

Escape clause with a difference; [Final Edition]

Grania Litwin. Times - Colonist. Victoria, B.C.: Dec 22, 2006. pg. D.6.FRO

Victoria's winter travellers looking for more exotic experiences

Hands-on holidays, volunteering vacations and learning expeditions are the latest travel trends, says Karen Dodd at Travel Masters in Bastion Square, who has been in the business for more than 30 years.

"People are tired of going on the same old holidays and really want to do something different now," she said this week, of those who want to escape the craziness of Christmas or dip into new thrills in 2007. "In the last 12 months I've sold more Antarctica trips than ever before. People want to go somewhere exciting, really offbeat -- even a little edgy, not necessarily comfortable."

People who have been to Europe are now "doing" the far corners of the earth, from Iceland and Antarctica to "anywhere" in South America and India. "And they are doing a lot more volunteer stuff, too, like working in hospitals or orphanages. Many want hands-on experiences, not just sitting in a bus."

Queen Alexandra Foundation president Joy Spencer Barry is going to Thailand after Christmas to teach English in Udon Thani for three weeks. The 60-year-old will then travel to South Pattaya and volunteer in an orphanage nursery for a week.

"It's basically a kiss and cuddle trip. I'm not trying to save the world, I just feel we have so much to be grateful for. We baby boomers have done Europe, done Hawaii, now many of us are saying it's time to share."

Realtor Colleen Milne, just back from five weeks in Africa, is already planning her next trip.

"I've travelled a lot, and am not tired of travelling, but my connection with Rotary has inspired me to combine my love of travel with something more meaningful." On her last trip she worked in an oral TB vaccine clinic and she is planning to get involved with a foundation called the Trampled Rose, which helps women awaiting surgery.

"It's not about price, it's about what's a person's dream is," Dodd says simply.

Many still line up for all-inclusive resorts, but seasoned travellers are searching for meaning and connection with culture, people or nature -- everything from polar bears in Churchill and virgin forests in Haida Gwaii, to remote villages in southeast Asia or tiger reserves in India.

"What happens in Hollywood sets off a lot of trends, too," Dodd says with a slight groan. "We are hearing so much about penguins now it's pathetic." A woman recently told her she wants to see as many penguins as she can, after being deeply touched by the March of the Penguins movie.

One of the wonders of travelling off the beaten track -- to places like Myanmar (formerly Burma), Cambodia or Vietnam -- is that locals there are not tired of tourists yet. Instead of jaded faces, travellers see beaming ones. "They're thrilled to see you, whereas Italians or Spaniards just wish you'd go home. Kind of like us Victorians in August.

"Myanmar is a magical place for people who've seen most of the world. The locals are poor and live under a military regime, but you don't see that presence. There are 5,500 pagodas, a lot in ruins, and you travel around by horse and carriage. It is peaceful and calm. People still live in bamboo houses and give you these tentative smiles. If you smile back you get this huge smile and a big wave."

Dodd and other local travel agents offer these suggestions for out-of-the box holidays:

HOT TRIPS TO COOL CLIMES

This will set you back \$7,000 to \$12,000, but one of the hottest new destinations is Antarctica, and chances are you'll see lots of penguins there, as well as some rugged landscapes and breathtaking scenery.

SLOW BOAT TO MANDALAY

An Orient-Express liner offers top-drawer luxury cruising on the Irrawaddy river from Bagan to the sacred walled city of Mandalay. Think African Queen meets haute cuisine, as you drift along this tranquil river in Myanmar, formerly Burma, observing bathing elephants, teak and bamboo dwellings, historic monasteries and ruined temples. Four nights one way, about \$3,000.

TEMPLES, TIGERS AND TRAINS

The Palace on Wheels luxury train tours the land of the Maharajas in ultimate opulence. It includes excursions to ancient temples, ruins, wildlife and bird sanctuaries, and pottery and textile markets. "India has a lot of appeal these days," Dodd says. "Although it still has a certain health stigma for some. You know you're going to be changed when you come out." (\$240 to \$535 US per night, minimum seven nights.)

CLOSER TO HOME CANALETTOS

Usually you have to go to England or Venice to see the highly prized works of famed Italian artist Canaletto, but pieces by this Venetian artist are on display until the end of the year at the Yale Centre for British Art, in Connecticut. The exhibit features more than 60 paintings and drawings created by the master while he lived in England from 1746 to 1755.

DOWN UNDER APPEAL

Julie Skinner, travel manager for the B.C. Automobile Association at Broadmead, says while lots of people still enjoy the Mexican Riviera, many are heading to Australia and New Zealand for Christmas and in the New Year. "It is a bit unusual, a good time to go because of the strong Canadian dollar, and most people see it as a once-in-a-lifetime adventure, so they go for a month or more. Some trips are surpassing \$10,000."

DARWIN WENT THERE FIRST

A Galapagos Islands Tour can set you back \$10,000 or more, or you can charter your own vessel for eight days for \$42,000, and buzz around on the luxury catamaran M/C Athala, which holds as many as 16 passengers.

ALL AT SEA

Repositioning cruises are super hot tickets, especially for those who want to unplug. This is the place to curl up with a good book for days on end, practise yoga, or work off the holiday overindulgence. They start in April and make super stocking stuffers! A typical cruise on Holland America, from Fort Lauderdale to Vancouver, is \$2,299 for 20 days, Skinner says.

TRAVELLING GIFT

BCAA is offering a special new gift card this year for the first time. It can be loaded with merchandise, services and trips valued up to \$10,000.

SCOTCH ON THE ROCKS

Rock climbing and caving during the day and scotch tastings by night are the hallmarks of this nearby package, which takes visitors to the **Horne Lake** Caves, says Luba Plotnikoff, manager of travel media relations at Oceanside Tourism. It offers scenic accommodation at the Quality Resort Bayside in Parksville and starts at \$219 for one rockin' day and night.

BEAVERS AND BEARS

Coastal Revelations Nature and Heritage Tours has a totally Canadian idea -- day trips to see beavers and bears in their natural habitat. Professional biologist Patrick Walshe guides visitors along winding trails near Qualicum Beach and Parksville. B.C.'s rain forest contains the highest biomass per hectare of any ecosystem on earth. His tours are \$200 for one to three people, or \$300 per day for up to 10. He also does snowshoe tours on Mount Washington.