

Social networking changing the way we travel

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This 2009 photo by Jessica Flynn shows the beach and Cliffside trails of Point no Point Resort on Vancouver Island, which a Facebook friend recommended to Flynn. Social networking sites like Facebook are changing the way travelers plan their vacations. (AP Photo/Jessica Flynn)

(AP) -- Isahrai Azaria is heading to Austin, Texas, in February, and thanks to Facebook, she already has 40 acquaintances, an invitation to go water tubing, and a line on the best vegetarian lunch place in town.

"It's been unbelievable," said Azaria, a singer who lives in San Francisco. "It was just a quick post on Facebook, but one of my [Facebook friends](#) is friends with some people in Austin," and those friends sent her tips on everything from yoga studios to local bus service.

Social media is changing the way people [travel](#). It's replacing

recommendations from experts and strangers with a targeted selection of information from acquaintances and their networks.

"Social media and travel are a perfect fit, because they both are built around this idea of sharing experiences and storytelling," said Mary Madden, a senior researcher at the Pew Internet and American Life Project in Washington, D.C. "Content, whether that's a blog post about your favorite restaurant or the story from your latest trip to Greece and photos of that trip, is a form of social currency that you share with other people who frequent your social media space."

Travelers have used the Internet for years to find hotels, restaurants and other attractions. Some Web sites offer recommendations from guidebook writers, critics and other experts, while others - like TripAdvisor.com, [Yelp](#) and Chowhound - offer feedback from individuals about their personal experiences. But credibility can be an issue. A good review could be written by the business owners themselves or their friends, while bad reviews could come from their competitors. A destination [Web site](#) might only list businesses that pay to be featured.

In contrast, a recommendation from a Facebook connection or your Twitter feed may feel more trustworthy and less random than something you stumble across on a Web site - even when the tweet or Facebook message is from someone you don't know.

"I see my social media network as a big focus group, a big travel guide," said Jessica Flynn, who owns Red Sky Public Relations in Boise. "I don't know all the people directly who I follow on Twitter, but I just find them interesting."

Last summer, Flynn let it be known on Twitter and Facebook that she and her boyfriend were headed to Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. She heard back from the owners of cheese shops, wine bars, and

bed-and-breakfasts.

"It is commercial, in a way, but it also gives me a connection that I would never have had," said Flynn. "I wrote back, 'I'll be 30 miles south of you. What do you know about that area?' And then they responded and gave me something."

Azaria, who doesn't drive, looked on mass transit Web sites when searching for a place to stay in Austin. She got bus schedules, but couldn't tell which neighborhoods were safe for waiting at a bus stop.

"When I have a friend of a friend tell me on Facebook it's kind of sketchy in this area, it's like, 'OK, let me think about a different area,'" said Azaria.

Airlines, hotel chains, tourism agencies and companies like Orbitz also use Facebook to keep fans up-to-date on specials and deals. Facebook applications like Dopplr let users share travel plans and add reviews.

Outside of [Facebook](#), trip-sharing Web sites such as Everlater provide a way for travelers to post their stories and photos.

Twitter has become a medium for travel-related businesses to provide quick messages about upcoming events, promotions, even weather conditions. It's also a way for these entities to identify regular customers and reward them with discounts. Other travel businesses use Twitter to build relationships with customers and promote visitor satisfaction by answering individual queries through Twitter with on-the-spot advice.

A Web site called Twisitor Center lists hundreds of local tourism authorities around the world that [tweet: twisitorcenter.com/](#). One of them, Travel Portland, the Portland, Ore., marketing office, uses Twitter to help travelers get quick answers to their Portland-related questions.

Many of the tweets received at Travel Portland are from people looking for restaurants. A staff member serves as official Travel Portland tweeter, but anyone who sees the feed can respond to a query. "The nice thing about Twitter is (visitors) may also get six, seven, eight answers back from people who live in Portland," said Deborah Wakefield, Travel Portland's vice president of communications. "If somebody is downtown, asking about a great hotel for kids, they may get recommendations from people who have a favorite."

Tweets are especially handy if you're walking around outside looking for a good breakfast place - a common query for Travel Portland.

"Even if your phone has Internet capabilities maybe it's slow or difficult to see a web site - so Twitter makes it really convenient when you need one of those instant recommendations," said Wakefield.

And Tweets are limited to 140 words, a welcome contrast to the torrent of information on the Web.

"People start to rely on those trusted portals that help sift the cream from the top," said Madden, of Pew. "Otherwise people would be overwhelmed by information by doing research on line."

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