

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL INTEGRATION IN TODAY'S EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

How a Centralized Digital Distribution Platform Can Help Local Tourism Businesses Thrive

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For decades, the traditional travel booking flow seemed to follow a predictable pattern:

travelers picked a destination, booked accommodations, and then—almost as an afterthought—selected experiences, like tours, safaris and guided hikes. But today, that order does not seem to capture the influence that experiences have during the early stages of the trip-planning process. Current research suggests that the increased importance of experiences will continue to shape the travel-planning process for consumers across all segments. Destinations and partners who evolve how they position their offerings to feed the appetite for authentic experiences can thrive in this new environment.

This whitepaper delves deeper into the shift to experience-first travel, explores the effects of this change on the travel economy and presents a model that maximizes digital visibility for destinations and local tourism businesses, enabling them to benefit from this change to the industry.





THE EXPERIENCE-FIRST TRAVEL SHIFT

Experience-focused travel isn't new; the trend has been steadily gaining traction for years, with industry leaders pointing to its growing importance. As Greg O'Hara, founder and senior managing director at Certares, **noted** in 2022, "Historically, people decided to go to Greece or Saudi Arabia or Italy, and then would decide what to do. Nowadays, people are making decisions about travel based on what they want to do, not where they want to go."

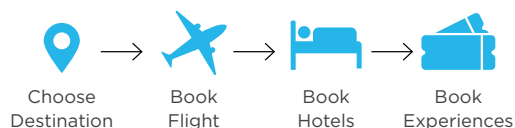
However, recent research indicates that experience-focused travel isn't merely a trend; it's a seismic shift in how travelers envision and plan their trips, one with long-term implications for destinations and the local businesses that support them, like tour operators and hospitality partners. According to **Get Your Guide's Travel Experience Trend Tracker 2024**, a staggering 98% of surveyed travelers considered experiences to be very or extremely important when deciding where to travel and are considered before anything else in the customer booking journey. A **2024 McKinsey survey** supports these findings: survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that experiences were one of the most important factors during their destination selection and trip-planning processes. For many travelers, experiences are even more important than value: according to the **AMEX Global Travel Trends Report 2024**, 77% of travelers now prioritize the right travel experience over the cost of the trip.

This means that destinations with a diverse and easily bookable selection of experiences are far more likely to attract visitors than those relying solely on their traditional brand appeal.

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TYPICAL TRAVELER BOOKING FLOW



TRAVELERS' ACTUAL DECISION FLOW



Source: Get Your Guide's Travel Experience Trend Tracker, March 2024

THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY'S TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT ON TRAVEL

As international travel continues to grow, policies that encourage inbound tourism bring in travelers whose spending translates into state and local lodging taxes and local economic support. The combination of experience-first travel and lodging tax revenue is a powerful ecosystem: more inbound travelers seeking unique experiences lead to increased occupancy rates, generating tax revenue that funds community development, infrastructure improvements and job creation.

With travelers prioritizing experiences, many lodging providers have seized the opportunity to enhance their offerings and create unique, immersive stays. The American short-term rental (STR) market reflects this shift, with nine out of ten guests actively seeking accommodations with an “interesting look and feel,” according to [Phocuswright](#). Hotels, vacation rentals and even boutique inns are rebranding themselves as experience-oriented stays, offering immersive elements that tie directly into local activities. From farm stays in rural regions to urban hotels curating personalized cultural itineraries, lodging is no longer just a place to stay—it's a part of the travel experience itself.

For rural or lesser-known areas, this shift from destination-first to experience-first travel planning can be transformative. Traditional tourist hotspots have long dominated the travel landscape (particularly for international audiences), but experience-led travel opens the door for small towns, agritourism hubs and outdoor adventure destinations to attract visitors who might not have considered them otherwise. This shift is particularly meaningful for destinations that have historically been overshadowed by more well-known travel hotspots.





EXPERIENCE-FIRST TRAVELERS AND THE NEED FOR ONLINE BOOKING

While this shift to experiential travel has phenomenal potential for destinations of all sizes, it comes with a significant challenge—the digital divide. The same travelers who hunger for authentic experiences are more digital-first than ever before. According to a **2024 report by Hilton**, 80% of travelers believe they should be able to book an entire trip online, from lodging and transportation to experiences. This trend is even more pronounced among the segment that **Get Your Guide** names “Explorers,” who take more trips and spend more on experiences per year than the average traveler. These highly lucrative travelers were 1.7x more likely than the average traveler to book trips and activities online in 2024.

Thus, the economic impact of digital visibility and online booking capability cannot be overstated for travel businesses. With data from Arival and Phocuswright’s 2023 Experiences Traveler report showing that **guided tours and experiences are now the most popular activity type**—surpassing even visits to iconic landmarks—destinations that prioritize digital access to these offerings stand to benefit the most from the experience economy. Ben Drew, President of online booking platform Viator, highlights **that online intermediaries distributing tours and activities have seen explosive growth** in the post-pandemic world, with gross bookings projected to rise from less than \$8 billion in 2019 to nearly \$20 billion by 2025.

In essence, destinations and travel businesses that make their experiences digitally accessible and bookable are poised to capture a significantly larger slice of this rapidly expanding market.

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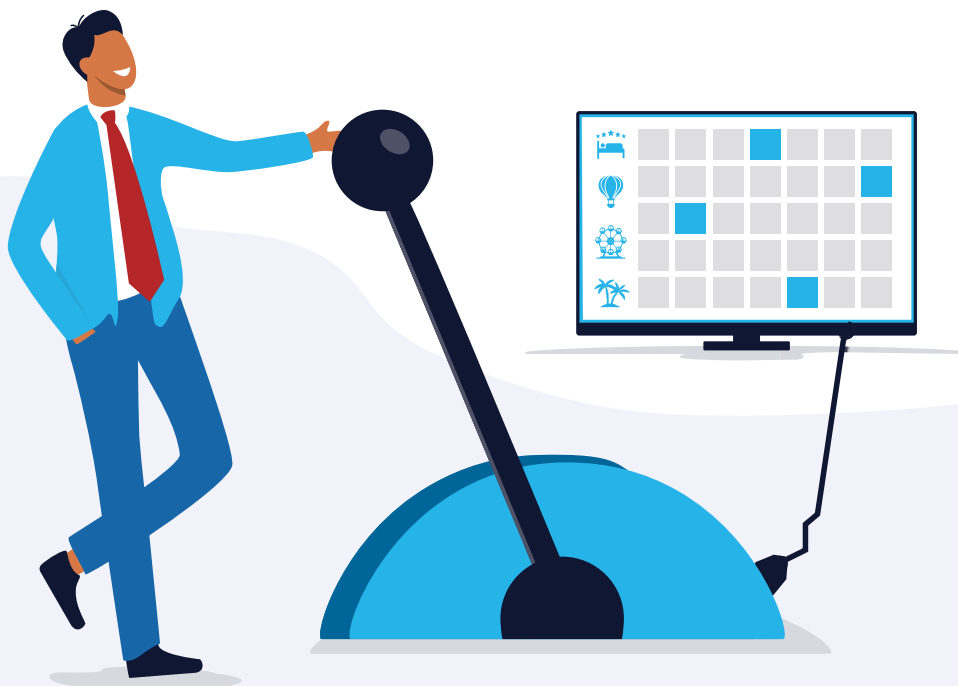
HOW TOURISM EXCHANGE USA ENABLES DIGITAL INTEGRATION FOR EXPERIENCE PROVIDERS

For both popular and lesser-known experience providers to truly thrive in the experience economy, they need to be able to connect with global distribution channels that allow online booking and digital promotion. At Tourism Exchange USA, a B2B travel distribution platform, we facilitate those relationships to ensure maximum exposure for experience providers across the nation.

Tourism Exchange USA enables suppliers—like attractions, tour companies and hospitality businesses—to manage live availability, pricing and bookings. The platform connects suppliers to many popular industry booking systems and channel managers, who can pull rates and availability directly from the booking system—all updated in real time.

One of our key areas of focus at Tourism Exchange USA is fostering public-private partnerships, particularly by expanding opportunities beyond major international gateways and into rural areas. By collaborating with state DMOs, Tourism Exchange USA bridges the gap between local governments, small tourism businesses and global distributors, ensuring rural destinations have the same digital access and economic opportunities as metropolitan areas. This collaboration drives investment in lesser-known regions, sustains local businesses and reinforces tourism as a pillar of economic resilience.

Our goal is to ensure that diverse, authentic travel experiences are not only visible but easily bookable by international distributors. For DMOs, tour operators and independent experience providers, we serve as a connector, helping businesses—big and small—integrate into the global digital travel ecosystem. Ultimately, this integration supports sustainable tourism, workforce development and digital visibility for small businesses by providing the tools and connections needed for destinations to thrive in an evolving travel landscape.



FINAL THOUGHTS

As the industry adapts to this new reality, it is clear that the role of experience-led travel will only continue to grow. For destinations, tour operators and businesses, the message is clear: the future of travel belongs to those who embrace the experience economy. Platforms like Tourism Exchange USA are not just facilitating this transition—they are empowering destinations and travel providers to unlock unprecedented opportunities in a rapidly evolving market.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

The experience economy is here to stay: What started as a hot trend has developed into a core shift in how travelers ideate and plan their travel, emphasizing unique, authentic experiences over most other travel considerations.

2

Experience vendors and destinations with strong digital footprints will thrive: As more and more travelers prioritize online booking capabilities, it's vital for experiences to be easily accessible through major booking platforms.

3

Platforms like Tourism Exchange USA enable digital integration for the experience economy: By connecting tour operators and other experience-based businesses to global distributors, Tourism Exchange USA helps these businesses adapt to the shifting digital landscape and maximize their revenue from experiential travel.



Get in Touch

ABOUT TOURISM EXCHANGE USA

Tourism Exchange USA helps travel businesses from across the USA get in front of more travel buyers around the world. We're a one-stop exchange that enables tourism suppliers (including accommodations, tours and attractions) to manage live availability, pricing and bookings across multiple distributors. By connecting your business to industry booking systems and channel managers and providing real-time updates on availability and pricing, we empower your business to thrive in the digital-first global travel marketplace.

Learn more at <https://tourismexchangeusa.com/>.