

Malaka Hilton

One of the best specialty travel agencies catering to sophisticated travelers seeking extraordinary experiences is located here in Sarasota and run by its founder, Malaka Hilton, called Admiral Travel Gallery. She and her husband, Ryan, escort groups to Egypt or South Africa (their specialties) or to any exotic location, providing unique itineraries and personalized service



This month Malaka leads a group on a 10-day trip to Egypt that includes a 3-night Nile cruise. Joining the trip is Roy Yamaguchi, founder of the restaurant chain Roy's, and Salvatore Ferragamo (grandson of the shoe designer) who will be sharing wines from his vineyards. Adding to the wow factor is a full day in the company of famed Egyptologist Zahi Hawass including an after-hours tour of the Egyptian Museum. Guests stay in the Four Seasons Hotel in Cairo in addition to the Sun Boat IV which will take them on their cruise. That's in part, what makes them both some of the best in travel according to Condé Nast and Travel + Leisure magazines

There's a whole world of boutique, specialty travel agencies catering to the gourmet tastes of sophisticated and well-monied travelers seeking extraordinary experiences rather than mere vacations. One of the best of those travel agencies is located here in Sarasota and run by its founder, Malaka Hilton, called Admiral Travel Gallery.

Though she's only in her late-ish 30s, this native got her travel career started while still a youngster—traveling with her parents to far off places like Egypt, Japan, and Moscow as part of her cardiologist father's (Dr. Mahfouz El Shahawy) many medical conferences. Later she would go on to organize those same conferences for him, setting up travel arrangements for groups of 100 or so physicians and their families.

The family connection played heavily in her formative years and in Malaka's career as well. Her father is Egyptian and her mother, Sylvia, is Yugoslavian. They met each other in Vienna, moved to New York, and have lived on Bird Key since 1975. Her dad knew Malaka would never get into medicine because she recalls how little he was home.

When college came around Malaka opted for majoring in hospitality at Florida State University and even interned at the Longboat Key Club but, she reflects, "I didn't see myself in hotels or restaurants." She was about to graduate and join her dad on another conference—this one to Greece—when a family friend said to her, "You should get into travel." She took classes at a Sarasota travel school and did grunt time at Horizon Travel (now defunct), learning the office side of the biz. But she had a head start on the travel side due to the many trips she had organized for her father, not to mention the many trips she made with her family, often visiting relatives in Egypt.

Those family trips had a lasting effect on Malaka. She not only remembers them "vividly," but admits, "they're probably what got me into this business." And so it happened. Her dad saw space available on Palm Avenue and 10 years ago, she opened her Admiral Travel company. While her agency can book any exotic trip you may want, its strong suit is in the unique special excursion they offer.

Case in point: this month Malaka is leading a group on a 10-day trip to Egypt that includes a 3-night Nile cruise. Joining the trip is Roy Yamaguchi, founder of the restaurant chain Roy's.

Add to that a rare visit to the tomb of Queen Nefertari and dinner at Medinat Habu Temple in Luxor (prepared by Roy himself). Guests will savor wines from Salvatore Ferragamo (grandson of the shoe designer) produced by his vineyards. Adding to the wow factor is a full day in the company of famed Egyptologist Zahi Hawass including an after-hours tour of the Egyptian Museum. Guests stay in the Four Seasons Hotel in Cairo in addition to the Sun Boat IV which will take them on their cruise. Travel and family would play a major part in her personal life as well. On a trip to South Africa to do what is called in the biz a "site inspection" in advance of her dad's medical group's next conference, Malaka was scheduled to visit a game reserve, but wanted to head home early instead. The rep from South African Airlines who had helped with the trip urged her to stay and insisted she visit the Londolzi game reserve.

Ryan Hilton, a veteran guide, drove Malaka and her parents and helped them choose a safari camp. Their days driving together included witnessing two kills by a cheetah—a rarity for such an elusive creature—that served as a positive omen of sorts as the couple clicked and maintained contact after Malaka left. 1997 proved to be a watershed year for Malaka. She opened her biz in March, 1997, and met Ryan in June. He visited in July, came here permanently in September, the couple married in spring of 1998, and are co-owners of the business. The couple have two children: Carter, 4, and Alexandria, 7, who always travel with their parents.

They split the travel duties, but still average 10-15 trips a year with Ryan gone 12-16 weeks while she may be gone around 14 weeks and they schedule their trips pretty much back to back.

Malaka and her 16 employees staff either the Palm Avenue or Lakewood Ranch locations. She has wisely tapped into the many contacts she has made over the years here in Sarasota and beyond. The couple trade on their collective personal experiences in designing their trips. Ryan takes groups to South Africa to visit game reserves. Malaka takes groups to Egypt. Trips are personalized to give unique experiences—not the usual “today we did the pyramids, tomorrow we ride camels” type of itinerary. They also keep their group's size intentionally small so guests can enjoy the experience more.

Their expertise has not gone unnoticed. Open this August's Condé Nast Traveler, and Ryan was listed as one of only four top travel consultants specializing in travel to Southern Africa. The native Zimbabwean adds artistic touches to his trips such as poetry readings and painting sessions in addition to wildlife sightings. Malaka has topped Travel + Leisure's lists for being the best expert on Egypt which, given her many travels, family ties and trips, had to have been a slamdunk. You'll see her mentioned in the Travel + Leisure September issue on the magazine's “A-List” of “super agents.”

It seems smart to ask this seasoned traveler and business owner what trends in travel are hot right now. For families in particular, “Barging...river trips in France...people love them,” she readily notes. Italy is also “very hot” and is the place where everyone is going. Croatia is a “best kept secret” in Europe offering smaller crowds and better value, dollar-wise. New Zealand is also showing up on more people's radar as well for fly fishing, the food and wine experience whereas India is rising in popularity, too. And yes, when asked, she admits getting asked these questions all the time at parties.

Where is/are her favorite spot(s) to vacation? “Anywhere tropical,” she says with no hesitation, reciting Bora Bora, Tahiti and she admits to always enjoying South Africa and Egypt—two places where, she's “never bored.” And yes, this mom of two finds Egypt very safe. “You can feel safe at 2 a.m. in Cairo, I've brought my children.” Plus, she adds, “Egyptians love Americans.”

So, if you're an adventurous explorer, better get booked with this company soon. Their trips are mapped out through 2008 and include South Africa, Venice, Tanzania and, of course, Egypt.

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