

Far from the madding crowd

Do you dream of holidaying with a maharajah, bagging front row seats at Asian Fashion Week or leading the life of a spy? Time to treat yourself to that once-in-a-lifetime experience – **Kate Graham** shows you how

Every successful person knows that the better the contacts, the better the business. And, as it turns out, the better the holiday, too.

Thanks to a bulging contacts book, there is no limit to what some companies can offer. Take the guys at Quintessentially Escape: “Whether it is a birthday celebration on an iceberg or a family experience which will never be replicated, we can tailor anything for anyone,” says account director Freddie Read.

And if luxury resorts sound boring, why not request for your accommodation to be crafted just for you? “We have built igloos for our clients, filled them with luxurious interiors and then had chefs flown out to cater for them under the stars,” Read explains.

Our favourite is the adrenaline-pumping adventure dubbed Quintessentially Bourne: trained by an elite Special Forces Unit, travellers’ two-day roller-coaster trip from London to Morocco includes specialising in counter surveillance, weapons training and anti-interrogation techniques. Watch out, Matt Damon, we’re coming for you.

Beyond the silver screen

International Travel Management have also turned to movies to find inspiration: they crafted an *Indiana Jones* adventure for one



From an *Indiana Jones*-style trip through Brazil (above) to living like a nomad in the Gobi Desert (top right) and rubbing shoulders with geishas in Kyoto (bottom right), some bespoke travel agencies can unlock even your wildest travel dreams

client, who trekked through the Brazilian rainforest, learned cave rappelling and rode a horse with a biologist guide. Then, after visiting the immense sand dunes and multicoloured lagoons of the northern Brazilian coast, a boat was chartered along the Parnaíba river for some private fishing. This incredible adventure cost the Indie wannabe more than HK\$900,000, but according to John Clifford, the company’s president, he is just one of a growing number of enthusiasts: “The thirst for excitement has been replaced by a thirst for the unique. This type of experiential travel is truly an art form. It takes a lifetime to cultivate the contacts to make them a reality.”

Another movie, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, revealed a world all but

closed to outsiders. Many travel to Kyoto in search of this most elusive Japanese icon, but not many get the chance to rub shoulders with them. Enter Kyoto Sights and Nights.

Peter Macintosh is a Canadian-born geisha expert who can slide open those elusive paper doors. His VIP service includes a guided stroll through the geisha district, followed by a two-hour kaiseki feast in the company of a *maiko* (trainee geisha). After your meal you attend a private geisha party in an exclusive teahouse, where the skilled, kimono-clad ladies play the shamisen for your ears only.

Deserts, dons and dandy dresses

For an exclusive Asian adventure, try Remote Lands. They don’t do groups or tours, fixed dates or pre-set itineraries. Travellers are hand picked – not just anyone gets access to the trips on offer. “We specialise in unique experiences that are difficult to arrange, and require extraordinary insider connections,” explains director of marketing Bruce Lazarus. “We open the door to authentic ways of life and deeper insight into the soul of Asian cultures.”

Try living the life of a nomad, for example: arrive in the Gobi desert to find your luxury camp already prepared, complete with fine linens and pillows, bathrobes and slippers, generators for climate control, private en-suite bio-toilets and in-tent spa treatments...



Or, for a more glossy trip, they can also arrange an insiders' look at Asian Fashion Weeks. In Bangkok, India and Hong Kong, they can get you private consultations with high-end jewellers, designers and fashion experts; front row seats and backstage access at all the top fashion shows; and invitations to the hottest VIP parties.

But, for the ultimate exclusive holiday experience, get Remote Lands to organise a stay with the Maharajah of Burdwan and his wife, in their palace overlooking India's Mount Kangchenjunga. You could also meet the Queen of Bhutan at her palace and learn about her charity, the Tarayana Foundation, which brings healthcare and education to the far-flung reaches of her country. Not hands-on enough? Try spending some time with the prince of Bali, a skilled kite maker. Join his family in the kite creation, then relax over a sumptuous Balinese banquet in his palace.

There's no need to rely on amateur snapshots for memories, either: Remote Lands will arrange for a professional photographer to accompany your entire trip, discreetly capturing the moment and resulting in a beautiful leather-bound photo album of "royal" portraits that will be a treasured memento of your journey.

With these kinds of contact books, the only real limit to your travels is your imagination... ①