

What is a Study Tour?

By Helen Cannon-Brookes

A Study Tour is a learning experience, not just a holiday. You will learn about the destination before you embark, and when you reach the destination, you will learn even more.

What will I gain from a Study Tour?

You will become a travel sleuth. During a series of pre-tour meetings that are a required component of Study Tours, each participant presents a short talk on a subject relevant to the tour. These presentations, which are also made available in soft copy, establish focus and enable the participants to develop a shared base of knowledge. Is Borobudur really an enormous mandala? What does it mean that the Dalai Lama is a reincarnation? What are the Kathakali dances of Kerala? Was the Silk Road more than a trade route? Has Nagasaki recovered from the Atomic Bomb? What is a *hamam*?

In addition to providing in-depth information about the culture, history and politics of the destination, pre-tour meetings allow participants to get to know each other and to choose roommates. (Single rooms may be available on some Study Tours.) Women usually make up the majority of the group but men are very welcome. In fact, each Ladakh tour had four male participants, and five men have registered for the April tour to the Lesser Sunda Islands.

Homework done, friendships made and ready to go. Where?

Study Tours have ventured to distant Asian destinations such as the Silk Road, Rajasthan, Egypt and Oman. Closer to home, Kyushu, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Java all offer different experiences. Remote destinations like Tibet, Ladakh and Sikkim need expert planning, and Bhutan never fails to inspire. Do you want to see backstage Angkor, sail the backwaters of Kerala, ride a camel at Dunhuang after exploring the Mogao Caves, bathe in an onsen or bargain for ikats and batiks in Indonesia? The choice of destinations is wide.

Some lucky people have time, money and no family or job commitments. For those who are less free, there are shorter tours of one to four days to nearby destinations such as Malacca, Jakarta, Penang or Medan. These tours also include study components, so even briefer journeys provide valuable insights into other cultures.

Why join an FOM Study Tour?

The Tour Leader is usually an FOM volunteer with experience travelling or living in the selected destination. Thanks to the industriousness of the tour leaders, contacts made possible through the museums and input from other knowledgeable FOM members, Study Tour itineraries



Tour leaders Helen Cannon-Brookes and Sue Ellen Kelso outside the Governor's Residence in Gangtok

Photo by Margaret White

include special events and activities that commercial tour companies simply cannot provide. For instance, in developing the Sikkim tour, which took place last November, we arranged to visit a private Lepcha museum. I discovered the museum's founder, Sonam Tshering, on the internet because he had received an award from the Indian

"As you walk, and eat and travel, be wherever you are, otherwise you will miss most of your life." The Buddha

government for his services to the Lepcha community. He lives in Kalimpong and so I set about finding his phone number. He does not speak any English but I was already on email terms with our guides. In the end, our two guides climbed down a steep mountain for half an hour in the dark to meet with old Mr Tshering at his village home to arrange what time he would climb the mountain and open up for us the next day. I also arranged to visit Gandhi Ashram, a school for desperately poor children. All students learn the violin and the Senior Jesuit head master suggested

putting on a concert especially for our group. Indian friends advised me that a substantial donation would be expected, but with 16 group members, a suitable donation was not a problem. The concert was spellbinding; 28 violinists and three cellists played rousing Western classical music and never missed a beat even when the electricity failed and they could not see their music! It was an experience that I will remember for the rest of my life. On the other end of

the social scale, we were invited to tea with the Maharaja and Maharani of Burdwan at their palace in Darjeeling. The Maharani is a friend of a friend of a friend of mine! I wrote letters asking for permission to visit the Palace, hoping that the Maharani would show us around. The result was that they invited us to tea and also extended invitations to long-term VIP residents of Darjeeling whom they thought we would enjoy meeting. Watching Kanchenjunga turn pink at sunset from the Maharaja's living room while servants offered us tea and Indian delicacies was magical!

As co-organiser of the Ladakh Study Tour, I was able to arrange a memorable evening of dance in the hotel garden with a backdrop of snow-capped mountains. Because the dancers performed just for us, afterwards we could examine their costumes and heirloom jewellery and handle the Ladakh headdress called the *perak*. We also visited a remote village famous for its metalwork and observed a 90-year-old goldsmith in his workshop. The director of the Snow Leopard Conservancy and his assistant came to lunch and explained how they are trying to help villagers benefit from snow leopard home-stay tourism, rather than shooting these endangered animals. They brought a DVD, which we watched together at our hotel.

No question that Study Tours offer unique experiences, and usually at an excellent value, too, thanks in large part to the time and energy that Study Tour leaders devote to the planning process.

Is change inevitable?

The time for visiting unspoilt regions is running out. It is unreasonable to want to preserve less developed countries as quaint anachronisms and expect the people to continue to follow a medieval way of life because that is

what we want to see. Travellers may want remote villages, but remote villagers want roads and electricity. New hotels and restaurants and enormous numbers of visitors strain and sometimes overwhelm already fragile infrastructures. Now that Tibet is accessible by train, for example, it is being swamped with tourists.

FOM encourages responsible travel.

FOM tour leaders seek to discover still-unspoilt cultural destinations and hope to keep them that way. Local arts and crafts provide a livelihood for many poor people and tourism boosts these traditional economies. Our credo: dress modestly; ask permission before photographing; assimilate a scene's beauty into the memory, not the memory card; and don't hand out sweets and pens, a demeaning holdover of an old-style tourism.

I like to travel to unfamiliar destinations. I try to keep an open mind, to remain receptive to the history and culture that hides around every corner and to banish preconceptions. I have benefited from the Study Tour experience, not just through the knowledge I have acquired about people and places that could not be found in any library, but by sharing adventures and discoveries with like-minded members. Instead of bringing home souvenirs, I try to bring back life-enhancing thoughts so that I can internalise the travel experience and gain an intellectual perspective on this wonderful world we live in.

Helen Cannon-Brookes has lived and travelled extensively throughout Asia Pacific since 1980. Her passionate interest in Buddhism and Himalayan culture has led to 11 visits to the Himalayas, from west to east. She has taken part in 18 FOM Study Tours and co-led the tours to Ladakh and Sikkim. She is a keen photographer wherever she travels.



Dancers wearing the perak, the Turquoise Headdress of Ladakh
Photo by Helen Cannon-Brookes