



# A very frequent traveler looks back

A longtime **BJT** contributor talks about some of her strongest memories from more than two decades of globetrotting.

by *Margie Goldsmith*

**W**hile working as a travel and lifestyle writer over the past 25 years, I've visited nearly 120 countries and territories on seven continents by airplane, helicopter, train, ship, kayak, horse, camel, and elephant. I've luxuriated in overwater bungalows in Fiji, been fluffed and buffed at the finest Southeast Asia resorts, and been wined and dined by private chefs in palaces and on secluded beaches. I've gotten up close and personal with the gorillas of Rwanda, have been nearly eaten by a cheetah in Namibia, and have bottle-fed newborn lambs in New Zealand. I've tried every adventure from canyoneering in Wales to dune bugging in Atlantic Canada, slept on the softest beds everywhere from Australia to Vietnam, and dug my feet in the sand of beaches from Canouan to Easter Island. People ask what's my favorite destination, but picking one would be like choosing a favorite child: each country is different but equally loved.

When I look back on my travels, what stands out most is not the number of World

Heritage Sites I've visited or the five-star hotels or the gourmet wine and food. My strongest memories are of the people I've met, including the ones whose languages I don't speak, because there's always a way to communicate.

Once I was in Morocco, staying at Sir Richard Branson's Kasbah Tamadot, a former Moorish palace perched 4,000 feet up in the Berber countryside. I toured the area with a guide, luxuriated at the resort's spa and pool, and returned for dinners al fresco. One morning I went for a run down the steep hill outside the resort. Standing on the side of the road were two Berber women, each dressed in a head covering, long skirt, and slippers with pointed toes.

Coming back up the hill I saw the women were still there. Each extended a henna-tattoo-covered hand. Were they stopping me? No! They wanted to run! I gripped their hands and the three of us charged up the hill, shrieking with joy. At the top, we doubled over in laughter and hugged like long-lost friends. While I can't recall the color of my posh suite or

▲ Trying the EdgeWalk at Toronto's CN Tower  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARGIE GOLDSMITH, EXCEPT AS NOTED

the delicious Moroccan food I ate, I will forever remember the joyous shrieks and huge smiles of those two Berber women.

Not all of my trips have started well. I went to Liss Ard Estate in Ireland's County Cork, a former country home surrounded by velvety green countryside and woods. Liss Ard is home to artist James Turrell's Sky Garden Crater, said to be a transformative experience and the reason I chose to go. I lay on my back on the cold stone plinth artwork for at least 25 minutes, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did.

Disappointed, I gave up, had dinner, and went to the nearby village pub to listen to live music. The place was empty except for a three-piece band. When I walked in, the guitar player asked whether I could sing and I shook my head no. They started to play Paul Butterfield's "Born in Chicago," and I pulled out my harmonica. "I can't sing," I said, "but if you play in the key of A..." We jammed until after midnight. Maybe the Turrell artwork wasn't a transformative experience, but playing music with the Irish boys from Cork certainly was.

Some trips never deliver great experiences. Once, I took a tall-ship cruise to the San Blas Islands in Panama, where I went to meet the indigenous Kuna Indians. Among the ship's 30 passengers were eight disheveled, grubby photographers and 10 nubile teenaged models, always dressed in bikinis or peignoirs, even to meals. Each time we landed on an island, this motley group would disappear behind the palm trees, where the models would strip and the

## Margie's Travel Tips

- On a tight schedule? You're only as good as your guide. I always work through a U.S. tour operator, especially for private trips; the operator knows the best local bilingual facilitators to whisk me through customs in many visa-required destinations.
- One of the best ways to get to know a country is to hire a driver/guide (also arranged by the tour operator) who can take you to restaurants, markets, and other attractions that you otherwise wouldn't find.
- If want to visit a particular destination or shop for certain items, let your tour operator know well in advance so he can arrange special stops for you. And buy all theatre and concert tickets way before the trip through the tour operator or you'll end up in the last row.
- Many traveler scams start at airports. Rather than choose a taxi driver from a lineup, arrange to have one waiting for you with your name on a sign. It's safer and much more convenient.

cameramen would shoot them in provocative positions. Palm trees don't provide much of a curtain and the Kuna women, dressed in long skirts and modest hand-embroidered blouses, stared in disbelief. At least the Kuna and the rest of us passengers had something in common, and happily, the cruise company went out of business.

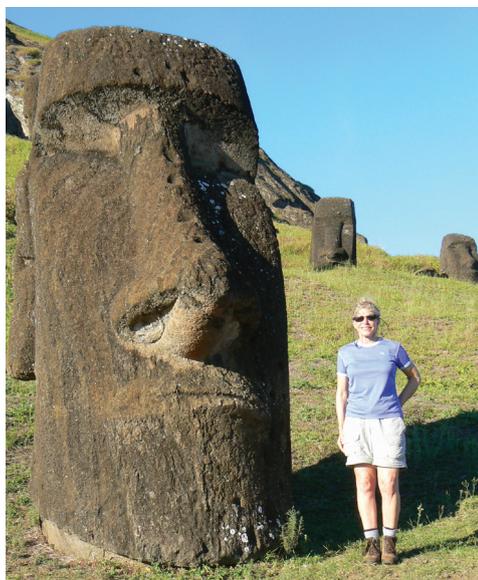
Many vacationers insist on visiting at least one Michelin-starred restaurant, and while I like gourmet fare as much as anyone, I prefer

simple food, which always offers an indication of a country's culture. In the Swiss Alps, I ate in the finest dining establishments of St. Moritz and Arosa, but I had my most memorable meal after walking an hour on a snow-covered path to the Alpenblick Restaurant, a wooden hut in the middle of nowhere. There, I dined on local cheeses, dried meats, and freshly baked bread followed by a decadent dessert of mounds of fresh whipped crème slathered on layers of pastry. And though I can't remember the name of the dessert, I can still recall the taste of that crème.

Khachapuri, a cheese-filled bread sometimes also filled with spinach or potatoes, is the national dish in the Republic of Georgia. It's much better than pizza, so good they serve it in many restaurants in Russia. I devoured it at every meal in Tbilisi's finest dining spots, but liked it best the day my guide and driver took me to the Caucasus Mountains. There, we gorged on khachapuri on a picnic table next to a rushing stream and near a grazing goat. It doesn't get more authentic than that.

Speaking of authentic, my first meal in Havana was in a restaurant and was one of the worst meals I've ever had. After that, I had the taxi driver take me to a paladar, a home-cooked meal served on the porch or living room of a local's home—much cheaper and much more delicious.

When I'm traveling, I love to combine authenticity with extravagance. On a trip to Fiji, I took a 50-minute jet hop to Sumba, an Indonesian island where men still carry machetes—though no longer for headhunting, just for cracking coconuts. Here, locals live



Visiting Easter Island



Sumba, which Goldsmith wrote about for the February/March 2015 **BJT**

MONICA RENATA

exactly as their ancestors did, often with their animals in wooden houses on stilts.

There is only one luxury resort on the island, Nihiwatu, where each guest has a personal mori-uma (much more than a butler) who anticipates his or her every move. Jenny planned my activities and meals, handed me a fluffy towel after each swim, and guided me to ancient Sumbanese villages and on hikes to hidden swimming holes. The food was gourmet, yet I could dine barefoot beneath the stars as the ocean lapped peacefully a few feet away.

While Nihiwatu was my most luxurious trip, my most memorable one was to Bhutan, a tiny country wedged in between India and China. I say “memorable” because while more than 12 years have passed since I went there, I can still see the rosy-cheeked mothers leading their toddlers up a mountain trail on ponies or yaks and the groups of uniformed schoolchildren who raced after me to touch my clothes and perform a private concert of every song they knew.

A close runner-up for most memorable is Papua, New Guinea, which is easily accessible by ship but attracts few tourists. My Coral Cruise ship towed a smaller vessel that could pull up right onto the sand at each island. At each landing, the locals put on a “sing-sing,” a song-and-dance exhibition that they performed in their native dress with painted faces, bare breasts, and grass skirts. On one island whose inhabitants were once cannibals, the chief looked at me fiercely as I disembarked the boat. I took a step back as he said, “We used to eat you, but now we greet you.” Then he broke into a big toothy grin.

There are some countries whose politics I hate, but I visit them anyway because I know that

anything I buy from locals will go directly into their pockets. Tibet was disappointing because the Chinese have destroyed so many monasteries and nunneries and have built tinted blue glass buildings where they don’t belong. I went there to climb to Advanced Base Camp on the north face of Mt. Everest. On the way back to Katmandu, I stopped at a Tibetan Refugee Center. An older woman working at a loom said, “Please tell everyone at home and on the internet to tell the Chinese we wish them no harm, but please tell them to go home.”

Another time I visited Myanmar. I abhor its politics, but I wanted to see the country’s most sacred Buddhist pagoda, Shwedagon, and the remains of 2,200 temples in Bagan. It was dawn in Bagan, and I was alone with my camera, trying to capture the sunrise on the temples. Suddenly a small girl carrying a flashlight approached and pulled on my arm. I couldn’t understand what she was saying, but she led me to a dark temple and shone her flashlight on a flight of stairs so I wouldn’t trip. From the second floor, I could see every temple around me—the perfect photo. After I got my picture, she led me to her home, where her mother offered me tea. I gave them my NYC hat and lipstick. They were ecstatic, and their smiles meant more to me than the photographs I had just taken.

I continue to travel the world, looking to accumulate more memories like these, and though the list of places I’ve visited is now long, my wish list is still long, too. Up around the top of it right now: Iceland, Greenland, Austria, the Baltics, and the greatest new frontier of all, outer space. **BJT**

Dogsledding in Banff in Alberta, Canada



## Margie’s Packing Tips

- Print a currency-converter table, which will be much handier than a smartphone-based or online calculator. (See [oanda.com/currency/travel-exchange-rates](http://oanda.com/currency/travel-exchange-rates).)
- Buy converter plugs for your electrical devices and carry a multi-outlet extension cord for recharging multiple devices. (Often, accommodations have only one or two accessible plugs.)
- Bring a small flashlight and leave it by the bedside for nights when you want to get up in the dark and can’t find the light switch.
- When traveling by airliner, try to limit yourself to a carry-on plus a backpack/duffle bag. That way, you’ll never have to worry about lost luggage or wait for it to come off the carousel.
- Limit clothes to one dressy outfit and some mix-and-match casual items. No one notices what you’re wearing.
- Wear your heaviest shoes on the airplane and pack only one pair of dress shoes, sneakers, and flip-flops. Pack socks in the shoes.
- Leave room in your suitcase for items purchased on your trip. If that’s not possible, ship home whatever you can’t resist purchasing.
- Buy insurance. If you take at least four trips a year, buy it by the year. You can also insure by the trip.



FOTOLIA

Goldsmith went to Myanmar because she wanted to see the country’s sacred Shwedagon pagoda.

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