



Bucking the trend

Outlook | Travel's great restart may be on hold but there are some parts of the sector that will begin the new year with the wind in their sails. By *Tom Robbins*

Dude ranches

In the Rockies west of Denver, the CLazy U ranch has been welcoming visitors for a taste of cowboy life since the 1920s. The accommodation might have grown more luxurious (there are now 38 guest cabins as well as a spa) but the appeal remains much the same as ever: the chance to ride, hike, snowshoe or fly-fish amid wide open spaces. Yet since the pandemic hit, there has been a surge in demand. Bookings have doubled year on year. "We have way more inquiries than we can actually accommodate so our wait-list for next summer is more than 400 families long," says Brady Johnson, the director of sales and marketing.

It's a trend being seen at ranches across the West. "The pandemic has spurred a fresh wave of excitement for this uniquely American travel experience," says Jennifer O'Donohue, brand director at Triple Creek Ranch in Montana's Bitterroot Mountains. It started 2020 with 43 per cent of May to October reserved; it is beginning 2022 with 76 per cent of the same period booked.

Johnson puts it down to dude ranches finding themselves in "a sweet spot" for Covid-era vacations, thanks to their offer of abundant space, private cabins, low overall guest numbers, and a wider boom in interest in outdoor activities. Border closures have helped boost domestic US travel but dude ranches are now also attracting international clients – George Morgan-Grenville of the UK-based operator Red Savannah reports "buoyant demand".

Meanwhile the success of the Paramount TV series *Yellowstone*, starring Kevin Costner as a Montana ranch owner, has also revived many western fantasies. Those not content with holidaying on a ranch are seeking to buy their own: brokerage Hall and Hall says 2021 was their best year in the 75-year company history "by far" – culminating in the purchase, earlier this month, of the 340,000-acre Beaverhead Ranch by Rupert Murdoch.

Sleeper trains

A growing environmental awareness – and a rising dislike of airports – is prompting a return to long-distance international overnight trains. Earlier this month, a new Nightjet sleeper pulled out of Vienna Hauptbahnhof bound for Paris Gare de l'Est, the first direct rail link between the two cities since the Orient Express retired from the route in 2007. After 14 hours and traversing three countries, it arrived bang on schedule at 9.42am (although the wider timing was less good: due to Omicron-related travel restrictions, there were no paying passengers on board). The new service is aimed at both business travellers and tourists: deluxe cabins come with en-suite showers; breakfast and a glass of sparkling wine are included in all classes.

The new Vienna-Paris link is far from alone: a few days earlier another Nightjet set off on its maiden journey, from Zurich to Amsterdam, while a Zurich to Rome Nightjet is due to launch in 2022. In fact, since launching the Nightjet brand in 2016, Austrian Railways has expanded it to 20 routes linking eight



countries. A fleet of new upgraded carriages is due to be introduced in 2023. Other operators are expanding sleeper services too: December also saw the launch of services from Paris to Lourdes and Vienna to Cluj in Romania.

The original Orient Express finally hit the buffers in 2009 but the name itself is making a comeback. Since 1982, the Venice-Simplon Orient Express, a private London-Venice train that's now part of the Belmond group, has used the name under licence from French rail operator SNCF. In 2017, the hotel group Accor formed a partnership with SNCF to develop the Orient Express brand and, earlier this month, it unveiled plans for "Orient Express La Dolce Vita". Starting in 2023, six trains will run from Rome to Paris, Istanbul and Split, each



with 30 suites, one "Honour Suite" and a restaurant. Rather than recreating the Edwardian look beloved of many heritage trains, the interiors will be inspired by the 1960s and 70s, and designed by Milan-based Dimorestudio.

Not to be outdone, Belmond says it will launch further French and Italian routes for its Orient Express in 2022, while it recently debuted a new carriage on another of its trains, the British Pullman. Rather than ape the Wes Anderson aesthetic, as so many hoteliers have done, it hired the director himself to design the carriage, an immaculate art nouveau style dining car.

Polar cruises

Border closures meant that last year no cruise ships made it down to Antarctica during the austral summer. The resulting pent-up demand, as well as an

increasing public fascination with the fragile polar environment, seems to have supercharged an existing pre-pandemic trend. (According to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators, visitor numbers more than doubled over seven years to hit 73,991 in 2019.)

Earlier this month, the Roald Amundsen, a battery-hybrid ship operated by Norwegian line Hurtigruten, reached the white continent for the first time this season. The company, which runs seven "expedition cruise ships", says its forward bookings for the next Antarctica season (in 2022/3) are 93 per cent up on the same point in December 2019, while Arctic bookings for summer 2022 are 128 per cent up on two years ago.

Several other cruise ships are currently en route to Antarctica. They include Scenic Eclipse, a luxury vessel that carries just 200 people and offers helicopters and a submarine to help guests explore. Scenic says its 2022/23 Antarctic voyages are "virtually sold out" and that it has put its 2023/24 programme on sale early in a bid to keep up with demand. For those who can't wait that long, however, Omicron-related travel restrictions mean there is some last-minute availability for this coming February (16 days, from £10,781 per person).

Hotel villas

Private villas within the grounds of luxury hotels are enjoying a Covid-linked surge in popularity, according to Jules Maury, head of Scott Dunn Private. "They offer the best of both worlds – all the services of a hotel, and a buzzy restaurant and bar you can visit if you want to, but also your own private space," she says. "So if you do need to isolate there because new rules have been brought in, or someone tests positive, you can do so in comfort, with plenty of room, your own pool and so on. It provides a sort of insurance."

She recommends the eight "beautiful" standalone villas at Castello di Reschio in Umbria (from €16,000 per week for six people), the residences and villas at Jumby Bay in Antigua ("a firm favourite over the last year, and continuing into next"), Finca Cortesin in Andalucía and Amanzoe in the Peloponnese.

Travel agents

Over the past two decades, advances in technology have made it increasingly easy to book your own flights, hotels, car rental and tours online. And then came the pandemic, and a raft of ever-changing travel restrictions, testing requirements and last-minute cancellations. Travel is more complicated than it has



been in a generation and so a helping hand – that of an expert travel agent – is suddenly at a premium once more. Virtuoso, the US-based network of agents, says it saw the number of people seeking a travel adviser grow 50 per cent in 2021 compared to the previous year.

"A great many people had their fingers burnt when the pandemic hit, and it has been widely reported just how many have lost money or spent significant amounts of time 'on hold' to online companies," says Gemma Antrobus, chair of the specialist travel agents group at the UK's Association of Independent Tour Operators. "We have found that a significant amount of our new business is from clients who have never previously used an agent." Similarly, Steppes Travel report seeing the proportion of new clients rise over the past six months to 65 per cent of all inquiries. "Clients want to speak with someone to help them navigate the ever-changing confusion of rules," says product director Jarrod Kyte.

Superyachts

The superyacht's USP – that it offers an escape from the rest of the world – has never been more relevant, and since the start of the pandemic charter and sales companies have been riding a wave of demand. Burgess, a superyacht broker with 14 offices worldwide, says every



yacht in its 100-strong fleet is booked for New Year and that it's a similar picture across the rest of the market. Burgess's bookings for the Caribbean in February, March and April 2022 are up 60 per cent on the same period in 2021, and bookings for next summer are "unprecedented". The most popular yacht in the company's fleet is the 73-metre Titania, which takes up to 12 guests and is due to appear in the next series of Netflix drama *The Crown*. Rates start at \$565,000 per week.

Family gatherings

The desire to reconnect after a long period of separation is driving a boom in holidays for big groups of extended family, often anchored around a special event. "People are making up for low-key lockdown birthdays and time apart by taking multigenerational, celebratory holidays in style," says a spokesperson for Red Savannah, which reports high demand for villas sleeping between 14 and 28. "And it's not just relatives," says Jules Maury at Scott Dunn Private, "people are booking multigenerational family trips and adding groups of friends too. They just want to gather people together."

In the UK, the property rental company Unique Homestays says larger houses suitable for a multigenerational celebration are proving especially popular, particularly those with swimming



pools, hot tubs or tennis courts. A third of 2022 availability at all its houses that sleep more than eight has already been taken (as against 12 per cent at the same point pre-pandemic). Most popular is Anthology Farm near Cheltenham – two 18th-century barns converted into a stylish self-catering retreat for up to 18; rates start at £7,995 per week and it is already 80 per cent booked for the coming year.

Tour operators have also seen growing interest from families who want more intrepid, adventurous trips, often to remote places, after spending lockdowns close to home. "Family bookings are surging," says a spokesperson for Black Tomato, the London and New York-based operator which started out specialising in upmarket escapes for couples but has seen family trips rise to 55 per cent of all bookings. "For the most part these families aren't interested in cities, they're seeking fresh air and the great outdoors." In response the company has launched what it calls "field trips" – educational add-ons for children aged 12 and over that range from a scientist-led tour of Cern in Geneva to joining archaeologists on a dig in Cairo.

Adventure cycling

They have been around for several decades but bikepacking (like backpacking, but with luggage strapped to your bike instead of your back) and gravel biking (a halfway house between road and mountain biking) have found themselves suddenly in vogue during the pandemic. "Bike sales boomed as more people looked for ways to stay healthy and active, and many took to the woods and mountains to avoid city crowds," says Mike Lessard, tours director of the Adventure Cycling Association, a Montana-based non-profit that maps routes and runs tours in North America. For 2022, it's offering 21 "dirt/gravel" tours – eight are new, and several have sold out already.

In the UK, Saddle Skedaddle has also introduced new trips off the beaten path. "People are looking to explore more remote areas," says Adam Walker, head of customer experience. "Gravel bikes are a great innovation because they allow people to ride on a mix of trail surfaces. They offer the benefit of a road and off-road bike in one." And though it remains a niche at the extreme end of the bike-packing trend, growing numbers are signing up for extended, often transcontinental rides. The Adventure Cycling Association is running nine "epic tours" across the US in 2022, and though they last from 28 to 93 days, all but one are already sold out.

TDA Global Cycling started off staging the Cairo-Cape Town Tour d'Afrique but now runs long-distance trips worldwide. In 2019 it notched up a record number of participants but says that total has already been exceeded for 2022 before the year has even begun. It too has added new tours to meet "unprecedented interest", with trips in subsequent years also filing up. All 50 places on its 2023 Silk Route cycling expedition, a five-month \$26,500 adventure from Beijing to Istanbul, have already sold out, and another 33 people are on the wait list.

"Particularly for these once in a lifetime trips, people are now thinking: if I am ever going to do this, then I better do it soon as the future obviously is not predictable," says Henry Gold, TDA's founder. "People are saying: I want to do something special. If not now, when?"



Clockwise from main: riding at Triple Creek Ranch; the yacht Titania; Anthology Farm in the Cotswolds; Henry Gold on TDA Global Cycling's Silk Route ride; Villa Noci at Castello di Reschio; the MS Roald Amundsen; designs for the Orient Express La Dolce Vita's suites and restaurant
TDA Global Cycling; Oscar Farrera/Hurtigruten; Dimorestudio