



Why Lifestyle-First Travel Requires a Different Kind of Psychology



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The case for identity-led matching in experiential travel

In 1997, Stanford professor Jennifer Aaker published research that would reshape how marketers think about brands. Her Brand Personality Scale identified five dimensions that consumers use to perceive brands as having human-like traits: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness.

The tourism industry took notice. By 2006, researchers had adapted her framework to destinations. The idea was compelling: if consumers anthropomorphize brands, surely, they do the same with places. Paris became "sophisticated." Bali became "spiritual." Las Vegas became "exciting."

The framework offered a promising direction. When Ekinci and Hosany applied Aaker's five-dimension model to tourism destinations, the structure shifted from five dimensions to three, with several traits merging into a category called "conviviality." This adaptation revealed something important: destinations and people relate to personality constructs differently.

That insight opens a question worth exploring: what if we applied personality psychology not to places, but to the people involved in travel?

A Different Starting Point

Most travel platforms begin with a familiar question: "Where do you want to go?"

It seems logical. Travel has destinations. But this question assumes travelers already know what they're seeking, that they can articulate it, and that geography is the primary variable in a meaningful experience.

Lifestyle-first travel inverts that assumption. It starts with "Who are you?" and lets the answer guide discovery.

This isn't just a UX change. It's a foundational shift in how we think about travel itself. When travel becomes an expression of identity rather than an escape from routine, the matching problem changes entirely. You're no longer optimizing for amenities and price points. You're seeking resonance.

The Experiential Travel Challenge

Experiential travel has grown because travelers increasingly seek transformation, connection, and meaning. They want to return home changed, not just rested.

The industry has responded with "authentic experiences" and "local immersion." But these often remain surface-level, curated for consumption rather than designed for genuine connection.

True experiential travel requires something deeper: alignment between who the traveler is and who creates the experience. A host who understands your relationship with solitude. A guide who reads whether you need challenge or permission to rest. A property that reflects values you hold but may not have articulated.

This kind of alignment doesn't happen through destination branding. It happens through understanding people.

Where Personality Actually Lives

Think about your most meaningful travel experiences. What made them memorable?

I'd wonder if it wasn't that the destination's "brand personality" aligned with your self-concept. It was a host who understood what you needed before you articulated it. A guide who read your energy and adjusted the pace. A property owner who anticipated your unspoken preferences.

Real personality exists in travelers seeking transformation and hosts creating those experiences. The geography provides context, but the connection happens between people.

Self-congruity theory, pioneered by M. Joseph Sirgy, tells us that we're drawn to brands whose personality matches our self-concept. Tourism researchers applied this by asking whether travelers seek destinations that "feel like them."

The insight is valuable. The application can go further. Travel isn't ultimately about places matching your identity. It's about matching travelers with the people who create experiences that resonate with who they are and who they're becoming.



Depth that genuine compatibility requires

Building on the Foundation

This realization led us to build Travelese as a lifestyle-first discovery platform.

Instead of asking "what personality does this destination project?" we ask "who is this traveler, and which hosts genuinely understand what they seek?"

Instead of matching people to places, we match people to people, with place as context rather than protagonist.

Other platforms are exploring this territory, and the industry's growing interest in psychology-informed travel is a positive development. Personality quizzes and preference surveys represent meaningful steps toward understanding travelers as individuals.

We've chosen to take this further by making identity-led matching the foundation rather than a feature. When lifestyle understanding sits at the core, everything else, the discovery process, the host relationships, the post-travel connection, aligns around who the traveler actually is.

The Depth That Lifestyle Matching Requires

Academic destination personality studies typically use 15 to 42 trait attributes to profile a place. That level of depth works for broad categorization.

Lifestyle-first matching requires more. At Travelese, we capture over 500 data points across travelers and hosts. We're not asking, "are you adventurous?" We're understanding the specific conditions under which adventure appeals to you, what "adventure" even means in your personal lexicon, and how that intersects with your energy levels, social preferences, dietary needs, accessibility requirements, and dozens of other factors that actually determine compatibility.

This depth serves a purpose beyond personalization. It enables the kind of matching that creates genuine resonance, the feeling that a host truly understands what you're seeking, sometimes before you've fully articulated it yourself.

Three Sides, One Ecosystem

Traditional travel platforms match travelers to inventory. Newer approaches match travelers to destinations or experiences. These models optimize for transactions.

Lifestyle-first travel calls for something different: an ecosystem where travelers, hosts, and alliance partners connect through genuine compatibility. When a host and traveler form a relationship through shared understanding, both profiles deepen. When that relationship leads to referrals and return visits, the network strengthens organically.

This is the difference between optimizing for bookings and optimizing for relationships.

Bookings are events. Relationships compound.

The Language of Meaningful Travel

The vocabulary we use to describe travel reveals how our understanding has evolved. Each term marks a shift in what travelers seek and what the industry attempts to provide.

Experiential travel entered the conversation in 1985, when John Gattorna's "Insights in Strategic Retail Management" described it as travel "where the destination is not as important as the experience which can be had there." That insight sat relatively dormant until the 2010s, when platforms like Airbnb Experiences and industry reports from Skift brought the concept into mainstream industry discourse. The term captured a shift from passive sightseeing toward active engagement, but it remained focused on activities and attractions.

Deep travel emerged in 2010 when Tony Hiss published "In Motion: The Experience of Travel." Hiss described deep travel as "an exhilarating state of mind that travel can evoke, when suddenly everything seems fresh, vibrant, intensely interesting and memorable." His contribution was psychological: travel as perception shift, not just location change. The concept has recently gained renewed attention as overtourism concerns push the industry toward quality over quantity.

Lifestyle mobilities, formalized by Cohen, Duncan, and Thulemark in their 2013 book and subsequent research, challenged the boundary between travel and everyday life. Their framework recognized that for a growing population, mobility itself has become a lifestyle choice rather than a discrete event. Travel, leisure, and identity intertwine in ways that traditional tourism categories cannot capture.

Transformative travel gained academic legitimacy through Yvette Reisinger's 2013 edited collection and subsequent empirical research. This work examined how travel changes people at a fundamental level, altering values, worldviews, and self-understanding.

Notice the trajectory: from experience (what you do) to perception (how you see) to lifestyle (how you live) to transformation (who you become). Each evolution moved the conversation closer to identity, to the recognition that meaningful travel is ultimately about the traveler themselves.

Identity-led travel represents our contribution to this progression. It synthesizes these insights into an operational framework: travel that begins with who you are, matches you with hosts who understand that

identity, and creates the conditions for resonance that experiential, deep, and transformative travel describe but rarely engineer.

Lifestyle Travel as the Foundation

The travel industry has spent two decades applying brand psychology to places, and that work has generated valuable insights. The next evolution applies those insights where they have the strongest effect: between real humans with genuine personalities.

At Travelese, we stopped asking destinations to carry personality and started understanding the people involved in travel, both travelers and hosts.

That's not just a better matching algorithm. It's a fundamentally different theory of what makes travel meaningful. Travel as lifestyle expression. Discovery as identity exploration. Connection as the product, not the transaction.

The magic of experiential travel isn't finding a destination that "matches your vibe." It's connecting with hosts who genuinely understand what you're seeking, because understanding who you are was the starting point all along.

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