

GEOEX  
*Ultima Thule*  
JOURNAL OF THE FARTHEST PLACES

*The Importance of Travel in Turbulent  
(and Not So Turbulent) Times*

by Don George

I have been roaming the wide world for more than four decades, first as a student and then as a travel writer, and each trip has underscored the validity and power of a simple truth: At its heart, travel is about connection. When we venture into a foreign setting, we may initially feel displaced, uneasy, ignorant about what to say or how to act. But as moments stretch into hours and hours stretch into days, we experience just how similar we are to these people that had been foreign to us. We come to understand their daily rituals, foods, entertainments, beliefs. We learn to read the body language, recognize the cultural cues. We connect.

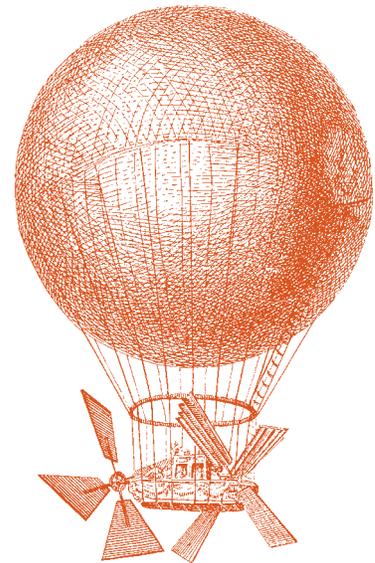
And when we make these connections, we understand that, despite differences in economic background, religious belief, and cultural tradition, we all share the same needs and dreams. We understand that the world is fundamentally a friendly place, our shared blue-and-green home.

That's why I feel travel is more important than ever now.

Each of us, as a citizen-ambassador, has a crucial role to play in the world today. I was first struck with the ambassadorial role we play as travelers when I visited Jordan a year after September 11. Before I left for Amman, virtually everyone I knew advised me not to go. I would be met with insults and rocks and maybe worse, I was told. And yet as I explored Jordan for 10 days, I was treated with extraordinary hospitality and warmth. I traveled to Jordan because I was hungry to hear with my own two ears how everyday Jordanians felt about their government and my government and the situation in the Middle East and the larger world. I landed thinking I was prepared for anything, but I was unprepared for what I discovered: my hosts felt exactly the same way. They were hungry to hear from an everyday American what everyday Americans thought about our government and the Jordanian government and the situation in the Middle East and around the world.

It was then I realized that travel is a two-way street: When we journey to unfamiliar places, not only do we gather information about the places we visit and the people we encounter, we also disseminate news about our homelands to the people we meet. We become moving media, embodying

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WEIRD EATS

*GeoEx staff comes up with another batch of odd edibles.*

◆ WEIRD EATS ONE

Becca Glatz: Hákarl, an Icelandic delicacy prepared with Greenland shark, is poisonous if eaten fresh. To neutralize its toxins, the shark is cut up and packed into a wooden crate, where it sits, draining fluids and fermenting, for about three months. Then it's hung to dry out in the open air for several more months. When ready to eat, it has a very strong smell (ammonia is a by-product of the fermentation); it's cut into small cubes and served on a toothpick. Mine was served on a little slice of rye bread to cut the intensity. The good stuff is really expensive.

◆ WEIRD EATS TWO

Jesse Knight: On my first night in a small village in South Africa, I was served mopane worms, large, furry caterpillars. Now, I've eaten insects before, but this was a special case, since the freshly flash-fried critters were still alive as I tossed them in my mouth. The way their small, book-like suction cup feet gripped my cheeks left me wondering who was eating whom.



For more literary travel musings, visit our blog at [GeoEx.com/Blog](http://GeoEx.com/Blog)

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information and imparting news in everything we say and everything we do. We become representatives of and ambassadors for the places we come from and return to—and in a larger sense, we become ambassadors for the human race.

I have learned this over and over, from a stilt home in rural Cambodia to an off-the-tourist-path bistro in Paris to a smoky Maasai hut in Kenya to a Native American's kitchen in New Mexico. For me, this connection is the greatest gift of travel. It teaches us that we are linked to a whole much greater than ourselves, and that our fundamental responsibility is to honor and appreciate that whole, and to nurture it, so that we leave every place we visit feeling more intimately connected and treasuring it more deeply than when we arrived.

Today, when the world is wracked with division and the specter of indiscriminate destruction haunts every passageway, it may be tempting to stay home. But this is precisely when we most need to travel, to weave the global threads of connection that bind us. We have much to teach each other, much to learn from one another; we have a precious opportunity to raise a banner of hope and unity. The future of our planet is in our hearts, minds, and hands. I urge you to explore, appreciate, and share the vast and irreplaceable wonders of our singular home.



For a decade, Don George, the beloved and award-winning Editor in Chief of GeoEx's blog, has been procuring captivating and compelling travel stories for us. His recent book, *The Way of Wanderlust: The Best Travel Writing of Don George*, features a heart-opening collection of his own evocative essays and tales from his 40-year career as a travel writer.

### A Celebratory Trip in Bhutan

GeoEx has been sharing the little-known Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan with travelers since 1985, collaborating closely most of that time with our superbly capable and connected in-country colleagues at Yangphel. In January, to celebrate our 27-year relationship, five GeoEx staff members joined Yangphel in the Land of the Thunder Dragon for a commemorative journey.

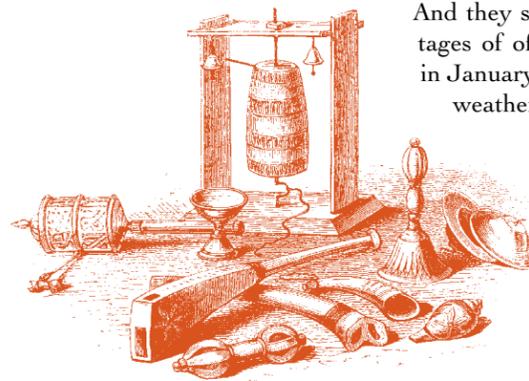
"A prime gift of the trip for me," reported Wen Minkoff, GeoEx's marketing maestro, "was getting to know our Bhutanese colleagues, learning



about their history and traditions, and discussing how we can create amazing insider experiences for our guests." Kim Anderson, whose cheerful voice often greets GeoEx callers, added, "I witnessed a partnership dedicated to preserving and sharing Bhutanese culture and hospitality, rooted in mutual respect." One night Yangphel CEO Karma Lotey gave a poignant speech describing our companies' special relationship and explaining that "when we welcome GeoEx guests to Bhutan, they become family rather than visitors." Our group of five certainly felt that, as have the 35 other GeoEx staffers who've made Bhutan scouting trips over the last three decades.

The January journeyers returned to San Francisco excited about other experiences as well, like staying at a lovingly crafted riverside camp: "There were two traditional hot-stone baths set up for us in the open air, right near the water's edge. We bathed under the stars, breathing in the smell of traditional herbs. It was fantastic! We also were treated to archery and darts lessons at the campsite."

Another highlight was an evening conversing with Bhutanese dignitaries. "We had really enriching conversations with leaders in government, education, media, and nonprofit organizations. This provided insights we couldn't have gotten any other way." And they saw firsthand the advantages of off-season travel: "Going in January was a treat because the weather was fine and we felt like we had the whole country to ourselves."



Visits to sacred spaces left strong impressions, too, especially the majestic Punakha Dzong (which they traveled to by river raft, being welcomed with lunch and

a changing tent), the Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Chorten (a hillside temple they hiked to that afforded amazing valley views), the renowned Tiger's Nest, and temples farther afield not usually seen by Westerners. "It was wonderful to spend time at the Pema Choling Nunnery, located in central Bhutan, since it has been supported in a substantial manner by past GeoEx guests who were moved by their interactions with the nuns. The day we visited, the nuns were meticulously brushing saffron-infused water on prayer scrolls to preserve them."

The team previewed lodging offerings as well, visualizing the best combinations for different GeoEx travelers. High marks went to Zhiwa Ling in Paro and Gangtey Lodge in the enchanting Phobjikha Valley for their balance of comfort and Bhutanese charm, and to the Amankora in Bumthang for its luxurious amenities. The not-yet-open Six Senses Resorts may provide additional high-end options for future trips.

Thinking back on their two-week adventure, Asia aficionada Elizabeth McNeil shared, "I now have an even greater desire to send travelers to Bhutan, because I understand the sacred spirit and riches of the country, and because our partnership with Yangphel feels like a personal relationship rather than a business one."



◆ WEIRD EATS THREE

Jennine Cohen: I was served llama carpaccio at a romantic, elegant, private dinner at a traditional estancia up in the northwest corner of Argentina. Llamas are so cute and all that, but I have to say their raw meat was quite good.



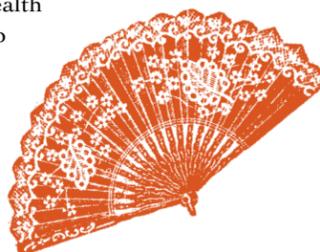
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## In the News

We're always thrilled when our trip designers and their handiwork grace the pages of respected publications. Recently *Forbes*, *Departures*, the *Robb Report*, the *LA Times*, and *Vogue* have written about GeoEx, citing, for example, *Japan: Tip to Toe* (to be led by Don George) as a top trip for 2017, Vietnam's little-explored caves of Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park as a fetching destination for the year, gorillas of the Democratic Republic of Congo as an important endangered sight to see now, and Cuba as a country that changes a visitor.

In other news, *Condé Nast Traveler* once again recognized Kate Doty, Vassi Koutsaftis, and Brent Olson for their expertise, including them on their 2016 Top Travel Specialists list. Kate also earned a spot on *AFAR* magazine's Travel Advisory Council, joining a remarkably diverse group of skilled travel professionals who support *AFAR* in its inspiring work to promote experiential and transformative travel.

Additionally, we're delighted that anonymous staff surveys placed GeoEx on *Outside* magazine's 100 Best Places to Work for the sixth consecutive year, this time at number 12. The list showcases US companies that "make employee health and happiness a point of pride." We're also proud that GeoEx was one of the three finalists for the 2016 San Francisco Chamber of Commerce's Business in Excellence awards. Go to [GeoEx.com/Media](http://GeoEx.com/Media) to find out more about our accolades and appearances in the press.



## New Trips and Other Notes

### SAFARI IN CHAD'S ZAKOUMA NATIONAL PARK WITH MODERN-DAY EXPLORER

Next spring our first groups will venture into a country wildly devoid of tourism to explore 1,179-square-mile Zakouma National Park, home to a hugely diverse grassland ecosystem and a rehabilitated herd of 400 elephants—a great conservation success story. "GeoEx is one of the few tour operators that has been awarded private, weeklong trips in the park," explains GeoEx safari celebrant Starla Estrada, "and we've enlisted a dynamic duo of leaders: legendary safari guide Brad Hansen and Kingsley Holgate, modern-day explorer, Royal Geographic Society member, and globally respected expert on remote African tribes."

With only six to eight travelers per departure, we'll each have a front-row seat to Zakouma's varied wildlife, from lion prides to rare nocturnal honey badgers and flocks of 5,000-plus northern crowned cranes (just one of the 375 bird species found in Chad's protected parks). Moving across seasonal marshes, we'll witness enormous congregations of roan antelopes, red-fronted gazelles, Kordofan giraffes, and other ungulates migrating to oases under the predatory, if secretive, eyes of cheetahs and spotted hyenas. We'll meet the nomads of the Sahelian belt and overnight in a comfortable mobile camp with fresh, innovative cuisine.

◆ WEIRD EATS FOUR  
Silvia Francis-Bongue: *I always laugh remembering the first time I ate passion fruit. I was on a farm in Colombia when somebody handed me one picked from a nearby tree. I had no idea how to eat it but had enjoyed the heavily sugared juice for years, so I figured I was familiar enough with the fruit to go for it. I bit right in, with the thick flesh still on. The man who gave it to me looked horrified and asked, "What are you doing?" Sensing that I had done something stupid and hoping my face wouldn't reveal the sourness on my tongue, I just said, "This is how I like to eat passion fruit."*

◆ WEIRD EATS FIVE  
Mike Parker: *I've had my share of unusual beverages—butter tea, mare's milk, oyster stout—but the most memorable had to be the fermented camel's milk I drank in a Gobi nomad's ger. As the container emerged from beneath our host's bed, I spotted several camel hairs sprouting from the thick, trembling mass of "milk," which was somewhere between the texture of yogurt and rice pudding. How did it taste? Precisely the way a camel smells, with a hint of sour, effervescent booziness.*



To reach the travel wizards noted here, please call 888-733-9019

If you're tempted by the notion of being one of the few outsiders to visit Africa's fifth-largest nation and one of the oldest places on earth—where hominids date back seven million years—contact Starla about *Chad Explorer: Wildlife, Culture, and Conservation* (March 13–21, March 20–28, and April 10–18, 2018).

### FAMILY ADVENTURES IN THE REALM OF VOLCANOES AND FAERIES

Iceland feels like a distant faerie land of fire and ice, with locals who believe that magical creatures inhabit their landscape of glaciers, geysers, waterfalls, and—oh, yes—volcanoes. Yet the island is actually closer than most other European destinations. Our new, fully customizable *Iceland Family Explorer* delves into the country's otherworldliness in just seven action-packed days, attending to every wish and whim of your loved ones. We've tracked down the top Icelandic guides to take you off the beaten path, travel places only a super jeep can go, and link nights in independently owned inns, from colorful harbor towns to cosmopolitan Reykjavik.

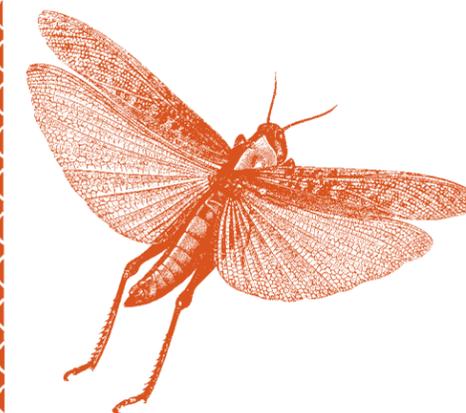
"Since adventure is front and center on the most memorable family vacations," explains Iceland specialist Natalie Crow, "we've found child-friendly excursions as exciting as the scenery is wild." You can explore lava tubes, skid through verdant valleys by ATV, traverse aqua-hued glaciers in crampons, trot away on five-gaited Icelandic horses, follow moss-laden trails to passages behind waterfalls, kick ice on aptly named Diamond Beach, and Zodiac through the Vestmannaeyjar archipelago to behold one of the planet's largest puffin colonies. There's even a chance to hike into the Thrihnukagigur Volcano—your guide, no doubt between tales of Viking lore, will gladly help with pronunciation of this ancient and largely unchanged tongue.

In addition to revealing the rich Icelandic culture and highlight sights away from crowds, your guide will show you to streams and pools safe for soaking, given Iceland's intense geothermal foundation. Hot springs serve as community centers, a wonderful, healthy way to get to know the locals. You'll depart refreshed and replenished from this breathless realm of thunderous waterfalls and black-sand beaches inhabited by creative urban dwellers, rural characters, and, yes, faeries. Natalie is the one to call.

### ANNOUNCING CENTRAL TIBET TREK WITH VASSI KOUTSAFTIS

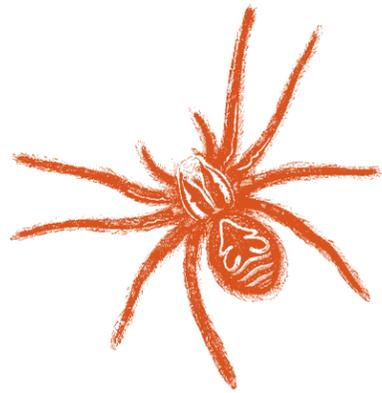
One of the most beautiful spots in the Nyenchen Tanglha range—in the world, some mountain lovers might argue—is also one of the most sacred. Namtso Lake, a huge saltwater lake set beneath wide-open skies at 15,479 feet with a backdrop of towering snowcapped peaks, draws people on pilgrimage from across the Tibetan Plateau, as well as migratory birds, pikas, hares, and nomadic herders with yaks and sheep. Historically, pilgrims would cross the frozen lake at the end of winter, armed with food and supplies, to reach one of its five islands, where they would stay all summer until the lake iced over again, providing a path to leave. Today, believers pay homage by walking clockwise around the dazzling cobalt pool, a 20- to 30-day journey that takes them past cliffs strewn with billowing prayer flags, monasteries, and sacred stones and grottoes.

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◆ WEIRD EATS SIX  
Kai Roath: *One of my favorite memories is eating chapulines (grasshoppers) dipped in guacamole with a friend in Mexico City before going to an arena to watch Lucha Libre, a form of professional wrestling. One of the 'hopper's fried barbed legs got stuck in the roof of my friend's mouth, and I had to extract it with some tweezers during an electrical blackout; he lit and relit matches, holding them up to his mouth so I could see what I was doing.*

◆ WEIRD EATS SEVEN  
Jessica Silber: *My mom and I ended a hike in a Tanzanian village with banana beer. It was made with millet essentially thrown in whole for fermentation, making for a sour, gritty, textural drink, served at the same temperature as the rain forest we'd been hiking in. We drank it from a bucket along with our hosts. The experience was delightful, although I don't see the drink catching on in San Francisco's hip beer halls anytime soon.*



◆ WEIRD EATS EIGHT

Tina Liadis: *The Cambodian town of Skuon is nicknamed Spider Village because there are LOTS of the eight-legged arachnids, especially tarantulas. The locals fry them up and enjoy them served over noodles or rice. Adventurers on our Cambodia: The Road Less Traveled journey, which moves overland from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap, will see mountains of fried spiders at the Skuon market, ready to eat!*

◆ WEIRD EATS NINE

Sara Barbieri: *Walking through the market in Mon, Nagaland (in northeast India), I came across a bundle of sbrunken critters, tied together and cavalierly presented on a small, low table covered with a yellow checkered tablecloth—the plastic, picnic sort. They were flattened as though ironed and black as charcoal. I wondered out loud “What are these?” not prepared for the answer: smoked rat. I always love a tasty treat to gnaw on.*

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We'll get a taste of that experience on our new *Monasteries and Mountains of Central Tibet* (July 1–13, 2018), led by the celebrated and indefatigable Vassi Koutsaftis, who has headed many of GeoEx's pioneering adventures, including treks to Dolpo-Shey Gumpa in western Nepal, Snow Lake and Baltoro Glacier in Pakistan, and the Kangshung Face of Everest in Tibet. The first day of our four-day trek takes us to the southeast corner of Namtso Lake, where we'll walk the kora around the temples of Tashi Dor, explore caves, soak up views of 23,300-foot Nyenchen Tanglha, and camp in comfort alongside nomads, far from other visitors. Then we drive into the mountains for three glorious days of moderate trekking and sensational alpine scenery around Chomokangar, another Himalayan giant just short of 23,000 feet. Bookending the trek are three days in Lhasa and three in Kathmandu, where Vassi will give us inside looks at key Himalayan sights. Edwin d'Haens is standing by with full details.

AFRICA FOR ART'S SAKE

“Sometimes a project or an initiative can galvanize feelings about a whole place,” said Thomas Heatherwick, who is responsible for the design of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, due to open in South Africa this September. “This project, I hope, can be one of a number of things that gives a reason to look with a fresh eye at a city and a country and hopefully a continent—for those of us who don't spend enough time understanding it.” The much-anticipated museum, set in a refurbished silo complex on the Cape Town waterfront, is the centerpiece of Starla Estrada's new *Art in Africa* custom journey (available year-round), which explores some of the most intriguing private collections and public displays of art in South Africa and Kenya.

In addition to curator-led gallery visits and insightful walking tours—the one in Johannesburg led by art expert Jo Buitendach reveals inspiring street murals, installations, and graffiti—each of the luxurious hotels on the itinerary has its own phenomenal private collection. From the Saxon's traditional West and Central African pieces to the stunning contemporary bronze sculptures at Delaire Graff in the Cape Winelands to Segera, a Kenya treasure cherished for its contemporary works (not to mention safari experiences), you'll have rare inside access to artwork, artists, and art connoisseurs. Starla can time your stay at Segera to coincide with its artist-in-residence program and, of course, fold in personalized wildlife excursions in the Laikipia Highlands, community project visits, and relaxing spa treatments. Starla is poised to make all the arrangements.

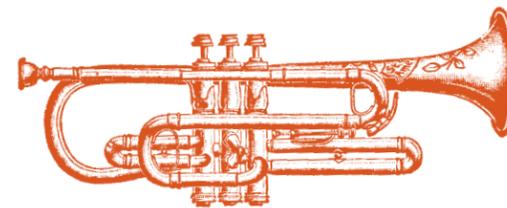
¡VIVA CUBA!

With relaxed travel requirements and commercial flights from multiple US cities, it's easier than ever for Americans to reach Cuba—and they have been rushing in. “But relationships are everything on the ground in Cuba right now,” explains Americas guru Jennine Cohen. “Travelers without inside connections are finding out the hard way that web-booked home-stays and self-made itineraries can unravel quickly. Authentic experiences are increasingly harder to find.”

She and our in-country colleagues continue to track and respond to the rapidly shifting environment, happily orchestrating both Group and

Custom Trips that weave in the newest restaurants, galleries, lodgings, music venues, and cultural experiences. “Charming boutique hotels and villas are popping up,” Jennine says, “and they're oases for our travelers, making them feel worlds away from the influx of tourists.” Other things for GeoEx guests to look forward to: Group Trips as short as six days and Custom Trips that can be as short as five, with truly tailored-to-you itineraries—perhaps you'd like to focus on music and art or economics and architecture. Or maybe your family wants to combine hiking, caving, and kayaking with cultural activities like salsa lessons and playing dominoes with local kids.

Contact Jennine to start planning your Custom Trip (offered November–May) or to reserve your space on *Connecting with Cuba's Living History* (spring 2017 departures are sold out, but we're taking bookings for next season, with trips starting in December).



TASMANIA: MADE FOR THE STARRING ROLE

In the Academy Award-nominated film *Lion*, Tasmania's breathtaking scenery splashes across the big screen: magnificent coastline with turquoise sea, rugged landscapes, and miles of untouched nature. But the island, found south of mainland Australia and known to locals as Tassie, plays only a supporting role in the movie; on your *Amazing Tasmania with a Touch of Melbourne* custom journey (offered year-round), it plays the lead.

More than a third of Tasmania is preserved in national parks. It's home to a variety of wildlife you won't see on the mainland, as well as four of the eight Great Walks of Australia. “There are adventures for people of all ages, like hiking through eucalyptus forests, kayaking spectacular bays, taking a river cruise through the UNESCO-listed Tasmanian Wilderness, and visiting conservation projects,” says our Australia savant Esther Hsu. “The air is exceptionally clean, and the easygoing islanders claim to have the purest water on earth. I believe it.”

Esther has mapped out a 14-day sample itinerary that dots much of Tasmania—from the Cataract Gorge wetlands in the north to Cradle Mountain in the west and Freycinet's soft beaches in the east to the soaring cliffs of Bruny Island in the south. Your private Tassie guide will usher you slowly through glacial landscapes, rain forests, alpine heathlands, and on to the coast, pointing out Tasmanian devils, wallabies, quolls, and tiny carnivorous marsupials. A couple of days in Melbourne cap off your trip, with city sightseeing and wine tasting in the acclaimed Yarra Valley. Esther has pinpointed sublime lodgings throughout and is keeping a close eye on the MACq01, a luxe hotel on Hobart's waterfront due to open in June. She looks forward to giving you more information.



◆ WEIRD EATS TEN

Amanda McKee: *Within my first two hours in the Peruvian Andes, I cooed at cute, fluffy alpacas by the road and then was faced with one on my plate: alpaca carpaccio, served with shaved parmesan, basil oil, dried tomato, and candied garlic. Feeling both horrified and happy, I savored every bite. The next day, cuy (guinea pig) was on the menu; I thought of my brother's childhood pet, Ralph, as I tasted the slightly gamey, chicken-like meat. Cuy is so entrenched in the local culture that it appears as the main course in a famous Last Supper painting that's hung in the Cusco cathedral.*



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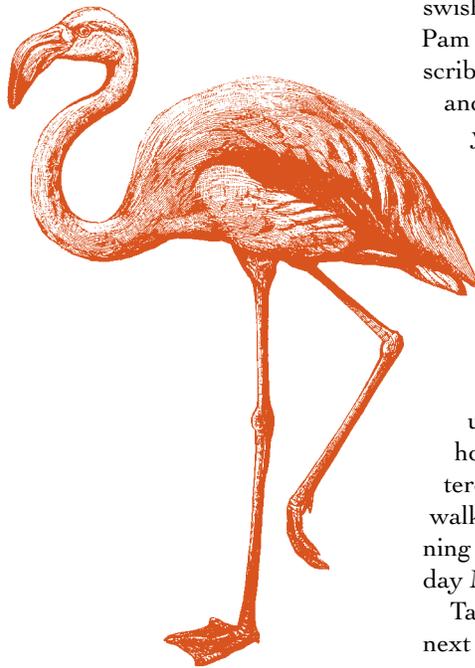
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**WHEN THE SERENGETI GETS UNDER YOUR SKIN**



“They are quiet, the elephants are. I can hear them exhaling; I can hear the swish of air behind their great ears as they flap,” recounts travel writer Pam Mandel, and we’re instantly transported to Tanzania. She vividly describes her safari guide Eli, “whose smile would shame the noonday sun,” and confesses to having painfully sunburnt ears. She snaps photos of yawning lions, her hands shaking in excitement, and learns that hippos get sunburned, too, which is why they stay below the waterline. On the last day, she is not ready to go: “I am not done watching the warthogs run on their short, funny little legs. I am not done examining the sharp patterns on the zebras.”

You’re likely to feel the same reluctance to leave on *Wildlife Wonders of Tanzania*, GeoEx’s Group Trip that ranges from the fabled Serengeti to Tarangire National Park and Lake Manyara (with tree-climbing lions and thousands of thirsty flamingos). Lined up are activities not included on other companies’ safaris, such as a hot-air balloon ride at dawn that reveals aerial views of animals scattered across the Serengeti and ends with a champagne brunch, nature walks in the Ngorongoro Highlands to remote communities, and an evening bonfire with a Maasai elder, who talks about traditional and modern-day Maasai life.

Tanzania native and superstar guide Arnold Swai will be leading our next two departures, which take place during the dry winter season, when grasses are low and animals are easier to spot. Call Jess Silber to reserve your space on the August 22–September 2 or September 11–22 trip, as well as to learn more about 2018 green-season departures and the best type of sunscreen to pack. Pam’s full story, “An Eye-Opening Serengeti Safari,” can be found at [Geoex.com/Blog](http://Geoex.com/Blog).

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