

CRUISE EXTRA: BEST VALUES, SHIPS, TRIPS, CABINS

Condé Nast Traveler

PULLOUT
EXTRA
**HOW TO
TIP**
PART 2
A GLOBAL
GUIDE

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

AUGUST 2009

SUBLIME TRIPS EVERY TIME!

126 TOP TRAVEL PLANNERS—AND HOW
THEY CAN WORK WONDERS FOR YOU

SUDDENLY EUROPE

NEVER-BEFORE
BARGAINS IN ENGLAND,
ITALY, FRANCE, SPAIN,
IRELAND, AND MORE



**BIKING
DENMARK**
**LOVING
ECUADOR**
**TASTING
TAIPEI**

(SPLASH!)
**WORLD'S
SEXIEST POOLS**



PERRIN'S PEOPLE

126
World's Top
Travel
Specialists

Offering a blend of expertise, access, and good value, these select travel consultants are the pros to turn to for your next big trip

Twenty years of interviewing travel agents and tour operators for "The Perrin Report" and other *Condé Nast Traveler* articles has given me a well-thumbed directory of the most trusted insiders—people who offer the best combination of specialized knowledge (based on firsthand travel experience), local connections, user-friendliness, and value for your dollar.

Each year, my team and I evaluate hundreds of new applicants to this list, and only a small number make the cut. Our recommended specialists have undergone a rigorous screening process that begins with a

47-question application with sample itineraries and client references, then continues with phone interviews and, in most cases, road-testing by *Condé Nast Traveler* staff. Those who unnecessarily book trips through pricey middlemen (as opposed to directly with local hotels and suppliers) or use on-site contacts that charge exorbitant rates are disqualified. Even so, the travel specialists who make the grade

can be expensive. The price quoted within each listing represents the minimum cost per day for two people for the trips that he or she typically books.

I receive hundreds of letters annually from readers reporting back on their trips that were arranged by these travel planners. Any specialist who is the object of valid complaints is removed from the list.

Prefer not to hop from specialist to specialist but to develop a relationship with one travel agent? The consultants marked with the **Ⓢ** icon are your best bet. Even if you settle into a long-term relationship with one of them, when booking a journey where the right guides and local connections are critical it's still advisable to contact the listed specialists to find out what they offer that your generalist travel agent doesn't. —W. P.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU If you have returned from a trip arranged by one of the listed travel planners, please share your feedback. You can post a review online, and read reviews posted by fellow subscribers, at cntraveler.com/specialistreviews. To comment privately or to nominate someone new for consideration, e-mail me at perrinfeedback@cntraveler.com.

THE LISTINGS BELOW ARE ORGANIZED BY EXPERTISE IN COUNTRIES & REGIONS, CRUISES, SPORTS & ADVENTURE, AND SPECIAL INTEREST

COUNTRIES & REGIONS

AFRICA

Madagascar
Monique Rodriguez, Cortez Travel & Expeditions, Solana Beach, California

Thanks to more than 100 trips to this Indian Ocean island, Rodriguez—an honorary consul of Madagascar who visits three or four times annually—knows the best places for spotting its one-of-a-kind wildlife (including the rare aye-aye lemur), experiencing Malagasy culture (via torch in the homes of native Malagasy who are her friends), and luxuriating on pristine beaches. Her local connections enable Rodriguez to open doors to just about any plantation, atelier, or factory (800-854-1029; moniquecortez-usa.com; cortez-usa.com; \$600*).

Morocco
Joel Zack, Heritage Tours Private Travel, New York City

An expert on Moroccan architecture and historic preservation, Zack has made 30-plus trips to the country and returns at least twice a year. He'll help you dive into the culture inside the casbahs—whether through a meeting with art gallery owners or a visit to villagers' homes—and, as much as he loves Marrakech hot hotels and the museums of Fez, may try to coax you out of the major cities to the beaches of Essaouira or the ethereal High Atlas Range (800-378-4555; joelzack@private-travel.com; \$800*).

Seychelles
Astrid Breuer, Island Splendor Vacations, Seychelles

Seychelles native Breuer speaks all three local languages (English, French, and

Creole), which helps in negotiating discounted hotel rates for her clients, whom she occasionally meets up with on the islands, since she lives on Praslin. She knows the best times to visit—whether for scuba diving, fishing, or even whale shark tagging—and can guide you beyond the hottest Mahé hangouts and La Digue beaches to less-touristed out islands. What we love most? She works to accommodate all budgets in this notoriously expensive destination (818-489-2246; astrid@gotoseychelles.com; gotoseychelles.com; \$375*).

Tunisia
Jerry Sorkin, TunisUSA, Wayne, Pennsylvania

Sorkin, who has been arranging travel to Tunisia for 16 years, spends almost half the year in Tunis, where his company has an office. His trips link sightseeing—walks around Roman ruins and normally off-limits excavations, visits to beaches and mountain villages, shopping in city bazaars, drives through the Sahara—with human connections between travelers and everyday Tunisians. Half of most itineraries are spent in remote areas (888-474-5502; info@tunisusa.com; tunisusa.com; \$600*).

Safaris: East Africa
Linda Friedman, Custom Safaris, Bethesda, Maryland

Friedman, who speaks Swahili and has multiple offices in Kenya, spends eight weeks a year in Africa. She can send you to the bottom of northern Tanzania's Olduvai Gorge (a.k.a. the Cradle of Civilization) with one of the site's curators or weave meaningful cultural exchanges into her itineraries—such as volunteering at a school or health clinic. But her latest passion is gorilla tracking in Rwanda, which she's done seven times in the last four years. She contributes money from

each trip to local educational programs (866-530-1982; info@customsafaris.com; customsafaris.com; \$1,000*).

Nina Wennersten and Daniel Saperstein, Hippo Creek Safaris, Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey

We receive more reviews extolling Wennersten than any other travel specialist on this list, thanks to her no-holds-barred candor, attention to the minutest of details, skill at choosing welcoming intimate camps and lodges. 24/7 accessibility, and eagerness to make sure everyone has the most rewarding experience of Africa that their budget will allow, readers rave about her arrangements in southern Africa, too (866-930-9124; info@hippocreek.com; hippocreeksafaris.com; Kenya, \$800*; Tanzania, \$1,190*).

Safaris: Southern Africa
Cheri Briggs, Explore, Steamboat Springs, Colorado

With offices in Botswana and Zambia, Briggs spends six to eight months of the year in Africa, perpetually scouting out new territory. Having served on the boards of several African conservation organizations, she applies her environmental ethics in choosing accommodations, from classic mobile tented safaris to luxe lodges, and fosters client participation in community and wildlife projects. She can have you viewing a trance dance with Bushmen in the Kalahari or lion stalking at night with veterinarians (888-596-6377; exploreafrica.net; exploreafrica.net; \$800*).

Julian Harrison, Premier Tours, Philadelphia

Harrison, who co-authored Fodor's *African Safari*, is fluent in both Afrikaans and

Ⓢ = Recommended generalist

WHEN TO USE A TRAVEL SPECIALIST

The listed consultants will add enough value to justify their cost only on certain types of trips. So you must first determine whether you're better off using their services or making the arrangements yourself. Generally speaking, if you have more money than time, hire one; if you have more time than money, do it.

DO HIRE A PRO FOR ...

- ▶ Start-to-finish customized itineraries with all the bells and whistles
- ▶ Once-in-a-lifetime splurges (e.g., wedding anniversaries) involving four- or five-star hotels
- ▶ English-speaking guides and drivers
- ▶ Special access to monuments, events, or people
- ▶ Cruises with private shore excursions

DON'T HIRE A PRO FOR ...

- ▶ The cheapest options
- ▶ Airline tickets only
- ▶ Single components of a trip (e.g., a one-day tour, restaurant reservations)
- ▶ B&Bs or run-of-the-mill hotels (such as those of a mid-priced chain)
- ▶ Redeeming frequent-flyer miles or guest points only

hotel equals a bad trip. Wallace (also see "United Arab Emirates and Oman"), who has visited virtually every property in the Maldives, will match you to the right one while making sure your stay is perfect. His behind-the-scenes string pulling with resort managers, concierges, maître d's, sommeliers, spa directors, room butlers, and dive masters translates into special perks for clients, from advantageous room locations to deserted-island excursions (800-335-6033; lindsay@linarastravel.com; linarastravel.com; \$500*).

Mongolia
Jalsa Urubushurov, Nomadic Expeditions, Monroe Township, New Jersey

Urubushurov has an office in Ulaanbaatar, speaks two Mongolian dialects, and has an enthusiasm for his ancestral homeland that is infectious. He recommends traveling within the country by four-wheel drive and horse rather than by air—so as to better appreciate the vast, unspoiled landscapes—and stopping en route to meet with nomadic families and experience their natural warmth. Travelers stay in a combination of accommodations: hotels, ger (traditional Mongolian tents), and Nomadic Expeditions' eco-friendly lodge in the Gobi Desert (800-998-6634; jalsa@nomadicexpeditions.com; nomadicexpeditions.com; \$655*).

Myanmar
William Myatwunna, Good News Travel, Yangan, Myanmar

When Lonely Planet writers decide that it's time to update their guide to Myanmar, the first call they make is to Myatwunna. Born in Yangan and educated in Europe, he is your key to this famously reclusive country. Not only does Myatwunna arrange for drivers, translators, river cruises, mountain treks, bungalows at beachfront resorts, private tours of hill-tribe villages, and hot-air balloon rides above the ancient ruins of Bagan but he also keeps clients apprised of the latest news and trouble spots (951-375-050; goodnewstravel@gmail.com; myanmargoodnewstravel.com; \$600*).

Family Travel in Asia
Leslie Overton, Absolute Travel, New York City

Traveling to Asia can feel daunting enough, but doing it with kids? That's another story. Overton, however—who has traveled in nine Asian countries with her two daughters, ages five and nine—designs trips that will please parents and children alike. She can arrange water buffalo rides in Thailand, kite flying adventures in China, and visits to local schools so the children can interact with kids their age. She also informs clients about different safety standards (car seats, etc.) so they can take necessary precautions (800-736-8187; loverton@absolutetravel.com; absolutetravel.com; \$750*).

EUROPE
Austria and Central Europe
Elison Poe, Poe Travel, Little Rock, Arkansas

Poe used to live in Vienna, returns to Austria at least three times a year, speaks German, and calls the country her "home away from home." She has the clout to get you the royal treatment in Central Europe's finest hotels, yet she

will also point you toward inexpensive must-dos, such as colorful vegetable markets and free concerts (800-727-1960; epoe@poetravel.com; poetravel.com; \$275*).

Belgium and the Netherlands
Harmina Mulder, The Travel Society, Darvina, Michigan

At least once your native Holland at Mulder, who visits her native Holland at least once a year, sends travelers to both the highlights and the lesser-known gems, such as Giethoorn, the Venice of the Netherlands. Under her care you'll be biking to the Keukenhof Gardens to see the tulips in April and ordering bulbs to be shipped to your home five months later, just before planting time (303-337-8262; harmina@travelsociety.com; travelsociety.com; \$400*).

TIP
3 DON'T CLAM UP
OF:

To design an itinerary customized to your personality and interests, the consultant needs to know a lot about you. When a travel planner asks about your past trips, your expectations for this one, your hobbies, your physical condition, and your travel companions, be honest, specific, and thorough in your responses. If there are things you have not liked about past trips, bring these up. If you're eager to interact with locals off the beaten tourist track, say so. Never delegate this vital phone conversation to someone else; that would be like sending your assistant to be fitted for your custom-tailored suit.

Bulgaria, Romania, and the Balkans
Alexander Datsiev, Exeter International, Tampa, Florida

The knowledge that Datsiev gained as a tour guide in his home country of Bulgaria will help you navigate the region's relatively undeveloped infrastructure and sometimes Communist-style customer-service mentality. He'll have you taking classes in traditional Bulgarian woodworking or visiting the private cellars of a Romanian monastery for wine-tasting and a chat with the monks (813-251-5355; alex@exeterinternational.com; exeterinternational.com; \$700*).

Croatia
Wanda S. Radetti, Tastyful Croatian Journeys, New York City

Radetti returns to her native Croatia four or five times a year to continue exploring the 1,185 islands of the country's coast. She can point you toward Istria's most savory trifles, introduce you to the lamp-lighter who uses a long wick to illuminate the gaslights of Zagreb's Old Town, and wrangle invites to the Grand Masked Ball in the Carnival city of Rijeka (718-932-

Wendy Perrin's Tenth Annual
126 Top TRAVEL SPECIALISTS

6803; wandaaradetti@visitecroatia.com; visitecroatia.com; \$800*).

Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland
Gwen Kozlowski, Exeter International, Tampa, Florida

Thanks to the 500 travelers she sends to these countries annually, Kozlowski has clout with the most charming designer hotels and the best English-speaking guides—those who know how to bypass every line. In Prague she can pull strings to get you inside the Strahov Monastery's library (yes, behind the velvet rope), and in Krakow she can arrange for lessons with local artists in traditional Easter egg painting and other folk crafts (813-251-5355; gweng@exeterinternational.com; exeterinternational.com; Czech Republic and Hungary, \$900*; Poland, \$800*).

France
Anthony Bay, Abercrombie & Kent, Valbonne, France

A resident of France for the past 20 years and currently based in Provence, Bay is not only a registered French National Guide but also charged with the development of Abercrombie & Kent's new European itineraries. This means he's on the road in Europe a lot. If you're lucky enough to snag him, however, he can design a ne plus ultra itinerary that incorporates everything from hidden-gem vineyards to the most authentic regional festivals (33-4-92-95-35-59; france@europe.abercrombiekent.com; abercrombiekent.com; \$1,100*).

Jill Jergel, Frontiers International Travel, Wexford, Pennsylvania

Well connected among French hoteliers, Jergel (see also "Europe: Canal Barge Trips") packs her detailed itineraries with exclusive experiences such as hot-air ballooning over the châteaux of the Loire Valley or venturing beneath the Eiffel Tower to see the elevator's original nineteenth-century hydraulics. She's also the go-to person for French barge trips (800-245-1930; jergel@frontierstravel.com; frontierstravel.com; \$750*).

Howard E. Lewis, Protravel International, Beverly Hills, California

Lewis, who has spent nearly 500 days in France over the past 10 years, is perfect for independent travelers who, rather than using English-speaking drivers or guides, prefer to drive themselves to the cozy inns, chic hotels, and over-the-top châteaux that Lewis knows so well, stopping en route to explore the charming corners of France that he has mapped out for them (310-271-9566; howard@protravelinc.com; protravelinc.com; \$500*).

Germany
Marion Harbison, Sterling Brownell, Chattanooga, Tennessee

Harbison spends two weeks a year in her native Germany, where she used to be a travel agent. Not only can she point you toward the country's less-visited castles, regional specialty snacks, and colorful small-town festivals but she can get you into private wineries and local events you won't find on the Internet

(423-894-9001; marionh@sterlingvt.com; sterlingvt.com; \$225*).

Greece
Ronnie Liadis, Liadis Travel, Newtown Square, Pennsylvania

Need a romantic getaway or honeymoon? Liadis, who spends at least two weeks in Greece annually, loves to send clients to one of a kind hotels, such as a cave house tucked into Santorini's cliffs or a resort nestled among ancient ruins. And she throws in special touches like culinary experiences and off-the-beaten-path wineries (800-542-3471; ronnie@liadis.com; liadis.com; \$400*).

Leftheris Papageorgiou, Hellenic Adventures, St. Paul, Minnesota

Seeking a true understanding of Greek history and culture? Papageorgiou was born and raised there and has explored every corner of the mainland as well as 57 of its islands. His museum connections and expert guides can open doors that are otherwise closed to travelers, and his encyclopedic knowledge of the best islands and the best months for visiting guarantees that you'll end up in the right place at the right time (800-851-6349; leftheris@hellenicadventures.com; hellenicadventures.com; \$600*).

Christos Stagiou, TrueGreece, Athraoussi, Greece

After growing up in Athens and on the island of Patmos, Stagiou moved to the United States for college and graduate school. Now, armed with an MBA from Stanford, he's back home, giving visitors a luxe, intimate experience of unspoiled Greece. He'll have you swimming in the crystal-clear waters of isolated beaches, staying by traditional Greek wooden boat to deserted islands, joining in village celebrations, or learning how to make authentic spanakoptita (800-817-7098; info@truegreece.com; truegreece.com; \$500*).

Ireland
Kathleen Sheridan, Altour, Paramus, New Jersey

Sheridan, who scopes out Ireland's rapidly changing scene three times a year, prefers its fine manor houses and lodges to its B&Bs but will help you stretch your dollar as far as it can go. She'll keep you away from places that have grown too touristy, and can arrange for everything from golfing to surfing—yes, surfing (201-477-7002; kathl.sheridan@altour.com; altour.com; \$600*).

Italy
Andrea Grisdale, IC Bellagio, Bellagio, Italy

A bilingual former guide and tour manager, Grisdale still spends two months of the year on scouting trips throughout the country and the rest of it at her base on Lake Como. Depending on your interests, she can have the crypt of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice opened for you, procure a Ferrari that you can drive through Piedmont, or arrange a visit to Carretta's famed marble quarries with a local sculptor. She and her shrewd team manage to make arrangements for 3,000

☞ Recommended generalist

*Prices represent the minimum—per day for two people—that you should expect to pay. The more you spend, the more the travel specialist can embellish your trip with added value.