



## Rating foreign tour companies that customize tours

In past issues, we've printed letters from subscribers who took customized private tours (outside of the US) that were arranged by tour companies and guides that are local to the destinations.

Anyone writing in should include the **name and contact** information of the foreign tour company or private guide (location, phone, email and/or web-

site); an idea of the **itinerary**; the **length** of the tour (number of days/nights); when the tour took place (month/year), and the approximate **cost** of the tour and what was included. Relate your **experiences** of the trip, both positive and negative, and observations. Lastly, include a **rating** from [1] (poor) to [10] (great).

Here are a few collected submissions.

**A**s part of a whirlwind trip to pick up additional countries on my Travelers' Century Club ([travelerscenturyclub.org](http://travelerscenturyclub.org)) list, my wife, Susan, and I scheduled a private day tour on the Isle of Man for July 3, 2018.

Our starting point was Liverpool, where at 9:20 a.m. we caught a Flybe ([www.flybe.com](http://www.flybe.com)) flight to Castletown, Isle of Man. Booked online from the US, round-trip air for two cost \$170.

We were met by the guide Jane Hodson, owner of Guided Tours of Mann (46 Alexander Dr., Douglas, Isle of Man; phone +44 7624 433957, [www.guidedtoursformann.com](http://www.guidedtoursformann.com)).

For £150 (near \$193), Jane gave us a fantastic tour of the southern half of the island. Highlights included Castletown, Balladoole, the village of Cregneash and the Sound, the town of Peel, the village of St. John's and the Laxey Wheel. Jane's love for the island came across very clearly as she showed us many unique sights.

Having spent many years abroad, Jane now sees the island from a different perspective than someone who has never lived elsewhere.

We were sorry to say good-bye but needed to catch a 4:15 p.m. flight back to Liverpool. In hindsight, we should have booked at least two days with Jane. [10]

**NORMAN DAILEY  
ALEXANDRIA, VA**

**M**y friend Carolyn and I took a fabulous trip through the Balkans in September and October 2018. Carolyn prepared a list of things we wanted to do and things we didn't (since we had both already "dipped our toes" in the area). She



**The Laxey Wheel, once used to pump water from mines on the Isle of Man. Photo by Norman Dailey**

also contacted several companies who advertised an interest in that part of the world.

We selected Rad-Festa (35 Hristo Belchev St., Sofia, Bulgaria, p.c. 1000; phone +359 2 986 3927, [www.rad-festa.com/en](http://www.rad-festa.com/en)). We had Radoslav's complete attention from the beginning.

Our trip lasted 18 days and took us from Croatia to Bulgaria via Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia. Radoslav arranged our cars (a Citroën and a Volkswagen, both new, clean and comfortable) and driver-guides as well as several local guides, hotels (each with breakfast) and airport pickup and delivery. The tour cost each of us just under \$4,000, including entry fees.

We had two "teams" to share our

travel. Kenan, a young "Bosniak," as he characterized himself, was our companion/guide for 10 days in the countries from Croatia through Macedonia. And near the Bulgarian/Macedonian border, we were met by driver Emil and guide Danny, who were with us during our five days in Bulgaria. We became fond of all of them!

Communication was very easy during both the planning and the trip, itself. Radoslav checked frequently to see that things were going as planned.

One thing that really set this trip apart was the selected hotels. Most of the time, we were at "boutique" hotels, each of which was either inside or adjacent to the city's historic center. Several, such as the **Kriva Cuprija Hotel** in Mostar and

**Sleep Split** in Split, were in historic buildings.

Our guides, as well as hotel desk personnel, had great suggestions for restaurants, where we truly enjoyed the local cuisine and wines.

I really enjoyed our trip in that part of the world and sincerely recommend Radoslav and his team. [10]

**SARA ANNE GARDNER  
PORTLAND, OR**

**W**hy do we leave the comforts of our home and friends to travel to unfamiliar surroundings? Is it the lure of adventure, to learn the history or culture of another country?

In the case of our visiting **BANGLADESH**, it was a simple photograph of the traffic in Dhaka that led my husband, Doug, and our friend Dennis Shigematsu to decide that we had to check this place out. As intrepid travelers, we love the sense of adventure, but after studying the history of Bangladesh, we found it would offer so much more.

Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, is a low-lying, densely populated country in South Asia. It has a rich cultural history, with human habitation dating back 20,000 years. Dhaka, the capital, has a population of over 15 million.

Having limited time, we decided to visit the tribal areas of Chittagong; the capital city; the biodiverse Sundarbans; Rajshahi, and, in the north, Rangpur. We also would sail on a Rocket paddle steamer.

After contacting a couple of agencies in Vancouver and finding them ill-equipped to deal with travel in Bangladesh, we searched the Web and found Nijhoom Tours (House #06 [ground floor], Road 17, Nikunja 02, Khilkhet, Dhaka 1229, Bangladesh; phone +880 1799 002244, [nijhoom.com](http://nijhoom.com)). Mr. Hasan was immediately responsive and helpful in planning our trip.

We arrived in Dhaka on Tuesday, Oct. 14, 2014, and were met at the airport by Hasan, who took us to a comfortable hotel. Early the following morning, accompanied by our guide, Niaz, we boarded a train to Chittagong.

The trip was long, and rice fields

and intermittent villages dominated the scenery, but the coaches had TV, air-conditioning and comfortable seats. In Chittagong, we had an interesting ride in a motorized rickshaw through the city congestion to the Grand Park Hotel.

In the morning, we visited the controversial ship-breaking yards and markets selling marine paraphernalia as well as fresh fruits and vegetables. We were forbidden to take photos of the yards.

In the afternoon, we boarded a bus to Bandarban and the Hillside Resort, the next day driving in a 4x4 to the starting point for our trek. It was very hot and humid for the steep, 2-hour walk to a remote village at Boga Lake. (Our village was Christian; a neighboring village was Buddhist.)

All materials had to be carried in and out of the village. Our simple hut was constructed entirely of bamboo, and we ate our meals in a small restaurant. We hiked around the lake as the sun set.

The next day, after visiting other tribal villages, we retraced our scenic journey, stopping to see the Supreme Bliss Buddhist Pagoda and Monastery, then returned via Chittagong to Dhaka.

The following morning, Hasan



**Doug and Deb Blenkarn and Dennis Shigematsu on the bow of the Rocket steamer. Photo by tour guide Hasan**

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## Foreign tour companies —

led us on a tour of Dhaka. By car, rickshaw and foot, we visited the parliament buildings, the Dhakeshwari National Temple, the Armenian Church, the Star Mosque and Ahsan Manzil (a former Nawab residence that has been restored).

“Wow!” moments included observing the worship of different faiths, riding rickshaws through crowded markets, being rowed through Dhaka’s harbor and seeing life at the Sadarghat river station.

At dusk, we sailed from Dhaka on a Rocket paddle steamer. We had a first-class cabin with twin beds and meals, while second-class passengers spread their blankets on a lower deck and supplied their own food. Our cabin had no washroom, but it was comfortable, and the meals were quite acceptable.

On disembarking the Rocket, we drove to the 15th-century Mosque City of Bagerhat to visit several ancient mosques, including the Sixty Dome Mosque, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Early the next morning, we left our hotel to board a boat for a 3-day tour of the Sundarbans. We were accompanied by Hasan, the captain, a guide, three cooks and three boatmen. Our meals, mainly vegetarian, were tasty and plentiful. The accommodation was sparse but clean, and we had our own bathroom!

The Sundarbans, another must-see UNESCO Site, is a huge delta containing the largest mangrove forest in the world. It drains the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers into the Bay of Bengal.

At dawn and dusk, we boarded smaller boats to explore canals, where we spotted deer and enough birds to make any ornithologist happy. We didn’t see any tigers, however.

On Saturday, Oct. 25, we said good-bye to Hasan, and Niaz joined us for our trip north. We traveled by train to the city of Rajshahi and the next day by boat to an island *char* in the Ganges. Chars are flood-prone, self-reliant islands.



**Water taxis in Dhaka Harbor — Bangladesh.** Photo by Deborah Blenkarn

On this particular char, half the population (around 100 people living in thatched huts) were citizens of Bangladesh; the other half were citizens of India. There was a guard hut at the border but no interaction between the two sides.

We were certainly an anomaly, as the younger children had never seen white, middle-aged people.

Traveling north by car the next day, we visited Puthia Estate, with its palace and beautiful Hindu temple, Govinda. The surface of the temple was covered with carved terra-cotta plaques and ornamental towers.

Nearby, we toured several buildings representing the British-colonial period. Unfortunately, they were in stages of deterioration, but they did give us a glimpse of their one-time splendor. Govinda was a bustling place with many local tourists.

The following day took us to the outstanding Kantaji Temple, an 18th-century Hindu temple in northwestern Bangladesh. It is one of the best-preserved historical sites in the country. Dedicated to Krishna, each surface of the temple is covered with delicately carved terra-cotta friezes depicting flora, love, travel and contemporary life of the time.

We returned to Dhaka on Oct. 29 and early the next morning were

taken to the airport to catch our flight.

Travel in Bangladesh can be challenging, but Hasan and his team took great care of us. We never once felt compromised or fearful. The people were curious but courteous.

The cost of our 17-day tour was about \$2,000 per person, which included all transportation, guides, reasonably priced hotels, breakfasts and site entry fees. We were responsible for dinners and lunches except on the Rocket and in the Sundarbans.

We highly recommend this trip. [10]

**DEBORAH BLENKARN**  
NANAIMO, BC, CANADA

I had saved a copy of Julie Cassen’s letter (*July ’16, pg. 27*) about the excellent experience she and her husband had while traveling in **MYANMAR** with Santa Maria Travels & Tours (90 Kan-Road Condo, Rm. 1-C, Kan Road, Quarter 10, Hlaing Township, Yangon 11051, Myanmar; phone +951 537191, [www.santamariatours.com](http://www.santamariatours.com)).

In December 2016, I sent my first inquiry to Zaw (whom Julie had mentioned) regarding a trip to Myanmar. The next day I received a suggested itinerary and preliminary pricing. I was amazed that all of my