

The Concierge

TIPS ON TRAVELING ABROAD

By Kate Silver

THE WASHINGTON POST

For five long days, the envelope seemed to be staring Kelly Bemmes down, daring her to peek. Inside were the destination and itinerary for a weekend trip that the 22-year-old was taking with her mom, Kim Bemmes. It took some effort, but she resisted. The mystery and anticipation was, after all, part of why the two booked the trip for \$650 each via Pack Up + Go in the first place: The travel agency specializes in “surprise” vacations.

When her dad dropped them off at Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport early on a Thursday morning in August, Kim did the honors. She opened the envelope and read where they were headed: Philadelphia. Both mother and daughter were thrilled.

Kelly said she decided to book the trip after reading about Pack Up + Go on Facebook. She hadn't traveled much, and loved the idea of someone else planning her getaway.

“I just knew I wanted to go somewhere, and it would be cool to be a surprise because I was going to make the best out of any situation,” she said.

They spent the plane ride poring over the envelope's contents: a \$50 Uber gift card for airport transportation; reservations and a \$100 Harp & Crown restaurant gift card; confirmation for two nights at the Logan Philadelphia, Curio Collection by Hilton hotel; and maps with suggested itineraries that included the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Eastern State Penitentiary, the Mutter Museum, gardens, and other spots.

Over the three days, they hit nearly all of the suggestions. Kelly said that even though the trip was short, it was one of the best she has taken, because there was no stress involved.

“I hate planning. Nobody wants to check for their flights and hotel online,” she said. “And I just liked the surprise, because I knew it was going to be somewhere I had never been and I didn't really have anywhere in mind that I would prefer to go.”

Her mom loved it, too — so much so that she plans to do another surprise trip using Pack Up + Go with Kelly's dad for their 23rd anniversary.

Pack Up + Go is one of a handful of surprise vacation travel agencies that aims to add a suspenseful twist to trips. It works like this: Travelers go online and fill out a survey, which asks questions about recent trips taken, upcoming trips planned, vacation preferences (action, relaxation, culture), hobbies and interests, dietary restrictions and other inclinations. Travelers opt for a road trip (starting at \$400 per person) or a flight, train or bus (starting at \$650 per person), then the travel team gets to work planning a do-

estic three-day weekend shaped by the survey. A week before the traveler embarks, the company e-mails a weather report and packing tips (such as bring a bathing suit or hiking boots). The envelope with the destination, maps, and confirmations arrives via mail.

Pack Up + Go founder and chief executive Lillian Rafson launched the business in 2016 in Pittsburgh after first hearing about surprise vacations while traveling in Eastern Europe.

“I met two sisters who were on a surprise vacation from a European agency. And I just thought: ‘That is the most fun idea; I'm so jealous,’” she said.

With Pack Up + Go, she decided to focus on planning trips in the United States to encourage domestic travel. “I was in Riga, Latvia, when I first heard of this, but at that point I had never been to Charleston, S.C.,” she said.

Initially, she assumed that clients would be like her — easygoing millennials with some disposable income and limited vacation days. What she found was, well, another surprise.

“We have had an 80-year-old celebrating a birthday. We've had parent-child trips. We've had three generations go on a trip together. We've had 50th anniversaries celebrated. We've had 18-year-olds who just graduated high school. It's turned out to be a much broader range than I had imagined,” she said. “I think it goes to show that everyone loves a surprise. And there are so few times in life when you can really genuinely be surprised together.”

The Vacation Hunt is an agency that adds an additional twist to the mystery vacation game: Travelers receive clues leading up to the trip. Jeff Allen and Roshni Agarwal, the husband-wife team behind the Washington, D.C.-based busi-

ness, comb through books and sift through trivia to try to find clues that are challenging enough that clients can't just Google the answers and spoil the big reveal. (A recent clue: “Visit the unforgettable cafe at the edge of the world. Grab a drink and watch the divers jump off!” Destination: Negril, Jamaica, Rick's Cafe).

They decided to start the company after Agarwal planned a surprise 30th birthday getaway for Allen. She loved how the hints along the way built excitement for the trip, and it was fun for both of them. The couple has ventured around the globe, and thought it would be exciting to be able to put their travel knowledge to use and plan mystery trips for others.

Agarwal said that most of the Vacation Hunt's clients are working professionals — many of whom are honeymooners, exhausted from wedding planning — who “have more money than time to do something like this,” she said. And, she added, they like the idea of some kind of adventure.

Agarwal and Allen get to know their customers through an online survey, e-mail, a phone consultation and their social-media accounts. The Vacation Hunt's surprise vacation package (starting at \$750 per person in the United States or \$950 per person internationally) includes flights, accommodations and at least two pre-planned activities (such as a walking tour, dinner reservation, brewery tour or museum visit) along with a suggested itinerary with dining and transportation recommendations. Travelers receive two or three clues by e-mail; an envelope with the destination, confirmations, and itineraries comes by mail a few days before the trip. Alternatively, if someone already has a destination in mind, the Vacation Hunt offers a trip-planning service (starting at \$150 for a weekend) and can create a surprise itinerary.

In Britain, a cruise company is about to launch its first luxury mystery cruise. The Secret Sailaway, by Bolsover Cruise Club, will embark on March 9 and sail to six cities over 16 nights (at a price just under \$16,000) from an undisclosed starting point.

“All I can tell you is that guests will fly business-class out of the UK to meet the ship in a mystery location,” said Michael Wilson, managing director of Bolsover Cruise Club. To build suspense, riddles are available online for passengers to try to decipher. (They can also request the answers after booking). Or they can await the big reveal as they sail into port.

Like the other leaders in the burgeoning surprise-vacation industry, Wilson said that the goal of the cruise is to add a little thrill to the adventure.

“It is a completely different way of seeing the world, simply taking a leap of faith and seeing where you end up,” he said. “The thought of arriving at the airport with no idea where you are heading until you check in is so exciting.”

WANT TO TRAVEL BUT DON'T CARE WHERE? ‘SURPRISE VACATIONS’ HAVE YOU COVERED



HERE

NEW HAMPSHIRE PUMPKIN EXPEDITION

With Halloween on the horizon, why not take the kids to North Conway, where fall also means it's time for the Pumpkin Patch Express on Conway Scenic Railroad. (Oct. 20-22 and 27-29). Kids of all ages are encouraged to don their spookiest costumes and hop aboard vintage coaches that travel round trip from North Conway to Glen, where each child can visit the pumpkin patch and select his or her own pumpkin. Departures that travel directly to the patch depart at 1:30 p.m. Friday-Sunday, with an extra 3 p.m. departure on Saturday only. The 11:30 Bartlett Valley Train also stops at the pumpkin patch on its return to North Conway. Adults from \$17.50; ages 4-12 from \$12.50. 800-232-5251, conwayscenic.com/events/event/pumpkin-patch-express.

PORTLAND HOTEL GETS SPIFFY REHAB

Tucked in the heart of Portland's historic Old Port district, the Portland Harbor Hotel recently unveiled a \$1.8 million renovation project involving the hotel's original 95

rooms. All new custom-designed furniture features arm chairs and love seats from Italy, and wooden crafted wardrobes, desks, and side tables. Acknowledging 21st-century traveler preferences, desks serve as a combination writing surface and storage area, and bedside stands feature power and USB plugs. Navy, khaki, and white décor give a nod to the property's coastal location, and blend with the sleek custom furniture. Other highlights include individual pantries on each floor of the hotel featuring Starbucks touch-screen machines, a new, expanded lobby with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Portland's Fore Street, and new Maine-created artwork, such as the maritime photography of Jim Dugan. Fall rates from \$269. 207-775-9090, www.portlandharborhotel.com



THERE

SURF AND HIKE IN MOROCCO

Geckos Adventures, a tour company specializing in adventures for 18- to 29-year-olds, has announced a new eight-day African trip. Morocco Mountains and Beaches highlights the country's A-grade Atlantic surfing beaches as well as touring and hiking the Atlas mountains. Features include a hike to the highest point in North Africa, a visit to the blue pools and waterfalls of Paradise Valley, and yoga and surf opportunities along the coast of South Morocco. Travelers will stay four nights in a budget hotel, one night in a mountain gite, and two nights in a surf camp. The first departure is March 28, with additional departures each month through December 2018. Rates from \$705 per person, double-occupancy. Maximum group size of 16. 855-832-4853, www.geckosadventures.com/en-us/morocco/morocco-mountains-and-beaches-107935

HISTORIC INN LUXURY MAKEOVER

The Lygon Arms in the Cotswolds, dating back to the 1300s, has seen many owners and undergone name changes across the centuries. This historic coaching inn recently opened — after multimillion-dollar renovations — in the heart of the quaint Broadway Village in Worcestershire. Indulge

in a night of luxury in the King Charles I Suite, the room where King Charles I and his supporters would assemble, or in the Cromwell Room, where Oliver Cromwell slept the night before the Battle of Worcester. All of the 86 guest rooms and suites in the sprawling inn feature restored antiques, original paintings, and quirky period features. Renovations also include two new culinary destinations (Lygon Wine Bar, Lygon Bar & Grill), refreshed luxury spa, and reimaged landscape and gardens. Rates from \$325. www.lygonarmshotel.co.uk

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HIGH-CAPACITY PORTABLE CHARGER

Tired of running out of power? Anker has released PowerCore II Slim, an ultra-thin power bank that provides up to three full charges for flagship smartphones, tablets, and other USB devices. Provides smarter charging by leaving lightning port free for headphones and other accessories when not charging — with no need to take your phone out. Quick charge input delivers a full recharge in just four hours.



Works with iPhone, Samsung Galaxy, and more. (Cannot recharge Samsung W700.) Includes PowerCore Case for iPhone, micro USB charging cable, and worry-free 18-month warranty. \$37.99. www.anker.com/products/variant/PowerCore-II-Slim-10000mAh/A1261011



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