

# Holiday with an Expert: 7 Superb Guided Journeys in India

Tours led by top photographers, musicologists, adventurers, bikers, and herpers.

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Get a fresh perspective on your wildlife shots with inputs from Kalyan Varma. The naturalist-cum-wildlife photographer conducts travel photo

workshops to places from Borneo to Madagascar. Photo courtesy Kalyan Varma

## **Kalyan Varma for Wildlife Photography**

Kalyan Varma can change the way you see the world, whether hiking in the forests of the Western Ghats or lying low in the Andaman Islands. His greatest asset is his familiarity with actual fieldwork: Varma is a photographer, filmmaker, naturalist and explorer, often in the trenches on professional assignments for National Geographic and the BBC. He holds photography workshops and seminars, and has co-founded the online photo community India Nature Watch, and Peepli Project, a website that uses storytelling to highlight environmental issues. On his photo tours, however, expect to learn from hands-on shooting exercises in the wild, and from his incisive feedback to help “add depth and meaning to your images”. For the details of 8-10 day trips to Namibia, Ethiopia, Madagascar and Borneo this year, train your lenses on his website (or better still, email him).

## **Gopal Singh Chouhan for Music**



Sound Travels' Rajasthan Musical Adventure tour wraps up with a visit to the Rajasthan International Folk Festival, which takes place at Jodhpur's magnificent Mehrangarh Fort. Photo courtesy Sound Travels

In his teens, Gopal started wandering around Rajasthan, archiving music on a laptop in remote villages and burning one-off CDs for the musicians he met. His objective was to record the music of—and for—those who had neither the exposure nor the means to do it themselves. Today, he is part of the two-member team at Sound Travels, a tour company conceived by harpist and ethno-musicologist Georgie Pope. Chouhan primarily manages the Rajasthan tours, such as the Rajasthan Musical Adventure, which begins in Delhi and ends at Jodhpur via Bikaner and Jaisalmer. En route, travellers meet with artists and musicians, and visit spectacular lakes and temples. The tour culminates at the famous Jodhpur RIFF (Rajasthan International Folk Festival). In April every year, they have a trip to Assam where the Assam Musical Adventure celebrates the springtime festival of Bihu with stops at Kaziranga National Park and Majuli, India's largest riverine island. There are trips to Pushkar and Ajmer in February. The idea is to explore the musical and natural diversity in India, "to experience, not consume it," he says.

# Vaibhav Kala for Adventure



Vaibhav Kala's Aquaterra Adventures has conducted whitewater rafting trips through Patagonia's Futaleufu River and the Grand Canyon in Colorado, as well as the Brahmaputra, Sutlej and Arunachal's Kameng River. Photo courtesy Aquaterra Adventures

Twenty years after he started the Delhi-based outfit Aquaterra Adventures, Vaibhav Kala still likes to lead from the front. While Aquaterra offers outdoor journeys across categories and grades of difficulty, the few trips that Kala leads are often longer and harder than the rest. A seasoned adventurer with a penchant for climbing and whitewater rafting, he knows the Himalayas intimately and routinely maps the wild as far as China and

Chile. Pencilled in his calendar are hikes up to Himalayan passes in Kashmir (August) and Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania (2017), and rafting down the Subansiri River in Arunachal Pradesh (December) and the Ahansel River in Morocco (2017). If you're a first-timer, don't despair; Kala says those with enough grit and fitness may make the cut too.

See [aquaterra.in](http://aquaterra.in).

## Adesh Shivkar for Birding



Birdwatcher Adesh Shivkar has a keen eye for avian creatures. Spot flocks of birds like the Tibetan sandgrouse on trips to Ladakh with Nature India Tours. Photo: Soumyajit Nandy/Flickr/Creative Commons.

Adesh Shivkar's 25-year-long journey as a birdwatcher is just as interesting as his tours. Quite like Dr. Salim Ali, the Birdman of India, who shot sparrows with an airgun when he was a child, Shivkar shot birds with a catapult as a boy, until he encountered the exhibits at the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS). Years later, he quit a successful pharmaceutical career to

do what he loves best—leading bird-watching tours across the country with partner Mandar Khadilkar. Their organisation, Nature India Tours, primarily focuses on birding, along with excursions to see tigers and snakes. Shivkar is currently excited about returning to Mishmi Hills in Arunachal Pradesh, and for their upcoming 11-day birding trip to Ladakh in August.

See [natureindiatour.blogspot.in](http://natureindiatour.blogspot.in).

## Shilpa Sharma For Textiles



Through travel company [Breakaway](#), Shilpa Sharma customises trips centred around [Indian textiles and crafts](#). Learn about the art of miniature painting, how copper utensils are handcrafted in Punjab, or how indigo fabrics are dyed.

Shilpa Sharma is better known as the co-founder of Jaypore.com, a premium online store for Indian textile and handicrafts. Few know that about a year before Jaypore took shape, Sharma started a travel outfit,

Breakaway, focused on Indian textiles and crafts. Roping in like-minded people from the industry (and beyond), she hoped to offer experiences that one “can leisurely unpack over a lifetime”. Today, with 30-40 trips a year across categories, Breakaway seems to be doing just that. Although Sharma manages to lead only a handful of those tours—what with the demands of running Jaypore, and a new restaurant called Mustard in Goa—she routinely curates new itineraries led by her friends from the textile industry.

Sharma recommends places she knows well, and is mindful of the ethics and responsibilities towards both artisans and travellers. Breakaway’s schedule includes day-long tie-dye workshops in Bengaluru, which involve a hands-on interaction with a textile designer, as well as tours from Kanchipuram to Maheshwar and Bhuj to Lucknow. She is happy to tailor trips for research scholars, tourists, and even those who hope to work with weavers and artisans.

See [break-away.in](http://break-away.in).

## **Shahwar Hussain for Biking**



Go biking through the Northeast with Shahwar Hussain's tour company Chain Reaction. Their schedule includes trips to remote regions, such as the snow-covered mountains of Arunachal Pradesh pictured here. Photo courtesy Shahwar Hussain

A seasoned off-road biker and an automobile journalist, Shahwar went from restoring vintage cars in a garage in Guwahati to running bike tours for his company Chain Reaction. It helps hugely of course, that he has travelled widely in the Northeast, and speaks fluent Assamese, Bengali, Nagamese, and a smattering of Mizo and Khasi (in addition to English). On his trails, expect to ride for hours without meeting a soul, eat riverside lunches packed in bamboo by friends from a village on the way, and halt at places with names as beautiful as Mechuka and Doyang. Starting this season, Hussain is also joining forces with Oken Tayeng from Abor Country Travels, for a trip to WWII crash sites in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland this October. Also, watch out for tours across the Northeast on vintage Land Rovers.



See [facebook.com/Chain-Reaction-India-425397250811651/?fref=ts](https://www.facebook.com/Chain-Reaction-India-425397250811651/?fref=ts).



While herpetologist Gerry Martin studies snake venom across India, he also conducts trips and workshops for adults and children to acquaint non-researchers with snakes. Photo courtesy Gerry Martin

### **Gerry Martin for Snakes**

Gerry Martin first held a snake when he was three years old and went on to befriend a hundred others while growing up on a farm in Bengaluru. Martin began his career as a herpetologist with India's best-known herper Romulus Whitaker at the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, followed by a stint at National Geographic Channel, and eventually set up conservation outfit The Gerry Martin Project (TGMP) in 2008. "The idea is to conduct expeditions rather than tours," says Martin, to include non-researchers in the travelling party and thereby fund projects while allowing everyone a ringside view of the action. At the moment, Martin has been collecting and studying venom across this country, where almost 50,000 people die of snake bites every year. He is looking forward to his next trip to Arunachal Pradesh (August-September). There are plenty of other trips and workshops for adults and children and workshops throughout the year.