

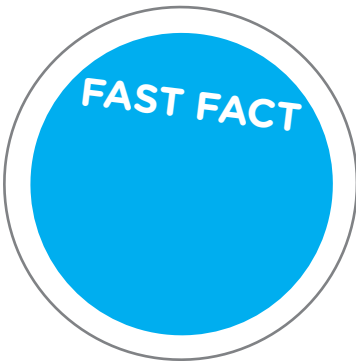


PICTURE: JULIE SKOTTE/VISIT GREENLAND

# 10 OF THE Best OFF THE BEATEN TRACK TOURS

See more unusual places with an escorted tour

@jobooth\_travel



There's a lot to be said for a good guide, wherever you are. I've been glad of them plenty of times over the years, from the lady who scored me access to the private apartment of a princess in Rome to the tour leader whose sharp eyes could spot a sleeping sloth in thick vegetation at 50 paces in Costa Rica.

However, there have been places where a guide hasn't felt like a bonus, but a necessity, and without exception this has been in places where British tourists are thin on the ground. In the vast and starkly beautiful wildernesses of Namibia, with no sign of life – or mobile signal – for hundreds of miles, I remember being relieved that someone else was map reading and handling the long drives. In China, barely able to pronounce the word for 'thank you', let alone read a menu, I needed help to order anything – followed by advice on how to go about eating the chicken foot I'd been brave/stupid enough to request.

So for clients who want to venture off the beaten track, taking an escorted tour provides a wonderful compromise. They can experience areas of the world rarely visited by other tourists, but with a safety net stretching beneath them to ensure their trip runs smoothly.

And escorted tour operators – even relatively mainstream players – are responding to demand with tours to some truly unusual destinations. We've rounded up 10 to suggest to adventurous clients.

**1 THE BALKANS** Clients don't have to leave Europe behind to head away from major tourist hotspots. Croatia, Bulgaria and Slovenia might be mature tourist destinations, but there are other Balkans where visitors are far fewer and further between. Insight Vacations ticks off a fair few of these on its Treasures of the Balkans tour, which visits Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania (land-only prices for the 17-day trip start at £2,525).

There are plenty of lesser-known spots en route, from Lake Ohrid in Macedonia, one of Europe's hidden beauty spots, to Peles Castle in Romania's Carpathian mountains, the spectacular Neo-Renaissance summer home of the country's first royal family. Guests will get an insight into the siege of Bosnian capital Sarajevo on a visit to the 'tunnel of hope' – a section of the tunnel that was part of the city's lifeline – with a resident who lived through the blockade, and visit Veliko Tarnovo, an ancient city of the Bulgarian empire.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [insightvacations.com](http://insightvacations.com)

**2 UZBEKISTAN** OK, it might not roll off the tongue as an obvious destination today, but with its pivotal location on the ancient Silk Road trade route, Uzbekistan has been welcoming visitors passing

through for more than two millennia. It sits at the heart of central Asia and is arguably the most fascinating and impressive of all the '-stans'. Shimmering mosques and stout rock fortresses spring up from the desert. The now-sprawling city of Samarkand, well-preserved Khiva and minaret-scattered Bukhara are highlights, and are all included in Just You's 12-day The Silk Road to Samarkand trip, which gives solo travellers an opportunity to visit the region with the companionship of a group and the support of a guide.

The itinerary includes some longish drives – guests can comfort themselves that it would have taken the original camel caravans far longer – but these are made up for by the unique sights, from ornate palaces and mosques to buzzing bazaars. Prices start at £1,999 including flights, half-board accommodation, transport, guiding, portage and airport lounge use in the UK.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [justyou.co.uk](http://justyou.co.uk)

**3 JAVA** Bordering Malaysia and Singapore, Indonesia can feel a little forgotten by British tourists among its more visited neighbours – especially if you're looking at any of its islands beyond Bali. Yet Java, next door, has stunning scenery and rich cultural traditions that make it worthy of exploration.

New to the Cosmos Tours & Cruises' 2016 programme is Jewels of Java and Bali, which will give clients a taste of both islands. On Java, guests can experience rural life at Candirejo Village, take a lesson in traditional gamelan music, visit the intricately carved Borobudur Temple and the palaces of Yogyakarta, and climb the 245 steps to the rim of the Mount Bromo volcanic crater.

On Bali, the tour heads for cultural centre Ubud, surrounded by rice paddies, villages and ancient temples, and where clients can spot macaque monkeys. After trips to more volcanoes and temples, there's beach time at Nusa Dua. Prices for the 13-day trip start at £2,279, including flights, accommodation, some meals, transport and guiding.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [cosmostoursandcruises.co.uk](http://cosmostoursandcruises.co.uk)

**4 BURMA** Burma has been an Asian success story in recent years, but we're still talking about relatively small numbers from the UK, and it's a destination quite untouched by the outside world.

Although the people are among the friendliest I've ever met – I know, brochure cliché alert, but nowhere else has a family of strangers invited me off the street to their daughter's birthday party – the language barrier is an issue, particularly in rural areas, and finding



→ your way around isn't easy outside downtown Yangon.

However, there's a treasure trove of sights and experiences to be found here, so it's an adventurous tourist's dream. New to Trafalgar's 2016 touring programme is the 11-day Secrets of Myanmar (the alternative name for Burma), which is packed with under-the-skin experiences, from taking part in a lamp-lighting ceremony at the golden stupa-crowned Schwedagon Pagoda to eating a home-cooked meal with a family in temple-dotted Bagan. The trip takes in all the major sights from capital Yangon and the famous temples of Bagan to Mandalay, day cruises on the Ayeyarwady and beauty spot Inle Lake, where the fisherman row their boats with one leg while standing on the other.

Starting at £2,645 on a land-only basis, the trip includes 10 nights' bed-and-breakfast accommodation, 11 additional meals, sightseeing and the services of a tour leader and VIP door-to-door transfers.

**FIND OUT MORE:**

[trafalgar.com](http://trafalgar.com)

**5 COLOMBIA**  
It's a far cry since the days that Colombia was regarded as too dangerous for travellers – in 2014 the tourist board reported a year-on-year rise of 28.5% in British tourists, and Avianca increased the frequency on its direct Heathrow-Bogota flight to daily in July.

The destination has a lot to offer, from snow-capped peaks to Caribbean coast, and lush coffee plantations to unspoilt Amazon jungle. The colonial gem of Cartagena is a must visit, and the ancient Tayrona capital, Ciudad Perdida, which dates back to the 11th century, is hailed as second only to Machu Picchu in historical importance.

Titan Travel's 15-day Contrasts of Colombia itinerary will run for the first time next year, visiting vibrant Bogota, staying in a hacienda in the Coffee Zone, descending into a salt mine to discover its underground cathedral, and stopping at colonial towns before ending at the beautiful city of Cartagena. Experiences include cable-car

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**Newfoundland is in a world of its own – even its time zone is half an hour ahead of the mainland**

rides across the Chicamocha Canyon, a cooking lesson, and a tour of a tobacco plantation.

Prices for the first departure of the tour, on January 19, start at £2,799, including flights, accommodation, 24 meals, excursions, guiding and the Titan VIP Home Departure Service.

**FIND OUT MORE:**

[titantravel.co.uk](http://titantravel.co.uk)

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#### NEWFOUNDLAND

Canada might be a familiar destination, but even repeat visitors are unlikely to have explored Newfoundland. This picturesque and sparsely populated island off the country's eastern coast is in a world of its own – even its

time zone is half an hour ahead of the mainland. Colourful fishing villages dot the epic marine landscape, icebergs and whales float off the coast, and traces of the Vikings who settled here in the 11th century can be found, alongside evidence of 16th century Basque whalers and, 100 years later, the remnants of the oldest English settlement in Canada.

Collette's 13-day tour starts in St John, North America's oldest and easternmost city, and tours the north of the island. Plenty of memorable experiences are included, from lobster dinners on the beach and musical performances to hands-on lessons in archaeology, and iceberg spotting from a lighthouse overlooking 'Iceberg Alley'. Boat trips venture out to spot puffins, whales and eagles.

Prices for 2016 departures of the tour, which run only during the summer season, start at £3,709, including flights, accommodation, 18 meals, transport, guiding and door-to-door transfers in the UK.

**FIND OUT MORE:**

[gocollette.com](http://gocollette.com)





## ➔ 7 GREENLAND

Three-quarters of the world's largest island is covered with ice, so it's probably unsurprising that it's one of the least densely populated countries in the world. There is, however, still plenty to see, and the name of Taber Holidays' Greenland's Ice, Whales and Culture tour pretty much sums the destination up.

The tour focuses on both the new and old ways of life on Greenland. The first part of the itinerary is based in Ilulissat, a modern town on the doorstep of Disko Bay where humpback whales come to feed on fish, and the magnificent Ilulissat Ice Fjord, where visitors can see calving glaciers, icebergs and remote settlements in which hunters still live by the old traditions.

The trip then moves on to Qasigianniguit for an insight into the island's history at the Living Settlement project, where volunteers bring to life the ancient Thule culture by manufacturing tools and leather

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### Addis Ababa's National Museum is home to three-million-year-old skeleton Lucy

clothes, and paddling visitors in kayaks while wearing Inuit clothing.

This eight-night trip is private but partially guided, so clients have support throughout. Departures run from June until August. Next year's prices haven't been released yet, but this year it cost £3,595, including flights from Heathrow to Ilulissat via Copenhagen, transfers, hotel accommodation and activities.

**FIND OUT MORE:**  
[taberhols.co.uk](http://taberhols.co.uk)

## 8 ETHIOPIA

Tourism is still in its infancy in Ethiopia, and sadly for many, the name is still more synonymous



ABOVE: Fasil Ghebbi, Ethiopia

with famine than anything else. But this does the destination a disservice – its scenery is spectacular, and its history rich and ancient.

The breathtakingly beautiful, 1,000-year-old rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are fascinating for those with or without faith, and they're just the start, with the tombs and obelisks of Axum and 17th-century castles to discover too.

Dramatic landscapes such as national parks in the Simien and Bale mountains offer

trekking and wildlife spotting, including baboons and ibexes.

Saga has a new 12-night tour for groups of up to 18 guests, starting in capital Addis Ababa, where the National Museum is home to three-million-year-old skeleton Lucy. The itinerary includes Lalibela, Axum and the Simien Mountains, plus other highlights from the walled fortress city of Fasil Ghebbi and the 13th-century monastery of Debre Libanos, as well as Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, and the Blue Nile Falls. ➔







LEFT: Jeju Island

RIGHT: Harbin Ice and Snow Festival



➔ Prices start at £2,499, including VIP door-to-door airport transfers, flights, accommodation, most meals, guiding, tourist visa, travel insurance and portage. The first departure is on November 11. **FIND OUT MORE:** [travel.saga.co.uk](http://travel.saga.co.uk)

**9 CHINA** With its language and alphabet barrier, cultural differences and huge size, China can be a challenge for an independent traveller. However, its signature sights are so appealing that sending clients off to see the Great Wall and the pandas might

seem relatively pedestrian to the super-adventurous. So why not give them something to boast about and send them somewhere really unusual?

Harbin, the capital of China's northernmost province, is famous for the annual Harbin International Ice and Snow Sculpture Festival – the largest of its kind in the world. It's particularly surreal at night, when the huge ice structures are lit up all the colours of the rainbow.

Wendy Wu Tours combines a three-night trip to Harbin with another red-letter experience – Chinese New Year in Shanghai. So as well as seeing the highlights of China's most modern city, clients will get to bring in the year of the monkey with dinner and dancing on a cruise down the Huangpu River, looking out over the historic Bund and futuristic Pudong. Departing February 2, the eight-day tour will be accompanied by Wendy Wu herself, and starts at £2,290 including flights, accommodation, meals and transport, guiding, entrance fees and visa costs for UK travellers.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [wendywutours.co.uk](http://wendywutours.co.uk)

Super-modern capital Seoul's high-tech heart is punctuated with meticulously reconstructed palaces. Yet it doesn't take long to get out into the countryside, visiting beautiful national parks or remote islands where life has stayed the same for centuries.

Travelsphere's 11-day South Korea's Heart and Seoul itinerary mixes it up. In Seoul, travellers will visit Gyeongbok Palace, take in the largest underground shopping centre in Asia and head out to the demilitarized zone that stretches for 2km on either side of the border between North and South Korea and is home to Cold War sights, including the Third Infiltration Tunnel, built by the North for a surprise attack but discovered by the South in 1978.

Then it's on to 'museum without walls' Gyeongju, packed with structures from the Silla kingdom which ruled from the seventh to ninth centuries; Gayasan National Park, where Haeinsa Temple nestles in the wooded foothills; and Jeju Island, where travellers will find volcanic craters, lava tunnels and Confucian shrines. Lessons in cooking Korean barbecue, making spicy pickle kimchi, and in sunmudo, a martial art practised by Korean monks, are included.

Tours run in the spring and autumn, with prices starting at £2,799, including flights, accommodation, transport, some meals, guiding and portage.

**FIND OUT MORE:** [travelsphere.co.uk](http://travelsphere.co.uk)



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GREECE

**10 SOUTH KOREA** Clients who want to dig deeper into South Korean culture than dancing to *Gangnam Style* can explore this compact land of contrasts on an escorted tour to help them squeeze the most out of their trip.