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TRAVEL

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Pick your adventure



A fisherman on the Li River who uses cormorants to dive for fish (for more on this and other Chinese wonders, turn to page 16).

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WE BEGAN BELIEVING
THAT THE POINT
OF GOING SOMEWHERE
WAS TO REPLICATE THOSE
PERFECT PICTURES
IN MAGAZINES.
— TOM EATON

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A TASTE FOR TRAVEL

Credited with elevating Indian cuisine to an epicurean experience, Michelin-starred chef **Vineet Bhatia** gets large dollops of creative inspiration from travel.

Anything and everything influences me – plates, magazines, people's likes and dislikes, my travels ... inspiration can strike anywhere. Although I wanted to be a pilot at a very young age, and I grew up near an airport in Bombay, I took my first domestic flight aged 21. What a joy it was! I never knew that in the next 10 to 12 years I'd be doing three flights a month.

I'm a constant traveller – it's something of a trademark now. It begins mostly in London and goes on to everywhere. Mauritius and Mumbai get three or four visits a year, I'm in Geneva every six weeks, and I use Dubai as a transit hub once every four or five weeks to go to Bahrain, Doha or Saudi Arabia.

My wife, Rashima, says this is the secret to our happy marriage – because I'm never at home. She's my business partner, wife and boss. When I'm working in London, 16 hours a day, we see each other at work and at home, but we're not really standing in front of each other. When I'm travelling, I've got WhatsApp and Tango (the Middle Eastern equivalent) as well as Skype. And the airlines have in-flight Wi-Fi, so communication is instantaneous.

Technology has been a huge asset for travellers who need to keep in touch, not just with their families, but also their teams around the world. The guys in Geneva might send me a message or photograph to comment on, or I might get a call from the head chef in Bahrain to confirm the menu offering when the royal family is sitting for lunch...

Vacations boil down to the schedule. My diary is generally booked up 12 months ahead, but we try to plan at least one trip a year somewhere totally different.

Long breaks happen mostly in summer. Last year we went to Japan and before that



Venezuela, where I saw black-coloured corn for the first time.

I thought it was artificially dyed, but locals convinced me that black is the corn's natural colour. That was an eye-opener. There is a black potato, too. I've seen purple and white, but never black potatoes. When you get a naturally black potato, it boggles your mind. This is a very important aspect to travel – it opens up your thought processes.

It was Japan, though, that really hit me. The culture, the people, their eating habits, eye for detail, precision – it is absolutely fantastic. As a chef, I enjoyed visiting the markets and seeing things so symmetrically arranged. All the carrots, beans and peas are the same size, yet they are not genetically grown. The quality is grade A, not just in the big cities such as Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, but also in the smaller villages of Mount Fuji, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Japanese have also produced the cuisine I love most after my own. I've used Japanese flavours to influence my own dishes. We combine the flavour and pungency of wasabi with mustard seed, for example, and infuse it with tandoori prawns. I have made

a dressing out of the Japanese lemon yuzu, soya sauce and tamarind chutney to go with idli, a steamed rice dumpling from the south of India. And chicken tikka is still chicken tikka, but instead of adding black-mustard seeds from North India, you can replace them with a hint of wasabi for a further kick.

Travelling to the Middle East, I've found a lot of familiar food, because there has been so much trade between India and the Arab world over many centuries. We use jaggery, brown sugar and molasses, while they take date syrup and honey influences from Morocco, Iran, Iraq and Syria. We try to incorporate those into the cuisine, because they are also part of the Indian repertoire.

I'm looking forward to participating in the Chefs Who Share – the Art of Giving fundraiser in Johannesburg this year, as I have never been to South Africa. I want to see the local market, to work with the local chefs, and to get a sense of the local people. That will be inspiring, because that is the common denominator everywhere. No matter where you go, it's all about people, culture, respect, and good-quality fresh products cooked with passion, love and care. That is what travel has taught me. ■