

Transformative Trips Are the New Midlife Crisis Splurge

If all you're doing on your vacation is relaxing, you're doing it wrong.

By [Nikki Ekstein](#)

March 19, 2019, 12:31 AM EDT

It's not inconceivable that your travel agent could soon take the place of your doctor—particularly if the doctor you see most frequently happens to be a therapist.

A rising number of travel pros are now writing “prescriptions,” personalized vacations meant to address the questions and frustrations we feel in our daily lives. Whether that means strengthening family relationships, improving work-life balance, or curing an entrepreneurial dry spell, they're solutions to issues that don't individually constitute medical diagnoses but seem as ubiquitous today as the common cold.

“I've been traveling this way for myself for many years,” says Tom Marchant, co-founder of the luxury travel outfit [Black Tomato](#). “The most valuable things that I've brought back from my travels are the lessons that I've been able to apply from other communities into my daily life.”

That philosophy is what has led him to create [Bring it Back](#), a collection of mission-driven itineraries that travelers can custom-tailor based on personal goals and challenges. Among the needs that he's hoping to help clients address: how to turn a passion into a career, how to spark creativity, or how to lead a healthier and more sustainable lifestyle.

“I constantly see people wrestling with frustrations that they need to unpack, and they just don't feel like they have the time,” Marchant says. “There's nothing wrong with using your travels to recharge on the beach, but they can also be a brilliant vehicle to find those answers to the fundamental questions that we all have.”



Copenhagen, Black Tomato's destination of choice for a lesson on work-life balance. Source: [Black Tomato](#)

The Trips That'll Solve Your Midlife Crises

Debuting on Wednesday, *Bring it Back* consists of seven trip ideas built around profound cultural experiences. Unlike with traditional vacations, guests will book them based on what they want to learn—not where they want to go.

To create a better separation between the personal and the professional, for instance, Marchant recommends Copenhagen, where travelers can meet with a variety of experts that have shaped Scandinavia's reputation for work-life balance. To strengthen family relationships, he says Mongolia is best: There, travelers can spend time with multigenerational nomadic communities whose traditional lifestyles require youngsters to take care of their grandparents as much as the grandparents take care of the youngsters.

“It's not about necessarily finding the right take—it's about finding an alternative take,” says Marchant, recognizing that the same problems can be addressed differently by different cultures around the world. “We want to expose you to a different way of thinking so you can bring it into your daily life.”



A glacier hike with *Into the Glacier*, an Icelandic travel startup that helps teach lessons on entrepreneurial thinking. Source: *Black Tomato*

Most itineraries use the client's quest to inform each day's activities. A six-day trip to Iceland designed to address “entrepreneurial inspiration,” for instance, includes daily lessons such as “preparing your body and mind for transformation” (through a dip in the geothermal hot springs at the Retreat at Blue Lagoon), “better utilizing your resources” (a hike with the founder of the burgeoning travel startup Into the Glacier), and “creating new opportunities from obstacles” (a day with an Icelander who almost lost everything in the Eyjafjallajökull volcano eruption—and then used the tragedy as a springboard for a now-thriving business).

The luxury trips start from \$5,420 per person based on double occupancy and generally last a week, covering destinations that range from Cuba to Morocco and Ibiza. Don't see your problem addressed on Black Tomato's short list? The company can whip up a custom solution, though more trips will be formalized soon.

A Broader Movement

Marchant's offering is the first formal product to promote travel-as-therapy, but others are on the same wavelength. Most notable is David Prior, who co-founded an eponymous travel membership club last fall on similar principles as Bring it Back.

"So many of our early clients came to us looking for a total reboot," Prior says. "And our answer for that is to go way beyond the spa and the hiking vacation—to skip the five-day boot camp resorts and do something far more creative and meditative." Learning a new skill in its place of origin, he says, is a particularly good strategy. "It's the idea of using your hands to get out of your head."



A spiritual quest in India with Prior. *Photographer: Gentl & Hyers*

For one client in a creative rut, that meant traveling from Tasmania to Seville to the English countryside, learning different ways to harvest fruit and produce jam—a favorite foodstuff—in each destination. For a mother looking to connect with her teen son, it was a series of pottery and indigo-dyeing classes with Japanese masters.

And sometimes, it's more of an internal journey that's required, Prior says. For a major tech founder who needed a sabbatical, it was showing him the world through a nonbusiness lens—and shutting down Barcelona's Sagrada Familia for the ultimate contemplative moment. And for a client who'd started to feel overwhelmingly jaded about the human condition in light of current-day politics, the formula was a spiritual escape in Varanasi and

Rajasthan, in India. Each of Prior's trips is planned as a one-off—what he calls a personalized “travel prescription.”

“We want to send people where they’ll feel most like themselves, and identify what will be most freeing for them,” says Prior.



Travelers on a Prior trip in Mandu, one of India's ancient fort cities. Photographer: Gentl & Hyers

The Medicine You Don't Know You Need

Marchant and Prior are ahead of a trend, albeit one in its infancy.

“Most of our clients’ travels are motivated by endangered experiences—wildlife or cultural conservation—and increasingly by a desire to contribute philanthropically to the places they visit,” says Jimmy Carroll, co-founder of Pelorus, a British-based expedition travel company. His company has a life coach on its payroll who can build programs for guests looking to spiritually reset or energize for life’s next challenges, but Carroll says demand is still nascent for this type of offering.

“We only do a handful of trips like this a year,” he says, “predominantly for younger travelers, people in their early 30s who are constantly connected. Bringing a life coach into your travels instead of your regular everyday life allows you the time to think and reflect, and that makes all the difference in terms of enacting meaningful change.”



Mongolia, where Black Tomato is sending travelers to enhance their family relationships. Source: Black Tomato

“This is something we’re going to see as a growing motivator in travel in the next two to five years,” predicts Marchant, inspired by the increased awareness of mental health and holistic wellness.

Prior agrees. Already he works on at least a half-dozen travel prescriptions each month. “There’s a big industry around what we’re doing that hasn’t been fully tapped yet,” he says. “It’s incontrovertibly a growing market; people are increasingly wanting to use their leisure time to enrich their lives in a certain way.”

The key, Marchant says, is thinking not just like a travel agent but like a psychologist.

“Oftentimes you don’t even have the bandwidth to work out what you really need—so we’re going to help do it for you. We have to match destinations and experiences to what people are going through in their lives,” says Marchant. And this time, a pampering beach resort just won’t cut it.