

For those travelers who don't do buses

By Beverly Beyette
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So you've skied in St. Moritz, danced until daybreak at carnival in Rio, and shopped till you dropped in Tokyo's Ginza. Now you seek a real adventure.

Bespoke travel may be in your future.

Bespoke - a fancy way of saying custom, tailor-made or



independent - is one of the fastest-growing segments of the travel industry, fueled by affluent been-there-done-that travelers who wouldn't be caught dead on one of those board-the-buses tours.

They want to float down the Ganges during a tribute to an Indian river goddess, take an early-morning-alm's walk with Laotian monks, or come face to face with cannibals on the island of New Guinea.

For a price - as little as \$300 per person per day (excluding airfare, but some of these travelers have private jets) or as much as \$300,000 for a two-week dream journey for a family - anything is possible.

"This has been an incredible growth area," says John Clifford, president of International Travel Management in San Diego. "It's probably 95 percent of my business. These are mature, well-traveled clients who've done London, Paris, Tokyo, Sydney. There's this craving for something that is not as sterilized. They want to connect with people and culture and cuisine."

His typical clients include "affluent couples in the baby-boomer generation, Gen X singles, affluent gay clients."

Typically, bespoke travel begins with extensive interviews to determine clients' interests and such details as whether they're early or late risers.

Catherine Heald, who lived seven years in Hong Kong, is chairman and chief executive of Remote Lands travel in Manhattan, specializing in bespoke travel to Asia - journeys that are "completely tailor-made and very high-end."

"You're not just lumped in with a bunch of people who just get shoved onto buses and herded around," she says. "Our clients have done Europe to death. They've done South America, and now they want to get more exotic. They want the next frontier, which is Asia. Or they've been to Asia and done the basic places and now want the deeper experience," perhaps being guests at a wedding or spending time in locals' homes.

One client will be staying in a maharajah's palace in Darjeeling, India. Another hopes to go to Indonesia's Irian Jaya to meet the last known cannibals. "You have to trek for four days through deep, thick jungle to get to them," Heald says. "It's not like they're on e-mail. Our contacts in Indonesia are searching for them."

Clifford's clients seek intimate boutique hotels and "something new that a travel magazine hasn't written about. The *Survivor* show has led people to become interested in faraway places like Truk [or] Palau" in Micronesia. Another destination of interest is Upper Mongolia, where there's a luxury tent village.

Hylton Lea of Santa Monica, Calif., a vice president of ReVive skin care, and his partner, Danny Robinson, shun programmed trips.

"That's not what we do," Lea says. "We walk."

But they rely on Clifford to find boutique hotels and good restaurants, whether in Istanbul, Paris or Buenos Aires.

"The places he puts you in, they're not flashy," Lea says. "They're these really cool little gems," such as the Gaia Hotel and Reserve in Costa Rica, where a car picked them up at the airport and "the general manager was at the gate to meet us."

India is a specialty of Indian-born **Pallavi Shah**, owner of Manhattan's **Our Personal Guest**. One goal, she says, is for travelers to "really get under the skin of a country."

The agency has arranged for clients to take part in an evening ritual on the Ganges in which they float down the river in a small flower-laden boat and light candles to the river goddess. Others have mingled with monks in Laos.

"When people make money, they feel entitled to have something very specific to themselves," she says. "What they're looking for is an international experience, on their own terms, when they want it, and loads and loads and loads of service."

That might include chartering a plane. But no matter how travelers get to their destination, Shah says, "we like to have them experience a city in its own way," meeting the locals, doing as the locals do - while staying in five-star hotels.

If you're just going to London to do theater, "you don't need me. You can just call the concierge," she says. "If it's difficult and you can't do it yourself, come to us."

Pamela Lassers, director of media relations for upscale Abercrombie & Kent, attributes the surge in independent travel to a desire for "more meaningful travel experiences" and to the Internet, where travelers are

discovering new places and adventures.

Africa is number one in popularity, she says, especially safaris with intimate 12- to 15-room private tent camps.

Celebration travel - birthdays, weddings, anniversaries - is a staple. "We had a lovely young couple who were going to be in Kenya and decided they'd like to get married. We were able to arrange a Masai wedding," Lassers says.

One family chartered the 360-foot tall ship Sea Cloud for a 50th birthday celebration for 50 people.

Custom journeys are "growing so fast I can't hire enough staff," says Katherine Graves of international tour operator Travcoa.

Popular destinations? "It's the world," she says. "Some people have a life list that they're checking off."