

Transcript of Podcast 084 : Travel Best Of Lists

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{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'whys' behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

I'm seeing the usual memes about how January lasts for 73% of the year. I'm not feeling that this year to be honest; everything seems to be progressing normally for me. I am noticing the mornings getting lighter slightly earlier each day, and I don't yet know how I feel about that. There's something quite nice about walking to work in a slightly dusky environment, but then of course we get to the height of summer and I'll go jogging around the streets at 5am in broad daylight again. Possibly. I am getting fat again, but this I think is natural for Winter. But I'm not going jogging in a named storm, of which we've had rather a lot of late. Something in the flat rattles when the wind's up and it's annoying. I mean, I'm pretty sure the roof isn't going to blow off, but you never know.

I'm away for the next two weeks in the Caucasus, which my research has shown are currently a little colder than here, though at least drier and slightly less windy. By 'a little colder', Baku and Tbilisi are around what we had here last week when it was a bit nippy, while Yerevan will be hovering around minus 10 Celsius. Which is nice. I do own socks, you may be pleased to know, but as I keep saying it's very much the wrong time of year to be heading out that way.

Last weekend I took a quick overnight trip to Glasgow; I'd've stayed the whole weekend but trains back on the Sunday were ... affected by engineering works and mostly didn't exist, so I went up late on Friday after work, and came back Saturday evening. Late on Saturday evening because it was cheaper - my ticket from Glasgow to Wigan was £12 and I've had beer in Curious Liquids that cost more than that. Not on this trip, granted (though I did pop in for a quick non-alcoholic lager while I had half an hour to kill, given I was going there anyway to buy another bottle of whisky to take back to Salford. I could start doing blog posts and video shorts about whisky like I do for beer, but to be honest it would be an expensive and fairly infrequent affair.

Apart from volunteering again at Queen's Parkrun, and it was good to see the old gang there again, the main reason I went up there was to get my hair colour re-touched. When I had it done first, back in October, my salonist said it'd probably last at most three months, so I pre-booked an appointment at the end of January, conveniently before my trip to the Caucasus - though I pulled it forward a week because of flight admin. As it turns out, even three months later, even at the Parkrun, people were still wowed by the purpleness of my hair. It was getting back to grey in the roots at the front, but certainly it was still definitely colourful, and it lasted far longer than I was expecting.

Even so, it was a good time to get a refresh. And it didn't take as long as last time since it didn't involve bleaching my entire hair, just the central section and the rooty bits. She did approve of the shampoo and conditioner I'm now using, so that's cool I made the right decision in the shop last time.

While I was up in Glasgow, I had an overdue eye-test. I'm supposed to have them every two years, but the time came around just after I moved to Salford, and because I wanted to return to an opticians I'd been before - I'd had really good session there two years ago and, obviously, they would have had a record of my prescriptions and everything, so it made sense to go back, only of course they were in Glasgow and I wasn't. I meant to go when I was up in late October but in a textbook example of ADHD-related decision paralysis, I neglected to book an appointment until it was too late and they didn't have any. Even this time it still nearly happened, let's be honest.

I wouldn't be able to tell you what my eye prescription is; the figures mean nothing to me; suffice to say though my left eye is dreadful and my right eye is merely a bit bad. I've needed glasses since I was a single-figure kid; I didn't think anything was wrong but a series of incidents involving mainly depth perception (I once got sent off in a football match in primary school sports for arguing with the teacher-referee about whether a ball had gone

in the goal or not; that I was the only person who thought it had, did not seem to make a difference to me), my parents took me to the optician and I ended up with glasses, probably, as the optician specifically said, for the next fifty years. I have no idea why he thought to tell my eyes would miraculously improve by the time I hit 58 years old, but I can't see (ha) that happening!

In fact my eyes are getting worse, because I'm getting old. Not in an actual prescription sense; my left eye has deteriorated slightly but not enough to warrant new glasses. No, it's more in a sense of ... I'm at the age where reading glasses might become A Thing I need to concern myself with. Not quite yet; I am getting new glasses but that's because my old frames are snapped to shit because I keep bending them to make them stay on, and my lenses have lost the protective coating on them because I'm ... too casual? with them, but also, this gives me the opportunity to get, oh what are they called, not bi-focals or vari-focals, but, uhm, 'anti-fatigue' lenses, which are apparently similar to, but milder, than, the bi-focals so beloved of the middle-aged crowd. The optician said the advantage of my being so short-sighted is that this is something that comes later to people like me, but come it has.

It's something I've been noticing for a while, actually. I'm having to take my glasses off more if I want to see my phone clearly, especially if I'm lying in bed, and also to read labels on bottles and cans. I'm not yet in a situation where computer screens become a problem but that's just because I have a tendency to sit further back from the screen when I'm at my desk than most people do, and I've not really noticed any problems with using my laptops yet, but I'm now aware of it being A Thing so I'll probably create the problem myself in my own head over the next two months.

Anyway, they're more expensive than standard lenses, obviously. Which is irksome but I pretty much can't function without my glasses so here we are. Like, even though I'm absent-minded and whatnot, even leaving my water bottle in the hair salon, because that's obviously so on-brand, I never forget my glasses anywhere, simply because it's so blindingly obvious when I don't have them. That I can't find them when I'm not wearing them is a purely eyesighty issue.

If only lenses could be as dayglow yellow as the top band of my bobble hat.

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Of course it's the New Year, and as such, the travel world is plastered with lists of 'where to go in 2024', 'best places to visit in 2024', and the like. Now, I have to say I've never been terribly fond of these sorts of things on a fundamental level for a number of reasons. I mean, sure they provide a good quick way of inspiring people, especially people who are relatively new to travel, but sometimes I feel that they tend to be quite ... okay, let's just take a run-through of one I found online, and see if you can guess what I'm about to say.

This is a list from 23 January, from Time Out magazine, which listed "The World's Best Cities For 2024". Can you guess what the number one is? Well, can you?

* At ten is Porto, in Portugal, a city described in the article as being "a great city for "romance". I have no idea what that even means, and it makes it sound cheesy as fuck. I have been to Porto. It rained. I drank port.

* At nine is Rome, Italy. I mean, yes, but.

* At eight is Tokyo, Japan. Never been. Maybe one day. And people do rank it as one of the world's Great Cities.

* Seven is a possibly unexpected Liverpool, UK. I lived here before it was cool. But it's not like it's a city that's come straight out of leftfield - it's got a long-known history and culture, and it hosted Eurovision last year, so its unexpectedness in this list is its higher position, not its existence.

* Six is Mexico City, Mexico, which, you know, is one of the biggest cities in the world.

The article proffers the next three mainly for their nightlife and food scenes, but, like there's nothing else to do there. Madrid, Spain is at five, London, UK, is at four, making the UK the only country to have two cities in the top ten, and Berlin, Germany, is at three.

So to the top two. Can you guess them yet? One of them is blindingly obvious. At number two is Cape Town, South Africa. Because it's "beautiful". And "cultural". And described as "perhaps the most unpretentious coastal city in the world" by one of their correspondents, despite them also talking about "top-rated restaurants, pristine wine farms and a swanky nightlife scene". So, yep, definitely unpretentious, definitely down-to-earth.

Top of the shop is New York City, USA. Obviously.

So, what I'd say about this list; I think the word is 'conventional'. Or 'unoriginal'. There's often nothing new under the sun, and the same old places get pulled out each time. Almost to the extent of replacing the previous year with the current year.

I mean, they're right, in a way, if you were to list Great Cities, there's a fair chance you'd name most of those, but that I guess opens the question of 'so why does this even need to be a list?'. It'd be a bit like my naming 'Best Football Teams In The World' and then not being surprised that no team from Scotland is on it. It's almost lazy journalism, in a sense; I can't believe there's anyone on the planet who doesn't know what a vibe New York City or London are; I mean, sure, you don't have to like them, you don't even have to have been to them, but surely you don't need to be told that they're 'Great Cities', and honestly, anyone who needs a list like this for 'inspiration', who needs to be told and reminded of this, is probably not the target market for travel literature anyway.

It'd be better to say 'yeh, we know these are great cities, you know these are great cities, so how about you give these lesser-attested places a think, for a change'.

Plus they always tend to be, shall we say, 'Western-friendly'. An endless series of cities in Europe, North America, and parts of eastern Asia, with the occasional other city thrown in for the 'ooo, ethnic chic' diversity quota. It's very much geared towards a White Western mindset, which, I don't know, I guess their audience skews that way, but a couple of those cities do have big underlying issues with poverty, equality, and other cultural issues. And I'm saying that here mainly because I'd argue a city, a place, can't be truly 'great' unless the majority of people living in that city or place can appreciate it to a large percent. Like, obviously every city is going to have things that are unattainable to anyone but the very posh - London has, for instance, places like the Ritz Hotel, world-famous, cultural icon, cheapest rooms for a random midweek in May are £925/night - but cities where a large proportion of its entire population are unable to access a large proportion of its attractions probably oughtn't qualify as 'Great Cities', unless the list is 'Great Cities if you're White and Western'. Which, to be fair, it probably could be.

And note in that list there is only one city in Africa, one city in Asia, and none in South America. That's an awful lot of the world with apparently no Great Cities for 2024. Their best cities list in 2023 had five of the same cities, in a slightly different order, then Paris, Barcelona, and Amsterdam replacing Berlin, Liverpool, and Porto, Singapore replacing Tokyo, and the only cross-continental transfer being Dubai in place of Mexico City. That list feels probably even more 'conventional' to be honest.

Now, for clarification, the rationale for the survey was simply to round-up the best cities in the world. They're quoted as saying they wanted not only a list for inspiration purposes, but also create "a global snapshot of city living." In addition, they should all have a "strong community spirit and an undeniable vibe." Other criteria included food, culture, and, apparently, architecture. I would say I don't know an ugly cultural or foodie paradise (I've never been to Bandar Seri Bagawan, in Brunei), but for one thing architecture is relative - some people like Glasgow's new developments along the Clyde. Laura does not - and for another, what people want in a city, either for a visit or for a home, differs greatly from person to person; this is why me and Laura have different views of Manchester.

We both agree Salford is ugly though. And not a cultural or foodie paradise. Salford isn't going to appear on any list of 'great cities of the world'. It's not going to appear on a list of 'great cities of the north-west'. And there's only seven of them. To be fair, one of the other six is Preston, so at least it wouldn't be bottom.

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On that note, well, not Salford-related, I did a search for 'less visited destinations for 2024'. This brought me up a couple of related articles that I'm going to briefly touch on.

One was by Forbes, and was less of a listicle, and more of a 'we asked eight travel experts and this is what they said' article. It was called "Where To Travel And Avoid The Crowds In 2024", so you'd expect places that, well, were less touristy and more unusual and exciting. Be aware that this is in Forbes, a website noted these days primarily for, well, blogger journalism.

The first place mentioned is the Canary Islands. The article says they are "still under the radar, especially for American travellers". The Brits all raise an eyebrow. Don't go there expecting it to be less visited just because you don't go there. It'd be like me going to, idk, Antigua or Dominican Republic and expecting it to be devoid

of tourists, just because it's never mentioned in domestic literature.

The next two places suggested are Uzbekistan and Kurdistan. I've been raving about Uzbekistan since 2014, and indeed you'll have heard my podcast on it some years back – one of my most popular podcast episodes as it happens – and the country is, now, becoming more popular, but to be fair it's still not tourist-central so Forbes here may have a point.

Kurdistan, oh bless, it's been on my list for ages but I've still not managed to get there as other things have got in the way. It doesn't help that there's often a Travel Advisory on the region, and while I have issues with travel Advisories that I've mentioned several times before, that one exists makes it always slightly more hassle to get to, including insurance.

Next on Forbes' list is South Africa. One of my good friends on Travel Twitter has had a bit of a spat with the South Africa tourist industry because, in part, she feels the board is over-concentrating on foreign (White) visitors at the expense of domestic (Black) tourists, and that there's a concerted attempt to price domestic tourists out of the market. I don't know how true that is, but what I will say is this, plus the Time Out mention of Cape Town as one of the Cities of 2024, does suggest there's definitely a certain amount of specific advertising to appeal to people, well, people like me, basically.

In addition, in any case, I'm not entirely sure how 'less visited' South Africa is. I went there in 2016 and I never felt like the only backpacker, never mind the only tourist. Even in Durban; a city that you probably won't see on 'Great City' lists because as a Black majority city, it has a bad reputation amongst White journalists who emphasise its alleged danger. Indeed I passed over an article recently on 'the fifteen most dangerous cities in the world'; the entire top five were in South Africa, including Durban. Kabul was not on the list. South Africa has a strange vibe in the world of Western travel – rated both very high and very low – but in terms of tourism, I mean it's no France, but equally it's no Burkina Faso.

The next suggested country is that lesser-known and rarely-visited country of *checks notes* South Korea. This is followed by somewhere called India, I don't know if you've ever heard of that one, I don't know it. Now, I was having a conversation with Laura yesterday about this, and it may be that we move in different circles; her 'bubble' is much less likely to visit India than my 'bubble' because our separate group of friends tend to want different things from a holiday (and is one reason why I'm more likely to be surprised at tourists in Aruba than Angola), but either way, I don't think anyone would consider India (or South Korea) in general as "still under the radar", even, I suspect, for American tourists. And by definition I'm not sure India is exactly the right place to 'avoid the crowds', given, you know, it's the most populated country in the world. To be fair the article talks about someone bike-riding in Rajasthan, a state with 'only' the same population as the UK in an area about halfway between Montana and New Mexico. Maybe you can escape the crowds there. Maybe.

Rounding off the list are brief mentions of the Azores and Tasmania (which, fair, although I know Tassie is becoming popular in my bubble), Namibia (which always feels more popular than it probably is – I think it's one of those places on many people's bucket lists), and quiet villages in remote parts of Spain and Greece, mainly for wine and hiking. These are I guess more what I'd expect from such a list, but even so, it's not like they're exactly unknown. What they are, in fairness, is 'lesser-visited than the places you usually go, but still with the same level of comfort and confidence'. It's like 'If you like Paris, you might like Lille' rather than 'If you like Paris you might like Bucharest' and certainly not 'If you like Paris, you might like Kinshasa', which ... I mean it very much depends what you like Paris for, I guess.

I guess my takeaway from this is the very strong vibe that my definition of 'lesser visited' doesn't tally with the general journalistic definition. Or the audience for which these articles are aimed at. I mean, I guess, compared with the Time Out city list, these places are 'less visited', but honestly, that's a low bar. I'm not expecting Kinshasa to appear on any 'must visit' lists, but it'd be nice to see Benin there one day.

I'm expecting Kinshasa to appear before Kirkby-in-Ashfield, in all fairness.

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Another travel-centred list came from the British edition of Vogue magazine who, in late December 2023, issued a list of 'Best Places To Travel in 2024'. They didn't limit themselves to cities, so their list includes regions and a couple of entire countries. They also didn't rank the destinations listed in any order, so it vibes as a kind of 'fairer' list. But let's see.

The list included:

- * Sifnos, a Greek Island that I've never actually heard of, which is a good start, but then there's a lot of them. They highlight the island is notable for its clear water and on good food. That said, I'd be hard-pushed to think of anywhere in that region that doesn't have either of those things.
- * Grenada, in the Caribbean. Its resorts were mentioned, and that could go either way to be honest, when you think about sustainability, environmental effects, cruise ships, and the local economy, but in its defence the article does then go on to talk about its "buzzing" capital, the ability to hike through the rainforest, and, especially, highlights the country's scuba diving - including the world's only underwater sculpture park. Obviously not my scene, but I've seen the pictures and it does look pretty stunning. Also, and I don't know if this is just me looking at it from a UK perspective, but when I think of that part of the world, it doesn't feel Grenada hasn't really been on anyone's radar here, not since 1983 at least, and even that wasn't for tourism.
- * Quito, Ecuador. Here the emphasis was on architecture and design, including its UNESCO old city, and on the prevalence of boutique hotels. Taking these criteria, one might feel it should have been in Time Out's list, but, well, it wasn't. Note that the article was also written before people with guns started invading television studios, but I hope that was just a short-term incident.
- * Big Sur, California. I think the way this one is described here is it's specifically appealing to the road-trippers, with the subtext of 'slow down'. The listed attractions here, apart from the scenery, are mainly cute hotels on a road trip you're already doing, so the implication is 'why not stay a while to enjoy the view from a lovely place'.
- * Tangiers, Morocco. I've only briefly passed through here; I didn't get a sense it was any significantly different to anywhere else in Morocco, although obviously the draw here specifically is for its cultural history; after all there's still some pop-culture lore from when it was a 'free city' in the 1930s and its associated somewhat Bohemian vibes. In addition, the article plays up its luxury boutique hotels. As an aside, I have the same sense about Casablanca; a city with heritage but which I hear doesn't quite live up to it any more and it's become a trifle soul-less, though I've only ever passed through it on a train.
- * Jeju Island, South Korea, which is on the list for two main reasons. One is shellfish diving, not doing it yourself but rather experiencing the culture and traditions of it, especially given it's mostly an all-female concept. The other is its prevalent usage in Korean drama serials, which are becoming as popular as K-pop in the western world, so if you like the idea of seeing, for example, Game of Thrones filming locations, why not take it international? The article does not mention the other attractions of the island, which Wikipedia tells me include neolithic ruins, volcanoes, and pristine forest.
- * Bodrum, Turkey, which the article describes as being "The Next Ibiza"; your mileage may vary on whether that's an attractive concept or not. It bogs up the vast Riviera and the city's beach clubs. It's a place I'm aware of, as there are many numbers of seasonal holiday flights there from the UK; it's definitely on our radar!
- * Madagascar. An entire country that's vaguely been in my mind for a few years but never actively looked into it. The article talks about it being up-and-coming centre for eco-resorts, and a centre for environmental travel and related tours. It's definitely one of those places that's famous for wildlife and scenery, as well as being another place often on people's bucket-lists without ever being actioned, because of where it is and how much it costs to get there.
- * Serbia, which would be an easier place to get to if they fixed their railways. I've been there three times, but primarily because I have a penpal there so it's an easy place for me to explore. The article talks about Belgrade's nightlife and museums (and specifically the one dedicated to arguably the most famous Serb and possible Aromantic icon, Nikola Tesla), as well as the wider countryside, including mountains, gorges (like the Iron Gates), and associated wildlife.
- * Galicia, Spain; the draw here, the article reveals, being its beaches, and additionally the Islas Cies nature reserve, an offshore island with secluded beaches, forests, and restricted access. The area also includes the pilgrimage centre of Santiago de Compostela, a city I failed to visit because the train was booked out. Because it was Easter Sunday. And I didn't make the link between the two.
- * The final place I'm mentioning on the list is Paris, which I'm not going to comment on, suffice to say the impression it's on the list is because of the 2024 Olympic Games and while they're not necessarily doing anything different, because it's Paris, they don't need to, they're doing 'more' of it.

As lists go, actually, that one's not too bad. It's got a nice selection of cities, countryside, culture, and environment, and a mix of 'really popular places but...' and 'places you might not have considered'. I don't know if I feel 'inspired' by it, but it's nice to see a few places even I hadn't thought of before.

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In October 2023, National Geographic produced an article they called 'The Cool List 2024', which they described as "the 30 most exciting destinations to visit in 2024". I'm not going to go through the whole list in

detail, but I'm mentioning it because it's another example of a list created with a good intention but which seems to have let itself go a bit in its application. Its definition of destination is a bit vague, as some of them are more akin to 'events' than places; one-off reasons to visit a destination rather than the destination itself.

The list is divided by continent. Of the 30 places, would you like to guess how many are on each continent?

You're wrong. 14 of them, just under half, are in Europe. Now some of these are indeed exciting destinations: the Wild Atlantic Way in Ireland is quite a fine road trip, Emilia-Romagna in Italy is mentioned specifically as a place to tour vineyards by bicycle but honestly it's a grand part of the world anyway, and the Albanian Alps are a cool, lesser-visited, and adventurous place to go hiking.

Where it falls down a bit is listing 'Europe by Train' and the European Football Championships in Germany as 'exciting destinations'. Leaving aside they're not destinations but concepts, are either of them really accessible or even appealing to the average tourist? The first one, you'd do one, maybe two at a push, but anyone interested in travelling Europe by Train has probably had it on their list for ages anyway and has planned an Inter-Rail or Eu-Rail ticket; the majority of people would only be visiting a couple of cities at most on a holiday. And as for the second one; if you don't already have a match ticket, forget about it, and would you really want to be in the same city as a whole gaggle of football supporters? At least with ice-hockey there were far fewer of them and there's more camaraderie in the sport.

As an aside, it also lists 'North Yorkshire' and 'Galloway and South Ayrshire'; the former in connection with rewilding, the latter being part of a biosphere reserve. I love the idea of highlighting these things, but they are remarkably niche, and given the list also includes Pompeii and Valletta, one might feel somewhere like Orkney has been a bit short-changed.

So, 14 in Europe. The next highest, with 9, is "The Americas", combined into one bloc. Included here are such things as the Iberá Wetlands in north-eastern Argentina (and not far from the Pantanal), the Acadian World Congress in Nova Scotia in August with traditional Acadian food and music, the coast of Dominica, and a new series of public art in Miami. It also highlights a new museum opening in New York City, a city not shy of museums, but I'm mentioning it because it's described as being "first in the city dedicated to both international and local LGBTQ+ history and culture". Which I'm obviously going to approve of.

It also mentions the Total Solar Eclipse in April as being a reason to go to Texas. Total Solar Eclipses occur roughly twice every three years, although in fairness, Texas is a relatively easy place for a relatively large number of people to get to. It's no Kergeulen.

That leaves a grand total of 7 left in the rest of the world, the largest bulk of the world, and the most populous part of the world. And given the nature of the items in the list thus far, it feels weird that such a large part of the world wouldn't have as many interesting reasons to visit in 2024. Well.

Three of them are in Africa. The Andrefana Dry Forests in Madagascar (popular country!), mentioned here as they've recently been added to the UNESCO list, famous for hosting lots of baobabs, amongst other things. Akagera a National Park in Rwanda that contains swampland, woodland, and savannah, and an awful lot of wildlife; a safari destination for people who don't want to go to, or can't afford to go to, Kenya, Tanzania, or Botswana. And the third place in Africa listed is Sierra Leone. As a whole. And it's listed because it has a new airport making it easier to access. Why go to Sierra Leone? Beaches, mountains, chimpanzees. And a new airport. And better roads than it had.

Asia also accounts for three. Sikkim, in north-east India, is mentioned seemingly because few tourists have historically visited, mainly because, er, it didn't have an airport till 2018, and then the pandemic happened. Why else is it on the cool list? Mainly, it's like Bhutan, but without the tourist tax. Then, the city of Tainan in Taiwan gets a mention because it's 400 years old this year and having some celebrations. Finally, of all places, Xi'an gets on the list because of the Terracotta Army; this is like Pompeii being on the European list.

The last continent gets one entry. A 560-mile round trip of Victoria, in Australia, links thermal springs, sea baths, and newly-built spa resorts, and is known as the "Great Victorian Bathing Trail". Which, I mean, I'm sure it's great, and I have now at least been to a couple of spas, but really, is that all that Australasia / Oceania can manage that's 'cool' in 2024? A lot of cultures must feel quite short-changed.

Let alone that Europe gets twice as much as Asia and Africa combined. It feels like it's very much catering to a specific audience; given the nature of the places and events listed too - culture, environmentalism, slow travel -

it's not an audience that wouldn't be off-putted by less western-centred ideas. It almost feels like a 'here's a few places easy for you to get to that you might like because they'll make you feel good about yourself doing things your friends will think you're 'hip' for doing'. It's not a bad thing, in terms of concepts like Hometown Travel, but if I were to see 'Welsh Whisky', 'Belfast', and 'South Ayrshire' on a travel list, I'd assume it was a travel list specifically dedicated to 'cool places and events in the UK in 2024', not a theoretical worldwide list that ignores most of the world.

Unless the Welsh Whisky comes from Patagonia, I guess. Which it doesn't.

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Now, I've whinged a bit about Best of lists not really being Best Of, or even they not being terribly useful since they talk about places we already know. "Best of 2024" is interchangeable with "Best of 2023" or in fact any other year; people have been visiting places like London for as long as people have been visiting places, and while journey times were longer, we know rich Romans did tourism because travel guides existed from those times, and people were writing about things like pan-European cuisine; we know for instance Britannia, what became later known as Great Britain, was famous in the Roman Empire for its oysters, with the caveat that you had to go there to sample them because refrigeration hadn't yet become advanced enough for effective transportation.

But what would a better list look like? What would a list of, say, best destinations to visit in 2024 look like if it included both the known and the obscure, the close-to-home and the far-away, the mundane and the quirky, and which covers most of the world? Well, fear not, listeners, as, of all people, CNN came up with one. Well, that's not entirely true; its coverage of Africa is a bit limited (though, as you'll hear, still oblique), and that's still greater than its coverage of Oceania, which, spoiler alert, again gets precisely one entry, but it's certainly more interesting than the other lists.

In no particular order, well, the order they listed places in, here's CNN's "Best Destinations To Visit in 2024".

- * We start with Sumba, a small island in south-central Indonesia, quite off the beaten track even for backpackers. CNN promote it as a beach destination with a side of community and sustainability, so definitely one for the more 'thoughtful' traveller.
- * Turkey's Black Sea Coast. Although famed for its beaches, most tourists to Turkey for them visit the Mediterranean coast or the area in the Southwest around Bodrum. The north is suggested as an alternative because it's less touristy, but also it's seen as more scenic and historic. As if anywhere in Turkey can be less historic, mind. My only observation is it's slightly more awkward to get to, but maybe that's a good thing?
- * Tartu, Estonia. This European Capital of Culture for 2024 was also mentioned on National Geographic's "Cool List", for the same reasons of student culture, museums, the old town, and, er, a festival devoted to kissing. Not my scene, obviously, but definitely cool.
- * Tainan, Taiwan was also mentioned on the Cool List, but CNN instead talk about its street food, "otherworldly" landscapes, and museums. It's interesting how the same place appears on two lists for two different reasons.
- * Northwest Michigan, which is noted for its quaint towns, rolling countryside, wineries, cherries, and sand dunes. Note this refers to NW 'mitten' Michigan, around Traverse City, not the UP. I've never seen the UP on any 'must visit' list. I have been to both. The bus route in Traverse City is called the 'cherriot'. Which is cute.
- * The only 'concept' on this list is the Trans Dinarica Cycle Route, which crosses eight countries in the western Balkans and will provide 4,000km (just under 2,500 miles) of bicycle-friendly route. Presumably it could also make a pretty good long-distance footpath, though that might take a while.
- * Culebra, Puerto Rico. Not Puerto Rico as a whole, but a lesser-visited island off its coast, listed here because of its nature and water activities. This is very much one for the Forbes 'less visited destinations' list, except ... it wasn't.
- * Then comes the most left-field entry of the lot. Angola. Yes. Angola. It's simplified its visa regime, and offers scenery and culture. What's not mentioned is Luanda is often considered one of the most expensive countries for foreign residents, but let's not let that stand in the way of ... the first time I've ever seen Angola on a 'best of' list.
- * Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. It mentions the Bay of Fundy and some historic architecture, and also has to specify they mean Saint John and not St John's. Which is a different place, in a different province, a thousand kilometres away.
- * South Korea gets another mention, primarily for, of all things, Squid Game. Apart from that it's quite a vague

justification, simply saying 'it's got it all'. This isn't helpful.

- * Albania - Beaches, mainly. Though it does mention the old towns like Berat and Gjirokastër, and the mountain scenery (especially around Theth, which I never made it to, because I went in an October and I didn't have walking boots. Most of the time I didn't even have sandals). I probably ought to do a pod on Albania at some point, actually.
- * Chile, which they say has "a little something for everyone." But then they go on to explain it, unlike South Korea. But mainly it's the natural world and the landscapes - desert, volcanoes, and Andes and Patagonia,
- * Abrolhos Islands, Western Australia - Underwater spectacular, with a large coral reef that's less visited than the Great Barrier Reef.
- * Macedonia, Greece - not to be confused with North Macedonia, but I've already ranted about that pointless spat. Anyway, Macedonia proper has, and I quote "archaeological sites, history-rich towns and beaches galore". And no weird statues paid for by the state because the president's daughter was in art college.
- * Panama; a country it notes as having a vibrant and historical capital city, lots of national parks, is big on sustainability, and, oh, a small canal.
- * Galicia is another site that we've heard about in a previous list. CNN highlight the mountains, the sea, and Santiago de Compostela.
- * A slightly oblique one from Asia now, and that's Singapore's offshore islands. They're not something I'd really given any heed to, bar back in 2012 when I was contemplating taking a day trip to Indonesia in order to, er, tick Indonesia off as a country I'd visited, and I noticed they existed. The article gives them note for sustainability, ecotourism, and a turtle sanctuary.
- * Mérida, Mexico. Not only do CNN talk about its beaches and its Mayan ruins, they also specifically state that it's one of the safest parts of the country. Sigh.
- * Kind of similarly, the next destination is Morocco, where they talk about its history and sustainable tourism, but again make a specific note that they are no longer hampered by the recent earthquake.
- * Florida's freshwater springs - does exactly what it says on the tin.
- * Also in the USA, and also mentioned in another of the lists, is Texas Hill Country - Natural springs, cream pies, hiking, food, and wildflowers. Oh, and a solar eclipse. Of course.
- * Fujairah. Don't worry if you've not come across this before; it's very much 'Hometown Travel' but for the United Arab Emirates - a part of the country in its far east, less known and visited by tourists. Or locals. It's noted for mountains and beaches, and for being quiet. It's also not very big, being the same size as the English district of Cheshire East, and the same population as the district of Windsor and Maidenhead.
- * Greenland - ... it's expanding its airports (!) making it more accessible. I guess this means you're going to be less restricted on what you can take, making it cheaper when you get there. For a limited definition of 'cheaper'.
- * And finally, Uzbekistan. For reasons well-attested, especially by me.

So that was quite a varied list, wasn't it. I think I like that one; it covers both ends and doesn't necessarily assume you're living somewhere specific. It's still a little Western in outlook but certainly it's not as obviously so as, say, the Time Out list of best cities. Which didn't even feature Abi Dhabi.

{section separation jingle}

I just have a couple of observations to finish off with, and at first these might sound paradoxical, but bear with me. Firstly, it's interesting how many places appear on more than one list. From the obvious, like parts of Italy, to the up-and-coming, like Galicia and Uzbekistan. It sometimes feels like there's a small number of places that everyone raves about (London, New York, Paris, not Munich, everybody talk about Pop Musik), and a small number of places that people keep mentioning for cultural purposes (Morocco, South Korea, Madagascar), while there's a lot more places that only get mentioned in passing, if at all.

Conversely, given a large enough list, it can feel that pretty much everywhere and anywhere can be mentioned, as long as someone's been there. But often when you get to this level, it's less about the destination and more about the experience. Tokyo is on the lists, as a specific destination, but those who mention, say, "Rwanda" or "Argentina", or lesser-visited parts of popular countries like Spain, Italy, or the UK do so for a specific reason or activity, rather than the place itself. It's almost as if people need a 'reason' to go there to see or do a specific thing, rather than because the place itself is interesting and attractive enough. And part of me is thinking 'but there's so much else here that you'd like, and are you even going to see/do/visit any of it while you're there or are you just going to tick that one thing you've been told about off your list and never come back'.

And then you visit Paris again. Because of course you do. Because everybody does.

It's interesting too to see what countries and places were not mentioned in my brief trawl; for instance South East Asia as a whole got nary a mention, with Indonesia, a cornerstone of my travel bubble, getting one small island, which is more than Vietnam, Thailand, and Philippines got. Some of the world's more popular tourist attractions weren't mentioned (Machu Picchu, for one), now to be sure I didn't search for those terms, but it's interesting to ponder if we're slowly becoming more 'experience-travel' rather than 'bucket-list-travel', even if those experiences are still centred on the western world. Not that experiences aren't bucket lists, because of course they are, but rather experiences tend to last longer and be more immersive. That's a subject for a different podcast. The Thoughtful Travel Pod is somewhere else in your podcast app of choice, but you probably already know that.

I wonder what Best Travel Lists would look like if I lived in Nigeria, or India, or even Australia? Would they be tailored to local interest? Or would places like New York City dominate anyway?

Today I learned I don't need a visa for Angola. Something something anti-bucket-list podcast episode.

-- {end pod jingle} --

Well, that's about all for this pod. Join me next time for another adventure beyond the brochure. Until then, , and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}