

New sites help travelers find hot spots, deals

BY GREGORY M. LAMB

Exploring the mysteries of an exotic vacation spot can be part of the adventure. But for most travelers, the more they know before they go, the better they feel.

Only a few years back, the big travel aggregators on the Web, such as Travelocity, Expedia and Orbitz, revolutionized travel by putting a lot more information in the hands of travelers. Now new Internet companies are trying to give even more power to the people, providing them with deeper and more specific information. The second wave of travel sites on the Web is harnessing the same social networking resources that have made Web sites such as MySpace.com an Internet phenomenon.

"We feel like it's going to be a tremendously disruptive time. We think it's going to change who the players are" in online travel, says John Bray, a vice president at PhoCusWright Inc., an independent travel and tourism research firm in Sherman, Conn., that has spent the past 13 years closely watching how the travel industry uses the Internet. "It's going to stimulate a lot of positive change because anything that empowers consumers is great for business."

TripAdvisor.com is the largest travel community in the world with 3.5 million registered users, spokesman Brooke Ferencsik said. Its motto is "real stories from real travelers. Much of the content is provided by those who visit the site and share their experiences. The material goes far beyond simply rating a hotel or resort. In forums, for example, visitors can discuss all aspects of a destination with others who have been there or are planning a trip.

Ferencsik said inquirers often find that someone can immediately answer their questions.

The site, owned by Expedia but operating independently, also solicits content from travelers ("Share your perfect day or perfect weekend on a budget"). The site's "Inside" essays on various topics are essentially "wikis," material written by a visitor that can be corrected, altered, or added to by others. "One traveler might write, 'This is the best way to get to the airport,'" Ferencsik

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BROOKE FERENCSIK, TRIPADVISOR.COM

said, "but another traveler can actually edit that content and suggest that, you know what? That road is closed — here's an even better way to get to the airport. It's fresh, up-to-date information that you can't get from a guidebook."

To screen out slanted material, favorable or unfavorable, from travel industry insiders, each review is screened.

"We have proprietary tools in place that actually help us detect fraudulent reviews," Ferencsik said. Editors scan reviews and spot-check review authors. But even if a bogus review slips through, it's likely to be surrounded by many honest reviews, he said. "People will be able to get the right idea; most people read 10 or more reviews to generate an opinion."

Gillian Samples, an assistant at a law office from Glendale, Calif., reserved a hotel room at a traditional online travel site. The hotel was highly rated — and expensive. "But when I got there, it was

disgusting," she says in an e-mail. Travelers on *TripAdvisor*, she says, had advised "never go there." On reflection, she says, "I should have known. *TripAdvisor* is always very helpful, very accurate."

But another *TripAdvisor.com* contributor, Shane Leslie, a production supervisor in Elwood, Iowa, said he and other posters have had their negative reviews removed from the site. Ferencsik said reviews are never pulled simply because they are negative. But

that hasn't soured Mr. Leslie on the site. "I think being able to actually read and then ask questions is the biggest reason I will continue to use it regularly," he said via e-mail. "I think it gives people the feeling like 'Hey, it is really nice to help someone out'" by posting your own experiences.

While it's rare to find a business that sometimes advises a customer not to buy, *Farecast.com* is doing just that. *Farecast* helps travelers decide when to buy an airline ticket by predicting the cost of future airline travel. It forecasts whether the cost of a flight will go up down or stay the same over the next seven days, and provides a 90-day history of fares on the route. At first, *Farecast* will only track domestic flights that originate in Seattle or Boston, but the company hopes to have most major U.S. airports covered by the end of this year.

Farecast recently predicted that the cost of buying a ticket from Boston to Minneapolis for a flight in August will hold steady over the next seven days. But it forecast that a flight at the same time from Seattle to Albuquerque, N.M., would drop \$17 over the same week and expressed "more than 80 percent confi-



dence" in both predictions.

The forecasts are based on algorithms developed by computer scientists who study indicators of future prices, including the price history and demand.

Each prediction includes a "level of confidence" in the prediction that ranges from "less than 50 percent" to "more than 80 percent." On average, Farecast.com says it can predict with 70 percent to 75 percent confidence across the routes it monitors. And even when it predicts with low confidence, so far users seem to appreciate the company's honesty in making that admission,

CEO Hugh Crean said.

Among other start-up travel sites are *gusto.com* ("We connect you with fellow travelers and relevant travel information based on your preferences and lifestyle," the site says), *boardinggate.com*, *triporama.com*, and *homeandabroad.com*, Bray said. It's all about "tagging content and sharing it with others," he said.

Many of these sites are just starting out, trying to attract users and refine their technologies and strategies. Eventually they would expect to make money by selling ads or earning fees when they pass customers along to a purchase

site, such as an airline's own Web site.

Farecast, along with sites such as *FareCompare.com* and *FlySpy.com* (still in testing), are using online "predictive technology" to try to change the world of airline-ticket buying, Bray said.

As people become more comfortable on the Web and get used to high-speed connections, they "want to do more complex travel planning," Bray said. "There's a new level of sophistication there that these tools are providing."

Chris Gaylord contributed to this article.

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