

The New Grand Tour



*Jan Ritch-Frel - Photo:
Independent Media
institute*

Six million years of human evidence offers a powerful universal education to address humanity's most significant challenges and opportunities.

All of humanity can now take the Grand Tour: a travel circuit of global sites that help us understand ourselves and our history, made increasingly clear thanks to recent advances in archaeology and the sciences. The stops on this tour include archeological sites key to understanding the stages of human history starting six million years ago and leading up to the dawn of the modern era. Other sites include museums and spaces that educate visitors about the biology of our existence, focusing on our primate roots within a diversity of ecosystems.

The point of this Grand Tour is to co-mingle an education on the phases of human history with a study of our biology and evolution that only recently became available due to advances in science and research. It fosters an understanding of the human story as a single global data set. As people become accustomed to relying on the wider breadth of evidence to understand themselves, we are all stronger. It becomes easier to authentically connect with each other when we have a true universalizing framework. This framework will open constructive pathways for finding happiness, reducing suffering, and adapting together for resilience and survival. Wherever you are in life, there is potential to find value in this evidence-based understanding of human tendencies.

It only became possible in the past decade to trace the outlines of the complete

human story. Travelers will be surprised by the increasingly clear evidence that illustrates the diversity of [early hominin species](#), the pace at which they made complex and ingenious tools, and the emergence of ritual, religion, agriculture, and even our modern societies. Similarly, scientific discoveries we've made about brain development, hormones, and genomics will compel us to rethink the causes of criminal behavior and reimagine childhood development and education.

Taking the Grand Tour

Completing the Grand Tour may be easier for the one billion people who travel internationally each year than the seven billion others. But the good news is that the education embedded in the tour is available online through a study of the sites along the tour and related research. For many people, there are relevant pre-historical sites, museums, and research centers located within a few hundred miles to visit and more deeply enrich their educational experience.

You can say you've completed a Grand Tour when you have obtained a good general understanding of each study topic listed below and visited and/or studied at least two sites related to each of them.

The study topics are:

- Paleoanthropology and the human evolutionary story of the past six million years of evolution.
- Primatology and the behavior and lifestyles of wider mammal families.
- Transitions from hunter-gatherer lifestyles to village societies and the establishment of the first city-states.
- Behavioral biology and neuroscience to learn about the function of the human brain and its interactions with the processes that produce language and real-world functioning.
- Ecology and the study of regional wilderness areas to understand animals as part of the fabric of interdependencies in the larger ecosystem.

Some experts who have tracked the paradigm shifts across these topic areas have predicted that many of the newest discoveries will spill over into the wider societal spectrum. The rising public interest in human cultural and technological evolution, early societies, and the biological facets dictating human behaviors is

visible on best-seller lists, popular podcasts, and highly-rated YouTube channels. [Educators believe](#) there is potential for the new, globally sourced breadth of knowledge we now have about our species' origins to become preeminent within the study of political and social sciences. This would edge out the near-monopoly that Europe has had on scholarly understandings of human history for the past 2,500 years.

Below is a sample list of Grand Tour locations for each of the geographical regions and/or topics of study listed at the bottom of this article. Over time, a map could grow to contain hundreds or thousands of sites that qualify as educational sources to populate the Grand Tour. Newer evidence, sites, and museum exhibits will often be easier to learn from as they are less weighed down by the historical attitudes of previous eras. The world has exceptional books and reference materials, tour guides, and teachers, real and online, to help people along their journey. And it is increasingly easier to ensure docents and guides educate people with the most up-to-date information about the sites they're helping to interpret.

The Old Grand Tour

There was a Grand Tour in a previous era. This famous journey through Italy and the classical world established particular pieces of ancient history as central to humankind. The ancient worlds of Rome, Greece, Egypt, and the kingdoms of Sumeria were understood as the borders of the ancient past. What came before these worlds was vaguely understood to have involved stone tools and ice ages.

For 300 years, if you were a young, privileged European man, the final stage of your education would include a visit to Italy to learn about the Renaissance and its roots in Rome, then to Greece and the wider Mediterranean. Young elites gained a worldview shared across nationalities living in high-income countries, shaped by the expert guides who accompanied them. It was sweeping in scope entrenched in a reductive understanding of the human past and a linear sense of history and the progress of humanity.

This "old" Grand Tour cemented a particular political and philosophical education that the world has largely inherited today. This education is often presented through colonial and imperial conquest, modeled and legitimized by the collapsed empires and city-states of the northern Mediterranean regions.

Even with its many blind spots, misconceptions, and lapses, the old Grand Tour

did help to create a shared sense of history and culture where none had existed before by linking together disparate sites across the European continent. It provided a common—if faulty—framework for understanding the then-contemporary world.

And it should not come as a surprise for students of history that there was an even older Grand Tour before this one. Young privileged men of ancient Rome relied on a Grand Tour guided by a historian and geographer named Pausanias to learn about a selectively chosen, venerated history of Greece. Touring is a hugely popular educational format, from the Santiago de Compostella pilgrimage route for learning about medieval Europe to following the Great Wall of China to learn about the country's wider dynastic history.

The New Grand Tour

The new Grand Tour proposes to revolutionize this outdated vision through visits to museums, archaeological sites, and research centers that explain the different facets of human biological and technological history. Together, these sketch a more accurate story of humanity. This Grand Tour takes us from the emergence of our genus, "Homo," to the beginnings of our hunter-gatherer past and the transition to early societal organizational schemes. Then, onwards, to the founding of the first city-states.

This education can reshape our core beliefs, attitudes, and approaches to daily life. It also provides sounder, more actionable answers to some of the most important questions we face today, such as:

- Does social complexity require social hierarchy?
- What social models are the most resilient and produce the least suffering?
- What kind of resource consumption are we designed for?
- What is a sustainable and healthy mix of work and leisure?
- How do we explain the prevalence of conditions like obesity, depression, anxiety, cancer, and heart disease—and what can we do about it?
- What are the kinds of child-rearing and educational environments that the human lineage evolved with and depended on?

- Does the moral arc of the universe “bend toward justice”?
- How should we understand criminal culpability in a structurally unequal world?
- What is addiction, and how can we treat it?
- What social relations tend to promote cooperation or conflict? What is the relationship between social arrangements and the tendency toward peace or war?

You don't have to make [every stop on the Grand Tour](#). Get acquainted with and learn about at least a few items from each category below. Try to pick from two different regions of the Earth for each.

Human Origins

A series of recent archeological site findings have significantly updated our evidence and understanding of humanity's origins. Some of the most significant discoveries include:

Koobi Fora / Lake Turkana — Kenya

A region of paleoanthropological sites in northern Kenya known as [Koobi Fora](#), near Lake Turkana, features well-preserved hominin fossils dating between 3.2 and 1.3 million years ago. This includes at least two species of *Australopithecus*, three species of the genus *Homo*, *Kenyanthropus platyops*, stone tools dating back to 2 million years ago, and a nearly complete skeleton of a male adolescent *H. ergaster* specimen about 1.5 million years old called “[Turkana Boy](#).”

Denisova Cave — Russia

Situated on the foothills of Siberia's Altai Mountains, [Denisova Cave](#) is the only site known to have been occupied by Homo Sapiens, Neanderthals, and Denisovans. The cave has yielded impressive jewelry and other [artifacts](#) and provided genomic evidence of the direct descendants of Neanderthal and Denisovan parents.

Luzon — Philippines

In 2018, researchers [discovered](#) a cache of butchered rhino bones and dozens of stone tools that pushed back the earliest evidence for human occupation of the Philippines's largest island from 100,000 years ago to a startling 700,000 years ago. Included in the discovery on Luzon was a unique human species that has been dubbed [Homo luzonensis](#). This raises questions about how our supposedly

primitive ancestors crossed the Southeast Asian seas. The northern areas of the island, with their extensive [cave systems](#), illuminate the early movement of people to the Philippines—from Late Pleistocene to Early Holocene foragers to the spread of Neolithic farming and later metal-age cultures.

Central Narmada Valley — India

The Central Narmada Valley is a region in central India [featuring](#) extensive Early and Middle Pleistocene deposits, associated Palaeolithic fossils, and the only fossil evidence of a non-modern hominin species in the subcontinent. This makes it an especially vital region for understanding Acheulean stone tool technologies in the Paleolithic records of the Indian subcontinent.

Hunter Gatherer Transitions to Early Societies

Various recent archeological discoveries have expanded our knowledge about the societal transition from hunter-gatherer, to agrarian, to modern. Some of the most significant discoveries are below:

Transitions:

The following archaeological sites provide some key insights into important transitions made by early human societies:

Dolni Vestonice — Czech Republic

Dolni Vestonice is an Upper Paleolithic [archaeological site](#) in the [Czech Republic](#) and a particularly abundant source of prehistoric artifacts dating back 29,000 years. It is unique for its insight into Ice Age cultural practices in central Europe, with huts of mammoth bones, technologies like kilns, task specialization, burial practices, and art-making. Highlights include some of the earliest examples of symbolic representation, especially ceramic figures of humans and nonhuman animals, such as the famous “[Black Venus](#)” and an enigmatic grave known as the “[Triple Burial](#).”

Mal'ta Buret — Siberia

Mal'ta, about 62 miles northwest of [Irkutsk and Lake Baikal in Siberia](#) represents the vast, vital [Mal'ta-Buret](#) culture dating back around 24,000 years. The site comprises a series of subterranean houses made of mammoth bones and reindeer antlers, from which have been excavated expertly carved bone, ivory, and antler objects. These include famous female figurines, as well as sculptures depicting swans, geese, and ducks, and engravings of mammoths and snakes. The findings

shed light on the cultural practices of ancient northern Eurasians who contributed to the peopling of the Americas and whose technologies spread from Europe to Africa.

Scaling Up:

A variety of historical sites full of archaeological evidence show the enormous scale and scope of ancient human societies, some of which are below:

Caral-Supe / Norte Chico — Andes

Caral-Supe is a [sacred ancient city](#) dating back some 5,000 years and is thought to represent the oldest city in the Americas, at the origin of Andean culture. The 150-acre complex of pyramids, plazas, and residential buildings shows clear evidence of ceremonial functions, revealing the existence of a well-established and powerful religious ideology and a consolidated hierarchical state system. Bone instruments, [quipus](#) (the knot system used in Andean civilizations to record information), and extensive trade goods have been unearthed from the complex.

Teleilat Ghassul / Ba'Ja — Jordan

At [Teleilat Ghassul](#), just north of Jordan's Dead Sea, a cluster of hills contains the remains of several villages dating back at least 6,000 years. They offer an unparalleled glimpse into the increasing social and economic complexity between the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. This encompasses the earliest production of olive oil, products such as fiber and dairy, and cult and religious practices.

South of the Dead Sea, shielded in the area's rugged sandstone formations, lies [Ba'Ja](#), a neolithic settlement of 9,000 years ago. The site features an ossuary with the bones of three adults and nine small children, with walls painted in a fresco technique showing abstract motifs and geometric figures, as well as the richly furnished tomb of a young girl whose magnificent [necklace](#) made of limestone and shell beads is on display at the nearby [Petra Museum](#). The museum also includes a significant collection of Neolithic artifacts.

Şanlıurfa Province / Boncuklu Tarla / Çatalhöyük — Turkey

[Şanlıurfa](#) Province, in [southeastern Turkey](#), contains multiple significant archeological sites. Three of these—Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori, and Gürcütepe—have revolutionized our understanding of the Eurasian transitions from the Ice Age into domestication, agriculture, and a host of new technologies that lead to modernity.

[Boncuklu Tarla](#) contains remains from a settlement first occupied about 12,000 years ago. Houses and other dwellings have been unearthed alongside temples and other sacred buildings, accompanied by complex art forms and advanced artifacts. Together, these paint a picture of the settlement of northern Mesopotamia and the upper Tigris region. They reveal information about the cultures and religions of the people that lived there and the transition from nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles to a sedentary agricultural lifestyle.

[Çatalhöyük](#) is the site of two ancient mounds, beneath which lie the remains of a complex, 9,000-year-old society with a population between 3,500-8,000 inhabitants. Layer-by-layer, excavation of the site has revealed evidence of continual transformation and radical changes in behavior, lifestyle, art, and ritual. The site is exceptional for its substantial size and longevity, distinctive housing layout, wall paintings, and reliefs. UNESCO [refers to it](#) as: “the most significant human settlement documenting early settled agricultural life of a Neolithic community.”

Communities and Institutions:

Evidence has shown how early human societies contained advanced institutions, communities, and culture, some of which are highlighted below:

Monte Alban — Mexico

The [Monte Alban civic ceremonial center](#) of an ancient metropolis in Oaxaca, Mexico, was inhabited for 1,500 years by the Olmecs, Zapotecs, and Mixtecs. These people built terraces, dams, canals, pyramids, and artificial mounds carved into the surrounding mountains. They even constructed a ball game court, temples, tombs, and bas-reliefs with hieroglyphic inscriptions. This site offers unique insights into pre-Columbian society in Mesoamerica.

Ugarit — Lebanon

A vital seaport city on the Mediterranean coast of northern Syria and a key economic hub in the ancient Near East, [Ugarit](#) served as a trade center between Egypt and the major powers of Bronze Age Asia Minor and Mesopotamia. Key finds include the world’s earliest recorded [treaty](#). Stratified mounds reveal the city’s development from its origins around 8,000 years ago, its peak around 3,470 years ago, and its destruction around 3,200 years ago. The excavation of its Golden Age libraries revealed a hitherto unknown [cuneiform alphabetic script](#) and an entirely new mythological and religious literature (some of which shed new

light on the Hebrew Bible). The library also revealed archives dealing with the city's political, social, economic, and cultural life.

Primatology

Expanding our understanding of our other primate relatives offers many clues and insights about humanity, and breakthrough research is happening in the following centers:

Gombe Stream Research Center — Tanzania

Founded in 1965 by Jane Goodall, the [Gombe Stream Research Center](#) is home to the longest-running field research on chimpanzees and remains a world-class research laboratory that uses the best available methods to advance innovative science, to support conservation, and to train Tanzanian scientists.

Camp Leakey, Tanjung Puting Reserve — Borneo

Camp Leakey is a center in the Tanjung Puting Reserve in Borneo where researchers study orangutan, proboscis monkey, gibbon, and leaf-eating monkey behavior and ecology. It also houses research into orangutan sign language abilities and cognition.

Behavioral Biology and Neuroscience

It is often difficult to access scientific research centers or real-world site experiments in behavioral biology and neuroscience, so the most approachable research in these fields is available through scientific journals and authors such as Robert Sapolsky and [Frans de Waal](#).

A great place to start is by listening to Robert Sapolsky's famous [Behavioral Biology lecture series](#) at Stanford University. It takes time to learn how to read academic journal papers on biology or to work through the many exceptional books on human behavior. Brenna Hassett's book on the evolution of childhood, [Growing Up Human](#), is another excellent starting point.

Museums

There are hundreds of museums with exhibits relevant to the Grand Tour, some of which include:

Iziko South African Museum — Cape Town, South Africa

The [Iziko South Africa Museum](#) in Cape Town helps humanity reimagine the story of human evolution, centered on the diversity of humans today and how we came

to be as we are. The museum pairs storytelling with fossils and artifacts from across the continent to paint a picture of how biology, technology, and culture influenced humanity's emergence.

Museum of Human Evolution — Burgos, Spain

[The Museum of Human Evolution](#) in Burgos, Spain, aims to offer a holistic vision of human presence on the Earth. It has one of the largest collections of early hominin fossils from many species, found at the nearby [Atapuerca archaeological sites](#) and elsewhere. It also showcases the scientific disciplines involved in fossil recovery and the scientific interpretations drawn from them.

Natural History Museum, Paleoanthropology Collection — London, United Kingdom

The [palaeoanthropology collection](#) at London's Natural History Museum holds the United Kingdom's largest assemblage of fossilized hominid remains and a diverse collection of hominin tools, with over 3,000 specimens. The collection includes 17 of the 24 generally recognized hominin species in the form of original fossils and scientific replicas.

Museum of Us — San Diego, California

Exhibits at the [Museum of Us](#) in San Diego, California, offer multicultural perspectives to spark dialogue, self-reflection, and human connections centered on the shared human experience.