

# 6 Best Bespoke Tour Operators

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Want to see a Tiger up close? Or lion, leopard, cheetah, elephant, rhino, gorilla, etc? There's no better safari company than Micato.

An off the rack suit or dress might fit you, but no matter how well manufactured it is, a custom-tailored version is going to fit you even better.

The same is true with travel.

There is nothing wrong with group tours or off-the-rack itineraries, and many high-end luxury tour operators excel at these, but even if you enjoy traveling with complete strangers, a generic itinerary is always going to mean compromises. By their nature, planned itineraries cater to a common denominator, and it's unlikely you could go on a trip to Paris, no matter how high end, without visiting a "must-see" attractions like the Louvre or Eiffel Tower. These are both worthwhile, but if you have already seen them, as many well-travelled people have, you may feel that on some parts of the trip you are wasting your time.

That's why the best tour operators also offer completely customized, bespoke trips. In some cases these might closely mirror catalog itineraries but with departure dates that are up to you, and no unknown "colleagues." However, in most cases they are highly customized to address your likes and dislikes, be it a preference for small intimate inns over grand hotels (or vice versa), the finest dining or the most local dives, and your sightseeing passion, from visiting medieval battlefields to meeting local artists behind the scenes to seeing cutting edge architecture. The top tour operators can get you in where doors are otherwise closed, grant unique audiences and basically make your travel dreams come true. It's probable that the more experienced a traveler you are, the harder you are to please or interest, and that's all the more reason for going bespoke and getting exactly what interests you without compromise.

The following are all companies with which I have some personal experience, and the best in class for what they do, which is heavily custom - all but one of these also does very-high end "scheduled departures," an industry euphemism for group trips. The exception, Gray & Co., does nothing but completely custom itineraries, it's their entire niche. One important thing to look for when selecting a custom tour operator and one hugely important hallmark of the companies below is that they don't sub-contract - unknown to travelers, many "tour operators" are actually just middle men passing off their customers to local ground handlers who may or may not be thoroughly vetted. The companies I have selected here typically have their own full-time guides, their own local offices, their own bikes, cars, safari vehicles or whatever it is they do, and they do it themselves. They may augment this by bringing in hyper-specialized local experts, from chefs to anthropology professors, but on a daily basis the people you interact with logistically are their very well trained employees. The further afield you travel, the more important this distinction is, but it's one many travelers don't realize is important until it's too late. These companies all know that if you want something done right you have to do it yourself and they do.

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Easter Island is one of the world's greatest travel destinations - and just one of many great places around the world that Abercrombie & Kent specializes in.

This is true even if you do unaccompanied custom travel: when my wife and I did a bespoke solo cycling trip through Burgundy with Butterfield & Robinson, it began with their local guide coming to our hotel, delivering the bikes, fitting them, going over the routes and maps, offering personal restaurant and sightseeing recommendations, and it was he who was available via cellphone for problems or emergencies throughout. We never need to make the call, but he was available on the periphery at all times, and the same is true for the other companies listed here doing non-accompanied itineraries. In other cases you might travel with a guide, a guide and driver, or in some cases, a full team.

Finally, in many cases it makes sense to go "semi-bespoke." A top luxury tour operator like Abercrombie & Kent offers all sorts of excellent scheduled departures, and this might make a lot of sense for cruising to a polar region, where it would be excessively expensive to charter a boat safe for the conditions and go without other people. But upon landing you might want to extend your trip and do your own thing, For example, A&K's "Classic Antarctica" sailing departs from and returns to Buenos Aires, and maybe you want to travel to Mendoza and visit wine country for a few days, go fly fishing in Patagonia, or head to Iguazu Falls, one of the great wonders of the world. Adding a few days (or a few weeks) of bespoke travel to a scheduled departure is something companies like A&K and Micato Safaris do all the time, and they do it very, very well. It can also make the overall trip more affordable than doing it purely bespoke.

Without further ado, here are my picks for Best Bespoke Travel Companies for different kinds of trips:

**Safaris, Africa & India:** I've written here before about [Micato Safaris](#), 9-time winners of *Travel + Leisure Magazine's* Best Safari Outfitter, and for good reason - out of all these categories, no company stands as head and shoulders above its competition as Micato. I've traveled with them three times, to East and South Africa and up Mt Kilimanjaro, and I simply would not recommend going with anyone else if you can afford to go with Micato. A family-owned business for nearly half a century, they are incredibly well connected and experienced, have the best guides, the best insider and local access, and the most clout with the finest accommodations and safari lodges across Africa and India. They control every aspect of their fine-tuned operations, down to getting my wife the cockpit seat with the pilot in our bush plane carrying passengers from their competitors. You can read in far more detail about why Micato is so awesome at what they do in my previous story ([click here](#)) but it's worth noting that India is often overlooked as a safari destination - most people automatically think Africa. If you want to see the biggest of the big cats, tigers, you go to India, where you also see the Taj Mahal and other palatial cultural treasures thrown in as a bonus. The Pinto family, Micato's owners, are from Goa, and are equally adept at showing guests the best possible experience in Tanzania, Kenya, Botswana, South Africa or India. A Micato hallmark is having a dinner in-country at the house of one of the many friends of the Pintos, maybe a doctor, lawyer or architect, people just like you except living in Cape Town or Mumbai, a standout insider experience you can't have on your own if you don't have local friends.

**Luxury Biking & Hiking:** [Butterfield & Robinson](#) owner George Butterfield literally invented the genre of guided European bike trips in the 1960s and his company has evolved into an unparalleled, global, active travel luxury machine. They do all the classics: Tuscany, Provence, Burgundy and Bordeaux, plus lesser visited European areas like Piemonte and the Dolomites, as well as China, Vietnam, New Zealand and many more, and they do it better than anyone. Their multi-lingual guides know the best restaurants, from dives to Michelin-stars, the best places to shop, and they always use the best hotels - often exclusively. I did a Tuscany bike trip with B&R where they took over an entire walled medieval hilltop town for our group. Go on a B&R group trip and chances are good that everyone else will have been before, maybe a dozen times - they enjoy one of the highest repeat customer rates in the entire travel industry for a reason, because they are so good. But fully half their business is bespoke, and they do the research, the legwork, pre-check all roads and routes, and consistently deliver the best guides, accommodations, food, and service. They specialize in biking, hiking, walking and multi-sport trips combining these, often with kayaking or sailing thrown in. One of their hallmarks is special experiences along the way, such as private visits to otherwise closed museums or VIP wine tastings with the vintners at non-public wineries. Two years ago, when I launched this column, *The Great Life*, I used a B&R trip which I described as "[The Greatest Vacation Ever](#)" to kick things off. It's still true today.

**General Luxury Travel:** [Abercrombie & Kent](#) is the very rare example of a company that does a wide variety of things and does them all well, but they can pull

it off because it all comes back to planning, experience, connections and guides. Whether you are going on city sightseeing tour across Spain, a small adventure cruise to Antarctica or trekking to Everest Base Camp in the Himalayas, A&K can do it right. They have been THE leader in guided cultural and active travel worldwide for more than half a century, and have the deep connections needed to make things happen all around the world. They are especially strong in Western Europe, Spain, France, and Italy, but also an excellent choice for detailed tailor made trips to China, Myanmar or South America. Think of A&K as the catch all of luxury bespoke travel - if you want to go to the Galapagos the right way, call them. If you want to visit the polar regions, call them. If you want to stay in the best 5-star city hotels and eat the finest meals in Paris, Barcelona and Rome, call them. It's that simple. They also do unique annual and extremely luxurious small group trips using chartered and customized wide-bodied intercontinental jets, such as around the world or around Africa or around South America, complete with chefs and expert guides, true once in a lifetime trips. [I recently wrote about this here at Forbes.com.](#)

**Golf:** When I wanted a tee time at Muirfield, this year's British Open venue, the hardest of all Open courses to get on, and arguably the most desirable round in Scotland, I called Sam Baker, founder and owner of [Haversham & Baker Golfing Expeditions](#). When I needed to know where to eat in the small and remote Scottish town of Dornoch, home to legendary Royal Dornoch Golf Club, I called Sam Baker - after all he is a member, has a house in Dornoch, and spends much of the summer there, despite living in Ohio. When I needed to decide whether my free day on the northern Scottish coast would be better spent playing Cruden Bay or Royal Aberdeen, I called Sam Baker, because while I know an enormous amount about golf courses and travel, and have been writing on the topic for nearly 20 years, I didn't know the answer to this particular question - and I knew he would. That's why I have recommended Haversham & Baker to several friends, and they have all been thrilled. They can arrange helicopters, charter jets, supply drivers, get tee times on the Old Course at St. Andrews, all that stuff, but maybe more importantly, Sam knows the best chefs, innkeepers, and pubs across the British Isles. They specialize in Scotland, Ireland, England, Wales, Spain and Portugal, and are currently expanding into Australia and New Zealand, which frankly covers pretty much all of the A-list golf destinations outside North America.



Visit Turkey on one of Whole Journeys' - a spinoff of Whole Foods - active culinary trips, and you might try this spread for yourself.

**Active Culinary:** [Whole Journeys](#) is a new company but they are part of a much more established company that knows a whole lot about food, Whole Foods. Launched last year specifically to combine active travel with hands-on local, regional and indigenous food experiences, the trips combine things like hiking, biking and rafting with cooking classes, truffle hunts, visits to farms, meals at ultra-local dives, piggybacking on the sourcing, supplier and ingrained knowledge that [Whole Foods](#) has developed as it has grown into one of America's most beloved retailers. Many of the Whole Journeys itineraries are offered only as private custom trips and their destinations are chosen for the food experiences they offer, ranging from a 10-day hiking and trekking trip along the tea trail in China's remote Yunnan province to a walking food tour through Spain's Basque country to a 9-day Peruvian trek that includes hiking to Machu Picchu and meeting with farm cooperatives growing coffee for Whole Foods, visiting cocoa plantations and exploring Peru's rich and varied corn culture. As a spokesperson for Whole Foods told me, "It's all about the food, and then how do we get to it? By foot, by bike, by raft?" Whole Journeys is the only company here I have not actually traveled with, but I have worked with folks from Whole Foods on my culinary journalism, and they have the unique local connections, often with small farmers they have partnered with, to offer one of a kind insider access. They simply have connections no one else has at the most grass roots level. They also have a great track record for their culinary classes, especially at their Austin world headquarters.

**Ultra-Luxury Cycling and Hiking:** [Gray & Co.](#) is unique in that it offers only completely bespoke very high end itineraries, and its rates typically start around \$1,500 per person per day and go up - way up - from there. Its heavy repeat clientele includes billionaires and internationally known celebrities. Aimed at a customer base who has already done a lot of things, including pedaling through Tuscany and Burgundy, they take a different tact, focusing on the very best places for the activities rather than top tourists destinations. For instance, the company has an emphasis on road cycling, so owner Cari Gray, with a career in the luxury bespoke tour business, seeks to find the very best roads and places to ride, then builds trips around that. She can do Tuscany and Provence very well, and does, but her marquee destinations are less obvious places few competitors go, like Austin, TX; Santa Barbara, CA; Argentina, Mallorca, and the Canary Islands. Want to go mountain biking? Gray & Co would love to take you to the Atacama desert in Chile, not everyone's first thought. Prefer walking and hiking? She suggests Iceland, from coastal bluffs to lava fields to hot springs. Trips are incredibly well staffed, with a pool of personally selected guides so good that clients often individually request them to be flown to trips, even far from their homes. Gray & Co. trips often involve fleets of vehicles and sometimes private planes, and these are operations conducted with military efficiency (she does high-end corporate group trips as well, which involve a lot of personnel and moving pieces). Because her clients tend to ride very expensive bicycles, she won't let them be transported on racks or roofs, so there are vans to carry the bikes, cars to transport the riders, mechanics that travel with groups, and so on and so on. When I rode with Gray & Co in Italy, the "loaner" bikes supplied were high-end, carbon fiber Pinarellos. Her guide to client ratio (usually 2:1) is lower than any company I know of, and since every trip is bespoke, whenever a new area or new roads are

included, she gathers her team and does the trip, without clients, in advance, to make sure everything from road conditions to the service at chosen hotels is perfect. It's hard - maybe impossible - to beat that level of service.

Safe & fun travels!

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*(I have traveled with Micato, Butterfield & Robinson, and Gray & Co. over the years while on assignment for Cigar Aficionado Magazine, USAirways Magazine, Investors Business Daily and other publications. In these cases the travel costs were either waived or greatly reduced for the various publications.)*

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