

Rented penguins and \$300,000 dinners: The wildest holiday requests from the super rich

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Whether they're arranging \$300,000 private dinners with celebrity chefs or pop-up luxury campsites in the steppes of the northern Sahara, luxury travel agents and concierge services manage to make the impossible a reality.

Last summer, luxury concierge service Element Lifestyle secured the key to the Sistine Chapel so a New York family of six could open the doors and enjoy Michelangelo's stunning artwork alone -- an experience that cost roughly US\$75,000.

On a flight to Seoul, the Asia travel specialists at Remote Lands helped a prominent Korean-American family of four buy out all 12 First Class seats -- at about \$20,000 per seat -- on Korean Air so they could enjoy the cabin in private.

When a family forgot to get a Myanmar visa for one of their children, award-winning travel company Red Savannah's local fixer reportedly managed to convince the head of immigration in Yangon to approve the forms while the clients were in the air. When the travelers landed, the visa was waiting for them.

Black Tomato

In Iceland, luxury adventure travel specialist Black Tomato made a dream proposal come true by hiding a diamond ring inside an ice cave for the bride-to-be to discover. On another trip, Black Tomato sent a Hollywood cinematographer, who had filmed blockbusters like "Star Wars" and "Interstellar," to shoot a family on their six-week sailing odyssey through the Indonesian islands. In total, the group spent roughly US\$665,000.

Super-elite travelers can afford to go anywhere and do anything, but often rely on teams of highly skilled, adaptive and creative travel experts to make it happen.

"The only reason any of these things are possible is that we've got a fantastic network of fixers around the world, who know us and the types of experiences we like to provide," Tom Marchant, co-founder of Black Tomato, tells CNN Travel.

"There is sometimes a Willy Wonka element to the way we work. Is this possible? I don't know ... Let's explore it!"

Going above and beyond

Some people might walk into a San Diego hotel suite and find a basket of fruit or perhaps a bottle of wine. Others discover a trio of live penguins, borrowed from the zoo for the afternoon.

That's how Element Lifestyle founder Michael Albanese once surprised a client, whose

girlfriend was obsessed with penguins.

"When we learned that [the girlfriend] loved penguins, it sparked an idea. Can we hire an animal wrangler? Can we get the hotel on board? We started making calls and it came together pretty easily," he tells CNN Travel.

"There were three penguins in total -- one was a bit grumpy and stood off in the corner. But needless to say, that set the tone for the entire weekend."

Albanese, who works with clients who spend roughly \$100,000-\$200,000 per two-week trip, has also created treasure hunts around Europe for families and friends, complete with a unique theme song written and performed by a well-known recording artist.

For another client, the company arranged a private eight-course dinner hosted by celebrity chef Eric Ripert, of the world-renowned Le Bernardin in New York City.

"Clients ask us for the impossible and they know it. Usually, these requests are so far outside of the box, it presents an exciting and unique problem to solve," says Albanese. "These wishes require time, patience and tenacity."

In the case of Ripert, he says, it took over nine months to convince the chef, who rarely does private events of this nature.

"It wasn't even a milestone or a birthday or anything. The client's wife just loves Eric Ripert, so this was a dream dinner. We also hired the sommelier from French Laundry to suggest wine pairings, and he found this port on a shipwreck that was older than Abraham Lincoln. It was easily a \$300,000 dinner."

Personal, unique, immersive

At Black Tomato, the more personal and creative the itinerary, the better.

A few years ago, the company organized a trip for a Canadian philanthropist who had his own set of "7 World Wonders" on his bucket list.

He started with a dive between the tectonic plates in Iceland, then went diving with great white sharks in Cape Town for a few days, accompanied by one of the world's leading marine biologists.

In India, he spent time teaching English at a school in a slum to give back, then took an after-hours tour of the Forbidden City in Beijing to have the whole place to himself.

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Tom Marchant, Black Tomato

The trip culminated with a meaningful visit to Hiroshima, Japan.

Growing up, the philanthropist read a book, written by a survivor of the nuclear attack, that had deeply influenced his life philosophy. Black Tomato tracked down the author and arranged for the client to have dinner with his hero.

"That kind of highly personal experience that is completely tailored to the client is what makes a memorable trip," adds Marchant. "I think that is one of the embodiments of what luxury is these days: demonstrating genuine thought for our people."

In addition to personalization, he says that ultra-high-net-worth travelers also value exclusivity. That's why they set up a service called Blink -- providing what's essentially a pop-up accommodation that has been designed by the client.

"The word unique is thrown around pretty liberally. But is it really unique? In this case, yes, because you designed it yourself."

From the thread count of your sheets to the transparency of your ceilings, travelers can design the perfect remote retreat.

The company has set up some stunning private pop-ups, including a US\$100,000 luxury camp in the depths of the southern New Zealand mountains accessible only by helicopter.

On another trip, they built temporary luxury accommodations in the middle of the Sacred Valley in Peru.

To reach the tented camp, the clients took a private train ride through the valley, and Black Tomato surprised them with a fireworks display along the way. The trip cost just under US\$1.4 million in total.

"We set them up in remote parts of the world that have never had accommodations, so you are basically the first person to ever stay overnight in that place. That sunrise or sunset that you're watching from your bed? No one else is going to have that moment."

What 'luxury' means to millionaires and billionaires

For Red Savannah's affluent clientele, luxury doesn't simply mean infinity pools and glamorous spas.

Elite travelers are seeking more "experiential journeys of substance and authenticity" over "sanitized" luxury.

Founder and CEO George Morgan-Grenville tells CNN Travel that he rarely receives outlandish requests.

"While there can be a very definite keenness to push boundaries and experience what others never have, I balk at some of the outlandish claims made by travel companies," he says.

"For example, they have clients who requested a celebrity chef fly to Antarctica to make

them an eggs Benedict while being entertained by a world-class mezzo-soprano.

"I have personally dealt with a number of very well-known names -- including taking His Royal Highness Prince Charles on safari and also walking in the Himalayas -- and in 33 years, I have never seen an absurd request like that!"

Even so, the company has managed to accommodate a few wild cards.

For a special anniversary, for instance, a client asked Red Savannah to purchase an expensive Cartier bracelet for his wife, then help him surprise her at dinner in Dubai.

"To cause a distraction, we arranged for the couple to have a table by the restaurant's massive aquarium. We had a scuba diver appear and wave frantically at the client's wife.

"Having attracted her astounded attention, [the diver] then held up a message which read 'Look at your place mat'."

Of course, when she looked down, there was the Cartier box.

Another client -- a well-known fintech entrepreneur -- was visiting a Tuscan villa for the second time.

As a tennis fanatic, he requested that the villa's private tennis court be extended sideways by exactly 40 centimeters to have more space between the side of the court and the net.

"We duly arranged for the work to take place with no charge for the client, who now returns every year for two to three weeks," says Morgan-Grenville.

"It is only possible to operate at the high end of the travel industry with deep-rooted knowledge and a very substantial black book of contacts. Pretty much any request can be fulfilled providing you know the right people."

Access and assistance

Catherine Heald, the CEO and co-founder of Remote Lands, says true luxury is also about logistics.

"Ultra-wealthy travelers are looking for access and assistance," she tells CNN Travel.

"These clients want to be able to navigate destinations with the highest precautions and to know that they are working with people that can get this done for them regardless of price."

She cites a trip to Mongolia last summer, where two ultra-high-net-worth individuals wanted to take a day trip to Lake Baikal -- "the largest, deepest, clearest and oldest freshwater lake in the world, which holds 23% of the world's fresh surface water" -- in neighboring Siberia.

They hoped to fly via private jet to Siberia's Baikal Airport, then take a helicopter to Olkhon Island within Lake Baikal where they would meet a master fisherman.

This side trip proved to be very tricky to accomplish in one day, due to potential weather delays.

"Chances were high they might end up having to stay in Ulan-Ude or Olkhon Island, or not even get off the ground at all."

But the jet took off and the stars aligned. "They had what they described as 'the best day of our lives,'" says Heald.

"Around sunset, they boarded the chopper and then the jet on time. They were back in their warm beds at the Shangri-La Hotel Ulaanbaatar by midnight. Mission accomplished!"

The ultimate isolation

For some elite travelers, a beautiful yacht in a secluded cove is the definition of luxury, especially in the middle of a pandemic.

Yacht management, brokerage and charter company [Y.CO](#) has arranged some epic adventures over the years, including a journey through Norway where the group gave them a nearly unlimited budget.

The brief was simple: "Create an adventure that was beyond their wildest dreams."

"The request started a project that took months of planning and culminated in all kinds of weird and wonderful events," Charlie Birkett, Y.CO co-founder and CEO, tells CNN Travel.

"We had mermaids delivering riddles to the guests, leading the children on a magical fairytale treasure hunt, a dramatic classic car chase along the coast (watched live from the yacht) and we even arranged an ABBA-themed party on the roof of the ABBA museum."

Yacht trips are in high demand these days. Y.CO has seen a 50% uptick in enquiries since pandemic-related lockdowns began earlier this year.

"More and more, the yacht is becoming the base by which to unlock amazing adventures," Gary Wright, Y.CO co-founder and chairman, tells CNN Travel.

"We're seeing a lot more demand from clients who want to explore more secluded areas, spending more time onboard and less time in busy ports."

In addition, people are choosing their destinations to suit changing travel restrictions. For example, US clients are more interested in French Polynesia, while European clients are keen on the Mediterranean.

Luxury travel vs Covid-19

Just like the rest of the world, luxury travel is changing due to the pandemic.

According to Albanese of Element Lifestyle, clients are looking for open spaces where they can rent a private home.

They're also traveling more domestically. For example, Americans have shown increased interest in destinations like Lake Tahoe, the Hamptons, Twin Farms in Vermont, Blackberry Farm in Tennessee and the Ranch at Rock Creek in Montana.

Likewise, Marchant says Black Tomato's travelers are booking domestic road trips and longer, more immersive stays in remote places.

"In the short term, we are seeing people's decision-making processes being driven by where they can go and how easy it will be," says Marchant.

Luxury travelers are also taking months-long trips since many people can now work anywhere.

"Some want to hole up in a private house in Montana or stay on a private island with their family -- we've found lots of private properties and private yachts for clients," says Marchant.

"That way, you can work during the day, but over the weekend or evenings, you are surrounded by beautiful scenery and nature and new things to do."

Multi-generational travel may be another lasting trend, as many people want to spend more time with their loved ones.

"And a lot of families have not been able to see each other, because everyone's been so separated, so we are seeing bookings of big family groups coming together for a private home somewhere beautiful next year."

Private islands, yachts and jets are also in high demand, according to Red Savannah's Morgan-Grenville.

"There is a defined swing away from urban towards more remote areas and most people are typically requesting low-density accommodations, such as safari camps and private villas," says Morgan-Grenville.

"Exclusive private islands such as Thanda Island, off the coast of Tanzania, will also be much in demand, as will resorts in the Indian Ocean with private beaches and overwater accommodations... Glorious isolation will be the order of the day."