

Experiential travelers crave authenticity

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Story Highlights

Many travelers are moving away from the rapid-fire, whistle-stop tours of old in favor of slower, more immersive guest experiences.

The experiential traveler seeks authenticity in their hotel experiences.

The experience can be lived out through the most luxurious of offerings to the most minimalist.



Editor's note: This is the second in a three-party series on hotel trends. Read part 1, "Hotel trends: How to stay ahead of the curve." The third installment will be published Monday, 20 February.

Our analysis of trends in tourism patterns that impact our industry covers a number of tourism profiles, all of which highlight the key drivers for these segments of visitors. These profiles often run across income brackets. One profile that we anticipate will continue to strengthen through 2012 is the "Experiential Traveler."

One of the challenges of globalization and the associated democratization of travel is that what was once a romantic experience coupled with a wonderful sense of adventure has now become mundane and often tedious for many travelers. Destinations have become commercialized and the excitement of arriving in a new city has been replaced by the challenge of cramming the exploration of the city into one day or at the most two, with a whistle-stop tour of museums, galleries, churches and castles—all becoming notches on the traveler's money belt.



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This level of experiential travel continues to be important in broadening horizons, but for many is not offering the depth of experience they are yearning for. Seeing the sights is not enough, and there is a move from simply seeing to truly experiencing and making the event transformational by being absorbed in that experience. There is a burgeoning desire to stray from that beaten path and understand how the locals live, work and play, and perhaps give something back in exchange for that understanding. The [website for AFAR](#), one of the organizations targeting this sector of the tourism market, has an excellent definition of this type of experiential travel:

"What is experiential travel? Experiences that connect you with the essence of a place and its people ... simply seeing the sights is no longer enough. Experiential travelers want to venture beyond the beaten tourist paths and dive deeper into authentic, local, culture, connecting with people from other cultures in ways that enrich their lives and create lasting memories."

For many, this focus might require a transition from the increased speed of

travel, driven from a yearning to see the world, to slowing down the process. This has moved the emphasis to the quality of the experience rather than the quantity of experiences. These "real" experiences are all-inclusive, mesh good with the bad and might even take you out of your comfort zone and encompass some negative aspects of life, most of which are generally avoided in the traditional tourist program.

The participation continuum

True experiential travel can take a variety of forms that encompass experiences that cover a continuum from active participation by the traveler through to a more passive participation. This participation has traditionally related to four ranges of experiences: *education* and *entertainment* as activities that engenders a level of absorption from the participant, through to the more immersive activities that relate to *aesthetic* appreciation, such as visits to museums or galleries or the *escapist* activities, which at one end of the spectrum might be an activity such as golf and at the other end of the spectrum encompasses adventure tourism. These four levels of categorizations have been further broken

down into five components of the experience process: sensing, feeling, thinking, acting and relating.

There is a shift to a more radical, all-encompassing, transformational experience that appears to be tied to a desire to move the vacation needle to an experience that is more enriching and offers more value at a level of self worth. This appears to tie in all of the five components of the experience process but with an emphasis on "relating" at a very personal level. There are a number of values associated with this approach, but two that stand out are *authenticity* and *integrity*.

Fundamentally, experiential travel should be transformational at a number of levels and can be scalable. The transformation can be through a structured educational program such as a cookery class or meditation retreat, or though living and immersing yourself in a community and culture. At the higher end, the programs can be delivered through the comfort of

your 5-star resorts or, at the more economical end of the market, the experience can be sought out with a backpack and an adventurous spirit.

Experiential travel will continue to grow as a market, with travelers seeking to enrich their lives with a collection of experiences. This is becoming part of their individual sense of sustainability, improving their sense of self worth through acquiring skills, education, knowledge and personal wellbeing whilst contributing to the lives of others. It is critically important to understand this market and stake a position in this value system.

Next Monday's installment, written by Jonathan C. Nehmer, highlights key steps for a successful hotel lobby redesign.

As Chairman of OBMI, Tim has an intimate knowledge of what has driven the success of the company. Over the past thirty years he has been fortunate to have worked closely with previous visionaries, Bill Bissell and Baudilio Ruiz establishing OBMI as a global architectural presence and he is committed to build upon that legacy. Tim's focus is on quality in terms of service and of design. He prides himself on a tradition of empowering effective teamwork and leveraging the diverse skill-sets of team members thereby releasing the passion and dedication every member of the OBMI team brings to their professional role.

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