

How travel agencies avoided extinction and became a luxury service

Millennials are using travel agencies. Yes, really.

By [Aditi Shrikantaditi@vox.com](mailto:Aditi.Shrikant@vox.com) Sep 21, 2018, 6:30am EDT

Virtuosos is a service that pairs travellers looking for a luxury vacation with travel advisors. *Courtesy of Virtuoso*

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A map of the world, push-pinned into drywall; clocks that mark the times in Tokyo, Paris, and London; a cheesy poster of a family at the beach — this is the aesthetic usually associated with brick-and-mortar travel agencies. For those of us who grew up with Expedia, Kayak, Booking.com, and Hopper, the travel agency seems an anachronism — a vestige of unnecessary middleman services that were eliminated by the World Wide Web.

But, surprisingly enough, the travel advising industry is thriving. And millennials are increasingly turning to agents, as opposed to the internet, for help planning their vacations.

According to a [2017-'18 study](#) by the travel and hospitality marketing firm MMGY Global, 33 percent of millennials are looking forward to hiring travel agents in the next two years. And according to data from the [American Society of Travel Agents](#), recently rebranded the American Society of Travel Advisors, millennials are more likely than baby boomers or Gen Xers to say that hiring a travel expert was worth it. ASTA also found that a whopping 55 percent of millennials are more likely to hire travel experts and let others take care of planning a trip, compared to 42 percent and 28 percent for Gen Xers and boomers, respectively.

To be clear, no millennial is seeking travel advice from a *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*-style agency. Today's agencies and advisers look quite different. They have sleek websites that feature an infinite scroll of Instagram-worthy, far-off destinations. They provide ready-to-purchase package deals that are only a few clicks away from being yours, along with one-on-one services with advisers. But most importantly, they perpetuate the idea that a vacation can *change* you, a concept millennials find increasingly appealing.

It's about emotional and physical health and wellness; it's about exclusivity; it's about having experiences off the beaten path. Welcome to "transformative travel," where a trip is the only thing standing between you and Your New Self.

Transformation as a product

Lenli Corbett, 35, had always wanted to visit South Africa but didn't know where to start. She wanted to go on a safari, dive with sharks, and learn about Nelson Mandela and the history of apartheid. But she also wanted to do more low-key activities like scour local grocery stores and see how those in Cape Town and Johannesburg buy produce, something she tries to do in every country she visits. This list of things seemed unwieldy, especially with no advice and guidance from friends or family.

Then she read an article about the travel agency [Explorer X](#). She wanted the personalized trip; she wanted to be transformed. She reached out to Explorer X co-founder Michael Bennett, and together, they planned a vacation that satisfied her bucket list but also ensured she met locals who could give her suggestions and help her navigate the country as a solo traveler.

During one of Corbett's long layovers, Explorer X set up a trip to the Apartheid Museum, where Corbett was driven into town by a man named Donald who had grown up in South Africa and voted in the first democratic election when Nelson Mandela was elected. On her way to Cape Town, Corbett had another particularly helpful guide who drove her to a nearby market when her boat to Robben Island was canceled.

The local guides, Corbett says, made it feel more like an "experience" rather than someone just taking you around to show you sights. This is what agencies are selling: the idea that you're not "sightseeing" in a country but "experiencing" it.

According to a poll by [Skift](#), a business-to-business media company that reports on the travel industry, 54 percent of respondents said transformation was an important aspect of traveling. In Skift's 2018 report "[The Rise of Transformative Travel](#)," Beth McGroarty, director of research and public relations at the Global Wellness Institute, says travel is now seen as a "shortcut" or "shake-up." The global travel economy is shifting from a focus on "esteem" to "self-actualization," and travelers are buying services that they perceive as being able to induce quick and complete change.

Anyone who has been on dating app lately can attest to the fact that today, travel is not a privilege but a hobby; someone who doesn't prioritize travel may be viewed as small-minded, uninterested in external and internal exploration. Millennials don't want to relax and forget life, they want to learn how to live a more fulfilling

one. That's what travel agencies like Explorer X are selling — a catalyst for a more fulfilling life.

Bennett and his Explorer X partner Jake Hauptert also founded the Transformational Travel Council. At Explorer X, advisers (which they call “travel mentors”) can simply provide guidance to those who want to plan their own trip (for “only” \$500), or can create a custom trip for clients (also starting at \$500). Corbett's custom trip to South Africa rang in at about \$6,000. “We want to get the focus off the bucket list and get back to the roots of travel and see what they are trying to get out of a trip,” Hauptert says.

Explorer X does this by talking through the goals and intentions of trips with their clients (hence the word “mentor”) and by setting them up with local guides, something that users report is even more valuable than the other benefits of booking with an agent. Corbett said the convenience a travel agent provides, like figuring out flight transfers and airport pickups, is nice, but the network of locals Michael offered was what made the service really worth the cost.

Right now, about one-third of Explorer X clients are millennials, but the company is always looking for more ways to build relationships with a younger demographic. One of these efforts, Project X, launched in March: Clients only give a budget and answer a few questions about their interests and goals, and then one of Explorer X's travel mentors will put together a trip that will be entirely unknown to the client until the day of travel. So far, those interested in Project X have been about 50 percent millennials. The first Project X trip is set to happen this October.

Transformation does not have to be a solo activity, either. Wellness retreats that focus on yoga, marijuana, or detoxing also carry the promise of change, but in a group setting. [**Life Before Work Travel**](#), a company that plans group trips for people ages 18 to 35, recently pivoted from party tours to transformative travel.

Company founder Brady Hedlund started his company in 2007. But four years ago, he got an ulcer while trying to keep up with the raucous drinking happening on his tours. So for his company's 10-year anniversary and his 30th birthday party, he hosted [**Island Life**](#), a party on a small island in Panama. The 250 travelers who joined him could stay and indulge in the usual debauchery featured on Life Before Work trips, but he also hired speakers on health and wellness, yoga teachers, and self-help experts. To his surprise, the self-help portions of the event were the most highly attended.

“That changed our whole trajectory of the company to be more focused on impactful and inspiring stuff like that,” he says. “We believe that millennials want that even more. Millennials are seeking to learn and grow and gain more value from an experience.”

Why millennials book travel agents



Virtuoso client surfs in Wyoming. *Courtesy of Virtuoso*

Because travel has shifted from doing things to feeling things, millennials are turning to those who have been there and done that and can tell you, “This trip will change your life.”

Misty Belles of [Virtuoso](#), a popular travel network that matches clients with travel advisers, says that because of this preference for insider knowledge and faith in those who possess it, millennials are more likely to want to cultivate a relationship with a travel expert, as one would with a nutritionist or personal trainer. Because as anyone who has used that free personal training session that comes with your gym membership knows, there really is a difference between Googling the best

workouts and getting (possibly very similar) pointers from someone standing next to you, making you do another set of crunches. It feels more valuable.

Misty also says the demographic of young people who use Virtuoso tend to be short on time but not on money. They work in tech in San Francisco or finance in New York. They want to travel but don't have time to plan it.

ASTA representative Eben Peck says the uptick in millennials using travel agencies is a welcome, but admittedly “puzzling,” trend. According to Peck, an interest in travel agents skipped a generation, and while Gen Xers are more willing to book independently, Boomers and Millennials don't mind a little help. But unlike their parents, Millennials don't suffer from a lack of knowledge, more like a crushing amount of it. The internet is filled with lots of resources but also lots of misinformation and horror stories. Tweets about [Airbnb bookings gone wrong](#) litter the web, and people fear being [ensnared by fake reviews](#).

ASTA is currently working on a new PR campaign to perpetuate these fears of bookings gone wrong. “We are gathering horror stories with the idea of driving people to a travel adviser, saying, ‘If you use an adviser, you won't have these horror stories’,” Peck says.

Travel agencies are also capitalizing on people's fears of the unknown, albeit in a more subtle way. Both Corbett and another Explorer X client, who also traveled to South Africa, said they had anxieties about their trips. Although both had been to Europe and consider themselves avid travelers, they said with some bewilderment that they “didn't know anyone who had been to Africa.”

Millennial-marketed travel agencies do little to discourage this trepidation, and their sites contain an undertone of exoticization. On the homepage of GeoEx, a luxury service that offers adventure trekking tours, the words “Explore Ethiopia” and “Explore India” appear over full-bleed images of locals. The travelers — all white — stick out in the crowd.

How luxury agencies are adapting



Nancy Denious planned her honeymoon to Argentina using GeoEx. *Courtesy of GeoEx*

The demand for more adventurous trips may also have to do with the changing perception of what luxury is. Now luxury is less about how expensive a thing is and more about how exclusive it is. “It doesn’t always mean going to a five-star restaurant,” GeoEX managing director of global sales Jennine Cohen says. “It could be a picnic at the top of the mountain you get to via helicopter.”

GeoEx says that millennials make up about one-third of their clientele, and even if they choose the same destination as their older clients, they have different interests. “I planned a couple’s trip to Iceland and they had an amazing time, but they did say they wanted more hiking or boot camp classes,” GeoEx managing director of global sales Natalie Crow says. “I would never have a mature traveler saying they want to wake up at 7 am and do a workout or boot camp class.”

Misty of [Virtuoso](#) also notices an increase in requests for exclusivity from younger travelers. “We find millennial travelers love that behind-the-velvet-rope access,” she says. “They want the backstage tours, they want the better seating, they want the VIP sections. They want all those things that they may not know how to get on their own but an adviser will.” This access — going backstage at a music festival, or watching one of your favorite TV shows shoot on set — is not only a better story to tell when you get home but also more Instagrammable, something she says is important to millennials.

There are also logistical preferences that travel advisers must adapt to. Advisers must be able to send succinct emails and texts that lay out all travel options — they can’t require a client to hop on the phone every few weeks. Boomers, however, really love printed packets of information that they can touch and take with them. To supplement a paper itinerary, GeoEx started an app that stores an itinerary and has all the necessary phone numbers and addresses.

Unlike boomers, millennials also don’t like a rigid structure where every minute of a trip is planned out for them. They want some time to reflect and explore on their own, something travel advisers now take into account: a sort of structured self-exploration time in a finely curated adventure. Travel agents must walk this line of planning something safe but not boring, convincing the traveler that this totally chiseled-out itinerary has room for serendipity.

One of GeoEx’s clients, Nancy Denious, hired a travel adviser because she wanted her honeymoon to Argentina to be hassle-free yet personalized. When asked what GeoEx provided that she couldn’t have planned for herself, she mentions convenience and expertise, but also a dinner arranged by her brother, who wanted to plan something in secret for his newly married sister.

GeoEx worked with Denious’s brother and her tour guide Andreas to arrange a private meal among the sand dunes in Cafayate, cooked by a personal chef, accompanied by a note wishing the couple well. “The whole thing was a surprise,” Denious says. “We thought maybe GeoEx had planned it, but then we saw the note and it was so special.” Without the help from an agency, Denious says, she can’t imagine her brother coordinating such a romantic night from thousands of miles away, or even knowing where to begin to make it happen. And that’s why you call in the experts.

