

Dear Everyone

After being home for about two weeks, my Spain and Portugal tour seems like a distant memory already! There's a short report on that tour later in this newsletter. Meanwhile it's onwards and upwards for my Jordan and Egypt tour that leaves on November 3. Then there's a break for all of us over Christmas before I head into the Northern Hemisphere winter for my epic Scandinavia tour at the end of January.

2024 Tour Updates:

Scandinavia and also **Vietnam and Cambodia** (in March-April) are both full.

Central America (Costa Rica, Guatemala and Panama) April 30 – May 21. We are very close to making this tour a confirmed departure, but it would be great to have just two or three more people book, especially given the ongoing pressure from overseas operators and hotels for early deposits. The full itinerary is available now, just contact Moray and she will email you a copy straight away. I don't anticipate repeating this tour again, so if you want to get a true flavour of this region that is still little visited by New Zealanders do come along. It's not always a straightforward place to get to or travel through on your own, so this is your chance to explore the stunning history, landscapes and diverse cultures of this thoroughly enjoyable part of the world.

The Atlantic Provinces of Canada (Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island) June 18 – July 09. The itinerary for this tour is now out and we do need to confirm this departure soon, again because of pressure from operators and hotels. As with Central America this is a very complex itinerary to organise yourself, with its combinations of short ferry rides, an overnight ferry trip and road connections. But on the tour, you just have to relish the amazing landscapes, layers of history and extremely welcoming locals.

Over the years I've discovered that, sometimes, because a country or region is not well known, when there aren't many tours to the area and there is little written or filmed about it, people can be reluctant to go there with me! But that is actually one of the joys of exploring somewhere that is not so obviously on the travel map and that is definitely the case with this part of Canada.



There's much more to this region than its undoubted spectacular scenery.

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We will learn about the First Nations people, the Mi'kmaq, who have lived here for more than 4000 years and originally used hieroglyphics for their written language; and also the Acadians, people of French descent who came to the region in the 17th and 18th centuries. They were later violently expelled by the English, with some of those who survived taking refuge in Louisiana.

The Atlantic provinces are also famed for their food – the seafood is some of the best in the world, especially lobster and shellfish, including scallops and oysters. But there is also wild salmon and other fish; excellent beef, ice cream, baking and desserts featuring locally grown berries and even Acadian cinnamon rolls known as nuns' farts!

This is going to be a tour of real discovery but at the same time where accommodation, cuisine and language are familiar enough to make for very relaxed, easy travel. If you'd like to know more, do email Moray for a copy of the full itinerary.

Zambia, Botswana and Namibia (Sept 01 – Sept 26) – see the main newsletter feature below!

Southern India – November 2024

Flight schedules and hotel availability and prices are finally coming online so the full itinerary for this tour will be available early next year, if not later this year. The tour will include Chennai, Pondicherry, the little known but astonishing Chettinad region, Unesco World Heritage Hindu temples, the Kerala backwaters and the spectacular Maharajah of Mysore's palace, among so much more.

Feature tour

Zambia, Botswana and Namibia (Sept 01 – Sept 26)

By the time you are reading this, my African itinerary will either be available to send to you or be just a few days away from being ready.

Space on this tour is very definitely limited as it features several deluxe ensuite camping areas just for us and going out on safari in just one or two vehicles. There are also very, very limited single occupancy rooms (or tents!) available. This is another tour that would be exceptionally complicated to organise on your own and massively more expensive if you're not in a small group. And you have me, who absolutely loves Africa, along to keep everything running smoothly.



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My tour begins in Zambia where we will spend three nights in one of Africa's top wildlife parks, South Luangwa, but one that is far less known than parks in Kenya and Tanzania. Walking and night safaris are a special feature of this park.



Here's an excerpt of an article I wrote about a typical safari outing from this camp:

South Luangwa has a relatively healthy population of lions and other predators so when this was first suggested by Dora we contemplated who might be stalking whom. We were assured that every walking party is accompanied by an armed scout and the park guides are so familiar with their territory they tend to know where certain animal species tend to frequent.

We didn't encounter any big cats but became encircled by a dozen-strong family group of giraffes. These were Thornicrofts, Zambia's own sub-species, which is found only in this part of the country.

There are only about 800 of this sub-species in the wild and this is the only place to see them. You can recognise a Thornicroft giraffe by its star-shaped markings, which extend all the way down its legs.

While we stood entranced, two young male giraffes were play-fighting, or necking – thwacking their long necks in improbable angles against their opponent's. Any second I expected to hear the crack of a broken neck. Giraffe babies, a mere two metres tall, gazed unperturbed at us from over the top of thickets of thorn bush.

Apparently encountering a tower of giraffes like this was a rare sight, as even our guide and escort were taking photos of the giraffes on their mobiles.

Later the same afternoon we were back in the jeep again, this time for a combined afternoon-evening safari drive. Su, our driver, took us into the park to a lookout point on top of a bank overlooking the river. Dozens of hippos lay semi-submerged in the shallows, nostrils flaring and emitting the occasional snort. Drifting past them like knobby logs of wood were the crocodiles. Clearly the storks - the saddle-billed with their red and yellow bills and the maribous with their rather sinister bare pink heads - did not consider themselves on the crocodiles' dinner menus. They strode through the shallows close by, every now and then taking to the air, a little ponderously; not surprisingly for birds that are about 1.5 metres tall.

We weren't the only things watching the wildlife on the riverbed. Two lions that had been asleep full stretch in the sand were waking up ready for a night's hunting. It was now almost dark and one of the lions stalked lazily through our headlights, pausing briefly to glance at the jeep with its open sides. He was less than a metre away.

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The Zambian part of the tour ends with two nights at the awe-inspiring Victoria Falls, truly one of the world's greatest natural wonders. We then move into **Botswana** where we will set out on safaris in Chobe National Park, which is famed for its huge number of elephants, and among the watery wilderness that is the Okavango Delta. Seeing an elephant swimming across one of the many channels here is one of my indelible memories of the Okavango, as was being gently paddled through the network of channels, where spectacularly coloured birds swooped and dived for fish.



Our third country is **Namibia** where the emphasis is very much on some of the most amazing landscapes in Africa, especially its giant sand dunes and sweeping deserts. We will meet the local people, the Damara, and visit the largest and most important concentration of rock art in all of Africa. But we're not neglecting the wildlife in Namibia because we are spending time in Etosha, which is regarded as Namibia's greatest wildlife park. One of its key features is a vast salt plain so large it can be seen from space. The waterholes in the park attract thousands of animals in the dry season (which is when we are there).

I cannot say enough about the wonders of sleeping (in great safety and with ensuite bathrooms!) in a tent while on safari. To lie there and here the sounds of Africa at night is one of the greatest experiences ever. When I'm ever asked that, if I could go back to just one place on earth, I think it would be to be on safari in Africa. My husband Derek says the same thing.

Tour report

Spain and Portugal, September 2023

There were 14 of us on this tour, which started in Barcelona, Spain, and ended with a farewell lunch in Porto, Portugal (before we took a fast train back to the capital, Lisbon, to begin our onward flights).

Although it was hot in places such as Seville, temperatures definitely cooled off in Portugal and by enjoying some long lunches or siesta times, especially in Andalucia, we dodged the heat of the day as much as we could. Our hotels were chosen to be right in the historic centre of the cities we visited. It meant sometimes we had to get to the front door on foot rather than by bus but equally restaurants, cafes, shops and historic sites were right there!

The rewards for a few sweaty moments were many! Our visit to La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona was a bucket list even for me and for many other tour members and did not disappoint.

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The exterior of this Gaudi masterpiece is audacious, stupendous and in places quite bonkers! But the interior, with the afternoon sun igniting the stained-glass windows was absolutely sublime. We all staggered out of Madrid's Prado museum reeling for the riches of art and in awe of one of the best museum guides I've ever encountered. Some of us recovered with a cold beer with the locals in the nearby El Retiro Park.

I used trains as much as I could on this tour, so we all became quite adept at getting on and off highspeed trains with our luggage! Apart from an exciting few minutes embarking and disembarking, the train travel was very relaxing!



Andalucia (Southern Spain) was a heady mix of Moorish architecture, tapas bars and even crystal-clear views of the Rock of Gibraltar and Morocco!



We enjoyed a relaxed day off in the spectacularly situated town of Ronda, staying in a wonderful heritage hotel with everyone's room different and furnished with antiques.

Lisbon was heaving with cruise passengers and other travellers when we arrived but things had calmed down by day two. We got used to avoiding being flattened by the famous yellow trams and had a wonderful day out around the town of Sintra with its flamboyant mansions. Our lunch that day was right beside the Atlantic Ocean, at a beach bar with mostly local patrons.

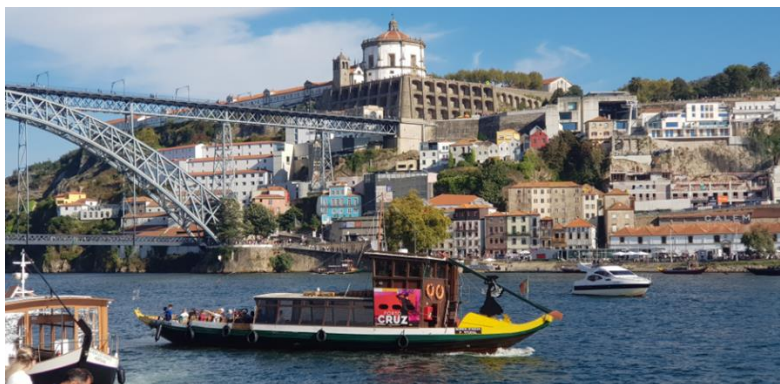
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I think many of us were blown away by the beauty of Lisbon's Jeronimos Monastery cloister. The guide was a bit bemused by so many of us being transfixed by the gargoyles around the cloister spewing out water after a sudden downpour! Most of us had never seen gargoyles doing what they had been made to do.



Porto is a beautiful town, albeit somewhat hilly for walking around! We ended the tour with a scenic rail journey alongside the Douro River and a farewell lunch at a winery on a terrace overlooking the river. Accompanied by the winery's own vintages we ate our way through fantastic breads, cheeses and cured meats, demolished partridge or salmon pies and finished off with almond pie. All made on the premises.



We did a lot of walking, a great deal of eating, a little tasting of local wines and learned so much about the region's culture, architecture and history along the way and I think we all had a wonderful time on the Iberian Peninsula.

On the home front

Derek and I have just celebrated our 26th wedding anniversary, and we also hosted about 25 people at our house for a joint birthday celebration for Derek and Rachel recently. Meanwhile Natey is now enrolled ready to start school next year. He learnt to ride a two-wheeler on Derek's birthday and his sister Zoe at only 18 months is now working out how to ride a scooter as she clearly wants to keep up with him! Georgie is now walking as well and seems to have got the climbing bug from dad Jono. She certainly didn't get that from her grandmother!

I'll be back with the next newsletter after my tour to Jordan and Egypt.



Very best wishes

Jill