LIEN DE RUYCK

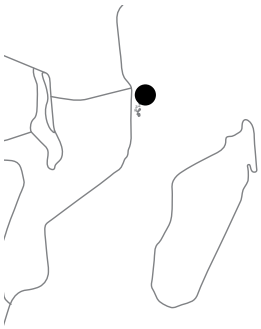
OFF-GRID Adventures

Lannoo

VAMIZI
11.0232° S, 40.6905° E

A Hope Spot

Freediving in the Indian Ocean



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Mozambique invites exploration at a slow pace. We're headed to the coral island of Vamizi, set among the Quirimbas Archipelago. This eight-mile-long finger of island is one of the world's most important biodiversity hotspots. A bastion of hope, it offers a deep dive in paradise. To get there, we admire Africa from above, flying low over the clearest blue water, with tiny remote islands all around us. Easing down, until our wheels touch the island airstrip and roll us to a gentle stop. Is it me, or does time seem to have slowed down already?

The island is blessed with a tropical climate and powder-soft sandy beaches that rival those of the Maldives. We stay in one of only six secluded villas on the island. Nestled in the shadow of mature casuarina trees, each has its own access to the beach. An easy encounter with the untamed, so far. I can't wait to explore and jump into a kayak to get a first glimpse of the environment. As it's still early morning, kingfishers and cicadas fill the air with their dawn songs. I glide almost effortlessly over the glass like water and drift past mangroves along the shoreline. With tropical temperatures of about 35 °C, I'm looking forward to spending time in the water and exploring the healthy coral reefs around.

Butterfly effect

All over the tropics, reefs are in terminal decline, prey to global warming, overfishing and pollution. In parts of the Indian Ocean, bleaching has affected coral by 60-90%. But we live in hope: in 2013, this island group was designated as one of the first Hope Spots by Mission Blue, an alliance of 200 respected ocean conservation groups and like-minded organizations. Hope Spots are seen as parts of the world that are critical to its health and its ecosystem. Any successful result here has an exponential knock-on effect for the world as a whole. If you want to see the butterfly effect at work, this is a good place to start.

The art of freediving, a serene underwater dance.

But change doesn't just happen overnight. After years of effort, the community-led Friends of Vamizi programme has managed to establish a dedicated research centre with resident zoologists on the island. Together they have recorded over 180 different species of coral and more than 300 species of reef fish. This is a sanctuary for some of the most significant wildlife habitats in the Indian Ocean and a community-driven marine protected area (MPA), in partnership with the WWF and UNESCO.

If you're lucky enough to visit the island in July or September, you can spot the humpback whales on their epic voyages between East Africa and Antarctica. They bring their newborn calves with them and the new families enjoy frolicking in the deep water channels around the island.

Underwater world

No wonder that this is the place divers dream about... The wild underwater landscapes, the bounty of tropical ocean currents and an abundance of marine life make Vamizi diving beyond world-class. Neptune's Arm – where coral gardens tumble down the edge of a 1,000-metre (3,280-foot) cliff so crowded with fish you can hardly see the view – has been named as one of the top ten scuba sites on the planet.

The zone is an eye-opening place, which, in addition to its radioactivity, also has an incredible beauty.

Soviet mural at the post office in Pripyat. ***(right)*** **A bird's-eye view on the bewildered city center of Chernobyl.** ***(following pages)***

LOCATION

Chernobyl power plant
Ukraine, Europe

CURIOSITY

This zone represents the third-largest nature reserve in mainland Europe and has become an iconic experiment in rewilding. The land surrounding the plant, which has been largely off limits to humans for three decades, is a haven for wildlife.

TRAVEL TIP

Monitor Ukraine's current safety and entry requirements. When in doubt, consult your doctor for a medical check-up before departure.

BEFORE YOU GO

Watch HBO's five-part *Chernobyl* miniseries that tells the powerful and visceral story of the worst man-made accident in history, or read the graphic novel *The Lost Child of Chernobyl*.


СССР
ПОЧТА СССР


GP

Canada's true nature only really reveals itself with a bird's-eye view.

But the area never feels truly wild to me. Even when we spot a grizzly bear by the side of the road, I barely flinch. Is it down to social media that Highway 93 feels a bit like Rue Déjà Vu? The kind of place where brochures and Instagram walls come to life? There's so much to see in such a limited space, but little to discover in a truly spontaneous way. We enjoy it, but something's not quite right. Around every bend there's another breathtaking landscape, with an info board and a designated photo stop plus a small crowd gathered. For the first time in months we feel more like tourists than travellers. With its four million visitors a year, Banff is almost becoming a victim of its own success.

Continental divide

Fortunately, our wheels keep us focused. Although we're not always in our comfort zone. We've been living out of our panniers for 70 days and wearing the same handful of clothes all that time. On the road, the icy wind keeps us alert, and each of the five climatic zones we cross through introduces itself with its own soundtrack and scent. In the evening we pitch our tent next to the horse-watering hole of a campsite that has been fully booked for months. We continue with our stubborn approach to travel – no making of plans or reservations – but this is the first time we need a pass to be allowed to see the great outdoors.

The appeal of this region isn't new. It's been an attraction for a century and a half. For nature lovers, but also for gold and fortune seekers of the Crown Colonies. Ten years after British Columbia joined the Canadian Confederation, construction of the transcontinental railroad through the Rocky Mountains began in 1881. The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) opened up the Banff area to a large audience. It became a gateway through the mountain range that previously split the continent in two over a distance of nearly 5,000 kilometres (3,110 miles).

Unusual catch of the day. ***(left)*** **Rider's high on the Columbia Icefield.** ***(right)***

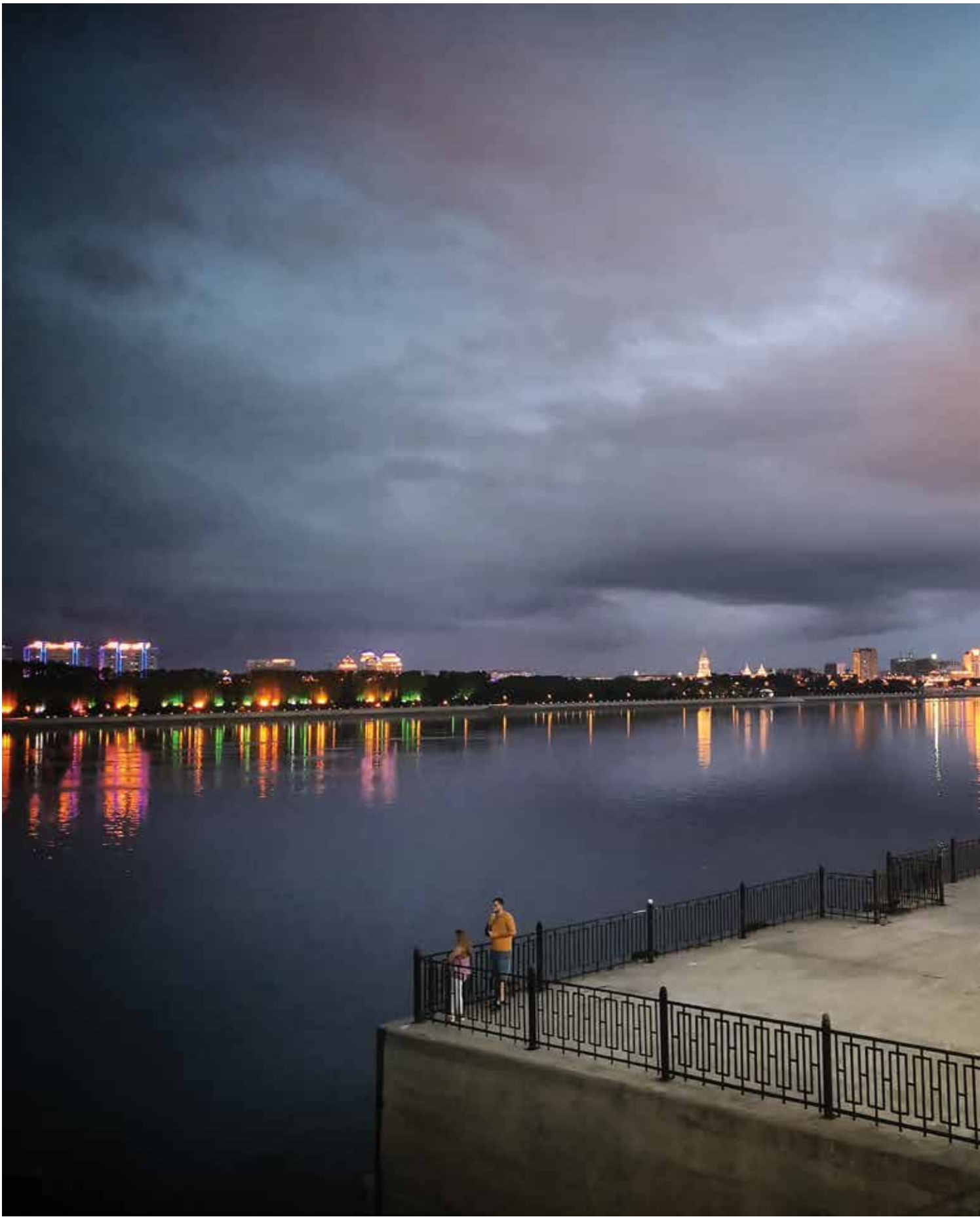
The area first became popular when some railway workers hit upon sulphurous hot springs at the base of Sulphur Mountain. The Banff Springs Hotel opened its doors there in 1888. It was the place to be seen among the Victorian nobility, who loved to come and feel rejuvenated by the 'healing waters'. We freshen up back at the water pump.

Expo 86

In an attempt to get an alternative view of the region, we ride the Sea to Sky highway to the seaplane base on Green Lake in Whistler, hoping for a maiden flight in the country that likes to show off its special aircraft. Because here and there you can still see remnants of the World Exposition on

Into the mountains, on the way to Leh and Khardung La.

IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT



Riverside view of the Chinese city of Heihe, from Blagoveshchensk. ***(left)*** **Lada country.** ***(following pages)***

LOCATION

Magdagachi
Siberia, Asian Russia

CURIOSITY

Siberia is home to the world's longest railway line and the world's deepest lake.

ADVENTURE TIME

It is unbearably cold in winter and boiling in summer, so the best time to visit Siberia is in March when the temperature varies from -5 °C to -25 °C. But don't let that stop you.

TRAVEL TIP

Visit Pleistocene Park, a 144km² (56 square miles) fenced-off area in Arctic Siberia, where Russian scientists are trying to stave off catastrophic climate change by resurrecting an Ice Age biome complete with lab-grown woolly mammoths.

BEFORE YOU GO

Few Russians speak English. Learn some basic Russian phrases and words, or decide to stick to interpretative dance and hand signals. Пожалуйста!

Sea kayaking to the rhythm of the Atlantic Ocean. ***(top)*** **Cabin life.** ***(bottom)***

And that volatility also applies to the water. The tidal currents between and against the islands are deceptively strong and the water here barely reaches 11 °C in summer. Nevertheless, on Streymoy I want to go out into the North Atlantic, whatever it takes. At the highest point, winds reach up to 11 knots, leading to dangerous seas and giant waves at the entrances to the fjords. But that doesn't stop us. We each put on a thick drysuit and woolly hat, warm up our muscles and pull the sea kayaks into the water.

Our trip starts in Hósvík, on the east coast of Streymoy. The bright red suits and kayaks contrast against the green of the cliffs and the blackened basalt rocks. The salty wind scrapes my cheeks as the noses of the kayaks make their way through the ocean. It feels like paradise. Until we paddle past Við Áir, one of the world's last three whaling stations still standing. Closed in the 80s, it is now part of a maritime museum. The area is also one of the locations of the controversial *grindadráp* (whale slaughter) drive hunting. Dating from the 9th century, this traditional practice (now heavily regulated) turns the Sundini sound red, with hundreds of pilot whales and dolphins rounded up and killed. A horrific practice, which I immediately condemn. Hunting was once a matter of life and death for families on the remote islands, but it still survives as a tradition today – despite significant protest from animal activists. Our guide also doesn't want to rock the boat. We take a break, shake hands again over a hot cup of tea, then finish the kayak trip in silence.

Atlantic puffins

In the end it is Mykines that appeals to my imagination the most. The steep cliffs provide a safe haven for millions of seabirds that live here permanently, come here to

breed, or are just passing through. Of the 305 species, the petrel and the puffin – or more precisely, the Atlantic puffin – are the most iconic. After a bumpy crossing and a trip from the harbour, we reach Mykineshólmur via a footbridge over a gorge that's 35 metres (115 feet) deep. I feel like both Indiana Jones and Melanie from Hitchcock's *The Birds*. The small lighthouse island is the breeding ground for one of the largest colonies of Atlantic puffins in the world. They look both comical and sad at the same time, with their brightly coloured beaks and fish in their mouths. Millions of puffins fly to and fro to dig their nests into the cliffs, hatch their eggs, and around 40 days later disappear again with their young into the northern sun. It's as if we're in a nature documentary. //

sometimes doesn't even make it onto the map, it contains more than 90% of all the ice mass on Earth. Yet this canary in the climate-crisis coal mine is also what gives it the most hope. WWF has managed to ban fishing from an ocean area of 4,500 km² (1,740 square miles) off the northern Antarctic Peninsula, naming the wildlife sanctuary Hope Bay. The bay is teeming with natural intelligence and all creatures great and small, including whales, krill and phytoplankton. We almost forget that the deep ocean and its inhabitants are our natural carbon processors. Each year, marine ecosystems and wildlife together absorb nearly three billion tonnes of carbon. The amount of CO2 a whale absorbs is comparable to the amount absorbed by around 3,000 trees. This blue carbon phenomenon captures more carbon worldwide than all rainforests combined. And that is more than worth protecting.

This is the only place on Earth that doesn't officially belong to anyone. For more than 4.5 billion years, no human was carried here on the wind or the waves. The explorers who first mapped the continent were hailed as heroes, but carnage often followed in their wake. The tide turned in 1959, and the continent became the first open nuclear-free zone following the Cold War arms race. My homeland Belgium was one of the 12 countries that co-signed the Antarctic Treaty. The Protocol on Environmental Protection was later added, making it impossible to exploit mineral resources until at least 2048.

It is our most symbolic place, dedicated to peace and science. But that doesn't mean there aren't nations that have unofficially claimed a chunk of the Antarctic. Officially, the 68 stations are solely engaged in peaceful scientific research, but their motivations are not always so clear. Now it's up to us to protect this wilderness and its inhabitants. For activists, restoring the whale population is a much-needed reminder that international cooperation can be effective, protection can work, and our species has the ability to reverse the damage we've done to our natural world. So long as there's a whale plunging its tail into the depths, there's hope on the horizon. //

Abbey Road, Antarctic edition.