

TRAVEL + LEISURE

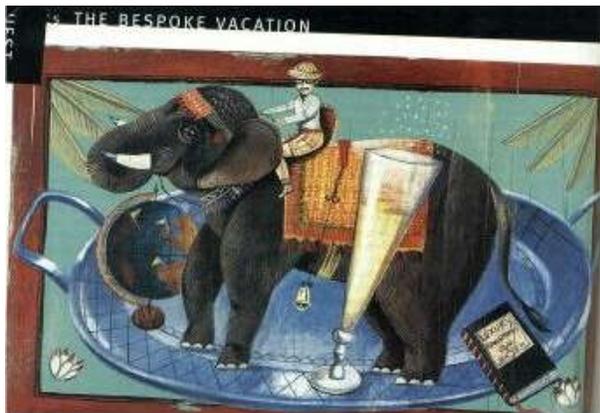
celebrating 30 years

The World on a Platter

BY STEPHEN WHITLOCK
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In travel, one size no longer fits all. Here's how the industry is responding to the demand for made-to-measure trips:

When almost anyone can book a journey with a quick point-and-click, travel agents are supposedly a vanishing breed. But the well-to-do prefer their travel made-to-measure, just like their suits and their shoes. With requests



for customized and personalized vacations rising sharply, both agents and traditional tour operators are changing their businesses to meet that demand. "Because there are so many people who have money, the new currency is how unusual and rare the experience is," says Keith Waldon, a spokesman for Virtuoso, a network of high-

end travel agencies whose annual sales top \$2.5 billion. It's the cocktail hour competition among the boomers.

More than just booking air and hotel, agents and outfitters today are arranging customized wine tastings, visits to artisan workshops, and private after-hours tours of the British crown jewels and the Vatican. Even at companies like Butterfield & Robinson and Abercrombie & Kent—both of which have been primarily associated with pre-arranged tours—requests for customized trips, known in industryspeak as FIT's (foreign independent travel), are increasing.

"These types of itineraries have almost doubled in the past two years," says Claire Reyes of B&R.

"There are two parallel trends now: people who want personalized service and those who want highly specialized trips," says Kristina Rundquist, spokesperson for the American Society of Travel Agents. "Most Americans have precious little time for vacations anyway, so they like to make sure they get

exactly what they want, whether it's a boutique hotel or a special kind of restaurant. They need someone who will listen and cater to their needs."

Those providing tailor-made trips find that their specialized knowledge is increasingly put to the test. One Virtuoso client, for example, wanted not only tickets to a specific box at Wimbledon but also to be seated next to a particular member of the royal family. Other requests successfully met have included audiences with Nelson Mandela and Queen Noor. A Hollywood celebrity ask trip outfitter Absolute Asia to ship a truckload of Diet Pepsi to Laos, and Bill Fischer of Fischer Travel recently organized a takeover of Amanresort's Amanjena outside Marrakesh

for a 40th birthday party. A hundred guests were flown in by charter jet, in addition to 120 party planners who arrived via a commercial flight.

Not every demand placed upon the world's best travel consultants requires exotic locations and expert insider knowledge. One regular client of Absolute Asia—a man who has taken private helicopters on day trips to Everest base camp—insists on making his own breakfast each morning. The company calls ahead to each luxury hotel to make sure he has kitchen access. Sometimes the hotels refuse, but as Absolute Asia sales director Natalie Nevares says. It's our job to make them say yes.

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