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ROUGH GUIDES: MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME ON EARTH

Written by **Rough Guides**

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MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME ON EARTH

THE ROUGH GUIDE TO THE WORLD

Fully updated fourth edition

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INTRODUCTION

What makes the ultimate travel experience? Is it something as simple as stumbling across that perfect undiscovered restaurant where you can feast on traditional food among locals? Or is it that dream adventure that takes you outside your comfort zone and pushes you to new limits? We asked our Rough Guide writers to share their most inspirational experiences – to inspire yours. Wildly different, the accounts all had one thing in common: authenticity. Each and every one pushed travel a bit further, either through opening a path to new territories, forging fresh routes across established ones or offering a new way of looking at the world.

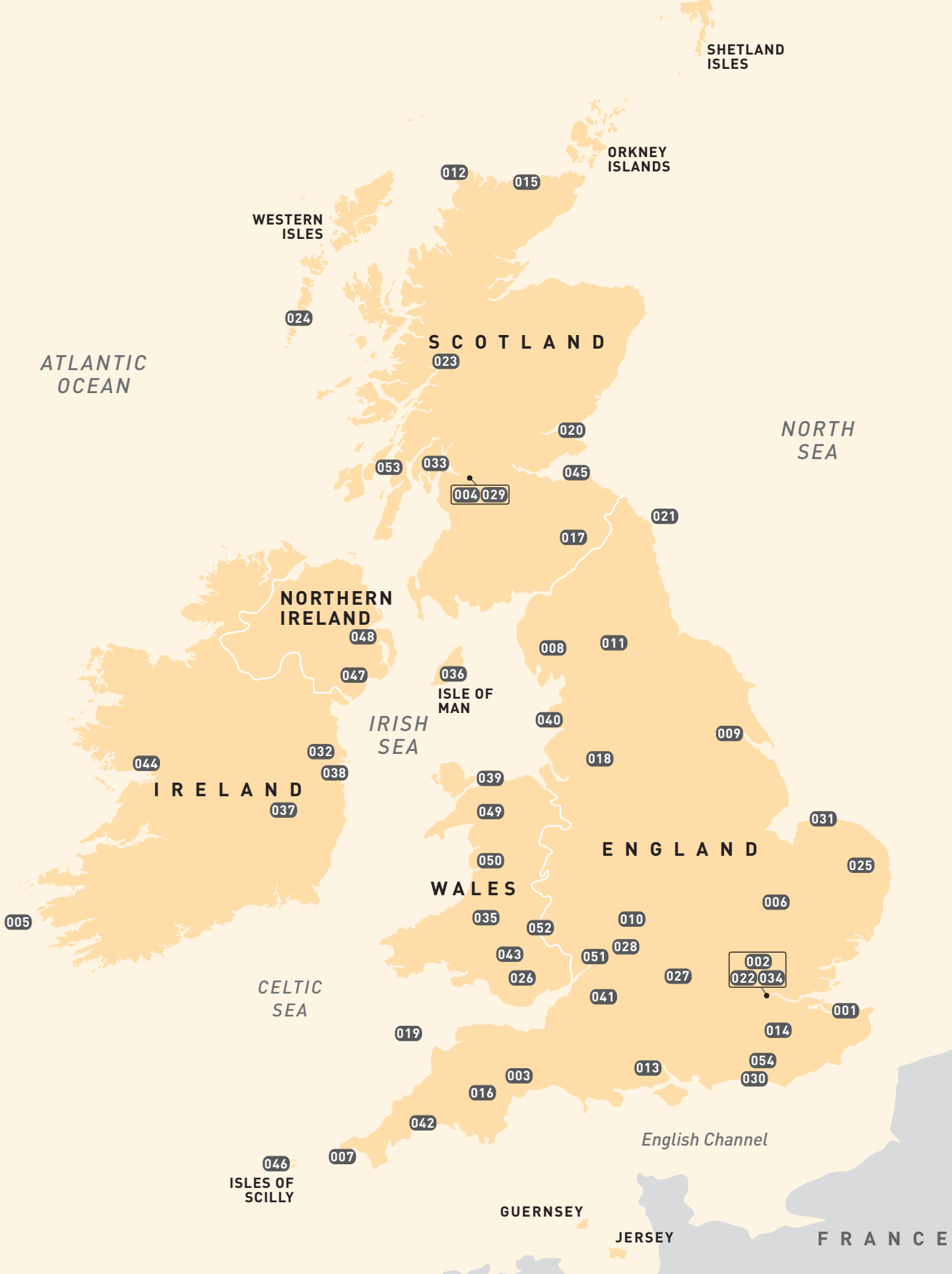
It might be the all-encompassing awe of discovering an ancient city like Volubilis or defying gravity at China's Hanging Temple, or the sheer exhilaration of paragliding against a dramatic Matterhorn backdrop. It could be humbling wildlife encounters, from hippo-spotting in the Bijagós Islands to glimpsing jaguars in the Paraguayan Pantanal, or it might be appreciating natural wonders in all their diverse glory: Pamukkale's shallow staircase of thermal pools, the towering giants of Sequoia National Park, the churning waters of Devil's Pool in Zambia.

A shift to conscious travel sees people make better-informed decisions, not only booking trips that are unique but those that benefit local people and places too. Travellers are heading off the beaten track in an attempt to prevent popular places being "loved to death", whether that be wild camping in the Oman desert, going off-grid in northern Saskatchewan or exploring unchartered fjords in wild East Greenland.

That's not to say travel always has to be pushing yourself to extremes – you can have a life-changing experience from something as wonderfully unassuming as clawing for clams on Île de Noirmoutier or getting lost in the golden streets of Valletta.

Some experiences in this book are easy to undertake, others require planning and expertise. Some are rare events that happen once every few years; many are daily occurrences. Every single one, though, is a personal recommendation. For this fourth edition, we've added more than one hundred and fifty new experiences from around the globe. We hope that they truly inspire you to make the most of your time on Earth.

Joanna Reeves, Editor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BRITAIN & IRELAND

001–054

Which is the real Britain and Ireland? The tradition-rich home of Welsh choirs, Oxford colleges and Georgian spa towns? The open expanses of green Connemara hills, vast Norfolk beaches and rearing Scottish highlands? Or the culture-packed buzz of its fast-paced cities? The answer, happily, is all of them. Layered with centuries of history, peppered with iconic attractions and well stocked with regional delicacies, Britain and Ireland juggle old and new to thrilling and sometimes eccentric effect, whether you're staying in an off-grid treehouse in Wales, walking in Hockney's landscapes on the Yorkshire Wolds Way, admiring street art in Manchester and London or cycling the North Coast 500 in Scotland.

001 In celebration of the oyster

ENGLAND I've always loved Whitstable, the arty fishing town on Kent's northern coast, with its shingle shore, its beach huts, its huge skies and its workaday bustle – and its oysters, which have been harvested in these estuarine waters since Roman times. So here I am, the archetypal "Down From Londoner" as locals call us, come to celebrate these ancient, sea-salty delicacies at Whitstable's annual Oyster Festival.

Heralding a week of ceilidhs and crabbing competitions, tug-o-wars and dog shows, the festival starts with the stately Landing of the Oysters, when fishermen carry baskets of freshly caught creatures from sea to shore to present them for blessing. Having witnessed this peculiarly moving scene, I follow the carnival parade of giant sea beasts and excited schoolkids through town before ducking off to the harbour. In the cool of the fish market I discover enormous prawns, silvery sardines and tiny tiger-striped clams shifting on their icy beds – and, of course, the celebrated oysters, heaped on wooden carts. Natives being out of season, these are Rock oysters, their gnarled, algae-tinged shells as dark, cold and heavy as tombstones.

Nearby, at the seafront, serious-faced shuckers deftly gouge open shells and flip the meat, mermaid tattoos writhing on their arms as they prepare plates for the feeding frenzy. This is not refined food. Silt smears the cold marble slabs while grit-flecked brine swooshes out of primeval-looking shells. The oysters themselves are colossal, their flesh gleaming and smooth, laced with delicate black frills. I grab a plate, plus a lemon quarter, and tip them back, savouring that surprising hit, mineral and creamy, a slurp of the ocean.

Next I head to the *Old Neptune*, Whitstable's pub on the beach, for a pint of oyster stout. Dark and cold, with a salty caramel bite, it's the perfect drink for today. Just yards away, silvery waves klonk hard against the shingle, churning up speckled shells before retreating with a shimmery whisper. Even without its Oyster Festival, Whitstable has a lot to celebrate.

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The Globe Theatre: Shakespeare as it should be

002

ENGLAND It's standing-room only in 'the pit' at Shakespeare's Globe on London's South Bank, a reconstruction of the original theatre a few hundred metres away at which Shakespeare's theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, performed from 1599. Here in "this wooden O", as Henry V calls it, hard wooden seats encircle the 'thrust' stage, but you get the best atmosphere if you take your place in the pit, standing in the footsteps of the Elizabethan and Jacobean 'groundlings' who paid a penny apiece.

The cheap seats are also the best seats. This close up, Shakespeare cannot be dusty or distant. The performances are energized, physical, exhilarating. Audience and actors can see each other clear as day. The modern Globe's first artistic director, Mark Rylance, has said that he found himself on stage here "thinking of the audience as other actors". This is a participatory, democratic theatre experience. There's a terrific camaraderie, as both actors and audience tacitly agree to ignore the roar of that aeroplane flying overhead or those first drops of rain from the summer sky.

There's also a real intimacy in those moments when Shakespeare lays bare the inner sinews of human thought and emotion. Only here do you have the chance to eyeball Hamlet as he contemplates 'self-slaughter', Lady Macbeth as she tries to wash the imagined blood from her hands. With no elaborate sets, no darkened auditorium, it is only by the joint act of imagining that other worlds are conjured on stage.

The play ends, and the actors stamp out a valedictory jig on the bare wooden stage. It's a euphoric moment, and a Globe trademark, bringing tragedies, comedies and histories to a close in the same vein: inclusive, exuberant, joyous.

003

The burning barrels of Ottery St Mary

ENGLAND On the fifth of November, the small town of Ottery St Mary in Devon is brought to a standstill for an ancient tradition that has nothing to do with Guy Fawkes. While the rest of the country celebrates with fireworks, the crowds in Ottery cheer as locals run through the temporarily car-free streets with huge, flaming tar barrels hefted onto their shoulders. One of the biggest bonfires in the South West burns on the banks of the River Otter.

Thought to have originated in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, the reasons behind the celebration have been lost to antiquity. The main theory is that it began as a pagan ritual to cleanse the streets and ward off evil spirits, although many long-time residents have their own theories. Some families have carried the barrels for generations, and see it as a rite of passage.

The night begins around 5.30pm, when the first barrel is lit in front of a public house (each barrel is sponsored by a local pub), with sixteen more throughout the night; the smallest are light enough for children to carry, while the heaviest is a mighty 66lb. So far, women aren't allowed to participate and it can feel like a bit of a lads' game, but hopefully that will change in the future.

The night is rough, ready and dangerous: this is not a spectacle put on for tourists. In fact, to carry a flaming barrel you must be born and bred in Ottery and deemed ready by the current Barrel Rollers.

It certainly is a sight to behold: the streets and pubs jam-packed, people cheering and shouting as a Barrel Roller propels through the crowd, head bent beneath the weight as the dancing flames and roiling smoke reach skywards. Then the barrel is passed on and the former carrier will more often than not be faced with the new conundrum of slapping out the flames encasing the thick, hessian-sacking gloves they wear to protect their hands. Hair is singed, skin blistered, clothes ruined, but their broad smiles hold strong.

004 | Gigging in Glasgow

SCOTLAND Pop stars, travelling from coach to bar and from plane to arena, are notoriously oblivious about the city they happen to be performing in. There are countless stories of frontmen bellowing "Hello, Detroit!" when they're actually in Toronto. But some places have a genuine buzz about them. London is fine, but all too often its crowds sit back and wait to be impressed. If you want real passion, vibrant venues and bands who really play out of their skin, Glasgow is where it's at.

Scotland's biggest city has an alternative rock pedigree that few can match. Primal Scream, Franz Ferdinand, the Jesus & Mary Chain, Simple Minds, Snow Patrol and Belle & Sebastian have all sprung from a city that *Time* magazine has described as Europe's "secret capital" of rock music. Its gig scene, which stretches from gritty pubs to arty student haunts, marvellous church halls to cavernous arenas, is enthusiastic, vociferous and utterly magnetic. Nice 'N' Sleazy and King Tut's Wah Wah Hut (where Alan McGee first spotted Oasis) are legendary in their own right, but if one venue really defines the city, it's the Barrowland.

Opened in the 1930s as a ballroom, the Barrowland was the hunting ground of the killer known as "Bible John" in the late sixties. It's still a fairly rough-and-ready place – the Barras market is just outside, and its location in the Celtic heartland of Glasgow's East End makes it a favoured venue for rambunctious traditional bands. Shane McGowan's been there, drinking lurid cocktails, his slurred vocals drowned out by a roaring crowd. So have Keane, flushed with early success and looking bemused at the small fights that broke out near the front at their performance.

Of course, most gigs finish without the drama getting violent. With a 2000-person capacity that's atmospheric but intimate, and without any seats or barriers to get in the way of the music or the pogoing, the Barrowland is a wonderful place to see a live performance, full of energy and expectation. You could have witnessed PJ Harvey transfix the crowd, the Streets provoke wall-to-wall grins, the Mars Volta prompt walkouts, Leftfield fill the space with spine-shaking bass and the Libertines perform their epic, edgy, reunion gig. This is the stuff of music legend. Head to the Barrowland and be part of it.

005 | Getting away from it all on Skellig Michael

IRELAND The jagged twin pyramids of the Skellig Islands rise abruptly out of the Atlantic Ocean, six miles off the southwest tip of Ireland. Little Skellig is a teeming, noisy bird sanctuary, home to around 50,000 gannets and now officially full (the excess have had to move to another island off County Wexford). In tranquil contrast, neighbouring Skellig Michael shelters one of the most remarkable hermitages in the world.

In the late seventh or early eighth century, a monastery was somehow built on this inhospitable outcrop, in imitation of the desert communities of the early Church fathers – and, indeed, continuing the practices of Ireland's druids, who would spend long periods alone in the wilderness. Its design is a miracle of ingenuity and devotion. On small artificial terraces, the dry-stone beehive huts were ringed by sturdy outer walls, which deflected the howling winds and protected the vegetable patch made of bird droppings; channels crisscrossed the settlement to funnel rainwater into cisterns. Monks – up to fifteen of them at a time – lived here for nearly five hundred years, withstanding anything the Atlantic could throw at them – including numerous Viking raids. In the twelfth century, however, a climatic change made the seas even rougher, while pressure was brought to bear on old, independent monasteries such as Skellig Michael to conform, and eventually the fathers adopted the Augustinian rule and moved to the mainland.

The beauty of a visit to the island is that it doesn't require a huge leap to imagine how the monks might have lived. You still cross over from the mainland on small, slow boats, huddling against the spray. From the quay, 650 steps climb almost vertically to the monastery, whose cells, chapels and refectory remain largely intact after 1300 years. The island even has residents, at least in the summer: friendly guides, employed by the Office of Public Works to give talks to visitors, sometimes stay out here for weeks at a time, making the most of the spiritual solitude.

006 | Bat-spotting on the River Cam

ENGLAND Visitors to Cambridge often come pre-programmed with a vision of themselves punting idyllically along the Backs, untroubled as a cloudless sky. Unfortunately, the reality can be more like a waterborne scrum: unscrupulous touts, mega-punts lashed together, and cacophonous collisions. For a more original twist on this most 'Cambridge' of pursuits, take to the river by night. Head upstream along its quietest, unlit stretch, away from the city. And look out for bats.

'Bat safari' tours run on summer nights on the stretch of river heading out towards Grantchester Meadows. Gathering at the boat yard by the Mill Pond just before dusk, passengers – some bat enthusiasts, most novices – are equipped with warm blankets and a bat detector. This converts the bats' echolocation signals, which they use to orientate themselves and locate insects, into frequencies humans can hear. Each boat is helmed by a bat expert from the Wildlife Trust, and propelled by a 'punt chauffeur'.

Bat numbers in the UK are declining, but here the supply is plentiful. Dusty college attics make perfect roosting places, apparently. As night falls, the bats emerge to devour the evening swarms of insects. A common pipistrelle bat consumes three thousand insects in a night. Twilight is breakfast-time, and they're ravenous.

The bats are – or can be – a pretext, really, for an idyllic journey. All signs of civilization give way to dark skies and silence as you leave the city. Progress is slow and stately. The water splashes gently against the sides of the boat. Torches sweep the mist-topped waters to illumine bats skimming the surface. Weeping willows drip from the riverbank; tree branches are outlined against the starry sky.

Just don't tell all the other punters...

A play among the elements

007

ENGLAND Although it gives the impression of being much older, the Minack Theatre only dates back to the 1930s. Rowena Cade decided to carve a stage into the cliffs near the small Cornish village of Porthcurno, all so *The Tempest* could be experienced among the elements. It took her and her gardener, Billy Rawlings, and some local craftsmen just six months of work before the first play was put on for the public.

While it's a treat to see any type of performance at the Minack, it's apparent in every lovingly placed stone that it was designed to give Shakespeare's works the grand stage they deserve. Few things can compare to passing a summer's evening watching one of the playwright's iconic works here; the crash of the waves echoing behind the dialogue, the light of the moon glittering on the sea for a backdrop. It's a raw and rewarding experience, a thrillingly literal vision of all the world as a stage.

Though it's what makes the experience so unique, sitting out among the elements is something you need to be prepared for. The cliffs of Cornwall are famed for their blustery weather, so warm clothing is a must, and you might want to bring a cushion for your stony seat. But once you're wrapped up and sipping a hot drink, you'll find it all adds to the cosy atmosphere and enhances the feeling of camaraderie in the audience.

The Minack Theatre is open year-round, even when there aren't performances, giving everyone a chance to wander the steps and stand on the stage. You can also visit the Rowena Cade exhibition, which shows the staggering hard work and ingenuity that went into making the Minack, and the passion that brought it to life.

After your visit make time to explore the surrounding area, where you can enjoy beautiful cliff walks, the pale sands and clear water of Porthcurno beach, and sleepy Porthcurno village. The Porthcurno Telegraph Museum is surprisingly interesting – submarine cables from all over the world ended here, making this quiet village the British government's hub of telegraphic communication for decades.