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The 130-passenger ms Savor, winds its way along the Danube in Austria. Photograph courtesy of Tauck

No lazy *beaches* need apply as travel ups its *game*

BY REECE ALVAREZ

VACATION PLANS ARE IN FULL BLOOM — BUT WHERE TO?

Another escape to the turquoise tropics or perhaps something off the beaten path — a river cruise from Amsterdam to the Black Sea, maybe a tour of filming locations for “Game of Thrones” or “Downton Abbey?” All are possible and increasingly popular as travel agencies report steady growth in luxury travel that offers unusual locales and/or experiences.

“People in the Westchester region have been expanding their horizons lately and looking further than the Caribbean or Mexican beach resort experience,” says Jack Ezon, president of Ovation Vacations, a member of the luxury and experiential travel network Virtuoso. “New Yorkers, especially from Westchester County, are a lot more active than they used to be. For the new 30-to-40-something group, biking is the new golf.”

Still, more than half of the top 10 destinations for 2015 summer bookings are in Europe, with the United Kingdom topping the list followed by France and Italy, according to Virtuoso.

Ezon attributes Europe’s reemergence as a popular destination in large

part to the favorable currency exchange rates for Americans:

“Back are the days when people fly to Europe for a few days to shop for their wardrobes, taking advantage of the exchange rate.”

But travel has expanded beyond sightseeing and shopping. High-end travel agencies are reporting significant increases in requests for experience-focused and unique vacations in places like Australia, New Zealand and Croatia. These have developed niche markets for luxury and adventure travel, from cultural excursions with Aboriginal tour guides to visiting the landscapes made famous by film and TV series like “Lord of the Rings” and “Game of Thrones.”

“The primary trend across all destinations is simple — clients want to experience something that they never have before and that most people won’t get a chance to experience,” according to a 2015 Travel Trends Report from Zicasso. “From elephant training to before-hours private tours of the Vatican, travelers want to return home with an incredible story.”

For Zicasso, gastronomic tours are a top request, particularly to Italy,

by far the service's top destination for 2015. Indeed, the company has seen requests grow by "leaps and bounds" for personalized experiences such as cooking classes, private tastings, truffle hunts and hiking tours. Also trending are culturally immersive experiences like private walks with archaeologists, visits to marble quarries and genealogical trips for travelers seeking to trace their Italian roots and connect with their heritage.

Tauck, a 90-year-old guided tour and cruise company that designs and operates more than 100 itineraries to 70 countries and all seven continents from its Norwalk headquarters, touts river cruises as the fastest-growing segment in its global portfolio, as well as the fastest-growing category in leisure travel.

"On a river cruise, versus an ocean-going cruise, you spend much more time exploring the destination instead of spending days at sea where you're limited to the ship's amenities for amusement," says Tom Armstrong, corporate communications manager at Tauck. "River cruises offer daily opportuni-

ties for shore excursions, and many of (Europe's) most historic cities and picturesque villages have grown up along (its) rivers, which have long been used for transportation and trade."

Many luxury travel companies have come to pride themselves on customizing unusual experiences for their clients. For instance, when a family with a history-minded son wanted to add a unique touch to their European vacation, Zicasso arranged for a tour of D-Day beaches with a retired French general as a guide. Tauck offers guided sightseeing in London, including an exclusive presentation by Celia Sandys, Winston Churchill's granddaughter and biographer.

Historically themed vacations are just one segment of a growing array of niche travel options.

Spain is frequently mentioned among the top destinations, with Ovations projecting it will overtake France as its most popular European offering after Italy this year. The island paradise of Ibiza, legendary for its nightclubs, has matured into a luxury destination complete with \$17,000-per week

mega-villas and private islands with new upscale restaurants and hotels, says Ovations' Ezon.

Spain is also the site of Zicasso's "Game of Thrones" tours, timed to coincide with the airing of the fifth season on HBO.

Buikling off the popularity of its "Lord of the Rings" and "Downton Abbey" vacations, Zicasso's "Thrones" tour features the homes of royal families real and imagined, past and present. The tour includes Seville's Alcázar castle (the Water Palace of Sunspire in Dorne, home of "Game of Thrones" newest key character, Prince Duran Martell) as well as the bullring of Osuna, rumored to be the site of the season's grand finale (spoilers withheld).

"We've seen great interest from fans of TV series or movies to not only visit the filming locations, but to really immerse themselves in the history and culture of those destinations," says Steve Yu, director of marketing and business development at Zicasso. "Fantasy truly meets reality on this unique Spanish journey." ■



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