

21

VISIONARY WOMEN TRAVELERS

THROUGH HISTORY

These trailblazing women defied convention to feed their wanderlust. Their daring adventures opened up the world for everyone.

BY
KATIE KNOROVSKY
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
BIJOU KARMAN



4TH CENTURY

EGERIA

In the fourth century, a Christian pilgrim by the name of Egeria set off from the Mediterranean to reach the Holy Land, using the Bible as her guidebook. "These mountains are ascended with infinite toil," she writes about her intrepid climb up Mount Sinai, in detailed letters sometimes called history's first travel memoir. Her insights reveal a cultural sensitivity that transcends time: At each stop she took care to inquire about local customs and traditions.

CA 985-1050

GUDRID THORBJARNARDOTTIR

Icelandic sagas immortalize the Viking wife and mother Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir as "a woman of striking appearance and wise as well, who knew how to behave among strangers." By many accounts the most traveled woman of the Middle Ages, the hardy "far traveler" is said to have crisscrossed the North Atlantic several times between Greenland and Iceland. She also sailed to North America—five centuries before Christopher Columbus—and to Rome on a religious pilgrimage.

1740-1807

JEANNE BARET

Two centuries after Ferdinand Magellan sailed around the world, a French "herb woman" disguised as a man became the first female to circumnavigate the globe. With her chest wrapped in bandages, Jeanne Baret conspired with her lover—a renowned botanist—to earn a spot on a 1766 expedition. The ruse was up two years later (the couple remained in Mauritius when the boat sailed), but Baret's feat came full circle upon her eventual return to France in the early 1770s.



1805-1881 ▲

MARY SEACOLE

Although Mary Seacole earned fame as a "black Florence Nightingale," the British-Jamaican nurse considered travel the ultimate antidote for the limiting Victorian era. Her witty autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, recounts her exploits tending to cholera victims in Panama and at the front lines of the Crimean War. "As I grew into womanhood," she writes, "I began to indulge that longing to travel which will never leave me while I have health and vigour."

1831-1904

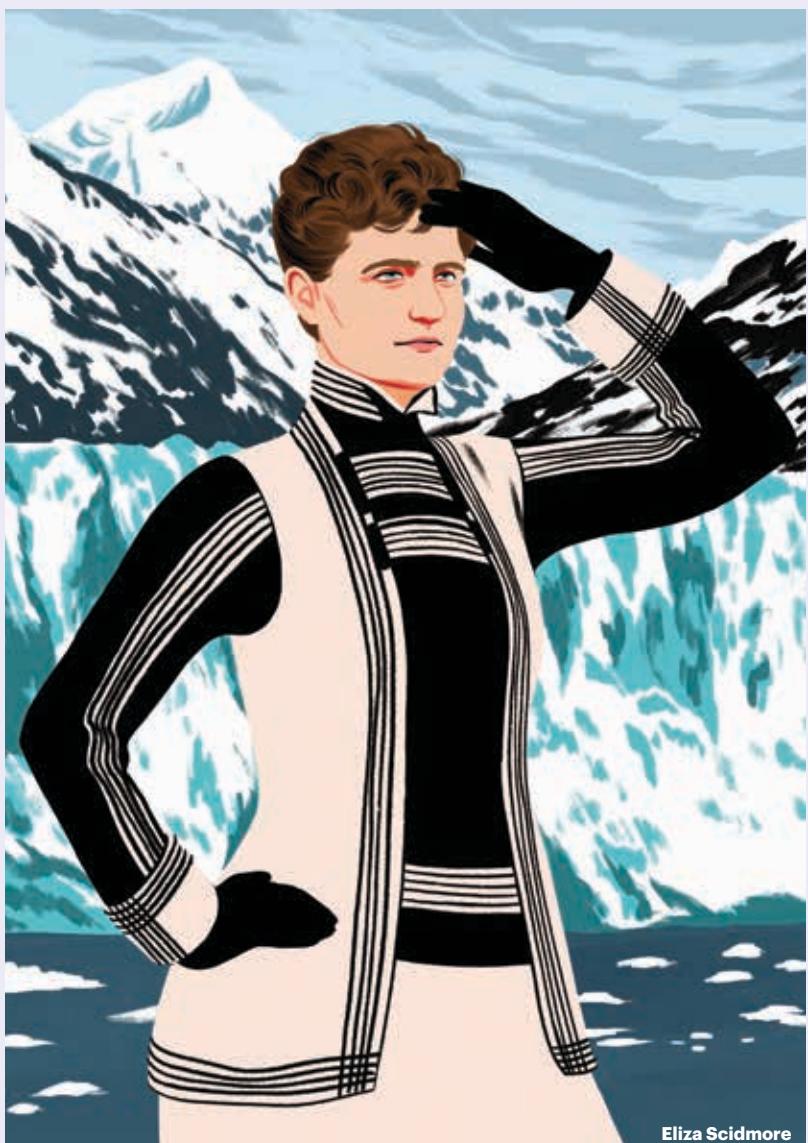
ISABELLA BIRD

Some people live to travel; Isabella Bird traveled to live. On doctor's orders, the chronically ill Englishwoman set off for North America on her debut adventure in 1854. The open air suited her well-being as much as travel stirred her soul. The first woman elected to be a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, she went on to climb volcanoes, ride horseback through the wilderness, and commune with locals, chronicling her voyages in books about Hawaii, Tibet, Colorado's Estes Park, Korea, Morocco, Vietnam, and beyond.

1856-1928 ▼

ELIZA SCIDMORE

The first woman elected to the National Geographic board (and to have a photo published in the magazine), Eliza Scidmore likened her travel appetite to "original sin." Among the pioneering



tourists to cruise through Glacier Bay, she penned Alaska's first guidebook, in 1885. Yet the renowned "lady writer" did more than plant the seeds of wanderlust in her readers: Her idea to bring cherry trees to Washington, D.C., blossomed into a rite of passage for spring travelers the world over.

1864-1922

NELLIE BLY

In the action movie that was her life, Nellie Bly always did her own stunts—none more spectacular than her breathless voyage around the world in 1889. Moving by train, steamship, horse, donkey, and rickshaw, the 25-year-old journalist traversed 24,899 miles in 72 days. She detoured in France to meet her muse Jules Verne, visited a Chinese leper colony, and acquired a pet monkey in Singapore—all with only a small satchel and a single dress.

1868-1926

GERTRUDE BELL

Englishwoman Gertrude Bell traded upper-class comfort for desert forays by camel. A cohort of T. E. Lawrence—but with a better mastery of the Arabic language—she embedded herself in local life as she roved the sands of the Middle East, from Persia to Syria. Arabia's "uncrowned queen" helped draw the borders of modern Iraq, advised on the writing of its constitution, and established the Iraq National Museum. Bell also scaled the Alps and preserved antiquities on archaeological digs.

1875-1937

HARRIET CHALMERS ADAMS

Neither vampire bats nor avalanches could stop Harriet Chalmers Adams from venturing deep into South America in 1904. She and her husband covered some 40,000 miles in three years, crossing the Andes by horseback, wandering the Amazon alongside jaguars, and canoeing in snake-tangled waters. Exclusion from the men-only Explorers Club did not faze her; in 1925 Adams became the inaugural president of the Society of Woman Geographers.



1884-1959 ▲

AUGUSTA VAN BUREN

Before Thelma and Louise took to the open road, there was Gussie and Addie, aka Augusta Van Buren and her sister, Adeline. In 1916 the socialites with a rebellious streak crossed the continental United States on motorcycles—roaring across dirt trails, cow passes, and roads pocked with mud holes as they traversed some 5,500 miles in 60 long days of heat and rain. Augusta went on to join Amelia Earhart's Ninety-Nines group of women pilots.

1887-1972

LOUISE ARNER BOYD

Louise Boyd took her vast inheritance from the California gold rush and put it on ice. The heroine of the high seas led and financed several scientific expeditions into the Arctic wilds, helped document Greenland's fjords and glaciers, completed covert missions for the U.S. government, and was one of the first women to soar over the North Pole in an airplane. "Far north, hidden behind grim barriers of pack ice, are lands that hold one spell-bound," she wrote in 1935.

1887-1973

EMMA GATEWOOD

In 1955, 67-year-old Emma Gatewood emerged from the Appalachian Trail as the first woman to hike all 2,050 miles in one season by herself. Emboldened by an article in *National Geographic*, she was nicknamed the "hiking grandma"—in fact, the mother of 11 was a great-grandma—and went on to conquer the trail two more times as well as the 2,000-mile Oregon Trail. Her marching orders to "pick up your feet" have motivated countless walkers since.



1892-1926 ▼

BESSIE COLEMAN

Bessie Coleman rose above the prejudices of her era. In 1921 she soared into history as the world's first African-American woman pilot. Born the daughter of a maid and a sharecropper, the manicurist turned aviatrix learned to fly in France after being rejected by American flight schools. For five years she traveled the U.S., performing heart-stopping stunts in the sky—at her insistence, only at venues with desegregated crowds—until a fatal plane crash.

1893-1993 ►

FREYA STARK

Perusing a map was said to fill Freya Stark with “a certain madness,” which provoked fearless explorations of the remote deserts of the Middle East, chronicled in more than 20 books beginning with 1932’s *Baghdad Sketches*. Her preferred mode of transport was on the back of a donkey or camel, and although measles, dysentery, dengue fever, and other illnesses took their toll, her boundless spirit of adventure—and ready smile—always persevered. “Curiosity,” Stark writes, “is the one thing invincible in nature.”

1906-1996

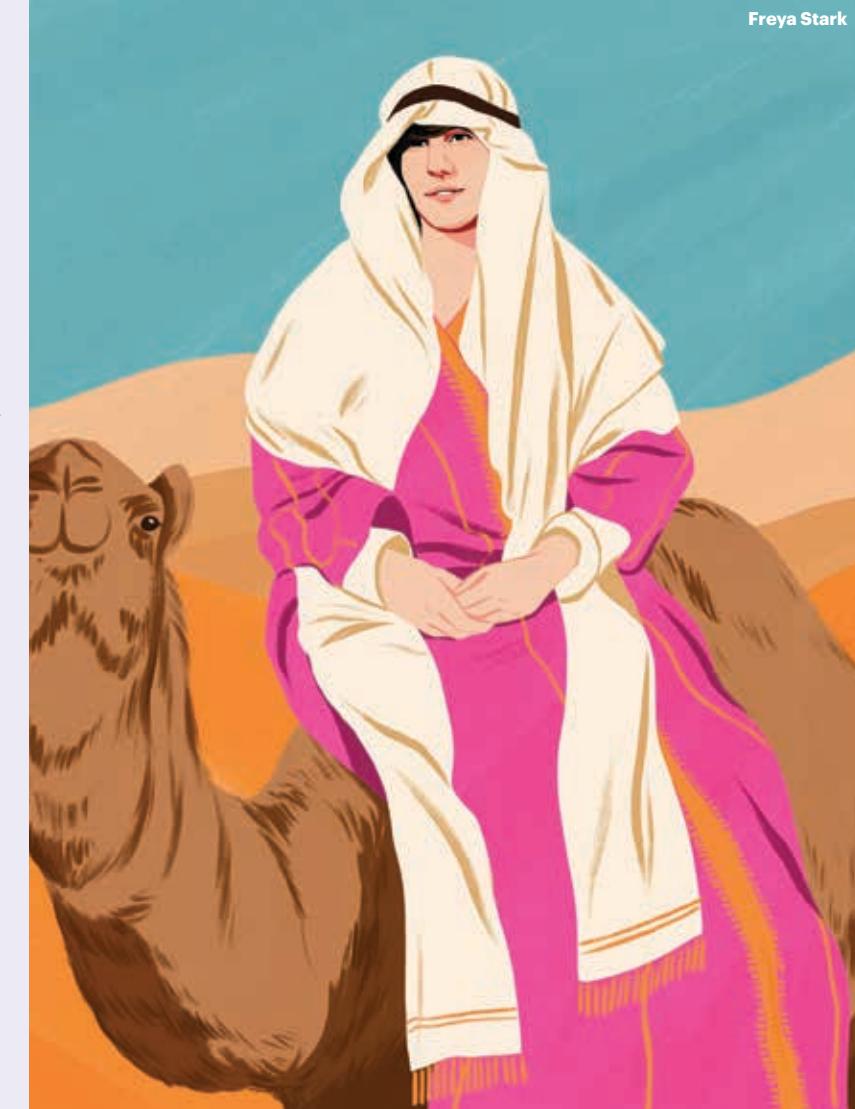
ALOHA WANDERWELL

In 1922, 16-year-old Idris Galcia Hall pursued her fantasies to “sleep with the winds of heaven blowing round her head” when she answered an ad to join a world tour. She became known as Aloha Wanderwell and was promoted as the “world’s most widely traveled girl,” eventually driving across six continents in a Ford Model T.

1908-1998

MARTHA GELLHORN

Pursuing a life “almost explosive in its excitement,” journalist Martha Gellhorn took in the “view from the ground” in 53 countries—Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, China by sampan and horse, and the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. Describing herself as “permanently dislocated,” the glam vagabond based herself for a stint in Cuba as the third wife of Ernest Hemingway, who appears in her 1978 book, *Travels With Myself and Another*.



Freya Stark

1926-

JAN MORRIS

Prolific Welsh writer Jan Morris lived the first half of her life as James Morris, posted to Palestine in 1946 as an intelligence officer and scrambling down

Mount Everest to break the news of its first successful summit in 1953. After transitioning to female in 1972 (a different kind of journey), Morris began writing about places in earnest, revealing an unparalleled knack for evocative city portraits. Her 40-plus books span Venice to Hong Kong, the U.S. to the Arab world.

1931-

DERVLA MURPHY

Dervla Murphy wrote the book on traveling at full tilt—literally. The Irishwoman’s 1965 memoir, *Full Tilt*, chronicled her solo bicycle trip from her home to India, by way of Yugoslavia, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Subsequent books revolve around similarly voracious voyages through challenging landscapes, including a three-month slog with a mule in the Ethiopian highlands and a 1,300-mile trek through the high Peruvian Andes with her nine-year-old daughter. The familiar thread in all her exploits: Embrace the unpredictable.

1943-1991 ►

SAN MAO

San Mao, whose real name was Chen Mao Ping, launched her bold career as Taiwan’s “wandering writer” and translator with her 1976 travelogue *Stories of the Sahara*. (An example of her lyrical prose: “Every time I thought of you, a grain of sand fell from the sky. Thus the Sahara Desert formed.”) The polyglot bohemian flitted among Germany, Spain, northwest Africa, Central and South America, and the Canary Islands, spending much of her life as an expat and inspiring generations of devoted readers and travelers.



San Mao

1984- ▲

EVITA ROBINSON

No traveler is an island—at least not if globetrotter Evita Robinson gets her way. The three-time expat founded Nomadness Travel Tribe, an online community designed for millennial travelers of color. Whether shark diving in Cape Town or teaching English in Japan, the 20,000-plus members of Nomadness—mostly African-American women—have emerged as a force in the not-always-inclusive travel industry. “We are here, and we are relevant,” said Robinson in her 2017 TED Talk about black travel.

1987-

ERIKA S. BERGMAN

National Geographic Young Explorer Erika S. Bergman brings unprecedented depth to her travels—whether she’s scaling the hazy rainforest canopy in Costa Rica or deploying underwater robots in the icy Arctic. The deep-sea submarine pilot is most at home probing uncharted waters. “Anyone can be an adventurer,” she writes. Her network of engineering camps and girls’ mentorship programs, Global Engineering & Exploration Counselors, puts that mantra into action.

