



ANGIE WANG

LIKE A LITERARY COMPANION to Google Earth, a host of new books zero in on points across the globe from Alaska to Iran, the Middle East to Mesoamerica, Khartoum to Calcutta and, of course, Paris (we'll always have Paris), providing highly individual answers to the question: Why do we travel?

Patricia Hampl isn't sure we should. Raised in Minnesota, educated by nuns, she long sought to reconcile her Roman Catholic school appreciation of the "inner voice" with her "native" Midwestern trait: "the desire to be elsewhere." Early in **THE ART OF THE WASTED DAY** (Viking, \$26), she reaches back to Chaucer to grasp the roots of wanderlust. "Springtime, after a winter cooped up, and everyone wants to hit the road," she writes, paraphrasing his zestful Canterbury pilgrims. Hampl suspects that a less cheery impulse motivates contemporary American wanderers, a national mania — encoded in the Declaration of Independence — to pursue happiness, rather than "stay put" and simply be happy. But after the death of her husband, she found that her enjoyment of her quiet hours had palled. To rekindle her pleasure in her own company, she embarked on "a tour of the heroes of leisure," men and women like the "sluggish, lax and drowsy" French philosopher Montaigne, who holed up in a drafty tower to write his "Essais"; the Moravian monk Gregor Mendel, who founded the science of genetics as he cultivated his abbey's garden; and the reclusive 18th-century Welsh BFFs known as the Ladies of Llangollen. Here Hampl finds proof of the endurance of "the sane singular voice, alone with its thoughts," which doesn't need to cross mountains to express itself.

In **ALONE TIME: Four Seasons, Four Cities, and the Pleasures of Solitude** (Viking, \$27), Stephanie Rosenbloom, a travel col-

umnist for The New York Times, set out on her own for a more practical purpose. Learning that increasing numbers of Americans were taking vacations-for-one, she decided to test-drive the trend in some of the world's most sociable cities. In so doing, she not only dispels the stigma attaching to solo travel, she debunks the myth of the "supposed horror of solo dining." In Paris, she picnicked amid the promenades of the Luxembourg Gardens, feasted on oysters at the Closserie des Lilas and ambled through Balzac's home, Hampl-style. In Istanbul, she lolled in the steamy Cemberlitas hamam. In Florence, she communed at the Uffizi with the most ogled woman in the world, Botticelli's Venus. "I liked to be alone in Constantinople," Greta Garbo said. So, Rosenbloom discovered, did she. But she also explored New York, her hometown, as if she were a tourist: "Savoring the moment, examining things closely, reminiscing — these practices are not strictly for use on the road. They're for everyday life, anywhere."

The veteran adventure writer Levison Wood had no desire to go it alone on his 2016 trek through Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, which culminated in a death-defying crossing of the bandit-ridden mountain jungles of the Darién Gap. For one thing, as a seasoned British paratrooper, Wood is steeped in esprit de corps. But **WALKING THE AMERICAS: 1,800 Miles, Eight Countries, and One Incredible Journey From Mexico to Colombia** (Atlantic Monthly, \$27) reveals a less sentimental reason for the author's fondness for company. Without the translation skills and acute regional spider-senses of his compañero, the Mexican photographer Alberto Cáceres, Wood might have been kidnapped, or worse, by the desperadoes they encountered. His latest wanderlog, a self-declared "tale of adventure in the modern age," continues the exoticizing, thrill-a-minute tradition of "King Solomon's Mines" and Indiana Jones. For four months, the

friends forded streams, plunged into skull-filled cenotes, slithered up muddy ridges, skirted quicksand, huddled in bat caves and hacked through forests filled with tarantulas, scorpions, poison frogs, jaguars and fer-de-lance snakes. There were rewards along the way, from hugging a "dopey" sloth to summiting Costa Rica's Mount Chirripó at dawn. "We stood in wonderment while the sky grew redder and the sun rose above the eastern horizon," Wood writes. "To the east shone the Caribbean Sea, merging into the sunrise, and with a sweep of 180 degrees, I looked behind me, and there was the golden panorama of the Pacific; two oceans from one vantage point, separated by one narrow spit of land."

At the edge of the Darién Gap, Wood came across a sign on the Pan-American Highway that read: "12,580 km to Alaska." Unbeknown to him (presumably), another explorer, Mark Adams, had completed his exploits of the northern reaches of that road soon before Wood began his down south. In **THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG: My 3,000-Mile Journey Around Wild Alaska, the Last Great American Frontier** (Dutton, \$28), Adams repeats the steps (and oar strokes) of the 1899 Harriman Expedition to Alaska. Fifty years before the territory became a state, the Gilded Age entrepreneur Edward Harriman led a reconnaissance tour of the Alaskan coast, starting in Seattle, heading north through the Inside Passage, up to the Gold Rush town of Skagway, on to the former Russian capital, Sitka, and from there to Kodiak Island, the Aleutians and "obscure places . . . labeled UNKNOWN on maps." Among the passengers were the eminent naturalist John Muir and George Bird Grinnell, founder of the Audubon Society. Taking a boat into Glacier Bay, Adams observes sea lions clustered on low rocks "like ants on a dropped lollipop," then turns in time to spot six spouting whales. Jumping from ferry to kayak, he glides with a guide into a cove dominated by a "neon-blue glacier" and sets up camp on Russell Island, "a cathedral of ice," to behold the Grand Pacific Glacier. Adams and his guide wake in that breathtaking setting to a heart-stopping spectacle: two grizzly bears nosing around their tent. After trying to scare them off, the men high-tail it for the kayak. Later, Adams meets a cruise ship pilot who had spotted them on the beach before the ursine invasion. "I thought, Man, look at that setup!" the pilot tells him. "Those guys must be having the time of their lives." He wasn't wrong.

The British geography professor Alastair Bonnett has a flair for communicating his passion for "the glee and the drama, the love and the loathing" that emanate from the earth's most perplexing and mutable places. Prudently, he has gathered 39 of these protean zones between two covers, so readers will know what on earth (or water) he's talking about. And if **BEYOND THE MAP: Unruly Enclaves, Ghostly Places, Emerging Lands and Our Search for New Utopias** (University of Chicago, \$25) doesn't produce a tsunami of new geography majors, he isn't to blame. Had you heard that a peat bog as big as England was discovered in Congo only four years ago? Were you aware of the term "spikescapes" — public spaces that urban planners mine with booby traps, like benches barbed with steel prongs and rosy fluorescent lighting that showcases acne, spooking teenage loiterers? Don't you wish you could visit the massive film set in the Ukrainian city of Kharkov, the size of two football fields, built between 2006 and 2011 to hold a disturbingly exact replica of 1950s Moscow, where thousands of drably clad actors re-enacted Soviet life, including nighttime visits by the K.G.B.? Bonnett's provocative detours show us how much more we can know of the known world, if we know where to look, and how.

Still, some places are harder to access than others.

LIESL SCHILLINGER, a critic and translator, is the author of "Wordbirds: An Irreverent Lexicon for the 21st Century."

When the journalist Stephan Orth traveled to Iran, he was aided by the accident of his German nationality. Americans have a hard time getting visas to the country and it's not much easier for others. Nonetheless, like a web-savvy denizen of Bonnett's 16th stopping point, "Cybertopia," Orth used the internet to launch himself into a fantastical realm that happens to be real. In **COUCHSURFING IN IRAN: Revealing a Hidden World** (Greystone, paper, \$16.95), he describes the openhearted reception he encountered in that closed country, where he found lodging in the homes of ordinary Iranians who put him up free during his two-month trip. This was brave of them because, as Orth's host in Shiraz explained, taking in foreigners is forbidden. "Be quiet and don't speak English on the street," he is warned. "Otherwise, the neighbors will hear you." Orth found his hosts mostly through the app "Couchsurfing," an international enterprise that pairs travelers with sociable locals. City by city, he winged it, texting his hosts to arrange meeting points. On the island of Kish, in the middle of the night, he fished for bream and catfish with a die-hard Iranian fan of the American motivational speaker Anthony Robbins. In Isfahan, he played guitar (Adele and Metallica) for a classroom of schoolboys. And in Tehran, he joined a clandestine gathering of mild-mannered BDSM devotees in a public park. "The people here are hungry for news from other countries," he observes, adding that outsiders are just as hungry for on-the-ground knowledge of Iran. "I have an explicit answer to the question of whether you should visit a country where you are at odds with the political leadership," he writes. "There are no bad places if the reason you are traveling is to meet people."

The novelist Jamal Mahjoub has been at odds with the political leadership of Sudan for much of his life. Born in London in 1960 to a Sudanese journalist and a British accountant, he was raised in Sudan's capital, Khartoum. He went to England for college and stayed abroad thereafter. His parents remained in Khartoum until 1989, when an Islamist coup spurred them to move to Cairo, never to return. But in 2008, Mahjoub began a series of his own returns. **A LINE IN THE RIVER: Khartoum, City of Memory** (Bloomsbury, \$30) explains why. It is said, he writes, that from the sky the city resembles an elephant's head ("khartoum" means "trunk" in Arabic). But on his visits, he saw that Khartoum's outward face had changed, studded with towering buildings courting oil-industry wealth. Beneath the boomtown mask, he detected a palimpsest of the past, from imperial interference (Egyptian, British) to the rise of the charismatic "Mahdi" to the demise of Maj. Gen. Charles Gordon, which provoked Lord Kitchener to reassert British influence. When, in 1956, the British relinquished their hold, Khartoum was reborn as the capital of the Republic of Sudan. Why, Mahjoub asks, has his country made so little use of its freedom? "Out of half a century of independence Sudan has seen 40 years of civil war." With this book, he wanted to trace "the evolution of the tragedy of a nation never achieved," a task he likens to "trying to throw a rope around a cloud."

While Mahjoub's fascination with Khartoum is largely political, the journalist and political scientist Kushanava Choudhury takes his own hometown extremely personally. Passionate and pugnacious, Choudhury's **EPIC CITY: The World on the Streets of Calcutta** (Bloomsbury, \$28) reveals a man head over heels in love with a badly behaved but alluring metropolis. Westerners see his city as "the epitome of urban hell, the Detroit of the world," but to him, the city's flaws can't dispel its enchantment. Although born in Buffalo, Choudhury lived in Kolkata, as the city is now known, until he was almost 12, when his family moved back to the United States. Resistant to American transplantation, he

pired for the chaotic hubbub of West Bengal and after graduating from Princeton returned to Kolkata to work for an English-language newspaper. Back in Bengal, he exulted in the "aimless, digressive" conversational pastime known as *adda*; savored the street food; admired the gaudy chariots and costumed revelers that thronged narrow lanes during Hindu festivals; and embraced the whoosh of the monsoon rains that send the tarpaulin roofs of sidewalk restaurants "flying open like giant capes." He left again to study at Yale, but returned after he got his doctorate, with his grad-school girlfriend, soon-to-become wife, Durba, in tow. Immune to her husband's magnificent obsession, she protested when he mocked her preference for Western-style coffee shops over tea wallahs whose stands faced open gutters. "Who do you think you would



An unpaved highway in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest.

marry who would be happy here?" she exclaimed. But "Epic City" makes it clear that Choudhury's heart already belonged to another. What living woman can compete with an immortal old flame?

A more placid female smoothed Shoba Narayan's re-entry to India when she moved with her husband and young daughters to Bangalore — southern India's tech hub and finance center — after nearly 20 years in the United States. That female was a cow, whom she encountered in her building's elevator, "angled diagonally to fit," heading three floors up to bless a housewarming. "You'd think that a modern democracy like India would get over this cow obsession," she thought, amused; but after mulling it over, she hustled upstairs to ask the cow to bless her apartment, too. The friendship Narayan struck up with Sarala, the cow's escort, forms the subject of her amiable memoir, **THE MILK LADY OF BANGALORE: An Unexpected Adventure** (Algonquin, \$24.95). At first, Narayan was wary of the earthy, grassy-smelling unpasteurized milk Sarala sold, produced by cows that grazed in the neighborhood. Before long, though, she became an "evangelist," inviting neighbors

over for coffee in hopes of converting them to fresh milk. Soon she resolved to buy a cow to donate to Sarala's herd, scouring nearby villages for a candidate. "This is a good cow," the owner of a Holstein-Friesian assured her. "Its milk will taste like ambrosia." Sold. As her new acquisition munched betel nuts, coconut and bananas, Narayan decided the creature was "positively Zen" and named her "Blissful Lakshmi," for the goddess of wealth.

Rick Bass had other sacred cows in mind when he began a multistop literary and gustatory pilgrimage a few years back. Reeling from an unsought divorce and yearning to reinforce his bonds with the authors and artists who had shaped his writing life, he devised a soul-nourishing, road-burning act of tribute. He would leave his log cabin in Montana's remote Yaak Valley, travel to the homes of his mentors and thank them by cooking them a meal. In the record of this culinary catharsis, **THE TRAVELING FEAST: On the Road and at the Table With My Heroes** (Little, Brown, \$28), Bass serves up a rich smorgasbord of a memoir, truffled with pungent anecdote, sometimes funny, sometimes sorrowful, always savory. The melancholic power of these reunions is heightened by the reader's awareness that some of these literary lions (Peter Matthiessen, Denis Johnson, John Berger) were soon to roar their last. But there's also abundant hilarity, usually provided by Bass's mountain-man approach to the dinner table. Whether the GPS points to Wisconsin (Lorrie Moore), the "meadow-scented green wonder of West Sussex" (David Sedaris), the French Alps (Berger) or northern Idaho (Johnson), Bass loads the cooler with salmon, elk and rhubarb, like a bear on holiday. At Tom McGuane's place in Montana, he attempts to grill a turkey, producing a "sonic blast" that rocks the house, burns "like a comet" and blazes in a golden "molten, gurgling, flaming corona." At Berger's farmhouse, on the other hand, where a crowd of friends and family has gathered, every course is perfection. As Berger pours out wine "like rich paint in our sunlit crystal goblets," Bass reads grief in his host's eyes. Remembering that Berger's wife of 40 years, Beverly, had died not long before, he recalls the emotion that gave rise to his pilgrimage: his fears, as a suddenly single man, about what the rest of his life would look like. "What do I need?" he asks Berger. "Courage" is the reply.

THE ROAD TRIP BOOK: 1001 Drives of a Lifetime (Universe, \$36.95) requires a different kind of courage, as well as, in some cases, "nerves of steel, a seriously capable vehicle and very good health insurance." Covering "every country on the planet that was feasibly accessible at the time of publication," this ravishing and sometimes hair-raising bucket list for the bucket seat was assembled by ace road-tripping writers and edited by the "motoring journalist" Darryl Sleath. Don't mistake it for a mere coffee-table book: Although its lavish photographs invite armchair daydreams, this tome doubles as a reference work. Each entry includes a Google Maps link and helpful tips (if driving in Bhutan, be advised that roads are generally eight feet wide, tops, unpaved and "subject to severe landslides"), and the drives are organized according to an orderly geographic scheme and meticulously indexed. Especially tempting entries include the Beartooth Highway drive, which starts in Montana, with stunning views onto Yellowstone's glacial lakes, pine forests, waterfalls and mountains; the Trollstigen National Tourist Route in Norway, whose hairpin curves reward those who don't need Dramamine; and, in Northern Ireland, the "Game of Thrones" drive, which begins at the Titanic Studios in Belfast, heads north past the Antrim coast, and loops round to the Cushendun Caves, before descending to the spooky Dark Hedges on the King's Road. Fasten your seatbelts! □