

A pottery workshop in San Marcos Tlapazola, Oaxaca, Mexico.

Trips with Purpose

For global-minded travelers today, learning from a local is the new must-have experience and a profound way to give back.

by Gisela Williams



A FEW YEARS AGO, Geetika Agrawal, a creative director from a communications agency in New York City, was on vacation in Bali, wandering around the village of Ubud. She recalled that all the other tourists visiting the island were doing the same things—checking out the monkeys at the Monkey Forest, getting a massage, or signing up for surf lessons at a beach town in the south. But she sensed that there was much more to the island’s cultural life and had a strong urge to experience something of it. She strolled by a few yoga studios and vegan cafés and ended up walking into a jewelry store where the shopkeeper was working with silver. “I started asking her questions, and then I offered to help her as she was pouring silver into molds. I ended up acting as her assistant for the next three hours,” recalled Agrawal. “It was the end of my trip, and I thought, This is what I have been looking for; this is the magic. I wished I had found the jewelry maker sooner so I could have spent part of every day of my trip with her.”

Not too long after, Agrawal left her job and launched Vacation with an Artist (*vawaa.com*), a travel company that organizes individual mini apprenticeships with artists and master craftspeople around the globe, from indigo dyeing with a women’s cooperative in Vietnam to making incense with a perfumer in Los Angeles.

“We’ve got our heads in our phones or we’re sitting staring at a screen all



the time,” Agrawal said. “So many of us are craving to connect with our senses, work with our hands, and be creative.” She knew that travel has always been a way to dive into unique experiences, but wanted to open more

doors for people looking to make connections like she did in Bali.

These days there is a growing number of inquisitive, well-seasoned travelers who want to do more than check off a bucket list or fill their Instagram feeds with street food and sunsets. They want to have authentic, local experiences; that could mean sourcing ingredients and cooking with one of the best chefs in the world in Italy, or it could be learning century-old ways of weaving with a female collective in a village outside of Oaxaca, Mexico. These travelers know that by learning a new craft or skill, they are also giving back to the community by supporting local artisans and helping keep traditional arts alive. So to meet this new demand, a new crop of luxury travel



Left: Members of the Vida Nueva women’s cooperative in Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca. Above: Cooks preparing dinner at Pocoapoco, in Oaxaca.



Clockwise from above: A weaver in Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh, India; thread dyeing in Jodhpur; Amber Fort in Jaipur.

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outfitters is curating journeys that provide deeper insight into diverse cultures in some of the most far-flung destinations.

“What is the point of traveling if you are not experiencing the colors of the world?” said David Prior, founder of the two-year-old Prior Travel (*priortravel.com*). Originally a journalist who was schooled at the Slow Food program at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in northern Italy, Prior custom-designs trips for individuals and small groups that are often led by fellow journalists—like Deborah Needleman, a former

New York Times editor. This fall Prior hosted a long weekend at Casa Maria Luigia, the stylish new 12-room inn by chef Massimo Bottura and his American wife, Lara Gilmore, in Emilia-Romagna, where the guests spent hours sourcing the region’s best ingredients, from Parma ham to Parmesan. This past November, Needleman led a weeklong trip to Rajasthan, India, during which guests took workshops in block printing in Bagru and *kantha* stitching in Kolkata.

“For us, our value system is such that we don’t think of sustainability as a donation or a top-down kind of

idea,” said Prior. “It’s just the best and most interesting way to travel.” By that he means that the best hotel is not always the one with five stars and plunge pools but sometimes a small gem of a property like the Ahilya Fort, located in a small Indian village of silk and cotton weavers, that is individually run and owned by the son of the last maharaja of Indore.

Alice Daunt of Daunt Travel (*daunt-travel.com*), who often organizes one-off wild adventures to places like Chad and Nepal for her A-list clients, feels similarly. “Interesting, adventurous destinations,

Shopping the markets for ingredients with chef Massimo Bottura in Bologna, Italy.

as well as properties that support the local community, are worth traveling to.” She pointed to the Comuna do Ibitipoca, a remote hideaway in the heart of a Brazilian nature reserve, and Sol y Luna, an old-school ranch-like property in the Sacred Valley of Peru that supports a school and several foster homes for local children.

“Your carbon footprint is detrimental to the environment, but the effect that informed and authentic travel has on you as a person—the impact it might make on your daily habits—is also something that adds to a sustainable world,” said Marta Tucci, one of the three female founders of Naya Traveler (*nayatraveler.com*), a company that helps its clients go off the well-beaten path and meet and interact with small artisanal communities. Morocco, one of its most popular destinations, is a good example. “In the last five years the country has become an extremely popular destination, yet most visitors tend to want to stick to Marrakech and the Sahara, both of which, in their own ways, have become somewhat overrun,” said Tucci. Naya Traveler’s planners will suggest their clients travel into the raw landscapes of southern Morocco, staying in private houses and escorted by a translator, to experience authentic Moroccan life away from modern conveniences.

When Emma Ponsonby and Ahmed Gouda, the founders of the Amsterdam-based Satopia Travel (*satopiatravel.com*), send clients to destinations whose survival is in danger, such as the Maldives, they try to focus the trip on matters like climate change and marine conservation. They have guests meet with biologists and researchers, and they select hotels that are plastic-free and involved with local initiatives. They also can organize workshops



with experts, like the chef Francis Mallmann at his private island in Patagonia and the award-winning travel photographer Darren Jew on swimming with whales in Norway, to inspire new ways of thinking about travel.

Last year Needleman traveled in Oaxaca to Pocopoco, a guesthouse that describes itself as a cultural residency retreat open to creatives and academics. Owner Jessica Chrastil asks her guests what they are interested in learning about and then helps them connect to local talents, from poets and dancers to the founder of a women’s rug-making cooperative. Needleman was interested in pottery making in a rural Zapotec village.

She said the experience blew open a portal into an alternative way of living that made her see the world very differently. “The sense of community there is so real,” she recalled, “and the objects that they make are not just isolated products that they sell to tourists. The acts of weaving or spinning pots are actually tied into their daily lives, how they live and think, like a language.” She added, “Supporting these traditions and crafts through conscious tourism is a way of preserving an alternative and fragile ecosystem.”

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