

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Outlook 2021: Slow' stays, safety will guide affluents eager to travel

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Four Seasons is touting how travel can forge connections. Image credit: Four Seasons

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Arguably, no luxury sector has been as severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic as travel and hospitality, but some industry watchers see pent-up demand and vaccine rollouts as reasons for cautious optimism.

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Luxury travel had seen a period of unprecedented growth leading into 2020, as affluents developed an appetite for unique experiences and remote areas of the globe became more accessible. At the start of 2021, destinations and hospitality brands are pushing to safely welcome back guests despite various COVID-related travel restrictions remaining in place.

"Travel for 2021 is still very much a mystery for the travel, hospitality and tourism industries, as well as the travelers themselves," said Damon Banks, editor and managing partner at [LuxeGetaways](#), Washington, D.C. "We are all cautiously optimistic that some level of travel will be resumed by late spring or early summer, but as 2020 has taught us, nothing is for certain."

Here are some of the key trends for the luxury travel and hospitality sector heading into 2021:

Extended experiences

Not all affluents have stayed close to home since the start of the pandemic, but leisure travel has evolved. Remote work flexibility has contributed to the popularity of extended trips while concern over international travel and commercial airlines has more consumers interested in domestic trips and "staycations."

"The industry will continue to reach out to travelers with opportunities for future travel," Mr. Banks said. "As many of us are truly missing the ability to travel, many of the hotels continue to offer staycation options that provide us with an opportunity to find some sense of normal when it comes to travel, but without having to venture too far from home."

"As remote working and virtual learning continue into 2021, hotels and resorts that can provide extended stay options, especially those with areas for outdoor activities, will be doing so as many people are eager to get out of the cities and spend several weeks or months at a resort," he said.

Four Seasons is promoting extended stays as many affluents continue working remotely

Hospitality group Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts is inviting guests to stay longer at their properties in a new campaign playing on the trend of "workcations." Through the "Extend Your Stay" initiative, guests can unlock special services and benefits once they book stays that are 30 days or longer ([see story](#)).

With so many individuals still working from home, brands like Auberge Hotel Collection and Mandarin Oriental are introducing remote long-term stay packages to accommodate working individuals looking for a vacation while still navigating the pandemic. Some packages even include tutoring for children who are attending school remotely.

For instance, the Mandarin Oriental Workcation package includes private sanctuaries in selected rooms, complimentary Wi-Fi, printing, dining credit, as well as temperature checks, increased cleaning measures across all areas and even PPE for all guests ([see story](#)).

Another trend is high-net-worth travelers renting out entire boutique properties to ensure social distancing.

Hoping to capitalize on this trend and other changing preferences, tour operator TCS World Travel has moved into the luxury vacation rental space with the launch of Private Homes Plus.

The new all-inclusive residential stays service allows clients to book vacation rentals, activities and transportation including air and on-the-ground travel in a single booking. During the pandemic, private air travel has seen a surge in interest among the affluent and now TCS will be able to offer clients a more complete travel experience ([see story](#)).



TCS World Travel is launching a luxury vacation rental program. Image credit: TCS World Travel

"We expect the trend of low and slow travel to continue for a while, which means staying in one location for longer periods of time," said Misty Belles, managing director of global public relations at [Virtuoso](#), New York. "The flexibility afforded us through work-from-home and virtual learning will make it possible, so extended stays will remain popular.

"The companion' to this trend is the expectation of privacy, making private villas and residences connected to hotels for in demand," she said. "Not only do these offer the same or better amenities as guests have at home living rooms, kitchens and amenities like a private vehicle but they also allow tighter restrictions over who enters the residence and when."

Travel tech

Hospitality brands will also have to leverage technology as a way to encourage consumers that travel is safe.

A year into the pandemic, consumers still have several concerns about traveling. According to the "[Rethink Travel Global Survey](#)" from Amadeus, 84 percent of consumers report technology would increase their confidence in traveling the next 12 months.

More than four in 10 travelers, 43 percent, are concerned about the increased risk of catching or transmitting the virus while traveling. Between 30 and 40 percent of respondents also cited other concerns such as government-imposed quarantines, being stranded, mixing with crowds and reduced enjoyment due to restrictions or closures ([see story](#)).

In light of the pandemic, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts is investing further in its mobile application and chat that allow guests to control how they engage with others, limiting face-to-face interactions while maintaining personal service. The app features include booking and managing reservations, requesting luggage pickup, airport transfers,

room service, restaurant and spa reservations ([see story](#)).



A UV robot used at the Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills. Image credit: BHCVB

In another consumer-facing effort, Beverly Hills Conference & Visitors Bureau is calling attention to its world-class service and new safety standards with its "Something to Feel Good About" initiative. Some of the technology highlighted in the campaign included a UV robot that disinfects rooms at the Waldorf Astoria and Beverly Hilton ([see story](#)).

"Travelers have accepted the reality that the experience will not be the same for many months yet and have accepted that safety is the most valuable amenity when staying with luxury hotels and resorts," Mr. Banks said. "We have traded extravagant breakfasts for intimate in-room dining that is prepared and delivered with safety as the number one priority."

Push to meet demand

To meet pent-up demand from travelers, hospitality brands are pushing ahead with renovations, expansions and new offerings ahead of the easing of lockdowns and travel restrictions.

"The news of the vaccine gave travel a much-needed boost because it created a promise to the return to some semblance of normalcy," Virtuoso's Ms. Belles said. "People have been dreaming of traveling again for almost a year now, whether it's to see loved ones they've been separated from or the opportunity to explore once again.

"For the first time, there is confluence of both time and financial affluence amongst upscale travelers," she said. "They've not spent money on travel or luxury goods and services in more than a year, plus the market has been performing well overall, which is the truest indicator of how luxury travel will perform."

Four Seasons has announced anticipated openings and renovations in several markets.

Most of the brand's anticipated opening are concentrated in North America. The group is also renovating and enhancing properties in the Americas, Europe, Middle East, Africa and Asia Pacific ([see story](#)).

Similarly, Italian jeweler Bulgari is building its hospitality business with new properties in Rome ([see story](#)) and Miami ([see story](#)) in the next few years.



Bulgari Hotel Miami Beach. Image credit: Bulgari

Private aviation has also seen a boon, with JetLinx and NetJets among the companies experiencing growth in the sector as the wealthy opt for private planes rather than commercial flights.

Brands are expected to play-up the emotional benefits of travel as well, by focusing on celebratory trips, multi-generational bonding, wellness and unique nature experiences.

Interest in wellness travel had been soaring among affluents prior to the pandemic, but experts are confident that this will resume as the luxury hospitality industry rebounds. In light of the pandemic, consumers have become more mindful of both physical and mental health ([see story](#)).

"With the desire to vacation again, experiential travel is still the most sought-after travel experience with a focus on wellness and fresh air," LuxeGetaway's Mr. Banks said.

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