

Trend game

Escorted touring is on the up, but what's in store for 2017, asks Katie McGonagle

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How trendy is your average escorted touring client? If 'not very' is the answer that springs to mind, think again.

Even if they're not the type to pay attention to the latest looks at London Fashion Week or the glossy pages of *Vogue*, touring clients are more 'on trend' than they might appear.

They're already leading the way by tapping into a growing sector of the industry. Whether they're young, adventurous types keen to take on the Salkantay Trek (the Inca Trail is so last season); solo travellers who won't be deterred from Iran or Uzbekistan just for the want of a like-minded companion; or tourists who value those under-the-skin experiences you simply can't get by yourself, they're all way ahead of the curve.

To make sure you're steering them in the right direction, we asked operators for their take on the touring trends for 2017, so read on and you'll be the Anna Wintour of travel in no time.

▶ FAST AND FURIOUS

Forget lounging around on the beach - the growth in active tours shows no signs of slowing down, and is even branching out beyond the obvious destinations and clientele.

"Cycling is becoming more popular across the board," says Intrepid Travel head of business development Daniel Pawlyn. "As people look for new and exciting ways to explore a destination rather than simply travel through it, old favourites such as Vietnam remain popular, but for 2017, we are introducing trips to non-traditional cycling destinations such as Japan, Burma, Sri Lanka, India and Tanzania."

The operator is adding varied trips such as Hike, Bike and Kayak Vietnam, and seven new active family holidays, ranging from biking through Morocco's Atlas Mountains to white-water rafting along the Zrmanja River in Croatia.

Active trips are also opening up new sides of familiar



FAST FACT

Research by YouGov and 18-30s specialist Topdeck found over a third of millennials are influenced by social media

destinations. Europe is the adventure playground *du jour* for the likes of Tucan Travel, which has added two nine-day hiking tours to Bulgaria and Romania, and G Adventures, which is tipping Montenegro for the top with an eight-day sailing trip ex-Dubrovnik. Even Shearings Holidays, which skews towards an older audience, has brought in walking holidays to Switzerland and Austria for 2017, following Abta research that showed 6% of over-55s booked a sporting holiday.



LEFT: Austrian Tyrol

RIGHT: Persepolis, Iran



Across the pond, Grand American Adventures saw its active tour bookings rise by a whopping 27% this summer, with wildlife up 19% as well, driven by increased interest in the national parks and great outdoors.

increase in travel by train that it is launching a Greek rail tour for next year, alongside recent additions in Portugal, Italy and Canada.

That's good news for rail specialists too. Tim Fleming, sales and business development director at Diamond Rail Holidays, says: "Our programme of escorted

European holidays by rail has never been more popular. More people are realising the network of high-speed trains across Europe extends way beyond destinations served by Eurostar.

"Without any hassle at all, passengers can be whisked off to the Pyrenees, the Italian Lakes, Spanish Coast and beyond. Travelling by rail in Europe is easy and affordable and, for those who enjoy an escorted holiday, it is a fantastic alternative to travelling by coach too."

Steam is making a comeback too, according to Maria Cook of Ffestiniog Travel. "Tram tours are proving very popular as they combine travel by several modes of transport, both modern and heritage," she says. "Travelling by heritage transport, whether it be a steam train, tram or bus, is something we are developing more and more in our tours. Southern Sweden, Trams of Central Europe, and English Trams and Trolleybuses are all new examples of this."

▶ SINGLE FILE

Escorted tours have always been popular with solo travellers, but it seems more people than ever are leaving friends and partners at home and ticking off their personal travel list by joining a group tour.

Wendy Wu Tours has seen a

“ Travelling by heritage transport, whether that be by steam train, tram or bus, is proving very popular

13% increase in the number of 50-plus solo female travellers over the past three years, compared with an 8% increase among men the same age, and women are opting for longer and more adventurous tours to boot. Single travellers make up 18% of Wendy Wu's customer base in the UK, and more than half of Intrepid Travel's. The latter has seen a 38% growth in solo travellers over the past five years, proving individuals with an adventurous streak are increasingly keen to see their wish-list destinations, even if friends and family don't feel the same.

That's reflected in bookings by specialist operators such as Just You and Solos, which focus on solo travellers. All Leisure Holidays group sales director Colin Wilson says: "Solo travel continues to grow in popularity at an exponential rate. Just You has been taking solo travellers on holiday for more than 10 years,

and in the past 12 months, we have seen a huge rise in bookings – in fact, we are currently 34% up on bookings through the trade compared to this time last year."

Trends in solo travel, unsurprisingly, reflect the wider market, with more adventurous destinations – Just You has added tours to Iran and Mongolia plus river cruises along the Brahmaputra in Assam, India, for next year – but also a return to so-called 'safe' destinations.

Andy Fairburn, marketing manager for fellow specialist Solos, says: "Geopolitical events have shaped travel trends over the past 12 months and are likely to continue to do so into 2017. Customers are choosing to holiday in seemingly safer destinations, such as Spain and Italy, or opting for the convenience and organisation of an escorted tour, allowing scope for sightseeing, cultural interaction and adventure, but with the guidance and support of an accompanying tour leader.

"With the introduction of new 'safe' destinations such as Korea, Peru and Albania, bookings for our Discovery programme have increased by 25% in the past year."

▶ ARE YOU SITTING COMFORTABLY?

If your idea of escorted touring is barely a step above

backpacking, it's time for an update. The appetite for comfort-level tours is bigger than ever, with travellers demanding all the individual attention of a tailor-made package within a group tour. Think higher-grade hotels, flexibility over meals and excursions, and more inclusions.

Carl Burrows, managing director at Collette, says: "For 2017, we have included more in every tour than ever before. From adding extra meals, excursions and amazing hotels, we have now included gratuities in our tours, making them even more inclusive than ever. We also recognise how individual our customers are, hence we introduced more choices on tour so they can tailor their holiday experience exactly the way they want it. For example, they can choose which restaurant they'd like to dine in at the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, or choose between a whale-watching cruise and a sand dunes adventure in New England."

Cosmos Tours & Cruises has, likewise, seen more demand for its premium-level 'Select by Globus' range, which includes private home pick-ups, higher-grade hotels, and more included excursions and meals. The operator has added 22 premium itineraries for next year.

Lucy Jackson, European product manager at



LEFT: The Canadian, Via Rail

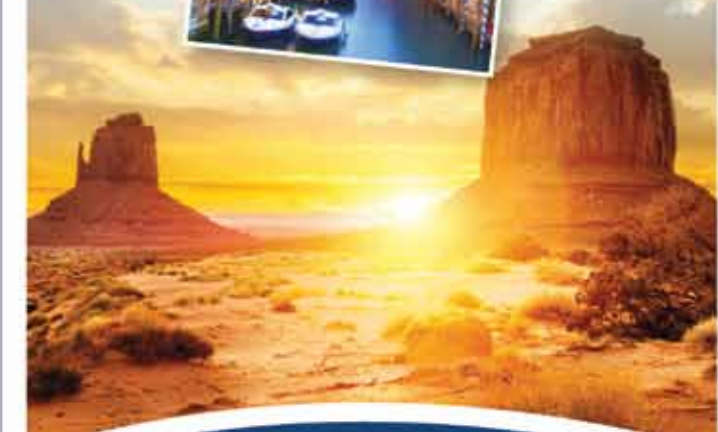
PICTURES: FAIRTE IRELAND; TUCAN TRAVEL; TREKAMERICA; JUST YOU; SHEARINGS; DIAMOND RAIL; INTREPID TRAVEL; SAGA



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ASK THE EXPERTS



Brian Young,
managing director,
G Adventures

“Today’s traveller is looking for more sustainable and authentic travel options, so anything agents can do to arm themselves with this kind of information will help them sell more adventure travel trips. Agents have a big part to play in helping sell responsible holidays and educating the consumer on better ways to travel that help keep money in local economies.”



Louise Heatley,
head of product
and contracting,
Great Rail Journeys

“We have already introduced seven new Great Britain and Ireland tours for 2017, and have plans to bring in more with our December brochure release. We have seen an increase in domestic bookings, especially to Ireland, and anticipate this will only increase next year.”



LEFT:
Tikal,
Guatemala

RIGHT:
Lake Louise,
Canada

BELOW:
Killarney,
Ireland



Shearings Holidays, says: “We’ve seen a demand for more flexibility, whether that’s being able to choose from a range of hotels – varying locations or varying star ratings – tailoring the board basis, or customising itineraries. We offer ‘Your Holiday, Your Way’ on our river cruises, which lets customers combine cruises and pre or post-cruise stays so their holiday is unique and personalised to their own preferences.”

Even at the younger end of the market, there’s demand for more comfortable accommodation. TrekAmerica’s Plus tours, added this year, use value-driven hotels and lodgings rather than the brand’s standard camping accommodation, and have already attracted a slightly older demographic, with an average age of 26 and an 87% female take-up.

Tucan Travel has rebranded its ‘Budget Expeditions’, aimed at 18-35s, as ‘Adventures for 20s & 30s’, with

more two-week tours for time-poor professionals seeking adventure without the luxury of a backpacker’s time-scale.

▶ LIVING LA VIDA LOCAL

It’s hardly new to say escorted touring gets travellers to the heart of a destination – one of its key selling points has always been experiences that immerse guests in the destination – but operators have been stepping up their game even further.

For G Adventures, that means more homestays and more social enterprise projects, so travellers can give back to the communities they visit, while Intrepid Travel has added local experiences such as joining a nomadic Berber family on a walking expedition through the High Atlas Mountains next year. Likewise, Cox & Kings is introducing more market tours and opportunities to meet local people for next year, following positive feedback for activities such as calligraphy lessons in China and tea ceremonies in Japan.

Newmarket Holidays is also responding to good feedback about existing activities – joining local fisherman to see the early-morning catch in Kerala or staying overnight in a traditional Rajasthani village – by adding more, with a new village stay option in South Africa and a Harley-Davidson biker tour through the Canadian Rockies. **tw**

