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# BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY: NADIA SAVOVA

**TRAVELER MAGAZINE**, published by *National Geographic*, recently launched a “Travelers of the Year” program to recognize “individuals who explore the world with passion and purpose.” Contributing editor George W. Stone described the 10 inaugural recipients as “dedicated voluntourists, green-minded adventurers and culture-embracing pilgrims [who] remind us that we have the power to reach beyond the bubble of our daily lives, learn from locals in far-flung places and make a difference both around the world and in our own neighborhoods.”

One of the honorees was Nadezhda (Nadia) Savova '06, a world traveler since her Furman days, during which she spent time in Spain, Cuba, Peru, Mexico, South Korea and points between and beyond. Her academic talent, energy and high-octane personality helped her earn the Donaldson-Watkins Medal for General Excellence when she graduated. And her interest in travel obviously never waned during her years of graduate work at Princeton University.

Here's Stone's article about her, reprinted with permission from the November-December issue of *TRAVELER*.

“Travel has taught me that the best things that happen to us are those we never planned for or could even imagine,” says 29-year-old Nadezhda Savova. When she inherited her great-grandmother's crumbling house in Gabrovo, in her native Bulgaria, the budding anthropologist turned a burden into an opportunity.

She organized a team of local volunteers and rebuilt the structure into a community-owned Bread House and Cultural Center where neighbors could come to bake loaves and form friendships. The project was such a success that the peripatetic Princeton Ph.D. student (she's traveled to 76 countries) established similar programs in a dozen countries, from Israel to Brazil, Russia, South Korea and the United States.

“Making bread is extremely low-cost and merely takes time, creating the perfect opportunity to talk, listen, and learn,” Savova says. “By breaking bread with people of all walks of life, even feuding groups could come together.”

The Bread Houses Network has evolved into a community-development model that can be replicated almost anywhere, provided there's an oven and an open mind.

“One of my favorite exchanges was in Cape Town,” Savova says. “An elderly white man and a young black orphan, who otherwise would never meet, laughed, joked, and baked for hours. In a short time, they formed a fascinating relationship, almost like grandparent to grandchild.”

**NG Traveler: Why is travel important?**

**Nadezhda Savova:** It's the time when we have to trust others and be truly vulnerable — which is, in reality, our chance to get liberated from the bondage of thinking we are in control of life.

**NGT: Can you point to one trip or experience that ignited your curiosity about the world?**

**NS:** I spent two months in Ethiopia, on a pilgrimage to the so-called Second Jerusalem — Lalibela. I saw poverty and hunger in the bodies and eyes of the people, but never saw them beg. Finally, I asked a woman why no one was begging. “People somehow help each other,” she said. “One is poor one day, another day another person is in need, so life just goes in cycles.” This simple answer taught me to appreciate the subtle ways in which people of different cultures not only survive, but find meaning and consolation in even the most desperate situations.

**NGT: What inspired you to travel in the way that has resulted in your being chosen as a Traveler of the Year?**

**NS:** I have always been instinctively drawn to bakeries when I travel because the soothing aroma of hot bread makes me feel at home. Over the past three years, I got more interested in breadmaking and began using it to bring diverse, even feuding, people together.

**NGT: Who is your hero and why?**

**NS:** I am deeply inspired by the women I've met in some of the poorest places in the world. From the *favelas* in Brazil to the shantytowns in India, from the descendants of the Maya in Mexico to the Bedouin tribes in Morocco, the women often do both men's and women's work, yet ceaselessly find the strength to smile and show genuine hospitality to strangers.

**NGT: What do you never leave home without when you travel?**

**NS:** A small bread stamp, in the Orthodox Christian tradition, with the image of St. Nicholas, the protector saint of travelers.

**NGT: What was your most surprising food experience on your travels?**

**NS:** Beyond experiences like crispy grasshoppers in Mexico and fried tarantulas in Laos, the food that surprised me most was dipping French fries into a Frosty — my “rite of passage” into American college culture.

**NGT: Name three places that you'd like to visit before you die.**

**NS:** Syria's Saydnaya Holy Mountain. It's one of the most holy places for Christians in the Middle East, where locals still speak Aramaic, the language of Christ. New Zealand for its fascinating Maori culture and majestic natural beauty. Timbuktu. It was described in a book of African tales my mom read to me as a child and gave us both a rare outlet for imagined travel while we were locked behind the Iron Curtain in Communist Bulgaria.

**NGT: Name one place you've been to that you think everyone should visit.**

**NS:** I must mention two places, since both are amazing and in the same part of the world: Cappadocia in Turkey is a valley of wind-eroded yellow sandstone formations dotted with caves and rock-hewn monasteries, while Bulgaria's Rose Valley is a plain of lavish green and pink when the roses bloom in May.



**NGT: What's next?**

**NS:** I will be developing five new Bread House programs across Bulgaria funded by an American foundation that supports our efforts to help strengthen civil society after socialism. [F]

**UPDATE:** In a recent email Nadia expanded on her new project: "I just defended my Ph.D. in cultural anthropology, and my topic was researching sustainable development and the role of community arts for local social cohesions. This is where I discovered the key role of traditional foods and their effectiveness in nurturing community.

"Why bread? It is perhaps the most universally known food (bread being made across the globe not from wheat alone but also gluten-free ingredients), and bread is also a uniquely cherished, special food, often considered sacred for the multiple transformations it undertakes from the grain and for its archetypal associations with notions and memories of home, family, safety, fellowship and care.

"Collective bread-making is also among the most universal art forms, resembling pottery and sculpture, conducive to sculpting and decorating, attracting people of all ages and walks of life. It does not require any special skills, talent, or education, making it a very effective tool for inter-generational and inter-cultural dialogue and for integration of people with disabilities. We also employ collective bread-making as an educational tool to teach about nutrition, in particular on issues of gluten-free breads and baking, linking bread to all other foods, such as vegetables, fruits, cheeses, soups, etc., pointing to a holistically healthy lifestyle."

Learn more at [www.breadhousesnetwork.org](http://www.breadhousesnetwork.org).



CATHERINE KARNOW/INTERNATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Nadia Savova with loaves of bread decorated with traditional Bulgarian patterns.