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# NEW LANDS

The jet set are redefining five-star travel as we know it, checking out of five-star hotels to embrace exclusive adventures that give something back. MOJEH explores the new movement of the moment.

By Laura Binder



You're in BayanÖlgii, Western Mongolia, one of the world's final frontiers. There are no other tourists around, no porter, no waiter. Instead, you're riding among nomadic tribes, hunting for food and fur on the back of a wild horse, golden eagles flying overhead, acting as your guide. You submerge yourself in local customs and find complete honesty in the tribe's cultural roots. Sound like a luxury holiday to you?

While such a venture might not tick the traditional travel boxes we've come to know and love (pillow menu, first-rate spa, Michelin-starred chef...), it is an example of a sustainable travel trip created for a new wave of luxury traveller who not only wants a rare cultural experience, but one that gives back to local communities too. It's a concept that's quietly captivating the most seasoned of travellers, taking them beyond classic five-star hotels and on to new corners of the globe. And the best part? It's for their eyes only. "These types of trips are essentially a little bit of a secret, but are growing in all markets," reveals Scott Dunn's Head of Experimental Travel, Marcus Potter. "Those who go on them don't want to shout too loudly about them because they don't want every man and his dog visiting and the magic of the exclusivity to be lost. It is a slow process of word of mouth."

While a rare visit to Western Mongolia is one offering from Epic Tomato – the bespoke expedition arm of luxury travel company Black Tomato – it's far from the only option out there. Talk to the right people and you could find yourself heading to the most remote parts of the lush Guyanese Amazon to ride on the open savannahs among real-life Vaquero cowboys, rounding up cattle with the wind in your hair. Not daring enough? "For a survival element, guests could camp in the heart of the Amazonian jungle," suggests Epic and Black Tomato's co-founder Tom Marchant, "where they'll live and learn survival techniques from Amerindian Tribes, surrounded by the most exotic and endangered creatures in the world."

So what's causing luxury-lovers to shun the revolving doors of the world's finest hotels and check in with tribesmen instead? For a generation that has it all, there's simply something left wanting – and, according to Marchant, holidays are the perfect opportunity to fill that void. "The definition of what a luxury holiday is has changed," he says. "Now it's all about the luxury of experiencing something new and authentic." In Namibia, for instance, you could immerse yourself in the animal skin-wearing Himba tribe – one of the last remaining semi-nomadic tribes – in remote northern Africa.. It's an experience that will leave you feeling like a real-life Indiana Jones; after all, their language patterns and colour-coding systems have fascinated scientists for years, yet few will ever get to experience it first-hand.

Potter believes it is this rarity that holds so much appeal, too. "It's all about exclusivity," he says. "You can get that amazing happy feeling of arriving somewhere so very special if the destination doesn't get the hordes of tourists that simply destroy it in time." Embark on Shakti Village Walks in the Indian Himalayas and you'll be privy to a rare glimpse of this little patch of the country, courtesy of the local community who form a team of guides, porters, cooks and helpers. "The walks are only ever done exclusively by a couple or a family. You are simply the only tourist at that time and are able to get a unique insight into this part of India like no other," tells Potter. "They only have around 100 guests a year doing this and it just feels utterly exclusive."

That over-used word – 'experience' – is integral to the trend. While for many, luxury hotels are a novelty – a sight to behold, a memory to be cherished – for the elite echelons of society their offerings reflect everyday life. Where's the 'experience' in that? "Many luxury travellers already have their luxury at home," comments Potter. "With their glamorous homes, rainforest showers, beach house for weekends, visiting masseuses or a favourite restaurant around the corner – they already know about materialistic luxury. Where they seek their luxury travelling experiences is to go beyond this."

India-based Karishma Patel – a self-confessed resort-addict – couldn't agree more, which is what led her to discover WHOA (Women High on Adventure). The organisation leads women from around the globe on life-altering adventures





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while connecting with local women in the countries they visit. It was set up by co-founders Danielle Thornton and Allison Fleece who met while climbing Kilimanjaro in 2013 and became inspired to share this experience with others. To date, it's sponsored 20 local women in Tanzania, Kenya and Peru to share in adventures that could take you from hiking up to Africa's highest point to white-water rafting on the Urubamba River in Peru. "There is a built-in camaraderie experienced on each adventure," says Allison, "a natural bond and an energy that is hard to put in to words."

Karishma's 'holiday' of choice? To climb to the top of Africa's highest mountain, Mount Kilimanjaro, working with local women to complete the challenge. A WHOA-devised adventure, it saw her trek through five climate zones before making her way to the Uhuru peak – 'the roof of Africa' – where she stood and surveyed the world from 5,895 metres up. "Prior to WHOA, holidays always meant a luxury resort or renting a luxurious house or apartment and then exploring the place and enjoying the resort's facilities," concedes Karishma. "Slowly I realised that I have missed out on so much and that a break doesn't necessarily have to be luxurious."

"The trip was a lot more difficult than I imagined," she recalls. "The first day made me realise that this isn't going to be easy, but then there was no way I would give up. I mentioned to Allison that I am a very angry person, but on those eight days on the mountain, not once did I get angry or wanted to complain about hygiene or how difficult it was for me to take every small step." For Karishma, it brought new depth and meaning to travel. "The most striking feature was the giving back to the community," she goes on. "Isn't that the most beautiful thing you can do for a place that has given you a life-changing experience?"

This bid to take travel to new heights is redefining the concept of 'luxury travel' as we know it. "If there is typical five-star travel, true six- and seven-star travel is all about the experience outside the hotel," comments Potter. But for many, the biggest challenge of all could be closing the door on a hotel's luxurious suite for more modest accommodation. But, as the organisers promise, you needn't trade all your creature comforts in the name of sustainability. On the contrary, some camps and properties are busy developing sustainable programmes that encourage community interaction – which means you can head to the Tanzanian safari lodge Singita Sasakwa, perched on the majestic Serengeti plains, to Cambodia's dreamy beach resort of Song Saa or even to Africa's very own Eden - Bom Bom Principe Island – and give back without compromising on all the luxurious trimmings.

As for what comes next, Potter predicts that the concepts of a 'bespoke experience' and going 'off-the-beaten-track' will reach greater heights than the high-end travel industry has ever dealt with before. "This could well lead to luxury pop-up camps being erected where absolutely no form of luxury hotel exists, so you can still experience the authenticity and beauty of travelling so far from civilisation, yet have a luxurious experience at night," he says.

In the more immediate future, though, Epic Tomato predicts the sustainability bug will be caught by the entire family, with parents wanting their children to get acquainted with different ways of life worldwide. "We had a family looking to travel to the Galapagos Islands to see the incredible wildlife," he says. "After their experience, they wanted to give something back to the communities and wildlife of the islands, so we arranged for them to volunteer at the Charles Darwin Research Centre working with scientists unearthing new endemic species to better understand the incredible work that's done daily to keep these protected islands so pristine."

While Karishma admits she'll continue to take her family on luxury trips of a traditional ilk, she doesn't plan to spend her next life-altering adventure alone. "I fondly remember the girls that I met at the Maasai school, where we helped clean up their library, and the hardships that the porters go through carrying peoples' stuff on that mountain," she says. "Yes, there is so much more to life than just the luxury – I want my kids to learn about compassion and kindness and if I don't do it they will never learn."