

PRIOR EXPERIENCE

He graduated from writing about ultra-exclusive holidays to arranging them for the discerning traveller. David Prior tells *Fiona Golfar* why it's been all about the journey



The charming New York brownstone apartment of David Prior, the 35-year-old founder of travellers' club Prior, is furnished with pieces brought back from around the globe. The mantel features a playful porcelain lion from Tamil Nadu, a dried artichoke flower from Sicily, an antique Florentine mannequin hand and 19th-century watercolours of British seaweeds, among much else. The fireplace and surrounding shelves are rammed with refer-

ence and picture books on everything from Japanese Zen cuisine to the wild swimming holes of Sydney. The floor is covered with a rug made from 200-year-old embroidered and embellished saris and in among the map-filled walls are framed images of highlights from David's career as a globe-trotting travel editor.

When David was nine, his parents took him and his three siblings from their home in Brisbane on a tour of Europe in a mini bus. 'It sparked my imagination,' he recalls, in a

soft Aussie accent. 'Although it was called a vacation, it was really an education.' David would grow up to write for *Condé Nast Traveler* and *The New York Times* before founding his 'travellers' club for the modern era' in September last year. The annual membership of \$2,500 (£1,900) unlocks a world of specially curated, tailored, once-in-a-lifetime experiences around the globe. The Prior website portrays a world of souks and pyramids, bicycle rides through Hanoi and train trips on the Darjeeling Himalayan

Railway. David has persuaded famous friends to share their enthusiasms: author John Irving writes about panettone, and art curator Neville Wakefield about sailing Björk's boat across the Atlantic.

Prior pitches itself as a kind of 21st-century reinvention of clubland's Travellers Club, a community for the curious and creative who are bored with existing benchmarks of luxury travel (see: infinity pools, thread count and champagne on arrival) and instead crave experiences that are real, rare and enriching. Members include Silicon Valley CEOs and leading lights from Hollywood and fashion. Industry bible *Travel + Leisure* recently named Prior as one of the four innovative travel companies 'raising the bar in 2019'. 'More than ever we are defining ourselves by the experiences that we have rather than what is in our closet or in our garage,' says David Prior. 'We get to know our members intimately and then we design experiences with them in mind, but beyond that we are building a community of like-minded travellers.'

What makes Prior unique is its roster of events, journeys and activities only available to members. There are year-round invitations to unique group trips often led by industry leaders, local events such as book signings or dinners, and its 'nomadic clubhouses'. The first of these was opened in October at Heckfield Place, where close friend and culinary director Skye Gyngell (of Spring fame) and James Henry (formerly of Paris's Bones) created a feast for 20 Prior members including Alex Eagle, Laura Bailey, Luke Edward Hall, Skye McAlpine and Orlebar Brown founder, Adam Brown.

In May this year you can take part in a weekend celebration of the cuisine and culture of Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, hosted by superchef Massimo Bottura. December 2020 brings a visit to a purpose-built camp in Chile's volcano-strewn Araucanía lakes region to observe a total solar eclipse.

Starting out as a stylist in Sydney, David then won a scholarship on a four-year food culture course at the University of Gastronomic Science in Piedmont, run by the founder of the Slow Food movement, Carlo Petrini. To fund his travels in Europe, David pitched stories to Australian magazines about food and travel. 'Food is a way to understand culture,' he says. 'It's also what has connected me to a lot of different people. Food became the lens, the doorway in, and then it became much broader.'

After graduating, David spent four years



Journeymen:
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working with Alice Waters at her legendary farm-to-table restaurant, Chez Panisse, in San Francisco. 'I met everyone with Alice, from fishermen to presidents, and together we travelled all over the world. From her I learnt you can have a vision for the world and that if you believe in it others will follow.'

During their time working together Waters encouraged him to continue writing. 'David just innately knows how to find the right people and places,' she says. The big US publications took notice, and after moving to New York he was appointed contributing international editor of *Condé Nast Traveler* at the age of just 30. His elegant view of the world and instinct for the next hot destination was, and is, tempered by a flair for witheringly honest criticism. 'As a good editor you have to always keep your eye and your pen sharp. Now we do it on behalf of our members and I think that honesty engenders a level of trust that is lacking in the travel world currently,' he says.

In 2017, looking for a new challenge, David curated a 23-day 'test' trip to India for a group of discerning friends to see if his strong editorial views could translate into an actual travel experience. He sent 1,000 floating candles down the Narmada River and served an exquisite dinner at dusk of two dozen Rajasthani delicacies on polished brass platters in Jaipur at the Raj Mahal Palace, all under a billowing pink tent as peacocks strutted by. 'I found just as I

could produce a magazine story that would evoke a sense of curiosity and wonder on the page, I could also do that in real life.'

Shortly after, David met Marc Blazer, chairman of chef René Redzepi's Noma restaurant and founder of Overture investment group. 'We invest in individuals who have the vision and drive to revolutionise stale industries,' he says. 'David is one of those.'

Recently, David took 13 members of his family, including his eight-month-old nephew and 78-year-old father, on an adventure to Japan. They stayed in traditional Machiya houses in Kyoto, visited the new Mori digital museum in Tokyo and finished up skiing in the white-hot winter destination of Hokkaido. There were noodle bars one night and elaborate kaiseki dining the next, a trip behind the scenes of a sumo wrestling stable and a special night for his five- and eight-year-old nieces, Polly and Frankie, in the Hello Kitty hotel room in Tokyo. The trip encapsulated David Prior's philosophy of travel: 'High road, low road, but never middle of the road.'