

Five Places You Should Visit Now For Authentic Experiences

Peru's Northern Interior - Assam, India – Kekova, Turkey -Southern Morocco - Bayan-Ulgii Aimag, Western Mongolia

By Paige Stringer

My most memorable travel experiences have always come from an open mind and a flexible agenda. Customizing your own travel can be challenging though – how to find those authentic out-of-the-way places?

In this article are five must-see destinations for independent travelers seeking unique adventure activities and cultural immersion, and the local companies that can help you genuinely connect with new people and places.

Northern Interior, Peru

For many travelers, Peru has become synonymous with Machu Picchu. However, in the largely undiscovered North, Peru's rich culture combines with extraordinary opportunities for adventure activities as well as more gentle nature and wildlife experiences. My colleagues at Xola (www.xolaconsulting.com) worked in Peru for several weeks this spring and turned up the following off-the-radar itinerary.

From Chiclayo, drive to [Chachapoyas](#), home to the ancient People of the Clouds before the Inca took over their civilization. The basis for this culture's name was evident as our car edged up the mountain in dense cloud cover until we were rewarded at our destination with a stunning view of sharp mountain peaks poking through downy, white clouds.

Hike or horse-back ride through the area to view the ruins that archaeologists are just starting to map and excavate. The massive fortress at [Kuelap](#) is quickly gaining recognition as “the Machu Picchu of Northern Peru” with over 400 buildings enclosed by a 70-foot stone wall. The Xola team was the only visitors at the site that day, and marveled at how the Chachapoyas people created this stone compound atop a mountain without the use of the wheel.

The burial ground of [Karajia](#) features impressive capsule-like tombs built into the hillside. Stop by the museum in [Leymebamba](#) to view over 200 mummies recovered from the remote Lake of the Condors.

When you have had your fill of cultural history, take a kayak down the Utcumbamba river, explore the colonial town of Levanto, or wander the Sunday market at Tingo. Be sure to try the milanesa at La Tushpa restaurant in town! **Contact:** [El Chillo](#), a family-run home-stay that can organize trips to area attractions - they also have their own hydroelectric plant and trout farm, and the fresh trout is delicious! (511) 265-9158. Also: InkaNatura (www.inkanatura.com) 074 20-9948, Kuelapperu (www.kuelapperu.com) 001-407-583-6786.

Assam, India

For an experience of India not frequently sought out by international travelers, try heading to the NE, to the state of Assam. In India where tourism is growing at a pace of more than 13% a year, very few people venture to Assam – barely over 7000 people made it there in 2004. Land in Guwahati, Assam's

capital city, and board the train for a journey through a maze of tunnels, to the Southern Hill Station of [Haflong](#) where you can explore an area of the state not easily accessible by road. The surrounding North Cachar Hills are dotted with tiny villages where visitors are eagerly welcomed. Contact Meri Hmar (merihmar@yahoo.co.in) at the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) to arrange multi-day treks in the hills with overnight lodging at the various home-stays in villages along the way.

After Haflong, take the train to [Dibrugarh](#) to experience Upper Assam's green tea gardens and the wide Brahmaputra river flanking the northern border of the town. In nearby [Dibru-Saikowa National Park](#), glide over the Brahmaputra in a long wooden boat while sighting rare birds and herds of wild feral horses.

[Purvi Discovery](#), run by Manoj and Vineeta Jalan in Dibrugarh, lead trekking and horseback riding tours around Upper Assam and the neighboring states of [Arunachal Pradesh](#) and [Nagaland](#). They operate several heritage tea bungalows in Dibrugarh and camps in Arunachal. **Contact:** Purvi Discovery (www.purviweb.com/index.htm), +91 373 2301120, 2300035

Kekova, Turkey

Find relief from the crowds that flood Istanbul, Cappadocia, and other popular tourist destinations by heading to the remote island of [Kekova](#) and the ancient villages of Simena (Kale) and Teimiussa (Ucagiz) on the Turkish coast. In the second century, a series of massive earthquakes shook the area, leaving behind an entire city of impressive ruins just few feet below the crystal-clear water of the Mediterranean.

Our friends have said they admire the unique character of this place that intertwines culture and nature with the low-key ambiance of coastal living. In a single day, you can swim in warm, turquoise waters rich with sea life, explore thousands of years of history, and linger for hours with the locals over a dinner of lamb kebobs and grilled fish in the cool evening air, often finishing close to midnight.

Join a kayak guide (approx \$50) out of nearby [Kas](#) to explore the ruins of [Teimiussa](#) and the sunken city off Kekova Island – our gang was particularly enchanted by the Greek and Roman architecture, and the remains of stone stairs rising dramatically out of the water. Stop for a refreshing swim in Tersane Bay before paddling on to [Simena](#), an ancient and picturesque village accessible only by water. Wander the streets of this charming town, home to just 500 people, and explore its impressive medieval castle that dates to the 4th century BC. **Contact:** Insight Travel in Kas TEL: 90 242 836 3692 <http://www.tour-turkey.com/kas-sea-kayaking-tours.htm>

Southern Morocco

The town of Zagora lies deep within the [Draa River Valley](#), where rocky desert begins to give way to golden sandy dunes. Explore the valley's impressive relics, left behind by cultures dating back thousands of years: kasbah fortresses, rock paintings and engravings, and the [Venus of Tan-Tan](#), the oldest human figurine ever found.

Mohammad, Jawad, and Khalid Chahid are three brothers operating [Caravane el Haoudaj](#), a superior camel caravan business out of Zagora, and an excellent team to take you to the famed [Tinfou Dunes](#). A one-time prisoner caught up in the [Sahawari conflict](#), Mohamed Chahid is also a passionate civic leader who is proud of his country and bent on improving the lives of his countrymen.

Embrace a mystical experience –be mesmerized by the camel’s gait as it carries you through the trackless sand of the Sahara, revel in Khalid's quiet singing from aboard the camel behind you, and sleep soundly in the starry desert in a traditional nomadic tent.

The Chahids can also make arrangements to take you to the soaring Erg Chebbi dunes which stretch east into the Algerian Sahara. Depart from Merzouga, a half-day's drive from Zagora. **Contact:** [Caravane el Haoudaj](#); 91, bd. Mohamed V Zagora; CP 45900, Maroc; tel 00212 44 84 71 34, GSM 00212 62 13 44 05; email: haoudaj@hotmail.com or j.chahid@gmail.com

Bayan-Ulgii Aimag, Western Mongolia

In many ways, Western Mongolia is the ultimate adventure travel destination. Tourism is just starting to develop in this country where remote geography, nomadic traditions, and shifty political history has left it largely unchanged over the centuries. The [Bayan-Ulgii](#) province is Mongolia's 'Root of the World', where a rich [Kazakh culture](#) resides in a remote land of high mountains, even glaciers, steep slopes and rushing torrents.

Take a plane flight or travel overland from the capital city of Ulaanbaatar to Bayan-Ulgii in October to experience the traditional [Eagle Hunt](#) unique to Western Mongolia and the Kazakh nomadic people. The art of training birds of prey, including massive golden eagles, is a 6,000 tradition that is an essential means of survival for the community. Don't miss the annual Eagle Hunt, a remarkable event pitting the best hunters and birds in the area against each other in friendly competition. The festival offers an unforgettable opportunity to mingle with the local people and get a taste of their nomadic way of life.

Also drive to nearby [Altai Tavan Bogd National Park](#) and for horse-back/camel riding or hiking to the Potanin glacier in the highest range of the Altai Mountains. The local Environment Protection Agency offers English speaking guides and will issue permits and direct visitors on tours, such as to an ancient Hunuu burial ground. Contact: Mongolian National Tourism Organization (www.mnto.org), (11) 350441

-Paige Stringer manages marketing and public relations for Xola Consulting (www.xolaconsulting.com), an adventure travel consultancy, and provides strategic direction for Off the Radar (www.travelofftheradar.com) - the company's adventure travel website and online newsletter that provides information to adventure travelers about the best sustainable adventure travel destinations and tour operators. Contact her directly with questions or comments at paigestranger@xolaconsulting.com.