

# TURN GENGHIS KHAN IN MONGOLIA, DO THE TANGO IN ARGENTINA

A new breed of vacationers is increasingly opting for a travel experience rather than a holiday package, swapping kitchens for malls and sanctuaries for luxury suites

By Aditi Pai

Mahesh Shahani's only constant companion during her six-week solo trip to Buenos Aires last September was a pair of shining black stilettos—her dancing shoes. The 25-year-old Mumbai-based traveller-designer-teacher was on a holiday filled with tango swirls, Spanish sessions and milonga (a social tango dance party) nights. None of those oh-so-touristy museums and churches for her; it was tango hostels, camps at island hamlets, and brushing up on her smattering of Spanish all the way. "It opened up my world and made the experience so much more personal. I learnt tango in its birthplace," she says. Back home, the dance enthusiast now teaches Spanish at the Instituto Hispania "bringing in references from the trip" to teach Spanish culture.

Shahani is among a growing breed of Indians, both, young and old, who are crossing continents and flying to distant lands to experience all that is offbeat and fun. From cooking Cantucci (a type of hard biscuit) in the kitchens of Tuscany, to swimming with the sharks in Cancun or learning the war techniques of Genghis Khan in Mongolia, these new-age travellers are sweating it out in kitchens, sanctuaries, running tracks or village schools. "There is a marked shift towards experiential travel. Those who have seen a place want to go back and explore the real character of that place which lies in its smaller towns," says Subhash Motwani, director, Compact Travels in Mumbai that specialises in organising offbeat experiences.

Even as families are charting out itineraries for the Big Ben-Eiffel Tower busload tours, a few travellers are whetting their appetite for experiences that are off the beaten track. Trading luxury suites for small-town lodges and hostels, travellers are surfing on the Atlantic Ocean-kissing beaches of Biarritz or exploring Bolivia on foot and by bus. "Backpacking holidays teach you not to plan every minute of your life. You learn to believe in serendipity," says Shridhar Sethuram, 42, a private equity banker from Mumbai. He's travelled to 67 countries in the last 15 years—Galapagos (islands known to have inspired Charles Darwin) to study nature, China to understand economic markets, Israel and

## WARRIOR TRAINING, MONGOLIA

Live the life of a Mongol warrior under Genghis Khan on the Mongolian steppe. You can ride, shoot with a bow and arrow, and learn battle tactics as you stay in a felt ger (tent) and wear full martial costume.

**Cost** Rs 1.85 lakh per person for 9 days  
**Operators** Pioneer Expeditions, UK



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Ethiopia for a peek into international politics and six visits to South America to learn Spanish. "I travel with only my return air tickets and camera. The rest I explore through locals and other like-minded travellers," he says.

Adventure, learning and volunteering—if there's a need, there's a tour. Sports or adventure tourism is fast catching on among enthusiasts who go scuba diving to New Zealand and to Kenya to soar in hot air balloons. "It's about achieving your sports goals along with seeing a new place," says Mohan

Joshi, 67, a Mumbai-based athlete and a regular at the city marathon. With 85 other members of Mumbai's Striders' Group of marathoners, he will take off next for the Amsterdam Marathon scheduled on October 21 this year.

It may not fit into the idea of a holiday in the hills but volunteering while on vacation, or voluntours, is picking up as a getaway option. "It's a beautiful learning curve for urban people who live a privileged, sheltered life," says Komal Lath, 26, a branding professional in Mumbai. Four years ago,



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## FLOATPLANE HIKING, CANADA

Explore some of the most remote and spectacular areas around the Bella Coola Valley deep in the heart of the Coast Mountain Range in Western Canada on a floatplane.

**Cost** Rs 1-2 lakh per person for 9 days  
**Operators** Wild Earth Adventures Ltd, Canada



REUTERS

## TEACHING TOUR, CAMBODIA

Besides exploring Phnom Penh's tourist attractions and visiting Angkor Wat, you can give in to your philanthropic instinct by volunteering at an orphanage.

**Cost** Rs 59,000 onwards for 2 weeks  
**Operators** TUI India



AP PHOTO

## CULINARY TOURS, EUROPE

Shop, cook and eat at farms and homes of locals, learn with Le Cordon Bleu-trained chefs in Paris, or dine with a family anywhere from Cairo to Florence.

**Cost** Rs 35,000 onwards for 3 days  
**Operators** Compact Travels, Mumbai, and Active Gourmet Holidays, Connecticut

she spent a month in Kerala hopping across five villages to play with kids and sing to elderly people.

Travelling is all about exploring and trips to rural pockets are an eye-opener for the cityfolk, an experience they are beginning to cherish. Bangalore-based The Blue Yonder now has "almost 20 per cent" Indians in their tours to Calicut where the travel com-

pany works with the Institute of Palliative Medicine. Travellers can stay from a few days to weeks working with local volunteers in varied ways—teaching PowerPoint presentations to reading out to the ailing. “Travel can go beyond an ordinary holiday and teach you to connect with local entities,” says Gopinath Parayil, 38, founder of the Blue Yonder.

So, what’s fuelling this type of tourism? A quest for the out-of-the-ordinary, say tour planners. “A lot of Indians travelled to the West in the past five years. They now want to go back but want a value-addition,” explains Motwani. He has organised a meal for a couple with an Egyptian family, planned concert tours to Prague and taken people cycling to Dresden.

The interest in rising but the numbers are still low. At UK travel company TUI’s Indian arm, only three out of every 100 people inquiring about volunteer-tourism actually sign up. “It’s a business of the future. The connotation of a holiday is still leisure and pleasure. The real interest is from people who have been there, done that,” says Raja Natesan, COO of TUI. In 2011, the company had taken a few people to Japan to help out after the tsunami and to Africa to work in the sanctuaries, cleaning forests and making hedges. The takers for this type of tourism are often the



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#### ARCTIC REINDEER MIGRATION

Assist the Sami ‘siida’ (a family group of herders) of Finnmark, Norway, on their annual reindeer migration. Only 14 people are invited to partake in it each year. Cross the barren Arctic tundra on a snowmobile adventure.

**Cost** Rs 5 lakh, excluding airfare, per person for 10 days

**Operators** Pioneer Expeditions, UK

#### CYCLING IN GERMANY, FRANCE

Explore the French wine region on cycle or ride from Dresden to Prague through cobbled streets and lanes. Stop by at local cafes, visit street shops and set your own pace.

**Cost** Rs 52,000 onwards for a week

**Operators** Compact Travels, Mumbai

“well-heeled and well-travelled” in the 30 to 50 age group. “A lot of well-off couples with no kids are keen on volunteering travel,” says Natesan.

Greater exposure to world travel trends is seeing Indians lapping up new travel ideas like barging (living and cooking on barges), culinary tours or holidays where you travel with a lensman and see the place through your camera. Connecticut, US-based culinary tour company Active Gourmet Holidays, which has been taking global tourists into kitchens across Europe and America, had two Indians travelling to Tuscany in 2011, spending up to \$4500 (Rs 2.25 lakh) for a week in the Italian city. They learnt the basics of the local cuisine right from picking meats and veggies in the markets to cooking them and even went on food trails. “The interest is growing from the number of queries I receive,” says Jo-Ann Gaidosz, the company’s founder.

Hectic as it may seem, the trips are never a case of all work and no play. A visit to a sanctuary or an orphanage lasts for a few hours every day. The rest of the day is spent on the typical leisurely touristy activities.

The offbeat experience comes for a few extra dollars. Motwani says that activity-based experiences cost up to 40 per cent more than the regular holiday tours. But that doesn’t deter travellers who seek a unique offering. Language, cuisine, a local skill or playing with village kids—Indian travellers are breaking out of the familiar package tours to learn while having fun.

with Chumki Bharadwaj



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