

Vacations in Dangerous Places

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Best Luxury Adventure Tours

By David Peisner Sep-2012

For a brave breed of travelers and tour operators, only the world's most unstable regions will do.

Nigel Green became interested in traveling to the world's most unstable regions largely by accident. In 1989 he was taking a long holiday in Mongolia and China and, in the spring, found himself in Beijing. "It was all kicking off in Tiananmen Square at the time—the student uprisings," says Green, 49, who works in debt collection at a law office in Guildford, England. "It was really exciting. It was history. I just got a taste for it after that."

Since then, Green has been just about everywhere in the world that the British Foreign Office and the U.S. State Department have advised against going, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Chechnya and North Korea. As he's discovered, planning trips to such places can be complicated, but over the last few years, a number of companies have emerged that specialize in ferrying tourists to political hot spots, war zones

and other way-off-the-beaten-track destinations.

“It’s a fascinating part of the travel industry that’s growing,” says Jonny Bealby, a former travel writer who started **Wild Frontiers** (44-207/736-3968; wildfrontiers.co.uk), an outfitter that runs trips to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, among other places. “Our clients want to see these places for themselves and not simply rely on what the media says about them.”

Even within such a niche corner of the travel industry, there are a variety of options. **Untamed Borders** (44-753/213-9504; untamedborders.com), cofounded six years ago by James Willcox, an itinerant Englishman who has had jobs restocking cruise ships, driving a forklift and teaching English abroad, runs tours mostly to Central Asia that emphasize the region’s culture and history. Green contacted the firm to help him get into Chechnya earlier this year. “I tried myself, but there was no way of getting permits,” he says. Untamed Borders had a guide with contacts throughout the Caucasus and organized a trip through Chechnya as well as neighboring Dagestan and Ossetia. Most of the guides Willcox employs are locals he’s met or been introduced to during his own travels.

Nicholas Wood, a former *New York Times* foreign correspondent, started a company called **Political Tours** (44-843/289-2349; politicaltours.com) in 2009, which now organizes trips to places like Libya, Bosnia and North Korea. The approach is to offer the kinds of experiences he’d had as a journalist. “The way we do stuff, it’s almost like creating a documentary,” Wood says. “We bring people into contact with foreign affairs. So we put together clients with journalists and analysts, and take them to see real live situations. Then they can understand the bigger picture.”

Most of these operators emphasize that they take great care to avoid active conflict zones. Despite the widespread impression that places like Afghanistan and Iraq are a maze of IEDs, RPGs and violent jihadists, large swaths of both countries are relatively safe and can be negotiated without

a phalanx of security. “I wouldn’t want to travel anywhere we’re going with armed guards on a regular basis,” says Willcox. “The worst thing that’s going to happen in Afghanistan is a roadblock with a lot of guys holding automatic weapons. Having a couple of armed guards isn’t going to make any difference. In fact, it might instigate a firefight. Plus, having armed guards draws attention to you and puts a huge barrier between your group and the rest of the country. You can’t interact.”

Although the term “war tourism” has mostly become a pejorative for these types of vacations, some companies embrace it. **War Zone Tours** (646-863-7131; warzonetours.com) is run by guys with backgrounds in the military and security contracting and caters to adrenaline junkies. “We want clients to feel like they’re on the edge of a very dangerous situation,” says Rick Sweeney, a War Zone Tours guide. “There’s definitely risk and a lot of waivers involved, but it must be very manageable for us. You’re trying to get somebody on that edge, but we know, because of the infrastructure we have in place, that it’s actually not nearly as dangerous as it may seem.”

War Zone Tours will allow up to four people on a trip, though most excursions are limited to just one or two brave souls. The itineraries are specifically designed to a client’s wishes, but as Sweeney says, there are some lines the company won’t cross: “We’re very clear with our clients. You’re not going there to fight. I’m not going to hand you an AK-47. We’re not there to get shot at.”

The challenges of running tours in parts of the world with little or no tourist infrastructure are numerous. Banks are a rarity in many of these places, so transferring money or paying locals becomes a challenge. When Bealby began trips to the remote Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan, he sent along tents, tables and other equipment with the group because there were none in the region available to rent.

As Willcox puts it, “Cars break down, drivers don’t turn up, people get malaria, security on roads becomes a problem, so we get stuck in certain

areas. Lots of stuff goes wrong, but we haven't had anyone kidnapped or killed.”

Bryanne Congrene, a 53-year-old Australian switchboard operator who did a tour of Afghanistan with Untamed Borders last year, recalls hearing a bomb blast near Herat that she later discovered had killed two policewomen. But she says she felt extremely safe: “I could be in downtown New York and something could go wrong.”

Prices vary, from roughly \$2,300 (plus airfare) for, say, a ten-day ski holiday in the Bamyan district of Afghanistan to more than \$20,000 for higher-risk, tailor-made journeys. Some detractors have disparaged the idea of traipsing through other people's problems as unseemly. But as Willcox points out, his company and others pump money into poor communities, and although he's heard these criticisms, it's never from the locals.

“To be honest, the majority thinks we're nuts,” he says. “But the second reaction is they're proud. It's as if they've almost forgotten they've got a lot to offer. They might be struggling, but other people are willing to take the risk and travel halfway around the world to visit.”