

LUXURY

TRAVEL ADVISOR

DESTINATIONS

New York:
Insider Secrets

Palm Beach:
Live Like a Local

Dublin: City Charm

HOTELS

Four Seasons Provence
Caribbean Resorts

CRUISES

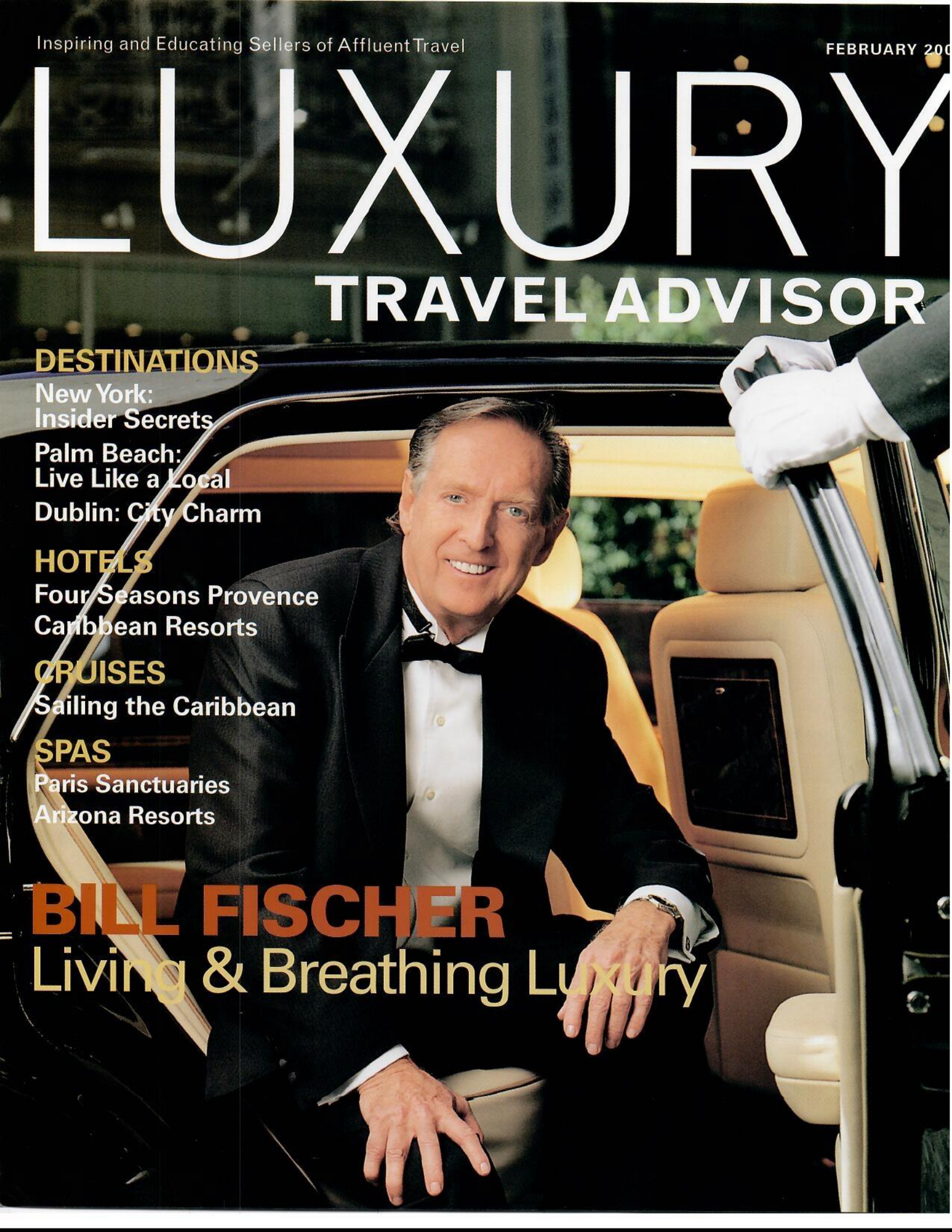
Sailing the Caribbean

SPAS

Paris Sanctuaries
Arizona Resorts

BILL FISCHER

Living & Breathing Luxury



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It's no secret that Bill Fischer charges his clients a sizeable fee to enter his world of luxury services, and a healthy retainer simply to maintain their elite status with him. His phone and fax numbers are unlisted, and he has a list of VIPs around the world who are anxiously waiting to become a client of Fischer Travel.

What's not so obvious is how Fischer, who handles travel for some of the most celebrated film stars and wealthy business executives worldwide (nearly half of his clients are international), has created a unique travel business that many would call legendary.

Some would say it's his relentless pursuit to visit every hotel he does business with before he'll send a single client there. Then there's his devotion to staying abreast of an industry he knows well; he is seen frequently at trade events and always makes time to visit with representatives of luxury travel businesses when they pass through his hometown of Manhattan.

Others would say his success spawns from a confidence developed from years of selling only luxury travel, and only to those with whom he wants to do business.

Case in point. Just 10 days before Christmas, Fischer's staff of 20 agents is working furiously to accommodate last-minute requests from clients who have just decided they'd like to get away for the holiday. They want access to the most elite resorts in the world, most of which have been booked solid for months. In many cases, they're traveling with family or entourages of seven to 10 people.

In other travel agencies, this challenge could create a frenetic tableau, with frustration and stress in full show. But in Fischer's midtown-Manhattan office, the

scene is one of quiet intensity. No one appears out of sorts as they work the phones and e-mail.

The professional tone is undeniably set by the unflappable, impeccably dressed Fischer, who watches the scene with a great sense of calm.

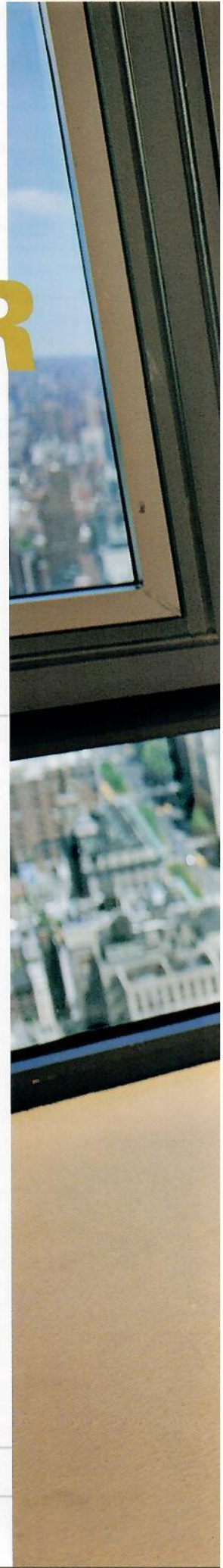
One reason for his air of tranquility is that in many cases, Fischer will get his clients into these unattainable resorts, and into some of the best suites in the house. Luxury hoteliers readily admit they hold back some premium suites during high season for Fischer—they've learned that it is a lucrative business working with the man who rents out entire resorts for clients celebrating a special birthday or anniversary. At the very least, Fischer will consistently send them a steady stream of high-paying travelers who are willing to pay for only the best accommodations, dining and amenities.

But gaining entry into Fischer's world isn't easy. If he finds a hotel wanting, he will not book any business there, even if a client requests it.

"If a client says he'd like to go to a certain hotel and it's not a hotel we sell, I'll say 'That place is not for you.' They'll say, 'But I know some people who went down there, and it was written up!' And I'll say, 'I've been there, I know what it is!'"

In one case, Fischer found a Caribbean resort that had opened with great fanfare to be "an utter

BY RUTHANNE TERRERO





FISCHER'S FORECAST for the travel industry: "On the luxury side it's going to explode."

disaster" when he personally visited, finding that the local insects were biting staff and guests and the food was "inedible."

"People were calling me from all over the world saying they wanted to go and I said, 'Not with us,'" he says. Fischer didn't send a single client there for the next three years, until management had rectified every problem he'd cited, including agreeing to install heating in its outdoor swimming pool.

"Some clients would have liked it, some would have hated it. That doesn't work with us," says Fischer. "That's why I go to the resort to see if they are able to handle the luxury client. Sometimes they are not only unable to handle it, they just don't understand luxury."

Indeed, general managers often receive a full, unsolicited report of the good and bad things Fischer experienced at their hotel. In one case, Fischer called the actual president of a hotel company after he'd returned from one of the properties in

"You have to know what you're selling. You can't sell luxury without going to these places because clients ask too many questions."

— Fischer

its portfolio. After hearing 19 pages of comments, the executive promptly heeded Fischer's advice to bring in experienced staff from his company's network to assist the ailing property.

Why doesn't Fischer merely walk away from such scenarios, choosing instead to simply work with luxury properties that do suit his standards?

"In my heart, I couldn't do that because the hotel would have been a disaster. It would have



FISCHER IS DEDICATED to keeping up with industry events. In October, he attended Luxury Travel Expo in New York where he met with Wolf Hengst, president, worldwide operations, Four Seasons (left) and Peter Greenberg, travel editor, NBC's Today Show and chief correspondent, The Travel Channel (center).

been bad karma for all the other hotels in its system around the world," he admits.

This passion for excellence explains why Fischer spends 200 days a year traveling throughout the world. His daughter and colleague, Stacy Fischer-Rosenthal, who has worked alongside him for 22 years, also travels several months annually. "Stacy really gets it, she knows how to handle this type of client, and that's the most important thing," says Fischer.

The rest of his staff is also on the road as much as possible.

"We want them to know every little detail about the places we sell, whether it's the hotel, the restaurants, the car service or the helicopter service," he says.

The entire office recently went on a "field trip" to Paris and the South of France.

"We took a helicopter from Monte-Carlo to San Tropez, which took 22 minutes. In the summertime, if you drove from the Nice airport to

St. Tropez it would take over four hours because of the traffic," Fischer says. "Because we know the product, we can tell clients to take the helicopter, and we'll get them a car at the other end."

Nor is it simple to become a client of Fischer Travel. By unlisting his phone number years ago, Fischer eliminated the hassle of "shoppers" who would ask for travel advice and then book with an agency across the street to save \$50.

"We're not an information bureau, we're an agency," says Fischer.

If you can find him, there is a waiting list, an admission fee and an annual retainer to contend with. In return, however, clients receive personal, 24/7 service from their appointed agent, whose duties may include rising at 3 a.m. in New York to ensure a hotel room in another time zone is properly prepared for the guests' arrival. Other typical tasks include preparing around-the-world itineraries with private-jet service for each leg of the journey, or finding elephants on which the client and his entourage can ride through the streets of India.

"To be an agent here, you have to be very dedicated. It's not a nine-to-five job," says Fischer.

"People here are making great money, well above the average for the travel business. But you have to be on call around the clock. You have to be well-traveled, dedicated to the clients, and you have to listen and understand. It's all in the details. You cannot make mistakes with these clients."

The average tenure for agents of Fischer Travel stands at 12 years.

"Some don't get it and some do, and the ones

ADVISOR INSIGHT:

Fischer advises all travel agents to look at their role as a true professional.

"When I changed my business, I looked at doctors, lawyers and other professionals to see what they charge and why people were paying them. People will pay for service and for something that is unique."

Don't always assume the client wants to save money.

"A client from Chicago once said, 'Do you know why I like to deal with you? You always get me the limo and the suite,'" says Fischer. "The agent she had been dealing with was booking her in a car and a room to save her a couple of hundred bucks. She wasn't looking to save a couple of hundred bucks!"

who do are the ones that stick around," he says. Those agents who do make the cut deal with a luxury clientele that takes frequent and customized vacations, traveling often with companions in groups of 10 or more. Taking over cruise ships, villas or entire resorts is not unusual for Fischer's staff, who also perform a wide variety of concierge services, such as preparing and delivering customized invitations and commissioning food trucks to serve a gourmet, pre-flight breakfast for clients traveling by private jet.

Fischer grins when he speaks of some of the more unusual requests he and his staff have fielded.

"One client wanted to make sure her husband caught a fish while vacationing in Africa, so we hired a frogman to go under water and put a fish on his hook. He caught a fish on his own, but we still had to pay the frogman.

"Another client booked a particular villa on a private island in the Bahamas because it had a heliport in case he wanted to go to the casino or dancing at night. A couple of months before departure, we found out the lights at the heliport were never installed, which was a big problem."

Fischer's staff called the manufacturer of the missing lights until they were properly installed. But the work needed to be approved by the FAA, a process that typically takes three months.

"I had to call someone and say, 'What about two or three days?' and I got someone over there. Then, a couple of days before the client was scheduled to leave, he said he'd like to swim with dolphins while he was there."

Fischer's staff made some calls to secure the trained dolphins, only to find out they were already committed to taking part in a movie for two weeks.

"We ended up getting four of them released. I guess the other four doubled that day," he laughs.

"It's all about details and making people happy," he says.

Fischer offers up what looks like a family photo album, only twice the size. It's a client's itinerary, filled with painstakingly detailed information.

"This is someone who took a trip around the world in a private plane, all the destinations they went to, the currency, the time changes in each place, and maps. To prepare something like this is mind-boggling," he says. "We also hired someone to go with them. The agent who was working on this had to get up in the middle of the night to ensure the cars were at the airport and to make sure the hotel was ready for them. We do a fair amount of trips like this each year."

Bill Fischer wasn't born selling luxury. Twenty-eight years ago he was selling \$199 packages

to Las Vegas. But he always set his sights on affluent travel, staying at the best hotels whenever he could. He had also worked with a client who was willing to pay 10 times more than what a trip was worth, if only he could get it.

"That was the breakthrough. When I quoted him a price and he said, 'No problem,' I realized that type of client is out there. I realized what people will pay to get what they really want.

"Having no money, I went to some of the bigger agencies, telling them I could train their managers to sell luxury travel. Everybody told me to forget it, but I knew it would work."

Deciding to go it alone, Fischer segued into a boutique agency selling only to the affluent travel market, which meant giving up 80 percent of his existing clientele.

"It was a struggle for five years and I didn't see much money coming in. I had a family, and I was borrowing money along the way. But I was so committed to making it happen, and after five years it kicked in."

Three years later, satisfied with the client

"It's all about the details, and making people happy. That's what our clients look for."

— Fischer

base he had built, Fischer unlisted his phone number. But he became more exclusive still.

"People would say, 'If you get me into this place, you'll get all my business.' We would get them in, but we didn't get all their business!"

As a result, Fischer told his astonished accountant he was going to charge a \$5,000 admission fee for those who truly wanted to be his client; five years later he increased it to \$10,000. Another five years later, he added an annual retainer for those who want to remain on his exclusive list.

Today, it stands at \$100,000 with an annual \$25,000 retainer fee.

"Who knows in the next few years where it'll be?" laughs Fischer with confidence. ■





LUXURY TRAVEL ADVISOR cover
subject Bill Fischer with daughter
Stacy Fischer-Rosenthal

A note on Bill Fischer, who is featured on the cover of our inaugural issue. I had the pleasure of accompanying Bill around the show floor of Luxury Travel Expo in New York last October. It was fascinating to watch the exhibitor's faces light up as Bill approached them. After just a few minutes, I realized this was happening for two reasons: Bill is not only a great travel agent to do business with, but he has also helped many people in this industry. As I walked alongside him that day I heard one tale after another of how he had helped someone secure a job, or alternately, assisted a hotel in finding just the right sales representatives or general manager. Warm, reciprocal relationships are one of the most special dynamics that exist in the travel industry, and Bill has taken that element to the highest level by always being there when someone needed help or advice. We are pleased he was willing to share some of his stories with you in our first issue of Luxury Travel Advisor.

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