

TRAVEL

# Following the footsteps of a radical explorer forgotten by history

Feted by royalty and friends with other intellectual luminaries of his day, George Forster was one history's greatest explorers. An early advocate of racial and gender equality, retracing his journeys is an eye-opening way to see the world.

By Andrea Wulf

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Jean Francois Rigaud, Portrait of Dr Johann Reinhold Forster and his son

George Forster c. 1780 Oil on canvas  
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA

What ever happened to traveling? We’ve all seen photos like the ones of long queues snaking up Mount Everest, hordes of influencers overrunning the once-quiet island of Santorini in Greece and so many visitors descending on Maya Bay—the setting of *The Beach*—that it has been damaged. Too many of us now travel to see a spot that countless

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pulls me in. I don’t mean cultural attractions with historical significance, but following in the footsteps of men and women whose lives and ideas so captivate me I end up writing books about them. That is my driving force—all in the name of research. Kind of. But most importantly it can take you to places far from the social media crowd.

Where they went, I try to go (as long as the travel budget allows it). Following the trail forged by the explorer and scientist Alexander von Humboldt was

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thrilling – and sometimes daunting—but it gave me my book *Invention of Nature* and took me to Venezuela to see the great plains of the Llanos and the rainforest. I traveled to the remote Orinoco Maipures rapids at the border between Colombia and Venezuela, I saw the Aztec sculptures he sketched in Mexico and climbed up and down volcanoes and mountains in Ecuador. I did the same for George Forster, the slender pony-tailed adventurer whose travels and achievements once captivated monarchs, poets and scientists but who has now been largely forgotten—something I hope my new book, *The Traveler*, will rectify. In 1772, at the age of seventeen, he joined Captain James Cook's second voyage on the *Resolution* as the assistant naturalist and draughtsman. He was an extraordinary scientist, revolutionary and passionate believer in humankind – and probably the most fascinating man you've never heard of.

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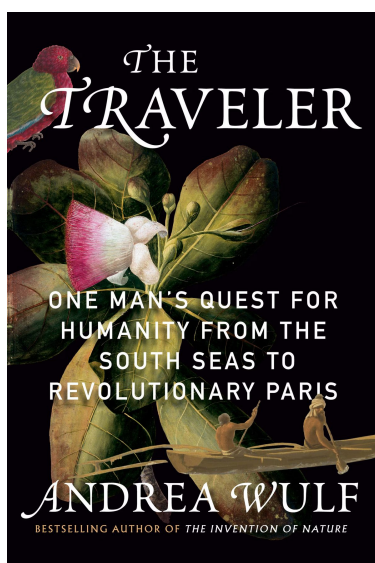
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The *Resolution* voyage shaped his life and thinking—a three-year exploration that brought them deeper into the icy polar seas of Antarctica than anyone before them. They sailed some 75,000 miles, roughly the same distance as if they had gone three times around the equator. They stopped at New Zealand, Tahiti, Tonga, the Vanuatu archipelago and many other South Pacific islands. Forster walked along black volcanic beaches, witnessed cannibalism, faced fierce warriors, enjoyed local dishes such as roasted yams, barbecued pork and coconut pies with a crust of baked bananas. He recorded languages and customs, observed rituals and described clothing, hairstyles and jewelry—wherever they anchored he “could not

wait the moment which should bring us acquainted with the inhabitants of this land.” For Forster this was a voyage of human interaction and unlike most of his contemporaries who regarded indigenous people as inferior beings, he approached them with a remarkable unbiased attitude. He returned imbued with a deep-seated belief in the equality of races.



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I believe one of the reasons why he was so unusual for his time was that he became a traveler at the age of ten when he accompanied—as a botanist—his father on a wild expedition to Russia. From that time, George Forster traveled for much of his life. He was a

traveler in body  
and mind, always  
on the move and always fascinated by  
people. He was a perpetual outsider,  
without roots to anchor him to a place.  
Yet I believe this was also the reason why  
he embraced the otherness of others. His  
life is a reminder of the importance of  
love, kindness and humanity—and  
traveling.

On his return he published his famous *A Voyage Round the World* in 1777 and was feted across Europe. Everybody wanted to meet the young explorer—George III, Benjamin Franklin and the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna, amongst many others. He was friends with Germany's most famous poet, Goethe, a mentor to Alexander von Humboldt, and knew Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine. He married the fiercely independent Therese Heyne, who had a great love for books ... and men ... and accepted her affairs. In his mid-thirties he was pulled into the vortex of the French Revolution and became a co-founder of the short-lived Mainz Republic, the first republic

on German soil.

**(Who really discovered Antarctica?  
Depends who you ask.)**

Trying to understand Forster brought me to libraries and archives, where I read thousands of letters that reveal a man who was honest with himself and the wider world. But because he was a traveler, I also packed my bags. My destinations and routes were determined by where he went. I marched through European cities with photocopies of 18<sup>th</sup> century engravings and maps to figure out where he had worked, lived and walked. His house in London in Percy Street, for example, is today an Indian restaurant where I had a quite good curry. I spent a memorable day in Kassel, Germany, where Forster had worked as a professor of natural history and once dissected an elephant that exploded, rushing through the streets for hours with the remarkably energetic retired director of the local Stadtmuseum (city museum), now in his eighties.

But I also ventured further afield to the South Pacific. At one point, I found myself sailing towards the crushing surf of Tahiti's reef in a small outrigger sailing canoe—far too close for my taste but it felt entirely appropriate because the *Resolution* was almost shipwrecked here. When Forster first arrived, he was captivated by the island. "It was one of those beautiful mornings which the poets of all nations have attempted to describe, when we saw the isle of O-Taheite, within two miles before us," he wrote on 16 August 1773 as the *Resolution* approached Tahiti—an island lifted from the emerald sea, revealing its volcanic origins in the high mountains and black sands. He was even more fascinated by the people. An intuitive

ethnographer, his detailed accounts are still regarded as the best descriptions of Polynesian culture before European contact.

I spent three weeks in New Zealand—or Aotearoa to use its Māori name. My first encounter with Māori hospitality was on the day I arrived, delayed by 12 hours, when the director of a Māori travel agency met me at the airport with six enormous bags of food for my onward journey, ensuring that I didn't go hungry like the crew on the *Resolution*. I hiked for five days along the glorious Queen Charlotte Sound at the northern part of the South Island. The *Resolution* anchored three times here, and I wanted to experience the landscape where Forster had collected plants. Nothing had prepared me for the mesmerizing otherworldliness of the forests and it made me realize just how strange it must have been for Forster 250 years ago. Tree ferns lacing the sky and ancient trees covered in hanging moss and so many small ferns that miniature forests grew upon the branches—entire ecosystems

suspended in air. Everything was green, cushioned, lush and fecund, dripping with water and life.



The tree that the Resolution crew used as a gateway at their anchorage in Dusky Sound in  
ANDREA WULF

I love the slowness of walking, rather than rushing from one place to the next. Travelling today has become so fast that it's almost impossible to imagine how it must have been in previous centuries. As my body ached at night, I thought of the deprivation that Forster encountered—scurvy, weevil-infested ship's biscuit, freezing temperatures, incessant rain and so much more.

I made my way down to the southern tip of the South Island to Dusky Sound, the

expedition's first anchorage—an almost thirty-mile-long fjord carved out by glaciers. *The Resolution* was dwarfed by the mountains that dropped steeply into the water. Silhouettes of peaks and slopes in different shades of greens and greys were layered upon each other. Shadow, mist, rock and foliage softened by the distances. It's still a remote and wild place, and I had to get a helicopter and boat to get there. It was cold, wet and magnificent. I saw the rocky outcrop on which Forster had encountered the first Māori he ever met—an old man and two women. "Their hair was combed, tied on the crown on the head, and anointed with some oil or grease," Forster described them in his *A Voyage Round the World*, "white feathers were stuck in at the top; some had fillets of white feathers all round the head, and others wore pieces of albatross skin, with its fine white down in their ears."

We sailed into Wet Jacket Arm, a long inlet with dozens of waterfalls tumbling from perpendicular rocky cliffs. Forster spent a wet and stormy night here when

the waves had roared and lightning had illuminated the broiling water surface. The weather gods provided wind and rain too when I visited. “We saw the billows foaming, and furiously rolled above each other in livid mountains,” George said, “in a word, it seemed as if all nature was hastening to a general catastrophe”—he remembered it as the longest night of his life.

The most exciting moment for me was when I went to the small natural harbor in Dusky Sound where the *Resolution* had anchored in March 1773. I saw the stumps of the trees that the Resolution crew had felled to set up their observatory tent and I found the actual tree that they had used as their gangway—still leaning almost horizontally over the water, just as William Hodges, the expedition artist, had painted it. Unfathomable that it still exists. There I was, on the other side of the world, surrounded by mountains, ancient forests—and touching the same tree that

George Forster had walked along to get in and out of the *Resolution*. It felt as if time and space collided and some other dimension opened. He could have stepped out of the forest any minute, his bag full of plants.

At some stage during the research of this book my money ran out. So, I still have Antarctica on my list, as well as Easter Island, Tonga and Vanuatu. But that's okay. I'm in no rush. Forster was a born storyteller, who painted with words and his descriptions sing off the page. Where earlier explorers such as Christopher Columbus struggled to describe South America's landscape as anything more than green, Forster even turned the icy world of Antarctica into shades of blue, purple and green. So, at least we can travel with him in our mind. It won't give you that Instagram selfie, but it'll make your mind fly.

Andrea Wulf's book *The Traveler. One Man's Quest for our Humanity from the South Seas to Revolutionary Paris* is published by Knopf. You can purchase the book [here](#).