



MAKE

IT

SPECIAL

Travellers are spending big on extravagant trips
to celebrate life's important milestones

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Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia, left; remote Minaret Station in New Zealand; glamping in Patagonia, below



It's been a century now since F. Scott Fitzgerald noted that the very rich are "different from you and me". But even such a seasoned observer of the jet set as Fitzgerald might have struggled to wrap his head around how some of us travel in the 21st century. Especially when it comes to celebrating a special occasion.

Imagine, if you can, taking 20 of your closest friends to Chilean Patagonia to spend your significant birthday fulfilling a dream of seeing the solar eclipse. A pop-up camp is erected on the remote steppes specially for the occasion, complete with wood-fired asado barbecues and an on-site sommelier, cauldron-like hot tubs and flamenco dancers. Group activities include guided fly-fishing, all-terrain vehicle adventures, hiking and horseback riding. And, of course, gazing at the heavens through telescopes, technical glasses and geodesic dome tents beneath a blanket of stars.

"Blink" camps such as this, by custom-travel company Black Tomato, are just one of the extreme ways in which the well-to-do mark major life events these days. From honeymoons to wedding anniversaries, graduations to retirements, the urge to commemorate an occasion by doing something spectacular together, somewhere in the world, is a defining new fashion of ultra-luxury travel today.

The 2026 Virtuoso Luxe Report, an annual trends barometer compiled with input from more than 2000 top global travel agents, found that celebrating a milestone is now the No. 1 motivation for booking trips among their wealthy clientele. Forty per cent of Virtuoso agents reported a rise in clients wanting "exceptionally high-end experiences", often centred on a landmark moment in their lives.

It's a trend that's not limited to the elite, if my own experiences are any indication. In the past year I've been to two milestone celebrations and had to decline two more due to not being a tycoon.

Both trips I made were for significant birthdays of old friends; one at the Regent Phu Quoc in Vietnam, where we shared a lavish four-bedroom beachfront villa and had an itinerary of spe-

cial moments put together for the occasion, and another on the Greek island of Paros, where my gift to the birthday girl was to help organise the celebrations, including a dinner party for 36 on the shores of the Aegean.

But as I discover during research for this story, the rich do milestone travel differently from you and me. Well, certainly me. Travel + Luxury's survey of five leading luxury-travel companies uncovered countless examples of incredibly extravagant itineraries they've put together for clients.

All five operators reported that they had seen a recent surge in requests for milestone holiday-planning, especially post-Covid lockdowns, with, as Abercrombie & Kent Australian marketing chief Michelle Mickan puts it, our "renewed appreciation" for the importance of connection with loved ones.

"We're seeing celebrations for just about everything – birthdays, wedding anniversaries, retirements, graduations and honeymoons, as well as achievements like commercial success," she says. "In terms of group dynamics, it's an even split between multi-generational families – including 'skip-gen' trips where grandparents travel with grandchildren – and groups of friends."



Africa continues to be the most popular destination – from safari staples such as Botswana and Tanzania to Egypt's ancient wonders – followed by India, Japan and emerging cultural hot-spots such as Uzbekistan. "Private experiences are a major trend, including exclusive use of riverboats in Egypt and private lodges in Africa like Gorilla Forest Camp in Uganda or Olonana in Kenya. Trips typically span around 10 days and feature two to three key stops, blending iconic highlights with immersive, personalised experiences," Mickan says.

Recent standouts among A&K's custom itineraries include a dramatic vow renewal ceremony in Cairo where the still-happy couple and friends descended on the Giza Plateau by helicopter to land at the base of the pyramids (the permit process alone must have been excruciating to organise). And a Christmas escapade to Lapland featuring reindeer sleigh rides and igloo dinners beneath the Northern Lights. The kinds of holidays, Mickan says, "that transform life's milestones into unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime memories".

Corporate lawyer Kate Mitrevski was inspired by her own milestone moment when she founded Escape Stylist in 2020. She and her husband skipped a traditional wedding in favour of eloping to the US, where they flew into the Grand Canyon to exchange vows then spent a month partying with friends in Las Vegas, New York City and Mexico.

"For me, travel has always been the most meaningful way to celebrate," says Mitrevski. "I value experiences over things and every birthday and anniversary has been an opportunity to explore somewhere new."

Now she channels that energy into creating similarly unforgettable experiences for others, whether designing intimate couples getaways or a 10-night festive season holiday in Fiji for 46 family members, paid for by a generous grandmother.

"My clients are using milestones as a justification to really splurge on their bucket-list trips," she says. "Regardless of the group size, the common thread is always the same – every client

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wants a trip that feels thoughtful, personalised and rich in memory-making moments.”

Love, it seems, is a frequent motivation. Julie McIntosh, founder and director of The Classic Safari Company, cites recent journeys her team has planned, including a “jungle-samba” honeymoon that combined flagship stays at Belmond Mount Nelson hotel in Cape Town and the Sabi Sands private game reserve before jetting to South America, where the lovebirds sambaed in Rio and tangoed in Buenos Aires. And a Kenyan honeymoon with an epic helicopter ride along the Rift Valley, flying over the flamingo-pink Lake Logipi and landing on the dunes of Suguta Valley for a Champagne breakfast.

Paul Groves-Berry, Australian director of luxury destination specialist Southern Crossings, says demand for shared celebrations is increasing among family and friend groups, the latter particularly around landmark events such as competing in a marathon or ironman. “We’re seeing a real trend for creating a 10 to 14-day itinerary for international visitors – or a week to 10 days for local travellers – around a single-day event like these.”

Catering to particular interests is a trademark of their travel planning – “anything from pop-up wilderness camps ... to food and wine, golf, hiking or fishing, to special interactions with notable personalities: chefs, sports stars, musicians and more”.

Clients prefer exclusive-use properties or buyouts of

lodges including Sal Salis, beside Western Australia’s Ningaloo Reef, and the fly-in Minaret Station on New Zealand’s South Island. Privately chartered super-yachts, small-group expedition cruises and luxury rail carriages such as the new Aurora and Australis cabins joining the Indian Pacific and the Ghan from April also fit the bill. As do private islands.

“The destinations they choose are usually places where there is an abundance of different activities to suit different generations and interests,” says Southern Crossings New Zealand director Sarah Farag. “Places like the Great Barrier Reef, anything from diving and deep-sea fishing to simply relaxing by the beach. Or Queenstown, to enjoy a range of outdoor activities to suit different appetites for adrenaline. The strong focus remains on shared experiences to foster connection and create lasting memories.”

When Tom Marchant co-founded Black Tomato in London 20 years ago, milestone travel was more of a “niche indulgence” but now it drives almost half the company’s business. So much so that it has launched a new service called See You in the Moment specifically to deliver “extraordinary group experiences” anchored around a shared event or challenge.

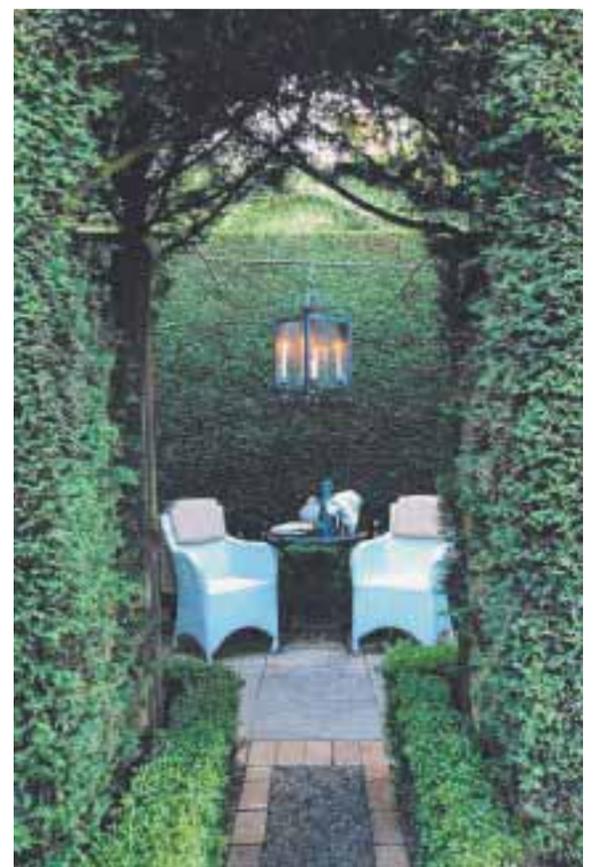
“Over the past decade, accelerated post pandemic, we’ve seen milestone journeys become a mainstream and culturally accepted way to gather the people you love and make the time together count,” he explains. “What’s changed isn’t only volume but an underlying ambition. These days, clients ask us to create entire,



Safari group in Chobe, Botswana, above; Laucala Island, Fiji, below left; Huka Lodge, New Zealand, below right

multi-chapter journeys that unfold like a story: a private takeover of a remote lodge, a pop-up camp erected just for them, then a slow travel experience on a yacht or train to close.”

Where they choose to go is down to “the alchemy of place, privacy and possibility”. Among their Australian clients, demand is up for Japan, Indonesia (Raja Ampat and Komodo by private phinisi boat), Africa (multi-gen safaris with conservation impact) and longer Latin



FIVE JAW-DROPPING MILESTONE ITINERARIES

Japan: A “devotion and craft”-themed 40th gathering of close friends that took over a countryside ryokan with its own onsen. Activities included after-hours access to a Kyoto temple garden for a private tea ceremony, a sake masterclass in Fushimi, a pre-opening visit to a contemporary art museum on Naoshima with its curator, and a vintage train-carriage ride through cedar-lined valleys with a bento menu prepared by a celebrated chef.
blacktomato.com

East Africa: An elite safari for a family reunion staying at exclusive-use lodges with private game drives, Champagne breakfast overlooking the Serengeti, and travel between properties by chartered planes.
abercrombiekent.com



New Zealand/Fiji: A three-week honeymoon where destinations and daily activities were determined by the couple’s whims and the weather “to ensure the most perfect experiences at every turn”. Between breathtaking stays – including Huka Lodge, The Landing residences and a buyout of Como Laucala, the Fijian island resort where just one of its 25 villas costs more than \$10,000 a night – the newlyweds were treated to a powhiri Maori welcoming ceremony, a private opera recital in

the Waitomo glow-worm caves, and whale watching by chopper with a marine biologist narrating the show.
southern-crossings.com

India: 50th and 60th birthday dress-up parties in the desert palaces of Rajasthan such as the 18th-century haveli mansion of RAAS Jodhpur, the scene for memorable dinners on a candlelit roof terrace beneath the illuminated wonder of ancient Mehrangarh Fort.
classicsafaricompany.com.au



Thailand: A 40th celebration with 20 friends at a private island resort with a roster of activities including beach picnics, motorcycle sidecar escapades, rice-paddy breakfasts and long-table dinners with fire jugglers and dancing.
escapeystylist.com



Giza Plateau, Egypt; Belmond's Mount Nelson hotel, Cape Town, below. Bottom, from left: tango in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Great Barrier Reef, Queensland; Mehrangarh fort in Jodhpur, India



America circuits. The brief is rarely as simple as “throw a party abroad”, he says. “Yes, clients want gasp-worthy moments, but they also want meaning – time carved out for family, deeper access to culture and conservation, and experiences that feel impossible to replicate. What we see most is a desire to do something that feels profoundly personal rather than conspicuously grand.”

The million-dollar question is, how much does a milestone holiday cost? “As we tailor make every trip, we do our best to match their budgets,” McIntosh says. “But for a multi-generational safari you won’t be getting much change out of \$200,000-\$250,000.”

“Celebration travel sits on a spectrum,” says Marchant. “We start with intent – what memory should this create? – and design up or down from there.” But a rough starting point would be \$US800-\$US2500 (\$1200-\$3800) per person per day, excluding international flights. Blink camps begin at six figures and run way higher depending on duration, location and creative brief. Big buyouts and complex itineraries are typically planned 12 to 24 months ahead.

“Usually these kinds of trips are money-is-no-object occasions that value experience over cost,” says Farag. “Above all, they are looking to create the moments and memories that money can’t buy.” Or can, if you’re very rich.

