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If you're afraid of getting lost en route to a Greek ruin or leaving Spain without sampling the best tapas, travel with a tour guide and transform your holiday experience, says Ally Wybrew



FROM LEFT Camel-trekking in Morocco; canoeing in Canada; Mount Fuji in Japan



Alison Brown is a tour manager at Saga Holidays and Titan Travel, leading guided trips in Canada, Spain and Japan. She says:

"Being a tour guide is all about enhancement. It's providing that bit of local knowledge that allows you to see beyond the surface of what you could read in the brochure or see on Instagram. It can sometimes be overwhelming to be wandering around when you're not quite sure what you're looking at. A good guide can help you see things differently and make sense of what you're seeing."

"With a guide, you can do something that's a bit more authentic. In Japan, for example, I love taking guests to local markets – it's a really wild experience and they get to taste a lot of exotic

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food. Me being there gives them the confidence to try new things and allows them to experiment in ways they might not have done if they were on their own."

"I remember organising a tour of Canada for two ladies, one of whom was celebrating her 70th birthday. I knew of a local group of Canadian Mounties who would come and do talks, and although it wasn't scheduled for our tour, I made contact with one of them to ask if he'd come along in his uniform and surprise her on her birthday. It was really lovely; she cried."

"I also led another very memorable tour in Italy with a lady who had recently lost her husband. I took her to the Spanish Steps to relive a holiday they'd enjoyed together. It was really quite moving – she just sat for a bit, and she wouldn't have done that on her own."



Rory Dent, a tour guide in Tokyo for Tobira Travel, gets a kick out of showing off the less visited corners of the city. He says:

"Japan is a very interesting country. I first moved there in 2012 as a student and I've been guiding in Tokyo for the past three years. When it comes to my job, I don't like having a set route that I do every day. I prefer mixing things up and bouncing around different parts of the city based on my guests' interests. Personally, I'm very ►



LEFT On safari in Botswana's Chobe National Park **BELOW** A tree frog in Costa Rica, home to five per cent of the world's biodiversity

'Being a great tour manager is all about showing care and compassion, and a love of people'

interested in the northeast of the city, which is traditionally the lower-class area, as I'm a big fan of the history of the working man.

"Having a guide really helps you contextualise and understand Japan. There's a lot that's easy to miss. Pointing out sights and telling you about them is an interesting and important part of the job, but it's about experiences too. The people in Japan are a huge part of what makes the place so wonderful. My role is to introduce travellers to more interesting and less over-saturated parts of the city to enrich and enhance their experience. For example, taking them for lunch at a locally run business in a quieter part of town, making sure the proprietors see the fruits of this Japanese tourism boom, and that travellers find somewhere they'd struggle to discover alone.

"There's a lot of Japanese cuisine that isn't really popularised abroad, so introducing folks to dishes they may not know is rewarding. I really love *monjayaki*, which is a variation of the more familiar *okonomiyaki*,

a pancake-style omelette. Basically a big puddle of batter – a bit unappetising to look at but totally delicious – it's originally a pauper's dish that was invented through privation, experimentation and minimising food waste."



Karen Holladay, a tour manager for Riviera Travel for 19 years, believes being a guide is all about compassion. She says:

"Starting out as a tour manager was a stroke of fate for me. I was studying languages at university when a representative from a tour operator walked into the classroom and asked, 'Is there anyone here who speaks French and is free to take a group of people to Paris on Saturday?'

All I heard was 'Paris on Saturday', and my hand shot up. I've never looked back.

"Travel has always been a passion for me and I've found that helping other people explore the world has been the most rewarding way of seeing new places. Southern Africa, whether South Africa, Botswana or Victoria Falls, is an unforgettable experience and made all the more special if you're accompanied by someone who knows and loves the area. For wildlife and scenery, Costa Rica is another wonderful destination, where nearly 6 per cent of the entire world's biodiversity can be found in an area smaller than Scotland. From the Caribbean to the Pacific coasts, every day is an adventure here.

"And then there's Star Clippers, which has the most beautiful sailing ships in the world. Whatever the itinerary, seeing the sails unfurl as we leave each port to moving music is a memory never forgotten.

"Being a great tour manager is all about showing care and compassion, as well as a love of people. Understanding what needs to be done in a crisis or when someone is feeling unwell makes guests able to relax, knowing they are in good hands."



LEFT Florence is just one highlight of a Tuscany tour **BELOW** Local colour in Buenos Aires, Argentina



Matt Purse, a tour manager for Riviera Travel for more than 15 years, enjoys the responsibility that comes from being a guide. He says:

"Being a tour manager is unlike any other job. You must be enthusiastic and passionate about the places you visit. Tour managers can make or break a holiday, so it's a big responsibility, because you're trying to deliver someone's dream. You also have to step up when things occasionally go wrong. The most satisfying part of my job is when guests come up to me and say, 'You made our holiday'.

"I've been to many amazing places with Riviera Travel but if I had to choose my favourite European tour it would be Florence and Tuscany. We spend several days on a bed & breakfast basis giving guests not just the chance to explore on foot but also taste the culinary delights on offer, such as the famous Fiorentina steak or wild boar. An afternoon visit to the Uffizi Gallery is also a must.

"After three nights in Florence we switch the city for a country break, where we see just how beautiful Tuscany is. You'll explore hilltop towns like San Gimignano, Volterra and Siena, and travel through picture-perfect countryside – not forgetting the chance to try the stunning selection of wines the Chianti region has to offer.

"I guarantee you will see more on an escorted tour, meet more like-minded people and still have space to do what you want. But most of all you'll have the holiday of a lifetime without the hassle." ■



Simón Chacón Galué, a Buenos Aires-based tour guide for GuruWalks, loves introducing guests to the locals. He says:

"When you visit a city as a tourist, you have limited time. A tour often only lasts two hours or so but you get to see the landmarks and, more importantly, understand what it is you're looking at. You can ask your guide, 'Should I try this kind of food? Where should I go? Where shouldn't I go?' You can learn more about the destination in a short period of time if you have somebody local with you recommending places and things to do. For example, last week I went to a Philharmonic event with tango and typical Argentinian music. I sent my group the link and a couple of them came with me.

"When you take a tour, you visit different neighbourhoods so you can see where local people eat and where they spend their time. Chinatown is my

favourite spot because even though it's still in Buenos Aires, it feels like another place entirely – especially at the weekends. There are nice parks in that area, too.

"Lastly, I love meeting people. Every group asks unique questions and they interact with you differently. I've met so many people and had so many experiences. It's always nice when you click and then go for lunch or drinks together. One time this guy had an extra ticket to a football match and I went with him. It was nice that I could do something like that with somebody I had met only a few hours before."

