

In safe hands

Memories of unforgettable guides, past and present

Aung Zaw Min, Ayeyarwady River, Myanmar: Casually known as Khun, this kind and thoughtful guide from Yangon led our group of five women on shore excursions from the Belmond (then Orient-Express) cruiser Orcaella on a seven-night Ayeyarwady voyage in late 2013. I was the eldest of the party, and Khun, a married chap, decided quite swiftly that I had the most potential to be troublesome. He dubbed me “senior wife”, and the other women were ranked on a sliding scale to “most junior wife”, which made our outings feel like family gatherings. Helping Khun to keep us in line (what is Burmese, I wonder, for “herding cats”) were Orcaella’s logistical shore staff who carried walkie-talkies and wore matching T-shirts. They looked like a touring sports team and made us feel lightly tethered to the river vessel by an invisible but reassuring thread. Khun, dressed in loose and traditional garb, was the most knowledgeable and scholarly of guides and the most patient of shopping scouts as his band of wives marauded village markets for striped textiles, ornamented puppets, lacquered bowls, sequined bags and battered brass gongs. He carried this booty for us, despite our protests. When we decked ourselves with silver bangles from little shops with names such as Treasure Island, he bowed to us and said we looked like princesses. Khun occasionally entrusted us to the care of bicycle rickshaw and bullock cart drivers but not without warnings to check for splinters and keep our hats in place. As we rumbled along in a truck with bench seats to see a famous pagoda, we kept making impromptu stops. “For snakes crossing,” said Khun, ominously. “Very bad luck to kill a snake.” On the second-last night, all passengers gathered at the rear of Orcaella’s top deck and we each wrote a wish on a scrap of paper to pin to a fire-lit Shan balloon. One by one they were released to fly high and white like shooting moons. I wished Khun and his real wife a happy and prosperous future but knew that the goodbyes from his five holiday wives would feel to all of us like a divorce. More: belmond.com/orcaella.

SUSANKUROSAWA

Carlos Vivar, Guatemala: Among the Mayan ruins of Guatemala, as you stagger between tales of genital mutilation and rulers with names that sound like exotic wildlife, a good guide comes in extremely handy. I was lucky to be with Carlos Vivar. He wasn’t just showing me around the temples of one of the New World’s more perplexing civilisations. He was taking me home. Carlos comes with all the usual qualities of a great guide — excellent English, a thoughtful courtesy, and an uncanny ability to predict the needs of his clients. He is knowledgeable without being pedantic, fun without being flip-pant. But what is really fascinating about Vivar is the way his life is so deeply embedded in the region and in the ruins he shows to clients. He clambered over these ancient temples as a boy. He helped the first archaeologists



when they arrived to excavate. When he finally went off to school — leading to the education that has made him a guide — it was to search for his father, lost in the civil war. When Vivar takes you to Uaxactun, deep in the jungle, away from the crowds of Tikal, it feels like a very special journey. It is one of Guatemala’s most fascinating sites, among the least visited, and Carlos grew up here. At day’s end, enjoying a chilled glass of white wine on a high temple, you feel yourself alone with the ancient Maya. As there is no accommodation at Uaxactun, Vivar has created a small private camp with showers and flushing loos. And as there are no restaurants, he has stage-managed one of Central America’s great experiences — a

It’s all white now

CATHERINE MARSHALL

“Stick with me, I’ll make you awesome,” says my ski instructor. I find this statement hard to believe. It’s snowing so hard the roads have been closed and monstrous icicles are hanging off the eaves of mountainside cabins at Breckenridge, Colorado. My eyelashes are frozen and my stomach is a nest of butterflies. Right now I’d rather be back in Breckenridge’s Gold Pan Saloon — the oldest pub west of the Mississippi — playing beer pong with those folks from Iowa. For reasons unknown, they picked me last night, from among a pool of potential champions, to make up a team of two whose goal was to slam ping pong balls into cups of beer across a table in the room next door.

I’d never heard of this sport before, but assented. I joined Greg against Maria and Ashley, and though I started out shakily and was forced, as a penalty, to down several tots of beer when the cups on our side were slam-dunked by the opposing team’s balls, I prevailed, achieving enough goals of my own that Greg and I emerged victorious.

Walking from the warm saloon into the frigid night air, I felt acutely the contrast of this agreeable evening activity with my daytime travails on the slopes that now loomed somewhere in the darkness. A novice skier, I’ve

THE INCIDENTAL TOURIST

Down the slopes at Breckenridge, Colorado



JEFF ANDREW/VAIL RESORTS

come here from Vail where a Swedish ski instructor had worked against hope to fortify my confidence. When he praised me for skiing with momentum and not giving in to panic, I responded with gloom.

“I do panic but I just don’t show it,” I protested. “Whatever works for you,” he replied.

By the time the weather changed, I’d found my feet. “Here is your first snowflake — you’re a skier now!” he exclaimed as I caught the rogue ice-crystal on my tongue.

But all that is worthless to me now. I’m heading towards a run at Breckenridge with a new ski instructor

who’s promising to make me awesome. The woman sitting beside me on the chair lift raises her eyebrows behind her goggles when I mention I’m a beginner.

“He must have confidence in you,” she says, eyeing my instructor. Surely I’ve been tricked into coming to this place? A lone snowboarder is tumbling down the frozen cliff face ahead of us, shafts of powder unsettled in his wake.

Further down the mountainside, now tumbling perilously away from us, I’ve seen rows and rows of stretchers laid out on the snow, just waiting for some fool to take a fall. I’ve practised on the training runs and watched videos of myself inching sloth-like through the snow though, at the time, it had felt as though I was racing ahead at breakneck speed.

Now I face the very prospect of sliding down this dangerous black run, that devil-may-care cliff-face snowboarder closing in on me from behind. I’d rather be carried off this mountain on my own legs than a stretcher, so I listen carefully to my instructor and do exactly as he says — ploughing through powder, jumping mounds and getting straight back up when I fall.

In the end, I become a champion for the second time in less than 24 hours. I’ve stuck with him and, hey, I’m awesome.

Catherine Marshall was a guest of Vail Resorts.



BELMOND



SUSAN KUROSAWA



TENEDOR TOURS



JOHN BORTHWICK

Clockwise from main picture, cruise ship Orcaella on the Ayeyarwady River in Myanmar; Aung Zaw Min guides tourists through village markets in Myanmar; San Sebastian guide Gabriella Ranelli; Beks Ndlovu from African Bush Camps; the Temple of the Masks at Uaxactun; colourful cars in Havana; the Yeats statue in Sligo, Ireland



AFP

people at the Cohiba cigar factory, he knows the guys at the ballet school and the boxing hall. Some places he takes you, you'll find in a blog or a superior guidebook but many you won't. Martinez took us to a side street for delicious crunchy plantain, and drove us out of Havana to Vinales, where we took a little boat through dim, watery caves. And when our hire car broke down 8km out of Havana (on a dirt road, in a rainstorm), we called the rental company — no answer. We called the hotel — no answer. We called Jorge — 20 minutes later a brand-new car magically appeared. When we phoned to thank him he just laughed. "Of course," he said, "it's nothing." More: jlmg@nauta.cu.

AZBK NIGHT

Beks Ndlovu, African Bush Camps, Zimbabwe and Botswana: I was feeling strangely relaxed standing by Ngweshla Pan sipping wine at sunset, surrounded by 30 elephants slurping their own sundowners from the waterhole. "We were here first. The elephants will respect that," my guide Beks Ndlovu whispered, calmly reassuring me. Later, at Ndlovu's beautiful Somalisa Camp in Hwange National Park, we watched two elephants mating just 3m away under a starlit sky. Zimbabwe's professional guides are among the best in Africa, and Ndlovu ranks among the best of them. Yet he's renowned and respected not just because of his exceptional guiding skills on walks, drives and canoe safaris, but because of his entrepreneurship and commitment to local communities through his company African Bush Camps. He offers private guiding to guests from his eight camps in Zimbabwe and Botswana. Ndlovu grew up in a Zimbabwe village and he and his German wife, Sophia, have stayed put while many safari companies deserted the country during Mugabe's darkest years from 2000-2010. They established a foundation working with local schools and women's groups' projects, which guests can visit; it's a rewarding way of seeing the human side of life in the African bush. "To us, the foundation is as important as the business," he told me. "We're both hugely passionate about it." More: africanbushcamps.com.

SUE WATT

Aengus Cantwell, County Sligo, Ireland: "He was the great Irish silly-billy," declared our guide of poet, Nobel Laureate, patriot and sometime politician William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). He is honoured in his hometown of Sligo by a dramatic bronze statue of himself wrapped in his own words, so to speak. County Sligo, Yeats's "land of heart's desire", is a realm of Celtic mounds, Druid tombs and fairy forts, not to mention those Irish constants — saints, scholars, sinners and drinkers. Our virtual guide to this numinous world was Yeatsian expert Aengus Cantwell, who passed away in October, 2010. He joined our group for dinner at Sligo's 15th-century Markree Castle. He discoursed spell-bindingly about Ireland's mythic landscape and songlines: "It's like a manuscript we have lost the skill to read, but where you can sense

traditional Mayan dinner cooked by a local family and served in front of a Mayan temple adorned with candles. It is a moment of pure magic. Carlos Vivar works for Viaventure in Guatemala. More: viaventure.com.

STANLEY STEWART

Gabriella Ranelli, San Sebastian, Spain: With just one day to decode San Sebastian, to understand it so intimately that I can write an "insider's guide" for an international magazine and not be exposed as a fraud, I desperately needed an expert. Or a godsend. Gabriella Ranelli is both. A Manhattan transplant, Ranelli married a champion pelota (handball) player and has, over two decades, transformed herself from outsider to the best-connected Basque I could hope to meet. Fortunately, she still speaks like a New Yorker — rapid-fire, info-heavy — and downloads her knowledge non-stop over six hours: people, history, customs, beaches, hotels, art and design, festivals and, most of all, food. Oh, the food. From stunning still-life seafood displays at La Bretxa market, to pigs ears in dense romesco sauce at Borda Berri pintxos bar, to a shop devoted entirely to anchovies, and a peek inside a txoko, one of the city's underground, men-only gastronomic societies that exist purely for the pleasure of eating. She worked her phone like a lobbyist, gaining entree to, and interviews with, three-star chef Pedro Subijana at his hilltop restaurant Akelarre, and then a guided tour of the celebrated Arzak with Eleni Arzak, crowned best female chef in the world in 2012, who insisted on dessert, including "inside-out M&Ms" and a chocolate ganache cased in beetroot that left me speechless. Ranelli is simply the best guide in the Basque country and one of the finest cultural interpreters you could hope to meet anywhere. More: tenedor.com.

KENDALL HILL

Jorge Martinez, Havana, Cuba: There is tourist Havana, double-glazed and air-conditioned, and then there is Havana, rough, joyous and tatty. Jorge Martinez straddles both; although born and bred in the capital, he glides around in a very un-Cuban car. His choice is a gleaming executive saloon with every bell and whistle. Martinez loves the Beatles, is the warmest, kindest guide you're likely to meet, and knows Havana like I know my hands. In this country of mojitos, he knows where they serve the best; he knows the loveliest restaurant hidden up the most beautiful, crumbling flight of stairs. He knows the

that, as Yeats said, 'the other world seems but a step away'. Cantwell put aside a dog-eared volume of Yeats to digress a while. "You know that Freud declared the Irish to be the only race that can't be psychoanalysed. He said the tales we invent about ourselves are far more interesting than the truth." Describing himself as having "all the enthusiasm of the aficionado but none of the caution of the scholar", Cantwell, a former missionary in the Philippines, added with a sigh that "Yeats was a great poet but a daft individual. At times one feels like drowning him in the faecal waters of Manila Bay." Vale to a memorable guide and scholar. More: markreecastle.ie; discoverireland.ie.

JOHN BORTHWICK



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