

Robb Report

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BEYOND THE GUIDEBOOK

Been there, done that is not what you'll get if you pick the right travel company that can customise your holiday the way you like it.

By SANJAY SURANA



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The idea of bespoke travel surfaced about a decade ago: travellers wanted to experience a destination in a unique way and boutique outfitters tinkered with their product to assuage this nascent demand. This cottage industry has now morphed into a global juggernaut, with every travel agent promising the ultimate bespoke experience. The sad truth, however, is that most don't offer anything vaguely distinctive. Many simply cobble

together pieces of different prepackaged itineraries and pass off the result as a bespoke experience.

"The agencies that consistently look for ways to offer new bespoke adventures, while encouraging clients to escape their comfort zones, are the ones that give the greatest value," says Jeff Romeo, an expert travel consultant with Los Angeles-based Bluefish (www.thebluefish.com).

"There's a different experience waiting for

Whitewater rafting in Chile. Bespoke travel experiences challenge clients to learn something new about themselves while stretching their boundaries.



The best bespoke operators have exclusive rights or connections for the trips that they pull together.



everyone, and some might not realise it until they're there or encouraged to get there."

In conversations with a number of travel companies that specialise in truly bespoke travel, one thing is evident – bespoke is about meeting the client's needs, not trying to shape the client's preference to fit a product that's already in the market.

Adrian Bottomley, of Hong Kong's Whistling Arrow (www.whistlingarrow.com), a small adventure firm, warns of the smoke and mirrors that numerous agencies use. "With the globalisation of travel and its increasing online presence, companies often just offer fancy sales and booking portals or platforms that disguise an essentially generic product."

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"We have had a fair amount of success with trips that people just can't find anywhere else. In Coron (the Philippines), we built our own expedition boat and designed an island-hopping itinerary that explores parts of the archipelago that only we have permission to visit," says Bottomley.

London's Black Tomato (www.blacktomato.com), which was founded 10 years ago, worked on the premise that there were legions of travellers with curious natures and bagfuls of money, but there wasn't an agency addressing their needs. Black Tomato's success from the outset came as a surprise

A hot-air balloon ride is another way to appreciate Morocco's beauty from a uniquely different perspective.



– it has enjoyed double-digit growth every year. This prompted the company to open Epic Tomato (epictomato.com) two years ago, offering adventure trips with a number of self-proclaimed world-firsts such as abseiling down a waterfall in Guyana and climbing a mountain in Tanzania.

“Our customers must feel that the trip

Epic Tomato has organised adventure trips with a number of self-proclaimed world-firsts.

is ‘just for me’, that’s what is important,” says Tom Marchant, Black Tomato’s managing director.

Epic Tomato, for instance, takes documentary teams to parts of the globe that Western travellers haven’t visited for a century.



Epic Tomato’s exclusive trips can include kayaking in a Patagonian cave.

“Some people say the world is fully discovered, but we say it hasn’t been fully explored. People want to take time off from their 24/7 lifestyle and have a sense of anticipation and anxiety about going to places nobody they know has been to. It feeds into their desire for bragging rights. The world is grand enough to facilitate this kind of adventure,” says Marchant.

The definition of bespoke also needs calibrating. “It’s about new experiences, but also new ways of seeing familiar places,” Marchant explains. Black and Epic Tomato scope out future destinations by sending staff to revisit locations they know well (because places change constantly) or by looking at trends in other areas, such as fashion, film and literature.

Philippe Brown, founding partner of Brown + Hudson (www.browndanhduson.com), highlights a change in the industry.



Bespoke involves a commitment to staying abreast of trends and what the clients desire, even if it's the opposite of what they wanted a day earlier.

“The world of bespoke travel took a turn, quite some time ago, towards the experiential. The key, now and in the future, to fulfilling the needs of discerning and typically well-travelled clients is understanding who these individuals really are, what makes them tick and what excites them. Bespoke operators must create experiences that don't yet exist.”

And remaining bespoke involves a commitment to staying abreast of trends and what the clients desire, even if it's the opposite of what they wanted a day earlier.

“To keep up with our clientele's evolving needs, our team continues to develop its unique travel, lifestyle and psychographic client interview process. The future of truly bespoke travel lies with companies who are an integral part of their client's world and mindset,” says Brown.

Marchant echoes his thoughts. “Bespoke business requires human interaction. Many companies try to automatically generate



Hop on a quad bike or snowmobile to hunt down the Northern Lights in rural Iceland.

bespoke experiences, but a formula won't tell you where to stay in Santorini, Greece.”

Brown insists that technology will also play a part. “The ease with which social networks evolve and bring people with similar interests together means a likely increase in bespoke travel for groups or collections of individuals with niche interests. In recent months, we've encountered large parties with specific interests ranging from tribal culture in the Lesser Sunda Islands to supercar grand tours of Europe, Chilean rodeo and Middle Eastern theology.”

Bespoke travel, the real stuff, the trips that can get you blessed by a fourth-generation shaman at Siberia's Lake Baikal, have you crushing grapes with vintners in central France or trekking with nomads in West Africa will, in the right hands, get better, smarter, more intuitive and more inspiring.

The winners? We, the travellers, of course. 🍷