

'At daybreak the smell of baking bread from the ovens drifted across the snow'

Michael Kerr reveals in a powerful piece of vintage travel writing – from Nicolas Bouvier's 'The Way of the World'

Nicolas Bouvier (1929-1998) grew up in a Protestant, bourgeois household in Geneva, and was itching to look beyond it. "At eight years old," he once recalled, "I traced the course of the Yukon with my thumbnail in the butter on my toast."

In 1953, aged 24, he drove from home to Belgrade to meet his friend Thierry Vernet, an artist. Then off they went, in Bouvier's tiny Fiat Topolino – across Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan into Pakistan. It was a trip that took 18 months on the road, and then until 1963 to make it into print. The result, *The Way of the World*, a dazzling celebration of the joys of travel, was introduced to British readers in 2007 by Eland.

In this extract, Nicolas Bouvier reports from Tabriz, in Iran, where he and Vernet – having driven 900 miles through Anatolia in two weeks – ended up staying for six months.

WINTER AND WARMTH IN TABRIZ

Nicolas Bouvier and Thierry Vernet are in Iran, where they learn to savour the rich flavours of a simpler life

December

The sky was lowering. Lamps were lit by midday. The sweet smell of oil and the clinking of snow shovels enveloped the days. Sometimes the songs and flutes of an Armenian wedding in a nearby courtyard filtered through the snowflakes. Boiling tea throughout the day kept us warm inside and clear-headed. The more the town settled into the thick of winter, the more we liked it.

This idea seemed to worry the widow Chuchanik, our landlady, who often came to see us: it seemed preposterous to her that we should have come so far, and of our own free will, to settle in Tabriz. At the beginning, she thought we must have taken to the road only because someone had chased us from home. She sat in a corner of my room, a plump partridge in a black smock, and in silent reproach observed the camp bed, the bare floor, the window draught-proofed with old newspapers, the easel or the typewriter.

"But what are you doing here then?"

"I have those pupils." [Bouvier was teaching French to several local people.]

"But in the morning?"

"You can see what I do – take notes and write."

"But I write too – Armenian, Persian, English..." She counted them off on her fingers. "It's not an occupation."

We would soon abandon this delicate ground for news of the neighbourhood, about which she was very well informed: the newspaper vendor was dead of stomach pains... the grocer's son had just finished a large portrait of the emperor, made out of old postage stamps, which had taken him two years and which he wanted to present himself in Tehran... Sat—, the tanner in Chahanas Avenue, had gambled away 30,000 toman the other night without turning a hair. At that I pricked up my ears: it was quite



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Last word

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness and many of our people need it sorely on those accounts."

Mark Twain, 'The Innocents Abroad' (1869)

UNDER COVER

The Bazaar of Tabriz, main; Swiss author Nicolas Bouvier, below

a sum, and Armenian rumour never lied where figures were involved.

The town still had a few rich people, well concealed, but it no longer saw the colour of their money. For the most part they were great landowners like old M—, hiding the extent of their fortune under a ragged exterior. Fearing betrayal if they invested it locally, they hoarded their money, sending their excess income to foreign banks, or playing behind closed doors for fantastic stakes. Sat— the tanner, who had brazened out his loss, owned at least a hundred villages between Khvoy and Miandeh. A medium-sized village brought in around 20,000 toman; thus he could count on an annual rent of two million toman and his loss was insignificant.

When the bazaar got hold of the story, what on earth did they make of it – the destitute majority who were the town's real face? Not much. They knew that Sat— had a full stomach three times a day, that he slept as the fancy took him with one – or two – women under enough blankets, and drove around in a black car. Beyond that, their imagination ran out; luxury belonged to a world they had no idea of, either from books – since they couldn't read – or from the cinema, which disseminated a foreign mythology.

When they penetrated the houses of the rich it was through the servants' quarters, which were scarcely better equipped than their own hovels. They were unable to grasp the idea of 30,000 toman as we are to grasp the idea of a thousand

million dollars. Those who have nothing envy nothing beyond what touches the skin and the stomach: to be clothed and fed leaves nothing to envy. But they weren't fed, and hurried barefoot through the snow, and the cold got worse and worse.

Because of this fantastic divide, the rich had lost their place even in the popular imagination. They were so rare or distant that they no longer counted. Even in its dreams the town remained faithful to its privation: everywhere else, fortune-tellers promise love or travelling; in Tabriz, their predictions are more modest, again involving a fine poem (instead of picking a card, the customer pricks with a pin a quatrain in a collection by Hafiz, which the fortune-teller interprets): three pots of rice with mutton, and one night in white sheets.

In a town so well acquainted with hunger, the stomach never forgets its rights and food is a fête. On feast days, the housewives in the neighbourhood rise early to peel, crush, bone, stir, chop, knead, and blow on the coals, and the fine vapour floating from the courtyards betrays the presence of steamed sturgeon, chicken in lemon juice grilled over charcoal, or one of those large balls of mince stuffed with nuts and chopped herbs, bound with egg-yolk and cooked in saffron, which they call *keufteh*.

Turkish cuisine is the heartiest in the world; Iranian has a refined simplicity; Armenian is unequalled for pickles and sweet-and-sour; for ourselves, we ate a great deal of bread – it was marvellous bread. At daybreak the smell from

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF TRAVEL WRITING

◆ In *The Unremembered Places*, published this month (Birlinn), Patrick Baker explores far-flung ruins and relics – from a cemetery for dam-builders to the remains of illicit stills – that serve as archives for Scotland's "wild histories". It's a haunting little book (just over 200 pages).

◆ Also recently published: *Walks on the Wild Side* by John Pakenham (Eye Books), who recalls treks in the desert of East Africa in the 1980s with local tribesmen, when technology meant map and compass and many villagers had never seen a white man; and *Where Was I Again?* (through Amazon: tinyurl.com/ydhhk2an), a new edition of collected pieces by Geoff Hill, a travel writer who can be lyrical but whose strongest instinct is to go for a laugh.

◆ Head to the Laos of the 1950s (left) with Norman Lewis, in an extract from his book *A Dragon Apparent* read by the BBC presenter Petroc Trelawny. It's one of a series devised to encourage donations to the Hands Up Foundation, a charity working in Syria and Lebanon (tinyurl.com/yab7kldc).

◆ Need a breath of sea air? Try the quirky *Edge of England* (edgeofengland.com) podcast, for which

Emily Jeffery and Cole Morton explore the coastline around Beachy Head, Birling Gap and the Seven Sisters.

◆ In a fond and funny piece for *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane, who took to the rails just before the global lockdown, celebrates the enduring romance of the sleeper (tinyurl.com/yddyebft).

◆ Eighty years on from the birth of Bruce Chatwin, author of *In Patagonia*, writers who knew him contributed to a podcast released on the website Travel Writing World (tinyurl.com/y999gxc9).

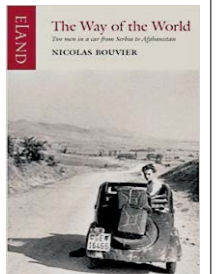
◆ From *The Telegraph* archive: Jenny Diski (tinyurl.com/yycmppyv), on a cargo ship, discovers that you can't quite leave everything behind.

the ovens drifted across the snow to delight our noses; the smell of the round, red-hot Armenian loaves with sesame seeds; the heady smell of *sandjak* bread; the smell of *awash* bread in fine wafers dotted with scorch-marks.

Only a really old country rises to luxury in such ordinary things; you feel 30 generations and several dynasties lined up behind such bread. With bread, tea, onions, ewe's cheese, a handful of Iranian cigarettes and the leisurely pace of winter, we were set for a good life: life at 300 toman a month.

From *The Way of the World* by Nicolas Bouvier (Eland) (travelbooks.co.uk), the largest independent publisher of travel classics, also publishes

Bouvier's *The Scorpion-Fish*, *The Japanese Chronicles* and *So It Goes*, a book of shorter pieces. It is still fulfilling orders, and most titles can be downloaded.



UP, UP AND AWAY

Books that will lift you out of lockdown

WEST WITH THE NIGHT



WEST WITH THE NIGHT
Beryl Markham
(North Point Press/Macmillan)

Beryl Markham (1902-1986) grew

up in Kenya, hunted with the Maasai, worked as a bush pilot and became the first woman to fly the Atlantic solo from east to west. Her memoir culminates with that feat and her Zen-like response when, somewhere over Cape Breton, her engine cut out. Hemingway, who was no fan

of hers, said: "[She] can write rings around all of us who consider ourselves as writers... it really is a bloody wonderful book."

ALOFT
William Langewiesche
(Penguin Modern Classics)

Before he was a writer for

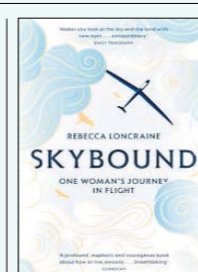
Atlantic Monthly and *Vanity Fair*, Langewiesche worked as a pilot for 15 years from the age of 18, so editors have



pushed him towards aviation. In this collection of essays, he considers how we move about the earth and how we view our place within it. Some are frightening, some reassuring, but all are "suffused with the wonder I still feel that as a species we now find ourselves in the sky".



PILOT SCHEME
These writers take you into the cockpit



SKYBOUND
Rebecca Loncraine
(Picador)

Two years after being diagnosed (at 35) with

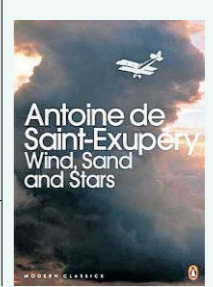
breast cancer, Rebecca Loncraine booked a lesson at a gliding club and fell in love with flying. Her "private love letters to the wind" were the beginnings of *Skybound*, which appeared in 2016, a couple of years after her death. It's an extraordinary book, one in which the writer,

for whom the world had closed down, feels it reopen, and carries the reader up on the thermals with her.

WIND, SAND AND STARS
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
(Penguin Modern Classics)

Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944) might not have

been a model pilot, prone as he was to daydreaming at the controls and near-fatal crashes, but he



made poetry of his experience. This book recounts his years flying airmail routes across the Sahara and the Andes; it culminates with the story of his miraculous survival following a crash in the Libyan Desert in 1936 while he was trying to break the Paris-Saigon record.