



## The Art of the BRAG

How elite travelers are upping their one-upmanship game

By David Hochman

**M**ichael Lorentz recently returned from a ski vacation—in North Korea. “It’s actually quite trippy,” he says of his black diamond runs with totalitarians. “Imagine *1984* meets *Teletubbies*.” Lorentz has been to Antarctica too and the Galápagos, and just about every African nation that Western governments urge you to avoid: Libya, Niger, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Lorentz is often listed as one of the world’s best private travel guides. He plays Sherpa to executives, Oscar winners, and the occasional journalist on trips that are perilous, remote, and

guaranteed to get jaws dropping at cocktail parties. I met Lorentz on an expedition into Ethiopia’s isolated Omo Valley in 2011. He was taking me to see tribes so cut off from civilization that they have no written language or calendar. To reach the Mursi people, Lorentz carried me on his back across a tributary of the Omo River and kept feral dogs and armed warriors from messing with our day. Mission accomplished: I’ve dined out on that story ever since.

“Travel on the upper upper end tends to be as much about bragging rights as it is about which helicopter you use to get someplace safely,” Lorentz says, “but the sport of one-

upmanship is changing in subtle and profound ways.” Partly that’s because so much of the world has been conquered already. Cuba and Machu Picchu are now practically as easy to visit as Vegas, and fractional ownership makes flying private like grabbing an Uber. The road not taken goes past that laksa house you saw on Anthony Bourdain’s show. When everyone’s been everywhere, what’s an alpha traveler to do?

**F**or the elite globe-trotters Lorentz runs with, the new brag is the unbrag. Whereas ten years ago, peacocking about how much you spent at Singita Ebony Lodge in South Africa might have impressed, today the gloat is how many tsetse flies you swatted viewing the nearly extinct Kordofan giraffe.

Victoria Hilley and her high-flying clients at Remote Lands, a boutique Manhattan travel advisory, understand that Siem Reap, Cambodia, has been done to death and Myanmar is so...2016. The flip is to build trips around access rather than Places to See Before You Die.

Hilley recently sent a young tech entrepreneur to the Mustang district of northern Nepal. “There’s a king in that region, and we arranged for them to have dinner together before the client helicoptered back to Kathmandu,” she says. Another time, when a billionaire inquired about “seeing the Laos nobody gets to see,” Hilley dispatched him to far-off Muang Sing for a basic homestay. Very basic. “He was literally sleeping in a hut on a mat on the floor separated by a sheet from four other family members who came in and slept next to him,” Hilley says. “I asked, ‘How was it?’ He said, ‘I wouldn’t have changed it for the world.’” Yes, the client ended the trip at an Aman resort, but as Hilley puts it, “it’s this thing of ‘Let me be genuinely and uniquely uncomfortable for a few days so I can have some perspective when I return to my normal routine.’”

Incidentally, Hilley herself is what she calls “an unabashed country collec-

tor.” She is up to 119 passport stamps after recently nabbing Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Hilley often travels with a girlfriend who has a subspecialty in checking off UNESCO World Heritage sites, though even there, Hilley has her friend beat. “She has 142. I have 187,” Hilley says. Both are members of the exclusive Travelers’ Century Club, an organization for those who have visited 100 or more of the world’s countries and territories. “Every meeting is an excuse to blab about where to go next,” she says.

Still, those two trailblazers can’t hold a candle to Cassie De Pecol. Early this year, at age 27, De Pecol became, according to Guinness World Records, the fastest person to travel to every sovereign nation on earth. It took 18 months and 26 days, and she did it with one pair of running shoes. De Pecol was never injured or robbed and got sick only once—in Papua New Guinea. Whether in Vanuatu, Mali, Tuvalu, or Benin, she discovered the take-home was the same: “The world is accepting and kind. People everywhere simply want to be healthy and happy.”

Tom Stuker and Fred Finn, meanwhile, have waged a decades-long battle up in the air. Both gents are in the running for world’s most frequent flier. Finn, an Englishman now residing in Ukraine, regaled me for over an hour with tales from a half century of almost constant travel for work and pleasure. The former toy-industry executive has flown over the Atlantic more than 2,000 times, including 718 flights on the Concorde. “I once flew from New York to London three times in one day,” he says.

While Finn’s tally of nearly 16 million miles is astounding, Stuker’s 18 million puts him in the lead. With over 8,000 flights, the New Jersey-based auto-sales consultant has completed the equivalent of 722 circumnavigations of the globe, mostly on United, “which has never once lost a

bag of mine,” Stuker says. At his level, premier status is a mere trifle. Corporate suites at Chicago Bears games, meet and greets with United CEO Oscar Munoz, a chauffeured Mercedes to whisk him across the tarmac—these are the perks of the guy who has “enough upgrade certificates to paper over Lake Michigan,” as he puts it.

Is there satisfaction in being at the head of the travel pack? Yes and no.

Stuker loves flying and enjoys the quasi-celebrity status that comes with mingling among the crème de la crème. (“Kenny G was so nice,” he says.) But he has a lot of haters, he tells me. “I’ve actually had somebody say, ‘I hope you and your family die in your carbon footprint.’”

**L**orentz, my Africa guide, thinks true rewards come not from accruing points or even ticking off destinations but from helping others. This past spring, Lorentz escorted the former CEO of a global colossus to a new wildlife reserve in Zambia to engage with conservation teams on the ground. Another client quietly contributed \$2 million for African sustainability causes. “Giving it away is emerging as a kind of post-one-upmanship,” Lorentz says. “If you’ve done better than everyone in your field, you can now help everyone else do better. Those are the real bragging rights.”

That may be true, but I wanted to find someone above the fray of competition, so I called the only wayfarer alive who can’t be outdone. Buzz Aldrin is arguably the most traveled person in history—Gemini 12, Apollo 11, the North Pole, South Pole, down to the *Titanic* in a submarine. He once hitched a ride on

a whale shark near the equator. Aldrin says he’s been dreaming of missions to Mars lately, since he’s clearly got a lock on this part of the universe. Even at age 87, he’s still winning. “I’m in a wheelchair now,” he says, “which means they let me on any airplane first.” ♦

**ACCESS**  
— Anyone who has traveled to 100 or more countries and territories is eligible to join Travelers’ Century Club. Membership is \$100, plus annual dues. [travelerscenturyclub.org](http://travelerscenturyclub.org)