

TRAVEL

India Cool is... DIVING DEEP

The large groups of Indian tourists seeking pav bhaji in the Alps are fast dissolving. We're also moving on from the three-nights/four-days guidebook vacations. Immersive travel is the way forward, says SHEENA DABHOLKAR

Dabholkar spent her summer working on a farm—planting seeds, pulling out weeds and raking pine needles

From top:
Planting beans;
a farmhouse in
Palombara Sabina

Dabholkar
booked a
one-way
ticket to Italy

I'm a travel blogger who hasn't been to many places.

I moved countries twice as a child, signed up for an exchange programme in college and I've spent a large chunk of my adult life travelling both for pleasure and work, but when I'm comparing notes with others I seem to stick way less pins onto an atlas.

The trouble with me is, given the choice, I'd rather get stuck in one place than see several. I'm a slow, experiential traveller and, increasingly, I'm realising I'm not the only one.

JUMP IN, DON'T FLOAT

Taking the time to fully immerse ourselves in a destination and its cul-

ture is how many young people are now experiencing the world. It's the antithesis to the three-nights/four-days vacation, a proper departure from the holiday that's over by the time we've unpacked. Rather, immersive travel lets us actually take a break from our busy lives to try something new and fully recharge. It offers a glimpse beyond the superficial, to get under the skin and find the pulse of a destination. It's a way for us to ask, "Who are its people?", "What do they do?", "How do they live?"

A couple of years ago, at age 27, I bought a one-way ticket to Italy on a whim. I wasn't sure where exactly I wanted to go, but I had two qualifiers

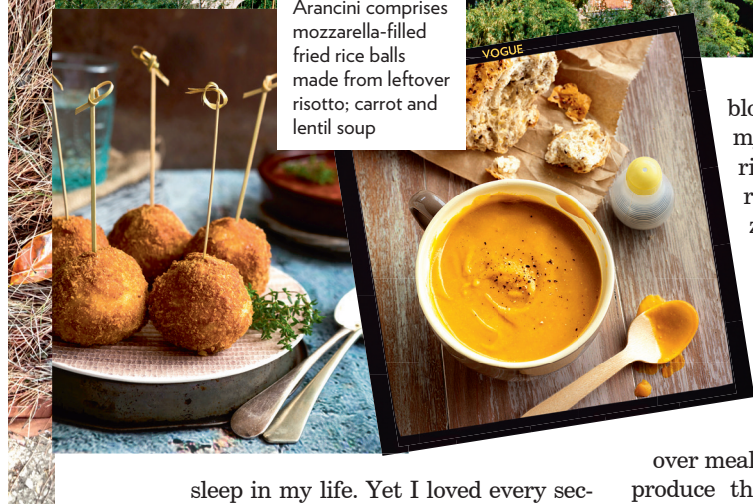
for what I wanted to do—something active and something different. I settled on a fortnight's stay at a vineyard outside Rome learning about organic farming. It seemed interesting enough and I yearned, after years of living in a big city, to work with my hands. It would be my first time in the country, I loved Italian food and casually saying I was going farming in Italy seemed to evoke a certain sense of romance.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

The reality, of course, is that farming is far from romantic. I found myself on my knees and hands in the field planting long rows of beans and seeds, digging out weeds and tying vines. I raked leaves, fed pigs, made paths, watered plants, collected eggs and harvested fruits and vegetables. It pushed me to my limits physically, my knees were buckling at the end of each day and I never looked more forward to



From left: Ischia Island; foraged purslane, a salad green that grows wild across Italy



Arancini comprises mozzarella-filled fried rice balls made from leftover risotto; carrot and lentil soup

sleep in my life. Yet I loved every second of it. When the end of the two weeks on that small winery on a beautiful estate in Palombara Sabina reared its head, I was ready to do it all over again. I found myself another farm, this time a small terraced plot behind a bed and breakfast on the island of Ischia in the Gulf of Naples.

DIFFERENT STROKES

As it turns out, going to a new country for the first time to farm is not about farming at all. I merely expected to grow a few things but rather I received a crash course in sustainable living from people who ate seasonally, knew where all their food came from and had to be responsible about their waste.

I reaped the most pleasurable rewards of helping grow my own food. I was taught how to preserve fruit, pickle capers, and make jam and tomato sauce to give ingredients a longer lease on life. I learned to cook dishes I'd rarely seen on an Italian restaurant's menu—lentil soup with garlic and rosemary, beer battered zucchini

blossoms, rabbit pâté, and my favourite, arancini, fried rice balls made from leftover risotto and filled with mozzarella. I enjoyed two-hour-long limoncello-fuelled lunches that helped me understand the relationship between food and family; time spent chatting, gossiping and making plans for the future

over meals made from fresh, organic produce that they grew themselves and products like vinegar, parmesan and olive oil bartered with friends and neighbours.

I certainly didn't expect to be introduced to an entire community by running the farm's stall at their local farmer's market (even though we had no common language) and sharing with them a bountiful communal Sunday breakfast to which each farmer brought his offerings.

Neither did I expect to learn tales of folklore or participate in annual cultural traditions like picking green walnuts and brewing walnut liqueur on the 24th of June. Nor did I ever imagine I'd be treated as one of their own. Which meant waking with the sun (*a fanabla!*), entertaining their babies (awww...), working as hard as they did (*Che palle!*) and swearing endlessly in Italian. But my biggest lessons were about myself. I learned how happy I was with so little (aided by the fact that the airlines lost my baggage) and how the skills I take for granted—my internet savviness, my knowledge of

photography, my ability to build a website and so on—were the very things they could benefit from to sell their beautiful, small-batch wines. Sharing my gifts was my way of giving back.

My short five weeks were much more than a delicious vignette of life in rural Italy. By putting myself in the locals' shoes for a brief moment, I didn't just experience two destinations in a way not otherwise marketed to tourists, I garnered a newfound appreciation for my own life and gained a family I'd never known before.

Maybe I haven't been to many places. But I belong to all the ones I have. ■

Dabholkar blogs about design and travel at Thisissheena.com

TOTAL IMMERSION

Farming in Italy not to your taste? Dabholkar has some other suggestions

GET CRAFTY, WITH A SILVER LINING

The Kota Gede neighbourhood in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, is synonymous with silver crafting. Sign up to learn the art of Javanese silversmithing at Art Studio76, which offers short, full-day and weekend courses. A skilled local artisan will show you the ropes so you can hammer, solder, engrave and polish your own unique piece of jewellery. The best part: you can bring your own designs. Artstudio76.com

WORK YOUR WAY TO FUN

Fancy seeing turtles nest on a beach in Mexico or learning permaculture in Portugal? Volunteer a few hours a day in lieu of meals and accommodation; learn practical skills like gardening, woodworking, conservation and eco-building; live with a local family and explore the gorgeous surroundings on your days off. Check out websites such as Helpx.com and Workaway.com, which list opportunities worldwide.