

Click here for the revolution

Whether you want to find or investigate something, buy it, book it or barter for it, the internet has established itself as your likely first port of call. As the range of products and services available on-line widens exponentially, **Anna Brown** considers the opportunities for destinations in the digital marketplace.

What proportion of the hits on travel websites would be classed as window shopping? Or daydreaming? Is it not the digital equivalent of reading the travel section of the Sunday papers with a cup of tea on a rainy day in November? Or poring over the brochures for package holidays in the Caribbean that someone left on the train? Often there's no pretence of the potential to purchase: the viewer/reader is simply after fuel for their fantasies.

Like another, less salubrious, global industry for which the technical ability to deliver the stuff of fantasy into 'the privacy of your own home' is critical, the travel and tourism business would appear, in principle, ideally suited to the internet. From www.travelocity.com to www.lonelyplanet.com, consumers are replacing phone calls and brochure browsing with

time on-line. And, even though all websites are not created equal, and a nice bit of Shockwave doesn't come cheap, there is a reasonable chance of a 'small-scale' destination using the web as a cost-effective marketing tool competing with the well-funded portals of the travel trade corporates.

Whether it's the Lawnmower Museum (ds.dial.pipex.com/town/square/gf86/index.htm) or the London Eye (www.british-airways.com/londoneye), good destination websites aim to give you a taste of being there. Webcams and weather updates, 'highlights from the collections' and restaurant menus are all enticements to visit, travel and arrive in person.

Sometimes you can check availability or book tickets over the web – when it works, this is an excellent service. At the very least, the potential visitor should be able to find out opening hours and print off a map.

What's the next step for a cultural or commercial destination establishing itself on-line? Offering web-based content, over and above images and text designed to attract visitors. Creating a virtual destination that carries the same brand as the physical destination but which operates in its own distinct marketplace. Major museums such as the Tate (www.tate.org.uk) and the Guggenheim (www.guggenheim.org) are pursuing this strategy, making digitised segments of their collections accessible on-line. This separates the web destination from the physical place, linked through the common denominator of the brand.

E-commerce is a further step, whether it's booking theatre tickets or Christmas shopping

with the British Museum (www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk). This level of e-commerce, where a brochure or catalogue is replaced or enhanced with a website, and the call centre gives way to the real-time interactive booking system, uses a new medium to play an old game. To date, not much money is being made this way. A service is provided, and a marker is put in the ground (staking out a branded bit of web space), but nothing revolutionary is happening.

The rise and rise of the independent traveller, and the independent-minded resident visitor, has a number of implications for destinations – large and small, cultural and commercial – which hold true, or truer, in cyberspace. Destination guides and 'lifestyle portals' are responding to the trend with aplomb, catering to any and all travellers' tastes and preconceptions (see www.whatsonwhere.com and www.timeout.com, for example).

But the success of an e-commerce site devoted to travel depends on making daydreamers into buyers, converting desire into impulse purchase at the click of a mouse. It's all about disseminating the sense that we, the surfing public, should act and not watch, do and not dream.

In the final analysis, in e-tail as in retail, it all comes down to the trust the consumer places in the brand. It is as a branding initiative that lastminute.com will be remembered, not for its flotation. Lastminute.com set out to brand the very idea of taking a holiday, or making a spontaneous dinner reservation, or buying a birthday gift on the day itself. I'm not just buying a ticket to Istanbul this weekend,

I'm buying into the personality behind my purchase: I'm the sort of person who flies to Istanbul on a whim. The sort of person who subscribes to the lastminute.com email service. The sort of person with more money than time, more spontaneity than savings, more joie de vivre than ... the Joneses.

Another up-and-coming player, confidently entitled unmissable.com, styles itself the 'first website for the experience economy'. Here, consumers can choose from a number of more or less extreme, unusual or extraordinary holiday and event options.

This isn't necessarily a new message, but it is in a critical sense defining a new market. Consumers in this marketplace are likely to have a high level of disposable income, but more importantly are willing to splash the cash for a product that suits their idea of themselves. These are the new buyers, as consumer society enters its 'mirror phase': affluent e-sumers browsing 'experiences of a lifetime' are no longer 'buying into a lifestyle'. With every self-affirming click, they are consuming an idealised image of themselves.

When www.yellowrent.com goes live later this year, an even larger market will be tapped. Since it began on 1 September 1999, this dot.com has expanded rapidly from three to almost 50 members of staff spread over six countries. Offices have now been established in Sweden, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy and Germany. During the initial start-up phase, activities are being concentrated on the rental of top-of-the-market holiday accommodation, with a large number of European agents already signed up to this new digital marketplace.

The vision of yellowrent.com is 'to enable the hiring out of everything from holiday homes to office equipment and even *whole lifestyles*'. It gushes forth:

You will have the opportunity to experience the things you have always dreamed of without having to own them – you can now rent them. You might want a charming stone built cottage in the vineyards of Provence, you might need a motorbike for the summer, you might want the latest snowboard for the winter season or ... well, practically anything will be possible. You will be able to search and book villas, cottages and apartments throughout Europe. You will be able to read about your destination object and receive answers to your enquiries immediately.

And what of the philosophy around which yellowrent.com has been constructed?

Soon more and more products and services will be offered to like-minded people who think that the only things that are worth owning are experiences.



View some of the Guggenheim's collections on-line



Shop on the web at the British Museum