

Creating ADVENTURES

Take the POLAR PLUNGE!



If you've not been before, make this the year you try a holiday with a difference! Our polar holidays are all about experiences: Reaching inaccessible regions by icebreaker, driving your own dog sled team amid the pine forests of **Norway**, seeking both the Geographic and Magnetic **North Poles**, exploring the **Northwest Passage** by expedition ship, mountain biking in **Arctic Canada** or driving yourself around the **Faroes**. New for 2024: the possibility of taking part in a 2-day/1-night **Nordic skiing** polar trek from your ship, a unique and all-new experience in **East Greenland**.

>> Ask for details.



COMMUNE WITH AMUNDSEN

I recently had the pleasure of meeting **Anders Bache**, the **Norwegian** curator of the fascinating **Amundsen Museum**, south of **Oslo**. Though time appears to have stood still, **Anders'** knowledge of and passion for his subject brings this tiny house alive - it's as if **Amundsen** himself has just momentarily stepped out. If you find yourself with a spare afternoon in **Oslo** en route to one of our **Arctic** voyages, ask **Fiona** how we can include a visit to this gem of a museum.



Dear Adventurer

Very Happy New Year wishes for 2024. I'm pleased to say that 2023 did not disappoint and 2024 is looking similar! Amid a record year for bookings, I finally made it to Georgia in October and I'm just back from Central India where I recce-ed a stunning wilderness lodge in Pench National Park. In February I'm making a whistle stop trip to Antarctica then in the late summer Costa Rica beckons. It's so good to be travelling again and I hope I can inspire you with this latest round up of travel snippets.

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The Warm Heart OF GEORGIA

I sensed my trip was going to go well when the smiling immigration officer at **Tbilisi** Airport welcomed me to **Georgia** and proffered a miniature bottle of **Georgian** red with my speedily stamped passport. Soon after, I was in the safe hands of my excellent driver guide who would be my constant companion for the next 10 days. Finally, three years after the pandemic, I've made it to **Tbilisi**, the charming **Georgian** capital where **Europe** meets **Asia**. What a great start. Cobbled streets, hanging balconies, fortresses, churches and a trendy café culture vibe, interwoven with the ever present **Kura River** which wends its way through the centre of the city.

Heading North, up the **Georgian Military Highway**, I saluted the border with **Russia** before making the unforgettable pilgrimage to **Trinity Church** perched high on a knoll in the shadow of **Mt Kazbegi** (5054m) in the **High Caucasus**. There is no place like it - this tiny church with a backdrop of snow peaks will stay with you long after you visit in person.

Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, burial place of Georgian Kings, imposing **Ananuri Fortress** and **Stalin's Museum**, featuring his childhood home and original railway carriage at **Gori** (his birthplace) are all stand-outs in what was an extensive trip around **Georgia**. I wandered the

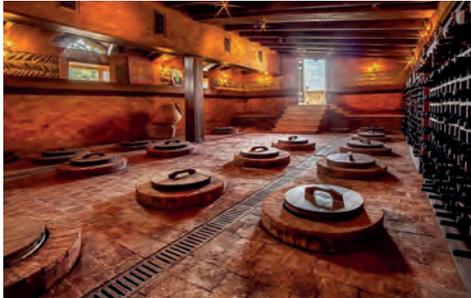
7th century cave town of **Upliksikhe**, marvelled at **Kutaisi's** 12th Century **Gelati Monastery** with its incredible frescoes and got vertigo visiting the **Enguri Reservoir Project**, at one time the largest dam in the world.

I arrived in **Ushguli** in thick snow, with its **UNESCO** Fortress Tower Villages - a must see of the **Svaneti** region in the **High Caucasus** with near 5000m peaks of **Tetnuldi** and **Ushpa** looming over me. I strolled around the village, lit a candle in the tiny church and fell in love with the incredible scenery and sharp mountain air. Wherever I went, **Mt Tetnuldi** seemed to follow me.





Irakli in Vardzia



Soon it was time to head south, to the **Black Sea** coastal city of **Batumi** with its 19th century and soviet architecture, incredible Botanical Gardens, palm tree lined plaza and dancing fountains – a sight to behold.

I paid brief homage to the border with **Turkey** at **Sarpi** before turning east once again, travelling three hours to the former Soviet spa town of **Borjomi** to hike in its beautiful national park. The four hours I spent trekking on steep zig zag trails of conifer and pine to the beech and oak lined ridge with far reaching views, were just sublime.

Special mention must go to my **Georgian** driver, **Irakli** and his trusty 4WD. He transformed my trip with his encyclopedic knowledge of the region's history, politics, architecture, culture and daily life and drove me safely and with good humour almost the entire length and breadth of the country. It



Ananuri Fortress

was a pleasure and a privilege to spend time with him and gain such an insight into the life of **Georgians** today. I have returned home with a renewed interest in the region and its lively neighbours.

Winding up the trip I suggest that southern **Georgia** is the unsung hero. If you are lucky enough to go, you must visit **Vardzia** – not only for its extraordinary cave city but also for the drive to and fro – at first following a picturesque river in a deep and winding canyon and later the gorge giving way to vast prairie like windswept plains, reminiscent of my trip to **Tibet** some years back. The glory of the autumn leaves - golden yellows, reds and browns among the green, only added to the colourful canvas laid out before us as we drove.

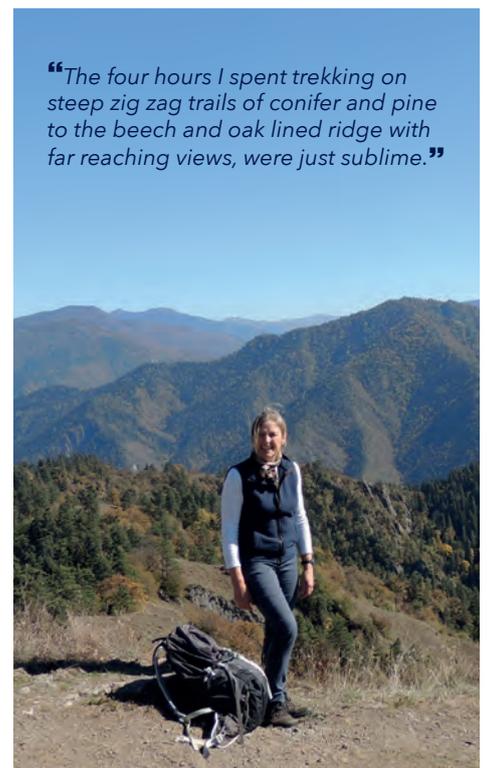
My last day was spent sipping some rather nice **Georgian** reds and whites in the SE wine

region of **Kakheti**. En route we stopped at the roadside and **Irakli** bought great slabs of salty sheep's cheese, bow shaped **Kakheti** bread, buffalo yoghurt and long candle-like strings of **Churchkhela** made from grapes and walnut. Cobble streets, wine chateaus and imposing monasteries were found at every turn and I spent some time reminiscing about the food I'd been enjoying. Giant fresh tomato and cucumber salads bursting with flavour and infused with walnuts. **Khachapuri** (a doughy bread) with cheese (**Sulguni**) or Quail's eggs, thick creamy yoghurt and local honey, walnuts and dried fruit, grilled trout and **Churchkhela**. All washed down with a glass of **Tsinandali** red or a chilled tankard of **Natakhtari Gold**.

All too soon my trip was over. **Irakli** and I had covered 2400kms around **Georgia** in pursuit of memorable landscapes and experiences. I found them around every corner.



Bread making in Kakheti



“The four hours I spent trekking on steep zig zag trails of conifer and pine to the beech and oak lined ridge with far reaching views, were just sublime.”



NOT BEEN THERE YET?

Do remember, in terms of destination ideas, our newsletters are just the tip of the iceberg. We tailor-make holidays to some incredibly diverse locations worldwide. Think **Egypt** or **Ecuador**, **Oman** or **Uzbekistan**, **Tibet** or **Tajikistan**, **Sri Lanka**, **Morocco**, **Mongolia** or **the Maldives** to name but a few - call us to discuss your hopes, your dreams or even your fears and we will look after you.



ONE + ONE = TWO

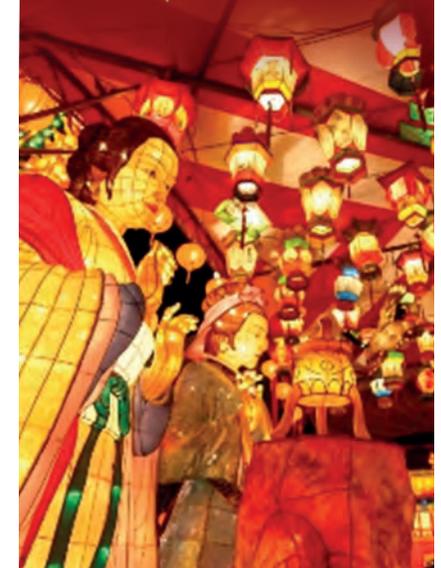
Like most of us, I could not operate without the help of my trusty accountant. She not only keeps me on track but deals with some of the onerous paperwork required to maintain our **ATOL** license which ensures all your holidays are safely **ATOL** protected. She called in recently to see what I was up to!



JAPAN'S NAGASAKI LANTERN FESTIVAL

After a three year hiatus, **February 2024** sees the return of the Lantern Festival at **Nagasaki** on **Kyushu** in **Japan's far South West**. Stunning arrays of colourful lanterns adorn streets, temples and houses, and visitors can expect an eclectic blend of entertainment, from captivating lion dances and masked performances to impressive parades and hands-on lantern-making workshops.

>> Ask **Fiona** for tailor-made travel ideas for **Japan**.



"The trip went well - all your arrangements were excellent, informative and helpful. So many thanks for all your work in dealing with what must be one of the longest booking arrangements you have ever had - three years? Numerous landings - regularly two a day - and an outstanding number of "wildlife" sightings, including, much to everyone's delight five polar bears. Unbelievably calm weather throughout, extensive wildlife sightings, the most comfortable facilities and ever helpful **Sea Spirit** crew/ staff made for an excellent trip. With many thanks to you **Fiona** for "making it all happen!"

Alfie Ingram, Svalbard Circumnavigation and Kvitøya June 2023



Client COMMENTS

LETS CELEBRATE - LETS TSECHU

We've great news - **Bhutan** has just announced numerous festivals running through to **April 2024** celebrating the country's national identity and promoting bird watching. The festivals include the **Rhododendron** and **Black Necked Crane Festival** and the **Bhutan Bird Festival** in **Tingtibi** home to the critically endangered **White-bellied Heron**. Visitors can expect local singers, mask dances and traditional **Bhutanese** music. Wander among food stalls of smoked fish, bamboo shoots, pickles, **Kharang** (maize grits) and **Tongpa**, the local brew served in bamboo containers, a favourite of locals and foreign visitors alike.

>> **Fiona** will plan your visit.



SAIL/FLY ANTARCTIC EXPRESS *with Fiona!*



In mid-February, I head out on an exciting voyage **South. Antarctic Explorer Express** is a condensed version of the longer **Peninsula** itineraries. It may seem indulgent to embark on a quick trip to **Antarctica**, but for travellers who are short on time, this short trip could be just what you are looking for.

By flying across the **Drake Passage** in at least one direction combined with a compacted time in **Antarctica**, these voyages are tailored for travellers seeking a quick adventure to the frozen continent. Enjoy zodiac excursions to explore rugged coastlines, where unexpected appearances from curious whales are known to occur.



Ship: **Sylvia Earle**
(132 passengers)

When: Nine day voyages:
February 2024/25

Ask: **Fiona** for availability
and pricing

Client REPORT

ROBERT CURRIE IN HOKKAIDO, JAPAN

September 2023

The raw white fish glared at me so balefully from the plate that I wondered which of us would manage to eat the other. Eventually I accepted a draw, ate his companions and left him on the plate. This was my only attempt to eat sushi, and it took place at a posh **Japanese** restaurant in **Sapporo**, the main city of **Hokkaido**, which is the northernmost island of **Japan** and where I have spent three delightful weeks following an itinerary impeccably organised by **Far Frontiers Travel**. The following night I did my bit for the **Japanese** ecology by eating venison. My guide had told me this was encouraged, as the deer population was getting out of control. Other ventures into **Japanese** cuisine were more enjoyable. At a stall by **Lake Toya**, I persuaded **Masako** my guide to try a soft ice cream. This was, unusually, black, being flavoured with squid ink. She got her own back by presenting me with octopus dumplings, made with rice flour rather than suet, and rice balls, flavoured with salmon and wrapped in edible seaweed.

I spent the first morning in **Tokyo**, watching a sumo training session. One giant practised pushing another giant out of a ring. The bouts, which I watched on TV that evening, are ferocious, the grips being best left to the imagination. The afternoon's tour of **Tokyo** featured **Meishi Park**, a tranquil woodland in the heat and bustle of **Tokyo**, dedicated to the **Emperor Meishi** (1868-1912) and his **Empress Masako**. **Hiromi** the guide told me they had transformed **Japan** from a feudal society to an industrial democracy.

Hokkaido is about the size of **Wales**, sparsely populated and lovely; pretty in places, awesomely grand in others. One day I spent peacefully cruising **Lake Toya**; another walking around another lake in **Unema Park**, looking at verdant islands and



Hokkaido, Japan



Robert Currie with guide Masako

spotting the occasional heron. By contrast, we walked up to the crater of the volcano **Mount Ouso** and saw the steam rising. **Masako** told me that it erupted on average every 25 years. I incautiously asked her when it had last erupted. "25 years ago" she replied.

The highlight, for me, was the cruise along the side of the **Shiretoku Peninsula**. The planned cruise was cancelled because of high winds. **Sachiko** the guide arranged with another company to cruise the more sheltered water on the west side. The bears on the shore were too distant to be worth photographing, but the grandeur of the cliffs, tortured into fantastic shapes by wind and sea, would alone have made the trip worth while. The following day we walked on the **Noshuy Peninsula**, a flat, desolate spit pointing into the **Okhotsk Sea**. From there I could see **Kanashir**, an island controlled by **Russia** though claimed by **Japan**. **Tommy**, the driver, whose hobby is mountaineering, wanted the **Russians** gone so that he could climb two mountains on **Kanashir**.

I spent the last three nights at a **Ryokan**, a traditional **Japanese** inn where I slept on mattresses on the floor, and ate meals prepared in my room by the maid. The first evening featured a tea ceremony, a serious but friendly ritual that included much bowing and smiling. Its original purpose, I believe, was to emphasise equality between host and guests, and among the guests, at a time when **Japanese** society was oppressively hierarchical. The tour of **Kyoto** included colourful, ornate **Buddhist** temples and more modest, naturalistic **Shinto** shrines. I understand from **Meiko** the guide that the contrast in appearance reflects the different values of the two philosophies.



Robert Currie with guide Sachiko

Hokkaido is a wonderful place, a land of contrasts, not only between city and country, but also between rural prettiness and the bleak austerity of volcanoes and coastline. What made it a glorious holiday destination was the guides, whose expertise and helpfulness made me feel I was with friends, and the people on whom I practised my comically inept **Japanese**. "Yubin kitte wo kaitain desu ga" (I should like to buy a postage stamp) secured enough stamps to post a card to **England** and have it safely and promptly delivered.

Client COMMENTS



“It was a fantastic holiday. **Morocco** was very interesting and each place we visited was different. I think it was probably the best possible itinerary for getting an overall view of what the country has to offer. I would certainly like to go back. Our driver, **Mohammed**, was outstandingly good and went out of his way to help us at every turn. He knew all the best places to stop for coffee and lunch. It was a wonderful holiday - I loved **Morocco** and thoroughly enjoyed every minute.”

**Susan Matthew with Patrick and Bunny Johnstone, Morocco
October 2023**



“Last year’s grand voyage on the ferry along the west coast of **Greenland** has been eclipsed by this year’s **Scoresby Sund** voyage on the **Rembrandt Vin Rijn**. There was comparatively little wildlife in late **September**, but we had the aurora most nights, a greater variety of icebergs, glaciers and snow than I thought existed, and we spent an awesome afternoon pushing our way out of rapidly thickening ice. Back at home, a friend asked if I’d been frightened of being stuck there. No, it was much too interesting for that! Altogether a wonderful trip. Thank you as always for your help.”

**Anne Robinson, Sail Scoresby Sund,
September 2023**



“**Mongolia** - you were all I hoped you would be - remote, majestic, proud, tough, unforgiving, with an unsurpassed beauty of your landscape and peoples. **Mongolia** was spectacular on so many different levels and I will forever remember and hold in my heart the kindness of the remote herders and their families who welcomed us into their gers and shared their fermented mares milk/tea/hard cheese/home distilled vodka and **Mongolian BBQ (Khorkhog)** and the always delicious national dish of **Khuushuur** meat pastry. To witness a **Mongolian** horseman (and woman) at full gallop across the wide open plain of the **Altai Mountains** is truly a thing of beauty and an experience I will treasure and be forever grateful for. Till next time, and as always, thank you **Fiona** for your professional, considered, ongoing assistance in helping me realize my travel dreams.”

Julie Butler, Riding in Mongolia and the Gobi Desert, July 2023



“I had a wonderful time. Thank you for arranging such a great holiday. All my arrangements went smoothly. I found out a lot about **Greenland** and its people, saw many beautiful landscapes, met some interesting people both other travellers and locals. Pre-departure there was just enough information and not too much. I found having all the itineraries, tickets and vouchers in order in a neat wallet very helpful.”

**Diana Lubelska, West Coast of Greenland
by Ferry, August 2023**



“I just wanted to say what a FABULOUS trip I had in **India**. Your partners over there were fantastic and looked after me very well, keeping up to date with the schedule by WhatsApp and being on time whenever they were meeting me. The hotels were wonderful - very much days of the Raj!! I even had a visit from the family at **Ratan Villas** to make sure that everything was in order. My driver **Sohan** was perfect and kept me safe in the madness that is Indian traffic! The guides were all very knowledgeable and friendly - I felt very lucky to have my own individual guide rather than be in a group. Getting that iconic photo at the **Taj Mahal** was a big plus. **Varanasi** surprisingly touched my spiritual heart much more than I expected. The architecture, colour and light made it a dream for taking photos and I am still going through my 500+ shots. Great memories as I waded my way through them. Thank you so much for organising everything for me.”

**Denise Cox, India,
October 2023**

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