

**THE BEST
BRITISH
TRAVEL
WRITING
OF THE 21ST CENTURY**

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THE BEST BRITISH TRAVEL WRITING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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THE BEST
BRITISH
TRAVEL
WRITING
OF THE 21ST CENTURY

A CELEBRATION OF OUTSTANDING TRAVEL
STORYTELLING FROM AROUND THE WORLD



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FOREWORD

BY JESSICA VINCENT

I was in Bulgaria when everything changed. The air smelled of pinewood and charred meat; my hands were burning with cold. It was March 2020 and I was spending the month writing, skiing and eating paprika-spiced *bobchorba* in Bansko, a wood-and-sheepskin village at the edge of the Pirin Mountains. On that perfect bluebird morning I'd planned to ski Todorka Peak and eat garlic bread straight from a clay oven, but I knew something was wrong before I reached the front of the gondola queue.

"Not today," a stern-faced woman said with a wave of her candy-pink acrylic nails. "Mountain closed."

It was, of course, inevitable. The coronavirus had reached Europe, and non-Bulgarian nationals were to leave immediately. With no home of my own in the country I belonged to, I would spend the next three months – the longest I'd spent anywhere in the last four years – living at my in-laws' in the tiny East Anglian village of Boxted.

Rural Essex felt worlds away from my life on the road. I went from trekking through jungles in Mexico and ice climbing in Peru to doing downward dogs and baking cakes on repeat within the same four whitewashed walls. The full-time traveller in me felt trapped. The writer in me, unable to see past the fog of familiarity and routine, was void of ideas to pitch to editors. I didn't have it bad compared to many, but I did fear for my job – because what is a travel writer who can't travel?

I couldn't travel, but I *could* read. As infection numbers rose, I'd lose myself in the words, and worlds, of others. I'd smell the cigarette smoke of Tibet's Qinghai railway with Monisha Rajesh; I'd walk the scorched fields of southern Spain with Laurie Lee; I'd listen to the note of a broken piano in the Siberian tundra with Sophy Roberts. The adventure didn't stop there: magazines like *National Geographic Traveller* and *Sidetracked* took me on food trails through Hanoi and rock-climbing expeditions in China.

The more I read about travel from a locked-down world, the more I realised that I'd got it all wrong. There was a time when I thought of travel as going to faraway places and seeing as much as possible, as if tallying up hundreds of countries and monuments would somehow make me a wiser, worthier traveller. But the more I read, the clearer it became: the essence of travel isn't to move – it's to *feel*.

With that, I hung up my baking tray and went in search of wonder close to home: I foraged my local woods for nettles and wild garlic; I paddled the length of the River Stour in a blow-up kayak; I walked sections of the longest coastal path in the world, taking time to smell the grass and taste the salt of the North Sea. For the first time in my life, I looked at my home as I would any other country: with curiosity and a sense of adventure. I hadn't left home, but I was finally travelling again.

It was out of this strange, but enlightening, time that *The Best British Travel Writing of the 21st Century* was born. Amid a climate of closed borders and fear for the outside world, I wanted to compile a book that celebrates the stories and writers that for the past two decades have made us *feel* something for the unknown and, in the process, brought us closer to it. As I hope this anthology shows,

the best travel writing won't just make you want to go somewhere, it'll make you want to *know* it.

To ensure as many people as possible were given the chance to be part of this book, I asked writers from around the world to submit up to three of their favourite travel stories published in UK magazines, newspapers or online journals between 2000 and 2021. My co-editors – three hugely respected writers in the travel-writing space – and I chose the final collection based on the quality of the writing, originality and their ability to inspire and educate readers.

We were particularly mindful of diversity, too: you'll notice that the collection includes a range of voices, writing styles and destinations. The result is a book where stories on racism, religion and identity are heard side by side, and where countries like Italy and Britain rub shoulders with Iraq and Pakistan. This is a book that celebrates the beautifully crafted and thoughtfully researched travel narratives of the last 20 years, but it also looks to the future – to a brighter, more inclusive era of travel writing.

Of course choosing “the best” of anything, especially something as subjective as travel writing, comes with its own challenges – some might even say it's a futile endeavour. But to celebrate no one out of fear for choosing inadequately seems equally pointless, and perhaps even a little cowardly. These stories were chosen not just because they inspire wanderlust, but because they confront important, and sometimes uncomfortable, issues like climate change and the exploitative nature of travel. I ask you to approach this anthology as you would any other travel narrative: with an open mind and a willingness to fall in love with the world, and the people in it, all over again.

Wherever you are and whatever travel means to you, I hope this book inspires you to get out into the world. Whether you're

backpacking Southeast Asia or camping in your local woods, I hope you'll go in search of wonder not to tick off sights or to take a photo for social media, but to listen, to learn and, most importantly, to *feel*.



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INTRODUCTION

BY LEVISON WOOD

Travelling – it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller.

Ibn Battuta

I've always felt a strong connection to these famous words by Ibn Battuta. In the 14th century, the Moroccan adventurer travelled for thirty years all around the known world, venturing further than any other explorer in pre-modern history.

I studied his journeys while I was at university and was compelled by this notion. I could think of nothing better than having the ability to share big ideas – to travel and to tell stories. And so I have – I've been lucky enough to visit over 100 countries and make a career out of spending a life on the road.

This inherent connection between travel and storytelling is written into our DNA. Storytelling has been at the heart of human communication long before even languages developed. Cave drawings dating back 30,000 years, found in Lascaux in France, show artistic representations of animals and people in motion. Two thousand years ago, the ancient Greek geographer Pausanias wrote one of the very first discovered travel guides, focusing not on the practicalities of the journey like where to stay or what to eat, but on the identity and history of Greece, and the landscapes, local myths and artworks that he saw.

To me, Ibn Battuta's words represent the immense power of travel to open ones eyes to the important stories of the day; to

help you connect with people that you otherwise might not come across. It gives you new perspectives and the ability to continue to learn about the world. Travel changes who you are, and in my opinion, it makes you a more understanding and compassionate person.

This notion is something that has become part of my essence – the opportunity that travel affords you to grow, learn and evolve. Yet, in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, the ability to jump on a plane at the drop of a hat suddenly disappeared. Without that exhilarating feeling that I got from travelling far and wide, and all the lessons that I thought I could only learn from exploring, I felt a gaping hole – a troubling loss. It seemed that the world spun a curveball and we all forgot to duck.

It was a whole new world to navigate, and even home felt strangely foreign with new rules and restrictions. We began to speak a new language: of working from home, lockdowns and quarantines. I felt claustrophobic.

But then I stopped. I thought. I tried to approach this new existence in a way that I would a new journey. What can we learn from this experience? What lessons can we take with us when the world opens up again? I started to think about storytelling and what inspired me to travel in the first place.

And so, I delved back into my bookshelf and re-read the diaries of Captain James Cook. I pored over Wilfred Thesiger's exploits in the deserts of Arabia and laughed at the feigned amateurishness of Eric Newby and Hugh Carless as they bumbled over the Hindu Kush. I turned to travel magazines and newspapers for inspiration. Stories, some of which are included in this book, took me far and wide, learning lessons that I would never get from my own travels; lessons I could only gain from these writers' unique

experiences, perspectives and from that moment in time. From Ash Bhardwaj's journey to India to take his dad's ashes to the holy Ganges River, I learned about the power of travel to connect you with your heritage. Lilly and Andrew Ryzebol took me to the dark otherworldly depths of Lake Huron's Georgian Bay to learn how facing a lifelong fear and pushing your limits can bring purpose and meaning to life.

All of a sudden, I had that feeling again. That buzz. This was it – the very reason *why* I started to travel in the first place. To learn and to look in wonder at the magic of the world.

Now that I can travel again, I've realised that this reflection on *why* I travel has given me a new appreciation and understanding of it. Sometimes you don't realise how important something is to you until you lose it. In our busy lives, it's easy to get caught up in the moment and forget the very reason for doing something we love. Writing is inherently about reflection. When Jess approached me and asked me to edit this book, it felt like the stars had aligned. She too had taken comfort in the arms of great travel storytelling at a time when actual travel was out of reach.

As I'm sure you will agree, travel writing is a genre of huge importance. Yet it has changed dramatically since the tales of ancient explorers. It is no longer about documenting uncharted territories or mapping newly discovered lands. Now that people have been almost everywhere, it might seem that travel writers have lost their purpose.

But when you consider the wide-ranging subject matter contained in this anthology, it becomes apparent that travel writing has evolved into a crucial way of engaging with your place in the world in a particular moment. It's about understanding your experience. Travel writing is slow. It disregards the fast news cycle

and takes a step back to observe. It is much more about getting to know a destination, its people, and where you sit among them. It has become a personal response to a place. And in my opinion, this makes it more valuable than ever before.

Now, as the world opens again, remember that being an armchair explorer has the power to make you appreciate your own adventures all the more. I hope that when reading this book, you will see it for what it is: a celebration of genre that can transport you to far-off destinations, one that champions storytelling but is also anchored by reality – the recipe for inspiration. I hope you come away wanting to travel. But I also hope you come away wanting to read more about travel.

To write is to understand, no matter who reads it. Whether you document your journeys in a diary or in a best-seller, the objective is to develop your ideas and thoughts. In the excellent writing in this book, I feel that I am going through experiences with the writers and taking away the lessons that they learned.

Before lockdown, I had only ever thought of Ibn Battuta's quote in its current order. Now I understand a new meaning. Above all, lockdown made me remember that behind every great adventure there are stories that inspired it. So, think of it as more like an incredible, interconnected circle:

“Reading great travel storytelling – it leaves you speechless, then turns you into an explorer.”