



Destination Insider
Come explore with us

May 2010

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From the CEO's Desk

Dear Partners,

We recently launched our newest product line Explore that features “Out of the ordinary tours for everyone”; giving individuals and small groups an authentic and sustainable travel experience. Travellers will experience the great outdoors, local customs and charming hospitality, flavourful traditional cooking, stimulating art and intriguing architecture in a unique yet easily accessible manner.

One of the driving forces behind the Explore product line is the realisation that no matter how good or wise we are, locals always know the best kept secrets that will bring long-term success to a particular destination. And while we travel from one destination to another in search of compelling stories to inspire your clients to travel, it has been and will be our constant endeavour to listen to locals, initiate partnerships, engage them, and determine mutually beneficial alignments. We have made several friends in the process, the very best in what they do; ready to help your clients absorb the destination like a local. They love their mythology, history, and folklore and brilliantly weave them into their narratives, the end result being, a true local experience.

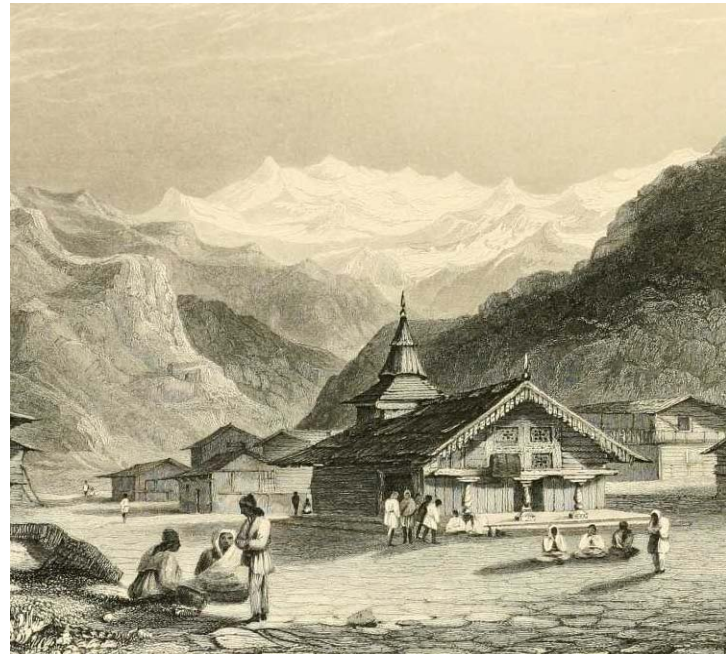
We felt that it was necessary to create a platform where our friends are able to share their expert insights, wonderful stories and delightful conversations for a never before take on destination travel and knowledge sharing. The Destination Insider which we will bring to you once every two months is a result of that. It will be great to have your feedback as it progresses over the issues.

Come explore with us.

Regards

Dipak Deva





Sumit Raj Vashisht is an Author, Painter & Heritage Guide. He is a friend of Sita and your insider in Shimla. Sumit has been meticulously maintaining old records, maps and photographs of the town for years now. With him, many of our clients have managed to locate old houses in Shimla where their forefathers were born, churches where they were baptized, cemeteries where their ancestors were buried, nursing Homes where they were born, roads on which their ancestors walked and offices they worked in. In this issue he shares with you two of his favourite walks in Shimla, the beloved "Queen of Hills", the once decadent Summer Capital of the British Raj.

All that Raj

"Isn't it strange to dine in silk stockings in such a place, to drink a bottle of hock and champagne every evening, to have delicious moccha coffee and receive Calcutta Journals, every morning?" wrote Frenchman Jacques Mont sometime in the early 19th century. He was in Shimla, then a settlement of no more than fifteen hamlets, as a guest of Captain Charles Pratt Kennedy, the British Political Agent. The Gurkhas of Nepal who brutalised the locals were defeated and driven out. Peace had returned.

Shimla was declared the Summer Capital of British India and rose in prominence nearly half a century after Jacques Mont's visit, but Captain Kennedy was already living a life that would characterise the bubbling and decadent ways the British Raj would escape to every summer thereafter.

One of my clients from England was kind enough to share some old letters her maternal grandfather wrote from Shimla to his mother. "...Last night I went to a ball given by the German Consul who is the richest man in Simla and gives the best entertainments. The narrowness of the space rather prevented me from showing off my fine stride but I did not get very much bored which is generally the best I can say of a ball. Thursdays I am going to Viceroy's for a dance and I am afraid I shall get entrapped for several others..." he wrote.

There are various tales as to how the town drew its name. According to a legend, the town got its name from Shyamala, the dark Goddess of power, widely worshipped in these hills. The story of the Gerad Brothers is also talked about. They were on their way on an official survey, when they saw a fakir (ascetic) near Jakhoo Hills, the highest among the seven hills of Shimla. The fakir who it seems could understand the language of the animals, provided drinking water to weary travellers. The thatched cottage he lived in was named as Shyamala. It is also said that it was a British officer who accidentally stumbled upon Shimla while moving his troops. On the way he stopped in a dense cedar forest that was full of hyenas and bears. He was so struck by its cooler clime that he decided to pitch tents for the night. Later, when he returned to the plains, he recommended that army outposts be set up in that area which was so much like England.

Shimla remained the summer capital for the British Government from 1822 to 1947. The British brought here everything. They built here everything that was necessarily required to lead a comfortable life. They constructed roads to Shimla and even got it connected to the plains through railways. They introduced the best of schools and brought medical facilities for the natives and European population of the town. They introduced club culture to Shimla and built some of the most beautiful buildings. I think that there is no other shopping street in India that is



more beautiful than the Mall Road of Shimla. The Tudor Style structures make it look like an old English Town. The Norman Gothic building of Gaiety theatre adds another jewel in Shimla's crown.

In this issue I would like to share with you two of my favorite walks that I love to take my clients out on -

The Descent to Annadale:

Captain Kennedy, the British Political Agent, once while roaming in the forest behind his cottage looked down the valley and spotted a vast open ground. He thought of going there but was unable to find the way. He called a villager who had come to the forest to collect wood and asked him the way to reach that open ground. Very willingly the villager escorted Kennedy. There, the political agent spent the whole day roaming around with his local escort. Till then the ground was used as a grazing plot for the cattle of the residents of the nearby village called Kyatoo - now pronounced as Kaithu.

Roaming alone in the lap of that natural glade, the young political agent missed the company of his beloved Anna with whom he was in love. That was the day when the glade received its name as Annandale. Later Annadale was used as the venue for public functions.

A lovely walk from Kalibari temple towards this wide open ground takes you through some of the narrow streets, trails and old houses where you can have some glimpses of typical India lifestyle. People basking in sun, ladies drying laundry outside the house or washing clothes, children playing cricket in the streets, shopkeepers busy with their customers. The walk then takes you through a patch of dense forest; pass the Annandale ground which is now a golf course. A small chalet at the entrance of the gate has been converted into a museum that depicts the history of the Indian Army. Carry on with your walk and finally it takes you outside the grand gates of a huge lodge from where the entire Indian subcontinent was once controlled.

Hike to the Highest Peak of Shimla:

Like Rome Shimla is also called the city of Seven Hills and Jakhu is the highest among them. A small temple dedicated to the Hindu God Hanuman, crowns the summit of the hill with groups of macaques darting around it. The temple existed much before the Shimla rose to prominence. This was the place where British officer Captain Alexander Gerard saw a fakir, who could understand the language of the animals and provided drinking water to weary travellers.

We will take the uphill road next to the Christ Church leading to the highest hill of Shimla from where, on a clear day, one can enjoy the breathtaking panoramic view of the snow clad Himalayan peaks to the north. Be careful about the monkeys on the way as they sometimes become aggressive. A stick, easily available on the way from the shops, is highly recommended to help keep them away. One you have enjoyed the sight of the Himalayas, there are two options, one is to turn right and head towards Titla Hotel and further to the Ridge or to take a left turn and to the Governor's House. From here you can reach the Mall passing through a number of old houses such as Woodville Palace, Oakover, Cedar Lodge and the oldest cemetery of Shimla.



Gautam and Venetia Kotamraju are friends of Sita and organise motorbike trips and charity rides of all shapes and sizes. An Anglo-Indian couple based in Bangalore, they will take you along the meandering tree lined roads of South India on the old British Royal Enfield motorcycles. In this issue Venetia talks about her favourite biking trip – Bangalore to Goa and why she thinks that Indian cows may in fact have a hearing problem.

Are Indian Cows Deaf?


Motorcycling as a hobby is still fairly nascent in India and the sight of four Bullets – one of the most powerful bikes on the Indian road and certainly the loudest – loaded to the gills with luggage is enough to draw most of a village out of their houses. The blond ponytail under my helmet gives them an added shock. In a country where most women sit sidesaddle, there are few female motorcyclists but funnily enough my gender seems almost irrelevant. Such things are allowed, expected even, of firangs (foreigners); I would be no more bizarre an object to look at if I were riding naked. Although not in my mother-in-law's eyes. As the wife of a pukka Indian, I ought to be producing babies not riding a bike. At any rate, the villagers have already guessed our destination (where else would a firang be going?): Goa, India's California stuck in a permanent summer of love.

The Jewel de Rock is perhaps not the best hotel in the small town of Hassan in the plains of central India. The entire reception and first floor are still very much under construction but oddly the second floor has a row of rooms which although not luxurious offer a bed, a hot shower (provided you have your hot shower between 5 and 6am, which luckily we did) and, at a push, a cup of chai as we load up the bikes for the day's ride.

Sailing out of the gate and back onto the state highway at 7'o clock, the growing elation of riding a put-put-putting Royal Enfield Bullet on a cool but sunny morning in India suddenly bursts as the put put put turns to shudder shudder shudder stop. The petrol levels have sunk and the reserve pipe on this bike – a classic Bullet Machismo born in the same year as me, 1983 – is not working. Fortunately, I am travelling with experienced Bulleteers who know exactly what to do. Carefully selecting the biggest spanner in the tool kit, they give the tank and the pipe a few good whacks and soon petrol is again flowing and we are off!

It is sharad or autumn, one of the six seasons of the traditional Indian year, and white lotuses have reclaimed the lakes that the monsoon had battered and muddied. Soon we start to climb out of the plains and into the greenery of Chikmagalur, a coffee growing district in the horse-shoe shaped hills that mark the start of the Western ghats. The road narrows into tight steep curves and the air suddenly cools. A thick forest on either side of the road boasts an extravagance of flowers, electric blue Morning Glory tightly wound up a huge silver oak or pale pink japaa (wild hibiscus).

After a hugely delicious Chikmagaluri breakfast courtesy of Shreedev Hulikere and his wife Sushmita at the stunning hill getaway amidst coffee and pepper plantations that is Woodway Home Stay, we descend briefly to the plains before climbing again, this time into the Western ghats proper. Our next stop is Agumbe, the legendary cliff that marks the edge of the ghats and from where you can see the Arabian Sea 60km away. The road by now is studded with potholes but thankfully little else so we are able to manouevre the zig zags with relative ease and still enjoy the view.



As we climb the last few kilometres into Agumbe, the sun light becomes intermittent and the road is freshly wet. Agumbe has one of the highest rainfalls in India. It also has a precipitous descent down 14 hairpin bends of terrible road, each one hiding a manic bus driver taking the turn at full tilt. We peer into the horizon, just about spot the sea 60km away and hurry back onto the bikes before the rain starts.

Emerging from the 14th hairpin bend we ride straight into the sun towards the coast. It's 4:30pm and we reckon we can make it to the beach house at Kundapur by sunset. We didn't count on the cows. There are three main hazards when you're on a motorbike in India. One is the truck and bus drivers. The former drive at night, tend to be drunk and never have properly functioning lights or indeed much else. Every morning you see fresh remnants of the inevitable consequences: trucks in ditches, trucks on their backs, truck-sized holes in a wall. The bus drivers aren't normally drunk but they like to get wherever they're going fast, perhaps buoyed up by the loud Bollywood (or Tollywood etc depending on which part of the country you're in – the South Indian film industry beats the better known Bollywood by a mile, with its moustachioed belly-out heroes and incomparable dance routines) hits on the TV. The second hazard is the dogs who cause innumerable accidents by running out into the middle of the road at the worst moment. But at least dogs tend to run away if you blow your horn.

Cows, the third hazard, don't. Although slower than dogs and thus easier to avoid, they refuse to alter their trajectory in any way for the traffic. Even with four thumping Bullets bearing down on them with horns a-blast, the cows don't even look in our direction. Someone observed that calves had a slightly greater sensitivity to traffic which suggests that cows grow into their obdurance, probably because everyone always does swerve round them rather than into them. To hit a cow in India is to invite the wrath of everyone in the vicinity, a hefty fine at best and jail at worst. But even if you know the bike, car or bus is going to go around you, you would surely still react – look round maybe, or even hesitate slightly. Which is why I think that Indian cows may in fact have a hearing problem.

On a rural road like this, peregrine cows can bring your average speeds down from 70kmph to about 30. Several emergency stops later the sun is beginning to turn orange as it sinks and the race begins. We don't know how far it is to the coast, nor do we know the way, but we are by unspoken agreement determined to see the sun set into the Arabian Sea. The suspense as we reach the top of every slight elevation in the road is unbearable – can we see the sea yet? Our speeds increase as the road narrows to a strip that is only just wider than our tyres. Our sole pillion and de facto photographer tries desperately to take shakey photos of the descending sun ahead of us, but in vain. Finally we hit the west coast highway and turn left before realising we should have crossed it instead. The agonising realisation of those precious seconds wasted speeds us on as we cross the final backwater paddy fields. The sun disappears behind palm trees – palm trees we really are almost there! – and suddenly the road ends in sand and we have hit the beach. A ruddy fragment of cloud marks the spot where the sun had sunk into the sea.



Socialite and Art Consultant Umang Hutheesing is your insider in Ahmedabad, Gujarat's Jewel in the Crown. He passionately calls Ahmedabad the "Splendor of the Orient built by Merchants". Umang is heir to a historic mercantile family of Ahmedabad that actively financed India at different stages of her history. His private collection of costumes and accessories of princely India, the largest such collection in the world, was recently on exhibition at the Pierre Bergé - Yves Saint Laurent Foundation in Paris. Umang is a friend of Sita and leads our special interest Art, Craft and Textiles tours in Gujarat by appointment only.


Splendor of the Orient

People have historically loved to travel and discover new lands, explore new cities and experience different cultures. They have been called explorers, travelers, and now tourists! The nouns change but the spirit of adventure still remains the same. Many of these travelers have documented their experiences in journals, paintings and now photographs, films and the net, so that when they return home they can share their experiences with their friends and fellow citizens. These travelogues have become an important source of historical record for they are authentic first hand accounts of people who have as historians and travelers seen and experienced several places, and can therefore compare and evaluate with the standards of that time.

"Look at the beautiful balconies over the Grand Canal with the romantic gondolas, it is Venice! And this magnificent villa on this graceful plaza, it is Florence!" These two historic cities are full of beautiful art and refined architecture, their squares are adorned with statues and fountains, and there is sophistication in its people and vibrant culture alive in every street. After all, both these cities were built by its mighty merchants! Who were trading in jewelry, textiles and fine crafts! Florence and Venice are enchanting cities, and millions of tourists from around the world come here every year to imbibe their magic.

Yet, unknown to the new generations of the world exist a third city of equal historical beauty and might. A city described by the famous French Traveler and Jeweler Tavallier a few centuries ago "The most beautiful city in the world" comparing it to Florence and Venice, He says there is no great Palace of King of this city, yet every home is exquisite with its lace like wooden facades. There are numerous streets with large gates and plazas full of lively activity and delicately carved pagodas to feed the birds in the middle. The people are intelligent and proud of their heritage. "A beautiful city built by its citizens, patrons of art architecture and culture, "This City of Merchants!"...The City of Ahmedabad.

Metropolitan Ahmedabad is the gateway to Gujarat, but it was earlier known as Ashaval and then Karnavati. Today's Ahmedabad was built by Sultan Ahmed Shah in 1411 on the banks of the river Sabarmati; for it was here as the legend goes that the Sultan had seen a hare hunt the hounds!



William Finch and Nicholas Withington, who stayed at Ahmedabad in 1611 AD "found fine inlay work, gold and silver brocade, velvets and taffetas". German traveler Mandesloe in 1638 described it as "the headquarters of manufacturers, the greatest city in India, nothing inferior to Venice, an unsurpassed commercial emporium where merchandise from any part of Asia could be had and where foreign bills could be exchanged". Sir Thomas Roe thus writes to King James of England during Mughal Emperor Jahangir's reign, "Ahmedabad is a Godly city, as large as London".

James Forbes in his Oriental Memoirs published in 1813 thus described the city of Ahmedabad, "Until this visit to Ahmedabad, I had no conception of the extent of oriental magnificence, the palaces and splendid chambers described in the Arabian Nights Entertainments, appear no longer over charged or fabulous."

Lock wood de Forest, noted American Artist and Decorator was so impressed with "the exquisite taste and beauty of Ahmedabad's Havelis" that he and Louis Tiffany of "Tiffany & Co." USA started a partnership with the Hutheesing Family in 1881 AD. Together they created architectural and interior marvels of Ahmedabad's Splendor, winning nine international gold medals in the World Expos in Paris and London. They proceeded to do the interior of 'The White House', 'The Kensington Palace' and several other landmark buildings in America and Europe; this, when the world was imitating Imperial Europe in art and design.

Modern Ahmedabad is a city raised not by imperial powers, but by its mercantile community its 'Mahajans'! The Mahajans contribution to the building of our nation is exemplary. Their culture of enterprise brought significant wealth and prosperity through trade and industry. Ahmedabad became the Manchester of the East with maximum number of textile mills. This culture of enterprise and entrepreneurship continues till this date. The Mahajans were renowned for their culture of Philanthropy and Patronage building Educational and Cultural Institutes, Temples, Museums, Hospitals and several other community welfare Trusts and Endowments. They invited leading Architects of the time like Le Corbusier, Louis Khan, Claude Bathey etc. to build institutions for Modern India. Ahmedabad's unique culture of Enterprise and Philanthropy made it the epicenter of Mahatma Gandhi's Swaraj Movement. It was here the Gandhiji established the Sabarmati Ashram from where he orchestrated India's Freedom Movement for 17 years and later led the Dandi March against the salt tax, the rest is history.

Ahmedabad's legendary wealth produced magnificent Havelis of artistic and cultural splendor, bringing to life the fact that India is an ancient living tradition alive and vibrant in its homes, not necessarily fossilized in the museum and is a land of colour, each having its own significance and iconography, a land of 'more' rather than 'less'; a seamless union of the classical and the contemporary!



Yoga Guru Atul Vyas recently journeyed to Haridwar to pay obeisance to the Ganga, considered as one of the most sacred rivers of India. In this issue he shares his encounter with the "Tree Baba", a Yogi or ascetic who lives on top a tree and does Yoga and Meditation deep in the forests of Haridwar. Atul is a friend of Sita and is happy to share with your clients the secrets of his Yogasutra and many more such wonderful stories of his journeys in India.

Yogasutra

In today's world if you want to do Yoga, you will be spoilt for choices. Please feel free to make a choice. I sincerely believe they all should ultimately lead to one goal; to connect with your inner self. But the "Tree Baba" turned it on its head when I met him during my recent visit to Haridwar. "Atul to do nothing is Maha Yoga," (meaning the greatest form of Yoga) he said with a smile on his face.

The mythological town of Haridwar in North India is where the most venerated of Indian rivers, the Ganga enter the plains from the lofty Himalayas. Haridwar when literally translated means "the Gateway to the Abode of Gods." I was there during the Kumbh Mela, a religious festival that runs for almost 3 months and has now caught the imagination of travellers, itinerary planners and media alike. It is a great time to be in India to watch the country's eternal faith in motion.

As a child I remember my mother taking us to the Kumbh Mela for the time-honoured dip in the Ganga which is believed to have powers to wash away all your bad karmas. My mother Daya Vyas was a Yoga teacher who believed in Sarvodaya (the awakening of all mankind). For her, Yoga was the medium for such transformation. She shared her knowledge of Yoga with whosoever was interested till the ripe age of 80 and I was lucky to have met some of the leading luminaries of the world because of her. Former American President Bill Clinton learnt Yoga from my mother, so did Hollywood stars such as Tom Cruise, Nichole Kidman and Kate Winslet. I was also fortunate to have met some of the most powerful Yogis or ascetics from the Himalayas. My mother had put me into rigorous training under these mighty Gurus or Masters and I had the opportunity to learn from them about Yoga, Meditation and Spirituality. But nothing like what the "Tree Baba" told me that day by the banks of the serene Ganga.

The Kumbh Mela is also the time when many come in search of a Guru for spiritual guidance. My journey to Haridwar was also aimed at spending quality time with such Masters who congregate on the banks of the Ganga every Kumbh Mela.

Just the other day, it was hilarious to read about a group of foreigners, led by a so called Guru, completely taking over a section of a National Park close to Haridwar. They had actually encroached into protected area which was illegal. The squatters refused to leave despite repeated requests by forest officials that they are a threat to the flora and fauna of the area. I don't know what happened there after, but the Kumbh Mela is also about such frauds. Unfortunately many who come in search of spirituality with their heart in the right place are often conned by such fakes.



When I reached Haridwar from Jaipur, the news of a “Tree Baba,” an ascetic who lives on top a tree was doing its rounds. Yoga also sharpens your instinct and something inside told me that I must meet him. So after the customary dip in the Ganga which I have done unfailingly since I was a kid, I decided to go in search of the “Tree Baba” with my friends. We took a tuk-tuk ride to the edge of the town and passing through camps of saffron clad ascetics we started walking through a small man made trail.

As we moved in, the forest started getting darker and thicker and the noise and din of Haridwar began to fade away. We must have walked for almost 2 hrs without taking a break. Suddenly something most breathtaking unfolded. I saw a Ganga whose water was pure blue, white sands spread across its bed with forests on both sides. Ah! What a sight it was. I was stunned by its sheer beauty and powerful spiritual vibrations. But I remembered what my mother once said “for this will pass too...learn to appreciate the source...someone who has created something this beautiful...just imagine how beautiful that source must be...that's the eternal...that's the forever”. How so very true.

We continued walking and realised that we were not alone. We saw a small crowd, a mix of Indians and foreigners, patiently waiting for the “Tree Baba” to return from the forest. Every morning, I am told, he retreats to the caves inside the forest to do Yoga and Meditation and would return only late in the day. I roved my eyes around and saw a wooden platform above us on a tree, the abode of the “Tree Baba”. There was a loop of bycycle tyres woven around the trunk of the tree till the top. Baba would climb up taking its help. On the ground there was a Yagna Kunda (place to light the sacred fire for religious rituals), a piece of cloth to sit and one small earthen pot. That's about it. One of the foreigners started talking about Yoga and Meditation and we joined the conversation that went on for quite some time. It became very intense at times. We agreed, we disagreed and we debated vehemently about the finer nuances of Yoga and Meditation. The setting sun finally brought good news. Suddenly there was a flutter among the crowd. “Baba is here,” somebody said.

We all looked and saw a young ascetic. He must have been not more then 24 years old. Long matted hair, thin but an athletic body, dark complexion and a great innocent smile on his very calm, relaxed, happy face. He was only wearing a loin cloth and nothing else. Baba very calmly came and sat down. He thanked every one with folded hands for taking the pain to come and see him. He didn't have to. But Yoga teaches you how to drop your ego and be humble.

“So you people were debating about Yoga and Meditation,” he said, looking at us. While he had a mysterious smile on his face, we were dumbstruck. How is it possible for him to know that? He was not even present. But I remembered my mother telling me once “the real essence of a Yogi is much beyond the physical realm...one day you will realise it”

“Tree Baba” laughed out loud seeing us all confused. He addressed the crowd in his gentle voice “you don't have to live on top of a tree or retreat to the caves in the mountains to do Yoga. Anyone can do Yoga, anywhere; and you don't have to be fit or holistic or spiritual...” “Still better do nothing... for that is Maha Yoga” (greatest form of Yoga). I asked “Tree Baba” what he meant by “do nothing”... Somebody from the crowd asked about the practicality of “doing nothing” in today's world where one need to earn and feed one's family.

Wonderful Baba again laughed out loud. “When I say you become a non-doer by body, mind and thought Iam not asking you to forsake your family and come to the jungle to join me. By asking you to be a non-doer, Iam simply asking you to completely surrender to the moment. It could be the moment while you are doing Yoga, it could be the moment when you are with your loved one at home, it could be the moment when you at work in your office or it could be this moment when we are all together by the Ganga talking... once you have learnt to do that, you become a Yogi without actually doing Yoga...where every moment is spiritual....where every day is a meditation”

“Realise,” he continued “that we are all a part of a beautiful conspiracy of the One that you believe in, Ishwar, Bhagwan, Allah, Christ, Guru Nanak doesn't matter. The One you believe in has, like a good father, taken care of everything and want us to surrender to the moment. He wants us to be a non-doer just like you would want your little child at home to be”

Having said that he invited us to meditate and celebrate the moment. We went into deep silence, which was very peaceful and serene



Mark Shipley is President and Chief Strategic Officer at Wanderlust, a New York based travel and destination marketing firm that specialises in communications strategies, internet marketing, branding and management consulting for the tourism industry. He is a friend of Sita and in this issue he shares his expert insight on what consumers want from their travel and destination brands.

Wanderlust - What Are Travelers Searching For?

It seems like every day that goes by there's another study reporting travel and tourism trends. Room bookings, flight reservations, search activity, and the like are being measured and reported ad infinitum. The effects of the recession, higher gas prices, the reduction in airline flights, increases in ticket prices, and many other factors are well documented in the press. There is no shortage of data out there, but where are the insights that can give destination marketers a competitive advantage in good times and bad?

Over the course of the last two decades, Wanderlust has explored many dimensions of travel and tourism marketing: destination purchase drivers, consumer perceptions and expectations, the competitive environment and how it impacts consumer choice, the growing influence of the internet as a medium, and the power of brand advocacy. What we have learned is that it's important to identify, understand and pay close attention to the patterns that hold true regardless of weekly changes in economic climate, consumer sentiment, gas prices and the like.

The Online Travel Search for Inspiration

Travel decisions are, to a large extent, driven by hedonistic and emotional issues. We know that if we can uncover a uniquely relevant and deliverable promise and communicate it using vivid mental imagery, we can successfully differentiate a destination from its competitors and convince more people to come. If the destination lives up to the consumer expectations our marketing creates, we have a great shot at getting them to tell others about their great experience, too.

So what do today's travelers want from travel and destination marketers? Our recent research tells us it's basically the same thing they've always been searching for — inspiration. Before Travelocity and Orbitz, they were inspired by the posters hanging on travel agency walls. They found inspiration in glossy brochures and on the pages of travel magazines, reading the New York Times travel section and watching high definition travel programming on cable television. Today, by contrast, a full two-thirds of people planning travel completely bypass these other media and consult only the Internet.

And no wonder. There's a multitude of online sources to look for travel information: email, search engines, destination, tourism and CVB sites, the sites of repackagers and discounters, consumer review sites, booking sites, Travel 2.0 sites like TravelMuse, blogs, social bookmarking and tagging sites, Wikipedia, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, Webshots, Ebay, Myspace, Facebook.... You get the idea. If you want travel information, it's online.

The only problem is, now that they have the internet, they're searching for inspiration in pull-down menus, online forms, radio buttons, and tag clouds. Instead of inspirational imagery and engaging stories, their first impressions are more often lackluster thumbnail photos alongside a low-price offer. Instead of finding inspiration, for many consumers today, the entire process of researching and planning a trip starts with finding the cheapest flight, hotel room and rental car available. They haven't even decided what to buy, and someone's trying to make a deal.

Is Travel 2.0 The Answer?

While the vast majority of today's online destination and travel sites are not designed to offer the inspiration travelers seek, Travel 2.0 sites claim to overcome this. Unfortunately, early indications are not promising. Let's take a look.

I want to take my family on a trip. I'm not sure exactly where we should go, so instead of using Travelocity, I point my browser to that new Travel 2.0 site I read about somewhere called TravelMuse. When the site loads, I'm presented with a dramatic photo of Cabo, the promise of "insider recommendations," and featured links to two nearby locations we've had great experiences with, Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard. I'm impressed. This is not your typical site — they know what I've come for: there are no prices in view.



Since I've come to TravelMuse in search of inspiration, I click on the top most featured link on the right side of the page: Get Inspired: Discover your dream destination.

One, Two, Three, Dream

TravelMuse has done what no site I've found can do: they've reduced my search for inspiration down to three simple steps. How cool is that?



I excitedly fill in the blanks.

Itinerary

My family lives outside of Troy, New York, so if we fly, we'll leave from Albany. There are four of us. We'd like to go for four days, mid-week, the last week of October. We want to stay in four star accommodations or better. And since we don't get away nearly enough, we're willing to spend some money: we've budgeted \$2,000 per person.

Themes @ activities

We like Art and Museums, Arts and Entertainment, and Outdoor Adventures – so I select these phrases under Activities.

Maximum flight time

Since it's a short trip, we don't want to spend more than four hours traveling each way, either by car or on a plane. Incidentally, TravelMuse makes the assumption that we have decided to get on an airplane to travel. This is a pretty big assumption today. Even so, I click the "Inspire me" button on the bottom right, and... (drum roll)



What a letdown. Instead of the vivid imagery and engaging stories I was searching for, I've again been served up lackluster thumbnail photos alongside low-price offers. This looks like pretty much any Travel 1.0 site out there. Instead of finding inspiration, I'm looking at tiny pictures of a fountain in D.C., a shopping district in Quebec, a field of tulips in Ottawa, and the inside of a cathedral in Montreal. Right below the tiny photos that have little to do with Historical Vacations, Art and Museums and Outdoor Adventures: suggested packages that have no relationship to the budget I set.

I was willing to spend upwards of two thousand dollars per person, and TravelMuse left over four thousand dollars on the table. This is neither helpful to the travel planning consumer, nor is it good business for travel destinations.

How Southwest Got Online Travel Search Right

It seems to us that there is a real opportunity for destinations to take back control of their marketing and ditch these sites that are commoditizing travel and leaving the average traveler uninspired.

Southwest Airlines did this a long time ago. Today, they're one of the few airlines that's making a profit. While they're viewed as a low cost airline, Southwest consistently fills their seats and commands the highest average ticket price from my home airport in Albany, New York. More often than not, I fly Southwest and so do my friends and family. How did they accomplish this? They know what their brand stands for, and now so do their employees and their customers. The flight attendants and pilots tell jokes. It's inspiring. Everyone on board is enjoying the trip. Southwest is in complete control of the consumer's interaction with their brand. They control the advertising, the email marketing, their web presence. If you want to book with Southwest, you have to use their booking engine, not the one that all of their competitors use.

If more travel and destination marketers followed Southwest's lead, everyone would benefit: travelers and owners of travel and destination brands alike.

Mark Shipley can be contacted at –

Email - mshipley@createwanderlust.com



Lovleen Sagar is Assistant Vice President, Distant Frontiers. With a Masters degree in History of Art, Lovleen almost became a museum curator!! She is glad she didn't as it would have deprived her of all her fascinating travels, interactions with people from every corner of the world and experimenting with world cuisine! She says she loves to discover small things on her travels and how cultures across the world are somehow connected; how cultures have influenced each other over centuries of history. She is a self-proclaimed Queen of Trivia on the subject! In her free time, she devours on all kinds of books and finds solace in creative pursuits like pottery, poetry and gardening.

Urban Adventures

"I believe falling in love with a city is just as exciting as falling in love with a person. Your senses become engaged and you simply feel more alive...." Fiona Caulfield.

Delhi Must-Do's - Morning in Hauz Khas: An Oriya Temple, village walk, 14th Century monuments, boutique shopping for antiques, furniture, silver jewellery and designer clothes. A sumptuous lunch followed by Champi and Chai!

Start the day by visiting an Oriya Temple, unique in its architecture. The temple belongs to the ethnic community from Orissa, a state bordering Bengal. You would see the priest offering prayers on behalf of the devotees, temple bells ringing and strong temple incense wafting through the air. A ten minute walk and you are in the Hauz Khas village. The road south to the urban village of Hauz Khas is lined on both sides by ancient stone monuments, and the entire village is dotted with domed structures—the tombs of minor Muslim royalty from the 14th to the 16th centuries. At the end of the road is the tomb of Firoz Shah Tughluq, who ruled Delhi in the 14th century. Hauz Khas means "Royal Tank," referring to the artificial lake visible from Firoz Shah's pillared tomb. The tank was actually built a century earlier by Allauddin Khilji as a water source for his nearby fort, then called Siri (the second city of Delhi). It's an amazing learning for present day Water Harvesting Schemes.

Back in the village, wander through the narrow lanes to experience a medley of old and new structures—expensive shops and art galleries in a medieval warren. Boutiques and shops set in converted old homes up and down narrow alleys sell handicrafts, curios, old carpets and kilims, and designer clothing (both Indian and Western). Most stores are open Monday through Saturday from 10:30 to 7pm.

Meet the famous Mr. K.D Aryan of **Sri Books** selling antique maps, books and film posters. He has been featured in a BBC documentary and very proudly tells you his story. **Ethnic Silver** and **Plutus** are lovely shops selling silver jewellery, but the effervescent Mrs Kusum Jain of **Cottage of Arts & Jewellery** is a must for her designer jewellery, old textiles, paintings & prints. **Lola's World** is another magical shop with everything for children up to age twelve. There are also some lovely things for mothers and home furnishings. More designer wear at **Ogaan** and simple daily wear at **Cotton Curio**. The village is also dotted with Art Galleries, featuring contemporary Indian artists. Mentionable ones include **The Village Gallery** and **Dr. Mulk Raj Anand's Lokayata**.

Find your way to the gardens near the ruin of a **madrassa** at the back of the village. The kindly old gentleman often playing cards can sometimes be coaxed into an impromptu Urdu lesson. Or be tempted by the village kids playing cricket. The serenity of the place makes it one of the favoured places for romance – you will see lots of young couples out on a “date”.

In the 1980s Hauz Khas was designated an upscale tourist destination, but (perhaps fortunately) the process of redevelopment was never completed, so some of the village character persists.

After exploring, stop for a meal at one of the village's restaurants, particularly the south Indian specialty restaurant, **Naivedyam**. The rasam (spicy tomato soup) is brilliant and the dosas (south Indian rice pancakes) & idlis really authentic. They don't serve alcohol though. Other recommended restaurants are Park Balluchi (in the Deer Park, with Mughlai cuisine) and the Bistro Complex with varied options.

The **Aurbindo market** is next door to the Hauz Khas Village, wander about for books and music at **Midlands** and if you are really tired after a long day, try the Indian head massage, Champi at one of the numerous unisex parlors (Affinity, Meghna & Geetanjali) in the **Green Park Market** ten minutes away, followed by chai & a snack at **Evergreen Sweets**.





Kuntil is an Explorer and travels all over the Indian sub-continent to make friends with locals. With us he manages the Destination Knowledge Centre which is responsible for product ideas and experiences that are fun, fascinating and challenging. Kuntil is the editor of the Destination Insider.

Tête-à-tête

During my recent visit to Kerala I had a tête-à-tête with Stephane Junca, Director, Asia Pacific of Relais and Chateaux at Malabar House. My most gracious host Joerg and Txuku was kind enough to set it up for me despite Stephane's very busy schedule. Here's what conspired.

Kuntil: Experiential travel is the hot ticket these days and “authentic” is the prevailing buzzword in the travel industry - what does it mean to you?

Stephane: Well, let me share my experience in a 5-star hotel in Mumbai. I checked-in past midnight and my internal flight was to leave in the next 5 hrs or so. When I checked –out the person in the front office asked me “How was your stay with us Sir?” I was there for a few hours and it was hardly a stay, but probably this person never bothered to check that and I suspect this is his routine question to all customers checking out. So Luxury need not necessarily be Authentic.

Coming back to answer your question, Experiential Travel for me is about highly personalised integrated travel where you as a holidaymaker seamlessly blend in to the local environment, its history and culture. Where there is enough opportunity to interact with locals, not necessarily with those locals who depend on you for a living. Where there is time to discover and where its fun to slow down. It's basically about forgetting time and living life like our ancestors did without a wrist watch.

Kuntil: How would you describe a typical 'Experiential Traveler'?

Stephane: Someone who would definitely demand and would want the privilege of having access to a local “in the know” to help him/her absorb the destination like a local, in its totality.

Kuntil: Travellers these days are seeking online sources to research authentic travel experiences like never before. However, on most occasions they have to reconcile with offers of the cheapest flight, the cheapest hotel room and the cheapest rental car available. The majority of today's online destination and travel sites donot offer the inspiration that experiential travelers seek. Do you agree?



Stephane: When I was working in Bali, I was surprised to know that many travellers would land in Bali without even knowing whether Bali is in Indonesia, or Indonesia is in Bali. That ignorant, that disconnected. They are probably the ones who opted for “the cheapest flight, the cheapest hotel room and the cheapest rental car available” online. Yet there are travel sites such as Bali Autrement which offers Out of the Ordinary Tours and take the Bali Experience beyond its beaches. I am sure there are similar sites. You need to look for it harder I suppose.

Kuntil: Ayurveda, Homestays, Backwaters, Great Cuisine, friendly people... what next for the Experiential Traveler in Kerala?

Stephane: Kerala is a fantastic destination and has done well for itself. I think the next level would be to create genuine opportunities where there is people to people interaction. Straight from the heart.