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# TALES FROM NOWHERE

EDITED BY DON GEORGE

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There are people everywhere who form a Fourth World, or a diaspora of their own. They are the lordly ones! They come in all colours. They can be Christians or Hindus or Muslims or Jews or pagans or atheists. They can be young or old, men or women, soldiers or pacifists, rich or poor. They may be patriots, but they are never chauvinists. They share with each other, across all the nations, common values of humour and understanding. When you are among them you know you will not be mocked or resented, because they will not care about your race, your faith, your sex or your nationality, and they suffer fools if not gladly, at least sympathetically. They laugh easily. They are easily grateful. They are never mean. They are not inhibited by fashion, public opinion, or political correctness. They are exiles in their own communities, because they are always in a minority, but they form a mighty nation, if they only knew it. It is the nation of nowhere.

— Jan Morris

# INTRODUCTION – NOWHERE, EVERYWHERE

BY DON GEORGE

07.

We've all been to Nowhere. It might have been in the middle of Mongolia or Manhattan. It might have been at a Zen monastery, a no-man's-land border outpost, or a six-palm island in an endless sea. You may have found Nowhere on a sultry summer night in Paris when you'd spent your last euro and had no place to sleep; or on a midnight jeep safari in the Tanzanian bush after you'd blown your last spare tyre, with your campsite a distant pinprick of light; or in the comforting cocoon of an all-night train compartment, sharing soul-secrets with a total stranger. Nowhere is a setting, a situation and a state of mind. It's not on any map, but you know it when you're there.

Nine months ago, when Lonely Planet announced the theme of this year's literary anthology, *Tales from Nowhere*, I embarked on my own journey to Nowhere, an editorial expedition into uncharted wilderness. There were no guidebooks or landmarks; no compass or map. Where is Nowhere? And how do you create a book about it?

As with many great journeys, setting out was simultaneously exhilarating and unsettling. Fortunately, compiling two previous Lonely Planet anthologies, *The Kindness of Strangers* and *By the Seat of My Pants*, had taught me to trust this

process: to trust the theme, because it resonated with my own travel lessons and those of other travellers; to trust the journey, because when you open yourself to the world, the world always responds with grace; and to trust the untapped tales that awaited in the wilderness.

And what tales awaited! In the months after we announced this theme, hundreds and hundreds of stories arrived by digital camel, bus, túk-túk and canoe. The range and quality of submissions astonished and delighted me – tales that I never could have imagined, and that expanded the characteristics and boundaries of Nowhere day by day.

In the end, choosing the stories for this collection was an extremely arduous and edifying task. The thirty-one pieces presented herein are exceptional not just for their literary qualities but for their life qualities as well. Full of passion, surprise, wonder, curiosity and revelation, these real-life tales compose a kaleidoscopic portrait of the many Nowheres we visit – and the many roads we take to get there – in our lives.

In some of these stories, the authors intentionally journey to Nowhere, but with unintended consequences. Simon Winchester wings off on assignment to cover the worst country in the world – and brings back an all-too-dramatic souvenir; Pico Iyer searches for nothingness on Easter Island, and finds it in greater abundance than he'd hoped for; Laura Resau unwittingly bonds with Mexican villagers through a succession of mysterious Maya rites; Angie Chuang pursues a pulse-pounding pilgrimage into the heart of Afghanistan; Christopher Cox confronts lethal mines and memories en route to Pol Pot's Cambodian hideout; and Stanley Stewart ventures upriver beyond the last human settlement in Sarawak.

In other stories, the authors stumble upon Nowhere by accident, and recount the adventures, encounters and illuminations that ensue. Marooned at a dusty nondestination in Malawi, Judy Tierney learns to revel in everyday riches; Lisa

Alpine tumbles into an oasis of tranquillity in war-torn Israel; James Hamilton is transported by a symphony of art and nature in Death Valley; Conor Grennan skids into an unforgettable encounter in rural Sri Lanka; and Rolf Potts gains a new worldly perspective in a rural Kansas town.

Other authors enter the gates of Nowhere via circumstance and serendipity. Danny Wallace's condemnation to airport-lounge limbo is commuted by an unlikely angel; Karla Zimmerman's country-road collision on a Vietnamese bus builds impromptu bridges; Don Meredith's spontaneous detour to join an old friend on an African engine safari ends in a celebration of Shakespeare, Tuskers beer and the simple bounties of the bush; and Pam Houston's odyssey into the wilds of Australia introduces her to a character named Cool Beans and the wonders of Western Australia.

Finally, some of these tales travel rare, rugged roads to unexpected Nowheres, as in Davi Walders' deeply moving discovery of a place – and its courageous witness – that almost ceased to exist; Joshua Clark's extraordinary excavation and evocation of an obliterated neighbourhood and its indomitable denizens; Karl Taro Greenfeld's gripping depiction of doggedly tracking an interminable trail into a deadly territory; and Jason Elliot's deliciously eye-opening account of a journey to a place where cultures clash and coalesce.

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Re-reading these tales and reflecting on my three decades of travel, I realise that my own adventures have taken me to Nowhere almost everywhere: when I left the comfortable Connecticut countryside for the widening wilds of college, when I left college for Paris, when I left Paris for Athens. All these were excursions to Nowhere. I recall the initial intimidations and later illuminations of Princeton, literature

and writing classes and teachers that deepened and directed my life. I recall my first fledgling forays in Paris – *le jeune américain* slipping on identities like overcoats, trying to fashion a new life in a new language in a new city, drunk on art and architecture and history, wandering in the footsteps of Hemingway and Baudelaire. In Athens I recall out-of-time afternoons at a no-name seaside café with an alluring, elusive expat who embodied all the clarities and confusions of Greece for me; an off-limits border town called Pythion, where I missed the connection for the Istanbul-bound train and had to linger for twelve hours in the rail station with only a suspicious policeman and my journal for company; and most hauntingly the Palace of Knossos on Crete, where past-life intimations plucked me around every corner.

A year later I found myself – or lost myself – in Japan: among the mesmerising moss-pocked rocks and meticulously raked sands of Kyoto's Ryoanji Temple rock garden, an exquisite enigma designed so the viewer cannot see the entire garden from any vantage – but must 'see' it, complete it, in the mind; under the soft and softly scented pink petal fall of cherry blossoms in spring, efflorescent affirmations of evanescence and eternity; and on the idyllic island of Shikoku, site of a sacred pilgrims' path, where my own heart's pilgrimage culminated in a Shinto wedding ceremony in my wife's village home.

In the ensuing decades I have visited Nowhere around the globe: in the simple, time-fusing touch of hand to holy water at Notre Dame cathedral in Paris; in watching sunrise fire up the pulsing, breathing earth energy of Uluru, in Australia's Outback; in scrunch-scrunch-scrunching along Pakistan's Karakoram Highway, a momentary mote among the aged implacable peaks; in swimming among sea lions and bounding among blue-footed boobies in the raw, rooting wonder-world of the Galápagos; in adrenaline-pulling past a momentary glimpse of oblivion on a sheer slippery ascent of Yosemite's Half Dome.



Whether setting, situation, or state of mind (or usually, some conjunction of all three), what all these Nowheres share is the quality of disorientedness. For a moment you lose your bearings, there are no coordinates, all sense of the familiar is gone: you're Nowhere. Then you settle into your neo-Gothic dormitory room, assemble an identity at the Musée d'Orsay and the local café, you reach the Karakoram guesthouse, flop back onto the Galápagos ship, hug your wife and kids on Half Dome's glinting peak. Your jagged edges snap back into the global picture-puzzle.

But for a moment that you will never forget, you were a disconnected piece in another puzzle: Nowhere.

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The pieces in these pages map the geographical reaches of Nowhere, from Tuscany to Timbuktu, Antarctica to Yap, and the emotional reaches too: delight and despair, remorse and reconciliation, humour and heartache, loss and longing and love.

As I survey this map now, five interwoven lessons seem to stand out in relief.

The first is that Nowhere, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. One person's Nowhere is another person's Everywhere. The most unimaginably remote outpost is someone's everyday world – and means the world to that person. Everything is relative, and we would all do well to heed this humble, humbling lesson.

A second, corollary lesson is that we are always, everywhere, surrounded by riches. If we assess a place as Nowhere because it is impoverished or dull or boring, that is because we are impoverished in attention and appreciation. Virtually wherever we are, if we can slow down, focus and absorb the Nowhere around us, we will be astounded by its intricate depths and riches.

The third, linked lesson is that the size of the world is not fixed. It is as big as our experiences and our imaginations; it grows as we grow. This is true for all humans, whether in steel-and-glass city skyscrapers or branch-and-mud jungle treehouses, stony highland castles or goatskin desert tents. In this sense, too, every Nowhere is a Somewhere: every excursion to Nowhere expands the dimensions of our world.

The fourth lesson is that humans are a remarkably resourceful and resilient species: we confront unimagined challenges and overcome them. If we can embrace and embody the qualities Jan Morris ascribes to Nowhere in the epigraph to this collection – courage and compassion, humour and humility, tolerance and understanding – our potentials are infinite.

The fifth lesson is a simple truth the tales within these pages abundantly illuminate and celebrate: The world has an inexhaustible ability to surprise us, and grace us, with revelations. If we embark on each adventure with an open heart and an open mind, trusting in the journey, travel will take us places we never planned to go, and enrich and enlighten us in ways we never otherwise would have known.

And so it is with this adventure, for my own *Tales from Nowhere* journey has led me to one final revelatory surprise: Nowhere is not, as I had believed, an isolated outpost of disorientation; Nowhere is an everyday human hub of intertwining roads, where life-changing connections, revelations and resolutions are bestowed.

As the end approaches, I want to thank the countless fellow travellers who have helped me on this trail: in particular, the hundreds of writers who submitted their tales to this collection; my Lonely Planet colleagues, who embraced and supported this journey every step of the way; and my family, who anchor and answer my own life's journey, day by day.

Now I hand this adventure over to you. Here's the map, and a simple prayer: May it lead you Nowhere, everywhere.

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