



**M**elbourne couple Grant Thomas and Neville Tiffen were just weeks away from heading to South America for a luxury tour of the Galapagos Islands in April when the COVID-19 travel restrictions brought everything to a halt.

“In hindsight the timing was lucky because we didn’t get stuck overseas,” Thomas says. Now, after months of isolation and with domestic travel slowly restarting, Thomas has asked the same high-end tour company, Abercrombie & Kent, to design them a bespoke Tasmanian holiday instead. Their trip will include a stay at sumptuous lodge Saffire Freycinet, take in Cradle Mountain and explore the island’s west coast, an area the operator doesn’t usually include on itineraries.

“I’ve been to Tasmania before and done the classic touristy things — Hobart, Port Arthur — and I did consider that we could probably organise this trip ourselves as well,” Thomas says. “But the service some agencies provide is over and above what you can experience as a tourist on your own — even, we think, in a country we know well.”

Denied their usual international client base, Australia’s luxury tour operators and private jet companies are working overtime to convince a savvy and self-sufficient local clientele that getting someone else to design a domestic holiday with all the bells and whistles is worth every dollar.

The upper echelons of the tourism market in this country are overwhelmingly angled towards visitors from Asia, the US and Europe, with high net-worth Australians preferring to spend their travel dollars on cooking schools in Tuscany or lavish African safaris. China is Australia’s top spender, driving \$13bn into the economy last year, followed by the US (\$3.9bn) and Britain (\$3.4bn). But, with borders closed to international visitors at least until September 17, tour operators and private jet services are recalibrating their offerings to entice a choosy local market.

“International bookings usually make up about 75 per cent of our clientele,” says Kirsty Siekmann, chief executive of luxury concierge site The Tailor. “At present, inquiry-wise, that number has reversed, and 75 to 80 per cent of our inquiries are domestic.”

Australians, she says, are asking for a different, in many ways deeper, product to their overseas counterparts. “We’re creating private, upmarket journeys; perhaps the Eyre



### How luxury operators are capturing the Australian market

ALEXANDRA CARLTON

Peninsula for the wildlife, up to the Flinders Ranges and the Barossa. Or outback Queensland, the Daintree. But unlike our internationals, who may be more ‘bang, bang, bang’ because they want to take in all of Australia, our Australian guests want to have a bit of privacy, travel with extended family and stay longer in one place.”

Sujata Raman, A&K’s regional manager Australia for Asia Pacific, is seeing a similar pattern as Australian residents begin to consider exploring their own backyard. Locals, she says, seem to be looking at their country with fresh eyes. “Ordinarily, Australians tend to see domestic trips as filler trips between overseas trips,” she says. “They might do a long weekend at a luxury lodge or a family holiday of four or five days. The change for us is to continue those short breaks but also introduce longer journeys for Australian travellers, with fewer stops so they can enjoy and absorb more once restrictions lift.”

Captain’s Choice is another exclusive tour operator redesigning its journeys for a discerning local market. The company’s idea is to combine parts of the country Australians wouldn’t normally see into one trip, connected by the speed and convenience of private jets. “One we’re doing takes you from Sydney to Uluru for lunch, then over to Ningaloo Reef to swim with whale sharks, then down to the Margaret River and then Coffin Bay,” says chief executive Bas Bosschieter.

“What we’re effectively doing,” he adds, “is



taking these iconic Australian places that you’ve heard of but probably think are too hard to get to, or too far to drive to, and making them very, very special.”

A large part of that specialness is due to the use of private jets, a mode of transport uniquely suited to domestic travellers with disposable cash that would otherwise be spent overseas, and those concerned with social distancing and hygiene. Almost all of the country’s luxury tour operators make private aircraft a centrepiece of their domestic itineraries.

The charter companies are being flooded with direct inquiries from domestic travellers. Paul Crook, managing director of Air Charter Service, says January to March was one of their busiest periods to date, with an 89 per cent increase in inquiries year-on-year, mostly from essential business travellers who still needed to get around the country and were

lured by the convenience and safety of private travel. April slowed when the lockdowns hit hardest but domestic inquiries increased again in May with a focus on travel in August through to January. Popular destinations include Cairns, Hamilton Island, New Zealand and Fiji, in anticipation of interstate and Pacific “bubbles” opening.

It’s not surprising that holiday-makers who would otherwise be spending big overseas are considering the value of private jet travel, especially when the aircraft come with built-in social distancing. “People prefer to be away from other people at the moment,” says Daniel Renwick, chief pilot from Global Jet International. “Not only are you away from the crowds when you board in private terminals but we have companies that sanitise the aircraft after landing, PPE equipment for the crew, and nurses who check every passenger before the flight.”

## Making an entrance, outside the bubble

JEREMY BOURKE



A long-held travel fantasy has been to arrive at a foreign airport and find the guy in the suit holding the sign with my name on it. I envy those afforded such luxury. Not for them the queue for cabs or coming to grips with the local public transport system, of

which no two in the world are alike. Then it happens, in Montreal. And it is nice. Swish car, a mildly obsequious driver and we go straight to the hotel. I see little of the city and nothing of its people. The element of discovery of a new place has been removed.

How good it is instead to stay out of the bubble, to move as the city moves. That always sets the tone of a place.

Take madcap, assertive New York, to which I arrive by train. As I step out of Penn Station onto 7th Avenue, the freneticism of Manhattan rains down. There are cabs everywhere but plenty of competition for them, and none yields to my kerbside beckoning. So I follow the lead of those around me, stepping into the traffic stream and defying one to pull up in front of me. No limo could provide such a savoury first bite of the Big Apple.

Japan, by contrast, is politeness writ large.



Tokyo metro trains are serene, because no one would be so rude as to speak on a phone. And in Kyoto, the rear door — never the front — of taxis opens as if by magic as one approaches.

To me, laid-back Tonga is personified by

Tevita, my driver on the island of Ha’apai, who is the only person I see in this Pacific nation to use a seatbelt: it holds up the lava-lava enclosing his considerable girth. Tevita’s mantra for life is: “Don’t worry, be Ha’apai.”

London serves up fairly benign transport experiences, until my first encounter with that force of nature, the cabbie