



“The biggest impact in people’s decision to travel is word-of-mouth followed by the web,” says Mariëtte du Toit-Helmbold, CEO of Destinate, a tourism-marketing agency. “Blogging catches both elements.”

Du Toit-Helmbold cites research from the latest Travel Trends Report at ITB Berlin (the world’s largest tourism convention): 92% of social media users are influenced by travel blogs, with up to 72% willing to change their destination choice based on the opinion of friends and networks on social media.

“Travel bloggers are changing the media landscape,” says Keith Jenkins, CEO of travel blogger network iambassador and a creator of the Velvet Escape travel blog. “They offer immediate and longer term benefits.”

Jenkins explains that bloggers can create buzz before, during, and after a trip, tying together their content with the same hashtag. In addition, because online content is searchable, has a longer shelf life, and incorporates social media interaction, travel blogs can rank high on Google.

“It’s not like publishing a magazine article and hoping people read it,” Du Toit-Helmbold says. “On the web, you have content and stories from a variety of perspectives talking to a variety of audiences over an extended period. As a destination, we can use that content through our channels.”

Du Toit-Helmbold explains that the goal is to have bloggers create content that inspires people to explore destinations in

# RISE OF THE TRAVEL BLOGGER

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*As the power of the web continues to grow, tourism boards and destination marketers are looking for new ways to collaborate with travel bloggers and online influencers. Eugene Yiga finds out how travel bloggers are transforming the tourism industry and the media landscape.*

a way that's different to what a guidebook might say. For example, one of Destinate's current campaigns is the "Stellenblog", where top international bloggers connected with interesting locals and shared stories of Stellenbosch, beyond good food and wine.

Another campaign that uses unique experiences to change perceptions about a destination is "#LoveCapeTown". The goal is to reposition the city as a place one can visit all year round - for history, culture, art, and so on - instead of just in the summer for sun and sea.

"We are not best placed to tell Cape Town's stories," says Velma Corcoran, Executive Marketing Manager for Cape Town Tourism. "As much as we would love to, there's

inauthenticity because people know it's our job. So bloggers being able to tell the story - whatever the story is - in a credible and authentic way carries more weight."

Over time, many destination marketers have learned that the way bloggers like to experience a destination is quite different from a group of journalists on a press trip. More specifically, travel bloggers don't enjoy rigid itineraries that involve too much activity. Giving them extra time and flexibility works well.

As a result, Corcoran's goal is to work with bloggers slower and longer so that they have room to explore and do what they do best. It's about giving them guidelines and structure, connecting them with key locals,

and "letting them loose" to experience the extraordinary and (sometimes) unexpected.

"Understand what the blogger's interests are and match that with unique, alternative experiences," says Du Toit-Helmbold. "We always keep a few surprises up our sleeves because that makes for interesting reading."

However, how does a tourism board or destination marketer pick a blogger? Du Toit-Helmbold suggests finding those that speak to a wide audience and matching that audience with the market the destination or product wants to reach.

"We have to understand the audience," she says. "When we select bloggers, we make sure they have a wide reach, they are multi-

channelled, and that there's high engagement. We've got to make sure the content works for an extended period. We also have to contract and agree on payment – if there is payment applicable – and then manage that process very carefully," she says. "This makes it clear what the expectations are."

While it's good to approach digital marketing campaigns in a professional way, bringing formality to the agreement also brings up a tricky issue. How much is a blogger worth? And how much should they be paid?

"It's a contentious discussion when you discuss how much value an impression brings," says Michael Bean, Managing Director of BrandsEye, an online monitoring and insights tool that tracks online conversations. "But it's quite an important thing for advertisers and marketers to understand."

***"Research shows 92% of social media users are influenced by travel blogs, with up to 72% willing to change their destination choice based on the opinion of friends and networks on social media."***

Not all online influencers will supply content for free because they love what they do. Nor should they have to. Earning an income and doing work you enjoy can go hand in hand. Yet many bloggers are underselling themselves.

"I hate to say this but bloggers are cheap," says Jenkins, pointing out that the top 50 bloggers have a reach of more than 10 million people while a one-page advert in a high profile international travel magazine (with a circulation of around 800 000) is close to \$150 000 (R1,950 000). "The reach they have is undervalued."

Some question whether bloggers can remain objective if they're receiving free trips and/or getting paid. That's why the only way to maintain trust with the audience is if the tourism board or destination marketer doesn't expect specific coverage.

"You cannot tell people what to write," says Corcoran. "Any blogger worth their salt isn't going to write anything because then they put at risk their credibility with their audience, which is ultimately the thing they have to trade on."

Jenkins agrees. "The influence of the destination on what the blogger would write about ends with the creation of the itinerary," he says. "It's up to the blogger to blog about whatever interests them and fits their blog."

Still, whatever content comes out of the process is something tourism boards and destination marketers need to work with. "Yes, the blogger will publish and share that content on social media, but you can't just sit back and see it happen," says Du Toit-Helmbold. "You have to make sure it works for you. It's an investment. You have to make sure that investment sweats." **R**

## TOP 5 LOCAL BLOGS TO TRAVEL BY:

- [www.brightcontinent.co.za](http://www.brightcontinent.co.za)
- [www.travelwrite.co.za](http://www.travelwrite.co.za)
- [www.thetravelmanuel.com](http://www.thetravelmanuel.com)
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