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Thursday Travel

## Oh, the places you'll probably never go. Except in photos.

Regan McMahon

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There was a time when beautiful photo books spotlighting exceptional places gave readers a glimpse of land, people and wildlife that would always be there. These days, the underlying message is we are lucky to view these now, because their existence is more fleeting than we may have imagined.



The special relationship between setting and people is dramatically evident in Tibet, where Buddhism found a welcome home below the snowy peaks and endless sky. "[A]nyone who has traveled across these high plateaux will understand how this contemplative civilization flourished in a landscape of such vastness," writes author Matthieu Ricard in "Tibet: An Inner Journey" (Thames & Hudson; 232 pages; \$45).

Ricard held a Ph.D. in molecular biology when he left his native France in 1972 to study Buddhism in the Himalayas. He has spent the past 30 years there; he became a monk and serves as a French translator for the Dalai Lama. He is also an exceptional photographer, whose sensitive and joyful pictures are informed by his love of the region, its people and their religion.

His book is a unique combination of intimate close-ups, awe-inspiring landscapes and ancient religious rituals. The portraits show young and old, villagers and nomads, religious and secular folks staring directly into his camera, seemingly communicating their souls to the viewer. His subjects are unbelievably colorful -- their handcrafted garb in brilliant reds and golds, vibrant against piercing blue skies and deep green hillsides, with pale prayer flags flapping in the wind and white tents planted on rugged slopes.

As Ricard explains in his introduction, "This book seeks to bear witness to all that survives of that ancient world. ... It also aims to provide a glimpse of a unique culture

that is desperately trying to preserve its authenticity despite the major upheavals that have shaken the land of its birth."

The same sense of urgency pervades Alastair Fothergill's "Planet Earth: As You've Never Seen It Before" (UC Press; 312 pages; \$39.95). This companion piece to the BBC series "Planet Earth," which Fothergill produced, uses state-of-the-art technology to photograph the planet's landscapes and creatures from the air and under the sea, atop high mountain ranges, across vast deserts and down in the nooks and crannies of the deepest oceans. Yet in the text and captions for the 400 photographs, there is the ever-present reminder that we may be seeing some of these species for the last time unless we do something about human-influenced climate change and other man-made threats to the natural world.

Well organized in logical categories such as "the great plains, fresh water," "the great sands," "rainforests," "shallow seas" and "open depths," the book shows life as it is lived by animals, fish and birds hunting, feeding, mating, migrating, marauding and killing to survive, often in inhospitable climes. As extensive as this volume is, it is but a snapshot in time. As David Attenborough writes in his foreword, "the world itself may never look the same again."

The message that we should cherish and preserve what we have is at the core of a book about a city, too. In fact, "Orléans Embrace with the Secret Gardens of the Vieux Carré" (Morgana Press; 388 pages; \$50 ) celebrates just part of a city: the famed French Quarter of New Orleans.

This book, which hits stores April 1, is actually a compendium of three pieces. "Orléans Embrace" is a passionate reflection in two parts by TJ Fisher that serve as bookends, with Roy F. Guste Jr.'s "The Secret Gardens of the Vieux Carré: The Historic French Quarter of New Orleans," originally published in 1993, nestled in the middle. The 339 color and 49 black-and-white photos are by New Orleanian Louis Sahuc. Each work is a love letter to this seductive place with its distinctive history, character and architectural style contained in a 12-by-6 block grid (vieux carré in French means "old square"). "Within the fabled courtyards of the Vieux Carré, one is never lonely; the company of the past is always within reach ..." writes Fisher. "We love the French quarter not only because of who she is and what she symbolizes, but because of who we are when we are with her."

Visually, "Orléans Embrace" focuses on the quarter's unique architectural elements, while "The Secret Gardens," by the former fifth-generation owner of New Orleans' famous Antoine's Restaurant and author of nine books on Creole cuisine, lives up to its name. *Guste* shows us pockets of privacy and lush floral hideaways the average visitor would never know existed behind brick walls and colonial facades.

Even though the French Quarter was spared in the Katrina catastrophe, the surrounding devastation inspired a heightened desire to preserve its fragile beauty. One hundred percent of the publisher's profits from the sale of the book will go to French Quarter preservation.

Sometimes change is good, as when "the ancient enemies of human progress -- poverty, ignorance, and disease -- can be defeated, or at least forced to retreat, through the empowerment of women and girls." These are the words of former U.S. Secretary of State Madeline K. Albright in her foreword to "Women Empowered: Inspiring Change in the Emerging World" by Phil Borges (Rizzoli; 112 pages; \$29.95).

This stunning book, featuring arresting sepia-toned photos of women who have broken through cultural barriers to better their lives and the lives of their children, is full of firsts. Nana Gyetuah, 56, is the first female chief of her village in Ghana. Faranza, 21, of Kabul, is one of the first female freelance journalists in Afghanistan, and her photos of widows after the fall of the Taliban helped publicize their plight around the world. Rosa, 27, was raped by four men and was one of the first women in her village in Guatemala to ever press charges against her attackers. Her friend Maria, an outreach worker for the global humanitarian organization CARE, took the perpetrators to court and won the case.

This lovely and powerful book is the combined effort of CARE and award-winning photographer Borges, who was an orthodontist in San Francisco for 18 years before selling his practice in 1989 and moving to Seattle and pursuing a career in photography. He began documenting the work of CARE in 2004. As he writes in his introduction, "I too came to believe that the most efficient way to alleviate poverty and reduce population pressures in the developing world is to empower women and girls through education, economic opportunity, and open discussion about rights."

Borges has traveled extensively and published award-winning books that connect readers to people in the developing world. He makes that connection again in "Women Empowered."

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/03/15/DDGD9OKRR91.DTL>

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