



The AI Travel Revolution Has a Blind Spot (And It's Not the Traveler)



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The travel industry is racing toward an AI-powered future. Agentic systems that search, compare, and book without human intervention. Conversational interfaces that understand natural language. Personalization engines that predict what you want before you know you want it.

It's impressive. It's inevitable. And it's solving only half the problem.

Everyone's talking about how AI will transform travel discovery for consumers. But something keeps popping in my head: What happens to the businesses on the other side of this equation?

The One-Sided Revolution

The current wave of AI in travel is laser-focused on traveler convenience. And why wouldn't it be? That's where the transaction starts. Help someone find and book faster, and you capture the commission.

But this creates a fundamental imbalance. AI is being engineered to serve travelers while businesses are left scrambling to reverse-engineer visibility. Hotels are being told to turn their websites into structured data. To optimize for machines. To make themselves "agent-readable."

The advice is sound. But it misses the deeper problem.

When AI agents start making recommendations, they'll draw from the same pools of data that current search algorithms use. And we already know how that story ends. Research shows that branded hotels have nearly a five percentage point advantage in AI visibility compared to independent properties. More than 70% of AI-recommended accommodations are affiliated with major hotel groups.

Independent properties, including the boutique inns, the family-run lodges, and the authentic local experiences that experiential travelers are actually seeking, are being systematically filtered out of the conversation before it starts.

The Experiential Travel Paradox

The irony is striking. At the exact moment AI is consolidating discovery around the largest, most data-rich players, traveler preferences are moving in the opposite direction.

The shift toward experiential travel isn't a trend. It's a fundamental reorientation of why people travel. More than half of American travelers now say they're drawn to immersive, hands-on experiences that connect them with a destination's culture, history, and environment. Nearly all travelers (98% in one major study) say experiences are very or extremely important when choosing where to go.

This isn't about visiting landmarks or checking destinations off a list. It's about identity. Travelers increasingly want journeys that reflect who they are: their values, their pace, their passions. The industry has various names for this shift: deep travel, psychographic travel, identity-led discovery, lifestyle travel. The labels differ, but the underlying change is consistent.

People don't want to be told where to go based on where similar demographic profiles have gone. They want to discover places that match how they live.

And this is the problem: the AI systems being built today have no mechanism for this kind of matching. They're optimizing for conversion, not compatibility. For speed, not fit. For the transaction, not the relationship.

The Visibility Crisis Nobody's Discussing

While the big players invest hundreds of millions in AI infrastructure, independent travel businesses face an existential question: How do we exist in an agent-mediated world?

The numbers are stark. Major hotel chains command 80% or more of their bookings through direct channels. Meanwhile, independent properties spend less than 2.5% of net room revenue on marketing, compared to 36% for Booking and 54% for Expedia. The playing field isn't just uneven. It's designed to concentrate visibility among those who can afford to buy it.

And the AI revolution is accelerating this concentration. When travelers ask an AI assistant for recommendations, that assistant pulls from OTA listings, review aggregators, and structured data sources. Properties without a massive digital footprint, the ones that rely on word-of-mouth, repeat guests, and authentic reputation, simply don't surface.

This matters beyond the economics. The independent sector provides 63% of room capacity in Europe alone. These aren't just businesses. They're the fabric of local tourism economies. They're the authentic experiences that experiential travelers say they want but increasingly can't find.

The current trajectory leads somewhere troubling: a travel ecosystem where AI efficiently matches travelers with the properties that have the most optimized data, not the properties that would actually be the best fit.

The Missing Intelligence

So what's actually missing?

Current AI in travel does one of two things well. It helps travelers search and book more efficiently. Or it helps businesses optimize their listings and pricing to compete for visibility. These are valuable capabilities. But they're operating in parallel, not in concert.

Nobody is building intelligence that serves both sides simultaneously.

Think about what that would require. On the traveler side, you'd need to understand not just where someone wants to go, but who they are. Their travel personality. Their pace. Their interests beyond the obvious. What energizes them versus what exhausts them. How they want to feel, not just what they want to see.

On the business side, you'd need equally rich profiles. Not just amenities and star ratings, but atmosphere. Energy. The kind of guest who thrives there versus the kind who leaves disappointed. What makes a property distinctive beyond its location and price point.

And then you'd need matching logic that connects these profiles in meaningful ways. Not "people like you booked this" but "this place aligns with who you are."

This is the intelligence gap. And it's why the AI travel revolution, for all its sophistication, is still solving the wrong problem.

Building for Both Sides

At Travelese, we started with a different question. Instead of asking "How do we help travelers find destinations faster?" we asked "How do we help travelers discover where they actually belong, and help businesses attract the guests who will genuinely appreciate what they offer?"

That reframe changed everything.

Our platform captures over 400 data points about travelers. Not demographics or search history, but lifestyle factors. How they prefer to spend their mornings. Whether they seek adventure or restoration. Their relationship with food, culture, nature, activity. The things that make a trip feel like them versus feel like a compromise.

On the business side, we built equally detailed profiles. More than 100 data points per host that capture not just what a property offers, but its character. Its ideal guest. The experience it's designed to deliver.

Then we built matching intelligence that connects these profiles. When a traveler discovers options through our platform, they're seeing places that align with their identity, not places that paid for visibility or optimized for algorithmic ranking.

The result is a three-sided marketplace where everyone benefits. Travelers discover destinations they didn't know existed but immediately recognize as right for them. Hosts attract guests who arrive pre-qualified, people who understand what they're getting and are excited about it. Alliance partners like tourism boards and travel organizations connect their regions with travelers who are genuinely matched to what they offer.

This isn't about being anti-AI. It's about being pro-compatibility. The technology exists to do better than optimizing for conversion. We optimize for fit.

The Future Isn't Just Machine-Readable

The industry conversation right now is about making travel businesses visible to AI agents. Schema markup. Structured data. API readiness. And yes, that infrastructure matters. If you're not machine-readable, you won't be part of the automated conversation.

But machine-readable isn't enough. Because the AI agents coming online will still be making recommendations based on the same limited signals: price, location, ratings, availability. They'll be faster and more conversational, but they won't be smarter about what actually creates a great travel experience.

The next wave of travel technology needs to go deeper. It needs to understand the human on both sides of every booking: the traveler seeking an experience that resonates with their identity, and the host seeking guests who will genuinely connect with what they've built.

That's the blind spot in the current revolution. And it's the opportunity for anyone willing to build differently.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The travel industry is at an inflection point. AI will reshape how people discover and book experiences. That's not in question. The question is whether that reshaping will concentrate power further among the largest platforms, or whether it will create new pathways for authentic connection between travelers and the businesses that serve them.

I believe there's a better path. One where technology amplifies what makes travel meaningful rather than commoditizing it. Where independent properties can compete on compatibility rather than marketing budget. Where travelers find experiences that feel like them, not experiences that feel like everyone else.

We're building that path at Travelese. And we're looking for partners who share the vision: hosts, travelers, tourism organizations, and travel advisors.

If this resonates, I'd love to hear your perspective. Drop a comment below with your thoughts on where AI in travel is heading. Or book some time with me to explore how lifestyle-first matching could work for your business or your travels.

The future of travel discovery is being written right now. Let's make sure it serves everyone, not just the side with the biggest data budget.

Mark is CEO and Co-Founder of Traveler, a lifestyle-first travel platform that matches travelers with destinations based on who they are, not just where they want to go. You. Doing. You? Anywhere.