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Travel

TRAVEL TIPS

How to Have a Culturally Rich Vacation



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Whether your next vacation is to a big city, the beach or someplace rural, why not make the trip more fulfilling by soaking up the destination's culture? "Getting exposed to local culture is enriching and shows us a world beyond ourselves," said Ashish Sanghrajka, the president of Big Five Tours & Expeditions, a Stuart, Fla.-based travel company specializing in custom cultural immersion trips.

But he cautions that without thoughtful planning, a cultural getaway can be canned and touristy instead of authentic. Here, are his top tips for taking a vacation with a true cultural sensibility.

DITCH THE GROUP TOURS Group trips aren't ideal for cultural immersion. "Group itineraries have a fixed agenda, so there's little room to go off script, and the more scripted a trip, the less authentic it is," Mr. Sanghrajka said. Instead, he suggests using a travel adviser who is knowledgeable about the destination you're interested in or specializes in off-the-beaten-path cultural trips. It's also possible to build an itinerary by reading history and travel books and doing research.

MINIMIZE PLANNED EXCURSIONS Without set tours, you have more opportunities to discover the local culture in an organic way. Instead of booking a culinary tour of Barcelona, for example, book a guide through a local tour company who is well versed in food, and ask this guide to take you to favorite restaurants and food markets. Having an unspecified agenda has led to many rewarding cultural insights for Mr. Sanghrajka. “My guides have invited me to their homes for dinner, to weddings and to other outings where I saw how the locals really lived,” he said.

Also, in developing countries, village tours, although popular, can be inauthentic. Explore small villages on your own instead. In Rajasthan, in India, for example, Mr. Sanghrajka likes staying in countryside properties and biking through the nearby villages.

CHOOSE SMALL HOTELS THAT ARE LOCALLY OWNED Chains and large, splashy properties won’t give you a glimpse into the local culture, but staying at a small hotel owned by locals and situated in a former home, historic building or residential part of town will. Mr. Sanghrajka, for example, recently stayed at Saruni Samburu, a safari camp in northern Kenya that is owned by a couple who live onsite and hire their staff from the local Samburu tribes. Since such hotels don’t have big marketing budgets, you’ll have to do some legwork to find them — peruse travel blogs and books or ask a travel adviser.

SKIP THE OBVIOUS BEACHES Steer clear of Caribbean destinations where cruise ships dock and go for lesser-known islands and peninsulas where there are opportunities to partake in culture and enjoy the ocean, too. One example is Mancora, a town on Peru’s northwest coast, which has good snorkeling and surfing but is also near Chulucanas, a town known for pottery made with pre-Incan techniques.