

CULTURED TRAVELER: LIFESTYLE TOURS; Locals Who Will Open Doors and Minds

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IT was only after eating flaming sausages at Tasca el Corral and fried sardines at La Plata that we got down to the business of nibbling pig's lips at Bar Celta, a brightly lighted, blue-painted wood tapas bar in Barcelona that specializes in Galician cuisine.

This was our fourth stop on an adventurous four-person culinary tour of the city's Gothic quarter. A friendly waiter swiftly dropped two plates on the counter: one filled with pimientos de Padrón (fried salted green peppers), the other with fried pig snout, which, truth be told, looked and tasted like pork rinds, although harder and crunchier.

"By Galician standards these are a drinking snack, like crisps and peanuts," explained one of my guides, as we chased the food down with a ceramic bowl full of Ribeira white wine.

Who knew? I probably wouldn't have if it wasn't for this tapas crawl dreamed up by Saboroso, a small tour company started two years ago by two English journalists specializing in food and travel, Tara Stevens and Kirsten Foster. Tours, (34) 667-770-492, www.saboroso.com are 95 euros (\$118 at \$1.24 to the euro) a person including food and drink.

Saboroso's tapas tour is an example of a "lifestyle tour" -- a relatively new trend found primarily in Europe's major cities. While you might get a history lesson or two, for the most part the tours, which are designed for a specific group, couple or even a single tourist, are meant to connect travelers to a city's immediate buzz, whether through food, shops, artist's studios or a stroll through a developing neighborhood.

One of the early pioneers of this trend is a self-styled "lifestyle guru" named Tobias Moss of Karma Kabs, (44-208) 9640700, www.karmakabs.com, in London. Six years ago he brought in some Ambassador cars from India and had friends decorate the interiors with sari fabrics, disco balls and plastic flowers. He and his drivers are now

well-known London characters and on a first-name basis with some of the city's most famous artists, nightclub owners and restaurateurs. For £60 an hour (\$109 at \$1.81 to the pound), up to four visitors can cruise around the city with Mr. Moss or one of his crew.

"I don't have a set thing," Mr. Moss said. "I'm very spontaneous. It depends on how long they've got. I might take them to the club Sketch -- the owner is my partner -- because by day it's a gallery. Or we might go down Brick Lane and see the ethnicity. I just hang out with them, and if the people are cool I can get them into anyplace that they normally couldn't get in."

Some of Karma Kab's recent cool customers have included Kate Moss, Emma Thompson, Oliver Stone and Scarlett Johansson. "She used us a few times while she was filming a Woody Allen movie here," said Sacha Vitorovich, a driver and one of Mr. Moss's three partners (the other two are Mourad Mazouz, the personality behind the clubs Momo and Sketch, and Tom Conran, son of Sir Terence Conran). A poet and artist from Serbia, Mr. Vitorovich said that in the seven years he's been driving Karma Kabs, he's never taken the same route. "It's always a different adventure," he described. "It's the journey that matters, not the destination."

Henrik Tidefjard, founder of Berlinagenten, (49-30) 437-20701, www.berlinagenten.com, in Berlin, said, "It's like fashion. People today want their trips to be more individualized. They are looking for new limits."

He said Europe's low-cost airlines were helping to drive this trend. "People are now traveling an average of two or three days to a new destination," he said. "I think of myself: I'll take a low-cost flight, and it doesn't really matter where I sleep. I'd rather spend my money on food, shopping and experiences. That's why I'm doing this business. So I can reduce the amount of time people spend finding the best shopping area and the best restaurant so you don't need to stand there on the street saying, 'Oh no, where should we eat?' "

As with Saboroso, Mr. Tidefjard's signature tour is food-focused. He takes clients on what he calls a Gastro-Rallye of the trendy Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg neighborhoods of Berlin. Clients choose a four- or five-course meal (the five-course Gastro-Rallye is 109 euros a person), with each course taken at a different international restaurant. "At the same time you are having a culinary experience, you are experiencing the neighborhood and its small secrets and how people are living," Mr. Tidefjard said. "It's interactive and social. You are always on the move and wondering, 'What's the next stop? What are we going to eat next?' "

Monica Summerville, an American film editor in her mid-30's who lives in London, hired Warsaw Trip, (48-509) 538-450, www.warsawtrip.pl, for a recent weekend trip to Warsaw with her boyfriend (an average tour is 90 euros a person for a half day, including transportation). "It really felt like we were meeting with friends," she said.

"When you only have a weekend you really want to come away with a sense of place," she continued. "They spent a lot of time with me on e-mail before we arrived, asking what we were interested in. My mother is Polish, and I mentioned to them specific dishes I remember that she used to make. They made an effort to find restaurants that made those foods. They took us into places where we would never have gone on our own like a bookshop cafe and a Russian market. I find that when you walk in somewhere with a native speaker you get treated better."

By day, Agnieszka Wojtowicz, a co-founder of Warsaw Trip, works in public relations and marketing. She said that she and her partner, Wojtek Blaszczyk, had played host to so many visiting friends over the years that they eventually realized that there could be a market for individualized tours. "We have a lot of connections here and know how to get to the places that are not known even to the inhabitants of this city," she said. "Warsaw is not so easy to access. It's a strange metropolis with a strange history. For a foreigner without people to take care of him, he won't see so much, really. He might see the touristic spots but he won't get any deeper."

Cities like Amsterdam, where English is widely spoken, might be easier than Warsaw to navigate but it still helps to know a charismatic local. Mandy Mooren, one of the three founders of Like-a-Local, (31-206) 702483, www.like-a-local.com, in Amsterdam, would agree (tours are 18 euros a person for a dinner to 21 euros for a two-hour shopping tour). Last year she and her partners started connecting travelers with Amsterdam locals through a variety of specialized tours, like shopping with Sabine, a shopaholic flight attendant from Amsterdam, or drawing with two Dutch artists, or having home-cooked meals in Amsterdam. They have added tours in other Dutch cities as well as Barcelona, Madrid and Lisbon and plan to add more locations soon.

"Our first goal was to find out if the concept worked," Ms. Mooren said. "And we now know it does. When we started a year ago, we had on average one request per week. Now we have at least one to two a day. The travelers that book with us are as enthusiastic about the experience as our 'locals.' "

Laurie Bunn, a 59-year-old American from Clearwater, Fla., and several friends signed up for a home-cooked dinner with Like-a-Local. "It was the highlight of the whole two weeks we were visiting the Netherlands and Belgium," she said. "I like to

travel to Europe and see the things that tourists normally see, but I like to go beyond that to see how people live.

"It was an experience just going up those narrow steps to our host's apartment," she continued. "There were seven of us from all over the United States, and they made us all feel at home. We had a wonderful dinner, and we all sat around and talked and talked. I'd do it again in a flash."

FOR THOSE WHO GO, THOSE WHO KNOW

Here are some other lifestyle tours available abroad and at home.

EUROPE

InTouch Travel connects clients with hosts in several European countries; 866-396-5102, www.intouchtravel.com; two-night stays including meals and hotel start at \$3,200 for two.

COPENHAGEN

CPH: Cool is a new company that offers shopping, cafe and modern-architecture tours; (45) 2695-5474; www.cphcool.dk; 200 kroner (about \$32 at 6.3 kroner to the dollar) for two hours.

PARIS

Chic Shopping Paris, offers insider shopping tours; (33-6) 14.56.23.11; www.chicshoppingparis.com; from 100 euros (\$124 at \$1.24 to the euro) a person for four hours.

BARCELONA

Coolhunter, offered through the Hotel Arts, can arrange a ride with a Formula One driver, help find fashion deals or set up a cooking lesson with a Michelin star chef; (34-93) 221-1000; www.hotelartsbarcelona.com; 325 euros for a half day.

MELBOURNE

Shopping Secrets offers a tour of Melbourne's best insider shops; (61-3) 9670-8740; www.hiddensecretstours.com; 70 Australian dollars (\$54 U.S. at 1.39 Australian dollars to the U.S. dollar) a person for a three-hour tour.

MARRAKECH

With Koubba, the friendly and stylish British expatriate Lara Cleminson leads in-the-know travelers on custom shopping tours when she's not organizing glamorous tent parties in the desert; (44- 20) 7751-3139; www.koubba.com; starts at 150 euros for a full day.

LOS ANGELES

Take My Mother Please features the lively Anne Block, who offers a variety of tours of Los Angeles in her gold Cadillac; 323-737-2200; online at www.takemymotherplease.com; from \$300 for a half-day tour with up to three people.

MEMPHIS

American Dream Safari offers city and blues tours, also in a Cadillac, a beige '55 model; 901-527-8870; www.americandreamsafari.com; from \$50 a person for three hours. GISELA WILLIAMS