

# 1000

THOUSAND CLUB



# Magellan

MODERN DAY





photo credit: Makanyane Safari Lodge



"I love a little bit of everything in life." That statement, more than any other, sums up the world of Philippe Kjellgren, an entrepreneur and world traveler who turned his love for the good life into a successful business. The president and founder of Kiwi Collection, a website popular with in-the-know travelers looking for the very best in high-end hotels, Kjellgren was, quite literally, born to do this job.

The son of a diplomat was raised all over Africa, mainly in the French-speaking parts, attending nine schools throughout his youth. After he returned to his native Sweden, he got involved in the fashion industry, gaining the exclusive rights to many luxury brands. His retail experience led him to develop a successful point-of-sale system – the cashier's checkout system in every business establishment – but even with these successful endeavors, his love of travel never abated.

"I had many friends who were too spoiled and rich for their own good, and they had a lot of money but hadn't traveled very widely. I had traveled so many places, over 100 countries now, so they all wanted recommendations when they traveled." The constant need for recommendations from even the most privileged of people showed him an opening in the travel industry that he could fill.

"It's very hard to find trusted advice, and even then people have different tastes. This is for my category of people, people who are very traveled and very used to luxury. There are other niche sites for, say, high-design hotels. But even then, those are not necessarily luxury hotels, they can be fairly basic in terms of service but simply be highly designed, because that's what some people are looking for." And so the Kiwi Collection was born, a repository for all of Kjellgren's personal experience and a vehicle through which he could continue to explore the very best of the world's offerings.

The ideal Kiwi Collection user is a high-end traveler, spending at the very least about \$500 a night, or the equivalent of \$500 a night in the local market. "In New York, \$500 a night is luxury, but it is fairly usual, in a little village in South America that a \$60 a night hotel might be a \$500 hotel experience. The bar has been raised all over the world, and is rising all the time," Kjellgren says. "A five-star hotel 10 years ago would not be a five-star hotel now; a three-star hotel now is better than some five-stars then."

So what makes a hotel stand out to someone like Philippe Kjellgren, as the best keeps getting better and he keeps seeing the best? Attention to detail is the absolute most important thing, and properties that go to extensive lengths to personalize a stay are always a better experience. Many properties tout their high-end furnishings and high-tech gadgets, but personal care always trumps technology.

"All hotels have these high-tech things, but I think we live surrounded by that now. When people anticipate your needs, it is really impressive." He gives an example of one hotel in Europe, when he arrived late after flying for most of a day. "When I got to my room, the first call I got was from the spa director, calling to say that they'd heard I had a long flight and they were sending a masseuse for a 15-minute in-room

*Photographer Paul Joseph. Orig. Published in Elegant Bride*

massage. Was I excited I saved fifty bucks? No. It was a value-added thing above and beyond the dollar amount.”

Other examples include hotels that stock the liquor bar to your individual preference, or hotels where you're greeted by name before you've checked in for the first time. “The Peninsula in Beverly Hills changes the literature in the room depending on who's coming. If it's a man they include car and boat magazines; if it's a woman they have more fashion magazines, and if they know I like *National Geographic*, then they will have *National Geographic*.”

Kjellgren also noticed another deficiency in the hospitality industry, one that his site seeks to rectify in a way that is tailored to the needs of his users. The Kiwi Collection rating system is an independent entity that does not take into account the inconsistent ratings of other guides, giving their readers a useful gauge for comparing different properties.

He and his staff “try to manage expectations across the board, so when our users see we've rated a hotel as five stars, whether it's in the Maldives or in New York, they'll know they're likely to get the same kind of experience.” And of course, when you are looking at as many extraordinary properties as the Kiwi Collection staff are, your scale must accommodate the truly superlative, hence the 5-star plus rating they have adopted.

“Some of these hotels are so wonderful, and we could go to six stars, seven stars, but that gets confusing. The 5-star-plus ratings are the above and beyond of the 5-star hotels. For instance, when you have two hotels in a city and both are undoubtedly 5 stars, but one is better than the other, that is a 5-star-plus.” The site also offers their WOW picks, which are editorial picks, places where reviewers have been and had an incredible and unique experience, but which aren't intuitive choices for most users and require a little more information in order to be appreciated.

A new version of the site – bigger and better – will be launching in 5-8 months, following

some established reviewing patterns and inventing some others. Aside from their unbiased and well-contextualized reviews, The Kiwi Collection is about building relationships, with managers and concierges and owners, which should make booking through the site an even more attractive option. “When someone books through us, we can send a personal email to someone, saying ‘Hey, take care of this person,’ and leverage their experience on behalf of their users – and thus the site is a benchmark of quality for both individuals and properties.”

Of course, that high expectation of quality must be extended evenly across the board, and when good hotels go bad, they won't linger on forever. “Sometimes, new management teams take over, or there's a new owner, and we'll revisit it and sometimes it isn't as good. Every single hotel isn't the same within a brand, even if they're a great brand. We would never say something negative, we just don't include them if they're not up to our standards.” Hotels cannot pay to be listed on the site, although once they are listed they can pay for extra marketing and advertising opportunities to make themselves more prominent within the approved editorial content.

Next up for Kjellgren and his reviewers is a constant stream of new properties around the globe. There is a constant need for reviews of Asian hotels: “Tokyo hotels are amazing and the city is underrated – people still think of it as being very expensive, but the cost is still 60% of what it would be in New York, and of course Asia is exploding everywhere.” They are very excited about South America, especially Argentina, Chile, and Brazil as well, and expect to see much more out of those destinations in the future. “They're doing well now with luxury boutique hotels in Buenos Aires – the value is still good and it is just fantastic hospitality, culture, wineries, beaches – everything.” And of course, he mentions the Middle East as well: “Dubai is a huge experience; they're trying to build a New York City inside of 10 years.”

When traveling, Kiwi Collection representatives try to get a representative range of experiences that visitors would have, whenever it is possible in their schedule, to write better reviews and also, in some cases, just to see new things. “We go horseback riding, diving, paragliding—you HAVE to go diving in the Maldives, or hiking in Bhutan, otherwise you haven't really been there,” says Kjellgren, recounting some of his greatest hits. “I stayed in a hotel in Amman where you can arrive by car, boat, or paraglide, so of course I opted to paraglide in.”

The trends in luxury travel have clearly moved away from places that are overdeveloped, but even then Kjellgren is hesitant to dismiss anyplace outright. As he discusses the advantages of numerous different sorts of vacations, Kjellgren demonstrates one of the distinguishing characteristics of the most seasoned, cultured

*“I stayed in a hotel in Amman where you can arrive by car, boat, or paraglide, so of course I opted to paraglide in.”*

travelers. He recognizes that people exist along a continuum of pleasure, with those who are not used to luxury appreciating even the smallest bit on one end and people like Kjellgren on the other: someone who has lived with luxury for so long that they have comparable perspective on the small things – Kjellgren appreciates how differently he experiences things from other people.

He talks about travel to Western Europe: “Some places in Europe live a little too much on their history, I am thinking specifically of Rome. It's not as interesting to me, but it's a matter of taste. For someone who has never been to Rome, I would say you have to go to Rome, but I don't feel the need to go back every year. Same with the Louvre, it's a museum, but unless you really love museums there's no reason to see it more than once.” Similarly, not every worthwhile experience has to be a luxury experience, since as



photo credit: Six Senses Hideaway Zighy Bay

he says, “I enjoy a five-dollar meal in a tiny neighborhood place or a cold drink in a local bar as much as a 3-star Michelin restaurant; it’s all about the experience.”

So how does Philippe Kjellgren vacation? The same way most people spend most of their time – at home with friends. “I have a very rustic summer home just outside of Stockholm in the inner archipelago. My vacation is I try not to stay in a hotel. We see friends, I do work on the house, repair the deck, have people over to cook dinner and have wine. It’s all about quality time with friends. One year we rented a sailboat in the Barrier Reef, or we’ll rent a house for a few couples and just hang out. Sometimes we do things like go diving, but then, unfortunately, it makes more sense for me to stay in a hotel where I can get everything set up.”

Some of the simple pleasures he indulges in are good food and drink; his tastes run from the simple to the most upscale. “My favorite champagne is Krug, I love Krug; I think the bottle is so foxy. I love the taste, and I love the design, that long slim neck... it’s very sexy. I like things that are a bit different.” Ever the cultural nomad, he still maintains, “I try to drink Absolut vodka because I’m Swedish; “absolute” is a big word in Sweden, we use it a lot, and I like to help build the brand. I generally prefer European wines to North American wines, but there are great things all over.” He also admits to a weakness for clothes stemming back to his days in the fashion industry; he keeps in touch with his old contacts and will sometimes wear clothes from his former clients, but now he branches out; as he jokes, “When I worked in fashion I spent all my money on travel; now that I work in travel I spend all my money on clothes.”

As trends in travel continue to grow ever more personalized and exotic, Kjellgren feels the next big thing in extreme vacations will be really far-flung destinations. “People will want hotels in the Himalayas, in Bhutan, places that are very hard to reach. I sit around the table at so many dinners with so many rich people, and

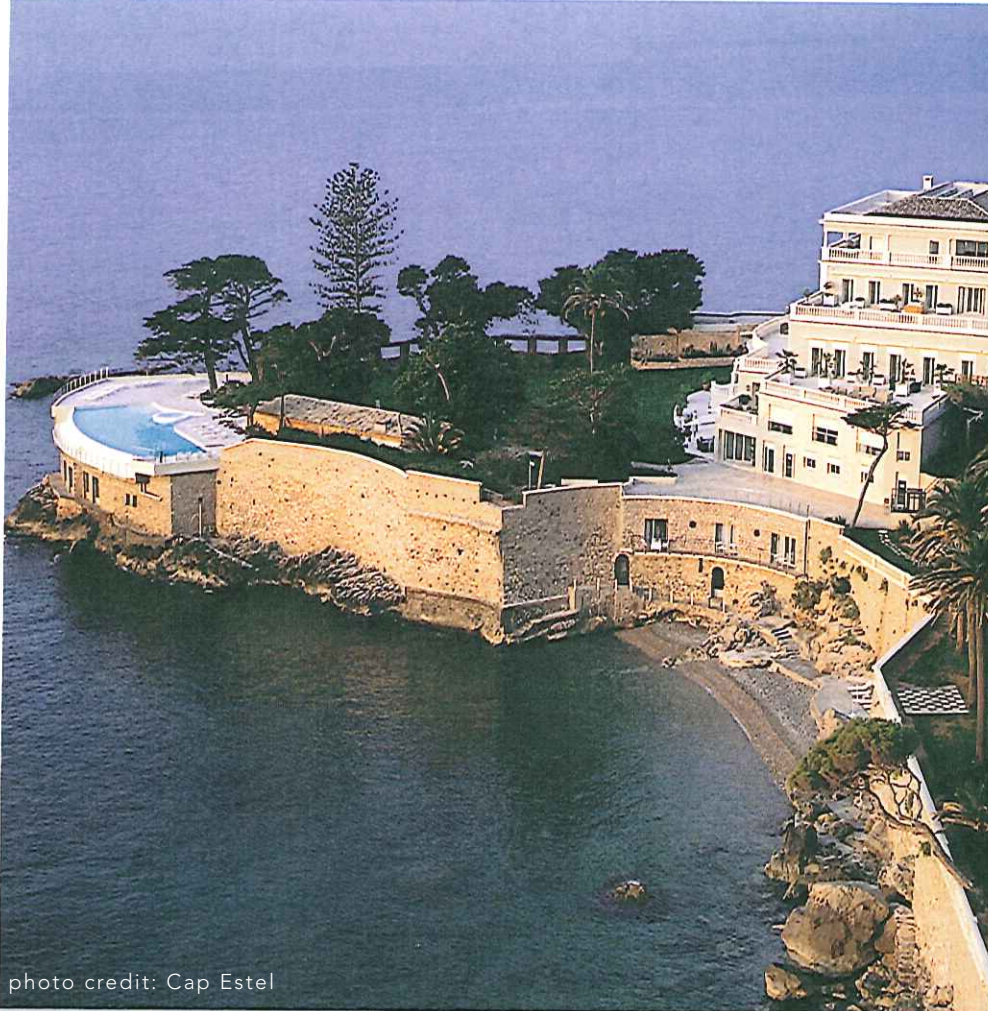


photo credit: Cap Estel

it’s all about bragging rights for being somewhere first. Everyone wants to go somewhere no one else has been. It’s more adventurous in a sense, but there are only so many times you can reinvent the wheel. Richard Branson’s Virgin Galactic is kind of the end of that, there’s not much more extreme that you can invent.”

And sometimes, extreme doesn’t have to be extreme in its conventional sense; in an increasingly planned and sanitized world, sometimes the most exciting trip is simply to step as far as possible outside your own boundaries. For example, he says, “I stayed in a traditional ryokan in Japan, and the experience was all about being somewhere historic, having a really authentic experience – a cultural safari.”

“If I wasn’t working here I would still be doing this, but just for fun. I book myself into 10 different hotels on my own trips, just because I like to see them; I rent a car and drive up and down every street looking for the best little restaurants and bars and shops.” He expects to travel about 150 to 200 days this year, with

upcoming trips to Buenos Aires & Sao Paulo, the Maldives, Turks & Caicos, then back to Europe. He is most excited about the new developments in Buenos Aires & Maldives – they are locations drawing people from a variety of places, making them ripe for development, and therefore ripe for visitation and review by cultural arbiters like Kjellgren. He says of his own expertise, “I have been blessed with a huge range of experiences. I can actually judge and look at details that most people would never notice. I’ve lived on four continents, been so many places, I can appreciate things for what they are – I really enjoy so many little things.” And after so many years working around the hospitality industry, he has enough ideas that he anticipates creating something great of his own design. “In the end, I’d like to start a resort on Madagascar, where I used to live, it hasn’t been too developed yet but it’s a beautiful place. I would live on a little island off the coast of Madagascar, and hopefully all my friends would come visit me.” Philippe, I’m there. ■