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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# If your name's not on the list, you're not coming on holiday

Meet the vet set, the elite travel companies that won't let you book until they've given your personality a thorough examination

Susan d'Arcy Published: 22 February 2015



Exclusive access: Bellini Travel's Castello di Reschio, in Umbria (Bellini Travel)

answers to an email interview and follow-up phone calls. That owner is Annick Belanger, a friendly, unassuming Canadian who says her screening system evolved because she is passionate about Panama and its people, and wants to share this special place with those she thinks will appreciate her eco-sensitive approach.



Sweet Bocas, in Panama

This feature is about some of the world's most exclusive holidays, so before you read on, we'll need to ask you a few questions. What was your most recent memorable holiday, and why? What's in your carry-on bag? And, more profoundly, what element best represents you?

If this feels a little intrusive, apologies — but this is how business works at the most elite level of holiday booking. Welcome to the vet set, where clients don't get to choose their travel agent, the travel agents get to choose their clients. Only if they like the cut of your jib will you then be given the green light to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on holidays booked with them.

The above questions (along with "What was your best culinary experience?" and "What made you want to know more about us?") are part of the screening process for those wishing to rent a swanky new villa in Panama. Tucked away on the country's northwest coast, Sweet Bocas is perched on stilts over a jade-coloured Caribbean Sea. A private chef is on hand, and there's a crew on standby 24 hours a day to ferry guests to secret beaches in a private 30ft motorboat.

It costs from £36,000 a week to hire, but prospective guests aren't even able to look at its password-protected website unless the owner feels comfortable with their

Philippe Brown, founder of the luxury travel company Brown + Hudson, charges a minimum of £1,000 simply to create an itinerary for potential clients. Properties on his books include the royal palace of the King of Ladakh and Sirai House, in Kenya, which has a vast infinity pool overlooking the Laikipia plains and is owned by the multimillionaire Michael Spencer. "For high-or ultra-high-net-worth people, the revenue from letting someone use their property is derisory," he explains. "What is often more important is the connection that the transaction can allow. So we consider carefully who the owner is, what their interests are, who wants to stay and what their interests may be. The cost of the property is generally an administrative matter." Those "admin fees" can tot up to more than £115,000 for a week through Brown + Hudson.

It might seem strange to erect hurdles in front of people able and willing to splash five figures on one of your holidays, but according to Theo Osborne, it's necessary. He is a director of Parnassus Travel Group, which specialises in tailor-made holidays worldwide — he's also the younger brother of George Osborne. "Of course we vet people," he says. "The first question we ask any caller is, 'Who recommended us?' For us, it's not simply that you might have £250,000 to spend —

we want to work with like-minded people.”

Parnassus has exclusive access to extraordinary private homes, some belonging to friends of the Osborne family. These properties can cost £300,000 to rent for a week, so Osborne is keen to keep the owners as happy as his customers. Even if you pass the initial personality test with flying colours, he wouldn't immediately offer you a top property. “It's rare we'd accept a big booking without testing the clients with something simple, like a weekend in Paris.”

These elite operators are at pains to emphasise that, despite appearances, there is nothing snooty about them. Selection is made on the basis of sensibility, rather than snobbery. Emily FitzRoy set up the Italian specialist Bellini Travel 15 years ago. She has a strict limit of 100 clients a year, with members of the British royal family and hip-hop stars clamouring to be among the chosen few allowed to book Castello di Reschio, in Umbria, or the award-winning Tuscan winery of one of Italy's leading fashion designers. “In general, we are looking for clients who not only appreciate the finer things in life, but want to get under the skin of their destination,” she says. “As we look after a limited number of people each year, we can pull in huge favours.

“For example, we're just in the middle of negotiating to close the Uffizi for a client who only has 24 hours in Florence, but wants to see Botticelli's Birth of Venus on his own.”



Eleven Experience's Chalet Pelerin, in France

of the contact details on our website. In reality, people have to be referred by existing clients or friends. I know some clients so well, they trust me completely to decide where they should go next.”

This approach was pioneered by Earth, which was founded by Glen Donovan 25 years ago. Forget the cover of Vanity Fair: the world's most famous faces know they've made it when Earth fixes their trips. The company went ex-directory 15 years ago and officially stopped talking to the media in 2007, but we coaxed a quote out of Donovan. “We sell places we love to people we like,” he says. “Our holidays are entirely personal and idiosyncratic to our own passions and experiences.”

Not everyone can risk being open about their involvement in these rarefied circles. One luxury travel company, which refused to be named, confessed to running an invitation-only members' club in addition to its operation open to the general public.



One of Sweet Bocas's bedrooms

A Bespoke biodegradable bikini; pencils and toothbrushes for local poor children  
 B Head-to-toe Armani; phone, iPad, laptop, BlackBerry; pomeranian  
 C Some Primark; bottle of own-brand vodka — have you seen what some of these hotel bars charge?

3 If you were an element, you'd be...

A The classical elements — earth (the planet I love to explore ethically), water (which I conserve by reusing my towels) and air (through which my carbon-offset private jet flies)

The adventure hotelier Eleven Experience is so anxious not to seem superior, it has a policy never to use the word “luxury”, despite charging on average £1,500 a night for a room. It was founded by Chad Pike, MD and vice-chairman of the private equity operation Blackstone Europe. (“Eleven” refers to the amplifier scene in This Is Spinal Tap.)

Its portfolio includes a Colorado lodge with a private mountain, and Chalet Pelerin, in Le Miroir, France, which has an indoor saltwater pool and an outdoor hot tub. It plans to open five more properties this year, one of which will be a retreat in Iceland with access to some of the world's best salmon-fishing.

Eleven's director, Julian Hutton, explains: “Luxury conjures up the wrong image. We're not about gold taps. We don't want people who show off. We're about authenticity and secret experiences that delight. We don't like to talk too much about what we arrange, but it's definitely not just if you can afford it.”

The company has never advertised and keeps its website deliberately vague to deter tourism's equivalent of tyre-kickers. Roz Webster, who runs Cream Travel, an A-list travel consultancy, does the same. “We wouldn't advertise,” she says. “In fact, I'm considering getting rid

Granted, those invited to join have to spend a large sum every year, but budget is not the deal-breaker. “Sometimes,” one staff member confides, “we let a couple in even if they only spend £100,000 a year, just because they are so damn nice.

“You can't say who we are, though. The big spenders we haven't invited would go nuts — and they're a nightmare to deal with already.”

Would you pass The Sunday Times Travel VIP holiday personality test?

By Martin Hemming

1 What was your most recent trip?

A Overlanding through the Stans in an argan-oil-fuelled tuk-tuk (read my blog)  
 B Yachting. Didn't leave port, but you should have seen the size of my boat  
 C Caravanning

2 What's in your suitcase?