



MUD, SWEAT AND TEARS

Experiential trips that satisfy our urge for nature and adventure are becoming big business

WORDS ALEX BRIAND



Time was when a holiday meant doing not very much at all. Those precious vacation days were used to unwind on a beach, somewhere hot, with only enough physical exertion to reach for a mojito, or turn a page.

However, in the past few years, and especially in the luxury sector, sun, sea and sand has been replaced by mud, sweat and tears, as travellers seek to challenge themselves more than ever before. Driven by a newfound desire for experiences (and, no doubt, the Instagram value of the resulting snaps), adventure is booming. This year's Virtuoso Luxe Report shows that "active or adventure trips" are the number one top luxury travel trend for 2019.

So why the change? Philippe Brown of hyper-bespoke luxury travel company Brown and Hudson (brownandhudson.com), puts it down to what he refers to as "the denatured state" of our modern society.

"There is a desire for people to grow, and you can't find that kind of growth on a smart device, or in a familiar environment. To try and feel alone and have that worthwhile time you've got to go off the beaten track. You have to be increasingly creative. It's exoticness, anonymity, challenge."

Antonia Bolingbroke-Kent, who hosts a seminar at the Adventure Travel Show (adventureshow.com) at London's Olympia on January 19-20, agrees: "Adventure fills this need to escape and unwind, and reconnect with the wilderness. You're testing yourself and embracing the unknown – all these things are very life-affirming."

Part of the appeal of adventure travel is the refreshing simplicity of a single, challenging but surmountable goal – something luxury travellers whose day-to-day lives are busy and high-pressure are increasingly looking for. In fact, the rise in adventure travel benefits from another thoroughly modern phenomenon – mindfulness. "We're getting close to travel as therapy," says Brown.

The destinations vary, but the focus is on the new. Some of these are due to recent changes – for example Zimbabwe's booming safari industry post-Mugabe – or simply new luxury accommodation where there was none before. The Virtuoso report singles out Columbia, Sri Lanka and Bhutan as travel destinations on the rise.

Bolingbroke-Kent, who owns travel company Silk Road Adventures and produced

last year's Joanna Lumley-fronted TV series on that part of the world, says there's also been "an explosion of interest in Central Asia. Places like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Lots of people want to stay in yurt camps. They want the wilderness, but I also hear: 'Do the yurts have en-suite bathrooms?'"

That mix of wilderness and creature comforts is even more of a temptation for high-net-worth travellers. For the time-poor, concentrating the experience of an adventure holiday into the purely exhilarating and beneficial is an irresistible prospect.

Kittua Camp in the mostly untouched west of Greenland is a glamping trip writ large. Only accessible by boat or helicopter, and based among the world's oldest mountains, it offers truly unparalleled expeditionary opportunities. And on return, travellers can

rejuvenate in their luxury heated tents, or the sauna – or with a gourmet meal.

"It's the introduction of a few comforts," says Brown and Hudson's Mark Beken. "Whether it's turning up with your favourite brandy or whisky, or a fresh pair of socks, or even us flying in a loved one."

Brown says: "We work out what the specific luxury is that's going to make that expedition possible for someone, then we bring it in." It's a sentiment reflected in the overarching trend in the Virtuoso report, towards individualisation: the super-personalisation of a trip to a traveller's specific needs.

"When you're dealing with millionaires and billionaires, they can do anything they want," says Brown. "They can take their jet or yacht and go anywhere. It's up to us to come up with a story – a dramatic arc."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Camping in British Columbia; climbing Half Dome in Yosemite, California; the Elburz mountains in Iran
OPPOSITE TOP: Monte Fitz Roy, Patagonia
OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Antonia Bolingbroke-Kent in India