AROUND THE WORLD BY PRIVATE JET

News / Business aviation

From Petra to Easter Island, seeing the wonders of the world in luxury is made easy aboard a new round-the-world TCS private jet trip.

In 1522, when the Spanish carrack Victoria sailed into Seville after completing the first circumnavigation of the globe, this epic voyage of discovery had taken almost three years. Only 18 of the original 260 crew were on board, and the numerous casualties included the expedition's leader, Ferdinand Magellan.

Now we are in the oh-so-easy 21st century, and I'm about to whizz around the same planet in just 23 days, flying in a sublimely luxurious private jet west from Orlando to London on a fantasy trip that will take in nine countries and make stops to see a fiesta of bucket-list sights including Machu Picchu, Easter Island, the Great Barrier Reef, French Polynesia, Angkor Wat, the Taj Mahal and Petra.

The TCS World Travel private jet

Magellan and his God-fearing sailors were seeking spices, but what are my 19 fellow passengers after? Not wealth. Mostly American, these good-natured, name-badge-wearing globetrotters can clearly afford the £77,800 ticket per person (based on two sharing) for our all-inclusive odyssey in which everything is provided, from freely flowing Pol Roger to pillow gifts to emergency purses of local currency.

Nor are they seeking glory. Around half are retired (although the rich and clever never really retire). Many quietly sing of self-made success, courteous and sociable achievers who have served their years in the battlefields of finance, law, health and property. On this whirlwind of a trip there will be postcards sent, and Facebook postings, and Facetime with the kids back home, but no bragging. Even the natural desire to see the wonders of the world is muted by the fact that most passengers have already visited some of the destinations on our World Heritage Site-spangled

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itinerary. “It’ll be Petra for the third time,” sighs a seasoned traveller from Massachusetts who has kindly brought along some wine from his Napa Valley vineyard for us to share.

No, in essence, everyone boarding our palatial black-and-silver Four Seasons Private Jet in Orlando has simply booked a good old-fashioned escorted group holiday. The formula is no different from the continental package tours pioneered by Thomas Cook in 1855, except that the top hats and parasols have given way to Tumi puffer jackets and backpacks by Kate Spade. On this journey of a lifetime we will be clocking up 20,000 nautical miles in a customised Boeing 757 with 52 flat-bed seats in Italian white leather. Now that is space (such aircraft normally carry around 239 passengers), although there are also tours where the configuration is 80 reclining seats – and if you can cope with that, you’ll save more than £25,000 a head.

Surprisingly, we only spend a total of 48 hours and 30 minutes in the air flying to London the long way round, which is a pity because this level of in-flight comfort is quite life-ruining. Every passenger is given Bose noise-cancelling headphones and an iPad pre-loaded with films to keep, while the 14 all-British crew are the quintessence of Joanna Lumley-ish loveliness with a dash of Biggles and a splash of *Are You Being Served?*. Not everything is absolutely top class – the bathrooms are basic, there’s nowhere to hang a jacket, and the meals are unsensational (the thinking is that the gourmet thrills should happen on the ground).

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Aboard the Boeing 757, passengers recline on one of 52 flat-bed setas sheathed in Italian white leather; a

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Why start in Orlando? Because it’s easy to reach and the climate is reliable, although no one seems to notice how deliciously bizarre it is to jet from one magic kingdom (Walt Disney’s) to the Inca equivalent in Machu Picchu, Peru. We land in Lima then take a charter flight up to Cusco, and the jump to 11,152ft has everyone short of breath and reaching for the coca tea. When you tear around the world this fast, plunging in and out of places in a global version of supermarket grab, you have to be up for it.

Is it exhausting? No, because all the dreary bits are removed. At the airport we use private terminals or just march straight through the departures hall. Our bundle-of-laughs “first lady of luggage” fills in all the landing cards. Somehow, my suitcase gets beamed from my over-water bungalow in Bora Bora to my rainforest-wrapped suite in Far North Queensland without my lifting a finger. It is like undergoing some ambrosial kidnapping.

On the ground, the level of service is regal. When we set off to see the Inca ruins around Cusco,

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there are never more than six or eight passengers in the minibus, even if it seats 18, so guests don't feel crowded or have to wait for the last person who's decided to buy that divine alpaca scarf after all. In Tahiti, changing flights in Papeete, we are given exclusive use of a huge lounge, where the standard Polynesian welcome of live music and garlands of flowers is taken to new heights when it evolves into a terrific floorshow with tattooed and plumed dancers. When we take a day cruise to snorkel on the Great Barrier Reef there are just 16 of us on a catamaran that normally takes 90, plus a photographer who follows us underwater to create a complimentary DVD of images capturing this classic voyage.

But is it meaningful? That's the question on the lips of everyone we meet, as we flit hummingbird-like from one world-famous bloom to the next. Bubble-wrapped in luxury, there's a suspicion it might all be one long, cosseted blur, that we'll end up feeling as dissatisfied as a child being rushed through a toy shop. That isn't the case. One reason is that we're visiting great wonders of the world, which in my experience always live up to their hype. When you walk down the Siq in Petra and see the Treasury carved out of pink stone, even for the umpteenth time, the wow factor is undeniable. Another crucial element is flexibility – if you want to peel off and see a specific work of art in a museum, they'll happily fix it. A third plus is the high quality of our local guides. Visiting Machu Picchu (I'd been before), I'm concerned my new friends will only get a superficial encounter – but I'm wrong. Our enthusiastic guide, Diego Valle, does an excellent job lifting the lid on "Mucho Picture", as he quips, from telling the tale of its discovery by Hiram Bingham to explaining the elaborate stonework used to track the movement of sun and stars.

Finally, there's the commendable fact that the organisers of this tour don't skimp on a thing – and boy, do they love a surprise. The itinerary might simply say "beach dinner", but it'll most likely be followed by some high-class fire-dancers and a seriously good firework display that screams "No Expense Spared!" into the warm night sky. "No can do" does not seem to be in the company vocabulary. If you want to bring seven suitcases, that's fine (I'm told the record is 13); if you need to call in your own private jet to collect your shopping halfway through, no problem; and when our beloved plane hits a brief technical snag in India, three more aircraft are instantly chartered to ensure no one misses seeing the Taj Mahal.

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Tropical views on the way to Easter Island

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Perhaps the greatest thrill of travelling like this is that it redraws all the maps. To fly by scheduled carrier from Lima to Easter Island, our next stop and one of most remote inhabited islands in the world, it would take almost 13 hours, going via Santiago de Chile. We do it in five while enjoying a light lunch of shrimp ceviche and passionfruit panna cotta with a chilled glass of Puligny Montrachet 2011.

For many on board, the chance to visit this mystery-rich dot in the Pacific is the deal-clincher. Our arrival is made all the more spectacular by Captain William Tupling-Prest , one of our three trusty pilots, who takes the jet down to 2,100ft then circles the island so we can enjoy exhilarating views of its volcanic craters and iconic moai (statues) – something that would never happen on a regular flight.

Only 14 miles by seven, Easter Island is the world’s most fascinating sculpture park, home to some 8,000 Polynesian and Chilean residents plus 4,000 mostly wild horses. We check into the

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excellent, eco-sensitive Explora Rapa Nui hotel (which serves some of the freshest, most inventive food I eat on the whole trip), then do the standard tour to see the island's strange, cartoon-like, top-knotted figures created between the 12th and 17th centuries, and visit the incredible quarry where these colossal heads, some weighing up to 82 tons, were carved. What makes our brief time here feel special, though, is the additional activities that are offered. Everywhere we go we get such optional excursions – deep-sea fishing in Bora Bora, ballooning over Angkor, a curry-making class in Jaipur. These are at no extra cost, and it means you get to clock up a whole bundle of bonus once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

In this case, some of us take a sunrise hike up the extinct Terevaka volcano, others go horseriding, while I opt for a bike ride along the coast to see the mighty parade of 15 moai at Ahu Tongariki. Yesterday the island was swarming with Japanese visitors from a 960-passenger cruise ship, but now we have its bewitching landscape to ourselves.

We freewheel along the empty roads, drinking in the gorgeous early-morning light, and then finally cool off in natural rock pools by the sea. "So, do you think this trip is worth six cents a second?" a fellow globe-circler asks me close to our halfway point. I'd never thought to make such a calculation, but that's probably why he's rich and I'm not. After our series of life-affirming days on Easter Island, the answer can only be yes – assuming you've got the bucks and are happy travelling in a large group.

When the tattered remnants of Magellan's great Armada de Molucca made it home, the captain declared its greatest achievement (along with a lucrative cargo of cloves) was to have "discovered and made a course around the entire rotundity of the world". He received a knighthood and enough riches to support two mistresses, and the entire crew were granted commemorative coats-of-arms.

We, in turn, get rewarded with a gala dinner at the Four Seasons Hotel in London, complete with a bagpiper, four choices of smoked salmon, mini-Bakewell tarts and a Beatles tribute band, where everyone enjoys a last dance together. It's an emotional finale to a dream trip that many will no doubt see as a sunlit plateau on life's long journey. As the Fab Four sang so harmoniously on Abbey Road: "Because the world is round, it turns me on."

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