Walks back to things past

A STAFF REPORTER

Stan Bruce, 66, from the Midlands in the UK, his wife and son, Andy, who is with the UN and lives in New York, are here in search of their roots. Bruce's ancestors had a silverware shop at 9 Old Court House Street, initially named Pittar & Co in 1825, succeeded in 1848 by Charles, Nephew & Co. They are here to locate it.

Anne Renshaw, a flutist from London, is here on a sentimental journey. Her father, who was with the Royal Air Force and was responsible for setting up the radar system in India, had passed through Calcutta in 1944 summer on his way to Kalimpong, and later in November when he stayed at the Grand hotel. On Thursday morning, all four were treated to a hearty Anglo-Indian breakfast at a private home in a landmark heritage building on Chowringhee.

Earlier in the morning, they had been shepherded around Dalhousie Square by Husna Tara Prakash Of Glenburn Tea Estate & Boutique Hotel. She also offers the Glenburn Experience in Calcutta tailormade for foreigners — mostly Europeans — in search of the past in the form of colonial buildings, remnants of the Raj or of ancestors in the cemeteries scattered across the city. Individuals and small groups have always visited the city to dig up the past, but now there seems to be an upsurge of interest, what with the formation of the Scottish Calcutta Heritage Trust and the interest that other international bodies are taking in its built heritage.

The Bruce family in search of the tombs of ancestors at the Mallikbazar cemetery on Thursday.
Picture by Sanjoy Chattopadhyaya

That translates into more clients for Prakash and Devika Datt Duncan, her partner for the Calcutta operations alone. "People, who come here expecting to see only poverty, are surprised that there is so much culture — at least in comparison with Delhi," says Datt Duncan with some relish. In 2008 she had 123 visitors. This year, just 85 people, but the "season" has just started.

Their clients have included a woman related to three viceroys and Bishop Cotton's great grandson. "Since they come here to retrace history we have to do in-depth research to locate places of interest for them," says Datt Duncan.

However, foreigners are not content with "white" heritage. They are willing to venture deep north as well to visit Marble Palace, Kumartuli, Jorasanko Tagore house, the Maniktala Jain temple and Sovabazar. Cruises down the Hooghly to the Sunderbans, Barrackpore and Murshidabad are also arranged. The Bruces will visit Flagstaff House in Barrackpore on Friday, and Datt Duncan was in a tizzy in the afternoon to get permission from Raj Bhavan.

They also organise accommodation at and visits to Bengal Club and Tollygunge Club, meant for members only. Special interest tours are also rustled up.

For National Geographic's programme on food they had to take a team to the bazaar, followed by a demonstration of Bengali cooking at the "heritage" home of Surajit Iyengar, where breakfast is laid out for all visitors.