

DESTINATIONS OF A LIFETIME

225 OF THE WORLD'S MOST AMAZING PLACES

Foreword by Dan Westergren, Director of Photography,
National Geographic Traveler magazine

 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
WASHINGTON, DC.



Soaring arboresque columns grace Sagrada Família, Barcelona, Spain. Preceding pages: Seams of salt honeycomb the great flats of Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD 6

NATURE UNBOUND 10

The Wild Side of Awesome

HAND OF MAN 56

Humankind's Ageless Handiwork

SEA & SHORE 136

Where Land and Water Magically Merge

MOUNTAIN MAJESTY 192

On Top of the World

TOWN & COUNTRY 242

Culture and Countryside Combined

INDEX 312

ILLUSTRATIONS CREDITS 319



DESTINATIONS OF A LIFETIME

The geological wonderland known as
the Quiraing, Isle of Skye, Scotland



Chapter One

NATURE UNBOUND

Feel the primeval siren call back to the basic beauty of the land around us. From South Dakota's multihued Badlands to the bright white vistas of Bolivia's salt flats, step into some of the most beautiful spots on Earth.

ARIZONA

ANTELOPE CANYON

A sinuous canyon cathedral

Carved into the reds and golds of northern Arizona, Antelope Canyon is among the world's most photogenic natural landscapes. Formed by water rushing through rock, it's a slot canyon—a narrow gash in the earth—its swirling ridged rock walls a canvas of extraordinary colors in subtle grades from muted purple to bright orange. When the sun is at its highest point, beams of light shoot down from above so brightly and powerfully that they look tangible.

The canyon has two parts, both located on the Navajo Indian Reservation and both reachable only by guided tour. Upper Antelope Canyon—called Tse' bighanilini, or “the place where water runs through rocks,” in Navajo—is the more accessible of the two, with an entrance at ground level (Lower Antelope requires descending stairs), and it's more prone to those magnificent beams of sunlight. The twirling walls of Lower Antelope Canyon, known as Hasdestwazi (“spiral rock arches”), glow in waves of light and shadow. At the bottom, the width varies from a hallway to a space just wide enough for one person to walk through; at points, all that's visible above is a thin sliver of sky. The sensuously curving, corrugated walls give a sense of movement, with color and air now rushing through where water once flowed.

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

Not far from Antelope Canyon, on the other side of the town of Page, is Horseshoe Bend, a dramatic curve in the Colorado River. A 1.5-mile (2.4 km) hike along a well-traveled trail leads to a spectacular and unusual overlook. Down below, the river curves in what is close to a full circle around a high mass of land (in fact, it's 270 degrees). It's possible to step right up to the ledge and look down—or even to lie down on the ground for better photographic access.



Millennia of slow wear by the mighty Colorado River have exposed Antelope Canyon's spectacular colors at Horseshoe Bend (above). Entering the canyon's walls (opposite) is akin to dropping into a giant's ear canal.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Antelope Canyon is at midday from April–Sept., when the sun is at the right angle to cast its famous beams of light down into the canyon.

*PLANNING

Antelope Canyon is south of Lake Powell and about 5 miles (8 km) east of Page, Arizona; it is accessible only by guided tour (listed on the park website). This is largely a matter of safety: On rare occasions, rainstorms can result in flash floods through the canyons; visiting during such conditions is prohibited.

*WEBSITES

navajonationparks.org/html/antelopecanyon.htm



BADLANDS NATIONAL PARK

A tortured terrain on the edge of the Great Plains



The Badlands' White River Valley Overlook rewards with a fantastical vista (above). The park is home to a growing number of American bison (opposite). At an estimated 80 million strong in 1800, the number of bison dropped to about 500 a century later owing to overhunting.

With soaring pinnacles, twisted valleys, and towering buttes, it's easy to understand how the Badlands got its name. French fur traders, who encountered this landscape on the edge of the Great Plains, indeed found it "bad land" to cross. Now it's a geologic theme park of sorts, where erosion reveals a beauty in the passage of time.

Perhaps it's no surprise that such an otherworldly setting once held an ancient sea and was later home to prehistoric animals like alligators and three-toed horses, whose remains turn up regularly. In 2010, seven-year-old park visitor Kylie Ferguson found a saber-toothed cat skull in what has since become a rich fossil quarry.

Today travelers often encounter startlingly large bison, which can weigh 2,000 pounds (907 kg), grazing by the road. This part of South Dakota is also home to eagles, rattlesnakes, and bighorn sheep. You might want to use your GPS to locate another wildlife highlight, Roberts Prairie Dog Town, off unpaved Sage Creek Rim Road. Everywhere the landscape amazes, with fantastical shapes and colors ranging from yellow-and-gray mounds to red rocks and black shale.

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

The scenery is certainly spectacular viewed from a car, but a hike is really the only way to experience the Badlands. Adventurers on the 1.5-mile (2.4 km) Notch Trail snake their way through a canyon and then face the intimidating prospect of scaling a log ladder up a cliff. **Caution:** The trail is slippery after rain and has sheer drops. But once atop the butte, the path leads to a notch in the canyon wall, framing a panoramic view of the White River Valley.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

Visitation is highest during summer, but spring and fall travelers get the bonus of mild weather and lighter crowds. Winter weather varies but can bring punishing storms. The South Unit's White River Visitor Center is open in summer only; check with the Ben Reifel Visitor Center for specific times.

*PLANNING

The park is located 6.8 miles (11 km) south of Interstate 90, 75 miles (120 km) east of Rapid City, South Dakota. A 40-mile (64 km) loop drive on State Route 240 can take most of a day, with stops for hikes and overlooks.

*WEBSITES

nps.gov/badl

Indeed, this is easily accessible wilderness. A 40-mile (64 km) loop, connecting at both ends to Interstate 90, takes you through the heart of this once impassable outback. The sights come quickly when starting from the east, beginning with the Badlands Wall, an eroding cliff stretching out over 100 miles (161 km), mostly within the park. The formation marks a break in the prairie, pulling back the ground cover to reveal the stark beauty of a half million years of erosion—a process that is continuing even now, with some areas losing up to one inch (2.5 cm) every year. In another half million years, the Badlands will be gone.

Learn much more at the park's Ben Reifel Visitor Center, which (along with welcome water and air-conditioning) features great exhibits outlining the relentless natural forces responsible for the strange scenery. If you come during the summer, you may see paleontologists carefully working with artifacts, eager to share their discoveries with the public.

Although remote, the park can be busy during summer days. Savvy visitors know to camp out or at least arrange to be on-site at dusk: There's an undeniable beauty here toward sunset, when the harsh light of midday yields to a more forgiving view and long shadows soften the landscape. It still feels like another planet, but it's a welcoming one.

VISIT LIKE A LOCAL

Few travelers make it to the park's remote Stronghold District, located on the Oglala Sioux's Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. But if you have a 4x4 vehicle and the nerve to drive dirt tracks across a former military bombing range, you'll find the region's most spectacular scenery at Sheep Mountain Table. Nearby, it's history that stirs the soul at Stronghold Table, which preserves the site of one of the last known Ghost Dances of the 19th century, a mystical Native American ceremony outlawed by the U.S. government.

"My favorite thing is doing the park loop on my motorcycle. It's just different all the time."

– Rick Husted,
third-generation owner
of Wall Drug Store



Sunrise awakens the varied strata
of color in South Dakota's Badlands
National Park.



MY SHOT

Grand Canyon, Arizona

The 900-year-old cliffside granaries at Nankoweap are quiet reminders that the Grand Canyon has been inhabited and viewed as a sacred place by Native Americans for centuries. I dreamed up this image years earlier when I first visited this site. It took half a decade to get the boating and campsite permits and the moon to align. Since you can't touch the granaries, I used small lasers to light the windows and, with the help of a full moon and a long exposure (almost a minute), got the shot.

– Pete McBride, *National Geographic* photographer



SALAR DE UYUNI

A crisp white world, with more than a pinch of salt



Some 25,000 tons (22,675 tonnes) of edible salt are extracted each year from surreal Salar de Uyuni (above and opposite), the largest salt flat in the world.

Vast, surreal, and whiter than freshly laundered sheets, Bolivia's Salar de Uyuni is a landscape so dazzlingly bright that sunglasses aren't a luxury—they're a vital piece of safety equipment. At 4,086 square miles (10,583 sq km) and with 11 billion tons (10 billion tonnes) of salt, the world's largest salt flats, in southwestern Bolivia, are rightly marked out as one of South America's natural wonders not to be missed. To explore here is to feel as if you've stepped into a toothpaste commercial or a dream, a brilliant white world that stretches to, and beyond, the horizon.

The massive *salar* (salt flats, or salt desert) formed from the remains of prehistoric (now evaporated) Lake Minchin—though local legend claims it's composed of the breast milk and tears of Tunupa, the mountain goddess, after she was betrayed by her husband. This area is rich with Andean cultures, including Quechua and Aymara, and the little islands across the salar contain shrines to Pachamama (Earth Mother) where locals leave gifts, including cigarettes and coca leaves.

Light fills the sky, bouncing off the salt lake's glistening surface. Time your visit right and a surface layer of rainwater, which evaporates again by the summer, means a perfectly reflective sheen that mirrors the sky. The cool high-altitude (11,985-foot/3,653 m) air of the Altiplano is as pure as the landscape. There's little vegetation, except the island's tall,

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

You could see the Salar de Uyuni from the confines of a 4x4, or you could experience it with the adrenaline rush and sense of freedom it deserves, riding a motorbike across what feels like the world's biggest ice rink (the surface looks like ice and snow, but it's solid and crunchy). Open up the throttle and soar across this beautiful landscape—on a motorcycle, you can go anywhere on the giant white plain, exploring far away from any other tourists or signs of civilization. motorcycletourbolivia.com

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

January and February are best for seeing eerily beautiful reflective surfaces, but rain between Dec. and March can make travel difficult. The flats start to dry beginning in April, with June–Sept. offering the best climate and travel conditions. Take warm clothing, as June and July can be cold and snow occasionally makes access difficult.

*PLANNING

It's recommended to book tours in advance and to find reliable safe operators through trusted travel companies such as Journey Latin America. From La Paz it's quickest and often cheapest to take a regional flight direct to Uyuni, but many opt to come by car for a slower, more scenic trip via Oruro. A slow train from Oruro arrives in Uyuni late at night; or travel overland from Potosí or northern Chile.

*WEBSITES

boliviatravelsite.com,
journeylatinamerica.com

slow-growing, thorny cacti, and not much wildlife, apart from stray vicuñas and llamas or the pink flamingoes feeding close to shore.

Salt is all around, though, from the stalls in “lakeside” villages selling salt trinkets and souvenirs right up to the local hotels crafted—in both bricks and furniture—from the abundant white stuff. Men with shovels dig piles of salt at the edge of the lake. Around 28,000 tons (25,400 tonnes) of salt are mined from the flats each year; up to 70 percent of the world's lithium reserves are found here, with China, Japan, and others lining up to help mine it (hopefully without destroying one of the world's most pristine and beautiful landscapes).

There are no roads across the salt, just faint tracks where vehicles have traveled. Outsiders would easily get lost; local drivers navigate using Tunupa volcano and other jagged distant peaks beyond the shoreline.

With no markers on the salt flats, the whiteness and light play tricks on the eyes; something far away can look close, and vice versa. Travelers can take playful advantage of this, with quirky photographs that toy with perspective, snapping their “tiny” friends tumbling out of Coke bottles or cradling them in the palm of their giant hands.

VISIT LIKE A LOCAL

Standard 4x4 tours ship travelers across to Isla Incahuasi, which has a restaurant on it but can get quite crowded. Oddly, there's another island (there are dozens across Salar de Uyuni), Isla del Pescado (Fish Island), just a few minutes' drive from Incahuasi where far fewer tours go. Here it's likely you'll have the island to yourself. Climb the cliff tops for absolute silence and views over what feels like an Arctic wilderness, just with an added pinch or two of salt (an understatement) instead of ice and snow.

“Some of the better 4x4 tours cross the salt lake to the sacred volcano—there's also a cave close by containing the remains of mummies from the Chalpa tribe dating back 1,300 years, with the clothing, skin, and hair still in remarkably good condition.”

– Robin Thomas,
motorcycle guide



Like a regiment of alien volcanoes,
piles of drying salt await transport
from Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia.



EXPLODING IN COLOR



Lavender fields at Sénanque Abbey, France

Christmas Island, Australia

Each rainy season Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean witnesses one of the world's most spectacularly colorful migrations as a moving tide of millions of crimson red crabs make their yearly pilgrimage from the island's central forests to breed at the ocean shore.



Lake Nakuru, Kenya

In the heart of the Kenyan Great Rift Valley, Lake Nakuru hosts one of the greatest bird spectacles on the planet as hundreds of thousands of greater and lesser pink flamingos flock, in blankets of pink, to the water's edge to feed on the lake's algae.

Mallory Square, Key West, Florida

Each night this buzzing Key West square fills with vendors, street performers, and acrobats. But the star of the show is the sky, transformed into blazing oranges, pearly pinks, and velvety purples as the sun drops into the Gulf of Mexico.

The Lubéron, France

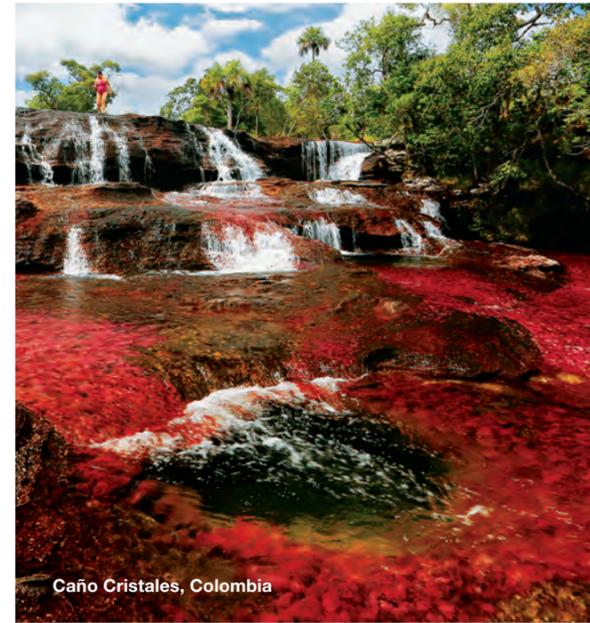
Across the seasons the Lubéron Massif is alive with color—with almond blooms, red poppies, fall foliage, and more. July is no exception; it is when regimented rows of fragrant lavender bushes peak in vibrant purple across the picturesque Provence landscape. The fields of Sénanque Abbey near Gordes provide the quintessential display.

Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada

Directly under the "Aurora Oval," Yellowknife is a northern lights hot spot where curtainlike waves of the aurora borealis twist and writhe across the vast skies of the Canadian wilderness in dazzling shades of green, yellow, purple, and red.

Erg Chebbi Dunes, Morocco

Constantly shifting in the North African winds, the golden dunes of the Moroccan Sahara take on a different hue every hour but are at their most spectacular at sunrise and sunset, when their curved shadows contrast with the sun-burnished sand.



Caño Cristales, Colombia

Grand Prismatic Spring, Wyoming

Yellowstone National Park's Grand Prismatic is the largest—and most colorful—hot spring in the United States. Its rainbow halo is the consequence of pigmented bacteria in the microbial mats that grow around its edge, its deep blue center the result of its depth and purity.

Caño Cristales, Colombia

Caño Cristales, the river of five colors, runs through Macarena National Park in central Colombia. On sunny days from July to November, the combination of the *Macarenia clavigera* plant, the chemistry of the rocks, and the sunlight turns this river into a liquid rainbow.

Hitsujiyama Park, Japan

Blooming close to the ground in glorious blankets of pink, white, and magenta, the shibazakura flowers of Hitsujiyama Park in Chichibu are truly sublime. Commonly known as moss pink, the 400,000 or so vivid blooms, arranged in bold patterns, are best in April and May.

Vatnajökull National Park, Iceland

This is one of the best places to experience Iceland's magnificent crystal-blue ice caves. Their fantastical formations, in vibrant tones of cerulean, cobalt, and aquamarine, last only for the winter season, before melting in the warmth of spring.



Inside an ice cave at Vatnajökull National Park, Iceland

ISLE OF SKYE, SCOTLAND

THE QUIRAING

A geological wonderland in the north of Skye

Just above Staffin Bay in the northeast of the Scottish Isle of Skye rises the Quiraing, part of the Trotternish Ridge geologic phenomenon, formed when the weight of volcanic lava flow on the region's sandstone and limestone caused massive landslips. The result was this statuary of basalt pinnacles—towering rock pillars and overgrown obelisks on a most majestic green carpet unraveling down steep slopes to the sea. Closer to shore, ice scouring of Jurassic rock rounded lower gully formations, leaving rolling hills and bumps while other high rises of the Quiraing, like the 120-foot (37 m) so-called Needle, are still “young” and a bit, er, unstable. Even today shifting slips still morph the landscape, as evidenced by frequent road repairs.

From the Bealach Ollasgairte car park, a circuitous 4.3-mile (7 km) footpath weaves through the Quiraing's geological folds to its summit, crisscrossing nicknamed sites like the Table, a football field-size plateau hidden amid this stone stadium. The so-called Prison got its name from the rock walls that form a surrounding “fortress,” perhaps used as such against Viking invaders in earlier centuries. Beyond the Quiraing, other curious formations jut from the Trotternish Ridge, including the Old Man of Storr, Kilt Rock, and the plummeting Mealt Waterfall. And don't miss the rippled terrain of Fairy Glen—a miniature Quiraing—outside the nearby village of Uig.

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

Many anchor south in Portree, but you'll find the Flodigarry Hotel (hotelintheskye.co.uk) much closer to the Quiraing, with newly renovated circa-1895 lodge rooms named for such revered Scots as William Wallace and a pub serving whiskeys fireside from Talisker Distillery. To the north are spectacular viewpoints at Rubha Hunish—Skye's northernmost point. Finish up in Uig with a pint by the pier at Isle of Skye Brewing Co. skyeale.com



The colorful houses of Portree harbor (above) pale in comparison with the nuanced palette of the Quiraing (opposite), a still moving landslip on the Isle of Skye.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

The Isle's Highland Games in August are enough reason to head here in the summer, but you'll also find the Fèis an Eilein, or Skye Festival, July–Aug. in south Skye.

*PLANNING

The Quiraing is not on a direct bus route. Come by car from the Scottish mainland via the Skye Bridge in Kyle; the Mallaig–Armadale Ferry; or the ferry from the Outer Hebrides (Tarbert or Lochmaddy) into the port at Uig. Park at Bealach Ollasgairte.

*WEBSITES

seall.co.uk, theskyeguide.com



NORWAY

SPITSBERGEN

Arctic wonderland at the top of Europe



Cloud-wreathed mountains of the remote Svalbard archipelago greet hikers along the Arctic tundra (above), where Spitsbergen hosts some 3,000 polar bears each year (opposite).

Norway's northern extreme is an Arctic version of the Galápagos, a vast and untamed island where wildlife is abundant—and people insignificant—amid a landscape of glaciers, snowcapped mountains, and iceberg-choked fjords.

Part of the Svalbard archipelago, Spitsbergen counts more polar bears (some 3,000 pass through) than year-round human residents, a testament to both its extreme climate and utter isolation hundreds of miles north of the European mainland. From walrus and reindeer herds that run a hundred strong to bearded seal, arctic fox, beluga whales, and more than a dozen seabird species, animal life is rich and varied thanks to the island's unique geography. After its long journey across the North Atlantic, the Gulf Stream finally peters out on Spitsbergen's western shore, releasing the region from the clutches of polar ice for a few sun-splashed months each summer and generating wildflowers on land and abundant food in the surrounding sea.

Although European whalers established temporary bases here in the early 17th century, the first permanent settlers didn't arrive until the early 20th century, to work coal deposits. Founded by American industrialist John M. Longyear, one of the those early mining towns evolved into Longyearbyen, the archipelago capital, recently revived as a funky wilderness

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

Despite its harsh climate, Spitsbergen is actually a year-round destination. During the summer, a variety of passenger vessels explore the island's fjord-rich west coast. In winter, tourism activities are restricted to the region around Longyearbyen.

*PLANNING

Spitsbergen hovers on the edge of the Arctic Circle about 570 miles (917 km) north of the Norwegian mainland. Daily flights connect the island with Oslo and Tromsø. There is no regular boat service between mainland Norway and the archipelago. Hurtigruten is among several companies that organize Spitsbergen cruises during the ice-free summer months.

*WEBSITES

svalbard.net/en,
hurtigruten.com

town with art galleries, gourmet restaurants, and the planet's northernmost music festival (October's Dark Season Blues). The island's only other town is nearby Barentsburg, an old Russian coal-mining colony that's a charming throwback to Soviet days.

Most of Spitsbergen is an uninhabited wilderness accessible mainly by boat in summer and snowmobile in winter. Seven national parks protect its natural treasures, including a north-west coast spangled with spectacular landforms. Surrounded by glaciers, Magdalenefjorden preserves the ruins of a 17th-century British whaling station called Gravneset. Scattered along a white-sand strand are old stone blubber ovens and a cemetery holding some 130 graves.

Framed by jagged snow-covered peaks at the head of Liefdefjord, Monacobreen glacier, more than 5 miles (8 km) across, was discovered during an 1899 scientific voyage organized by Prince Albert I of Monaco. NASA tests space suits, instruments, and techniques for future Mars missions amid Bockfjord's alien landscape of rust-colored desert hills, black volcanic peaks, and simmering hot springs. Sandbars off the north coast swarm with walrus and predatory polar bear, in a bleak landscape on the cusp of 80 degrees north latitude only some 600 miles (965 km) from the North Pole.

“When I was growing up here, there was no reason to stay. I couldn't wait to get out. But when I did, I realized what I was missing and after only one year I came back. I couldn't live without the nature, the simple life, the quiet.”

– Ingrid Kårstad,
wilderness guide

VISIT LIKE A LOCAL

Most in Longyearbyen own their own snowmobile, used for getting around town as well as weekend recreation in the great white wilderness that surrounds the territorial capital. Snowmobile trails along the southern edge of the Isfjord lead to glaciers, ice caves, and wildlife areas, as well as Pyramiden ghost town, the towering snowcapped cliffs of Tempelfjord, and the Russian settlement at Barentsburg. Spitsbergen Travel offers rentals and excursions. spitsbergentravel.com



UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

With crisp, clean air and little artificial light, Spitsbergen is ideal for stargazing, especially the period from mid-November through late January, when the Arctic isle experiences 24 hours of darkness. The aurora borealis (northern lights) is best seen between September and March; go online to see the Kjell Henriksen Observatory's daily online aurora forecast (visit-lyngenfjord.com). Svalbard Villmarkssenter organizes northern lights evenings including a meal served around an open fire. svalbardvillmarkssenter.no

Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen's capital city, glows at dusk.



MY SHOT

Flatey Island, Iceland

Flatey is the largest of Iceland's western islands, believed to have been forged under the weight of a great glacier during the last ice age. Most houses there are occupied only during the summer season. We ran into these two brothers, wearing their Icelandic sweaters that their grandmother has knitted for them, selling little painted pebbles to visitors from a small road stand on the island's only street. They looked right at the camera, making this a particularly powerful portrait.

– Sisse Brimberg
and Cotton Coulson,
National Geographic
photographers



»MORE TOP PLACES

UNFORGETTABLE ANIMAL-WATCHING



Black-browed albatross colony, Steeple Jason Island, Falkland Islands

Black-browed Albatross, Falkland Islands

In the short season between hatching and first flight, 70 percent of the world's black-browed albatross population cover cliffs on the Falklands, sitting on Dr. Seussish tufts and stretching their wings. Once they hit the air, they may not land again for months or even years.

Porcupine Caribou Migration, Canada

In Canada's remote Vuntut National Park, and across the border into Alaska, porcupine caribou migrate in herds so wide they trample ground flat as an interstate. Some 130,000 animals move more than 1,500 miles (2,414 km) annually.

Salmon Spawn, Southeast Alaska

In late summer, millions of salmon return to their birth streams to spawn and die. At the end of each summer a quarter million fish and a hundred bears show up at Anan Wildlife Observatory, near the town of Wrangell.

Mexican Free-Tailed Bats, New Mexico

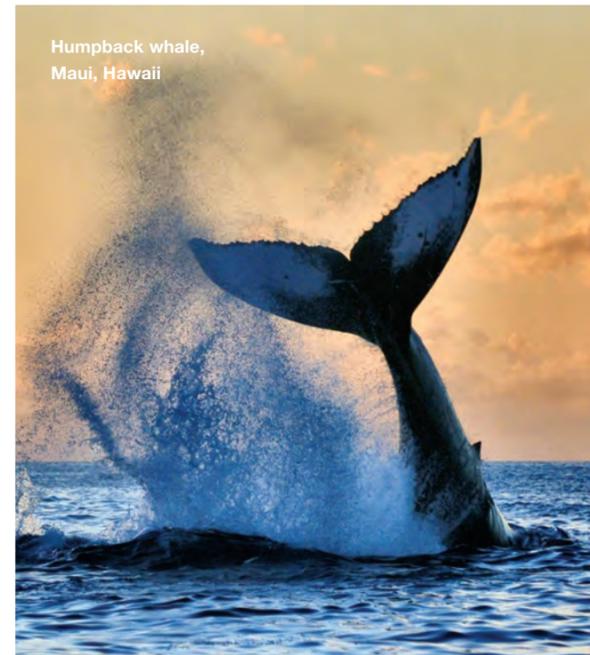
Every summer's twilight, about a half million bats pour out of the entrance to Carlsbad Caverns in southern New Mexico. The bats swirl, orient, and then form a river of life in the sky.

Monarch Butterflies, Mexico

Millions of monarch butterflies, each not much heavier than a postage stamp, migrate up to 3,000 miles (4,828 km) to winter in the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, about 60 miles (97 km) northwest of Mexico City, covering the trees so thickly the trunks can bend under the orange-and-black wings.

Puffins, Scotland

Ask a cartoonist to draw a bird, and odds are it will look like a puffin, with a bright, striped beak, and unlikely flights. The Shetland Islands have seven main puffin colonies, with perhaps the most scenic at Foula, where they cover Britain's highest cliff.



Humpback whale, Maui, Hawaii

Humpback Whales, Hawaii

Humpbacks summer in southeastern Alaska and winter in Maui—not a bad life. Best spots to see these leviathans with their new calves are off west Maui, around Wailea and Lahaina. Nothing like watching a 30-ton (27 tonne) mom teach her 10-ton (9 tonne) baby how to jump out of the water.

Lemurs, Madagascar

More than 100 species of lemur live in Madagascar—and nowhere else on Earth. With huge eyes, long tails, and a face somewhere between a squirrel and a cat, lemurs range from the 3-foot (0.9 m) indri to Madame Berthe's mouse lemur, which weighs about the same as an AA battery.

Leatherback Sea Turtles, Trinidad

As many as 10,000 of these armored giants come ashore in Trinidad, an awesome concentration of the largest turtle species left, weighing up to 2,000 pounds (907 kg). A female may lay some 80 eggs a dozen times during the six-month breeding season, with the babies hatching about two months later.

Mountain Gorillas, Uganda

The Bwindi Impenetrable National Park is home to roughly half the 750 mountain gorillas remaining in the wild. Expect thick jungle, a lot of sweat, and then the miracle of going eye to eye with the very deep gaze of a watchful silverback.



A young mountain gorilla and its mother in Bwindi Impenetrable Park, Uganda



MY SHOT

Majlis al Jinn, Oman

Majlis al Jinn in the Sultanate of Oman is not only one of the largest cave rooms on Earth, it is also among the most beautiful. The dimensions are truly staggering: In this image the climber is ascending a 600-foot (183 m) rope toward the ceiling. The shaft of sunlight behind him occurs only at certain times of the year, which is why I was in the Arabian Peninsula in August, when outside temperatures were over 120°F (49°C). But inside the cave was cool and nice.

- Stephen Alvarez,
National Geographic
photographer



NAMIBIA

SOSSUSVLEI DUNES

Sandy summits along Africa's southwest coast



Sossusvlei (opposite and above) is home to the largest sand dunes in the world, shaped by the wind. High levels of iron in the sand create its distinctive glowing hue.

Colossal orange, red, and pink sand dunes flank the Tsauchab River Valley of west-central Namibia, an area collectively called Sossusvlei after a large salt pan that simmers among the shifting sands. Nearly as high as the Empire State Building, several of the granular formations tower more than a thousand feet (305 m), including the mammoth Big Daddy and the ethereal Dune 45, which seems like a landform on Mars rather than planet Earth.

Created by Orange River silt flowing into the Atlantic Ocean and then spread along the coast by the Benguela Current, the Sossusvlei dunes are the most striking feature of the Namib Desert. The wind shapes and moves them from every direction, sometimes into crescents or radiating stars. The ruddy colors derive from a high degree of iron in the sand, with the older dunes showing off even more vivid hues than the younger mounds.

Entirely enclosed within Namib Naukluft National Park, Sossusvlei also harbors desert-adapted rare or unusual flora and fauna. Among the creatures that roam the dunes are the shovel-snouted lizard, ostrich, jackal, and gemsbok (oryx) antelope. Another salt pan, called Dead Vlei, shelters a ghost forest of camelthorn trees, some more than eight centuries old.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

The national park is open year-round, but extreme summer heat makes April–Oct. the best time to visit, especially for those who wish to hike the dunes.

*PLANNING

A good paved road connects Sossusvlei and Sesriem Gate, the main entrance to the park, which is about 200 road miles (322 km) from Windhoek. Most visitors drive themselves to the area in cars or RVs rented in Windhoek; a 4x4 is not necessary. African Profile Safaris arranges private road and air transfers to the park. profilenamibia.com

*WEBSITES

sossusvlei.org

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

Sunrise brings out the most intense colors at Sossusvlei and also the coolest temperatures for climbing the dunes. Vehicles start queuing at the park village of Sesriem in the early morning dark—and when rangers finally open the gate, there is a slow-motion rush (everyone keeping to the national park speed limit) to the best viewpoints and trailheads. An alternative to the terrestrial view is a sunrise hot air balloon flight with Namib Sky, run by an experienced Belgian balloonist and his family. namibsky.com



MY SHOT

Serengeti National Park, Tanzania

For two years I watched this remote Vumbi pride of 5 female lions cooperatively raise 13 cubs in Serengeti National Park. Wild lions are disappearing, and the great Serengeti ecosystem may well be one of their last stands. This image is one of my favorites because it shows the close bonds we saw every day. For this shot I was able to gradually move our specially converted Land Rover close to the lions' resting site hidden near a water hole, then to carefully climb onto the roof and shoot straight down, as if from a balloon.

- Michael Nichols,
National Geographic
photographer

INDONESIA

KOMODO NATIONAL PARK

Indonesia's real-life land of dragons

The world's largest lizards, pink-sand beaches, and primeval landscapes set Komodo National Park apart from the rest of the vast Southeast Asian archipelago. The park comprises 3 main islands (Padar, Rinca, and Komodo) and 26 smaller ones, plus the marine areas between. Volcanic in origin, the islands blend savanna grasslands, wooden ravines, and thick mangrove swamps.

The most striking attraction of this real-life Jurassic Park is the Komodo dragon, a monitor lizard that can grow up to 10 feet (3 m) and 150 pounds (68 kg). Hunting in packs and equipped with sharp teeth and claws, the lizards are among the globe's most fearsome carnivores: Komodo dragons have been known to stalk and devour humans, even in recent times.

All of the hoopla surrounding the lizards overshadows the park's other wildlife wonders—crab-eating macaque monkeys, vast colonies of fruit bats, the Javan spitting cobra, and more than 70 bird species, including the rare orange-footed scrub fowl and the lesser sulphur-crested cockatoo. The warm tropical waters around the islands are equally rich with life, a mosaic of coral reefs, shallow bays, and deep channels that harbor ten dolphins species, five different types of sea turtle, the endangered Indonesian dugong, and migrating blue and sperm whales.

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

Although dragons gather around the visitor area at Loh Liang Bay, the best way to view them in their natural habitat is a hike into the Komodo Island wilderness. Hire a guide at the ranger station and set off into the bush on walks that can vary from one hour to an entire day. All the guides carry a long forked pole to push dragons away should they venture too close. Along the way you might see mother dragons tending their nests, youngsters perched in trees, or a group of dragons stalking prey.



Stalking the islands of Komodo National Park (opposite), the fearsome Komodo dragon (above) can reach lengths of 10 feet (3 m).

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

July–Oct. is the mating and nesting season for Komodo dragons, when they are not as easy to see. The rainy season runs Jan.–March, leaving April–June the best time to visit.

*PLANNING

Komodo National Park is about 250 miles (402 km) east of Bali. The most common way to visit the park is via multiday boat tours originating in Bali or Lombok through companies like Peramatour. Scuba excursions are also organized by Dive Komodo and other outfitters.

*WEBSITES

komodo-park.com,
peramatour.com,
divekomodo.com

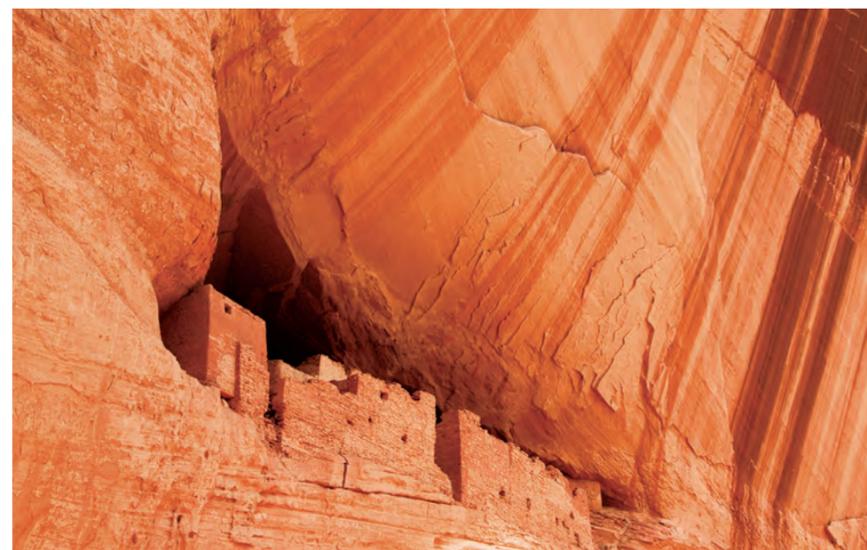




ARIZONA

CANYON DE CHELLEY

Navajo legends come to life in a scarred red-rock canyon



Tucked into a cliff, the White House ruins (above) at Canyon de Chelly give evidence to the presence of Native Americans for nearly 5,000 years. Opposite: The canyon's 800-foot-tall (244 m) Spider Rock.

Like a skyscraper standing in the desert, Spider Rock towers over Arizona's red-rock landscape. The 800-foot (244 m) sandstone spire forms the spiritual heart of Canyon de Chelly National Monument, run jointly by the National Park Service and the Navajo Nation. As in a cathedral, visitors to the remote overlook are typically silenced by the sight spread before them—and once the wind picks up, it's easy to believe the Native American legend of a supernatural woman who inhabits the rock and weaves fabric with rays of the sun.

This place, located near the Four Corners region, is still held sacred by the Navajo people, who continue to live seasonally in the canyon bottoms, growing corn, squash, and beans. Traditional foods such as posole (a hominy stew), blue corn pancakes, and fry bread are served in the cafeteria of the park's Native-run hotel, providing you with a taste of the rich culture that once dominated the American Southwest.

Native Americans have lived in the area for nearly 5,000 years, building shelters in the sheer rock faces. Over the centuries, they faced invasions from neighboring tribes, the Spanish, and later U.S. colonel Kit Carson, who laid waste to the canyon in 1864. Today visitors to this sacred land can drive the canyon rim roads, along a landscape that seems frozen in time.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

Although the park is open year-round, try to avoid the heart of summer, when temperatures can exceed 100°F (38°C). Winters can be pleasant, although temperatures can drop below freezing, and occasionally there's a dusting of snow.

*PLANNING

The canyon is 3 miles (4.8 km) from the tiny town of Chinle, Arizona, a drive of about 1 hour 40 minutes from Gallup, New Mexico, and just over 3 hours from Flagstaff, Arizona. Along with the park hotel, the area has campgrounds and a few motels.

*WEBSITES

nps.gov/cach, navajonationalparks.org/html/canyondechelly.htm

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

Except for a short hike to White House Overlook, the only way to enter the canyon interior is via Indian-led tours, which offer a chance to experience the majesty firsthand and learn about Navajo life. Look out for pictographs on the canyon walls and inside the ancient dwellings. The popular 4x4 excursions may cover territory but lack intimacy. Instead, join a guide on foot or horseback and slowly descend into the spirit of the place. The park website provides a list of authorized tours and guides.

BRONX, NEW YORK

NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN

Vibrant plant life in New York City



The multipaned Enid A. Haupt Conservatory (opposite) is equally sparkling after dark, particularly during special exhibits such as the springtime Orchid Show (above).

In 1888, married botanists Nathaniel Lord Britton and Elizabeth Gertrude Britton visited the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in London, and were inspired to give New York its own majestic, great garden. The result was the New York Botanical Garden, a sprawling, luxurious 250-acre (101 ha) landscape designed on a native forest site cut through by the Bronx River, with an unparalleled array of more than a million plants and architecturally magnificent historic buildings.

The Garden's crowning glory is the soaring, light-filled Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, an enormous Victorian glasshouse that houses 11 habitats, including American and African deserts, rain forests, and aquatic and carnivorous plants. Also of note and particularly vibrant when burning red and orange in autumn, the Thain Family Forest, at the Garden's center, is the largest remaining piece of New York City's original wooded landscape. The NYBG's 50 gardens include a conifer arboretum, gorgeous in winter snowfalls and resplendent with cherry trees in the spring; a meticulously designed rose garden; and an azalea garden, which erupts into a canvas of bright pink, purple, and coral flowers in late April and early May, intertwined with nearly a mile of walking paths. Truly a year-round delight.

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

Every winter, the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory hosts the exquisite Holiday Train Show, a family-friendly extravaganza that kids love and that brings out the child in adults, too. The landmark greenhouse, reminiscent of a glass palace, becomes a vast cityscape, with intricate miniatures of more than 150 New York City landmarks, all made from natural materials and surrounded by lush plant life. Model trains weave among the buildings and chug overhead on bridges that are, like the buildings, uncanny NYC replicas.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

The New York Botanical Garden is open Tues.–Sun. (with some holiday Mondays thrown in), year-round, except Thanksgiving and Christmas. Check the website for season-specific shows and walking tours, including fall foliage, the Train Show in winter, the Orchid Show in spring, and the Garden's various concert series and art exhibitions.

*PLANNING

The Garden is about 13 miles (21 km) north of midtown Manhattan, in the Bronx, accessible by the Metro-North Harlem Railroad or the B, D, and 4 subway trains. Once there, use the tram to get around, or simply navigate by foot.

*WEBSITES

nybg.org



NORTH CAROLINA/VIRGINIA

BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY

Taming Appalachia's rugged ridgeline

Swooping gracefully into valleys from raptorlike heights, the carefully curated vistas of the Blue Ridge Parkway have become iconic American images. Rolling from western Virginia into North Carolina, the scenic road overlooks fields farmed by Native Americans centuries ago, 19th-century pioneer homesteads and mills, and the hazy peaks of the southern Alleghenies. Dubbed America's Favorite Drive, the parkway offers a slow road through a spectacular landscape with its leisurely 45-mph (72 kph) speed limit.

Bridged in stone and curved around the highest peaks in the eastern United States, the 469-mile (755 km) road—commissioned in 1935 and originally built by the Civilian Conservation Corps—took a full half century to complete. Parkway engineers blasted 26 tunnels through the solid mountain rock, leaving other summits to punctuate the views. Landscape architect Stanley Abbott strategically repositioned silvery weathered cabins and other built elements along the course of the highway as he orchestrated a series of pastoral panoramas.

Today's visitors can trace the first blush of purple rhododendrons creeping up the hillsides in spring or contrast the ridgelines' brilliant autumn foliage with still summery meadows below. Period signage guides you to a series of well-maintained hiking trails.

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

The Blue Ridge's mountain music traditions enrich its landscape. The Blue Ridge Music Center in Galax, Virginia (blueridgemusiccenter.org), includes an outdoor amphitheater and interactive exhibits. Two regional music trails—Virginia's The Crooked Road (myswva.org/tcr) and Blue Ridge Music Trails of North Carolina (blueridgemusicnc.com)—suggest stages where you can hear spirited performances of old-time, gospel, and string band music and enjoy high-energy clogging and flatfooting.



Whatever your mode of transport, the fluid curves of the Blue Ridge Parkway (above) offer beautiful vistas of the southern Alleghenies (opposite).

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

The Parkway is open year-round, with occasional local closures for snow and ice (check ahead before travel). Many roadside facilities are closed in winter.

*PLANNING

Maintained by the National Park Service, the Parkway is free—and popular, with 15 million visitors a year. The Parkway links Shenandoah National Park near Waynesboro, Virginia (Milepost 0), with Great Smoky Mountains National Park near Cherokee, North Carolina (Milepost 469), with connections to all major highways.

*WEBSITES

nps.gov/blri, blueridgeparkway.org, virtualblueridge.com





MY SHOT

Orkney, Scotland

From 100 feet (30 m) in the air, the Ring of Brodgar stands out like a beacon from another age—and it is. My camera, dangling from a kite, caught the great Neolithic stone circle on a narrow neck of land in the Orkney Islands. I was thrilled to see it from this vantage, as the sea eagles soaring overhead might have five thousand years ago, when the ancient stone circle was part of a sacred pilgrimage route to a temple complex and ancestral tombs nearby.

– Jim Richardson,
National Geographic
photographer



BERLIN, GERMANY

MUSEUM ISLAND

Classic antiquities in an avant-garde city



The famed bust of Nefertiti, dubbed the “most beautiful Berliner,” is star of the Neues Museum (above). Nearby, the imposing Ishtar Gate rises again at the Pergamon Museum (opposite).

Thanks to Germany’s interest in archaeology at the turn of the 20th century, Berlin has amassed an embarrassment of antique riches, many housed in impressive buildings cradled by the Spree River on what is known as Museum Island. As you roam their vast galleries filled with restored monuments from around Europe and the Near East, appreciation of their beauty and age is in some cases dwarfed by awe of their sheer scale.

One memorable experience is walking through the massive 46-foot (14 m) Ishtar Gate at the Pergamon Museum, famous for its eponymous Greek temple. Constructed around 575 B.C. and later reduced to rubble, the Babylonian gate is here reconstructed to its former glory, with glazed tiles made from precious lapis lazuli stones interspersed by lions, aurochs, dragons, and other significant symbols. Nearby, the Neues Museum, specializing in Egyptian and Etruscan sculptures, is home to the 3,300-year-old bust of Queen Nefertiti, which locals praise to be the “most beautiful Berliner.” The stately, neoclassical Altes Museum contains Greek and Roman antiquity, while the eclectic Bode Museum brings together Byzantine art with a precious-coin collection. Particularly now, as its multidecade renovation plan is under way, this cluster of buildings housing ancient treasures sets the world standard in celebrating and conserving world heritage for posterity.

VISIT LIKE A LOCAL

Lines to get into Museum Island’s exhibitions can often stretch for hours. With the current renovation work at the Pergamon, the queue has only grown longer. To skip the long wait, purchase a time-slotted ticket in advance, which grants the purchaser a window of 30 minutes to enter the museum. Holders of a Museum Pass (berlinpass.com), which opens doors to more than 50 attractions, including the museums on Museum Island, for three days should also sign up online for an appointment for free entry.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

As a city, Berlin is a year-round destination with plenty to do any season. Summers are especially glorious, with long days and warm weather that bring out the best in the city and its people.

*PLANNING

The public bus 100, a route served by a double-decker, connects Berlin’s many famed sites, including the Alexanderplatz TV tower, Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, and Museum Island.

*WEBSITES

visitberlin.de/en/spot/museum-island, whc.unesco.org/en/list/896

GRANADA, SPAIN

THE ALHAMBRA

European Islamic architecture at its most sublime

The sheer walls of the Alhambra citadel—described by Moorish poets as “a pearl set in emeralds”—rise majestically amid cypress and elm forests. Framed to perfection by the peaks of the Sierra Nevada behind, this fascinating multibuilding complex overlooks the Spanish city of Granada.

Although certainly impressive from the outside, the real splendor of the Alhambra lies within. Interconnected by irrigated gardens, quadrangles, pillars, and porticoes, these Mudéjar palaces are a frenzy of elaborate geometrical designs covering every available surface. Exquisitely carved wood and stucco, interlocking glazed *azulejos* (tiles), arabesque reliefs, and cedar wood marquetry ceilings overwhelm the senses at every turn.

Rebuilt in the 11th century by Muslim emirs, Calat Alhambra (meaning Red Castle in Arabic) reached its zenith in the 14th century, when the Nasrid kings, the last of the Moorish dynasties to rule on Iberian territory, added the magnificent palace compound. Their mission: to create a piece of paradise on earth. The gentle sound of running water, scintillating fountains, still pools reflecting the blue Andalusian skies, and the recently renovated Court of the Lions—with its 124 slender marble pillars and breathtaking filigree walls—ensure the spirit of the emirs lives on.

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

No trip to Granada and the Alhambra would be complete without a hike through the narrow cobble lanes of the Albayzín quarter to the Mirador de San Nicolás. This is the place of the picture postcards, the Alhambra perched on its hill with the majestic, and often snowcapped, Sierra Nevada as a backdrop. If possible, time your arrival for sunset, when the distant palace is tinged golden orange, the cafés are buzzing, and the Spanish guitars and dancers are out in force.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

For most amenable temperatures visit in spring or autumn. In summer, remember sunblock, as temperatures can climb over 100°F (38°C); winter requires a warm jacket.

*PLANNING

International flights land in Malaga, 90 minutes by car, or in Madrid or Barcelona, from where there are connections to Granada. The number of visitors to the Alhambra is limited, so it is important to book in advance, especially April–June, as tickets often sell out.

*WEBSITES

alhambraGranada.org/en, whc.unesco.org/en/list/314, renfe.com



High above the city of Granada, the glowing walls of the Alhambra (above) comprise multiple Moorish palaces connected by gardens, porticoes, and pools, as in the Court of the Myrtles (opposite).



QATAR

DOHA

A futuristic city soaring out of the desert

The glittering, ultramodern skyline of Doha, capital city of the Persian Gulf state of Qatar, is the signature image of the richest country in the world. The behemoth skyscrapers of Doha's West Bay district have shot up from a site that just decades ago was a desert hamlet of one-story, stone-and-mud homes. Doha was a small pearl-diving and fishing town until it began exporting petroleum and then natural gas; seemingly overnight it vaulted to glitzy First World status. International architecture firms jumped into Doha's building boom to design gravity-defying skyscrapers that channel the city's frenetic culture of expansion and growth.

The towering silhouettes piercing the desert sky today are kinetic, sculptural, and extravagantly lit. A sense of movement is everywhere: The cylindrical 656-foot (200 m) Tornado Tower puts on a dynamic light display nightly that evokes the vortex of a cyclone in a variety of color combinations. Nearby, the glass-sheathed Al Bidda Tower works a sense of torque and upward rotation into its profile, and the 46-story, 758-foot (231 m), dome-topped Doha Tower is clad in a patterned steel skin that recalls the design of ancient Islamic sunscreens. Doha's tallest skyscraper of the moment (several others that may rise higher are under

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

The Bird Market in Souk Waqif gives visitors a window into the centuries-old Bedouin tradition of falconry. Rows of falcons for sale are lined up on perches, their heads encased in hoods. Nearby is an area where the birds are exercised daily, with a hospital just for the falcons. The raptors, once used to hunt small game, are today kept for sport. But falcons are still so treasured that some sell for the price of a car, and Qatar Airways permits them to fly in the main cabin with their owners.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

The summer heat of Qatar's desert climate is searing. Visit Nov.–March, when temperatures are milder.

*PLANNING

Visitors need a tourist visa to visit Qatar, which you can purchase at Doha International Airport when entering the country. Doha has a public bus system that links important sites; a metro system currently under construction should be operational in the next decade. For sites off the beaten track, hire a taxi or walk—driving in Qatar on a foreign license is not advised.

*WEBSITES

qatartourism.gov.qa



Doha's renowned architectural variety is evidenced by its futuristic West Bay skyline (above) and the Victorian-style Grand Heritage Hotel (opposite).





Doha's open-air Souk Waqif (above), watched over by the illuminated spiral mosque of the Kassem Darwish Fakhro Islamic Centre, provides a curling contrast to the cubist Museum of Islamic Art (opposite), designed by I. M. Pei.

construction) is the 980-foot (299 m) torch-shaped Aspire Tower in the Doha sports complex, which housed an enormous flame at its top for the 2006 Asian Games.

There's more to Doha's architecture than flashy high-rises. Across the bay, on its own little island, is one of city's most celebrated architectural feats, the Museum of Islamic Art. Understated but imposing, it was designed by architect I. M. Pei, who undertook the project when he was in his 90s. He drew on influences of classic Islamic architecture, blended them with a modern aesthetic to reflect Doha's character, and arrived at an abstract cubist pyramid of crisp angles and clean lines. The geometry is as blocky and chiseled as the city's high-rises are slim and soaring.

One of the closest things Doha has to a historic quarter is the revitalized Souk Waqif (standing market), an open-air exchange that was a Bedouin trading center a century ago. The market had fallen into disrepair by the late 20th century but was rebuilt in 2006 to restore its 19th-century character, incorporating details of traditional Qatari architecture—like exposed timber, whitewashed mud-rendered facades, and wood roofs—in an attempt to recall a heritage fast fading from view.

“For a genuine experience that’s not touristy, walk through Souk Al Ahmed and Souk Al Asiery, behind the Fanar center; old souks with lovely fabric stores.”

– Vani Saraswathi, *journalist*

▶ VISIT LIKE A LOCAL

Set aside one whole evening to walk along Le Corniche, the broad, palm-lined 4.3-mile (6.9 km) pedestrian promenade that arcs around Doha Bay. By late in the day the temperatures have cooled to tolerable, and after dark Doha's cityscape is set off to spectacular advantage. The blazing vertical profile of the West Bay district is reflected in the dark water for double the spectacle, and the glowing white limestone of the Museum of Islamic Art looms like a massive ghost ship in the harbor.



MY SHOT

Jaipur, India

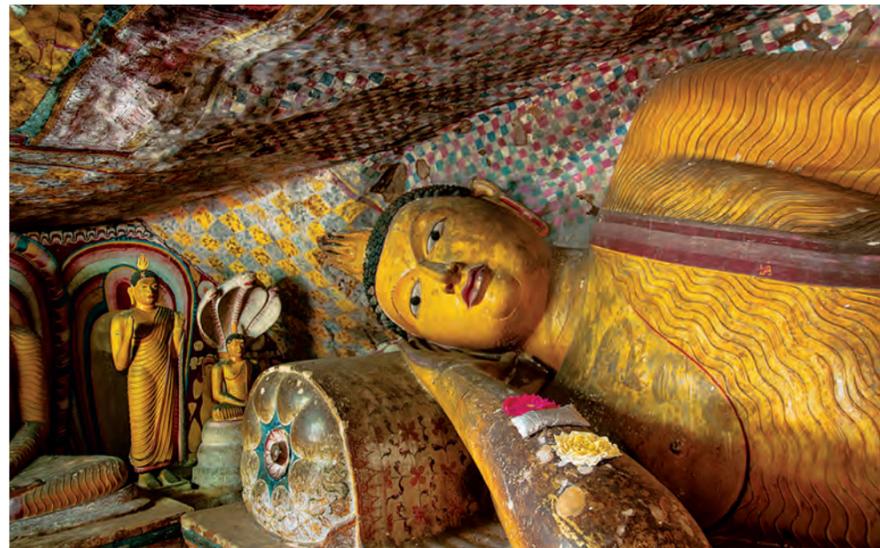
For this shot, I liked how the contrast and shadows of the afternoon sun emphasized the lines of an ancient step well in Jaipur, in the Indian state of Rajasthan. I had been living in India for almost six years and wanted to explore how our changing environment is impacting women. The image of women standing at the bottom of a once full well raises the question: As water becomes scarcer on the planet, how far will they have to walk to find it?

- Ami Vitale, *National Geographic* photographer

SRI LANKA

GOLDEN TEMPLE OF DAMBULLA

Adorned and hidden Buddhist cave temples



An enormous reclining Buddha (above) almost 50 feet (15 m) long, elaborate frescoes, and more await those who brave the entrance to Dambulla's massive cave temple complex (opposite).

Deep in the tropical undulating interior of Sri Lanka lurks a vast complex of richly decorated and Buddha-stuffed cave temples dating back to the third century B.C. The largest and best preserved of them can be found at the Golden Temple of Dambulla, 47 miles (76 km) north of the city of Kandy. This sacred place, an active monastery, includes an astounding 80 caves twisting through a rocky ridge. Within these heavily frescoed caverns, 153 statues of Buddha in various sizes and poses—including a giant sleeping Buddha—share space with countless murals and paintings of Buddha and his bodhisattva followers, depictions of Sri Lankan kings, and even a few statues of popular Hindu gods like Vishnu and Ganesh. The caves were inhabited by the exiled King Valagamba, who hid here for 14 years during the first century B.C.

Indeed, this mysterious cavernous complex dates back over two millennia and is considered integral to the history of Buddhism, namely for its preserved art but also for its role as a pilgrimage site. Five caves are considered most prominent, including the Cave of the Great Kings, Cave of the Divine King, and the Great New Monastery, dating back to the third century B.C., which archaeologists suggest was home to a prehistoric civilization long before the arrival of Buddhism transformed Sri Lanka.

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

It's possible to visit the caves on your own, but using a guide gives you access you wouldn't have otherwise. Tour Agency Audley uses local guides who don't shy away from the region's sensitive and complex history. Its 11-day Temples & Islands journey emphasizes Dambulla but also stops in mystical ancient ruins like Polonnaruwa, Kandy's iconic Temple of the Tooth, and Nuwara Eliya's chilly and verdant tea hills for hikes through the terraced plantations. audleytravel.com

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

Sri Lanka's two monsoon seasons (Yala monsoon season, May–Aug., and Maha monsoon season, Oct.–Jan.) make travel to the teardrop-shaped island tricky. High season (Dec.–March) remains the sunniest and best time to visit, with the months of April and Sept. making for a good shoulder season.

*PLANNING

Sri Lanka's main airport is just outside Colombo. Intracountry flights are expensive and limited, but travel by chauffeured car remains affordable. Sri Lanka's rickety old wooden trains are a charming retro novelty and offer an incredibly scenic ride, but they are slow and seriously lacking in modern comfort. railway.gov.lk

*WEBSITES

srilanka.travel, whc.unesco.org/en/list/561



BAGAN

History set in stone along a fabled river



Inside a pagoda in the ancient city of Bagan (above); sunrise brings definition to a few of the city's many temples (opposite).

More than 2,000 temples, monasteries, and pagodas sprawl along the eastern bank of the Irrawaddy River in northern Myanmar (Burma), all that remains of an ancient metropolis that once harbored as many as 200,000 residents. The ancient city of Bagan flourished here between the 11th and 13th centuries A.D. as the capital of the first kingdom to unite most of what now constitutes modern Myanmar. Mongol invasion quashed Bagan's power, and the city slowly faded in both importance and memory, until it was rediscovered by intrepid travelers during the days of the British Empire.

Bagan, along with Angkor in Cambodia, is one of the two most important ancient religious cities in Southeast Asia, with a vast array of sacred antique structures. Among its foremost landmarks are the huge, pyramidlike 12th-century Dhammayangyi Temple; the highly revered Ananda Temple, with its four massive golden Buddhas facing the cardinal directions; and the adjacent, soaring Thatbyinnyu Temple, highest of the shrines and a favorite place to watch the sun rise or set over the riverside plains.

The Bagan Archaeological Museum safeguards sundry treasures recovered from the site, including the "Rosetta stone of Burma"—four languages carved into a stone slab called the Myazedi inscription. The modern-day villages arrayed around Bagan produce a wide variety of traditional handicrafts, in particular the marvelous lacquerware for which the region is known.

TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

*WHEN TO GO

The climate is tropical all year, but the coolest period is Nov.–Feb., when daytime temperatures are warm but comfortable rather than scorching triple digits. Winter is also when some significant Bagan religious celebrations take place, such as the week-long Ananda Temple Festival.

*PLANNING

Bagan sits about 111 miles (179 km) southwest of Mandalay in central Myanmar. The ruins can be reached by bus and train from Mandalay, as well as daily flights from Yangon (Rangoon), but one of the more enjoyable ways to arrive is via the daily Malikha riverboat service from Mandalay. Be aware that there is a tourist tax.

*WEBSITES

baganmyanmar.com,
myanmarrivercruises.com



UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES

Spread across 26 square miles (67 sq km) of predominantly flat plain, Bagan lends itself to exploration by bicycle. Many hotels have their own bike fleets, and there are plenty of places to rent in New Bagan and other villages. Electronic bicycles (e-bikes) have become increasingly popular, allowing riders to explore even more of the ruins in a shorter time span. Family-friendly guided bike tours are available through outfitters like Grasshopper Adventures in New Bagan. grasshopperadventures.com

MY SHOT

Caucasus Mountains, Russia

Walking through isolated Ushguli, at some 7,000 feet (2,134 m) considered the highest inhabited settlement in Europe, is like visiting frozen history, untouched by centuries of wars and invasions happening elsewhere. At this altitude, light can change in a heartbeat. Often I see something, I set the tripod, and it's already gone. Here the light became smooth and gentle on the village, making the grass around even greener as the mountains far behind showed their beauty for a moment. I'm watching all these changes through my lens, so I'm ready to press the shutter.

— Massimo Bassano,
National Geographic
photographer





One of the world's largest monoliths (nearly 6 miles/9.7 km in circumference), Australia's Uluru is held sacred by the Aboriginal people.