

Luxury Travel's Hot Trend: Bespoke Biking & Hiking Vacations


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The Tour de France has cycling on many people's minds, and for luxury travelers, there has never been a better time to tour the world on two wheels. Ditto for those who prefer hiking.

When the 2016 edition of the popular *Travel + Leisure* Magazine World's Best Awards came out recently, tour operators were stunned. A little known company that had never appeared in the rankings before took the coveted Number One spot as the World's Best Tour Operator. But I wasn't surprised.

Gray & Co. is a high end, 100% custom road and mountain bike (and hike) tour operator out of Canada, created in 2009 by a longtime industry veteran specifically to address the demands of deep-pocketed, experienced travelers who had "been there and done that." I've cycled twice with [Gray & Co.](#) while writing about bike tours, and was so blown away I included them here at [Forbes.com](#) in my 2013 feature "[6 Best Bespoke Tour Operators](#)," covering cycling, safaris, culinary trips, etc.

Almost all cycling tour operators offer catalogs with what are called "scheduled departures," or group trips you can join on certain dates. Gray & Co. doesn't do that. Every trip you go on is yours and yours alone. And while they will gladly take you to heavily visited classic cycling hotspots like Tuscany and Burgundy, their clientele has usually done that already. Owner Cari Gray's forte is finding awesome places to ride, with great scenery, hotels, food, and most of all, fantastic pavement with little traffic. She raves about places that are off of many traveling cyclists' radar, such as northern Argentina, parts of Australia and the Canary Islands, or Chile's Atacama desert for mountain biking enthusiasts, all handpicked because of the quality of the cycling. Before running a tour to a new area, she gathers her team of guides, support drivers and mechanics, and does the trip, in advance of paying clients, to make sure everything from road conditions to the hotels is perfect.

While it is hard to beat this level of white glove service, Gray & Co. is not alone - the private and bespoke bike vacation business is booming at all sorts of price points. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the entire guided cycling industry, which was pioneered by [Butterfield & Robinson](#), whose slogan is "Slow Down to See the World," and started taking customers on luxury journeys in 1966. For decades, B&R, as its ultra-loyal fans know it, has been the widely acclaimed, award-winning world leader in luxury scheduled cycling trips, and over the years added hiking, kayaking, sailing and "multi-sport" departures. But they have also vastly grown their bespoke business - so much that it now accounts for at least half their volume. In other words, while B&R is an awesome company, the only thing better than their regular trips is their private trips. I have personally ridden with the company three times, they are among the greatest trips of any kind I've done, and I was not at all surprised to see them ranked Number Two in the new *Travel + Leisure* list (which despite the number of cycling specialists, included tour operators from many other fields).

[Tourissimo](#) is a new player in the bespoke cycling world, but like Gray & Co. it was born from years of experience with another well-known U.S. tour operator. In this case, the founder is Italian, and split off to launch his own company focused entirely on cycling and hiking within Italy, really dedicated to giving an immersion experience specifically based on client interests beyond cycling, be it art, food or history. With offices in Turin and Boston, [Tourissimo](#) is probably the most flexible in its bespoke pricing, and will put clients into everything from four and five star hotels to agriturismo lodging, working farms that offer overnight accommodations and revolve around food production. I recently met the company's founder, Giuseppe "Beppe" Salerno, and his passion and knowledge of both cycling and Italy was impressive, Salerno partnered with legendary Italian bike manufacturer Bianchi to offer high end rides for all his clients, and does have a few special scheduled trips he leads himself, called Magnifica Tours, but otherwise it is all private and custom.

Several other top bike tour operators have moved more heavily into bespoke trips in recent years. [Backroads](#), which is the largest and best established high-end active travel tour operator in the U.S., does plenty of custom worldwide, and has plenty of experience. I have traveled with several of the best bike companies, including [Backroads](#), and while they generally all have quality guides and well-chosen routes, each has some area in which they excel - [Backroads](#) was memorable for the quality of the cuisine throughout, better than it had to be. [Trek Travel](#), spun off from the famous Wisconsin based bike manufacturer of the same name, is another classy company doing lots of bespoke trips, and they were just ranked Number Seven on the *Travel + Leisure* list. Not surprisingly, [Trek](#) provided the best hardware of any company I have traveled with, high end full carbon (Trek) bikes with top of the line electronic shifting, and they were the first to routinely provide Garmin GPS bike computers with pre-loaded daily route maps.

Not all "bespoke" trips need be extra pricey or heavily customized - some people want a catalog trip but don't want to do it with strangers or need a particular departure date. Also, most trips are less strenuous than they sound on paper, but if you are worried it still might be too much, or conversely, avid cyclists often find these trips have too little riding, by going custom you get the exact exertion level you want. Cycling trips are great vacations, and offer a lot more than cycling (riding is usually limited to 2-5 hours per day). You see the destination more closely and at a relaxed pace, you get a good workout and burn some calories, which is important because all these trips tend to focus on great food and wine. But by going bespoke, you can cater all the extra-curricular activities to your passions, take your kids, take their grandparents, do whatever it is you want to do. And there are more great choices than ever.

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