

# A Local Perspective

When you're aiming to get up close and personal with local culture, look to guided excursions and community-based programs for enriching, immersive experiences.



Local musicians entertain guests around a bonfire at Fogo Island Inn, Newfoundland, Canada.  
ALEX FRADKIN © 2013



Beyond straightforward tourism, many of us crave authentic and exclusive experiences that allow us the opportunity to discover something unfamiliar on our journeys. Engaging with local history, customs and communities is a beautiful way to travel, but that kind of trip can also be difficult for a visitor to design by themselves. That's why we find letting the locals lead the way to be the best bet when looking for a truly immersive journey to a new place. A guide can be instrumental in providing the necessary insider access and cultural insight that a traveler might struggle to find on their own, and community programs can give an authentic glimpse into the culture of an area, educating, enlightening and entertaining travelers all at the same time.

For inspiration on getting more from your destination than a souvenir, we spoke to our partners in Arizona, East Asia and Newfoundland about how to best immerse yourself in the local culture using the resources you'll find in many of the planet's most intriguing destinations.



# Connect with the Culture

“Colossal cliffs, spires and cathedral-like buttes catch fire in the late afternoon sun, burning a deep crimson against a flawless blue sky,” Mr. Harper says of **Sedona**, the rugged resort town in Northern Arizona’s **Verde Valley**. It’s easy to get lost in this visual splendor: The striking red-rock formations emerge from forested valleys, tempting travelers to stop and contemplate the engrossing views, perhaps gathering on the many overhanging balconies of the town between jaunts to art galleries and local shops. Outdoors enthusiasts from across the world head to

Sedona to hike and mountain bike through its distinctive canyons, and a trek into this otherworldly landscape via at least one of the hundred or so area trails surrounding the town is a must.

But Sedona’s reputation for outdoor adventure provides only part of its robust identity. The rest is informed by the omnipresent reminders of its connection to the New Age movement and claims that significant “vortex” energy is found at various points in the area, as well as the fact that Sedona is the ancestral home of numerous Native American tribes. These

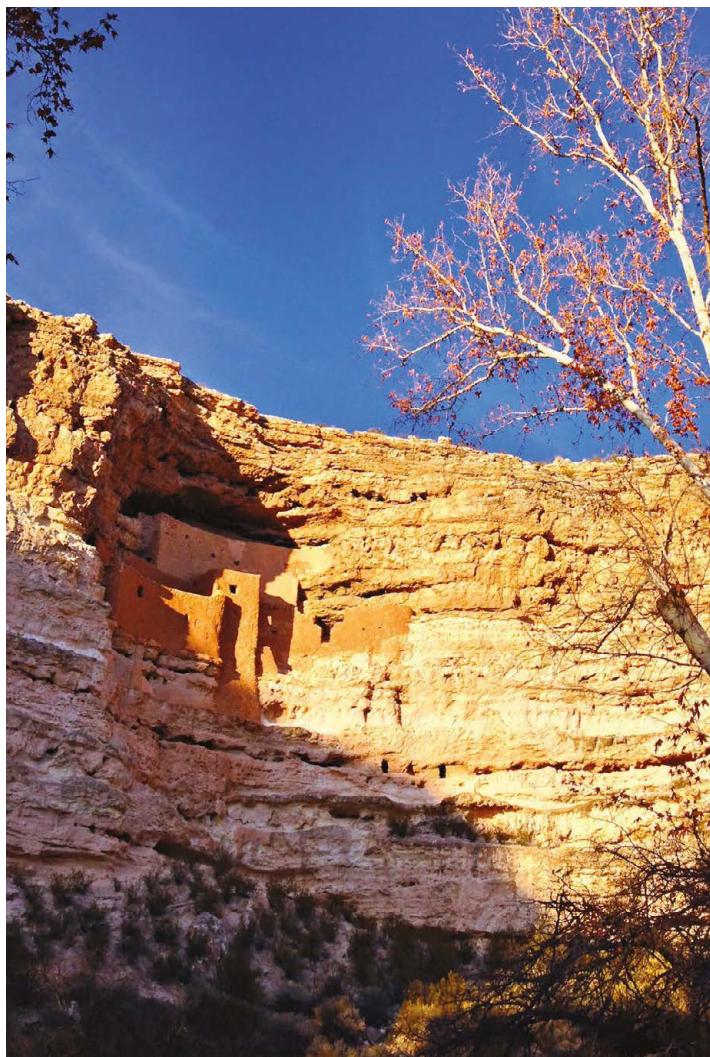
include the Sinagua, a pre-Columbian people whose cliff dwellings and petroglyphs are still visible in the area today.

Located in Sedona’s scenic Boynton Canyon, **Enchantment Resort** (along with its ancillary destination spa, **Mii amo**) bridges these traditions through adobe-inspired architecture, spa treatments that draw on local traditions and a diverse program of experiences offered in collaboration with local indigenous groups, including the Hopi, Yavapai, Apache and Navajo.

“Our Native American programming is a prized cultural experience,” says Felicia Filep, activities director at Enchantment Resort. “Attending activities that coincide with the solstices or equinoxes gives you the full picture of the local tribes that call Boynton Canyon home.”

Guests can take part in presentations and activities led by indigenous performers and facilitators, including cultural events such as the talking circle ceremony, a medicine wheel walk or a Native American flute performance.

Two of the most popular outings at Enchantment blend local history and flavor with Sedona’s outdoor appeal, designed to provide guests with a deeper appreciation and connection to the region’s rich culture. On the Native American Teachings Hike, led by a Mescalero Apache guide, guests learn about tribal history and traditions and take part in a sage cleansing ritual atop a mesa. The Cathedral Rock Vortex Experience is an excursion to one of Arizona’s most recognizable landmarks, which is also believed to be a center of spiritual energy. On this hike, guests learn about the significance of vortices in sacred sites and participate in a guided on-site meditation.



LEFT: Evening light falls on Cathedral Rock in Sedona, Arizona. ABOVE: Ancient cliff dwellings at Montezuma Castle National Monument

## SEDONA SIGHTSEEING

- **JEROME:** Head 30 miles east to Jerome, a former copper-mining town built a mile up into the side of a mountain. The art galleries, eateries and quaint small-town charm offer a change of pace from the resort feel of Sedona, and the terraced streets provide unobstructed views over the **Coconino National Forest**. [azjerome.com](http://azjerome.com)

- **HIKING OUTFITTER:** Gear up at one of Sedona’s excellent outfitters, such as **The Hike House**, where you can consult the enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff for expert advice on your hiking plans. [thehikehouse.com](http://thehikehouse.com)

- **VILLAGE RUINS:** Several ruins of the Sinagua people are preserved in the Sedona area, including the cliff dwellings at **Montezuma Castle National Monument** and the fascinating excavated pueblo ruins and accompanying museum at **Tuzigoot National Monument**. [nps.gov/tuzi](http://nps.gov/tuzi)

## LOCAL CHARACTERS

Fogo Island Inn's roster of community hosts covers a range of personalities and professions in order to match guests with the most appropriate guide. Some of the characters you might run into include:

**• The Foley Brothers:** Phil, Fergus and Norm Foley are charismatic, hospitable and indisputably Irish brothers. Whether being serenaded by Celtic tunes at "Phil's Shed" (a sort of local pub), discussing Norm's acting chops (check out the film *Fogo*) or learning specifics of the island's history and topography with "Ferg" (who is a retired fisheries officer), expect a colorful tour of Fogo.

**• Mona Brown:** As the resident naturalist and guide, Mona's expertise in berry picking often sees her win top honors in the island's annual Partridge Berry Harvest Festival. She also engages in a variety of traditional island activities such as jarring fruits and jams, making quilts and punt rowing.

**• Alfred "Alf" Coffin:** A local grower and stoic fisherman, Alf maintains a passion for traditional methods in his work. Alf's dedication has resulted in his becoming one of the inn's biggest suppliers of fresh produce, and lucky guests might even catch one of his masterful harmonica performances.

## GET YOUR FEET WET

# Community Programs

A stay at Fogo Island Inn on the northeast coast of Newfoundland is inherently an immersive one, an attribute that becomes apparent even before you arrive. The succession of flights, drives and ferry crossings required to make the journey to the remote island has the effect of taking you further and farther from the cares of ordinary life, both psychologically and literally.

"As we drove from the ferry to the inn, the wild landscape captured me as the more remote parts of Scotland and Ireland reliably do," Mr. Harper says. "Here were shimmering bogs, ancient ribs of rock exposed to the elements, and an occasional village, its mostly white buildings crowded together like a flock of birds huddled at the edge of the sea."

At only nine miles wide and 16 miles long, the island's 2,400 inhabitants — descendants of European cod fishermen that settled the region centuries ago — form a tight-knit community resolutely committed to preserving their identity as people of the sea. As the inn's literature puts it, the geographical isolation and the challenges of life on the edge of the North Atlantic yield a "place of unique stories and traditions," and engaging with those who make their home in this remote and rugged land can often have a profound effect on travelers.

"Who you are as a person — you don't discover that sitting in a room all by yourself," says Zita Cobb, founder of Fogo Island Inn. "You discover that in relationship — in relationship to nature, in relationship to the other. [Fogo Island] is a place to reconnect with the most important things, and from that, yourself."

Following that advice, Mr. Harper suggests that the best way to begin a stay on Fogo is to partake in the inn's orientation program.



TOP: Fogo Island residents Aubrey and Cedric Payne tend to boats in dry dock for the winter months. ABOVE: A friendly Fogo Island local tends to his property. RIGHT: Local boat builder Frank Combden in his Fogo Island workshop

This includes a half-day tour of the island with a local such as Roy Dwyer, a teacher, writer and storyteller who escorted Mr. Harper on a previous trip and introduced him to the island's remarkably hospitable "fishermen, craftspeople and everyday folk," says Mr. Harper.

According to Sandra Cull, the inn's community hosting coordinator, residents that serve as community hosts don't work off a script, so spending time with them allows guests of the inn an authentic island experience and a deeper sense of place.

"As lifelong islanders, these community hosts share the island through their own individual lenses, so no two hosts offer an

outing remotely like the other," Cull says. "But most-enjoyed are stories from the fishermen, who have seen abundance, mere survival and a demand to [either] diversify or abandon their home and relocate."

With a community host, guests have the opportunity to meet and talk to local captains and crews — even to try their hand at cod fishing, when in season — and enjoy a true glimpse into Fogo Island living. In addition, the inn offers a range of indoor and outdoor cultural, marine and artistic experiences that includes boating and hiking tours, winter snowshoeing and ice fishing, and foraging for berries and mushrooms.





GET OUT OF THE WAY

# Escape the Crowds

While the breathtaking experience of standing alone among ancient wonders, artistic masterpieces or in an evocative landscape is not always possible, seasoned travelers know the value of a respite away from the crowds, particularly when cultural experiences are the focus. "Whether or not you have a reserved entry, the world's great art museums are far more enjoyable when you're not fighting your way through tour groups to see the paintings," Mr. Harper says.

Securing a reputable guide is often the link needed to escape the tourist crowds and discover authentic and immersive travel experiences. "Working with a local guide or destination specialist allows you to prioritize your itinerary and quickly become acquainted with your destination," says Andrew Harper Travel Advisor Joe Colucci. "An experienced guide knows how to avoid the crowds, and many can facilitate behind-the-scenes access

to popular performances and exhibits. The Travel Office frequently arranges guided after-hours visits to the Vatican and Sistine Chapel, for example, as well as private museum tours and meetings with emerging artists."

A destination specialist can also take you well off the beaten path and offer exclusive adventures unavailable to the average traveler, accessing remote destinations that are difficult to reach or that require special government permits.

**Preah Vihear Temple**, a World Heritage site subject to periodic border conflicts between Thailand and Cambodia, is one such destination. The well-preserved Hindu temple is an exceptional example of 11th-century Khmer architecture, but due to poor road conditions and complex border crossing restrictions, "it simply cannot be done on your own," says Eric Kareus, director of travel at ATJ (formerly Asia Transpacific Journeys). Few guides

are familiar with the site, Kareus says, but with ATJ "you can hop in a helicopter with an expert guide and explore this fascinating temple in brilliant seclusion."

A better-known temple complex like Angkor Wat benefits from greater accessibility, but Kareus says the large crowds can dampen the experience. In response, ATJ developed an alternative journey to explore the ruins of **Banteay Chhmar**, secluded on a hilltop roughly three hours northwest of Siem Reap. Guests stay overnight on the temple grounds in a luxury safari-style tent, with a local Cambodian dinner and a performance of traditional music provided by residents of the nearby vil-



TOP LEFT: ATJ founder Marilyn Downing Staff takes a chai break with new friends in Eastern Bhutan. ABOVE: A spice farmer offers a tour of his farm near Munnar, India.

lage. The following day, Dr. Damian Evans, an archaeologist with the French Institute of Asian Studies, leads a small group of guests on a private tour of the ruins. "Touring with an expert archaeologist adds perspective on the wonder and technological advancement of the Khmer civilization," Kareus says, noting that the journey is designed to recapture the thrill and mystery that famed French naturalist and explorer Henri Mouhot felt when he arrived at the temples of Angkor in 1860. □

## FOLLOW THE GUIDE

- The Andrew Harper Travel Office recommends taking at least one half-day guided tour when visiting any major city for the first time.
- Travel Advisor Juliet Haussler says she's had some of her best travel experiences while working with a local guide. In Bhutan, she was invited into the home of the king's personal chef for a traditional Bhutanese lunch. On the same trip, she also had a private meeting with a Tibetan high lama to learn about his experience fleeing Tibet. "I never would have had these experiences without a guide," Juliet says.
- Crowds may be impossible to avoid in more popular sites, yet an experienced guide can still prove invaluable. In the case of Angkor Wat, the best guides know which entrances and exits allow guests to explore past the 5:30 closing time, when all other travelers have left for the day.
- Don't forget to consult the climate information in *The Harper Collection*. In addition to weather averages, which tell you what to expect during a given month, Mr. Harper often offers advice about which months feature the best combination of pleasant temperatures and smaller crowds.