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New India tours tout escape from ordinary

By Johanna Jainchilli

Tour operators that specialize in India say that their clients are looking for unique experiences beyond the iconic but increasingly crowded highlights like the Taj Mahal.

"India is becoming a commodity," said Ashish Sanghrajka, president of Big Five Tours & Expeditions. "It is impossible to show someone the real India just going to major sites. ... People want to go to India and see it in a way that they're not surrounded by tons of tourists and souvenir hawkers. We want to get people off the beaten path."



The Jawai Leopard Camp is part of Big Five's Deserts of North India tour.

To do that, Big Five is offering a new, 16-night tour called Deserts of North India that includes luxury tent accommodations in the Thar Desert, a visit to India's tea regions in Glenburn and Darjeeling and a trip to the abandoned ghost capital of Fatehpur Sikri, a Unesco World Heritage Site.

The tour takes people to India's landmarks, like Jaipur's historical Amber Fort, as well as less-visited, rural communities and farms in the areas of Nimaj and Mihir Garh.

Guests will stay in four small, luxury tented camps, including the newly opened Jawai Leopard Camp, which features eight luxury tent accommodations, each with a private deck overlooking the wilderness, where guests will go leopard-tracking. Visit www.bigfive.com.

Religious festivities



The reception tent at the Chamba Camp, one of the camps offered on Geringer Global Travel's 15-night Kalachakra 2014 India Holiday tour.

Other operators are also offering new and unusual India experiences.

"Most of our clients are looking for unique experiences in India," said Susan Geringer, founder of Geringer Global Travel. "About 95% of them want to have special immersion experiences in addition to the sites, even if they are staying at luxury properties."

Geringer Global Travel's 15-night Kalachakra 2014 India Holiday tour in July coincides for the first time

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with the annual Kalachakra Festival, a Buddhist festival presided over by the Dalai Lama, this summer in its 33rd year.

The tour will take people to Delhi; Ladakh, a Buddhist enclave; and the city of Srinagar in the Kashmir Valley, where they will also stay in tented mobile luxury camps, which Geringer offered briefly in 2013.

The tour includes a monastery visit, dinner with a Kashmiri family, a cruise along Dal Lake in traditional shikara boats, a camel safari and a morning spent at the Kalachakra Festival. Rates begin at \$9,840 per person. Visit www.geringerglobaltravel.com

Insight Vacations' new Mystical South India tour visits Kerala and Tamil Nadu, taking participants to some of India's oldest Hindu temples.

Signature Insight experiences include a Kathakali dance performance in Kochi; a cruise with an expert naturalist through the waterways of Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary; and in Madurai, joining temple priests to fan Lord Shiva with incense and ply him with bananas. Visit www.insightvacations.com.

Kensington Tours' new offering, India's Holi & Elephant Festival, debuted this month but will be offered again next March.

The tour gives participants the chance to take part in the Holi, an ancient Hindu religious festival and national holiday that celebrates spring with singing, dancing, parades and fireworks and the traditional painting of elephants and participants.

On the Kensington tour, guests in Jaipur will visit Elephant Village, a complex where visitors can observe elephants in a natural setting before painting and decorating the elephant in the Holi tradition. During the festivals the participants, like the elephants, will end up doused in paints of many colors, as they celebrate Holi on the grounds of an Indian palace.



Elephants and humans alike don paint during Holi celebrations, the focus of a new Kensington tour.

The tour also includes a private tour of the Taj Mahal, Amber Fort, the Observatory of Jaipur and artisanal workshops.

Visit www.kensingtontours.com.

Cuisine and Jewish culture

Orient Flexi-Pax Tours, a division of IsramWorld, is offering several new India tours this year, including an 11-night Culinary Expedition by Private Car that presents a taste of cuisine from the Northern and Western frontier of India.

The tour visits India's restaurants and spice markets, offering experiences including a visit to street markets and food stalls in Delhi, home cooking demonstrations with an Indian family, curry tastings and a sampling of Nawabi-style cuisine.

Beyond food, the tour will take participants to a private prayer ritual in Jaipur and to architectural landmarks, including Amber Fort.

Orient offered a soft launch of a culinary tour to India in 2012, and thanks to its success, has now introduced regular culinary program tours.

The company's 11-night Jewish Heritage Tour takes travelers to historical sites and attractions in Mumbai, Cochin, Kolkata and Delhi.

Experiences include a visit to various synagogues; a Sabbath (the Jewish holy day) spent at the Magen David Synagogue, home of the largest Baghdadi Jewish community in India; visits to Jewish villages near Alibaug; and a meeting with a New Delhi rabbi. Visit www.orientflexipaxtours.com.

Follow Johanna Jainchill on Twitter @jjainchilltw.

political strife

Hoteliers capitalizing on Hainan demand