

COMMENTARY

D.L. Stewart: Web site's offerings enough to bounce our checks

By D.L. Stewart

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Proving once again that you don't have to be logical to launch a Web site, a Virginia company is offering to sell you an experience that "money can't buy."

But then, wallbounce.com isn't worried about oxymorons. Its target audience is people to whom moderation in the pursuit of indulgence is no virtue and spending \$5,000 or more for dinner is no vice.

As its Web site explains, "Wallbounce is the premier provider of 'discerning learning experiences' with lectures, workshops and special event recommendations in cities across the globe. Through relationships with various organizations, we provide access to speakers, experiences, events and behind-the-scenes moments, which will create an indelible memory."

A \$5,800 dinner, in fact, is the centerpiece of what the fledgling company refers to as "discerning learning experiences." So it has arranged dinner for six around the chef's table at Alain Ducasse, which is New York's trendiest restaurant. Or at least it was yesterday. The dinner includes champagne, a white-truffles tasting menu from Alba, premium wine with each of the seven courses and an introduction to the executive chef and sommelier. There's also a similar, but obviously less filling, meal for \$5,000 that doesn't include white truffles from Alba. The Web site didn't say what you get instead of white truffles, so I'm guessing white-truffle helper.

Still, as the company's press release gushes, even that is "the ultimate dining experience for a few ordinary people who will pay \$5,000 to have their greatest wish come true." Which may or may not also be an oxymoron, depending upon your definition of "ordinary people" and how many of them there are who can afford to put \$5,000 on their Visa card for dinner.

Then again, if paying \$966.66 a person for dinner sounds expensive to most people in the country, that's only because most people in the country don't live in New York or other East Coast cities. But there are enough of them to constitute a market for such "discerning learning experiences" as a baker coming to your home to teach you how to make cookies (\$700), a personalized shopping trip with a celebrity-

fashion stylist (\$925) or a manicure/pedicure party with three of your closest friends for \$450. Which comes out to less than \$6 a digit, assuming you and your friends all have the standard number of fingers and toes.

On the West Coast you can take three friends on a boat out of San Diego and go shark diving for \$12,000. If all goes well after five days, you will bring three friends back to San Diego.

In the Rocky Mountain area you can engage in simulated air combat in a T-34 Mentor military airplane for \$800.

In the Midwest, the Web site advises, there are "currently no experiences." Which is what people on the East and West coasts have been trying to tell us for years.

So maybe "Midwest discerning learning experience" would be an oxymoron, too.

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