

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

How luxury travel brands are pivoting during the pandemic

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Belmond First Light nature and photography excursion in France. Image credit: Belmond

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Luxury hospitality brands must continue adapting to meet the evolving expectations of the post-coronavirus traveler.

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During a panel at the FT Business of Luxury Summit on Nov. 24 moderated by *Financial Times* travel editor Tom Robbins, industry insiders discussed how expectations have changed for hospitality brands as consumers have turned to domestic travel and become more mindful of sustainability. While the coronavirus pandemic has changed luxury travel in many ways, it is only one of the challenges facing the industry.

"There is no doubt that certain aspects of travel and how we've been traveling have changed," said Melinda Stevens, editor in chief of *Cond Nast Traveler*. "I find interesting the fact that it used to be that we would see travel as something that happened, by definition, going on a plane for a very long time and that it happened on the other side of the world.

"And I think probably what we learned during this time is not only does [travel] happen there, but it also happens closer to home," she said. "The places literally just round around the corner from ours and certainly further, we don't know very well, where we're all exploring for the first time and really enjoying."

Travel in the time of COVID

Luxury consumers are looking forward to traveling as soon as it is safe to do so. Expectations have evolved, however, regarding when a "return to normal" will occur, whether that is next spring, summer or fall.

Confidence is returning to travelers, as panelists noted that interest and inquiries are growing particularly with promising news about vaccine development.

With travel and border restrictions, domestic travel has been the bright spot for the industry in 2020. Many hospitality brands, including Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts and Marriott International, have leaned into staycation or workcation trends ([see story](#)).



Journeys By Design will offer fewer safari excursions, balanced out with higher price points. Image credit: Journeys By Design

Growth in domestic travel has presented challenges for certain destinations or travel providers, which have worked to adapt to the times.

For instance, the remote island nation Mauritius introduced a new visa to lure entrepreneurs and remote workers for longer-term stays. Safari provider **Journeys by Design** is planning to introduce mobile expeditions and other adventure products in the United Kingdom and the United States next year.

"That shift in domestic tourism is something that we think we can benefit from, both for business-minded reasons but also for the environment too," said Will Jones, founder of Journeys by Design.

Mr. Jones also predicts that in the future, his company will scale back the number of trips while growing the booking value of expeditions.

These decisions are a contrast to the over tourism that was becoming problematic at many of the world's most desirable destinations ([see story](#)).

Ms. Stevens agrees that going forward, sustainability should be front and center for the travel industry.

According to a recent report from Euromonitor, 53 percent of travel companies are interested in investing in energy over the next five years and 59 percent want to focus on developing sustainable products and services. Additionally, 47 percent of travel businesses globally plan to invest in sustainable sourcing in the next five years ([see story](#)).

Looking ahead

Travelers' priorities may continue to change, impacting other aspects of the luxury hospitality industry, such as design.

Belmond's president and CEO, Roeland Vos, predicts that hotels will have to carve out physical spaces for guests to distance themselves from each other. Already, some luxury travelers are booking out smaller properties for stays with family and friends.

This shift may be a boon for independent hotels, or groups of boutique properties, rather than the larger hospitality brands.

"It's important that our hotels don't kind of siphon themselves off from the places that they find themselves in," Ms. Stevens said. "What I find galvanizing about the really progressive hotel chains and small independent hotels is that they are employing more locally, are more connected to what's happening on their doorstep."

Luxury hospitality brands have also turned to digital channels to continue to engage with travelers and offer unique, albeit virtual, experiences.

Beginning at the onset of the pandemic, the digital event series, Belmond Invitations, promoted the hospitality group's Good Living philosophy of well-being experiences such as musical performances or guided meditations that enrich mind, body and soul ([see story](#)). Meanwhile, Mandarin Oriental launched the YouTube series "Fantastic Recipes," featuring chefs and bartenders from properties around the world showcasing their talents so that consumers at home can still enjoy luxury dining under lockdown ([see story](#)).

"You honestly do not need a private jet in order to travel," Belmond's Mr. Vos said. "You can have wonderful experiences that are just around the corner from where you live or where you are."

"I do think that travel will be seen as more valuable because people will think about it more before they go," he said.

"When they travel, they want to have a high-value experience and at some point, it does come at a price."

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