

The fire and brimstone of American politics was doused by a mighty blizzard during the Iowa Republican Party caucuses in January. Among those snowed in was a group of foreign tourists travelling with Political Tours, which advertises itself as the only travel company in the world to specialise in news and current affairs.

Just imagine the response of the progressives among them when a group of Trump supporters came to their aid.

But such are the unscripted moments that prompt travellers to question their assumptions and expand their understanding of the world, says Nicholas Wood, founder of the company based in Oxfordshire, England.

"The woman who ran [our hotel] arranged for a local bar and a restaurant to be opened up, she arranged for a bowling alley, she even had the snow cleared from the road so that we could get there in our bus," Wood says.

The Iowans encountered along the way "were all going to vote for Donald Trump", he says. "They were ordinary, lovely people. If you're a Trump sceptic you [think], 'Why on earth would these people do it?' ... [But] you're sitting down in their kitchen or in a diner, and you're hearing from them very honest, unedited conversations about their lives and how that fits in with the US politically.

"And then you get a better understanding of why and how people could vote for someone who most of the world thinks is a danger to peace and democracy."

Such touchstones have characterised Political Tours since Wood conceived the idea while working in the Balkans as a correspondent for *The New York Times*.

His aim? To take travellers beyond the headlines in countries undergoing political change.



TRAVEL POLITICS

Behind the news

Tourists are heading into politically disputed territory and loving it, writes Catherine Marshall.

Today Wood runs the company with his South African-born wife, Karen Davey, a former doctor. They've led tours in more than 30 countries – most recently the Russian breakaway state of Transnistria in Moldova, and Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Tour groups typically number around 10, and tend to embody a spectrum of political

affiliations; they're led by locally based journalists and political experts.

"I always say there's no job in the world like being a reporter," Wood says. "Doors open, you can go anywhere, you can ask any question – and that's essentially what we do. Some places we won't go, some things we won't do if it's too intrusive or

Experience fervour on the US Elections 2024 tours in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Washington DC. Below right: Nicholas Wood on the Lebanon-Israeli border. PHOTO: AP

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Need to know

Political Tours runs small-group and private tours. The seven-night US Elections 2024 tour will visit Detroit and Washington DC. Price £5900 (\$11,500) twin share, including all accommodation and meals, local transport and expert guides. Political Tours' subscription webinar program, *Insight*, features contributions from analysts, journalists and other experts. For details: politicaltours.com

risky, but [elsewhere] you're getting the same privileges and access as a journalist." Australians comprise a third of Political Tours' clientele. "They are among our very best customers," says Wood. "It's a long way from the idea of a package tour, and there's a sense of discovery in there. I think that's something that Australians are particularly interested in."

On an upcoming Colombia itinerary, guests will meet a former National Liberation Army guerilla who now runs his own vegetable business, and family members campaigning for their "disappeared" relatives.

But it's surely the US Elections 2024 tours in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Washington DC – which coincide with the November 5 election – that will prove electric.

"There's nothing like US politics," says Wood. "The razzmatazz of those rallies is amazing. And the urgency of this election ... if you go to some communities in, you know, downtown Philadelphia, some were despondent about [President Joe] Biden but now Kamala Harris is on the ticket, things are completely changed."

"I think you're really going to get a sense of that when you're out there." L&L





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