



IN FOCUS

THE NEW JET SET

The whys and where-tos of travel are being transformed says Lauren Ho

The modern traveller wants to re-discover adventure, discover new neighbourhoods and live like a local, only with better wi-fi. Lauren Ho on the shifting demands of the modern globetrotter.

Ironically, despite the upheaval the travel industry has gone through over the past few years, there is a strange sense in which things have come full circle. Before the 1950s, travelling for pleasure was a rare pastime, reserved for those with the financial means and an intrepid outlook: those who were both interested and interesting. These days – for better or worse – anyone can pretty easily find a flight to even the farthest-flung of destinations. Travelling is now more predictable and less of a “journey”, prompting many to again seek out adventure and authentic experiences.

Needless to say, it’s the Millennials who are leading this particular charge. A demographic that lives for the moment, they have grown up in a rapidly changing environment that has given them a set of priorities and expectations different from previous generations. They have reshaped the way things are bought and sold, turning to a new set of services that provide access to products without the responsibility of committing to ownership, in turn giving rise to what is now known as the “sharing economy”. From housing and car rentals to fashion and pet borrowing, this has had an impact across industries, including travel, forcing many companies to question their traditional business models.

One such pioneer of the sharing economy is Airbnb, which has created a market for short-term lodging in other people’s houses and now has over one and a half million listings in 34,000 cities. This alternative to traditional accommodation is not only cost-effective, but is also flexible, personal and, perhaps most importantly, enables travellers to get that all-important local experience: to live, at least temporarily, like a native.

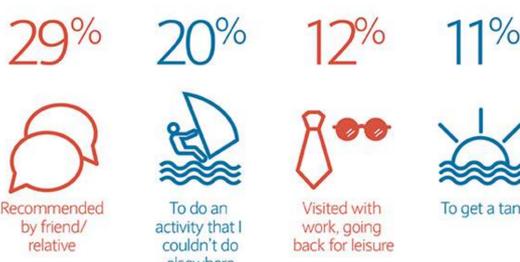


New rental services such as Airbnb let travellers live as, and amongst, locals. Credit: Airbnb

Travelling is now more predictable and less of a “journey”, prompting many to again seek out adventure and authentic experiences.



Why we go where we go...



Source: Trip Advisor/Ipsos Mori



Marriott's new Moxy brand is aimed at younger, more design-conscious customers with bars that double as co-working spaces.

While many hotels would argue that Airbnb is only generating new demand, rather than displacing existing demand, competition in the hotel market is at fever pitch. It feels as if there is a constant flow of new niche concepts.



Meanwhile the possible merger of a number of heavy-hitting hotel companies is also seen as a response to the rise of Airbnb and other short-term rental options. Two of the world’s most powerful hotel corporations – Starwood Hotels and Resorts and Marriott International – are set to join forces, which will result in the world’s number-one hotel chain, with more than one million rooms and 30 brands between them; meanwhile French group Accor Hotels, behind affordable options such as Novotel and Mama Shelter, will pair up with Canadian group, FRHI Holdings, owners of Swissôtel, Raffles and Fairmont.

As you would expect, offering the latest technology remains a priority, with speedy wi-fi a deal-breaker for the digital nomad. Best Western – the first hotel brand to introduce free wi-fi – is leading the way once again with the instalment of li-fi technology, a wireless network that is transmitted through lights and is so far measured to be about 100 times faster than the average wi-fi connection. Others are doing way more than offering rocket-fuelled wi-fi. Last year, the world’s first robot-staffed hotel launched in Nagasaki, Japan, while the recently opened Arive Hotel in Palm Springs clearly targets the digital native or gone-native. Brainchild of former Facebook employee, Ezra Callahan, the hotel ditches traditional services and replaces them with technology used in everyday life. Expect easy check-in at the hotel bar, Netflix and Apple TV in guest rooms and TMS communication to order room service and house keeping.

Of course, many in the ultra-luxury sector insist that Airbnb and similar have had little impact on their business. “The ultra-luxury market has not been affected by short-term rental companies whatsoever,” says Jaclyn Sienna India, co-founder of super-exclusive US-based travel agency, Sienna Charles. “Our clients make enough money to spend it how they like. They desire perfection, they don’t like taking any chances and they want to be in the best of the best, when they can.”



London's SideStory offers themed tours by local creatives including photographer Stuart Freedman, who leads the East End Revival tour.

They desire perfection, they don't like taking any chances and they want to be in the best of the best, when they can.



The Peninsula Hotels, meanwhile, endeavour to supply visitors with insider access, providing edited experiences with PenCities, their own city guides. “Guests are looking for bespoke experiences, with curated recommendations on the latest restaurants, galleries, seasonal celebrations and smart things to do in each of the Peninsula cities,” says Peter Borer, Chief Operating Officer. And the Conrad Hotels have recently launched a “Stay Inspired” initiative called “Conrad 1/3/5”, which offers travellers personal recommendations in convenient one-, three- or five-hour increments, designed to fit anyone’s schedule.

And it’s not just hotels that are offering this kind of curated cultural immersion. Rachael Moloney, a journalist and travel entrepreneur, has set up SideStories, together with business partner Giovanni Donaldson (a former director at Virgin Holidays). Based in London, it offers themed tours curated by local professionals, including access to kitchens, studios and workshops.

“The modern traveller is looking for direct access to the people who make a city tick creatively”, explains Moloney. “They are after a spontaneous, immediate travel experience and deeper levels of engagement with a location.” Meanwhile, the former creative and media director at Soho House Group, Florian Wupperfeld, has launched Leading Culture Destinations, which he describes as a hybrid publishing company and travel agency. It offers curated tours for the culture-hungry traveller, such as “art safaris” in Berlin with exclusive access to the most sought-after private collections.

Intrepid, energetic and Internet-savvy Millennials are no doubt reinventing the travel industry. They view travel as a birthright, as a reward and as a means of personal enrichment. They often travel to travel, and travel for work. They are defined by their mobility. It’s no surprise, then, that the industry is scrambling to cater to their needs and wants. “Luxury hotels are certainly trying to bridge the gap between their older, loyal clientele and attracting the new demographic,” says Jaclyn Sienna India. “The main impact to affect a traveller’s decision are like-minded people or influencers; they trust those they admire and they crave authenticity in all forms.”

Main image credit: Airbnb

Intent on expanding its client base, Airbnb is now targeting business travellers; its partnership with Concur, a business travel technology company, not only allows employees to bill rooms booked through Airbnb directly to their companies, but the rental outfit now has a dedicated business travel portal for which the slogan simply reads: “Travel for work, feel at home”.

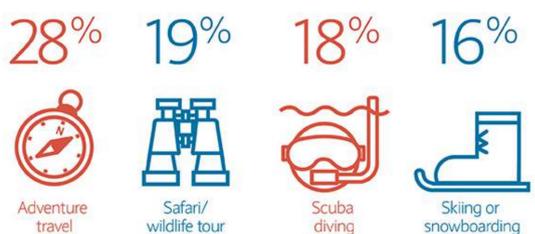
That’s a sentiment shared by enterprising Amsterdam-based company HotelsAhead. The company has already developed the smart citizenM chain, aimed at the modern business traveller who prefers a twenty-four-hour on-site café and a lively social/work space to over deferential and intrusive service. Its new brand, Zoku, which is set to launch in Amsterdam later this year, targets the “digital nomad” – the mobile professional who leverages technology in order to work remotely. Zoku offers live/work lofts rather than rooms and promises the flexibility and home comforts of an Airbnb rental combined with the service and social buzz of a traditional hotel.

While many hotels would argue that Airbnb is only generating new demand, rather than displacing existing demand, competition in the hotel market is at fever pitch. It feels as if there is a constant flow of new niche concepts aimed at satisfying the shifting demands of the modern traveller.

A number of the industry’s major players have taken a good, hard look at their various formats, found them lacking and decided to launch their own design-led and lifestyle-focused concepts, emphasising affordability and a new connection with a hotel’s local area (often located in “neighbourhoods” rather than traditional tourist ghettos). Moxy by Marriott is expanding at a considerable pace, with three properties just launched and a further twelve set to open over the next two years, while Hilton is working hard on not one, but two new accessible offerings: Canopy, due to launch in Reykjavik this year, and Tru, with 102 hotels signed off and thirty more in various stages of approval.

Again, the emphasis is on an intimate neighbourhood location and buzzy, social lobby spaces that attract residents to work and play, allowing visitors to interact with and live like a local. “Canopy is a brand that redefines the lifestyle segment and brings guests closer to the destinations and communities in which they travel,” says Gary Steffen, global head of Canopy by Hilton. At the same time the slick Generator group - among others - redefines hosting with high-quality, design-friendly and service-orientated offerings that are an update of the traditional bunkhouse.

What Millennials are planning this year



Source: Trip Advisor/Ipsos Mori



Arrive in Palm Springs is one of a new wave of hotels where service is discreet, on-demand and largely digital rather than over-formal and intrusive. Credit: Jaime Kowal

That doesn’t mean the luxury sector can ignore wider shifts within the industry and consumer demands. After all, the legions of tech titans, with very different demands of their temporary accommodation, have serious spending power ... and a serious appetite for travel and new experiences. “The new informed traveller wants well-designed, functional and electronic-ready rooms; great, healthy organic foods; warm, authentic and informed service; a great location and no nickel and diming,” says India.

Great service will always be the key to success. It’s just that the sort of service that people are looking for is changing. The staff at the Mandarin Oriental in London will supply guests with everything from cashmere hot-water bottles at turn down to a twenty-four-hour wellness menu devised by the in-house lifestyle coach, Ruben Tabares.

“Luxury might have become more accessible, but service remains key to making the difference,” says Gérard Sintès, the hotel’s General Manager. And while the service is second-to-none at all Aman Resorts properties, Olivier Jolivet, the brand’s new CEO, insists it has to be linked to immersive cultural experiences: “We always try to get under the skin of any destination. Our architecture, cuisine and experiences are all influenced by the history, heritage and people of the location.”

Five key travel trends

- 1 The Real Deal**
Cultural homogenisation has prompted many travellers to seek genuine experiences. From food to accommodation, authenticity is key. Generic sightseeing is out and living like a local is in.
- 2 Plain and Simple**
In response to this new breed of traveller, traditional hotel brands are creating pared-down diffusion lines, where locality and cultural immersion takes centre stage via vibrant, social lobby spaces.
- 3 Inside Track**
In order to provide the ultimate cultural experience, enterprising companies are popping up with teams of skilled insiders to deliver authenticity and cultural immersion.
- 4 Live to work and work to live**
From whooshed-up wi-fi to lobby-work spaces and hybrid office lodgings, hotel brands are adapting to accommodate the arrival of the “digital nomad”.
- 5 Tailor-made**
Done with generic itineraries, the modern traveller wants different experiences for his or her personal requirements, and hotels are going out of their way to provide these personal recommendations.