

LIVING &gt; TRAVEL

## Are We Witnessing the Return of the Travel Agent?

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by JENN RICE



Travel agent—it's a job that seems to have gone the way of the television repairman or switchboard operator. But there's a fresh new crop of travel experts—more aptly described as travel designers—who offer resources far beyond the basics of organizing flights, lodging, and tours. These designers create trips that you can't just book online, trips for travelers, not tourists. And discerning travelers, at that.

“People want to see the world before it changes, and it’s changing fast,” says Lia Batkin, cofounder of In the Know Experiences. “They want truly authentic, unique experiences.” No longer is it about checking boxes at a major tourist hub. Rather, it’s about digging deeper into more mainstream destinations or going for lesser-known spots that can only really be accessed with expert assistance. Rather than traveling to Paris to see the Louvre and Eiffel Tower, for example, travelers might land at Charles de Gaulle and immediately be whisked away in a private car to taste back vintages in Bordeaux’s most storied cellars. Or a traveler might tell their designer they want to explore Bhutan, have two weeks, want to spend time hidden away in a cliffside monastery, and leave the details to them. These are the kinds of trips that can’t be planned with a quick visit to Expedia and TripAdvisor.

And though many of these trips can come with a serious price tag, the definition of luxury travel is changing; no longer is it all strictly high end. People want a mix of high and low, and hire travel designers to point them toward the right hole-in-the-walls and local experiences. “I think it almost becomes a badge of honor that you went on an amazing trip but did super-cool, under-the-radar, local-type things that weren’t super high end or expensive,” says Batkin. “It means that you’re a true traveler.” For example, while a meal at Osteria Francescana, chef Massimo Bottura’s three Michelin-star restaurant in Modena, Italy, is understandably a bucket list item for many, a travel designer at Food Valley Travel will also hook up a pasta-making class at Boutique del Tortellino, a locals-only shop so unassuming that it’s tricky to even find without an expert directing you there.

These new travel agents rely heavily on developing personal relationships with their clientele before organizing a once-in-a-lifetime trip. And the planning process can be long, taking anywhere from a couple of months for a wine and culinary tour through Australia to a couple years to organize a lavish multi-month journey through Southeast Asia, complete with after-hour private dinners at Angkor Wat. “When we speak to clients, we will never be prescriptive in telling them what they should do in each place they go,” says Jacada Travel’s marketing manager, Leila Al-Qattan. “We want to know what makes their heart race, why they want to travel to that specific destination, and what their favorite moments have been in previous trips they’ve taken.” From there, designers craft detailed itineraries and then continue to stay in touch once the trip begins (in case, say, the client needs help shipping back a case of wine from a particularly special tasting). Pricing runs the gamut. “We can do a weeklong helicopter trip around Ethiopia for \$30,000 or an 11-day wine and culinary tour of Australia for \$7,100,” says Al-Qattan. “We’ve also sold epic trips that will set someone back six figures. Ultimately, everything we do is tailor-made and private, so it comes with a price tag.”

So how do these agencies get the inside scoop? Most have feet on the ground in the locations they’re sending their clients or focus on one specific area. Italian natives Emanuela Raggio and Anna Merulla of Beautiful Liguria live in Liguria (more commonly referred to as the Italian Riviera) and focus exclusively on this region. “You have to be local to propose authenticity and quality, and to be able to continuously select and scout new travel experiences,” notes Raggio. For example, she likes to set up her gourmand clients with a private cooking class with a Ligurian family in their home to learn authentic coastal dishes passed down from generation to generation. Dining at a popular restaurant is fun, but experiences of this nature are truly unforgettable and one of a kind. Jacada Travel offers trips worldwide and employs travel designers who have spent time—whether living or working—in the regions they’re sending travelers. “On our Latin America team, we have a native Peruvian, someone who lived in Argentina for years, and another member who drove a truck from Colombia all the way down to Ushuaia and back up to Rio,” says Al-Qattan.

So what do these hyper-curated trips look like? Saporo Travel crafted a trip focused on one grape varietal in Sicily for a discerning oenophile. “I think there is now a shift toward diving deeper into niche interests, such as gastronomy,” says James Imbriani, the company’s founder. Food Valley Travel arranged for travelers to visit Antica Corte Pallavicina to see firsthand where coveted black pig culatello ham is made (usually there’s a six-month waiting list and \$600 price tag per ham). At Jacada Travel, “A client loved golf and we set up practice on top of the glacier their helicopter landed on,” says Heather Richardson, the company’s editorial manager. In the Know Experiences’ agents have even gone as far as shutting down the roads in Bandol, France, for a client’s 50th birthday party trip; vintage cars were transported in from all over Europe to create a rally and chefs flew in and created foodie pit stops along the way.

And the personalized attention doesn’t stop once an itinerary is sent out. Jacada Travel, for example, has also sent food-obsessed clients destination-centric cookbooks prior to traveling or even curated a playlist of a client’s favorite songs to listen to in a private jet while chasing the northern lights. Some will even meet with clients personally. “The designers who work in our Cape Town office will often go to meet their travelers for a coffee or drink during their time here, and if one of the team is traveling in the same place as a client, they’ll go out of their way to have a catch-up,” says Richardson. “It becomes a real relationship, which makes sense—travel is a very personal thing.”