



EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEYS FOR EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE





We love exploring as it
broadens our minds.....
Which is why a business like
ours should never stand still...
So with the addition of South
America to our portfolio,
we have rebranded African
& Indian Explorations to
The Explorations Company.

"Twenty years from now you will be more
disappointed by the things you didn't do than
by the ones you did do. So throw off the
bowlines, sail away from the safe harbor.
Catch the trade winds in your sails.
Explore. Dream. Discover."

Mark Twain

WELCOME TO OUR LATEST NEWSLETTER

A big thank you to all our loyal travellers and we trust that you are all having a wonderful year.

This year has seen a huge amount of change for us. We have moved into a lovely, converted barn in Southrop, Gloucestershire – happily very close to a rather fine pub and we would love our clients to drop by and see us. We have completed, after almost a year, our new website and we would welcome your comments on it. Finally, we have rebranded our company after 25 years as we have expanded our portfolio into Central/South America and Antarctica (actually both polar regions), which we are very excited about. Louise heads up our South American and Polar division with very many years under her belt and we look forward to creating some magnificent and unusual holidays for you in these regions.

In this issue we feature some of our favourite guides. The value that one gets from having a wonderful, knowledgeable guide who is not only a walking encyclopaedia, but adds great depth and insight into your holiday is immense, whether it's a safari in Africa or a holiday in Asia or South America.

We also cover family safaris as this is what we have become so well known for and are leaders in our field. We have always taken our own families on safaris and holidays to our homelands and the regions we promote so our clients have first hand experience, suggestions and advice from parents! We also feature our sailing holidays here, which are particularly good for families.

We cover some of our favourite camps in East Africa as well as walking safaris. So many of our clients are interested in incorporating walking within their safari – from a day to a proper, dedicated five day (or more) walking safari which can be entirely private, led, of course, by the very best guides. Here we are showcasing Zambia. In addition we have a fabulous wild dog safari in Zambia with a dedicated wild dog scientist; please call us for details. Riding safaris are a favourite of ours and we talk about some exciting riding safaris in South Africa and Botswana. Katharine has just returned from Zanzibar with some new findings and Kate is off to Uganda again on a lengthy expedition as well as revisiting Ethiopia. New for us is the Congo, where one can find the western lowland gorilla, and Sao Tome and Principe where there is a fabulous lodge on a pristine beach with not another soul in sight!

Spearheading our crusade for the Slow Travel Movement, Hashim has just returned from a wonderful river cruise on the Hooghly River in Bengal. He describes it in these pages as being utterly sensational. Also on a cruise theme, we also feature the Sanctuary and Orient Express boats on the Ayeyarwady River in Burma, a fabulous way of seeing the country and keeping nautical. We also include a super new houseboat in Kerala and another in Srinagar. We feature our favourite coastal boutique hotel in India, Neeleshwar, and we are thrilled to introduce our wonderful, new cycling and walking holidays through Rajasthan – staying at gorgeous palaces and forts en route. I cannot recommend this highly enough and the experience transforms any holiday to this region.

Louise has just returned from Costa Rica and reveals her findings; as I write this she is away again looking at Polar Bears! We also discuss the Galapagos Islands and Antarctica.

With very best wishes

Nicola Shepherd

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AFRICA

“To travel is to take a journey into yourself.”

Danny Kaye



FAMILY SAFARIS

The Explorations Company (previously African Explorations) was really at the forefront of running family and special interest safaris 25 years ago. We have continued in that vein and there is nothing that we love more than to arrange a family safari, taking into account everyone's hobbies and interests and making it as fun and educational as possible! The great hits for this year were Zanzibar and Pemba Island – where lots of watersports and scuba diving courses were done – with our clients declaring both regions an absolute hit. Private mobile safaris were another real winner with many families preferring the option of spending time together as a family. San Camp and Camp Kalahari in Botswana where one can ride quad bikes, see desert wildlife, spend time with habituated meerkats and sleep out on the salt pans always comes up trumps as does the Young Explorer's programme, which is a camp privately closed to you, in the Okavango Delta, with the most extraordinary guides and one learns to fish, read the night sky, learn about animal tracks and the medicinal properties of trees and plants. The Zambian side of the Victoria Falls is another all time winner with so many activities that one can partake in at the Falls. Combining the highest sand dunes in Namibia with the Okavango Delta offers a fabulous contrast, too. Fishing and walking as well as game viewing in the Selous in Tanzania, staying in a private lodge, really went down well with many of our families as did our camel trekking safaris in Kenya. The tree houses in Laikipia offer a great experience as well as the horse riding there and the community projects. All in all, another year of great family safaris resulting in memories of a lifetime!

Zambia offers fabulous family safaris too where one can take a private house in the south Luangwa, visit villages, learn to play the drums, play football with the local teams and generally have a lot of fun! For teenagers craving adventure one can go canoeing on the Zambezi River. Start your safari in the Victoria Falls region in Zambia and end off at Lake Malawi where we have several wonderful places to stay – some on powder-white sand beaches and all offering lots of watersports: from canoeing to kayaking, sailing, overnighting on a catamaran, visiting community projects – the options are endless!



PRIVATE HOUSES AND VILLAS

Private houses and villas for families are available in some surprising places but Kenya's Laikipia plateau is excellent. Here one can game view by vehicle and on foot, horse ride, camel trek, fish and have fun on the rivers. The Okavango Delta in Botswana, the game rich south Luangwa and the lower Zambezi and Livingstone (Victoria Falls) regions in Zambia have some stunning and eclectic choices, too. Then the shores of Lake Malawi, many locations in South Africa and a wonderful private villa in Mozambique (which offers every watersports under the sun) are all tremendous additional candidates if one is looking for something very different on this theme.



EAST AFRICAN SAFARIS

Especially for those clients who are particularly interested in capturing the wildebeest migration in the Serengeti in Tanzania or the Masai Mara in Kenya, East Africa offers an unparalleled game viewing experience, alongside some of the most breathtaking scenery in the forms of infinite savannah plains, teeming with wildlife.

There is a guide who is a great friend of ours, Alex Walker – another tremendous fount of information who creates camps with just the right amount of style. He happens to serve some of the tastiest food in the Mara but, overwhelmingly, he has the most incredible guides. You also have a vehicle to yourself privately when game viewing which is crucial! He has set up two camps in the Masai Mara in Kenya and one camp which moves according to the movement of wildlife in the Serengeti in Tanzania.

Speaking to a client who recently returned on safari with her family, staying at Alex's camp in Tanzania, she said that her family were literally moved to tears when having

to depart. This compels me to expand on the theme: Alex has created a beautiful, authentic camp, which he usually hosts himself (something rare these days). Here one can walk and game view to one's heart's delight in the company of extraordinary guides as well as flycamp out for a night away from the main camp. The location moves from the northern part of the Serengeti in June to October to the southernmost region of the ecosystem for most of the rest of the year. During the latter period, the ungulate calving season, the location is remotely and a long way south of Ndutu: fantastic for viewing the migration. These camps offer the most authentic safari experience possible.



SCIENTIFIC RESEARCHERS – WILD DOG, LION AND ELEPHANT, TURTLES, WHALES



We have access to scientific researchers who greatly enrich your safari, taking it from something lovely to something extraordinary, which is what we are all about! This is not available to the general visitor but, given sufficient notice, we can arrange for you to spend a day privately assisting with the research, whether it is collaring a lion to obtain further information, collating data on nesting turtles, spending a day with elephant or wild dog researchers or even going out with experts on the ocean using hydrophones to hear the whales communicating with one another. Like a private guide, such experiences and people transform a holiday. One pays a donation for this privilege; well worth every penny!

RIDING SAFARIS

Riding is one of our favourite ways of being on safari; here are two riding safaris to consider! The first is in South Africa, a week's riding safari, and the second is hosted by our great friends Robyn and David Foot in Botswana.

Wait A Little Horse Safaris is one of the few places in the world where you can see the "Big Five" close up from horseback. Only experienced riders and small groups allow fast riding and exciting experiences with the interaction of wildlife. Years of experience and training enables the horses to be calm merely metres away from big game. Small groups of only 7 riders and the permanent personal attention of Gerti & Philip and their staff ensure an unforgettable safari. Their passion for nature, conservation, the environment and their involvement in the game reserve management helps to understand the hard work required to protect the last remaining wildlife areas. Close to the famous Kruger National Park, these horse safaris cover an area of over 35 000ha. The area is of great diversity with many rivers, hills, outcrops, rock formations and giant old trees. The backdrop of the Drakensberg mountains is dramatic and fantastic views give you many opportunities to enjoy Africa's spectacular sunsets! The accommodation consists of a combination of spacious and luxurious safari tents at the main camp, a wilderness camp called Beacon Rock and Phiva Lodge, which is a luxurious lodge located on the closeby Makalali Game Reserve.

In addition, they offer flatwork clinics with Gerti Kuessler who is a dressage rider and FEI coach. She teaches you how to have fun with your horse in all disciplines based on the German Scales of Training. Afternoons are spent riding amongst the big 5.

Eventer Lucinda Fredericks commented to Eventing Magazine after she went on safari with her husband Clayton: "We were made so welcome by Philip, Gerti, the grooms and all the tracking staff and grew very fond of our amazing horses". Lucinda even likened her favourite, Steiner, to the late Bally Leck Boy as he gave her such a lovely ride.



SADDLE AND PADDLE – THE ULTIMATE COMBINATION IN BOTSWANA

The remote and mysterious Makgadikgadi Pans are a place to feel gloriously free. Our five night/six day safari on horseback follows the meandering shoreline of this ancient lake bed with the most perfect ground for exhilarating riding. Early explorers such as David Livingstone ventured this way and the likes of Frederick Courtney Selous intrepidly hunted the area on horseback. Since their time this extraordinary landscape, with the Pans disappearing into the distant heat haze, has hardly changed. During the dry season they ride at a fast pace in the heart of the pans and, when the rains arrive, they ride through the adjoining woodland and grasslands where the full waterholes attract the last surviving migration of zebra and wildebeest in southern Africa. Amongst this lives the desert adapted wildlife, including

brown hyaena, black-maned lions and habituated meerkats! Stay at a wonderful, luxury tented camp for three nights and two nights are spent out beneath the stars in a comfy bedroll. For the ultimate safari, add on three nights canoeing along the Selinda spillway with David as your guide. The canoe trail replicates the safari experience of old as you canoe some 45 kms along the Spillway through one of Botswana's richest wildlife areas. It is wonderful to paddle through this wild country with no other soul to be seen except your safari companions, keeping a wary eye on the resident hippos, stopping to track on foot vast herds of buffalo or old bull elephants and enjoying the rich birdlife.



David Foot has been leading safaris for 25 years and is one of Africa's finest guides. One can either just do the 5 night riding safari across the salt pans in the Makgadikgadi or our recommendation would be to add on the canoeing for a full 8 or 9 day safari and then, if one has the time, add a private mobile with David for a few nights at the end. Perfection...



SAILING HOLIDAYS IN AFRICA

Whether for a couple or a family, sailing holidays are a really wonderful component in a safari to Africa! A family returned in the summer from taking a private dhow safari through the Quirimbas archipelago in Mozambique. A well travelled family, who were keen on their scuba diving, this surpassed all their expectations in every respect. The region is completely uncommercial, pristine, the waters pure, the coral unbleached and they said it was by far the best scuba diving they had done anywhere – which included the Maldives!



WHO IS THIS FOR?...

....Anyone who loves living an adventure, beaches, sea, boating, local culture, swimming and lazing. It offers eye popping snorkelling over coloured corals, lobsters, turtles, starfish and shoals of rainbow coloured fish.

As well as snorkelling, swimming and scuba diving en route, one can hone one's sailing skills under the tutelage of the skipper. There is reef walking, exploring and rock pooling, swimming, beachcombing, island exploring, meeting the local fisherman, going fishing.....and the food is absolutely delicious. In fact the food is a highlight, cooked by taste bud tingling, magician, chef Richard. You dine on board at a fully laid table waited on by ever smiley Charlie.

They have 30 and 45 ft dhows, fully staffed with captain, sailing crew and hospitality staff and can take from 2 - 8 people. One can sail or be motor powered depending on winds. We offer private charters or scheduled 4 – 6 night dhow departures. The Quirimbas has jaw dropping beauty, a perfect water-island fantasy land with the finest crystal seas, secluded islands, remote fine white sands with only shells and friendly fisherman in sight. The perfect way to explore Mozambique!

Another country which offers a wonderful private catamaran experience is Madagascar. On a privately skippered and fully crewed boat one can explore the Nosy Be archipelago off the north west coast of Madagascar for three or more nights, visiting different islands and snorkelling, fishing, swimming and scuba diving en route or just use the "cat" as a means of transport from Nosy Be to a lodge on a private island. We cannot recommend this highly enough and our clients have always returned elated!



CONGO & THE WESTERN LOWLAND GORILLAS

The Republic of **Congo** has opened its doors! Famous for its lowland gorillas, it offers gorilla-trekking in a pristine and uncommercial environment. On a one week journey in search of these magnificent creatures, you will have three opportunities to view the lowland gorilla for up to an hour.

Visit Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the north of the Congo, near the border with Gabon. Odzala-Kokoua is one of Africa's oldest national parks, covering 1,360 million hectares of pristine rainforest. Protected within its boundaries are forest elephant, forest buffalo and 12 primate species, including globally-significant populations of western lowland gorilla. One of the great features of gorilla-trekking here is that the cost of the permit is included and you have access to the gorillas over three days.

Flying into the most remote rainforest in northern Congo, one couldn't help but notice the never-ending sea of green. Upon landing one is confronted by an emerald wall bursting at the seams with life. Here one can see the western lowland gorilla in the jungle, near Ngaga Camp. Spend six nights between two very beautiful camps, gorilla trekking, exploring rivers, rainforests and walking. Each camp consists of six creatively designed guest rooms, taking inspiration from the designs of the local B'Aka Pygmy groups. Natural locally sourced materials are used extensively in the construction of the camps: sustainably harvested hardwoods, bamboo and raffia palm matting.

In the case of Ngaga Camp, each of the guest rooms is raised 3-4m above the ground with a wrap around walkway allowing full appreciation of the forest canopy.

There are currently three groups of gorillas under research in the region, with two groups that can be viewed by guests: Neptuno, a troop of 16, Jupiter, a troop of 25 and the Pluto troop, accessible only to the researchers. Wherever one places a foot or pulls back a branch life simply pours in, in this vibrant ecosystem. Yellow-backed duiker, putty-nosed monkeys and noisy wattled hornbills were only a few of the jungle residents that one can see. And when you do catch the eyes of a gorilla, something primal stirs within you... A connection from hundreds of thousands of years ago...



SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE-REMOTE, UNSPOILED, IDYLIC

São Tomé and Príncipe is a two-island country and Africa's second smallest nation. Portuguese and Creole-influenced, these islands offer unspoiled scenery and a remoteness that is hard to find. Whether in thick jungle or on palm-fringed beaches, you'll have this tropical paradise virtually to yourself, with only around 20 tourists a week venturing here!

You can sip some of the world's best coffee, eat fresh fruit and seafood, delight on gourmet chocolate, stay in the crumbling roças (houses) of the old colonial plantations, dive and snorkel in uncharted waters, trek the endlessly bio-diverse jungles, and explore sleepy fishermen's villages at your own, leisurely, pace away from anything that resembles hustle and bustle.

São Tomé Town is a charming, colonial capital where accommodation is in old cocoa plantation houses. At the southernmost tip of the island, Praia Jalé is an eco-tourist region and home to nesting sea turtles. Off the southern tip of the island lies the tiny islet of Ilhéu das Rolas, which straddles the Equator. It has some stunning beaches and offers good diving. São Tomé is the kind of place you may never have heard about but, once you visit, you just might never leave.

Príncipe is the smaller of the two islands and is, if at all possible, even more laid-back; its only main town, San Antonio, has some distinctive colonial architecture whilst its beaches are deserted and its waters good for snorkelling. There is a wonderful lodge here, Bom Bom Island, which offers remoteness, idyllic beaches and world class fishing!





WALKING SAFARIS

Another of the Explorations Company's favourite ways of experiencing the bush!

Don't forget about Zambia – the spiritual and founding home of the original walking safaris! Whether it's a five day walking safari with one of Zambia's finest guides, with a maximum group size of six people or whether its walking with one's own, privately guided party, we cannot recommend this highly enough, taking place in the game rich south Luangwa region.

For the more avid walker, explore both north and south Luangwa on a 9 night/10 day safari. North Luangwa may offer less concentrated wildlife sightings than the south, but more than makes up for it in its beauty, remoteness and ruggedness of the region. This is conducted on a private basis.

In Tanzania, we offer fabulous walking safaris in the Selous, Ruaha and Katavi regions of southern Tanzania as well as in the Ngorongoro Highlands as part of a private, mobile safari or even staying at rustic, tented camps. Walking is fabulous as it offers far greater freedom as well as allowing one to be far more in touch with nature. One learns so much more on foot, such as the medicinal properties of trees and plants as well as being able to really take time to appreciate the surrounding area. There is no pollution and with the guide keeping the party downwind, one can walk alongside elephant and get close to other creatures, including antelope and zebra. The walks can take five days to Lake Natron, a wonderful soda lake famous for its huge flocks of flamingos, as well as a three day walk to Empakaai Crater, a dramatic, collapsed volcano which is also excellent for flamingos and pelicans. One can even walk to the active volcano, Ol Doinyo Lengai – meaning Mountain of God in Maasai. These walks occur in the Great Rift Valley. The Maasai tend their goats and cattle and one has more of a cultural experience here.



Kenya has wonderful, private walking in the Loita Hills, assisted by mules and there is camel trekking in the Laikipia regions. Alternately, stay at one of our favourite camps, the gorgeous Galdessa in Tsavo East, renowned for its elephant and lion population; here one can walk out for the whole day, returning to the beautiful, lush oasis of your camp situated on the Galana River, 15 kms upstream from the Lugard Falls. This truly is a gem!

The Tuli Block in Botswana offers fabulous walking safaris (as well as magical, photographic hides where you can have a professional photographer tutor you). The western sector of Mashatu, which includes the Motloutse River and the Mmamagwa Ruins, offers incredible vistas characterised by the large sandstone outcrops in the area. The Mmamagwa Ruins provide a fascinating insight into the early indigenous people of the Limpopo Valley. The Motloutse River is famous for being the river in which diamonds were first discovered in Botswana and which resulted in this country now enjoying the highest GDP per capita of any country on the African continent. Steve Quinn, a wonderful, interesting, knowledgeable guide will reveal this fascinating region to you.



ALL THINGS BOATING

On the basis that we don't talk about boating holidays enough in India particularly, but also in Burma (Myanmar), we thought it about time that we let you in to these wonderful secrets. Hashim has just returned from the Hugli Cruise in Bengal.

Brahmaputra Cruise – Assam, India

The Brahmaputra rises high on the Tibetan plateau, where it is known as the Yarlung Tsangpo River. As old as the Himalayas, the ever-growing river is forced eastwards by the rising mountains until, now known as the Dihang River, it breaks through great savage gorges into Arunachal before entering the plains of Assam and finally becoming the Brahmaputra – Son of Brahma the Creator and the only 'male' river in India. Here it is a great, meandering, braided river which is still, despite extensive silting, navigable for much of its length. This is a circumstance that aided the British in their quest for tea, timber and oil. The Brahmaputra River Cruise offers a fascinating 'inner view' of remote villages, weaving communities, tea gardens, splendid wildlife including Gangetic dolphins and stops at the legendary park of Kaziranga and Orang to look for elephants, rhinos and even tigers. Comfortable cabins, warm, friendly and efficient service, excellent food, expert cultural and naturalist guides all combine to make this an experience of a lifetime which brings to life the human and natural landscapes of this intriguing and often overlooked region of India. You can select between 4, 7 & 10-night cruises or combine these for a 14-night cruise.

“One's destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.”



Ganges & Hugli Cruises, Bengal, India

For millennia the Ganges has nourished all of India's great empires from the Mauryas, whose great Emperor Ashoka spread Buddhism around Asia, to the Great Mughals and finally the British and other East India Companies. The cities, forts, temples, mosques and markets that flourished remain surprisingly intact and vigorous even if they are largely ignored by motor-borne tourists clinging to highways that skirt the floodplains of the river. The Hugli and Ganges cruises are the most wonderful way to experience this hidden facet of India. Here you will find historic European colonies, great palaces and forts like Murshidabad and Chunar, jaw-droppingly beautiful terracotta temples, mighty mosques and rainbow-hued local bazaars. Add sudden explosions of colour marking a local festival, great battlefields like Plassey, idyllic villages buried in lush green fields sheltered by towering bamboo groves and the endlessly fascinating life on the river and you have a fascinating mélange of attractions. The Ganges and Hugli cruises are about many highlights but also feature sudden spontaneous encounters which only become possible when one travels slowly in small groups; as such they list amongst some of our very favourite experiences in India. Highly recommended!

Cruising the Ayeyarwady – Burma

Bordered by five countries - Thailand, Laos, China, Bangladesh and India - Myanmar (formerly Burma) is a gentle land of shimmering lakes, mythical rivers, emerald forests and villages which have been unchanged for centuries. Its people are full of warmth and grace. Burma's temples and stupas, shrines and monasteries are as much part of the landscape as her colourful markets, vibrant festivals and remote villages. It is a land waiting to be uncovered... waiting to be discovered...but gently, slowly and with care. Thus one of the best ways to explore her beauty is on the luxury cruise ship Ananda, although there are also Orient Express boats such as the luxury Orcaella with her 7 and 11 day cruises and the larger Road to Mandalay; both boats complete with swimming pools. The Ananda offers cruises from 3 nights to 12 days from Bagan to Mandalay and visiting local villages and markets en route; the longer cruises tend to explore the more remote regions. One can also sail via the Chindwin River, watching the scenic landscapes pass by. The excursions will include many tribal villages where you can learn about the local people and their customs. Cruising the Ayeyarwady River is a fabulous way to see inner Myanmar in considerable comfort and luxury.

AND FROM LARGER CRUISE BOATS TO SMALL, LUXURY HOUSEBOATS!

Keeping with the nautical theme, we bring you two new houseboats – one of the finest ways of exploring the lesser trammelled routes of India. The first houseboat is based in Kerala and the second is in Srinagar, an area of Kashmir which is perfectly safe and extremely beautiful and pristine.

The Lotus is our Kerala houseboat which is simply beautiful. One of the most wonderful ways of reaching the coast near Calicut is to take the houseboat for two days through the backwaters. A houseboat is the most wonderful, dreamy, experience where you can watch local life at a pace almost unassociated with our present lifestyles. We are all in favour of the Go Slow holiday movement – allowing one to absorb the sights, sounds and pleasures of our surroundings. A stay on a houseboat allows just this. With bicycles on board one can stop and cycle around villages, perhaps having tea with the local people and chatting to them or even just walking around and marvelling at this beautiful, verdant region. Watch as the locals barter along the river, trading their wares and in the morning washing their hair or doing their laundry. All of this can be quietly absorbed at an appropriate distance so one is able to immersing oneself into the lives of others without any form of intrusion. The food on board is some of Kerala's finest.

The Sukoon Houseboat in Srinagar is the most heavenly experience imaginable. Srinagar is quite beautiful, with hardly a tourist's face to be seen – rather like the Himalayas – which makes it so special! With just five enormous cabins with huge, luxurious, en suite bathrooms this boat can (and really ought to be for the ultimate experience) be taken exclusively and privately or one can simply take one of the cabins. The days are spent water trekking which means setting off by shikara or canoe along these silent, lily clad waters, perhaps trying one's hand at angling or fly fishing for rainbow and brown trout. There are some fabulous walks in the area as well and one can visit remote villages. There is some excellent birdlife here, too. Another idea is to start off in stunning Ladakh, perhaps doing a village walk staying at beautifully appointed and furnished village houses en route, then ending up at Srinagar for five days or so for some rest and relaxation in an utterly exquisite location!

A PRIVATE, CULINARY TOUR OF INDIA

Keeping with the theme of private guides: our guide in India for this newsletter is Jonty Rajagopalan. She is a food and cultural historian and specialises in all things foodie and cultural around Hyderabad. Together with Jonty you explore the food markets, understand this region's food history and even participate in some of the cooking. You can customise your culinary tours to include hole-in-the-wall restaurants which the locals swear by or choose to dine in royal comfort or in a simple home – or both! Whatever your choice, these tours are sure to be a gastronomic delight!

In addition, she can fly with you to Ahmedabad, Amritsar and Calcutta where she will highlight how each region's character comes into its own in the kitchen, something that is intrinsically "India". She will also guide you around her favourite temples and markets and you will be warmly welcomed into the local village homes where you will learn how religious beliefs interplay with local cuisine. You can, of course, stay in the finest hotels and palaces en route. Call us for more information!



MIND, BODY AND SOUL

A little gem called Neeleshwar on the coast in India.

Well, we are all a little bit biased about Neeleshwar, we must confess! A little piece of heaven just feet away from the warm waters of the Arabian Sea, with fifteen rooms, Neeleshwar is a gorgeous boutique hotel that offers so much. For those who simply want to relax and swim in the sea and eat wonderful seafood then this is entirely for you but there is much more on offer at Neeleshwar as well. (At certain times of year they have the Theyyam, a very special cultural ceremony that is vibrant and teems with music, dance and colourful costumes).

They also have an ayurvedic doctor and we strongly recommend the ayurvedic packages for both ladies and gentlemen! Based on the 3000 year old vedic science, Ayurveda, massage and treatments and a healthy diet leave one feeling rejuvenated and wonderful. There is Hatha yoga practised every morning and there are also meditational courses for those that really take it seriously.

There are plenty of walks, the retreat having first-class guides who can be enlisted to show you around the villages on foot or by bicycle.





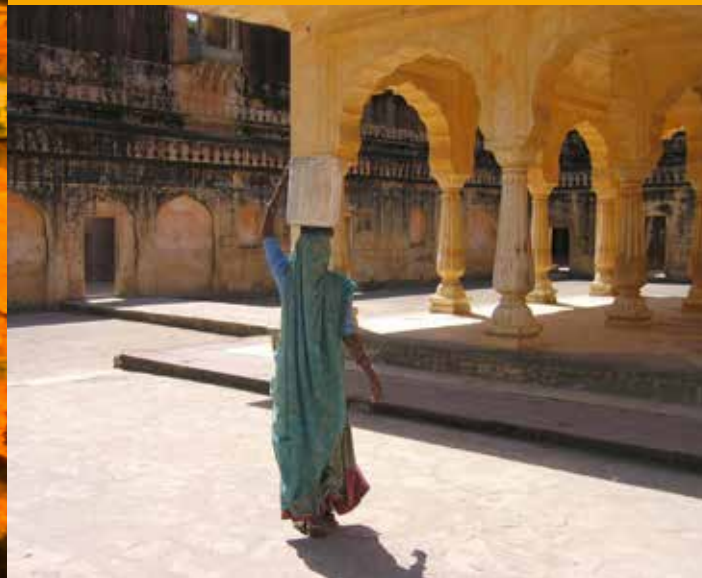
WALKING AND CYCLING HOLIDAYS THROUGH RAJASTHAN

....staying at gorgeous forts and palaces en route

We have just introduced some wonderful, innovative holidays to Rajasthan with a twist. Some people enjoy sightseeing by car and, certainly, it is still the main way to connect one city with another. But we feel that so much is missed in a back of a vehicle and we are delighted to showcase some fabulous holidays arranged by Altaf, a friend of ours.



These holidays offer you the best of Rajasthan, staying en route at marvellous, opulent palaces such as Devi Garh outside of Udaipur, as well as the smaller, heritage style properties and even owner managed havellis. This continues our thread of the Slow Travel movement whereby one should take things more slowly, increasing awareness and allowing one to appreciate and understand the local area. You see so much more on foot and by bicycle, moving at a sensible and relaxed pace, and if one wants to get beneath the skin of a country, to see villages as a participant and not as a spectator, then this is for you. I believe the local term used is experiential travelling!



The walking is in the Kumbalgarh Hills, meandering through forests and staying at beautiful, little owner managed properties. The walking journey is private and takes three days with a guide whose enthusiasm and knowledge entirely brings the local region to life.

The cycling is a five day journey, mainly on dirt roads in the countryside between Jodhpur and Udaipur. En route one can stay at forts and palaces and beautiful, tented camps. Again, this is private and sympathetically and knowledgeably guided.

Don't forget, we also offer wonderful cycling holidays through Madhya Pradesh!

WALKING IN THE HIMALAYAS

At some risk of repeating ourselves, I think we have established that at Asian Explorations (now the Explorations Company, of course!) we feel one of the best ways to explore the countryside is on foot. This particularly applies to mountain regions and we have the finest walking holidays throughout the Himalayas; from Kumaon, Sikkim, Ladakh and Dharamsala / McLeod Ganj to Bhutan and not forgetting Nepal. In our last newsletters we have covered walking in Kumaon so I thought we should try and promote lovely Nepal instead!

To recap on our private, walking holidays in India: these are undertaken with just yourself or your party and an excellent Sherpa guide who will reveal the plants, trees and local culture to you. These treks are not arduous and you set your own pace. Perhaps five hours or so a day are spent walking, stopping for a picnic lunch en route. You stay at village houses which have been westernised to a certain degree for you, ensuring that you have all the comforts required, from comfy mattresses and pillows to cashmere blankets and hot water bottles and, of course, excellent food! Your guide is with you at meal times and you can immerse yourself in village life, watching farmers plant chillies and harrow their fields with oxen. There are several houses that one can walk to and we would suggest doing this over a week although, of course, it can be just for a few days should you prefer. The best time to walk is in Spring when the rhododendrons are out. At Dharamsala and McLeod Ganj one spends time with families and, using your guide as translator, one gets a fascinating insight into their lives.

The treks in Nepal are a different beast. These are proper, dedicated walking holidays which are also operated on a private basis. These can be amazing, gentle, walking holidays in the Everest region and at the base of Annapurna with expert Sherpa guides, from 9 days to 2 weeks. One stays in comfortable lodges and cabins en route. These walks can be tailored to you and are taken at a pace that is not onerous, staying at the very best lodges and tea houses. They can include rafting down the river Seti, or simply walking and exploring the region taking in the culture and villages. We can tailor these walks to specific interests, eg the fauna and flora of the country. The lodges are all really comfortable and in fantastic locations with awe inspiring views.







BHUTAN

Bhutan is the most extraordinary kingdom which leaves travellers in awe. Not only does it very obviously offer the most breathtaking scenery imaginable – those gin-clear days of October with the snow capped mountains in sharp relief or the rhododendron filled forests in Spring – but also offers an insight into a culture and way of life that is close to perfection!

The Bhutanese people are all so charming and it is remarkable how the younger generation have mastered English so well. This is a country whose social and, partly, economic survival revolves around their 13 arts and crafts. These include silver and goldsmiths, woodworkers, weavers, painters and other skilled trades. There are centres of learning teaching these skills around the country, purely funded by the king. Houses are built in the vernacular style, utilising these arts and crafts which, by default, creates

jobs for life for the local people. For the more ambitious, MBAs and doctorates are also funded abroad by the king as well as their medical care. It is the only country whose GNP is measured in “Happiness”!

Bhutan only opened her doors to tourism relatively recently and one can stay in Bhutanese styled lodges (which are 2 or 3 star equivalent) whilst there have been recent additions of 5 star Bhutanese hotels. For some serious comfort, Christina Ong’s Uma Hotels in Paro and Punakha offer state of the art spas and the most amazing cuisine or the Aman luxury boutique hotels have a foothold in most of the regions such as Paro, Punakha, Thimphu, Gangtey and Bumthang.

The country really offers something for everyone whether it’s the magnificent architectural marvels of the temples and dzongs, learning about Buddhism, the magnificent scenery, fabulous walking, cycling and even river rafting or bird watching



and the chance to have a full day's walk to a camp for the night and walking back to your hotel the following day. You can spend time chatting, via your guide, to Yak herders and tasting their cheese or perhaps sit in on a debate with the monks (who have studied philosophy for 9 years) or have a Bhutanese breakfast in a village house. You can even milk the cow beforehand, as I did! My most vivid recollection was walking through the forest with my guide towards haunting chanting, only to stumble upon a small shrine where a priest and his protégé were chanting their mantras. Their voices were carried by the wind and it was the most beautiful experience: just them and the two of us. This is Bhutan; pristine, unsullied and beautiful beyond belief. But please go – and go now – because I wonder how long it will survive in this magical bubble devoid of westernisation!



COSTA RICA

Costa Rica proved itself to be a wildlife marvel on my recent visit there in September. But it is also a destination that is perfect for romantic getaways and adventures in remote rainforest locations. With a bewildering biodiversity (despite its modest size), disarmingly friendly people known as Ticos and a wonderful array of beautiful wilderness lodges that offer fabulous comforts amidst stunning jungle settings, Costa Rica really has got something for everyone.

Costa Rica has earned the nickname of the Switzerland of Central America, partly because it has invested in education and public health instead of an army (abolished since 1949) and protects over 25% of its landmass and coastal waters with a stringent National Parks policy. Its charm lies in a combination of all these things and it is easy to get around and experience a total contrast of climates and landscapes with, always, the warmest welcome wherever you go. This is a verdant treasure awaiting your discovery! When you arrive in Costa Rica, you will hear the phrase 'Pura vida!' exclaimed many times; this means "pure life" although the exact meaning is hard to exactly translate as it is part greeting and part exclamation. But it embodies all that Costa Rica is about.

I discovered the perfect location for a romantic and adventurous getaway with a thrilling twist – you arrive and depart the lodge by white-water rafting along the stunning Pacuare River which is deep in the heart of the central highlands. With plenty of instruction from the river guides and lots of laughter we arrived wet but exhilarated after an hour spent riding the grade III rapids. A few nights spent in the forest scouting for toucans and monkeys, hiking to remote indigenous Cabecar communities whilst luxuriating in a hilltop villa complete with springwater pool and canopy walkway and enjoying fabulous cuisine lulls you into a relaxed state in this remote paradise. Then, when its time to leave, the grade IV rapids await! With names such as Pinball and Washing Machine I will admit to slight trepidation at the start but Ivan, our guide, talked us expertly through the thrilling ride. With an



inevitable cry of "pura vida!" we made it through the rapids with time to stop at a beautiful waterfall for a swim, float serenely through a deep canyon and enjoy a delicious picnic lunch before, sadly, our fabulous adventure came to an end.

Heading north to the Caribbean coast via a stunning scenic flight over the mountains brought me to Tortuguero National Park. The theme of the Park is a series of natural canals that meander through thick mangroves, a haven for beautiful birds such as trogons, tanagers, kingfishers,

herons and cormorants as well as lizards such as the Emerald basilisk and the Jesus Christ lizard that walks on water. One early morning while walking to breakfast I came across a pack of very lively white-faced Capuchin monkeys fooling around in the trees, hanging off each other's tails and generally looking like they were having a great time. However one of the most awe-inspiring experiences for me was being lucky enough to witness green turtles laying their eggs along the beach. Heavily protected here, the beaches are preserved for the turtles to nest in peace. Great care is taken to ensure the presence of humans does not disturb this important event, especially considering that only around 2% of the eggs will survive to maturity. To be able to watch a turtle lay her eggs, disguise the nest from predators with her flippers and then return finally, exhausted, to the sea felt like a truly privileged moment.

Probably the most magical location I visited was in the far south of the country; I flew down to the beautiful Osa Peninsula which lies between the Pacific Ocean and the Golfo Dulce. The Golfo makes a perfect naturally-sheltered spot for humpback whales to calve.

The Gulf uniquely witnesses two migrations annually (from both the north and south) to its sheltered bay, ensuring the presence of whales here for about eight months of the year. Having slept in a beautiful remote lodge whose only access is by boat, I woke early to head out into the bay searching for these magnificent marine mammals. Just as we sipped our morning Costa Rican coffee, spotted dolphins appeared off the bow, leaping out of the water. The previous day I had seen a vast school of bottlenose dolphins out on the Pacific Ocean side while heading out to Cano Island to snorkel and swim. This morning, however, we had our sights set on finding the humpbacks. As Eric, our guide, scanned the horizon we saw deep out in the bay a huge splash of water as a whale breached and the huge black tail appeared. To my slight chagrin the magnificent creature moved away as we approached but close encounters are very common here. However, even at a distance, I felt touched by the whale's presence and felt the magic of this beautiful place. Next time!

For me, Costa Rica makes an incredible destination for wildlife lovers and, especially, for bird-watching with the resplendent quetzal in the cloudforests and vivid scarlet macaws and toucans along the coasts. Those seeking active adventure, perhaps as a family, can enjoy horse-riding, canopy walkways, surfing, kayaking and snorkeling. So escape to gorgeous romantic hideaways amid forest and along rugged remote coastlines in this beautiful - and utterly, disarmingly, friendly - Central American nation!

"The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page."

SOUTH AMERICA





ANTARCTICA

Antarctica, the vast White Continent, remains even today one of the world's last true wildernesses. With the closest point of the continent at the Antarctic Peninsula some two days away by sea from South America, this white desert is still the wild, beautiful and challenging location that remains as it was when explorers such as Amundsen and Scott travelled there over a century ago.

Vast colonies of Adelie, gentoo, rockhopper and macaroni penguins inhabit the peninsula in huge numbers. Leopard, elephant and Weddell seals can be seen lying languidly on icebergs waiting to feed in the short austral summer as you float past on small inflatable zodiac craft. Listen out for the signal at any time of day from your expedition cruise ship that a whale has been sighted off the bow as, later in the season, humpback and orca whales are often seen! Look out for albatrosses flying in the wake of your ice-strengthened expedition cruise ship as you cross the Drakes Passage from the South American mainland....stunning.

The only way to navigate the channels and bays of the Antarctic Peninsula is by expedition vessel with an ice-strengthened hull. One sails the waters of the Antarctic Ocean, crossing from the closest mainland point in the south of Argentina at Ushuaia and spending two days at sea in either direction. For many this is a fascinating and exhilarating sea voyage as you ply the waters of the Drake Passage looking out for whales and albatross and spending time getting to know your fellow explorers and preparing for your unique adventure with an incredible exploration team. We choose only those vessels that offer the best team of specialist expedition leaders in fields ranging from history to geology, marine biology and photography. If you have the additional time for this adventure-of-a-lifetime we would certainly recommend you take a longer journey that also includes the Falkland Islands and South Georgia, fascinating both for its history associated with Shackleton and its vast colony of King penguins, one of the largest species in the region and second only in size to the Emperor penguin.

Or, if you want a true sense of how it felt for the early explorers to sail these challenging oceans and be right up close to nature, we can also arrange a private sailboat for you and your friends or family – the ultimate, exhilarating, adventure!

Even this last real wilderness has, however, today become a little easier to access than before as nature lovers can visit the northernmost tip of Antarctica by air if they wish, thus maximizing time on land (or perhaps to fulfill a very specific wildlife encounter). One accesses the Antarctic Peninsula by flying across Drake Passage from southern Chile to the nearest airbase on King George Island. Here you join your Antarctic expedition vessel and head out for a week exploring the islands and bays of this region and walking amongst huge colonies of penguins and seals. Look out for the skuas, though, who like to swoop low in search of prey – as they steal the catch of other birds and even their eggs! If you want to be one of the very few to be privileged to witness the sight of hundreds of Emperor penguins at a vast colony on the Weddell Sea then we can fly you by ski aircraft into an expedition camp to meet these magnificent creatures, found only deep into the continent's interior. This is very special, a chance to photograph majestic Emperors against a spectacular backdrop of ice cliffs, pressure ridges and icebergs. You will fall asleep to a chorus of trumpeting calls and wake to find curious penguins outside your tent.



However you wish to explore this spectacular and pristine environment rest assured that we can talk you through exactly what to expect, how to prepare for your adventure and the different sights you might encounter during different parts of the austral summer. We, like those explorers of a century ago, have long been beguiled by the call of the wilderness in these Polar Regions (as well as elsewhere) and we would love to share our experiences with you so you can achieve your own lifelong ambition to visit these spectacular last frontiers. Our polar expert, Louise, having travelled south to Antarctica, is now equally fascinated by the different wildlife to be found in the northern Arctic regions and will shortly be returning from a journey to see polar bears in Canada so, if you want to make your own polar explorations, both north and south, please call her to get the latest news!

PRIVATE GUIDES

We've said it before but it's worth repeating: A private guide completely enhances any safari. It's as simple as that. Of course there is a cost to it but the value equation far outweighs any "argument again" Such guides bring a region to life with their in-depth knowledge and anecdotes gleaned from years of experience and one develops a wonderful rapport, parting as friends. Over the last 25 years we have built up a knowledge-base of the finest private guides, most of whom we know very well, and we love matching their skills with the requirements of our clients. Here we will focus on three such specialists: **Richard Knocker**, guide extraordinaire in Tanzania and Kenya; **Jonty Rajagopalan** in India and **Carlos Vivar** in Guatemala.



Richard Knocker – Tanzania and Kenya

We have known Richard for over 20 years and we use him as our default guide, if he is available, for Tanzania (now his home) and Kenya, where he was brought up. Richard is a bon viveur, extraordinarily good company and one of the finest guides (perhaps the best) in East Africa. He has an amazing pair of eyes that don't miss a trick and is particularly good with his birds and plants. He smoothes over any "African-isms" that might crop up on a safari, is entirely unflappable and has a great sense of humour. In the words of our client, Mike Lynch who recently travelled with his family to Tanzania with Richard: "As I said in my thank you letter to Richard, he is most thoughtful, courteous and patient with his clients. He handled my two teenage nephews extremely well. Richard was always extremely knowledgeable, witty and pushed us to our limits. Having a private guide is essential in my opinion for a first class safari in Africa. I would never go without one – their in-depth knowledge is imperative in a wild environment to ensure a safe and fulfilling trip. The guides trained eyes means that they can spot game that the average tourist would never even spot. I would certainly hire him again if I were to return to Africa"

Carlos Vivar – Guatemala

Deep in the dense Petén Jungle, in the northern region of Guatemala and close to the more well-known pyramids of Tikal, lies the archaeological site of Uaxactun. What makes Uaxactun so special, aside from its spiritual and astronomical significance, is that it is the only ancient Mayan site that was never abandoned. Next to the site is the village of Uaxactun whose inhabitants had no school until 15 years ago, who saw aircraft before they saw cars and who today still speak in their native Mayan tongue.

Our expert local guide, Carlos Vivar, was himself brought up in this village playing freely among the holy temples of his ancestors and listening to his grandfather who, as a Shaman (Maya spiritual leader or medicine man), told stories of those ancestors and the respect and love for nature this Mayan heritage brings.



Today, Carlos has an impressive background as a guide. He's guided throughout Central America and has been rated among the 10 best guides, out of 3000 guides worldwide. He speaks perfect English, with a touch of a Southern US accent thanks to his love of American country music! Carlos set up a comfortable camp as part of a community project at Uaxactun to offer an unique experience. You sleep and dine in the jungle amongst the Mayan temples, visit the friendly community that never abandoned Uaxactun, learn about the jungle and how the community lives off it, and hear Carlos' stories about everything from his shaman grandfather, nature, local wildlife such as howler monkeys and toucans, his beloved Yamaha TT500s, country music and of course the significance of the beautiful Mayan site of Uaxactun. Being with Carlos is a fabulous addition to one's experience.

Jonty Rajagopalan – Hyderabad, India

Jonty opens doors to the hidden gems of Hyderabad, a city which is also home for Hashim. She is a food historian but is also the city's most knowledgeable guide. Jonty is warm, engaging and passionate about India and Hyderabad; when guiding she fills your day with information and anecdotes about the country and its people whilst opening doors to parts of the city that give you a whole new perspective on India, past and present. It is impossible to put a price on this invaluable personally tailored experience.



Jonty will arrange a lunch at the private home of an old Hyderabadi family where the food is outstanding and the hospitality of the family and their warm welcome into their home is an experience to treasure. Other visits include the traditional palaces of Hyderabad along with behind-the-scenes tours of the old city and market where she introduces you to vendors and crafts people off the beaten path, and a tour of some historic tombs that most people don't even know exist!

STOP PRESS...WHAT'S NEW?

Our new website will be kept up to date with news on a daily & weekly basis. Please visit the "News" link from the home page at www.explorationscompany.com.

Photographic Safaris with Jonathan and Angie Scott:

Jonathan and Angie have just finished a specialist photographic safari in Botswana where clients learned how to get the most out of their cameras and lenses as well as improving the art of capturing the best of the light and how to create more atmospheric images. They also covered composition and how to visualise the pictures you want to take. With Jonathan as your host one is in the company of one of the world's most knowledgeable big cat experts who has 35 years in his field and who, in partnership with Angie, is renowned for his books and TV programs on lions, leopards and cheetahs. These safaris are wonderful, please register an interest with us to ensure inclusion on future such safaris as they fill up at very short notice.



Exclusive Villa Leobo Private Reserve – South Africa

Leobo is a 12,000 acre private reserve located in the malaria free Waterberg Mountains in South Africa. What makes Leobo so different from the usual "luxury game lodge", is that there are no set rules for meals or game drives and you have total exclusivity of the reserve; no other visitors are allowed except for your own party. There is so much to do apart from the usual game drives. This reserve is for those wanting "something more" and its most prominent feature is that it has its own observatory! With clear skies and no light pollution the local astronomer, Dr Phil Calcot, is able to point out stars, planets and constellations. Other activities include clay pigeon shooting, fishing, sleep outs at the hippo hide and quad biking.

Bale Mountain Lodge - Ethiopia

Bale Mountain Lodge is located southeast of Addis Ababa in Harennna, the amazingly beautiful cloud forest on the southern slopes of the Bale Mountains - Sanetti, the highest point, peaks at over 4000 metres. The lodge is very comfortable indeed and provides a wonderful base from which to explore the mountains with their high-altitude Afro-Montane vegetation and the chance to see endangered Ethiopian Wolves (estimated numbers left have been placed at 350). Bale is one of the best birding areas on the

continent and there are other endemic species here, too, such as Mountain Nyala, Menelik's Bushbuck, rare Giant Forest Hogs, silver cheeked hornbills, blue winged goose and Rogets rail.

Pelican Point - Namibia

Built in 1932 and with only 9 rooms, this arrestingly unique lodge is decorated in warm, contemporary designs and colours. Pelican Point Lodge is located on an exclusive stretch of isolated peninsula near Walvis Bay. Highly unusual and definitely 'one off', it is a former lighthouse which has been converted to a luxury property with unparalleled views. With the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the lagoon of Walvis Bay on the other one can sit on one's own private deck and watch hundreds of Cape Fur Seals on the beach.



The birdlife is also good - Damara terns, pelicans and flamingos. Explore the dramatic coastline or take a walk to an old jetty and watch the world and ships go by. In the evening enjoy scrumptious dining with excellent wines.

Jawai Leopard Camp, India

Lying at the heart of an untrammelled wilderness, where leopards roam wild and free, is Jawai Leopard Camp. Guests can track big cats in customised 4x4 safari jeeps and the camp has 8 luxurious



tents, each with oodles of space and privacy and encapsulated in a landscape surrounded by craggy granite formations of caves, kopjes, Anogeissus scrub and winding sand river-beds. Decorative artefacts abound, hand-crafted using age-old traditions of Indian workmanship. The Camp lies upstream of the Jawai Bandh, one of western Rajasthan's largest water reservoirs, and is a sparkling attraction for an array of migratory birds which include flamingos, geese and cranes. Rambles in the countryside, sundowners and private dining at a host of inspiring spots make for a wonderful stay.



Awasi Lodge– Patagonia, South America

Awasi's legendary service and exquisite remote experiences in the Atacama Desert come to the stunning Torres del Paine National Park in Patagonia. A lodge of only 12 villas within a private reserve adjacent to the Torres del Paine per se, each villa is assigned its own private, professional guide (just as we like it!) and you have a dedicated 4x4 vehicle at your disposal during your stay so you can explore Patagonia and Torres del Paine with absolute privacy and freedom. Awasi has long been regarded at the Atacama's finest hotel specialising not only in stunning accommodation, excellent service and fine cuisine but especially in top level, private guide services from a professional and experienced team of local guides; we are certain that you will love exploring the wild plains of Patagonia as well with these experts, going wherever and doing whatever you wish each day! Fabulous....



Fraser House, Southrop, Gloucestershire, GL7 3NR, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1367 850 566

Fax: +44 (0)1367 850 584

Email: info@explorationscompany.com

www.explorationscompany.com

