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Deconstructing TripAdvisor

Nancy Keates on how seasoned travelers decode the ratings on the nation's most influential hotel review site.

By NANCY KEATES

'Simply the best!!!!!!' "Very Grand!!!" "Awesome." "Unbelievable."

The last one might be the most accurate.

You'd think a reporter who has covered travel for this newspaper for more than a decade wouldn't be fooled by such superlatives. But on a trip in January my family discovered that some people who write reviews on TripAdvisor.com are thrilled to pay \$280 to spend the night next to an eight-lane highway. Ranked on the Web site as the No. 1 property in Carlsbad, Calif. -- ahead of the Four Seasons Aviara and the famous La Costa spa -- the West Inn & Suites wasn't only far from the center of the quaint oceanside town, it was also next to a working train track with a view of a large power plant.

A Second Opinion



Many experienced travelers compare TripAdvisor reviews against those on major travel booking sites. Here are some other sites with user-generated hotel reviews.

For many, TripAdvisor has become a first stop for travel planning. Thanks in part to its prominence in Google searches, some 24 million visitors a month check out what other users have to say about where to stay, eat and play around the world. (In contrast, publisher Frommer's sells 2.5 million guidebooks a year.) With more than 250,000 hotels, its sheer breadth of properties makes it more useful than other hotel Web sites. Its wide range of contributors -- there

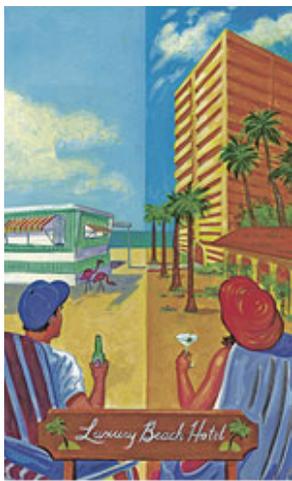
are nearly 10 million reviews and opinions -- make it more democratic. At a conference in November, the chief executive of guidebook publisher Lonely Planet said the Web site's influence is so great that the company considered eliminating hotel reviews altogether. TripAdvisor is also gobbling up a number of other sites that do things like search for low fares and list seating charts on airplanes.

But relying on the wisdom of crowds can be dangerous. When Chirag Chotalia, a private-equity investor from New York, booked a long weekend at the Ritz-Carlton South Beach in Miami this March, he was swayed by two reviews. One raved about the "excellent" staff; the other called the service "stellar." Instead, the 25-year-old says he found surly, unprofessional concierges, a long wait at check in and an under-staffed pool. A spokeswoman says that the "overwhelming majority" of guests are very happy with their stays.

Luxurious in Liverpool

To avoid such pitfalls, it is necessary to deconstruct every review -- and its author. After all, a hotel recommended by a once-a-year vacationer could be a disaster for a business traveler. What someone from Liverpool, England, finds luxurious might not appeal to a picky Manhattanite. Roosters crowing at dawn may not seem worth mentioning to some reviewers, while others might think harping on things like an "intermittent electrical buzzing in the air unit" (see Amalfi Hotel, Chicago) is a tad excessive.

In an attempt to decode TripAdvisor, I interviewed heavy users and spoke to online-travel experts. The most common, and most obvious, place to start when determining reliability is to weed out reviews that are way off the mean: those that have one star when the rest are positive, or five stars when the others are mixed. That indicates either an unusual incident or a writer with some interest in the hotel, like a rival property or the general manager's friend. Other hints a review might be fake: The writer mentions a nearby property as superior, has only written about that one hotel and has only visited the site once -- on the day of the review. (You can check for other hotels a writer has evaluated by clicking on the reviewer's name.)



David Brinley

Next, study the reviewer as closely as the review. In February, Juan Padro, a headhunter from North Grafton, Mass., was weighing a trip to Ladera in Soufriere, St. Lucia -- a resort that elicited mixed opinions on TripAdvisor. Some guests raved about the privacy, peace and beauty, while others complained it was too much like a campground to justify the average \$990-a-night rate.

Mr. Padro didn't make up his mind until he read a review entitled "What a rip off!" It said, "one of the things that **MUST BE MENTIONED** is the fact that the moment the sun starts going down, the beautiful chorrus [sic] of frogs starts their singing until the sun rises again. It was really hard to fall asleep with all that noise." The reviewer complained that the music and the atmosphere in the bar was "VEEEEEERY RELAXED" -- and left for South Beach, Miami, two days into a 10-day stay. "The guy was so clearly a meathead," says Mr.

Padro, who decided (correctly, it turned out) that any resort that would scare off someone like that would be perfect for him.

Excessive effusiveness is a red flag for Wayne Rutman, a private investor from Wilmington, Del., who is on the road every month and frequently uses TripAdvisor to plan his trips. Phrases like "dream vacation of a lifetime" and "best place I ever stayed" signal a lack of experience. People who find it necessary to say they're world travelers in the first line are also suspicious, like someone who feels the need to impress others at a cocktail party, he says.

Some Good Finds

Often the reviews are dead-on. Fusion Suites, the bed and breakfast ranked as the No. 1 property in Amsterdam, is an amazing find, with enormous rooms located on a tree-lined street near the Van Gogh museum. I had never heard of Eastgate Tower near the United Nations in New York when I took a chance (again) on Trip-Advisor and booked it for a recent family vacation. The \$250-a-night suite had two large bedrooms with two beds in each, two bathrooms, a living room and a full kitchen; it was clean and well-staffed; there was even a bellman who carried bags.

Where a reviewer lives -- a detail listed right next to the user name -- can be a telling clue. Among heavy users in the U.S., there are ongoing discussions about whether non-Americans can be trusted. "Europeans have different standards," says Loren Medina, a school social worker in

Paramus, N.J., who travels with her husband and children. "The rooms are smaller, they're in older buildings with older plumbing. They find more things acceptable."

Mr. Chotalia, the New York investor who was disappointed with his stay at the Ritz-Carlton South Beach, wonders if such geographic issues played a role. The upbeat reviewers "sounded educated and worldly so I thought I could respect their opinions," he says. But when he looked again, he noticed the first was from Manchester, England, and the second from Canada. ("There are cultural differences between Canadians and Americans," says a spokesman for the Canadian embassy in Washington.)

The reviewer's hometown can count even within the U.S. Bob McDevitt (whose screen name is Cap10Bob), doesn't believe anything written by a New Yorker. The 58-year-old salesman from Boston says "people from there wouldn't like anything anyway." Here's an excerpt from Mr. McDevitt's TripAdvisor write-up of the Westin Rio Mar in Puerto Rico (which is now the Rio Mar Beach Resort & Spa, a Wyndham Grand Resort): "A group of five middle age golfers/fishermen/general tourists, stayed for 4 days in mid-March. We found the hotel to be excellent."



One TripAdvisor reviewer complained about noisy frogs at the Ladera in St. Lucia (top). The site ranks West Inn & Suites (above left) No. 1 in Carlsbad, Calif., and Eastgate Tower (above right) No. 49 in New York City.

New York banker Aylin Ural, 35, wrote a review of the same hotel a week later. "Every morning starting at 6 a.m. we awoke to people walking above us, doors slamming constantly, toilets flushing incessantly, and people from the parking lot shouting. This is EVERY morning. We are from Manhattan so we are used to noise." She says reviews by Manhattanites are often the only ones she'll believe. "We have certain standards," she says. Many accolades by her brethren ("beautiful beaches" and "a true paradise") steered her to spend her honeymoon at Marriott Frenchman's Reef in St. Thomas despite numerous TripAdvisor dissenters who hailed from other locales. She loved it.

The reviewer's user name matters to Michelle Hill, who lives in Lake Placid, N.Y., and travels with her husband and kids several times a year. A recent report by someone called "crzy4cncun" was believable, she decided, because it meant that person had a lot of experience in

Cancun. In the review, crzy4cncun mentioned that she had a teenager: That was an added bonus for Ms. Hill, since finding somewhere kids that age can be happy is difficult, she says.

Ms. Hill always clicks on a user name to check what other properties that person has written about. She considers herself "very particular" -- a Westin Hotels kind of person as opposed to a Best Western gal. Review writers who stay in chains she would avoid wouldn't understand what she's looking for, she says. The jackpot: Finding someone who has reviewed a property where she's also stayed so she knows if they're in sync.

In general, TripAdvisor is more helpful for smaller, more obscure properties that aren't fully covered by other sources. It can be time-consuming and less effective for well-known hotels because they have so many reviews that are often so widely disparate, making it hard to get a sense of the property. Orlando, Fla.-based consultant Mark Feinberg discovered that when he was planning a trip for this month to New York to celebrate his daughter's 12th birthday. Finding himself stuck on the Web site for hours trying to decide between the Four Seasons and the Ritz-Carlton, he finally went with his cousin's advice and chose the Four Seasons because he was so confused by what he read on TripAdvisor.

The Four Seasons reviews ranged from "Wow, what a place" to "Nightmare after nightmare." According to the latter: "There was still feces flecking the toilet when we checked in and a hair on the nice, white sheets...The front-desk staff were gruff and unhelpful -- failing to even answer basic questions about museums and theatre tickets." Comments on the Ritz-Carlton Central Park also ran the gamut, from "Missed it by very much" to "Perfect Stay."

The Four Seasons hotel's director of marketing, Brian Honan, says the chain takes feedback "really seriously," and that the hotel has no record of any such complaints over the dates the guest stayed at the hotel. A Ritz-Carlton spokeswoman says it views comments from guests as a chance to "continue to improve."

Up-to-Date Details

When certain key words ("hurricane" or "construction") pop up, TripAdvisor is at its best. It is one of the few places to find indications that a recent event has affected the hotel's quality. Mr. Feinberg learned that lesson the hard way when he stayed at the Renaissance Resort at the World Golf Village in Saint Augustine, Fla., a few months after a hurricane. Reviews he read in golfing magazines had raved about the place, but he smelled mildew and mold everywhere. When he looked on TripAdvisor afterwards, he saw people had mentioned the problem.

Renaissance General Manager Mark Schwantner says the resort did experience a problem after the hurricane knocked out power for a few days. Since then the resort has spent over \$1 million adding new dehumidification units and resealing the building; it now monitors interior humidity levels to make sure they don't exceed 55%.

When TripAdvisor started in 2000, the site was a search engine that hooked into travel information already on the Web -- from newspapers, magazines, online guidebooks, chat rooms, message boards and personal home pages. As traffic grew, people started adding their own reviews, which soon became the most-read pages on the site.

"When we first thought of pushing the user reviews, we were actually a little nervous about whether the site would just turn into a gripe site," says TripAdvisor co-founder and chief executive officer Stephen Kaufer. Instead, most of the reviews were overwhelmingly positive. That gave the company the idea to earn money by "contextual-commerce links," allowing consumers to make a reservation through links to booking sites.

Focusing on Transactions

Hotel-booking sites started to see the value in that. In 2004, IAC/InterActiveCorp bought TripAdvisor for an estimated \$430 million and wrapped it into its Expedia group. (It later spun off the Expedia group, including TripAdvisor, into a separate company.) Revenue from the 173-person company comes from travel-related advertising and the fees TripAdvisor gets from online-booking sites when users click to make a reservation. It often isn't enough just to have a lot of traffic on a Web site, says Scott Kessler, an equity analyst with Standard & Poor's. Since TripAdvisor has such high-quality traffic (people who use it have a great interest in making a purchase since they are considering a trip) it makes financial sense to take that traffic and try to turn it into revenue, says Mr. Kessler.

As a result, TripAdvisor has shifted from solely a forum-like site to more of a transaction-based model. In August 2006, the company changed its format so that instead of going directly to hotel reviews, the home page's default became similar to what you'd find on airline-booking Web sites. Consumers enter dates of travel and destination and are presented with a list of properties they can book online. That's a different list from the top hotels as ranked by TripAdvisor users; to get to that page, users have to type the name of the city followed by the word "hotels" in the main search bar.

Sometimes the drive to monetize can be at odds with the drive to be consumer friendly. TripAdvisor doesn't give a hotel's Web address unless that hotel pays it to do so, encouraging visitors to use online-booking sites (including Expedia, Orbitz, Hotels.com and others) and discouraging them from leaving the Trip-Advisor site. "If all we did was look out for consumers, we'd provide a link that would take you to a hotel's Web site," says Mr. Kaufer. "It does absolutely conflict with our interest in making money." He says TripAdvisor looks out for consumers in many other ways and that there are paid links to hotel sites.

The company's revenue is still small, at \$105 million in 2006, compared with sites like Expedia and Travelocity. However, with profit margins estimated above 50% and a growth rate thought to be over 50% a year, the site offers potential at a time when hotels and airlines are trying to take back online bookings and get consumers to go directly to their sites, says Aaron Kessler, an analyst at Piper Jaffray Companies.

As the Web site has evolved, so have the users. It is possible to see how other reviewers rate a review, a feature called "Helpful Votes." People can also pick a few hotels off a destination's top rankings and then go into the TripAdvisor forums, where locals tend to respond. That's where the site's addicts often congregate as well. Over 530,000 members have posted to the forums since the site started them three years ago, the company says. Of those, 769 have posted more than a thousand times. The most active member posted 20,593 times.

Taking the time to open photos posted by reviewers helps users get a sense of the writer. One noteworthy example: a picture of a pair of dirty socks used to illustrate a lapse in housekeeping. Frequent TripAdvisor visitors also use the subrankings (including "Romance," "Families" and "Singles") and the information listed to the right of reviews that give the writer's age, purpose of their trip and reasons for selecting the hotel. A new feature on the site lets users email a reviewer directly to get more information.

Though the West Inn is still rated the top hotel in Carlsbad, since my family's stay there reviewers have remarked about the hotel's downsides, including its location. Why didn't that happen earlier? Kim Akers, the hotel's general manager, says people did mention its proximity to the highway (and that I didn't go far back enough into the reviews) but that in most cases they all said it didn't diminish the experience because the hotel has triple-paned windows, music piped in outside by

the pool and a shuttle to take guests to downtown Carlsbad.

Then again, there are some things people just won't tell you. Tara Yelman, a divorce attorney from San Diego, found the Four Seasons Hualalai on the Big Island, Hawaii, through TripAdvisor and asked for a room as quiet as possible after reading some complaints about thin walls. The room she stayed in -- an oceanfront with the best full-ocean view on the property, separated from most of the other rooms at the hotel -- is now so precious to her she won't ever give away the room number. Especially not on TripAdvisor.

A Second Opinion

Another tip: Many experienced travelers compare TripAdvisor reviews against those on major travel booking sites. But there are some smaller options out there. Here are some other sites with user-generated hotel reviews.

| SITE | # OF REVIEWS | COMMENT |
|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Fodors.com | 125,000 | The user-generated reviews are generally more helpful than the Fodor's reviews, which tend to include more information than opinion and rarely anything too negative. Reviews are limited to the restaurants and hotels already in the database -- places a spokeswoman says the company identifies as quality locations. Information about the commenters is limited to their home towns. |
| Gusto.com | 15,000 | This independent start-up based in Springfield, Mo., has an audience that's 70% female with an average age of 39 years. It covers hotels around the world but, as founder Jeff Wasson says, it is "North America-centric." Site has links to writer's profiles and hotel Web sites. |
| HotelShark.com | 1,300 | Each property on this site, run by an independent Palo Alto, Calif., company, includes a composite summary of reviews in a Zagat-like approach -- but often there's only one review to summarize. That's because the company screens reviews and only accepts ones it finds "sincere," says creator Ken Marshall. Reviews that are no longer applicable are removed. |
| IgoUgo.com | 45,000 | Launched in 2000 and owned by Travelocity, IgoUgo's coverage is vast, though the reviews tend to be short and over a year old. ("We're streamlining that process to make it easier to submit," says Peter Campion, general manager.) The site provides a lot of background information on the person writing the review, including their dream destinations and favorite movies and bands. |
| Zoomandgo.com | 35,000 | Travelers from all over the world submit reviews and video clips of hotels and vacations, though 70% of users come from the U.S. The most popular destinations are the Caribbean and major U.S. cities, but founder Jonathan Haldane says there are a surprising number of video clips from Hong Kong. |

Write to Nancy Keates at nancy.keates@wsj.com

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