

# THE SUMMER OF SOCIAL TRAVEL

by ROSE DE FREMERY

It's summer, and as sunny days stretch out along the calendar from June through August, many of us are looking forward to a relaxing vacation. Planning a trip? Whether you've already got one scheduled or haven't even given it a moment's thought, there is an expanding assortment of social travel sites ready to help you easily conceive and plan a getaway that's all your own.

By now, we're used to thinking of trip planning in terms of a search. With a possible destination already in mind, you go straight to a site like TripAdvisor or Expedia. After plugging in the name of the place you want to visit, you browse attractions of interest, read a few reviews, and then sift through search results for deals on accommodation and airfare to fit your budget. But how do you find the inspiration for your trip in the first place? How do you locate even more interesting places to explore on the fly once you have arrived at your destination? And how do you share that experience with friends and family? Whereas earlier travel sites were primarily concerned with the logistics of finding you a hotel reservation or a plane ticket, more and more social travel sites are arranging themselves around your preferences and your social networks, letting those aspects drive the process of planning a trip instead.

Gogobot is fast becoming a hub for social travel, having recently logged one million registered users. The startup was founded to ease frustration involved with what CEO Travis Katz saw as a

broken, cumbersome search process that didn't draw upon each person's unique interests. As a result, Gogobot is geared towards speedily surfacing the information you want. As soon as you log in for the first time, Gogobot presents you with an array of destinations, asking you to log previously visited locations so they can be added to a passport as part of your profile.

Personal recommendations are the centerpiece of the site, so you are of course encouraged to chip in with expertise on places you've been. Likewise, if you're contemplating a trip, you can ask questions of the community to get insider tips. The minute you begin planning your trip, a personalized page opens with suggestions on things to do, places to stay, and restaurants you might like. A map appears at the right, and below it are several recommendations from active Gogobot users. You can add attractions and accommodations to your trip and then save the whole package for future reference.

Wisely recognizing that the future of social travel is very much intertwined with mobile access, Gogobot offers an iPhone app whose features are tilted toward the phase of travel in which you actually hit the road and start your trip. If you tap on Explore, the app uses your current location to provide recommendations on nearby activities, hotels, and restaurants. You can snap a photo and create a postcard with Instagram-like filters including cute frames in the style of a postcard you might see on a gift shop rack. If you configure your Foursquare or Facebook account to feed check-ins into Gogobot, those check-ins will begin appearing in your personalized Destination Guides. When I connected my Foursquare account, most of my check-ins from a recent trip to Singapore appeared in my Singapore Destination Guide, creating a useful journal that I can easily refer to the next time I plan a trip there.

Wanderfly presents a completely different vista, replete with aesthetically pleasing eye candy, to inspire the prospective traveler. But as with Gogobot, Wanderfly begins by building your profile in order to generate custom recommendations. Once you've signed



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in using your Facebook or Google ID, the first order of business is to tag your travel interests with categories like “foodie,” “authentic,” “culture,” “family,” and so on. Wanderfly then nudges you to start entering recommendations for places you’ve already traveled. After being given the option to invite Facebook friends, you land at your shiny new home page. Once my account setup was complete, I was treated to a gorgeous photo of a temple in Seoul, Korea. A list of twenty-three other possible destinations awaited my perusal.

Wanderfly takes the liberty of auto-following a few key users at the outset so you can see how recommendations work. As you navigate through the site, a right-hand side bar is continuously updated with recommendations from other users. If you click on a user’s profile you’ll quickly see boards of their favorite destinations as well as a discreet but still eye-catching yellow box inviting you to recommend places you consider “cheap,” “unique,” “historic,” or whatever the person has listed in their profile. Although Wanderfly integrates with Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, it does not offer an app as of yet. I’d love to see it roll out an iPad app like the social magazine Flipboard. Although the photos on Wanderfly would appear cramped on an iPhone, they would dazzle on an iPad. While Gogobot is all business, narrowing the gap between you and the information you seek as quickly as possible, Wanderfly has the more leisurely feel of a coffee table art book designed to stir daydreams about faraway destinations.

AFAR features a rich graphic design like Wanderfly but encourages you to write short blog posts called highlights, recapping exceptional travel experiences you’ve had. That’s fitting seeing as the site is affiliated with a travel magazine. Once you begin following topics of interest, you’ll find more highlights to explore. There is always an option to save a highlight for future reference much in the way you would save an item of interest in Wanderfly. You can pose questions of the AFAR community as well.

Trippy is another option. Visually organized much like Pinterest, it’s geared more toward soliciting recommendations from friends. At the beginning it asks you to set up travel boards to which you can save photos of restaurants or sightseeing spots. Once you have a travel board set up, you can click on a discreet button at the bottom to begin creating a trip. At that point Trippy will want some more information about the type of trip you are taking before setting you up with a personalized trip page. Unlike Gogobot and Wanderfly, which automatically generate recommendations for you, Trippy leans on your social network a bit more. If you don’t already have a robust circle of friends on Trippy, you’re going to have to post out to Facebook, Twitter or elsewhere to get their input. Interestingly, if you choose to share your trip using the iPhone app it will let you know which of your Facebook friends

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have previously lived near the location you plan to visit.

There are several budget-friendly options for travelers who want to stretch their dollar. WeHostels, formerly Inbed.me, helps you find bargains on hostels all over the world. Even better, it tells

you who will also be staying there so you can find travel buddies before you leave. In the latest release, each hostel has a Hostel Lounge where travelers can have an open discussion about the hostel and its environs, a planner where they can coordinate group activities, and a city guide as well. Newcomer CasaHop, in beta at the time this issue went to press, taps into your social networks to facilitate home exchanges with people who already have a connection to you. More ambitious features beyond just house swapping are reportedly in the works. And Airbnb offers travelers a wide selection of privately owned accommodations across the globe, allowing mobile booking via iPhone and Android apps. Long-running site Couchsurfing connects people for homestays and local Meetup-style activity groups. Tripping touts options ranging from “couches to castles,” helping travelers find hidden gems through the tips of locals. You can book home rentals or homestays through the service, but you can also use it to make local friends before you go in order to get the most out of your experience.

Each trip is unique and fortunately, there is very nearly a site or service to suit every kind of traveler. What’s better, social travel sites are not only helping us find transportation and accommodations, they’re connecting us with fellow travelers and locals in order to make the journey more meaningful. Just in the course of writing this article I received six great recommendations on places to visit during my family vacation this summer, including a tempting French bistro and a classic speakeasy bourbon bar. Who knows how many fascinating ideas will come your way as you explore the potential of social travel?

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*Rose de Fremery writes on a variety of topics related to social media including sports, music, politics, travel, and startup culture. You can find her on Twitter @RosedeFremery.*



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