

'Inspiring and
essential'

ALASTAIR
HUMPHREYS

'A joyride ...
mind-shifting,
heart-lifting'

ISABELLA TREE



'As entertaining
as it is
enlightening'

INDEPENDENT

WILD CITIES

Journeys through
the Modern
Urban Jungle

CHRIS FITCH

CHRIS FITCH is a science and travel writer. He is a former staff writer for *Geographical Magazine*, and has contributed to titles such as *National Geographic* and *Lonely Planet*. His previous books include *Atlas of Untamed Places* and *Subterranea*. Having previously lived in the Solomon Islands, South Korea, Taiwan, New Zealand and Brazil, he is now based in Lisbon, Portugal.

@chrisfitchchris
chrisfitch.org

A BOOK OF THE YEAR IN THE *INDEPENDENT*

‘An engaging tone enlivens a book packed with surprising information . . . *Wild Cities* is a splendid, uplifting book that is as entertaining as it is enlightening’

***Independent*, five-star review**

‘The battle for stabilising our planet will be won or lost in cities. Chris Fitch’s beautiful book is a joyride through the ingenious nature-based solutions for urban life and infrastructure that are showing the way. *Wild Cities* is a mind-shifting, heart-lifting glimpse into the healthy, sustainable, calm and beautiful cities that could be ours if we open our eyes to the possibilities and pull together for change’

Isabella Tree

‘An inspiring and essential guide to reconnecting urban life with the wildness we all need for a thriving future’

Alastair Humphreys

‘Thought-provoking and can give food for thought to policymakers and individuals alike’

Geographical

‘An excellent, meticulously researched book, which should be mandatory reading for every city planner in Britain’

Country Life

WILD CITIES

Journeys through the Modern Urban Jungle

Chris Fitch



William Collins
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

WilliamCollinsBooks.com

HarperCollins*Publishers*
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper
Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by William Collins
This William Collins paperback published in 2026

1

Copyright © Chris Fitch 2025

Chris Fitch asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All photographs courtesy of the author

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-00-855722-5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publishers.

Without limiting the exclusive rights of any author, contributor or the publisher of this publication, any unauthorised use of this publication to train generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is expressly prohibited. HarperCollins also exercise their rights under Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790 and expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception.

Set in Adobe Garamond Pro by HarperCollins*Publishers* India

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% Renewable
Electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd



This book contains FSC™ certified paper and other controlled sources to ensure responsible forest management.

For more information visit: www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

For Ana, *meu amor*

CONTENTS

	Prologue	1
1	Tokyo, Japan	9
	The big city with little forests	
2	Medellín, Colombia	38
	The city where everything is connected	
3	Singapore	60
	The city with buildings covered in life	
4	Tallinn, Estonia	85
	The sanctuary city for pollinators	
5	Wellington, New Zealand	110
	The city where the birds came back	
6	Nairobi, Kenya	139
	The city with space for big animals	
7	Sydney, Australia	167
	The city where there's life underwater	
8	Munich, Germany	190
	The city with the free-flowing river	
9	Barcelona, Spain	215
	The walking-friendly city	

10	Copenhagen, Denmark	238
	The city with edible streets	
11	Flagstaff, United States	262
	The city where night is protected	
12	Paris, France	286
	The city where death creates life	
	Epilogue	302
	Acknowledgements	313
	Endnotes	317
	Index	395

PROLOGUE

‘Sometimes I touch the tree. Talk with the tree.’ Qing turned his head, looking around. ‘Maybe we find a big tree . . .’

I too began scanning the area. ‘Do you look for a certain species? Or do you just want any big tree?’

‘Big tree!’ he barked over his shoulder, already on the move.

I followed the doctor as he ran to a large ginkgo tree, twenty, maybe thirty metres tall. The highest branches disappeared into a thick canopy. Ginkgo are ancient trees, a species hundreds of millions of years old¹. The leaves, with their distinctive stingray shape, have been found in fossils unearthed from before the time of the dinosaurs. Modern cultivated ginkgo can be found all over the world, but they are such a recognisable symbol of Tokyo that the leaf is used as the official logo for the city government, as well as for one of the two metro networks².

Qing cautiously extended his arms. ‘I just touch the tree . . .’ and he pressed his hands firmly against the bark.

Curious, I copied his actions. Arms outstretched, I placed my palms against the rough surface, cracked like mud in the hot sun. It was firm, but surprisingly malleable, verging on soft.

‘Now, you can talk with the tree.’ Qing stared forward, focused on the trunk in front of us. When he spoke, it was directly into the wood, addressed, I suppose, at the soul of the tree.

‘You are my good friend.’ His speech was slow, measured. ‘I get lots of power from you.’

Wild Cities

Suddenly I felt self-conscious, very aware of our public location. I heard the click-clacking heels of young women heading home, the crunching of gravel, as bicycles, suitcases and grocery trolleys were wheeled past. Public declarations of love to trees, even in a foreign language, felt like breaking some kind of social taboo.

Qing turned his gaze to me. 'Maybe, you can close your eyes? If you're opening the eyes, maybe you cannot enjoy the sense of smell very well. Also, deep breathing! Deep breathing, so that we enjoy that sense of the smell.'

I cleared my throat. 'So, it's about the senses? We're smelling, listening, feeling . . .?'

'You're feeling, yeah yeah. You can put your whole body in the park atmosphere.'

'How do I do that? Hug the tree?'

'No!' His response was surprisingly stern. 'No, we don't hug.'

'We don't hug.'

'We just use these,' and he did a little jazz hands wiggle.

'Okay, hands are enough.'

This tree honouring routine has been a regular part of Dr Li Qing's routine for many years. During breaks in his working day, as a medical doctor in the neighbouring Nippon Medical School, he would change out of his official medical attire into casual clothes, then head outside, and cross the road to stand beneath a tall, majestic, right-angular stone arch. A *torii* gate, the traditional entrance to a sacred Japanese shrine.

This was Nezu, a space of worship for almost two thousand years.³ In the grounds of the shrine, he would admire the colourful azalea garden, with more than three thousand flowers, blooming in various shades of pink, red and white. Walk the passageway beneath hundreds of small scarlet torii gates, all lined up in a row. And absorb the sights, smells and feelings of the many trees that surrounded him: ginkgo, of course, transforming from summer greens to autumnal yellows. But also

Prologue

cherry trees – so important to Japanese culture – with their world famous blossom seasons, Japanese cedar, aromatic cypress and others.

Qing placed his hands again upon the trunk, tilting his gaze towards the canopy. His cheek twitched, the faintest of smiles. ‘Bigger trees are better.’ He said it like a monk, as though imparting great wisdom.

‘Okay. Because they’ve got more . . . stories?’

‘More power.’

‘More power?’

‘Yeah, more power. Bigger trees give you more power. More energy.’

Despite my awkwardness, I did as I was told. Hands upon the tree. Eyes closed. Deep breaths.

We stood in silence. I felt my pulse lightly beating in my fingertips, what felt like tiny furs tickling my skin. A woody aroma, although my nostrils lacked the palate to pick out any individual scents. I heard water, flowing over tiny waterfalls in a nearby stream. Crows screamed at each other in the sky overhead. A rumble of voices from the passing crowd, the occasional clicking of cameras. I tried to shut out any intrusive thoughts, just feeling the sensation of bark beneath my fingertips. Sun on my skin. The sound of leaves, caught in a breeze, brushing into each other. That faint musty scent in the air.

In that moment, I had the strange sensation of inhabiting two worlds simultaneously. In one, I felt relaxed, bathing in some sort of forest spa. Clocks stopped, time stood still. I could almost feel my brain unclenching, as tension I’d been carrying around with me was finally released.

But then: undeniable reality. The knowledge, tucked away in the back of my consciousness, that the busy urban world marched on around us. At this very moment, the subway network mere metres away was packed with millions of commuters, rushing to get home from another hard day in the office.

Wild Cities

The electric lights of Shibuya were getting ready to illuminate, for another night of frivolities, high jinks, and debauchery. Beyond the bubble of calm that surrounded us, the world's biggest metropolis sprawled in every direction.

So, how did I end up here, fondling trees in a Japanese park?

Before we answer that: how did you spend 23 May 2007?

What a time. Rihanna was inviting us to stand underneath her umbrella. Spiderman, Shrek, and Jack Sparrow ruled the silver screen. A young senator named Barack Obama was gearing up for a run at the US presidency. The global financial crisis was yet to bite, and atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations sat at a relatively healthy 386 parts per million.⁴ For none of these reasons, 23 May 2007 could be regarded as one of the most important and pivotal dates in human history.

Like most people, I was pretty ignorant about the importance of the day. As a freewheeling undergrad, fresh from finishing my first-year exams, I spent the afternoon at a local theme park, foolishly indulging in the unlimited pizza buffet before hitting the rollercoasters. That night, my friends and I went to a gig by the pop-rock band Wheatus, reflecting deeply on how we too were just teenage dirtbags, baby.

Why was this date so special? It has been estimated that 23 May 2007 was the moment when *Homo sapiens* became a majority urban species.⁵ For the first time in our history, there were now more people living in towns and cities, than in rural locations.^{6,7} 'Wisely or not, *Homo sapiens* has become *Homo urbanus*' quipped an article in *The Economist*.⁸

Since then, the trend has only continued. While the total rural population flatlines, the urban population keeps growing. Of the 8 billion humans currently eating, sleeping and procreating their way around the planet, around 55 per cent now live in some form of urban environment.⁹ And by 2050 – just twenty-five years away – two thirds of the entire global

Prologue

population are expected to be city dwellers: almost 7 billion people. Humanity is on a seemingly inevitable slide towards an urban existence.

In many ways, my own story mirrors that of our species. My formative years passed in a tropical blur in Honiara, capital city of the Solomon Islands. Here, I was essentially surrounded by nature. Every afternoon after school, I would disappear into the forest next to our house, getting muddy, sunburnt, and bitten by mosquitoes, searching for secret passages through the humid undergrowth. Weekends were spent snorkelling down at the beach, bobbing on the waves looking down on sea anemone and starfish, trying to avoid being thrown against the sharp coral. Domestic life revolved around nature, I knew little else. This was my normal.

But, in the late 1990s, our time in the South Pacific came to an end. I found myself in suburban Surrey, in the commuter belt of one of the world's most global cities.

Cut to two decades later. I was now working in London, senior staff writer for *Geographical*, a monthly magazine published on behalf of the prestigious Royal Geographical Society. Climate, wildlife, culture, urbanism, geopolitics . . . anything to do with geography, or how humans interact with the world around us, was now my beat. I enjoyed this lifestyle, there are obvious benefits to living in a major city: the energy, the creativity, the connections, the convenience. But there were also those quietly corrosive elements that I struggled to find comfortable: the greyness, the noise, the artificiality. It didn't help that the view from my bedroom window looked out over the top of a large shopping centre, a desolate space of metal ladders, guard rails, ventilation pipes and air-conditioning units. Not a shred of greenery in sight. The absence of meaningful ecology in life weighed heavily on me, even if I didn't entirely understand why. And I strongly suspect that I wasn't alone.

Cities don't come out of nowhere. They're built on landscapes.

Wild Cities

Before there were cities, there were once swamps, forests and deserts. Winding rivers, arching bays, sloping valleys. Nature, rich in biodiversity, an unimaginable variety of lifeforms.

These natural features are almost irrelevant to the daily life of the modern city dweller, replaced by roads and buildings, disappearing beneath concrete and asphalt. Today's average human needs to travel almost 10 kilometres before they find themselves in an undeveloped location, and considerably further in heavily urbanised regions like Western Europe and North America¹⁰. The spread of cities means that we as a species are getting further and further away from natural spaces with each year that passes.

This means each new generation now experiences, and accepts, a more diminished version of what they consider to be a normal amount of nature, a phenomenon known as 'shifting baseline syndrome'. Nature is vanishing, but we don't notice, because we accept the increasingly sterilised world we were born into as normal. At the extreme, there are now billions of people worldwide who, unlike their grandparents, or other ancestors, are almost entirely cut off from nature.

And that's a problem, because we are inherently nature-loving creatures. Humans evolved within nature, it's something we are instinctively attracted to. The concept of 'biophilia' – human attraction towards life, in whatever form it appears – was first conceived around the turn of the twentieth century¹¹, later popularised by the legendary American ecologist Edward Osborne 'EO' Wilson, often called the 'father of biodiversity'¹². Wilson argued that biophilia, the innate love of nature, isn't something humans learn: we are *born* with it. It's a quality that all humans crave, regardless of our individual life experiences.

I once heard this argument made beautifully on a sunny Saturday afternoon at an old city reservoir in the east of London. The surrounding landscape was a mix of red brick, low-rise residential blocks, and modern shiny glass structures that burst

Prologue

towards the sky. This reservoir had been through an ecological makeover: the water had been cleaned up, and reedbeds, hedgerows, wildflower meadows and fruit trees planted. The new wetlands were now opening to the public as an urban nature reserve, home to a wide variety of wild birds, insects and amphibians. To commemorate the occasion, a small crowd – myself included – was listening to a speech by none other than Sir David Attenborough.

‘Contact with the natural world isn’t a luxury. Of course, it’s a huge pleasure. Of course, it’s a huge delight. But it is actually a *necessity*, for all of us.’

That voice. I bet you can even hear him speaking these words.

‘All we know about the natural world, gives us pleasure, delight, expertise, continuous interest throughout the year, joy on many occasions, and solace on sad ones. Knowing about the natural world, and being in contact with the natural world, is the most precious inheritance that human beings can have.’

Nature is for everyone, he was saying. Not just people who spend their days outdoors searching for wildlife, who know the Latin names of each creature they find. It’s also for people with no idea what they are looking at.

‘What I want to say now is no more than this: this is part of our heritage. This is what makes life important, and worth living. This is a source of joy and solace, that everyone should have.’

All of us, deep down, have that same desire to connect with the natural world, hard-wired into our genes. This is biophilia. This is what we miss out on when we live in cities. And it’s central to everything that follows.

The consequences of ignoring biophilia, of living a nature-deficient life, can be highly detrimental. There’s a fancy term that people use: ‘nature deficit disorder’.¹³ It’s the idea that modern humans, and especially children, are suffering psychological problems because of our detachment from nature.

Wild Cities

Personally, I really felt this disconnection. My self-diagnosed nature deficit disorder manifested itself as a low-level stress, a heavy anxiety trapped inside my chest. I developed an indecisive personality, torn between different potential futures. Am I a city person, or a nature person? Do I like skyscrapers, or forests? Tarmac, or dirt? Would I like to disappear into the relative anonymity of a huge city, or live in glorious remote isolation? And the answer to these questions was basically . . . yes. Yes to all. Yes to nature, and yes to cities. Ultimately, I finally asked myself, is it really necessary to choose . . .?

This became my focus. Could I find, somewhere in the world, a city that balances the social and cultural lifestyle that makes cities great, with the ecological biophilic conditions that humans crave? Does such a place exist? If I can't find one perfect city, maybe inspiring stories from many different cities would be just as good, or even better?

And so I travelled, chasing fascinating stories from continent to continent. I discovered guerrilla gardens and rooftop forests. I observed giant urban river rodents, and a bird that gets drunk on fermented fruit. I ate leaves growing wild by the side of the road, followed the legacy of an eccentric nineteenth-century alien chaser, and confronted my own inevitable mortality. Most importantly, I found nature, even within the city.

But it's not really about me. This book is for the billions of people living in cities, and especially anyone feeling as starved of nature as I did. Importantly, it's about how the lives of many people, in certain cities, are already being improved by greater access to nature, and the projects that made this possible. It's about sharing ideas, educating and inspiring city residents, their leaders and other influential people, to emphasise the importance of urban biodiversity.

With all that in mind, back to Japan.

Tokyo's majestic Meiji Jingu forest grew from trees planted a century ago, and is still maturing



Avenida Oriental is one of several green corridors that stretch across Medellín





Oasia's leafy exterior pops against the backdrop of Singapore's central business district

Kampung Admiralty in Singapore is a multi-purpose living facility, designed with a specific focus on biodiversity



Since Tallinn reduced mowing of public land, grassy lawns have turned into wildflower meadows



Tallinn's pollinator highway contains an abundance of wild spaces, providing food for local pollinators



Seeing a tui in central Wellington would have been unthinkable just a few decades ago

Nairobi National Park protects the city's wildlife against the pressures from a growing human population



Water dragons and other marine creatures can be found around Sydney's bays and headlands

New habitats are being created where artificial surfaces once transformed the coastline beyond recognition



Wild beavers, Europe's largest rodent, have repopulated large sections of the Isar river in Munich

Renaturalisation has turned the Isar river into a more holistic and accessible part of Munich



Restricting vehicle access to Barcelona's streets has turned them into new spaces for walking, cycling and recreation



The pineapple weed is far more aromatic than its location – growing by the side of the road – would suggest





Light emissions are heavily regulated in Flagstaff, to ensure the protection of a starry night sky

In Paris' ecological cemeteries, a place of death has become a celebration of life