

IN-STORE

Matching the boutique feel with customized experiences

February 20, 2014



By JOE MCCARTHY

Luxury hotel brands are contending with the rise of boutique properties through a number of means, including trip customization programs such as Peninsula Hotel's Academy.

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With original, specific and authentic experiences now the expected norm among luxury travelers, hoteliers must enlist support or train in-house teams to develop experiences on a guest-to-guest basis. Some hotels have heeded the shifting landscape by assembling programs that anticipate and help realize consumer wants.

"Each hotel curates its own Peninsula Academy program to identify truly unique experiences that will bring the destination to life for guests through exclusive activities that are accomplished with the attention to detail that Peninsula is known for," Robert Cheng, vice president of marketing at [The Peninsula Hotels](#), Hong Kong.

"We leverage our connections in each city to find the appropriate partners and experts that can provide a new perspective into the culture and dynamic of each Peninsula destination," he said.

"Of course, to make the experiences even more special we also include elements of bespoke Peninsula transportation – from a private helicopter and chauffeured Rolls-Royce

to a Mini Cooper S Clubman – to ensure guests experience the destination in true Peninsula style"

More control

The Peninsula Academy Program aims to introduce guests to the culture surrounding each of its properties.

Guests can consult the Academy team at each property to craft a specific program exploring subjects such as history, cuisine, dance, art, wildlife or others. Pre-structured activities are also available and group tours are regularly scheduled.

The recently added Kid's academy makes the brand more inviting to families.

Programs at Peninsula New York include "Behind the Curtain: Broadway Up Close," "Harlem Gospel Brunch: Historic Tour and Church Service," "Taste of Central Park: Foraging Tour and Picnic" and a pre- or post-tour at the Museum of Modern Art.



Peninsula Hotels Central Park program

Guests visiting Peninsula Chicago can schedule a boat tour of Chicago skyscrapers, a racetrack adventure, baking classes and tours through culturally significant neighborhoods.



Peninsula Chicago's cultural tour

At the Hong Kong property, helicopter tours, a traditional arts and crafts class and cooking classes await guests.



Peninsula Hong Kong's UNESCO geopark helicopter tour

A Japanese wind chime class for kids, a sake brewery tour, a kimono class and a Washi paper art experience can be scheduled at Peninsula Tokyo.



Wind chime class at Peninsula Tokyo

Although the brand works with outside organizations to construct some programs, its employees undergo training sessions to gain the wherewithal to guide tours on their own.

For a brand that touts its dedication to pages, the concierge members in white outfits, letting each property's concierge team develop its own program exudes a sense of authenticity.

Academy program video

More information about the Academy can be found [here](#).

"Luxury travel is as much about the experience as it is about the accommodations," said Taylor Rains, account executive at [Rawle Murdy Associates](#), Charleston, SC. "Brands

spent years developing on-property initiatives that would allow for maximum comfort and luxury while on property.

"Only recently have they started to apply similar strategies to the off-property experiences their guests are looking for with their stay," he said. "It's important for hotels to help guests cater their whole travel experience to meet their expectations.

"When it comes time to refer a friend or consider a return visit, consumers are likely to think about the trip as a whole rather than segmenting out each element. As a result, a poor off-property experience can sully their perception of the hotel itself. Peninsula has adopted an interesting program here with the Peninsula Hotels' Academy. It seems like a solid way for guests to get the most of what they are looking for out of their stay."

Customizing experience

Many other luxury hotel brands are initiating customization programs for experiences.

Four Seasons Resort Rancho Encantado Sante Fe, NM, teamed up with Adventure Partners to provide guests with opportunities for experiencing the culture and history of the region through its new Adventure Center.

The Adventure Center allows guests to meet with adventure guides, learn about New Mexican culture and arrange a customized trip ([see story](#)).

Furthermore, most brands have rudimentary program itineraries that guests can find activities through or shape vacations around.

Home-sharing companies led by Airbnb have raised pressing concerns for hotel brands that now have to contend with an ultra-specific, growing and disruptive trend.

Airbnb has clearly struck a crude oil-like vein in the consumer imagination, as more than 500,000 listings in 34,000 cities have erupted to meet the nascent demand. As more consumers consider the merits of the sharing ecosystem, luxury hotels may begin to devise some alternative strategies ([see story](#)).

Although it may seem that brands have the clout to handle such threats, enlisting the help of trip specialists will ensure that structural responses are compelling.

"It's often in the best interest of a hotel to look to specialists," Mr. Rains said. "It's one thing to have an on-staff individual that can speak generally to many things, but when it comes to diving deep, it's often best to outsource.

"And when a guest is looking for something specialized and customized just for them, they are likely to appreciate the fact that an expert was brought in for it."

Final Take

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