

GEOEX

Ultima Thule

JOURNAL OF THE FARTHEST PLACES

30 Years of Trekking Around Everest

This May marks the 60th anniversary of the first climb of Mount Everest by Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary. In honor of the occasion, we asked our longtime leader and veteran trekking guide Vassi Koutsaftis — who has led adventurous folks to all three Everest Base Camps and, as far as we know, is the only Westerner to have been to the Kangshung Face of Everest (the east face from Tibet) ten times — to reflect on his trekking experiences around the fabled mountain.

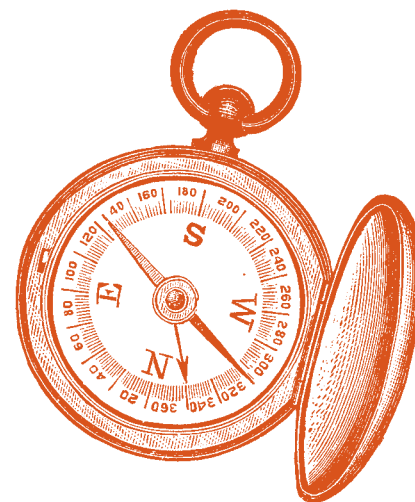
I remember the first time I saw Everest. It was February of 1983. I was trekking to the Nepalese Base Camp, seeing some of the world's most impressive peaks, when suddenly the whole of Mount Everest appeared. The other peaks seemed like midgits in comparison. I couldn't believe the size of it, the sheer immensity of the mountain, its beauty, and that I was there all alone. There was snow all around, and the day was sunny and glorious.

On that trek, I climbed from Lukla to Base Camp, staying in teahouses along the way. With the exception of an Australian couple coming down while I was headed up, no other trekkers were on the trail. My only companion was a dog that followed me all the way from Tengboche, a tiny monastery at about the trek's midpoint, to Base Camp and back again, playing in the snow and eating my leftovers. (I'm not so fond of dal, the local dish of spiced pureed lentils, and food those days was dal, rice, and more dal.)

In the spring of 1984 I found myself going back and paying the price for being too relaxed about altitude sickness. I hadn't had problems the year before, but this time was different. I got very ill in the middle of the night at Lobuche, the last camp before Base Camp, and found myself all alone, stumbling like a drunken man back down the extremely difficult, cold, dangerous descent to Pheriche (today this village is home to the Himalayan Rescue Association clinic). I told myself then that I would never do this again, yet here I am almost 30 years later and I keep returning.

In the early 1990s, when expeditions began flocking to the Nepalese Base Camp, my friend Tom Cole suggested exploring the far quieter Kangshung Face, the east face, accessible from Tibet. It was — and still is — too remote and hard to get to for most trekkers. I was instantly hooked. This trek has truly the most breathtaking mountain scenery around. You can see all of Everest, from the base to the summit, from 17,000 to some 29,000 feet, along with other incredible peaks. You're in the middle of stunning mountain views and Everest is in your face. (By the way, in the

(continued on page 2)



◆ IN THIS ISSUE

30 Years of Trekking Around Everest
[page 1]

Celebrating Everest and Great Travel
Writing with Jan Morris [page 3]

31 Years, 18 Months, 15 Countries
[page 3]

Notes [pages 3–8]

Memorable Moments in Family Travel
[pages 2–7]

54

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MEMORABLE MOMENTS
IN FAMILY TRAVEL

From rambunctious rickshaw rides through the Thamel District to messily devouring honey crêpes outside the Cave of the Seven Sleepers, we've created some of our most memorable (and often mirthful) travel moments with family. We asked the GeoEx staff to share their favorites.

◆ MEMORABLE MOMENTS
IN FAMILY TRAVEL ONE

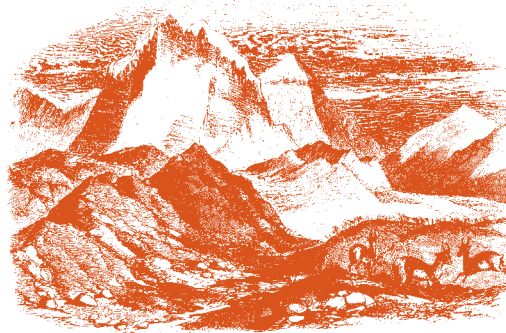
Kirk Uhrlaub: My family and I ascended from the sunny beaches near Kona, Hawaii, to the hills of Waimea for an adventure on horseback. The hotel concierge mentioned that it might rain, but what we got was an hour-long ride in one of the most outstanding downpours I've ever seen. We loved it, and realized at that moment that we'd arrived as a traveling family.



(continued from page 1)

category of breathtaking mountain scenery, Snow Lake and Baltoro in Pakistan take a close second.)

I've now led the Kangshung trek ten times and still want to go back. I remember not just the landscapes but also the wonderful people I've taken there. They've become friends. You share a lot while you're on a trek. You realize what's important in life and learn a great deal about yourself. You see the purest of night skies. One night a group of us sat out counting satellites and shooting stars. There are funny memories, too, like the night we woke to see our toilet tent—still fully assembled—running down the hill. Two villagers had just picked it up and run away in the moonlight.



Over the decades, trekking around Mount Everest has become a little more comfortable. Rather than looking forward to the end-of-the-journey shower (three or four weeks later), today's expeditions often have water to wash with during the trek. And it's not just dal and rice anymore. In fact, if you want dal and rice, you have to ask for it, and the cook usually gives you a skeptical look. Salad, pasta, pizza, and, believe it or not, sushi with wasabi and soy sauce are on trek menus. Though it's nice not to have to face dal and rice for every meal, old-timers like me can't help feeling a little nostalgic for simpler times on the mountain.

That said, trails are cleaner today than when I started trekking. People are more conscious about garbage and plastic: they're either burned or carried out. Food used to be prepared over a wood fire; now the cooks use gas canisters. Expeditions have to pay a cleanup fee, and the requirement to pack litter out is not only better for the environment, it also means there's more work for porters and Sherpas. The porters, who used to be in the snow and ice with just flip-flops and whatever they could scrounge to keep warm, now are at least supplied with basic shoes and cold-weather gear.

Technology has also altered the trekking experience. Nowadays your cell phone will probably work on the North Face of Everest (the Rongbuk) in Tibet. And at the Nepalese Base Camp, there's a makeshift internet café—the connection speed is nothing to write home about, but imagine sending an e-mail from an Everest Base Camp! Today trekkers and climbers can make live broadcasts, perhaps offering the folks on the couch at home a taste of climbing Mount Everest. But nothing will ever replace the real trek and the exhilaration that comes with overcoming tiredness, biting cold, and altitude sickness to see the sun rise and paint Mount Everest in gold—the feeling of total freedom.

*To learn more about GeoEx's spirit-lifting treks,
please call us at 888-755-9019 or visit GeoEx.com/treks.*

Celebrating 60 Years of Everest and Great Travel Writing with Jan Morris

Speaking of Mount Everest, GeoEx is pleased to be hosting an event featuring acclaimed author Jan Morris, who, as a correspondent for *The Times*, accompanied the first expedition to reach the summit on May 16, 1953. In conversation with her longtime friend (and our beloved blog editor) Don George, Jan will discuss the historic ascent 60 years ago, as well as some of her most memorable adventures and stories from more than a half century of thrilling exploration. We hope you'll join us in New York City on May 8. Proceeds from this evening affair benefit the American Himalayan Foundation. For more information and to purchase tickets, please visit GeoEx.com/ut.

31 Years, 18 Months, 15 Countries

World travelers are often collectors of little-known facts, so we thought we'd share a couple from the GeoEx world. You probably already know that our travel maestros take enormous pleasure in tailor-making extraordinary Custom Trips for our guests. (We've been at it for 31 years and are rather proud of having choreographed some highly unusual adventures.) But how long would you guess our longest Custom Trip lasted? And how many countries would you imagine any one of our trips touched? Okay, so the headline gives it away: 18 months and 15 countries. All filled with special-access visits and personalized experiences. We're at the ready to handcraft your next adventure. For inspiration and starting points, we recommend that you peruse our favorite sample itineraries at GeoEx.com/featured-trips.

Notes

EXPLORING THE SILK ROAD

We at GeoEx are especially fond of using writer William Hazlitt's oft-quoted line, "In traveling, we visit *names* as well as places," because we ourselves so strongly believe it. The Silk Road is one such name. Merely a mention of this fabled interlinking trading route—which stretches thousands of miles across, around, and throughout Europe and Asia and dips its long fingers into the lands of North and East Africa—sets even the most-well-traveled minds aflutter. Not just because of its legendary status, but also due to the incredible places and sights it connects: Moscow and its imperial grandeur . . . the daunting Karakum, one of the world's fiercest deserts . . . Urumchi, the most landlocked city on earth.

We've been lucky enough to be exploring this unparalleled network of commerce for decades and can assure you: it's every bit as spectacular as it sounds. But we also know that undertaking the Silk Road is no small feat, which is why we offer trips to suit all kinds of travelers. Our 20-day *Silk Road: A Journey Through Time* (September 7–26) travels across three countries—China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan—delving deeply into the most famous Silk Road cities. As we go, we explore magnificent museums,

(continued on page 4)



◆ MEMORABLE MOMENTS IN FAMILY TRAVEL TWO

Nicole Peelle: *My brother and I once spent a few weeks on a sheep ranch in southern Australia. At night we chased 'roos from the back of a truck and, when nature called, we ventured to the outside loo with a flashlight to look for poisonous snakes before sitting down. Needless to say, we also ate our life's worth of mutton and bonded not only as brother and sister, but as only two Yanks out of their element in the Aussie outback could.*

◆ MEMORABLE MOMENTS IN FAMILY TRAVEL THREE

Adam Vaught: *When my mother (after much prodding) came to visit me in Cambodia, I took her to my favorite local dive for dinner. I remember proudly watching her eat boh boh, a traditional soup made with, among other things, coagulated chicken blood. Naturally, it wasn't until after she finished that I told her the ingredients list.*

◆ MEMORABLE MOMENTS
IN FAMILY TRAVEL FOUR

Tina Liadis: *When I was ten years old, my four siblings and I traveled by train with our mother from Athens to Copenhagen. Some must have thought my mother absolutely crazy to travel with five children on a three-day journey, but we never got bored. Forty years later, I still remember the many wonderful people we met and interesting places we saw as we traveled through Greece, Yugoslavia, Austria, Germany, and Denmark. To this day I love traveling by train.*



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

(continued from page 5)

shrines, grottoes, and markets. For those who consider comfort and ease just as important as unforgettable scenery, we offer our 21-day *Silk Road Aboard the Golden Eagle and Shangri-La Express* (departures in September and October — call for details) from Moscow to Beijing (as well as a 13-day abridged version that ends in Kazakhstan). Imagine rolling along through open fields and in sight of towering mountains en route to Dunhuang's Cave of a Thousand Buddhas and China's Great Wall without having to repack your bags: it's your very own hotel on wheels.



TWO WAYS TO TACKLE ANTARCTICA

Vast ice sheets, towering bergs that jut into the sky like expertly chiseled sculptures, and a bevy of unusual wildlife whose playful antics offer a sharp contrast to the incredible stillness of their surroundings: Antarctica is a last great wilderness, a continent whose sheer beauty and remoteness are endlessly mind-blowing. Of course, traveling here isn't like planning a quick weekend getaway, so we're delighted to hear from our travelers that the expertly run cruises we arrange do the place justice. D. Hall, for example, recently returned saying, "We went in with high expectations, [and] the trip definitely met them. . . . The entire experience was special."

Our 10- to 22-day *Explorer's Antarctica* (offered November–February) sets forth aboard a comfortable, ice-strengthened ship from Ushuaia, Argentina (on South America's southernmost tip), complete with a highly skilled and exceedingly knowledgeable team of naturalists, historians, and geologists poised to offer insight into everything from the habits of native leopard seals to the effects of climate change. While crossing the formidable Drake Passage, we're treated to the soothing company of frolicking dolphins and diving albatrosses, soon emerging into a wondrous floating garden of pack ice and icebergs. Reaching our destination, we spend as much time as possible on the Antarctic Peninsula and the eye-popping South Shetlands, going ashore by inflatable Zodiac boats to hike, photograph, and even camp or ski.

Starting this year, we're also offering an entirely new way to explore the White Continent: *Antarctica Express: Fly and Cruise*. This 8- or 10-day tour (offered December–February) is perfect for travelers with limited time but ample desire to discover this pristine landscape. For more details, give Urs Hofmann a call.

MONGOLIA: LAND OF ANOTHER ERA

There's nothing quite like Mongolia's vast Gobi Desert, its large swaths of rolling plains dotted with felt-covered *gers*, and wandering nomads with a caravan of horses, camels, and goats in tow to make you feel like you've stepped back in time. On our 18-day *Mongolian Odyssey* (August 10–27), we embark on a fabulous touring and trekking adventure across this fabled land, encountering an unexpectedly wide variety of landscapes, from vast sand dunes to snowy peaks, from forested enclaves to the oceanic steppe. We begin with sightseeing in Mongolia's pulsating capital, Ulaanbaatar, before setting out to experience some of the country's unique treasures: the stocky and handsome *takhi*, or Przewalski horses, of Khustain Nuruu National Park—the only truly wild horses in the world; the evocative remains of the old capital of the Mongol Empire, Karakorum; and the alluring Khangai Mountains, where we commence a moderate, yak-supported, 4-day trek through untouched, wooded valleys dotted with turquoise highland lakes. This trip is filled with the kinds of moments sure to take a front seat among your most cherished memories, including a day exploring Khongoriin Els (Singing Sand Dunes) on camelback and time spent in the hospitality and home of a nomadic family, dining on dishes like *horhog* (a stew of mutton and vegetables cooked with red-hot rocks) and getting to know their enthralling culture. To get more information on Mongolia trips, Michael Steigerwald is your man.



TREKKING TO PERU'S LOST TREASURES

"I will never address another human without remembering the grace of the Andean people; I will never sleep again without drifting to some lofty terrace in the Andes, majesty and beauty unmatched." So wrote one of our travelers to Peru not long ago. We feel much the same, and we're intent on sharing this captivating country in exceptional ways. One of our favorites: our 15-day *Choquequirao: Trek to a Lost World* (June 29–July 13 and August 31–September 14), which combines cultural exploring with a rigorous mule-supported trek, and travels not only to fabled must-see Machu Picchu but also to Choquequirao, a lesser-known, hugely spectacular lost city that's tougher to reach and wonderfully free of visitors. To get to this phenomenal Incan outpost, perched on a promontory nearly

(continued on page 6)



◆ MEMORABLE MOMENTS IN FAMILY TRAVEL FIVE

Amanda McKee: *While exploring the Western Cape of South Africa, my family stopped at an ostrich farm in Oudtshoorn. Little did we know we'd be offered the chance to ride one of those enormous birds. My Aunt Sandy, in her sixties at the time, astonished us all by climbing aboard—in a skirt, no less. I'll never forget watching her being carried inelegantly along, holding on for dear life and laughing hysterically.*

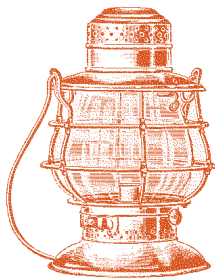
◆ MEMORABLE MOMENTS IN FAMILY TRAVEL SIX

Alexis Bowen: *While trying to find a relative in a rural town in Donegal, Ireland, our family was advised to seek help in the local pub. The small town did not have street names or numbered addresses, so the bartender gave us these directions: "Go down the street and make a right at the brown house, go up a hill, down a hill, up a hill, down a hill, turn left, then bumpy-bumpy bump, turn right, go to the end of that road, and you will run into Shay's house." We left the pub, then counted the hills and the bumps in the road 'til we finally met our long-lost great-uncle.*

◆ MEMORABLE MOMENTS
IN FAMILY TRAVEL SEVEN

Brady Binstadt: *Watching my mother and wife step far outside of their comfort zones in Vietnam.*

We were on a short cruise in Halong Bay and neither had a swimsuit. But you're only in Halong Bay once, so they sidled up to the rail wearing their T-shirts and shorts and, with big, courageous smiles, jumped in.



◆ MEMORABLE MOMENTS
IN FAMILY TRAVEL EIGHT

Kai Roath: *My father and I spent a week hiking to desolate dolmens and standing stones on the northern coast of Wales. I will always remember us laughing and cursing as we searched fruitlessly through the misty fog and flocks of sheep for the fabled Druid's Circle on the headland of Penmaenmawr.*

I felt like Tuco searching in a frenzy for the buried treasure in the famous scene of The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.

(continued from page 5)

6000 feet above the roaring Apurimac River, we spend multiple days off the beaten path, trekking across mountain passes and through cloud forests, stumbling upon remote villages, and bedding down in tents en route. If trekking isn't for you, our 9-day *Land of the Incas* tour (September 21–29) is a superb option for exploring Peru: day hikes amble through the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu, and nights are spent in comfy, atmospheric hotels.

Although Peru's breathtaking natural beauty is here to stay, the same doesn't hold true for Inca Trail permits, which go quickly. It's a good idea to book your trip early; call Jennine Cohen for details.



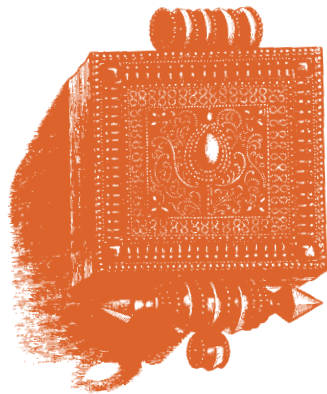
TRIBUTE TO TURKEY

Turkey practically exudes warmth and hospitality from its marble ruins and white-sand beaches. It's also one of those rare places where many of the world's major influences collide: an intermixing of Eastern and Western culture 5,000 years in the making. While we at GeoEx haven't been around *quite* that long, we do have more than three decades of experience in this amazing land, learning its customs and accompanying travelers, and we still jump at the opportunity to share its stunning array of landscapes, locales, and antiquities. Our 14-day *Tribute to Turkey* (April 13–26, May 4–17, September 21–October 4, and October 19–November 1) does just that, relishing all that makes this country so incredibly special. Together we wander through Istanbul's colorful markets, occasionally haggling for exotic spices and hand-knotted carpets; marvel at the relics of ancient Troy and the remains of Assos, perched high on an Aegean hillside; explore magnificently preserved Ephesus, once the Roman Empire's second-largest city; and bask in the fairy landscapes of Cappadocia, a world of fantastically sculpted stone and rock-carved homes, churches, and monasteries.

We also offer plenty of departure dates to fit any schedule. Waiting until the school year is over to travel? Summer, though hot, offers the perfect excuse for afternoon soaking in the island-studded Aegean Sea. Autumn months, in contrast, are a marvelous time to see Istanbul's dazzling domed mosques and preserved palaces unencumbered by heat. Whenever you go, rest assured that the delectable cuisine Turkey is famous for—including vegetable-stuffed dolmas and grilled lamb kabobs—will be waiting. Carey Johnston is ready to get you started.

THE PERFECT TRIO: VIETNAM, LAOS, AND CAMBODIA

Once collectively known as Indochina because of their early Hindu and Chinese cultural and artistic influences, vibrant Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are the ultimate traveler's trifecta. To truly appreciate and understand one of these countries, it helps to experience the others, a fact we've taken into careful consideration while crafting our 16-day journey into the *Heart of Indochina*. Along with a complete cultural immersion that includes the engrossing museums and food-lined alleyways of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Hanoi's French colonial architecture, Luang Prabang's gleaming temples, and breathtaking Angkor (the ancient seat of the Khmer Empire), we'll bask in the beauty of emerald mountains and azure seas, filling up on steaming bowls of *pho* as we go. We set aside an entire day to explore the exceptionally preserved port town of Hoi An—filled with boutique shops bursting with silks, paintings, lacquerware, and embroidered goods; another for cruising among the majestic, craggy, limestone karsts of Halong Bay; and still several more for delving into the vast offerings of Laos' and Cambodia's two most renowned UNESCO World Heritage Sites. When all is said and done, we come away with ample appreciation for each country's multifaceted heritage, modern ways, and gracious people. Tina Liadis is the one to call (departures: November 16–December 1, 2013; January 11–26, 2014; and February 15–March 2, 2014).



INTO, ACROSS, AND BEYOND TIBET

Traveler-writer Fosco Maraini once called Tibet's giant *chorten*, the Kumbum, "a sanctuary not only for the faithful but for the whole of humanity, for the men of all times and all countries who believe in beauty and bow before the mystery of inspiration." We feel this way about Tibet as a whole: a mystical land of spiritualism and enlightenment whose endurance is a testament of strength for us all. That's why for more than a quarter of a century we've been bringing travelers to this remarkable region, introducing them to its unbelievably likable residents and sharing with them Tibet's jaw-dropping Himalayan scenery and array of exquisite temples and monasteries.

On our 12-day *Journey Across Tibet* (September 16–27), you'll experience firsthand what makes this landlocked region so enticing, including its deeply religious culture. Together we explore the Holy City of Lhasa, walking alongside pilgrims at Jokhang Temple and perusing the city's old quarter. We take in Buddhist-inspired *thangka* paintings and geometrically

(continued on page 8)

◆ MEMORABLE MOMENTS IN FAMILY TRAVEL NINE

Jean-Paul Tennant: *My 10- and 11-year-old boys were so enthralled by everything they saw in Kenya that they enthusiastically documented words and pictures in their journals without any prompting from me. One wrote that he had experienced his first kiss: "Her name was Daisy, she was ten feet tall and had a long purple tongue." Daisy was one of the semi-domesticated giraffes we encountered in Nairobi, and my son enjoyably fed her by holding food pellets between his teeth.*



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noted here, please call
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patterned mandalas. Moving on, we feast our eyes on Gyantse’s sensational giant *chorten* and Shigatse’s grand and gilded Tashilunpo Monastery. Then we embark on one of the world’s most breathtakingly dramatic drives, across 15,700-foot Khampa La Pass, skirting aquamarine lakes and icy Trans-Himalayan peaks. Next it’s off to Mount Everest and a visit to the Base Camp from which the early British expeditions of the 1920s and ’30s made their valiant, doomed attempts on the earth’s apex. Finally we reach the bright lights and flurry of activity in Kathmandu, the last chapter of our unforgettable journey. For more information, contact Kirk Uhrlaub.

THE TIME IS NOW FOR CUBA

Intoxicatingly colorful and deeply intriguing, Cuba is a place like no other. Crumbling colonial masterpieces line streets that rumble with ’59 Chevys and pulse with music and hopeful determination. But changes are unfolding, and to experience frozen-in-time Havana and other parts of this fascinating country, we recommend going sooner rather than later. Luckily, our Cuba celebrant, Adam Vaught, has lined up one more eight-day Cuba trip this season (May 18–25).

GeoEx is one of the few travel companies with a people-to-people license to Cuba, Adam explains, and our trips are designed as educational exchanges, deeply immersing our travelers in the country’s culture and history. We get to know locals in colorful Havana; talk with historians, students, dancers, and artists; and dine on such homemade treats as *ropa vieja con moros y cristianos* (a shredded beef dish) at family-run *paladares*. Then we’ll set out for the countryside to learn about a rural community project, explore a lush valley, and experience life on a family tobacco farm in the beautiful, multiethnic town of Viñales. And as Adam points out: “In May, Cuba is relatively free of tourists and temperatures aren’t too hot: it’s the best time of year to go.” He’s standing by to give you the details.



If you’d like more information on any of the trips mentioned in this newsletter, please visit our website, 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.