10 great destinations lost to modern travellers

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Chris Leadbeater

Travel wonders including the pyramids of Meroe in Sudan remain off-limits to tourists Credit: Getty

Chris Leadbeater Travel Correspondent
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There are many reasons to read Fyodor Dosdoevsky's masterpiece *Crime and Punishment* – but one is its compelling picture of St Petersburg in the mid-19th century.

"The heat in the street was terrible," runs the opening chapter, as the protagonist Rodion Raskolnikov steps out into Russia's then-capital. "[So was] the airlessness, the bustle and plaster, scaffolding, bricks and dust all about him, and that special Petersburg stench so familiar to all who are unable to get out of town in summer." As with Dickensian London and Hugo's post-Revolutionary Paris, a city and an era comes alive via the written word.

The bleak truth, of course, is that, amid the turbulence of this increasingly troubled century, the St Petersburg of 2024 is just as out of reach for holidaymakers as its 1866 incarnation. And while you would surely have no desire, even if you could, to encounter the rotting alleys and fetid canals of the city in the reign of Alexander II, the splendours

that, until recently, made St Petersburg such an alluring destination – the art treasures of the Hermitage; the ramparts and Romanov shrines of the Peter and Paul Fortress; the opera temple that is the Mariinsky Theatre – are currently, in effect, no more accessible.

This may be a cause for sorrow if you hadn't managed to take a trip to St Petersburg before Russia became a global pariah in 2022, but a reason for a sad nostalgia if you *had*.

And it isn't alone. St Petersburg is just one of 10 travel wonders discussed in this article; places in countries as diverse as Venezuela, Syria, Yemen, Iran, Mali and Ukraine that have two things in common. They are now, due to war, political problems or all-out danger, thoroughly off-limits to tourists. And they have all, in the relatively close past, been seen and loved by one of *Telegraph Travel*'s team of writers – prompting recollections that are all the fonder for the fact that, in some cases, these desert ruins, crashing waterfalls and dreaming citadels may be unreachable for the foreseeable future…

Palmyra, Syria

Even in 2009, two years before Syria began its descent into its seemingly interminable civil war, travelling to Palmyra felt like climbing through a narrow window in time. Driving north-east out of Damascus, I passed a giant billboard showing the face of Bashar al-Assad. There it stood, marooned on an otherwise featureless stretch of desert highway, the basic message inherent in the hard and hawkish gaze. "All of this is mine."

Palmyra 'belongs to the ancient world', says our writer Credit: Reuters

This claim seemed especially preposterous three hours later, when those rose-stoned ruins came into view. Because it was obvious, at first glance, that Palmyra does not belong to al-Assad. It doesn't really belong to Syria, either. It belongs to the ancient world; to the Palmyrene merchants who founded it as a Silk Road settlement; to the Romans who inevitably conquered it; to Zenobia, the Aramaic queen who rebelled against them in AD 270. I remember walking along the Great Colonnade – the city's grand main avenue, constructed under Roman rule – feeling that I had been transported back two millennia; feeling millions of prior footsteps under my own; feeling incredibly privileged as a result.

In retrospect, I feel even more privileged to have seen the Temple of Bel, the first-century wonder that, in 2009, was Palmyra's best-preserved structure. Islamic State changed that in 2015, blowing up all but the temple's entrance arch. Academic opinion differs on how much of (or even whether) the site can be restored in an hour of peace that is yet to arrive.

Perhaps Palmyra will rise again (the Great Colonnade largely survived in 2015; the basic blocks of the temple are still there). It certainly *has* in the past – weathering similar dictators, iconoclasts and brigands. As and when it does, it will still be a jewel of the ancient world, inspiring awe – but no sense of possession – in those who lay eyes upon it.

By Chris Leadbeater

Isfahan, Iran

In the backstreets of Isfahan, just a short skip from its fabled square, I met the most extraordinary man. Sat in the dusty doorway of his small shop, Mostafa was hunched over and so deeply engrossed in whatever he was doing that he almost didn't notice I was there. Looking up, a large smile spreading across his weathered face, he revealed the subject of his intense concentration: a portrait of the great Iranian poet Hafez painted on a piece of camel bone barely the size of a fingernail using a brush made from a single cat's hair.

"We've been doing this in my family for centuries but not many people bother now," he said solemnly, speaking of the precious Persian artform made famous here in Iran's most evocative city.

Isfahan is Iran’s 'most evocative city' Credit: Image Bank/Getty

Such revelations, surprises and memorable encounters come thick and fast in Isfahan, a place of palaces, glazed mosques, ornate gardens and bustling bazaars that was once the seat of the mighty Persian Empire. Mostafa was merely one of the many unforgettable people I met on my two eye-opening weeks in Iran back in 2015 – during a relatively brief window in which the doors were swung open thanks to thawing political relations.

The doors, alas, have been slammed shut again with the UK Foreign Office – and other Western governments – advising against all travel due to the increased threat of terrorism, kidnapping and arbitrary arrest. Renewed tension between Britain and Iran – sparked the regime’s support of Hamas and its continued nuclear policy – has led to further sanctions in recent months.

It’s sad news for all. From a travel perspective as one of the world’s great destinations – one not just remarkable for its history and ancient civilisation but also for the warmth, kindness and concern expressed by the wholly hospitable locals. The narrative was nearly always the same. “Are you enjoying my country?” they’d ask eagerly. “You are most welcome. Please go home and tell everyone that we are good people.”

By Nick Boulos

Timbuktu, Mali

It proved simpler to reach Timbuktu than its name and reputation suggested. Disappointingly so. It was 1999 and we flew to Bamako, Mali’s capital, where we discovered there was a plane that could take us to Timbuktu in a few days’ time. We took

a bus to Mopti, wanting to have at least some sense of the distance and remoteness with which Timbuktu is synonymous, and picked up the plane there.

An ancient, noisy Russian workhorse, the plane had propellers and quite a lot of strategic gaffer tape holding bits of it together. We were the only obvious foreigners on board, craning to peer through the thick, foggy glass of its windows at the fabled world below.

Kate Humble in the Sahara Credit: Kate Humble

The light when we stepped down on to the dusty tarmac was white hot. Shape blurred and shimmered. Colour bleached a faded sepia. A long straight road, dubbed “Aid Agency Street”, led from the airport through a newly-built suburb, erected to house the offices and workers of the agencies that had moved in after the conflict between the Tuareg people of northern Mali and the government.

Timbuktu certainly had an end-of-world feel. End of an era too. A dusty vestige of a once great trading post. The iconic mud-built mosques, amongst the oldest in West Africa, were pockmarked and weather beaten and barricaded shut. An air of desolation hung in the sand-filled streets, where sandblasted cars nosed through the heat alongside donkeys and sheep driven by small, wiry men swathed in black robes and turbans.

In Timbuktu, discover iconic mud-built mosques which are amongst the oldest in West Africa Credit: LightRocket/Getty

The covered market – a warren of cubby-hole shops deep in welcome shadow – sold dates, rice and tea from sacks; sugar and tobacco, bolts of shimmering blue-black cloth, goat skin bags, enamel teapots. There was salt in grey-white slabs and chewing sticks. Here there was life. Deals were struck, news exchanged, hands shaken. Deeply creased faces. Tobacco-stained teeth. Fierce pride. We were offered formal, cautious hospitality, but were largely ignored.

We left Timbuktu just 24 hours after we arrived, heading north with a desert guide called Shindoog to join one of the caravans that were part of the centuries-old salt trade. We travelled with three men and 50 camels, walking and riding 1,500km (930m) through the Sahara to the ancient salt mines of Taoudeni and back. Only when we returned to Timbuktu five weeks later, scrawny, unwashed, with sun-blackened faces, did we

appreciate the miracle that it should exist at all, this remote outpost of humanity, threatened by ever-shifting sands and a searing sun. Only then did we understand why, for the people of the desert, it has always been worth fighting for.

By Kate Humble

Meroe, Sudan

Pyramids. The very word draws the mind, immediately, to Egypt; to those colossal sandstone tombs, built to hold mummified monarchs during their journeys to the afterlife.

But there is another country where vast royal graves stand proud by the Nile. The ancient Egyptian realm was a shape-shifter – waxing and waning along the banks of Africa's great river over the course of three millennia. And at times, power was concentrated far further south than Giza – with the Kushite pharaohs who held sway in what is now Sudan.

In Meroe, 177 pyramids are closely clustered in golden sands Credit: Getty/iStock

They left necropolis clusters of their own. At El Kurru. At Nuri. And, most particularly, at Meroë, where the classic pyramid blueprint was adapted, the core of the structure supplemented by an H-shaped brick entrance – an anteroom off the main burial chamber. Though nowhere near as big as their Giza counterparts, the Meroë pyramids have a majesty of their own – 177 of these strange structures, closely clustered in golden sands.

Alas, Sudan is no-one's idea of an easy-to-visit destination. It has regularly fallen foul of Foreign Office warnings in the last 30 years, and the current advice is for Britons to stay away entirely. My own visit, during a brief period of calm, felt like a peek through a door that is frequently slammed shut – on to a secret garden of which few travellers are aware.

Chris Leadbeater in front of the Meroë pyramids Credit: Chris Leadbeater

Which, in effect, it is. While there *were* other tourists at Meroë (the obligatory groups of intrepid Germans), there is almost no comparison between a morning amid these tombs and an afternoon at Giza. No vast crowds, no huge tour buses, little hassle from hawkers; just 1,000 years of history, laid bare in soft dunes. Including the Pyramid of Amanirenas – a warrior queen who took the fight to the Romans, her tale an obscurity few get to hear.

By Chris Leadbeater

St Petersburg, Russia

I first visited St Petersburg (then Leningrad) during the mid-1980s and I will never forget the revelation I experienced. We in the West had grown to think of Russia (then part of the Soviet Union) as a threat, a severe and an alien land, far removed from the prosperity and tolerance we enjoyed at home.

And of course there were and still are many differences. But at every turn I was reminded of what binds us. The history and culture – the music, the art, the architecture and the literary traditions – and even the family links. After all, Alexandra, the last Tsarina of Russia, was Queen Victoria's favourite granddaughter.

The Hermitage Palace holds one of the greatest collections of Italian, Dutch, French, Spanish and English art Credit: Image Bank/Getty

When you wander around the Hermitage Palace where she once lived, you are constantly reminded of even older connections. It holds one of the very greatest collections of Italian, Dutch, French, Spanish and English art, and among its treasures are the paintings that Catherine the Great bought from the heirs of Robert Walpole at Houghton Hall in Norfolk. Meanwhile, one of the most amusing highlights of the visit is the fabulous Peacock Clock – a mechanical marvel centred around a golden bird that lifts its tail, opens its beak, arches its neck and does a pirouette on its perch when striking the hour. It was made in England in the 1770s.

And the connections go the other way too. Head off to the Mariinsky Theatre and you will, of course, be visiting the home of one of the world's greatest ballet companies. It was here that one of the staples of the London Christmas season, Tchaikovsky and Petipa's *Nutcracker*, premiered in December 1892.

For now – unable to visit St Petersburg – we can only experience those insights second hand. For me it's a poignant reminder of how travel enlightens and war benights us.

By Nick Trend

Leptis Magna, Libya

A Roman bath house near Carlisle has recently been discovered that has links to the Roman city of Leptis Magna, birthplace of the Emperor Septimius Severus, in modern-day Libya. In the bath house there's a dedication stone to Severus's wife, as well as North

African-style architectural features, suggesting that the bath house had been built specially for the great man (he came to Britain in AD 208 and died in York in 211).

In 2004 I visited his home city on a trip to Libya. The former Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, ruled by the autocratic Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, was enjoying a brief window as a niche tourist destination and its biggest draw was its Roman antiquities. Libya has three Roman cities, of which the most impressive is Leptis Magna, once the third most important Roman city in Africa after Carthage and Alexandria.

Leptis Magna was once the third most important Roman city in Africa Credit: Corbis/Getty

Since my visit Libya has been riven by civil war and the country remains a byword for chaos and violence. Leptis Magna, though apparently intact, is off-limits and Unesco has placed it on its list of World Heritage in danger. This makes the memory of my visit all the more precious.

Our little group had the place to ourselves and, having entered through the arch dedicated to Septimius Severus, we were soon lost among the city's old stones. The amphitheatre, backed by the blue of the Mediterranean, was spectacular enough, but what really sticks in my mind is the elaborate bath house complex, known as the Hadrianic Baths, where Septimius Severus kicked off his sandals and enjoyed some serious pampering. You can't help feeling that getting wet in Carlisle would have been a bit of a letdown.

By Nigel Richardson

Angel Falls, Venezuela

I think about Venezuela often, despite the fact it's almost never mentioned in the news and has been on the FCDO's "Don't Go Unless You Have To" list since mid-2017. I treasure the memories of a 2014 trip to see Angel Falls – the world's tallest uninterrupted waterfall – which tumbles from one of the extraordinary table-top tepuis that inspired Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (though the author, like a generation of travellers today, had never been). Venezuela's wild east is so far from the world's woes that you genuinely feel you've escaped and are safe – or as far as flying in a single-prop over jungle-clad peaks can ever feel safe.

I spent time on Isla Margarita, which had pith-helmeted female policewomen, white sand and turquoise sea, and rum, and made me think of Bermuda and the Anglophone Caribbean. I have visited Caracas on several occasions; the centre is chaotic and alienating, but the outskirts reminded me of the Hollywood Hills. My chief regret: I never made it to the Llanos. These open plains are, I am told, perfect riding terrain, and I'm never happier than when I'm pretending to be a South American cowboy.

Angel Falls in Venezuela is the world's tallest uninterrupted waterfall Credit: Getty/E+

Venezuela was open to international tourism long after President Hugo Chávez began pushing through his Bolivarian ideology. But he ground down people's democratic rights and the direction of travel has been disturbing since then. The FCDO advises us to stay away from Venezuela "due to ongoing crime and instability". It adds, in the safety and security section: "The UK does not accept the legitimacy of the current administration put in place by Nicolás Maduro."

Politics and protecting nationals are hazily interwoven in foreign affairs. Caracas was never the safest city, but the national murder rate is comparable with Brazil, Belize, St Lucia and Jamaica. Recent tensions with Guyana look like a distracting ploy. Let's hope

elections later this year mark the beginning of the end of isolation and the mass exodus of weary citizens. This fabulously beautiful country – visited by Columbus, named “Little Venice” by Vespucci and colonised by Germans – should not be off the map.

By Chris Moss

Socotra, Yemen

Climbing up a thousand metres through a dusty heat, we crested the mossy ridge, and there it was. The last remaining forest of dragon blood trees in the world, hundreds of them standing sentinel along a limestone ridge, silhouetted against a huge sky like blown-out umbrellas, their wizened boughs twisted like bent spokes tangled in a wind.

Socotra's Haggeher mountain range is home to the last remaining forest of dragon blood trees Credit: Digital Vision/Getty

I was high up in the Haggeher mountain range on Socotra, a Yemeni island the size of Cornwall which has never heard of McDonald’s. It’s the land of the djinn, prized for its frankincense, where older generations still consult a Makoli witch doctor, where men still speak in unwritten languages and sleep in caves in the hot months. An island cut off from the world for six months a year by monsoons and now by war in its motherland.

I could have taken the weekly ‘humanitarian’ flight from Abu Dhabi. But I wanted to take time to arrive at this island caught in a fracturing time capsule, a Unesco Natural World Heritage Site where a third of its species are endemic, so instead I boarded a commercial dhow carrying building materials, several hundred cartons of chocolate milk, and provisions for a week.

Annabel Heseltine visiting Socotra, Yemen

Thirty-four hours later silvery white sand dunes shimmered in a milky moonlight. Ahmed Adeeb helped me clear customs and drove me to a huge white tent and a warm bush shower on a pink sandy beach guarded by curious Egyptian vultures. We spent a week swimming in warm seas vivid with bright fish, exploring huge caves vibrant with stalagmites and stalactites, gyrocoptering, hiking and fly-camping. Our last destination was the forest, where, miraculously, our tents had now been moved into the shade of the dragon blood tree, known for its red resin and still harvested by Soqotri as a cure for dysentery and fever; a colour so evocative of the tragedy unravelling in its beleaguered homeland.

By Annabel Heseltine

Chernobyl, Ukraine

One might lament the loss of access to more obvious destinations in Ukraine since Putin's tanks rolled over the border. Lviv, like a mini-Vienna, with its elegant architecture and multitude of coffee houses; the capital Kyiv, where gilded, fairy-tale cathedrals meet monstrous Soviet-era monuments; Odesa, a mighty Black Sea port that was last year named a Unesco World Heritage Site. But Chernobyl, site of the most infamous nuclear disaster in history, deserves a spot on every travellers' wishlist – there's nothing else on Earth quite like it.

I visited with friends in late November 2018 on a freezing day-trip from Kiev with a wise-cracking but knowledgeable guide. When our group asked for a photo at the Chernobyl town sign, he dutifully obliged, declaring: "Everybody smile! Say 'cancer'!"

Nature is slowly reclaiming the site of the infamous nuclear disaster Credit: Getty/AFP

Jokes aside, the exclusion zone is safe to visit, provided you follow a few simple instructions – don't wander off, pick anything up, or sit on the ground.

The larger one-time workers' town of Pripyat is the undoubted highlight: a sprawling, Brutalist Cold War museum, frozen in time – but which nature is slowly reclaiming. A photographer's dream. Geiger counter in hand, its reading fluttering like a cardiograph, our guide led us around the most eye-catching and important spots: the fairground, the echoey remains of a basketball court, the hospital – with a creepy children's ward still filled with empty cradles. As we exited, our guide pointed out the tattered remains of a fireman's jacket – its former owner among the disaster's first victims.

Our final stop was the power plant itself, contained since 2016 within a vast £1bn steel structure that dominates the skyline. Inside, robotic arms are finally finishing the job of picking apart the nuclear muddle, and visitors can now safely stand within 100 metres of the exact spot where the grim but fascinating catastrophe began. It's an affecting experience, and one which – when peace returns to Ukraine – I'd recommend to anyone.

By Oliver Smith

Pyongyang, North Korea

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as it likes to be known, gifted me the weirdest experience of my travelling life. I went in 2013 as part of a group – the only way outsiders were allowed in – and the whole trip was carefully controlled to create as wholesome a picture as possible of a society more repressed than any other on the planet.

In the capital city, Pyongyang, we stayed where all Westerners are obliged to stay, in a heavily guarded highrise hotel on an island in the Taedong river. Known jokingly as The Alcatraz of Fun, it had a rotating restaurant on the top and a karaoke bar in the basement.

Nigel Richardson visited North Korea Credit: Nigel Richardson

Our sightseeing involved an endless diet of monuments and museums to the various Kims and their stellar achievements. These included the Museum of the Construction of the Metro and – wait for it – the Museum of the Construction of the Museum of the Construction of the Metro. There were several funfairs because funfairs are Kim Jong-un's idea of a good time. In one I had my Ray-Bans nicked (I had put them down briefly to take a photo) and when I complained was told I must have imagined it "because there is no crime in the DPRK".

So far so surreally dystopian, but our last day there was International Workers' Day, a national holiday, when people are given special dispensation to let their hair down. They swarmed drunkenly and joyously in the parks, they embraced us Westerners like long lost friends, and for that one day Pyongyang was a Carnival of Fun.

By Nigel Richardson