



***Dear traveler,***

After a brief, sorely needed break, we herewith resume issuing our Newsletter, the long-time tradition of sharing our latest news and projects with you. We had a relaxing Holiday season followed by a frenzied activity, preparing, and sending multiple groups to Africa in January and February. Now that we have some breathing time, we feel the urgency to update you regarding the various new wonderful opportunities we are offering.

***But first, let me extend to you all our best wishes on the occasion of Valentine's Day, a day in which we should never forget to be thankful for the blessing of having our friends and loved ones around us.***

Before exploring the different destinations that we want to update you on, there are two items of news that we believe will be warmly appreciated by everyone:

- ♥ We found a new reputable Travel Insurance company that offers coverage to most of our destinations without consideration to the age of the traveler; thus, their premiums are lower than those of the other two companies we have used in the past, that over-charged in cases of high age brackets. **Trip Mate** is a great choice for people over 70, and we have added their link on our website so that you can easily get a quote for your tour and sign up for the coverage.
- ♥ To meet the increased frequency of airline "problem issues" resulting from canceled flights, changed schedules, loss of luggage, and the complex requirements from many of you who combine tours and expand tours to include multi countries, we diligently searched and finally succeeded in finding a company, called EXITO Travel which will handle our client's demands and requirements with airfares. **Exito Travel** is an industry-leading airfare management company that has been in business for almost 30 years. They provide airfare solutions to tour operators, foreign tourism boards, tour planners, and travel agencies all over the US and abroad. Their full-service Air Desk Team will work one-on-one with you to

hand-select the best routes, airlines, and fare options for a streamlined booking process. They work behind the scenes with the airlines to manage schedule changes before departure, and they're available 24/7 for any irregular operations assistance that might occur during the tour. They are very accustomed to dealing with *off-the-beaten-path* flight routings, and, of course, our incomparable air expert Jill Bock will always be here to assist with the more straightforward, less complex bookings and give you advice on the flights that would work the best in each case.

To turn now to the various news regarding our planned destinations: We start with the most incredible news: we will now be able to relaunch once again tours to **Afghanistan** (after a long hiatus since the takeover by the Taliban). We are currently discussing details and checking the current situation concerning security and safety and the availability of suitable services. It has reached our ears that presently, with the Taliban controlling the country, the acts of terrorism and the danger level have been substantially reduced. We are aiming at operating small groups of a minimum of six and a maximum of 10 participants for the time being. Our First tour there will be in **May 21 - June 01, 2023** (accompanied by our tour manager **Nancy Weber**), and the following one will be in **November 05 - November 16, 2023** (which I intend on escorting). Those programs will once again cover the gems and highlights of this fascinating country: The Valley of the Giant Buddhas of Bamian, the Turquoise lakes of Band e Amir as well as the religious center of Mazar e-Sherif with its astonishing shrine of Imam Ali and the ancient city of Herat along with Kabul of course. The most lasting memories of this legendary land are those on the human scale, such as sipping tea with the Taliban or flying kites with children in villages, walking the bazaars, and interacting with the population, which has always been hospitable to its guests.

Our planned tours to Africa will cover Chad and Cameroon. There you can see ancient yet still thriving traditional cultures, renowned art forms, flamboyantly colorful festivals, mask dances, and a dazzling ethnic mosaic, all of which are the exotic gems of tribal Africa. This fantastic cultural odyssey takes you to the remote and seldom-visited countries of Chad and Cameroon. After a few years of suspending our classical tour to those two unique countries, we decided to offer them in the fall of 2023: the first one in **October 09 - October 24, 2023** will be Chad during the colorful *Gerowol festival* (one of the last few genuine and authentic festivals of the world) combined with Cameroon which is the pinnacle of African destinations filled with colorful tropical gems. And then, in **December 02 - December 10, 2023**, we are thrilled to launch our latest adventure in Chad, visiting **THE ENNEDI MASSIF** (a UNESCO NATURAL Heritage site). It is a spectacular tour of Chad's most remote and breathtaking lands that takes you to places few western travelers have ever been to. The Ennedi is a vast collection of Sandstone Mountains sculpted by the wind and sand over millennia into stunning rock formations. The region is inhabited by one of Africa's most traditional and least-known tribes (the Tubu). Besides the marvelous rock art dating back thousands of years which still maintains its vivid colors, you will also encounter big herds of camels and visit their drinking waterholes, which are shared by one of the last populations of Saharan crocodiles. This is a once-in-a-lifetime adventure that we can enthusiastically recommend. The tour will be accompanied by **Michel Behar** and will be limited to only 10 participants!

It's not only us who welcomed the wonderful news about the end of the Ethiopian civil conflict that has devastated parts of this beautiful country for over two years, but the entire world is happy to see an end to this destruction and the current implementation of the Peace agreement between the central government and the Tigrayan rebels. Given this development, we can now offer again a tour that we sadly took off our map for years: **Ethiopia's Historic North and Timket Festival**. This tour is scheduled for **January 14 - January 24, 2024** and will be led again by a world authority on Ethiopian archaeology and history: **Prof. Matthew Curtis** from California. He will also lead the next tour tied back-to-back with Ethiopia, which is the **Horn of Africa** (exploring Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somaliland). Our February 2023 Horn of Africa (HOA) tour is leaving on Valentine's Day with ten guests, and we still have a few spots on our **November 29 - December 13, 2023** tour, which is led by **David William**. If you are yearning to go on a wild off-the-beaten-track adventure to an obscure part of the continent, join us either in November of this year or in **January 25 - February 07, 2024**.

We are happy to re-launch our multi-country **Mosaic of the Balkans (September 29 - October 13, 2023)**. Albania is the true hidden gem of the Adriatic region and the Balkans peninsula. It is a country offering an amalgam of many civilizations and combines several of the marvels and wonders of Greece and Turkey blended. The amazing cultural mosaic of the Balkans' region and its diverse ethnic fabric, combined with its historical importance and natural beauty, offers you a glimpse into Europe's least explored countries such as Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Kosovo, Bosnia & Herzegovina. This stunning region is home to an eclectic mix of people: ethnically, geographically, and religiously. It is radiant in the early summer and early fall months when its acacia forests are flowering. Its famous coastline is dotted with sleepy villages on turquoise bays. Its rugged interior mountains are home to ancient Christian monasteries, churches, spectacular lakes, and waterfalls. One can also visit their Roman ruins, medieval churches, fortresses and monasteries, colorful old Turkish bazaars, Ottoman citadels and mosques, and elegant imperial Austro-Hungarian towns. Many of these wonders are UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Even if you have been to **Egypt** before, our tours in mid-February (already fully booked) and early March (*still open*) to this most ancient of countries in the world will be one of your most memorable journeys ever, and its temperate climate will be a most welcome reprieve coming as it does at a time when we all want to escape from the bitterly cold weather around here. This is a country that, no matter how often one visits it, continues each time to capture the imagination of travelers, writers, explorers, and philosophers afresh --- going back at least 3,000 years. Another piece of news that delighted us is that the **Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM)** had a soft opening that allows groups of 10 or more visitors to see it finally. In mid-February, I shall escort my first group there, and in March, our tour led by the eminent archaeologist **Geoff Emberling** will be our second group to visit Egypt (**March 21 - April 07**) and its new Grand Museum. This tour will comprise a 5-day sailing on the Nile in a privately chartered yacht followed by an expedition visiting the intriguing Siwa Oasis. There is still **ONE** cabin available on the boat, so if anyone desires to join a uniquely spectacular tour, please let us know immediately.

Another tour that had previously found great favor with our clients and that we are offering it again is that to the **North African countries of Mauritania, Tunisia, and Algeria**. To these destinations, we are scheduling two yearly departures that can be chosen as a complete tour totaling 21 days OR divided into segments, in which you can choose to visit only one or possibly two consecutive segments of this 3-country tour. We have started reversing the order in which the three countries are visited this year: The tour will begin in Mauritania and end in Algeria. This way, the tour culminates with THE BEST and the most unique destination. Our tour to Algeria includes some of the "best-preserved" Roman ruins, stunning desert vistas, elevated city of bridges (Constantine), some of the most beautiful, lush oases in the world, ancient towns that have been locked in medieval times (Ghardaia) and some stunning old desert rock engravings (Acacus Mountains). The country is home to eight UNESCO Heritage sites and a fascinating history of its colonial era under French occupation until its independence in 1962. The dates are **April 27 - May 22, 2023, October 05 - October 30, 2023, Apr 12-May 08, 2024 & Oct 04 - Oct 30, 2024**.

A new pioneering adventure that we are currently working on will cover some of the beautiful Indian Ocean Islands: Starting in the **Maldives**, then into **Seychelles**, then **Mauritius**, then **Reunion**, and ending in **Comoros**. The dates are scheduled for **September 04 - September 29, 2023**. The tour is intended to offer a glimpse of the unique characteristics of some far-flung Island nations. This tour will have a relaxed and slow-paced style, given the isolation of the islands and their intimate connection to nature. Starting in the Maldives, which is often described as a "tropical paradise" because of its striking beauty, unrivaled elsewhere in the region. Maldives is a tropical country comprised of several separate islands, wherein the sea comprises 99% of its territory! Stunning white sandy beaches surround each island. It is a wonderful experience to visit and explore the islands' beauty. In Seychelles, you will visit the UNESCO World Heritage site referred to as the original "Garden of Eden." Located on the granitic island of Praslin, the Vallée de Mai is a vast area of palm forest that has remained largely unchanged since prehistoric times. Dominating the landscape is the world's largest population of endemic coco-de-mer, a flagship species of global significance as the bearer of the largest seed in

the plant kingdom. The forest is also home to five other endemic palms and many endemic fauna species. The property is a scenically attractive area with distinctive natural beauty.

While in Reunion, you will marvel at one of the world's most active volcanos and the highest peak of the Indian Ocean, as Reunion shares many similarities with Hawaii. Mauritius is famous for its vibrant multicultural population since it was at the crossroads of maritime trade and discoveries since the Arab times and through the Middle Ages, where Indians, Dutch, French, and English claimed to control. Its commonality with the Indian subcontinent stems from the Europeans bringing in Indian labor to harvest and plant.

As the proud pioneers of travel to **Iraq**, we are happy to announce that our March tour is sold out, and we still have a few spots in the October tour led by our delightful **Dr. Barbara A Porter**. The tour will be offered with an extension to the fabulous Kurdistan region, which though strikingly different from the rest of Iraq, is nevertheless an intrinsic part of the country. As the October tour fills up, we already have the dates ready for our spring and fall 2024 Iraq tours. Iraq has always intrigued hard-core adventurers and seekers of ancient civilizations. Home of civilizations such as the Babylonians, the Sumerians, the Akkadians, and the Assyrians, Iraq holds some great sites that fire the imagination and captivate the soul. Additionally, it provides a straightforward and close encounter with the major denominations of the Islamic faith and displays the impressive Holy sites and monuments that adorn their ancient cities. We would be delighted to see you on our **October 25 - Nov 08, 2023** tour.

Another country that still preserves its pristine character and has not yet been overrun by mass tourism is **North Sudan**. We offer two tours a year there: one in the fall and one in winter. Our **November 03 - November 13, 2023** tour is led by a world authority on Sudan and ancient Nubia: **Richard Lobban**. This tour is the natural continuum on the ancient pharaonic legacy of the Nile Valley and Egypt, so anyone who has been captivated by "ancient Egypt" will be completing the circle by visiting this stunning country with its highly hospitable people and some of the most captivating ancient awe-inspiring ruins, consisting of pyramids, temples, and tombs.

While always looking to push the boundaries of the unfamiliar and exotic, we offer a perfect extension to our North Sudan tour, a tour to **South Sudan (November 13 - November 20, 2023)**. It's an easy one-direct flight between Khartoum and Juba (the capital of S. Sudan), and you land in one of the least visited nations in the world. There you will see interesting tribes and nomadic clans of cattle herders. The people of these dynamic groups have distinctive "V" shaped markings on their foreheads and dye their hair in cow urine, giving it a yellowish-orange tint. South Sudan is one of the most exclusive unexplored frontiers on the African continent and a dream destination for those searching for the ultimate "off-the-beaten-track" adventure. We recently had several guests visiting South Sudan, and they all came back raving about the experience and were highly impressed by our ground operator there.

One of our most cherished destinations is the **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)**, which I have repeatedly mentioned in my previous newsletters in 2021 and 2022. Under the effective leadership of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (commonly known in the West as MBS), currently, the country is undergoing a radical and rapid transformation that began two years ago. The country is now one of the Top tourism magnets in the Middle East region, surpassing even Dubai (UAE) and Egypt in terms of the number of visitors per year. We anticipate that by the first part of 2024, the country will be totally touristic and lose much of its allure as many places there are being converted into recipients of mass tourism and Vegas-style edifices with lights and glitz, and mega-developments. So don't procrastinate and postpone your visit to KSA and join us soon on one of our scholarly-led tours. The dates are **Mar 06 - Mar 19, 2023** and **Nov 14 - Nov 27, 2023**.

Another place that always captivated visitors with its gamut of historical places, fabulous Mediterranean cuisine, excellent wines, beautiful seafood, ancient sites, and stunning topography is **Cyprus**. Our **May 09 - May 25, 2023** tour that combines it with **Malta** and **Greece** has two spots left. And we have a new date in September/October 2023 that is easily combinable with an excellent next-door neighbor: **Lebanon (October 15 - October 22, 2023)**. A mere 45-minute flight from Larnaca to Beirut gives you an amazing combination

of two magical lands, making this tour a perfect two-week program. Cyprus is a one-week tour that suffices to cover all treasures from Monasteries to churches to ancient ruins and small quaint villages to spectacular mountains and beaches. The tour usually covers the Greek side of the Island as well as its Turkish side. Our guides and drivers are some of the top operatives we have ever worked with, and every client who returned is thrilled at the experience. The weather there is glorious from September to November and then again in spring from the later part of March until mid-June. Therefore, if you have not yet seen Cyprus, combine it with Lebanon, which has always been a well-traveled bridge between East and West, and so is dense with history and, of course, also a world-renown culinary experience.

A new project we are very excited to promote for the first time is a tour to **Poland, Lithuania, Latvia & Estonia** (Discovering the beauty of the Baltics) scheduled for **July 15 - July 28, 2024**. Those small states have experienced many wars, occupations, and revolutions, but lately, they have all re-emerged to reveal their splendid history and beauty to the world. And in Poland, you will get a glimpse of this fantastic destination wandering the halls of the Royal Castle of Warsaw, embarking on a walk-through historic Krakow, and visiting the haunting Auschwitz Camp, as well as touring medieval monasteries and amazing salt mines. Exploring those countries, you will quickly discover the unique survival techniques these cultures are built on. Enduring the aggression of its more powerful neighbors, Soviet occupations, and two world wars, it's not surprising to find the people here consciously aware of and appreciative of their present era of new-found freedom. The many monuments and museums here serve as a constant reminder of what those resilient countries have been through.

Once again, even if you have been to **Spain** before, our tour of Andalusia is an enriching experience that is worth going back to again and again, particularly in the Fall. The tour is in **September 06 - September 20, 2023**. The striking feature of the southern region of Spain is that it offers visitors a remarkable blend of different ancient civilizations that eventually crystalized into the present rich, unique culture infused with the haunting aura of a long exotic history. It represents a mixture of the orient and occident, and its culture has borrowed from both East and West. Modern Spain is unique in that it was forged from both cooperation, bitter conflict between Catholic monarchies and Muslim Caliphates, and a long Jewish heritage and a Moorish sub-culture. Each of these elements left impressive monuments and stunning relics. In addition to this abundance of historical wealth, the south of Spain boasts beautiful weather in the Fall and offers a gastronomical array like none in the world. The scenery is also fascinating, with white villages teetering on the precipice of yawning gorges dotting barren landscapes and shining like gems from afar, vibrant medieval cities that seem as if time stopped there. In addition, rolling hills are covered with sunflower that forms a yellow sea as far as the eyes can see. Each city in southern Spain has its unique flavor; some are walled with commanding views, others coastal, shimmering along the turquoise sea, while mountains and valleys surround others in every direction. You will be immersed in a kaleidoscope of unforgettable experiences: and the sounds of passionate Flamenco dancers will inject a magical feel into you. The master of Moorish and Roman history, ethnographer **Mohamed Halouani**, will lead the tour.

Given how **Pakistan** is becoming one of our most popular destinations, many of our clients have been revisiting it, and we can see some other companies now started offering this marvelous country. Our comprehensive ideal tour begins at the southern part where Karachi lies on the Arabian Sea to Lahore (and Islamabad), crossing the amazing Indus Valley with its many UNESCO sites. Then the beautiful stretch from Islamabad towards the Chinese border along the Karakoram Highway and passing through the Hunza Valley will mesmerize you with its majestic mountain peaks, gushing rivers, and verdant valleys. We still have a few spots for the **May 09 - May 21, 2023** (Chitral Festival) and **October 11 - November 05, 2023** tour. Otherwise, we hope to see you on one of our tours in 2024 The dates are **February 14 - March 10, May 09 - May 21 & October 09 - November 03**.

Our plans for the African tours of January-February 2024 are currently in their final preparatory phases. We expect to complete these plans and have all the tours posted on our website within 2-3 weeks. We already have our Ivory Coast tour listed, and the next ones will follow suit.

Our in-depth exploration of the enigmatic and historically unique **Ivory Coast** covers an exciting array of tribal heritage sites, great song, dance, mask performances, and special colorful ceremonies. Its vibrant markets showcase a gamut of colorful dresses, masks, fruits, vegetables, and fetish stands, all of which will no doubt invite capturing these scenes on camera. Add to that its historical legacy related to a rather dark time when Ivory Coast was one of the major countries of West Africa from where the slave trade originated. Our last tour this January, which David William led, came back raving about their experience, and if you desire a more extensive experience, you can combine our next Ivory Coast tour with the Nigeria tour that precedes it from **January 09 - January 19, 2024**. Michel Behar is leading both tours. There you will discover with him one of Africa's most vibrant ancient kingdoms on a tour that will challenge any preconceived ideas about Nigeria. There is no doubt about it – Nigeria is huge. It is the most populous country in Africa and the seventh most populous country in the world. Nigeria boasts an array of ethnic groups and rain forests, savannahs, waterfalls, and other natural attractions. Then if you want to explore West Africa further, you can tie--- after Nigeria and Ivory Coast---a tour to the Niger which is scheduled for **January 29 - February 07, 2024**. This tour of the relatively obscure nation of Niger offers a beautiful mix of wildlife, ancient cities, desert vistas, lush oases, and a unique cultural component with many ethnic tribes.

By the time you get this newsletter, I shall be heading to Cairo to revisit my parents for a few days, followed by escorting our mainland Yemen tour, which will be a sure adventure. I have heard about this tour and how fascinating it was from our last group who did this week in Yemen last November; they loved every bit of it. Remember that our **Yemen** tour of **November 14 - November 22, 2023** still has a few spots open if you wish to join. This is a guaranteed epic adventure that explores the safe region of Hadhramaut. Occupying the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen has been at a crossroads of trade and exchange for millennia. Ships sailing the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, East African Coast, and the Persian Gulf all have made the call at Yemen's harbors. In the dry desert highlands and the narrow wadis, there are cities of mud-built skyscrapers to explore and small villages to discover, situated precariously on rocks surrounded by date palms and lush greenery. The gem of this tour is Shibam, dubbed "Manhattan of the Desert" for its 10th-century skyscrapers - **[Read the Review](#)**.

A final suggestion I would like to share with you is that we are increasingly delving into **arranging customized private tours** for almost all of our destinations' repertoire. So if you are interested in any of our exciting places and the group scheduled tour dates do not suit your calendar, we can work with you to put a private program and combine multiple countries if you wish.

It is heartbreaking to witness how devastating the latest **earthquake** that hit Turkey and Syria was, and I am sure you all have followed on the news the extent of the destruction caused by mother nature that impacted such a vast number of people. STS has a long history of promoting tours to both nations, and we are happy to report that our partners and colleagues in the impacted areas are fine and safe. For those of you who would like to help with donations, here is an article that offers at the end of it various links that you can contribute on them to help the victims and their families.

**[Deadly Earthquake Kills Thousands in Syria and Türkiye - Arab America](#)**

Finally, we want to remind you of two important things: If you have enjoyed your tour with us please post a supporting review of us, on **GOOGLE** and follow us on our **FACEBOOK** page so that we can spread the joy of travel to more friends and followers.

Thank you once again for your interest in our journeys and we look forward to serving you as always.

Sincerely,  
**Ihab Zaki, Managing Director  
and Spiekermann Travel Team**