



See change

How India turned a boy into a businessman

At the age of 16, Lincoln Harris was having a tough time at school and had no idea what to do with his life. He decided the only way to break out of the rut was to do something completely different.

So he set off on a six-month spiritual trip to Dharamsala in northern

India, and although it only lasted a month, it made enough of an impression on him to turn his life around.

“You could call it culture shock, but I think it was so much more than that,” Harris says of the journey he took 10 years ago. “I was processing a lot of my short life; processing some

dramatic and traumatic events and actually reliving them.

“Just being in India brought it all into focus – all that emotion that had been below the surface percolated up, and I had to deal with it.

“That is generally what happens in India to people if they are open to

that sort of experience. It mirrors what is going on for them personally.”

On his return home he went back and returned to India three more times before deciding to start his own company specialising in travel to India – Journeys With Lincoln Harris. His desire was to introduce people to India and expose them to its power without becoming too overwhelmed – as he had been on his first trip.

“India can be a broad experience,” he says. “There’s the ‘outer’ experience of travel with all the new sights and sounds, but there is also something going on internally, and to ignore that is to lose half of the potential of being in India. The idea was to look at the total experience rather than just visiting the Taj Mahal. We still go to the well-known places, but it’s also about interaction with people.”

At first Harris was insecure about his young age (21) when he started the company. With the average traveller usually aged between 40 and 55, Harris often finds himself guiding tourists who look and act more like his parents. But he says once people witness his enthusiasm and knowledge of India, they become comfortable.

Harris was keen to retain the “spontaneous experiences” that are usually more associated with independent travel – a theory he almost came to regret on the first day of his first tour five years ago.

“A woman tripped over and turned her ankle,” he says. “I had these visions of the whole trip being put on hold because we would have to spend a week in Delhi waiting in hospital. We quickly discovered it was okay – just a bit sore – but I was very anxious about how it was going to go.

“Overall, that trip was just amazing, and there were lots of those spontaneous experiences. But India is

always throwing up challenges, and essentially, as a leader, it all comes back to you – even things that are out of your control.”

A group of middle-aged Westerners following a 25-year-old Australian would make an unusual sight on the streets of India anyway, but Harris says Indians are naturally very curious, and never hesitate to strike up a conversation with visitors.

“You might find within 10 minutes of meeting an Indian he is asking you about your work, how much money you earn, where you live and what your parents do. You are suddenly spilling your entire life story. They are so open with each other and their curiosity is so strong that they just want to know.

“That is difficult for Westerners sometimes, because we’re very reticent about those things. We don’t always give away personal information, and when you have someone in your face asking questions, staring and wanting to take photos, it can be confronting.”

Harris says the dramatic contrast in cultures between India and Australia means there are possibilities for life-changing experiences on his trips. Nevertheless, he constantly finds himself working against people’s misconceptions that India is a dangerous and dirty place, with the constant threat of major incidents.

Three people pulled out of one of Harris’ trips when the tsunami hit the south coast of India on Boxing Day last year. Harris was actually in the country when the big wave hit.

Witnessing the extent of the damage, he realised he was in a position to raise money to help relief efforts. A few days after the disaster, he sent an email to all of his associates, family, friends and past travellers, saying he had set up a bank account to help establish a school in Chennai for children who had lost both parents.

SNAPSHOT

NAME Lincoln Harris

AGE 25

LIVES Brunswick

RAISED IN Ocean Grove

FAVOURITE PLACE IN INDIA Dharamsala

is my home away from home, and that’s

really where the whole thing started

FAVOURITE INDIAN DISH Anything with

paneer in it – an Indian cottage cheese

LIKES Seeing the reaction of first-time

visitors to the Taj Mahal

TRAVEL FRUSTRATIONS Dealing with

the different sense of time

READING A book about the campaign of

Alexander the Great in India

FAVOURITE FILM *Monsoon Wedding*

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Taking my first

group and getting the sense that I was

doing something I wanted to

He was amazed when he returned home to find \$6500 in the account.

Harris also contributes money and support to a home for handicapped Tibetan children in northern India. Physically and mentally disabled children learn practical skills like drawing and wood carving, creating items that can then be sold.

“Some of them become so good at what they are doing that they become the major breadwinner for their family,” Harris says. “I’ve had ongoing contact with the home since I started, and I bring some of their cards to Australia and sell them. Then I take the money back and buy more cards.

“It gives us a reason to go and visit the home, so we are not just turning up as tourists and taking photos.”

For more information about Journeys with Lincoln Harris, visit: www.journeyswithlincolnharris.com or tel: 9386 5364. **mw**