

# FORBIDDEN COUNTRY

Just returned from hiking in Afghanistan, *Tracey Croke* suggests five testing trips that could help you shed any preconceptions about so-called no-go zones

Visiting and learning about areas that were once considered no-go zones due to conflict, lack of infrastructure or simply misinformation, can often provide a greater sense of escape and rejuvenation than a predictable beach getaway. The new generation of tour operators has recognised that Australian travellers are craving these unconventional, exploratory trips and opening up new horizons around the globe in a responsible way. Below is my top pick of challenging trips that you can fit into your annual leave.

## CLIMB THE FORGOTTEN PEAK OF MOUNT HALGURD IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

Kurdistan has been autonomous since 2003 and not suffered the violence experienced by the remainder of Iraq, though Sydney-based mountaineer Ade Summers says it is far from easy to travel through. Earlier this year, he led the first commercial climb up Mount Halgurd, the highest peak in the Zagros Mountains. He explains: "We had a military liaison officer with us so we wouldn't wander into areas with unexploded ordinance on the lower approach."

A close call with an avalanche saw the group break trail in waist-deep snow, before a second slide forced them to abort the climb altogether. Three days later, however, the weather cleared enough for Summers himself to summit.

As if the glitzy capital of Erbil was not surprise enough—in a territory labelled no-go by the Australian government's travel advisory service—the group was overwhelmed at being invited to dine with the president's nephew at a six-star hotel one night. Summers admits: "It was better food than the freeze-dried meals we had on the hill!"

He believes anyone able to trek for multiple days carrying a 20-kilogram pack would enjoy the climb, though you need to be mentally strong to follow a little-known path in somewhere like Kurdistan. "You've got to be able to deal with the unexpected

and have a real sense of adventure," Summers explains.

## SCALE GRANITE PEAKS ON THE ISLAND OF SOCOTRA

The Yemen may not be everyone's choice for a stress-busting getaway due to ongoing security issues, including Al'Qaeda attacks, but 380 kilometres off the mainland sits peaceful Socotra Island with its Unesco-listed beaches and the Haghir Mountains. Sometimes referred to as the Galapagos of the Indian Ocean, Socotra is one of the world's most isolated landforms of continental origin and a third of its species are found nowhere else.

## ENTER INTO ARNHEM LAND

The Yolngu homelands of north-east Arnhem Land are presumed difficult to access, but with the right permits you can stay with and learn from the people who have cared for this special part of the world for over 40,000 years.

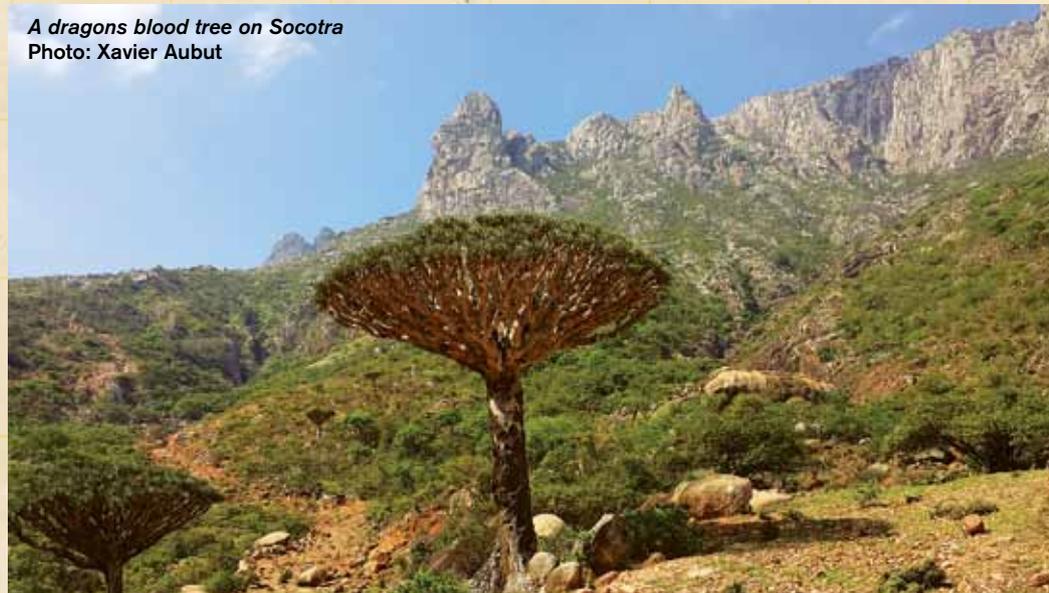
Former Tourism Australia director John Morse, who has been visiting Arnhem Land for many years, says: "It's always been possible to visit Arnhem Land but many people think a special invitation is required;



*Kurdistan's Zagros Mountains*  
Photo: Secret Compass

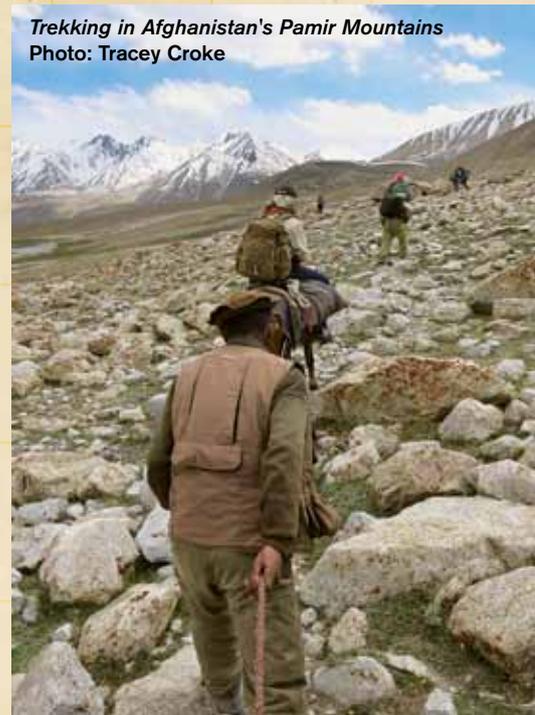
## A dragons blood tree on Socotra

Photo: Xavier Aubut

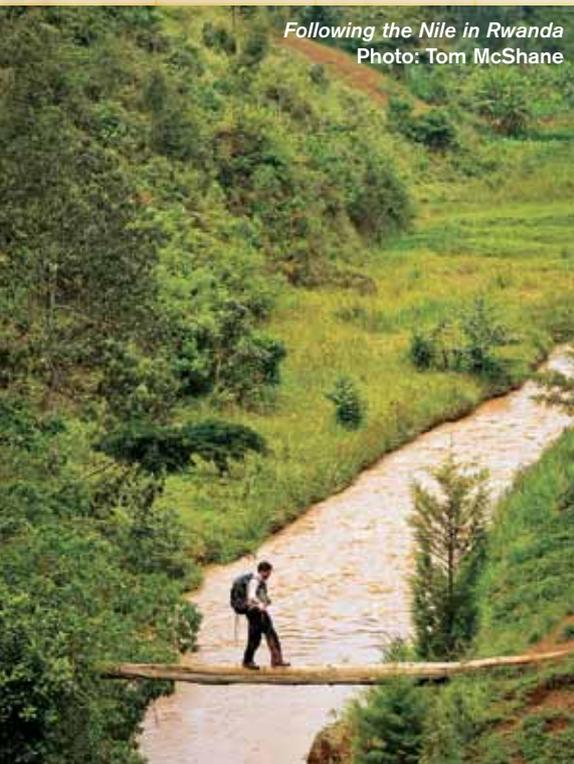




Arnhem Land  
Photo: Wayne Quilliam



Trekking in Afghanistan's Pamir Mountains  
Photo: Tracey Croke



Following the Nile in Rwanda  
Photo: Tom McShane

**FOLLOW IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MARCO POLO ACROSS AFGHANISTAN**  
Queenslander Campbell Costello is one of a few outsiders to have crossed the Showr Pass in post-conflict Afghanistan as part of a three week expedition in the remote Pamir Mountains.

He says: "I know being in the Wakhan Corridor is very different from other areas in Afghanistan, but not once did I ever feel threatened."

He adds: "From massive mountains that seem to ascend out of nowhere to dry desolate plains that look like something off a George Lucas movie set, the scenery is stunning and the people are possibly the most hospitable I've met on all my travels."

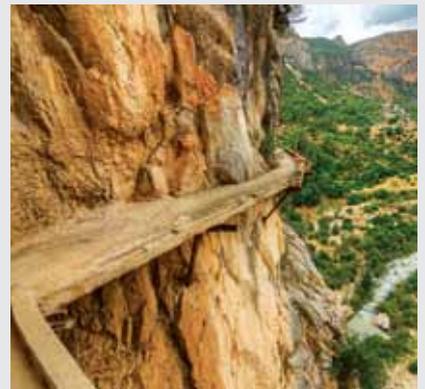
**WALK THE NILE IN SOUTH SUDAN**  
British ex-soldier Levison Wood is currently undertaking a year-long challenge to walk the length of the Nile, and is calling for eight fee-paying walkers to join him and

a documentary crew for 10 days in the Nubian Desert in September as a way to raise funds for African wildlife charities Tusk and Space for Giants.

The 6,840-kilometre journey, which Wood started last December in the highlands of Rwanda, was deemed politically and medically impossible until now. [W](#)



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**POPULAR TRAILS THAT PUSH THE BOUNDARIES**

- **The frozen Zanskar:** Nepal-based operator Project Himalaya runs a 20-day trip walking the semi-frozen Zanskar (or Chadar) River, where the conditions change hour-by-hour as the water ebbs, flows and freezes.
- **Hua Shan Trail:** China's notorious 120-kilometre trail starting in the old capital of Xi'an features precarious-looking ledges made of a couple of planks hammered together.
- **El Caminito del Rey:** This heart-pumping route (*pictured*) near Málaga, originally built for hydroelectric plant workers and technically closed since 2000, is currently being restored.
- **Cascade Saddle:** A fixed wire rope was recently proposed for this spectacular two-day alpine crossing in Mount Aspiring National Park due to the number of fatal falls that have occurred on it during wet weather.

that's not so. There is a real desire by Yolngu people to open their land, homes and share their deep knowledge and exquisite culture with the outside world."

Aboriginal-owned operator Lirrwitourism has recently launched a seven-day tour that aims to 'earn and learn' from tourism without dominating Yolngu culture. Manager Matt Grooby says: "Nowhere else can you get the same level of connection and understanding with people on their homelands and on their terms."

