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BY FC EXPERT BLOGGER MICHAEL VALKEVICH Fri Oct 8, 2010

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Lately I've been reading about a few interesting innovations in travel--which probably shouldn't come as a surprise, since that's what I write about. In fact, I spend most of my time looking for innovative stuff from the business and corporate travel side of the industry. From everything I can tell, however, the true innovations in travel are coming from the leisure side. Putting aside my disappointment, I feel a bit left out--like I'm rooting for the wrong side. Still, it's not like watching the Yankees win (I'm from Beantown). Frankly, this development is great for all of us and only natural.

See, in the global economic downturn that everyone seems to be saying is "over" (who am I to judge?) the travel sector was hit pretty hard. This is consistent with market trends; travel indices are always closely linked to GDP/GNP changes. This time around, though, we noticed something in the numbers which was quite interesting--leisure travel didn't experience the downturn that corporate travel did. Indeed, it wasn't even close.



One of the really, really disappointing things about innovation in general is that it tends to "follow the buffalo." In other words, people who create innovations in technology aren't dying to get into industry verticals which find themselves in a death spiral or really deep rut. For instance, if you ran a venture capital fund and someone showed up at your doorstep trying to get funding for a company to bring back the redoubtable [car phone](#), you probably wouldn't be falling over yourself to invest.

The reason this is a letdown is because in my particular field I've soaked up a lot of well-meaning kvetching about the lack of innovation in business travel. Of course, I'm part of the chorus, but let's be honest here--the bread and butter for the next five to 10 years for the travel sector is going to be the leisure traveler: the people who work hard and save up for a special

travel experience and are highly unlikely to cancel it in the event of a bad fiscal quarter. Furthermore, they're more likely to invest and participate in innovative travel experiences, thus reinforcing these things.

What things? Well, of late there's a lot of talk about the Total Experience. Airports are, let's face it, uncomfortable and sometimes downright nasty places. Airlines are correct in their assumption that some people will pay a premium to be escorted through a Premium Security Line and directed to a Fancy Schmancy Lounge prior to their flight. A couple in their late sixties going on a long-dreamt-of trip to Africa are highly likely to pony up for the airport limousine transfer, rather than get dumped in a strange, remote airport where they will be approached (with all their luggage, mind you) by cab drivers who may or may not be in the increasingly lucrative kidnapping business.

(I'll guess that "kidnapper" is a dated term, like "janitor" or "nanny." Sorry, I just haven't kept up with the latest and greatest politically correct nomenclature. Euphemism is a tough gig these days.)

Here are a couple of good indicators for this stuff: one is the [report](#) that I mentioned a few weeks ago, which mentions several impacts of changes in tastes, buyer profiles, and the results of emerging middle classes in some nations driving new traveler behavior. Another is the growing influence of groups like the Adventure Travel Trade Association, or ATTA, which is hosting their [Adventure Travel World Summit](#) this week. Check it out--these people are promoting and advocating one of the fastest-growing

and most successful travel sectors, one that serves people who are demanding a bit more from their hard-earned time off.

This business of wanting to be cared for is what sets apart the live, professional [travel agent](#). I've gone into this before, but now I have way more backup. Only the pros can give you the real end-to-end service and see through the details that create a great experience. When it comes to that trip you've been waiting so long for, you don't gamble just to avoid a small-price, high-value booking fee.

At this point I should probably say something about "Social Networking Web Sites" or "The Internet: 2.0." But I'm not quite sure what to take away from most of those articles I've read or presenters I've seen, so I guess I won't go into it.

Anyway, this is a good thing! For a long time spending on biz travel has outpaced that for leisure travel. Biz travel spending inevitably will come back, but the industry has learned where the juicy fruit is, not just the low-hanging variety. All of us can probably rejoice in the fact that we'll see more offbeat and fun hotels, as pointed out by fellow *Fast Company*-er Suzanne Labarre in [one cool blog post](#). Or that we may be seeing more routes, competition, and thus fare decreases in markets like Brazil, with a quickly growing base of outbound travelers.

There's a good counter-argument that the metaphorical "buffalo" will return to the plains of the guys who go to D.C. every single week or have to do PowerPoints in different cities three times a month. But based on the current data, I'm looking forward to the next few years of innovations and improvements that the above-described traveler profile will demand. I think catering to them will be a healthy, challenging exercise for the rest of us in the business.

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