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Culture

A history of spice

Did you know chillies are Portuguese, and that pepper clears the nose? RMIT alum Himanshi Munshaw Luhar turned her passion for food, science and history into a business that helps travellers understand the story behind food – from India to Dandenong, Melbourne.

"Everything changes every 50 kilometres in India – the clothes, the food, the language. That's what we help people understand, the cultural differences. It's fascinating," says Himanshi Munshaw Luhar, who grew up in India, migrated to Australia to study a Masters of Accounting at RMIT and now runs a culinary tours and holiday business.

Himanshi combined her business knowledge with her love of food and Indian culture to establish Beacon Holidays, running culinary tours through India, Turkey and Africa, and also a local version through Melbourne city and Dandenong.

"Indian food has evolved over time, and it's still evolving. There's a lot of influence with a lot of dynasties that have been in India, right from the Indus Valley to the British," she says.

"For example, chillies are not Indian, they are Portuguese. When the Portuguese were in Goa, they brought chillies and tomatoes, they introduced both to Indian cuisine. The British brought High Tea to India."

"Everyone has left a little bit of something behind. Curry is not an Indian word – it's a British word. They came up with that because everything that had a bit of flavour, they called it a curry."

The customised culinary tours take in the culinary capitals of India – starting in Calcutta, down through the spice plantations, including experiences like going to markets, learning how to cook different foods and even having a royal picnic with a prince.

The favourite stop on the tours is usually the spice plantations and learning about the health benefits to each flavour.

"Pepper clears your nose, turmeric is a good healing agent, cumin is good for digestion, mustard oil is used to preserve food. It's all naturally based elements that have been part of our food for a very long time. They are all natural based elements and there is a science behind the health benefits," she says.

The company initially started a half-day version of the tours in Melbourne city and Dandenong to help prepare people for the Indian experience, but Himanshi soon found the local tours were popular in their own right.

Beacon Holidays is now into its second year in Melbourne. "What we are building is a niche operating boutique company where everyone's opinion matters on their holiday, and they have the flexibility to do what they want," she says. But setting up the business has its challenges. "People say you need to give yourself three years when you start a business, so next year we hope to see how far we've come," she says.

"It's all part of understanding the commonality of food. That's what we do when we celebrate – we eat. Hopefully you learn about local cultures and take a little bit back home, and see if you want to fit it into your life."

Indian culinary tours in Dandenong and Melbourne city most weekends: www.beaconholidays.com.

Annual Appeal 2011

The [2011 Annual Appeal](#) is now on until the end of the financial year (30 June). 100% of all money raised goes directly to scholarships for disadvantaged students.

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Himanshi Munshaw Luhar in India.



A culinary tour through a Dandenong spice market.