

50 TOURS OF A LIFETIME

GOING DEEP
GETTING PE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELER | MAY-JUNE 2011

PLUS:
10
Great
Guides

*Our sixth
annual list of the
world's best
guided trips.*

By
MARGARET LOFTUS

**P,
PERSONAL**

EGYPT**Dive into History**

Retrace Alexander the Great's march through the Western Desert to the Oracle of Amun, where he was proclaimed a god and the pharaoh of Egypt. In the Siwa Oasis—housing a distinctive Berber culture—stay at Adrère Amellal, a modern eco take on the traditional Siwi thatch-and-mud home. Later, scuba dive in Alexandria's harbor for a look at the surreal, preserved ancient city discovered in 1994. **Ker & Downey:** "Uncovering Alexander's Egypt: A Desert & Diving Expedition," 14 days; \$9,870; www.kerdowney.com. **■**

BOTSWANA**Africa, Inside and Out**

A unique foray into the heart of Africa in two parts: Spend the first week embedded with the San community as young men prepare to hunt an antelope for a rite of passage that will initiate them as adults. Next, fly to Makgadikgadi Pans to ride quad bikes across the lunar expanse of a giant ancient lake bed toward Kubu Island, a granite rock sacred to the Kalahari Bushmen. **Trufflepig Travels:**

"Bushman Initiation Hunt & Kubu Island Quad Bike Safari," 15 days; \$17,825; www.trufflepig.com.

GHANA**Voodoo and Bush Camping**

The journey kicks off in the capital, Accra, then heads to Ghana's remote northern region. Meet traditional Lobi people, visit a witchcraft oracle, and pitch your tent in the bush. Green to the core, the outfitter often eschews hotels in favor of camping and uses alternative energy at its Toronto headquarters. **Gap Adventures:** "Ghana Untouched," 13 days; \$2,700 (some meals not included); www.gapadventures.com. **■ ■**

ASIA**SRI LANKA****Ceylon Rising**

Peace has finally come to Sri Lanka after a quarter century of intermittent civil war, making the island's pristine nature reserves and trove of cultural marvels more accessible than ever. A fourth-generation Tamil guide shows you what you've been missing: The ancient city of

Polonnaruwa with the massive carved Buddha images at Gal Vihara; the tropical modernist architecture of native son Geoffrey Bawa; and the former rebel stronghold of Trincomalee, prized for its strategic harbor and stunning beaches.

Remote Lands: "Sri Lanka Reborn in Peace," 7 days; \$3,600; www.remotelands.com. **■**

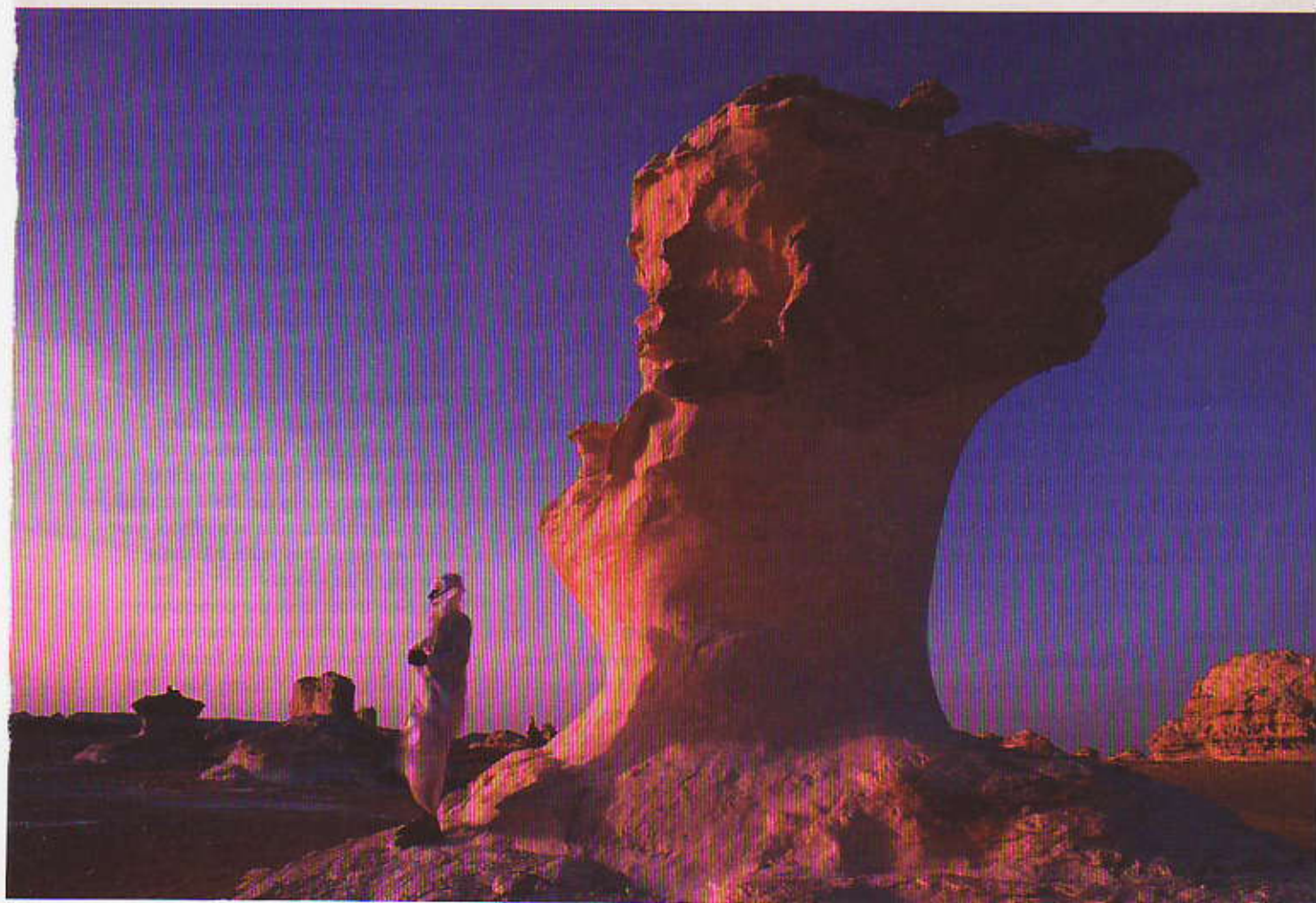
INDIA**Cats and Culture Combo**

One of ten special expeditions planned to commemorate the operator's 25th anniversary, this one-off itinerary with the company's founders is part tiger safari, led by leading conservationist Amit Sankhala, and part survey of Indian culture. You'll learn about Indian musical styles in Rajasthan and be welcomed into the home of a family in the Blue City of Jodhpur for lunch. **Wildland Adventures:** "Tigers and Travels Through India," 18 days; \$5,995; www.wildland.com. **■**

CHINA**Old-World Tradition**

This insider tour is an immersion into a rural culture that's fast disappearing, from

SERE SANDS Ker & Downey takes travelers to Egypt's White Desert to view limestone formations (below). In Zimbabwe, track herds of elephants with Africa Adventure Company (opposite). Opening pages: Buddhist temples in Bagan are stops on a biking trip in Myanmar with Butterfield & Robinson.





NOBLE TRUTHS The Borobudur Buddhist temple in Java is one stop on a cultural tour of Indonesia offered by Journeys International.

the traditional peoples of Longsheng, known for their longevity, to the Huizhou-style houses of Nanping, built in the Ming and Qing dynasties. **Big Five:** "China: Captivating Visions & Timeless Horizons," 15 days; \$5,490; www.bigfive.com.

MYANMAR

Biking Burma

Biking is a way of life in Myanmar and undoubtedly the best way to soak up its lush countryside and encounter the gracious Burmese people. Pedal through ancient villages that seem right out of an Indiana Jones movie, stopping to visit hillside temples and meet with artisans such as traditional silk weavers and lacquerware craftsmen. A river cruise down the Ayeyarwady, lined with stupas, monasteries, and nunneries, provides a respite.

Butterfield & Robison: "Myanmar Biking," 9 days; \$7,495; www.butterfield.com.

CHINA, NEPAL



Capturing the Himalaya

Chase the light with nature photographer Lewis Kemper on this overland journey from Tibet's "forbidden city" of Lhasa to Everest Base Camp. Along the way, Kemper shares his tips on how

best to shoot the lively bazaars, timeless monasteries, colorful prayer flags, and majestic peaks. **Destination Himalaya:** "Photographer's Tibet: To the Roof of the World," 16 days; \$5,400; www.destinationhimalaya.net.

VIETNAM


Kid-Friendly Orient

Bookended by Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, this private family excursion is action-packed with quintessential Vietnamese experiences. Trek in biodiverse Hoang Lien National Park, meet members of the Zay hill tribes in the Black Hmong villages, cruise through the limestone peaks of Halong Bay, and dine with descendants of the royal family in Hue. **Horizon & Co.:** "Vietnam Family Adventure," 14 days; \$3,598; www.horizon-co.com.  

PAKISTAN




Hindu Kush Adventure

British writer turned tour operator Jonny Bealby began taking intrepid travelers to Pakistan nearly ten years ago after living with the indigenous Kalash, a pagan community in the Hindu Kush. He returns every year to guide what has

become his company's signature trip, from Islamabad northwest to Chitral and the Kalash villages, to the spectacular mountainscapes of Shandur Pass, Hunza, and Skardu. Geraldine Sharpe Newton, who has traveled with the outfitter eight times, says, "It's very humbling to see people who lead their lives so detached from ours—and with so much less." **Wild Frontiers Adventure Travel:** "Hindu Kush Adventure," 17 days; \$3,195; www.wildfrontiers.co.uk. 

THAILAND

Lending a Hand

Known to travelers for its beaches, Phuket is also home to some of the country's neediest children, many of whom lost parents in the 2004 tsunami. Spend a day pitching in at a school near Kuraburi where they learn life skills. Then stay with a local family in Ban Talae Nok to see how the community is developing artisan cooperatives as a means of recovery. Finally, head north to the rolling hills of Chiang Mai for a hike through the countryside to visit hill tribes. **Planeterra Foundation:** "Volunteer with Children in Phuket," 13 days; \$1,249; www.planeterra.org.   

RUSSIA**Siberian White Water**

Join Russian river pro Vladimir Gavrilov for this 166-mile white-water expedition on the Kaa-Khem River—the Motherland's version of the Middle Fork of the Salmon—deep in Siberia's Sayany Region. Raft class III to IV rapids by day, camp in the taiga forest by night, and brace yourself for the Mel'zey'skiy Cascade, a section of river ten miles long with more than 30 rapids. **ECHO River Trips:** "Rafting Siberia's Kaa-Khem River," 15 days; \$5,660; www.echotrips.com. **N C**

MONGOLIA**Climbing the Steppes**

While you might cover more of Mongolia's vast landscape in a jeep, traveling on foot makes for a far richer experience. This trek, led by Australian adventurer and writer Tim Cope and accompanied by Mongolian artist Tseren Enebish, follows the migratory route of the nomadic Khotont people in the glacier-capped Kharkhira and Tsaast Uul mountains—refuge of the elusive snow leopard. **World Expeditions:** "Mongolia in the Footsteps of the Nomad," 18 days; \$4,560; www.worldexpeditions.com.

INDONESIA**Sumatra Quest**

True to its name, the outfitter offers trips that are heavier on culture shock than coddling. Enter the island of Sumatra, where you'll stay in a traditional Batak Karo village, climb the active Sibayak Volcano, and camp among the orangutans in the rain forest of Gunung Leuser National Park. Spend two days in Banda Aceh, an area recovering from civil war and devastation by the 2004 tsunami; at a nonprofit learning center, you can help local kids practice their English. **Intrepid Travel:** "Sumatran Highlights," 15 days; \$1,825; www.intrepidtravel.com. **N V S**

LEBANON, SYRIA**Western Civ Survey**

Stomping grounds of successive groups of Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and Ottomans, Lebanon and Syria are littered with the ruins of structures built by former rulers. This operator has curated a collection of the most intriguing sites, from the ancient city of Palmyra to the Roman temples of Baalbek, for a private driving tour that lets you soak up the splendor at your own pace. Diversions include a tour of Aleppo and a visit to Chateau Ksara, Lebanon's oldest



TIGER, TIGER Seeing the big cat is a highlight of this India safari with Wildland Adventures.

operating winery and a legacy of the Phoenicians, one of the oldest wine cultures in the world. **Cox & Kings:** "Empires Past," 13 days; \$6,795; www.coxandkingsusa.com.

INDONESIA**Beyond Bali**

Most visitors to Indonesia never venture past Bali. This itinerary shows off what they've been missing in the rest of this richly diverse country, including a three-day stint aboard a schooner scouting for dragons around Komodo island; watching the sun rise at the Borobudur temple archaeological site; and a visit to

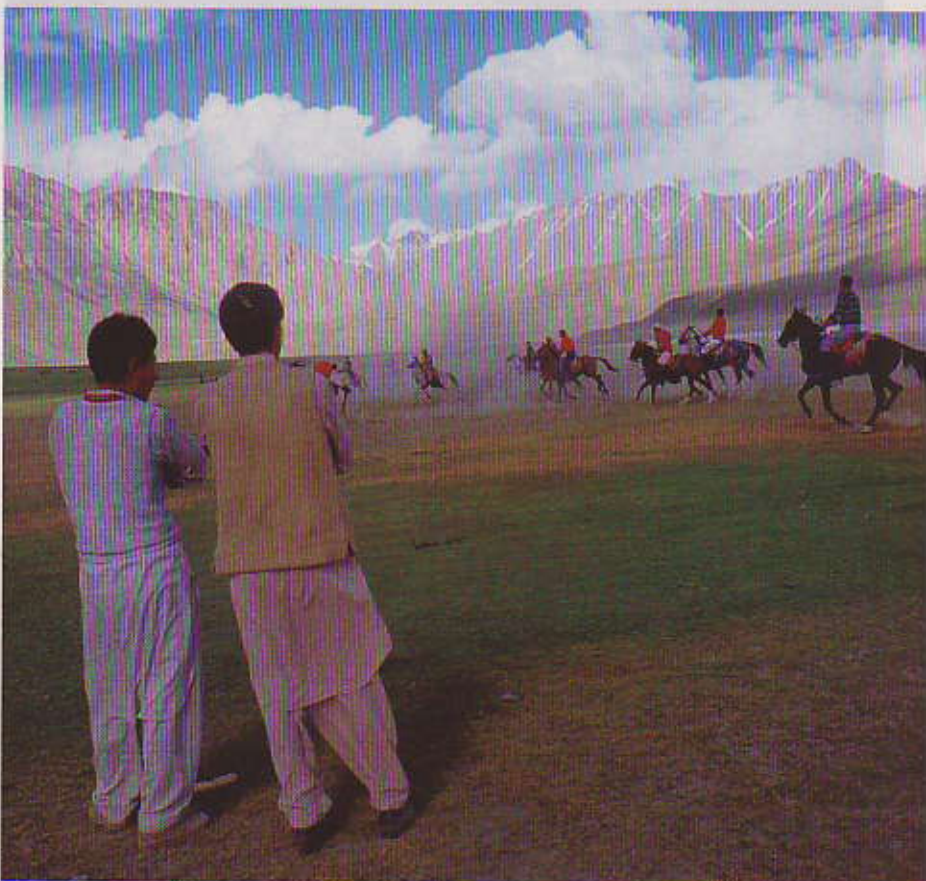
Prambanan, one of the grandest Hindu temples in Southeast Asia. **Journeys International:** "Adventures with Apes, Arts & Dragons," 12 days; \$4,475; www.journeys.travel.

CENTRAL & SOUTH AMERICA**GUYANA****Behind the Guiana Shield**

Most Guyanese live on the coast, leaving the country's interior largely untouched. Travel deep into the remote Guiana Shield via small plane, canoe, 4x4 pickup truck, and the occasional bullock cart to discover one of the last unspoiled rain forests on Earth. You'll stay at Amerindian-owned lodges along the way and experience indigenous culture. **Wilderness Explorers:** "Amerindian Guyana," 16 days; \$4,236; www.wildernessexplorers.com. **N**

ARGENTINA, BRAZIL, URUGUAY**Tour del Sur**

Pack your bike, sleeping bag, and stamina for this more-than-a-month-long cycling tour. Ride through lush coastal islands, the Juréia rain forest reserve,



MOUNTAIN POLO Wild Frontiers Adventure Travel guides guests into Pakistan's Hindu Kush to watch polo matches such as this one in the Shandur Pass and meet villagers from Kalash communities.

Circuito Vale Europeu (Brazil's first official bike-touring route), and the mountains of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. You'll stop at Florianópolis, Porto Alegre, and Montevideo—cities with many cycling aficionados. **Tour d'Afrique:** "Samba Tango Bicycle Expedition: Rio de Janeiro to Buenos Aires," 36 days; \$3,900; www.tourdafrique.com. **V** **C**

BELIZE, GUATEMALA, HONDURAS

The Maya Kings

Scholars have a better understanding of the way the ancient Maya lived, thanks

to recent breakthroughs in deciphering Maya script. However, the reasons for the civilization's collapse remain a mystery. Join expert David Drew for an archaeological survey of this lost civilization, from the hieroglyphic-inscribed monuments of Copán to the remote jungle ruins of Lamanai. Last year, the operator funded a project to train a local in pottery reconstruction to help maintain a small museum dedicated to the ruins' artifacts. **Andante Travels:** "The Maya in Guatemala and Belize," 15 days; \$5,395; www.andantetravels.co.uk.



STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN On an Andante Travels tour of Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras, participants can climb steep stairs up a Maya temple at the UNESCO World Heritage site Tikal.

ECUADOR

Galápagos Land and Sea

The best way to explore the famed archipelago that sparked Darwin's theory of evolution is the way the eminent naturalist himself did it: by land and sea. Spend the first half of the tour hiking and kayaking the volcanic islands for up-close looks at giant tortoises, blue-footed boobies, and other endemic species. Next, board a 20-passenger yacht to cruise the rugged shoreline in search of sea lion harems and primeval lava landscapes. **Southern Explorations:** "Galápagos Supreme," 12 days; \$4,895; www.southernexplorations.com. **V**

PERU

Saddle Up for the Inca Trail

Machu Picchu has been one of the world's top tourist draws since American historian Hiram Bingham brought it to our attention exactly one hundred years ago this July. But few reach the Inca trail on horseback. This ride takes you through 15 different biozones, starting in the foothills of the snowcapped Salcantay Mountain and stopping at small lodges along the way. The highlight is a private guided tour of the lost city. **Mountain Lodges of Peru:** "Lodge-to-Lodge Ride to Machu Picchu," 7 days; \$2,950; www.mountainlodgesofperu.com. **V**

COLOMBIA

Lost and Found City

Surrounded by the dense jungle of northern Colombia, Ciudad Perdida was built by the Tayrona some 600 years before Machu Picchu. It was lost to the modern world until the mid-1970s, when archaeologists learned of its existence after ancient ceramic urns and other looted treasure began to appear on the black market. Getting there requires a rigorous, three-day trek through thick vegetation, waist-high rivers, and a final ascent up 1,200 moss-covered steps. Sleep in hammocks and bathe in rivers. **Adventure Associates:** "The Lost City, Journey to the 10th Century in Colombia," 7 days; \$1,390; www.adventure-associates.com. **V**

ARGENTINA, CHILE

Patagonia Adventure

Few things are as thrilling as riding cross-country on a motorcycle with nothing between you and your surroundings. With the dramatic geography of Patagonia as your backdrop, this road trip—from the heart of the Lake District, across the Andes, and into Tierra del



GOURMAND'S DELIGHT Dine and hike through the northern Italian countryside, stopping at towns such as Orta San Giulio, with Wilderness Travel.

Fuego—ups the ante. It's *Motorcycle Diaries*, only more comfy. You'll stop for a boat cruise along the Moreno Glacier, camp in Torres del Paine National Park, dig into traditional asados (Argentine barbecue meat fests), and overnight at local farmhouses. **Compass Expeditions:** "Patagonia Explorer," 18 days; \$7,290; www.compassexpeditions.com. **C**

EUROPE

AUSTRIA, GERMANY, HUNGARY, SLOVAKIA

Cycle the Danube

Wending through the heartland of Eastern Europe past medieval towns, Roman ruins, historic bridges, and sweeping alpine vistas, the nearly 2,000-mile-long Danube River has long held an allure for cyclists. Unlike most supported rides, this one extends the well-trod Passau to Vienna route; you'll go from Regensburg, the northernmost bend in the river, to Budapest. Cyclists pedal at their own pace, regrouping at points of interest and in the evenings to share their experiences. Past guest Linda Myers likes the local focus. "We ate at neighborhood restaurants and interacted with residents." **ExperiencePlus!**

Bicycle Tours: "Bicycling the Danube," 13 days; \$4,600; www.experienceplus.com.

ITALY

Hike, Make Pasta, Eat

Feast your way through northern Italy's Piedmont, Lombardy, and Veneto regions—think tangy goat cheeses, creamy risottos, Barolo and Barbaresco wines—priming your appetite with day hikes and visits with vintners and cheesemakers along the way. The best part? Two nights at Verona's luxe Villa del Quar, where the chef shares his pastamaking prowess in a cooking lesson before dinner at the hotel's Michelin-starred Ristorante Arquade. **Wilderness Travel:** "Great Hikes and Chefs of Northern Italy's Gourmet Trail," 8 days; \$5,295; www.wildernesstravel.com. **C**

UNITED KINGDOM

Paddling the Wild West

With its rugged nooks and crannies, Scotland's sparsely populated western coast is prime paddling country. This guided trip shows off the highlights of the 300-mile Scottish Sea Kayak Trail, from Loch Linnhe to the beach-fringed

islands of the Sound of Arisaig, teeming with seals, otters, dolphins, minke whales, and basking sharks. Stay at inns right off the trail. **Wilderness Scotland:** "The Scottish Sea Kayak Trail," 6 days; \$1,250; www.wildernessscotland.com. **C V**

SPAIN, MOROCCO

Moorish Delights

From Granada's 14th-century Alhambra palace and Arabic tearooms to the vibrant Djemaa el Fna town square and Dar Si Said Museum in Marrakech, this private tour threads together Spain and Morocco's shared Moorish heritage. Lodgings are luxe, with stays at the elegant Alma Palacio de Villapanés in Seville and Kasbah Tamadot, Virgin founder Richard Branson's retreat in the Atlas Mountains. **Artisans of Leisure:** "Southern Spain & Morocco," 14 days; \$13,295; www.artisansofleisure.com.

BULGARIA

Mountain Romp

Carved by deep river gorges and riddled with vast networks of caves, southern Bulgaria's Rhodopes mountain range is