

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Hotels are start, end points of travel experiences

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Boutique hotels tend to reflect their local neighborhoods. Image credit: Nomad Hotels

By SARAH RAMIREZ

NEW YORK As affluents become more drawn to experiential travel, the role of the hotel has evolved to become more about the destination than simply about hospitality.

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During a panel at *Cond Nast Traveler's* Points of View Summit on Oct. 7, industry experts discussed how high-end and boutique hotels are becoming more reflective of their location. Design, sustainability practices and programming are different ways hotels can incorporate local elements.

"It's about bringing the culture of the city into our spaces," said Kelly Swadon, partner/chief brand officer at **Ace Hotel Group**. "It's about the local community and their voices contributing to designing, building, even programming our spaces.

"Our hotels are our guests' first introductions to a city," she said. "It's an extension of the community."

Hotel culture

The popularity of home sharing services such as Airbnb Luxe has shown the hospitality industry that travelers want to approach destinations from the perspective of locals.

"[The travel experience] begins and ends with the hotel," said Ike High, international travel industry sales manager at **Explore Charleston**. "It's the first and last thing travelers see. If they have a bad taste of the hotel, they're likely to have a bad taste of the destination."

Hotels remain competitive by offering engaging programming and luxe amenities.

1 Hotels' Brooklyn Bridge

1 Hotels' Brooklyn Bridge hotel includes design elements and furniture made by local artisans. Image credit: 1 Hotels

"It's not enough to have a comfortable bed," said Arash Azarbarzin, president at [SH Hotels & Resorts](#). "We have an ethos and a story behind every one of our hotels."

Hotels can draw inspiration from their locales in a variety of ways, such as interior design or restaurant menus with locally-sourced ingredients.

For instance, 1 Hotels' Brooklyn Bridge property in New York includes furniture built by local artisans, according to Mr. Azarbarzin.

"I think travelers are coming to the destination and hoping to find hotels that reflect the city," Mr. High said. "I don't think travelers want hotels that are contrasting to the city."

Sustainability is another important aspect through which hotels support their local environments. The hospitality industry has a significant impact on the environment due to factors such as single-use plastic and water consumption for linens.

SH Hotels & Resorts has made sustainability part of its brand positioning, even adding timers to showers so guests can be aware of how much water they are using. Ace Hotels switched to refillable bottles for toiletries years ago to reduce its environmental impact.

[View this post on Instagram](#)

Love thy mother and fight for her too. A global call to arms to act now to demand energy revolution and to make better choices and personal changes starting today. We see you out here, New York. #fridaysforfuture

A post shared by Ace Hotel New York (@acehotelnewyork) on Sep 20, 2019 at 11:06am PDT

Sustainability is becoming an important part of hotels' local positioning

More recently, hospitality group Marriott International announced plans to reduce its plastic waste by eliminating single-use toiletry bottles in its guest bathrooms by 2020 ([see story](#)).

According to the [Sydell Group](#)'s chief investment officer Matthew Livian, smaller hospitality groups are better equipped to make cultural changes due to their smaller footprints.

"Regardless of where it's coming, I think the shift [to sustainability] is good," Ms. Swadon said.

Social storytelling

Engaging guests with local experiences is also essential in drawing in travelers.

"We're in the business of making memories, and today those memories are documented better than ever and shared around the world," SH Hotels' Mr. Azarbarzin said. "Our most important job as hoteliers is to make sure those memories are amazing."

Social media has become a key source of inspiration for consumers as they make travel plans, but a recent report finds that friends' posts are more influential than what a brand or publication shares.

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](#)).

During a presentation at LuxeCX/AMCX 2019 on Sept. 25, the general manager of Taj Hotels' The Pierre shared his facts-based approach to customer experience. Feedback from consumers often gathered through social media is essential for understanding what parts of the hotel experience resonate.

Social media content, particularly on Instagram, is also critical for Mr. Luiggi and his team to track what stands out for guests. Many will share photos from their arrival, underscoring his belief that first impressions shape the experience ([see story](#)).

"We like to think we're ambassadors of the cities we're in," Sydell Group's Mr. Livian said. "We take that responsibility seriously and want to make sure the narrative we're telling is one that elevates the neighborhoods in and is true to them."