

The world economy is poised to regain momentum and business travellers are increasingly seeking luxury-level travel experiences for employee group getaways, company-sanctioned prospecting and entertaining activities, and individual free time itineraries, alike. With so many options in what's become a very mature luxury marketplace, where will attentions be focused this year for corporate travel departments, road warriors and those in between? One notable development is that high-end business travellers want ever more unique and personal experiences proffered with an extraordinarily high quality of service.

Five Travel Trends Benefiting Luxury Business Travellers

By Merilee Kern, MBA





Business travel is tough enough in the best of circumstances and is all-too-often replete with challenges.

Relative to these specific key drivers, here are five notable trends that luxury-minded business travellers can benefit from in the months ahead:

Small Group Cultural Immersions Loom Large

Business travellers are increasingly seeking exclusive and regionally-authentic itineraries that cater to small groups. Tour companies like Fort Washington, Pennsylvania-based Gate 1 Travel are capitalising on this trend with offerings that can provide business groups the convenience of an escorted tour with the intimate view of local cultures that large groups just can't provide. "Our small group tours option has seen, by far, the most significant increase in booking volume—up 50% in 2016," the company reports.

Those on business trips are becoming more interested in indigenous experiences, for themselves or while entertaining others. A City Lodge Hotel Group report concurs that the trend of being "connoisseurs of local culture" will boom this year. It emphasises that indigenous tourism experiences and cultural immersion will remain a big factor whether travelling within your own home country or jaunting to faraway lands. "We'll see more people wanting to visit more than the big landmarks and monuments of their destination," it says. "Rather, people are more likely to be interested in knowing about the locals—those that call that place home. Trips to the rural communities will become popular, and travellers are likely to be more interested in private guides that teach them about the traditional ways of life."

Private Villa Travel Surpassing Leading Luxe Resorts

Today's breed of private villa rentals have become the ultimate in luxury travel lodging for business travellers. This is due to the vast array of benefits and creature comforts it proffers for VIPs and small groups. While maximised privacy and security, uber-tailored guest service and five-star accommodations and amenities are chief reasons the trend toward private villa lodging is exploding, an elite few have offerings far beyond that don't just rival, but far exceed, those offered by high-end resorts, including those elite penthouse suites. According to luxury travel agent Sandy Webb who books elite vacations all over the world "private villa residences offering first class, one-of-a-kind services are ushering in an entirely new era of bespoke business hospitality around the globe. They are, in fact, single-handedly setting a new and decidedly elevated standard for luxe business and corporate travel worldwide."

According to owner Cathryn Arnell, this includes proffering a bevy of premium benefits to those on business trips, for corporate events, or those companies proffering the experience as an employee reward. This includes custom-prepared gourmet meals from an on-site private chef in an authentic and stylishly-appointed residential setting, 24/7 bilingual butler service and multiple staff, monitored security, housecleaning services, private infinity-edge ocean view pool, fully equipped state-of-the-art gym, large media-entertainment room, concierge and spa service, musicians for hire, sports and boating excursions, red carpet treatment at the city's leading beach club and most renowned restaurants, and more. "Given that guests enjoy complete privacy and security in the most exclusive area in Puerto Vallarta, commandeering the entire 10,000 square foot space with all of the relaxation, solitude and discretion that affords, the result is a one-of-a-kind business trip providing an unparalleled culinary and luxury living experience."

Higher Calibre Private Jet Jaunts

According to Sergey Petrossov, founder and CEO of JetSmarter—an industry-leading private jet company based in Dubai, people are increasingly growing accustomed to personalised experiences, so much so, that it isn't a demand anymore; it is now an expectation that needs to be met.

In order for brands to be memorable, they need to remember their customers and offer unique customised experiences. For its part, this JetSmarter achieves by placing a heavy emphasis on member relationships, with each assigned a relationship manager who is responsible for creating personalised and customisable private travel experiences. This level of tailored service is something high-end business travellers are coming to expect and depend on to help ensure getting from point A to point B is as enjoyable and problem-free as possible.

JetSmarter also cites that there's a very thin line between high-end and luxury, with the difference barely noticeable. "The travel industry is inundated with both high-end and luxury brands, however the distinction is relatively minor," Petrossov said. "People often confuse high-end brands for luxury ones. Luxury brands essentially need to heighten their levels of service to be able to distinguish themselves from their high-end counterparts."

Next-Gen Travel Tech Eases and Expedites

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a tech trend that will continue to evolve at a rapid pace. According to Advito's 2017 Industry Forecast, AI has already enabled a range of apps, bots and software that make it easier for industry

purveyors to interact with business travellers at every step of a trip to expedite, ease and enhance. AI automates computer processes to work in the same way as the human brain. Natural language processing (NLP) helps computers understand human speech or typing, and AI then applies machine learning to provide a useful response.

Advito reveals that the travel industry is "well-positioned to embrace AI," and also that the wider travel industry is adopting AI as, for example, KLM passengers are now able to use Facebook Messenger to confirm bookings, get boarding passes and flight status updates. "AI is still in its infancy, but it is in our immediate future," the report asserts. "As it develops, it will help simplify complex travel decisions, shorten the buying process and deliver a more personalised offering."

Game Changing Smart Suitcases Solve Perennial Problems

Business travel is tough enough in the best of circumstances and is all-too-often replete with challenges. From crowded freeways, overbooked flights, Wi-Fi downtime and generally not having necessary items at hand, traversing to and fro can be fraught with more than its fair share of frustrations. Not surprisingly, technologists have responded with problem-solving gadgets and gear that exemplify tremendous innovation and ingenuity both in concept and execution. One glowing example of this is the Bluesmart Suitcase, which can be a business traveller's best friend. Billed as "the world's first smart suitcase," this carry-on keeps traveller's belongings tracked, devices charged, bag secure and trips hassle-free thanks to integrated technology that syncs to an associated mobile app that's compatible with both iPhone and Android.

The suitcase features a built-in battery/charger with two USB ports. The substantial 10,000 mAh battery can charge your phone up to six times, juicing up this and any other USB-connectable device from the USB port on the back or the inside. The bag also boasts a 3G+GPS tracker with global coverage to track the suitcase anywhere in the world; a scale built right into the handle that interfaces with the app to tell you the approximate weight of your suitcase; and a remote digital lock that can be set up to lock itself when you step away and to unlock when you return. The TSA- approved smart lock provides distance alerts, notifying you if you leave it behind. Of course, the bag needs to carry your belongings, so the main compartment does provide large space for clothes, shoes, and coats, while a secondary TSA-friendly compartment is able to accommodate up to a 15" laptop.

Despite widespread geopolitical uncertainties of late, the future is bright for this crucial category of business-borne luxe hospitality. □