



Exclusive, VIP, after-hours visit to Schonbrunn Palace. © Luxury Gold



Private in-suite dining on the road less traveled in Namibia. © AndBeyond

THE TOP TRENDS IN LUXURY

The luxury travel segment is changing. Numerous surveys, as well as a wealth of anecdotal evidence, have demonstrated that pandemic-era challenges, as well as shifts in traveler preferences and demographics, have created new opportunities for savvy travel advisors and suppliers.

Among the latest surveys to explore the direction of this lucrative segment is American Express Travel's Global Travel Trends Report, which found that personalized experiences, high cleanliness standards and privacy were the "most desirable" luxury amenities among respondents. In addition, the survey found that 80 percent of those surveyed are willing to travel during off season to avoid crowds. A recent survey by Tripadvisor and Accenture, meanwhile, found that luxury-seeking millennials are a driving force in the travel industry's recovery.

These new trends are fueling sales opportunities, according to Lily Szemplinski, luxury travel advisor at Global Travel Collection's In the Know Experiences in New York City. "The luxury travel market is booming," she says. "People have never been more excited to get out and have new experiences while ensuring their comforts are being met. The last two years have given travelers a different goal ... they

want to feel an experience differently than they ever have."

As affluent globetrotters seek new ways to experience luxury travel, here are some of the key trends that have emerged, according to multiple travel advisors and suppliers.

THE QUEST FOR SPACE

It's only natural that, after more than a year of staying indoors, upscale travelers are craving wide-open spaces as well as experiences in less-crowded destinations and venues.

"Most of my true luxury travelers have been looking for more adventure/outdoor experiences," says Renee Taylor, a Travel Experts affiliate in Searcy, Ark. "They want to get out into the world and enjoy it, rather than being stuck inside. They're looking for custom-designed, out-of-the-box excursions in historical cities, private catamaran cruises at sunset on a beach and more destination-oriented cruises, rather than ships that are huge floating resorts."

Mark Lakin, founder and CEO of The Legacy Untold, a New York City-based luxury travel agency, reports that his clients are increasingly venturing away from traditional itineraries. "Ten or 20 years ago, it felt a lot more common to stay on the circuit of France, Italy, Spain, Mykonos,



Increased bookings in mountain destinations such as Montage Deer Valley, Utah.
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TRAVEL TODAY

BY MARK CHESNUT

Ibiza, the Hamptons, whatever,” he says. “Now, people are really into doing other things, going to places that are less touristy.”

Rick Stiffler, senior vice president of global sales - leisure at Preferred Hotels & Resorts, has also witnessed a surge in bookings in what are ordinarily less-visited destinations. “Travelers are seeking properties that prioritize safety protocols and space, which has naturally led to an increase in bookings at properties located on the coast or in secondary destinations in the countryside or in the mountains,” he explains. “Travelers want the intuitive service and stand-out facilities of a high-end hotel coupled with [the health and safety] of their own private home or residence.”

IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

Upscale travelers are increasingly looking for deeper, more rewarding connections with the places they visit, according to Sherwin Banda, president of African Travel, a Los Angeles-based luxury safari operator. “Luxury travel has moved from indulgence and conspicuous consumption to the desire to be immersed in the destination with more meaningful experiences,” he says. “Guests want to leave the destination being transformed by the people, its culture and its bewildering sense of

adventure. Clients are looking for more off-the-beaten path and remote experiences, where they can have exclusivity with fewer crowds.”

The desire for more immersive experiences also means that the appeal of itineraries that are jam-packed with multiple destinations has waned, according to June Chin-Ramsey, CEO of Philadelphia-based Context Travel, an operator that offers scholar-led walking tours in more than 60 destinations and will debut multi-day tour packages in 2022.

“We see slow, intentional travel as a trend that is here to stay,” Chin-Ramsey says. “Rather than booking a single tour in one destination and quickly moving onto the next place, more of our clients and agent partners are booking multiple tours in the same city to really dive deep into the destination. For example, a client heading to Paris may spend one day with an art historian in the Louvre, another day touring Parisian markets with a chef, and the next learning everything they never knew about the Eiffel Tower and Tuileries with a French historian.”

Guy Young, U.S. president of Luxury Gold, a global operator that specializes in high-end, small group tours, agrees about the appeal of immersive experiences, especially when linked with sustainability. “Coming out of COVID, luxury travelers are looking for more meaningful



Glamping at Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle, Thailand. © Four Seasons



Scholar-led private tour, Mexico. © Context Travel

The Top Trends in LUXURY TRAVEL Today

travel experiences and not just over-the-top luxury,” he says, noting his company’s decision to add sustainability-focused “Make Travel Matter” experiences to every 2022 departure. “Connecting with locals, having a positive impact on local businesses and an awareness around sustainability are increasingly popular with luxury travelers.”

Jesse Terranova, luxury travel advisor at Global Travel Collection’s In the Know Experiences, predicts this interest in sustainability will continue to grow. “The pandemic has had a large impact on the travel market, giving rise to luxury travel,” he says. “Travelers are wanting to focus more on sustainability and be more responsible coming out of the pandemic, so it will be interesting to see how that will be integrated over time.”

PERSONALIZED EXPERIENCES

Terranova has also noticed an increased demand for greater personalization, which he says is good news for the travel agency community. “The travel experiences that are most in demand are the bespoke experiences — the unique experiences that are hand-curated for the client and personalized for their desires and needs — ones that you simply cannot book online,” he says. “You must go through a travel advisor for the type of experiences that these folks are seeking.”

Paloma White, founder and CEO of Paloma White Travel in San Diego, also reports that an increasing number of clients are opting for personalized travel experiences — and they’re willing to pay substantially more for it. “Private tours are becoming more popular,” she says. “Even those who would typically go on small group tours are seeking private options. Not being able to travel has made people appreciate travel in a new light, and they are much more willing to spend money in order to feel comfortable while doing so.”

The challenge, according to Lakin, is that these travelers sometimes

look to advisors and suppliers to create complex itineraries within a much shorter booking window — and then make changes. “We’ve booked trips to Africa on seven days’ notice,” says Lakin. “And not only that — they’re there for two weeks in Kenya and then call us and say they want to go to the beach in Tanzania and then to Namibia and we’re planning it live, trying to communicate while they’re moving around.”

BIGGER WALLETS

Upscale travelers are, by nature, bigger spenders than most when it comes to vacation planning. But, as White indicated, many of them are now willing to invest even more than usual to assure they get the most out of their time away.

“The biggest change is that my clients travel spend is trending higher than past budgets,” says Kim Schott Steiger, a Travel Experts advisor in St. Charles, Minn. “People are being driven to new experiences and pampering as they begin to travel again.”

Luxury Gold’s Young agrees. “Many high-net-worth individuals have seen their wealth grow during the pandemic, and they have not been able to travel much over the last 18 months,” he says. “Pent-up demand is very high.”

The Legacy Untold’s Lakin identifies several reasons why travelers are spending more on big-ticket vacations now. “People seem less cost-sensitive in our market than they ever were, and I think the reason for that is, unfortunately, the wealth divide has grown during the pandemic. A lot of people that have money have not spent it on clothing, have not spent it on travel, have not spent it on restaurants like they traditionally would, so even if they’re making less, they saved more and they’re ready to prioritize travel. So, we’re seeing longer trips, bigger budgets, and shorter booking times.”

BROADER DEMOGRAPHICS

While big-budget travel is often associated with a limited demographic range, some suppliers and advisors are finding fresh opportunities to



sell luxury travel to more client types. L.A.-based African Travel, for example, recently debuted “pride safari” itineraries for upscale LGBTQ vacationers.

Maria Swinarski, luxury travel advisor at Global Travel Collection’s In the Know Experiences, reports a surge in luxury travel requests from multigenerational groups. “I am getting more inquiries from families with young children that are look-

ing for luxury vacations, where their kids [and] young teens get to experience their own form of luxury — whether that be kids’ clubs, dining experiences, or on-property activities,” she says.

Luxury-seeking young adults are an important source of revenue for Eileen Anderson, a Travel Experts affiliate in Raleigh, N.C. “Millennials have emerged as my fastest-growing segment, especially those with young families for whom time is scarce,” she says. “They are typically high-wage earners with dog walkers and housekeepers. And while they may peruse online options, they quickly realize that travel is best left to professionals to research their dream trips and keep up with the myriad of international regulations.”

Terranova notes that suppliers are taking notice of these affluent younger travelers, too. “With the rise of technology startups and ease of wealth through Tik Tok and crypto currency, the demographics of clients continues to shift to younger individuals,” he says. This shift has affected the demand of accommodations, giving rise to trendier luxurious properties. Montage is coming up on their 20-year anniversary, and their Pendry collection has been extremely popular for the young and wealthy. Their Baltimore location has been outperforming the Four Seasons, and they’re opening properties in Utah, Montana and New York.”

PANDEMIC CONCERNS

The most extreme difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic may be fading, but travelers and travel professionals still must contend with constantly changing realities and regulations. “Many luxury clients have been concerned and confused about all the COVID restrictions, even if I walk them through what’s required,” says Julie Caldo, a Travel Experts affiliate in Newnan, Ga. “The fear of testing positive, even though they’re vaccinated, is making them travel closer to home. I’m

expecting this to continue for most of next year, however, my ‘travel-no-matter-what’ clients will go outside the United States.”

Lakin says that the complexities of travel today make the role of those who sell travel even more crucial. “Our job as a travel advisor is, in the first conversation, to really set the tone about what the travel industry really looks like, [by telling clients] this is what the country you’re going to look like,” he says.

LONGSTANDING TRENDS

For all the recent evolution in the marketplace, some universal truths remain about upscale travel, according to Preferred’s Stiffler. One is that there is no single definition of luxury, and there never will be. “I have always believed that the term ‘luxury’ means something different to everyone,” he says. “This could be an evening turndown for my parents or keyless check-in for my nephew. There are so many options for luxury travel today, but at the end of the day, it all comes down to thoughtful service.”

“As we turn an important corner in this pandemic, the ability to travel has become a luxury in itself,” Stiffler adds. “Moving forward, luxury will mean having a personal connection to where you travel, how you travel and why you travel. Luxury won’t simply equate to cost or high-end amenities. Travelers will think less about the money spent on a trip, and more about the destination and experiences it will likely provide.”

Stiffler predicts even more growth in specific types of luxury travel. “I also think sustainable travel will not only be popular but will become the norm moving forward,” he says. “People want to know that their vacation will not have a negative impact on the local community or the surrounding environment. Travelers will also continue to appreciate what is in their own backyard. They are realizing that luxury travel doesn’t always mean a nine-hour flight in first class. It could be an hour away from your front door.”

Mary Catherine Sinkule, a Travel Experts affiliate in Birmingham, Ala., sums it up nicely. “I have found that a lot of luxury travelers are wanting a more quality vacation all around,” she says. “Time is precious, and if you are going to travel now, you want to do it right.” ●

