

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Ultra-personalization continues to drive travel trends

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Japan is one of the top travel destinations among affluents.

By SARAH RAMIREZ

While authenticity has been a leading focus for heritage hospitality and travel brands, ultra-personalized experiences are set to overtake it, according to a new report from Virtuoso.

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For affluent travelers, these personalization requests go beyond upscale accommodations and events and instead include specific meals and personal photographers. Social media continues to play a major role in travel planning, from inspiring some adventurers and motivating others to seek out under-the-radar experiences.

"This year our advisors reported a significant increase in client requests that has travel reaching new heights when it comes to personalization, even in the luxury space," said Terrie Hansen, senior vice president of marketing at [Virtuoso](#), Dallas, TX. "Customization has always been the preference for the affluent, but the level of specificity in airline seats, not just carriers, and hotel room numbers, not just individual hotels or brands, has been amped up."

The global travel network surveyed more than 1,000 travel advisors from affiliated agencies across the globe for its 2018 Luxe Report.

Travel priorities

At the heart of burgeoning vacation trends is an emphasis on destinations and activities that reflect travelers' own interests. Social media inspiration is also one of the main motivations for travel, especially among younger generations.

According to a survey from Allianz Global Assistance, about half of millennials say social media influences their travel decisions. Peer-to-peer word of mouth holds the most sway, as 86 percent of consumers trust their own social networks to post accurate content about travel experiences, while 55 percent deem brands to be truthful on social media ([see story](#)).



Travelers want to explore their passions through bucket-list experiences. Image credit: Luxury Retreats

For affluents, however, social media means more than simply capturing a photo for Instagram. Virtuoso has worked with clients to organize professional photoshoots, sometimes themed, at various destinations.

Hotel brand The Dorchester Collection is looking to help guests create and capture memories of their trips by launching a collection of city guides.

Curated by a select group of influencers, the #DCmoments City Guides are designed to inspire people to explore and share their favorite places on social media ([see story](#)).

Travelers are also exposed to new locales through social media, leading them to seek out unusual accommodations, like igloos or treehouses, that have not been overdone. They also expect transportation providers to cater to them, whether through more accessible travel routes or VIP service while going through customs.



Nature-oriented travel is also a popular trend. Image credit: Aspire Lifestyles

Lastly, conservation is also a growing priority among travelers, especially animal lovers. Not only do some guests want to attend safaris or go whale watching, but they will also seek out animal protection facilities and other welfare-oriented interactions.

As travelers become more environmentally conscious, luxury hotel brands are introducing more sustainability initiatives that prove hospitality does not need to sacrifice upscale experiences to achieve ecological and social responsibility ([see story](#)).

Unique experiences

When it comes to destinations, different countries and cities find popularity depending on the purpose of travel.

Italy is the top global destination, and also ranks the most popular among families, millennials and honeymooners. South Africa is the most popular adventure destination and Japan is the top emerging country.

Japan is also the most popular travel destination among Asian millionaires. This is a result of its strong heritage, a variety of destinations across the country and the low yen ([see story](#)).

Exploration and experiencing new cultures outranked relaxation as the primary motivation for travel. The leading vacation types are multigenerational travel and adventure trips.

According to a report from Travel Leaders Group, adventure travel, which includes activities such as hiking and nature exploration as well as cultural and culinary exploration, is growing in popularity. This finding is consistent

with an overall shift in luxury consumers' habits, favoring experiential purchases ([see story](#)).

In addition, many luxury hospitality brands are already emphasizing their commitment to customer service.

For instance, in its first digital-led campaign, Hilton's Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts gave concierges the starring role. All of the videos emphasize face-to-face interactions, a conscious choice the brand made based on their own consumer data ([see story](#)).

"Travel is enhanced through human connection," Ms. Hansen said. "That is the one element that cannot be fabricated, knocked-off or replicated through technology.

"Consumers want an experience that is as individual as they are," she said. "Luxury brands that connect with guests on a deeper level and offer something that's non-Google-able will find themselves viewed as something other than a commodity."

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