

# Expo



# Go your own way





## Is there any part of the planet left to discover? **Rachael Oakes-Ash** reveals where the tourists have yet to trample.

Intrepid travel has never been about Frette cotton sheets, butler service and a cappuccino in the desert – intrepid travel is about people. The original backpackers who first beat the path into Thailand, India, Nepal and even Bali didn't find a Starbucks frappe waiting for them, they found locals living their daily lives and inviting them in for a sweet mint tea, a bitter betel nut or a puff on an opium pipe.

Tourism is an economy that many developing countries have been keen to embrace and who can blame them? Witness the success of Thailand's tropical islands and a tourism industry that employs thousands of locals. See what tourism has done to increase the already outstanding economy of Dubai and turn around the fortunes of such destinations as Niseko in Japan and Goa in India. Purists will tell you these places have been ruined but how do they know? Because they went there first.

When a destination is burgeoning it creates a ground swell on the travel circuit as those in the know tell those who want to know where to go. These once-secret destinations open to the intrepid and then to the masses and reap both the rewards and consequences.

Yet mass-market travel serves a purpose too, for holiday-seekers and families and those who simply don't wish to be first. Forget India, some will say, yet those seeing India for the first time don't know what it used to be.

For many that's what travel is: boasting rights, the badge of honour to say, "I was here before the developers." So if you want to boast or simply avoid the masses try these hot spots.

### **Like Nepal? You'll love Bhutan.**

Nepal's Annapurna trek became so popular it was dubbed the Coca-Cola route. Travellers were likely to run into hordes of trekkers high in the Himalayas all searching for an authentic experience. Then the country hit political turmoil and tourism ground to a halt. It's back now with half-a-million people expected to tread the kingdoms' soil by the end of this year. There's good reason – its mountain village people are some of the most charming in the world.

But it is nearby Bhutan that is causing the real buzz. You won't find thousands of tourists here. This landlocked oasis of ancient culture monitors its progression into the modern world carefully and allows far fewer travellers inside its borders. Travellers can only fly into the country with Druk Air, there is no domestic air travel and no railway tracks so the only way to navigate this land of beauty is by road or foot. However, independent travel is not allowed so you will have to go with a tour guide or group.

Why the fuss? Bhutan prides itself on its upkeep of old-world traditions. Visually the country is dramatic. Set in the eastern Himalayas with cliff-hugging temple fortresses and strands of prayer flags, a trek through Bhutan is like stepping into

the pages of a rich and ancient text. The Buddhist country measures its gross national profit by happiness, not monetary wealth.

**Who goes?** Kumuka Worldwide has a nine-day guided Bhutan Heart of the Dragon tour, including a six-day trek from \$3255. See [kumuka.com/Bhutan-Heart-of-the-Dragon.aspx](http://kumuka.com/Bhutan-Heart-of-the-Dragon.aspx)

### **Partial to India? Try Bangladesh on for size.**

You can't beat India for a culture shock, the sheer number of people (more than a billion) living in a region the size of a postage stamp where up close and personal takes on a new meaning. The colours, the personality, the dramatic change in landscape from mountain to beach makes India special but the country's current economic boom and its history as a backpacker pilgrimage means you will be hard-pressed to find somewhere no one else has been.

The neighbouring country of Bangladesh serves up a cultural experience with fewer people and serious bragging rights. This mainly Muslim country sits on the Bay of Bengal and is oft overlooked by those taking the India-Nepal route. It's a land of passion, of crumbling architecture dating back 2000 years, of mangrove parks, pristine beaches and rich history.

Political unrest means travellers must exercise caution. A curfew allows for plenty of sleep from 11pm but that adds to the dinner party takes back home. Don't expect discos, bars and nightclubs; do expect to be enthralled and inspired.

**Who goes?** Intrepid Travel has a 13-day trip to Bangladesh. Canoe the mangroves, marvel at mosques, sail the Shitalakshya River, shop at the Shankharia Bazaar and visit tea plantations and waterfalls. From \$1150, see [intrepidtravel.com.au](http://intrepidtravel.com.au).



Unbeaten track .... (clockwise from top left) hiking through

### **Done China? Head to Mongolia.**

China has been in vogue for a few years now. The Four Seasons, Peninsula and Hyatt have all moved in and the Olympics saw all eyes on China.

There's no doubt that China has a lot to offer the tourist and the traveller but those seeking a less public experience may consider Mongolia.

Landlocked between Russia and China, Mongolia holds a lot of secrets. It's the home of Genghis Khan, who led his Mongol Empire in the 13th century, and it was once ruled by Tibetan Buddhism and China's Qing Dynasty before finding independence in the early 20th century.

Translation: it has a lot of stories to tell. The people of Mongolia are mainly nomadic herders, horses are revered here and it's possible to take horse treks through the country and channel your inner warrior.

Mongolia is rich in more than just human



# Special Report



## > CITY WATCH

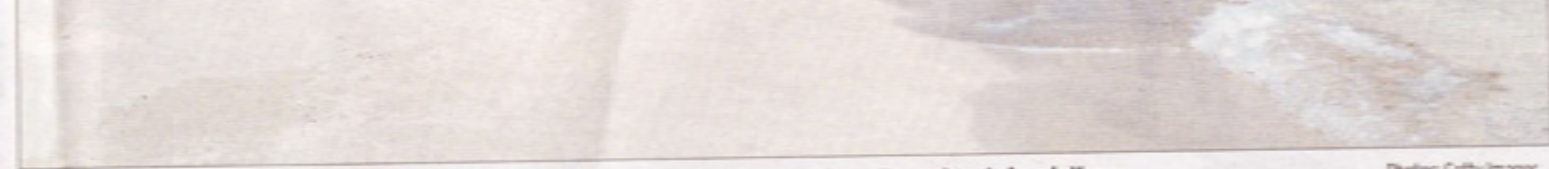
■ **Wellington, the new San Francisco** They share a harbour-front position but San Francisco may want to watch its back as Wellington goes international with a hoard of undiscovered bars and restaurants in back alleys and lanes serving up the nation's finest coffee. There's a tram (just the one), movie studios thanks to Peter Jackson and a thriving arts community. Plus the Wellington Rugby Sevens, the World of Wearable Art Festival and, come 2011, the Rugby World Cup. Go now, before the rigger-buggers arrive.

■ **Vancouver, the new Sydney** With half the population of Sydney and an amphitheatre of mountains on a waterfront harbour, Vancouver is vying for world attention. Come 2010 they will get it as host of the Winter Olympic Games. Chosen by Hollywood's elite as a feature film location for such blockbusters as *Juno*, *X-Men* and *Fantastic Four*, Vancouver has celeb cred.

■ **Prague, the new Paris OK**, we're stretching on this one – what city can seriously replace Paris? But if any city is on the rise it's Prague. It sits on the Vltava River, which links the city with a series of historical bridges. The centre is filled with classical architecture and is known for its charming beauty. Throw in a castle, palace, chateau and museums for a well-rounded culture fix.

■ **Phnom Penh, the new Bangkok** It's dusty, chaotic and cheap – just like Bangkok used to be. You won't find any swanky spa retreats; Raffles is the only true five-star hotel here. You will find a thriving riverfront filled with bars and restaurants overlooking the Tonle Sap River. Add temples galore, a palace, markets at every corner, tuk tuks, tourists and tailors – sounding familiar?





Radophu Valley, Bhutan; Bangladesh women in traditional dress; glorious white sands of Uoleva Island, Tonga; desert views in Yemen.

Photos: Getty Images

history. The Gobi Desert houses the Flaming Cliffs – Bayanzag – where dinosaur remains are. Archaeologists have found dinosaur eggs and complete skeletons. Even Genghis can't compete with that.

**Who goes?** GAP Adventures has a 21-day Nomadic Mongolia tour visiting remote monasteries, camping in the wilderness, camel-riding and hanging with nomadic herders in their tent-like "gers". From \$2749 plus local \$US250 supplement. See [gapadventures.com](http://gapadventures.com).

## The rest of the 'New Black' list

■ **Cambodia, the new Thailand.** Sure, the tourist bus world knows about Siem Reap and the ancient temples of Angkor Wat but go south to Phnom Penh and experience a cowboy town on the rise. This is Bangkok long before the street

hawkers went commercial. It won't stay this way forever, so get on your bike now. See [mot.gov.kh](http://mot.gov.kh).

■ **Tonga, the new Fiji.** Azure waters, squeaky-white-sand beaches, no schmick international hotel chains (yet), Tongan bear-hug hospitality and one of the only places you can swim with whales. Lots and lots of islands. Enough said. See [pmo.gov.to](http://pmo.gov.to).

■ **Yukon, the new Alaska.** The northern star lights of Aurora Borealis, glaciers, mountain peaks and plenty of snow in Canada's most western state. Add whitewater rafting on aquamarine rivers, dog-sledding through forest plains and tramping around snow-melt lakes. Did we mention the madness of the 500-plus-kilometre Yukon Arctic Ultra winter marathon? See [travehyukon.com](http://travehyukon.com).

■ **Yemen, the new Egypt.** You don't get much older than Yemen. From 2200 BC Yemen's position on the Arabian Peninsula overlooking

the Red Sea, Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden made it a thriving port in the spice trade. The Persians and Romans wanted it but failed. The British colonised Yemen in the late 1800s and lost it in the 1960s. Expect ruins, desert and 200 islands with dive sites that rival the Maldives. See [yementourism.com](http://yementourism.com).

■ **Sumba, the new Bali.** Four hundred kilometres east of Bali and set in the Indonesian archipelago, Sumba has surf breaks to rival the best in the world. The island is seriously third world and villagers are mainly practicing "animists" who slaughter animals to predict the future. You won't find many hotels or hostels but New Jersey ex-pat Claude Greaves has set up the Sumba Foundation to help the locals and supports them with his intrepid jungle retreat, Nihiwatu, perched on a cliff on a private beach. See [nihiwatu.com](http://nihiwatu.com).

■ **Moscow, the new New York.** Cold winters, entrepreneurs, gangsters, fur coats, vodka martinis and new money. No, it's not New York, it's Moscow. This city is so hot right now, Louis Vuitton and his friends have moved in to the new capital of capitalism where anything goes if you have the cash to buy it.

■ **Cape Town, the new Rio de Janeiro.** Azure waters and white beaches with a city and mountain backdrop make Cape Town South Africa's answer to South America's party city – just add rum. Like Rio, this vibrant city is visually stunning and revolves around the beach life. Like Brazil, the country will go soccer-mad as hosts of the next FIFA World Cup.

■ **Abu Dhabi, the new Dubai.** With 15 million tourists a year projected for 2010 in Dubai, Abu Dhabi is looking like a less worn option. Get in now before the city spends the \$166 billion it has dedicated to tourism infrastructure over the next five years. Dubai might have the world's tallest tower but Abu Dhabi will have the world's first extension of the Louvre in Paris.