

BTN Looks Back

2019: Corporate Travel Riding High, but Early Signs of Trouble

By **Elizabeth West** / July 20, 2025 / **Contact Reporter**

There were big stories in 2019 that look up a lot of oxygen. Brexit was one example as the U.S. hurtled toward a no-deal position with the European Union, and what impact would that have on travel? (It was largely OK in terms of ripple effect, but there were some logistical bumps for sure.) There was considerable momentum behind certain technological innovations—some that would endure (machine learning) and some that would not (a blockchain-based distribution concept called Winding Tree). A couple of storylines, however, that initially seemed like anomalies, were early signs of deeper problems that would play out over time.



The overriding characteristic for business travel in 2019 may have been the palpable confidence in the industry itself. The BTN Corporate Travel 100 was spending at higher levels than ever. As a group, the top 100 companies spent more than \$11.8 billion in U.S.-originating air spend, the metric by which that annual BTN list of big corporate travel spenders is compiled, with companies like Deloitte, IBM, PWC and EY solidly in the top 10, while Amazon and Google had leapfrogged to new prominence in that arena as well.

U.S. airlines in 2019, according to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation, spiked profits by 25 percent over 2018 and was on a seven year streak of consecutive earnings increases. STR reported the highest performance ever for the U.S. hotel industry, with supply reaching 1.9 billion available room nights that year, and demand clocking in at 1.3 billion room nights. Though growth rates had slowed from previous years, the industry remained on an upward trajectory and continued to reach historic highs year on year.

Agencies and corporate travel technologies were pursuing innovation as well. BCD Travel released its SolutionSource Developers Hub, which many industry observers looked at has a major step in the right direction for third-party technologies to finally get more deeply integrated through corporate travel gates. Midmarket agency ATG Travel was collaborating with IBM Watson to create a new booking experience that incorporated machine learning and “automated reasoning,” which we might now call artificial intelligence.

A collaboration between United Airlines, ARC, a blockchain-based startup called BlockSkye and a confidential “large corporate” began a direct booking effort with blockchain-based ledger for payment reported its first successes. The teamwork would turn into a **much bigger story by 2023**, with the large corporate ultimately revealed as PWC and a new player Kayak for Business getting into the mix. But the seeds were planted in 2019.

A bigger headline at the time was airfare filing company ATPCO pushing its Next Generation Storefront standard. It worked to reconcile via an ATPCO algorithm what had become proliferating branded fare types into a comparison display for agencies and booking tools that organized such fares along like-for-like attributes.

NSG ultimately would take a backseat by 2021, though its imprint would be seen on Sabre’s 2021 Sabre Red 360 agency desktop rollout. But in 2019 NSG proved a flashpoint, with a major booster in Delta Air Lines which leveraged its influence to “force” certain players into incorporating the standard into their booking displays.

GBTA did not execute a full recruitment process for its open leadership position vacated by Mike McCormick, and perhaps more than the ACTE appointment raised hackles among members by hiring longtime industry firebrand and GBTA Allied Leadership Council president Scott Solombrino as executive director.

It was an internal-hire move criticized in general in a BTN report by a seasoned association management consultant, and according to a veteran buyer member of both ACTE and GBTA had stirred up acrimony to the point of distraction from other critical industry issues. The Solombrino hire would prove disastrous for GBTA in the coming months; at a time when visionary leadership would be crucial, the organization would be left in crisis communications mode. ACTE would shutter its organization as it reeled in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic when it was forced to cancel its annual convention.

Mysterious Pneumonia Reported in China – BTN didn't cover the pneumonia-like illness spreading in China until January. But word of fevers and respiratory disease of an unknown origin had spread into some mainstream media by very late December, after being investigated by the Chinese health authorities in the final days of 2019. Airports in China and surrounding countries began scanning arriving and departing travelers for fever by the first week of January and by January 31, U.S. airlines would cancel flights to China as would airlines around the globe in an effort to contain the spread of what had become known by then as Covid-19.

It's arguable that no single topic will ever have more dedicated ink in BTN than did the Covid-19 pandemic, as it shut down travel operations around the world, isolated and stranded business travelers away from their homes and, once returned, kept them at home for the better part of two years.

All of that ink would wait until 2020. Covid's origins, however, are tied to December 2019, when airlines, hotels, TMCs, business travel associations and travel managers all were projecting a strong trajectory for business travel in the months ahead, despite headwinds in terms of uncertain trade relationships—particularly between China and the U.S.—and the pending reality of a no-deal Brexit as well as other geopolitical and economic tensions.

2019 BTN Highlights

A Month-by-Month Look

JANUARY

British Airways tests **expanded fare options** on Boston and Dubai routes, available mainly through direct and NDC-enabled channels, to raise pricing flexibility and compete with low-cost carriers.

Carlson Wagonlit Travel reluctantly pilots **access** to Lufthansa's lowest fares via aggregator **Travelfusion** after the airline removed these fares from GDSs. CWT sees the move as a commercially motivated channel shift that creates inefficiencies.

Delta Air Lines pulls its content from the TripActions booking platform, saying that the platform did not meet the carrier's display requirements. Soon after, **TripActions** unveils a **new flight booking platform** endorsed by Delta that allows travelers to easily compare and book flight options.

TripActions works together with payment tool Divvy to integrate travel booking and **expense management**.

New Zealand-based **Serko** grows its North American footprint by **acquiring** U.S.-based expense management provider InterpIX Inc., securing in-market software, support capabilities, and SaaS technology to improve its

Corporate travel demand starts 2019 strong, with major U.S. carrier reporting large year-over-year increases in business bookings and showing optimism despite macroeconomic concerns.

Lufthansa initiates **biometric boarding** at Miami International Airport. This would enable passengers to use facial recognition cameras to board flights in under two seconds. The carrier plans to take the project to more U.S. airports and add biometric terminals.

With outcomes uncertain two months before the U.K.'s planned departure from the EU, travel managers face major **planning challenges**. They take limited precautions amid concerns of travel disruption, cost surges, and regulatory changes in case of a no-deal Brexit.

American Express Meetings & Events expands its **Meetings Marketplace** through partnerships with mobile app Attendify and registration website builder Splash.

Aventri uses VenueBook's direct booking technology to revamp its **strategic meetings** platform. It would allow event planners to source, negotiate, and book non-traditional venues directly in Aventri's dashboard.

United Airlines—with the Airlines Reporting Corporation; a large corporate client; and Blocksky—has successfully tested a **blockchain-based reporting and settlement system** for direct flight bookings. They would eventually like to expand live testing and include other airlines and suppliers.

Cvent CEO Reggie Aggarwal talks to BTN about his company's plans to apply **AI and blockchain technologies** into corporate travel and event management.

MARCH

In the event of a no-deal Brexit, the U.K. and EU have agreed to continue **air travel rights** through March 2020. This news eases concerns for around 164 million air passengers between the U.K. and EU member states each year.

Industry experts observe that hotel firms are rapidly launching and acquiring **new brands** to fill gaps in service and pricing tiers, target diverse travelers, improve loyalty programs, and extend their global reach.

United Airlines launches a **meetings portal** within its Jetstream platform for corporate clients to quickly access flexible discounts, automatically apply transient agreements, track related bookings, and earn amenity funds for attendee travel.

Certify and **Chrome River** have merged under a new \$1 billion+ holding company backed by **K1 Investment Management**. They serve both SMBs and large enterprises while maintaining separate brands to better compete with industry leader **Concur**.

Abacus creates **Abacus Travel**, a **booking tool** offering flights, hotels, cars, and rail, to allow for real-time policy compliance and seamless expense tracking. It's the company's first major product launch under its parent, Certify.

Amex GBT introduces a suite of tech upgrades, like a **benchmarking tool** that features traveler well-being metrics, AI-powered booking recommendations, and hotel re-shopping.

APRIL

Fragmentation and consumerization drive **travel management companies** like **Amex GBT**, **BCD**, and **CWT** to invest more in innovation and partner with startups to deliver custom solutions for business travel programs.

Delta aims to resume operations in **London Gatwick** in 2020 with flights from Boston and JFK, while its partnership with Korean Air adds new flights between the U.S. and Asia. However, COVID-19 delayed those plans to **May 2023**.

TravelBank has released a **new flight shopping display** based on Next Generation Storefront standards that uses ATPCO's star ratings to provide travelers with a more transparent sorting of fares by class, restrictions, amenities, and price.

Washington State Senate **passes a bill** that grants consumers rights to access, correct, and delete personal data, while imposing obligations on businesses to adopt reasonable security practices and allowing the Attorney General's Office to enforce violations, with civil penalties up to \$7,500 per violation.

After recently signing a partnership deal with Amex GBT, travel management startup **Lola** gets \$37 million in **Series C funding** to double its workforce and focus on tech development.

Boeing 737 Max aircraft remains **grounded** for several more weeks as **Boeing** upgrades its anti-stall software pending FAA review. North American airlines continue to adjust their schedules and deploy alternative aircraft to cover affected flights.

BCD and **CWT** are each moving their fragmented energy, resources, and marine (ERM) travel content and support into **centralized global platforms**. **Amex GBT** also strives to deliver a consistent global ERM platform, which it believes will help with scalability.

MAY

ATPCO's **Next Generation Storefront (NGS) standard**, designed to help airlines better display and differentiate fare options through third-party channels, is gaining traction. **Delta** leads the adoption efforts, while industry figures debate refinements like alternatives to the current star-based rating system.

Travel and payment providers advance the use of **virtual cards** through mobile wallets. The industry moves toward standardization, broader NFC adoption, and improving reliability and back-office processes.

SAP Concur faces leadership and organizational **changes**. Jim Lucier becomes company **president**, as Mike Eberhard retires. Additionally, Christal Bemont advances to the role of chief revenue officer.

U.K.-based **Corporate Traveller** has partnered with **BitPay** to become the U.K.'s first business TMC to let SME clients pay for bookings with bitcoin and bitcoin cash, settling payments within **two business days**.

Travel startup **Pana** raises **\$10 million** in Series A funding to develop its focus on guest travel, especially for job candidates and other non-employee travelers. Pana seeks to combine its technology and offline agent support, deepen TMC partnerships, and explore use cases like small meetings and events.

JUNE

Controversy ensued for corporate travel groups **ACTE** and **GBTA** in appointing new executives from within their boards. Those in the industry think about conflicts of interest, governance transparency, and potential fallout in member trust and event attendance.

Strong Customer Authentication (SCA) rules taking effect in the European Economic Area on September 14 are expected to disrupt corporate travel payments, specifically those involving plastic cards. This is due to complex, country-specific interpretations, with virtual and lodge cards likely less affected but still facing uncertainty.

Hobo Hotel completes the first hotel booking on a **public blockchain** using **Winding Tree's** platform. It shows advancements toward decentralized, secure, and open-source travel distribution, with support for fiat, credit, and cryptocurrency payments.

Mint House, a tech-driven, apartment-style hospitality startup for business travelers, raises \$15 million in Series A funding to introduce its short-term rental model into 10 new U.S. cities, vying to become a trusted **corporate lodging alternative** to traditional hotels and Airbnb.

JULY

Several airlines pilot the **International Air Transport Association's New Distribution Capability** standard with select TMCs to enable more personalized, retail-like fare and ancillary distribution. They aim for wider adoption and "critical mass" by 2020.

India-based **OYO Hotels & Homes** wants to **invest** \$300 million in the U.S. to scale its hotel footprint, talent, and infrastructure. They're backed by Airbnb, SoftBank Vision Fund, Greenoaks Capital, Sequoia and Hero Enterprise.

Canada's new **Air Passenger Protection Regulations** require airlines to compensate passengers up to \$2,400 for flight disruptions within the carriers' control—applying to all flights to, from, and within Canada—while exempting delays or cancellations caused by safety-related mechanical issues.

Deem announces it will **discontinue** its Deem Expense system, transitioning clients to Certify. Meanwhile, the company will keep focusing on its Work Fource travel platform and integrating with various expense providers via its Open Expense Alliance.

American Airlines and **Qantas** have received tentative U.S. DOT approval for their long-awaited **joint venture**, enabling revenue sharing and coordinated services between the U.S. and Australia/New Zealand. New routes and deeper integration are being planned, pending final approval after public commentary.

With the **Boeing 737 Max** being grounded since March 2019, a recent GBTA survey reveals that travelers and buyers are worried about flying the aircraft once it returns to service. TMCs and booking platforms offer aircraft type data at point of sale so that users can implement profile preferences or policy rules. But aircraft swaps close to departure could still happen, and most companies haven't yet changed policies to block 737 Max bookings.

AUGUST

More travel managers struggle with hidden **resort fees**, as attorneys general in all 50 states and DC investigate the growing use of "drip pricing." Legal action against **Marriott** spotlights deceptive practices, yet the fragmented hotel ownership structure and limited regulatory involvement leave managers to rely on traveler vigilance amid ongoing market and platform efforts to raise transparency.

Venue options for **meetings** have been shifting from traditional hotels towards flexible, purpose-built spaces and tech-enabled platforms. Instead of directly competing with them, hotels continue to invest in and collaborate with alternative venues. BTN speaks with three meetings professionals about their sourcing strategies.

British Airways receives a £183.39 million fine from the U.K. Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) for a **2018 data breach** that compromised nearly 500,000 customers' personal data via a fraudulent site redirect. Following that, ICO declares a proposed \$123 million fine against **Marriott International** for a data breach coming from **Starwood** systems, which Marriott failed to detect post-acquisition. Ultimately, that incident compromised the personal data of 339 million customers, including 30 million in Europe.

France plans to have an “**eco tax**” of €1.50 to €18 on outbound flights starting in 2020. The move draws criticism from **Air France**, which argues the tax will affect competitiveness without directly supporting aviation sustainability. Analysts note it aligns with a growing European trend of taxing air travel for environmental reasons.

SEPTEMBER

Southwest Airlines says that by mid-2020, it will begin offering full booking capabilities in **GDSs** through new agreements with **Travelport** and **Amadeus**.

SAP Concur’s A.G. Lambert explores how **AI** transforms corporate travel. In an op-ed, he notes how AI is balancing cost control and employee satisfaction, automating tasks, enhancing compliance, and enabling personalized travel experiences for both travelers and managers.

Corporate hotel rate negotiations for 2020 are swaying in buyers' favor due to slowing ADR growth. Buyers are pushing for lower rate increases, targeting hidden fees, and leveraging alternative lodging options like Airbnb for negotiating power against still-strong but stabilizing hotel occupancy.

Hotel giants Accor, Hilton, IHG, and Marriott’s joint \$50 million investment in meetings tech platform **Groups360** has raised **antitrust concerns** over potential collusion, exclusivity, and data sharing. Groups360 emphasizes it has safeguards in place to protect sensitive pricing data and prevent anti-competitive behavior.

European business travel stakeholders brace for the potential disruptions **intended** to start on September 14, 2019 as **Strong Customer Authentication** (SCA) becomes mandatory for e-commerce payments in the EU. They believe added verification requirements may complicate corporate travel bookings despite some exemptions, grace periods, and ongoing upgrades to authentication protocols like 3DS.

BCD Travelpurchases long-time affiliate **Adelman** and wants to keep it as a standalone operation with its current leadership.

Following a series of acquisitions, U.K.-based **Reed & Mackay** buys **Business Travel Direct** as part of its **strategic growth**. The subsidiary would run as a stand-alone business under managing director Julie Oliver for that time.

OCTOBER

Several sources familiar with **Google’s** plans told **The Beat** the search giant had **plans to enable corporate identifiers on Google Flights**, thereby allowing business travelers to shop corporate negotiated fares on the metasearch. However, those predictions did not materialize.

JetBlue prepares to take on the “obscene” premium fares between the U.S. and London as the carrier **prepares to launch its first European** flights in 2021, which it did do in August 21.

Delta Air Lines and **Latam** announce partnership, with **Delta taking a 20 percent stake in the Brazilian airline**. Latam exited its previous partnership with American Airlines the Oneworld alliance. The partnership will built on Delta’s joint venture with AeroMexico, further connecting North and South America. Delta will **exit stake in Gol** by December.

Facial recognition and biometric identifiers become the vision of future traveler mobility across airports and border crossing, immigration processes. The **World Travel & Tourism Council** identified 53 efforts in play in 2019 to implement biometrics across the U.S., Southeast Asia, the EU and the Caribbean.

NOVEMBER

BCD Travel opens its **GlobalBusiness technology marketplace** to developers at authorized time periods. The upshot is that marketplace members have access to the same APIs BCD uses to power its own core solutions and, therefore, can develop deeper integrations.

Ohio-based travel management company **ATG** uses natural language processing, data retrieval, automated reasoning and machine learning capabilities of **IBM Watson to deliver booking recommendations**.

United Airlines announces plans to pursue Brazilian carrier Azul and bring it into a four-way **joint venture partnership with Avianca and Copa**, as United sees opportunity in Latam leaving its AA partnership. The carrier also increased its regional service within the U.S. via two-cabin, 50-seat Bombardier CRJ-530s.

Accor expands its co-working brand Wojo, which it launched in 2015, beyond France and into Barcelona. Accor had plans to create 1,200 Wojo locations in Europe by 2022. The Covid-19 pandemic will de-rail that plan, but Wojo as of 2024 had 400 locations.

JetBlue and Norwegian plan to interline; however, the move never materialized. Norwegian changed its strategy after Covid-19 to operate mostly short-haul flights within Europe.

IAG inks agreement to buy **Spanish airline Air Europa** for 1 billion euros with plans to build Madrid into a European hub. The acquisition plan is scrapped in 2021 and re-upped in 2023 and fully abandoned 2024.

DECEMBER

United CEO Oscar Munoz announces plans to step down in May and be replaced by then-United president **Scott Kirby**. He had taken the reins in 2015 after a federal corruption investigation of prior CEO Jeff Smisek. Munoz's early tenure faced serious challenges highlighted by a heart transplant surgery and viral video of the airline forcibly removing Dr. David Dao from a flight. After that, however, **United saw a significant turnaround** under Munoz and Kirby, strengthening its network from its hubs and improving operational and financial performance

ARC CEO **Mike Premo** announces plans to retire at end of 2020; **Lauri Reishus**, then-executive VP and COO, succeeded him as the first female CEO of ARC.

American Express Global Business Travel president **Philippe Chereque** announces plans to depart the **organization** by end of March 2020 to join Certares, the investment company that led private equity group that holds a 50 percent stake in GBT. **Andrew Crawley** slated to join Amex GBT in the newly created role of chief commercial officer in April.

By the end of 2019 **TripActions, TravelBank, Upside, Psngr1, WhereTo** and **AmTrav** each had adapted the **Next Generation Storefront standard** to their booking displays. Next Generation Storefront was announced in late 2018 and led by ATPCO, but with major booster Delta Air Lines, which leveraged its content with emerging players in order to drive adoption.

A **cluster of mysterious pneumonia cases**, mostly in the Hubei province of China, was first reported to the local government on Dec. 27, 2019 and published on Dec. 31. Some airports in Asia begin screening passengers for fevers prior to boarding and upon arrival.

Editor's Note: Monthly highlights were composed by BTN editorial engagement manager Gianna Song with the help of AI tools.
