

Going Your Way

Have the time of your life
exploring the world on
your own terms. BY LISA MATTE

How valuable is your time? Is it a limited commodity divided among work, family and leisure pursuit? Do you long to engage the world beyond your peripheral vision, fantasize about wandering the Taj Mahal or exploring the eastern steppes of Mongolia, but find the concept of time spent traveling an insurmountable obstacle?

Start packing. The good news is an array of high-end tour companies has emerged in recent years, founded on the principle that what precious time we have to devote to leisure travel should be spent pursuing our individual interests, fulfilling our personal goals.

Make no mistake. These are no cookie-cutter tours. They're all about luxury and ease of travel.

*Umaid Bhawan Palace as seen
during a Remote Lands tour*

PHOTO: REMOTE LANDS







Greaves Tours' private aircraft allows clients to maximize their time (above); A game of elephant polo in Rajasthan (left)

PHOTO: GREAVES TOURS

end tours to destinations throughout India. The company's specialized itineraries are based on personal experience.

"The Cambata family originates from India," said Carole Cambata, president of Greaves Tours LLC. "All members of the family are involved in the day-to-day operations of the company, and very much involved with the development of any new and existing tour destinations."

"When Greaves' Family India tour was initially being designed, it was with the family discussing what areas of India we enjoy with our children and grandchildren while taking into account the variety of culture, wildlife, historical sites there are to visit within the country."

Recently, Greaves took a giant step forward when the company purchased a private aircraft. The Super King Air B2000 paves the way for travelers to explore more of India, even when time is limited. Consider this: The drive from Delhi to Agra to visit the Taj Mahal can take up to five hours — each way. The long drive time isn't due so much to distance as to sub-par roads: It's a dusty, bumpy five hours.

"The aircraft allows our clients to maximize their time spent on the ground in India, seeing more of the country and lessening the time spent transiting on commercial planes or long road journeys," said Cambata. "Clients may

Greaves Tours (www.greavesindia.com) is leading the way when it comes to innovation. For more than 30 years, the family-owned company has offered high-

design their own itinerary to best suit their interests and travel schedules. All journeys are customized to meet the preferences and expectations of each traveler — one flight, two flights or an entire journey by private plane."

Also specializing in travel to India, **Luxury Tours of India** (www.luxurytoursofindia.com) works with clients to develop unique itineraries that may focus on adventure, relaxation, bird-watching, arts and architecture — even a camel safari in the Thar Desert.

Like Greaves Tours, New Jersey-based **Nomadic Expeditions** (www.nomadicexpeditions.com) has a firm connection to the destination it serves: Mongolia. The company was founded in 1992 by Jalsa Urubshurow.

"Jalsa is a Kalmyk Mongolian who was born and raised in New Jersey, but grew up with deep love and respect for Mongolia, his ancestral homeland," said Undraa Buyan-nemekh, program coordinator at Nomadic Expeditions. "Jalsa first visited Mongolia in 1990. [The prime minister at that time] asked him to help to promote Mongolia to Western travelers."

"Jalsa's countless trips to Mongolia to explore its vast land, fragile ecology and environment, rich culture and tradition, ancient history and Buddhist monasteries became the foundation for our unique collection of active and cultural journeys ... today Mongolia has become the up-and-coming destination for those who seek unique adventures and out-of-the-ordinary experiences."

These days Nomadic Expeditions is seeing a marked shift in its customer base as private travelers express interest in touring on their own rather than as part of an alumni



or special-interest group. That shift is a driving force behind the company's individualized travel planning process.

"Our goal [during the planning process] is to learn as much as possible about our travelers, their interests and travel preferences," said Buyannemekh. "We ask them about their expectations and we design our itineraries based on the individual preferences of each traveler.

"For someone who is not familiar with Mongolia at all but still very much interested in traveling there, we engage in extensive dialogue with them to give them an overall understanding of the country. ... We often send potential travelers a reading list so they can get familiar with the destination. We design tours from as little as two days to as long as one month. Our goal is to plan the best trip possible within the timeframe one is able to travel."

Remote Lands (www.remotelands.com), an exclusive tour company with a focus on destinations in Asia, specializes in very small groups: an average of four (usually two parents and two children). The company has, on occasion, accommodated groups of up to 12.

"We are extremely focused on a very small niche and spend an extraordinary amount of time talking to our clients in person or on the phone and exchanging hundreds of emails in order to create the best trip possible for them," said Catherine Evans Heald, Remote Lands CEO, who co-founded the company in 2006 with COO Jay Tindall.

Heald touts the company's firsthand knowledge of Asia as a key factor in its success.

"Simply put, Asia is what we know," she said. "I lived in Hong Kong for seven years, and my co-founder, Jay Tindall, also spent many years in Hong Kong and currently heads our Bangkok office. All of our staff members have traveled extensively in Asia, so collectively we have decades of travel experience. ... We've evolved in the sense that we've added more destinations and experiences to ensure that we're

A Nomadic Expeditions camel tour through the Gobi Desert (above); Arriving in style at the Rambagh Palace on a Remote Lands tour (right)

PHOTOS: BARBARA BALIK; RAY MAIN.CO.UK



always on the cutting edge of luxury travel, and we've also refined the itineraries of the places we know well.

"Change happens in Asia at an incredibly rapid pace, and we pride ourselves on staying on top of things and introducing them to our clients."

In addition to specializing in Asia, Remote Lands prides itself on its "sky's the limit" commitment to fulfilling even the most extreme travel requests.

"We had a large family travel to Mongolia last summer. We built a luxury yurt (*gers* in Mongolian) camp solely for them in the Arburd Sands and Jalman Meadows," said Heald. "We flew in two sets of fine Pratesi linens, robes

and slippers and Molton Brown toiletries — one to each camp — as well as individual sets of binoculars, maps and field guides.

“The family also required a separate bathroom per person, so we flew in extra bio-toilets and showers. The camp was much more than a place to sleep, eat and bathe — there was also a library yurt filled with books and fitted with traditionally painted Mongolian furniture, which the family found particularly impressive.”

In fact, some high-end tour companies specialize in family travel. Chicago-based Kipling & Clark (www.kiplingandclark.com) is one of them. The ultra-luxe tour company evolved from its founder’s personal interest in Asia, rooted in his Asian studies background and 14-year tenure at Korean Air, to encompass the interests of, first, his wife, and eventually their daughter.

“My wife, Bev, 8-year-old daughter, Zennia, and I have traveled to Asia frequently over the past five years, averaging nearly two months a year traveling to Japan, China, Southeast Asia and parts of India,” said Kipling & Clark founder Randy Lynch. “As we shared our family’s luxury travel experience with friends and clients alike, we began to realize that our trips had hit a nerve with a certain market: high-end earners with families seeking unique cultural experiences in the context of private luxury travel.

GOING GREEN

While the tour companies mentioned in this article focus on luxury travel and securing the finest goods and services for their clients, they are keenly aware of their responsibility to contribute to an infrastructure that supports sustainable tourism.

Kipling & Clark is developing opportunities for clients to support the destinations they visit. One project involves the Angkor Well Project in Vietnam, where a donation of \$400–600 will cover the cost of a well and pump sufficient to provide drinking water to an entire village.

In India, Greaves Tours has developed links with heritage conservation groups including Jaisalmer in Jeopardy, an organization committed to the conservation of Indian heritage; Travel Operators for Tigers, a U.K.-based campaign that promotes Tiger Reserves; and the Happy Home and School for the Blind in Mumbai.

Set in the Gobi’s Gurvansaikhan National Park within sight of the Gobi-Altai Mountain Range, Nomadic Expeditions’ Three Camel Lodge is a testament to alternative energy.

Photovoltaic solar panels and wind energy power all lighting at the lodge and guestrooms, made of *gers* (traditional nomadic dwellings). In addition, a portion of guest fees is designated to fund programs and improvements at a local public school. The lodge also contributes to the regional economy by hiring locals and using only locally owned suppliers.



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The Concha Y Toro vineyard in Chile, a stop on a Yampu Latin American tour (top); Elephant training camp with Kipling & Clark (bottom)

PHOTOS: CONCHA Y TORO; KIPLING AND CLARK



“Based on our extensive and continuous travels throughout the Pacific Rim, we have gained first-hand knowledge of every notable luxury property in the region, and we have established critical Asia-

based contacts for our clients’ custom needs.”

Examples of Kipling & Clark’s special-access private itineraries include arranging geisha entertainment and “dress-up” events for kids in Kyoto, private panda encounters in China, and cooking opportunities with some of Asia’s most notable chefs. In deference to the current world economy, the company has also incorporated altruism into its private tour itineraries, arranging visits to designated orphanages and grade schools in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Burma with the goal of drawing attention to the needs of the various institutions.

If the mention of cooking opportunities in Asia piqued your interest, you may want to check out **Yampu Latin American Tours** (www.yampu.com), culinary itineraries including wine tours through Argentina and Chile. While the company focuses on group travel, any of its dozens of tour itineraries can be tailored for private parties. In fact, personal travel sparked the development of the company, formerly known as Kontiki Tours.

“It all started with a trip to Peru,” said company founder Monica Irauzqui. “My husband, José, is from Peru. I traveled there with him for a month in 1998. On our first trip to Cuzco, José met a shaman and talked to him for hours. I discovered Cusquenian art and developed a love for Peruvian food. In Machu Picchu, we were inspired by the natural beauty that surrounds the Inca city.

“When we returned to New York, we started the company — selling only tours to Peru. The next year we traveled to Chile and, upon our return, designed Chile tours. We travel all around Latin America several times a year — developing new tours, meeting new guides and experiencing destinations in new ways.”

Yampu is always on the lookout for new destinations. Last year, the company developed itineraries for exploring Mexico. More recently, they added Colombia.

“We look for places that are culturally rich or naturally beautiful,” said Irauzqui. “We want the political environment to be stable, and we listen to our clients. For a while, clients have been asking for Colombia. I see it as one of Latin America’s last undiscovered gems.”

Whatever your personal interest or geographic preference, experiencing the world based on a personalized itinerary ensures you’ll have the time of your life. ■■■