

THE BUSINESS OF PLEASURE

From the future of on-the-road catering to connected concierges and hoteliers devising new models for hospitality, our panel of insiders offer their views on the world of travel and where it is heading.



01

Josef Paler Director of the Kaiserhof School, Merano

NOTES: From its base in the Alpine spa town of Merano in German-speaking northern Italy, the Kaiserhof has trained generations of students from around the world in the art of hospitality. Originally opened for service in 1903, it has been based in the neoclassical Kaiserhof Hotel since 1975. Here students are taught the tricks of the catering trade: interning in kitchens and at reception desks in summer and taking classes in cooking, hotel management and event management.

“Our region benefits from being bilingual in German and Italian. Today, however, we focus on teaching in English, Spanish, French and Russian. Not only because many students will work overseas but also so that all of them can communicate with tourists who are arriving from abroad.

Tourism has become increasingly international in recent years because the internet has made everything much more available and transparent.

With today’s ease of travel, people are taking shorter, more frequent holidays and spending less time in each place. People aren’t travelling to Egypt or Turkey so much anymore. They’re going where it’s easier to get to, where it’s cheaper and safer – to the Balearic Islands and to Greece, most of all.

Since I became director of the Kaiserhof School in 2000 our student body has tripled and much has changed in the global economy and beyond. We still concentrate on Tyrolean cuisine, for instance, but



students now learn to cook for special dietary needs as well, something that’s very important today.

Technology is also a key part of what we teach. New media and computer management, reservation systems and online marketing are part of the students’ education from the beginning.

Travellers’ expectations have increased, especially in South Tyrol. Even mid-level businesses have had to improve their infrastructure and the services that they offer. Travellers are looking for luxury, authentic cuisine and someone who speaks their language. Only hotels with at least four stars survive here. That’s because guests want perfect service and perfect food.

Bicycle tourism is also very important in our region; a lot of cyclists visit us. All of our cities have cycle lanes and there’s a path along the Adige River that’s very popular. Bike tourism is thriving in many places, not just in South Tyrol, because it offers a different way of travelling. Life slows down a bit, you can see everything you want to see and at your own pace. You just find your path and you’re off.

Some of my favourite places to cycle are the regions along the Danube, which are incredibly beautiful; then there’s Lake Neusiedl, and the Po River in the Comacchio region where there’s a nature reserve that opens three times a year just for cyclists. It’s full of animals you hardly ever see in Italy.” — LR

RECOMMENDATIONS: Paler’s favourite travel pastimes

- 1 Take a *gracht* tour of Amsterdam, exploring the canals by boat.
- 2 Enjoy the panoramic view of Croatia from the mountaintop fortress of Motovun in Istria.
- 3 Stroll the beautiful streets of Brussels in the evening.



02

Sam Chapman Co-founder of Sherwood, Queenstown

NOTES: New Zealand-based Sam Chapman, who previously owned restaurants and bars in Auckland and Wellington, took over a failed 1980s mock-Tudor motel with two partners and transformed it into the Sherwood Hotel on the shores of Lake Wakatipu.

“I’d always found the hotel travel experience kind of unsatisfying; more often than not you felt like you were in some non-place. Travel is finding out what it is to really be somewhere. The better experience has always been about how close you get to what it might be to live somewhere.

In most hotels the room is your experience but our guests are happy to forsake some of the things that hotels have traditionally focused on. They’re not worried about having thousands of dollars worth of marble in the bathroom or a gazillion-inch television on the wall. The rooms have to feel like a lovely place to be but they’re much more interested in who they might meet in the common areas.

Food is critical. Eating – and eating together – is such a huge part of being human. It’s one of the best platforms for meeting other people and it provides that universal moment that everyone can share in.

Technology already augments reality but creating digital platforms is going to make the experience so much more seamless. As technology develops there’s the opportunity for the app to do the storytelling too; the rise of the digital collective experience.

Hotels have to get out of the situation of being the world’s most perishable commodity and the only way to do that is making it about the experience. The opportunity is to tailor unique experiences for people, to engage with the local community and environment in a way hotels haven’t traditionally managed to do.” — SFG

RECOMMENDATIONS: Chapman’s home-and-away comforts

- 1 An exquisite meal at Fraîche in Amsterdam, followed by a short stroll to Café Nol for a nightcap.
- 2 Organic food at Port Vila’s Mama’s Market in Vanuatu.
- 3 The family farm near Erewhon. Even after 40 years its silent beauty takes my breath away.

03

Gianmario Tondato da Ruos CEO of Autogrill, Milan

NOTES: Autogrill’s highway-spanning service stations are hallmarks of any Italian road trip. Since starting as a biscuit-stand on the Milan-Turin motorway in the 1940s, the firm has expanded and now has outposts in airports, railway stations and roads across 29 countries.

“Big chains are losing ground and people want an experience that is seen to be real. They want quality in food and traceability in the production chain; they want attention to how the story of food is told.

Our challenge is to maintain a local approach but build it to an industrial level. We can learn from small, independent players and bring in the structure to innovate. Our attitude to tradition cannot be like that of a Luddite; we don’t want to destroy progress but it must take into account sustainability and the environment.

Until five years ago, if you’d blindfolded a person then left them in a big airport hub they wouldn’t have known what city they were in. They would simply have been surrounded by big brands. Now small but important changes are happening and local products are emerging.

Design in our sector must be warm and functional. Inside, many kitchens are now open to view; in the past the kitchen was somewhere that had to be hidden and only smells would escape from them. But now the most important seat to have in a restaurant is virtually in the kitchen. This mirrors a new approach to transparency.

Until not long ago we dedicated a small amount of our income to food; it wasn’t perceived as something of value. Now teenagers want to become chefs. This is ultimately positive because it brings along a quality we are happy to pay for. Whenever people talk about what’s great where they live, they mention restaurants; food is extremely influential for quality of life.” — CHR

RECOMMENDATIONS: Adventures of Tondato Da Ruos

- 1 I like to get involved in sports when I travel. The SlickRock cycle trail in Utah offers great views over the Colorado River.
- 2 Japan is the most interesting destination I’ve ever visited – it is an incredible place.



04

Jason Catifeoglou

Partner at Zetter Group, London

NOTES: A partner at the Zetter Group with Mark Sainsbury and Michael Benyan, Catifeoglou is a champion of low-key and characterful hotels in a market dominated by big-name openings.

“It is 18.30 on a Monday evening and the cocktail bar at the Zetter Townhouse in London is buzzing with people. Most of the guests are not even staying in the hotel. Being part of a community, involved in the culture of the neighbourhood here in Clerkenwell, is one way hotels are changing; guests are looking for an experience, not just a bed to sleep in. All travel industries have gone through dramatic changes in the past few years, the hotel industry included. Technology is at the forefront: from altering the distribution of available rooms to reducing the need for services like concierges, hotels are constantly looking at trends, tastes and how to stay one step ahead of expectations.

Properties such as Zetter Townhouse don’t operate with a corporate manual; instead many hotels are giving more autonomy and freedom to the staff, utilising their uniqueness to help guests feel more at home. By stripping back some of the traditional services, hotels are looking to new models on which to operate.

For some this means reducing your staff-to-room ratio, cutting full-service restaurants and concierge positions. For others it means giving guests options like self-service breakfasts, flexible online check-in and utilizing smartphone technology for everything from air-conditioning to room keys.

In emerging cities there are small hoteliers doing amazing things in design, technology and social consciousness, building successful business models around these ideas. The status quo doesn’t hold as much power as it used to and hotels are changing quickly.” — JKD

RECOMMENDATIONS: City-to-beach tips from Catifeoglou

- 1 Upland restaurant, New York City. The menu reflects sophistication but isn’t fussy.
- 2 Workshop Coffee, near Zetter Townhouse.
- 3 As a native Greek I am constantly seeking out the sunshine. Spetses is my preferred destination.

05

Marie-Claude Métrot

Hospitality consultant, Paris

NOTES: Marie-Claude Métrot (better known as Miss Métrot) is an outspoken hospitality consultant whose previous roles include designing the service protocols at Le Cheval Blanc in Courchevel and Randheli as well as nine years at the Ritz Paris.

“There are codes for everything. A bloody mary should be consumed in the morning, the best time for a glass of champagne is 11.00 and a cosmopolitan tastes best at 18.00. A good cognac and cigar can’t be consumed before nightfall. In a hotel we have to constantly invent new experiences for our guests. Guests shouldn’t have to think; we should think for them. The idea is to keep them inside the hotel as long as possible so that they consume more.

French lifestyle and values are unique. We French still have this very special *savoir faire*, this humour and a sense of not taking ourselves too seriously. The French also have a charm and a sense of derision that the entire world envies.

Exporting French know-how abroad is my cup of tea. It has been tough but I’ve fulfilled my aims and I now have clients around the world: I have worked for the Royal Mansour, the Touessrok, the Mansion at MGM Grand in Las Vegas, the Saudi Royal Family, Le Cheval Blanc in Courchevel and Randheli, and at the Ritz Paris.

I am about to host 11 ambassadors from the Louis XIII Hotel, located in Macau. They are coming all the way to Paris to learn about etiquette and they will bring the lessons learned back to Asia. I teach my skills not only to people working in hotels, on private jets, yachting and private residences but also to businessmen. It’s important to know how to sign contracts, to propose a toast or to sit down correctly.” — DHZ

RECOMMENDATIONS: Miss Métrot’s language etiquette

- 1 “OK”, “Can I...” and “We have...”: these are banned words and phrases in good businesses.
- 2 Replace them with more elegant terms: “All right”, “May I...” and “We recommend...”



06

Naoki Ito

CEO and co-founder of Party, Tokyo

NOTES: Naoki Ito is CEO, chief creative officer and co-founder of Party, a branding, media and ad agency based in Tokyo and New York. He recently worked with Nikken Sekkei on Narita International Airport’s new Terminal 3 (pictured, see issue 84) for low-cost carriers. Clients have included Google, Sony and Muji.

“More travellers are seeking a unique experience. I spent a week cycling across Japan’s southwestern island of Kyushu. We rode to the top of a mountain, across the high plains. On a bike you’re exposed to the elements, you have more time to look around. Another time I travelled by canoe with a guide around the protected wetlands of Kushiro Shitsugen National Park in Hokkaido. With a guide you’re going somewhere or doing something you couldn’t do on your own.

That’s why concierges don’t necessarily have to be at hotels; they should be more local. For instance: what if there was a real-time concierge-texting service? You could arrange to have a canoe waiting for you on the bank of a river in a forest. The concierge can help you find something nearby. You send a text and a local – perhaps someone elderly who knows a lot about the area – replies immediately with recommendations.

Being able to access neighbourhood knowledge is one reason I almost never stay in hotels. I prefer vacation rentals. Wherever I go I visit markets. You can learn a lot by asking a farmer or stallholder where a carrot comes from. Some people prefer to check into a hotel and grab dinner downstairs in the restaurant but you miss out on the local experience.

Consumer reviews are important but someone should curate them so you only have to read the best. If this linked to a vacation rental, these properties would stand out in what might be a saturated market.” — KH

RECOMMENDATIONS: Ito on his perfect places to visit

- 1 White Sands National Monument in New Mexico. It’s scorching by day so go very early in the morning.
- 2 Off-piste skiing at Mount Annupuri in Hokkaido.
- 3 Ohara in Kyoto, where the city’s chefs source their produce. I love visiting the farmers’ market, open daily.

07

Carlos Couturier

Co-founder of Grupo Habita, Mexico City

NOTES: Carlos Couturier opened Habita’s first hotel in Mexico’s City’s Polanco neighbourhood in 2000. Today the firm operates 14 different properties in Mexico and another in New York.

“Mexico’s hotel market is growing in two ways. There’s growth in mass tourism and hotels with 500 rooms or more. But there’s also a smaller market that appeals to a taste for more personalised service.

Previously, good design was enough for boutique hotels to be successful. Now there is a lot more attention paid to the quality of the experience. The staff are important; a great hotel with bad staff will be ignored.

The perfect hotel also needs a connection to its surroundings and the neighbourhood culture. Successful projects are social hubs. It goes beyond hospitality to a cultural experience, including restaurants or museums.

A boutique is a destination more than a hotel. Now you find Starbucks and Chipotle in any city. What’s hard to find is authenticity. I think the future of design-minded hotels is to link to a real sense of place. I think people are looking to travel to places such as Austin, Reykjavik or Lima that offer a unique experience.

Every destination has an essence but the trick is to capture that experience. The secret is to find the flavour of the area. Every one of our hotels is a different experience because they are in different places. Once people discover what they like, they become repeat guests.

I’m the antithesis of the sunbathing tourist. When I’m on vacation I want to learn. I want the destination to give me something other than design, whether that might be history or gastronomy or adventures. If I am in Patagonia I’ll go rafting or hiking but I can’t go somewhere to stay in the hotel all day. I look for an experience with substance.” — NPF

RECOMMENDATIONS: Couturier’s cook’s tour

- 1 Nobody should miss *tostadas de atún* at Contramar when visiting Mexico City.
- 2 Hamburger at Au Cheval in Chicago.
- 3 The fish shack La Guerrerense in Ensenada, Baja California, has the tastiest seafood in Latin America.