



## *From the practice of law to luxurious travel, some 172 countries later, owner of First Cabin reflects on the path less traveled.*

By Jonathan Lancaster

**R**aised in Massachusetts, Robert Kenyon received his first overseas assignment at age 17 with the U.S. Marine Corps when sent to serve in Vietnam. He returned with a love of Asia and a passion for travel. Upon return, Kenyon earned his degree in law and practiced with the San Diego District Attorney's office for six years. It was not very long thereafter before his long held passion for travel overcame his zeal for the law.

His introduction to worldwide custom travel came as a tour manager for a renowned luxury tour operator, which took him to the far reaches of the globe. After leading many of these journeys, Kenyon began to write the itineraries for custom travel, offering them to an increasingly strong client base that grew in number over the years, and which tours became quite successful with most selling out upon release.

In 1989 he launched First Cabin Travel, which offers customized tours primarily within Asia. The tours include a private vehicle, private driver and guide, with accommodations, breakfast and lunch served daily, the cost averaging about \$425 per person per day for land arrangements. International airfare and local airfare are additional. Given the quality of the land arrangements and service, it readily stands out as the most affordable, luxury-styled tour offering in the marketplace.

## Del Mar Profile: First Cabin Travel

### **What would be the differences between a trip planned by First Cabin and a trip planned by an individual or another company?**

One important difference is that I personally have traveled everywhere that I send my clients. I write all of the itineraries within the First Cabin portfolio and do not rely solely upon overseas ground operators to inform me about what is available. I have visited the many regions to gain first hand knowledge of conditions on site. Of the 195 countries recognized within the world community, I have visited 172, some on more than 35

occasions. No doubt that it is an important distinction worth noting and separates us from most other tour operators within the field.

A second point is that I have become close friends with all of the ground operators that I have worked with for some 34 years. They know what I require for my clients and I know that they will perform accordingly. All of our custom tours include a private vehicle, private driver and private guide. When it comes time to be met at the airport, someone is there to greet you with a clean, reliable vehicle, who also speaks excellent

English and who has the knowledge of their surroundings.

We have added a section of "Special Offer" tours, including trips to Myanmar (Burma) and Indochina, which, as with many other of our itineraries, make for a truly unforgettable holiday. All of our itineraries can be further customized to suit the needs of each and every one of our clientele.

We encourage potential clients to compare what we offer with any other tour company within the marketplace, and almost always, they come back to book with us, if it



is an apple-apple comparison. We consider our luxury-styled tour packages “an unexpected bargain”.

It is the very reason why over the years that the majority of bookings come from repeat clientele and their enthusiastic referrals. We like to think that once someone books a tour with us, it will not be their last.

**So a private car, private driver, private guide, including hotel, breakfast and lunch averaging \$490 per day is for real?**

In Southeast Asia and India, absolutely it averages that amount per day. Although we no longer offer planned itineraries to Africa, we certainly can put together a customized itinerary for safari. What needs to be considered is that those camps that offer the very best comfort and best animal sightings are quite pricey. Having said that, how often does one plan to go on safari to Africa, thus it makes best sense to choose an itinerary that allows for great rewards. It does not have to be the very top of the line, but certainly it should not be at the bottom.

**You focus on Southeast Asia, India, China and Myanmar, all Third World countries. What should a traveler expect in accommodations?**

At certain Third World destinations, the accommodations and service would rival and even surpass what could be found in Europe. There are safari camps where one would have to touch the canvas to confirm that it was a tent they were assigned for the night. The accommodations in India are palatial, in a literal sense as hoteliers have refurbished former palaces. In Hoi An, Vietnam, the Nam Hai Resort would compare favorably with any resort along the California coast.

Early on in my business, I would only use five-star properties for my clientele. In recent years, most governments in the Third World have encouraged a free economy and the infrastructure has truly improved dramatically. I now offer some four-star boutique hotels that are perfectly clean and comfortable. Travelers need decide whether they prefer the luxurious amenities of a five-star property, which in itself can be a highlight of the journey, or whether they want to focus on spending the majority of the day exploring and thereafter use the accommodation simply for a respite from touring.

By using small boutique hotels, we can substantially reduce the cost of the holiday. For instance, an 18-day tour to Bangkok, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, with a private guide, private vehicle with driver, breakfast and lunch daily, and accommodation is priced at \$490 per person a day, double occupancy – rather phenomenal price given the exclusivity of private travel.

**Has customized private touring become the new norm?**

With a private driver and guide, you can choose to spend 30 minutes or three hours at the Taj Mahal, visit every shopkeeper or none at all, and return to the hotel when you choose.



It makes a world of difference - it's time well spent and there are no delays waiting for a late arrival. Our clients have grown to love custom, privatized touring over group tours.

### **How has the internet affected the travel industry?**

The Internet has made travelers savvier about what is available, although it comes with some risk. There are some remarkably attractive websites out there, particularly for Southeast Asia. Being familiar with what is being offered – at what appears to be a very attractive price point – I know to be impossible. Something has to be compromised along the way. I would encourage travelers to visit our website and to read our blog entitled: *“Has Anyone Seen My Driver”* to learn what one might consider when planning their dream holiday.

### **Tell me about some of the most interesting or funny things that happened while accompanying groups of travelers.**

Most in the business could go on for hours with these kinds of tales.

During one early trip to China, we had traveled up to Lhasa, Tibet. The Chinese in those days would heavily overbook their hotels, so upon arrival, I handed everyone their keys and told them to hold on to them, and not return them to reception. After settling everyone in, I went to my room for a short while. Later, when I returned to the lobby, one of my clients and the security guard at the hotel were standing toe-to-toe screaming at each other - my client in English and the security guard in Mandarin. Obviously, neither one understood the other, but neither was giving an inch. Long story short, my client had gone to his room and was seated on the toilet when it came time to reach for the paper. He leaned to his left, and soon found that his toilet had yet to be bolted to

the floor. The bowl actually slanted left and my client crashed down with it. Miraculously, he was not cut or injured. He then cleansed himself as best he could and immediately stormed downstairs to the manager, who explained it to the guard.

In a nutshell, since we had planned to leave early the next morning before breakfast time, I relinquished the funds owed me for the missed breakfast and handed them over to the security guard, allowing him to find a replacement for the toilet. In those early days in China, finding a western-styled toilet was no easy task. However, the guard was able to “save face” and be on his way to find a new replacement toilet and my client need not make a payment.



### **What is your personal most favorite destination?**

I honestly have no favorite, although there are certain destinations that I would not care to revisit. Western Africa is a hard territory to travel and although there are some remarkably unique areas to visit, I am not convinced that it is worth the effort given the limited rewards offered the willing traveler, Timbuktu being one of the more fascinating sites. I recall sitting in a very large tent with a group of traders around a small fire as we drank tea and looked over some beautiful pieces of Amber being offered for sale.

### **Is there a destination that one simply must visit?**

India is one country that should be near the top of your bucket list. It has been so hard to get Americans to visit there, however, to a person, everyone that I have ever taken or sent to India returned highly pleased with the journey. They might choose not to return, but they were enthralled by the experience.

Myanmar (Burma) surely is another that should top the bucket list. The country has been such a cloistered society for decades, now opening its doors to the outside world. One should consider travel to Myanmar in earnest before the inevitable changes begin to occur, which will change its present innocence and uniqueness in many ways. It has so much to offer the willing traveler and truly, the time is now.

### **Do you have a philosophy of travel that you would like to share?**

I encourage travelers to choose a location where they have not been, where they have no ties and where the culture will be of first impression to them. And when traveling, bring along those intangibles that cannot be purchased. A smile upon your lips, warmth within your heart and an openness about your newfound experience. Most of all, be certain to listen; not to preach, to witness; not to judge; allowing the country to make a change in you, rather than you recommending how things should change for them.

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