04 guided city walks

Seeing it all from the ground up

→ Kolkata, continued from 1

The GPO itself boasts a huge classical dome. Under its cavernous in- Hooghly, terior stands a statue paying tribute to a "dak runner", a kind of longshoulder. Cogs like these sustained the Empire.

iam, the huge Indian Museum and pigeons. the extraordinary Victoria Memorial

burgh or London White Town gradually gives way to many five-star joints – so I downed a English) to take care for someone the vim and chaos of "Black Town", trees sometimes protrude jauntily from the upper floors of prodigious- left until almost last. Mr Surajit traffic. y-decaying buildings whose colour "Bomti" Iyengar lives in an aparthas long since faded into mottled mildew-grey. Perhaps only in Kolkata could you call this "character" and mean it.

We adjourned for lunch by the Star Theatre at Bhojohori Manna, a This was proving small chain of modest restaurants a fine way to delve serving typical Bengali cuisine. Delicious and cheap, I relished bhetki paturi (fish in mustard seed sauce walk through dense wrapped in a banana leaf). shukto (squash, string hoppers and aubergine with coconut sauce), and **quarters swirling** a spectacular item called *daab* with humanity and *chingri*, with fat marinated prawns then duck into small conut. "Bengalis," Husna-Tara re- tranquil side streets minded me, "are famed for their sweets." So a bowl of *mishti doi*, or sweetened yogurt, was chased for research purposes with an utterly delicious natun gurer ice-cream flavoured with jaggery, a traditional unrefined cane sugar. And another. This was proving a fine way to delve into Kolkata. We'd walk through dense cacophonous quarters swirling with humanity and then duck into small tranquil side streets. Here stood old courtvard houses with classical pillars and colonnades fronting private Hindu shrines - properties of once-prosperous Bengali clerks and administrators who absorbed European ways while working with foreign,

mostly English, traders. At Kumartali, the potters' enclave, saw clay pots and jars still made in timeless fashion in rudimentary workshops. Its potters were preparing for a major festival and sculpt

comes clear. For good reason was ought to drop by and rinse their own ond imperial city after London. A interior walls still bear European ment to decay, still-handsome knot of muscular tiles bearing rosette designs. Alongedifices – Writers' Building, Govern- side it stands the popular Armechange and, farther away, Fort Wil- wealthy pious pay priests to feed

stand amidst countless other less- hemmed in by a railway line stretch-Town", as it used to be known, still or the drab, scruffy surroundings, Yet, not quite. It may be Kolkata's with brilliant orange, yellow and large ancient Lal Dighi tank as a shack any health inspector would hough it were some village pond. torch. Yet its proprietor proudly set We headed on to nearby St John's Man-pulled rickshaws with honk- to work brewing it fresh, his bevering horns still weave slowly through age strong, dark and not too sweet an automated tannoy urging penearby streets. Beyond, where - perfect actually and better than destrians (in Bengali, Hindi and

> second and lived to tell the tale. My tour's quirkiest element was touching amidst Kolkata's frenetic



into Kolkata. We'd cacophonous

ing huge colourful statues of mul- ment overlooking Chowringhee ti-armed goddesses for symbolic Road in the heart of the city. We immersion in the sluggish River dropped by next morning for "Breakfast at Bomti's", a curious By the Hooghly itself, near where rendezvous with someone who's the celebrated Howrah Bridge happy to host complete strangers distance postman clutching a spear spans the river in a web of massive for breakfast and chat. His home is and lantern with a mail sack over his grey girders and beams, we paused in the old Whiteway & Laidlaw Deat the Ram Chandra Goenka Zenana partment Store, one-time Selfridg-Bathing Ghat. The little 19th-centu- es of the East. This once-stately pile Looking up and down BBD Bagh ry pavilion was built specifically for with Ionic columns, pediments, (formerly Dalhousie Square) and noble ladies to come and bathe in domes and stained glass had, splutits surrounding streets, the scale the Hooghly. Tatty and ignored now tered Kolkata's Telegraph newspaof Britain's imperial enterprise be- - the city's civic authorities really per in 2006, been left "a brick heap with skin like a mangy dog's". Mon-Calcutta once considered the sec- lamentable ineptitude - its rounded umental decay had become a monu-

Its facade has, finally, enjoyed some much-needed restoration. ment House, the former Royal Ex- nian Ghat built in 1734, where the Bomti told me they were currently painting its domes gold but the interior remains a surreally pre-Just round the corner and posterous shell. Climbing stairs to his top-floor apartment (formerly er mansions and office buildings. es the city's flower market at Mullick store managers' accommodation) The resulting streetscape of "White Ghat. Perhaps it's the intense light you pass vast dim floors, empty but for stray spore-like clusters of wouldn't look out of place in Edin- but those mounds of coiled mari- desks and cabinets tended by listgolds and hibiscus sear your eyes less clerks. His apartment proved surprisingly airy, its walls lined with pusiness and bureaucratic heart crimson. We rested up for chai, In- paintings mostly by Bengali artists, but people still bathe in BBD Bagh's dia's ubiquitous sweet milky tea, at though some visitors might find the encounter a touch contrived.

church. At a busy junction I heard awaited them at home – strangely

Modelled on London's St Martinin-the-Fields, St John's was one of the East India Company's earliest public buildings. Our tour, it seemed, was circling back to the city's roots. In its grounds stand a fin de siècle replica of the Holwell Monument and countless memorials to Raj pioneers who were, say, struck by lightning while horse-riding or who "sunk in camp" during a sudden illness. Most compelling of all is the modest whitewashed mausoleum of Job Charnock. The bold 17th-century company administrator married a Hindu and finally rested up here amidst a cluster of fishing hamlets in August 1690. Kolkata's founding has always been attributed to him and the commerce that grew in his wake.

Yet following a 2003 High Court decision, Charnock is no longer the city's official founder. History has been re-clarified, textbooks have been changed. You have to wonder, though, whether those gowned High Court judges pin their own official genesis on humble fisherfolk or hard-nosed foreign traders.

Amar Grover visited Kolkata with Ampersand Travel (www.ampersandtravel.com; 00 44 20 7289 6100) which organises tailor-made tours, staying at the Oberoi Grand Kolkata (www.oberoihotels.com). A walking tour with Glenburn Private Excursions (www.glenburnteaestate. com) costs from Rs16,650 (Dh1,337) per person. Tours are much cheaper for groups of two and four - with one. two- and three-day options.



The colours of Kolkata's flower market stand out in contrast to the drab surroundings. Amar Grover for The National



Getting to know a city is best done on foot, and you'll discover even more in the company of a good guide, writes Gill Charlton

Cairo

London

Even Londoners sign up for Mary and David Tucker's walking tours which explore "concealed residential districts, the city's courts and alleys that are keyholes highest viewpoint and its most elhaunts of The Beatles and Harry Pot- \$300.

A two-hour walk costs $\pounds 8 (Dh46)$ per • Visit www.walksinistanbul.com (00 person and there's no advance booking involved. Just turn up at the relevant tube station at the appointed hour. Or you can work with the company to create a private tailor-made walk: £120 (Dh688) for two hours for guide with a degree in American of them university graduates who up to 12 people.

• Visit www.walks.com (00 44 207 624 3978)

Istanbu

in the UK for several years. Her halfand full-day walks offer a real insight is an intrinsic part of the day. All the (Dh98-Dh122) per person. into the city's long cultural history.

poke around forgotten corners of from a full-day "Big Apple Sampler" main sights. Above all, Arzu's tours around Manhattan, to a Greenwich rare skill of bringing places to life Historic Harlem. so visitors see them through the eyes of those who once lived there. a two-hour tour to \$695 (Dh2,553) for • Visit www.paris-walks.com (00 331

Golden Horn, Byzantine and Ot- enough notice, Lina can usually find specialist options. These include a cost. "Step on Asia" day taking in smart

into London's past". The guides are egant Ottoman palace, the Beylerall fully-trained Blue Badge holders bevi. There are also day trips to the and include several professional ac- Princes' Islands, an hour's sail from tors and barristers who know how to the old city, where ancient monastell a good story. The guides special- teries and Ottoman mansions sit fers more than 100 themed walks ise in particular areas, ranging from in pine groves and you walk along in and around the city. Their clashistory-focused tours of Old West- wild cliff tops that swoop down to sic two-hour strolls around central minster, Greenwich, Hampstead or sandy coves. A four-hour tour costs Paris concentrate on a particular literary Bloomsbury to the London US\$200 (Dh735); eight hours for quartier or pursue a popular theme

90 533 382 6047)

New York

Native New Yorker Lina Viviano is a registered tour speakers (Brits or Americans), most politics from Harvard. She's been have lived in the city for many years running her own company, Gotham and know how to entertain. An Istanbul native, Arzu Tu- than walking history lectures and food, so sampling local specialities dresses. These walks cost €20-25 tours are private and tailored to suit All the walks are tailor-made and customers' interests. They range

Prices range from \$199 (Dh731) for As well as classic tours taking in the the Big Apple Sampler day out. With 4809 2140)

toman Istanbul, Arzu offers more another couple to help share the

Visit www.walkingnyctours.com

(001 646 645 5782) Paris

Peter and Oriel Caine run Paris Walks, which ofsuch as the French Revolution, Old Les Halles Market or Hemingway's Paris. There's no advance booking; simply turn up with €12 (Dh59) at the Metro station listed on the website schedule

All the guides are native English

Walking Tours, in Manhattan and There are also regular Chocolate lance guide, he makes even the histo-Brooklyn for the past 20 years. A Tours visiting the workshops of masfriendly, funny and insightful sto- ter chocolatiers - and sampling the quent translator for foreign journalryteller, her tours are much more produce. For fashionistas, the Paris Fashion Walk visits top designers' expats and Egyptian parents who tuk set up her own private include visits to places you'd never boutiques as well as vintage shops walking tours 13 years ago after living find on your own. Above all she loves and one that sells only little black of the Pyramids. Newcomers to the Italian husband, she set up Artviva, Private tours can also be arranged, particularly useful if you want to walking tour of Islamic Cairo and the concentrate on the Louvre, the Père mile-long Muizz li-Din Allah Street, As well as street walks telling the the old city as well as taking in the walking, subwaying and snacking Lachaise Cemetery or take a family named after the Fatamid caliph who history of Florence through its in the backstreets of Kowloon and walk with younger children. These conquered Egypt in the 10th century, are entertaining and she has that Village Eating Tour and a trot round two-hour tailored tours cost €160 and which spans a millennia's worth daily gallery tours including "Mas-(Dh787) of recently-restored mosques, sabils, Ottoman palaces and other monu-

ments Ahmed charges from \$26 (Dh95) per

Pedestrians pass through Times Square in Manhattan, New York. Guided tours of the borough include one that samples the food at local eateries. Emmanuel Dunand / AFP Below, the Louvre Museum in Paris can be enjoyed better as part of a private tour. Getty Images / Gallo Images

the American University of Cairo. An erudite, eloquent and engaging free-

person for groups and \$150 (Dh551) per day for private guided tours. Thirty-year-old Ahmed Seddik studied Egyptology at

Contact ahmed.siddik@gmail.com (00 20 10 676 8269) Florence

When Rose Magers, an Australian, came to study law ists, he is also in demand from both in Florence she was appalled at the poor standard of tour guiding in the love his child-friendly tours by camel city. Together with her theatrical capital should book his guided lec- which organises highly entertaining ture about the King Tut Treasure in walking tours for small groups led the Egyptian Museum, followed by a by art experts who are native English speakers.

monuments and murals, there are terpieces of the Uffizi", "The Original David Tour" and an unusual guided stroll through the city's gardens and and goldfish markets, walks through fountains. Expect to pay around shady parks and up to spectacular (00 91 9811 330 098)

€25-35 (Dh123-172) per person for viewpoints. As well as group walks a three-hour walk. ArtViva can also there are private bespoke options: a arrange private tours including visits to artisan studios and a variety of "exclusive experiences" such as an irreverent look at the city's history led by a count from one of Florence's oldest families followed by a drink at his palazzo on the bank of the River Arno. A similar programme of walks and exclusive gallery visits is also offered in Venice and Rome, including ate about her birthplace. She can obprivate after-hours Vatican tours.

• Visit www.italy.artviva.com (00 39 055 264 5033)

Hong Kong

Walk Hong Kong, run by retired banker Marco Foehn and photographer Jackie Peers, uses British residents for many of its themed tours. Hong Kong has a surprising amount of open countryside ffering superb walking: the strenuous MacLehose Trail in the New Territories, a circuit of Lamma Island, or a panoramic five-hour walk across the top of Hong Kong Island on the Dragon's Back Trail. These daylong hikes cost HK\$500 per person (Dh236) in a small group.

The company also offers guided pavement walks around Kowloon and Hong Kong Island, plus a choice of themed days out: birdwatching in the Mai Po wetlands, exploring Second World War battlefields, photography guided shopping excursions. There's even a walk focusing on haberdashery.

Families are not forgotten. Dedicated tours include visits to the bird

Good guides the ticket to a better experience

Carly Chynoweth

A great tour guide can make a holiday. They will add colour, context and a sense of how what and an occasional guide, is often you're seeing fits into a much amused by the "facts" he hears bigger picture; they'll answer at some historical sites. your questions and direct your "The guides have clearly learnt attention towards details you something and they say that might not otherwise have spot- each time. It's blatantly wrong ted. They should also know just when to be quiet and let the gospel truth," he says. experience speak for itself, according to Sam Ham, a professor of communication psychology at the University of Idaho there's no way that's original who also specialises in training that column is upside down, that guides and has worked with the building isn't on its foundation Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority. and that one is actually sitting Although a good guide should on a modern concrete plinth, share stories, Prof Ham says that Appleyard says. it was a moment of silence that had the greatest effect on him when he visited Bali.

He and his wife had been travelling with a fantastic guide – "he want to impart that they can" asked questions rather than just tell when their audience would giving out information, which rather have some peace and qui meant he was able to direct us et. "I've been on tours with exceltowards things he knew would lent guides who really know their interest us" - who suggested that stuff but who never shut up," she they attend a funeral service.

"Funerals are public in Bali. The whole community comes out to see it." Before joining the form their own impressions funeral their guide explained they don't want to have someone its importance in Balinese cul- do all their thinking for them. ture, the religious significance That's one of the reasons that of the ceremonies involved and academics leading tours will ofthe correct etiquette. "Then he ten give a talk the evening before stepped between my wife and I visiting a particular place; this so that we looked like his friends rather than his customers and we stood silently at the funeral. and to avoid missing interesting It was one of the most moving details without overwhelming and truly amazing experiences them on the day. of my life."

By keeping silent and allowing deh, an author who frequently the Hams to observe the funeral as members of the community (MRT), wishes more travellers rather than outsiders observing another culture, the guide allowed them to understand the seriously they take their jobs experience emotionally as well It's not simply a matter of pointas intellectually, Prof Ham says. ing out attractions and adding Of course, good guides also commentary; he puts in weeks need to get the basics right, he of preparation around everyadds: a thorough understand- thing from accommodation to ing of their subject; fluency in road closures for every trip, on the travellers' language; and an top of the extensive reading and ability to tell compelling sto- research that he does to stay on ries. "Guiding is not just giving top of the latest history and arentertaining facts to pleasure chaeology, for example. Tourists seekers," he says. "The guide's should help their guide do his o role is to provoke the tourists to her job by being polite, punctual

them. Some people, eager to get the writer, photographer and MRT best out of their holiday with guide. While most of the coma cultural twist, turn to travel companies that offer specialist she has come across some tourlecturers - often academics - as ists who have not done even the well as professional local guides. most basic research into the "At an archaeological site any- cultural mores of their hosts. one can point and say this is a "It amazes me that some wombath, that is the Eastern gate," says Irenie Ekkeshis, the sales things, which even I don't find and marketing director of Trav- aesthetic and which people here eller, an independent company find very offensive. You will not with strong ties to the British get the best out of a country if Museum. "You can get that from a guidebook. But a lecturer will say 'right, picture this' and will With more and more of us retell you the story of what hap- searching and organising the pened in that bath and why, or which invaders entered through it's not surprising that some that gate, and what the implica- travellers eschew formal tours tions were."

They should also be able to an- dependently. Websites such as swer questions that deviate from www.ourexplorer.com list scores the standard script - something of local guides, although anyone that local site guides may not be able, or even allowed, to do.

Sometimes lecturer-led tours can also offer access to sites that online reviews. People who have are not open to the general visitor, Ekkeshis says. "For example, the lecturer who does our Easter able to find someone when they Island tours is Dr Jo Anne Van arrive simply by keeping their Tilburg. She's a world-renowned authority on the Easter Island has the advantage of allowing statues and has done the most you to meet your guide before [academic] work on the island in the past 20 years." The ar- be aware that good guides are ofchaeologist, who splits her time ten booked up well in advance, between UCLA and Rapa Nui, is often by big tour operators. the director of the Easter Island Statue Project, which means that tial guides at your hotel for an she can offer her groups access interview before agreeing to hire to working digs that aren't open them. "You have to like the per

to the general public. While expertise, storytelling ability and general good humour make for an excellent companion, a bad guide can be something of a nightmare: unfriendly, inflexible, unable to answer have the right to say something questions and - in some cases, and ask them to find someone at least - the purveyors of entire- else."

Surekha brings the city's 1,000-year

At weekends, Surekha organises two-hour walks for groups of up to 15 people which cost \$14 (Dh51) per person. Otherwise, all walks are private and tailor-made to suit.

Visit www.walkhongkong.com (00

guided day costs HK\$3,000 (Dh1,417)



tain access to the Old City's private mansions and parts of the Red Fort not open to the public, and has permission from Delhi University to visit the former Viceregal Lodge and Old Secretariat.

history to life with her infectious enthusiasm and the help of old photographs and maps. She doesn't ignore the present either, introducing visitors to delicious street food and good-value shops. She can also tailor tours to focus on a special interest such as textiles, gardens (Delhi is famous for its huge collection of exotic trees), stepwells and spiritual sites. The opening of the clean, efficient Metro has made it possible for Surekha to introduce off-beat walks including a tour of Mehrauli in south Delhi, the first of the capital's seven cities and now a wonderful mixture of quiet residential lanes, ancient ruins and Mughal-era pleasure gardens.

Visit www.delhimetrowalks.com

852 9187 8641) Delhi

for up to eight people.



ly untrue stories. Andrew Appleyard, who worked as an archaeologist in the Middle East before joining travel operator Exodus as the international sales manager

05

from the outset, but to them it's

Urban myths abound and many "original" historic sites are actually restorations. "You say, no

Gill Charlton, a British travel writer, gets particularly frustrated with guides who are so full of facts and figures that they says. "It's incredibly irritating." Better guides, however, appre ciate that people need time to gives people enough information to put things into context

Tehran-based Saeed Alizaguides for Martin Randall Travel understood just how hard professional guides work and how think, to immerse themselves in and showing courtesy to both the story and to make their own guide and fellow guests, he says meanings with respect to the Getting the best out of a guide things the guide shows and tells is sometimes down to you, says Jane Taylor, a Jordan-based

> pany's clients are well prepared, en will wear the most décolleté you try to impose your values on

> minutiae of our trips online, in favour of finding a guide inplanning to hire a guide this way should always ask for references rather than simply relying on plenty of time and are not travel ling in the high season might be ear to the ground; this approach making up your mind. However, It's also worth meeting potenson, because that will make a big difference to how much you like your trip," says Maan Al-Sabbagh, a professional guide based in Syria. "If you don't feel comfortable with your guide, you