

Where I find inspiration ...

Deafening silence in the Outer Hebrides, birdsong and loud music in Trinidad ... philosophers, artists and writers tell of places that quicken their creative pulse

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Hot air ballooning in Cappadocia, Turkey. Photograph: Getty Images/Lonely Planet Images

Zanzibar, Mark Horton

If any place conjures up the exotic and romantic it must be Zanzibar, off the East African coast. The very name, the aroma of spices, the history of Arab sultans and their harems have all fed into a successful modern tourist industry. But I first visited in 1984, when it was very different, a very nervous place. There was one government hotel (with no toilet paper) and no places to eat, just street food.

I was there to survey the archaeology. With colonial guidebooks from the 1930s, a rundown Land Rover (which had been a mobile cinema until the equipment broke down) and an 1899 map, I hunted out ruined cities, ancient mosques and Arabian palaces. The charm overwhelmed me. Turquoise seas and white beaches, without a soul; cloves everywhere, laid out to dry. The bush was full of exotic flowers, and the trees were laden with mangoes and lemons. As we heaved our canvas tents from site to site, I felt like some 19th-century explorer, blundering into a Garden of Eden.

Now, Zanzibar is a very different place: westernised, entrepreneurial and rather commercial. But I still go back to dig holes into those sites we rediscovered and seek out those places that haven't really changed that much. It's still Africa, and it still inspires.

Mark Horton is professor in archaeology at Bristol University and a presenter on BBC2's Coast

• *Kuoni (01306 747002, kuoni.co.uk) has seven nights' all-inclusive at the Sandies Mapenzi Beach Club from £1,214pp*

Greenland, Sarah Gavron



Sarah Gavron in Greenland with daughter Lily.

It felt like we were journeying to the remotest place on earth, as a tiny collection of houses came into view on the Greenland ice: Niaqornat, home to 59 Inuits and 100 dogs. My Danish husband had persuaded me that living here would inspire a documentary. We stepped out of the helicopter with our six-year-old daughter and 11-month-old son: no accommodation, cafes, bars, shops or doctors. Our clapboard house had a mattress, a Calor Gas heater and a freezer full of reindeer legs. We stocked up on tins and seal meat. No fresh food: in this barren landscape nothing grows.

The world's largest island has fewer than 60,000 inhabitants. Howling dogs and 24-hour daylight keep sleep in short supply. At night, we'd stand on the beach watching hunters bring in their catch, while whales spouted 100m off the black strand. I was mesmerised by the icebergs, some as big as tower blocks, that danced in the bay, changing colour as the sun bounced off the horizon.

Over the past 18 months, we've been charting the villagers' lives. Niaqornat is changing. In spring, the receding glacier scars the ground. Hunting quotas harm livelihoods. If the population falls below 50, the government talks of relocating them to a city. And Lars, the lone teenager, who's never been more than a few miles from home, is constantly on Facebook chatting to 200 friends across the globe. Trying to capture this change in all its complexity inspires me.

Sarah Gavron directed Brick Lane and is now working on Edge of the World, a documentary about Greenland

• *Discover the World* (01737 214250, discover-the-world.co.uk) has four nights in west Greenland, at the Hotel Arctic in Ilulissat, from £1,553pp, including flights from Reykjavik but not from the UK

Serbia, Sophie Cooke

I was invited to a short story festival in Serbia in 2009. The car pulled through the Belgrade traffic past dirty concrete apartment blocks, prostitutes in tight red tops working the roundabouts. So far, so post-communist. Then we crossed the river and sped up a cobbled hill, past baroque courtyards, Orthodox churches, crowds of students. Here was a city whose old heart was still splendid.

This is a country that has drastically changed its identity three times in the space of a single human lifetime. It fought the Nazis, yet ended up as the bogeyman of Europe. It went from communism, and a national motto of "brotherhood and unity", to tearing itself apart in the civil war of the 1990s. Then it accelerated into an extreme form of capitalism. Belgrade's uber-rich dress in Versace – yet average salaries are tiny and there is no social security.

I was sitting in a cafe when it dawned on me. The character for whom I had been unable to find a home belonged here. Finally she, and my third novel, acquired a name – Dragana Savic – and her story is also the story of Belgrade.

I went back last year. By then I had friends in the city. We ate from grill stands and smoked in secret bars. We watched a Gogol play in a car museum, and danced in nightclubs under the bridges. We talked books in a biker bar.

Belgrade inspired my novel, but it is inspirational in a more general sense: it is filled with kind and witty people, wise beyond their years, who always impress and energise.

Sophie Cooke is a novelist, poet, short-story writer and photographer

• *Regent Holidays* (0845 277 3317, regent-holidays.co.uk) has three nights in Belgrade in a three-star hotel from £355pp, including flights

China, Susan Stockwell

China shook me up and was very exciting because I could feel the rapid rate of change happening in front of my eyes, as if life were speeded up. It was infectious: I felt extra energy and could harness that for my work, gaining insights into a future world that may overtake the old world I come from. I found people's resourcefulness, reusing everything time and again, saving fuel and living off little, life-affirming.

I made some seminal pieces in China and Taiwan, and since. Working with recycled materials has moved my work on and deepened it. As an artist travelling for work, I sometimes feel like a spy witnessing secrets that few others are party to. This feeds my work in mysterious ways.

Susan Stockwell is a sculptor and artist

• *Audley Travel (01993 838220, audleytravel.com) has a nine-day Highlights of China trip, taking in Beijing, Xian and Shanghai, from £2,020pp including flights*

North Yorkshire, Bob and Roberta Smith



Ribbleshead: 'moving and wonderful'. Photograph:

Alamy

Ribbleshead viaduct is beautiful and majestic. It was built to shorten the journey time from London to Glasgow on the Midland Railway. As a child, I was taken to witness its greatness by my father. My dad was a landscape painter and made several studies of it, which I cherish. For me, this kind of structure will always have more authority in the landscape than works of public art.

This summer I took my wife and kids and camped just above Hawes on the Pennine Way. We visited the viaduct and walked up to the entrance to Blea Moor tunnel and thought about the men who died building this structure. Visit Ribbleshead; it is moving and wonderful.

Artist Bob and Roberta Smith has curated *The Life of the Mind* at the The New Art Gallery, Walsall, which opens on Friday

• *The Station Inn, Ribbleshead (01524 241274, thestationinn.net) has doubles at £60 a night, bunkhouse beds at £10*

Outer Hebrides, Matthew Bourne

I decided to visit Harris to mark the end of some professional and personal journeys, to cultivate solitude and contemplative stillness.

The route took two days and was an integral part of the experience: a series of trains, ferries and a touring bicycle carrying panniers stuffed with notebooks, clothes and tins of beans. Two trains, two ferries and 75 miles of challenging cycling later, an unmarked track led to Cabhalan Cottage. It overlooks a coastal inlet and has no neighbouring houses or nearby road. Being cocooned within the cottage's four-foot-thick walls provided the ultimate haven for reflection without distraction. The solitude became dangerously addictive.

Harris is the personification of Mother Nature: the golden eagle that regularly took flight just feet from the front door, the deafening silence at the foot of Màs Garbh, and the infinitude of the golden beach at Losgaintir. A sense of privilege, heartfelt respect and almost penitence for being human manifested themselves throughout the two weeks I spent there. Harris is a very special place and the memory of it continues to be a source of clarity, insight and humility.

Matthew Bourne is an award-winning pianist and composer. His latest album is *The Money Notes*, with Dave Kane and Steve Davis

• *myguideScotland* (0800 680 0722, myguidescotland.com) has a self-drive Lord of the Isles trip to the Outer Hebrides from £355pp for seven nights, including ferry crossings and B&Bs

Trinidad, Amanda Smyth

The charm of a land can wear off after a while: a place becomes familiar, and no longer casts the same spell. Not so with Trinidad. I first went just after I was born, and have visited almost every year since. For a time I lived in south Trinidad; years scattered here and there at various points of crises. It was a place to heal, to recover. Trinidad has pulled stories right out of my heart. My first novel came from tales I heard as a child. What is it about this island?

There are the rising hills at the back of my mother's house, the Northern Range, and the gold afternoon light burning through the leaves; the coarse grass underfoot, gigantic red ants, the shaggy heads of mango trees. There is the familiar song of Kiskadee birds; green parrots squabbling in the yard. And of course, the terrific heat that makes you want to fall to the ground.

It is far from paradise. Just last night there was black smoke on the highway, and when we got close there were orange flames leaping high. I'm going to write about this, I thought. But I had seen fires before – why was this so different? And then it came to me: there were no fire engines speeding through the traffic. This fire was burning freely, left to rage against the dark blue sky.

And yet, later, somewhere in Port of Spain, we caught the tinkly rolling song of pan-playing in a dark back street and I was awed. The truth is this: Trinidad is a place where writers, musicians and artists are bursting through this beauty and darkness. A hot little melting pot of activity, Trinidad is alive!

Amanda Smyth is the author of *Black Rock (Serpent's Tail, £7.99)*

• *British Airways* (ba.com) flies Gatwick to Port of Spain from £555 including taxes

Massachusetts, Sarah Thomas

The Pioneer Valley in western Massachusetts is cut through by the Connecticut River, in which one of my ancestors drowned in the 18th century. In the autumn, the maple trees flame red and orange, and the oak leaves bronze. Northampton, Massachusetts, home of Smith College, is a small city that grew up along the banks of the Connecticut. Nonotuck, its Indian name, means "the midst of the river". In 1871, Miss Sophia Smith endowed a college for women, and it has flourished ever since. Its campus, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, the architect of New York's Central Park, is a tree-shaded refuge. Smith educated the wives and daughters of presidents (Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush and Julie Nixon Eisenhower) and sent young women out confidently into the world to become politicians and teachers.

It was at Smith that I began the journey that led me to the Bodleian Library – I am the first woman to lead the organisation since it opened 400 years ago. A chance job pasting bookplates in the library of Margaret Sanger, the early 20th-century advocate of birth control, became the first in a series of positions in great libraries. The Pioneer Valley is not only fertile farmland, but also an inspirational place for women, and a rich cultural environment for printers and others working in the book arts.

Sarah Thomas is director of the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford

• *Virgin Atlantic* (virgin-atlantic.com) flies Heathrow to Boston from £342 including taxes

Turkey, Elif Safak

One of my favourite places in Turkey is Cappadocia, known for its fairy chimney rock formations and cave hotels. A hot-air balloon lets you see the breathtaking moonscape from above.

The first time I did this, I resisted. Grumpy and cranky, I woke early and let my friends drag me into this valley. Hot-air balloons of all colours were being filled with air. There was a strange silence, as if everyone felt the need to stop talking and start looking within.

Then we began to ascend. As the sun rose, streaks of fiery red turned azure. The caves below resembled polished prehistoric eggs. The air was crisp and we could smell wild herbs wafting in the wind from the mountains. In a balloon you cannot change lanes, swerving left and right as you wish; you move up and down with the current, much like in life.

I have been back, but the first time remains unforgettable. The place and its balloons helped me to rethink the notion of "peaceful surrender", which played a central role in my latest novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*. I believe Cappadocia's modesty, serenity and uniqueness will speak to your heart.

Elif Shafak is a novelist and Turkey's biggest-selling female author

• *Exodus* (0845 287 3680, exodus.co.uk) has an 11-day Cappadocia and the Taurus Mountains trek from £1,049pp, with basic hotel accommodation and camping, and including flights

The Lake District, Robert Rowland Smith

The best walk I ever did was by Wastwater in the Lake District, and the experience began long before I got there. The very name clinched it: I loved the desolate melancholy it evoked. The place married beauty with bleakness, or something darker. Small wonder that not far from here Wordsworth conceived his concept of the sublime, a coming together of the exquisite and the terrifying.

Wasdale forces you to connect not only with the outer landscape, but with your inner self. You may be getting back to nature, but you're also being tugged within, to places not often visited – buried memories, hopes and fears, milestones passed. Where Buttermere pleases the eye and gives a sense of pastoral wellbeing, and Windermere offers itself up like a playground, the water here remains inscrutable, and keeps putting the question back to you, like a mirror. The fact it's the deepest lake makes it less, not more penetrable.

Then there's the ring of mountains: they serve to make the valley feel all the more hidden. When you're down on the flatlands, you could be in the safety of a child's farmyard set, so penned in and miniature does it seem. But in case that sounds too cosy, there's the Viking church reminding you that you might at some point need mercy from all those towering forces gathered around.

Robert Rowland Smith is a philosopher. His new book is *Driving With Plato: The Meaning of Life's Milestones*

• *YHA Wastwater* (0845 371 9350, yha.org.uk) has rooms from £13.95pp. *The Wasdale Head Inn* (01946 726229, wasdale.com) offers B&B from £59pp

India, Cyrus Todiwala

Think of a small boy, returning from school, let loose in a confectionery shop. That's me in a local market. Everywhere I go, I try to see what the locals eat, buy and drink. I'm writing this from Mumbai, where sweet potatoes are in season. They are char-baked in the streets on carts carrying a brazier or *sigri*. Then the potatoes are cracked and sprinkled with salt, chilli powder and lime. Wow! We already do a tandoori sweet potato dish at Café Spice Namasté, but now we shall have to create a new dish and make it more rustic. Wherever I travel, something inspires me to create a dish.

Cyrus Todiwala is chef/patron of Café Spice Namasté

• *Responsible Travel* (01273 600030, responsibletravel.com) has a 15-day India Culture & Food tour from £1,380pp, excluding flights

Morocco, Lucy Wadham

Mountains have a way of gathering you up and lifting you into another realm. One minute you're sitting in a bus with all the other tourists on the flat, potholed road that leads south from Marrakech and the next you're spending the night in a sheep shed 3,000m up, with six Muslim shepherds. Our walk in the High Atlas lasted only four days but with each passing day, those hills engulfed us further into the kind of natural embrace that makes you forget where you're from.

The bus from Marrakech dropped us off in Asni, an unremarkable village at the foot of Mount Toubkal, teeming with crooks masquerading as mountain guides. One of them, Brahim, took our money and went to buy supplies. He invited us to wait in his house with his wife and five daughters and after several hours, returned fall-down drunk, carrying two plastic bags containing the following provisions: a tin of sardines, a box of laughing cow cheese, five tomatoes, some almonds and a pot of honey.

He told us he was feeling unwell and that his cousin, Mohammed, would be our guide instead. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Mohammed was fitter, sunnier and more popular than Brahim, a quality that would prove invaluable on our trek. For with no money and our pathetic supplies, he had to cadge our bed and board from friends and relatives along our route. Those four magical, prelapsarian days of Berber hospitality were the inspiration for Aisha's redemptive journey in my third novel, *Greater Love*.

Lucy Wadham's latest book is The Secret Life of France. She blogs at secretlifeoffrance.com

• *Kasbah du Toubkal in Imlil (kasbahdutoubkal.com) can arrange treks in the Atlas and has doubles from €160 (£134) a night. Easyjet (easyjet.com) has flights from £69.99 one way*

New York, Will Beckett

Nothing has given me more ideas or inspired me more than a trip to New York. It was phenomenal: I ate at some truly inspiring places, from cheap'n'cheerful burger bars like the hidden Burger Joint at Le Parker Meridien Hotel

<http://www.parkermeridien.com/eat4.php> and Shake Shack

<http://www.shakeshack.com/>, to exceptional restaurants, of which my absolute favourites were the Minetta Tavern in Greenwich Village and The Breslin in Midtown.

It was fantastic seeing the cocktail bar scene in New York, which is dominated by speakeasy-style bars like PDT and Death & Co.

The trip inspired our new restaurant's interior design and inspired us to do more with our burgers (PDT's Chang Dog made me think the kimchi burger I had eaten in Seoul could work in London) and with bone marrow.

Will Beckett is a restaurateur who co-owns the Underdog Group. His latest restaurant is Hawksmoor Seven Dials

• *Stay three nights at the Radisson Lexington Hotel New York with British Airways (ba.com/sale or call 0844 493 0758) from £439pp, saving up to £130 departing prior to 28 February, 2011. Includes return BA flights from Heathrow and accommodation only. Subject to availability, based on two sharing and includes all UK taxes. Book by 25 January*

Nigeria, Lola Shoneyin

Last year, during a brief visit to Calabar, Nigeria, my host took me on a boat ride downriver. We set off mid-morning and sliced through the murky waters of the Cross River. On both sides, the river bank was crowded with palm trees that leaned in on the

water as if their fronds were simultaneously fascinated and fearful of the deep, as I was. After about 40 minutes, we moored at the jetty of a quaint little town called Oron, which used to serve as a ferry terminal in the colonial days when roads shared their burden with the great rivers. It was like walking into the past.

Wooden louvres favoured by colonial architects hung still from the windows. Clear inscriptions, from over 50 years ago, had resisted the warm winds that skim the tide and whirl around the old post office, the stopover inns and hotels (many of which are now brothels), the shacks and small bungalows on both sides of the narrow roads, and the pale yellow museum. In front of the museum, standing on a pedestal was the stone statue of a venerable colonial curator, complete with khaki trousers, thick-rimmed glasses and a safari hat.

At a certain point during my meander through the town, I could now feel what was missing from a story I'd given up on when I couldn't make the connection between the Nigeria I was familiar with and the Nigeria that primitively hounded children and labelled them child witches. I was suddenly struck by the primitiveness of my surroundings, as if this town had stubbornly decided to stay mired in the past.

Although this wasn't entirely the case in Oron, I suddenly understood how it was possible for the collective spirit of a people to remain anchored to a darker age, despite substantial exposure to the inevitable tide of newness.

Before leaving, we stopped by a shack on the river bed and tucked into bowls of fresh fish pepper soup. Watching the fishermen pulling their dug-outs ashore, my story came alive again.

Lola Shoneyin is an author and poet. The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (£7.99, [Serpent's Tail](#)) is out now in paperback

• *Arik Air (arikairuk.org.uk) flies to Lagos from £199 return*

Edinburgh, Simon Munnery

I have spent every August bar one for the past 24 years in Edinburgh, performing at the fringe festival. I used to imagine that if you did the fringe long enough, you would graduate to the festival proper, but no. The whole city buzzes at that time of year, the population doubles, and the air is filled with a tingling excitement. This can drive you nuts, so it's good to be able to get away from it. Fortunately the city provides for this by having a huge mountain, called Arthur's Seat, installed in the middle. It must have taken ages to build, for from its summit you can see the entire city and the Firth of the Forth beyond, on those rare days when it's not raining. I lost my virginity up there, and every year go back to look for it. Looking down on the tiny cars whizzing about allows me to imagine I'm a deity and on this conceit I based a character I used to do called the League Against Tedium; somewhere there's a photograph of me standing on the peak with a whip trying to lash the sky into obedience.

Simon Munnery's [Self Employed](#) will tour throughout the UK from 31 January

• *Channings (channings.co.uk) has doubles from £99 a night. East Coast (eastcoast.co.uk) has fares from London Euston to Edinburgh Waverly from £47.50 one way*

Interviews by Rachel Dixon

Readers' tips

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