

EVENTS/CAUSES

## Virtuoso uses Travel Week to position itself as sustainability travel leader

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By RACHEL LAMB

Travel network Virtuoso is positioning itself as a leader in the industry through Virtuoso Travel Week, an event looking to command tourism trends for the affluent crowd by offering trip options that are environmentally and economically sustainable.

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Similar to what Fashion Week does for that industry, Virtuoso Travel Week hopes to set the standards for lasting travel trends. Sustainable tourism is a huge trend for this year's travel providers and destinations.

"Just like the Fashion Week parallel suggests, Virtuoso is looking to position its Travel Week as the event that sets the pace for the entire year in upscale travel," said Taylor Rains, account coordinator at [Rawle Murdy Associates](#), Charleston, SC.

"Fashion Week has become such a successful annual event, in part, because it transformed a commodity into an all-around experience," he said. "Virtuoso is applying that same strategy to luxury travel."

Mr. Rains is not affiliated with Virtuoso, but agreed to comment as an industry expert.

**Virtuoso** was not able to comment before press deadline.

## Sight seeing

Virtuoso Travel Week was Aug. 11-17 in Las Vegas. It comprised sessions, sales meetings and dinner events.

Quite a few high-end travel destinations and providers are incorporating sustainability into their offerings.

For example, the Kingdom of Bhutan is focusing on a low-impact/high-yield sustainable tourism model. Tourism directly supports the people of Bhutan, with a \$65-per-day royalty going towards alleviating poverty and fully-subsidizing education and healthcare for residents, according to Virtuoso.

In addition, Aqua Expeditions is launching its third luxury vessel in 2014 that will sail along the Mekong River in Cambodia and Vietnam. This location was chosen for its exotic location, abundant nature and rich cultures.

Meanwhile, Virtuoso's Mexican properties increased from 2008-2011. Mexico has 115 hotels and establishments certified by Earthcheck and Rainforest, with more planned in the future.

Also, consumers can go to Ecuador for its new "conscious tourism" concept. It is the first nation in the world to include the Rights of Nature in its Constitution and the country will forgo 846 million barrels of heavy crude reserves to protect the nature and people of the Yasuni National Park.

Ecuador will also be the first developing country to propose an effective, quantifiable and verifiable carbon abatement model, according to Virtuoso.

Furthermore, river cruising in AmaWaterways reported 10 percent annual growth as an industry. In turn, this tourism helped the surrounding economy.

Consumers can also experience experiential, lower-cost itineraries that choose authenticity over glamour with the Abercrombie & Kent destinations. It is offering 17 new destinations this year.

"If Virtuoso Travel Week achieves even a portion of the global success of Fashion Week, it will effectively brand itself as the industry leader in travel trends," Mr. Rains said. "With that, Virtuoso will become a crucial network to follow, not only among industry professionals, but also luxury travel consumers looking for the best of the best."

## Giving back

Virtuoso saw a 51-percent increase in production since 2009, which is proof that the travel industry is thriving.

In light of economic uncertainty, consumers would rather spend money on personal connections and experiences, rather than material possessions, per Virtuoso.

Affluent consumers believe in the power of sustainable giving, which is why many luxury marketers are using sustainability efforts as part of their corporate social responsibility.

For example, high-end destination club Inspirato is partnering with local, national and global charities for its Inspired Giving platform that allows non-members access to its property portfolio in exchange for donations to organizations.

When consumers donate \$2,000 to an array of educational, environmental and health charities, they are given access to Inspirato destinations in California, Colorado, the Caribbean, Mexico, France, Hawaii, London, Italy and New York ([see story](#)).

In addition, Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts used its new electronic gift cards for a corporate social responsibility effort. For every gift card purchased, the hotel will plant one tree as part of its 10 Million Trees commitment ([see story](#)).

The hotel's employees worldwide are helping to plant trees in and around the communities in which Four Seasons has properties.

Using Virtuoso Travel Week as a platform to deliver trends seen in the market can help industry leaders such as Virtuoso position themselves as authoritative voices in the travel industry, especially if the trends appeal to an ultra-affluent audience.

"Environmental sustainability transcends consumer demographics," Mr. Rains said. "It has become a global movement in and of itself.

"What makes luxury consumers distinct is that they are not looking to abandon the upscale amenities they have come to expect," he said. "As such, environmental sustainability must be applied with careful consideration in order to ensure that affluent consumers feel considered while doing their part to promote stability."

Final Take

*Rachel Lamb, associate reporter on Luxury Daily, New York*