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Tour-Guiding Lights

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Historians-researchers-professors all roped up into one, these tour guides, suggested by the BTAP team, package their experiences in unique, entertaining and always-educational ways.

Who hasn't, at one time or another, remembered being bored to tears by a tour guide droning on endlessly with facts and figures that did nothing to stir the imagination about the destination? Fortunately, there's a band of men and women who have made it their lives' mission not only to educate, but also to enthrall visitors with accounts of a city, a country, a culture told with such passion and love that we fall under the spell of their story telling. We've found some of them for you to experience.

BEIJING

SHOWING THE BEST

When Tony Chen travelled to New Zealand to study tourism at Christchurch Polytechnic in 2005, the young Beijing native was surprised to discover retired New Zealanders offering free tours of the old cathedral area. "They would take people to the cathedral and point out interesting things along the way," he recalls.

The former travel guide wondered why there was nothing like this in Beijing, despite the city being the former imperial capital and a treasure trove of imperial sites, old temples and charming courtyard houses along old hutongs, or narrow alleyways.

"I looked around and saw everyone was doing the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace and the Great Wall," he says. There were some people doing tours around the hutongs, but they were plying the same alleys and from the seat of a fast-moving rickshaw."

He soon began exploring little-known hutongs, jotting down notes and linking the more interesting ones into walks. In May last year, he felt ready to launch his own company, called Stretch-A-Leg. He set up a website, distributed flyers in areas foreigners gathered and placed small classified ads in local expat magazines. The biggest boost came from foreign residents in Beijing, who enjoyed his walks and passed his name along. Word of mouth helped give the small company steady business.

TOUR MENU: One of the keys to his success is that he focuses on individualised, off-the-beaten-track explorations for small groups. He says: "I just do my best to try to find out what people are here for, and focus on that. I try to offer visitors a unique and personal experience."

THE EXPERIENCE: Head down a hutong or up a mountain trail with Tony and you'll find yourself being guided past a carved archway, a small Muslim shop selling traditional snacks or a farmer's front yard. He'll stop an itinerant vendor to buy something, allowing you to ask a few questions, and maybe even take a photo or two. He'll guide you into the courtyard house of a man who has raised crickets for decades and take time to decipher a classical expression on an old door, or explain the symbolism of a pomegranate design on a house.

Equally important, he has a deep and genuine interest in Chinese history, and a sweet humility, a hangover from his earlier days as a doorman and bell hop at the China World Hotel. "You have to realise what you don't know and then you have to learn about it," he says.

Surprisingly, Tony credits his foreign clients for dramatically changing his perspective on China. "When I started to work as a guide, I wondered how come the visitors knew more than I did," he says, adding that books in China often fail to provide a complete description of events. "There are a lot of things they don't tell you in Chinese history books," he says.

Asked if he ever gets tired of exploring the same hutongs and mountain paths, he shakes his head smiling, explaining that "people are always different". He says: "To some extent, a lot of my education comes from the visitors – it's a constant learning process. The challenge is to make things work, and to show other people the best of my country."

Paul J Mooney

CAIRNS

ROCK ARTIST

Willie Gordon, an elder of the Nugal-warra clan, part of the Yimithirr tribe within the Australian Aboriginal minority, is a renowned author and lecturer. A former city-dwelling boilermaker, he's involved part-time running programmes boosting Aboriginal self-esteem. Many visitors to North Queensland's resort area of Cairns and the Great Barrier Reef add World Heritage-listed Daintree Rainforest and the town just to its north, Cooktown to their activities.

TOUR MENU: Rainbow Serpent Tour (mornings, five hours); Great Emu Tour (afternoons, three hours). Morning tours visit six sites of traditional rock art paintings and include tame 30-minute wilderness rambles.

THE EXPERIENCE: Grandfatherly Gordon told me he assumes people have read guidebooks or scoured the web. His strength: myths, legends and facts related in so entertaining a way that his fame has spread across Australia. Boundless enthusiasm for his subject is instantly obvious.

On a morning tour, he drove us to a spot 40 minutes north of Cooktown, toward a modern-day Aboriginal settlement called Hope Vale. He turned onto a bush track before Hope Vale. Claspng Aboriginal-motif walking sticks, we strolled down mysterious trails over open countryside. High points overlooked vistas of pristine rainforest. Dramatic outcrops of giant rocks were haphazardly strewn as if by some heavenly hand. Six overhangs, creating small caves, were stops along the way.

At each, rock art chronicled Aboriginal myths and spiritual beliefs with depictions of family members or illustrations of stories passed down through centuries. Gordon was ready with tales explaining what we saw. Some art is thousands of years old – though none of these are among Australia's oldest, dating back 40,000 years.

Others, relatively recent, were painted within the past century. Gordon believes his grandfather, who lived nearby, may well have painted some. A few incorporate Yirmbal, the rainbow serpent. One overhang, called the "birthing cave", was where women in pre-colonial times isolated themselves from their community for several weeks before and after a birth – attended only by other women. Male presence was considered taboo.

Gordon stopped to pluck twigs and told us about plant medicinal or nutritional properties. Leaves from one were rubbed between fingers until juices created a thick lather. "Old-fashioned Aboriginal soap," he explains. His stories were mostly told to him by his father Tulo, an artist with works hanging in galleries in Cooktown and Cairns. "Each tale aims to impart a little knowledge of Aboriginal culture. I send people home thinking they've had enormous fun, but they've also learned something."

Chris Pritchard

HONGKONG

LECTURES ALFRESCO

Jason Wordie is a Hongkong-based historian and author. He has written four books documenting the history of Hongkong and Macau, the most recent being *Streets: Exploring Kowloon*. He also contributes regularly to the South China Morning Post on local history, culture and society and has been conducting historical walking tours in Hongkong and Macau for six years. Currently, the 40-year-old Australian is devoting his time to his PhD in History at the University of Hongkong.

TOUR MENU: Choose between Macau or one of Hongkong's districts (out of the 12 in the programme) for a three-hour wander, which challenges urban preconceptions, ferreting colourful facts and hidden historical interest. Be advised: those who join these "open-air lectures" (as Jason describes them) are required to "switch their brain on" since they will be called upon to participate in this learning experience.

THE EXPERIENCE: Having just moved to Causeway Bay, I wanted to know more about my neighbourhood, and thus,

chose that specific tour.

One weekday, I arranged to meet Jason at Sogo at 9am and was there on the dot. Twenty minutes later, he still had not shown up, but a young man in a floral shirt and jeans carrying a knapsack was loitering about. It turned out to be Jason. When I told him that I was expecting an older man in a tweed coat clutching a book, he immediately laughed. From then on, he remained chatty and affable, dispelling the myth of a serious historian.

He begun by saying that most of Hongkong's historical secrets were reflected in its street names. Using Sugar Street as an example, he revealed how a sugar refinery mill, belonging to British traders, Jardine, Matheson and Co., stood there in 1905. A fluent Cantonese speaker, Jason revealed that Yee Wo Street means Jardine in the language. To illustrate his anecdotes, he brought vintage images of the locations under discussion in a clear folder, allowing guests to compare then and now scenarios. Causeway Bay derived its monicker from the causeway across the shallows between east and north points. The Hongkong Central Library used to be a pond and Victoria Park (a reclaimed area) came into being only in the 1950s.

As we sauntered along and reached more historical landmarks like temples, schools and churches, each of these elicited an "a-hah" moment for me and like a proud teacher, Jason seemed pleased to be part of this learning process, especially in reshaping the myth that Hongkong is all about shopping and commerce. Discovering a city has never been so enlightening and fun, it reminded me of going on a field trip with a favourite lecturer.

Lucinda Law

MANILA

TREASURING TRADITION

Tina Decal is the woman responsible for Kulinarya Tagala, a culinary tour of the Southern Tagalog provinces of Laguna and Quezon. She grew up in Sariaya, Quezon, moving only to Manila in her university years. She returned to her hometown in 1993, and until 1999, was managing a resort. Torn between the demands of caring for her family in Manila and her passion for sharing Quezon's unique culture with visitors, she found a happy medium in 2003, offering Viaje del Sol, the first Southern Tagalog culinary experience. She believes food is the perfect bait to lure people into her province and introduce them to the rich traditions she grew up with.

TOUR MENU: Under Tina's direction, small entrepreneurs in Laguna and Quezon organised themselves to promote their inns, cafés and gallery studios more effectively, and make it easier for tourists to discover them. But Tina took the initiative further by providing a local perspective. Having grown up in the area, she is well poised to share historical tidbits and personal anecdotes.

THE EXPERIENCE: Viaje del Sol is a one-of-a-kind tour that allows participants not only to taste what the province has to offer, but to relate intimately with its colourful residents.

Promptly at 7am on any given day, Tina personally picks up guests from their Manila hotel. Armed only with her enthusiasm and a megaphone, she is able to rouse anyone suffering from early morning lethargy.

The tour kicked off with a cup of rice coffee and breakfast at Manga't Suman at the home of brass sculptor Carlito Ortega. His lovely abode was ensconced in a sprawling three-hectare property, inspired by a plantation in the American South and featured a garden overflowing with rare plants and sculptures. A treat followed with Carlito inviting guests into his workshop to see his latest creations. This cheerful and friendly artist even allowed guests to wield a welding torch on his own pieces!

Lunch was at Kusina Salud of fashion designer and advocate of Filipino indigenous materials, Patis Tesoro. Her home, garden and aviary were the setting of a provincial café, offering authentic Filipino dishes using locally available ingredients and prepared by her son-in-law, California-trained chef Paul Poblador. The Ensaladang Pako (fern salad) and Seafood Kare-Kare (seafood in a peanut and ground rice stew) were best sellers. Chef Paul demonstrated for tour participants his take on the fern dish.

The highlight of the day was the Lambanog Tagayan, which took place in one of Sariaya Town's ancestral homes. This was a rare opportunity to enter a 1920s dwelling. It was made even more special meeting its owners and experiencing an age-old social custom with them. Tina led the group in drinking lambanog (spirits made from fermented coconut), paying homage to an elegant past.

Last stop was potter Ugu Bigyan's garden in Tiaong, Quezon. Tina had twisted Ugu's arm to demonstrate how he prepared his signature dish, Kulawo, a salad of banana blossom in coconut milk the way the barrio folk do. Guests milled around the artist's garden and cluster of nipa huts, purchased his unique pottery ware and proceeded to indulge

in the most memorable high tea of Pancit Habhab (stir fried noodles, the local way), Guinataan (chewy ground rice patties in sweet coconut milk) and Kulawo, all served on Ugu's handmade plates.

Maida C Pineda

NEW DELHI

TRIVIA QUEEN

Beeba Sobti wears her name like a warm, snug sock. It's a Punjabi endearment meaning diminutive, and Beeba, all of five foot nothing, is possessed of an ageless Peter Pan-like ability to flit, fly, bully and bend the laws of time. She bristles with electricity, stories and excitement spilling and sparkling, black eyes impelling you backwards into the past.

She's walked heads of state and their jittery bodyguards through the lanes of Chandni Chowk, escorted incognito Hollywood celebs through Mughal memories, and guided scholarly Ivy-League fogies, delegations and diplomats, besides her faithful following of history-loving Dilli-wallahs. She's a historian, research scholar and school teacher besides being the city's most sought-after tour guide.

TOUR MENU: More often than not, her walks are organic, taking form according to the propensities and interests of the group. Which is why she likes a group to give her at least three months notice to allow her time to ferret out the unique stories and experiences that are her trademark.

The group size for a customised walk can vary from one to 15, ideally no bigger, because she doesn't use a megaphone. She's done scores of walks from the conservative to the quirky – festival walks, era walks, church walks, mosque walks, spice walks, river walks, jewellery and silk walks, fragrance walks, Ramadan food walks that are done at night and dawn when the fasts are broken or begun, and even hydraulic walks about Mughal reservoirs.

THE EXPERIENCE: The reason she's so much in demand is that her walks are crowded with eager ghosts jostling to tell their stories. The Begum who bribed the local local pir (a Sufi saint), the eunuch who poisoned the baoli (step-well), the Emperor's raunchy harem games, the smells, trees, clothes, medicaments and beauty routines of long ago. She's not above a few theatrics – breaking into a sher (an Urdu sonnet) or dressing up as a courtesan to explain to a delegation of hypnotised Pakistani ladies, the significance of each item of adornment, the symbolism of their motifs.

She cleverly uses food and flavours to recreate an era. Walkers on a Colonial Delhi tour would be out at dawn in the very English Lady Willingdon Park, with chota hazri (little breakfast) served up just the way it was for the burra sahibs. After a few hours of walking through churches, graveyards and imperial edifices and indulging sahib-like in a spot of sketching and birding, it was time for bada hazri – a big English breakfast with bacon and scrambled eggs, all before the heat of the day set in.

Food walks in the Old Walled City of Shehjahabad trace the street-food bazaars of a time when nobody cooked at home because that was a job best left to the experts. Walkers get to taste the subtleties and refinement of the Mughal palate and the fried, spicy chaat snacks of the commoners, while Beeba opens up to them a world of fascinating facts about what they are eating. The old restaurateurs, whose families have been doing this for generations, will nod in agreement, chipping in with yet more hoary anecdotes and culinary wisdom.

Beeba fleshes out the dry skeletons of history with delicious trivia, and fills out the contours of local culture with real experiences carefully created. She likens her guiding to a dance performance where she must somehow lock her walkers into a spell cast by the pace, drama, space, sights and taste of the walk. She does this because she passionately believes that history is so exciting that it must be revisited and savoured, all the better to understand that it's a continuous thread that connects the present to the past and the future.

All you need to bring is a love of history and a pair of comfortable shoes.

Bharati Motwani

SHANGHAI

AN EYE FOR ARCHITECTURE

Spencer Dodington, 39, is a Texas-born architect who has lived in Shanghai for nine years. He first came to Shanghai

to work in finance, then fell in love with the city's historic buildings, began to collect antiques and eventually earned a degree in architecture. He renovates old properties and gives city tours through his company SDJH Shanghai.

TOUR MENU: A tour with Spencer is more than just a "see this see that" experience. He knows history, architecture, antiques and Shanghai, and, astonishingly, he can speak Shanghainese. Most tours start on the Bund, but no two are alike. A Spencer Dodington tour has twists and turns and surprises; it is an exploration, not a programme. ?

While he admires the Bund, Spencer's heart is in the old concession areas, with their dramatic apartments, unique lane houses, Art Deco classics and whimsical, one-of-a-kind mansions.

"One of the areas I take people to on tours, is the western end of Fuxing Road, between Ulumuqi and Huashan Roads," he said. "It has some really fantastic Art Deco and Moderne townhouses, and some old, huge English Tudor mansions, also a bunch of California-style Moorish revival homes. It can give a walker a full-on appreciation for the multitude of styles of the 1920s and '30s; it's Shanghai architecture in miniature, on just that one stretch."

THE EXPERIENCE: We started our tour on the Bund, as boats honked and jostled on the Huangpu River, and a sea of humanity, mostly Chinese tourists from the provinces, ebbed and flowed around us. Spencer described the famous cityscape: the heavy, ponderous Bund buildings are backward looking and historicist, he said. They were built from imported materials, and were meant to impress. Some are leaning; he pointed those out, explained the building process, and why they are sinking (the weight of the buildings, the lack of further alluvial deposits, and the draining of the groundwater).

But not all the Bund buildings are backward-looking: he directed our gaze to the Peace Hotel. That, he said, was the first modern building on the Bund, an Art Deco landmark, with its simplified lines, linear elements, and lack of columns. He pointed to the famous pyramidal top, which is decorated by a pair of panthers: Egyptian designs were popular in 1929, following the discovery of King Tut in 1922.

The details come quickly; here's one more: the hotel was hit by errant Nationalist bombs in the 1930s, and the current renovators have some serious structural work to do.

We walked across the famous "iron bridge" over Suzhou creek, viewed a few more sights, then took cabs to the French Concession. After stopping for streetside xiao long bao, we strolled along Shaoxing Road. This is the land of lane houses, those unique Shanghai structures that effortlessly blend East and West. We walked down one lane after another, including one that Spencer has never viewed before.

At the end of it, just by chance, was a classic old 1930s apartment building. At the end of the tour, he asked if we wanted to see more – he was ready to go as long as we wanted.

Brent Hannon

TOKYO

THE EDO EXPERT

Mr Oka is one of Tokyo's best-kept secrets. After years spent escorting Japanese tourists abroad, this smartly dressed professional guide retired and returned to Tokyo. Eager to use his English and share a passion for Edo history, he began a series of walking tours, helping hundreds of visitors uncover the gems of the city.

TOUR MENU: His website lists 14 walks. The two introductory tours are perfect for those short on time, visiting major sights such as Meiji shrine, Asakusa Kannon Temple and the Imperial Palace. For the more adventurous, his "local tours" cover areas that go unnoticed by even the most regular of visitors.

THE EXPERIENCE: We met under the red tori gate at Nogi shrine and, after the requisite bows and introductions, jumped on the metro at Nogizaka station. Within minutes, we were discussing his life in Japan. Coy about his exact age, "it is not always the Japanese way to answer a direct question with a direct answer," he says with a twinkly smile, happy to reveal that he lived through WWII but was not quite old enough to fight.

Despite his indeterminate number of years, we walked at a smart pace, passing the Imperial Palace to arrive at the nearby Chidorigafuchi, the resting place for the remains of unknown Japanese soldiers. As we approached the austere shrine surrounded by chrysanthemums, I received a fascinating potted history of the Edo period, from the shogun era with its stratified caste system to the Meiji restoration.

As well as a history buff, Mr Oka is a treasure trove of cultural information. Strolling beside the moat that surrounded

the Imperial Palace, I learned why so many cherry blossom trees were planted nearby ("they console the spirits"), and that every year at the Bon Festival families welcome back the spirits of their ancestors with food, drink and entertainment, and that Japan is still based on the rice growing culture.

Rummaging in his wallet, he produced a five yen coin and pointed to the bent blade of rice depicted there. "Like the Japanese, it is ripe but it humbly bends," he explains.

After a short tea break, we were off again, and soon found ourselves at the soaring torii of Yasukuni shrine, controversial because inside are enshrined the souls of a small number of war criminals. Finally, we arrived at the busy intersection of Kojimachi, where Mr Oka pointed out a lighthouse, not as strange as it sounded when I learned that just metres from where we were standing used to be underwater.

It was the end of my four-hour tour and just as we were about to descend back into the metro, Mr Oka pointed to an otherwise unintelligible sign. It revealed that on this very spot Tokyo University was first founded. Tokyo is a metropolis filled with myriad stories. It takes someone like Mr Oka to bring them to light.

Kate Graham

WELLINGTON

MAD ABOUT THE CITY

The weather forecast called for scattered heavy rainshowers and overcast skies in New Zealand's capital Wellington. The prospect of a city tour on a dreary winter morning could dampen anyone's enthusiasm to explore the place. Unless the tour guide is jolly Jennifer Looman.

"Hello!" chirps Jennifer, director of Wild About Wellington, a city-tour boutique operation that provides personal guided expeditions into the crafty nooks of Wellington. The sunny disposition is genuine. Jennifer, 43, was determined to lift my spirits.

"Every morning I wake up and think, 'who is going to enjoy Wellington with me today?'" says the perky mother of two, who spent 20 years of her professional life working in the IT industry before switching to tourism.

What's most striking about Jennifer is her passion. Her unique tours are a reflection of her zest for life. She loves shopping, dining in vibrant settings, exploring art galleries, socialising, sharing a cuppa or bar hopping, and she's mad about Wellington.

TOUR MENU: Established in 2005 on a shoestring budget, Wild About Wellington targets individual travellers or small groups (maximum six persons per tour) to enhance their holiday experience. Jennifer is a storyteller. She takes her guests for a stroll, peppering conversations with anecdotes visitors won't find in guidebooks.

"We do seem to attract clients who want a personalised approach, an intelligent insight into the city and a large amount of flexibility in their experience," she observes. Whether guests arrive with a backpack or by private helicopter, she proudly shows off her city through her self-designed tours, which highlight beer-tasting sessions, browsing for hand-crafted items and chocolate sampling.

THE EXPERIENCE: The City of Style is a pleasant walking tour that introduced me to Wellington's cosmopolitan side, primarily showcasing fashion, organic skincare oils and accessories created by some of the city's top innovators and artisans.

I met Jennifer's favourite jeweller, Ian Douglas of The Village Goldsmith, whose exquisitely designed pieces are so luxurious that retailers from the most exclusive corners of the world are said to stalk him. The soft-spoken Douglas even allowed me to try on a necklace and a ring that are worth thousands of dollars.

"Often these products are made right in front of our eyes, then sold to private clients in New York, or wing their way to Dubai," Jennifer beams.

Debbie R Coloma

TOUR GUIDES

**BEIJING
TONY CHEN**

THE DETAILS: US\$40 for a group of five for a two- to three-hour tour.

CONTACT: Stretch-A-Leg, tel 86 10 6711 4088, mobile phone 86 13601 094588, www.stretchaleg.com

**CAIRNS
WILLIE GORDON**

THE DETAILS: Gordon picks up and drops off from Cooktown resorts and motels. Morning tours cost US\$98.90 per person; afternoons are US\$77.40 for a maximum of 20. If numbers booked are small, a four-wheel drive is used; if more, it's a bus.

CONTACT: Guurrbi Tours, tel 61 7 4069 6529, www.guurrbitours.com

**HONGKONG
JASON WORDIE**

THE DETAILS: US\$35 per person with a minimum of 10 people in a group. Participants receive comprehensive notes.

CONTACT: email info@jasonwalks.com

**MANILA/QUEZON PROVINCE
TINA DECAL**

THE DETAILS: US\$43.20 including transportation to and from Manila for a minimum of 10 participants.

CONTACT: tel 63 2 728 8234, mobile phone 63 927 563 0989

**NEW DELHI
BEEBA SOBTI**

THE DETAILS: Prices are subject to specific arrangements.

CONTACT: tel 91 11 2689 7651, mobile phone 91 98 10126383, email dr_poonam_bhasin@yahoo.com

**SHANGHAI
SPENCER DODINGTON**

THE DETAILS: US\$26.65 per person for a half-day tour.

CONTACT: tel 86 13501662908, www.luxuryconcierge.com

**TOKYO
MR OKA**

THE DETAILS: US\$138.66 for the day, with up to 10 participants.

CONTACT: www.homested.com/mroka

**WELLINGTON
JENNIFER LOOMAN**

THE DETAILS: Beer tours are US\$77.56 and US\$113 per person for two and three hours respectively; shopping tours are US\$88.64 per person and chocolate tours are US\$62.78 per person.

CONTACT: tel 64 2 7441 9010, www.wildaboutwellington.co.nz

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