

Luxury reimagined

Luxury travel is an ever-changing concept. Now, more than ever, it is transcending materialism as we recalibrate what is truly enriching, **Rowena Marella-Daw** reports

The one constant in life is its unpredictability. It's therefore no surprise that more and more people – from Baby Boomers to Zoomers (Gen Z) – are eager to live life to the fullest, whatever the cost. And while expecting a lot more value for their money, in the process they are redefining the paradigm of 'luxury travel'.

Luxury travel advisors have been witnessing a shift in priorities, preferences and expectations from clients, including young affluent travellers. The McKinsey & Company's 'What is the Future of Travel' survey reveals that "Millennials and Gen Zers are travelling more and spending a higher share of their income on travel than their older counterparts" and "will cut all other expenses before they trim experiences".

Reassuringly, Gen Z's "are also a generation that cares deeply about the impact their actions have on the environment and are willing to adapt their behaviour accordingly," reveals Advantage Travel Partnership's Jetsetting Into Tomorrow survey. As a result,

luxury travel has evolved to go beyond five-star opulence, and instead focus on authentic encounters.

This time it's personal

As mass tourism continues to overwhelm popular and culturally iconic tourist destinations, the word 'privacy' has become the holy grail in luxury travel. Rental of villas and high-end residences with dedicated staff, private jet and yacht charters have become far more desirable alternatives for those seeking exclusivity.

And when it comes to cruising, quality, not quantity, makes all the difference. "The ultra-luxury cruise sector is booming, with luxury brands targeting the younger 'cruise-curious' traveller", says Simon Lynch, Global Product & Strategy Director at Scott Dunn. "We're prioritising the best in class - notably Ponant, Explora, Scenic and Silversea. In doing this, we're taking away the sector's overwhelming choice, skipping 'group activities' in exchange for totally exclusive experiences at each port." Bespoke service is also high on the

agenda of discerning clients. "Today's luxury traveller places equal emphasis on the overall [cruise] experience – pre- and post-departure customer service, carefully selected destinations, and the activities available upon arrival," Lynch adds.

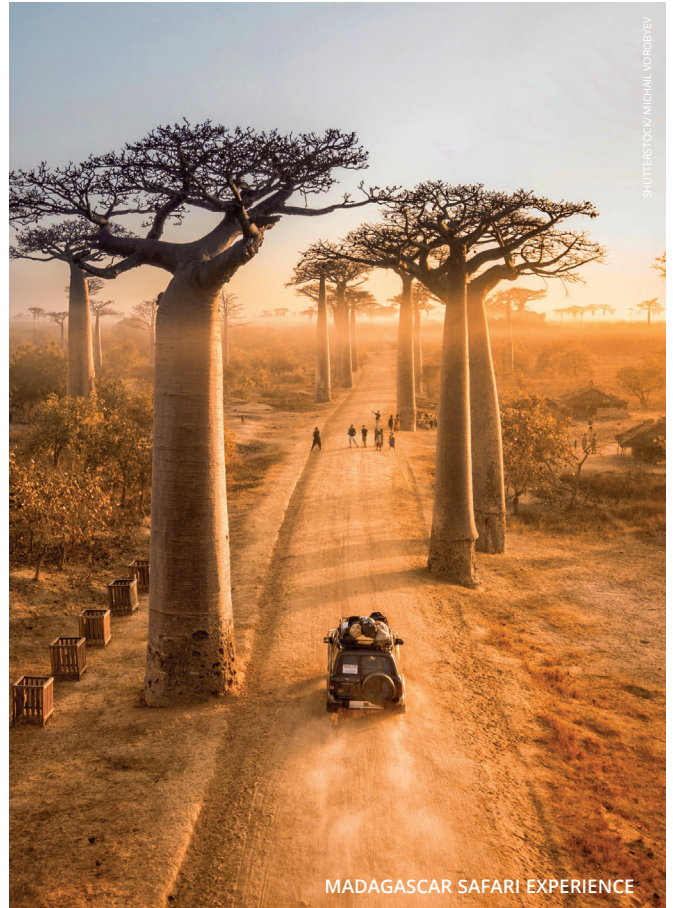
Looking for the exceptional

Gastronomy-inspired indulgence is not confined to Michelin-star cuisine. Maverick foodies have a big appetite for exploring local food and learning about their provenance. "Many travellers choose destinations based on their culinary offerings, from learning to cook traditional dishes with local chefs, exploring vineyards and tasting regional wines in Instagrammable locations, to Agritourism— farm-to-table experiences where you can visit farms and indulge in cuisine made with fresh, local produce," says Andrew Duncan, Global Ambassador at Oliver's Travels.

According to Ludo Bennett-Jones, CEO & Founder of Love to Explore, "Younger clients are more experience-driven ▶



GASTRONOMY EXPERIENCES ARE IN VOGUE



SHUTTERSTOCK/MICHAEL VOROBIEV

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WELLNESS RETREATS ARE TRENDING



► than price-sensitive. They aim to fulfil bucket list experiences.” Tour operators and travel agents working together to create an exceptional itinerary that, in Ludo’s words, “no one can make online makes it truly personal and is the reason clients will continue to book with experts.” And while AI is already here, Virtuoso Chairman and CEO Matthew D Upchurch, believes that it can be a helpful tool for agents, saying “Our philosophy on technology remains: automate the predictable, so that we can humanise the exceptional.”

Health is wealth

Health tourism is showing no signs of slowing down and agents can offer a health MOT as part of a long-haul package. According to a joint report from Virtuoso® and Globetrender, demand for specialised wellbeing treatments is increasing, with one in eight Virtuoso® clients heading for upmarket health retreats. Wellbeing and medical resorts have responded quickly to rising demand by offering bespoke treatments that incorporate holistic and medical approaches for a wide range of

health concerns – from diabetes, stress and insomnia to anti-ageing, menopause and boosting immunity, including the long-term effects of Covid.

Western Europe is leading the market when it comes to hard-core medical retreats, which are also becoming more popular among young jetsetters.

Further afield, India is well known for luxury wellness resorts such as Ananda in the Himalayas which offers healing programmes focusing on Ayurveda, yoga, and naturopathy and wellness product is booming in the Caribbean, including La Toubana Hôtel & Spa in Guadeloupe which has just updated its SISLEY SPA concept, meanwhile in the UAE Sha Emirates, described as the “first healthy-living island in the world”, is scheduled to open in 2026.

Phenomenal encounters

The word ‘experiential’ is helping to catapult the luxury travel market to new heights.

‘Eclipse-chasing’ is another trend that has emerged, with luxury travellers venturing across the globe to experience these rare celestial events,” says Simon Lynch.

“Greenland, Iceland, or Mallorca are top spots for the 2026 Total Solar Eclipse.”

Adrenaline junkies with deep pockets will relish activities such as tagging hammerhead sharks in Costa Rica, or meeting a bonafide Transylvanian count set within the depths of the mysterious Carpathian Mountains.

Sarah Faith, senior values writer at Responsible Travel, confirms that there is a shift in attitudes from lavishness to real encounters. “This involves finding exclusivity in nature or the chance for once-in-a-lifetime experiences with local or Indigenous guides.

“What’s great is this kind of nature-based luxury travel is usually relatively low volume but financially high impact and as such it can be a real boost for conservation,” she emphasises. “In Kenya, luxury safaris on land leased from Maasai landowners provide sustainable incomes in harmony with nature. In return customers get a highly personalised holiday with experiences that they might not get on a safari elsewhere.”

Luxury travel will continue to evolve, and what used to be unthinkable will become reality, such as orbital flights and space travel. The possibilities are endless. •

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La Creole Beach Hotel & Spa



La Toubana Hotel & Spa

THE UNIQUE 5-STAR EXPERIENCE, LA TOUBANA HOTEL & SPA

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Le Jardin Malanga

THE AUTHENTIC COLONIAL CHARM, LE JARDIN MALANGA

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