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Heritage walks in big metros: An ideal opportunity for entrepreneurs in tourism business

BY ISHANI DUTTAGUPTA, ET BUREAU | UPDATED: SEP 29, 2013, 08.15 AM IST

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Vinay Kumar is regional manager, operations, Delhi, at shipping and logistics firm NYK Line. When he isn't busy straightening out transportation of goods via ocean, land and air, Kumar indulges in a pursuit that brings him closer to terra firma: heritage walks. Kumar first went on a heritage walk, organised by Delhi Heritage Walks, about a year back. Since then, he's been hooked, and spends weekends sauntering through Delhi's myriad heritage sites.

"I'm born and bred in Delhi, but it was only after going on my first heritage walk to the Jama Masjid and Chandni Chowk areas in the heart of Old Delhi that I discovered fascinating details about the heritage, culture and history of the place," says Kumar, who had earlier visited the area many times on different errands, but had never even given a thought to its rich history.

Kumar now regularly goes on heritage walks around Delhi monuments, early mornings or evenings, on weekends. He has introduced these walks to friends and sometimes takes his wife and seven-year-old daughter along. "Though she [the daughter] is more interested in fast food and visits to flashy malls, I hope that with time I will be able to introduce the culinary delights of the lanes of Chandni Chowk to her through the walks," adds Kumar.

It's thanks to the efforts of the likes of Kanika Singh, a PhD student of history at Delhi University, that people like Kumar are talking a walk down the bylanes of bygone times. Along with her friend, the late Rajesh Ranjan, Singh set up Delhi Heritage Walks (DHW) about three years ago, giving not just tourists but Delhiites too the opportunity to discover the culture, heritage and history of the city.



While heritage walks are a popular way of discovering historical sites in Europe and America, the trend is yet to catch on in a big way in India.

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Some of the heritage walks that are popular — with DHW having to refuse late entrants — are Phoolwalon Ki Sair (during the traditional festival of flower sellers in October in Mehrauli), Tughluqabad fort and the Mehrauli Archaeological Park, all lesser-known monument clusters in Delhi.

Mehrauli Archaeological Park, Delhi



Historical Background: Spread over 200 acres and adjacent to the Qutub Minar complex, it consists of over 100 important monuments, representing over 1,000 years of history

PLACES OF INTEREST:

Lal Kot: Fort constructed by Gurjar Tanwar chief Anangpal around 731 AD and expanded by Anangpal II in 11th century

*Remains of Ghiyasud
din Balban's tomb,
built in 1287 AD*

Jamali Kamali mosque & tomb: A mosque and the tomb of Sufi saint Shaikh Jamali Kamboh, who lived in the age of the pre-Mughal Lodhi dynasty and the Mughals

Dilkhusha: Initially the tomb of Muhammad Quli Khan, foster brother of the emperor Akbar. It was later remodelled by British official Charles Metcalfe in the style of European residences for use as a pleasure resort during monsoons

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"I had been leading heritage walks with other organisations, such as travel agents and tour operators, but was never satisfied with either the level of academic input or professional management which should go into organising these," says Singh. For her part, Singh reckons it is vital to know a bit about the visitors' background.

"It's the little things that make all the difference between rote memorised guiding and making a heritage walk fun and informative." DHW organises walks every weekend. The cost is between ₹400 and ₹600 per head. The organisation has also worked with corporates such as GE, Nikon and HSBC to design customised heritage walks.

India Taking Baby Steps

While heritage walks are a popular way of discovering historical sites in Europe and America, the trend is yet to catch on in a big way in India. Experts and tourism industry honchos now believe that with the completion of the Nizamuddin Conservation Area project in Delhi — which comprises the world heritage site of Humayun's Tomb and its surrounding areas of Sunder Nursery, Batashewala Complex and Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti — this niche tourism activity will receive a boost.

"The project aims to unify segregated zones of the conservation area into an urban historic district of considerable cultural significance," says Archana Saad Akhtar, programme officer, outreach of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture which, in partnership with Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), recently completed the restoration of the famous Mughal monument, Humayun's Tomb.

Sunder Nursery, which will be spread across 30 acres when completed, will have heritage walks and nature trails. Heritage walks are an opportunity not just for the tourism industry. Camera and imaging products major Nikon, too, has been associating with heritage walks through its division Nikon School in different Indian cities mainly to engage with customers.

"We have just expanded our Nikon School initiative, which was started in 2010," says Sajjan Kumar, vice-president, Nikon India. The photo walks conducted by the school have been held at places of historical interest in Delhi such as the Red Fort, Old Fort, Qutub Minar and Mehrauli Archaeological Park. Through these walks, customers of Nikon's digital SLR products are able to interact with technical

staff members and get a better understanding of their cameras as well as of photographing archaeological buildings.

Discovering Mumbai On Foot

Cut to the financial capital, where Mumbaikars along with visitors to the city are opening up to the idea of discovering heritage through walks. When Viraat Kasliwal decided to turn cultural entrepreneur rather than go overseas for an MBA degree in 2009, he knew he was taking a risk.

The first year was spent mostly on researching about the cultural heritage of Mumbai. "I was lucky to get the help of historian and writer, the late Sharada Dwivedi, when designing my walks," says Kasliwal, CEO of Raconteur Walks Tourism Company.

Today he can boast of having organised heritage walks for at least 2,000 guests, many of whom are not foreign tourists but locals. While the company has marquee offerings such as Apollo Gate and Front Bay Walk, the Churchgate Heritage Mile and Malabar Hill Walk, its most memorable experience was organising a half-day walking tour of the city for Hollywood director Steven Spielberg and his family.

"For many young professionals in the city, going on these heritage walks has become an activity preferable to going shopping or visiting restaurants," says Kasliwal.

Churchgate and Heritage Mile, Mumbai



Historical background: By 1668 all seven islands of Bombay were under the control of the British East India Company. After fortifying the town from sea-borne invasion, the company went about constructing buildings that epitomised imperialism and power

PLACES OF INTEREST:

DN Road: Also called Heritage Mile of Mumbai, it is one of the oldest parts of the city and is reminiscent of the colonial past

FW Steven's gothic masterpiece, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus. It is also known as Victoria Terminus

Flora Fountain: It is one of the busiest precincts of Mumbai

Kala Ghoda: The historic art district has many Gothic buildings and numerous art galleries

Oval Maldan, Old Secretariat, University Library and Convocation Hall, High Court building, old PWD building and Telegraph Department

Veer Nariman Road (formerly Churchgate Street) down to Marine Drive with a view of the Art Deco skyline

Walk Into History

Vipul Kumar, 28, an assistant vicepresident at a foreign bank, is one such Mumbaikar who started rediscovering the city through heritage walks. "I am not new to this concept having done walking tours in London, Paris and Rome among other cities. Sometimes you visit a city, zip through its roads looking around, but you often miss the stories that have shaped it. Walking tours help you know more about the city and such stories," says Kumar who goes on heritage walks along with wife Megha Sood, an advertising professional.

"Almost every building of south Mumbai has a story to tell. Mumbai has a very big population of tourists and migrants who have made this city their own and walks like these will help them understand the culture, history and traditions," he adds.

Ranjit Shahani, country president, Novartis India, who has been a mentor to Kasliwal and his company, explains that such niche cultural tourism ventures will do well in tapping the huge wealth of heritage in India.

"While the entrepreneurs will have to build a strong network with hotels and travel agencies, history, local culture and tradition add a unique flavour to the tourism experience," he says.

Beyond Delhi and Mumbai, other Indian cities with a sense of history and heritage can also become destinations for such walks.

As Gérard Prinsen, executive tax director with Ernst & Young in Milan, Italy, who visited India for the first time earlier this year, puts it: "Walking through a city is a very immediate and intensive way of knowing the place, its people, the local flavour, sounds and smell. Much more than if you take a bus or taxi."

Prinsen went on a three-hour heritage walk with Raconteur Walks in Mumbai. And he was so happy with the experience that, at the end of his business trip, he booked himself into a second walk. Now you could call that talking the walk!

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