

GEOEX

Ultima Thule

JOURNAL OF THE FARTHEST PLACES

In Search of the Extraordinary

Some of the most fun we've had in our three decades in the travel business is working with our savvy, endlessly adventurous travelers. Their deep curiosity about the world and excitement to explore it continually tops off our tank of wanderlust. And their particular ideas for travel—in terms of both destinations and experiences—keep us on our toes in a way that we love.

George and Carol Milne, for example, intent on getting to know unfamiliar cultures and wildlife, requested that we devise a multifaceted trip to Ethiopia. They specifically asked us to line up a three-day stay in a walled Muslim town, which we did with pleasure—and some solid groundwork. During their stay in Harar, they slept in a local home, sat with their hosts (who chewed khat late into the day), and went into the fields to meet farmers. When they saw the arduous process of using a bucket to retrieve water from the well, they made a decision. “We headed to town,” George explains, “to barter for a pump and some hose. We delivered them to the well the next day, and all these people arrived. It sort of became an event.”

Later on their Ethiopia journey, while interacting with tribes in the south (another of the Milnes' wishes), they shared tea with a woman in her thatched dwelling. “It's hard to know how old she was,” Carol recounts, “but she was clearly the matriarch of the family. We gave her a little handheld mirror, and she got this enormous smile. She probably didn't get to see herself much!” Before leaving the country, George and Carol walked through the mists of the mountains to find a troop of Gelada baboons, rounding out a unique Ethiopian adventure.

Then there's Christy Becker, who describes herself as “a stay-at-home mom who is never home.” She's always full of ideas about unusual places to travel, destinations with diverse cultures that will open her family's eyes to the greater world. She, her husband, and their 13- and 16-year-old children just returned from Guatemala, where they loved seeing how Guatemalans live, even joining local kids in school and mountain biking on Mayan trails still used by indigenous people.

And there's Fiona Chalom, who says, “I want to get off the beaten path before places change markedly,” and has trusted us to arrange journeys as far afield as North Korea and Papua New Guinea. We'd love to go on about our inspired and inspiring travelers, but alas, space won't allow. We invite you to read more about a special group of them at GeoEx.com/Ambassadors, and as always we encourage you to challenge us with your wildest travel dreams.



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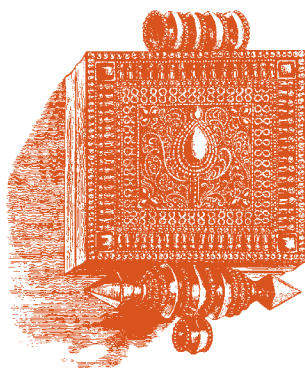
ROUSING BORDER CROSSINGS

"Life is never going to be quite the same again after your passport is stamped," Graham Greene wisely wrote, but as many travelers know, the act of reaching a border post and getting that stamp can be a life-changing adventure all on its own. Let's hear from staff about border crossings they won't soon forget.

◆ ROUSING BORDER CROSSINGS ONE

Sara Barbieri: *Visas on arrival for Pakistan are only available for groups of two or more. Go figure.*

Our Pakistani representatives jumped in to help me, calling in favors, meeting me in the border town of Tashkurgan (China), bobnobbing with officials, writing a letter on the spot to immigration dignitaries that promised to keep me safe in Pakistan, etc. I waited demurely in my own room at Sost immigration, trying to look like no trouble at all, completing the form they gave me. Finally the visa was stuck into my passport, and after it was stamped (another room, more waiting), I grinned, yelped, and pumped my arm in triumph. They all smiled and looked happy, too.



Report from Iran

GeoEx pioneered American travel to Iran, leading our first trip there in 1993. Our returning travelers have invariably enthused about the warmth of the people and the wonders of the sites. GeoEx CEO Jean-Paul Tennant recently visited Iran for the first time. We sat down with him to get his impressions of this alluring, often misunderstood country.

Why did you want to visit Iran? I'd heard that Iran has everything: a rich, layered history that remains in flux to this day; a dynamic, evolving culture that is very different from our own; kind, open people who are as fascinated by us as we are by them; delicious food; spectacular architecture, including some gorgeous mosques; and wonderful artists and craftspeople. Whether or not they've entered Iran with well-informed preconceptions, GeoEx guests have always come back raving about the country. I was very excited to finally have the opportunity to experience it for myself.

Did you have any hesitations about traveling to Iran? Not at all. It felt 100 percent safe at all times.

How did people react to you? They would approach us in a friendly way and ask, "Where are you from? Germany? Australia?" When we answered, they would say, "USA? We love Americans! I have a cousin in Los Angeles! Come to my house—I will feed you dinner!" A few people just came up to us and said "I love you" out of the blue.

What were three highlights of the trip? Esfahan: The vibrant square in this ancient cultural capital was filled with people at all hours. Evenings were especially beautiful, with the mosques and fountains lit up and the horse-drawn carriages circling around.

The artisans and artworks, from copper work to ceramics, textiles, and paintings: The artisans were highly skilled and eager to share their craft, often employing techniques that have been used for centuries.

The Tomb of Hafez in Shiraz: This monument, built in memory of the beloved 14th-century Persian poet Hafez, was brimming with people reading poetry and quotes, a daily ritual that continues into the evening. Our guide told us that Hafez's poetry addresses issues of life and love that are still applicable today. It was tremendously moving to see the people of Shiraz showing their reverence for a poet from their proud past. And the tomb itself is incredibly beautiful.

What was the biggest surprise? Learning that Iranians sometimes enter into marriages with an expiration date: The marriage license has both a start and an end! Iran is very socially conservative, and the only acceptable way for a man and a woman to spend time together is if they are married, even temporarily.

How was your guide? She was outstanding. She clearly loves her country and was full of stories! She talked with us about everyday life for Iranians: work, family, romance, cooking, recreation. And she presented an honest picture. For example, she told us about the time she nearly lost her guide license—and her livelihood—when a member of the "morality police" caught her with her ankles showing in the lobby of the Laleh Hotel in Tehran. All in all, we learned so much from her.

Did you have the opportunity to interact with Iranians? Yes, every day! More than in any other place I have ever been, the locals jumped at the chance to talk with Americans, to share stories, talk politics, and compare experiences in our respective countries. I should add that this was true of the Iranian men. Women still behave (and are treated) quite differently in Iran, but it was nice to see that this might be starting to change, especially with the younger generations in the bigger cities.

What was the biggest lesson you brought home? In addition to all the lessons I learned about the culture, history, and art of Iran, I was reminded how incredibly fortunate we are to live in a country that grants us the personal freedoms that we have in the US.

Based on your trip, what's the best way for travelers to get the most out of a visit to Iran? Because Iranians are so open and friendly and particularly interested in Americans, it is a wonderful place to leave shyness behind and chat openly with the locals. They will respond with unforgettable warmth, enthusiasm, and hospitality.

If you're interested in traveling to Iran, planning ahead is essential. Our fall Treasures of Persia departure is sold out, and space for 2015 trips (April 13–May 1 and September 28–October 16) is going fast.



Mark Your Calendars for Isabel Allende

We are thrilled to have internationally acclaimed novelist Isabel Allende joining us in conversation with our own Wanderlust editor-in-chief, Don George. Winner of Chile's 2010 National Prize for Literature, Isabel describes her fiction as "realistic literature," rooted in her remarkable upbringing, her feminist convictions, and the harsh political realities that shaped her destiny. We hope you'll join us on September 24 in the Bay Area. Check GeoEx.com/Events for more information.

More Chances for In-Demand Trips

Prompted by the interest of GeoEx travelers, we've lined up additional dates for a handful of sold-out and in-demand trips. The new-in-2014 *Untamed Patagonia* was a hit, and we've added departures for December 21–January 2 and January 11–23. We're finalizing a June/July departure for *Pakistan's Hunza Valley*—our own Sara Barbieri just returned from the region and would love to chat about her experiences there. Our popular Cuba, West Africa, and Iran trips are also filling 2015 dates quickly. Give us a call to grab your spot, and keep your eyes out for other 2015 departures in our new catalog—arriving late September.



The arrival of the 2015 catalog is imminent. Request yours (also available as an app) at GeoEx.com/Catalog

◆ ROUSING BORDER CROSSINGS TWO

Alice Howell: *I hiked for seven days on an old salt route in northwest Nepal to cross into Tibet. At the border, the Maoist rebels who had taken the post demanded more money from my guide. When my guide resisted, we were told we would be kept there, and they halfheartedly attempted to shuffle us into a dank, dark holding room. We wound up paying our undue extra and were allowed to cross (via wobbly footbridge) —only to be greeted by hostile Chinese border officials who shook us down for all imagery of the Dalai Lama.*

◆ ROUSING BORDER CROSSINGS THREE

Jesse Knight: *When crossing from Peru to Ecuador, the power went out in the immigration office, turning the room pitch-black. Suddenly I was tackled to the ground by an Ecuadorian guard. When the power returned a few minutes later, the guard stood up, brushed off his clothes, stamped my passport, and let me through.*

Notes

SEPARATING PEOPLE FROM POLITICS IN CUBA

◆ ROUSING BORDER CROSSINGS FOUR

Jessica Silber: *When bussing from Tanzania into Kenya, my two friends and I were the last to receive our passports back from officials at the chaotic border. The process had taken so long that our bus driver left without us, abandoning us but taking our luggage. We were frantic. Luckily, a kind stranger drove us into Kenya, where we caught up with the bus. The other passengers laughed heartily when we three grumpy wazungu reclaimed our seats.*



◆ ROUSING BORDER CROSSINGS FIVE

Brady Binstadt: *In Chile, after driving well over 100 miles on a gravel road (the kind with more tumbleweeds than speed limit signs), there was a little shack with one beat-up truck parked next to it. That was the official border post. We had to wake up the two guards (one Chilean, one Argentine), both in full uniform though it had been 17 days since anyone crossed. When I spotted a Ping-Pong table outside, I foolishly challenged them to a few games. Have you ever played Ping-Pong in the middle of the famously windy Patagonian steppe with someone who has a lot of time on his hands? Well, let's just blame my loss on the home-table advantage.*

It's just 90 miles from Key West to the Cuban coast, but it might as well be 90,000, as difficult as it is to navigate the regulations and ideologies that divide the two. Thanks to our people-to-people license, GeoEx is closing the gap, introducing Americans to this off-limits island in a way that separates the people from the politics.

GeoEx trips reveal Cuba through the eyes of its people. Our Cuba celebrants have sleuthed out the best speakers and most insightful meetings, enabling an open exchange of ideas. And because GeoEx keeps groups small (6–16 guests), we are able to gain greater access. “I can’t get over how mobile it felt to be 9 or 10 people,” explained Nancy B. “The size of the group allowed for a flexibility not possible in larger groups.” Exploring Old Havana with an architect, discussing Cuban culture with a sociology professor, seeing life on a tobacco farm in the Viñales Valley, meeting with officials (with some luck) at the US Interest Section, and hearing from artists in their studios are among the activities in store. Since we’re few in number, each of us can actively participate in the discussions.

Knowing that things in Cuba can (and do) change at any moment, GeoEx has arranged for a skilled trip-leading duo: US-based Tony Pandola and one of our handpicked, best-in-country Cuban guides. Our travelers praise Tony’s knowledge (he is obsessed with Cuban history and revealing the nuances of the shifting perspectives), good humor, and ability to keep things running smoothly. They also appreciate our immensely articulate guides, who open windows into the vitality and hopefulness of the Cuban people and work magic when it comes to securing dinner reservations at the right restaurant or finding that late-night jazz or salsa club.

Phone Jennine Cohen to find out which of our upcoming Scheduled Trips (December 19–26, January 2–9, January 9–16, and once a month from February to May) still have space left.

CALLING FOOD LOVERS, HISTORY BUFFS, AND ARCHAEOLOGY AFICIONADOS

Heart of Indochina has it all. In 16 phenomenal days, we explore the best of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, getting a complete cultural immersion with private museum and gallery visits, insightful stops in heart-stirring temples, some delicious culinary moments, and much scenery gazing.

From the bustling streets of Ho Chi Minh City to the magnificent remains of the Khmer Empire in Angkor Wat, we dip in and out of enduring legacies—and UNESCO World Heritage Sites galore—while meeting the people who put the heart into Indochina. Some of our favorite trip activities that travelers would be hard-pressed to arrange on their own include joining a charismatic Hoi An chef for an introduction to Vietnamese street food and a cooking lesson; exploring the award-winning Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi with Indochina art expert Dr. Mark Rapoport; participating in the time-honored process of rice farming near Luang Prabang; and visiting Conservation d’Angkor (usually closed to the public), which saved Cambodian cultural heritage from the lucrative trade of ancient relics. Errin Mixon, our Indochina passionista, would love to tell you about

plenty more, including the overnight cruise on limestone karst-dotted Halong Bay.

Making *Heart of Indochina* even more attractive—especially for first-time Southeast Asia travelers—we’ve carefully chosen hotels for their charm and luxury, selected guides we know to be extremely knowledgeable and fun, and thrown in extras that other companies don’t, like bottled water, most gratuities, and medical evacuation insurance. The best time of year to see this trifecta is coming right up, and our two Scheduled Trips are timed accordingly: November 8–23 and January 10–25. Errin is the one to call.

AWAKENING THE SOUL IN INDIA

“This is indeed India!” Mark Twain once exclaimed. “The land of dreams and romance, of fabulous wealth and fabulous poverty, . . . of a thousand religions and two million gods, . . . the one land all men desire to see, and having once seen, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for the shows of all the rest of the globe combined.” Like Mr. Twain, we’ve been under the spell of India for decades and have intelligently designed *From Taj to Tiger* to offer a comfortable window into the country’s beauty and mind-bending complexity.

On this 16-day journey, we ponder the changing facades of the Taj Mahal at sunrise, watching light dance across its marble paths and inner chambers, and we savor the grandiose beauty of Udaipur’s majestic palaces and lakes. We make merry in the streets of Narlai, a charming off-the-beaten-path town, during a festival (Diwali, the Festival of Lights, on our October 11–26 trip, and Holi, the Festival of Color, on our February 22–March 9 departure). And we relish once-in-a-lifetime moments, including gliding on the sacred Ganges past locals bathing from ghats and safaring in Ranthambore National Park, where Bengal tigers quietly roam.

Upon returning from India with GeoEx, Shannon B. advised travelers: “Jump into India without worrying too much. . . . It’s an incredible, crazy, wonderful place that has both very hard things to see and deeply beautiful things.” Act fast if you’d like to join our guaranteed October trip. Sara Barbieri is happy to discuss details and options with you.



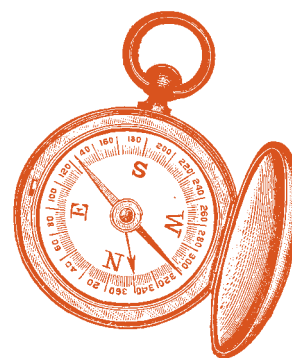
FESTIVAL TIME IN BHUTAN

Villagers flock from the surrounding valleys to attend the Trongsa Tshechu, one of Bhutan’s largest, most significant religious and social gatherings of the year. We love to join in the festivities, taking in firsthand the colorful expressions of the country’s Buddhist culture. Monks in robes

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



◆ ROUSING BORDER CROSSINGS SIX

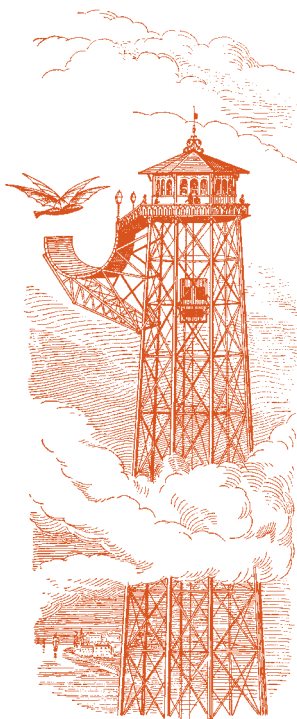
Natalie Crow: *Crossing from Costa Rica to Panama on the Caribbean coast felt like a major adventure. I was let off by my bus on a dirt road in what seemed like the middle of nowhere and had to walk to a tiny, dilapidated shack (aka the border post) to get my stamp. Then I had to pick my way across a “bridge”—basically an ancient, rickety railroad trestle with only a few random planks strewn across it (unattached) to keep you from tumbling into the rushing water below. I walked very carefully and was grateful to arrive in Panama!*



To reach the travel wizards
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◆ ROUSING BORDER
CROSSINGS SEVEN

Jean-Paul Tennant: *Back in the days of a divided Germany, I crossed from West to East with my family to visit relatives trapped on the wrong side. There were watchtowers, machine gun turrets, rows of barbed wire, and East German border guards ripping apart seats and probing gas tanks to make sure no one left with hidden human cargo. The measures East Germany put in place to keep its citizens from leaving made quite an impression on me, even as a young boy.*



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adorned with intricate designs dance, spin, and roll their masks in time with meditative music. The rituals recount stories of Buddhism's arrival in Bhutan with Guru Rinpoche.

This five-day jubilee, featured on the December 28–January 5 edition of *Sacred Festivals of Bhutan*, takes place at the immense Trongsa Dzong, which, with its maze of passageways intersecting courtyards, dozens of temples, and towers, is an exemplary specimen of multilevel *dzong* architecture. Once a powerful fortress, it is now a monastery and administrative complex that serves as headquarters of the local government. During the *tsechu*, we join throngs of revelers inside to watch mesmerizing performances, including the fire blessing: locals run through a ring of burning straw.

Because there's so much to see in the Land of the Thunder Dragon, our trip includes explorations on either side of the celebration. We move through bucolic countryside, enjoying stunning views of eastern Himalayan peaks, proud monasteries, and striking temples. We spend time in Paro's tiny streets, lined with brightly painted wooden shops, and wander through Thimphu, where we're tempted by Bhutanese weavings, prayer flags, and silver. And we hike up to Taktsang Lhakhang, the Tiger's Nest, one of the most important religious sites in the entire Himalaya. Contact Michael Steigerwald for more information.

MORE THAN PASSION FOR MYANMAR

Myanmar's golden hour enchants us at sunset, when pastels play tricks on gilded pagodas, adding to the glowing mystery of this once-forbidden destination. No wonder travelers have begun to flock here since the tourism boycott was lifted. But we know from experience that you need more than passion to have a good trip in this tricky-to-navigate country.

The tourism infrastructure is in its infancy, and finding space in hotels—especially comfortable hotels run by reputable folks—is tough. Luckily, our Myanmar mavens are well acquainted with the options and reserved rooms long ago in first-rate lodgings for our December *Inner Burma* journey. For this trip and all our Myanmar adventures, we are just as diligent about vetting the other businesses with whom we interact, so you can rest easy knowing that we work with quality ventures run by honest, progressive-minded sorts interested in keeping the country moving in the right direction. Instead of worrying about where to stay and whom your money is supporting, you can focus on the moments you came for, moments we've thoughtfully lined up for you on *Inner Burma*.

Throughout the trip we walk and talk with Myanmar's gracious citizens, enjoying insightful conversations about traditional ways of life and the rapid changes taking place. We appreciate cultural masterpieces, like Bagan's Plain of Temples, more breathtaking than pictures can convey. We hike among Kengtung's least frequented villages, meeting their residents, visit an elephant sanctuary, and delight in a two-day Irrawaddy River cruise, among much else—all during the best weather of the year.

We recommend reserving your space very soon on our December 6–17 *Inner Burma* (the January departure is sold out). If these dates don't work for you, ask us about a Custom Trip: we'll tailor it to your time frame and interests. Errin Mixon is here to help.

THIS JUST IN! GENIUS GUIDE BOOKED
FOR GALÁPAGOS HOLIDAY TRIP

Stellar guides make all the difference in travel. They open our eyes, pique our curiosity, impart details we'd never discover on our own, and up the ante on camaraderie and fun. That's why we work hard to find top-notch guides for our trips. Galápagos guru Natalie Crow has just informed us that one of these extraordinary people is now confirmed for our exclusive holiday group departures in the Enchanted Islands: Emma Jane Ridley.

Daughter of a foreign correspondent, Emma has a French education, is fluent in four languages, and was raised in Lebanon, Belgium, Great Britain, and Italy. Her ardor for natural history led to her studies in marine biology, which in turn brought her to a career as a naturalist and dive guide in Ecuador 20 years ago. "Emma is now a permanent resident of Santa Cruz, capital of the archipelago," explains Natalie, "and we're so lucky to have her as our guide."

This December, as we base our holidays from the unique and comfy Galápagos Safari Camp, Emma will reveal the Galápagos Islands as she sees them, illustrating their magic and fragility. She'll teach us to snorkel with friendly sea lions and map out the best spots to encounter Darwin's finches, lava lizards, swimming penguins, and other fantastic wildlife. We'll hop from island to island, gaining a new appreciation for Mother Nature as we learn about the isles' volcanic origin and the animals that have called them home for eons. During the *Galápagos Safari's* holiday dates, GeoEx will have the camp—and Emma—all to ourselves. Contact Natalie to grab the few spaces that remain on the December 20–27 or December 25–January 1 trip.

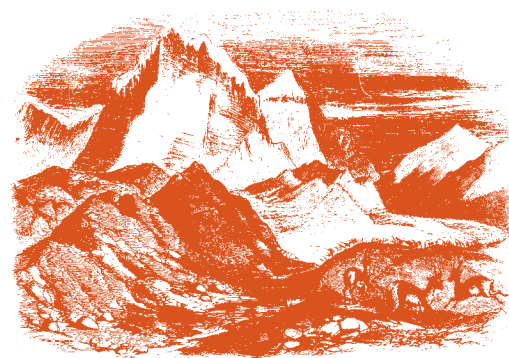
BOTSWANA: WILD AND MIRACULOUS

The Okavango Delta's "existence in the middle of the Kalahari Desert is nothing short of miraculous," wrote Frans Lanting in *Africa's Last Eden*. "The very notion that a place as wild and untouched as the Okavango even exists may seem like a dream." It's a dream we've been happily dipping into for years, weaving in and around the great delta's waterways, exploring its deserty borderlands, lolling in its exquisite lagoons, and getting acquainted with its splendidly sundry wildlife. Each time we go, we find this world wonder—which just became the 1,000th UNESCO World Heritage Site—more wonderful.

Our Botswana buffs are keen to share the dizzying variety of wildlife in the lush delta and its Kalahari environs: swimming elephants, bubbling pods of hippos, graceful giraffes, gliding Nile crocodiles, majestic lions, elegant oryx, bristly warthogs, and such spectacular and numerous birds—try kingfishers, lilac-breasted rollers, and Pel's fishing owl—that almost everyone becomes a keen birder. Our journeys include a myriad of activities, from bush walks to *mokoro* (canoe) safaris and excursions into the remote Deception Valley. One expert guide is with us throughout, so we won't have to reinvent the wildlife-visiting wheel at each camp; our guide will know what we've seen and what to be on special lookout for.

The 2015 dates for our *The Miraculous Delta: Botswana's Okavango* are April 9–20, June 10–21, and August 28–September 8, scheduled to coincide with two particularly apt times of year for wildlife viewing. If you

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◆ ROUSING BORDER
CROSSINGS EIGHT

Amanda McKee: *We'd been traveling for days through Chile's remote Aysén region, heading toward Argentina. When the road ended at glacial Lago O'Higgins, we took the ferry across and found the lonely border post set amid breathtaking scenery and nothing else. The immigration guards, pleased to have company, stamped our passports and invited us into their living quarters for coffee. Then we spent 24 hours no longer officially in any country, biking across a mountain pass, camping overnight, and biking some more before finally reaching the Argentine border post—still miles from roads.*



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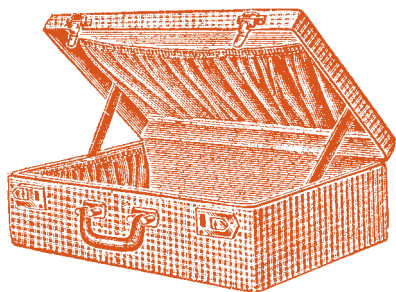
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can't wait until then (we understand), ask about Custom Trip possibilities—even mobile safaris, an excellent option for families. Starla Estrada and Linda de la Torre are at your service.

MYSTICAL WEST AFRICA NAMED ONE OF 50 BEST TOURS OF A LIFETIME



On its annual quest to find the world's best guided trips, *National Geographic Traveler* took note of our *Mystical West Africa*, granting it a 50 Tours of a Lifetime award. "We're pleased and excited," says Starla Estrada, GeoEx's Africa aficionada. She deserves credit for acquiring rare invitations to intimate ceremonies and behind-the-scenes experiences that make this adventure through Benin, Togo, and Ghana so special.

Throughout the journey we revel in engaging with the people of these contrasting countries, including fishermen in the stilt village of Ganvie, fetish-market vendors in Lomé, and artisans of Kumasi. We see an Egun mask ceremony, are present for a voodoo ritual, and attend a traditional and celebratory Ashanti funeral. At every turn, we are astounded by the thriving traditions and complex history around us.

GeoEx guests Debby and John Fletcher reported back to us about the remarkable moments they had on this "illuminating cultural tour," including being surrounded by singing and colorful dress at a Sunday church service on Lake Nokwe, watching traditional dances and drumming, tracing the slave route, and visiting with a Ghanaian coffin maker. They were particularly surprised to see "the extent to which voodoo beliefs permeate the society." You can visit GeoEx.com/Ambassadors to read more about their experiences.

If you have your heart set on this trip, call Starla with haste: our January 8–20 departure is nearly sold out, and we expect our September 17–29 (2015) departure to fill quickly.



If you'd like more information on any of the trips mentioned in this newsletter, please visit us at GeoEx.com/UT 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.