

**INSIGHT**

Tour Operators Insight

# Finding niche products through partners

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The savvier travelers get, the more they want. They want more authenticity, they want more uniqueness, they want more insider knowledge and they want more local interactions when they're on the road now. And that holds true as much for group tour-goers and vacation package buyers as it does for independent travelers.

Thus, the pressure is on for tour operators and wholesalers to keep up, to find true hidden gems and off-the-beaten path experiences. It's no longer enough to book a group into a typical touristic restaurant to showcase regional cuisine. Oh no. Travelers want to experience the local *taverna* or go even deeper and have a meal in someone's home. Perhaps they want to give back while on tour and engage with some thriving social enterprise projects. And they'd love to stay at some truly unique boutique properties along the way, too.

The more specialized the demands, the more operators are having to dig to find those experiences. While tour operators' product development teams are often well-oiled machines that work tirelessly to scout new venues and vet the old ones, it seems it is almost impossible to keep up with the exacting needs of today's travelers.

Thus, product development today has taken on new meaning. Now it's just as much about tour operators identifying partner companies that have tapped into a unique experience or offering as it is about them finding those offerings on their own. For instance, this year **The Travel Corporation partnered with VizEat**, a culinary experience app with 22,000 local hosts in 110 countries that allows users to book meals at local hosts' homes. Through the new partnership, guests traveling with The Travel Corporation brands can book VizEat meals.

That partnership followed one **forged last year between The Travel Corporation and Me to We**, a tour operator specializing in volunteer travel, which is now available as an extension option for several of The Travel Corporation's brands.

Similarly, Classic Vacations last year **launched Classic Connections**, a program that brings in partner companies to offer travel and tours to Classic customers in regions of the world or in niches where the wholesaler hasn't traditionally offered product. Classic Connections kicked off with a partnership with Me to We as well, and has expanded to include partnerships with Back-Roads Touring, CroisiEurope river cruises and National Parks Revealed, which offers customized tours of national parks.

Whether these partnerships are transparent or are taking place behind the scenes, it is likely we will continue to see more and more of them in the packaged travel space. Because if tours and packages are going to remain competitive, chances are they're going to have to do so with the help of well-picked partners that are offering some truly unique and innovative travel experiences that many tour operators would be hard-pressed to find or be able to develop on their own