

Imagine if you knew when and how you would die. It would probably change the remainder of your life. And the shorter the time you had the bigger the changes you might make. Most people, when asked, say they wouldn't want to know in advance when that moment might be. There is good and bad in not knowing. But, if you were only destined to be alive for one more year you might not want to spend it working, paying the mortgage and doing all the humdrum day-to-day things that carry us forward in time. The notion that life and time should be lived full on, especially when it is rationed, inspired the 2007 movie *The Bucket List*, where two terminally ill patients (Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman) travel the world to fulfil all of their ambitions before they died (kicked the bucket!). It also sparked a frenzy of list-making and goal-setting among the worried well.

Bucket lists became a thing.

In the movie the two men set off around the world ticking things off the list – skydiving, driving a mustang, seeing Everest. But it also included some emotional journeys we all might like to make before we pass away like mending fractured relationships and telling people how much they mean to us. Bucket list fans however usually lean more towards lists of awesome experiences and are less about enjoying life and the wonderful people we get to share time with. The list sometimes drives how they live their life, ticking off those items becomes all important; swimming with dolphins; walking The Great Wall of China. And in truth some of those bucket list items never live up to the expectations – they are often crowded with tourists and nothing like the fantasy we have built up in our mind's eye.

I am not a fan of bucket lists and have never had one. The joy of travel and exploration is often in the random encounters and unexpected swerves that great adventures should bring. I have listed the memorable journeys I have taken in over 20 years as a travel writer in the hope that you might ditch the bucket list in favour of a great adventure.



Shwedagon Pagoda (Golden Pagoda)

## Adventure CALLING



Make 2016 the year you fulfil your ambitions to see somewhere spectacular, to visit the place of your dreams and experience the trip of a lifetime. **Norah Casey** shares her own incredible journeys to whet your appetite.

### A STEP BACK IN TIME

#### YANGON, MYANMAR

Fellow travel writers urge me to head for Cuba before it is utterly changed by the dramatic improvement in relations with the US this year. For me, Myanmar is the place where you can truly travel back in time to a bygone era and a civilisation virtually untouched by tourism or external influences.

Myanmar – formerly Burma – is slowly opening its doors to tourism so you now have a chance to glimpse life in this previously closed and troubled country. When I visited a few years ago it was still rare to find outsiders, let alone media representatives. We went there the year before my husband, Richard, died to visit a close friend of his who had taken up the post of British Ambassador. He was based in Yangon (Rangoon). There were no banking facilities or ATMs, no mobile signals let alone Wi-Fi. Now, all that is changing but there is still time. The best thing you can do in Yangon is soak up the atmosphere of this slowly transforming city and see first-hand what other

ancient Asian cities might have been like had they not been touched by development. This remains a country that time forgot, the street vendors, markets, bicycles, the people and especially the ethereal and strange vistas of crumbling facades of previously grand buildings.

Yangon offers you something you will never see anywhere else – one of the most extraordinary sacred places in the world. You can't miss the stunning 2,500-year-old Shwedagon Pagoda (Golden Pagoda) which rises majestically on a hill above the city. The towering stupa is made from 60 tons of gold and is encrusted with rubies, sapphires and jade topped with an enormous 76 carat diamond. The majesty of the glittering splendour of the Golden Pagoda is only part of the attraction. All around the base, stretching out to five acres or more, is the most extraordinary selection of shrines, Buddhas, smaller pagodas and temples all with colourful, blinking light displays. Once you



Wai-O-Tapu

### WALK ON THE WILD SIDE ROTORUA, NEW ZEALAND

The smelliest and most surreal place I have ever visited is Rotorua. Not the town – it's drab and dismal – but the geothermal wonders are spectacular. Richard and I drove there from Auckland for a memorable few days. You can smell the sulphur for miles but, amazingly, after a while you don't notice it. It is one of the few places on earth where you can see first-hand the intensity of volcanic geothermal activity. Television documentaries can never do justice to the showy spectacle of the planet's awesome power.

Thermal parks, volcanic crater lakes, geysers, boiling mud pools and psychedelic sinter terraces more than make up for the uninspiring town. Rotorua sits on a vast volcanic field with an incredible geothermal eco-system but head for the more managed areas like Wai-O-Tapu where you can see the full glory of Mother Nature right up close. It might look as scary as hell but it is very safe to walk along the trails, just don't fall in! We wandered through bubbling hot mud pools, steaming ground, huge craters and hot springs – don't miss the hypnotic fizzling Champagne Pool. Head to the park early to catch the 10.15am daily eruption of the Lady Knox Geysir.

A must-see while you're there is Te Puia, where the Pohutu geyser (among the world's top five geysers) erupts up to 30m in height up to 20 times a day – sometimes for a few minutes or several days. Back in 2000 it erupted for 250 days. It's powerful to watch. This an area steeped in Māori culture and there are plenty of traditional performances on offer, we even learned the Haka. So take a walk on the wild side and head to smelly but splendid Rotorua.

### A CITY ON SPEED SHANGHAI, CHINA

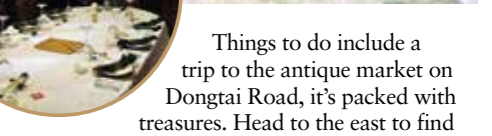
You can feel the energy as soon as you touch down at Pudong Airport. Shanghai is five times bigger than New York, it's pacier and more beautiful than Hong Kong and it makes Tokyo feel tame. It's a vibrant, fast-moving city and no other city feels more alive.

Speaking of warp-speed, you'll feel a little dizzy after the journey in from the airport on board the Maglev, the world's first high-speed magnetic levitation train. It reaches a speed of just over 430 kilometres an hour and takes less than eight minutes to reach the centre in Pudong – a journey that would take at least 45 minutes by car, if not longer.

Shanghai is really two cities in one. The high-rise, futuristic Pudong east of the river and the ancient Puxi side, west of the river. The Puxi side is by far my favourite, combining ancient China with strong colonial influences. The Pudong side is spectacular, a glimpse into a future of vertical living where impossibly tall buildings house homes, schools, shops, workplaces and even hotels.

My favourite place to stay is a boutique hotel near the former French Concession with a great restaurant and a buzzy bar. URBN Hotel is a very chic 26-bedroomed hotel that makes Shanghai more human-sized and is China's first carbon-neutral hotel. We organised fashion shows, cocktail evenings and lunches there a few years ago and the staff were fantastic to work with. URBN is friendly, efficient and stylish and once I discovered it I never went back to the fabulously swank but impossibly high bedrooms of the five star hotels in Pudong.

On my first trip I stayed in the world's tallest hotel, the Grand Hyatt which starts at the 53rd level rising to 87 floors of the 88 storey Jin Mao Tower in the business district. I feel uneasy from the fourth floor upwards in any building so a stay on the 70th required enormous amounts of courage, mind distractions and wine.



Things to do include a trip to the antique market on Dongtai Road, it's packed with treasures. Head to the east to find an exotic market of birds, fish and flowers and jars of prize fighting crickets. The Bund is the fashionable art deco riverfront, great for people watching. Head to the rooftop of the M on the Bund for a cocktail with a great view. Bring along a favourite dress or jacket and your bargaining skills and head to the South Bund Fabric Market where hundreds of tailors will compete to create the garment of your choice.

Shanghai has some fantastic restaurants but for an incredible dining experience head to Ye Olde Station Shanghai (Shanghaioldzhan.cn), an old French monastery and home to former empress dowager Cixi's train carriage dating back to the Qing Dynasty (1644 to 1911). It is by far my most memorable meal in China for the food and the sense of history that surrounds you in that ancient railway carriage.

get used to the spectacle, the sense of spirituality pervades. This is a very sacred Buddhist place and it is always crowded with worshippers, monks, nuns and hundreds of volunteers who constantly sweep and clean the area. For a small price a guide will take you through the major attractions. You visit barefoot so early evening is best when the ground is cooler. Dress modestly as this is the country's sacred capital.

If you can afford to, then follow in the footsteps of Somerset Maugham, George Orwell and Noël Coward and stay at The Strand hotel (Hotelthestrand.com) which is steeped in history and restored faithfully to its colonial past. This grand hotel, formerly a sister to Raffles Hotel in Singapore, has withstood turbulent times over the past century and retained the essence of elegance which marked it as one of the world's great hotels. The Strand now has marble laden bathrooms and is richly decorated with over 100 tonnes of teak, lavish carpeting and Burmese tapestries. Wherever you stay try to plan a visit while you can still glimpse the wonders of the past.



Angkor Wat



## A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY SIEM REAP AND ANGKOR WAT, CAMBODIA

Cambodia is probably my favourite place in the world. I went there by chance a few years ago when plans to do business in Vietnam were cancelled at the last minute and I diverted to Siem Reap for five days. There are many reasons why I fell in love with the country, among them the people, the culture and the magnificent archaeological remains of temples dating back to the ninth century. This vast historically significant area, the heart of the Khmer Kingdom, stretches across 400 square kilometres and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Everywhere there are reminders of the Khmer Rouge genocide which killed two million people in the late 1970s. And despite the unimaginable horror people endured, what emerged from that darkest of times is a beautiful and proud race of people.

We visited a wonderful home for street children, run by an Australian woman who fell in love with the country and wanted to make a difference. We spent a day with an amazing man whose family were killed by Pol Pot who transformed his family home and estate into a ramshackle school with corrugated lean-tos. Over a thousand kids came to learn each day from teachers who donated their time as and when they could. The children who follow you everywhere are clever and charming, they captivate you with smiles and trinkets. My mother, who came on

the trip, would take time out from the heat and sit for an hour or so happily surrounded by children.

The art and craftsmanship in Cambodia is stunning – I waited a day or so for a fine silversmith to make me two beautiful elephants that live either side of my fireplace now. We booked a guide through the hotel and you will get so much more out of your stay if you invest in one of these knowledgeable locals to show you around and fill you in on the history. He also introduced us to the local food and gave us an impromptu lesson on the difference between the meat of the python, cobra and the everyday water snake. And he gave us a lecture when we were squeamish. During Pol Pot's era he told us that he and his family would have died had they not lived on snake.

Snakes and spicy crickets aside, the food was of a very high standard and the service was always with a smile. The temples are beyond incredible. You can't hope to visit them all, we spent each morning visiting the more historically significant and chose a selection of others from different eras and cultures which were off the beaten track. There is a sense of beauty about Cambodia which will always remain with me. When I have visited everywhere I want to go in the world I plan to go back. We stayed at the Park Hyatt Siem Reap. **siemreap.park.**

The temples at Angkor Wat

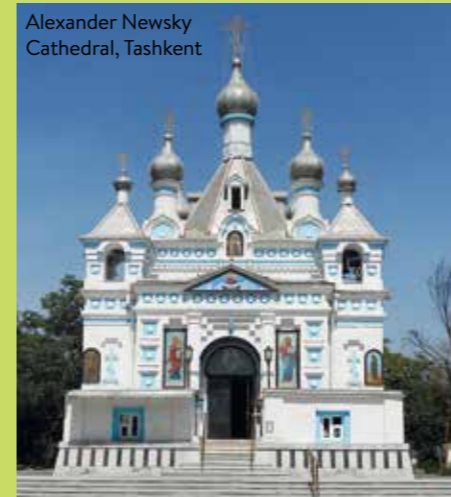


BBQ Snakes!



Margaret Casey in Cambodia

Alexander Newsy  
Cathedral, Tashkent



## A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN

When I visited this former Russian state you could have filmed a wild life programme from my bedroom. Thankfully, at the last minute I packed a mosquito sleeping bag because it gave me some respite from the flying insects, cockroaches and vermin which had taken up residence in the dilapidated hotel. The bats had commandeered the hallways and I got used to shaking out unwelcome guests from my boots and jacket every morning.

I was there with the World Health Organisation doing media sessions with women from Uzbekistan and neighbouring countries, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. Formerly a republic of the Soviet Union, it declared its independence in 1991. The ancient Silk Road trading route transversed Uzbekistan and the country is home to the most impressive and historically significant Islamic architecture, mausoleums and mosques in central Asia.

And yet I am guessing few people other than those in the travel writing business know much of its treasures. But it is slowly being discovered by the adventurers who want something out of the ordinary. You will never encounter anything like it. I stayed in Tashkent and happily it is now home to some decent hotels and international chains. The people are incredibly friendly and everywhere you go you will feel welcomed (but make no mistake this is a harsh police state). Astounding architecture steeped in ancient history, beautiful ceramics which still grace my kitchen table, gallons of green tea and the toughest bread I have ever eaten are among my many memories of this fascinating place.

Uzbekistan is definitely a road less travelled and you will have to work hard to find its treasures – but that's what great journeys are all about.

Whatever is on the list for 2016 and beyond I hope you enjoy great adventures that take you places you have never been before. Embrace the unexpected and enjoy the splendour of planet earth.



IRISH TATLER TRAVEL

Kauai

## ISLANDS FOR THE ADVENTUROUS HAWAIIAN ISLANDS, USA

I chose to include Hawaii of all of the islands I have visited because it combined the best snorkelling I have ever experienced and a night-time walk to see first-hand the red-hot bubbling lava lake in the world's most active volcano. I was lucky enough to lecture there on a few occasions and spent time on my two favourite islands – the smaller and quieter Kauai and Big Island (also known as Hawaii Island). Don't waste your time in Oahu (Honolulu) and Maui which are touristy and crowded. The stunning Waimea Canyon in Kauai (the wettest place on earth), the spectacular cliffs on the Na Pali coastline and the incredible snorkelling on the beaches in Kauai (50 miles of white sand) made this one of the most beautiful islands I have visited. The people are beautiful, gentle and serene. Kauai is lush and green and the oldest in the Hawaiian chain.

We stayed on the Coconut Coast but drove all over the island daily to visit the best beaches. If you ever visit, head for Lumahai Beach where Mitzi Gaynor, 'washed that man right out of my hair,' in the film, *South Pacific*.

Big Island is a world apart from Kauai and the attraction is the world's most active volcano Kilauea which has been erupting continuously since 1983 (there are three active volcanoes on the island). The island is still growing because of the lava flows. If you can, visit the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park at night – it is one of the most amazing experiences to see the broiling red lava pulsating at the heart of the crater.

At the Kaumana caves you can climb over ancient volcanic rock and into the lava tubes left behind as the molten lava drains away. If you are planning a trip then follow the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory Daily Update ([Hvo.wr.usgs.gov/activity/kilaueastatus.php](http://Hvo.wr.usgs.gov/activity/kilaueastatus.php)). This isn't a Disney experience and the volcano alert level changes constantly. It's a chance to witness the awesome power of nature with 70 million years of volcanic evolution. This once in a lifetime experience is not for the unadventurous but believe me it truly is worth it. At the time of writing, Kilauea was erupting at its summit and the lava lake was still active but only low levels of seismic activity were being reported. This is a surf and turf experience like no other. **II**



The active volcano, Kilauea