



Smooth ride

With luxury touring on the rise, escorted trips don't have to mean roughing it, writes Laura French

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The words 'escorted touring' might once have conjured up images of big groups trundling on and off packed coaches, with a long checklist of must-see activities to rattle through. Yet these days those stereotypes couldn't be further from the truth.

A growing array of luxury tours takes the opposite approach,

offering boutique hotels, small group sizes, unique access and immersive experiences that veer away from the tourist track without compromising on comfort.

Interest in these is on the rise, according to Paul Melinis, head of sales for Insight Vacations. "Luxury touring is certainly in demand," he says. "Since

launching Luxury Gold, we've seen an increase in interest from travellers looking for a luxury product that delivers great value."

That's good news for your wallet, as these tours mean higher-value bookings and, in turn, increased commission. And if they impress, they might just bring some repeat business your way, too.

▶ TOP-END TREND

There are several factors driving the rise in demand for luxury tours. Lee Hamilton, manager of specialist sales at Prestige Holidays, says: "Itineraries can be very complex, and people's lives are busier now, so they might opt for an organised tour because they don't have the time to undertake all the planning."



→ It's also down to an ever-increasing desire for adventure travel that goes beyond the beach. That means the more unusual tours are doing especially well, according to Michelle Laverick, head of marketing at Collette. "Our off-the-beaten-track tours that still have a luxury feel have experienced the greatest growth over the past few years," she says. "But customers don't want to stay in a hostel or three-star accommodation. They have arrived at the time of their life when creature comforts are important."

“**Off-the-beaten-track tours that still have a luxury feel have experienced the greatest growth over the past few years**”

customised tents (the largest on the mountain) for added comfort and private toilets available exclusively to the operator's guests.

Kuoni's Kenya in Style tour takes luxury safaris to a new level with stays at Lake Elmenteita Serena Camp, where the 'tents' resemble full-on houses with four-poster beds, glass windows and wooden front doors - all surrounded by elegant gardens filled with acacia trees.

For more boutique-style hotels, Back-Roads Touring checks guests on its Italian Indulgence trip into the Hotel Villa La Palagina, a historic house in the Chianti countryside that was home to 19th-century prime minister Bettino Ricasoli.

Collette, meanwhile, offers a stay in a glass igloo on its Northern Lights of Finland tour, which is new for 2018, throwing it in with other extras such as the chance to lead a dog-sledding team.



Lake Elmenteita Serena Camp

▶ **ADDED EXTRAS**

These extra-special experiences give luxury tours an edge, so emphasise them to help sway customers with doubts. APT features a range of Signature Experiences that promise VIP access - from meeting a Mountie in Banff (on its Rockies Explorer and Alaska Cruise) to a tasting experience in Ho Chi Minh City designed by celebrity chef Luke Nguyen (on its Vietnam and Cambodia Highlights trip).

charter flight in Canada on its Polar Bear Churchill tour.

It's not just about the experiences themselves; highlight details such as private transfers and porters. Abercrombie & Kent offers a complimentary laundry service and travelling bell boy, so guests don't have to carry their bags between hotels.

Collette, meanwhile, has its Diner's Choice programme, giving guests the freedom to choose where to eat, as well as which excursions to go on at no extra cost (both are included in the initial tour price, so you earn commission on the lot).

And if they're not convinced by the idea of travelling with a group, there's the option to arrange a fully tailor-made tour, so customers can tweak itineraries and get some privacy, while still having the benefits of a tour guide and driver.

▶ **WIDENING THE NET**

There's no need to limit luxury tours to the super-rich, however. For those

unwilling to splash quite as much cash, there are still upgraded options available. Leger Holidays brought out its Luxuria range in 2015, offering luxury coaches for those wanting added leg-room, armchair-style seats and touch-screen TVs. Accommodation upgrades are also available on several of the operator's itineraries.

Shearings has taken things a step further with its range of Grand Tourer trips, which combine a Home Connect door-to-door pick-up service with higher-end accommodation, portage, travel on a luxury Mercedes coach and other perks, offering an ideal upselling opportunity.

Stressing value for money is also key: Titan's Deluxe Alaskan Voyage might clock in at £4,449 for 18 days, but when clients consider it combines premium hotels with a ride on the Rocky Mountaineer, a seven-night cruise and its signature VIP door-to-door service, they might find this luxury touring lark is worth a look after all. **tw**



Shearings' nine-day Swiss Alpine Railways Grand Tourer trip starts at £1,029, including coach travel, accommodation, three excursions and home pick-up. **shearings.com**

Kuoni's eight-night Kenya in Style itinerary starts at £3,885, including BA flights, transfers, accommodation and some meals. **kuoni.co.uk**



ASK THE EXPERT

“Be prepared to justify the higher price that luxury tours carry. Many travellers do head-to-head price comparisons of tours from different operators to the same destination, and a luxury tour is always going to carry a higher price. Point to the inclusions, and calculate the added costs clients will have to pick up on a lower-priced tour with less included. Look into the quality of the hotels, and point out how and where the luxury itinerary has accommodation in the heart of desirable cities, rather than an hour outside town. And remind clients that vacations are a time to splurge a bit!”



Cinque Terre, Italy

PICTURES: ROCKY MOUNTAINEER; BACK-ROADS TOURING

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