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Selecting the Perfect Travel Consultant or Provider ADD TO MY VAULT

If a couple or family had 15 days to travel anywhere in the world, where should they go and what should they do? *Robb Report* posed that question and many others to dozens of travel consultants and providers in order to choose “The Perfect 10”, a compilation of 10 ultimate itineraries that we featured in our January travel issue. The companies we queried are among a wide range of respectable travel firms that can arrange custom adventures all over the world. If you haven’t found a travel provider you can trust, or if your go-to consultant isn’t knowledgeable about the destination you’re planning to visit, here are some things to keep in mind.

Ask how often your consultant travels to the destination you are interested in visiting. Consultants who have lived in the country or city you are visiting, and those who travel to the location routinely, will likely have a much deeper network of contacts—and a passion for the destination. James Berkeley’s Los Angeles-based Destinations & Adventures (www.dairtravel.com) arranges custom itineraries all over the world, but while questioning him about various locations for “The Perfect 10” story, I learned that he had lived in Cairo, Egypt, for four years. As soon as we started discussing Egypt, something changed in his voice. The experiences he began to describe contained a level of insider knowledge that immediately caught my attention. For example, through his connections with Zahi Hawas, the renowned secretary general of Egypt’s Supreme Council of Antiquities, Berkeley can get his clients into Queen Nefertari’s tomb, which is closed to the general public. “People who go in are in tears, because this is something they have always wanted to see,” says Berkeley.

Randy Lynch—the founder of Kipling & Clark (www.kiplingandclark.com), a Chicago-based travel provider that specializes

Japan, and other Asian countries, and he is fascinated by the region. (Get him on the phone and you’ll see what I mean.) Lynch’s enthusiasm has helped him develop a vast network of contacts, which often translates to insider access for his clients. “During the critical periods in Japan—the cherry blossoms and the fall—you can’t get into the *ryokan* [inns] unless you know the families who operate them,” says Lynch, who, not surprisingly, claims a close relationship with several such families.

Be self-centered.

Notice whether your consultant is telling you what to do or asking what types of things you would like to do. If it feels like you are being sold a pre-designed itinerary, then you probably are. Jean-Michel Jefferson, who founded New Zealand-based Ahipara Luxury Travel (www.ahipara.com) seven years ago, takes a personalized approach, starting from scratch for each of his clients’ excursions. “We start by building a brief of clients’ interests, tastes, and aspirations,” he says. “This forms the basis of the style of accommodations, menus, and activities, and the pace throughout the experience.”

Request a sample itinerary for a destination you know well.

This is one of the simplest and most effective methods for gauging whether your tastes and expectations align with a consultant’s—and vice versa. You can evaluate the consultant’s recommendations for the area and communicate your favorite (and least favorite) activities, restaurants, and hotels so that the consultant can better understand where you’re coming from. This will offer greater peace of mind when you get a recommendation for a hotel, restaurant, or tour in a destination that is new to you. A couple of days before my conversation with Berkeley, I had been in the Atacama Desert in Chile. After reading through Berkeley’s suggested Atacama itinerary, we discussed his recommendations in the context of what I experienced and were able to fine-tune my expectations for the Egypt itinerary.

Request images of each night’s accommodation.

Make sure you know exactly where you will be sleeping and what to expect before arriving at each destination. Ask for Website addresses and images of the hotels and hotel rooms in which you’ll be staying. (You might also want to view the hotels’ locations on Google Earth or a similar program.) Even if a hotel is operated by a brand name you trust, that brand’s standards may vary depending on which foreign country you are planning to visit. Remember that everyone’s comfort level is different and just because a consultant promises you’ll be comfortable doesn’t mean you will be.

Call on previous clients.

Speak with past clients who have visited the places you’re considering. Ask what the clients were looking for during their trip and how the consultant’s service was able to meet their expectations.

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trip and how the consultant was or was not able to meet their expectations.

Don't be shy.

Interview consultants as you would potential employees. Ask questions about their background, their interests, and what distinguishes them from other professionals. Ask about how they handle security and emergencies on their trips. Also ask how long the consultants have known the guides who will be leading your trip. What languages do the guides speak? Have they been formally educated about the subjects you are most interested in? Most important, ask what the consultants can do to make your trip like no other. Jennifer Dubois of TCS Expeditions (www.tcs-expeditions.com), a Seattle-based travel company that specializes in themed around-the-world trips, says she cannot guarantee an audience with the Pope, but she will inquire. And if you're interested in having tea with the Dalai Lama, DuBois says, "We can find out where he's going to be and request an audience with him. He loves to meet with people."

— Jennifer Hall

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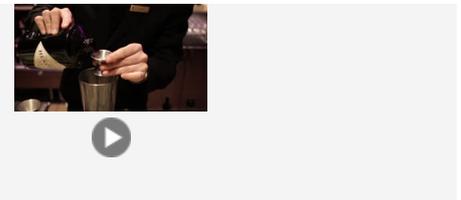
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