

Up Close and Personal

For high-flying travelers, run-of-the-mill travel agents just don't cut it.
Alex Gorton reports on the rise of the super-fixers
who can access the impossible.



When it comes to the travel industry, there are agents and then there are super-agents, an elite group of global connoisseurs who can arrange just about anything. Exclusive and expensive, these experts work with the upper echelons of the market and pride themselves on discretion, efficiency, and killer contacts.

Based on a True Story is one such company. Established in 2003, it specializes in bespoke holidays for a closely guarded group of clients including high-profile billionaires and celebrities. Trips begin at €250,000 and have included a holiday to India where the clients stayed with the Maharajah of Jaipur and played a game of elephant polo against the royal family. The company has also built a luxury igloo in the Canadian wilderness and mud-huts in the Kalahari specifically for clients' trips.

Niel Fox, C.E.O. of Based on a True Story, believes that luxury is "an everyday experience for this level of client" and knows that he has to equal or surpass their high

Bruce Willis, left, with Tania Illingworth, who arranged his Kremlin visit, including a private viewing of the Terem Palace, right.

expectations. In order to do so, BOATS always sends a 'facilitator' on a reconnaissance trip of the destination long before the clients even set foot on a plane. Once the guests have arrived, the facilitator will act as manager, fixer, and consultant for the duration of the trip.

Such attention to detail is also apparent with Exosphere, a membership-only travel service. While there's no fee for membership, you have to be invited by an existing client or member of the board to join: until then Exosphere remains strictly ex-directory. Based in London, the company is run by John Saunders and Sophie Leyton, who arrange one-on-one meetings with customers to talk about their needs.

A recent whistle-stop trip to the UK for a US visitor involved accommodation at Claridges, Chewton Glen, and Gleneagles, helicopter transfers to the Derby at Epsom (with morning suits waiting at Chewton Glen) and a private tour of the inner circle of Stonehenge.





The first hints of the super-agent trend could be identified back in 2000 when Quintessentially, the luxury lifestyle group, was established by Ben Elliott and Aaron Simpson. Originally a London-based, 24-hour concierge service, the company has expanded dramatically and is now a global operation with 35 offices around the world (with 15 more opening in 2008) and interests in wine, publishing, and property.

It is, however, the concierge service that the company is best known for. If you want to have your finger on the pulse and book the hottest table at the hippest restaurant before getting VIP access to an exclusive members club, then Quintessentially promises it can deliver. Aiming to 'access the inaccessible', the company claims it's "like having a best friend in every city". Among recent projects, Quintessentially has successfully organized a tour of the Pyramids with a leading Egyptologist, helped a member attending a summer garden party at London's Ministry of Defence find a camel to take as a present, and booked sold-out tables, rooms, and tickets for clients.

A private camp specially constructed in a remote corner of British Columbia for a night out in custom-built igloos complete with en-suite bathrooms, dining room and hot tub. All part of a holiday in Canada arranged by Based On A True Story.

L.A.-based Mint works on a similar level. A private travel and lifestyle management firm used to dealing with the whims of the rich and famous, Mint will get you what you want, when you want—which generally means right now. Dedicated to providing personalized service and exclusive access to select clients, Mint can offer travel, entertainment, exclusive restaurant and club reservations, and luxury assets and acquisitions.

With offices in Beverly Hills and Chicago, brothers Gordon and Steven MacGeachy established Mint in June 2003. As well as arranging exclusive trips and access to shows and parties during Milan Fashion Week, Mint has also sourced seven Stradivarius violins from 1710-1719 and flown them to LA for a private showing. Having enlisted a panel of experts and the first chair of the LA Philharmonic to help, the client was able to listen to the instruments before buying the one he liked.

It is not only on a global scale that super-agents and concierge services come into their own. More locally, companies like Matueté in Brazil and Deliciously Sorted



Above, lining up for elephant polo at the palace in Jaipur.



in Ibiza provide insider knowledge and unrivalled service for their clients. Founded in 2001, Matueté is a luxury tailor-made travel production company based in Sao Paolo. From in-depth viewings of Brazilian art accompanied by a leading professor to insider tours of Rio and private house rentals on a remote beach in Natal, nothing is too hard to arrange. A recent trip for an American client involved a private jet from New York to Brazil, a yacht down the Amazon accompanied by one of Sao Paolo's best chefs and a specialist in the Amazon eco-system. International rockstars (including members of U2) and businessmen are among their clients.

Tania Illingworth offers a similar service in Russia. A distant relative of Leo Tolstoy, for the past 17 years she has led and organized private groups, museum tours and individual trips into the country for clients including Viscount Linley. With contacts in all fields she can arrange access into the most private of places including the Hermitage, the Tsar's palaces or the State Museums,

guided by a specialist curator. In 2006, she organized the impossible when she arranged for the Kremlin to be opened up privately for Bruce Willis on a Thursday when it has never previously opened to the public.

Finally, if you're heading to Ibiza, then there's only one number you need to know, that of Serena Cook, the impossibly well-connected fixer behind Deliciously Sorted, the ultimate Ibizan concierge service. Having previously worked as Jade Jagger's private chef, Cook knows everyone there is to know on the island and can arrange anything from smart villa rentals to last-minute reservations at the hottest restaurants, D.J.s for private parties, babysitters, private planes, and yacht hire—you name it, she can lay her hands on it.

With this kind of service, it's hardly surprising that super-agents like Deliciously Sorted, Based on a True Story and Quintessentially are going from strength to strength. Anything else just doesn't cut it.



Left, Russian trips take in the tsars' summer residence, The Catherine Palace.
Right, Bryan Ferry is a popular guest at Quintessentially parties.

Based on a True Story: +44 207 100 6991
www.basedonatruestory.co.uk

Deliciously Sorted: +34 666 127 743
www.deliciouslysortedibiza.com

Exosphere: info@exosphere.com

Matueté: +55 11 3071 4515
www.matuete.com

Mint: +1 310 273 3225
www.mintlifestyle.com

Quintessentially: +44 870 850 8585
www.quintessentially.com

Tania Illingworth: +44 207 834 5630
www.rctours.com

The vast dunes of the Lençóis Maranhenses as seen during one of Matueté's walks in one of Brazil's most striking regions.





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Tel +971 4-3039-826 · Fax: +971 4-3039-827 · info@drettmann.com