

Frette linen at the Mandarin Oriental.

Specialist tour operators like Hinterland Travel (*Hinterlandtravel.com*) and Wild Frontiers (*Wildfrontiers.co.uk*) offer guided trips to remote, wild and dangerous places, mostly in Central Asia and the Middle East. Regional tour operators such as Sitara offer tours of the five Central Asian ‘Stans’ (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) as well as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and China. The most interesting tour operator is Secret Compass (*Secretcompass.com*), which runs expeditions to places that have rarely been traversed, climbing the Zagros Mountains of Iraq or river rafting through the Murchison Falls in Uganda. Tourists have to apply to the expeditions and pay approximately £3,500 per person for such once-in-a-lifetime trips. These are expensive, but not much more than your standard luxury vacation. Human rights organisations like Global Exchange (*Globalexchange.org*) also run what they call ‘reality tours’, in which they attempt to connect visitors with locals for meaningful conversations and understanding.

Countries such as Poland, Sudan and South Africa have tried to capitalise on this interest and encourage war tourism. When I stayed in Johannesburg, a popular tour involved a visit to the Apartheid Museum, Nelson Mandela’s house and the suburbs of Soweto, where the now-iconic image of a young man holding a dying schoolboy in his arms sparked the Soweto Uprising. Tour operators were also willing to take interested tourists to the dangerous suburbs of Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville, often after signing stringent disclaimer forms. Closer home, Sri Lanka has been criticised for building tourist lodges in the site where “tens of thousands of civilians were killed”, according to an article in the *Telegraph*.

## WHY WOULD YOU GO?

Few tourists go on a lark; most go because it is a calling. Pavithra Selvam, a 27-year-old London-based communications professional, went as a humanitarian aid volunteer to Afghanistan and, with the United Nations Development Programme, to the West Bank of Palestine. In Afghanistan, although



## In 2001, I had coffee with Israeli friends in downtown Jerusalem. The following day, the Hamas carried out a suicide bombing yards from where we sat

she had a bodyguard, she lived in constant fear of being abducted. “Being a woman and a foreigner is a double negative. Plus, I’m South Indian, which is completely different from being a white aid worker. People expect you to conduct yourself just like the Afghan women.” After being threatened during her stint at the West Bank, Selvam had to beg an Israeli taxi driver to smuggle her out of the country. He saved her life by telling the border police that she was his Indian girlfriend. The average tourist can view these types of experiences as life-threatening—or life-enhancing.

For some outsiders, events in India can provide the same sense of violation as a war-torn destination. Ulrika Nandra, a Swedish-Indian journalist, came to India to write about the country. She wrote several Mumbai stories, including one about Kamathipura, the red-light district, after interviewing pimps, police officers, brothel owners and sex workers. It became the cover story of *Svenska Dagbladet*, a Swedish daily, and ran with a headline translated as, ‘In Bombay, you can buy a 12-year-old for less than 100 kronor.’ That was in 2007. Since then, Nandra has had all her Indian visa applications rejected.

Artists are attracted to conflict zones too, mostly for the intense visual—and

other—experiences they offer. Ernest Hemingway lived in Cuba, which wasn’t exactly war-torn but certainly more dangerous than his birthplace, Oak Park, Illinois. Isak Dinesen left Sweden for Kenya and found a “freedom which until then, one had only found in dreams.” Currently, visual artist Emanuel Licha has a project, *War Tourist* (*Wartourist.net*), in which he films Sarajevo, Chernobyl, New Orleans, the suburbs of Paris and Auschwitz. News reports describe a Japanese trucker, Toshifumi Fujimoto, who sought out Middle Eastern trouble spots such as Syria, Yemen and Cairo, where he photographed, among other things, bodies of war victims including a seven-year-old girl. All this without a flak jacket or helmet. (Fujimoto had taken insurance as a precaution, but that was pretty much it.)

If artists—and a trucker—go to war-torn spots for inspiration, journalists, most famously Barkha Dutt and Christiane Amanpour, go to report. These aren’t for the faint of spirit. War photographer Kevin Carter, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his image of a vulture waiting behind an emaciated girl in Sudan, committed suicide at age 33. His story was immortalised in the movie *The Bang Bang Club* (2010).

Nandra explains a code of conduct. She takes precautions for staying safe. She walks fast, as if she is going to meet someone; avoids eye contact; dresses in local garb to blend in; carries nothing of value except an ID and a contact number; and stays on top of embassy warnings about locations. Some of it also has to do with attitude, though. Leonardo DiCaprio’s portrayal in *Blood Diamond* (2006) comes to mind. He doesn’t judge or try to reform the people who surround him.

Conflict zones may not be for you, particularly if you are going with family. Certainly, only a minuscule percentage of the world’s one billion tourists (as of 2012) are going to visit war-torn lands. Reliable statistics for the number of these travellers aren’t available, but those who go can take comfort from the knowledge that their visit will not only help the tourist economy, it will help a country heal. As film-maker Ashvin Kumar says, “Tourists normalise a battled land.” ■