

In May 2013, GUNNAR GARFORS entered the league of extraordinary travellers who have been to every country in the world. Here, the CEO of Norwegian Mobile TV Corporation relives some of his most memorable experiences, from jogging in dystopian Pyongyang to visiting one of Africa's most isolated countries.

One man, 198 Countries



I am one of those annoying people. You know, the sort of man who will always beat you at your own game. But the game that I enjoy playing the most is that of travel — and it's precisely travel that I end up discussing wherever I am. Be it Kiribati, Chad or Kosovo, I have been to all the 198 countries of the world, and have an interesting story to tell from each of them.

But ever since I achieved the goal of my life, in May 2013, when I visited Cape Verde, the last of the 198 countries, they have been posing me the same question: "What will you do now?"

Answer: True travellers never stop. Travelling is a disease. One we are glad not to be cured of. To be sure, we are obsessed with the idea of experiencing new things, discovering new stories, meeting new people; but then, no place grows old on a true traveller. He will always want to revisit the places he's been to, find out how and why they have changed and rediscover their magic.

So which are my favourite destinations? There are just so many incredible places on this planet that it will be arrogant of me to rate them. Nonetheless, out of those places that made an everlasting impression on me, I have listed a few here, one from each inhabited continent.

Africa: Sao Tome and Principe

This is one of the smallest, least visited and most isolated countries of Africa. Do you need more reasons to visit? Let me throw in what is probably the best chocolate in the world, small intimate beaches and blowholes where the ocean forces sea water through small cavities and creates frequent geyser-like explosions. I decided to visit the island-country by a cargo ship from Gabon. What was advertised as an 8-hour trip ended up taking 40. How does that sound, if you are an impatient explorer? Painting the third layer of a very white wall would seem like Christmas Eve to a six-year-old, in comparison. Well, sometimes aeroplanes do come in handy.

The island-nation Sao Tome and Principe is one of Africa's smallest and least visited countries



The Blue Lagoon geothermal spa, in Iceland, is highly popular among tourists

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Europe: Iceland

Iceland is called a fairy tale island and you will understand why upon arrival. The scenery is wild, unique and almost unimaginable. Clearly an inspiration for Viking writers who wrote tales that have inspired young and old alike for over a thousand years.

While visiting the country, a car is a must. And Reykjavik, the tiny capital, offers gourmet food and quality parties. It isn't quite fair to call it nightlife, though, for the Icelandic parties last at least till the morning.

Then there are the hot springs, which cannot be left unvisited, although the locals prefer far less touristy places than The Blue Lagoon. I'd recommend you to join them.

Iceland's oldest lighthouse lies 30 minutes' drive from the airport, perched on a hill. The foaming witch pot of an ocean is several hundred meters away, an earlier lighthouse that was built closer to the sea didn't withstand

the wild weather. Do not let that scare you — the steep cliffs that prevent the ocean from wrecking the island are a must-see. They generate ideal wind conditions for playful seagulls and provide a wonderful backdrop with extraordinarily beautiful views of the Atlantic, with a few small islands off the coast. There is nothing that will make you feel as refreshingly young as that sea spray on your face. Just carry your coat along.

Asia: North Korea

This is a country that's at once unique and depressing. You might think it's an unlikely tourist destination, but the country is easily accessible to all foreigners save the South Koreans. The majority of tourists are Chinese, but a few thousand Westerners, too, visit the country every year. Tourism, however, is tightly controlled, and you will always be accompanied by two official tour guides — or guards, if you like. And don't expect to be able to call

home. Your mobile phone will be “kept safe” at the airport until you depart from the country. This confiscation of phones is a pretty redundant exercise, I say, for North Korea’s mobile network provider isn’t exactly a big fan of roaming services.

Everything you see in North Korea will be orchestrated to a smaller or greater degree. Tourists will only get to see certain sights and eat at certain restaurants. I did, however, manage to talk myself into jogging around the capital without a guide, although I should add that my activity was interrupted by attractive girls that control traffic. Who would ever want to go back to traffic lights?

Propaganda is ubiquitous in what is essentially a very poor country. Of course, you will not get to see the areas that are in the worst state. Pyongyang is much better off than every other part of the country: something that you may sense venturing outside the capital. There is so much green and fertile farmland, but virtually no agricultural machinery. Kim Jong-un, how about reducing the military budget a notch or two and buying a couple of tractors?

Many people who claim to have visited this country have merely been to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between the two Koreas. They have technically crossed the border, having walked to the other side of one of the small cabins placed exactly along the border. These cabins were built for “neutral” negotiations, with one half of the cabin in each country.... Technically, visiting South Korea from the North is much more special — do it.

Oceania: Tuvalu

I could feel it even before the plane landed. This country is one-of-a-kind. Everything is tiny, including the airport terminal building. There was no room for the 25 passengers inside the building. And the runway takes up so much space that everything is found very close to it. And when the two weekly airplanes from Fiji aren’t around, kids play football on it, and adults do yoga.

Very few people visit Tuvalu, and there isn’t too much infrastructure to accommodate tourists, either.

EVERYTHING YOU SEE IN NORTH KOREA WILL BE ORCHESTRATED; TOURISTS CAN ONLY SEE CERTAIN SIGHTS AND EAT AT CERTAIN RESTAURANTS



A statue of Kim Il-sung, the founding president of North Korea

GETTY IMAGES

But, to me, this is a good thing. I prefer the places less travelled. People are more genuine, more welcoming, and everything seems more real than what is the case in 'tourist hells' around the world. Tuvalu is in the Pacific, but it is very far away from the cartoon island stereotype. It is expected to be the first country to 'sink' should the ocean levels rise. But, of course, the country will not sink: it will be flooded. But the legend of Atlantis is strong, and in common language, sinking sounds scarier, more dramatic and, maybe, more real. Locals are worried, and

they have good reasons to be.

During my stay, I got talking to an old guy in a bar. He asked me where I was from.

"Norway."

"What? Nowhere?"

ON THE TUVALU ISLAND AIRPORT RUNWAY, KIDS PLAY FOOTBALL AND ADULTS DO YOGA

"Nor-way," I said. Slowly but loudly. He still looked puzzled. "It's in Scandinavia. It's in Europe. Northern Europe."

He didn't react instantly. He had a sip of beer. Then he raised his voice.

"We are sinking. We are sinking because of you!" He lifted his finger and pointed at me.

"Because of me? I looked around, securing exit options."

"We are sinking because of pollution from Europe," he explained.

The old guy was a little drunk, but there is no denying that such feelings are not unique, and that he may be proved right.

Tuvalu must be visited sooner rather than later.

South America: Bolivia

Imagine you're on an aeroplane, cruising between snow-capped mountains that suddenly reveal a sprawling city spanning as far as the eye can see. Touching down on Bolivia's El Alto International Airport is a great way to rediscover the romance of the window seat. The airport is one of the world's highest, being located more than 4,000 meters above the sea level; that calls for one of the world's longest runways, due to the fact that air is so thin. And El Alto is the gateway to La Paz: the world's highest capital city. The metropolis is an excellent starting point for mountain hikes and bike rides. Or how about a 3,600 metre bike descent into the Amazon Jungle? Or you may want to engage in some llama spotting. If the jawdropping mountains don't do it for you as a backdrop, the colourful traditional Bolivian dresses worn by many local women should. Do carry your camera along.

North America: Dominican Republic

On June 18, 2012, I set the record for visiting five countries in one day, visiting Asia, Africa, Europe, North America and South America. The country in North America happened to be Dominican Republic, famous for its crowded tourist resorts guarded by armed personnel. But who wants to stay in a wannabe prison on holiday when the country offers so much more than umbrella drinks on private beaches? Underground caves with fresh water pools, a surprisingly diverse wildlife in the green mountains and an unusual nightlife. Locals in Bavaro, on the East Coast, party at a combined car wash and pub. That's a proper 24/7 business for you. •

Garfors writes regularly on garfors.com. He has also had his travel stories published in magazines and on websites across the world, and is currently writing a book on his travels.

