

Tahoe travel company focuses on creating experiences beyond typical tourist attractions



A woman spends her day making pottery on Majuli Island in northeast India. Photo/Toni Neubauer

By Jessie Marchesseau

A World War II memorial would never have made the list of places Jan Potter wanted to see while visiting India. It probably wouldn't have even made the list of things she knew existed in India. But it does, and when she visited it in the

small northeastern village, she was surprisingly intrigued.

“We all have different backgrounds and different cultures, but they are more interwoven than we think,” she said.

The memorial was just one of many new and unexpected experiences on Potter’s four-week trip to northeastern India and Bhutan. Potter, a retired school teacher, and her husband, Gil, made the trip last November along with a photographer from Texas and the founder of Incline Village-based adventure travel company Myths and Mountains, Antonia “Toni” Neubauer.



Bhutanese children from the eastern part of the country sit on the local farm produce. Photo/Toni Neubauer

“In northeast India, I really knew nothing about it, and now my mind is so interested in learning about the background of that area,” Potter said of her trip.

The group traveled in private cars with local drivers who were adept at avoiding the never-ending procession of cars, buses, people, elephants and cows clogging up the roadways as well as rattling off the history of nearly every small village they came to. They visited a town in the middle of a river, slept in bamboo beds, ate authentic cuisine and visited community libraries.

They didn't hit a single tourist attraction and saw less than a dozen American or European people in the entire four weeks.

The trip was designed and booked through Myths and Mountains. The itineraries the company offers travelers are not just about snapping pictures; they're about interaction. Rather than hitting up the common tourist attractions and booking people in Holiday Inns, Myths and Mountains takes people inside the true culture of a country. Travelers have the opportunity to visit small communities, sit with local artisans, tour area businesses, and stay in boutique hotels or even the homes of local residents.



Bhutanese prayer flags flutter in the wind. Photo/Toni Neubauer

Neubauer calls Myths and Mountains more than an adventure travel company; it's also an educational travel company.

"We live in a world today where people don't understand each other; they're afraid of each other," she told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Travel provides that understanding we so desperately need."

The company books pre-designed and custom trips featuring nearly a hundred itineraries in Asia, Southeast Asia and South America that can be divided into four categories: cultures and crafts, religion and pilgrimage sites, environment and natural

history, and natural healing and traditional medicine.

If you would rather learn the finer points of Guatemalan cooking than take photos of the Eiffel Tower or make a mandala with monks instead of joining the throngs of tourists at the Vatican, then Myths and Mountains may have just what you're looking for.

Neubauer says for Myths and Mountains there is no such thing as a "typical trip." They have designed numerous custom trips over the years including one for a couple who wished to explore the art of puppetry in Vietnam and another focused on shamanism in Ecuador for the students of Emory University.

Neubauer's passion for educating doesn't end with travelers. Her background in education, a doctorate in educational administration to be exact, inspired her to form READ Global in 1991, just three years after she founded Myths and Mountains. An acronym for Rural Education and Development, READ was Neubauer's way to give back to the rural communities in her travel destinations.



A dancer at the Trashigang Tsechu Festival in Bhutan. Photo/Toni Neubauer

She saw how tourism could create a village of beggars, how schools and hospitals built with the best intentions would fail because the villages hadn't the means or the knowledge to manage and maintain them once the organizers were gone. Instead, READ builds rural library community centers and helps form for-profit local businesses to sustain them, along with providing training to local residents so the centers can be maintained long after READ leaves. Since its inception, the organization has built 85 rural library centers.

READ has since branched off from Myths and Mountains, though Neubauer is still on the board. However, it still receives a

great deal of support from Myths and Mountains and its clients.

It's this way of giving back which recently earned Myths and Mountains the 2015 Tourism Cares Legacy in Travel Philanthropy award. The award recognizes travel companies with outstanding philanthropic efforts which have had a positive impact for more than 15 years.

However, it's their outstanding knowledge of the regions they travel that earned Myths and Mountains numerous other awards and designations including being named a Trusted Travel Expert on Wendy Perrin's 2015 WOW List for five different countries, a Conde Nast Nepal Top Travel Specialist and one of National Geographic Traveler's 50 Tours of a Lifetime among others.

But the Potters didn't choose their Myths and Mountains trip because of an award or something they read in a magazine. They chose it because they believe in the READ program and because this particular trip enabled them to visit READ libraries in India and Bhutan while exploring a new country in an intimate way.

"My favorite part," Potter told *Lake Tahoe News*, "is how it makes you want to learn more about the world."