

GEOEX

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JOURNAL OF THE FARTHEST PLACES

The Wonders We Never Look For

by Pico Iyer

One of the things my wife and I share is a dislike of cold. Another is a dislike of snow. But after a friend rhapsodized about how easy it is to see the Northern Lights in central Alaska—stay three nights in autumn or winter, and there's a 90 percent chance of seeing something wondrous—the two of us devoted our next 18 months to plotting a trip. We saved up our money, we squirreled away our rare holiday time, and we pretended not to listen when a warm friend told us that the high temperature one recent day in Fairbanks was minus 41 degrees Fahrenheit.

Last January, my wife flew all the way over the Pacific from Osaka and I drove from Santa Barbara to the San Francisco airport so we could take the two flights up to Fairbanks together. It was 10:30 p.m. by the time we arrived in the snow-encircled dark, and poor Hiroko had been traveling for around 27 hours, across 16 time zones. But I excitedly began to show her all the websites kind friends had recently shared with me for getting a preview of Nature's daily miracle; my local alternative newspaper in Santa Barbara had actually—propitiously!—run a cover story on the aurora just two weeks earlier. Not long before that, an artist from Iceland had abruptly pulled out her laptop, before I'd said a thing about the Lights, and shown me mind-expanding showers of colors above the rooftops of Reykjavik in mid-September.

The new friend who greeted us at the baggage claim area in Fairbanks drove us 90 minutes through the silence—thick forests all covered in snow surrounding a small black ribbon of tarmac—and we trudged through heavy drifts to our modest room in Chena Hot Springs, arriving just after midnight, minutes too late to sample said springs.

But when we awoke the next morning and spent long minutes getting ourselves up in the layers of long johns and undershirts and snow boots and down jackets, of gloves and extra jackets and snow pants we'd bought for the occasion—each of us was wearing 13 pounds of clothing—it was to stumble into a whole day of activities beyond anything we'd dreamed of.

Suddenly, we were racing through the woods behind a team of Alaskan huskies as a seasoned dog-musher explained to us what he looked for in a lead dog. We were sitting in a wild, huge mineral bath far beyond any such outdoor facility we'd visited in Japan, reddening from the warmth

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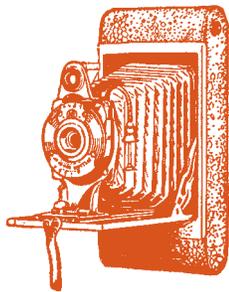
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UNEXPECTED WONDERS

Inspired by Pico Iyer's eloquent essay just east of here, we asked our staff to remember instances where their destinations offered up unexpected wonders.



◆ UNEXPECTED WONDERS ONE

Don George: I went to Cambodia to see Angkor Wat, but when I was overwhelmed by the selfie-snapping throngs of tourists there, I journeyed three and a half hours north to an obscure temple site called Banteay Chhmar. Clambering over the jungled ruins there, entirely alone, turned out to be one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life.



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

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even as our hair turned white within seconds. We were walking through a cathedral-like space made of ice, with shrines and sub-chambers glitteringly fashioned out of ice (and an ice bar in which appetitinis were served in goblets of hard ice). We were driving snowmobiles at high speed through the dusk as indigo skies cast an eerie light over the snow.

That evening, our gracious host drove us back to Fairbanks to spend the night in a remote hillside cabin built entirely for seeing the Lights. The owner of the cabin showed us stunning slides of all the auroras he'd seen from his perch. But by 1:30 a.m., we were exhausted and had seen nothing, so we headed home. The next evening, after a rich and magical day, we were taken to another celebrated aurora-viewing cabin, and we stayed there for four hours. Nothing—though we were told we could have seen something the previous night if we'd just hung around for 30 minutes more.

And so it went, evening after evening. Smiling front-desk women offered to call us in the middle of the night as soon as they spotted the Lights. They never called. We were flown out to an isolated lodge 98 miles from the nearest road, where conditions were perfect for aurora-viewing. One night the skies lit up and the owner of the lodge jumped out of bed, speedily put on all his clothes, and rushed out to alert us—but by the time he arrived at our door, the Lights were gone.

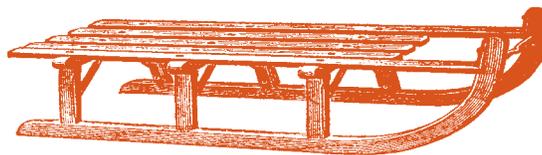
The last of our seven days in Alaska was crystal-clear—ideal for Lights-viewing, we were assured. But suddenly an ice fog descended in the unseasonably cold afternoon and as we watched, Providence literally swiped an eraser across the skies before our disbelieving eyes.

I thought of the book that had been my talisman for 30 years and more, and through eight or more readings, Peter Matthiessen's majestic *The Snow Leopard*. The seasoned traveler goes all the way to Inner Dolpo in search of the famously shy and elusive cat, even extending his trip on the special scientific expedition with the result that he has to miss Thanksgiving with his eight-year-old son, who's just lost his mother.

But he never sees the rare cat once. Instead, he sees himself. He sees the limits of his ambitions, his projections, his griefs. He sees the folly of expectation. He sees that life always gives us the things we never thought to ask for. He learns about the illusions that his recently deceased, Zen-minded wife had wanted to teach him about—and the impermanence.

It's never what we're looking for that's important, so much as the eagerness and hopefulness that animate the looking. Our Alaska trip was one of the most memorable and otherworldly of our lifetimes. And Hiroko tells me now—since we're both human—that we'll return to Alaska soon enough, in March, when the prospect of seeing the aurora is said to be even greater.

*Pico Iyer is the author of twelve books, most recently *The Man Within My Head* and *The Art of Stillness*.*



Fresh Eyes in China

GeoEx's Story Krishman, just back from China, sat down with us to answer questions about her adventure.

What surprised you most about China?

Truthfully, I was a bit nervous to go. I had heard about the crowds and lack of personal boundaries. But I was visiting for the first time and didn't want to miss bucket-list attractions like the Forbidden City, Terracotta Warriors, and Shanghai, so I prepared myself for the worst and dove in. Surprisingly, the crowds didn't bother me. I even had a moment alone on the Great Wall! As I progressed through my trip, I came to understand that immersing yourself in China means embracing being surrounded by people. Oh, and they had great coffee; that was a very pleasant surprise!

What was the major challenge on the trip?

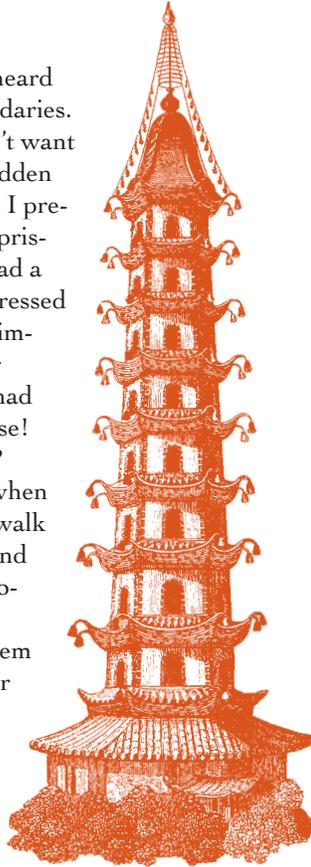
It's hard to ignore the pollution. You see it when you fly into the cities and you feel it as you walk around. Some days are better than others, and spending time outside major urban areas provides a break. Our guide explained that one way the government is addressing the problem is by allowing Beijing residents to drive their cars only on certain days (determined by license plate numbers).

What was the most memorable moment?

I loved the Muslim quarter in Xian, a city that drew Arabic merchants-turned-residents during the ancient Silk Road era. The Muslim quarter's street market was so exciting, lined with unending food stalls serving Muslim food made with Chinese cooking methods. Typical dishes included buns stuffed with marinated lamb, persimmon pies, barbecued meats on skewers, and those famous dumplings. It was amazing to wander, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells. It gave me a sense of what real life is like in that community.

What was your biggest takeaway from your journey?

Tourism in China is geared toward the Chinese tourist, not the Western traveler. To truly see the country, I had to let go of my romantic notions that the old way of life in China should be preserved. I had to abandon my expectations of how I wanted to see China's celebrated structures and natural wonders. I had to relax and embrace the way that China wanted me to experience its sights and culture. I had to be open-minded. And isn't that what travel is all about?



◆ UNEXPECTED WONDERS TWO

Natalie Crow: *On my first trip to South America, Machu Picchu was the one thing I wanted to experience. However, the top highlights turned out to be the blue-green color of remote mountain lakes; meeting local villagers and their horses, llamas, and guinea pigs; and the feeling of trekking up and over the Andes.*

◆ UNEXPECTED WONDERS THREE

Starla Estrada: *I spent a week on an ice floe in the Canadian Arctic to see the narwhal ("unicorn of the sea"), and while we did see a couple of those beautiful creatures, the highlight of the week was spending time with the Inuit guides and elders, learning about their culture, ancestry, current lifestyles, hunting techniques, and challenges of modern times.*



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China is one of our expert picks for 2018 travel. Please visit GeoEx.com/Blog for the others, as well as for the full Q&A with Story.

Awards and Accolades

◆ UNEXPECTED WONDERS FOUR

Jesse Knight: *Madagascar had an instant WOW factor that I didn't expect. The animals are incredible, and you can walk everywhere during your safari because none of them are dangerous to us. Culturally and scenically, the island is a really interesting mix of Africa and Asia.*

◆ UNEXPECTED WONDERS FIVE

Tina Liadis: *While on Flores Island in Indonesia, I stumbled upon a celebration in a remote village. Traditional music and dance were performed to welcome some visiting government officials. But the real fun began after the VIPs left, when it seemed the entire village, from toddlers to grandparents, joined the dancers onstage. It was one of those joyous moments that make travel so special.*



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

We are thrilled that our GeoEx catalog recently 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. We're also proud that Kate Doty and Brent Olson have once again been included in *Condé Nast Traveler's* Top Travel Specialists list: Kate for her ability to arrange exceptional insider experiences and Brent for his Bhutan knowledge and connections. Additionally, we're delighted that anonymous staff surveys placed GeoEx on *Outside* magazine's 100 Best Places to Work for the seventh consecutive year, this time at number 17.

Giving Back Update

In late September, GeoEx's San Francisco staff had the pleasure of learning from Dr. Arturo Izurieta Valery about the notable conservation work that the Charles Darwin Foundation is doing in the Galápagos Islands. The CDF, now one of the eight primary organizations supported by the GeoEx Foundation, conducts cutting-edge research and important monitoring of wildlife in Galápagos National Park in an effort to safeguard the diversity and vibrancy of this electrifying UNESCO World Heritage Site. GeoEx's Shana Chrystie, who spearheads our Giving Back program, has been inviting members of the organizations we support into the office to educate and inspire staff. You can find out more at GeoEx.com/ResponsibleTravel (donations are always welcome).



New Trips and Other Notes

IT'S TIME TO EXPLORE AFRICA'S EXCITING ART SCENE

"The hot new place for contemporary art is Africa," declared the *Economist* last May, citing Paris' recent Fondation Louis Vuitton exhibits, Sotheby's first auction of contemporary African art, and Cape Town's new Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA), "the biggest buzz in the continent's collective creative world for many years," according to *The Guardian*.

With her finger on the pulse of the art world, our Africa expert Starla Estrada carefully designed *Art in Africa* to provide aesthetic-minded travelers a remarkable look at the most intriguing private collections and public displays of art in South Africa and Kenya. You can look forward to curator-led gallery visits, eye-opening walking tours (the one in Johannesburg, led by acclaimed photographer James Delaney, reveals breathtaking street murals, installations, and graffiti), exclusive access to an artist-in-residence program, and stays in luxurious hotels, each with its own phenomenal cache of art. Custom Trips are offered year-round, and the first group departure is set for September 1-13. Starla is here to make the arrangements.

INTO THE WILDS OF WESTERN CANADA

With glacier-draped limestone mountains in the east and lush coastal rain forest in the west, British Columbia offers astonishing natural landscapes that are wonderfully close to home. Humpback whales frolic along inlet waters, massive cedars whisper, and the elusive “spirit bear” (a white subspecies of black bear found nowhere else on the planet) forages freely.

“Getting to fully experience this extraordinary range of scenery and wildlife in just eight days is no easy feat,” explains our Jennine Cohen, which is why she’s put together the new *Canadian Rockies and Coast Adventure* (Custom Trips available June–September).

Jennine has sussed out two luxurious wilderness lodges with sensational settings, gourmet meals, and stellar guides, and she’s figured out how to connect them with sea and bush planes. At Bugaboo Lodge in the Canadian Rockies, you can tackle the via ferrata fixed climbing route to magnificent Grizzly Ridge or hike across glaciers with the Bugaboo Spires—almost mythical among mountaineers—mere steps away. Then at Nimmo Bay Lodge in the Great Bear Rainforest, you might paddleboard past sunning seals and perching eagles, interact with native Kwakwaka’wakw people, fish for rainbow trout at a remote stream accessed by helicopter, or kayak a river estuary while bear cubs scour for salmon nearby. Whatever you decide, whether you’re a first-time heli-hiker or an advanced paddler, Jennine is standing by to make your dreams a reality.

WEST AFRICA: WHERE BORDERS DEFINE COUNTRIES, NOT PEOPLE

“One minute you are steeped in voodoo culture and African drumming, and the next you are embraced by local Christianity and a gospel choir,” explains GeoEx Africa aficionado Jesse Knight, describing his recent trip in Benin, Togo, and Ghana. He was impressed by the respect he sensed among local people (“despite their competing gods”), the feeling of being the only visitors around, the incredibly immersive experiences the group had, and the great photography opportunities—of people dressed in beautiful fabrics, markets filled with traditional foods, women balancing goods on their heads, and smiling children in traditional villages.

“The day we witnessed Gelede, an elaborate masked voodoo dance, especially stands out in my memory,” says Jesse. “Images of Carnival and Mardi Gras are hard to set aside, as the origin of many of the sounds and costumes came from West Africa via the slave trade. We were surrounded by a large circle of dancers and drummers, who asked us to join them, to shake our hips and shoulders and dust up the earth. We felt totally welcome and were captivated.” Jesse’s blog “Unexpected West Africa” at GeoEx.com/Blog shares more stories and photographs. To learn more about our next edition of *Mystical West Africa* (September 14–26), reach out to Jesse or Jessica Silber.

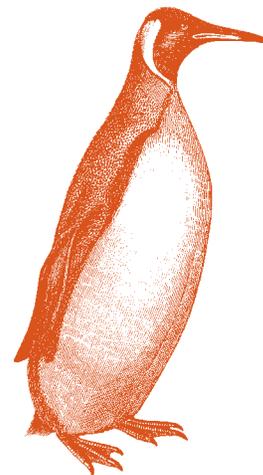


◆ UNEXPECTED WONDERS SIX

Jennine Cohen: *The unexpected high point of my recent llama trek in Argentina was the spontaneous visit I had with a family living in a remote area of the Andes outside of Salta. That, and meeting a family of fifth-generation winemakers!*

◆ UNEXPECTED WONDERS SEVEN

Sabrina Middleton: *I went to Antarctica for the penguins, and I did see many adorable species of the bird, but I was most surprised and delighted by the icebergs. The icebergs of white, gray, and blue and the immense size of the icebergs and surrounding scenery were awe-inspiring.*



(ICE) BREAKING NEWS: ARCTIC SAVINGS
AND NEW ANTARCTICA VOYAGE

◆ UNEXPECTED
WONDERS EIGHT

Wen Minkoff: *I went to East Africa for the spectacular wildlife and tribal cultures, but the food was an unanticipated highlight. As a vegetarian who is also a bit of a foodie, I was delighted by fresh, gorgeously presented meals that were often farm-to-table.*

◆ UNEXPECTED
WONDERS NINE

Amanda McKee: *When I finally saw them in person, Alaska's mountains and fjords were just as glorious as I'd dreamed. But I never imagined I'd get so close to brown bears. Lots of brown bears. After our pilot-guide flew us by bush plane into the wilderness, we spent an unbelievable four hours on foot watching some 50 grizzlies graze on grass, dig for clams, snooze in meadows, pounce on swimming salmon, and romp around in mud. And we lived to tell the tale!*



If you've been feeling the pull of the North Pole, our Urs Hofmann has good news about our cruise to the top of the globe: "The required hotel and charter package (\$1895) is complimentary (while space lasts)." He goes on to explain that this expedition is by far the safest way to get to the North Pole and that "by sailing aboard a powerful nuclear ice-breaker, you're practically assured of reaching your goal." Along the way are helicopter and Zodiac excursions to watch for polar bears and walrus. *The North Pole* (June 13–26 and June 24–July 7) starts and ends in Helsinki, Finland's design-savvy capital.



If, however, your proclivity is for the polar opposite, Urs suggests our new Antarctica voyage, *Emperor Penguins of Snow Hill* (October 6–19, October 18–31, October 30–November 12, and November 11–24). "This trip hasn't been offered in years," he rhapsodizes. "You get to visit an emperor penguin rockery that few people on earth have seen in person." You travel aboard the ice-cracking *Kapitan Khlebnikov*, taking advantage of its two helicopters and fleet of Zodiacs to experience the endearing birds, as well as seals, whales, and ice formations. Witnessing penguins in their home environment—chicks huddling at their parents' feet and playful adults tobogganing across the ice—is one of the more spirit-lifting sights we can imagine. Urs is the one to call.

NEW SHANGRI-LA DISCOVERED IN COLOMBIA

Americas passionista Jennine Cohen, who loves to venture off the trodden path, is back from Colombia with exciting news: "I found a mountain paradise!" She stumbled upon an enchanting, whitewashed colonial town in the Andes called Barichara, home to painters, sculptors, poets, writers, and many indigenous folks. No American tourists are to be seen, and the cuisine is excellent, thanks to the town's setting within the "agricultural breadbasket" of Santander. In the morning, the mountains fill with a graceful mist and exotic birdcalls, and then the sun breaks through to shine down on wonderfully deserted hiking and mountain-biking trails. You can raft a nearby river, amble through thriving farms, and visit an archaeological museum with "one of the best collections of artifacts on the continent . . . The whole place feels like one big secret!"

Having tracked down lovely local properties to host our guests, Jennine is eager to introduce travelers to the wonders of Barichara on tailor-made *Flavors of Colombia* journeys (offered year-round). You can also wander Bogotá's car-free streets on Sundays, spend time with experts at historic haciendas in the Coffee Triangle, watch for red howler monkeys in coastal Tayrona National Park, or take salsa lessons in seaside Cartagena, followed—or fueled—by a Caribbean rum tasting. Give Jennine a ring to hear about other insider activities and options, including forays in neighboring Panama, another underappreciated destination.

MONGOLIA AWAITS: PRIVATE JOURNEY WITH TOP GUIDE

Raised in Mongolia as part of a nomadic family, Ishee Battulga has a marvelous gift for immersing travelers in the culture and natural beauty of his vast, little-developed, sparsely populated land. “Our adventure was so special because of the connections that Ishee personally had with people,” writes traveler Connie D. “Everyone seemed to know him, and we were invited everywhere.” We’re chuffed that this fantastic, decade-veteran GeoEx trip leader is at the ready to guide our travelers on Custom Trips (offered May–September).

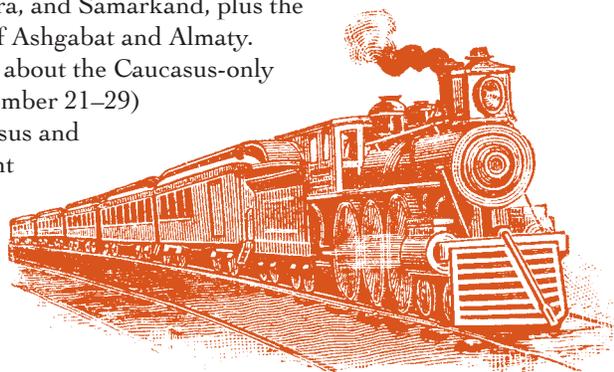
Mongolia Explorer is excellent for unplugging in nature and experiencing a different way of life. Staying in the best hotels and cushiest *ger* camps available, you’ll wander, hike, and horseback ride through the forested mountain wilderness of Lake Khovsgol, the glorious, open skies of the Gobi Desert, and the Yol Valley in the Altai Mountains, where bearded vultures soar with wingspans of up to nine feet. In July, you can catch Naadam, the country’s largest festival, whose thrilling archery, wrestling, and horse-racing competitions are best appreciated at a celebration in the countryside. Our Mongolia maven Tina Liadis has much more to share.

CULTURAL CROSSROADS BY RAIL

“Forward-thinking but proud of tradition, [Georgia] is a country of ancient recipes cooked up in tucked-away taverns where toastmasters raise glasses of spirits to honour heroes old and new,” writes Lonely Planet on its 2018 Best in Travel List. Longtime fans of this south Caucasus nation, we are pleased that it’s getting attention, but its neighbors—are captivating blends of cultures, languages, religions, and landscapes—are worth exploring, too, as we do on our *Caravans and Conquerors* three- to six-country rail epic.

While in Georgia, you’ll meander Tbilisi’s web of winding alleyways past its 13th-century castle and 5th-century cathedral, and visit Mtskheta, a picturesque UNESCO-listed city with astounding cliff-top churches. You’ll discover a 6th-century BCE cave city, nod to Joseph Stalin’s birthplace, and study the long history of viticulture in the beautiful Kakheti region. You’ll also venture through Armenia and Azerbaijan, learning why locals call Dilijan “Little Switzerland” and gaining insight into Baku’s medieval walled town and Gobustan’s prehistoric rock engravings.

If you’re up for further explorations of cultural crossroads, you can jet over the Caspian Sea and continue rolling through Central Asia, spending time in the sensational Silk Road cities of Khiva, Bukhara, and Samarkand, plus the modern streets of Ashgabat and Almaty. To find out more about the Caucasus-only departure (September 21–29) or the full Caucasus and Central Asia jaunt (September 21–October 6), contact Urs Hofmann.



◆ UNEXPECTED WONDERS TEN

Errin Mixon: *I have seen Angkor Wat, the pyramids of Egypt, and Bhutan’s famous Tiger’s Nest monastery—all architectural marvels. And yet I never fell in love with a building until I met the Taj Mahal. On first sight, my heart actually swelled. I wanted to lay my hands on its marble, to embrace its grand dome, to gaze at it all day.*

◆ UNEXPECTED WONDERS ELEVEN

Corinne Edwards: *Though I was thrilled to see Iran’s amazing historical sites (like Persepolis and the Tomb of Hafez), what I came back raving about was how incredibly friendly and hospitable the local people are. It was such a heart-opening experience, and so different from what the media portrays.*



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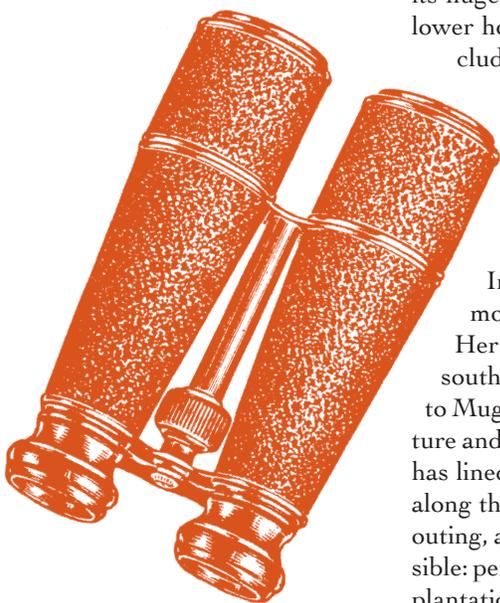
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INDIA: COUNTRY OR CONTINENT?

India is more than a repository of civilizations. Its tumultuous and romantic history has shaped it into a lively, ever-changing mosaic. Considering its huge diversity of politics (up to 35 parties are represented in India's lower house), languages (the country officially counts 22), religions (including Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity), and landscapes (from tropical lowlands to snowcapped Himalayan peaks), it's no wonder a 2017 *Economist* article pondered, "Is India a Country or a Continent?" and examined how it is "more integrated than the European Union, but less unified than the United States."



This fascinating collection of colors and contrasts inspired our India guru Tina Liadis to craft a new Custom Trip that can accommodate travelers as varied in interest as the country is in character. Her sample itinerary—just a starting point—takes you from north to south, exploring magnificent forts and opulent palaces that date back to Mughals and Maharajahs, and investigating traditional Dravidian culture and winding Arabian Sea waterways. In signature GeoEx style, Tina has lined up insider looks at key sights, such as a private *aarti* ceremony along the Ganges, a sunrise visit to the Taj Mahal, a Mumbai street food outing, and a cooking class in Chennai. Many other combinations are possible: perhaps Munnar (surrounded by brilliantly green tea and cardamom plantations), the UNESCO cave sites of Ajanta and Ellora, Odisha (home to 62 indigenous tribes), and Kanha National Park, a fantastic place to spot Bengal tigers. *Colorful India* journeys are best undertaken between October and March. Contact Tina for tailored options. (Train buffs might like to check out our new *Trans-India Express*, a 15-day foray from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal via Darjeeling.)



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.