

A HUSBAND AND WIFE DUO GO ON A MOTORCYCLE RIDE ACROSS 18 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Making friends in foreign lands



Manas and Anuradha Dewan found dosti everywhere they went

After a decade in corporate communications and marketing with Mercedes-Benz India, a stint with Dow Chemicals and another with the \$5-billion OTE group in Oman, Manas Dewan decided that it was time for a break. His wife Anuradha, a former philosophy professor in a Pune college, who quit her job and turned consultant to join him in Oman, was of the same mind.

It was all still fun, because Oman changes your definition of things. There's both snow and lush greenery, and we had a villa on the pristine Azaiba beach," she says. "But I too decided it was time to do something else. Things were perfect – but was this a golden cage?" Adds Dewan: "We had other life goals and aspirations, like exploring the world – and we weren't getting any younger: our 16th wedding anniversary was coming up. We decided, the time is now – there's no point waiting to fulfil our dreams."

So, the couple came back to India at the end of his contract in mid-March 2017, bought themselves an 800 cc Ducati Scrambler motorcycle and began their paperwork and route planning. "The power-weight ratio of this bike was the best we found, even with our

limited luggage," Manas explains. Anuradha chips in: "And our luggage really was limited – we even bought boots that we could share, a tad tight for him and a little loose for me!" The height was perfect for both of them, and it could take the speeds required for European highways.

Heart connection By end-April, they were all set. They shipped the bike, which reached Valentia in Spain in the third week of May, and they got there on 1 June. "We decided on that place because it was perfect for our plan: close to Gibraltar and Portugal, the southern end of Europe.

So, they covered Spain and the entire length of Portugal. When they reached San Juan in Puerto Rico, they found that they were luckily there at the time of the summer festival, and witnessed the spectacle of fireworks going off through the night. "There were hundreds and thousands of people on the streets shouting "Ola!" says Anuradha. "We were packed like sardines in a can."

Along what they call their 'Dosti on Wheels' ride, they experienced the kindness of countless strangers in the many small towns and hamlets they

visited. "We had taken a conscious decision not to go to the big cities," Anuradha explains. "We used Air BnB throughout, and stayed in the most lovely homes that had been built in the thirteenth, seventh and even third centuries." Adds Manas: "The soul of a country is in its villages. Wherever we stayed, our hosts and we opened up our lives to one another. We have seen something like a hundred lives like this." Meeting all kinds of people – rich, middle-class and refugees – they also learnt the pain of Austrians being estranged from the mainland.

They had an 'amazing' experience in Switzerland, where they tried out couch-surfing for the first time. "I had always wondered what kind of people would be willing to host complete strangers for nothing in return," says Anuradha. "I had

to overcome my own inhibitions, but it was the most wonderful experience. We never felt like strangers, but it was like we had known each other for ever."

People had advised them to avoid Montenegro, because the people there were hostile to foreigners. "But the more they told us, the more we were determined to go there," Anuradha says. Manas picks up the narration: "At the Bosnia border, we were approached by a hunk of a guard, who looked like Vin Diesel's brother. Six or eight similarly-built guys rushed out of the border post and surrounded us. Now, what?" The question in their minds was answered, when they took out their mobile phones and started taking selfies with the Indian visitors!

The Dewans spent 30 days in Turkey, the last of the 18 countries through which they rode on their 20,000-km voyage. Here, too, they found that 'the connection of the heart' was so powerful that made language superfluous. Anuradha sums it all up: "It gave us a new perspective on life; it was a spiritual journey, which changed us in so many different ways."

♦ SEKHAR SESHAN
sekhar.seshan@businessindiagroup.com