

GREAT

TRAVEL THE WORLD'S MOST SPECTACULAR ROUTES

JOURNEYS









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GREAT JOURNEYS, SMART TRAVEL



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Why do we travel? To broaden our minds? To get away from ourselves and other people (or conversely to ‘find’ ourselves)? To undergo rites of passage before embarking on the next stage of our lives? To celebrate our union with the planet and all its peoples? Often enough today, we travel simply because we can. Cheap and plentiful airfares have shrunk the globe, making it easier to jump on a plane and lie on a beach halfway across the world. The idea of the authentic, all-consuming ‘classic’ journey is something different though, isn’t it? Isn’t that what we really mean when we talk of travel broadening the mind? Aren’t we talking about those bygone days when we really were out of our comfort zones, when we lingered with travel?

Many of the trips, voyages and expeditions we’ve collected here have little to do with tourism or travel in the modern sense. In fact, quite a few are a product of the rise of civilisation itself, when new lands were forged and new knowledge cultivated as a consequence; journeys undertaken at a time when, unlike now, most of the world was unknown and seemingly unknowable. That’s not to say that you won’t find a relaxing ocean-side drive in this book as well.

Marco Polo brought back to Venice tales of lands no one had ever dreamt of, places so exotic and otherworldly that his recounting of his adventures rendered him a prophet without honour, branded a liar by his own people. As JG Ballard wrote, Marco was ostensibly the ‘first tourist’, setting the stage for many Grand Tours and Grand Packages to come, inspiring legions of travellers to seek out new lands, to travel for travel’s sake. Many of our great journeys are the product of this adventurous spirit,

of the thrill of divesting oneself of the trappings of modern life and simply experiencing the world in its infinite variety and beauty, letting the journey unfold.

Each journey is epic – epic in scale, physicality, significance, or scenery, sometimes all at once. When you’ve stared down the mighty fjords and glaciers of Norway, you might think everything else pales into insignificance. For those with a spiritual bent, the Shikoku Pilgrimage and Buddha’s odyssey are designed to achieve enlightenment and transcend earthly limitations, while Muslims undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca believe that the journey will divest them of prior sins while showing the way to a more fulfilling life. These quests are about the desire to understand our place in the universe, and, in some ways, so are the world-beating missions from the Golden Age of exploration, which tested the claims of unassailable and unobtainable lands because these voyagers felt that to stay at home and never try to find out what lies beyond would mean stagnation, a devolution of the human spirit rather than evolution.

Today, the spirit of great exploration is not dead, merely displaced. After all, no one rides the *Royal Scotsman* luxury train around the Scottish Highlands with the express intent of advancing the human race. Well, maybe not consciously... Nostalgia, in the case of the *Scotsman* and pretty much every classic train journey, is a more accurate way to describe the engine that drives such voyages, and that’s part of their own peculiar ‘greatness’ – the trains are slow and they take their time, and they can instantly transport you back to an era when



much travel for pleasure was painstakingly enabled by rail.

Elsewhere, curiosity is one of the strongest motivating factors. It seems hardwired into the collective consciousness, as we are essentially migratory, also social creatures and many of our great journeys were – and are – undertaken to satisfy our social, curious urges. We want to connect with other lands, other peoples, to imbibe the rituals of another culture so that we may alloy them with the things in our own world that we cherish. Other journeys are one-offs and can be admired as virtually unrepeatable achievements. Realistically, not many of us will have the wherewithall to recreate Amelia's Earhart's incredible plane journey around the globe, although reading about it should be no less inspirational as we recreate in our minds what it must have been like for her to travel so far and wide, and what it must have felt like to stumble at the very last hurdle.

That's the real key to this book: inspiration. Above all, we aim to instil that sense of great exploration that many feel has been buried by the modern world. Of society today, it's often said that we are 'time poor', that no one seems to possess the time to do anything of lasting duration, which explains the rise of 'slow travel', 'slow food' and other 'slow' movements designed to restore what has supposedly been leached away by a world in which everything is within easy reach. Think of this book then as your own personalised guide to slow travel. You can pick and choose which journeys you will actually undertake and which you will simply read about, allowing the latter to linger in soft-focus in the imagination as wondrous feats from bygone ages. With the former, you may not be able to conquer the world like, say, Alexander the Great did, but you can certainly travel from his birthplace, Pella, in Greek Macedonia, to Alexandria in Egypt, the city he founded, savouring Alexandrian sights along the way.

In recent times, there has been a rash of scientific evidence for the therapeutic value of travel. This evidence suggests

that getting away from it all opens up neural pathways that help to beat stress, stave off Alzheimer's and produce positive and effective thinking. When overseas, the act of having to cope with a linguistic problem of translation or a confusing transport timetable forces us to think in new and unexpected ways. The thrilling disorientation of arriving in a foreign land and grappling with its mysteries and complexities seems to unlock a hidden dimension of creativity, as our brains rewire in an attempt to acclimatise. As a knock-on benefit, we are now able to solve the problems in our lives that, when we first left home, seemed insurmountable. Thousands of kilometres away, we can view them as if through the wrong end of a telescope – small and insignificant; easier to grasp, ruminate upon and solve for the perversely liberating distance that has been placed upon them. No wonder so much great literature was derived from partaking of a classic journey or two: the Shelleys on the Grand Tour; Theroux in the Pacific and on the Trans-Siberian; Stevenson in Cévennes; Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. No wonder many future leaders, Che Guevara foremost, returned from their own great journey with ideas that would change the world.

You might think that travelling as far and as uncomfortably as possible would increase the chances of all that happening, but positive disorientation of the kind we're talking about does not have to be achieved solely through discomfort or endurance. It can come from a confrontation with sheer beauty: the fjords; the soaring Three Gorges on the Yangtze; the indescribable magic of the Copper Canyon; the majesty of the mightiest rivers – the Nile, the Mekong, the Ganges, the Amazon.

So, as you thumb through this book and perhaps plan a journey or two, be comforted by the thought that when you return from your adventure you'll doubtless have confirmed what we knew all along: that by travelling – by doing it right, by foregoing convenience for substance – you'll have become a smarter, more well-rounded human being.



GREAT JOURNEYS



OVERLAND



ISTANBUL TO CAIRO

A CLASSIC OVERLAND TRIP ENCOMPASSING A MAELSTROM OF EXPERIENCES, SANDWICHED BETWEEN TWO VIBRANT CITIES, ISTANBUL AND CAIRO. EN ROUTE YOU'LL SAVOUR SUMPTUOUS MEDITERRANEAN COAST INSET WITH RISING MOUNTAINS, AND VAST TRACTS OF WINDSWEPT, SUN-BEATEN DESERT.

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The Istanbul to Cairo route is a favourite for novice backpackers and seasoned travellers alike, and the reasons for that are not hard to divine. Firstly, Istanbul straddles two continents, making it an excellent entry point into the Middle East. From there, the route snakes its way down through Turkey, which has an abundance of historical riches including the Gallipoli peninsula and the poignant Anzac battlefields; the amazing Istanbul; Ephesus, with its marvellous Roman remains; and Cappadocia's extraordinary fairy chimneys. The route then enters Syria and the stimulating bazaar at Aleppo, not to mention the stunning city of Damascus. Many travellers follow their nose to Jordan, where there is so much to enjoy: the ruins of Petra, for example, or the chance to float in the Dead Sea. A detour to Jerusalem is always worthy regardless of your religious views, while snorkelling in the Red Sea provides more of an earthly thrill. Crowded Cairo is the end point and a trip to the Pyramids the icing on the cake.

The route is versatile and exciting and can encompass many different adventures: diving among spectacular marine scenery, trekking through waves of sand dunes, spending days adrift on a small Nile felucca or whiling away nights at old colonial drinking dens and pounding Mediterranean nightclubs. There are five millennia of history and culture here, including the pyramids and the rock-cut city of Petra, the desert oasis ruins of ancient Palmyra and the gigantic columns of the Roman temple at Baalbek. Every town and city, valley and hillside seems like it's a living museum: the field that saw Ramses triumph over the Hittites; the site where Alexander the Great sought the advice of the Oracle; the location where Cleopatra bathed; the route walked by Christ; the spot where Napoleon put ashore.

ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES

- * **Overdosing on classic historical wonders: the pyramids in Cairo and Petra; Palmyra and the Crusader castle of Krak des Chevaliers in Syria; Ephesus in Turkey; the Aya Sofia in Istanbul; the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall in Jerusalem.**
- * Doing the rounds of essential museums: Cairo's Egyptian Museum, which contains some of the most amazing artefacts in the world; the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul and Azem Palace in Damascus; the Israel Museum in Jerusalem; and the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv.
- * **Kicking back on sumptuous beaches: Patara in Turkey; Eilat on the Red Sea; Netanya, Tel Aviv, Bat Yam and the Sinai Peninsula.**
- * Enjoying the nightlife in Tel Aviv, Istanbul and Cairo.

DISTANCE - 1200KM | **COUNTRIES COVERED** - TURKEY, SYRIA, LEBANON, JORDAN, ISRAEL, EGYPT | **IDEAL TIME COMMITMENT** - SIX TO EIGHT WEEKS | **BEST TIME OF YEAR** - SEPTEMBER TO NOVEMBER, MARCH TO MAY | **ESSENTIAL TIP** - SYRIA DENIES ENTRY TO ANYBODY WITH AN ISRAELI PASSPORT-STAMP; TRAVEL FROM ISTANBUL TO CAIRO FOR A DETOUR THERE AFTER SYRIA.

A photograph of a narrow, rocky path in Petra, Jordan. The path is flanked by towering, dark rock walls. In the distance, a brightly lit, ornate temple facade with columns and carvings is visible. A small, open-sided vehicle with a canopy is parked on the path, with several people inside. The scene is illuminated by warm, golden light, likely from the setting or rising sun.

PETRA

Anyone on the Istanbul to Cairo route should prioritise a visit to Jordan's ancient city of Petra. Hewn from towering rock walls of multicoloured sandstone, the imposing facades of its great temples and tombs are an enduring testament to the vision of the desert tribes who sculpted them. Almost as spectacular as the monuments themselves are the countless shades and Neapolitan swirls formed in the rock. Petra is often called the 'Rose Red City' but even this hardly does justice to the extraordinary range of colours that blend as the sun makes its daily passage over the site.

PEARL OF THE ARAB KITCHEN

You'll find excellent food everywhere in the Middle East, but special attention should be paid to the Lebanese scene. Here, life revolves around food, and Lebanese cuisine is often described as the 'pearl of the Arab kitchen' – the country is a gateway to the Mediterranean, linking the cultures of East and West. At *kebabji ahwa* (restaurants that specialise in kebabs), you will find long metal troughs, the width of a skewer, filled with glowing charcoal. Skewers of lamb, chicken and beef kafta are evenly cooked to customers' tastes.





■ THE JOURNEY TODAY

You've travelled to Egypt overland from the north, and the first place you hit is the Sinai Peninsula. You snorkel the spectacular Sinai coast and hit the superb beaches. From southern Sinai you go to Cairo, visit the pyramids and catch a train down to see the Pharaonic splendours gathered around the Upper Egyptian centres of Luxor and Aswan. From Upper Egypt, you travel straight up the Nile Valley. Egypt really is the most extraordinary place, you reflect, recalling the words of the ancient Greek historian, Herodotus: 'Concerning Egypt, I will now speak at length, because nowhere are there so many marvellous things, nor in the world besides are there to be seen so many things of unspeakable greatness.'

The pyramids leave an indelible mark on you, as do the immense, awe-inspiring temples and monuments left by the Pharaohs, the legacy of the Greeks and Romans, the churches and monasteries of the early Christians and the incredible art and architectural legacy of early Islam.

Back in Cairo, at the end of your Egyptian sojourn, you relax in a busy coffee house at dusk, as the voice of Egyptian diva, Umm Kolthum, wafts around you. You people-watch out onto the busy street, fascinated by the day-to-day machinations of Egyptian society and culture, which seem to provide just as much intrigue and magic as the country's historical treasures.

It is this latter thought that stays with you as you catch a ferry to some small family restaurant on the far bank of the Nile, thinking that the street scenes are almost as exciting as the pyramids themselves.

■ SHORTCUT

If time is pressing, two weeks should be enough to enjoy two countries along the way: Egypt and Jordan, say, or Jordan and Israel, or Syria and Lebanon. Turkey alone would probably need the whole two weeks.

■ DETOUR

In Turkey, many overlanders cross the Sea of Marmara in a hurry to get to the coast. Meanwhile, travellers who only have eyes for Gallipoli journey down through Thrace to the Gallipoli peninsula. Both sets of adventurers miss out on Bursa, a key city on the original Silk Route and a wonderful stopover. It's easily reached from Istanbul and is a complete contrast to the coastal regions with a very Turkish feel. Bursa's big attraction, now and historically, is the thermal springs at Çekirge. The city is also famous as the place where the oh-so-savoury Iskender kebab was invented and as the birthplace of Karagöz shadow puppets.



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OPENING SPREAD Petra's dizzying, towering, rose-red rock walls. **ABOVE (L)** Too good to be true: Kaputa beach near Kas, Turkey. **ABOVE (R)** Cairo's bustling Khan al-Khalili (Great Bazaar). **LEFT** The sumptuous dome interior of the Hagia Sophia Church (Church of Divine Wisdom), Istanbul.

ARMCHAIR

* *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977) and *Death on the Nile* (1978)

Egypt's enormous Amun Temple Enclosure contains the famous hypostyle hall, as featured in both films.

* *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) In David Lean's film, Der'a in Jordan is where Lawrence (played by Peter O'Toole) is captured while in disguise.

* *Star Wars* (1977) Selime, at the northern end of the Ihlara Valley, is

where some scenes for the original *Star Wars* were filmed.

* *From the Holy Mountain* (William Dalrymple) This book is an ambitious attempt to revisit the roots of Christianity in the troubled spots of eastern Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine and middle Egypt.

* *The Pillars of Hercules* (Paul Theroux) Author Theroux's exploratory jaunt around seaside Turkey, Syria, Israel and Egypt.