



Courtesy of Entrée Destinations



Viking Ocean Ship; Bora Bora Lagoon

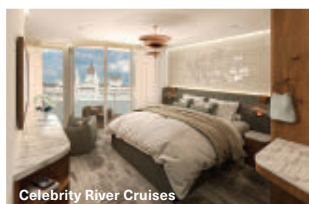


Puglia, Italy

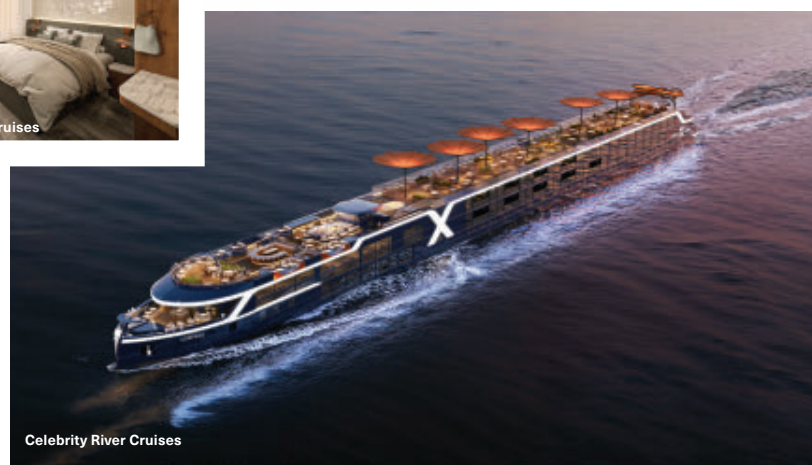
How Under-the-Radar JOURNEYS Can Resonate With Luxury Travelers

BY WENDY HELFENBAUM

The demand for luxury travel continues to climb, according to the 2026 Virtuoso Report. In addition to naming the top five global destinations — Italy, Japan, Greece, France and Croatia — the report revealed that the term 'luxury' continues to evolve as upscale travelers look beyond fine wine and high-thread-count linens to cool-climate destinations, fewer crowds, shoulder season value and immersive cultural experiences. Here are some memorable options around the world.



Celebrity River Cruises



Celebrity River Cruises



L'Impressionniste. Courtesy European Waterways

UNCOVER HIDDEN GEMS

Luxury travel advisor David Hartman of Fantastic Endeavors in Key Largo, Florida, says clients want to travel deeper into already popular spots.

"For example, Italy is the most popular destination for Americans, but instead of seeing the usual Rome and Tuscany, you're now seeing more Sicily and Puglia. I've been scheduling more trips to unique hotels and taverns in Bari versus Florence," he says.

Hartman is selling more trips to Antarctica — especially sailings that avoid the Drake Passage.

"Expedition cruise lines have realized that the 'Drake Shake' is not for everybody, but they can fly people there and pick them up at the Antarctica Peninsula. Silversea has 'fly and cruise' arrangements from Ushuaia, the tip of the South American peninsula," he notes.

Clients may not realize they can have exclusive experiences on mega cruise ships, but Hartman says the interest in 'ship within a ship' sailings is surging. For example, MSC World America's recent



Enchante Sundeck. Courtesy European Waterways



Courtesy European Waterways

launch showed off its glitzy Yacht Club.

"MSC started that concept in Europe many years ago and have perfected it," he notes.

"Celebrity's newer ships have The Retreat, and they're retrofitting that experience with their older ships. I love selling it because it combines a smaller luxury area within a bigger ship experience."

Hartman says itineraries along the Danube River down to the Black Sea to more relaxing, uncrowded destinations like Bucharest are becoming more popular, and he's looking forward to Celebrity entering the river cruise segment. Viking's new Vesta ocean liner is another great option for travelers.

Sailing aboard a converted industrial

barge is a high-end way to explore Europe's smaller waterways, notes Stephanie Sack of Barge Lady Cruises in Chicago. Hosting from four to 20 passengers, these flat-bottomed boats bring guests into secluded, stunning areas.

"On a barge cruise, you're deep into untouched, beautiful nature with all the creature comforts of a floating boutique hotel. It's an attractive way to travel for people who insist on the best food, wine and service," she says.

Companies operating fleets of converted barges include U.K.-based European Waterways, which runs 18 barges in nine countries, Massachusetts-based French Country Waterways, Les Bateaux Belmond and CroisiEurope in France.



Traube Tonbach, Black Forest, Germany



MSC World America Yacht Club



Traube Tonbach, Black Forest, Germany



Jagdschloss Friedrichsruhe



Wald & Schlosshotel Friedrichsruhe



Wald & Schlosshotel Friedrichsruhe

OFF-SEASON FIVE-STAR LUXURY

Clients wanting to explore less tourist-laden destinations with world-class lodging and gastronomy would enjoy a road trip in Southwest Germany. Here, guests can discover historic, private properties — either in the city centers or tucked in quiet natural surroundings.

Hotels worth recommending include Wald & Schlosshotel Friedrichsruhe, a 300-year-old hunting lodge surrounded by a massive castle park and steps from a 27-hole golf course. Its gourmet restaurant, Le Cerf, boasts a two-Michelin-star chef, and the property has an award-winning spa. Located in the heart of the Black Forest, Traube Tonbach has been owned by the same family for more than 230 years and offers direct access to scenic National Park trails. For a unique Grand Hotel experience, the circa-1865 Europäischer Hof Heidelberg — family-owned for four generations — features exquisite dining at the historic Kurfürstentube, plus a spa with views of Heidelberg Castle.



Fairmont Le Château Frontenac © Simon Côté

HEADING OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Skiers and snowboarders seeking hidden powder stashes and show-stopping views during their luxury winter escapes will love Whistler Blackcomb's seven new Wonder Routes, a curated network of trails and stops.

"Luxury today is as much about the experience as it is about connection — the chance to truly engage with a place. The new Wonder Routes invite guests to explore Whistler Blackcomb through a more intentional lens: to savor the views, discover hidden pockets of the mountain, trace its history, and appreciate moments that might otherwise be missed," says Dane Gergovich, Vail Resort's senior manager, communications.

Self-guided, suitable for skiers at all levels and woven directly into the lift network, the Wonder Routes allow skiers while riders can follow color-coded, turn-by-turn directions outlined in the Wonder Routes Map. Epic Pass holders can also use the MyEpic App to access the map, track their stats, log vertical and earn badges — creating a unique, personalized on-mountain experience, he adds.



Whistler Blackcomb Credit: Vail Resorts



Whistler Blackcomb, Credit: Vail Resorts



Courtesy of Entrée Destinations



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IMMERSIVE ADVENTURES UP NORTH

Marc Telio, president of Entrée Destinations, is seeing significant demand for cold-weather adventures.

"We're offering more of the north of Canada and above the Arctic Circle — lodge-based stays where you can experience northern life and winter activities," says Telio, adding that clients love seeing bears and whales as part of their bucket list journeys.

There's also increased demand for luxury remote fishing lodges — Telio likes booking Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge on Vancouver Island.

"We do a ton of multigenerational fly-in trips every year. Wilderness resorts in Canada and Alaska are top of the list because you get soft adventures: the grandparents can have a nice bottle of wine while their kids and grandkids run around," he says.

"I had a family of 90 take over Sonora Resort on the coast of British Columbia and everyone had individual activities: boating, heli-fishing, or just staying on property."

Telio especially enjoys introducing customers to authentic experiences explor-



Clayoquot Wilderness Resort. Credit: Tom Cahalan



Courtesy of Entrée Destinations

ing Indigenous cultural history.

"Seventy-five percent of our clients are American and we're seeing much more growth in demand for the cultural experiences we serve up," he says, citing Pow Wows held year-round across Canada as a top activity.

In the Maritimes, Telio recommends sending clients to the Fogo Island Inn in Newfoundland, the Muir Hotel in Halifax and Trout Point Lodge, a luxury wilderness lodge in East Kemptville, Nova Scotia.

"I love the activities there — forest bathing, stargazing and yoga," he says. "I also love the Inn at Bay Fortune on Prince Edward Island owned by Chef Michael Smith, who's become an ambassador for Canadian cuisine. They do a farm-to-table Fireworks Feast where they serve street food style, but the quality is Iron Chef-level."

In Quebec City, Telio likes to send clients into the community of Wendake, where the Huron-Wendat people are based.

"The Hôtel-Musée Premières Nations is a stunning First Nations hotel and museum. There's a longhouse with a fire



Courtesy of Entrée Destinations

pit inside, where they tell their myths and legends. I brought a family of 22 from the Middle East there last year; they stayed at the Fairmont Château Frontenac, and for them to have a spectacular private Indigenous foraged lunch and museum tour was a major highlight," he says.

Hartman says luxury travel advisors have many options to fill client demand for incredible experiences.

"When we talk to clients, I always emphasize that we always have ideas that'll just blow them away," he says. ■



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