

TRAVEL + LEISURE

The Power of Travel

IN THE WORDS OF

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS



◀ Mark Thornton Safaris takes select groups on foot through the Serengeti.

▲ A Nomadic Road driving expedition in Mongolia.

GROUP TOURS GET A GLOW-UP

Post-pandemic, small-group tours organized around shared interests are attracting an enthusiastic crowd.

By Jennifer Bradley Franklin

GRACE GUERRA IS a self-described extrovert, but even she wasn't quite sure about going on vacation with a bunch of people she didn't know. "There's always a bit of nerves," says the Oceanside, California-based marketing manager. Guerra had signed up for a small-group glamping adventure in Moab, Utah, organized by **Cherish Tours** (*four days from \$1,025 per person*). She was intrigued by destinations such as Arches National Park, of course, but also the emphasis Cherish puts on introducing visitors to female-owned businesses and creating opportunities for women to connect in an open, supportive environment.

"Getting to do this with other women was a big incentive for me, as was meeting new people who are choosing to invest in these kinds of adventures," says Guerra, who shared her safari-style tent with an assigned roommate. The trip

was so much fun that she took a second one with Cherish, to Costa Rica, just five months later.

While Cherish Tours focuses on women-only trips, it's one of a growing cohort offering departures organized around affinity groups and special interests. Consider the **Table Less Traveled** (*nine days in Italy from \$9,460 per person*), which launched its food-focused trips in 2015 to "fast-track relationships for people who wanted to explore deeper," in the words of founder Annie Sim.

Her forays to Italy, Japan, Peru, and beyond focus on cultural experiences—visiting an off-the-beaten-path family farm or enjoying an intimate dinner in someone's city apartment—that wouldn't be feasible as a larger group. Lately, Sim says, she's seen a spike in interest, and as a result is tripling the number of itineraries on offer in 2024.

Sharing an adrenaline rush is another way to forge connections. Expedition specialist **Nomadic Road** (*10 days from \$7,200 per person, all-inclusive*) gets strangers bonding by leading mini-convoys of 4 x 4 vehicles through remote parts of Bolivia, Madagascar, and Mongolia, among other destinations. Founder Venky Sugavanam connects by phone with would-be drivers to ensure they're up for the challenge before confirming each booking.

Even companies better known for private travel have launched small-group itineraries, often because their clients are looking for a more social experience. **Mark Thornton Safaris** (*11 days from \$12,950 per person, all-inclusive*), for example, just organized its second-ever group tour in October. The eight-person voyage, which the company says sold out in one day, involved walking through the Serengeti, in the midst of the Great Migration, with stays at mobile camps.

Another firm, **Naya Traveler** (*10 days from \$7,000 per person*), has also seen strong demand for its newly relaunched small-group departures. First up will be a journey through Morocco next October for up to 10 guests, with stops in Fez, Marrakesh, and the Sahara.

For some travelers, the decision to sign on comes not only from their own specific interest but also the desire to just get going. Pam Czekanski, who works in investment management in Boston, often travels with friends and family, but she had doubts about convincing anyone to join her on a wish-list trip to New Zealand.

"I said, 'Now is the time; I'm not waiting any longer.'" She booked a tour with **Active Adventures** (*14 days from \$6,999 per person*) that saw her joining a group of six other travelers and two guides to hike and bike across New Zealand's South Island. "It was," Czekanski recalls, "above and beyond."