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JOURNAL OF THE FARTHEST PLACES

The Disconnection Connection

by Don George

"The world is too much with us," William Wordsworth lamented in 1802. And that was before laptops and smartphones. Now the world is *really* too much with us. We wake to the ring of our cell phone's alarm, and before we are even fully conscious, we're blearily checking the screen to see if we received any urgent emails overnight, or if anyone commented on our Facebook post, or liked our Instagram photos. And then there's the Twitter-twitch: What tweets have exploded since we logged off seven hours ago? This cycle continues throughout the day until the last email check before going to bed.

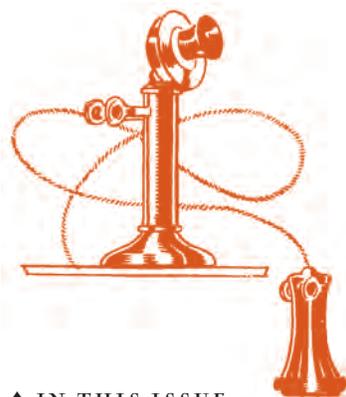
While this scenario may not be entirely true for you, at least parts of it are true for most of us. For better or worse, our phones, tablets, and laptops have become our constant companions. We are virtually always connected—and always virtually connected. According to a 2018 Nielsen study, American adults spend more than 11 hours per day watching, reading, listening to, or interacting with media. For many of us, this technological connectivity has led to a fundamental disconnection with the immediate world around us.

That's one of the reasons I love to travel. When I venture beyond my familiar confines, I'm inspired to leave my devices behind and focus on the people and places around me.

This happened dramatically on my first Kenya-Tanzania safari. When I left my laptop at camp and my phone in my backpack, Africa grabbed me: the scent of fresh dung on the breeze mixing with the dry, dusty smell of the land; the sweet cacophony of birdcalls—sandpapery grates, branch-strung chirroo-chirroos, far-festooned woo-woo-woos; the golden sunlight spreading like butter over the savannah. One day, the murky curves of the Mara River revealed a dozen slick brown lumps of hippopotamus backs, and mud-colored crocodiles motionless on its banks; another day, acacia trees thrust their thorny branches into the sky, and mesmerizing giraffes, elephants, and Cape buffalo materialized in front of cloud-massed Mount Kilimanjaro. Day after day, the world—the pulsing, vibrant, wild life-and-death planet we inhabit—took shape all around me.

At the end of the day, when I eschewed Internet surfing for dinner conversing, I discovered that our guide was a fount of information on the

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SPRING

2019

◆ DISCONNECTION CONNECTIONS

As Don points out just east of here, remarkable things can happen when we're disconnected. We asked the GeoEx staff to recall surprises that unfolded while traveling without phone service or the Internet.

◆ DISCONNECTION CONNECTIONS ONE

Jessica Silber: After enjoying cocktails one evening in a beach town in Mexico, my friend and I realized we couldn't use our phone app to get back to our B&B.

We asked the bartender to call us a cab, but after multiple calls he reported sadly, "It's too late; the drivers are all off work."

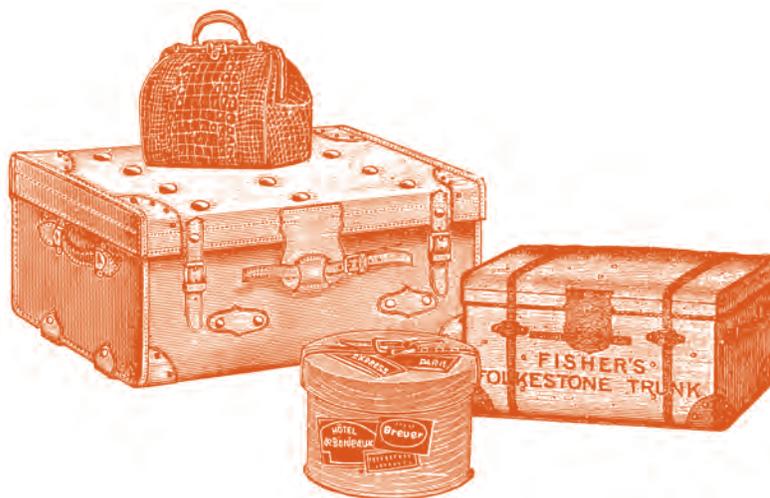
He then asked his boyfriend, who was helping out behind the bar, to drive us to the hotel. Since none of us knew the way, it became a hilarious challenge trying to describe a route from memory, all the while chatting with our hero driver about how he found small-town life after his recent move from Mexico City. It felt like a huge accomplishment when we finally pulled into the driveway of the hotel, and we all cheered.



For more literary travel musings, visit our blog at GeoEx.com/Blog

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history and political situations of Kenya and Tanzania, their neighbors, and the larger world outside them. One night we talked about Somali politics and warlords, and how precarious the condition of that country was. I'd known this vaguely from headlines in the States, but being on the ground in a country that shared a long border with Somalia gave the issue a personal, palpable urgency—as it did with our discussions of Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan. Rather than reading about the world on a screen, I was absorbing it all around me.



This same lesson manifested in different form on a Japan trip I led last year. One night our group crowded into a semi-private room in a tiny neighborhood restaurant. Our Japanese guide ordered, and soon a procession of delicacies appeared before us: beautiful ceramic plates and bowls graced with sashimi, *agedashi* tofu, grilled fresh-caught fish and local vegetables, exquisite slices of *wagyu* beef, and *karaage* chicken, plus local sake and beer. For the next hour we feasted and laughed and joked with the waitresses and toasted the chef. We reminisced about the day's adventures and shared our individual examples of the wonders that were unfolding around us. We reveled in the food and the atmosphere and each other. We were immersed in the moment; no texts were sent, no emails checked, no Instagram or Facebook photos posted.

That night the world took on a heightened vibrancy, immediacy, and intimacy: life unfiltered. Tastes were keener, sounds were clearer, smells were sharper, colors were brighter. We re-experienced the joy of connecting with the people around us, and we rediscovered the delight of connecting with our world. That feeling infused the days that followed.

That's the potency of the disconnection connection, and now I do my best to embrace it on every journey. As I discovered in East Africa and Japan, it's a little alchemy that can conjure life-changing gifts.

Don George is Editor in Chief of GeoEx's blog and author of The Way of Wanderlust: The Best Travel Writing of Don George, which features some of the evocative essays he has written over his 40 years as a travel writer.

News from Saudi Arabia

Now that Saudi Arabia is cracking the door open to tourism, GeoEx returned to the kingdom with a group of travelers this past fall. To find out about their experience, we sat down with the trip's leader, Middle East expert and Syrian native Bisher Alissa.

The trip sold out quickly. Why do you think Americans are interested in going to Saudi Arabia?

Saudi Arabia has long played a significant role in the stability of the global economy, but it is one of the world's best-kept secrets, a difficult spot for non-Muslim travelers to experience firsthand. The cradle of Islam, the kingdom has always followed religious and tribal tradition, and elders have been highly influential. Now we see an urge for change and openness. There are young leaders, a growing role for women, and a big vision that's already led to social change and an openness to investment, the building of megacities, and the development of tourism. So, there's a great deal for travelers to be curious about.

Where did the trip go, and how were you received?

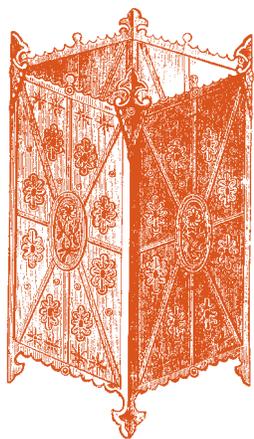
Our group of 12 travelers, all Americans and mostly women, covered the major regions of the country—the Hejaz area, the Asir region, Nejd, and the north, a geography larger than Western Europe! We were well received everywhere, from the cities to small towns. Saudis are open and wanted to know where we were from, the places we were visiting, and what we thought of their country. While many Saudis are well traveled in the West, most hadn't been to the stops on our itinerary. In some places, hotel staff asked us to take group pictures because they were not used to seeing tour groups!

Were any local encounters especially memorable?

Many were. For instance, while visiting a traditional mud-brick village in Abha that's now abandoned, we met an old man who was so excited to show us his former family home that he took us through every nook and cranny, telling us about his life there, how things have changed, and his hopes for the future. At another point, members of a women's weaving collective invited the women in our group for a private chat, giving them special insight into their social and work lives.

What should interested travelers know?

Saudis are sincere and generous people, eager to share their traditions, as well as things you may not expect—like the lively art scenes in Jeddah, Abha, and Riyadh. Of course, tourism is very new, so things don't always go as planned and you have to be flexible—a worthwhile trade-off when you're getting up close with ancient and modern riches that have been kept under wraps.



For more from Bisher on travel in Saudi Arabia, see his full interview on Wanderlust at GeoEx.com/Blog. There you can also find links to our future Saudi Arabia group trips.



◆ **DISCONNECTION CONNECTIONS TWO**
Elizabeth McNeil: *The highlight of our time in Morocco was spending the night in the Sabara, at the Erg Chebbi Dunes camp. Everywhere else, we had Wi-Fi (even on the bus!), but here, we only had the stars and the dunes and each other. I don't remember the last time I felt that relaxed.*



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Peter Hillary: On Making and Retracing History

◆ DISCONNECTION CONNECTIONS THREE

Tina Liadis: While traveling in a remote region of Myanmar at the end of the rainy season, bad weather canceled my flight out, and my three-night stay became seven. I was the only guest at the lodge, and there was no Internet access or phone service. The one connection to the outside world was an unreliable radio phone. At first I was anxious, worried about the work I had left behind and about missing my international flight home, but once I realized there was nothing I could do, I relaxed and went with the flow. The hotel staff took me under its wings. The reservations manager led me on a bike to his village, where I met his parents and siblings. Another staff member showed me the nearby waterwheel he had fashioned out of bamboo to generate electricity for his village. And yet another brought me to her Karenni Baptist church Sunday morning, where I was warmly welcomed by the entire congregation. Fond memories!



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wizards noted here,
please call
888-733-9019*

Acclaimed mountaineer Peter Hillary looks back at his 1981 history-making trans-Himalayan trek (documented in First Across the Roof of the World) and looks forward to the Himalayan Traverse journey he created with GeoEx and will be leading November 2–18, 2019—without any trekking!

Many people wonder what sparked our 1981 trans-Himalayan trek from Kangchenjunga in northeast India to K2, the world's second-highest mountain in far-off Pakistan. The answer is simple: For 20th-century mountaineers, exploratory journeys into the Himalaya were among the ultimate adventures, and a complete traverse of the world's greatest mountain range seemed irresistible to me and my trekking partners. The hardest part of the trip was its duration: a full 10 months of living rough and at high altitude accompanied by periods of intense homesickness that were held at bay by a determination that we would reach the foot of K2. The best part of our long journey was being immersed in the simple lives and rich cultures of the people we moved among; that was a remarkable privilege.

It has been a dream of mine for years to share this end-to-end Himalaya adventure with kindred spirits who want to experience this incredible region. I've worked with GeoEx since 2003, always appreciating the company's thorough and enthusiastic people, and so GeoEx seemed like a good partner to make this dream a reality. The result is our *Himalayan Traverse* adventure. We'll go from Ladakh, India, to Kathmandu, Nepal, to Darjeeling to Bhutan, and instead of toughing it out trekking, we'll take leisurely walks and explore Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, lush tea plantations, ancient temples, traditional crafts like weaving and papermaking, and, of course, mountaineering lore and amazing Himalayan scenery. (On a clear day, the views of Everest's summit from our fly-over flight are unforgettable!) I can't wait to tell stories from my 1981 Himalayan traverse, share experiences from my more than 40 expeditions in these mountains, and offer the group insights throughout. I want this trip to be one of the best adventures these travelers have ever taken! All they need to bring is a sense of adventure.

Here's to Inspiring Wanderlust

We're proud that two essays on GeoEx's blog, Wanderlust, have recently earned accolades. Ariel Andrew's story "The End of the World, with Her" won a Gold Award in the 2018 Travel Media Awards Competition of the North American Travel Journalists Association. And "The Importance of Travel in Turbulent (and Not So Turbulent) Times," by our own Don George (whose prose opens this newsletter), took home a Silver Award in the 2018 Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Competition from the Society of American Travel Writers Foundation. We hope you'll read these and other compelling travel stories at GeoEx.com/Blog.

We are also delighted that the 2019 GeoEx catalog won an award for outstanding design and production from the Publishing Professionals Network (Bookbuilders West), one of the largest and most prestigious events of its kind in the United States.



Snippets from the Giving Back World

Global Fund for Women recently expanded their Young Women's Leadership Initiative (launched in Southeast Asia in 2017) to East Africa. Kenyan and Tanzanian girls and mentors met in Kenya to get started, connecting a new group of young women leaders working for change in their communities.

To dissuade Chinese travelers from purchasing ivory in neighboring countries (the sale of ivory is banned in China), **WildAid** is partnering with the China Customs administration and the World Wildlife Fund to create a national public awareness campaign featuring popular Chinese actor Huang Xuan.

The **American Himalayan Foundation's Stop Girl Trafficking (SGT)** initiative reports that 12,000 girls at risk for trafficking and child labor are now safely enrolled in more than 500 schools across Nepal. In the eastern district of Udayapur, the number of at-risk girls enrolled in school has grown from 60, when the program started in 2007, to 848 this year.

Trip Notes

A SACRED STAY IN JAPAN

This fall, Don George will return to his second home to lead *Japan: Tip to Toe* (October 10–24, 2019), a journey he created to explore the natural and cultural range of the country, from Hokkaido to Kyushu. A top highlight is the stay in the Buddhist complex of Mount Koya, or Koyasan, as the Japanese call it. "Koyasan is a thriving monastic center of more than 100 temples and 4,000 residents, set among densely wooded mountains south of Osaka," Don explains. "Established by revered scholar-monk Kobo Daishi in 816 as headquarters for his Shingon school of Esoteric Buddhism, Koyasan remains, 12 centuries later, one of Japan's most pristine and sacred sites, manifesting a masculine side of Japan worlds away from the hostesses and Hello Kittys of Kyoto."

On Don's first visit, a monk in mustard-colored robes succinctly stated this holy place's essence: "Koyasan is purity." On our trip we absorb some of that purity, sleeping on tatami mats in austere temple rooms and dining on the monks' *shojin ryori* fare of sticky sesame tofu, vegetable tempura, rice, and miso soup. In the morning we wake to enshrouding mists and shuffle down silent hallways to join chants swirled by cymbals, gongs, and incense. Kobo Daishi is believed to live at Koyasan still, sitting in eternal meditation in an elaborate mausoleum, and through the centuries, Japan's most rich and powerful have built palatial sepulchers to share in his grace. "The forest cemetery where these are located, the Okunoin, is a soul-plucking place of towering thousand-year-old cedars and more than 200,000 burial sites and monuments," Don shares. "At night, we follow a ghostly lantern-lit trail here, winding through the moss-covered stones deep into the mystery and majesty of ancient Japan." To join Don in October, reach out to Tina Liadis.

◆ DISCONNECTION CONNECTIONS FOUR

Jesse Knight: *On the second night of my group trip in Kenya, we flew to an isolated mobile camp without Wi-Fi. We went for hikes, kayaked, swam under a waterfall, sipped sundowners on boulders overlooking the savannah, and bonded over shared experiences and good stories. It was a great way to get to know one another. A few days later, we arrived at a modern lodge with connectivity, and everyone jumped on their phones to check email and social media. We noticed a difference right away and agreed to avoid having phones at group meals. At the end of the trip, everyone said their favorite moments were those unplugged days when we were more deeply connected to nature and each other.*



GOING WITH THE FLOE IN THE ARCTIC

There's a majestic marine animal that can swim for days, whose black skin and translucent fur appears white only because it reflects the icy wonderland around it: the polar bear. Spending time admiring and photographing the much-loved (and seriously endangered) beast in its natural habitat is the prize of a lifetime—a prize this new 11-day Arctic cruise is striving to help you achieve.

In the Svalbard archipelago, we venture to the base of spectacular tidewater glaciers, glide by Zodiac and kayak among towering icebergs and deep fjords, and watch for those heart-tugging ice bears. Reindeer, walrus, seals, and foxes may also make an appearance. Our sightings are put into context by experts on board, as well as by visits to museums and galleries that inform about Norway, the Arctic, Norwegian explorers, and contemporary local artists. Before returning to real-world Oslo, we stop in the Arctic town of Longyearbyen to make friends with sled dogs and appreciate the local architecture, like the *lavvo*, the traditional tent of the native Sami people. In 2019, *Ice Bear Explorer* departs on June 2, 9, 16, and 23. Kim Anderson is standing by to make the arrangements.



◆ DISCONNECTION CONNECTIONS FIVE

Amanda McKee: *I was biking in the hilly Dordogne region of France, trying to reach a cave I'd heard was worth seeing, and when I saw a dirt path heading in the "right" direction, I took it, hoping it would be a shortcut.*

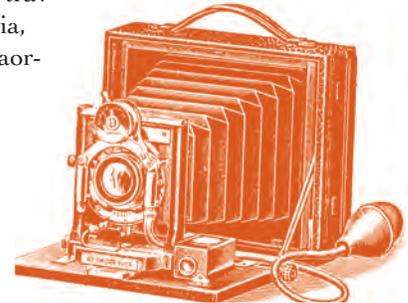
I had no signal to verify my location with Google, but I pedaled on faith, following the trail even as it turned upward into a long set of roughly laid, ancient stone steps. Eventually, I was bushwhacking my way through the forest, hoping to find some road, any road, when I popped out in the backyard of a country house. The home's family and friends were sitting down to a lovely al fresco lunch when they saw me appear. Instead of calling the police, they invited me to join their meal, and I sat down to a fabulous lunch with new friends. It was far more interesting than the cave would have been!

HIDDEN TANZANIA WITH TWO LEGENDS

Anyone who has traveled with star safari guide Brad Hansen and adventurer-author-philanthropist Kingsley Holgate knows that their new *Secrets of Tanzania* safari will be a treat. As Donald C. expressed, "Brad and Kingsley's warmth and knowledge are outstanding. They make everything come alive!"

Brad crafted this trip himself so that travelers can experience the best of Tanzania, timing the departures for the most extraordinary wildlife viewing and choosing exclusive locations away from the typical tourist spots. We'll revel in Mwiba, a jewel of a private concession in the north that is thriving again under the management and protection of the Friedkin Conservation Fund. We'll game drive and walk through the Grumeti, a private 350,000-acre

reserve in the Serengeti that Brad calls "the finest wildlife concession in Africa." Our March trip (March 3–15, 2020) is the best time to see baby animals and to stay at Maswa Game Reserve, where the wildebeest migration might thunder across the Makao Plains, while the September departure (September 9–22, 2020) will visit Ruaha National Park, dotted with rock outcroppings and baobabs and known for its high densities of predators (think big cats, hyenas, and wild dogs). In addition to seeing sensational wildlife, we'll get to spend time with the Hadzabe, one of the last hunter-gatherer tribes. Traveling with two legendary Africa experts makes this an especially remarkable opportunity to intimately immerse yourself in Tanzania, appreciating the interplay of wildlife, local community, and conservation. Contact Starla Estrada to reserve your spot.



SOUTH AMERICA'S DYNAMIC DUO

If both Machu Picchu and the Galápagos are on your bucket list, you'll be glad to know that our customizable *Machu Picchu and the Galápagos Islands* adventure seamlessly weaves them together, packing in an incredible combination of cultural and natural history.

First to Peru, where we get to know the Sacred Valley and Cusco, described by Jan Morris as combining "the compulsions of Stonehenge, a small Barcelona, and a Kathmandu." Of course, Machu Picchu is the showstopper: We'll revel in its mountaintop perch and staggeringly precise stonework. If we're craving active or natural explorations, we might raft or kayak, or add a brilliant Amazon river cruise among the jungle's birds, monkeys, sloths, and medicinal plants. Then on to the Enchanted Islands, where unparalleled interactions with such bewitching creatures as giant tortoises, skittering marine iguanas, and charismatic cormorants await. In between walking, sea kayaking, and snorkeling excursions, we'll kick back on a wonderfully comfortable ship or luxury yacht. (If you're not a fan of sleeping on boats, ask about the charming Galápagos Safari Camp, nestled into the highland cloud forest.) You don't have to be an evolutionary biologist to appreciate the dazzling array of diversity that makes these islands one of a kind.

Space is filling quickly for this summer and fall, so we encourage you to lock in plans now. Linda de la Torre is ready to plan your getaway.

THE REBIRTH OF SRI LANKA

While Sri Lanka may be on island time, you can't call it sleepy. After 400 years of colonialism followed by a 30-year ethnic war, Sri Lankans are impatient to make a name for themselves in the global sphere. Colombo is rapidly blossoming into a modern metropolis with designer clothing boutiques, contemporary art galleries, co-working spaces, and international restaurants. Outside the capital, new accommodations are opening their doors, and the Northern Province (sometimes known as Tamil Country) is welcoming its first travelers in decades.

Back from the Isle of Serendip and firmly under its spell, our GeoEx travel mavens created *Soul of Sri Lanka* to share its impressive diversity and wealth of wonders, from the north—the part of the country least touched by tourism—to the south, now home to a luxurious oceanside tented safari camp in Yala National Park, where leopards, flying foxes, and elephants roam free. Along the way are insightful conversations with friendly locals, the exquisite

frescoes of Sigiriya's ruined fortress and other UNESCO-acclaimed archaeological gems,

strolls through breathtaking tea trails and captivating colonial towns, and evidence of a harmonious intermingling of faiths: Churches, mosques, temples, and *kovils* (the Tamil word

for a type of Hindu temple) are sometimes built in such close proximity that you can hear the call to prayer, church bells, and Buddhist chants all at once. Departures are set for February 8–21 and February 22–March 6, 2020, and Jessica Silber is the one to call.



◆ DISCONNECTION CONNECTIONS SIX

Corinne Edwards: *Many of the lodges on my Everest Base Camp trek didn't have Wi-Fi and the rooms weren't heated, so my fellow trekkers and I often congregated around the fire (fueled by dried yak dung) to keep warm and chat. We shared tales from the trail and from our home countries, and we got to know the local staff and other travelers. It was a refreshing break from tech-zombie land.*

◆ DISCONNECTION CONNECTIONS SEVEN

Starla Estrada: *On my recent adventure into the distant reaches of Colombia, I disconnected from my devices and was able to slow down and soak up more fully the country's amazing wild nature reserves. My eyes opened in a new way to vast riches of flora and fauna. Did you know that Colombia is the planet's second-most-biodiverse country? If you haven't watched the documentary Colombia: Wild Magic, do so!*



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EGYPT ON THE RISE

Following the Arab Spring in 2011, tourism is beginning to blossom in Egypt once again. For now, tourist numbers are low, allowing for quiet, crowd-free moments at such iconic sites as the Pyramids of Giza — something that was nearly impossible 10 years ago. The people we meet on our Egypt group and custom trips, including artists, home cooks, copper-smiths, and perfumers, welcome us with gleaming smiles, reflecting how happy they are to see travelers returning.

Our new *Splendors of Egypt* group trip (December 4–16, 2019) delves into the country’s heart and history alongside

two amiable experts — Randa Abdel Wahab, an Egyptologist and Cairo native, and Bill Jones, a British-born, Paris-based explorer, raconteur, and veteran trip leader. Together we’ll journey from Cairo to Aswan, marveling at grand monuments, mind-blowing hieroglyphs, and bygone-era villages, and browsing for hand-loomed silk scarves, alabaster vases, papyrus art, and other treasures. During our five-night cruise aboard a superbly appointed *dababeya* reserved exclusively for our group, the life-giving Nile comes into clear focus. We kick back on deck, watching bustling activity on the river and spotting stunning ruins on its banks. We hop

from the Valley of the Kings and Queens to Esna, Edfu, and Kom Ombo, soaking in the tremendous temples, fine friezes, and quiet moments of contemplation in limited-access tombs. Contact Kim Keating for details, and if you’d prefer the women-only edition of this trip, *Egypt Insider*, stay tuned for 2020 dates, as 2019 departures are sold out.



If you’d like more information on any of the trips mentioned in this newsletter, please visit us at GeoEx.com or call us at 888-733-9019. And if you haven’t received our beautiful catalog and would like to, please write or call, and we’ll have one winging your way immediately.