

PrivatAir *the magazine*





Previous page Clockwise from top right: Lions in Kenya; the beautiful Lake Palace, India; riding an elephant; the mountains of Antarctica; Polynesia; with these companies you are able to meet the indigenous people of the land. Above: Helicopters and yachts are part of the package

in electricity, we'll furnish it with comfortable beds, we'll provide a chef and a butler – whatever it needs.'

An alternative is to take a private house, and the ultra-travel agents pride themselves on finding extraordinary properties which are not normally available through the rental market. 'We started using private houses because we realised that they could be more luxurious than the hotels in the area,' says Stephen Chew, who runs the Latin American specialist Azul. 'It's the service you put in that makes the difference.' So his customers might find themselves in a highly staffed 17th-century hacienda on the Yucatan Peninsula or a town house with its own schooner in the Brazilian fishing port of Paraty.

Exciting and unusual modes of transport are also an important part of the ultra-traveller's experience. 'Sticking people in the back of a minibus is not interesting,' says Niel Fox, 'nor is an S-class Mercedes for that matter, though we can provide those if appropriate. When clients fly into India, I try to meet them on the runway in a tuk-tuk; and we sometimes use Royal Enfield motorbikes for travelling through the countryside, because that's how the locals get around.'

A trip through New Zealand with the Auckland-based company Seasonz – who looked after several of the stars of *The Lord of the Rings* when it was being filmed there – could involve a river jet boat, a luxury catamaran, a deep-sea fishing boat and an America's Cup yacht; while a day that goes without a helicopter transfer is, for tour operators of this calibre, a missed opportunity.

Niel Fox will go to extraordinary lengths to avoid tourists. 'I've driven past Ayers Rock five times but never stopped to see it,' he says. 'I couldn't bear to share it with so many people. Why bother when you can take a 4x4 into the Olgas – which are nearby and also spectacular – and have the whole place to yourself?'

The greatest test of an ultra-travel agent is whether he or she can have a major tourist site closed down to give a client exclusive access.

For example, Q Escape, the travel arm of the London concierge firm Quintessentially, boasts of having closed down both the Pyramids (for a wedding) and the Taj Mahal, and is offering private access to the principal sites of St Petersburg as part of a forthcoming tour following the path of a solar eclipse.

Conversely, these agents can provide introductions to people ordinary travellers might never come across. In Egypt, Q Escape offers to arrange breakfast with the Director General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and 'a private dinner with local dignitaries'.

Niel Fox, on the other hand, prides himself on organising encounters with the indigenous inhabitants of remote places: 'In Africa we got together 19 different spiritual leaders of the bushmen, which was something that hadn't happened for generations. And in Borneo we had a special celebration of all the key tribes, with about 16 musicians and 60 dancers.' But, he adds, such occasions have to be approached with great sensitivity: 'People who turn up in helicopters can ruffle some feathers with people who haven't been exposed to that kind of wealth. It's our job to manage the situation.'

How much does a holiday of this nature cost? Based On A True Story is introducing a programme of long weekends costing from €50,000, but for one of their full-blown Extraordinary Holidays the minimum is €200,000 (not including inbound flights). 'At least,' says Niel Fox, 'that's the point at which we become effective. If people want to spend less than that – well, we just refer them to another company.' ■

CONTACT DETAILS

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