

# Intrepid traveller

From diving with whale sharks in Africa to witnessing a wedding ceremony in Tajikistan, Professor Tan Chorh Chuan enjoys the nooks and crannies of the Earth. **By Natalie Koh**

WEEKEND WITH

PROF TAN CHORH CHUAN  
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**H**OLIDAYS today usually indicate a tight itinerary, early morning wake-up calls and whirlwind sightseeing. That means apart from the scenery, there's little difference from the fast-paced life in Singapore you leave behind. That's why to Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, president of the National University of Singapore, travelling ought to be a slow-paced affair. "Four weeks is a good time for a holiday," he says. "You don't have to plan the trip from one end to another. You just need to know where you're starting and where you're ending."

Of course, it's hard to get away from work for a month at a time now, but in his younger, less busy days, he revelled in his long travels. "Part of the interest is not being stuck to a schedule. The process of travelling itself is interesting. It creates a sense of anxiety of not knowing what's going to happen, and you get to know yourself a lot better," he enthuses.

And now, with additional positions of deputy chairman of Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A\*Star) and senior adviser to the Governing Board of Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, Professor Tan's busy schedule only makes him appreciate long trips even more. "I usually need a few days to unwind and get out of the business mood or I'll find myself very irritated about the long queues, or slow trains," he says. "That's a terrible way to travel."

His passion sparked during his university days when Eurail Train Passes were all the rage. "That was a really exhilarating experience because everything was so new to me," he remembers. "In those days, Singapore was so



PROF TAN

He trekked three hours with a party (left) to a village in Tajikistan to attend a wedding and he has been to South America's Atacama Desert with his wife (below)



different from Europe. We didn't even have McDonald's, much less museums, so the difference was very stark."

It was such a memorable holiday for him that he began travelling every year. "Initially, it was just about seeing new things, and being exposed to new ideas and experiences." But as time went on, he learnt to appreciate the process of travelling itself. "Say, if you take a public bus in the rural parts of China or South America, people come on in their native costumes, and you have chickens and goats on the road. Everywhere you stop, there's something different."

To get that experience, you can't sign up for a tour or plan your holiday down to toilet breaks. What the 52-year-old does is book his plane ticket, and figure out what to do only when he gets off the plane.

He recalls one of his earlier trips to the Xinjiang Province of China in the 1980s. He went to the capital, Ürümqi, with the intention of moving on to Kashgar, a crucial part of the old Silk Road. But he bumped into an old Teochew man and they bonded over their ancestral roots. "I told him I was on the way to Kashgar," Professor Tan shares, "But he said it's not that interesting and recommended I go to Yining, which is near the Soviet border. He said there were minority groups that held horseraces out in the plains and is very exciting."

But when he arrived, he was met with hostility; he never got to see the horserace, and years later, he found out that Yining was known to be a very violent area at the time. Not exactly an ideal vacation, but an exciting one, to say the least. "You come across unexpected situations," he admits. "But then you have the opportunity to reflect on how you reacted to things and what it tells you

about yourself. And because you're travelling alone, there're completely no distractions, and you have plenty of time to think."

Eventually, he did see a horserace out in the plains, but in Tibet. And since then, he has travelled to countless other countries. "In South America, I've been to Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, Brazil, Chile, Mexico," he names. "And Central Asia: Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Outer Mongolia, Pakistan, many parts of China..." he trails off, but, well, you get the picture.

He's also gone diving with whale sharks in Djibouti, but his heart remains in the more remote countries. For one, there's Tajikistan, where while trekking, he had bumped into a group of natives. "These guys looked like something out of the bible," he laughs. "One of them was getting married and they wanted us to come along to take photos. It turned out to be a three-hour walk to the village, but it was a wonderful experience. We joined in the wedding ceremony and mingled with the men."

He recalls his trip to Chile, too, where he and his wife travelled northwards from Tierra del Fuego, the southern tip of Chile. As they moved up the latitudes, they experienced the differing climates: from the sub-Antarctic climate at Tierra del Fuego, to fjords, on to a volcanic area, and, finally, the famed Atacama Desert.

That's not to say he avoids your usual tourist sites like the Taj Mahal and Eiffel Tower, but "I'd rather see less and understand more," he quips. So when he visits a famous site, "I read the history, or do some sketching. So what if you don't see all the 15 or so famous sites in the place? What's the big deal? It's better to have a memorable experience than tick off sites on a list."

Even though his current job restricts the length of his holidays, it does offer some perks. "We can afford the full spectrum of travelling, like go to the Ritz Carlton, or in Paris, the two-star Michelin restaurant at the Eiffel Tower," he says. "We're also able to enjoy backpacker hostels with different food and different people."

But it's all about soaking in the atmosphere, regardless of the budget. "It doesn't need to be a swanky place. It could be a market, where you can just sit and watch people," he shares. Currently on his wishlist is a trip on the Trans-Siberian Railway and a visit to Mount Kailash in Tibet. He doesn't know when he can go there, but for now, he's off to Bhutan for a 10-day trek. Don't ask him what else he's going to do there, though, he probably hasn't decided yet.

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