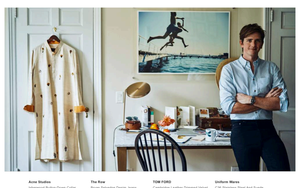
MEET MR DAVID PRIOR, THE TRAVEL GURU TO KNOW

How the founder of travel club Prior is creating memorable experiences



Acne Studios
Abramovich Bulkin-Down Collar Striped Cotton-Poplin Shirt

The Row
Bryan Sateenjo Denim Jeans

TOM FORD
Cambridge Leather Trimmed Sneakers

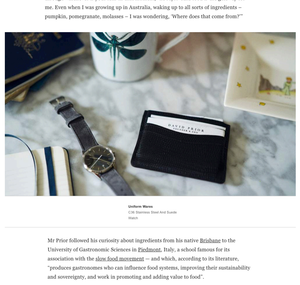
Uniform Wares
C36 Stainless Steel And Suede Watch

Words by Mr Chris Wallace, US Editor, MR PORTER
Photography by Mr Paul Barbera
Styling by Mr Moe Hoelster

Really, my dream is to recreate The Explorers Club in a modern way,' says New York-based travel mastro Mr David Prior, referencing the organisation set up in 1905 to promote scientific exploration and field study.

We are walking along a rain-slaked street in the West Village. The air is chill. This is the kind of day to cosy up by the fireplace to read about distant lands, though we'll settle for what's on today's itinerary: sliding into a table at favourite local Italian Via Carota for some hearty pasta.

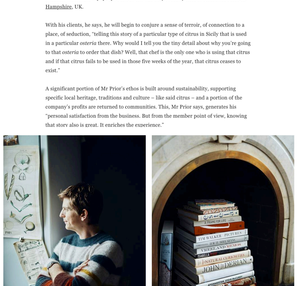
Food is the perfect place to start talking about Prior, the travel club that Mr Prior, a former travel writer and editor (for *Condé Nast Traveler*, *T*; *The New York Times Style Magazine* and more) has just launched, with the aim of bringing his editorial nous to bear on creating special experiences for its members. "I think you look at the world through whichever is your lens in that moment," he says. "And food is the gateway for me. Even when I was growing up in Australia, waking up to all sorts of ingredients – pumpkin, pomegranate, molasses – I was wondering, 'Where does that come from?'"



Uniform Wares
C36 Stainless Steel And Suede Watch

Mr Prior followed his curiosity about ingredients from his native Brisbane to the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Piedmont, Italy, a school famous for its association with the slow food movement — and which, according to its literature, "produces gastronomes who can influence food systems, improving their sustainability and sovereignty, and work in promoting and adding value to food".

"It was kind of a fantasy world of university in a castle in Piedmont," Mr Prior says. "Tartufo, chocolate, on a river in this misty valley. It's famous in terms of food." While studying there, Mr Prior started writing for Australian travel magazines, telling stories about places and people through their culinary traditions. "Food's a way to understand culture," he says. "It's also what has connected me to a lot of different people – sort of like that idea of 'tell me what you eat and I'll tell you who you are'. And I figured very often if I could understand the food culture, I could understand the wider culture, and so then food became the lens, the doorway in, and then it became much broader than that."

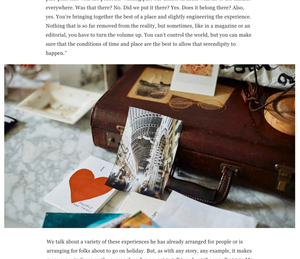


After school, Mr Prior joined up with fellow foodie Ms Alice Waters, owner of the farm-to-table mecca Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, and a kind of godmother of modern American culinary culture, whom Mr Prior describes as "a genius connector – and a very seductive person. She knows how beauty and deliciousness can seduce people. She believes, as I do, in the power of beauty, that food is not frivolous, but can be a Trojan horse for other ideas, as can building an experience."

Mr Prior's new venture is to seep people away to foreign lands, building around them a fantasy and incredible experiences. For members of Prior, he and his team offer a bespoke travel service, invitations to one-of-a-kind experiences and to what he calls a nomadic clubhouse — pop-ups such as the one they recently held at Heckfield Place in Hampshire, UK.

With his clients, he says, he will begin to conjure a sense of terroir, of connection to a place, of seduction, "telling this story of a particular type of citrus in Sicily that is used in a particular *osteria* there. Why would I tell you the tiny detail about why you're going to that *osteria* to order that dish? Well, that chef is the only one who is using that citrus and if that citrus fails to be used in those five weeks of the year, that citrus ceases to exist."

A significant portion of Mr Prior's ethos is built around sustainability, supporting specific local heritage, traditions and culture — like said citrus — and a portion of the company's profits are returned to communities. This, Mr Prior says, generates his "personal satisfaction from the business. But from the member point of view, knowing that story also is great. It enriches the experience."



Watson Kinand
Striped Wool-Blend Sweater

James Perse
Combed Cotton-Jersey T-Shirt

We've been sort of nibbling around the edges of the functionality and ethos of Prior — a club whose members can interact between themselves, curated experiences, sustainability — but now I think I note what may be the signature spirit of Mr Prior's endeavour, which is this interplay between narrative and immersion, for lack of a better word. As any casual user of Instagram knows, there is a good deal of editing involved in creating a fantasy portrait of a person, place or thing – in creating the type of enthusiastic portraiture of glossy magazines. Which is all well and good. Pretty pictures are very pretty, and alluring. Great 'grams, like evocative books and movies and other pop cultural iconography, do indeed make me want to travel to the places of their making. But, only to recreate the image that first seduced me? Or to have a new, second-level, personal experience of the place? Well, yes. And that blend of fantasy and first-hand experience, Mr Prior says, is precisely what he's after.

"I always describe it as Diana Vreeland meets David Attenborough, Vogue meets *National Geographic*," he says. "And if you can get both of those ideas and their world views, then you have a great travel experience. You have your idea of Rome, that romance of Rome, and then you also need to have the vigour of 'this is Rome', that is actually Rome right now. With these experiences, I like to turn the volume up on what the place is. There's always something curious, always something indulgent, always some introduction to some extraordinary person; there's always some food or drink experience that is of that place. There's always an accommodation that is of that place, that isn't a generic version. There's always something… even magical. For example, the pale-pink tent with the peacocks walking past our dinner in India with all of the candles everywhere. Was that there? No. Did we put it there? Yes. Does it belong there? Also, yes. You're bringing together the best of a place and slightly engineering the experience. Nothing that is so far removed from the reality, but sometimes, like in a magazine or an editorial, you have to turn the volume up. You can't control the world, but you can make sure that the conditions of time and place are the best to allow that serendipity to happen."

We talk about a variety of these experiences he has already arranged for people or is arranging for folks about to go on holiday. But, as with any story, any example, it makes more sense to focus on the personal, and so we get to talking about the very first trip Mr Prior remembers taking, a very *National Lampoon's Vacation*" with his family in a minibus across Europe, where he first fell in love with maps. We talk about souvenirs, like the hundreds-of-years-old rug in his apartment made of dozens of saris. He's forthcoming with tips. "The greatest lesson that I learned," he says, "is that when you're curious about someone, curious about their place and the thing that they're proud of, the thing that they're the steward of, everything's available to you."

This being a story about travel experiences, perhaps inevitably we find our way back to the one that gave rise to the project, which Mr Prior happened on in the shadows of the Himalayas. "I went to Ladakh in India," he says, "next to Kashmir. It's this Buddhist territory between Pakistan and China and India in a militarised zone, so you can't use a phone or computer. For 10 days, I didn't look at a screen at all, except on a camera. A friend of mine had restored these farmhouses throughout the valley, with views soaring down to monasteries in the distance, these raging torrent rivers, apple and cherry orchards… It's just extraordinary.

"And one day my friend said, 'You know there's this weird thing where the local indigenous tradition mixed with the Buddhist tradition and they have these female oracles'. Now, oracles are certainly not my thing. But we went, and the oracle was dressed in this Himalayan gypsy-type thing, spinning around, throwing daggers into the ceiling, speaking in tongues, touching you and then she stops, exhausted. And starts telling my friend all about her life and it was spot-on. And [my friend's] crying and I was like, 'Yes, this is amazing, my life is sorted, I cannot wait for this.' Thinking I'm going to get this whole 20-minute self-indulgent thing, the oracle talks to me and I'm like, 'Wait, it's already done?' And the translator says, 'She says, "Just do it."' I mean, a Nike slogan? Anyway, that morning I was thinking, 'How cool would it be to try to breathe life into editorials, having people fall in love through these stories, having them have an emotional reaction? How would that be to facilitate that? Do I really want to do that?' I think I do. Let's try it.' And so then, for the rest of the trip, I started planning on how I would do it."

One very personal way he did was by taking 13 members across three generations of his family with him to Japan for the holidays. There were, of course, all of the curios, the indulgences, the expectedly unexpected signatures of a Prior experience. But, because there were little kids, there was also Hello Kitty and Disneyland. "It was hilarious," Mr Prior says. "It was really an experiment in multi-generational travel." And it was also, not coincidentally, a bit of an homage to that first minibus tour with the family. "This was something my father would never do. He was a lawyer, he's retired. And he would never have ever said yes to anything like this. And I called him and said, 'Look, I think we should go to Japan for Christmas.' And he just said, 'OK, let's do it.' It was a huge vote of confidence in me."

Maybe his dad, too, had been to see the Nike oracle. Or maybe his dad has learnt the lesson he's shared with me and found the right sort of curious person who will make everything available to him. Either way, I bet they had a good time.

For more travel advice, go to MR PORTER's Style Council