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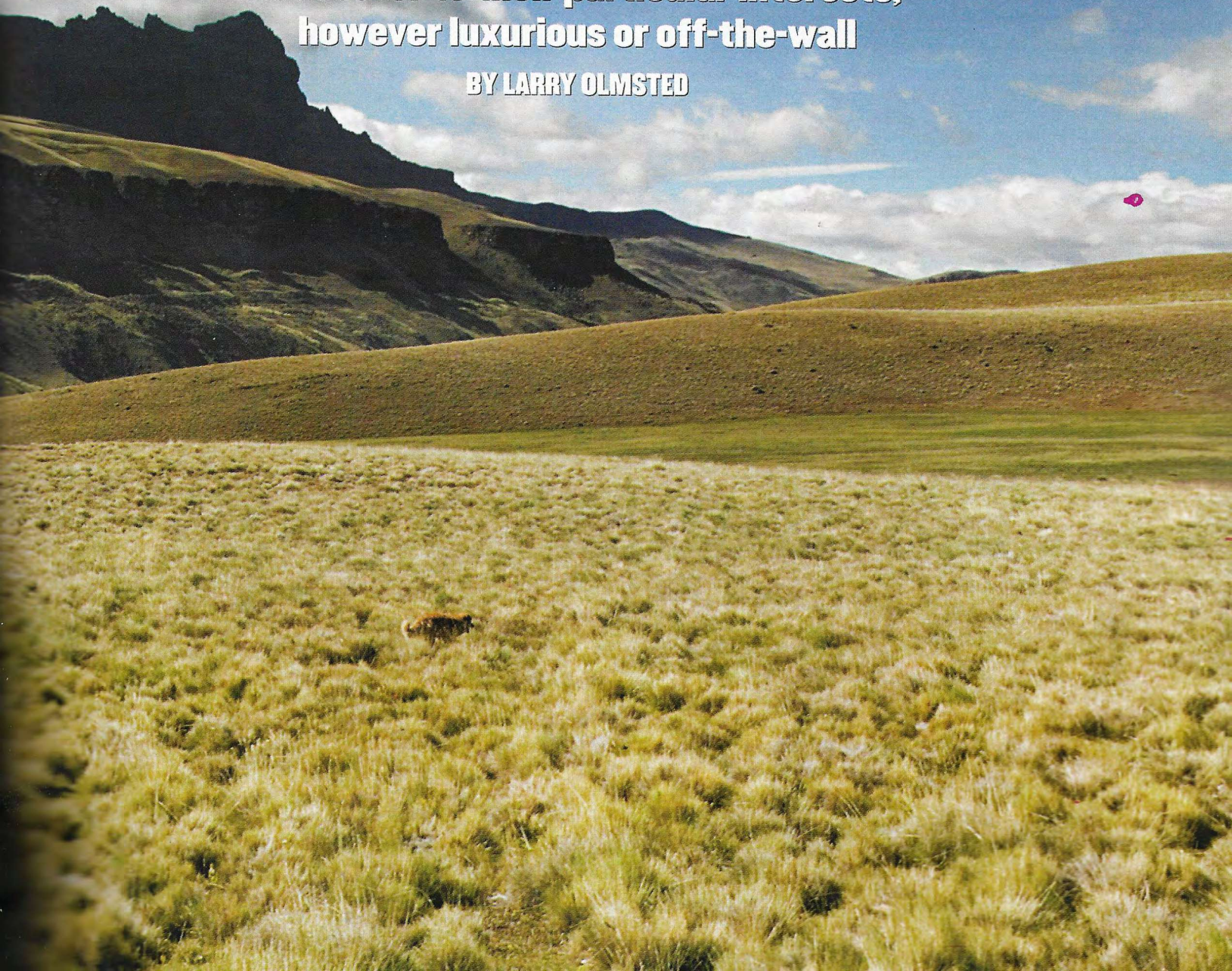
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# tailored **TREKS**

**For many travelers, nothing beats one-of-a-kind trips  
that cater to their particular interests,  
however luxurious or off-the-wall**

**BY LARRY OLMSTED**



## JOE FEENEY AND HIS WIFE, TINA, HAD WANTED TO CLIMB MOUNT KILIMANJARO FOR YEARS

but like many other working Americans, they couldn't fit it into their hectic schedules. And incorporating a safari into the trip was nigh on impossible unless they had more time to travel. "We had never been to Africa, and you don't want to go halfway around the world and then not go on safari," says Feeny, the head of equity trading for the investment arm of a large insurance company. "Imagine coming back and telling everyone you had gone to Tanzania and didn't see a lion, an elephant or a rhino. What were they to do? • Enter family-owned Micato Safaris. The bespoke travel company wins "world's best" awards annually

and one of the reasons is its emphasis on planning the perfect trip for its patrons. The Feeneys were assigned a program director to oversee the details of their trip and answer their questions. "We would wonder about something like medicine or clothing or food or gear for the climb or visas, and call her, and she always knew the answer straightaway," says Joe. Eventually the Feeneys agreed on an action-packed two-week trip, including the weeklong climb up Kilimanjaro and four days of wildlife safaris, with short plane flights in between to maximize time. The custom itinerary they developed was so much more efficient than any off-the-shelf trips they had seen that they convinced three friends, who were equally pressed for time, to join them. "A lot of people go on safari alone for 10 days, but honestly, the quality of the guides and accommodations were so good, I don't feel like we missed a thing. We could not have been in better hands."

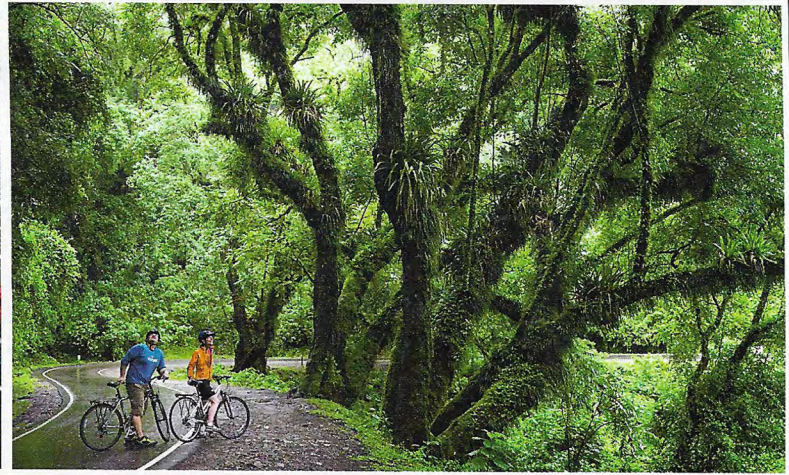
The Feeneys are not alone. High-end tour operators and specialty travel agencies of every ilk are describing similar anecdotal evidence of the boom in bespoke travel—and virtually every one of

these is rolling out a custom, private division. "It has increased tremendously, and is now 40 percent of our business," says Micato Safaris President Dennis Pinto, who put the bespoke percentage at virtually nil just five to 10 years ago.

Stacy Small, president of Elite Travel International, has witnessed the bespoke boom firsthand. "I've had my business for three years and we have yet to sell a single package trip, even at the highest end. Every trip is a custom tour for my clients," she says. "They don't just go to Italy; they want a personal shopper in Milan and a private boat tour in Venice. We work with some of the best companies that do those things, using them as a starting point, but it is always customized from there." Marc Telio, founder of Entrée Destinations, which specializes in luxury travel and yacht charters in Canada and Alaska, half-jokingly says, "We have about 150 detailed itineraries on our Web site, and we change and update them every year, but I seriously doubt anyone has ever booked one. They get an idea, but we change this hotel or the yacht." Jamen Yeaton-Masi, operations director for Country Walker



For more than four decades Micato Safaris has offered guests exclusive access to many game reserves in Kenya and Tanzania at which they can view giraffes and other wild animals. The company assigns program directors to each trip so that every detail and question is taken care of



Butterfield & Robison caters trips focusing on food and wine and biking. Clockwise from top right: After biking in the Damaraland wilderness, relax in your private tent at the new Doro !Nawas Lodge in Namibia; northwest Argentina offers scenic vistas; and Venice is a bespoke favorite.

has also seen the explosion in custom travel. “I would say that in the last two years, our private custom trips have doubled. We always had some, but suddenly it is a core part of the business.”

Industry experts cite several reasons for the boom. Pinto thinks it is part of the larger growth in multigenerational family travel, and a similar trend toward groups of friends traveling together. In either case, they want to spend time with just their chosen traveling companions. “I think it came after 9/11, when people did not want to leave family members behind. To have the family together for a couple of weeks is a tremendous bonding experience.” Small thinks the boom is due to the increasing number of people who, because of wealth or fame, crave privacy. “Private is the key word in these trips. These people are very, very busy, and when they take the time to take a vacation, they want everything to be perfect, including who they are traveling with.”

Dominic Hampshire, founder of Latitude International, an agency specializing in travel to the British Isles, credits the boom to private aviation—and one-upmanship. “We’ve seen how private air has proliferated quickly, and so has private travel. But on top of that, people want to do something all of their friends are not doing, something where they come away with a great, special memory.” Butterfield & Robison’s Cari Gray sees it as part of a larger global custom movement: “There’s such a trend towards customization. It is all about options and choices, which are increasingly revered in our society.”

Whatever the reason, the bespoke trend is good news for travelers, at least those craving more than a day at the beach. Bespoke travel is for those with special interests—from art to mountain climbing to

food and wine—and almost always features guides, drivers and experts, with personalized, detailed daily itineraries similar to those found in luxury package trips. New York’s Absolute Travel is a leader in exotic luxury vacations in Asia, Africa, Australia and the South Pacific, but it still sometimes turns away deep-pocketed clients. “If someone wants to go to Bali and spend a week relaxing at the Four Seasons and lie on the beach, we tell them to just call the hotel,” says company marketing manager Christina Stubbs. “Our clients go to Bali and want to meet the silversmiths, learn about cooking, go to the outlying islands, see the culture up close. It’s the same idea as a group tour, where everything is planned, including airport pickup, cars and drivers, and excursions, but on a totally private and custom basis. We don’t have 18-day trips or 21-day trips; we have whatever you want.”

No matter how wealthy a traveler is, time remains the most valuable commodity, as was the case with the Feeneys. As the world becomes a smaller place, people increasingly want exclusive, unique travel experiences but without sacrificing quality and all without hassles or complications. They also want the security of knowing that if something does go wrong, from a cancelled flight to an impending monsoon, they have someone to call who can actually fix things. Even experienced travelers often feel uncomfortable making their own arrangements. In addition, the explosion of luxury accommodations worldwide means that many of the best choices in emerging regions are new and largely unknown, except to specialized insiders.

But there is also another force at work that is helping to drive this trend: a demand for authenticity. Since the demographic for bespoke

experiences, these people demand a very deep level of expertise and local knowledge, which is why so many bespoke travel providers focus on specific regions or activities. Long past taking snapshots of the Tower and Buckingham Palace, these travelers crave local flavor and are willing to pay those who know how to provide it like a local. They have developed close relationships with the people on the ground, from local artists to national park managers, to offer the most authentic experiences. We cater to couples and families looking for private, custom trips that are also authentic,” says Emanuel Burgio, a former New York investment banker who created Blue Parallel based on the needs and demands of his former employers. The company specializes in South America and boasts clients such as Ravi Singh, a powerful financier who oversees global securities for Goldman Sachs. “Authenticity has become a buzzword,” says Lisa Lindblad, owner of Lisa Lindblad Travel Design. “It means really wanting to get under the skin of a place. I was trained as an anthropologist, and my guests just want to experience culture one way or another on their trips, whether it is artisans or architecture. We always remember that what is good for one client is not necessarily good for another, and while a good guide can make a trip, a bad one can ruin it, and even a mundane one can spoil it. I offer travel that is like theater, with drama, and there is a rhyme and reason for the way a two-week trip and the daily itinerary is laid

**“Our clients go to Bali and want to meet the silversmiths, learn about cooking, go to the outlying islands, see the culture up close.”**

**—CHRISTINA STUBBS**

this dinner follows that one. To us, the hotels are the fixed resources, the platforms from which to explore the world, and the real luxury is the people who help you see the world around you and experience it firsthand. It truly is an art.”

This art is the reason why almost all the top bespoke travel providers have particular areas of expertise. No travel expert can claim to know the entire world intimately. “I lived and worked in Hong Kong for seven years, and my business partner lived in Asia for many years as well,” says Catherine Heald, cofounder of Remote Lands. “We know Asia very, very well. We don’t know Europe, we don’t know South America. I think with this whole customization trend in travel, it is better to specialize, and this is especially true in Asia, where you are going to need more help than if you go to London.”

Bespoke travel spans every conceivable location and activity, and while it has more obvious appeal in places such as Cambodia or Madagascar, custom trips to mainstream European destinations and even to U.S. and Canadian locales remain popular. Bespoke trips are similar to the kind of high-end tours that have long been offered by companies such as Abercrombie & Kent, Mountain Travel Sobek and Butterfield & Robison, with detailed daily itineraries, guides, drivers, and planned meals and activities. Some itineraries can run 30 pages long, and past itineraries from Absolute Travel read as much like history books and

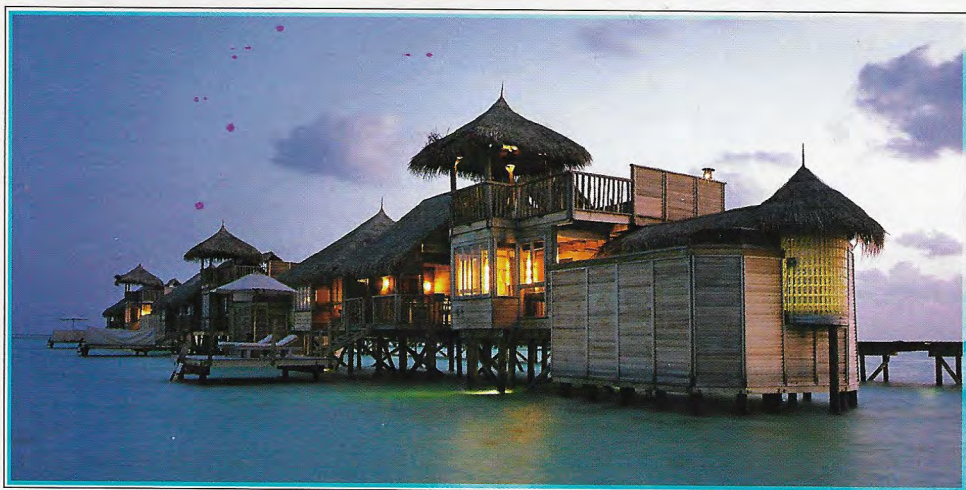


Lindblad Travel Design specializes in bespoke trips to Africa and Asia. Her discerning clients have enjoyed stays at Amarvilas in Agra, India.

# THE TAILORS OF TRAVEL

The top bespoke travel providers specialize in particular regions or activities. Here are some of the best

**Absolute Travel:** Since 1989, this New York-based luxury travel agency has organized custom itineraries to 53 countries throughout Asia, Africa, Australia and the South Pacific. Individual agents specialize in each continent or region, visiting them several times each year and creating detailed daily tour itineraries for every client. (800-736-8187, [www.absolutetravel.com](http://www.absolutetravel.com))



Elite Travel International is known for its white-glove, one-on-one service in exclusive destinations around the globe such as the Soneva Gili by Six Senses in the Maldives.

**Black Tomato:** Since 2005, Black Tomato has organized trips, from scuba diving between tectonic plates in Iceland to watching the Monaco Grand Prix in style, for elite British clients. Now, the company, founded by Tom Marchant, James Merrett and Matt Smith, hopes to inspire Americans to venture to offbeat locations such as Croatia, Slovenia and Syria. Black Tomato suggests itineraries, but clients are free to tweak them or create something on their own. ([www.blacktomato-travel.com](http://www.blacktomato-travel.com))

**Blue Parallel:** Founded by an ex-investment banker to cater to the demands of high-income Wall Street executives, Blue Parallel has quickly grown into a full-service bespoke travel provider that does equally well with families and adventurers. The company covers Central and South America and uses extensive local connections to provide unique VIP access and experiences. (800-256-5307, [www.blueparallel.com](http://www.blueparallel.com))

**Butterfield & Robinson:** In 1966, George Butterfield and his wife, Martha Robinson, created the category of guided luxury active travel with bike trips to France. They were the first Western bike tour operators into Vietnam, Namibia and other locales. Their bespoke division has its own full-time staff and offers bike tours, walking tours and yacht charters, among other trips, with a focus on

food and wine, especially in Burgundy. (866-551-9090, [www.butterfield.com](http://www.butterfield.com))

**Country Walkers:** For almost 30 years this Vermont-based company has led walking trips all over the globe, and has seen a boom in bespoke trips among its many repeat customers in the last two years. The company consistently wins kudos for its excellent pool of multilingual, locally knowledgeable guides. (800-464-9255, [www.countrywalkers.com](http://www.countrywalkers.com))

**Elite Travel International:** Stacy Small has parlayed her insider knowledge as a travel expert into a boutique luxury travel agency offering white-glove, one-on-one service, with a focus on the finest accommodations around the globe. (877-714-7224, [www.elite-travelinternational.com](http://www.elite-travelinternational.com))

**Latitude International:** As an equerry, owner Dominic Hampshire made high-powered connections while planning trips for

British royalty. The queen does not carry a wallet, and in that spirit, everything, even checking in and out of luxury hotels, is done for clients. Hampshire covers the British Isles and specializes in private castle visits and tea times at exclusive golf clubs. (011-44-207-373-1999, [info@latitude-international.com](mailto:info@latitude-international.com))

**Lisa Lindblad Travel Design:** For the past 10 years Lindblad has been considered an industry guru of luxury bespoke travel, but she accepts only a small number of discerning clients. The Columbia-educated anthropologist has lived in Africa, written two books on the continent and specializes in Africa and Southeast Asia, although she covers the globe. (212-876-2554, [www.lisalindblad.com](http://www.lisalindblad.com))

**Micato Safaris:** For more than 40 years Micato has specialized in luxury wildlife safaris across East and South Africa, using the finest boutique lodges, tented camps, guides, drivers and pilots. A few years ago the company launched its Bespoke Collection of accommodations, consisting of private ranches, family homesteads and country estates in Africa, many within private game reserves, to which guests have exclusive access. (800-MICATO-1, [www.micato.com](http://www.micato.com))

**Remote Lands:** Barnard College graduate Catherine Heald lived in Asia for seven years before founding Remote Lands with fellow Asia aficionado Jay Tindall, in 2006. The company is entirely Asia-focused and its customized trips feature locals, from monks to maharajas, fishermen to financiers, and nomads to nobility. (646-415-8092, [www.remotelands.com](http://www.remotelands.com))

**Seasonz:** The extra Z is for New Zealand, which is native Sam Porter's specialty. Seasonz has its own collection of rental properties, from wilderness lodges to private islands, its own guides—with expertise in fishing, rafting and adventure travel—and even its own regional chefs, who specialize in local cuisine. (011-64-9-360-8467, [www.seasonz.co.nz](http://www.seasonz.co.nz))

Travelers better appreciate what each day entails. Other itineraries are voluminous, as some travelers elect to build in more free time or hire guides only for a day here or there. Regardless of a plan's level of detail, all clients maintain the flexibility to make changes on the fly.

Whether travelers entrust experts such as Expedia or Absolute Travel to do the bulk of the planning for their trips to exotic locales, or prefer to research and develop their own itineraries, both approaches offer the same benefits: spending valuable vacation time doing only things you want to do, with no compromises and no strangers as traveling companions who could potentially cause friction. Even when the planning is left to the experts, these trips begin with an in-depth interview to determine the sights and experiences you will enjoy and your preferences for food and lodging. The exhaustive itinerary list that results lets them propose a detailed itinerary that is always subject to your review, editing and approval.

A small but significant percentage of bespoke travelers simply take off-the-shelf itineraries, but they either want to go on different dates, require special handling or just don't like to travel with strangers. "When we started three years ago, most people booked trips identical or very similar to those in our catalog," says Butterfield & Robinson's Cari Cary. "They would do our 'Classic Tuscany,' but only with their friends. Now it has become much more common to do highly customized itineraries, even in places we do not normally offer trips. We recently did a bespoke trip for four people with five guides [the company's norm is two] because everything had to be perfect every minute of the day, with no margin for error."

Elite Travel's Stacy Small agrees. "When people spend this kind of money, they want to know who they are traveling with." Her agency

while Absolute Travel handles trips for a number of professional athletes, and walking-tour specialist Country Walkers recently put together a bespoke trip for actor Matthew McConaughey. Not every well-heeled traveler hates the group dynamic, however; companies

such as B&R, Micato and Country Walkers enjoy a high level of repeat business and find that many customers still alternate between bespoke travel and group trips straight out of the catalog. Others don't mind fellow travelers but just have their own agendas, such as Burton Lustine, the owner of several Washington, D.C.-area car dealerships, who did a few group biking trips with Butterfield & Robinson before switching to bespoke versions.

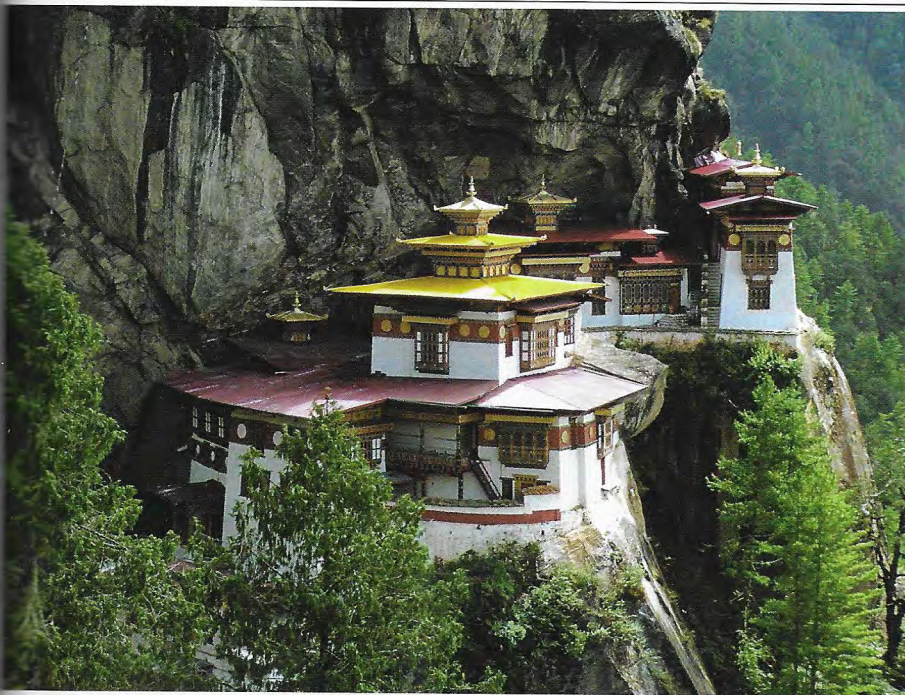
"I have two important criteria for taking a trip," says Lustine. "First, I need a swimming pool wherever I go, and that is not always possible on the scheduled trips. Secondly, I want a lot of culture, and also, while I want a lot of physical activity, I like to wake up

whenever I want. I am a history buff, and would rather design specific elements of my trip, and the bespoke opportunity addresses that. On the Normandy biking trip, I customized it so I could visit specific sites and battlefields with an expert local guide."

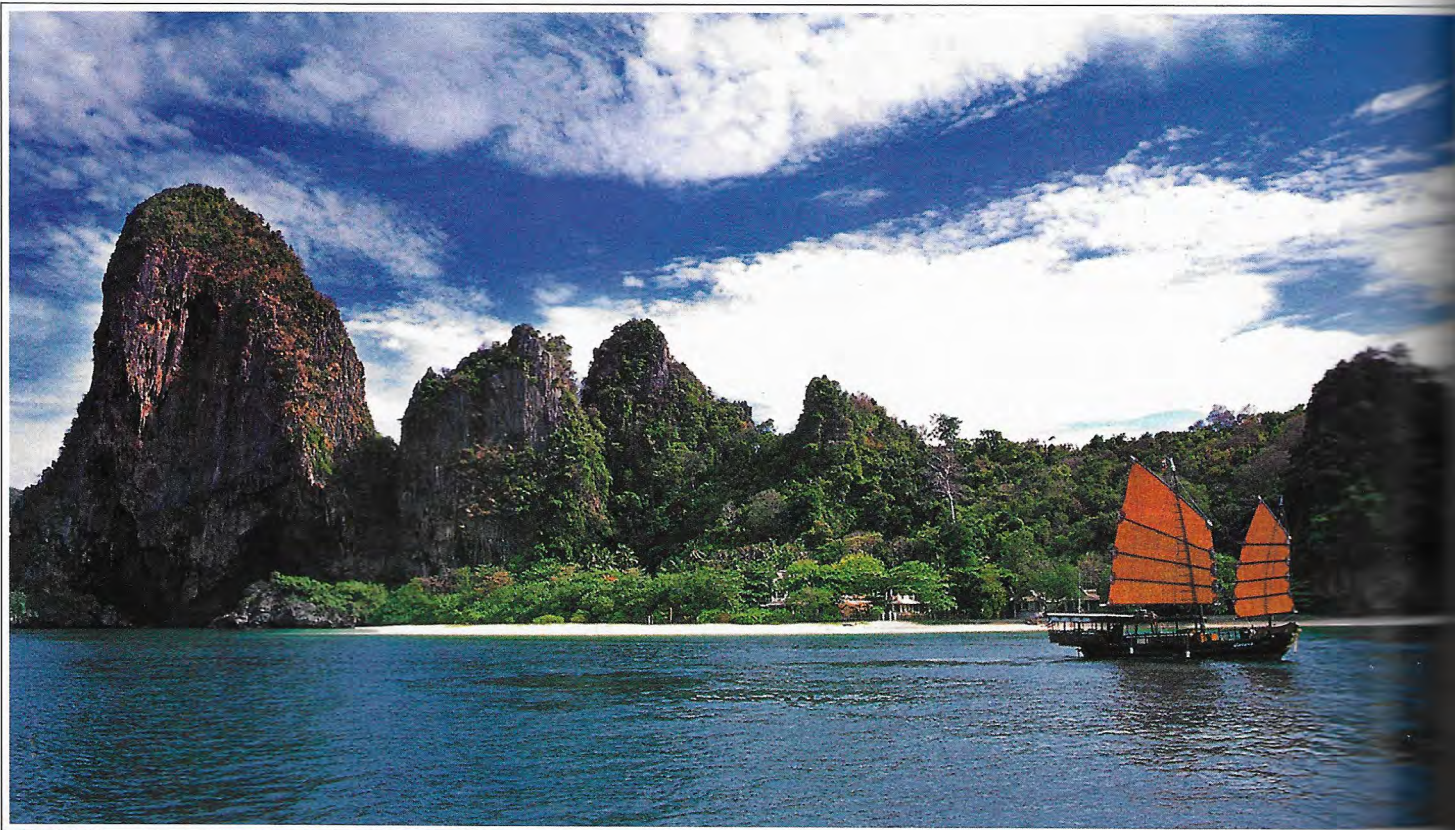
Bespoke travel is not bargain travel, but it does not have to break the bank either. Some companies simply quote a price for the entire itinerary, while others add service or consulting fees to the trip cost. Absolute Travel's average itinerary lasts around 12 days and runs about \$15,000 for two people, no more than many luxury travelers would spend on their own in an era where four-figure hotel rooms are increasingly common. The company regularly coordinates custom trips for as little as \$3,000 to \$4,000 per person for eight days in less expensive parts of Asia, but \$50,000 trips are quite normal, and Stubbs notes that

**"Hotels are platforms from which to explore the world, and the real luxury is the people who help you see the world around you."**

**—LISA LINDBLAD**



New York-based Remote Lands is entirely Asia-focused with trips in which travelers can mingle with (clockwise from top right) Naxi women in Yunnan province, China, and visit the Buddhist shrine in Borobudur, Central Java, Indonesia, and the Tiger's Nest Monastery in Paro, Bhutan.



Thailand is known for its beautiful islands and Absolute Travel can create an itinerary that allows for a stay at luxurious resorts such as the Rayavadee Resort, which is set over 26 acres that overlook the Andaman Sea in Thailand's southern Krabi province.

it used to be that a "\$100,000 trip was a rarity, something we did a couple of times each year, and now it's an everyday thing."

Latitude International's approach is to itemize every component of the trips it arranges, from drivers to helicopter charters, without markups, and then add a 25 percent fee (but not to lodging). With Micato, custom trips often cost no more per day than group versions in the company's catalog, especially for parties of four to six that fill a safari vehicle and would require their own driver and guide anyway. Lisa Lindblad charges a \$2,500 consultation fee for putting together a bespoke itinerary.

Each provider uses a different pricing structure, but all can create trips to meet a wide array of budgets. Marc Telio of Entrée Destinations thinks bespoke travel will continue to become more widespread, and potentially even less expensive. "This trend is not just for the luxury segment," he says. "They read the travel magazines, *Wine Spectator*, publications like that, and they see over and over that the sexy way to travel is to go to Italy and have a private tour of the Sistine Chapel."

Besides the local expertise, authentic experiences, privacy and flexibility, one special benefit of bespoke travel is access, the opportunities offered by highly specialized travel providers to otherwise off-limits experiences and sights. "Companies like ours not only take care of every detail, but also provide access customers could not otherwise get," says Blue Parallel's Burgio. "For instance, because of our relationship with high-ranking officials, we are able to pick up our clients at the airport in Buenos Aires as if they were diplomats. We've had clients come to Argentina to kayak and got them a former member of the Argentinean Olympic kayaking team as their guide. Our job is to 'make the impossible happen,' which is what creates lasting memories."

Telio puts it this way: "You can book yourself into the Four Seasons Whistler without any help. We often achieve private access,

such as arranging for our clients to play golf with the mayor of Whistler, or have a private performance of *Cirque du Soleil*. Our guests routinely meet Masai elders and enjoy other immersive experiences such as meeting with paleontologists Philip and Leakey, the grandchildren of Louis and Mary Leakey. Latitude International is built almost entirely on the concept of access and special handling, as its owner, Dominic Hampshire, was in 1990 a personal aide to the British royal family, and takes the concept of treating clients like royalty seriously.

"We literally hold the keys to the castle, and our connections allow for visits to otherwise private castles, golf clubs, after-hours tours of museums with the curators, those kinds of things," says Hampshire. "A lot of our clients want to meet local people during their travels, not celebrities, but rather to visit a Scottish castle and not just see it, but sit down to tea with the 16th earl." Catherine Frick of Lands notes that "it could be palaces with royalty one day and down to a dinner at a remote indigenous village the next. The goal is to have a profound, life-changing experience."

Sometimes this access comes in the form of experiences that cost more money cannot otherwise buy, but more often it's a matter of expertise: any traveler could theoretically visit the Vatican, but a guide in Florence, except that he would not be able to get into the Vatican. Either way, from dining with royals to kayaking with a former Olympic athlete, bespoke travel offers truly once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Hampshire says there are limits to what even the best companies can arrange. "Our clients often ask to meet the queen," says Hampshire, "but that's something even we can't do." ❖