Making the Connections

LUXURY-TOUR OPERATORS CAN ARRANGE MEETINGS FOR CLIENTS WITH LOCAL BIG SHOTS IN ANY DESTINATION.

BY SANA BUTLER

FASHIONABLE PARTYING WITH THE IN-CROWD.

CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON—MAGNUM

SOPHISTICATED TRAVELERS HAVE LONG wanted to absorb the local, day-to-day culture of their destinations, whether by staying with neighborhood residents, working on a nearby farm or volunteering at a community nonprofit. But now travel companies are exploring a new avenue for helping visitors feel right at home in a foreign country: hooking them up with the local in-crowd.

They aren't necessarily big-name celebrities or even local heroes. More often, they're individuals who mean something special to the traveler—and with whom the tour operator may have become a special connection. Geoffrey Kent, cofounder of Abercrombie & Kent, calls them "and" moments. "'And' moments are the unexpected occasions of surprise have become part of our trademark," he says. A&K recently made restaurant reservations for a client vacationing in Russia to have lunch with Alexi Paleschenko, adviser to former president Mikhail Gorbachev, after he expressed an interest in learning the inside story of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

After Kelly Perkins, a 45-year-old Californian heart-transplant recipient, spent 11 days climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro on an A&K tour, she wanted to meet with members of the trauma team who helped perform the first successful heart transplant at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town. A&K made the introductions—including one with Nelson Mandela's private doctor, who met Perkins and her husband, Craig, at the airport to give them the clean bill of health they needed after passing through the yellow-fever belt.

The meetings are rarely advertised as part of a prepackaged itinerary but are often arranged on the fly with a phone call when the client asks for it. The cost can run into the tens of thousands of dollars. The London-based lifestyle management firm Ten Group is planning this month to have a member and his family headed to the Monaco Grand Prix fly on the same private plane with the AT&T Williams Team. The owner of the New York City–based Heritage Tours Private Travel recently called a friend in Morocco to arrange a dinner for a businesswoman at the home of a local senator in Rabat because she said she needed a break from traveling with siblings.

Though it can be a great networking opportunity, often travelers are interested in simply meeting locals who share their interests. The new seven-room Tcherassi Hotel and Spa in Cartagena, Colombia, can arrange to have fashion designer and owner Silvia Tcherassi drop in and take a guest shopping at her favorite stores. Chess players can call Pure Entertainment Group, a new concierge lifestyle-management firm based in Montreal, to arrange a match of minds anywhere in the world with top-ranked chess grandmaster Jacob Aagaard. "We will fly him to meet our members," says Steve Edo, CEO and founder. He recently arranged to have the Rolex watchmaker who built the limited-edition Jacques Piccard available for members traveling in the Netherlands to talk about upcoming designs. "We have members who collect watches like some people collect cars," he says. In October, Pure arranged last-minute tickets during the Paris Fashion Week for socialite teenagers to attend a party at a Paris club with R&B singer Rihanna. "I hire staff around the world who live the same luxury lifestyle as many of our clients," says Edo. "We can connect on every level." And when they do, guests can too. □