

THE WORLD OF TAILOR-MADE TRAVELS

IN LUXURY, BESPOKE IS THE ULTIMATE LADDER. MADE-TO-ORDER ANYTHING IS OFFICIAL STAMP THAT YOU HAVE ARRIVED. THEN WHY SHOULD YOUR HOLIDAYS BE ANY DIFFERENT? HERE'S A LOOK AT SOME OF THE CUSTOMISED VACATIONS THAT ARE ON OFFER.

BY NUPUR AMARNATH



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There's nothing wrong with going off the rack. For clothes, an off-the-rack suit might fit you like a glove. In accessories, a branded shoe will work just as well. For travel, a group tour might turn out to be just what the doctor ordered. Especially for travel. A group tour, a scheduled itinerary is a no-brainer. You can leave all the planning to the tour operator of your choice and relax—the core idea behind the vacation, after all.

Then why rock the boat, not literally, and go for something custom-made. Why not go for the tried and the tested and order a holiday off the brochure much like opting for the buffet at a restaurant? Because, for one, it is the buffet... something that caters to the lowest common denominator, much like planned tours. And two, if you are a seasoned traveller, the usual is not what you are looking for. For you, the chance encounters of a custom-made tours, the thrill of serendipitous discoveries and the high that no one has probably been where you are going.

Travellers by nature are curious, passionate and looking for unique and authentic experiences. Bespoke travel just fans these emotions further. At most times, it's not about the expensive places you stay at or the concierge services, it's the experience. But then money is the key to unlocking it. For instance, a bespoke tour around Paris might take you to the Louvre or the Eiffel Tower, just like any other group tour. But it can get you closer to the exhibits or stay longer at the top. Then again, it can be rediscovering the Italian countryside while touring in classic cars. Or take you to a manned Mission to Antarctica and closer to the penguins, an experience that only the researchers have an in on. Want to make your next holiday a bespoke one? Here's where you get the ideas.

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INTO THE WILD

BESPOKE SAFARIS

When it comes to safaris, it's quite common to pick a group tour. Safety in numbers, after all. But there are those who like to answer the call of the wild on their own time. That's where players like **Micato** step in. Nine-time winner of the Travel & Leisure award, 50 per cent of the company's work deals in bespoke safaris. The company keeps abreast of the hottest new bush camps, latest trends, swankiest private homes open to guests, who has the greatest new chef at their camp and which camp has the best game. But designing bespoke safaris is also a process. First, they get to know you. Your interests, favourite past trips, energy level, expectations of a vacation in general and a safari in particular, Africa of your imagination. Practical considerations such as time of year, length of trip and budget parameters are considered. Then they get to work, matching your interests with the best of African/Indian safari life. For instance, there will be culinary trips including special guest chefs, interactive demonstrations, regional cuisine, markets, top restaurants, and home-hosted experiences with Micato owners or staff. Active safaris including hiking mountains out to fly camps, biking through reserves or cities, horse riding, hot air ballooning, in remote areas with small camps and lodges. Advanced conservation itineraries that include time with leading conservation teams in East or Southern Africa – Ewaso Lions project in Samburu, Mara Predator Project, Relocation efforts in South Africa, etc. Elite jetting itineraries on private chartered jets through South and East Africa including stays in Namibia, South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Seychelles, which have been most popular the past two years.



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Looking out over the Salt Mountains from Las Cornicas ridge while mountain biking in the Atacama Desert



PEDDLE POWER

LUXURY BIKING AND HIKING TRIPS

Biking and hiking can well be comfortable and luxurious if your bikes are custom-fitted to your size, and there is a specially devised tour itinerary and experience, like entry into closed museums or VIP wine tastings at non-public wineries come along the way, to look forward to. Tour operators such as **Butterfield & Robison** and ultra-luxury biking and hiking company **Gray & Co.** cater to such tastes. Guided biking tours are not a novelty but it gets a new spin when your guide knows his region like the back of his hand. And that's what distinguishes ultra luxury biking and hiking from standard guided tours – the quality of service. They do the research,

the legwork, pre-check all roads and routes, and consistently deliver the best guides, accommodations, food and service. It's not just limited to biking and hiking, but combines it with multi-sport trips with kayaking or sailing on the side. In fact, Gray & Co. takes this to new level of service by adding trails that are very different from the standard biking and hiking experiences like the European countryside. They handpick the biking trails more for the activity than as a tourist destination and then itineraries are devised around it. Some of the destinations in their roster are quite surprising. Case in point: Santa Barbara, CA, Argentina, Mallorca, mountain biking in Atacama desert in Chile and hiking in Iceland.

JOHN WARBURTON-LEE PHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY



PITCHING THE TENT

GLAMPING IN THE HIMALAYAS

Let's get this straight. Camping is what the plebs do, glamping is how the rich pitch their tents. A portmanteau of glorious camping, **The Ultimate Travelling Camp**, a premier luxury camping company in India, specialises in just that. This nomadic super luxury camp introduces the traveller to different adventures in carefully selected locations in the mountains, deserts, jungles and unexplored countryside. TUTC maintains the intrinsic exploratory nature of camping but gives it an extra sheen with luxury tents that are kitted out with amenities at par with any top-notch hotel room. The nomadic nature of the camp makes it possible for the company to pitch tents wherever the traveller desires. You can enjoy a game of polo in Ladakh, attend the Hornbill festival in Nagaland, explore the Dudhwa National Park. And call it day in the lap of luxury in the wilderness, all with a personal butler in tow. For the Hornbill festival, TUTC has fielded special requests to pitch tents in the hills in Kohima, so the patrons can have a ringside view of the tribal festival. The idea behind TUTC is to give the travellers a comprehensive experience in terms of stay, sightseeing and food. The latter usually showcases the region's (where they have set up camp) delicacies like the delectable Awadhi cuisine at the Kotwara camp and the rice beer and tribal food in Nagaland. Currently they have set up in Ladakh, Nagaland, Terai and Dudhwa.



Clockwise from left: Bird watching picnic setup; white-tent-interior; sand-tent-interior; view-around-thiksey; Members of the Samdom tribe at the annual Hornbill Festival, Kohima, Nagaland, India

THE SWEET RIDE

VINTAGE CAR TOURS

Imagine driving a classic convertible through the gentle slopes of the Chianti region. Imagine stopping on the way to discover the artistic treasures Tuscany is famous for. Imagine braking to savour the delights of “slow food” through the genuine local cuisine paired with their famous wines. Explore the Italian countryside afresh, not in a heavy-duty Italian road scorcher, but a classic car that lets you soak in the charms of country living. **Chianti Classic Car** (www.chianticlassiccar.com) is a classic car hire company based in Tuscany, Italy. From self drive hire to the organisation of events, classic car tours, weddings, car and hotel solutions, track driving at the Mugello circuit and much more, if it's a driving holiday you want, they have the idea. Together the brothers, Federico and Lorenzo Dini, started **Vintage Car Touring** (www.vintagecartouring.com) to organise and promote touring holidays in vintage cars around some of the most fascinating regions throughout southern Europe, all year round. Each region and route has been visited and thoroughly put to the test by VCT staff to ensure that every tour runs as smoothly as possible. Drive around Tuscany, Provence, Sardinia or Mille Maglia in a car dating back to the 60s or 70s, all perfectly and lovingly restored and maintained.



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A view of the McIlroy game on the green at Royal Portrush Golf Club, Northern Ireland

FORE PLAY

GOLFING HOLIDAYS

Golf with today's hectic work pace is considered quite a luxury in itself. But if a golfing holiday makes it possible for you to tee off at the premium golf courses around the world, for a golfer it would be a priceless experience. That's where players like **Haversham & Baker Golfing Expeditions** come in. Luxury golfing holidays is not just about setting tee times and getting hotel reservations, it's about the complete experience. It's about knowing the local conditions, situations, secrets, food and how to make sure you have a good time on and of the course. Some of the favoured golfing destinations are Scotland, Ireland, England and Wales with some of the world's oldest and finest clubs, and greens so exclusive that they probably draw blood at the entrance. And if it's blue enough, you can get in. Managing to get in on exclusive courses, playing a round at hard to get on greens is the Holy Grail in golfing holidays.

COURTESY OF SHARAD KOHLI (2)



At the Royal Dornoch GC in Sutherland, Scotland.

Castello di Vicarello
co-owner Aurora
Baccheschi Berti (left)
with her students in
Maremma, Tuscany.



TASTE FOR TRAVELLING

CULINARY TRIPS

Today's traveller is not just a globetrotter but is into global gastronomy. Food has become an intrinsic part of every travel. Yes, India is famous for travellers who carry their own 'tiffins' of homemade snacks and pickles. But the palate is now undergoing a change. Culinary trips are becoming common. And while every travel company makes food a big part of their journey, companies such as **Whole Journeys** are planning trips where food is the focus. They combine active travel with hands-on local, regional and indigenous food experiences. There will be the usual biking, hiking and sightseeing but interspersed with cooking classes, truffle hunts, wine tours, farm visits and meals at ultra-local dives. For instance, many of the Whole Journeys destinations are chosen for the food experiences they offer. They have four categories of tours planned under active foodie, Hands-on cook, health & wellness and global connect. Itineraries range from a 10-day hiking and trekking trip along the tea trail in China's remote Yunnan province to a walking food tour through Spain's Basque country. Another operator, **The International Kitchen** concentrates on small groups and hosts cooking classes for them in various locations in Italy, South America, France, Spain, Portugal, among others.



A market tour with the Hanoi
Cooking Centre, in Vietnam.

FROM TOP: SALLY GALL; COURTESY OF THE HANOI COOKING CENTRE



CARVE SOME POWDER

DRIVING ON ICE

This is the stuff that comes marked with "Stunts performed by trained drivers. Don't try this at home". We are talking about drifting on frozen ice at 150 kmph with some 500+ horsepower under you. Spike Ice by **Bespoke Tours & Travels** makes it possible. This tour is not for the faint-hearted. After all, it makes it possible for you to ride some of today's most fascinating supercars, read Ferrari, Lamborghini and Porsche, on to one of the most challenging winter driving areas in Sweden close to the Polar Circle! Learn how to drift and control while steering different sports cars under extreme conditions. The cars are fitted with spike tyres for a rally-car-level grip on frozen roads. There's professional video and data analysis as in a proper race and highly experienced instructors to support you through the length of your drive. They can even arrange for one-on-one coaching. It's a four day drive-a-thon on ice on a frozen lake, all of 50 centimetres thick. The cars on offer are the Ferrari 430, Ferrari 599, Lamborghini Gallardo, Lamborghini Murciélago, Audi R8 V8, Audi R8 V10, Porsche Turbo and BMW M3. And for real thrill seeking (as if this wasn't enough) you can even experience racing, by getting behind a prototype Aquila CR1.

AGENCJA FOTOGRAFICZNA CARO/ALAMY

Porsche driving training in Lapland (Finland)