

# Facebook, Twitter: new roadmap for high-end travel

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Tourists take pictures of sea lions at the marina of Punta del Este, one of the most exclusive seaside resorts of Latin America, in Uruguay. Facebook, Twitter and a host of invite-only travel websites are fast becoming a key pipeline for well-heeled travellers as well as the budget-conscious to find hot deals and destinations.

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Bigwigs from the world's elite travel industry, gathered in the chic Riviera resort of Cannes for the annual ILTM trade fair that wrapped up Thursday, had their eyes on social networks as a crucial tool for the future.

"Social networks, such as Facebook with its 600 million users, will have a dramatic impact on how affluent consumers make their (travel) decisions," Klara Glowczewska, editor of Conde Nast Traveler, told a conference at the event.

The American-born socialite and interior designer, Baroness Monica von Neumann, told Luxury Travel Magazine she uses travel websites for their customer reviews and hotel rankings.

"Testimonials really help in the decision-making process," Von Neumann said.

And the trend is set to intensify when the first wave of US baby boomers -- veteran travellers who are web-savvy and engaged in [social networking](#) -- turn 65 next year, predicts Preferred Hotel Group president Lindsey Ueberroth.

Matthew Upchurch, CEO of the elite network of travel agencies, Virtuoso, sees the Internet as opportunity more than threat for its 6,000-plus advisors, spread across 22 countries.

"Social media is one of the best things that ever happened to true professional travel advisors," Upchurch told AFP.

"I have up to 1,200 friends on Facebook, who are either close friends or colleagues and when I learn something really interesting about a destination that I have just come back from, I click 'share' and everybody benefits."

Social media are also starting to have a major impact on exclusive hotels and resorts, which are using them to boost their online presence, attract a new clientele and ensure customer ratings remain high.

Hotels are increasingly using [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) to publicise new activities and deals and keep up a dialogue with customers.

Most luxury hotels today employ social media managers to protect their image and reputation online, Olivier Chavy, a senior luxury and lifestyle executive at the Conrad and Waldorf Astoria hotels and resorts, told AFP.

Online bookings today account for between 55 and 60 percent of all business, Chavy noted, meaning that a single bad review on a popular travel website can destroy a reputation for luxury that has taken years to build up.

Savvy upmarket travellers, however, can pick up tips on less well known websites and invitation-only online communities, such as [asmallworld](#), the [kiwicollection](#) of hotels, [Jetsetter](#), [Rue La La](#), [SniqueAway](#), [Tablet Hotels](#), [Vacationista](#) or [Voyage Prive](#).

Online niche communities like [asmallworld](#) also offer well-off vacationers a chance to discover new discrete upmarket hotels, such as the new luxury [Crans Ambassador](#) hotel and resort that opens this Christmas in the Swiss Alps.

Social networking for travel is not confined to young, wealthy vacationers.

Some 6.5 million of America's 77-million baby boomers are already active social networkers, according to a study carried out for the Preferred Hotel Group.

While the very wealthiest boomers chose to get their travel advice from personal luxury experts, the Preferred Group study said millions of others spend hours researching and booking travel on the Web.

With the first wave of boomers turning 65 next year, a whole new healthy, wealthy and extremely active generation are about to intensify their passion for travel, the study suggests.

Just how this fast-growing trend will impact a market that still heavily relies on travel agencies and tour operators is still unclear, according to experts from over 70 countries at the four-day ILTM event.

The hottest up-and-coming destinations tipped by experts in Cannes included Finland, the Mongolian Steppes and Ethiopia for the adventure-driven; or for luxury-loving sunseekers, the lush rainforests of Cambodia's first ever island resort at Song Saa.

Rory Hunter, who is building the Song Saa resort, told AFP he would use a cocktail of on- and offline media to attract customers ahead of its opening in late 2011.

"Online will be a key part of our strategy but to get the right volume, we will also be using tour operators and [travel](#) agents."

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