

# Calgary Herald

## They're not here to take your order

Travel advisers say it's not about where you go, it's about who you are

**SEAN MALLEN**

Outside, Las Vegas is a blast furnace. Inside the Monet room of the vast Bellagio hotel, the air conditioning is jacked to near meat-locker levels as hundreds of smiling, impeccably groomed purveyors of luxury travel gather around endless rows of tiny tables.

Kristina Mees of Geneva's Mandarin Oriental Hotel arrives at table 235A, shakes hands with Lucy Vieira and Wendy Jimenez of the Toronto-based TTI Travel, opens her iPad to a series of elegant pictures and at exactly 8 a.m. starts pitching the virtues of her posh hotel. She has four minutes.

Over the next half-hour, table 235A circles the globe, as representatives of properties and tourism boards from Peru, Amsterdam, Sydney, San Francisco, St. Barth and Bhutan deliver elevator pitches in assembly-line fashion.

This is Virtuoso Travel Week, an annual gathering of travel advisers and providers. Organizers call it the Fashion Week of luxury travel.

Central to it all are these speed-dating sessions.

The TTI team will go through 200

of these for each morning session. Organizers estimate convention-goers will stage an unimaginable 320,000 separate face-to-face meetings during the week.

More than 5,200 people from 98 countries are in attendance, including more than 200 Canadians. The process seems mind-numbing but Vieira, attending her 10th travel week, believes it is essential both to her business and to the hotels, cruise companies and national tourism agencies at the event.

"The world is in our hands for a week," she said.

"It brings all of our colleagues into one place for one week, introduces us to new products."

Virtuoso is a Texas-based network that links worldwide travel advisers to luxury travel providers. Just do not call their people "agents."

"We consider agents to be order-takers," Virtuoso spokeswoman Misty Belles said.

It was the order-taker function of traditional agencies that faced an existential threat from the rise of do-it-yourself Internet booking. A 2006 headline in Business Insider

magazine read: "travel agents could go the way of the dodo by 2016."

But advisers, those who counsel the well-heeled on the best places to go, are thriving. Vieira said she is constantly adding new advisers to her team, and many earn commissions that run into six figures.

Vieira said what separates advisers from agents is the selling of something deeper than flights and hotels. For about \$250 she will prepare a "life-experience travel plan," a multi-year outline of recommended places to go and things to see.

"It can't just be, 'Where do you want to go?' It's, 'Who are you?'" she said. "We're about selling the luxury of the experience."

A YouGov survey released at Travel Week suggested while upper-income earners expect to slightly cut their overall discretionary spending this year, they plan to spend 10 per cent more on fine dining and travel.

One of the featured speakers was Canadian Chris Cahill, recently appointed the head of the luxury division of AccorHotels, which has just bought the Fairmont chain.

Cahill believes large areas of the world remain underserved, giving him confidence the segment can keep growing, saying: "There's still lots of runway for us."

*Sean Mallen is a Toronto-based writer and the former Europe bureau chief for Global News. He attended Travel Week as a guest of Virtuoso, which did not see or review this article before publication.*



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