Places and languages

There are over one hundred and ninety countries in the world and about seven thousand languages. In first place is China. There are over one billion speakers of Mandarin Chinese. In second place is India with speakers of Hindi. And in third place is Spanish. Spain isn’t a big country, but there are over four hundred million Spanish speakers in different countries around the world. This is very true in Latin America.

As a first language, English is in fourth place. About three hundred and eighty million people are native English speakers. But English is in first place as a second language for many other people. Over a billion people speak English for doing business, reading the news or studying science and medicine. In some countries, English is not the native language, but it is the official language for the government and in schools. And even in London, the capital city of Britain, there are over three hundred different languages.

Chinese, Hindi, Spanish and English are the ‘big’ languages. About eighty per cent of the world’s population speak them. But these are only four languages, so what about the other 6,996 languages? Many countries have lots of different languages. For example, on the islands of Vanuatu in the South Pacific Ocean there are sixty-five different islands and they have one hundred and nine different languages.

Finally, there are some languages with only one speaker. They are old people and they speak the language of their parents and grandparents. For example, Charlie Muldunga lives in Australia. He speaks English because it is the first language of the country. However, his native language is Amurdag. It’s an ancient language and he is the last speaker of this Aboriginal language.

Extreme sports

Lots of people do sport in their free time, but these people do extreme sports!

Cliff diving is a very exciting extreme sport and Cyrille Oumedjkane is an expert cliff diver. In this photo, he is in Kragero, Norway at the cliff diving world series. He can jump between twenty and thirty metres into the water feet first. (Normal divers jump from ten metres or less and they jump into the water head first.) He can jump from any high place. ‘I cliff dive because I don’t like soccer. I like the adrenaline,’ he says.

You can ‘highline’ in lots of different places, but mountains are popular. You put a line between two high places and walk across. In this photo, American Andy Lewis walks above a canyon in Utah, USA. It’s early evening so he can’t see well. Also the wind is strong so Andy can’t walk fast, but highlining is a great adventure.

Perhaps you often go cycling, but how well can you cycle across the top of a 1,000 metre mountain? Professional mountain biker Kenny Belaey cycles across South Africa’s Table Mountain in this photo. ‘The landscape is perfect,’ he says.

In this photo Justin Ferrar flies above Fronalpstock in the mountains of Switzerland. The weather is perfect for paragliding and today it’s very peaceful. But paragliding isn’t normally relaxing! Extreme paragliders can fly over 3,000 metres high and very long distances (over 300 kilometres).

A cashless world?

It’s midnight in Paris and I need money quickly. The banks are closed, but outside there’s a cash machine. I put in my bank card, enter my PIN (personal identification number) and ask for 500 euros. The cash machine sends a message to my bank in Washington D.C. My bank replies to the message and says I have the money in my bank account. After a few short moments, I receive my cash.

Nowadays, we move money around the world at high speed. I can get money from a bank anywhere in the world or I can pay my hotel bill with a credit card. In fact, some people think we don’t need money at all.

Before money, people bought and sold goods with animals. But you can’t carry animals around your neck or in a bag so people needed something small. About three thousand years ago, the Chinese used seashells and later they used metal coins. The Romans also bought and sold objects with metal coins.

In the thirteenth century, the explorer Marco Polo travelled to China. He saw paper money for the first time. A century later, countries in Europe used paper money too. One reason was that it was good for paying large amounts.

Like paper money, cheques were also practical and the Bank of England made the first cheque book in the nineteenth century. Then, in the early nineteen fifties, the USA introduced credit cards or ‘plastic money’. This form of payment is still popular today.

For the first time since humans used animals for payment, we can now buy and sell with no coins, notes or cheques. You can even pay for goods by mobile phone. In Africa, around six million people already use mobile phones instead of cash. So do we live in a cashless world? Not quite. Every day, we need some cash for a coffee, a ticket or a newspaper.

Nature in art

You can see paintings of nature everywhere in the world. Many artists paint and use nature in their work, but the results are very different. Art critic, Liz Searle-Barnes looks at five of them.

Stanislaw Witkiewicz was born in 1885 in Zakopane. He died in 1939 but you can see his paintings in art galleries in Poland. Many people like Witkiewicz’s paintings of people’s faces, but I prefer his paintings of nature and landscapes. He painted this one in 1907. It shows the Hinczow Lakes in the Tatra mountains in southern Poland. There are the green fields and the white rocks and I like this painting because the water in the lake is so blue. I want to swim in it.

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, in the past, Aboriginal people painted pictures of nature and animals on rocks. In parts of Australia, their Rock Art is 30,000 years old. Nowadays, modern aboriginal artists also paint nature. For example, this colourful painting by Ginger Riley Munduwalawala (1937–2002) shows hills, rivers, birds and kangaroos.

Japanese art is famous for landscape paintings. You can often see the sea and sky, and the mountains and trees. Andõ Hiroshige worked in the nineteenth century and he’s one of Japan’s most famous artists. He printed and sold thousands of beautiful prints in his lifetime. However, he was poor when he died.

Damien Hirst is the richest artist in England. He is a painter, but he is more famous for art with different animals (living and dead) including a cow, a sheep and a shark. In one room of a gallery, he put lots of fruit and real butterflies live there. They fly round the heads of the visitors. For some people he is a genius, but other people disagree. Personally, I like his work, but I prefer his early paintings.

**How well can you remember?**

Memorising names and faces-Do you often forget names and faces? When you meet someone for the first time, listen to them. Repeat their name and use it in the conversation. For example, ‘It’s nice to meet you, Elaine.’ Look at their face and the clothes they wear. Introduce them to another person and make conversation. With new work colleagues, write down their name, their job and where you met them.

Memorising numbers -Do you often forget new numbers? For example a telephone number, a house number or a PIN number. Some people ‘see’ the number in their brain. Maybe the numbers are in colour or they see the numbers like a picture. You can also repeat the number a few times or learn the numbers in groups. So you remember the first two numbers because it’s your age. And the next three numbers is the house number of a friend. We remember better when we make it personal.

Memorising directions and addresses -Taxi drivers learn hundreds of roads and addresses. How do they do it? Some people see the directions in their head. They see a picture of the roads or the buildings. Other people repeat the names of the roads, or the directions. For example, ‘Turn left at the end, turn right at the cinema.’ You can also draw the directions on paper. When you draw, use different colours – the brain remembers more when it sees colour.

Holidays

I don’t like holidays with hotels, beaches and swimming pools, and I’m not interested in sightseeing in old cities. I’d like to do something exciting and nowadays lots of holidays have excitement. There’s backpacking over the Andes of South America, or I could go on a safari and see animals in Africa. Maybe I should visit Australia and swim with dolphins along the coast.

But when I choose a holiday, I always have the same problem. I don’t want to go somewhere and see lots of other tourists. I want to be the only person there. The problem is there are other tourists everywhere these days. Is there anywhere in the world without other people?

What about Antarctica? It’s huge and beautiful. Between 1,000 and 5,000 scientists work there, but nobody lives there. It doesn’t have a government and there are no cities so there’s no pollution or noisy traffic. It has lots of nature and wildlife. It sounds perfect!

Actually, there are also tourists in Antarctica. Tourism in Antarctica began in the late 1950s. About 500 people a year visited from Chile and Argentina. Nowadays, about 50,000 tourists from all over the world go by ship to the continent every year and the number of cruises is increasing.

So like everywhere else with tourists, Antarctica is changing. You can’t stay overnight, but you can visit areas with wildlife. Some people think the numbers of wild animals and birds are decreasing as a result. However, there is also some positive news. Many cruise ships are members of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO). They teach their passengers about Antarctica and its wildlife. The cruise companies also give money to environmental organisations in the region. These organisations want to help the nature and wildlife of Antarctica so it doesn’t change in the future.

Looking for a new Earth

For thousands of years, humans have explored the Earth. Nowadays, we are exploring space. Astronomers are the modern-day explorers. Currently, many astronomers are looking for new planets and new places for humans to live in the future. But where do astronomers start looking?

First of all, astronomers look for a star. That’s because our own Earth orbits a star (the Sun). More importantly, it is the correct distance from the Sun for heat and light. So when astronomers have found the star, they look at the planets around it. In recent years, astronomers have found nearly 400 new planets with stars. Unfortunately, many of these planets are either too near to the star or too far away.

However, if the planet is in a good position, astronomers look for three key things: water, air and rock. Water is important because all life needs water. Humans can drink it and they can also grow plants with water. And plants produce air for humans to breathe and food to eat. So all life on other planets will need water and air. Rock on a planet is also important. That’s because there is often water under the rocks.

After many years of looking, astronomers have found a planet that is similar to Earth. It’s Gliese 581g and it’s near a star. The astronomers think it has water and rock and the average temperature is between –31°C and –12°C. That’s cold, but not colder than Antarctica or the Arctic Circle, for example. Gliese 581g is bigger than the Earth and a year on Gliese 581 is only 37 Earth days instead of 365. But astronomers do not think these are big differences and some of them think Gliese 581g will be a new Earth. However, Gliese 581g is twenty light years from Earth – a distance of 18 trillion km.