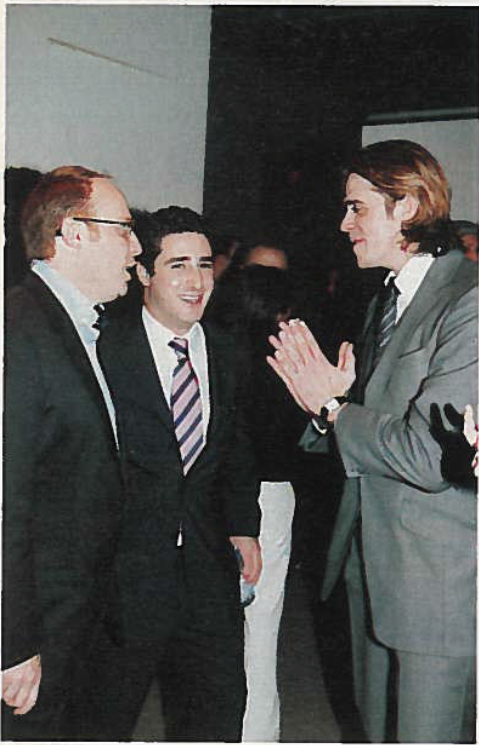


Between the lines

The chequered life and art of Bridget Riley

in some way, whatever their income. Luca del Bono, the director of Quintessentially Travel, says, 'Our service isn't just for film stars and millionaires, it's for everyone. We act as a regular travel agent, only faster and often cheaper. We have strong business relationships with all the big hotel groups, so we can get you a room somewhere when even the manager can't.'

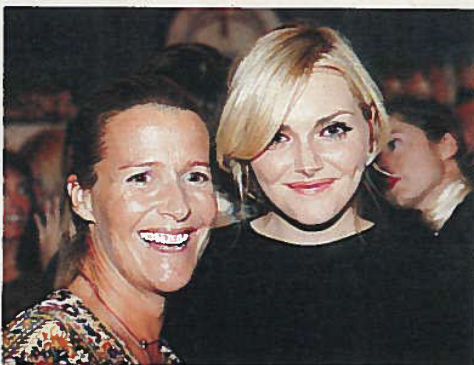
The venture has been so successful that two years on Elliot and Simpson have set up Quintessentially in America. Their launch party was held in the distinctly highbrow quarters of Sotheby's on York Avenue, where the boys were supported by the likes of Sophie Dahl, Sir David Frost, Moby, Stella Tennant, Bay Garnett and most of Manhattan's Park Avenue power people. The evening was supported by Elliot and Simpson's new best friend, Sony CEO Sir Howard Stringer, and all the glossies turned up to cover the event and get intimate with its dashing British co-hosts.



PHILIP HANHART

want to join us rather than work against us.' Elliot also claims that business is easier in the US. 'In London "business" is a dirty word, whereas in New York it's what everyone is here to do. In the UK meetings are padded with small talk, and you need about five meetings to clinch a deal; here, you need two, and you get straight to the point the moment you sit down. And you can't bullshit people here – if you say you're going to do something, you have to do it.'

Of course, the Americans are simply loving the fact that Ben Elliot is Camilla Parker Bowles's nephew. They have also fallen for his public-school charm and good looks. While Simpson has returned home to run the show in London, Elliot has set up temporary camp in Manhattan and has been hailed as a money-making, deal-raking Hugh Grant. Spend five minutes talking to Elliot and it's hard to deny that he does have the gift of the gab. He's anathema to his peers back home, but the



Madonna called us at 4.30pm and asked for a Throat Coat teabag – which are not available in the UK. We got one to her by 6pm

It is now two months since that night and the boys are still getting their fair share of airtime in the Big Apple. Quintessentially's attempt to crack the US is an ambitious move for a British company that is only two years old and isn't understood by half the people it is primarily aimed at. Then there is the fact that since September 11 New York's businesses have taken a massive tumble and are still licking their wounds. But that won't deter these boys. It seems that they are prepared for the demands of New York, where the service industry is the best in the world. 'We have more competitors out here,' Elliot says, 'but we're confident we can find our own niche. There's Personal Concierge International, Circles of Boston, Amex and Sony's personal concierge service, Cierge. But since we arrived here we've been approached by Amex and Cierge to do business with them. They

Americans are impressed by success. 'Surely it won't last,' we English say, grinding our teeth with envy and frustration. 'Of course it will,' say the Americans, smiling proudly on someone who shows much potential.

Since they launched in 2001 with a £600,000 cash investment, Elliot and Simpson have turned Quintessentially into a lucrative business. Their annual turnover last year was £2.6 million and the company was profitable for the last quarter of that period. Half of this profit is a result of Quintessentially Travel, the other half from the personal management sector. 'It's hard to specify which of our services is our most profitable because they are all inextricably linked,' Simpson says. 'We will genuinely do anything for our members, so it's hard to compartmentalise areas of profit.'

When Simpson says he will do 'anything' for his members, he's not joking. Requests made

by those for whom money is not an object make fascinating reading. Simpson recalls, 'One of our members called us from St Tropez to get a plastic surgeon to her villa. About to host her own party, she was putting on some false eyelashes and ripped her eyelid in the process. We managed to get a surgeon to her house within half an hour, who gave her a micro-stitch and replaced the false eyelash minutes before her first guest arrived.'

Del Bono recalls another coup for the company. 'During her last tour, Madonna called us at 4.30pm on a Friday and asked for a Throat Coat teabag – not available in the UK. We called the US supplier who said he had just sent one box to a woman in Kilburn. We tracked her down and I personally delivered the teabag to Madonna on my Vespa by 6pm that day.' There are plenty of others, from the man who wanted a drum kit helicoptered to his yacht in Monaco to please a famous drummer guest on board, to the man on holiday in Madagascar who wanted a specific type of rum flown out to him in the desert by private jet because they didn't sell it there. They were even prepared to help out Jeffrey Archer. When Lord's cricket ground were selling off rolls of turf, Elliot was asked by Archer, who is banned from the ground, to buy some on his behalf. The turf was then delivered to Archer's garden. There is a lot of stress involved in meeting such requirements, but there is clearly a profit to be made from this level of service.

In addition to arranging people's lives, Quintessentially has also carved a niche for itself in the world of party organising. The company is regularly approached to stage events and provide guest lists for some of the UK's largest companies – Vertu, Marc Jacobs, Jil Sander and Tiffany & Co. The boys accept the level of commitment needed to make Quintessentially work. 'We serve people 24/7, so we have to be on call 24/7 too,' says Simpson. 'The danger in this job is that you can get so bombarded with requests it can grind you into the ground. And you can never, ever say no.'

Quintessentially's presence in New York will clearly benefit its British members and vice-versa, and they plan to launch in LA, Dallas, Chicago, Miami and San Francisco over the next two years, before knocking on the doors of Hong Kong and Shanghai. This summer they open offices in Beijing and Dubai. 'We already have "solutions" for people in 24 countries,' says Simpson, 'and we hope to be a global brand by the end of 2005. In June they will be offering their members a quarterly magazine, edited by Lucia van der Post, and a Quintessentially credit card.'

Does all of this sound a bit overambitious – arrogant, even? New York, apparently, provides an environment that encourages such fervour. 'Working in New York is like putting your fingers in an electrical socket,' Elliot says. 'When I was in England people accused me of being aggressive. Here they applaud the go-get attitude. People love what we are doing.'

Time will tell if Quintessentially will achieve the world domination it so impatiently desires. With a global membership of 4,000 and relationships with more than 16,000 suppliers worldwide, it's clearly on its way. And, love them or hate them, Simpson and Elliot are not going to stop now. ■