

Customised travel experiences that incorporate tech elements and local culture

Companies offer special experiences and hi-tech options to younger generation of travellers, writes Daniel Scheffler



GUESTS AT WILDERNESS SAFARIS CAN SEE ANIMALS IN THEIR NATURAL HABITATS.

Travel has been forced to change. In the past, the glamour of travel had everything to do with the luxury of getting onto a private plane and heading anywhere in the world to satisfy our hunger for discovery and adventure.

Today's jaded travellers are harder to please. This generation needs financial and time investment to be justified, and savvy companies are quickly responding to the changing tides, offering new value through pre and post experiences and a host of lifestyle services - and for the more enterprising brands, it can go way beyond these elements, to personalised apps, customised travel pods and more.

"Travel now meets you in the spaces you congregate in and is, in fact, empathetic," says Tom Marchant who owns the innovative travel company Black Tomato.

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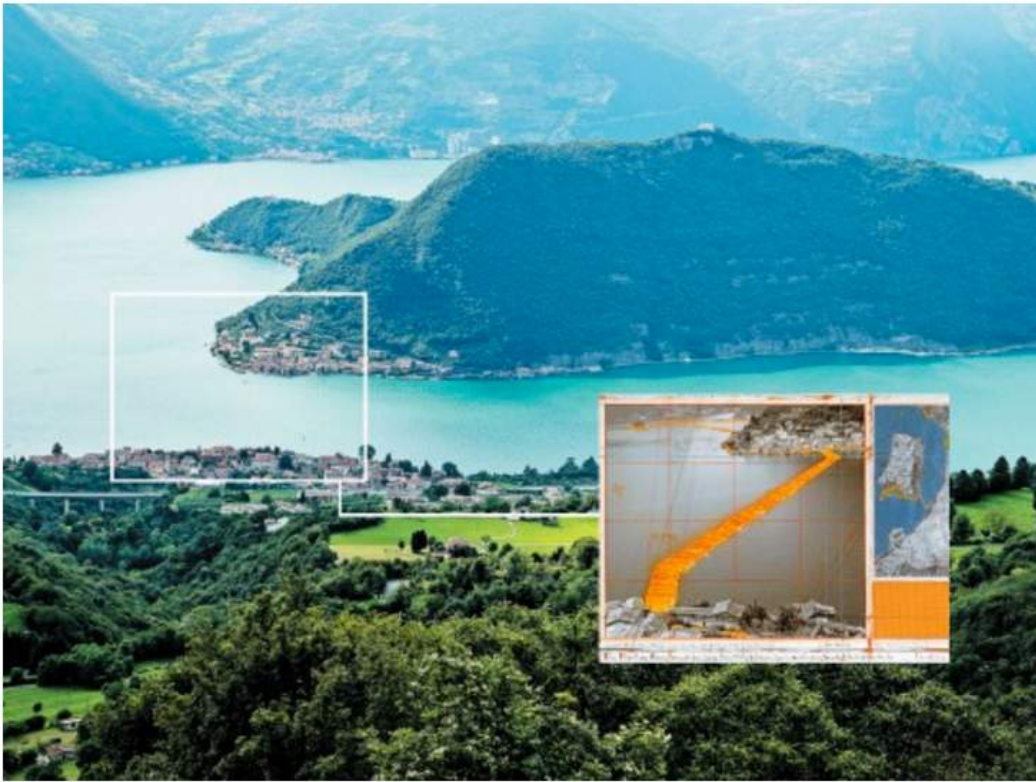


Guests at Amangani in Wyoming can go horse riding in summer.

Instead of just offering a range of packages for their clients to choose from, what Black Tomato aims to show is that they can cater to and address the feelings that every single traveller experiences - from the initial thrill to anxiety and everything in-between.

These new considerations have everything to do with the shifting demographic of today's travellers. This new generation, call them millennials if you will, is, according to a Boston Consulting Group report, defined as between the ages of 16 and 34 and is interested in travel abroad than older generation by a 23 per cent margin. The United Nations even states that nearly 200 million travellers are young people and will generate US\$180 billion in annual tourism revenue. To truly push the boundaries of travel for this generation, companies now have to offer something much more intangible that travellers can truly feel. This process starts at the very beginning - the anticipatory thrill of a new adventure.

"Half of the fun of travel is the anticipation. As a travel company it's our job to tap into that and also use that process to get people adequately prepared," Marchant says. What he and his team do at this early stage, for example, is begin the proceedings with an "arts of travel" kit, which can include everything from relevant literature to music inspired by the destination to get the traveller excited and in the pre-adventure frame of mind. This crucial step is mirrored at the end, when they follow up with 'back to reality' kits to greet travellers when they return.



Easing travellers into and out of their holidays is clearly a key part of a successful trip according to Black Tomato, and the company is taking this a cyber step further with an app based on the "internet of things". This allows the user to control a house's heating, booking of cabs, music playing for back home - all consolidated in an app. "So while lying on the beach the day before they board their flight, or in the taxi on the way to the airport they can create a far more welcoming environment to return to, and avoid as best they can, the 'back to reality blues' feeling," Marchant says.



The massage therapists at Amangani in Wyoming are as well versed in spiritual healing as they are in pampering.

For those who truly want to get away from it all, one of Black Tomato's more recent examples of customisation (as part of their larger offering) is called Blink. This innovative service revolves around the idea of creating prefabricated pods that are tailored just for you. These highly individualised pods are then set up in various places all over the world, often in places that virtually nobody has ever been to or stayed at. To Marchant, this is truly the definition of new luxury. "Inspired by the rise of pop-up restaurants, bars and retail stores, we've cast our eyes to the world of accommodation and immersive travel experiences to offer travellers a personalised experience that can be enjoyed for a brief moment, but soon after gone forever," he says. The company remains tight-lipped on the details, but has confirmed that Blink will debut at destinations including Argentina and Iceland. The luxury of this service lies not only in its highly individualised exclusivity, but also its temporary nature - it can only ever be experienced once by the people in it at that very moment. This sort of groundbreaking "hardware" is certainly making waves in the travel industry, but the human element is still crucial. "Human expertise and insight are necessary and so the role [of the travel expert] has never been more important," Marchant says.

Nowadays, these travel experts might not take the form of an agent or concierge, but of "regular people" that young travellers can relate to.



Wilderness Safaris has some of its camps as no Wi-fi zones to promote a digital detox.

Gibby Road, a community marketplace for trusted local influencers (Gibbies) and local experience seekers (Roadies), is a prime example of how a company has taken advantage of the sharing culture, along with the valuable insight only a local can give.

"The next generation of traveller is looking to connect to these shared resources, such as Uber and AirBnb, and is also looking to dig deeper and find something that speaks to them specifically," says Rachel Harrison, co-founder of Gibby Road. The company's other founder, Shawn Ward, adds: "[It's about] eliminating the 'tourist' experience and replacing it with 'true local experiences'." The company has also tapped into this generation's affinity for giving back to the community - for every transaction that they process, proceeds go to local charities, allowing travellers to venture into the "voluntourism" spectrum. Justin Watzka, managing partner at Coachman Hotel in Tahoe, notes that the idea of what constitutes a luxurious vacation is changing: "We're finding that our guests - who really represent the 'next generation' of travellers - are more interested in experience and community than in extreme luxury. They're willing to pay for a four-star meal and recognise modern comforts at the hotel, but also have no problem sharing an Uber pool from the airport."



Mount Fitzroy in Argentina. Black Tomato will also launch Blink pods in Argentina.

Gilad Goren, co-founder and president of Raleigh & Drake (a custom travel app brand for millennials), thinks the three big reasons for travel right now are urban travel, the authenticity of personally being in music festivals, art shows and anything that can't be done digitally, as well as travel relating to a skill or hobby. But truly travel is simply going beyond the buzzword "experience", as Goren says: "It's an anecdote for future conversations; an activity/meal/interaction that both epitomises and highlights the destination you chose, and the reason you went in the first place."