



World of Wonder

by Bill Weir as told to Megan Michelson

illustrations by Dan Williams

photographs courtesy of CNN and Philip Bloom

When veteran news reporter BILL WEIR signed on to host CNN's new travel show, *The Wonder List*, an eight-episode series that premiered this spring, he had no idea what his journey would bring him. In the end, he found joy, beauty and faith in humankind.

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My second favorite sound in the world is the thump of airplane tires hitting the tarmac in some corner of the world I've never seen. I adore that moment when everything is new and the brain is forced to make sense of strange signs, smells and rhythms.

In my early years as an anchor at ABC, breaking news usually waited on the other side of the jetway and deadlines got in the way of pure exploration. But in 2005, Diane Sawyer tossed me a plum assignment that was deliciously vague. "Go explain what's happening in China," she told me.

It was a chance at a completely different kind of storytelling. Instead of a mad search for officials or eyewitnesses to an often-tragic news event, I had over a billion potential subjects. I could wander in search of people, places and moments that would help us understand the seismic economic boom happening in China.

It was fantastic.

I filled up my passport with similar grand projects and eventually my favorite



sound in the world became the click of the front door latch after weeks abroad, the welcome home from family, and the question, "How was it?"

Ever since, I've angled for assignments that allowed me to explore big questions in strange lands. My new show, *The Wonder List*, is a culmination of all of that wanderlust. But this is not a travel show for travel's sake. It is a search for amazing stories of change in places of natural and cultural wonder worth savoring, while anyone still can.

The bigger idea is that we all have a wonder list filled with places we care about and worry about. It could be a drive-in theater or a small town dance hall. It could be a hiking trail or surf break. I live in Manhattan but spend every possible weekend among the bears, beavers and birds around a perfect little lake 50 miles outside of the city. Watching the sun set there, listening to the frogs, I often wonder, how long can it stay this perfect? And what do I have to do to make sure it does?



LEFT: Just across the river from the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, *The Wonder List* crew captures a landscape littered with waste.

RIGHT: Visitors to the Taj Mahal pose for a picture. Air pollution has discolored some of the marble at the UNESCO World Heritage site that attracts 3 million visitors a year.





"I have a St. Augustine quote written on the first page of my wonder list journal: 'The world is a book, and those who don't travel read only one page.'" —Bill Weir

My daughter, Olivia, inspired this show. We are very close. Like her old man, she is an only child and we share a birthday, almost to the minute. The day she turned 10, I turned 46 and after a depressing bit of candle counting, I realized that this little girl will reach my age in the year 2050.

Now, every time I read a scientific projection about water use or extinction trends, it helps me imagine what grown-up Olivia's world will look like in the middle of the 21st century. Will there still be tigers in the wild or glaciers in the Alps? Will visitors to the Holy Land still have a River Jordan deep enough to recreate the baptism of Jesus? Will there still be gorgeous little islands in the South Pacific where sun-kissed tribes live completely off the grid?

My grandparents lived from the Wright brothers to the space shuttle. That's a lot of change in one lifetime, but Olivia will see a boom in technology and population unlike anything in human history.

When I was born, there were fewer than 4 billion people on the planet. When Olivia hits middle age, that number will be closer to 10 billion. They will strive for nice houses and cars and the iPhone 35, their wants and needs changing our blue marble in ways we can't even imagine.

With *The Wonder List*, I set out to make a love letter to the planet as we know it now—eight special time capsules that Olivia can watch with her kids to understand what has changed and why.

Bill Weir enjoys a gondola ride through the canals of Venice, Italy, featured in the "Venice" episode of *The Wonder List*.

Sharing the Planet

A dramatist believes that in the worst of conditions, the human spirit will prevail. A comedian believes that in the best of conditions, humans will screw things up.

Frankly, I go back and forth, depending on the day or the scientist I've just interviewed.

Think about it this way: The Earth is around 4.6 billion years old. If you scale that massive number down to around my age and pretend the Earth is 46 years old, humans showed up four months ago and the Industrial Revolution began one minute ago. In those 60 seconds we have cut down half the forests and eaten half the fish. We've diverted almost every river on the planet, changed the chemistry of the ocean and the sky, and even turned Oklahoma into an earthquake zone.

But we have also managed to extend life expectancy, lift millions of people out of poverty and feed 7 billion mouths each day. Once people realize the unintended consequences of our ambition, I believe that same human innovation can pull us back from the brink.

Our final episode in Florida's Everglades is a good example. A century ago, 95 percent of the shore birds in Florida were wiped out to fill the demand for colorfully feathered women's hats. We'll never get those numbers back, but once sense trumped fashion, the slaughter stopped. People eventually realized that you can't pave over an ecosystem like the Everglades without fouling the drinking water, killing all the fish in Florida Bay and destroying natural hurricane protection.



So a generation after the Army Corps of Engineers ripped it apart, they are now under orders to fix it.

Michael Grunwald, who wrote a wonderful Everglades history called *The Swamp*, gave me a great quote in our Florida episode. "Animal control gets thousands of calls a year from people with alligators in their backyards. Nobody realizes that we moved into the gator's backyard," he said.

In India, I learned that it's a lot easier to care about the plight of tigers if you don't wake up every day afraid of tigers. Some 400 million Indians don't have indoor plumbing, so they go off to squat in the forest where it is awfully easy to be mistaken for prey. So there is fear. And where there is fear, misunderstanding and destruction often follow.

Whether it's tigers in India, coyotes in Los Angeles or black bears in New Jersey, we have to realize that we are sharing this planet. And the planet is a much nicer place if one species—us—hasn't killed, caged, or controlled



every other species, no matter how inconvenient that may seem.

In each hour-long episode of *The Wonder List*, I tried to highlight the work of unsung folks who get up each day and try to fight off devastation with innovation, whether it's a field biologist trying to save an endangered tortoise in Galapagos or an activist trying to keep the Dead Sea from evaporating due to human conflict. These folks turned out to be surprising wells of hope. So often, the answers we are looking for are already there and the only thing missing is political will.

Meeting individuals who devote their lives to projects bigger than themselves always fills me with faith in our species.

Travel with Meaning

The best thing I can do is spread the idea of more conscientious travel. From Galapagos to Venice, countless locals told me they want tourists to come—and often need tourists to survive—but they want folks to visit their hometowns the right way, not just for their own quality of life but to give their guests the best experience possible.

Until Venetians put up a squawk, massive cruise ships would dump thousands of people in St. Mark's Square, turning quaint medieval streets into a sweaty scrum. Most would buy an overpriced slice of pizza and a cheap mask, get back on the boat, and tell folks back home that Venice is overrated.

Most of the good people on that ship came with pure curiosity and good intentions. But they didn't know that to truly experience La Serenissima, you have to hear the echo of your footsteps in an empty campo. You have to spend a couple of nights and watch the way the light changes. You have to get off the beaten path and find a little inn where the old lady grows her own tomatoes for the sauce. When you pay that bill, you get the satisfaction of knowing your money will keep the soul of the city alive.

So often we are sold tour packages that promise carefree pampering while we tick our bucket lists, but all of my best memories while traveling were made by breaking from the safety of the herd and exploring on my own.

My wife and I went to Venice for our first wedding anniversary in 1997, and I remember so many quaint little artisanal shops. We bought handmade books and shoes and *commedia del' arte* masks that we still cherish today. But a lot of those local craftsmen got fed up with the higher costs and growing crowds and moved to the mainland. In their place are purveyors of cheap plastic tchotchkes or masks made in China.

It may be our romantic memory, but Venice felt more alive back then. There are still pockets that carry the same vibe, but I met so many Venetians who worry that their town is becoming a soulless museum that only the rich can afford to enjoy.

For the show, I went in search of great stories. When I learned about a little Greek island called Ikaria where people live impossibly long lives, I had to go gather their secrets before the modern world came creeping in.



Ikaria is essentially a pocket of longevity, where the island's residents are living unusually long, healthy and happy lives. There is no magic bullet, instead there is a buckshot of life choices like fresh food and rigorous movement throughout the day. On this island, no one wears a watch or cares about what kind of car they drive. They have no concept of American-style stress. The elderly aren't warehoused on Ikaria. They are considered vital members of the community, and lonely isolation is almost forbidden. If you don't show up to drink and gossip, people will come looking for you.

If anything, their secret to longevity and happiness is the number of people in their lives they feel comfortable hugging. The places with the strongest social connections and family units tend to express the most satisfaction in life.

Let Go to Truly See

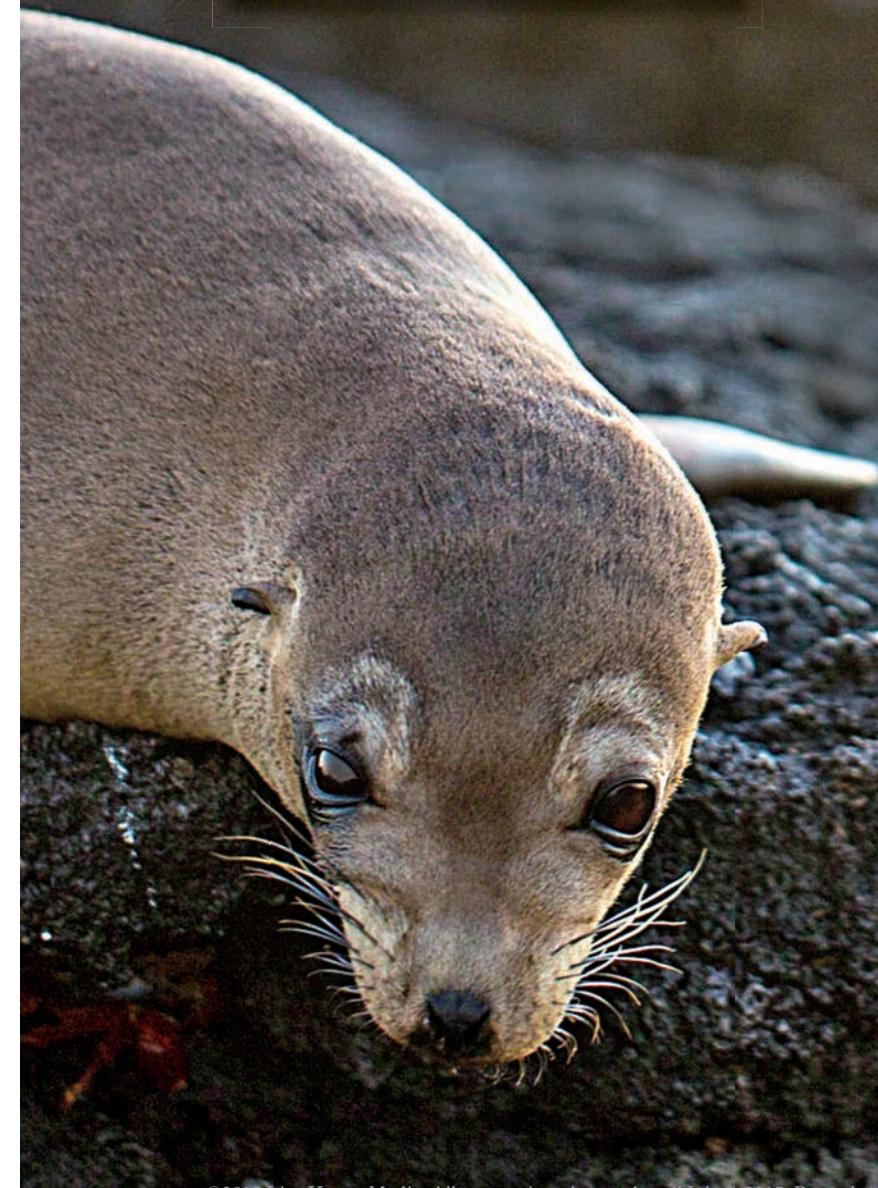
Where should you go, if the world was entirely yours to explore? And what will you gain by traveling there? Those are questions only you can answer. But, if you're open to suggestions, I have a few.

THIS PAGE: A Galapagos giant tortoise enjoys a meal at Galapagos National Park. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** A young sea lion rests on the rocks of Fernandina, Galapagos Islands, just after sunset. **INSET:** A Galapagos land iguana perches among the trees on North Seymour Island. Bill Weir prepares to join the sea iguana on an underwater escapade off the coast of Champion Island and reflects on the day shortly after setting sail for Fernandina.



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—Bill Weir





In Ikaria, Greece, Konstantinos Spanos, 101, says the key to long life is modesty in everything, including “food, women and entertainment.” He reads five hours a day.

Madagascar is hands-down the most exotic place I've ever been. It's a different world, with plants and animals that exist nowhere else. It is a very poor country, but largely safe for tourists, and they have amazing food, one of the few benefits of being colonized by the French.

The little island of Mota Lava in Vanuatu is among the most beautiful places I've seen, populated by some of the warmest folks I've ever met. Beaches like sugar. Azure seas full of fish. The island took a real beating from Cyclone Pam, but people who live there are determined entrepreneurs who want everyone to know they are open for business.

Our trip to Chamonix, France, was my first visit to the Alps, and despite a youth spent playing in the Rockies, I was absolutely blown away by the landscape there.

Travel—like life—is all about expectation management. Years ago,

I would pin a pretty brochure above my desk, save up, count the days, and when vacation finally arrived, the view from the room couldn't possibly live up to my expectations. Suddenly I'm starting my vacation angry, debating whether to demand a different room or move hotels. My mindset was always selfish.

But when I started traveling the world for work, lodging decisions were out of my hands and food choices were made on the fly. Once the control freak in me let go, it became hugely liberating. I was able to live in each moment without thinking about what I might be missing at the other hotel down the beach. Mishaps became more manageable, pleasant surprises became more common.

So now when I plan vacations, my itinerary is much looser. I try to find smaller, owner-operated lodgings at the front end of the stay and a couple of nights in a nicer hotel at the back end. That way, if it feels like we're roughing it too much, we have a spa to look



forward to. If we're pleasantly surprised by some obscure B&B, we can cancel the big hotel and go native for the entire trip.

I have a St. Augustine quote written on the first page of my wonder list journal: “The world is a book, and those who don't travel read only one page.”

For so much of human history, people lived and died within 20 miles of the spot they were born, so it's no wonder we evolved into tribal animals, suspicious of whatever lives over the next hill. Travel changes that mindset. It forces you to rethink your own manners and traditions. And it makes you realize how much you have in common with that person walking by, whether you're in Shenzhen, China, or Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

Oftentimes I'll enter a strange, war-torn land with my guard fully up and discover a kind of universal hospitality that transcends national politics or language barriers. There are bad actors everywhere, but they are vastly outnumbered by folks with the same hopes and dreams as you—a full belly, a safe home, a slightly better life for the kids.

Travel doesn't have to be expensive and elaborate. After a decade in New York, my wife and I still play a game we call subway roulette, where we take the train to a random stop, get off and explore. You can do the same in almost any town.

No matter where I am, each day I ask myself: Was I surprised today? Did I learn today? Did I love someone today?

If I can answer yes to all, I know I'm living a happy life. When I'm on the road for a passion project—or just coming home full of new discoveries—the answer is always yes. [lh](#)



How to Travel Meaningfully Six Tips from Bill Weir

Mix it up. Pamper yourself with a couple of days poolside at a spa resort, but then ask around for the best off-the-beaten-path bungalow where the innkeeper grows your lunch.

Hire a local driver or someone who can guide and translate. Before you leave, go online and make some connections. Reach out to the local paper or even the mayor's office and explain that you're looking for a dependable guide who will show you around for a negotiated price.

Read a novel set in your destination while you're there. I read *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga in India, *Shadow Country* by Peter Matthiessen in the Everglades, and Ernest Hemingway's *Across the River and Into the Trees* in Venice.

Capture your trip elegantly. You should be able to sum up a 10-day safari in less than 20 photos. One good shot of the yawning lion is enough.

Get closer to your meals. For at least one meal, catch that fish (or at least pick one out as the fishermen come in for the day). Ask to see the garden or watch the preparation.

Crash a party by timing your trip with a local festival season. In Ikaria, we arrived during Panegyri season, a weeklong Greek Orthodox blowout, where every village throws a party each night. Locals make you help cook the goat and pour the wine. They make you dance with everyone in the village. For one night, I felt like a real Ikarian, and it was amazing.

For video clips, behind-the-scenes footage and extensive photo galleries of Bill's travels across five continents, visit: cnn.com/shows/wonder-list.

After a successful first season of *The Wonder List* with Bill Weir, a CNN Original Series, the network recently announced a second season will air beginning in early 2016.

TOP: Children of the Yake Village, Tanna Island, Vanuatu. **BOTTOM:** Lido Junction, North of the Dead Sea, Israel.

