How to Meet Local Families When You Travel with LikeLocal

Hosted by **Tracy Collins** with guest **India Gustin**, LikeLocal

India Gustin from LikeLocal shares how the platform connects travellers with vetted local hosts for family meals, picnics and celebrations, the picnic in Dilijan that led to a graduation party in an Armenian mountain village, where you can book, and how to get by when you don't share a language.

This transcript has been lightly edited for easier reading. Links to everything mentioned are in the show notes at globaltravelplanning.com/episode109.

INDIA I'm in a remote mountain village in Armenia at a graduation ceremony. And I was just having so much fun, and it's just one of those experiences that you're like, "Wow."

TRACY Have you ever wondered what happens after your tour guide drops you back at your hotel? Where do they go? What do they eat with their family? And what would it be like to join them? In this episode, we're talking about a different way to travel, one that opens the door to people's everyday lives. I'm joined by India from LikeLocal, which connects travellers with local people through experiences like sharing a meal in their home, joining a family celebration, or simply spending time together. If you've listened to our episodes about Vietnam and Cambodia, you'll know that Doug and I absolutely loved our LikeLocal experiences, from cooking with a family to attending a Cambodian wedding. Today, India shares her own stories from Armenia, including how a picnic led to that unexpected graduation invitation. We also talk about how these experiences work, what to expect if you're feeling a little nervous, and how you connect when you don't speak the same language. Let's meet India.

TRACY So India, before we get into talking about LikeLocal, I'd love to hear a little about you, about your background, and what led you into the world of travel.

INDIA Of course. Well, I was actually born in Belgium, and my family is very international. My dad's from Belgium, my mum's Italian, and ever since I was young, we lived in multiple countries. I kind of half grew up in China, where we explored Asia as well. I was homeschooled for a bit when we were travelling in South America. So that was just my childhood, and I think the whole travel thing is kind of in me at this point. Then my parents at one point decided to move to Italy, and I finished high school there, and then I went to university in the UK. And after graduating, I've been a freelancer, just backpacking my way around the world to different countries. So travel is definitely in my blood.

TRACY That's wonderful. So I have to ask you as well, how many languages can you speak?

INDIA I can speak three languages fluently. At home it's a major mix of French, Italian and English.

TRACY Fantastic. That's lovely. I actually nannied for a family in Switzerland many, many moons ago. The father was from Finland, the mum was French, and we were living in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, and the kids were both born in the UK. So Lauren would start a sentence in English and go into French. Luckily, I spoke French because I'd lived in France for a few years. And then she'd end it in Swiss German. It was amazing.

INDIA Yeah, that's exactly what it's like at my home as well.

TRACY It's amazing. It's an incredible gift actually, to be brought up with that cultural mix and the ability to travel and learn those languages, and just have them as your mother tongue, as it were. So I'm going to ask you, of course, how you got involved with LikeLocal. Anybody listening to the podcast may have heard Gevorg, the founder of LikeLocal, who was on one of our earlier episodes. And in two recent episodes, at the beginning of October and the beginning of November, Doug and I talked a lot about the LikeLocal experiences that we loved so much in Vietnam and Cambodia. So I'm intrigued to find out how you became involved with LikeLocal, and what it is about the company and its approach to travel that appealed to you.

INDIA The way I got involved was actually very random. I always feel like it was the universe bringing us together. I was planning a trip to Armenia a few months ago, and because, like I said, I've been backpacking on and off for the last three years, I'm always after local experiences, the kind of experiences you can't really book with a tour guide. So I was looking for these experiences, and I posted in a Facebook group asking for a local experience in Armenia, and that's when Gevorg contacted me. We spoke a little bit, and he helped me and said, "Yeah, I know a few people here and there in Armenia." And then he asked, "By the way, what do you do?" We got talking, and he asked me if I wanted to join LikeLocal. He explained the whole concept to me, and I thought it was absolutely amazing. Everything snowballed from there really quickly, because as soon as he asked me, I just had to say yes. I felt like I was the perfect demographic, and as a traveller, these are the exact experiences I look for when I go on my next trip. It was just an obvious answer, honestly.

TRACY And for anybody listening who hasn't come across LikeLocal before because they haven't listened to our early episodes, shame on you, you need to listen to those episodes! Can you explain what it is and what makes it different from a traditional tour or travel experience?

INDIA In simple terms, LikeLocal brings together travellers with locals through very simple, otherwise mundane experiences. We are not a tour group. We don't organise tours. LikeLocal allows travellers to have a meal, a lunch or a dinner with a local family in their home. That's the most basic experience. But we quickly realised that locals are really curious about travellers as well, and they're really happy to invite travellers into their homes. So LikeLocal also has a lot of other experiences, such as weddings, ceremonies and birthdays, really anything that a local family, or locals in general, are celebrating or doing where they want to invite one or two travellers to hang out with them for the day, have lunch with them, have a picnic or just show them around. That's basically what we do. We bring these experiences together.

TRACY And that's the key. When people say, "Yeah, we visited Cambodia, we visited Vietnam," sure. But when we did the experiences with LikeLocal, we weren't just visiting the place. We were being welcomed into people's everyday lives, and that's something you rarely, rarely get the opportunity to do. You might meet people in your hotel, or perhaps your tour guide, but you don't actually get to see what it's like when they go home after their job. What happens when they go home at night? That has always absolutely fascinated me. For me, those personal connections are such an important part of travelling. We expect to meet fellow travellers when we travel, and that happens. But being able to step into the life of a person living in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh or somewhere in Cambodia, and experience something like a wedding, or just go and have an evening meal, which we did with a couple of families, is something so special. Why do you think those personal connections are such an important thing to have?

INDIA I think it's so funny the way you explain that, because I was stuck not knowing how to get these experiences. I was stuck writing in Facebook groups, looking for that local connection and not knowing what was out there for me to book. Like I said, we're not a tour group. This is really just bringing travellers and locals together, like you said, after they finish their workday and go home to their family, and they're still curious and want to learn more about travellers as well. I enjoy these experiences so much because I'm a firm believer that the locals create the place. A place wouldn't be what it is without the people in it. So I think it's so important that people learn more about that: their practices, aside from the sightseeing and the well-known history that everyone knows about a place. What about their ancestors? What about their practices, their culture, the cultural differences, the traditions that created a place? Thailand, for example, wouldn't be Thailand without the people in it and what they do in their daily life, and the mundane activities that they do, and we wouldn't otherwise be able to see that.

TRACY Exactly. And I think that fascinates people wherever they visit. We get asked quite often about visiting the UK, about things like where the kids go to school, or how it works when the bin men come round and collect the garbage. Just everyday things that are different. What's it like at the supermarket? How do you prepare your meals? When do you eat? What do you eat? All that kind of stuff can be so different to what you experience in your regular life. And I think you touched on something really important there as well, which is what the local hosts themselves are getting out of welcoming travellers into their homes and communities. That's something Doug and I have talked a lot about. When we were in Vietnam, in Ho Chi Minh, we went to Kim's house, and Doug went into the kitchen and did the cooking with Kim's mum, which completely threw her, because it's not normal in Vietnamese culture for the man to be in the kitchen. She was on the phone to her sisters and her auntie, she was taking video of Doug, she was doing a live call showing them Doug in the kitchen, and Kim said, "She can't believe it." It opened her eyes to something completely different.

INDIA I love that, especially because the hosts we have on LikeLocal obviously want to be part of LikeLocal and part of the experience, so they're just as curious as we are. It's so much fun to see that as much as you're asking them about things, they're doing the exact same thing to you. So it's just fun conversations, funny stories, laughs. It's a melting pot. It's really relaxed and fun.

TRACY It is a lot of fun. Actually, fun is a really great way to describe it. And I also felt it was such a privilege to be able to experience this, because like I say, it's not easy to do. I never thought in my life that I would be going to a wedding in Cambodia, ever.

INDIA Yeah, how else would you be able to go? You'd just ask people on the street?

TRACY Exactly! "You're getting married, can I come to your wedding?"

INDIA Yeah.

TRACY You just couldn't do it. So let's talk a little bit about the experiences that people can actually have. What sorts of activities and opportunities are available through LikeLocal?

INDIA With just about all of the hosts, they offer a lunch or a dinner, a meal. Sometimes you can get a breakfast or a brunch or something like that. It's all very informal. We have all the hosts on the website, where they live, a little bit about them and what they offer. It's all very informal. You decide you want to have lunch or brunch or whatever, and the timing is all organised between the two people. It's not anything super strict. Then obviously, depending on the time of year, the locals are not scheduling their weddings around when travellers get to the country. But if you're lucky enough to be travelling to a country where we offer LikeLocal and there happens to be a wedding or a graduation ceremony or a birthday, or really anything the locals want to welcome travellers to, then that's also part of it. It's advertised on the website, or you can contact us directly and figure out the dates. But again, it's very informal. It's being with the family for a meal, half a day, a day, a couple of days, who knows? If you get along with them, you might end up doing a bunch of day-to-day activities with them. If you want to go to the supermarket, anything really, fishing, anything that the family is doing.

TRACY It's really, really good. So I assume when you went to Armenia, you had the opportunity to have that LikeLocal experience?

INDIA I did a few times, and I had the best time. I met a lot of our hosts, and it was just an amazing time.

TRACY So do you have a favourite story or example of an experience?

INDIA One of the experiences that I realised really encompassed a lot of what LikeLocal is about was one of the first experiences I did. It was in Dilijan in Armenia, and I went on a picnic with a local family, and it was so much fun. They were very fun personalities, both of them. We grilled, we were cooking and making things for the picnic, we had the picnic, and we got along so well. I was staying there for a couple of days, and she had just graduated. This was an older woman who had just graduated from a hospitality course or something like that, and she was having her graduation ceremony the next day, so she invited me to go with her. Obviously I agreed, and I remember being there the next day with all these Armenians who had just graduated, and again, it was so much fun. There was an open bar, of course, which was a bonus, a barbecue, music. And I just remember thinking, "How am I here? I'm in a remote mountain village in Armenia at a graduation ceremony." I was just having so much fun, and it's one of those experiences where you're like, "Wow." A pinch-me moment.

TRACY And it's so different from a lot of the ways you can travel through places, where you go and do your tour and then go back to your hotel or your Airbnb or whatever, and you don't have that depth of experience. I think that's it, that's probably the word I'm looking for. It's just

such a deeper experience, and it completely changes your expectations, I think. Being exposed to what LikeLocal can offer has changed my expectations of what I want to achieve when I travel. I want to have that. And I really want LikeLocal to be everywhere around the world, so that these doors are open anywhere in the world, because it would be amazing.

INDIA I think no matter how authentic and local a tour is, there's always that lack of freedom in it. Like you said, you finish and then you go back to your hotel room and it's done. That's the experience. It's very structured. It's always going to be structured, right? Whereas being able to get put in contact with a local, you can just figure it out with them. I think there's so much more freedom. You can do a lot more. It's obviously a lot more real, and yeah, there's the depth in it, like you said.

TRACY Absolutely, 100%. So you just mentioned that you get put in touch with a local. How does LikeLocal find the local people and families who want to become hosts?

INDIA Well, Gevorg, the founder, is originally from Armenia, so LikeLocal started primarily in Armenia in the beginning. He already had a good network of people there, and that's how he built up all the hosts in Armenia. Then for Cambodia and Vietnam, it was a lot of vetting and sourcing, and sending people to look out for families who wanted to become hosts for LikeLocal. And of course, I just need to say this: yes, all the hosts are vetted. It is not just random people inviting people into their homes, okay? So it is very safe. When I did it in Armenia, I did it for a few weeks, and like I said, I went to see a lot of our hosts. I am a solo female traveller, and I have to say it is extremely safe as a solo female traveller. I was always very comfortable and always felt really welcome. I just had to put that out there.

TRACY Now, we've mentioned Armenia, Vietnam and Cambodia. So those are the three areas at the minute where there are experiences available, where there are locals ready and willing to meet and greet, do the dinners and lunches, and welcome you into their home.

INDIA Yes, those are the three countries where we have hosts. We also have a few hosts in Georgia as well. That's not really actively advertised, but if people are curious and are in Georgia and want to know if there are any hosts available, they just have to message us and we'll let them know. I would say Cambodia and Armenia are the most active at the moment. We still have hosts in Vietnam, but as we are currently relaunching everything, we need to get the momentum back. But yes, Cambodia, Vietnam and Armenia are the places where we have hosts.

TRACY So if someone's listening and thinking this sounds wonderful, which it absolutely is, how would they go about booking a LikeLocal experience?

INDIA We have a website, likelocal.io, and also an Instagram, likelocal.io. You can either message us directly on Instagram or go to the website and look through the hosts and see what you like. Then you just click on the little booking button, and you get directed to a place where you can message us, and we can help you figure it out from there.

TRACY So what would you say to someone who loves the idea of visiting a local family, but is feeling a little bit nervous or unsure about what to expect?

INDIA For someone who's maybe not used to talking to locals, or doesn't really do that kind of travelling, I think it's just something to try for the first time. Obviously, it might be a little bit nerve-racking in the beginning. But honestly, just keep in mind that these are people who are just as curious about you as you are about them. They are very welcoming, and they are on LikeLocal because they want to meet people like you and me, curious travellers who want to know more about their lives, and they're very happy to share their lives. Like I said, I did this as a solo female traveller in Armenia for a few weeks, and I've felt safer with the families, because these are actual locals who can show you the ropes. It's amazing.

TRACY I must admit when we were going to the wedding, I was a little bit nervous, because I was thinking, "This is going to be a big wedding." And there were a lot of people. A lot of people. And when you walk in, they're going to look, and they're kind of thinking, "Okay, what are these two Westerners doing at this wedding?" But everybody was smiling, and everybody was welcoming. What do you do if you don't speak the local language? How do you get by? Well, I will say Google Translate is extremely good.

INDIA Yeah, Google Translate becomes your friend. There's no way around it, honestly. You're not always going to find someone who speaks fluent English. The idea is that you go to a local family's house, and sometimes they might not know as much English, and that's absolutely fine. Again, Google Translate becomes your best friend, and it's still a lot of fun. You communicate with gestures, and everyone just laughs. Everyone knows that's how it goes. And funnily enough, a lot of the families have younger children, and they're actually the ones who speak much better English, so they're your translators between you and the parents. It's honestly a whole experience.

TRACY It is, and actually, it isn't a barrier. I just don't think it is a barrier. I think there's a perception that it's going to be a barrier, but it's not, because we've got Google Translate now. But believe me, I moved to France, gosh, 39 years ago, something like that, and I spoke very little French and lived with a family who didn't speak very much English. And you communicate. You learn to communicate. You don't need to be fluent, you don't need to know the words necessarily, because you will just be able to communicate. It just works. As you say, gestures, and just the feeling of being made welcome. A smile goes a long way.

INDIA It does. Yeah.

TRACY It is fantastic. Now, how are you getting the word out about LikeLocal? Because I know it's being relaunched, and we want more travellers out there to understand this style of travel. You've mentioned you've got the website and your Instagram, so I will share those in the show notes. So please, guys, go and follow them.

INDIA I mostly focus on the marketing side of things. For the time being, it's a lot of social media, a big push on social media. That's the main way we're doing it. We're also in contact with nonprofits and NGOs to grow in that sense, and to get funding for marketing purposes as well. It's really just about getting eyes on LikeLocal right now, curious eyes, people with the same sort of mindset as you and I. It's a very specific experience, I think, so we need the right people to see it and find us.

TRACY Absolutely. Though I firmly believe that being able to go and experience something you would not normally ever have the opportunity to do makes this an experience everybody should want to have. I think it's more that people just don't consider it. I know you talk about demographics and all the rest of it, but I honestly think that if people knew about this and realised it was something they could do... Because you know what? People are curious about people.

INDIA Exactly.

TRACY They want to know how other people live around the world. And I just don't think they realise that we've actually got that ability through LikeLocal, in a few places in the world, and it's fantastic. I said that to Gevorg right from the start when I heard about LikeLocal. I said, "It's genius, just genius, that somebody has actually said, 'Let's do this. Let's organise this.'" So looking ahead, what are you most excited about for the future of LikeLocal, and what would you like to see the company achieve?

INDIA Well, I'm excited for, like you said, the right people to come along and realise that these experiences do exist, and for it to go from there and go global, and have these experiences in every single country out there. Because honestly, right now we're limited to three, maybe four countries. I'm just waiting for the moment when we can have these experiences all over Europe as well. Everyone knows Europe so well. Italy, France, Germany. Everyone goes to these countries and does the same things and the same tours, and it's constantly like that. But imagine going to an Italian family's home in a tiny little village somewhere that no one goes to, and you can spend the day there and eat there and learn about... I just think it adds so much.

TRACY Exactly. Or even going to my mum's house on a Sunday for a Sunday roast in the UK and experiencing that. Just the regular way we do things, what happens on a Sunday in the UK with a regular family, where we meet up, what we eat, how it pans out. I think that would be cool. I've said to Gevorg that if we could get people in the UK to do this, it'd be amazing, because I know plenty of people who would absolutely love to do it. It would be absolutely fantastic. You might have your private tour guide for the day, you might go on a small group tour for the day, but after you get dropped off and you go back to your accommodation, don't you want to know where your guide goes when they go home at night and put their feet up in front of the TV, or have a drink, or go to the pub? Do you know what I mean? I want to know that.

INDIA Where do they go? What do they do? How is their home life? Honestly, it's so easy. Simple.

TRACY Oh, well, thank you so much for joining me today, India. It's been lovely to hear more about LikeLocal and the opportunities travellers have to connect with local communities and local people through LikeLocal. It's just so special, and I'm so happy that it's back up and running. We'll make sure we link to the website and the Instagram in our show notes. It's been great to chat with you.

INDIA Amazing. Thank you so much for having me, and for your lovely questions.

TRACY Oh, lovely. Thanks, India.

TRACY A big thank you to India for joining me today. I hope this conversation has inspired you to think a little differently about your next trip, not just about the places you want to see, but about the people you might meet along the way. As you've heard, some of our most memorable experiences have come from simply spending time with local people, sharing a meal and being welcomed into their everyday lives. If you'd like to find out more about LikeLocal, you'll find the links to their website and Instagram, along with our earlier episodes about our experiences in Vietnam and Cambodia, in the show notes at globaltravelplanning.com/episode109. And if you know someone who'd love this way of travelling, do share this episode with them. Thanks so much for listening to the Global Travel Planning Podcast. Until next time, happy global travel planning.

©Global Travel Planning 2023-2026 | All Rights Reserved