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TRAVEL 29 Sep 2012



Strolling Through Cities

Footloose for a day? Then why not foot it around to catch the local sights

Chitra Narayanan

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WALK & TALK: (Clockwise from left) Raconteurs lead a group in Mumbai

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The assignment place: an ancient banyan tree at the Okhla Bird Sanctuary in Noida. The time: 6 am, Sunday. A motley bunch of birding enthusiasts is huddled, with flasks of steaming coffee in hand, planning the route, occasionally exclaiming at the fat green pigeons nesting in the tree.

As the sun rises, pan your gaze to the Nicholson cemetery on the northern fringes of Delhi. The time: 7.45 am. History buffs are gathered around a young PhD scholar, Kanika Singh, who is animatedly telling them about the 1857 mutiny and the role played by Brig. Gen. John Nicholson.

Elsewhere, an ebullient designer Himanshu Verma is leading a disparate group of expats and locals on a 'food and faffing' walk. It's a thoroughly satiating tour of Old Delhi, sampling kulfis, sherbets, parathas and jalebis.

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(Left to right) Kanika Singh delves into the history of Delhi; and a bazaar trail in Chennai

Lazy weekends are out. Come Saturday, and groups of all kinds — bird lovers, history addicts, butterfly chasers, foodies, heritage preservers — are banding together, putting on their shoes and setting out on glorious rambles.

Walking mania is not just hitting the capital city. Wing your way to Mumbai, and here 20-something Viraat Kasiwal and his team of young raconteurs lead people on walks (through the week; not just weekends) that go out of guidebook territory and into fascinating parts of the city. From heritage to bazaars, they spin a mighty good yarn as they take you through a stroll down the old Fort area. The young start-up is now planning to expand to a cricket walk, an art and architectural walk, a Gandhi walk and a food walk. Unlike other walking groups, Raconteurs doesn't really need a quorum for the walks — and is willing to take even one person.

Now move to Chennai, and you will find zany new trails opening up, courtesy Storytrails.in. The promise is creative outings that give you a glimpse of local lives. Imagine setting out on a trek that leads you into craftsmen's workshops to watch the hand-made jewellery take shape. Or a dancer's trail. Or a bazaar trail. From October, Storytrails will also be starting walking tours in Madurai.

The trails are open throughout the year, and the operative word is 'storytelling'. What's so special about all these walking tours is that their leaders are experts and passionate about their subjects, bringing alive local monuments, streets and even trees that you might never have given a second look.

For instance, in Delhi, Pradeep Kishen, author of *Trees of Delhi*, occasionally takes people through Lodhi Gardens, pointing out native species. Or take the Delhi Heritage Walks, created by history lovers. Every weekend they take people around old monuments and heritage sites, but they structure it around themes — and their narrative is no boring history textbook, but drawn from William Dalrymple's stories (and this sometimes leads to heated, but entertaining, debates amidst the walkers who pooh-pooh the Briton's view of our history).

The prices of the walks range from a mere Rs 250 to Rs 1,500. Some of the walks are hobby groups banding together, while many others are full-time ventures. Some such as the bird and butterfly walks are free, as are the activist or cause-led walks. Often, organisations such as the Aga Khan Trust for Culture use walks to create awareness for their pet projects.

The themes behind the walking tours are mind-boggling. From Gandhi walks that take you around spots associated with the Father of the Nation (and this is a theme common to Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi), to slum tours that immerse you in the Dharavi experience, to biodiversity walks to create awareness on saving the Yamuna, the strolls are diverse. Arshiya Sethi of Kri Foundation, who has curated a number of walks in the Capital, describes a cactus walk, a saree walk, among some of her more offbeat strolls.

So, put on your walking shoes and get set to discover your cities anew — on foot.

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