

Geoff Martin

Geoff Martin led informal yachting and diving trips around the South Pacific for 10 years before suggesting to some friends that they might like to come with him to Nepal. Since then, he has run more than a dozen tours all over the world. Focus Magazine talked to the traveller turned tour leader at his home in Hallidays Point, on the North Coast of New South Wales.



What got you hooked on travel? When I was 13, Dad took me to New Zealand – just me and him. My brother was living there at the time. I thought it was amazing; I mean, culturally you could hardly distinguish it from Australia, but in terms of scenery and the whole outdoor experience ... Rotorua, Mount Cook, walking on the glacier – I remember hobnail boots. It made a deep impression.

> What's been your best travel experience?

That's so hard. Apart from Nepal, Kathmandu and the Everest region (which amazes me every time I visit) there have been so many.

One place that was really something was The Nazca lines, in Peru. These are enormous designs cut into the desert; you can only see them from the air. We had a light plane and we did figures-of-eight over each of them. They are gigantic – there's no way you can see how anyone could have created them without help, without being able to fly. I'd read Von Daniken, so I knew a little bit about it. It just blew me away.

> What else happened on your South American trip?

I rounded up some mates for one of my "Martin's Mayhems", as I call them. I was particularly pleased, because I was able to do something that you don't really see offered anywhere. You know how, quite often, you'll get a couple and one will want to do adventure and all the hard stuff and his partner will want things a bit softer?

So I organised in Peru for the group to split up ... so at one stage, for example, we had most people doing the Inca Trail and the others hung back in Cusco for a day or two and then took the train. We all met again at dawn at the Sun Gate above Macchu Pichu. Incredible! And everyone gets to do what they want to do and share their experiences.

> You are a self-taught tour leader?

Yes, I am. I discovered I had a bit of an aptitude for running trips. It was Nepal that got me started, raising money for the Fred Hollows foundation to cure eye problems in developing countries. I flew into Kathmandu – my first trip abroad really, not counting the Pacific region. Stayed in the Radisson, which was a mistake – totally insulated.

But I got really hooked on heavy trekking, and I conquered a couple of personal targets: 5,200 m and then a trip I led with a dozen of us and a 6,400 m pass. That one was a bit over the top! We got waylaid by the Maoists and spent 5 days negotiating a little ransom to be allowed to carry on. We had a porter down a crevasse at one stage. It's not for everybody, but in terms of trekking, that was my peak – that was my personal Everest. I wouldn't want to actually climb it, but everyone has the need to be challenged, I believe. And I'm very pleased I did that.

> It's a serious responsibility. Do your clients know what they're signing up to?

It's more informal than that on my trips. They each take responsibility themselves, and if we're on a trip, then the contracted company obviously looks after the group. But I'm always very careful to make sure everyone knows what to expect. Group dynamics are important, and plenty of free time.

That's another big plus point about my trips; I program in so much free time, and when I'm doing my trips I've learned that's the one essential item. Give people space and freedom, never over-promise, and always try to over-deliver.

You can gather a group together and they'll follow you, but give them some freedom and it works.

> You've also been to Africa?

I took a group to Kenya and Tanzania last year, doing a safari through Maasai country and the Serengeti, plus climbing Kilimanjaro. And that was a memorable experience. I don't think I have the

words to describe that first evening on the plains – with the tents and the Maasai guides and you've been exposed to all these amazing sights and experiences for the first time, and everyone's been clicking away at zebras, lions and buffalo. I mean, WOW!

You quickly get used to some things. But there are always surprises and rare sights, like crocodiles waiting at a waterhole for an unwary wildebeest or watching a cheetah make a kill. It's just an indelible memory.

> How did you travel on that trip?

We traveled by truck most of the time. Big, old thing; they are the best vehicles for the job. They're so reliable and very, very slow. So you get this fantastic exposure. It's not a case of shooting from A to B, you're really experiencing the culture and the landscape.

> What trip have you just completed?

We've just returned from a fantastic adventure, a combination of a trip to China including trekking part of the Great Wall for four days. Then we flew to Xian to see one of the most incredible finds of the 20th century.

A farmer just happened to discover a terracotta warrior, and after excavations they have discovered a full "terracotta army" of over 8,000 pieces. They are still excavating and piecing together the collection. What a spectacle.

Then, with a little bit of determination, we managed to secure sleepers on the new "Rooftop of the World" train across the Gobi desert in China and across the Tibetan plateau to Lhasa. An amazing journey to say the least ... and because the trains are now pressurised, none of us were affected by the altitude.

Lhasa itself is an amazing city, with one of the main attractions, the Potala Palace, being the home of the Dalai Llama until he was exiled by the Chinese government in the fifties. We then headed off by four wheel drive across Tibet to the Nepal/

Tibet border for our main goal, which was a ten day trek to the Kanshung (Hidden) face of Everest. We climbed through two major passes, each over 5,000 m high, along with our guides and 25 yaks carrying our trek bags – and saw some of the most incredible sights. We could almost touch Everest with our

fingertips, we were that close.

The Kanshung face of Everest is an amazing sight and you feel so much closer to the mountain. We spent the last night before climbing the final pass camped on snow, which was a new experience for some of the group.

The next day's climb through

the pass was a difficult one due to the snow and we had to descend to the snowline in 60 cm of snow. It was an interesting day and quite fun, once everyone got used to the snow. After the trek we drove down the Friendship Highway to the Friendship Bridge, on the Nepalese border. That was an experience in itself, with roadworks and dynamiting going on all around us. Some of the crew were a little concerned, but we lived to tell the tale. We then went on to Kathmandu in a bus, with plenty of guitar playing and singing happening.

> Did you stay in the Radisson again in Kathmandu?

No, no. We stayed in the Diplomat Hotel (about one and a half star) in Durbar Square, surrounded by locals and hundreds of market style shops. We stayed for about three days, which is the right amount of time needed to explore Kathmandu, recover with a few beers on the rooftop and do some bargain hunting. That's more my style.

> What's next?

Next year I am organising a couple of special trips to Nepal. The first is for those people who want to experience the country, Kathmandu and an introductory trek up to about 3,500 m. This will be followed by a fairly heavy trek to Gokyo Lakes through Renjo La on the Nepalese side of Everest. Some people may go on both – I'll have to wait and see.

> Thank you for your time Geoff.

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