

GET AWAY THE BEST AUSTRALIAN ADVENTURES MONEY CAN BUY

virgin australia

APRIL 2019

voyeur

TIMELESS APPEAL

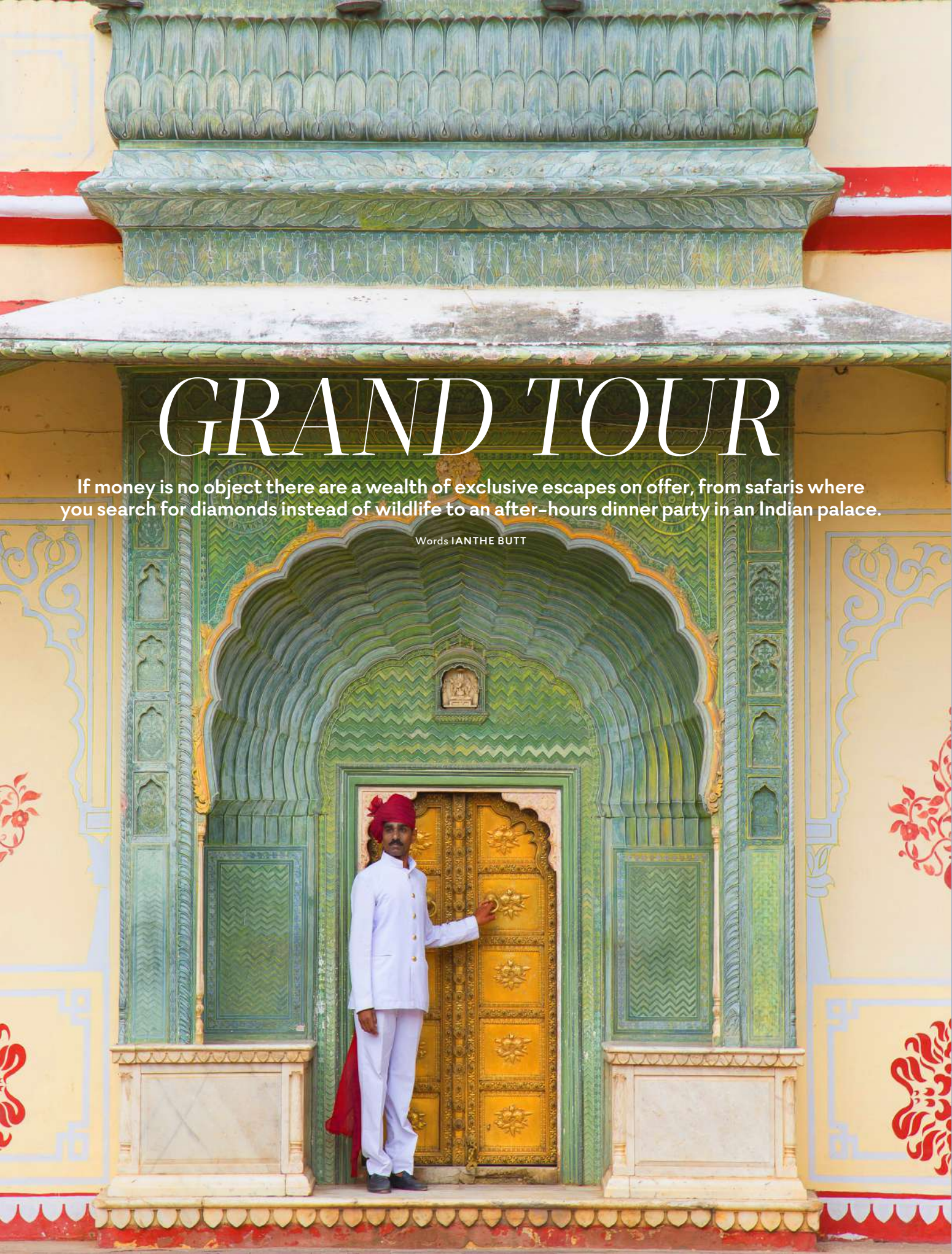
Step back in time on Lake Como's storied shores

GRAND DESIGNS

Find Marrakech's magic in its mountains, museums and remarkable medina

Virgin

australia



GRAND TOUR

If money is no object there are a wealth of exclusive escapes on offer, from safaris where you search for diamonds instead of wildlife to an after-hours dinner party in an Indian palace.

Words IANTHE BUTT

WHEN IT COMES to luxury, a tropical private island jaunt or a stay in the penthouse suite will no longer cut it. While for some, all-out decadence from the moment they touch down ticks the box, the idea of luxury has, for the most discerning holidaymakers, widened to include more unusual, unique experiences — time spent with experts who offer a different lens on a destination, or itineraries that feature exclusive access to hard-to-get-in-to historical monuments. These days a host of well-connected tour operators tap into their jam-packed address books to craft the most fascinating and decadent trips for high flyers. Here are seven of the smartest.



RISE AND SHINE DIVE FOR DIAMONDS IN SOUTH AFRICA

It's hard to make the most precious gemstone in the world more desirable, but at Ellerman House in Cape Town they've managed it, with a blow-the-budget trip to follow the journey of a diamond from seabed to surface. A combination of limousine and private jet swoops guests to Port Nolloth where those with a PADI Open Water certification can dive with Benguela Diamonds' divemasters to witness gravel brought to the surface, or watch from the comfort of a boat. Later the ocean's bounty is revealed as the gravel is 'jigged' to separate out gemstones. A gourmet seafood lunch and diamond masterclass covering carat-weights and clarity follows. Guests can select a rough diamond to be set into a piece of bespoke jewellery at Benguela's design studio in Stellenbosch. It has to be among the most opulent holiday souvenirs going.

Ellerman House Diamond Safari costs about \$21,500 (maximum six guests, no discount for fewer) including jet travel, food and drinks. Excludes purchase of diamond and jewellery manufacture. www.ellerman.co.za.



A ROYAL FEAST DINE IN A PALACE IN JAIPUR

India whirls with colour, nowhere more so than in Jaipur, also known as the 'Pink City', packed with blush-coloured buildings and scores of once-royal residences. With the help of 'luxperts' Black Tomato, it's possible to take over the private rooms in an astonishing palace for an after-hours dinner party. At the 18th-century City Palace, in what's as close to a modern-day Maharaja experience as possible, guests can wonder at the frescoes of the Chandra Mahal corridors and the lush Jai Niwas Garden. Cocktails are served by candlelight in the blue-hued Chhavi Niwas room, before dinner in Sukh Niwas, a space with gilded walls that's packed with regal memorabilia. Classical Indian entertainment — performers displaying traditional folk dance in twinkling costumes or musicians playing the chikara — comes before a lavish royal *thali* platter of delicately spiced curries and breads, straight from the royal kitchen.

Black Tomato can arrange tailor-made 10-day itineraries in Rajasthan including the City Palace experience from about \$17,800 per person (based on group of four) excluding international flights. www.blacktomato.com.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT Private plane; 'jigging' for diamonds on a Diamond Safari; Sukh Niwas with Lalique table. **OPPOSITE PAGE** City Palace guide.



BLAST FROM THE PAST
EXPERIENCE CHINA'S
ANCIENT WONDERS
MINUS THE CROWDS

With a UNESCO-listed ancient city in the heart of its futuristic capital, and its man-made wonder of a wall, China packs a weighty punch when it comes to historical and archeological treasures. And they're even more entrancing when visited without the crowds. In Beijing, Wix Squared will pull strings to arrange private visits to the Ming Dynasty-era Temple of Heaven at night, and secure VIP access to the secret gardens and chambers inside the Forbidden City that are normally off-limits. Next, rather than battling tourists with selfie sticks on the busier parts of the Great Wall, you can visit the lesser-known Hebei province for killer bird's-eye views on a helicopter tour, followed by a hike past crumbling watchtowers to a once-in-a-lifetime meal: a lunch of fine French fare set up on a little-known portion of the Wall, served by a wall-side chef and waiter.

Wix Squared offers an eight-night tailor-made trip in Beijing and Shanghai including hotels from about \$12,100 per person (based on two travelling). www.wixsquared.com.



BUBBLE IN PARADISE
THE ULTIMATE CHAMPAGNE EXPERIENCE

"Come quickly, I am tasting the stars," enthused Benedictine monk Dom Pérignon in 1693, after drinking wine he'd been tasked to rid of its undesirable bubbles. Luckily, criticism turned to celebration, and today no word in the dictionary evokes luxury quite like champagne. A visit to its birthplace is a pilgrimage for those with a discerning palate, and no one knows the region better than wine gurus Grape Escapes. After landing in Paris you'll be whisked away to Champagne, and Suite Josephine, the fanciest room at the newly opened Bond-lair-like Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa, which has spectacular views of the valley's lush, striped vineyards, for a two-night stay. On the agenda are a helicopter trip over the vines, being chauffeured in a Maserati to a private tour at Moët & Chandon, with lunch at the Moët Mansion (once a regular haunt of Napoleon) for rare Dom Pérignon vintages paired with fine cuisine, tastings at the Bollinger estate in Ay (which usually keeps its doors shut to the general public) and supper at triple-Michelin-starred l'Assiette Champenoise restaurant.

Grape Escapes can tailor-make two-night Champagne experiences similar to the above from about \$8150 per person based on two people sharing, excluding flights. www.grapeescapes.net/champagne-tours.



PRETTY FLY
TRAVEL AUSTRALIA
LIKE A ROCKSTAR

From the waters of the Great Barrier Reef teeming with confetti-like flurries of fish, to the awe-inspiring monolith of Uluru in the Red Centre, Mother Nature has writ her magic large in Australia. See it like an A-lister on a two-week private jet trip organised by The Tailor. Extravagant is the watchword here; kicking off in Melbourne, a stay at the six-star Crown Towers is combined with a helicopter trip along the Great Ocean Road. Onward stops (in a chartered Swiss Pilatus PC-12 aircraft) include a stay at luxe lodge Saffire Freycinet in Tasmania (and foodie jaunts to pluck oysters from the ocean) as well as sunrise over Uluru at glampsite Longitude 131°. Next up is a ranch adventure at Bullo River Station in the East Kimberley to get hands-on and herd cattle, then a zip over to Queensland's Lizard Island for days filled with dives at famed scuba sites and picnics on blinding-white beaches, before a final stop in Sydney for a private tour of the Opera House and a Sydney Harbour Bridge climb.

The Tailor's 14-night 'travel like a rockstar' trips, including the above experiences, start from \$33,700 per person (based on six travelling, twin share). www.thetailor.com.au/travel-australia-like-a-rockstar.

THIS PAGE Bullo River Station helicopter. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Traveller on the Great Wall; Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa; bottles in the cellar; Temple of Heaven; l'Assiette Champenoise dish.

NEXT UP IS A RANCH ADVENTURE
AT BULLO RIVER STATION IN
THE EAST KIMBERLEY TO GET
HANDS-ON AND HERD CATTLE.

