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# Pack Your Bags, Lose Your Baggage

BY ELLISE PIERCE ILLUSTRATION BY SHARON KILDAY



## THE ULTIMATE TRAVEL EXPERIENCE? MAKING THE JOURNEY THE DESTINATION.

**W**hile in the middle of sun salutations at a chic Himalayan retreat one afternoon — between dosha-balancing meals, massages to meant to relax and restore, and oil-dripping shirodara treatments to soothe and invigorate — I realized all of this wasn't enough. I wanted something more.

I asked my yoga teacher where I could take a class that might be more rigorous, more real than what I'd just experienced — after all, I was in India, believed to be the birthplace of yoga thousands of years ago.

The next two days at 5:30 a.m., I practiced alongside a guru at the shala on the Ganges with about 50 others. The imposing guru barked out the asanas in Sanskrit and used my ponytail as a handle to get me into a backbend he knew I was ready for. After class, he invited me to lunch, then to the temple to pay respects to Hanuman, the monkey god, and to be part of the daily ceremony in which incense is burned and sent to the heavens.

Not the sort of thing you'd find on most people's bucket list, but I'd happily travel halfway across the world to have an experience like that again — it's that moment when you find yourself in a foreign place no longer feeling like an outsider, but feeling centered in the midst of what's going on around you.

Experiential travel, travel that's about the experience and feeling one has while traveling — of being in a particular place, part of the local scene and culture — is a growing trend, especially among the well-traveled set.

Because after you've done the Louvre with a private guide at midnight when it's closed to the public (check), stayed in at the George V (check) and taken a balloon ride over Chianti in the fall while the olive harvest is going on (check), what do you do next?

"I think people have moved beyond collecting brand-name hotels or destinations as status symbols in travel just as many have gotten tired of brand-name designer labels," says Melissa Briggs Bradley, founder and CEO the New York-based luxury travel company Indagare (and former travel editor of *Town & Country* magazine). "They are looking for more tailored and personalized trips because they deliver a more powerful experience than just following the crowds."

So, with "journey is the destination" as the new goal — not the postcard-worthy sights a particular place might offer — the luxury of the trip is in the details. Which is how bespoke travel companies like Indagare are now designing trips for their clients.

It starts with getting to know them well. Really well.

To elicit a particular client's likes, dislikes, dreams (and quirks, such as one traveler's refusal to stay in a hotel with

*"People are looking for more tailored and personalized trips because they deliver a more powerful experience."*

- Melissa Briggs Bradley, CEO of Indagare



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Amanaya Beach Resort in Turks and Caicos is perfect for the traveler who wants to experience quiet water all day.

two faucets or another who would never take more than 45 minutes for a meal), London-based bespoke travel agency Brown & Hudson sends all new clients a 16-page questionnaire that includes open-ended queries, like, "Is there anything you've always wanted to try?" and "What would you like to get out of this trip?"

"We are a cross between a therapist and an investigative journalist," says Phillippe Brown, who started the company seven years ago after he worked as a guide for Butterfield & Robison, and before that, in the advertising business. "It's a process of creation rather than sales, so it's perfectly suited to people who've traveled a great deal, who've done it all, and it starts with the client."

It also starts with a \$1,700 upfront fee to pay for the sort of in-depth research that's required to, say, arrange for a meeting with one of Charles Darwin's grandsons in advance of a Galapagos trip for a family in London, which Brown did recently. Which is part of understanding on a deeper level the reason behind a particular trip for that individual client.

"There's something we're looking for that we need that isn't available to us where we are," Brown says. "Why are you traveling on this particular occasion? Themes that might come back are: a desire to escape from the day-to-day, adventure, curiosity, break in the routine or be anonymous, often. We'll tie that into wellness and growth and self-development. When we're not developing, we encounter a blockage, and that's often resolved through travel."

Travel as therapy often means being open to an experience that's not on an itinerary, and to some level of risk.

One bespoke trip included a Mount Everest trek and recovery.



That requires a breaking away from the organized guides and tours and a comfort level that you have at home. Because the point is you're not at home, and you've gone through a great deal of trouble (airports, taxis and boats) to get to where you are, so why not give in and soak up every part of that experience?

It's not for everyone. Some people don't want that much authenticity — they simply want to do what they usually do, but in another place, the travel experts say.

Not only do people crave different types of travel experiences, they may have different travel needs depending on where they are in their lives at that particular time. Major

life changes, such as divorce, kids leaving home or a job that just ended often precede travel in order to heal and renew.

"There's something for everyone," says Lauren Maggard, a luxury travel consultant with Jet Set World Travel in Chicago, who started the company seven years ago with Julia Douglas, her flatmate while attending Sotheby's Art Institute in London (they bonded over a love of travel and weekend trips to Paris, Barcelona and Venice without an itinerary). "We try to get as much information from them on the front end in order to build the right trip."

All beach vacations aren't the same, even on the same island, and even among five-star resorts, whose clientele can vary greatly. "Someone might want to go to the Turks and Caicos, where they can stay at the Gansevoort and have a lively deejay by the pool, or they might stay at Amanaya, where it's quiet by the pool — and quiet by the beach, too — and simply want to read all day and sleep for 12 hours a night," she says.

Or they might want to take a grown-up version of a gap year — a chunk of time off between careers, as in the case of a 55-year-old Portland IT executive who had just sold his company and took off a month to unplug and recharge. But the trip started long before that. After the initial planning, he spent eight months training for a two-and-a-half-week hike to the Mount Everest base camp.

"He put a lot of thought into it before he contacted us," says Maggard, who put together three itineraries for him to choose from. "There's a goal and an intention set. It's not, 'Let's go to Italy and eat our way through the country.'"

Because her client told her he wanted to recover — and in luxury — after his strenuous trek, she arranged for an additional week of morning yoga, daily messages and meditation at Como Shambhala Estate in



Brown & Hudson planned a special trip to Reykjavik, Iceland.

Hali, for a total price tag of \$40,000 for him and a companion.

Then there are the really challenging trips to organize. One of Brown & Hudson's clients was a couple in which the woman was experiencing memory loss. But she loved to play the piano and she adored James Bond movies.

"One of our trip planners remembered that a Bond film was shot in Iceland, so that's a no-brainer," says Brown. "We got in touch with the production company in Iceland and asked if someone would meet with her to talk about making the film.



Cemo Shambhala Estate in Bali offers a stress management program.

They said they would and we asked what they would charge. 'Nothing — just buy us lunch,' he told me.

"On her last Friday in Reykjavik, we thought about what she could do and we arranged for her to go to the concert hall there and play the piano for her husband ... and then film it so [she] could see it again."

For these bespoke travel companies, arranging travel is less about the passport stamp or the amenities at the hotel, or even the place itself.

"Being part of a personal legacy is what we do," Brown says.

"Their mission is about people: their clients and the folks they will connect to during their travels, like I did with the yogis beside me on their mats in India.

"We have a lot of families who say, 'We want to go away with our kids but come back with them having a deeper understanding of the complexities of the world and being better global citizens,'" says Indagare's Bradley. "I love these clients. They could go and sit on a beach every vacation, but they really want to use their holidays to expand their kids' world views and also their values. Sometimes it is a local guide, a shaman, a cook, an NGO head who says something that just clicks — and you carry that lesson home, and it shifts how you look at the world."

Ellise Pierce is currently in Spain, where she hopes to once again dance the flamenco wearing the shoes she bought in Madrid after her first lesson years ago.

#### Resources

**Brown & Hudson**  
Suite 11, 85 Barby Road,  
W10 6BN, London,  
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44-203-358-010;  
[www.brownandhudson.co.uk](http://www.brownandhudson.co.uk)

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