

# FIBER ART TRAVEL ADVENTURES

BY JANET MENDELSON

I was anxious. Not so much about spending four days sailing the coast of Maine aboard the *J. & E. Riggin*, an historic windjammer. No, it was the idea of traveling solo among more experienced knitters that had me in knots. Would their lingo leave me behind? Would I fail at dyeing yarn with seawater?

But by noon the first day out, my worries evaporated. Relaxing on deck, 13 knitters worked on individual projects as we got to know each other, following the pace set by wind and water. Knitting instruction at all levels was offered by our onboard expert, Mim Bird. Over four days, I learned to work new patterns while the old wooden schooner breezed by rocky islands covered with pines. We set aside needles when needed to help hoist or furl sails and to feast on gourmet meals prepared by Co-Captain Annie Mahle on an antique cast-iron stove. Talk came easily. Knitting was our common bond. We were members of a tribe.

That feeling is typical on adventurous trips designed for those with special interests in fiber arts. You're with your own kind—be they artisans, beginners, or admirers of craft. In places around the globe shared experiences spark creativity and expand everyone's cultural horizons.

Want to weave with Mayan women in Guatemala? Learn botanical dyeing in New Mexico or Norway? Explore the rich history of textiles in Poland? The possibilities are diverse. Added highlights range from cooking classes to winery tours, yoga, or dining with locals in their homes. Let's take a look.

HERE: Skeins dyed with seawater, drying overnight on the deck of the historic schooner

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: An Arts & Cultural Travel botanical dye workshop with artist India Flint in New Mexico.

BOTTOM: Arts & Cultural Travel art group exploring a cave in Central America—adventurous souls who even went zip-lining.



SHARON BLOMGREN

*I'm a believer in the transformative power of travel.*

## ARTS & CULTURAL TRAVEL

<https://artsandculturaltravel.com>

Twenty years ago, Sharon Blomgren, a jeweler and comforter maker, was running a tech company when she decided to lead destination art workshops. Her company, Arts & Cultural Travel, takes up to 12 participants per trip to Europe and the Americas. Everyone completes a hands-on project inspired by what they see and do.

“What I enjoy is watching women—and they are mostly women—who don't know each other, who are vulnerable, creating art that expresses themselves, and seeing this warmth that happens, the sharing that goes on,” says Blomgren. “An exchange takes place. They share resources, books, knowledge. I'm a believer in the transformative power of travel. That's how this idea came into play.”

Among A&CT's 2018 trips, weaver Brescia Karlovic-Logan will lead a group to Guatemala where she will simultaneously teach a simple weaving project to 15 women in a rural community and their visitors, a project that reflects their individual life stories. Their work will launch *Women's Woven Voices*, her traveling quilt exhibition to be created by 1,000 women globally. The travelers will also learn about chocolate making and its influence on Mayan culture.

Last year, the Australian botanical dye artist India Flint led a workshop in New Mexico. This year she'll again teach Being (t)here: Exploring the Poetics of Place, but this time in Norway where they will use natural materials, journaling, and stitching to create works infused with the surrounding landscape. In Ireland, mixed-media artist Shelley Rhodes' textile workshop will draw inspiration from the rugged coastline, a bit of pub crawling, and an Irish jig or two; months later, she'll lead another group in Sardinia, Italy.



SHARON BLOMGREN





JOLANTA SZYMZYK, EXPERIENCE POLAND

## EXPERIENCE POLAND

[www.experiencepoland.net](http://www.experiencepoland.net)

Jolanta Szymczyk, a textile artist immersed in Polish culture, design, and manufacturing traditions, also works closely with the Australian Textile Surface Design Association. As director of Experience Poland, she plans tours for up to seven people in places that connect her to her native land. Each is designed with the travelers' unique interests in mind, providing personalized networking opportunities with those who shape Poland's leading role in the field of textiles and its cultural scene. The itinerary often includes time to soak in hot springs and a cooking lesson making traditional dumplings.

"I need to feel a place's heart beating," says Szymczyk. "The places, the people we meet, and the traditions observed let me share stories, memories, but also [provide] rich and deep context to a lot of the experiences we encounter, giving my clients a unique insight into the country."

Since personally visiting the Baltic Miniature Textiles collection at the Gdynia Museum, a number of her tour participants had their miniatures accepted into other events in Ukraine and Romania, reports Szymczyk. "Our clients form their own creative networks and friendships with artists, designers, and practitioners and remain in contact with them afterwards."

*I need to feel a place's heart beating*



PETER DUDA, EXPERIENCE POLAND



CYNTHIA LECOUNT SAMAKÉ

## BEHIND THE SCENES ADVENTURES

<http://btsadventures.com>

During the 1990s, at the University of California, Davis, Cynthia LeCount Samaké taught World Textiles and led field research expeditions. Soon after, she traveled to Mexico and South America, feeding her dual passions: folk art and travel. She has now led arts tours for 22 years. Along the way, in Mali, West Africa, she married Barou Samaké, a Frenchman. In their company, Behind the Scenes Adventures, he's the Africa specialist. In February, one of his groups went to Ghana where they made glass beads, met fantasy coffin carvers, and, in workshops, printed batik yardage and Kente cloth.

"I choose destinations for unusual textile techniques and fabulous textiles, the cultural and historical interest, and for particular festivals that are not well-known," says LeCount Samaké. Deeply familiar with each destination, she wants participants to gain a better understanding of the culture and countries they visit. In her friend Latifah's apartment in Essaouira, Morocco, the group had a cooking lesson: working in shifts, charring eggplant, making crepes, and preparing their meal on a typical two-burner Moroccan stove.

In Bolivia during Carnival, BTS visitors last year met costume embroiderers and mask makers. They also visited weaving villages with a Bolivian friend LeCount Samaké has known for 30 years. In 2018, BTS trips head to Morocco, Bolivia, Ghana, Peru, India, Cambodia, and Thailand. In Argentina and Uruguay, knitters will spend time with a knitwear designer, tour heritage sites in Buenos Aires, and enjoy four days on an *estancia* (ranch) where they'll dye wool for a pattern created especially for them.



CYNTHIA LECOUNT SAMAKÉ

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP: Experience Poland visited the *Paper Objects* exhibition featuring a collection of handmade paper-based objects inspired by traditional Polish Textiles including the "Kontusz Sash" (Kontusz Belt) and selected paper artworks. The Kontusz Sash is a symbol of old Polish culture, frequently featured throughout Polish rich and turbulent history and literature.

BELOW: Paper artworks by students of Krakow's Fine Arts Academy in *Paper Objects* exhibition. (Right) Artistic director. Professor Małgorzata Buczek-Słedzińska (Left) Jolanta Szymczyk, Experience Poland

THIS PAGE

TOP: Visiting a village family of ikat skirt (*sampot hol*) weavers in rural Cambodia; the weaver is holding the frame that she uses to tie and bind the silk weft threads to be dyed into a pattern. Witnessing traditional textile methods and meeting the artists is an important part of the Behind the Scenes experience.

BELOW: A Behind the Scenes trip in Accra, Ghana. Elsa Shartsis of New York stamps her cotton fabric with hot wax as Ghanaian batik artist Tekper looks on Melanie Grishman and Jean Haefele work in the background.





JANET MENDELSON

## AUTHENTIC TRAVEL AND TOURS

[www.authentictravelandtours.com](http://www.authentictravelandtours.com)

As an artist, Joan Molloy Slack (known as Siobhan), focuses on felt-making, botanical printing, sculpture, and pottery. She's also a teacher, gallery owner, and, for the past 17 years, a tour leader organizing trips to Mexico, Scotland, France, Ireland, and within the U.S. Although she's temporarily cutting back on trips this year, Slack has planned at least two—a September fiber art tour in Ireland (her ancestral home), and felt-making, botanical printing workshops, and tours in northern Wisconsin.

## THE SCHOONER J. & E. RIGGIN

[www.mainewindjammer.com](http://www.mainewindjammer.com)

Back on the Maine windjammer under fair skies, we savored another breakfast fit for royalty while the crew ferried the day's needs to Warren Island, a state park: live lobsters, fresh corn—all the fixings for a signature Maine meal. The crew also hauled crates of sock yarn, basins, syringes, and packets of dye for our workshop on dyeing with seawater. On the island, Heather Monroe of Highland Handmades in Carmel, Maine, taught us that salt in seawater affects the pH level, altering the tone. "As a professional, it's sometimes stressful; as a creative, it's bliss," says Monroe.

Spring through autumn, the *Riggin* offers three knitting cruises and similar 3-, 4- and 6-day cruises for quilters, foodies, photographers, and others. While we dug into the lobster, my wet skein—a swirl of soft greens and melon yellow I named "Mojito"—warmed with others in a metal pan on the wood fire so the dyes could penetrate. Our work finished drying on deck overnight.

ABOVE: Three of 13 passengers on a 2017 knitters' cruise aboard the J. & E. Riggin in Penobscot Bay, Maine.

*Janet Mendelsohn*, a freelance writer and author of *Maine's Museums: Art, Oddities & Artifacts* (Countryman Press), especially enjoys writing about travel and the arts. She welcomes readers' story ideas. Contact her through [www.janetmendelsohn.com](http://www.janetmendelsohn.com).

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The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.

— William Faulkner

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