

# GEOEX

## *Ultima Thule*

JOURNAL OF THE FARTHEST PLACES

### *The Meaning of Adventure*

by Pico Iyer

Bells were ringing on every side of me, and I could hear hymns rising up in the dusk through a grating above the catholicon far below. The call to prayer struck up from a minaret nearby, and when I descended a narrow staircase, to where the crowds had gathered, it was to hear an ancient wailing and music that seemed to come from some previous world. Robed deacons were chanting above the richly colored holy books in the little Ethiopian chapel, and when I made my way into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre itself, it was to find myself in a little side chapel, where a candle flickered, and as she walked with a friend through the ill-lit space, a girl from France, probably 14 years old, brushed away her tears and then fell to sobbing again.

I've never been one of those intrepid souls who bungee jumps from a high rock canyon in Utah, alas, or tries whitewater rafting in Borneo; truth to tell, I'm probably too timorous or ill-conditioned for either. But look at those first two syllables in the very word "adventure": They speak of a sense that something wonderful is on the way, which is what I felt every moment in Jerusalem. For believers, "Advent" means the arrival of illumination or grace or redemption itself; but even for those without belief, the word seems to be standing on tiptoe, offering a sense of bright expectancy and attention. It all but reminds you that adventure has less to do with the place where you're going—or with what you're going to be doing there—than with the spirit that's propelling you on the journey. Every one of us knows how a trip across town can be an adventure, sometimes more than we would like.

I often remember perhaps the best New Year I ever spent, which—because it was in Ethiopia—happened to come six days before Christmas, as it is on the pre-Julian calendar still observed in Abyssinia. An old school friend and I were in the magical little village of Lalibela, and when we arose it was to walk through the labyrinth of rock-cut churches carved underground in the middle of Ethiopia's high plateau. Devotees in white were everywhere, and priests, with thick beards and staring eyes, rocked back and forth over the palm-sized volumes in their hands. Five days later, on Christmas Eve, all Addis Ababa seemed to be full of people holding candles and singing hymns in graveyards and jam-packed churches as if the Advent were happening at that moment.

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**KINDNESS OF STRANGERS**  
*GeoEx staff recalls moments of kindness we received from people on the road.*



◆ **KINDNESS OF STRANGERS ONE**  
Glenn Ringer: *As we walked down an obscure country lane in Iran, a man came out of his home and asked our guide about us. Then his wife emerged with a pot of hot tea and fresh fruit from the garden. We had a wonderfully interesting chat about their lives as rural farmers and about their excitement regarding warming relations between our two countries.*



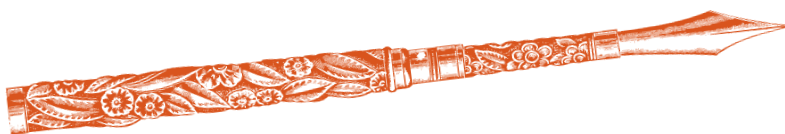
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*(continued from page 1)*

Around them were unpaved streets and half-finished hotels that seemed to embody a place that, to Western eyes, could not have looked less hopeful or prosperous. And the material need so painfully obvious on every front only compounded and deepened the spiritual fervor all around. Adventure appeared to be telling me here how what we have externally lives in a very complex relation to the much deeper question of how rich we are.

I love going to Paris, of course; but when I go to the “Paris of the Middle East,” Beirut, I find just as much sophistication and savoir faire as I’d encounter along the avenue Montaigne, but accompanied by a landscape as radiant as in Saint Tropez, a populace as charming and multilingual as I’ve found anywhere, and a political and historical complexity that gives texture and unexpectedness to the sheer sense of style and joie de vivre everywhere apparent. I loved spending a week just wandering around Venice recently, following nothing but whim; but when I’ve gone to what used to be known as the “Venice of the East,” Bangkok, I find something much less readily apprehensible to me, with shadows and grace notes and a sense of mystery around the clock that I never found when I was growing up in Europe.

Adventure, in other words, comes in going somewhere as different as possible from the world I know; and whether I go first-class or third-, whether I travel by foot or by Singapore Airlines, is all but immaterial. Growing up in England and then California (and living now in Japan), I’ve been one of the few on our planet who’s never known homelessness or hunger or war; I’ve had all the comfort and ease I could want. So going to another place of ease and comfort would often be no vacation at all. When I travel away from home, I want to see how the other half (which is to say, 99.7 percent of our neighbors on the planet) lives and to look a little beyond my too comfortable ideas and easy assumptions. Adventure comes guaranteed and free of charge in Cuba or Haiti or my parents’ homeland, India.



Some of my friends consider these trips “adventure vacations,” but to me they’re just ways of guaranteeing I’ll be startled, illuminated, expanded, and come home a slightly different person from the one who left. I love Santorini, but I got much more from the difficult time I spent in Yemen, on my way to the beautiful Greek island.

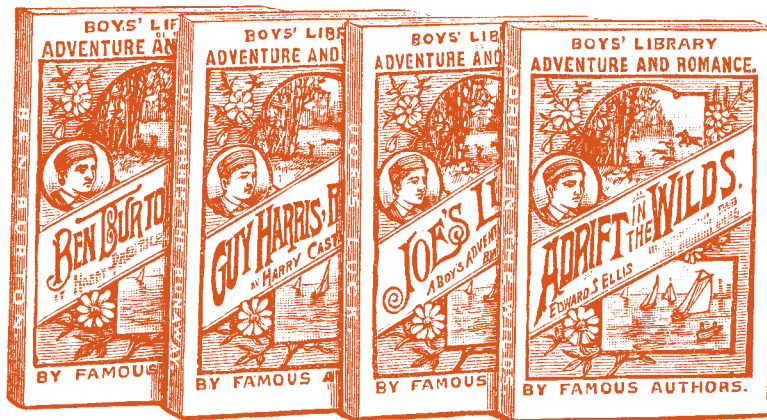
The world for me might be an “Advent card,” of the kind I knew when growing up—though perhaps it would be better to call it an “Adventure card,” in which, one by one, I open windows to find the surprise and present hidden behind each secret door: Cambodia, Syria, Bolivia, Tibet, Colombia, El Salvador, North Korea, South Africa. Yet unlike in an Advent card, there are many more than 25 windows in an Adventure card; you can keep on opening them forever—even very close to home, if you don’t have the time or resources to travel far—so that the sense of exploration doesn’t end, but deepens with every new opening.

The beauty, perhaps the point, of adventure for me is that it is not

confined to your vacations, your moment of skydiving, your turning a corner in a city you don't know. Find the spirit that is its center and it becomes something you bring back into your "regular" life. New Year's Day, perhaps both Jerusalem and Ethiopia taught me, need not come only on January 1.

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*Pico Iyer is the author of numerous acclaimed travel books, including Video Night in Kathmandu, The Lady and the Monk, and Falling Off the Map, as well as two novels and a portrait of the Dalai Lama. His latest book is The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere.*



### *In Case You Missed Pico Iyer and Don George*

Speaking of Pico Iyer, the celebrated author joined Don George, Editor in Chief of our blog Wanderlust, this past February for an inspiring and thought-provoking conversation at the headquarters of *Sunset* magazine. They chatted about falling in love with Asia (Japan was the enchantress), about why we travel, and about where to travel ("The top three places to visit are Cuba, Iran, and Vietnam," according to Pico). We've posted a video of the event at [GeoEx.com/Events](http://GeoEx.com/Events) so you can enjoy (or enjoy again) their eloquence and wisdom.

### *Riches and Revelations of the Silk Road (And the Fun of GeoEx Group Travel)*

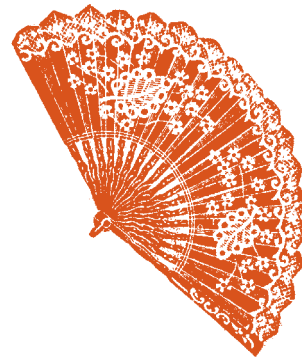
Our latest news from the digital world is that we've just released a video about traveling across the Silk Road. Take a look to see and hear some of the stirring images and sounds from the planet's epic trade and travel route, and to get a taste of the camaraderie that so often blossoms on our Scheduled Group Trips: [GeoEx.com/Silk-Road-Video](http://GeoEx.com/Silk-Road-Video)



*For more literary travel musings, visit our blog at [GeoEx.com/Blog](http://GeoEx.com/Blog)*

#### ◆ KINDNESS OF STRANGERS TWO

*Amanda McKee: In the remote mountains of Japan's Shikoku Island, we stumbled across a village dotted with life-size dolls — "tending to" gardens, "waiting" for the bus, "lounging" on a bench. When we stopped for a closer look, the artist who made them came out to greet us. Through our translator-guide, she explained her craft and then took us through town and into the no-longer-used school (populated with her "pupils"), telling us the story of her life and the village's evolution.*



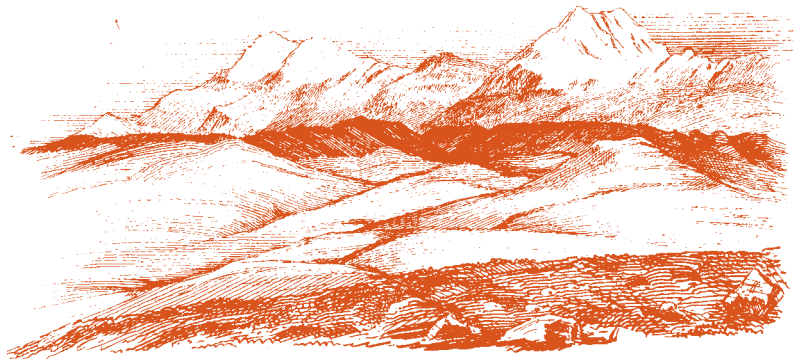
## Notes

### INTRIGUING IRAN, INSIDE AND OUT

“Does your country know that there are good Muslims in the world?” a 15-year-old Iranian girl asked GeoEx traveler Noni Allwood, sparking a warm, candid conversation between the two. Dozens of guests have reported such heart- and mind-opening interactions during our Iran trips, made possible by our attuned local guides. Noni calls her guide her “best connector”: “He made it completely safe and appropriate to reach out to strangers. These introductions led to stories about dreams, ambitions, praise, criticism, and hope—all of which we would have missed by not knowing how to reach out.”

In the years since GeoEx’s first trip in 1993, we’ve marveled at Esfahan, Persepolis, and Shiraz. We’ve roamed with Persian nomads and hiked in Iran’s mountains, always continuing to build friendships there. Our trips take a good look at the changes afoot, as well as the echoes of the country as it once was, seen beautifully in the red-hued mountain village of Abyaneh, seemingly frozen in time.

Like many returning guests, our Iran impresaria Linda de la Torre advises, “Don’t believe all that you read about Iran. It’s changed dramatically since the turbulent years of the 1990s, and it is still evolving. Right now, its colorful bazaars, souks, textiles, and traditions mix beautifully with modern life. It’s a momentous, special time to visit.” Drop Linda a line to hear more impressions and to grab the in-demand spaces on *Treasures of Persia* (September 28–October 16, October 5–23, and in 2016: April 11–29, May 9–27, September 5–23, and October 17–November 4).



### ETHIOPIA: TRAVELING IN OLD-WORLD AFRICA

“For a trip that wanders far and wide in a less-traveled country with staggeringly varied cultures and landscapes, it doesn’t get much better than Ethiopia,” says our supercharged Africa doyenne Starla Estrada. “We’re one of the only travel companies to combine the north and south, and to offer extensions to Harar (the center of Islamic culture and religion in the Horn of Africa), Bale Mountain National Park, and the remote Danakil Depression, one of the lowest and hottest points on earth.”

*Ethiopia: The Island of Africa* begins in Addis Ababa, strolling the city’s museums and galleries and exploring the more urban side of this nation—



#### ◆ KINDNESS OF STRANGERS THREE

Urs Hofmann: *While meandering through the magnificent souk in Aleppo, Syria, I met an old man who was carrying a giant bunch of keys. He offered to take me around. Until deep into the night, he led me through the narrowest alleyways and through tiny doors and huge gates, which he opened with his magical keys. Inviting me into his world, he gave me access to mysterious, enchanting corners of the souk.*

#### ◆ KINDNESS OF STRANGERS FOUR

Natalie Werve: *On my recent Chile trip, I took a taxi back to my Santiago hotel because it was late at night. The driver refused to accept my tip, and then he waited outside to make sure I got into the hotel safely.*

one of the oldest in the world. Next it's on to Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, and then to the jaw-dropping Simien Mountains, also known as "the roof of Africa." Later we arrive in transfixing Lalibela to admire 12th-century churches exquisitely carved into solid rock and painted with Orthodox frescoes. In the Lower Omo Valley, we delve into personal encounters with tribal peoples—the Hamar, Ari, Bena, and Mursi. They share their rituals and equally interesting adornments, many of which communicate as much as they decorate. Starla is happy to make the arrangements for your trip (June 12–27 and October 9–24) and Harar and Bale extensions (following each).

NOMADS AND NAADAM: ETHEREAL DESERTS  
AND THE VERDANT VALLEYS IN BETWEEN

Traditional wrestling sleeves adorning their arms, two men, jaws clenched, lean toward one another in a grapple hold, each anticipating the other's next move, angling to tackle him to the ground to win the match. It's Naadam, the festival of all Mongolian festivals, a celebration that erupts each year across the country and features epic wrestling contests, as well as horse-racing, horse-praising, and archery competitions. While most Mongolia visitors watch these traditional games in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, *Mongolia Explorer* (July 7–19) takes us into the countryside to experience them as they were when the Mongol hordes dominated the Central Asia steppes. Out here there is no huge, modern stadium, only the vast landscape extending to the gloriously empty, unbroken horizon. We witness the competitors' expressions up close, hear their labored grunts, and wander among them after the games.

Before Naadam, we travel to the sculpted red sand dunes, rocky outcroppings, and low desert shrubs of the hypnotic Gobi Desert, which our Mongolia maestro Michael Steigerwald describes as "somewhat akin to the American Southwest in terms of variety of terrain." Later we journey to Lake Khovsgol, which soothes the senses with forested hills and lush green meadows—verdant visions we don't generally imagine for this country. Throughout the trip, we spend time with hospitable city dwellers, merchants, and monks, as well as nomads who travel by two-humped Bactrian camels, horses, and occasionally reindeer. Give Michael a call for more information.

ROMANCING THE 'STANS

We chasers of the few remaining nowherelands, of legends and landscapes meant for dreams—those Akhal-Teke horses running wild in our mind's eye—are hooked on the 'Stans. Naturally we're captivated by the gob-stopping Islamic architecture and riveting tales of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan, but also by the lesser-known yet superlative arts. *The Epic of Central Asia*, our 21-day journey across Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, opens hearts to the artful treasures of the region and to the people who make them.

We pore over exquisite carpets in the Turkmen capital of Ashgabat and make a rare detour to Nukus, Uzbekistan, to take in the world's second-largest collection of avant-garde Russian art at the museum nicknamed the "Louvre des steppes." (By gathering this collection, Russian artist Igor Savitsky saved many pieces from destruction by the Soviets.) In

*(continued on page 6)*



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noted here, please call  
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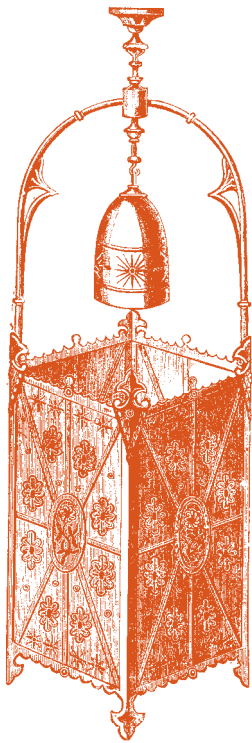
◆ KINDNESS OF  
STRANGERS FIVE

Jennine Cohen: *Just after college, I was traveling in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. I met a kind woman named Cida, who promptly invited me to stay with her. As a hairdresser, she had worked her way out of the favelas (slums) and now was living on her own in an apartment. Cida made me a copy of the keys that very same day—and I lived with her for nearly a month. She always inspired me.*

◆ KINDNESS OF  
STRANGERS SIX

Eric Holman: *In Cuernavaca, Mexico, I struck up a conversation with my taxi driver using my go-to topic—soccer. After learning that I played, Miguel invited me to play with the team he managed. The next Sunday, he came all the way to my host family's house to pick me up and even paid the 50-peso league registration fee. From then on, I played with them each week, and he always gave me a ride.*





◆ KINDNESS OF STRANGERS SEVEN  
Linda de la Torre: *At the Istanbul airport, while I was waiting for my flight to Iran, an elderly Iranian woman sat next to me and we began talking. She lit up when I said I was American, explaining that her daughter lives in the US. When we landed in Tebran, she found me again and went out of her way to help me orient myself and find the correct immigration line.*

(continued from page 5)

Khiva and Samarkand we meet master wood-carvers and a family of papermakers, and dine in the workshop of textile artisans. In Tashkent we visit the home and studio of Akbar Rakhimov, an Uzbek ceramicist whose work combines the glazed styles of Kushan times and the blue style of the Timurids. While Kyrgyzstan is best known for its scenery—wildflower-peppered pastures, rising mountain peaks, and pristine Issyk Kul—we also appreciate the handiwork of a women’s felt-making cooperative and the unearthed Scythian treasures found at Burana Tower, an 11th-century minaret that is itself a work of art. Contact Sara Barbieri for details on our September 3–23 departure.

#### RETRACING OUR FIRST TIBETAN FOOTSTEPS

The flight from Beijing to Lhasa has travelers glued to the window. Stretched out below are, in the words of the climber-photographer Galen Rowell in *Mountains of the Middle Kingdom*, “hundreds of snow peaks in all directions, a vision off the scale of my experience.” When he saw them in 1981, he was heading to the Tibetan backcountry—the first time Americans were permitted there—on the expedition that sparked the founding of GeoEx (see [GeoEx.com/History](http://GeoEx.com/History) for the story). Our *Journey Across Tibet* (September 16–27) retraces their footsteps and those of celebrated mountaineers to Rongbuk Monastery at the base of Mount Everest’s iconic north face.

We land in Lhasa, pausing to acclimatize and marvel at the grandest of the Potala Palace’s rooms, audience halls, chapels, chambers, and jeweled burial *chorten* of past Dalai Lamas. Then it’s up thrilling hairpin turns to 15,700-foot Khampa La, past turquoise lakes, and on to Sakya, a monastery instrumental in transmitting Buddhism to the Mongol court of Kublai Khan. After crossing 17,000-foot Pang La, we reach Rongbuk, the world’s loftiest monastery. We drink in views of the earth’s highest mountain and wonder at the early British adventurers who made their brave but ill-fated attempts to reach its summit. On a last great drive, we follow raging snowmelt down from the Tibetan Plateau to the warmer, greener climes of Nepal, wrapping up amid the gaudy shrines and medieval streets of once-forbidden Kathmandu. Michael Steigerwald is the one to call.

#### ROLLING EPICS: TRAIN TRAVEL THROUGH EURASIA

We sometimes call it rail cruising, but that term may be too flippant for the kind of grand travel we experience aboard Golden Eagle trains, crossing faraway borders in splendid comfort and style, and hopping off for insightful explorations. On *Caravans and Conquerors* (October 15–30) we traverse the southern Caucasus and cross the Caspian Sea to parts of Central Asia that are otherwise inaccessible. We enjoy Armenia’s Lake Sevan, investigate the viticulture of Georgia, and see the 11th-century Synyk-Kala minaret in Azerbaijan, stopping for the legendary towns and natural pearls of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.

On *Pioneering Persia* (September 17–October 1, October 6–20, October 29–November 12, November 16–30, and November 29–December 13) we journey from the banks of the Danube to the shores of the Bosphorus and through remote, spectacular eastern Turkey to entrancing Iran. Along

the way we watch a memorable Puszta horse show, perhaps with a *palinka* (fruit brandy) in hand; visit the tomb of Ferdowsi, the father of the Persian language; and take a good look at Sighișoara, rumored to be the birthplace of Count Dracula.

Contact GeoEx trains guru Urs Hofmann to learn more about these rolling epics. Be sure to ask him about saving 50 percent on the single supplement for *Caravans and Conquerors*, and about the highlights and surprisingly delightful misadventures of his recent *Pioneering Persia* journey.



#### UNDERWATER ANTICS IN THE GALÁPAGOS

Our man Simon Krejcik recently returned from the Galápagos Islands enthusing about their wildlife wonders. “You can’t beat the diversity here. I had the most unique snorkel of my life,” he exclaimed, describing how he watched a mischievous flightless cormorant—one of the rare species found in the archipelago—diving down to nibble on the fins of unsuspecting snorkelers. Even Simon, an experienced diver, wasn’t safe from the swimming bird: it snuck up on him and playfully attacked his fins, too (you can see the video at [GeoEx.com/Galapagos-Experts](http://GeoEx.com/Galapagos-Experts)). The other bewitching creatures of these isles, from giant tortoises to skittering marine iguanas and charismatic penguins, are just as unafraid of humans, allowing for unparalleled interactions.

Our *Exploring the Enchanted Islands* is the trip to take if you’d like to follow in the fins of Simon. We’ll explore a handful of the archipelago’s most fascinating corners based from our supremely comfortable, 48-passenger ship. Our expert naturalist guides accompany us on every outing, explaining the dazzling array of diversity that makes these islands one of a kind. Simon adds, “I never considered myself a birder, but you become one in the Galápagos!” You don’t have to be an ornithologist or an evolutionary biologist to appreciate one of the few places left on the planet where the human footprint is kept to a minimum. This 10-day trip, with seven nights at sea, departs weekly, and summer and December holiday departures are already filling. Simon is standing by to give you details.

#### ◆ KINDNESS OF STRANGERS EIGHT

Jean-Paul Tennant: *Upon my purchase of a gift in Kamakura, Japan, the attentive shopkeepers gave me three additional items for which they refused payment. I rejoined my traveling companion and headed down the street, only to be chased down minutes later by one of the shop’s women, arms laden with the same gifts for my friend. She bowed and apologized profusely for not noticing him earlier.*

#### ◆ KINDNESS OF STRANGERS NINE

Kristina Tuohey: *The day I arrived in Damascus to study Arabic, the caretaker of my hotel sent me upstairs to nap while he went across the street to negotiate the purchase of a mobile phone on my behalf; he didn’t want me to pay “foreigner prices.” Days later when I was lost, a stranger put me on the right bus and paid my fare. Then there was the woman who shared her sour apples with me in the dressing room of the Hammam al-Nouri. There were gestures like this all summer.*



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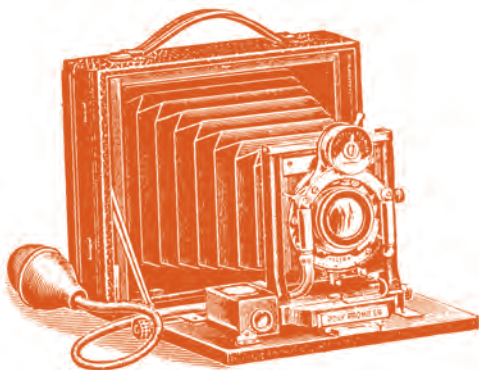
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**THERE'S TALK OF A NEW CUBA**

For all of the chatter about thawing US relations with Cuba, you may be wondering what it means for you. The simple answer is that American tourists wishing to travel in Cuba are still required to take part in a full-time, people-to-people program through a US-based operator. With regulations relaxing, more companies are offering trips, and though having options is always good, it's important to choose wisely. "Cuba is an incredibly complicated and nuanced place to do business," explains GeoEx's Cuba pro Jennine Cohen. "The success of our trips leans heavily on our long-term relationships and our years of experience."



Jennine has her ear to the ground for fresh ways to get to know the country and its people on our *Connecting with Cuba's Living History* journey. When she noticed, for example, that Trinidad and Cienfuegos were becoming go-to regions for tour groups, she decided that the experience was no longer worth the long drive from Havana and now takes travelers to the closer Viñales Valley, a stunning World Heritage Site, for a more uniquely Cuban experience. Jennine adeptly lines up insightful conversations with historians, economists, artists, entrepreneurs, and academics. Plus, she has a knack for tracking down the hottest new dining spots.

We're pleased for our neighbors that their intriguing nation is opening up, but we realize that an influx of US tourism will undoubtedly impact Cuba in the coming years. "Travelers right now," Jennine says, "have a special opportunity to visit Cuba while monumental changes are in the making and traditional Cuban culture is still robustly alive." Needless to say, space is going quickly; call Jennine to reserve yours (November 28–December 5, December 19–26, December 26–January 2, and 2016 departures from January through April).



If you'd like more information on any of the trips mentioned in this newsletter, please visit us at [GeoEx.com/UT](http://GeoEx.com/UT) or call us at 888-733-9019. And if you haven't received our beautiful catalog and would like to, please write or call and we'll have one winging your way immediately.