

Inside the lives of travel tutors for the wealthy: big paychecks, yacht trips, and very little personal space

LIAN KIT WEE | 09 October 2024 01:00 AM



When a missed flight left travel tutor Joanna Dunckley and her client stranded in a hotel, she wasted no time and turned the room into an impromptu classroom.



Travel tutors can earn 6 figure salaries but at high personal costs. Ranta Images/Getty, Mykola Syvak/Getty, Anna Kim/Getty, Tyler LeBl

- Travel tutors can earn six figures a year, but that price tag comes at a personal cost.
- Tutors often have to contend with little to no social life while maintaining professional boundaries.
- They also need to be flexible, adapting to a family's plans and travel delays.

Her job required the utmost flexibility: Some days, she'd teach math classes on a superyacht. Other days, she'd turn an ant bite into a science lesson on ant colonies and formic acid.

Dunckley's role is anything but traditional. For the past 14 years, she's worked with Tutors International, a company offering private travel tutor services.

Dunckley's lessons could take place anywhere — she taught marine biology on yachts on the Mediterranean and covered history while exploring the killing fields of Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

"It's the best way to teach because you can personalize your curriculum," Dunckley said. "If your student is a golf lover, you can tailor all your physics questions to how they relate to golf."

Tutors International, a UK-based company offering these services, advertises [positions](#) with salaries ranging from \$150,000 to \$380,000 annually.

Founder and CEO [Adam Caller](#) said this high price point is designed to "attract the absolute best out of the school system to work one-on-one with a family for several years."

"We're basically paid like very good lawyers," said [Nathaniel Hannan](#), who has worked with Tutors International as a travel tutor for 18 years and has lived in 13 different countries.

But the hefty [paycheck](#) comes with significant caveats, said four current and former travel tutors who spoke with Business Insider.



Hannan said that he earns around \$250,000 annually and has lived in 13 countries. Nathaniel Hannan

Living someone else's life means compatibility is key

Travel tutors become an essential and close-knit part of their client's world, which often means putting their own on hold.

"You are living their life and making yourself available for their life," Dunckley said.

The close relationship with the family is both a challenge and a reward.

"The relationship we develop with those families lasts many years after we finish tutoring their kid," said Tutors International's Hannan. "My professional obligations to a family expired four years ago, but I'm happy to fly across an ocean and spend time with them on my dime."

Hannan said that candidates for Tutors International answer rigorous essay-style questions and undergo interviews before Caller shortlists two for a client.

Ultimately, the choice often comes down to which tutor the client connects with best, which Tutors International's Dunckley likened to matchmaking.

She said that while many tutors may have similar paper qualifications, their ability to meet the family's needs is usually the dealbreaker.

"One family might want to travel and use the locations as inspiration for learning, and another needs their child to get into Harvard," said Dunckley.

The process of matching tutors with families goes beyond academic expertise. Dunckley says tutors and families must fit each other's personalities and lifestyles.

"You're not just showing up, teaching for a few hours, and then living your own life," she said. "You're spending time with them in airports and dragging bags through high-stress situations."



The constant traveling meant that high-stress situations from flight cancellations or delays were unavoidable, said Dunckley. Chen Junqing/Getty Images

Professionalism is a non-negotiable

Living so closely with the families they tutor presents professional boundary challenges. Caller told BI of one tutor who learned this the hard way after being filmed drunk at a private party.

"You can't just go and have a glass of wine with them at the end of the day," Caller said. "No matter how your clients might be behaving, the tutor shouldn't have done that, but it's difficult for a tutor to get right."

While tutors work and live close to their clients, maintaining boundaries becomes paramount. For Hannan, keeping a professional distance means adhering to one cardinal rule: Not living with clients.

"It's hard to maintain a professional distance from your student if your bedroom is next to theirs," Hannan told BI. "You're there to do a job, and even though you might become friendly with the family, you're not their friend."

Dating takes a pause

With the constant travel, finding time for romance can be [difficult](#).

"That's probably a big part of why I'm single," Hannan said of his busy traveling schedule for the past 18 years. "That's something that I have to accept if this is something that I want to do for my career. So it's just par for the course."

Tutors International's Dunckley said that being a travel tutor is likely very difficult for tutors with "a very close social network" and becomes much less suitable for tutors looking to settle down.

When Dunckley had her child, residential assignments became difficult.

"It is possible, but much less flexible, once you have a family," said Dunckley, who completed a two-year role with her husband and child traveling alongside her.

Dunckley has since stopped travel tutoring and, after starting a family, took on a client account manager role at Tutors International from her home in Spain.

It's not all work and no play

In addition to the usual school holidays, tutors are also given time off from their jobs to unwind and explore the cities they're in.

Dunckley said tutors must weave their off-time into wherever they are, even out at sea.

"I remember in Tonga, I took a day off and dropped off the side of the boat in the kayak and disappeared into the day, the island, and just sort of chilled with a boat," said Dunckley. "It's not going to be where you can plan to be off on weekends."

Dunckley also said tutors have to learn to balance their time and [find hobbies](#) that you can do to make sure you're not hyper-alert the whole time." Dunckley said that she relaxed by reading a book or visiting restaurants.

"It's not good if you burn out and are resentful or unhappy," Dunckley said. "For me, it was just making sure that when I did have the time, I made the most of it, and I didn't just sit and stew or worry."



A day off for Dunckley sometimes meant making the most out of alone time on a boat. Bodo Miller/Getty Images

While the constant traveling satisfied Dunckley's wanderlust, she said that the most fulfilling part of her job was being a part of her students' lives.

"It's not just the educational stuff. It's the life stuff too, like changing the tire on a car, figuring out where you're going, and getting laundry done in the middle of nowhere in China," Dunckley said. "Children benefit from having somebody on their side, building their confidence as role models and mentors."

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