



It's all about

AUTHENTICITY

**Discerning travellers want that one-of-a-kind experience,
and luxury tour operators are delivering**

By Kathryn Follitt

IN REAL ESTATE, it's 'location, location, location'.

And in luxury touring, it's 'access, authenticity and à la carte'.

Several of the top luxury tour operators agree that high-end touring has seen huge changes in the past few years, as upper tier clients with a lot of 'been there, done that' destination fatigue seek new experiences for that all-important bucket list.

Canada's own Butterfield & Robinson built its business on authentic tours — its slogan since 1966 has been 'Slow Down to See the World'. It's a touring style that's now very much in vogue. "The definition of luxury has really changed," says Kathy Stewart, media & client relations. "Meeting the winemaker, picking the grapes and eating at his home is the definition of luxury. Access is luxury."

Upmarket clients are less interested in frills, and more interested in something a little more transformative, she says. "Gone are the days of gold taps and formal multi-course meals."

B&R has also focused on creating a product that's designed to fit the traveller. The company's Signature Trips offer walking and biking journeys at different skill levels. New self-guided walking trips in Burgundy have been added to self-guided biking trips in Burgundy and Tuscany. And new 'Bistro' journeys offer the same great B&R approach but with less emphasis on accommodation and service, and more on the experience, with a lower price point. "These are aimed at the traveller who doesn't need as many bells and whistles," says Stewart.

About 40% of B&R's business is bespoke, up from 24% a few



Machu Picchu with Abercrombie & Kent



Butterfield & Robinson's cycling tour

years ago, she notes.

That bespoke/group split is almost the same for top U.S.-based luxury operator Abercrombie & Kent. A&K gets about 50% of its business from bespoke clients, says director, media relations, Pamela Lassers.

While even A&K's groups are quite small, with just 12–18 guests on land-based programs and 24 on Family Journeys and cruises — the company also offers a 'Take This Journey Private' option, based on requests from past clients to duplicate a group itinerary for their family or friends. These tours include expert local guides, private airport transfers, deluxe accommodation and enriching sightseeing.

Anticipating the ever-escalating needs and wants of high-end vacationers is a big part of A&K's success. "What was considered a luxury experience just three years ago is now considered run-of-the-mill by many travellers, challenging us to change up our game," says media relations manager Jean Fawcett.

A Croatian trip includes Croatia oysters and a wine tasting with fine and rarely exported local wines. The 'Arctic Cruise Adventure: Polar Bear Country' charters the luxurious and all-balcony Le Boreal to see the Svalbard Islands, Greenland and Iceland's West Fjords.

In a sure sign of the recovering U.S. economy, A&K has brought back its private jet journeys. The company has also expanded its 'Travelling Bell Boy' service — offering seamless luggage collection and delivery between destinations — from Europe tours to the rest of the globe.

A&K is seeing double-digit growth for 2012, with business up 20%, says Fawcett. Tanzania, China, Peru and India are "especially strong", she adds. The company is also seeing more 'cele-

bration' trips, with the number of reservations marking a birthday, anniversary, honeymoon and so on up from 12% in 2010 to 18% in 2012. And solo travel is up 29% over last year.

Cox & Kings has also seen a jump in solo travel, particularly

“

Gone are the days of gold taps and formal multi-course meals.

among women. The luxury operator gets 30% of its business from group tours and the focus these days is on personal experiences and interaction with locals, says Scott Wiseman, president, Cox & Kings, The Americas.

Travellers "are looking for safe, convenient and comfortable ways to go on an adventure, learn a new skill, meet a new friend, without sacrificing authenticity," says Wiseman.

Cox & Kings' epicurean trips throughout Latin America and Europe are big sellers for foodies, he notes. "Luxury tours are becoming more and more niche, catering to a specific audience with specialized interests."

Next year will mark "the return of the Big Trip", says Wiseman. "Consumer confidence in extended luxury journeys is on the upswing."

No matter where the location, that's good news for everyone.