

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Consumers more apt to call on travel advisors for complex, costly trips

January 23, 2020



Family travel is a growing segment. Image credit: Ritz-Carlton

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK Rather than being made obsolete by online booking accessibility, travel agents have proven to be a valuable resource in navigating the modern tourism landscape, according to executives from Travel Leaders Group.

Subscribe to **Luxury Daily**
Plus: Just released
State of Luxury 2019 **Save \$246 ▶**

Travel advisors are particularly leveraged for longer tours, cruise vacations, multigenerational trips and access to exclusive experiences, fitting into the predominant travel trends of today. During a media event hosted by Travel Leaders Group on Jan. 22, speakers noted that luxury travel is looking up, in turn raising the outlook for the continued role of high-touch travel planning.

"As it turned out, travel advisors weren't dinosaurs," said JD O'Hara, CEO of [Travel Leaders Group](#). "They weren't replaced by the Internet or do-it-yourselfers.

"Travel advisors didn't go away at all," he said. "They became trusted and invaluable experts for frequent and luxury travelers."

Travel trends

While consumers might pick a do-it-yourself booking process for simple, short jaunts, even millennials are reaching out to professionals for help in planning multi-day journeys.

Three-quarters of all international travel is booked via an agent, and 80 percent of all cruises are sold by a travel advisory.

Consumers who are looking for high-touch service also tend to go through an advisory. As consumers and regulations such as the California Consumer Privacy Act demand more privacy, agents' roles are also poised to expand.

What tourists want out of a vacation has changed, as they desire more authentic, local experiences rather than hitting the same spots as everyone else. This is also evolving their approach towards picking destinations, with more far-flung locales gaining interest.

Becky Powell, president of [Protravel](#), noted the rise of long-term family travel, as traditional school environments get swapped for learning around the world.

Another trend is the solo traveler, which companies are planning around. For instance, cruise lines are offering more affordable fares for individual guests.



Cruise lines are catering to solo travelers. Image credit: Crystal Cruises

The cruise industry is booming, with 100 new ships set to launch by 2027.

Hotels are also speedily expanding their footprints with new locations and additional types of properties.

For instance, hospitality group Marriott International is launching all-inclusive destinations, including a forthcoming Ritz-Carlton resort, as consumer interest in these offerings grows.

Marriott plans to grow its all-inclusive footprint in locales that are already popular with leisure travelers, including millions of its loyalty members. The group expects to open five resorts between 2022 and 2025, including a Ritz-Carlton property in Riviera Nayarit, Mexico ([see story](#)).



A rendering of Nia, the planned all-inclusive destination with four Marriott International brands including The Ritz-Carlton. Image credit: Marriott International

As travel becomes more about authentic experiences, hotels are moving away from carbon copy properties and towards interior designs that capture the feel of their community. With the traditional branding of a hotel less consistent across the chain, loyalty is even more important at driving repeat business.

Loyalty programs are one of the best ways to ensure continued customer retention, something hotel brands are embracing by unifying those programs across multiple brands and merging luxury with mass market.

Marriott International unified the loyalty programs across three of its brands, while Hyatt Hotels and Small Luxury Hotels of the World similarly combined loyalty programs. By merging their programs across brands, these groups are pooling resources to gain access to a wider consumer base and ensure a seamless and desirable customer experience no matter where guests stay ([see story](#)).

Risk assessment

In recent years, consumers have become more cognizant of the impact of travel on the environment. Some have chosen to avoid certain destinations due to fears of overtourism.

Companies are also taking the ecological impact of their operations into account. For instance, cruise lines have switched from engine power to energy from the shore while they are in port.

Airlines are looking at how they can reduce their carbon footprint. Meanwhile, hotels are cutting out plastic in the form of straws and toiletries.

Climate change is also affecting how consumers travel. Cindy Schlansky, co-president of [Tzell Travel Group](#), said she has seen travelers rush to get to certain destinations that are in danger.

The bushfires in Australia, while a natural yearly occurrence, have been more severe than usual this year as high temperatures and dry periods exacerbated the blazes. Rain this week ushered in some relief, but now the country is working to get the message out that it is safe to visit.

Speakers from the briefing noted that consumers who had already booked travel have not changed their plans to visit Australia. In a Travel Leaders Group survey conducted in October and November, Australia was the top destination that consumers want to visit in 2020.

Chris Allison, head of commercial partnerships for [Tourism Australia](#), said that one way to support the rebuilding efforts is for consumers to travel to the country, but the challenge will be getting new tourists to book. The tourism board has been working to use its owned channels to provide updates, seeking to be a central source of information.

[View this post on Instagram](#)

We have created a resource that highlights tourism areas that have been affected by bushfires to help you plan any upcoming travel within Australia. There are vast regions of the country that remain unaffected by the bushfires and continue to offer our guests the incredible tourism experiences that we have to offer. Please visit <https://www.australia.com/en/travel-alerts.html> for information.

Instagram post from Tourism Australia

Aside from environmental risks, travel companies are now facing a potential health crisis with the Wuhan coronavirus.

Lisa Wheeler, senior vice president of operations at [Altour](#), said that it is still early in the outbreak, but so far her agency has not seen a pullback in clients' desire to travel to China.

Amid the risks inherent in travel today, Altour has hired its first chief risk officer to advise both its agents and clients of risks, whether related to weather or political climates.

"We need to have a responsibility to the travelers out there and also make sure that our frontline agents are prepared to react and identify where they are," Ms. Wheeler said.

© 2020 Napean LLC. All rights reserved.

Luxury Daily is published each business day. Thank you for reading us. Your [feedback](#) is welcome.