

Tours & Cruises

TAILOR-MADE TOURS: BESPOKE TRIPS ARE ALL THE RAGE

By Beverly Beyette, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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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 or 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 alms 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 (www.internationaltravelmanagement.com). "It's probably 95% 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 (www.remotelands.com), 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 said. "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." Another destination of interest is Upper Mongolia, where there's a luxury tent village.

Hylton Lea of Santa Monica, a vice president of RéVive 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 in Costa Rica, where a hotel car picked them up at the airport and "the general manager was at the gate [of the hotel] to meet us."

India is a specialty of Indian-born Pallavi Shah, owner of Manhattan's

Our Personal Guest (www.ourpersonalguest.com). 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 religious 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 (albeit while staying in five-star hotels).

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

Africa's popularity

PAMELA LASSERS, director of media relations for upscale Abercrombie & Kent (www.abercrombiekent.com), a U.S.-based agency with 50 offices worldwide, says: "This year we're seeing really dramatic growth in independent travel. It represents about 50% of our overall business." She attributes the surge to a desire for "more meaningful travel experiences" and to the Internet, where travelers are discovering new places and adventures.

Africa is No. 1 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." One family chartered the 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, director of inside sales and guest relations for international tour operator Travcoa (www.travcoa.com). "People are looking for the new type of travel, which is the experience. Anyone can go sit on a beach in Hawaii," but custom clients want to "meet the local people, have the local food."

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