

Luxury

## The 2020 Innovators in Travel and Hospitality: Winter Edition

Colin Nagy, Skift - Jan 21, 2020 2:00 am



### Skift Take

**T**wice a year, this column looks at who is doing it right. Here are some of the most inspiring innovations in design, service, and guest experience in hospitality and travel. Let the debates begin.

— Colin Nagy

*Colin Nagy, head of strategy at FFNY, a global advertising agency, writes this opinion column for Skift on hospitality, innovation, and business travel. On Experience dissects customer-centric experiences and innovation across hospitality, aviation, and beyond. You can read all of his columns [here](#).*



Twice a year, I canvas smart minds from hospitality and assemble my notes from personal experiences. Here are the brands, people, and places standing out far above the crowd. Threaded throughout are some interesting currents to watch in 2020: the continued rise of female general managers, smarter and more creative approaches to sustainability, and the evergreen topic of removing friction from the customer experience in new ways. Enjoy the list.

### BEST AIRPORT

The world has heard enough about Changi for the time being. In terms of airports that work incredibly well, Hong Kong, Zurich, and Helsinki top my list this year, with the Finnish capital being one of the most painless connections in the world, full-stop. In the U.S., though, it isn't anything special in terms of design, I always enjoy flying in and out of Austin Bergstrom and would venture to say it is one of the friendliest in the states.

## **BEST GLOBAL LIFESTYLE BRAND TO WATCH**

I've been inspired by watching Potato Head, the hospitality brand based out of Bali. It has a design sensibility, good taste, some of the best music and cultural programming and a vibe that is hard to replicate. There's a feeling of energy in the air when you experience the properties. I also like seeing Indonesian brands have a bigger presence on the global hospitality stage: their restaurant in Hong Kong is particularly well-executed.

## **MOST WELCOME IN-FLIGHT FEATURE**

On Finnair's inflight entertainment, they break out the course of the flight in terms of takeoff, landing, and when meal services will be. It allows you to plan your flight when you want to sleep or get some work done. It seems like a no-brainer, but I haven't seen many other airlines do it.

## **BEST HOTEL**

It's not new on the scene, but Ett Hem in Stockholm stood out to me for several reasons: the Ilse Crawford design holds up, and I'm told she regularly checks in with the property for some nips and tucks. Second, there is no back of house: the staff works in full view: cooks cook in the open kitchen, check-in happens in a living room: you feel like you're part of the show in a beautifully designed residence. Helena Lundqvist, who runs the property as head of operations, combined with the owner, Jeanette Mix, are elegant stewards of modern Swedish hospitality. One of the true standouts of the year for me.

I'm also constantly impressed by the Baccarat in New York. If the location, across from MOMA, wasn't enough, the *savoir-faire* of the iconic French brand is on display in just about every element of the experience, down to the perfect espresso glasses, and up to the chandeliers in the Bar and Grand Salon. Plus, the general manager, Hermann Elger, is one of the best hospitality executives in the business and reads a

room like no other. A picture of class. All eyes will be on their Doha opening, which will be a meaningful expansion of the brand in a luxury obsessed market.

## **MOST CREATIVE IN SUSTAINABILITY**

I like how Cathay Pacific is creative in sustainability, but aren't beating the drum on it too loudly, I had to dig into their annual report and speak to executives. Their actions tell the tale. According to their annual sustainability report: carpets in their aircraft are made from "regenerated nylon waste materials such as discarded fishing nets, fabric, and carpets." The plastic that wraps the blanks is biodegradable. Certified sustainable seafood is used for inflight food and in 2018, "Cathay used over 38 tons of hydroponic vegetables locally grown in Hong Kong." Even better, they continue with creativity even in a difficult environment. Another great example is Air New Zealand with their edible, plant-based cups to remove waste.

## **BEST HOTEL OPENING**

The most impressive hotel opening of the year in terms of both craft and press strategy undoubtedly goes to the Rosewood Hong Kong. It's their home turf, and no expense was spared in creating a jaw-dropping property, with a handpicked staff from the best of the best in Hong Kong and other markets.

## **UNDERRATED CARRIER**

Now that La Compagnie has updated their cabins into fully lie-flat beds, it is a no-brainer for flying between the states and Paris, or the states and Nice. It does what it needs to do well, at price points much lower than Air France and other competitors, while not skimping on service.

## **MOST INSPIRING HOSPITALITY ENTREPRENEUR**

Beks Ndlovu is a hospitality entrepreneur creating both conservation and upward mobility for guides and hospitality workers in Africa. Born in a small rural village of Lupane on the outskirts of Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park, he's built an entrepreneurial career that grew from ecology and guiding with the African Bush Camps — a multi-lodge business based in Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The company, rooted in hospitality and sustainable tourism, donates profits from its safaris to the local communities. Through its foundation, it also supports healthcare and a local primary and secondary school, and creates jobs for guides and other

staff members. As Zimbabwe skirts a perilous economy, people like Ndlovu are pillars that keep the country's amazing tourism opportunity going.

## **MOST INTERESTING ADVENTURE TRAVELS**

I'm inspired by what Ishkar is doing with their guided trips, getting travelers into contexts that are hard to navigate alone. An example is a photo tour in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, with a professional photographer, a musical tour in Mali, as well as in Iraqi Kurdistan. Elsewhere, Prior, founded by travel journalist, David Prior, has exceptional taste and craft when putting together trips, notably a weekend of fire-cooked meals with Argentine chef Francis Mallmann.

## **MOST ENJOYABLE ROOM**

The most enjoyable I saw this year was at the Mandarin Oriental Dubai. It was unique in that it balanced some of the brand's classical heritage with modernity (with quite a view of the ocean). There was an intentional balance and it was the room that I enjoyed staying in the most.

## **BEST SOCIAL ENTERPRISE**

I'm inspired by what the Sumba foundation is doing in Indonesia. In addition to training and creating jobs for the adjacent Nihi (named best-in-the-world multiple times), the foundation's mission has evolved and adapted over time since its founding in 2001. According to the group, "Having established a solid foundation of better health and basic education for the community, we can move to what is needed next: supporting even better education, training new skills, and creating employment and small-scale business opportunities..."

## **BEST AIRPORT HOTEL**

Yes, you read that right. All too often airport hotels are dingy throwaways. But the Grand Hyatt at SFO is connected to the airport directly by Airtrain, is brand new, and beautifully executed. Plus, it serves as a semi-midway point between San Francisco and Silicon Valley for people that have to be in both places during the week. An honorable mention goes to the newly opened TWA hotel at JFK for its design, (but not for its service or welcome).

## **BEST RETAIL**

I was astounded by how well-curated the retail was at the Bvlgari Dubai. Instead of the predictable luxury brands that one would expect in a star-studded place, it was a boutique that would have not been out of place in an artsy neighborhood in the world. It features handmade sneakers from the brand Feit, interesting small electronics, and a worldview. It truly stood out as a statement of intent that reflected well on the entire hotel experience.

## **SMARTEST WELLNESS THINKERS**

Conference directors and strategists looking to re-think their wellness offerings should look to Harry Jameson and Anna Bjurstam as the top thinkers in wellness. Bjurstam has been running the discipline for Six Senses, while Harry began as a columnist for Esquire UK and has since evolved into an in-demand consultant, recently designing the sleep rooms at Ellerman House in South Africa.

## **BEST PLACE TO SHAPE A HOSPITALITY CAREER**

The more I dig around training and management, the more I realize that Four Seasons has created some of the best hospitality thinkers around. In addition to the people like Max Musto and Lizah Bywater that work day-to-day with the brand, the diaspora of those who have been trained here and have contributed to the betterment of hospitality is vast. Of particular note, as I have covered in the past, is how the brand moves people around the world, creating a cadre of seasoned, worldly hoteliers.

## **BEST MOUNTAIN HOTEL**

It might not be as flashy as some of St Moritz palaces, but Lorunzer in Zurs am Alberg, Austria is spoken of by the most jaded travelers and skiers in reverent terms. It is a family-run hotel since 1927 with a long list of devotees from around the world.

## **THE BEST APPROACH TO CONSERVATION**

I've reported this year on Singita's approach to public/private partnerships, and the conservation in their Grumeti reserve. Their 100-year mission, and the stewardship of African wildlife and ecology under founder Luke Bailes, is one of the most inspiring in hospitality. If you haven't spent time on their website or reading about

their work, do so. In addition, they recently hired Inge Kotze as general manager of conservation, overseeing Singita's new all-woman Conservation team, which is responsible for Singita's Biodiversity and Sustainability initiatives, as well as its community partnership programs.

## **BEST LOYALTY PROGRAM**

I've deliberately been moving away from the shackles of most loyalty programs and just trying more products. The one I am prioritizing in the hospitality space is World of Hyatt. Their top globalist status is one of the best offerings in the category, and the mobile app and experience design is strong.

## **BEST U.S. AIRLINE SERVICE**

Delta has improved its U.S.-based product tremendously, but the nod to service goes again to Alaska. I'm constantly impressed by their onboard staff, but also the remote customer service teams (shout out to Sharon in Boise). They are warm, pleasant, and unflappable. It makes me regret the years of abuse I've suffered from other domestic U.S. carriers.

## **BEST LONG-HAUL FIRST CLASS PRODUCT**

Singapore Airlines takes the cake for its long-haul First product, the newly refreshed suites. There aren't a ton of them in flight right now, I count around seven routes, but there isn't anything like the space, attention to comfort and culinary detail afforded by the product. Best in the sky.

## **BEST BUSINESS PRODUCT**

There have been some new entrants for top-tier business products, notably ANA's newly launched "The Room" business class, but Qatar's Q Suite, which feels like a First product in most respects, is the strongest offering. In addition, the service and precision of the staff, coupled with their F&B push it over the edge.

## **BEST REMOTE HOSPITALITY EXPERIENCE**

Sometimes getting super far away is necessary. I've never felt more remote and

isolated than in Natural Selection's Hoanib camp: in the best possible way. The terrain is otherworldly and guides can take you to spot an endangered Rhino on foot. It's worth the bumpy trek through a landscape that looks like the surface of Mars.

## **MOST ANTICIPATED OPENINGS**

Openings to watch this year are Xigera, a new safari camp in Botswana from the Red Carnation brand and Airelles in Versailles, set within the grounds of the iconic Château de Versailles with views over the Orangerie; the Pièce d'Eau des Suisses and The Palace. Can Ferrereta will open in Mallorca, opening up a lesser-known area of the island to travelers. Six Senses is opening in the Negev Desert in Israel in addition to its awaited New York property opening, and the Legian Sire is opening in Lombok, Indonesia. Finally, Park Hyatt concludes its Japan trifecta with the opening of the Park Hyatt Niseko in Hokkaido, following the opening of the pitch-perfect Park Hyatt Kyoto helmed by Mark De Leeuw this year.

## **SHARPEST MINDS**

I have the pleasure of meeting with some of the sharpest hospitality executives for coffee and to catch up and learn. People that impressed me this year were Thomas Carreras of the Four Seasons New York Downtown, Luis Cobo Gonzalez of Park Hyatt Dubai, and Pep Lozano of the Bulgari Dubai. Alina Peter, who heads up the operations center of the anti-poaching and law enforcement units at Singita Grumeti, was also incredibly inspiring.

*CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story included an incorrect spelling of Luis Cobo Gonzalez' name.*

Tags: luxury & wellness travel, luxury & wellness travel report, luxury hospitality, luxury travel, on experience

Photo Credit: Shown here is the facade of the Desa Potato Head in Bali. The installation is made of multicolored 18th-century teak shutters sourced from around the archipelago. Desa Potato Head