


CENTURION

M A G A Z I N E

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Bartolomé Island, in the Galápagos, is one stop on the President's Journey Around the World expedition with TCS World Travel.

...757 Jet to Fly Around the World

No lines, no delays, no lost luggage. This charter company makes an epic journey effortless. *by Tom Vanderbilt*

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MOST OF US VIEW air travel as a necessary hardship endured as a means to getting to fabulous places. But on a recent private jet journey with TCS World Travel, I quickly began to wonder whether I was simply enduring my time in fabulous

places so I could get back on the plane. I got my first sense of what an extraordinary trip I was about to embark upon when I arrived at Rwanda's Kigali International Airport. It was stone quiet—you could actually hear crickets. The reason? The airport was closed for runway maintenance, with all flights postponed. Well, not all flights. Suddenly there was the rush of Rolls-Royce engines, as the 757 operated by TCS came gliding into view, looking like a luxury stealth bomber in the midday African heat.

A private jet tour company in business for nearly three decades, TCS operates two planes and does 22 trips annually. I boarded the President's Journey Around the World midstream, joining about 50 others, many of them repeat guests, who were spending three weeks traversing the globe, with pit stops in places like Kyoto intermixed with longer sojourns—gorilla trekking in Rwanda, a four-day Galápagos cruise. My fellow passengers owned companies, vineyards, and even championship



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TCS World Travel operates two Boeing 757s for its globe-trotting itineraries.

Thoroughbreds, and they also had both the money and time to do things right. "Getting people to embark on multi-week group travel can be a challenge," Shelley Cline, president of TCS, told me in the skies over Central America. "They're unsure they're going to like it. But once they come on board, they love how much they can see in a short period of time."

Indeed, the beauty of traveling with TCS is the company's ability to make travel feel effortless. Every time we landed in a chaotic airport (Casablanca's Mohammed V International comes to mind) with snaking customs lines, we suddenly found ourselves being ushered by men in suits toward an agent who was miraculously free. The right forms had always been filled out in advance, the proper transport (helicopter, Zodiac) was always waiting.

We enjoyed this ultra-VIP service on our excursions as well. There was a private breakfast in Rio de Janeiro, at the base of the iconic Christ the Redeemer statue (a level of access normally reserved for world leaders like President Obama). Our evening on the verdant terrace at Heaven, a stylish new hotel in Kigali, Rwanda, started with a blazing performance by

singers Charly and Nina, one of the country's hottest acts.

Choreographing this bureaucratic ballet was Richard Butler, a tall, unflappable Brit. He always seemed to be in motion—bounding up stairs, down gangplanks—and at the ready to attend to guests. Meanwhile, Jany Baccallao, a dashing Cuban American and former actor, had the Herculean task of ensuring that the group's luggage made it around the world. He's never lost a bag.

But the aircraft itself was the star of the show, with its cool white leather and handsome wood accents, warm lighting, and footrests that doubled as ottomans for seat-hopping passengers (only a quarter of the 200-person plane was occupied). It felt like we were in a chic hotel bar. Butler explained the "two-thirds rule" to me: If you flew for nine hours on one of their planes, it felt like six.

Because time flies when you are being indulged, I watched films (*Gorillas in the Mist*) with QC30 Bose headphones and wrapped myself in an Avoca woolen throw when I wanted to sack out for a few hours. Every time we reboarded the plane, the crew would be lined up, offering hot towels and cool drinks.

And then there was the food that made most first-class fare seem

institutional by comparison. Dishes such as chicken with lemon tartare relish and baby potatoes were de rigueur. As we left Morocco, we were served pan-fried perch with minted eggplant, white couscous, and green lentils. Somewhere between Casablanca and Rio, I did something I'd never done before: I asked for seconds of an airline meal.

But even the best travel tacticians have to wrestle with the occasional hiccup. Naturally, TCS comes with a doctor on board. Ours was a professor of emergency medicine at Harvard (as well as an attending physician at Massachusetts General Hospital), who took care of a passenger's broken collarbone in Vietnam and put another suffering from severe dehydration on an airborne IV drip. And somewhere over the Atlas Mountains, Butler came on the PA system to announce that our itinerary to the Galápagos had to change. TCS had been given permission to fly directly to Baltra, Ecuador, bypassing the customary transfer at Guayaquil, but a sudden shift in policy by the Ecuadorean government had scuttled that plan.

"That's why we call it an 'expedition,'" Cline said with a resigned smile. Despite some major attempts at string pulling—with former diplomat Mark Johnson, a lecturer on the trip, making a call to the U.S. ambassador to Ecuador—we all had to decamp for a short economy-class flight. Undeterred, TCS managed to keep our group together and rustle up business-class catering. "All good fun," Butler said as he scanned his spreadsheets, munched on a chicken sandwich, and planned our next out-of-this-world adventure. *From \$51,950, all-inclusive; tcsworldtravel.com.*