

FLYING HIGH

Affluent travellers are sparing no expense in their pursuit of the ultimate holiday experience

👁️ JAIMEE



IF THE VISION of white-gloved butlers drawing you a bath – patiently scattering rose petals while you put up your feet in the presidential suite surrounded by mountains of designer shopping bags – is your idea of a luxury holiday, it's time to change the channel.

“The definition of real luxury has changed,” says Alex Malcolm, founder of Jacada Travel, a UK-based boutique travel operator that is targeting affluent Singaporeans with super exclusive curated travel experiences that run the gamut of driving Lamborghinis across a frozen lake in Finland or enjoying peace and solace in a remote lodge in Madagascar.

According to Credit Suisse Research Institute's 2017 Global Wealth Report, Singapore's household wealth grew 3.4 per cent to US\$1.2 trillion in mid-2017. The average wealth per adult Singaporean remains at a high level of US\$268,800, compared to US\$115,560 in 2000. With more than 150,000 millionaires in Singapore and growing, there's plenty of money for travelling, which is why you see more luxury travel operators popping up in Singapore, all of them registering double digit growths in business, with no slowdown in sight.

What's changing, they say, is how the wealthy - or simply high-earning professionals - are travelling now. “More people are looking for an experience that, whilst still having business class flights and 5-star hotels, takes them out of their comfort zone to experience something they never thought they would do,” says Mr Malcolm.

While he started in the U.K. in 2008 and now has offices in London, Cape Town and Santiago, it is his Hong Kong office

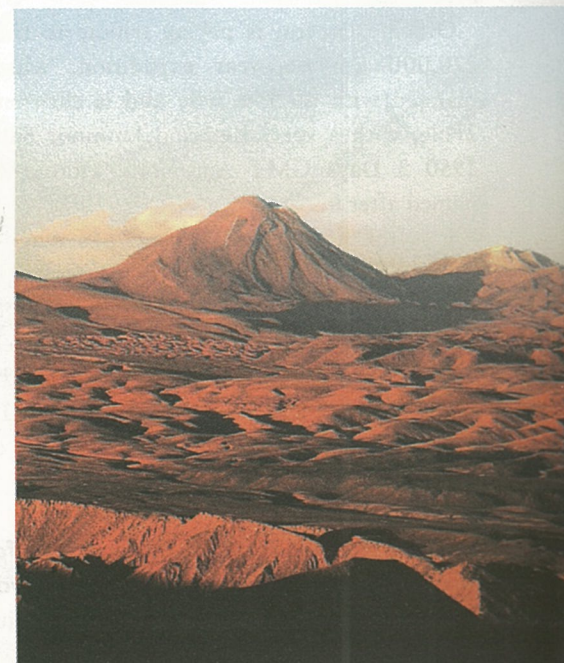
which opened three years ago that is seeing the most growth as the Asian market booms. In Singapore recently to woo potential clients, he says “we've seen growth here of around 20 per cent and we're expecting it to grow closer to 40 per cent in the coming year.” Currently the Hong Kong market is still twice as large as Singapore, but Mr Malcolm feels it's a question of engaging the market, which could mean opening an office here in the near future.

Jacada is just one of several luxury travel operators that have come to tap the Asian market. And it comes on the heels of Scott Dunn, one of the largest bespoke agencies in the world, which opened an office in Singapore last year to cope with the demand.

“Scott Dunn has been in operation in the U.K. for over 30 years, and whilst we have always had a proportion of international guests, it wasn't until 2015 that we saw such a significant number of enquiries coming from Asia,” says Victoria Hogg, its Asia Pacific Sales and Service Manager. “Without an office in the region, it made it extremely difficult to provide the kind of service we pride ourselves on, with the eight hour time difference.”

The Singapore office services the entire Asian region, but Singapore remains its biggest market, followed by Hong Kong and Australia. “Our guests are primarily high net worth individuals and the majority of our bookings are for families (a mixture of expats and local Singaporeans). In terms of adventurous couples, they want to get off the beaten track, be it glamping under the stars in Oman or embarking on a

(1) Watching the Northern Lights in Iceland's Kirkjufell Mountain. (2) Atacama Desert in Chile. (3) Ausangate, or what is known as 'Rainbow Mountain' in the Andes of Peru. (4) Stilt fishing in Sri Lanka. (5) Exploring Antarctica.





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dolomite ski safari. We've also seen families with older children getting more adventurous, with itineraries such as learning to surf at Nihl in Sumba or an epic road trip along California's coastline."

Call it 'achievement-based travel' or 'transformative' travel, all travel operators have noticed one major trend - "where travellers venture into new pastures to learn from cultures and places that differ from their own", says Nico Heath, co-founder and director of Lightfoot Travel, one of the earliest entrants into the Singapore luxury travel market.

Launched in Singapore in 2009, "We've grown 30 per cent year on year," says Mr Heath. "We were founded in Singapore, it's where our roots are, and 55 per cent of our business still comes from Singapore in comparison to our other offices in Dubai and Hong Kong. We can organise up to 70 tailor-made itineraries a month, ranging from a three-week long trip around the Antarctic, a family safari in South Africa, or a week's stay in Mongolia."

With an increasing appetite for adventure, "destinations such as Ethiopia and Iran are becoming increasingly popular," says Mr Heath. "It's also a well-known fact that Singaporeans are foodies, and this doesn't stop when they travel. Many guests choose a destination for its culinary experiences, such as cooking classes in Sri Lanka or the infamous sushi of Tokyo. We also find that Singaporeans prioritise privacy and exclusivity, with private villas and yachts becoming increasingly popular, especially for multi-generational family holidays."

Simplicity is also another pursuit for travellers suffering from information overload. "Curated, artisanal and authentic experiences still matter, but a much bigger trend will be travelling for pure calm, ease and total decompression," says Mr Heath.

Another luxury operator to open an office in Singapore is A2A Safaris/A2A Journeys, which was started by African safari enthusiasts Jose Cortes and Victor Dizon in Hong Kong in 2002. It also has offices in Manila and New York, with representatives around the world.

Until 2014, they specialised only on curating bespoke safari holidays to Africa. But they've since moved into current

hot destinations of Latin America and Antarctica, sending "more than twice as many Singaporeans to Argentina and Chile last year," says Mr Dizon. "The figures are even higher for Antarctica which has seen a real spark in interest from Singapore and our Asian clients across the board."

In the past five years, A2A has seen their Singapore business grow three-fold, and it is now about 65 per cent the size of its Hong Kong customer base, which is its biggest market. "And it's fast catching up," he adds.

Do you really need to be a millionaire in order to afford such services? It would help, but it's not entirely necessary. "Our customers usually spend an average of US\$9,000 (excluding airfare to Africa or Latin America) for a period of one-and-a-half to two weeks," says Mr Dizon. At Jacada Travel, shorter trips within Asia can come to just US\$2,000 to US\$3,000, says Mr Malcolm, although the average expenditure is around US\$8,000 to US\$9,000, excluding flights. "The more expensive trips would be closer to US\$40,000 a person, and if we need to charter planes or boats, then it goes up to US\$60,000."

The demand for bespoke travel has even led conventional tour operators to offer luxury options. Insight Vacations Asia, for one, launched a separate outfit, Luxury Gold, to cater to this demographic and "our bookings for 2018 are double that of 2017 already," says Evon Ler, President of Insight Vacations Asia.

"Our customers come from all over the world, but most recently we've seen a big boost in Asia, namely Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines and India. Singapore accounts for 40 per cent of Asia sales.

"We have trips that start from US\$2,775 per person (land tour only) and average prices are about US\$5,000 for the longer itineraries of about two weeks. Cooking classes and Michelin dining are very popular. Eastern Europe, Iceland and Scandinavia are top Europe destinations. India and Sri Lanka are also popular."

With more players comes more competition, notes New Zealander Alexandra Stewart of Antipodean Luxury Travel, a relatively new boutique startup that began in Singapore. As the name suggests, she focuses on unique experiences in Australia, New Zealand and Fiji.

"The luxury competition in Singapore has certainly increased, with a number of international brands opening offices in Singapore," says Ms Stewart. "We believe that is affecting the larger travel companies as they compete for market share. We have not experienced too much competition in our space, as our travel plans require deep personal knowledge that can only be gained through years of experience and from living in the destination; this is hard to replicate and impossible to fake."

She adds, "The most popular trips are the classic sights, whether it is the Icons of Sydney, to the clear deep waters of the Fiords of New Zealand. We have a number of honeymooners, and we see more interest in the Pacific Islands, high-end golf trips and tours with a heavy focus on 'farm-to-plate' and food-related experiences. The prices can range from S\$15,000 to \$500,000."

All bespoke luxury operators bank on insider knowledge as their USP, which their clients happily pay a premium for. As they say, the world may be your oyster, but premium travellers are snapping up all the pearls.

10 HOTTEST PLACES TO GO 2018



Nº 1 ANTARCTICA

Antarctica and its sub-Antarctic sisters of South Georgia and the Falkland Islands is every experiential traveller's final frontier and the only truly pristine continent left, says A2A's Victor Dixon. Best explored by boat, most cruises depart from Ushuaia in southern Argentina with voyages from 10 to 20 days that include the Falklands and South Georgia.



Nº 2 ZIMBABWE & ZAMBIA

While South Africa is a favourite safari destination, Jacada Travel has seen increased demand in trips to Zambia and Zimbabwe. Besides top-class lodges and crowd-free safaris, the conservation efforts in some of the parks have been quite admirable. Investment in infrastructure in both countries is also on the rise. Liuwa Plains National Park was taken over by African Parks and has since seen a huge increase in animal population and a decrease in poaching.



Nº 3 ARGENTINA AND CHILE

A2A's Victor Dizon describes the two as: "So similar but yet vastly different. From some of the driest places on earth in the Atacama and Puna Deserts to one of the windiest in Patagonia's Torres del Paine and Los Glaciares and with lakes, fjords, volcanoes and the Andes mountains running along the eastern border of the country. Patagonia is New Zealand on steroids – imagine South Island populated with Latino flair. Santiago is on the rise too."



Nº 4 SRI LANKA

Go leopard spotting in Yala National Park, dive with blue whales, or get lost discovering the Dambulla Buddha caves, suggests Nico Heath of Lightfoot Travel. "Alternatively, book a seat on the newly relaunched and stunning scenic train journey from Colombo to Jaffna, which is a major draw for those who like old-fashioned travel experiences. Sri Lanka may be getting more and more popular, but there are always secret spots to be found."



Nº 5 ETHIOPIA

A new international airport terminal and daily flights from Singapore mean that this is an emerging hotspot, says Lightfoot Travel's Nico Heath. "Ethiopia is the oldest independent country in Africa, and perhaps one of the oldest countries in the world. Go north to discover the churches of Lalibela, go south for a dizzying array of wildlife, and then head to Turmi to discover the 50 local tribes that have lived here for centuries."



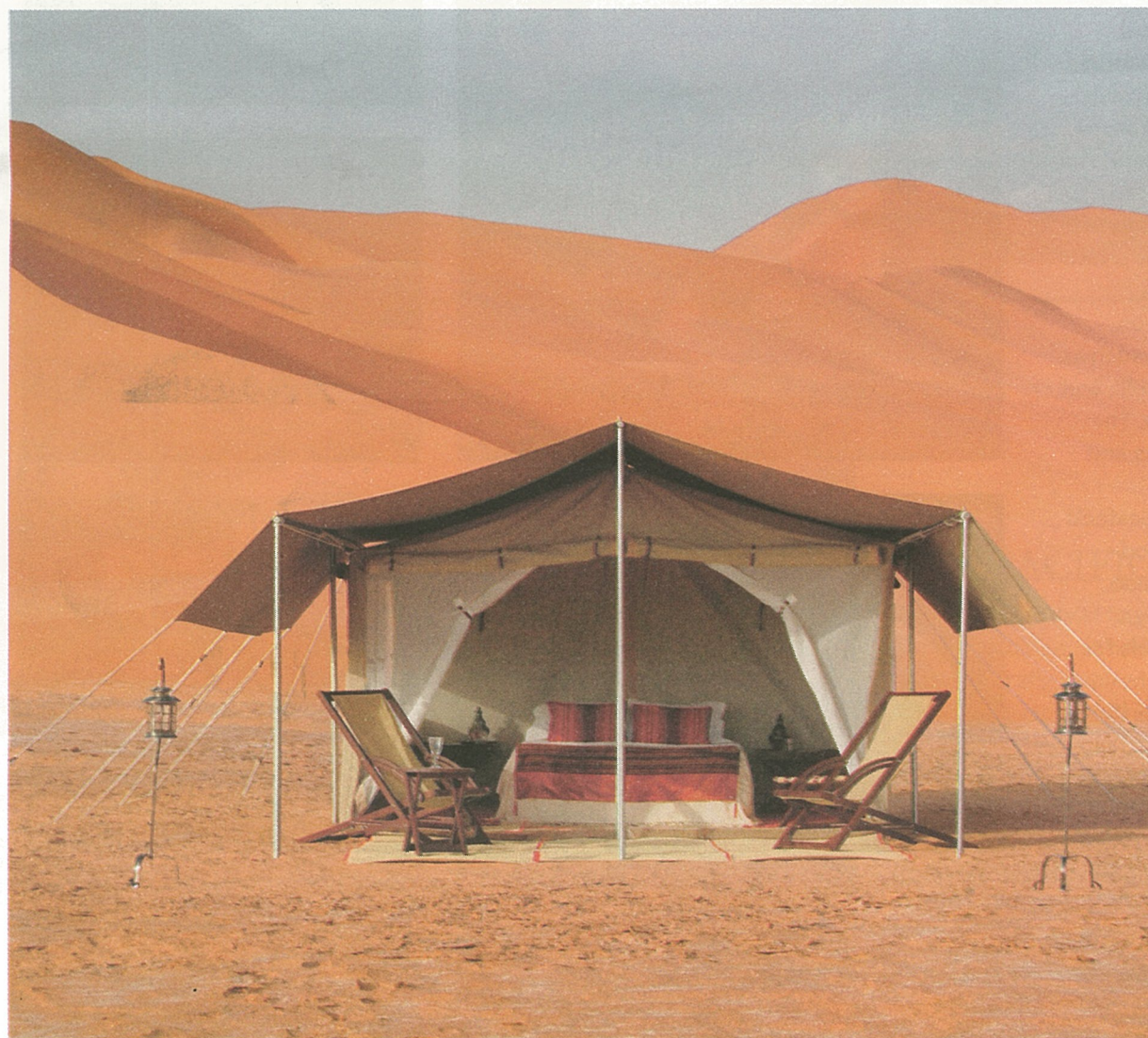
Nº 6 NEW ZEALAND

Glacier hikes in New Zealand are one of the top activities now, says Alexandra Stewart of Antipodean Luxury Travel. Visitors set up base at Lake Tekapo and head out to Mount Cook, where you can go heli-hiking (where you fly in by helicopter or ski planes) with experienced guides to explore the majestic Tasman Glacier. Enjoy breathtaking views and the excitement of visiting ice caves.



Nº 10 POLAR EXPRESS

Move over, Northern Lights. Bookings may still be up for Iceland, but travellers are moving further into the Nordic region, says Jacada Travel's Alex Malcolm. "Norway has so much to offer, from the dramatic scenery of the Lofoten islands, cute coastal towns, fine dining in Oslo and the chance of seeing polar bears in Svalbard." Jacada also offers husky sled rides and Inuit culture experiences.



Nº 10 OMAN

Oman, which seemed to be low on the traveller's radar until just a few years ago, welcomes visitors with Arabian hospitality, culture, rolling sand dunes, bustling souks and majestic mountains. Scott Dunn recommends exploring the lesser known region of Salalah in the south where the Anantara Al Baleed Resort sits on a glorious untouched stretch of white coastline. Glampers can stay in Canvas Club or Hud Hud's authentic Bedouin style tents.



Nº 8 CROATIA

Evon Ler of Insight Vacations' Luxury Gold picks Croatia for its "Amazing seafood, iconic landmarks in bustling Adriatic cities to hidden gems known only to the locals. Discover rich heritage dating back 2,500 years in majestic Dubrovnik, see how oysters are harvested on the floating oyster beds of the Adriatic and along the way, taste local wines and cuisine."



Nº 7 POLAND

There will be more interest in Poland, especially from May 2018, when the national carrier LOT Polish Airlines starts flying from Singapore to Warsaw. Says Evon Ler, "This direct flight will make it easier to visit this country which offers medieval architecture and picturesque villages as well as Polish castles and palaces."