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ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN EDWARD MILLER; SUBARU OF AMERICA, INC. (TOP RIGHT)

The Grand American Road Trip

Travel companies are seriously upgrading the auto vacation—devising itineraries so deluxe and detailed all you have to do is get behind the wheel

By DONNA BULSECO

THERE IS NOTHING like a road trip to make you feel alive and free to go anywhere you darn well please on a full tank of gas. At least, that's my memory of the ones I've taken, from the college-era trip from Malibu to Mazatlan in my psycho boyfriend's VW van, or the time my husband and I barreled cross-country in a vintage 1952 Kaiser Manhattan and got lost in Iowa, driving alongside endless rows of cornfields in search of a diner.

These days, however, a certain demanding segment of travelers is less willing to leave even the open road to chance, preferring a bespoke itinerary that frees them from mundane decisions and panicky "do

we turn here?" freakouts, even if it comes at a price. Excursions can start at \$800 a day and soar to \$4,000, depending on lodging and extras like expert guides stationed en route. Some companies will even bundle in top-notch wheels—such as souped-up Cadillac Escalades and Lamborghini Huracans. (Not included? That full tank of gas. You're on your own when it comes to budgeting for rising gas prices, now approaching \$3 a gallon on average.)

Families, groups of friends, couples—both empty nesters and honeymooners—are booking these self-drive getaways in the U.S. with travel companies such as All Roads North, EXP Journeys and Black Tomato. All three provide customized route maps and highly detailed itineraries, charting every mile of the trek. In large part, the newest iterations of the road trip

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ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



PARK AND RECREATION Marin County's Ridgecrest Blvd., just off California's Highway 1, one of the most popular routes offered by luxury road trip companies.

AARON HOJACK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (CALIFORNIA); ELEVEN (ICELAND)

Revved-Up Road Trips

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tame the rambunctious tradition, ensuring you get pampered when it's time to turn in, whether that means bunking at southern Utah's luxurious Amangiri or glamping on a cliff in Zion, snoozing in a safari-like tent kitted out with a king-size bed and fully functional bathroom.

On the front end, booking one of these pumped-up road trips cuts out the months of mind-boggling Googling and family bickering that go into planning it yourself, said Jen Grossman, co-founder of Shalom Tikvah, a nonprofit based in Baltimore. Her family of five has traipsed through the Canadian Rockies, the American West and down the Pacific Coast Highway using itineraries created by Kevin Jackson, co-founder of EXP Journeys, based in Solana Beach, Calif. By having a sea-

These newest iterations of the road trip means bunking at Utah's luxurious Amangiri or glamping on a cliff in Zion, snoozing in a safari-like tent.

soned hiking and mountaineering guide like Mr. Jackson plot out the miles and the hours on the road, these road trippers can avoid the high-trafficked areas in Yosemite and, if they've rented an RV (which the company will also book for you), find the choicest camping spots in the Grand Canyon, with awe-inspiring vistas untrampled by tourists. Mr. Jackson also sometimes accompanies the clients, driving and serving as a guide during outdoor excursions.

A well-researched game plan can still yield surprises—the good kind, said Carolyn Butler, whose family took a trip this summer organized by All Roads North, a 4-year-old company based in Venice Beach, Calif. Over the course of 10 days, the Butlers drove 900 miles across Colorado, Utah and Arizona. All Roads North co-founder Sam Highley choreographed a day that included a waterfall hike in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Park with a bush-

craft and survival expert who taught her boys, ages 9 and 12, “how to set up a backcountry shelter, sharpen knives, light a campfire and hike across mesa ridges.” The family had “glamped” nearby the night before.

This new vision of the American road trip strays from the classic form established from the 1950s to the 1970s, the heyday of such vacations, according to Richard Ratay, author of the new book “Don't Make Me Pull Over! The Informal History of the Family Road Trip” (Scribner). “I'm skeptical of the luxury aspect,” said Mr. Ratay. “So much of the fun and the opportunity for bonding was facing the challenges, even the boredom, that travel along the highways can bring a family's way.” The trips he remembers could sometimes be a mind-numbing trek from point A to point B involving unsavory pit stops, license plate games that ended in tears and, worst of all, a wrong turn that set the happy journey emotionally and strategically off course by hours.

But getting lost isn't a worry, or frankly, an option when you have at your disposal minutely planned guides, 24/7 emergency assistance and GPS. All Roads North's Journey Guides map out every superlative crook in the long and winding road, as well as driving times and lore about locales along the way. EXP Journeys and Black Tomato give clients a preprogrammed GPS. That allows travelers to feel a sense of discovery but also have a sense of security. “We call it ‘framed spontaneity,’” said Tom Marchant, founding director of Black Tomato, based in London, referring to some of the more unusual detours that can be built into their road trips. For example, the company once arranged a hot-air balloon trip in the Grand Tetons for a photography buff, starting at one particularly photogenic bend in the road.

Not all the detours need be quite as extravagant. All Roads North clients who were wheeling through Montana on the same day as the annual Great Montana Sheep Drive (held every September) were directed to Reed Point off I-90 to watch some 2,000 sheep sashay down Main Street after the hay-bale rolling and log sawing contests. Before the sheep drive, they were sent to the Grand Hotel, a beautiful old railroad hotel in nearby Big Timber, for lunch. And a recent EXP Journey's itinerary along the California coastline recommended a turn off on Highway 1 for a short hike to witness Big Sur's 80-foot. McWay Waterfall, something most tourists see only from the road. Driving time doesn't exceed three to four hours a day, said EXP's Mr. Jackson, in the hopes that road fatigue doesn't set in. For the time-pressed and deep-pocketed, shortcuts are suggested:

“Driving around the south rim of the Grand Canyon can take four hours, so why not do a helicopter tour instead?” he said. The company will book a local driver to transport the car and luggage to the night's 5-star hotel, such as Sedona's Enchantment Resort, while you're flying high.

A “luxury road trip” might seem an oxymoron, but it has definite perks—such as the possibility that the aforementioned helicopter takes you to see wild mustangs. “We found a ranch west of Yellowstone, where a

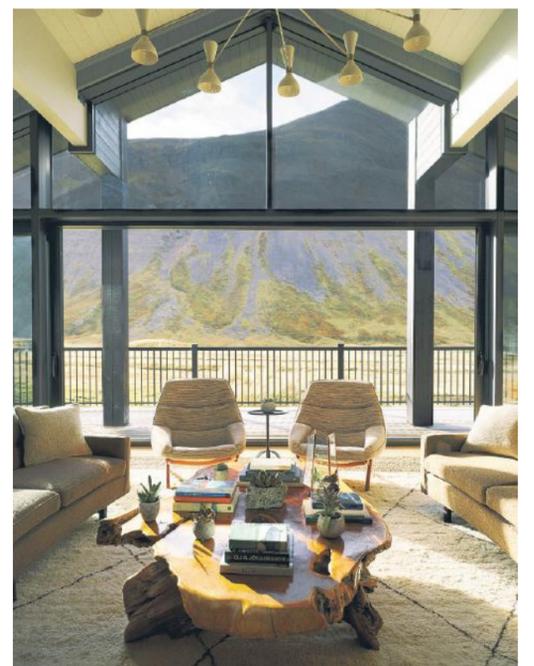
herd of 300 mustangs was being relocated,” said Mr. Highley of All Roads North. After a catered picnic on a hill overlooking Paradise Valley in Yellowstone, he and a family of clients flew over the ranch to see the horses. It's likely the family will remember that moment as fondly as I do the miniature horse farm outside of Solvang from a road trip long ago. Come to think of it, the scale of the horses from up in the sky, and the warm, fuzzy feeling of being there, was probably comparable.

How to Say ‘Are We There, Yet?’ in Icelandic Companies that arrange luxe road-trips abroad

Central Europe and the Baltics Exeter International has been refining self-driving tours through Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Slovenia since 2009. The company gains points for providing a preprogrammed Garmin GPS that will bark out, in English, your carefully curated stops. Most travelers arrange their own car rental, but hand-holding is a 24/7 phone call away for emergencies or any question, like “Where can I park in Bratislava?” From \$800 a day; exeterinternational.com

Argentina and Chile Swoop Patagonia's self-guided drives through Patagonia can last anywhere from 5 to 32 days. Inquire online or call an expert who will drill down on details about the company's prepackaged excursions, or customize your own. Detailed driving notes and maps, written by trekkers who've been there, keep you on course. *Ten-day road trip from Bariloche to El Calafate, from \$1,825.* swoop-patagonia.com/travel/road-trips

Iceland, Scandinavia and Scotland Based in Reykjavik, Nordic Visitor offers self-drive itineraries of sundry lengths, from 5 to 16 days. Peruse routes online,



POSH PIT STOP Iceland's Deplar Farm, one of the lodging options offered with Nordic Visitor's self-drive itineraries.

then speak with a specialist to finesse accommodations as well as extras—those heli-spa treks add up, you know. Your choice of car comes with free GPS, Wi-Fi and use of a cellphone that has a 24/7 hjálp (that's Icelandic for ‘help’) line, in case your Ford hits a fjord. Once booked, an itinerary and map wing their way to you in both digital and hard copies. From \$700 a day; nordicvisitor.com



BRIAN EDWARD MILLER

UNEASY RIDERS / SO MUCH CAN GO WRONG WHEN YOU'RE FREEWHEELING IT

“POWERFUL TRAVEL moments get you out of your comfort zone,” said author Dave Hoekstra, referring to that special brand of discomfort that only road trip glitches can deliver. Mr. Hoekstra should know. He spent June 2016 to March 2017 driving across 24 states, covering some 24,200 miles, as recounted in “The Camper Book: A Celebration of a Moveable American Dream” (*Chicago Review Press*). One such glitch: The time he camped in his Ford Transit Van in subzero weather at Minnesota's Dakotah Meadows

RV Park. “I slept wearing a couple of winter coats. I was by myself. I wished I were with a warm woman and a bottle of tequila. I finally took a shuttle to the Mystic Lakes Casino to warm up.”

Often, the most hellish aspect of the road trip is the road itself, as Dan Pashman, host of “the Sporkful” food podcast, recalled: “My most terrifying road trip was on my honeymoon in 2007. My wife, Janie, and I drove down the beautiful Adriatic Coast in Croatia. I was white-knuckling it on a

nightmarishly narrow road on a cliff. Cars whooshed past me; tour buses clumsily swerved into my lane. And every mile, there was a cross and flowers where someone had died, lest I forget one false move could lead to our demise.”

Author James R. Hansen points out the other variable in a road trip—the person at the controls. Mr. Hansen, who wrote the 2005 biography “First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong,” (Simon & Schuster), remembered taking a road trip from Ohio to Indiana with Arm-

strong himself at the wheel. “Being driven by the astronaut who took the Eagle down in that historic landing in 1969 was stirring, yet I knew in the '50s, as a test pilot, Neil was notorious in his carpool,” said Mr. Hansen. “Betty Love, one of the riders, told me that Neil sat back in the driver's seat like he was in an easy chair and crossed his left leg over his right knee. He once ran an air-police truck into a ditch. When Neil showed the MPs his I.D., instead of bawling him out, they saluted him.”