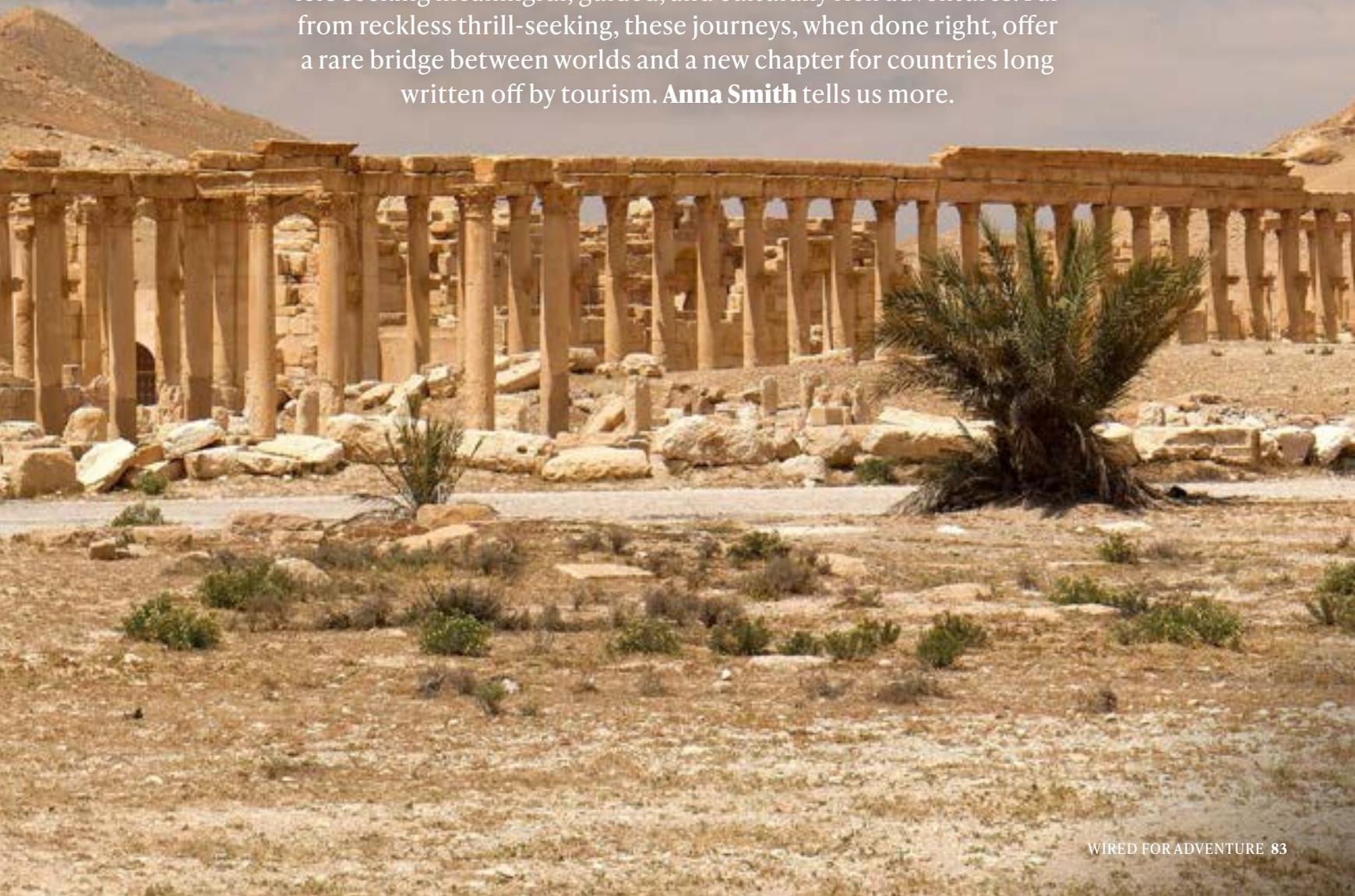




THE RISE OF EXTREME TOURISM

Once best known for their headlines of hardship, Afghanistan, Syria, and Somaliland are quietly emerging on the radar for travellers seeking meaningful, guided, and culturally rich adventures. Far from reckless thrill-seeking, these journeys, when done right, offer a rare bridge between worlds and a new chapter for countries long written off by tourism. **Anna Smith** tells us more.



If you were to visit Afghanistan today, it's likely that Bamiyan would be on your itinerary. It's a four-hour drive from Kabul and is home to one of the most popular tourist sites in the country – or at least it was. The Buddhas of Bamiyan were two 6th-century colossal statues carved into the sandstone of the Bamiyan valley. The largest of them was 53 metres tall and was the frontispiece to a system of caves where early Buddhist monks lived and meditated. In 2001, the Taliban spent 25 days destroying the Buddhas because they were considered idolatrous. They now charge £5 to visit the holes in the cliff where they once stood.

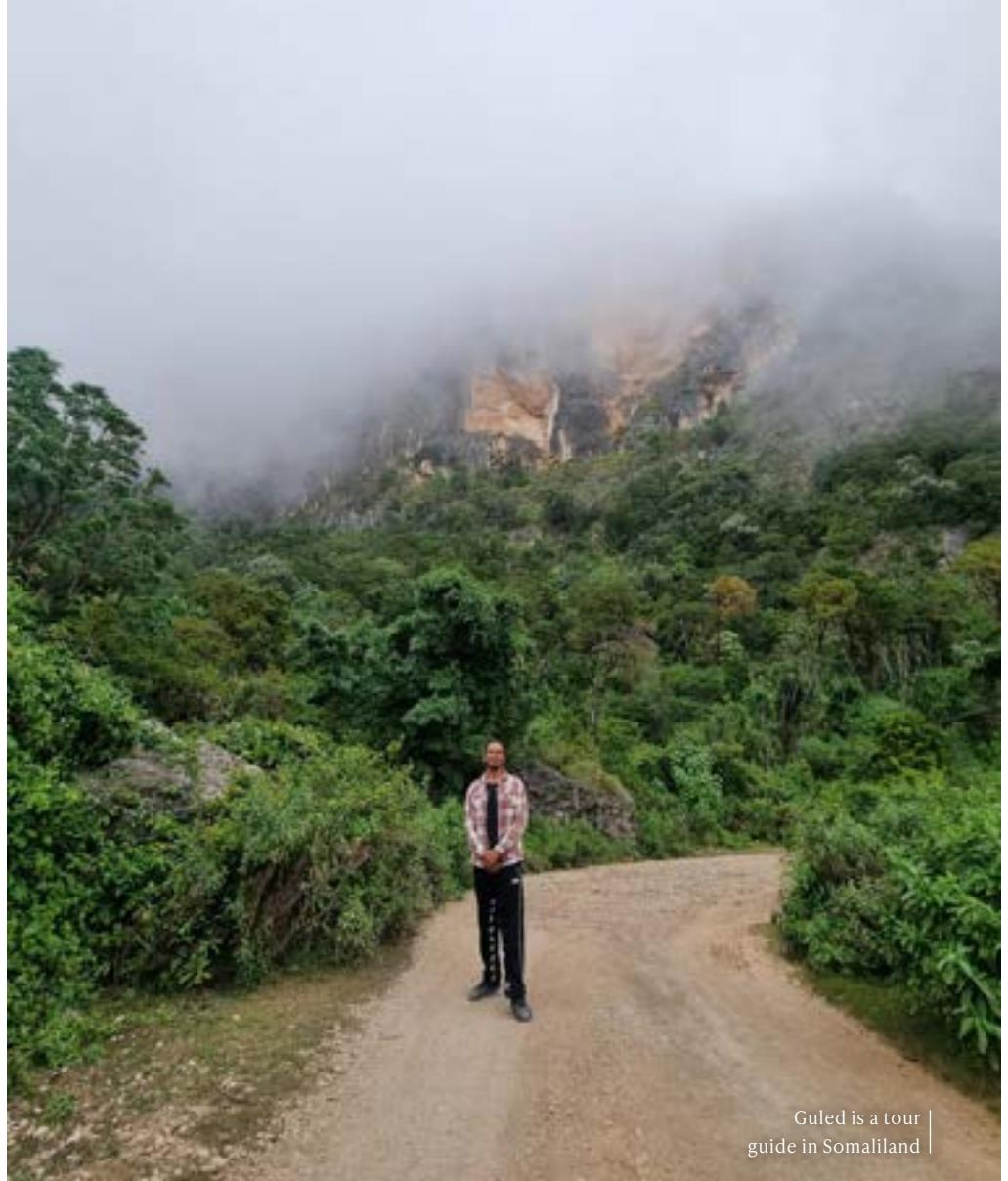
The Associated Press ran a headline last year that read “the Taliban are working to woo tourists to Afghanistan”, and with 7,000 tourists visiting the post-war nation in 2023 (a more than 200% increase on 2022), it seems to be working. Their motivation for this is accepted to be pecuniary, and beyond the irony of charging to see the remains of a monument they blew up, it's a logical move for a regime that is otherwise financially isolated from the rest of the world. The motivation for tourists to answer this call can be more ambiguous. For the majority, the draw of the ancient sites, natural beauty, and rich cultural exchange is reason enough to navigate the logistical and security risks involved. For others, these very risks make the country worth visiting. It's the latter type of travellers who make so-called ‘extreme travel’, to places deemed risky for tourists, usually because of conflict, terrorism, or a lack of consular assistance, which is controversial.

Countries like Afghanistan, Syria, and Somaliland (under the umbrella of Somalia) all grace the FCDO advisory against travel list, and, as a result, have become tricky to get to. Whether that's because standard insurers won't operate there, visas are difficult to come by, transport is complicated, or upfront costs are too great, tourists have to be absolutely set on seeing these places before they make the journey. Regardless of the motive, this style of travel is becoming increasingly popular. James Wilcox, founder of Untamed Borders (www.untamedborders.com), who specialises in tours to hard-to-reach locations, says, “There's definitely more people going to unusual places than there were 17 years ago. There are more people wanting to do it and more people arranging travel.”

This is undeniably due to the rise of the internet and social media. Everyone with a connection can access the information needed to travel to these destinations as well as relevant security updates. Videos of the warm welcomes you get when you arrive certainly elevate their appeal. However, the one-upmanship of social media is likely contributing to the tourists visiting just for the shock factor, which has created some worrying trends, as Fatima Haidari, an Afghan tour guide who was forced to flee the country in 2021 when the Taliban returned to power, explains:

“I believe it's okay for the people to go to Afghanistan because isolation makes Afghanistan worse. But I also believe in morality. I have seen some travellers, especially influencers, who have gone and stayed there for a couple of days, have taken photos with the Taliban and their guns, and called the Taliban their brothers. They are normalising the Taliban.”

In this, she describes the central issue with extreme travel and, in many ways, tourism as a whole. Done right, it's a valuable experience for both the traveller and the hosts. Different cultures, money, and ideas are exchanged in places where weak passports or authoritarian regimes limit them. Done badly, and it is those regimes that reap the benefits. Guides like Fatima, as well as Tayseer Asadi from Syria and Guled Abdi from Somaliland, walk this



Guled is a tour guide in Somaliland





Guled and a tour group at Laas Geel in Somaliland, home to some of the earliest known cave paintings



Goats at market in Somaliland. Livestock is the region's biggest export

line between individual tourists and their countries' global standings daily, and throughout a series of conversations, all attributed a lot of power to extreme tourists. From helping with financial or social isolation to challenging the world's most oppressive regimes, travel to unstable regions can shine a light on the impact tourism truly has across the globe.

The Why

Afghanistan, Syria, and Somaliland have all had different historical relationships with tourism. For the two former states, it was a robust money-maker and employment opportunity before multi-decade conflicts shut it down. In fact, in 2010 Syria, one year before the civil war broke out, tourism was responsible for 365,000 jobs and 14% of the GDP. Tourism resumed tentatively under the Assad regime in 2017 and slowly grew despite being viewed with suspicion. Currently, around half of the people employed pre-war are working in the industry. The hope was that numbers would reach pre-2011 rates by 2028, and although it remains to be seen how tourism will fare under a post-Assad government, travellers are already flocking to the new, 'free Syria'.

Afghanistan welcomed around 100,000 tourists per year in the 1970s; a decade that ended with the Soviet occupation of the country. Subsequent power transitions and the brutal two-decade American war, which started in 2001, decimated the industry, and the relentless human rights abuses of the current Taliban government have prevented a full revival despite it being a moment of relative security. "It was the Taliban themselves who were creating insecurity inside Afghanistan. Now they have the power, so there is nobody else outside to create insecurity," Fatima explains. "Plus, the Taliban needs money and needs to show the world that 'we are not the Taliban of 20 years ago and we have changed'. So, they promised to protect tourists. Tourists have more security than the local people."

On the other hand, Somaliland has never known tourism as an independent nation. Though they too experienced a devastating civil war whilst a part of Somalia (at the end of which they declared independence in 1991), they have since been a stable entity in the Horn of Africa, with democratic elections and peaceful power transitions. Guled, a freelance guide and engineer, estimates he had one client in 2023, and only 200 people visited the pseudo-state in 2024. In fact, it's supposed that more foreigners have visited Antarctica than Somaliland. Part of the issue is that Somaliland isn't on the map - both literally and figuratively. Only a handful of nations recognise Somaliland's sovereignty from Somalia, and no international bodies (like the UN or the International Olympic Committee) do. This leaves it out of most international discourse, and many people simply don't know that travelling there is an option. Combine that with the volatile situations in neighbouring states and a lack of consular assistance, and the industry has barely taken off, despite potentially being a lucrative source of income for a country with 70% youth unemployment that relies on international remittances.

For many in these countries, tour guiding is not the obvious career path, especially if they did not have a relationship with the industry before it was shuttered, like Tayseer did. He got his qualifications in 1984, and, although he turned to fixing during Syria's 14-year civil war, it was a pure love for his country that brought him to guiding; "if I didn't love it, I wouldn't do it for 40 years." Fatima's path to guiding was more accidental, but still motivated by a passion for her country. In 2009, she began posting the findings of a university project to Facebook, where she uncovered the history of her hometown,

Herat, where she was also studying journalism. This led to her welcoming online connections to the country and eventually becoming a professional guide. Even now that she can't guide in person, she continues to run virtual tours with Untamed Borders, despite the potential risks, to 'still showcase its beauty'. "I feel like I'm in Afghanistan and I'm doing my job. It's also my way to not give up, to defy the Taliban's rules and restrictions on women."

James, who has employed the three guides for multiple Untamed Borders' tours, makes it clear that this passion is the make-or-break of a guide in unstable countries. "If you don't like guiding people around Iraq or Yemen or Libya it's a terrible job because you're under suspicion from the government, you're hanging around with these people who potentially are targets, they can be really demanding, they want to take photos of stuff that you're not supposed to take photos of. Someone has to really love it, and the rest you can teach."

With Somaliland offering less risk to its guides, Guled answered the call more casually, responding to an Untamed Borders job ad looking for people with good English skills. After taking a responsible tourism course, he hasn't looked back, supplementing his engineering work, which there isn't always much of, with freelance tour guiding. He is, nevertheless, extremely passionate about the potential his country has both as a travel destination and player on the world stage. "There's this drive that comes from the highest peak (Mount Shimbiris, 2,640m). You come down from it on the Gulf of Aden, and then you drive all the way to the capital city. On your right, coastline and, on your left side, high dunes of sand with mountain views for like 20 hours non-stop. That's one of my favourites." Tayseer spoke with equal affection of Palmyra and Krak des Chevalliers - a first-century ruined city in the centre of Syria and a preserved medieval castle in the west, respectively. Fatima extolled the beauty of Bamiyan and the Band-e Amir national park; "it has everything - history, natural beauty, culture."

With Great Power

Although there have been security issues for foreigners in each of these countries (including, in extreme cases, kidnappings, imprisonments, and deaths), James says the majority of the issues Untamed Borders face are administrative. From sorting visas and navigating ever-changing borders to completely rebooking flights or cancelling tours, as long as a trip to one of these regions has a knowledgeable guide and logical itinerary, physical risks can be reliably mit-

igated. As Tayseer puts it, "if it was not safe, we would say 'it's not safe, don't come'". Indeed, Untamed Borders only returned to Syria this May once they could assess the security situation and continue to pause trips to regions like Chechnya, where they can't.

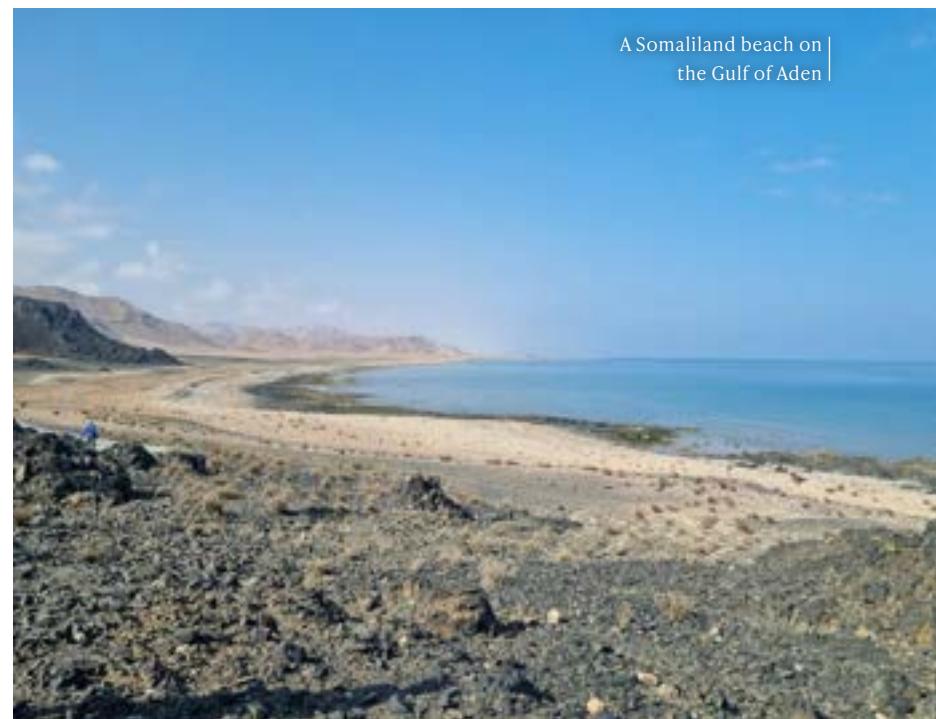
As Fatima described, tourists in these countries will often be afforded greater security than locals in some cases. This is most visible in Afghanistan, where Afghan women are banned from many things permitted to foreign women, including tourism and leisure activities, as well as playing sports, reading, singing, and speaking in public. Fatima avers that tourists are loved by God in Afghanistan and are therefore loved by the people, but adds that for some local women, it's upsetting to know that they do not have the same freedom foreigners do in their own country. Of course, this is the case because foreign women are bringing revenue to the regime, though in this strange interaction Fatima sees hope; "I quite believe [tourists] might one day change the perception and the mindset of the Taliban to let other women get an education and have the right to work and have their human rights. In this sense, I am very positive."

James also sees positives in the exchange. Whilst acknowledging that it isn't always ideal that tourism revenue ends up with unsavoury regimes, he points out that the money is also spent "on roads and paying civil servants and doing all of the normal stuff" as well as with locals, including tour guides, guest house owners, restauranteurs, and shopkeepers. In Somaliland, which has a democratically elected government yet receives next to no international investment, these funds are essential. Syria is also suffering economically under international sanctions as the world tentatively gauges the changing situation. When asked if tourism could help ease the burden of sanctions, Tayseer responded, "Yes, surely. Syrian people love the whole world, we are not against anybody."

For both Tayseer and Guled, tourism could be a rehabilitation for their countries, not just economically, but also po-



Fatima (right) in Herat, Afghanistan

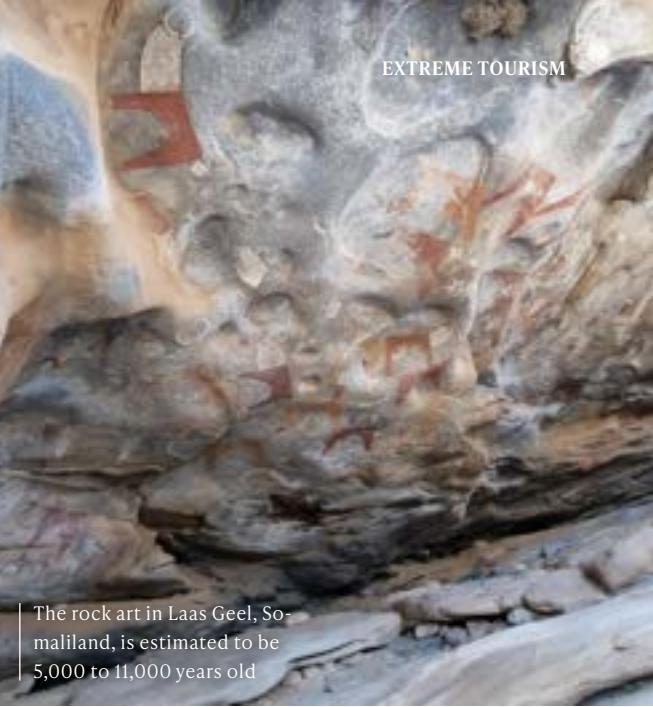


A Somaliland beach on the Gulf of Aden



School children in Somaliland wave at a group of tourists

Somaliland has the highest mountains in Greater Somalia, with the highest rising to 2,460m

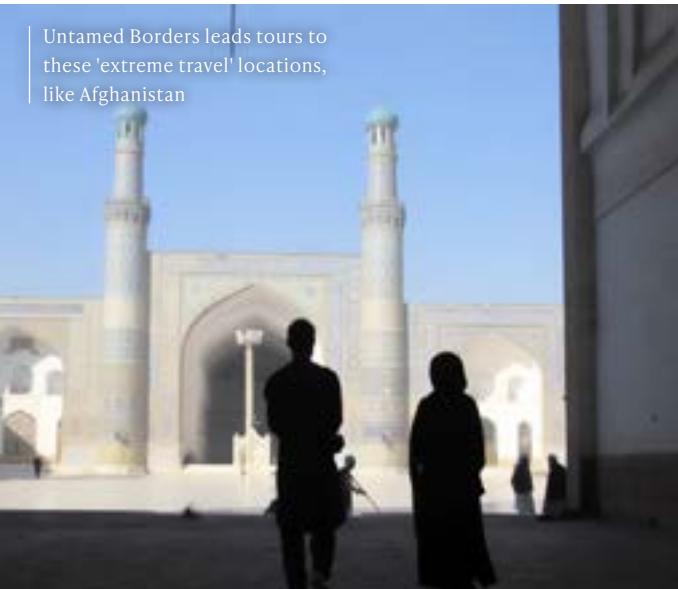


The rock art in Laas Geel, Somaliland, is estimated to be 5,000 to 11,000 years old



Tayseer guiding for Untamed Borders at Ummayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria

Untamed Borders leads tours to these 'extreme travel' locations, like Afghanistan



states have people working without proper conditions. There are lots of countries which are fairly low on Amnesty's lists where it's 'normal' to travel. And that is the normalisation of travelling to those places."

Looking to the Future

The role of the tourist is obviously a complex one, which is only heightened in countries with already complex international relationships. Despite conversations about governments, economics, and legitimacy, the one commonality between all three guides was a sheer joy in interacting with people from all over

literally. A more prominent international standing could help lift Syria's sanctions and put Somaliland on the map. "Somaliland will benefit

from tourism in terms of getting to know the country. It's not recognised, but if it gets recognised, it could play a big part in world politics," Guled says. This is the same legitimacy that Fatima fears irresponsible tourists could lend the Taliban. In each case, the tourist has an immense responsibility to respond to their host country, which James reckons extends far beyond the FCDO advisory list; "Thailand had a military dictatorship, Egypt has a military dictatorship, and many of the Gulf

the world. "Obviously, we have a very weak passport," Fatima says, "we can't see the world as we want. So, when foreigners come to our country, we are so happy to meet them, talk to them, interact with them, invite them for lunch, dinner, and ask them questions." Tayseer echoes, "Syria is the people. They are good people, merciful, and they don't have problems with each other. Even [with tourists from countries historically hostile towards Syria], people say hello to them and will invite them to eat in their houses, have a cup of tea or coffee, and have jokes with them."

At its core, extreme tourism can be this beautiful exchange of cultures and a mutually beneficial arrangement. If it's done responsibly, it has the power to elevate the voices of Afghan women, ease Syria's financial hardships, and put Somaliland on the international stage. Done irresponsibly, however, by people hoping to capitalise on the shock or challenge of travelling to an unstable region, and the instability can be compounded. For the guides, their hopes for the future are great. Guled and Tayseer hope to see their countries prosper and welcome more visitors to their ancient lands and vibrant cultures. Fatima one day hopes to return to a free Afghanistan, where she can open her own tour company and run schools for girls in rural provinces. When asked if there was anything final she wanted to add, she simply said, "I just hope that one day everyone can live in peace." **W**

Guled, Tayseer, and Fatima all guide with Untamed Borders. Fatima now guides remotely in online sessions, with a portion of the proceeds going to a women's education charity operating in Afghanistan.