

Touring with “new eyes”

KELLY NG looks at how people with visual impairment can enjoy sight-seeing. They can also help their sighted travel companions to experience a new world.



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Traveleyes tours pair sighted and visually-impaired group members for a unique experience. Here, Anne and Mariana examine the medieval brickwork at Seville in southern Spain.

Alex T James stood before a white lion statue in Kathmandu Durbar Square, a royal palace in Nepal. A partner took his hand and guided it across the curves of the lion statue while describing to Alex what he was touching. How do you “see” a place when you are blind? It turns out that it takes some teamwork, and a lot of trust.

“Sighted guides who go out of their way to help those who can’t see make it easier,” said Mr James, who has travelled extensively over the years. He was in Nepal with Traveleyes, a British travel company which pairs blind and partially sighted travellers like himself, with those who see well. Sighted travellers are responsible for describing the scenes before them to their visually-

impaired companions — serving like their “eyes”.

“For me, travelling is a chance to explore new countries and have a sensory experience. There is nothing more exciting than experiencing the sounds, smells, and feelings of a new city,” said Mr James in an interview with the *Nepali Times*.

Liam Mackin, another **avid** blind traveller, said that travelling also calls for some creativity. After their visit to the Taj Mahal in India, for example, Mr Mackin and his partner went to pick up some **miniature** marble models of the Taj Mahal to “feel what (they) would have seen”.

“It’s quite difficult to get a sense of the place when you’re visually impaired, so we have to be creative,” he told *The*

Telegraph. Mr Mackin has travelled all over the world, both independently and with Traveleyes. “Through Traveleyes, I’ve met lots of people who live all over the world, so I go to visit them,” he said.

Using other senses

Since Traveleyes started in 2004, its participants have gone around the world — from soaking up the sights and sounds in New York City’s Times Square, to hiking up the Great Wall of China, and feeling their way around jungles in Borneo. On tours, each blind tourist is paired with a different sighted traveller every day, so that everyone will get to know one another during the trip. The firm was founded by **entrepreneur** Amar Latif, who lost 95 percent of his eyesight by the time he was 18. Mr Latif, now 45, refused to give up on his passion for travelling.

“When you start looking with your other senses, the world becomes more alive,” Mr Latif wrote on Traveleyes’ blog. “Because I can’t see, I am more curious about the sights. So when I travel, I make sure that I get my sighted companion to describe what’s before me and I often end up with a more **vivid** idea than if a sighted person was to just glance at something, take a picture and move on.”

Different world

For the travellers who see well, experiencing a new place with their visually impaired partners can be an

eye-opening experience.

“It was the visually impaired travellers who took me by the hand and taught me what to do. They were good-humoured and sociable people. Ours was always a noisy group because we laughed so much, and we functioned as a team. I learned more about pride, humility, and determination than I ever could from any book,” said Pamela Kirby, who guided a blind traveller in the Spanish island of Ibiza last September.

Tony Booth, a retiree who was a sighted guide during a recent trip to Nepal, said the responsibility of guiding the blind helped him learn to experience new places using his other senses.

“When you are travelling with visually impaired people, what you can see is sometimes of less interest to them. Your other senses become much more important. You become much more aware of what you can hear, what you can smell, what you can feel. You become aware of a different kind of world,” Mr Booth said.

VOCAB BUILDER

avid (say “eh-vid”; adjective) = very enthusiastic.

miniature (say “mini-chur”; adjective) = very small copy of an object.

entrepreneur (say “on-tre-pre-ner”; noun) = a person who starts a business.

vivid (say “vi-vid”; adjective) = clear and detailed.



Traveleyes founder Amar Latif. He turned blind at the age of 18, but refused to give up his passion for traveling.

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