

Bell de Souza, C.O.O. of Mansour Travel Company in Beverly Hills, Calif. has been in the travel industry for over 16 years. We welcome him in sharing his insights into leisure travel in some of the world's top destinations.

Q. What are some of the top cities that clients request for a leisure trip?

A. Paris, Rome, Florence, Vienna, London, Prague, Bangkok, Bali, Buenos Aires, Rio.

Q. In your opinion, which is a must-see city in Europe? Why?

A. This is a very subjective question and, like beauty it depends on the eye of the beholder (traveler). However, if one were to be pressed for an answer, I would say that these cities would rank high on my list: London, Paris, Amsterdam, Rome, Vienna, Florence, Prague, Budapest for a variety of reasons: history, cultural richness, architecture, theatre and music, shopping etc.

Q. Describe the best cultural experience you've had on a trip?

A. "Best" is difficult to pin down. There have been many memorable experiences on different trips to Bali, India, Thailand and even Europe that I can recall. These included local theatrical experiences, wonderful opera and theatre, folk art and crafts. Even hair-raising taxi rides through some of the cities in Asia could count as "memorable cultural experiences!"

Q. Is there a hot new country people are visiting that you believe may become a top world destination?

A. Croatia and some of the countries that were part of the former Soviet Union are gaining in popularity and will soon become popular with the mainstream tourists from the US.

Q. Which is your favorite city for museum or gallery hopping?

A. Mine is Paris. But also New York, London, Rome, Florence, Amsterdam, Brussels, Prague, Budapest... the list goes on. All of Europe is a veritable feast for museum and gallery lovers. Also, remember that most of Asia and Egypt are replete with fabulous

temples, palaces, mausoleums and other monuments that are equally breathtaking and hark back the ancient worlds.

Q. Can you recommend some art galleries to visit in Paris?

A. Paris has over 70 museums and monuments each with its own specialty and appeal for different people. I would recommend that for museums a traveler check out this Web site for more details: www.museums-of-paris.com. Art galleries in Paris (and there are literally hundreds of them) are constantly changing their exhibits and artists. It is always advisable to check out what is going on in the city before arriving there. Some of the important permanent galleries are: Pompidou Centre Place Georges Pompidou, rue du Renard, Paris; Musée de l'Orangerie; Jardin des Tuileries, Place de la Concorde, Paris; Musée National du Moyen-Age (Musée de Cluny) and Musée Marmottan.

Q. Who is your favorite artist? Have you seen their work? Where?

A. I do not have one favorite artist. But I have seen some of the great works of Rembrandt and Van Gogh in Amsterdam; Andy Warhol in London; of the impressionists at LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), many of the great masters at the Louvre and so on. Appreciation of the Arts, I think, is an ever evolving process (and a very personal one) for most people. The beauty of travel is that one gets exposed to new experiences all the time.

Q. What would you suggest a traveler see in Chicago who was interested in artistic pursuits?

A. Again, it is difficult to encapsulate all that is wonderful to see in this great, vibrant city. But I think that in addition to all of the usual attractions one must check out the new Millennium Park (designed by the great architect Frank Gehry). Check out the Web site to get a feel for the experience: www.millenniumpark.org.

Q. Is there a lesser known gallery or museum that you could recommend on the West coast?

A. In Los Angeles, in addition to the better known galleries and museums, I would recommend the

"Museum of the American West" (it used to be called the Gene Autry Museum until recently). The Web site is: www.astry-museum.org/museum/index.php

Q. Name an ideal trip for the art lover.

A. I don't think that one could do justice to that question in a short answer. I would want to talk to the client and see what kind of "art lover" he or she is. We would see what their budget was, how detailed an immersion in art the client wanted etc. Based on what they told us we would recommend something that would be best suited to their needs and interests. I think it is a mistake for a travel agent to have canned "ideal trips" for different kind of clients. Travel should be a very personalized experience and, at least for our clientele, the cookie cutter approach is an absolute no-no.

Q. Are there any art or cultural packages available at your agency?

A. Yes. We do have access to tours offered by reputable tour operators that include packages for cultural and art-oriented tours. Our specialty though is customizing our clients trips based on their specific needs and interests. We have relationships and resources all over the world that we draw upon to make sure our clients get the best possible experience in each destination.

Q. Why would a client go through an agency to book this kind of trip?

A. A professional travel agent is trained to guide a client through the entire process of planning a trip, whether for business or for leisure. Travel agents take classes, participate in seminars, become destination specialists and join professional associations in order to ensure they make each client's travel experience as personalized, convenient and memorable as possible. There are some things technology cannot replicate, and personal touch is one of them. The Internet is a valuable resource, but it cannot replace the expertise, guidance and personal service of a travel agent.

To share your thoughts on the next Travel InnSights topic: Americana or Adventures in Sports, please email thall@THOR24.com. Thank you! ✎