

NatGeo Traveller

June 2018

Circulation: 37,119



WEALTH OF EXPERIENCES

WHEN MONEY IS NO OBJECT, WHAT IS LUXURY? FOR A GROWING NUMBER OF ULTRA-WEALTHY TRAVELLERS, IT'S NO LONGER ABOUT PRIVATE BUTLERS AND PENTHOUSE SUITES, IT'S ABOUT IMMERSIVE, AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES, FROM PRIVATE AUDIENCES WITH THE DALAI LAMA TO BEING STRANDED ON BEAR GRYLLS' ISLAND
WORDS: SIMON USBORNE

When Jenny Graham joined Quintessentially Travel in 2010, the itineraries it was creating for its high-net-worth clients didn't place heavy demands on the printer at its London office. "It was very transactional in those days," says Jenny — now the company director — as if talking about a distant decade. "We'd have just a few components — the flights, the transfer, the hotel — and we wouldn't really be expected to do anything else. I've just been looking at an itinerary my team has been working on, for a three-week trip to Ecuador, and it stretches to 30 pages."

The trip will include a suit fitting by one of the city's top tailors — all conducted from the comfort of clients' hotel rooms, of course — private access to some of Ecuador's grandest colonial buildings and natural wonders, and a flight west to join a private cruise among the Galápagos Islands. "It's not just 'days one to seven: overnight, half-board at a five-star hotel' anymore," adds Jenny. "People want to be guided, they want to be shown things that were once 'money-can't-buy'. They want to know that they have really immersed themselves in that destination."

What they're after, Jenny says, is not just a holiday but also an 'experience' — to be ejected from the plushiest sun loungers beside the bluest resort pools and sent on a journey. For a growing number of super-rich travellers, it's no longer enough to have a butler for tour every need, a menu of pillows or a Maybach waiting at the door of the Gulfstream jet. The buzzwords redefining the luxury market, under the experiential umbrella, are authenticity, transformation, and access.

"Now, money can buy pretty much anything," Jenny says. "We can get shops closed down [for

a private view], we can get an art buyer or art historian to guide you around a city, or arrange a private meeting with the Dalai Lama."

Jenny recently had a client in India who gave her four days to arrange a family birthday trip in California's Napa Valley. "Initially, they wanted something simple but, the day before, they wanted certain wineries to be closed down for private tours, and a Bollywood singer to be flown in." Within hours, a singer was on the way — for an additional £50,000.

Demand is rising not just for posher and more expensive, but for tougher and more transformative. Another try-

hard neologism has emerged in this new era: the 'luxepedition'. Jenny tells me she's sent people to the Great Wall Marathon in China, one of the most arduous, and on demanding hiking trips to Bhutan. "When people talk about experiences, they're motivated by how it could benefit them, be it stress management, self-reflection or a physical test," Jenny explains. "They want to disconnect."

Edward Clare's travel budget hit giddy heights when his parents sold Dreams, their bed business, for a reported £200m in 2008. The 32-year-old from Buckinghamshire works in property and has a fast, demanding life. Most of his

holidays have been conventional, by the standards of the very wealthy, often involving his fiancée, Riah. "We normally do Dubai, we've done Barbados quite a lot, Ibiza, Mykonos," he says. Two years after selling the business, the Clares rented Richard Branson's Necker Island, in the British Virgin Islands, for a fortnight. "That was about £250,000," Edward recalls. "We had 28 people out and it was really relaxing."

More recently, Edward felt an itch to return to island life, but wanted something less relaxing. "I'd been watching *The Island with Bear Grylls*, where people get abandoned on an island and

have to survive, and I remember thinking, 'I'd love to do this but I'd hate to be on telly and look like an idiot,'" he says. Edward found Desert Island Survival online. The company sends clients to the same island featured in the TV show, a forbidding Pacific jewel 100 miles off the isthmus of Panama. They're trained to build shelters and fish before being left to their own devices, minus their phones.

Edward sent an online enquiry, got a call back in just 10 minutes, and immediately booked a flight to Panama City. "It was a lot harder than I was expecting," he says. "It was rainy season so there wasn't much sun but the hardest thing

was the amount of sand and salt on my skin for 10 days, with no fresh water to wash. And then the sand flies and mosquitos. But it also forced me to completely switch off and be self-sufficient. I came back really recharged and open.”

Edward says bragging rights partly explain the appeal of travelling off the moneyed path. “People are fighting for an experience now; a lifetime trip they can tell their friends about,” he says. “Anyone can go and book a flight and stay at Sandy Lane in Barbados, if they’ve got the money, but if you say I survived on an island for 10 days, or went up Everest, or whatever it is, it holds more gravitas. And you’ve also achieved something for yourself.”

Edward says he enjoyed not being judged for how he looked while on the island, and proving he could support himself. By his standards, the holiday was one of the cheapest he’s taken, costing a relatively meagre £1,650.

Time and money

Luxury for many wealthy people like Edward often involves isolation, and when logistics become more challenging, and that hotly demanded ‘access’ more complicated, the costs of luxepeditions can mount. Patrick Woodhead is an Antarctic

explorer based in South Africa who runs White Desert with his wife, Robyn, and a team of guides and specialists. In 2002, he was part of the youngest, and fastest, team ever to reach the South Pole, and later led a 75-day, 1,150-mile traverse of the continent. “I remember thinking at the time that if we built a little camp on Antarctica, it would be amazing way for people to explore the interior,” he says. “Over the years, that idea has evolved into a luxury offering.” That’s an understatement. Each winter, White Desert flies a dozen big-spending travellers at a time from Cape Town to a specially built runway on Antarctica by private jet. Visitors stay at Whichaway Camp, a collection of six luxury, dome-shaped sleeping pods surrounding a central pod. Interiors are decked out in African safari decor and high-tech mod cons. Facilities include a fully stocked bar, with meals rustled up by an award-winning chef.

By day, Patrick’s customers can hike through ice tunnels, visit science research bases or abseil from towering peaks. Ice climbing and kite skiing can be arranged. A flight, by propeller plane, whisks visitors to an emperor penguin colony at Atka Bay. Or, for ultimate Instagram kudos, stand

on the Geographic South Pole itself after a seven-hour flight inland. The cost for a seven-night trip: £60,000 per person.

“The prices are very high because the logistics involved are phenomenal,” says Patrick. “We have a lot of guests who have seen and done everything but being in the interior of Antarctica still blows their minds.” He adds: “I think there is a sort of nature in humans to be competitive. They want to explore something new.”

The Woodheads have entertained Saudi royalty, British royalty (Prince Harry once dropped in), space royalty (Buzz Aldrin), and dozens of CEOs. Approximately 40% of guests come from America, while almost a third are Chinese. Patrick says the commitment of time, if not money, puts off travellers solely in it to brag and take the photo to prove it. “We get them to meet scientists and learn about climate change and we’re putting these scientists in contact with billionaires, sometimes, who might be interested in funding these projects,” he adds.

The demand to do more — to experience more — is transforming luxury travel beyond these new extreme outlets for adrenalin-deficient titans of industry. The hotels

5 OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD TRIPS

FLY TO ANTARCTICA

White Desert has built a luxury camp on the edge of Antarctica, reached via private jet from Cape Town. Includes the option of flying to the South Pole. £60,000 per person. white-desert.com

SURVIVE ON AN ISLAND

Hop on a boat to an island off the coast of Panama, where *The Island with Bear Grylls* was set. Includes training in shelter building and spear fishing, but otherwise you’re on your own. £1,650 per person. desertislandsurvival.com

DIVE TO THE TITANIC

Blue Marble Private recently added the wreck of the *Titanic* to its offering. Trips are based in Newfoundland and include three-hour dives in a submersible. £76,400 per person. bluemarbleprivate.com

ROUND THE WORLD BY PRIVATE JET

Join Geoffrey Kent, founder of Abercrombie & Kent, on a 25-day, global circumnavigation on a Boeing 757, starting in Miami. From £110,000 per person. abercrombiekent.com

TAKE 52 WEEKEND BREAKS

Take inspiration from one recent client of Quintessentially Travel and plan a year of long weekends away. In the client’s case, this meant kitesurfing, museum tours and fine dining. £100,000-plus. quintessentiallytravel.com





that were once the centre of a brief itinerary are locked in an experiential arms race, too. "I remember when guests departed from their Caribbean resort and literally signed a cheque for their deposit for the next year," says Henry Gray, a veteran hotelier and vice president, operations – hotels and resorts at Six Senses, a luxury spa resort group based in Thailand. "Same time, same place, same cabin — that was it."

Henry says technology has driven the subsequent transformation, first in shaking up the way people researched and booked holidays, and then in the way they were influenced via social media. No longer can resorts rely on loyalty. At Six Senses, even sleep has become an 'experience'. "And we don't just mean the mattress," says Henry. "It's the bamboo pyjamas, the natural materials in the linen and we have a sleep tracker for guests and we use them to make recommendations."

The traditional resort kids' club, filled with shiny toys and nannies attempting to feed the boisterous offspring of wealthy guests, has no place in this new world. According to the Six Senses website, its Grow with Six Senses programme incorporates the six

dimensions of wellness (social, environmental, physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual) and brings kids "back to basics" in order to reconnect with nature and others around them.

"You don't just tick boxes and say, we've got this restaurant, this spa and these facilities," Henry says. "You have to go much deeper because we're all competing for the same piece of pie and you have to be very competitive to get a slice."

At Quintessentially Travel, Jenny Graham says she's too busy to worry that the demands of the guests — who return from these trips and tell their wealthy friends about them — will only push up the bar of expectation ever higher. The company started with three people 18 years ago, and now employs 50 travel consultants. Jenny recently arranged 52 consecutive weekend breaks for a man in his 40s who'd sold a business and wanted a year off. He went kitesurfing, took courses, holidayed with friends and family. He spent very little time sitting on beaches. "We were well into the hundreds of thousands of pounds," Jenny says. "People thought the internet would be the death of the travel specialist, but this demand isn't going to go away." □

TALKING HEADS



Edward Clare // Inspired by *The Island with Bear Grylls*, I found a company that takes you there. It was a lot harder than I was expecting but forced me to be self-sufficient. Anyone can book a flight to Barbados, if they've got the money. But surviving on an island for 10 days holds more gravitas, plus you achieve something for yourself.



Jenny Graham, Quintessentially Travel // Arranging luxury holidays used to be very transactional. We'd organise just a few components — the flights, the transfer, the hotel — and not much else. Now an itinerary might stretch to 30 pages. People want to be guided, they want to be shown things that were once 'money-can't-buy'.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Vineyards, Napa Valley, California
ABOVE: Emperor penguin chicks, Atka Bay, Antarctica