The Caledonian forests of the Scottish Highlands and islands, the west coast Celtic rainforest and the steep lime woods of the Wye Valley have existed for thousands of years – possibly since

trees first recolonised Britain as the land warmed after the last ice age some 10,000 years ago. Lost in time, they are portals to the past, filled with the promise of adventure.

Mossy and mystical, Ballachuan forms a stunning 9,000-year-old backdrop to the Cuan Sound. A light-loving pioneer, multi-stemmed and self-coppicing, hazel probably reached western Britain via the sea, colonising exposed locations with poor soils. Mesolithic hunter-gatherers used its strong, pliable shoots to create dome-

shaped shelters and collected its highly nutritious nuts. Exceptional for lichens and bryophytes, Ballachuan’s dwarf hazelwoods harbour an array of wildlife, including roe deer, pine marten and rare marsh fritillary butterflies. Seal and otter frequent the surrounding rocky shores.

Best for: ghosts and legends

Dering Wood, Kent

If you insist on walking Britain’s woods and forests at night, expect the unexpected. They have long



© FLYBY PHOTOGRAPHY, SHUTTERSTOCK

Dering Wood is sometimes called the ‘Screaming Woods’

been regarded with awe as weird and mysterious places, the abodes of spectres and supernatural beings. Ancient Dering Wood, for example, is sometimes known as the 'Screaming Woods' thanks to its reputation for being haunted. Hoax stories about massacres and disappearing hikers abound, and thrill seekers flock here at night hoping to hear strange noises. And they do – but the incredibly eerie sounds come not from ghosts, but rather the foxes, barn owls and sika deer that roam this habitat at night.

Best for: caves and canyons

Dovedale Valley, Derbyshire

Since time immemorial humans have explored caves. We have sheltered in caves, buried the dead in caves, practised rituals in caves and expressed our art in them. And today there's no better way to reconnect with our ancient ancestors than by living as they did: wandering through the woods, foraging for wild food and sleeping in remote caverns. Or, if you prefer, simply meditating by flickering candlelight.

The lovely limestone Dovedale Valley in the Peak District is steeped in romance. The pinnacles of Ilam Rock, Jacob's Ladder and Tissington Spires are popular with climbers, but the valley also features 16 caves, three fissures and four rock shelters. Some are well known: a 39ft natural arch



© LIGHTPRESS

One of the yurts at Comrie Croft

frames Reynard's Cave, which has been used since prehistoric times, and the twin voids of Dove Holes look like owlish black eyes. A hoard of Late Iron Age and Roman coins was recently discovered in Reynard's Kitchen Cave (the smaller one, to the left of the main cave), and late 19th-century quarrying at Dove Holes led to the discovery of

Stone Age mammal remains identified as sabretoothed cat, mastodon and hyena.

Best for: camping

Comrie Croft, Perthshire

Magical by day and mysterious at night, woodlands are enchanted places where nature,

Wild camping is only legally permitted in Scotland and on Dartmoor. Of course, in practical (if not strictly legal) terms, you can sleep wild almost anywhere, as long as you observe a few important guidelines (leave no trace) and try to obtain the landowner's permission first.

experienced close up and first-hand, helps us to feel happier, more alive and in touch with what is real and important. When wild camping isn't an option, tree-clad sites, from elegant yurts to elaborate eco-retreats, make great exploration bases – and the back-to-nature set-ups are as wild as 'proper' camping gets.

[Comrie Croft](#) is one such destination: an eco-aware, community-minded co-operative offering semi-wild camping and rustic glamping in beautiful birch woods. For cosy *hygge* try their Nordic *katas*, complete with wood-burning stoves: hand-built by local crofters, most occupy wooded glades and have their own hammock and firepit. There's some bunkhouse accommodation, too. Along with its walking routes, Comrie Croft is also a mountain-biking centre, with a bike workshop, hire facilities and well-graded trails to explore. To the west, amid some of the largest ancient oak woodlands in Tayside, is a wild gorge and waterfall known as

the Deil's (Devil's) Cauldron. In high summer, head south to find Linn a' Chullaich ('the Linn') along the Water of Ruchill – a wild swimming spot complete with pebble beach.

Best for: charismatic wildlife

Richmond Park, London

Richmond Park is essentially a royal hunting forest in miniature, created by Charles I in 1625 after he moved his court to Richmond Palace from plague-ridden London. Much to the fury of landowners and residents, the king enclosed a landscape of medieval farms and commons and introduced around 2,000 red and fallow deer, whose descendants roam Richmond Park to this day. The newly enclosed land contained mature individual oaks – many of which are still standing. Later pollarded to protect them from browsing deer, they look magical in the early morning mist and the park is a wildlife photographer's dream.

Best for: lost ruins

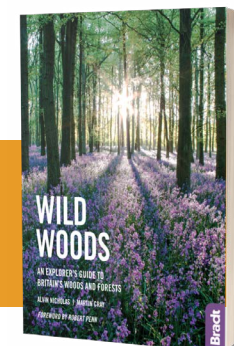
Kennall Vale, Cornwall

Britain's woods and forests are littered with lost ruins – crumbling castles, hidden follies, forlorn

mansions and the remnants of old industries. Buried deep in remote woodlands, unrecorded remains await discovery, and among the gnarled, twisted trees keen explorers can feel like archaeologists unearthing ancient and forgotten civilisations.

At Kennall Vale, you can explore the moss- and ivy-clad remains of one of the largest and most complete gunpowder works in Britain. Believed by some to be haunted, it certainly has a gruesome history. Several horrible accidents occurred here, most notably in 1838, when five mills blew up in succession, killing one man, and on 15 January 1841, when another, John Martin, died after entering the glossing mill as it exploded. A quarry lake and sheer cliffs add to the extraordinary atmosphere. Oak, beech, ash and sycamore grow in the surrounding woods, now designated as a nature reserve, accompanied by luxuriant ferns, mosses and liverworts that thrive in the humid conditions. Look out for dipper and grey wagtail by the river and rare brown long-eared, lesser horseshoe and greater horseshoe bats at dusk amid the ruins.

For more on Britain's best woods, forests and wild experiences, check out [Wild Woods](#), which is out this month. The Travel Club members can get **50% off** their copy with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**.

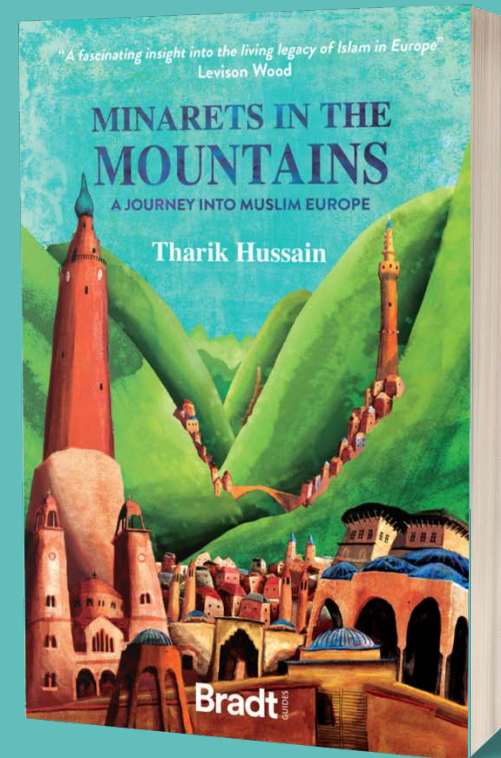


INTRODUCING THE TRAVEL CLUB TALKS!

FREE to attend for Travel Club members, the **Travel Club Talks** is an exciting new series of online events offering an opportunity to hear from our authors firsthand and put your questions directly to them.

Our inaugural event, **Decolonising Travel Writing with Tharik Hussain**, will take place on 29 September. Tharik will be discussing his new bestselling book, *Minarets in the Mountains: A Journey Into Muslim Europe*, and why it's more important than ever to hear from new voices in travel writing.

[Click here](#) to register for your free ticket (usually £5) using the code **TTCEVENTS**.



SPOTLIGHT ON THE INDEPENDENT: WILD WITH CONSENT



You might say that finding a secluded spot at a British campsite this summer was like trying to find a needle in a haystack. But that just became a lot easier with the launch of Wild With Consent, a new venture that gives self-contained camper vans access to remote sites on private land across Northumberland. We caught up with founder Grace Fell to chat about why the pandemic inspired her to share her love for campervanning with others.

Tell us a little bit about yourself. What inspired you to set up Wild With Consent?

My inspiration came from family trips to Scotland in our trusty Iveco campervan – lovingly known as ‘Tubs’. We would regularly park up for the night on the side of a beautiful loch, rolling out of bed for a bracing morning swim. This type of campervanning, away from crowded campsites, is a truly liberating experience and one that I want to encourage more people to enjoy.

Because of the pandemic more people than ever have discovered the joys of campervanning, and the boom in holidays in the UK this year has meant that existing campsites have become very busy. With the launch of Wild With Consent this summer, I hope to help more visitors enjoy our magnificent rural countryside in a responsible way and away from the crowds. As an independent traveller, it can be really difficult to find unique and tranquil locations where you are

not trespassing, so connecting campervanners to landowners unlocks access to private land and some of the most beautiful and untouched parts of the country.

Why did you choose Northumberland as your base?

We started in Northumberland because it is my home county and I know it like the back of my hand! But also because it is genuinely wild – the average population density is 64 people per square kilometre, compared with the England average of 427. And then there are the sights – Northumberland is full of ruined castles, boasts more than 30 miles of pristine beaches, and offers incredible wildlife, charming villages and superb seafood – from the oysters at Lindisfarne to some of the country’s best fish and chips in Seahouses.

How many sites do you have across the county? How do you go about selecting new ones?

We currently have 14 sites, predominantly in Northumberland. Our premium and super premium locations are selected to have no road noise or light pollution, are sited well away from any buildings and of course have superb views of the surrounding countryside. Wild camping is illegal in England without the landowner’s

© WILD WITH CONSENT



Grace launched Wild With Consent in July 2021

permission, so access to our sites is a privilege that we are excited to share!

How do you ensure each site remains pristine?

The low-impact ethos is a key pillar of Wild With Consent to ensure our natural beauty spots remain pristine. Sites are offered only to those travelling in self-contained campervans and are only available to one campervan per night to maintain privacy. Campers are required to adhere to wild-camping guidelines, such as respecting the natural environment, lighting fires responsibly, and causing minimal disturbance to animals and vegetation to maintain the ethos of 'leave no trace'. Conscious camping and being sensitive to our natural surroundings are at the heart of the business and something I am hugely passionate about, as are our clients.

Why wild camping? Do you not miss the facilities of a campsite?

It might sound clichéd, but wild camping unlocks a new world of freedom and allows you to escape from the everyday – you can leave behind all the stress of daily life and really connect with the nature around you. Through Wild With Consent, I really want to bring these benefits to more people in a safe, authorised way. And anyway, our campervan is fully equipped with a toilet, shower



Each site is available to only one campervan per night to maintain privacy and peace

and full cooking facilities – a fully-fledged home on wheels! I actually much prefer an outside shower from the back of the van with a great view than a damp campsite shower block!

What if I don't have my own campervan?

It doesn't matter at all – we can recommend a number of brilliant campervan-hire companies

across the country, and there are plenty of options available depending on what you are looking for. My advice would be to book early, though, as demand for vans has really soared since the pandemic. Personally, I would go for [Quirky Campers](#) as their vans are so individual, and it's lovely to meet the hosts who have handcrafted each van to become a perfect home on wheels.

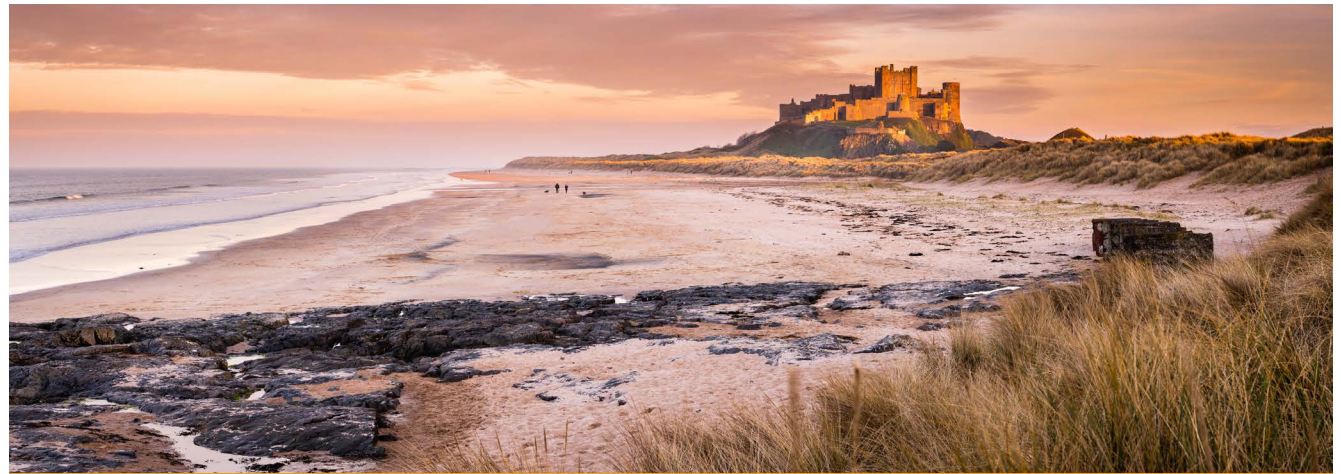
What tips would you give to anyone wild camping or campervanning for the first time?

Take note of Alfred Wainwright's saying: 'There's no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing.' Then, take the time to listen, to see the details and appreciate your surroundings – leave your technology behind and really engage with nature. The luxury of wild camping is in the back-to-basics approach, and I always find returning to daily life from a campervanning trip really puts things in perspective.

Where would you particularly recommend visiting while in Northumberland?

A visit to the spectacular Farne Islands should be on everyone's list, but particularly those with an interest in wildlife – the islands are home to around 120,000 pairs of breeding seabirds, plus thousands of grey seals. Autumn is a wonderful time to visit when there are new-born seal pups and, if you're lucky, you might even spot a pod of dolphins or maybe even minke whale along the way!

Otherwise, I'd recommend a walk into the Cheviot Hills to visit the Iron Age hillforts – the views are amazing and stretch as far as the Lake District. Northumberland is also home to more castles than any other county in England and



© DAVE HEAD, SHUTTERSTOCK

Bamburgh Castle is a Northumberland icon

the coastal castles are particularly dramatic – Lindisfarne, Bamburgh and Dunstanburgh.

Do you have a favourite camping site in Northumberland?

My favourites have to be Dunstan Hill and Elwick, with their amazing views out over the Northumbrian coast. I particularly love the spectacular vista across to Holy Island and Lindisfarne Castle from Elwick. On the edge of Lindisfarne Nature Reserve, the site is a haven for wildlife – both birds and seals – and waking up to nothing but the call of oystercatchers is something very special. And there is nothing

quite like watching the sun rise behind the ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle from the comfort of your campervan bed!

What's next for Wild With Consent?

We are planning to expand into the rest of the UK imminently – watch this space! We have had lots of interest from potential hosts, so we think we will be in a good position when the time comes to roll out. But, for now, we are keen to ensure that all new sites pass our high standards so our guests can be assured that when they book with Wild With Consent they are guaranteed truly wild places.

Wild With Consent are offering The Travel Club members a **5% discount** for first-time customers – see page 41 for more details. For more on Northumberland, check out [Bradt's Slow Travel guide](#) to the region.

IN PICTURES: REFLECTIONS OF BRUGES

The capital of West Flanders, Bruges is a city with plenty of charm. Much of its period architecture, built between the 15th and 18th centuries, remains intact, making the UNESCO-listed centre one of the best-preserved in Europe. Cobblestone streets, windmills and spires add to its delights. A visit to Bruges is as much a lesson in history as it is a feast for the eyes for those who seek to explore with a camera in hand. Although most tourists visit in summer, it has much to offer all year round.

*Photographer and author **Astrid McGechan**, who is running a photography tour to Bruges later this year, shares her advice on how to get the best out of your photography in this timeless city.*





Previous page

For the photographer, a sharply defined reflection is always a joy to discover. There is an element of chance because, of course, when the water moves, so does the reflection. But that is where the fun lies: a photo will never be the same twice. The unifying factor within this image is that over half is given over to a wonderful smoky blue. It was hard to leave this intoxicating scene as I couldn't be sure whether I had captured the best version. I was just grateful to the designer of the building for choosing such a lovely shade of blue.

Left

Bruges is often referred to as the 'Venice of the North' thanks to its network of canals and vast number of bridges (more than 80). There is no question that the last light of day, when captured in a photo, can be both poetic and romantic. With just a few splashes of colour, the reflection in the water here plays a major role and the featureless sky above gives a lovely clarity to the whole scene.



From late November, decorations for Christmas in Bruges spring up everywhere – candles and colourful lights appear, as well as the traditional ice rink and Christmas market. While days are much shorter at this time of year, when night falls and the lights come on, a whole new world is revealed.

Above left

When photographing against a black sky, the main features of an image are powerfully presented. Red is often the most prominent colour, and here the vivid red on the right-hand side is effectively doubled by the reflection and lends an excitement to the image. In other parts of the photo, yellow is of course dominant, contrasting with the cool splashes of blue and cyan.



Above right

Looking at this image, ask yourself what is the very first area you look at to begin with. More often than not, it will be the brightest part. But in a matter of seconds your eye and mind will join together and detect some of the scene's more subtle details, such as the vivid red doors, one above the other, the intriguing shadows from the two windows, and the unusual ribbon lighting to the left. Exploring a photograph carefully can often reap far greater rewards than simply looking at it as a whole.



One of Bruges' symbols is the swan. A late 15th-century legend has it that the city was required to keep swans on all lakes and canals at its own expense 'until the end of time' by unpopular emperor Maximilian of Austria, as revenge for his imprisonment and the execution of his trusted advisor Pieter Lanckhals (*langhals* means 'long neck') by the city's inhabitants.

Many of them live on the city's waterways, and one can find dozens on Minnewater Lake. According to folklore, this was named after Minna, a young and beautiful girl who loved a warrior called Stromberg, who came from a neighbouring tribe. Her father, however, hated the tribe and instead wanted to arrange a marriage to a fisherman from his own tribe. Minna ran away to escape the marriage and hid in a nearby forest. When Stromberg returned from fighting the Romans, he searched and found Minna in the woods, but she was too weak and died from exhaustion in his arms. Stromberg buried Minna, and on the riverbank where he had found her he placed a heavy rock engraved with the words 'Minna water'.

The decision to position the swan in the top right-hand corner of the fairly unconventional square frame was very much my intention. The magnificent bird, in full battle dress, sat so well in that space. The amber-coloured water was a gift, its texture like woven cloth. The swan repositioned its wings shortly after I took this shot, and the moment was gone.



Close to Minnewater Lake, the Begijnhof was first built in the 13th century as a Beguine Benedictine Convent, although the chapel and most of the buildings we see today were erected in the 17th century. This medieval oasis is one of the best preserved in Belgium, and although today the Beguines are all gone, a few Benedictine nuns still live here.

It is an architectural delight, with every portrait window adding to the sense of balance and repetition. I chose to shoot with the two trees in front because they were dark like the roof and the windows themselves. I was particularly pleased that the strong oblique lighting offered a handful of streamlined shadows, which lay across the foreground and ran semi-parallel to the wall.



Much has been written about the varied and colourful history of Bruges, which reaches back to the 9th century and the establishment of a fortress named *bryghia* by the Normans. In this shot of City Hall, that rich history is conveyed by the gargoyles, the wonderfully ornate doors and, of course, the focus at the very heart of the image - the elaborate iron streetlamps. It is pivotal for a photographer to ensure that the symmetry of such a building should be respected, and that the crop - side to side, and top to bottom - reflects this respect.



There are three elements to this shot of a freestanding statue in Walplein, all positioned diagonally: a few branches from the tree, the shape of the horse and its mane and the positioning of its mouth directly in line with the roof. One of the charms of this remarkable city, which is brimming with architectural variety, is the stepped roofs, which provided me with the third and final shape needed to make this image coherent.



I intentionally photographed Bonne-Chière Mill from below to emphasise what a remarkable structure it is – not only is it functional, but it is also romantic. I was blessed by the perfect skyscape behind and the lighting was everything I could have wished for – the punchy contrast gives a sense of depth and dimension. The grass mound positions the mill on a platform, from which it feels like it could reach the sky.





Left

No trip to Bruges would be complete without wandering along the canals just a stone's throw from the city. The seemingly endless tree-lined waterways lead out of the centre in all directions and are well worth exploring. Mornings in winter can bring rising mists over the canals, bathing them in the golden light of the rising sun.

Of course, getting up so early may not be to everyone's taste, especially after a particularly delicious meal in one of many great Bruges restaurants the night before. But the reward for doing so can be immense. The magical, almost dreamlike mood produced by early-morning beams of sunlight created a scene I will never forget. The silver highlights on the trees to the right with their vague accompanying reflection were spellbinding. The bridge in the distance gives the eyes a nice resting point.

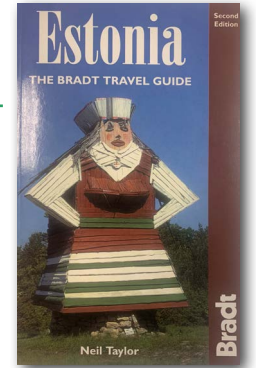
Previous page

Post-dawn light can be sharp and ideal for a photograph that includes what many would call a vanishing point. I am particularly fond of the stick-like regimented nature of the trees to the left - I am always drawn to multiple repetitions and strong geometric diagonals. The fiery yellow on both sides of the canal is one of the great photogenic offerings that Bruges and its surroundings offer in autumn and winter.



Astrid McGechan is a Surrey-based freelance photographer and author. Initially she photographed almost only landscapes, drawing her inspiration from natural scenes that evoke a sense of tranquillity and harmony, but has more recently become fascinated by urban life and architecture and has spent time photographing in cities in the UK and abroad. For details of a discount on her photography tour to Bruges later this year, see page 41.

FROM THE ARCHIVES: ESTONIA



To celebrate the publication of eighth edition of our Estonia guide this month, author **Neil Taylor** looks back on the very first edition and how the country he loves has gone from a Soviet backwater to one of Europe's leading tech giants.

Estonia first came into my life in May 1992. At the time I was running Regent Holidays, and my writing was restricted to brochure copy, press releases and grumpy letters to the trade press. Regent specialised in what had been, until the previous year, the Soviet Union, but which had suddenly become 15 different countries, each immediately determined to stress these differences rather than any remaining similarities. New currencies appeared, as did border posts, together with signs in English and genuine menus in restaurants, with dishes listed actually being available.

I had not been to Estonia, nor to its neighbouring Baltic republics, as there seemed to be little point, given that only one itinerary was allowed there by the Soviet authorities: two to three nights in each capital followed by a compulsory

week divided between Moscow and Leningrad. But this all changed once re-independence was declared in August 1991. Suddenly, the whole of Estonia was open and visa-free. Even had there been nothing there to see, the ability to enter formerly forbidden territory would have attracted visitors, and Regent was happy to capitalise on that.

“I had not been to Estonia... as there seemed to be little point.”

Indeed, Regent and Bradt soon realised that there was a lot more than just ‘something’ there. Perhaps the only advantage of being under Soviet tutelage was that the wild animals, forests and manor houses, unlike local people, had been left largely alone. Of course, most manor houses and many churches had been neglected, but fortunately not destroyed. Some furnishings managed to reach a museum or two. It soon became possible to discover buildings across

six centuries, and much of their contents, which had been skilfully hidden during the German and Soviet occupations. The first national park had been established in 1971, with strict rules to ensure that what was pristine stayed pristine. The plants, rocks and animals were thoroughly studied and catalogued. This work, not being political, could be left in the hands of enthusiastic Estonians unimpeded by interference from Moscow.

Writing the book

What persuaded me that I could write a book? The answer is simple and is the same one I give when people ask why I helped to establish a travel company. Two words: boundless arrogance – the complete opposite of two other words, common sense, which should have given me pause for thought.

I was prepared to work at it on most Sundays (the travel agency opened on Saturdays) and



Neil with his *Estonia* and *Baltic Cities* guides

some evenings too. I was prepared to take copious notes on each visit to Estonia and to pester people who could not understand why a rundown building might be of interest to foreign groups. What I could not do, however, was even begin to think about how to write 80,000 words when previously 1,500 had been my maximum. I dare not remember how far the original deadline slipped. Was it two months, or is my memory being unduly indulgent, and it was in fact two years? Hilary was very kind to me during that frustrating time, pointing out that books always benefitted from extra time devoted to them.

A former member of my Regent staff, Anita Sach, had the unenviable task of making my text readable for a general audience. She pointed out that while I thought I was writing sensible English, I was in fact fitting English words into a German sentence pattern, because I had read so many German books about Estonia, there being next to nothing in English at the time.

In a pre-internet era, and in countries that had not been visited since the 1930s, the need for a tour operator and a publisher was clear. Both organisations initially tended to treat the three

countries as one, as 'The Baltics', so the first Bradt guidebook and most Regent itineraries reflected this. However, it did not take long for this error to be corrected and for each of the three countries to be given their own book. Fortunately for Bradt, no other publisher has realised their mistake as they continue to publish 'Baltic' guidebooks.

Where Bradt led, government ministers followed. In June 1999 Glenda Jackson was not an actress but the Minister of Transport, one of many ministers who would visit Estonia in the early days. She was due in Tallinn about ten days before advance copies could be expected, but the Embassy offered a book launch during her visit if we could get copies

there in time. Editorial Director Tricia Hayne, by then well used to producing miracles, of course ensured that they were.

The royal family and government ministers have continued to emulate Bradt's enthusiasm for Estonia. All four of the Queen's children have visited over the years, and the Queen herself was happily persuaded by Estophiles in the government to visit in 2006. While Covid prevented royal visits in 2020 and 2021, the Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab came to

***"In a pre-internet era,
the need for a tour
operator and a publisher
was clear."***

Estonia in March 2021 to celebrate 100 years of UK–Estonian diplomatic relations. Three months later, I was kindly awarded an MBE by the Foreign Office to honour the work I have done for this partnership since the 1990s – during which time the Bradt guide has provided a constant thread.

Twenty-five years on

What then has changed since the early 1990s and the publication of my first Estonia guide in 1999?

I am quite happy to continue to use the word ‘normal’ to describe the country, even if this is a term unlikely to be used much elsewhere in the Bradt pantheon. To reach normality was a risky process for Estonia in the late 1980s, and it is a tribute to the country that the label still applies, however abnormal its big neighbour to the East is now becoming. This label is certainly of benefit to a guidebook writer; no longer do I have to explain the local currency, worry about medical facilities or suggest that a few words of Russian might help in isolated parts of the country. In fact, Estonia has become a pioneer

in the technology world over recent years, with the country often being called E-Estonia. Skype and Bolt are just two of several Estonian inventions that have quickly spread to become household names worldwide. While other countries still dither about abolishing cheques, Estonia decided right at the beginning of re-independence in 1991, that such antiquated forms of transferring money had no role in a modern economy. They were also the first nation to fully allow elections online – 44% of all votes cast at the 2019 parliamentary elections were done so in this way. Their ease with technology meant Estonians were well equipped when Covid hit last year, as schools and businesses were able to move online with minimal disruption.

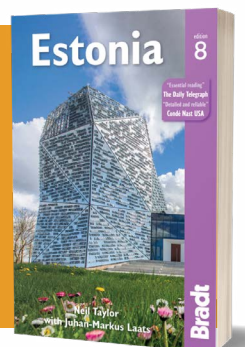
“Without a Bradt guide, visitors are unlikely to find a weighing-machine museum or a ceiling covered with photographs of Miss Estonia.”

Such technological developments have also helped shaped the guidebook. Space that used to given to practicalities such as bus and train times, all of which are found online, can now be given to what is pleasantly abnormal. For instance, without a Bradt guide, visitors are unlikely to find a weighing-machine museum, a ceiling covered with photographs of

Miss Estonia or a swing that offers a few seconds of Latvia in the air before a return to terra firma in Estonia. Equally they will find a page or more on a major gallery or museum relegated to a couple of sentences in a Baltics guidebook.

The former President of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, in office from 2006–16, did not only want his country to be normal – he wanted it to be boring and Nordic as well. He hoped for positive comparisons with Finland and Sweden and presumably negative ones with Russia. Non-readers of a Bradt guide, who hardly venture beyond a Tallinn shopping centre or an Irish pub, could well agree with him. But those who do read the book can look forward to long, interesting days spent as much in museums as in national parks, along the ramparts of a medieval castle or beside a gently meandering river.

The 8th edition of Neil's [Estonia guidebook](#) is out this month. The Travel Club members can get their copy for just **£8.99** with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**.



OUT THIS MONTH!

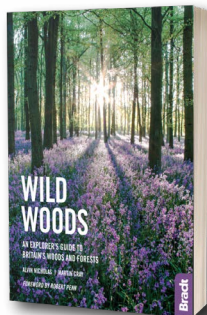
The Travel Club members can claim their exclusive **50% discount** on ALL our books by using the code **TRAVELCLUB50** at checkout. This month's new titles are:

Wild Woods

Alvin Nicholas & Martin Cray

£18.99

Wild Woods explores over 450 of Britain's most magical and lesser-known woods across the length and breadth of England, Scotland and Wales. There are details of how to access each wood, and useful icons highlight key features or experiences so that you can easily find the woodland trip that's right for you. Whether you seek high adventure, a chance to commune with nature or a romantic getaway in a quirky retreat, we guarantee you will find inspiration within these beautiful pages.



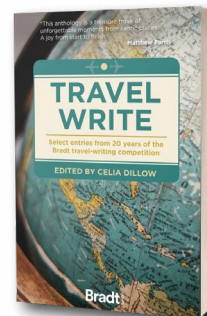
provides comprehensive information on how to stargaze safely and responsibly. But, more than that, it explores the history behind astronomy, and the fascinating myths and folklore associated with the stars. Whether you want to marvel at the Milky Way, learn about constellations and comets or go in search of nocturnal wildlife – and whether you're an amateur astronomer or a stargazing beginner – this is the perfect handbook.

Travel Write

Edited by Celia Dillow

£10.99

For over 20 years, Bradt Guides has run a prestigious travel-writing competition – for both new and previously published writers. Edited by a former winner of the competition, and with a foreword by Bradt Guides founder, Hilary Bradt, *Travel Write* brings together nearly a hundred of the most colourful and fascinating entries that have caught the judges' eyes.

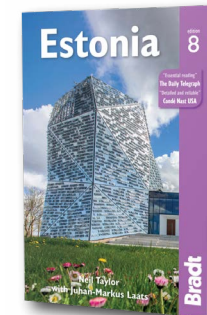


Estonia

Neil Taylor

£17.99

Bradt's *Estonia* remains the only English-language guidebook to this Baltics destination and this eighth edition reveals more of the country than any previous guide. Offering extensive coverage of Estonia's complex cultural history and its artists, writers and musicians, alongside comprehensive practical information, Baltics expert Neil Taylor MBE proves that there's much more to Estonia than the cobbled streets and cafés of Tallinn.



Dark Skies

Tiffany Francis-Baker

£14.99

Covering both the International Dark Sky Association's Certified Sites and Britain and Ireland's Discovery Sites, *Dark Skies*



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 bookings with Wild With Consent

[Wild With Consent](#) are a new UK-based platform that allows campervanners to browse and book privately owned sites with full landowner permission. Only one campervan is allowed in each spot per night, and locations (14 at present, predominantly in Northumberland) are chosen for their scenic beauty, lack of light pollution and noise, and sense of isolation.

The Travel Club members can enjoy **5% off** bookings with the code **BRADT2021** (valid for first-time customers only).

5% off Reflections of Bruges tour with Light & Land

Led by photographer Astrid McGechan, [Reflections of Bruges](#) is an upcoming tour run by specialist operator, Light & Land. The three-day trip will take place in late November/early December when the light is low, and shadows are long, and Astrid will be on hand throughout to help develop your vision and photographic techniques, including shooting at night, long exposures, ICM and multiple exposures.

The Travel Club members can enjoy a **5% discount** on bookings – when you have reserved your place, email admin@lightandland.co.uk to claim your discount.

Aardvark Safaris: 5% off all tours

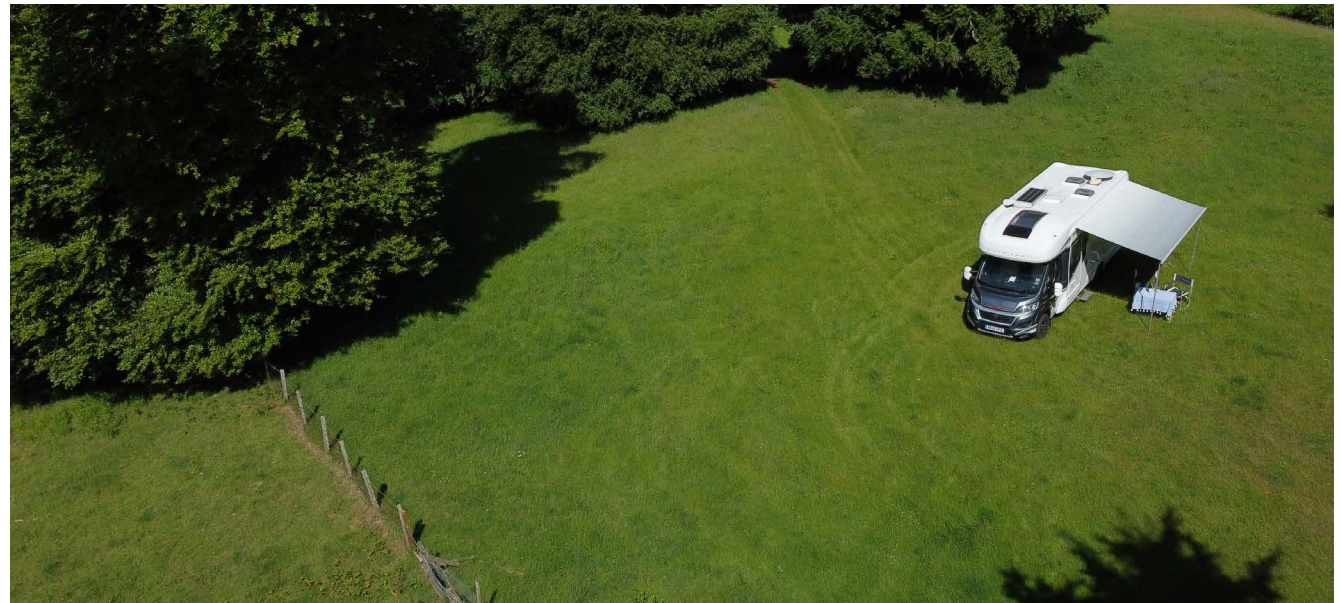
Aardvark Safaris specialise in tailor-made, high-quality African safaris away from the crowds. Just email mail@aardvarksafaris.com and mention that you are a Travel Club member when booking.

The Adventure Creators: 10% off all Pyrenees tours

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

Adventurous Ink: get your first month free

[Adventurous Ink](#) is a unique subscription service. Each month you'll receive a new book



Wild With Consent have more than a dozen secluded sites across Northumberland

© WILD WITH CONSENT

or journal featuring writers, photographers and illustrators who really 'get' the great outdoors. Get your first month free with the code **BRADTINK** (valid when purchasing a two-month subscription).

Bidroom: Free Plus membership

Founded with the mission to make the hotel industry fair for both travellers and hotels, [Bidroom](#) is the first membership-based marketplace for travel lovers. Hotels get bookings with no commission, and instead they offer discounts and added perks to members such as free room upgrades, complimentary welcome drinks, free parking and discounts on spa treatments and dining experiences. The Travel Club members can get a one-year Plus membership for free (normally £49) to unlock bigger discounts and a wider selection of hotels and partner extras. [Click here](#) to sign up.

The Cook's Place: 10% off cooking courses

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

Dog-Friendly Weekends: Free subscription

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

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

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

HÔRD: 10% off everything

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

Inertia Network: 5% off any booking

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

Letters from Afar: 10% off

[Letters from Afar](#) is a unique subscription service that shares handcrafted letters from around the world each month. The Travel Club members can get 10% off their first subscription using the code **TRAVELCLUB** at checkout.

Lupine Travel: 5% off tours

[Lupine Travel](#) are a UK tour company specialising in unique destinations and travel ideas at affordable prices. For your 5% discount, just email info@lupinetravel.co.uk and mention that you are a member of The Travel Club when booking.

Muddy Boots: 10% off Discovery Walks

Launched in 2020, [Muddy Boots Walking Holidays](#) run self-guided walking holidays and guided 'Discovery Walks' in the Yorkshire Dales. Walks range from 2½ to 8 hours, with routes



Exploring one of the 'Discovery Walks' offered by Muddy Boots

suitable for all ages and abilities. To claim your 10% discount, use the code **THETRAVELCLUB** at checkout.

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

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

Native Eye: 5% off tours

[Native Eye](#) specialise in small-group tours to some of the world's most adventurous destinations from Chad and Congo to Saudi Arabia and Iraq. For 5% off any bookings made until 31 December

2021 (for tours in 2021 or 2022), contact them on 01473 328546 or info@nativeeyetravel.com and state you're a member.

Natural Britain: 10% off

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

Safari Drive: 10% off vehicle and equipment hire

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

Sunvil: 5% off Alentejo bookings

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

Tonic: 10% off subscriptions

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

Travel Africa: 20% off subscriptions

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

Untamed Borders: 10% off group tours

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

Wanderlust: £10 off subscriptions

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

COMING NEXT MONTH...

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

A cycling adventure in The Gambia, how to enjoy a half-term family wildlife adventure in Britain, and a sneak preview of our new photography handbook: *The Travel Photographer's Way*.

Travertine terraces in Pamukkale, Turkey; one of the many magnificent photos found in *The Travel Photographer's Way* © NORI JEMIL