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'We have a blind date with the world!'

RESHMI R DASGUPTA

It's not often that two passions can converge to give a unique perspective and purpose to life. But that's exactly what happened to 45-year-old William D Chalmers who set up the Great Escape Foundation to pursue his twin objectives of social service and travel.

The one-time business executive who was also part of Bill Clinton's political team has now turned travelling into an instrument to help social causes. The Scavenger Hunt entails that participants not only see exotic parts of the world in a uniquely indepth manner, they also raise considerable sums of money, individually or via sponsors for good causes. Reshmi R Dasgupta caught up Chalmers when he landed in India for a five day halt after stints in China and Macau as part of Great Escape 2005.

He and the 11 participants were looking forward to the next parts of the adventure that would take them to Egypt, Dubai, Istanbul, and several countries in Eastern Europe before returning to New York on May 7 for the prize giving ceremony.

How did the Great Escape Foundation start and why?

It was always my intention to retire at 40 and luckily I did! After that I wrote books, screenplays....but I felt I needed to find a meaning to my life. Of course, I travelled a lot and the people who I met often belonged to or worked for organisations like CARE , Medicin san Frontieres and Unicef. I saw the good work they were doing and decided to raise money for them. And what better way than in doing what I love to do anyway -- travel?

So we decided upon one fund-raising event every year which would be a round the world Scavenger Hunt, a sort of travelathon, with the goal of raising \$1 million a year. That would merge the objectives of the foundation with travel. We haven't reached that figure yet, but we're getting there. It's actually a labour of love -- sometimes more labour than love when I have to sort out the logistics!

How did you decide on setting up the Scavenger Hunt?

For a long time I was what could be called a "global summit junkie" -- I trailed the great leaders round the world wherever they were meeting. That called for a lot of travelling. Then in 1989 there was a race around the world in public transportation. I spent 17 days travelling the world in public transportation and I actually won the event! So the New York Times featured me as the "World's Greatest Traveller". Some time alter when I was sitting with friends in Pohara in Nepal, I thought of putting together a travel adventure competition, with a non-profit intention. That's how the Scavenger Hunt came into being -- and now we have Great Escape 2005.

Why call it a Scavenger Hunt?

Being a scavenger is very different from say, being a treasure hunter. A scavenger examines what is around, he seeks...

What kind of people take part?

They are of course, all seasoned travellers. They also want to help good causes. They must have particular skills of overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, of being able to communicate with people. Naturally, they have to be good at problem solving as we give them some pretty unusual tasks!

What do the teams do?

I call it a blind date with the world! Actually, it's like putting together a big jigsaw puzzle because the participants travel to 10 countries across 4 continents, seeking out clues and information. We don't want them to read or "prepare" too much before they actually land in a country. Our idea is that the travellers should learn about things from the local people, interact with the culture of the places they visit. We want them to go to the market places, participate in the festivals, try out the cuisines, learn about the politics, culture, economy and religions of the countries they go through. That's why our motto is 'Trusting strangers in strange lands'.

How do they get the required points to win the contest?

Well, in the Scavenger Hunt we tell them to, say, learn yoga from a yogi or find out the meaning of a tune or learn a joke from a taxi driver or even find a unique fruit! We have a list of things they have to do, information they have to gather. That's what gets them the points to win! But we ask stuff they won't find in any guide book so they have to interact with the local people!

How much does it cost to participate?

A lot of those who take part get sponsors so that the money can go to charity. Otherwise, it is \$7900 per person, of which 30%-40% goes to chosen charities. This year there are 11 participants, and they are from the US, Canada and Belgium.