

Growing passions

Travellers who want to be more than tourists are lining up for garden tours and other adventures, writes **Kate Armstrong**.

Australians increasingly want more out of their holiday than a plastic souvenir and Bali belly. They want to dabble on a canvas in Italy, improve their French, master Spanish cuisine and expand their intellects. They want experiences that enable them to move beyond the tourist gaze.

It's known in the industry as special interest travel, and it's the hot ticket for those wanting a close-to-the-country experience involving a particular interest or theme. It's also one of the fastest growing niche markets.

The director of Intrepid Travel, Darrell Wade, says: "Ten years ago people looked at me blankly when I mentioned specialist adventure travel. Now we get hordes of experienced travellers coming to us because they want more out of their trips. I've gone from preaching to listening."

Special interest tours cover sport, cultural activities, intellectual pursuits and hobbies. For example, active travellers can play golf at St Andrews or Pebble Beach, cycle along the Loire or sail like Odysseus among the Aeolian Isles. Those wanting to invigorate both their mind and body can dig for treasures in the Atacama Desert, trace their family tree in Ireland or visit the battlefields of France. Art lovers can learn to tell a Cimabue from a Giotto; concert buffs a Smetana from a Bartok.

Hobbyists, too, are well catered for. Budding cooks learn to whip up a risotto in Tuscany, while textile enthusiasts marvel at the intricacies of Vietnamese silks and photographers get together to zoom, focus and develop.

Max Howie, of the cultural tour specialists International Study Program, says it gives groups of like-minded people "a chance to share their passions for experiencing other cultures. It helps them appreciate their own cultural heritage. It gives them a chance to pause to smell the flowers and listen to the birds as they travel."

The former ALP president Barry Jones, who has led a cultural tour to Greece and Turkey with ISP, says such tours "help people make sense of life. It changes their attitude and outlook. It reinforces what they know about the world."

Special interest travel appeals particularly to older and experienced travellers, those with the time, money and passion to devote to a country and theme. Travel operators say the over-50s are most interested in lifestyle adventures such as gourmet walks, gardening trips and concert tours. Genealogy, birdwatching, safaris and trips to the Antarctic are also popular.

Younger participants tend more towards adventure travel but are also open to experiences ranging from cooking and photography courses to trekking and archaeological digs.

But age doesn't really matter. Stephanie Hammond, of World Expeditions, a specialist in adventure travel, says she prefers not to categorise the travelling public. "The kind of people who come to us are ageless. They don't choose trips because of how old they are, but because of their attitude."

On garden tours, green-fingered travellers discuss the colours in Monet's garden at Giverny or the layout and plant varieties of Renaissance design. According to Kent Ross, of Ross Garden Tours, friendships grow faster than plants. "A common interest among like-minded people creates bonds. Most of our groups have formed strong friendships and many groups have reunions every year."

Most special interest tours are led by experts. Well-known personalities and enthusiasts share much more than a plane ride with their group, imparting historical facts and cultural mores.

For instance, Margaret and Gough Whitlam led tours to Italy until recently with ISP. Australians Studying Abroad, a cultural tour specialist, employs scholars and academics from around the world to explore cultures from Morocco to Mongolia.

Margaret Watson's Literature Comes to Life tours cover Edinburgh to Bath and visit everything from Sir Walter Scott's gothic-fantasy home and Dylan Thomas's boathouse to the Book of Kells at Trinity College, Dublin. "Travel and books go together in the same way that travel and art have gone together for centuries," Watson says.

Her tours aren't about librarians poring over archive collections. They bring literature to life, as their name suggests, in a fun way. "We walk around Wordsworth's garden in the Lake District, then go inside into his drawing room and read his *Daffodils* poem while we sip a wine and nibble on a locally made gingerbread. We visit Virginia Woolf's 'room of her own'

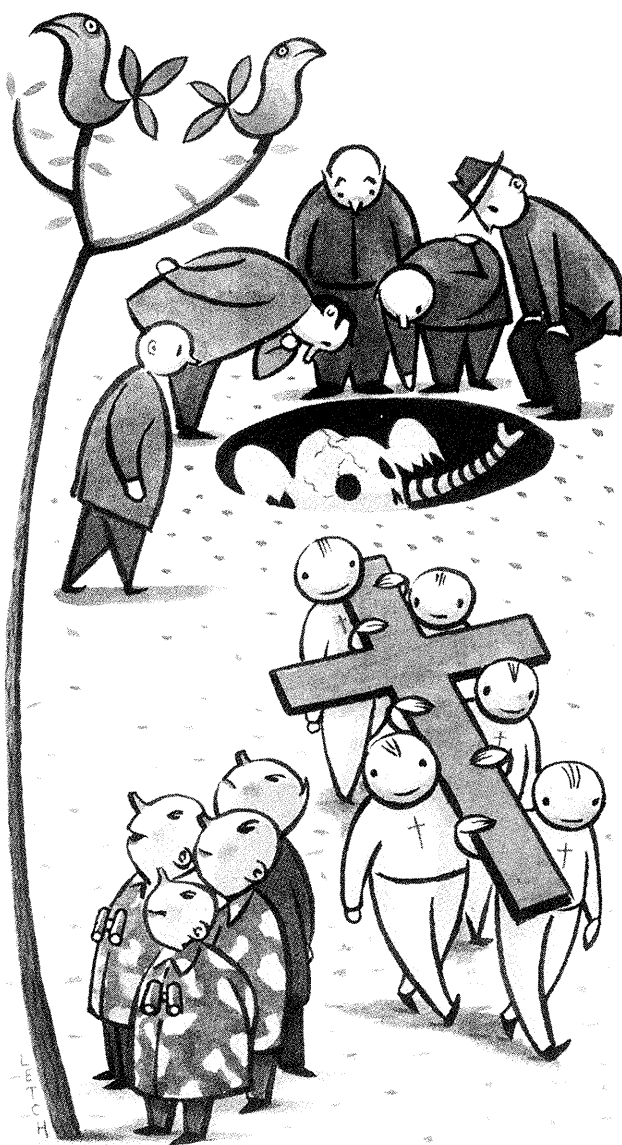


Illustration: Simon Letch

in Rodmell, discuss Vita Sackville-West's bisexual love life while we rave about what she's done for the gardening world at Sissinghurst. We sit in Rudyard Kipling's study and wish we had one just like it.

"After participants get a sense of the literary world, they come back with a greater desire and a clear context in which they can read books. They can visualise what they are reading. They buy books, join book clubs, attend launches and festivals."

Sydneysider and keen painter John May spent five weeks on an art tour in Tuscany with 34 painters, sculptors and art enthusiasts. Each day he set up his easel, looking over olive groves to terracotta roofs in the local village, and put brush to canvas.

"One of the joys of painting on a tour is to sit and look and actually see what is before you, rather than taking a quick photo and moving on, never capturing in your mind what you actually saw."

On his return to Australia, May and his group held a small exhibition in a local gallery, selling a couple of pastels. "It's amazing how the atmosphere, freedom and association with other artists improves one's painting and outlook on life, even after returning home. I knew the tour

would give me the time to focus a little on my painting. I didn't realise how much my art and thinking were going to change as a result of the trip."

Fellow special interest traveller Ann Wilson experienced a radical change five years ago when she returned from a religious pilgrimage. In Medjugorje, Bosnia, she climbed the hill where it is said the Virgin Mary appears. "The orchestral hum of the rosary-reciting pilgrims gave me an energy and determination I'd not felt for a long time. At the top there was nothing, yet there was everything. I returned with renewed enthusiasm."

The trip inspired her to open a restaurant, St Ann's on Rathdowne, in Melbourne's trendy Carlton. She plans to return to Italy with her two daughters later in the year for the canonisation of Padre Pio.

Most pilgrimages offer secular and spiritual journeys to cathedrals, chapels and holy sites such as Lourdes, Guadeloupe and the Holy Land. Selina Hasham, of Harvest Pilgrimages, says her company has about 50 departures annually with people of all ages heading off for a spiritual experience.

Many itineraries base groups in one place, reducing the need to repack at each port. Those preferring to go solo can do so with the help of customised itineraries. Accommodation ranges from Tuscan villas to five-star hotels. Free days are factored in and dining options range from campsite fry-ups to gourmet extravaganzas at Michelin-rated restaurants.

Special interest travel does not come cheap. Prices are as varied as the options, but a specialised itinerary lasting two weeks to a month can cost from \$3000 to \$20,000. It is important to shop around, establish that the operator is licensed and credible, and ask about the tour leaders and experts.

Kate Armstrong is the author of Inspiring Adventures Overseas: Special Interest Travel (Global Exchange, \$24.95).

WHAT'S

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Literature: Literature Comes to Life, Travel Solutions, 297A High Street, Ashburton, Victoria 3147. Phone (03) 9885 5231, fax (03) 9885 8014, email info@travelsolutions.com.au, Web site www.travelsolutions.com.au

Pilgrimages: Harvest Pilgrimages, Level 1, Polding House, 276 Pitt Street, Sydney 2000. Phone 9267 9200, fax 9267 9119, toll-free 1800 819 156, email harvest@pilgrimage.net.au

Art: Paint in Italy with John Lovett, c/o Trans-Pacific Travel, PO Box 73, Isle of Capri, Queensland 4217. Phone (07) 55923349, fax (07) 55923416, email sales@transpacifictravel.com.au, Web site www.johnlovett.com

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