

This page is protected by Copyright laws. Do Not Copy.

Web start-up merges online, offline features in 'adventure GDS'

Dan Luzadder

Global travel distribution is marching to the ever-changing rhythms of a new drummer these days -- the Internet -- but the tune being played in some ways harks back to familiar melodies.

AdventureLink, an Internet start-up that expects to launch early next year with what it calls an online GDS, will not offer what airlines' CRSs once offered to agents: dumb terminals hard-wired to giant mainframes.

AdventureLink has something more commonplace in mind: The telephone.

But AdventureLink's co-founders, Kelly Tompkins and Michael Culhane, are quick to note that in this case the telephone is an Internet phone, a worldwide, instant voice link generated by a mouse click.

"A key to this system is the ability to leverage voice-over Internet protocol [VoIP] and put one of our telephones actually on the agent's desk," Tompkins said. "They get a phone from us plus an Internet connection, so that they can take booking leads through our Web site."

Adventure travel is not something that has made its way into the traditional GDS inventories, the two entrepreneurs said.

And when it comes to booking online, there are uncertainties for online travel shoppers when they try to book the kind of adventure experience they want. Not least of these uncertainties is concern about the safety of sending money via the Web to an operator half a world away.

That makes the development of a database for adventure travel inventory, coupled with a network of experienced adventure travel agents, a unique offering in this segment of the industry, the owners say.

As for finding participating agents, the company intends to screen interested agents, examine their track record in handling adventure travel, and conduct one-on-one interviews with them before bringing them into the network.

Once the agents are aboard, "Our Web site visitor can click to talk to someone in real time," Culhane said. "Our system then searches through who is available and connects the call. The system dials the customer's number and connects the two."

From there, agents in the network can coordinate the trips with bookings they access through traditional GDS providers for air, hotel and ground transportation reservations. AdventureLink handles the payment processes from buyer to supplier.

VoIP isn't new, and the idea of using the Internet for cheap phone services has been around for some time.



Letter to the Editor
Click the image above
to send an e-mail to TW.
Your letter could run in
a future issue!

Creating a VoIP-phone network among specialized knowledge groups, however, is a relatively new phenomena.

Tompkins said AdventureLink was the first to put together a network of experienced travel agents and to deploy an Internet inventory and VoIP communications system that enables those agents to field calls like a call center.

"The reason we call AdventureLink a GDS marketplace, and the difference from, say, Sabre and other traditional GDSs, is that this gives the agent a more complete selection," Culhane said. "They have their airline, cruise, hotels in the traditional system. We are creating the world's largest database of adventure travel and will have thousands of trips in that database."

From the AdventureLink site, consumers will be directed to agents who then use the site to match the consumer's needs with inventory in the system. Culhane said the agents would be able to use search criteria such as "African safari, Southern Africa, time of year, price points, lodging preference," as search parameters, then offer customers choice and comparison shopping.

"Just looking on the Internet, an adventure traveler might see two trips that look exactly the same, but one is \$2,000 more than the other," Tompkins said. "With this they can turn to someone who can explain why."

AdventureLink, Tompkins said, is the realization of a business plan that he first conceived in the mid-1990s, a time when it was too far ahead of then-available technology. Technology has now caught up, said Tompkins, a former member of the Canadian national cycling team whose own sports travel led to his interest in the industry.

"I have done four or five online travel companies," Tompkins said, "and adventure travel was the very first segment I looked at back in 1994-95, when the Web was just coming available. I realized that it was just too complicated a project at that time, and so I put it on the back burner -- until now."

It is the VoIP connectivity, which enables customers and knowledgeable agents to speak directly and instantly, that makes the "new GDS" work, the owners said.

With adventure travel, Culhane said, consumers need an agent "with passion to talk about a trip, who knows it inside-out."

"It is understandable that you would expect intermediation in booking a product like this," Culhane said. "That is where AdventureLink is situated. That is our model."

"What you are seeing is that we are going to plug that particular hole, to allow intermediation with smart, passionate travel agents who are not just order-takers but who can help people find and book the trip of their dreams."

In screening agents, the company will seek to determine how long the agent has been in business and what expertise they have in specific destinations.

AdventureLink will also want to know how many times agents have visited particular destinations, their sales volume and what tour operators they've used, "to get a feel for what

types of travel they sell."

Culhane said he expects to interview every applicant.

In addition to certified adventure travel agents, the company will work with affiliate agents who can also direct consumers to appropriate inventory to meet their needs or wishes through the Web site's inventory database, Culhane said.

Beyond that, AdventureLink will act as payment agent on bookings, collecting from customers and distributing payments to suppliers, with a 10% commission going to agents who book through AdventureLink.

The service is in beta testing right now; no firm launch date has been set.

The traditional GDSs would be accessed independently by participating agents, but the day might come when there is more direct Internet linkage with GDS inventories.

Tompkins said, "Sabre has an XML platform they are working on, and we anticipate that in the future we will be able to connect through the Web site."

To contact reporter Dan Luzadder, send e-mail to dluzadder@travelweekly.com.

Copyright © 2008 by Northstar Travel Media LLC. All Rights Reserved.
100 Lighting Way, Secaucus, N.J. 07094-3626 U.S.A. Telephone (201) 902-2000

TRAVEL WEEKLY