

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



The joys of Tunisia en famille

After an adventurous life of travel of her own children's author **Liz Laird** takes a road trip with her grandchildren, inspiring her new novel

His seven-year-old eyes open as wide as they'll go, Fergus asks, "This is the actual, you know, Sahara?" – "It is," we reassure him. Pause. "This is the best day of my life!"

I've discovered recently the joys of adventurous travel en famille. Blessed now with four grandsons between the ages of 11 and seven, whose fathers, our two sons, have inexplicably matured into confident, experienced men, the family holiday has evolved into a whole new thing.

To reel back a bit, I must explain that I've had an adventurous life of travel myself. Years of living and working in Ethiopia, Malaysia, India and the Middle East have given me more unexpected surges of adrenalin than are comfortable to remember. There was the arrest in Ethiopia on a charge of murder (I didn't do it). The mad dash across the Green Line during the civil war in Beirut.

The curfews in Ramallah and Gaza. And the moments of great calm and beauty too: the warm starlit nights on a reed island in the marshes of Iraq before they were drained by Saddam Hussein; the sweet embrace of a baby chimpanzee in Zambia; the chanting voice of a Somali storyteller in her mud house in Jijiga, her face almost obscured by the clouds of incense rising from her brazier.

The best adventure of all was in India. I was on my way to Bhopal to teach a course in the university's summer school. As the plane from Mumbai rose over the Western Ghats, the bumpy air pockets defeated me and I threw up. The man in the next seat looked after me. He was kind, funny and had freckles on his cheeks. I felt I'd known him all my life. His

I loved watching my grandsons' response to a new country



In the ruins of the Roman city at Dougga, main; author Liz Laird, above (Pictures: Angus McDowall)

name was David McDowall and I married him.

Wherever I was, I wrote. I stuffed slim blue envelopes with pages of letters to my parents. I scribbled in notebooks and wrote a diary every day. I'd done that from the age of 12, and it seemed natural to continue.

So when, after David and I had settled back in Britain and nervously decided to make our living as writers, I only had to pick up a diary or leaf through old letters, and the plot of a novel was right there. I wrote about street boys in Addis Ababa, camel jockeys in Pakistan, a child in the ruins of Beirut, refugees in Jordan,

children in Kenya, Zambia and Ethiopia.

Perhaps it was the months of quiet reflection during Covid that let the steam gently fizzle out of me. I've lost my enthusiasm for long days bumping over unmade roads in pursuit of a story, and I get muddled trying to work out flights and hotels and visa requirements. But I don't have to bother any more. Our sons have stepped up to worry about all that. The oldest, Angus, is currently based in Tunisia, and that brings me back to the Sahara.

Tunisia, a long sliver of a country extending from the Mediterranean in the north to the great desert in the south, must be one of the pleasantest of all Arab countries for the foreign traveller. Most tourists head to the beaches, making forays into a picturesque souk or old city medina.

There were ten of us on our Tunisian road trip, David and me (the grandparents), our two sons, their wives and their four lively boys. That was a good number, enough to fit comfortably in two cars. The long hours on the road were eased by brilliant recordings of favourite

books. All the planning and booking was done by Angus, while Aynnah, his wife, master-minded the catering of picnics, snacks and drinks. All we grandparents had to do was enjoy ourselves.

How is it that the vast and glorious relics of Rome that litter Tunisia are so little visited by travellers? You can take your pick from El Jem's arena, smaller but almost as impressive as the Colosseum in Rome; to a 132km aqueduct running from a sacred spring in the hills to the ancient city of Carthage; to entire cities at Dougga or Sbeitla, complete with temples, market places, paved streets, and the outlines of shops and dwellings.

If David and I had been exploring Tunisia on our own, we'd have studied guide books, endeavouring to get to grips with the history. We did try.

"What does the guidebook say?" we asked Angus, as we stood in a subterranean rotunda in the ruins of a Byzantine basilica.

"It says 'a subterranean rotunda with a complex interpretation,'" said Angus, shutting the guidebook again.

It was much more fun panting along after the children in deserted arenas and temples, as they raced up and down massive stone stairways, leapt from fallen pillars to ruined walls, and disappeared down holes into the vaults below with no intimidating "Keep off" notices or disapproving guides to stop them.

I did my best to be educational. "See that archway over there?" I'd say. "That's where the lions came out, their jaws dripping, padding across to the Christians huddled in terror, right there where you're standing..."

I'm speaking to empty air. They've raced away to see who can be first up to the topmost gallery.

In the end, it was the night in a desert camp, a two hour camel ride into the dunes, that was the highlight for us all. I watched anxiously as the camels rose groaning from their knees carrying my whole family high on their backs. Would the seven-year-old make the two hour ride? What if someone fell and broke a limb?

Everyone made it, and the fun of rolling down sand dunes, the night



in tents and the staggering beauty of the desert sunset will always remain with us. I loved watching my grandsons' response to a new country and culture. Since I became a granny I've thought a great deal about my own childhood, and how very different life in the 1950s was to the present day.

In my latest novel I've returned to those days. Charity Brown, the main character, belongs as I did to a small evangelical Protestant sect. Her Scottish family are strict Sabbatarians, as was mine. As she encounters the outside world at school and with her neighbours, she questions, doubts, pushes boundaries and comes to her own conclusions, torn between loyalty to her family, and the honesty which compels her to set out on her own path in life. This was my story, and I hope it has meaning for any young teenager from a strongly religious background, whatever that religion might be.

I won't forget the faces of my four grandsons around the flickering camp fire in our Sahara camp. The world they'll have to negotiate will be very different from mine. I believe that the stories they imbibe at this early age will inform and sustain them throughout their lives. It's a privilege to be a children's author. It's a responsibility I don't take lightly.

The Misunderstandings of Charity Brown by Liz Laird (Macmillan Children's Books) is out now, £12.99



David and Fergus in a Roman temple in Tunisia, above; Liz's new book, top

CITY TOUR



Cool culture in Zurich

Once a hotbed of artistic thinking, Zurich has recaptured the zeitgeist, says Bernadette Fallon

Zurich may be the financial capital of Switzerland but here's an interesting fact – more people work in the arts than banking in the city, which is fast gaining a reputation as the country's coolest.

It was a hotbed of culture and revolutionary zeal during both world wars, when exiled artists, writers and avant-garde intellectuals took refuge here, among them Irish writer James Joyce, who wrote Ulysses, one of the most famous novels of all time, in the city.

James Joyce had his last night out in the Kronenhalle bar in January 1941, three days before his death following surgery on a perforated ulcer. He's buried in Zurich's Fluntern Cemetery beside the Zoo, the final stop on the tram line. The journey is a steep one, up some of Zurich's prime real estate hills, past detached mansions on leafy streets with stunning views. Joyce was fond of the Zoo's lions and when he was buried his wife Nora said she liked to think of him lying there listening to them roar.

The Kronenhalle was also a favourite with designers Coco Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent and artists Marc Chagall and Pablo Picasso, whose art can still be seen on the walls alongside works by Miro,

Matisse and Klee. Today it's as much art gallery as bar and restaurant – expect to pay around £18 for a cocktail and double that for a main course. Opposite, the Café Odeon, founded in 1911, also became a home from home for emigres such as Joyce, Lenin and the Dadaists, who were founded in Zurich. These days, with its red banquettes and Art Nouveau vibe, it's a smart spot for food and drinks – try the two-course set menu lunch, around £23.

Located in Bellevue – "beautiful sight", the area is a good place to start exploring Zurich's Old Town, where the river Limmat meets Lake Zurich under the Quaibrucke – Quay Bridge. These crystal-clear waters are clean enough to swim in and many people do. Close by the bridge, the Frauenbad, "women's baths", is an area traditionally reserved for women with a covered-in section for privacy.

Along the river, the Fraumünster, "women's church", with its Marc Chagall stained-glass windows was built on the site of a 9th century women's abbey and faces the Grossmünster, with its soaring Romanesque twin towers, dating back to the 1100s. The shady Lindenhof with its 52 lime trees is home to the 9th century St Peter's

church, with its distinctive tower and the largest clock face in Europe.

For a more contemporary look at the city, take the number 4 tram to Zurich West, the city's former industrial area, now home to its cool cultural quarter, where theatres, galleries, museums and artist studios have replaced factories and shipbuilding yards.

I'm staying in some luxury at the Storchen Hotel, with its elegant riverfront cocktail bar and upstairs, a restaurant terrace overlooking the water and soaring Grossmünster towers. From here, I watched the sun go down over a Michelin-starred dinner of scallops, oysters and ravioli,

From here, I watched the sun go down over a Michelin-starred dinner

accompanied by several amuse bouches and some of the hotel's own Chardonnay.

The next morning, I woke up to a view of swans bobbing on the Limmat and breakfasted on eggs from the hotel's hens. They live on a farm at the lake, near the Storchen's sister hotel, the Alex, which I could travel to by private riverboat if I took the notion. The Storchen is a member of the exclusive Preferred Hotels and Resorts group, rooms from £380 (Preferredhotels.com).

Zurich West, today a trendy nightlife area, main; Storchen Hotel, top; Quaibrucke, above

If you're not up for Michelin dining, you'll find lots of great foodie alternatives. Zurich is big on responsibly sourced ingredients and also home to the world's oldest vegetarian restaurant. Open since the 1880s, Hlil is currently run by the fourth generation of the family who founded it. Main courses from £20-£25.

And, of course, there's chocolate (you didn't expect me to visit Switzerland and not mention chocolate). Lindt's Home of Chocolate is a 20-minute journey from Zurich, where you can take a tour of the museum and visit the biggest Lindt chocolate shop in the world (Admission £13 adults, £9 children, Lindt-home-of-chocolate.com). When you're done with culture (and chocolate), you can be in the countryside in under 20 minutes, with all of the Alps to explore. Whether it's a starting point or a city destination, there's a lot more to Zurich than banks.

Edelweiss Air flies direct to Zurich from Edinburgh, Flyedelweiss.com. For more visit Zuerich.com and MySwitzerland.com. A Swiss Travel Pass, from £186 for 3-days, offers unlimited travel on the country's rail, bus and boat network, Mystsnr.com



SHORT STAYS

Why hostels are best for bargain Euro breaks

No longer restricted to just backpackers, hostels are more appealing than ever, says Sarah Marshall

Anyone who's taken a gap year or backpacked across continents has probably stayed in a hostel at some point along the way. Cheap and cheerful, these simple properties accommodate millions of travellers on a budget, making it possible to explore exotic destinations without racking up a big bill.

In the last few years hostels have upped their game. Facilities have improved, rooms benefit from greater privacy, and the interior design could match some of the trendiest hotels. And as the cost of living crisis continues to bite, hostels present an economical option for a holiday. Try some of these European options for a short break this year...

A&O Hostel Rotterdam

Netherlands
On a mission to reduce its ecological footprint, A&O wants to become the first CO2 net zero European hostel chain by 2025. Even better for eco-conscious travellers, the location of this branch, a 10-minute walk from Rotterdam Centraal train station, is ideal for Eurostar connections from London St Pancras. The 19th century brick building features free Wi-Fi, satellite TV and tea and coffee makers. Take advantage of a free breakfast buffet. Dogs are welcome, and bike rental is also available.

How much: From £41.50 per night (twin room, two sharing). Visit aohostels.com

Crans-Montana

Switzerland
For more than a century, upmarket resort region Crans-Montana



The A&O Rotterdam Hostel

has been a centre for health and wellness. Once used as a sanatorium, this beautifully converted hotel promises to benefit both body and soul, with views of the Rhone Valley, Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn. Summer activities on offer include mountain biking, road cycling, hiking and water sports on lakes 1500 metres above sea level. Visit the Alaiä Chalet, an indoor and outdoor skate and trampoline park, or Alaiä Bay, a new artificial surf park.

How much: From £41 per person per night in a six-bed room including breakfast. Visit youthhostel.ch/en/hostels/crans-montana

Next House, Copenhagen

Denmark
A cinema and yoga studio position this 'next level' hostel above other affordable properties, in a city famous for quality and design. A whopping 1666 beds are spread across 433 rooms, and include women-only dorms. Communal areas are split between a lounge, a football court, and a restaurant serving stone-baked pizzas.

How much: Rooms from £14 per person in a six-bed dorm. Visit nexthousecopenhagen.com

WOT Peniche

Portugal
Choose between dorms, suites, studios and apartments at this hip, design-led hostel in Europe's bohemian surf capital. A few minutes' walk from the best seafood restaurants in Peniche, the colourful property is run by a team of cool locals who know the destination inside out. Learn to surf with one of the schools along Baleal Beach, or take a boat trip to the Berlengas, an archipelago with dramatic scenery, flourishing wildlife and one of the most beautiful forts in Portugal.

How much: From £16.50 per person per night in a six-bed dorm. Visit wotestub.com