

# EXPEDITION UNKNOWN

Mystery trips are becoming increasingly popular for savvy travelers who love surprises or don't have enough time to plan. **By Melanie Lieberman**



For me, the best part of mystery travel is getting out of your own way," says Marie Chalkley, who works in international policy for the federal government in Washington, D.C. A well-seasoned traveler, Chalkley recently handed off her vacation planning to **Magical Mystery Tours**, one of several companies that create full itineraries but don't tell clients where they're going until the last minute. Chalkley's first trip? A 10-day solo journey to Spain. "I had a lovely experience in Madrid, where I left the Prado in search of lunch and ended up befriending a bartender at a nearby tapas bar," she explains. "My Spanish is terrible, but we bonded over our shared love of Spanish wines." Magical Mystery Tours has since become her go-to travel agency, helping her cure a tendency to "plan the fun right out of vacations."

The company was founded in 2009 by Denise Chaykun Weaver, who after planning a successful surprise trip for a friend realized she could do the same kind of thing for a living. "Our travelers often describe the phenomenon of opening their mystery-destination envelope as the 'kid-on-Christmas-morning' feeling," she says. New clients fill out an online questionnaire that asks about budget, trip duration, favorite climate, and how spontaneous they are. Weaver and her team of

travel consultants then conduct a phone interview before selecting a destination and booking airfare and lodging. Activities can be arranged for an additional fee.

Of course, travelers don't arrive at their terminal unprepared. A week before departure, Magical Mystery Tours e-mails a weather report and a suggested packing list. A few days later the company sends an envelope—not meant to be opened until the traveler arrives at the airport—containing an itinerary and a destination guide.

Magical Mystery Tours has now planned surprise vacations for thousands of travelers, with weekend getaways for two starting at \$1,200. Another satisfied client is Steven Hannah, an IT-solutions architect and avid scuba diver from Illinois who told the company he wanted to go somewhere warm with great water. Three months later he and his wife found themselves in Belize, exploring the world-famous Blue Hole, touring Mayan ruins, and unwinding at Chan Chich, a remote jungle lodge.

As the trend has caught on, a number of established companies have begun offering mystery trips. Luxury outfitter **Brown & Hudson**, for example, creates private weeklong journeys starting at \$26,000. Clients are asked a series of questions, such as who they'd most like to invite to a dinner party—fictional, alive, or

dead. Their responses determine where they go and who they'll meet during their trip. And because most clients travel by private jet, they don't find out where they're going until they arrive.

A newer, more affordable option is **Pack Up & Go**, founded early last year by Lillian Rafson, who learned about mystery trips from a fellow traveler in Eastern Europe. Pack Up & Go offers three-day itineraries, which can be arranged as little as four weeks ahead and start at \$400 per person for road trips. The company quizzes clients on past and upcoming vacations, preferred travel style, and leisure interests. "There's also a space in the survey for anything else we need to know, such as any destinations they definitely do not want to visit," explains Eric Johnson, the company's director of business development. Pack Up & Go also sends an envelope revealing the traveler's destination, along with an itinerary containing curated recommendations for places to eat and drink and things to do and see.

Johnson says the company gets a lot of requests for special-occasion trips, too—birthdays, anniversaries, honeymoons, even proposals. "We're sending a couple to Pittsburgh. The guy is proposing to his girlfriend tonight. We helped coordinate that for him." Now the only remaining mystery is whether she'll say yes.

## 5 Mystery-Trip Operators

**Pack Up & Go**  
packupgo.com;  
three-day  
getaways from  
\$400 per person.

**The Vacation Hunt**  
thevacation  
hunt.com; two-  
or three-night  
getaways from  
\$750 per person.

**Magical Mystery Tours**  
magical-  
mystery-tours.  
com; weekend  
getaways for  
two from \$1,200.

**Brown & Hudson**  
brownand  
hudson.com;  
weeklong  
journeys from  
\$26,000.

**The Key**  
the-key.ch;  
ultra-luxe  
private surprise  
vacations  
starting at  
\$250,000.