

Don't leave home without your travel concierge



DEBORAH STOKES
Inside travel

You feel you simply have to get away but the garden needs planting and there are a million things to do for that upcoming party. Relax. Just call your personal travel concierge.

This is a new breed of high-end travel agent, who will not only look after all your trip details — perhaps booking a reservation at the hottest restaurant in Paris or finding Spanish tutors for the kids in Madrid — but will also take care of things on the home front.

Their services don't come cheap, averaging \$60 an hour. But, for those who can afford them, they offer all the advantages of having a well-connected travel agent and a personal assistant.

"We can take care of anything that gets in the way of how our clients like to travel," says Wendy Davis, president and founder of Zebrano Lifestyle Solutions in Toronto. This week, the company arranged to have the backyard pool opened for one vacationing client. Recently, another family's hardwood floors were refinished

while they were on vacation. "We moved the furniture out, arranged to store it, and then moved it back in again."

Zebrano's staff includes two interior designers, two travel planners, an event planner, even an antiques dealer — helpful when clients are looking for Art Deco finds in, say, Miami. Last October, it got the licences it needed to make travel bookings.

For Davis, who was a business development manager with Sears Travel before she started her venture six years ago, travel was the missing link to complete its menu of services for its affluent clientele. Although travel was always part of Zebrano's plan, both Sept. 11 and SARS put it on hold. "But luxury travel is back, big-time." The company charges \$60 an hour for its services.

Luxury travel is not only back, says Jordana Appugliesi, of Bespoke Experience. "It's back with a twist." Bespoke Experience is one of two new travel concierge services that have opened in the past month in Toronto. "People have the money for luxury travel, but they want to spend it in a different way. They want an experience." The fledgling firm offers everything from event and lifestyle management, to arranging your luxury yoga retreat in a private villa in Ibiza. It is offering an opening promotional package of \$235 for five hours of concierge service.

While these new firms appear, traditional travel companies are launching high-end divisions featuring "high-touch" services.

For example, American Express Platinum cardholders have access to Platinum Concierge services, which can assist with reservations, tickets or locating goods and services anywhere in the world. One cardholder arranged delivery of a sample of water from the Dead Sea. Another used Platinum Concierge services to arrange for an Elvis impersonator to preside over his Las Vegas wedding.

Attache, of Toronto, which has been in business for more than seven years, is one of the more established travel concierge services. The company will help clients with their needs at home, but its main business is providing customized luxury travel experiences, says Roger Kershaw, general manager.

He says he recently designed a six-month round-the-world tour for one couple that included meeting with Tibetan monks in Laos and a safari in Botswana. Attache is able to do this through a network of travel contacts around the world. "We've made it our business to know the world of travel," Kershaw says.

Trufflepig, one of the new concierge services in Toronto, was started by Charlie Scott and Jack Dancy, formerly of luxury tour operator Butterfield & Robinson. The well-travelled pair have contacts around the world to assist them with their clients' customized travel plans. "We're like the black book of travel," says Scott.

■ Deborah Stokes is the *National Post* travel editor.

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