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WIRED FOR TRAVEL/ Using the Internet to avoid travails

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The GreatEscapes Foundation has taken that great institution from our youth - the scavenger hunt - and amped it up to something global in scale. Instead of looking for a weed whacker and a pound of brown rice, this "Blind Date With the World" might send competitors off to take a camel ride in Egypt's Valley of the Kings or to toss a Frisbee from the Great Wall of China.

The Global Scavenger Hunt, in its second year, will send 25 teams of two on a 23-day world tour this spring that will touch down on at least four continents and in 10 countries. At stake is \$100,000 in prize money and the "World's Greatest Travelers" trophy.

It's a challenge akin to the wager that sent Phileas Fogg "Around the World in 80 Days" - but set in the jet age.

Event organizers stress that this is not a contest meant for the casual traveler, that it is "a cultural immersion for independent- minded travelers." In simple terms: It's a contest for those who prize adventure more than comfort and who can embrace the tour motto of "Trust strangers in strange lands." No whining allowed.

"It is an authentic global adventure that restores the curiosity and appeal that turn-of-the-century travelers had," says event organizer and author William Chalmers.

"It is my belief that you never feel more fully alive than when overcoming obstacles. Not by climbing Mount Everest mind you, but by being challenged by different languages, transportation snafus, cultural barriers, personal dynamics and the ever-present fever of competition."

Each team will be given a well-thought-out "List of Things to Do in Tokyo (or New Delhi, or Prague) " that will have them solving riddles, following cryptic clues, answering travel trivia and looking for physical hints to discover unique items wherever they are on that day.

This quick lap around the globe starts April 25 in Los Angeles and ends May 18 in New York.

Participants pay a donation of \$9,900 each (\$7,900 if they opt out of the competition for prize money). A portion of that is tax deductible because the Global Scavenger Hunt is a fund-raiser for charities, including Doctors Without Borders, The Hunger Site, Care, UNICEF and Habitat for Humanity International.

The donation covers all airfares, first-class hotels and 30-40 percent of meals. The winning pair last year averaged about \$60 a day in out-of-pocket expenses. None of the items required as part of the scavenger hunt is more than \$10.

The application deadline is Friday. If you don't have a partner, event organizers may be able to help find one for you.

www.globalscavengerhunt.com/home.htm