

Roads less travelled

*Whether it's mastering ikebana during cherry blossom season, exploring Casablanca's Art Deco heritage or poking around the homes of Antwerp's design elite, bespoke travel tours are putting the surprise back into travel.
By Rachelle Unreich*

Visitors at the Amber Fort in Jaipur, India.



ESCAPE

PICTURE THE SCENE: you're in Japan and have just driven through heavy snow to a 350-year-old saké brewery, or *kura*, for a tasting. Before nightfall, you'll be dining in a mountainside restaurant with a choice of 'wild' foods (that would be sparrows and bear), if you dare, cooked over an open fire. Days earlier, you were in a dazzling temple learning zazen — seated Zen meditation — with a monk; on this trip alone, you've seen private dance performances in a teahouse and enjoyed shiatsu therapy in a tatami room tucked into a bamboo grove. Are you in heaven? Close. On Sydney-based Jane Lawson's Zenbu Tokyo tour, you're enjoying the new kind of bespoke travel experience.

Nowadays, travellers don't want an *Eat, Pray, Love* travel journey. They're not trying to find themselves, but they are willing to hunt down the obscure, the unseen and the unusual on their trips away — or at least have a holiday that hasn't repeatedly appeared on their Instagram feed. The lure of this kind of tour is seeing

secret spots, getting access to something normally only granted to insiders and, above all, the emphasis on experience as a priority.

And customers are spoiled for choice. Prior is a travellers' club co-founded by former travel writer-editor David Prior (an Australian based in New York), which offers a range of events and itineraries to its members, who pay a \$3500 annual fee. Money well spent? Says Prior, "More than ever, we define ourselves by the experiences we have, rather than what is in our closet or our garage." On offer at Prior? The chance to celebrate Día de los Muertos (the Day of the Dead) in Oaxaca, Mexico, or watch the solar eclipse in Chile. These trips aren't about seeing everything

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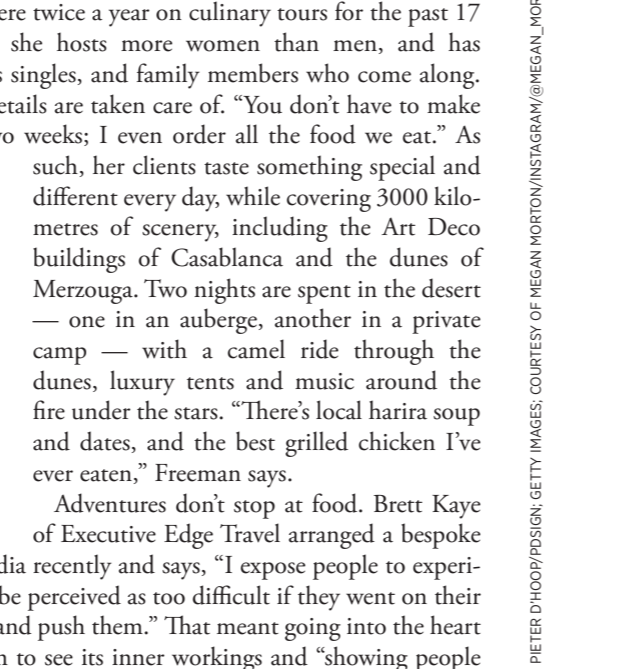
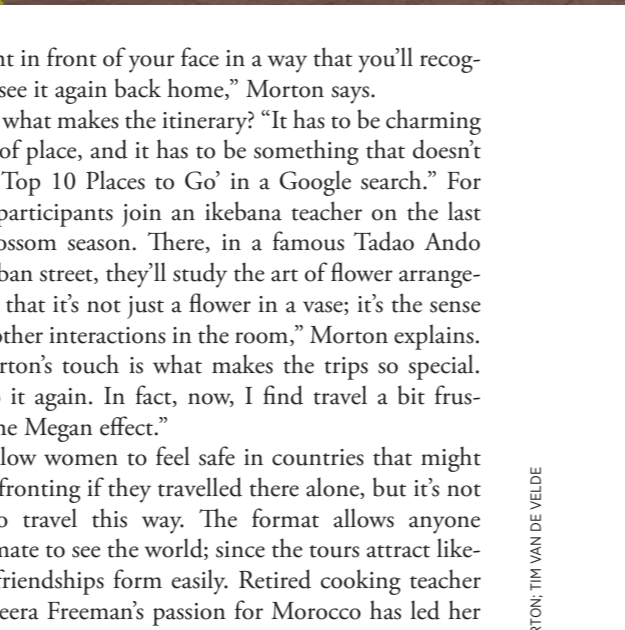


From top: Japan; stylist Megan Morton with locals in Jaipur, India, on her Excursions program through The School; Caffé Palladio in Jaipur.



a city or country has to offer, but rather a unique glimpse of wherever the traveller's individual interest lies.

Join uberstylist and author Megan Morton on her tours to Paris, India, Africa, Peru or Japan with her company, The School, and you view those places through her specialist lens. That appealed to Melbourne fashion designer Karishma Kasabia, who has been to both Paris and Jaipur with Morton, even though her own family hails from India. What was the lure of travelling with a handful of women (five to 10 on any given trip), rather than going with her husband and child? The answer lies in her description of a standout experience in Jaipur, when the group visited Caffé Palladio, a peach-and-mint-hued haven where handpainted birds and lush greenery adorns the walls. "We sat at the ►



Clockwise from above: harvested marigold heads in Jaipur; the ornamental gardens of Real Alcázar in Seville, Spain; Koutoubia Mosque square, Marrakech, Morocco; Megan Morton in Jaipur.

to put beauty right in front of your face in a way that you'll recognise it when you see it again back home," Morton says.

The criteria for what makes the itinerary? "It has to be charming and have a sense of place, and it has to be something that doesn't come up in the 'Top 10 Places to Go' in a Google search." For example, Tokyo participants join an ikebana teacher on the last day of cherry blossom season. There, in a famous Tadao Ando house on a suburban street, they'll study the art of flower arrangement. "You learn that it's not just a flower in a vase; it's the sense of space and the other interactions in the room," Morton explains. For Kasabia, Morton's touch is what makes the trips so special. "I'd definitely do it again. In fact, now, I find travel a bit frustrating without the Megan effect."

Group tours allow women to feel safe in countries that might ordinarily be confronting if they travelled there alone, but it's not just women who travel this way. The format allows anyone without a travel mate to see the world; since the tours attract like-minded people, friendships form easily. Retired cooking teacher and translator Meera Freeman's passion for Morocco has led her to take groups there twice a year on culinary tours for the past 17 years. Generally, she hosts more women than men, and has couples as well as singles, and family members who come along. Once there, all details are taken care of. "You don't have to make a decision for two weeks; I even order all the food we eat." As

such, her clients taste something special and different every day, while covering 3000 kilometres of scenery, including the Art Deco buildings of Casablanca and the dunes of Merzouga. Two nights are spent in the desert — one in an auberge, another in a private camp — with a camel ride through the dunes, luxury tents and music around the fire under the stars. "There's local harira soup and dates, and the best grilled chicken I've ever eaten," Freeman says.

Adventures don't stop at food. Brett Kaye of Executive Edge Travel arranged a bespoke Jewish tour of India recently and says, "I expose people to experiences that might be perceived as too difficult if they went on their own. I challenge and push them." That meant going into the heart of an Indian slum to see its inner workings and "showing people

cafe, while enjoying tea, treats and a calligraphy lesson with Maybelle [Imasa-Stukuls], a calligrapher who was on the trip. We all got the chance to have one of our favourite quotes written by her on hand-marbled paper. It was so memorable," Kasabia says.

The School's trips are short — five days — and don't claim to hit all the sightseeing hotspots. In India, they stay put in Jaipur (although side-trips are offered as an extension, to Bikaner, Udaipur, the Taj Mahal in Agra and Bundi), "so we're not running at a pace where people feel they've got all this nervous energy all the time," Morton says. "Instead, India unfolds before us. When you go to a place like India and you do it fast, your brain can't comprehend all the beauty and poverty before you, so you end up scoring it, often saying it was terrible. If you're going with us, we want to make sure every single thing is perfect." Since it's an all-female tour, programs are women-led, with the goal of revealing a destination's hidden delights. "We're not a trip where we're trying to fix you — because you're not broken — but we're trying

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Travel's new guard

ZENBU TOURS

Jane Lawson runs luxe Japanese cuisine and culture tours several times a year. From \$12,199 (for seven days), based on double occupancy. zenbutours.com

PRIOR

Among Prior's upcoming Club Journeys are trips to Seville, Spain, and a purpose-built camp in Chile's Araucanía lakes region. Annual membership is about \$3500, applied as a 10 per cent credit towards travel within the year. prior.club

THE SCHOOL

In 2019, excursions with Megan Morton's The School go to Paris and India, starting at \$6800 for five days (not including flights and accommodation). theschool.com.au

MOROCCO WITH MEERA

Meera Freeman runs tours of no more than 10 guests a few times a year to Morocco, and accepts expressions of interest in accompanied and custom tours. From \$10,950 for 14 nights (based on double occupancy). meerafreeman.com.au

EXECUTIVE EDGE TRAVEL

Brett Kaye personally escorts about four trips a year. Pricing is usually \$420 per day twin-share. executiveedge.com.au

ASA CULTURAL TOURS

ASA runs a range of tours throughout the year. Stephen Crafti will lead two more in 2019, to Finland and Germany. From \$7980 for 13 nights (double occupancy). asatours.com.au

how magical they are. It changes people's perception when they get a hands-on experience." It's all in the mix of luxury with the atypical. "In Vietnam, our clients might have a beautiful experience in Ho Chi Minh City and then stay with a hill tribe for a few nights," Kaye says. Seeing a country this way also reduces costs. "If you're doing a joy flight over Victoria Falls [in southern Africa], it might be very expensive, but with a group you're both discounting it and sharing the experience."

For Stephen Crafti, an architecture and design writer with more than 40 books to his name, offering design tours (through Australians Studying Abroad Cultural Tours) to destinations including Finland, Germany, Japan and Belgium allows him to share "the best of the best" with a design slant. In Berlin, that might mean visiting a Le Corbusier apartment where the owner and architect explain how everything was painstakingly resurrected or sourced. Or calling into fashion designer Frank Leder's studio, to be greeted by the designer and peek into his "curiosity cabinet of artefacts". When visiting designer Tim Van Steenberg's private home in Antwerp,

Fashion designer Tim Van Steenberg's home in Antwerp, Belgium. Left: the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, Morocco. Below: The Jane restaurant, Antwerp.



Belgium, Tim will offer his tour guests tea and cake before allowing them to peruse everything inside — "You can stroke the throw on his bed!" Crafti exclaims. "It's so personal. It's not just being voyeuristic; it's meeting the top people and understanding how they think."

Also in Antwerp, one gets an entrée into the impossibly tricky-to-book Jane restaurant, set in a converted chapel, for an 11-course meal. What effect do his tours have? Crafti explains it this way: "You might know nothing about Bauhaus and come on my tour, and it doesn't mean you have to come back painting everything in your house white and make some severe openings. But it opens people's minds." ■

