

JOURNEY MAN

A 34-YEAR-OLD TRAVEL WRITER FROM BRISBANE HAS VENTURED INTO THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY,
USING HIS INSIDE KNOWLEDGE TO PUT TOGETHER THE PERFECT TOUR FOR PEOPLE WHO WOULD NEVER BE SEEN DEAD ON A TOUR.

STORY **MILANDA ROUT** | PHOTOGRAPHY **GENTL + HYERS**

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David Prior's first tailored tour took 13 guests on a 23-day tour of India, taking in Delhi, Agra, Jodhpur, Mumbai, Maheshwar, Varanasi, Jaipur and Udaipur.



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described it as being in a dream, a celebration akin to a wedding, a feeling of childlike wonder. It was a day that started by watching Indian weavers, sitting cross-legged on the floor, working the looms that held extraordinary coloured silk threads to make Maheshwari saris. The women of the party were then dressed in saris, the men in turbans as warriors in Rajasthan once would have been. They met that evening for a candlelit dinner in the gardens of an 18th-century fort on the banks of the Narmada River in Central India. This was not your standard guided tour.

“I have been married for a long time but it was sort of like a wedding day, it felt we were part of a wedding party, the girls all going off to this room to have our saris wrapped,” says Judy Stewart, one of the guests. “We had this done and all of a sudden, you felt taller, you felt very feminine and you felt very beautiful. Then we went downstairs and the men were there, and the male guide had wrapped them in turbans. The men looked amazing and the women look gorgeous. We went out into these gardens where there was this long table with candles, a beautiful Indian feast.”

This moment, this day, this tour was the brainchild of Australian food and travel writer David Prior. The Brisbane-born 34-year-old spent a decade journeying to various ends of the earth in search of good stories. His work has appeared in British *Vogue*, *Vogue Living* and *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, and he is the contributing international editor for *Conde Nast Traveler*. Now he has turned that knowledge into a new venture, organising bespoke tours for people who wouldn't normally be caught dead on tours. This 23-day trip to India for 13 discerning travellers was his first venture.

“I spent my whole career in editorial, working with a photographer to create a moment, to elevate that moment, to turn the volume up in a certain place,” Prior tells WISH on a visit to Sydney. “I would make sure we would be at the right time to see that festival or have the table in a certain way, just to tweak it slightly to make sure it was this fantasy for people on the page. So I got to thinking what it would be like to do what I do with editorial but make that an experience for people.”

He recruited a group of culinary heavyweights to be guinea pigs on his inaugural trip, including his former boss and culinary icon Alice Waters from Chez Panisse in California, who is credited with starting the farm-to-table movement in the 1970s; the owners of Zuni Café in San Francisco, Gilbert Pilgram and Richard Gilbert; and Cristina Salas Porras Hudson, who runs Hudson Vineyards in the Napa Valley. Judy and Michael Stewart, from Brisbane and a legal background, were the only couple from Australia and not from the world of food. They have known Prior his whole life – he was born the day before the eldest of Judy's four boys, and she calls him “my fifth son”.

Judy and Michael had always wanted to go to India,



where Michael spent the first few years of his life, his parents having met in Mumbai (then Bombay). “I thought, if I am ever going to go to India, this is the way to go, to have what David calls the ‘white glove’ experience. It was the first time I had ever been on a trip where I thought, ‘I don't have to think about this. Someone has done all the thinking for me.’ I think that is a huge luxury. The thing is to find the person you are prepared to trust to get it right.”

Prior created individual itineraries for all the guests and they were able to decide whether to eat together or “opt in” to experiences. He took care of the logistics: when the Stewarts' plane landed in Mumbai in the middle of the night, he sent someone to meet them and escort them through the rather hectic customs process. “I rang him up as soon as it was a civil hour and said, ‘Whatever I can do for you for the rest of your life, I will do for you, just for that act,’” says Judy, who was

worried she would spend hours in a visa queue at zam.

“There are places that have a barrier to entry,” Prior says of the destinations such as India that he will make a key part of his business. “If you break those barriers down and find the keys to the city, you can have a much stronger experience. That has always been my role and responsibility for the magazine [*Conde Nast Traveler*], but that was from a still-image point of view, having people access what is best of the place. That is the

exciting thing about this business; it allows me to be even more untethered in my imagination around creating stories that come to life.”

The stories that came to life in India included the sari-clad candle-lit dinner at the Ahilya Fort in Maheshwar to floating 1000 candles down the holy river of Narmada and sunset at the Taj Mahal. There was a sunrise walk around Mumbai to experience the markets and the “calmer face” of the city before the

chaos of the day to a margarita party in the Peacock Suite of the Taj Mahal Palace (the hotel). The later was a last-minute request by Pilgram and Gilbert of Zuni Café. “It was my job to say yes and make those things happen,” Prior says. “But what do you do when there is a local election and alcohol is banned? We managed to get it but probably broke a few rules.”

“We had the most extraordinary trip,” Waters tells WISH from her office in Berkeley, California. “I have always wanted to go to India; I have wanted to go for 40 years. I was worried about taking such a big trip ... but it was seamless from beginning to end.” Waters names her highlights as the flower markets in Mumbai and that dinner at the Ahilya Fort, in which she describes as “very dreamlike”, draped in her sari amid the candles. For the Stewarts, Prior has offered up what Judy believes is the new form of luxury travel: the inside know-how to ensure people get to really experience a city (food, culture, history, life) as opposed to just traipsing around monuments like every other tourist.

“Everyone can do almost anything – it is all very accessible online, people are no longer held back by lack of knowledge,” Judy says of travel. “But having someone who knows what they are doing, has great contacts and can guide you so you don't have a bad day; that is what is going to become more and more valuable. I think the [luxury] experience will become smaller and more intense as everything becomes mass-marketed.” Prior agrees. “There is a global move from luxury to something more: a celebration of diversity, there is so much, whether it is natural or creative or food,” he says. “It is the difference, not the delivery of service that is the interesting thing about travel.”

Prior is looking at Spain and Japan for the next trips for his venture (called Prior Knowledge). More India tours are already being planned. He has also just secured a financial backer, Overture Investment Partners (the group behind Copenhagen restaurant phenomenon Noma), allowing him to create one-off experiences, from trips like India to one-day events. This comes amid an emerging global luxury trend of what *The New York Times* has called “travel designers” – a new breed of consultants offering a top-end expertise-based service that goes beyond the role of the traditional travel agent; they do house calls to spend time with their very busy clients, plan multiple holidays for the year and cater to every individual taste and need.

Prior, now based in New York, was absolutely thrilled with the reaction to his inaugural trip, particularly from the restaurateurs behind Zuni Café. In fact, the feedback has helped him shape what is to come. “Gilbert has stayed in the best hotels, has sublime taste and he said something to me at the end, which is really nice and has developed a mantra for my business,” Prior says. “He said, ‘It is almost impossible for me, at 65 years of age, and having travelled everywhere, to get this childlike wonder, and you did that every day.’ For me, that has really crystallised what I want to do.” www.priorknowledgegetravel.com