

TRAVEL

Those used to travelling in luxury are spending on unique experiences at the more remote corners of the globe, such as exploring ice caves in Gigjökull, Iceland

# Into the wild

From tribal immersions to intrepid Arctic explorations, as wealthy individuals seek ever-more exclusive adventures, a new breed of travel operator is stepping in to offer the ultimate in unique experiences, as journalist-cum-adventurer Hugh Francis Anderson discovers

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Great Britain is undeniably linked with adventure. We have long been a country of significant exploratory standing, with the likes of Sir Francis Drake, Gertrude Bell, Captain James Cook, Isabella Bird and many, many more widening the world's horizons. From discovering distant lands to climbing the tallest mountains on earth, our small archipelago boasts an extraordinary adventurous spirit.

Nowadays, the concept of adventuring has entered an entirely new realm. With the onset of TV, the internet and social media, adventure now goes hand in hand with a high profile. Sir Ranulph Fiennes, for example, has been publicly documenting his expeditions for over 50 years, and we need only think of the time when Bear Grylls took then-President Barak Obama into the wilds of Alaska as proof of the excitement and power that adventure holds. It's little wonder then that the world's elite, from CEOs and royalty to Hollywood stars and music icons, want their own piece of the action — and are willing to pay large sums of money for the privilege.

The experiential adventure sector of the travel industry is one that is seeing enormous expansion. According to a global 2018 study by the Adventure Travel Trade Association, more than 70% of tour operators reported growth, with 40% coming from new customers. If that's not proof enough, in the past decade the value of the adventure sector has grown by over 20% to an estimated \$683bn. Evidently, adventure travel is big business.

As an adventure correspondent, I have witnessed the metamorphosis of this sector in just a few years. Founded in 2014, London-based IGO Adventures set out to create life-affirming adventures around the globe in the form of quadrathlon events, where both body and mind are pushed to the limits — think the infant sibling of die-hard ultramarathon Marathon des Sables. From Arctic Norway to the deserts of Morocco, I partook in these adventures for the very reason they were created. As IGO founder

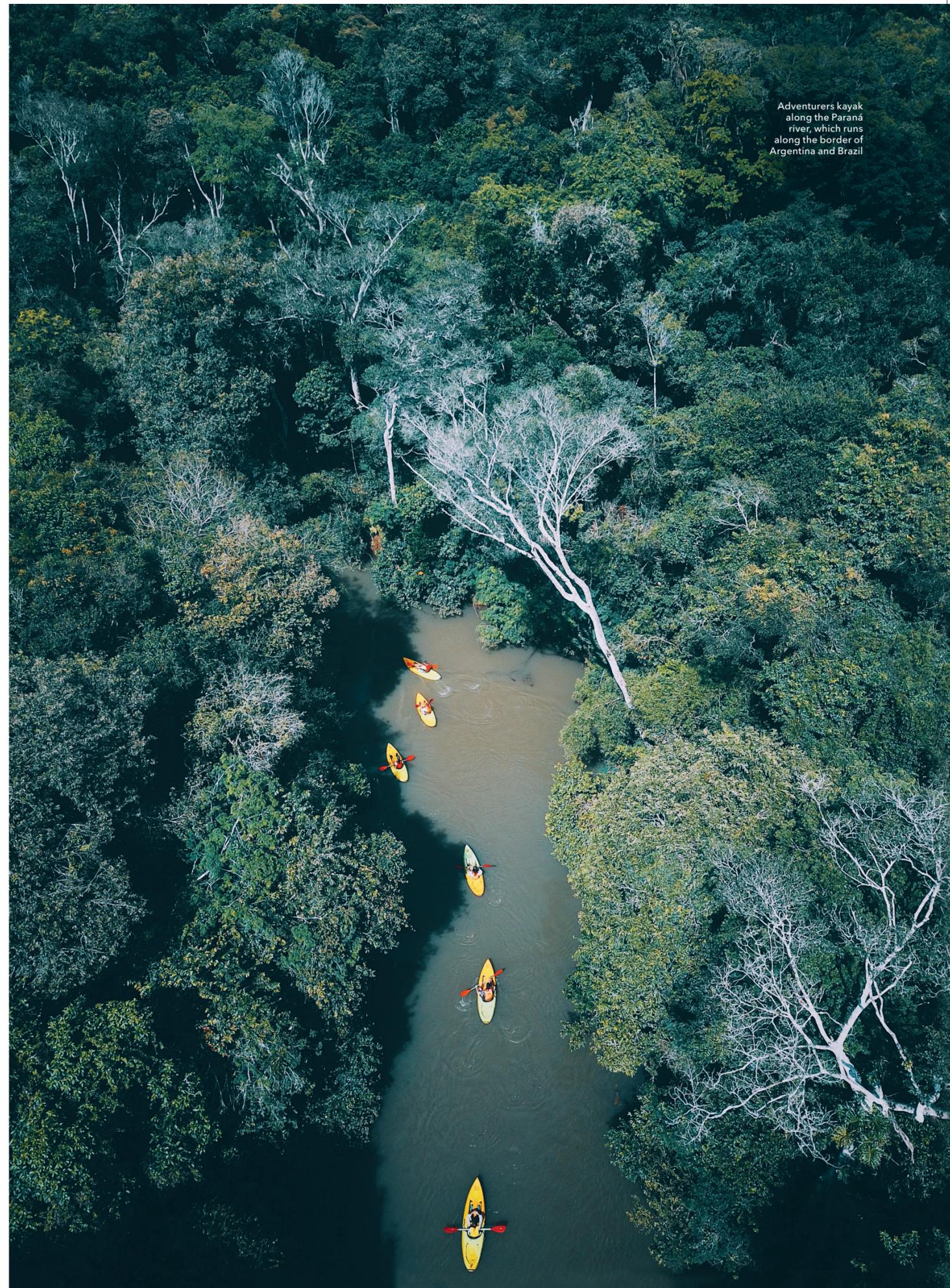
Bobby Melville says: "Our ethos is to create as many life-changing moments within a short period of time. Wilderness, challenge, camaraderie — touch the wild and the wild will touch you."

While these adventures were some of the toughest experiences I have undertaken, they are designed as group events, focused on multi-sport travel competitions into the "known" unknown. Fast-forward a few years and a new trend has emerged. People now want what no-one else has ever experienced — they want the true once-in-a-lifetime adventure. Indeed, leading luxury travel operator Abercrombie & Kent reported a 15% increase in solo travellers — and those individuals looking for that special something is only on the rise in 2019. Fortunately, there is now a host of companies to expound the exclusive side of adventure travel.

One such brand is Black Tomato. Although its remit as an exclusive experiential travel operator is well known and it has been creating ultra-luxury experiences since 2005, it has recently picked up on a desire within its client base to pursue a rawer experience. "There are many reasons that experiential, boundary-pushing travel has increased in recent years," says co-founder Tom Marchant. "Those who are able to travel in luxury are becoming more and more interested in the idea of spending their money on something that no-one else has done. We believe that the high-net-worth traveller now wants to be surprised, pushed and challenged in ways that a five-star hotel and regular concierge company cannot compete with."

Black Tomato's Get Lost package, which ranges from £15,000-£100,000+ per person, is about as experiential as one could hope. The principle is simple: get dropped

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Adventurers kayak along the Paraná river, which runs along the border of Argentina and Brazil

Wealthy individuals seeking something completely different can undergo an extreme exploration in a challenging location, such as Erg Chigaga in Morocco's Sahara Desert



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into an unknown, remote part of the world and explore your way through it (under the guidance of a hidden support team). Marchant accounts the desire for such an adventure derives from the need to unwind and escape our fast-paced lives.

“The idea of disconnecting and gaining a deeper sense of connection with the world around us is appealing to anyone that has a passion for and a yearning to travel,” he explains.

Yet the concept of experiencing the remotest areas of earth within the parameters of luxury does still exist. Pelorus, for example, is one such company facilitating these journeys. Founded just over a year ago by Geordie Mackay-Lewis and Jimmy Carroll, both former captains in the British Army, Pelorus’s experiences put luxury in remote locations.

“The world has become smaller. New technology and assets allow us to take people much further than before,” says Carroll. “The key is to do it in comfort and to not endure harsh conditions. We can build mobile camps that are of five-star quality to allow guests to experience these hard-to-get-to areas in comfort.”

Carroll accounts this to the development of “assets” — better private aircrafts, more runways in remote areas and, increasingly, expedition superyachts. “For example, we are running yacht expeditions to Papua New Guinea that incorporate tribal immersions, jungle treks, hidden islands, diving and so on. By looking at everything, we can build experiences that incorporate every element and utilise all the assets available, from diving, boats, flying, paragliders and so on.”

And while Pelorus’s primary offerings, which start from £20,000, offer luxury with adventure, they also run ultra-extreme explorations, too. Its Unknown experience surprises guests, leaving them in remote locations with minimal notice. One group was dropped in the Middle East, trained with the Israeli Defence Force, trekked alone across the desert from Jerusalem to the Jordanian border and abseiled in the Wadi Rum. What’s more, Pelorus even has counter-terrorism and espionage adventures

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for clients who feel the need to experience war. And they’re not the only ones.

As the newest kid on the block, Pencari Black is focused entirely on military adventure. “Our guests can immerse themselves in an authentic and realistic Special Operations experience,” says founder Major Dean Williams MBE. “It is an opportunity to experience the adventure of a lifetime. You’ve seen the movies, you’ve read the books, you may have even played the game on your children’s Xbox — now you can experience it for real.”

Available in three levels — Elite, Vanguard and Ultra — and all guided by former special and commando forces operators, an ultra-luxury private concierge service takes care of everything before and after the adventure. As Williams comments: “Each level offers a degree of luxury travel both pre- and post-experience, with our private concierge offering guests the opportunity to build their own itinerary or leave it to us to design a truly bespoke and personal experience.”

Nowadays, extreme adventuring takes many different guises. Yet the one unifying reason these companies exist comes down to the simple notion Pelorus’s Carroll describes: “People wish to have a sense of detachment from the busy world they live in.” And it’s true — people increasingly want to reconnect with something real, to do something truly exceptional with their time.

We are currently living in an open world: we see explorers and adventurers battling into the unknown across all media outlets and every day see ever-more exotic and remote parts of the globe. Instinctively, we all want what we see — and those lucky enough to have the capital can now have it, too.