Wonders Worth Exploring For

I love exploring in sandboxes. But what does that mean? What do I-- and you hope to find?

I suppose something that does reveal a bit about how the world works would be one answer. So, if planar travel exists finding a portal and how to use it would fit the bill of understanding the edges of the world. Or, a shrine that allows time travel. Or just examples of what geography is possible-burning seas and crystal forests on one end, and just confirmation that, yes, deserts do exist, on the other.

Because there is a type of pleasure in genre expectations being fulfilled too. So in a world that we get to explore, we will probably want to encounter terrain types that we are familiar with from real stories of exploration: deserts, tall mountains, undersea ruins.

But I think there is more to my desire to explore than that. I think there is a part of me that hopes to be surprised and awed.

One of the difficulties of the RPG sandbox is that although anything is possible, the majority of it will be limited by what we can describe using language. And so the things that might have awed actual explorers like the Grand Canyon or the giant Sequoias, Angel Falls or the Pyramids, are going to be far less impressive when just described. Heck, even standing right beside a giant Sequoia it's hard to perceive its size.

So, I think there are limits to our ability to create awe or wonder through description, at least if we limit ourselves to using sensory details. The imagined wonder might need to be more conceptual.

So not the tallest waterfall, but one that flows backwards, not the biggest tree, but one that grows in a single day.

Features of a Wonder

Here are some general principles that could help us generate places a player could encounter in an rpg sandbox that might evoke a sense of wonder:

We want **locations** that are a semi-permanent part of a landscape. A miniature city or a tree that has diamonds for fruit might be cool, but the fact you could dig them up and carry them off in a wagon detracts from their wonder for me. The wonders we want will be locations players can return to again and again.

That being said, it might be more of a draw in a game if **players can take souvenirs**-- bits of the landscape, vials of liquid-- that have value or strange properties from these sites.

Odd, but not deadly. Deadly can be awesome too, but I think it is much easier to evoke fear in someone then a sense of wonder and I'm shooting for the latter. So, we'll try to keep them survivable even if they are dangerous.

A toy to use or figure out. Either they have some pattern or system to them or they might have potential uses for players. This doesn't have much to do with wonders more with any building block of a game where players can make choices.

And for the purposes of a list I'm sharing with lots of different DMs, **not too weird**. I tried to stick to fundamental, elemental things like earth and water, so the wonders would be more likely to fit in your campaign without messing with your tone, or level of magic too much. Even a low magic campaign might have room for one "Shy Forest."

In other words, not only would "rubbery pods the size of a house that float in a certain direction based on your emotion" be more likely to trigger your "WTF!?" reaction than wonder, it also presumes a lot more about your campaign world, how weird it is, and how players might travel around in it. So if some of these entries seem a little mundane, that's one reason.

Okay, some of these don't fulfill all of these criteria, but hopefully they would be suitably interesting and trippy if encountered by your players. Have fun with them.

Geographic Wonders

- **Walking Rocks** A great flat plain filled with rocks of various sizes. Each night, they slide along at walking speed in one of the four cardinal directions. They range in size from pebble to huge boulders you could build a keep on. (sort of like <u>sailing stones</u>).
- **The Teeming Plains** Vast plains with many overlapping fossilized tracks. Apparently caused by some near–instant calamity in the ancient past. If you learn to distinguish the tracks you can follow those of mages, warriors, and angels to where they stop, dig there, and find caches of ancient magic left where they died.
- **Everburning Fire** In some far away hollow surrounded by wastelands is a fire that will never go out. It can catch fuels on fire and burn them up, but will remain, burning on the ground even when the fuel is burnt up. Burns in the rain. Burns in the snow. Smothering it might put it out.
- **Cold Fires** Found in a crater this fire can be spread by normal fuels carried on a torch, in a brazier but will never consume the fuels. It burns underwater. It burns eternally but is not hot.
- **The Great Mirage Lake** A huge, dry, sea. When a water craft is pushed into it water forms all around, lifting it up. This water might be collected in a container from inside the craft.
- **Lesser Mirage Lake** A beautiful blue lake in a dry land. The waters recede from any living thing. It might be possible to catch some with a suitably long pole. It might be possible to explore sunken cities hidden in its deepest parts.
- The Blanched Moors Low, wet lands covered with shallow, bitter pools. In these are the perfectly preserved bodies of creatures that have died here, all white. White stallions, white cocks, white apes, albino princesses. Perfect for those searching for material components or extinct beasts to revivify.
- **The Solid Fogs** At certain times of year the mists across some bays coalesce into solid clouds. These are a danger for ships. There are tales of mages gathering the stuff with shovels and saws to place in the air and build towers on.
- **Lethe Fogs** Said to rise from the ground in fell bogs. It smells faintly of over ripe apples and eats away at the memory (lose XP every day you travel in it). If bottled could cause memory loss in targets elsewhere.
- **The Sweet Wind** A chance wind that arises on a certain lost plain. It smells faintly of vanilla. It clears the air and sharpens those that breathe it (extra XP for anything that grants it; bonus chance for checks like casting spells to be successful).

- **The Crowding Grove** A forest of trees that press in on any living thing, becoming impassable. Cuttings and twigs taken will have similar properties.
- **The Shy Thickets** Thick brush that parts for anything living. Plantings can be taken. Might function as a good anti-undead defense.
- **The Abrupt Forest** When the sun rises on this it is a flat, treeless plain. But soon saplings push out of the sod and grow. And grow. Trees will grow to adult height by sunset (or alternatively noon). Depending on the type of forest they may grow as fast as a meter a minute or more. Once night falls they recede back into the earth. Cuttings and saplings can be taken.
- **The Hidden Forest** Opposite of above; the trees of this forest grow quickly once night falls and recede to a flat plain in the day.
- **The Forest that Isn't** − A normal forest at night but the light of dawn turns the timber to birds or butterflies which fly away only to come settle back into tree form when night falls.
- **Water Rise** Water that flows up. Sometimes found underground where they are an unfamiliar hazard to explorers. On the surface their waters "fall" straight up to space. Can be bottled.
- **True Ice Walls** These sheets of ice are somehow pushed vertically from a great frozen plain or lake. Rows and rows. Some pressed tight like the strata of a tilted mesa, some with space enough between for a human to walk. When someone is seen through the ice their true feelings toward you are visible in their face. Crews harvest sections with saws and sleds to place in faraway palaces.
- **The Dammed Muds** Flats of mud that stretch for miles and that never dry. Even if dug up and moved to somewhere else the mud will remain mud. Rumored to be treasured by mages in the making of living statues.
- **The Shards** A flat landscape, as far as the eye can see, covered with shards of inscribed pottery. Like a great library, the writing on the shards can be searched for spells, recipes, or the locations of famous treasures. Except some essential bit of information will always be missing, the one shard that bit was on lost to the ages (spells will misfire in random ways, recipes have side effects, treasure maps will have some riddle that needs answering or might point to two equally possible places).
- Where God Waits The landscape of this whole area is actually the shape of a human lying on its side. The hip a great hill. Two cults have sprung up around it, one that protects the figure in expectation of its waking day, the other secretly digs out its grey, clayey flesh at night to eat.

- 21 **The Graveyard of Gods** A set of canyons filled with white bones too big for even dragons. Ribs as big as rivers, hills of solid bone. Operations have been set up to "mine" the ivory, cutting out solid blocks as big as wagons can carry. Interesting murals might be scrimshawed in hard to reach places.
- 22 **The Battlefield** A Great rocky depression filled with the bones of thousands of warriors. Weapons and armor of excellent quality can be found if long enough is spent rummaging through the rusted, broken gear scattered through the rocks. Some say those who take from this place are cursed by doing so.
- 23 **Tidal Sands** This section of desert acts like waters in a bay, receding to reveal hidden treasures, returning to catch the uncautious in smothering dunes.
- **Calving Cliffs** Rough cliffs above the sea. They are lined with cairns along their edge (like the <u>tomb of the eagles</u>). Every so often chunks of the cliff will break away and ... float. These floating islands sometimes calve with whole cairns on them, sometimes with a party of tomb looters stuck on them.
- The Plug A great lump of lead the size of a keep. Rumored to have been created to encase a powerful evil. Constantly hacked at by the poor and greedy the lead used to make shot for slings, roofing, pipes each time some is taken away there is a chance of evil being released to wreak havoc.
- Tar Glacier A huge swath of tar filling an alpine valley, infinitesimally creeping forward. What other uses it might have?
- 27 **The Fickle River** Every few days this river will completely change the direction it flows. Commerce and the towns and villages that line it are shaped by this, with different trade and small festivals happening when the current turns their way or remains their way for more than certain amounts of time.
- Flower Trail Steppes About a half hour after walking on the ground in this region small, bright flowers bloom all around the area walked on. Impossible to cross without leaving a colorful trail. Very dangerous, as bandits and large predators have learned to use this in tracking prey. The cut sod is worth its weight in gold to potentates for use in gardens.
- Old Chalk Hills Rolling hills made up of powdery, grey chalk under a thin layer of grasses. This chalk preserves the life of anything buried in it. Digging in the hills will uncover every type of ancient life, even humans, which, after catching a few deep, coughing breaths, will resume life.
- 30 **Heavy Sands** These sand bars in a river delta fluctuate in color depending on the health of the ruler of the empire. The grains act normally filling spaces, able to be made into glass but are as heavy as lead.

- **The Whirlwind** This persistent tornado is given different names by different cultures— Kasirga, Kimbunga and is said to have a personality. It moves randomly across the plains often just in sight, a deadly threat if it decides to come toward the viewer.
- **The Shy Sea** A vast plain of gravel, every few weeks a murmuring sound all around signals the rise of clear, fresh water bubbling up from below. The waters of this new shallow sea, eventually about as deep as a human is tall, are said to have healing properties.
- **Ice Flats** These areas look as if a great lake was covered in ice and then the water disappeared. Sailing ice boats is a quick but dangerous way to cross them. At night, fires and lights are often seen flickering below the ice, as if whole cities live beneath.
- **Fire Pools** An area of natural pools that smells faintly of stale oil and looks oily. At night a pale fire flickers across the surface giving an eery glow to the whole area. Water collected here will also burn in the dark. Drinking the water is not advised.
- **Green Canyon** A small, winding canyon unrecognizable as such because its ground-level opening is filled with greenery. Clambering down a trail into the canyon reveals that the greenery is from trees growing in mid-air, their roots bare. The heartwood of these trees is buoyant.
- **The Weeping Stones** In an otherwise dry badlands, these pinkish, hard rocks trickle moisture. Mosses and lush grasses grow around their bases. Oval and each close to the size of a person, the rocks show signs of having been chipped at over the centuries. A fist-sized chip will trickle a waterskin full in a day.
- **Summer Mountain** This mountain range is seasonal. It slowly recedes into winter and pushes up in spring. Tallest at the summer solstice, its behavior shapes the trade and ecology of the entire region.
- **The Speckled Shoals** These rocky shoals are dangerous to ships, but beautiful. Made up of small rocks the many colors of fall leaves, these have actually fallen from the small trees that crown the shoals and grow leaves of stone. Cuttings can be taken.
- **The Child of the Sun** Hidden in an underground cavern is a tiny sun. Just like our sun but the size of an apple. It floats above the cavern floor. Here warm breezes blow, green mosses spread across the cavern floor and mouse-sized cattle graze in the glow.
- **The Rotten Rocks** Actually two hills of greenish stone crumbling to powder. The hills can be seen from quite a distance. The powder decays metal as a rust monster.

- **Amber Beach** This long, sweeping beach hidden in a cove is made entirely of bits of amber smoothed by the sea. The amber holds fragments of ancient trees, bugs, and some even tiny fairies. It's said warming those over a fire will release the fairy which might perform a service.
- **Bower Village** Seen from nearby hills this looks like a thriving riverside village. On closer inspection it's all made of straw, mud, and found objects. A single male bower bird lives here. If caught and moved elsewhere he will construct a similar village in approximately 1 month.
- **Auburn Hills** Hills covered with fine, red–brown grass but oddly little wildlife. Closer inspection reveals the "grass" is human hair. Can be used to make rope and cloth like silk. Do not burn.
- **Ember Showers** These blasted lands have barely any plant growth, and the few weeds and scraggly bushes are singed and blackened. Each day a shower of embers falls here. Legend says, if you can catch one in holy water the ember will cool and "grow" back into what it was before, and that each of these embers are the pages from some great library.
- Well of Coals This tavern–sized crater is filled with smoldering coals. Removed coals are replaced by more coals that seem to push up from inside the earth. These coals will never burn out and are tempting for merchants to take, but there is a small chance each day they will begin reproducing and filling the area they are in completely with coals.
- The Thick Airs In a small, hidden valley the air is so thick that moving through it is more like moving through water, or snow. It is so thick that small items, like apples and daggers, can be placed in it and will not fall. It is said it is so thick it can be scooped into bags and carried away.
- The Thick Waters The waters in this small, forgotten pool look normal in every way, but feel more like a thick mud. A boat will sit on the surface and not sink into it. They cannot be drunk. It is said if they are warmed the thick water will thin itself, becoming normal and expanding in volume by 10 or 100 times.
- **The Splintered Ridges** A set of several long straight ridges. Under the thin layer of soil and grass these hills are made entirely of wood. And this wood is said to heal itself, prized for shields.
- **Breathing Mountain** The canyons at the base of this mountain are beset by winds every few hours. These blow down and away and then in a few minutes and toward the mountain again. The winds are of such force they can blow mules down the canyons and suck small children up and away.
- **Dewdrop Flowers** The petals of these small flowers are made of water droplets. The slightest brush will release the droplets and cause the flower next to it to release its, sending glistening waves through the fields. Greatly sought be rulers or arid realms.

- 51 **The Smoking Lands** Lands much like ours except that the living things are a bit paler, a bit grayer, and where our life has hair they have smoke rising off of them. Women with smoky tresses, wolves that have fur of smoky tendrils.
- 52 **The Great Green** A vast swath of green grass that reaches heights of 12 feet. Travel through it is risky because so many have gotten lost, or never returned. Who knows what wonder it hides.
- Where the Light Falls Imagine a shaft of sunlight breaking through the clouds on a cloudy day. In this place there are many of these sunny rays of light, of various sizes and falling at various angles, even when there are no clouds. If a living thing walks through the one of these, the light will fallow them until they leave the region. Follow them even at night.
- **Twilight Vale** This secluded valley is always in the gloaming. It is a peaceful dusk, with crickets and fireflies. But the sun never shines here.
- **Root Forest** This grove of trees grows upside down. Nothing is seen but roots. Digging in the earth around the trunks reveals leaves and mango–like fruit. Eating one of these fruit will give you all the benefits of a good nights sleep without having to sleep.
- Fertile Earth This patch of land is so fertile that anything planted in the ground here will grow into a tree. These trees look just like oaks, and are just as slow to grow, but bear fruit that is the young of the planted "seed." Bury a bird and the tree bears eggs. Bury a fruit and the tree bear seeds. Bury the dead and ...
- 57 **Impenetrable Forest** After walking for half an hour into this stand of trees you will find yourself walking back out. Always.
- 58 **Down Showers** In this area, in the winter, small downy feathers fall instead of snow. These blacken and decay eventually. Gathered fresh into sacks, the down can be used for bedding and clothing that provides excellent warmth while virtually weightless.
- 59 **Salt Forest** Seen from a distance it looks like a snow–covered forest. Closer inspection reveals trees, shrubs, stumps, everything made entirely from salt. Rain causes the whole to melt away. Later, the salt then pushes up from the ground to slowly reform the forest. This salt is said to be useful for leaving trails in labyrinths that remain undisturbed.
- 60 **Cold Springs** A series of ponds and geysers in a rocky badland that have, not hot, but freezing cold waters. This water is said to keep it's cold far longer than normal when transported elsewhere.

- **The Great Shells** This forgotten bay holds oysters the size of ox carts. Pried open, candlesticks, crowns, and other objects can be placed inside to be covered by mother-of-pearl.
- **The Horned Rocks** A rocky mountainside out of which grows sets of horns. There are various spirals, curvatures, and length. If a horn is cut, another will begin slowly growing from the same spot. These horns, when carved properly, can be heard farther than should be possible when sounded.
- **Sculpted Forest** Old oak forest carved in marble. Each leaf and acorn detailed realistically. It's said each acorn if planted and watered, will grow a 20×20×3 section of stone wall.
- **Rust Beach** Run of beach made of rust. Rumored that a god corrodes under the water nearby. Eat the rust to immunize your body to magic.
- **Glass Fumaroles** Natural glass extrudes in strange spindles from these steaming, sulfurous holes. Glass so pure and fine that, if struck, the noise made is only heard by elves.
- **Leaves with No Trees** These grassy plains are covered in colorful leaves in the fall, though there are no trees for miles.
- **Hidden Valley** A small, fertile valley with a creek that no one knows about, but you. Maps don't show it. Travelers will route around it and not realize the extra time their journey took.
- **Beast Amphitheaters** Natural, rocky concavities where, at midnight, all the animals from miles around gather in, to sit in silent circles until dawn.
- **Twin Valley** Every tree here is next to an identical tree, every flower, an identical flower. Each squirrel you see, each deer is a pair.
- **Punctured Lands** These grassy, foggy flatlands are treacherous because the ground is full of holes. Fist-sized to horse-sized, the holes plunge hundreds of feet into darkness. Listening at the holes, will let you here the voices of the dead, different hole, different voice.

- **Bright Hills** Everything here seems normal, except there are no shadows
- **Coral Road** A sinuous, bright-red road that might be aeons old, it curves to miss mountains no longer there, bridges over rivers now dry, before disappearing under the sea.
- Wandering Grove Within a large area of plains, a particular grove of trees is never seen moving but often found in different locations. Some say it hides an ancient shrine and moves to keep it safe.
- Cypress Stands These low, rolling hills are peppered with lines and stands of Italian Cypress. Close inspection reveals they outline former lanes and villas. Somehow, the trees survived the complete destruction of the rest. Reading a map here will cause ancient dwellings, cities, and roads that no longer exist, to appear on the map.
- Winter Boulders Above the tree line there is an area that looks clear, but in winter fallen snow reveals the shapes of invisible boulders. The boulders have centuries of graffiti and recesses carved into them. Placing objects into recesses will make them invisible too.
- **Moth Fogs** Marshy lands where any movement causes millions of tiny, white moths to rise up and flutter about. They are drawn to faces.
- **Rushlight Berries** Inedible berries that glow as bright as a candle when ripe. Dim as they overipen.
- **Lichen Field** Above the treeline, a valley filled with yellow–orange lichen. Eating a handful allows a person to go a week without food.
- **Balancing Bole** The trunk of what was once a huge fir balances precariously on a point jutting out from a high cliff. It is said that if you say a name as you push on the trunk it will rotate so the small end points toward where that thing is in the world.
- **Balancing Rocks** Above the treeline, a whole valley filled with piles of balanced stones. Make your own pile and gain luck for as long as it stands. The higher the pile, the more luck but the more likely it will tumble once you leave.

- **Sand Falls** A plateau in a desert with dunes on and around it. Every third day sand falls from above. The sand is so pure and fine it's said a person with cursed weapons or armor can remove them while standing under the fall.
- **The Roots** Acres of twisted roots with no soil. Very difficult to travel through. These roots consume soil around them and cuttings are feared by farmers and desired by sappers.
- **Dark Water** Somewhere in the ocean a patch of dark water exists. It is oily and stinks like rotting fruit. Bathe in it and animals will ignore you for a day.
- **God's Breath** These rocky flats are blasted by a continuous downward wind. So loud that speech is impossible. It is said someone cannot be scryed for as long as God breathes on them.
- **The Shells** Deep in a desert a vast area of pinkish dunes. These are actually made up of millions of tiny shells. Placing the shells in water causes them to revivify as tiny molluscs and crustaceans that are voracious and consume any meat nearby.
- **Grey Hills** These low rolling hills are a sickly grey and made almost entirely of clay. They are treacherous in wet weather but folks say bricks made from the clay cannot be broken by siege engines.
- **Keep Tree** From a distance it looks like a stand but it's actually one huge, ring-like tree. With one entrance and a clearing inside some thirty feet across, many tribes, patrols, and pilgrims have sought shelter here over the years. Oaths made inside bind like a geas.
- **The Honeycomb** Red sandstone with tight, twisting passages and holes of different sizes worn by wind and ancient water ways. The best shelter for miles in the badlands, it's said you can hear the conversations of all those that have camped there before in the wind moaning through the crannies.
- **God's Bowl** In the floor of a rocky mountain valley a massive vein of white quartz holds a pool of water. This water will never freeze even if taken from the pool.
- **Wight Woods** Evergreen trees that do not move in the wind but move as if by wind if the dead are moving near them.

- **Dark Ice Caves** The ice these caves are found in is a dark, purplish hue. It melts to water of the same color. This water freezes in darkness regardless of temperature. Treasured by desert castellans.
- **The Great Stillwater** This lake in the center of a northern bog is deathly still. In fact no ripples move on the water when it is disturbed. If some of this is poured in another body, that water will still for an hour.
- **Ghost Road** Parties traveling on this ancient road see no one behind them and a party far in front of them that looks identical to theirs. All parties see this. Two parties traveling at the same time will not see each other until close enough to be mingling horses.
- **The Old Teeth** A line of obsidian plugs jutting from a rocky landscape. Fires set next to them produce no smoke, as if the plugs breathe it all in.
- **The Round Pools** A flat, stone plain dotted with small, circular pools. The fresh water never dries up and bathing in one will speed healing of small wounds. Bathing in several in the proper intervals will heal completely and even restore limbs.
- **Ghost Creek** The loud sound of water flowing in a creek is heard here, but no water. Containers left out overnight will fill slowly. Drinking the water in them will allow a person to rest without sleeping, like an elf, for a week.
- **Honeyed Cliffs** Tall cliffs so covered in wild beehives that honey drips down along the length of them. This honey is said to preserve things indefinitely and locals place the bodies of revered dead all along the bottom of the cliffs.
- **Root Cavern** A vast cavern with roots in place of stalagmites and stalactites. They drip thick sap which will trap the unwary. If thinned with alcohol and drunk, it is said to make the skin bark–hard for a day.
- **Stalking Creek** Travelers through dry hills will sometimes encounter a creek that they cannot shake. Hiking directly away from it reveals that it curves around the hill you just hiked over. Once the creek is seen parties lose their sense of direction and will remain lost. It is said hiking up the creek will reveal the last party lost to the creek around the source and free travelers from its hold.
- **The Barrens** Huge swath of forest that appears devastated by a recent fire. Walking into it will drain strength from a person (drain 1 hp per turn of hiking) while revitalizing the small area around their path.

- **Waterfall Tree** A huge tree with water cascading from its crown. Drinking this water sharpens the mind (2x experience for a session).
- **Stunted Forest** An ancient forest of twisted and stunted trees, few as tall as a person. Burning the wood properly in an athanor refills items with magical power.
- **Fainting Forest** A vast aspen grove with trees that fall away from living things walking close. Each morning the trees raise themselves again. Their wood is the best for making detection wands.
- **World Trees** Huge trees, hundreds of feet across and tall enough to disappear into the clouds. Their bases partially hollowed away by fire and ancient carvings, a person sleeping inside one will wake in another time.
- **Mica Fields** The flat earth glitters golden for as far as the eye can see. Sheets of this mineral can be pried up to make windows ghosts cannot pass through.
- **Valley of Graves** It's easy to miss that the low, woody shrubs here hide thousands of graves. Each has a flat stone marked with simple runes, indicating how the dead were noteworthy. Eat leaves from above a grave to attain similar attributes for a week. (treat searching the graves as a library).
- **Carved Towers** —There are twelve of these huge, natural boulders carved into simple temples. The temples vary but have windows, benches, and a fountain. Each month of the year the fountain flows and a warm lights appear in a different temple. Drinking from the waters will cause hostiles to always target you last, for as long as the water flows in that temple.
- **The Great Graven Tusk** A huge tusk emerges from the muck of a swamp. It's scrimshawed with an ancient story. At a particular hour of day the sun falls on a part of the story that causes flowers to blossom all around the tusk. Wear the flowers in your hair and enemy blows will always do the least harm possible.
- **The Black Tears** At random times this volcano rains down perfectly smooth, tear-shaped bits of obsidian the size of a human head. This makes travel here treacherous, but the tears are highly sought as scrying devices.
- **Carved Grove** This remote section of forest has crude figures carved in the trunks of the trees. Visiting the grove will cause your own crude likeness to appear the next day. Then, strangers will treat you as long-lost friends until someone else visits the grove and their likeness is carved.