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Report

Sailing at Alaska, across the Himalayas or by train through Mongolia: long journeys are in demand (but a big budget is needed)

A tour through the Iraqi part of Kurdistan, sailing from Alaska to Greenland or by train through Mongolia? The world is open to travelers again after the corona pandemic, as it turned out this weekend at the Vakantiebeurs for special trips in Amsterdam. Indispensable: a hefty budget.

David Bremmer6 January 2025, 11:59



Sustainability is popular at the fair: there is interest in the Trans-Mongolian railway. The flight there makes the trip less green. Image Getty Images

Long train travel is all the rage, says Silvie Sweegers of Tiara Tours. “Every time, more and more travelers are important to sustainability.” For example, the tour operator offers a trip from Mongolia to China, over the last stretch of the Trans-Mongolian railway. “You start in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar and then travel to Beijing.”

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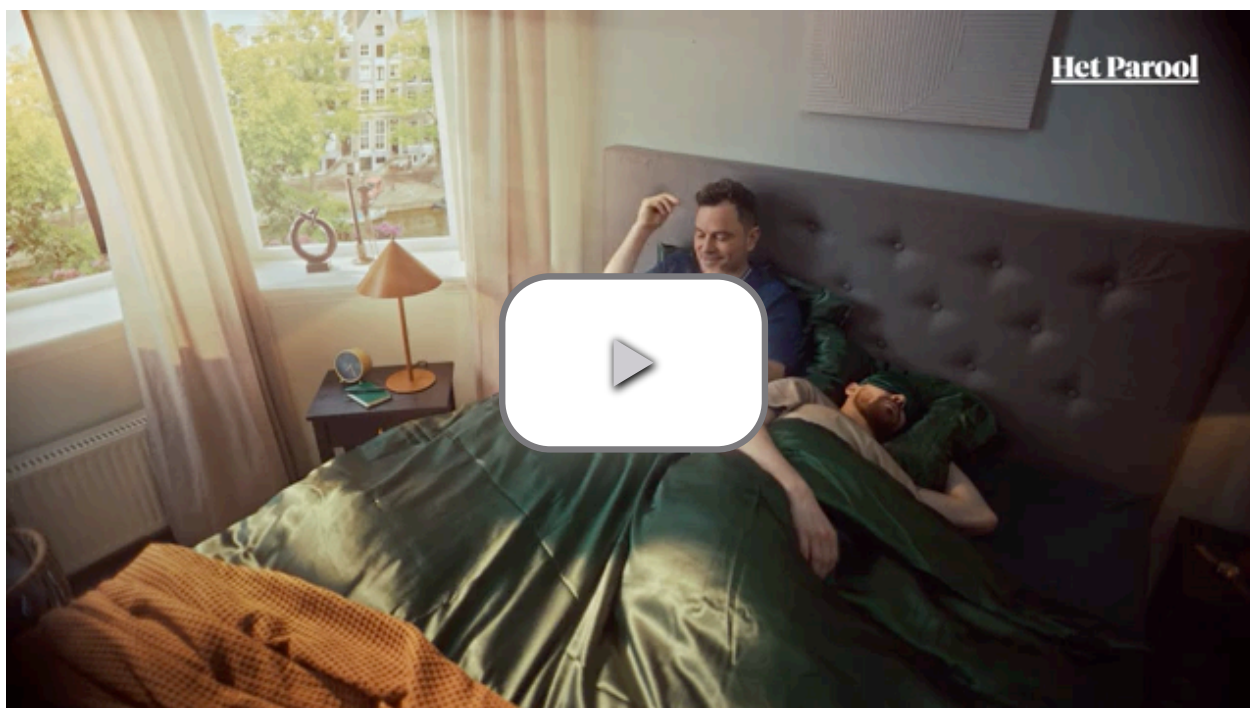
The costs are relatively not good, compared to many other trips on the stock market: 1200 euros. That is excluding the considerably less sustainable air travel.

The Himalayan Express from Beijing to Lhasa is also popular, she says. Due to the war in Ukraine, Tiara Tours had to completely reinvent itself; previously, the travel agency was a specialist in the famous Trans-Siberian Express through Russia. “Only Mr. Putin will no longer allow that.”

One of the most unique trips on the fair is Tecla Sailing. Travelers sail the Northwest Passage by sailing ship: from Dutch Harbor,

Alaska, to Greenland. The cost: from 23,400 euros.

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"Lots of money, but you will be away for 52 days and make a unique trip," says [captain Gijs Sluik](#). "You meet the local Inuit population, sail along sea ice and see polar bears, narwalz and belegas. In some places, only a hundred others have been ahead of you."

Penguins wagg past you

Almost as adventurous: to the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and Antarctica. Passengers board in Ushuaia, the southernmost tip of Argentina, on an expedition ship with space for 100 to 160 people, says Laurens Steijn of BirdingBreaks. "Everyone has their own cabin, there are also doctors on board."

What makes the trip so special? "South Georgia, an island 500 kilometers long and 100 kilometers wide, lives a million penguins: king penguins, stormband penguins and donkey penguins. With zodiacs, small rubber boats, we go ashore and you are in the middle of the *wildlife*. The penguins are waggling between you."

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BirdingBreaks is now offering the trip temporarily with a 40 percent discount, reports Steijn. Incidentally, the price is still at least 8700 euros, again excluding flights.



Image David Bremmer/AD

Some destinations turn out to be unbookable in practice. Contrary to what the [Holiday Fair for special trips](#) reported in advance, a winter sport in North Korea is impossible: the country is currently almost closed to tourists.

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However, travel expert Maurits of WorldExperts offers alternatives, including Pakistan. “That country would be very unsafe, but we only get into the *safe zones*. There is just a group back and people are very enthusiastic: the population welcomed them so nicely and hospitable!”

No problem with dictatorial regimes

WorldExperts has no problem traveling to countries with dictatorial regimes. “Journalists always start with that. However, politics should never be an obstacle to getting to know cultures,” he says. “In North Korea, people also go to work, the supermarket, to funerals and weddings.”

Despite visa problems (see box), 140 providers were in the Beurs van Berlage this weekend. That's more than last year, but less than the record of 175 from 2020.

“Customized trips are a growing segment,” says spokesman Boudewijn Richel. “Our customers are often well-educated people. *Adventure travel* for young people aged 25 to 35 is also popular.”

Yet there are mainly many seniors walking around – the category with enough time and money. Tour operators, especially those that offer the most expensive trips, recognize this in a chivalrous way.

What is striking is that there are also plenty of 'ordinary destinations' being touted, such as Curaçao and the Czech Republic. “The criterion is not the destination, but whether an organization delivers tailor-made trips,” emphasizes Richel. “Travel in the Netherlands or Belgium is also offered here.

Traveling all Wadden Islands with a sailboat can be special, but regular package holidays do not belong here.”

The visitors have different dreams. Jacqueline from Gemonde in North Brabant is looking for 'the ideal family trip for five people' with daughter Elise (22). “We have saved for years for this. It should be adventurous, a mix of culture and nature and not too touristy.” In the meantime, they have gained inspiration. “Ecuador with the Galapagos Islands seems ideal to us.”

Visa problems affect African exhibitors

The [Holiday Fair for Special Travels](#) faced an unexpected problem this year: more and more visa applications from African and Asian exhibitors are rejected by the government.

“Last year, for example, we had ten stands from Uganda, now only three,” says spokesman Boudewijn Richel. The rejection rate for African countries has increased from 50 percent last year to no less than 90 percent now. “If there is already a bracket wrong in the documents provided, such as the wedding book, a rejection from The Hague follows. The government sees people from African countries as potential criminals and immigrants.”

These include countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, or Asian countries such as Nepal. “All popular tourist destinations.” All rejections are unjustified, says Richel. “These are tour operators with a decent business who have often been coming here since 2012.”

Several exhibitors had already incurred the costs: booked stands, airline tickets, hotels. Many would also be at the [Vakantiebeurs in Utrecht](#) (January 9 to January 12). “Some have lost 10,000 euros.”

Richel hopes to be able to make agreements with the government by next year to prevent repetition.

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