

mirrabac moments

Newsletter of Mirrabac - Specialists in Small Group Travel Summer 2010/2011



Spirit Bear



New Year Greetings

Badgers, bears, leopards, wolves...mountains, deserts, forests, fjords. Just a few of the creatures encountered and paths wandered in 2010.

We soaked up the intrigues of South America, the vast vistas of Namibia, the cast of thousands in South Africa's incredible Kruger Park and, finally, awe-inspiring Alaska and the Great Bear Rainforest. And we were joined by a great bunch of fun-loving Kiwis and Australians who shared our will to explore, learn and be uplifted by new experiences each day. Thanks for your company – you each made a great trip that much greater. See you again soon!

As another year gears up we look forward to more good times with more fun people in 2011.

Best wishes from...

The Mirrabac Team

Coming up in 2011

19 April – 16 May

All Around Turkey

...East, West, Mediterranean Coast and Black Sea Region.

13 June – 1 July

Wild on Wildlife

...you won't find a better tour for following the wildlife.

1 July – 21 July

Namibian Explorer

...don't miss this one, the first departure is fully booked.

6 Aug – 1 Sept

Splendours of South America

...Andes, Amazon, Iguazu Falls... fabulous stops on our journey.

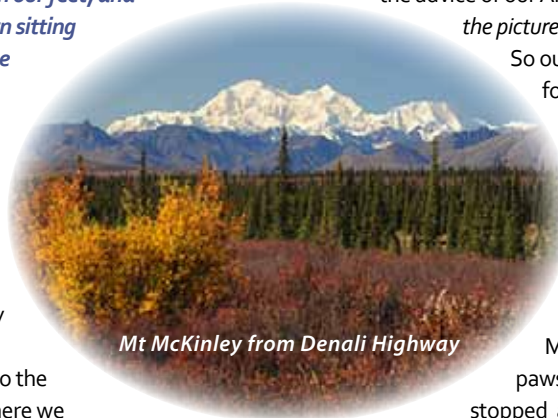
We design our own exclusive itineraries so you have an 'out-of-the-ordinary' experience.

Awesome Alaska

"In Alaska, everyday's a postcard," says Corey, our trusty alpine guide. We can't argue with that. There's a brilliant blue sky above us, golden sun bearing down us, the crisp 'living-ice' face of massive Root Glacier beneath our feet, and 16,390' Mt Blackburn sitting in snowy glory on the horizon behind us.

We're in the heart of the Wrangell-St Elias National Park, the largest national park in the US. We've walked four leisurely kilometres along a 1920's wagon road to the edge of the Root where we strapped on crampons, got instructed on how to master the metal footwear, then stomped one-by-one up the short ridge onto the glacier. It's pure magic up there. Glacial streams carve narrow crevasses through the ice and dot iridescent turquoise pools across the terrain.

We quickly find our 'ice-legs' and trek across the glacier, absorbed by the beauty all around. Here and there, cascading waterfalls of melted ice disappear into deep, mysterious ravines with startling azure walls. Eventually our guides drop mats on the dry ice and we stop for a picnic. The valley below is painted autumnal gold and away in the distance, in the sleepy former mining settlement of McCarthy, quaint old Ma Johnson's Hotel awaits our return at



Mt McKinley from Denali Highway

the end of another exhilarating day.

You've heard it from Mirrabac before, *Life's an Adventure*...and they don't come much better than our first Alaskan adventure in September. We'd taken the advice of our Alaskan agent: "You can take the picture or you can be in the picture".

So our enthusiastic adventurers found themselves in plenty of pictures – postcard pictures! We strolled forgotten trails and scoured stony river flats; we kayaked to one glacier and flew over others. We dropped in on Iditarod multi-champion, Martin Buser, and shook paws with his prized huskies. We stopped and shopped in quaint little

towns like Talkeetna and Homer and listened to their historical stories. We photographed stunning Mt McKinley from many angles over three days – very, very few of Alaska's visitors in 2010 got to see North America's highest mountain at all! Our flight-seeing excursion around the mighty one was truly breathtaking, as were our small plane flights in and out of remote McCarthy. And, in McCarthy we were wowed by a gentle display from the Aurora Borealis.

Alaska had saved its very best summer weather for our 13-day visit, with blue skies and sunshine – every day! Fall was in its full glory with colourful Aspens lining the highways and hillsides. We crossed the enormous state by land, sea and air and it was the same from every angle – simply awesome.

Great Bear Rainforest

The Great Bear Rainforest lived up to its name – plenty of rain, forest all around and plenty of bears!

A relaxing 2-night sail down the Alaska Marine Highway gave us time to switch our focus from mountains and glaciers to fjords and forests. Wildlife was high on our wish list and we didn't have to wait long. Our first sighting came as we flew into the Great Bear Rainforest – three humpbacks rocking and rolling below us.

The rain was steady as the seaplanes – two for our group – dropped into Hartley Bay where our cheery crew waited to take us aboard our chartered boat, the Island Odyssey. Adventure ahoy!

After settling into our cabins and devouring the first of chef Kate's gourmet meals, we visit the nearby Long House of the Gitga'at, the local First Nations people. Their guide, Cathy, relates the stories depicted in the striking totem poles. Then it's time

Rain - what rain? We've got bears to see.



to head out on the water.

The rain has no impact on our excitement, which ratchets to fever pitch when we come across a group of humpbacks bubble net feeding, the mammal's most inventive mealtime technique. The whales ring their prey in a shrinking circle, blowing bubbles under the doomed fish and trapping them, before powering up through the 'net', mouths gaping wide to land their catch in one great gulp. *Cont'd pg 2*

Great Bear Rainforest *cont'd*

First Mate, Steve, attaches a sonar device to the bow and we listen to the lead whale 'vocalizing' the moves. We hear the distinctive 'NOW' call, hold our breath as bubbles break the surface, then gasp in awe as fearsome 'caverns' burst from the turbulent waves. It's spellbinding!

We've barely recovered from the drama when Skipper Neil spots a whale in 'show-off' mode, breaching over and over. A full top-to-tail breach has us gasping anew.

Our first few hours on board Island Odyssey were merely a taste of the incredible wildlife encounters, magnificent natural surroundings and top-rate crew we would enjoy for the next week.

Bears are top of our wish list: black, brown, white -we're not fussy. Our first shore excursion turns up paw-prints and other evidence but no sightings. Day two delivers the ultimate – the rare, white spirit bear. We've settled in at the bear-stand above a swollen stream to wait and hope. Rain splashes from the overhead canopy and an hour or so passes easily. Suddenly, a ghostly shape lumbers from the tunnel of overhanging trees. The beautiful creature ambles along the bank just metres across from us. We're ecstatic!

There is much more to come. Mother grizzlies with curious cubs keep us captivated. Nine grizzlies show up one day. A black bear also strolls by to make the daily 'sighting list' recorded by our naturalist guide, Lindsay who also inspires our bird-spotting. Two grey wolves lurking on a beach provide yet another magic moment. "We can only see them because they've allowed us to," says Neil of these masters of disguise.

The Great Bear Rainforest is magnificent - wildlife aside, it is privilege enough just to be here.



On Safari in Southern Africa

Namibia

Namibia is known as the 'Gem of Africa', not only because it is the world's richest source of gem-quality diamonds, but also because of the wonders of the country. Namibia has a magnetic appeal.

When you're travelling through the country's technicolour landscape, every day is a highlight but, as usual, our 2010 Namibian Explorer safari had its unique moments. Rob reports a few of them:



Himba Woman

A special surprise was the group of Himba women selling their crafts at the Pelican Baai yacht club in Walvis Bay – I have never seen them this far south. Okaukeujo waterhole in

Etosha Park never disappoints.

We watched as herds of elephant came to drink along with other regulars – springbok, kudu, gemsbok, to name just a few. A magic moment on the drive from Aus waterhole to Halali was a lone leopard stepping out in front of us to cross the road – now that's always a big bonus!

A traffic jam on the Park's high ground near Sueda flats was a sure sign something of major interest was afoot. Sure enough, a pride of lions oblivious of the spectators stalked a very large herd of zebra. It was a great thrill to sit and observe the matriarch at-

Namibia 'Gem of Africa'



Sunset at Quivertree Forest

tempting to secure 'dinner' while her offspring kept their distance and presumably 'did as they were told'. What a buzz when they crossed right in front of us!

Tsumcor waterhole provided more magnificent elephant viewing - right up close and personal! We watched with glee as they dowsed themselves in brown dust that stuck to the wet sections of their gigantic torsos. There were babies as well – always a giggle – trying to act so 'grown up' but not quite there yet.

Our first outing at Okonjima was leopard tracking and it wasn't long before we encountered a magnificent male lazing under an acacia tree. On our drive back to camp a herd of mountain zebra posed perfectly for us in the veldt. The reserve's cheetahs did not disappoint during our two-day stay.

Our 2011 Namibian Explorer has proved popular, so much so that we've scheduled a second departure.

Don't miss out - there's no third departure.

Wild on Wildlife - South Africa

The action on our 2010 'Wild on Wildlife' Safari raced along from the very first day. Entering Ngonyama Lodge's lion sanctuary at feeding time might sound like tempting fate - it wasn't!



Rather, an opportunity to observe the growling, wheedling and 'table etiquette' as the family scrapped for the tastiest morsel watched by a nosy bushveld kingfisher.

Great photography with thrilling sound effects.

We crossed the highveld to Louis Trichardt where the locals at our Lodge put on a dinner-time dance. Our tour leader was easily coaxed into performing!

Next up, 10 'wild' days in Kruger National Park.

Day one: we're at Punda Maria Gate. Finally, we're in The Park and there, just a couple of hundred metres ahead, a bull elephant crosses the road. We're off to a good start. Turns out elephants are not shy in Kruger and over the coming days elephants of

all sizes keep us entertained. Our peak elephant experience comes as we watch in awe from Schingwedzi Bridge as a whole

herd slides down the dusty riverbank and troops single file across the dry riverbed in the distance. Impressive! A troop of baboons skulks around while hippo and crocodile wallow in the river below us.

Each day we are privileged with incredible wildlife encounters – a pair of Scops owls (the smallest owl in Southern Africa) perched overhead at Satara restcamp is a rare treat. So is the hooded vulture dropping in for a chat with a Bateleur eagle. We meet plenty of rhino, often with a calf in tow.

"Whoa-hoo" Adrenalin rush!

Biyamiti Hide provides some pulsating moments.

No sooner have we arrived

than two massive bull elephants turn up to frolic and splash at the waterhole in front of us. They depart, bare metres from the hide, so close we could reach out and touch them. We don't, but 'whoa-hoo' – adrenalin rush!

The male leopard lounging in a thicket not four metres from our vehicle is another unbelievable buzz.

After a two-day sojourn circling lush Blyde River Canyon we were ready for more rewarding wildlife viewing in Pilansberg National Park.

We will be going 'wild' again in 2011. Will you?



Crossing the Schingwedzi River

All Around Turkey

East, West, Cappadocia, Mediterranean & Black Sea Region

With a history inhabited by no less than fourteen civilisations, enigmatic Turkey is one of the world's most fascinating and hospitable countries.

Ruins adorn the landscape, east to west. Yet all was not lost and today Turkey has some of the world's most impressive and elegant buildings: Istanbul's 6th century Hagia Sophia and 17th century Blue Mosque; Eastern Turkey's 18th century Ishak Pasha Palace; and the 14th century Sumela Monastery in the Black Sea Region, are among them.



Hagia Sophia, Istanbul

We've tasted Turkey twice and it's time for another feast so first-up for 2011 is our **All Around Turkey** tour. Yes, we're venturing further this time, heading into Eastern Turkey and the Black Sea Region after we've explored the west's famed and favourite spots. With endless vistas and dramatic scenery, Eastern

Hot Air Ballooning Cappadocia

Turkey resembles a vast, wild and beautiful national park. It's an impressive destination - picture this:



Mt Ararat, Lake Van, Ishak Pasha, Nemrut Dağı. Yet, it is seldom visited by tourists. North of this, the beauty of the Black Sea region is also legendary.

As well as a friendly welcome from the Turks, who feel a particular affinity for their ANZAC compatriots from Australia and New Zealand, here's just the tip of what you can expect if you join us in April:

- Grand old Istanbul
- ANZAC Day at Gallipoli
- 3-day sail on the Turquoise Coast
- Exploring East, West, North and South
- Incomparable ruins from past civilisations
- Hot-air balloon ride over Cappadocia
- Bazaars, markets, street stalls
- History, culture, character
- Many, many memories

Turkey's story is one of the oldest on record - as we know, Noah's Ark is reputed to rest on Mt Ararat. Its history is also indelibly, poignantly linked to our's.

It is an enthralling place - come, see for yourself.

Splendours of South America

Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina

The city of Cusco was abuzz when we arrived in June in the middle of Corpus Christi, an event of great significance for Cusquenians. The festival has been celebrated all over Peru since the Spaniards came, but reaches its high point here in the imperial city of the Incas, colonial city of the conquistadors.



Corpus Christi Festival

Crowds surged through the cobbled streets toward the Plaza de Armas, readying for the pageant. We tagged along, found a strategic balcony above the plaza and settled in to enjoy the festivities. One by one ornate ceremonial litters topped with massive statues of Christ, the Virgin Mary and various saints, emerged through the towering doors of Santo Domingo cathedral. Each was held precariously aloft by 15-20 men in Sunday suits who inched their way down to the main square, the struggle on their faces matching the weight of their revered load. Adoring masses mobbed the bearers, seeking to touch the

holy icons they carried.

Local bystanders swarmed the square, many dressed in traditional Andean colours, men wearing the colourful *chullo* (traditional Andean beanie). It was truly a great spectacle.

The following days in the Sacred Valley were full and fulfilling. Machu Picchu stirred our senses - our amazing Inkaterra hotel soothed our souls. Viewing the Andean Spectacle Bear here was a bonus.

The traditional Andean weavers at Awanacancha inspired us. The tiny daughters of our Uros reed boat captain enchanted us with their delightful renditions of *Alouette* and other international favourites. We tasted everyday rural life when we visited a local family and shared their offering of hot potatoes and creamy goats' cheese. Delicious!



Shy Singer

For a couple of our group being rowed across 'the top of the world' through Lake Titicaca's deeply mysterious waters was an unforgettable thrill - heaven almost! This year, along with the highlights we enjoyed in 2010, our South America tour includes yet more famous splendours: the Amazon Jungle, Iguazu Falls (from both sides), Rio De Janeiro and Buenos Aires. **We'd love you to share this splendid journey.**

Did you know...

...the meglomaniac King Antiochus I of Kommagene, decreed that 2,150m Mt Nemrut would be his mausoleum. He commissioned colossal stone statues depicting Apollo, Zeus, Hercules and other heavenly deities to adorn the tomb because he believed he was related to them.

Nemrut Dağı



... one of Machu Picchu's roles was as an astronomical observatory. At precisely mid-day on the two equinoxes the sun "sits with all his might upon the pillar" throwing no shadow. So the Incans would "tie the sun" to the pillar (known as the Intihuatana Stone - 'Hitching Post of the Sun') to halt its movement.

Machu Picchu



...you shouldn't resist the travel temptation.

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover." Mark Twain

And did you know...

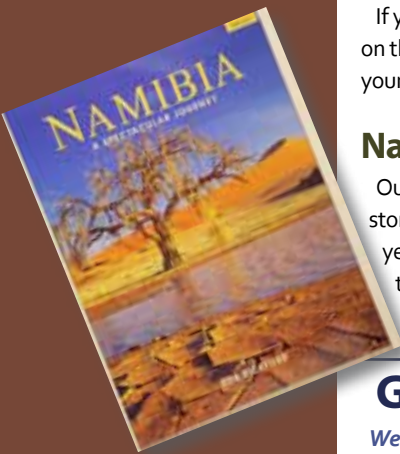
Haley's Comet was visible in the sky both on the night that Mark Twain was born and on the night he passed away.

You Said It...

"Thank you so much for one of the best holidays of my life." (South Africa)
Marvyne, Auckland, NZ

"...if I didn't have another trip in a lifetime (I'm sure we will) Alaska and the Great Bear Rainforest, which were two entirely different trips, were just magical."
Bev, Arrowtown, NZ

"Thanks for organising a wonderful trip to the special places of Peru and Bolivia...we are in awe of where we have been. Looking forward to another trip with Mirrabac."
Dennis & Jeanette Melbourne, AUS



"Mirrabac's Southern Africa adventures have left us with permanent grins and a persisting wish to return...The schedules allow plenty of time for obtaining stunning images."
Brenda & Malcolm Ashhurst, NZ

mirrabac
small group tours

Eyes on the Horizon

One of the major dilemmas facing adventure lovers is where to venture next and how to fit in all their dream destinations. And we're no exception at Mirrabac. Much as we would like to offer all our best-loved tours each year, we haven't yet mastered the art of being 'everywhere at once'. We'll keep working at it, meantime, we're keeping an eye on the horizon and our planning for 2012. The tentative schedule looks like this:

- **Galapagos Explorer** returns. There's a good reason why the islands are known as the Enchanted Isles. Yes, they're truly enchanting. We'll have an 8-day chartered cruise of Galapagos, explore mainland Ecuador and stop by at Easter Island.
- **Namibian Explorer** - the annual favourite features, of course.
- **Trans Siberian Railway** - the world's best known rail journey, 10,000 kms, Vladivostok to St Petersburg with several off-train stops along the way. You'd be surprised how busy and how much fun a day onboard can be.
- **Alaska and the Great Bear Rainforest** - we've had lots of requests for a repeat of this amazing journey. And we don't need any persuading! We'd love to be back there this year, but South America is in that slot! If you're tempted by any of these destinations, return the enclosed feedback form so you'll be in the running for first grab at a seat - you know how it goes, numbers are limited.

In the Distance

Good, keen explorers (such as Mirrabac travellers) are always on alert for new pathways so we're looking at some new destinations for future tours: Polar Bear safari (see below), Patagonia, Birding in Ecuador. If any of these sound like you, register your interest now and we'll keep you posted.

Make it a date now...

...**Saturday, 5 March, 2011.** That's when we'll be gathering for our annual Mirrabac Get-together. It's a great chance to catch up with friends from past trips and make the acquaintance of travellers who may be sharing the roads ahead. There'll be lots of chin-wagging, plenty of photographic records and travel tales to swap and plenty of scheming and dreaming over future adventures.

If you'd like to join us for an afternoon of good company, great food and even greater laughs, see the details on the enclosed feedback form, put a reminder on your calendar (or its technological equivalent!) and drop your RSVP in the mail.

Namibia - a Spectacular Journey

Our 2004 pictorial publication **Namibia - A Spectacular Journey** is now on the shelves of Namibian Bookstores in four languages. The original English version was joined by the German edition in 2008 and, last year, by the French and Italian editions. The publication is selling well - 8,000 copies so far - and, according to our highest-selling retailer, is the 'best-selling' publication of its kind. Rob Bickford Publishing has plans for the next photographic production. It may take a while but promises to be an exciting challenge.

Going Polar

We've had bears on our mind lately - black, brown, white...which got us to thinking about polar bears.

We're planning a dedicated Polar Bear Safari to the polar bear capital, Churchill, Canada. We'll meet the bears at their favourite time, in their favourite place - November at Hudson Bay, where they congregate in large numbers to wait for the big freeze so they can head off on their annual hunt.

The snow will arrive before us, setting the scene for magical photography and 'real life' bear encounters. We'll spend 5 days at a wilderness lodge so we can fully embrace this incomparable experience.

This safari is for anyone who loves photography, or



Blue-footed Booby Galapagos



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wildlife, or both, and has a spirit of adventure. Our year of departure (probably 2012) will be confirmed when we know how many of you want to join us.

Register your interest now - only 10 will be lucky.

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'Mirrabac Moments' is posted to you once a year. If you would prefer to receive the newsletter via email, please let us know. 'Mirrabac Memos' are emailed throughout the year with information updates. If you want the early word on coming adventures, be sure we have your email address.