

Bespoke luxury travel experiences, and why it should matter

 By [Robin Fredericks](#)

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Mastering anticipation has become a key factor in knowing what a guest wants before they want it. In the last two decades, travel booking has moved away from conventional face-to-face interaction toward an interaction which combines the convenience of the internet with hyper-personalised experiences - including liaising with travel experts to curate bespoke travel itineraries.



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"Once upon a time we used to sit across a desk from a high-end travel agent whenever we wanted to book a holiday; factoring in timelines and available budgets. Now, however, holiday vendors and their packages have given way to the convenience of online booking – and it looks like it's here to stay."

This according to Steven Bond, editor, *Destinations of the World News*, who gathered a group of brand leaders and travel operators – comprising Michael Marshall, chief commercial officer, Minor Hotel Group, Candice D'Cruz, VP luxury brand marketing and management, Marriott Luxury Brands MEA and Saurabh Rai, executive VP-South Asia, MEA and Australasia, Preferred Hotels – during the recent Arabian Travel Market in Dubai.

The panel explored how established brands can adapt their products to facilitate customers who are seeking something far from a generic hotel experience.

Transformational travel

Travel has evolved from being something from a rest and recuperation process to something which includes self-actualisation, but how does one factor this in?

Rai poses two aspects to consider:

"What we see about personalisation is that experience in and around the hotel is very important. We're seeing independent properties expand the boundaries of what a hotel can deliver by imagining a hotel as a representation of the destination itself.



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"When the hotel can become the window to the destination and embrace the best of the culture, the gourmet, the history, and the architecture and almost become like the signature of the destination, the canvas of personalising, the experience is way bigger and that is as transformative an experience a hotel can imagine."

The second side of transformational travel, says Rai, is "it is not just about accommodation or what you can deliver to your guests in your hotel environment, it's about people-to-people, it's about experiential travel – bringing authenticity to your service delivery."

"I think as the ambassadors of hospitality and believers in travel, we also have the responsibility of being slightly careful about how much orchestration we do in the nature of travel. Authenticity has to prevail – that in itself is transformative," adds Rai.

D'Cruz says that experiential travel has evolved. "It's moved from experiences, which use to be the buzzword of yesterday, to transformational travel, which is the buzzword of today.



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"Self-actualisation, however, is actually the new buzz word. When we look at luxury consumers today, they are interested in discovering themselves. Travel is no longer a means of escaping reality – it is the reality."

In terms of transformational travel, says D'Cruz, people are looking at coming back feeling like a new person. They want to really connect with a destination or brand, whether it's a hotel or dining experience; they want an experience that really touches them emotionally, where they can garner a deeper relationship or understanding of the destination and come back feeling different.

“ *Personalisation means different things to different people.* ”

"Luxury travellers are a bit harder on themselves than they were before, they're redefining what success means to them. For example, if they had a fitness regime, perhaps a few years ago, as part of redefining success, they'd probably run a marathon; they are relooking at what fitness means to them – when they talk about transformation, they are not only looking at themselves, they're looking at how they can extend it to their partners and their family."

They want to experience the brand, learn about the brand, and connect with the community, says D'Cruz.

Technology systems and processes

Tech has become an enabler, giving brands greater insights into their customer, now more than ever before, says Marshall.

"We communicate beforehand. We see your interests are, for example, in wellness and we'll share the wellness we have within the resort. That is a very big hook now. We see now how it has grown, it's worth a billion dollars now. It's something that we are focusing on a lot."



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"Through technology, we can track where you are spending, and what you are spending on, what you like or what spa treatments you like. Then we also add our own information. Whether you always book a sea view room, etc. To be able to foresee your trend – we need to know how that trend is working in a specific market. We can anticipate where you are going and why you are going there."

Marshall adds that the hospitality industry should take note of travellers who are prepared to share information about themselves, whether that be via Facebook or Instagram, and use that data effectively to personalise their brands communication and/or service delivery toward a travellers preference or likes; what they spend on and what experience they really want.

"The world is so digitally connected and the luxury consumers are far more digitally savvy and influenced," says Rai.

"It's a complicated turf. Hospitality as an industry today is possibly addressing the most complex consumer segmentation. So not only is it cut by gender, by ethnicity, by geo domicile; you're catering to five generations – there is nothing in common between baby boomers and what they call personalisation compared to millennials or Gen Z – so it's a broad spectrum.

"Personalisation means different things to different people."

Loyalty programmes

But how does one separate the differences? How can it be addressed?

Through loyalty programmes, says Rai.

"Through loyalty programmes, brands can gain access to a social profile that is digitally transparent. You'd have access to your customers spend, where they shop, their groceries, what clothing brands they like, etc."



From here, you can decide how much personalisation you can embed, adds Rai. "It comes down to the cost of operation. Do you really want to cater to each individual or do you want to deliver one scattered experience?"

Mastering anticipation

When it comes to luxury guests, it's about finding the balance between hi-tech and hi-touch, says D'Cruz. It's about how much technology can be used to enable the guest experience and how much can be delivered on that cost of recognition.

Marshall adds: "Customers will still want what they have always wanted: recognition. It's always going to be there. Personalisation will always help your ability to do recognition better – but I think going forward, less is more. We don't want to bombard guests with emails or social channels we use. We can send them information that they'd appreciate instead; in that way, you can engage more and be more communicative.

"Your communication needs to be dynamic."

The panel concluded with three key takeaways:

- **Disruption** – there is going to be a lot more in the luxury space – luxury products and luxury experiences; think about how deep those experiences can go.
- **Self-actualisation** – People are going to spend a lot more time on travel and to discover themselves; asking themselves questions like "who am I?" and "what do I feel?"
- **Technology** – It's about having an AI ecosystem, to power the way people live their lives. The hospitality industry needs to embrace AI as an enabler and not a detriment.

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