



Social Content: The Missing Link in Travel Marketing Direct Hotel Distribution





For over **twenty years**, hotel marketing has relied on the traditional online distribution mix—split between OTAs, indirect B2B wholesalers, and direct channels like a hotel's own website.

This strategy worked exceptionally well in the early 2010s when platforms like **Expedia** and **Booking.com** were still driving the monumental shift from offline to online travel bookings.

Social media, at the time, was still an emerging phenomenon. Discovery and inspiration were largely in the hands of traditional media outlets, while influential voices on social platforms were just beginning to find their footing and build their audiences.

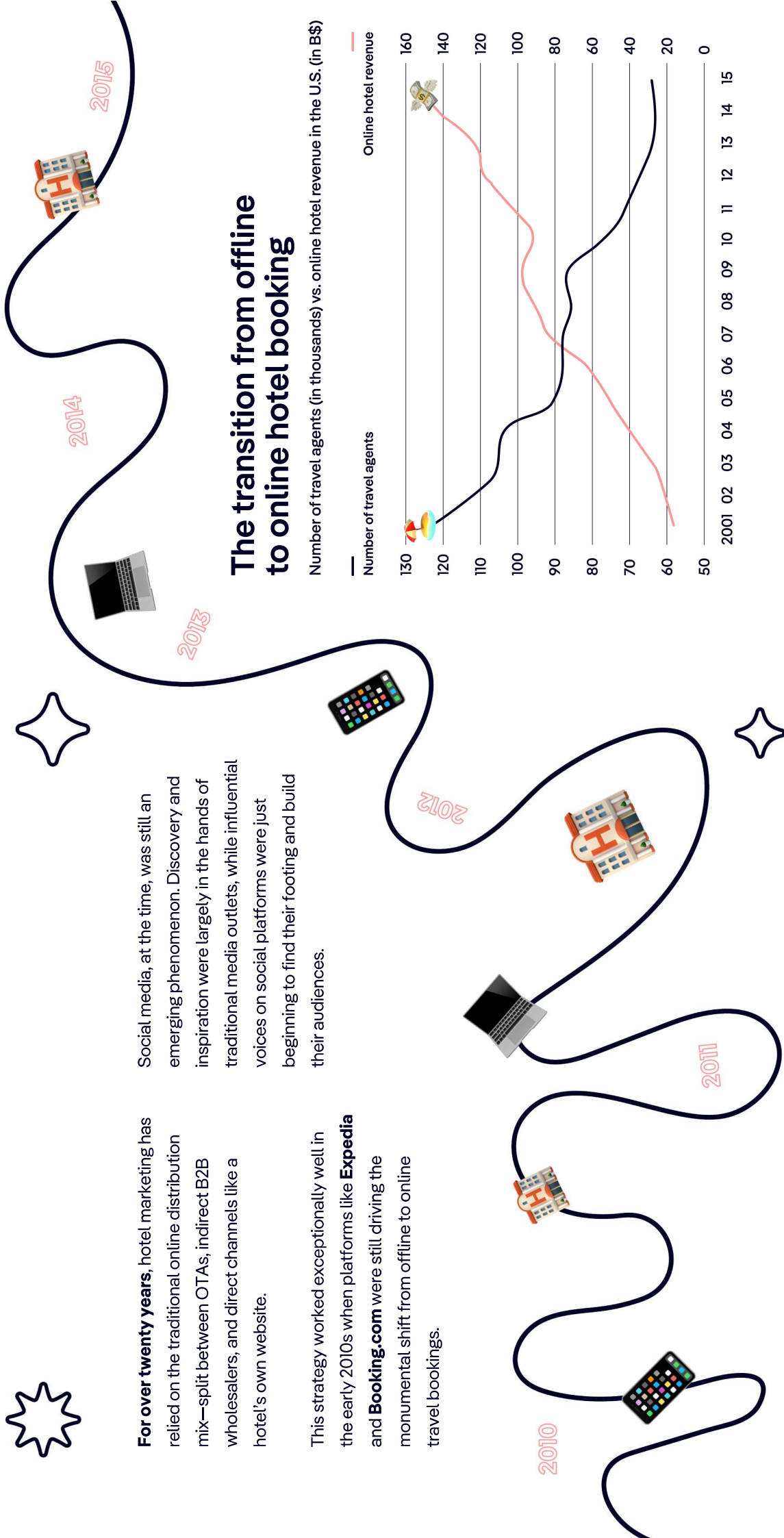


2012

2010

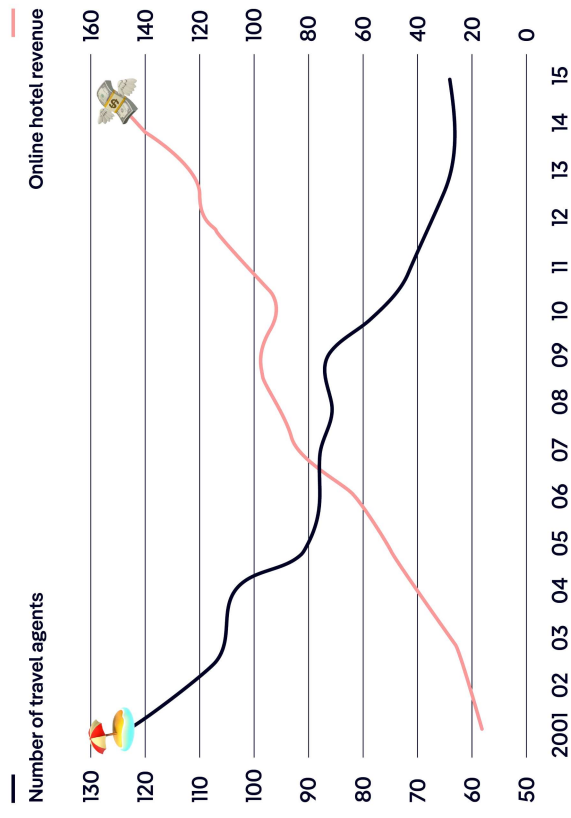


2011



The transition from offline to online hotel booking

Number of travel agents (in thousands) vs. online hotel revenue in the U.S. (in B\$)



Source: Beautiful Destinations Analysis, Business Insider, McKinsey, Phocuswright





Fast forward to today, and while

OTAs remain a vital part of hotel distribution, the landscape of traveler expectations and marketing possibilities has evolved dramatically.

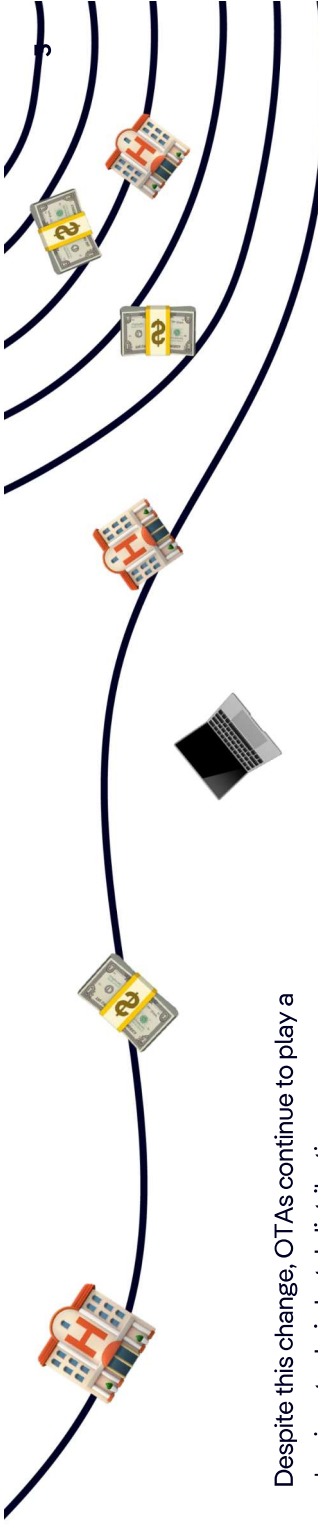
The problem?

Hotel distribution hasn't kept up.

The way OTAs present hotel options today remains largely unchanged from a decade ago—a mass-market transactional experience:

- Small, static thumbnail images.
- Text-heavy descriptions.
- Limited video content (if existent at all).

The emphasis remains primarily on price comparison and speed but fails to capture the unique, experiential value hotels provide.



Despite this change, OTAs continue to play a dominant role in hotel distribution.

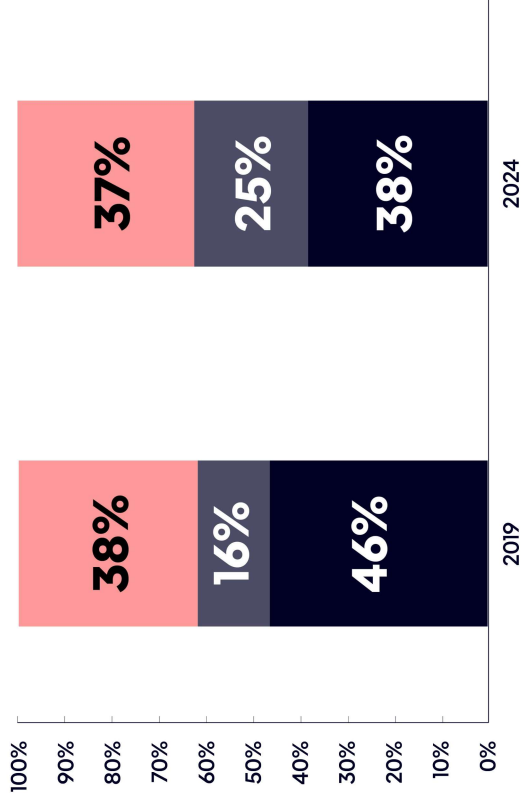
- According to Skift's latest [Hotel Distribution Outlook](#), OTAs account for the largest share of hotel gross bookings (despite a minor decrease in market share over the past five years).
- When combined with indirect B2B wholesale channels, third-party intermediaries are responsible for approximately two-thirds of all hotel sales today, underscoring the continued reliance on these platforms.



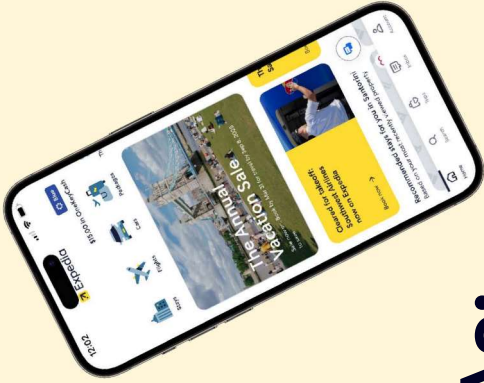
Hotels have been unable to grow their direct distribution

Share of digital hotel bookings (in value) by major online distribution channel

■ OTAs ■ Wholesale ■ Direct



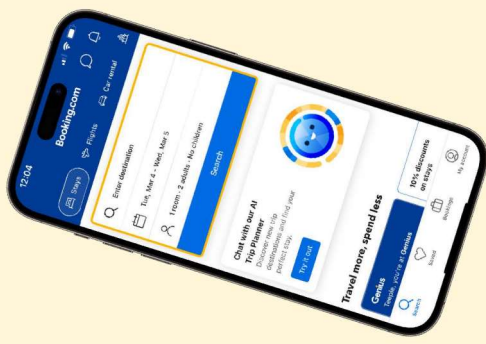
Source: Beautiful Destinations Analysis, Skift



The Role of OTAs: Why They Still Matter *(But Must Evolve)*

To be clear: OTAs undeniably play a vital role in the hospitality ecosystem.

- They solve discoverability challenges, particularly for smaller, independent hotels.
- They invest in cutting-edge technology, data, and media presence that individual hotels cannot match.
- Most importantly, they provide scale, bringing in substantial demand and booking, providing a reliable source of demand for properties of all sizes.



In simple terms: Hotels rely on OTAs to reach global audiences that would otherwise remain out of reach. OTAs are the backbone of demand generation for many properties.

However, the limitations of the current OTA model are increasingly difficult to ignore.



1. The Commission Trade-Off: Is the Value Worth the Cost?



The visibility and booking volume OTAs provide are undeniable, but they are not for free.

With commission rates today reaching **as high as 30%**, hotels sacrifice a large share of their revenue with every OTA booking. While these fees have historically been the price of access to a global audience, the question arises: Are hotels still getting the right value in return?

One of the biggest challenges hotels face is price discounting, where OTAs lower rates to drive volume. According to Hotrec's 2024 **Hotel Distribution Study**, OTAs offered lower prices than hotel-set rates in four out of ten cases. While this helps drive conversions, it also makes it harder for hotels to maintain rate integrity and build strong direct booking channels.

Case in point: European hotels across all categories have reported **a steady decline in direct bookings** since the pandemic, further reinforcing their reliance on OTAs.

Here's where the opportunity lies:

Despite these costs, the way hotels are presented on OTAs hasn't evolved.

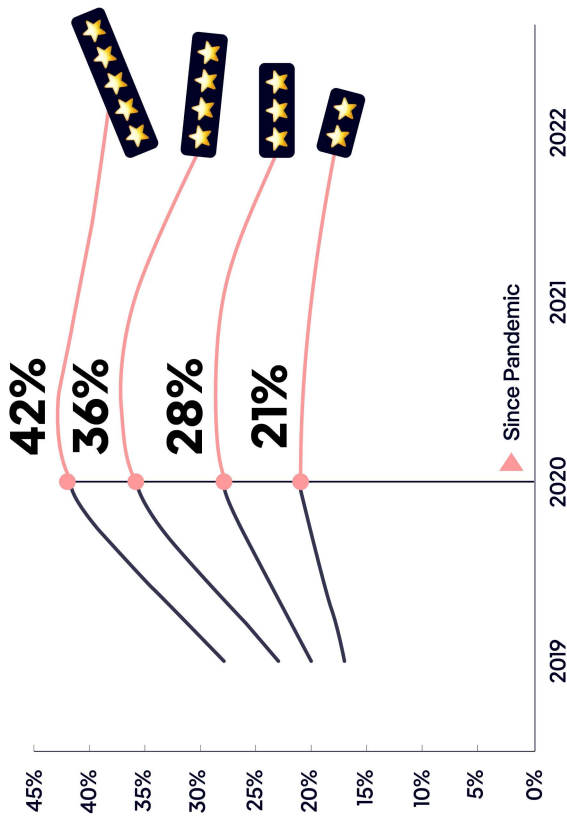
In an era where travel marketing is more dynamic than ever—especially with immersive video—hotel listings on OTAs remain mostly static and transactional.

This gap between cost and content value is what's prompting hotels to rethink their distribution strategies.



The European hotel sector has been steadily losing direct sales

Share of direct distribution (in value) by hotel category in Europe



Source: D-Edge Hospitality Solutions

2. The Static, Transactional Content Problem

While OTAs excel in presenting thousands of hotel options quickly and efficiently, their content presentation has not changed over the past decade.

- Most OTA pages feature uninspired, repetitive imagery, bullet-point amenities, and text-heavy descriptions that fail to differentiate one property from another.
- The unique essence of a property—what makes it truly special—is rarely communicated.
- For example, a standard image of a pool or a generic lobby shot does little to evoke the magic of an extraordinary experience, like a romantic evening framed by the stunning views of sunset brought to life in rich video.

To illustrate this gap, let's compare how the iconic Atlantis The Royal in Dubai, renowned for its luxurious [sky pool Cloud 22](#), is represented on an OTA versus the hotel's own social media.

On an OTA: Imagine you're searching for a romantic getaway with your partner. The listing on Booking.com might feature a standard thumbnail of a generic hotel room, a basic pool image, and text listing "sky pool access" as part of the amenities. While factually accurate, the listing completely misses the emotional resonance of what this iconic hotel offers.

The experience appeal? Almost entirely absent.

On Social Media: Now, contrast this with a short-form video of [Atlantis The Royal on our own Beautiful Hotels Instagram account](#), showcasing its stunning sky pool, Cloud 22, winner of the Best Swimming Pool by the FACT Spa and Wellness Awards UAE 2023.

In just 15 seconds, viewers are transported to a unique experience: we glide over the shimmering infinity pool at sunset, as the breathtaking backdrop of Palm Jumeirah, the Dubai skyline and the Arabian Gulf is revealed.

That's how you engage travelers into becoming your next guests.

Hotel content on OTA websites falls flat



Static Hotel Images
Mostly standard, uninspiring shots that don't showcase the unique appeal.

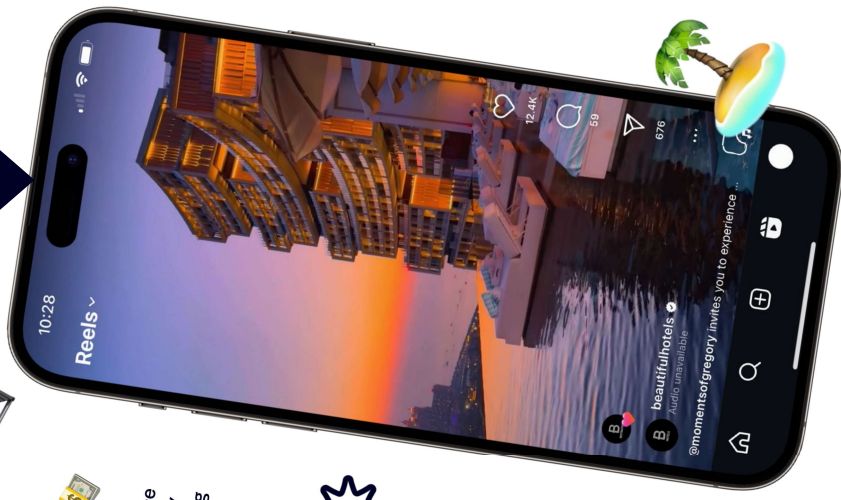
Transactional Focus
Prioritizes price and availability over storytelling and inspiration.



Lack of Standout Features
Hidden mention of signature offerings like Cloud 22 or breathtaking views.



Text-Heavy Image Descriptions
Overwhelming text paragraphs that lack emotional resonance.



Source: Beautiful Destinations Analysis, Booking.com



The Missed Opportunity: Why Static Content Falls Short



The stark contrast between OTA listings and immersive social media content highlights a fundamental shortcoming of OTA-driven content: speed and efficiency prioritize price filters and availability over storytelling and inspiration.

Travelers are treated as commodity shoppers rather than experience seekers.

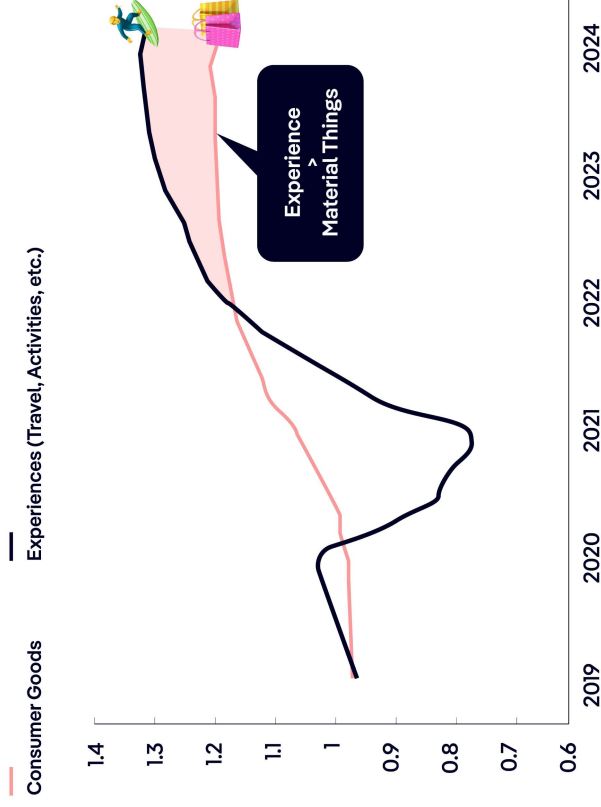
But today's travelers are no longer just booking rooms—they're booking experiences.

As the travel industry **embraces the Experience Economy**, it's clear that static, transactional content simply doesn't meet rising expectations anymore.



The experience economy is real and travel is at the core of it

Total consumer spending (indexed) by product category



Experience > Material Things

Source: Earmest Analytics, GetYourGuide



This trend has dramatically heightened expectations for how hotels are presented online.

Today's travelers no longer want to simply read about a hotel—they want to feel it before they book:

- They want high-quality video content—rich, visual, and emotionally compelling—content that inspires, captivates, and ultimately converts.
- Immersive, emotionally resonant content like room tours, destination itineraries, and behind-the-scenes perspectives are what they expect.

Here's the reality: At a time when consumers rush to **social media platforms for travel inspiration**, and short-form video content is **redefining how they dream, discover, and decide**, today's uninspiring OTA approach is no longer enough.

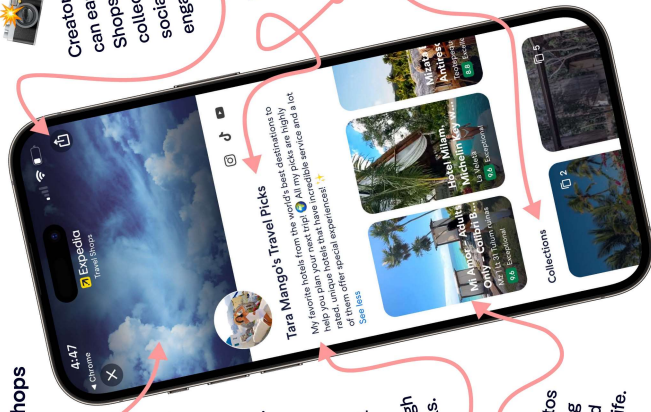
Reimagining Hotel Marketing: A Shared Opportunity

The time to make a change is now. As the travel industry increasingly embraces the social media age, both OTAs and hotels have a crucial role to play in reimagining how travelers discover and book their next stay.

This is an opportunity for both OTAs and hotels!

Expedia: The first OTA to embrace social content-driven travel booking

Expedia Travel Shops



Creators can build their own storefronts within the Expedia app to showcase curated travel recommendations.

Creators can earn commissions by sharing their Travel Shop and collections through personalized links.

Immersive photos and videos bring destinations and experiences to life.

Creators and users can easily share Travel Shops and travel collections across social platforms to engage their audiences.

Individual Travel Shops may be featured on Expedia's homepage, and search results, and search visibility.

Creators and users can group their favorite stays and experiences into themed collections for easy sharing.

The Case for Improvement: OTAs as Better Partners

The opportunity for OTAs to evolve is clear: by investing in richer video content experiences, they can become better partners for hotels while simultaneously enhancing the booking journey for travelers.

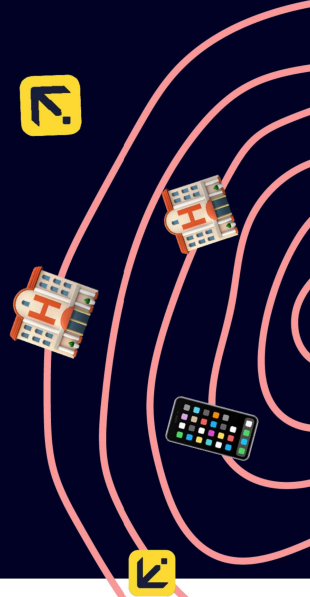
OTAs have the scale, reach, and resources to lead the way in transforming hotel booking into a dynamic, visually engaging video driven experience. By embracing visually compelling content—specifically immersive short-form videos and curated storytelling by creators—OTAs can move beyond simply driving transactions to connect with travelers on an emotional level.

One OTA leader is beginning to adapt to this new reality.

Expedia Travel Shops is a prime example of how an OTA can embrace the social media era. By integrating video content, creator collaborations, and **social commerce functionalities**—all seamlessly embedded within the existing Expedia mobile app—Expedia is paving the way for a more engaging booking experience.

- This initiative empowers creators (and potentially hotels) to curate their own storefronts, offering personalized travel recommendations enriched with visually captivating content.
- Creators can add their own videos and storytelling, moving beyond static, pre-defined PR imagery to deliver dynamic, emotionally resonant content that inspires action.

For travelers, this means exploring recommendations that feel more authentic and immersive, emotionally connecting through curated video experiences, and booking directly within the Expedia ecosystem.



The Case for Change: Hotels Want Direct Bookings



As Expedia sets a new OTA standard with its Travel Shops initiative, hotels must seize this moment to rethink their own distribution strategies.

The key to success lies in striking a balance: leveraging OTAs for visibility and scale while investing heavily in direct channels powered by social media and rich, storytelling-driven video content.

- By showcasing the unique essence of their properties, hotels can break free from platforms that don't let them show their true experience and reclaim ownership of their brand story in ways that inspire, engage, and foster loyalty.
- The goal isn't about replacing OTAs but complementing their scale with the emotional pull of direct communication and booking channels.

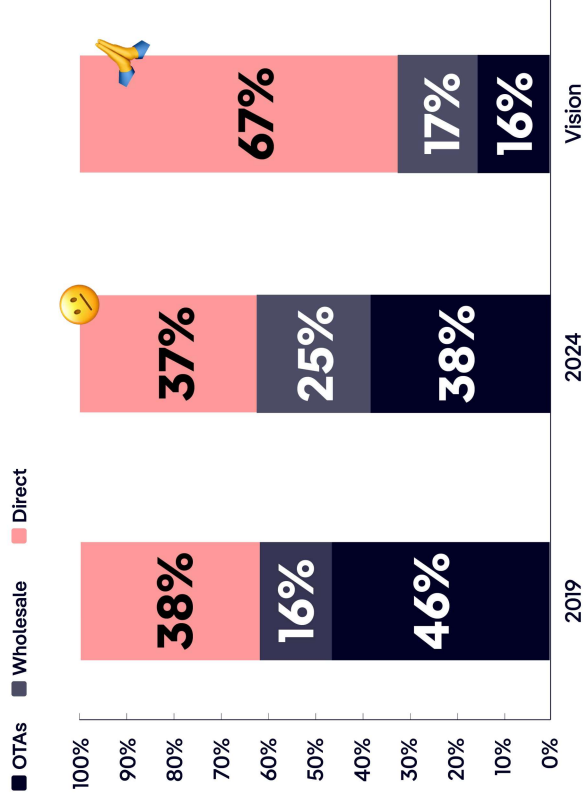
The Good News:

Hotellers are willing to move in this direction. Skift industry surveys reveal that many aim to reduce OTA reliance to less than one-third of their overall sales while shifting their distribution mix to prioritize direct bookings.



Hotellers want direct bookings, hoping to reduce OTA impact

Share of digital hotel bookings (in value) by major online distribution channel



Source: Beautiful Destinations Analysis, Skift



By embracing this shift, hotels can meet travelers' rising expectations emphasizing what truly makes a stay special—the joy of beautifully designed rooms, breathtaking views, and transformative wow moments that bring their travel dreams to life.

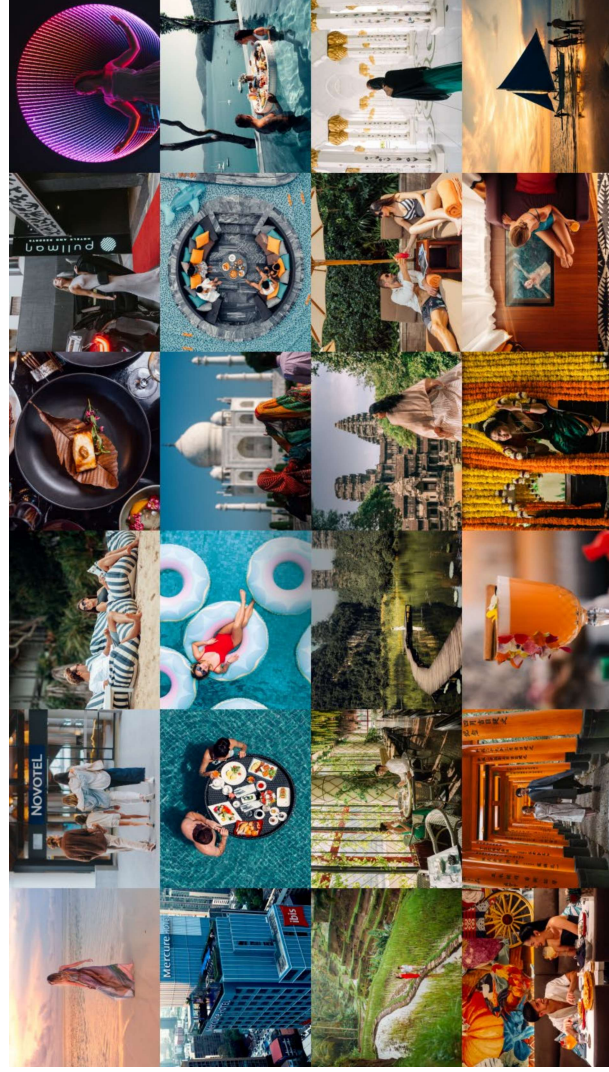
One of the most compelling examples of this shift in action is our [partnership with global hospitality leader Accor](#).

Recognizing that static imagery no longer captures the essence of modern travel inspiration, Accor launched the “For ALL The Travelers In You” campaign—a groundbreaking video-first initiative designed to transform how the brand connects with travelers.

We created dynamic video content that showcases Accor's portfolio of hotels through immersive, visually rich narratives. The campaign's “From Dawn to Dusk” concept spans 21 destinations, featuring 67 properties (with more in the pipeline), capturing the magic of each location through short-form videos optimized for social media and digital marketing.

The numbers speak for themselves:

- The collaboration has already produced over 400 vertical videos (5-15 seconds), 2,000 high-quality photos, and 400 short-form outtakes designed for cross-platform distribution.
- These assets are not only fueling Accor's social media presence but are also enhancing sales pitches, event activations, and member recruitment efforts.



This case study demonstrates how large hotel groups can leverage video-first content to enhance their direct marketing efforts and build deeper emotional connections with travelers.

But this shift isn't just for large hotel chains.

[Full Sizzle Reel >](#)

Some of the most innovative work in video-driven hospitality marketing is coming from boutique hotels—properties that have mastered the art of digital storytelling to captivate audiences and drive bookings.



Here are three standout examples:

Selected hotel brands master immersive video on social media

Standout hotel brands

SIX SENSES
Captivating posts showcase luxury retreats and otherworldly architecture. ~280k+

FORESTIS DOLOMITES
Tranquil, alpine morning and wellness escapes shine in serene, cinematic videos. ~350k+

KATIKIES
Stunning short-form videos highlight Cycladic charm, dreamy sunsets, and refined luxury. ~100k+

Source: Instagram



Six Senses:

With over 200k followers, Six Senses' Instagram captivates with stunning visuals of luxurious resorts, wellness, and sustainability. Showcasing serene destinations, holistic well-being, and unique guest experiences, it inspires travelers seeking rejuvenation, adventure, and mindful escapes.

Forestis Dolomites:

With a growing community of over 350k Instagram followers, Forestis transports audiences to the tranquil Alps. Its videos highlight serene alpine mornings, panoramic spa treatments, and the harmonious beauty of wellness retreats surrounded by nature.

Katikies Hotel Santorini:

With 100k Instagram followers, Katikies leverages short-form videos to highlight Cycladic charm. From magical sunsets and infinity pools to bespoke dining experiences, the content evokes a sense of romance and refined luxury.

The Bottom Line?

Direct channels, powered by rich video storytelling, are the future of hotel marketing, no matter the size or style of the hotel!



- **For boutique hotels**, video allows smaller properties to punch well above their marketing weight class, competing with larger brands by showcasing their unique charm and distinctive character, leading to organic viral reach.

- **For larger hotel chains**, which often struggle to convey personality due to their standardized offerings, video helps bring out the individuality of each location, highlighting what makes every property special. Whether it's a rooftop pool in one city or a historic courtyard in another, video helps large brands tell localized, emotionally resonant stories that don't translate as easily via the written word.

When done well, video content delivers an emotional promise. It's about inviting travelers into an experience, creating a connection that goes way beyond price or amenities.

Social media's role becomes even more critical as social commerce functionalities, like in-app storefronts, continue gaining traction in the travel industry. The potential for social commerce, particularly for hotels, is massive, as explored in **Chapter 3** of our *The State of Social Media in Travel* report. Stunning video content doesn't just inspire; it will increasingly drive direct sales.

Hoteliers: Own Your Story, Shape Your Future!

The future of online distribution isn't about sidelining OTAs—it's about leveraging their traffic to drive demand, encouraging them to evolve with better content, and heavily investing in your own direct distribution channels to reclaim ownership of your story.

Together, you and your OTA partners have the potential to redefine hotel marketing through richer content, inspiring storytelling, and elevated user experiences.

But here's the truth: The days of passively relying on outdated content strategies and intermediaries are over.

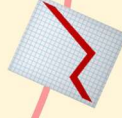
In a world where social media is reshaping how travelers dream, discover, and decide, the power is shifting—away from static platforms and into the hands of bold brands that embrace immersive storytelling and build direct relationships with their audience.

If your hotel isn't investing in video and leveraging social commerce, you're not just missing an opportunity—you're leaving revenue, relevance, and lasting relationships on the table. At Beautiful Destinations, we've spent over a decade helping hotels like yours create content that inspires, engages, and drives results.

Whether you're a boutique property looking to stand out or a global chain aiming to redefine your guest experience, we're here to help you take control of your marketing future—with original, rich video content that turns inspiration into action.

The future of hotel marketing is already here.

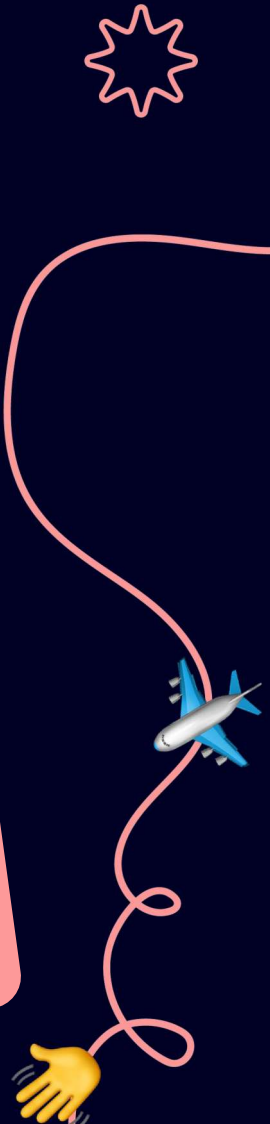
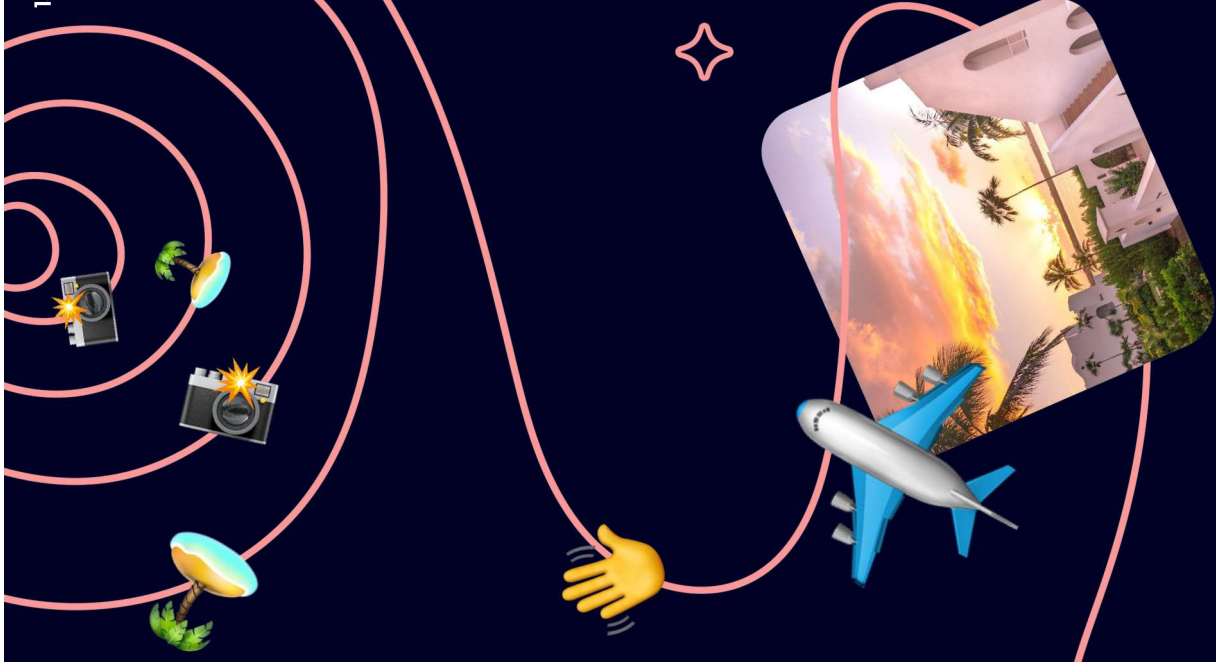
The Question Is:
Will you lead the charge—or get left behind?





Jeremy Jauncey
Founder & CEO,
Beautiful Destinations

Beautiful Destinations is a multi-award-winning strategy, creative, and content agency, home to one of the world's largest and most influential Online travel communities. Our team consists of travel marketing experts who specialize in inspiring and engaging global audiences through content. We use innovative marketing strategies and cutting-edge video content, to help shape the way the world travels.



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