

## DESTINATIONS

# Dispatch From a Trip to the Other Side of the World

A once-in-a-lifetime private jet journey with luxury purveyors TCS World Travel.

WORDS BY T. COLE RACHEL



**THERE WAS A** moment on my recent trip with TCS World Travel that I momentarily forgot where I was. I found myself standing in the middle of a tropical garden somewhere in the Cook Islands as an expert botanical gardener handed me a fruit unlike any I had ever seen before, freshly plucked from a similarly alien-looking tree, and suggested that I take a bite. As I savored the sweet fruit and looked around at my surroundings — an abundantly green jungle garden with peekaboo views of a volcanic mountain in the distance — someone asked if I'd ever been to the island before. This island? For a few seconds, my overstimulated brain couldn't remember where we actually were. Having spent the previous few days dipping from beautiful place to even more beautiful place, I could no longer even remember what day of the week it was. Given the nature of this particular travel experience, I could be forgiven.

TCS World Travel specializes in fantastical, globe-spanning private jet trips. Though they are not unlike current private jet itineraries offered and organized by the likes of the Four Seasons and Aman, TCS has been in the game longer than most of their contemporaries. As a result, they have turned the notion of an expertly curated private plane travel experience into something of a fine art. Before my trip, I'd heard of this experience described as a kind of cruise in the sky, which is not incorrect. TCS has their own plane — an exquisitely decked-out Airbus A321 outfitted with 52 business-class seats for everyone on board and a dedicated staff — which becomes your de facto home base while on the journey. This plane takes you from place to place, country to country. You have a designated seat for the entirety of your trip, as well as a personable crew whom you quickly come to know on a first-name basis.

Roomier than any first-class flight I've ever experienced and tailored to your specific taste, the flight experience is seamless and amazingly efficient. This was, at least for me, the most incredible thing about TCS. Your experience passing through the airports, no matter how big or small the city, rarely lasts for more than a few minutes, and because all the hotels and transfers have been prearranged, you literally never have to touch your luggage. In most cases, my suitcase was already waiting for me in my hotel room upon my arrival, having been deftly transferred there by the insanely organized TCS staff. Similarly, all meals and excursions are planned in advance, a transfer and a guide await you everywhere you go, and upon leaving, your luggage is collected from your hotel room and transferred back to the plane as if by magic. For those of us who have grown weary of shuffling our oversized suitcases through long airport lines, this aspect of the TCS experience alone was enough to have me sold. While the company is adept at arranging experiences and the kind of access not available to the everyday traveler, the most luxurious quality of the trip is the ease with which it all happens.

I had the experience of joining an itinerary called the “Wonders of the South Pacific” — a 23-day journey that began in Kona, Hawaii, before eventually making stops in the Cook Islands, New Zealand, various points across Australia, and Fiji before landing you back in Hawaii (albeit in a different island resort than where you started). Because of my pesky day job, I wasn’t able to do the full itinerary — I tearfully deploined in Sydney — but I was able to enjoy a full 11 days of the journey and get a sense of just how the experience works. My main concern, as a person whose primary predilection as a traveler is to wander, was that I’d find the itinerary too rigid, or that the entire thing might feel like the world’s most extravagant field trip for grown-ups. And while the planned activities are nothing if not robust, I was happy to find that the staff also offered plenty of flexibility along the way. I was also routinely in awe of the logistics involved, not to mention a staff who exhibited an almost superhuman level of focus and attention to detail. As we day-tripped to sheep farms and bird sanctuaries in New Zealand (where I shared space with a kiwi) and were privately ferried around Sydney’s iconic harbor and given private access to a symphony rehearsal in the legendary opera house, a TCS team member was never more than a few feet away. My usual need to do my own thing was tempered by the fact that even the most exotic experience — such as a private encounter with a koala — was rendered completely effortless. By my third day on the trip, I fully understood just why people would pay so much for this kind of experience.

Other than the logistics, my *other* primary question prior to my trip was a pretty simple one — what are the people going to be like? On my particular excursion, my fellow travelers — more than 30 of them — made up an unexpectedly diverse mix. Not too surprisingly, the demographic skews toward the other travelers, many of them retired (who else has the time and the means to take a trip that takes the better part of a month to complete?), and among them were a great number of repeat TCS customers. While a few people seemed to know one another, most did not, which meant that, in some ways, this really did feel like a grown-up version of summer camp. At our first dinner in Hawaii, one could sense everyone's shyness, a quality that quickly evaporates during the shared experience of traveling. Within a week, I was getting life advice from a very wise woman named Peg, getting gardening advice from an expert quilter named Judy, and pledging my devotion to my frequent seat-mate Happy (the most aptly named person I may ever have met). Given the diversity of dining options and experiences on offer, plus the length of the trip, it's inevitable that sooner or later you meet everyone. I had not expected to feel so bonded with my fellow travelers, but upon exiting the trip was a pretty simple one — what are the people going to be like? On my particular excursion, my fellow travelers — more than 30 of them — made up an unexpectedly diverse mix. Not too surprisingly, the demographic skews toward the other travelers, many of them retired (who else has the time and the means to take a trip that takes the better part of a month to complete?), and among them were a great number of repeat TCS customers. While a few people seemed to know one another, most did not, which meant that, in some ways, this really did feel like a grown-up version of summer camp. At our first dinner in Hawaii, one could sense everyone's shyness, a quality that quickly evaporates during the shared experience of traveling. Within a week, I was getting life advice from a very wise woman named Peg, getting gardening advice from an expert quilter named Judy, and pledging my devotion to my frequent seat-mate Happy (the most aptly named person I may ever have met). Given the diversity of dining options and experiences on offer, plus the length of the trip, it's inevitable that sooner or later you meet everyone. I had not expected to feel so bonded with my fellow travelers, but upon exiting the trip early in Australia and saying my goodbyes over breakfast, I was struck by how kind everyone had been and by how genuinely sad I was to part ways with them. In the end, it's this aspect of the TCS travel experience that proved the most compelling — while the company is providing what is unquestionably a very luxurious experience (with, it should be said, a price point to match), my biggest takeaway was a much-needed reminder of just how magical and bonding travel can be. As I said goodbye to my new friends Peter and Jane, with whom I had shared many a great meal over the previous 11 or so days, my sadness about leaving was abated. "Don't worry. We'll see you in NYC soon," Peter said. "We're friends now. You're stuck with us." ●

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## Our Contributors

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T. Cole Rachel is a Brooklyn-based writer, editor, and teacher with over 20 years of experience working in print and digital media. He is currently an editor-at-large at Departures.

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