

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do." It's a line often attributed to Mark Twain, and goes on to suggest that we "throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

Penned by a literary genius or not, it's sound advice. So why are so many of us so lazy when we travel, taking virtually the same trip every year? Whether it's hanging out at the same Ibiza beach club or skiing down the identical stretch of the Alps, we are often creatively bankrupt when it comes to planning a holiday.

Part of the problem is the need for today's tourists to recreate abroad exactly the creature comforts they have at home. Nowhere is this more apparent than those luxury resorts that pride themselves on providing the same bed linen in every city, the same art on the walls and the same room-service food. Even the greeting at the reception desk doesn't vary. The thrill of the unexpected – one of the key reasons for travelling – is nowhere to be seen.

Yet, we live in a time when it has never been easier to experience all the cultural novelty we could wish for. Luxury travel companies can provide something different, more adventurous, experiential and authentic. They do all the hard work, you enjoy the experience.

Black Tomato, for example, specialists in 'tailor-made authentic

experiences', has recently launched Epic Tomato, a tour agency that offers challenging trips such as 20 days in the barely explored mountains and western provinces of Papua New Guinea, or journeys along the White Nile in Uganda by foot, horse, bicycle and kayak – a voyage following in the trails of Churchill and Theodore Roosevelt.

I'm not suggesting we have to pack our rucksacks and go back to basics to truly experience a destination. Unlike in the era of Winston and Ted's excellent adventures, luxury and exploration are happy bedfellows in 2012, with plenty of top-end hotels offering exciting and enticing locations and activities. Four Seasons, for example, has just announced its World of Wonder programme, which enables guests to tour tea plantations by bike, assist in archaeological excavations or read a script on stage with a Broadway cast. This year top-end boutique hotels have popped up in some of the most unlikely places, from Ecuador and Panama to the Congo and Cambodia. Even Antarctica is no longer inaccessible, with a slew of new cruises taking travellers almost literally to the end of the earth.

In all of these hotels, accommodation, service and design are not sacrificed, but are combined with a new take on luxury: private guides, expert-led tours or lectures, local interaction or unique wildlife or cultural experiences all capped with a session in the spa and an evening at a fine-dining restaurant. They are responding to the demand of a new breed of top-end traveller, one for whom an authentic and interesting experience is as important as an on-site butler and pillow menu. These adventurers don't want to sacrifice quality or comfort, but are willing to skip extraneous trappings for a unique trip that will stay with them forever.

So, if the realm of the explorer is within easy (and comfortable) reach, why aren't more travellers taking advantage of it? A trip doesn't even need to be a near-the-knuckle test of your comfort zone. Yes, sailing the Panama canal or staying at a luxury jungle camp are fantastic, but truffle-hunting in Alba, mask-making in Venice or joining a float at the Rio carnival are equally rewarding. True travel is about discovering the mystery and magic of a destination, indulging in the unique experiences that it offers, whether that is close to home or half way across the planet.

Then, rather than returning and bragging about how a hotel in Paris ordered in sushi from your favourite restaurant in Japan, you will have some real stories on which to dine out. ①

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Lauren Steventon CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE