

Ella Maillart was born on February 20, 1903, in Geneva to a well-off family. She discovered her love of reading – especially travel writing – early on. A sickly child, she threw herself into sports from a young age. In 1913, when the family moved to Le Creux-de-Genthod on the shores of Lake Geneva, she began sailing with her friend and neighbor Hermine de Saussure, known as Miette. Winter brought other pursuits: skiing and hockey. Gifted in every discipline she turned her hand to, Maillart competed in sailing at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris and went on to represent Switzerland in several world skiing championships between 1931 and 1934.

Maillart eventually gave up sailing, but only after crossing the Mediterranean several times with friends. In 1930, having tried her hand at various jobs without ever finding something she enjoyed, she set off on her first journey. She went to the Soviet Union to see firsthand how other people lived, staying in Moscow for nearly six months and spending time in the Caucasus.

In 1932, while climbing mountains in Soviet Turkestan, she glimpsed China for the first time. Two years later, in 1934, she was dispatched to Manchuria, in northeastern China, as a reporter for *Le Petit Parisien*. It was there that she visited Manchukuo, a puppet state established and controlled by Japan.

In 1935, she met up with British writer and military officer Peter Fleming in Peking. On the spur of the moment, the two decided to set off together for Xinjiang in northwestern China: a region that had long been closed to foreigners and was then in the grip of a years-long civil war. Their trip – lasting seven months and covering over 6,000 kilometers – took them all the way from Peking to India.

In 1939, Maillart set off on a new adventure with Swiss writer Annemarie Schwarzenbach, driving a Ford from Geneva to Kabul. When news of the Second World War broke, she settled in India, where she remained until the end of the conflict.

After returning to Switzerland in 1945, Maillart split her time between Geneva and Chandolin, a village looking over the Val d'Anniviers valley high in the Swiss Alps. Between 1957 and 1987, she led a series of organized excursions through Asia. She also gave talks about her travels, often using her own photographs as part of her presentations.

Maillart died in Chandolin on March 27, 1997, at the age of 94.

The exhibition features prints produced especially by Photo Elysée plus original works as preserved by Maillart. Her photographs are paired with her own words, foregrounding the relationship between text and image, which was a hallmark of her work.

The titles of the photographs follow Maillart's original annotations. For reasons of consistency, proper names retain the spellings she used, while for historical accuracy, place names appear in their official form at the time the photographs were taken.

While Maillart's photographs speak to her distinctly personal perspective, some are also rooted in their time, reflecting early 20th-century European sensibilities and representational frameworks.

[Introduction]

Writer and photographer Ella Maillart traveled extensively through Asia in the 1930s, sharing what she observed through her books and photographs. Her archives were added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2025. Through this exhibition, Photo Elysée pays tribute to her distinctive and important body of work.

The archives of Swiss traveler, writer and photographer Ella Maillart (1903–1997) were added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in April 2025. This distinction recognizes the value of her writings, photographs and films as universal documentary heritage. The archives are a tangible chronicle of Maillart's memory and of the historical 20th-century events to which she bore witness.

Photo Elysée is marking this international recognition with an exhibition devoted to Maillart, a major figure in photography whose visual work has been under the museum's stewardship since 1988. The show looks back on Maillart's travels in the 1930s, setting her images in dialogue with her writings.

Between 1930 and 1939, Maillart devoted herself to exploring Asia – a passion she would pursue for the rest of her life. Affected by the trauma of the First World War and disillusioned with Europe's industrialization and growing consumer culture, she packed her bags and headed off in search of alternative ways of living. Journeying through the USSR, China, Afghanistan and Iran, Maillart witnessed the early days of Soviet rule in Central Asia, the emergence of post-imperial China and the birth of Manchukuo, the Japanese-controlled puppet state in Manchuria. She documented her travels in her writings and in the hundreds of photographs she brought back to Switzerland, carefully annotating them upon her return.

Maillart published a series of illustrated articles and longer works that would cement her reputation as one of the most significant female traveler writers of the early 20th century. Her first book, *Parmi la jeunesse russe* [Among Russian Youth], recounted her time in Soviet Russia in 1930, while *Turkestan Solo* documented her 1932 journey through Soviet Turkestan. In 1935, she published *Forbidden Journey*, an account of her expedition across Chinese Turkestan with Peter Fleming. And in *The Cruel Way*, written in the style of a novel, Maillart told the story of her 1939 trip from Geneva to Kabul with Annemarie Schwarzenbach.

With her innate curiosity, Maillart offered a unique perspective on a pivotal time when Asian and global history were changing course. And her work, unmatched in its boldness, remains just as salient when set against the political and social context of the 21st century.

Memory of the World

Ella Maillart captured the political and social shifts unfolding around her on camera. Her photographs and writings testify to a world that has long since disappeared, a world left irreversibly changed by the ravages of war and the loss of peoples and communities.

In 1930, Maillart set off to explore Asia, a vast continent plagued by instability following a series of revolutions that toppled regimes – some of which had been around for centuries. Embracing risk and welcoming challenge, she made travel her way of life and documentary reporting the guiding purpose of her work.

Through the viewfinder of her Leica, she captured scenes from the early years of Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union, from the territorial conflicts in northern China after the fall of the imperial regime, and from Korea and Manchuria under Japanese occupation. Her corpus, produced under – and in spite of – the watchful eye of authoritarian powers, offers unparalleled insights into the major events of her time, serving as both an object of study and an important source of collective memory.

Maillart's work is also a record of a world lost in the mists of time: of glaciers now shrunken by a changing climate, of the Aral Sea since drained for farmland irrigation, and of the Buddhas of Bamiyan destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.

Quotes for translation:

- “In Moscow, I'd promised myself not to write about modern Russia; I was overwhelmed by too many conflicting impressions, lost in a different world that I found fascinating. ... In this country, this new testing ground, nothing is fixed, everything is changing. What's true one month may no longer be true the next.” *Parmi la jeunesse russe*
- “And I think of all the things I came across that afternoon: the uniforms, the trucks, the coils of barbed wire, the huge sabers with shagreen handles, the officers with their stern faces. Yes, the [Japanese] army is firmly entrenched here and it will not give ground. But one question burns on my lips: will war break out from here?” *Le Petit Parisien*

Personal Memory

For Maillart, nature, travel and solitude were as much about understanding herself as they were about discovering the world. Through her photography, she underscored the beauty of the natural world and the resilience of the people she met, especially women.

Maillart's often deliberate choice to journey alone reflected her conception of travel as an exercise not only in exploring the world, but also in looking inward and reflecting on herself amid a deep existential crisis.

Asia offered an escape from the unrest of interwar Europe, allowing her to reconnect with the past while diligently recording and documenting the lives and daily routines of nomadic communities threatened by the inexorable advance of modernization. The Silk Road also featured prominently in her travel accounts: she followed parts of its route, capturing the stories and legacies of those who had gone before her.

Having given up sailing, Maillart found in the landscapes of Asia a new way of connecting with the vastness of the natural world, coming to feel at home in the often harsh conditions she encountered on her travels.

Maillart's personal visual language was rooted in her quest for authenticity. She documented the realities of everyday life in places little known to Western audiences, revealing the bonds – sometimes brief, sometimes more sustained – that she formed with the people she encountered on her journeys. Women, and the conditions in which they lived, were a particular source of interest for Maillart. She portrayed them as active agents of their own lives and drew attention to the significance of their labor, whether in the home, in craft traditions or in factory work.

Quotes for translation:

- “This was the route taken by the earliest transcontinental corridor known to history: the China–Mediterranean connection, or the Silk Road. For nearly a thousand years, merchants, Chinese soldiers, scholars, Buddhist pilgrims and Nestorian Christians took this path.” *Ma philosophie du voyage*
- “We live in a time when the image has become indispensable. It reigns, it is everywhere, it has become the true international language. And because the eye is naturally curious, it has grown voracious. ... Too often, this machine placed before the eye raises a barrier between the viewer and a scene filled with remarkable actors. ... And yet, let us be honest: this feverish hunt for images has pushed me to open doors; it has led me to discover unforgettable places and unforgettable people.” *L'appétit de l'œil*
- “What written or inherited rules govern a woman's life? By what means can propaganda reach women? How can they be made aware of their independence? Did they learn to read in earlier times?” Travel notes, 1932

Preserving Memory

Ella Maillart chose to entrust her archives to two major Swiss institutions, ensuring her work would be preserved and made visible to the public.

In her final years, Maillart donated her writings to the Bibliothèque de Genève and her photographs and films to Photo Elysée. Both institutions now manage her legacy in collaboration with the Ella Maillart Foundation.

During her life, Maillart published books, gave talks, held film screenings and shared her work and experiences more broadly in Switzerland and beyond. In this, she was driven by a desire both to engage with audiences and to fund her itinerant lifestyle. Her lifelong commitment to public education and awareness is evident in the sheer size of her archive, which contains several thousand items.

Among the most significant components is her card catalog: 48 boxes holding hundreds of cards that together form a visual record of Maillart's life, documenting her journeys through images and handwritten captions. These cards offer insights into her working methods and contain previously unpublished photographs that shed light on places visited during her life.

Quotes for translation:

“Perhaps I have a photographer's eyes ... fate has bestowed upon me eyes that love to see.”

Viva – A travers les yeux d'Ella

Ella Maillart: Biography	
1903	Born in Geneva
1916	Gets her first taste of sailing at Le Creux-de-Genthod with her friend Hermine de Saussure, known as Miette
1919	Founds the Champel Hockey Club, the first women's field hockey club in French-speaking Switzerland
1923–1925	Sails across the Mediterranean several times
1924	Competes in the Olympic Games in the monotype category
1926	Co-founds the Swiss Ladies' Ski Club in Mürren
1930	Travels to Moscow and the Caucasus
1931–1932	Leads the Swiss women's field hockey team
1931–1934	Joins the Swiss women's ski team Competes in the world championships
1932	Travels in Soviet Turkestan Publishes <i>Parmi la jeunesse russe</i>
1934	Publishes <i>Turkestan Solo</i>
1934–1935	Travels in China as a reporter sent by <i>Le Petit Parisien</i> to investigate the Japanese occupation of Manchuria
1935	Travels from Peking to India across northern China with Peter Fleming
1937	Publishes <i>Forbidden Journey</i>
1937–1939	Travels to Turkey, India, Iran and Afghanistan for <i>Le Petit Parisien</i>
1939	Drives from Geneva to Kabul with Annemarie Schwarzenbach
1939–1945	Lives in India
1947	Publishes <i>The Cruel Way</i>
1988	Entrusts her photographic archives to Photo Elysée
1997	Dies in Chandolin
2025	UNESCO adds the archives of Ella Maillart and Annemarie Schwarzenbach (1908–1942) to its Memory of the World Register

Historical events	
1910	Japan annexes Korea
1911	The Xinhai Revolution takes place in China
1912	The Qing Dynasty ends and the Republic of China is established
1914	The First World War begins
1915–1916	Imperial rule is restored in China
1916	The Republic of China is restored
1916–1928	China enters the Warlord Era, a period of major political instability
1916–1934	The Basmachi movement (an Islamic nationalist group) rises up against the Russian Empire and, later, the USSR, in Central Asia
1917	The Russian Revolution begins The Russian Civil War breaks out Vladimir Ilyich Lenin seizes power

1919	The First World War ends Students protest in Peking The March First Movement occurs (a series of protests against Japanese colonial rule in Korea) Korean nationalists establish the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai
1921	The Communist Party of China is founded
1921–1922	Soviet Russia experiences its first major famine
1922	Joseph Stalin becomes General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is formally established
1923	The Russian Civil War ends
1924	Vladimir Ilyich Lenin dies
1927–1937	The Nanjing decade ushers in a period of civil war in China
1929	Stalinism begins The USSR starts forcing collective land ownership
1931–1933	The USSR experiences its second major famine
1932	Japan's colonial occupation of Manchuria begins The state of Manchukuo is established
1934–1935	The Long March happens, and Mao Zedong assumes leadership of the Communist Party of China
1937–1938	Stalin carries out the Great Purge
1939	The Second World War begins