

Travel writer Domhnall O'Donoghue has visited some of the world's most magical regions — here, he recounts 15 of his most memorable experiences from the past three years



1. Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has faced many challenges over the centuries. Along with Portuguese, Dutch and British colonisation, in recent decades, it has endured a civil war and was battered by the 2004 tsunami, resulting in a devastating loss of lives. Even so, the people are among the friendliest in the world.

Locals told me that a central philosophy in Buddhism is helping others, which was evident throughout my two-week stay this year. Whether I was learning traditional Kandyan dance, creating Mandala art from dyed rice or scaling Sigiriya Rock in a thunderstorm, the teachers and guides always sported warm, broad smiles.

2. The White House, Washington, D.C., USA

With the 250th anniversary of America's Declaration of Independence on the horizon, I visited the Capital Region — Washington D.C., Virginia and Maryland — home to some of the modern world's most beautiful and consequential sites.

I will forever remember attending a Christmas event in the White House, where I sat beside then-President Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, who had lost the election just weeks earlier. While Hilary Clinton could disappear into the woods following her defeat in 2016, Kamala was Vice President, obliged to attend official functions. She wore a brave face and danced to James Taylor and Trisha Yearwood.

3. Markweti Safari Lodge, South Africa

Venturing on a safari has been on my bucket list since falling in love with the adventures of Ernest Hemingway. During my stay in the fenceless, eco-friendly Markweti Safari Lodge — a three-hour drive from Johannesburg — we were summoned from our beds at ungodly hours to view Africa's Big Five — elephant, rhinoceros, buffalo, lion and leopard. Who needs sleep when there's so much natural beauty to admire?

Many claim that all animals should live in their natural habitat — I always agreed with that sentiment until I witnessed a leopard devour the zebra carcass it had stored in a tree.

4. Tartu, Estonia

I visited Estonia in 2024, the same year it legalised same-sex marriage, the first Baltic country to do so. In Tartu, I proudly marched with thousands of members of the gay community and our allies, who had travelled to the country's second-largest city.

While many regions worldwide are sadly reversing hard-won civil liberties, it's heartening that progress continues to be made elsewhere. Speaking to locals, many suggested that equality for LGBT+ people might have occurred earlier if it hadn't been for the oppressive Soviet occupation.



A traveller's photo album

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10



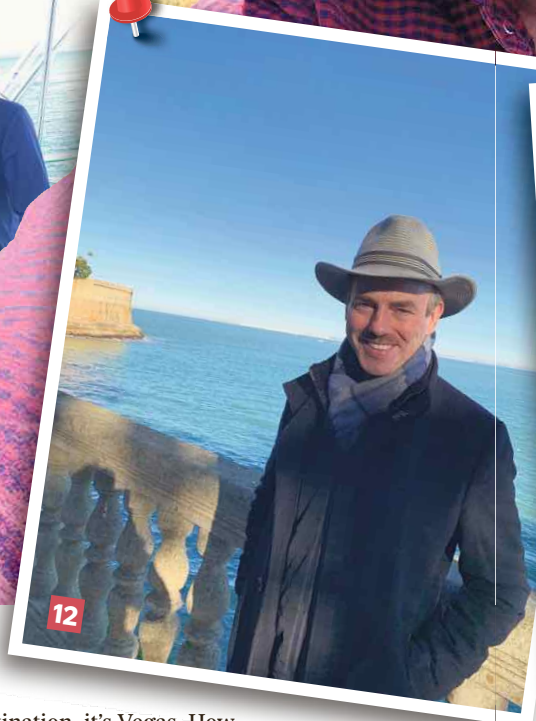
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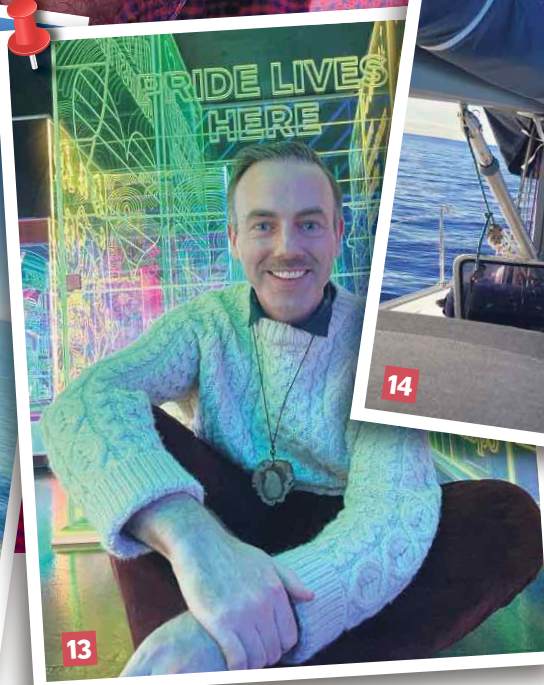
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9. Las Vegas, USA

If there is ever a bucket-list destination, it's Vegas. However, it was never on my radar, thanks to a lifelong aversion to gambling. When I visited, following a five-day road trip in Nevada, I avoided the chaotic casinos and focused on its entertainment offering instead.

I howled laughing at Luenell's raunchy jokes at the Jimmy Kimmel Comedy Club, admired iconic signage at the Neon Museum, and joined hundreds of spirited women at the Channing Tatum-produced *Magic Mike*. Outside the city is Hoover Dam, once the largest in the world. During my stay, I was pleasantly surprised to remember that Sin City is far more than roulette tables and slot machines.

10. Nantes, France

Jules Verne allocated Phileas Fogg 80 days to travel around the world, but I had just 80 hours to explore his hometown of Nantes. However, it was enough time to fall in love with this French city and its incredible celebration of culture, history, science and industrial heritage.

The city-wide collection of interactive art is astonishing, particularly the masterpieces on L'île de Nantes, once home to the city's naval shipyards, now occupied by mechanical elephants, herons, ants, spiders, hummingbirds, sloths and chameleons. Jules Verne would be proud.

11. Puerto Rico

Party-loving Puerto Ricans, or Boricuas, are regularly voted the world's happiest people. I tested their bonhomie during my first surfing lesson, but thanks to the support

of the locals, I succeeded in mounting my board, even for just a few brief moments. It wasn't just in the Caribbean Sea where I became wet but also in El Yunque National Forest, the island's tropical rainforest, and the capital city, San Juan. There, a thunderstorm interrupted a tour of some of the main bars — including La Factoría, where the 'Despacito' music video by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee was partially filmed.

12. Cadiz, Spain

I've heard many descriptions of Cadiz — 'the thorn in Napoleon's side', 'the cradle of flamenco', 'Havana with more charm', and even 'the last European jungle'. For me, it's a cornucopia of cultures and civilisations. A crossroads. An outdoor museum. A dance floor.

Cadiz is also the perfect base for exploring the white villages perched high in the surrounding mountains. Or to sample the world-famous sherry in Jerez de la Frontera's cathedrals of wine, followed by shrimp omelettes and churros from the local restaurants and markets.

Or to flop on the endless beaches. In fact, a bikini-clad Halle Berry emerged from these hypnotic waters in the 007 film *Die Another Day*. There's good reason why Andalusia is one of my favourite European regions.

13. Portland, Oregon, USA

Portland, Oregon, has many monikers, including Bridge

City. While this refers to the gigantic structures crossing the Willamette River, it could easily be a metaphor for the local people, who brilliantly unite the region's diverse communities.

Here, a person's sexuality, ethnicity or religious beliefs aren't tolerated, they are celebrated. And in America today, this simple concept of inclusivity is more important than ever.

14. Madeira, Portugal

One of the first faces you'll see in Madeira is local superstar footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, whose name and statue adorn the airport. He regularly speaks lovingly about the autonomous region of Portugal, located off the northwest coast of Africa — and understandably so. A highlight of my stay was spending a lazy afternoon exploring the coastline with the boating company Happy Hour Madeira.

15. Vienna, Austria

In Vienna, I explored some of the city's lesser-known neighbourhoods, where the past meets the present and family businesses reign supreme. The highlight was meeting the staff of Vollpension — a pair of Viennese cafés that double as social enterprises to address the loneliness many senior citizens experience while supplementing their pensions.

Affectionally referred to as 'Granny' and 'Grandpa', they play various roles here, from serving customers to conversing with us. In addition to the charming company, their cake was incredible.