

WHITTLESEY TRAVEL
Independent Travel Specialists

The Explorer

Magazine Issue 04 — Spring 2024

Italy: La Dolce Vita

Travel Trends 2024 ± Eastern Europe by Rail

Travel with Purpose ± Coffee Culture

In partnership with

Explore!

Explore!

Marco Solo

Solo travellers will always find themselves in good company on our small group adventures. So, there's no need to wait for the perfect travel companion – start planning where you want to explore next.



Find out more

Hello

In our first *Explorer* issue of 2024, we've looked at some of the team's top predictions for this year's travel trends. From the return of Asia to the rise of the 'chill-venture' and the e-bike revolution, check out how we'll be holidaying this year.

As a huge coffee fan, I'm excited to share a brilliant piece on the cultures and traditions of the humble cup of coffee from Clare Finney on page 26. (Tea-lovers, fear not, we've got you covered on page 31).

We've also got Italy, Antarctica, and an epic rail journey through Eastern Europe all lined up for you in this issue.

Wishing for a happy and healthy year ahead and once-in-a-lifetime adventures for all in 2024, wherever they may be.

Enjoy!



A stylized, handwritten signature in yellow ink.

Michael Edwards
Managing Director,
Explore Worldwide

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The Big Travel Trends for 2024

What will our holidays look like in the year ahead? We asked a panel of Explore experts to predict where, why and how we'll be holidaying in 2024.

Meet our experts



David Bray,
Head of Business Intelligence

Having worked in travel for 20 years, David has specialised in Greek Islands, Latin America and now is wedded to adventure travel. David's our 'man with the numbers'.



Hannah Methven,
Sustainability Specialist

Passionate about rail travel (natch), our sustainability specialist travelled by train to Marrakech, Brussels and the Alps last year. Never seen without her Water-to-Go bottle and folding coffee cup.



James Adkin,
Product Manager and Cycling Expert

Hugely well-travelled, James is a real expert on Asia and the Middle East. He has two other passions – cycling and food. Having developed much of our cycling programme, he then indulged his passion for food creating our gastro tours.



Luke Judd,
Senior Digital Marketing Manager

Luke is a tech wizard with enviable website skills. He loves his adrenaline fuelled adventures – the latest? Getting married and honey-mooning in Asia!





The rebound of Asia

This time last year, believe it or not, much of Asia was only just reopening to travellers. Over the last six months, Asian destinations have been experiencing a new lease of life.

Luke reports a 98% increase in traffic to our India trip webpages in 2023 compared to the year before. Meanwhile Cambodia (up 76%), Vietnam (up 82%) and Thailand (up 60%) have also seen a huge spike in popularity.

"Travellers are so delighted to travel back to Asia" says James Adkin. "For colour, culture, flavour and pure vibrancy, there's just nowhere else quite like it".

New trips to the region for 2024 include Japan's Sapporo Snow Festival, an Indian Tiger Safari, and China, back after a few years' hiatus.

Above
Lovely locals - a lady selling fresh fruit on the go

Left
Visiting Angkor Wat is one of the highlights when going to Cambodia

Left
Hammocks are a great addition to any chill-venture

Right
A lovely beach day in Belize



Chill-venture

Due to financial and environmental concerns, many of you are taking fewer overseas trips each year, but you're making them count – travelling for longer, and taking time to get under the skin of your destination – as well as building in time to really switch off. You are packing in a lot to these precious trips when they do happen – culture, experiences, action, and then – increasingly – building in some chill time. Explore has noted an increase of 81% in booking pre or post tour extensions this year. "Popular extensions include a four-night Zanzibar Island extension for some beach time after a busy Tanzanian safari with early morning game drives," says James. "And a three-night Peruvian Amazon extension to discover the rainforest from a comfortable lodge is perfect after walking the Inca Trail."

Overland travel

Sustainable travel is no longer a trend. It's an imperative way to ensure we can protect our planet and continue to enjoy the world. Since calculating and displaying carbon footprints for all trips in early 2022, the Explore Product Team has been making changes across the board, working in collaboration with suppliers to make greener choices.

Hannah says: "This year we've added a new overnight rail journey in Laos and relaunched an Azores walking tour with two domestic flights removed. We've also introduced a brand-new foodie trip to Bordeaux (easily reached by rail itself) that includes several train trips and e-vehicles."

► Read about our Rail Odyssey to the Balkans on **page 12**.



Left
Train travelling in Sri Lanka lets you see some spectacular views

Right
Travelling by trains means you'll mix with the locals in a different way

Transformational trips

Over the last few years, one thing's been very clear – you want more from your holidays! Rest and relaxation are great, but what else? You want to come home from your long-awaited breaks having experienced something new – having learned something, about the world and about yourself, or achieved something. You love holidays that combine wellbeing and growth, and Explore's booking data backs this up. David says, "Our active holidays were up 29% in 2023, with walking holidays up a whopping 52% since before the pandemic."

Walking holidays with emphasis on self-reflection and personal growth are particularly in-demand, such as the legendary Camino de Santiago walking trip, up 20% since 2022, and Inca Trail treks up 40%.

► Read more about transformational travel on **page 16**.



Right
It's the journey that counts on the Camino de Santiago

Left
Reaching new heights when visiting Machu Picchu

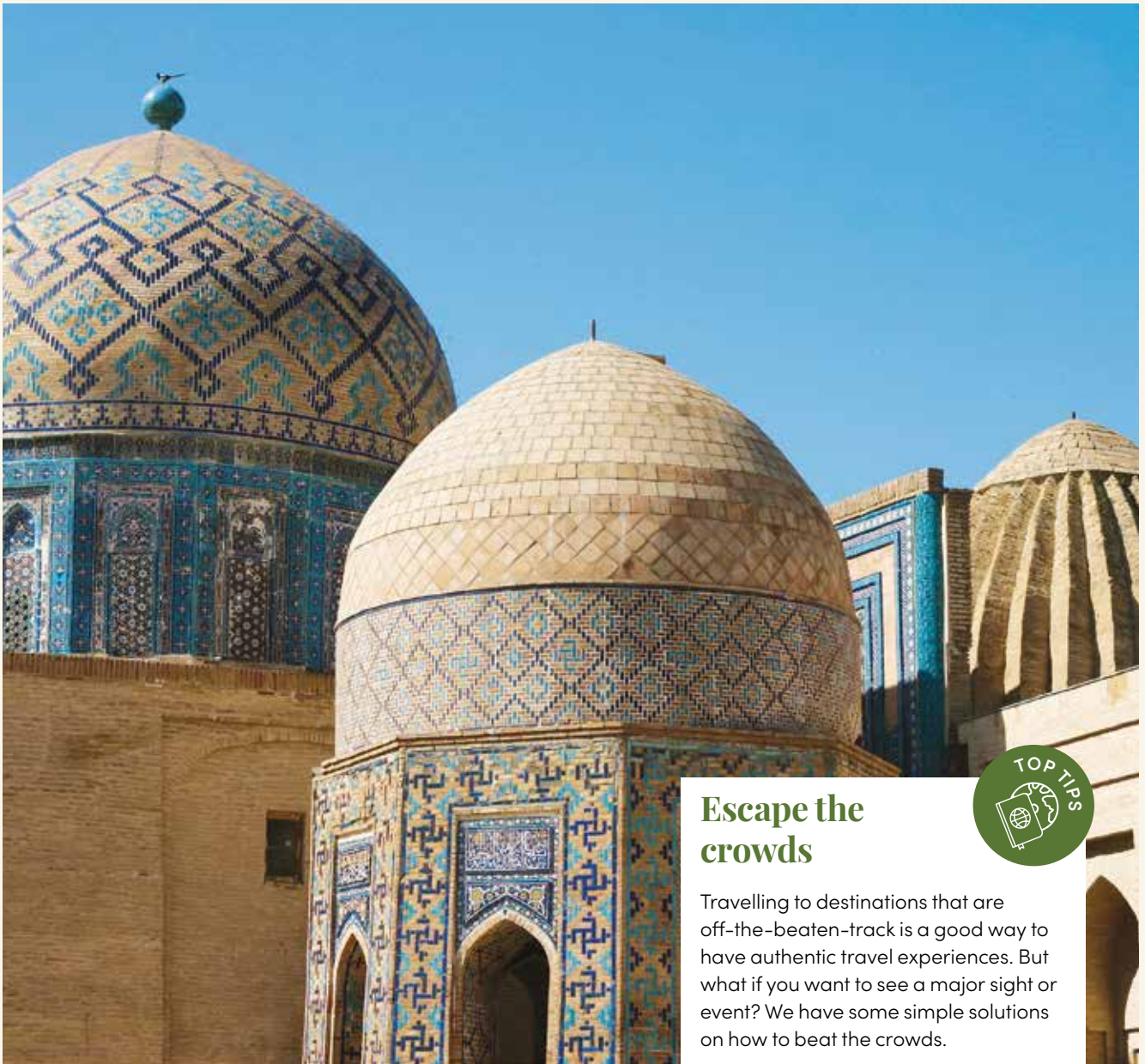
Left: Travel around places with a little extra boost

Below: Nothing stands between you and your surroundings when cycling



The e-bike revolution

E-bike snobbery is so 2019! An electric bike can be a fantastic introduction to cycling holidays or can enable cyclists to take on more challenging terrains than they might usually choose, from rolling vineyards to steeper mountain climbs. "You can use the support of the bike's built-in motor to give you an extra boost or choose to go under your own steam – with an e-bike, you can do a bit of both," says Hannah. E-bike options are now available on almost every Explore cycling trip – the latest of which is Cycle Mexico.



Undertourism

Escaping the crowds and visiting more remote, esoteric destinations holds greater appeal than ever. Research conducted as part of American Express' Global Travel Report showed that 89% of respondents want to travel to destinations they've never visited before, while 68% pride themselves on finding lesser-known holiday spots before they become popular. David Bray can back this up: "At Explore, destinations like Georgia (up 55%), Romania (up 103%) and Uzbekistan (up 37%) are seeing a surge in interest this year, while trips to Laos and Guyana have more than doubled."



Escape the crowds

Travelling to destinations that are off-the-beaten-track is a good way to have authentic travel experiences. But what if you want to see a major sight or event? We have some simple solutions on how to beat the crowds.

CAMBODIA

Angkor Wat on two wheels

Choose to cycle between the major temples of Angkor Wat while the vast majority of visitors travel by bus, thus avoiding other holiday makers and getting much closer to the jungle and local life along the way.

CROATIA

Croatia Island hopping

Pick Croatia's pristine Brac Island over trendy Hvar for an equally blissful beach experience away from the crowds.

GUATEMALA

Day of the Dead with locals

Take in Day of the Dead celebrations in Oaxaca, Mexico by all means, but don't miss the festivities in Guatemala which are incredibly vibrant but usually only frequented by locals.

5 destinations

Off the beaten track

Take the path less travelled and discover some truly authentic gems. Forget the usual tourist places and check out these top 5 picks for authentic destinations that absolutely deserve a spot on your wish list.

GUYANA

Get ready to immerse yourself in the lush rainforest of Guyana! Overflowing with exotic wildlife and plant life, the country on the north-eastern shoulder of South America will offer you the jungle experience of a lifetime!

Stay in cosy riverside lodges, nestled among indigenous communities, as you embark on thrilling canopy walks, spotting a myriad of bird species, and glide along the Burro Burro River in traditional dugout canoes.

explore.co.uk/GYA



SENEGAL AND THE GAMBIA

A bird watcher's paradise, Senegal is home to the Sine-Saloum Delta and the National Park des Oiseaux du Djoudj – both bursting with bird species from brilliant blue kingfishers to pale pink flamingos. The Gambia, the smallest country in mainland Africa, delivers more spectacular birdlife and some of the finest beaches in West Africa.

explore.co.uk/SE

PHILIPPINES

This less-visited South East Asian country offers contrasting landscapes with cobbled towns, white-sand beaches, an active stratovolcano and the bustling mega-city that is Manila. Our personal favourites are the ancient 2000-year-old rice terraces made by the Ifugao people and Spanish influenced Vigan.

explore.co.uk/PIP



MONGOLIA

Welcome to Mongolia, a land of boundless horizons and epic nomadic traditions! Oh, and don't even get us started on the Naadam festival. It's an incredible festival that celebrates the country's culture. Prepare to witness fierce competitors battling it out in traditional games like wrestling, horse racing, archery, and you won't believe this—ankle bone shooting! Get your game face on because this is a one-of-a-kind experience that will leave you truly immersed in Mongolian culture.

explore.co.uk/GK



ROMANIA

Romania might be one of the underdogs of European destinations, but boy, does its diverse heritage and history pack a punch! Get ready to be whisked through medieval castles, picturesque villages and vibrant cities, all framed by the stunning Carpathian Mountains.

explore.co.uk/TD



A RAIL



ODYSSEY

Page 12

View onto Zagreb, Croatia from the shortest funicular in the world the Zagrebačka uspinjača

Left

Orthodox churches like this one in Andrićgrad are epicenters of history, architecture, art and religious beliefs



An overland odyssey through the Balkans to visit seven former Yugoslavian countries was an eye-opener for this group of history buffs.

Words — Lynn Houghton



Slovenia. Croatia. Bosnia and Herzegovina. Montenegro. Serbia. North Macedonia. Kosovo. An overland trip to many untrodden lands in 16 days. It was too good to be true for a group of historians keen to lower their carbon footprints.

"Although many of us had heard of these places," confesses travel writer Lynn Houghton, "few of us were aware of the different cultural influences we would encounter on our journey. The stamp of kings, queens, emperors and, of course, religion was evident at every step."

The first gathering for Lynn and her companions was Slovenia, famous for Lake Bled and its island church. "We were greeted by our guide, Jane (pronounced Yaneh) who would introduce us to the customs of these under-the-radar countries, where lively conversation in local establishments – often about football or politics, along with copious coffee drinking – was a favourite pastime."

Our city guide, Ute, took the group on a brief orientation tour of Ljubljana's old town. They were then free to explore the capital, a bijoux city with a variety of shops and cafés skirted by the fast-flowing River Ljubljanica. "On a

sustainable note, I spotted clever farmers had cut out the supermarket middleman by setting up vending machines, selling unpasteurised milk directly to locals who brought their own containers."

The first train journey of the trip was the three-hour trip from Slovenia to Zagreb, Croatia, where passports were stamped by officials on board. "It was an older train with traditional compartments each accommodating six passengers, and very comfortable." On arrival, a celebration dinner was booked at respected fish restaurant, Ribice i Tri Točkice. "Rather appropriately for a pack of rail fans, we were booked into a hotel named the Orient Express with the Croatian Railway Museum just behind us!"

The next day involved a walking tour of the historic Croatian capital, with its impressive food market, imposing cathedral and, at the city's Upper Town, a memorial to those who lost their lives during the Medieval witch trials. In the afternoon, Lynn and her fellow travellers ventured out to the stunning Plitviče Lakes. "We'd never seen water like it – incredibly clear and azure-coloured."

After a second train trip, the group had an overnight stay in Podgorica, the capital city of Montenegro, a busy city stacked high with new shopping malls and restaurants. "That evening we ate at the nearby traditional restaurant Rostilj Beli, and experienced our first taste of proper Balkan goulash, a beef or venison stew with paprika and plenty of onion. Delicious!"

Serbia was next. Lynn recalls the journey. "Following a coffee stop en route, we arrived at the Serbian border and Prijepolje station. The city train we boarded near the confluence of the Lim and Milesevka Rivers was nearly empty, but that would change during the seven-hour journey to Belgrade."

"I got chatting to a gaggle of youngsters sitting across from me. Their English was excellent, picked up effortlessly from TV and YouTube." ➤



History facts

On war

"It was the death of Communist dictator Joseph Broz 'Tito' 30 years ago which caused violence to erupt. Travelling through Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in particular, cemeteries were on view with multiple thin, white grave markers, looking like skinny soldiers standing to attention. Almost all were emblazoned with the date "1993". An obvious reminder of the conflict due to the wars of independence."

On Roman influence

"Half of Split, a town on Croatia's coast, is the ancient Roman Palace of Diocletian. Built between 295 and 305, Emperor Diocletian lived here until his death. Roman influence is also obvious in North Macedonia, where stunning mosaics can be found on the outskirts of Stobi."

On Sarajevo

"It remains most famous for being the place where Archduke Franz Ferdinand was killed, lighting the touchpaper for the outbreak of WWI. This beautiful city also held a successful 1984 Winter Olympics, but less than a decade later was under siege during the Bosnian Inter-Ethnic War of 1992-1995. It is fascinating to visit the Tunnel Museum, where visitors can walk through part of a vast underground tunnel that connected the outside with the city during the 44-month siege. When open, the tunnel measured 960 metres in length and was 1.5 metres tall, providing a lifeline and a conduit for those trapped in the city."

Waking up in Belgrade, Lynn spent the morning exploring and spotting a patchwork of architectural styles including the gorgeous Russian-Secession-style Moskva Hotel just around the corner.

"Jane was brilliant at making sure we engaged with authentic city life. He arranged dinners in local restaurants with live music; these tiny orchestras prompting folk dancing to spontaneously erupt. We loved his tidbits of cultural insight too – including warning the vegetarians in the group that, particularly in Serbia, they might be referred to as "devil worshippers".

The group whooshed onward to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the city of Sarajevo. "It was a place I might not have flown to directly for a dedicated city break," says Lynn, "but I was delighted to have the chance to explore it on our train-led journey."

Arriving in Mostar with free time to explore on their own, Lynn and her friends discovered a beautifully maintained Muslim cemetery only steps from the old town. Many of the white tombstones were entwined with flowers and fixed with photos of young men. "Mostar was the place that most emphatically brought home to us the staggering number of young people who lost their lives during the war."

Stari Most, Mostar's quaint 'Old Bridge', was rebuilt after the war and is an outstanding example of Balkan Islamic architecture. As they wondered round, the group soon realised that a centuries-old tradition was to take place in front of them: a young man was readying himself to leap off the bridge into the fast-flowing and freezing Neretva River. "Jane had told us the story of the first ever jumper, who is said to have dived off the bridge to retrieve a silver coin tossed in by a nobleman."





Overland trips in Europe

From picturesque landscapes to vibrant cities, travelling through Europe by train will transform the journey itself into an exciting and immersive part of your holiday. Here are two of our most favourite train trips.

LONDON TO ISTANBUL

When visiting Europe, why not take the time to see as much as possible. Travelling from London all the way to Istanbul will let you experience some of the most famous and hidden pearls that this continent has to offer, while travelling through nine different countries.

explore.co.uk/RLA



LONDON TO THE SPANISH COAST

Get ready to savour a tantalizing blend of mouth-watering food, vibrant culture, and stunning scenery as you travel through the captivating west of Europe. Don't want the journey to end in Spain? Hop on the next train and continue all the way to Marrakech.

explore.co.uk/RLM



Money is still the motivation for the divers – though now it is the visitors who donate the coins.

"The last segment of our tour sped by, with a quick overnight stay in Kosovo before heading for the airport," Lynn recalls. "Our train experiences had been comfortable, with views we were lucky to have witnessed. My favourite was travelling through the Kučka Korita mountains with roughhewn tunnels opening out to arresting views of autumnal coloured valleys streaked with early morning fog."

Understanding this area's troubled past is only part of the Balkan story. It's an area rich with tradition and culture, distinctive to each individual country, region and even city, and it's a journey best done slowly. "Working our way through at a slower pace, on this more contemplative scenic route allowed us to appreciate this complex, warm and fascinating region," says Lynn. "Part of me remained there long after I'd left." ■

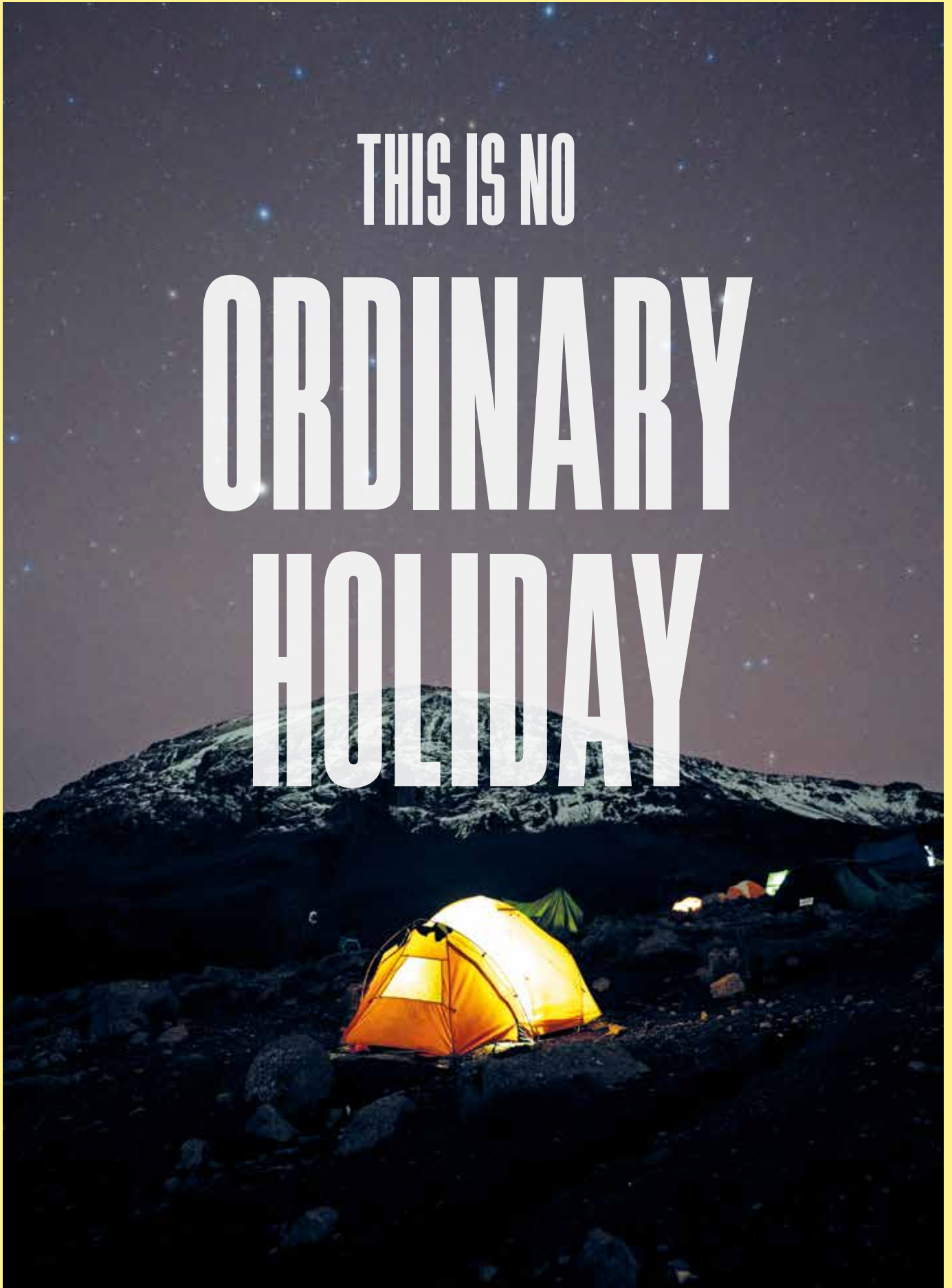
Above
Mostar is one of many places not to miss when travelling through Bosnia and Herzegovina



Lynn Houghton
Award-winning Travel Writer
and Photographer

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THIS IS NO
**ORDINARY
HOLIDAY**



We know that travelling can have a profound effect on us – from the places we visit to the people we meet. But to experience longer-lasting change for good, we need to start from the inside out. Xenia Taliotis explores the rising trend of transformational travel.

Left
Nights in the tent with the top in sight – trekkers on Mt Kilimanjaro

The age of pilgrimage; the age of exploration; the age of enlightenment; of the grand tour; of adventure; of the hippie trail; of experience; of responsibility and now the age of transformation, the one that combines the best of the others, and raises them.

Over the last few years, one thing has been clear – we want more from our holidays. A new destination with a bit of rest and relaxation will tick a box but won't change a mindset. My research into transformational travel has uncovered the hope that our journeys can change our perceptions, or even ourselves. These journeys present us with different interpretations of the world, connect us to each other, take us to places where nature is wild, where communities are remote, where life is different to ours, helping us to acknowledge our infinitesimally small place in the scheme of things.

A new name for an ancient belief

In truth, this is by no means a new idea. Humans have been using travel as a vehicle for reaching emotional, intellectual, and physical goals for thousands of years. We've journeyed in search of spirituality, self-improvement, or self-awareness; to satisfy our curiosity, or fulfil a dream; to conquer fears or mountains; to gain insights and knowledge. Though he didn't know it, 16th-century French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, described transformational travel perfectly: "Travelling produces a marvellous clarity in the judgment of men. We are all of us confined and enclosed within ourselves and see no farther than the end of our nose. This great world is a mirror where we must see ourselves in order to know ourselves."

Fast-forward to this century, and to 2016, when the Seattle-based Transformational Travel Council was formed. Their mission has been to encourage people to plan meaningful trips that "start from the inside out, uncover the true self, and lead to a renewed awareness that radiates positive impacts on others and the world". They believe that through transformational travel, we can challenge our bodies and minds, find the inspiration to grow, and learn to be better and do better by others, our planet and all it sustains.

Open minds, open hearts

What shape do such trips take? The good news is the criteria is broad. Anything that acts as a catalyst for change! It doesn't have to be a hardcore hike or a marathon climb. For some it will be a silent retreat, for others standing on Africa's highest point, at the summit of Kilimanjaro, or selling up and back-packing around the world. What counts is being open to learning, before, during and after your adventure. The process and the progress. There will be lessons learnt and interactions along the way that will hopefully compel you to live your life differently when the holiday is over.

Speaking to travellers who have experienced transformational journeys, it's clear that preparation is an important part of this process. The build-up itself is an opportunity for transformation, whether that's becoming fit enough to climb the mountain, researching the communities you'll be visiting or just picking up some basic language skills so you can communicate better.

Travel changes everything

Depending on your plans, this prep can be a few weeks or a few months. In extreme cases, it can take years: it was five years after motivational speaker Caspar Craven and his wife Nichola pinned a vision statement with their intention to sail around the world that they finally set off with their three young children for their two years at sea. Their motivation, he says, was to have "magical life-changing experiences". Even now, eight years later, he sees the effect on his children. "They learnt how to work as a team, how to problem solve, how to communicate when language is a barrier. Nichola and I wanted them to understand how fortunate they are not by being told, but by being shown. By seeing how difficult life is for many in the world, we hoped they would grow up focusing on what they can give, not what they can take, and how they can make the world a better place."

There's no doubt that travel can be a force for good, but only if used responsibly. We travel because we want to, but life is more than about our wants. Transformational journeys enable us to turn our desire to escape, if only for a few days, into something that changes us. "And that", says the philosopher Jonah Lehrer, "changes everything – potentially." ➤

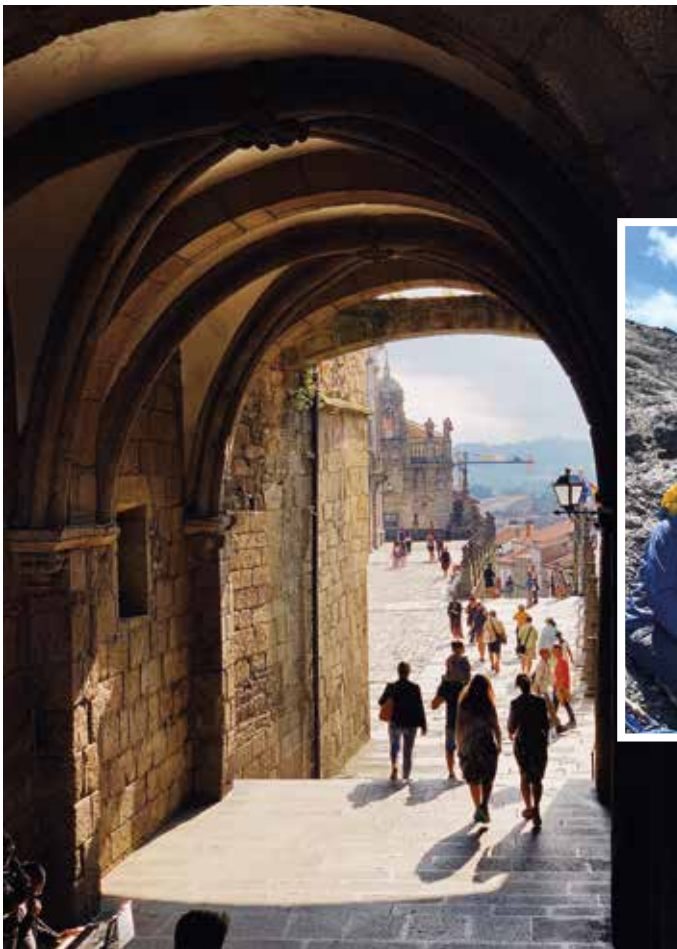


CAMINO DE SANTIAGO
Kate Hooper, 65, Leicestershire, artist

**“One person had written
“I leave my fear here”.
That was so powerful.”**

In May 2023, I did a section of the Camino de Santiago with my friend of 54 years, Fiona. We'd both wanted to do a walking holiday and felt drawn to the Camino for some undefinable reason that had nothing to do with religion.

The strange thing was that once there, I did come to see it as a pilgrimage. I didn't have a spiritual awakening as such, but did feel this extraordinary, visceral, sense of connection – not only to Fiona – but also to my fellow travellers. There was something immensely unifying about it, a shared purpose between us all, no matter what our story. There were people walking to commune with God, to find solace, to celebrate friendship or health or recovery, to fulfil a promise or a wish. We were all there for such different reasons – everyone does their own Camino – but our goal was the same. We all wanted to reach the end – Santiago de Compostela – and we all wanted to find something within ourselves. For me that was a sense of belonging, of being part of something so much bigger than me. That feeling has stayed with me, as have some of the things that people said or wrote. One person had written “I leave my fear here”. That's so powerful. It was the best holiday I have ever had.



MOUNT KILIMANJARO
Olivia Loy, 28, Australia, doctor

**“Kilimanjaro was
inspirational. It taught
me a lot about myself.”**

I'm very active with a say yes attitude, so when my friend Tess suggested we climb Kilimanjaro with her cousins, in 2022, I jumped straight in. Though I knew people who'd done it, I didn't ask them about the challenges – only about the euphoria they felt on finishing. Even the practicalities surprised me: you're bundled up in layers because it's perishing, but the altitude sickness tablets make you wee a lot, so you're frequently having to undress.

We decided on a seven-day climb because it has a 75–80% success rate. The first four days were well within my fitness reach, but the final climb, starting at midnight on day six and ascending from 4,600m to 6,000m in freezing temperatures, was tough – low oxygen, laboured breathing, and slow walking as we followed other groups to the summit. I had to lie down for a bit at the top, but everyone was singing and whooping, and having their photos taken, so I joined Tess and our group in a little victory dance.

Kilimanjaro was inspirational. It taught me a lot about myself. I learnt that I am not invincible, that though fit, I can be caught out. But this realisation has only made me more determined to do things now, when I am strong and young, and to fundraise while I'm about it.

The climb was an intimate, intense experience that took my and Tess's friendship to a deeper level and created an unbreakable bond with her cousins. When the anniversary came up on my timeline, we all messaged. My friends were physically on the other side of the world, yet I felt so close to them.



Left
Everyone on the same path – the Camino de Santiago

Above
Olivia and her friends on the way to the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro



MACHU PICCHU
Alex Nicolaou, 46, London, mature student



“It changed my perspective and my behaviour permanently.”

I first saw Machu Picchu on a postcard when I was about nine and I remember thinking, I'm going to go there when I grow up. It wasn't until six years ago that I made that happen. I was 40, newly divorced and floundering slightly. I needed a break but wanted something more meaningful than my usual sea or ski holidays.

I chose the longest Inca Trail and Machu Picchu tour I could afford, one that included interactions with local people so I could learn something about their culture, and how they lived. I'm fit so I also looked for fairly strenuous hikes, and a total immersion in nature. I swam in hot springs, found a new passion – birdwatching – and found the peace and solitude I needed even while being in a group. I was relieved to see how many of us were on a similar inward journey. We'd have meals together, of course, but we mainly hiked individually.

Seeing Machu Picchu itself was deeply spiritual. It really is like a giant outdoor cathedral – a place of reverence and awe, but what made the biggest impact on me was meeting people from such remote and poor communities, and realising what a huge impact our actions have on them. Their environment is completely at the mercy of what we are doing to the climate. It changed my perspective and my behaviour permanently. I left all my camping gear there, all the clothes I could do without, and I now always ask for donations in lieu of gifts. I now put the planet's needs over my own, and without being too intense, encourage others to do the same. ■

“Transformational journeys enable us to turn our desire to escape, if only for a few days, into something that changes us.”

Above left
The view onto Machu Picchu is extra special after having made it there on foot on the Inca Trail

Above right
Experiencing local life can often be the highlight of a holiday



Xenia Taliotis
Editor and writer Xenia Taliotis contributes to numerous publications, in the UK and abroad. Her writing appears regularly in The Telegraph, The Times, i News, Women's Health, and Breathe.

Happy 2024!
We've been busy
at Explore HQ
working on our
new branding and
winning some very
special awards!

Our World

We're 'Sustainable Travel Company of the Year'

We're thrilled to have been named 'Sustainable Travel Company of the Year' at the TTG Travel Industry Awards 2023 and couldn't contain our excitement when shortly after we also won the Star Sustainability Initiative Award from Travel Bulletin.



Here are just some of our recent initiatives to show how and why we won!

1. Our kind of travel is sustainable by nature

Our trips have always maximised the positive impact on local communities – we travel in small groups that are less invasive on destinations and wherever possible stay in, and eat at, locally owned and managed establishments, guided by local leaders. We prioritise local businesses for our activities and support community-run initiatives, so our customers can have local interactions and a respectful insight into local life.

2. We're working hard to reduce our carbon footprint

In 2022 we introduced carbon footprint measurements on every one of our tours. Now that we have this measurement, we've been working hard to reduce our emissions throughout our programme and operations. We've set the target of reducing our carbon by 50% by 2030, with a target of 7% on reducing our carbon intensity for 2023. We've taken out domestic flights (for example in Pakistan and the Azores), added new rail journeys (e.g. Laos) and worked with suppliers to make greener choices.

3. We've partnered with Klimate to contribute to carbon removal projects

We've moved away from avoidance-based offsetting and towards carbon removal, which uses technologies and processes that lower the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere. Klimate will help us manage a carefully-chosen and monitored portfolio of projects. We make a contribution to Klimate for every person that travels with us.

4. Last year we launched the Explore Foundation

As a registered charity, the Explore Foundation is managed by an independent Board of Trustees, yet it benefits from Explore's huge community of overseas partners and contacts. Through this network, the Foundation identifies and supports projects in countries that Explore customers visit, working to deliver support where it's most needed. Explore covers all administration costs, so 100% of donations to the Foundation go directly to supporting our chosen projects.

► These projects are just the tip of the iceberg. If you want to explore more, feel free to visit: explore.co.uk/award or visit the Explore Foundation, theexplore.foundation

We've had a refresh!

Things are looking a little different! We felt ready for a bit of a change, so you'll notice some new colours, fonts and logos in our brochures and across our website – we hope you like our new look.



In line with our rebrand we've created a new Explore Manifesto that we'd like to share with you:

Travel is just the start.

You TRAVEL to your aunt's house for Easter.
Some people TRAVEL to work.
Are you travelling for business? they ask.

Now EXPLORING.
That's what quickens the pulse.
That's what Mark Twain did.
And Alice in Wonderland.

If travel is the route from A to B,
exploring is the meandering road.
It's the unmarked side street, or
the curious turn off.

When you explore, you don't just focus on getting somewhere, your eyes are wide open, your senses are alert.

It would be easy to follow the crowds to the famous sights and check them off a list. But we'll never just do that.

We prefer going a little deeper, in smaller groups.
Making friends, treading lightly, and being mindful of local communities.

If travel is asking for directions,
exploring is taking the time to sit down with a stranger.

If travel lets you see the world,
exploring makes you feel it.

Don't just travel, Explore!

Recipe

Pasta zucchine sesamo menta

Our product manager Valentina Chironna, a born and bred Italian, has kindly shared one of her favourite Sicilian summer pasta dishes (passed down from her mum and grandma!).

Ingredients for 4 people

Spaghetti or any dried pasta: 400 g
Green and yellow courgettes: 4
Garlic: 2 cloves
Mint: 1 sprig
Extra virgin olive oil
Salt to taste
Roasted sesame seeds

Instructions

1. Trim and wash the courgettes carefully; then cut them into rounds and sprinkle them with salt.
2. Slice the garlic and leave it to brown in a pan with 1 glass of oil.
3. Remove the garlic and fry the courgettes; drain them and keep them warm.
4. Boil the spaghetti in boiling salted water; drain it when al dente and sauté in the pan with the olive oil.
5. Add the courgettes and mix carefully. If courgette flowers are available at your local farmers market, wash them, slice them and sauté with the rest of the pasta and courgettes.
6. Turn off the hob and add mint leaves. Always leave the mint uncooked to avoid giving the dish a bitter taste.
7. Complete with roasted sesame seeds and serve. Buon appetito!



► Did this recipe get you in the mood to visit Italy? Well, we have the perfect introduction to Italy for you on the next page.

SPOTLIGHT ON ITALY



LA DOLCE VITA



Top Tips

Hand signs

Italians have perfected talking with their hands. Did you like your meal? Don't just nod, push your index finger into your cheek to indicate 'buono' (good).

Milk is for mornings

Milk is for breakfast, so Italians would never order a milk-related beverage (cappuccino or latte macchiato) after 11am. Only a *macchiato* (coffee with a few drops of milk) is acceptable.

Getting the bill

When you're dining in Italy, you'll most likely never get *il conto* (the bill), unless you ask for it or go to the cash register to pay. This is because it's considered bad manners for the waiting staff to give you the bill if you didn't ask for it. It's not bad service, they just don't want to rush you and be rude. Mealtimes are sacred and savoured in Italian culture.



A seamless fusion of extraordinary art, iconic cuisine and awe-inspiring landscapes, Italy is the gift that keeps on giving. One taste of the good life, and you'll be back for more. Here's why.

With its distinctive boot-shaped peninsula stretching out into the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic Seas, Italy is a true Mediterranean gem, with a remarkably varied landscape. Up north you have the Dolomites that result in stunning mountain scenery and beautiful lakes in its alpine foothills (Lake Como anyone?). Further down you have Tuscany's iconic rolling hills adorned with vineyards and olive groves, the Amalfi Coast and Cinque Terre offering jaw-dropping cliffs and crystal-clear waters, and Mount Vesuvius. In the far south, on the heel of Italy's boot, you'll find Puglia, a region synonymous with olive trees and responsible for 40% of the country's olive oil production, while Italy's biggest islands, Sicily and Sardinia promise delicious food and sun-soaked beaches.

Ancient History

While Italy is still a relatively young nation, its regions and islands display a heritage that stretches back millennia. The Romans initiated it all in 753 BC, influenced by the Greeks, using Italy as a base to build an Empire that would impact Europe for years to come. From the Roman Era and the Glory of the Médicis during Italy's Renaissance, through a 40-year dictatorship and two World Wars to the present day, Italy has been shaped by its history but has fortunately managed to preserve much of its historical architecture and art. This makes it the country with the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the world.

Discover the preserved site of **Pompeii**, a Roman city that was buried under ash after the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. Or stroll through the **villas and gardens of the Médici** – named after one of Italy's most powerful families that consolidated power in Florence during the first half of the 15th century.

Art and Architecture

The country's cities are treasure troves of art and architecture. Artistic luminaries like Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael found their muse here, leaving permanent marks on every cobblestone street and ornate cathedral. You can step into an unassuming-looking church or walk across a random square and discover art pieces of incredible craftsmanship—seeing it where it was intended to be, rather than in a museum.

There are widely-known sights such as the Colosseum and Pantheon in Rome, Michelangelo's David in Florence or the Venetian palaces lining the Grand Canal. Worth a visit when venturing to the South of the country is the rock city **Matera** in the Basilicata region, one of the oldest cities in the world where you can find hidden cave art, a unique and ancient form of expression carved into the limestone walls. You also shouldn't miss the beehive-shaped **trulli houses in Alberobello**. ➤

Above

Including its islands, Italy has a whopping 7,900 kilometres of stunning coastline

Left

The Colosseum in Rome, just one of many architectural highlights of the country



Left
Wandering the cobblestone streets – a perfect way to see more of local life

Below
Absolutely mouth-watering – the *focaccia barese* topped with mortadella, burrata and pistachios





“Italians have food down to a T.”



Before you go

If, like us, you love to find out all you can about a destination before you go, here are our recommendations to get into the mood for Italy:

 **The book to read:**
L'amica geniale (My brilliant friend) by Elena Ferrante

 **The film to watch:**
Caro Diario (Dear diary) by Nanni Moretti

 **The series to watch:**
Inspector Montalbano

 **The music to listen to:**
Gianna Nannini

Food and Drink

Ah, the Italian cuisine! Films have been made and songs written about it. And it's no surprise because Italians have food down to a T. They've mastered the art of using a few items of outstanding quality (all locally produced and fresh), cooking and seasoning them the right way to create delicious dishes that stand the test of time.

Italy is a foodie's paradise and each of its 20 regions has its own fresh local specialties.

› **Emilia-Romagna:** Often overlooked by tourists, this region is located between Venice, Milan and Florence. It is well known for its incredible produce, namely the famous *Parmigiano Reggiano* (Parmesan cheese), the *Prosciutto di Parma* (Parma ham) and the *Aceto Balsamico di Modena* (balsamic vinegar from Modena). And as if that isn't enough to entice you, it's also the birthplace of the *Lasagna alla Bolognese*.

› **Apulia (Puglia):** If you're exploring the 'heel' of Italy, make sure to buy some *friise* (small rings made from crispy bread dough with olive oil) and some fresh *focaccia* from a bakery. *Orecchiette alle cime di rapa*, is a classic Apulian pasta dish and, according to locals, you haven't truly tasted *burrata* (a cheese made from mozzarella and cream) until you've tasted it here, so we suggest you plan to have some during your visit.

► **Sicilia (Sicily):** The biggest island of the Mediterranean has been invaded by a range of different civilisations in its history. This has influenced the island's cuisine. Deep-fried rice balls, *arancini*, are typical Sicilian snacks that you should try as a starter. Another regional specialty is *Caponata*, a sweet and tangy aubergine stew, with celery, pine nuts, olives and capers. The highlight of Sicilian gastronomy however are the desserts, *Cannoli Siciliani* (fried shells filled with sweetened sheep ricotta) and *cassata* (sponge cake layered with ricotta and candied fruit) are just two examples.

It's well known that Italians adore their *caffè*, enjoying 14 billion espressos each year! This is impressive for a country with a population of just over 60 million. Many Italians have their daily coffee in local cafés, most of which are no-name, family-run places with just a 'BAR' sign out front. Payment is made first while standing at the counter (*al bancone*), and the coffee is downed straight away, all taking less than five minutes. If you prefer to linger over your *caffè*, perhaps with a pastry, you'll pay more to sit at a table.

Nothing beats an **Italian gelato** in summertime. But did you know that gelato isn't actually ice cream? It's made with more milk than cream, and is therefore much denser, smoother and richer than regular ice cream. Here's a few tips to find the best quality gelato:

- 1) Metal containers and flat spatulas ensure quality.
- 2) Natural ingredients yield the best colours; avoid neon shades.
- 3) A smooth texture, no ice crystals, indicates top-notch gelato.
- 4) Avoid places with overflowing, overdecorated containers.
- 5) Choose spots with a limited but seasonal flavour selection for fresher ingredients. ■

“Italians adore their *caffè*, enjoying 14 billion espressos each year!”

► Make the most of your time in Italy by combining more than one tour – because why settle for just one adventure when you can have multiple?

See more on [explore.co.uk/extend-your-europe-adventure](https://www.explore.co.uk/extend-your-europe-adventure)

Make the most of your time in Italy

The options of things to see and do in Italy are endless. That's why we've taken the time to pick some of our favourite tours for you.



FOR HIKERS:

Walking the Amalfi Coast – Agriturismo

Discover the breathtaking Amalfi Coast on this walking holiday, exploring cliff-top and woodland trails and ancient stone stairways connecting charming villages. Explore the towns of Ravello, Positano, and the island of Capri, all while staying with an Italian family on a tranquil farm, savouring home-produced delights amid Mediterranean views.

[explore.co.uk/NAW](https://www.explore.co.uk/NAW)



FOR ART AND CULTURE AFFICIONADOS:
Venice to Rome by Rail + Sorrento and the Amalfi Coast

Join this whistle-stop tour of Italy, traversing iconic cities by train. Cruise Venice's canals, explore Bologna's food markets, and admire Florence's grand architecture. From Rome, journey toward Naples, pausing at the Amalfi Coast's breathtaking beauty and exploring the legendary ruins of Pompeii.

[explore.co.uk/VRA](https://www.explore.co.uk/VRA)



FOR CYCLISTS:

Cycle Puglia

Discover the 'heel' of Italy on a mix of leisurely and moderate grade cycle rides through the sun-drenched region. Along the way we sample the superb Pugliese cuisine with cheeses from a local *caseificio* (dairy farm), a visit to a family-run bakery and wine tasting.

[explore.co.uk/CIP](https://www.explore.co.uk/CIP)



FOR FOODIES:

A taste of Italy – Walking in the Emilia Romagna

Embark on a leisurely walking holiday with a culinary twist in Emilia Romagna. Discover the secrets behind Parma ham, parmesan cheese, balsamic vinegar and Lambrusco wines while rambling through picturesque landscapes and uncovering architectural gems in Bologna, Modena, and Ravenna.

[explore.co.uk/TOER](https://www.explore.co.uk/TOER)



FOR ISLAND FANS:

Classical Sicily

Looking to discover the highlights of the largest Mediterranean island? This trip could be for you – get to know the wealth of ancient historical sights, food, culture and take the opportunity to climb up Europe's tallest active volcano, Mount Etna.

[explore.co.uk/CS](https://www.explore.co.uk/CS)

B
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THE COFFEE

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10 CONNECTION

Coffee brings people together wherever you are in the world. But it's more than just a hot drink. Award-winning food writer and author Clare Finney explores the lure of the bean.



“One of the first things I do when I arrive somewhere new is seek out good coffee. It’s the hit, of course – but it’s also the sensory experience coffee creates, and which reflects a country’s culture and cuisine.”

Title picture

A typical coffee chat moment in Durrës, Albania

Left

Arabica coffee is said to be the first species of coffee to have been cultivated

Left below

A street vendor selling fresh coffee in Istanbul, Turkey

Right

A group of men sharing coffee at a camel market in Saudi Arabia



In 2010, on the cobbled streets of a former market in London, a restaurant called Caravan opened its doors courtesy of Kiwis Laura Harper-Hinton, Chris Ammerman and Miles Kirby. The food hailed from all over the world, and in the basement, intoxicating cocoa and nut aromas emanated from a large, loud, shiny roasting machine. People queued for hours – but many were initially confused as to the concept of this café-cum-restaurant, where the cuisines of Italy, Spain, Vietnam, Mexico, Morocco and more shared plates that were served day and night above the in-house coffee roaster. Yet there was a clear connecting thread, as there is between all these countries across the world: the love, experience and memory of coffee.

“It’s a big part of travelling for me,” says Kirby, who called the restaurant Caravan for that reason. “One of the first things I do when I arrive somewhere new is seek out good coffee.” It’s the hit, of course – but it’s also the sensory experience coffee creates, and which reflects a country’s culture and cuisine. Think of the tiny espresso bars of Italy; the grand Viennese cafes of Austria; the long-handled pots of Turkey and the clay pots of Mexico, which mix coffee with

sugar and spices. These rituals are as much about the sights, sounds and people around coffee as the flavour, and they inevitably work their way into our memories of travelling.

“One of my earliest memories is of my mum drinking coffee and eating marmalade toast,” says Kirby – and his saying so immediately recalls mine of my parents, plunging the cafetière, Scottish shortbread on the side. The pre-frontal cortex, where we process smell and taste, is close to the area of the brain where memories form, so many of our most powerful recollections are multi-sensory. “It’s part of the vernacular” says Kirby: of our own lives, and of our experience of another country. Thus, wherever you go, coffee is more than a drink. It’s a medium of connection and continuity. It wears many hats, but at its heart is this most fundamental human need.

This has been true throughout coffee’s history, says Mark Riddaway, a food writer, historian, and author of *Edible History*. In it, he devotes an entire chapter to coffee and its ‘connective force’. “What’s really interesting about coffee is that the spread happened very quickly and recently, and the common threads are of connection,” he continues. “Whilst there are distinctive elements of coffee culture in different parts of the world, almost all of them are based around the same principles of conviviality and communication.”



“Coffee is more than a drink. It’s a medium of connection and continuity.”

There are several reasons for this, one of which is quite simple: “coffee is a drink that’s drunk out. The complexity of preparing it – the roast, the grinding, the brewing – means historically people went out for coffee,” he explains. And whilst the advent of capsules, filter coffee and freeze-dried granules has changed this a bit, it’s still largely true around the world. Like many families in Britain, mine revolved around tea; yet going out for coffee was a sacred part of the weekend or being on holiday, when we could linger in the sun over cappuccinos. Now my boyfriend and I spend as much time choosing a coffee stop as we do restaurants on holiday; more, even, because we like returning to and building a rapport with the same cafe. That’s a core part of discovering a new area for us: riding Athens’ tattoo-brewed third wave; being told by Maud in Marseille that the Marseillais have gibassier for breakfast, not croissants; sharing an eyeroll with the barista in Barcelona when a tourist in front of us asked for three different syrup flavours despite being repeatedly told they didn’t serve flavoured coffee. None of these experiences could have been found in a hotel, however snazzy the Nespresso machine. »

Below left

A special ritual, the coffee ceremony in Ethiopia

Below right

Coffee art and flat whites – coffee trends are constantly changing and evolving

Yet there are complex reasons too; reasons rooted in coffee's historical connection with Islam, and the way it spread around the world with that religion. "It originated in Ethiopia, but at some unrecorded point in history it crossed into the Arabian Peninsula which was when people first started cultivating the beans to make a drink." There, a particular sect of Islam called Sufism fell in love with coffee's powers as a natural stimulant, which enabled them to worship for hours on end. "The basic principles of Sufism are finding ways to commune with God through meditative, rhythmic processes; night-time rituals which involve hours of repetitious chanting or movement," says Riddaway.

Coffee, and the ritual of preparing it, became bound up with religious ritual, and travelled with the Sufis wherever they went. "They were well travelled, and coffee soon spread across Egypt, Arabia and North Africa, breaking out into the secular world," he explains. When the Ottomans conquered that part of the world, it spread through the Ottoman Empire to Turkey. Because we come from a country where booze is the heartbeat of our social interactions, it is easy to overlook coffee's importance to a culture where booze is haram," he continues. But the impulse to sit around and chat whilst sipping something is deeply human, and true regardless of what one drinks.

In the 16th century, coffee took off in Europe, swirling across the continent from France to Finland. "At one point there was a greater density of coffee houses in London than anywhere else in the world, including Istanbul," says Riddaway. "It was only because Britain came to control the

tea trade that we ended up developing a tea culture; the rest of Europe went coffee mad." Coffee houses proved the primordial soup for political and artistic movements; their spread was integral to the Age of Enlightenment. And wherever coffee went, it evolved and assimilated into the local culture and cuisine.

Fast forwarding to the present day, that is why the rise of coffee tourism makes so much sense. Who can imagine a day in Rome without a pit-stop at an espresso bar? Or a weekend in Paris without watching the world go by over a petit déjeuner of croissant, orange juice and café? "I love the coffee culture of Denmark and Sweden, where they prefer filter coffee rather than something milky," says Kirby. Their famed culture of 'fika' is an inversion of the Swedish word for coffee, 'kafi', and is as much about people pausing their work and coming together as it is the pastries and coffee. Growing up in New Zealand, Kirby was used to the flat white: an invention born of Kiwis having their overseas experience (OE) and bringing fresh coffee back home with them. There, the espresso-based approach taken by Italy met fresh, quality milk, which caramelises as it steams, creating a naturally sweeter drink than one you'd find in Italy or France, where they tend to use UHT.

Being too long to shot, but too short to take-away, the flat white is a drink to linger over and shows more appreciation of the coffee itself than a latte. Coffee culture in New Zealand therefore evolved in tandem with its now legendary food scene, in "quality restaurants where you can stay from morning to night." It's a symbiotic relationship, Kirby continues, enabling people in both sectors to specialise and innovate while at the same time creating great environments for eating and drinking. That culture has since gone on to redefine Britain's coffee scene: once in thrall to France, Italy and American chains, now blessed with a blend of those and Kiwi-led restaurants and roasteries.





Above
Espresso is essential in Italian coffee culture

"In a way, we're still tourists in the coffee world," says Riddaway. Once a nation of tea-drinkers, now we're discovering coffee in all its forms. Earlier this year, coffee sales overtook tea sales in the UK; 63% of Britons now drink coffee regularly, while only 59% regularly drink tea, according to The Statista Global Consumer Survey. At home, the origin of our coffee beans is – rightly – a growing concern, leading to an increased interest in coffee plantations when travelling abroad. In Brazil, Vietnam and Colombia, the three biggest producers of coffee in the world, it's possible to visit small scale coffee farms and sample different varieties of bean, from Açaí and Catuai to the seductively named Bourbon Santos, a beloved Brazilian bean that tastes almost buttery. In Ethiopia, the birthplace of coffee, you can tour plantations, then watch their historic Habesha coffee ceremony, which involves roasting the green beans over an open fire and brewing them three times. I have not – yet – been so lucky as to visit countries where coffee is grown, but even in sipping their brews I feel a sense of connectivity.

Which is why I'm excited about the prospect of coffee tourism, which even in its infancy feels like a consolidation of the last 700 years of coffee and connectivity; from Ethiopia to Exmouth Market, fire roasted beans to flat whites, the plunge of my parents' cafetiere in our house in Brook Green to Maud in Marseille, pouring two café au laits and lecturing us about pastry. ■



Clare Finney
Food journalist, writer, and author of The Times Food Book of the Year 2023 'Hungry Heart: A Story of Food and Love'

@finneyclare

Dear tea enthusiasts,



Fear not, we've got you covered!
As tea gives coffee a run for its money, we couldn't resist sharing our top picks of extraordinary tea moments with you.

CHINA

When it comes to tea, China reigns supreme as the ancient motherland of the beloved beverage, with a rich tea-drinking heritage dating back to before 2000 BC. Tea holds a significant place in Chinese culture, ranking alongside essential elements like firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, and vinegar. To truly experience China, a visit to a traditional tea house is an absolute must. We suggest going with a local guide who can enlighten you about the tea varieties and guide you through the intricate social etiquette surrounding tea culture in China.

SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is one of the world's tea powerhouses. So when visiting the island nation don't miss the opportunity to explore a tea plantation. Take a leisurely walk through the tea fields, gaining insights into the intricate process of tea production and the remarkable families behind it. And of course, what better way to top it all off than to savour a local, freshly brewed cuppa.

JAPAN

Seeking the crème de la crème of matcha? Look no further than Uji in Japan, renowned for producing the finest green tea on the planet. Immerse yourself in Japanese tea tradition as you savour the delicious matcha during a private tea ceremony. Guided by a master, you'll embark on a serene journey, learning the art of making your very own tea. Embrace the Zen and indulge in matcha perfection!

MOROCCO

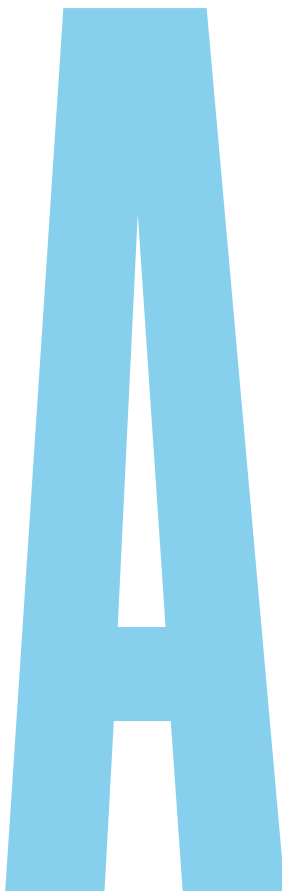
If you find yourself in Morocco, you mustn't pass up the chance to try the famous mint tea. Brewed with fresh mint and a (big) serving of sugar, this deliciously hot, sweet, and refreshing drink will capture your taste buds. Brace yourself, for soon you'll be sipping (and yearning for) this delightful tea for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

TURKEY

Did you know that Turkey holds the crown for the highest per capita tea consumption globally, averaging over 3.5kg per person? It's no surprise, considering Turkish tea, or Çay, is deeply woven into its social fabric. Served in tulip-shaped glasses, this rich black tea, prepared using two stacked teapots, is served with a side of sugar that you can add to your liking.



Writer and broadcaster Mark Stratton journeyed to Antarctica to discover the ways in which polar travellers can make a difference and give back to the icy continent and its inhabitants.



Above the smudged tideline on Deception Island's coarse black sand, we set up a 25 metre transect along the beach. Two overenthusiastic fur seals are too close so are shooed away while a solitary chinstrap penguin propels itself along the shoreline, its brushtail flickering like a broomstick sweeping away cobwebs.

Haining, our Chinese naturalist onboard AE Expeditions, *Sylvia Earle*, takes us through the process of sampling for microplastics – the pernicious scourge of our oceans. We scoop up 2cm depth of sand from five random sample points, add to a bucket, pour in seawater, and then upend the mixed sediment through a sieve. “We’re looking for plastics under 5mm,” he said, explaining microplastics are already polluting Antarctica and entering its food chain. Within the quadrats we remove two suspect pieces of white matter to be taken to our vessel for laboratory analysis.

Each time I visit Antarctica, I’m asked whether it’s fitting to travel to what is perceived as a fragile environment in the grip of climate change. West Antarctica’s glaciers are indisputably retreating; it’s commonplace down here to hear the gunshot ricochets of their facades crumbling away in slabs. Likewise, increasing red and green algae colours the snow, thriving off moister conditions due to warming temperatures. I see first-hand during an 11-day voyage around the Antarctic Peninsula, how heavy

early summer snow is having a knock-on effect on penguin breeding.

“Warmer temperatures bring more precipitation, which falls as snow. It was especially thick around November when gentoo penguins were egg-laying,” said Anette Scheffer, the ship’s science coordinator. If penguins oviposit on snow rather than exposed rock their eggs freeze. At gentoo colonies, such as Damoy Point, we see few chicks and some of those are so undeveloped they face a race against time to mature and fledge before winter’s onset.

Enter the *Sylvia Earle*. The small purpose-built cruise vessel is built carbon-neutral, her rounded Ulstein X-bow more efficient through seawater thus reducing fuel consumption. But it’s the addition of its new science-laboratory that appeals to me, located within a striking split level glass atrium between decks six and seven at the bow with a large library full of research books.

This dedicated science lab heralds an upgrade in citizen science capability, allowing guests to participate in research that can add value to voyages to the 7th continent. She’s named after the legendary marine biologist, and National Geographic scientist-in-residence, Dr Sylvia Earle, who I meet after the voyage for an exclusive interview.

I ask Sylvia if we should be travelling to Antarctica at all? “There is of course a cost benefit to this, but it can be justified if those ▶

A SACRED PLACE

A photograph of a whale's tail breaching the surface of the ocean. The tail is dark and textured, with a white patch on the underside. The water is a deep blue with white foam from the splash. In the background, there are blue mountains under a clear sky. The title 'A SACRED PLACE' is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image.



Above
The *Sylvia Earle* just off the Antarctic coast

Top
Kayaking in the clear waters

Right
Weddell seals are just one of many endemic species of the Antarctic continent

Page 32
Some Adélie penguins balancing on the edge of an iceberg

Page 33
Finding whale flukes – just one way people can assist researchers when visiting the frozen continent

going to this sacred place go with respect and make a commitment to make a difference with the knowledge they acquire. There are many more fishing vessels in Antarctica than cruise-ships taking people who come in peace rather than doing harm. Travellers must pledge to make a difference and go with the promise to give back," she explained.

The most direct way to give something back is by assisting research to foster a better understanding of Antarctica's natural environment and the issues it faces. "Participating in citizen science is extremely helpful to scientists for whom the logistics and costs of coming down here are high," said Annette. "I think all vessels should have a dedicated facility for science". And she insists data collected is valuable. "Passengers recorded a humpback whale recently down here that had been spotted offshore in Brazil. This helps inform us of their migration routes and can guide potential changes to marine protected areas if we find high concentrations needing better protection".

Inspired by thoughts I can make a difference I throw myself into the citizen science program during my voyage down the Antarctic Peninsula (the continent's archipelagic finger of land pointing towards Tierra del Fuego).



“It can be justified if those going to this sacred place go with respect and make a commitment to make a difference with the knowledge they acquire.”

We cruise down the Weddell Sea, on the peninsula’s eastern-side, aghast at tabular icebergs the size of small towns drifting away from the disintegrating Larsen iceshelf. We watch huge feeding flocks of Adelie penguins porpoising across the Southern Ocean and follow seal-eating orca. Typically, we make land daily to view wildlife, as at Deception Island where we carried out the microplastic survey.

Citizen science is fun to participate in and includes seabird surveys and sampling phytoplankton – the building block of the ocean food chain and responsible for generating every second breath of oxygen we take. Our photographs of humpback tails are entered into the *Happy Whale* app database: the whale fluke patterns are like individual fingerprints to identify them. And we carry out a cloud survey certified by NASA with Polish crewmember, Paulina, timing observations for when a NASA satellite passes overhead. “NASA can see the upper levels of the cloud by satellite looking down, but our observations fill in their knowledge gap to what is happening beneath the cloud base,” said Paulina. “These observations are important to their research on ocean temperature warming and climate change”.

Annette takes us out on a Zodiac to analyse phytoplankton and krill. We dangle an instrument over the side called a Secchi disc and record the point of depth where we lose sight of it. This is where it enters the phytoplankton column, in our case around 8 metres deep. “It’s critically important as the base of the food-chain, eaten by krill, which is in turn eaten by whales and penguins,” said

Annette. “Phytoplankton seems to be decreasing and we’re not exactly sure why. Our research can assist determining whether this is due to atmospheric warming, acidification, or changes in sea currents,” she said.

Some of the krill we land in a trailing net, micro-crustaceans, are taken back to the laboratory for analysis under microscope. “It’s more to show passengers what the sea, which can look empty, is really like under the boat and all around them. It’s teeming with life,” said Annette. Satisfyingly, the microscope work also determines the two suspected items of microplastic we harvested on Deception Island are organic matter, likely bone.

“You’re not just coming here to be entertained. You’re coming here to be informed, inspired, and motivated to change yourself and those around you with a greater respect for nature,” Sylvia Earle told me, her words a clarion call for all Antarctic voyages to put science at their heart. ■



Mark Stratton

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▶ This is an abridged version from an article originally published by Wanderlust magazine on wanderlustmagazine.com.

The Explore Foundation supports grassroots projects in countries that Explore customers visit. This issue, we spoke to Lisa Jelly, founder of **Lehara**, a charity that provides people from rural communities in Nepal with skills that enable them to earn a living and help their community thrive.



PAY IT FORWARD



Left
Namche Bazaar in the
Khumbu Valley, Nepal

“Lehara has given me an option of earning a good wage, while staying close to my home village. The whole of the Lehara team are really close and we help and support each other. I’m really looking forward to helping Lehara grow and see the benefit to my local communities.”

Namgyal Doma Tamang, Shomare

Once the concept of Lehara was born, the location was a given. I’d already fallen in love with the people and communities of the Khumbu Valley whilst climbing there myself in 2019. And as one of the most popular regions in the world for trekkers, it seemed the perfect pilot for our initiative. I’m proud to say Lehara has now been a registered charity in the UK since October 2022. Our first school opened in September 2023, in the Khumbu Valley in the foothills of Everest in Nepal.

What is the secret of your success?

The magic behind Lehara is how it’s fully embedded in the communities of the Khumbu Valley. Qualified therapists provide high-quality sports massage to trekkers and climbers that visit the region every year. The revenue generated not only covers small operational costs of the clinics and pays the therapists a good wage, but it also contributes to a community investment fund. This fund will become available once a year to financial grants from existing organisations and charities across the Khumbu, where their initiative benefits local healthcare, education, or the environment.

What are you most proud of so far?

Our six qualified therapists are fabulous! When we first recruited trainees in Autumn 2022, we were offering a training position that was completely unknown to the locals. It took a leap of faith for these individuals to say yes. I’ll be forever grateful for how brave they were, and the commitment and hard work they have shown is a credit to each of them. During the training course, they were like sponges, picking up the manual therapy skills so quickly, and being complete professionals from their very first day in clinic. I believe the Lehara team will grow over the coming years, but these six will always have a special place in the Lehara family.

What is your goal for the Lehara initiative?

- › For our flagship Sports Massage Service in the Khumbu Valley, to offer 2-3 locations for trekkers to receive high-quality sports massage. The service will be led and operated by locals, with advice and support from our English trustees.
- › For a Lehara massage to be included as part of the trek for multiple tour operators, so pre-bookings can be made.
- › And for our trained therapists to become part of the leadership team, and for the team to grow!

What does the support from the Explore Foundation mean to Lehara?

It means everything. It highlights that a well-respected organisation like the Explore Foundation can see the true potential that Lehara has in providing safe and sustainable employment for locals, as well as long-lasting community investment programmes.

The financial support has funded training positions for three Sherpas. We were able to set up a residential course, with teachers from the London School of Massage, along with the equipment and training venue needed to run the course. We hope in the future, Lehara will be able to provide sports massage sessions to Explore trekkers, showing how Explore is committed to providing sustainable tourism that invests in local communities they visit. ■

- › To find out more about the work that is supported by the Explore Foundation, visit theexplore.foundation

Lisa, tell us a little bit about Lehara and why you set it up?

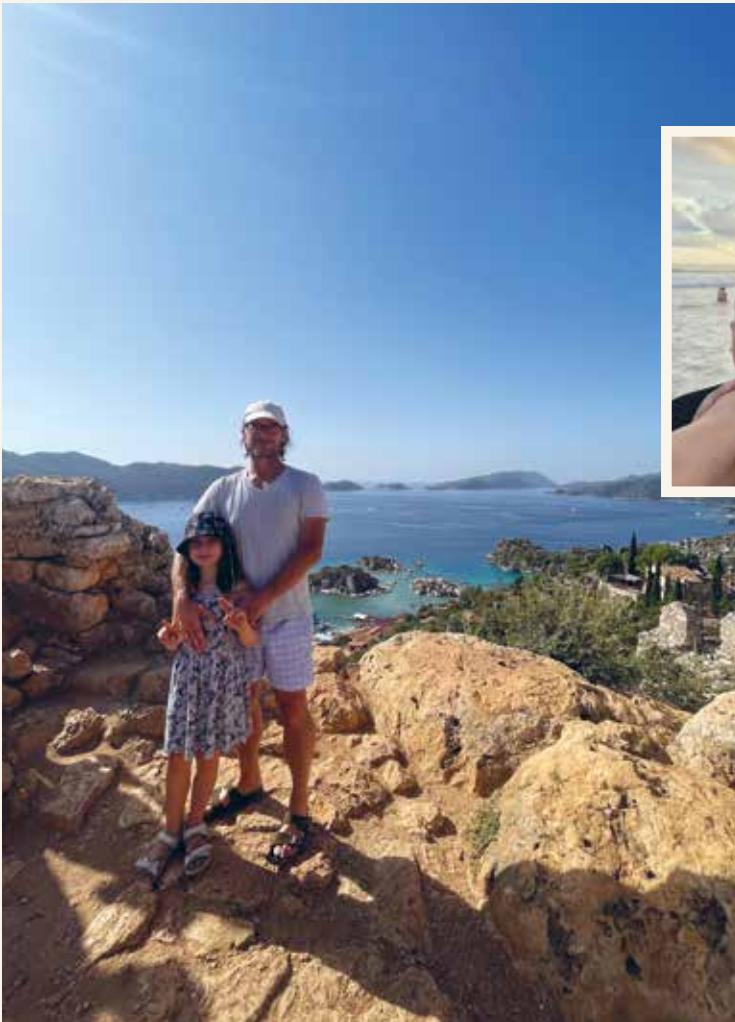
I came up with the idea in 2021, after listening to a podcast by Douglas MacLagan on sustainable giving. He explained that it wasn’t just about money, but also passing on knowledge and time to support initiatives. He labelled it the 3 Ws – Wealth, Wisdom, and Work. These became the driving principles behind a hospitality school he set up, teaching street kids the skills to enable them to get a job in a Kathmandu hotel.

I was struck with how simple this concept was. I applied it to my world of Physiotherapy and manual therapy and the idea behind Lehara was hatched! Our mission was to provide training in sports massage techniques to enable a high-quality service to trekkers and climbers along the Everest Base Camp route.

We know our trips are special, but don't just take our word for it. Explore adventurers are our best ambassadors.

Family
edition

Over to you...



Above
Mathilda and her dad Michael –
discovering Turkey's treasures

Below

Enjoying the beach life –
Matthew and Emilia with their
parents in Costa Rica



Cruising the jungle waters

We had such a good time in Costa Rica! Our guide Oscar was a cool guy who made every day fun. We took a speedboat to the Ossa Peninsula where we saw whales, dolphins and turtles! We also loved spending time with our new friends from the trip and cruising the jungle waters in Tortuguero for crocodiles and monkeys.

Matthew and Emilia, age 13, on their time spent discovering the wonders of Costa Rica on the Family Costa Rica Rainforest and Wildlife Adventure.

From the hotel room into the river

Our holiday to Thailand was my best holiday ever! I had never been further away than Italy before. I loved all of it but my favourite bit was the River Kwai. We stayed in these wooden raft houses. They have no electricity so we used torches and candles, it was really fun. The rooms all have hammocks outside and you can jump straight into the river from outside your room and drift down in the current to climb back out by the restaurant. We also went rafting here and explored along the river. It's such a cool place.

From Phoebe Dewar, age 9, talking about her and her family's adventure in Thailand over the festive season.

Kids, Kas and kayaking

This was my first time in Turkey. It was incredible! The water was so clear and blue everywhere and I was able to swim every day. I learnt how to kayak, and we went to a sunken city! I also made some nice new friends, and we did trips to Kas (they have lots of lovely cats there!) and we even saw wild horses during a hike in the mountains.

Matilda Edwards Lopez, age 9, raving about her autumn holiday on our Turkey Family Coastal Adventure.

Share your travel stories...

If you've travelled with Explore and have a story you would like to share, we would love to hear from you! Send us your story on mystory@explore.co.uk

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talking about holidays!**

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