



By Hiral Dholakia-Dave/SATimes

India Untravelled, a proponent of socially responsible travel experiences in rural India has organized from April 13-15, a first of its kind trip wherein travelers will stay in an organic farm in traditional mud and thatched roof cottages and tents, enjoy traditional folk performances on the farm and street festivities in Anandpur Sahib and visit Indus Valley site at Ropar. And cherry on the cake – the revenue generated will go towards supporting livelihoods of artisans of village of Rail Majra.

SATimes spoke to Shiva Nath, the co-founder of India Untravelled.

What was the motivation behind launching this idea?

Punjab has been celebrating the festival of Baisakhi since over 300 years and gradually these celebrations have been reduced only to the rural parts where agriculture is still practiced. While everyone in the cities of India has heard of Baisakhi, few have experienced the joy with which our farmers celebrate the harvesting of their crops. To join them in their music, dances and feasts is a soulful experience, one that everyone should savor at least once in their lifetime.

Why did you choose Prakriti farm?

Prakriti Farm is an organic farm on the Punjabi countryside, an hour from Chandigarh, quietly nestled in the Shivalik Range. Kaushal, the owner of the farm, often visited his grandparents in the village of Rail Majra and the surrounding forest as a kid. He fondly recalls collecting wild berries and flowers, sleeping under starry skies, milking cows before the crack of dawn, sitting by the chulha waiting for hot and crisp paranthas and eating makki di roti and sarson da saag with fresh white butter dripping off the plate, lovingly poured by his grand-

A Baisakhi special trip to Punjab's countryside



Colorful festivities in Punjab

mother. This was the Punjab he grew up in.

After many years of living in the cities, he returned to see farmers selling off their land and taking up small jobs in the factories nearby. The cultural landscape of the village had changed, the natural spring in the forest had dried up, the land was barren and devoid of all vegetation, and the entire village was exposed to flash floods. It was this ignorance and neglect of nature by the local community that made Kaushal and his family sit up and do something for the environment. Practicing organic farming techniques, Kaushal's family has slowly recreated the ecological environment of the private forestland they had inherited from their

ancestors.

Rail Majra largely consists of farmers and homes a group of talented musicians and dancers. Since the establishment of factories in the nearby towns, many people have sold their agricultural land and ignored their



Tents at Prakriti farms

artistic talents to keep blue-collar jobs which can financially sustain their families. While Prakriti Farm is a living example of using ancient and organic farming techniques to revive the soil and grow healthier crops, tourism via Prakriti Farm is a way to encourage the artistic talent of the village and a motivation for the village folk to preserve their traditional way of life.

What is the focus of India Untravelled?

India Untravelled was launched in January 2012, as a quest to help travelers discover an India that does not feature on regular tourist maps. Our destinations typically lie in rural parts of India with untouched natural beauty, where hospitality comes innately to the people and a traditional, earthy way of life can still be experienced. Keeping in mind the needs of different kinds of travelers, our destinations range from heritage homestays set in relatively rural parts of the country, to farm stays and village guest houses that offer complete immersion in rural India. These experiences let travelers discover the vibrant culture of India's villages, indulge in delectable local cuisines, uncover ancient traditions, rejuvenate with the region's folk music and dances and explore centuries old indigenous art forms. We handpick partners based on accessibility, authenticity and elements of social responsibility and act as their marketing arm to raise awareness and

generate business using social media platforms.

How did India Untravelled happen?

The idea of India Untravelled was born on the countryside of Punjab, where a family from the pind of Ghallu managing a farmhouse amid a 400-acre fruit farm really touched me. Tourism constituted a significant part of their livelihood but this isn't the sort of experience that people would book through a travel agent in today's Google-reliant world.

Due to lack of a significant online presence, the revenues did no justice to the potential of the experience.

With my experience in digital marketing at the Singapore Tourism Board, I decided to



Ropar wetlands

start India Untravelled in an attempt to bridge the online marketing gap between travelers and countryside hosts in India.

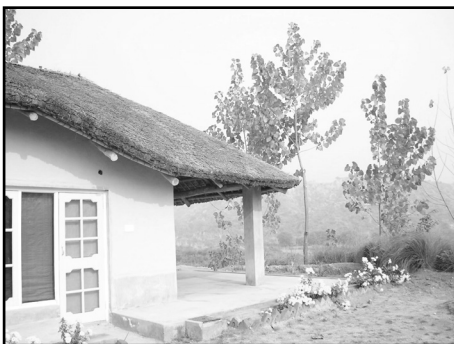
Tell us about your background.

I hail from Dehradun, a valley at the base of the Himalayas and spent six years in Singapore, studying and then working as a social media strategist with the Singapore Tourism Board. After traveling extensively on the countryside of Southeast Asia & Europe, I came back to India with a desire to explore my own country. I picked up marketing projects with social enterprises in the rural tourism industry and took to freelance travel writing, before taking the plunge to start India Untravelled. The core team of India Untravelled consists of passionate travelers, ever ready to set out on the road to discover new and exciting travel experiences and ways to use tourism as a means of generating alternate livelihood options.

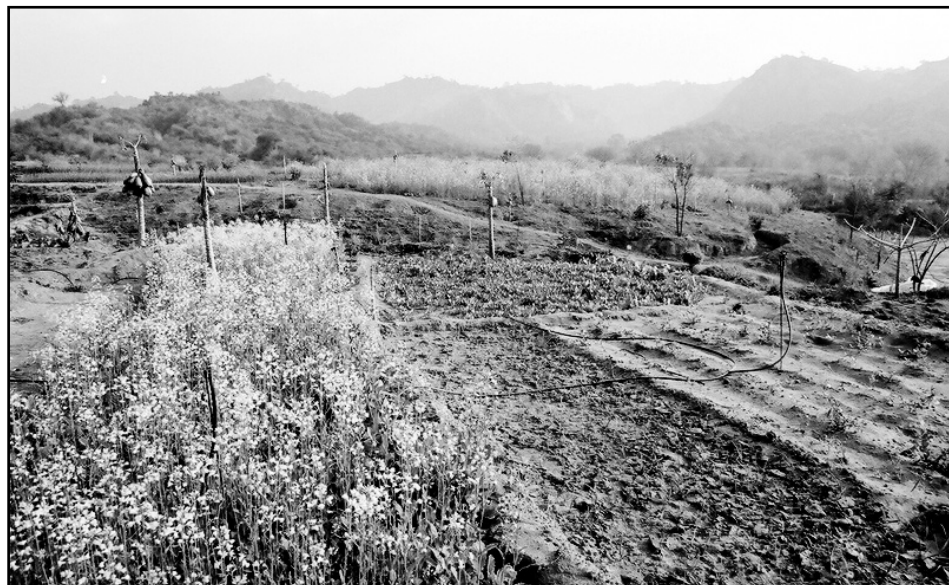
How's been the response to the Baisakhi special trip?

We started marketing the Baisakhi trip in early February; it was a bit too early for people to confirm their plans even though we sensed a fair amount of excitement in the enquiries we got. We received only two bookings until early March and then things exploded! We closed bookings last week with all 12 spots on the trip filled and an extra 13th spot created for an enthusiastic Punjabi girl 'who's lived in Punjab but never seen the countryside celebrations of Baisakhi.'

A lot of solo female and male travelers are joining us, which excites me as a proponent for the cause of solo travel in India. We set out on Friday the 13th and are extremely excited to see our travelers experience Punjabi country hospitality and try what some feel is the best food in India!



Mud and thatched roof cottages at Prakriti farms



Mustard fields in bloom at Prakriti farms