TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Luxury hospitality is not about thread count, but what counts: Crystal exec

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Crystal's new digital tool is part of its larger digital efforts. Image credit: Crystal

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK – Luxury tourism in 2019 is going to be about personal service, exclusivity, individuality, emotions and enrichment, according to a panel at The New York Times Travel Show.

During the discussion, moderated by *Insider Travel Report's* editor in chief James Shillinglaw, speakers noted that much of the growth in luxury tourism is coming from consumers' interest in gaining access, whether it is the opportunity to meet royalty or sailing to previously unavailable destinations on a smaller, more nimble cruise ship. While new trends are emerging, luxury hospitality will remain centered on the human connection above all.

"I think the word luxury is the most overused word in our industry," said Carmen Roig, senior vice president, sales and marketing at Crystal.

"Luxury is very personal," she said. "Everybody has great hardware. We say it's not about thread count, but what counts.

"And what counts today is the experience that you deliver."

Traveler profile
While significant attention is being drawn to millennials, panelists pointed out that for luxury travel, the boomers still control much of the market due to the wealth they have amassed over the years.

Jon Grutzner, president of Luxury Gold and Insight Vacations, said that finding who the luxury traveler is comes down more to psychographics than demographics. Consumers at the same income level will trade up or trade down in particular categories, making it more important to find those who are willing to invest in travel.

Signature Travel Network's executive vice president Ignacio Maza said that even though millennials might not have the funds to warrant them being a primary luxury travel target, they still show a willingness to spend on certain aspirational experiences.

Luxury marketers may want to wait to target younger clientele. Image credit: Protravel International

While Crystal might not be marketing directly to millennials, the company still sees younger travelers on its vessels as they vacation with their families.

Even younger children are being exposed to luxury travel, with Protravel International's president Becky Powell noting that parents will pull kids out of school for a trip, looking at it as an educational experience.

Luxury travelers tend to be affluent but time-poor. In the United States particularly, the affluent do not tend to take all their vacation days, leading to limited trip lengths.

One of the key areas seeing growth in luxury travel is cruises. Brands are rolling out smaller ships to be able to venture to new ports of call.

Another trend panelists are seeing is the blurring of the lines between land and sea travel. Tourists are choosing to take trips that incorporate both cruises and land expeditions, and cruise lines are offering experiences beyond the water that can be tacked on to an on-board trip.

When luxury travelers opt for a tour, today they are often looking for "ungoogleable" experiences, according to Mr. Grutzner. These include cultural immersion and insider access to people and places.

Luxury Gold offers a reception hosted by Princess Anita von Hohenberg, a descendant of the Habsburgs. Image credit: Luxury Gold

Tours also tend to be smaller and more customized, allowing for a more intimate journey.

The luxury travel experience is also becoming more purposeful, whether it means fitting in volunteer work on a trip or considering overtourism before booking a trip to an endangered destination.

Hospitality help
For luxury travelers, advisors still play a key role in the booking process.

Ms. Roig said that these consumers do research a trip online, but they want the ability to discuss a potential trip with an expert.

Instead of eliminating the role of the travel agent, technology has actually increased consumers' desire for a human interaction, according to a marketing strategist from high-end hospitality network Virtuoso.

During the digital revolution about 20 years ago, many cried that the death of the travel agent was looming, as online

travel agencies appeared, giving consumers the ability to book trips themselves. In a presentation during Luxury Interactive 2016, the speaker explained how contrary to this prediction, most travel agencies are looking to hire as affluent travelers in particular call upon their service (see story).

Often getting an advisor to truly understand the intangible product that hospitality is selling revolves around having them experience a hotel or tour themselves.

Beyond education, a key aspect of selling trips is relationship building. Signature Travel Network's Mr. Maza suggested that agents act more like financial planners, getting to know their clients, including details such as birthdays and other milestones.

Luxury travel is going to rely on individualized attention and a personal service for differentiation.

Crystal is exploring the personal side of travel in a multichannel campaign that highlights how guests make each experience their own.

As high-end hospitality brands continue to emphasize experiences over amenities, Crystal is wagering that focusing on both its travelers and crew will set it up apart from other cruise lines. Crystal also leverages user-generated content in the campaign for an added personal touch (see story).

"The key word is enrichment," Mr. Maza said. "Wherever you go, you can be enriched with the right advisor. And I think that's what people are looking for.

"I think nowadays luxury is about being, not about owning," he said. "I think the owning is over…It's about living the luxury and it's about putting all your heart in it, and if you really are mindful and you are present you will be enriched."