

STARQUEST EXPEDITIONS WAS RECENTLY
FEATURED IN THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

Modern Marco Polos

Travelers retrace ancient trade routes on a three-week, multi-flight journey

By Myrta Pulliam
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Call it a promise. Call it a warning.

Eighty-eight intrepid passengers on a reconfigured 757 jet were told that what we would see and experience on our three-week trip “will not be exactly how it is back home.” Nearly 20,000 nautical miles, 27 flight legs, nine visas and \$40,000 later, we would have to agree.

Our once-in-a-lifetime journey was called the “Crossroads of Humanity: Exploring the Great Trade Routes and Ancient Empires.” It could have been tagged “To Timbuktu and Back.”

In 20 days, we would parallel the paths taken for centuries by traders and merchants who brought silks, gold, spices and tea from Africa and the Orient to the European marketplace.

The itinerary would begin in Reykjavik, Iceland, and go to Armenia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Bhutan, India, Ethiopia, Libya, Mali and Malta. Some of us opted for Laos over Cambodia.

My favorite pretrip quiz was to ask friends, “Do you know where Yerevan is?” Only one person of the 40 or so I asked knew it was the capital of Armenia. And who knew Timbuktu was in Mali? Or that the capital city, which we flew into, was Bamako?

Was it fun, as vacations often are? Words like interesting, fascinating and educational would be more accurate.

The piece de resistance probably was visiting Timbuktu, although each of the countries had its own fascination.

We couldn't eat any fresh vegetables or drink tap water. Food was often basic, and some of us even lost weight. And, yes, jet lag was tough the first few days, going east for long flights and crossing multiple time zones.

But we couldn't whine. The pluses made up an endless list.

To see the incredible places we did—forbidden places, places many people wouldn't think they'd ever get to see, to get a sense of so many cultures, such a variety of architecture—was simply astonishing.

The process for a private jet trip that goes halfway round the world begins more than a year in advance.

The first brochure from Starquest Expeditions arrived in April 2004 for the three-week trip completed in October and November 2005. Starquest is a Seattle-based tour operator that specializes in private jet excursions. The National Trust for Historic Preservation was one of several arts and educational institutions that sponsored the trip.

In January 2005, we received a mailing schedule, a packing list, information about the expedition, a five-page reading list and a pre-trip checklist. We had to fill out and return a personal history and information about getting to and from Iceland, and send four passport photos, insurance documentation and copies of our passports. “Expedition details” was 17 pages and, in retrospect, barely scratched the surface.

The June mailing included hotel details, choices for optional sightseeing and hotel upgrade information. We were told to be in good health and be prepared for high altitudes and malaria. We got a letter from the medical director of Starquest, giving us general hygiene tips: Bring our own diarrhea kit (Cipro, Lomotil, Imodium), get a prescription for an anti-malarial, and bring mosquito repellent. Immunizations suggested were tetanus, polio booster, yellow fever, Hepatitis A, pneumococcal pneumonia and influenza.

In addition, we had to fill out what seemed like reams of paper for the many visa applications. We had to have at least 12 blank pages in our passports. Anyone whose passport showed evidence of a trip to Israel would need a new passport to visit Libya. Visas would not be needed for Iceland, Mongolia and Malta.

Final documents arrived in September—the detailed daily schedule, the jet schedule and flight information, a wheeled overnight bag, hotel address list and a backpack. Why the wheeled bag? For some stops, we would leave large suitcases behind and use only the wheeled bag. Having the same ones made it easy for our guides to find our luggage.



Halfway 'round the world

Highlights of each stop on the trip:

Iceland: The Blue Lagoon, a gigantic thermal-heated hot tub, which relieved the jet lag.

Armenia: Seeing Mount Ararat, the landing spot of Noah's Ark, in the distance (it is actually in Turkey), and seeing a partially finished museum's outdoor sculpture.

Mongolia: Visiting the Hustai Wild Horse reserve in the countryside where the Przewalski's horse has been brought back from near-extinction.

Vietnam: Being in places that were part of a war we'd read about: China Beach, Hue and Da Nang, and spending a night in the Hanoi Hilton (no, not that one, the new one near the Opera House).

Laos: The unspoiled city of Luang Prabang, a World Heritage site full of Buddhist temples; the Mekong River; the city's night market, and its fantastic food and restaurants.

Bhutan: The little Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas is thought to have inspired Shangri-La. A peaceful, spectacular mountainous area where one could easily spend more time.

India: The sacred Ganges River at dawn at Varanasi is a sight like nothing you've seen anywhere before, teeming with people at sunrise.

Ethiopia: You just can't conceive how the Christian churches of Lalibela could possibly have been hewn from solid rock.

Mali: Seeing the “blue men,” the Tuareg people, on the edge of the Sahara, camels and all, and bargaining for a necklace was a blast. The streets are all sand. Talk about primitive. But charming. Just being able to declare that you've been to Timbuktu says it all.

Libya: How incredible to visit one of those places that had been forbidden to Americans for so long. The National Museum in Tripoli had an old VW Beetle that had belonged to Moammar Gadhafi. The Roman city of Leptis Magna was magnificent and in decent repair.

Malta: Seeing ruins of a town that dates at least to 2500 B.C., and possibly as far back as 4000 B.C., plus an underground burial chamber of the same era.



Other Journeys

Starquest Expeditions, tour operator of Seattle, Washington, specializes in educational travel trips by private jet.

This year's expeditions:

- **Around the World:** Cover five continents, explore 13 of the world's most treasured and legendary places including Machu Picchu, the Serengeti Plain, the Great Barrier Reef, the Taj Mahal and the Sphinx. March 17-April 9 (will be repeated in 2007), \$50,225 single occupancy or \$44,950 double occupancy.

- **Mediterranean Outposts:** Explore the Mediterranean's lost empires, including 13 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Malta, Tunisia, Libya, Turkey, Italy, Greece and Croatia. May 26-June 8 and Oct. 6-19, \$25,050 single occupancy or \$21,950 per person double occupancy.

- **White Nights & Viking Gods:** Trace the legends of the Vikings through Iceland, Norway, Greenland, Russia and Estonia. July 1-16, \$25,950 single occupancy or \$22,950 per person double occupancy.

- **India By Air and Train:** Explore India from north to south, from Delhi to Mumbai and see 12 UNESCO World Heritage sites along the way. Oct. 28-Nov. 16, \$26,250 single occupancy or \$22,950 per person double occupancy.

- For information, call (800) 454-4149, or log on to www.starquestexpeditions.com



Our final mailing in October included a small ring binder notebook with the itinerary, contact numbers, participant and staff names, and information about each country we were to visit. The itinerary warned that although this was final, we should expect the unexpected, and each evening we would receive the next day's schedule.

Packing it in

Packing was a challenge. We were going to be in hot, humid climates, like southeast Asia, several deserts and the cold steppes of Mongolia. Laundry would be available at most hotels. Most of us opted for comfortable safari clothes: T-shirts, chinos, sweatshirts which could be layered, hiking boots, sneakers and a pair of walking sandals sufficed. Leaving other clothes and shoes behind allowed more room for souvenirs.

Taking up suitcase space was a huge kit of electrical converters for recharging camera batteries, running a laptop and recharging a cell phone, which, amazingly, worked most of the time.

The chartered 757 that belonged to Icelandair was reoutfitted with all business-class seats. The group reached Iceland from Boston, New York, Minneapolis and the West Coast in time for an arrival dinner. The contingent was from all over the U.S.—well-heeled, well-traveled and young and old.

When we checked in with Starquest, we received our ID badges, which also served as boarding passes, and our "personal audio enhancement systems." (More on that later.)

True to their word, our inaugural daily itineraries were in our room. Typically, we left our large suitcase outside our hotel room by 10 p.m. and it was carried off to the plane. By 6 a.m., we wheeled our roller bags to the reception area before breakfast.

The hotels varied from very basic to four-star quality, but all were clean, and most had Internet access at business centers.

Special treatment

The expedition leader and two assistants (plus the expert lecturers) and the physician were with us at all times.

Although entering and leaving a country was slightly different each time, we usually were whisked into special lines, or sometimes skipped immigration and customs altogether.

A Starquest employee who had been at a destination a day or two before we arrived there met

us at the plane, got the group through customs and immigration as smoothly as possible, and prechecked everyone into the hotel.

We would arrive at our rooms to find a little souvenir from the staff along with the daily itinerary. We also received a few dollars' worth of local currency in each location.

So much to see.

Some of us thought two days in each place was not enough time. Others said it was just right.

A typical sightseeing excursion was on three buses, with a local guide on each. The audio systems worked like magic. The words of the guide speaking into his headset were clearly transmitted to the earpiece of each traveler.

One of the joys of a trip like this is learning so much about places we'd previously known so little about. Lecturers who travel with the group enhance this. The list included a former U.S. ambassador, an Islamic scholar/archaeologist, an Art Institute lecturer and a photographer for National Geographic's *Traveler* magazine.

The long flights incorporated slide shows and PowerPoint presentations about each upcoming destination: culture, history, politics, art, architecture.

As they told us in one of our early mailings for the trip: "We ask you approach each day with an open mind. . . . In our diverse world, it is sometimes surprising to realize that many people have lifestyles and attitudes so different from our own."

Again, we would have to agree.

For more information

- "Silk, Scents, And Spice: Retracing the World's Great Trade Routes, the Silk Road, the Spice Route, the Incense Trail," by John Lawton, (Economica, \$24.95).

- "East to the Amazon: In Search of Great Paititi and the Trade Routes of the Ancients," by John Blashford-Snell, Richard Snailhaim, (John Murray Publishers, Ltd., \$15.95).

- "From Egypt to Mesopotamia: A Study of Predynastic Trade Routes," by Samuel Mark, (Texas Monthly Press, \$27.95).

- "Trade, Traders and the Ancient City," edited by Helen Parkins, and Christopher Smith, (Routledge, \$125).

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