

There's no place like home

Live like a local and make lasting memories on a homestay, says Aby Dunsby

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Chiang Mai, Thailand

Though a destination's monuments might intrigue and its landscapes enchant, it is the people who live there that provide the inimitable splashes of colour.

For the ever-increasing number of clients looking to 'live' a destination rather than merely visit, nothing can beat getting to know the locals and experiencing how they go about their day-to-day lives.

While homestays were once only the choice of year-abroad students or backpackers on gap years, they are becoming more popular with clients seeking an experiential style of travel, and who are keen to discover a destination in all its authenticity.

On a homestay, clients will eat what the locals eat, sleep where they sleep, and feel the warmth afforded by forging friendships and sharing stories with local people, allowing for a personal, memory-filled experience that no hotel could ever provide.

► SELLING THE STAY

This 'real' style of travel might not be for everyone: air conditioning or heating may be lacking, and there'll be no en-suite facilities or room service.

However, those who are happy to stay in basic accommodation and forgo little luxuries will be rewarded with family-like hospitality, home-cooked food, and an immersive trip that they're

likely to remember forever.

"We feature homestays on many of our trips and our travellers often tell us they were one of the highlights of their holiday," says Daniel Pawlyn, head of business development at Intrepid Travel.

For those who might be nervous about spending weeks living in someone else's home but who are still keen to give local living a go, an escorted tour is a fail-safe option. More and more operators are including homestays as part of wider tours, allowing clients to take stock for a few days, meet some new and interesting people, and see an entirely unique side of a destination in the process.

► HOME FIRES

"A homestay is a very authentic, cosy experience. It doesn't have that corporate feeling of a hotel reception desk and instead clients get a warm welcome from the family," says JoJo Fung from Collette, who recently returned from a farm stay in Matamata in New Zealand as part of a Collette tour.

That's part of the reason homestays are becoming increasingly popular for solo travellers, who enjoy the 'home from home' feeling of being part of a family, eating together, socialising and sharing stories.

Staying in someone else's home is also far cheaper than staying in a hotel or even a

RIGHT:
Ecuador

FAR RIGHT:
Farm stay,
Matamata,
New Zealand

BELOW:
El Questro,
Western Australia



➔ hostel, so it's a great way of keeping costs down for cash-strapped clients on an escorted tour.

It also gives them a chance to take some time out from the tour to get a greater sense of independence. "Homestays give our customers a more personal experience while on a tour with a group of people, as they are divided into small groups of two, three or four people per family," says Fung.

a dash of local living by staying in traditional types of accommodation, such as a ryokan in Japan or a riad in Morocco, for example.

A homestay is likely to be less about the actual accommodation and more about the people living there, the

welcome clients get and the customs they'll be able to witness and partake in.

G Adventures has a range of experiential Local Living tours, which give clients the chance to live with locals and get stuck into their daily lives.

Options range from staying in a Karen village in northern Thailand, where they can learn about medicine from a shaman or play football with the locals, to staying with a family in the Ecuadorian Amazon and hiking through the jungle together, learning about medical plants and how to use a blowgun along the way.

▶ HOME AND AWAY

When it comes to location, homestays are often about letting clients



SAMPLE PRODUCT

Explore's 13-day Backroads of Kerala trip starts from £1,759 including return flights, eight nights' hotel and four nights' homestay accommodation (B&B), seven other meals, transport and local guides. explore.co.uk

Intrepid Travel offers a 20-day Trans-Mongolian Experience from £2,545, including two nights on a homestay, some meals, transport and activities. intrepidtravel.com

FAST FACT

APT's El Questro, Gorges and Purnululu tour in Australia includes a lodge homestay in the Kimberley



➔ get off the tourist trail and discovering how the locals live without the crowds.

“Homestays are a great way to experience rural parts of a country and learn about local life away from the cities,” says Pawlyn at Intrepid Travel.

Two of the operator’s most popular homestays are in fittingly remote locations: Zululand in South Africa and the Kerala Backwaters in India.

“Staying in villages reduces travel time to and from more traditional tourist towns, allowing clients to experience how the locals live in the destination they are visiting,” says Chris Ellis, product manager for Asia at Explore. “The villagers will speak basic English but are keen to learn and practise. And with tour leaders on hand, clients will be able to exchange stories and learn about their way of life.”

Trafalgar offers a similarly

“
Guests spend a night on a farm in Rotorua with semi-retired sheepshearer Norm and his wife Judi

off-the-beaten-track experience as part of its 18-day Best of New Zealand itinerary, during which guests spend a night on a farm in Rotorua with Norm and Judi Fleming, a semi-retired sheepshearer and his wife, who now manage 50 acres and some cattle and sheep. Eating together and getting to know each other is also integral to the experience: Norm and Judi will prepare guests a home-cooked feast, before inviting them to gather around the log-burner in the ➔



ABOVE: Intrepid homestay, Malaysia



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→ farm to relax and share stories of life from their respective countries.

▶ LEARNING ON THE JOB

One of the major draws of homestay accommodation is the enriching and educational aspect that living with a local host can bring, whether it's learning about traditional food and drink, day-to-day customs and practices, and even language skills.

Lots of operators offer homestay experiences that allow clients to learn about local traditions. For example, on Wendy Wu's Reflections of Vietnam tour, which involves a homestay in the Mekong Delta, visitors can see how crispy rice paper and sticky rice are made, and drop into workshops to observe local crafts.

Explore's 13-day Backroads of Kerala trip includes four nights in homestay accommodation, one of which is based on a plantation where clients learn about farming and cooking.

By getting to know their hosts and spending time with them, clients can also pick up tips about areas they should visit, from tucked-away restaurants that tourists would be



Homestay guests can learn about traditional food and drink, local customs and practices, and even language skills

unlikely to find, to crumbling temples, buzzing markets or cool backstreet bars.

▶ GIVING BACK

By staying with a local family, clients can also help safeguard a community and improve its economy, so ethically aware clients can feel happy that they are giving something back to their newfound friends too.

G Adventures' new For Good project sees clients staying with hosts in Maribojoc on the island of Bohol in the Philippines. In 2013, Bohol was hit by a 7.2-magnitude earthquake, and many residents lost their homes. Since then, community project Gawad Kalinga has been helping the community rebuild, and G Adventures' homestay programme works alongside it to rebuild homes, install proper bathroom facilities, and provide them job opportunities as hosts.

Generally, bringing an increasing flow of travellers into poorer, rural areas will help improve quality of life for those that live there, but there's also an argument that too much development could impact indigenous people negatively. G Adventures recognises this and has developed a set of homestay guidelines to provide suppliers and partners offering homestay accommodation with a list of good practices for the benefit of travellers, hosts, the surrounding communities, tour operators and the local governing bodies, to make sure homestays have a lasting positive effect on the host community. **TW**



ASK THE EXPERT



Carl Cross,
managing director,
On the Go Tours

"Homestays provide an immersive cultural experience and are a great opportunity to enjoy the daily life of the locals. If travellers embrace new customs and are sociable with their hosts, they'll be able to reap the benefits and come away with a better understanding of local life, some new friends, recipes for amazing home-cooked local dishes, and memories that they can keep forever. Our Thailand Temples and Tribes tour is ideal for those wanting to gain an insight into the local lifestyle, with one night spent in a rural homestay in the village of Mae Kampong. Our hosts warmly open their homes and share their cultures and traditions with travellers. Homestay schemes also help to support local projects within the community."



ABOVE:
Vietnam

LEFT:
India