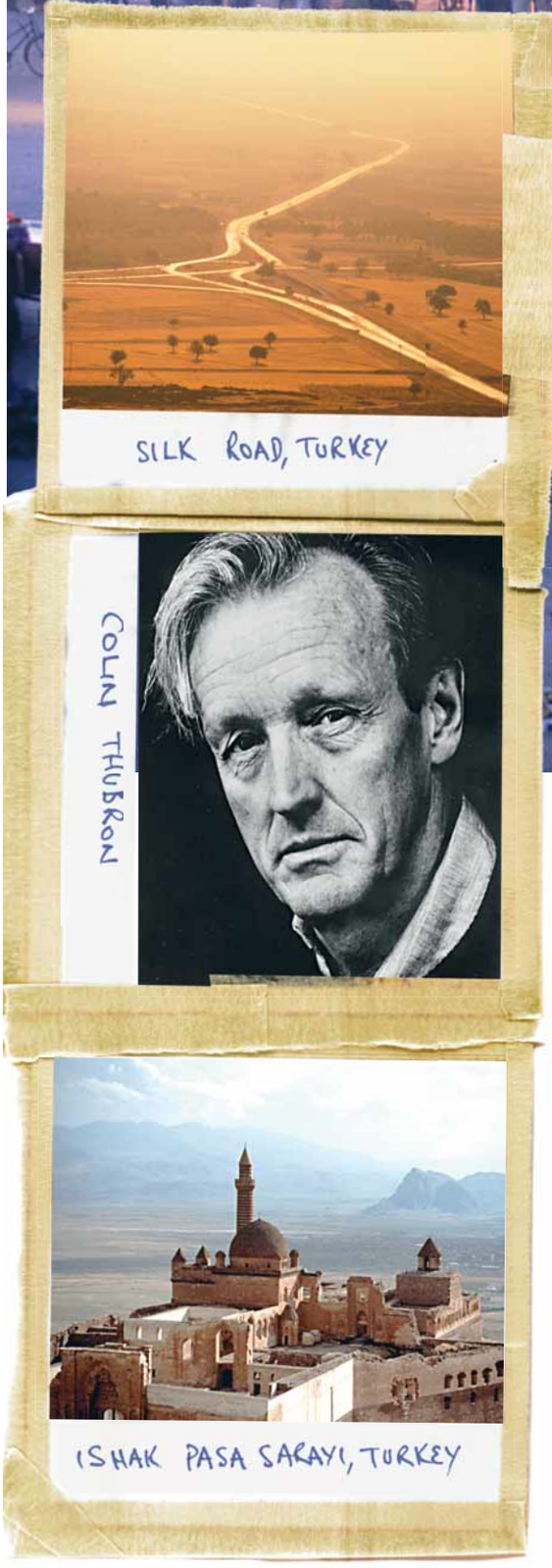
WORDS **CLAIRE SCOBIE**

Roam alone

Everybody wants to be a travel writer, but few go to the lengths that English author Colin Thubron does.

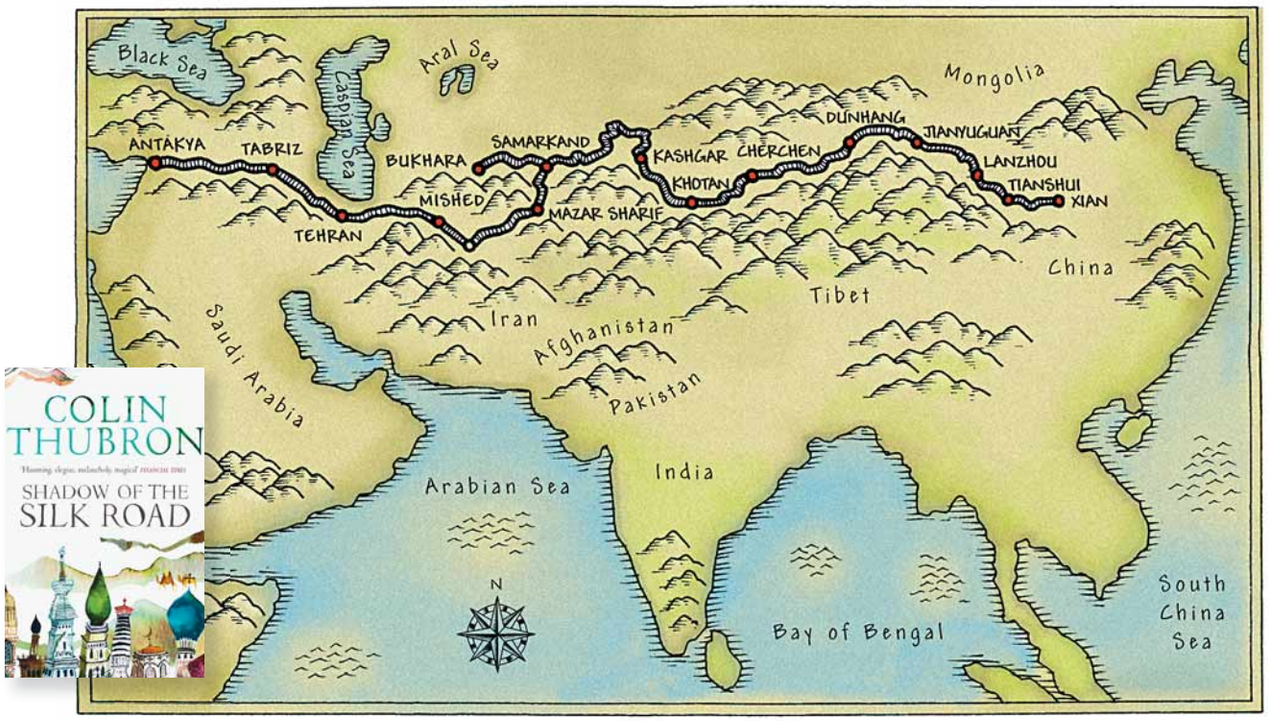


THUBRON PORTRAIT: SALLY SOAMES; PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

COLIN THUBRON ALWAYS travels alone. "Nobody is stupid enough to go with me," says the 68-year-old. From his first book, *Mirror To Damascus*, written in 1965, to his latest account of an eight-month, 11,500km odyssey across China, central Asia, war-shattered Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey, following "the ghost of the Silk Road", Thubron has travelled with one aim: to get to the heart of where he is and understand the essence of those he meets. "Everything has to be sacrificed for the fascination with the country."

He has been attacked in the Middle East by Palestinian refugees and followed by the KGB during the Brezhnev era. More recently he was quarantined for SARS in northwest China and nearly killed by a drunk driver in Kyrgyzstan. Nonetheless, says Thubron, he has "very rarely feared" for his life. "There's a great romance about travel, but in a way you're like a journalist looking for copy. You take risks and undergo hardships you'd never do if you were travelling for interest, let alone enjoyment."

One of the finest travel writers of his generation, respected both for his elegant, inimitable prose and great tenacity to endure, Thubron – who visited Australia to attend the Perth Writers Festival last month – is in the league of travel scribes such as Paul Theroux and Jonathan Raban. However, he also shares with the late writer-explorer Dame Freya Stark a refined sensibility and love of history. Throughout ❯



In *Shadow Of The Silk Road* (Vintage, $25), Thubron traces the ancient Silk Road trading route, stretching more than 11,000km from Antakya (Antioch) in Turkey to Xian in China.

> “His scene of undergoing root canal treatment without anaesthetic is unforgettable

FREYA STARK PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; MAP: LIONEL PORTIER

his nine travel books, the Eton-educated writer is often found rootling about among tombs and ruins in his attempts to make sense of the present by looking to the past.

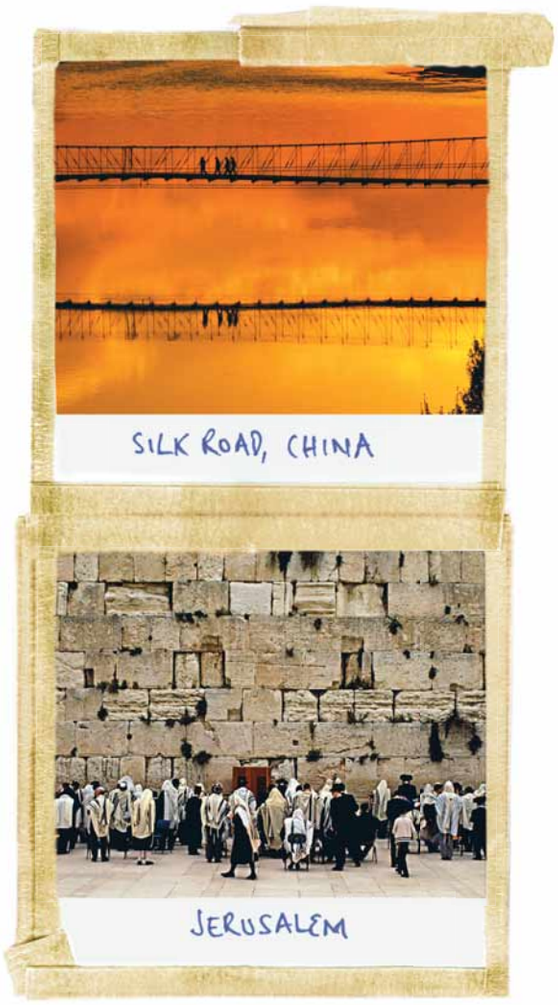
This is also the reason why, on his recent central Asian adventure, he found himself climbing an 18m sheer cliff to explore a 10th-century castle “with a rather romantic idea of what I was going to find at the top”. Stark, a “loved friend” of his youth, may have given him a map of the castles built by the fearsome Order of Assassins, but that didn’t prevent her protégé’s nerve failing halfway up. Somehow, Thubron, then 64, made it to the top, “heady with triumph”. His descent must have been even more terrifying as there’s no mention of it.

Thubron’s reticence to divulge the personal is a mark, perhaps, of his Englishness. It’s also a quality of humility. He goes to these far-flung realms that most of us avoid, to listen; to try to be “a clear glass of some kind so the country can shine through”. These efforts not to “cloud” his experiences give startling verisimilitude to the personalities he meets en route. He recounts (*In Siberia*, 1999) meeting Viktor, who lives in Pokrovskoe village, birthplace of Rasputin, the dubious mystic who had great influence over Tsar Nicholas II.

Viktor’s face “was like a ghastly distillation” of Rasputin himself. “Greasy locks of hair dangled round his shoulders [like a] black halo… A drunk, of course… he lived by selling potatoes.”

In his *Shadow Of The Silk Road* (2006), he shares steaming noodles with a poor Chinese family and it’s the “redundant” father dressed in a “frayed blue jacket and Mao cap” who haunts him. “I felt the old man epitomised a sort of Chinese who is isolated, the sort who gave their lives to socialism. Their day, it’s gone away from them.”

This propensity to capture the universal in the particular and give humanity to the lives of ordinary people has become one of Thubron’s hallmarks. After writing four books on “confined areas” – Cyprus ›



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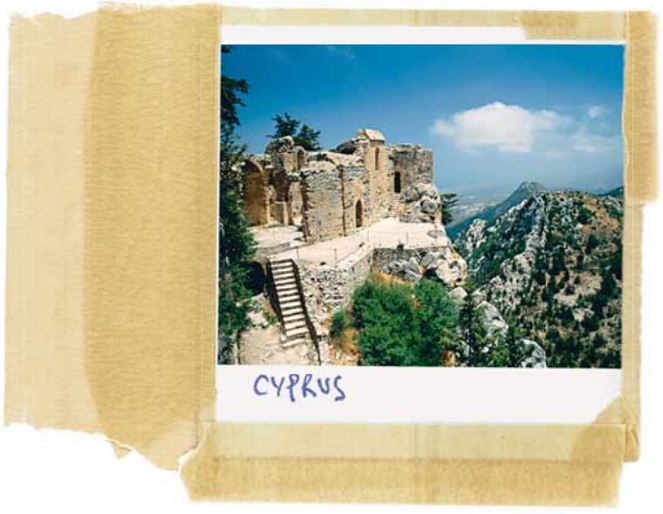

Damascus, Lebanon and Jerusalem – Thubron felt confident enough to tackle the vast regions of Russia and China, and rely more on chance encounters and his "own experiences and impressions".

In part, he puts this down to a serious road accident he suffered in 1978, which gave him time to study Russian (he later learned Mandarin and is fluent in both). Laid up in hospital, he dreamed of following the Great Wall of China. As that was then impossible, "the next best thing seemed to advance on Soviet Russia." The result, *Among The Russians* (1983) was followed four years later with *Behind The Wall*, about China 10 years after the Cultural Revolution. While the importance of this immense event was the leitmotif for the journey, it isn't what stays with his readers.

"People are drawn to the few personal pieces in my books," he says. "It always amuses me. There were lots of insights about the Cultural Revolution… but frequently what people remember is how I released an owl at night so it wouldn't be eaten by the Chinese. Recently with the *Silk Road*, I can be sure that the one thing people are going to remember is how I went to a dentist in Iran and had a rather terrible afternoon being drilled."

His scene of undergoing root canal treatment without anaesthetic is unforgettable. After two hours, the dentist, "like a stocky mechanic with a crew cut", gives up and a female dentist wearing a chador takes over. Thubron survives to continue following the web of intertwined trade routes that make up the Silk Road. As he goes, he revisits his long-standing curiosity in Islamic cultures in a region frequently divided by cultural boundaries rather than any drawn on a map.

Thubron remains nagged by self-doubt, surprising, given the confidence his writing exudes. He still strains to "get people right" and unlike others in his genre, notably Bruce Chatwin who made it an art form, invents nothing. "It just wouldn't work," he says. "What I am trying to find is what is essential to them, which in my case is mostly what they believe in, where their trust is, rather than what their political theories are or their social position."

A novelist as well as travel writer, Thubron alternates between the two genres. The personal, which is "left untouched" when writing travel finds expression in his novels – "not autobiographical in fact, but often in feeling." His latest novel, *To The Last City*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2002.

For as long as he can remember, Thubron wanted to be a writer. His mother, who came from the family of the first English poet laureate, John Dryden, encouraged her son's love of words. The thrill of travelling ensued, as between 1947 and 1951 the young Thubron would visit his parents in Canada and the US, where his father was posted as a military attaché. "It opened my eyes to a bigger world at a terribly impressionable age," he recalls. "I've never forgotten going from drab south-east England after the war, where I'd never see a neon light, to Times Square."

Although his parents were often away, home – when not at boarding school – was Pheasants Hatch, an atmospheric, part-Tudor house in East Sussex that Thubron recently sold, after his mother's death.›

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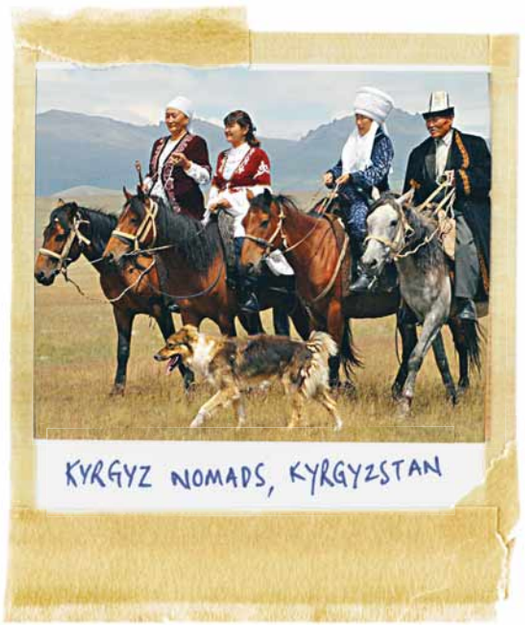

It was, he says, "a huge wrench, but [to keep it] would have pulled me back to the past." These days he divides his time between London and Philadelphia, where his partner of 13 years, Margreta de Grazia, professor of English literature at the University of Pennsylvania, lives. He likes to write in solitude at a friend's bleak farmhouse in Wales. "I'm an obsessive. I like to disappear inside my books. I love the immersion."

When he travels, he's equally immersed and, despite more than 40 years crisscrossing the globe and making a career from writing about "countries we've been taught to fear", remains seduced by the thrill of the unknown. In *Shadow Of The Silk Road*, he writes, "Thousands of miles from anyone who knows you, you have the illusion that your past is lighter… Dangerously, you may come to feel invulnerable." Unlike most, he doesn't seem to get lonely or miss creature comforts.

Spare a thought then, for de Grazia. "It's harder for her," he says. "We were on the end of a satellite phone together, but this was [for] emergencies only. She knew I didn't want to be disturbed too much or pulled back." While most of us don't have the luxury of time, or Thubron's courage, he thinks the ideal when travelling is, "to switch off your own cultural world. For me, this means to travel alone… to get off the tourist route, not doing the expected or what's laid down, doing whatever you devise that you want to do."

His journeys give him, "a different feeling about home… a quickened interest in the outside world." And, of course, a shelf full of books. So does he have a favourite? "People always say how pleasing it must be to have a line of books – what a sense of achievement. I never quite feel that way. They seem like disordered relatives of mine who I'm not terribly fond of. Usually one's too fat and another's a bit inaccurate. If I'm forced to say, it's probably the last one. Luckily, I tend to feel that my last one was better than any before, before I get them in perspective and see that that isn't so."

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