

## Luxuria in extremis A desire to return to Eden is driving a



Words by  
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'What shall we do with a man who is afraid of the woods, their solitude and darkness?' asked Thoreau in 1850. 'What salvation is there for him?' The backwoods philosopher believed that to maintain a spiritual balance, one had to combine the untrammelled purity of the wilderness with the refinements of civilisation and, more than 150 years after his death, it appears that he's bang on trend.

A desire to return to Eden is the latest evolution of the travel industry, says Serge Dive, of Beyond Luxury Media. 'When the [Boeing] 747 opened up the world, the appeal was the country itself. People wanted to see Thailand, Japan or Chile, and where they stayed was a secondary concern. After the turn of the millennium, the hotel became the appeal. Luxury brands became more



## and for high-end wilderness adventure that touches the soul



stant than the destination. But everything has changed again. Now top-travellers are leaving that behind to search for transformative experiences in wilderness. But, of course, with all the essential luxuries in tow. 'There's a more general maturing of what luxury travel is,' says Norman of Butterfield & Robinson ([butterfield.com](http://butterfield.com)). 'It's that notion of something powerful, emotional and real.' Philippe Brown of bespoke tour operator & Hudson ([brownandhudson.com](http://brownandhudson.com)) agrees: 'Our clients are often extremely well travelled, but bored with generic luxury experiences where the basis is on penthouse suites, cars and yachts. They're looking for a more interesting idea: a story that resonates with them.'

The huge demand for comfort in fundamentally uncomfortable places runs far deeper than the quest for a dinner-party anecdote. Serge Dive has a theory. 'Jung called it divine conflict,' he says. 'Man is in a constant state of tension between his desire to be at one with nature and his ambitious craving for superiority. Because we spend so much time in pursuit of the latter, and have so little time for holidays, when we can get into the wilds we seek it at its most extreme.'

The concept of 'luxuria in extremis' was first born in Africa, where eccentric pioneers like Geoffrey Kent of Abercrombie & Kent ([abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk)) first drove Land Rovers laden with candelabra and fine wines into the bush for a special safari holiday more than 50 years ago. They were inspired





by the earlier example set by 19th-century explorers such as Henry Morton Stanley and the fabulously-named Major Percy Horace Gordon Powell-Cotton: men who would happily battle wild beasts so long as there was a decent malt and a feather bed at the end of the day.

That model has now spread to the farthest reaches of the globe. White Desert ([white-desert.com](http://white-desert.com)) has established a luxury campsite in Antarctica, to which, for just over £50,000 per person, clients fly in from Cape Town on a private jet for an eight-day adventure involving Emperor penguins, kite-skiing, ice-climbing and a visit to the South Pole. 'Many clients come to tick off another bucket-list destination, but when they arrive they realise there's a

much deeper encounter on offer,' says White Desert's Robyn Woodhead. 'They're surrounded by luxury but completely disconnected. They go for a walk, and out there they undergo a transformative experience.'

And in another wilderness, Mongolia's Jalman Meadows, a vast, unpopulated steppe close to the Siberian border, you'll find Nomadic Journeys ([nomadicjourneys.com](http://nomadicjourneys.com)) running a pop-up hotel hidden among a cluster of traditional gers. Clients more used to jet life arrive on foot, or by yak cart, to spend the days hiking, fishing and simply absorbing the emptiness.

Alternatively, high in the wilds of Ladakh in the Himalayas, where the intrepid come in search of the snow leopard, tour operator Jamshyd Sethna





Previous pages: Awasi Lodge in Patagonia, Chile. Clockwise from this picture: the remote White Desert camp in Antarctica; luxury lounging at Tswalu Lodge in the Kalahari Desert; Alaska's Ultima Thule Lodge; Greaves Travel's camp near Thikse Monastery in Ladakh, Himalayas



ktihimalaya.com) has turned village houses into boutique hotels. He has hired locals to work as guides, and brought in all the necessary ingredients to create the warmth of a family-run lodge in the midst of an otherwise strikingly austere environment.

On the other side of the world, in the stunningly pristine Cisnes Valley in southern Patagonia, Rex Bryngelson (chilepatagonia.com) has built the luxury lodge La de los Fariol to transport fly fishermen to trout heaven. The crystal-clear waters, vast blue skies, and good, simple food coupled with the utter silence of humanity provide an experience that's ultimately less about the thrill and more about peace of mind.

And if this remote Eden we're seeking can be of the more traditional kind, based around perfect white beaches and turquoise lagoons, there is still an emphasis on delivering uniquely enriching experiences. Nosy Ankao (timeandtideafrica.com) for example, is a desert-island archipelago off the northern tip of Madagascar: later this year 14 ultra-luxurious villas and a world-class spa will open on its pristine shores, and wildlife-focused activities ranging from deep-sea fishing to diving and whale-watching will be on offer.

A spiritually enriching vacation needn't entail isolation from the rest of humanity, however, as Tanya Dalton of India experts Greaves Travel (greavesindia.com) explains. 'Every four years we run a luxury camp at the





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Kumbh Mela, when up to 10 million pilgrims come to bathe in the Godavari River,' she says. 'In the midst of this teeming mass of humanity, our clients can discover the spiritual enlightenment that is sometimes missing from their daily lives.' Along similar lines, Greaves also offers ashram retreats aimed at facilitating a deeper journey into the self.

John Saunders is managing director of Exosphere Travel ([exosphere.com](http://exosphere.com)), which realises travel dreams for the cash-rich and time-poor. His clients, he says, seek 'undiluted authenticity'. On trips that range from pop-up safari camps in the far corners of Botswana to horseback journeys across the Oman desert, they are, he says, 'investing in life experiences rather than commodities. To learn something is far more rewarding than staying at a five-star hotel on a beach.'

Those behind some of these new, experience-based vacations are not the hoteliers of old, but visionaries from diverse backgrounds: bankers, advertising executives and entrepreneurs such as Colin Bell of safari specialists Great Plains Conservation. In many instances they have made their fortunes, and are now less focused on profit-making than on conservation of the environment.

Geoffrey Kent's latest venture is a case in point: a nine-day voyage on a superyacht to Palau in the North Pacific, where he's obtained permission for his guests to enter the forbidden zone of the Seventy Islands World Heritage Site and swim in the normally off-limits Jellyfish Lake. This unprecedented access was granted only because a chunk of the £99,000 per person price tag is paying for a team of research scientists from Monaco's Institute of Oceanography to accompany the trip. 'Tourism at this level needs a higher purpose than

pure hedonism,' says Kent. 'It should sustain the environment and also have a long-range purpose.'

Mystery is key. Itineraries and timetables are tedious distractions that dilute the experience. As Serge Dive puts it: 'When you watch a film or read a novel you don't want to know what's coming. Travel should be the same.' Such demanding requirements are certainly putting tour operators to the test. Last year, for example, Philippe Brown of Brown & Hudson received a request from a client to arrange a trip to live among Vietnam's most remote hill tribes. It's not the kind of holiday you find in the brochures, and in the steamy northern highlands, tourist infrastructure is entirely absent. 'To bring this client's dream to life, we worked with the local community for months to design and build the perfect home and base for the client's explorations,' says Brown. 'Rather than taking over someone else's home, we, and the client, felt that the community would derive greater benefit from us building something afresh that would become theirs after our clients left.'

For Maudie Tomlinson at Scott Dunn ([scottdunn.co.uk](http://scottdunn.co.uk)), the challenge posed by her clients was to provide a multi-generational party with the most authentic possible experience of the American South West. Hotels and motels – even on an exclusive-use basis – simply wouldn't cut it, so she built an entire bespoke tepee village in a remote valley and employed local Navajos to run the place. Navajo textile artists are known as dream-weavers, and so too, it seems, are people like Brown and Tomlinson. No matter how extreme our travel fantasy might be, they can make it reality ●