

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT

Hanging out with locals is one of the best aspects of travelling and **Richard Asher** knows how to score an elusive invitation.

AS I TAKE UP AN AWKWARD STANCE and prepare to address the pink ball between my legs, two things strike me about my situation. First, I've discovered that croquet is far more fun than I previously thought. Second, I seem to have, once again, lucked upon the kind of invitation-only travel experience money can't buy.

When the ball knocks the centre peg at the end of the lawn, marking the end of the match with South London gents Simon and Graham, it dawns on me that luck has very little to do with it. Such experiences keep happening to me because I let them happen.

I've done rather well at being included, invited and even accommodated by locals on my travels. From joining a game of ping pong on a Beijing street and free lodgings with a family of Slovenian beekeepers, to an organ-clenching 170 kilometre-per-hour Yamaha pillion ride around the Isle of Man, I've learned that there is, absolutely, an art to scoring an offer to join in.

Micro-managed trips and the herding of tourists on package tours fills me with distaste. I much prefer the romantic notion of serendipity on the road. Participating rather than watching sets me aflutter, because taking part is what makes my adventures unique from yours, and vice-versa (although I've made exceptions for cock fights and nights at the ballet).

Mucking about with strangers – whether for a meal, a singsong or a spot of croquet – makes for the best bragging rights, and even better memories. When I joined the guys playing cricket in the shadow of Purana Qila,

one of Delhi's oldest forts, I was living Indian life with Indian locals. You can't buy that. And that is exactly the point.

If you too want to partake in these types of encounters, you have to be on top of your weaselling-in game. Nobody wants to be that guy who invites himself. But there are not-so-subtle ways to send a message that might lead to an invitation. Only awkwardness, pride and dishonesty can stand in your way. Oh, and you can't be a comfort princess!

When it comes to activities, always project an interest in what's going on. Let people see you're watching and never give the impression that you're about to dash off to the next sight. The best way to appear unrushed is, well, not to be in a rush. Hang around as long as you need. Be open, and people will sense it. Then graciously accept your summons from your newfound friends.

Travelling alone usually works in your favour. Large groups are more intimidating to approach and could be a drain on resources. Worse still is being part of couple, especially an over-affectionate one. Folks will give you a wide berth, either out of consideration for your perceived need to be alone, or out of distaste for your PDAs.

Budget travel, ironically, tends to open doors to money-can't-buy experiences. Fancy sipping on vodka and nibbling gherkins with Arctic oil drillers as you thunder across the Siberian steppe? I only got that when I travelled third class. Got enough skills to give a spontaneous English lesson in Laos? Arrive in Oudomxay with no money and no water for your instant noodles, and ask for help. As for my heart-

pounding experience zooming around the Isle of Man on a motorbike, that began with a few clicks on couchsurfing.com.

Catch eyes, smile and take every chance to talk, especially in the local language. Don't be shy about posing questions, and be open about your circumstances. Asking for directions can lead to experiences a travel agent will never give you. And don't be too proud to drop "I'm probably sleeping in a field tonight" into your conversation. If it's true, that is. By this point you will likely find you don't have to.

Travel in developing countries. Here, people are generally warmer to strangers and retain a greater sense of community (with humans, not their phones). That being said, places like Europe can surprise you, as I discovered during my croquet escapade in South London. So can introverted Japan, where enough curiosity shown in two sozzled businessmen's baseball practice once led me on a magnificent sake-fuelled tour of Shinjuku. Kanpai!

Ah, yes, alcohol. That's my final tip. Go where people are drunk. Even in North Korea, it works like magic. When I stumbled upon Kim Il-Sung's birthday celebrations in Pyongyang's Moranbong Park, vodka was being poured for all. A few gulps gave the picnicking locals the liquid courage to beckon members of our group over for dances and chats that drove our government minders bananas.

And croquet? What a splendid way to spend an afternoon. It's like snooker, only with fresh air and without the smoke. Next time you're in London, I'm sure the guys at the croquet club near South Merton will be happy to give you a game. ☺

Egrets meditate
over still waters
and a sleepy boatman
glides past swaying palms.
Meanwhile in a little boat
rubbing shoulders with ducklings,
you run into yourself.

Slow down
in God's Own Country.



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