



Quirky Guides

It's a funny old world and sometimes, when I travel, I find that the most interesting sights aren't always the most obvious. For example, when I was in Budapest, the revelation that delighted me most was the fact that, under socialism, the Hungarians used to enjoy nothing more than a game of Monopoly. Except that it wasn't Monopoly, of course. There was no private ownership and monopolies - except the state kind - weren't allowed. So instead of property, players acquired points for good behaviour. If you were really incredible, you won a package holiday to Yugoslavia. If you were heinous, you didn't go to jail but to pioneer camp.

So I'm writing my Quirky Guides to celebrate travel experiences that are slightly offbeat; I'm adding three new ones to the mix each month. On these pages, you won't find directions to the Eiffel Tower; neither will you learn that there are nightclubs in Ibiza. Instead, you'll discover a bar that serves cocktails garnished with a severed human toe and a restaurant that cooks up roadkill. There's massage of the masochistic kind in Beijing, a couple of embalmed horses, and a whole lake full of German OAPs wearing arm-bands. And, just in case you want to repeat my experiences for yourself, I'm including 'Getting There' details at the bottom of each article.

Recent articles [Puffins in the Farne Islands](#) Jul 1, 2008 A couple of summers ago I went for the first time to the Northumberland coast. For non-British readers, that's the northeast coast of England, just south of the Scottish border. I went because, each July, thousands of puffins nest on the Farne Islands, two miles off the coast...

[Racing with Reindeer](#) Apr 30, 2008 When the Russians tell "idiot" jokes, it's the Chukchi who take the flak. Chukotka is an impossibly remote land – there are no roads to connect it to the rest of Russia, and almost no roads within the region itself – and the rest of the country perceives it as backward. Certainly the

area's had its troubles: following the fall of the Soviet Union, when state subsidies ended, its people experienced a poverty that left many starving and some suicidal.

[Auberge Saint-Antoine, Québec City](#) Apr 1, 2008 I've stayed in a lot of hotels, but few have grabbed me like this one. At first glance, it's suitably elegant and eclectic – sofas, armchairs and blazing fires welcome guests in from the winter snows. There are plenty of comfortable hotels in the world, however. The Auberge Saint-Antoine really succeeds because it blends its luxury with a truly original and intriguing approach to the history of the land on which it sits...

[The Friendliest Reindeer in the World](#) Mar 1, 2008

It's not normal, I think, to have trouble taking photographs of reindeer because one of them is insistently licking your hand. But these are the Cairngorm reindeer, probably the friendliest reindeer in the world.

[Paddling the River Feshie " in February of course](#) Mar 1, 2008

The forecast was for a great day on Cairngorm Mountain. I was set to go telemarking - but when we got to the car park at the foot of the mountain, a gale was blowing. 'Oh well,' said Mike as he drained his cup. 'The weather's no good for telemarking. But the water on the river's really high. Let's go rafting instead.'

[The Eating Habits of Pine Martens, and Other Matters](#) Mar 1, 2008

Pine martens have a bit of a thing for crunchy peanut butter, but they won't touch the smooth. They love sultanas, but turn their noses up at raisins. 'Their taste is very refined,' says Alan, my guide from Speyside Wildlife.

[Inuvik: A Town at the Edge of the World](#) Feb 1, 2008

Inuvik is a quirky kind of a town. Located in Canada's Northwest Territories, it's only existed since the 1950s. The Canadian government decided that it needed an administrative centre in the Western Arctic and the existing native settlement at Aklavik was reckoned to be at too great a risk from flooding. And so, in 1955, they started to build a new one...

[Driving the Ice Road to Tuk](#) Feb 1, 2008

Tuktoyaktuk, or Tuk as it's more commonly known, is an Inuvialuit (part of the Inuit family) community on the shores of the Beaufort Sea. During the summer, its thousand residents can only reach the nearest town, Inuvik in Canada's Northwest Territories, by air or sea. In winter, though, a 194-kilometre ice road is carved into the surface of the Mackenzie River and out across the frozen ocean itself.

[Following the Yukon Quest](#) Feb 1, 2008

The Yukon Quest used to be called 'the toughest dogsledding race in the world' until the marketing brains decided the tag line was putting off would-be participants. It runs each February for a thousand miles between Fairbanks in Alaska and Whitehorse in Canada's Yukon Territory...

[The Basement Bars of Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina](#) Dec 1, 2007

"I was 16 years old when the siege of Sarajevo started, and at that age you need to live a little," says Samira Džanko. And so, while Serb shells rained down upon her city, she would tell her parents she was going to her friend's house, then she'd run with her friend to the Kinemica Club bar...

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