

OPINION ■ FROM THE WINDOW SEAT

Next-gen travel retailing: It's personal

By Arnie Weissmann   | Dec 10, 2017

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One could say that travel advisers, as a group, have evolved from order takers to recommendation engines. Today, they take pride in familiarizing themselves with inventory – the best hotels along the Amalfi coast, the best restaurants in Tokyo, the finest boutiques in Milan.

They brand themselves by association with the suppliers they book, becoming experts in all-inclusive choices in Mexico and the Caribbean, forming close relationships with certain safari outfitters, relying on trusted hotel concierges.

I have, I believe, caught a glimpse of the next evolutionary spin, or, less grandly put, an approach that better syncs travel retailing with emerging societal trends.

Last fall, when I was at Pure, the experiential travel luxury conference in Marrakech, I met David Prior, contributing international editor for Conde Nast Traveler. Over lunch, I found that this 34-year-old Australian had an eclectic work history and a talent for identifying and befriending influential creatives.

Among other activities, he had spent years at Chez Panisse working with Alice Waters, whose innovative approach influenced a generation of chefs.

Prior told me he had recently returned from a food-focused trip to India that he had arranged for a group of friends/tastemakers, including Waters and other chefs, environmentalists, photographers and writers (food blogger Skye Alpine wrote about the experience for Conde Nast Traveler).

It was an experiment of sorts for a nascent travel business Prior was mulling. Under the intentionally cheeky working title Prior Knowledge, he sought to create an experience tailored to what he perceived to be the shared tastes of his friends and himself.

I ran into him again last week, and his concept had become a business plan backed by Overture Holdings, whose investments include the renowned restaurant Noma in Copenhagen and offshoot restaurants launched by Noma alumni.

Prior's business, scheduled to launch in April, will comprise a membership model for travelers who share a simpatico world view, plus an editorial component that will give definition to that perspective.

Prior's travel sensibility could be characterized as "fisherman to prince." That's not only his target audience, but also the range of people with whom his clients might interact.

"It's more sophisticated to have a full range of experiences than to be cloistered," he said. "That's where travel is going, getting under the skin of a place."

His "high-low" approach extends to pricing, as well: People can enter at a level they can afford and move up. "Ultimately, it's about point of view. People want to associate with a brand and point of view -- that's where I see the opportunity."

Creating clarity and strength around his brand, he believes, will require knowing a range of people in a destination who collectively reflect his and his clients' shared tastes and interests.

"My strength, I believe, is to identify what is endemic to a place and to find the right people who represent that," he said. "I'm never going to win a Pulitzer Prize for writing, but I can help people understand what is special about a place and show it to them without steamrolling out what makes it special."

Some experiences could be packaged and recur, while others would be highly customized. For example, he said he knows a highly regarded chef in Paris who is between jobs.

"I could ask him to take a group shopping in the morning to buy ingredients for an amazing picnic that would be delivered to them at Hotel de Crillon or [Four Seasons] George V," he said. "Perhaps this will only be offered for a year [or however long it takes until his next job] on Thursdays and Saturdays. Or we could create a one-off -- a birthday party in Seville. It would allow me to do what I like to do editorially, but in real life."

His hands-on, personal approach, he believes, will differentiate Prior (the business) from travel advisers who might rely on a trusted hotelier to design something for a client.

People will book, he said, "because the trust works in both directions. It will be the best possible experience around their taste, but I also want a commitment from them that they will work with us and trust us."

Prior's plans include the creation of a nonprofit committed to "a hyperlocal approach to give to communities in a way that preserves what they represent." But the business itself, he believes, could be "a Trojan horse [that enables travelers to] channel money to people who are stewards of their culture."

If Prior's vision is well defined as an editorial component, he believes the membership model becomes, essentially, opt-in. On a website and through social media, Prior will rely on people he has met "who have a particular knowledge about particular places and have great taste." This "taste trust" will give editorial shape to his perspective. "For instance, rather than ask for British designer Ilse Crawford's favorite interiors, I might get her recommendations for her five favorite bike paths."

Prior was also recognized last week at the Bloomberg 50 gala as one of 2018's "Ones to Watch."

I'd say the industry should take Bloomberg's advice on that.