

Magical mystery tour

When you've been there, done that and have 10,000 photos to prove it, why not let a complete stranger arrange the ultimate surprise vacation for you? Mike Peake investigates whether the surprise travel trend will take off...



By Mike Peake

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Mystery trips: the new way to travel?

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One damp Friday in November 2002, my wife put us both on a Eurostar train leaving London and told me we were heading off on a city break. While Paris seemed the most obvious destination, something about my other half's wry smile as we chugged through the English countryside made me take a more thorough look at the route map up on the wall. Eurostar trains don't only go to France – apparently they go to Belgium, too.

Some 13 years later, it turns out that this trip – to the indescribably lovely Bruges, as it happens – marked me out as an early adopter of something called 'surprise travel'. Apparently it's the latest trend now, and if my one experience of it is anything to go by, it's brilliant. Why? Because there's no way that I would have booked a trip to Bruges (really, Bruges?!) if I were doing it myself.

The reason surprise travel works is because it increases the chances of you visiting places you've perhaps never heard of or have already written off as not for you. When it comes to holidays, you've already been to the places that you think you want to go – the idea behind surprise travel is that it will hook you up with a holiday consultant who can use their vast experience to create a trip you'd perhaps never think of.

It's patently not for everyone – in fact it's only really suited to seasoned travellers who are prepared to take a frankly enormous leap of faith – and it doesn't come cheap. Brown and Hudson, a British company that has just launched The Journey With No Destination has added fuel to this quietly simmering trend, says that a budget of least Dh85,000 per person would be required because of the level of time invested into creating what is, in effect, the ultimate dream trip. But for rich well-travelled clients (and there are many) who want an adventure it's the perfect surprise-cation.

'There's so much travel information out there that some clients just don't know what to do,' says Philippe Brown, founder of Brown and Hudson, 'so the idea of surrendering the responsibility to someone else can be very appealing. For that reason we think surprise travel is a trend that could really take off.'

Philippe says that the idea is not just about treating a client to an endless stream of random surprises that are loosely connected to their interests – it goes deeper than that, almost to an existential level. He argues that the very essence of the idea is to get to the root of what people want to feel from a journey, rather than what they want to see. 'Perhaps someone may express to us that they love art, but never take the time out to paint any more as work and family dominate their days,' he says. 'So we may think to inspire the client by setting up a private art class with their favourite living artist.'

As further examples of what people might be looking for, he suggests a renewed appreciation for the wonders of your own city or, perhaps, a desire to share in the grace and kindness exhibited by the indigenous people of different parts of the world. 'There's no set of stock answers,' Philippe says. 'It's different for everyone.'

If mystery trips are the new way to travel, it naturally raises the question: What's so wrong with the old way of doing things? Isn't spending hours on Tripadvisor and nosing through guidebooks what booking a holiday is all about?

Jenifour Jones, who runs a US-based event-planning company called Go Get It Events, agrees that the traditional way of booking a holiday is fine for most people. But when you've seen the world and travel regularly, she says, surprise travel is an attractive option. She should know – she was arguably the first person in the world to offer surprise travel to clients and has planned around 25 such trips over the past five years.

'The people who want this will seek me out because they've heard that this is something we do,' she says. 'But the average person doesn't want it because they want to be in control. For the more adventurous types, it's a fun and luxurious thing to do.'

Jenifour cites the example of one wealthy client who asked her to organise a surprise trip not just for one friend, but for 100. 'He actually did this twice!' she says. 'He likes to surprise his loved ones with amazing experiences, so they get the invitation but they're not told where they're going. They're just told that they should clear certain dates and the type of clothes to bring, and then they show up at the airport with no idea where they going.' The subterfuge continues all the way to the destination because this particular client, she says, is able to afford private travel – so guests are bamboozled with everything from signs giving a false destination at the airport to pilots giving them misleading clues.

'The first time they flew to Greece and had a private cruise for a week through Montenegro, Croatia and Italy,' she says. 'Then we did it again a few months ago, and this time it was in the Caribbean.'

For both Jenifour and Philippe, success is all in the planning, and that begins with a long conversation with the client. 'We ask them where they've been, where they do not want to go and what they do not want to do,' says Jenifour. 'This is absolutely vital.'

Brown and Hudson aims to go even deeper with a questionnaire that you might imagine in a psychologist's waiting room. Philippe says that questions such as 'Can you share a childhood memory that evokes feelings of warmth and nostalgia' and 'Dead or alive, who would your ideal dinner guests be?' help him understand where a client is coming from. There's certainly little doubt that it's a very different approach to showing someone a brochure and seeing on which page they linger longest. Philippe says these questions are not just a gimmick, but a way to work out what people want to feel. If you were to say you wanted a greater appreciation of nature, the journey might include a private meeting before you go at the Galapagos Conservation Trust in London with Randal Keynes OBE, the great-great-grandson of Charles Darwin, or the author of a book about how to read landscapes. In this way, Philippe says, clients don't miss out on any of the expectation and rising excitement that comes before a holiday. 'In fact there's even more expectation because of the intrigue,' he says. 'You might miss out on the expectation connected to the place, but not on the expectation of the feeling you want to get out of that trip.'

So how might we lesser mortals who don't have hundreds of thousands of dirhams to spend on a holiday for two go about setting up a surprise trip for a loved one? 'The most important – and difficult – thing is to focus on the outcome rather than the place,' says Philippe. 'You have to think about it in a different way. Think about the feeling you want to achieve and do your research far and wide. By going into that realm, ideas will pop up that you can probably tie to any place on the planet.' A good example of how he was able to put this kind of thinking into

practice is a recent trip to Iceland that he planned for a couple named Holly and Zac. She wanted rest; her husband sought adventure. Both happened to have a soft spot for James Bond films. The result was an unforgettable journey in which Zac got to meet a former policeman who climbs mountains and with whom he went ice-climbing; Holly got to soak in healing waters near lava fields and, a keen pianist, was even lucky enough to play in a Reykjavik concert hall. Together, they also met the movie producer who shot the Icelandic scenes for *Die Another Day*. These aren't perhaps things you could pull off yourself, but by thinking laterally a very different and more fulfilling holiday could be just around the corner.

Whether or not surprise travel takes off in a big way remains to be seen – it's likely that given the time-intensive planning needed it will remain an expensive option that will only appeal to a select few. But the industry seems ready for it, and Jenifour Jones sees it steadily catching on. She says, 'so long as travel remains affordable I think this will only become more popular.'

Surprise travel here in the UAE is no sweat for Kate Pittam at Scott Dunn Travel. 'If someone wanted to take a loved one on a lavish, surprise visit to Dubai we would ask them to name their favourite food, preferred type of hotel, interests and activities,' she says. 'Once we get a feel for the person, we could create, say, a bespoke trip that included a deluxe suite with private butler at the Burj Al Arab, arriving by helicopter. It might lead to private polo lessons, or a night in a luxury Bedouin tent in the desert. Food could be sushi in an underwater restaurant, or a private dinner with a Michelin-starred chef. The secret is understanding the customer and having contacts.'

For most of us, surprise travel will be little more than an intriguing concept – and maybe something to give a go when we win the lottery. Perhaps the take-away message from all of this, however, is we should be thinking just a little harder about what we want out of a holiday. 'If you don't talk about the destination, you'll inevitably start talking about how you want to feel,' says Philippe. 'That's your starting point. A world of possibilities will start to reveal themselves once you establish that.'

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