

UNFORGETTABLE

Gifts

Tailored experiences can be more satisfying than anything wrapped

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT

Women relax at the base of the Ausangate Mountain in Peru as part of a Rustic Pathway program that sends students around the world.

S OARING HIGH ABOVE THE CLOUDS IN A HOT-AIR BALLOON, PEOPLE LIKE ANTS BELOW YOU. SCALING AN INDOOR ROCK WALL IN PREPARATION FOR THE BIG CLIMB, HEART POUNDING WITH EXCITEMENT. ROCKING OUT AT A CONCERT YOU THOUGHT WAS SOLD OUT. IT'S NO WONDER THAT PEOPLE ARE TAKING THEIR GIFT-GIVING TO THE NEXT LEVEL BY GIVING AN EXPERIENCE. THE ADVENTURE ENJOYED AND THE MEMORIES CREATED WILL UNDOUBTEDLY LEAVE A LASTING IMPRESSION. »

JUSTIN ROSE/CONDE NAST



Add rock climbing to a trip to Greece, or an underwater adventure. PADI has 6,000-plus dive centers and resorts located around the world, including Utila, below, a Honduras Bay Island.

"The memory of the experience lingers."

— Doug Rollins, vice president of sales and marketing at Château Élan



Chicagoan Christian McKenzie knows this firsthand. For the 30th birthday of her friend Paakwesi Ayekumi, McKenzie tailored a gift experience that tapped into his educational pursuits: mechanical engineering and solar energy. "He's into urban farming and sustainable business practices, so I got him two tickets to a farm-to-table pop-up dinner," she says. "In addition, I included a cookbook of comfort food with eco-conscious options. Plus, he collects sneakers,

and Nike came out with a limited-edition breakfast food-themed sneaker earlier this year, so I included a pair of those as well." Ayekumi was blown away. "Christian gave me an experience I could never forget," he says. "It left me speechless and in awe wondering how did I get so lucky to have a woman that understands me on so many levels." Stephen Walker, of Buford, Ga., was similarly wowed last year when his wife, Jana, gave him

woodworking lessons. Jana had watched her husband spend months gathering woodworking tools and machines, inspired by a visit to a craftsman of wooden kayaking paddles. Stephen, a graphic designer, had created a website for him. "Stephen had built this wonderful workshop full of tools, but it felt like he was having a hard time figuring out what to do with them or how to use them, even though he really wanted to," she

says. "I happened upon a master woodworker who offered instruction and I just knew that would be perfect."

Stephen agrees: "That was pretty darn awesome."

Chicago-based event planner Kerry Bannigan knows professionally as well as personally the lasting power of an experiential gift. For adults, she suggests helicopter rides, spa retreats or cooking classes. For kids, she recommends racetrack days, paintball games or a dress-up photo shoot.

"Experiences are priceless happenings that people can look forward to, enjoy and then look back on memories to share," she says.

In between tastings and other events, Château Élan, a winery and resort located in Braselton, Ga., also offers guests the chance to custom-blend a fragrance and enjoy an overnight stay, often centered around Valentine's Day and Thanksgiving. The option is popular with both leisure and business guests. "The memory of the experience lingers," says Doug Rollins, vice president of sales and marketing.

Jill Joanne, a perfumer and mixologist, flew from California with her assistant to make their custom scent just for fun.

"We had a wonderful time and made some perfumes that were heavenly," says Joanne. "It's the perfect place to make holiday gifts that will be unforgettable."

For those who crave adventure, travel is always a welcome gift, whether it's a local getaway or a global escape.

Rustic Pathways offers authentic experiences for students to travel to more than 21 countries from Cuba to Fiji, touting opportunities for them to learn more about indigenous people while performing community service. And with more than 6,300 dive centers and resorts located around the world, PADI, the world's largest recreational diver training organization,



Tickets for hot air balloon rides will always impress, especially in the region of Cappadocia, Turkey, known around the world as one of the best places for the high-flying experience.



allows people to give the gift of underwater exploration. Haversham & Baker Golfing Expeditions can score you a tee time at coveted courses.

For a contained adventure, try day passes or yearly memberships to botanical gardens, museums, aquariums and zoos.

Jim and Marion Hook of Tucson always give their Australian relatives a membership to the Taronga Zoo in Sydney. »

Giving a yearly membership to a zoo, botanical garden or museum will benefit the venue, too.

TIPS

GIFTING THE IDEAL EXPERIENCE

Creating a treasured memory for someone you love is easier if you keep these ideas in mind:

Be a sleuth. Think back on conversations about long-held desires or fantasies. If you are unsure, quiz partners, parents, friends or colleagues for clues. Or ask directly what they'd do if the sky were the limit (but tailor it to what you can afford to spend).

Start early. Sourcing a thoughtful gift experience requires some lead time. You'll need a chance to scout wisely before you commit.

Set a budget. Not all gift experiences need to be extravagant. Think theater tickets, restaurant gift cards or passes to a yoga class.

Surprise and delight. Giving your loved ones something they wouldn't normally do for themselves is a surefire way to success.

Play your part — or not. Is the experience something you can share? If so, great; you'll enhance the experience. But it's also OK to sit it out.



Haversham & Baker
Golfing Expeditions can score you a tee time at coveted courses, including Ballybunion Golf Club in Ireland.

“We know they love going to the zoo, so we avoid purchasing unwanted gifts or gifts that are the wrong sizes,” Marion says. “We don’t have to deal with very expensive international mailing, either. Everyone is happy and the gift is not just a one-time deal; they use it all year round.”

If you’re not sure where to start, lean on technology.

“Giving a physical gift is a great thought, but the right experiential gift can create memories that last forever,” notes Jason Reid, co-founder and CEO of the on-demand gifting app, Giftagram (giftagram.com). The app features niche and fun products and services; purchase and send the recipient a message to build anticipation. It features an experience category that includes such offerings as cliff camping in the Rocky Mountains or a private tour of the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

“From an apprenticeship with a

top chef to a private styling with an acclaimed fashion designer, life experiences live on with us and will remind us of the sender for years to come,” Reid says.

Gifting platforms such as the Whilo app, short for “what I love,” allow the potential recipient to build a registry-like list of experiences they’d enjoy,

“That was pretty darn awesome.”

— Stephen Walker, gift recipient

such as jet skiing at Lake Tahoe or cooking classes.

“We aren’t mind readers, and everyone is constantly juggling five things at once, making it nearly impossible to keep copious notes on what loved ones want,” says Lindsey Miles, co-founder and managing partner of Whilo (whilo.com). “The memories last a lot longer

than a trendy purse.”

IfOnly (ifonly.com) provides a bevy of curated experiences in categories that include sports, film and TV, home décor and photography. Every experience sold gives back a percentage to a designated charitable cause, according to Lindsay Stevens, a public relations consultant who represents IfOnly. Recent experiences have included chocolate-making classes, heli-skiing and tours of a farmers market with a renowned chef.

Trevor Traina, founder and CEO of IfOnly, says the recent increase in popularity isn’t surprising. In a

recent IfOnly survey, 72 percent of college-educated Americans say they’d rather receive an experience over a physical item.

“It’s what drives the stories that shape our identity and make up the sum of who we are,” Traina explains. “That’s why experiences make the perfect gifts.” ●

BALLYBUNION GOLF CLUB



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