

# MADE TO MEASURE

With travelers becoming ever more discerning and adventurous, customized travel and tours have become an indispensable source of revenue for agents, reports **Judy Jacobs**

AS TRAVEL AGENTS continue to seek ways to remain relevant in a do-it-yourself world, selling customized travel is on the rise.

In fact, an American Express Travel survey of agents found that customization of travel will remain a key priority for 2015. A sizable 67% of respondents stated that crafting customized itineraries is where they spend most of their time helping clients. In addition to selecting the most suitable flights and hotel accommodation, this includes using their local destination expertise to plan relevant activities for clients.

Custom packages are increasing in popularity as tech-savvy consumers become more sophisticated and discerning travelers, and are looking for something beyond lazing on a beach or touring tried-and-tested destinations.

"Clients are very different, and have very different expectations, and only customized packages can cater to them. We see our clients not as numbers but as people who are really expecting a once-in-a-lifetime experience and deserve to have one," says Jean Jimenez, marketing and product manager at Albee

Adventures, which specializes in custom tours to Central America.

An ability to customize FIT packages is where savvy travel agents can shine. And they can rely on the help of a handful of tour operators that are increasing that segment of their business. For example, bookings for Abercrombie & Kent's Tailor Made Journeys, its custom division, were up 20% in 2014 over the previous year and now

make up about half of its business. And growth is accelerating. "The numbers right now [in January] are almost where we ended up last year," says Pamela Lassers, the company's director of media relations. "A lot of it has to do with the favorable (euro) exchange rate. Agents should point out to clients that it's a great time to go to Europe."

There's a perception that customized packages are only for rich clients, but although they've never really been geared toward the budget market, they can be put together using moderate hotels and do-it-yourself sightseeing options.

Travel agents with detailed knowledge of and experience in a certain destination should specialize in that market and create the packages themselves. Most, however, are more likely

## SELLING TIPS

- **GET ORGANIZED:** Be sure to get everything in writing, especially the names of off-the-beaten-track places clients want to visit.
- **BE UPFRONT:** Explain how a quote is developed, letting clients know all the different costs involved in designing a customized trip.
- **ASK & RECEIVE:** Create a list of detailed questions to ask your clients to get a good idea

of what they want out of their trip. And don't be afraid to reach out to suppliers for help.

- **RESEARCH & COMPARE:** Study existing tour operator itineraries to get a sense of how much to schedule into each day of a client's trip.
- **LOCATION LOCATION:** Suggest centrally located hotels to give clients the ability to walk to sights and explore independently.

develop expertise but still rely on tour operators to put their packages together.

### Leveraging expertise

While tour companies like Abercrombie & Kent have divisions that handle custom tours, others specialize in destinations where they have expertise. Borton Overseas is one of these. The Minneapolis operator sells customized trips to Scandinavia and Africa. The level of customization depends on the client, and although it can include meals, tours and private guides, some want far more, says the company's managing director, Linda McCormick. "A couple of years ago, for example, we had someone in the construction industry who wanted to see architecture in every place they went to."

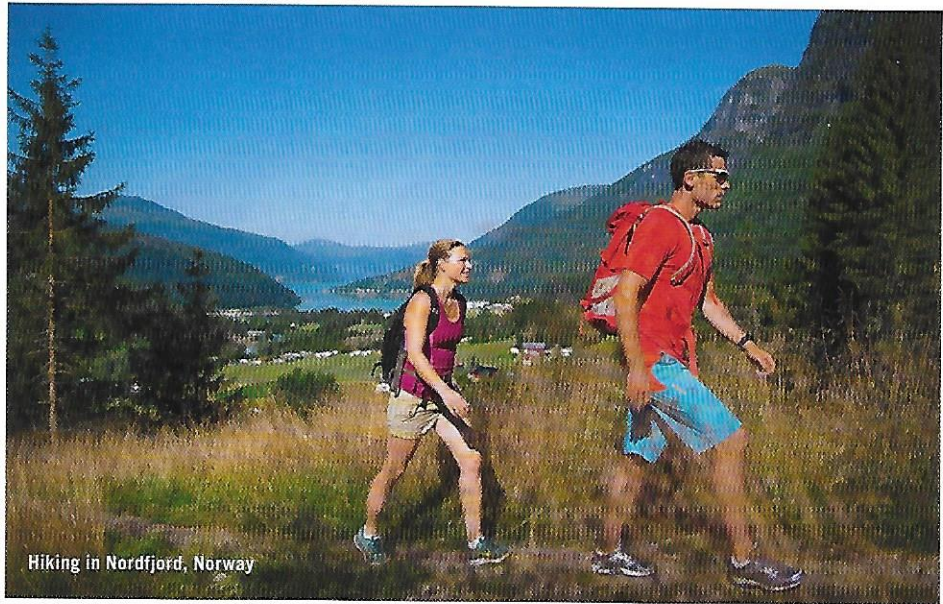
The growth in interest in certain destinations among those seeking custom packages is often seen as a harbinger for their future popularity. For Albee Adventures, this has been the case with Panama. "Although Costa Rica is the most popular destination for our business, followed by Belize, Panama is the fastest-growing destination for us," says Jimenez of Albee Adventures.

In terms of demographics, custom packages appeal to singles, couples, families and small groups. A&K's Lasser says the company receives many requests from groups that want to include a philanthropic element, citing as an example a group booking earlier this year to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro and raise money for Free the Children.

Many other trips revolve around food and wine, whether it's a barge trip on a French canal or a few days added on to a Machu Picchu itinerary to visit Lima to check out its hot new chefs.

Many companies don't charge upfront fees to create itineraries — which may come as a surprise to agents for whom fees are an integral part of doing business. "Our company has always been anti-fee. We try to stay away from charging fees as much as possible," says Christopher Grum, owner of Premier Custom Travel, in Sugar Land, Texas. "On the custom packages it's a bit different because they're getting concierge service. We build them [fees] into the package and don't mention them."

Allison Rulon-Miller, founder of From Lost to Found Travel, is another agent who doesn't charge a direct fee for custom packages, despite them being very labor intensive. "Usually people are planning these trips six, 12, even 15 months in advance. And I may have to do a lot of iterations before the packages are finalized," she says. Nonetheless, this former investment banker wouldn't have it any other way. Rulon-Miller's passion for helping others travel in a unique, intimate way is, she says, what keeps her in this business. For her, custom travel is the only way to go. ■



Hiking in Nordfjord, Norway

## CASE STUDIES

### BORTON OVERSEAS, INC. MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

Borton Overseas, Inc., a tour operator headquartered in Minneapolis, specializes in crafting bespoke packages for individuals, families and groups in Scandinavia and Africa. Its best-selling destination is Norway, and many of its clients are people from throughout the US who have Norwegian heritage.

One package it created recently was for a travel agent in Raleigh, North Carolina, whose clients — two couples in their 50s — wanted to explore Norway. The 13-day trip included a two-day stopover in Iceland, hiking in Norway and stays in moderately priced hotels. The land cost was \$2,600 per person.

Among Borton Overseas' many group tours was one it organized for the members of the Sons of Norway. The fraternal organization's president wanted a tour of Norway focusing on his passion for the once common, but now rare, medieval stave churches. The group visited most of the 13 that still remain.

Being in Minnesota, her company has also arranged a lot of trips for people who want to trace their family heritage, as well as some itineraries revolving around food and wine. Borton Overseas has a customized quote fee of \$100, which is applied to the trip.

### PREMIER CUSTOM TRAVEL SUGAR LAND, TEXAS

When Chris Grum and his wife launched Premier Custom Travel, in Sugar Land, Texas, in 2009, they planned an agency that would focus solely on custom travel packages — hence the name. It didn't turn out that way, however, and customized itineraries now make up only about 15% of their business.

The couple began selling custom itineraries to New York City, as Chris previously lived there and because both of them are passionate about the theater. They advertised at local playhouses and promoted packages that included tickets to Broadway shows, backstage tours and meals at some of the city's top restaurants, often with a hockey game or other sport event thrown in.

Clients also came to them to create a custom package and often wanted something ticked off their bucket list, according to Chris. He recently put together an Ireland itinerary for a couple who'd been before but wanted to return so the wife could trace her roots.

As they were avid cruisers, Chris arranged for the couple to sail to England, which took 14 days, and spend three nights in London and nine days touring Ireland with a private guide. The total spend, including the cruise and business class airfare, was around \$16,000.