

The world is NOT ENOUGH

Private islands and yachts? Passé. From hanging out at an Antarctic research station to weekending with a tribe in Ethiopia, the super-rich are taking holidays to the extreme. *Kate Wills* reports on the new thrillioneers

Wolf's Fang Peak in Antarctica is one of the most inhospitable environments on the planet. Temperatures dip to -50C and altitude sickness is a given, so it's a good thing you spent the morning in survival training. After lunch with scientists at the research station, you go abseiling into glacial crevasses, then relax with a spot of kite-skiing. You could hop in a snowmobile and take advantage of the 24-hour sunlight, but you decide to head back to your state-of-the-art sleep pod for an early night. After all, tomorrow you're competing in an Antarctic marathon.

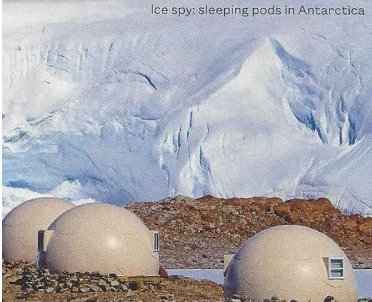
It might be the, ahem, polar opposite of a beach break, but this was one London-based entrepreneur's recent holiday. The cost? £63,000 for an eight-day trip, bespoke eye masks included. 'It isn't for everyone,' admits Robyn Woodhead, COO of White Desert.

But, she points out, 'it's totally immersive, which is why our clients like it — they can really disconnect'. From its office in Westbourne Park the specialist travel company has taken many an intrepid holidaymaker, including Prince Harry,



Prince Harry

Ice spy: sleeping pods in Antarctica

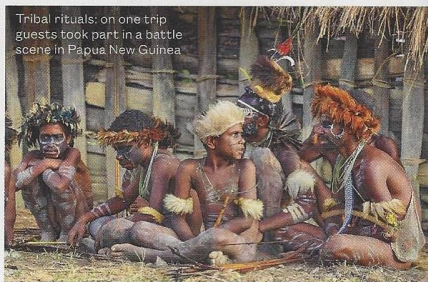


Saudi royal family, Dominic West and Bear Grylls (of course), to the White Continent.

But it isn't just Antarctica that's drawing high-spending clients. Where once luxury holidays meant superyachts and safaris, now the top 0.01 per cent are craving something a little more... high-octane. 'We call them "luxu-peditions",' says Philippe Brown, co-founder of Kensington-based tour operator Brown + Hudson, which has arranged trips for Catherine Zeta-Jones, Jim Berkus (chairman of United Artists Talent Agency) and Brad Grey (the former CEO of Paramount), at a minimum cost of £20,000 per week, per person. Brown has recently arranged an archaeological dig in Abu Ballas, Egypt, for six Canadian businessmen, a camping trip on the rim of an active volcano in Indonesia for a Middle Eastern family and a hike through the ice caves of Afghanistan for a group of wealthy Americans.

Meanwhile, those wanting to take exploratory travel to new depths can book a 'Dive the *Titanic*' tour with Blue Marble Private, an outfit that can also arrange for you to fly Russian fighter jets or explore thermal vents on the Galápagos Rift. Nine people have already paid the £84,000 for the first tour in 2018, but as the blurb in the brochure puts it, 'Far fewer people have visited the wreck of the *Titanic* than the number who have been to space or summited Mount Everest', so presumably it's kind of a bargain.

Even more mainstream tour operators, such as Abercrombie & Kent, have noticed an increase in people wanting to book trips to places no one — or at least none of their friends — has been before. Their 'Inspiring Expeditions' series offers ultra-exclusive holidays to



Tribal rituals: on one trip guests took part in a battle scene in Papua New Guinea

remote, hard-to-reach places, including a private island research station off the coast of Panama and a round-the-world jaunt by private jet with A&K founder Geoffrey Kent, from £122,915 per person. 'It's no longer enough to hike the Inca Trail, now you have to spend one night in a pod in the Sacred Valley and then zip-wire down,' says product manager Graeme Bull.

'Adventure travel has grown by 350 per cent in the past year,' says Matthew Robertson, founder of Momentum Adventure, which has sent Gwyneth Paltrow and her family kayaking with Komodo dragons, and a City banker to the Borneo jungle for SAS survival training. Trips start at £15,000 and stretch 'well into the millions'. Luxury brands are also catching on to the power of intrepid adventures accompanied by a high thread-count pillow at night. 'We just did big trips for Dunhill, Bentley and Weatherbys the private bank.'

Robertson argues that, for those who want for nothing material, having a unique experience carries more caché: 'These people have enough stuff; what they're looking for is an authentic slice of the action.'

For people who spend their lives calling the shots, the dream vacation often involves relinquishing all control. 'We



Jim Berkus



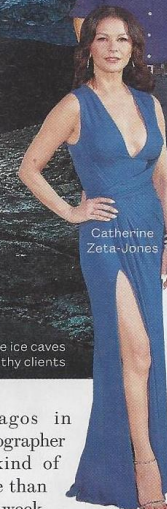
Gwyneth Paltrow



Cold comfort: remote ice caves are one option for wealthy clients



Bear Grylls



Catherine Zeta-Jones

"OUR CLIENTS HAVE ALREADY TRAVELLED EXTENSIVELY AND EXPERIENCED THE BEST MONEY CAN BUY, SO IT'S ABOUT FINDING A WAY TO MAKE THEM EXCITED BY THE WORLD"

guarantee how clients are going to feel during and after their trip — but we don't tell them where they are going,' says Philippe Brown.

Besides, as Jenny Graham, Director of Quintessentially Travel, points out: 'Doing something hardcore and out of your comfort zone means you have to focus on the right now, so for some people it's actually more relaxing than lying on a beach.' The company has offices in Portland Place and 66 locations around the world. 'We've arranged for clients to travel around Rajasthan by rickshaw, to take part in the Baja 1000 challenge (an off-road buggy race in Mexico) and for one City boy to spend seven days living with a tribe in Ethiopia.' She booked a trip for one couple who spent their honeymoon deep-sea diving

amid remote archipelagos in Indonesia with marine photographer Shawn Heinrichs — a kind of experience that costs more than £100,000 per person, per week.

'At the end of the day it's not like new countries are popping up, so it's about what you can do in those destinations to make them exclusive and extraordinary.'

Doing battle on a pirate ship, being ambushed by ninjas on a high-speed Japanese bullet train or shaving the heads of novice Buddhist monks in Burma are just some of the 'waking dreams' arranged by Based on a True Story in Queen's Park. This ultra-elite 'experiential' firm stages trips that are almost like theatrical productions in an attempt to cure ultra-high-net-worthers of the ennui that can come with immense privilege.

'Our clients have already travelled extensively, they've experienced the best luxury money can buy, so it's about finding a way to make them excited by the world,' says

Oliver von Holzinger, MD of Based on a True Story. 'One particularly memorable trip was for the maiden voyage of a superyacht starting in Greece, so we based their adventure on *The Odyssey* and Greek mythology. We worked with a historian from Oxford University to devise a treasure hunt that involved the children learning to fight like Spartans, overcoming Medusa, making a deal with a Cyclops and singing a lullaby to pacify a Minotaur. It included exclusive access to the ruins of Olympia where we hosted a fully costumed mini-Olympics and culminated in a five-headed fire-breathing pyrotechnic Scylla. Besides the hundreds of actors involved, they didn't see another tourist at all, and this was in August — high season.'

Although this clientele is cosseted in extreme luxury, many are keen to slum it in return for a slice of local colour. 'I just organised a trip around South America for two very high-profile guys,' says Von Holzinger. 'It was based on *The Motorcycle Diaries* and they were happy to sleep in hammocks. We've taken two princesses on an Amazonian expedition via Ecuador and Bolivia, where they spent months training in kayaking and outdoor skills in preparation. On one expedition we arranged for guests to spend time with a tribe in the jungles of Papua New Guinea. There was a surprise ambush, then a battle scene was reenacted, before our guests took part in celebrations involving ancient customs and sacrifices. Accommodation was set up for them in an abandoned village, but was luxuriously upgraded.'

It seems even when you're roughing it in the middle of nowhere, you still need your creature comforts. 'One client chartered a boat down the Amazon and decided they wanted a running machine on board — that caused a few headaches,' recalls Graeme Bull. 'Another client was sailing around Palau but requested a particular kind of wine and a £20,000 bottle of whisky, which was tricky to get through customs. Recently a couple wanted to go to the North Pole for 24 hours. We made it happen but at the cost of £600,000 — we had to charter an army plane and a helicopter.'

Clearly for some people that's a drop in the (Arctic) ocean, but sometimes the costs are prohibitive, even for thrillioneers. 'We were planning a trip on a submersible research vessel around Galápagos for one client, but the charter fee was just too high so it didn't happen,' laments Von Holzinger. 'We all want to be David Attenborough, but there are limits.'