



# Volun-touring in India

by Wendy Elks

A tourist coach is one way to see swathes of a foreign country, but slower modes of travel - taking public transport, backpacking, or riding a bike are better ways to experience its real character. The sights, sounds and smells of everyday life, tasting authentic regional food and meeting local people are often the strongest memories of a trip; but too often, the pace and volume of tourist traffic can make such leisurely sojourns impossible.

‘Voluntouring’ - travel that includes volunteering for a charity - is a growing way of getting off the beaten track, meeting local people and discovering a country’s real culture, whilst contributing in a meaningful way to the community. Touring on horseback is another special way to experience the sensory characteristics of a place, though many horse-riding tours are brief, and only cover a small area.

In the deserts of northern India, a marvellous combination of these two -voluntouring on horseback, is possible. Travellers who have taken these trips, including some Australians, say that riding large distances over spectacular country, whilst taking part in enjoyable and rewarding aid work, is the most incredible travel experience on the planet.

Combining horse-riding tourism with humanitarian aid is the brainchild of Alexander Souri, a New York-born producer, director and horse-lover with a rich cultural background and creative, global mind. In 2004 Alexander set up Relief Riders International.

The idea developed out of his culturally rich childhood. With a French mother and an Indian father, Alexander was sent to boarding school in Nainital, a hill station located in the foothills of the Himalayas, from the age of 9. Resenting his ‘banishment’ at the time, the

free-spirited boy's sole joy was riding through the wilderness on his beloved Marwari horse – the ancient breed favoured by Indian nobles since before the time of Alexander the Great.

As a young adult in the US, Souri worked in communications and on movie projects such as 'The Matrix' and 'X-Men', but in his 30s he decided he wanted to do more meaningful work. Drawn back to India and the cultural richness of his father's land, his social conscience was developing and his love of horses hadn't wained.

*Canadian, Jan Cumming on the road to Pushkash during the November 2012 ride through Rajasthan. Photo by Sue Beeton*



Relief Rides take place in Rajasthan, Northern India, three or four times a year. For 13-15 days, the RRI team and up to 12 'voluntourists' ride through picturesque countryside from one outlying village to another. A day is spent in each village, where the RRI medical camp and mobile eye surgery is set up. Play and sporting equipment are distributed, along with school materials, and goats as part of a sustainable livestock program. Everything is free.

Dr Sue Beeton is an associate professor in Tourism at La Trobe University in Victoria. A horse-lover with a passion for the high country, she took part in a November 2012 ride through Rajasthan.

An experienced rider, Sue was paired with Tulsi, a 3-4 year-old mare on her first tour. Sue was amazed at how well Tulsi and the other horses

coped with the constant noise, sights and sound that are characteristic of India. “Rajasthan is classed as desert,” she said, “but the land is arable, and there are many small villages and rural workers. Everywhere we went people came rushing out of the fields to see the strangers on horseback.”

The ride ended at the Pushkah camel and horse market, the largest of its kind in the world. India is a constant kaleidoscope, but the noise and visual stimulation here was something else. “It was like riding through a sideshow alley, and Tulsi was alert but so sensible, absolutely bombproof. The Mahwari horses have such a great nature...everyone fell in love with their horses,” Sue enthused.

The 6 touring riders were split into fast and slow groups. Competent riders had long canters across the fields, and there was lots of walking, as 6 - 8 hours may be spent in the saddle. The saddles are English or Indian military; though some people had brought sheepskins, Sue found hers very comfortable.

“The country is flat so the riding is not too difficult, and there’s a long break in the middle of the day. The camps were set up outside villages, with lovely big tents, a bathroom tent and great beds – very civilised and comfortable.”

A support vehicle is always there to give someone a lift or provide assistance. “On our trip there were eight grooms; because of India’s caste system, riders don’t care for their horses, so there was not enough contact with them, really. But what’s great about the trip is that the staff, organiser, doctors, etc are all local, Indian people. Horse riding and camping gives an opportunity to get to know local people – something that rarely happens with conventional travel.”

Around ten grooms care for the horses, which are tethered at night, with a fire for warmth and to deter wild animals. They are shod to minimise stone bruises on the variable ground, and fed sorghum, green grass, barley, lucerne, flour, spices, herbal tonics, and electrolytes. Water is a priority in the hot climate; every opportunity is taken for the horses to drink, and each village happily shares its water.

In India there is one dentist for every 90,000 people, and they are mostly in urban areas. In Rajasthan, 25 million people are illiterate, and 21 million – Australia’s population – live below the international poverty line of \$1.25 a day. RRI takes dentists, doctors, and valuable education materials to the people. During each expedition around 2,500 people are treated – most for the first time in their lives, and 65 needy families receive goats.



*Alexander Souri in Northern India. Photo courtesy of RRI*

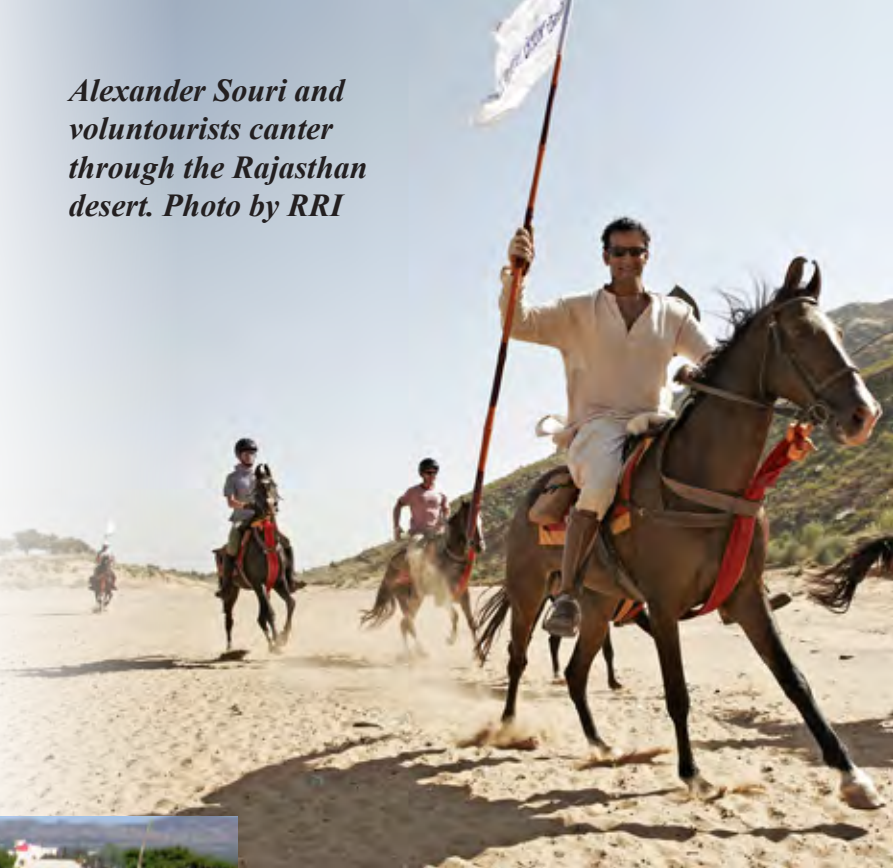
Since its inception in 2004, RRI has helped over 18,700 people. In 2010 the organisation won the United Nations NGO Positive Peace Award for its outstanding leadership in combining adventure travel with humanitarian aid.

Horses provide a spiritual element, as well. "There is too much ill-will, lack of humanity and mismanagement of resources," Alexander said in a recent interview with Amaho Magazine. "In times like these, horses are animals that portray success and loyalty and the motivation to move on. Plus, horses are loyal friends. In such an emotionally taxing field, we need to stay close to nature."

For more information on RRI or Voluntouring in India see [www.reliefridersinternational.com](http://www.reliefridersinternational.com)

*For more details on the Marwari Breed online in Wikipedia [CLICK HERE](#).*

*Alexander Souri and voluntourists canter through the Rajasthan desert. Photo by RRI*



*Horses from the RRI ride resting at Pushkah Fair. Photo by Sue Beeton. Below: Frazzica Productions launched a documentary on the plight of the Mawari horses at the Sundance Film Festival in August.*



*The Marwari (or Malani) is a rare breed of horse from the Marwar (or Jodhpur) region of India. Known for its inward-turning ear tips, it comes in all equine colours, including pinto patterns. Many breed members exhibit a natural ambling gait.*

*The Marwari is descended from native Indian ponies crossed with Arabian horses. The ponies were small and hardy, but with poor conformation; the influence of the Arabian blood improved the appearance without compromising the hardiness.*

*Legend in India states that an Arabian ship, containing seven Arabian horses of good breeding, was shipwrecked off the shore of the Kachchh District in the 12th century. These horses were then taken to the Marwar district and used as foundation bloodstock for the Marwari.*

*The breed deteriorated in the 1930s, but today it has regained some of its popularity. Frazzica Productions has made a documentary on these indigenous horses, and are promoting it world-wide to raise awareness and funds to help support the existing horses and provide education and equipment to ensure a kinder way of training. Visit: [www.indiegogo.com/projects/marwari](http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/marwari) or [www.marwarimovie.com](http://www.marwarimovie.com) to see the movie trailer.*