

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

## Luxury travelers are opinion leaders: Virtuoso CEO

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*Affluent travelers can lead others to make responsible travel decisions. Image credit: Paul Gauguin Cruises*

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK Where the luxury travelers go, the rest of the market follows, making these consumers powerful influencers in shaping more sustainable, responsible travel.

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During a panel discussion at The New York Times Travel Show on Jan. 24 moderated by Insider Travel Report editor in chief James Shillinglaw, executives discussed the future of travel and the ways in which the industry will need to grapple with issues such as sustainability and overtourism. As companies rush to meet consumers' value demands, panelists warned against greenwashing in favor of authenticity.

"People travel for experiences," said Leigh Barnes, chief customer officer of **Intrepid Travel**. "In many ways, the future is now, and we've reached the point where we all need to be taking action and there's two particular components, and community is just one of them.

"As a tour operator, we need a social license to operate," he said. "So if communities don't want us there, we actually don't have a product.

"Second of all, if we don't have a healthy planet, we can't have a healthy travel sector."

Travel with a purpose

Both luxury travel companies and consumers are becoming more mindful of the impact that their presence has on destinations.

One of the issues is overtourism, in which hot spots are seeing stress from crowds of visitors.

Daniel Skjeldam, CEO of **Hurtigruten, Inc.**, described overcrowding as "the elephant in the room" within cruising, particularly as ships get bigger. The executive believes that ships need to move in the opposite direction, and lower their capacity.



*Hurtigruten tour. Image credit: Hurtigruten*

Panelists generally agreed that the ball is in locations' courts to set the guidelines, such as how many visitors they will allow at once, primarily because these destinations often rely on tourism for residents' livelihood.

One way to prevent overcrowding is to encourage travelers to visit destinations in the off season. This also ensures that the local economy does not hurt during what would usually be a less active time.

Matthew Upchurch, chairman/CEO of [Virtuoso](#), said that this type of travel has long been a pastime of luxury tourists. Governments can also prompt visits during slower seasons by drawing tourists with cultural events.

Intrepid Travel's Mr. Barnes also noted that it is important for travel companies to be respectful of destinations, since they rely on access to run their businesses. Supporting sustainability can also be a strategic investment on the part of tourism bureaus, helping to ensure that the natural features that draw consumers including wildlife continue to do so.

Lisa Lutoff-Perlo, president/CEO of [Celebrity Cruises](#), told the story of Icy Strait Point, AK, which was having trouble retaining its youth as they became young adults. After the cruise business helped to develop the town, it became a more appealing place to live, in part because of employment opportunities within cruising.

Beyond supporting local communities economically, travel can have a significant impact on global affairs, opening up people to new cultures.

"Without travel, the world will be a much more dangerous place," Mr. Skjeldam said.

The travel industry is working to make its operations less impactful.

Hurtigruten is investing in biogas and is looking into the potential for battery-powered vessels. Integrated into the expedition cruises' onboard dining experience is education about how a greater portion of the animal is used by chefs.

Celebrity has made inclusivity a key aspect of its brand and efforts. Thirty percent of the cruise line's bridge crew on its new Edge ship are women, and it boasts the first female American cruise ship captain.



*Travel companies are protecting destinations. Image credit: Celebrity*

Edge has been designed to be more efficient, including a bow that cuts through the water more easily.

Human touch

Digital interactions are shaping how consumers book and experience travel.

For instance, entrepreneur David Neeleman is working on a new project with the code name Moxy. Similarly to how his earlier venture JetBlue was positioned as a customer service company that just happened to fly, Moxy will be a technology firm that flies, putting the emphasis on innovation.

Moxy is working on a super app that will contain aspects such as hotel bookings and rental cars in the same platform as airplane travel.

Consumers expect travel to become seamless due to advancements in technology over the next decade, according to a new report from digital travel platform Agoda. Expectations for the 2020s include hotel check-in through mobile applications and passport-free travel ([see story](#)).

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](#)).

Mr. Upchurch compared the changing role of a travel advisor to the trajectory of wealth advisors or luxury sales associates. Rather than relying on these professionals for transactional tasks, consumers are turning to them for advice.

The executive also sees the potential for artificial intelligence to free up agents for more human interaction.

"I think AI is going to be one of the greatest things that ever happened to human interaction," Mr. Upchurch said. "Because it's going to address the concept that I call 'automate the predictable so that you can humanize the exceptional.'"