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Deluxe: Warrior class travel adventures

Lainie Anderson for Deluxe Adelaide | AdelaideNow | May 14, 2011 12:00am

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Photo: Courtesy of Ahipara Luxury Travel

Source: AdelaideNow

IN today's world of do-it-yourself online travel bookings, travel designers offer a parallel universe.

They don't peddle off-the-shelf packages that connect the dots between accommodation and attractions listed on government tourism websites. Instead, they arrange carefully crafted, one-off experiences.

"When you visit a new country and you've got a good friend who's well connected, you see and experience so much more," says Jean-Michel Jefferson, a former UK and Russian-based corporate high flyer who set up Ahipara Luxury Travel in 2002 with his Kiwi wife, Karen.

"I was raised in North Africa and the Middle East. Dining with Bedouins in the desert and sipping coffee with Berbers in the Atlas Mountains were all part of growing up. I created Ahipara to develop travel the right way – to bring those sorts of very intimate, often life-changing experiences into mainstream tourism."

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New Zealand-based Jefferson's most expensive itinerary was designed for a Russian oligarch and hit \$750,000. (Things do get pricey when you're booking rooms at \$40,000 a night.)

"Another client spent \$250,000 on his 50th birthday. We hired a private island, taught him to dive for crayfish, had a top chef put together a banquet for 20 on the beach, then, timed exactly for the coffee, had a Maori canoe with 18 warriors hit the beach at full speed and perform a wild challenge.

"The client was a little worried when he saw the warriors. Normally, he's surrounded by bodyguards and armoured vehicles, and here he was, sat in nothing but his Speedos. He asked me for an AK-47."

But Ahipara has also created short-break itineraries for as little as \$5000.

"We work with all budgets, from three-star to six-star," says Jefferson. For a family of four we can do some absolutely amazing things from about \$200 a day per person.



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"It's just a matter of working really closely to establish who the clients are and what they love, and getting them to trust us enough to build their entire itinerary," he says.

With exclusive access to people and places across NZ, Jefferson's 'crazy ideas' might include a helicopter flight into Fiordland for a day's hiking with Lydia Bradey, the first woman to climb Everest without carrying oxygen; a rally drive on a stretch of NZ circuit; or a deer and pig hunt with Maori elder Tom Loughlin before digging out your own hangi pit.

With specialised itineraries comes personalised service. Jefferson's quickest lead-time for a two-week holiday is 24 hours. He meets clients on arrival and drives them to their first NZ destination, to establish a connection and a 24-hour point of contact if things go awry.

But while travel designers offer a new route to holiday bliss, they're not easy to find. It can be a matter of knowing the right people. Ahipara's clients are mainly European, Russian and American. About 80 percent book on the recommendation of a former client.

Here in Australia, the designer travel tag is arguably the domain of Drew Kluska and Outback Encounter, named by National Geographic Adventure as Australia's best adventure travel company.

Outback Encounter can design bespoke journeys from about \$500 per person per day.

Of course, some opt to spend more.

Kluska once moored a 30-metre super yacht off Weipa on the far north Queensland coast for eight guests who were on a 12-month, around-the-world angling odyssey. He also provided a matching 20-metre yacht for the crew and guides, and tropical blooms flown in from Cairns (a cool \$7000).

The guests then arrived in two helicopters (a third chopper transported their luggage) for a week of world-record-breaking deep-sea and inland barramundi fishing.

An Aboriginal dance troupe performed a private smoking ceremony on the final night, while a Darwin tour guide scoured Arnhem Land for two days to find the best barramundi bark paintings money could buy.

"The art of travel designing is mostly about the little black book of amazing contacts that no-one else has – to connect clients with incredible people, places and experiences," says Kluska. "Our clients get all the benefits of that little black book."

Lainie Anderson travelled as a guest of Ahipara Luxury Travel, ahipara.com. Outback Encounter, outbackencounter.com.

*** Deluxe Adelaide Travel hits the streets on Wednesday May 18 and can be found in Adelaide's top watering holes, restaurants and venues.**

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