



The Bold And The Bizarre

Looking for an out-of-the-ordinary holiday
off the tourist map in the country?
Chitra Narayanan shows the way

Would you like to spend a week with camel herders in a Rajasthani village? Or how about spending a vacation retracing the steps of a 19th century travel book? Or, how about climbing through the mountains to catch a glimpse of a Himalayan flower that blooms only once in a few years?

Today, an array of travel firms specialise in making such travel dreams come true. "No matter how bizarre or wild or difficult, if you've dreamt of a particular journey or an adventure in India, we'll make it happen," promises **Sohil Paul of Aquaterra Adventures**, a Delhi-based travel firm. Adds **Sonalata Datta of PL Workdays**: "That's why we are here."

Datta cites the example of a travel writer from *National Geographic* who wanted to stay

The Moorcroft trek involves following the path of two explorers who travelled in the Himalayas between 1819 and 1825. Far less has changed on the route than might be expected



with a group of camel herders in India. Datta identified a village near Pushkar where the writer could stay but there was one problem: the camel herders wanted to interview the lady before they would allow her to come and camp with them. She passed the test!

Welcome to the world of tailor-made holidays — tours that are custom built to fit individual requirements. As the globe becomes a smaller place people are searching for unusual vacations that are so far off the beaten track that nobody else can follow. So, a handful of specialist travel agencies are being inundated with unusual requests.

As a result, they've begun thinking out of the box and offering out-of-the-ordinary holidays.

Both Datta and Paul's firms specialise

in special interest holidays. Then there are others like Jayanta Chatterjee of Xebec tours who, inundated with requests for anthropological visits, has started a conducted trip to tribal settlements in the interiors of Orissa.

Quite a few of Aquaterra's unusual tours have been sparked off by queries on the Internet. The flower trek is one such example. "Many Europeans are interested in flowers and get excited that the flowers found on the Alps are found on the Himalayas as well," says Paul. Thus began Aquaterra's flower trek, which passes through a village near Kullu in Himachal Pradesh, where women collect herbs and flowers from the mountains and dry them. Visitors even sit in on a class where an old woman teaches the youngsters the art of drying the flowers and storing them.

Chalking out these tours naturally takes hours and even days of meticulous preparation. In Aquaterra's garage-turned-office there are rare volumes like William Moorcroft and George Trebeck's book on travels in India over the Himalayan passes between 1819 and 1825. Aquaterra has begun conducting the Moorcroft trek, for instance, as it is in great demand especially from the British. "What's amazing is that although it's nearly 200 years since they travelled on this route, little has changed!" says Paul.

Although 90 per cent of requests come from foreigners, but these special holidays are open to Indians as well. The only problem is that the costs can be quite prohibitive. Tours like these, especially on the Himalayas, are likely to cost around Rs 3,000 per head per day. But this year, since the travel industry has been hit by a spate of cancellations, many of these firms have been trying to fill the empty dates by getting Indians hooked.

Aquaterra, for one, has tried to make their jeep safari tour from Shimla/Manali to Lahaul/Spiti more affordable for Indians by giving the option of bringing their own four-wheel drive along. "For a four-member group which brings its own vehicle, we could provide support services for as little as Rs 1,000 a day," says Paul. Support services include camping infrastructure like tents, food, guides, etc. Typically, on treks and safaris, the larger the group the lower the costs.

Anthropological holidays, which are incidentally quite high on the popularity charts, work out cheaper than treks. "But these are arduous," warns Chatterjee of Xebec, who takes visitors on a 10-day tour of tribal villages in Orissa. "You have to walk a lot, you don't have a luxurious atmosphere — you will be driving for long



Tribal holidays are not so expensive but they can be extremely arduous