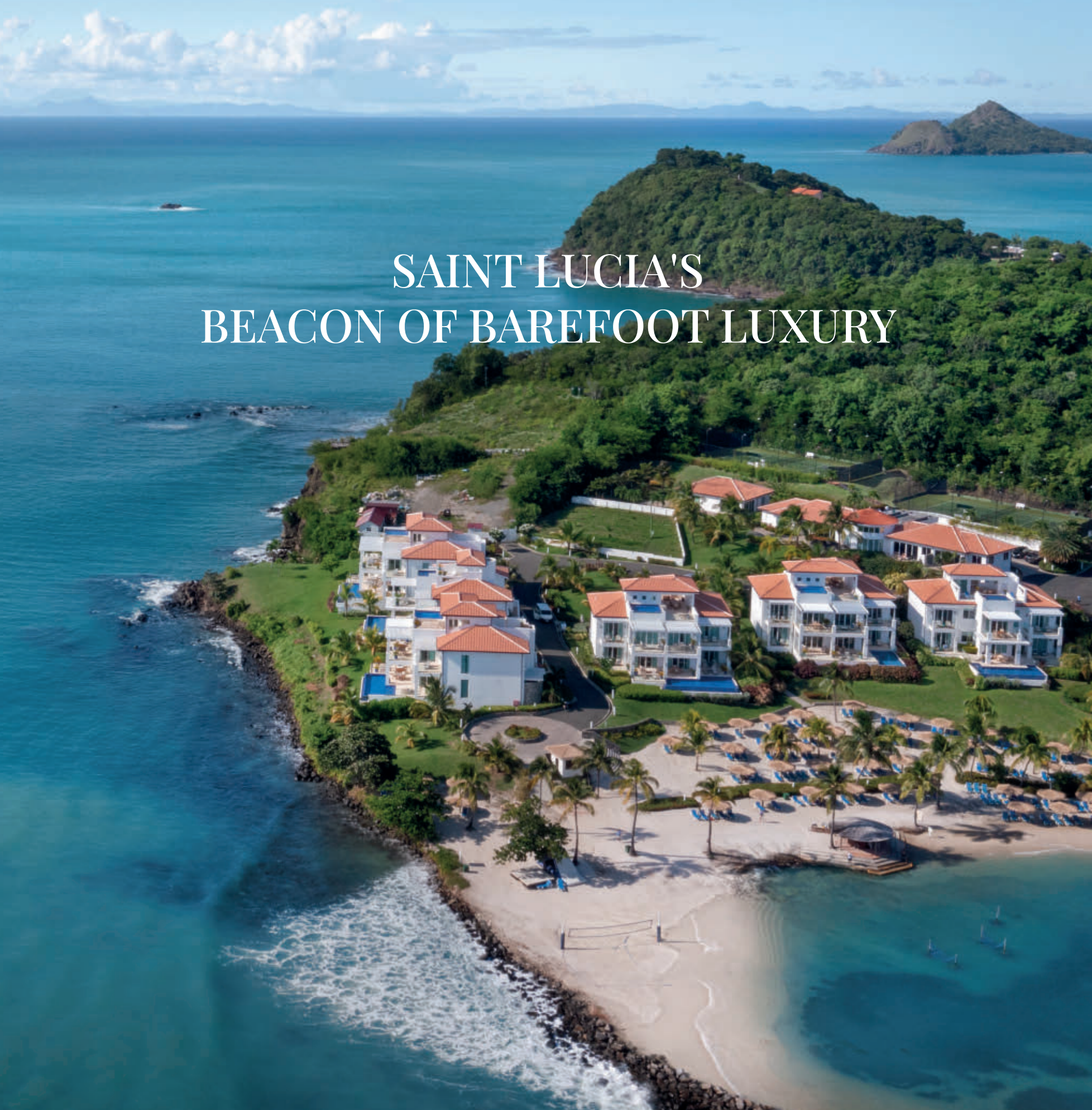


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# TRAVEL WEEKLY

THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY'S TRUSTED VOICE

## A POSSIBLE PRICE PUSHBACK

### Luxury travelers have paid up. Did they finally hit a ceiling?

By Christina Jelski and Nicole Edenedo

After years of shrugging off soaring hotel costs, affluent travelers may finally be showing some early signs of price resistance.

Silvio Rebmann, CEO and founder of Berlin-based Cube Travel, surfaced the issue of high hotel rates during a panel at Preferred Hotels & Resorts' Global Conference 2024 earlier this month.

"Though 2024 has started off very good, I do see a shift in the market," Rebmann said. "I find a lot of customers are feeling the pain of increased pricing in markets like Italy, so we now see our customers moving toward [destinations] that offer more value for money."

So far, pricing concerns haven't taken a toll on Namai Bishop's business, but the

founder of London-based LuxePrive Travel said that some high net worth clients are similarly shifting their booking habits. Rather than change to a lower-cost destination, Bishop said, she's noticed some multi-generational groups opt for multi-bedroom villas in lieu of multiple rooms or expansive suites at luxury properties.

"There [has been] an exponential hike in rates at luxury hotels for two- or three-bedroom suites," Bishop said. "Hotels are increasingly charging a premium for the privilege of families who wish to share extra living space. Villas offer better value for money."

And rather than make compromises on luxury travel, Bishop said some clients are opting to pull back spend in other categories, such as retail. "We see a trend of travel being prioritized over other traditional

See **PRICING** on Page 6

### Four Seasons Yachts' unique plan: Hotel-style pricing for food, rooms

By Andrea Zelinski

Four Seasons Yachts strives to be different from luxury cruise lines. Thus far, it is succeeding.

Set to debut in January 2026, the brand plans to charge guests a la carte for lunch, dinner and alcoholic drinks. It's a model that not only veers away from the all-inclusive pricing model standard for luxury cruise lines, but virtually every river and ocean cruise brand, all of which include three meals a day in their pricing.

"It is a departure from the traditional luxury cruise product, and it more aligns with the Four Seasons hotel and resort," said Nils Lindstad, vice president of business

development and sales excellence for Four Seasons Yachts.

Also like a hotel, Four Seasons Yachts will charge per-suite pricing, instead of per person, which will range from just under \$3,000 per night to \$45,000 per night for its four-deck, 10,000-square-foot suite.

What will be included is breakfast, non-alcoholic drinks, WiFi, watersports activities, the use of marina toys, gratuities, taxes and port fees, he said. Also, the seven signature suites will each have a complimentary bar stocked with guests' preferences, including alcohol.

"We did a lot of research and a lot of focus groups with advisors and also with

See **FOUR SEASONS YACHTS** on Page 6

**Cruise lines crowd control**

Efforts to curb cruise ship visits have intensified since the pandemic, when residents of destinations got a prolonged taste of life without port calls. Today, lines are working with destinations to be part of the solution.

BY ANDREA ZELINSKI

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## On the Record

Nils Lindstad of Four Seasons Yachts on its CEO search and advisor relationships. **2**

## Featured on our website

Is it safe to travel in Mexico's Baja region? [travelweekly.com/mexico-insight-0520](https://travelweekly.com/mexico-insight-0520)

## Destination: Caribbean

Black-owned hotels in Grenada, St. Lucia, Bahamas empower communities. **34**

## Mark Pestronk

The federal government will ban the use of noncompetes this year. **38**

**The Mirage will close its doors on July 17**

The Mirage Hotel & Casino will close on July 17 to begin the property's transformation into the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino and Guitar Hotel Las Vegas. Hard Rock took control of the Mirage on Dec. 19, 2022, after closing on its \$1.1 billion acquisition from MGM Resorts International. The hotel has continued to operate as the Mirage since then. The Hard Rock Las Vegas is expected to open in spring 2027.

**Margaritaville reveals Panama resort plans**

Margaritaville is making a foray into Panama with its first development under the new Margaritaville Beach Resort & Residences concept. Slated to debut in mid-2027, the Margaritaville Beach Resort & Residences Playa Caracol will be located a little over an hour from Panama City. The property will feature a mix of 80 cottages and 181 high-rise accommodations as well as 261 residences, restaurants and a beach club.



Rendering of the Margaritaville Beach Resort & Residences Playa Caracol.

**Uber introducing airport shuttle service**

Uber plans to launch a shuttle service in the U.S. this summer, offering transportation to events and airports. Business Travel News reported that customers who use the Uber Shuttle service will see a "Shuttle" option on their Uber app and will be able to book up to seven days in advance. The service will not be subject to surge pricing, the company said. Uber did not disclose which airports would have shuttles available.

**Nils Lindstad**  
**Four Seasons Yachts**

*Several members of the Four Seasons Yachts leadership team left the start-up cruise brand this year, including president and CEO Larry Pimentel. Nils Lindstad, vice president of business development and sales excellence for Four Seasons Yachts, spoke with cruise editor Andrea Zelinski about the direction the product is headed in and what travel advisors can expect.*

**Q: What's going on with Four Seasons Yachts?**

A: We continue to search for a new CEO, someone to oversee the seasoned leadership team that we have put in place here. We're continuing to build such exciting momentum in partnering with the Four Seasons team, and everything is moving forward towards our inaugural voyage in January 2026.

It was tough to see the two founding members [go] who supported the project from the beginning. Leadership changes can occur, but we're full steam ahead with the yacht. At the end of last year was the steel cutting, the keel is being laid this summer, and we are taking delivery from Fincantieri at the end of 2025. The demand and the bookings we have seen to date have all been very positive.

**Q: Some travel advisors say the leadership departures make them uneasy. What's your response?**

A: In startups and different projects, it's not uncommon to have some of these changes. To make them feel at ease, everything as it relates to the construction of the vessel and the other investors who are part of this project, everyone is still very excited for everything we're doing and nothing has slowed down that progress. We're still on the hunt [for a CEO]. No decision has been made there, but obviously we're looking for someone with extensive experience and expertise in passenger shipping, specifically in the luxury travel space. Until the replacement is named, everyone is focused on the goal of delivering this yacht

and getting everything set up for our inaugural year.

**Q: You began with invitation-only bookings. How has that gone?**

A: The Four Seasons' loyal guests, the ones who experienced stays at hotels and resorts, in residences, had been on the jet product, those were who the initial invitations had gone out to at the end of last year. We did very well there. We opened [bookings to the public] in March. Demand has been very strong. We opened the first 19 voyages and [the ships] have 95 suites. We have very scarce inventory, so we have to be very careful and balance the availability with the demand. But first and foremost, the initial focus was on the Four Seasons loyal guests and their travel partners.

**Q: With such limited inventory, will you court advisors since you already have a Four Seasons past guest waitlist?**

A: From day one, advisors have always been a part of our go-to-market plan. They are a big pillar of what we are doing. We always had the ability for invited guests to delegate the booking to their travel partner of choice. If you go on our consumer website right now, our e-brochure has no phone number listed. The call to action is to reach out to your travel partner of choice. We're sitting at just under 2,000 advisors that have registered through our portal with us. We have a very healthy mix of bookings that have come from the travel advisor community.

**Q: Are you doing outreach or have any preferred relationships with travel agencies?**

A: That is starting now. We absolutely will be reaching out in a more proactive manner. We're about to open up roughly 22 more voyages for sale. There absolutely is a strategy to continue connecting with those travel partners.



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## DOT STUDIES ANTI-COMPETITIVE CLAIMS

## Discount carriers say Big Four's rewards programs unfair

By Robert Silk

Do the loyalty programs of the Big Four U.S. airlines play a role in stymieing competition?

The three discount airlines that participated in a May 10 joint DOT/Consumer Financial Protection Bureau hearing on airline and credit card rewards programs say yes.

And they have the ear of secretary of transportation Pete Buttigieg.

"One of our concerns, of course, is what role these programs may play in affecting the ability of other players, smaller players, newer players, to compete," Buttigieg said.



COURTESY OF SPIRIT

Spirit is one of the discount carriers that participated in a May 10 hearing on airline rewards programs.

Discussion about the topic was driven by Spirit chief commercial officer Matt Klein, who said that consolidation, with American, Delta, Southwest and United controlling approximately 80% of the domestic airline market, drives flyers to Big Four loyalty programs.

"Customers sort of get trapped," Klein said. "They're in cities dominated by certain airlines, which means you have to fly those airlines in those cities. That then gets you into these loyalty programs, and that gets you hooked into [thinking], 'Well, I guess I need to fly American' or 'I guess I need to fly United.'"

Control by the Big Four airlines of limited gate space and runway access at certain airports adds to a feedback loop that makes it more difficult for smaller carriers to become relevant, Klein said. He also argued that highly profitable rewards programs enable the large carriers to sell tickets at lower prices than they otherwise would, again hurting discount carriers.

Executives for Allegiant and Breeze agreed with Klein, while emphasizing measures they've taken with their loyalty and credit card programs to counter the Big Four's advantages.

Allegiant chief marketing officer Scott DeAngelo said the airline provides early check-in, early boarding and a free drink to all holders of its Allways Visa

card and also has no minimum threshold for Allways point redemption. Offering those instant benefits, he said, is a strategy geared toward enticing people who are entrenched in larger airline programs in which benefits must be earned.

Larger carriers Delta, Southwest, Alaska and JetBlue were invited to be on the panel but declined, the DOT said.

**What's best for consumers?**

Consumer advocates on the panel agreed with Klein's premise.

Among them was Erin Witte of the Consumer Federation of America, who said the largest airlines are able to use their market position to get more favorable co-branded credit card terms from banks.

"I think it really makes sense to zero in on that and evaluate whether that's anti-competitive," she said.

But not everyone is sympathetic to such arguments.

"The notion that a frequent flyer program is a tool to stifle competition is pretty silly," Gary Leff, who writes frequently about rewards programs on his View From the Wing blog, said in an email.

"There's little barrier to entry in offering an attractive program. Not every airline is smart about doing so, however."

Spirit, Leff pointed out, has benefited heavily from its Free Spirit loyalty program, including leveraging it for \$1.1 billion of borrowing.

Still, he said, Free Spirit pales in some ways to other airline rewards programs, including having points that expire after 12 months. Points don't expire at several other U.S. carriers, among them giants Delta, Southwest and United.

"Any relative disadvantage is of their own making," Leff said. "Sure, they're an undersized airline. Grow the airline, and its relevance in key markets, and they can grow the value of their loyalty program."

Along with competition, the hearing dealt with the questions of transparency and fairness in airline

rewards and credit card programs, including the practice of periodically devaluing loyalty points. The two regulatory bodies are considering whether to impose new rules on rewards programs and also whether there is cause to enhance enforcement of existing rules.

**'One of our concerns is what role these programs may play in affecting the ability of other players to compete.'**

**Pete Buttigieg, secretary of transportation**

## Domestic leisure travel's pandemic-era growth has started slowing

By Johanna Jainchill

LOS ANGELES — Domestic leisure travel, the sector that powered U.S. travel after the pandemic essentially halted international arrivals and business travel, is starting to plateau.

The U.S. Travel Association reported that the number of leisure trips taken in the U.S. by residents decelerated throughout 2023 after rapidly growing and surpassing 2019 numbers by 2022.

"We've been a bit drunk on leisure travel as an industry, and every good party has to end," Geoff Freeman, CEO of U.S. Travel, said during the group's annual IPW conference here this month. "Coming out of the pandemic was a unique point in time where one segment could carry the entire industry. I don't think we'll see that again anytime soon."

The good news, Freeman said, is that although domestic leisure numbers are normalizing, it is at a rate substantially higher than before the pandemic.

"Americans ... seem to be willing to do two things: travel more and spend more within traveling," he said.

In Utah, for example, domestic visitor spending made up 92% of all visitor spending in the state in 2019 and jumped to 98.4% by 2021. That number started to decline in 2022, to 95.6%.

Adam Burke, CEO of the Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board, said that

while domestic leisure travel had fully recovered to 2019 levels, with 43.3 million U.S. visitors last year, it is now seeing signs of a slowdown from that market, including shorter trips.

Burke said indicators such as consumer sentiment and anxiety around the upcoming presidential election are reasons the U.S. has to do more to focus on accelerating the rebound of the international inbound market, which is still lagging.

**New York's international gains**

New York, where domestic travel is expected to recover to 97% of 2019 levels this year, is seeing international growth pace higher than domestic; international arrivals are expected this year to recover to 98% of prepandemic levels.

Fred Dixon, CEO of New York Tourism & Conventions, described the domestic numbers as a normalization. And since the base of domestic leisure is so much bigger than international (50.6 million vs. 11.6 million last year) it takes more to grow.

"It's plateauing to a degree," Dixon said of domestic leisure levels. "The rapid rebound we saw is returning to more normal patterns of growth."

**Florida steals share**

In Florida, which is the most-visited state by travelers in the U.S., domestic leisure is not only still growing, its over-

all share is increasing.

Florida's 123 million domestic visitors last year represented 14.8% of the domestic market share, Visit Florida reported, up from 13.8% in 2022 and 13% in 2019.

"It appears that additional share all came from California," said Dana Young, CEO of Visit Florida, citing statistics showing that its gain was California and New York's loss, which were down 1.2 and 0.8 percentage points in domestic market share, respectively.

Prior to the pandemic, Young said, Visit Florida had not marketed in California. But during the pandemic, when

California was on lockdown and Florida had reopened, that changed.

"We said, 'Why don't we start putting some money into the California market and see what happens?'" she said. As a result, "L.A. has gone from nowhere in our orbit to one of our top 10 inbound markets in just three years."

Florida is also seeing continuous demand from its standard markets, she added, and domestic travel will continue to be buoyed this year by 73 domestic air routes being added from May to October. Florida is expecting a 4% increase in domestic airlift capacity this year.



PHOTO BY MARIADAV/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

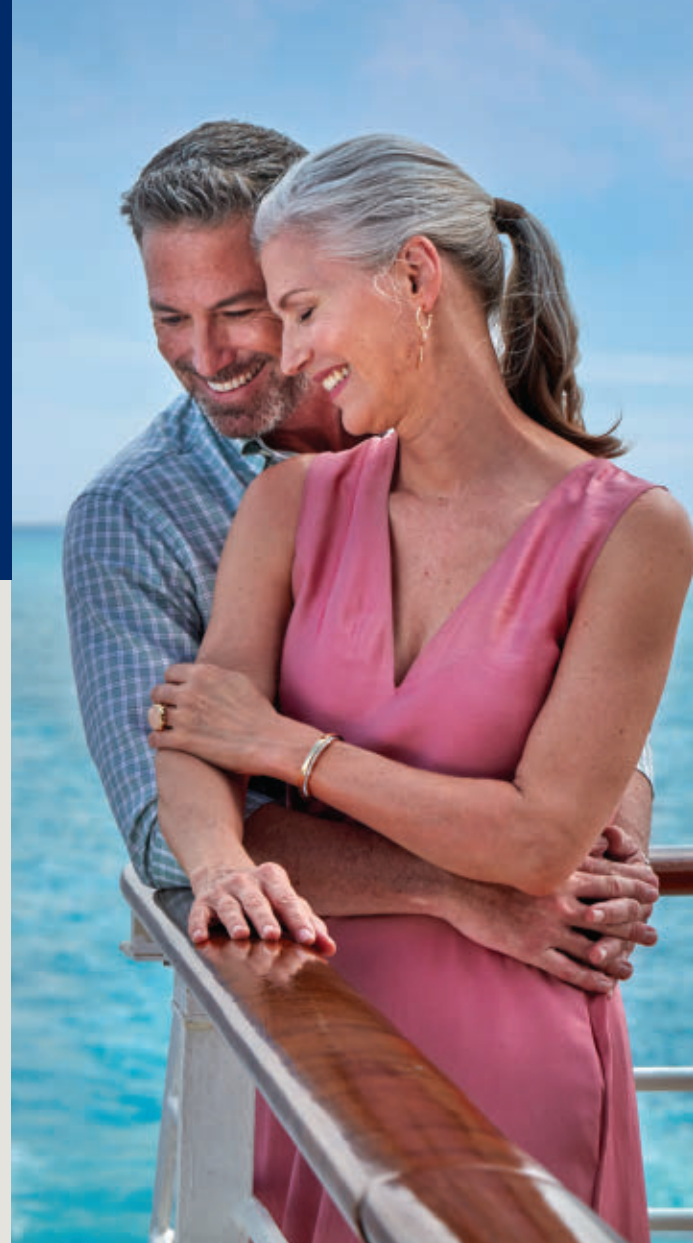
Miami Beach. Florida's share of the domestic leisure market grew by 1 percentage point last year.



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COURTESY OF PREFERRED HOTELS & RESORTS

The Farol Hotel in Cascais, Portugal, a member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts, is among the more affordable destinations seeing an uptick.

## PRICING

Continued from Page 1

luxury lifestyle expenditure allocation, like fashion, home interiors or automobiles,” she said.

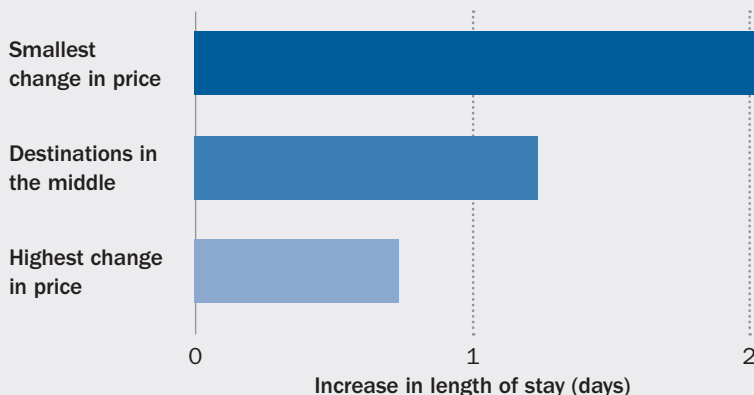
Bishop’s remarks align with findings from the Mastercard Economics Institute’s 2024 trends report, released this month, which found that the spending on experiences over material purchases remains prevalent. Spend on experiences and nightlife is at its highest point in five years, according to the report, making up 12% of tourism sales as of March 2024.

The report also underscored elevated pricing across leisure and hospitality, saying that suppliers have to raise prices to keep up with inflation as surging desire to travel means demand is outstripping supply.

“You have higher prices because costs increase, but you also have higher prices because demand has increased,” said Michelle Meyer, Mastercard’s chief economist, who added it’s not a sustainable

### Worldwide: Increase in days spent in destination, by affordability

Markets with the smallest increase in hotel prices have seen the biggest extension of trip length.



Source: Mastercard Economics Institute

cycle. “At some point, you have a price level where consumers are no longer as tolerant.”

Although Meyer said “we have not yet hit those levels on aggregate,” the Mastercard report did indicate that travelers are already gravitating toward longer trips to more affordable destinations where the dollar goes further, with markets like Turkey, Spain and Portugal seeing an uptick in popularity.

### Hotel rates are still rising

Hotel rates may not be increasing as rapidly as they were right after the pandemic-era travel restart, but they’re still inching upward. And Virtuoso executive vice president David Kolner says high rates aren’t likely to go away anytime soon.

The ADR for Virtuoso’s preferred hotel network, which skews toward the high end, hovers around \$1,500 to \$1,700 per night, representing a roughly 50% increase on prepandemic ADR of approximately \$1,000 per night. Kolner estimates that this year, ADR is up around 2% or 3%

so far, versus a roughly 7% jump last year.

“People are paying those prices and more,” said Kolner, adding that clients in the high net worth and ultrahigh net worth demographics continue to prove resilient from a travel spend perspective.

It’s the clients that may have exhausted their pandemic-era savings, however, that may rein in their travel budgets, he predicted.

“In the U.S., that phenomenon of excess savings that started during the pandemic is done,” Kolner said. “Through monitoring the U.S. government reports, it looks like in March [savings] went back down to prepandemic levels. So, I think there’s going to be this division, especially in luxury leisure, between high net worth [travelers] and the people that were maybe aspirational, with their pandemic surge in excess savings.”



**‘That phenomenon of excess savings that started during the pandemic is done.’**

David Kolner, Virtuoso

### Rates leveling off?

In Italy, Greece and France, all three of which benefited from a pandemic-era boom in pent-up demand, luxury hotel rates may have finally leveled off some. According to Virtuoso data, hotel bookings and pricing have remained flat across all three markets so far this year.

“And that’s not necessarily a bad thing, because last year was a record-breaking year,” pointed out Kolner. “But Spain, Portugal and Germany are all doing really great, with year-over-year growth, and we know those places [are perceived] as having better value for money in general, even before the pandemic. So, maybe people are going other places. But they’re also not not going to Italy.”

Hotel rates across Europe are also being carefully tracked by tour operators like Collette, with spokesperson Samuel LaFrance reporting that the company is anticipating more hotel price hikes in 2025-2026.

Collette usually negotiates hotel rates at least a year in advance to keep costs down, said LaFrance, who added that continued increases could prompt some traveler pushback over the next two years.

“They will be more conscious about where to travel, for how long and what type of arrangements they will choose,” he said.

A result, LaFrance said, could be a boost to Collette’s U.S. tours.

“If Europe becomes more expensive, [travelers] might rethink and look at our U.S. tour portfolio and travel with us in the U.S.,” LaFrance said.

## FOUR SEASONS YACHTS

Continued from Page 1

consumers, really talking to what the high net worth individual would like to see,” he said. “These are the inclusions that we’ve ended up with.”

Several luxury cruise specialists, however, said the a la carte pricing strategy made them unlikely to sell the product.

“That, to me, is insane, and I won’t sell it,” said Dennis Nienkerk, a luxury travel advisor with Strong Travel Services in Dallas. “If somebody called and insisted, I’d give them all the warnings, but I don’t see how they can maintain that model in an industry that is growing more and more all-inclusive all the time.”

Mary Jean Tully, CEO of Tully Luxury Travel, said she’s heard similar responses.

“We’ve had a few inquiries but nothing yet,” she said. “People are waiting to see, but no one likes the idea that it’s not all-inclusive so far.”

But Four Seasons Yachts wants to differentiate itself from other brands in the luxury cruise market. Four Seasons announced in 2022 that it would extend its land-based brand to the seas with former Azamara CEO Larry Pimentel

at the helm. Pimentel promised the brand would create a “new category of luxury lifestyle travel” on a 95-suite ship sailing in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. The brand’s first ship is under construction with Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri, and two more are planned.

Carlos Edery, CEO and founder of Luxury Cruise Connections, thinks the Four Seasons Yachts will appeal to a segment largely outside the market of regular luxury cruisers.

And while he predicts that its a la carte pricing may eventually evolve to half-board or full-board upgrades to cover lunch and dinner, he said Four Seasons is doing something to differentiate itself from other cruise products and appeal to ultrahigh-end consumers.

“I think there’s a very small sub-segment from the luxury cruise industry that might experience this,” he said.

### Leadership upheaval

When it launched, Four Seasons became the third in a trio of hotel brands to expand into cruising.

Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection was the



A rendering of a Loft Suite terrace on a Four Seasons Yachts vessel. Four Seasons Yachts plans to have an a la carte model on its ships.

COURTESY OF FOUR SEASONS

stepped down earlier this month.

Lindstad said it was sad to see leadership leave, especially those who were there from the beginning, but that their departures have not delayed the launch.

“Everything as it relates to the construction of the vessel, the other investors who are part of this project, everyone is still very excited for everything we’re doing and nothing has slowed down that progress,” he said.

Four Seasons Yachts owner Marc-Henry Cruise Holdings is on the hunt for a new CEO and has hired former Seabourn president Josh Leibowitz as an external consultant.

For some travel advisors, the departure of some of those executives, like Pimentel, a longtime cruise line leader who is known by the trade, has been cited as a reason to hold off on bookings.

“There’s been a lot of management changes, so people want to wait and see what happens,” Tully said.

But Edery remains confident Four Seasons Yachts is going in the right direction, in part, he said, because many people that Pimentel hired are still with the brand.





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**Disney** CRUISE LINE

# 25 years in 25 minutes

Since July 22, 2021, when Turks and Caicos reopened to tourists after a pandemic shutdown, its resorts have been mentioned 44 times in *Travel Weekly*. Of those citations, 40 were about properties on the island of Providenciales.

And indeed, until earlier this month, all four of my previous visits to the country were to resorts on the island nicknamed Provo.

Provo's resort boom, much of it on the luxury end, has considerably increased the pace of activity on the island. I still wouldn't characterize it as crowded, but those who haven't visited in the past 10 years will likely notice more people on the sand and more traffic on the main roads.

And all visitors will perceive that Provo's international terminal is way, way, way, way overdue for expansion and updating. It's not merely overcrowded; it's overwhelmed.

Not so, however, at the adjacent domestic terminal. Eight of Turks and Caicos' 40 islands and cays are inhabited, and in South Caicos, a 25-minute flight

away from the airport chaos, the clock seems magically to have been turned back 25 years.

There is currently only one luxe resort, Sailrock, on South Caicos. The company that operates it owns 90% of the island, the vast majority of which is undeveloped. For the time being, it appears that there are more flamingos, wild donkeys and wild horses than people.

(The donkeys and horses are descendants of animals that once hauled salt to South Caicos' port from the still-visible salt flats that were once the economic engine of the island. After that business collapsed, the animals were simply set free.)

The island has a broad, bulbous area where most residents live and a very long and narrow peninsula separating the Atlantic from the shallow Caicos Banks. In addition to owning a significant piece of the bulb, the entirety of the peninsula is Sailrock property.

The resort's great house sits atop a ridge where the peninsula begins, positioned so that, upon entry to the lobby, guests can look right and see the active Atlantic and turn left to view the calm, turquoise banks.

Or another way of putting it: sunrise breakfasts and sunset drinks. It takes only about 15 minutes to walk from one coastline to the other.

## There are more wild donkeys than people on South Caicos.

There are currently 38 units on the 770 acres the company owns. "We were into social distancing even before Covid," joked the reservations manager, Layvern Daniel.

While the properties' suites and villas are congregated near the great house, the bulk of the peninsula is undeveloped, except for a few houses along dirt roads. It has, on paper, been subdivided into 600 lots that are being offered for sale. So far, only a few have been sold and built upon.

Activities are primarily low key. A snorkeling boat excursion makes a stop at "star fish alley," a sandbar where you're guaranteed to see starfish and sand dollars.

I'm told there are better reefs than the one I visited on the same excursion; the coral where we stopped was mostly dead, and the fish seemed also to be practicing social distancing. But

## FROM THE WINDOW SEAT

of the boat, I saw a couple of unusual things: three of the largest barracudas I've ever seen, each approaching five feet long. At one point, they must have heard a supper bell ring somewhere because they took off like a shot together. (I also saw a smaller barracuda when I was in the water, but unless you're a needlefish, they're not really a concern.)

Another highlight was motoring for 10 minutes alongside an enormous eagle ray with what had to be an eight-foot wingspan.

I also took an all-terrain vehicle excursion to the far end of the peninsula

to kayak and, the next day, bumped along the peninsula's unpaved roads on a mountain bike. Other activities include a multipurpose tennis/pickleball/basketball court, a soccer field and a bocce lawn.

I didn't see anyone engaged in field sports on the hot May days I was there. The vibe is primarily chill. A few modest spa shacks with banks views offer Bali and deep tissue massages near a yoga platform. There's a narrow beach on the Atlantic side, but most guests favored the wider banks-side sand where umbrellas, lounge chairs and hammocks are set up near the lunch restaurant, The Cove, which is also open for bonfire dinners three nights a week.

By law, there are no motorized watercraft in the Caicos Banks; the resort offers a Hobie Cat and standup paddleboards there.

All published rates include flights to and from Provo and a \$40 credit, per person, per day for breakfast.

The resort will have some high-end competition on the island early next year when the former East Bay Resort reopens as Salterra, part of the Marriott Luxury Collection. It is currently undergoing extensive renovation.

Alas, the clock winds forward 25 years to airport chaos after the flight back to Provo. Nonetheless, I found that South Caicos calm had remarkable staying power.

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Arnie Weissmann  
Editor in Chief

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COVER STORY

# Cruise Lines Crowd Control



**Efforts to curb cruise ship visits have intensified since the pandemic, when residents of destinations got a prolonged taste of life without port calls. Today, lines are working with destinations to be part of the solution.**

**BY ANDREA ZELINSKI**

**A**ngela Hughes' shirt was soaked with sweat last summer on a cruise call in Santorini, Greece.

The CEO of Trips and Ships Luxury Travel said the temperature was a scorching 100 degrees, and Oia was packed. The crowd shuffled in the same direction up the steep and narrow streets of the whitewashed village, as people waited in lines to take pictures at the best viewpoints.

When Hughes reached the top, she noticed people waiting for a ride back down on the cable car. The wait, she said, was more than two hours.

Santorini was "absolutely miserable," she said, adding that the island is calmer and less crowded when the ships are gone.

"We've had clients go, 'Oh my gosh, I pictured this picture-perfect postcard of what Greece should look like, and all we got was 10 million people walking all in one direction, everybody shuffling to get a picture in the prime spots,'" Hughes said.

That experience was despite Santorini, in 2018, setting a limit of 8,000 daily cruisers in an effort to curb overtourism.

Other destinations have gone further. Citing the strain of too much tourism on infrastructure, the community and the environment, ports large and small, from Alaska to Norway, have taken steps, some drastic, to reduce cruise ship traffic.

The strategies have differed. Some, like Venice, Amsterdam and Barcelona, focus on pushing ships out of city centers. Others' efforts are environmentally driven: Norway plans to limit cruise traffic in its Unesco World Heritage-listed fjords to ships using alternative fuels by 2026.

Some communities in the U.S. are regulating cruise ship traffic. In March, Bar Harbor, Maine, implemented a voter-initiated daily limit of 1,000 cruise passengers; officials in Juneau capped the number of daily ship visits to five this season; and Key West voters are in a yearslong political battle over the size of cruise ships that can dock there.

Hughes, a former professor at Brigham Young University who taught geography, travel and tourism, sympathizes with these communities, even though cruise is her fastest-growing business.

"The resident population can become completely over-

whelmed by just the surge in tourist numbers," she said. "And then it causes all types of service disruptions, and it eventually leads to a deterioration of amenities."

Cruise backlash is not new, but the pace of destinations pushing back against overtourism in general, and cruise ships specifically, picked up during the pandemic, according to several industry experts.

Just as people in big cities noticed air quality improvement during the Covid-19 shutdown, people in popular port cities also found out what it was like with fewer tourists, many of whom were coming off cruise ships.

"The pause in global activity — not just cruise, not just travel — gave everyone a moment to step back and think about the role of tourism in their communities," said Jan Swartz, executive vice president of strategic operations for Carnival Corp. That led to more local discussion in port cities, she said, which in turn led to officials from the destinations that the Carnival Corp. brands visit to start conversations with the industry.

### **Cruise lines collaborating**

As a result of that dialogue, Carnival and other cruise companies are taking steps to work with municipalities to self-regulate their numbers and their impact.

It was during the pandemic that Key West residents voted to limit cruise ships. In 2020, more than 60% of voters there opted to ban cruise ships carrying more than 1,300 people (passengers and crew), citing concern about ships causing water turbidity that threatens coral reefs. They also wanted to limit the total number of people coming ashore to 1,500.

The limits didn't last long, being overturned soon after with legislation signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis. A less stringent city council restriction in 2022 allowed one ship per day to dock at the harbor. But in March, the Florida

Department of Environmental Protection gave the green light for the pier to accommodate ships that are larger than what was previously permitted, infuriating local activists.

The legislative reversal did not change the cruise lines' sensitivity to local concerns.

MSC Cruises USA president Ruben Rodriguez said the line carefully considered which ship to send to Key West and decided on a smaller one, the 2,500-passenger Magnifica, despite demand that would support a larger vessel.

"We care a lot about long-term relationships and the communities we visit, so we generally don't go where we're not wanted," he said. "If our model is not a fit for the needs and wants of a community, we'll have dialogue, we'll build a relationship, but we'll respect that."

Last year, about 700 cruise ships carried nearly 1.7 million passengers to Juneau, up 74% from a decade ago and 28% from the previous peak in 2019. City officials worked with CLIA to tap the brakes and agreed to establish a five-ship daily limit, giving cruise lines a year's notice.

"The visitor industry is vital to our local economy, and it's essential we preserve the things that make Juneau an incredible place to live and to visit," said Alexandra Pierce, tourism manager for Juneau.

David Herrera, president of Norwegian Cruise Line, said such agreements are examples of cruise lines wanting to find the balance between what locals want and profitability.

"We have to find a way to make it work, because that's where guests want to go and that's where we want to take them," he said. "Whether it's Alaska or whether it's Europe, we've just got to figure it out, and I think we're all motivated to do that."

Cruise lines are also adjusting their schedules and adding technology to be more environmentally friendly.

Celebrity's next newbuild will have a tri-fuel engine that can use progressively cleaner fuels as they come to market, said Laura Hodges Bethge, the line's president.

"We understand where these communities are coming from, and we want to work with them," Bethge said. "In some cases, that might mean a pause until the future develops itself."

Celebrity is also adapting its itineraries. To help reduce stress on Venice, it shifted more sailings to Ravenna, where parent company Royal Caribbean Group built a terminal. Guests can drive two hours to Venice or instead experience a city with fewer visitors.

"We want to go to the places that our customers want us to go to, right? Venice is one of those places," Bethge said. But calling at Ravenna is a "way in which we can find ways to work together, and when we could do that in ports of call all over the world, it's a really good thing."

Ravenna is an example of cruise lines teaming up with a destination to offer new stops. Private cruise destinations also provide alternative places to visit, ones where there are no locals to be resentful. Several lines are investing in

See **BACKLASH** on Page 14



1

PHOTO BY ANGELA HUGHES



3

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2

COURTESY OF PRINCESS CRUISES



5

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1) A crowd of cruise ship passengers trying to make their way down from the cliffs of Oia on Santorini. 2) The Caribbean Princess in Bar Harbor, Maine, which has instituted a limit on cruise ship visits. 3) Las Ramblas draws thousands of pedestrians in Barcelona, one of several destinations that has moved cruise ships out of city centers. 4) Cruise ships in Juneau, which has capped the number of daily ship visits to five this season. 5) Activists protest the arrival of the Norwegian Dawn in Key West in 2021.

## BACKLASH

*Continued from Page 13*

new private destinations or expanding existing ones to support more ships.

"It's part of that macro strategy," said Jay Schneider, Royal Caribbean International's chief product innovation officer. "There are tensions for tourism, and there are tensions for, 'Well, wait a minute, this is too much tourism.'"

Smaller ships can go to less-visited destinations. Explora Journeys, for example, looks for places to sail its 922-passenger ships beyond marquee ports. "My best day is when our captains, who help us plan our itineraries, present an itinerary to us and I don't know where the blazes" that is, said Chris Austin, Explora's president, North America.

### Room for improvement

Despite those efforts, some within the industry think cruise lines can do even better.

Daniel Skjeldam, CEO of Hurtigruten Group, is not surprised destinations are pushing back against cruising, saying the industry does not provide them with enough value.

"In order to have acceptance for a visit, you need to treat the community you come into as if you are a guest, not an intruder," he said.

That means providing positive impacts, such as buying food and supplies locally, reducing emissions and plugging into shore power, Skjeldam said.

"Instead of buying something in the U.K. and shipping it in a container, frozen, to the ship or keeping it in the freezer, we are actually buying locally. It's costing more, but it's providing local value," he said.

CLIA, however, argues that the cruise industry does provide positive impacts.

Kelly Craighead, CEO of CLIA, described cruising as "managed tourism" that gives communities two years' no-

tice of the time and date ships are arriving, which helps destination managers plan.

"What we try very hard to do is communicate the willingness of the industry to create an experience that is so positive because we're agile, because we have adaptability and because we want to have these kinds of partnerships," she said.

Celebrity's Bethge added that while cruise lines must improve their environmental impact, the industry also needs to do a better job educating communities about the reality of that impact overall.

"We are in a very, very small snippet on the tourism spectrum," she said. "We come in with one large ship per day, and people think it's much bigger in aggregate than it actually is."

There wasn't as much backlash 20 years ago when cruise ships carried a little more than 2,000 passengers, said Walter Nadolny, professor emeritus of marine transportation and global business at the State University of New York Maritime College and a former environmental officer for both Norwegian and Carnival.

But ships have ballooned since then. For instance, the recently crowned largest cruise ship, Royal Caribbean International's Icon of the Seas, can sail with as many as 5,610 guests.

"I think they really crossed the line in size," Nadolny said, adding that today's big ships can hold more than twice the number of passengers of Carnival's Fantasy-class vessels, which carried 2,052 passengers.

Going big is the current industry trend. The Icon's sister ship will launch next year, and 2028 will see the launch of Royal's seventh Oasis-class ship, which is expected to hold 5,668 passengers. Carnival will add two Excel-class ships by 2028, each carrying 5,374 guests. And Norwegian Cruise Line is planning four Prima Plus ships, the first two carrying around 3,571 passengers each and the second pair expected to be larger.

Nadolny said he thinks lines may soon consider going smaller in reaction to destinations' pushback.

John Heald, senior cruise director and brand ambassador for Carnival Cruise Line, hinted that's something the company might be thinking about. He asked his audience on Facebook in April, "Do you one day hope that Carnival Cruise Line will build a smaller ship ... say, a Spirit class-size [2,124-passenger] ship?" The majority of the 8,000 people who responded said yes.

### Advising clients on overtourism

Overtourism and cruise backlash give travel advisors an important role in explaining to clients when places are closed or restricted to cruise ships and how they can be more respectful travelers.

For example, John Lovell, president of Travel Leaders Group, said advisors' expertise is important when guiding clients on options for getting to destinations that ships can no longer dock in directly.

"It just makes our job much more valuable, in my opinion, to be able to communicate what the overtourism stances of a particular destination [are]," he said.

Trips and Ships Luxury Travel's Hughes, who will be in Greece twice this year, said she's pleased cities are pushing back against overtourism because social, sustainable tourism is important to her, and she sees the strain that too much visitation can create.

"Ethically, it's hard for me, personally," she said, adding that clients' wants are the priority, and she is honest with them. She has also begun selling more small and expedition ships that visit "untouched" places, she said.

"If you're looking for that postcard experience in Santorini, then you need to do a land vacation because you're not going to get it, cruise-wise. You're going to get a taste, and then you're probably not going to like it," Hughes said. "If you stay there when all the cruise ships are gone, you're going to love it."



# Wedding, Honeymoon and *Romance*

Advisor



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# Modern *Romance* Travel

What it looks like and how suppliers are delivering on new experiences.

By Stacey Zable

**T**here is a lot to love about the destination wedding, honeymoon and romance markets, according to travel advisors and suppliers.

The Destination Wedding & Honeymoon Specialists Association (DWHSA), a network of romance travel professionals, says “industry reports show that destination wedding bookings surged from \$21 billion in 2022 to \$28 bil-

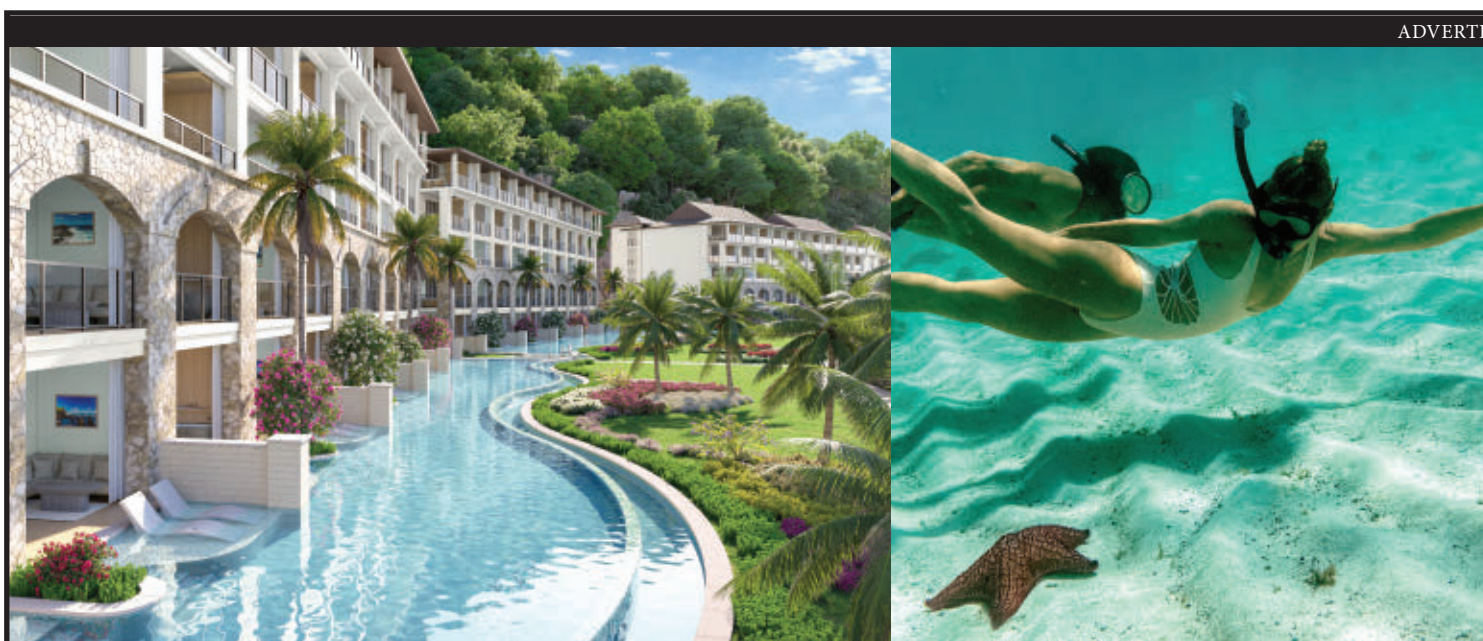


Buddymoons are probably the hottest trend right now for honeymoons. Couples will plan a traditional seven- or eight-night honeymoon for themselves, but they'll invite a few friends and relatives to join them for a few days in the middle of the trip. This pattern gives them ‘alone time’ on both ends of the trip combined with a fun group in the middle to experience the destination together.

- John Hawks,  
Executive Director and  
Co-Founder of DWHSA

lion in 2023 and DWHSA members expect that rise to be even greater in 2024.” They also predict steady increases in honeymoon trip budgets. And with this boost in romance all

around comes two trends: couples often inviting their friends and family along for the fun, and minimoons — shorter honeymoons taken close to the big day, with plans for a longer



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Located at the hook end of the Caribbean Island stretch, Saint Vincent is one of the region's unexplored wonders where nature and volcanic landscapes prevail. The journey to get there is as magical as the destination, enticing you to leave your world behind and be closer together. Sandals Saint Vincent and The Grenadines is tucked away on its own private cove surrounded by jungles and rivers, offering total privacy and seclusion with all the natural warmth that the Caribbean is known for.

### 2. An Underwater Adventure Together

Saint Vincent stands as one of the premier diving capitals of the world, with nutrient-rich waters that host a diverse array of marine life, including parrotfish, angelfish, moray eels and seahorses. The famous Tobago Cays Marine Park, just a short boat ride away, offers pristine coral formations and encounters with sea turtles, while the dramatic underwater topography of The Bat Cave at Buccament Bay invites adventurous divers to navigate tunnels and caverns to find its notorious flying residents.

### 3. Suites to Daydream About

Each of the 301 rooms boasts an out-of-this-world view, but none quite like the Vincy two-story overwater



trip at a later date. Many of the festivities will often include cultural immersion, so all can enjoy the authentic flavor of their locales. Travel advisors interested in this market

should “jump into this niche now with both feet,” says John Hawks, Executive Director, and Co-Founder with Lisa Sheldon, of DWHS. “COVID taught couples that time

together is precious, so there’s a tremendous market demand now for romance travel beyond just destination weddings and honeymoons. Romance travel is easily one of the fastest growing — and most dependably profitable — niches for travel advisors.”

Hawks adds that these client relationships with advisors have a “lifetime value” as travelers. He continues: “After the destination wedding and honeymoon, there are annual anniversary trips, baby-moons and familymoons as they have kids, and the occasional vow renewal. [There are] so many opportunities to book repeat trips with them.”

Nicole Bono, founder of Bono Events International, an independent affiliate of TRAVELLUSTRE, a Virtuoso Agency in Boston, Mass., agrees with the strong potential of the market. “It’s a great time for romance travel,” she says. “Travel is back stron-

ISEMENT



villas. A first for Sandals, these spacious accommodations are tucked into the most secluded corner of the private cove, where guests can take in the Caribbean breeze from their balcony on the second floor or catch some rays in a hammock suspended over aquamarine waters. Another first for Sandals? Select accommodations feature a separate media or fitness room.

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...Industry reports show that destination wedding bookings surged from \$21 billion in 2022 to \$28 billion in 2023 and DWHS members expect that rise to be even greater in 2024.

- *The Destination Wedding & Honeymoon Specialists Association (DWHS)*

ger than ever, and there's always a wonderful excuse to turn a love story into a magical adventure or event."

Hawks says couples are not waiting to experience romance travel together. "They'll plan a destination wedding that fits their budgets now instead of delaying for two years to save more money, or they'll choose a 'minimoon' for a few days in their bucket list destination instead of settling for a weeklong trip to a place that doesn't excite them as much," he says.



**Travel is back stronger than ever, and there's always a wonderful excuse to turn a love story into a magical adventure or event.**

**- Nicole Bono, founder of Bono Events International.**

Susan Moynihan, founder of The Honeymoonist, an independent affiliate of Largay Travel, a Virtuoso Agency in Annapolis, Maryland, is "a strong proponent of minimoons." She says: "Do something short and romantic right after the wedding to decompress, and then go all out for the honeymoon. [Minimoons] will always appeal to couples who want a delayed honeymoon, be it for timing (waiting to safari during peak

migration season in the Serengeti, avoiding monsoon season in Thailand) or work reasons; they've taken off time for the wedding and want to have a gap before they take off more

for the honeymoon."

Another big trend according to DWHSA is "buddimoons" with friends and family mem-



bers joining couples for part of or all of the trip. More than half of DWHSA members have reported buddymoon requests for 2024 and beyond, according to Hawks. “Buddymoons

are probably the hottest trend right now for honeymoons,” he says. “Couples will plan a traditional seven- or eight-night honeymoon for themselves, but they’ll invite a few friends

and relatives to join them for a few days in the middle of the trip. This pattern gives them ‘alone time’ on both ends of the trip combined with a fun group in the middle to experience the destination together.”

Hotel Xcaret Arte in Riviera Maya, Mexico is “becoming increasingly famous for hosting buddymoons,” according to Barbara Guadarrama, Corporate Associate Director of Weddings at Bodas Xcaret, the wedding service for Grupo Xcaret in the Riviera Maya, Mexico. “Couples come with their friends to have fun on our rooftop [bars] with iconic views, which is perfect for gatherings and late-night parties at our [El Deseo] Speakeasy,” she says. “Let’s not forget about our gastronomy. They have several options for restaurants. But what truly sets us apart is our seamless access and transfers to the parks. Guests can opt for a very fun night at Xoximilco, get adventurous at Xplor or Xavage, or simply indulge in relaxation at our Muluk Spa.”

According to Princess Cruises, “wedding vacations are on the rise — a concept where couples are foregoing the traditional honeymoon and inviting their wedding party to join them for the getaway.” The cruise line says: “A cruise ship is, of course, purpose-built to keep the party rolling.”

Vikki Knudsen, Senior Director, U.S. Sales and Meetings and Events for Club Med says she is seeing buddymoons as part of destination weddings. She says: “At Club Med Punta Cana, there are 35-plus land and water activities for honeymooners, from playing pickleball to chartering a yacht, and guests can conveniently stay together in the ‘adults-only’ Zen Oasis with a secluded poolside bar and jacuzzi.”

## FROM AISLE TO ISLE

When guests honeymoon at Sandals® Resorts, you can do as much – or as little – as they’d like. Spend their days sailing across azure waters, exploring the rhythm of the island or soaking in rays around the resort. Here, we make it easy for guests to get closer to the Caribbean – and closer to each other.



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Beaches Resorts is catering to the growing demand in “familymoons” at its properties. It recently added 12 new beachfront villas — the Firesky Reserve Villas and Eventide Penthouse Collection — at Beaches Negril in Jamaica, that can accommodate up to 18 guests. These expansive new villas offer rooftop terraces and fully equipped kitchens perfect for private chef dinners, says Marsha-Ann Donaldson, Director of Weddings and Romance at Sandals Resorts International. “A honeymoon comes in many shapes and sizes, and across our portfolio we work to offer a fit for every type of celebration,” she adds.

Windstar Cruises has also seen a big increase in familymoons. “[This is] likely because we have expanded and renovated our Star Plus all-suite yachts, which now have larger and adjoining suites that are perfect for bigger families and friend groups traveling together,” says Janet Bava, Chief Commercial Officer for Windstar Cruises. “Sharing the celebration with friends and family by bringing them along for the trip is a trend,” she



Sharing the celebration with friends and family by bringing them along for the trip is a trend.

-Janet Bava, Chief Commercial Officer, Windstar Cruises

says. “It’s a wedding and honeymoon wrapped up together. Windstar allows the wedding couple to have romantic evenings and experiences while enjoying the destination with

their loved ones. It’s a mix of alone time and special group activities to create lifelong memories for everyone.”



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## Cultural Immersion

Modern romance seekers are looking for locales where they can have cultural immer-

sion, either including it as part of the wedding or making sure their honeymoon authentically embraces the destination.

Couples planning their big day at Sunset at

The Palms in Negril, Jamaica, can request specific wedding traditions specific to Jamaica. These can include the traditional wedding cake (a Jamaican Black Rum Cake), reggae

music and the house pour of the local Appleton Estate Jamaica Rum.

Lisa Karageorgiou, Senior Conventions and Catering Manager, and Chrishna Bowe, Wedding Sales Manager at Grand Lucayan in Freeport, The

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**Today’s honeymooners are explorers of the destinations they visit, and they crave the opportunity to taste the local flavors, savor the aromatic drinks and enjoy the colors.**

**- Barbara Guadarrama, Corporate Associate Director of Weddings at Bodas Xcaret**

Bahamas, say “Couples want to be immersed in the true Bahamian experience.” They list the top request for destination weddings as a Junkanoo Rush Out — a parade of dancers and musicians that either close out the reception or lead the guests into the dinner after the cocktail reception. Rehearsal dinners at local venues is another popular request.



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Domestic weddings can also include aspects of the destination in their wedding. “Romance travel is all about sharing meaningful experiences together in a beautiful setting,”

says Maritza Koponen, Director of Catering for Four Seasons Resort and Residences Napa Valley in Calistoga, Calif. “Locally inspired details, like Napa Valley wines and cuisine, interactive food stations with chef attendants, and excursions to nearby vineyards infuse the festivities with a strong sense of place.”

Four Seasons is set within a vineyard and even has its own working winery onsite. “Four Seasons provides a private and immersive experience for guests, allowing them to fully embrace the wine-making process and the intimate, unique charm of being surrounded by the vines,” says Koponen.

Romantic cultural immersion also includes the regions for couples beyond the wedding. “Today’s honeymooners are explorers of the destinations they visit, and they crave the opportunity to taste the local flavors, savor the aromatic drinks and enjoy the colors,” says Guadarrama. She lists exclusive backstage tours and dinners at the Xcaret Mexico Espectacular show, dinners in a cenote at Xcaret Park, and Mexican wine tastings in Cava, the wine cellar at La Casa de la Playa, as examples.

At Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancun All Inclusive Spa Resort in Mexico, couples can explore local museums and take mixology classes, says Julieta Hernandez, Director of Fiesta Americana Travelty Collection Weddings.

Multiple cultural immersive tours are available such as a Mayan Museum Tour, where guests can enjoy Mayan history and art, as well as one of the Yucatán’s most important collec-

tions of Mayan artifacts. On property, culinary experiences at restaurants such as La Joya offer a menu representing diverse regions of Mexico accompanied by live mariachi music



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Located on Cancun’s most secluded stretch of white sand beach, the award-winning Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancún All Inclusive Spa is the perfect setting for a destination wedding or romantic Mexican-Caribbean honeymoon.

For couples seeking the perfect location for a magical beach wedding, the dedicated team of on-site wedding experts will take the stress out of planning one of life’s most important days, so you can relax and enjoy the wedding of your dreams. The resort, featuring authentic Mexican ambience, creates a true destination getaway complete with the luxurious comforts of warm, gracious service and timeless style, which serves as the perfect romantic backdrop.

Romance is always on the menu at the AAA Five Diamond Le Basilic – serving exceptional French-Mediterranean fare— and the upscale Mexican Restaurant, La Joya. Expanding its dining options, the resort offers three new restaurants sure to please even the most discerning palates. Chianti, Trattoria Italiana will feature live music and signature Tuscan cuisine. The second, an Asian restaurant, will feature a sushi bar and Teppanyaki Tables that seat 230 guests. The third is an Argentinian-Mexican steakhouse designed to evoke a sexy, supper club ambience complete with late-night Tango dancing.

While so much is new at the resort, the award-winning, state-of-the-art 40,000-square-foot Coral Beach Gem Spa remains unchanged, boasting a sophisticated design, innovative treatments

inspired by gemstone therapy, and a 10-Step Hydrotherapy circuit. Of Gem Spa’s 26 treatment rooms, two are Master Spa Suites with hydro-massage tubs and color therapy, and one is a VIP Couple’s Spa Suite with a double Jacuzzi tub and steam room, creating the perfect romantic retreat for newlyweds or couples looking to fall in love all over again.

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#### FIESTA AMERICANA TRAVELTY WEDDINGS

The travel agent incentive program offers exclusive benefits. The resort pays upon booking (within 30 days) and not upon arrival of guests. In addition, direct bookings on individual reservations or groups of up to 25 will also receive:

- Cash payment up to \$100 per booking
- Up to \$2,500 for a group booking

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and tequila tastings. The Table offers a nine-course tasting menu with beverages as part of an immersive 360-degree interactive culinary journey through Mexico's rich history.

Donaldson says: "Couples are seeking out incredible, personalized travel moments that turn into lasting memories and bring guests closer to the destinations they visit," She adds:

"This demand is inspiring new programs such as our Island Inclusive Dining, which allows couples in top-level suites to take their all-inclusive dining credits off-site to select

partner restaurants across the island. The program is currently available at Sandals Royal Curaçao [in Santa Barbara, Curaçao] and Sandals Royal Bahamian [in Nassau, The Bahamas], but is expanding to other resorts across the brand portfolio, encouraging guests to further immerse themselves in the colorful culture of the Caribbean."

In addition, guests in select suites in Sandals Royal Curaçao also have access to a fleet of convertible MINI Cooper cars to explore the island. This offering provides an opportunity to create "an immersive and enriching travel experience that simultaneously drives business to local establishments around the island," says Donaldson.

Depending on the property, Inclusive Collection, Hyatt resorts offer several cultural opportunities, according to Mark Benson, Associate Vice President, Sales and Strategy, Inclusive Collection, Hyatt. Guests can be part of such activities as the Cabo Art Walk featuring the local art scene in Los Cabos, and Temescal ceremonies, a cleansing ritual led by a Mayan healer, he says.

At Wailea Beach Resort - Marriott Maui in Hawaii, guests can participate in such cultural activities as Ti Leaf Lei Making, Mālama Hawaiian quilting, hula lessons, poi (taro) pounding, Ulu Maika (bowling), Ohe Kapala (bamboo stamping), and ukulele lessons. And a can't miss at the

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property is the Te Au Moana, meaning “The Ocean Tide” Luau, introducing guests to Hawaii’s history and culture through song, dance and traditional foods.

Newport, R.I., includes villas with private hot tubs and select ocean villas that have private hot tubs and private saunas. “Each villa is complemented by its own secluded courtyard,

evoking the ambiance of a personal residence rather than a typical hotel setting,” says Anney Jasinski, Director of Marketing for the property. “Couples relish the exclusivity of

## Private Accommodations

Donaldson is also seeing quiet travel as a trend that has risen as guests seek out more private accommodations. “This rising demand has informed the design decisions across our newest resorts, namely the new Sandals Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, which opened the end of March [2024 in Buccament],” she says. The property features all-new spacious and romantic Two-Story Overwater Bungalows. Sandals Dunn’s River in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, offers “similar privacy” in the Coyaba Sky Villa Swim-Up Rondoal Suites with private open-air rooftops, says Donaldson. The private accommodation trend at The Chanler at Cliff Walk in



Each villa is complemented by its own secluded courtyard, evoking the ambiance of a personal residence rather than a typical hotel setting.

- Anney Jasinski, Dir. of Marketing, The Chanler at Cliff Walk

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At Xcaret, they specialize in crafting unforgettable weddings set against the backdrop of breathtaking beauty, nature and luxury. The dedicated team is committed to turning this special day into a truly exceptional experience filled with love and joy.

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Picture exchanging vows in award-winning luxury settings like Hotel Xcaret México, Hotel Xcaret Arte, or La Casa de la Playa, or even amidst the iconic Xcaret Park. With over 15 unique venues, ranging from secluded coves to majestic caverns and picturesque beaches, each location offers the perfect backdrop for a magnificent celebration.

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unlimited access to Xcaret's tours, theme parks and premier cuisine. Seamlessly integrated into their stay at Xcaret hotels, this comprehensive package ensures a truly immersive and unforgettable celebration that the couple and their guests will equally enjoy.

### Tailored Support for Seamless Weddings:

Experience unparalleled attention and care with Xcaret Weddings. The dedicated team provides personalized planning and service, guiding every couple through every detail to bring their unique vision to life seamlessly. From venue selection to accommodating special requests, trust them to make your clients' wedding journey stress-free and unforgettable.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Explore further information about weddings at Xcaret by visiting [www.bodasxcaret.com](http://www.bodasxcaret.com)

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their space, with some opting to enhance their stay with a bottle of champagne and an indulgent aromatherapy bath at turndown.”

### More Romantic Experiences

Today’s romance travelers and honeymooners are seeking special experiences during

their trips. Here are a few you can add to your clients’ visits that will make them truly memorable.

➤ At Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancun All Inclusive Spa Resort in Mexico, a range of opportunities are tailored to enhance romance, according to Julieta Hernandez. She lists “serene moments” like private dinners on the beach and couple’s spa treatments to “exciting activities” like snorkeling and kayaking in the Caribbean waters.

➤ At La Casa de la Playa in Riviera Maya, Mexico, guests can choose a variety of romantic “Exclusively Your Way” tailor-made experiences, says Barbara Guadarrama. Options can include expert guides



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Sandals Resorts is dedicated to creating moments and spaces that facilitate meaningful connections, providing couples with a variety of experiences to enhance their honeymoon.

- Marsha-Ann Donaldson, Director of Weddings and Romance at Sandals Resorts International

taking couples on an exclusive caving tour in Xpeleo at Xplore park. Guadarrama suggests that couples seeking spiritual renewal take part in the Purification and New Being Ceremony which includes “moving rituals that calm the mind, purify the soul, and comfort the heart.” The private ceremony takes place in the natural hideaways of Xel-Há. Gastronomy enthusiasts can enjoy a private dinner at Cenote Rio Azul at Xcaret Park set in the jungle and featuring live jazz music and a menu designed by one of the hotel’s celebrity chefs, she says.

“Sandals Resorts is dedicated to creating moments and spaces that facilitate meaningful connections, providing couples with a variety of experiences to enhance their honeymoon,” says Marsha-Ann Donaldson. At Sandals Dunn’s River in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, guests staying in one of the new Coyaba Sky Villa Swim-up Rondoal Suites receive a complimentary Stargazing Concierge who will arrange romantic stargazing experiences on their private rooftops, complete with cocktail hours and wine and cheese nights. Donaldson notes that at the new Sandals Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in Buccament, couples can book guided kayak experiences to Buccament Bay Bat Caves or explore the resort’s gardens and trails on cruiser bikes.

Vikki Knudsen describes what she calls “the perfect day for couples at Club Med Punta Cana.”

She suggests beginning it with breakfast in bed in Tiara, the resort’s Exclusive Collection Space, followed by a horseback riding excursion, a couples massage in an

oceanfront palapa at the Club Med Spa, and a private sunset beach dinner. Other perks of a stay at Tiara include a dedicated concierge, daily evening champagne service,



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From the moment you arrive at Club Med Punta Cana, you’ll be immersed in a world of unparalleled beauty and tranquility. Our luxurious accommodations offer a peaceful oasis where you can unwind and relax in style. Whether you prefer a cozy beachfront bungalow or a spacious suite with breathtaking ocean views, we have the perfect option to suit your desires.

But your honeymoon experience doesn’t stop there. At Club Med, we believe that true romance lies in the details. That’s why we offer a range of exclusive perks and activities designed just for two. From intimate dinners under the stars to couples’ massages at our world-class spa, every moment is tailored to create memories that will last a lifetime.

And for those seeking adventure, Club Med Punta Cana has plenty to offer. Explore the beauty of the Caribbean with exciting water sports and thrilling excursions, or simply relax and soak up the sun on our pristine beaches. Whatever your idea of

the perfect honeymoon, Club Med has something for everyone.

But perhaps what truly sets Club Med apart is our commitment to sustainability. Through initiatives like Happy to Care, we strive to make a positive impact on the world around us, ensuring that your honeymoon is not only unforgettable but also environmentally responsible.

So why wait? Start planning your dream honeymoon with Club Med today and let us help you create the perfect getaway for you and your loved one.

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extra spacious accommodations, and a private pool area, she says.

➤ Windstar Cruises recently expanded its

partnership with Pacific Beachcomber to offer new two-night stay packages at The Brando, their exclusive private island eco-resort on the small private island Tetiaroa in Tahiti. At

Pacific Beachcomber's InterContinental Bora Bora Le Moana Resort in Bora Bora, Windstar currently offers one-night overwater bungalow stays as an additional excursion for

guests to book mid-cruise when overnighting on the island. "Guests simply disembark from the ship and are whisked away to a romantic, overwater bungalow for the night — a bucket list desire for most visiting Tahiti," says Janet Bava, Chief Commercial Officer for Windstar Cruises. "We also have air plus land plus cruise packages in Tahiti that make longer romantic trips super easy to book and plan."

➤ Nobu Hotel Ibiza Bay in Ibiza, Spain, provides a range of special experiences both within and beyond Ibiza Bay. The hotel's partnership with Ibiza Hike Station introduces adventurous couples to some of the

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Couples planning a destination wedding are after something truly special, as are modern honeymooners; they don't want the typical experience, but rather, a unique story to tell.

- Ally Pollema, Luxury Travel Advisor for Arbiter Travel Co.

most beautiful and remote parts of Ibiza, according to Joanna Ramonell, Director of Marketing and Communications for the property. “These hikes blend adrenaline-pumping adventure with mindfulness practices and will see them traversing dramatic gorges with awe-inspiring vistas, discovering hidden caves leading to natural Jacuzzis, while incorporating meditation exercises and sound therapy to enhance the experience.”

Each Inclusive Collection, Hyatt resort offers a variety of amenities and activities to further elevate honeymoons and romantic getaways, according to Mark Benson, Associate Vice President, Sales and Strategy, Inclusive Collection, Hyatt. Unique experiences include detox tea making classes, chocolate making experiences, and a variety of rejuvenating spa treatments at Zoëtry Marigot Bay St. Lucia and elevated wine tasting and exclusive events at Secrets® The Vine Cancun in Mexico.

Couples can experience intimate private beachside cabana dinners at Ko’a Kea Resort on Po’ipu Beach on Kauai, Hawaii. Ocean views, a dedicated server, a menu created by Kauai native Executive Chef Noelani Planas, and curated wine pairings by a master sommelier add to the romance of the evening.

## Getting Personal with Destination Weddings

The trend of personalization with couples

looking to make their destination wedding truly their own continues, with suppliers responding with their custom offerings.



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## PARADISUS PALMA REAL GOLF & SPA RESORT

Focus on romance, accented by superb gastronomy, modern spaces and unique Destination-Inclusive® experiences.

Located on the Dominican Republic’s legendary Bávaro Beach, Paradisus Palma Real Golf & Spa Resort has been redesigned to further embrace the surrounding nature of Punta Cana. All 596 suites feature spaces bathed in bright, natural light, pairing rustic wood furnishings with earth tones, designed to exude relaxation and serenity as soon as couples enter.

For a special touch throughout the in-room experience, guests are invited to upgrade their stay with Nikté at Paradisus by Meliá. Exclusive services and perks include premium room categories, turndown service, a premium minibar, a personal destination concierge, priority dinner reservations and a water ritual at the resort’s YHI Spa.

Couples can enjoy an intimate, private guest experience at the adults-only oasis – The Reserve at Paradisus by Meliá – where guests have access to the resort’s adults-only locations, including an

exclusive beach area, pools, lounges and an array of elevated restaurant offerings.

The Reserve has been completely renovated and features 152 spacious suites; Santé, a private restaurant featuring Mediterranean cuisine; concierge and turn-down services, exclusive private check-in and check-out and VIP Lounge.

Along with countless amenities available, the resort also includes access to 11 swimming pools, a world-class YHI Spa and fitness center, nine restaurants and 11 bars, nearby Cocotal Golf & Country Club, a Convention Center with over 31,000 square feet of multifunctional and flex space, and an array of Destination-Inclusive® off-site activities for The Reserve and Nikté guests.

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### ADVISOR INTEL

#### TOP FEATURES OF ROMANCE BY PARADISUS

- ◆ Paradisus hosts only two weddings per day, never at the same time, nor in the same location.
- ◆ We offer customizable and a la carte Romance Collections so you can plan your wedding exactly as you imagined it. All wedding Collections include a private space for an intimate ceremony.
- ◆ We specialize in multicultural and same-gender weddings. In addition,
- our team of Romance specialists is certified in Southeast Asian weddings.
- ◆ We help all couples to plan their celebrations free of charge. We pre-arrange all events for a stress-free experience.
- ◆ With our exclusive Love at First Site program, couples can visit Paradisus by Meliá resorts and enjoy a guided tour of the hotel, sample the wedding menu, and enjoy a special rate when booking their room. Best of all, the Love at First Site cost will be deducted from the final wedding bill.
- ◆ Couples celebrating their destination wedding at any Paradisus by Meliá will earn MeliáRewards points, which can be redeemed against free stays at any of the hotels in Meliá Hotels International’s portfolio or against other options including merchandise or gift cards.

“Couples planning a destination wedding are after something truly special, as are modern honeymooners; they don’t want the typical experience, but rather, a unique story to tell,”

says Ally Pollema, Luxury Travel Advisor for Arbiter Travel Co., an independent affiliate of Coastline Travel Advisors, a Virtuoso Agency in Los Angeles.

Aimed at further personalizing their ways to tie the knot for couples, Princess Cruises launched new wedding packages in June 2023 as well as the addition of TV host and bridal designer Randy Fenoli as Brand Ambassador for Love and Romance, a role which includes developing an exclusive signature

  
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**Couples are looking for more unique venues for their ceremonies on board — so we now offer the ability to get married anywhere they choose.**

**- Princess Cruises**

weddings package. New Princess Perfect Wedding packages are tailored for couples seeking unique choices for their big day. The first phase of new packages features at-sea options. A roll-out of additional packages — including the Randy Fenoli Weddings package, as well as Weddings Ashore — are to be announced at a later date.

“Couples are looking for more unique venues for their ceremonies on board — so we now offer the ability to get married anywhere they choose,” according to Princess Cruises. “This includes the center of the Piazza, the central hub, in a Sky

Suite, our most luxurious suites onboard, or out on the open deck with striking ocean views.”

The cruise line also says The Dome — “the first-of-its-kind, glass-enclosed entertainment and relaxation space on the top of the ship” — on new ship Sun Princess is another option for couples seek-



At Silverado Resort in Napa Valley, Calif., couples are seeking “more and more garden-inspired decor, along with European/Old World touches...”

- Andrea Luke, Dir. of Wedding Sales, Silverado Resort

ing a unique space. The 4,300-passenger Sun Princess launched in February 2024, sailing the Mediterranean and Europe, followed by voyages to the Eastern and Western Caribbean starting in October 2024.

At Silverado Resort in Napa Valley, Calif., couples are seeking “more and more garden-inspired décor, along with European/Old World touches being incorporated into wedding aesthetics,” according to Andrea Luke, Director of Wedding Sales for the property. One of the

most popular locations for weddings at the California landmark property is The Grove, which provides an outdoor setting with

views of the resort’s gardens, centuries-old oak trees, and the Atlas Peak Mountains, as well as The Mansion — the resort’s stately

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white main building that dates back to 1870. Guests can also wed at The Vineyard, with a winery backdrop.

Club Med partnered with Grupo Bisutti — the Brazilian wedding planners — to create a new venue at Club Med Punta Cana last July

2023. The brand already works with Grupo Bisutti and currently offers three Chez Bisutti venues in Brazil, including two venues at

Club Med Lake Paradise, and one at Club Med Trancoso, with a fourth to make its debut at Club Med Rio das Pedras this August.

In 2024, weddings at Xcaret in the Riviera Maya, Mexico, “have experienced a very healthy growth and evolution compared to 2023 and previous years,” according to Guadarrama. They are expecting to host around 300 wed-

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By prioritizing quality over quantity, couples can offer a more inclusive and fulfilling vacation experience for everyone involved. This approach allows guests to fully immerse themselves in the celebration without participation restrictions due to the group’s size.

- Julieta Hernandez,  
 Director of Fiesta Americana Travelty Collection Weddings

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dings this year. One of the main reasons for this growth is the expansion of offerings with additional wedding venues. Couples can now not only wed within two of its parks, Xcaret and Xoximilco, but also at its three hotels: Hotel Xcaret Mexico, Hotel Xcaret Arte and La Casa de la Playa.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines has recently updated local marriage regulations allowing couples to now complete their marriage registration in one day. A new online registration portal makes the process even easier for visitors.

## Wedding Size

Destination wedding group size varies depending on the venue and destination.

“While the typical destination wedding will average 30 to 40 guests, we’re seeing tremendous growth on both ends of the numbers,” says John Hawks of DWHS.

Guadarrama says a wedding at Xcaret can range from a small group of 30 to larger celebrations of 100 or more guests. The average number of guests ranges from 20 to 120 at Club Med Punta Cana, says Vikki Knudsen.

Julieta Hernandez says destination weddings today are characterized by smaller guest lists ranging from 45 to 80 attendees, although Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancun All Inclusive Spa Resort in Mexico also sees occasional larger weddings with guest counts of 150 to 300.

“Couples are intentionally limiting their guest counts to ensure they can

include all guests in activities and experiences throughout their stay,” she says. “By prioritizing quality over quantity, couples can offer a more inclusive and fulfilling vacation experi-

ence for everyone involved. This approach allows guests to fully immerse themselves in the celebration without participation restrictions due to the group’s size.” ♦

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sourced from its own gardens.

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# Three Black-owned hotels empower their communities



COURTESY OF STONEFIELD VILLA RESORT



COURTESY OF SPICE ISLAND BEACH RESORT



COURTESY OF THE OSPREY

Left, the Orchid Villa pool at St. Lucia's Stonefield Villa Resort, a former cacao plantation owned and operated by the Brown family. Top, the Spice Island Beach Resort in Grenada has long been associated with the Hopkin family. Above, the Osprey in the Bahamas is owned by Daphne Delaney and her husband, John.

By Mariette Williams

**O**n most Caribbean islands, tourism drives the local economy. But not everyone has benefitted. Hundreds of years of enslaved labor in the Caribbean, followed by years of Black people being shut out of access to economic opportunities, has kept Black hotel ownership in the region low.

Fortunately, things are changing, and Black-owned resorts have become some of the most successful properties in the Caribbean.

With Caribbean Heritage Month approaching in June, I reached out to three Black hotel owners to talk about hospitality, family legacies and what hotel ownership means to local communities.

## Family businesses

Black hotel ownership in the Caribbean is often a family affair, and Grenada's Spice Isle Resort, built in 1961, has been associated with the Hopkin family since the late 1960s. Janelle Hopkin's father, the late Royston Hopkin, became a majority shareholder in 1987, and the property has remained in the family.

"Our brand culture is rooted in the philosophy of connection through service," said Hopkin, the resort's president and managing director. "We offer outstanding service, authentic cuisine and experiences incorporating our local Grenadian culture. It's the ultimate Caribbean escape, where guests can reset, recharge and relax."

The all-inclusive property on Grand Anse Beach features 64 luxury beach and pool suites. Its top-notch service has earned it a AAA Five Diamond rating and

a legion of loyal guests.

"The Spice Island Beach Resort brand has been carefully nurtured by my father, who was a Grenadian hotelier and a towering force in the industry," Hopkin said. "My task, with the assistance of my family, is to continue to build on my late father's vision while carefully evolving the hotel's iconic brand to meet the needs of both its current and new guests."

St. Lucia's Stonefield Villa Resort shares a similar family story. The property is owned by Anista Brown, a St. Lucian who was born and raised in Soufriere, where the resort is located.

Cybelle Brown, Anista's daughter and the managing director of the resort, said part of St. Lucia's allure are its calming energy and natural beauty, which are also evident at the Stonefield.

"Nestled beneath Petit Piton, our property has stunning and awe-inspiring vistas, and every villa showcases panoramic views of the Pitons and the ocean," Cybelle Brown said. "We also have organic fruit and vegetable gardens that supply the restaurant, ensuring a genuine farm-to-table experience."

The property is a former working cocoa plantation where Brown's grandfather was an employee. Brown currently oversees

sales and marketing while her mother runs the day-to-day operations.

"My parents purchased the property in 1973 and continued to operate it as a working cocoa plantation," Brown said. "Our family of seven lived in the main house, which is now the resort's events center. In 1998, we built four villas and a restaurant and officially opened Stonefield Villa Resort. Since then, we've developed the resort into a 17-villa property."

In contrast to these extended-family connections, the Osprey, a boutique, residential-style resort on Great Harbor Cay in the Bahamas, was started by current owners Daphne Delaney and her husband, John.

The hotel boasts 400 feet of direct beachfront, part of a seven-mile stretch of pristine beach. Accommodations include a three-bedroom, 2,200-square-foot villa; a 1,000-square-foot cottage; two 500-square-foot suites with kitchenettes and lounge areas; and a private guest bedroom with a commanding ocean view.

Daphne Delaney designed it based on her family's extensive travels and stays in top-tier hotel properties.

"When we created the Osprey, we combined our love for the ocean and the natural environment with our desire for comfort no matter how rustic the location," she said. "Guests can expect an exclusive, highly personalized, luxurious stay on one of the Bahamas' most beautiful shores."

## Radiating benefits

The increase in Black-owned hotels is significant for owners and their communities; the properties create generational wealth and also serve as a model for other

local business owners.

"Representation is always important," Hopkin said. "When local entrepreneurs can build a successful hotel brand that can compete on a global scale, it hopefully encourages the younger generation of Caribbean youth to strive for greatness on their chosen paths and to believe that there is no limit to what they can achieve."

Beyond providing economic power to locals and creating opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment, Black-owned hotels offer guests a unique cultural perspective.

"We showcase the rich history, traditions and hospitality of the Black Caribbean community, providing a more authentic and diverse travel experience," Brown said. "Additionally, Black-owned hotels help to challenge stereotypes within the tourism industry. By highlighting the achievements and contributions of Black entrepreneurs in the hospitality sector, these hotels play a role in promoting representation and equality."

The growth of Black hotel ownership in the Caribbean means business owners can play a larger part in their island's tourism industry, which benefits both the current owners and the next generation.

"The Caribbean region, including the Bahamas, comprises mostly people of color, so our businesses are key to amassing the economic strength to advance the region and secure global recognition and influence," Delaney said. "Our heritage is filled with families of color persevering through hardship, overcoming challenging circumstances and achieving success through determination. We honor our history by building on that legacy."

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# Pursuing history by rail in France's Occitanie region



Beziers Cathedral with the city's 12th-century Old Bridge in the foreground.

PHOTOS BY NADINE GODWIN

By Nadine Godwin

**C**lients don't have to be history buffs to visit Occitanie, a wine region in the south of France that is the birthplace of cassoulet and an area rich with outcroppings suited to picturesque hilltop villages — and hiking.

But history has influenced the touristic landscape here.

With support from Destination Occitanie and local tourism offices, I traveled the rails in pursuit of that history.

In the Middle Ages, the city of Beziers was part of a cultural area known as Languedoc, where local nobles governed, not French kings, and the language was Occitan, not French.

The local culture at the time fostered religious tolerance and gender parity. The cathedral cloister in Beziers features

a plaque honoring six medieval troubadours; they include a woman.

Troubadours originated in Languedoc, and the plaque recalls a time when they traveled to the area's courts to sing of love.

Then, everything fell apart.

A religious heresy called Catharism had found a home in the region. Popes wanted to eradicate it, and French kings coveted the land. They got what they wanted. They launched the Albigensian Crusade in 1209.

Today a significant chunk of medieval Languedoc comprises Occitanie. Toulouse, a power center in Languedoc, is Occitanie's capital. Toulouse's St. Raymond Museum is sponsoring an exhibit devoted to the Cathars, on view through Jan. 5 at two sites: the museum itself and the city's Church of the Jacobins.

## A pass for exploring the past

Clients can undertake their own itineraries with the Occitanie Rail Tour Pass, at about \$11 a day for unlimited Occitanie travel over two to six consecutive days. SNCF, France's national rail-

way company, provides the platform for booking the pass.

Prime historical spots on my itinerary follow:

- Cordes-sur-Ciel, a hilltop town of less than 1,000 residents, exists as a direct result of the Albigensian Crusade. Count Raymond VII of Toulouse founded it in 1222 to provide a place for those who had lost homes in the fighting.

Five town gates survive, as do 13th- and 14th-century buildings — the oldest is the city hall — and the historical outdoor market site. Today it looks like the ideal perched village, and it charms with small houses, unique shops and appealing dining options.

I arrived by car, but Cordes is also accessible using a train/bus combination.

- The centurylong project to build the Dominican Church of the Jacobins started in 1230, immediately after the Crusade ended. It is an austere brick structure, designed in part to attract Cathars, who viewed austerity in theology and in life as the ideal.

Now deconsecrated, the church is no-

table for a line of 95-foot columns dividing its cavernous sanctuary lengthwise. A single column supports 22 ribs that fan out like palm fronds over the apse. An attached cloister is idyllic.

- Albi Cathedral, where construction began in 1282, during the Inquisition that followed the Crusade, also presents a simple redbrick exterior in response to Catharism. One view holds that the Roman Catholic Church opted for a huge, plain building to demonstrate power, but an alternative view says the plainness was meant to draw Cathars in.

After there were no Cathars to impress, the cathedral gained an ornate entry canopy and 200,000 square feet of frescoes on ceiling and walls — an eye-popping sight.

Its evocative surroundings include a rich collection of medieval houses (the 12th-century Fenasse Hotel being the oldest) and the former bishop's palace, now accommodating the works of and named for native son Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

- Beziers was the first town on the crusaders' radar. To terrorize the region, they destroyed it in 1209, killing around 5,000, including those who were sheltering in the cathedral when it was burned down. Another church where citizens unsuccessfully sought refuge, St. Madeleine's Church, survives.

Construction of Beziers Cathedral started a few decades later. Sited atop a dramatic promontory with the Orb River and the city's 12th-century Old Bridge in the foreground, it's a dream for photographers that very much belies the horror that predated it.

- Carcassonne boasts some of Europe's best preserved city fortifications. The outer Carcassonne wall was added in the 13th century because of weaknesses in city defenses revealed during and after the crusaders' attacks.

The walls have the drama and girth to fulfill the tourist's visions for a medieval citadel. Visitors can walk on the city ramparts as well as those atop the former viscount's 12th-century castle.

Carcassonne's medieval town is essentially a tourist town; only 35 people live in the walled center.

But Carcassonne is no less authentic. It must be seen.



Left, Albi Cathedral, a Unesco World Heritage Site, was built in the aftermath of the Albigensian Crusade. Center, the hilltop town of Cordes-sur-Ciel was founded to settle those displaced by the Crusade. Right, the walls of Carcassonne with the effects of the 2018 art installation "Eccentric, Concentric Circles" still visible.



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# Noncompetes are about to become illegal

**Q:** Did the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) ever adopt its proposed rule banning noncompetes, which you covered in a February Legal Briefs column (“Non-compete clauses could be going away”)? If so, how does it apply to the travel agency business? Does it supersede my state’s law, which allows noncompetes? Does it apply to independent contractors as well as employees? Does it also ban nonsolicitation clauses?

**A:** With little publicity, the FTC adopted the rule last month. It goes into effect on Sept. 4, and it will have a profound effect on businesses in the U.S.

For travel agencies, it means that you can no longer have clauses in employment or host-IC agreements (or policies) that prohibit an employee or IC from working with a competitor of the agency after the employment or IC relationship terminates. The rule does not prohibit non-compete clauses that apply during employment or during the host-IC relationship.

The FTC rule supersedes all state laws that allow non-compete clauses, even limited ones that allow such clauses if they are limited in time and geography.

The rule defines a non-compete clause

very broadly: It is “a term or condition ... that functions to prevent a worker from (1) seeking or accepting work in the United States with a different person where such work would begin after the conclusion of the employment that includes the term or condition; or (2) operating a business in the United States after the conclusion of the employment ...”

The words “worker” and “employment” are defined to include ICs and host-IC relationships: “A worker is a natural person who works or who previously worked, whether paid or unpaid, without regard to the worker’s title or the worker’s status ... including, but not limited to, whether the worker is an employee, independent contractor, extern, intern, volunteer, apprentice or a sole proprietor who provides a service.”

The term “functions to prevent” clarifies that “if an employer adopts a term or condition that is so broad or onerous that it has the same functional effect as a term or condition prohibiting ... other work or starting a business after their employment ends, such a term is a non-compete

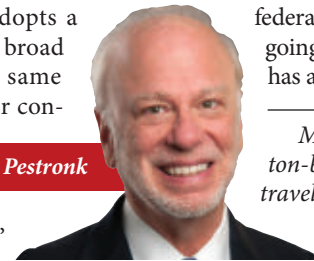
clause under the final rule.” So even non-solicitation or noninterference clauses can be deemed illegal non-compete clauses, depending on the effect they have on the worker’s ability to work in their chosen industry.

Obviously, what is a clause that has the “same functional effect” as a non-compete is very vague and depends on the facts of each case. Employment law experts are probably going to advise that you shouldn’t even have any nonsolicitation clauses or the like, in order to avoid expensive litigation.

There are two exceptions to the rule: It does not apply to “senior executives” making more than \$151,164, and it does not prohibit buyers of businesses from requiring the seller agree to a non-compete as part of the sale.

There is already a suit in Texas federal court to stop the rule from going into effect, and it probably has a good chance of success.

*Mark Pestronk is a Washington-based lawyer specializing in travel law. To submit a question for Legal Briefs, email him at mark@pestronk.com.*



Mark Pestronk

## Sustainable down to the last grain of sand

**A**part from admiring a particularly stunning beachfront, chances are you’ve likely never given much thought to sand.

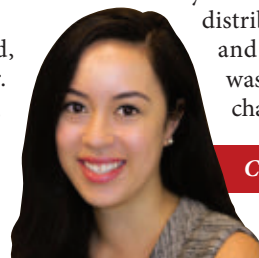
But sand, it turns out, is one of the world’s most vital natural resources.

That’s a fact I learned from Kurt Bjorkman, COO of the luxury California resort The Ranch at Laguna Beach, during an April lunch event hosted by Beyond Green, Preferred Hotel Group’s network of sustainability minded properties.

Bjorkman may be in the hospitality business, but as a hotelier with a sustainable ethos, he knows quite a bit about sand. (For the sand curious, he highly recommends picking up a copy of the book “The World in a Grain: The Story of Sand and How It Transformed Civilization,” by Vince Beiser.)

“Other than water and air, sand is the most consumed resource in the world,” said Bjorkman. “Pretty much everything we use has sand of some sort in it — from the concrete used to make roads, buildings and bridges to windows, computers, sunglasses. The list is endless.”

Sand, on the other hand, can be the bane of a golfer. Home to a nine-hole course, The Ranch at Laguna Beach requires a steady supply of the stuff to keep the course’s bunkers in pristine condition.



Christina Jelski

“Getting fresh sand is something most golf courses do on a regular basis,” said Bjorkman, citing the fact that every time players hit out of the bunker, some sand gets displaced into the nearby grass. Golf course sand also tends to degrade over time.

And it’s not just any ordinary sand but a specific type that’s required on the course.

“It has to be the perfect grain size and shape to hit a ball out of,” said Bjorkman, adding that the grain needs to be small enough that when hit out of the bunker, it will filter through into the soil rather than create a layer of grass-killing sediment.

But with sand mining an inherently unsustainable practice, causing environmental degradation and the disruption of ecosystems, Bjorkman sought a more eco-friendly solution.

The answer came to him after reading about a New Zealand-based company, called Expleco Limited, that had developed a system for crushing glass bottles and turning that product into high-quality sand. In 2018, Expleco Limited began distributing its products in the U.S., and The Ranch at Laguna Beach was among the first in line to purchase one of the company’s bottle-crushing systems, which consists of

two machines and costs approximately \$15,000.

According to Bjorkman, the sand made from crushed glass is identical in feel to regular bunker sand and is “almost indistinguishable” visually, save for a faint emerald tinge caused by the crushing of some green glass. The machines also save The Ranch at Laguna Beach hundreds of thousands of dollars each year in sand importation costs.

And in addition to creating a cost-effective and sustainable sand alternative, the system eliminates any need to transport and process the property’s glass waste.

But sand isn’t the only sustainable element The Ranch at Laguna Beach has incorporated into its golf course operations. The property uses only reclaimed, treated wastewater to irrigate all of its landscaping, including the golf course. And the course’s turf is maintained using only organic products. The resort has also reduced its overall turf area over the past few years, replacing a significant portion with native vegetation that has less environmental impact.

“It’s one thing to have a sustainable resort,” Bjorkman said. “It’s another to have a golf course that’s sustainable.”

*Christina Jelski covers the global hospitality industry for Travel Weekly. She also hosts the Last Resort podcast (travelweekly.com/Podcasts/Last-Resort). Follow her on Twitter @cjtravelweekly and contact her at cjelski@travelweekly.com.*



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# Theme park festivals attractive for advisors



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PHOTOS BY JAMIE BIESIADA

1) Performers during the new “Better Together: A Pixar Pals Celebration!” parade at Disney California Adventure Park. 2) A 25-foot sculpture celebrating Pixar Fest graces the Esplanade between Downtown Disney, Disneyland and Disney California Adventure. 3) Topiaries at the Epcot International Flower and Garden Festival. 4) A pickle milkshake and Impossible buffalo chicken tenders available during last year’s Epcot International Food and Wine Festival.

By Jamie Biesiada

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Thematic food? Check. Special drinks? Check. Exclusive merchandise? Check. Limited-run entertainment, big and small? Check and check. Specially themed festivals at theme parks offer unique experiences for guests, often at no additional cost outside of park admission (except, of course, for those snacks and T-shirts).

And for advisors who sell theme parks, limited-run festivals and events offer not only an opportunity to collect and post fresh marketing content that might attract a particular subset of travelers but can be the final piece that closes a sale.

The festivals come in many forms and can vary by year. Some of the most popular, like the Walt Disney World Resort’s Epcot International Food and Wine Festival, take place annually, but some happen more sporadically. Most recently, the Disneyland Resort here debuted Pixar Fest for the first time since its inaugural run in 2018.

“We love to give our trade partners something new to share with their clients, especially when it’s a limited-time offering or a limited-time event,” said Lynn Clark, vice president of sales and services at Disneyland Resort.

A number of trade partners were invited to preview Pixar Fest before it officially began, gathering content to share with clients and prospects. Disney also provides travel advisors content to use in marketing and social media, and Clark said the company hosts groups of agents on social media fan trips.

The Disneyland Resort took a different tack this year: It provided trade partners with its calendar of events at the beginning of 2024 to help agencies plan mar-

keting initiatives.

“They could also sell further in advance,” Clark said. “It was really, really well received.”

Susanne Hays, owner and president of Fairytale Journeys Travel in Alexander City, Ala., said having the calendar in advance has been helpful. And Pixar Fest in particular provides a unique selling point for Disneyland. Hays predicted it will help move the needle for clients who live on the East Coast and more typically opt to spend their summer vacations at Orlando’s Walt Disney World. A festival centered around such popular films and characters will likely be enough to draw them to the West Coast.

At Fairytale Journeys, she said, advisors can pull from a central directory of content gathered at events like Pixar Fest. While the content has the agency logo on it, advisors can customize the messaging around it, often with links to their own quote forms or the like.

“Not everybody is able to go to all these things,” Hays said. “That’s one thing that’s great about our agents — we’re big on sharing the content with our advisors, and they’re good about sharing it with us. It’s a win-win for both.”

At Small World Vacations in Washington Township, N.J., No. 61 on Travel Weekly’s Power List, trip reports are also shared among advisors, president and founder Sue Pisaturo said.

Pisaturo will share her report from Pixar Fest, and while it’s not mandatory for her agents to share their own trip reports agency-wide, they often do.

And the content captured often has legs.

For instance, a video Small World posted from Pixar Fest of Buzz Lightyear flying during the “Together Forever — A

Pixar Nighttime Spectacular” show has garnered more than 1 million views.

## Marketing tools for advisors

Adam Duckworth, president and founder of Travelmation in Fort Lauderdale, No. 55 on Travel Weekly’s Power List, said in addition to providing a marketing boost, special festivals can attract niche groups to the parks.

“I think anything that you can put into the hands of the travel advisor that is an additional marketing resource or marketing piece is beneficial,” he said.

Festival-specific marketing can attract others: Garden and topiary fans might want to visit the Epcot International Flower and Garden Festival in the spring, or Pixar fans might be drawn to the Disneyland event, he said.

Festivals can also help close sales. They can be “a definite selling point when you are talking about folks who might be on the fence,” according to Duckworth.

For instance, with Pixar Fest, a family might have children who are fans of the “Toy Story” films or “The Incredibles.” Characters from both appear at Pixar Fest in a variety of forms. Disneyland is also currently playing host to Season of the Force, with special Star Wars-themed offerings like a nighttime experience in Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge.

“The Disney fan base is so niche now in what they love, because Disney has so much [intellectual property],” Duckworth said. “It provides different opportunities.”

It’s also a tactic Disney Cruise Line has employed on its ships, he added, with themed cruises like Marvel Day at Sea, Pixar Day at Sea and Star Wars Day at Sea.

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