

the traveller

TRAVELLING THE COUTURE WAY

WITH TODAY'S DISCERNING TRAVELLERS SEEKING OUT THE EXPERIENTIAL OVER THE SYBARITIC, WE MEET THE COMPANIES WHO ARE RE-DEFINING THE CONCEPT AND CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE BESPOKE TRAVEL INDUSTRY.

WORDS *Bita Taghavi*

If ever a word was overused, abused and misinterpreted it has to be 'bespoke'. Poor old bespoke has taken a real battering, being bandied about as a ubiquitous prefix for everything from curtains to envelopes – and of course travel. So what does 'bespoke travel' really mean? Don't get me wrong, we're not here to talk semantics, but as the number of tailor-made travel companies has grown, increasingly it seems the definition is blurred. Is it simply about someone else organising all the bits we can't be bothered with, booking us a big fat seat in first class and sending us on a jolly good holiday, or should we dare to expect more?

Welcome to the couture travel renaissance. Of course, tailor made holidays are nothing new, but like everything, it seems, there's bespoke and then there's bespoke. For Oliver von Holzing of Brown + Hudson it's simple. 'Truly bespoke means that we never take an itinerary off the shelf. We have no shelf. Instead we always start with a large, blank sheet of paper. We decided to buck the trend of efficiencies and cut & paste, to re-invent what bespoke really means: made from scratch and only for you. We are extremely purist about this which is why our trips are truly bespoke, both in planning and delivery. If something doesn't exist, we create it, if it's not

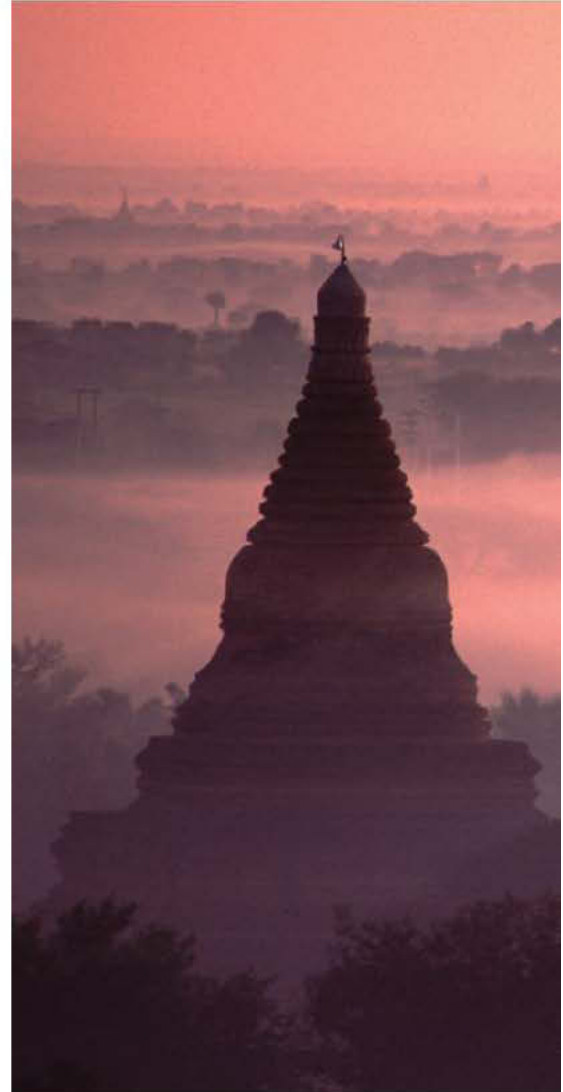
there we build it, if it doesn't seem possible we make it possible.' Music to the ears of today's demanding travellers, who seem to be eschewing uber luxury in favour of authenticity and the lure of a unique experience.

There was a time when we were content with jet-setting off to chichi destinations for some easy living with a side order of silk sheets and infinity pools. Things have changed. In an age where the world has become our endless oyster, lazy luxury just won't >>

The Leh Festival,
Ladakh, India.



BELOW Flying high in Zambia
RIGHT Bagan in Burma
BOTTOM RIGHT Helicopter
ride in New Zealand.



IN AN AGE WHERE THE WORLD HAS BECOME OUR ENDLESS OYSTER, LAZY LUXURY JUST WON'T CUT THE MUSTARD ANYMORE

cut the mustard anymore. And that's not all. For cash-rich, time-poor individuals, their time away has to count, which sets expectations soaring from the challenging to the nigh on perverse. We want sumptuous luxury, but we also want simplicity. We want the thrill of seeing the wonders of the world but we certainly don't want to feel like just another tourist. We want to touch the untouchable and be changed by it. The tallest order of all: we want access all areas – to integrate into a community and experience the culture from the inside, like a local. Believe it or not, there are companies and individuals out there who wouldn't bat an eyelid at any of this.

'For the sophisticated traveller it is more about the experience than the gloss', says Christopher Wilmot Sitwell, co-owner and director of Cazenove + Loyd. 'Where you stay is a major consideration, of course, but true added value is in what you do, who looks after you and what

you come away with in terms of experience and learning. Taking teenagers or a young family to the Amazon or the Serengeti or visiting Machu Pichu or Angkor Wat are life-changing experiences in a way that a luxury villa or hotel in Europe can never be.'

Quintessentially Escape's Jenny Graham agrees 'Luxury is being redefined as experiences because consumers are overloaded with products. The jetset aren't just populating 5-star hotels anymore – there is a growing demand for exotic travel and customised, ultimate experiences. Today's increasingly well travelled individuals want to be intrigued, entertained and enlightened. They will spend top money to be first, or reach the most remote places.'

It seems no amount of Swiss voile and champagne can compensate for Zeitgeist. Spontaneity and a unique experience of the locality are key. As Sitwell explains 'We believe

everything is possible... it is the client who drives everything'. Von Holzinger shares the same values 'Our ethos is that no one person on this earth is the same, therefore no journey or adventure created should be the same. That's why we begin each journey by learning as much as we can about the client. Asking questions like "what's your definition of exotic- first contact with Pastun Tribesmen or a luxury lodge in the Seychelles?" allows us to understand what will really engage their hearts and minds. Every little insight can grow into a fabulous bespoke experience.' It's an impressive offering. With this sky's-the-limit approach and carte blanche for clients to explore every whim and fantasy, you'd be forgiven for wondering how they can be sure they'll deliver. Enter the secret weapon: the aptly titled 'Fixer'. With the growing demand for authenticity, companies like Brown + Hudson, Quintessentially and Cazenove + Loyd



have reacted by working with in-the-know gurus that keep them one step ahead. 'Personal relationships are key to delivering on the ground', explains Sitwell. 'Throughout our three regions of expertise we have guides and 'fixers' who we are in contact with the whole time. For a 50th birthday party in Rajasthan we wanted to vary the cuisine – I had once had a spectacular meal in Kerala with a Muslim chef. Not only did our 'fixer', Oscar persuade the chef and his wife to come up from the South for the occasion, they brought all of the fresh ingredients with them.'

Quintessentially Escape has a network of specialist fixers all over the globe, poised and ready to spring into action. Whether it's a gastronome in Italy, a Bedouin Chieftain or a Russian member of state, these live wires offer something no five star hotel can match: insider knowledge and the ability to open otherwise closed doors. With the help of their army of experts, Quintessentially have arranged jaw-dropping feats; dining on an iceberg in New Zealand, private access to the Vatican, closing the Taj Mahal for

the day and an authentic indigenous experience to stay within a remote aboriginal community, to name a few.

But fixers are not the only vital element in delivering the extraordinary. You might think that once you'd facilitated closed door access to the Vatican, private picnics on the Great Wall of China and cycling with Olympian athletes in the Middle East, you could pat yourself on the back and take a well earned break. Not so. Arranging a detailed and unique itinerary is just

the beginning. Working assiduously to create truly bespoke experiences, outfits like Brown + Hudson constantly adapt to the needs of the client during their holiday – nothing is set in stone – which makes the guides they work with so crucial to their success. These hand-picked individuals accompany the client on their travels to ensure, amongst other things, that wishes become commands. 'The guides we work with tend to be renaissance types who have a broad range of skills and interests', says von Holzing 'on the ground they will team up with local specialists such as Masaai tribesmen, celebrity yogis, art and culture experts, to leading government or NGO insiders. Our guides are like swans – graceful above the water, paddling furiously below thinking about the client's experience and how to constantly improve it. A client on a two week cycling trip in the remote wilderness of New Zealand was overheard saying he would rather play golf that day. The guide went away and within 30 minutes came back with a solution: a tee-time at a course half an hour away – by helicopter, which he had also organised.'

At Cazenove + Loyd they believe a guide can make or break a holiday. 'We spend a lot of time building our relationships with key people on the ground in all our destinations and >>



RIGHT Hot air balloon safari in Tanzania
BOTTOM LEFT Man and seal, Ecuador
BOTTOM RIGHT Feeding a leopard cub in South Africa.

as a result we've built up a network of expert guides who are able to read the client extremely well and go the extra mile' says Sitwell. 'Be it private access to a museum or palace, tea with a Maharaja, a one-to-one wildlife encounter or a private tango lesson, we're confident our guides can make it happen for our clients.'

With the help of their dexterous specialists on the ground, these companies turn creative travel ideas into realities. But at the heart of truly bespoke travel lies a true understanding of the individual. By finding out what really makes someone tick and leaving no stone (however tiny) unturned, they are able to deliver what their clients want before they've even thought of it, let alone asked for it. Organising a honeymoon for a client in South Africa, Brown + Hudson discovered the groom was training for a marathon. Their response: they calculated his training needs and convinced the lodge and rangers in a wildlife reserve to flag out an 18km parcours for him and secure it with men on vehicles so he could do a full, safe run through

stunning, but otherwise potentially dangerous parkland. This was followed by a private meeting with one of the world's leading experts on marathons who created a personal running guide for him. And the pièce de résistance of this honeymoon adventure? A personal wedding blessing by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. But it's the (not so) little touches these companies add that are sure to elicit a gasp even from those accustomed to princely treatment. Arriving at your villa to find your framed wedding photo on the bedside table, a surprise visit from Father Christmas in the middle of the Rajasthani desert, a t-shirt baked

in a pie, an encounter with cheetahs at your hotel – a list of imaginative twists and surprises that would put Willy Wonka to shame.

Delving into this world of endless possibility, it's clear that what the top dogs in the industry offer goes beyond couture travel. Genies in bottles, unbridled creativity, fun and sheer magic are at every turn. In short: it's the stuff dreams are made of. /après

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