

Laura Mandala

Women in Travel and Tourism International

In light of International Women's Day and Women's History Month, Travel Weekly's Michelle Baran spoke with Laura Mandala, the founder of Women in Travel and Tourism International, about the ways in which the industry can and should be improving the travel experience for women and what the takeaways of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements should be for travel companies.

IN THE HOT SEAT

Q: How can the travel industry make it easier, safer and more welcoming for women to travel?

A: What we really need is large-scale social change at the highest levels. If you look at Canada for example, the Canadian government has a very detailed travel advice section on women's safety. It's extremely detailed. You compare that to the U.S. State Department, it's very modest in terms of advising women when they travel. I have found some other sites. There's a group called Sexual Assault Support and Help for Americans Abroad, they're funded by Pathways to Safety, an organization devoted to women's safety while traveling. But it took me some hunting to find that.

Q: What are the ways that women in the travel industry, including at higher-level positions in travel companies, can help improve

the travel experience for female travelers?

A: A lot more needs to be done in terms of making resources to help keep women safe available to the average woman traveler. Right now, you have to do an awful lot of searching to find it. When you talk about what can companies do and what can women who work for those companies do? Number one, those companies need to make sure that their own internal policies are conducive to women thriving and excelling, and that their own gender policies are intact. And number two, they need to think about what they're doing to ensure their visitors, their customers, their guests have access to information to keep themselves safe. I mean, I Googled LGBTQ travel and you've got the Human Rights Campaign, they're all about monitoring safe places for gays and lesbians to travel. Expedia has a statement on gay friendliness — [it] puts some information out there on gay-friendly destinations. So, we're not afraid to talk about how to make the LGBTQ population feel safe, but when we talk about issues related to the safety of women when they travel it

hasn't really gotten to the point where everyone is comfortable doing it.

Q: What are suppliers doing to better support their female staff and clients?

A: Companies need to make clear what their policies are about guests harassing other guests. Carnival has a great statement on their website. It says they will not tolerate behavior affecting the comfort, enjoyment, health, safety or well-being of other guests or crew. ... And maybe other travel companies have that policy, but I think those policies should be more visible. Put this on a napkin or placard along with safety information in the seat pocket in airplanes, for instance. Send a message. I've had instances on planes and trains where men I've sat next to would fondle their private parts. I'd love an airline or transfer company to say, "You can't fondle your genitals. We consider that inappropriate behavior." Can you imag-

'Companies need to make sure that their own internal policies are conducive to women thriving and excelling.'



ine ringing the bell for the steward and saying, "This guy is fondling himself? He's not doing it now that you're here, but he was." What are you supposed to do about that? Were they trying to be provocative? It's just bizarre. It's awkward. And imagine if that happens to a young person, sitting next to someone like that. I've been asked by a mother to switch seats with her 17-year-old daughter who was sitting between two men, one of whom appeared to have spent a good deal of time at the bar prior to the flight. I completely understood where she was coming from.

Q: What do you think the takeaway from the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements should be for the travel industry?

A: Number one is eliminating their own bias within their organizations and cleaning house and making sure their policies and procedures are up to Equal Employment Opportunity Commission standards. Number two, taking a look at their leadership structure. All of this happens because we don't have diversity in senior leadership. There's data to support that more women in senior leadership roles means more opportunity for women and more success at the bottom line for the organization. Number three, that they start looking at what they can do to make sure their guests, the people they're serving in the industry, have access to resources they need to be safe, both men and women. Let's come together as a community to get that information out there.

TRAVEL CONFIDENTIAL

Virgin Group founder Richard Branson is staging the **Necker Cup**, which is being billed as "the most fun and exclusive pro-am tennis event in the world," on his private island in the **British Virgin Islands** in November.

Last year, top players such as **Grigor Dimitrov**, **Tommy Haas** and **Justine Henin** participated. But the 74-acre island can only accommodate 34 guests. Branson could turn to his **Virgin Voyages** ship to serve as a floating hotel but, alas, it won't be finished for another two years. So Branson has arranged a charter with **SeaDream Yacht Club** instead.

Kelly Holton, communication and education team lead of the **Travelers' Health Branch** of the **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**, is the first to admit that prevention recommendations for the Zika virus are compli-



cated. Though it's fallen out of the news, Zika is still being actively transmitted in more than 100 countries. Holton addressed the topic at last week's **ASTA Premium Business Summit**.

Recommendations differ for different kinds of travelers. Pregnant women shouldn't travel to countries where Zika is present. If their partners travel there, they should use protection when having sex for a certain number of months after their return.

Holton said it's been one of the most challenging health communication topics she's worked on. And she has a theory why: "Part of that is because you're talking about mosquito bites and condoms in the same breath. But there we are."

Contrary to an ad from this month's Oscars broadcast, TC is clarifying that you cannot stay at the Overlook Hotel of "The Shining" fame. The cheeky ad for the "newly renovated" hotel, with the tagline "Come stay with us forever ... and ever," is actually for the **Academy Museum of Motion Pictures**, which opens in **Los Angeles** next year.

FRIENDS & COLLEAGUES



Tourism Cares has named **Paula Vlamings** CEO. She replaces **Mike Rea**, who had led the organization since 2013.

Vlamings is the former executive director of the Planeterra Foundation, G Adventures' philanthropic organization. She also was a senior sustainability leader for the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy's Institute at the Golden Gate.

Rea will remain senior program adviser with the philanthropic organization, with a focus on building West Coast partnerships and strategy.

Airbnb has hired former and longtime Amazon.com executive **Greg Greeley** to be the first president of its Homes division.

Greeley, who joined Amazon in 1999 after stints with Sun Microsystems and United Airlines, helped launch Amazon Prime in 2005 and became division vice president in 2013.

Airbnb said last year that it would split the company into four divisions: Homes, Trips, Lux and China.

Chris Chiames was named to the newly created role of vice president and chief communications officer at Carnival Cruise Line.

Most recently, Chiames served as senior vice president of corporate communications at Sabre Corp. Prior to that, he was vice president of corporate affairs at Orbitz Worldwide.



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Writer, producer and director Ava DuVernay, right, kicking off W Hotels' 2018 What She Said series on Feb. 23 at the W Hollywood.

PHOTO BY CHRIS SWOSZOWSKI, COURTESY OF W HOTELS WORLDWIDE

EMPOWER

Continued from Page 1

The U.S. national parks are also being promoted, based on respondents' desire for adventure when they travel. The other itineraries highlighted in the campaign are in Ireland, Italy and Costa Rica.

More than half of the respondents (51%) identify as feminists. The vast majority of respondents would prefer to travel with others, with 76% reporting that they would rather travel with their family or a significant other. Just 10% report they prefer to travel solo.

Other travel companies have also embraced this month's women's empowerment momentum. Intrepid Travel last week launched a line of women-only expeditions in Morocco, Iran and Jordan, with the goal of "encouraging female empowerment and showcasing the traditions and routines of local women in each destination," according to the company.

G Adventures, in partnership with its philanthropic arm, the Planeterra Foundation, is shining a spotlight on how travel can empower female communities around the world through four new women-led social enterprise projects:

- The Sthree Craft Shop and Cafe in Kandy, Sri Lanka, which is run by the Women's Development Center to empower women and at-risk youths.
- Penduka, a restaurant and workshop in Windhoek, Namibia, that employs 30 disadvantaged women.
- Cop(M)adam, a social enterprise in Ayvalik, Turkey, that provides environmentally impactful opportunities for women by recycling and reusing waste materials to create fashionable accessories.

• The Nyamirambo Community Tour in Kigali, Rwanda, which provides education and training for women and girls from diverse backgrounds.

Adrienne Lee, director of development at Planeterra and a G Adventures adviser, said, "On International Women's Day, we celebrate the progress we have made and continue to commit to the advancement of women in tourism. These newest social enterprises are cornerstone examples of how female-focused travel can strengthen communities."

W Hotels has relaunched a series it calls What She Said that originally kicked off in 2016. This year, the initiative will focus on providing a platform for gender equality by hosting provocative speakers who will address that and other topics. Its discussions include people such as writer, producer and director Ava DuVernay, known for her work on the film "Selma," who launched the 2018 series Feb. 23 at the W Hollywood.

In a release about the series, W Hotels stated: "It's time for women to speak up as never before. And perhaps most importantly, it's time for people to listen to What She Said."

What She Said will continue with one event each month at W hotels around the globe, covering a range of topics with industry experts in the fields of art, design, architecture, fashion and fitness.

"We still have a lot of work to do," DuVernay said. "We have a long way to go before we reach a state of equality, and platforms like What She Said are helping to do the work."

Indeed, Michelle "Mick" Lee, founder and president of Women in Travel, an



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— Carolyn Pearson, Maiden Voyage

organization that provides resources and tools to help women in the travel industry achieve success, said that she, too, sees a combination of progress and more work that needs to be done.

"I'm seeing a greater level of awareness," Lee said. "What I would like to see more of are specific objectives and plans about what organizations are going to do to change [things]. I would like to see more definitive action. ... We know that companies are engaged in this and talk the talk, and we see they are really supportive. Now follow up on that."

Lee strongly advocates for getting more women into higher-level positions at

travel companies, positions from which they can help create improved travel experiences for their clients, including female travelers.

"We need to get women up, and we need to get them into more senior roles, and we need to get them onboard to impact the travel industry overall," Lee said. "With a diversity of thought leadership at senior levels, there will be a greater level of awareness about how products and decisions and hotel builds and cabin configurations are created in the mind of both genders."

Travel still unsafe for many women

Whether travel is essential to women's careers or to the pursuit of their personal passions, it remains an unpleasant and in some cases dangerous experience for many women.

A survey of 400 U.S. women released last month by the Eric Mower + Associates marketing and communications agency revealed that two in five women reported having experienced sexual harassment while traveling solo. Another 80% reported having considered personal safety issues related to harassment or assault when planning a trip, and 65% said they research the relative safety of their destination before they go.

Fully 33% of respondents said that recent headlines about sexual harassment and assault made them feel less comfortable about traveling alone.

Concerns about safety and the need for a dedicated social network is what led

Carolyn Pearson, CEO of Maiden Voyage, to launch her company 10 years ago, with the aim of making women feel safer and less alone when traveling.

"Our raison d'être is to empower and liberate women to travel as much as they possibly can," Pearson said. "We love travel, we're right behind it. What we want [women] to understand are the risks; we want them to mitigate those risks, and we want them to have a plan B and a plan C should those risks materialize."

For example, Maiden Voyage provides a list of hotels it has vetted and found to be female friendly, with proper security measures in place, such as adequate door locks and policies that protect clients' privacy.

Laura Mandala, who founded Women in Travel and Tourism International in 2011, said one of the biggest challenges to improving travel conditions for women is that when suppliers do address safety and security issues, it can be seen as highlighting the fact that security is a problem.

"I worked for a major hotel brand that would not talk about the issue of women's safety because they felt like by talking about safety, it was automatically sending a message that maybe they're not safe," Mandala recalled. "I think that's the challenge that a lot of travel brands and destinations will struggle with. Put safety too far out there, it then raises the specter in people's minds of, 'Well, what do I need to be worried about?'"

But, she added, "A lot more needs to be done in terms of making resources available to help keep women safe."