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FOOT RACE

Themed walking tours have become a rage as foreign and domestic tourists put on their walking shoes to explore the Capital city

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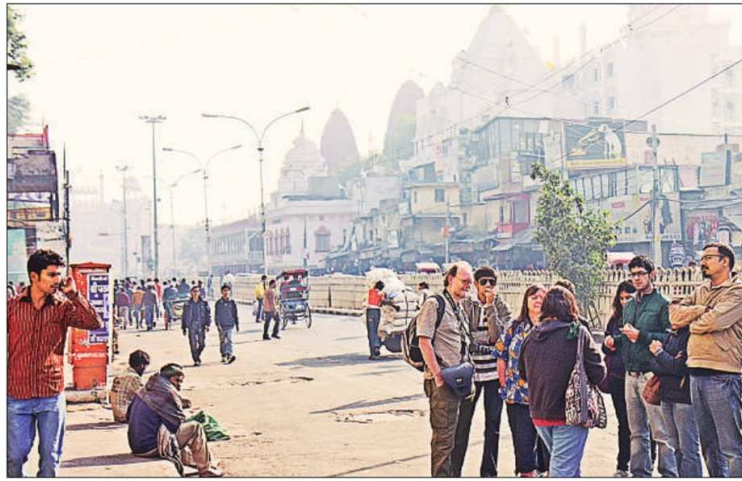
NEW DELHI: The international concept of walking tours has arrived in Delhi in a big way with foreign tourists exploring the multi-faceted city on foot like never before. No wonder then that there are many individuals, organisations and even international niche tour operators offering themed walking tours of the city.

TOMORROW
Delhi is endowed with a natural heritage but very few cities across the world can match. No wonder it is has become a hub of nature and eco-tourism.

"Since last October, my tours have been completely booked till March this year. And most of the bookings are from foreign tourists, mostly from Europe and the US who want to explore Delhi on foot," said conservationist Surekha Narain, who conducts themed walks in Delhi.

In fact, Narain, who already has 25 themed walks in her repertoire, soon plans to add 10 more. Her walks — British 19th Delhi, Mughal Delhi and Safi Delhi — feature among the most popular tours of this kind. "I always try to find new nooks and corners of Delhi. I also customise walks for my clients depending on what they are looking for. In the past one year, walking tours of Delhi have become a huge tourist phenomenon," said Narain.

Kanika Singh, who conducts heritage walks under the aegis of Delhi Heritage Walks, said: "These days, half the people who join our walks are tourists. Their numbers have been steadily increasing in the past couple of years. Many of them want to explore the lesser-known areas of Delhi with us." One of the most popular walks conducted by the Delhi Heritage Walks is 1857: The First War of Independence. Singh added that many foreigners have



■ A walking tour of Chandni Chowk conducted by the Delhi Heritage Walks. One of the most popular walks conducted by it is 1857: The First War of Independence. SONU MENA/HT PHOTO

been inspired for this walk by William Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal*. Jack Leenaars, a Delhi-based Dutch national who runs a very popular cycle tour company in the city, says the reason why foreign tourists go for such specialised walks is that they don't just want to see the city, but also "experience it." "Like Rome and Cairo, Delhi has heritage and history in its every nook and cranny. Unlike earlier when foreign tourists preferred Varanasi and Jaipur for a slice of India, they now want to explore Delhi," said Leenaars, who has a tie-up with several travel agencies for his bicycle tours. Sam Miller, the author of *Delhi: Adventures*

in a *Mega City*, who also keeps getting lots of requests for walking tours of the city, added, "My walks are aimed at people who want to see a living, breathing city. I do not follow any route. Unlike any other city in India, Delhi has lot of fascinating hidden places that make for good walks."

Shantam Seth, known for conducting Buddhist pilgrimages, concurred: "Delhi has been a much-maligned city, but people are now realising that it is an amazing place. It represents an entire panorama of India in terms of culture, history and diversity of faith." Seth's Delhi tours — Diversity of Faith, Capital Story, The City of Bibles, and Gandhi and Craft — which he started two years back, are pretty popular with celebrities that include Hollywood actors, Western businessmen and CEOs. "My journeys through the city are not monument-oriented, but conversation-centric. For me, monuments are just a tool to introduce history. I basically lead an inner journey, which is focused on bringing about an inner change in a person. But if this inner shift does not happen, then I feel I have wasted mine as well as their time," said Seth, who prefers to call himself a "cultural interpreter and a spiritual teacher". Seth is the younger brother of well-known author Vikram Seth.

In fact, it is the talks during these walks that make them different from the usual city tours to the monuments run by tour operators. The idea, says the walk leaders most of whom are history buffs or have an academic background in history, is to relive the city's history and heritage.

"We make the walks interesting by telling people stories and anecdotes associated with the place. The idea is to make people enjoy heritage as a living tradition," said Singh. "I use lots of photographs, sketches, rare maps and stories of the particular area," said Narain. A ride in Delhi Metro is a part of most of Narain's walks.

Realising the popularity of walking tours, many international tour companies such Urban Adventures, which conducts walking tours in many cities across the world, have also started Delhi tours. Some of the Delhi tour offers are Sunrise Delhi, where you "experience a sleeper side of Delhi street life" and Home Cooked Delhi, where you can "relish joyful cultural meanings of Indian food and meet an Indian family at their home".

So, what are you waiting for? Let's walk it out.

TALK TO US
Want to give more ideas on making Delhi a tourism hub? Write to us at manoj@delhiheritages.com



■ Jack Leenaars (in orange) with a bunch of tourists during one of the tours of Old Delhi on cycle organised by his company. ARVIND VARMA/HT PHOTO

Jack Leenaars, 35, a Dutch national, runs a cycle tour in the city called DelhiByCycle. Every morning, Leenaars sets out on cycles with a group of foreign tourists from Turkman Gate. Leenaars, who started his cycle tour two years back with a tour of Old Delhi, has now added two more tours of the city. "Two years back when I began, I did only five tours a month. Now, I do about 45 cycle tours a month. Most people who join my tours are foreign tourists who want to experience the streets of Delhi rather than just explore the monuments."

But is cycling a good way to explore Delhi? "We leave early in the morning and follow a carefully designed route. That is why we face no problem," Leenaars said. Recently, Leenaars started The Raj Tour and Yamuna Tour. While Raj Tour passes through Connaught Place, India Gate and Rashtrapati Bhawan, the



Yamuna Tour takes people through different periods of the city — from the Mughal to the British empire. But the Shah Jahan Tour, a tour of old Delhi, continues to be the most popular. Each tour lasts for about three hours and comes with a price tag of ₹1,500.

BOOKED FOR ADVENTURE
A growing number of books on Delhi have fuelled a desire among both foreigners and Indians to explore the city on foot. William Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty* — one of the most engaging accounts of the great Indian mutiny of 1857 — has made '1857 Mutiny Walk' in the Kashmiri Gate neighbourhood a popular walk in the city. Similarly, Sam Miller's *Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity* — an account of his walks through the city — has inspired many to undertake walking tours of contemporary Delhi.



At Paharganj, participants of a themed walk conducted by conservationist Surekha Narain. HT PHOTO

WALKERS' GUIDE
■ Most walking tours start at 8am and have definite routes
■ The walks cover a distance of 2 km lasting for about 2-3 hours.
■ Most organisations and individuals conducting walks have websites, where they post the schedules. So, most walks can be booked online.
■ Most walks cost between ₹200 to ₹500 per person. Pvt and customized walks can cost ₹2,000 per head.
■ A half-day walk with Shantam Seth can cost you ₹20,000, while the full-day cost is ₹30,000.

WALK WITH YOUR IPHONE
GPSmyCity is a Las Vegas-based company that offers 2,000 self-guided walking tours across 180 cities in the world through an application that can be loaded on your iPhone and iPad. And the best part is that it also offers self-guided tours of Delhi. If you want to walk at your own pace, all you need to do is load your iPhone with the self-guided walking tours from GPSmyCity.com and become your own tour guide. Also, you don't need any internet connection. Powered by GPS technology, the self-guided walking through GPSmyCity tour offers directions to famous attractions, monuments and interesting sites as well as hidden gems. The application is a smart travel companion with a detailed city map and powerful in-built navigation features with precise walking directions from one site to the next. The Find-me application displays your exact location, while an auto-tracking feature displays your movement on a map.