

AN OIL CRUNCH IN IRAN? (P.48) | THE BILL GATES OF CHINA (P.52)

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No Meetings.
(No Joke.)**

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radical reshaping
of the workplace.

BY MICHELLE CONLIN (P.60)

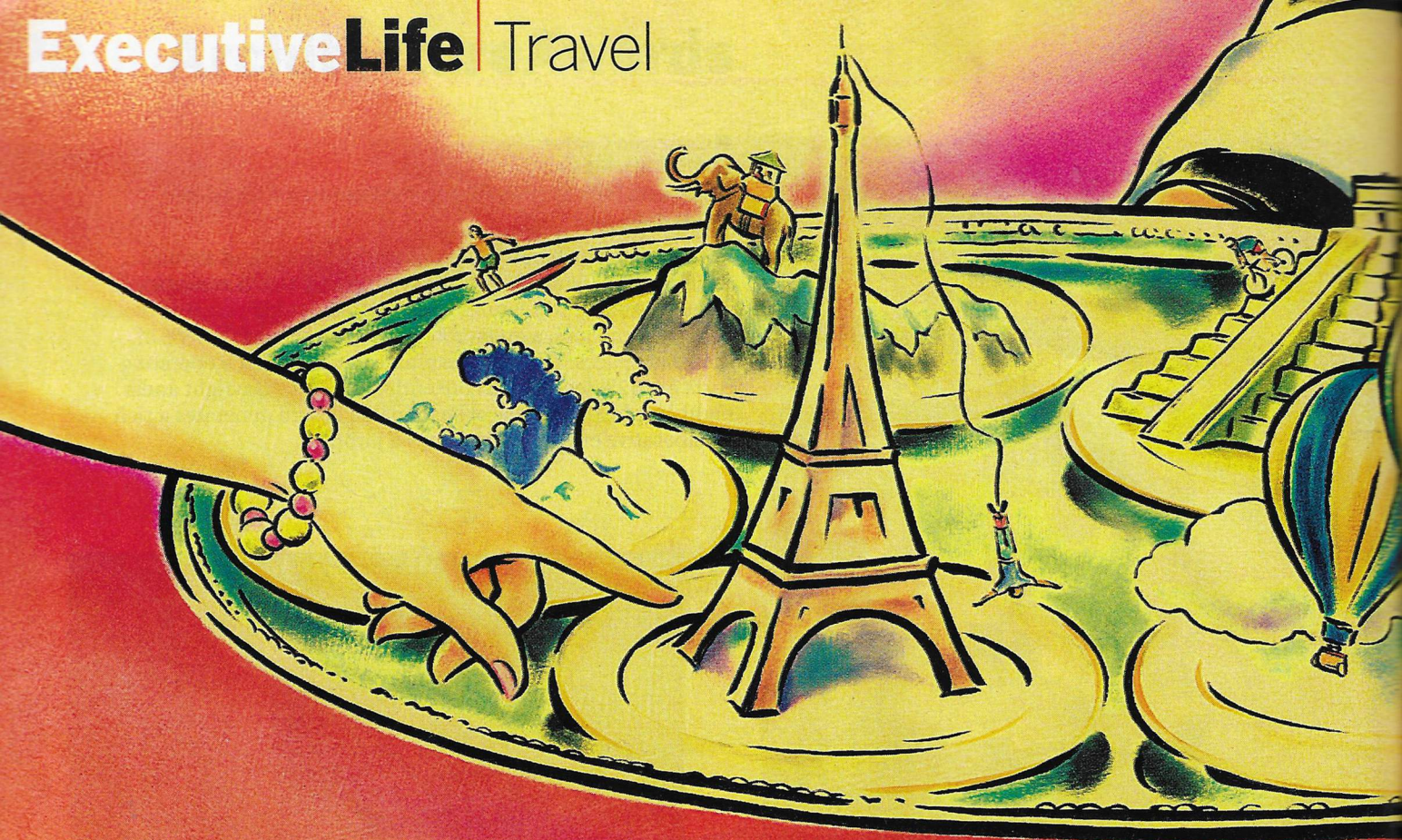


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Finely Tailored Vacations

“Bespoke” travel agencies will design personalized trips to anywhere in the world, even on short notice. **BY AMY CORTESE**

IN THE HANCOCK HOUSEHOLD, it is a tradition that upon graduating from college each of the three children gets to choose a dream vacation to take with their parents anywhere in the world. But the second eldest, Trent, didn't allow much time for planning when he decided just three weeks before his graduation from the University of San Diego last May that he wanted to go to Peru. “I thought, ‘We can't do that in three weeks!’” recalls Julie Hancock, who with her husband Mark owns a homebuilding company in Scottsdale, Ariz. Still, mom didn't want to disappoint, so she hopped online and found Blue Parallel, a boutique agency specializing in custom, or “bespoke,” travel (blueparallel.com). Julie called and ticked off her wish list. The Incan ruins at Macchu Picchu, of course,

were a must. Trent, an avid surfer, also wanted to hang ten at Peru's famous beaches. Mark, who doesn't like roughing it, insisted that only luxury accommodations would do. No problem. On June 10, Julie, Mark, and Trent flew first class to Lima for an 18-day adventure.

Travelers like the Hancocks, who want out-of-the-ordinary experiences often on short notice and are willing to pay for them, are fueling the bespoke travel business. These trips are to travel what couture is to fashion: tailor-made, costly, and designed to make a lasting impres-



sion. "We have tax advisers, personal shoppers, and hairdressers" who provide personal service, why not travel agents, asks Tim Costigan, director of bespoke travel for Butterfield & Robinson, a travel agency that focuses on biking and walking tours (butterfield.com). Close to a third of his agency's business now comes from bespoke, vs. almost none ten years ago. Abercrombie & Kent, another high-end tour operator, says 40% of its business is custom (abercrombiekent.com).

DINE WITH A MAHARAJA

THE BIG AGENCIES have a vast worldwide network of offices and "destination experts" they can draw on. Smaller firms such as Blue Parallel, which specializes in Latin America, and New York-based Remote Lands (remotelands.com), which focuses on Asia, rely on their intimate knowledge of a region and the relationships they've developed there.

Either way, these connections allow the agents to offer experiences you don't get with packaged tours, whether dinner with a maharaja in India, a private performance by local musicians, or a romantic dinner complete with fireworks in an exotic locale. There are more practical perks, too: local cell phones, Internet access, and a fast-track through customs. Catherine Heald, an entrepreneur who has lived and traveled widely through Asia, founded Remote Lands after growing frustrated with

other travel services she used. "They're supposed to be custom," she says, "but they give you the same cookie-cutter tour as everyone else."

Bespoke travel outfits typically start by quizzing clients about their interests and preferences, then craft itineraries that reflect them. Heald says her specialty is hooking clients up with locals, for example reindeer herders in Mongolia, Buddhist monks in Bhutan, or cannibals in New Guinea (they are said to eat only "witches" suspected of causing the death of a family member).

Emmanuel Burgio, a former New York investment banker who now lives in Argentina, says he started Blue Parallel with his old bosses in mind: people who are "short on time and want the best of the best." He often arranges super-luxe trips to World Heritage sites such as Macchu Picchu for busy professionals who might want to leave on Thursday evening and be back at their desks on Monday morning. His trips start at \$1,000 per person per day, not including airfare.

Time was an issue for Alyssa and Roger Duncan of Ulysses, Kan. The engineer and accountant travel frequently and this year wanted to go to India. Since they only had a week of vacation to spare, Alyssa contacted Remote Lands early last month for a December trip. "I said I want to see the Taj Mahal and only have a week, so go for it," says Alyssa. In addi-

tion to stopping at tourist sites, the Duncans will squeeze in an elephant safari, dinner with a local royal family, a trip to Udaipur featuring a private, candlelight dinner on a pontoon boat on the lake, and a visit to a tribal ceremony in Rajasthan followed by tea in the home of one of the tribe member's families. "That's something you couldn't arrange on your own," says Alyssa, who pushed back the trip until spring for personal reasons.

A CHANGE OF PLANS

ANOTHER BENEFIT of custom travel is flexibility. The Hancocks had planned to spend a few days hiking in the Peruvian Amazon. But one day slogging through knee-deep mud proved to be enough. "One phone call and, boom, our flights were changed and we were on our way," says Julie.

Bespoke travel tends to be on the luxurious side, but most agencies are willing to accommodate a client's budget and party size. To save money, they might suggest forgoing the five-star hotel for a charming, under-the-radar place, or staying with a local family. John Beinecke, a New York investment manager, has booked trips for 20 or more family and friends, including a biking trip through Puglia last May, through Butterfield & Robinson.

For the Hancocks, the goal was to experience Peru to its fullest; price was not a big concern. Their trip included local guides and experiences: They saw a bullfight, shared a home-cooked lunch with a Peruvian family in their hacienda, and attended a private ceremony with a shaman in the valley beneath Macchu Picchu that, Julie says, "prepared us for the spiritual side of it."

Then there was the surfing. They went to two beaches in remote northern Peru where surfers can hitch mile-long rides on the waves. At Pacasmayo, the first beach, surfboards and wet suits were awaiting them, along with a surf guide (a local legend), and a photographer who captured the day's activities for them. "It was amazing," says Trent. "We really got lucky with waves and the people we met."

The Hancocks spent about \$25,000, including first-class airfare. Julie, who usually makes the travel arrangements, believes it was well worth the price. "This is the first time I didn't have to do a thing," she says. Next year her son Chase is graduating. He's not sure where he wants to go yet, perhaps skiing in South America and then to Easter Island or the Galapagos. But one thing is already decided. The Hancocks will travel bespoke. ■