

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

For the world weary, only authentic, immersive holidays will do. If you're brave enough to put yourself in their hands, there's an army of well-connected "holiday managers" willing to cater to your every whim, says *Lydia Bell*

It's that time of year when the travel-trend reports that emerged in January have been read and discarded. Many have harped on in a similar vein since 2008, referring to the fact that since the financial crash, a significant proportion of the wealthy have embraced more "authentic" top-end lifestyle travel. That's to say, ditching white-gloved service and gold taps for experiences with more integrity, authenticity or heritage – even if those things are manufactured. The Virtuoso Luxe Report for 2015 points out that luxury travellers seek "authenticity" above all else. *Travel Weekly's* trends for 2015 included "bringing glamour to the wilderness" – citing Aqua Expeditions' new Aqua Mekong riverboat as an example; "personalisation" – to ensure that everything, from the people you meet to the food you eat, is really "you"; "immersion" – which means experiencing activities specific to that place, such as fishing with Eskimos; and modern-day "pilgrimages" – such as exploring graffiti art in Berlin, or street food in Lima.

The blanket term for these novel experiences is "new luxury" and they are aimed at the consumer who seeks a more meaningful version of a luxurious lifestyle – coupled perhaps with the fact that one-of-a-kind safaris and private expeditions to the Antarctic surpass a wardrobe full of Manolo Blahniks as 21st-century status symbols. At the top end of the scale, the global super-rich are increasingly dropping millions on round-the-world heritage-site jaunts in private planes – a sort of gap year for multi-millionaires.

But who is going to realise these complex desires? At the beginning of this year, American company Unity Marketing tapped a survey of more than 1,300 affluent travellers about their travel plans for 2015. They concluded that the wealthy are booking holidays at the last minute, using the internet meticulously for detailed research and price comparison rather than turning to travel professionals. Is this wise, though? And how much can you really do on your own? So would argue that booking your own travel online works only at the bottom end of the market and that attempting to arrange top-end travel online is a doubling of workload for a halving of quality – without saving any money.

"A really good tailor-made itinerary should be no more expensive than doing it yourself, but should add value



Clockwise from above: an "Epic Weekend" organised by Black Tomato could take you from your desk to the Norwegian fjords; get away from it all in Botswana at Belmond Eagle Island Lodge or Sanctuary Baines' Camp

through better use of time and better experiences overall," says Christopher Wilmot-Sitwell, co-owner and director of tailor-made travel specialists Cazenove + Loyd. "If you factor in all the time and anxiety in assessing different opinions and online options, a tailor-made solution should be a no-brainer. If two days of a 10-day trip to a destination are duff, you've lost 20 per cent of the value. Even a bad tailor-made company can get it 20 per cent better than a DIY itinerary – so imagine what a great one can do."

With prodigious connections and instinctive understanding of "new luxury", a tailor-made travel expert can tell you what you need to know in a matter of moments; finding out the same information yourself would take days of online research. As Nick Van Gruisen at The Ultimate Travel Company says: "Old Africa hands already know where to see the Big Five [lion, elephant, buffalo, leopard, rhinoceros] – what they really want is someone to point them to the best camp at the best time of year, with the best guide to see a rare bird, wild dog or a species of insect they've heard David Attenborough waxing lyrical about." Incidentally, Van Gruisen doesn't advertise, retains loyal clients through decades and insists that "can't be booked online" will remain his mantra.

A quick phone call to the tailor-made brigade can effortlessly secure the seemingly unattainable – including the best seats on complicated routes, the best table in the best restaurant and a chat with the chef, superior specialist guides, access to closed cultural sites – it's all up for grabs. And with problems solved as soon as they arise and added value thrown in as favours – be that free spa treatments or breakfasts – in most cases they more than earn their fee, in the same way that a good accountant does.

Apart from ensuring a more seamless execution of the practical side of things, bespoke travel experts know how to conjure perfect moments. They are masters of manipulation. "Tailor-made travel used to be about arranging a great itinerary and handpicking hotels. Now it's about designing each individual experience totally around the guest's interests; it's about providing all those little touches that create a magical sense of serendipity and the accumulation of moments of unexpected pleasure," says Marcus Potter,



tailor-made product development manager at Scott Dunn. "Gone are the days of seeing the same old sites on generic, boring, full-day tours," he says. "What people want now are experiential activities. Quite often, these will be ideas that don't appear in guidebooks and are absolutely not available online, but are created with local suppliers and guides during research trips on the ground.

"It might mean opening closed doors, such as organising access to a private party or local home. It could just be a case of finding the very best private guides. A big trend has been about crowd avoidance – quite often, you can visit a site when the masses aren't there, or go to places that don't appear on the tourist trail at all.

The other trend is social – experiences where you meet people who live in the destination you're visiting, whether that be a glamorous socialite or a Buddhist monk. It is not about status – it is simply a better way of travelling; a way

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of getting under the skin of a destination. It's no longer just about booking into the best suite at a luxury hotel."

And it doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg, Potter argues: "It might be something as simple as ensuring that your children have the chance to paint an elephant before riding it through a local tribal village in India, or going to a local house in Beijing to learn how to cook traditional Chinese dumplings."

James Jayasundera of Ampersand Travel believes that every wealthy, culturally interested family should have a holiday manager: "Rather than their asset managers, we want clients to think of us as their 'time managers' who will guarantee the best possible return on their valuable time.

"People are disenchanted with generic, off-the-shelf travel solutions. In their frantic modern lives, time is an extremely valuable asset and they want to entrust their holidays to experts who will create the most fulfilling, memorable and hitch-free experience," he says.

Jayasundera refers to high-end experiential travel as "luxploring". It's luxury, he says, but "not at the expense of cultural exploration, not being blinded by five-star luxuries and not being afraid to step off the usual circuit in order to experience something more rewarding".

In some uniquely complex countries, tailor-made, offline arrangements are simply the only way to ensure access to unique luxury accommodation, culture and expeditions. Esencia Experiences creates Cuban holidays that range from less than £2,000 all the way up to off-the-scale pricey. What you buy is solidity of arrangements, personalisation and

Right: a view with a room at Sanctuary Baines' Camp, in Botswana



MAGIC MOMENTS

Black Tomato arranged:

- In Nepal, for a team of 30 Sherpas to transport a dining table and kitchen to 2,500m, where a couple were prepared a gourmet supper with Himalayan views.
- In Iceland, an engagement ring set in a block of glacier ice, which was then carved out while the couple took a midnight sled ride under the Northern Lights.

Original Travel arranged:

- A two-year round-the-world trip on a client's private plane visiting the "planet's best bits". A website allowed friends to track and join him. He learned to sail, dive, surf and take safari photography. A company director personally supervised.

Scott Dunn arranged:

- To fly a guest 50 miles into rural Nepal for breakfast overlooking a spectacular view.
- A surprise off-piste picnic in the Alps complete with a "snowfa" (a sofa created from snow, coated in furry rugs), an ice bar with snow-chilled champagne and a chef.

Ampersand arranged:

- To trace the grave of a client's long-lost grandfather who died in service in India.
- Enough Evian for one family to bathe their child in each night in India.
- A 70th birthday tour of India: 10 parties over as many nights in locations such as Rambagh Palace, Jaipur City Palace and Umaid Bhawan Palace (below).

Cazenove + Loyd arranged:

- For Father Christmas to appear on a camel in the Thar desert on Christmas Eve.
- A wedding anniversary dinner for two in the ruins of Angkor Wat.
- Paragliding a couple's children on to the beach in Oman as a surprise.

Jacada Travel arranged:

- A helicopter surfing trip to a secret spot off the coast of Chile.
- An overnight camping trip to Antarctica.
- A special marriage proposal at a gaucho's secluded *puesto*.

The Ultimate Travel Company arranged:

- Expeditions to Scott's hut in the Antarctic.
- Helicopter trips to the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy, the Amazon and Everest.
- Remote Borneo adventures with explorer Robin Hanbury-Tenison.



travel that's heavily experiential. Forget fancy hotel rooms; instead, expect to meet famous jazz musicians or enjoy a private performance by the Cuban National Ballet.

"Cuba is a difficult destination with a huge lack of hotel rooms, so it's really important to be able to access private homes and apartments," says Johnny Considine, the company's travel director. "In a country with precious little internet access, potential visitors lack the know-how to find out about concerts or book restaurants, so a concierge is a life-saver. Esencia Experiences' guides are handpicked from the fields of academia or the arts and are passionate about their niche fields."

Personalisation is something the internet cannot achieve, no matter how many cookies track your habits. It's a process of psychoanalysing the clients, says Tom Marchant of Black Tomato: "From the start, the dedicated travel expert looks at not only where and when but *why* clients want to travel — whether to fulfil a dream, a need or a lifetime ambition."

Jayasundera agrees: "We try to get into the mindset of our clients to figure out what their definition of luxury is. One person's heaven can be another's hell. We place great emphasis on speaking to clients over the phone to discover their travel DNA by discussing what they have loved and loathed from past trips."

Bragging rights, too, have evolved says Marchant: "It's now more about who's travelled to the most remote location and done the most exclusive and immersive experience, such as eagle hunting or living with nomads in Mongolia, rather than who has sunbathed on the best beaches in the Caribbean." Black Tomato has in-house "bucket-list managers" who make clients' dreams a manageable reality, mapping out a lifetime of travel goals and keeping them up-to-date with when best to see world spectacles.

But is it all about one-upmanship? Alex Malcolm of Latin America specialists Jacada Travel argues that, although status is sometimes involved, "the true reason is that we're so over-stimulated in our everyday lives that it takes something truly extraordinary to make us feel in the moment and engaged with our surroundings".

Black Tomato is on this, too. A dedicated expedition section, Epic Tomato, creates "Epic Weekends" that transport clients from their desks at the end of the week to the jungles of Congo or the farthest reaches of Norway. "It's the type of trip that redefines the office water-cooler conversations," says Marchant. We'll say. ☺