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# Hotels, Feeling the Pinch of Airbnb, Promote Local Experiences

By LIZ MOYER MAY 29, 2017

“Tourist” has become a dirty word in the hospitality business. The preferred word? Local.

Travelers can now sign up through hotels and tour operators for experiences arranged by locals. The latest to join the trend are Marriott International, which recently took a stake in **PlacePass**, the tour- and activity-booking start-up, and Royal Caribbean Cruises, which just introduced **GoBe**, a seller — online and through an app — of land-based tours and activities.

The experiences can be as varied as the grand and the unexpected. On **PlacePass**, guests can book a private tour

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The new moves by these established companies reflect the increasing draw of home-sharing sites like Airbnb, which promise travelers the chance to live like a local, said Fiona O'Donnell, the director of travel and leisure research at Mintel, a market research firm, in Chicago.

“Guests want to feel like they are experiencing something in the design or the local flavor,” she said. “They want it to be memorable and part of the local scene, not like they are tourists.”

The moves are also an extension of a trend where hotels are moving away from a uniform experience, no matter where they are, to one in which properties blend into their communities and offer travelers access to local artists and businesses.

Hotel operators already have a trove of data about the preferences and behavior of their frequent guests, said Bjorn Hanson, a professor at the Jonathan M. Tisch Center for Hospitality and Tourism at New York University. Now, he said, the hotels are using that data to get travelers to spend more money when they visit. “Growth is slowing, so they have to shift their model to target more spending” per guest, he said.

Last year, Airbnb started its own Trips booking site, on which local “experts” sell experiences they put together, like a seven-hour day working and dining in an urban garden with a Los Angeles documentary filmmaker, or a three-day burlesque dancing class in London, complete with a workshop on making nipple tassels.

TripAdvisor, the online travel booking site, bought Viator three years ago. The booking site’s nonhotel revenue rose 31 percent last year, while revenue from its main hotel-booking business was down slightly.

The start-up Hello Scout offers concierge service and activities booking via its website and text message for independent boutique hotels in six cities, including New York, San Francisco and Seattle. Hotel guests use it to text local experts to book events, or find restaurants or other hangouts. Travelers pay a fee for the bookings, and the service is free to the hotels.

There are also start-ups that connect travelers with locals for dining-in experiences, like BonAppetour, where guests can book lunch or dinner at the home of a chef in Rome or go to a Parisian dinner party in a 19th-century apartment near the Champs-Élysées.

At the Stafford Hotel in London, the executive concierge, Frank Laino, created and is the host of a walking tour for guests to his favorite places in the St. James neighborhood, including visits to places not open to the public like Spencer House, Princess Diana's ancestral home, and Lock & Company, the world's oldest hat shop.

Marriott's investment in PlacePass — the amount wasn't disclosed — adds to its existing membership rewards program, which it had been building into an “experiences marketplace,” where points could be redeemed for local music, sports, food and dining, and cultural activities. The technology will be incorporated into the mobile app that hotel rewards members use to check in and out and to unlock their room doors.

Marriott is using big data technology to analyze and interpret customer activity on the app and to make suggestions about PlacePass experiences to try, whether or not that customer is currently staying at a Marriott property.

“Marriott is adding value to consumer lives besides just a bed in a hotel room,” Stephanie Linnartz, the company's global chief commercial officer, said.

Marriott sees its Moxy brand as a boutique hotel with the heart of a hostel, Vicki Poulos, the brand director, said. The hotels are typically in urban settings that are destinations for travelers seeking a new experience, Ms. Poulos said, different from a hotel in a suburb where travelers are not necessarily staying over to learn something new.

“We're really making sure we infuse that local culture,” she said. “People are determined to get to know what the community has to offer.”

Its Times Square location is set to open this summer, to be followed by a second site in Manhattan and three others in Denver, London and Seattle. Rooms in the Times Square hotel and others are 183 square feet, creating a space challenge in keeping with living in the Big Apple. Moxy calls this “urban camping,” and has installed wall pegs to move furniture off the ground and make room for yoga, Ms. Poulos said.

Another brand that Marriott inherited with its acquisition of Starwood Hotels last year, Aloft Hotels, sponsors live music performances by area artists.

Hilton Hotels’ budget Canopy and higher-end Curio brands also draw on the local scene. The Darcy, which opened this spring in the Logan Circle neighborhood of Washington, is a Curio hotel that will feature local celebrity chefs and room service with drinks featuring locally made Green Hat Gin and other products.

Radisson Red, which recently opened in Minneapolis and is set to expand into other markets in the United States next year, has an app that allows checked-in guests to talk to one another in a group forum, share tips for the best nearby restaurants and bars and arrange meetups.

For travelers who are combining work and play, “you want to check things out,” Heather Boschke, Radisson Red’s brand manager, said. “You want to see something new and different.”

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