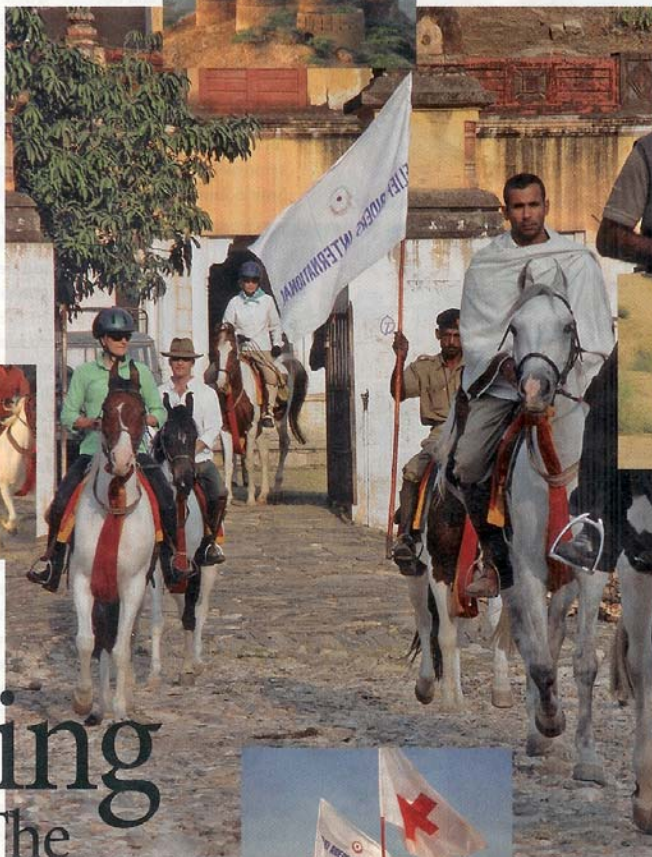


VOLUNTOURISM



A sight for sore eyes: Flags fluttering, Alexander Souri (right, in white shawl) arrives in an Indian village with fellow riders.

Riding To The Rescue

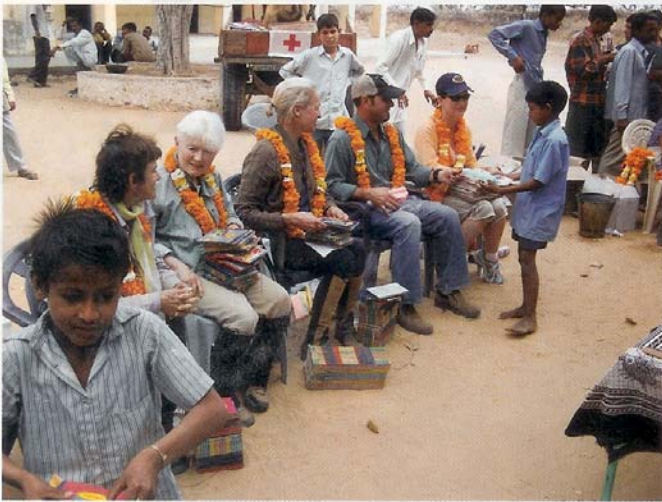
COURTESY OF RELIEF RIDERS INTERNATIONAL

A band of strangers gallops into town. Before they leave, they'll have dewormed 400 kids, removed 200 cataracts and pulled 60 teeth. It's their vacation | By Alan Farnham

A FIERY HORSE WITH THE SPEED OF LIGHT, A CLOUD OF DUST and a hearty "Hi-yo, Sonya!" Sonya, a beautiful white mare, is the preferred steed of Alexander Souri—adventurer, philanthropist and founder of Relief Riders International, an adventure travel company that leads caravans of riders through the deserts of Rajasthan, India's northwestern province. They bring relief, school supplies and goats to remote villages. What's more, they do it with panache.

"We're always in formation when we come in," says Souri, 36. "And we carry flags. I have my own. At the rear is the flag of the Red Cross." He





From top to bottom: Patients register for medical aid provided by Relief Riders' tourist-volunteers and doctors; rider Shirley Campbell (seated second from left) helps distribute school supplies and textbooks; a lady villager gets a nanny goat and complementary kid.

rides dressed in a white shawl, jodhpurs and a *kurta* (a long Nehru-collared shirt). The villagers invariably cheer, and dozens of excited kids run out to escort the caravan, which consists of up to 15 adventure-tourists (who have paid \$5,950 each for the two-week trip) riding Marwari mounts—descendants of the splendid warhorses that served feudal India's ruling families. Red Cross personnel and doctors—a dentist, ophthalmologist, pediatrician, gynecologist, etc.—plus a support crew, several Jeeps, three or four camel carts and a herd of 50 goats (to be given away later) bring up the rear.

Once the group has arrived, they set up their portable medical center in a *dharmshala* (pilgrim hostel) and begin screening locals to see who needs what—a tooth pulled, a cataract removed, a wound healed. Each rider plays a role preassigned by Souri: Some keep the lines of patients moving, others assist the doctors, still others entertain the kids. In the course of riding 150 miles they will visit up to five villages and treat upward of 2,400 patients. Half their nights are spent camped out in tents on the desert, the rest in 400-year-old forts converted into rustic hotels.

If the logistics of it all sound daunting, they are. "On certain dates," says Souri, "if we don't make 25 miles a day, we risk blowing the whole thing." What starts out as a canter may need to finish at a gallop. "It's an amazing thing to have to lead. You can't just catch the next bus."

By birth (and by experience), Souri is uniquely qualified to keep his show on the road. Born in New York City to an Indian father and French mother, he has produced both plays and special events, including part of Paul Allen's "Masquerade Ball of the Millennium" in Venice for 350 guests. He was part of the production crew responsible for special effects in *The Matrix* and *X-Men*.

His love of riding, coupled with his wish to honor his own Indian roots (and those of his father, who died in 2002) led him to start Relief Riders in 2004. In 2005 the company was cited by *Outside* magazine for offering the best adventure-travel experience in Asia. To date he has organized four rides, with a fifth scheduled for early October.

Karen Cedar, 48, went on Souri's first trip. She remembers "the landscapes, the temples, the welcoming people; the women dressed in stunning silks—saffron, red, pink, lapis blue; the smell of leather and of horse sweat." An experienced horsewoman, she found the riding "phenomenal. You can't do that kind of long distance riding in the U.S. anymore"—at least not in the Berkshires, where she lives (too many cars, too many roads).

Having prior riding experience helps but isn't absolutely necessary, says Dallas veterinarian Dickson Bain, 53, who rode with Relief Riders in October: "If you're young and strong, you'll be fine." Jonathan Rick, a Florida home designer, was part of that same trip, despite having herniated discs. "I'd had a car accident

COURTESY OF RELIEF RIDERS INTERNATIONAL

ForbesLife

and hadn't ridden in a few years. I wore a back brace." He's glad he pushed himself to go, since he got a perspective on India he'd otherwise have missed: "When you're sitting on a horse you can look over walls and into the backyards of people and see them at their everyday life." Persons who can't (or don't want to) ride can always travel in the camel carts or Jeeps.

How rough is the camping? Not very, says retired investment adviser Edward Goldberg, 68. "The campsites were beautiful, the setups impeccable. The johns were very adequate and clean." A portable shower dispensed plenty of hot water. The tents he describes as being "of British vintage—large, high, very comfortable, lined up precisely." Put-ups and take-downs were handled entirely by staff, as was the preparation of meals. The food was Indian but with concessions here and there to American tastes—Cheerios at breakfast, for those who wanted it. There were fresh fruit and fresh flowers. Goldberg recalls his desert evenings as particularly spectacular: "To look up into the night sky and see the storms gather, to hear the chants on holy days sweeping out across the desert."

Riders interviewed agreed that the trip had wrought within them a real, if hazy, spiritual change. Rick recalls the giving away of the goats as having been both moving and funny. Of the recipients, he says, "These were older people who had not been given too many things for free in their lives. They grabbed the goat around the neck, as if to say, 'Is this for me?' They were so appreciative, so friendly. A bond was made." Says Cedar: "There was a happiness about them that prevailed through their hard labor. I found that inspiring—that happiness can be more than what you have or want."

Souri has big hopes for his company, viewing it as a model, potentially, for other entrepreneurs wanting to combine profit with philanthropy. Though he prizes the autonomy and the freedom from bureaucracy that he enjoys as head of his own for-profit company, he is also experimenting with ancillary, nonprofit ventures that allow donors to make tax-deductible contributions to his work. For information on these, including "Give a Goat" and "Give the Gift of Sight," as well as for information on upcoming rides, visit www.reliefridersinternational.com. **F**