



Burma: Now's the time to visit if you value discovering a place before the hordes arrive.

## The Top 12 trips of 2012: Make it memorable

Quick, before the Christmas bills roll in: commit to making at least one memorable trip in 2012. Something to look forward to during the bleak days of midwinter and to look back on fondly for years to come. We've scoured the web, talked to friends, sorted through a mountain of travel promotions to find something for almost everyone. And off we go ...

### **1 Barging the Canal du Midi**

#### **Southern France**

Special Places Travel

Emma, a handsomely restored century-old barge with room for six passengers, plies the 17th century Canal du Midi seven months a year.

The weeklong, 80-kilometre trip meanders from either Carcassonne to Beziers or Carcassonne to Toulouse (it goes in reverse on alternate weeks). You enjoy daily stops, such as visits to the sprawling market in the ancient city of Olonzac or to Narbonne, the capital of Roman Gaul where chariot marks still score the Via Domitia. Other excursions include wine-tasting at a vineyard and a ramble through a château. The barge also carries six bicycles. Bloggers rave about the laid-back ambience and the hospitality of the owners/hosts.

**Downside:** Small cabins (100 square feet). July and August can be very hot in the south of France, but the barge is air-conditioned.

**Cost:** \$5,638 per person. Charters available starting at \$22,000 for four people. Price does not include getting to Paris or from Paris to the barge.

**When:** March 31 to Oct. 20, 2012

**Contact:** 1-877-642-2743 or [www.bargesinfrance.com](http://www.bargesinfrance.com)

## 2 The Mayan Route

G Adventures or self-planned

Despite ancient Mayan predictions, the world will probably not end in 2012. But that's no reason to delay a jaunt along the Mayan Route, named the second best region in the world to visit in 2012 by guidebook publisher Lonely Planet. The route, which is not a formally linked one, meanders 2,400 kilometres through Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and other countries. Tour operators typically offer a smattering of archeological sites, jungles and other highlights from 3,000 years of ancient Mayan history.

G Adventures offers the Mayan Adventure, a 22-day tour including the ruins at Uxmal and Xunantunich, a boat ride through the Sumidero Canyon, and stops at indigenous villages. Adventurous travellers, though, can organize independent tours including trips to the lovely city of Antigua and Chichicastenango's indigenous market, both in Guatemala (for self-planning ideas, check the Thorn Tree forum at [www.lonelyplanet.com/searchResult?q=mayan+route](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/searchResult?q=mayan+route)).

**Downside:** Crime in big cities; in May, farmers in Belize burn their fields causing extensive smoke.

**Cost:** G Adventures: From \$2,255 for the Mayan Adventure (doesn't include flights to Central America).

**When:** Year-round.

**Contact:** 1-877-277-9853 or [www.gadventures.com](http://www.gadventures.com)

## 3 Mysteries and Manners in Savannah: Selected Works of Flannery O'Connor

Worldwide Quest/Classical Pursuits

According to the website TripAdvisor, cultural voyages are second only to beach trips as the most popular vacation options for 2012.

This five-day event in Savannah, Georgia, includes readings from and discussions about the works of the late master southern fiction writer Flannery O'Connor, a native of Savannah; prowls through that city's antebellum architecture and its 24 public squares; and a trip to the Gothic-sounding Andalusia, the O'Connor family farm in Milledgeville.

**Downside:** You risk being the bore of the cocktail party circuit with your endless elucidation of all things O'Connor.

**Cost:** \$1,737 (doesn't include getting to Savannah).

**When:** April 1 to 5, 2012

**Contact:** 1-877-633-2555 or [www.classicalpursuits.com](http://www.classicalpursuits.com)

#### **4 Burma (Myanmar) and Laos**

Adventure Women

Repressive military rule, human rights abuses and other issues have long made Burma an unappealing tourist destination. That's slowly changing and now's the time to visit if you value discovering a place before the hordes arrive. It's also quite safe, says Helen Tomei of Adventure Women, which runs women-only tours. "We went there six years ago and didn't have trouble." Tiny neighbouring Laos is also little-visited and, according to Adventure Woman's website, has no bright lights, shopping malls or amusement parks. The trip includes archeological ruins, pagodas and Inle Lake, Burma, home of floating vegetable gardens and Ngae Ni's Intha tribe, famed for their one-leg rowing technique.

**Downside:** The risks that go with any politically troubled area.

**Cost:** \$6,146 (doesn't include getting to Bangkok, Thailand).

**When:** Feb. 15 to 28, 2012

**Contact:** 1-800-804-8686 or [www.adventurewomen.com](http://www.adventurewomen.com)

#### **5 Guided Sea Kayak Weekend on Lake Superior**

Naturally Superior Adventures

An unhurried — and affordable — paddle along the northernmost wilderness coastline of Lake Superior Provincial Park, this guided outing is geared to inexperienced and intermediate kayakers and campers alike. Trips run Friday afternoons to Sunday afternoons, with kayaking instruction, overnight camping and fresh meals by "wilderness chefs." Sights include boreal forests, rocky headlands and such wildlife as peregrine falcons and moose. You need to supply your own sleeping bag and will be expected to carry gear. This would make a dandy trip for outdoorsy families with children over 16.

**Downside:** Bad weather could make it a less than stellar weekend.

**Cost:** \$385 per person (doesn't include getting to base at Rock Island Lodge near Wawa, Ont.)

**When:** July 20 to 22, July 27 to 29 and Aug. 10 to 12, 2012

**Contact:** 1-800-203-9092 or [www.naturallysuperior.com](http://www.naturallysuperior.com)

## 6 The Silk Road by Rail

Journeys by Jerry Van Dyke

The kind of trip most of us can only salivate over, this three-week tour de force follows the ancient trade route from Beijing across the Far East and Russia to Moscow. It includes private group excursions at Xian, land of the Terra Cotta Warriors; Ashgabat, the "Las Vegas of the Kara Kum"; Dunhuang and the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas, the latter a treasure trove of classical Chinese and Buddhist art; and other sites. There are also trips to the Great Wall of China, Red Square in Moscow and other sites. The trip includes 15 nights aboard The Shangri-La Express and The Golden Eagle and five nights in hotels. The trains feature twin-berth cabins, some with ensuites, as well as piano bars and on-board doctors.

**Downside:** Rail travel, with its rocking motion and relatively slow pace, is not for everyone.

**Cost:** The trip starts at \$22,490 per person, which includes return airfare from Toronto.

**When:** Sept. 24 to Oct. 15, 2012

**Contact:** 1-800-265-8174 or [www.jerryvandyke.com](http://www.jerryvandyke.com).

## 7 Golden Sands and Silvery Backwaters of South India

Sacred Earth Journeys

At once an inward and outward journey, this 15-day tour led by meditation master Padma blends daily yoga and meditation sessions with an unhurried tour of the country where yoga was born. Stops include the tea plantation area of Munnar, the temple city of Madurai and the Hindu holy place of Mahabalipuram. Heck, there's even time for an overnight houseboat cruise and western-style sightseeing and shopping in the capital city of Tamil Nadu, Chennai. There's also a three-day yoga and meditation retreat on the Arabian Sea and private meditation consultations with Padma. This trip could cure the ills induced by our pell-mell Western ways.

**Downside:** Canadian government travel advisories recommend exercising high caution in all areas of India, including around religious sites, because of the threat of terrorist attacks.

**Cost:** \$4,445, not including airfare to India.

**When:** Feb. 26 to March 11, 2012

**Contact:** 1-877-874-7922 or [www.sacredearthjourneys.ca](http://www.sacredearthjourneys.ca)

## 8 Out of the Northwest Passage

Adventure Canada

With climate change ramping up, who knows how much longer trips like this will be around? This 17-day excursion includes Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Greenland in a single sailing, including

a stop at the Ilulissat where North America's icebergs calve from the Greenland ice cap. The operational word here is ice which is ubiquitous and can foreshorten ventures like the journey into Smith Sound, the route to the North Pole. The tour includes a round of golf on a course overlooking the Beaufort Sea at Ulukhatok and daily lectures on destinations. The north is a "profound place," says Ottawa-area singer/songwriter Ian Tamblyn, a veteran traveller and staff member on this trip. "I don't know anyone who's gone there and didn't come back addicted."

**Downside:** Because of the enormous distances covered, such trips are really samplers without a lot of time to linger in any one spot.

**Cost:** From \$7,376 excluding airfare to Kugluktuk (Coppermine) in Nunavut and return flight from Greenland.

**When:** Sept. 1 to 17, 2012

**Contact:** 1-800-363-7566 or [www.adventurecanada.com](http://www.adventurecanada.com)

## 9 Hiking Iceland

National Geographic Adventures

Predictions that next year will offer the best northern lights displays in a decade; worldwide attention thanks to the 2010 volcanic eruption; voted top destination for 2012 by readers of Lonely Planet and one of National Geographic Traveler's Best of the World picks: how can you not visit Iceland? National Geographic's 10-day outing includes a trek on the glacier-topped Eyjafjallajökull volcano whose ash caused air transport nightmare in 2010, a hike up a basaltic-framed waterfall, a boat ride among newly calved icebergs and a dip in the thermal waters of a crater lake. This trip is rated moderate for physical effort including hikes of up to 12 kilometres including some steep terrain — just the thing to spark your appetite for Iceland's ubiquitous seafood.

**Downside:** Iceland can be overcrowded with other tourists during the summer.

**Cost:** \$6,146, not including airfare to Iceland

**When:** June 29 to July 8, July 6 to July 15, July 20 to July 29, Aug. 10 to 19 and Aug. 31 to Sept. 9, 2012

**Contact:** 1-888-689-2557 or [www.nationalgeographicexpeditions.com](http://www.nationalgeographicexpeditions.com).

## 10 Eyes on Elephant — Zimbabwe

The Africa Adventure Company

You'll go on walks, take morning and night drives and canoe on this 15-day camping safari that tracks lions, rhinos, elephants and more in Hwange and Mana Pools national parks. Canoe expeditions, which include fishing, leave at dawn. Geography ranges from semi-desert to river islands. These safaris are small — a maximum of six people — and the company, committed to habitat conservation and local

education, has been guiding tours like these for 25 years. This trip was one of National Geographic Traveler magazine's 50 Tours of a Lifetime 2011.

**Downside:** Travellers on other safaris have cautioned that the unexpected can occur on any of these trips — anything from reactions to malaria pills to seeing too many wildebeests and not enough rhinos.

**Cost:** \$7,686 per person, not including airfare to Africa.

**When:** Tours that are still open include June 12 to 26, July 14 to July 28, Aug. 9 to Aug. 23, Aug. 21 to Sept. 4, Sept. 4 to 18 and Sept. 11 to 25

**Contact:** 1-800-882-9453 or [www.africa-adventure.com](http://www.africa-adventure.com)

## 11 Exploring the Byzantine Empire

Voyages to Antiquity

These folks offer higher-end cruises that focus on cultural history. Tours include lectures by guest speakers — authors and university professors among them — and there's no bingo, chorus line or Baked Alaska as one delighted Canadian customer exclaims in a testimonial. The Byzantine Empire tour sails from Istanbul to Venice, with excursions to monasteries, the Holy Cave of the Apocalypse where St. John dictated the Book of Revelation and other spots including the 13th-century Christos Elkomenos cathedral.

**Downside:** You are with up to 350 other passengers, so activities are at a group pace.

**Cost:** \$4,854 per person, not including airfare (low-cost flights to Istanbul are available from many North American cities including Toronto).

**When:** Sept. 23 to Oct. 8, 2012

**Contact:** 1-877-398-1460 or [www.voyagestoantiquity.com](http://www.voyagestoantiquity.com).

## 12 Great Bear Rainforest Tours by Sail

Maple Leaf Adventures

The Great Bear Rainforest 3 excursion in September aboard the schooner Maple Leaf visits the fiords, river estuaries and rainforests of B.C.'s coastal Great Bear Rainforest area. The nine-day trip includes cruises to grizzly bear havens where spawning salmon ignite a feeding frenzy (the elusive coastal wolf has also been spotted hunting salmon). With a naturalist aboard, the voyage includes sea lion, humpback whale and black and spirit bear watching as well as shore excursions such as a visit to a First Nations village and a forest walk. Passengers can help sail the schooner (on-board instruction available).

**Downside:** Like any tour involving wildlife, there's no guarantee every animal will actually make an appearance.

**Cost:** \$5,000 per person (doesn't include getting to Bella Bella, B.C.)

**When:** Sept. 20 to 28, 2012. The company also offers other tours of this sort in spring, summer and fall.

**Contact:** 1-888-599-5323 or [www.mapleleafadventures.com](http://www.mapleleafadventures.com)

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