



‘Luxury? It’s not a five-star hotel’

Silky sheets or the silence of a desert? A gourmet meal or meeting a tribesman? Stanley Stewart knows what luxury means to him

It was one of life’s great lunches. I was deep in the jungles of Borneo. I had done the sightseeing — a morning visit to the tomb of a leading figure in the War of the Penises, that notorious altercation when neighbouring tribes exchanged insults to one another’s manhood. Then I had headed upriver, my two boatmen poling the dugout canoe, as the last of the longhouses, and the last of what passed for civilisation in these parts, dropped astern. The river narrowed to a green aisle beneath the leafy vaults of the forest. The air was full of birdsong and butterflies. From the treetops, toucans shrieked and a tribe of proboscis monkeys looked down their long noses at us. By a waterfall, we stopped in a wide wedge of sun. The boatmen baked chicken breast, flavoured with lemongrass and ginger and packed inside bamboo, over a fire on a sandbank. Wine was cooled in the river. I still savour the memory of that lunch.

The best journeys I have made — the ones I think of as the greatest luxury — have rarely featured a five-star hotel. There was no room service crossing Mongolia by horse,

no spa menus trekking in the mountains of Ethiopia, no petals scattered artfully on my pillow while dog-sledding in the Arctic. The journeys that I have loved have been about another kind of luxury entirely.

We have become accustomed to the mini-break, the short sharp shocks of sun and obsequious service. We jet off for long weekends in luxury resorts and are back at our desks by Tuesday morning with the unsettling sense that we have never been away at all. Our break has the substance and satisfaction of a fading dream. Perhaps this is where the refinement of luxury tourism ultimately leads — to something so exquisitely packaged, so smooth and slick and hand-holding that it slides across the surface of our lives, barely causing a ripple.

I have nothing against short breaks; we all love them. But the best travel should be transporting. The farther it takes us from the routines of our own lives, the more interesting it becomes. Travel doesn’t have to be just a rest. It can be a change. It can challenge us, offer us new experiences and fresh horizons. Too often five-star trappings become a barrier between us and our destination.



Above: Stanley Stewart embracing the culture of the Wild West. Top: a river in Papua New Guinea

Real luxury is about something other than the threadcount of the sheets or the size of the pool. It is about time — time to pause, to savour, to allow things to happen, to get under the skin of a destination, time for the unplanned and the unexpected. It is about space, private space away from the crowds, away from our own culture thronging the well-worn paths of modern tourism. Luxury is not just about comfort. It can also be about stimulation and excitement.

And the best thing is you don’t need to come over all Bear Grylls to get to the headwaters of the Amazon, the white water of Patagonia or the jungles of Papua New Guinea. Dozens of high-end tour operators are pushing the boundaries, offering clients not a trip, but an adventure. The real refinement of luxury travel is the ability to take clients to remote destinations and to offer them unique experiences with style and panache.

Helicopter transfers ferry guests to mountain lodges, Himalayan treks feature village houses elegantly upgraded and restyled, chefs are flown in to serve dinner in a remote monastery or on the rim of an African crater, while a guide in a South

American cloud forest ensures a glimpse of the elusive giant anteater.

But it can be even simpler than that — a tented camp on the African savannah, where luxury is about being untroubled by other people, and where five-star treatment is measured by the timeless elements of the African safari — tired muscles after a day spent tracking elephants, a welcome shower beneath a suspended goatskin of hot water, a well-prepared sundowner, a crackling fire, the drifting smell of cooking, the sounds of the African bush and stories from someone who has spent their life in this place. Time slows, and you have the chance to feel the heartbeat of Africa without the noise of your own culture. That is luxury.

Lunching by that remote waterfall in Borneo, as the boatmen sharpened their swords on the rocks and cradled their blowpipes, I felt a long way from anywhere I knew. I had given myself time, and time had become slippery and unreliable. The river, the sandbank, the dappled sunlight, the close embrace of the forests, the silence broken only by birdsong — it felt like the beginning of the world. That was luxury.

Journeys of a lifetime

If you were in charge of a luxury tour operator, where would you go? Five of Britain’s expert explorers pick their dream trips

KAMCHATKA, RUSSIA

Will Bolsover, founder of Natural World Safaris

“Kamchatka is a remote bastion, a destination where creature comforts are left behind. The landscapes are mind-blowing. Because it’s so raw and unpredictable, it’s only for the intrepid. But once you’re there the sights are incredible. This land is home to geysers and ice sheets, as well as bears, wolves and whales. My first sight was a volcanic peak peering above clouds as we came in to land. We had the wilderness all to ourselves, perched on the lake’s shore with no one in sight. It was Kamchatka at its best.” *Natural World Safaris (naturalworldsafaris.com) offers a Kamchatka safari from £5,885*

SONG KUL LAKE, KYRGYZSTAN

Jonny Bealby, founder of Wild Frontiers

“I first arrived at this glacial lake two decades ago, following an ancient trail taken by Silk Road travellers. Whenever I return I walk up the lush green hills and look down on a world that hasn’t changed much over the years. Horses graze the pastures and eagles soar above, with stars lighting up the heavens at night. Knowing so many travellers passed this way adds to the magic. I’d return every year if I could.” *Wild Frontiers (wildfrontierstravel.com) offers trips to Kyrgyzstan from £1,590*

BAYUDA DESERT, NORTH SUDAN

Will Jones, founder of Journeys by Design

“One of my favourites was a journey that I shared with Stanley Stewart through the deserts of north Sudan. It was not an obvious choice of destination, with very average, spartan accommodation. However, the experience was a simple, old-fashioned narrative of adventures and struggles, with the heroes sitting around a fire in the heart of the Bayuda desert roaring loudly at each other’s jokes into the dark night around us. We travelled slowly across the Bayuda desert on foot and by camel from the western Nubian kingdom towards the ancient



From top: a picnic on the peaks, brown bears in Alaska and riding in Kyrgyzstan

city of Meroe, against the flow of the Nile, ending with a couple of nights in the dunes of the ancient city. It was a simple, traditional and trimmed-back journey across the deserts and sands of the Bedouin. We slept in simple tents for the most part. However, these experiences were the most memorable because we were forced to focus on the stars, the wind, the sand and the enormous good luck of close personal relationships and happiness shared on a journey together.”

Journeys by Design (journeysbydesign.com) offers a desert adventure from £5,100

WESTFJORDS, ICELAND

Tom Marchant, co-founder of Black Tomato

“A recent trip to Iceland took me far off the usual tourist trail when we explored an area known as the Westfjords. One of Iceland’s best-kept secrets, the region is isolated and uninhabited, so we helicoptered in from Reykjavik. For the next few days we snowmobiled, kayaked and hiked our way around, experiencing dramatic landscapes and spotting Arctic foxes and humpback whales. We stayed in dome tents miles away from the nearest village. Then at night we’d set off in search of the northern lights, which we learnt to capture with the help of an expert photographer.” *Black Tomato (blacktomato.com) offers tailor-made Iceland adventures from £6,500*

KODIAK ISLAND, ALASKA

Justin Wateridge, managing director of Steppes Travel

“Flying over Alaska’s emerald isle, the scenery was incredible — miles of wilderness and muted hues. Having landed on Karluk Lake, I sat and looked at the mountains. One had fissures resembling claw marks, another had slopes that begged to be climbed. It was all so still and quiet, until a bear stopped only 10ft away and began to eat a salmon. All we could hear was the crunch of bones, then she was gone. We flew back to our lodgings, delighting in an extraordinary day.” *Steppes Travel (steppestravel.com) offers a journey to Alaska from £6,995*

