



Wide World of Sports

"Sports have an ability to bring people together because you're sharing something, without language," says Oliver Percovich (profiled below), who founded Skateistan, Afghanistan's first coeducational skateboarding school. "There are lots of examples: rugby in South Africa connecting white and black cultures, North Koreans and South Koreans marching together in the 2006 Olympic Games, the Ping-Pong diplomacy between the U.S. and China. Sports are something we all have in common," Percovich says. Here are six trips, from Argentina to Sweden, to inspire you to make your own connections through sports. Game on.

THE COACH

NAME: Oliver Percovich

LOCATION: Kabul, Afghanistan; Percovich is originally from Melbourne, Australia

PROFESSION: Founder and director of Skateistan, a skateboarding school in Kabul that's dedicated to empowering urban youth through a sports and education program that emphasizes crosscultural understanding

WHY SKATEBOARDING: "In Afghanistan, about 70 percent of the population is under 25 years old. From the age of 6, many Afghani youth work on the street selling chewing gum or washing cars. They've never gone to school or held a pencil in their hands. You've got to engage this segment of the population if you want to change anything. I thought skateboarding could be a way of doing this because it can connect people across different cultural backgrounds."

WHAT WORKS: "A lot of problems in Afghanistan have come from using financial capital to attempt to solve problems. What I say is needed is social capital—building trust between people. The best investment



that we can make is to expose youth, especially girls, to what opportunities exist so that they can make choices themselves about what's important. Then we can give them the skills to change their circumstances. You cannot change somebody else's circumstances for them."

ON MAKING CONNECTIONS

THROUGH SPORTS: "When I fall off a skateboard, I fall exactly the same way as a street kid here in Kabul. We have very different backgrounds, but we go through that same pain in the same way. That's an instant connection.

In many cases, people have more similarities with each other than they have differences. When you start to share something, like sports, that's a good basis for understanding."

To apply to volunteer with Skateistan, visit skateistan.org

COMMON GOALS: On Christmas Day in 1914, during World War I, British and German soldiers took a break from the trenches to exchange gifts of chocolate and cigarettes and play a game of soccer using a makeshift ball.

TRIPS WORTH TAKING



ARGENTINA

ESTANCIA EL VENADO POLO SCHOOL 54/9-2241-67-3320, POLODAYS.COM

In the grassy Argentine pampas about 110 miles southeast of Buenos Aires, Estancia El Venado has been owned by the same family for four generations. During twice-daily training sessions, *estancia* (ranch) owner and polo pro Federico Cendoya teaches all levels of players how to master the game of polo—one of Argentina's most popular sports.

WHAT YOU'LL DO: In the morning, practice with a stick and ball, or ride around the grounds of El Venado; in the afternoon, play four chukkers (seven-minute periods) with instruction; improve riding skills by helping the estancia's gauchos herd cattle to fresh pasture on the 2,500-acre property.

HIGHLIGHTS: Dine outside on empanadas, *asado* (barbecued meat), and Malbec wine. Stay in an 1878 hacienda furnished with family antiques. Go birdwatching for monk parakeets and guira cuckoos that live in the estancia's century-old casuarina, eucalyptus, and *plátano* trees.

PRICE: One-week trips for \$2,100; includes lodging and meals.

CHINA

REAL GAP EXPERIENCE

44/(0) 1892-516164, REALGAP.CO.UK

Using smooth, rhythmic movements, the Chinese martial art of tai chi aims to harmonize the forces of yin and yang while promoting health and relaxation. The Tai Chi and Cultural Experience, run by Real Gap Experience, takes travelers to a martial arts school in Taining Global Geopark in the mountainous Fujian province. There, martial arts masters teach tai chi basics during daily training sessions.

WHAT YOU'LL DO: Perform tai chi exercises for body conditioning, breathing, and alignment; practice standing meditation and *qigong*, a discipline that focuses on cultivating one's *qi* (life energy) using the mind.

HIGHLIGHTS: Visit caves and waterfalls

FIRST PERSON

Horse Play

Alice Horlick / Estancia El Venado Polo School participant / Argentina

“As soon as I arrive, Federico says, ‘Do you want to get on a horse right now?’ They’re playing chukkers [a chukker is a timed period in a polo match] in the arena. So I go over and watch them play, and I’m thinking, ‘I don’t know if I’m ready for this yet.’ ● I end up playing the next day. Everything is on Argentine time. You have a relaxed breakfast. Then at 11 o’clock, when all the dew is gone and the sun comes out, you ‘stick and ball’ for an hour. Federico and his polo manager, Julian, teach you about swing technique and riding. I’m a little bit clumsy, so for me it was a real challenge. ● After practice, you have lunch. It’s amazing when they have *asados* in the garden, under a canopy of trees. There’s half a lamb on the fire. It’s very traditional, old-school Argentina. You get a glimpse into the real culture of the place because the pampas are made up of ranches like this. ● Following lunch, you have a long siesta until about five. Then you hop on a horse and play four chukkers. Federico really encourages you. He’ll say, ‘It doesn’t matter if you can’t do it. Just try and practice. It’s for you.’ That first time that you hit the ball right, you think, ‘Yes! Keep going!’ And the next time, when you actually hit it all the way up the field, you think, ‘Oh my God! I’m actually getting better at this! Finally!’ ● I only meant to stay for two weeks, and I ended up staying for a month and a half. Polo really is an amazing sport. Ask anyone who plays it. It’s like a drug.”

during a boat tour around Golden Lake. Join a traditional Chinese tea ceremony. Take Mandarin lessons three times a week.

PRICE: Four-week trips for \$1,660; includes lodging and meals.



GHANA

TRAVELLERS WORLDWIDE 44/(0) 1903-502595, TRAVELLERSWORLDWIDE.COM

Ghana's national soccer team, the Black Stars, is one of the top-ranked teams in Africa, inspiring hundreds of Ghanaian kids to take up the sport. However, there is little financial support for proper coaching. With Travellers Worldwide, soccer fans work with primary and junior secondary schools to teach young players fundamental ball skills. Prior coaching experience is not required.

WHAT YOU'LL DO: Using suggestions from coaching manuals, help students (ages 6 to 17) build fitness, agility, and teamwork through drills and scrimmages; organize and run a final soccer tournament among school teams in Accra; teach conversational English (optional).

HIGHLIGHTS: Depending on your soccer skills, play with an adult Division One or Two team. Chat with locals on the *tro-tro* (minibus) as you visit nearby sights such as Kokrobite Beach. With your homestay family, help make meals of fried yams, palm nut soup, or *waakye* (rice and beans).

PRICE: Two-week trips for \$1,211; includes homestay lodging and meals.



MONGOLIA

BOOJUM EXPEDITIONS
(800) 287-0125, BOOJUM.COM

Kazakh people in the Bayan-Ulgii province of western Mongolia continue the ancient Central Asian tradition of falconry (training raptors to catch wild game). Using golden eagles, the Kazakhs capture such prey as rabbits, red foxes, and wolves in the winter, when their pelts are most plush. Boojum Expeditions introduces travelers to “eagle hunters” and their families, who lead a hunt and welcome you into their nomadic way of life.

WHAT YOU’LL DO: Learn from the hunters about how they capture, train, and care for the eagles; on horseback or camelback, join the hunters as they pursue prey; visit other nomadic families who live in *gers* (yurts).

HIGHLIGHTS: Spend several nights in the hunters’ cabin, sharing stories and singing Mongolian folk songs. Sample boiled horsemeat and rice soup with *aruul* (dried cheese curds), dishes served to honored guests. See Kazakh women make colorful, intricately woven rugs.

PRICE: 11-day trips for \$2,250 plus internal airfare (about \$650); includes lodging and meals.



PERU
WAVES FOR DEVELOPMENT
(518) 339-2142,

WAVESFORDEVELOPMENT.ORG
Surfers from around the world come to northern Peru to ride the waves, some of the planet’s longest. But many Peruvian communities lack the facilities and skills to benefit from surf tourism. In the small fishing village of Lobitos, Waves for Development hopes to empower youth through a surf education program led by volunteers. Beginning surfers are welcome.

WHAT YOU’LL DO: Teach Peruvian kids how to swim and surf; lead classes in surf photography, how to open a surf shop, surfboard repair, English, and environmental conservation; organize a community development project such as a surf contest or beach cleanup.

HIGHLIGHTS: Surf every morning and afternoon and improve your skills with surfing lessons from experts. Learn

FIRST PERSON

A Perfect Match

Joshua Wallis / Travellers Worldwide participant / Ghana

“The first day I get to the school, the teachers introduce me to the children. The kids are very excited, and they rush to me. They are all boys, ages 6 to 16. They have a football [soccer] field about a two-minute walk from their school. So we walk over there with one other teacher and about 30 children. We do a few training exercises. Then we have a match. One team wins, and some of the children on the losing side seem to be upset. That’s just human—you always like to win. ● The kids take their sport very seriously. They watch their idol, Michael Essien, on the television. He’s a Ghanaian football player and sort of a legend. I have experience in football, but I don’t have experience in coaching. So I try to teach them how we teach it in England. ● I coach the children for about two weeks. On my last day we have a little tournament. Before the kids play their matches, they all stand up in a line and sing the national anthem. In England, you just get out there and play—you don’t think about why you’re playing. ● After the game, the boys are upset to see me leave. They say, ‘Oh, don’t go! Don’t go! We enjoy having you here.’ It’s quite sad. I have to admit, I have a little cry on most of the way back. The kids really taught me just as much as I taught them. I learned to keep my head up and do what I think is best. And to not take for granted whatever I have. It was brilliant.”



Spanish from a Peruvian teacher. Stay with the other volunteers in a local home and eat a seafood dinner in the host family’s restaurant.

PRICE: Two-week trips for \$900; includes homestay lodging and meals.

SWEDEN

MOUNTAIN TRAVEL SOBEK
(888) 831-7526, MTOBEK.COM

To navigate the snowy wilderness of Sápmi (Lapland) in northern Sweden, the indigenous Saami people have long relied on sleds pulled by reindeer or dogs. Travelers with Mountain Travel Sobek will learn from locals how to steer a reindeer sled and drive their own team of huskies about 75 miles from the Saami village of Övre Soppero to Jukkasjärvi. The trip ends with a stay at the Ice Hotel, made entirely from ice and snow.

WHAT YOU’LL DO: Lasso a reindeer for your sled; harness and command a team of four sled dogs; spend time with the Saami people, who share meals of Arctic char and reindeer.

HIGHLIGHTS: View the northern lights. Warm in the sauna after sledding. Spend one night in a traditional Saami *laavu* (tent) and another in the Ice Hotel, sleeping on reindeer pelts in a suite decorated with ice sculptures.

PRICE: 10-day trips for \$4,995 plus internal airfare (about \$500); includes lodging and meals. **A**

