

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Luxury travel today is individual, immersive, transformative

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Luxury experience is about the personal touch. Image credit: Ponant

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK Each traveler has his or her own idea of what constitutes a luxury experience, requiring hospitality brands and travel advisors to get to the heart of their personal desires to truly deliver customized indulgence.

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During a panel at The New York Times Travel Show on Jan. 24, speakers discussed how travelers' desires have switched from experiential pursuits to transformational journeys. Luxury travel is now more often about activities rather than laid-back luxury, as consumers look for ways to immerse themselves in local culture.

"Luxury is very personal," said Albert Herrera, senior vice president of global product partnerships at travel advisory group **Virtuoso**. "As the consumer, as the traveler, as the advisor, we all get more and more savvy in terms of what our customers are looking for and for ourselves.

"A lot of it is also about transformation, how the luxury experience can transform the individual," he said.

Consumption to conversion

Luxury travel has morphed from pure indulgence to immersion, and consumers are now calling the shots on what they consider luxury. This is an opportunity and also a challenge for hospitality companies as they look to deliver on this level of personal expectations.

Providing a comparison to today's luxury travel, Rick Baron, managing director of worldwide accounts at **Tauck, Inc.** painted a picture of his company's tours decades ago. Guests would dress up, and they would spend numerous leisurely hours taking in multi-course meals for breakfast, lunch and dinner.



Today's luxury travelers are more apt to want to get in on the action. Image credit: Tauck

Modern luxury travelers are more content to have access to experiences, such as the opportunity to cook their own meal.

Seconding this idea, **Ponant** Cultural Cruises and Expeditions' CEO of the Americas Navin Sawhney noted that luxury travelers are seeking spontaneity and the chance to get off the grid.

Lia Batkin, cofounder of **In the Know Experiences**, saw an opening for a company that focused on travel that took visitors beyond upscale hotel chains and popular restaurants, recognizing that some people are more interested in having a highly localized experience. For some luxury travelers, a heightened experience includes getting to dine at local mom and pop eateries.

According to Ms. Batkin, travel advisors need to continue to consult with clients and get to the heart of what they want, even after they have already worked with them. Travelers may want different things for different situations, and it is in the advisor's best interest to not stereotype or pigeonhole them.

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A long-closed remote land that still remains untouched by most of the world, Bhutan is a magical and notoriously mysterious destination that is slowly opening up to foreign visitors. So if you love exploring new cultures, hiking, and relaxing at a hotel tucked in the mountains with a spa there really is no quite better place to do this than at @amankorabhutan. Spread out in stunning and varied locations across the country, Amankora's 5 lodges offer unprecedented access to the world's last surviving Buddhist kingdom in the most unique way. Expect: the most seamless experience, expert guides and some of the most spectacular sites in the world. Along with many new developments, a few new properties are set to open in 2020 which is all the more reason to go now...

A post shared by In the Know Experiences (@intheknowexperiences) on Jan 9, 2020 at 3:24pm PST

Instagram post from In the Know Experiences

Furthering this idea of not being everything to all people, [The Leading Hotels of the World](#) specializes in boutique properties, 85 percent of which are run by families. The organization's president/CEO Shannon Knapp noted that some travelers are looking for this level of localization and community, while others prefer the consistency and familiarity of a chain.

Along with becoming immersed in a destination, increasingly luxury travelers are seeking to actually make a difference through their visit.

Ms. Knapp shared a story about a Leading Hotels property in Marrakech that helps to support the local community's co-op structure through tourism. A village sells tapestries and pottery, with sales distributed to residents.

Becky Powell, president of agency [Protravel](#), gave the example of a trip to Africa. While the animals on safari are a main attraction, what sticks with travelers are experiences they have meeting and volunteering with local children.

Mr. Baron noted that sustainability goes beyond environmental efforts to the way in which travelers interact with local cultures and lands. Tourists should ensure that their visit does not destroy people or places.

"We've gone in luxury travel from this idea of traveling for consumption, with eating and drinking and buying, to this idea of immersion immersing yourself in the culture, in the destination, really becoming a part of it," Ms. Knapp said.

"The next step is this idea of conversion," she said. "I think it's really leaving a destination better than you found it, which in turn transforms your life, leaves you with indelible memories forever, but you've also made an impact in that destination, that culture that you're traveling to."



La Mamounia in Marrakech, Morocco. Image credit: Leading Hotels of the World

According to Ms. Powell, while clients do not tend to ask about sustainability, it is something that makes an impression when they see it in action. As more Gen Z and millennial travelers enter the market, she expects to see more direct queries about brands' ecological and social responsibility.

Virtuoso's Mr. Herrera said that a key focus has been disseminating information from its partners to agents so that they can better answer client questions about sustainability.

In sustainability pushes, Ponant is sourcing two-thirds of its food locally, while Leading Hotels of the World is reducing its single-use plastic.

Moderator James Shillinglaw, editor in chief/founder of [Insider Travel Report](#), pointed out that sustainable luxury travel can also be profitable, not requiring companies to choose between the two.

Acquisition aids

Finding new luxury clients often leans on word of mouth more than anything.

Mr. Sawhney extolled the power of the travel advisor in bringing in new business. Meanwhile, Ms. Powell said that creating satisfied clients breeds more customers, since they will brag to their friends.

Another tool at advisors' disposal is social media. According to Mr. Herrera, having a set persona online can also help to attract clients.

Ms. Batkin stressed that one of the keys to her success was not turning down bookings for lower-priced trips. Getting someone in the door at a price point of \$150 per room has often led to more expensive stays down the road.

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.

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 ([see story](#)).

Hospitality companies should bear in mind that the luxury traveler is not necessarily an affluent individual. Mr. Baron said that his clients include guests from all walks of life, since some customers will save up to spend on travel.

As Generation Z consumers continue to acquire purchasing power, they are outspending other generations on luxury hotels and unique culinary experiences while traveling.

According to a survey from CIT Bank, the number of consumers making travel saving a priority more than doubled from 2018 to 2019. Following Gen Z, millennials are the second most likely to splurge on different aspects of their vacations ([see story](#)).

"If you try to save your clients money, you are never going to be successful at luxury travel," Mr. Baron said. "People don't travel to save money, they stay home to save money so that once or twice a year, they'll sacrifice and save so that they can have that luxury experience."