



Keith Rossiter on Tuesday

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Imagination takes flight in lockdown

WHAT do we have in common with our ancestors from the 17th century? Thanks to Covid-19 and the lockdown, more than you might imagine.

The 17th century was a time of constant turmoil – from the English Civil Wars and the beheading of a monarch, to constant conflict with our European neighbours.

The Great Plague of London (1665) sent those who could afford second homes scurrying off to their country retreats (sound familiar?).

At that time, most people strayed little from their home town – a bit like us in the Covid-19 lockdown.

But it was also an era of adventure for some, like the Somerset-born explorer and pirate William Dampier, who kept the nation enthralled with books about the exotic places they saw.

Suddenly the coronavirus has made the world seem as dangerous and distant as it must have to our 17th century ancestors. When the prospect of even a summer holiday in Brittany might seem daunting, the idea of a bird-watching trip to Africa is just ridiculous.



Now a beautiful book has come my way to fill the gap in the same way that Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World* did for stay-at-home Brits in 1697.

The Birder's Guide to Africa, by Michael Mills, with photos mostly by Tasso Leventis, goes beyond your standard bird identification book.

Mills covers continental Africa plus all of the islands that might be considered part of Africa, from Sao Tome to Madagascar, in considerable detail.

His guide starts with an analysis of what makes a country worth visiting,

based on five criteria – birds found nowhere else; other things to do and see apart from bird-watching; comfort; budget; and challenge.

I don't wish to knock our native birds which, apart from the jackdaws roosting in the tree outside my bedroom window, give me great pleasure. But a mere 574 species have

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been recorded here. Africa has almost 2,800 species, so good luck ticking all of those off your list.

Mills describes each country, its habitats, species, safety and ease of travel. The book opens up wonderful vistas, beyond the usual destinations we all know about.

While Madagascar, Tanzania and South Africa might be obvious choices, there's a lot more to Africa. Visit Gabon, for example, which is "an ecotourist's destination that is hard to beat".

Here you might be lucky enough to spot the gorgeous black-headed bee-eater. (Why, though, would one mention the black head when naming this bird which has beautiful green wings and an orange body?)

"This forest-filled Central African country", Mills writes, "...would be a major birding destination if it were not for the extortionate prices and lack of tourism operators."

If you visit parts of the Gabon coast in October to January you will have the best chance of seeing the "charismatic" African river martin.

Finally, I have to admit that this book has opened up a flood of nos-

talgia for me. I grew up in rural Africa and the birds remain vivid in my mind. The sight of a carmine bee-eater flashing through the trees like a splash of arterial blood; the unforgettable alarm call of the go-away bird in the wooded savannah of northern Zimbabwe; the raucous call of the hadada ibis strutting across the lawn in KwaZulu-Natal; an explosion of thousands of red and yellow bishop birds startled off their nests in a marsh in Mozambique.

The Birder's Guide to Africa is described as "the first comprehensive and detailed guide to birding the African region". It covers 68 countries and island states, 142 bird families illustrated with photographs, and 2,792 species.

The book is published by Go-Away-Birding (<http://goawaybirding.com>). Launched originally at the British Birdwatching Fair in 2017, it is available in the UK through Natural History Book Store and Wild Sounds at £34.95.

This 544-page guide is essential reading when planning any trip to Africa – and sumptuous reading for those of us stuck at home.

Haircut trip was welcome, but I might keep my clippers

I'VE never considered going for a haircut to be a 'treat' as much as a chore, but getting my locks tamed recently brought a whole new set of challenges into play.

I have not, thankfully, gone the full lockdown period without getting a trim, as clippers were purchased from a well-known online retailer and a loved one was persuaded to wield them for my benefit.

The arrangement suited me fine, and I would happily have continued getting my hair cut at home instead of the high street, were it not for my loved one's insistence that it could be better done by a professional.

So, as a result, on my day off I was queued outside the barber shop with a mask on my face and my coat in a plastic bag beside me.

As someone who prefers a walk-in



ANDY PHILLIPS

barber shop to a pre-arranged appointment at a salon, I had thought that the whole thing would be easy.

Yet hairdressers have had to take significant measures in order to wield their comb and scissors in the post-lockdown era.

First off, it meant waiting outside the barber shop instead of in it.

That made sense to me, as clearly a shop of about 15 metres square could not enforce social distancing while also having three customers in the chair.

I was lucky and it was a dry, warm day, but I do wonder what will hap-

pen when we get rainy days. It will have to be umbrellas at the ready, I suppose.

My coat had to go in a plastic bag as belongings needed to be kept separate once you were through the door.

The ubiquitous hand sanitiser was on a table, too, just in case I had gone five minutes without washing my hands.

I waited and stared through the window while those in the barbers chairs had their hair cut, and a long queue started to form behind me.

I could see people counting the length of the queue as they joined it,

and then dividing that by the number of barbers were at their posts, to create a sort of maths equation that would tell them how long they would probably have to wait.

Even once there was an empty seat inside, it had to be wiped it down before I could even get over the threshold, but thankfully it wasn't long.

While I was already wearing a mask, the apron that goes across your lap to catch the hair was replaced by a clear single-use one, made of the sort of lightweight plastic you might put your sandwiches into.

But any thought of how I looked was quickly gone when I realised what the hairdressers themselves have to deal with. A full length plastic gown, mask and gloves all made it

feel like they were ready to operate on me, let alone give me a trim.

They worked quickly, and to their credit did not moan about any of the measures, even saying that they would likely continue wearing gloves now that they had gotten used to it.

But it looked like hard graft. I must admit to finding masks not the easiest things to wear, as they steam up your glasses, so how they managed to continue without overheating I don't know.

And trying to have a conversation when you are both wearing a mask is another challenge altogether, so it's not really a social affair any more.

The relief of getting my hair cut was definitely worth going to get it done, but I might be tempted to keep those clippers – just for a rainy day, of course.