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Around the world in three weeks

By Vikki Hopes



Above: Janice and Erwin Van Diermen enjoy a stop at a step pyramid in Egypt, as part of The Global Scavenger Hunt. Right: Hindu holy men in Kathmandu, India await their next blessing.

The Great Wall of China. The pyramids in Egypt. The Parthenon in Greece. It might take a regular traveller a lifetime to tick these landmarks off their wish list.

It took Erwin and Janice Van Diermen of Abbotsford just three weeks.

The couple recently returned from an adventure called *GreatEscape2008: The Global Scavenger Hunt*. The journey involved them – and 12 other two-member teams – traversing 10 countries on four continents from April 10 to May 3.

In the process, they had to complete a series of scavenger hunts involving locations, food and cultural experiences for which they were awarded points for completing. The top team gets to repeat the journey free of charge next year.

The Van Diermens, who finished fifth overall, said the experience was “overwhelming.”

“I describe it as excruciatingly enjoyable,” Erwin said.

It all started last year, when they each celebrated their 50th birthdays. Janice’s gift to Erwin was a trip to anywhere in the world he wanted to go.

There were so many things he wanted to do – such as a Mediterranean cruise, an African safari or a trip to the pyramids in Egypt – that he couldn’t decide. So he procrastinated.

Then, Janice came across a newspaper article that said teams were needed for The Global Scavenger Hunt. She talked it over with Erwin.

“I said, ‘Hey, let’s do that. Then I don’t have to decide where we’re going,’ ” Erwin said.

What followed was a lengthy application and interview process – via e-mail and phone – with Bill Chalmers, creator of the competition.

The Van Diermens found out that they had been selected for the 2008 version, and they then had to produce the \$9,900 each to cover accommodation, travel and food costs.

They also had to prepare to leave their business – they own a Mr. Rooter plumbing franchise – in the hands of their employees during their absence.

Then, they were off. Participants were not told ahead of time where they would be travelling. All that Janice and Erwin knew was that they had to meet up with their competitors at a particular hotel in San Francisco.

From there, it didn't take long for the game to begin. Chalmers met with the teams, provided instructions and sent them off on a mini scavenger hunt. A couple of hours later, they were told they had another two hours to get to the airport for their next destination – Hong Kong, China.

Each team was handed a booklet listing the scavenger hunts they could choose from. It would be physically impossible for any team to complete all the tasks, so they had to be selective: Would they do a few large tasks, which were worth more points, or several smaller scavenges?

The Van Diermens said it took them awhile to figure out what strategy worked best for them.

“We wanted to play hard and we wanted to travel at our own pace – and that's what we did,” Erwin said.

The trip took them from China to (in the following order): Malaysia, Singapore, Nepal, Egypt, Greece, Romania, the Netherlands, and Canada, ending at the CN Tower in Toronto.

One of the scavenges they completed in Singapore was to find “the singing cab driver.” The rules prohibited them from using the Internet, so they deferred to their hotel concierge on how to find him. They then sang karaoke with the driver while he transported them to some of their other destinations.

Another scavenger involved finding a particular cafe in Egypt and having a Turkish coffee. When the Van Diermens found the site, it was closed for renovations, but the owner and his grandson were present.

They made them the coffee and chatted with them about the history of the place. They took the couple downstairs, where they revealed a 60-year-old printing press that had been used to print leaflets for an underground movement to get rid of their then King Farouk.

Even better, the owner pushed on a button that opened a secret passageway to a set of stairs – “just like in Indiana Jones,” Janice said. The couple got bonus points for this find.

A task in Kathmandu, India involved locating a certain temple and finding “something that happens there.” The Van Diermens found the temple, and discovered that it was the site for human cremations along the river.

While there, they realized they could complete another scavenger – to find a Hindu “holy man” and be blessed by him. The loin-clothed holy men sat at the temple all day, smoking questionable “herbs” and performing blessings.

There were so many scavenges along the way that the Van Diermens can't choose a favourite, but since they both have Dutch heritage, they found their time in the Netherlands – specifically, Amsterdam – to be the easiest.

Other portions were gruelling, as they involved searing heat, difficulties with language, chaotic social structures, or hours of travel. For example, it took 18 hours to get from San Francisco to Beijing, China.

On the plus side, the Van Diermens said their accommodation – usually five-star hotels – was exceptional, and they learned to become “savvy travellers.”

“We could travel anywhere in the world now and we wouldn't feel a twinge of anxiety,” Janice said.

The couple said they are now taking the time to process the things they saw and learned on this trip and determine what they want to do next. Will they volunteer in an impoverished nation? After witnessing the choking smog and abundant garbage in many of the countries, will they do more to promote environmental issues?

There's only one thing they know for certain.

“This has been a real special kind of thing that we did,” Janice said.