



FEMALES FEEDING

Five Kiwi women tell **Joanne Karcz** how small group food tours deliver big results for travellers seeking authenticity

Combine a long career in hospitality with an abundance of curiosity and a love of travel and you arguably have the perfect food tour guide. That's what five Kiwi women have put their money on, starting small-group tours that take adventurous foodies as far as Georgia, India, Japan and China. If their popularity is anything to go by, Kiwi travellers agree.

Being a Kiwi host means that when Kiwis join their tours, they're not the "lone Kiwi" says Vicki Ravlich-Horan, a Hamiltonian who runs Taste of Tours. "The in-jokes start from the first night because you kind of speak each other's language."

"There's just something that happens in the air when you meet somebody who's Kiwi," agrees Leanne Kitchen, who launched Everywhere and Beyond Tours in 2024. "I think as New Zealanders, we really treasure that."

"We're so independent in our travel style," says Sarah Meikle, a Wellingtonian who spends half of the year in India and founded All India Permit Tours. "The first thing [my guests] say to me is, 'I'm not a group traveller,'" she says, yet having just a handful of trips each year, all run by the

same host in small groups (six to 14 people depending on the destination) allows for flexibility and originality.

For Kitchen, this means being free to change plans that morning to capitalise on "unscripted things, that just might be really magical".

Fellow Wellington local Janice Kirkwood, who runs Eating Adventures with Sue Dempsy, agreed that small groups were key to pursuing authentic experiences.

"Other tours are the same tour year in, year out ... for us it's important we find new places to go, new restaurants [and if] something goes off the boil we can change it by the next time. That's the beauty of a small private tour company." Case in point, their tour of Georgia typically included dinner at a charming 180-year-old farmhouse, before a crackling wood fire. However, when other tour groups discovered it, they cut it from the itinerary and found somewhere new.

While food is central to each of the tour companies, it's not just about eating great food, but using cuisine to more deeply experience a culture.

"Food breaks barriers," Kitchen explains. "People

From left: Food breaks barriers, says Leanne Kitchen. Janice Kirkwood and Sue Dempsy at their favourite mentaiko (spiced cod roe) stall at Tsukiji Market in Tokyo. Sarah Meikle embraces the colour and elegance of Udaipur's palace hotels.

are charmed when you're interested in what they're eating. The locals love it. They love when you show an interest [in their food]."

"If you come to India, food is unavoidable," says Meikle. "It's very much intrinsic to the culture here. If you think about the Indian culture, the most important things to Indians are family and food. It shapes every part of their life."

Kirkwood and her co-founder, Dempsy, travelled to Tokyo twice a year for over 10 years and "absolutely loved the food". Then, says Dempsy, "Janice planned an itinerary [for a friend] which was all food-related. It was about giving him an experience of all the different dishes at specialist restaurants and things. He loved it and suggested we actually do it for a job."

They took his advice and hosted their first Tokyo food tour in 2018. When holidaying in Lima and Georgia, they discovered "amazing food", which led them to start leading tours to Lima in 2019 and Georgia in 2023.

However, it's not necessary to know the destination inside out to run an unforgettable tour. In 2023, Ravlich-Horan hosted her first tour to Sicily despite not having been herself. Instead, she worked closely with her Sicilian friend, Rosario, to create the itinerary.

"I trusted Rosario on that one. He knew lots of these people that are unique [and] perfect for us," she said, adding that there were "lots of Zoom



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chats" to pull it together.

"Tours are all about communication with your guests, and my role [is] host, not the tour guide. It's about fixing. It's about getting to know your guests, reading body language, understanding who they are before they even get there." Proof of success is in the pudding, so to speak; demand has led her to launch tours in Sri Lanka, Croatia, Puglia and South Australia, with more in the pipeline.

When looking for a change after running the Wellington on a Plate Food Festival for 15 years, Meikle "came to India, with the thought that I might start bringing people here", and help them navigate the destination. "India is tricky for a lot of people. [They] find it challenging in lots of ways." She had visited India "many, many times [and] planned many, many holidays for people and friends". In 2024 she hosted her first two tours to India and her six 2026 group tours have sold out.



Vicki Ravlich-Horan (right) and guests take in the bustle of Catania Market in Sicily.

A trained chef hailing from Te Awamutu but now Sydney-based, Kitchen began her foray into tours in 2024.

After her food and travel writing contracts slowed in 2023, she wondered what to do next. The answer was in China. "I really care a lot about China. I feel an affinity with the place, and I would like to share that with other people."

Since 2024, she has been "plugging away" developing tours and will run her first tour to Yunnan this October, with Sichuan to follow in 2027.

Being female-led doesn't make much difference to travellers, according to Meikle and Dempsey, who both report their tour guests are 40% men, with Meikle's next India tour largely attended by men.

It's also not as important as experience, when it comes to being an excellent travel host, says Ravlich-Horan. "I think a guy could do what I do," she says, adding that years of working front of house gives her the ability to "read people"; a

Checklist

FOOD TOURS

DETAILS

All India Permit Tours <https://www.allindiapermit.co.nz/>
 Eating Adventures <https://www.eatingadventures.co.nz/>
 Elsewhere and Beyond Tours <https://elsewhereandbeyond.tours/>
 Taste of Tours <https://tasteoftours.com/>

defining quality for hosts. "We've [all] come out of hospitality, but I don't think it specifically has to be women leading tours," agrees Kirkwood.

In India, Meikle does take a more considered approach, seeking ways she can empower female business owners or operators. "I love working with females here because I think it's really important that we females support females. [I work with] Pink City Rickshaws, and it's all female drivers." She also works with "a charity in Jodhpur that helps young women... to give them financial literacy and skills. And being a woman, I'm focused on that."

These Kiwi women love what they do. They love sharing their discoveries with others. They enjoy working with locals on the ground and the people who join their tours.

"We want it to feel like you're travelling with a group of friends, even though when you arrive you may not know anyone," says Dempsey.