

# Learn at leisure

## Holiday-makers are taking an interest in learning tours in areas such as photography and painting

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Life List Chase's guide and wildlife photographer Cheng Shun Ling (above in black) taking photo enthusiasts and participants on a Borneo river tour. -- PHOTOS: KOREA TOURISM ORGANISATION, CHANKERK TEH, LIFE LIST CHASE



By Huang Huifen

For most people, a holiday is a chance to unwind. But for some, it is a journey of knowledge. Study trips, where travellers learn about anything from history to painting to a new language, are having their turn in the sun.

SundayLife! found at least seven organisations here and abroad conducting such learning tours. The tours are usually conducted by experts in archaeology, photography and painting, for example.

Prices range between \$700 and \$7,500 without airfare - much higher than regular all-

inclusive sightseeing packages offered by travel agents.

But this has not deterred travellers. Most tour operators say they do not have problems filling the four- to 20-person numbers for each group trip.

Those for whom life is not a beach, more a landscape of learning, include banker Tan L.Y., who packed more than just her bags on her first trip to India last month.

**She brought along hours of knowledge acquired poring over books and doing Internet research on the Ganges River. She was on a study trip covering Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India, and had to make a 20-minute presentation to 19 other tour participants.**

**Those on the trip, organised by non-profit organisation Friends of the Museums Singapore, also had to go through a reading list on the sites they will visit.**

**Mrs Tan, 50, said: "I was initially daunted to hear of a reading list and pre-tour meetings and presentations. But when I actually witnessed the evening and morning prayer rituals at the Ganges River, they became very meaningful as what I have learnt came alive in front of me."**

**She went with her 17-year-old daughter. They each paid \$4,000 for the nine-day Buddhist-themed tour which included airfare.**

Other study breaks on offer in Singapore include local art club My Art Space's painting trips to regional destinations including Bali and Cambodia, launched eight years ago.

Shutterbugs who want to pick up new skills for their craft can choose from trips offered by a handful of photographers and photography institutes such as Canon Imaging Academy, commercial travel photography firm Eyes On Asia and wildlife photography firm Life List Chase.

Fancy learning a new language? Last July, the Korea Tourism Organisation launched a seven-day Korean language programme involving K-pop and K-drama at a Seoul university.

Elsewhere, Peter Sommer Travels, a UK-based tour operator specialising in archaeologist-led tours to spots such as Turkey and Greece, has seen an increase in international clients in the last three years, including those from Singapore.

While the Singapore numbers make up just 1 per cent of the clientele, Mr Peter Sommer, owner of the 16-year-old tour company, says the share of clients from places other than the traditional markets of United Kingdom and United States now make up 30 per cent instead of 10 per cent three years ago. Most of these clients are from Australia. On the popularity of learning-focused tours, Ms Lisa Chua Puay Hoon, a senior hospitality and tourism management lecturer at Temasek Polytechnic, says this reflects a shift from mass tourism to niche products with more hands-on and experiential activities.

"Traditional mass attractions are losing their appeal and the travel industry must create new products in response to the increasingly sophisticated travelling public," she says.

While most mainstream travel agents have yet to offer such learning trips, Chan Brothers Travel uses trained Egyptologists who have studied at an archaeology faculty for four years to address complex queries from increasingly sophisticated travellers on its Egypt tours, says its spokesman Jane Chang.

Luxury cruise operator Silversea Cruises also has what it calls a "Silver Perspectives Enrichment Programme" on its voyages where guests can attend lectures by experts such as journalists and academics on the politics and history of a cruise destination, or

learn cooking from the cruise's culinary director for free.

**For Mrs Tan's India trip with the Friends of the Museums organisation, the trip was led by Ms Abha Dayal Kaul, 51, the organisation's council member and museum docent (guide) at the Asian Civilisations Museum with a strong interest in Buddhist and Indian arts and heritage.**

**Thanks to Ms Kaul's network of contacts in India, the group got to view sacred Buddha relics stored in a room at the Patna Museum in northern state of Bihar. She says that normally, it could be difficult for a visitor to get access to the room in the small-town museum.**

**The organisation has been conducting study tours in Asia since 1979. These tours, held five to seven times a year, are conducted by members with a deep interest and knowledge of the history and culture of the destination. Participants must attend pre-trip meetings and present research on the country they visit. During the trip, they often get to explore museums with the directors themselves, meet well-known historians and dine at the homes of locals.** At My Art Space's painting trips, meanwhile, owner Chankerk Teh, 45, guides participants on interpreting the scene and use of techniques during daily three-hour painting sessions in places such as Bali.

For photography trips, participants are helped in developing an eye for images and in other technical aspects such as composition and lighting.

Photography enthusiast Stanley Yeo, 43, says he picked up many useful tips during a photography expedition to Hokkaido last year with Life List Chase, a two-year-old firm run by wildlife photographers Cheng Shun Ling and Ethan Lim, both 28.

Mr Yeo, who runs several food and beverage outlets here, was the only participant on the 10-day trip where he got to snap Japanese cranes, snow monkeys, sika deer and other wildlife. He paid about \$7,500 for the land package.

"I was guided on how to compose my photographs, especially in a bright background of snow, as well as to find a good spot among 80 other photographers to capture a shot of the cranes at a crane centre," he says. "Shun Ling and Ethan also taught me how to enhance my images using Photoshop during the daily review sessions."

He adds: "It is a very different experience from a run-of-the-mill holiday because you get to be with like-minded people practising and talking photography all day long."

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## **Background story**

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**MRS TAN L.Y. on her study trip to India**