



TRAVEL+LEISURE

THE A-LIST

THE 161 TOP TRAVEL AGENTS

In the hands of an expert, a simple vacation can become a life-changing journey: an unforgettable adventure; a soul-restoring retreat; an education unmatched in any classroom. For our 12th annual look at the best advisers in the business, we asked these travel pros to share their latest discoveries and insider tips from around the world. Wherever your travels take you—from cruising in Antarctica to a walking safari in Zambia—we have the agent for you.

EDITED BY AMY FARLEY

REPORTED BY STIRLING KELSO

The terrace café at Monteverdi, a hilltop retreat in Tuscany's Val d'Orcia (see Judy Nussbaum).



In the lounge of the Palace Hotel Tokyo, adjacent to the city's Imperial Gardens (see Duff Trimble).



ASIA

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Diane E. Hilliard

Discovery The village of Mae Hong Son, in northern Thailand, where you can ride elephants, visit a local hill tribe by boat, and—best of all—get a Thai massage at Phu Klou Country Club Health Mud Spa for about \$10.

Years as agent 41.

Other specialty Middle East.

Contact Hilliard Olander Travel, Stillwater, Minn.; 651/307-8225; diane@hilliardolander.com.

Janet Moore

Excited about Tracing the Burma Road from western China to Rangoon, Burma. Travelers make their way through emerald-green

rice paddies, fertile valleys, and the Gaoligong Mountains, known for their forests and fields of sugarcane, coffee, and papaya. Stops in Burma include Sagaing, famous for its monasteries, and the temple-studded Pagan.

Years as agent 28.

Other specialty Middle East.

Contact Distant Horizons, Long Beach, Calif.; 800/333-1240; janetm@distant-horizons.com.

CHINA

Stan Godwyn ★

Insider clout For a traveler passionate about Chinese porcelains, Godwyn arranged a

visit to the private OX Culture and Ceramics Museum, in Xi'an, where she met with the curator and was able to examine—and in some cases even handle—pieces from the early Ming dynasty.

Years as agent 19.

Other specialty Southeast Asia.

Contact TravelStore, Sacramento, Calif.; 800/283-2772 ext. 5511; stan.g@travelstore.com.

Karin Hansen

New favorite The 313-room Four Seasons Beijing, the company's seventh property in China. "It's a cut above the rest," Hansen says, noting the impeccable service, the spacious suites, and the hotel's artwork, which showcases the city's contemporary art scene.

Years as agent 36.

Other specialties Thailand and Cambodia.

Contact Frosch Travel, Deerfield, Ill.; 800/323-1276; karin.hansen@frosch.com.

Guy Rubin

See Super-Agents.

Laura Woo

Discovery A Hong Kong expert, Woo cautions clients not to leave the city without sampling a *dan tat*, or egg tart, from Tai Cheong Bakery, at Lyndhurst Terrace. Locals line up around the block for the hot, flaky pastry.

Years as agent 31.

Other specialty Hawaii.

Contact West University Travel, Houston; 281/497-8820; woo@hal-pc.org.

Mei Zhang

Insider clout For a prominent U.S. architect, Zhang planned a design-focused trip in Beijing that included a private tour of the National Center for the Performing Arts (a.k.a. the Egg), a discussion with a feng shui expert at the Temple of Heaven, and a private tour of the Rem Koolhaas–designed CCTV building.

Years as agent 13.

Other specialty Tibet.

Contact WildChina, Beijing; 888/902-8808; mei.zhang@wildchina.com.

INDIA

Jonny Bealby

New favorite The Lotus, a luxury houseboat in the backwaters of Kerala. The two rooms come with

teak floors and furniture, dhurrie rugs, observation windows, and private verandas. Travelers can arrange onboard yoga lessons and ayurvedic massages, and borrow the boat's mountain bikes to explore the area's temples and coconut groves.

Years as agent 11.

Other specialty Pakistan.

Contact *Wild Frontiers, London*; 800/454-1080; jonny@wildfrontiers.com.

Carole A. Cambata

Special booking Cambata personally hosted a trip visiting Rajasthan sights by Cessna Citation private jet. In Jodhpur, the group met the city's former maharajah for tea and sailed on Lake Pichola in a 150-year-old royal boat. In a village outside Jaipur, a local opened his house to them for a rooftop dinner accompanied by musicians.

Years as agent 32.

Other specialty Bhutan.

Contact *Greaves Tours, Highland Park, Ill.*; 800/318-7801; ccambata@greavestvl.com.

Ellison Poe

Excited about The city of Amritsar, in the Punjab region of northwestern India. There are grand sites—including Sri Harmandir Sahib, or the Golden Temple—and rewarding voluntourism opportunities. Poe often arranges for guests to volunteer at a Sikh *langar* (free communal kitchen) that feeds thousands of people a day.

Years as agent 30.

Other specialty Sri Lanka.

Contact *Poe Travel, Little Rock, Ark.*; 800/727-1960; epoe@poetravel.com.

Ashish Sanghrajka

New favorite Sanghrajka loves the about-to-open Banyan Tree in Kerala, India, one of the region's few high-end eco-sensitive hotels. Located on a private island, the resort's rooms overlook the southern state's serene backwaters.

Years as agent 13.

Other specialty Kenya.

Contact *Big Five Tours & Expeditions, Stuart, Fla.*; 800/244-3483; ashish@bigfive.com.

Pallavi Shah

See Super-Agents.

Bob Watson

Top tip If you go to Delhi, take a city tour with the Salaam Balak Trust. The organization's student guides—many rescued from life on the streets—lead tours of where they used to live, usually through backroads and slums seldom seen by travelers.

Years as agent 28.

Other specialty Southeast Asia.

Contact *Valerie Wilson Travel, New York City*; 914/701-3215; bobw@vwti.com.

JAPAN

Noriko Townsend

Excited about Akiota-cho, a small town in southwestern Japan, for its artisans and soft adventure opportunities. Hike past waterfalls in a forest to the Sandankyo Gorge, known for its dramatic canyon walls. Back in Akiota-cho, stop at Yokohata Craft Shop for gorgeous, hand-carved kitchen utensils.

Years as agent 18.

Other specialty Southeast Asia.

Contact *Altour American Express Travel/Japan In Style, Fort Collins, Colo.*; 877/737-1647; noriko.townsend@altour.com.

Duff Trimble

New favorite The Palace Hotel Tokyo, where many rooms have balconies overlooking the Imperial Palace grounds, a rare front-row seat in the capital. The hotel also has an excellent set of restaurants—from the six-seat tempura bar, Tatsumi, to the French-inflected Crown—and a buzzy, see-and-be-seen atmosphere.

Years as agent 12.

Contact *Wabi-Sabi Japan, Toronto*; 647/477-1711; duff@wabi-sabijapan.com.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Catherine Heald

Special booking Heald planned an over-the-top Balinese wedding for a Brazilian couple that began with a traditional Hindu wedding ceremony on a beach—the couple, in Balinese dress, arrived via helicopter—before moving to the prince of Bali's palace, where guests danced in the dozens of pavilions and gardens.

Years as agent 9.

Other specialty Asia.

Contact *Remote Lands, New York*

City; 646/415-8092; catherine.heald@remotelands.com.

Jarrold Hobson

Special booking Hobson (known as “the Indonesia guy” among colleagues) chartered a modern version of a traditional wooden spice-trading boat for a family traveling around Indonesia's Coral Triangle—what biologists call the Amazon of the Seas. Between trips to island villages, clients can snorkel right off the boat to see exotic corals, clown fish, and pygmy sea horses.

Years as agent 18.

Contact *Asia Transpacific Journeys, Boulder, Colo.*; 800/642-2742, ext. 223; jarrod@atj.com.

Sandee Litwin

Top tip Timing is everything when it comes to visiting Cambodia's Angkor Wat. “Have a private guide take you at 4:30 in the morning,” she says. “It's much cooler, you'll miss the crowds, and you'll see the sunrise over the temple domes.”

Years as agent 31.

Other specialty Europe.

Contact *Litwin Travel, Los Angeles*; 310/470-7202; sandee@litwintravel.com.

Rebecca Mazzaro

Discovery The obscure but fabulous balloon festival in central Burma's Taunggyi, which takes place every November. Tribal villagers fashion handmade paper hot-air balloons (shapes range from roosters to life-size elephants) that are loaded with candles and fireworks, released, and eventually catch fire and explode into a light show.

Years as agent 15.

Other specialty India.

Contact *Asia Transpacific Journeys, Boulder, Colo.*; 800/642-2742, ext. 233; rebecca@asiatranspacific.com.

Patrick O'Connell

Special booking For clients who wanted to see Vietnam's Ha Long Bay but didn't have much time, O'Connell chartered a helicopter to and from Hanoi. A private boat tour of the bay's islands was followed by a candlelit dinner in a limestone cave—they were back in the city by late evening.

Years as agent 14.

Contact *Asia Transpacific*

Journeys, Boulder, Colo.; 800/642-2742, ext. 242; pat@atj.com.

Darlene Ravin

New favorite Bangkok's Siam Hotel, surrounded by palaces and temples, on the Chao Phraya River. All 39 suites and villas have plunge pools, as well as personal butlers and Art Deco lighting fixtures and furnishings. Don't miss a Thai twist on whiskey soda at Chon Thai Restaurant.

Years as agent 15.

Other specialties Africa and South America.

Contact *Worldview Travel, Santa Ana, Calif.*; 303/929-8877; darlenerravin@gmail.com.