



I have always enjoyed the fact that the travel industry is an ever-changing canvas – with new countries to discover, new experiences to savour, and new challenges to overcome. Never one to shrink from a hard task, my New Year's resolution is to do my best to protect my clients from the perils of fluctuating currency and to bring you value for money and a feeling of security when booking your holiday. Whilst many of the big tour operators are applying last minute surcharges on their holidays to counter the effect of the weak pound, it is a practice we shy away from. Our aim is to deliver even greater value by taking advantage, on your behalf, of many of the special offers currently available in the market. Have a look at just some of the examples for this Spring on page 5.

Inside you will also find a wonderful account of a trip taken by one of our clients as well as a report of my recent travels in Syria, where the Ministry for Tourism invited me to discuss the perception of travel in the region and see some of the stunning boutique hotels converted from traditional houses.

Our polar arm, Arcturus, is now well established and we've had a superb start to the polar season with a raft of bookings and many kind compliments on the new 2009-2010 brochure. Do give me a call if you would like a copy or want to discuss any ideas – and happy travelling in 2009.

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brochure

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NEW IDEAS FOR A NEW YEAR

See pages 3 and 4 for lots of new ways to discover India, Indochina, Russia, South America and Southern Africa as well as our top trips for beating the credit crunch on page 5



UNCOVERING SYRIA'S SECRETS

Fiona reports on a visit full of colour, atmosphere and history

YOUR STORIES

Few of our clients' travels are more poignant than the journey taken by Ian Stubbs to Bhutan last year. Read his account on the back page



SYRIA

October 2008



"I have cheap and nasty". "Oh, No!" he said, smacking his forehead and actually blushing. I mean "cheap and nice". "So sorry – my English – I have just learnt".

This friendly and amusing exchange with a shawl seller in the museum souks of Aleppo was typical of my recent visit to Syria. I was there by invitation of the Ministry for Tourism who are anxious to put right the West's perception of visiting the Middle East and to lay to rest some of the misconceptions about travelling in the region. I found a friendly and laid-back country, minimal in its extremism and rich with a cultural heritage stretching back over the centuries to several thousand years BC – truly a cradle of civilisation.

*Arriving in Damascus at dusk, as the calls to prayer echoed over the city, I was excited about beginning what was to be an extraordinary journey through some of the most well-known ancient biblical sites. I visited the **Omayyade Mosque** at sunset, mingling with the crowds comfortably enrobed in my a'abyeha which must be worn by all ladies. I was entranced by the soaring ceilings, sparkling chandeliers and majestic back-lit minarets casting shadows of green and pink over the pomegranate sellers at the gates. Walking back through the covered souq of the old city to emerge into the warm night was a wonderfully evocative experience. Silks, brassware, glass and gold stalls stood shoulder-to-shoulder with those offering nuts and spices, inlay and mosaics and tiny cafes crammed with locals drinking tea and smoking 'argileh' or water pipes where charcoal burns on tobacco scented with apple or strawberry.*



*Heading east across the desert, **Palmyra** rose from the sand; majestic Roman columns and triumphal arches, tower tombs and underground vaults. Here one can buy sweet sticky dates and thick dark honey – specialties of the region.*

*I was most excited to see **Aleppo** in the northern part of the country, some four hours' drive from **Damascus**, and Syria's second city, dominated by the enormous 12th century citadel. They say it was never conquered and I could see why – the solid ramparts and series of ingenious devices to repel invaders. As I wandered through the museum souqs, famous for their oriental atmosphere, a massive storm broke out and lightning cracked all round, illuminating the wet cobblestones and clearing the air which had become quite thick with dust over the previous 24 hours and left a brown hue over the city.*

*Driving north-west out of Aleppo up towards the Turkish border, the scenery becomes quite picturesque, rocky hillsides of olive groves and pine trees, and from the sanctuary of **St Simeon**, a ruined church, one can see right down into the **Bekaa Valley of Lebanon**.*

*Returning to Damascus, I stopped at **Hama** and saw the great wooden water-wheels which have been used continuously for the last 1300 years and, in another spectacular thunderstorm, I scaled the impressive bastions of **Crac des Chevaliers**, the world's best preserved crusader castle and a perfect example of a military castle.*

*On my last day I went south to **Bosra**, an entire Roman city built of basalt which houses the impressive 9,000-seat theatre, considered to be the most complete in the world.*



My visit over, there was just time for a visit to a traditional hammam or Turkish steam bath in the old city, where I collected my threadbare towel and wooden clogs and spent an unforgettable hour or so being scrubbed and massaged and chatting in broken English to a friendly group of Syrian ladies, finally leaving with tingling skin and a feeling of utter relaxation.

Syria is a friendly and accommodating country with a treasure trove of architectural and cultural sights. A memorable stay would be in one of the old Damasian and Allepian houses now being converted into stunning boutique hotels. Set around a central courtyard beautifully laid out with intricate fountains, they feature hand-painted rooms, rich with mosaics, silks and tapestries and hung with delicate chandeliers and enchanting beaded lanterns.

*Returning home to winter in England I felt privileged to have completed another piece of the jigsaw of countries that link to form the ancient caravanserai corridors of the silk route. Syria combines extremely well with **Jordan** and I would highly recommend a visit.*

Wooden water-wheels at Hama



» suggested itinerary « from 7 – 14 days
» best time to visit « Spring and Autumn.
Call us for more details and a quotation

NEW IDEAS for 2009



Take a look at these new experiences we are offering in our favourite destinations. Whether you long for the thrill of discovering somewhere different, an exciting activity holiday or simply a break from winter, there is a trip here for you.

CAMBODIA/VIETNAM

Brand new Mekong River cruise

Starting in July 2009, the brand new RV **Indochina Pandaw** will make up to three two night cruises each week between **Saigon** in Vietnam and **Phnom Penh**, Cambodia. This new city link is in addition to Pandaw Cruises' existing seven and ten night cruises from Saigon to **Siem Reap**, further up the **Mekong** into the heart of Cambodia and will explore the delta creeks, towns and villages. The RV Indochina Pandaw is a new, boutique version of the colonial-style Pandaws that have plied the Mekong since 2003. There will be the same much-loved state-rooms as on the other ships together with spa facilities, fitness equipment, a cinema, cocktail bar and single sitting dining room. All cabins open on to a promenade deck.

Trek and camp among the Angkor temples

This three-day trek takes you through some of the lesser-known sights of the extensive temple complex at **Angkor** in Cambodia. We drive 60kms from **Siem Reap** through typical Khmer countryside to explore the long abandoned 11th century temple complex at **Beng Mealea**. Camping overnight at a 10th century capital, now strangled by jungle, we continue the next day on a pilgrim's path before camping at the summit of a sacred mountain. Waterfall swims, high grass meadows, limestone clearings and deep jungle are just some of the highlights on this unusual journey which ends with an aromatherapy or reflexology massage. Treks are three to four hours each day and camping is in comfortable dome tents.

» suggestions « Incorporate either or both of these activities into our 17-day Indochina Explorer itinerary. Please call for a quotation
» best time to visit « November – March



Gers, Tuva



RUSSIA OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

The Pearls of Tuva

An eight day itinerary to **Tuva**, one of Russia's most mysterious regions, full of virgin Siberian landscapes, fresh air and extraordinarily unspoiled culture where you experience the locals' way of life, their music, traditions and mysterious shamans' rites.

The journey starts in **Moscow** with a visit to the **Kremlin Palace** and the 15th and 16th century **Novodevichy Convent** before heading east to by air to **Krasnoyarsk** and then **Kyzyl**, the capital of Tuva. Here we visit the Buddhist temple and hear the lama's sermon and then drive to the Shaman clinic where you may ask about your future life or pass through the ritual of purification. We visit local lakes, a cattle-breeder's yurt, sleepy Siberian villages and experience the 'Kamlaniye of shamans' where shamans talk to spirits. The trip includes a stay in a Tuvan village of gers, comfortable thick felt yurts furnished with traditional wooden furniture and all facilities.

» prices from « £3,250 per person based on two people travelling including flights

Elabuga



Kazan, capital of Tatarstan

A private tailor-made tour of **Kazan**, the capital of **Tatarstan**, a city with more than 1,000 years of history. In the Middle Ages, Russia was under Tatar's yoke for almost 300 years and **St Basil's cathedral** in **Moscow's Red Square** was built to commemorate the victory of Russia over the **Kazan khanate**. This is an ideal tour to see some of the lesser visited areas of Russia, starting with a private guided tour of **Moscow** after which you take a comfortable overnight train to **Kazan**. The kremlin here retains many elements of its past including synagogues, German traditional churches and Hindu temples. We continue to **Elabuga**, a small trading town with a rich 200-year history and on to **Cheboksary**, the capital of **Chuvashia Republic** where its hospitable people greet you with a warm smile and the traditional offering of bread-and-salt. As they perform traditional songs and dance you will be able to taste several kinds of Chuvashian beer.

» prices from « £2,675 per person for a week's tour based on two travelling including flights

NEW ADVENTURES ON HORSEBACK



Estancia Huechahue



Patagonia – working estancia

Experience the wide open hospitality of a traditional estancia not far from the picturesque town of **San Martin de Los Andes** in northern Patagonia. At **Estancia Huechahue** in the foothills of the Andes you will experience the best of a working estancia with traditional Argentine hospitality. You can take a pack trip into the heart of the high Andes, help with the cattle work, go fishing, stalking, rafting, birdwatching, swimming, play tennis or just relax. Discover the history of the Mapuche Indians (Huechahue is the Mapuche word for battleground) or climb to the top of a high ridge to watch the condors. Itineraries are tailored to the individual and can focus on one activity or a combination of experiences.

» when « Year round. Please contact us for prices

Zambia – horse safari

The landlocked stand of **Zambia** still has vast tracts of pristine wilderness for true game enthusiasts. This horse safari is based at a lodge on the outskirts of the 22,480 square km **Kafue National Park** in the South West of the country. Kafue is the largest and oldest national park in Zambia and contains a vast and impressive range of scenery and wildlife.

All the horses are chosen for their pace, confirmation, ride ability and temperament and include South African Boerperd and Warmblood, Quarter Horse cross and thoroughbred crosses. The owners look particularly for responsive horses that like to work and are able to cope with the harshness of the African bush. They are all fit, in excellent condition and range in height from 14 to 17.3 hands. The day typically starts with an early morning call and a light breakfast before exploring the park and tracking game on horseback. Brunch is taken back at the lodge with the chance to relax by the pool. In the afternoon you take a shorter two hour ride, returning for sundowners and a delicious evening meal.

» when « The first safari goes out on 10 March and the last on 29 December 2009. Scheduled seven night safari dates run from Tuesday to Tuesday, although it may be possible to join for shorter or longer periods if availability allows.
» prices from « £3,470 per person including flights



Zambia horse safari

Argentina – Iberian Marshlands horseback crossing

Stay at three estancias and enjoy river crossings swimming on horseback on a ride for those who want a challenging gallop surrounded by wildlife across the vast expanse of the **Argentine Mesopotamia**. The **Iberá Marshlands** form one of the largest natural reserves in Argentina. Twice the size of the Florida Everglades, Iberá is the second-largest wetland in South America after Pantanal in Brazil and one of the most important fresh water reservoirs in the continent. Located in the province of **Corrientes**, the Esteros are mix of swamps, bogs, stagnant lakes, lagoons, natural slough and watercourses with a total area of between 15,000 and 20,000 square kilometres.

» prices from « £2,775 per person for an eight day holiday including flights. Departures from September to April



» suggestions « Make this part of your trip of a lifetime to India, combining it with Darjeeling or Kerala.
» when « A seven night/eight day itinerary departing Mumbai on 1 April 2009
» prices from « £3,785 per person including flights

INDIA

Mumbai to Rajasthan by luxury train

An eight day journey from Mumbai taking in the **Ajanta and Ellora Caves**, **Bandhavgarh National Park** (one of the best wildlife viewing sites in India), the **Red Fort** and **Taj Mahal** at **Agra** and the desert cities of **Jaipur** and **Udaipur** in Rajasthan. The **Deccan Odyssey** is a traditionally-decorated five star luxury air-conditioned train with spacious en-suite cabins, helped by the generous proportions of the country's broad gauge railway. Take a Deluxe Suite or, for the ultimate in comfort, one of four Presidential Suites that have an attached living room. There are two restaurant cars offering an array of Indian and international cuisine and a 'spa car' where you can enjoy a traditional Ayurvedic massage, work out in the gym, visit the hair salon or enjoy the heat of the sauna whilst the train is underway.

Argentina – trail riding or polo

Fun, fast and exciting, polo is a competitive team sport that combines good horsemanship with tactics and ball skills. Whilst it can be difficult or expensive to learn at home, the polo weeks at **Estancia Los Potreros** allow you to try this fabulous game in a truly unique environment, whilst not breaking the bank. **Argentina** has the best polo players in the world and so where better to start?

For those wishing to focus more on riding, there are a number of fixed date trail rides operating from the estancia. Expect to be in the saddle between four to five hours a day with the occasional days requiring an extra push to reach the objective. Nights away from the estancia are spent camping or in local dwellings allowing the visitors to experience another way of life.

» when « **Polo:** 30 March – 6 April; 21 – 28 September; 16 – 23 November 2009
Trail rides: 21 – 28 February; 14 – 21 March; 3 – 10 October; 24– 31 October 2009
» prices from « £2,640 per person for a ten day holiday including flights



Trips to help beat the **CREDIT CRUNCH**

» Botswana/Namibia/Zambia «

- » when « 1 Jan – 31 March 2009
- » how « A thrilling eight night itinerary including luxury lodge accommodation – three nights at the **Kalahari Plains Camp**, Botswana, two at **Xigera** or **Jacana Camp** in Botswana's **Okavango Delta**, two nights at **Lianshulu Lodge** inside Namibia's **Mudumu National Park** and a night at the fabulous **River Club** on the **Zambian** side of the **River Zambezi**. Includes all game drives and activities and seamless flying connections between lodges.
- » price « From **£3,625** per person for eight nights including flights, transfers and accommodation
- » saving « **£950** per person



» Tanzania/Mozambique «

- » when « 1 Jan - 31 Dec 2009
- » how « Combine a safari at the stunning **Sand Rivers Selous** camp in Tanzania and breathtaking **Vamizi Island** on Mozambique for unforgettable beach stay. The **Selous Game Reserve**, at a massive 50,000 square km, is the largest wilderness in Africa. Set on a wide curve of the mighty **Rufiji River**, Sand Rivers Selous is both an expedition base lodge and safari retreat; it's small but beautiful, with an imposing mess, swimming pool, excellent cooking and careful, at-your-whim service.
- » price « From **£5,620** per person for two weeks including flights, accommodation and game drives
- » saving « One night complimentary fly camping at Sand Rivers saving **£115** per person, one complimentary (resort) dive, saving **£100** per person (or equivalent credit towards another activity) and one complimentary night at Vamizi Island



» Patagonia, Central Chile «

- » when « 1 Jan – 31 March 2009
- » how « Stay an extra night for free at **The Cliffs Preserve**, where Pacific waves crash against the rocks of the wild uninhabited coastline and cabins with open fires welcome you after a day in the wild outdoors. In addition to comfort and excellent food the resort offers various on-land excursions plus a special programme during the whale season (November – end February). Luxury Suites have a jacuzzi, living room and terrace and guided activities include riding, trekking, boating and kayaking. One day's local sport fishing or rafting and one spa treatment per person is also included.
- » price « From **£3,150** per person for an eight day holiday including flights
- » saving « Stay five nights and pay for four and enjoy a bottle of Gran Reserve wine on the house



» St Petersburg, Russia «

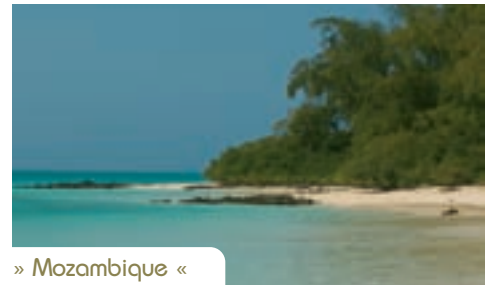
- » when « 1 Jan – 31 March 2009
- » how « Special rates for the newly opened **Hotel Ibis St Petersburg Moskovsky Vokzal**, one minute's walk from **Nevsky prospect** and an extremely cost-effective base from which to explore this beautiful city and its art treasures.
- » price « **£630** per person for three nights including flights, transfers and accommodation with breakfast

Don't put that trip you have been promising yourself on hold – we are able to negotiate some great discounts on your behalf, as these examples demonstrate.



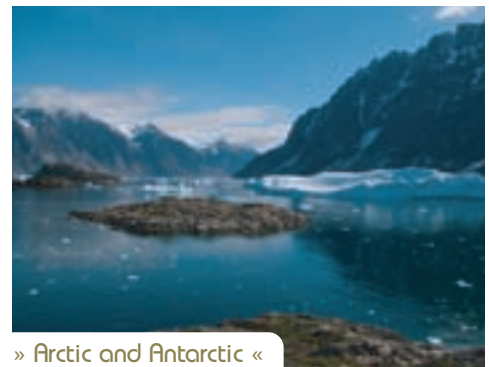
» Vietnam/Cambodia «

- » when « 1 Jan - 31 March 2009
- » how « Seven night **Mekong** exploration cruise from **Saigon** to **Angkor** on the brand new **Orient Pandaw** – a fine ship with only 30 cabins.
- » price « From **£2,195** per person including flights, cruise and sightseeing en route
- » saving « **£305** per person



» Mozambique «

- » when « 1 Jan - 31 Dec 2009
- » how « Long stay special at **Vamizi Island** in the **Quirimbas Archipelago** in the blue expanse of the Indian Ocean. This is the northern reach of Mozambique's 2,000 mile coastline. Consisting of 32 tropical islands, it stretches for 100 kilometres from **Pemba** to the **Rovuma River**, the natural border between Mozambique and Tanzania. The island of Vamizi, with its clear waters, acacias, hibiscus and casuarina trees has abundant marine and birdlife and thick, untouched coral reefs.
- » price « From **£3,775** per person for a nine day holiday including flights
- » saving « **£375** per person



» Arctic and Antarctic «

- » when « Arctic (summer 2009); Antarctic (winter 2009/10)
- » how « We have some great late offers for travel to the **Arctic** (Spitsbergen and Greenland) this summer season and for the coming **Antarctic** season (winter 2009/10). Please refer to the January 2009 Arcturus newsletter. If you don't have a copy, please ask and we will happily send you one.

Putting up the prayer flag



A traveller's TALE

Dance of the Black Hats



Return to Bhutan

Intrepid traveller and loyal client, Ian Stubbs, returned to Bhutan in the spring of 2008 on a very personal journey. Here he gives a moving account of his experiences...

"After three years I was returning, via Nepal, to the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon. I had a holiday organised for six months earlier but my father passed away and all kinds of plans had to be moved around. I must have driven Fiona mad with all that needed doing. Everything was put on hold but then I came up with an idea which gave a purpose to my travels... The flight into Paro airport in Bhutan is one of the most spectacular in the world as you fly along the Himalaya mountain range almost level with Everest. My guide and the driver who met me were to prove priceless in my achieving my main aim for the trip, to scatter my father's ashes in a holy place, following the correct protocol within the Buddhist religion. I also wanted to visit a local festival and hopefully to see the dance of the Black Hats; to visit three of Bhutan's most holy sites and to see the fabled Zi stones which are said to hold magic properties.

On the journey to the Bumthang region I visited the dzongs of Wangdi, Punakha and Tongsa, magnificent buildings dating back centuries, made mainly of stone and wood. While at Punakha I was lucky enough to see the Chief Abbot (Je Jhenpo), albeit from a distance, as he stopped off to bless local people. The dzong at Wangdi is one of my favourites – the building dates back to 1638 and has a strange feeling of prayers being absorbed into the very fabric of the walls, one of those moments of being able to sense the essence of holy calm.

On the outskirts of the town of Jakar we stayed at a guest house owned by a Swiss gentleman who has been there since the 1960s. Over time he has introduced brown-eyed cattle and is setting up a dairy and a brewery (to make white wheat beer). This part of Bhutan contains some of the holiest places and at one site I was able to see the fabled Zi stones around the neck of a golden Buddha, said to contain real power. This Buddha didn't just have a couple of these special stones but strings of them.

In the evening my guide and I worked through the plan for the scattering of my father's ashes. The site chosen was the burning lake where Pema Lingpa found many treasures. We had to buy prayer flags in Jakar and have them blessed at a local monastery. Yeshey explained the importance of the colour (white for the deceased) and the number of panels it should have. He also arranged a visit to the monastery of Namkhe Nyingpo to see the head lama who had agreed to bless the ashes of my father. It was very moving as he read holy text and sprinkled holy water with a peacock feather over the prayer flags and mixed some with the ashes.

We then went to the burning lake where we burned pine branches to create the smoke to carry our prayers to the sky. This part of the ceremony was particularly moving, and I left the others to string out the flag while I gathered my thoughts, then it was time to scatter the ashes into the lake...

The following day we went to the Ura Valley to witness the first day of the festival. As luck would have it, they performed the dance of the Black Hats – so all my aims were achieved.

My visit ended with a three day trek through the Gantry Valley – a good time to reflect on my return to this wonderful country and its friendly open people, all made possible through the help I had through Fiona and Far Frontiers Travel. Bhutan is truly a magical country and to anyone planning to go I would say, do it."

Our 17 day Crossing the Land of the Thunder Dragon itinerary starts from £3,650 per person London to London, based on two people travelling.



Namkhe Nyingpo, where the head lama blessed Ian's fathers ashes

Bhutan festivals 2009

Tsechus are annual religious festivals held in each district or dzongkhag of Bhutan in Spring and Autumn. The Thimpu and Paro tsechus are among the most important Buddhist celebrations in terms of participation and audience. Held at the dzong or monastic fortress, monks wearing colourful robes and masks act out plays whilst masked dancers whirl to the accompaniment of horns, drums and cymbals.

For those looking to visit Bhutan in 2009, here are some provisional dates for must-see festivals.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Punakha | 1 - 8 March |
| Tashiyangtse | 11 and 16 March |
| Tashigang | 2 - 4 April, 26 - 28 November |
| Paro | 5 - 9 April |
| Bumthang | 5 - 9 May, 27 - 29 September, 3 - 5 October, 2 - 6 November, 2 - 4 December |
| Wangdiphodrang | 26 - 28 September |
| Thimphu | 23 - 30 September |
| Mongar | 25 - 27 November |
| Tongsa | 25 - 27 December |



Your feedback

Here is a selection of comments we have received recently from clients about their trip.

"Fiona could not have been more helpful. Her knowledge and advice about Bhutan was invaluable in the planning of my trip and her perseverance with the Tibet situation was much appreciated."

Sybil Johnson, Bhutan, September 2008

"Very very good!"

Mr and Mrs John Timmis, Seville, September 2009

"Very happy with our trip – enjoyed the opulence though next time will probably want something rougher!"

Mr and Mrs Paul Cartwright, Shimla, July 2008

"Very satisfied indeed."

Mr and Mrs Roy Arnold, Jordan, July 2008

"An experience to be treasured. The boat was exceptionally well appointed and the crew were charming, as were our fellow passengers. It was a magical way to discover ancient Egypt and see life on the banks of the Nile. We shall keep our eyes open for other special offers in your e-newsletter!"

Claire and Robert Watson, Egypt, October 2008