

The connected travel experience takes centre stage

 By [Mariette du Toit-Helmbold](#)

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Travel continues to outperform other sectors despite uncertain global economic growth, rising geopolitical unrest, volatile oil prices and rising interest rates. Arrivals exceeded 1.1 billion in 2014, up by 4,3% with growth for 2015 forecasted at 3,7%.



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Mobile bookings have gone mainstream, expenditure is on the rise and emerging markets like China showing significant increases in disposable incomes. But what are the key drivers of this trend and what can marketers look at to survive in this increasingly competitive space?

I was recently at World Travel Market (WTM) in London to represent Stellenbosch and to present on digital marketing at the WTM Tech Talks. These are some of the global travel trends to emerge at WTM with an eye on South Africa.

The new American dream - work less, play hard

Americans have little to no annual leave. Forward-thinking US companies have begun recognising the need for time to refresh but for now, US holiday-makers of working age are likely to take last minute and package holidays. With trips likely to be spread throughout the year and the current exchange rate, South Africa stands to benefit from American travel and should look online to reach this internet-savvy market.

Experience is everything and the traveller is looking for instant and total immersion. Consider engaging online influencers and media to educate American holiday-planners about the non-safari side of South Africa through experiential storytelling and a personal lens, by Americans, on their experience of the destination.

Hipster holidays

"The trend is to be where it is at. So instead of concentrating all their activities around historical centres of cities, young, connected and hip travellers are now checking out what are the best areas for foodies and where creative people hang out, with participation (experience) being a huge part of their visit." So says Ulane Vilumets, founder of Like a Local.

Always seeking the edgier neighbourhood and undiscovered adventures, hipsters look to social media and user-review sites to plan their trips. Neighbourhood travel is an exciting development for regions beyond the central hub. The trend also spreads the economic benefits of tourism beyond its traditional ownership and entrepreneurs would do well to capture the imagination of young, hip travellers hungry for authenticity.

More on Millennials and the new Generation Zers

Loosely defined as people born after the mid-1980s, Millennials currently account for 217 million trips, a number expected to rise to 320 million in 2020. Millennials (or Generation Y) travel more overall on average 4.2 times a year (HVS Global Hospitality Services) than the 2.9 to 3.2 times per year for older generations and 58% prefer travelling with friends.

Speed, adventure and bragging rights are big incentives for Millennials, who also crave the freedom to make spontaneous decisions on holiday, and are tech natives with an eye on multiple apps and social platforms to curate their adventure. A far cry from the penniless backpacker of youth travel gone by, the Millennial is prepared to spend - not on souvenirs, but on adventures and experiences.

Millennials are our frontline marketers, driven by a desire to share their experiences on multiple platforms. Enabling this with free wireless and easy access to social details is a worthwhile investment for every tourism and tourism-related business. Keeping alert to what your visitors are saying about you on social media also generates honest feedback, a chance to fix problems and an instant, possibly enduring, relationship with customers.

Hot on their heels comes Generation Z, the 13-17 year old digital natives that are driving decision-making in the home through their mastery of technology and their unswaying pragmatic view of marketing. Authenticity is everything to this future-traveller - worth paying attention to right now.

Food and drink travel

The WTM Global Trends Report 2014 reveals that in 2013, international and domestic tourists spent more than US\$37 billion on food in France, with Italy next, netting more than US\$25 billion. Germany, Sweden and Spain complete the top five food destinations.

Foodie travellers spend about 18-20% more money in destinations and although food tourists do and will eat in restaurants, simple dining is not a food tourist's goal. Food is a key experience driver and a gateway to several other insights about the culture and traditions of a destination.

Learning about a particular food, or even better, a regional food culture is the big drawcard. In my professional experience I've seen how the addition of an olive oil tasting, a walk through a herb garden, and dining with a local family can change a meal into a captivating experience. Innovating around what you have and taking the experience onto centre stage is essential to draw in the crowds and make these new connected, experience hungry travellers the ambassadors for your story."



Ali Inay via [StockSnap](#)

Active, experiential travel

People are opting for active holidays over relaxation focused holidays. In 2014 already it was revealed that cycling is the new golf with the rise of MAMILs (middle-aged-men-in-lycra). 2015 saw a considerable increase in bicycle tourism offered by destinations and in August 2015, sustainable transport charity Sustrans estimated that cycling tourism adds over £650 million to the UK economy each year.

Active travellers wanting to invest in healthy living and healthy holidays, want a balance of challenging, beautiful terrain and fine lifestyle, food and wine experiences.

Travel 3.0 and increased personalisation

Technology continues to transform the travel experience making it richer and more enjoyable on the basis of travellers' personal preferences. Customers now expect companies to know them better than their neighbours would and to engage with them in a very personalised way.

Thanks to mobile technology and big data analytics, travel companies can suggest interesting things for travellers to do at their location. Suggestions will become increasingly personalised with online inventories of local travel services and activities helping to cross-check data on consumers' preferences and their current location. An example is Google Now, which aims to proactively bring consumers information before they ask, based on their past behaviour.

It's another way to stand out in a highly cluttered and de-personalised world. Being acknowledged - even before you have arrived - sets a positive perception into motion. It can't be an automated message - it has to be about each customer in a way that really counts.

Fast-paced changes in travel can blur the more constant features. We need to recognise that travel has always been about the experience but now each individual's experience is connected to the views and opinions of so many pairs of eyes. Travellers in-destination are all taking along a group of peers on their adventures. We have to help them spread the word by giving them highly visual, authentic and original experiences to share and rave about, not forgetting the free wifi."

ABOUT MARIETTE DU TOIT-HELMBOLD

Mariette du Toit-Helmbold is an international destination marketing and tourism thought leader, as well as a writer and public speaker on tourism, responsible tourism, destination marketing, brand innovation and digital strategy. She established Destinate, an international specialised destination and tourism marketing agency, after an enviable tenure of 10 years as the CEO of Cape Town Tourism

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