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What I've learnt in Hollywood  
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# Nouveau niche

With luxury travellers demanding more authentic and exclusive experiences on their journeys, travel designers are mining global contacts to create one-of-a-kind trips. By Mark Sariban.

**A**t a lavish lunch to mark the launch of PRIOR, a travel club offering members insider access to unique experiences around the world, co-founder David Prior relates where two of his members are currently travelling. One, he says, asked for Barcelona's Sagrada Família to be closed to the public so he could explore the famous cathedral in private. And the other, a passionate foodie, was making orange marmalade with nuns at a convent in Seville, an experience Prior himself stumbled upon by chance a decade ago while on assignment for *Vogue Entertaining + Travel*.

The bespoke club is the brainchild of Prior, an Australian travel writer who made his name at *Vogue Living* and who was until 2017 contributing international editor at US *Condé Nast Traveler*, and New York-based financier Marc Blazer, the backer of René Redzepi's Noma restaurant in Copenhagen. "Our philosophy is to apply a design sensibility and editor's lens over any travel experience to create thoughtful and singular journeys that extract the true essence of a place and its culture," says Prior. He describes the extremes of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur's private visit to the Sagrada Família and an Australian foodie's marmalade experience as the essence of his service: "The humblest moment is just as important as the 'heavens open up' moment."

For an annual fee of US\$2,500, PRIOR members have "unparalleled access to people, places and experiences", drawing on the expertise of a team from the worlds of fashion and design as well the travel industry that creates customised itineraries and offers informed travel advice and 24/7 assistance, devises group journeys and hosts one-off club events. "It's not a concierge service, nor is it so much a travel agency," Prior explains, "because what we're trying to do is really evolve people's travelling as well. We do think of it as a collaboration, and that's what it's been so far."

"It's quite stale, the travel world currently," he says. "There's a lot of plug-and-play itineraries: recommend a hotel, recommend a restaurant, plug in a guide who has always worked there. Whereas, say, I might know a chef who might be able to create a particular dinner in an architecturally significant building or house; that's never been done before. So we create experiences from scratch, tailoring it to the member's interests but also drawing on a network of artists, artisans and chefs."

The PRIOR concept has launched at a time when the concept of luxury travel is rapidly changing and a new breed of travel designers – essentially bespoke travel advisors to the ultra-wealthy – has come to the fore. Seasoned luxury travellers are focussing less on opulent surroundings and perks such as champagne on arrival and more on exclusive, authentic experiences that often rely on insider access.

"Luxury travel is in an interesting place," says Sara Grady, head of tourism at insights provider GlobalData. "Previously luxe-level expectations are now more commonly found in the mainstream. This is pushing the ultra-luxury market ... to be more niche, more exclusive, and allow the exploration of more far-flung places."

"And as the desire for more niche experiences grows, the need for more guidance also grows, and this is where travel designers come in. They are able to assure that level of authenticity and thus exclusivity which is essential to luxury travel."

Lee Tulloch, travel editor at *Vogue Living*, has seen the shift in the luxury travel market first-hand. "I've just been in Paris," Tulloch says, "and I've noticed the lobbies of hotels like the Hôtel de Crillon are full of a different kind of traveller altogether. They seem to be younger; there are more Asian travellers staying there: it's a completely different demographic. The youthfulness of well-to-do millennials has changed things. The luxury market can't just say millennials aren't making the [purchasing] decisions: they really are."



**Clockwise from top left:** travel designer David Prior; inspiration for a journey planned by Prior and his team may include a rock pool in Sydney (Prior recommends that international travellers arriving in Australia head straight to the beach and dive into the water); Bruges's oldest parish church; the colourful door of an ordinary house in Portugal; or the sun setting on a baobab tree in Botswana.



PRIOR members can also take part in Nomadic Clubhouse events, such as a take-over of the newly opened Heckfield Place hotel in Hampshire, England.



## PRIOR'S FAVOURITE EXPERIENCES FOR 2019

### A LONG SICILIAN SUMMER

To experience *la dolce vita* in the deepest way, spend an entire summer in Sicily. Rent a villa in the region's south-east, full of crumbling Baroque cities and tiny towns.

### BEYOND BHUTAN

Take an inner journey outside in Ladakh, exploring the remote Buddhist district high in the Himalayas where the way of life remains largely unadulterated.

### MASTERING JAPAN

Learn crafts alongside Japanese artisans keeping generations-old techniques alive in the mountain-bound town of Matsumoto.

### THE NEW SAFARI

To explore Madagascar is to fall in love with the bizarreness of the natural world and be converted to one of its guardians.

### RENEW CONFIDENCE AT CARNAVAL

To experience Carnival at its most visceral, head for Salvador in Bahia, the centre of Afro-Brazilian culture. Besides the requisite partying, it's an electric jolt for anyone's body confidence, as every shape and size shakes, swings and sways in pure anonymous joy.

"Ethical travel has always been the cheaper end of the market – backpackers – but that's changed now. The upper end of the market is now really concerned with sustainability, and individual experiences where you're part of the community. Luxury travellers have changed and are really wanting those kind of transformative experiences. That's part and parcel of wanting something special: they want to go somewhere or do something that no-one else has done in their group. Travel is status now. It's not just something you do for pleasure: it's something you do to enhance your status."

Inhabiting the travel designer space alongside PRIOR are the likes of Indagare, a US-based members-only luxury travel agency founded by Melissa Biggs Bradley, a former travel editor at US magazine *Town & Country*, and Essentialist, launched by former *Travel + Leisure* editor-in-chief Nancy Novogrod and hospitality veteran Joan Roca (Novogrod has since left the company). Indagare charges US\$1,775 annually for unlimited customised itinerary planning and a dedicated trip planner, while Essentialist charges US\$1,400 per household for unlimited trip planning for all family members.

"Recently we sent a family on a sabbatical that took them to 38 countries and seven continents in eight months," says Indagare's Bradley, who previously spent more than a decade as a travel journalist. "They climbed pyramids in Egypt, built *gers* in Mongolia, hugged pandas in China, and descended into a volcano in Iceland. We worked with them to arrange kayaking in Antarctica, to participate in morning prayer with Buddhist monks in Bhutan, and they also heli-hiked in New Zealand."

Each of these travel designers offer a one-stop shop, from booking flights and hotels and taking care of every last logistical detail to organising those one-of-a-kind experiences. "For a fashionable family with teenage girls visiting Tokyo," says Essentialist's Joan Roca, "we introduced them to a very well-known beauty blogger who showed them the best make-up boutiques and amazing Japanese products, brands and tips."

Of course, for some travellers the ultimate luxury is having someone not only taking care of all the details and finding niche experiences but being there to guide them around the world in a private jet. Bespoke tour operator Abercrombie and Kent is this year offering a Cultural Treasures journey around the world by private jet that will take in Mongolia, Bhutan and Japan, among other destinations. That trip will set you back US\$129,000 per person – twin share. And there's Victoria-based Captain's Choice, which uses a customised Boeing 757-200 for its increasingly popular all-inclusive private jet adventures at price points that can exceed six figures.

"We are doing some really incredible journeys this year," says Lou Tandy, co-owner and creative director of Captain's Choice. "In the middle of the year, I'm escorting an extraordinary journey called Harmony in the Himalayas. It is for women only, designed for the female executive or director who is looking to recharge and rejuvenate in an extraordinary landscape, with [Indian author] Ira Trivedi, who featured on the BBC's list of the 100 most inspirational and innovative women of 2017."

So this, it seems, is the future of luxury travel: more authentic, more exclusive, more niche, something that's increasingly difficult to achieve in a constantly shrinking and over-photographed world. "Less and less luxury will be about selling a product, but about fulfilling the customer's intimate passions. The price tag with this approach becomes irrelevant: having a paella in a secluded cove in Mallorca, only accessible by boat, can be as valuable to the right member as renting the largest boat in the marina," says Essentialist's Joan Roca, echoing something David Prior tells me at the launch of his service. "If you can find the essence of a particular place, which is what we are trying to do," says Prior, "that then becomes the experience that gives you an insight into a place and that's why we travel, for diversity. I think that's the true luxury, too." ■