



Handmade holidays

For those who have “been there, done that”, a new breed of luxury travel agent is curating bespoke trips offering unparalleled experiences

by Russell Williamson

Photo: Michelle Valberg/Arctic Kingdom

Maybe what makes a good traveller, a fulfilled traveller, has less to do with the particular destination that you are going to and much more to do with your attitude towards it, much more to do with the way that you are looking at what you have come to see

Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel*

In his 2002 book, *The Art of Travel*, British philosopher and author Alain de Botton explored the very essence of travel. Not the where or what, but the how and why: modern mankind's motivations, desires and expectations of travel.

This theme so piqued the interest of Philippe Brown, founder of London-based bespoke luxury travel agent, Brown + Hudson (brownandhudson.com), that it sparked the development of a new travel concept for his high-end clientele.

"I liked his slightly contrarian way of not focusing on the destination, but thinking about what you can get out of it," Brown says.

"We took that idea to its logical conclusion and created a concept called Journey With No Destination. We guarantee how clients are going to feel during and after their trip – and we don't tell them where they are going."

While clients set a few parameters, Brown + Hudson crafts each trip purely based on the client's desires, motivations and expectations without declaring the destination.

The idea of delivering a deeper, more thought-provoking and more satisfying experience than a travel-by-numbers guidebook holiday – no matter how luxurious – is a theme now central to the work of a growing number of bespoke luxury travel agents.

A bespoke service is precisely what firms like Brown + Hudson, New York-based Absolute Travel (absolutetravel.com), and Asia specialist Remote Lands (remotelands.com) offer: one-off itineraries, crafted for each individual client.

Many travel operators suggest well-developed itineraries, but as

Nathan Wedding, of Brisbane-based Seven Skies (sevenskies.com), points out, they're just that: suggestions as to where they might go, or which experiences they can enjoy there.

"These are mostly just to showcase our style and what we can do. All of our itineraries are tailored to our clients and handcrafted on a private, personal basis according to what they are looking for," Wedding says.

The typical customer for a bespoke travel experience is well-travelled and sophisticated. Needless to say, luxury is an integral part of the offering.

But as Brooke Garnett, director of sales at Absolute Travel says, the concept of "luxury" they provide goes well beyond the presidential suite or the helicopter transfers.





(far left) Philippe Brown, of Brown + Hudson; (left) camping beside the Fjallsárlón glacial lagoon in Iceland; (above) Absolute Travel's Brooke Garnett on a helicopter safari; (right) up close with elephants in Botswana; (opening page) hot air ballooning in the Arctic



Photos: (above) Karl Olafsson; (top and right) Absolute Travel

"Our tagline is 'private luxury journeys' and we have to be careful with the word luxury, because the luxury is more in the experience than just the hotel or the facilities. It is the experience that people remember, so we try to deal with the experiences first and then figure out, 'Okay, if that's what you are after, then this is where you should go,'" Garnett says. Those experiences do often include the very best hotels or lodges, Michelin-starred restaurants and private exclusive transport and guides. And when it comes to activities, the bespoke operators can

pretty much put together anything. Consider the Arctic trip that adventure specialists Mountain Travel Sobek (mtsobek.com) recently curated. It incorporated private jet transport to the far north, scuba diving on icebergs, dry-suit snorkelling with narwhals and belugas, snowmobiling and helicopter and balloon flights over the frozen Arctic while kitted out in custom-made clothing, and dining on local gourmet fare produced by professional chefs.

Adelaide-based firm The Tailor (thetailor.com.au) concocted a



Christmas surprise for a client and his family that involved building a treasure chest, half burying it on a sand cay on the Great Barrier Reef and then having the family arrive on Christmas Day by boat to find the treasure chest full of their Christmas presents.

And while Philippe Brown explains for Brown + Hudson, no activity is too extreme – “if it is on the planet or in near space, it should be possible” – he says many clients are looking for something more meaningful in their experience.

“We have always done experiential stuff, but people want to get beneath the skin of things in their way and at their pace. It is likely that people have travelled

and seen the world in a certain way, but we are finding that now they are thinking, I would really like to go back and explore, say, Thai boxing in that country, because that would be a different way to appreciate Thailand,” Brown says.

It’s a sentiment echoed by many bespoke travel operators, for whom success means combining two essential skills: the ability to ascertain and analyse exactly what the client wants from their travel experience; and the personal knowledge, contacts and creativity to deliver the perfect trip that is going to meet those needs.

“People have described us as a cross between a therapist and investigative

journalist,” Brown laughs. “The therapist because we ask a lot of weird questions to help us get a picture of who they are. The investigative journalist because when we have got an idea of where they should be going and why, we take that destination and rip it into its constituent parts and then rebuild it specifically for those clients.”

Absolute Travel’s Garnett says that initial, comprehensive consultation is vital, but it certainly doesn’t stop there.

“We have a conversation to get a feel for what they want, their budget and to make sure we are a good match. You hope that you have learned enough that your first proposal is right-on for what they want,



but that is rarely the case," she says.

"Often, they'll want a few tweaks and later on add some other things. It's something that constantly evolves, sometimes right until they depart or even when they are on the ground."

Bespoke luxury agents need to keep impeccably up-to-date information on the destination and the necessary contacts and experience and access. For firms operating at the highest level, that comes not from third party accounts, but from personal experience of the destination and trusted local sources.

"This is really critical," says Seven Skies' Nathan Wedding. "Most of the destinations that we specialise in

(clockwise from left) Celebrations in Bhutan; horse-riding on the beach in Mozambique; heli-skiing in Queenstown; dune-boarding; Nathan Wedding of Seven Skies

are bucket-list, or once-in-a-lifetime destinations. Most people may only go to Bhutan or Morocco once, it's not like travelling to Italy or France or North America. So we can offer them specialised knowledge, because we do travel there regularly, we have access to guides, to locals, to people who can really bring the destination alive.

"If we have someone who is interested in a spiritual experience in Bhutan, for example, we have very good contacts so we've been able to recently put together special experiences with abbots of monasteries and dzongs to provide meditation sessions or blessings. This is what our travellers are looking for – the experience that helps to uncover the destination itself."

Garnett says bespoke travel operators like Absolute Travel also rely on honest feedback from clients, most of whom are repeat business or referrals, to help keep abreast of changes.

Having the right contacts in destinations is also essential to create the perfect bespoke trip. Garnett relates an experience that Absolute Travel arranged for a South African-born, US-based client, who wanted to take his children back to South Africa for their first visit to help them understand their family's history.

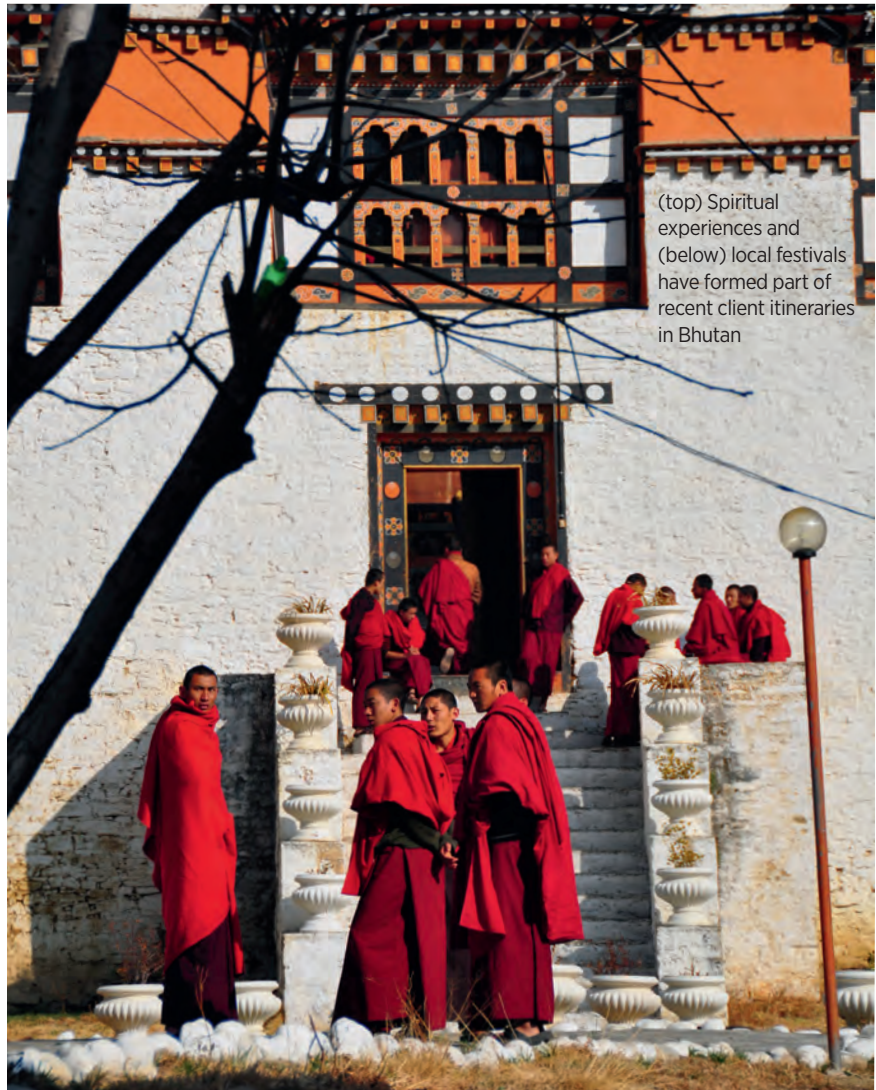
"They were in Cape Town and we arranged for a private visit of Robben Island, taking them by helicopter early in the morning before it opened to the public and having a tour conducted by Ahmed Kathrada and Denis Goldberg," she says of the itinerary.

Both Kathrada and Goldberg were sentenced to life imprisonment alongside Nelson Mandela in 1963. Kathrada served his time on Robben Island.

"It was an incredible experience for them, with no other tourists there, to have these two men retelling the story of their imprisonment with Nelson Mandela. For the client to be able to take his kids to where he grew up and have an experience like that was amazing."

Seven Skies' Wedding recalls a recent trip for a client to Bhutan that involved them being welcomed by local villagers in a remote part of the country to experience their Tshechu Festival.

"Being involved at a local two-day



(top) Spiritual experiences and (below) local festivals have formed part of recent client itineraries in Bhutan



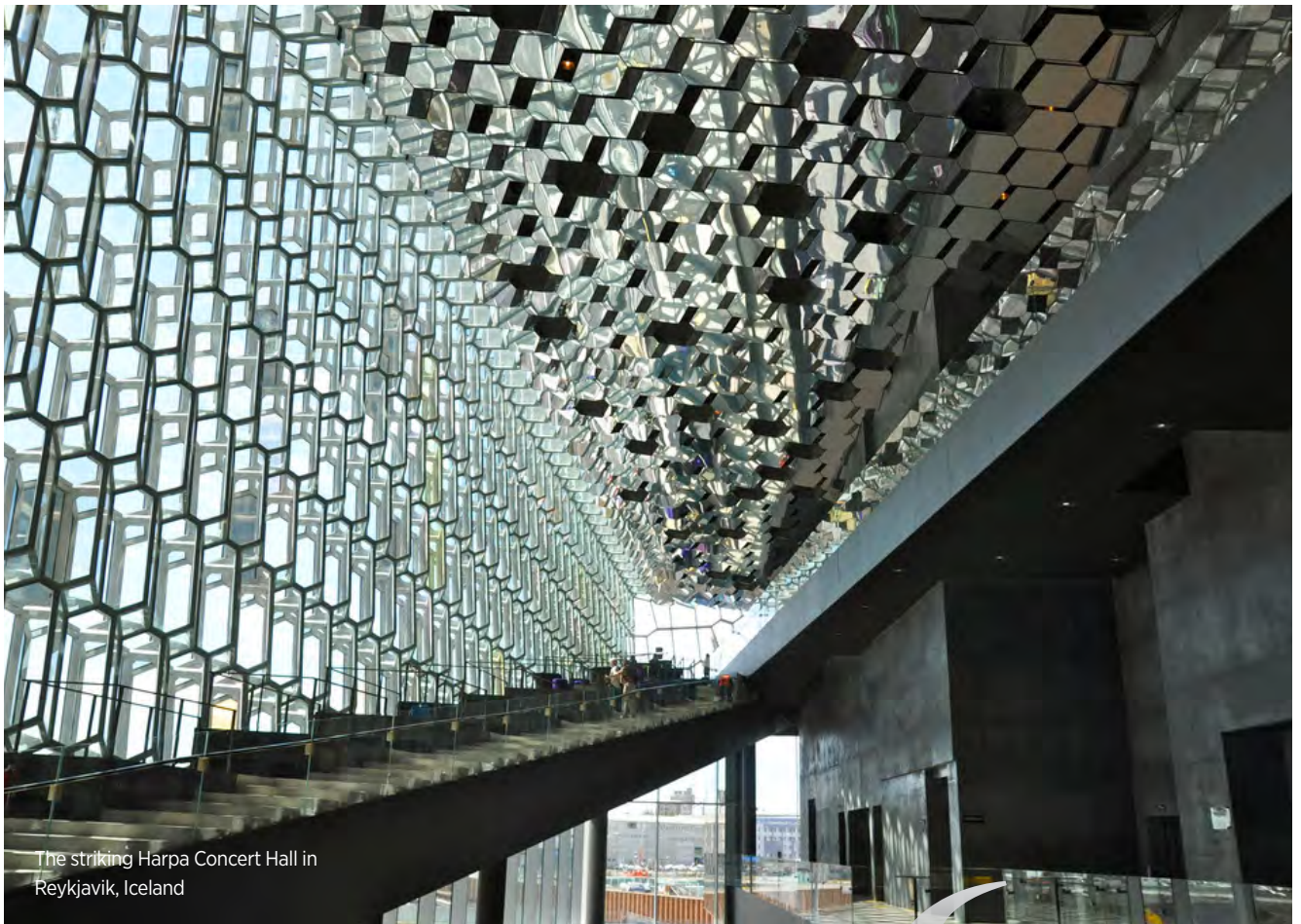


Photo: Sarah Ackerman

The striking Harpa Concert Hall in Reykjavik, Iceland

festival as the only westerners was just amazing, but there was more to come,” he says. “The clients were avid ornithologists. They had a particular request to see white-bellied cranes, but there are only 30 of these beautiful birds left in Bhutan and they are a critically endangered species.

“Through our local guides and contacts and constant work, we managed to see two of these birds one afternoon in a perfect setting on the river, feeding and hunting. We set up a basket of champagne and canapés on the riverbank to celebrate.”

For Philippe Brown, delivering those elements of surprise and delight is an essential part of the bespoke service. Brown + Hudson must often go well beyond the usual travel industry contacts to secure such experiences.

He recounts a trip his firm created for a couple that included time in Iceland. The woman suffered from limbic

encephalitis, which left her with no short-term memory and a need for rest and quiet. Her husband, however, was very adventurous and outdoorsy.

“We had to create a trip for him, for her, and for them together and we discovered that two of her passions were James Bond and playing the piano,” Brown says.

“We mapped out a trip and realised that one of the Bond films, *Die Another Day* was in large part shot in Iceland, so we tracked down the producer of the film and he spent three hours over a long lunch with our clients. It was one of their most amazing memories.

“In most of the hotels they were staying we also set up a piano or ensured there was one there, but on the last day in Reykjavik they had a free afternoon, so we thought, how we can take this piano thing and really elevate it?

“So we contacted the Harpa Concert Hall, and arranged for the client to play

We do travel, but what people bring home are stories ... We help create stories for people

a piano on the main stage which was then filmed so she would be able to have a reminder and memory of that special part of their trip.

“This is what we do. We do travel, but what people bring home are stories – stories for kids to marvel at on the trip, or friends to marvel at once home. That’s what it comes down to. We help create stories for people.” **RR**