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IN THE U.S. AND CANADA

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

DECEMBER 2011

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133

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FANTASTIC FEASTS
ON BARBADOS,
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JAPAN'S
SECRET CITY

LONDON'S
TOP HOTELS TESTED

**THE NEW
ROMANCE**
6 LUSH HIDEAWAYS
IN THE WILD

The Four Seasons
Tented Camp in
Chiang Rai, Thailand,
redefines camping

PLUS

Secrets of the Well-Groomed Traveler

Wendy Perrin's 12th Annual
Top Travel Specialists

The People Who Perfect Paradise

Illustrations by
Peter Oumanski

► What if there was someone who could get you the best hotel room in Istanbul (see page 134)? Or a tour of Teotihuacán with an archaeologist (see page 128)? Or a wine-tasting at a private château in Bordeaux (see page 132)? Well, there is. In fact, **133** of them, ready to lend their expertise on destinations from Anguilla to Zanzibar. We've vetted thousands of travel agents to come up with our list of the world's best. All you have to do is make the call.

So what are you waiting for?
Come meet the top travel specialists of 2011.

BUT FIRST, here's a taste of how one of our specialists, French Polynesia expert **Kleon Howe**, can embellish a trip to Bora Bora



THE JOURNEY

On the flight to Bora Bora, Howe will seat you on the side of the plane yielding the best views of the island's circular reef and multicolored water.



THE ARRIVAL

If you're on a red-eye to Papeete, connecting to Bora Bora, you'll arrive at 8:30 a.m., well before your room is ready. Howe can arrange for a morning massage at your resort, helping you to recover from the flight. You'll also be able to use all of the resort's amenities pre-check-in and avoid spending hundreds for a day room.



THE ROOM

Howe knows which resort gets the most sunshine and the best sunset views—the Hilton Bora Bora Nui—and which of its deluxe overwater villas yield the same superlative vistas that you get from the presidential overwater villas, but for \$3,000 less per night.

THE SPA

There's a secret spa gazebo with a panoramic lagoon view at the Hilton Bora Bora Nui. Howe can get you a coveted sunset massage there with the top therapist.



THE VIEW (PART I)

Crucial to an overwater bungalow is the view—through a transparent table or floor—of the sea life beneath. Howe knows which bungalows showcase coral, which look down on only sand, and which yield the most colorful fish swimming below.



THE MEAL

The island's most in-demand restaurant is the six-table Villa Mahana. Howe is friends with the owner, so he can get you the table of honor, overlooking a romantic courtyard.

Travel Specialists

private festivals or prayer ceremonies (800-777-8183; brent@geoex.com; \$1,200*).

Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam G. W. "Sandy" Ferguson, Asia Desk

A former resident of Thailand who returns for two months every year and who speaks Thai and some Lao, Ferguson is known for his fabulous handpicked guides and savvy hotel choices. In Cambodia he can arrange for you to join the monks at a mountaintop temple for their pre-dawn prayers (followed by a gourmet picnic breakfast), and in Vietnam he can have you visiting the recently discovered largest cave on earth, northwest of Hue at Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park (800-667-4993; sandy@asiadesk.net; \$600*; 12-night minimum).

Andrea Ross, Journeys Within Tour Company
Ross lives in Cambodia for half the year, where she runs the Journeys Within B&B in Siem Reap with her husband, and in California for the other half. She can pepper Southeast Asian itineraries with philanthropic elements, enabling travelers to engage with the local community. Her favorite secret destination? Battambang, Cambodia's little-visited second-largest city, which fell under Thai rule for more than a century but today has few crowds visiting its beautiful temples. Her affordable rates make her a great option for travelers on a budget (877-

454-3672; andrea@journeys-within.com; \$200*).

The Caucasus, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan

Jonny Bealby, Wild Frontiers
Bealby, who spent five months riding a horse across central Asia and traveling through the Caucasus (a voyage he recounted in his book *Silk Dreams, Troubled Roads*), plans trips that incorporate trekking, horseback riding, and white-water rafting and usually include introductions to his friends—nomads, carpet sellers, and even royalty. From viewing dinosaur footprints and 22,000-foot peaks to sleeping in yurts and feasting on mutton stew cooked by shepherds, his itineraries are for the adventurous and inquisitive (44-20-7736-3968; jonny@wildfrontiers.co.uk; \$400*).

China David Allardice, Eastern Journeys

What we like most about Allardice, a Brit who has lived in Hong Kong for the past 22 years, are his tricks for beating China's notorious crowds—he'll get you to the most popular sights at optimal hours of the day, as well as inside the special parts that are off-limits to the masses—and the cross-cultural interactions he can engineer: A trip might include a lesson with a calligraphy master in Hong Kong, a kite-making session in Beijing (yielding a kite that you can fly on the Great Wall the next day), or an impromptu visit to a traditional wedding (852-2544-5488; david@easternjourneys.com; \$425*).

Gerald Hatherly, Abercrombie & Kent

There are many ways a traveler can get utterly lost in China. But with Hong Kong-based Hatherly, who is fluent in Mandarin and spends 150 days a year crisscrossing the country, you can rest easy. He knows the best ways to negotiate a megalopolis like Beijing or Shanghai, and he's equally expert at leading guests off the beaten track and into lesser-known areas such as the rice terraces of Longsheng or the bamboo forests of Zhejiang, where the raw beauty of fast-vanishing rural China can still be found (852-2865-7818; hatherly@abercrombiekent.com.hk; \$1,000*).

Mei Zhang, WildChina

Zhang, who is based in Beijing, wants to show you the "authentic China" beyond anything you'll find in guidebooks, and—as a Yunnan Province native, Harvard MBA, and former consultant for the Nature Conservancy—she has a vast network of in-country experts in nearly every field who can make this happen... and get you farther off the beaten path than anyone else. Her cultural connections run deepest in southwest China—Yunnan, Szechuan, and Guizhou provinces—where you might find yourself having tea with a shaman, catching a private Naxi music concert at the home of the village head, or camping in luxury mobile tents on the Tibetan Plateau (888-902-8808; mei.zhang@wildchina.com; \$400*).

India

Victor Biswas, International Ventures and Travel

Looking for luxury and old-world charm? Biswas, a native of India who returns for at least three weeks a year and whose name is gold in his homeland, fills his itineraries with the sort of gracious touches—hard-to-book rooms in restored palace hotels or a meeting with Jaipur's top jeweler—that are available only through his countrywide network of connections (212-947-7075; victor@ivat.com; \$800*).

Lucy Davison, Banyan Tours & Travels

A Brit living in India since 2002, Davison loves bringing travelers into cultural moments that are ordinarily off-limits (weddings, school speech days, obscure festivals with costumed cows) and arranging surprises based on her clients' special interests—say, a private Sufi music performance for an

aficionado. She works hard to minimize India's countless challenges (from transportation logistics to finding good, safe food beyond hotel buffets), quickly troubleshooting any problems with the help of Banyan's seven offices throughout the country (866-401-3705; lucy@banyantours.com; \$600*).

Bertie and Victoria Dyer, India Beat

Flexible, energetic, and dead honest, the Dyers are Brits based in Jaipur who have a particular knowledge of Rajasthan, the temple- and art-rich region in the country's north. The duo will appeal most to those who want to get outside the luxury hotel bubble and experience more of the real India. In Jaipur, Victoria leads clients on a shopper's dream tour, into the local gem markets and through the city's best jewelry and silk boutiques (91-141-651-9797; bertie@india.beat.co.uk; \$400*).

India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Tibet Sanjay Saxena, Destination Himalaya

An army brat who grew up crisscrossing the Subcontinent, Saxena speaks both Hindi and Nepali. He designs adventure-packed itineraries that will appeal to a would-be Indiana Jones, filled as they are with under-the-radar destinations and unusual experiences: white-water rafting in Tibet, or touring an elephant orphanage in Sri Lanka (800-694-6342; sanjay@destinationhimalaya.net; India, \$700*; Nepal and Sri Lanka, \$450*; Tibet, \$600*).

Japan

Nancy Craft, Esprit Travel & Tours

For seven years Craft lived in Japan, where she studied weaving and dyeing, and her passion for these disciplines is evident in her art and culture tours. Clients get to meet master craftsmen such as silk weavers, textile artisans, and ceramists. She can also arrange private visits to Kyoto temples and is savvy about where to splurge. In Tokyo, for instance, she sometimes suggests that clients forgo splashier accommodations for a well-located business hotel (this can mean significant savings) and then stay at a special ryokan as a treat (800-377-7481; nancy@esprittravel.com; \$900*).

Duff Trimble, Wabi-Sabi Japan

In a culture where relationships are of the utmost importance, Trimble knows ev-

eryone who matters. He spends four months in Japan annually to maintain his ties at the most luxurious and authentic ryokans, the best kaiseki restaurants, and the chicest art galleries. His specialty is connecting travelers with local craftspeople who ordinarily don't meet with visitors—including a fourteenth-generation sake maker, a fifth-generation potter, and a monk whose family have been caretakers of a Buddhist temple for 500 years (647-477-1711; duff@wabi-sabijapan.com; \$2,000*).

Mongolia

Jalsa Urubshuraw, Nomadic Expeditions

Urubshuraw has an office in Ulaanbaatar, speaks two Mongolian dialects, and has an infectious enthusiasm for his ancestral homeland. He recommends traveling within the country by four-wheel drive and horse rather than by air—to better appreciate the vast, unspoiled landscapes—and stopping en route to explore dinosaur digs with leading paleontologists. Travelers stay in hotels, gers (traditional Mongolian tents), and the eco-friendly Three Camel Lodge in the Gobi Desert (800-998-6634; jalsa@nomadicexpeditions.com; \$655*).

Myanmar

William Myatwunna, Good News Travels

When Lonely Planet writers want to update their guide to Myanmar, the first call they make is to Yangon-based Myatwunna. Born in Yangon and educated in Europe, he is your key to this famously reclusive country. In addition to arranging for drivers and translators and booking river cruises, mountain treks, bungalows at beachfront resorts, private tours of hill-tribe villages, and hot-air-balloon rides above the ancient ruins of Bagan, he also keeps clients apprised of the latest news and trouble spots (951-375-050; goodnewstravels@gmail.com; \$600*).

Nepal

Antonia Neubauer, Myths and Mountains

Neubauer spends at least a month in Nepal each year, strengthening her network of friends—who go out of their way to give travelers intimate experiences of the local culture, such as an audience with a "living virgin goddess," a visit to a thangka (religious art) workshop, or a trek to Everest Base Camp. Neubauer is dedicated to making a positive contribution to the countries in

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