

Duff on Hospitality Law

## **Online Travel Update: Short-term rentals hosts become hot commodities; AirAsia continues its effort to diversify online offerings; Expedia launches AI-enabled virtual travel agents**

By Greg Duff on 4.12.21 | Posted in Online Travel Update

It was another relatively quiet week in the online travel world as evidenced by our stories below. Expedia Group's introduction of its Fast Track program designed to recruit unhappy Airbnb hosts and its rollout of AI-enabled virtual travel agents received most of the attention. Enjoy.

### **Short-Term Rentals Hosts Becoming a Hot Commodity**

*(“Expedia’s Vrbo Looks to Poach Discouraged Airbnb Hosts With New Incentives, March 29, 2021 via Skift Travel News) (subscription may be required)*

We have all read the many stories chronicling the successes of short-term rentals during the pandemic. Our team has done more work in the space over the last six months than the past two years combined. Now, as the travel industry prepares for the anticipated return of leisure travel (and continued strong demand for traditional lodging alternatives), distributors are getting creative in their efforts to add to their rental inventory – even going so far as to create a dedicated programs seeking to expedite the transition of disgruntled hosts wishing to leave their current distribution platform. Meet Fast Track. Recently, Expedia Group introduced its new host recruitment program (Fast Track), which Expedia acknowledges was created specifically to respond to the influx of disgruntled hosts seeking to leave Airbnb over its refund practices. Participants in the program will enjoy preferred placement on Vrbo and a “New to Vrbo” badge on its listing for up to 90 days. The new program is currently only available to hosts in the United States, but is expected to be rolled out globally over the next few months.

### **AirAsia Continues Efforts to Diversify Online Offerings**

*(AirAsia flies into various services in Chinese market, April 1, 2021 via China Daily Global - Top Stories)*

Recently, we detailed JetBlue's plans to expand its à la carte online offerings beyond just airline tickets. In this edition, we update similar efforts underway at Malaysian airline, AirAsia. In addition to traditional airline tickets, AirAsia now offers customers hotel bookings, event and activity tickets, food delivery services, a variety of traditional retail products (think Amazon) and

**Online Travel Update:** Short-term rentals hosts become hot commodities; AirAsia continues its effort to diversify online offerings; Expedia launches AI-enabled virtual travel agents

---

even financial services. Seeking to leverage the connections of one of its major shareholders, Stanley Choi (who has connections with Alibaba Group's Jack Ma), AirAsia is now focusing its efforts on growing its "digital business" specifically in China and leveraging Chinese travelers' growing demand for travel into other online products and services.

**Expedia Launches AI-Enabled Virtual Travel Agents**

*(Expedia launches virtual agent for advisors and travelers, April 2, 2021 via Phocus Wire)*

Why this story received the attention it did is a mystery. Expedia's introduction of virtual travel agents to respond to requests and inquiries from members of its travel agent affiliate program and Expedia Group travelers isn't unique to Expedia.

---

Other news:

**Sabre Makes a Bold Bet It Can Simplify the Way Airlines Sell Seats**

*March 31, 2021 via Skift Travel News (subscription may be required)*

Everyone loves an analogy. Now we have Sabre comparing booking a seat on a plane to shopping in a supermarket as it launches its "new airline storefront."

**Tripadvisor Suffered a 61 Percent YoY Decrease in Revenue in 2020 - Almost a Billion Dollar Drop**

*April 2, 2021 via Travel Daily News*

The travel and tourism industry was one of the hardest-hit industries by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the world's most visited travel and tourism website was not spared. Tripadvisor had one of its worst years and experienced a historic drop in revenue. According to data presented by TradingPlatforms.com, TripAdvisor experienced a 61 percent YoY decrease in revenue in 2020, a loss of almost a billion dollars in one year.