

SHOESTRING



Exploring the world - on a budget

Issue #6 | Free
February 2012

Cuba Libre!

Beaches, Castro and a lot of Che

Traversing the Stans

On the road through Central Asia

Aboriginal Oz

Learning about the Dreamtime

Scaling Mount Everest

The Himalayas off the beaten track

Plus:

Hitchhiking * Travel Insurance * Pakistan * TEFL



G' Day! →

After a long break, Shoestring Travel Maazine is back, packed full with tips, inspiration and a sense of adventure.

Our intrepid globetrotter Erik has filed his next report from the road, making his way east across the 'Stans, while Niamh has gone aboriginal Down Under.

Joining the local parties is always a good way of getting to know your host nations. Good thing then that Carnival is currently in full fling around the world and participation in the street events and parades is free.

From dodging buskers on the dreamy streets of Habana Vieja, to reaching Everest Base Camp off the beaten trek, this issue of Shoestring should give you ideas of where to go next and what to do while you are there.

Whether you are planning a Gap Year or your next backpacking adventure, I hope Shoestring will be the inspiration you need to make it happen!

Happy Travels!

Cornelia

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ISSUE #6

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TRAVEL NEWS & DEALS



the hungarian house of parliament
in budapest

New Discount card for SEA

International Backpacker have created a discount card for backpackers in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, the first of its kind for South East Asia. Special offer for cards purchased before 01. March 2012. For more info check:
www.internationalbackpackercard.com

Ballooning over Uluru

Outback Ballooning has announced that visitors will be able to enjoy hot air balloon rides over the Patji region just outside the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. During the dawn flights, Uluru will be clearly visible. The flights will start in March 2012 after 20 years of negotiations.

Blue Peter presenter in Antarctic

Helen Skelton, one of the presenters of kids show Blue Peter, is currently trying to set a new world record for the longest bike ride on snow through the Antarctic journey in early January, and is accompanied by Norwegian winter sports expert Niklas Norman.



view from a terrace in portmeirion,
north wales, uk

Couple travels world after death

One of William and Alice Green's wishes in life was to travel the world, especially to Australia and Great Britain. Both are now deceased, but their daughter had an ingenious idea: She set up an ad on Craigslist for „Helping William and Alice travel the world“. Thanks to the ad, travellers have now scattered some of their ashes at famous landmarks and took pictures for the daughter. Death is no longer a hinderance when it comes to globetrotting!

Switzerland outlaws naked hiking

A favourite pasttime in Switzerland, nude hiking, has been prohibited after a man walked past a family picnic area where children were playing at the time. While there is no law against public nudity, there is a law against public indecency and those found hiking in the nude could face hefty fines.

LOOKING FOR A FREE PLACE TO
STAY? CHECK COUCHSURFING!
www.couchsurfing.org

The edge of space

Austrian Felix Baumgartner is looking to break a 50 year old record, by becoming the man who dared the longest skyjump. For this, he will travel 120,000ft to the edge of space, before attempting his fall, which will also see him withstand the force of a sonic boom unaided. Keep updated at www.redbullstratos.com



marine iguanas sunbathing in
puerto villamil, isla isabela,
galapagos islands, ecuador



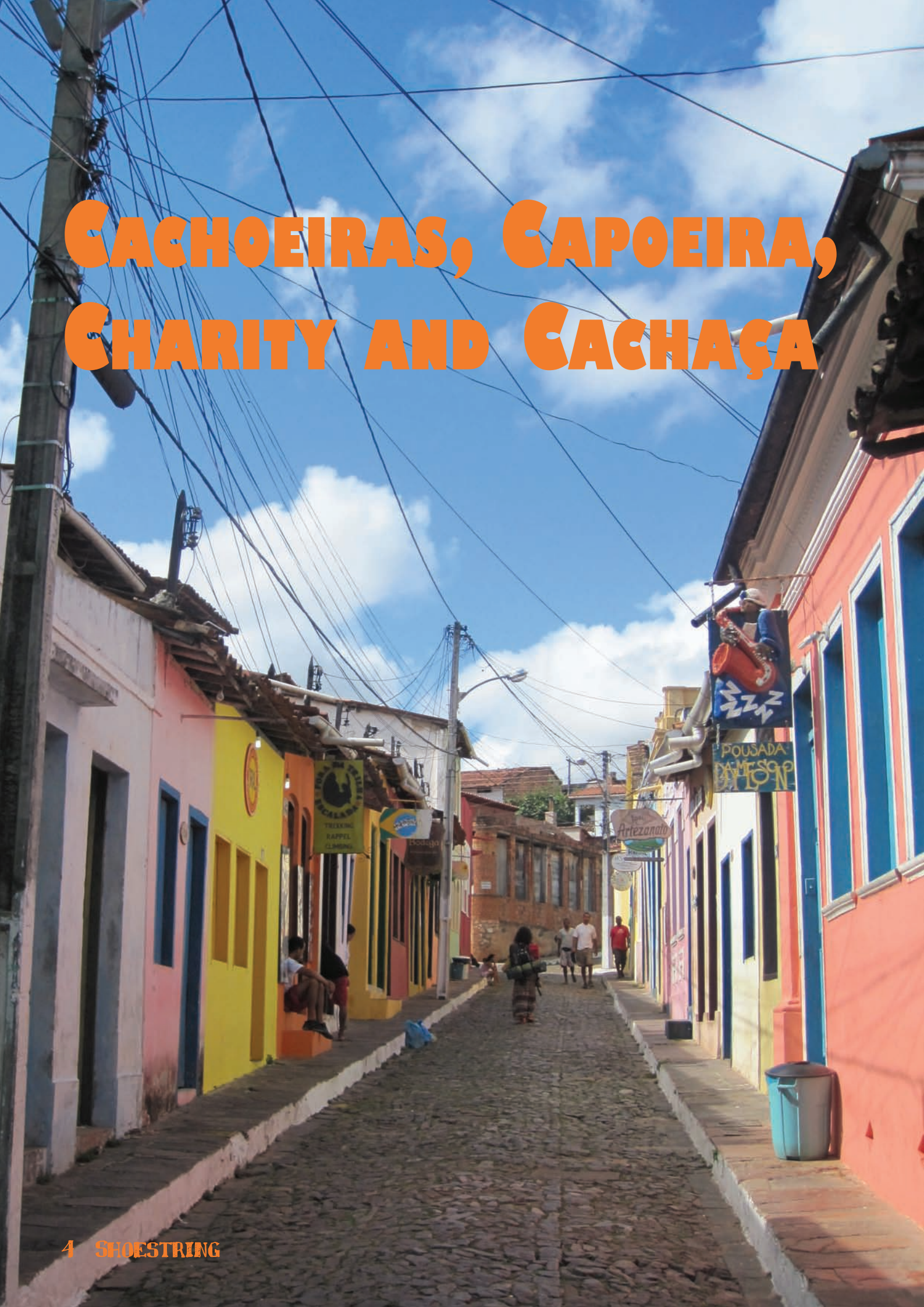
shop front in san francisco's
hippie haight ashbury district

Do you have a story to tell?

Have you had the experience of a lifetime somewhere off the beaten track? Discovered something new to do? Or taken a spectacular photo that's just too good to be hidden away? Then get published in **SHOESTRING**.

Send your stories and pictures to
editor@shoestring-magazine.com

CACHOEIRAS, CAPOEIRA, CHARITY AND CACHAÇA



As a student of Modern Languages at Newcastle University in England, it is compulsory to spend your third year abroad. Pity.

I was really looking forward to spending one of Britain's worst winters in North East England. Never mind, I guess Brazil will do.

Planning my year abroad was far from simple as I study three languages: Spanish, French and Portuguese, with only one year to immerse myself in all three.

My priority was Portuguese, the language I had studied for the least time. The reason I chose to study Portuguese? Aside from the fact that 273 million people speak Portuguese, and that it is the fifth-most spoken language in the world? I have been dreaming of Brazil since I heard the original Sergio Mendes' "Masque nada"...

Through my friend's sister I found the perfect placement: working as a volunteer in a social project in Bahia for four months at Associação Casa Grande, a small NGO.

Reliant on volunteers and donations, Casa Grande aims to further the local children's education and to offer a secure place for local children to learn and grow through playing. Their motto is aprender, brincar, crescer - learn, play, grow.

Unlike a lot of gap year organisations for volunteers, no sky-high payment is required; just your time, energy and support in return for basic accommodation and an unforgettable experience that will be with you forever.

For anyone with a basic level of Portuguese this placement is ideal: the children at Casa Grande although at times brutal in their criticism, they were my best language

teachers and it is thanks to them that my Portuguese improved so quickly.

Meanwhile the friendly people of Lençóis welcomed me into the vibrant, weird and wonderful world of Brazilian culture.

← →
'Doing Capoeira is a million times more fun than the gym!'

← →
The project not only provides academic support for the children: it also provides an English course for the older children, which is essential in a town with an economy based on tourism.

On top of this, Casa Grande has partnerships with other social projects: GAL (Grupo Ambientalista de Lençóis) where the children learn about the environment, and how to protect it; of utmost importance in a national park home to a variety of flora and fauna, various geological formations such as the multi-coloured sands of the Salão de Areias, and not to mention the second highest waterfall in Brazil (Cachoeira da Fumaça).

Fora da Trilha offers a free climbing session every week, while AGE teaches the children IT skills necessary to keep up with the digital era in which we live.

Associação de Capoeira Corda Bamba provides free capoeira lessons to the children twice a week in Casa Grande, this not only keeps the children active and healthy but also teaches them discipline,

respect and the history of Afro-Brazilian culture and its importance today.

Of course as a volunteer, it's also the best way to get to know the locals and it's a million times more fun than going to the gym, plus mates' rates make it a must!

For those of you that are not

sure what capoeira is, it is in essence the fusion of dance and martial arts. Created during the era of slavery, the slaves were not allowed to fight, so they disguised it with dance, et voilà an incredible mix of acrobatics, dance, haunting chants and animated African drumming.



Opposite page: Street in Lençóis (AnHu). Top: Cachoeira da Primavera near Lençóis. Below: Capoeira moves in synchronisation



Writer Profile



Name: Georgie Russell

Age: 22

This Modern Languages student has just spent four months volunteering in Brazil and practicing her Portuguese

Lençóis, once a diamond-mining town, is now a hotspot for tourists looking for adventurous trekking, or pure relaxation away from hectic Salvador.

←-----→
**‘Tranquility,
peace and nature
are very much
appreciated’**
←-----→

It is located in the Chapada Diamantina National Park, surrounded by awesome views and breath-taking waterfalls: another advantage of being a volunteer is the free trekking in your spare time.

From famous Morro de Pailnácio - ask about the myth of the lovers and the umbrella - to the stunning scenery of Vale do Paty, to the clear, blue waters of Poço Azul. It has it all, mountain biking for the brave, Weeklong or daytreks on horseback, as well as lots of swimming, sunbathing and relaxing.

With nearly 100 children enrolled in the project, peace, tranquillity and nature are much appreciated. As a volunteer, not only are you their teacher, but also you are a friend and provide support, a

listening ear and advice to the children and teenagers.

In a town where school is implemented in half-day shifts, where parents are working all day and children are left to their own devices playing in the streets or working on the trekking trails selling refreshments, Casa Grande offers some respite: where the children can just be children in a safe and supervised environment.

Of course there are days of frustration where perhaps some children are messing about and it feels like you are not making any progress, but when you put it into perspective a lot of children do not receive any support from their parents, some of whom are illiterate; others live with a family of eight in a one bedroom house; some children have learning difficulties which are not picked up on by the overcrowded and understaffed schools.

Considering all the circumstances, we have to refine what progress means, those small advances, although little, do not mean they are insignificant.

From the volunteers' blog it is obvious that this Casa Grande experience has profoundly

affected all of us who have been lucky enough to work with the project.

I have mentioned Capoeira, cachoeiras and the charity Casa Grande, but there is one infamous ‘c’ I have left until last: Cachaça, otherwise known as sugar cane rum and used for the legendary Brazilian cocktail Caipirinha.

Lençóis is home to a little bar called the Fazendinha, which literally means little farm, where they have over 50 home made flavours of cachaça. These can be consumed as cachaçapura (not for the faint hearted), batida (think alcoholic milkshake) or in a caipirinha with any fruit you desire - my personal favourite is with maracujá (passionfruit).

←-----→
**‘Once you have
visited Lencois
you never want
to leave’**
←-----→

So whether you come here for tourism, nature or as a volunteer please stop by the Pousada dos Duendes (the owner founded the Casa Grande project), and they will show you where Casa Grande is.

There also seem to be a lot of expats from around the world settled in Lençóis, so be warned, it seems that once you have visited Lençóis, you never want to leave.

-----→
WEBSITE
-----→

Association Casa Grande
www.casagrandelencois.org



Children at Casa Grande show off their art work. Above: The youngest class at the project. All photos GeRu



BUILD CASTLES IN YOUR DREAMS AT THE Fort HOSTEL

Boutique hostels can make a nice change to staying at a YHA. **SHOESTRING** editor **Cornelia Kaufmann** reviewed and unlocked one of York's newest secrets.

The historic British city of York has a lot to offer its visitors, but cheap accommodation is hard to find.

Luckily for all travellers, a new boutique hostel opened in 2010 right in the medieval heart of York and offers youth hostels and hotel chains some stiff competition.

The Fort Boutique Hostel is located on Stonegate, on a cobbled street in the pedestrianised zone around the famous Minster. For all your exploratory needs, you couldn't wish for a more central location.

Right next door to the hostel is Kennedy's Bar, which also belongs to hostel owner Karen Waughn. The bar serves as a reception area, and the friendly staff will be able to point you to your room in the townhouse next door.

Each room in the hostel has a specific theme, and each was designed by an aspiring artist wanting to create something memorable and different. The designs stretch from a dorm in log cabin style - complete with Stag's head and wooden walls - to a double room depicting historic York as well as a room that really comes to life under UV light. With comfy beds and most rooms ensuite, The Fort is a cosy hostel with unusual decor.

All double rooms can also be used as twin rooms to allow more flexibility; all include TV, there is wi-fi throughout the building and every hostel guest is supplied with fresh towels.

Karen Waughn describes her reasons for opening a boutique hostel as compared to a bed and breakfast like this: „I love travelling, and following my time in Europe I became aware

of the increasing popularity of boutique hostels. I knew it was something I wanted to do, as a hostel gives the guest the chance to save money without compromising on quality.“

True words, because guests at the hostel definitely don't have to compromise on quality. The entrance is only passable with door code, and the first floor houses a lounge area and kitchenette with free hot and soft drinks for guests.

Guests with reduced mobility also have a lift at their disposal to get to the upper floors.

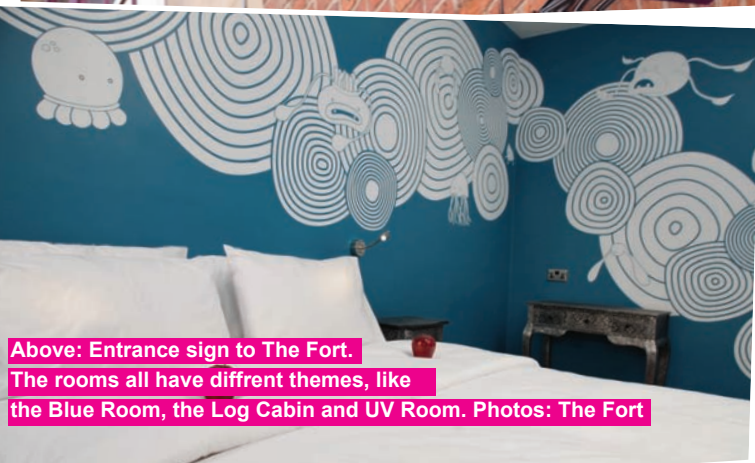
With York's diverse nightlife right around the corner from the hostel entrance, you'll have no problems finding somewhere to party with the locals. Unfortunately, the proximity to the clubs and bars also means that you can hear a lot of what is going on from your room, especially at the weekend. However, there is a simple solution: If you can't bear them, join them!

Don't worry about having to get up at the break of dawn for your breakfast though. Breakfast is served at Kennedy's bar from 10am onwards, so although you might get kept awake, you are also guaranteed a lie-in the next morning, which I think is a fair deal!

WEBSITE

The Fort Boutique Hostel
www.thefortyork.co.uk

Prices range from GBP 20.00 to 35.00 depending on room and travel dates which is within the price range that YHAs can charge as well.



Above: Entrance sign to The Fort.
The rooms all have different themes, like the Blue Room, the Log Cabin and UV Room. Photos: The Fort



JOIN THE PARTY, IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE LOCAL CULTURE

An impromptu street parade sweeps **SHOESTRING** contributor Lynn Mc Donnell up and through the streets of Tomohon in Indonesia

Previous page: A shrine overlooking Mount Lokon from across the valley. This page top: performers and climbers. Bottom: Climbing Mount Mahawu. Photos: LyMD

In the North-eastern tip of the state of Sulawesi in Indonesia lives a pretty decent collaboration of winding roads, idyllic deserted islands, busy transport hubs and a volcano or two.

Manado, the principal city in Northern Sulawesi is not unlike other Indonesian cities in that it is functional and clogged, a description that I have found difficult to expand upon.

Four hours on an enjoyably overcrowded bus south from the city however, lush mountains and sheer cliff dropswill welcome you to the overtly delightful village of Tomohon.

The perfect antidote to Manado's dullness, Tomohon is a sweet and dynamic little village. With two striking volcanoes towering over the village on both sides, it is a welcome pleasure to the eyes.

The scenery is not the only highlight. As with many other places in the world remote from the backpacker scene, it comes down to the people of the area, the local population that not only welcomes you but entertains you and teaches you.

Looking for a specific place to stay that had been recommended by a fellow traveller, I strolled through the town looking for a local to lend me a helping hand in the form of directional inspiration.

Unfortunately, the innate need to help a lost visitor far outweighed an innate sense of direction. After taking several different roads in all directions I was glad to come across a joyful little settlement of 5 huts and a grassy communal area that turned out to be the same place recommended to me.

'They now stood side by side the Minahasan dancers'

Early the following morning, prepared to hike up to either of the volcanoes' crater rims, I was perturbed to find the patch of grass outside my room unexpectedly awash with local Minahasan tribesmen in full costume bearing large drums and machetes.

The evidential confusion in

my eyes was met with that of the other travellers outside, whom for all my knowledge had crawled out of the volcano's crater as I had not seen any since arriving in town.

They now stood side by side the Minahasan dancers and the owners of their guesthouses whom had clearly dragged them here without much in the way of explanation.

The bizarre events that followed were made that bit more humiliating by the matching t-shirts that were produced by the local mayor.

With a stylish 'I love Tomohon' motif on the back we resembled some 1980's advertisement. Clearly this was not a spontaneous event and was cleverly organized, whether for this exact day or not.

'I felt a shift of emotion, from confusion to one of humbleness'

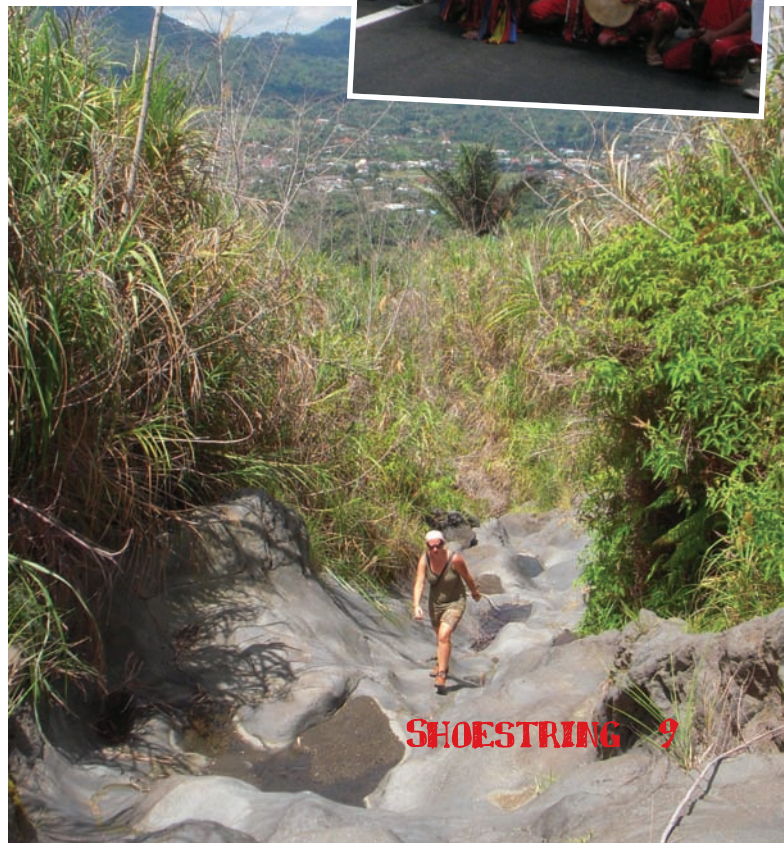
All dressed and presented, my newfound confused community and myself alike were ready. For what? All we knew was that more than likely, our morning was about to enter the paradigm of strange and more importantly, memorable.

An enigmatic occasion for sure, I took out my camera still unaware as to who indeed was the spectacle and attempted to establish my role as 'watcher'.

Gathered together, this small but bewildered group of tourists was instructed to follow the dancers as they began an obviously symbolic march through the villages' streets and to the base of Gunung Mahawu, the dominant volcano in the valley.

Needless to say, this march broke down any of my preconceived role as a watcher. I kept hold of my camera anyway in an attempt to confuse the social structures.

Passing by schools on recess to watch the 'parade', I felt a shift in emotion from one of confusion to one of humbleness and gratitude. The children were not only in number but also friendly, warm and welcoming. This small society welcomed 'us' as foreigners into their homes and their lives and as it soon turned out, into



their community and traditions.

As the now expanding parade that now included the original tourist group along with local shop-traders, priests and school children marched on through the valley, the reason for the event no longer seemed important. Regardless, we soon arrived at the base of Mahawu- and the cart that had been leading the parade since the start emerged a sa home to 100 tree saplings.

I learned that in an effort to combat global warming and the inevitable deforestation of their area, the people of Tomohon had introduced the concept of tree-planting during already existing traditional ceremonies.

Humbled as outsiders by our inclusion in these plans, we attempted to plant these 100 trees and make our own mark on the future of this impressive village.

← →
‘This ceremony introduced me to a proud society’

← →
In an attempt to get some relief away from a very public morning, I spent the rest of the afternoon summiting Gunung Lokon, the other volcano in the valley.

A stunning crater in an active volcano, Gunung Lokon looks down upon the whole village of Tomohon. The view more than compensated for the sulphuric stench that wafts

uninvited into your senses. The volcano willingly took over my newly established role as spectacle and allowed me to revert back to ‘picture taker’.

Since my short humbling stopover in Tomohon I have tried to find out about the ceremony that I took part in. I couldn’t find out much except that it was not a regular occurrence. The traveller inside me wants to ignore the cynical side of my mind that points out the fact that it was indeed election season in Sulawesi and that the mayor that had organized the parade was running for re-election that week.

The same traveller wants to further ignore the religious support of the local church in the purchase of the saplings and the association with said church with the mayor. The fact is that regardless of motive, the parade and ceremony introduced me to a proud society of high moral stature, healthy family and neighbourly virtues and a default to positivity.

Although being marched through the town clearly emanates the sense that as a ‘foreigner’ we are different, the towns people and children especially still welcomed us as one of them, into their homes and their lives. For this reason, the ‘I love Tomohon’ motif on my shirt was proudly worn as a comfortable travel and sleeping shirt during my travels. I continue to recommend it as a stop for anyone in Sulawesi.



Top: Shrine overlooking Mount Lokon. Lynn on a crater rim. Below: Street dancers and performers during the parade. Photos: LYMD



FEELS LIKE CUBA LIBRE

SHOESTRING founder Cornelia Kaufmann travelled to the Caribbean island, fell in love with Havana and witnessed history.

Plaza Mayor in Trinidad is lined by colourful and colonial buildings (CoKa)

In recent years, the Caribbean island of Cuba seems to have become a hotspot for all-inclusive holidays.

Tourists are flocking to the island to enjoy sun, sea and Cuban cigars in a hotel that looks identical to all the other hotels of that particular brand.

I have always wondered why anyone would spend money to fly to Cuba (or anywhere with all-inclusive hotels for that matter), just to sit in a hotel or lounge around the pool and not see anything of the country or even speak to the locals. What is the point of travelling to a country, if you don't see the real, the actual country you are in?

Now, I have a confession to make: When I went to Cuba, I was staying at an all-inclusive hotel in Varadero. That is because I accompanied my grandparents and sister on the journey and they were not keen on shared dorms. But unlike other tourists, I actually ventured outside of the hotel, even outside of Varadero, to see what Cuba was actually all about.

When thinking about Cuba, there are a few things that immediately spring to mind.

Communism, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Cuban cigars, rum, and the US trade embargo are usually high on that list.

Born in (West-) Germany before the Berlin Wall came down, but too young to actually remember the Iron Curtain dropping, I was thrilled at the prospect of visiting one of the last strongholds of socialism and experiencing first hand what my family had told me about.

—————
‘You step back in time, especially in the old town, Habana Vieja’
 —————

I had practised Spanish and was quite shocked that most people had a very good command of English, and some even spoke German due to Cuba's former ties with the Democratic Republic.

Of course, the staff of all-inclusive hotels don't really want you to leave the premises, unless it is on approved tours that show you happy-clappy people and shield your eyes from any poverty or hardship that might line the way.

Varadero is one of the island's foremost resorts. Dozens of hotels cover a small, sandy, 13km long peninsula. Every hotel looks the same, but the further up the peninsula you go, the more expensive the hotels get.

So when you walk into the town itself and find that the local supermarket only holds the most basic supplies, you begin to wonder what the reality is for those who live there permanently.

Cuba even has two currencies - pesos convertibles for the tourists, pesos cubanos for the local population. It is probably needless to say that the touristy one is worth a lot more than the local one.

Venturing further, we made our way into the capital Havana, and the place immediately blew my mind. What a beautiful city. Old houses, cobbled streets and big American oldtimers dating from the pre-revolution years in the 1950s make you think you have stepped back in time, especially in the quarter of Habana Vieja, the old town.

The city has an arty feel to it. And a relaxed vibe. Groups of men wearing white straw hats stand around street

corners, smoking cigars, having a laugh. I know it sounds totally clichéd, but that's what it's like. We found Hemingway's favourite hangout, the Bodeguita del Medio, had a Mojito and kept exploring.

I can definitely see why Hemingway loved it in Cuba. The markets are lively and colourful, Caribbean flavours and smells fill the air and music is played everywhere.

However, the buskers have two firm favourites when it comes to singing: „Guantanamera“ and „Hasta siempre, comandante“. The latter is a catchy song glorifying rebel leader and Fidel Castro's best friend Ernesto „Che“ Guevara, who played a major role in the Cuban revolution. I would not be surprised to find it being the unofficial anthem of the island nation.

—————
‘Hasta la victoria siempre can be found on boards and buildings’
 —————

The „Hasta siempre“ stems from a famous letter Che wrote to the Cuban people. It ends





Previous page clockwise from top left: Skyline of Havana seen from fortress El Morro; Kids playing in the streets of Trinidad; The beach at Varadero; Che Guevara billboard saying „Your example lives, your ideas remain“; Ernest Hemingway’s favourite bar, La Bodega del Medio in Havana. This page, left: Cigar smoking man in Habana Vieja; Top middle: The chocolate Museum in Havana; Bottom middle: River trips through Matanzas; Right: Lady and dog with hats; Below: American oldtimers on the streets of the capital. All photos: CoKa

with „hasta la victoria siempre“ - until the final victory - and this phrase can be seen on billboards and buildings throughout Havana and the entire country.

After this outing to Havana, my sister and I decided to travel overland from Varadero to Trinidad and back. It took several hours to get there, but I felt we were finally seeing the real Cuba. Pretty soon, we left the well-maintained tourist roads and ventured into villages and forests. Several times we had to change our form of transport, from a bus, to old Soviet army trucks, to a boat and eventually just our feet.

The route took us through some very poor communities, but I was amazed to find old couples sitting in front of their small wooden abode, holding hands and smiling contently. Leaving the tobacco fields behind us, we made it to Trinidad.

The city has wide squares and grand buildings and it is no wonder that it is on the UNESCO World Heritage list. But get up close to it, and you see the bright and vibrant paint flaking and iconic buildings crumbling. We stroll around,

and come across a small backyard bar called La Canchánchara, in which a band is playing Buena Vista Social Club songs.

Some local women get up and dance while they serve us their signature cocktail - Canchánchara - which is made out of rum, lemon juice and honey. The world seems a happy place there. Just outside, we witness the arrival of a food and supply trailer though, which puts us back in our place.

----->
‘We can turn this place around in 10 years’
 ----->

The locals get in line for their share of food. In that instant, it becomes clear to me that this is exactly what all-inclusive tourists should not be seeing, so they can spend their time on the beach, blissfully unaware.

I do manage to find someone who is willing to talk to be about Cuba’s present. He gives his name as José, and he has worked in the tourism industry before, but he had to leave to

help his family on the tobacco fields.

José tells me that he is fed up with the regime. „It has been too long.“ But he also says that not everything is bad. Their healthcare system is one of the best in the world - it’s so good that Cuba is trading with Venezuela. For a certain amount of oil per month, Venezuelan patients are treated for free in Cuban clinics.

José also likes that education at all levels is free. But he thinks that the time of communism is over. Too many tourists and „western“ ideas. He would be glad to see a democracy established, and the trade embargo with the USA lifted. „Give us 10 years and I honestly believe we can turn this place around, make new contacts, open up opportunities“ he tells me passionately and I believe him.

The following day, something remarkable, something historical happened - Fidel Castro, transferred his duties as President to his brother Raúl after nearly 50 years in power. And suddenly, it seems that they have taken a step closer to a free Cuba. Cuba Libre.



DISCOVERING ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

The culture of the land Down Under
from the Dreamtime to the present

Writer Profile



Name: Niamh Keoghan

Age: 28

Travel is my source of
inspiration and creativity
and it's a method of expressing
parts of myself

What seems to have become the 'norm' for those who are willing and eager to travel, is putting on a backpack and heading down-under.

Australia is where almost too many travellers start their once-in-a-lifetime tour of the world. Why? Because it's a safe, it's distant from most western countries, there's no real culture shock and travellers are widely catered for.

Convenience and no necessity to plan can be the main reasons for the hundreds of thousands of backpackers to opt for this country. This means that many backpackers can be inclined to have no deeper knowledge of what Australia actually stands for, when the country is experienced only in a manner that's 'typical' for backpackers.

I, myself, was once a person amongst these 'many backpackers'. I was 'guilty' of not realizing what Australia truly stands for. I hopped on a plane, simple because it was 'the place to be'. After a year, I left and for some reason I

returned two years later.

And it wasn't until that second experience that I was to become aware just how precious a country Australia really is. To share what I eventually found behind the backpackers lifestyle, I first must share how Australia had once been found by the western people, some 200 years ago.

On the surface, Australia is a land with many similarities to other Western countries, regarding language, wealth, lifestyle and acceptance of different cultures.

However, underneath, there's an existing part within society that isn't always acknowledged by those who view Australia from afar.

What aspect does this statement refer to? It's the Aboriginal communities who were, up until the start of the British colonization in 1788, the sole inhabitants.

The term 'Aboriginal' stands for the indigenous people of the land - indigenous meaning the minority in society that has developed its roots without any

connection or participation from Western cultures.

At present, these communities form 2,5 percent of the 20 million Australians - a percentage that confirms their 'minor' status in Australia. However before the arrival of the British, these communities were in the majority; consisting of approximately 350,000 inhabitants, with only 900 non - indigenous people, throughout the entire country!

They were divided into 250 'nations' and subdivided into several tribes or communities - each owning individual languages, traditions, music, art-forms and survival techniques.

There was diversity between these tribes on many levels. But on one all-important level they were united. And this unity existed and still does, even to this day, in the belief that their lives are spiritually bound to the earth and the environment. They also believe it's this vital connection that establishes the laws according to which they live.

Why are these facts relevant



This page: Goomblar Wylo atop the Sydney Harbour Bridge (TouAus). Next page left: Aboriginal boys dancing at Laura festival (LFest). Right: Niamh Keoghan in front of Uluru (NiKe). Top: Two young aborigines (TouAus). Below: Aborigine with traditional body paint at Uluru (TouAus). Bottom: Tribal dance display at Laura Festival (NiKe).

when considering travelling down under? It can be essential to have an extra ounce of knowledge to what's behind the didgeridoos, kangaroos, barbeques and boomerangs as this lets the traveller realize how sacred and spiritual the land actually is.

An Australian experience then suddenly becomes far more rewarding. Appreciation is raised for its vast space as well as an awareness and understanding for the deeper struggles between the minority and majority within society.

On a more personal note, when I first travelled to Australia, I was blinded to what was behind the bright sun, the beautiful beaches, the dry earth and the friendly smiles. My eyes didn't open until my second visit and what I discovered truly touched something within.

I found out that the Western civilized world that was brought to Australia in the late 18th century, has since intensely influenced the lives of the indigenous people and has led them to experience an invasion of literal space - meaning disputes over the landownership - and figurative space - meaning increasing restrictions when expressing their own traditional beliefs.

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'Freedom to live according to their cultural beliefs'
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When a traveller ventures into the Australian out-back,

the most populated cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, become a distant memory and suddenly the heart of Australia can be discovered. This is what I experienced during a two-month road-trip I took, together with a fellow traveller of Australian descent. The deserted, rural and remote outback - where urban life ceases to exist - is where the communities and tribes are settled. It's the spacious plains that offer them a degree of freedom to live according to their cultural beliefs that could otherwise have been snatched.

The outback 'allowed' this minority to express the laws of the land along with the complementing spiritual principles and practises. The first Western influxes and the accompanying lifestyle would never have coincided with the deeper importance the indigenous people give to life. So their seclusion was in aid of keeping their culture alive. It was an inevitable turn of events.

How unfair it seems that the only way they were able to hold on to their own ways of living was by opting for isolation! It could seem to be the result of feeling ashamed for the rich heritage they own, just because it didn't 'fit' with the beliefs of people who invaded their space (in every sense of the word).

This is where the friction between the two worlds began and for decades it seemed there was little that could be done to resolve the disputes. However, the world as we know it today is becoming more accepting of deeper beliefs,

cultures and groups that hold onto something other than what the individual considers to be the 'norm'.

Throughout my road-trip, I witnessed how the Western world in Australia is working to support the communities, so their culture lives on. I also witnessed the spirit that lies behind the sun, beaches, earth and smiles. I saw indigenous Australians standing strong in their own truth and this showed me, and hopefully many other travellers, the root of Australia.

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'Upon first seeing Uluru, I became silent, peaceful and touched'
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But where did I come across the root and heart of the land? It was in the red-centre where I stumbled upon the most familiar sight; Uluru (also known as Ayers Rock). The surrounding environment of this 350m high rock with a 10km boundary, made me truly feel to be on sacred land. With the first sighting I instantly became silent, peaceful and touched. I had no clue what was taking my words away and nearly bringing me to tears.

I spent several days in the red centre and by the last day I realized that, yes, the spirit of Australia is smack-bang in the middle of the desert, in the close vicinity of this amazing Rock.

For many tourists it can be a 'must-see' simply because it's the icon, symbol or emblem that stands on the desert horizon. But I realized it's so

much more. This notion was confirmed when I started hearing tales of tourists who had taken pieces of the actual rock back to their native home, as a souvenir. I'd heard they were unable to function throughout their daily lives, with that piece of Uluru in their possession.

The only way they were able to free themselves from the 'sin' they'd committed, was by returning what wasn't rightfully theirs to claim. The spirit of the blessed land held on to the spirit of the travellers and it led them to feel forced by an extra power to put right the wrong they'd done. This example is a mere representation of the spirit that lies upon these red plains.

Another encounter came to pass during the trip that showed me what's being done to sustain the indigenous culture, in this 21st century. Coincidentally, on the same two-month road-trip as mentioned before, we came across an annual dance festival, in an outback town called Laura (situated in the north eastern Queensland).

The festival was in aid of keeping the tribal spirit alive in the hearts of the indigenous people themselves - as they would be inclined to reject their own heritage, due to pressures applied by the Western society.

Also it was aimed at educating visitors and letting them be touched by the uniqueness of Australian heritage. Throughout the 3 day festival tens of tribes came together to share their individual tribal dance, music



and dress.

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**'Influence those
willing to be
touched, not by
the Australian sun,
but by the soil'**

← . . . →
The performances were literally out of this world and each one told the story of their ancestors, their connection with the earth and their love for nature. It was touching to hear the sounds of didgeridoos accompanied by speeches that expressed acceptance for their current status within Australian society as well as a willingness to change that status, by standing strong in their true culture.

This festival was just one of the many annual gatherings organized throughout Australia, aiming for disputes within society to slowly become a thing of the past. It's as the saying goes: "they will reap what they sow". All they need to do is continue holding on to their beliefs, their faith and their spirit and to not act out of shame for who their ancestors have 'let' them become but instead act out of pride and hold their heads high for the

fact that they, themselves, can positively influence those who are willing to be touched, not by the Australian sun but instead by the Australian soil.

And all we can do, as the travellers, is spread the word and open up our hearts to what this country has to offer.

One heart in particular has been touched. Although it's not merely enough to make a huge difference when it comes to acknowledging the Australian spirit so as the future of the communities can be stabilized and cherished by the entire population - but it's not a bad place from which to start.

And so, I speak from a personal perspective when I say that Australia becomes an extra special place when a visitor looks past the 200 years of recent history and engages in all that lies behind the Western influences.

Because it's still there today; it can be seen, felt and cherished, not only by the tribes themselves, but also by those who are on the outside looking in.

And suddenly Australia has become a country unlike anywhere else in the world. What a sacred place to have touched base with.

www.australia.com



KUTWAL LAKE IN PAKISTAN IS A PIECE OF PARADISE

Looking for a beautiful spot to relax and reflect upon the world, Zamin Haider came across a stunning lake in a nature lover's heaven.

If you are looking for paradise in Pakistan, I can guide you, because I found it in Haramosh, Gilgit-Baltistan. Haramosh lies about 65 kilometres (40 miles) east of Gilgit, in the south-central region of the Rakaposhi-Haramosh Mountains, a sub-range of the Karakorams.

Here you can find a sub-tropical forest, lush hills, verdant lawns and natural ponds and lakes. The trees and boulders are like immense sculptures in the open air. I believe it should be declared as one of the wonders of Pakistan, but for the moment, it appears to be the best kept secret of the Haramoshi people and a few intrepid explorers.

The people are very hard-working and friendly, although they do lack many modern amenities. The Kutwal Valley is far from the roadside and it takes 6 hours of trekking to reach it. However, the trek is quite unique.

It involves one hour of trekking across rocky terrain and a few hours crossing meadows and forests. The reward of such a trek is to find a wonderful mountain lake, with clear water that reflects

the snowy peaks and glaciers that encompass it. The climate in summer up there is cool and refreshing, a perfect place to take in the silent snow, the thick forests filled with cool breezes, the singing of birds, the bleating of goats and beautiful mountain flowers. Kutwal (and much of Haramosh) really is a paradise for adventurers and nature lovers.

We spent four days in the valley under blue skies and white cotton clouds, with a guide called Imran Ali, an impressive and knowledgeable local man. He says: "Haramosh is an excellent option for experienced trekkers and hikers. The trek can be quite demanding in places, so physical fitness and trekking experience is necessary."

Although some negative stereotypes persist in the mind of some people about this beautiful valley (Haramosh), I am trying to bring the truth of the matter to light. I always suggest that people visit the Kutwal Lake and see for themselves. When we went there, the locals were nothing but friendly and respectful. I would certainly go again!

CALLING ALL TRAVEL WRITERS

Fancy yourself a travel writer? Do you have an amazing gap year or backpacking experience you would like to share with the world? Have you taken photographs that are too good to be hidden away in a drawer somewhere? Then **SHOESTRING** would like to hear from you!

SHOESTRING is a travel magazine aimed at students, backpackers and gap year travellers who are looking for inspiration and advice when it comes to planning the next big adventure. It lives on voluntary contributions from

Preparing for a trip can be hard work, especially when there are many options to choose from. This is why Shoestring is looking for experience reports, introducing projects and how to travel on the cheap.

If you want to introduce a city that you know well, get in touch! I'm also always looking for simple (and I mean fool-proof), tasty recipes from around the world.

Shoestring should also feature outdoor stories, active stories, including extreme sports - but on a travelling angle. This could for example include travelling to New Zealand to bungee jump from the bridge where the sport was invented or crossing China on a pushbike. There are no real limits, as long as it has to do with travelling and is of interest to the target readership. Stories exploring different cultures are also welcome!

Have you recently read a really good (factual) travel book? Seen a great documentary? Want to explain why David Attenborough / Michael Palin / Ray Mears (delete as appropriate) is your travel hero? Tried a new travel app on your phone? If so, I'm looking for short reviews.

Your story should have a clear angle and be written in British English. Please don't send an email saying „I can write about India“ - let me know what experience in India you have in mind. Also, please don't elongate words for emphasis or add smilies, this makes it harder to edit your story.

Please send your stories to editor@shoestring-magazine.com. The full contribution guidelines can be found on the website www.shoestring-magazine.com

GETTING FRIENDLY WITH THE STANS ON THE OLD SILK ROAD

SHOESTRING's globetrotting correspondent **Erik Jelinek** has reached the next stage of his tour and shares the wonders of Central Asia.





For most travellers the countries of Central Asia - the 'Stans as they are often affectionately known - are a mystery, a sort of Here Be Dragons in the middle of the vastness of Asia.

Under - reported, unknown and so far from anywhere else. Does anyone even live there? At one point the region was home to vast, powerful empires that shaped the history of the world and controlled the lucrative trade along the Silk Road that passed through the heart of Central Asia.

But the shift of trade to the oceans led to a long decline and stagnation that culminated in the incorporation into the Russian (and then Soviet) empire, which further maintained the isolation. The fall of Communism led to an opening up to the rest of the world as well as chaos, instability and a collapse of the countries' economies.

Things are now safe and stable and it's possible for the intrepid travellers to discover these wonderful countries with millenary cultures tinged with Russian Communism as well as landscapes that range from vast, unforgiving deserts to some of the highest mountains in the world.

In this article I will be concentrating on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan - Kazakhstan will be covered in the next issue of Shoestring.

A trip to Central Asia can be a very rewarding experience but, more than most other regions in the world, requires some careful forethought and a little bit of planning to get the most out of it. Two issues are of paramount importance when planning a visit: timing and visas. From the shores of the Caspian Sea at -28m to the top of Pik Komunizma (renamed Peak Somoni, although most people still call it by its old name) at 7495m the span of altitude means that you can be baking in the plains whilst staring at snow-capped peaks where winter snows still lay heavy on the impassable mountain roads.

For a start winter travel, unless you are supremely prepared, should be discouraged as harsh, biting winds from Siberia howl from the north causing temperatures to plummet everywhere. The



The ruins of ancient Merv in Turkmenistan are waiting for you to explore them. Left: The Pamirs are a harsh, desolate environment where even the local herders find it difficult to eke out a living among the sharp peaks. All photos: ErJe

lowlands of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan become a furnace in summer but are ideal in spring and autumn.

On the other hand Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are dominated by their vertiginous mountain ranges, the Pamirs in the former and the mighty Tian Shan in the latter. The season for the mountains (and not just climbing them, but even simply getting around from valley to valley) is very short, from July to September, and even then you have to be prepared for sudden storms that can bring snow, hail, floods and freezing temperatures at any moment.

← →
'Russian is the best lingua franca, apart from Kzrgzstan'
← →

But first you have to get there. The difficulty doesn't lie in airlines, as you can get everywhere these days, but rather in getting into the respective countries. Each and every one of them requires a visa and these can be rather bureaucratic and constraining things to obtain. If you are at all pressed for time then these should all be organised before departure and count on starting the process at least a month before going, especially if you are planning to go to Uzbekistan.

There are two main problems with visas to the 'Stans; the first is general and the second specific. The general problem is that embassies require you to give exact entry dates from which

their validity commences. For people with a limited amount of time and specific itineraries then this will not be much of a problem, but for those who like to travel with fewer time constraints it can be tricky and will need at least some idea of an itinerary beforehand.

The specific problems centre on Uzbekistan, which requires that you apply via a local travel agency, and Turkmenistan, which doesn't give tourist visas to backpackers.

This can only be circumvented by obtaining a tourist visa for which you will need to show that you must transit the country. This means you need an Uzbek visa and then one for either Iran or Azerbaijan before they will even consider issuing you one themselves.

Nevertheless a visit to Turkmenistan, one of the most closed countries in the world (up there with North Korea and Eritrea) is well worth it. (Of course, as with all information concerning visas, this is all subject to the whims of the governments and embassies of the countries, which can be notoriously capricious, so I would recommend double - checking both online - with a forum such as Thorntree - and by contacting the relevant embassies directly.)

A few more tips to remember when travelling to Central Asia: since it was part of the Russian empire and Soviet Union for over 100 years Russian is the best lingua franca; apart from Kyrgyzstan the countries are still run by Cold War-era dictators who have little time for such



Top: The Fan mountains in western Tajikistan are a relatively easy and very rewarding hiking destination with snow-capped peaks, glacier lakes, alpine meadows and friendly farmer Middle: The infamous ship graveyard in Moynaq on what used to be the coast of the Aral Sea, but which is now the site of the greatest environmental catastrophe in the world. Below: The Registan complex in Samarkand, the pinnacle of Timurid architecture and among of the finest Islamic buildings in the world. All photos: ErJe

niceties as freedom of speech or human rights (though as a tourist you will be unlikely to see this in action), so steer clear of politics with locals unless you know them very well; dollars are the currency of choice, with euros a more distant second, and ATMs are not dependable; and most people are nominally Muslim, and whilst Central Asian Islam is generally tolerant, it's good to err on the side of caution and be respectful with regards to dress and public displays of affection between the sexes.

← → ‘Their glorious Silk Road history made them the richest cities in the world’ ← →

Once those obstacles have been surmounted you will discover that Central Asia can be one of the most rewarding travel destinations with something for everyone (unless you happen to be a beach bum, in which case you will be sorely disappointed). The 4 countries can be divided into two categories: the lowland, historical countries of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and the mountainous wonderland of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The former are easier to travel around, with decent

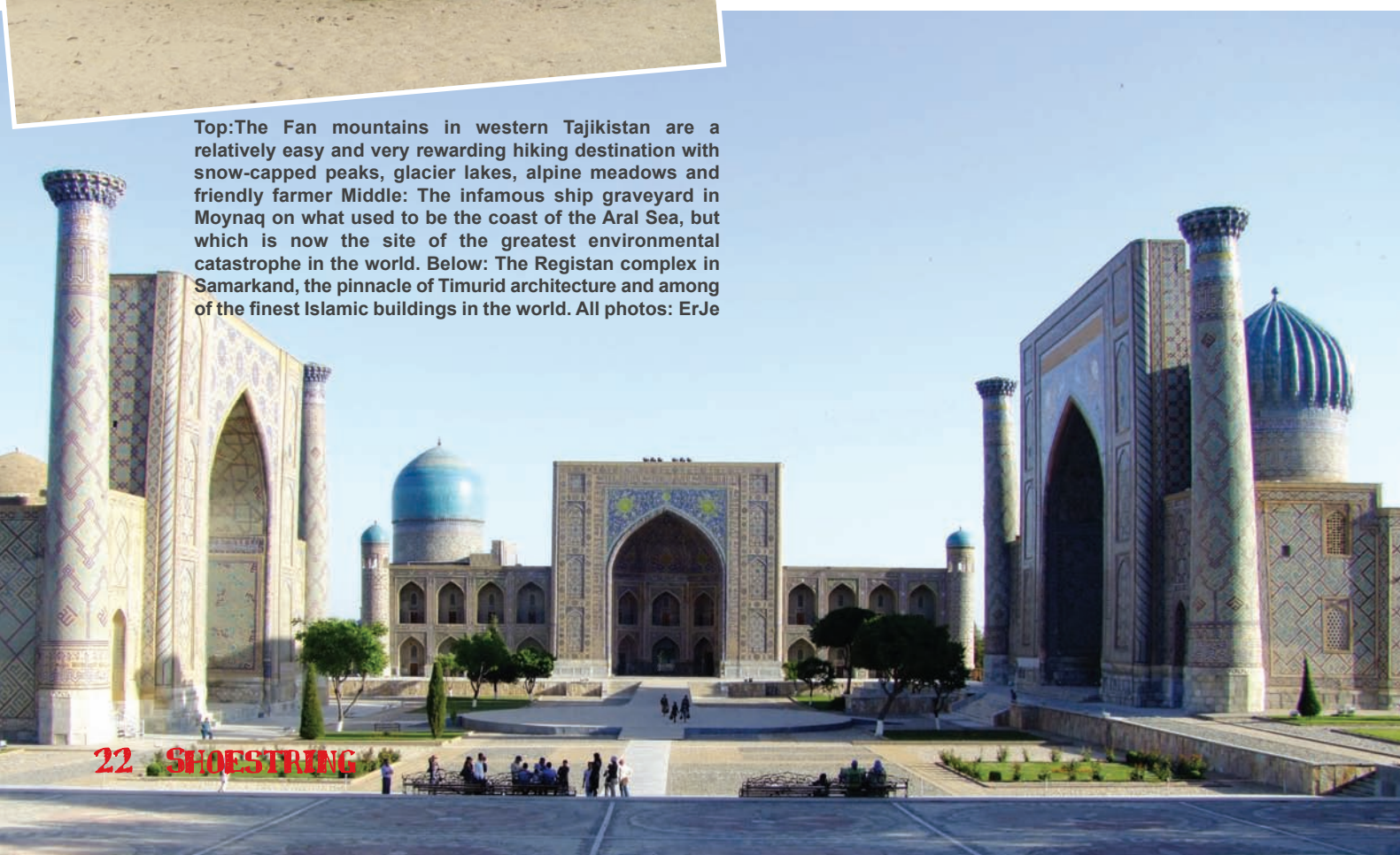
railway and road networks and obvious “sights”. Uzbekistan rules the tourist roost with its three jewels of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva and their glorious Silk Road history when they were amongst the richest cities in the world.

The mosques and madrassas built by Tamerlane and his successors rival anything in the Muslim world. This also means that these places are relatively touristified with large groups of older French tourists making up the bulk of visitors.

However step only slightly off this main tourist trail and you will be the only Westerner for miles allowing you to witness proper Uzbek hospitality. Uzbekistan is also the best place in the region to pick up souvenirs, from adras silks and silk carpets to miniatures and embroidery.

Travelling is generally inexpensive, especially if you change your money at the more favourable, black - market, rates (which are about 40% better than the official rates), although bureaucratic rules for foreigners mean that you have to stay at approved guest houses/hotels every night and show a proof of staying at such an establishment for every day of your stay, which means that accommodation costs cannot be circumvented. Still, you can easily get by on £15 a day.

If you manage to make it to



Turkmenistan then there are two places that you must visit. The first is the capital Ashgabat, a monument to the delusions of grandeur and wastage of vast natural gas wealth by the current and previous presidents.

Flashy, modern ministry buildings, vast museums and university complexes and apartment blocks lie empty and unused whilst an army of gardeners tend the grounds. And secondly the bizarre sight of Darvaza, a giant crater in the middle of the Karakum desert where gas seeping out of the ground has been on fire for the past 40 years.

← → **‘The goal in visiting Tajikistan is to travel the fabled Pamir Highway’** ← →

A unique and mesmerising place that looks like the very doorway to Hell itself. If you get in on a transit visa then Turkmenistan is very cheap and can easily come in at less than £10 a day, though if you enter on a tourist visa, with the accompanying guide and driver that such a visit entails, then you are looking at well over £100.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are all about the mountains, and yet their characters are very different. The Tajiks are a sedentary, Persian - speaking people with a long settled history of which they are fiercely proud; whereas the Kyrgyz are a Turkic, traditionally nomadic, people.

The ultimate goal of a visit to Tajikistan is to travel the fabled Pamir Highway that links Khorog in Tajikistan to Osh in Kyrgyzstan, skirting the borders of Afghanistan and China and passing in the shadow of some of the highest mountains in the world.

The air up on the Pamir plateau is thin and the landscape harsh and otherworldly, but hauntingly beautiful. And even if you're not there to climb mountains their majesty and the locals' ability to eke out a living in such an inhospitable environment make you feel humble.

The isolated nature of the Pamirs and lack of resources

means that prices are the highest in the region and getting around can be a real mission as public transport is extremely rare.

And although I'm a great believer in travelling alone or as a couple this is one place where it really does pay to be in a group (ideally between 4 and 6 people) so that you can split costs and hire a jeep and a guide together (even so you will be looking at around £50 or more per day per person).

If you are unable to organise a group before you go then head down to the Adventurer's Inn in Dushanbe where most overlanders congregate. For those who want to scale some heights but feel 6000m is overkill, or are unable to get a group together, there are plenty of smaller (only 5000m high) mountains in the Fan and Hissar ranges in the west of the country that are accessible even for the inexperienced.

As soon as you cross the border to Kyrgyzstan the landscape becomes more welcoming and verdant, with semi - nomadic families spending summers in yurts on high alpine pastures - jai-loos - looking after their herds of cattle, horses and sheep.

← → **‘See breathtaking landscapes and try Kyrgyz specialties’** ← →

And although the country is poor and the local infrastructure is sometimes lacking, there are great networks of grassroots tourism organisations (such as CBT and Shepherd's Life) that can easily help independent travellers to organise homestays and horse-trekking tours with locals for very reasonable prices: you can get a horse, accommodation and food from around £10 a day. These are fantastic opportunities to truly experience a very different way of life, see some breathtaking landscapes and try Kyrgyz specialties such as kymyz (fermented mares'milk) and kurut (dried curd balls).

For those who are not put off by a few bureaucratic hurdles then Central Asia will be one of the most memorable places you will ever visit; so what are you waiting for?



Top: A Tajik woman wearing a traditional Khan Adras ensemble. Saffron stand in the market of Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Below: Erik at the flaming gas crater of Darvaza, which has been burning for over 40 years. All photos ErJe





THE WAY BACK FROM STRAWBERRY FIELDS

Europe by way of hitch-hiking: First-time hitch-hiker **Michele Lorenzi** found that getting a suitable (and legal) ride is easier in northern countries than in the south.

Hitch-hiking is seen nowadays as a dangerous way to travel, or at least as a hippie occupation for lazy and rich youngsters.

But in some cases it is just the only possibility to go somewhere. The answer then is in your hand: that short and chubby finger you call thumb can really take you anywhere.

I spent the summer months in Denmark, working in strawberry fields: an amazing experience that restored my confidence in people, in fact I couldn't imagine to meet so many interesting and kind guys working there.

When the time came to go back to Italy, my dear friend who took me there with his car had already gone back to try and work things out with his girlfriend.

So, there I was, in Denmark, with only my tennis bag full of clothes and the tent where I lived during harvesting time. Well, I packed up all my stuff and bought a black marker, I was ready.

I tore down a cardboard box, wrote a big KBH on it and placed myself near the entrance of a motorway. KBH is the short and friendly way to refer to København, the capital

city of Denmark, Copenhagen. After waiting some twenty minutes, a nice big truck stops and picks me up, while cars are honking behind it.

The Estonian driver was one of the nicest guys I ever met, it's a shame that our knowledge of languages overlapped only for a few words in English; anyway, and despite that, the ride was very pleasant, and I must say, a hitch hiker on a truck always feels a certain superiority to all other cars that are below. From Copenhagen, I then set sail to Hamburg, where I arrived after crossing the Baltic sea on a ferry (paying the ticket of course, it's quite hard to get a lift offshore).

After another couple of days spent in Hamburg, I hit the road again: another truck driver gave me a lift to a near petrol station (it's always safer to hitch hike there than at the entrance of the motorway). I had waited for long hours, when an Hungarian guy offered himself to take me on his way to Budapest.

At first I thought that he was going too much to the East, but looking at the map I realized he was going to pass very close to

Vienna, so I enthusiastically accepted that lift that would bring me many hundred kilometers closer to home. The day after that I visited Vienna, and I was really impressed by the beauty of the historical centre, the elegance of the old buildings and the number of the attractions of the Prater.

The morning after I picked up my bag and I went to Schönbrunn, not to see the immense mansion of Emperor Franz-Joseph, but to show a cardboard with "Graz" written on it. That day I was able to reach Klagenfurt, a town near the border to Italy. As night fell, I took out my tent and put it near a fence in the gas station, and slept there very comfortably.

The following day, as I was crossing the border and entering in my home country, I asked myself if it would fill me with a feeling of relief or not. Well, it didn't. I was staying in front of the petrol pumps and this time Trieste was the city I wrote on the cardboard. A police patrol passed by and told me it was illegal to hitch-hike there; I was quite surprised, because not earlier than that morning, in Austria, two guys from the 'Polizei' checked my

documents and said everything was good.

But, despite that, the Italian poliziotti fined me € 24, and when I asked them how was I to move or to try and take a train, they just told me to ask somebody for a lift - Ok, that's how things work in Italy.

In the evening I reached Trieste, an ever-windy town on the Adriatic coast where a very good friend of mine lives. I still had some 300 km to go before reaching my hometown, Trento, but I gave up the idea of hitch-hiking again, and instead I decided to buy a train ticket.

The final leg of my travel was more comfortable on the railway, it's true, and I knew exactly what time I would be arriving home... but, I already missed hitch-hiking, talking with people I knew nothing about, finding out day by day what my next destination would be.

This one was my first long trip I made by thumbing up and I am realizing it was a kind of initiation for me; now I am confident enough to decide to use it again in the future: it only takes a bit of patience, a bit of trust in people, and a black marker.

BOOSTING YOUR CV WITH WORK EXPERIENCE ABROAD

Sometimes it pays to be thrown in at the deep end and find out whether you are actually cut out for the job you want, before you commit to a course of study or a permanent position.

Many employers these days insist on previous work experience and preferably even experience in working abroad.

So when I decided that I would take a Gap Year, I combined the two and looked for work experience opportunities in the media sector. This is how I came to work for the Daily Voice newspaper in Cape Town, South Africa.

I have always had a keen interest in journalism and had my heart set on studying the subject at university after my Gap Year. But I wanted to make sure that I could actually survive in a busy newsroom and the journalism was really the thing for me.

I expected to make coffee and photo copies for a day or two before they'd let me accompany anyone, let alone let me write a story. But while I was still on my train commute from the outskirts into the city centre of Cape Town, another train crashed into a lorry at an unsecured crossing, and according to police there has been casualties.

As soon as I arrived at the office, the editor introduced me to the team and sent me and a handful of other reporters out to the crash site. When we got there, police and ambulances were still there, there was blood everywhere

and several bodies had been covered with blankets.

'Talk about that for a first day on work experience'

First I got sent to walk long crash site from the point of impact to where the train eventually stopped and I was asked to measure the distance.

I felt sick to my stomach, seeing the blood, various items of clothing thrown across the tracks and the mangled lorry. When I later asked an eye witness about what had happened it transpired that a lorry had picked up day labourers, who were sat on the back of the pick up when the vehicle stalled on the tracks. The train was going too fast to stop in time. 19 people lost their lives that day. Talk about a first day at work!

I soon learned that the tabloid Daily Voice served the local English and Afrikaans speaking communities and I got sent on a few more harmless stories - I think the editor thought that my first day was too much of a shock. Because of the readership, I also got to go into communities and townships I might not have seen or visited as a normal tourist in the area.

When another reporter and I

were out on a story about a guy whose house got raided by police by mistake (they were meant to search the neighbour's house), we heard gunshots. Now, usually when you hear gunshots, you should run away.

Being investigative journalists, we ran towards them. It turned out that there had been a kidnapping and shoot out between taxi drivers over fares. Because we were first on scene, we got a big exclusive story for the next morning.

Being in South Africa, I also learned more about the Rainbow Nation's history and culture and used my free-time to see a bit of the country.

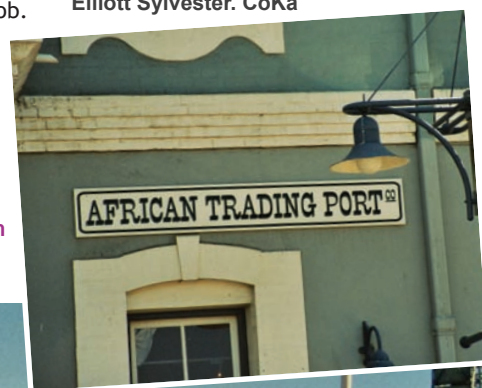
Working at the Daily Voice showed me that I really wanted to pursue journalism further.

Having this experience on my CV is definitely helpful and confirmed that I can actually do the job. Because English is not my native language, this placement also shows that I possess foreign language skills and that I can adopt to new situations.

workexperienceabroad.com
workandvolunteer.com



Top: making the front page. Billboard for my colleague Elliott Sylvester. CoKa



Right and below: Old African Trading Port at V&A Waterfront. Conny in front of Table Mountain, Cape Town. Photos: CoKa



Writer Profile



Name: Cornelia Kaufmann
Age: 24

This travel writer turned into a proper globetrotter during her Gap Year and has had itchy feet ever since



THE MAGIC OF EVEREST

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

SHOESTRING reporter Joe Reaney experiences an unforgiving and treacherous mountain while he is on his way to Everest Base Camp

I feel like throwing up. My head is spinning, my stomach churning, my joints throbbing.

I suck in a lungful of icy air but there isn't enough oxygen. Yet still I ignore that pounding thought: 'turn back, turn back'.

After two weeks of physical and mental exertion, with my final destination only an hour ahead, I know I can't give up now.

So I plant a walking pole deep into the dirt track and drag my heavy body onwards. Slowly, I begin to move my legs, bend my knees, pick up my feet, and I struggle on through the white wilderness, closer and closer to the finish line. I'm going to make it.

That's when it all goes black.

I awaken seconds later: confused, disoriented, falling. The footpath is gone and I'm sliding, hurtling, down the mountainside, twisting front to back, heading for the giant glacial lake below.

I dig my heels into the ground but it's scree: the earth is falling with me. The jagged silhouette of a rock is revealed through the thick fog, too late, as I smash my knee on it.

The agony darts up my leg: I cry out, and it echoes back. And it's only then I realise. I've stopped. The wind languidly whistles around the valley as I nurse my bleeding knee, my feet dangling uselessly below me.

Confused, I look up the slope to find that my torn - heroic! - down jacket is caught on the boulder above.

I'm suspended. I angle my feet and try to shuffle

backwards, up to the rock, but the earth slips again and I'm jerked back to my hanging position.

Then it dawns on me. It's 4.30am, minus 10 degrees Celsius, and I'm out of sight far below the path to Base Camp, on the side of a mountain that won't stay still. If I don't act soon, I'll freeze to death.

With a newfound clarity, afforded by the dramatic drop in elevation, I consider my options. I can't go up and I can't go down. So I'll have to go along... along the scree slope in search of something, anything, I can use to climb.

So I yank my jacket, testing my weight... I turn to face the slope... and, with an enormous effort, I heave myself up until I'm crouching on the fixed, solid, rock.

Then I tighten my bootlaces, take a deep breath and break into a sprint.

I tear along the slope, running at angles, slipping with every step; edging nearer and nearer to the freezing lake. My lungs burn, my legs ache, my conviction starts to die.

But then, out of nowhere, I see it through the fog: a wall of God - given rock, leading up the slope. A ladder.

Within an hour I'm back on the path, still nauseous. I look down at my warm hostel, then up towards Everest, and I consider just how far I've come. And just how close I am. And I know.

I can't give up now.

Trekking in the Himalayas is one of the reasons travellers flock to Nepal. Local guide Geeta Sharma offers tours across the roof of the world

Raj Bala Treks & Expedition was founded and is run successfully by two Nepali women, Geeta Sharma and Lata Sharma.

Years of knowledge, experience with boundless enthusiasm for their country and love for adventures, both ladies believe in sharing the sense of excitement and adventure that one feels whilst visiting the Himalayas.

Due to their well and active functioning in Nepalese Tourism industry, they have been successfully leading Raj Bala Treks & Expedition since the 1990s.

Their main direction is to provide first class adventure tourism whilst generating a fairer income for the local community.

„We pride ourselves on vast knowledge and networks which allows us to focus on every detail of your journey ensuring minimal impact on the environment and local people.

Therefore we have been in the profession long enough to know what makes our trips a huge success. We've spent years finding places to stay that are quaint, out of the way, and comfortable when we take you to the most amazing parts of the Himalayas.

When travelling with us you will feel a sense of comfort as you become part of our family.

Our team has been carefully selected for their specialized skills and talents along with their dedication to managing our large network of clients.

What hasn't changed is the passion for people, trekking, mountains and the personal service we offer to everyone who travels with us. Raj Bala Treks & Expedition continues to organize and lead quality treks, tours, climbs and adventures for small groups of like-minded outdoors people. We remain small enough for all our trips to be special.

This is our corner of the world. We know it intimately. We love it passionately, so much so that we want to share it with kindred souls. We are proud to showcase the Himalayas to the world!“ Geeta explains why she loves the

Himalayas so much: It was the month of November it was really getting colder in the upper elevations of the trek.

We were covered with best possible warm clothes to keep ourselves warmer and safe from the weather. After a healthy breakfast we started our walk for Tyangboche from Namche around 8: 30 in the morning.

This trek was truly becoming fascinating day by day. After approximately walking for 2 and half hours we came across a so called holy man covered his body with ashes, almost naked as only he had covered below his waist with a transparent and thin yellow cloth and was not very conscious about wearing the warm clothes like us.

To our utter surprise, he was not shivering at all. In fact, he was enjoying such cold weather and rather walked faster than us. We were really amazed to see his enthusiasm and his power to fight against nature.

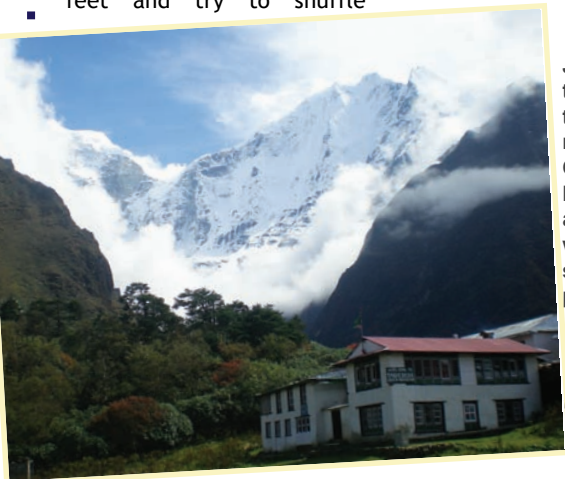
We continued our walk and that holy person was with us for preceding 2 days. We asked him so many questions out of curiosity as what his aim was and what he wanted to achieve by going through such tolerance and few of our members enquired when he would return from the trek.

That holy person said he spends around half of the years in different parts of mountains meditating and visiting the monasteries wherever they are. He also said that he wanted to have interaction with the monks at the monasteries over there.

In the beginning we were not ready to belief him easily and even thought he was looking for some donations or any favor. But that holy man never had any demands. After three days he got disappeared.

During the rest part of the trek we could not forget his ever smiling face filled with some divine powered until the end of the our trek. We also regret that we were not able to take his single photographer as he was indeed a faster walker even in the hard mountain.

Joe's hostel in the valley with the Himalaya rising behind. Opposite page: Mount Everest as seen from where Joe got stranded. All photos: JoRe



EVEREST BASE CAMP TREK

is a classic trek which follows in the footsteps of Hillary and Tenzing and ends with an ascent of Kala Pattar for superb views of Everest.

Kala Patthar is also known as black rock. Before reaching the Everest Base camp, the trail follows the Khumbu Glacier with huge ice pinnacles soaring to unbelievable height.

This trek starts with an exhilarating 35 minutes mountain flight into the airstrip at Lukla. From here you trek slowly upwards to the Sherpa capital of Namche Bazaar, following the valley of the Dudh Kosi river.

It is not long before you glimpse your first view of Everest as it peeks above the Lhotse-Nuptse ridge. At this point it is still many days walk away, but with careful acclimatization it is not long before you find yourself high up in the heart of the Khumbu region.

You visit Tengboche monastery en route before continuing on to your goal, an ascent of Kala Pattar, a rocky outcrop to the west of Everest.

This vantage point gives fantastic views of the Ice Fall and South Col as well as the immense south-west face of Everest which was first climbed in 1975 by Chris Bonington's team.

This is truly a classic trek, which undoubtedly gives one of the best mountain views in the world. Accommodation and food is provided in the local lodges.

Trip duration: 14 Days; Trip grade: Moderate to fairly challenging; Longer treks going right into high mountain

country, to some of the famous mountaineering Base Camps over high passes.

Physically quite tiring, involves approx 6-8 hours trekking along rocky ridges of high Himalayan peaks. No previous experience is required, you should be moderately fit, used to some regular exercise and enjoy walking in the high altitude conditions.

Activity: Trekking and Cultural excursion. Starts in: Kathmandu, ends in: Kathmandu. Trek type: TH (Tea House / Lodge). Accommodation: Hotel, lodge (tea house). Transportation: Flight and car. Maximum altitude: 5357m.

EVEREST HIGHLIGHT TREK

The experience of this trek retroactively helps you release your demons as you hike down to its ever so peaceful monasteries; while simultaneously viewing some of the highest and most panoramic peaks on the planet.

This scenic trek through the river valley of the Dudh Kosi takes you through the traditional Sherpa villages of Namche, Khumjung and Khunde and brings you to the ever-so-quiet monasteries at Thyangboche and Pangboche.

You will meet the friendly Sherpas and enjoy their world renowned hospitality. You will also be amazed to observe how life continues in this extremely quiet and spiritual side of the world; very much at its own pace as it has done for centuries. Our highest point is Pangboche [3908m] with its delightfully unspoilt monastery.

There may also be an

opportunity for you to visit the rather rare and unusual Buddhist nunnery at Deboche and the famous Thyangboche Monastery, set high on an inclined ridge, commanding some of the most spectacular views in the area.

Indeed, throughout this trek, you will have magnificent views of Mt Everest (8848m), Lhotse (8501m), Nuptse (7879m), Ama Dablam (6856m), Thamserku (6608m) and Kantega (6685m).

You will also see great glaciers, sprawling snowfields and glistening ice ridges emitting sparkling flashes in the warm, Himalayan sun. You will experience some unique nature hikes through dark forests, open pastures and wade through masses of rhododendron flowers in the pre-monsoon, or the reds and gold ones of autumn in the post-monsoons season.

Look out for the huge lammergeyers, with a 2 to 3m wingspan, circling on the up draughts, the proud thar, the Himalayan mountain goat silhouetted on a high ridgeline looking out for greener pastures or the strange musk deer, shyly scurrying through the undergrowth.

You will also look into the intricately carved Mani stones and prayer flags whispering odes to the gods in the breeze and the all-seeing eyes of Buddha on every Chorten and stupa. This is an area rich in cultural, religious and environmental interests, set within an awe-inspiring landscape below the highest mountain on Earth.

Trip duration: 8 Days; Grade: Soft adventure trek;

Activity: Trekking and Cultural Tour. Starts in: Kathmandu; Ends in: Kathmandu. Trek type: TH (Tea House / Lodge). Accommodation: Hotel, lodge (tea house). Transportation: Flights, private car or tourist bus. Maximum Altitude: 3985m.

WHEN TO GO

The best season to trek to the Everest base camp region is Autumn (from mid-September until November), and Spring (March to May). The nights are cold (between -10°C to 5°C) but the days are sunny and hot (between 10°C to 20°C). Trekking during the monsoon and winter is not recommended. March, April, October and November are the most favoured months.

WHAT TO TAKE

Lightweight walking boots, spare laces, sleeping bag and down jacket, a rain proof jacket with hood or poncho, fleece jacket or woolen sweater, thermal underwear, 2 pairs of loose fitting long shorts/skirts, 2 cotton T-shirts, Sun-hat, one pair of sandals, 2 pairs of thin and 2 pairs of thick woolen socks, first aid kit, flash light, toiletries with towel, sunglasses, suntan cream, lip guard, water bottle, iodine for the purification of drinking water, daypack, rucksack for porter.

Find out more about Raj Bala and their treks at:

www.thehimalayantrips.com



Trekking around Everest with Raj Bala

Top: Views you will be greeted with in Nepal. Below: Some of the highest peaks in the world, including Everest, behind Buddhist prayer flags. Photos: GeSh

BLOOD, SWEAT AND ENGLISH TEACHERS

From behind I may have looked composed and professional, but had I been facing a mirror rather than a whiteboard, the truth would have been apparent.

What on earth was the passive voice used for? My mind had gone blank with the pressure and the whole lesson was rapidly evaporating. This whole TEFL-course lark was a lot harder than I'd imagined.

In similar circumstances, a trainee in a previous year had apparently sat down and got out their lunch, leaving the pupils wondering if it was part of the lesson. Talk about unprepared - I didn't even have a packed lunch.

One of eighteen trainees of varying ages on an intensive four-week Cambridge CELTA course in England, I was paying for my lack of work the previous evening. I'd only done four hours of preparation and had sloped off to bed at midnight.

We'd been pre-warned that the course would leave no room to work part-time or socialise, but most of us had mentally appended the word 'much'. I mean, they were exaggerating, right?

The average day started in that most terrifying of environments for the untrained - the classroom. For this we were split into smaller peer groups, with half of us teaching on any given day. Those not teaching sat at the back observing or, if they were up next, wondering if anyone

would notice if they shrieked and ran out the room.

Later, after the fears of those teaching had proved to be unfounded (or entirely justified), we came together to get feedback from the assessor and to exchange it with our peers.

This could be a strangely deflating experience after the adrenaline of the classroom: Your concept-checking is okay but you're not eliciting enough; don't ask if they understand - they might think they do, even if they don't; and try not to weep so openly.

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'The ability to speak English is in demand in many countries'
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Afternoons brought with them a role-reversal as we became the students, learning the theory and practice of TEFL plus some key tenets of the English language. We were expected to incorporate these newly learnt classroom skills into our next lessons, like a juggler being thrown another couple more balls every day, and maybe the odd chainsaw.

Teaching English doesn't require you to speak a single word of the students' language. In fact, you're encouraged to ban all talk in any other languages and make the classroom an English enclave. "Just imagine you're in Torremolinos," you might tell your class.

The meaning of new words can be conveyed by charades, pictures and using words with which the students are already familiar, the latter being particularly useful if you want to avoid play-acting 'genetic engineering'.

By evening the course was over for the day, but the work wasn't. It was taking me upwards of four hours to prepare an assessed lesson;

researching the subject matter, creating the materials and drafting a to-the-minute lesson plan. Even our intended use of blackboard space had to be pre-determined.

Thankfully, in the real world, the ratio of preparation time to teaching time is far more reasonable. And you wouldn't be required to do the four written assignments that we had to produce in our spare time (ha!).

The hours soon took their toll, and it became the norm for me to have eyes sagging off my face at night and a caffeinated stare in the morning. Meanwhile, my anti-social working hours and trail of unwashed crockery was putting a strain on my relationship with my housemate.

I could have gone to sleep early, of course - the failure rate on such courses is only about 4% globally. And then I'd have felt bright and fresh as I humiliated myself in the classroom due to under-preparation.

I was aware of the more obvious benefits of the course before I started: the ability to speak English is in demand in many countries, making the ability to teach it a useful skill the world over. It can help fund trips to exotic places, can be a fun job in itself and makes for a much more immersed travel experience than just excitedly pointing at stuff and taking photos.

But it was the unexpected aspects that had the greatest impact on me. Firstly there was the growth in belief and self-confidence that came from having to repeatedly stand up in front of a group and perform. Then there was the sense of satisfaction that came exactly because the course was so demanding without being unrealistic.

Finally, there was the solidarity that came from sharing a difficult situation with others: hearing a

colleague say they were thinking about quitting was a daily occurrence, but so was the inevitable chorus of reassurance that came in response.

But as I stood facing the whiteboard, it wasn't the warm glow of comradeship that I felt but the icy grip of pressure. Come on, you've got this far - you can do this. "Okay," I said with a cheery smile and a gently perspiring forehead, "this is what I want you to do."

My tutor looked quizzically down at the lesson plan as I lopped off an exercise, handed out homework as an activity and generally squeezed my way out from the tight spot. No packed lunch required.

TEFL COURSES

www.celta.org.uk
www.teflcourse.net
www.onlinetefl.com



Writer Profile



Name: Neil Bennion
Age: 37

I travel because the open road is the purest expression of freedom I know.



HIT THE STREETS OF CAYENNE

The week before Lent starts is traditionally a time for parades, parties and lots of music. So when **Tom Giles** travelled to South America, he found a melting pot of cultures and beliefs during the local carnival.

Life in French Guiana is most of the time an exciting hodgepodge.

Around carnival it becomes evident that this region is undoubtedly the crossroads between South America, Europe and the Caribbean.

Traditions of many different and seemingly contrasting origins combine to form one glorious party, lasting all the way from Epiphany to Ash Wednesday, during which carnival is king in the town of Cayenne and normal life almost ceases to matter.

In the run-up to carnival, conversation seems to touch on no other subject. Who will be playing Vaval? This is the mythical King of the Carnival, pictured here in this year's interesting aquatic - themed costume.

Which groups will be honoured with the prime positions in this year's parades? The competition is not quite as cut-throat as that between Rio de Janeiro's famous Samba schools, but it is still pretty stiff. Who will dance with

whom at this weekend's Touloulou: a ball steeped in Creole tradition where the ladies arrive anonymously, covered up from head to toe, but where they dictate absolutely during the evening and men are not allowed to refuse a Touloulou's request for a drink or a dance?

←-----→
‘Weekends and
nights belong to
music, dancing
and drinking’

Once carnival is in full swing, there is little time for anything else. Weekends and most week nights belong to music, dancing and drinking.

Besides the main celebrations, such as the lively parades through the town centre, there are countless smaller events. Each night of the week is typically dedicated to one social gathering or another.

Friday evening? Let's cut the
galette (traditional French

cake). Saturday night? Time to dig out the Touloulou costume! Sunday afternoon? Head down to the main square, the Place des Palmistes, to dance along with the parades, and fall into Brazilian bars Chez Domino or Bar do Chris afterwards to refresh yourselves with cachaça and samba music.

Any other time is dedicated to preparation for the next party or recovery from the last one. Monday morning in the office at the height of carnival season is, to say the least, subdued.

For me, there is perhaps only one evening which could even come close to summing up the variety of my French Guianan carnival experience: sitting on the balcony of a friend's house on a Saturday evening, up on top of a hill and surrounded by Amazonian jungle, dining on snails and frogs' legs, drinking Brazilian Caipirinhas and Caribbean rum, while listening to the sounds of throbbing carnival drums carried up from the town below by the warm, heavy breeze.



Top: Vaval, the Carnival King is given the symbolic key to Cayenne. Above: colourful witch costume. Below: drum group during the parade. ToGi



FOR CARNIVAL!

WHAT IS CARNIVAL?

Carnival is a festive season before Lent starts. The main events are usually held in February, but this can depend on the calendar.

During Carnival, people dress up in costumes, or masquerade for the parades and parties.

Carnival is celebrated in predominantly Catholic and to a lesser extent Eastern Orthodox societies. In other religions, some events are adapted and modified so they appeal to a wide audience. Shrove Tuesday - the Tuesday before Lent starts - has thus become known as Pancake Day in many cultures.

In many cultures, the start of Carnival season is 11 November at 11.11am. From this point onwards, participants are allowed to work on their floats for the parades and practise new dance routines. The actual celebrations usually start the Thursday before Ash Wednesday, and lasts throughout the weekend. The festivities culminate in parades on either Rose Monday or Shrove Tuesday.

Carnival is often seen as a chance to celebrate local traditions as well, so every carnival party is unique. During the parades, local music and local languages, dialects and traditions play a major role.

Historically, Carnival was a time to have parties and the last chance to eat rich foods like meat, dairy and sugar before the 40 day fasting period of Lent began.

Where the word Carnival derives from is not entirely proven, but many believe it comes from the Latin expression *carne vale* which means „farewell to meat“.

The perfect pancake for Shrove Tuesday



Pancake Day this year is on 21. February.

Prepare each pancake separately in a beaker.

- 100ml water
- 3 big spoons of flour
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 teaspoon of salt

Shake beaker till dough is completely smooth.

Put oil in a pan and heat on full power (not too much oil - the dough shouldn't "swim" in the oil). When heated, put dough into the pan and keep on highest heat until the dough on top starts to dry. Put a lid on the pan.

Turn the pan around, let the pancake slide off the lid and back into the pan the other way up. Reduce heat by half. Put lid on pan and do not lift the lid for approx. 7 minutes. ENJOY! If everything went according to plan, you should now be about to tuck into a golden-brown, fluffy pancake.

Serving suggestions: sugar & lime juice; Nutella or any other chocolate sauce; banana, bacon and maple syrup; apples; sugar & cinnamon; vanilla ice cream and chocolate sauce (as a "Palatschinken") and many more!

Famous Carnival celebrations

CARNEVALE DI VENEZIA

The Carnival in Venice, Italy is one of the oldest and most famous ones. During the fest, elaborate face masks are worn and there are mask balls and best mask competitions held all over the city. The Venetian Carnival ends on Shrove Tuesday (21. February 2012).



KÖLNER ROSENMONTAGSZUG

The German city of Cologne is at the heart of the Carnival festivities. Parties kick off on Old Women's Day (Thursday, 16. February 2012) and culminate in a city-wide parade on Rose Monday (20. February 2012), the Rosenmontagszug. Sweets will be thrown from the floats, there are local dancers known as „Funkemariechen“ (in photo) and you should come in fancy dress.



CARNAVAL DO RIO DE JANEIRO

The Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil is considered the biggest in the world. The parade is filled with floats and foot groups from various Samba schools and the schools compete against each other. While parades are held at the Sambadrome and balls at the Copacabana Palace, local street parties are free for all. Festivities start on 18. February 2012.



NEW ORLEANS MARDI GRAS

The name Mardi Gras means Fat Tuesday in French, and known as Shrove Tuesday in other parts of the world. There are various parades through New Orleans but many of these do not actually enter into the French Quarter. The main throws to collect during Mardi Gras are beads and doubloons, while masks and revealing costumes are common features. Mardi Gras is on 21. February 2012.



DO NOT LEAVE HOME WITHOUT TRAVEL INSURANCE

Why do you need it?

Travelling without valid travel insurance, means that you are exposing yourself to more risks and dangers during your travels.

Should you have an accident while you are on the road, your health care bill could run up into the thousands without appropriate cover. Next to health insurance

With these covers in place, you can for example claim the cost of a plane ticket back, when your flight gets cancelled. Should anything happen to you while you are away and you have to return home, repatriation will be covered.

The cheapest travel insurance is not always the best for you. Shop around and compare covers before you buy but don't leave it to the last minute. Should you have to cancel your trip unforeseeably then you can still make a claim and won't end up out of pocket.

What should it all cover?

Medical and health cover for an injury or sudden illness abroad

24-hour **emergency service** and assistance

Personal liability cover in case you're sued for causing injury or damaging property

Lost and stolen possessions cover

Cancellation and curtailment (cutting short your trip) cover

Extra cover for activities that are commonly excluded from standard policies, such as jet skiing

Additionally, you might also want to get extra cover for **natural disasters** including earthquakes, volcano eruptions and floods

TRAVEL INSURERS

www.worldnomads.com/Backpacker-Cover

www.insureandgo.com/travel-insurance

www.direct-travel.co.uk/backpacker-insurance

www.backpackertravelinsurance.com

www.moneysupermarket.com

www.travel-insurance.net

