

Google's Travel Plans

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The US travel industry is facing a terrible year, thanks to credit crunched consumers and a weak US dollar. But Google sees an online opportunity in the struggling industry.

The search giant plans to expand its travel offering, which currently seems to be confined to one-off videos and ads from tourism boards. In the future, the site will have marketer-sponsored pages where would-be vacationers can learn tons about a destination and see related user-generated content. Check out this link to a YouTube New Zealand channel for an idea of the kinds of videos destined for such pages.

I journeyed to the NYC Googleplex May 21 to learn more about Google's plans. There, I spoke with Rob Torres, Google's managing director for Travel, over a lunch of beet salad and raspberry-garnished crepes. (I'll save discussion of Google's omnipresent cafeterias for another post).

Torres says that the goal of Google's travel division-aside from tapping into the \$90+ billion global travel ad and sales market-is to give users a destination where they can research travel plans, read user reviews, and see user uploaded videos and photos. Already, about 50% of travelers use some sort of online social media site to research their plans, says Torres. Why not give them a one-stop shop for travel information? 'We are already so highly searched for travel,' says Torres.

Fueling Google's travel plans is consumers move to researching and booking vacations online. In 2007, more travel sales were booked online than in person, says Torres. That means travel marketers, many of whom already spend millions on search ads and the like, will likely shift more of their budgets to the Web.

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