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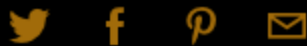
The Latest Travel Trend? Super Sabbaticals

by MARISA MELTZER

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A gap year used to mean full-moon parties in Thailand with \$100 to last two months. But now, burned-out billionaires are turbocharging the concept.



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A 40-year-old **London** tech entrepreneur had just sold his multimillion-dollar business and wanted a break before deciding his next move. He made an appointment with Nick Newbury, the cofounder of **Original Travel**, a U.K.-based ultrafixer, and confessed, “I’m ashamed that all of my travel to date has been a hedonistic cliché—St-Tropez, the **Caribbean**, the **Yucatán**,” Newbury recalls. His only parameters? He wanted to learn new things, dive deep into local cultures, and he didn’t want to stay in hotels. Money, of course, was no object.

Newbury came up with a bender of a trip, exploring 66 countries over two years via private jet. Some highlights: His client honed his running technique with members of the Tarahumara tribe, known for their barefoot long-distance runs along the isolated trails of Copper Canyon, **Mexico**. He spent two weeks skiing the brutally icy landscape of the Last Degree, 60 nautical miles from the South Pole, to re-create the conditions of an old-school expedition. He dove the Sardine Run off the east cape of **South Africa** among billions of tiny teeming fish with an Emmy Award-winning cameraman and a BBC guide so that he could film his own documentary. And he lived for two weeks in the Kalahari with the San, where he learned to hunt animals with a bow and arrow.

The cost for the trip was well into the seven figures, but who can put a price on personal transformation? It’s no coincidence that hard-charging career entrepreneurs, financiers, and other one-percenters, unaccustomed to half-measures at work or play, are seeking a maxed-out full-throttle gap year—call it a super sabbatical—to jump-start the kind of high-wattage mind-expanding, soul-sustaining experiences they missed out on while they were raising their next round and ricocheting between Silicon Valley, **Dubai**, and **New York**.

“We’ve had a significant spike in clients, largely between the ages of 35 and 50, looking to take extended sabbaticals,” says Jack Ezon, president of **Ovation Travel** in New York, whose stable includes Hollywood moguls and New York hedge funders. “The common denominator is a Type-A overachiever, either between jobs or having recently sold off their company—or just at a meltdown point of complete work and personal life imbalance. It’s their chance to really disconnect so they can reconnect to themselves, their loved ones, and the world around them.” Midlife crisis averted.



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David Prior, founder of the new membership travel service **Prior**, based in New York, ministers to such clients with what he calls “rare and precious” opportunities. Earlier this year, he orchestrated a six-month sabbatical for the cofounder of one of the largest tech companies on the planet, consisting of a series of encounters with “beautiful and remarkable” places, like a truffle hunt in La Morra with a Piedmontese-speaking local, and a private viewing of Gaudí’s **Sagrada Familia** (which had only ever been done for George Lucas). “Being enveloped by beauty nourishes creativity,” Prior explains. “It’s the ultimate jolt for tired eyes, fatigued bodies, and weary hearts.” For a New York media exec looking to take a power pause, he arranged a trip to **Japan** so she could work alongside 20 traditional artisans, from papermakers to indigo dyers and ceramicists. “Doing something with your hands gets you out of your head,” he says.

“I think about what epiphanies people want, what moves them, and what goose-bump moments will take their breath away,” says Mark Lakin, whose **Epic Road** designs deep-immersion travel. He took a prominent actor between seasons of his hit TV show on a six-week sabbatical around Africa that included learning traditional stick fighting from the Suri in southern Ethiopia and distributing solar lights for the Himba in **Namibia**. “I like to show people the ties that bind us together as humans, which is especially important in the political environment we have now. Whether they’re politicians or actors or billionaires, we’re shaping the way they see the world and creating empathy,” Lakin says.

Sometimes the empathy training hits closer to home. One of Ezon's clients, a New York tech founder, "woke up one day and saw his kids practically towering over him," Ezon says, "so he decided to put his life on hold and focus on his most precious assets." Ezon organized an eight month deep dive into South America for the family, with three kids ages 8 to 15. From **Antarctica**, they worked their way north, trekking through the **glaciers of Patagonia**; living on an estancia near Mendoza, shearing sheep and learning gaucho rodeo skills; and studying Incan culture in Peru and dolphins in the **Galápagos**. Likewise, a London finance executive negotiated a six-month break between jobs to travel with his wife and young children, and approached the U.K.-based fixer Ed Granville of **Red Savannah** to scheme it. The family took off on a 191-day, million-dollar trip around the world that included an astrological reading at the monastery in **Bhutan** where the royal family have their fortunes told; a trip across **New Zealand in a camper van** (with a private heli flight **over the Franz Josef Glacier**); and well digging and crop planting on the Indonesian island of Sumba, where the children joined a class at a local school. A few days into his sabbatical, Granville noticed, his client started to answer e-mails less frequently. And he came home with a beard.

But do these travelers, masters at formulating their business's core value propositions, return with more well-defined personal ones? Granville says the British banker did go back to finance, but his wife now works in wellness, thanks to techniques learned during their trip, and his children have been "drawn out of their bubble." Newbury wouldn't disclose how his client had been changed by the two-year megabreak, but observed that among his dialed-in dropouts, "at a basic level, the blinkers come off"; they return more keenly self-aware and connected to family and friends. Not surprisingly, some decide to pivot toward career philanthropy, Lakin says. Now they "don't just value success, but significance in their work."

How to Spot the Species

First-Time Gap Year

Dominant breed: Ivy Leaguers who missed the Goldman Sachs application deadline on an epic Euro tour or dharma bumming across **Asia**.

Distinctive markings: At the start: cuffed chinos and box-fresh Stan Smiths. By the end: organic cotton pants sewn by a Sri Lankan women's collective.

How to approach them: By requesting a spare seat in their grand taxi from **Marrakech** to Ouarzazate, where they will pick up a camel caravan into the Sahara.

Pack hero: Malia Obama, who deferred her Harvard entry to take a three-month educational trip through **Bolivia** and **Peru** between interning gigs in film production and at Spain's U.S. Embassy.

Mating calls: "Didn't we get messy together at La Tomatina?"

Gets spooked when: They miss a Skype call from their father, who's bankrolling the whole extravagant extracurricular.

Second-Chance Super Sabbatical

Dominant breed: Tech entrepreneurs who've sold off their companies, Hollywood actors between projects, financiers looking to hit pause after daily sessions of Headspace didn't do the trick.

Distinctive markings: At the start, white Brunello Cucinelli linen and fresh Apple Watch imprint. By the end, upcycled flip-flops from their newly launched ethical footwear brand.

How to approach them: Through the paddy fields, up to your knees in water, to join them for a hands-on deep-immersion session in traditional Balinese rice farming.

Pack hero: Bill Gates, not only because he was the pioneer of off-the-grid Think Weeks but because of his puzzle obsession: He and wife Melinda compete with \$15,000 hand-carved jigsaws.

Mating calls: "Will you join my table at the David Lynch Foundation fund-raiser next week?"

Gets spooked when: **Kyoto's** cherry blossom season comes early, thwarting their chance to study *shibori* dyeing with master craftsmen in Arimatsu. ♦