

LEAP OF FAITH

Asking the right questions can open up a whole new world of travel

BY MIKE PEAKE



I'm not a huge fan of planned "surprises", as I've usually sniffed them out long before the big reveal and have to put on an unconvincing display of amazement. But a new concept in travel that deliberately puts surprise at the heart of the experience is changing my mind, the idea being that the adventurous globe-trotter simply hands his money over to an agent and says, "Impress me."

Now, I realise that 99.9 per cent of people like to know where they're going when they rock up at the airport. But Philippe Brown, founder of London-based luxury travel company Brown + Hudson, asserts that for a minority of travellers, a "journey with no destination" (as they've termed it) is an alluring proposition – and I think he may well be on to something.

Brown counts himself among this select group of trusting individuals. "I'm the guy who asks the waiter to choose for him," he says. "It's more fun. It's interesting. It's a return to a more

playful time. For people who have travelled a lot, this is a chance to relinquish control."

Brown and his team hit on the concept while playing with ideas for The School of Life, a global organisation whose philosophy is to develop emotional intelligence through culture, with classes, therapies, books and film all part of its approach. And *The Art of Travel* by Alain de Botton, one of The School of Life founders, was a big inspiration. What really struck a chord was the notion of journeys based not around a destination, but on how a client wanted to feel – and the team also wanted to try to capture the sense of the unknown that permeated the 1997 Michael Douglas movie *The Game*.

To help potential mystery-seekers unlock which emotions they might want to feel on a journey, Brown's team designed a questionnaire.

"Who would your three ideal dinner guests be, from the past or present?"

"What would you like to learn?"

"What would you do for free?"

It's all a bit different to staring at a brochure and pondering questions like, How far is the spa from the beach?

To see if the team really could devise a surprise trip that would beguile and not just befuddle, Brown + Hudson recently walked former *Rolling Stone* journalist Jancee Dunn through the process. Her answers resulted in a four-day trip to a remote fishing village off Newfoundland, which was a big hit – if a bit heavy on the knitted jerseys. It left her insistent that she would reconsider the way she travelled and, in future, would spend more time on the "why" as opposed to the "where."

Me? I'm in – though there is a catch. Brown reckons there are 150 hours of research behind planning each surprise trip, so he can't do anything on less than a five-figure budget.

There is, of course, a DIY version. It involves a world map and a dart. Just try to steer clear of the blue and white bits. ■

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