

DRIFT VISTAS

A FIELD GUIDE

PHOTO: WILLIAN JUSTEN DE VASCONCELLOS / PEXELS

Places That Don't *Look Real*

*A field guide to twenty of them, and how to
stand there*

FIRST EDITION · 2026

They are real. That is the whole point.

Every place in this book has been called fake in a comment section. A pink lake, a mountain with stripes, a salt flat that turns the sky upside down. People assume a filter, or a prompt. There is neither. There is algae, iron, rain, salt and very old ice.

This guide does two jobs. First it tells you why each place looks the way it does, in plain language, because the real reason is always better than the rumour. Then it tells you how to be standing there when it looks like the photograph: the month, the hour, the gate to use, and the mistake that sends most people home with a grey picture.

That second part matters more than people expect. Almost every place here has a narrow window. The mirror at Uyuni lasts about three months. The tulips last three weeks. Grand Prismatic hides in its own steam every cold morning. Go at the wrong time and it is still a nice trip. Go at the right time and it does not look real.

Go see one. Then go see another.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

THE MONTH STRIP

Filled circles are the months when it looks like the photograph. Rings are months still worth the trip. Empty means closed, flooded, frozen or wrong.

STAND HERE

The exact viewpoint, and the time of day it works.

THE MISTAKE

The one thing most visitors get wrong. Read this line even if you skip the rest.

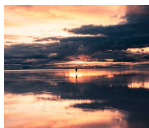
NO PRICES

Prices change by the season and go stale in print. Where cost matters we say what drives it and how to keep it down.

A NOTE ON LINKS

Underlined links open booking sites. Some are partner links: if you book through them we may earn a small commission, at no cost to you. It never decides what we recommend.

THE TWENTY



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Salar de Uyuni



02

Cappadocia



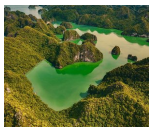
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Rainbow Mountain



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Plitvice Lakes



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Ha Long Bay



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Grand Prismatic Spring



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The Pink Lakes



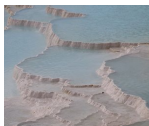
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Kawah Ijen



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The Tulip Fields



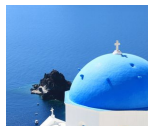
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Pamukkale



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Moraine Lake



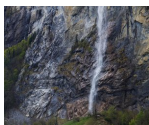
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Jökulsárlón and Diamond Beach



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Deadvlei

THE YEAR, AT A GLANCE

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Salar de Uyuni	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Cappadocia	○	○	○	●	●	●	○	○	●	●	○	○
Rainbow Mountain	○	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	○	○	○	○
Plitvice Lakes	○	○	○	○	●	●	○	○	●	●	○	○
Ha Long Bay	○	○	●	●	●	○	○	○	●	●	●	○
Grand Prismatic Spring	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	○	○	○
The Pink Lakes	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	●	●
Kawah Ijen	○	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	○
The Tulip Fields	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Pamukkale	○	○	○	○	●	●	○	○	●	●	○	○
Moraine Lake	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Santorini	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Lake Bled	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Lauterbrunnen	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Sigiriya	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Antelope Canyon	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Zhangjiajie	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Wadi Rum	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Jökulsárlón and Diamond Beach	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Deadvlei	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Filled: looks like the photograph. Ring: still worth the trip. Tap a name to jump to it.

N°

01

PHOTO: WILLIAN JUSTEN DE VASCONCELLOS / PEXELS

BOLIVIA · 20.13° S, 67.49° W

Salar de Uyuni

The sky, twice.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

Forty thousand years ago this was a lake the size of a small country. It dried, and left behind the largest salt flat on Earth: about ten thousand square kilometres of white, so flat that satellites use it to calibrate their instruments.

From January to March the rains leave a few centimetres of water on top. There is no wind to speak of and nothing on the horizon, so the surface becomes a mirror and the line between ground and sky disappears. When the water goes, the salt cracks into white hexagons that run to the edge of sight.



Bring rubber boots in mirror season. You will be standing in it.

STAND HERE

Any shallow stretch near the eastern edge at sunset or sunrise, when the cloud lights up from below and above at once. In the dry months, Incahuasi island, a hill of giant cacti in the middle of the white.

WHEN



January to March for the mirror. May to October for hexagons and hard blue sky.

BASE

Uyuni town

GETTING THERE

Fly from La Paz in about an hour, or take the overnight bus. Go out with a licensed 4x4 operator, for a day or for three, continuing south to the red and green lagoons.

GIVE IT

One night minimum. Three days for the full circuit.

THE MISTAKE

Do not arrive straight from sea level. The flat sits at 3,650 metres. Spend two nights in Sucre or La Paz first, and pick your tour by its vehicles and drivers, not its price.

N°

02

PHOTO: DIEGO F. PARRA / PEXELS

TÜRKİYE · 38.64° N, 34.83° E

Cappadocia

*A hundred balloons over a valley of
stone chimneys.*

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

Three volcanoes buried this plateau in ash. The ash set into tuff, a rock soft enough to cut with a hand tool, and rain did the rest. Where a harder stone sat on top, it sheltered the column beneath, and a tower was left standing with a hat on.

People have been digging into it for thousands of years: houses, pigeon lofts, painted churches, whole cities underground. The balloons are newer. They fly at dawn because the valley air is still and cold then, and they fly together because every pilot wants the same hour.



You do not have to fly. Watching from the ridge is free and just as good.

STAND HERE

The ridge above Göreme, on the west side of the village, half an hour before sunrise. The balloons rise in front of you and drift over the rooftops. For the rock itself, Rose Valley in the last hour of light.

WHEN



April to June and September to October: calm mornings, mild days. Winter brings snow on the chimneys and more cancelled flights.

BASE

Göreme or Uçhisar

GETTING THERE

Fly from Istanbul to Kayseri or Nevşehir in a little over an hour, then a shuttle to the villages.

GIVE IT

Three nights, so you have two or three mornings.

THE MISTAKE

Do not book one morning. Flights are cancelled whenever the wind is wrong, and it often is. Book the balloon for your first sunrise so a cancellation can roll to the next.

N°

03

PHOTO: BRUNO GARCIA PASCUAL / PEXELS

PERU · 13.87° S, 71.30° W

Rainbow Mountain

A ridge painted in stripes, at five thousand metres.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

The stripes are layers of sediment laid down flat, then tilted on edge when the Andes rose. Each colour is a different mineral: iron oxide for the reds, iron sulphide for the yellows, chlorite for the greens.

For most of living memory nobody saw them. The ridge lay under snow and ice until the cover melted back, and it only became a walk that people set out to do in the 2010s. It went from unknown to one of the most visited places in Peru in a few years.



Short of breath? Palccoyo, nearby, is a far shorter walk.

STAND HERE

The saddle opposite the striped ridge, reached by a broad path from the trailhead. The short extra climb to the higher viewpoint behind it gets you above the crowd and adds the red valley beyond.

WHEN



May to September. Dry, cold and clear. In the wet months the colours go dull under cloud and the trail turns to mud.

BASE

Cusco

GETTING THERE

A day trip: about three hours by road each way, leaving well before dawn, then a climb of an hour and a half or more. Horses can be hired for most of the ascent.

GIVE IT

One very long day.

THE MISTAKE

Do not go in your first days at altitude. The viewpoint is above 5,000 metres. Do Cusco, the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu first and leave this for the end.

TOURS AND TICKETS ➤

PLACES TO STAY ➤

N°

04

PHOTO: CHASING LUX / PEXELS

CROATIA · 44.88° N, 15.62° E

Plitvice Lakes

Sixteen lakes pouring into each other.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

The water here is loaded with dissolved limestone. As it runs over moss and algae it drops that mineral as travertine, a soft stone that grows by about a centimetre a year. Over thousands of years it has built natural dams across the valley, and behind each dam, a lake.

So the waterfalls are not wearing the rock away. They are building it. The barriers are still rising and the lakes are still changing shape. The colour, anywhere from emerald to milky turquoise, comes from the minerals and the angle of the sun.



No swimming, anywhere. The boardwalks are the whole experience.

STAND HERE

The clifftop path above the Lower Lakes, a few minutes from Entrance 1. It looks straight down on the boardwalks crossing the water, with the big waterfall behind.

WHEN



May, June, September and October. High water in spring, colour in autumn. In deep winter it freezes, which is its own version of unreal.

BASE	A guesthouse near the park, or Zagreb or Zadar
GETTING THERE	About two hours by road from Zagreb or Zadar. Buses run from both. Two entrances: 1 for the Lower Lakes and the big waterfall, 2 for the Upper Lakes.
GIVE IT	One full day. Sleep nearby the night before.

THE MISTAKE

Do not arrive at eleven. That is when the coaches do. Buy a timed ticket online ahead of time in summer and walk in at opening.

N°

05

PHOTO: MAXED RAW / PIXELS

VIETNAM · 20.91° N, 107.18° E

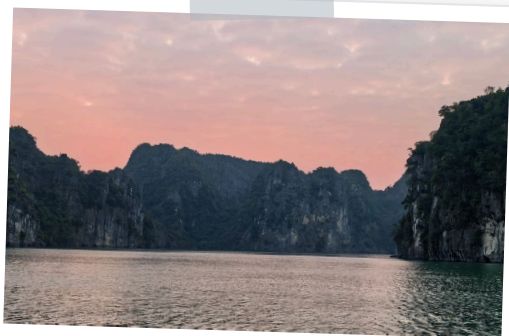
Ha Long Bay

*Sixteen hundred islands, most of them
with no name.*

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

This was a range of limestone hills. Warm rain dissolved the rock along its cracks for millions of years until only towers were left, and then the sea rose and flooded the valleys between them.

What remains is around 1,600 islands and islets standing straight out of green water. Most are too steep to land on. Many are hollow, with caves and enclosed lagoons you reach by paddling under an arch at low tide. The name means the place where the dragon descended.



Lan Ha Bay, just south, is the same scenery with a fraction of the boats.

STAND HERE

The top deck of a boat at anchor, at sunrise, when the towers come out of the mist in layers. For a high view, the steps up Ti Top island, early.

WHEN



March to May and September to November. Winter is cool and misty, which suits the place. Summer is hot, with storms.

BASE

Hanoi, then a boat

GETTING
THERE

About two and a half hours by road from Hanoi. Most cruises include the transfer.

GIVE IT

One night on the water, two if you can.

THE MISTAKE

Do not do it as a day trip. You will spend longer on the highway than on the bay and miss the sunset and the dawn, which are the reasons to come.

N°

06

PHOTO: YIZI ZENG / PEXELS

USA · 44.53° N, 110.84° W

Grand Prismatic Spring

A hot spring ringed in every colour of flame.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

Yellowstone sits on top of a volcano, and this is where some of its heat comes out: a pool about as wide as a football pitch is long, fed from deep below.

The middle is close to boiling and almost sterile, so it shows the pure blue of deep clear water. As the water spreads outward it cools, and each temperature suits a different community of heat-loving microbes. They make the rings: yellow nearest the centre, then orange, then rust red at the cool edge. The colours shift with the seasons as the microbes do.



Stay on the boardwalk. The crust is thin and the water underneath scalds.

STAND HERE

The Grand Prismatic Overlook, a short uphill walk from the Fairy Falls trailhead. It is the only place on the ground where you see the whole spring. The boardwalk beside the pool puts you in the steam, which is worth doing second.

WHEN



June to September. Most park roads are closed by snow from early November to late April.

BASE	West Yellowstone, or lodging near Old Faithful
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GETTING THERE	By car. Midway Geyser Basin is on the main park road between Madison and Old Faithful.
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GIVE IT	Two hours here. Three days or more for the park.
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THE MISTAKE

Do not go at dawn. This is the rare place where sunrise is wrong: on a cold morning the spring disappears into its own steam. Go between late morning and mid-afternoon on a warm, sunny day.

[TOURS AND TICKETS ↗](#)[PLACES TO STAY ↗](#)

N°

07

PHOTO: SERGEY GUK / PENTON

AUSTRALIA · 28.16° S, 114.25° E

The Pink Lakes

Lakes the colour of bubblegum, beside a blue ocean.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

Western Australia has a scatter of salt lakes along its coast, and the water in them is several times saltier than the sea. Almost nothing can live in it except a microscopic alga that protects itself from the sun by making beta-carotene, the pigment that colours carrots.

When the salt is concentrated and the light is strong, the alga blooms and the water turns pink, red or lilac. The shade changes through the day and through the year. At Hutt Lagoon, the largest of them, the pigment is harvested commercially for food colouring and supplements.



Pair it with Kalbarri's river gorges, forty minutes north.

STAND HERE

Hutt Lagoon, near Port Gregory, is the big one: the roadside lookouts on George Grey Drive run along its edge. Go with the sun high. A scenic flight from Kalbarri or Geraldton shows pink water, white dune and blue ocean together. Rottnest Island, a ferry ride from Perth, has small pink lakes to cycle past.

WHEN



A cloudless day, between mid-morning and mid-afternoon. The colour tends to be strongest in the warmer months, from about September to March.

BASE

Kalbarri or Geraldton

GETTING THERE

Hutt Lagoon is a long day's drive north of Perth, or a stop on the coastal road trip toward Kalbarri, Shark Bay and Ningaloo. Port Gregory is the village beside it.

GIVE IT

An hour or two, as part of the coast drive.

THE MISTAKE

Do not go at sunset or under cloud and expect the photograph. The pink needs overhead sun. On a grey afternoon it can look brown.

N°

08

PHOTO: MASKHID YUNUS / PEXELS

INDONESIA • 8.06° S, 114.24° E

Kawah Ijen

A turquoise lake of acid, and fire that burns blue.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

The crater holds one of the largest strongly acidic lakes in the world. Volcanic gas dissolves into the water and gives it that opaque turquoise.

Beside the lake, sulphur gas escapes from the rock at great heat and ignites when it meets the air. Sulphur burns blue, and in darkness the flames are visible running down the crater wall. Miners still carry blocks of yellow sulphur out of the crater on their shoulders, on the same path you walk.



Step aside for the miners. Their loads weigh more than they do.

STAND HERE

The crater rim at first light, when the lake turns from grey to turquoise and the steam catches the sun. The blue flames are lower down and only show in full darkness.

WHEN



The dry season, roughly April to October.

BASE

Banyuwangi

GETTING
THERE

A drive of an hour or more to the trailhead in the night, then a steady climb of about three kilometres to the rim. Usually combined with Mount Bromo on a trip across East Java.

GIVE IT

One night, with almost no sleep.

THE MISTAKE

Do not go without a guide and a proper respirator. The gas is dangerous, the crater closes when levels rise, and access rules change. Check the current rules before you travel.

N°

09

PHOTO: BRÁULIO JARDIM / PEXELS

NETHERLANDS · 52.26° N, 4.55° E

The Tulip Fields

A country coloured in with a ruler.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

These are not gardens. They are farms, and the crop is the bulb, not the flower. The Netherlands grows billions of them a year in the sandy soil behind the coastal dunes, each variety planted in its own strip, which is why the land looks striped from above.

The flowers are a by-product. Once they have opened and the grower has checked the colour, the heads are cut off so the plant puts its energy into the bulb. A field can go from full colour to green overnight.



Check a bloom report the week you go. Timing is everything here.

STAND HERE

On a bicycle, on the lanes between Lisse, Hillegom and Noordwijkerhout. For bigger fields and fewer people, the tulip route through the Noordoostpolder in Flevoland.

WHEN



Mid-April to early May, moving a week or two either way with the weather. Late March is daffodils and hyacinths.

BASE

Leiden or Haarlem

GETTING THERE

Train from Amsterdam or Schiphol to Leiden or Haarlem, then hire a bicycle. Keukenhof garden sits in the middle of the bulb district and has its own buses.

GIVE IT

One day. Two if you add Keukenhof.

THE MISTAKE

Do not walk into the rows. The fields are private, and feet spread disease between bulbs. Some growers open a field for photographs. Use those.

[TOURS AND TICKETS ↗](#)

[PLACES TO STAY ↗](#)

N°

10

PHOTO: SYD.TRG1 / PEXELS

TÜRKİYE · 37.92° N, 29.12° E

Pamukkale

A hillside that looks like snow and feels like warm stone.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

Hot springs at the top of this slope carry dissolved calcium up from underground. As the water runs downhill and cools, the calcium settles out as travertine, bright white, building rimmed pools one below another. The name means cotton castle.

The Romans built a spa city, Hierapolis, on the plateau above, and its ruins are still there: a theatre, a street of tombs, and a warm pool where you swim over fallen columns.



Shoes off on the travertine. Carry a bag for them.

STAND HERE

The upper terraces near the top of the slope in the last hour before sunset, when the white turns gold, then pink, then blue. Walk up barefoot from the lower gate to earn it.

WHEN



April to June and September to October. Midsummer is fierce on a white hillside.

BASE

Pamukkale village

GETTING THERE

Fly to Denizli, or come by road from Selçuk and Ephesus in about three hours. The village sits at the foot of the terraces.

GIVE IT

One night. Arrive mid-afternoon, stay for sunset, see Hierapolis in the morning.

THE MISTAKE

Do not come at midday on a coach tour. And know before you go that the water is rotated between terraces to protect them, so not every pool is full on any given day.

[TOURS AND TICKETS ↗](#)

[PLACES TO STAY ↗](#)

N°

11

PHOTO: MARIO VOGT / PEXELS

CANADA · 51.32° N, 116.19° W

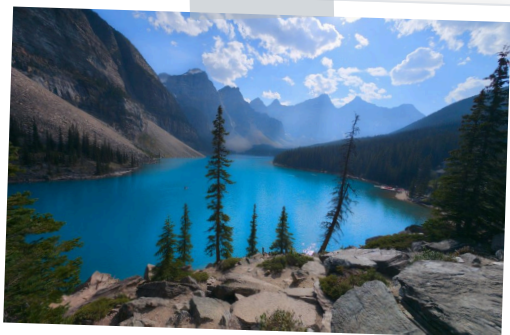
Moraine Lake

*The bluest water in the Rockies, for
about a hundred days.*

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

Glaciers above the lake grind the bedrock into a powder as fine as flour. Meltwater carries it down, and it is so light that it hangs in the lake instead of sinking. Those particles scatter the blue and green wavelengths of sunlight back at you.

The colour builds through June as the melt gets going and is strongest in July and August. Before that the lake is half empty and often still frozen. Behind it stand ten summits in a row, the Valley of the Ten Peaks.



Book the shuttle the day reservations open. They go fast.

STAND HERE

The top of the Rockpile, a pile of boulders at the lake's outlet with a ten-minute path up the back. Sunrise lights the peaks first, then the water.

WHEN



Late June to mid-September for the colour. The last two weeks of September for golden larches above the lake. The road is closed by snow from mid-October to about June.

BASE

Lake Louise or Banff

GETTING THERE

By shuttle only. Private cars are no longer allowed up the road. Reserve the Parks Canada shuttle well ahead, or use a commercial one for sunrise.

GIVE IT

Half a day. Longer if you walk to Larch Valley or Consolation Lakes.

THE MISTAKE

Do not drive up expecting to park, and do not come in May. The road will be shut and the lake will be ice.

N°

12

PHOTO: DIMITRIS MOUROUSIADIS / PEXELS

GREECE · 36.46° N, 25.38° E

Santorini

White villages on the rim of a drowned volcano.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

Around 3,600 years ago this island exploded. It was one of the largest eruptions in human history. The middle of the volcano collapsed, the sea poured in, and what was left was a ring of cliffs around a flooded crater.

The villages sit along the top of that ring, up to three hundred metres above the water. The houses were dug into the soft volcanic ash and limewashed white to throw off the heat. The blue domes are churches.



Walk Fira to Oia along the cliff. Three hours, start early.

STAND HERE

The path along the caldera edge between Imerovigli and Firostefani, at sunset. For the blue domes of Oia, look for the lanes that drop off the main marble street toward the sea, and go before nine in the morning.

WHEN



May, June, September and early October. Much of the island shuts for winter.

BASE

Imerovigli or Firostefani

GETTING
THERE

A short flight or a ferry of five hours or more from Athens. Buses fan out from Fira.

GIVE IT

Two or three nights.

THE MISTAKE

Do not plan your day around sunset at Oia castle in summer. It fills up more than an hour ahead. The same sun sets over the same sea from every village on the rim.

[TOURS AND TICKETS](#) ➤

[PLACES TO STAY](#) ➤

N°

13

PHOTO: RIEDELMAX. / PEXELS

SLOVENIA · 46.36° N, 14.09° E

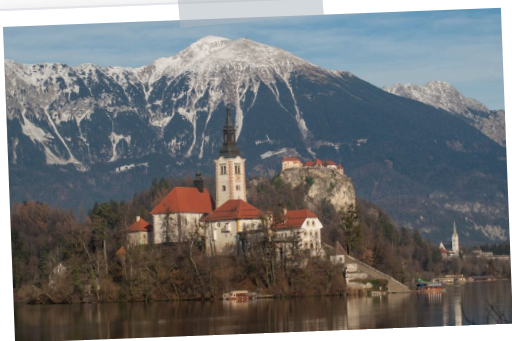
Lake Bled

*A church on an island, a castle on a cliff,
mountains behind.*

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

A glacier carved this basin and left one hump of harder rock standing in the middle. When the ice melted, the hump became an island, the only natural one in Slovenia. There has been a church on it for about a thousand years.

The composition is almost too tidy: island and bell tower in the centre, a medieval castle on a cliff to one side, the Julian Alps across the back. On still mornings the whole arrangement doubles in the water.



Order the cream cake. It was invented here.

STAND HERE

Ojstrica or Mala Osojnica, two rocky lookouts above the western end of the lake, twenty to thirty minutes up a steep forest path. Be there for sunrise. This is the view on the cover of every Slovenian guidebook.

WHEN



May to October. October brings mist and colour. In winter the peaks are white and the lake is quiet.

BASE

Bled, or Lake Bohinj half an hour on

GETTING
THERE

Under an hour by road from Ljubljana and less from its airport. Buses run from the capital.

GIVE IT

One or two nights.

THE MISTAKE

Do not see it from a coach in the middle of the day and leave. Walk the six kilometres around the shore, take a pletna boat to the island, and climb to the lookout at dawn.

N°

14

PHOTO: GOTTA BE WORTH IT / PEXELS

SWITZERLAND · 46.59° N, 7.91° E

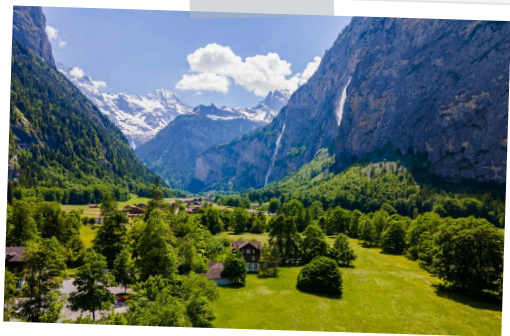
Lauterbrunnen

*A village on the floor of a valley with
waterfalls for walls.*

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

A glacier cut this valley into a deep U: a flat green floor about a kilometre wide between cliffs that rise straight up for several hundred metres. Streams that used to flow into the ice now simply run off the edge.

There are said to be seventy-two waterfalls. The one beside the village, Staubbach, drops nearly three hundred metres and turns to spray before it lands. Above the cliffs on both sides sit villages you can only reach by train or cable car, and above those, the Eiger, the Mönch and the Jungfrau.



See Trümmelbach when it rains: ten waterfalls inside the mountain.

STAND HERE

The village street a few minutes south of the station, where the road bends and the church spire lines up with Staubbach Falls. Then walk the flat valley path toward Stechelberg and look back.

WHEN



Late May to September. The falls are strongest with the snowmelt in early summer.

BASE

Lauterbrunnen, Wengen or Mürren

GETTING THERE

Train from Interlaken in about twenty minutes. No car needed, and the upper villages do not allow them.

GIVE IT

Three nights, so you get at least one clear day.

THE MISTAKE

Do not pay for a summit railway on a cloudy morning. Check the webcams first, and keep a flexible day for the high trips.

N°

15

PHOTO: ORKHAN SWEDEN, PEXELS

SRI LANKA · 7.96° N, 80.76° E

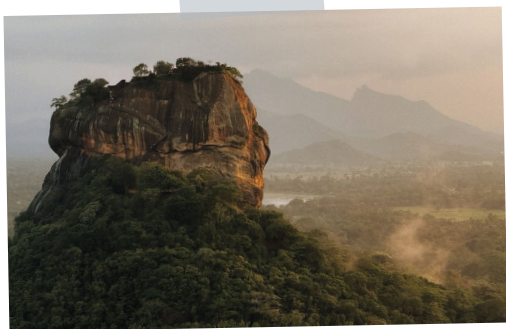
Sigiriya

A palace on top of a rock, in the middle of a jungle.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

The rock is the plug of an old volcano, the hard core left standing when everything around it wore away. It rises about two hundred metres, sheer on every side, out of flat forest.

In the fifth century a king named Kashyapa built his palace on the summit, with water gardens at the base, painted women on the cliff face and a gateway between the paws of a giant brick lion. The paws are still there. So are the pools on top.



Keep your voice down near the wasp signs. They mean it.

STAND HERE

For the view from Sigiriya, the summit, as early as the gate allows. For the view of Sigiriya, the top of Pidurangala, the rock next door, at sunrise. Do both on separate mornings.

WHEN



January to April is the driest, clearest stretch. May to September is dry too, and hotter. Rain is most likely from October to December.

BASE	Sigiriya village, Dambulla or Habarana
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GETTING THERE	About four hours by road from Colombo's airport. Most people come with a car and driver as part of a loop through the ancient cities.
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GIVE IT	Two nights.
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THE MISTAKE

Do not climb at midday. There is no shade on the staircases, and the heat is serious. Be at the gate when it opens.

[TOURS AND TICKETS ↗](#)
[PLACES TO STAY ↗](#)

N°

16

PHOTO: AUSTIN SULLIVAN / PEXELS

USA · 36.86° N, 111.37° W

Antelope Canyon

A crack in the desert that glows from the inside.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

Flash floods made this. Water carrying sand has been forced through a fracture in the sandstone again and again, widening it below while the opening above stayed narrow, and polishing the walls into curves like poured liquid.

Sunlight comes in through the slot at the top and bounces from wall to wall on its way down, warming from white to yellow to orange to deep red. Around midday in the warmer months a shaft of light reaches the floor in the upper canyon.



If the tour is cancelled for rain, be glad. That is how it was carved.

STAND HERE

Upper Antelope Canyon for the light beams, around midday. Lower Antelope Canyon for longer, tighter, more sculpted passages reached by stairs and ladders. They are separate tours.

WHEN



Open all year. The beams appear from about late March to early October. July to September is monsoon season, when tours can be cancelled.

BASE

Page, Arizona

GETTING THERE

The canyon is on Navajo land and can only be entered with a Navajo guide. Book a tour ahead. Page is a long drive from Las Vegas or Phoenix, and close to Horseshoe Bend.

GIVE IT

Half a day, with Horseshoe Bend at sunset.

THE MISTAKE

Do not get the time zone wrong. Arizona does not use daylight saving time and the Navajo Nation does, so confirm which clock your tour runs on.

[TOURS AND TICKETS](#) ➤

[PLACES TO STAY](#) ➤

N°

17

PHOTO: EEVNULL / PEXELS

CHINA · 29.32° N, 110.43° E

Zhangjiajie

*Three thousand stone pillars with
forests on top.*

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

This was a thick plateau of quartz sandstone. Water worked into its vertical cracks, froze, thawed and widened them for millions of years, until the plateau had been cut into more than three thousand separate towers, some over two hundred metres tall.

Pines grow from the tops and sides. After rain, cloud fills the gorges and the pillars stand clear of it, apparently attached to nothing. The floating mountains in the film *Avatar* were drawn from here.



*Walk Golden Whip Stream along the bottom.
Looking up is the best part.*

STAND HERE

The clifftop walkways of Yuanjiajie for the classic pillar views, and Tianzi Mountain for the wide ones. Go the morning after rain if you can, when the mist is in the valleys.

WHEN



April, May, and September to early November. Summer is hot and busy. Avoid the national holidays in early May and the first week of October.

BASE	Wulingyuan town, at the park's eastern gate
GETTING THERE	Fly or take a high-speed train to Zhangjiajie, usually through Changsha. The park ticket covers several days and the buses inside.
GIVE IT	Three days: two in the park, one for Tianmen Mountain near the city.

THE MISTAKE

Do not stay in Zhangjiajie city and commute. The national park is about an hour away. And do not confuse it with Tianmen Mountain or the glass bridge, which are separate sites.

N°

18

PHOTO: DALIANA RECI / PEXELS

JORDAN · 29.57° N, 35.42° E

Wadi Rum

Mars, with tea.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

Sandstone and granite mountains stand straight up out of a floor of red sand, like islands. Wind and rare rain have carved them into arches, bridges and narrow canyons. The red is iron.

It looks so little like Earth that it has played Mars, and several other planets, in film after film. People have lived here much longer than that. The canyon walls carry inscriptions and carvings thousands of years old, and the Bedouin families who guide you grew up in it.



Three days: Petra, Wadi Rum, then the Red Sea at Aqaba.

STAND HERE

On top of any dune or rock an hour before sunset, facing whichever way the shadows are longest. Then stay out after dark. The sky is the second half of the visit.

WHEN



March to May and September to November. Summer days are very hot. Winter nights are properly cold.

BASE

A desert camp inside the protected area

GETTING THERE

About an hour from Aqaba and two from Petra. You leave your car at Rum village and continue by 4x4 with a Bedouin guide.

GIVE IT

One night at least. Two is better.

THE MISTAKE

Do not visit for an afternoon and leave. Sunset, the stars and the cold blue dawn are the point. And check where your camp is: many sit near the road, and the silence is further in.

N°

19

PHOTO: LAURA PAPEDIS / PEXELS

ICELAND · 64.05° N, 16.18° W

Jökulsárlón and Diamond Beach

Thousand-year-old ice on a black beach.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

A tongue of Europe's largest ice cap ends here in a lagoon. Blocks break off the glacier front and float for months, slowly turning over, blue where the ice is dense and old, streaked black with volcanic ash.

A short river carries them under the road bridge and out to sea. The surf throws them back onto a beach of black lava sand, where they sit and melt, clear as glass. The lagoon barely existed a century ago. It grows every year as the glacier retreats.



Never climb on the ice. The blocks roll.

STAND HERE

The beach on either side of the river mouth at sunrise, low down, with the light coming through the ice. Then cross the road to the lagoon shore and watch for seals.

WHEN



All year. Winter has low golden light, ice caves and a chance of aurora. Summer has boat trips among the icebergs and daylight almost all night.

BASE

Höfn, or the farms and guesthouses near Skaftafell

GETTING THERE

About five hours along the Ring Road from Reykjavík. Take two days over it, with the waterfalls and the black beaches of the south coast on the way.

GIVE IT

A few hours here. Stay close the night before.

THE MISTAKE

Do not try it as a day trip from Reykjavík. That is ten hours of driving. And how much ice is on the beach depends on tide and wind, so allow a second look.

[TOURS AND TICKETS ↗](#)

[PLACES TO STAY ↗](#)

N°

20

PHOTO: HUB JACOU / PEXELS

NAMIBIA · 24.76° S, 15.29° E

Deadvlei

Black trees on white clay under orange dunes.

WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

A river once reached this hollow and trees grew in it. Then the dunes moved, cut the river off, and the water never came back. The trees died, several hundred years ago, and the air is so dry they have never rotted. They have simply stood there, scorched black by the sun.

So there are four colours and nothing else: black trunks, a white clay floor, dunes of rust orange among the tallest in the world, and a hard blue sky.



Carry more water than seems reasonable.

STAND HERE

On the pan in the first hour after sunrise, when the dune behind is lit and the floor is still in shadow, and the line between them slides across the clay.

WHEN



May to September. Cool mornings and clear air. In the summer months the heat on the pan is dangerous by mid-morning.

BASE

Sesriem, inside the park gate if you can

GETTING
THERE

About five hours by road from Windhoek, much of it gravel. From the gate it is an hour's drive on tar, then a last stretch of deep sand by 4x4 shuttle, then a walk of about a kilometre over a low dune.

GIVE IT

Two nights at Sesriem.

THE MISTAKE

Do not stay outside the gate and arrive mid-morning. Those sleeping inside the park may set off before sunrise. Everyone else waits for the outer gate to open, and misses the light.

[TOURS AND TICKETS ↗](#)

[PLACES TO STAY ↗](#)

Six trips that take in more than one.

Türkiye in ten days

Istanbul, a short flight to Cappadocia for three mornings, then west to Pamukkale and the ruins at Ephesus, and home from Izmir. Go in May or late September.

The high Andes

Cusco and Machu Picchu first, Rainbow Mountain once you are used to the altitude, then overland by Lake Titicaca to La Paz and a flight to Uyuni. The mirror and the dry trail do not overlap, so choose: April and May are the compromise.

Slovenia to the Croatian coast

Fly into Ljubljana, two nights at Bled and Bohinj, then drive south to Plitvice and finish on the Adriatic at Zadar or Split. One week, best in June or September.

East Java, coast to coast

Start with sunrise at Mount Bromo, cross the island to Ijen for the blue flames, then take the short ferry to Bali to recover. Dry season only.

Jordan in a week

Amman, the Dead Sea, two days at Petra, a night under the stars in Wadi Rum, and a last swim in the Red Sea at Aqaba.

The American Southwest loop

From Las Vegas: Zion, Bryce Canyon, Page for Antelope Canyon and Horseshoe Bend, Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon. About eight days by car. Spring and autumn are kindest.

Now pick one.

Not all twenty. One. The one you looked at for longest.

Find its page, look at the month strip, and count forward to the next filled circle. That is when you are going. Put a note in your calendar for eight weeks before, to book the thing that needs booking: the shuttle, the balloon, the boat, the guide.

Most of these places are closer and simpler than they look. The hard part was never the journey. It was knowing when to turn up.

TICK THEM OFF

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Salar de Uyuni | ☐ Moraine Lake |
| ☐ Cappadocia | ☐ Santorini |
| ☐ Rainbow Mountain | ☐ Lake Bled |
| ☐ Plitvice Lakes | ☐ Lauterbrunnen |
| ☐ Ha Long Bay | ☐ Sigiriya |
| ☐ Grand Prismatic Spring | ☐ Antelope Canyon |
| ☐ The Pink Lakes | ☐ Zhangjiajie |
| ☐ Kawah Ijen | ☐ Wadi Rum |
| ☐ The Tulip Fields | ☐ Jökulsárlón and Diamond Beach |
| ☐ Pamukkale | ☐ Deadvlei |

New places, every day.

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Researched and written by Drift Vistas. Details change: check opening rules, closures and entry requirements with the official source before you travel. No exact prices are given because they go out of date; comparisons are drawn from public listings.

Corrections: hello@driftvistas.com