IMAGES, INSIGHTS AND STORIES

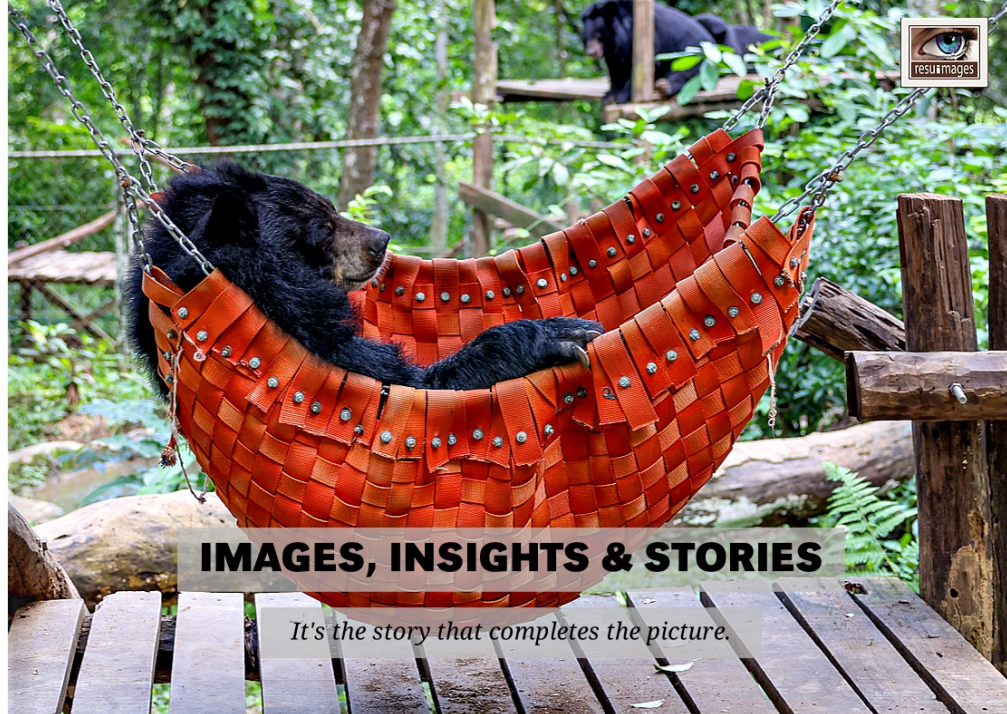
In the great library of forgotten ideas lived three beings who rarely appeared apart from each other:
Images, Insights and Stories.

Images was the fastest. He darted around the world collecting moments – a smile, a sunset over the sea, the pattern of frost on a window pane. He carried a sack full of raw data, fleeting and beautiful, but without context. 'Look!' he would often exclaim, throwing a handful of glittering images into the air and disappearing again before anyone could ask, 'Why?'

Insights was the silence. She sat in a darkened room and looked at the images that Images brought her. She was slow, thoughtful, and looked for connections. She saw the smile and the sunset and recognised the longing behind them. She saw the frost and understood the physics of cold. Insights was the 'aha!' moment, the spark that connected two separate images into one idea. She took the cold data from Images and gave it warmth.
But both felt incomplete. The images were beautiful but silent. The insights were brilliant but abstract.
Then came Stories.

Stories was the weaver. He took the vivid images and the deep insights and wove them into a tapestry.
He took the image of the smile, the insight of longing, and wove the story of a sailor returning home. He took the image of the frost, the insight into physics, and told the story of a child discovering winter for the first time.
One day, all three met in a clearing. Images threw an image of a broken bird's egg on the ground. Insights looked at it and said, 'This is not just destruction. It is also the beginning of something new, a sacrifice for survival.'
Both looked at Stories. Stories smiled.
He took the image of the broken egg and the insight of a new beginning and began to speak: 'Once upon a time, there was a phoenix who knew that his time had come…'
Images provided the colour, Insights gave the meaning, but it was Stories who turned it into something that could be felt, shared and remembered. And so they realised that, although they were different, only together could they truly change the world.

IMAGES, INSIGHTS & STORIES



„We only see what we know.“

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

This photo book that I am presenting to you here is much more than just a simple collection of images. It is my personal invitation to you to see the world around us with different eyes, to pause and take a closer look.

Through a careful combination of striking photographs, personal insights from individuals and captivating stories, I have endeavoured to encourage you to discover the details that are often overlooked in everyday life. Each picture you find here tells a comprehensive and multi-layered story from a person's own unique perspective.

The narratives I have added to the images are a deliberate mix of fiction and real, verified facts. They are presented in different contexts to encourage reflection and show the diversity of life.

My greatest wish is that you immerse yourself in these visual narratives. Discover the beauty and incredible diversity of our world in all its facets. Let yourself be fascinated by the small and large details that I have captured for you.

I have designed this book with care for all age groups; it appeals to children as well as adults. I sincerely hope you gain many interesting insights, enjoy looking at the photographs and have fun reading the stories.

resuimages

Reiner Sutter

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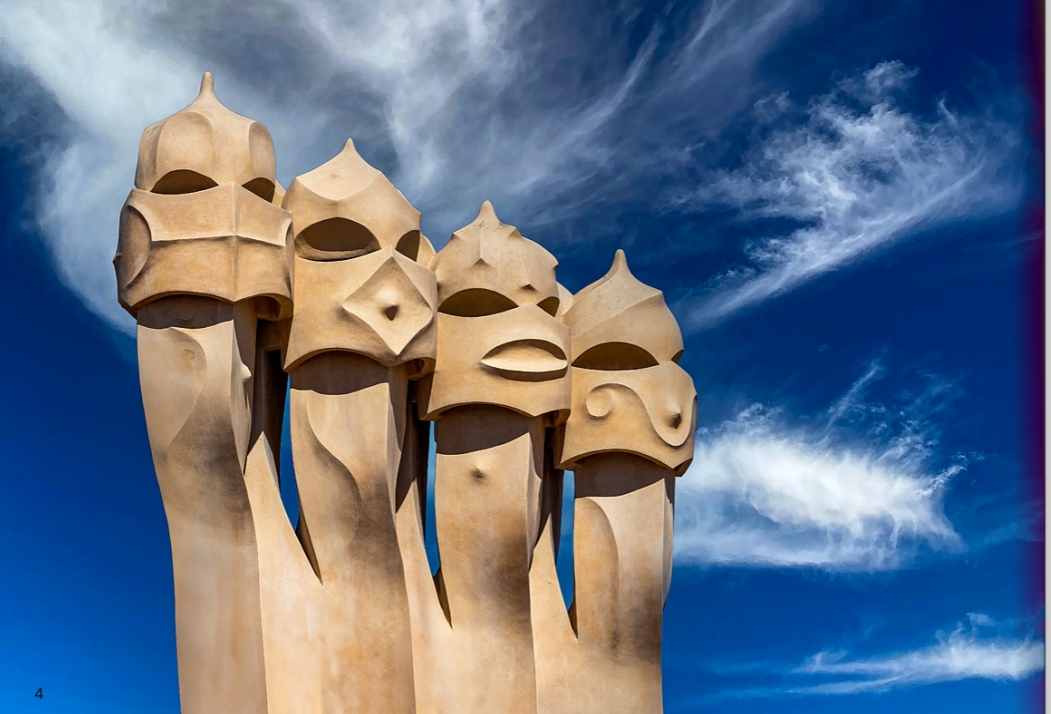


THE ARCHITECTURAL GENIUS ANTONI GAUDÍ

I am Antoni, a nature-loving dreamer. My childhood was a quiet study. While other children played tag, I sat there, my joints often aching from rheumatism, and watched. I saw how the wind shaped the pine trees, how the light danced through the foliage. Nature was my only, my eternal teacher. I understood early on that there were no straight lines, only the elegant curves, hyperboloids, and paraboloids of creation—perfect and in harmony.

Later, in Barcelona, when I began my work as an architect, people laughed at my ideas. My fellow students at architecture school followed rigid, linear plans. I, on the other hand, remembered the honeycombs, the snail shells, the arches of tree trunks—all of them static, efficient, and beautiful. My buildings should breathe, live. I used hanging models made of chains to calculate the perfect, natural load paths—a method that eliminated the need for traditional buttresses. The columns inside the Sagrada Família are not columns; they are trees branching out in a forest of stone, through whose colourful glass the light falls like sunbeams through leaves.

My life became more and more modest as my work grew. I devoted every waking hour to the basilica, my prayer in stone. In my worn clothes, with my unkempt appearance and without identification papers, I was often mistaken for a beggar. On 7 June 1926, on my daily walk to confession at the Church of Sant Felip Neri, it happened. Lost in thought, I overlooked one of the new trams on line 30 on Gran Via. The impact threw me to the ground. Passers-by saw my tattered clothes and left me lying there; the first taxi drivers refused to take a supposed vagrant to the hospital. Only a policeman forced a driver to do so.

Three days later, on 10 June, I died in the Hospital de la Santa Creu. When the news spread and the chaplain of the Sagrada Família identified me, the city was united in deep mourning. Thousands of people—rich and poor, Catalans from all walks of life—lined the streets for my funeral procession. They laid me to rest in the crypt of my unfinished cathedral.

My belief was simple: “Originality is a return to the origin.” And that origin is nature, divine creation. My legacy, which lives on in the Sagrada Família, is intended to remind architects and artists forever to seek the truest and most beautiful forms where they are purest: in nature itself.

MOSQUEE HASSAN-II

I am Omar, a craftsman in Casablanca. Back then, in the beginning, it was just an idea, a sparkle in the eyes of His Majesty King Hassan II. But it was no ordinary idea; it was a vision that touched our hearts: we were to have a building that was not only large but also embodied the soul of Morocco, here in our Casablanca.

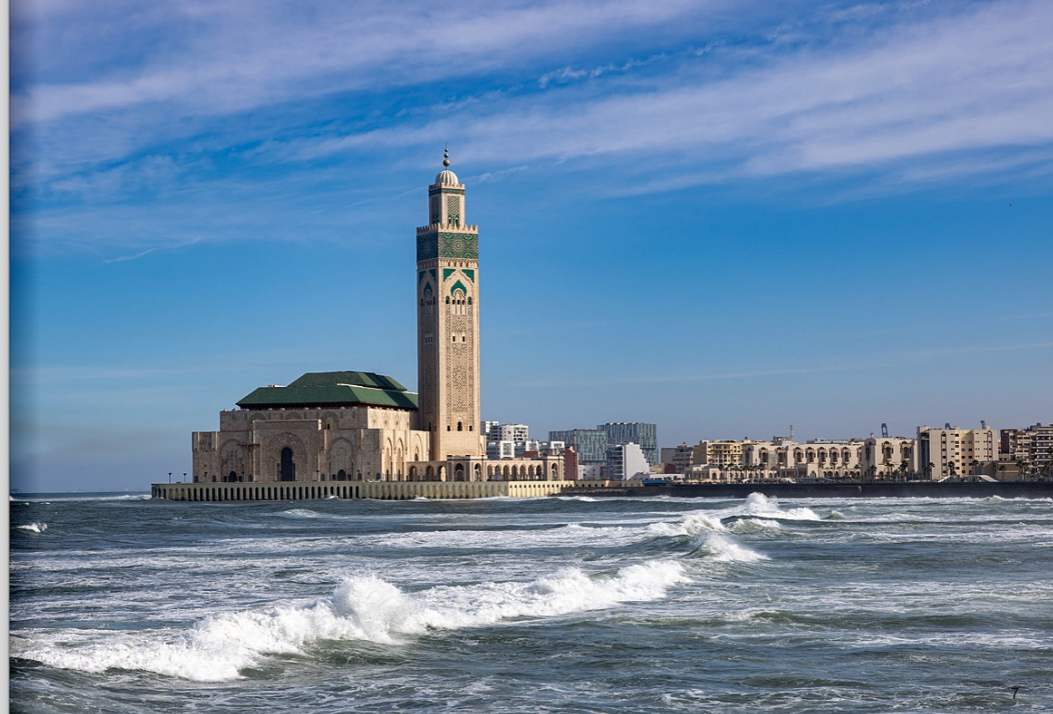
I still remember the year 1980 well. The King spoke of building a mosque that would stand “on the water,” inspired by the words that “God’s throne is above the water.” These words triggered something in us, something powerful. Suddenly, a jolt went through the whole country. It was as if every Moroccan felt: This is our chance to do something great for our faith, for our country. From then on, it was our mosque. Millions of us—my uncle, the farmer; my neighbour, the merchant; the simple woman next door—we all donated. Everyone gave what they could. It was this incredible, unspoken agreement, this feeling of togetherness, that united us all.

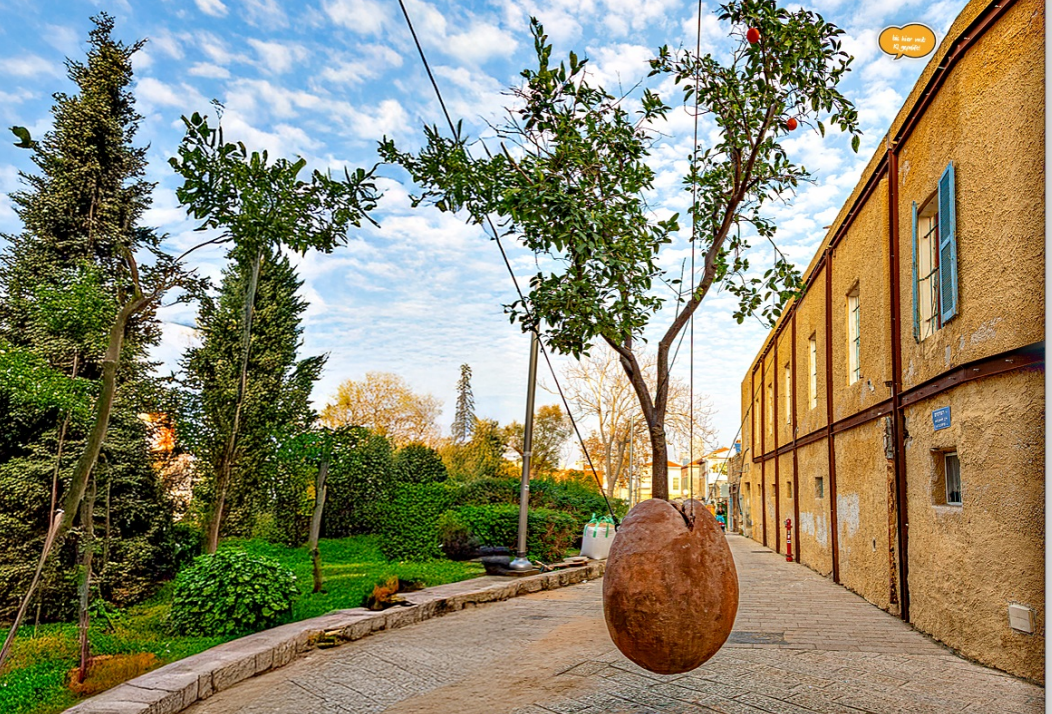
When construction began in 1986, under the direction of the French architect Michel Pinseau, the building site became a meeting place. Right on the Atlantic Ocean, where the waves used to break, a marvel was created. Over 10,000 craftsmen from every city and village in Morocco came here. It was fascinating to see them working tirelessly. They carved the cedar wood as if they were writing poetry, shaped the stucco into the finest patterns, and assembled countless mosaic tiles. Every detail reflected our history, our art, our pride. It was pure, living craftsmanship. We were all part of it.

We watched as traditional techniques merged with state-of-the-art technology. They made the mosque earthquake-proof and even installed a huge retractable roof so that we could pray under the open sky when the weather was good. Imagine that!

In 1993, after seven years of hard work, the time had come. The inauguration was a moment I will never forget. The mosque sat majestically above the sea, as if it had always been there. Its minaret, 210 metres high, pierced the sky. At night, when the laser beam pointed towards Mecca from the top, you felt connected to the whole world.

For me and my people here in Casablanca, this building is much more than just a tourist attraction. It is a symbol of our faith, our unity, and our craftsmanship. It was not just a king’s project; it was the work of all of us. Furthermore, it is our monument to ourselves, to our ability to achieve great things together.





FLOATING ORANGE TREE

I am Ran, the farmer, not the artist Morin. My life is the soil, the water, the growing. And when I walked through the old streets of Jaffa in 1993, I saw more than just the walls. I saw the loss. The loss of the connection to the earth that the modern world has brought with it, as the groves of the famous Jaffa oranges disappeared and high-tech agriculture moved in.

Morin, the artist, had a vision. He wanted to create something that defied the laws of gravity. He found a cutting from the Jaffa orange, the fruit that once symbolised the region's wealth. And what did he do? He hung it up. One metre above the ground, in a massive, egg-shaped terracotta pot. As a farmer, I had to smile, but it also made me think. He hung the tree with ropes and the expertise of the Volcani Institute for Agriculture, one of our most important research centres for innovation. The irrigation? A hidden drip irrigation system—an ironic tribute to the Israeli invention that made our dry land fertile, but which also shows how far we have strayed from natural methods.

The tree sprouted from the terracotta pot as if it wanted to break free. The sculpture immediately became a talking point. For me, as a farmer, it is a symbol with many interpretations. It has become an integral part of Jaffa's rich history.

The floating orange is not just a work of art that attracts tourists. It is a place of reflection on the past, the groves that have disappeared, and the present of the modern agricultural industry. Its simple but powerful statement reminds us that we can outsmart nature, that we can create new life in suspension. But it also shows the fragility of this artificial life. We farmers know that without the constant, careful care provided by this technical system, the tree would be lost. It reminds us that despite all our technology, we are still dependent on nature, even when we lift it off the ground.

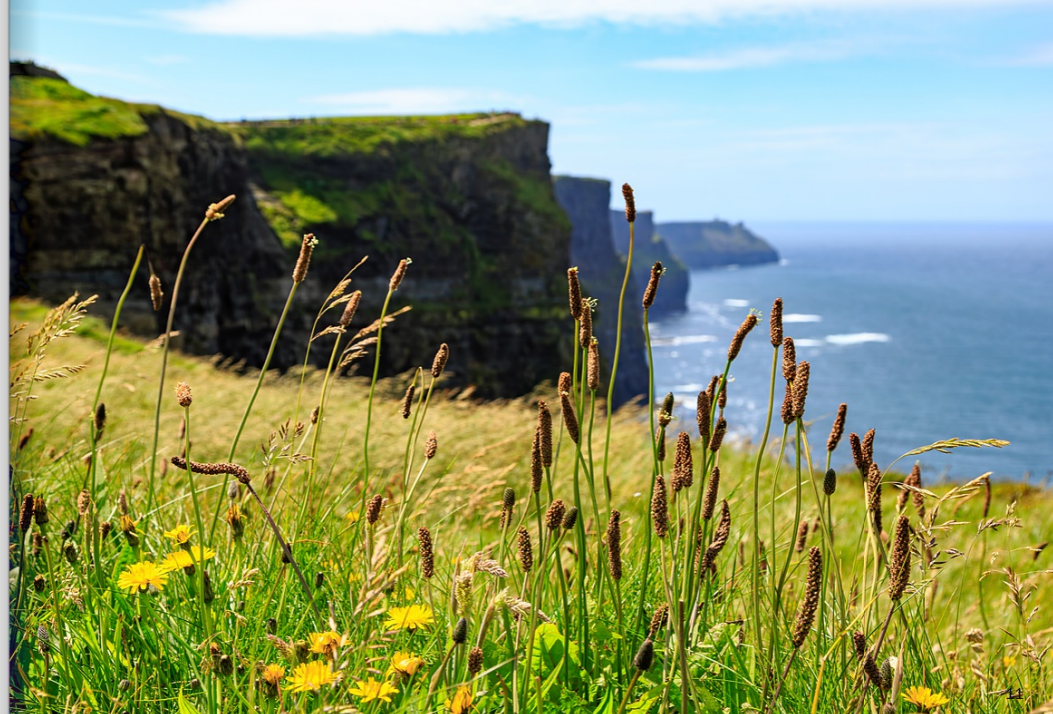
CLIFFS OF MOHER

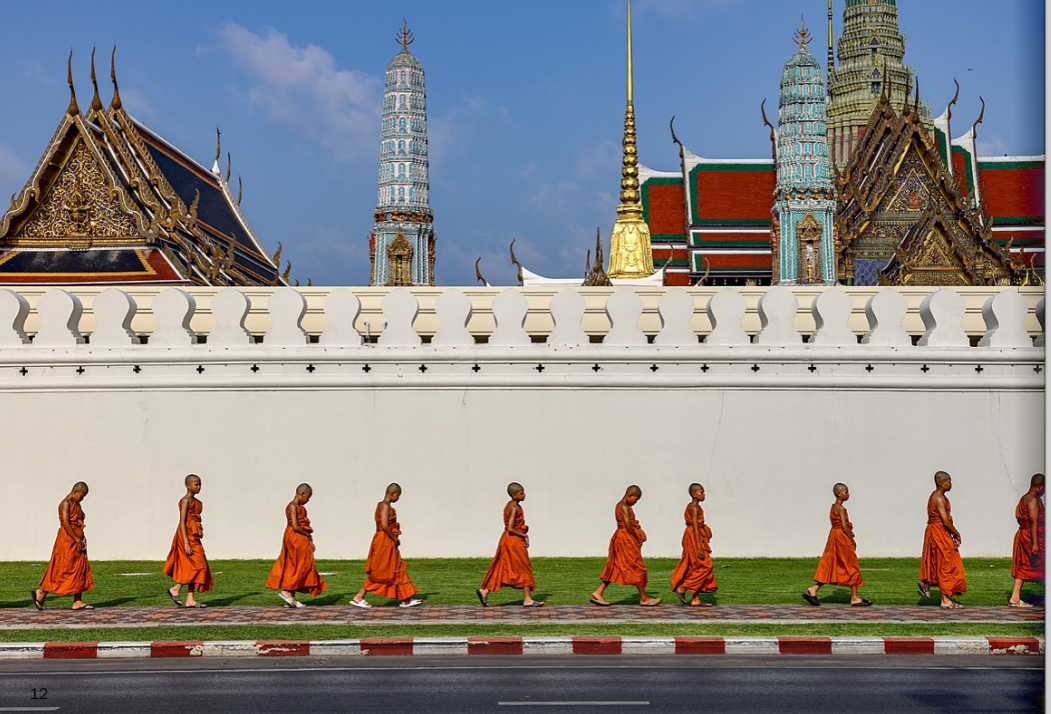
I, Cú Chulainn, the spear of the Ulstermen, speak. Hear the story of this windswept place, which mortals now call the Cliffs of Moher, near Knockevin in County Clare. It is a place of wild, untamed beauty, where the land ends abruptly and plunges into the yawning void of the ocean. When the day is clear, I look out and see the Aran Islands lying in the waters of Galway Bay as if they had fallen from the sky. Beneath me, the sea rumbles, its waves gnawing incessantly at the soft slate and sandstone. It is a sound that speaks of the eternal power of nature, a power that pushes even a warrior like me to my limits.

These cliffs, as old as time itself, are steeped in myth and the magic of the otherworld. It is a place for beings older than humans. This is where I ended up on my wildest hunt—not for a boar or an enemy warrior, but fleeing from an unwanted affection. A witch known as Mal had set her heart on me, the brave warrior of the Red Branch. But my soul belonged to battle and my duty, not to her. She was obsessed, pursuing me relentlessly across the breadth of Éire. Eventually, the chase led us to this southern region, near the mouth of the Shannon.

I saw no way out across the land. In a leap of desperation and strength, I made my way to the sea stack that stands amidst the foam. Mal, in her frenzied desire, followed me, but the leap was too far for her, and she fell into the raging waves below us. Thus, the cliffs still bear witness to this ill-fated pursuit.

Mortals also tell tales of mermaids and their magical cloaks, of fishermen overcome by greed—stories that speak of the dangers of power and desire that lurk on these rocky shores. The cliffs are saturated with such lore, tales of ancient warriors, witches, and giants. They remind people that the world is more than meets the eye, and that even the mightiest heroes must flee before the forces of nature and the whims of mythology. I stand here, a shadow of my former self, bearing witness to the timeless power of this windswept coast.





MONKS

The scent of jasmine and fried chicken hung heavy in the humid morning air of Bangkok. Despite the early hour, the city was already pulsating with life. Scooters buzzed like bees, and street vendors loudly touted their wares.

Luang Por Sombat, an old monk with a gentle smile that had carved deep wrinkles into his face, adjusted his pace to that of his novice, the young Niran. Their saffron-coloured robes glowed in the early light, forming a warm contrast to the grey asphalt. They had finished their alms round, and their bowls were filled with rice, bananas, and curry. Their destination that day was Wat Phra Kaeo, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, the spiritual heart of Thailand.

“Niran,” said Luang Por Sombat in a voice as gentle as the fluttering of a flag, “remember why we are walking this path. We are not walking to see the gold, the jewels, or the tourists. We are walking to renew our reverence for the Phra Kaeo Morakot.”

Niran nodded and concentrated. He was excited. Until now, he had only seen the great temple on postcards.

As they approached the Grand Palace, the atmosphere changed. The streets became wider, the sounds quieter. Above the high white walls, the towers of the temples rose into the deep blue sky—golden towers covered with mosaics that exploded like fireworks in the sunlight. At the gate, the guards bowed and let them pass. Inside the grounds, it was breathtakingly quiet. Only the soft murmur of visitors from all over the world could be heard.

Finally, they stood in front of the Ubosot, the ordination hall. They took off their shoes and entered the cool room. There, high on a throne, he sat: the Emerald Buddha. He was much smaller than Niran had expected, but his presence was immense. Carved from a single block of jasper (though often mistakenly referred to as emerald), the small, meditative figure radiated a deep calm.

Luang Por Sombat and Niran sank into the kneeling posture of worship. They closed their eyes and chanted their sutras, their voices mingling with those of the praying pilgrims. At that moment, surrounded by architectural splendour and historical significance, Niran was no longer just a young novice on an excursion. He was part of an ancient chain that linked this sacred place to the deepest Buddhist tradition.

As they left the temple and the noise of the city reached their ears again, Niran carried not only the filled alms bowl but also the image of the small, powerful statue in his heart—a reminder of the silence at the centre of the world.

MANIOC

Grandmother Mae Boun lived in the small village of Ban Klang, nestled between green rice fields and rolling hills in southern Laos. Her face was weathered by the sun and bore the marks of eighty monsoon seasons.

Mae Boun's extended family lived mainly on rice, the staple of Laotian cuisine. But in some years, when the clouds failed to appear or the floods were too severe, there was only cassava. The cassava plant was not only food for them, but also a promise. It grew where the delicate rice withered. Its gnarled, brown roots dug deep into the barren soil and were not deterred by drought or poverty.

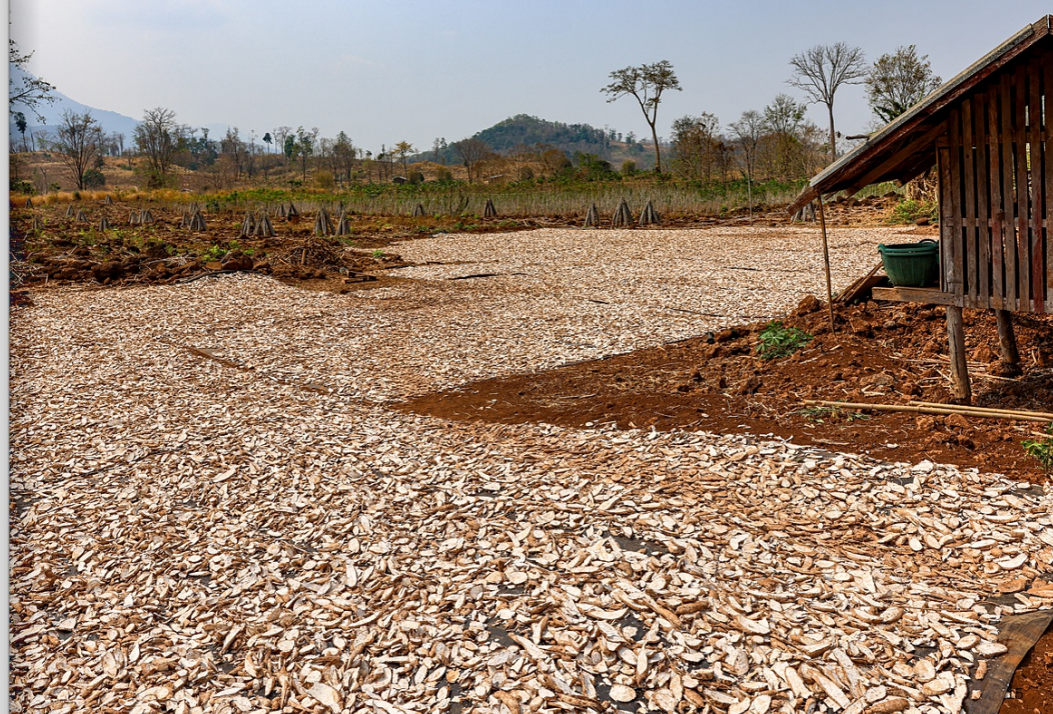
When Mae Boun's grandson, young Kham, grew impatient one day after a particularly hard harvest, he complained, "Grandmother, rice tastes better. Cassava is so tough and tastes bitter if you don't prepare it properly."

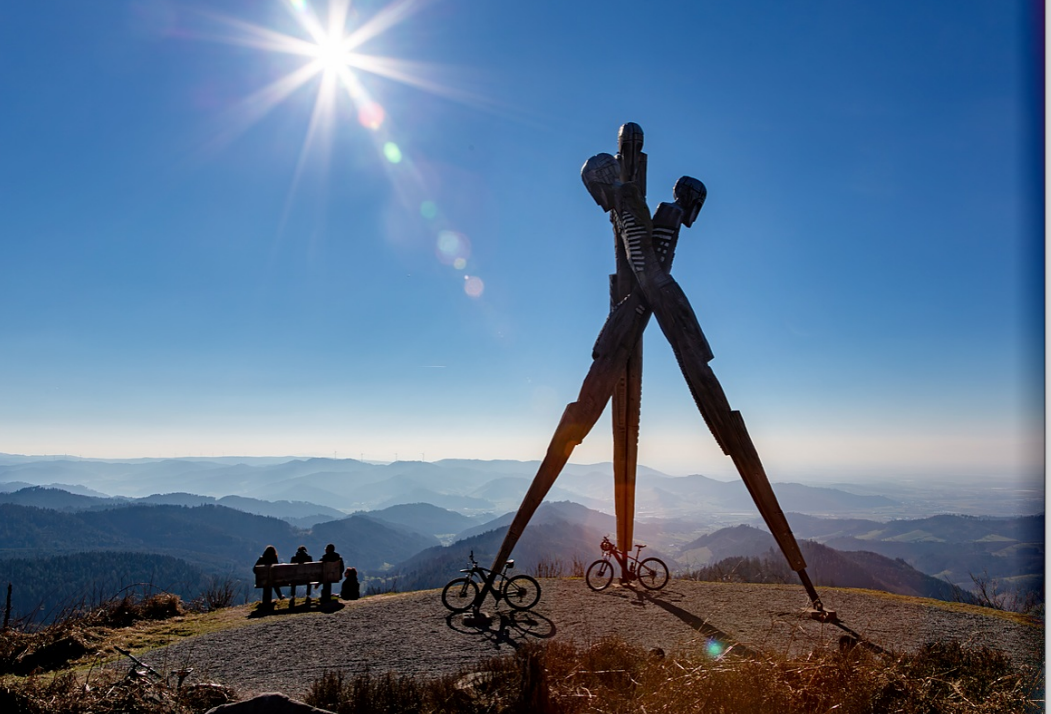
Mae Boun smiled, her smile betraying no sign of fatigue. She rubbed one of the large, starchy roots. "Kham," she said in a voice as gentle as the murmur of a nearby river, "rice is our feast. But cassava is our survival."

She explained to him the true significance of the plant in Laos: cassava is reliable. When all else fails—war, drought, poverty—farmers in Laos can rely on this root. It grows quickly and is resilient.

To remove the cyanide from raw cassava, you have to laboriously peel, grate, soak, and cook it. "This work," she said, "teaches us patience and respect for food. It teaches us that life requires effort." She showed him how to process it into starch (tapioca), how to bake sweet cakes with it, and how to cook the leaves as a vegetable. Cassava is the versatile staple of Laotian cuisine and agriculture, even if it is sometimes seen as "just" animal feed.

Later that evening, they sat around the fire. Mae Boun baked cassava doughnuts in coconut milk, her favourite dish. "Never forget, Kham," she whispered as she handed him the warm doughnuts. "Cassava is like family and the land itself. It's not always refined or sweet, but it's strong, it keeps us alive, and it's always there for us."





LOTHAR MEMORIAL

Years after the hurricane, Ludwig still remembers the experience as if it were yesterday, the memories searing themselves into his mind again and again.

“You know,” he said with a hoarse voice, “when I see the Lothar memorial on the Siedigkopf today, it still sends a shiver down my spine every time. I inevitably think back to that Boxing Day in 1999. Until then, the holidays had been so peaceful, so Christmassy and quiet here in our beloved Black Forest. But on 26 December? That’s when everything changed—forever.”

“I remember that morning,” he continued. His eyes grew distant. “The wind was getting stronger, but at first, we didn’t think anything of it. But then ‘Lothar,’ as we soon came to call it with awe, swept over us with a force we had never experienced before. The noises… oh God, the noises were terrible—a howling, a crashing, as if the sky itself were being torn apart. In the valley, here in Gengenbach, they later measured wind speeds of over 150 km/h, and in the higher elevations towards the Moosturm, it was probably around 200 km/h. These were no longer gusts; this was the pure, unleashed force of nature.”

“Within just two hours, our familiar world had changed,” he murmured, gazing into the distance. “When I stepped outside the next morning, my breath caught in my throat and my heart sank. Uprooted and broken trees lay everywhere. Entire sections of forest that we had known since childhood, where we had collected mushrooms, were simply gone, as if someone had erased them. It looked as if a giant had dropped a box of matches. The forestry industry here in the area was particularly hard hit; in Baden-Württemberg alone, over 30 million trees were lost. Unimaginable. But the worst thing was that 13 people in our state also lost their lives during those terrible hours. That affected us all deeply; it was as if a part of our community had been taken away from us.”

Six years later, on Boxing Day 2005, we gathered at the Siedigkopf. The artist Norbert Feger had created a memorial. It stands exactly where the storm had raged most fiercely, near the border with Nordrach, close to the Moosturm. It has become a quiet place of remembrance.

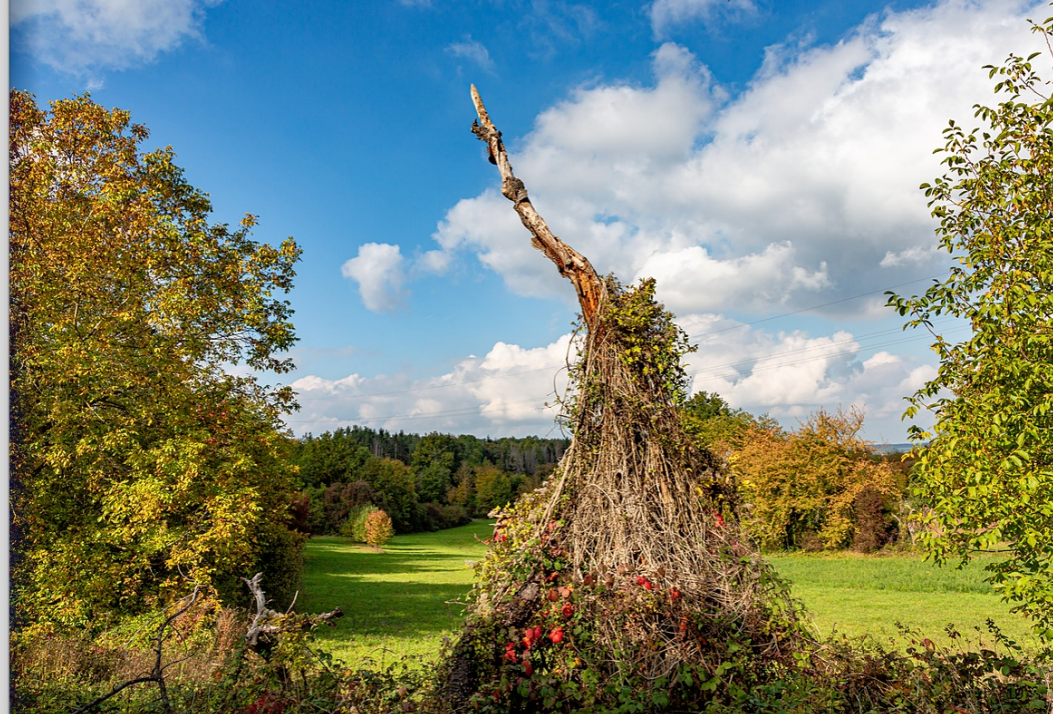
THE OLD TREE WON'T GIVE UP

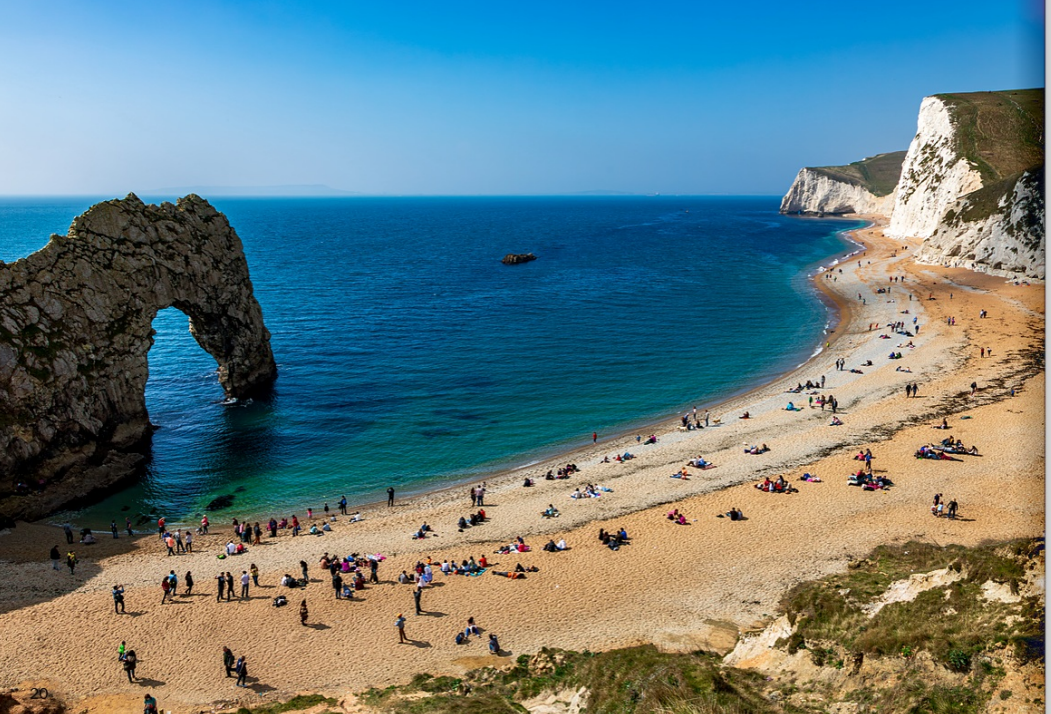
Oh, my child, come here and listen to me carefully. Sit down with me on the bench; we have a moment. I must tell you about our old tree, back there, on the border with Eisingen, on the outskirts of Gengenbach. You know, when I see it today, with all those wild thorns and bold rose hips winding around its weathered, dead trunk, my heart bleeds. It looks as if life is trying to suffocate it. But then, I see this one branch stretching upwards like a defiant arm, as if it wants to shout to the world: 'You haven't defeated me yet! I'm still here!' That's our tree, a true fighter. Despite all this burden, despite its obvious decline, it shows us all what true strength means. There, look closely. Do you see the small, green shoots sprouting from its old, cracked bark? They are so small, so delicate, but they speak loudly of perseverance and a strength that is deeply rooted in the earth.

We villagers know this tree, some of us for generations. We regard it with awe, almost with a touch of mysticism. My grandmother told me stories about it when I was a little girl—how it once offered us protection when the worst storms raged, how its shade cooled us. And do you know how many couples in love have met under its branches? Countless. It has seen so much love and so many secrets. It has always been a meeting place for all of us.

Some time ago, a young artist came from the city. One day, I saw him setting up his easel next to the tree. He was so quiet, so thoughtful. He began to transfer the shapes, the colours, all the suffering and hope onto his canvas. I watched him paint. You could feel him forming a deep connection with the tree. It was almost as if the tree were whispering its entire long life story into his ear.

When the painting was finished... oh, my child, it was beautiful. It showed not only the rough beauty, the scars of the tree, but above all, its unshakeable willpower. And then something wonderful happened: people came from far and wide to see this work of art and hear the legend of our old tree. They began to see it with different eyes. And so the tree lives on, not only out there on the road to Eisingen but in our hearts, in our stories, and in the memories of all those who honour its memory. It has become a part of us.





DURDLE DOOR ARCH

The old lady who simply called herself “Limestone” had seen it all. She wasn't made of stone; she was the stone. She was the Dorset coast. For thousands of years, she had watched the waves of the English Channel batter against her. And in her flank, where the chalk layer was softer and the Portland stone layer more brittle, lay her greatest jewel: Durdle Door.

The locals, the fishermen and shepherds, never called it by its modern name. To them, it was simply “The Door.” A gigantic, perfectly formed arch carved into the rock by the sea itself, a stone opening between sky and water.

Over ten thousand years ago, when the last ice age ended and sea levels rose, the coastline fought a losing battle. The sea ate into the soft layers behind a hard limestone ridge, creating a bay and a small, sheltered cave. When the sea finally breached the ridge, Durdle Door was born.

On a sunny afternoon in midsummer, a young painter named Finn sat on the cliff above the arch. He had spent the whole day trying to capture the colour of the water—from deep blue to turquoise, depending on how the light fell through the arch. He sighed. “You are beautiful, but you don't move,” he thought.

Suddenly, he heard a soft, crackling voice speaking to him in the wind. “Move? Oh, my boy, I move all the time. But in a timeframe that your short years cannot comprehend.” Finn looked around. Only the seagulls and the rock remained visible.

“Every year,” whispered the voice, the limestone, “the sea takes a small grain of sand from me. Every storm gnaws at my base. I am becoming wider and taller. I am the guardian of the land, but also the prisoner of time.”

“You mean you'll collapse one day?” Finn asked quietly, almost reverently.

“All doors close eventually,” replied the limestone with a melancholic rumble. “But that is not the end. When I fall, the remains of this arch will become a new sea stack—an isolated, watchful pillar rising above what was once my gateway.”

Finn understood. Durdle Door was not just an arch that once was. It was an arch that would be. It was a fleeting moment in geological eternity. The painter put his brushes aside and began to paint not the scene, but its story. He painted the light shining through the arch not as an end, but as a transition—as a gate that was always open, leading from the past into the future. He knew that as long as it stood, the arch was the purest form of a maritime wonder—a monument created by the silent, unstoppable hands of the ocean.

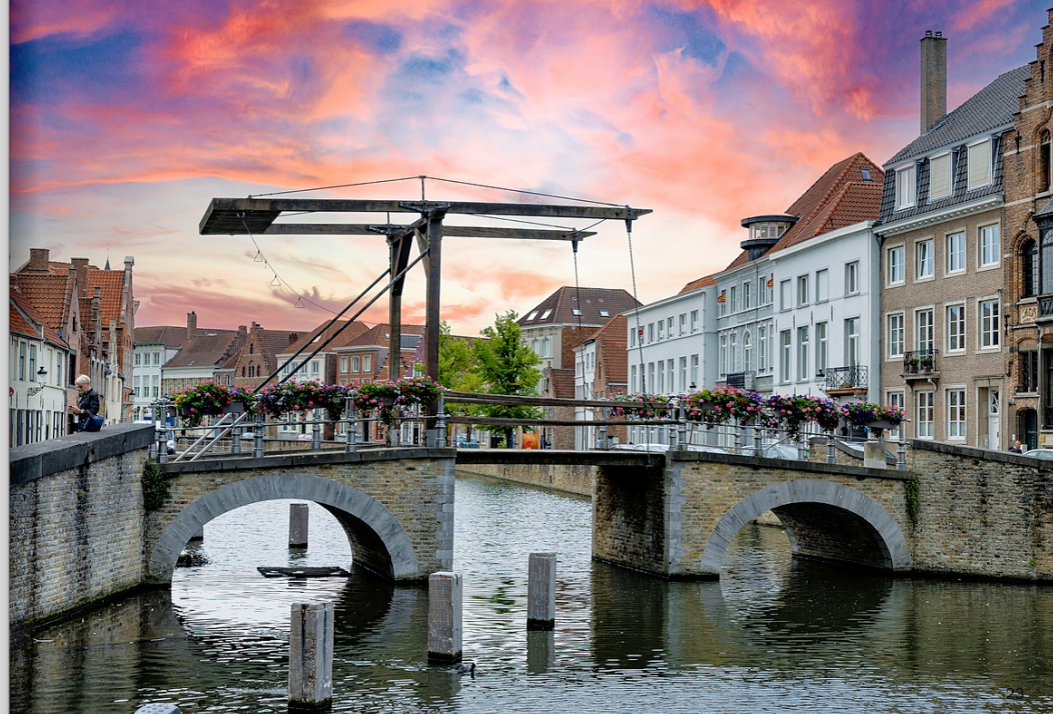
BRUGES

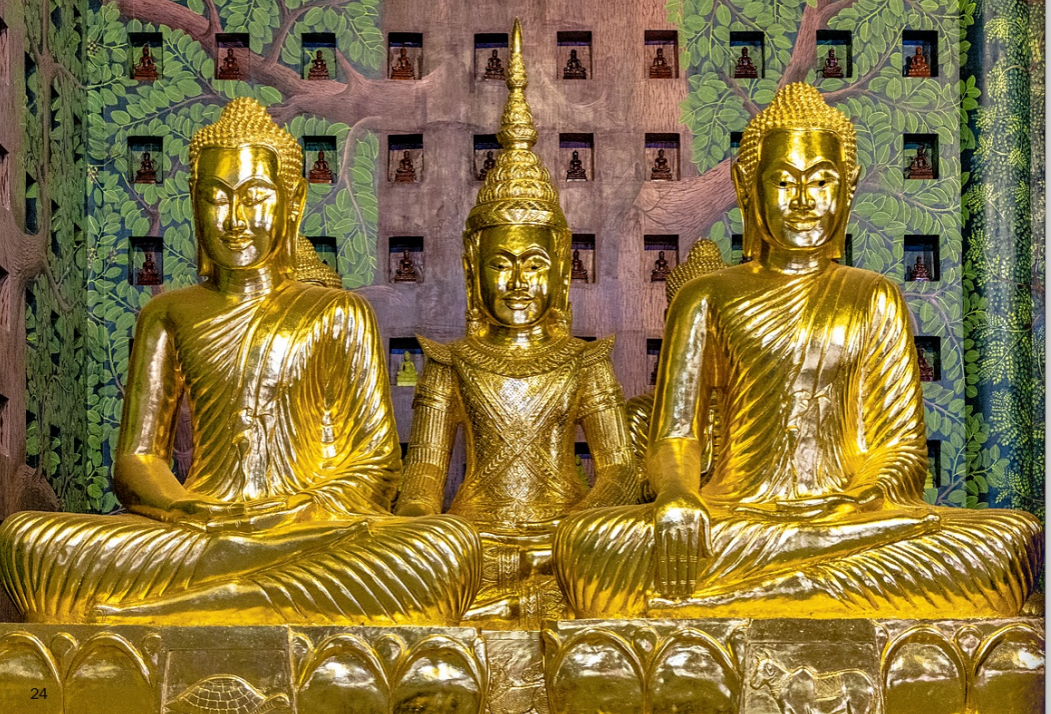
I am Willem, the weaver. My life unfolded in the golden light of the setting sun, which made the canals of Bruges sparkle. Our large market square, in the shadow of the majestic Belfry, was full of life. Merchants from all over Europe came and went, buying my precious Flemish cloth and trading spices transported to the North Sea via the Zwin inlet. I was a master of my craft, but the guild imposed strict restrictions on the price of my goods—we had order in the city, which was important to us.

One evening, I sat with my Elodie on the bank of a canal. We could feel it: the city was beginning to fade. The Zwin, the waterway that had made us so rich, was rapidly silting up. It was becoming increasingly difficult for large merchant ships to reach our port. It was the beginning of the end of our supremacy. Over the years, Bruges transformed from a glamorous metropolis into a sleepy town. I, Willem, now an old man, saw the old canals become quiet and empty. The merchants moved away; the traders closed their shops. Bruges became a “dead city,” as it was later described in a famous novel. It was sad, yes, but the silence preserved something that the hustle and bustle had almost destroyed: the beauty of the medieval façades and the romance of the canals.

Long after my time, at the end of the 19th century, the first tourists arrived. They recognised this preserved beauty that we had almost overlooked in our busyness. Bruges awoke from its long slumber and shone in new splendour—no longer as a powerful trading city, but as an enchanting open-air museum.

My story and the history of Bruges still echo in the canals and on the cobbled streets. I would have been delighted to know that my city has survived.





KINGDOM OF KAUSHAMBI

Oh, my heart, how wonderful are the stories that tell us about the presence of our beloved Teacher, even when he was still among us! Even during the lifetime of the Awakened One, the Buddha, people knew how precious every memory of his form, of his radiant face, was. Do you remember the story of the princess in Sri Lanka who revered him so much? Her heart longed for a sign of his presence. And our Compassionate One actually sent her a painted portrait of himself on cloth. Imagine that! A direct, personal gift from the Master to one of his devotees, across all distances. That alone is proof of his infinite kindness.

But the story that touches my heart the most is that of King Udayana of the kingdom of Kaushambi. When the Buddha travelled to the distant, pure Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods to teach his own mother there—an act of deep, filial reverence, isn't it?—the longing here on earth was unbearably great. King Udayana could hardly bear the separation. Out of deep love and respect, he had a statue of the Buddha made from precious sandalwood. And then, the Master's return home! Tradition tells us that this statue, inspired by the king's pure intention, came out to greet the Buddha. What a sacred moment! The Buddha, with his omniscient, gentle gaze, said to it, “Return to your place. After I have entered Parinirvana, you will serve as an example for the four classes of my disciples.”

Do you feel the significance of these words? The Buddha himself blessed this representation! He knew that after his physical passing, we would need something to hold on to, something to remind us of his teachings, of his enlightenment. This sandalwood statue was not just wood; it was a sacred instruction for the future. It became the first of all Buddha images, the blueprint for all the millions of statues before which we bow our heads today.

There was also that other occasion when he allowed King Bimbisara to use an image of him for the “wheel of life.” Here, too, the Buddha explicitly confirmed the deeply beneficial, even healing, effect of this image.

These stories show us that worshipping a statue or an image is not mere idolatry. It is an act of remembrance, a tool for our own practice. The Buddha himself gave us these aids so that his compassionate face, his teachings, would never leave our hearts. In each of these representations that have been created since then, his grace lives on.

THE STONE HEADS OF SNO

I am Sergei, an art lover from Tbilisi. When I leave the chaos of the city behind and drive into the quiet Khevi region, I find something that touches my soul. Near the village of Sno, surrounded by the majestic, rugged peaks of the Caucasus and criss-crossed by the clear waters of the Sno Valley, there is an unexpected and fascinating open-air gallery: the Stone Heads of Sno. They are not relics of a distant past.

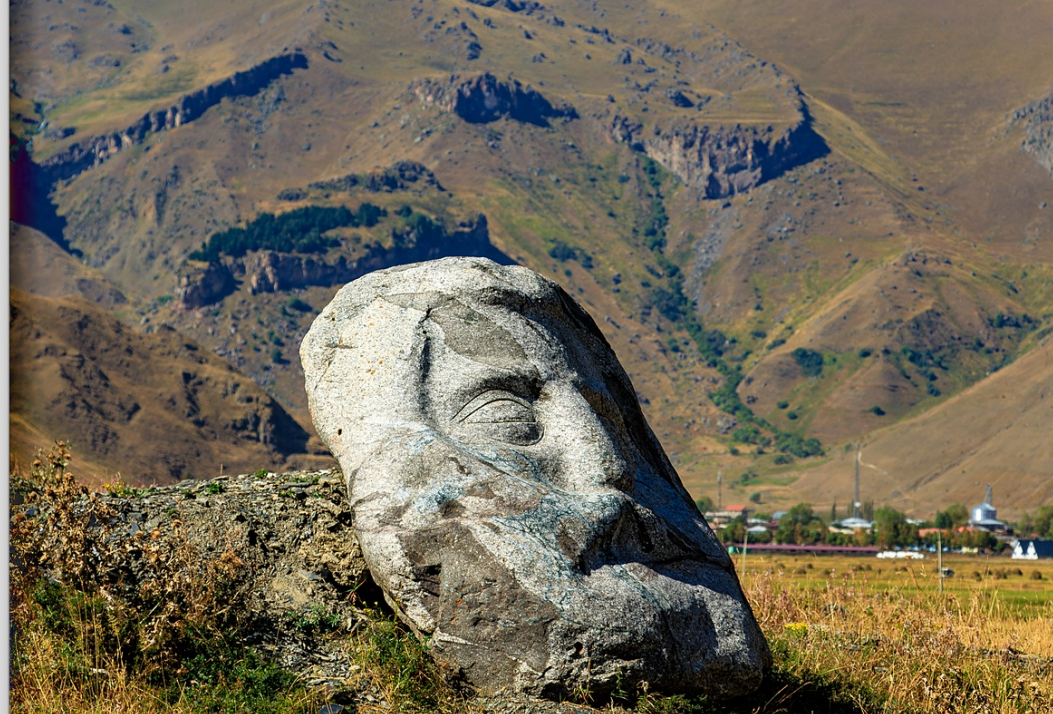
They are the work of a single man, the self-taught Georgian sculptor Merab Piranishvili. His story is one of dedication and a deep love for the culture of our homeland. I feel this love in every chisel stroke. Many years ago, driven by a vision to make Georgia's rich cultural heritage visible to all, Piranishvili began his monumental project. The material was simply lying around: huge basalt blocks scattered across the landscape as if by the hand of a giant. With chisel and hammer, sweat and endless patience, he began to breathe life into these raw stones. Each head, towering metres high into the sky, became a chapter of the Georgian soul.

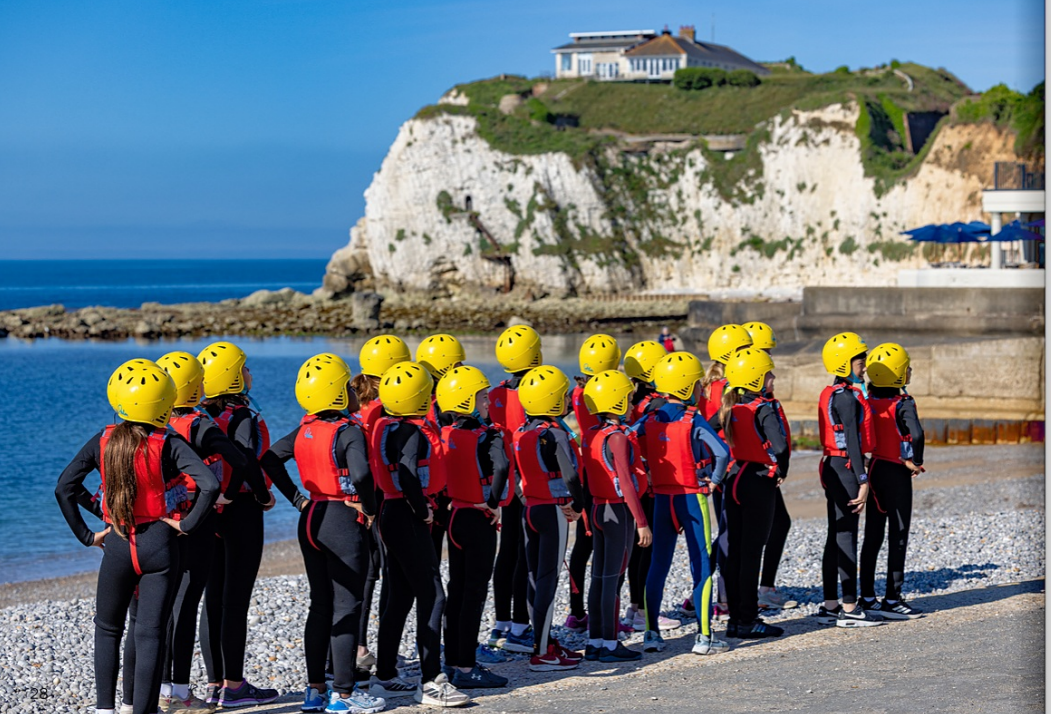
There is Shota Rustaveli, our great medieval poet, whose stony eyes seem to gaze with the wisdom of centuries. Next to him stands Vakhtang Gorgasali, the legendary king and founder of Tbilisi, whose gaze is fixed determinedly in the distance, as if he were still protecting his kingdom. Other faces followed—heads of thinkers, writers, and heroes whose stories are known to every Georgian.

Today, the monumental sculptures stand like silent guardians in the wide, green plain, surrounded by flocks of sheep and traditional stone houses. They form a fascinating contrast to the untamed, natural environment of the Caucasus. At sunrise, the first rays of sunlight capture their contours, while in the soft evening light of sunset, the faces seem almost alive.

The stone heads have become a place of pilgrimage—not only for art lovers like me but also for travellers seeking the authentic soul of Georgia. They invite us to pause, enjoy the silence of the mountains, and, at the same time, immerse ourselves in the rich history of a country that is proud of its past.

Thanks to Merab Piranishvili's passion, a simple village in the Khevi Valley has become a unique place of art and remembrance, where the stone faces of Georgia whisper timeless legends into the wind forever. They are proof that true art springs from deep roots in one's own culture and that a single person has the power to leave a lasting mark on the landscape, both physically and culturally.





THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

I am Peter, a pupil at Freshwater Windmill Lane School. For me, Freshwater Bay has always been the most beautiful place in the world, with its white cliffs and sparkling sea. But during the war, living with my grandparents, I saw our home become a frontline area. We were so close to the Germans that the English Channel often felt more like a trench than a protective sea.

My friend and I spent our days scanning the sky. We knew every sound, every silhouette. It was the day of the Battle of Britain in 1940 when we sensed the change. At first, there was only a distant hum, which quickly grew into a deep, threatening roar. On the horizon, above the blue water, they appeared: a huge formation of German bombers. I remember the fear that settled in my stomach and the panicked sprint for cover. We knew we were in danger.

Then, in the midst of the chaos, came the familiar, reassuring rumble. Our boys. The Spitfires and Hurricanes shot overhead. They surrounded the enemy planes like angry wasps. The sky turned into a tangled web of smoke trails and contrails. It was loud, terrifying, and at the same time—as the Germans were finally pushed back across the Channel—an extraordinary and unforgettable sight. Our pilots had saved us.

Air battles were a daily occurrence. Aircraft crashed repeatedly over the Farringford Farm fields and on Tennyson Down. We saw soldiers digging long trenches into the Down to prevent enemy pilots from landing there. Sometimes I saw pilots who managed to save themselves with parachutes. It was brutal; we heard stories—and sometimes saw it ourselves—of German pilots shooting at our British airmen as they floated helplessly to the ground. The war was cruel.

But tragedy didn't just strike from the air. I remember April 1943, when a severe storm raged. The sea we loved became a monster. Two of our Royal Navy landing craft sank right here in the bay. The screams of the sailors and Royal Marines drowning in the rough waves haunted me. It wasn't just about grand military strategies; it was about what was happening right here on our doorstep and the faces of ordinary people living through the horror. Freshwater Bay bears its scars from that time, and I bear mine too.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL VILLAGE IN ENGLAND

I am Morwenna. My home is Mousehole—or Mau-zl, as we say—a fishing village nestled on the granite coast of Cornwall. The houses look as if they were carved directly out of the rock. The story I am about to tell you is not a legend; it is our life, our salvation.

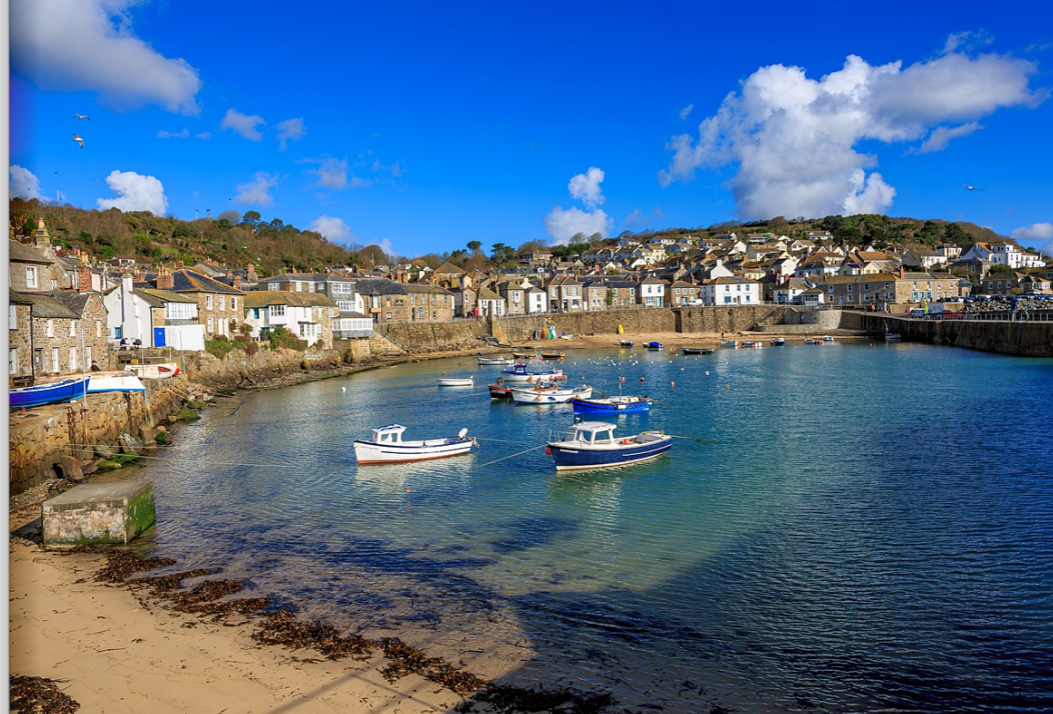
It was late December, and an icy wind whipped the spray over the high harbour wall. In my small living room, the fire flickered wearily. Outside, the sea raged and the harbour was empty. The fishermen had not been out to sea for over a week, and supplies were running low. I looked at my two grandchildren, who were staring hungrily at the wooden floor. There had been little light in our village this year.

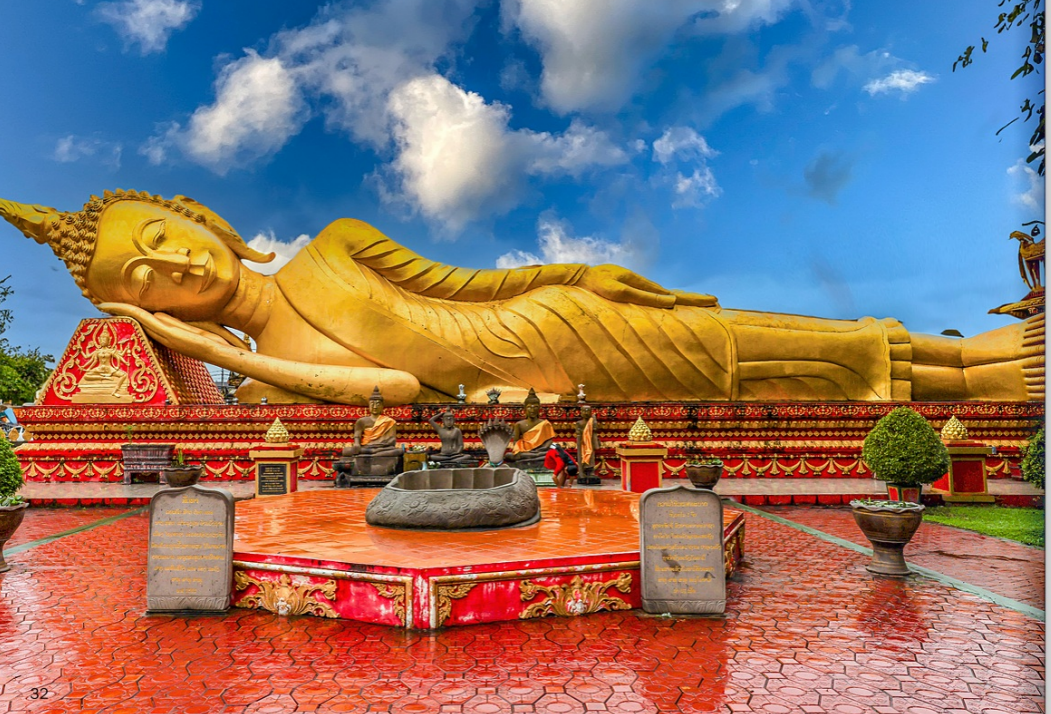
The most fearless fisherman was Tom Bawcock. A man with a beard as salty as the sea and eyes that could foresee the tides. He knew we couldn't wait any longer. On 23 December, when the storm subsided a little, Tom made a lonely decision. He hugged his wife and said, “I have to go out. The sea won't kill us, but hunger will.” He steered his small boat out into the raging waves. The whole village stood on the harbour wall and watched as his yellow sail disappeared into the grey sea. It was a desperate, reckless undertaking.

Seven anxious hours passed. The sun went down; hope faded. I lit my last oil lantern and placed it in my window, a tiny spot of warmth in the gathering darkness. Suddenly, in the twilight, a loud cry rang out from the sea. Tom Bawcock was back! And his boat was not empty. It was filled to the brim with fish, mainly sole and herring. He had found a shoal in the deep waters where the storm had not swept it away.

The joy was immeasurable. That night, we celebrated with a spontaneous feast. We baked all the fish together with potatoes and eggs under a crust of pastry in a single giant pie—the Stargazy Pie. The fish heads protruded from the pastry as if they were looking up at the sky. It was a dish that symbolised our rescue from the deepest distress.

Since then, Mousehole has celebrated Tom Bawcock's Eve every year on 23 December. We bake the Stargazy Pie to honour his bravery. And every year during Advent, when the village puts up its famous Christmas lights with motifs of fish, whales, and boats, I remember this. I smile because I know that the true beauty of Mousehole lies not in its streets, but in the spirit of its inhabitants—and in Tom Bawcock's small but life-saving lantern, which brought courage and sustenance out of the darkest storm. This story is the true essence of our village.





BUDDHA ON THE WAY TO NIRVANA

I am Siddhartha Gautama. I left my golden cage—the palace, the jewels, and my family—to answer the big question that tormented me: Why is there suffering? I spent years as an ascetic, fasting until my ribs protruded and meditating with unbearable rigour. But enlightenment did not come. I realised that neither absolute luxury nor absolute deprivation led to the truth. The path lay in the middle.

Exhausted and disillusioned, I accepted a bowl of rice porridge from a peasant girl named Sujata. The refreshment helped me gather the courage for my final meditation. I found a quiet spot on the banks of the Niranjana River and sat down under a large, spreading Bodhi tree. I vowed not to get up until I had realised the deepest truth of life.

As dusk fell, I felt resistance. Mara, the lord of illusion and desire, appeared to lead me astray. He sent temptations; I remained unimpressed. He tried fear, summoning armies of demons who threw spears and fire, but the spears turned into petals. Mara's last attempt was doubt. “Who are you that you deserve to sit under this tree? Who is your witness?”

I opened my eyes. I raised my right hand and touched the earth. This was the Bhumisparsha Mudra—calling upon the earth as a witness. With firm, inner calm, I said, “This earth is my witness. My deeds are my witness. I seek the deepest truth for the benefit of all beings.”

With this final rejection of illusion, Mara's power was broken. I sank deeper into meditation. I recognised the causes of suffering and attained the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths: suffering, the cause of suffering (desire), the end of suffering, and the path to the end (the Eightfold Path).

As the morning star rose in the sky, I broke through the veils of ignorance. I attained Nirvana—a state beyond death and rebirth, free from greed, hatred, and delusion. I was no longer just a human being. I was the Buddha—the Awakened One. I rose, not to disappear, but to teach for 45 years the truth I had found in that one night under the Bodhi tree.

THE CHARLES BRIDGE

On a foggy winter morning, I stand on the Charles Bridge (Karlův most). I am not a tourist, but a Prague native who earns her living here every day as a violinist.

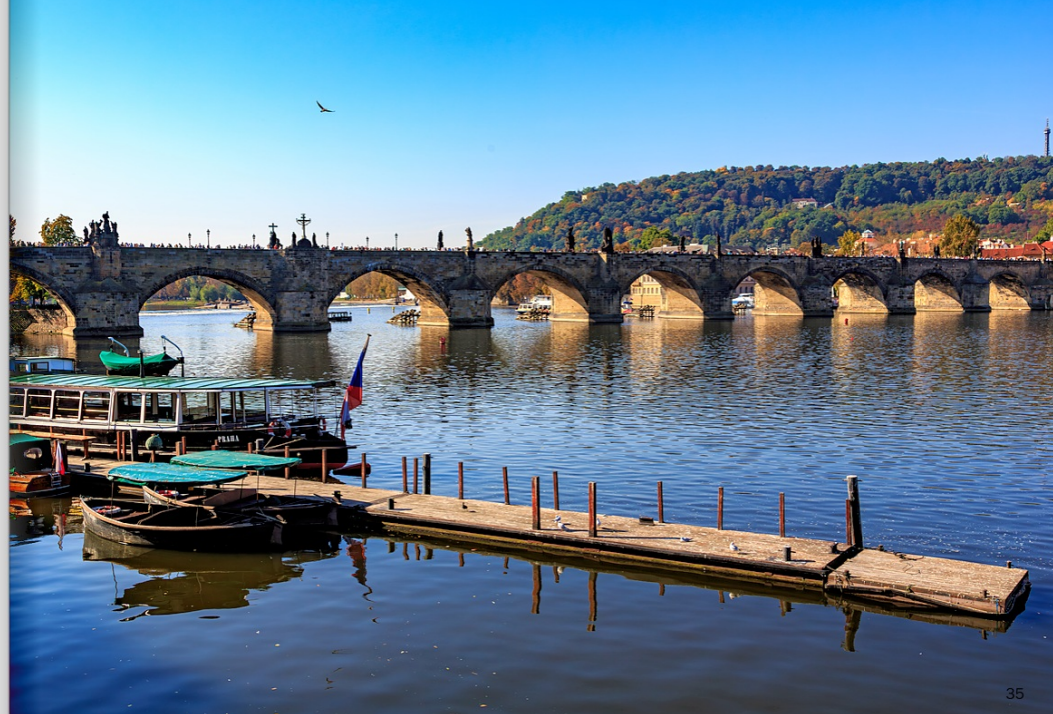
I know the bridge's history by heart. It was built after Emperor Charles IV laid the foundation stone in 1357 at that superstitious, symmetrical time: 5:31 a.m. on 9 July 1357 (1-3-5-7-9-7-5-3-1). The builders were said to have mixed eggs and milk into the mortar for strength—a quirky detail that always makes me smile.

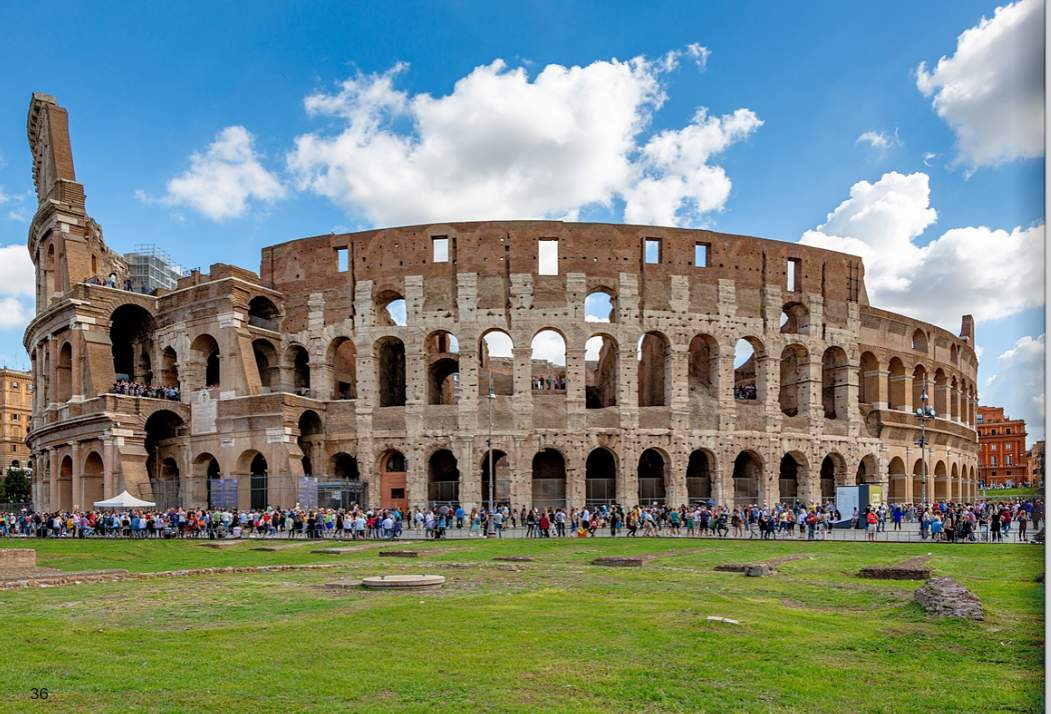
Centuries passed, and the 516-metre-long bridge, supported by 16 massive arches, became an open-air gallery. In the 17th century, the thirty majestic Baroque statues were added, transforming the crossing of the Vltava into a solemn procession of saints.

My gaze often rests on Saint John of Nepomuk, who was thrown from the bridge by King Wenceslas IV because he kept the seal of confession. Beneath his statue, a small, shiny brass cross is embedded in the railing. Tourists touch it every day, seeking wishes and promising to return to Prague, polishing the metal to a mirror-smooth finish.

This morning, there is no one else around, only the crackling of the fog and the soft murmur of the Vltava River. I begin to play. My music, pure and melancholic, seems to spring from the stones and history itself. I know that the bridge is more than just a structure. It is a bridge between times—a line connecting the past (the kings and saints) with the present (the artists and lovers).

As the first rays of sunlight pierce the fog and illuminate Nepomuk's brass cross, I take a deep breath. Charles Bridge is not just a connection between the Old Town and the Lesser Town. It is the soul of Prague, built on superstition, strengthened by eggs, and cemented for eternity by music and legends.





THE COLOSSEUM IN THE HEART OF ROME

Flavius felt the breeze blowing through the broken arches. He was not Emperor Vespasian, who had the Colosseum built in AD 72, nor was he Titus, who inaugurated it eight years later. Flavius was just a simple bricklayer in modern Rome, but he knew the stones better than any historian. For him, the Colosseum—the Amphitheatrum Flavium—was more than a ruin. It was the heartbeat of Rome, a stone witness to human extremes.

He closed his eyes. He did not hear the noise of modern Vespas and tourists, but the echo of 50,000 throats roaring with excitement. Flavius did not smell the soot, but the scent of sweat, sand, and blood. He saw the velarium, the huge sail roof stretched over the upper tiers to protect spectators from the scorching Roman sun. Flavius saw the imperial box, from which the emperors decided life and death with a single gesture.

But the true heart of the arena lay beneath his feet: the hypogeum. This labyrinthine system of underground passages, cages, and lifts was the stage for magic. From here, wild animals—lions from Africa, bears from Germania—were catapulted onto the sandy arena as if from nowhere. Gladiators waited here. Their helmets reflected the light, their muscles tense.

Flavius imagined a young man named Marcus leaning on the hilt of his sword. Marcus was not a hero, but a slave who could gain glory in the fight for his life or fall into the sand. The Colosseum was the place where the line between man and beast blurred, where life was spectacle and death was entertainment.

The games lasted for hundreds of years. Then, with the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity, the roar fell silent. The stones were plundered, and the Colosseum became a quarry, a dwelling, a workshop, even a fortress.

When Flavius opened his eyes, he took a deep breath. Today, the building was just a skeleton, a half-destroyed crown. But history was burned into every joint. He ran his hand over a block of stone crowned by a medieval cross. The Colosseum was not only the largest arena ever built. It was the ultimate monument: a reminder of the unbridled power of the Roman Empire, its cruelty, and the ultimate transience of even the hardest and most ambitious structures in the heart of Rome.

POMEGRANATE IS SAID TO BE A SUPER FRUIT

On the eastern edge of a sun-drenched garden, where the air was filled with the scent of figs, grew a pomegranate tree. It looked unremarkable until its fruits burst open to reveal their insides: hundreds of tiny, ruby-red jewels—the arils.

Amira, the gardener, knew that this was no ordinary tree. She called it her “king” because each fruit had a small, perfect crown at its tip. One day, her grandson Tariq returned from the city with a bowl full of artificial sweets.

“Grandmother,” he asked, “why do you always eat these sour fruits? There are much better ones in the city.”

Amira laughed and picked a pomegranate from the branch. She carefully cut it open, and the bright red juice almost spilled out. “My little Tariq,” she said, “modern doctors call this fruit a ‘superfruit,’ but we've always known that. It's not just sweet; it's medicine and history.”

She explained to him the secrets hidden in the seeds:
Antioxidants: “Every little seed is a soldier, my child. These soldiers fight against the ‘bad things’ in the body—free radicals. Their power is three times stronger than that of green tea.” She called it the inner shield.

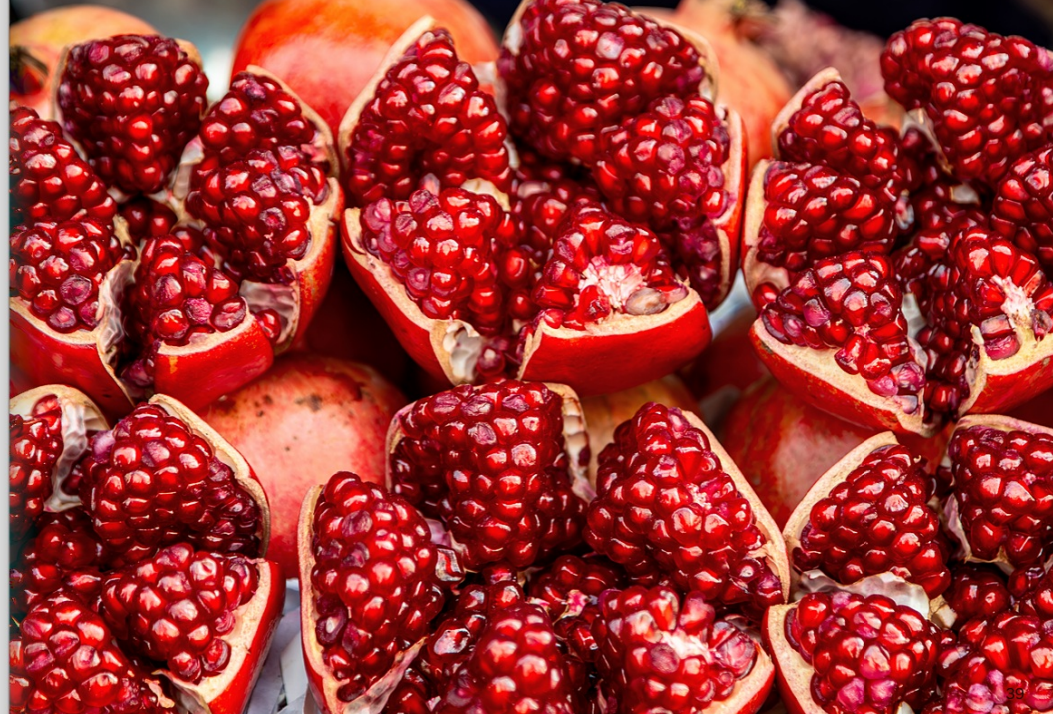
Heart and Blood: “The Persians called the juice ‘blood of the heart.’ It helps keep the blood fluid and the arteries clean. It is the fruit that keeps your heart strong.”

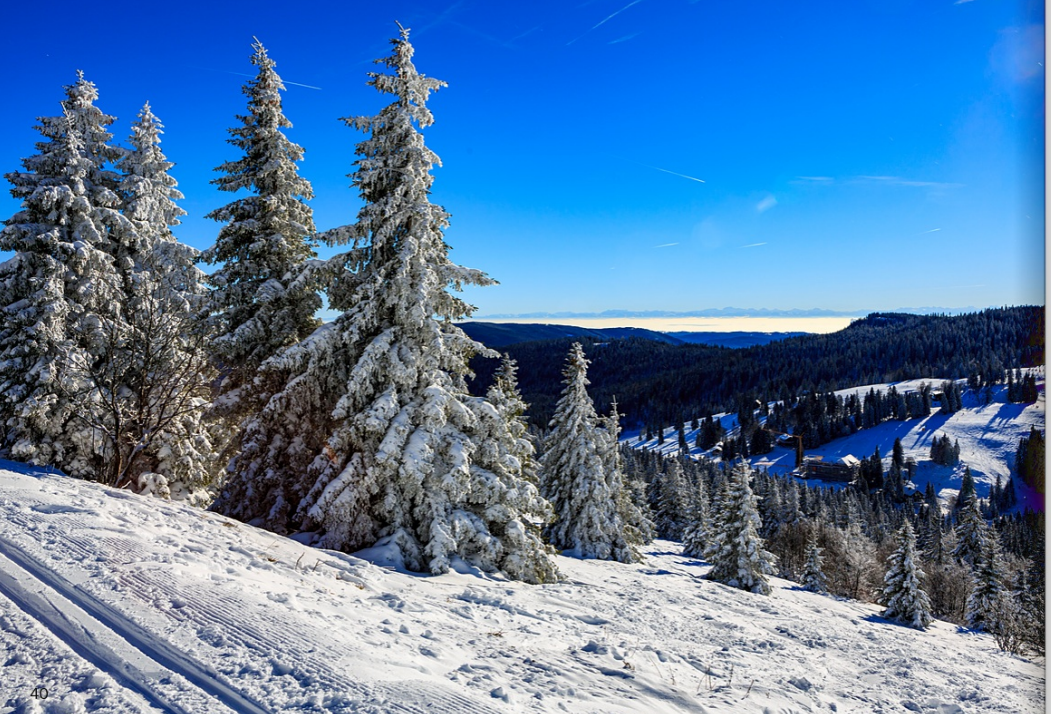
History and Myth: She told him that the pomegranate is a symbol in many cultures: of fertility (because of its many seeds), of life and rebirth (because of its long shelf life), and of royal power (because of its crown).

She handed him a handful of seeds. “Eat them. They are sour, sweet, and a little tart—like life itself. But they give you the strength to endure anything.”

Tariq nibbled on the crunchy seeds. He felt the taste invigorate his tongue. He understood that the true power of the pomegranate lay not in its sweetness, but in its incredible concentration of nutrients. The pomegranate was not just a fruit, but a complete nutritional package from nature.

From that day on, Tariq saw the tree with different eyes. He saw not just a sour fruit, but a small, crowned pharmacy from his grandmother's garden—the true “superfruit” that combined the wisdom of antiquity with the insights of modern science.





WINTER WONDERLAND

The Feldberg, a harmless green giant in summer, transformed into an icy ruler during the cold season. Storms whipped across its summit, driving the fine snow before them and leaving the trees standing on the slope like frozen sentinels. The valley was often shrouded in thick fog, which bathed the world in a mysterious grey.

A little squirrel named Fips, who had prepared well for the season, ventured out of his burrow. He had hidden a nut that he had forgotten about and was now desperately searching for it. As he bounded excitedly through the crunchy snow, the world around him sparkled in the sunlight breaking through the blanket of fog above the summit. From up here, high above the clouds, the sun seemed bright and warm.

Suddenly, Fips saw a group of people trudging through the forest on wide snowshoes. They laughed and pointed at the tracks they left in the snow. Fips was fascinated and followed them from a distance. They passed a frozen lake and marched past a small, snow-covered hut with a cosy light burning inside.

When the hikers took a break, Fips spotted an apple that one of them had lost. He hurried over, grabbed it, and rushed back to his winter pantry. The nut was lost, but the apple was a much better find. Happy and full, Fips crawled into his warm burrow and dreamed of the snowy winter wonderland that the Feldberg had become.

THE KILLING FIELDS

Vanna still remembered the laughter in Phnom Penh. It was April 1975, the Cambodian New Year, but the celebrations were overshadowed by fear. Then they came. Men and women, almost still children, dressed in identical black pyjamas and red krama scarves. The Khmer Rouge. They did not look like liberators. They looked like the end.

“The Americans are going to bomb us!” they shouted. “Everyone must leave the city! Immediately! Just for three days.”

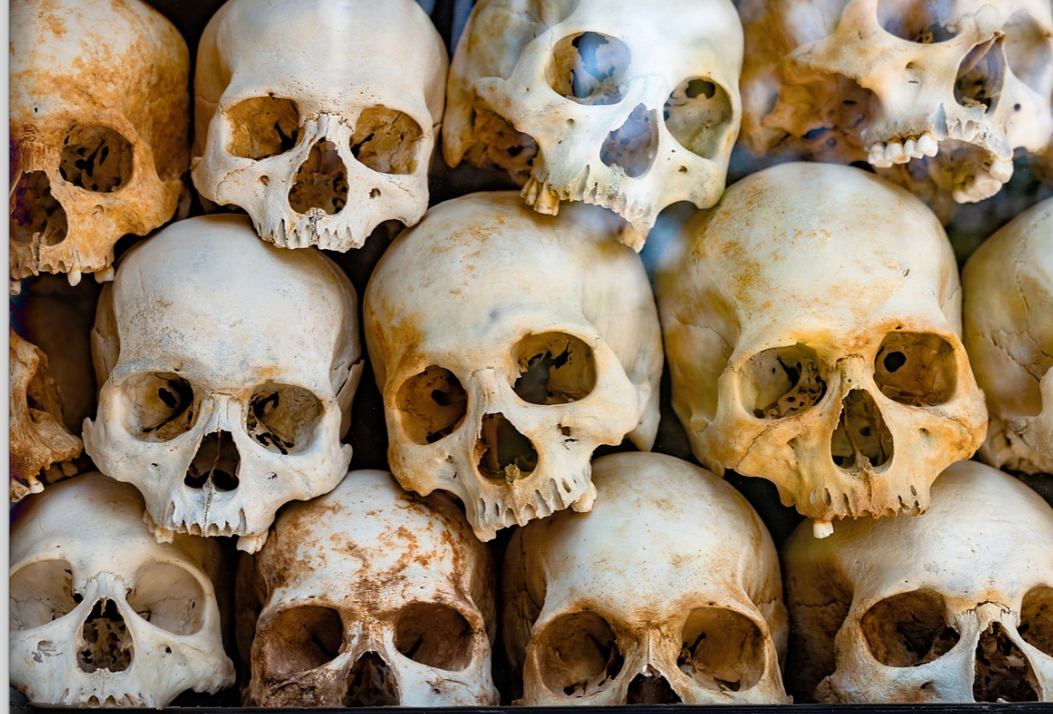
Vanna's family joined the endless stream of people pouring out of the capital. It was the beginning of ‘Year Zero.’ The leader they had never seen, but whose name was whispered like a curse—Pol Pot—had decided that society must return to its roots. No cities, no books, no glasses, no family. Only ‘Angkar,’ the faceless organisation, and the rice fields.

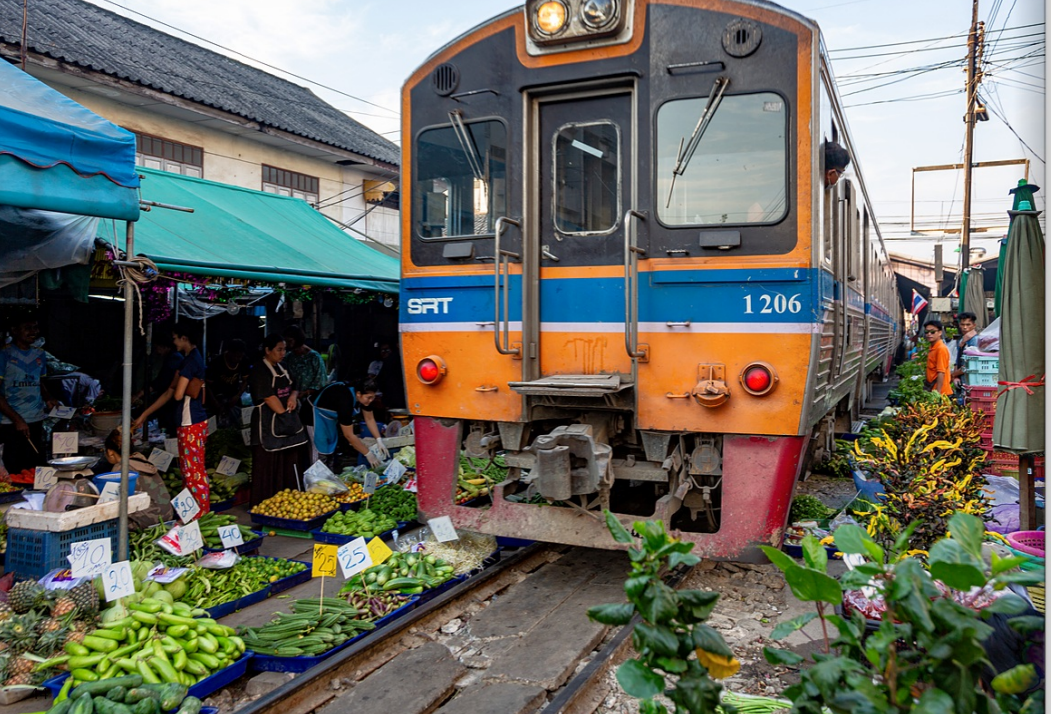
Vanna's father had been a teacher. That made him an enemy. When they saw him drawing the alphabet in the dust for his daughter, they dragged him away. Vanna never saw him again. They were forced into a collective economy. They worked seventeen hours a day barefoot in the mud, constantly plagued by hunger. There was only watery rice soup.

The ‘old people,’ the farmers, were allowed to monitor and punish the ‘new people,’ the city dwellers. Paranoia was like the air they breathed. A child could denounce his parents for stealing a mango. One wrong word, one memory of the ‘old life’ meant death. At night, people were taken away. They were told they were being ‘re-educated’ or taken to new jobs. They never came back.

One evening, as the sun set blood red, Vanna had to dig pits with others. She didn't know what for. Until the truck came. The Khmer Rouge soldiers herded dozens of emaciated figures to the pits. They were the intellectuals, the monks, the bespectacled. To drown out the screams, the guards played loud revolutionary music over loudspeakers. Vanna hid, trembling, in the tall grass, while around her echoed the dull sound of shovels striking skulls. They were saving ammunition. This was not a field for rice. It was a field of death. When the soldiers had disappeared, Vanna crawled away under cover of darkness. She didn't know where to go, only away from the smell of blood and earth.

Years later, long after the fall of Pol Pot, Vanna stood in that field again. The pits had been opened, the skulls piled up into macabre monuments. The world called them ‘The Killing Fields.’ For Vanna, it was the place where the music stopped and the silence began.





MAHACHAI MARKET

I am Mae Noi, and I have spent my life on the edge of the tracks. More precisely: on the tracks. My stall at the Maeklong Railway Market in Thailand is my kingdom, my empire of fish, prawns, and fragrant herbs. Tourists call it “Talat Rom Hup”—the Umbrella Pulldown Market—because of the ritual that is the heartbeat of this place.

On this particularly hot morning, while customers haggle and the smell of chilli and salt hangs in the air, I sit relaxed on my stool. My wares are so close to the steel rails you might think they would slip away. No one pays attention to the loudspeaker warnings; everyone knows the routine.

Suddenly, a vendor shouts, “Ma Kom!”—It's coming! I glance at my watch. Right on time. As if on cue, the market springs to life. There is no chaos, just lightning-fast, perfectly choreographed movements. We reach with practised hands for the awnings and pull them back with a loud bang. The baskets on the floor are simply shoved under the tables. Everything higher than the tracks must disappear.

A long, deep horn sounds, causing anticipation. Then it comes, the iron snake. The locomotive of the Maeklong train pushes its way slowly, almost reverently, right through the middle of the market. The steel wheels roll just a few centimetres from my toes and only millimetres above the baskets I didn't even push away. The fabric of my awning almost brushes against the carriages. I wave briefly to the train driver, smile, and watch as the last carriages slowly rattle past.

No sooner has the train passed than there is a loud clatter—the stalls spring back to life. The awnings are extended, and the baskets are placed back on the tracks. The whole spectacle lasted less than two minutes.

The Maeklong Market is not just a place of trade. It is a daily lesson in organisation, serenity, and the deep ability of the Thai people to find life where others would see only an insurmountable obstacle. The market is a living, breathing partnership between the railway and the people.

CAP FORMENTOR

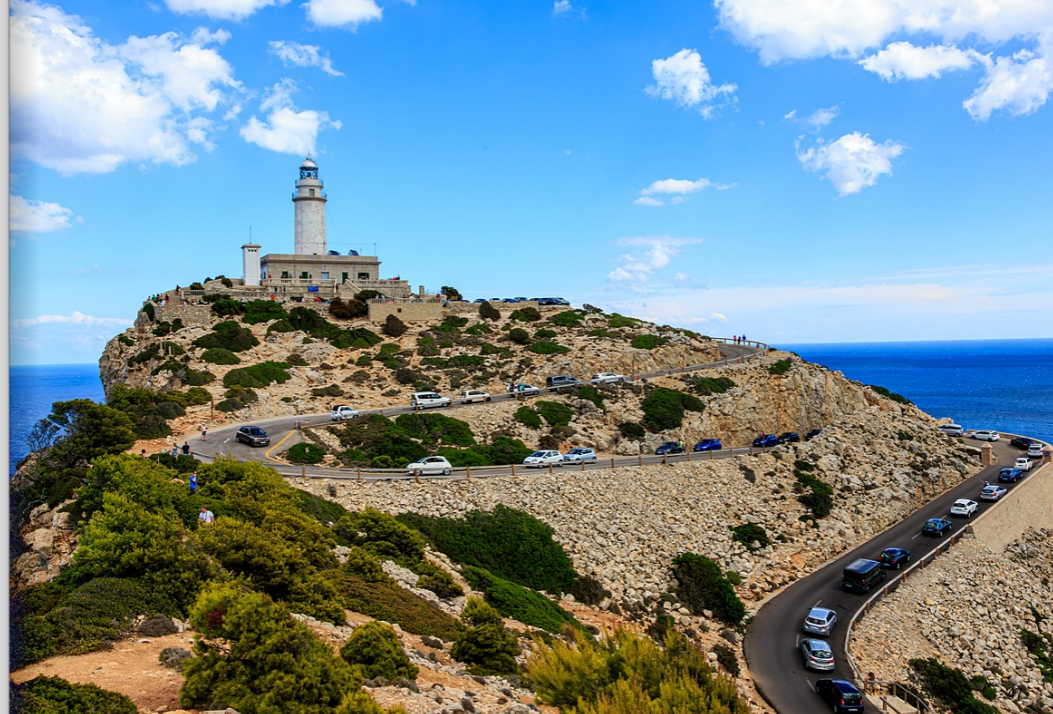
A light breeze blew across the narrow, winding roads of the Formentor peninsula, but it couldn't dispel the thick, stifling air between the bumpers of the countless hire cars. Leo stared intently at the red dot on the horizon—the Cap Formentor lighthouse. In his romanticised vision of Mallorca, he would now be standing on the cliffs with his girlfriend, a painter named Clara, watching the sun sink below the horizon. Instead, they had been stuck in traffic for over an hour, with no one able to move forwards or backwards.

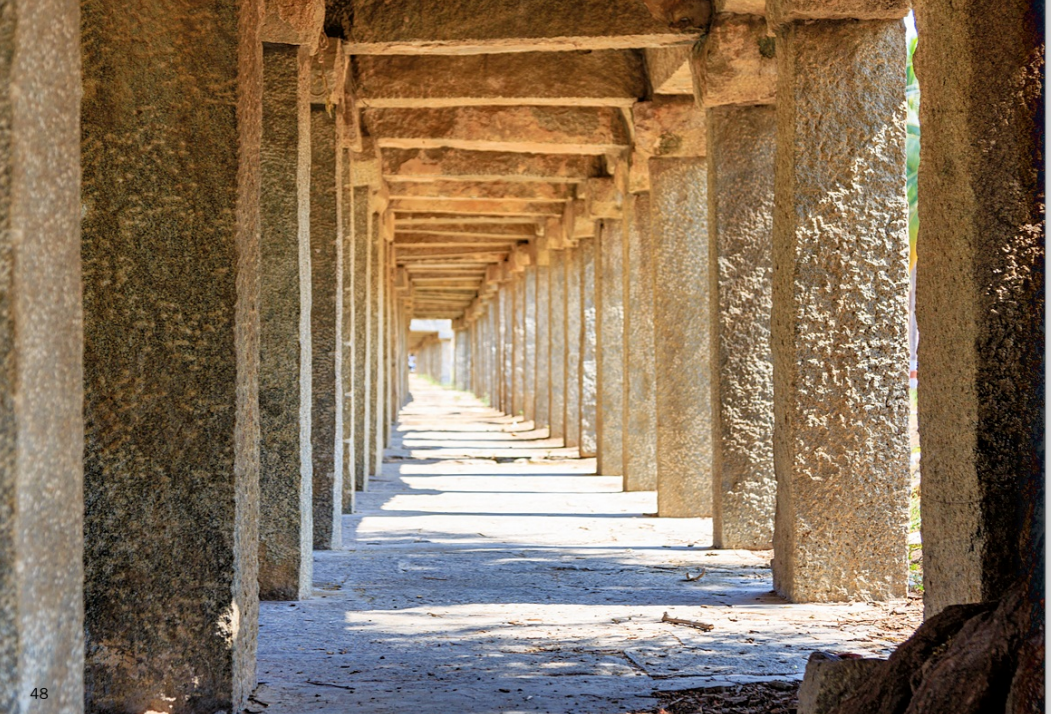
Clara, whose sketchpad was now covered in doodles, sighed. “It's like an allegory for our relationship, Leo,” she said with a sarcastic smile. “Once we get moving, we don't know how to stop. As soon as we're forced to a standstill, we can't move.”

Leo rolled his eyes but got out of the car to stretch his legs. He spotted a group of cyclists who had leaned their bikes against a rock ledge in frustration and were sharing bread and cheese with each other. Suddenly, inspiration struck him. They were stuck here in the beautiful countryside, but they had a choice: they could either be annoyed about the missed view, or they could enjoy the moment they had available to them.

He returned to the car. “Come on, let's have a party,” he said. Clara looked at him in confusion. He turned the music on low, took the blanket out of the boot, and spread it out on the warm asphalt. They ate chocolate and crisps and watched as the sun slowly bathed the rocks and the sea in shades of gold and pink. The lighthouse, their actual destination, was still visible in the distance.

As it grew dark, they saw the glow of the lighthouse and the twinkling lights of the other cars gradually starting to move. They had almost forgotten that it was their turn to drive. Leo put the car in gear, took one last look at the empty crisp packets on the back seat, and smiled at Clara. The lighthouse could wait.





HAMPI BAZAAR

I am Raju, a merchant here at the bazaar in Hampi, Karnataka, once the beating heart of the Vijayanagara Empire. The old pavilions cast long shadows on the road leading to the majestic Virupaksha Temple. I am the grandson of a spice merchant, and I know the old legends: the streets were once full of precious stones, silks, and spices, brought by merchants from Persia and Portugal. But today, it is quiet, almost peaceful.

Suddenly, a small, emaciated monkey appeared. He was not like the others; he had a sad, pain-filled aura. I knew the stories from the Ramayana that say Hampi was the monkey kingdom, Kishkindha. This monkey was special. It searched from one ruin to the next, sniffing the ground.

Finally, it paused, looked me straight in the eye, and pointed to a gap in the pavement. I was amazed. I crouched and put my hand in the gap. I felt a cloth bag. When I opened it, a handful of old, sparkling sapphires appeared. They were so beautiful I was almost speechless. The monkey nodded to me and disappeared.

I realised that the monkey must have been the spirit of a former monkey king who had given me a part of his legendary treasure. From then on, I sold not only souvenirs but also the story of my miraculous find. And even though the Hampi bazaar will never return to its former glory, its splendour lives on in the story I tell to anyone who will listen.

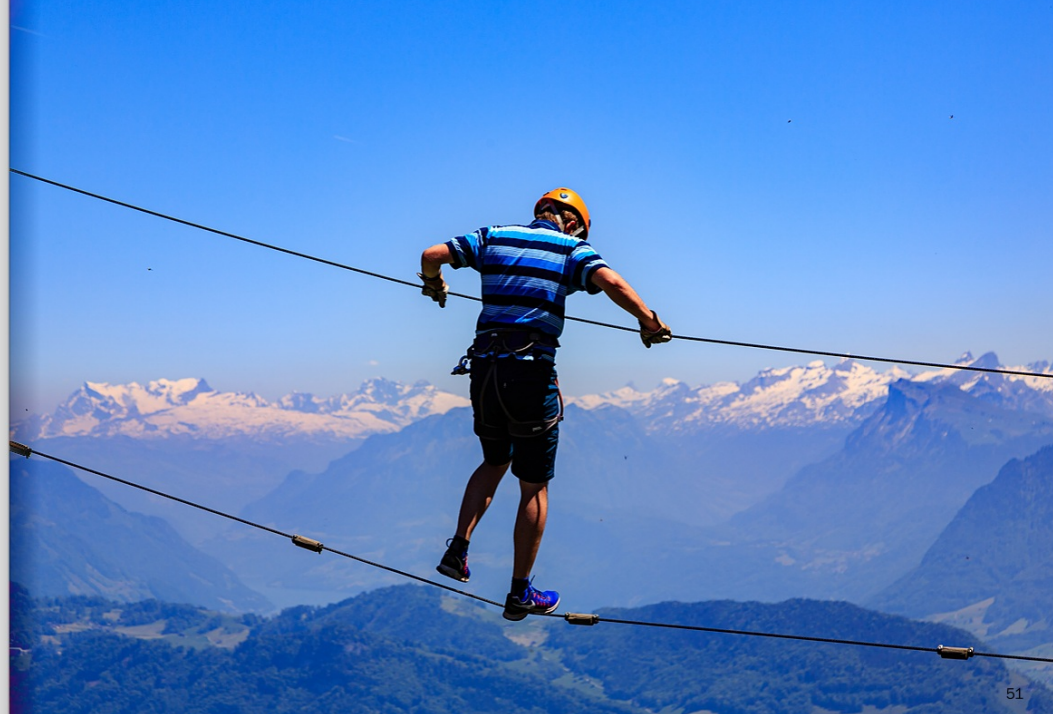
ADVENTURE PARK

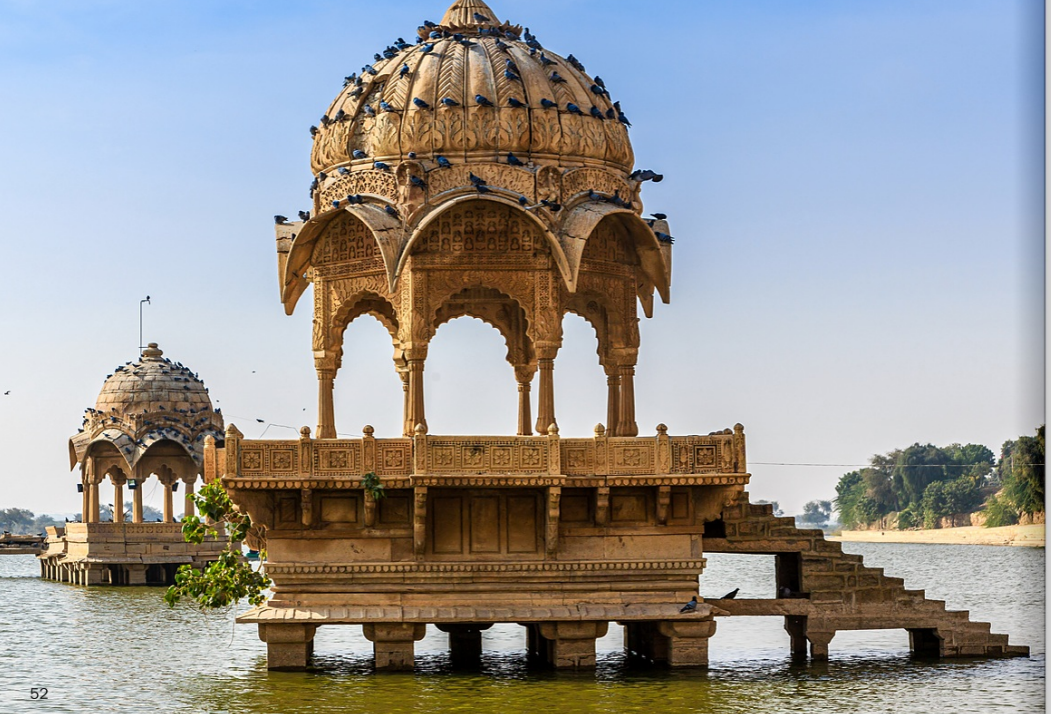
I am Pilu, a little dragon here on Mount Pilatus, high up near the Fräkmüntegg mountain station. I am a descendant of the ancient mountain dragons, and I desperately want to fly! But I am still fearful and shy. My friends—Felix, Flora, and Finn—have taught me a lot. But the great leap from the rocks to the treetops, the way dragons ascend, is still too big for me.

One day, new visitors arrived. They had ropes tied around their waists and climbed from tree to tree. They were humans, and they seemed to be having a lot of fun. I watched them curiously. They balanced across narrow wooden bridges, overcame wobbly obstacles, and finally abseiled amid loud cheers. It looked so easy and yet so exciting.

I gathered my courage. I swung myself onto a branch that pointed towards a zip line. “Pilu, what are you doing?” cried Flora. “That's dangerous!” But I didn't hear her. I decided to do what the humans did and fly along the ropes. I slid off, slowly at first, then faster and faster. The wind tugged at me, and I felt the adrenaline rush through my little body. I laughed and roared with joy.

The people below saw me and shouted in surprise and excitement. I, the flight-shy dragon, had gone from being a timid observer to a brave adventurer. Proud and happy, I landed gently on the last platform. From that day on, the Pilatus rope park was no longer just a place for humans, but also my secret training ground. And if you visit, you might just hear my distant roar as I swing from tree to tree with joy.





GADI SAGAR TEMPLE

I am Kishor, the old boatman here at Gadi Sagar, the artificial lake on the edge of the golden city of Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. I have witnessed countless sunrises that bathed the water in shimmering gold and know every little island with its ornate temples. At the entrance to the lake stands the majestic Tilon Ki Pol, the magnificent archway that tells a story of love, defiance, and jealousy.

The legend says King Maharawal Gadsi Singh had the lake built in the 14th century. But the gate is the heart of the drama. A dancer named Tiloka (or Tilon) fell in love and erected the magnificent gate in her honour. The jealous Queen wanted it demolished. But Tiloka was clever; she secretly had a Krishna temple built on the top floor to protect it. The Queen could not commit sacrilege, and so the gate remained standing, a silent witness to a forbidden love.

Generations later, I sit here and tell this story to the tourists who rent my colourful boats. When a young girl asked me if I believed it, I just smiled. “Belief is like the lake,” I said. “It catches the rain that the clouds bring. What you see are only the waves. But what lies beneath is true life. Sometimes you just have to look a little deeper.”

As the golden walls of Jaisalmer Fort reflected in the still water and the sun set, bathing everything in soft orange light, I saw the reflection of the temples and gates in the lake. It was a golden image of the city that carried the love and stories of its inhabitants. And I knew that the truth of the story lived in that reflection.

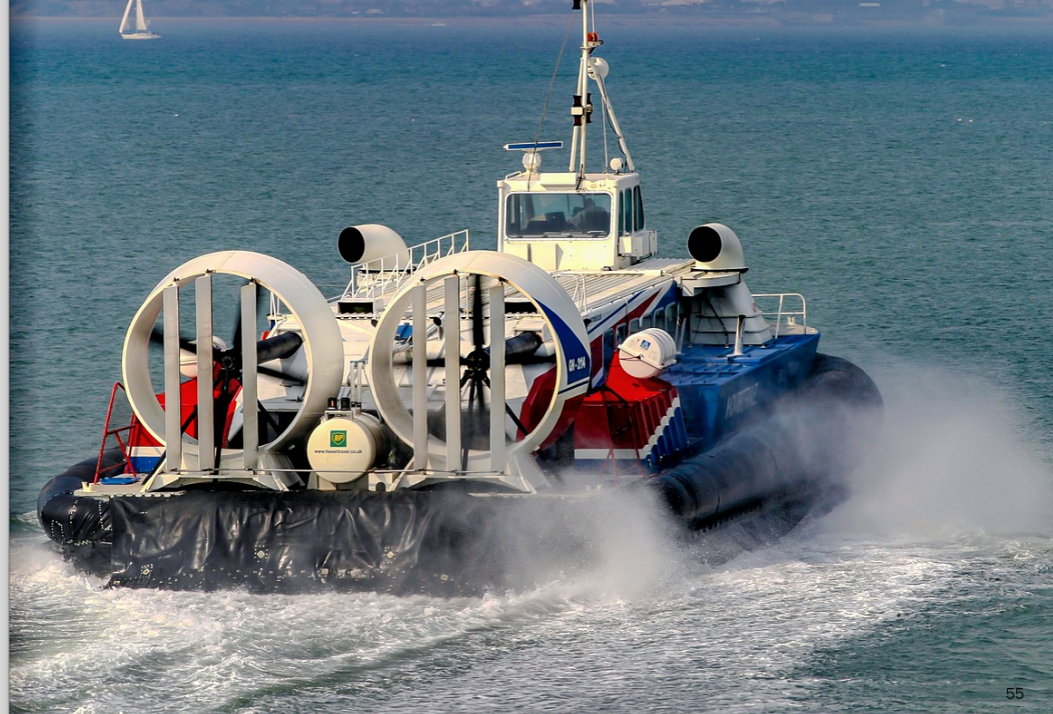
HOVERCRAFT SR.N1

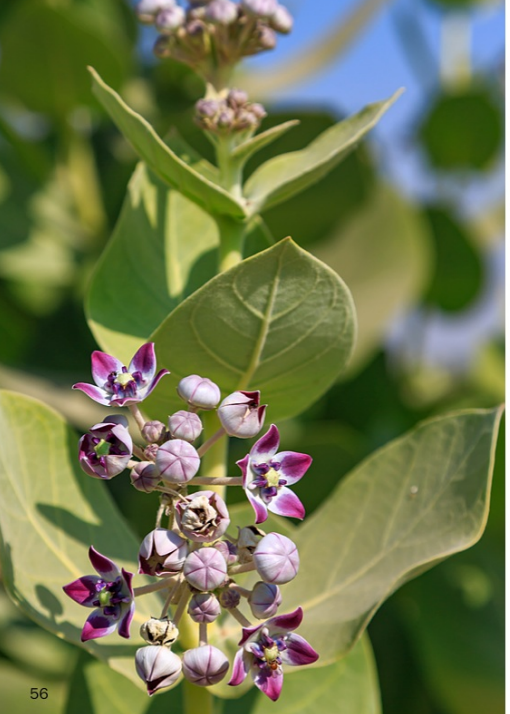
The barn door creaked as Sir Christopher Cockerell pushed it open in Norfolk in 1955. He wasn't working with precious metals, but with a vacuum cleaner, a coffee cup, and a cat food tin. His neighbours thought he was eccentric, but he knew that the strange device floating in front of him contained a revolutionary principle.

It took four years for the idea to become reality. On 25 July 1959—the 50th anniversary of the first crossing of the English Channel by air—the SR.N1, the first practical hovercraft, floated across the waterway from Calais to Dover. It was a technical marvel that looked like a flying saucer. Cockerell, the inventor, was on board as “mobile ballast” to ensure stability. The glorious era of the hovercraft had begun.

In the 1960s, these futuristic vehicles regularly carried passengers and cars across the English Channel and the Solent. It was the fastest way to cross the strait. But in the 2000s, after the opening of the Eurotunnel, they lost the battle against the competition. Today, only a small ferry service between Southsea and the Isle of Wight remains as a reminder of this glorious era.

But for those who witnessed the golden age of the hovercraft, the memory remains: an era of seemingly effortless gliding across the water, sparked by an eccentric inventor with a cat food tin.





SODOM APPLE

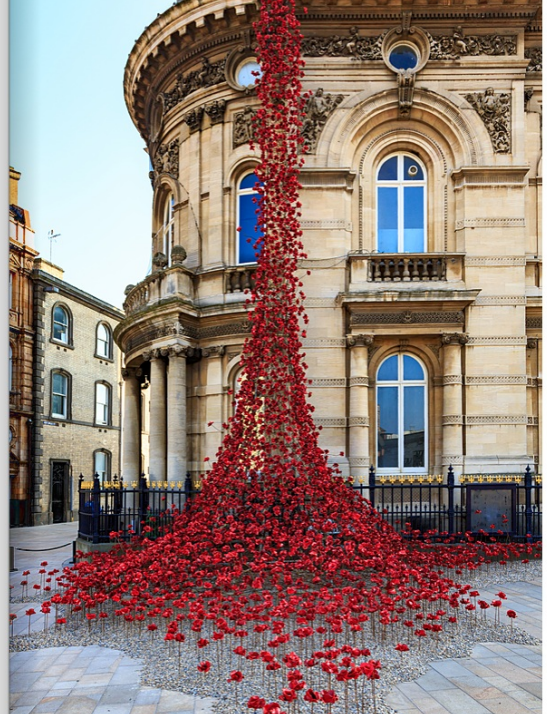
At the golden walls of Jaisalmer, where the sun makes the desert sand glow, a unique plant once grew: the Sodom apple. Although it possessed a seductive beauty with its bright purple flowers and radiant, apple-like fruits, it was surrounded by a bitter curse.

The legend of Brys Fort tells of a jealous Maharaja whose fate was closely linked to the transformation of the city. He had a young bride. She was exceptionally beautiful, but her heart belonged to another. The Maharaja, full of anger and jealousy, could not win her love. One day, in an attempt to bind her to him forever, he conjured up a mysterious plant: the Sodom apple. He cast a spell that anyone who ate its fruit would be bound to the city of Jaisalmer for as long as his love lasted. However, knowing that love cannot be forced, he added to the spell that the fruit would crumble to dust and ashes when eaten, as a sign of his broken love.

The bride recognised the bitter deception and was courageous. She ate one of the apples to show the Maharaja clear proof that his love was unrequited. The apple crumbled to ashes in her hand, an unmistakable sign that the spell had failed. Even the enchanted apple could not change her love for her beloved. Disappointed and defeated, the Maharaja suffered a heavy loss, and the city fell into ruin.

The Maharaja, who was almost destroyed by the tragic events, ordered all Sodom apple trees to be banished from Brys Fort and Jaisalmer to prevent the tragic story from repeating itself. Only a few of the plants can still be found in the remotest corners of the desert, but their magic has faded. Today, they are only a rare testimony to the legends of Brys Fort.

The story of the Sodom apple reminds people that true love cannot be forced and that one should never be seduced by outer beauty that hides a bitter interior.



WEEPING WINDOW

When the Weeping Window of ceramic poppies was installed at the Maritime Museum in Hull in 2017, it brought not only a work of art to the city but also a flood of memories and stories.

One of these belonged to Doris, an elderly lady who sat on a bench opposite the museum every day. For Doris, the poppies were not just a work of art. They were a deep, painful reminder of her grandfather, a fisherman from Hull. His trawler fleet was conscripted for service during the First World War. He never returned. His story was just one of many in a seafaring town whose victims disappeared into the sea without a grave to mark their passing.

On the first day of the exhibition, as the red flowers seemed to flow like drops of blood from the window of the former harbour office, Doris noticed a young girl gazing reverently at the poppies. She saw the girl's gaze and realised that she was not just admiring the beauty of the installation. The girl, named Chloe, was holding an old, faded photograph in her hand. It showed her great-grandfather, a merchant navy sailor who had been killed in the war.

The two struck up a conversation, and Doris told her about her grandfather, who had gone to war with his comrades from the fishing fleet. Chloe explained that her great-grandfather's story was hardly ever mentioned in her family. She felt that these poppies were a bridge to the past.

From that day on, Doris and Chloe met regularly at the Weeping Window. The installation became a meeting place for generations to share stories of the fallen sailors, fishermen, and trawler crews from Hull. The curtain of poppies was not just an exhibition, but an emotional place of remembrance.

When the Weeping Window left Hull to travel further afield, it left behind a deep trail of memories and a new friendship. Doris and Chloe stayed in touch and continued to tell the stories of their grandfathers so that the memory of Hull's seafaring victims would never fade.

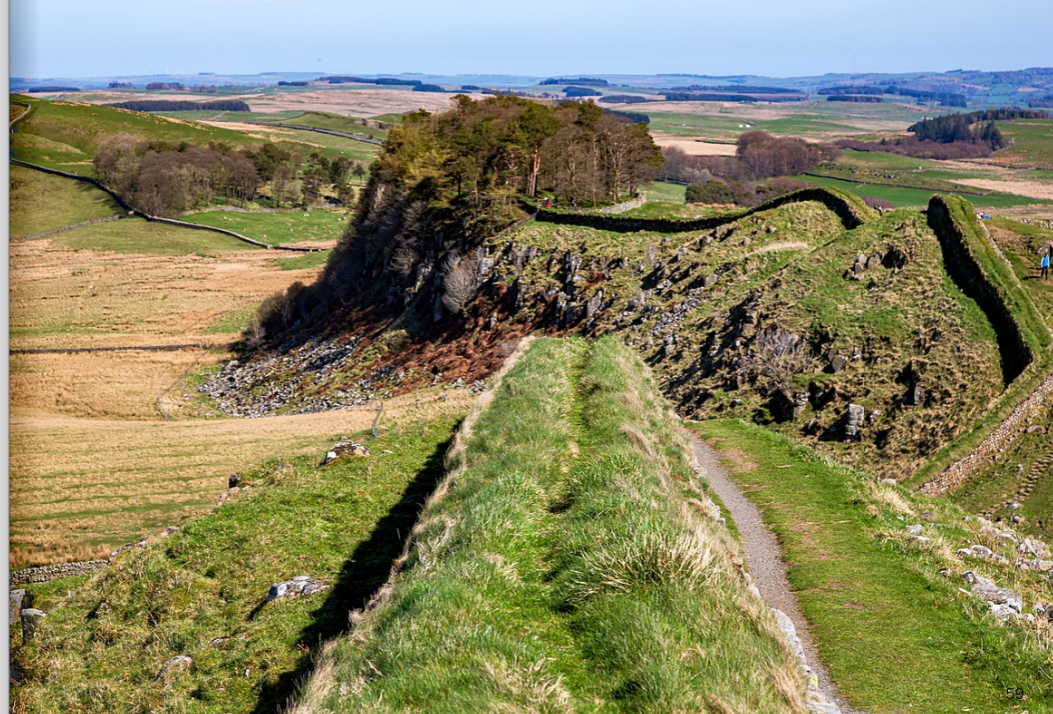
HADRIAN'S WALL

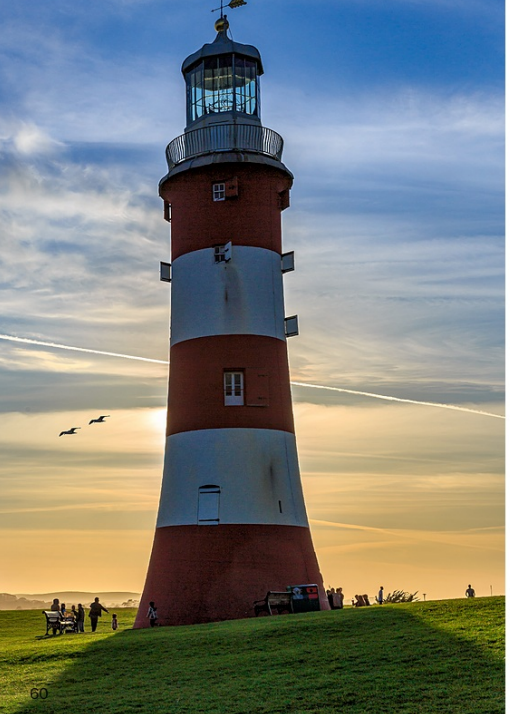
I am Marcus, a soldier from sunny Gaul, crouched here by the parapet of Hadrian's Wall (Limes Britannicus). The wind sweeps relentlessly across the barren hills of northern England, and the twilight bathes the endless stone wall in a soft, grey light. For weeks, I have seen nothing but this wall, the vast horizon, and the rough, unyielding tribes that we Romans call 'barbarians'. The cold penetrates my bones, and I miss the warmth of my homeland.

One day, I discovered a little boy from the northern tribes, his face painted blue, crouching at the foot of the wall, carefully clutching a small sheep he must have lost. He looked at me with fear and suspicion. I raised my hands to show that I was not a threat. The boy ran away, but the little sheep remained behind.

As I continued my patrol the next day, I found the sheep near a gap in the wall that had been created by a storm. The boy was sitting there with his mother, and they looked hungry. I thought of my own family. I took a piece of bread, some cheese, and a small bottle of wine from my supplies. I gave the provisions to the boy and gestured that they could take the sheep with them. The boy looked at me with wide eyes, took the food, and handed me a small, finely carved wooden figure, a replica of a sheep, as a thank you. It was not a gesture of trade, but a gesture of humanity.

I, the soldier on the enemy border, had found a connection with someone on the other side. When I returned to my post, I no longer found the cold wind so unbearable. I now know that although the wall separates people, humanity can bring them together again.





SMEATON'S TOWER

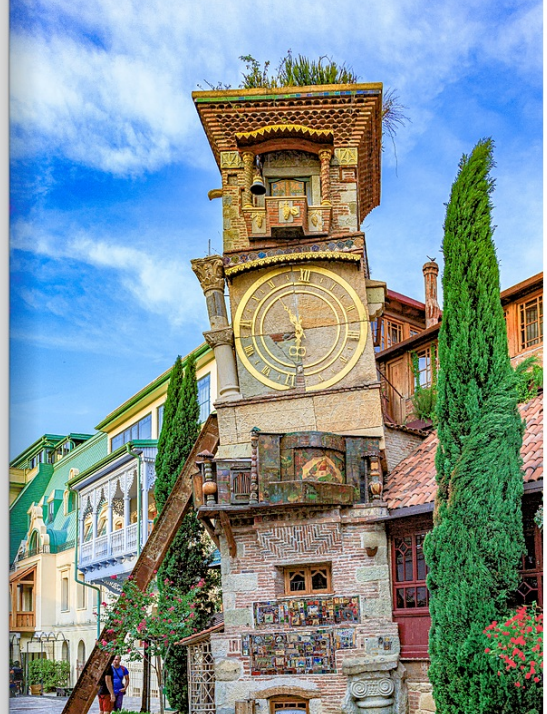
On the treacherous Eddystone Rocks, 14 miles (approx. 23 km) off the coast of Plymouth, stood the lighthouse designed by the ingenious engineer John Smeaton. Its construction, reminiscent of an oak trunk, was a marvel of engineering that served as a guide for ships for decades from 1759 onwards. But even the most stable structure cannot withstand the constant pounding of the waves forever.

In 1877, lighthouse keeper Alistair noticed that the entire tower vibrated noticeably when the waves were particularly strong. After 118 years of service, the relentless surf had eroded and hollowed out the rock beneath the foundation. It was clear that the tower, which had saved the lives of so many sailors, was now itself in danger.

Alistair thought back to the many nights he had spent watching over the dark sea by the light of candles and later oil lamps. He thought of the stories he had told with the other keepers in the small, barren lantern room. The tower was more than just his home; it was a companion that offered him comfort and security.

The decision had been made: Smeaton's tower had to be dismantled. But the people of Plymouth couldn't just give up on the old lighthouse. So the upper part was dismantled stone by stone and rebuilt on the cliff at Plymouth Hoe overlooking the sea. It was like giving an old friend a new, peaceful home.

Alistair, now retired, was one of the first to visit the relocated tower. He climbed the 93 steps he knew so well to the lantern room. From up here, he looked out to sea, where he could see the stump of the old lighthouse and its newly built successor in the distance. He saw the new lighthouse, bright and powerful. But in his eyes shone the light of Smeaton's Tower, whose story was now carried from the sea to the city and lived on forever as a memorial to John Smeaton.



THE BELL TOWER

Rising skyward like a crooked house of cards in the narrow, cobbled streets of Tbilisi's Old Town, the Gabriadze Tower, though built only in 2010, is the work of the famous puppeteer Rezo Gabriadze. It is a whimsical and charming reinterpretation of history, reminding residents and visitors alike that the magic of imagination lives on in the soul of the city. In its short lifetime, the tower has accumulated a history that has become an urban legend.

The tower's mythology holds that an old puppeteer had contemplated the history of Tbilisi for so long that he felt the walls themselves were whispering the stories to him. He heard the songs of the princesses in the fortress walls of Narikala, the cries of the fishermen on the Kura River, and the clattering of carts in Moti Chowk. But what he felt most strongly was the temporal gap left by the many wars and conquests in the city. To fill it, he built, stone by stone, the crazy, crooked tower from all the old, forgotten stones of the city. He decorated it with puppets and turned it into a place of magic and wonder.

Every hour, when the hands of the other clocks move in perfect synchrony, a small carved doll appears from the tower and rings the bell with a small hammer. But that is only the beginning of the magic. Twice a day, at noon and at 7 p.m., a window opens in the tower and a puppet theatre begins its performance.

It is an allegorical performance, titled “The Cycle of Life,” which tells the story of Tbilisi and the universal story of love and hope. The story says that when viewed with a pure heart, the puppets seem to be made not only of wood, but of the soul of the city. And everyone who hears these stories becomes part of the magical soul of Tbilisi forever.

BUDDHA'S FOOTPRINT

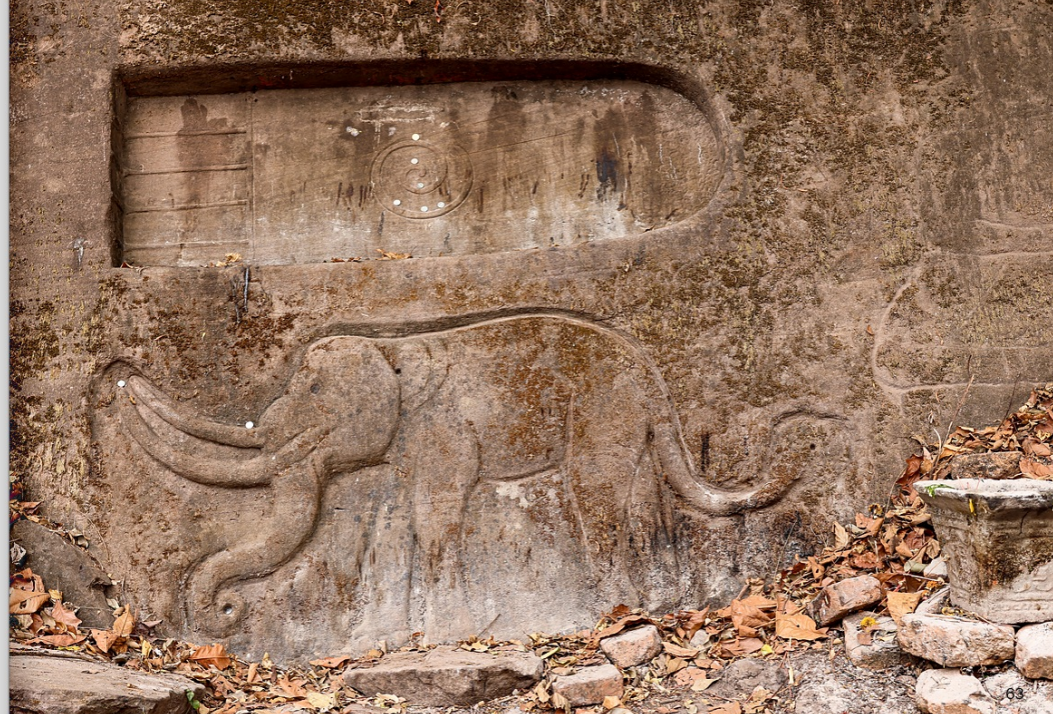
I am Somchai, a simple farmer from the Champasak region of Laos, and this is the story of the time I found the heart of Vat Phou. My faith in the teachings of Buddha was unshakeable, and I desired nothing more than to feel the presence of the Awakened One.

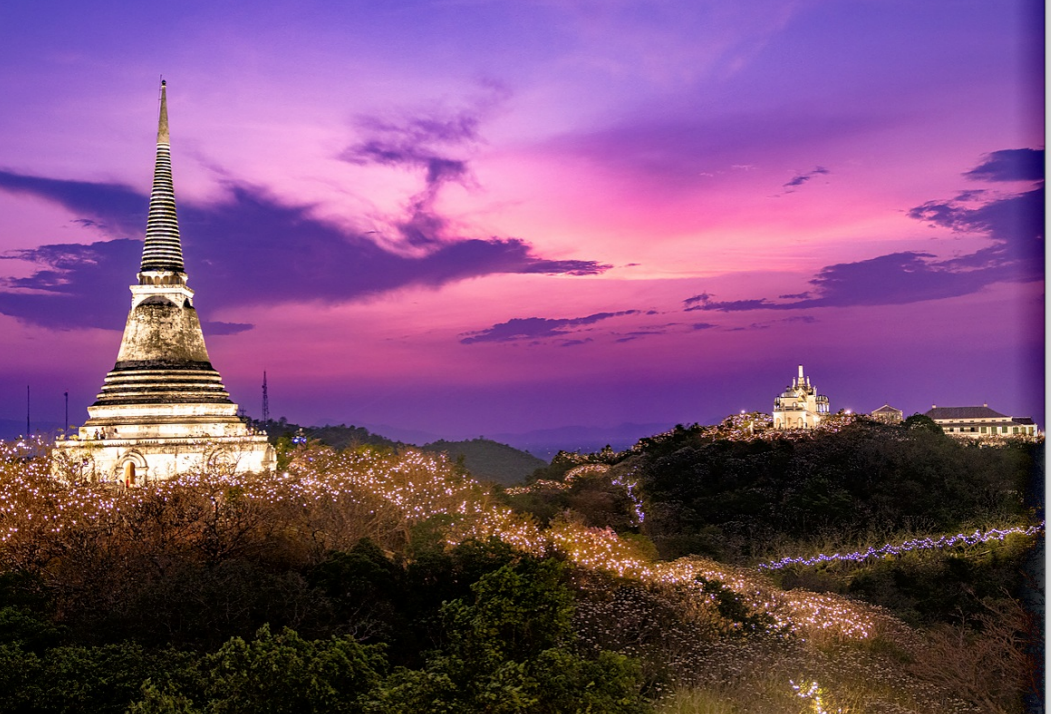
One day, after meditating for days on end, I hiked up the steep mountain where the temple stands today. I climbed over moss-covered rocks and past ancient trees until I reached the highest point. With my eyes closed, I prayed for peace and enlightenment.

When I opened them again, I saw a glowing footprint in the rock, surrounded by a soft, golden light. I was overwhelmed. I immediately realised that it must be the footprint of Buddha—a divine Buddhapada, representing his ancient presence. When I placed my own rough feet next to it, they seemed tiny in comparison to the divine imprint.

From that day on, I returned to the mountain every morning to meditate and clean the footprint. I told the people in the surrounding villages about my discovery. Many years later, the temple structure was formalised and built on this spot to honour the footprint. The complex itself, originally dedicated to Shiva and older than Angkor Wat, was designed along a stepped, vertical axis to convey people from the earthly plains to this divine sanctuary.

Even today, I feel the wisdom of Buddha permeating the rock and spreading across the entire landscape. I know that those who climb here with a pure heart can still feel the soft glow. This place remains sacred because of that single, powerful aniconic symbol I found here long ago.





PALACE HILL

I am Chaba, and I was just a young maid who climbed Khao Wang Mountain high above Phetchaburi. The summer palace of King Mongkut (Rama IV) was a strange, grand place, full of Western-inspired wonders. But my most unforgettable memory is of the night I discovered the King's true passion.

I had lost my way after fleeing from one of the aggressive macaques that live on the mountain. Shivering with fear and cold, I came across the illuminated observatory on the highest peak. The King, the great Rama IV who had travelled the world and loved astronomy, looked down at me. He was not angry, but surprised. He invited me to look through his huge telescope.

I, who had never seen anything like it, looked through it and saw the stars in all their glory. I felt as if I could touch the infinite vastness of the sky. This was the King's secret—his bridge between traditional wisdom and Western science.

From that day on, I often returned to the observatory. We talked about the stars and the mysteries of the universe. Through our conversations, I realised that the King wanted to share his knowledge with all people, not just himself. He promoted the education of Thai youth and founded schools.

The summer palace on Khao Wang remained more than just a royal retreat. For me, it became a symbol of the bridge between tradition and progress, of the openness of a king who saw the future in the stars. Our shared dreams under the bright starry sky above Phetchaburi are a story I still tell today.

THE HOUSE OF FREE PRESS

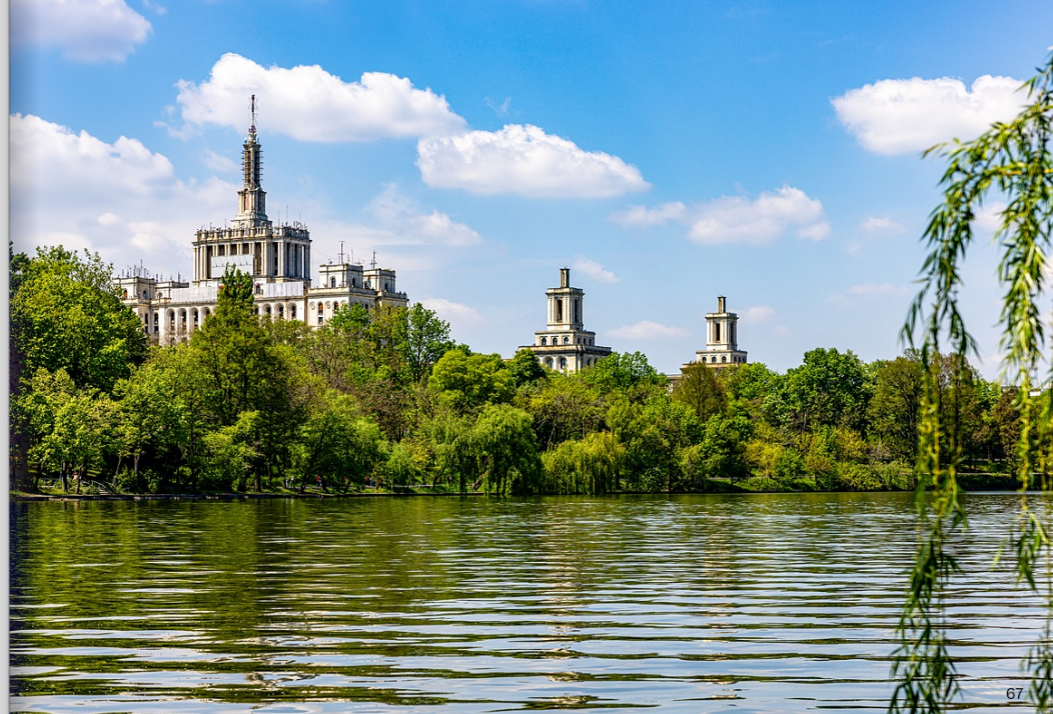
I am Mihai. I spent years in the basement of Casa Scînteii, the "House of Sparks," forced to print newspapers glorifying the regime. The building, a monument to Stalinist power, felt like a colossal weight pressing down on me.

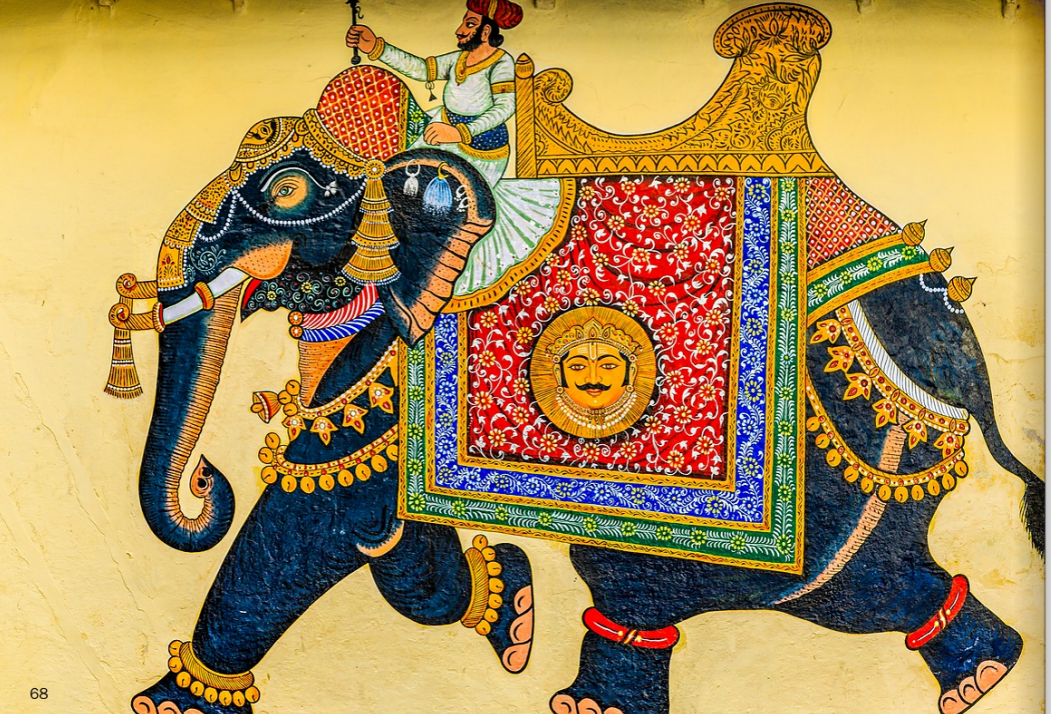
But in the cold tension of December 1989, everything changed. I was in my printing room when I heard a soft, persistent clattering. Curiosity led me to a hidden window and a secret shaft. I climbed up and found myself in an invisible passageway that led to the remote top floors. There, I found them: young reporters secretly printing leaflets about the protests in Timișoara—the truth, whispered through the old presses.

A new flame ignited in me. I helped them, using the very machines that had printed lies, to spread their message of freedom. In the days that followed, I saw the revolution—the sheer, unstoppable anger of the people—break over Casa Scînteii like a storm. I abandoned the basement and rushed to the entrance gates as the crowd broke through.

Then came the moment of liberation. Workers and students climbed the colossal facade under the icy sky. I watched as one of them, secured only by a thin rope, reached the enormous red star at the top. When he smashed it and the star fell to the pavement with a bloodcurdling, metallic crash, that sound was the loudest cry of liberation I had ever heard.

The house of propaganda became the home of the free press overnight. We tore down the old symbols in triumphant rage. I stayed as a printer, helping to publish the first true newspapers and books of the new Romania. I saw the past and the future merge right there, in those old walls, as they finally became the home of truth. This was my revolution.





MURAL AT MOTI CHOWK

I am Vikram. I came back to Jaisalmer after years in the big city, having chased artistic dreams that felt empty. I returned to Moti Chowk, our central square, only to find it quiet and colourless. The grand history—the princes and merchants who once brought it to life—had faded.

Then I met Priya, a girl with the most radiant eyes I had ever seen. She loved to play in the silence of the old walls and imagine the ancient stories. One day, she challenged me directly: “Why are the walls so grey and sad? Why are the old stories no longer told?”

Her words struck me deep in the heart. I began to paint the old legends on the walls. I painted horses going to war, princesses waiting at the window for their loved ones, and merchants passing by with camels laden with spices and cloth. Priya became my most honest critic. Every day she showed me where a horse needed to look braver, where a warrior's eyes should sparkle more intensely. I had lost touch with my roots in the big city, but I found them again through the eyes of that little girl.

When the mural was finished, the walls of Moti Chowk glowed with bright colours. The residents of Jaisalmer gathered; they rediscovered the old stories, and the square was once again full of life and colour.

I never left Jaisalmer again. I realised I had found my true home in Priya's eyes. And here, on the walls of Moti Chowk, the past lives on in the stories I painted.

GRAFFITI WALL

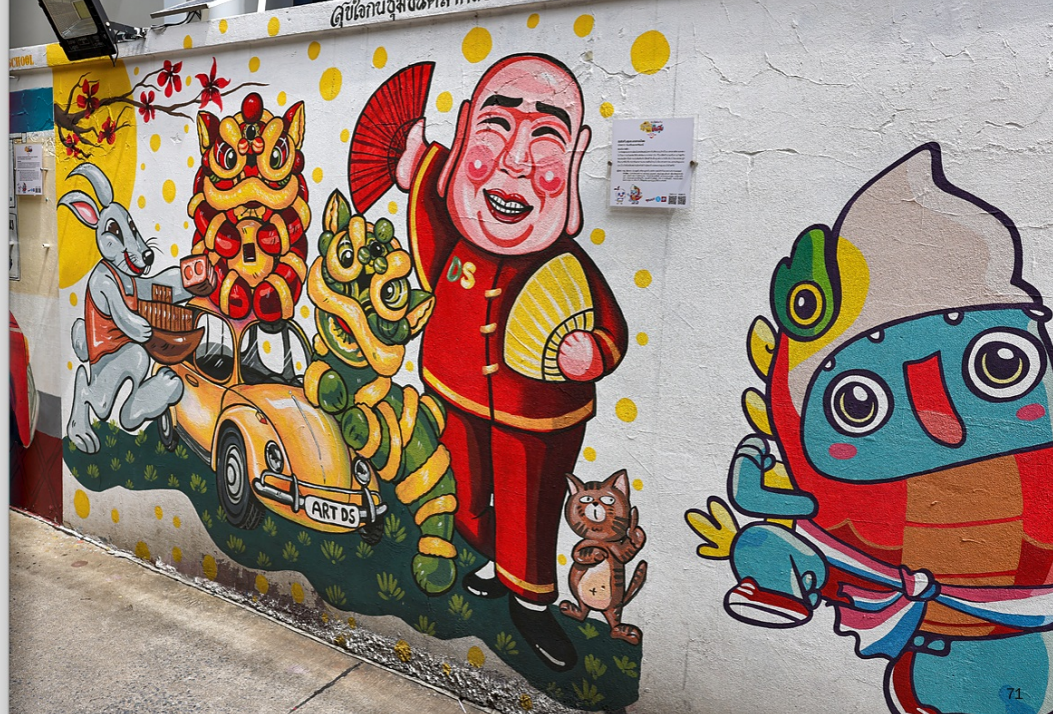
A few decades ago, the perception of street art in Bangkok was negative. The practice was restricted to the underground, with artists forced to work under the cover of night. In the early 2000s, graffiti was considered pure vandalism. Society often dismissed the activity, but the small, determined group of local artists persisted. They knew their work was art, not destruction, but the struggle for mainstream recognition was a tough battle.

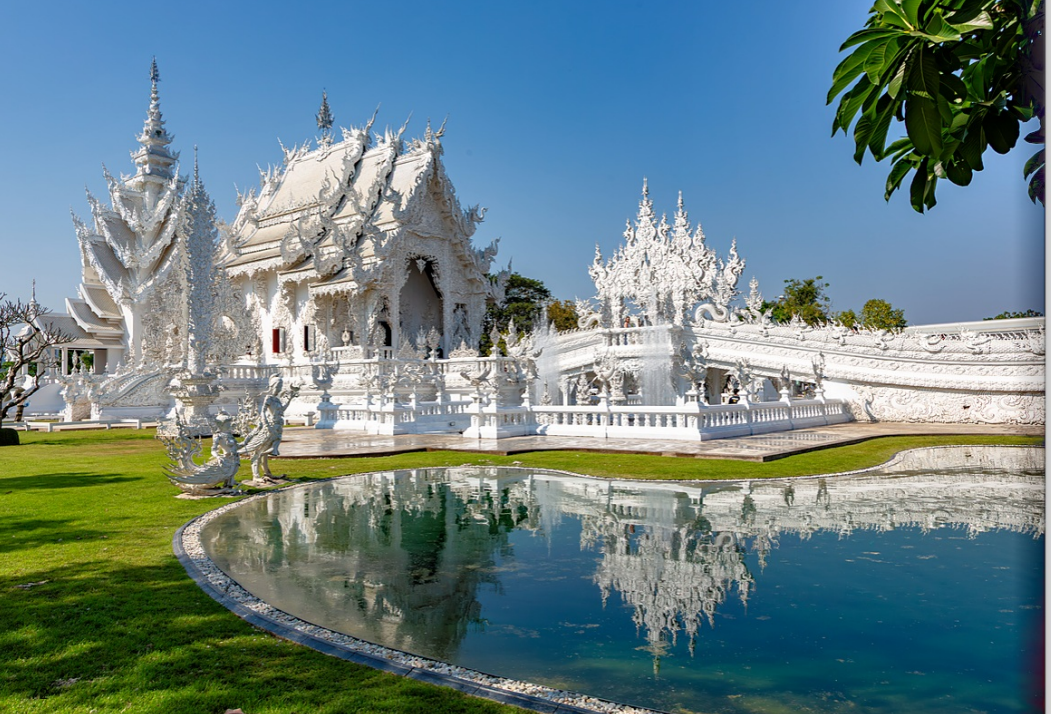
The turning point arrived with significant impact: the Bukruk Urban Arts Festival. The name itself—“Bukruk,” meaning invasion—was prophetic. Inspired by community art projects in Europe, the first festival in 2013 brought together Thai and international artists. They took over run-down neighbourhoods like Charoen Krung and Ratchatewi. Suddenly, the grey walls were replaced by huge murals, works of art that transformed the whole city into a gigantic open-air gallery. It was a transformative moment.

The festival laid the foundation for the thriving street art scene in Bangkok today. It included workshops, music events, and engaged the whole city. Artists like Alex Face, whose three-eyed child became an icon, and Rukkit, who completely changed the face of the city, played pivotal roles. Their works are now an integral part of Bangkok's identity.

For residents like Aunt Somkid, who had lived in Soi 32 for over sixty years, this so-called 'invasion' was initially sacrilegious. She cherished the cracks in the plaster, the patina of age, and the history embedded in the grey stones. The scaffolding noise, the acrid smell of spray paint, and young foreigners covering walls where perhaps only a small shrine had stood—she stood disapprovingly on the sidelines. The moment Aunt Somkid was won over came when she saw Rukkit's finished, huge, geometric mural of the rhinoceros. She never thought modern art could move her. But then she saw her little granddaughter standing in front of the painting, laughing with the eyes of a child who had seen something wonderful. Aunt Somkid suddenly realised that the artists weren't destroying the old walls. They were giving the walls a new voice, a new layer of history. It was no longer the Bangkok she knew, but it was loud, lively, and full of colour again.

Today, remnants of these festivals and countless new works can be found all over the city. What was once considered an eyesore is now celebrated. Tourists flock to these neighbourhoods to see the colours and history. Vandalism became art, and Bangkok is now their canvas.





WHITE TEMPLE

I am Chalermchai Kositpipat. The dazzling white glow of Wat Rong Khun is not just a building; it is my legacy, a testament to a modern dreamer. I combined the world of pop culture with the profound teachings of Buddhism to create this single work of art.

I was once deeply frustrated. I saw the ancient temples of my homeland decaying, and I felt their spiritual significance slipping away in the modern world. Then, I had a vision: I would create a temple so pure and radiant that it would enlighten the world. Inspired, I bought the old, dilapidated Wat Rong Khun in 1997 and began transforming it.

The entire design is a symbolic journey to enlightenment. To reach the main temple, the Ubosot, visitors must first cross the frightening transition. Below the beginning of the bridge is the pit of grasping hands—hundreds of white ceramic hands symbolising human greed, unfulfilled desires, and the torments of samsara, the cycle of rebirth. The narrow, snow-white bridge is the path of the Buddha, who successfully left all those worldly temptations behind. The white colour of the temple is purity, and the countless shards of glass are his wisdom.

Inside the temple, the story continues, but in a surprisingly modern way. My murals feature not only traditional Buddhist motifs but also icons like Superman and Neo from The Matrix, and depictions of global issues. This shows that the Buddha's teachings are eternally relevant. I am asking visitors to pause and reflect on their own life journey, right here, right now.

My dream did not end with the temple's construction. I see it as an ongoing project that will continue to grow and evolve, even after my death. It is a story that never really ends, but is constantly being rewritten over time, just as Buddha's wisdom constantly reinterprets the course of the world.

HOME MADE ENGLISH BREAKFAST

Every Saturday morning at 8 o'clock sharp, the alarm clock signals not the weekend, but the Martha Test. Since my mother-in-law has been visiting, that rule is set in stone. I burrowed back into my pillows, knowing exactly what awaited me: her famous homemade English breakfast.

Martha, that resolute lady from the Isle of Wight, has made this meal her life's work. She prepares everything herself—from the sausages, seasoned with a family recipe, to the dried beans she cooks for hours, never resorting to tinned ones. Her attention to detail is impressive, but it's a challenge for Sarah and me, who are used to quick muesli and coffee.

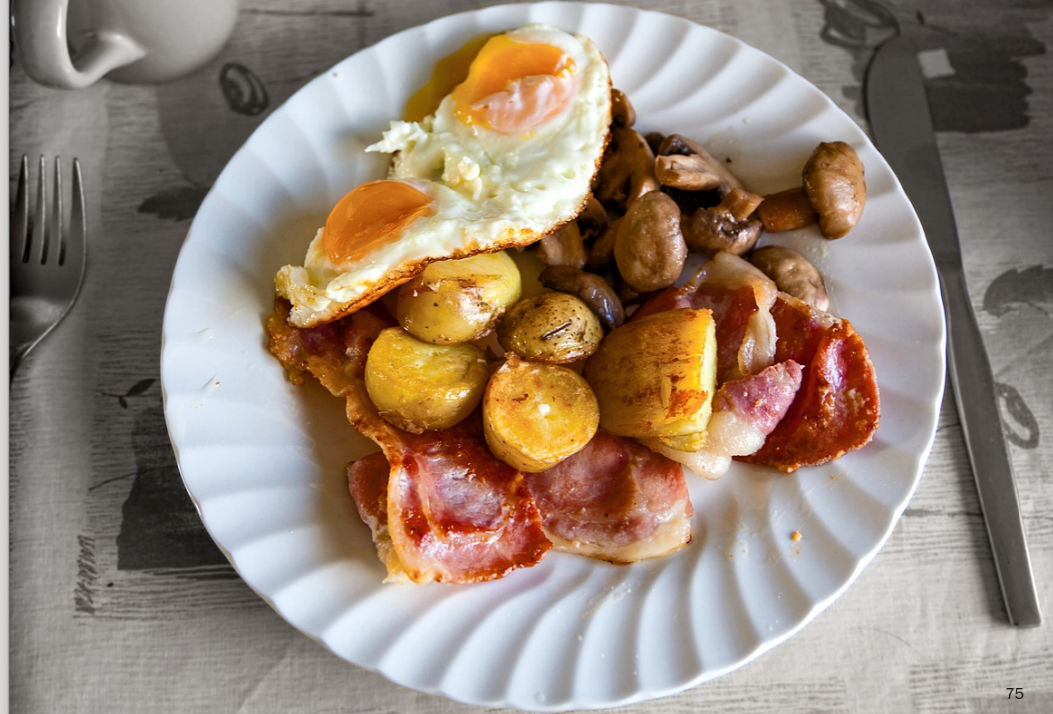
The pressure was high this morning. Last week, I dared to use ketchup on my beans, and Martha's resulting stern look haunted my dreams. I had to be perfect. The kitchen smelled wonderful, all fried bacon, onions, and herbs. Martha stood at the stove, armed with a spatula and a look that brooked no mistakes.

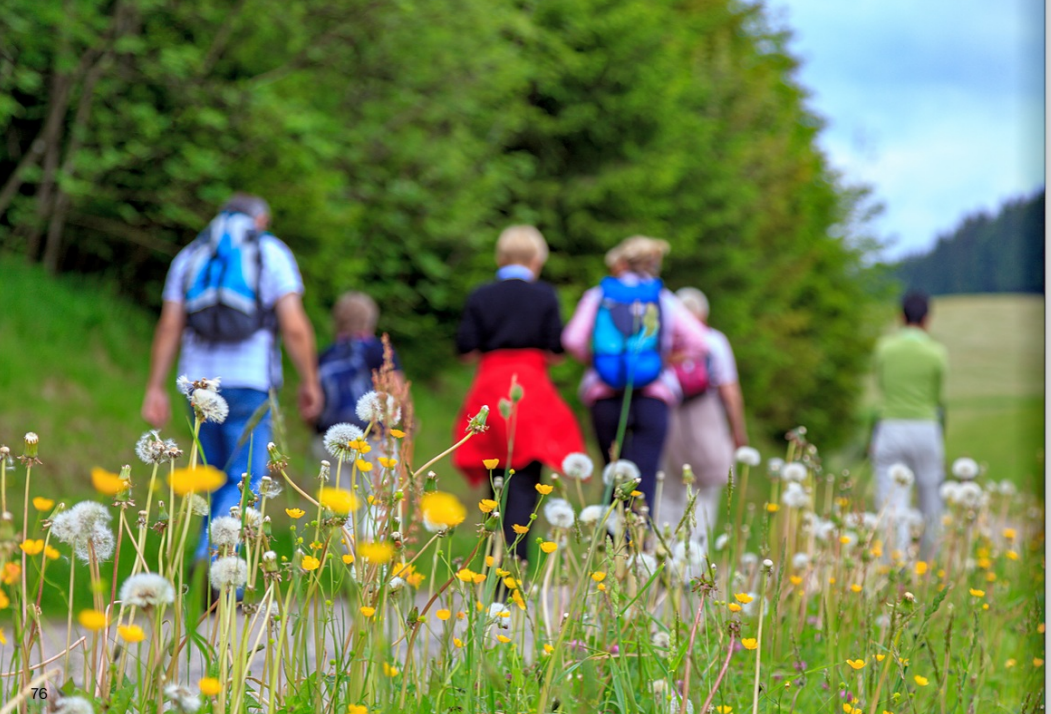
The plate she handed me was so generously laden it seemed to spin. I began to eat cautiously, each bite a ritual. I praised the eggs and the mushrooms, all under her watchful eye.

When I reached the beans, I took a deep breath. They were creamy, mildly seasoned, and clearly the product of hours of work. They were delicious, but I truly missed the familiar sweet taste of tomato ketchup.

As the final bean rested on my fork, I saw her looking at me expectantly. The moment of truth. I slowly brought the fork up, smiled, and delivered the verdict: "Martha, this is the best breakfast I've ever had." She finally smiled for the first time that morning. "I know," she said. "But I just had to hear it from you."

I looked at Sarah and winked. I had passed the test—at least for this week. It was worth it, I realised, to keep the peace and appreciate her unique, complex way of showing love.





HIKERS

The leaves crunching under my hiking boots always calm me. Deep in the Black Forest, far from the city, I feel at one with nature. I was heading toward Schliffkopf to watch the sunset. But the deeper I ventured into the fir trees, the darker it became, and soon an eerie silence fell over the paths.

I passed a small, moss-covered hut, almost swallowed by the trees. I've always dismissed the legends and myths of the Black Forest as old wives' tales, but in that silence, the fantasy felt suddenly real.

Then I saw her. A woman, Lotte, standing in front of the hut, dressed in a traditional costume like the ones in old paintings. Her gaze was fixed on the deep forest. Hesitantly, I spoke. She turned, smiled gently, and said she was a lost hiker. She offered to show me the path she claimed to have found. Relieved, I followed.

But Lotte led me away from the familiar route, onto a narrow, eerie trail that took us deeper into the trees. She spoke of the 'mystical paths' of the Black Forest and the magic dwelling in the ancient wood. I felt the cold increasing, and I realised I had strayed far beyond the path.

Just as I was about to turn back, I saw a beam of light in the distance and heard the voices of my friends calling my name from the Schliffkopf observation tower. I tore myself away from Lotte. She let me go with a sad look in her eyes. When I glanced back, she had disappeared as if she had never been there.

I told my friends about the encounter, and they joked about forest spirits. But I knew better. I had discovered the true magic of the Black Forest, hidden not only in its beauty but in its stories. I had not only found the way, but a secret of the forest itself.

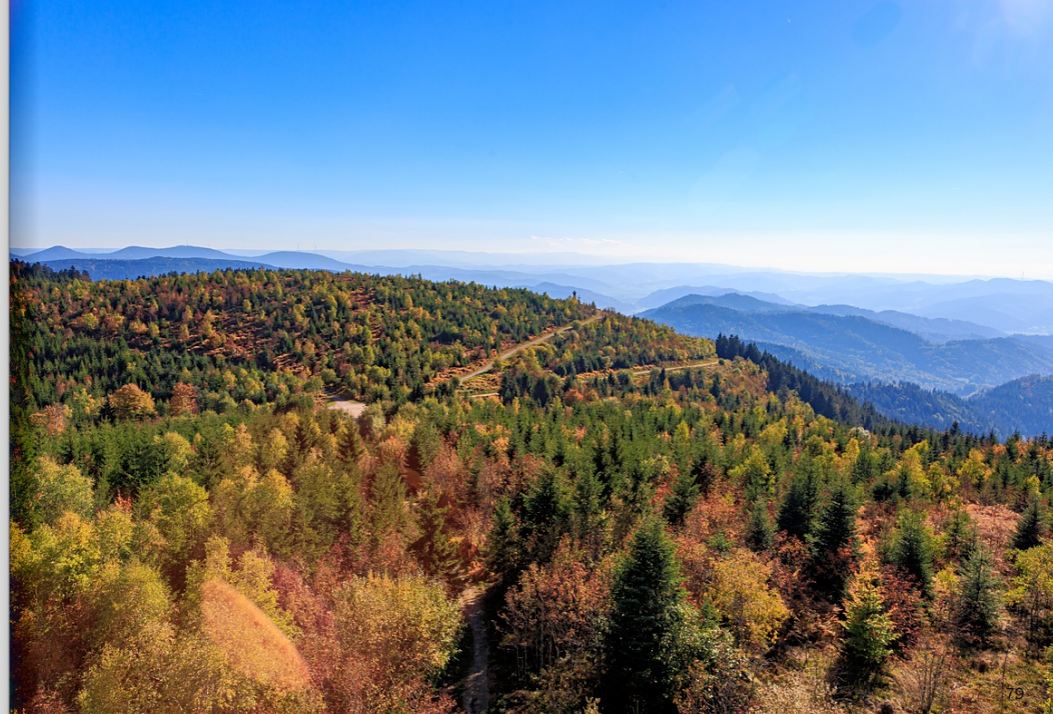
HURRICANE LOTHAR

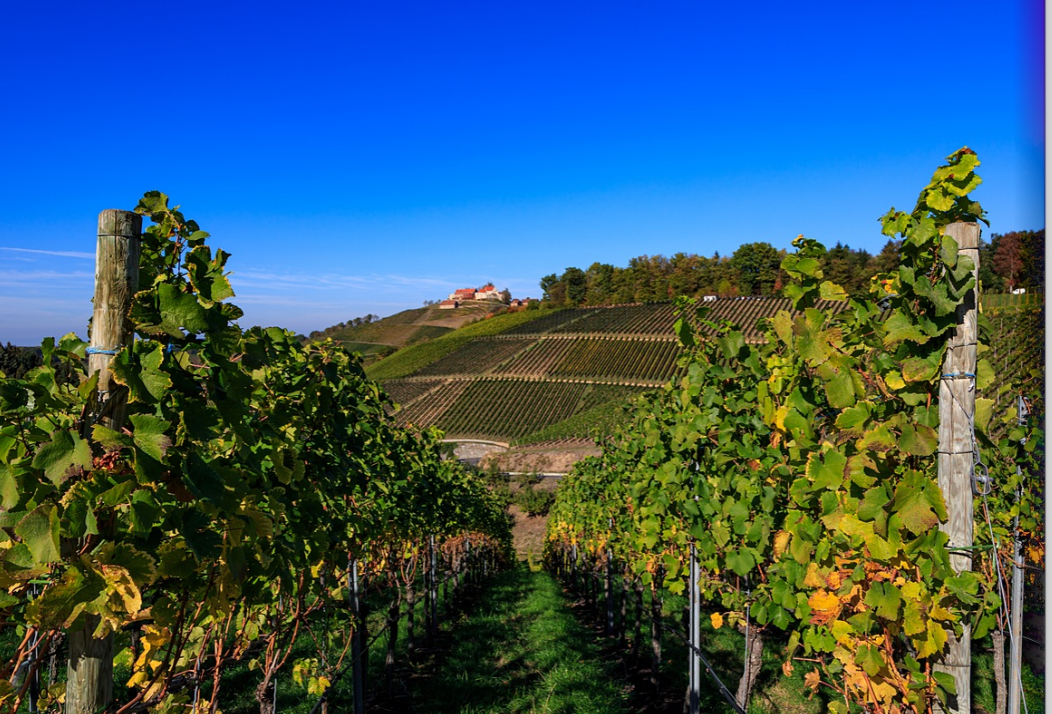
I am Karl, an old forester. The millennium was drawing to a close, but the final act of the 20th century was the beginning of a new age for us. On Boxing Day 1999, I was still in bed when an unusual wind rattled the windows of my forest lodge. It was no ordinary wind, but a deep rumbling that came from the Black Forest. I knew it did not bode well, and though I remembered my ancestors' stories of nature's fury, what I experienced that morning surpassed anything I could ever have imagined.

The hurricane, 'Lothar,' reached a terrifying strength. Trees snapped like matchsticks. The forest that had been my home all my life was razed to the ground within a few hours. I stood, shocked, at the window and watched the old fir tree—the one I had hugged as a child—fall with a painful crack. The noise was deafening. I saw the roots of trees that had seemed so firm being torn right out of the ground. The gentle rustling had given way to an angry roar.

When the storm finally subsided, an eerie, absolute silence fell. The cries of the wind died abruptly, as if someone had flipped a switch. I stepped out into the oppressive emptiness after the inferno and saw a landscape I no longer recognised. Where once there had been dense forest, countless trees lay criss-crossed on top of each other. The disaster raised many questions, but I knew the forest would regenerate. I watched how people stuck together to begin the clean-up work, and how nature, scarred by destruction, slowly came back to life.

Lothar was not just a storm; it was an event that taught us all how fast and unpredictable nature can be. Now, the story of Lothar is a constant reminder of nature's power, but also of our humanity's ability to recover and start afresh.





WINEGROWING

I am Jakob, a winemaker in the Durbach Valley. The history of winegrowing here stretches back to the 13th century, and I am proud to be part of that tradition. I work in the vineyards of Staufenberg Castle, whose walls tower majestically above our vines. My family has tended these slopes for generations, and I know my work is more than just harvesting grapes. It is the continuation of an ancient history hidden deep in the fertile soils of this valley.

One day, during the harvest, I came across an old stone hidden right in the steep slopes. It was a boundary stone marking the Klingelberg vineyards. When I placed my hand on that stone, I felt as if I could hear the stories of the many winegrowers who worked here before me. I heard the songs they sang during the harvest, smelled the scent of their grapes, and tasted the wine that had been produced in this valley for centuries.

Inspired by this experience, I set out to produce a new wine, one that carried the essence of those ancient stories. I called it my “winemaker's wine,” and it quickly became a symbol of the hard work and passion of the people of Durbach. The grapes come from the steep slopes we cultivate, and I treat the wine with the same respect and love that I learned from the generations before me.

My Winzerwein became famous, but I remain humble. I know that wine is more than just a drink. It is a tribute to the past, a toast to the future, and a recognition of all the people who have worked in these steep vineyards. It is a wine that tastes not only of grapes, but also of history, tradition, and the profound love of winegrowing.

Thus, I have become not only a winemaker, but also a guardian of tradition. I know that winegrowing in Durbach is not just a profession, but an art form, a tribute to nature and the people who love it. And in every bottle of wine that leaves our vineyards, the history of the valley lives on.

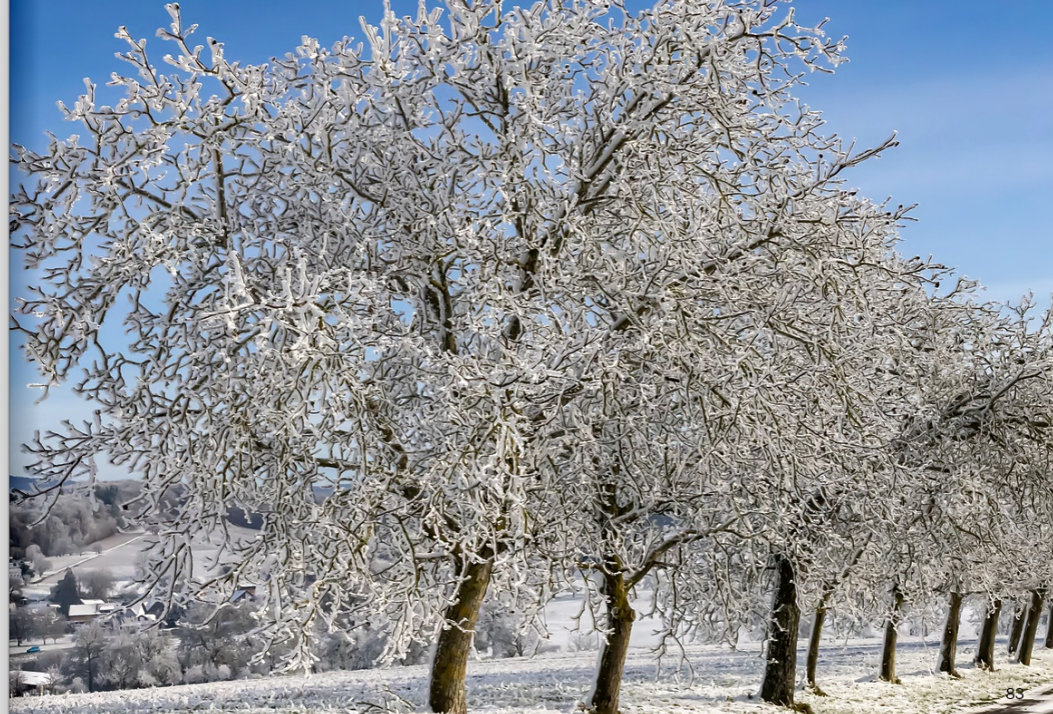
MARKGRÄFLERLAND

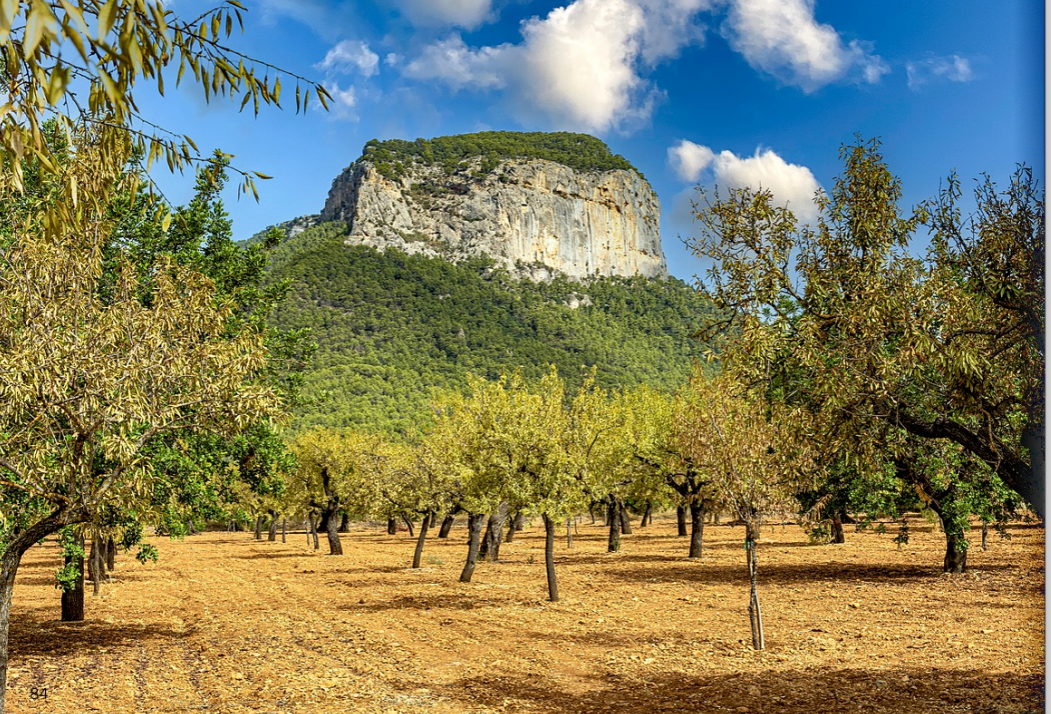
I am Lena, and I live a fast life in the city. When I arrived in the Markgräflerland for the winter, I saw only a mild, grey veil. The cherry trees in the Eggenertal valley looked bare and lifeless. I couldn't understand why they were exposed to the cold here, unlike the trees in the city that were so carefully protected.

My grandfather, Friedrich, who has spent his entire life among these trees, noticed my confusion. He knew every scar in their bark. He smiled and said, “They're not naked, Lena. They're just resting before putting all their energy back into the blossoms. They remember the power of the sun and the sweetness of the fruit they will bear.”

He took one of the bare, gnarled branches in his hand and stroked it gently. Then he showed me something special: a tiny, old piece of cherry still hanging there, shrunk by the cold into a small, black pebble. “This is the winter cherry,” he said. “It is not sweet and not juicy, but it reminds us that life exists even in rest.” I had never seen one before. I touched it; it was cold and hard, yet its simplicity held a quiet, deep beauty—not the radiant beauty of spring, but something stronger.

Touching that tiny, cold pebble changed everything. I began to see the cherry trees not just as bare branches, but as nature gathering its strength, patiently waiting for the return of life. When we returned to the warm salon, my view of the world had shifted. I no longer saw only the hustle and bustle of the city, but also the quiet power of nature, which rests in winter and returns in spring. I realised that beauty lies not only in the spectacular, but also in simplicity.





OLIVE PLANTATION

I am Miguel. My home is here, high above Bunyola, on the rugged slopes of the Serra de Tramuntana. For me, each gnarled, twisted olive tree is not just a plant; it is a part of my family history, engraved into these stone terraces over generations.

Every morning, before the sun reaches the highest peaks, I walk my grove. I know each of these old trees, whose massive trunks, marked by wind and weather, have learned to survive even on the most barren soil.

But one day, my grandson Toni, full of modern ideas, brought home a new, smooth olive tree from a breeding programme. I was sceptical. I told him: “A tree needs time to write its story. It has to feel the sun and the wind, the rain and the drought. It has to learn to fight against adverse conditions.” He was impatient. “The old trees are beautiful, Grandfather, but they don't yield enough,” he argued. “We have to modernise.” I nodded, but I knew he didn't understand that the true value of an olive tree lies not just in its yield, but in the history it carries within it.

That year, the drought hit hard. The new tree, spoiled by rapid breeding, struggled and bore little fruit. But my old trees, whose roots reach deep into the stone walls of the terraces, defied the drought. They didn't bear many olives, but the few they produced were of exceptional quality.

When Toni finally tasted the oil from the old trees, he understood. He tasted centuries of history, of patience, and of love in every single drop. He realised that the olive trees of Bunyola are more than just a plantation; they are a living monument that carries the history of Mallorca within them.

Now, we work together. Toni brings the modern techniques, and I preserve the tradition. And in every drop of oil we press, you can taste the history of the ancient olive groves of Bunyola, which form the heart of the Serra de Tramuntana.

TV TOWER

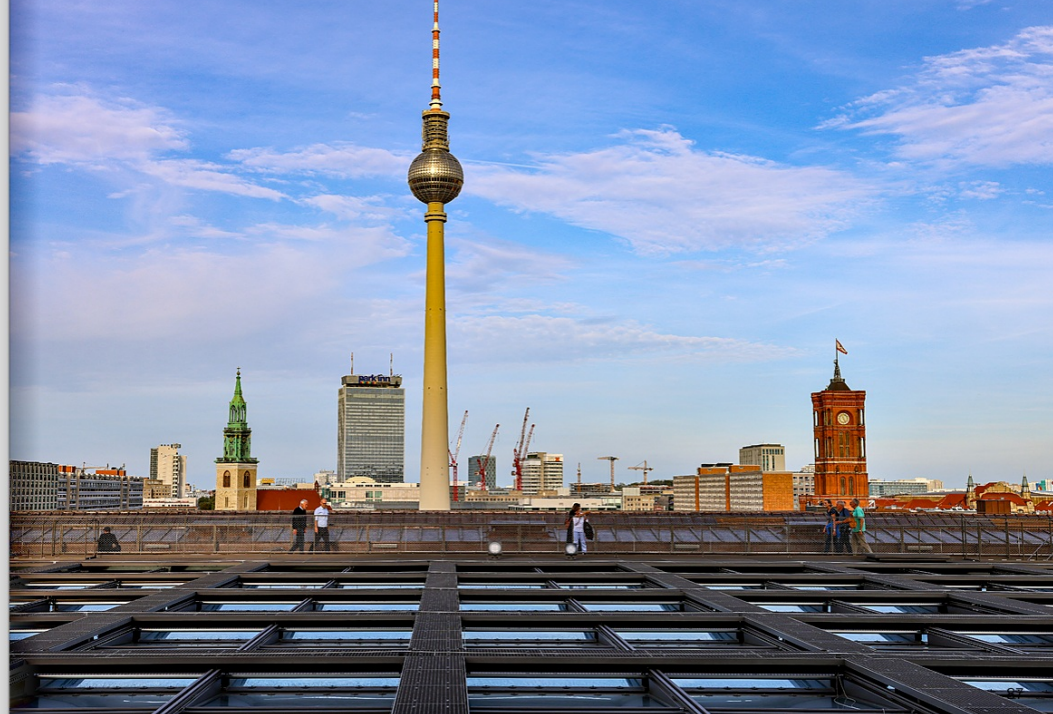
“Oh, my friend, sit down with me for a moment. I have to tell you about our sphere, our ‘Telespargel’ (telescopic asparagus), as we called it back then, and the little miracle it hides. Can you see it up there? I was a young engineer when we built that steel colossus. Back then, in the grey days of the GDR, the tower was meant to be a symbol of the strength and modernity of our socialist state—proof that we were technologically superior.

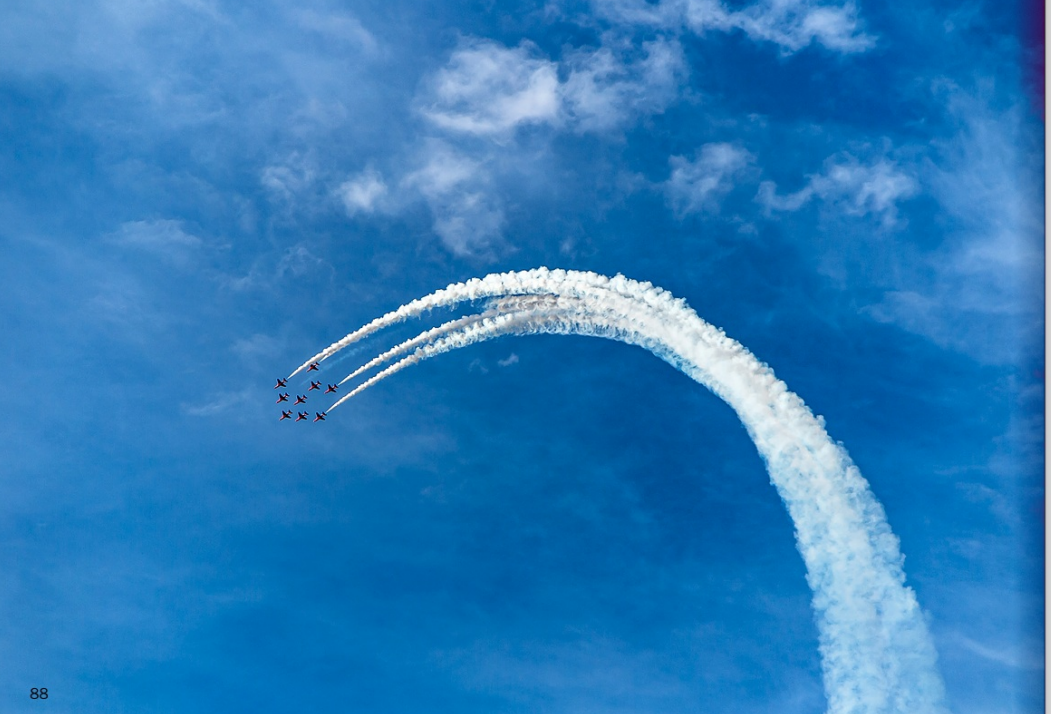
I remember the inauguration in 1969. We worked day and night on that masterpiece of engineering. But the clever party minds overlooked something wonderful, as it turned out later. When the tower was completed, the sun hit the stainless steel shell of the sphere, and the light reflected in a very specific way. It formed... a large, shining cross. I tell you, the faces of the party officials were bright red with shame! For the atheist leadership of the GDR, this was the ultimate punishment.

For us Berliners, it immediately became the talk of the town, a source of laughter, a glimmer of hope. We called it the ‘Pope's revenge’ or the ‘Dibelius’ revenge’—our small, silent rebellion that this symbol of faith appeared precisely on the building that was supposed to demonstrate the superiority of socialism. We smiled every time we saw it.

Many years later, after the fall of the Wall and reunification, the tower still stood. The cross still appears when the sun shines. But times have changed. It is no longer a symbol of irony or political struggle. It is a silent sign of change, a sign of hope hovering over our reunified Berlin. For me, who witnessed it all, this cross taught me that even in the grandest of man-made plans, nature or a higher destiny can prevail.

The tower has not only survived the political ideology of its time, but the times themselves. And today, yes today, it is a true symbol of Berlin as a whole. It belongs to all of us.”





ELIZABETHAN II'S JUBILEE

I am David. Born on this Isle of Wight ninety years ago, I've spent my life tied to its history and the history of the royal family. I remember the Queen's visits as a young girl and the stories my grandparents told me about Osborne House. On this bright June day in 2022, I sat on the beach with my granddaughter, Emily, waiting for the Platinum Jubilee flypast. Emily, a young girl from the city, has little connection to the monarchy, but she was here for me.

Suddenly, we heard it: a deep rumbling that grew louder and louder. I know the sound of aeroplanes taking off from the mainland, but this time, it was louder, more solemn, and full of historical significance.

The aircraft flew in an impressive, precise formation right over us. The modern Eurofighter Typhoons, the historic Spitfires, and the Lancaster bombers—they all spanned the arc from World War II to the modern era. I was silent as the spectacle unfolded. Emily cheered, but I saw her gaze soften; she was beginning to understand. The aircraft were not just machines, but symbols of the enduring monarchy, the resilience of the British people, and the changing times.

As the last jet disappeared and the smoke of the Red Arrows in the colours of our flag could be seen in the distance, Emily looked at me. I had tears in my eyes. I saw in those aeroplanes the history of the Queen and the island, and I knew that the traditions I cherished so much would live on. The flypast was more than just an air show. It was an echo of the past carried into the future.

SPRING WHITE ORCHIDS WITH PURPLE HEART

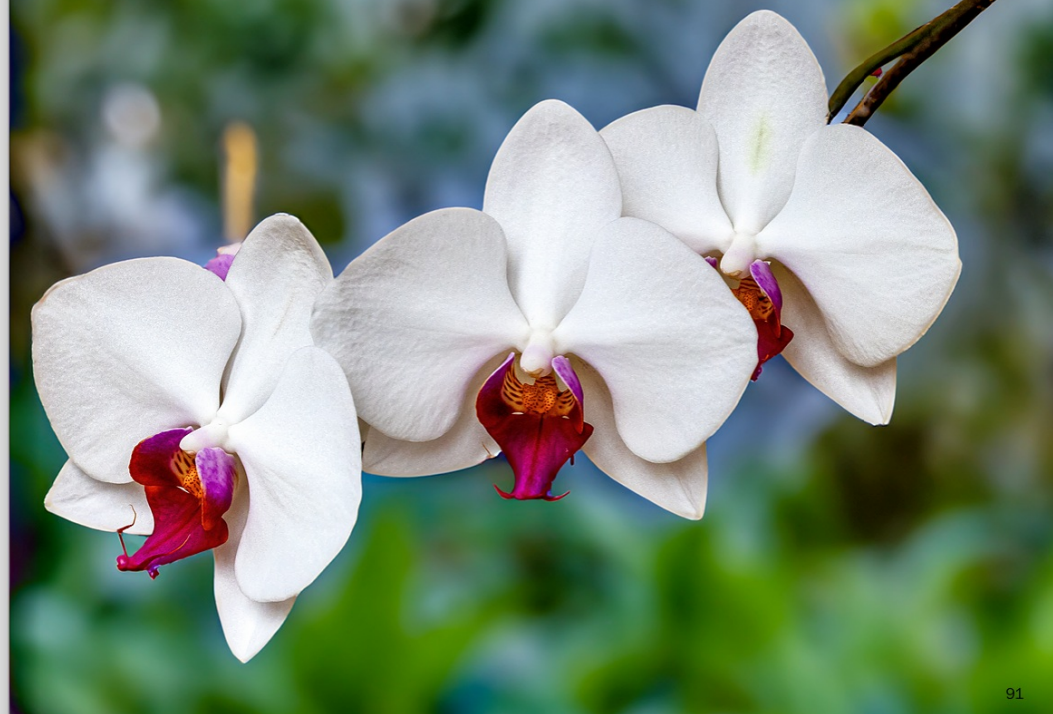
Once upon a time, I was just Elara, a young orphan living in a hidden valley far away from the hustle of the world. I lovingly cared for a very special orchid. Its petals were as pure and immaculate as the first snow, but at its heart it bore a bright purple colour.

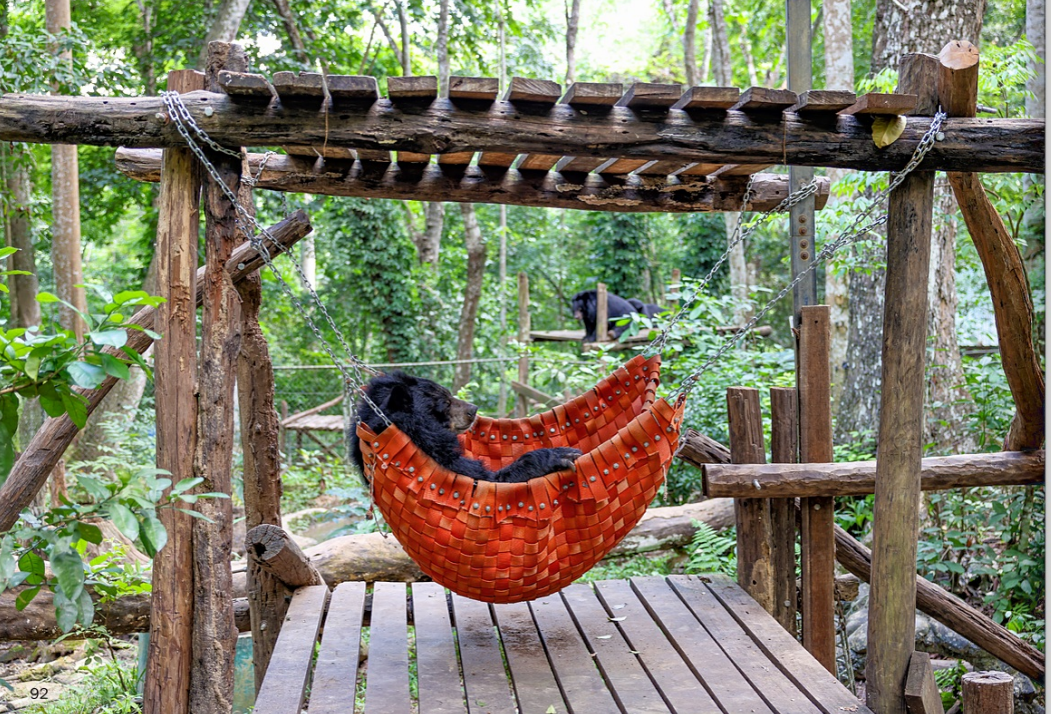
I know the ancient legend of this valley: a brave warrior gave his life to save our village. His pure heart, so full of love for his homeland, fell to the ground and became this very orchid. The flower was meant to preserve the memory of his purity and courage.

When spring came and the orchids bloomed, the light on the petals was dazzling. People travelled from the surrounding villages to see them. I knew that they saw not only the beauty of the blossoms, but also the story of the brave warrior. They saw the pure heart within the orchid and understood that true strength lies not in power, but in the purity of the heart.

One day, a harsh storm swept through the valley. I was inconsolable when the delicate blossoms were carried away by the wind. However, when the storm subsided, I realised that the blossoms had not been destroyed. They had been carried away by the wind to bloom in the most remote places in the world. From that day on, I knew that the orchid with the purple heart carried not only the warrior's memory, but also the hope for a better world.

I, the young orphan, had not only preserved the orchid's story, but also passed it on. I realised that the beauty of the orchid lay not in its white flowers, but in the powerful story it carried in its purple heart. And so, every year, the orchids with purple hearts bloom to remind the world that true beauty and strength come from within.





THE HAMMOCK BEAR

I am Mani, an Asian black bear, and I am the undisputed ruler of my jungle in Laos. But one day, near the river, I discovered a strange structure no one should have built: a sturdy wooden frame bolted between the trees, holding a soft, colourful net—a hammock. It was not like the rough vines I used for climbing.

At first, I was sceptical. The frame creaked, and the fabric wobbled violently as I tried to settle myself. But my curiosity was stronger. After several clumsy attempts, I finally managed to distribute my heavy weight. The feeling was incredible. I was floating in the air, free from the solid earth, gently swaying among the treetops. I closed my eyes and relaxed completely, dreaming of sweet mangoes and flying honeycombs.

My peace, however, did not last. One afternoon, a younger, careless bear named Poom stumbled through the undergrowth and froze when he saw me floating above. I opened one eye and let out a deep, warning growl; this was my private oasis! But Poom was too curious. He just stared at the gently swaying nylon surface. I knew then: the hammock was too tempting, and I would soon have to share my secret place.

The hammock became our secret retreat. When the silly humans wander by and find the wooden frame, Poom and I hide in the undergrowth. We watch them look at the structure and wonder who uses it, and sometimes, yes, we smile. They think the hammock is meant for them, but they are wrong. We are the floating bears of Laos. And if you listen closely, you might hear our soft, contented snoring echoing through the jungle.

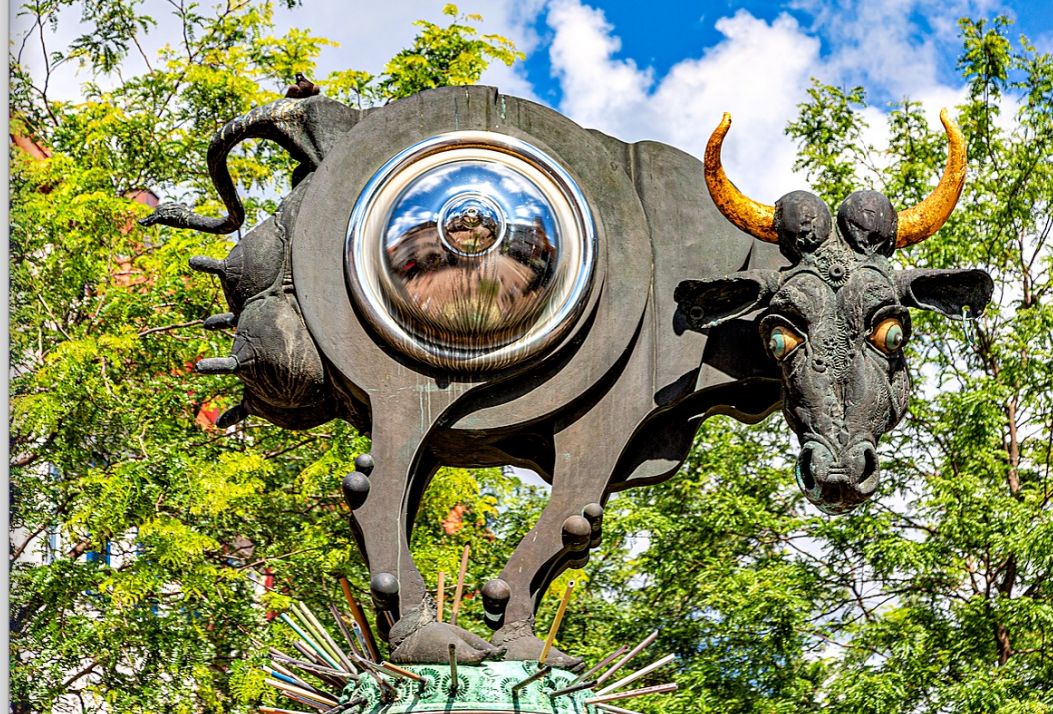
KUHRIOSUM

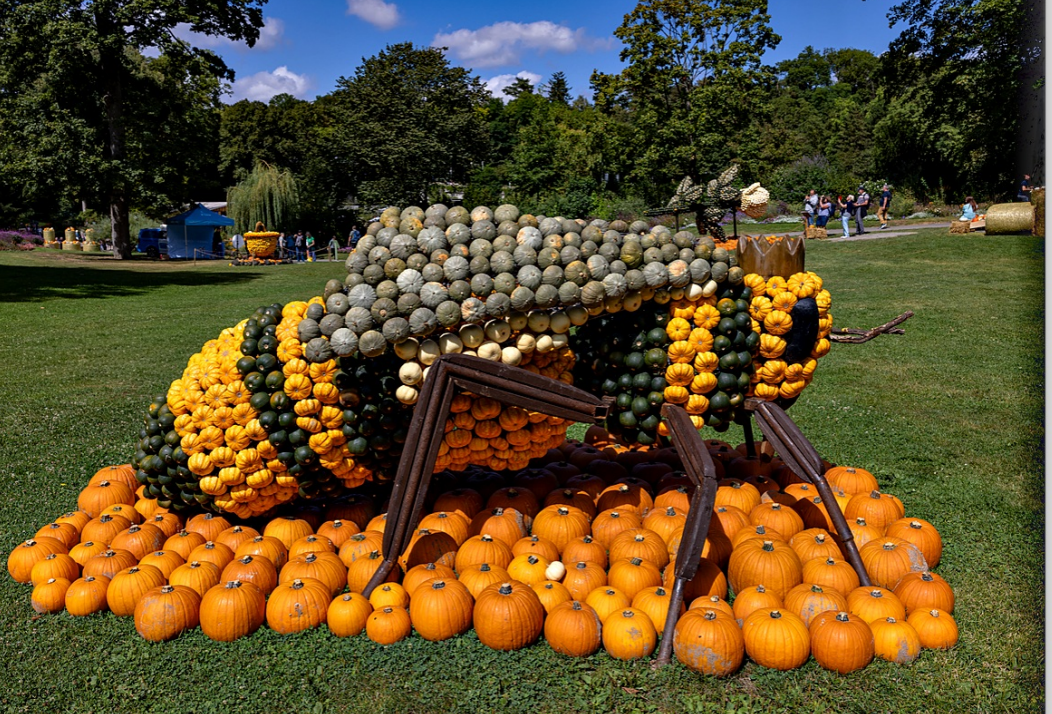
I am Charlotte. I was once just a little cow living in a quiet pasture on the outskirts of Bietigheim-Bissingen. The other cows were so dull; all they ever thought about was the lush green grass. But me? I dreamed of greater things. I dreamed of flying carpets, singing flowers, and magical fountains. My sisters made fun of me, of course; they called me “dreamy Charlotte.”

Then, everything changed. An artist named Jürgen Goertz was walking through the town, and he heard my story. He was fascinated, and he decided to create a monument to me on Kronenplatz.

I am bronze now—the Kuhriosum. I am a creature that embodies my own dreams. I am a fountain, pouring out not just water, but a glittering, golden stream that carries my story into the square. For the children, I am more than just metal; I am their silent, magical friend. They try to catch my golden stream, convinced it will bring them luck. Their cheerful laughter mingling with my splashing water is the most beautiful sound. They whisper their most secret wishes into my ear, and when the water sprays high, I know I am spraying the magic of their dreams into the town.

The residents of Bietigheim-Bissingen say I bring luck and imagination. And sometimes, if you listen very closely to the splashing of the fountain, you can hear my soft laugh and a quiet “moo”—because I am the dreamy Charlotte, and my magical adventures continue to this day.





PUMPKIN EXHIBITION

I am Princess Amalia, and I once lived in the residential palace in Ludwigsburg. My garden, the Blühendes Barock, was magnificent, but the melancholic beauty of autumn always pained me. The garden would become empty because my gardeners simply could not find flowers strong enough to survive the golden season.

One evening, during one of my walks, I came across a small, lost pumpkin. It was a pumpkin of an amazing orange colour that glowed in the moonlight. As I approached it, a small, glittering figure appeared. It was a little pumpkin spirit. He told me the many stories that pumpkins carried within them, of the sun of summer and the cold of winter. He said that his kind had the power to beautify autumn and give people hope.

Touched by his story, I decided we would banish the emptiness. The little pumpkin spirit and I summoned all the pumpkins in the land, from the small decorative ones to the giant edible ones. We arranged them into impressive figures that told the fairy tales and stories of the land.

When autumn came and people visited the Baroque garden, they were overwhelmed by the beauty of our exhibition. They saw not only pumpkins in the figures, but also the stories they carried within them. I grew old, but the pumpkin spirit returns to my Baroque garden every year to create the exhibition. When you visit the pumpkin exhibition at the Blühendes Barock today, know that you are witnessing the stories of the princess and the pumpkin spirit, reflected in every artfully arranged figure.

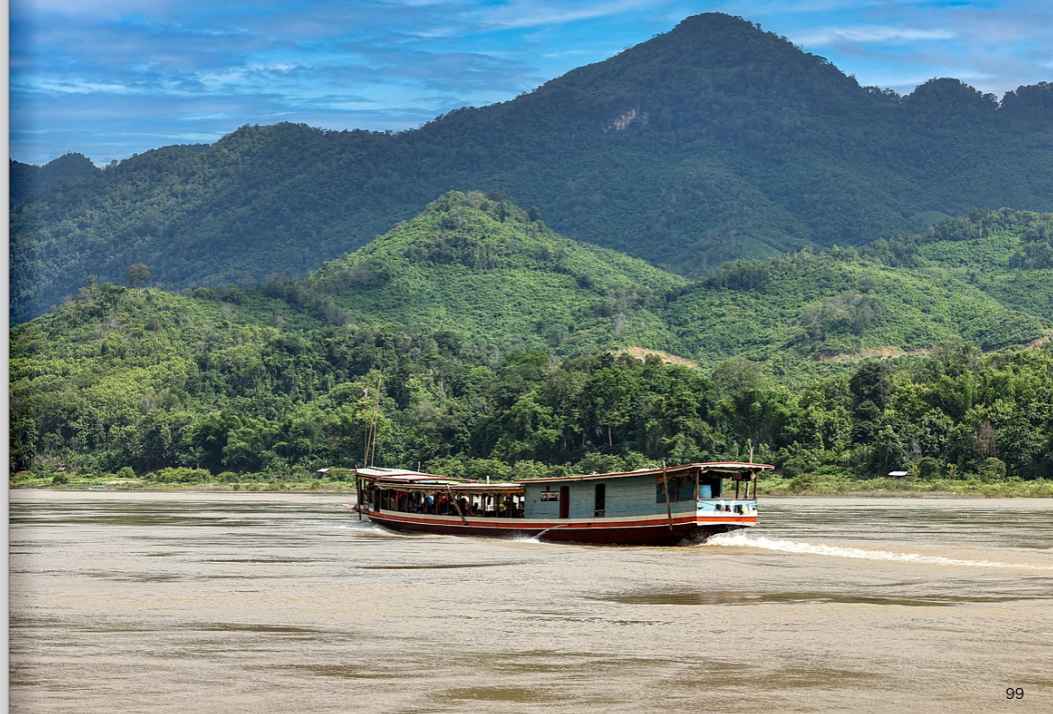
MAE NAM KHONG

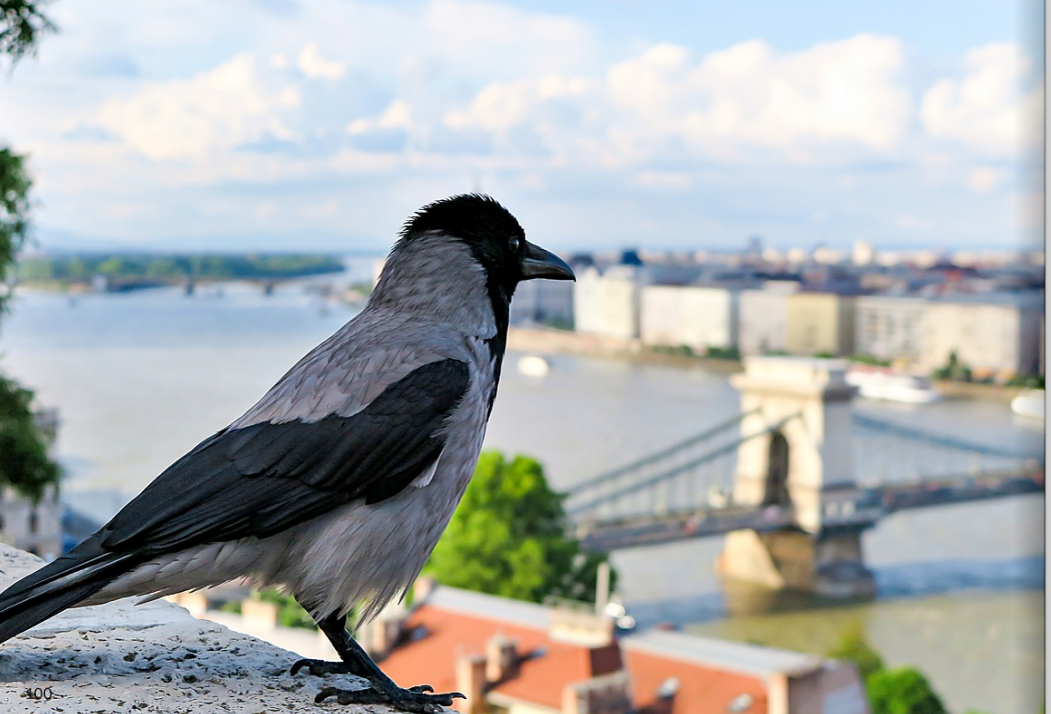
I was once a simple water snake living in a small stream, but my life belonged to the great mother of water—Mae Nam Khong, the Mekong—who nourished me. When my stream almost dried up, I had a transformative dream. I plunged into the deepest depths of the Mekong, where I met the ancient gods. I pleaded with them: “Please, let me be the mother of the waters.” The gods, touched by the purity of my heart, gave me a task: I was to live as a human, Sila, to learn how to bring nature into harmony with humanity.

I was reborn as a little girl and grew up on the banks of the Mekong, learning its language. In the rainy season, I helped the people save their homes. In the dry season, I showed them where to find the best fish. I was wise and kind, and the people called me the “daughter of the Mekong.”

One day, when I was grown up, I returned to the river and prayed. I had realised the profound truth: the Mekong is not just a river, but a part of life that demands balance—we must not only take from her, but also receive. I felt my true nature rush back to me, and I transformed into the great Naga who would protect the mother of water.

I, the Naga, still live at the bottom of the Mekong today. If you look closely at the emerald green water, you can sometimes see a movement that does not come from a fish, or hear a deep rumbling that does not come from a motorboat. That is me, the Naga, watching over the river and reminding the people of Laos that the Mother of Water is always with them.





CORVIN - THE CARRION CROW

I am Corvin, a special raven who lives high above the city, where the colourful Zsolnay tiles of Matthias Church reflect the sun. Unlike the common crows of Budapest, I am a direct descendant of the raven that returned King Matthias Corvinus' ring. I carry the memory of that legendary jewel in my heart.

One day, when the noise of the tourists had subsided, I landed on a window sill. Below me, I saw a young girl named Eszter. She had forgotten the old legends. She saw me only as an ordinary, annoying bird.

But I felt a deep connection to her sadness, a longing beneath the surface of the city's hustle. I tapped my beak against the window pane to catch her attention. When she looked up, I let her see the depth in my intelligent, alert eyes.

I executed a small, subtle trick. I grabbed a shiny souvenir—a small golden ring—that had fallen on the floor and placed it deliberately on the windowsill. Eszter picked up the ring, surprised and fascinated, feeling a strange warmth from the metal. When she looked up again, I was already gone. I rose quickly into the sky, becoming a tiny black dot over the parliament building.

She understood. My mission was complete. She had rediscovered the connection to the ancient stories that live in the soul of the city. I had brought her not only a ring, but also the memory of the magic hidden in Budapest's history.

From that day on, she will no longer see the ravens on the roofs as ordinary birds. I know she will carry that little golden ring with her always, not as a jewel, but as a silent promise. The secret of the King and the ravens now lives on in her heart, guarded by the black silhouettes in the sky.

KINGSTON-UPON-HULL

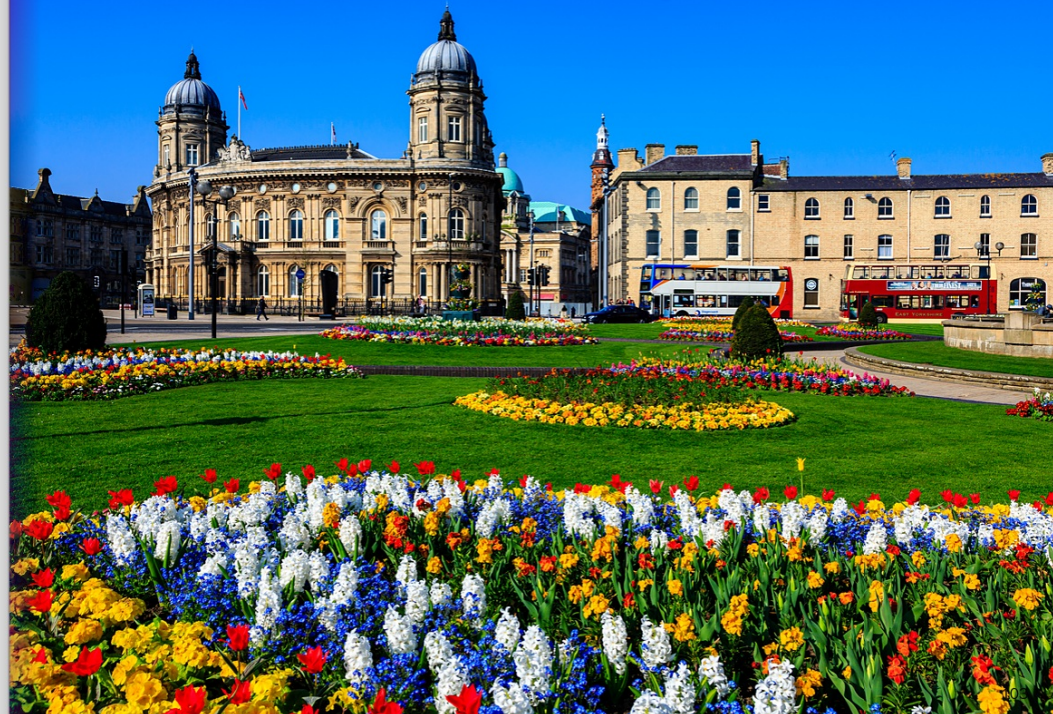
I am Arthur, an old fisherman who lives by the River Hull. I remember the cold, biting wind sweeping in from the North Sea and the Humber estuary. I remember the whaling and fishing glory days of Kingston upon Hull. While everyone else celebrates the modern changes, I often look wistfully at the river, seeing only the ghosts of the past.

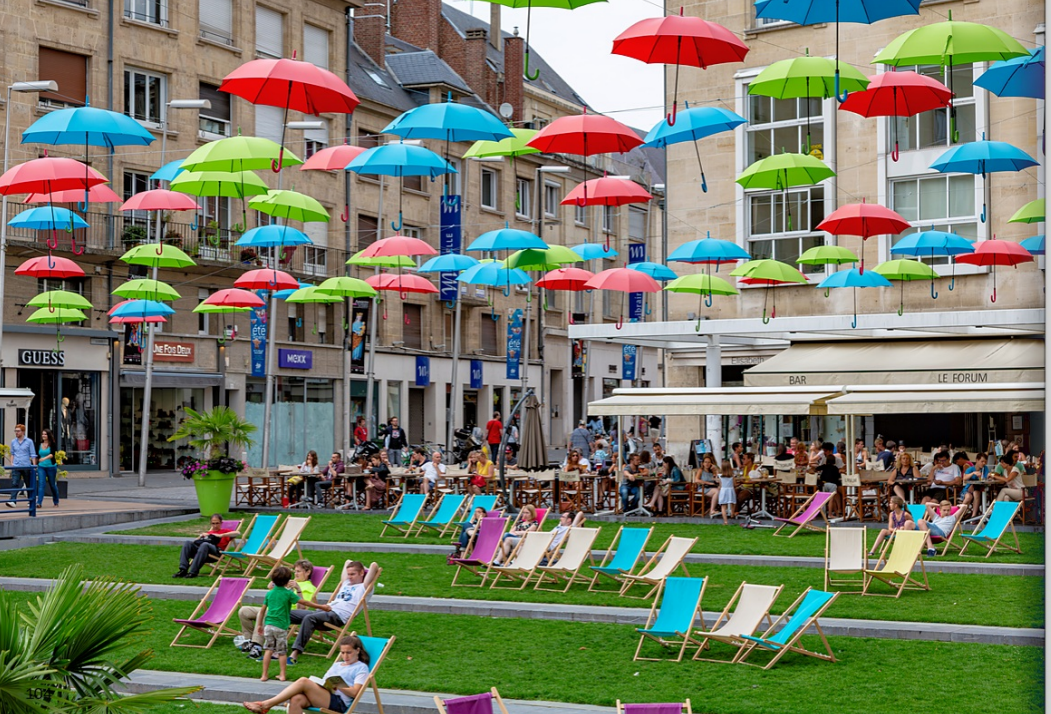
But this spring, something broke through the grey: the tender, sun-warmed rays, and a young girl named Lily. She is the granddaughter of an old friend, and she came to the river every day with her small easel. She painted the old red-brown brick houses and the ships, but she didn't paint the city as it was in my memory; she painted it as it should be—full of colour and hope.

One day, I had to stop and ask her what she was painting. "I'm painting the city," she said. "The city in spring." I told her I had only ever seen the city in grey fog. Lily smiled and said, "In spring, everything comes back to life: the old houses, the trees, the people. You just have to look closely to see the colours."

Her words touched me deeply. I looked at the city with new eyes. I finally saw the delicate green of the trees in the parks, the colourful flowers on the balconies, and the bright blue of the sky reflected in the river's water. I realised that the people in the city, just like nature, were awakening from their hibernation and celebrating the hope of a new beginning.

From that day on, I no longer saw Hull as a place of the past, but as a place of the future. The story of spring in Kingston upon Hull is no longer told only by nature, but also by me and the people who have rediscovered the magic of spring in the streets of our city.





AMIENS

I am Amie, a small umbrella maker in Amiens, northern France. I love springtime here, but business was failing. People no longer seemed to appreciate simple, traditional craftsmanship, and my workshop in the Quartier Saint-Leu was in danger of closing.

One day, walking past the blooming Hortillonnages, I had an idea. I decided to bring colour back to the city, not with flowers, but with the fabrics of my parasols. The mayor was sceptical, seeing only risk, not opportunity, but I was determined.

With the help of the few merchants who believed in me, I began to stretch parasols in a wide variety of colours across the streets. I used silk and cotton parasols in all the colours of the rainbow. At first there were only a few, then more and more, until the entire neighbourhood was covered by a canopy of floating colours.

The tourists who came to the city were thrilled. The city, otherwise known for its Gothic cathedral, suddenly became famous for its floating parasols. My workshop, which had been on the verge of closing, became a busy place again. I realised I had not only saved my livelihood, but also filled the city with colour again. The hanging parasols were a symbol of hope, reminding people that the traditions of the past still have a place in the modern world.

Since then, they say, the hanging parasols are a symbol of hope that fills the city with colour, joy, and the magic of imagination. I, Amie, the umbrella maker, became the guardian of this beautiful tradition and the protector of my city's soul.

KAKHETI PRAIRIE

I am Luka, a shepherd. For generations, my family has moved our thousands of sheep with the rhythm of the seasons, from the high mountains of Tusheti to the winter pastures in the semi-deserts of Kakheti. I know this land by the wind, by the way, the sun falls, and by the smell of the grass.

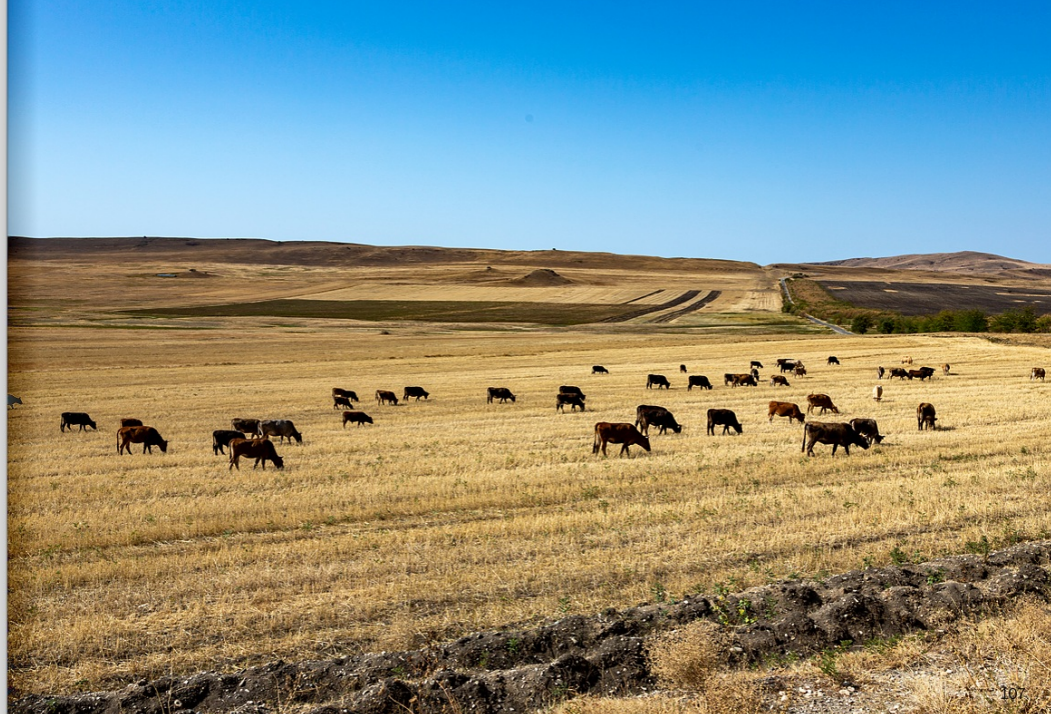
In my flock, there is a small, curious lamb named Beka. While the others graze, Beka is the “little explorer,” always searching for the rarest, juiciest blade of grass. I often have to bring him back from the edges of our pasture.

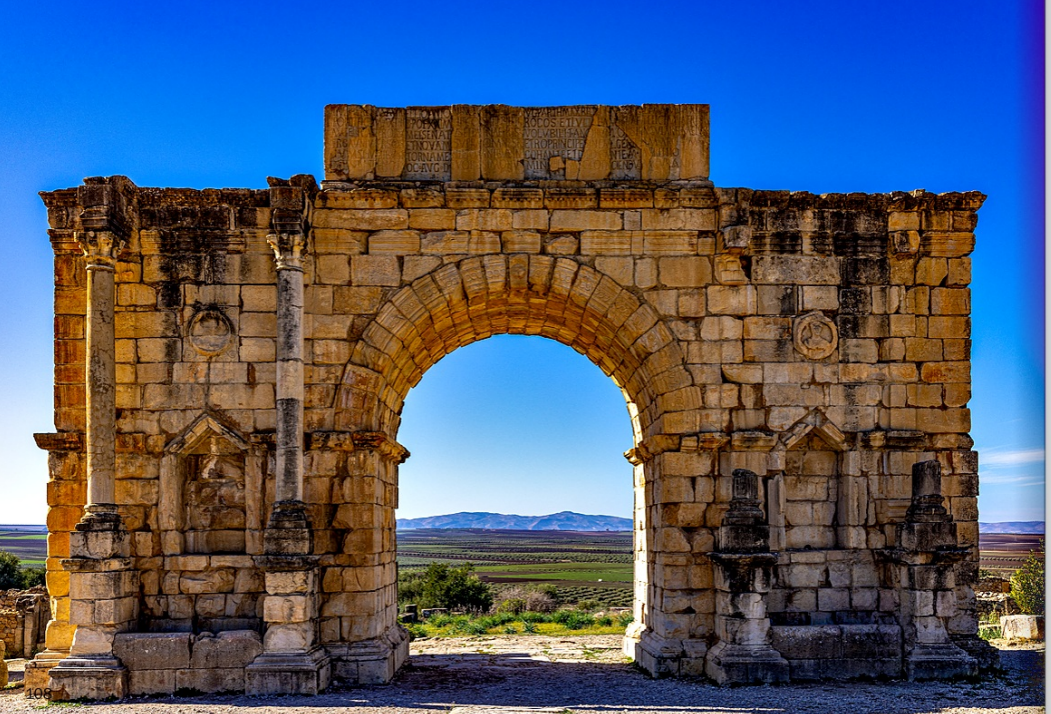
One day, with the sun at its highest, Beka started climbing a steep cliff for a golden blade of grass. I knew how dangerous those cliffs are. Just as Beka was about to reach his goal, the cliff began to slide. The lamb cried out in fear.

I rushed down the slope without hesitation. I know that the life of a single lamb is not worth much, but Beka belonged to the flock that is my family. I managed to reach him just as he was about to fall, and I carried him back on my shoulders, his small body trembling against mine. I was angry, but mostly relieved.

When we reached the flock, Beka immediately held out that small golden blade of grass to me. Touched by his gratitude, I ate it. It tasted sweet and powerfully of adventure. From that day on, I had a new perspective on the steppes of Kakheti. I saw not only the endless grass and the flock, but also the little adventures and stories hidden in this barren landscape.

Now, the story of the shepherd who saved the lost lamb is told among the others, passed down from generation to generation. Beka taught me that the greatest value often lies not in the entire herd, but in one small, curious heart.





VOLUBILIS

I am Tahar, nicknamed Qualili, because I thrive like the oleander on these barren slopes above the fertile valley of Volubilis, or Walila, as my people call it. I grew up on the shepherds' stories. The ruins are my home. While others see only rubble, I see the stories of the people who lived and died here, the conquerors who came and went, and the nature that outlasts them all. I am particularly fascinated by the majestic victory monument, the triumphal arch of Caracalla.

One day, while grazing my flock near the arch, I found a stone. It was no ordinary piece of debris. It bore a pattern I recognised from the old Roman mosaics, yet it also echoed the intricate designs of my Berber ancestors. It was a piece of history where two worlds met. I was fascinated. I began to work on the stone, grinding and polishing it until the pattern was recognisable again. I carved the whole history of Walila into that stone: the lives, the deaths, the conquerors, and the enduring nature that survives everything.

When I returned to the village, I showed the stone to my grandfather. The old man was moved. "You have not only found a stone, my son," he told me, "you have found the soul of Walila."

From that day on, I am known not only as a shepherd but as a storyteller. I understood that the stories live on not only in the ruins but also in the stones themselves, showing us how our past influences our present. I carry the soul of Walila.

HOLY KASBEK

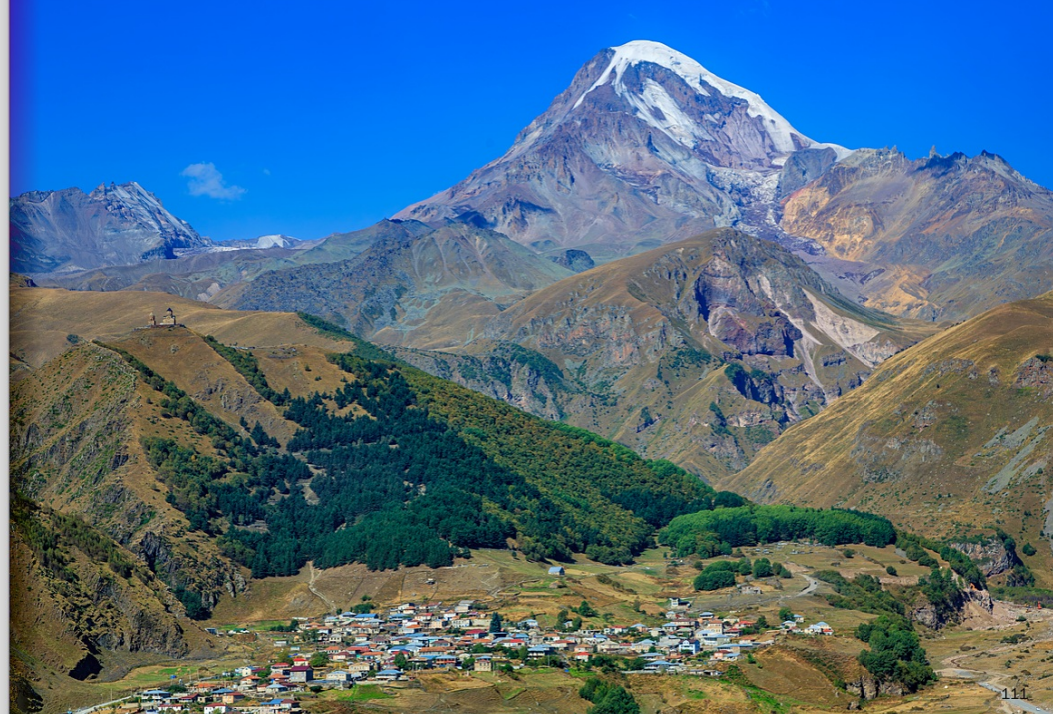
I am Davit, a shepherd in Stepantsminda, living in the shadow of Kazbek, the sacred, glacier-covered mountain. In our village, we still tell the ancient tale of Amirani, the Caucasian Prometheus, chained to the peak for his disobedience. But my story is different.

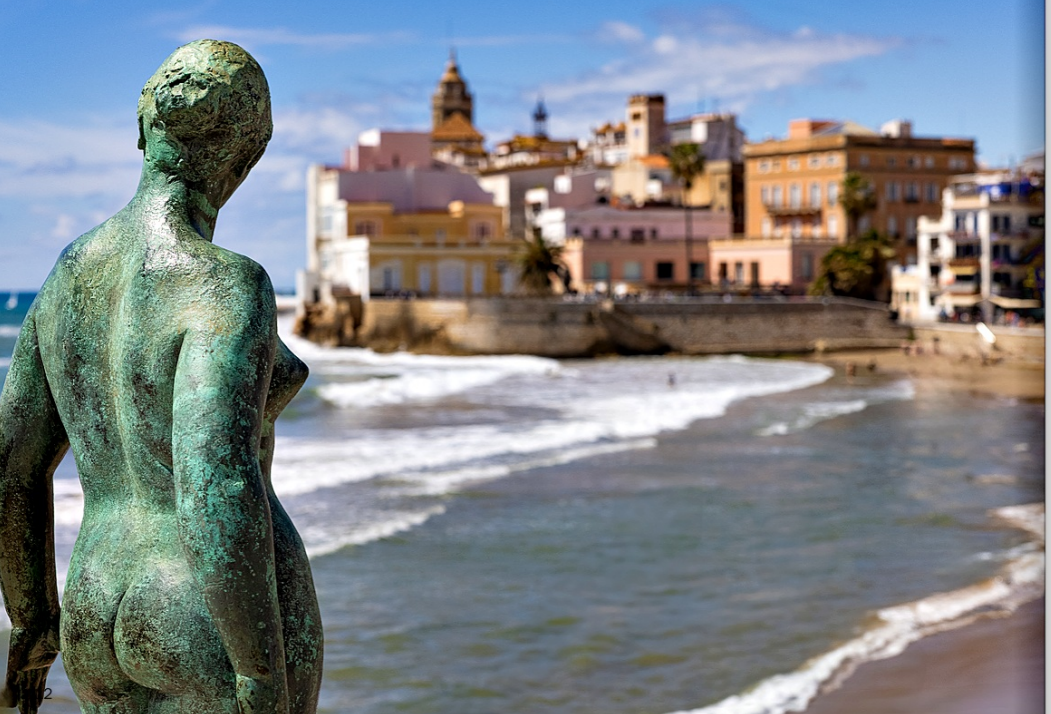
My father disappeared into the crevasses of Kazbek while attempting the summit. Driven by loss, I vowed to conquer the mountain, not out of boastfulness, but to uncover his secret. I knew the paths, the animals, and the dangers of the mountain, but above all, I knew that the mountain had a soul.

One day, as I set out for the summit, his spirit appeared to me. “Davit, you don't have to climb to the summit,” he said. “The mountain has already given you everything you need: strength, patience, serenity. And you will not find the secrets of the mountain at the summit, but in your heart.”

I understood. I turned back and devoted my life to our village and to sharing the true wisdom of the holy mountain—which is not to be found in the heights, but in the depths of the heart. My story became a legend passed down by the shepherds of Stepantsminda. People now come from all over the world to see Kazbek, hear the ancient legends, and feel the silence of the Caucasus.

I never reached the peak, yet I found the summit of wisdom. If you listen carefully today, you can hear my echo, the shepherd who found the true meaning of the holy mountain without ever climbing it, carried on the wind blowing over the peaks.





THE MERMAID OF SITGES

I am Mateo, a fisherman, and my hands are strong from a lifetime spent at sea off Sitges. My best friend is Sofia, the seamstress. Every evening, we met on the steps in front of the church to watch the sunset. My dream was a big catch to make me rich; Sofia's was a dress beautiful enough for a queen.

Then, the Mermaid of Sitges by Pere Jou was erected beneath the church walls. I found the magic first. When I touched the mermaid's open palm before setting sail, I had incredible luck at sea. I told Sofia, and she was sceptical, but when she saw the first riches I brought back, she started believing.

Sofia began touching the mermaid's hand to find inspiration for her dresses. Ideas flowed to her. We both became successful, and every evening, we came back, not just to dream, but to thank the mermaid and tell her about our adventures. Soon, the whole town started touching her hand for luck.

But over time, the gratitude faded. People forgot the stories and took the mermaid for granted. One evening, under the high moon, Sofia and I saw that the mermaid looked sad. We realised we had forgotten the stories we carried in our hearts. We made a promise that night: we would not only ask for good fortune, but we would always give thanks and tell of the magic we owed her.

Since then, I know the mermaid has been not only a lucky charm for Sitges, but a guardian of our memories. We taught the town that luck must be honoured.

PARAGLIDING

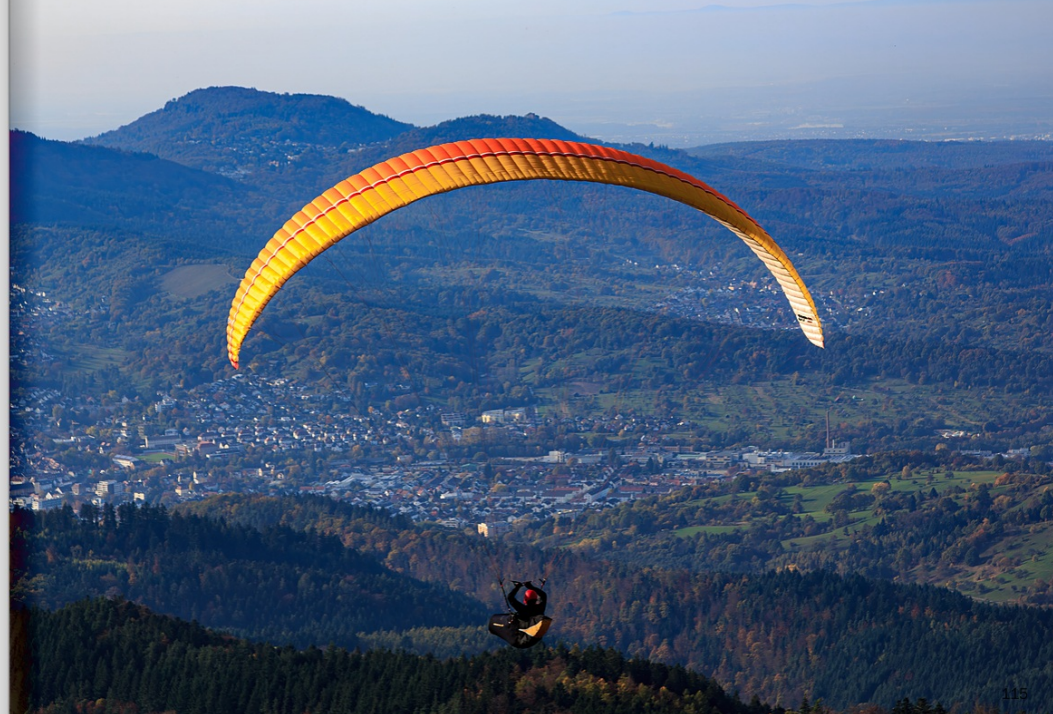
I am Johannes, and my family has been tied to the old Teufelsmühle in Loffenau for generations. In the summer of 1977, when we discovered that perfect launch site below the mill, I found my passion. For me, flying was not about conquering the wind; it was about understanding it. I searched the slopes, where the cold air played around the fir trees, looking for the perfect, gentle moment to take off.

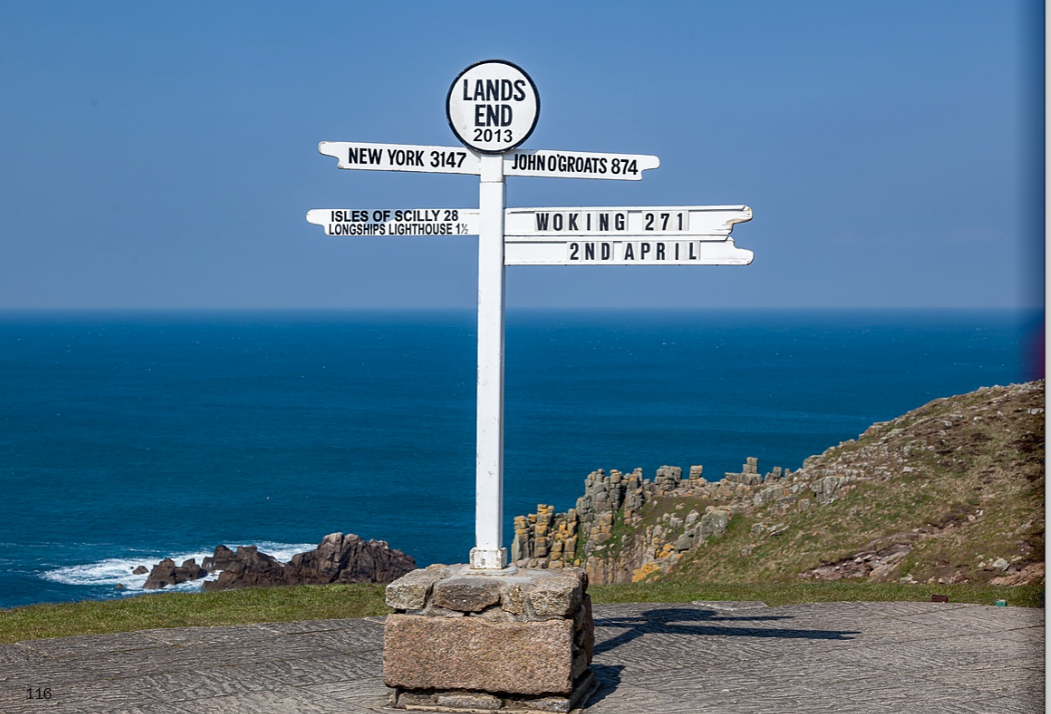
The old legends are real here. The Devil, who still resents losing the mill, watched me. He saw the confidence I placed in the wind. He, who considered himself the ruler of wind and weather, wanted to tempt me into overestimating my own powers.

One day, when the sky was clear, he appeared in the form of an old man. “Young man,” he said, his voice like dry leaves, “if you really want to fly, you must fly into the storm. Only there will you find the true power of the wind.” I knew instantly it was a trap. I saw in his eyes not the wisdom of the wind, but the lust for control.

I turned around and gave him my truth. “True strength lies not in defeating the storm, but in understanding it.” I ignored his temptation. I waited for the perfect moment, took off in a gentle updraft, and was carried far above the valley. The frustrated Devil disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

From that day on, we named our club the Teufelsflieger (Devil’s Flyers), not because we were possessed, but because we had defeated the devilish forces and made the wind our friend. It is a story still told here in Loffenau.





LANDS END

I am Liam, a fisherman whose family has lived by the sea at Land's End for generations. I've faced the wildest storms here, at the westernmost point of England. My greatest treasure is my daughter, Jodee, whose laughter is as bright as the sun. She loves the old stories about the sunken kingdom of Lyonesse—tales I always took with a grain of salt.

One stormy evening, I cast my net, dreaming of a huge catch, but the sea gave me only a small, glittering piece of driftwood—an intricately carved replica of a sword. I took it home for Jodee. When she saw it, she declared, "Dad, that's the Sword of Lyonesse. It was found to show us that the sea not only takes, but also gives." I laughed, but that night, as the wind whipped against the windows, I dreamed of a sunken kingdom.

The next morning, the sea was calm. I went to the beach and found a shiny piece of jewellery washed ashore—a small golden fish figurine. That was the moment. I took it home, and Jodee was overjoyed. I realised she was right: the sea had given us not only a treasure, but also a story.

From that day on, Jodee and I no longer see the sea as just a vast expanse of water. We see it as a living soul that tells stories and offers treasures if you are willing to listen and find them. And so, our story—the family who listened to the treasures of the sea at Land's End—became a legend in Cornwall, passed down from generation to generation.

ALLERHEILIGENBERG

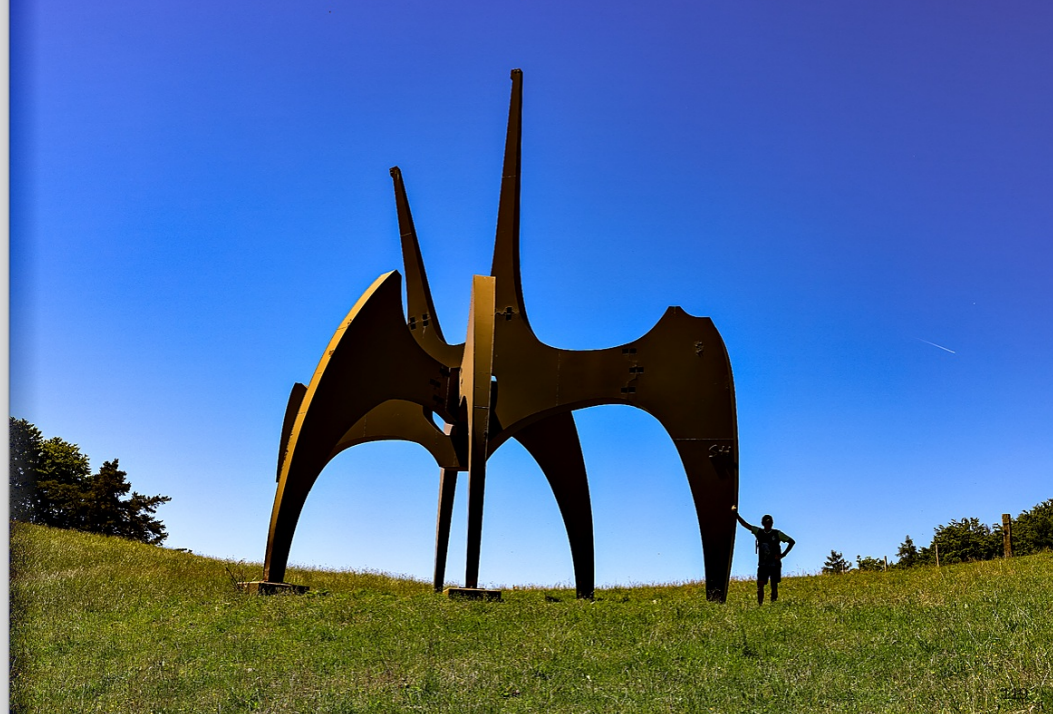
I am Heidi, and I was a young nurse working at the sanatorium on Allerheiligenberg near Solothurn at the beginning of the 20th century. The air up here in the Jura Mountains is pure and clear, meant to heal the patients' lungs. But I knew they needed more than clean air. I saw the fears and worries in the eyes of the sick and wished I could give them more than just medical help.

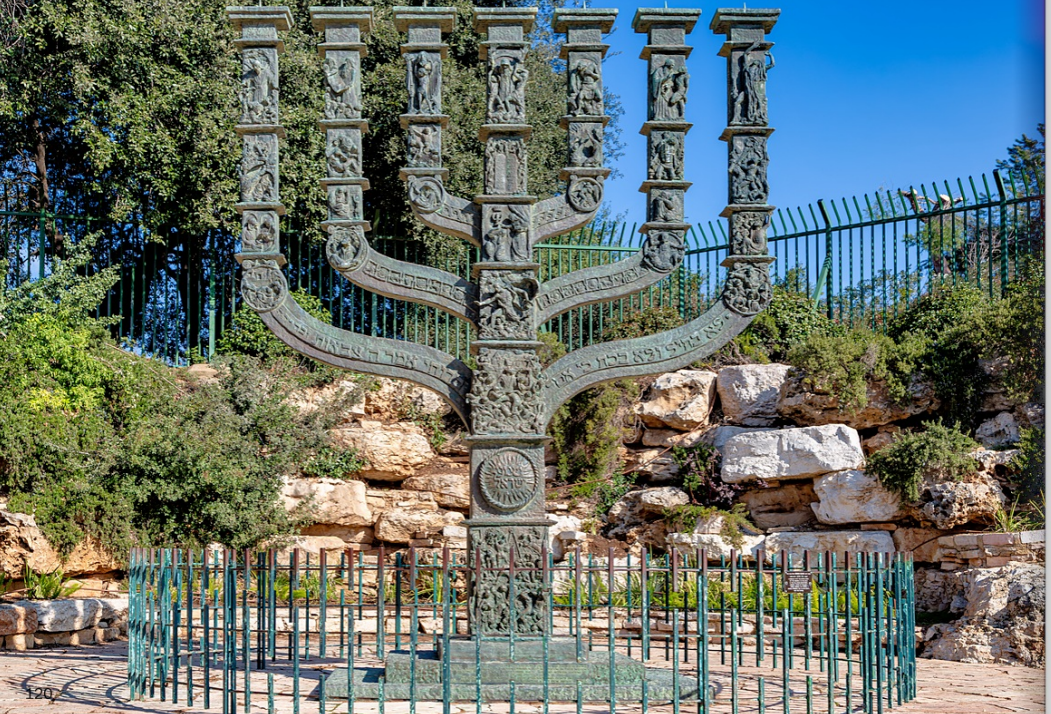
I had a special gift: I sang. My voice was like the wind blowing over the hills—gentle and full of hope. In the evenings, when the sun vanished behind the Jura, I would sneak up the hill to the spot where the monument stands today. There, I sang old folk songs and told stories of the hope that spring brought. I could feel the patients listening from their rooms, finding comfort.

One of my patients, a young painter named Artur, was too weak to hear my melodies clearly, but he felt the magic. He asked me what I did on the hill every evening. When I told him about my songs, Artur was inspired. He decided to paint a memorial to me, a painting that would capture the spirit of this place: the hope that singing brought to people's hearts.

But Artur was unable to finish his painting. He died before he could complete his work. His death deeply affected me, and I vowed to carry on his legacy. With the help of the other patients, we collected stones and erected the column and figure that stand today on All Saints' Hill. It is not a simple sculpture, but a tribute to the hope and comfort that Artur and I shared with the sick.

Now, it is said that on particularly windless days, you can hear the melody of my songs blowing over the hill. And in the monument's shape, you can see the hope that remains alive, even after the sanatorium is gone.





MENORAH

I am Dov. My face carries countless stories, and I am a living witness to history. The large bronze Menorah standing in front of the Knesset in Jerusalem is not merely a statue to me; it is a living book of bronze detailing the 29 decisive moments in the life of the Jewish people.

I was standing there, tracing the reliefs, when a young soldier named Sarah approached me. She asked what it all meant. I smiled and began at the beginning. I showed her the story of Abraham, leaving his country to follow God's call. “That's the beginning,” I told her. “The history of our people began with a promise.”

I led her through the centuries—the kings, the prophets, the Babylonian exile when we lost our homeland. “Each branch tells a different story,” I explained. “But all the stories are connected.”

We came to the reliefs of the Diaspora, persecution, and finally, the Holocaust. Her eyes filled with tears. She asked, “How could our people survive all this?” I, a Holocaust survivor myself, placed my hand on the relief depicting our return to the land of Israel and the founding of the state.

“The Menorah is more than just a sculpture,” I told her. “It is a reminder that our faith, our hope, and our will to survive are stronger than any destruction.” Sarah was deeply moved. She no longer saw a mere work of art, but a symbol of our eternal struggle and unshakeable hope.

Sarah visits the menorah often now. I realised that the history of our people lives on not only in books, but also in the reliefs of this Menorah. My purpose here is to ensure that this living book of bronze continues to teach the next generation, burning as an eternal light for the people of Israel.

RED COTTON TREE

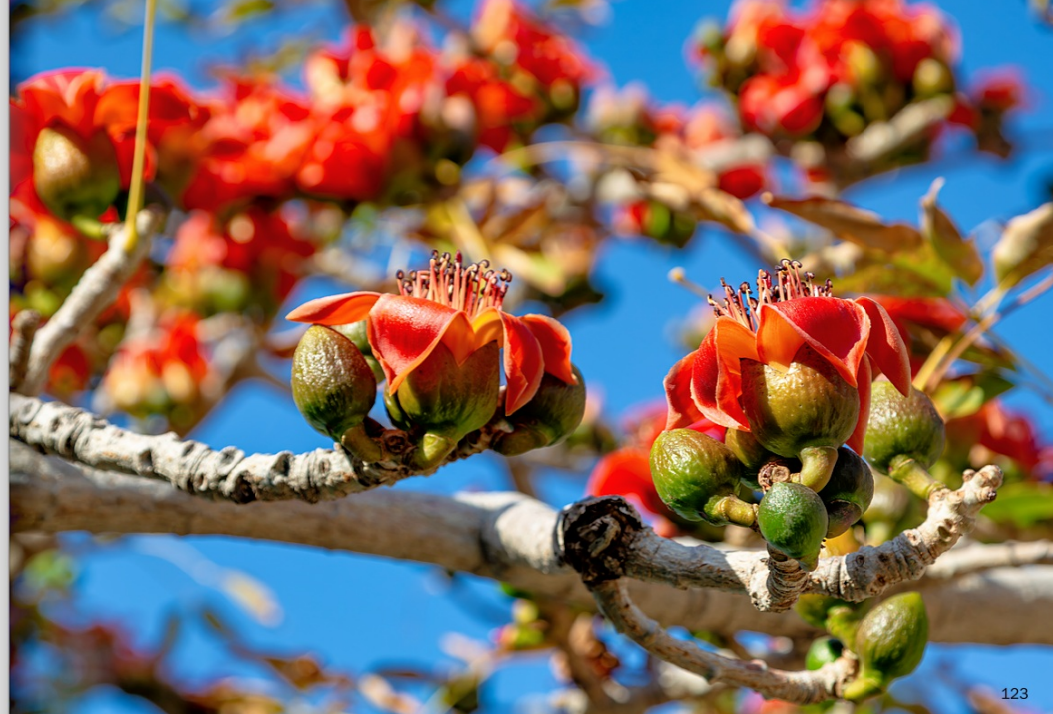
I am Amir, a gardener in Tel Aviv. The old, gnarled red silk tree, the Bombax Ceiba, near Rothschild Boulevard is my heart. Its branches whisper the city's stories, and in spring, it blossoms so brightly it seems to bring its own fiery season. It was the setting for my secret romance.

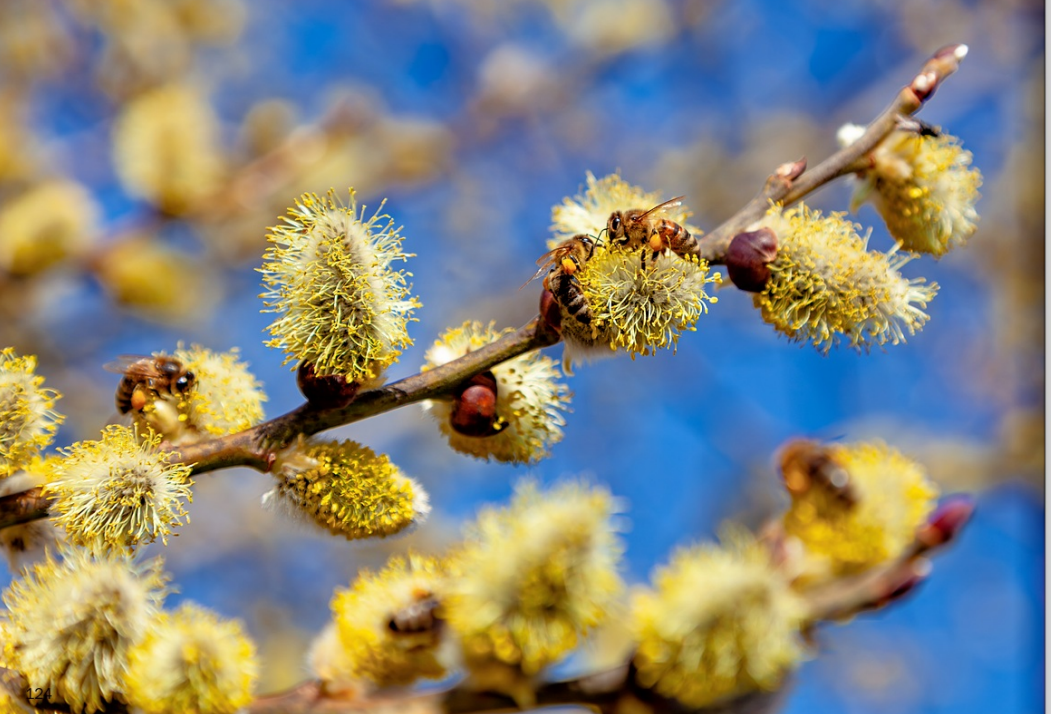
My love was Naomi, a talented artist. We met here every day when the tree was in full bloom. The bright petals that turned the ground into a red carpet were our symbol of love. But then she had to leave the city. My heart was broken, but Naomi promised she would return when the tree's flowers bloomed again.

Time passed. Not knowing if I would ever see her, I tended the tree with even greater devotion. I decided to record the stories of the people I observed under its shade. I painted the young lovers, the laughing children, and the old people resting on the benches. I painted their stories to keep the heart of the tree alive.

When spring came and the tree was in full bloom again, I stood under it and waited. The petals that fell on me were like a kiss of hope. Suddenly, I saw her—Naomi, walking down the street with a little boy. She had come back to fulfil her promise.

She hugged me, and then she saw the pictures I had hung on the branches. She saw our story reflected there and realised how deeply I had loved her. She decided to stay in Tel Aviv forever, dedicating her art to the city. Now, the red silk tree is our symbol of love and hope. Every spring, when the petals fall to the ground, they remind everyone of our story—that love, like the blossoms of the tree, awakens again and again.





HONEY BEES - PART OF A MIRACLE

I am Maya, and spring in the Markgräflerland is the most beautiful time of my life. The air is filled with the sweet scent of nectar from the cherry trees and willows. For my sisters and me, this is the time of hardest work. I know that to collect just 500 grams of honey, we must make 40,000 flights, covering 120,000 kilometres—a distance that feels like the end of the world.

This morning, the air was warm and clear, and the blossoms glowed. As one of the most experienced foragers, I set off. I flew over the rolling hills, past vineyards and flowering meadows, visiting one cherry blossom after another to collect the precious nectar. The work was hard, but it filled me with a deep sense of satisfaction. I knew that every flower I visited was a small contribution to the greater whole; I am part of a larger plan, a cycle that connects nature and our colony.

But one day, when I was at the end of my strength, I crashed. I landed on a willow catkin, so exhausted I nearly gave up. But I forced myself to think of the queen, my sisters, and the importance of our task. I thought of the honey we had collected and the hope it brought.

I pulled myself together and continued my flight. When I arrived at the hive, I was happy. I had done my part. As I settled down to rest, I dreamed of the thousands of kilometres I had travelled and the honey I had collected with my sisters. I realised then that I was not just an insect, but part of a miracle.

THE COPPER ROSE BEETLE

I am Cupri, the copper rose beetle (Protaetia cuprea). My cousin may wear magnificent green and gold, but my beauty is deeper. My shell shimmers with a deep, bronze to reddish sheen—as if I were dipped in a bath of molten copper.

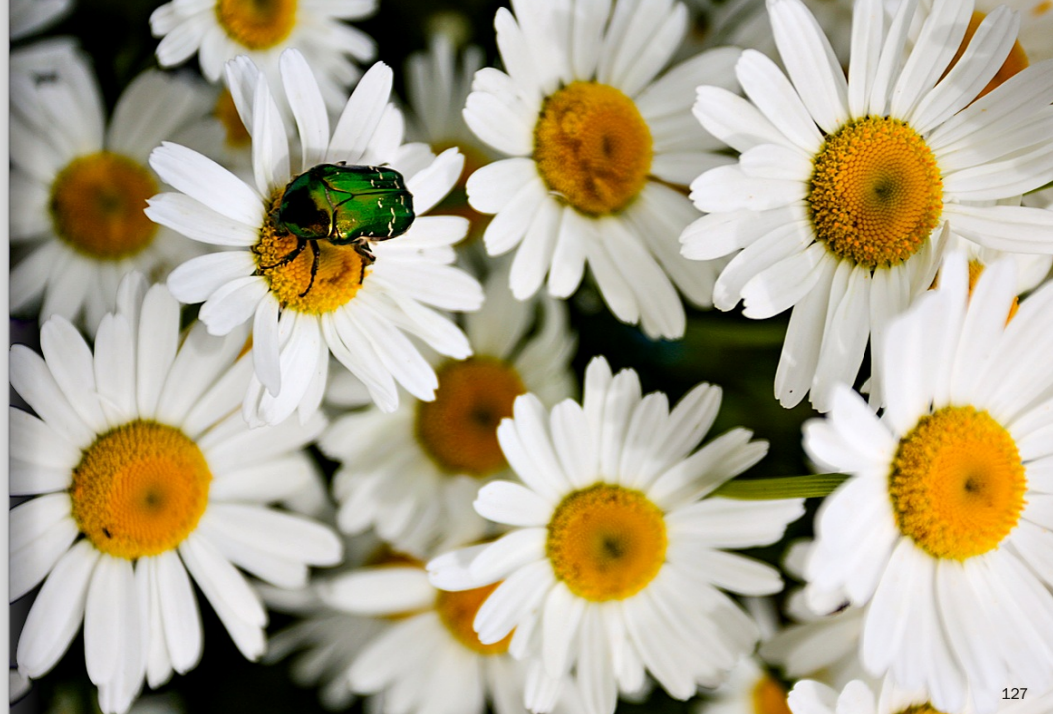
I am a creature of transformation. As a larva (grub), I lived deep in the warm compost for months. I was not a pest, but a diligent recycler, turning rotting wood and leaves into nutrient-rich soil. I was the invisible gardener of the depths.

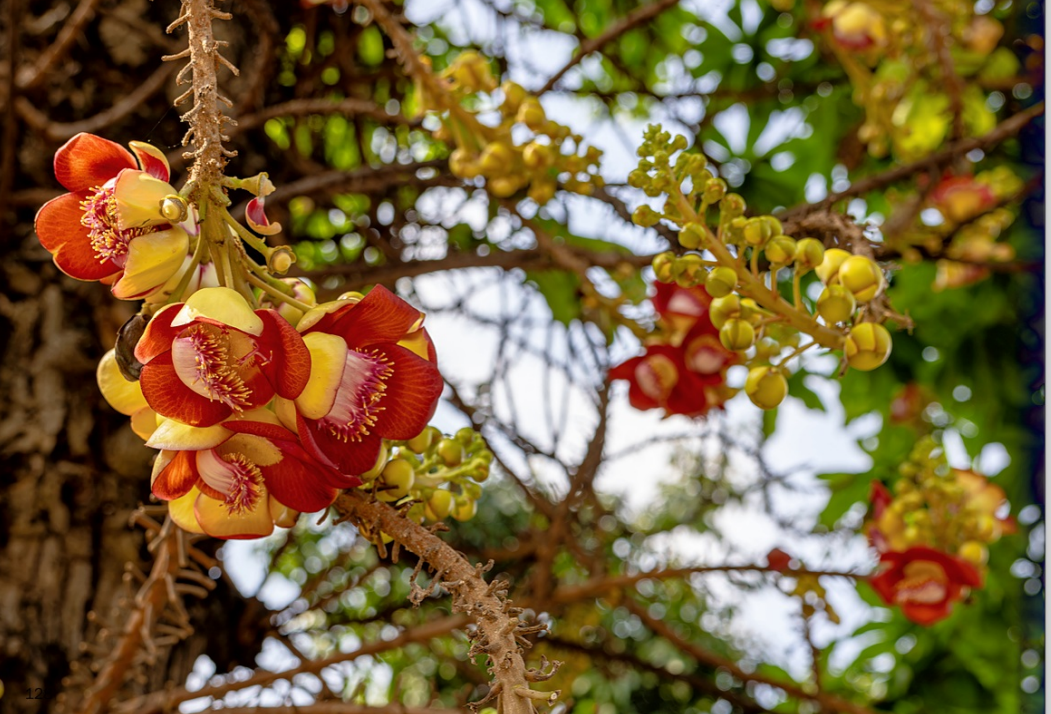
On this sunny June morning, I was ready. I broke free from my cocoon and emerged from my dark hiding place. My first act on the surface was to land on one of my favourite flowers: the bright red rose. I am a gentle eater; I feed only on nectar and pollen. I take the sweetness of life without destroying the petals.

As I crawled over a red petal, I felt a brief shadow. “What are you?” asked a boastful wasp nearby. “You're all rusty and dirty. And you're taking up so much space in my rose!”

I unfolded my wings—easily, through the side recess beneath my covers. “I am the gardener who lays the foundation,” I replied calmly. I rose into the air, my bronze armour gleaming. “I may not wear the brightest gold, but my colour symbolises the power of the earth. And I am the sign that the soil is healthy.”

I circled the garden. The sun caught my subtle copper sheen. I know that true beauty and strength lie hidden in the work—in the alchemy that transforms decay into new life. And sometimes, when the sun is just right, I wear a colour as rich as any gold.





THE EXOTIC BLOSSOMS OF THE CANNONBALL TREE

I am Achan Sumedh, a Buddhist monk, and I take care of the small grove behind my wat here in Thailand. In the centre of this grove stands a tree that is a constant lesson in extremes: the cannonball tree, which we call the sala tree. Its fruits fall like large, woody bullets, but its flowers—ah, its flowers are of unearthly beauty, a whirlwind of colours with an arrangement in the centre that reminds us of the naga and the crown of Shiva.

One hot afternoon, Nong, a young visitor from the city, came to the garden. He was captivated. “Achan,” he asked, “are these flowers real? And do they smell so wonderful? It’s a scent that is both sweet and spicy, as if you were looking into a hidden room in paradise.” I smiled and nodded. “They are real, my son. And their scent is so intense that it stuns bees and attracts moths. Nature is not subtle when it wants to represent the divine.”

I explained the spiritual significance to him: In India, the flower's structure is linked to the naga and Shiva's crown. Here in Thailand, we revere it as the sacred sala tree.

“You see the loud cannonballs on the ground,” I told him, “symbolising transience and the end. But you also smell the flower growing on its trunk, proclaiming imperishable beauty and new life.” I carefully picked a flower for Nong. “The cannonball tree teaches us that even in the face of destruction (the ball), the greatest splendour (the flower) can spring directly from the foundations of life. It constantly reminds us that the miraculous exists alongside the mundane.”

Nong bowed. As he smelled the flower, I saw the intense, exotic scent carry him away. I knew that the essence of the spiritual journey—the dramatic contrast between the deadly and the heavenly—had been reflected in his heart.

THAR DESERT

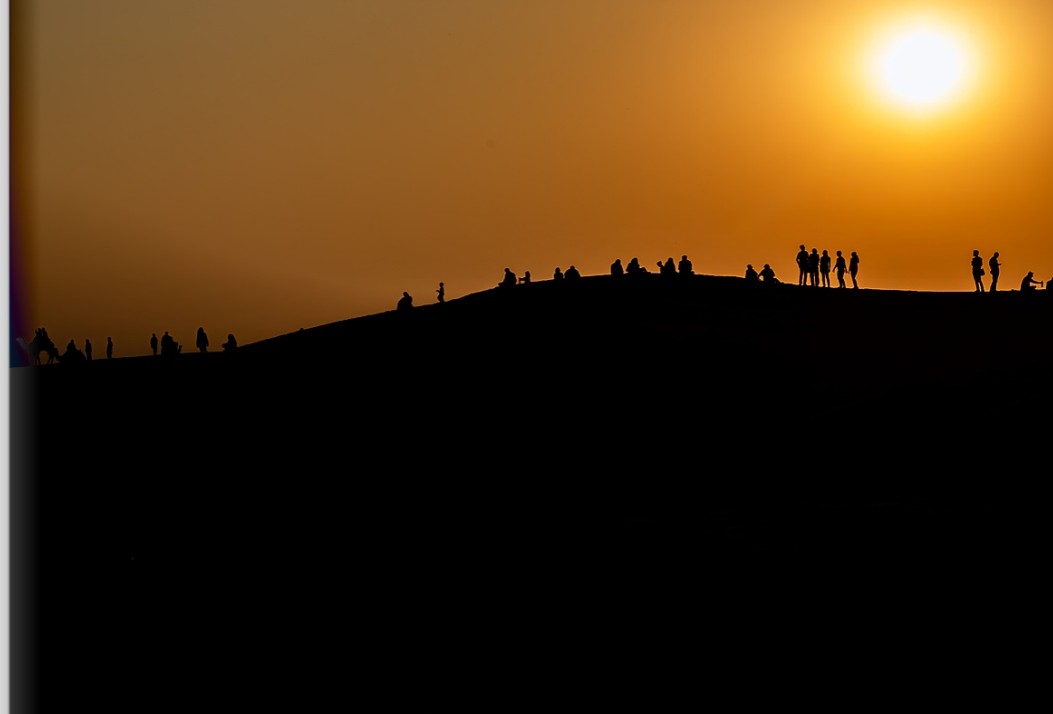
I am Bhoora Ram, the old man, and I have been the guardian of these Sam sand dunes for decades. Kanoi is my village, our root in the vastness of the Thar Desert, but the magic, for me, lies here.

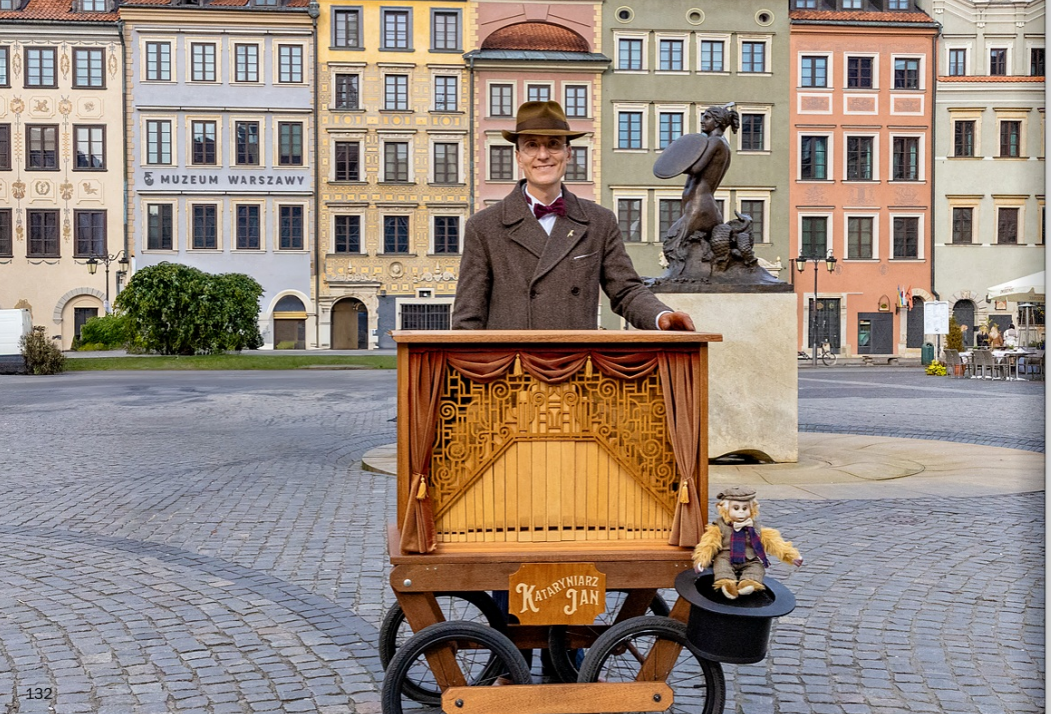
Today, I brought my young granddaughter Lajja with me to the highest dunes for the first time. “Grandfather,” she whispered, watching the flowing sand ridges, “why do we live in Kanoi when the most beautiful place is here?” I smiled. “Kanoi is the root, my child. These dunes are the breath. We need both. The village gives us stability, the sand teaches us freedom.”

I pointed to the horizon, where the last ray of sunlight set the sand ablaze. “Look closely. When the sun disappears, the sand begins to dance.” I waited for the temperature to drop and the wind to pick up, so the sand could begin its “singing”—a deep, resonant hum that is the whisper of the Thar.

I took out our small, dented brass container and lit the oil lantern. “This lantern comes from Kanoi,” I explained. “It is our promise that no matter how far we travel in the desert, the light of our home will always burn for us.” I told Lajja the stories of travelling merchants, Rajput warriors, and the gods who shaped these golden dunes. Our family’s collective knowledge is our compass.

As the countless stars exploded above us, I saw the understanding in Lajja’s eyes. She realised these Sam sand dunes were not just a picturesque place; they were the canvas of eternity, the centre of a culture that finds beauty in barrenness. She is rooted in Kanoi, but her heart, like mine, will always beat in the golden, singing dunes. The small lantern connected our home to the infinite expanse of the desert.





BARREL ORGAN PLAYER

I am Jan Kataryniarz, and I believe I am as essential to Warsaw's Old Town as the cobblestones themselves. Every day, regardless of whether the spring sun warms the colourful townhouses on Rynek Starego Miasta or the cold Vistula wind blows, I push my old cart to my spot under Sigismund's Column. My barrel organ is a creaking, magnificent machine, and its mechanics are the centrepiece of my life.

I am a witness to history; I saw Warsaw rise from the ruins of war. My music is the perfect complement to that miracle. I play waltzes, polkas, and old Polish folk songs that turn back time itself.

On a cold autumn afternoon, I was playing a particularly melancholic tune when a young man, Marek, stopped. He was a successful software developer who saw the old town as nothing but a backdrop. “Good afternoon, Mr Kataryniarz,” he said condescendingly, throwing a coin into my hat. “Why do you always play the same old songs? People want to hear something new. Something that fits with the modern pace of Warsaw.”

I stopped turning the crank. The melody broke off. “Marek,” I replied quietly, “you live in the skyscrapers of the city, in a world where everything is new. But this old town is not new. It is a memory. We rebuilt these walls not to be modern, but to remember who we were.” I tapped on the wood of my organ. “My music is like this building. It is the sound of memory. When I play these old melodies, I remind people that the city has a soul that is older and more resilient than concrete and glass. It is the indestructible melody of Warsaw.”

I smiled, picked up the crank again, and finished the wistful waltz. I saw the understanding dawn in Marek’s eyes. He was no longer just listening to a barrel organ, but to the echo of generations. I am not just a street musician; I am Warsaw's musical archivist, keeping the city's history alive—melody by melody.

THE NEEDLES

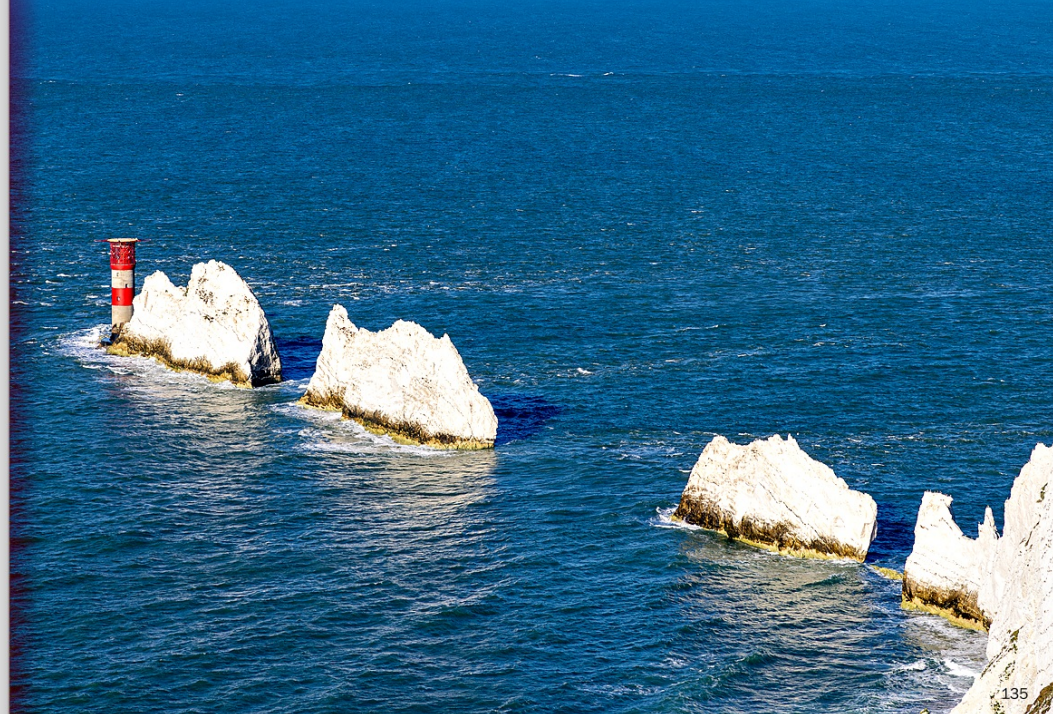
I am Elara, and I sit high on the windswept cliffs at the westernmost tip of the Isle of Wight, gazing out at the raging sea. Below me, they tower: the Needles. These three sharp-edged chalk cliffs are not just a sight; they are the last teeth of an ancient dragon.

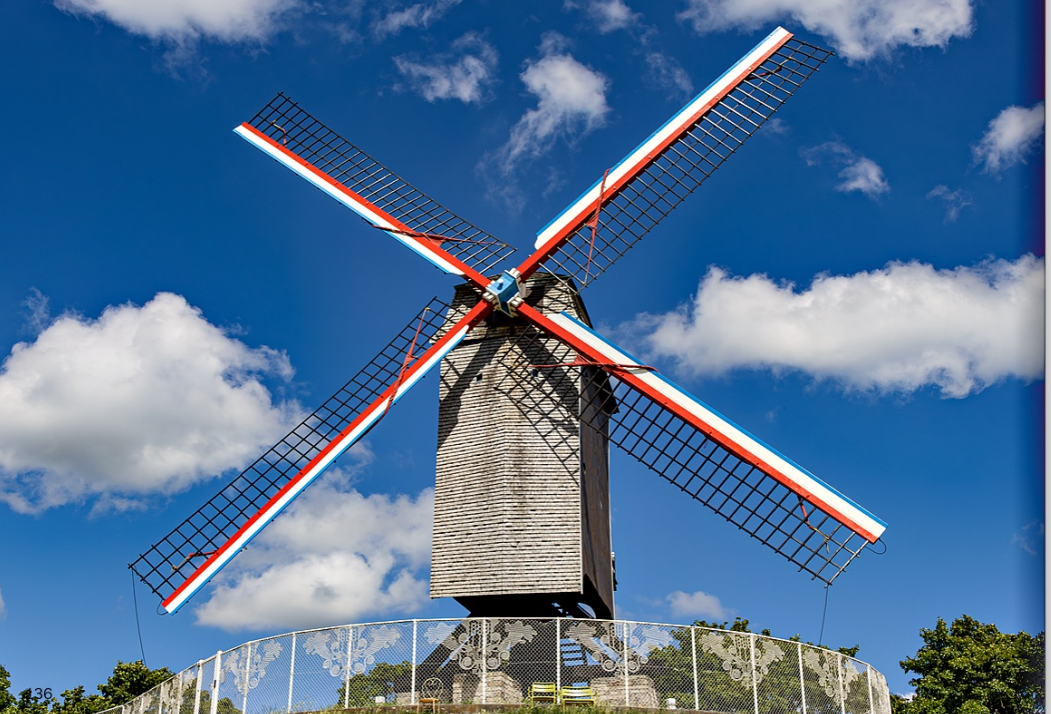
I know the true story of the Needles, the one told in the tales of sailors. This island was not always isolated. These rocks and the cliffs of Old Harry Rocks on the opposite coast were once one solid chalk bridge. But the sea, the tireless smith, struck again and again. Tides and storms gnawed incessantly until only this lonely resistance remained. I remember the fourth 'needle'—that slender column called Lot's Wife—crashing into the depths in 1764. The lighthouse is a modern guardian, but the Needles themselves are the original ones.

That afternoon, I watched a young couple. They laughed, took photos, and saw the rocks as a beautiful, static monument. "They don't know how alive this place is," I murmured into the wind. "They see the end points. I see the struggle."

I remember a severe winter storm in my childhood—the roar of the sea as it turned into a raging, foaming bull. The next morning, the land looked different—a new crack, a piece of land sacrificed to the ocean. The Needles taught us fishermen humility. They are a promise that even the hardest things must eventually yield to the unstoppable force of time and water.

As the sun sinks lower and the chalk cliffs glow bright white, I realise it: the Needles are not eternal statues. They are ticking clocks of geology, ending the history of the land with every beat of a wave, only to begin a new, smaller but equally proud history. They are the Isle of Wight's majestic final farewell to the Atlantic.





SINT-JANSHUIS WINDMILL

I am Marcel van der Velde, a baker in Bruges, and I have been accustomed to this sight since childhood. From my window, I see the Sint-Janshuis Mill standing proudly on the Vesten. It is a classic stand mill (Standerdmolen), a symbol of Flemish perseverance. My grandfather bought his flour from here, but now, the sails mostly turn for tourists.

On this cold, grey November day, the canals were steel-grey, and the city felt melancholic. I walked to the Vesten, where I saw the old miller Pieter adjusting the huge wooden sails. I knew the flour he ground now had little commercial value.

“Good evening, Pieter,” I called against the North Sea wind. “Are you reviving the old spirit?” Pieter, his face marked by wind and flour, nodded. “The mill must work, Marcel. If it stands still, it dies. The mechanics forget, the beams swell. It needs the wind to remember what it was built for.” The majestic turning of the sails, the creaking of the oak beams—it was the powerful, earthy sound of old, working Bruges.

“This mill,” Pieter continued, “is the history of Bruges. It is the work and it is the bread that is baked with the power of the wind and the tenacity of the Flemish people.” I watched the mill battle the north wind and convert it into motion. I understood. The Sint-Janshuis was not just a backdrop. It was a living monument to constancy. True permanence lies in constant, meaningful movement.

That evening, inspired by the wind of the mill, I returned to my warm bakery. I knew that the soul of the city would remain alive as long as the sails of the Sint-Janshuis mill turned.

KOUTOUBIA MINARET

I am Jamila. My life is Djemaa el Fna, the bustling square in Marrakesh where I sell spices. I know this city like the back of my hand, but the sight of the Koutoubia minaret fascinates me every day anew. It is not only the tallest building in the city; it is our heart and our compass.

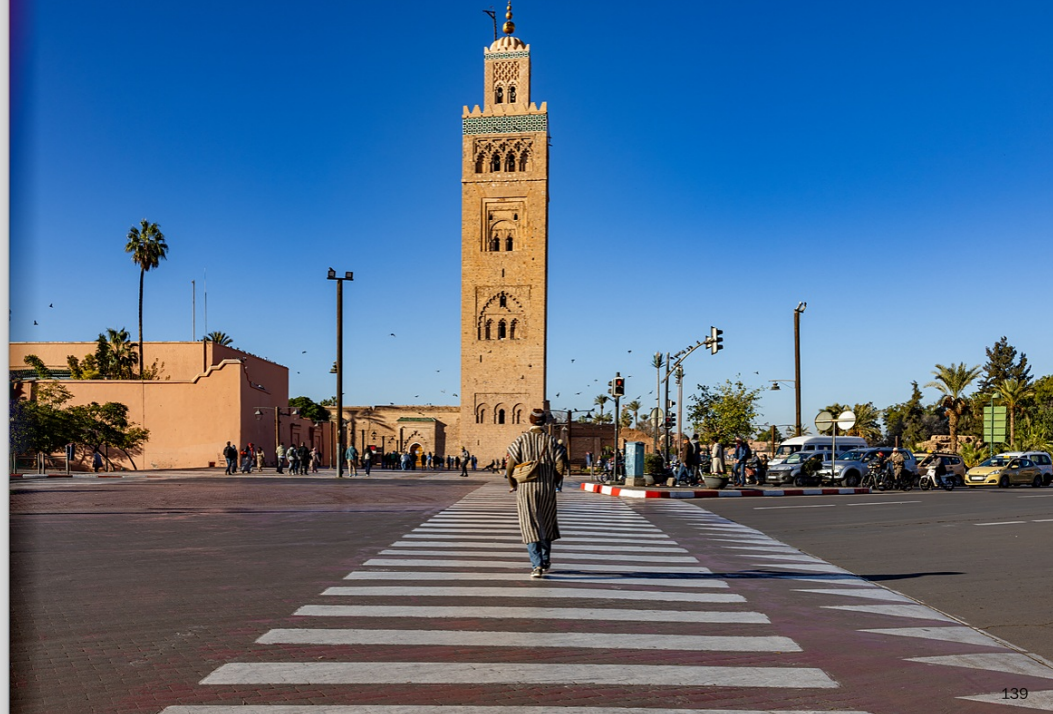
The minaret was built in the 12th century under the Almohad dynasty. It towers majestically above the roofs of the medina. Its ochre-coloured bricks glow in the sun, decorated with turquoise tiles and intricate geometric patterns—thousands of years of Islamic art in a single structure.

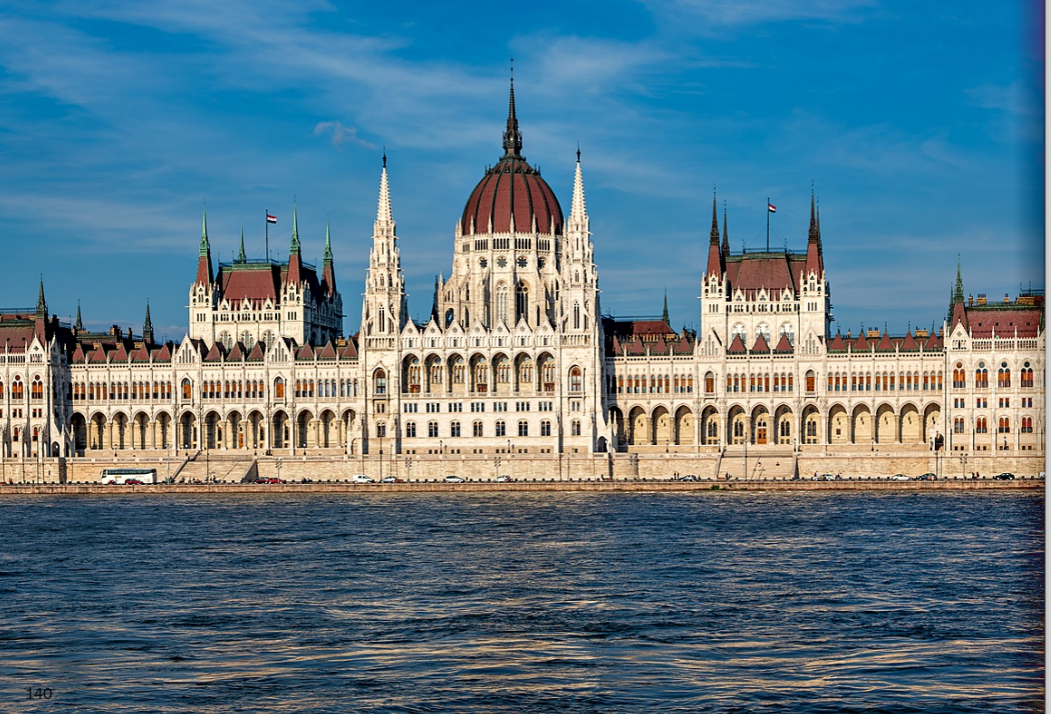
Every morning, just before the first call to prayer, I look up at this square tower. There is a famous legend: when the first building was completed, the Caliph realised that the foundation deviated slightly from the perfect alignment with Mecca. Only a few degrees! But he insisted on demolishing the tower and rebuilding it. What you see today is the second minaret—a testament to absolute precision and devotion.

One day, Karim, my young apprentice, complained. “Jamila,” he said, “people always want the same old spices. I want something new, something that stands out!” I looked up. The top of the minaret is crowned with three golden balls. According to legend, they were made from the melted jewellery of a caliph's wife, who donated it as atonement for accidentally eating dates during Ramadan. That is the story behind the gold.

“Karim,” I said quietly as the muezzin's call echoed down from the tower, “look at the Koutoubia. It is a monument to mistakes and perfection.” I explained to him how the caliph saw a flaw where others saw beauty, and how he turned it into a lesson in unwavering devotion. “Your work, Karim, may seem ordinary,” I continued, “but it is the first construction. You must carry it out with the precision of the second construction. People come to Marrakesh because this tower reminds them that the greatest buildings are not those that are completed the fastest, but those that are built with the greatest respect for the idea.”

When the call to prayer ended, Karim closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of saffron and coriander. He understood that the soul of Marrakesh lies not in the noisy alleys, but in the silent, mighty tower. The Koutoubia is not only the shadow of Marrakesh; it is our conscience.





PARLIAMENT BUILDING

I am Ferenc, and I work for the Budapest City Council. I take care of the details, the permits, and the smooth functioning of this great city. And from my point of view, the Parliament building is more than just a workplace or a structure—it is the heart of our national identity, a monument to the eternal soul of the Hungarian nation.

The story began when Buda, Óbuda, and Pest united in 1885. We needed something representative, something worthy of our thousand-year history. The architect Imre Steindl designed it. He opted for neo-Gothic, inspired by Westminster Palace, but with Hungarian splendour. Steindl died before his masterpiece was completed, but he knew what he was creating.

The construction was a huge undertaking for the administration and the construction workers: over 100,000 cubic metres of stone, half a million decorative stones, and 40 kilograms of pure gold. It was a building that displayed wealth and architectural audacity—a huge investment that paid off.

I know the old lady Katalin. Her grandfather was a craftsman and worked on the filigree balustrades. She often remembers the 90 statues of Hungarian kings and military leaders on the façade. For her and for me, the most important place is the Dome Hall inside. There, under the impressive Renaissance dome that pierces the neo-Gothic structure, lies our true treasure: the Holy Crown of Hungary, the Szent Korona.

This crown, which has adorned kings since the 11th century, symbolises our continuity and sovereignty. It is no coincidence that it is located in the Parliament; it emphasises that political power in Budapest is inextricably linked to our historical continuity—a masterpiece of symbolic planning.

The other evening, I was standing on the banks of the Danube as it was getting dark. The lights of the Parliament came on. 365 red lamps illuminate the façade, one for each day of the year. The 96-metre-high dome—a reference to the year 896, when the Hungarians settled here—shone across the water. I thought of all the turmoil this building has weathered: revolutions, wars, occupations. It stands there, an unshakeable anchor, reminding us in the administration time and again what we are working for.

The Hungarian Parliament building is more than just a place where laws are made. It is a stone crown for our city and an indestructible reminder that Hungary's identity lies in the Danube, its history, and this proud, radiant structure on our shore.

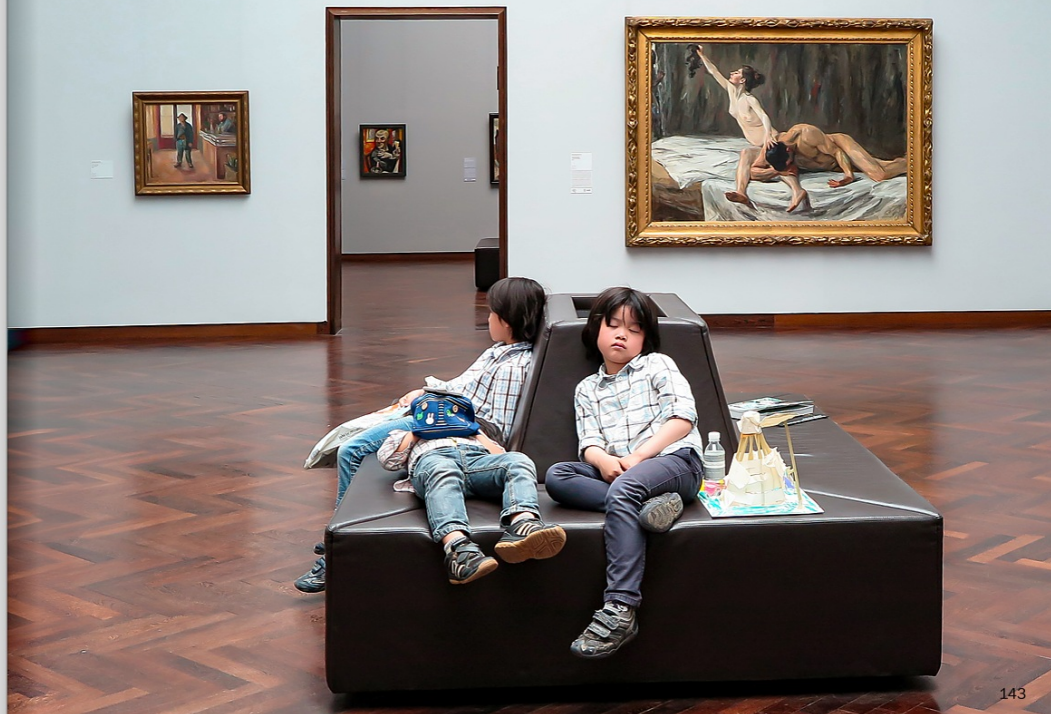
EXHAUSTED

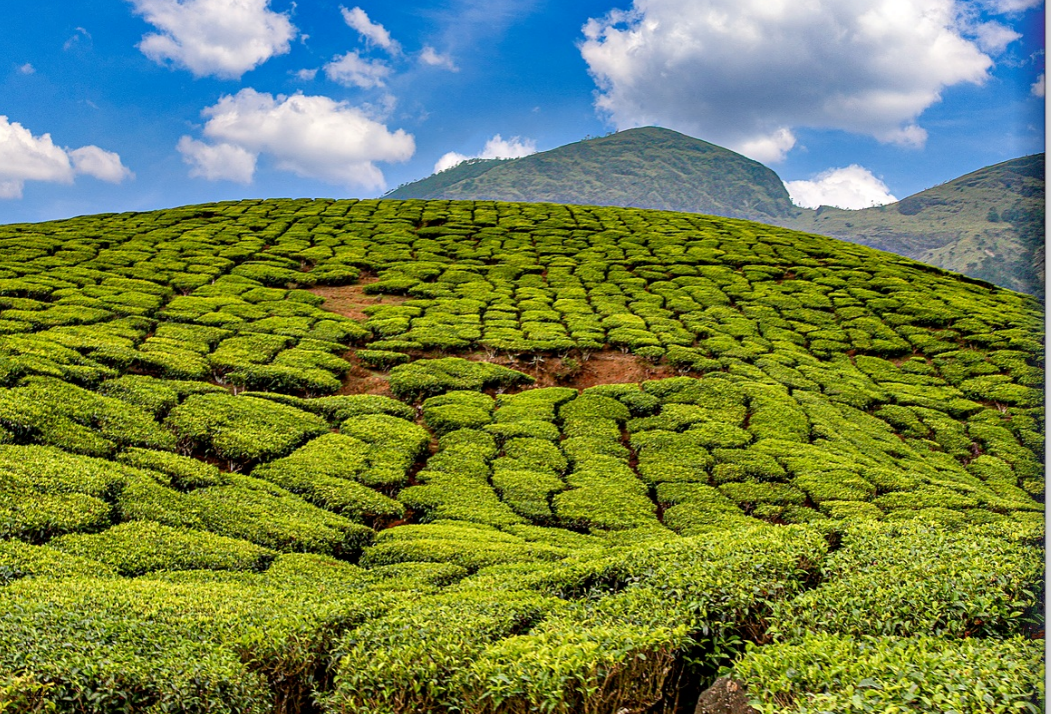
Oh, what a day that was! My legs still ache when I think about it, but my head is full of colours and faces. My name is Chung, and I went to the big Städel Museum in Frankfurt with my friends. At first it was exciting, you know? Huge rooms, so quiet and important, and pictures everywhere—so many pictures! The faces in the old paintings looked at us as if they held secrets. We marvelled at the masterpieces, the old artists from the books, but real! I saw knights, I saw princesses, I saw wild landscapes.

But after a while, I don't know... it was just too much. The stories, the colours, the quiet grandeur of the rooms—it felt like my little head was going to explode. The energy was simply gone, blown away.

And then I saw this bench. So soft and cool. I don't remember who fell onto it first; I think it was me. I lay down, my head on the cool leather cushion. My friends did the same. We lay there, our cheeks red and hot from running and marvelling. Our eyes simply closed. It was as if sleep was drawing us into the pictures. I think in my dreams I was the knight on the horse I had seen.

It was a magical moment, there in the midst of the venerable art collections, a well-deserved break that we simply had to take. Perhaps, yes, perhaps we will return one day, when we are bigger and stronger, to rediscover the treasures of the museum. But until then, this image of us, of our childish tiredness, will remain a warm part of the stories that unfold in the great, old Städel Museum. I will never forget that moment.





TEA ESTATES

My name is Naresh. I am a member of the large Tata family. The history of our tea plantations in Munnar is deeply rooted in the past, a history of colonial pioneering spirit, but also of resilience and change, which ultimately led to us Tatas.

It began in the mid-19th century when the British discovered the cool hills of the Western Ghats in Kerala. Colonel Douglas Hamilton followed in their footsteps, but the real beginning was in 1880 when a planter named A. H. Sharp established the first tea plantation on the Parvathi Estate. For decades, many small and large companies shaped the landscape. By 1915, there were 16 tea factories. It was an era of growth, but also one of struggle—a devastating monsoon in 1924 hit us hard, but we always bounced back.

After India gained independence, the tradition continued, but times changed. Today, much of this land, now managed by the Tata Group, is among the largest tea producers in South India. We continue the legacy, tending these emerald green “carpets” of tea bushes that characterise Munnar today. Places like Kolukkumalai Tea Estate, one of the highest plantations in the world, are a testament to our work. And the KDHP Tea Museum helps us preserve the fascinating history—from wilderness to the centre of the Indian tea industry. We Tatas are proud to be guardians of this tradition and to carry it into the future.

What moves me personally is the responsibility we bear. We're not just talking about tea here—we're talking about thousands of families whose lives depend on these plantations. The British brought the structure, yes, but the soul of the place is the labourers who go out into the fields every day at sunrise with their baskets.

My grandfather, himself a simple labourer on the plantations, told me about the harsh conditions during the colonial era. But when Tata took over the management, a lot changed. We value people's well-being, education for children, and healthcare. It's about creating a community, not just a factory.

The challenges today are different from those of the past. Climate change is a concern for us. We have to be innovative and develop new methods to ensure the quality of our tea while protecting the environment. That is the modern pioneering spirit that we at Tata live by.

When I look out over the hills today and see the sea of green, I see more than just tea. I see the history of India, the resilience of our people, and the future we are shaping together. That is the true legacy of Munnar, and it is a privilege to be a part of it.

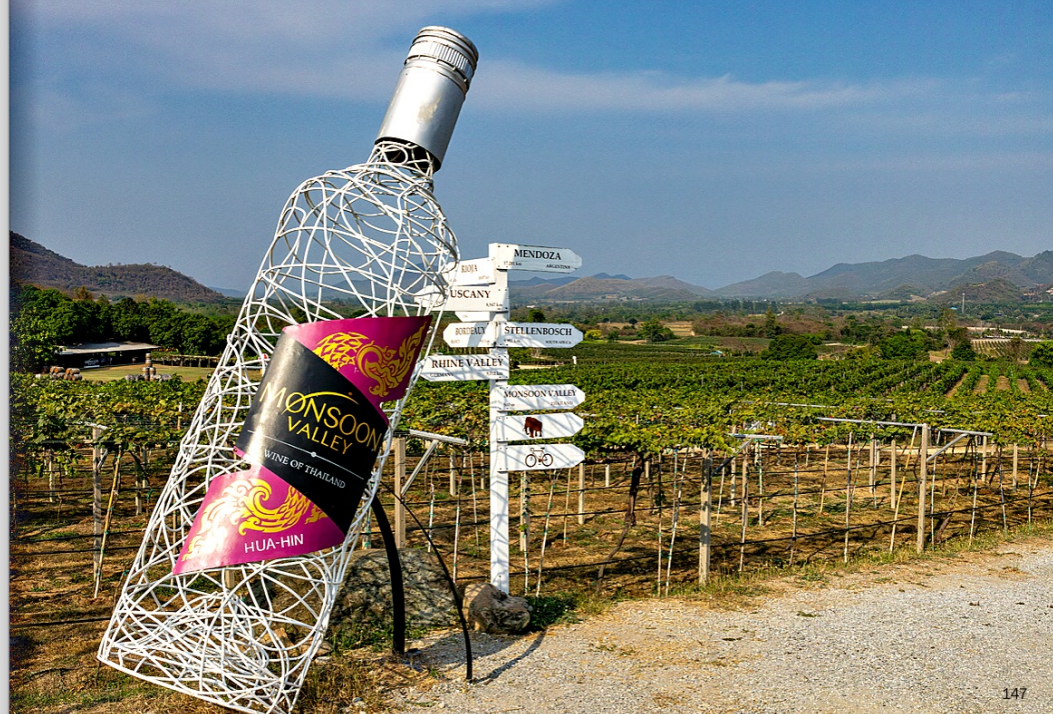
MONSOON VALLEY

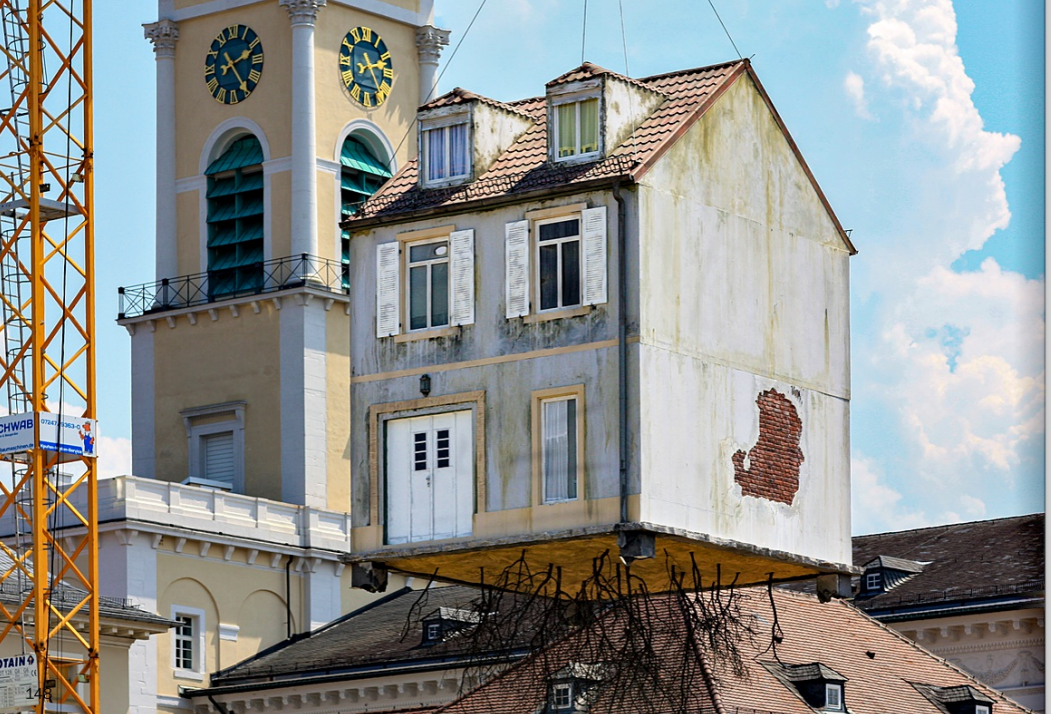
I am Chalerm Yoovidhya, founder of Monsoon Valley Wines. My story does not begin in France or Italy, but here in Thailand. When I returned from studying abroad, I had a vision that many thought was crazy: to produce wine in the tropics. It was 2001, and the experts laughed. Wine at 13 degrees latitude? Impossible, they said. But I was passionate and convinced that it could work.

I established my first vineyard in Tab Kwang, near Khao Yai National Park. The red soil and microclimate there were perfect for Shiraz grapes. And success proved me right. That encouraged me. In 2002, a new opportunity arose with a royal research project in Phetchaburi. The results were astonishing. So I acquired land near Hua Hin, an area that used to be an enclosure for wild elephants. That became our main location.

I knew I needed experts. German winemaker Kathrin Puff joined the team in 2007. Together, we developed innovative cultivation methods to overcome the challenges of the tropical climate. Since the vines here do not go into natural dormancy in winter, we have to induce an artificial dormancy period by defoliating and stopping irrigation. This allows us to control the growth cycles and achieve up to two harvests per year, which would be unthinkable in Europe. The high humidity and intense sunlight also require more precise management against fungal diseases and special sun protection for the sensitive grapes. We became pioneers of ‘New Latitude Wine’.

Today, my vision is being celebrated. Monsoon Valley has helped to make the Thai wine scene internationally known. Our wines—Colombard, Chenin Blanc, Shiraz, Sangiovese—have won over 300 awards worldwide and are served in the best restaurants. My story is proof that passion, innovation, and belief in the unexpected can overcome the limitations of traditional viticulture.





PULLED BY THE ROOTS

Ah, Karlsruhe... a city that for decades was one huge wound, a gulf that ate its way through Kaiserstrasse, this endless ‘Kombilösung’ (combined solution) of tunnel construction. Everywhere I looked, there were only building sites, fences, and noise. People were tired of it, annoyed by this eternal state of becoming that never seemed to end.

But I, Leandro Erlich, saw something else. I saw a huge, untouched canvas. In the summer of 2015, when the city was celebrating its 300th anniversary, the city and the wonderful Centre for Art and Media (ZKM) approached me. They had this crazy, brilliant idea: “The city is the star—art on the construction site.” They wanted me, an Argentinean, to intervene in their chaos.

I saw the Market Square, the heart of this construction site, and a vision arose within me. I wanted to create something that would make people pause, that would pull them out of their everyday lives. My work, “Pulled by the Roots”—torn out by the roots—was surreal, poetic, and painfully real. It was a two-storey, richly detailed house hanging from the hook of a gigantic construction crane, high above the abyss of the pit. It looked as if it was being torn out of the ground at that very moment or transported to a new, unknown location. The roots of the house dangled freely in the air, the foundations exposed. Vulnerable.

This work of art was no coincidence. It played with the harsh reality of urban change. But deeper, much deeper, it was about universal fears —uprooting, migration, the search for home in a world that is constantly changing. It was a visual irritation that astonished passers-by, leaving them breathless.

I wanted people to stop seeing the construction site as a necessary evil, as a nuisance. I wanted them to see it as a place of change, as a space for poetic reflection. “Pulled by the Roots” became one of the most iconic symbols of this ‘construction site art’. It showed us all how art can redefine public space, even in its most vulnerable moments. It was a silent cry of beauty amid the noise of the machines. And for a moment, in this chaos of excavators and fences, the people of Karlsruhe breathed art. That was my satisfaction, my joy.

KEW ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS

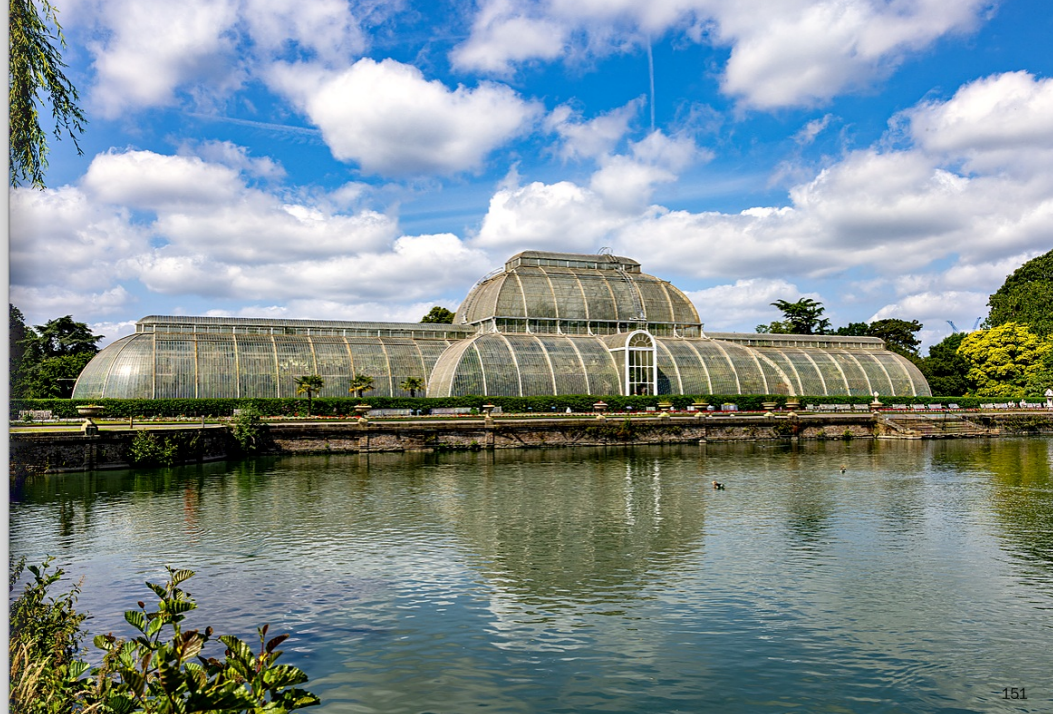
The young gardener Sophia speaks with a voice full of warmth and reverence for nature and history. Come here, sit with me for a moment. I want to tell you about a place that touches my heart, a story of passion that has grown over centuries, as deeply rooted as the oldest trees there. I'm talking about the Kew Royal Botanic Gardens in London—a place that is much more than just a park. It is a living soul.

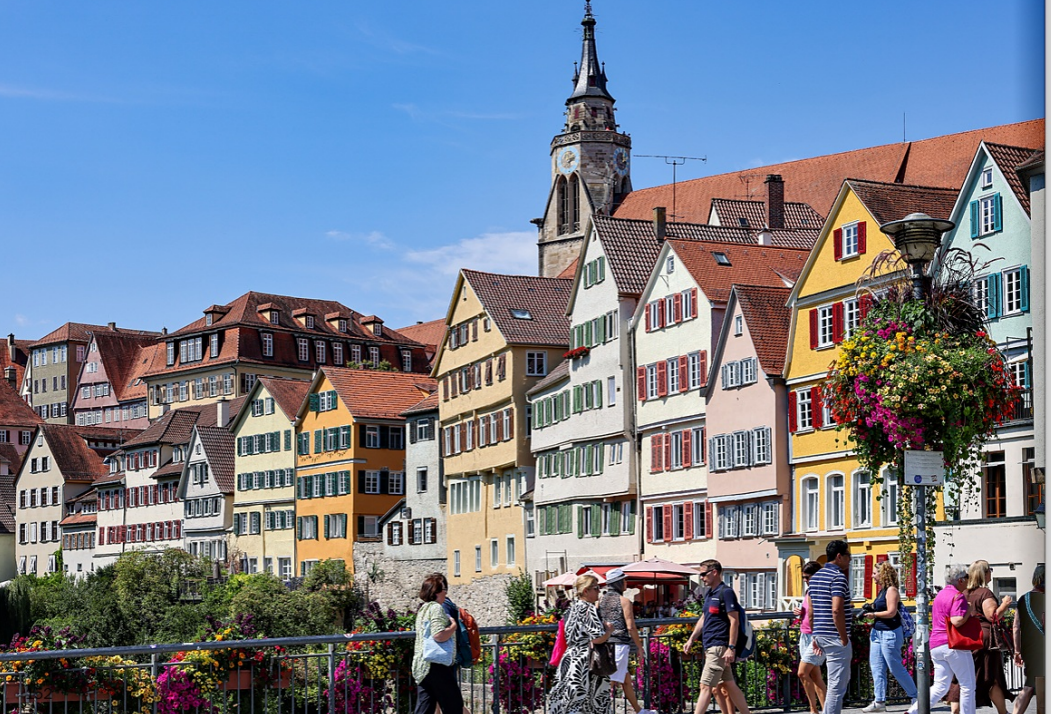
It all began so modestly, you know, as a royal summer residence. As early as the 17th century, Baron Henry Capel laid out exotic gardens there, out of pure love for plants. But the real magic began in 1759. Princess Augusta, the mother of King George III, had a vision. She began collecting rare plants from all over the world. Can you imagine that? Every plant has a story, a journey across vast oceans. She laid the foundation for what is now one of the most extensive botanical collections in the world. It was her personal legacy.

When her son, King George III, inherited the estate in 1772 and merged it with Richmond, Kew came to life as we know it today. But its true heyday came in the 19th century, under the hands of men such as Sir William Jackson Hooker and later his son Joseph. They were not mere administrators; they were visionaries and pioneers. They transformed the gardens into a global centre of science, a place of exchange and learning. It was during this period that these stunning, iconic structures were built. The iron and glass Palm House, built in the 1840s, is a masterpiece, a cathedral to nature that still makes every visitor's heart beat faster today.

Kew has seen so much over the centuries. It played a crucial role in science and helped bring useful plants to distant parts of the Empire. Even in the darkest times of war, the gardens made a contribution, researching medicinal plants and promoting gardening at home. They have always been a place of hope.

Today, these hallowed halls are home to over 50,000 living plant species. It is a refuge for our planet's biodiversity. In 2003, Kew Royal Botanic Gardens were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. They lead the way in research, with projects such as the incredible Millennium Seed Bank, where we preserve seeds from thousands of plant species for the future—for our children and our children's children. Kew is more than just a garden; it is a living archive of life on Earth, a place where you can feel the deep connection between humans and nature. It is a place of wonder that reminds us how fragile and yet how resilient life is.





TÜBINGEN

Ich bin Professor Rabold, und Tübingen ist mein geliebtes Zuhause, mein Herz und meine Seele. Mein ganzes Leben habe ich hier verbracht und die Luft dieser Stadt geatmet, die tief vom Geist der Gelehrsamkeit durchdrungen ist. Der „Genius Loci“ – der Geist dieses Ortes – ist so lebendig wie die jungen Studierenden, die durch unsere Gassen strömen. Die Geschichte dieser Stadt ist meine Geschichte, die Geschichte der Universität.

Unsere Ursprünge sind uralt. Als ich in den Archiven forschte, faszinierte mich immer, wie lange es her ist: Schloss Hohentübingen wurde 1078 erwähnt, die Stadt erhielt 1231 ihre Charta. Aber der wahre Wendepunkt war der Verkauf an die Württemberger 1342. Sie ebneten den Weg für 1477, das Gründungsjahr unserer Eberhard Karls Universität. Graf Eberhard im Bart schuf, inspiriert von seiner Mutter Mechthild, nicht nur eine Institution, sondern ein Zuhause für den menschlichen Geist – ein Zentrum, das schneller wuchs, als wir uns je hätten träumen lassen.

Ich gehe täglich durch unsere Hörsäle und denke an die Geister, die hier ihre Spuren hinterlassen haben: Kepler, Hegel, Hölderlin, Schelling. Ich spüre ihre Präsenz.

Die Reformation im 16. Jahrhundert prägte uns und machte uns zu einer Bastion protestantischer Bildung. Aber ich bin Gelehrter, und ich weiß: Geschichte hat auch dunkle Flecken. Ich denke an die Nazi-Ära, als fast 50 % der Stadt für die NSDAP stimmten. Das ist ein Schatten, den wir nie vergessen dürfen. Und ich erinnere mich an die Besatzungszeit der Franzosen, die bis 1991 andauerte. Auch das formt unsere komplexe Identität.

Heute ist Tübingen eine malerische Stadt mit Fachwerkhäusern und Stocherkähnen auf dem Neckar. Es ist eine lebendige Studentenstadt, die niemals stillsteht. Und die Universität? Für mich ist die Antwort klar, wenn wir uns fragen, ob wir eine Universität mit einer Stadt daneben sind: Tübingen ist ein lebendiger Organismus, in dem die Mauern der Stadt und die Hallen der Wissenschaft untrennbar miteinander verwoben sind. Es ist ein Ort, der mich jeden Tag aufs Neue inspiriert und herausfordert.

QUALILI

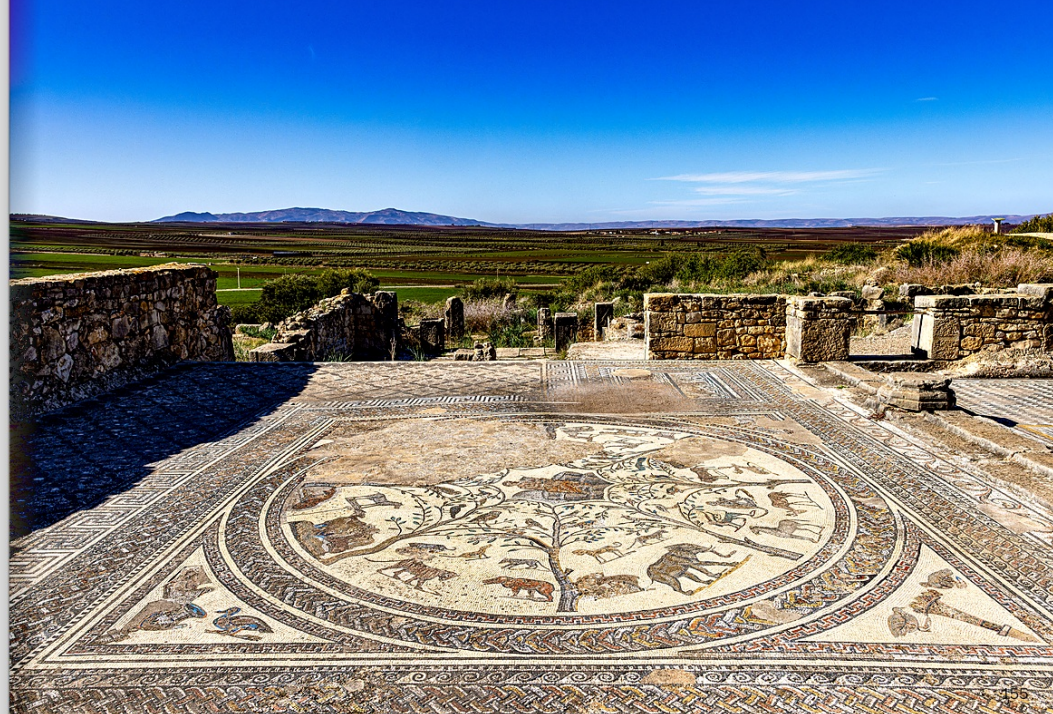
I am Mohammed. My homeland, Morocco, is a country with many stories that are not always easy to tell. It is a story of conquests and resistance, of loss and new beginnings, deeply rooted in our land. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ruins of Volubilis, which we used to call Qualili. Some see only Roman ruins, but I see the soul of our country buried beneath these stones.

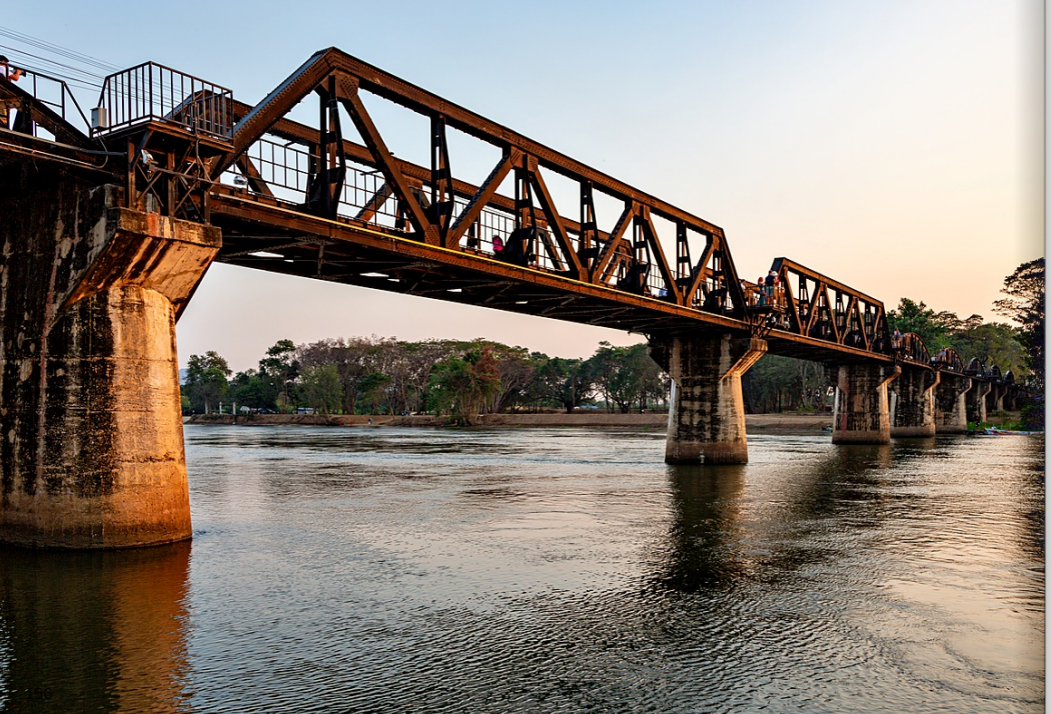
I think of the Carthaginian traders who came first, and of the people of the Neolithic Age, whose traces have long since been blown away by the wind. But then Rome came, and with it prosperity, which can still be seen today in the magnificent mosaics and the triumphal arch. I imagine my ancestors who lived back then, perhaps oppressed by foreign rule, but at the same time dazzled by the possibilities. The city flourished and exported grain and olive oil to Rome. The triumphal arch, which still towers above the city, was intended to demonstrate Roman power. But in my eyes, it also tells of the resilience that has always been strong in our culture.

When the Romans left, the city's splendour also faded, but it remained lively, now under our own name: Qualili. It became a melting pot for our diverse cultures until the Islamic rulers arrived in the 8th century. They called the people to the newly founded Moulay Idriss Zerhoun, and Qualili fell silent. All that remained were stones and a memory passed down from generation to generation.

However, history taught me that the stones never really fell silent. I hear the stories of the people who, after the earthquake in the 18th century, took the stones to build our new imperial city of Meknes. They created something new from the past—a part of the old city lives on in the new one.

Today, Qualili, our Volubilis, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. But when I wander among the old walls, I see more than just a tourist attraction. I see a monument to the tenacity and adaptability of our people. It is the history of our country: from the first settlers, the Carthaginian and Roman influences, the Islamic rulers to the French excavations that brought the ruins back to light. Volubilis is a reminder that our past consists of many layers that make our country so unique.





RIVER KWAI BRIDGE

I, Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson, rub my eyes.

I see the bridge in my sleep. The smell of damp earth, decay, and despair still lingers in my nostrils, even after all these years of trying to leave the horror behind me. I was one of the unlucky ones who ended up there, in that hell at the end of the world, forced to build the “Death Railway” through the relentless Thai jungle.

We, thousands of Allied soldiers—British, Australian, Dutch, American—were nothing more than slaves to the Japanese occupiers, who robbed us of our humanity and forced us to build their logistical link for an attack on British India. Every hammer blow on the rails was a cry of agony, every second under the scorching sun a struggle for bare survival. Plagued by hunger, malaria, cholera, dysentery, and the relentless cruelty of our guards, we toiled ourselves to death.

The bridge over the Mae Klong—better known today as the River Kwai Yai—was the centrepiece of our torment, the goal they demanded of us with lashes and blows. I remember the empty eyes of my comrades, their emaciated bodies, as they collapsed and died one by one. We buried them in the jungle, often without ceremony, just a silent prayer. It is estimated that over 16,000 prisoners of war and 100,000 Asian forced labourers died for this project—every single death a stab in my heart, a nightmare that will never leave me.

In 1943, the bridge was completed, a monument to our unimaginable suffering, a victory for the Japanese, a Pyrrhic victory for us who had paid for it with our blood. And then, in 1944, our own bombers dropped their deadly cargo and destroyed parts of what we had built with blood and sweat. It was a bittersweet moment—destruction that could have meant the end of the nightmare, but also showed the futility of our sacrifices. The bridge, the symbol of our slavery, became a victim of the war itself.

Today, the bridge stands again, repaired, a rusty memorial in Kanchanaburi. Tourists take photos, and I wonder if they really understand what happened here. I see the faces of the dead in the shadows of the steel girders, hear the screams in the wind. Places like the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum preserve the memory of our immense suffering so that the world will never forget that such a thing must never happen again.

I, one of the few survivors, bear the scars of that time as an eternal reminder.

HELMSLEY

I am Robert, I am old, and yet I feel young when I walk along the old streets of Helmsley, for the memories of the past are ever-present. The mist creeps over the rolling hills of North Yorkshire, enveloping the broken stones in a silent grey. Helmsley, once a proud market town, breathes the stories of centuries past.

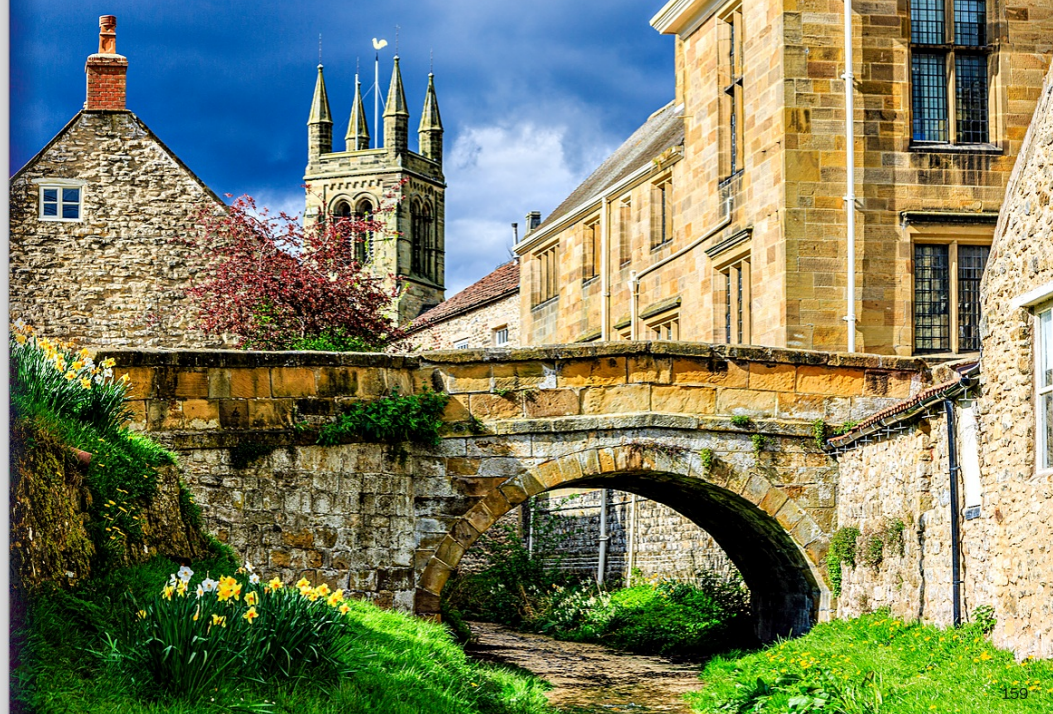
I see the first settlers, whose fields and huts have long since been swallowed up by time. Their voices have faded, but the effort they put into this land lives on in the foundations on which we stand today.

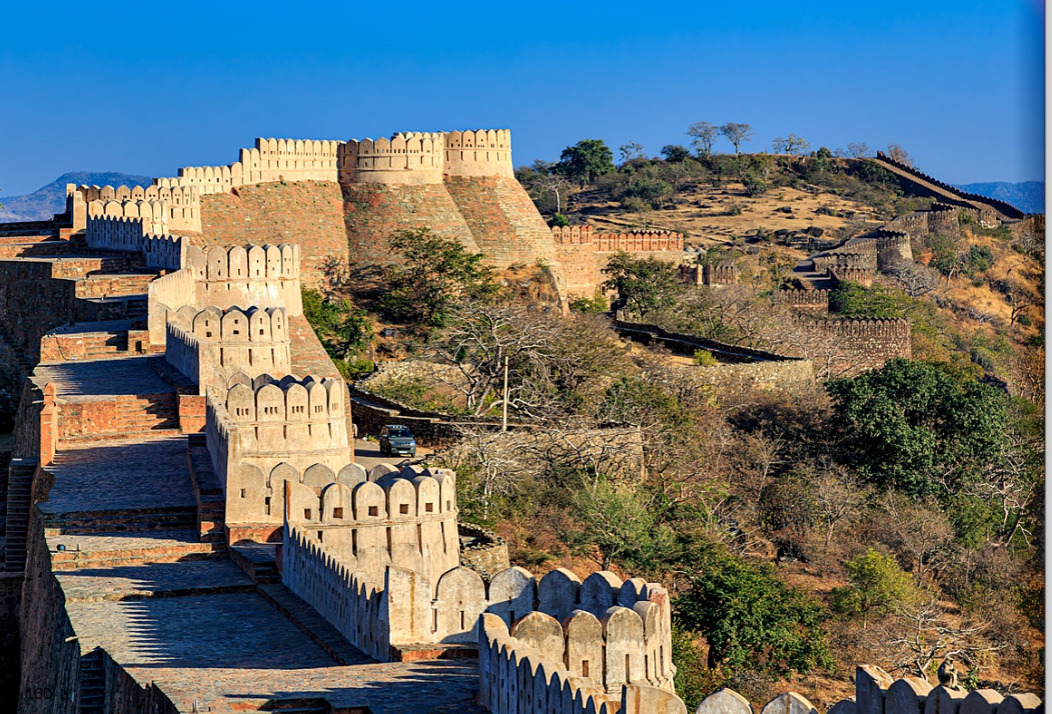
Then came the Normans, who gave the land to the conqueror's half-brother. Their legacy is the mighty Helmsley Castle, which towers over the town like an ancient, watchful guardian. I remember the time when Walter Espec built the first castle, made of wood and earth. Life was hard and uncertain back then, but the castle offered protection and hope. Later, when the de Ros family carved the castle out of stone, the town also grew. Here, in this market square, we celebrated our festivals, did business, and life pulsed. The market was the beating heart of our community, which lived from sheep farming and wool production.

Then came the Civil War, and the castle that once gave us so much hope became the scene of drama. For three months, we were besieged by parliamentary troops. That was the time I suffered the most. I remember the fear, the hunger, and the hopelessness. In the end, the castle fell, and our wounds were deep. When the mighty walls were torn down to prevent further military use, it was as if they were tearing our hearts out.

But life goes on, and in the 18th century, Helmsley found a new beginning. The Duncombe family built the magnificent Duncombe Park, but they deliberately allowed the old castle to fall into disrepair. Thus it became a romantic ruin, admired today for its melancholic beauty. With the arrival of the railway in the 19th century, modernity came to Helmsley, yet the town never lost its charm.

Today, I walk the streets of Helmsley. I see the tourists taking photos of the old castle, but in my eyes, I see more. I see the ghosts of those who lived, suffered, and loved here. I see the craftsmen who cut the stones, the merchants who offered their wares, the soldiers who died for their cause. The history of Helmsley is not just a string of dates, but a story of the people who made this town what it is today: a living monument to our past.





KUMBHAL GARH FORT - THE GREAT WALL OF INDIA

I stand on these battlements, the wind ruffling my turban, and my gaze wanders over the Aravalli Mountains. I am a warrior of Mewar, a Rajput, and this is my home, my refuge, my soul of stone—Kumbhalgarh. They call it 'the Great Wall of India,' and it is our pride, our shield against the world.

I remember the stories told around the fire, of Rana Kumbha, who raised this fortress from the ruins of the old in the 15th century. He was a visionary, a king whose heart was as strong as the stones he built here. We built this gigantic wall, 36 kilometres long, so wide that four horses can gallop side by side. It was not only made of stone; it was forged from determination, from the unshakeable will to protect our land, our families, our honour.

In times of need, Kumbhalgarh was our safe haven. When Chittorgarh was under threat, we knew we could find refuge here, that the gods watched over us from this 1,100-metre-high hill. Here, within these sacred walls, Maharana Pratap was born, the bravest of us all, whose name echoes in the songs of the bards. I remember his laughter as a child, his strength as a man, his indomitable spirit that inspired us all.

We repelled countless attacks—the Sultanates of Gujarat and Malwa, the mighty Mughals under Akbar. They all broke their teeth on our walls. We were invincible, a living legend. Only once, for a brief time, did the fortress fall. The memory of that defeat still burns in my soul, a shame we will never forget.

Today I stand here, an old warrior, and the fortress is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Tourists come and go, admiring the spectacular views and medieval architecture. But I see more than just stones. I see the faces of my comrades who gave their lives for these walls. I hear the clang of swords, the roar of war elephants, the cries of the wounded.

Kumbhalgarh is not just a tourist attraction; it is a tomb for our heroes, a testament to our courage, our unshakeable belief in what we fought for. As long as these walls stand, the memory of us, the Rajputs of Mewar, will live on.

CANNSTATTER WASEN - FOLK FESTIVAL

I'm Winfried, a fourth-generation showman. My life revolves around carousels, candy floss, and the noise of the crowds. And I know the history of Cannstatter Wasen better than anyone else, believe me. Most people think Wasen began with beer tents and fairground rides, but no, the story is much crazier than that.

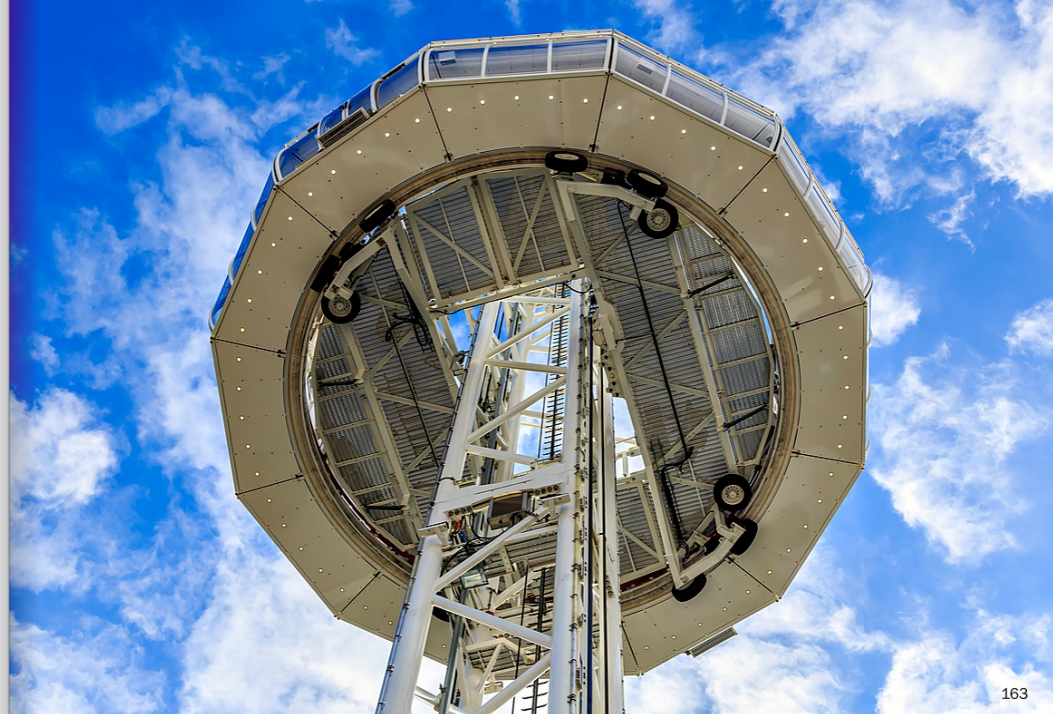
It all started with a volcano in Indonesia—Tambora was its name, erupting in 1815. It spewed so much ash into the air that there was a 'year without a summer' worldwide. Here in Württemberg, we had a bitter famine, and people were suffering.

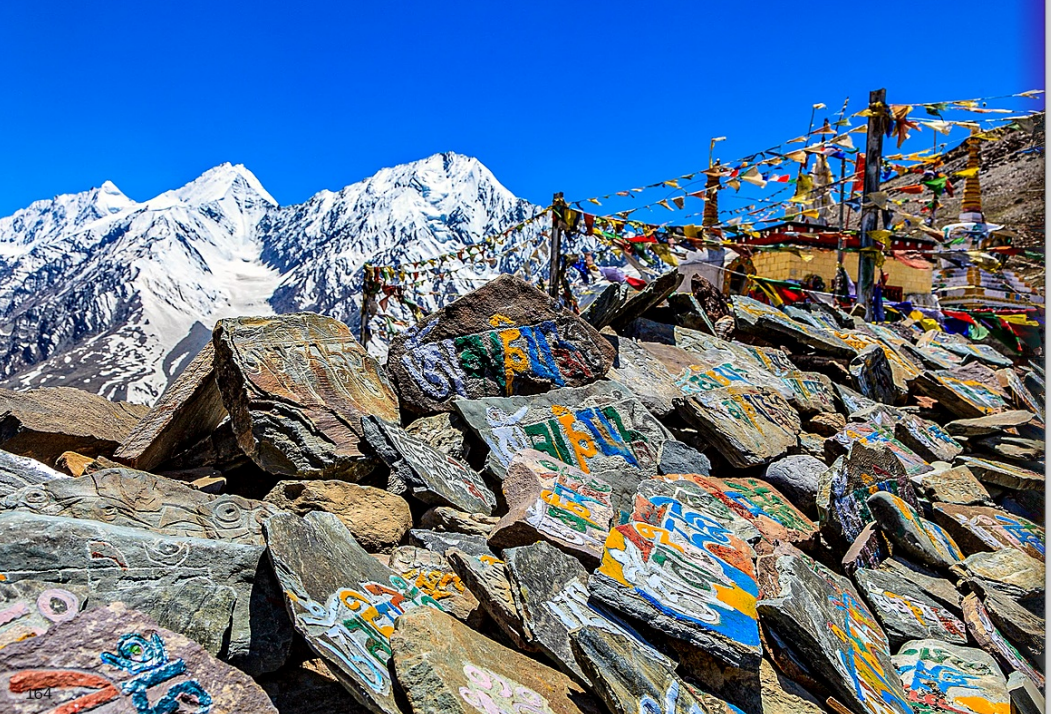
That's where King William I and his wife Catherine Pavlovna came in. They were clever. They wanted to revive agriculture and founded an agricultural association in 1817. Out of gratitude and to encourage the people, they invented the 'Main Agricultural Festival in Cannstatt'. It started on 28 September 1818 on the Neckar meadows—hence the name "Wasen," which simply means 'wet meadow.'

The centrepiece was the fruit column, which still stands there today, decorated with fruit and vegetables. It reminds us of the purpose: that we never forget where our food comes from. In the beginning, it was a serious affair: livestock shows and agricultural innovations to help farmers get back on their feet.

But people wanted to see more than just cows. They wanted entertainment! And that's where we showmen came in. Gradually, attractions, beer stands, and horse races were added. The first parade took place in 1841. Born out of necessity, the Wasen became what it is today: a huge folk festival, the second largest in the world, and Stuttgart's spring festival.

Today, the agricultural exhibition only takes place every four years, but the fruit column and the parade on opening day are our connection to its humble beginnings. We never forget that this huge spectacle arose from a time of need. And I, Winfried, am proud to be part of this history, which turns anew every year, just like my carousels.





MANI STONES

The wind whistles sharply across Kunzum La, at an altitude of 4,551 metres, yet its coldness does not touch my soul. I am Anzan, a simple monk, and this is our gateway, the sacred passage between Lahaul and Spiti. Here, amidst the majestic, rugged mountains, the stones speak a language of the heart.

Every stone here carries the echo of a prayer, the whisper of a pilgrim who begged for protection as he crossed the perilous path. Thousands of them line up to form our 'mani walls'—a collective soul made of stone.

In each stone, we have engraved the powerful mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hum'—'Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus'. We carve these sacred words as meditation, as a spreading of good wishes to the universe, as a shield against the darkness that can lurk in this solitude.

The people who come here, from travellers to simple villagers, know that this pass is no ordinary place. The goddess Kunzum Mata herself watches over it, and her small shrine at the top of the pass is a shining point of faith. I see the eyes of the travellers as they pass by the walls. They are full of hope, sometimes full of fear. They add another stone, a tiny but significant offering for their safe journey.

And then, as they walk clockwise around the walls, following an ancient tradition to seek good fortune and follow the flow of life, I feel their positive energy strengthening ours.

These stones are not mere antiquities; they are alive. They tell not a single, dated story, but an ongoing, eternal narrative of deep faith, of piety as old as the mountains themselves. They are a testament to our unshakeable trust in the blessings of the Buddha, in this inhospitable but sacred world.

REICHENAU MONASTERY

My name is Heinz, and I am the pastor here on the island of Reichenau. When I look out over the monastery, I see more than just old stones; I see the living history of our faith, deeply rooted in this sacred ground.

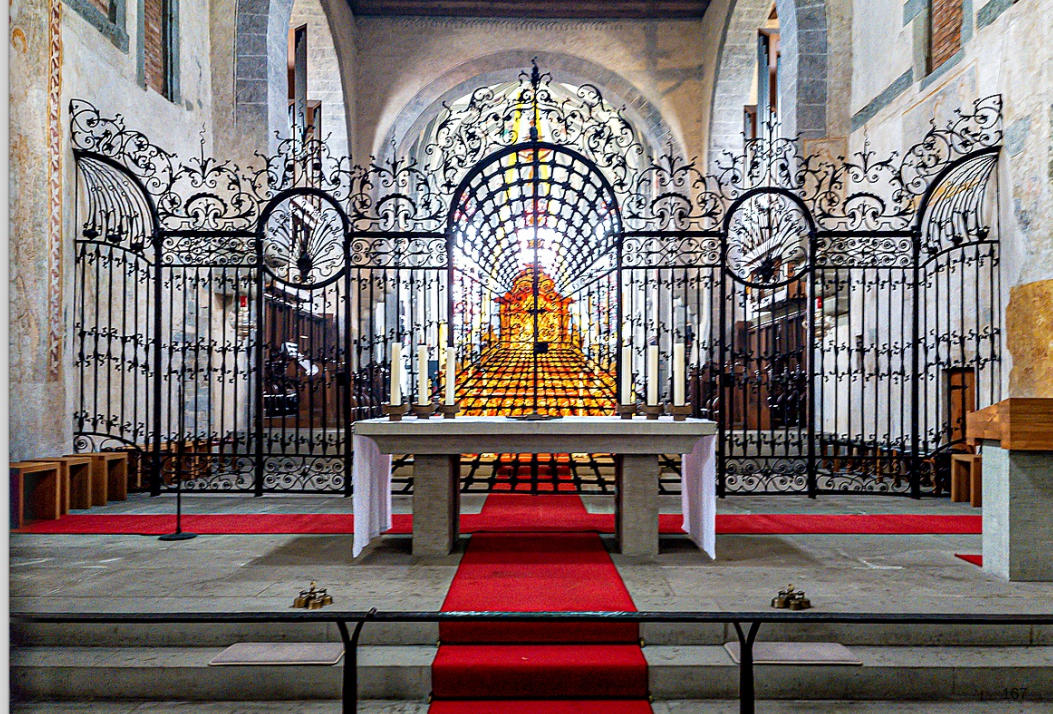
Centuries ago, in the year 724, the itinerant bishop Pirmin arrived. The island was wild and untamed, covered in forests and swamps. But Pirmin, with about 40 brave monks at his side, saw the potential for a place of contemplation and prayer. They cleared the land, laid the foundations, and created an oasis of faith that soon became a shining centre for all of Europe.

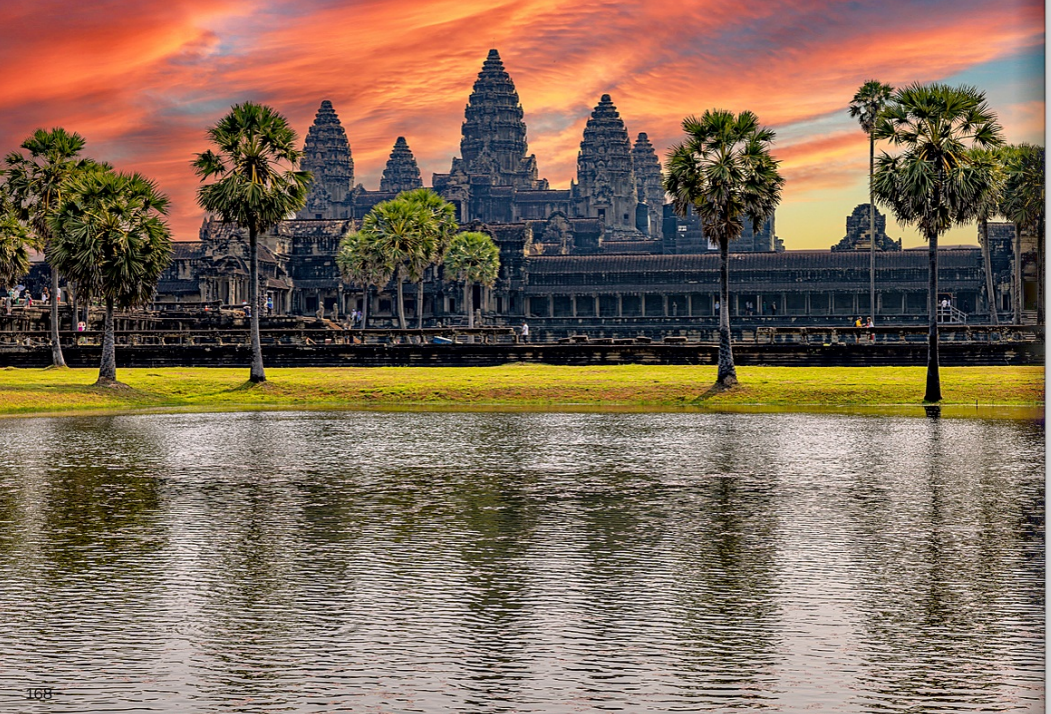
The monastery flourished in the 9th and 10th centuries. It was not only a place of worship, but also a beacon of scholarship. The monks in their scriptorium, including the famous Walahfrid Strabo, created manuscripts and illuminations of inestimable value. I imagine their devotion as they sat by candlelight, writing down every word of the Gospel with the utmost care. The original manuscripts from Reichenau can now be admired as UNESCO World Documentary Heritage.

The abbots of the abbey were powerful men, advisors at the imperial court. But their true influence lay in the hearts of the faithful. The three Romanesque churches that still stand proudly today—St. Mary and St. Mark, St. Peter and Paul, and St. George with its breathtaking Ottonian murals—are stone testimonies to this deep, unshakeable faith. St. George's Church in Oberzell is a special gem, whose paintings tell the stories of the Bible in a way that touches people deeply.

But over time, political influence waned, and the monastery lost its importance. In 1540, it was converted into a priory, and in 1803, in the course of secularisation, the last monk had to leave the island. It was a sad chapter, a loss for the spiritual community.

Today, in 2000, the monastery island of Reichenau has been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. That is a great honour, yes, but for me as a pastor, it is more than that. It is recognition of the people who lived and worked here, who shared their faith and shaped the world around them. The island has remained a place of silence and contemplation, a place where the history of our faith is alive and reminds us that the spirit of God still blows within these ancient walls.





ANGKOR WAT

I look at the stones that my ancestors shaped with blood, sweat, and immeasurable devotion. I am a Khmer, and this is Angkor Wat, the heart of our nation, the largest religious building in the world. Here I feel the presence of the ancient kings and gods, the history of my people, the story of our rise and fall, carved into every single stone.

It was in the early 12th century, during the heyday of our empire, that King Suryavarman II gave the order to build this gigantic temple. Tens of thousands of us worked tirelessly for thirty years. It was a titanic task, driven by deep faith. Originally dedicated to the mighty Hindu god Vishnu and facing west, it was intended as the king's state and burial temple.

The architecture is a marvel, a reflection of our understanding of the universe. The five central towers rise into the sky like the peaks of the mythical Mount Meru, the abode of the gods. The huge moat that surrounds them represents the cosmic ocean. I remember the stories from the Ramayana, which come to life in the elaborate reliefs on the walls, and the scenes from the life of our king. These images tell of our mythology, our heroic deeds, and our beliefs.

Later, under King Jayavarman VII, a change took place. Buddhism spread, and Angkor Wat became a Buddhist place of worship. The gods changed their faces, but the sacred character of the place remained. The faith of my people adapted, like the waters of the Mekong.

When the empire fell in the 15th century and the capital was moved to Lovek, the jungle reclaimed its land. Vines entwined the stones, but the sanctuary was never completely abandoned. Monks kept the flame of faith alive. But to the outside world, we were forgotten until the French explorer Henri Mouhot brought Angkor Wat back to the world's attention in the 19th century.

Today, Angkor Wat is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the national symbol of Cambodia. Millions of tourists flock here to marvel at the testimony to the past greatness of our empire. But for me, it is more than that. It is a reminder of my roots, of the strength and unshakeable faith of the Khmer people. When I stand here, I feel a deep connection to those who came before me, and I know that their legacy lives on in me.

PHRA MAHATHAT CHEDI PHAKDEE PRAKAT

My name is Araya, and I live in Betong, a place that is often in the news only because of the shadow of conflict, here in the deep south of Thailand, near the border with Malaysia. But I tell you, in our hearts we carry light. And this light has a form: the golden pagoda, Phra Mahathat Chedi Phakdee Prakat.

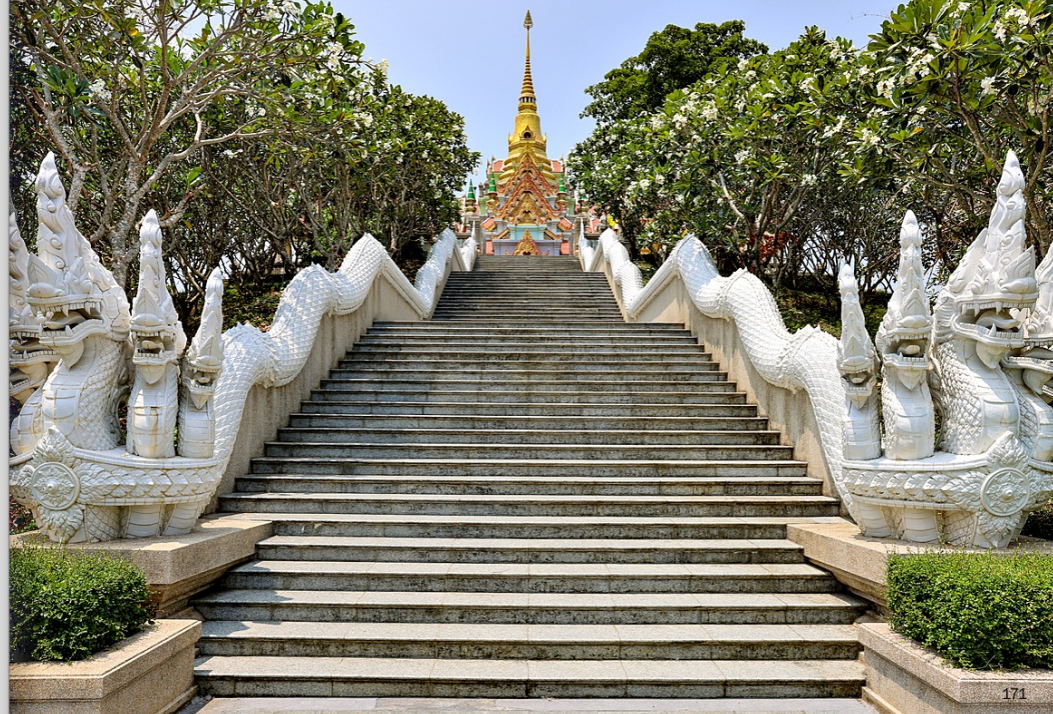
It is not old, not like the great temples in the north. It is young, born of our collective desire for harmony and peace. I remember the year 1996, when we all came together to honour the 50th anniversary of the accession to the throne of our beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej. It was our idea, the idea of the simple people of Betong.

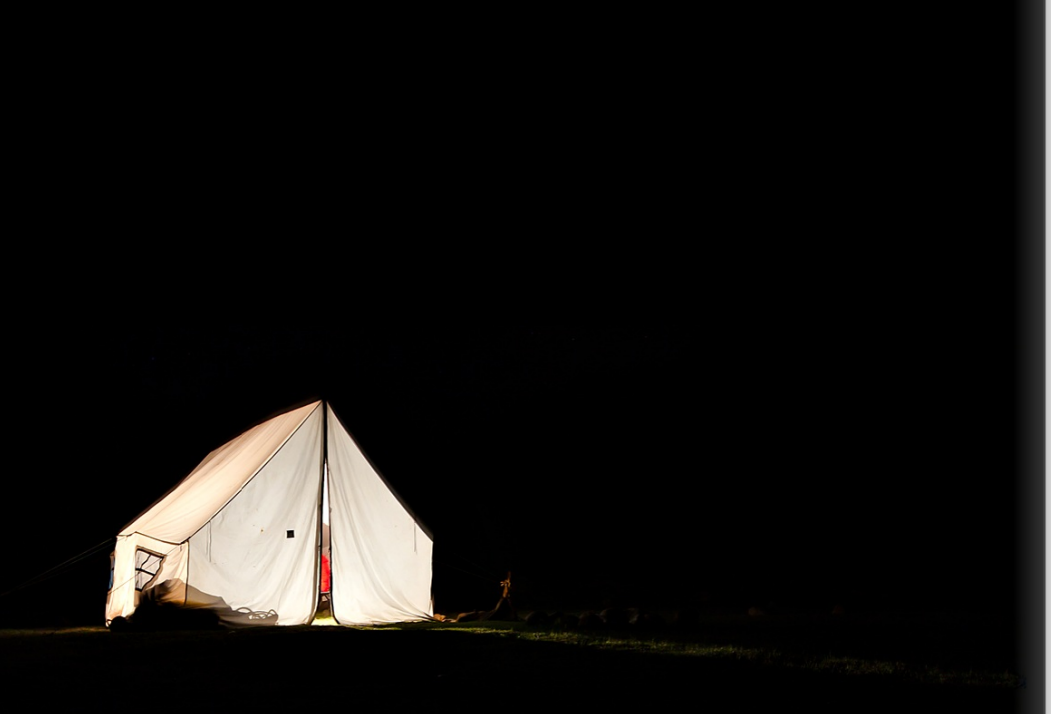
Everyone gave what they could. We financed the project ourselves, stone by stone, baht by baht. It was an expression of our deep piety and unwavering love for the royal family. We built it in the ancient Srivijaya style, which reminds us of our region's glorious past, yet it stands for our modern hope.

It now stands enthroned on the grounds of Wat Phutthatiwat, about 40 metres high, a beacon in the landscape. I helped to apply the gold leaf, and each leaf carried a silent prayer for the safety of my family, for an end to the unrest, for tolerance. Inside the chedi rest relics of the Buddha—a sign that this is truly a sacred place, a centre for our Buddhist community in the south.

When I climb the hill today and look out from the elevated position onto my town of Betong and the green mountains, I feel a deep, almost painful calm. This peaceful sight is so different from the stories of violence and fear that often surround us.

For me, the chedi is more than just a building; it is a promise, a symbol of our hope for lasting peace. It reminds me that we, the people of Betong, have the power to create something beautiful and meaningful, even in the darkest of times. And as long as it shines golden, I will hope.





MOUNTAINEERING IN THE HIMALAYAS

My name is Ramesh, a shepherd in the Spiti Valley. The history of the mountains here is the history of my life and the history of my ancestors. Before the Western mountaineers arrived, these peaks were not places for us to climb, but sacred dwellings of our gods and spirits, which we treated with deep reverence.

In the past, when the British came, they only wanted to draw maps. Andrew Wilson and his ilk were explorers, not mountaineers. For us, mountaineering in the Western sense was unimaginable—you don't climb onto the roof of your god's house. It was only much later, when the Indian government gradually opened up the valley, that this began to change.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the expeditions arrived. They called the mountains technical challenges and carved out new routes. Today's mountaineers are different. They talk about sustainability and respect. They learn from us how to survive at this altitude—in the dry air, without infrastructure. The mountaineers come to Gya or the CB peaks not only to reach the summit, but to experience our culture and protect nature. The mountains remain our home, and human curiosity now meets with the respect that these ancient rocks deserve.

But you know, it's about more than just history. It's about daily life up here. I remember a young, strong mountaineer from Europe who was here a few years ago. He wanted to climb Gya, the highest peak nearby, almost 6,800 metres high. He was well equipped, had the latest ropes and tents. The European laughed at our simple woollen clothes and our prayer flags. He saw the mountains only as a problem to be solved—a summit to be conquered.

He set off, but the mountain showed him its true power. The extreme altitude, the brittle rocks—after a few days he came back, exhausted, pale, with almost frostbitten fingers. He had not reached the summit. He had become silent.

When he broke camp, I spoke to him. I told him: The mountain does not belong to you. You cannot conquer it. You must ask its permission. I showed him how we leave a small offering at a pass, a handful of barley, to honour the gods. I think he understood something at that moment. He no longer saw just a rock, but the living presence we feel here. He left the valley with a different attitude. Today's mountaineers are slowly beginning to understand this better. They come to experience, not to conquer. And that's a good thing. Because the mountains will always remain here, long after we are all gone.

LOPBURI

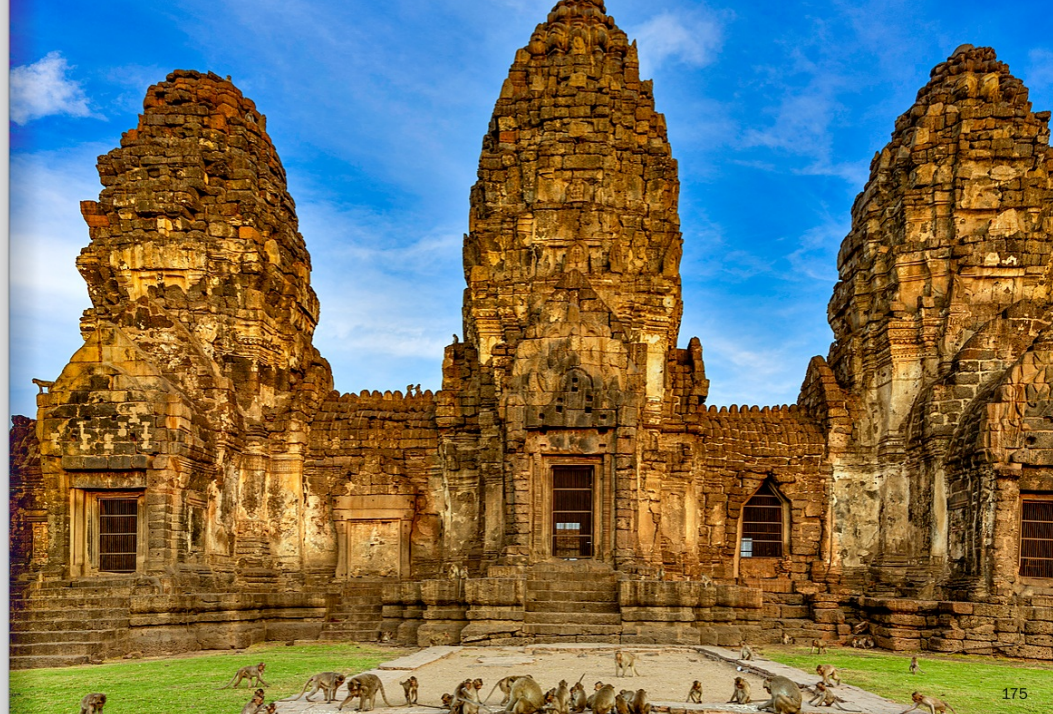
I am Prasong, a resident of Lopburi, and my story is closely linked to the small, cheeky faces that populate our city: the long-tailed macaques. To us, they are not a nuisance, but sacred, descendants of Hanuman, the monkey king from the Ramayana. They live among us, especially around the ancient Khmer temples of Phra Prang Sam Yot and the San Phra Kan shrine, as if they were guardians of our history.

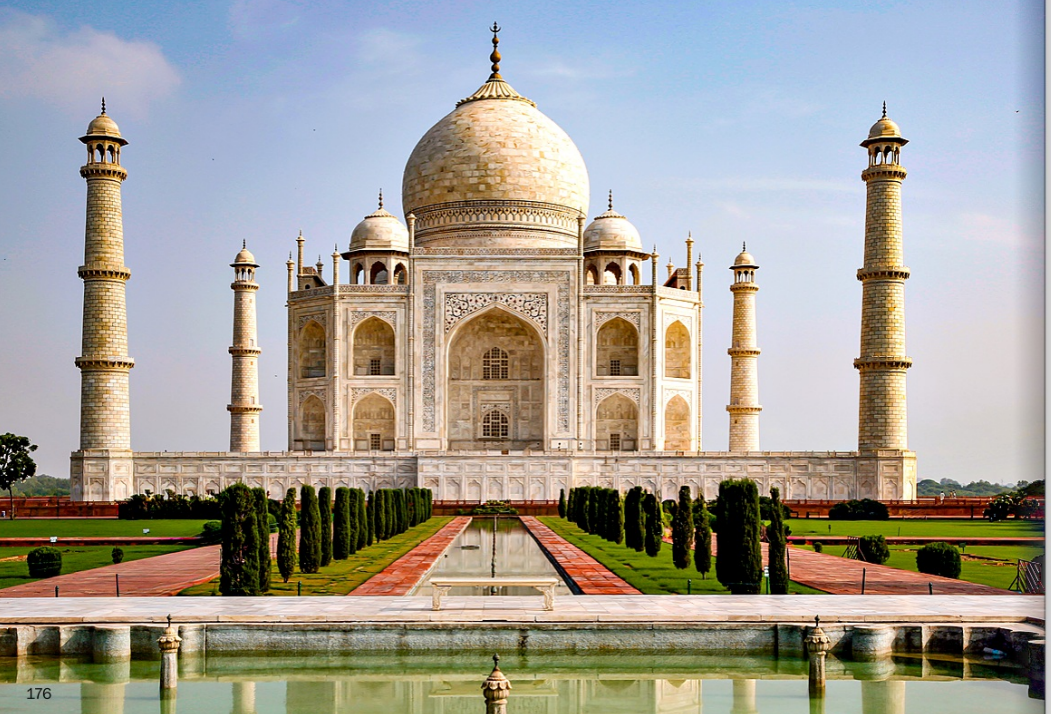
They used to be a joy, a sign of our unique heritage that attracted tourists from all over the world. I still remember the beginnings of the Monkey Buffet Festival in 1989, launched by a clever businessman. Tons of fruit, vegetables, and sweets, elaborately arranged to thank the monkeys and delight visitors. It was a celebration of gratitude, a lively spectacle that brought our community together and brought revenue to the city.

But over time, the balance began to shift. The monkeys lost their natural shyness, were overfed by us humans, and could no longer find natural food sources. They became bold, stealing food from our hands, causing chaos on the streets, and looting shops. The situation came to a head during the COVID-19 pandemic when the flow of tourists dried up. The hungry monkey gangs fought over territory, posing a real threat to us residents.

Today, we are trying to get the situation under control. The city council has launched sterilisation programmes and started building enclosures on the outskirts of the city to solve the problem of overpopulation. It is a difficult balancing act, because we want to preserve our cultural traditions while ensuring harmonious coexistence.

The story of the monkeys of Lopburi is a reflection of the complex world we live in—it reminds us that we must respect nature and find a balance in order to live together in peace. The monkeys are a part of us, a part of our identity, and we must find a way that works for everyone.





TAJ MAHAL

I am Mumtaz Mahal. My name means ‘the jewel of the palace.’ But my story is not one of a palace full of joy, but one of infinite love that ended in pain and was immortalised in immaculate white marble. I died in 1631 while giving birth to our fourteenth child, leaving my beloved Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal emperor, in deep mourning.

On my deathbed, I asked him for four promises: to build a symbol of our love, to take good care of our children, to never remarry, and to visit my grave every year. My Jahan was inconsolable. He promised me he would fulfil my first wish in a way that the world would never forget.

He gathered thousands of craftsmen, artists, and labourers from all over India, Persia, and Central Asia. For over 20 years, until 1653, they created this marvel on the banks of the Yamuna River in Agra. It is an exquisite blend of Indian, Persian, and Islamic architecture—the Taj Mahal, the jewel of Muslim art in India.

I, as a ghost, float above this immaculate white marble. I see it shimmering pale pink at dawn and glowing golden at sunset, as if taking on the colour of my love for Jahan. The mausoleum itself, the large garden (Charbagh), the mosque, and the magnificent entrance gate—all testify to the depth of his affection. In his heart, he even wanted to build an identical mausoleum of black marble for himself on the opposite side of the river, so that he could be forever connected to me.

But fate had other plans. In 1658, my beloved Jahan was overthrown by his own son Aurangzeb and placed under house arrest in the Red Fort of Agra. From his small window, he spent the rest of his life, until his death in 1666, gazing at my tomb, the symbol of our eternal love. His wish to rest in a black Taj Mahal remained unfulfilled, but his remains were eventually laid to rest next to mine.

Today, the Taj Mahal is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and attracts millions of visitors. They see the splendour, the architecture, but I see my husband's tears, his unwavering devotion. It is not just a building; it is a silent cry of love that has endured the centuries and lives on in people's hearts as the ultimate symbol of eternal love.

STONEHENGE

I am Brian, an archaeological researcher, and I have dedicated my life to unravelling the mysteries of Stonehenge. When I stand before this impressive monument, I feel the awe and curiosity that drive me. There are no written records of its builders, but the stones themselves tell a story that we archaeologists are trying to understand.

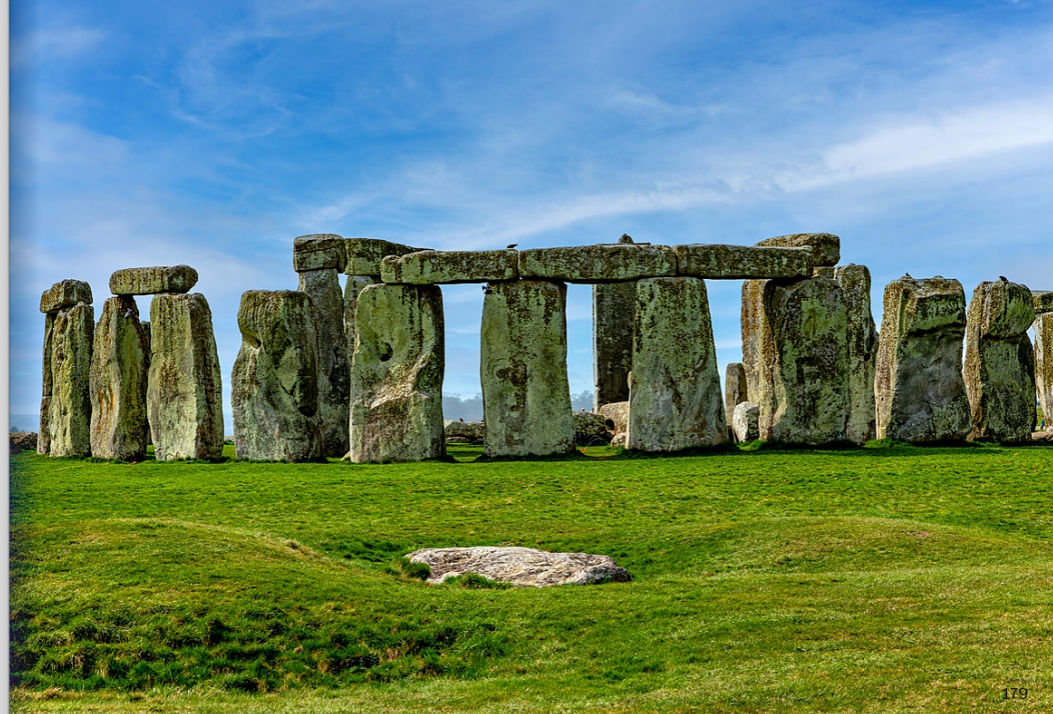
The story begins 5,000 years ago in the Neolithic period. The very first phase was a simple earthwork with a ditch, a circle that marked the beginning of something big. Inside this circle, we found the 'Aubrey Holes'—56 mysterious pits. We don't know exactly what they were used for—perhaps for wooden posts, perhaps as part of an early calendar system that helped people understand time.

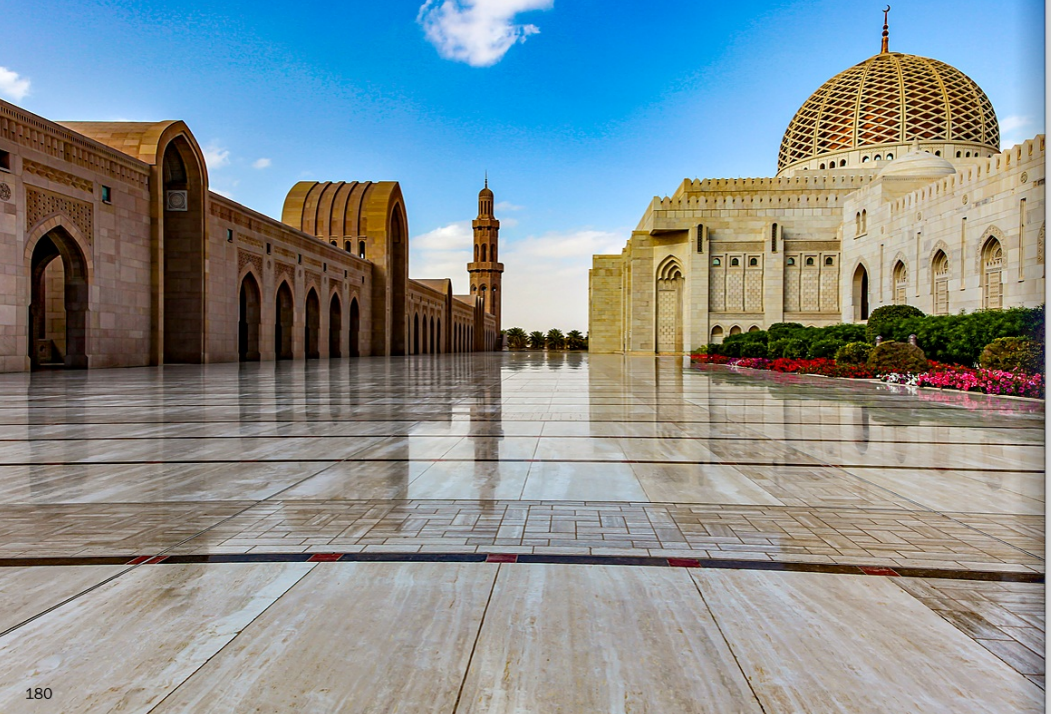
The most dramatic phase of construction began about 4,500 years ago. I never cease to be amazed by the technical mastery behind it. First, the smaller 'bluestones' were added, weighing up to four tonnes. These stones came from the Preseli Hills in West Wales, an incredible distance of over 240 kilometres. How they managed to transport these huge boulders without modern machinery—whether by land, water, or both—remains a mystery that fascinates and humbles us.

A little later, the more massive 'sarsens' followed, huge sandstone blocks weighing up to 50 tonnes, which were brought from the Marlborough Downs, about 30 kilometres away. These formed the outer circle and the inner, U-shaped trilithons. The sight of these huge stones, erected with such precision and topped with capstones, fills me with awe at the skill and determination of these prehistoric people.

The exact purpose of Stonehenge is still hotly debated among archaeologists. But one thing is undeniable: the monument's alignment with the solstices is perfect. It is aligned with the sunrise on the summer solstice and the sunset on the winter solstice. It must have been a place of enormous significance, a meeting place, a site for religious rituals, for observing the stars, and perhaps also a burial site for an elite class. Recent research emphasising the importance of the surrounding landscape supports this theory.

After about 1,500 years as an active ceremonial centre, Stonehenge lost its importance. Stones fell over and were stolen. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, restoration work began to secure this national symbol and present it to the world in its present form.





SULTAN QABOOS GRAND MOSQUE

I was one of the many labourers on this construction site in Muscat, and I remember every detail as if it were yesterday. The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque you see today is not just concrete and marble; it embodies the heart and soul of a people and the vision of one man, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said.

It began in 1992, when the Sultan wanted to give his people a gift—a main mosque that would not only be a place of prayer, but a shining symbol of the unity of Islam. I remember when construction began in 1995, the countless hours under the scorching sun. It was hard work, but we knew we were creating something unique. For six years, we sweated, built, and hoped.

I worked side by side with men from India who worked the sturdy sandstone for the façade. I saw the Burmese masters carving the wood for the ornate decorations with a steady hand, and the Italian experts laying the marble for the floors as if they were creating a painting. It was as if the whole world had come together to build this sacred house, a mosaic of cultures and materials, just as the Sultan wanted.

I remember the excitement when the huge chandelier from Austria was installed in the main hall—it sparkled like a starry sky. And then there was the huge Persian carpet, woven by over 600 workers in four years, a masterpiece of craftsmanship.

On 4 May 2001, the time had come. The mosque was inaugurated, just in time for the 30th anniversary of the Sultan's accession to the throne. I stood in the crowd and saw the 50-metre-high dome and the 90-metre-high main minaret, surrounded by four other minarets symbolising the five pillars of Islam. I was overwhelmed with pride. We had done it.

Today, when I visit the mosque, I am filled with deep gratitude. It is not only the main mosque of Oman, but also a place that welcomes visitors, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It brings people together, promotes understanding, and serves as a shining symbol of the visionary spirit of our Sultan Qaboos. I feel honoured to be a part of this history, a part of this place that will forever stand for peace and tolerance.

BIRD VIEW POINT

Grandmother Pranaya always tells me the story of how it all began when she was a little girl. Back in the 1970s, a man named Ratanlal Maloo started feeding a few migratory birds that came to our village of Khichan. “There were only a few,” she says, her eyes softening at the memory, “but their calls were the most beautiful I had ever heard. A promise that the cold season would soon be over.” We children called them ‘Kurja’. This name means so much more than just bird; it is part of our folk songs, a symbol of longing.

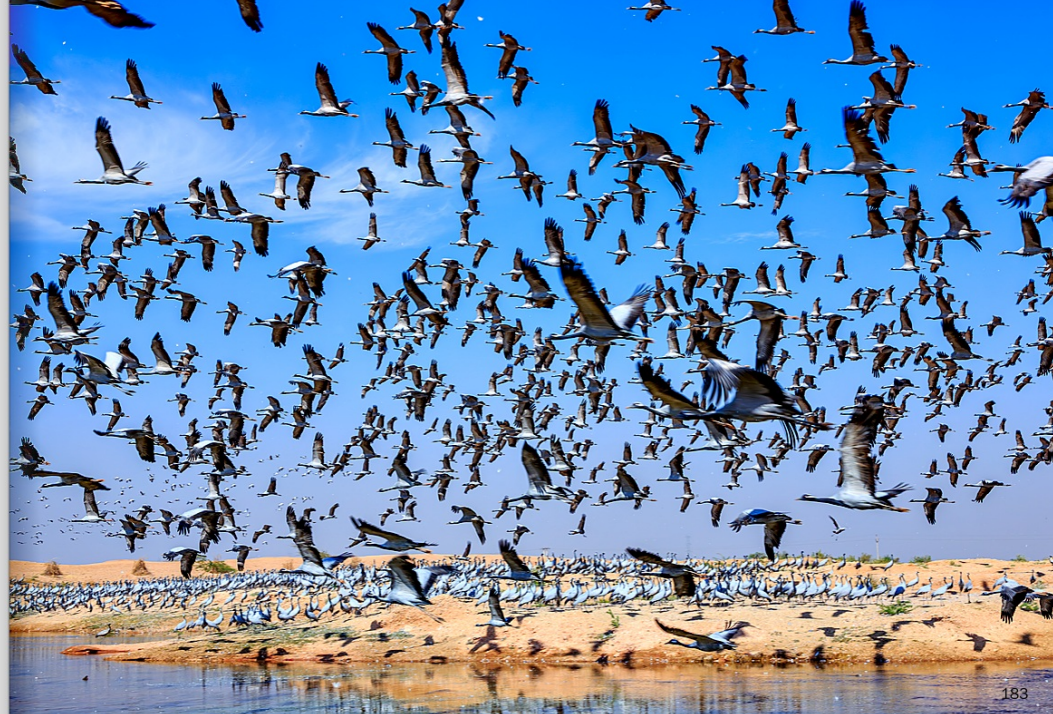
No one would have thought back then that this small gesture of kindness would one day become something so big, something so global. But the news spread, not only among us humans, but also among the birds themselves. Every year, more and more cranes came, until there were tens of thousands of them filling the desert with their trumpet-like calls. When they circled in huge formations in the sky and then landed near the feeding ground, it was always a magical moment, an awakening that took our breath away. That was my grandmother’s awakening, the awakening of her generation, which taught us how a single act of kindness can change the world.

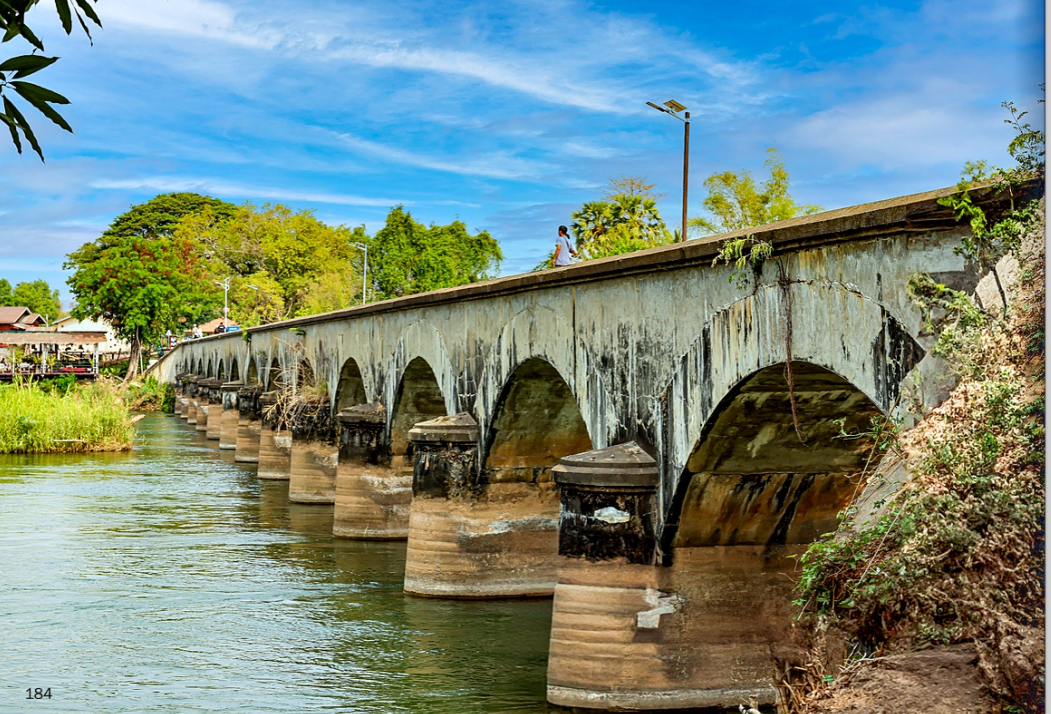
Today, when the sun rises, I often stand with my friends at the Kurja Resort's ‘Bird View Point’. It's a new place, built only in the 2020s. It's cool to come here because we can see the cranes flying in flocks just 50 metres away. We send selfies to our friends in the city, who would never understand what a spectacle this is.

The resort in the desert landscape of Rajasthan is modern, with comfortable rooms, and visitors from all over the world are here with their expensive cameras and binoculars to see what has always been normal for us. We have learned to communicate in English and help the tourists take the best photos. They bring prosperity, the world comes to us in Khichan, our families have work and a better life.

But I am torn. I wonder what it was like when only a few of them were here. When there were no hotels and no tourists, just Ratanlal Maloo and the birds landing in the quiet desert air.

I hope we don't lose the magic that once came from one man's simple kindness. The cranes are our kurja, our identity, and I hope that the next generation will love them as much as we do, and that we will find the balance between protecting these beautiful animals and the world they have brought us.





THE BRIDGE TO DON DET AND DON KHON

The old steel bridge that spans the water here on Don Det to Don Khon is more than just a connection between two pieces of land to me. It is a scar on the landscape, a rusty but proud relic that reminds us of a time when strangers came to tame the mighty Mekong River. I am Nai, born and raised here in the peaceful seclusion of the 4000 Islands (Si Phan Don) of Laos.

My grandparents told me about the falang—the French—who turned up here at the end of the 19th century, driven by the feverish dream of establishing a trade route to China. They saw the Mekong as their natural motorway, but the Khone Falls, the largest rapids in Southeast Asia, stood in their way with thunderous force. Nature had taught them a lesson they were unwilling to accept.

Their solution was as ingenious as it was brutal: a railway line, the first and only one in Laos at the time, to bypass the impassable waterfalls. I remember the stories of the squeaking of the carriages carrying freight and passengers, the noise that broke the natural silence of our islands.

This bridge, on which I stand today, was the centrepiece of their plan, a masterpiece of colonial engineering that was in operation from 1893 to 1941. It not only connected Don Det and Don Khon; it also connected two shores of forced labour performed for their colonial dream.

When the French finally withdrew and more modern transport routes replaced shipping, the railway lost its importance and fell silent. The tracks disappeared, reclaimed by the jungle or used by us locals for our own needs. The bridge, however, remained.

Today, the bridge is a simple footpath and cycle path. Tourists from all over the world walk across the rusty metal and take photos of the rice fields and the river below. For them, it is a fascinating historical monument, a sign of the creativity of the colonial era. For me, however, it is a daily, tangible reminder of the resilience of my people and the untamed power of the Mekong.

BUDDHA STATUE

I am Phet, a rice farmer here in Yala Province, in the deep south of Thailand. My life revolves around the fields, the monsoon, and the hope for a good harvest. But in recent decades, something new, something big, has shaped our horizon: the Phra Mahathat Chedi Phakdee Prakat.

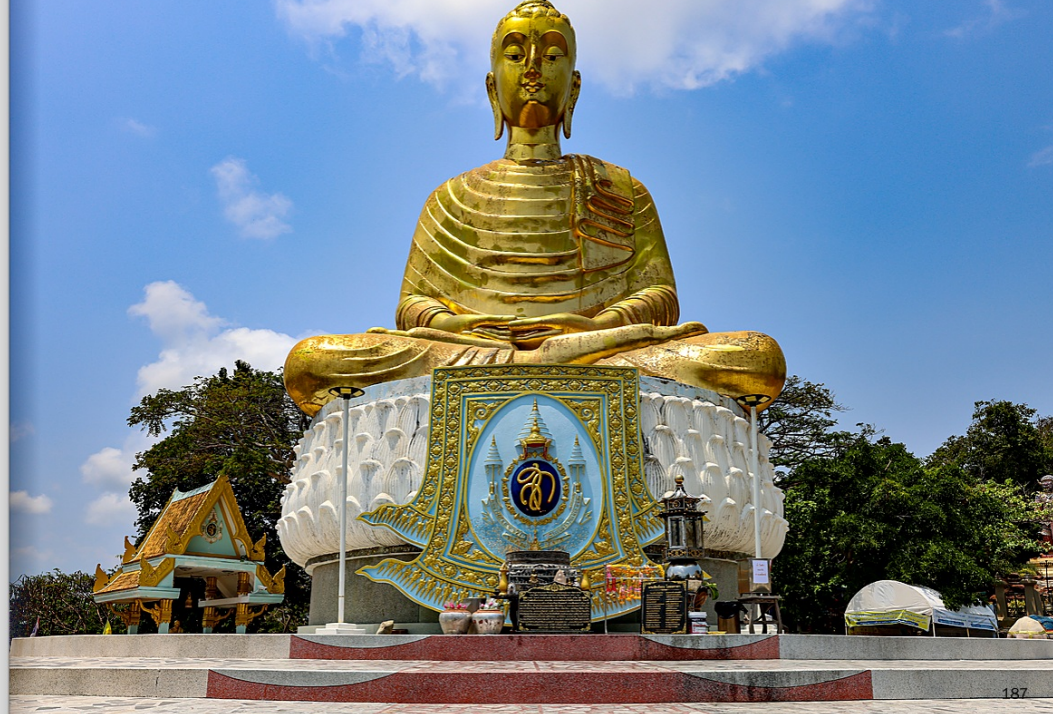
For the people in Bangkok, this pagoda may be a modern structure, barely old enough to have a ‘real’ history. But for us down here, it is the heart of our recent faith, a beacon in a region often marked by unrest and conflict.

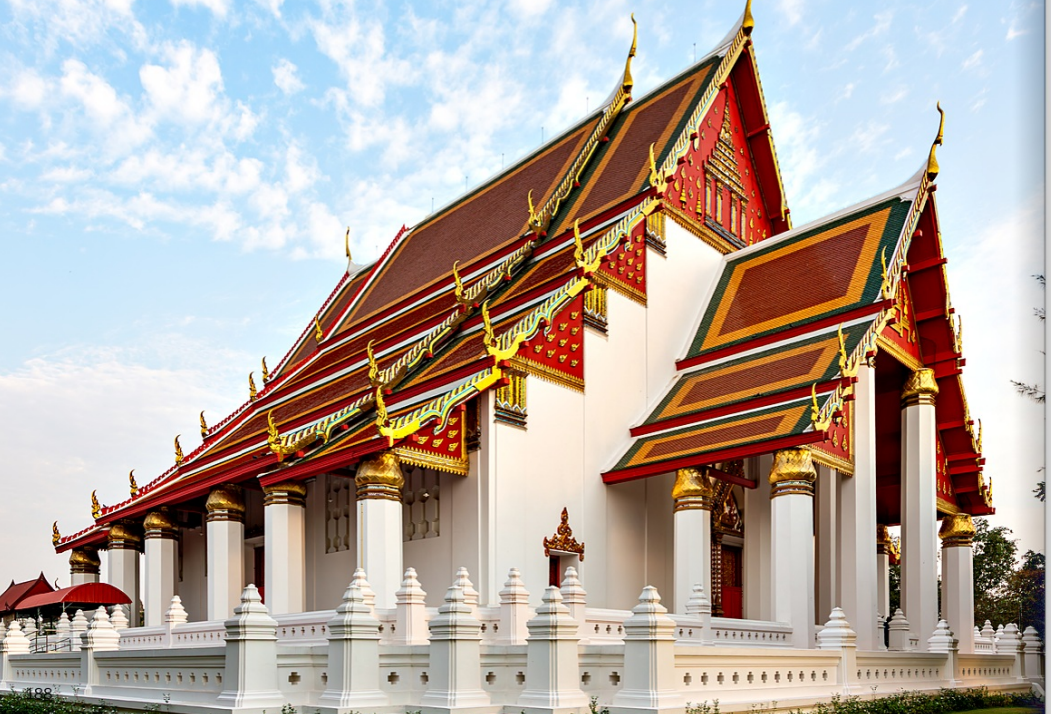
I remember 1996 well. It was the year our revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej celebrated his 50th anniversary on the throne. The news spread like wildfire through the rice fields: a large pagoda, a place of peace and worship, was to be built in his honour. At the time, I talked to my neighbours about the plans and how important this place would become for us. It was a time of new beginnings and respect for our monarch.

The Buddha statues within the complex, especially those in the small pavilion next to the golden main chedi, are not like the old, weathered stones found in ruins. They are younger than me, but their significance is ancient. The most important of them, which I visit every time I go to the temple, shows the Buddha in the ‘earth as witness’ posture, the Bhūmisparśa Mudra.

With his right hand, he touches the ground. When I kneel in front of it, I see more than just bronze or stone. I see the gesture of enlightenment, the moment when the Buddha called upon the earth itself as a witness to his victory over the demon Mara. For me, as a simple farmer who struggles daily with the vagaries of nature and the tensions in our homeland, this statue is a symbol of steadfastness. It reminds me that one must face the illusions and difficulties of life with inner peace.

The history of these statues may not be one of antiquity; it is one of the recent past, a history of popular piety, of deep respect for the royal family, and of an unwavering desire for peace in our sometimes difficult Yala. As I lay out my offerings and meditate, this modern pagoda teaches me that faith does not have to be old to be deep. It just has to be there, strong and present, like the golden shrine that now watches over our fields.





AYUTTHAYA

My name is Suphankanlaya. As a young princess of Ayutthaya, I saw the world from the magnificent golden palaces that formed the heart of the most powerful kingdom of Siam. The city, founded in 1350 by my ancestor, Prince U-Thong—later King Ramathibodi I—was our pride and joy, our second capital after Sukhothai.

I remember the daily sight of the three great rivers—the Chao Phraya, the Pa Sak, and the Lopburi—surrounding our island like protective arms. This strategic location made Ayutthaya a fortress and a magnet for the world. From my window, I could see the sails of ships from China, India, Persia, and Europe. Ayutthaya was a melting pot of cultures, one of the richest metropolises on Earth.

Our city was a marvel. Over 400 temples, each a work of art, some with influences from the ancient Khmer, towered into the sky. The gigantic fortresses and magnificent palaces bore witness to the power of 33 successive kings who ruled our Siam for over four centuries. I thought this splendour would last forever.

But then, after more than 400 years of prosperity, the inevitable happened. The Burmese armies besieged us. The splendour was replaced by the rumblings of war and the acrid smell of smoke. In 1767, the city fell. What followed was a nightmare. The conquerors systematically plundered, destroyed the sacred temples, melted down our beloved Buddha statues, and desecrated everything that was holy to us. Our magnificent capital was never rebuilt. The power of Siam, our hope, shifted away to Bangkok.

I still feel the pain of this destruction, even though my voice is only an echo from the past. For centuries, the remains lay dormant, left to the jungle and time.

Today, after so long, the Thai government has begun to remember. Restoration work began in 1969, and in 1976 the area was declared a historical park. And in 1991, UNESCO honoured our homeland as a World Heritage Site.

When I look at the ruins today, which attract visitors from all over the world, I see more than just stones. I see the memory of Thailand's glorious past. I see the famous Buddha head entwined by trees in Wat Mahathat. For me, these ruins are more than just an open-air museum; they are a testament to our resilience and the eternal spirit of Ayutthaya, which lives on despite everything.

LEATHERWORKING IN FÈS-MEDINA

I am a tanner. My name is Mourad, I am eighty years old, and my hands are as wrinkled and tanned as the leather I have worked with all my life. My life is inextricably linked to this place, the Chouara tannery, the beating, albeit smelly, heart of Fès El-Bali, our ancient, venerable medina.

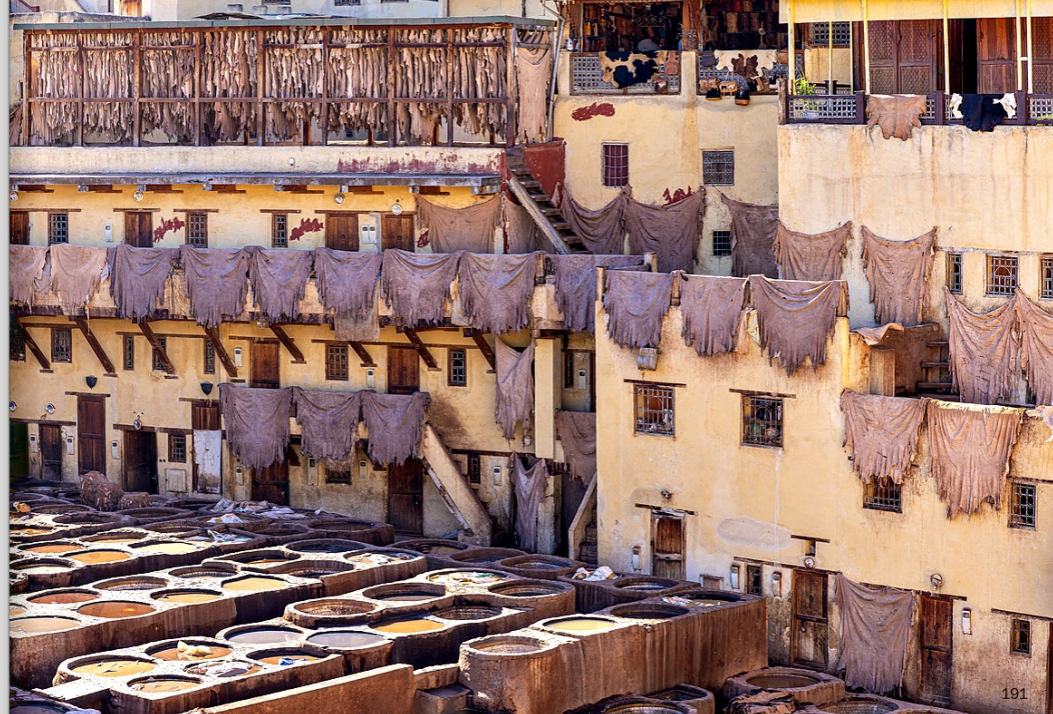
I have stood at these basins since my youth, when my knees were still strong and my back was straight. I took my place at the parapet from my father, who took it from his father, in a chain that goes back to the 13th century. We are the guardians of a process that has hardly changed for centuries. The world outside may talk of fast machines, but in here, time flows to the rhythm of the river Fès and our work.

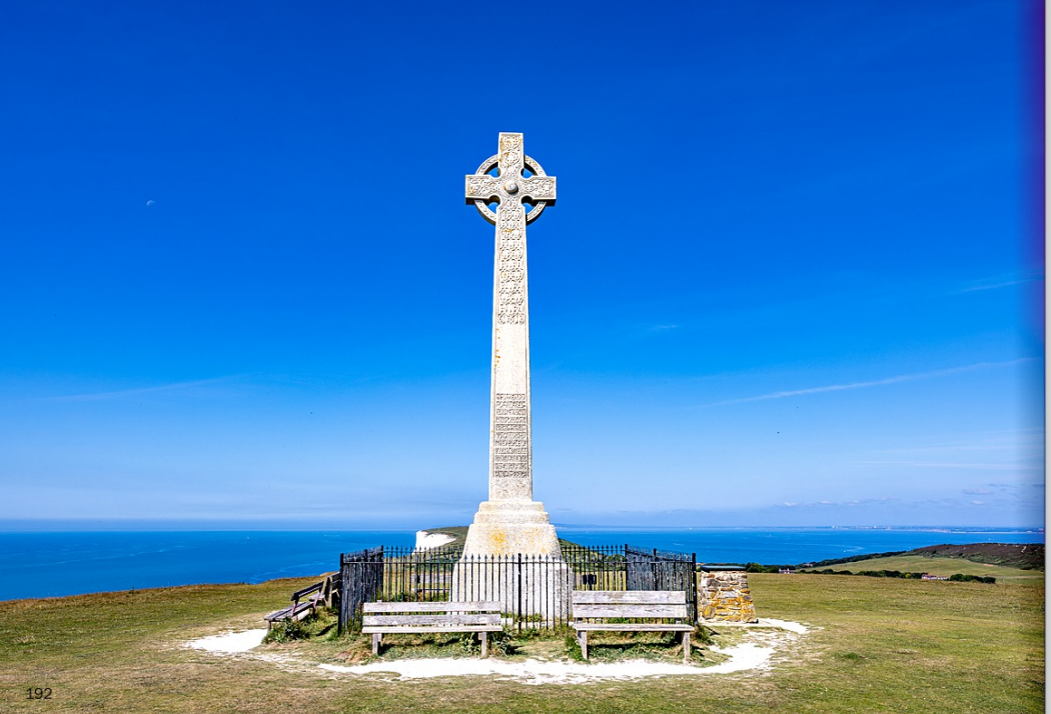
The smell... ah, the smell. The tourists, those curious souls, hold mint leaves to their noses as if to ward off a plague. They smile and take photographs, but they don't understand that this pungent smell of ammonia, of the mixture of lime and pigeon droppings, is the smell of authenticity. It is the scent of transformation, the smell of the hard work necessary to turn raw, stiff animal hides into something soft and supple. It is the smell of tradition that survives. I remember the coldness of the water in the early hours of the morning and the scorching sun at midday burning our backs. I remember the effort of kicking and turning the skins to ensure that every fibre softened, that every hair yielded. It is back-breaking work, but one that I do with pride.

Then there are the colours. We don't use chemicals from factories. Our colours come straight from the soul of Morocco: poppy for blood red, henna for the warm orange of the desert, indigo for the deep blue of the evening sky, and saffron for the yellow of the sun burning on our faces. We dip the hides, giving them life, personality.

When the leather finally dries in the sun on the rooftops, a mosaic of colours, I feel a deep sense of satisfaction. I know that this material will be transformed into beautiful bags, belts, and poufs in the hands of other craftsmen in the souks. Every piece that leaves our tannery carries a piece of my soul, a testament to our resilience and our identity.

For me, the Chouara tannery is not just an open-air museum, as the guidebooks say. It is alive, it breathes and smells, reminding us of who we are and where we come from. As long as I have the strength to stand by these vats, I will be a silent, proud guardian of this art that has stood the test of time.





TENNYSON MONUMENT

My name is Tony and I live in Freshwater, a place on the Isle of Wight that for me is inextricably linked to the story of one of England's greatest poets. Every day from my window, I see the imposing Celtic cross, visible from afar, perched on the crest of the cliffs. For me, it is much more than just a monument; it is the silent, powerful testimony of a man who loved this place as deeply as I do.

The history of this place began in 1853, when Alfred Lord Tennyson, who had just been appointed Poet Laureate, arrived here with his family. They were seeking refuge, a retreat from the noisy, exhausting life in London. They rented Farringford House in Freshwater Bay and bought it shortly afterwards with the proceeds from his poems, including the famous 'Maud'. For almost forty years, until his death in 1892, Farringford was his beloved home.

I often imagine him, a passionate hiker, climbing the nearby chalk hill, then called High Down, almost every day. He sought solitude, the breathtaking view of the English Channel and the majestic white cliffs. Up here, where the air was said to be 'worth six pence a pint', he found inspiration. Many of his most famous works, including 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' and 'Crossing the Bar', were written during these walks, shaped by the wild beauty of this landscape.

When he died in 1892, he was buried in distant Westminster Abbey, but his friends and neighbours here knew where his heart truly lay. They set up a fund, and in 1897 this 15-metre-high Celtic cross, made of sturdy Cornish granite, was unveiled at his absolute favourite spot, the highest point of the hill (which we now call Tennyson Down).

The inscription on the monument, which I have read countless times, states that it was erected 'In memory of Alfred Lord Tennyson' by the residents of Freshwater and other friends 'as a beacon for sailors'. Today, the monument stands as a landmark visible from afar above our bay. It is a constant anchor of history in my life here in Freshwater.

It reminds me that this great poet, who travelled the world, spent his 'happiest days' right here. It is as if his spirit, his poetry, can still be felt in the salty air and wild beauty of this landscape, and that makes me immensely proud to call this place my home.

CROCUSES OF ZAVELSTEIN

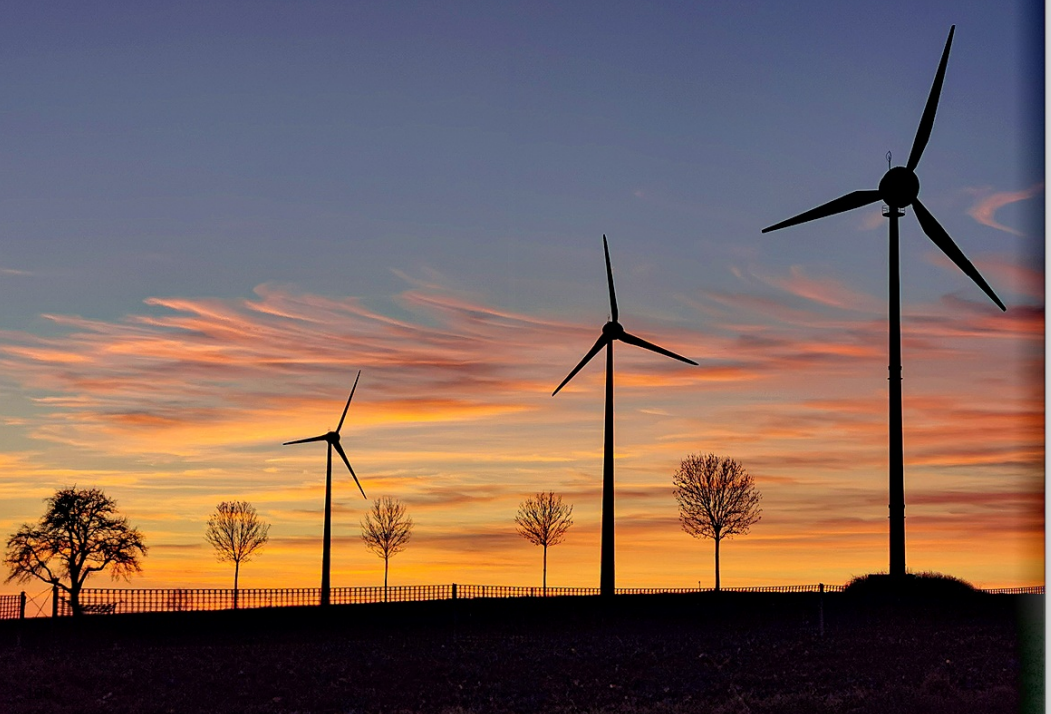
My name is Mathias. I live in Stuttgart, but every year in March, when the first warm rays of sunshine chase away the winter, I am drawn away, up into the northern Black Forest, to Zavelstein. The journey is short, but the world that awaits me there is very different from my hectic city life.

Here in Zavelstein, a small miracle happens every year. The meadows near the old castle ruins are transformed into a sea of deep purple and white. These are no ordinary garden crocuses, but wild crocuses (Crocus neglectus), which bloom here in their millions. For me, this story is fascinating, a mystery of nature. How did this Mediterranean plant, which is actually native to the south, end up here in our tranquil 'Veilchenstädtle' (violet town)? I rack my brains over this question every year.

There are old legends. Some say it was the Crusaders who brought the bulbs back with them on their return from the Holy Land or Italy and planted them here. A romantic idea. Others speculate that monks from a nearby monastery wanted to grow medicinal plants or harvest saffron here—even though this is the wrong type of crocus. I like the idea that a coincidence, a lost bag of seeds, triggered this miracle.

No matter how they got here, they have flourished magnificently. The phenomenon often lasts only a few days, a brief, intense burst of spring. I then wander through the nature reserve, breathe in the cool, clear air, and marvel at the blaze of colour. It is a well-known event that attracts people from all over.

For me, the story of the wild crocuses is also a story of successful nature conservation. The fact that this unique, colourful spring miracle will be preserved for future generations fills me with hope. For me, the crocuses of Zavelstein symbolise the beginning of spring, a reminder of how unpredictable and beautiful nature can be. And every time I drive back to Stuttgart, I take a piece of this magic with me.



ENERGY REVOLUTION

As mayor of Thümmlitzwalde, I look back with great pride on the development of our region in the field of renewable energies. What is now such a familiar sight in our landscape does not have a centuries-old history like our historic buildings, but is the result of forward-looking decisions that were made relatively recently.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, when awareness of climate change and the need to move away from fossil fuels was gaining momentum in the national debate, we in the local council were faced with important questions. We recognised that our region, with its wind resources, had the potential to contribute to the energy transition while strengthening the local economy.

It was not a decision that was made overnight, but a process that required careful planning. At the time, we made a conscious decision to designate priority areas for wind power, even though this involved discussions with local residents and conservationists. We knew that we had to bring about change, and that required courage and persuasion.

The first projects were implemented in the 2000s and 2010s. I still remember the debates about the height of the turbines and the visible changes to our landscape. But time proved us right. The technology developed rapidly.

Today, the municipality not only generates enough green electricity to power itself, but also supplies the surrounding areas. The local tax revenue generated by the wind farms has enabled significant investments in schools and infrastructure. The turbines, once viewed with scepticism, have become silent, efficient guardians of the climate, demonstrating that Thümmlitzwalde chose the right path when the future of energy was still uncertain. This change is the modern history of the region.

SPEICHERSTADT

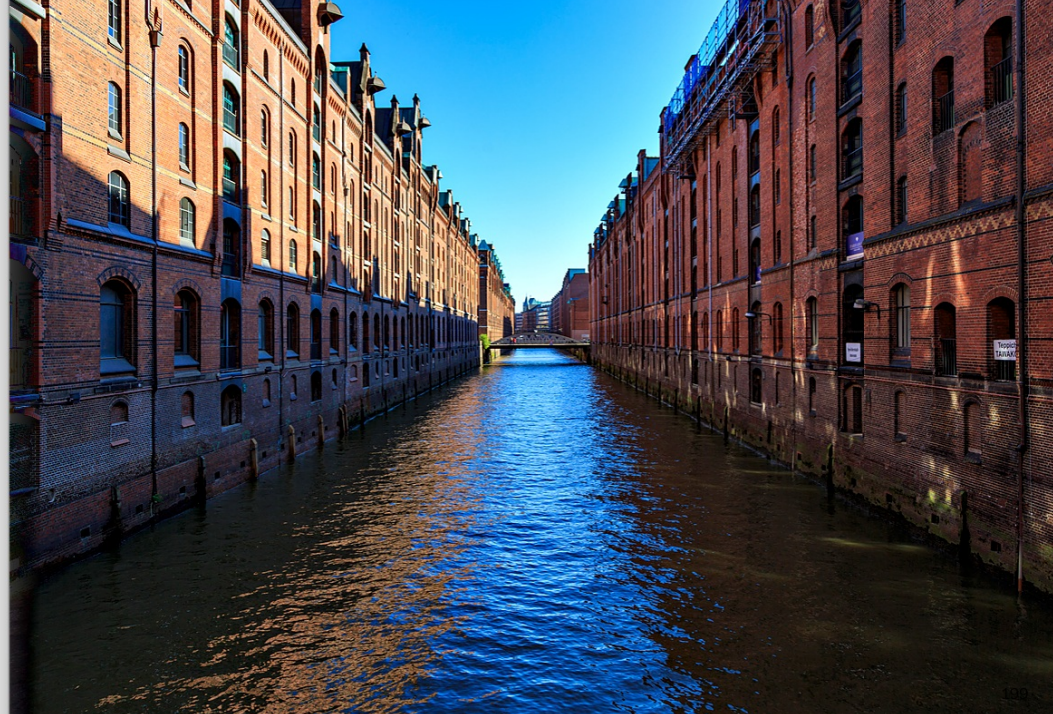
I am Fritz, a proud coffee roaster and part of a family whose history is deeply rooted in Hamburg, particularly in the Speicherstadt warehouse district. When my great-grandfather Johann Joachim Darboven laid the foundation for our company in a small office in 1866, he had a vision: roasted coffee, delivered directly to the customer. But the infrastructure that would make this trade world-class still had to be created.

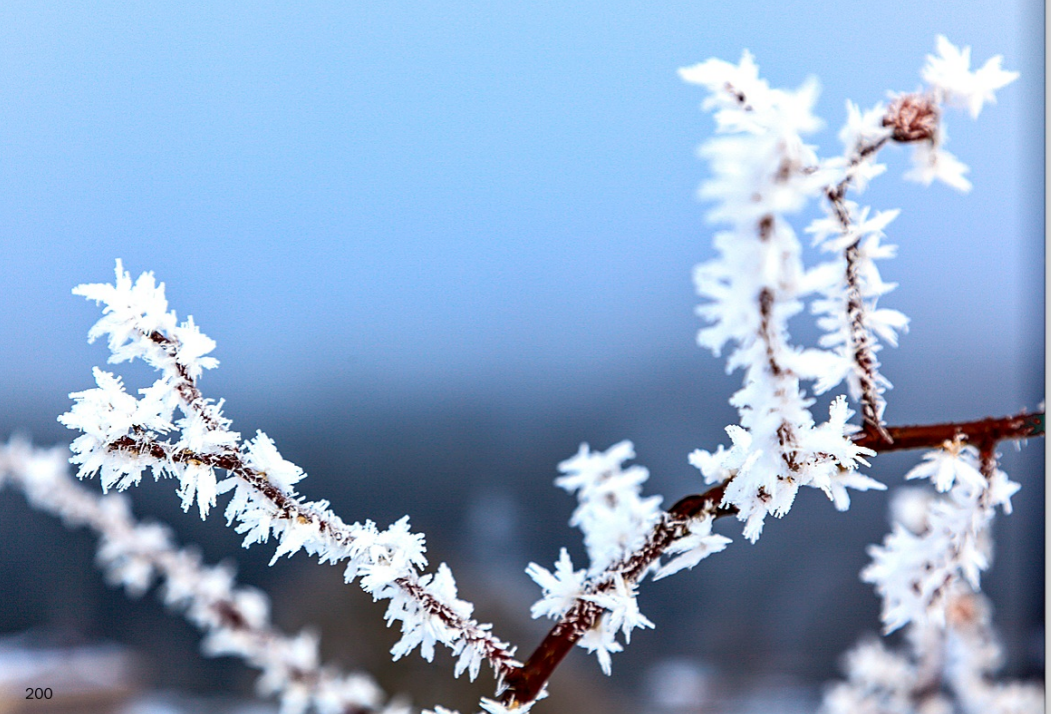
Hamburg's decision to join the German Customs Union was a political earthquake that changed our trading world forever. Suddenly, the construction of a huge free port was necessary. What happened next was an unprecedented feat of strength. Entire residential areas in Kehrwieder and Wandrahm had to make way, and over 20,000 people were resettled. Thousands of oak piles were driven deep into the muddy ground to create what we now know as the Speicherstadt.

The inauguration in 1888, which was even attended by Kaiser Wilhelm II, marked the beginning of a new era that went straight into our company annals. For us at the Darbovens, these striking brick palaces with their neo-Gothic gables became our commercial buildings, our treasure chambers.

Here, the heart of the coffee, tea, and spice trade beat to the rhythm of the hydraulic winches. It was fascinating to see how the valuable sacks of coffee were hoisted from the barges in the canals directly into the cool, secure storage rooms. This was more than just logistics; it was the guarantee of freshness and quality that our name promised. My uncle, Albert Darboven, who later ran the company for decades, often told me with shining eyes about the 1950s, when he himself, as a young man, laboriously hauled the heavy sacks as a 'shed guard'. This shows how deeply the Speicherstadt is anchored in our family history and our work ethic. The smell of raw coffee wafting across the canals is a memory we all share in our family.

Today, modern logistics have largely replaced the old warehouses in their original function. But the spirit of the Hanseatic merchant lives on. The Speicherstadt has changed, now housing museums such as Miniatur Wunderland, offices, and carpet dealers, and its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2015 moved me deeply. It is and remains the impressive, living symbol of our city, our port, and the centuries-old history of coffee, which we as the Darboven family have helped to shape and continue to write.





ICE CRYSTALS

I am Katrin, a restaurateur here in Lenzkirch. I have experienced countless winters, and each one has told its own story. But the quietest and most magical story is that of the ice crystals. When I open the shutters in the morning, I know at first glance whether it's that time of year again—that clear, dry cold that makes the air crackle, and the silence that is only interrupted by the sounds of the forest.

In the past, hoarfrost was simply a sign. A sign that winter would be hard and long. We knew that we had to store our supplies well and that the woodpile had to be high enough. The bizarrely shaped, glittering decorations on the fir trees and bushes were an everyday part of rural life here in the Black Forest. I remember how my grandfather always said, “Look, Katrin, the trees are wearing their finest jewellery. Then winter will last a while longer.”

Today, when people from the cities come to visit us, they see something completely different in this phenomenon. They see a winter wonderland, a picture-postcard idyll. I see their astonished faces when they return from a hike, their cheeks reddened, and they tell me how everything glitters and sparkles, especially down by the lakes, at Windgfällweiher and Schluchsee, where the damp air is coldest. For them, it is a special attraction, a highlight of their holiday.

I have witnessed how the story of ice crystals has changed. With tourism, this everyday natural phenomenon has become a valuable asset. When guests sit by the warm tiled stove and chat about the beauty outside over a cup of hot coffee, I know that these ice crystals are more than just frozen vapour. They have become part of our regional identity. A fleeting but reliably recurring miracle.

Sometimes, when the economy is booming and everyday life catches up with me, I step out into the silence of a winter morning. I look at the glittering landscape and remember my grandfather's words. In these moments, I am not just a restaurateur, but also part of this quiet, cold winter story of Lenzkirch. And I feel that each of these unique ice crystals tells not only a story about the weather, but also one about the people who live here and appreciate the beauty of nature so much.

HERZOGSTAND

Hello, I'm Alois. I've been guiding hikers and mountain lovers up here on the Herzogstand for over forty years now. And when I hear the stories people tell each other, I sometimes have to smile. There was never any talk of a great battle or anything so dramatic here. No, the history of our mountain is much quieter, much more regal.

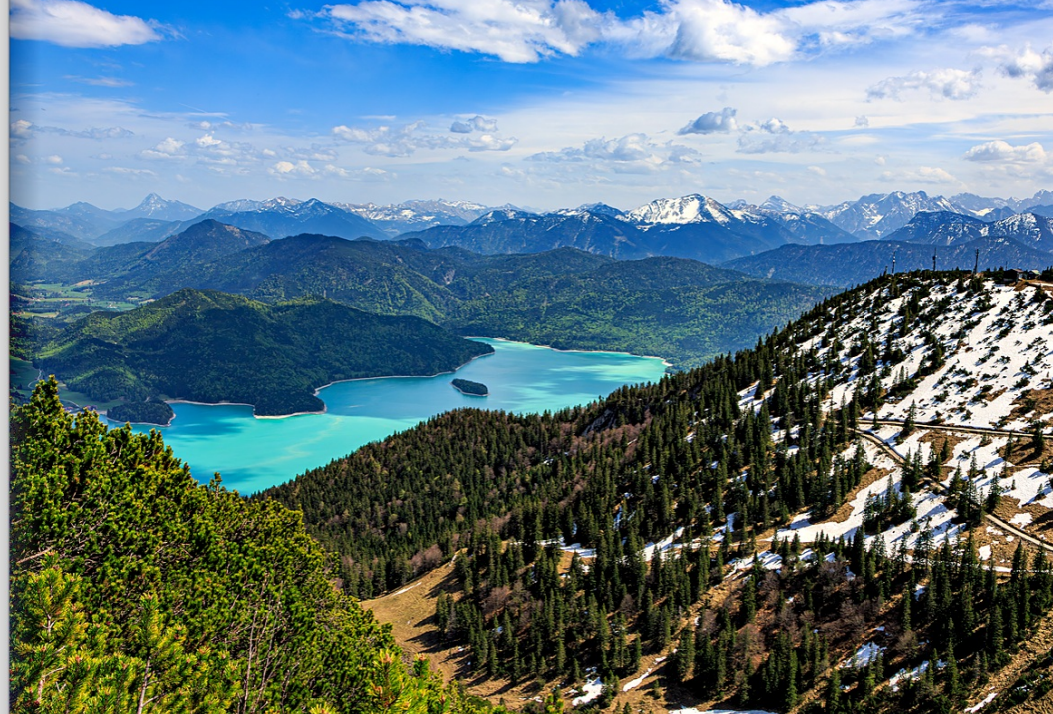
The name itself, 'Herzogstand' (Duke's Seat), already gives it away. Centuries ago, the Wittelsbach dukes and electors were already travelling up here, where we are now standing. This was their territory, their exclusive hunting ground. They sat on their horses, looked out over the glittering Walchensee and the quiet Kochelsee, and enjoyed this unique view, which each of us can enjoy today. No cows grazed here; this was a place for hunting and representation.

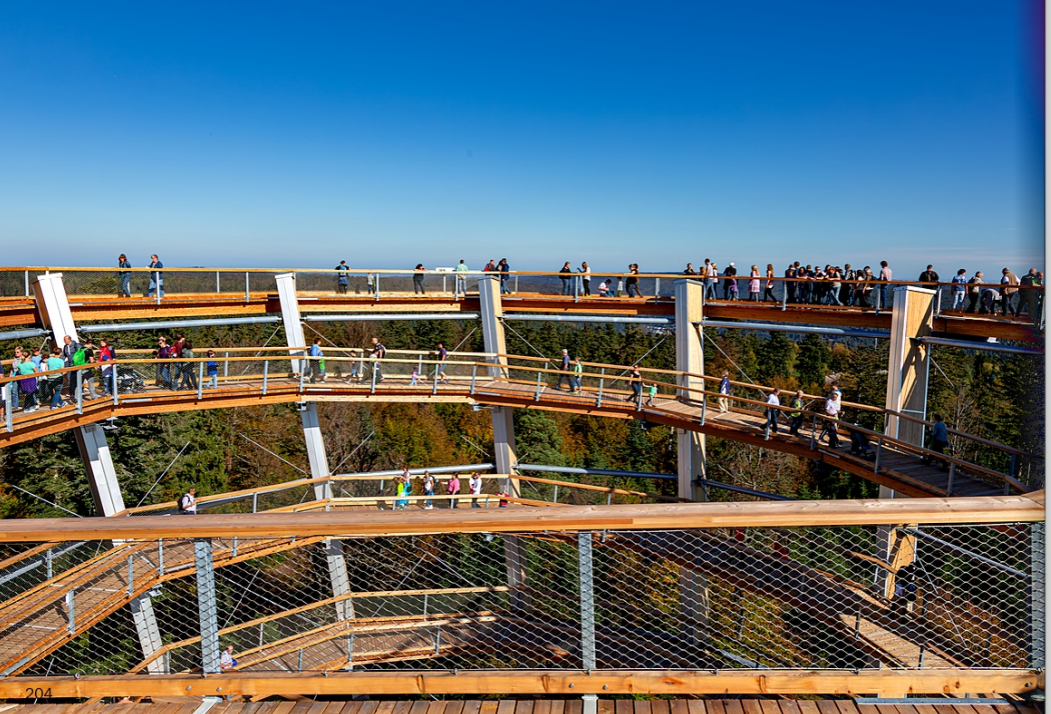
I remember the stories my grandfather told me as a boy. Kini, our fairy-tale king Ludwig II, loved this mountain in particular. He often came here to escape his noisy world. In 1865, he had a special wooden platform built over there, the 'Fürstenstand' (Prince's Stand). He would sit there for hours, all alone in silence, letting nature work its magic on him. This platform has now disappeared, but the spirit of that time, that peace and grandeur, can still be felt up here when you close your eyes.

The big change came in the 1920s when tourism arrived. In 1927, the Herzogstandbahn cable car was opened. This was a blessing for us locals and for visitors. Suddenly, the summit was no longer just for the very fit or the aristocracy, but accessible to everyone. People came in droves to enjoy the view that was once reserved for kings. Even during the war, our mountain became important as a strategic point because of the power stations down by Lake Walchensee.

But afterwards, peace returned, and the mountain became what it is today: a natural paradise for hikers, for daredevils with their paragliders and, in winter, for skiers.

For me as a hiking guide, the Herzogstand is the best example of change. From an exclusive spot for the nobility to a place for everyone. And you know what? The view is just as breathtaking today as it was for the dukes back then. That is the true story of this mountain—that in the end, the beauty of nature belongs to everyone.





TREETOP TOWER

My name is Hermann. I am a pastor here in Enzklösterle and Bad Wildbad, in south-western Germany. A man of the church, yes, but also a passionate hiker. The history of the treetop walk tower you are visiting today is also a small part of my history.

At the time, the town was preparing for the 2017 State Garden Show. There were big plans and much discussion. The idea of a path in the treetops was born. It was to be a tower, accessible to all, with a view of the Alb Valley. This caused a stir in the committees and among the citizens—too big, too modern, too expensive, they said.

I followed all this with great interest. For me, it was never just a tourist attraction. I saw it as an opportunity to bring people closer to God's creation in a new way, even those who are no longer mobile or are in wheelchairs. That's charity you can touch!

In one of these heated planning sessions, when the exact positioning was being discussed and the critics were getting loud, I spoke up. In a calm voice, I said: “Ladies and gentlemen, we are making something great possible here. We are not building a rival to the church in the valley. We are building a place of contemplation and vision, high up in God's open air.”

My words carried weight. The waves calmed down. The design was implemented, and the tower stands exactly where it stands today. It was ready in time for the opening of the garden show and was an immediate success that continued even after the show. I was one of the first to go up there myself. When I reached the 40-metre-high platform and looked out over the sea of leaves in the Black Forest, I took a deep breath.

Later, I even organised ‘devotions above the treetops’. I always tell people: don't just enjoy the view, be grateful for this natural beauty. For me, the treetop tower in Bad Wildbad is not just a tourist attraction, but a place that reveals the spiritual dimension of nature. A small but significant role for me, Pastor Hermann, who brought the church to the forest.

PUMPKIN PYRAMID

When I, Volker Lang, newly appointed director of Blühendes Barock, visited a Swiss farm in 1997, I had a sudden inspiration. I didn't see ordinary fields; I saw potential, I saw magic. The brightly coloured pumpkins in all their 450 varieties—I had to bring them to Ludwigsburg.

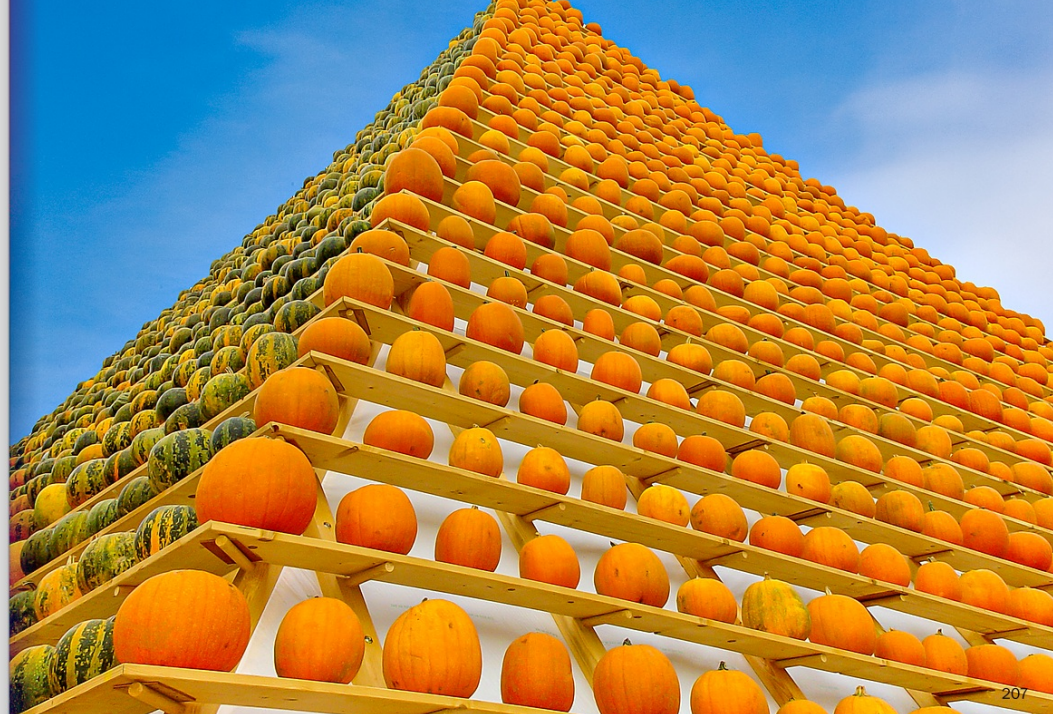
Back home, I shared my vision of a pumpkin exhibition. The reaction was muted. People looked at me as if I had gone mad. “Pumpkins? In a Baroque garden? Who would want to see that?” I did not let myself be deterred. The idea was too good, too colourful to be nipped in the bud.

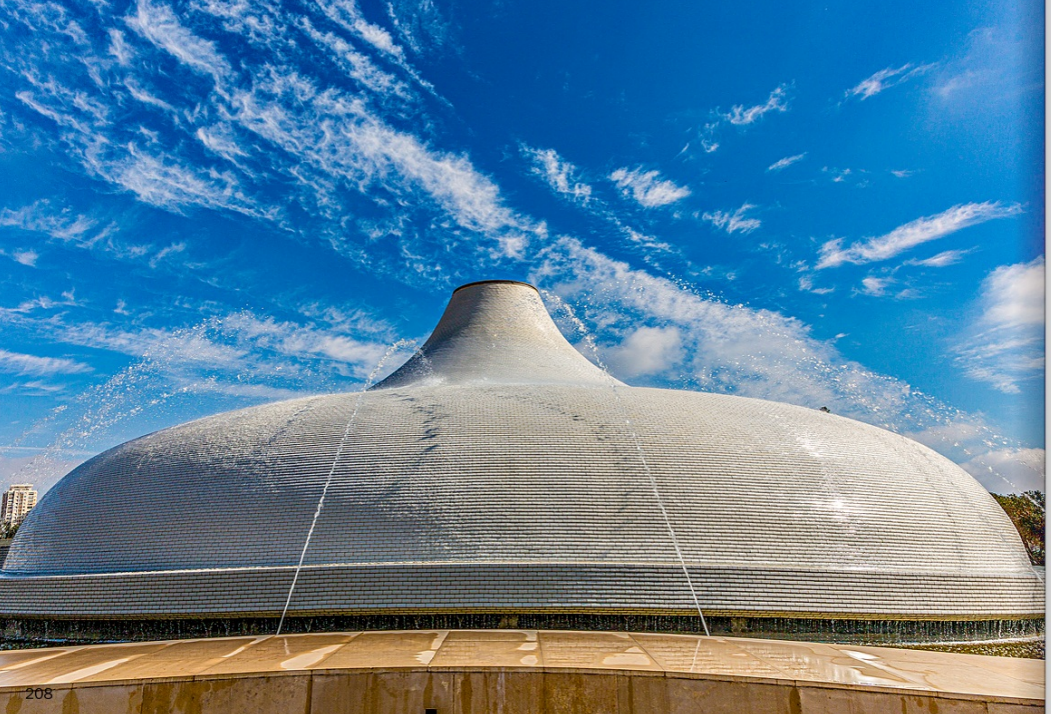
The year 2000 was our starting point. The motto: ‘Pumpkin pyramids’. We wanted to keep it simple, but we wanted to make a statement. We built the pyramids, huge, glowing towers of orange and green gold. It was a risk, but it was an instant success. People loved it! The pyramid instantly became an an iconic photo motif and a symbol of our courage.

This initial success gave us momentum. The small experiment became an annual tradition. But I knew we could do more. A pyramid was good, but sculptures? That was the future. We began to develop themes—‘Pumpkin Wildlife’, later ‘Girl Power in Pumpkin Garb’—and every year the artworks made from hundreds of thousands of pumpkins became bigger, more complex, and more imaginative. The pyramid remained the centrepiece, the foundation, but the exhibition grew beyond itself.

It wasn't always easy. The logistics, the weather, the shelf life of the pumpkins—every year brought a new challenge. We had to contend with storms, record heat that caused the pumpkins to ripen faster, and then came COVID-19, which forced us to make changes, such as cancelling the popular pumpkin regatta and the weighing championships with an audience. But we persevered. The response from visitors drove us on. We saw how people marvelled, laughed, and found their autumn tradition with us.

The pumpkin exhibition has grown from an idea on a Swiss farm to the world's largest event of its kind, attracting around 300,000 visitors annually. For me, it was a journey that lasted over two decades. Until my departure in 2022, I witnessed how a simple idea transformed the city of Ludwigsburg into a sea of colours in autumn and gave people optimism. And every time I see the majestic pyramid, I think back to the beginning and how important it is to believe in your visions, no matter how sceptical the world may be.





THE SHRINE OF THE BOOK

My name is Halef. My uncle and I were herding our goats along the rugged cliffs near the salty, silent Dead Sea. It was a hot day, like so many others. I was young and curious. One of my goats had run away, and I followed its tracks to a small, dark opening in the rock face—a cave.

I threw a stone inside to see if the animal was there. The stone hit something fragile. There was a clinking sound, as if clay had broken. My heart beat faster. Stories of treasure hunters were our daily bread. I crawled inside. The smell of dry dust and ancient times hung in the air. There, in the darkness, I found them: tall, slender clay jugs with lids.

One had been broken by my stone. Inside were no treasures of gold, no jewels glistening in the sun. They were old, leather scrolls wrapped in linen. The writing on them was strange, ancient. We took the scrolls to merchants, not knowing what immeasurable value they had. The world was in turmoil. It was said that these were the oldest words of God ever found, texts written centuries before our time.

I remember the time when the first seven scrolls were finally secured. The scholars talked about a special place they wanted to build for these finds. I never would have believed that my little discovery would result in such a grand structure. Years later, I heard about the building that was erected in Jerusalem. It was called the ‘Shrine of the Book’.

The descriptions were magical. The architects had been inspired by what I saw in the cave. They built a huge white dome shaped like the lid of one of the clay jars I found back then. It stands next to a wall of black basalt, symbolising the light and darkness described in the scrolls themselves. The interior, I was told, is cool and dark, like the cave at Qumran where I stood. There, in the centre, lies the Isaiah Scroll that I held in my hands as a boy. It is carefully guarded, only shown occasionally to protect it from the sun and the passage of time.

I, Halef, a simple Bedouin boy, am proud that my curiosity led me to a place that is now an international landmark—a guardian of history, born of clay, leather, and a stray kid on the edge of the Dead Sea.

SPITI VALLEY

I am Norbu, an old man from Jilang. My skin is tanned by the Spiti wind, and my eyes have seen more snow than most people could bear in a lifetime. Our history is not written in books; it is engraved in the stones of our houses, in the sound of our Tibetan dialect, and in the prayers we murmur every day.

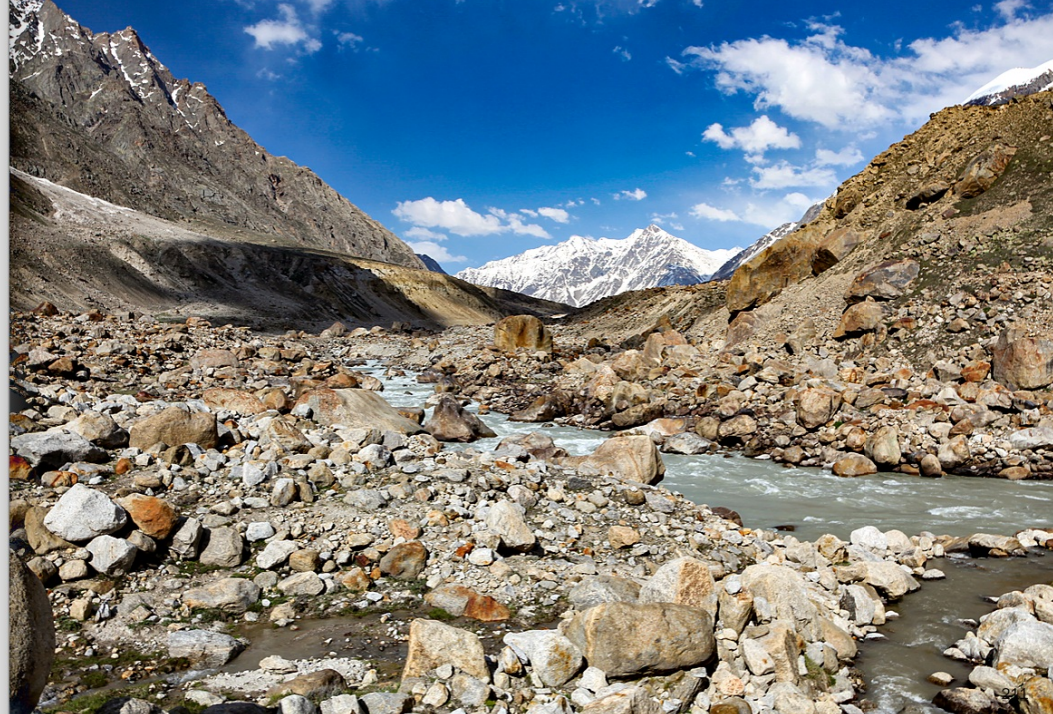
Jilang is small, little more than a handful of houses nestled on this dry, wide slope. We are part of Spiti, the land between heaven and Earth. We say we are Tibetan, and that is true. Long ago, when my great-great-grandfathers lived, we were part of the great Tibetan empire. The Buddhism we practise is deeply rooted in us. The monastery over there is older than most of the kingdoms in the valley.

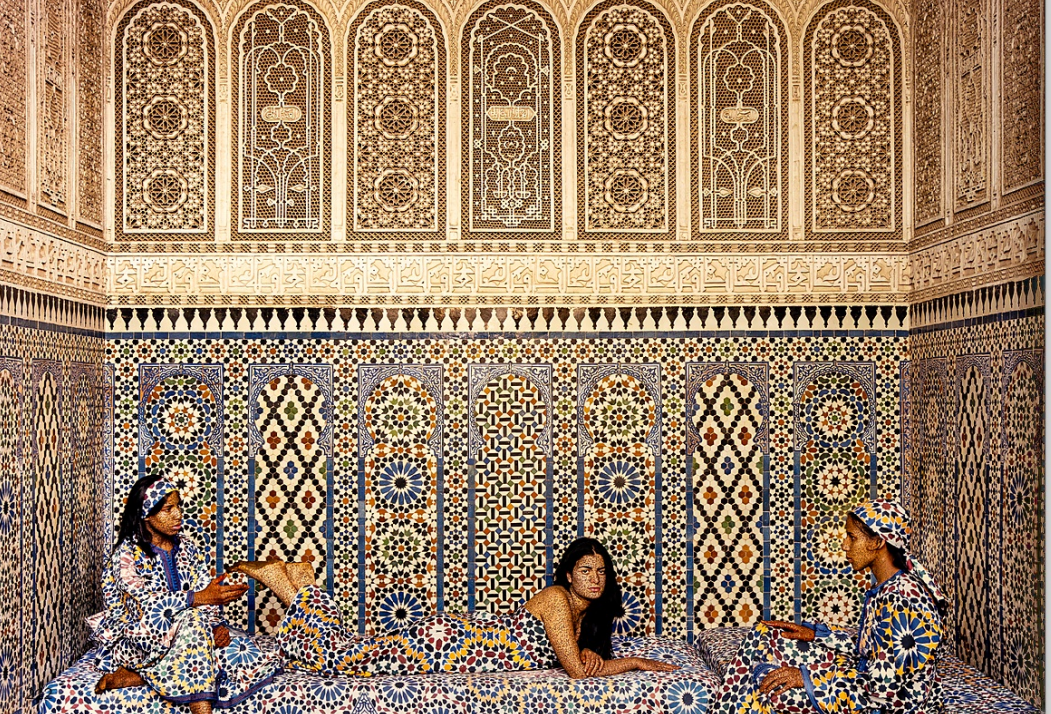
The rulers changed. Sometimes it was Guge, sometimes Ladakh, sometimes Kullu. For us up here in Jilang, this was often nothing more than a distant rumour. The passes were blocked for months on end, and winter was our constant ruler. The ‘nonos’, our governors, regulated things locally. We were isolated, left to our own devices. We had to be self-sufficient, growing the little grain we had on our terraces and herding our yaks and goats.

I remember the time before the roads. My father told me about the caravans that came in the summer, but the rest of the year was absolute silence. The outside world seemed as far away as the moon. This isolation made us strong. It allowed us to preserve our culture, which is hardly to be found in the cities of Tibet today. We are a window into the past.

Then, in the 1950s and 1960s, everything changed. The outside world became more turbulent. Tibet was taken over, and the Indians saw us as a borderland. Suddenly, men arrived with heavy machinery. They carved paths into the rocks, roads that connected the valley with the rest of India. It was the end of total silence. Trucks arrived, tourists, new ideas.

Today, visitors come to marvel at our pumpkin crops (yes, we have adapted!) and photograph our ancient traditions. The story of Jilang is a story of resilience. We still live in harmony with the harsh natural environment. The wind still whistles through the valley, and the snow still forces us to be humble. We have preserved our way of life, despite the roads and the modern world. And as long as we continue to pass on our stories orally and say our prayers, Jilang will remain a small, resilient village in the heart of the Himalayas.





MADRASA BEN YOUSSEF

I am Neyla. The air in Marrakesh is thick with spices and secrets. My world is one of silk, perfume, and the soft whispers that drift through the palaces of Sultan Abdallah al-Ghalib. I was his mistress, one of many, but I was clever, and he sometimes listened to my words. The city was his pride and joy, and he wanted it to be remembered forever.

I remember the year 1565. The sultan was obsessed with the project of renovating the ancient, venerable buildings of the Merinid dynasty. Not just renovating them, but turning them into a masterpiece, the greatest in the whole of the Maghreb. He often spoke of knowledge, of the Koran, of the students who would come from Andalusia and all over the country.

One evening, while he was studying plans drawn with ink and care, I placed my hand on his arm. “My Sultan,” I whispered, “a place of knowledge must shine, not just be learned.” He smiled, intrigued by my boldness. “What do you mean, Neyla?”

“The inscription above the gate,” I suggested, “should speak of hope. ‘May the highest hopes of those who enter my door be exceeded.’ But the courtyard needs life. The students spend their days there; they must feel inspired.”

Abdallah al-Ghalib, this powerful man whose word was law, thought about it. “You mean the decorations?” “Zellij mosaics,” I suggested, “patterns so intricate that the mind finds peace. Cedar wood, carved like the gardens of Granada. Stucco that tells the story of flowers and science. A large water basin to refresh the soul.”

He did it. He sent the architects back to work. The Madrasa Ben Youssef became a marvel of Andalusian-Arabic architecture. With 130 rooms for over 900 students who studied philosophy, medicine, chemistry, and religion there. I sometimes sneaked in disguised to see the progress. The white dome, the ornate details—it was intoxicating. The school became a centre of knowledge, a place so beautiful that it would stand the test of time.

Today, the school is closed and the students are long gone. I am now just an echo of history. But when the visitors who come today walk through the magnificent courtyard and marvel at the details, I know that I have contributed a small part to this. Today, the madrasa is a monument, a silent witness to the time in which my sultan and I lived, and a place where the beauty of art and the power of knowledge are eternally intertwined.

CONISTON WATER

I am Arthur, the author, and I pick up the manuscript Coniston Water. The ink on it is deep and multi-layered. It is not just water in the Lake District; it is a chronicle of humanity that I am trying to decipher.

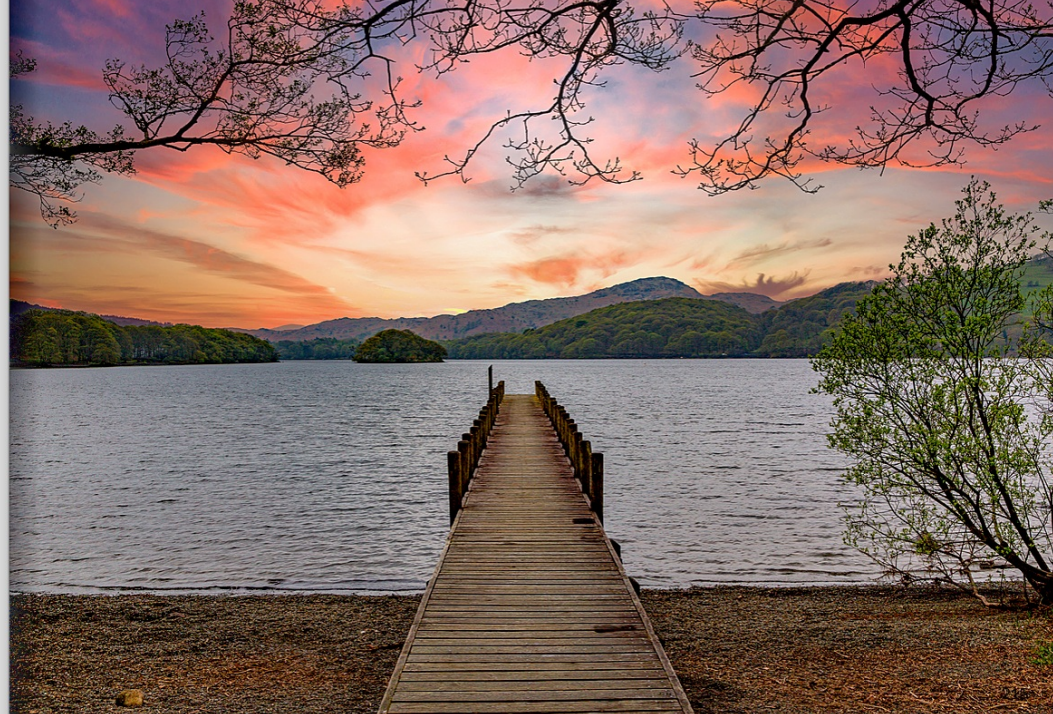
My story begins with an almost inaudible whisper from prehistoric times, the very first settlers who settled on these shores. I feel their primal connection to nature. In the Middle Ages, I turn the pages marked by the mighty Furness Abbey—monks who cultivated the land and gave the valley a structure that still echoes today.

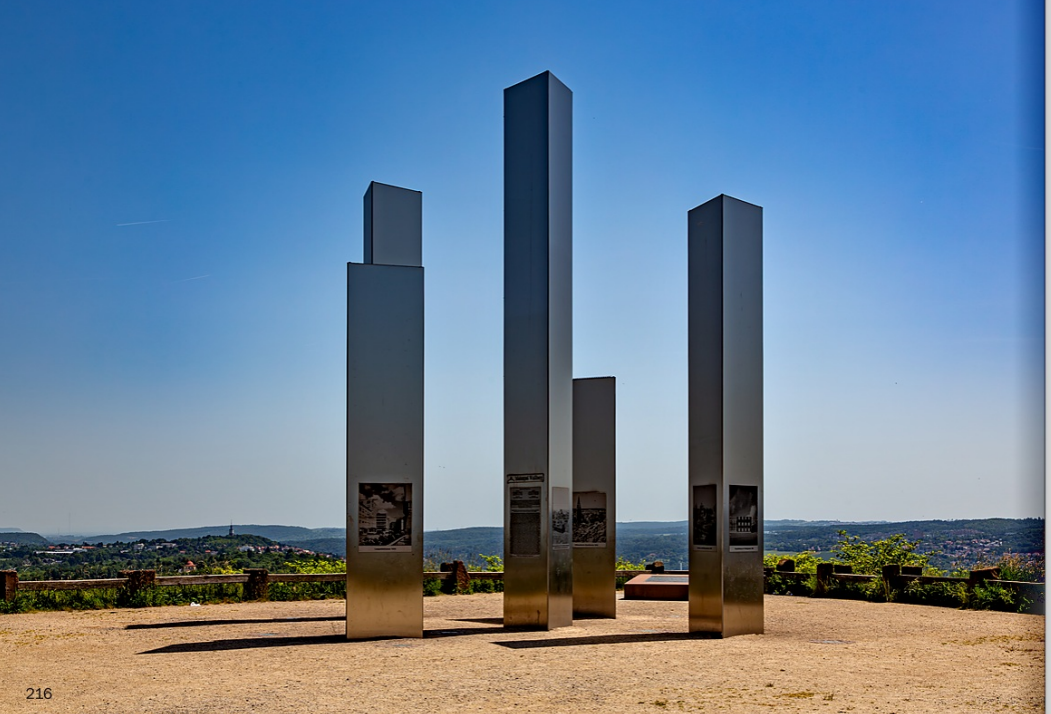
Then comes the harsh industrial era. I imagine the haze of steam ships puffing under the weight of slate from Coniston and copper ore from the Old Man of Coniston as they glided across the lake. The “Gondola”, whose replica now gently cuts through the waves again, was the beating heart of this time of change.

But for me, the real magic began in the 19th century, when the lake became a magnet for sensitive souls. I saw John Ruskin, the Victorian thinker, move to his Brantwood on the eastern shore. His spirit still permeates the air today, and I feel his presence in St Andrew's Church, where he is buried. And then there was Beatrix Potter, who found her ‘Lake in the Hills’ here and proved to me how deeply this place inspires, how the landscape itself becomes a character in her stories.

The darkest, most dramatic passage that comes to mind as an author is the era of speed records. I have often thought about the audacity of the Campbells, father Malcolm and son Donald. The lake was their racetrack, their place of destiny. Donald's tragic end in 1967, the desperate attempt to break the 300 miles (approx. 483 km) per hour barrier, the explosion, the sudden, terrible silence—this is a chapter full of pathos, a modern myth about human ambition. The wreck of the Bluebird K7 and its late recovery in 2001 are the sad, necessary epilogue to this story, which gave the lake back its dead.

Today, when I watch the sailors and canoeists, I see that the story is being continued by everyone who enjoys the tranquillity and beauty of this place, unconsciously following in the footsteps of all those who were here before them. The lake is a work in progress that never ceases to fascinate me as an author and teaches me that every place has an infinite story to tell; you just have to want to read it.





MONTE SCHERBELINO

I am Stefan, a goldsmith in Pforzheim. My hands, which usually craft delicate settings for diamonds, touched something completely different in the post-war period: the rubble of our city. Monte Scherbelino is not an abstract monument to me; it is a silent witness whose history I can feel in my fingers.

On 23 February 1945, not only my workshop but also the heart of our city was shattered into a thousand pieces. The Allied bombing raid left over 17,000 dead and a landscape of horror. In the aftermath, when we began rebuilding, the chaos was unimaginable. Where to put all the rubble?

The answer was the ‘Monte Scherbelino’. I remember the days when we drove cart after cart of broken bricks, bent steel, and the sad remains of houses—we called them ‘Scherbeln’ in Swabian—to the edge of the city and piled them up. The mountain grew and grew, a sad but necessary symbol of what we had lost. Every piece of rubble carried a story of destruction.

I can still remember the smell of burnt wood and dust that accompanied us for months as we helped rebuild our city. Sometimes, when I stand on the mountain today, I think I can still smell that scent, especially after a warm summer rain.

As the years passed and the clean-up work ended, we began to cover the mountain with soil. The monument to destruction became a green hill. I often stood there and looked out over the city as it slowly reawakened. It was a bittersweet feeling: sadness for the past and hope for the future.

Today, when I look out over Pforzheim from Wallberg, as it is now officially called, I see a stark contrast to the ruins of yesteryear. Monte Scherbelino is now a viewpoint, a place of tranquillity and panoramic views. For me, as a goldsmith who creates beauty from raw materials, this mountain represents the ultimate transformation—from rubble and destruction to new life and hope. It bears the scars of our past, but it also symbolises our resilience and our will to rebuild. A silent but impressive monument that always reminds us how fragile life can be and how strong the human spirit can be.

WULAR LAKE

I am Kanja, a fisherman from Wular Lake. My life and that of my ancestors are inextricably linked to this vast body of water in the heart of the Kashmir Valley. For us, it has always been more than just India's largest freshwater lake; it has been our lifeline, our mother. Since childhood, I have known every bay, every current.

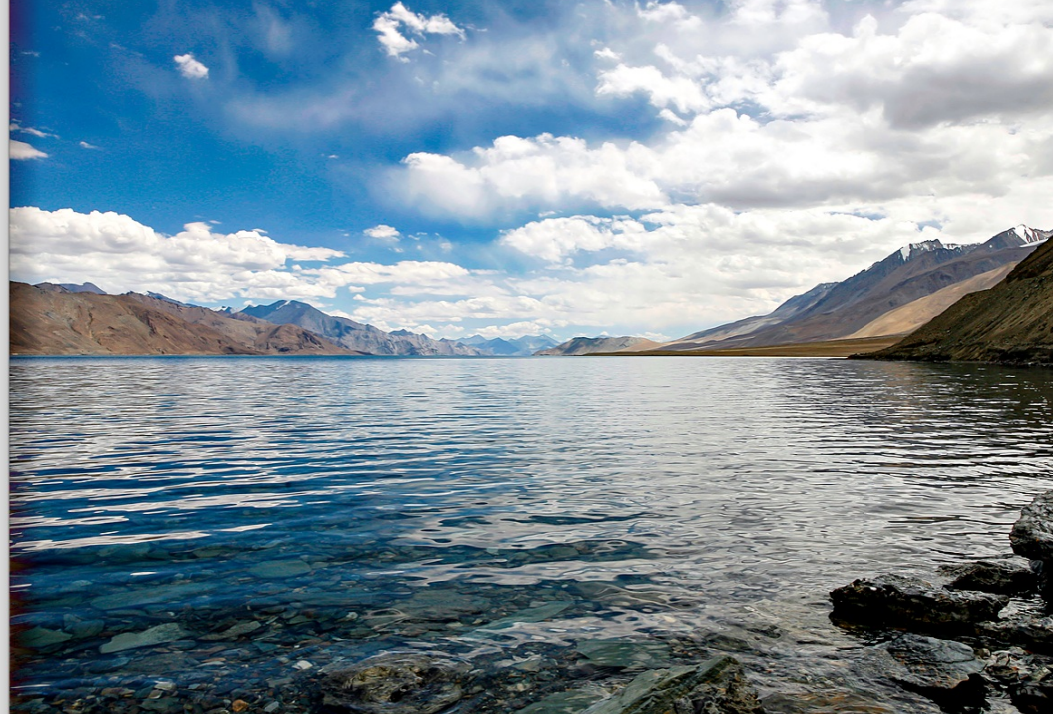
The lake has always been generous, providing fish for thousands of families like mine and serving as an important trade route. I remember my grandfather's stories about its heyday, when even the ruler Zain-ul-Abidin had an island, Zaina Lank, built in the 15th century. Its ruins, which still rise out of the water today, are a silent testimony to this rich past for me. My grandfather also told of the stormy waves that gave the lake its name, 'Ullola', a name from a bygone era that we now only know from songs.

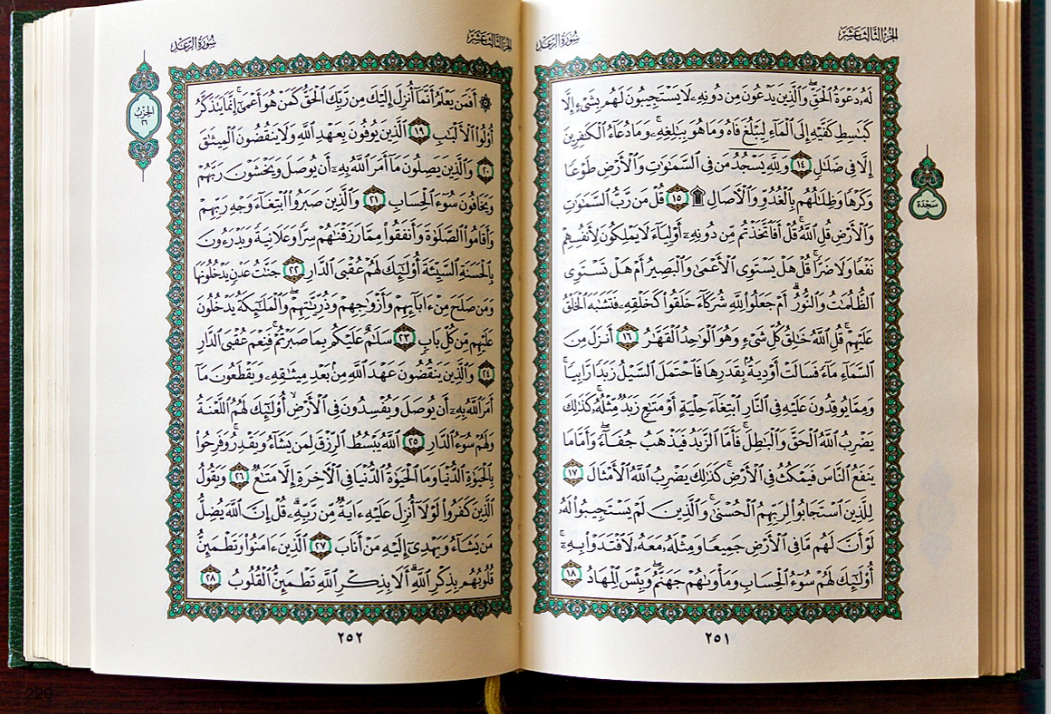
But in recent decades, the picture has changed, and not for the better. I see how the lake is suffering. People have begun to take away its space. Shore areas have been drained to turn them into farmland. Sewage flows into it. I often fish in areas where the water is murky and life is dwindling.

I remember that in the 1950s, willow plantations were established on the shore, which already caused the lake to shrink significantly. Since then, it has only gotten worse. The lake has shrunk dramatically. Fish stocks are declining, and it breaks my heart to see how many fewer birds come to rest in our wetlands in winter. We feel the changes every day. The work is getting harder, the catch smaller. Many fishing families have given up and moved to the city.

But the lake is my home. My father taught me how to mend nets and read the currents, and I have taught my children the same. But I am not giving up hope. Since the international Ramsar Convention recognised the lake as worthy of protection, something has changed. There are now renaturation projects, a fight for our unique ecosystem. I take part in meetings, talk to conservationists.

I want my children to experience the lake as I did when I was a child: clear, vibrant, and full of life. The story of Lake Wular is now also my personal story of the struggle to preserve it for the future. And I have learned that we, the fishermen of Wular, not only live on the lake, but also for it.





QURAN

I am Tarek, an employee here at Bait al-Qur'ān (the House of the Qur'an) in Manama. As I make my rounds, I feel that this place is much more than just a museum. It is a living link between the past and the present, the legacy of a vision that Dr Abdul Latif Jassim Kanoo brought to life in 1990. His idea was to create a sanctuary for Islamic history, which we preserve here for the world.

My work as the guardian of this collection is a daily exercise in humility. The more than 10,000 rare manuscripts and artefacts are like individual souls to me, carrying stories from different centuries and geographical regions. I touch them with the utmost care, yet I feel their immense history. There are the 7th-century parchments, their ink having survived the passage of time—it is like looking directly into the cradle of Islam. Every sheet of paper, every artistically designed cover tells of the hands that once shaped it, of the eyes that read the lines.

I am particularly fascinated by the extreme contrasts in our collection. The tiny miniatures, some so small that they were written on a grain of rice or a pea—a marvel of precision engineering and human perseverance. And then there are curiosities such as the printed Koran from Germany from 1694; reminding me how far the message and fascination of this book reach and how they transcend cultural boundaries.

For me, the building itself is a masterpiece that combines architecture and faith. The ornate Kufi calligraphy that winds its way through the corridors is like an endless poem. Under the large glass dome that captures the sky, the heart of the complex pulsates: our library with over 50,000 books, the mosque where the call to prayer resounds, and the school where children memorise verses from the Quran. The scent of old paper and fresh incense is always in the air here.

For me, the history of the Quran in Manama is a story of devotion, education, and the desire to share knowledge. When I guide visitors through the exhibition, I feel their awe at these works. It is a privilege to be part of this modern history of preservation and to know that this place makes the rich heritage of Islam accessible to future generations. It is a place that teaches that true treasures are not only made of gold and precious stones, but of knowledge and faith, preserved on paper and parchment.

MANAMA

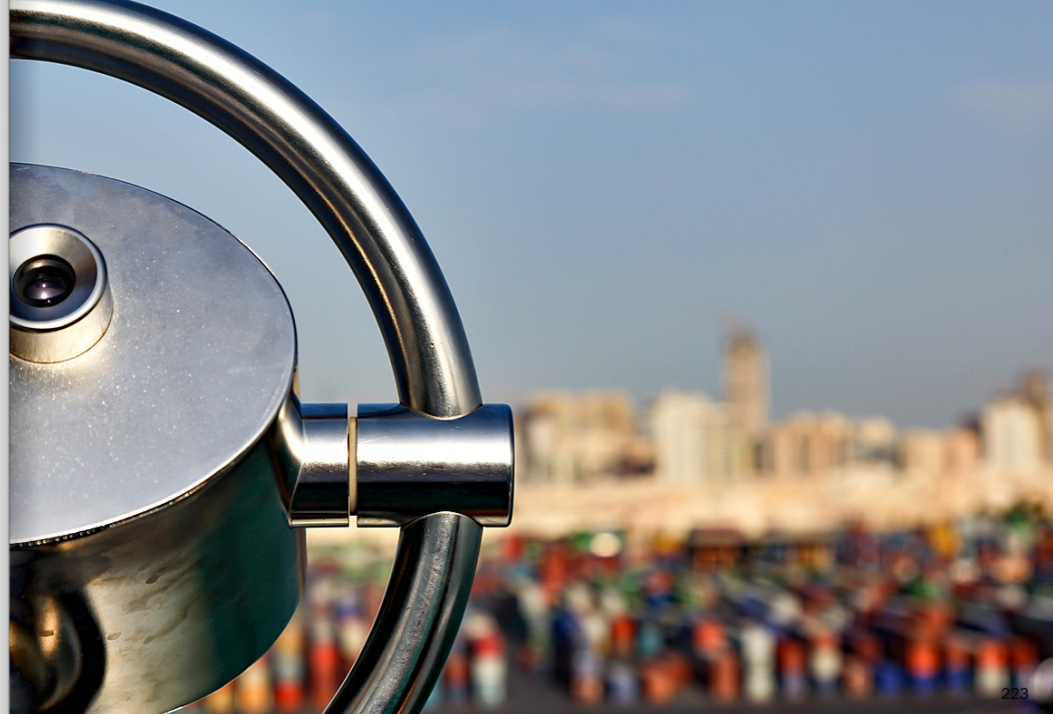
I am Marita, 1st Cabin Stewardess on the AIDA. Since AIDA added Manama to our winter programme, this city has become a fascinating chapter in the logbook of our voyages. When the AIDAdiva arrives at the spacious Khalifa Bin Salman Port, located just outside the city, I know that my guests are about to immerse themselves in a world that is so different from the Mediterranean or the Caribbean.

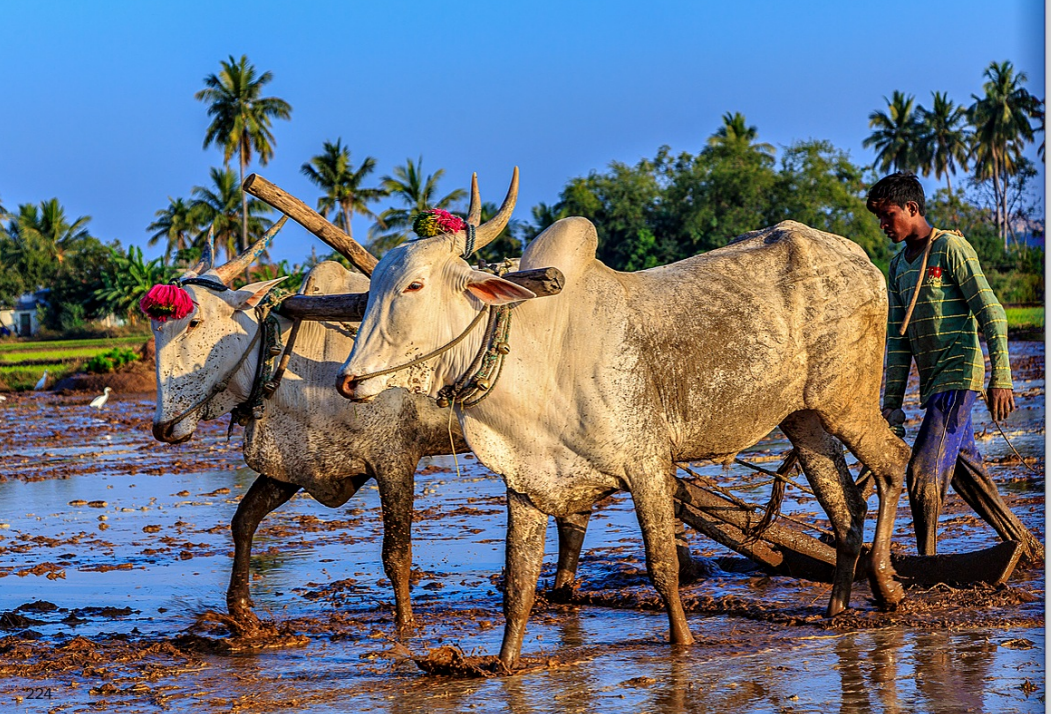
Manama translates as ‘place of dreams’, and this name perfectly suits this fascinating blend of ancient history and ultra-modern Arab culture. For me, the real journey begins as soon as we disembark. The skyline that greets us is a masterpiece of modern architecture—I immediately think of the innovative Bahrain World Trade Centre with its wind turbines, whose bold design is reflected in the calm waters of the Persian Gulf. It shows me how Bahrain is not afraid of the future.

But my heart beats for the ancient stories. I always send my guests to the Manama Souk, which is accessible through the historic Bab el-Bahrain gate. There, in the winding alleys, I breathe in the scent of exotic spices and perfumes, admire the colourful textiles, and love the hustle and bustle. Here you can feel the history of Manama as an important trading port, dating back to the time of the ancient Dilmun civilisation.

I always recommend that my guests delve deeper into the culture. The Bahrain National Museum is an absolute must-see, offering a deep insight into the country's millennia-old history. And the Al Fateh Mosque, one of the largest in the world, is simply breathtaking with its magnificent Islamic architecture and accessible to everyone.

My personal highlight is Qalʿat al-Bahrain, the fortress of Bahrain, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. When I stand there and look at the ruins, inhaling the stories of different civilisations, and then see the breathtaking sunset over the Arabian Gulf, I know why I love this job. Manama manages to preserve its rich heritage while boldly embracing modernity—it's a place that fascinates me every time I visit.





RICE FARMERS

I am Mahesh, a rice farmer from Attivatti, Goa, and for me, the land I work is not just soil. It is a deeply rooted part of my identity. For generations, we have been cultivating these lush green fields using methods based on centuries-old knowledge—a legacy entrusted to me by my ancestors.

Our history here in Goa is inextricably linked to the monsoon and to a unique, traditional system we call the ‘Communidade’. In this system, the land is farmed communally; it is the bond that unites us all in Attivatti. When work calls, we stand together—neighbours help neighbours, friends help friends, as our fathers and grandfathers always did.

However, my greatest pride is in our ‘Khazan’ fields, an innovation developed over 3,500 years ago. Imagine: we reclaimed swamp and mangrove areas and built dykes and sluices to regulate the salt water from the sea. That is true engineering! This system allows us to grow special salt-tolerant rice such as the ‘Korgut’ variety, often in rotation with shrimp farming. I remember how my father explained the complicated mechanisms of the sluices to me as a child and how important it is to respect the natural rhythm of the tides.

The arrival of the monsoon in June is the most sacred moment of the year. It marks the beginning of our main planting season. It is an incredibly labour-intensive time. We often plant the seedlings by hand in the flooded fields. But this time is also marked by rituals, by old folk songs that accompany our work, and by a strong community spirit that you can almost touch. The songs tell of the harvest, of rain and sun, and they make the hard work easier.

Yes, modern, higher-yielding hybrid varieties dominate elsewhere today. Many young people are moving to the cities in search of an easier life. But we stick to our traditional methods. It's not just about the yield, but about preserving our important cultural heritage. The rice fields shape the landscape of Goa and, for me, are a living symbol of the resilience and heritage of our local community. They are my history and what I want to pass on to my children one day, so that they never lose their connection to the land.

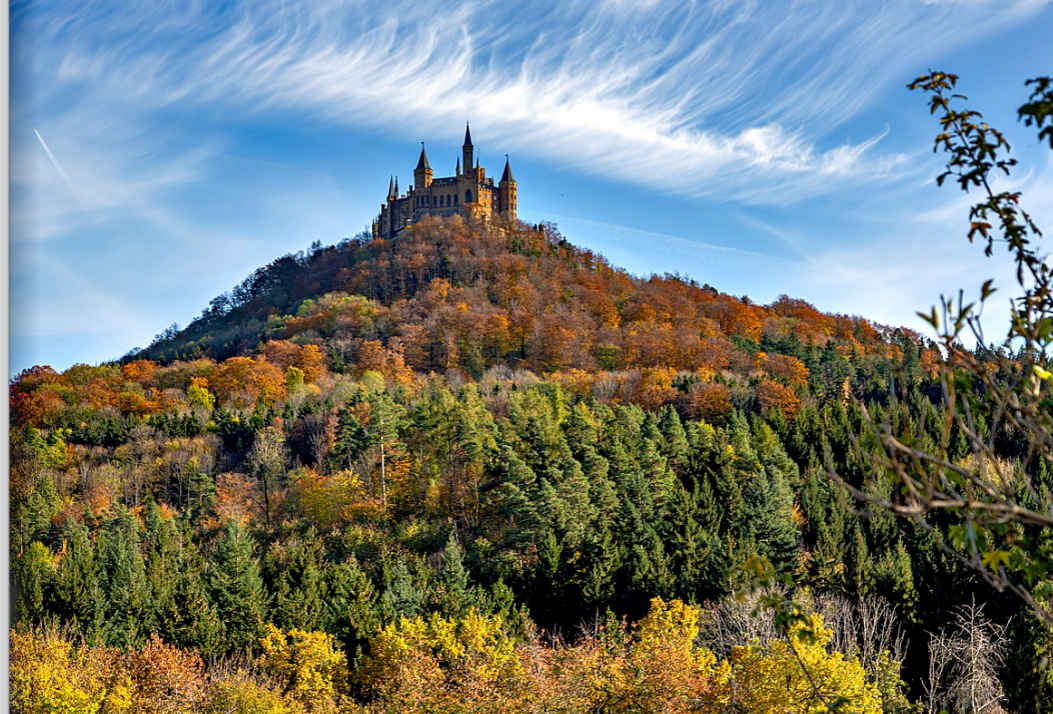
HOHENZOLLERN

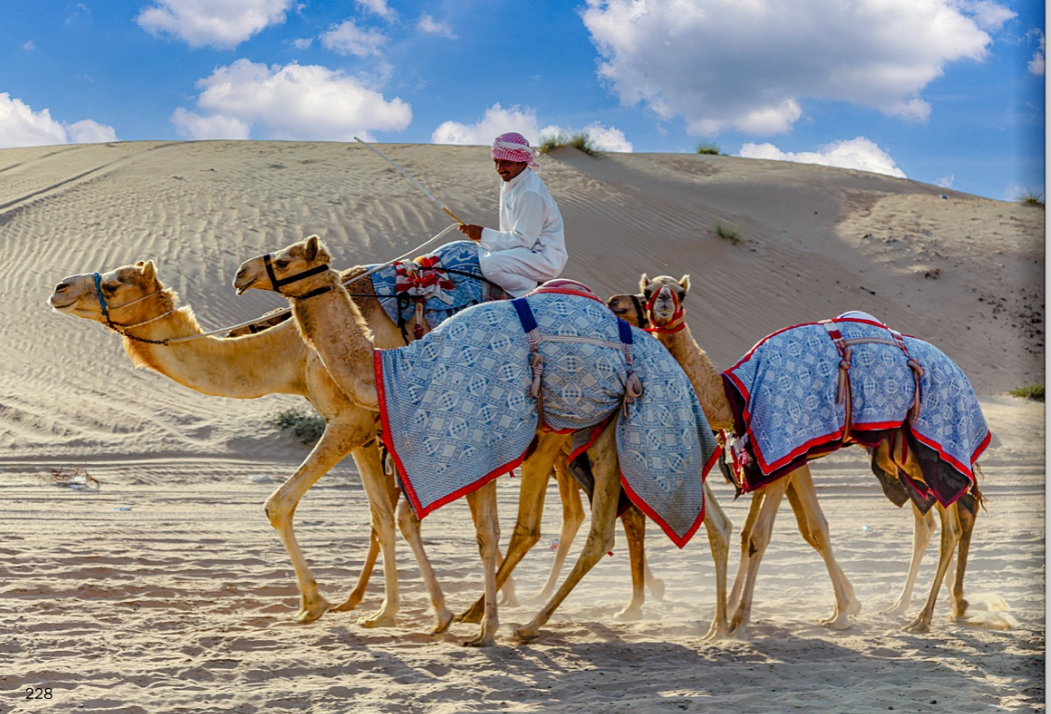
I am Elke, a member of the Hohenzollern family, and I feel the weight of the thousand-year saga that began on the striking Zollerberg in the Swabian Alb. This first castle from the 11th century was the modest but decisive starting point for us Counts of Zollern. From here, surrounded by the rugged beauty of Swabia, we developed through skilful politics, strategic marriage contracts, and expansion over the centuries into one of the most powerful princely houses in Europe, changing our name to 'Hohenzollern'. Every stone up here, every foundation that dates back to that time, tells me of our tireless pursuit of influence.

The original fortress was destroyed in 1423, but we quickly rebuilt it, a sign of our early resilience and unshakeable will. But then, as our influence grew and we began to rule from Berlin and shape Prussia, the remote ancestral seat lost its practical significance in the 18th century. It was painful to see the origin of our power so decayed, an empty shell of our past, ravaged only by wind and weather.

The turning point, the rebirth of our symbol, came in the 19th century. My ancestor, King Frederick William IV of Prussia, was inspired by the romance of the Middle Ages. He decided to rebuild the ancestral seat—not primarily as a military fortress, but as a magnificent monument to our dynasty and our glorious past. The present-day castle, built between 1850 and 1867 in a magnificent neo-Gothic style, sits enthroned like a crown on the mountain.

Today, Hohenzollern Castle is a living museum that houses the Prussian royal crown and countless art treasures belonging to our family. It is a place of remembrance and pride. When I walk through the great halls, the chapel, and the bedrooms, I can feel history in every corner. The view from the battlements of the surrounding Alb reminds me of where we came from and how far we have come—from a small Swabian count's house to an imperial dynasty. It is a privilege to be able to preserve this heritage for posterity and to share the fascinating history of the Hohenzollerns with visitors.





BEDOUIN CAMEL RIDER

I am Abdul, a camel rider in Dubai, and I am proud of the centuries-old tradition that is deeply rooted in my soul and the culture of the Bedouins. For us, camels were never just animals; they were our family, our survival in the merciless desert. They gave us milk, meat, and wool for our tents and clothing. Above all, these majestic ‘ships of the desert’ were the only efficient means of transport for trade and connection between the distant settlements on the Arabian Peninsula.

I learned from my grandfather how to ride them, how to understand their needs, and how to skilfully navigate the vast seas of sand, guided only by the stars when the moon lit up the dunes.

Today, in a modern Dubai full of skyscrapers and cars, much has changed. The car has replaced the camel as a means of transport, but the cultural significance and love for our animals remain. Thanks to the wise leadership of the royal family, our tradition lives on and is actively promoted.

Now we experience it in a new way: at camel races, a modern, exciting interpretation of our ancient tradition. Our animals compete against each other on specially designed race tracks such as the Al Marmoom Camel Race Track. Instead of human jockeys, we now use remote-controlled robot jockeys to ensure the highest animal welfare standards. This is innovation that respects our values. These races are our pride and joy, a vibrant competition and a link between yesterday and today that captivates spectators from all over the world. The noise of the crowd, the rapid footsteps of the camels—it’s an experience that makes your heart beat faster.

I also take tourists on desert safaris. On these peaceful tours through the silence of the desert, I share my stories and give them a small, authentic insight into our ancient Bedouin life. I show them how to sit on a camel, how to enjoy the tranquillity of the landscape when the wind whispers through the sand, and how we used to live when the desert was all we knew. Many tourists are surprised at how quiet the desert can be.

Whether on the racecourse, where speed counts, or on a safari, where tranquillity is the order of the day, the history of camel riders remains an essential part of Dubai’s national identity—the fascinating bridge between the glorious past of the Bedouins and our glamorous present, showing that you don't have to forget your roots while travelling into the future.

LIBERTY BRIDGE

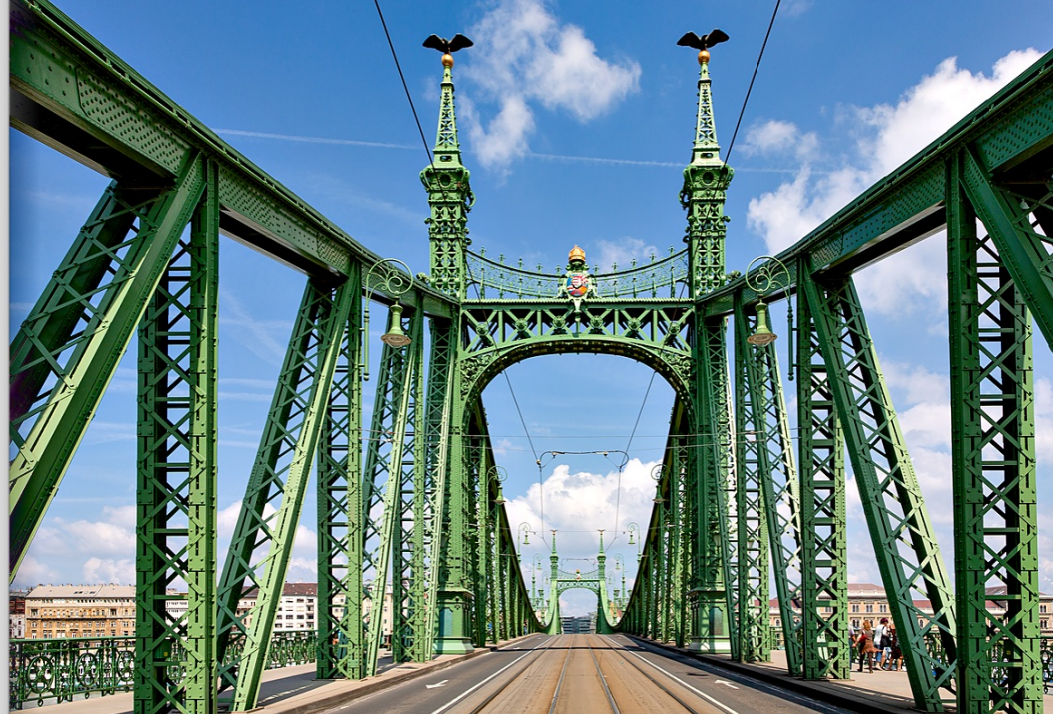
I am Akos, a taxi driver in Budapest. My life is a constant up and down, just like the journeys I take across the many bridges of this city. But none touches my heart as much as the Liberty Bridge. For me, it is not only a connection between Buda and Pest, but also a vibrant symbol of our city's history, living proof of our resilience.

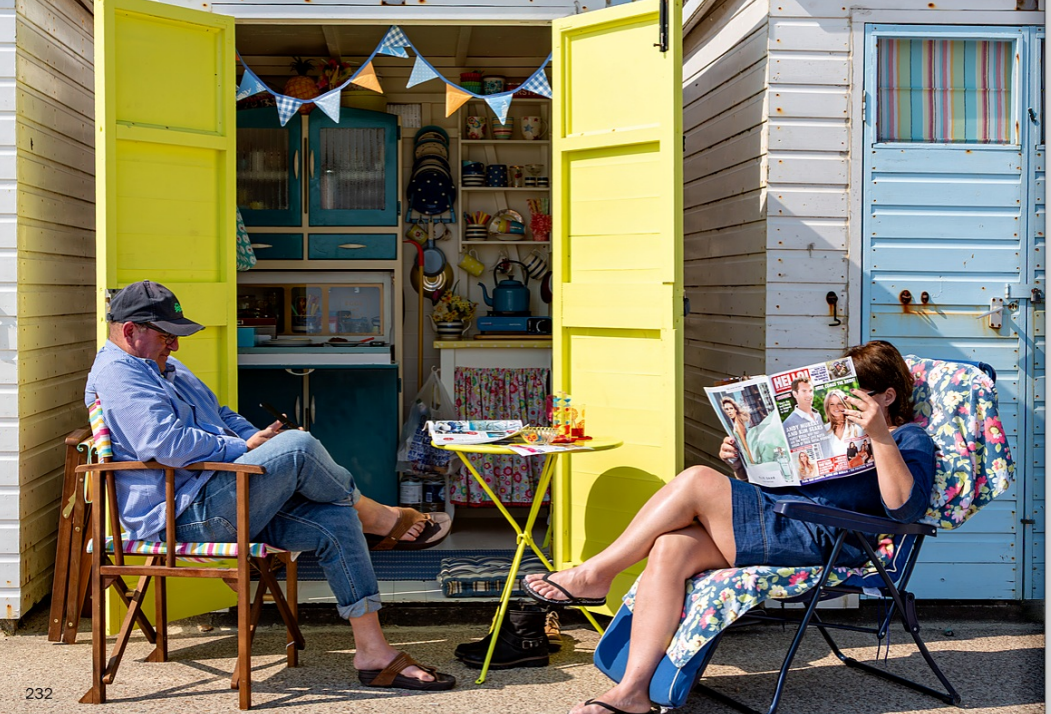
My family's stories have brought the history of the bridge to life for me, as if I had been there myself. My grandfather told me about the grand opening in 1896, when it was still called the Franz Joseph Bridge. He described how the Austrian emperor personally hammered in the last symbolic rivet as the bridge shone in elegant Art Nouveau style, adorned with the Hungarian coat of arms and the mythological Turul birds perched high on the pylons. I see them every day as I drive by and think of the hope and pride they represented in those distant times.

But then came the dark days of war. On 16 January 1945, my grandfather recounted in a heavy voice, the bridge, like so many others in the city, was blown up by the retreating Wehrmacht. He recounted the deafening silence when the smoke cleared and the sight of the destroyed Danube bridges, which seemed to break the heart of the city.

But we Budapesters are stubborn. The Liberty Bridge was the first of the destroyed bridges to be reopened on 20 August 1946. This was no coincidence; it was a sign, a promise to ourselves that we would not be defeated. With its new name, Liberty Bridge, the reopening was like a birth, a triumph of the human spirit over destruction and despair. The workers restored its appearance, and the old ornaments, the royal coat of arms, and the Turul birds were preserved and reused.

Today, the bridge is a living landmark that connects the past and the present. When I drive across it on warm summer evenings, I often see young people sitting, dancing, and enjoying the view when the bridge is closed to traffic. I see them laughing up there, reflecting the lights of the city and the Danube, and I think of the many stories this bridge has seen over the centuries. It is an honour for me to drive across it every day as part of this living history, knowing that it has stood the test of time. It reminds me that beauty and hope can always rise from the ruins.





BATHING HUTS

I'm Joanne, wife of Norman, a bricklayer in Lyme Regis. Norman works hard on the foundations that hold our town together, but my heart belongs to the colourful bathing huts on the beach. To me, they tell the story of our town, a story deeply rooted in Victorian and Georgian bathing culture, which I have been observing since time immemorial.

When Norman and I moved here, I was fascinated by these little huts. I heard about the old days, in the 18th century, when sea bathing became fashionable on medical advice, but people were still modest and hid from prying eyes. The solution was the 'bathing machines'—small wooden huts on wheels that were pulled into the sea by horses. The elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen changed in them and then glided, with dignity, into the cool water. Lyme Regis was an early adopter, with a bathing house serving spa guests since 1755. I imagine the strict customs that dictated that men and women bathed at different times or in different places.

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, customs became more relaxed and 'mixed bathing' became socially acceptable. The 'bathing huts' lost their wheels and simply remained on the beach. They became stationary shelters that offered protection from the wind and weather and provided space for a picnic or a cup of tea on the beach. A place for the family to spend the day without worrying about the stiff etiquette of yesteryear.

Today, when I bring Norman his lunch or walk with the children along the beach along Cart Road and Monmouth Beach, these huts are a real landmark. They are painted in charming pastel colours—soft shades of pink, green, and yellow that remind me of Neapolitan ice cream. Each hut has its own character and its own small community of owners who, like my husband and I, lovingly maintain them and sometimes even update them with small kitchenettes and cosy seating areas.

Many are privately owned, some can be rented, but they all serve the same purpose: they provide us with a cosy retreat to enjoy the picturesque coastline. For me, they are the living legacy of the Victorian era, an integral part of Lyme Regis' charm. They show that some things remain the same even as the world around us changes, and that a simple place on the beach connects us all.

ELBPHILHARMONIE

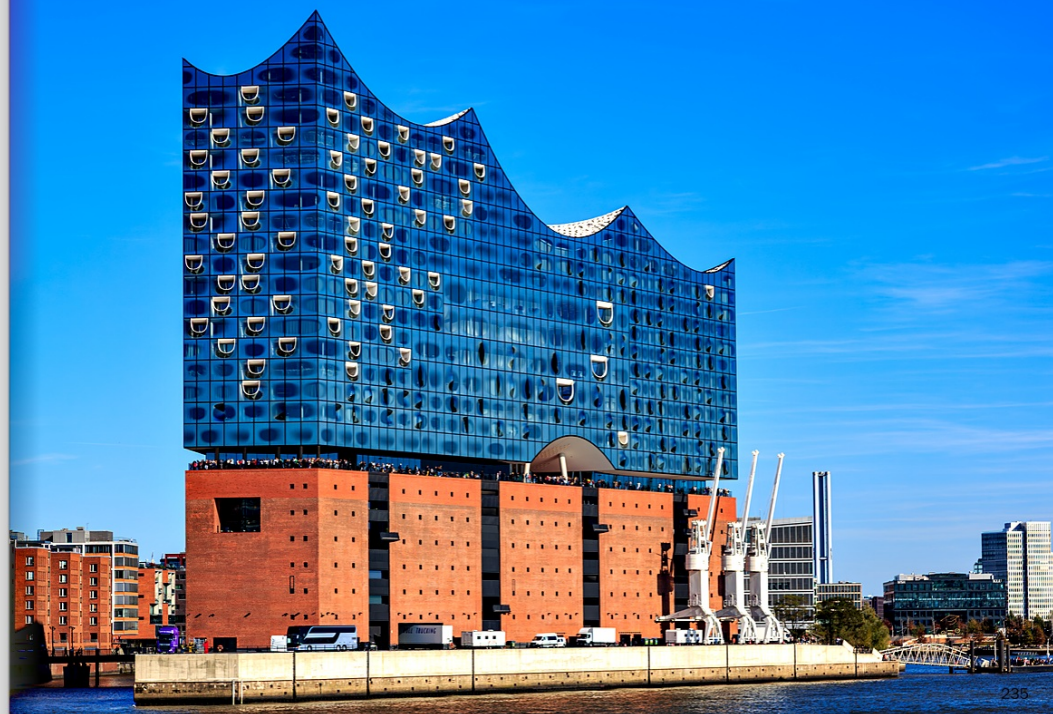
I am Hugo, an architect at Herzog & de Meuron, and I vividly remember the early days of the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg. For us, the project was a vision of transformation, a bold statement that would change the skyline of the Hanseatic city forever. It was a struggle, a battle for form and function that pushed us to our limits.

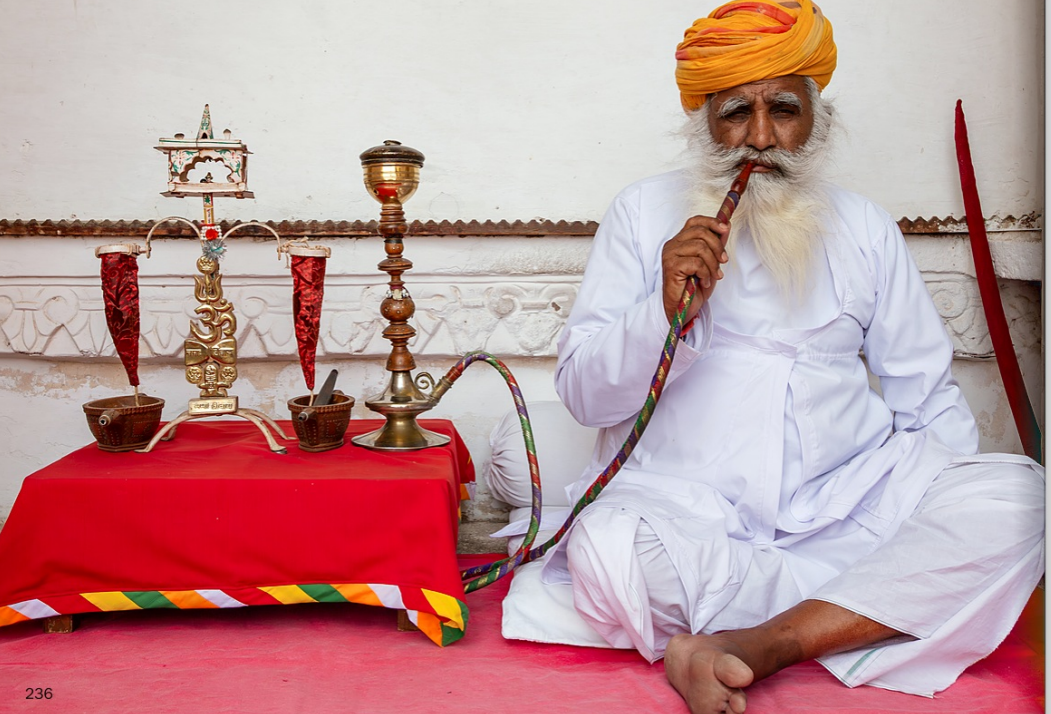
It all began with the historic Kaispeicher A warehouse in Hamburg harbour, a massive brick building that once stored cocoa, tea, and tobacco. For us architects, this warehouse was the solid foundation, the historical anchor that we wanted to respect and at the same time transform into something completely new. The idea was revolutionary: a spectacular, wave-shaped glass structure was to be placed on top of the old warehouse, reminiscent of the waves of the Elbe, an iceberg, or a proud sail—an architectural gesture celebrating Hamburg's connection to the water and the world.

The construction was anything but easy; it was a real ordeal. We faced immense challenges: complex statics, the development of the huge 'Great Hall', which rests on 1,200 steel springs to completely decouple it acoustically from the rest of the building—a technical masterpiece for perfect sound quality. But above all, the costs—which exploded from an original €77 million to over €800 million—led to years of debate, construction stoppages, and negative headlines in the press. We became a symbol of German large-scale construction projects with 'poor planning', which was painful because we believed in our vision and knew that we were creating something unique. The criticism was loud, the doubts were great.

Despite all the adversity and public hostility, the Elbphilharmonie was completed. On 11 January 2017, the time had come: it was opened with a festive concert. Overnight, public opinion changed dramatically. The building that had attracted so much criticism became a world-class landmark. The people of Hamburg embraced it.

The 'Elphi', as the people of Hamburg affectionately call it, is now not only a concert hall with unique acoustics and a freely accessible viewing platform, the Plaza. For me, it is a symbol of modern Hamburg, which masters the balancing act between historic harbour charm and architectural avant-garde and attracts millions of visitors every year. It was a difficult journey, but the result, this triumph of architecture and perseverance, makes me incredibly proud.





HOOKAH

I am Samir, an old man whose life unfolded in the shadows and on the sunny terraces of the magnificent Mehrangarh Fort, high above the blue city of Jodhpur. I served as a servant and later as a guard, and in my eyes, the hookah was always more than just a smoking device; it was a symbol of the status, relaxation, and rich tradition of our Rajput court.

The fort, founded in 1459 by Rao Jodha, was an impregnable stronghold and residence for the Maharajas of Marwar. In this world of warriors and palace intrigue, the enjoyment of a hookah was a precious moment of tranquillity. I remember how a Maharaja, perhaps Maharaja Man Singh, would retreat to the ornately decorated Phool Mahal after a long day of state affairs. The silence of the room, interrupted only by the gentle bubbling of the water in the pipe, was a sacred moment.

It was my job to hand him the ornately decorated hookah. These early pipes, originally made from coconut shells and bamboo, evolved in our royal courts into elaborate objects made of glass, metal, and precious stones. Each one was a work of art in itself.

I made sure that the tobacco, often flavoured with spices or fruit, glowed under the glowing charcoal. The smoke, cooled by water, was inhaled slowly and deliberately—a ritual, a sign of leisure and wealth, reserved only for the highest ranks. I learned that this was also an important social tool; offering a pipe to a guest was a sign of the highest honour and hospitality, often deciding the fate of alliances.

Today, as an old guard, I watch visitors stroll through the museum in our fort. In the galleries, they admire the historic water pipes, which now serve as silent witnesses to that elegant, bygone era. They sometimes ask me about their function, and I tell them about the life they represented. They tell the story of a lifestyle in which even the simple act of smoking was imbued with royal dignity and ritual, a time I will never forget. The pipes are empty now, but their story lives on in my memories.

SAMPHENG MARKET

I am Kanyanat. For a long time, my life took place here, in the heart of what tourists now call Chinatown, in the bustling Samphanthawong Market. My life was inextricably linked to the narrow, noisy alleyway that is now called Soi Wanit 1.

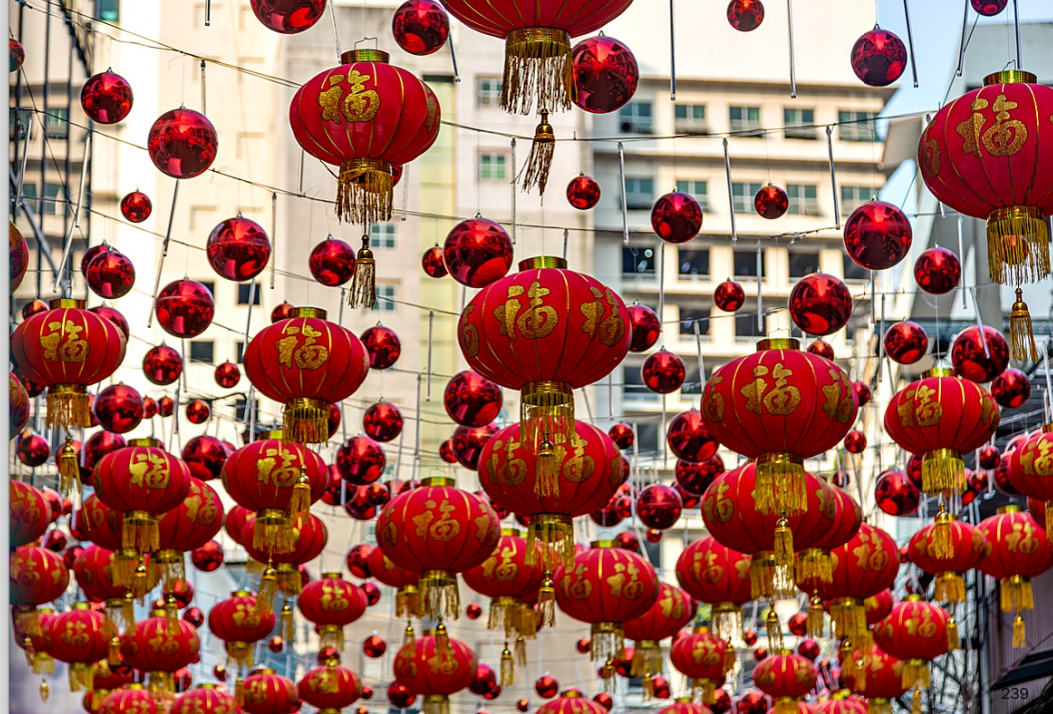
When I was young, I knew the story my grandfather told me. He spoke of the beginnings in 1782, when Chinese immigrants came here after they had to make way for the grand palace. Life was hard back then; there was still a canal, the Khlong Sampheng, and the neighbourhood had a bad reputation. In the 19th century, it was a place full of opium dens and brothels—and this was my home.

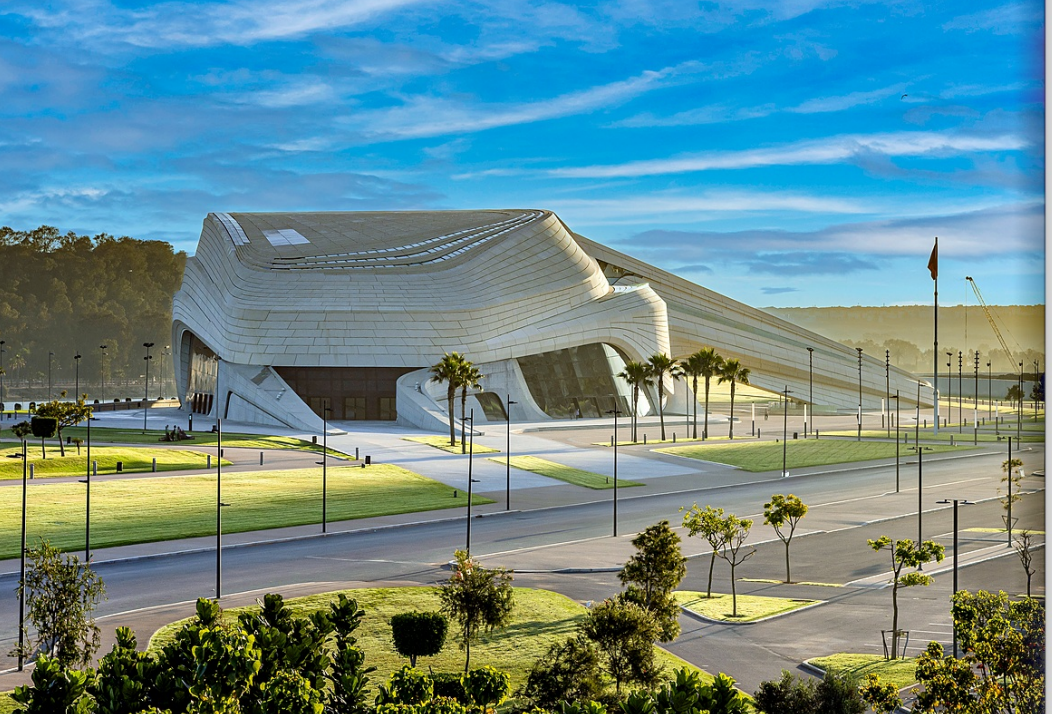
I remember the smell of opium, the darkness of the small rooms, and the constant coming and going of men. It was a place of survival, often marked by despair, a place where you had to grow up quickly.

However, the market around us was always changing. What was once a collection of simple stalls quickly became the dominant trading centre of the growing Chinese community and later the entire city. The alley where we lived was filled in to make way for roads. The shadows in which we worked gave way to the glaring light of neon signs. The opium dens and brothels became shops that now sell everything—fabrics, toys, jewellery, electronics.

I have witnessed the change. The neighbourhood is still chaotic, loud, and full of life, but in a different way. The atmosphere is no longer as gloomy as it used to be. The market is a living piece of history that reflects the entrepreneurial spirit of the Chinese-Thai community. People come here today to trade, to find bargains, not to seek what they used to find here. The noise of motorbikes and the cries of traders have replaced the darker sounds of the past.

Despite online shopping and modern shopping centres, this place remains important. I see the locals and visitors drawn to its traditional, bustling charm. My family's history is part of this place, part of its resilience. I am no longer the Kanyanat I once was, but I am still here. I watch as the market evolves and preserves its secrets, even those I know.





GRAND THEATRE OF RABAT

I am Sean Paul, an architect at Hadid Architects. I remember exactly when the Grand Théâtre de Rabat project landed on our desks. It was one of those visions that only Zaha Hadid could have—a masterpiece that would drive Rabat's cultural reorientation.

For us, this theatre was more than just a building; it was a sculpture inspired by the landscape we cherished so much. The flowing shapes and curved lines were intended to reflect the dynamics of the Bouregreg River, which meanders between Rabat and Salé. We deliberately broke with the traditional, box-like image of a theatre to create something that feels organic yet futuristic. The curved concrete forms that characterise the exterior were a technical challenge, but we knew they were necessary to realise Zaha's vision of a building that grows out of its surroundings.

Planning began in 2010. We knew we were creating something unique: the largest theatre in Africa and the Arab world. It was a challenge to translate the complexity of Zaha's design into reality, but we laid the foundation stone in 2014 and watched the structure grow. Tragically, Zaha did not live to see its completion in 2021, as she passed away in 2016. But her spirit lives on in every curve of this building.

The project was part of Morocco's national cultural programme. Today, the theatre houses a large 1,800-seat auditorium, an experimental studio, and an impressive open-air amphitheatre for up to 7,000 spectators. Each space is designed to inspire audiences. The official inauguration in October 2024, attended by the King's sister, was a moving moment.

For me, the Grand Théâtre de Rabat is not just a venue, but a bold architectural statement that combines tradition and modernity and carries Morocco's cultural ambitions out into the world. It is an architectural heritage site of international standing and a legacy of our vision, proving that architecture can evoke emotions and transform communities.

KARDUNGLA PASS

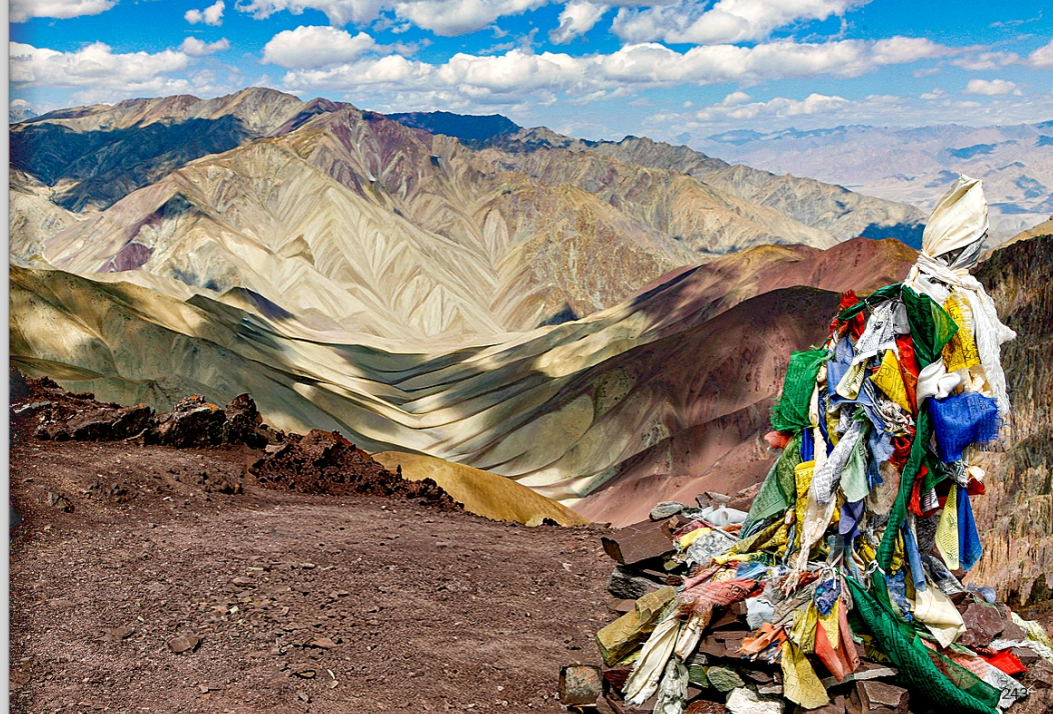
I am Amit, a guide at Countryside India, and I have shown thousands of travellers the wonders of Ladakh. But no place fascinates me as much as the Khardungla Pass, which we locally call Khardung La. For me, it is not just a pass, but the gateway to history and the breathtaking Shyok and Nubra valleys, a place that has stood the test of time.

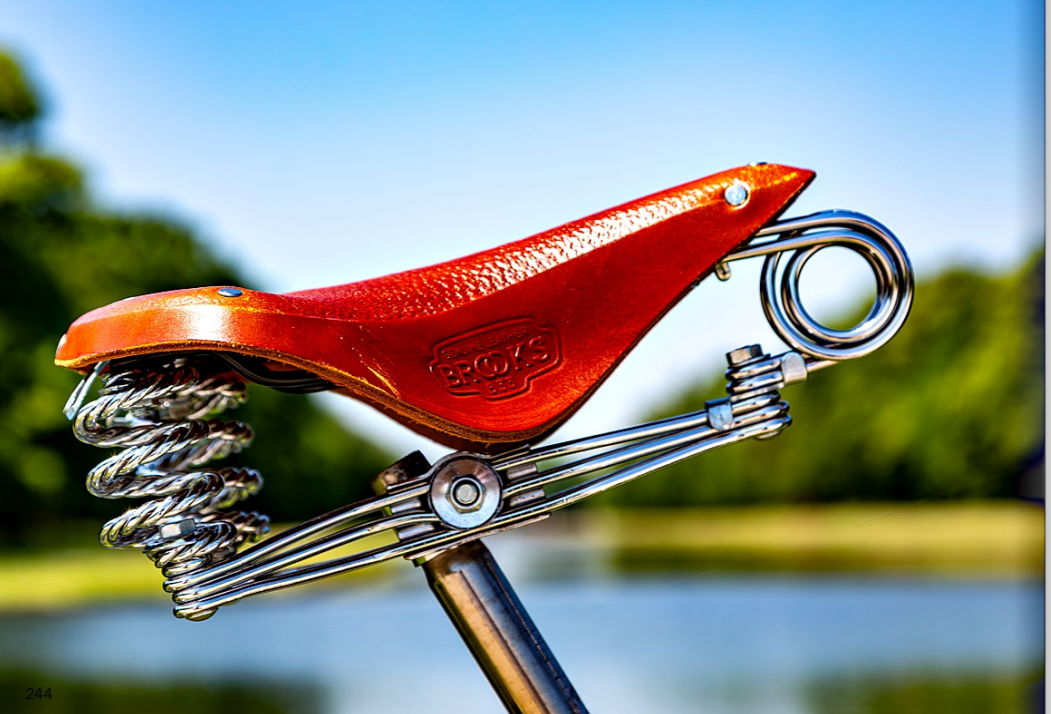
In the past, this pass was a vital part of the ancient Silk Road. I imagine the camel and mule caravans that transported goods here for centuries—textiles, spices, stories—between Central Asia and India. I can almost hear the bells of the caravans when I close my eyes. The wind up here, though icy, carries the echoes of those brave travellers.

Later, in the 20th century, the pass gained enormous military significance due to its proximity to the disputed border, the Line of Actual Control. The Indian Border Roads Organisation (BRO) built this motorable road, which was essential for supplying our brave soldiers in remote posts. I remember the stories of the hardships endured by the BRO workers who carved this road into the rock under the most extreme conditions.

For a long time, Khardung La, with a supposed height of over 5,600 metres, was known as the highest drivable road in the world. Countless travel guides, including ours, celebrated it as such. And everyone who came here felt the pride of standing on the ‘roof of the world’. Only more recent, more accurate GPS measurements corrected the actual height to about 5,359 metres. And yes, there are now even higher passable passes in Ladakh, such as the Umling La Pass.

But regardless of the corrected data, the Khardung La Pass remains an iconic destination. I bring cyclists and motorcyclists here who are looking for a challenge and want to experience the breathtaking scenery and thin mountain air. At the top of the pass, next to the small temple and cafés, there is a sign proudly proclaiming the traditional altitude. I smile every time I see it, because legend is sometimes more powerful than science. For me and my guests, it is and remains the highest pass in the world, in our hearts and in history.





NYMPHENBURG PALACE

I'm Max, a student in Munich. It was a sunny Tuesday afternoon, and I was cycling carefree through Munich. My destination was Nymphenburg Palace Park, where I was meeting friends. My old, rickety bicycle, an heirloom from my grandfather, squeaked with every turn of the pedals, but I loved it.

When I reached the magnificent palace moat, I stopped briefly to admire the majestic façade of the palace. The swans glided elegantly across the water, and the tranquillity of this place never ceased to fascinate me. I pushed my bike along the shore for a while, as cycling was not allowed in the inner park.

Suddenly, my rear wheel locked up with a loud, metallic clang. The chain had broken. I cursed quietly and examined the mishap. There was no quick fix; I had to walk. I pushed my bike and walked along the path to the Marstallmuseum, hoping to find help or at least a bike rack there. I knew that the museum itself housed an impressive collection of historic carriages and sleighs belonging to the Bavarian rulers. But now, of all places, I was standing with my broken bicycle at the site where the most expensive vehicles in Europe were on display.

I looked around and noticed an elderly lady smiling as she approached me. She was wearing a gardener's apron and seemed to be working there. “Are you having problems with your vehicle, young man?” she asked in a friendly voice. “Yes, the chain is broken. And that in front of the backdrop of royal splendour,” I replied with a smile.

The lady laughed. “You know, that's not so inappropriate. There's a very special vehicle in the Marstallmuseum. A pedal-powered garden limousine, a kind of historical bicycle rickshaw, which Elector Karl Theodor used in the 18th century.”

I was surprised. “Really? A pedal car for the Elector?” “Indeed. Technology in the service of garden art, as they said at the time,” she explained. “Even kings sometimes wanted to pedal themselves. So you see, your bicycle is in good company. Perhaps not quite as magnificent as Charles VII's coronation carriage, but historically relevant in its own way!”

I had to laugh. The idea of an elector whizzing through the park on an early bicycle prototype amused me. The lady showed me an inconspicuous back entrance to the Marstallmuseum, where I could safely park my broken bicycle.

TRADITIONAL WATERING

I am Ratan Singh, the sarpanch, or village head, of Kamba. Nestled in the sandy expanse of western Rajasthan, I look out over our fields, which have been suffering for months under a flawless, cruel blue void. The earth is cracked and hard, and every evening we, the elders, gather and gaze at the sky, desperately hoping for the arrival of the monsoon.

We in Kamba do not rely on modern canal irrigation; our lives are inextricably linked to the traditional 'pair' system, a clever way of making the most of every rare gift from the heavens. Our ancestors knew how to read nature. The village is located on a natural slope that we call 'agar' (or agor), our catchment area that directs rainwater to the lower-lying fields and the village.

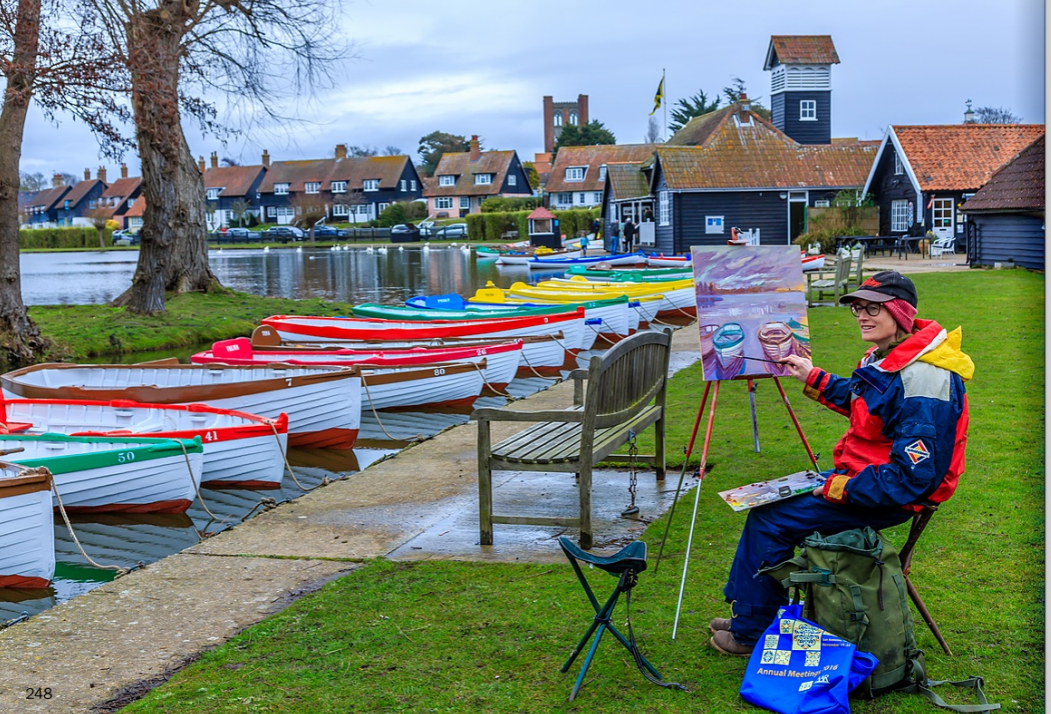
Weeks before the expected rainy season, all of us—every man, woman, and child—had prepared our traditional structures, the "khadins" or 'bandhs'. These are long, low earthen walls that we carefully built across the gentle slopes. They serve to collect and store the scarce surface water instead of simply letting it run off unused. It is hard work under the scorching sun, but it is our life insurance.

One evening, when the drought was at its worst, dark clouds finally gathered on the horizon. The tension in the village was palpable. When the rain finally fell in thick drops, we eagerly began to channel the water through small, strategically placed channels into the fields behind the earthen walls. It was a race against time.

We did not use the water to irrigate the plants immediately; that would have been wasteful. Instead, we allowed it to seep into the sandy soil in a controlled manner. The water remained in the fields for days until the soil was saturated. In this way, the earth was able to store enough moisture to sustain the entire growing season of crops such as millet (bajra) and legumes.

Near the fields, in the agor, our storage area, the families had also dug small, covered, cylindrical pits called 'beris' or "kuis". These reach down to the seeping groundwater, which we call 'rajani pani' (the seeped water). This precious, pure water is carefully used for the drinking water needs of the people and our livestock.

When the sun returned and the fields looked like a series of temporary ponds after the rain, we no longer looked desperately at the sky, but at the wet, fertile soil. Thanks to our ancient traditions of water management, we had captured the 'gift from heaven'. For all the people of Kamba, this is more than just irrigation; it is a centuries-old partnership with the harsh desert, a lesson in patience and sustainability that ensures the survival of our village.



PINDROPPAINTER

I am Susan, the painter. It was a clear morning in Thorpeness, that charming coastal village in Suffolk. As I set up my easel on the banks of the Meare, I immediately felt the magic of this place. For me, the 'Pindroppainter' who often chooses her motifs spontaneously, this place—Stuart Ogilvie's imaginative creation from the 1920s—is an inexhaustible source of inspiration that fills my palette with soft coastal colours. I love the unique atmosphere here, which reminds me of the Impressionists, but also gives me the freedom of abstract expression.

That morning, I wanted to paint the small boats moored near the famous 'House in the Clouds'. The converted water tower, towering high above the treetops, is simply majestic. I mixed my titanium white, a colour that is never missing from my palette. The calm on the water was perfect, interrupted only by the gentle lapping of the small sailing boats on the lake.

As I applied the first soft lines of the sky to the canvas, an elderly gentleman named Arthur came by with his dog. Arthur had spent his entire life in Thorpeness and knew G. Stuart Ogilvie, the founder of the holiday village, personally.

"Good morning, Susan," he greeted me. "The tower looks particularly majestic this morning." "That's true, Arthur," I replied with a smile, without taking my eyes off my canvas. "It's almost as if the sky itself wants to be a painting." Arthur looked over my shoulder for a while. He admired my ability to capture the essence of the moment, the balance between realism and fantasy. "You capture the magic of our village, Susan. Just what Ogilvie intended when he created this place—a place of fantasy."

I continued painting, my brushstrokes fluid and decisive. I enjoy interacting with the people who often watch me work on site. The surroundings of Thorpeness, with its Tudor and Jacobean houses, offer endless subjects.

At the end of the day, as the sun sank lower and a warm glow lay over the sea, my painting was almost finished. It was not just a representation of the landscape, but a documentation of the atmosphere, the people, and the unique history of this enchanted place in Suffolk. I signed it with my distinctive 'pindrop' style, satisfied with another 'honestly captured' moment in my beloved Thorpeness.

DEFORESTATION

I am Boun, the old fisherman from Mahaxay. My life is the Xe Bang Fai, which winds its way through our karst mountains in the Laotian province of Khammouane. It is our lifeline, our food, our way. But it also bears scars, the traces of the past.

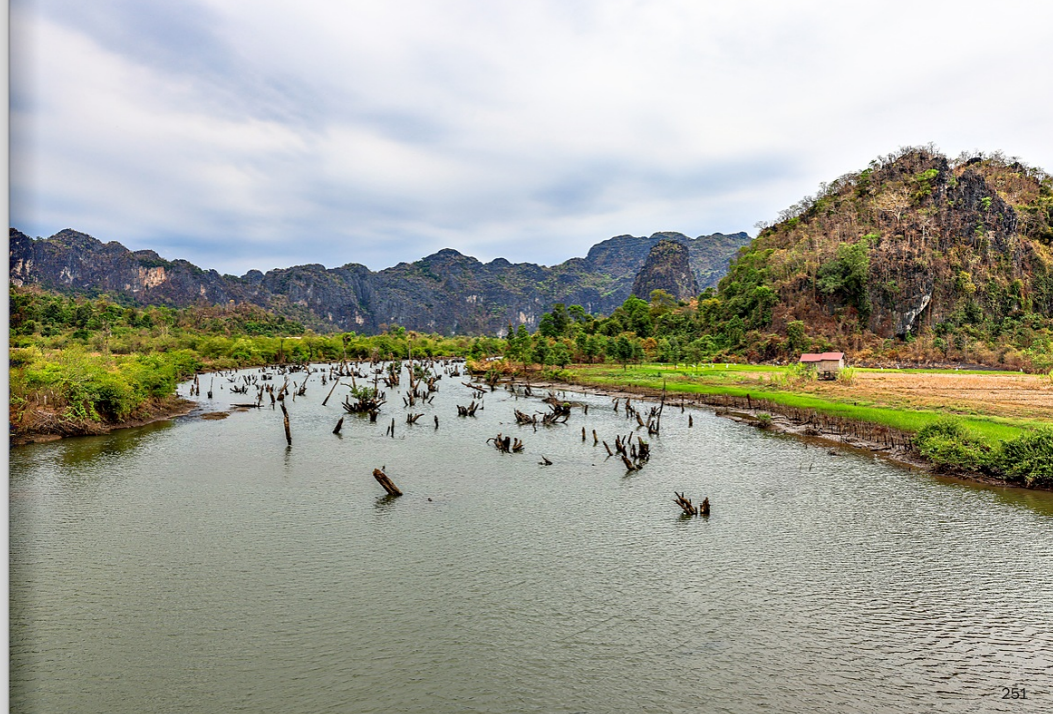
Every morning, before the sun turns the mountains golden, I push my little wooden boat into the water. The journey is often arduous. Remnants of a bygone era rise out of the water like silent witnesses: tree stumps, everywhere. When I was young, the big timber companies came. The forest was dense, full of life. They cut down the trees and threw them into the river to float them to the sawmills. It was a time of money, but also of great loss. Many logs simply sank. What remained were the stumps, which now protrude from the water like toothless jaws.

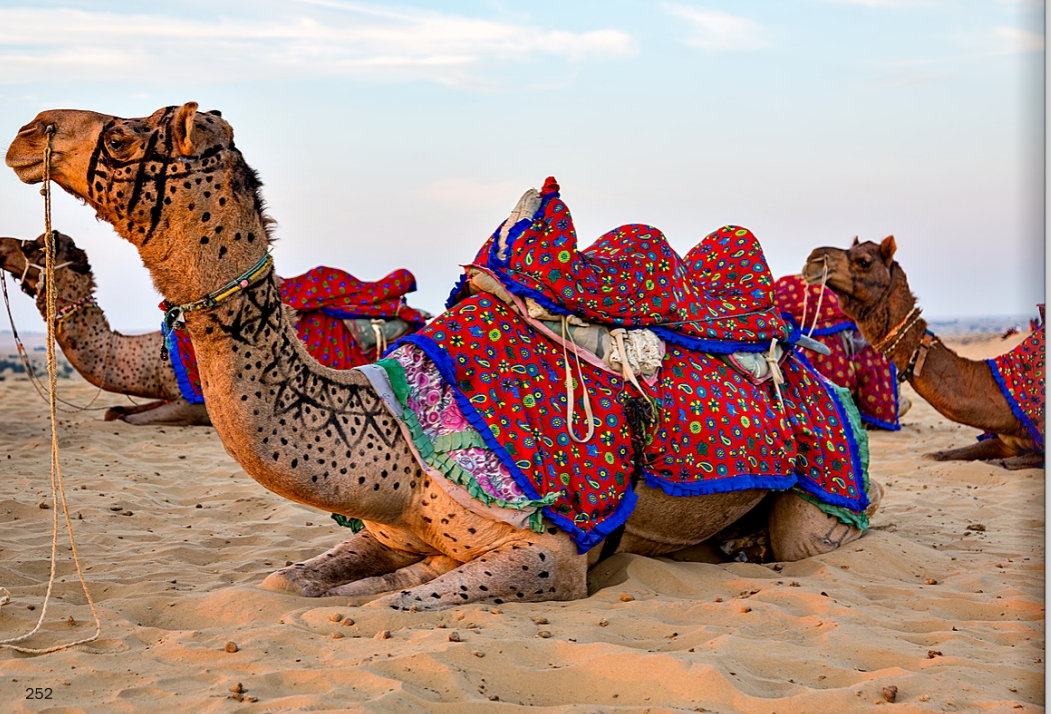
For us fishermen, these stumps are a double-edged sword. They are dangerous, especially when the water is low. I have to know every shoal, every sunken stump, so as not to capsize. But we have learned to live with them. They have become anchorages and provide shelter and habitat for fish. They are part of the river.

The other day, my grandson Somlith helped me haul in the nets. He was frustrated when the net got caught on a stump again. “Grandfather, why don't we just remove them all? They're just obstacles!”

I smiled, my hands marked by all the years. “Look closely, my boy. The river hasn't forgotten them. It has embraced them.” I pointed to a large stump that was almost completely covered with moss and vines. Small fish swam in the shade. “They remind us of what we have lost,” I explained to him, “but they also show us how nature heals and adapts. The river bears these scars with dignity. We must learn to live with them, not fight against them.”

Somlith nodded slowly. He understood the resilience of the river. The stumps are more than just obstacles; they are the history of Mahaxay, a constant reminder of our past and a foundation for our present life on the river.





KINGS OF THE DESERT

I am Rajput Rawal. Here, in the endless expanse of the Thar Desert, near Jaisalmer in Rajasthan, where the Sam Sand Dunes glisten, camels are kings. They are my family, my work, my life. I love the evenings most of all. The heat of the day subsides, a cool breeze comes, and the sun bathes the dunes in gold and red.

I am a camel driver, like my father and his father before him. Jumri, the old proud one, and Sultan, the young one, belong to me like my right hand. Yesterday evening, when the tourists were all in their camps, enjoying the music and dancing of Rajasthan, I stayed behind alone with Jumri and Sultan on a high dune. I looked out over the endless desert.

These animals, the ‘ships of the desert’—they are perfect. Their broad hooves do not sink into the sand, they do not need water for days. Without them, there would be no life out here, no villages, no transport, no tourism. They are the only true masters of this landscape. I thought of the old caravans that travelled the same routes long before cars. The camels were the connection to the world, the bridge between peoples.

Suddenly, Sultan raised his head and let out a deep gurgling sound. Not a sound of fear, but of familiarity. Jumri sighed and lay down in the cool sand. I stroked his neck. The calm and dignity they radiate is incredible. At that moment, as the stars came out, I felt deeply connected to this place and our traditions. I am Rajput Rawal, and this is my kingdom.

FORESTRY

I'm Hans, a third-generation forester here in Schömberg, in the northern Black Forest. For me, the forest isn't just a backdrop for Sunday walks; no, it's our heartbeat, our bread and butter, our home. I know every tree, every stream, every path in my district as if they were my own children. The forest is not a static place. It lives, it breathes, and it needs to be cared for. That is our job.

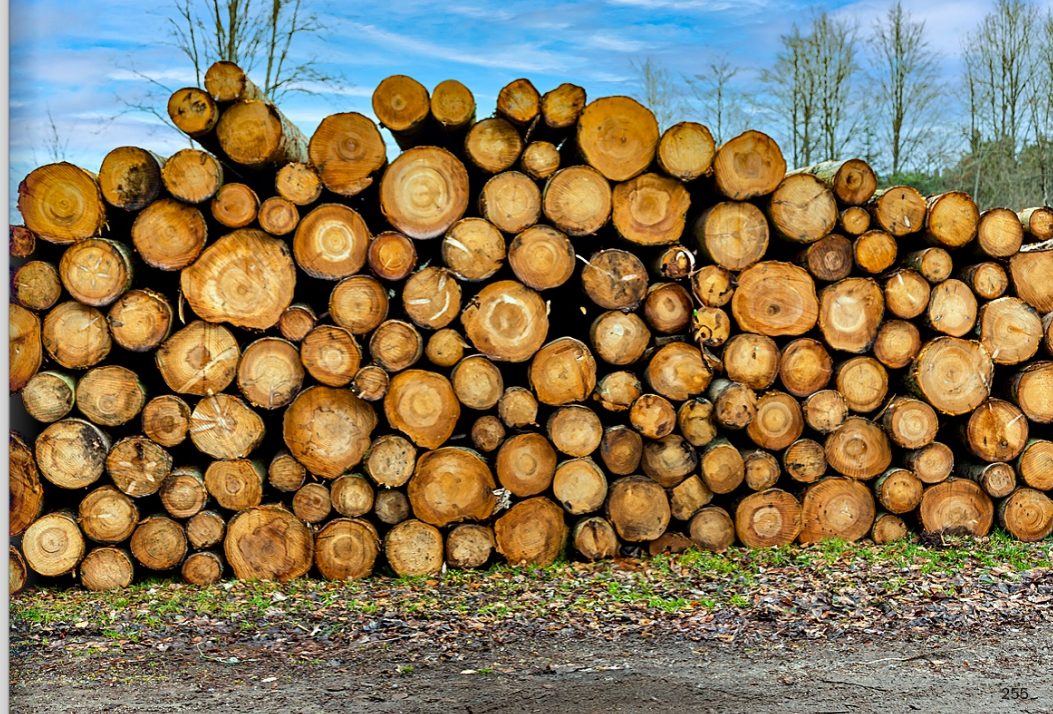
This morning I took my grandson Leon with me. Teenagers. More smartphone than wood in their heads, you know. He trudged reluctantly beside me, his nose half buried in his screen. “Look at this spruce, Leon,” I said, placing my hand on the rough trunk. “Over 120 years old. It has outlived the emperor, two world wars, and now all the modern hustle and bustle.” Leon just shrugged. “It's just a tree, Grandad.” That made me laugh. “No, my boy. It is our foundation. It is the forestry industry in Schömberg that built our villages in the first place.”

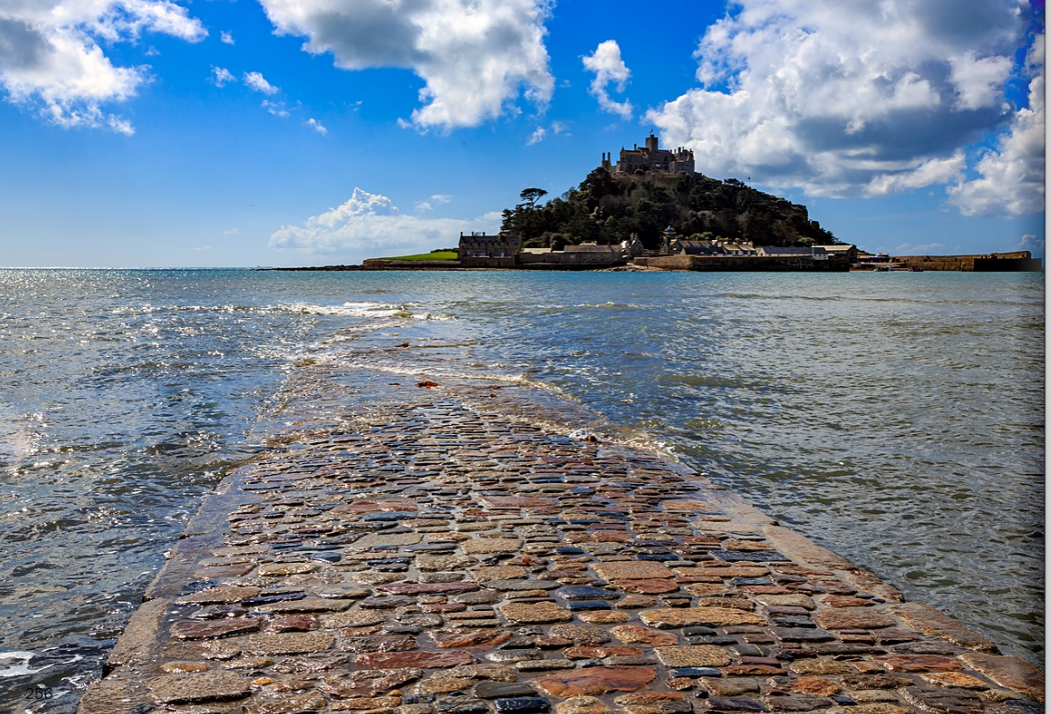
I showed him the old half-timbered houses in the valley. The wood for them? All from here. The forest protects us from erosion, filters our water, and gives us air to breathe. It is everything.

We walked on to a clearing with young seedlings. Neatly arranged in rows, as they should be. Sustainability, I explained to him. That's the word we love most here. We only take what can grow back. We nurture it so that it can withstand climate change. A cycle that we have treated with respect for centuries. I showed him how to clear a young tree of overgrown vegetation and talked about the economy—the sawmills, the carpenters, the woodcarvers. It's about work, about meaning.

Slowly, I saw Leon's resistance crumble. He no longer saw just green mass, but a carefully managed work of art. On the way home, he stopped and looked at the majestic fir trees. “Grandad,” he asked, “if that old spruce has to be felled, who decides?”

I smiled. Finally, the right question. “I decide that, Leon. And I do so with the respect that an old friend deserves. We are not the masters of the forest here, we are its guardians.” That is the true meaning of forestry in Schömberg. Leon nodded. I knew he understood. He will contribute his part to this legacy. The forest and us, we belong together.





ST MICHAEL'S MOUNT

I am Denzel, a tourist guide here in Cornwall. When I show our guests St Michael's Mount, I don't just tell them facts, I open the door to a world full of legends that are alive here. For me, this mount rises out of the sea like an island from a fairy tale, often shrouded in that mysterious mist that makes everything seem magical—as if the past is taking shape right before your eyes.

I explain to them that at low tide, the raised causeway connecting the island to the mainland becomes visible. It is a special moment to walk along this old cobbled path. At high tide, just a few hundred metres from the small town of Marazion, the island seems unreachable—as if it refuses to share its secrets. This constant play of the tides alone is fascinating and teaches us that nothing is permanent except the rhythm of nature.

I tell them about the ancient Cornish names, which mean ‘old rock in the forest’, and show them pictures of underwater excavations that have actually uncovered the remains of a sunken forest. And, of course, I tell them the legends. Of King Arthur, who fought a great battle here against a giant—I point to the spot where the giant is said to have fallen and see the wonder in their eyes.

I let them feel the history, how the Mount is said to be the last remnant of the legendary land of Lyonesse, which stretched as far as the Isles of Scilly and sank into the sea in a single night. And then there is the story of Joseph of Arimathea, Jesus' uncle, who is said to have landed here when he was trading in tin. Or, as the very old legends tell it, when he brought the Holy Grail with him. My guests' eyes light up at this idea, and I see them imagining how the Grail could be hidden here, perhaps in the old priory at the summit, where the castle stands today.

For me, St Michael's Mount is more than just a symbol of Cornwall; it is a living book of stories that I open and retell every day. It is an insider tip that I am happy to share with the world because I believe that everyone needs a little bit of this magic and wonder in their lives.

SCHLUCHSEE GRAFFITI

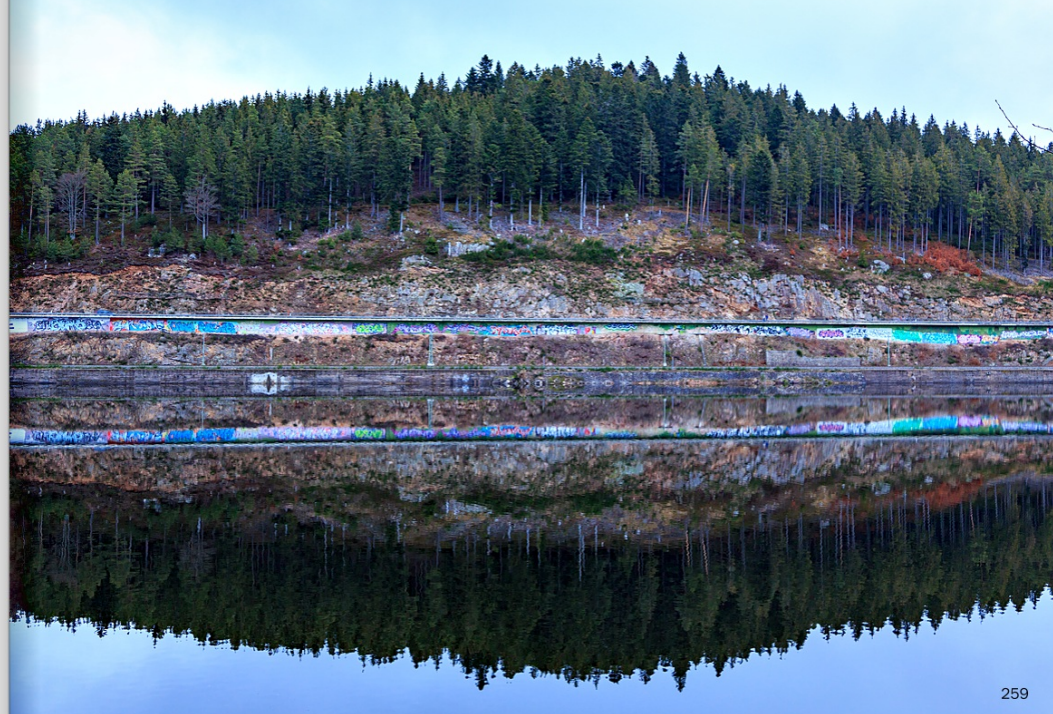
I am Herbert. A graffiti artist. Some call me an artist, some call me a vandal—I don't care. I see the world in shapes and colours, and Schluchsee in the Black Forest is the ultimate challenge for me. For centuries, this deep blue lake was just nature's canvas, known for its pristine reflections of fir trees and the sky. Boring. Too perfect.

At the end of the 90s, I changed that. I was one of the guys who discovered the grey concrete walls and bridge arches around the reservoir as our canvas. People saw it as vandalism, a disgrace to the picture-postcard idyll. But we fought for acceptance, for legal spaces to burn our colourful visions into this immaculate landscape. I wanted young people to have a place, for our voices to be heard, away from the quiet forests and traditional cuckoo clock culture.

The ‘story’ of the reflections and my graffiti here is a story of contrasts. There is the quiet, untouched beauty of nature reflected in the water, and then there is my raw, urban expressiveness manifested on man-made structures. It is the silent tension between the centuries-old tradition of the Black Forest and my modern, ephemeral art form that boldly inscribes itself into the idyll. Sometimes, when I sit there, I can almost hear the old fir trees murmuring about the neon colours I present to them.

There are rare, magical moments that keep me coming back to the lake. I remember how one day the light fell perfectly on a piece I had just finished, a large, abstract work in turquoise and orange. The colours of my graffiti were reflected in the dark water. For a fleeting moment, there was harmony between my colours, the sky, and the green of the fir trees, between my world and nature. It was as if the lake accepted my art, if only for a moment, before the waves distorted the image again.

And that is precisely the beauty of it—it is transient, fleeting, like life itself. My work is a dialogue, a provocative question to the silence of the Black Forest, echoing in the water for a brief moment.



GYMNOPILUS

I am Gaby, a mushroom picker from the northern Black Forest. I know every corner of our forest and search not only for edible mushrooms, but also for the stories hidden beneath the protective canopy of old fir trees. This morning, I stumbled upon a particularly touching one: the story of a moss-covered tree stump, a silent relic of a long-gone giant that must have fallen here long ago.

The stump, once mighty and tall, was now completely covered with a thick, soft carpet of lush green moss that absorbed the little light like a sponge. It felt like velvet under my fingers. Here, in this damp, shady world that I love so much, autumn awoke in all its quiet splendour.

Nestled in the emerald green cushion, mushrooms of the Gymnopilus genus grew in small, dense clusters. Their caps glowed in a spectrum from rust red to warm, shimmering golden yellow, as if they wanted to replace the missing sunlight on the forest floor and brighten the dark place.

The story they told was one of symbiosis and hidden riches that remain invisible to the naked eye. The mushrooms seemed to whisper to the moss as they worked tirelessly together to break down the hard tree stump into its components and return valuable nutrients to the forest floor. It is this eternal cycle of life that I see so clearly here.

It was a microcosm full of poetry that I discovered there: the delicate, ephemeral caps, which often bloom for only a few days, stood in perfect contrast to the enduring, soft carpet of moss—a perfect little work of art that captured the hidden magic of the forest. I didn't collect any of these mushrooms; I left them there, as part of this quiet little story of life, death, and rebirth that I had discovered, to take home with me—in my thoughts and in my heart. And I knew I would come back to see how the story continued.

LIMES WATCHTOWER

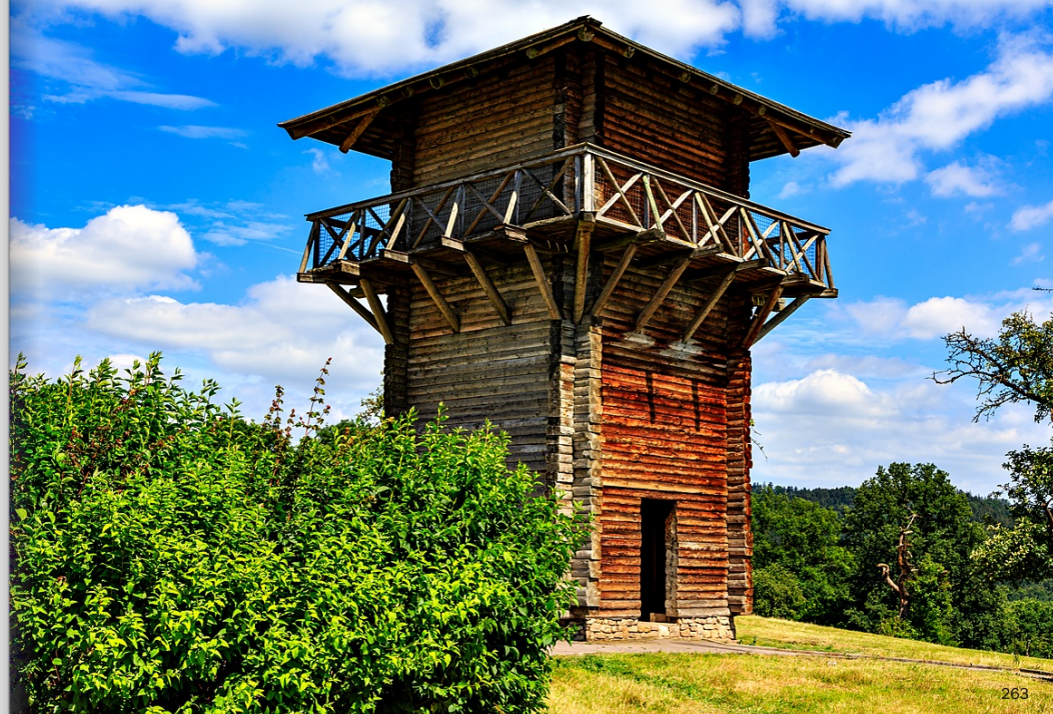
I am Caesar, a butcher here in Schwäbisch Gmünd, and I tell you: order must prevail. My grandfather always told me that, and when I see the old foundations lying here in the ground, I know that this principle already applied almost 2,000 years ago, when the Romans were in charge. They built the Limes, an impressive border that we can still feel in our valley today and which shapes our landscape.

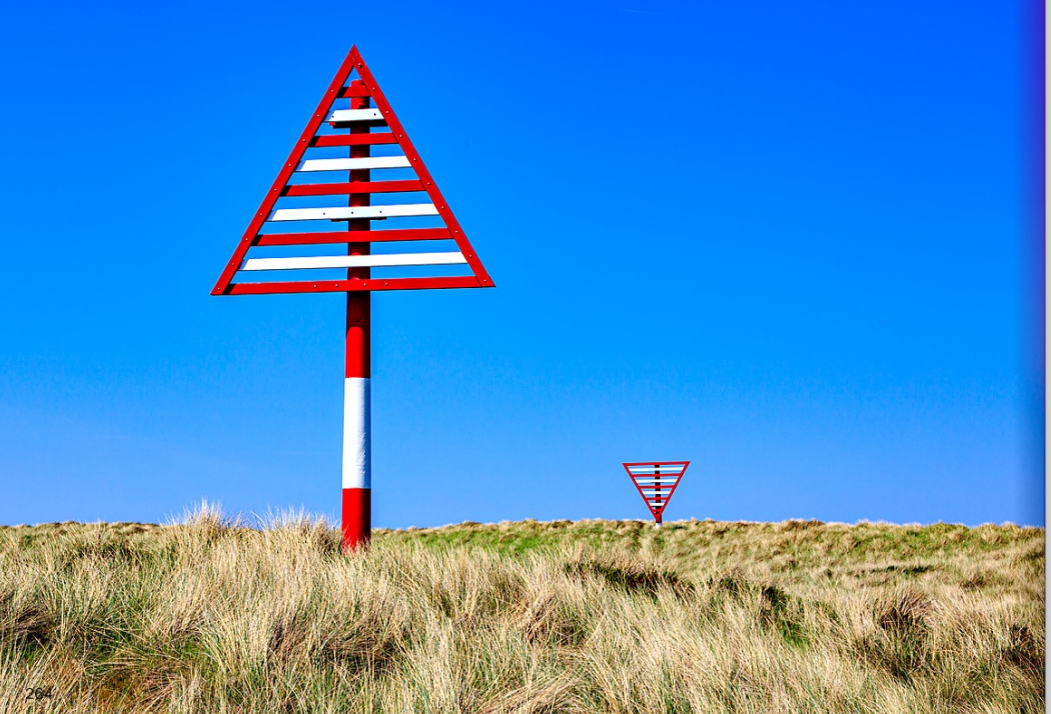
Here in the picturesque Rotenbach Valley, where the valleys meet the Alb, the Upper Germanic and Raetian Limes met. This was the border between two Roman provinces, and this is where the fun ended! Hundreds of watchtowers stood along this 550-kilometre-long line, like silent guardians watching over the land.

The Romans were a tidy bunch, and their planning was spot on. The towers, mostly built of wood or stone, were erected within sight of each other so that they could always see each other. Soldiers stood guard on the top floor, the watchroom, often auxiliary troops from distant parts of the empire. If there was trouble, they sounded the alarm with signal horns or light signals and alerted the rapid response troops in the rear fortresses, such as the nearby Schirenhof fortress. There were no half measures; safety was the priority!

For the Romans, these towers and the associated border fortifications of ramparts, ditches, and palisades symbolised civilisation in contrast to the wilderness of Germania. It was a daily reminder of Roman order and power.

Today, most of these towers have disappeared. But their foundations and the remains of the ramparts still bear witness to this distant time. In Lorch, right next to us, there is even a detailed reconstruction of a watchtower. I recommend everyone to go there and take a look. You get a vivid impression of life on the border. The history of a border that shaped life in the region for over 150 years, until the Romans abandoned it in the 3rd century AD and left the land to the Alemanni. Today, all of this is a valuable UNESCO World Heritage Site, and I, as Caesar the butcher, greatly appreciate this order, this history, and the sausage we produce here.





BEACONS

I am Finn, a sea captain. I know the often treacherous coast of Sylt, washed by the unpredictable tides of the North Sea, like the back of my hand. For me, the history of the beacons here represents the eternal struggle between man and the sea, which I regard with the utmost respect.

Long before modern lighthouses and GPS made navigation safe, these simple but indispensable wooden structures were our only hope. They were striking wooden frames, often painted bright red and topped with specific geometric shapes such as triangles or crosses. They were not lighthouses that glowed in the dark, no. Their secret lay in their precision during the bright daylight hours, when the sun fell on the red paint.

They served as ingenious landmarks. Their strategic placement was crucial. When a captain saw two beacons exactly above each other from the sea, he knew what to do. This bearing showed the safe channels through the dangerous sandbanks and shoals of the island.

These silent guardians were of existential importance. A small error in bearing, a tiny moment of inattention, and the ship and its crew were lost, shattered on the treacherous sandbanks that change with every tide. The ‘secrets’ of the beacons were therefore vital knowledge that was passed down from generation to generation by pilots and fishermen. I myself learned from my grandfather how to correctly position the bearing cross and which shape represents which channel. This knowledge was more valuable than any nautical chart.

Today, most of these old beacons have been rendered obsolete by modern technology, but some still stand on the beach, especially in the north near List am Ellenbogen, where they symbolically mark the maritime border. They tell the silent story of courageous sailors, of the constant fear of shipwreck, and of the quiet, reliable guidance we found in the simple but lifesaving wooden markers.

For me, they are a nostalgic reminder of a time when navigation was still an art closely linked to the observation of nature and a deep knowledge of local waters, a time I will never forget as a captain.

ALLIUM

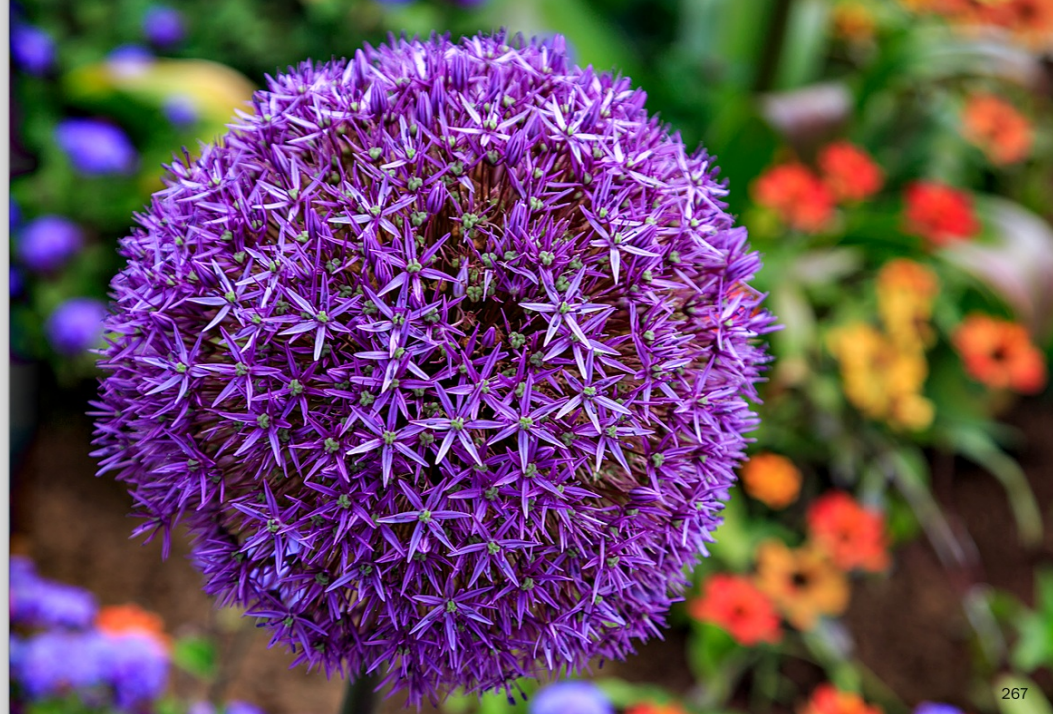
I am Gisela, a teacher in Mühlacker. For me, the history of ornamental garlic here is inextricably linked to the Enzgärten 2015 garden show. This event changed our town, giving it a new, green centre, and I was there with my school class to witness it first-hand.

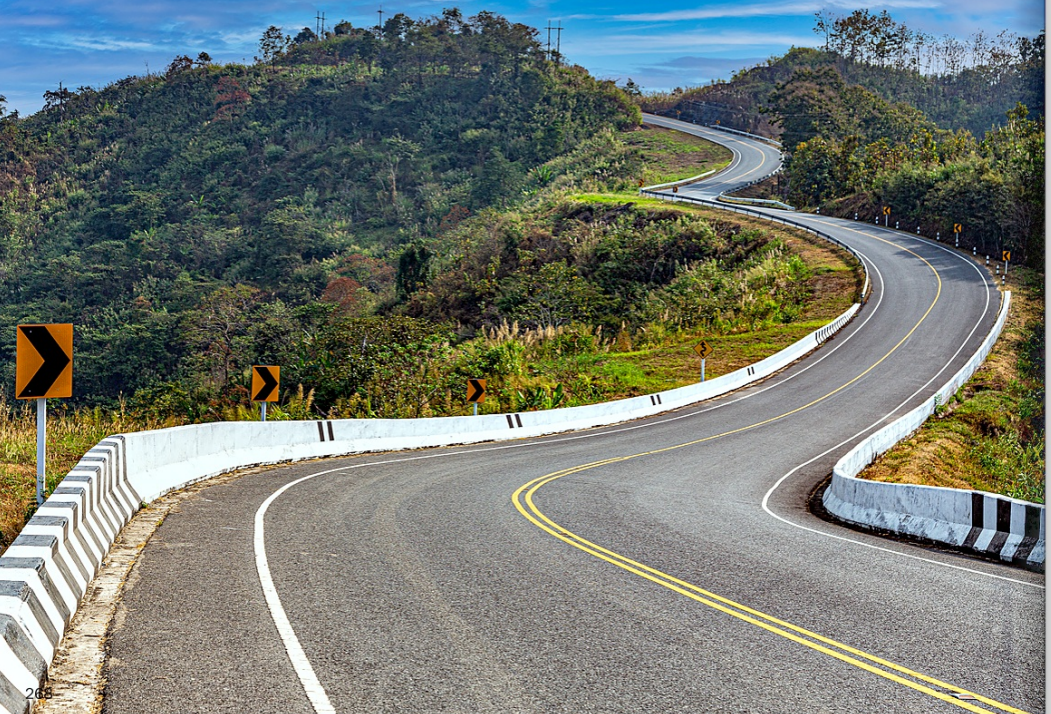
The story began years earlier with a bold vision: our town, long divided by the canal-like River Enz, was to grow together again. The planners had the idea of transforming the banks into a nature park. Allium—ornamental garlic—played a decisive role in the design of the flower beds.

Thousands of bulbs were planted in the autumn before the exhibition. I remember watching with the children as the gardeners planted the small, inconspicuous bulbs in the ground. They were the centrepiece of the 'perennial gardens' and 'exotic gardens' on the newly designed, more urban side of the Enz. The planners chose Allium because of its unique, almost architectural form and its bright colour.

When the garden show opened in May 2015, the miracle was revealed. I led my school class along the paths and we were all fascinated: hundreds of tall, slender stems rose from the unremarkable ground, crowned by huge, perfectly round, purple flower balls. They hovered above the other plants, creating striking accents and offering a surrealistic image that captivated the children and all visitors. For many, including us, the ornamental onion plant became one of the most popular photo motifs of the entire exhibition.

The story of the allium in Mühlacker is thus a metaphor for the entire garden show: it symbolises the transformation of unused riverbank areas into a blooming, vibrant centre and represents the aesthetic power of nature, which—skilfully staged—touches people's hearts and leaves a lasting green legacy in our city. I am glad that my pupils were able to witness this.





BIKERS PARADISE

I'm Steve, a retired Englishman, and when I think of Bo Klua, my heart swells. The history of the roads here in Nan Province, Thailand, is not an ancient saga to me, but a modern legend about freedom, asphalt, and the most breathtaking nature I have ever experienced on two wheels.

I've been told that in the past, the roads to Bo Klua, a small village known for its traditional salt production, were simple and often arduous. But in recent decades, something happened that changed the region forever: the roads were paved and upgraded. That was the moment that changed everything—the dream of every biker come true.

This development created the legendary 'Nan Loop', a network of mountain roads that is now considered one of the best motorcycle routes in the world. Route 1081 and the steeper Route 1256 through Doi Phu Kha National Park are at the heart of this story. The roads wind their way through a majestic mountain landscape in dizzying serpentines and wide, sweeping curves, past rice fields and jungle.

For me as a biker, this is an incomparable riding experience. The silence of the mountains, interrupted only by the rich sound of my engine, the freedom in every curve, and the breathtaking view above the clouds—that's what I live for. It's incredible; the roads are perfectly paved, traffic is minimal, and there are no speed controls—a true paradise for us bikers.

This is also about the transformation of the region: what was once a remote, unknown salt mining village is now a world-famous meeting place for motorbike enthusiasts. We bring life and tourism to the area, even if this change is not without its challenges for the local population, as I learn from my conversations with the locals. But ultimately, it is the story of a road that not only connects two places, but also my passion for adventure and the beauty of these unspoilt landscapes.

BO KLUA

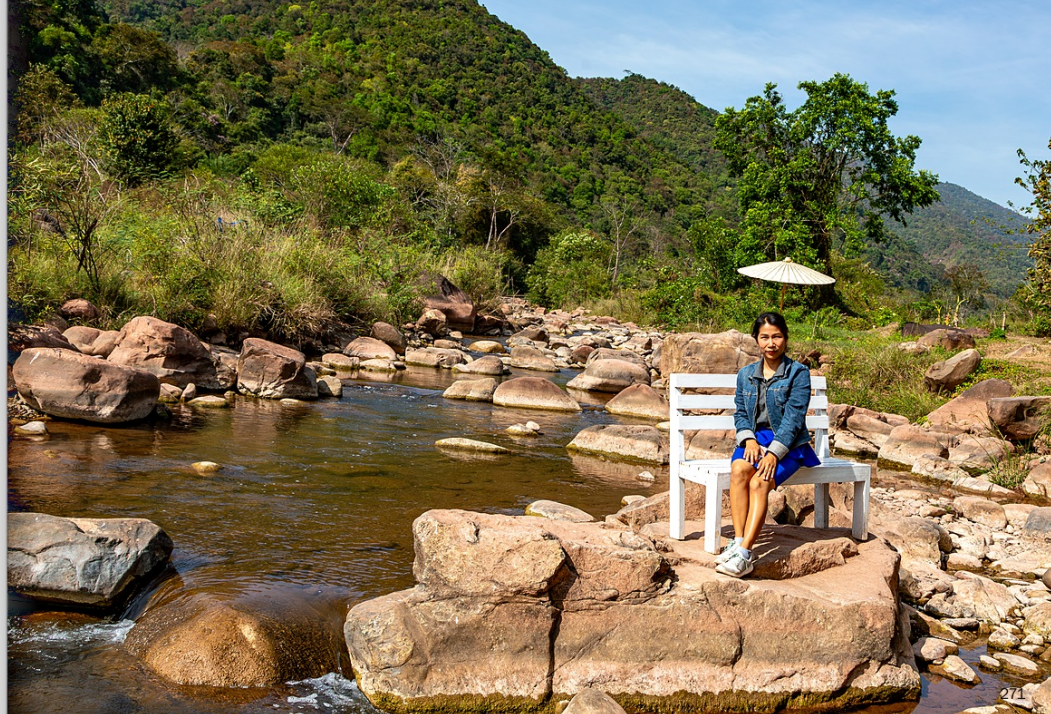
I am Mali, a salt cook in Bo Klua. In the quiet dawn, when the water of our small river flows over the moss-covered, smooth rocks, I feel the history that this place tells. It is quiet, personal, and deeply rooted in my heart. It is about me, a young woman whose grandparents still cook the precious salt in the old wells. Our family has lived off the white gold of the mountains for generations.

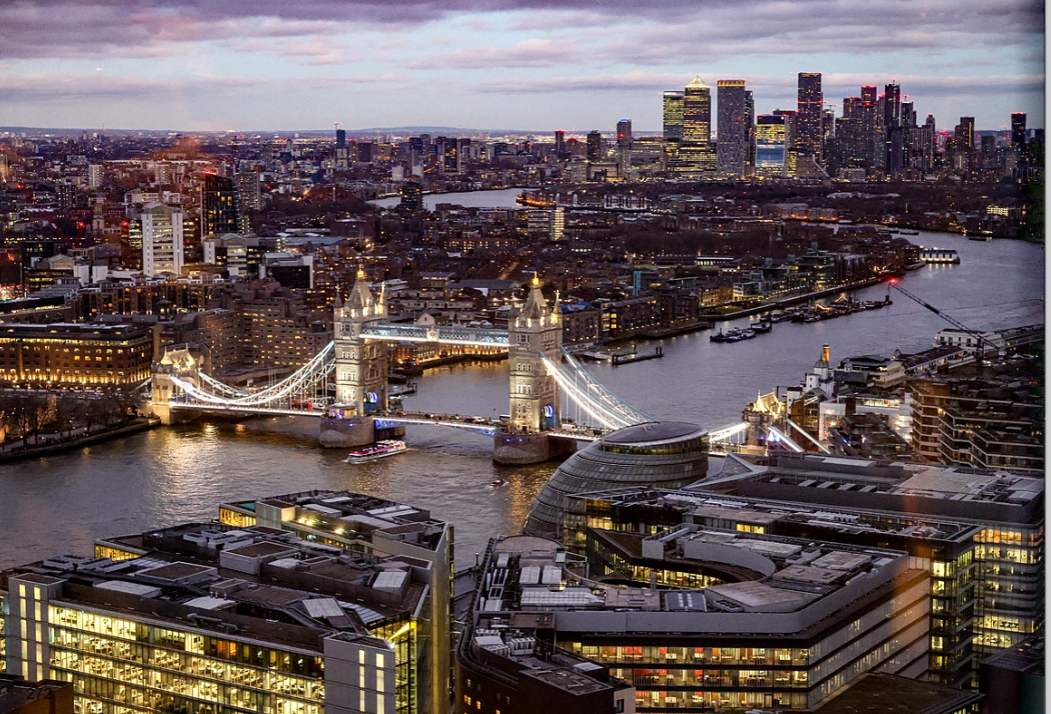
For a long time, my heart was restless, as restless as the water dancing over the stones and making its way. I was searching for a meaning that went beyond the hard work of salt boiling. But I found my peace in a certain place, where the river forms a small cascade and the water comes to rest.

On one of the largest, flat rocks that lie like islands in the stream stands a simple, white-painted wooden bench—a gift from my father, a place to linger and contemplate. Every evening, when the sun bathes the mountain peaks in golden light and the shadows grow long, I sit on this bench. I gaze at the mirror-smooth surface of the water, which reflects the deep green mountain slopes.

The villagers soon named the place ‘Maliban's Rock,’ and I became a familiar sight, part of the landscape, just like the old saltwater wells and rice fields that surround us. They say that anyone who sees me sitting there and pauses for a moment feels a deep sense of calm. Perhaps because they see the connection to our roots in my quiet observation.

The story is about the search for inner peace and the deep connection to nature that is so present in Bo Klua. This is the quiet poetry of a woman. She found her place in the flow of life. She sits on a white seat. It is perched on an ancient rock. She listens to the water. The water tells the story of its salt. It tells the story of her village. It tells the story of its eternal cycle of life.





TOWER BRIDGE

I'm Harold Steptoe, scrap dealer by trade, and when I look at Tower Bridge, I don't just see stone and steel, I see the history of London—and a whole lot of old iron! My father Albert, the old rascal, always told me stories about the construction of this monstrous but magnificent thing.

At the end of the 19th century, when London was bursting at the seams and traffic on the Thames was increasing, a new bridge was needed, east of the old London Bridge. After a public competition, the design by architect Sir Horace Jones and engineer John Wolfe Barry was selected in 1884. Construction began in 1886 and took eight long years. 432 construction workers toiled on this project. And the best part? Over 11,000 tonnes of steel were put into this colossus! That makes my scrap dealer's eyes light up.

They gave it its distinctive neo-Gothic appearance to match the nearby Tower of London—a chic cladding of Cornish granite and Portland stone that hides the raw iron. On 30 June 1894, the structure was officially opened by the Prince and Princess of Wales.

A marvel of Victorian engineering! A combined bascule and suspension bridge, its central carriageway could be opened using water-based hydraulics to allow shipping traffic to pass. The original steam engines pumped pressurised water into large reservoirs to raise the bascule bridges in just two minutes. Ingenious, I tell you. And the pedestrians? They could simply use the upper walkways, which are now glazed, during the opening process—that was foresight, my friend!

I remember all the stories. And then there was the thing with Bill Clinton in 1997! He wanted to drive over it, and bang, the bridge went up for a ship, because shipping traffic has right of way. There you have it again: in London, ships always have right of way, no matter who's in the car!

Today, the bridge is electrically operated and only opens about 800 times a year. In my day, or rather in my father's day, it opened over 6,000 times a year. That shows how things have changed. It has become one of London's most famous landmarks, crossed by around 40,000 people every day. A living monument that always reminds me of the glorious days of steel and real work. A bit of yesterday's scrap, but with style, and still an important transport hub that does its job!

BROUGHAM CASTLE

I am Roger. The history of Brougham Castle is the history of my family, a heritage deeply rooted in the soil of Cumbria. We can look back on almost half a millennium during which this strategically important location, where the Romans once had their fortress Brocavum, was our impregnable home. The land around us was often contested, but our walls provided security and a centre of power.

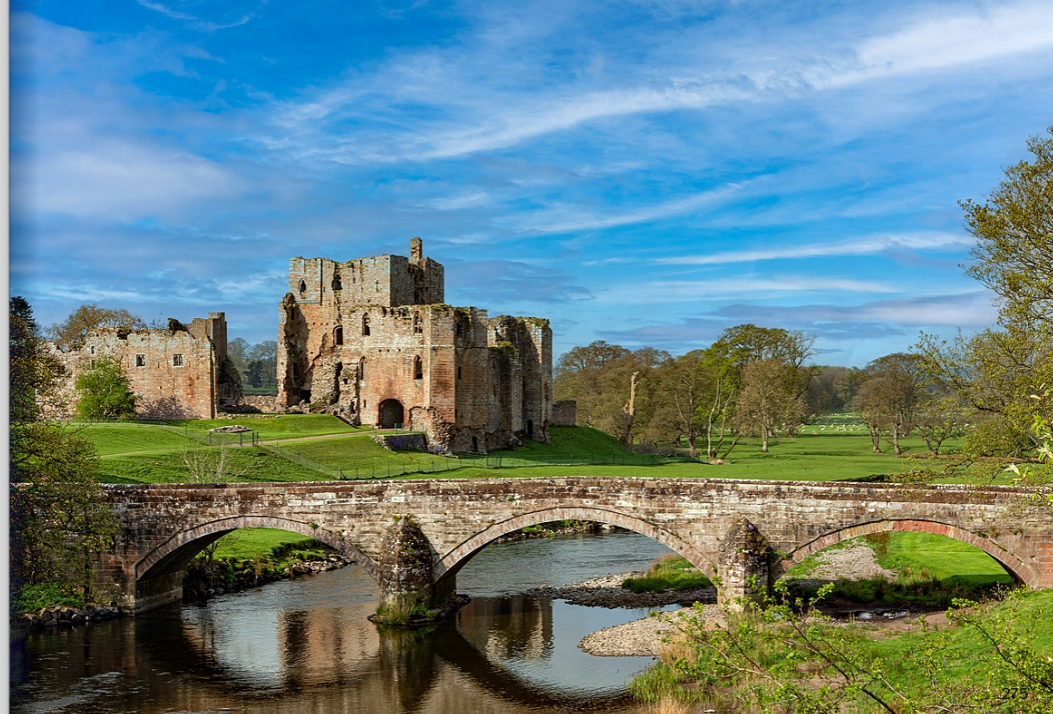
It all began in the early 13th century, around 1203, when the Norman baron Robert de Vieuxpont, our ancestor through the female line, began construction of the first stone fortress. It was an important defensive post against the Scots, who repeatedly crossed the border to plunder. The castle was the ancestral seat of our powerful Clifford family, who owned it for over 450 years. We were the lords of these lands, the guardians of the border.

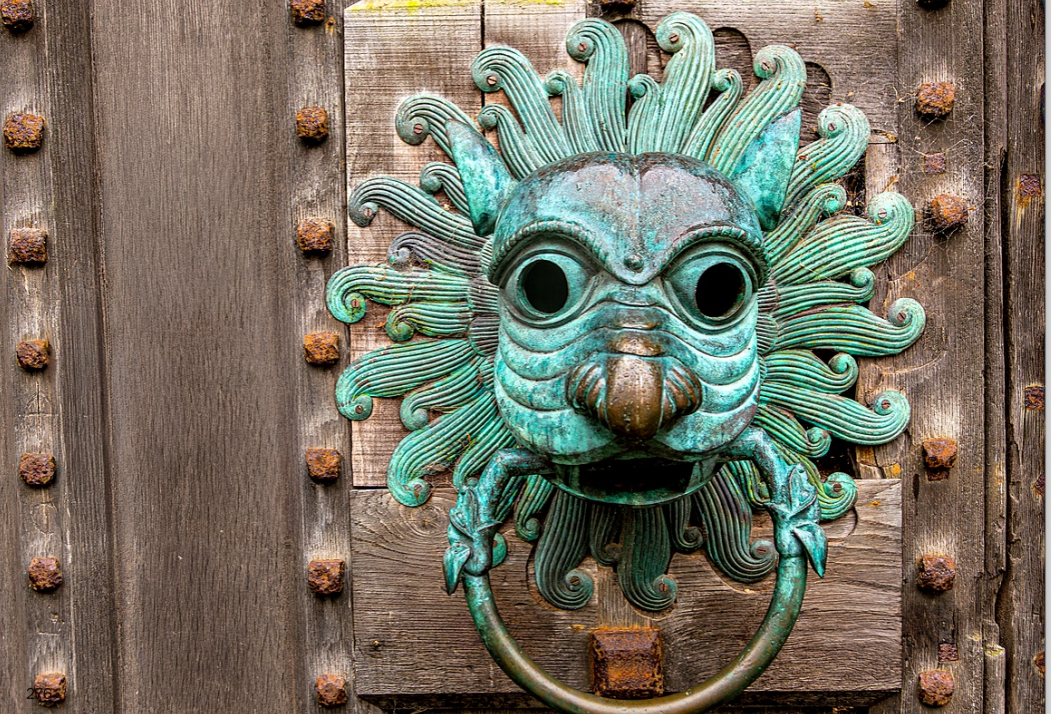
In the 14th century, under Robert's and later my leadership, Brougham Castle was extensively expanded. We built a double gatehouse to deter attackers, erected a massive stone curtain wall, and the striking Tower of League. All this was done to strengthen the defences and create more living space befitting our status. It was a time of growth and power, when the castle shone in all its glory.

After the destruction caused by the English Civil War, the castle experienced a final, proud heyday in the 17th century. Lady Anne Clifford, a determined heiress to our lands, had the castle restored in the 1650s and 1660s. She made Brougham Castle one of her residences and died here in dignity in 1676. She was a strong woman who defended our heritage tooth and nail and brought the castle back to life.

After her death, the castle passed to the Earls of Thanet, who unfortunately had no interest in our estate and simply let it fall into disrepair. The furniture and furnishings were sold, and Brougham Castle became a picturesque ruin, a sad shadow of its former self. It pains me to see it like this, but time changes everything.

Today, the ruins are managed by English Heritage and are open to visitors. You can explore the well-preserved remains of medieval military architecture and the rich history of our site. And even though only the stones remain, the history of the Cliffords and our castle lives on in these ancient, venerable walls, an eternal testimony to our times.





DOOR KNOCKER

I am James, the blacksmith. My hands have shaped many pieces of iron, but none with a history like that of the Brougham door knocker. The history of this piece is closely linked to Brougham Hall and the distant Durham Cathedral, dating back to the 12th century. There are only four examples of this unique design in the world, and I have been involved in creating a replica of it.

The original, an intricately crafted ring with a lion's head, adorned the north door of Durham Cathedral since 1172. In medieval English customary law, it was a powerful symbol of refuge and protection. Any fugitive who grasped this ring was guaranteed asylum in the church—a powerful protection from his pursuers.

A similar specimen, albeit made of iron rather than bronze, was located here in Brougham, a sign of the importance of our village. It survived wars and the turmoil of the times, but was eventually stolen and, as we hear, ended up at an auction at Sotheby's. A blot on our village and a disgrace to the history that was stolen with it.

In the 1990s, when the Brougham Hall Charitable Trust sought a replacement, I came into the picture. They wanted a replica that was in no way inferior to the original. It was not an easy task. There were complex negotiations and technical challenges, and we were denied the use of an existing mould. So we carved a wooden model, true to detail, with all the reverence this symbol deserves, until every strand of the lion's mane was in place.

In 1993, a bronze replica was made and ceremoniously affixed to the door of Brougham Hall. The story of this door knocker is not a legend about ghosts or the nearby old castle. Rather, it is a fascinating tale of medieval asylum rights, theft, and the determined restoration of a historical symbol here at Brougham Hall. And I am proud that a piece of my work is part of this living history, which shows that tradition and craftsmanship still have their place in the modern world.

THE EXPIATORY TEMPLE OF THE SACRED HEART

I am Don Carlos, priest at the Temple Expiatori del Sagrat Cor. My story is the story of this sacred place high up on Tibidabo Mountain, from where we can see almost the entire city of Barcelona.

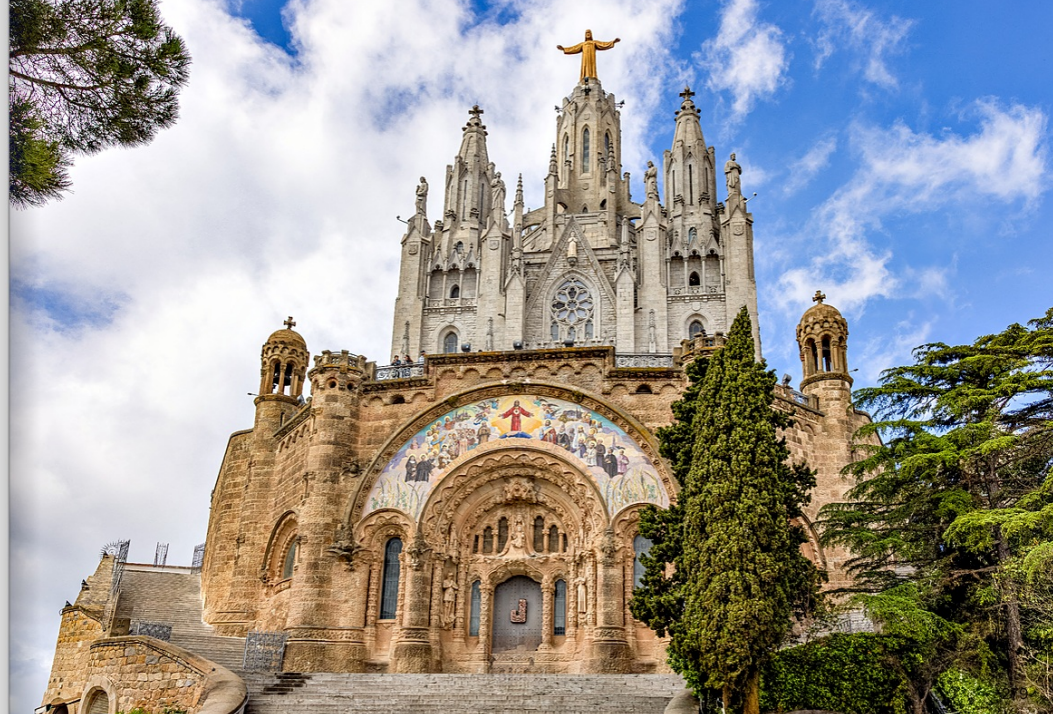
It all began in the late 19th century, when a group of devout citizens purchased the land to counteract the increasing secularisation of the city. On the occasion of the visit of Giovanni Bosco, founder of the Salesians, to Barcelona in 1886, the land was entrusted to his order. I see this as divine providence. The foundation stone for our church was laid in a solemn ceremony on 28 December 1902.

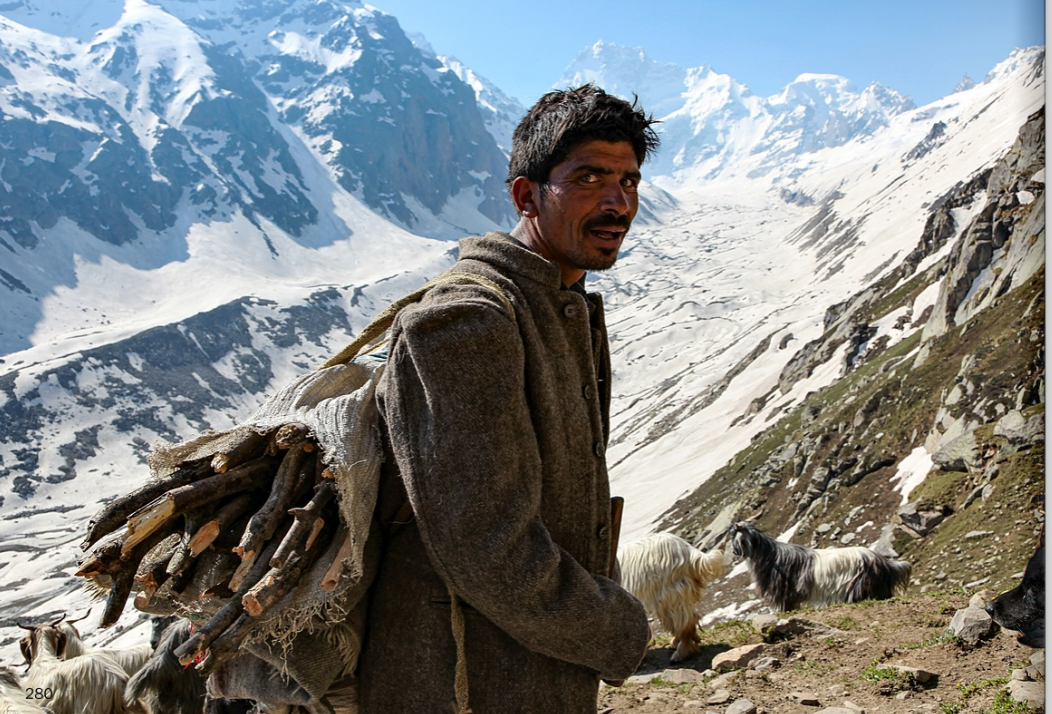
The design was by Enric Sagnier, who was inspired by the majestic Sacré-Cœur Basilica in Paris and combined neo-Gothic with neo-Byzantine elements. Construction work took decades, as it was financed almost exclusively by donations—hence the name 'Expiatory Church' or 'Expiatori'. It was a work of devotion.

The crypt was built first and completed in 1911. The main church itself was built between 1915 and 1951. After Enric Sagnier's death in 1931, his son Josep Maria Sagnier i Vidal took over the project and completed his father's work. In 1952, the church was consecrated, but the towers and the crowning statue followed later. Construction was finally officially completed in 1961.

The church is crowned by an impressive, huge bronze statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. His arms are spread protectively over Barcelona —a sight reminiscent of the Christ statue in Rio de Janeiro. The original statue was destroyed during the Spanish Civil War, a painful loss that was replaced in 1950 by the one we see today.

Today, the Temple Expiatori del Sagrat Cor is not only a spiritual centre but also a popular tourist destination. I see visitors who come here to enjoy one of the most spectacular panoramic views of the vibrant city of Barcelona and the Mediterranean Sea. For me, it is a place of faith, hope, and history that attracts believers and seekers alike.





BHAWA PASS

I am Tenzin, a shepherd. The Bhawa Pass, a giant of rock and ice, towered over 5,000 metres and presented a formidable but unavoidable obstacle for me and my resilient flock. This crossing is our annual ritual, a test of our endurance and courage amid the relentless beauty of the Himalayas. My face is weathered by the high-altitude sun and the biting wind. I looked up at the nearly vertical ascent ahead of me and murmured to my faithful sheepdog, “The mountain is calling.”

At dawn, when temperatures dropped well below freezing, we began the ascent. The air was so thin that every breath burned, and the cold penetrated through all layers of thick woollen clothing. The sheep, robust and adapted to the extreme conditions, followed my lead along narrow, rocky paths that wound dangerously along the steep slopes.

The ascent was a constant battle against the elements. Gusts of wind swept across the ridges, strong enough to knock a person off balance. The snow lay deep in the hollows, and in some places my dog and I had to laboriously guide the herd through man-high drifts. Every step required concentration; a misstep up here meant certain death in the abyss.

After hours of strenuous climbing, we finally reached the windswept summit of the pass. A small shrine, decorated with colourful prayer flags, fluttered wildly in the icy wind. I paused, my chest heaving with exertion, and prayed silently for the safe passage of my flock and my ancestors who had walked the same path. The sight before me was one of sublime, awe-inspiring beauty—endless rows of snow-capped peaks towering into the sky.

The descent into the next valley was no less challenging. The slopes were steep and slippery, and we shepherds had to guide the flock carefully to avoid falls. But with every metre we lost in altitude, the air grew warmer and breathing easier. As the sun stood low in the west and the shadows of the mountains spread across the land, we reached the first lush pastures of the lower valley. The sheep, exhausted but safe, immediately began to graze.

I pitched my tent, lit a fire, and looked back at the gigantic white giant we had conquered. Another year, another successful crossing—the Bhawa Pass had presented its challenge, and I, Tenzin, and my flock had mastered it.

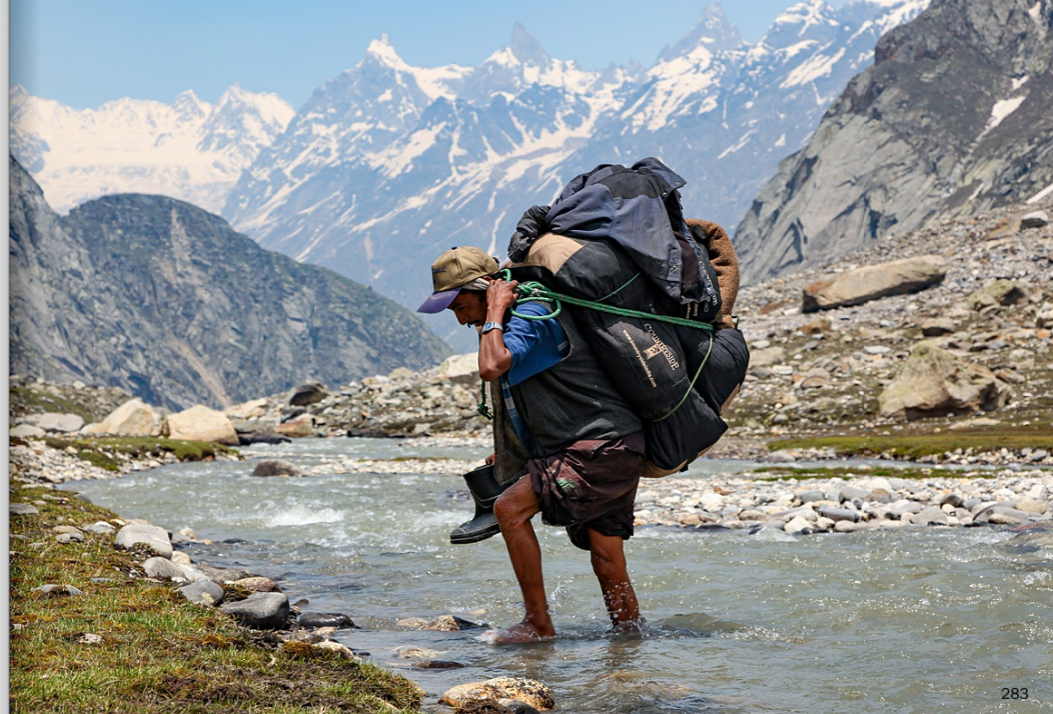
SHERPAS

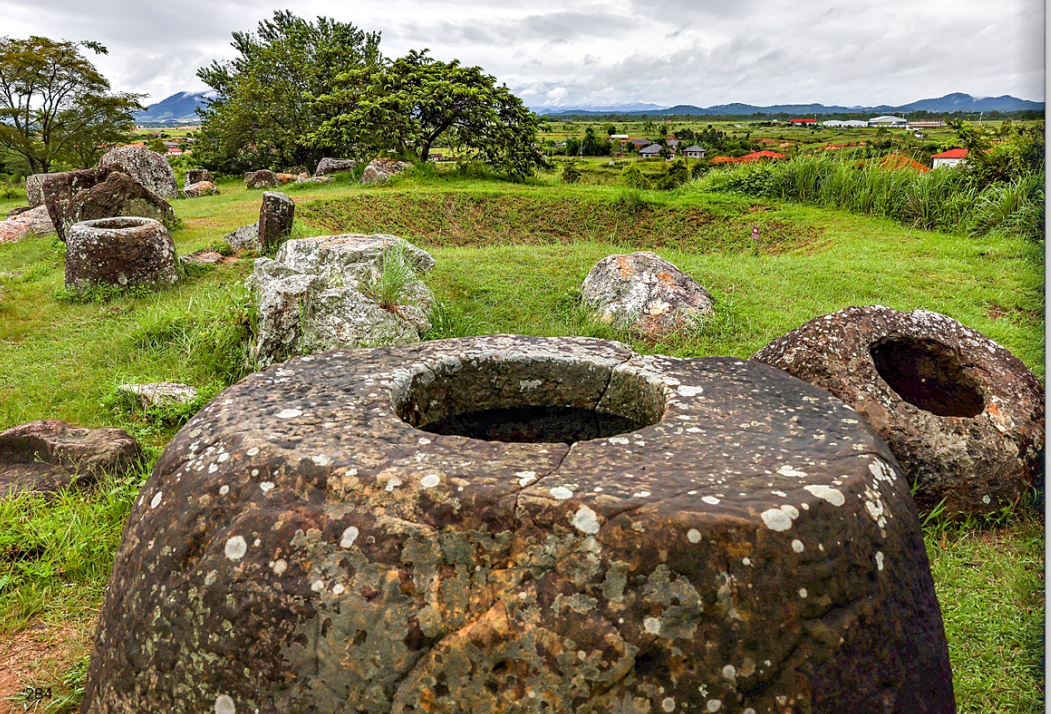
I am Arjun, a Sherpa, a mountain guide. The monsoon had turned the rivers of the Himalayas into raging torrents. I looked at the foaming, milky water that blocked our path. The group of mountaineers stood uncertainly on the bank, but I knew that hesitation was a deadly luxury up here. My job was to guide them safely to the summit, but first we had to overcome the forces of nature that stood in our way.

I attached the rope I always carried with me to a stable rock, stepped resolutely into the ice-cold water, and fought my way metre by metre through the treacherous current to the other side. After securing the rope, the hard work began. While the mountaineers followed with light packs, I shouldered the heavy loads: tents, food, oxygen bottles—the essentials for our survival at altitude. I carried the weight of the expedition not only on my back, but also on my shoulders, which had been shaped by years of hard work.

The path continued, from the raging rivers to the steepest mountains. Every step was a battle against gravity, every breath a challenge. The paths, often just narrow, windy ledges, required absolute concentration. I led the way, my crampons digging into the bare ice, my hands numb with cold, but my will remained unbroken. The mountaineers, themselves experienced climbers, struggled with the thin air and extreme exertion, but I seemed unimpressed. I was the silent engine, the driving force that kept the equipment intact and morale high.

When they finally reached the last high camp, where they were sheltered from the worst of the wind, the mountaineers looked at me with new respect. They saw me as more than just a guide; they saw me as a protector of the mountains, whose strength lay not only in his physical condition, but also in his unwavering determination to carry the burdens of others' dreams. I lit a small stove, a smile on my weathered face—for me, this was just another day in the clouds, another adventure mastered.





PLAIN OF JARS

I am Tey, a farmer and tourist guide in central Laos. I live in the middle of a mysterious place called the Plain of Jars, and for me, this is not just my home, but a place full of ancient stories that my ancestors have preserved for generations.

The story begins thousands of years ago, long before written records existed, when an unknown culture scattered hundreds, even thousands, of giant stone jars across the landscape. According to local legends, this region was once home to giants. One legend tells of a powerful king, Khun Cheung, who, after a victorious war, had huge jars made to brew abundant rice wine (Lao Lao) and celebrate his triumph. The jars, some of which are up to three metres tall and weigh many tonnes, bear witness to this legendary time.

Archaeologists now suspect that the reality is probably different, but no less fascinating. The most common scientific theory is that the jars were part of elaborate burial ceremonies. The dead may have been placed in the vessels to decay before their bones were buried in a second burial ritual. Bone fragments found during excavations support this assumption. The site apparently had great ritual significance over a long period of time, from the Iron Age until about 700 years ago.

Centuries passed, and the stone vessels remained shrouded in mystery. The modern world discovered them in the 1930s, but their significance remained a mystery. In the 20th century, the region became a fierce battlefield during the Vietnam War and suffered heavy bombing, rendering many of the sites inaccessible.

Today, the Plain of Jars is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a symbol of the rich but little-explored prehistory of Southeast Asia. Archaeological projects are continuously working to unravel the mysteries of these silent witnesses to the past. The history of the Plain of Jars is an ongoing narrative, with each discovery adding a new chapter, but the fundamental mystery of the ancient builders remains.

BRANDENBURG GATE

I am Hansjörg, a pensioner from Berlin. For me, the Brandenburg Gate is much more than just an architectural masterpiece—it is a living testimony to Germany's turbulent and often contradictory history. My own history is closely linked to it.

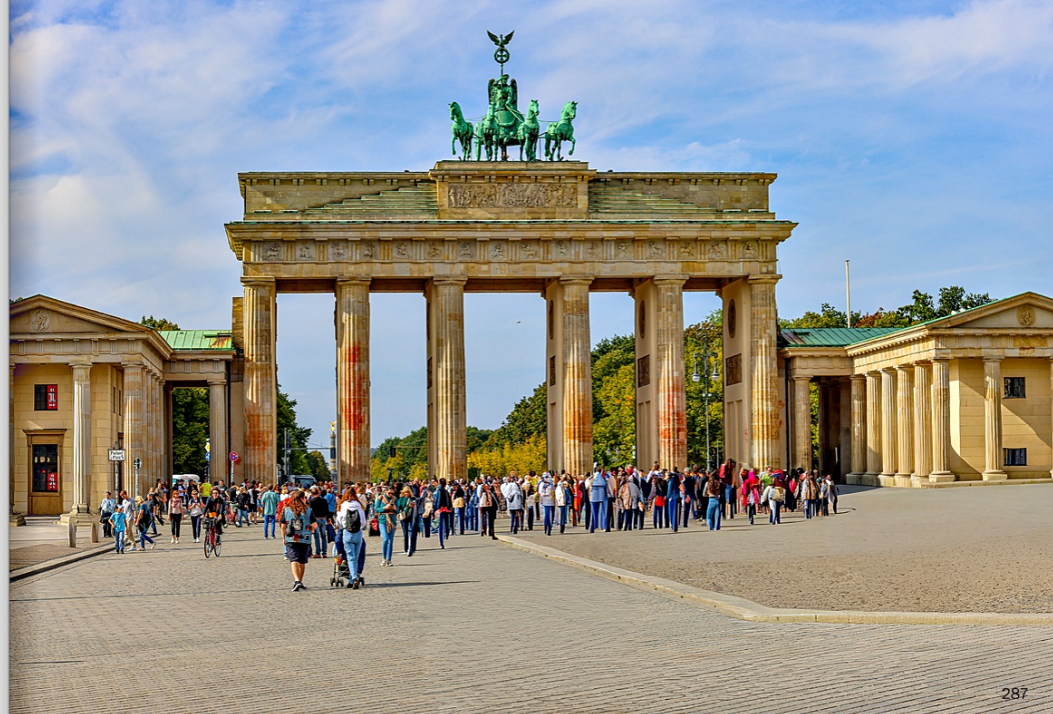
Built in the late 18th century, it was originally a ‘peace gate’, a symbol of Prussian militarism, designed to form a dignified entrance to the capital. I remember my grandfather's stories about the Quadriga, the goddess of victory Victoria, which was taken to Paris by Napoleon as spoils of war in 1806. Its triumphant return after Napoleon's fall, adorned with the Iron Cross, sealed the gate's reinterpretation as a symbol of national triumph and unity.

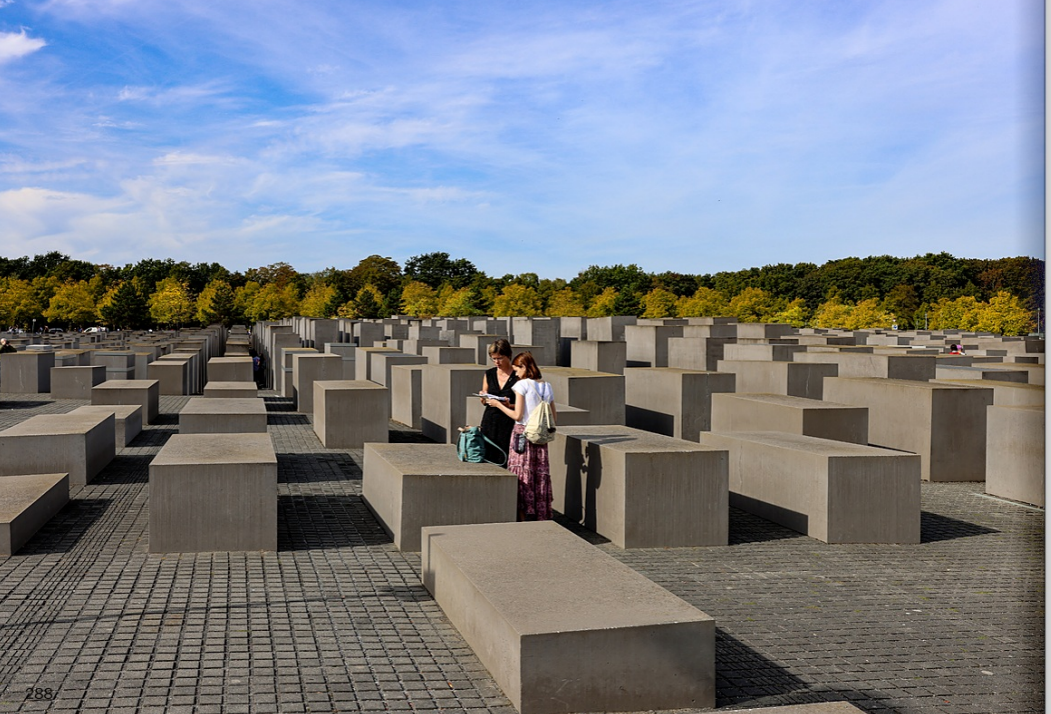
I myself experienced the darkest hours of the gate. When the National Socialists came to power, it was misused for their propaganda purposes. As a child, I saw the Nazis' torchlight processions, an image that has been burned into my memory. During the Second World War, the gate was severely damaged, but it was one of the few buildings on Pariser Platz to survive the bombing.

After the war, the Brandenburg Gate found itself in the Soviet sector, right on the border with West Berlin. With the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, it became inaccessible and stood in the heavily guarded border strip. For almost three decades, it was a sombre, insurmountable memorial to the division of Germany and Europe for me.

The isolation ended on 9 November 1989, the day the Wall fell. I was one of thousands who flocked to the gate and the Wall to celebrate our regained freedom. Overnight, the Brandenburg Gate became a shining, global symbol of peaceful revolution and unity.

Today, the lavishly restored Brandenburg Gate is a place of remembrance, celebration, and encounter. It serves as a central venue for major events and as a landmark that has survived all the turbulent chapters and now stands as a powerful symbol of democracy, unity, and peace in a united Europe. And for me, Hansjörg, it is the most beautiful gate in the world.





HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL

I am Anna and I work as a conscientious employee in the heart of Berlin's administrative world, where my daily routine is dominated by mountains of files and legal paragraphs. I live in the centre of Berlin, a city that is constantly grappling with its own complex history. And no place illustrates this struggle more than the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, better known as the Holocaust Memorial, which is only a few minutes' walk from my office near the Brandenburg Gate.

For me, the memorial is more than just a building; it is a constant, indispensable companion in the cityscape and a central place of remembrance. I still remember well the late 1980s, when journalist Lea Rosh's private initiative got the idea rolling. What followed were long, controversial debates that occupied not only Berlin politicians but the entire German society for over a decade. The question of how to remember divided opinions.

The decision was finally made in 1999, when the German Bundestag approved the construction of the memorial. The design by New York architect Peter Eisenman prevailed: a walkable field of 2,711 grey concrete steles of varying heights, arranged on a wave-shaped ground. When construction began, I was fascinated by the sheer size of the project.

But the controversies continued. The so-called 'Degussa debate' in particular made headlines that shocked me: the company that was to protect the steles from graffiti had a subsidiary that had been involved in the production of Zyklon B during the Nazi era. It was an ethical dilemma that brutally exposed the German economy's ubiquitous entanglement in the Nazi past.

Despite these shadows, the project continued. Finally, on 10 May 2005, the 60th anniversary of the end of the war, the memorial was officially opened. For me, this was a historic moment—the first and only time in world history that a nation had erected such a memorial to its own greatest crime, thereby publicly acknowledging its historical guilt.

Today, when I take a short walk during my lunch break, my path often leads me there. I enter the narrow, sloping corridors. The architecture immediately has an effect on me: I easily lose my balance, feel isolated, and disoriented. Eisenman's intention to reject a simple, predetermined interpretation and instead create an individual, unsettling experience works on me every time. It reminds me of the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust.

Today, the memorial is a central attraction for visitors from all over the world who pause there to reflect or simply experience the unique architecture. For me, this place of confrontation with the past is an important, visible sign of the infinite memory of the approximately six million murdered Jews of Europe, right outside my office door.

THE TECHNICAL GIANT

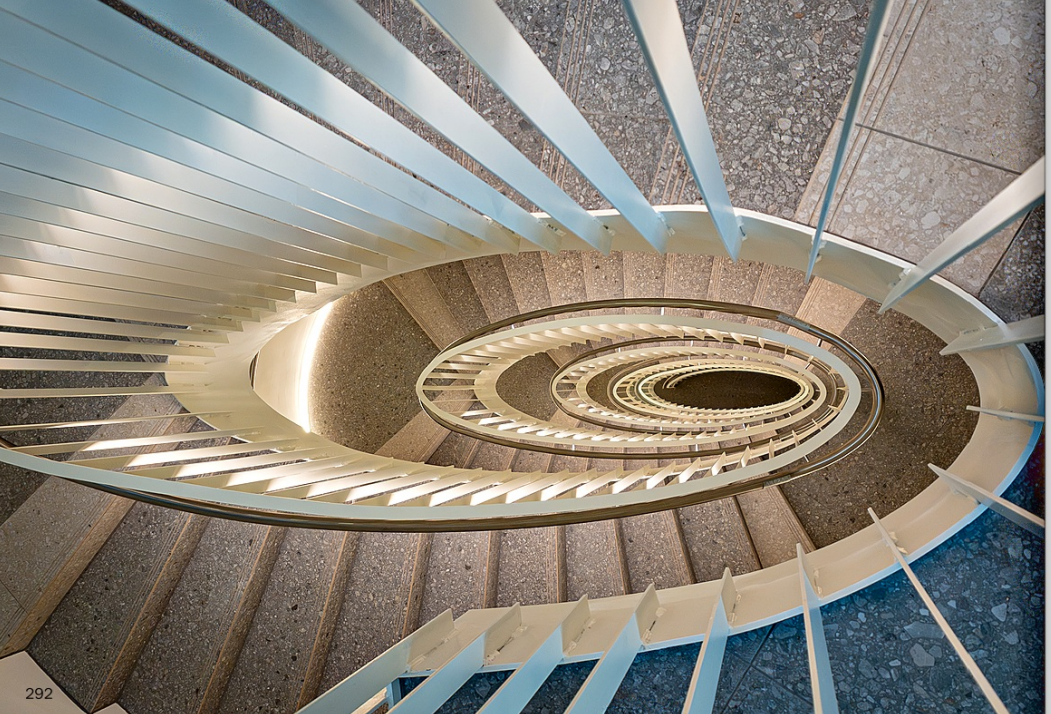
I am Hugo. All my life I have been a passionate engineer, first in the GDR, then in reunified Germany, and my heart has always beaten for technology that breathes history. And no technology fascinates me as much as the Niederfinow boat lift.

I still remember the awe I felt as a young man when I saw the old lift in full operation for the first time. After seven years of construction, it was put into operation in 1934—a masterpiece of its time. With its imposing 60-metre-high steel structure, it was considered the highest ship lift in the world. I was proud of this German engineering feat. Its task was ingeniously simple: to lift ships over the 36-metre difference in height between the Oder and the Havel-Oder Canal. A giant lift for barges. I often watched as the 85-metre-long trough transported ships weighing up to 1,000 tonnes in just five minutes. It was pure efficiency, a steel clockwork mechanism.

Over the decades, transport volumes increased and inland vessels became larger and longer. I watched with concern as ‘my’ old lift reached its capacity limits. Its load-bearing capacity was no longer sufficient. We needed something new, something bigger, something more modern.

The planning and construction of the new lift took many years. There were setbacks and delays, but I knew it was necessary. Finally, in October 2022, the time had come: the new Niederfinow ship lift was opened. It is now the largest and most modern in Germany, designed for the dimensions of modern cargo ships. They say that more steel was used in the new construction than in the Eiffel Tower in Paris. A giant of modernity.

Today, I often stand at the railing and look at the fascinating duo. The venerable lift from 1934 and its modern successor side by side. They tell the story of inland waterway transport and engineering technology over almost 100 years. The old lift now serves as an operational reserve and is a popular tourist attraction—a well-deserved retirement for a piece of engineering history that has accompanied me throughout my life.



THE STAIRWELL OF ENCOUNTERS

I'm Emil. My turf is Breuninger, right on Stuttgart's market square. It smells of tradition and luxury here, of the good old days, you know? As a Swabian, I like things neat and tidy, and I know every one of the more than 400 'Stäffele' stairways that cross-cross our city—each one has its own history, its own knight, its own spirit.

When I heard that a new 'House of Tourism' was to open in my old favourite fashion store from the past, just around the corner, I was sceptical. In October 2025, the time had come. A tourism centre! Would it work? The building has no centuries-old legends. No ghost stories. Just modern architecture.

On the day of the opening, my curiosity was stronger than my scepticism, so I used my lunch break to go over and take a look. And then I saw it: the staircase. A huge, modern spiral staircase made of marble and steel, designed by Aldinger and asp Architects. Flooded with light, it was almost a work of art. Very different from my solid, old staircases at Breuninger.

There stood a young architect named Elena, beaming. She knew every bend. For her, the staircase was more than just steps between the tourist information office downstairs, the offices, and the roof terrace. It was a metaphor for the connection between old Stuttgart and modern, future-oriented Stuttgart. I, the old Swabian, have my doubts. Metaphors and architects, that's a tricky thing.

But then I smiled. A family ran up excitedly and pulled out their StuttCard. Business people hurried past. Locals like me were just keen to see the view from the roof terrace. The staircase became a lively place. Suddenly it was full of life—very different from the quiet, old 'Stäffele'. For a moment, I even forgot about my mountains of files at Breuninger.

In this new heart of the city, the history of Stuttgart is truly unfolding anew. The city welcomes visitors and shows them new perspectives through its architectural 'Stäffele'. Elena and her staircase were the new centrepiece of these encounters. And even an old Swabian salesman like me had to admit: they did a good job.

THE CELTIC RING WALL

I am Airell, a name that means ‘nobleman’ in our language. As a nobleman of the Treveri tribe, I watch over this mighty ring wall, which you know today as the ‘Hunnenring’ (murus gallicus). But don't be fooled by the name, it is our work that towers here on the Dollberg. My grandfather began construction when the Romans were still far away (around 400 BC).

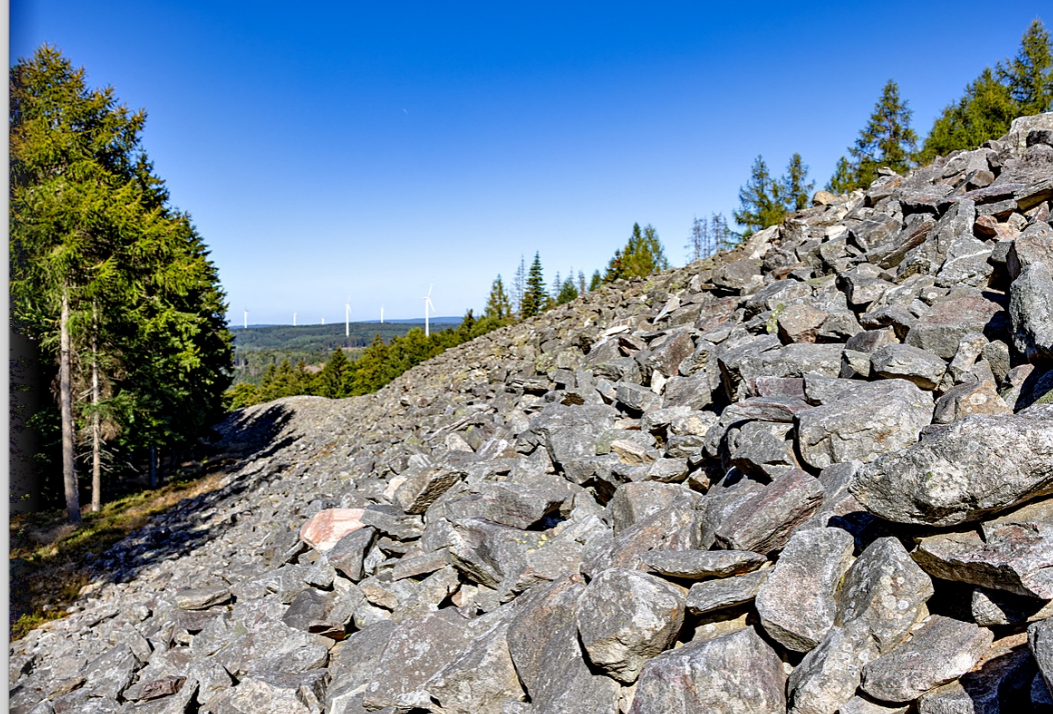
But times have changed. Now, in the first century BC, our complex is a mighty fortress, one of the most impressive in all of Gaul. I stand on the ten-metre-high and 40-metre-wide wall made of stone and wood. The wind whistles through the battlements. Inside our walls, life pulsates: merchants haggle, children laugh, and the spring inside provides us with vital water. This fortress is our home, our protection, the heart of our tribe.

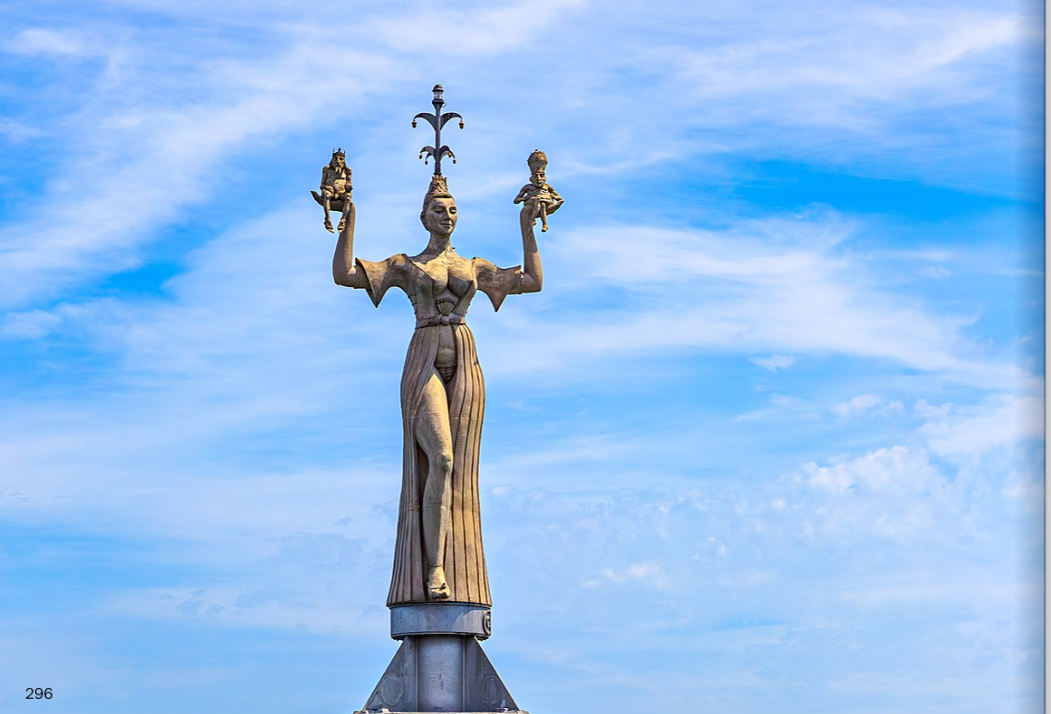
But dark clouds are gathering on the horizon. Rumours of a Roman general called Caesar who wants to subjugate all of Gaul reach us with every merchant. Then one morning I saw them myself: a legion. Steel-hard, disciplined men in rows, moving through our land like a snake of metal. My heart sank.

We were divided in the council. Some wanted to fight, using our mighty walls as an impregnable bulwark. Others, including myself, saw the overwhelming power of Rome and knew that direct combat would only bring death and destruction. We decided to take the path of prudence.

In 50 BC, we left the ring wall, our ancestral seat of power, and abandoned the settlement without a fight in the wake of the Gallic War, but not without deep sorrow. We retreated into the deeper forests to gather our strength. The mighty wall subsequently fell into ruin. Nature began to reclaim what belonged to it. The stones collapsed and formed the impressive earthen walls that you now admire.

I see the legions marching past us, hear their commands in the foreign Latin language. Our time as the undefeated masters of this land is coming to an end. But the memory of Airell, the nobleman of the Treveri, and of our mighty ring wall will live on in the stones, even if the Romans thought they had wiped us out. Our blood continues to flow in the veins of this land.





IMPERIA

I am Hans-Peter, the sculptor. My IMPERIA, which stands in the harbour of Konstanz and rotates, is not a monument in the traditional sense that idealises something. It is a mirror held up to the hypocrisy of the Council of Konstanz (1414–1418).

Back then, over 600 years ago, they all came to Constance: the cardinals, bishops, princes, and the emperor himself, to end the schism in the Church. For four years, the city was the centre of the Christian world. And what happened behind the scenes? While they argued about questions of faith, the trade in ‘easy girls’ flourished. Thousands of prostitutes followed the entourage of the high lords, because where power and wealth meet, morality is often not far behind.

My Imperia, based on a satirical story by Honoré de Balzac, is these women's revenge on the bigoted dignitaries. She was a courtesan who seduced powerful men and thus exposed them. Look at her! Nine metres tall, an imposing woman standing confidently in the harbour. In her hands she holds two naked little men, depicted as ridiculous fools. One with the imperial crown, the other with the pope's tiara. They are not the real pope or emperor, no, I never claimed that. They are ‘fools who have appropriated the insignia of worldly and spiritual power’.

The church and the city didn't want it at first. They said my statue was a ‘mark of shame’. But I erected it in 1993 in a cloak-and-dagger operation on the railway grounds, where the city had no say. Now it turns slowly and inexorably in a circle, reminding everyone that power is fleeting and that the hypocrisy of the powerful of yesteryear is as relevant as ever.

It is my prank against the double standards of the elites and my personal, small revenge on the hypocrisy of the world. Every time it turns, it is a silent, ironic laugh from me at all those who think they are better than others. It warns: history does not forget who the true rulers were —often they were the ones who were despised as prostitutes because they were the only ones who really saw through the men in their magnificent robes.

BRIGHT SUNFLOWER

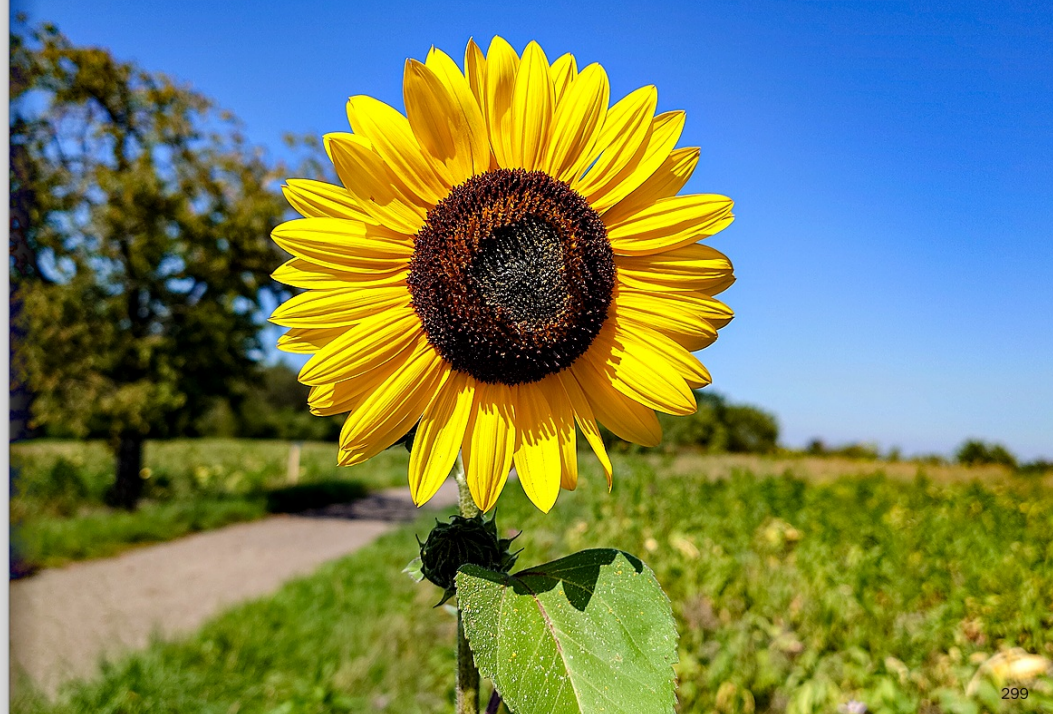
I am Helene, a young photographer from Pforzheim, and I had almost given up. Midsummer had taken hold of the fields between Gräfenhausen and Birkenfeld, and the air shimmered above the asphalt. I was looking for a motif that captured the essence of summer, but most of the flowers were wilting in the heat.

Then I saw her. Where the ground was a little rockier, she stood: Helia, the largest and brightest sunflower in the whole field. She towered above the rest, her flower head a radiant wheel of gold. Her bright yellow petals seemed not only to reflect the light but to actively draw it from the setting sun.

I set up my camera, but the image in the viewfinder was flat. It lacked feeling. I moved closer to the flower. Helia seemed to look at me with quiet dignity. I understood: the flower was not only beautiful, it was also resilient. It was the perfect symbol of the tenacity of life, asserting itself even in the scorching summer heat.

I waited. When the sun finally touched the horizon and the soft light of the ‘golden hour’ bathed the scene in a warm glow, I pressed the shutter button. The photo showed Helia against the dark backdrop of the nearby forest. She did not look exhausted, but triumphant. Helia radiated the promise of abundance and endurance.

I knew I had captured summer itself in Gräfenhausen—a quiet, golden miracle in the midst of ordinary fields.



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