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Travel Procurement

A man in a dark suit and blue shirt, wearing a light blue surgical face mask, stands in the center of the frame. He is positioned in front of a blurred background of a building with large windows and a paved area. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

August 2020

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SECURING SANCTUARY

California's Bill Amaral leans on procurement principles to help find, book and pay for hotel rooms for Covid-19 first responders. [page 16](#)



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EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

ELIZABETH WEST

ewest@thebtngroup.com
732.494.1955

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, THE BEAT

JAY BOEHMER

jboehmer@thebtngroup.com
646.380.6249

MANAGING EDITOR

CHRIS DAVIS

cdavis@thebtngroup.com
646.380.6248

SENIOR EDITOR

MICHAEL B. BAKER

mbaker@thebtngroup.com
646.380.6250

SENIOR EDITOR

DONNA M. AIROLDI

dairoldi@thebtngroup.com
646.380.6264

EDITOR

ADAM PERROTTA

aperrotta@thebtngroup.com
518.859.5117

STAFF WRITER & ASSISTANT EDITOR

DAWIT HABTEMARIAM

dhabtemariam@thebtngroup.com
646.380.6267

ART DIRECTOR

JAMES JARNOT

jjarnot@thebtngroup.com
646.380.6252

BTNGROUP

116 W. 32nd St., 14th Floor, New York, NY 10001
The BTN Group also publishes:

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Travel Procurement
PO Box 2007, Skokie, IL 60076-2007
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REPRINTS

Robbie Ray • Wright's Media
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Responding to New Demands

The challenges around buying travel right now are legion. Getting a handle on internal demand is only the beginning; buyers then must figure out what kind of supply is still available to them after the novel coronavirus decimated hotel occupancy and airline capacity, and whether their preferred suppliers still can offer healthy corporate partnerships. As Covid-19 continues to ripple through the U.S. and beyond, much of that work is difficult to assess and, arguably, not urgent due to the pause in travel.

Many travel buyers have been tapped instead for their strategic knowledge, contributing to “return-to-work” plans and collaborating with HR, legal, facilities management and risk. A few have been tasked with critical needs. That was the case for state of California business partnership and travel manager Bill Amaral, pictured on the cover of this issue of Travel Procurement.

As California saw coronavirus cases rising across key counties, it realized it had insufficient numbers of healthcare workers positioned to address the surge. The state turned to travel management to provide a solution that would mobilize healthcare workers and station them in counties where infection was flaring. There was one problem: Where would they stay?

Amaral, who has been pushing the state for a formalized hotel program for years, knew exactly what to do, but he had to do it fast. He saw hotel occupancy rates falling and realized that by putting together a housing solution, the state could support the local hospitality industry while serving communities and ameliorating the healthcare crisis. Not only did he create a housing program to support healthcare worker relocation, but he also incorporated housing for local healthcare workers so they could sequester from their families and prevent that vector of virus spread. Additionally, he created a program for homeless communities to provide housing and, as a result, protection from infection risk on the street. Turn to page 16 for the rest of the story on how Amaral stretched his skills to serve California in a time of crisis. At the same time, he proved the value of a formalized hotel program for the state, and now is pushing forward with that effort for traditional business travel.

While extraordinary stories like this have emerged from the pandemic, it remains difficult to find much buoyancy in the travel industry as Covid-19 continues to wreak havoc. A recovery for the travel industry—and the recovery of business travel—will depend on medical innovations in therapeutics, rapid testing and, ultimately, a vaccine. Until then, however, essential business must be done, and business travel must facilitate it. For those buyers working to deliver travel solutions to essential workers, all of us in the industry salute your work and ingenuity.

Write to me at ewest@thebtngroup.com to tell us a story about your travel management accomplishments during this time, or what your company or colleagues are doing to weather the storm.



Stay well,

Editorial Director, BTN Group

BTNGROUP

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT & GROUP PUBLISHER
LOUIS MAGLIARO • lmagliaro@thebtngroup.com • 973.769.0028

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER
LINDSAY STRAUB • lstraub@thebtngroup.com • 646.380.6274

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR
RICH MARKUS • rmarkus@thebtngroup.com • 301.944.4324

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR
CLAIRE LAVELLE • clavelle@thebtngroup.com • 646.380.6271

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CONFERENCE CONTENT & STRATEGY
DAVID MEYER • dmeyer@thebtngroup.com • 646.380.6246

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CONTENT SOLUTIONS
MARY ANN MCNULTY • mmcnulty@thebtngroup.com • 630.519.4510

DIRECTOR OF CONTENT SOLUTIONS & CONFERENCES
JEN BANKARD • jbankard@thebtngroup.com • 717.460.1091

EVENT MANAGER
MELISSA GAIN • mgain@thebtngroup.com • 917.626.6832

GROUP DESIGN MANAGER
MARIZA MOREIRA • mmoreira@ntmlc.com • 201.902.1965

MARKETING MANAGER
MAX BZDYK • mbzdyk@thebtngroup.com • 646.346.5676

DIGITAL DIRECTOR
ALEXANDRA MANCINI • amancini@thebtngroup.com • 201.902.1984

PRODUCTION MANAGER
MICHELE GARTH • mgarth@ntmlc.com

PRODUCTION SPECIALIST
LISA GONZALES • lgonzales@ntmlc.com

PRODUCTION SPECIALIST
GAYLE GRAIZZARO • ggrazzaro@ntmlc.com



100 LIGHTING WAY, 2ND FLOOR, SECAUCUS, NJ 07094
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American Airlines Getting More Aggressive with Capacity Control.

American Airlines' second-quarter revenue declined 86.4 percent year over year to \$1.6 billion, though the carrier has slowed its cash burn rate more than expected. While American in April had been burning through \$100 million per day, it had reduced that rate by June to \$30 million per day, which American credited to higher-than-expected revenue and cost-cutting measures. In terms of revenue, American, like its competitors, saw "continual growth in demand" from April through June, though it plateaued as the Covid-19 spread intensified in many parts of the United States, chairman and CEO Doug Parker said in an earnings call. American has seen only a "token amount of business travel, and there's not a lot of indicators that's going to improve," chief revenue officer Vasu Raja said. American reported a net loss of \$2.1 billion for the second quarter, compared with a net income of \$662 million in the second quarter of 2019.

Southwest Lowers Capacity Plans Amid Weaker-Than-Expected July.

Southwest Airlines is pulling back on its capacity plans for the next few months as it sees weaker-than-expected demand growth. The carrier reported \$1 billion in revenue for the second quarter of 2020, down 82.9 percent year over year. Even so, Southwest executives said they saw a "modest improvement" in demand, bookings and trip cancellation rates beginning in early May. This month, however, bookings have started to slow and cancellations once again have picked up, and Southwest now expects its July operating revenue will be down between 70 and 75 percent year over year. In an earlier forecast, Southwest had projected July revenue would be down between 65 and 70 percent year over year, according to a Cowen research note. Southwest reported a net loss of \$915 million for the quarter, compared with net income of \$741 million in the second quarter of 2019.

United Sees 50 Percent of Demand as Peak Recovery Point Until Covid-19 Vaccine.

Air travel demand is unlikely to surpass half of its normal levels as long as the Covid-19 crisis persists, United Airlines executives said during an earnings call. United's second-quarter operating revenue was down 87.1 percent year over year to \$1.5 billion, including a 93.5 percent decline in passenger revenue. Corporate traffic in June was down 96 percent year over year, EVP and chief commercial officer Andrew Nocella said. "We continue to believe a full recovery is contingent upon effective therapeutics and a vaccine," Nocella said. "Our best guess is demand, as measured by revenue, will recover over time to be down approximately 50 percent [year over year] and then plateau at that level until a vaccine is widely distributed." United reported a loss of \$1.6 billion for the second quarter, compared with net income of \$1.1 billion the second quarter of 2019.

Delta Ready for 'Choppy' Recovery in Q3.

With second-quarter revenue down more than 90 percent year over year, Delta Air Lines is bracing for an uneven recovery in the coming months that largely will not include corporate travelers. Delta reported adjusted revenue, excluding refinery sales, of \$1.2 billion in the quarter, down 91 percent compared with the second quarter of 2019. Delta's capacity was down 85 percent year over year in the quarter. "We thought from the start that the recovery would be choppy, and the past few weeks proved that would be true," CEO Ed Bastian said during an earnings call. Revenue in the third quarter likely will be a bit stronger, between 20 and 25 percent of what Delta made in the third quarter of 2019, Bastian said. Delta reported a net loss of \$2.8 billion for the quarter. Daily cash burn for the quarter was about \$43 million, and operating expenses were down 53 percent.

American Airlines and JetBlue Plan Partnership.

American Airlines and JetBlue Airways are forming a partnership that will include codesharing and expanded service offerings out of New York, the carriers announced. Pending government approval, the carriers will develop a codeshare network "pairing JetBlue's domestic network with American's international route map," according to JetBlue president and COO Joanna Geraghty. It will include about 60 routes operated by American and more than 130 routes operated by JetBlue. The announcement did not include specific details on how the carriers' respective loyalty programs would play into the agreement. JetBlue said it had no intention of joining the Oneworld alliance, nor would it join the joint business agreement in place between American and International Airlines Group.

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LODGING

Hilton Broadens Express Agreements for Meetings.

Hilton Worldwide has simplified and expanded the availability of its Express Agreements for small meetings. Hilton had offered flexible terms for group business up to \$20,000, but the company has increased that amount to \$50,000 “to accommodate a broader range of events and customers with these flexible terms,” said Hilton EVP and president of the Americas Danny Hughes in an email. The Express Agreements, designed for meetings booked and consumed within six months, allow for cancellation up to 14 days prior to arrival, Hughes said.

IHG Projects 75 Percent Q2 RevPAR Decline.

InterContinental Hotels Group anticipates a 75 percent year-over-year decline in second-quarter revenue per available room, resulting in a 52 percent RevPAR decrease for the first half of 2020 based on a comparable-hotel and constant-currency basis, the company announced. RevPAR declined 82 percent year over year in April and 76 percent in May, and is estimated to be down 70 percent for June. “The smaller but steady improvements in RevPAR through the second quarter are mostly attributed to the Americas franchised estate and the Greater China region,” the company said in a statement. IHG includes U.S.-franchised and U.S.-managed divisions in its Americas region. The Q2 Americas RevPAR decline is estimated at 72 percent year over year.

Cvent Introduces Health-Related RFP Questions for Hotels.

Cvent has created a set of nearly 60 standardized questions related to hotel health and safety protocols that will be included in the company’s Business Transient Solution request-for-proposals product, formerly known as Lanyon. Supplier answers to them, however, will be available in a custom channel field in the property profile, where clients will be able to view them through the Custom Template Builder while they are pulling information about a supplier’s specific bid or during the solicitation process. The questions will not be included in the RFP “so the answers will not remain stagnant in bids,” as suppliers can modify their answers as their practices around Covid-19 evolve, according to the company. The Covid-19 questions are available for suppliers to answer now, and were set to become available this month to all Cvent corporate clients to view.

PAYMENT

Amex Sees Full Force of Covid-19 on Q2 Commercial Card Spending.

The global Covid-19 pandemic battered American Express’s corporate card division during the second quarter, with plummeting T&E-related spending dragging the segment to a \$60 million net quarterly loss. American Express Global Commercial Services reported \$82.4 billion in card-billed business for the second quarter, a 36 percent year-over-year decline. Average quarterly cardmember spending dropped an identical 36 percent from the prior year to \$5,645, the company said. T&E spending was down 87 percent for the second quarter. Meanwhile, airline spending went to essentially nil, with airline-related spending volume comprising 0 percent of billed business on all American Express cards. CEO Stephen Squeri expressed optimism in noting that overall Amex spending volumes, “which declined to their lowest point this quarter in April, gradually improved in May and June,” with small businesses the most resilient in bouncing back.

TECHNOLOGY

Deem to Relaunch Hotel Search and Booking Platform.

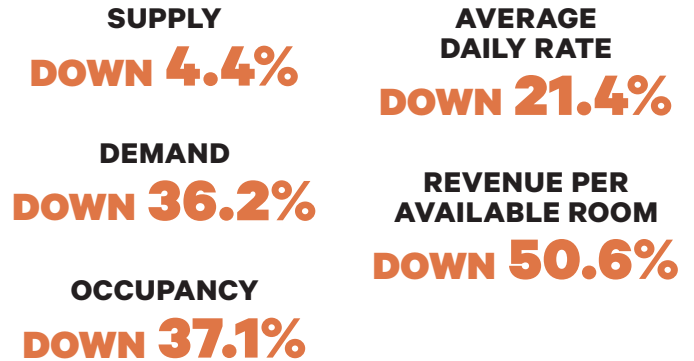
Corporate travel technology provider Deem last month relaunched its hotel search and booking capabilities, the company announced. New features and functionality include the ability for users to select multiple filters—such as company locations, dates, hotel brands, amenities, star ratings and number of guests—to generate a new search. Users previously could select only one filter at a time. The company also consolidated steps that were required to search and book a hotel by automatically exposing content that users previously searched for, said the company in an email. Sort, filter and search options have been moved to their own section “for ease of use and understanding of how each impact the hotel results shown to the traveler.” Key amenities also will be shown on each hotel card.

BUSINESS TRAVEL BY THE NUMBERS

HOTEL

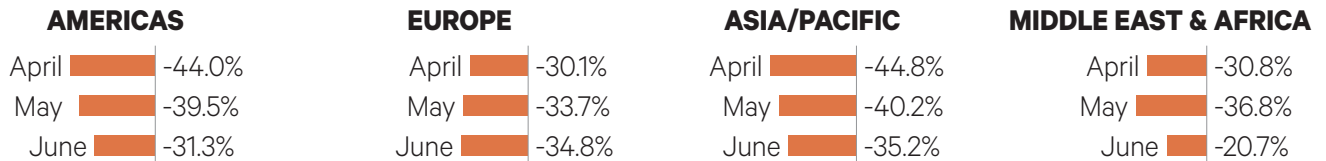
Demand projections in STR and Tourism Economics' latest 2020 U.S. hotel forecast, issued in late June, aren't as dire for 2020 as some of their previous estimates. The firms, however, don't expect a full recovery to pre-pandemic levels until 2023. Meanwhile, BCD Travel asked travel managers to project supplier pricing when travel recovers versus pre-pandemic levels, and found little consensus outside of expected airfare hikes.

2020 U.S. YOY FORECAST

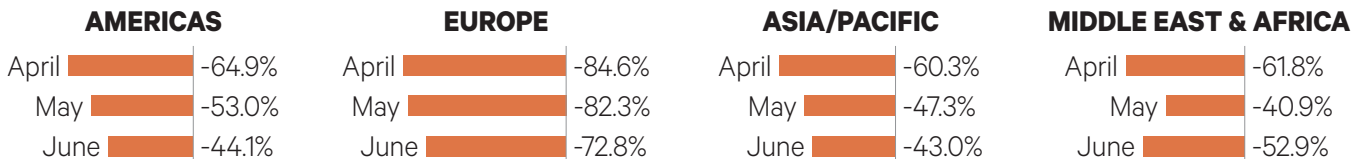


Source: STR

LOOKING BACK AT ADR: YOY CHANGE



LOOKING BACK AT OCCUPANCY: YOY CHANGE



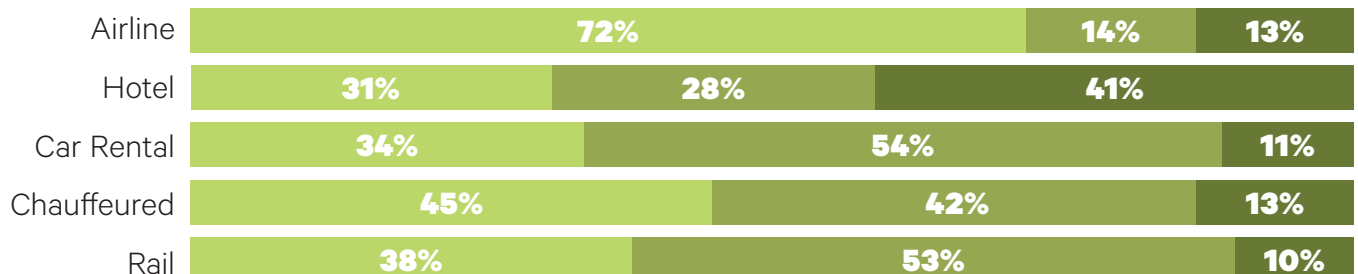
Source: STR

PRICING

TRAVEL BUYERS FORESEE HIGHER AIRFARES

As business travel recovers, how do you expect pricing to change from pre-pandemic levels?

Will increase
Will stay the same
Will decrease



Source: BCD Travel June 2-12 global survey of 100 travel managers

Wyndham Preps Live Mtg. Plans Amid RFP Ambiguity

Wyndham Hotels & Resorts recently expanded its Count on Us cleanliness initiative, introduced in early May, to its meetings business. SVP of global sales Carol Lynch in July spoke with lodging editor Donna M. Airolidi about the program as well as the future of hotel requests for proposals.

How do the meeting and event enhancements differ from the general Count on Us initiative?

We're working with our operations teams at the hotel level to come up with those guidelines around cleaning, obviously, and everything's in place from the guest standpoint, but we're really carrying that over to the public space and the meeting space. Having those visual cues all around social distancing. Having different products easily available at the hotel as you're walking through the space. As we're working through this, we were able to partner with planners and help them understand from city to city and state to state what some of those guidelines are. Because it's different from state to state. How do they prepare their attendees? We're working very closely with them to design a program that makes sense. Obviously, function space is a big part of that. They will need double if not more the amount of function space than they typically would have, just because of social distancing. We're able to work with our technology

suppliers to provide schematics and layouts of those meeting and banquet spaces. We're trying to be creative around outdoor spaces ... that are safe and provide that distancing and [still] fit into their programs. Food and beverage is a big piece of this. We're used to going to larger meetings and have buffets laid out, and that is not how things will be.

What are you seeing for future corporate group bookings?

It really varies when talking from client to client. Things we've seen are, looking into maybe the fourth quarter, smaller meetings. [There's] nothing of substantial size for this year. We're really looking out to the future. It's really uncertain right now. But I think that smaller meetings programs will come back sooner; hybrid meetings certainly. Giving people the opportunity to attend either in person or virtually will be with us for months ahead.

What are the main concerns travel managers have voiced about putting travelers back on the road and into hotels?

The No. 1 thing they want to know is that they are going to be in a safe environment. Launching Count on Us early on as we did and working with all of our clients and messaging that and constantly updating them on what we are doing and assuring them that our hotels are taking all the right steps to provide a safe and clean and healthy environment.

WYNDHAM'S CAROL LYNCH TALKS:

- The necessity of creative use of hotel function space
- Buyers' concerns about restarting business travel
- The pandemic's effect on the RFP process



What do you think the RFP season will look like this year?

It's interesting, we've seen just about every scenario you can think of. Late July and August is normally when many companies launch RFPs for the next year. This would normally be a pretty busy time for us. But we've seen only a handful, though we expect to have more probably between August and September. But it does vary. We have some travel managers say, 'Yes, we will launch an RFP in September.' Others are still deciding. They say they may want to do negotiated rates blended with dynamic rates. I do think it will vary and be very different from traditional RFPs, just from resources alone. Many companies don't have the resources to launch a full-blown RFP as they would typically do. We've been very open in talking to each one of them on what will be best for their programs, and flexibility comes into play. But I do think we'll see fewer markets with specific negotiated rates at properties and probably more around dynamic pricing.

Do you think that will last past this pandemic?

I think this could be the catalyst for change [from] the way RFP seasons have been executed in the past. More than ever, our industry is probably ready for it. Because we know the resources it takes to facilitate the whole RFP process from the buyer's and the hotelier's standpoint. It could change the way that travel buyers buy in the future. ◀

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Summer U.S. Covid Spread Scrambles Demand Forecasts

After weeks of halting recovery that sparked some industry optimism that the worst of the Covid-19 crisis in the United States has passed, a dramatic surge of cases throughout the South and West has frustrated travel suppliers, muddled business travel demand forecasts and made the prospect of a U.S. recovery anytime soon much more tenuous.

The situation in the United States stands in contrast to those in most of Europe and parts of Asia, where Covid-19 cases as of late July remained low, some international travel restrictions have eased and tickets purchased through travel management companies have started to climb, if gently.

In the U.S., though, year-over-year declines in the volume of air tickets sold through corporate travel agencies and settled through ARC have hovered at about 90 percent, and was 89.2 percent for the week ending July 26. Given the variances by state in restrictions regarding use of face coverings and holding indoor gatherings, suppliers and analysts in July began to express new doubts about the United States' ability to control the virus and help business travel re-emerge.

Deutsche Bank airline analysts, meanwhile, in a July 13 research note wrote that recent booking trends are evidence that the recovery will be bumpy.

"Although we think we've marked the bottom with traffic gradually improving since mid-April, we expect the demand recovery to be

uneven as spikes in Covid-19 cases and the emergence of new hot-spots dissuade travelers from returning to the skies," Deutsche Bank analysts wrote, according to The Beat.

They added: "Recent booking trends suggest that a patchwork of domestic quarantine restrictions recently imposed by various jurisdictions are suppressing travel and leading to a rise in cancellations. The concern among investors is that the nascent recovery in domestic demand is at risk, which is of particular concern given that the industry is in the midst of peak season and not expecting to see much improvement in international demand."

Meanwhile, Cowen airline analysts noted that "concerns of a second wave and quarantine measures is leading to a slowing in forward bookings and an increase in close-in cancellations," according to a July 10 research note, according to The Beat.

The Cowen research note added: "Peak demand traditionally ends in early August as people get ready for kids to return to school (which is now at risk). Corporate travel generally picks up in September, but with continued concerns about a second wave, demand may falter."

In fact, some suppliers and analysts have resigned themselves to the projection that there won't be a true U.S. business travel rebound until a Covid-19 vaccine—currently under development by many entities throughout the world—becomes widely available. United Airlines EVP and chief commercial officer Andrew Nocella, for example, during his company's second-quar-

Cowen airline analysts noted that "concerns of a second wave and quarantine measures is leading to a slowing in forward bookings and an increase in close-in cancellations."

ter earnings call in July, said United didn't believe demand would crack even half of pre-pandemic levels until a vaccine was available.

In a July update to its annual U.S. lodging forecast, real estate firm CBRE noted that hotel bookings made through global distribution systems, typically corporate in nature, were underperforming versus bookings made through other channels. So were bookings made at luxury- and upper-upscale tier hotels, typically popular among business travelers, and CBRE didn't project a rebound there until a Covid-19 vaccine or treatment is available, which they don't foresee before mid-2021.

Without a vaccine, some suppliers are taking matters in their own hands to limit the spread Covid-19. U.S. airlines, in particular, in July strengthened policies concerning mandatory passenger face coverings, in some cases refusing medical exemptions, banning noncompliant travelers and extending the requirement to the entire airport.

But corporates too are playing a key role in limiting business travel demand, U.S. Travel Association president and CEO Roger Dow said during a July webinar. Dow said many corporations are limiting travel via policy for fear of litigation, a fear he and the CEOs hope to remedy via legislation.

"Right now, no matter what we do, until they change those policies, it's going to be very hard," Dow said, noting USTA is pushing the federal government for liability protection for facilities on a national level, at least through 2021. ■

Pandemic Could Spark Surge Of Contactless Payments

With hygiene and safety concerns top of mind for companies and their employees when business travel resumes, contactless corporate payments look ready to finally gain significant traction—and travel and expense departments stand to benefit in a big way from contactless finally making contact.

Near Field Communication technology, or NFC, which enables payments to be made by waving an NFC-equipped physical card or mobile wallet near an NFC point-of-sale terminal, has been around for more than a decade. But long-ingrained consumer habits of swiping cards—along with merchants' reluctance to invest in upgrading their point-of-sale equipment to accept a payment method that consumers largely didn't need—created a chicken-or-egg scenario that bogged down adoption of the technology, particularly in the U.S., which has lagged other markets when it comes to contactless usage.

But amid consistent promotion from card issuers and gradual cardholder realization of the benefits of contactless payment, the technology began carving out a foothold in 2019. That momentum was turbocharged by the Covid-19 outbreak and attendant rise of

social distancing and hygiene principles.

Contactless Converts

Surveys conducted amid the pandemic consistently have indicated a surge in consumer preference for being able to make in-person payments without touching a card reader, keypad or pen. That preference for contactless prevailed in the corporate sector as well, noted April Bridgeman, director for Advito, the consulting arm of corporate travel management giant BCD Travel.

"We have definitely seen a renewed interest in contactless payments as part of our clients' holistic return-to-travel strategies," Bridgeman said, adding that 67 percent of respondents in a May 2020 BCD survey of 1,260 business travelers rated the use of contactless payment systems as the most important regulatory measure to ensure safe travel amid Covid-19.

"Travelers are looking to minimize unnecessary physical contact and ... travel managers' key concerns with getting their travelers back on the road center around health, safety and duty of care," Bridgeman noted.

As corporate T&E leaders revamp their programs with risk mitigation as a driving principle, many are eyeing contactless payments as a key

element of the post-Covid "new normal."

Cecile Mutch, senior director of corporate services for Kellogg, said that while her company's corporate card provider will not offer contactless functionality until next year, "we are considering their mobile wallet solution for greater security and safety."

Whether via card or mobile, Mutch said that she was confident Kellogg employees will be quick to adopt contactless payments based on their embrace of EMV chip-and-PIN payments as that technology became the standard a few years ago.

"We will also communicate a general acceptance that [contactless] provides greater card security for our cardholders," Mutch added.

Merchant Movement

On the merchant side, many retailers began actively encouraging contactless payments amid the pandemic due to their own safety and hygiene concerns—and the sudden shift in consumer attitudes is bound to compel even otherwise reluctant merchants to step up adoption of NFC acceptance technology.

"Importantly, merchants are asking cardholders to pay using contactless, so it has created a shared healthcare interest between the parties,"

"It's too early to say if it's changed behavior forever, but we're seeing a number of commercial cardholders paying by contactless for the first time, and if those habits take hold, it could represent a huge shift."

DAVID VOSS
BANK OF
AMERICA



said David Voss, head of commercial cards in Europe, the Middle East and Africa for Bank of America.

The share of contactless transactions made on all Bank of America-issued corporate cards in Europe in the second quarter of 2020 surged by 30 percent year over year as the pandemic took hold, Voss noted.

J.J. Kieley, vice president of American Express's payments consulting group, noted that the card giant since 2019 has incorporated contactless technology in all of its newly issued small business and corporate cards in the U.S.,

and the company now is actively promoting adoption and acceptance of contactless among retailers.

"We are helping merchants set up contactless-enabled terminals and reminding merchants globally that they do not need to collect ... signatures at the point of sale, which helps reduce the need for a shared stylus, pen or finger on the touchscreen," Kieley said.

Meanwhile, payment card networks recently have played another key role in promoting contactless amid the pandemic: raising the amount limits for contactless payment

transactions, thereby enabling larger purchases to be made without a touch.

Those cap increases already have had a tangible effect in driving contactless payments.

"We are seeing commercial cardholders use contactless for transactions at the higher amounts, and consumer awareness of the changes is reasonably high," Voss said. "Our average contactless transaction amount for commercial cardholder payments has increased by 16 percent in Europe, [and] we do expect to see the higher limits retained or even increase in some countries, over time."

“It’s too early to say if it’s changed behavior forever, but we’re seeing a number of commercial cardholders paying by contactless for the first time, and if those habits take hold, it could represent a huge shift,” Voss said.

Mobile Model

While plastic cards equipped with NFC technology are fast becoming the rule rather than the exception, contactless goes beyond cards.

“We are also seeing merchants interested in other forms of payments that help reduce physical contact, for example the ability for consumers to pre-pay online, by app or smartphone,” American Express’s Kieley noted.

Along with offering hygiene and safety advantages, contactless payments via mobile could be particularly well-suited to helping achieve several longstanding goals of corporate T&E and payment programs, such as providing travelers with a more convenient, seamless and “consumer-like” travel and payment experience.

That’s especially true in such markets as Asia and parts of Europe, where ubiquitous mobile wallets like Alipay and WeChat Pay have become an integral part of consumers’ everyday lives. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the travel ecosystem had begun laying the groundwork to incorporate those services, with hotels, airlines, restaurants, ground transport providers and other suppliers adapting their systems to accept the mobile wallet services.

“These trends signified to business travel managers to start strategizing on how to

integrate digital wallets into their processes to drive traveler trust in their program, Advito’s Bridgeman said. “And now they need to adopt, or risk being left behind.”

Mobile wallets also have stood as a key complement to virtual payment cards, which can be issued and accepted with no physical card involved at any point in the process. Virtual cards offer many widely acknowledged benefits, such as easy issuance, spending controls, data capture and one-time use numbers that are useless to data thieves in the event of a breach. But technical limitations long have hamstrung virtual cards, especially in the hotel sector, where card numbers had to be sent to a property via fax—a tedious process often ending in confusion and frustration during check-in.

Mobile wallets offer a way around such complications by enabling virtual cards to “live” on a traveler’s mobile device, which can simply be waved near an NFC terminal at the front desk—a process as simple as checking in with a plastic card. And once loaded onto a mobile device, virtual cards can subsequently be used to make other payments during a trip, such as meals, coffee and ground transport, ensuring all in-trip costs flow directly to corporate spending managers for reconciliation and reporting.

Lindsay Huston-Herbst, head of North America commercial card product management for Bank of America, called mobile wallet integration “the icing on the cake” for the use of virtual cards in the corporate payment context.

“With travel activity so low right now, we see this as the perfect opportunity to reevaluate payment solutions. Virtual cards are a natural next step in the digital transformation of travel.”

APRIL BRIDGEMAN
ADVITO

“Virtual [cards] offered through mobile wallets will allow companies to eliminate manual matching and provide seamless reconciliation, enriched data and reporting, even removing the need for expense reporting in some cases,” said Huston-Herbst.

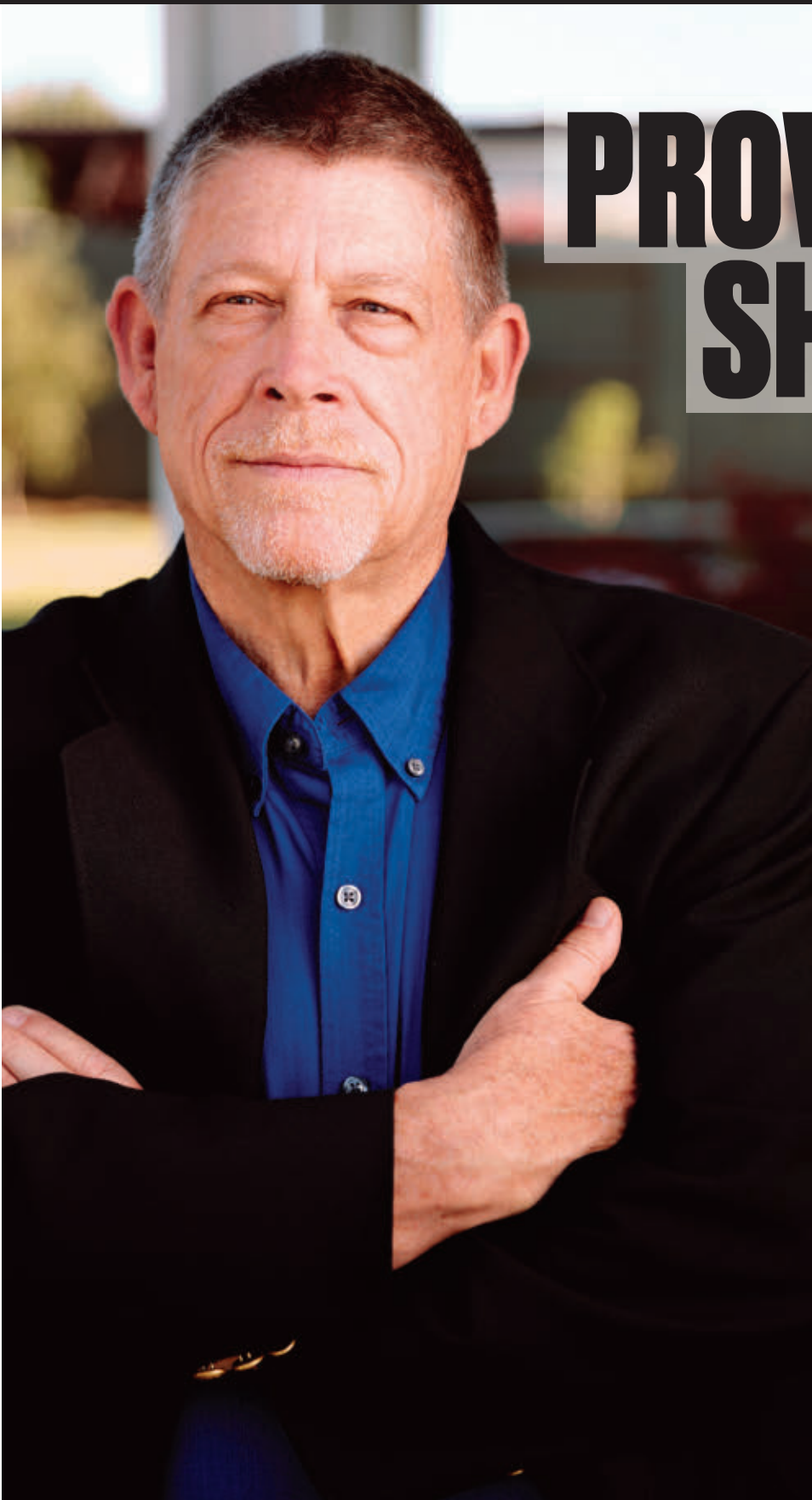
“The ability to pay with a corporate virtual form of payment while on trip for things as small as a cappuccino is imminent,” Bridgeman noted. “It will be more convenient for travelers, increase security, improve spend controls and provide more and higher quality data.”

Along with foregrounding hygiene and safety, the Covid-19 pandemic has spurred organizations to re-evaluate their overall travel and spending programs, striving to bring modernization and increased efficiency to those areas by implementing new services and systems.

“Many CEOs are telling us that Covid-19 will accelerate technological transformation and are looking to us to help support them with this strategy,” said Huston-Herbst.

Along with the compelling case for adopting new tech, the currently dormant state of most corporate T&E programs makes now a particularly good time to dedicate efforts to implementing such solutions, Bridgeman noted.

“With travel activity so low right now, we see this as the perfect opportunity to re-evaluate payment solutions,” said Bridgeman. “I think as travel programs look to modernize and become more efficient in the wake of this major disruption, virtual cards are a natural next step in the digital transformation of travel.” ■



PROVIDING SHELTER

**CALIFORNIA
LEANS ON TRAVEL
MANAGEMENT FOR
\$40M COVID-19
LODGING PROGRAM**
BY ELIZABETH WEST

The complexities associated with managing travel for the state of California are immense. Business partnership and travel manager Bill Amaral has navigated those complexities for seven years, implementing new payment and employee reimbursement processes across 270 state agencies and getting a travel booking channel mandate from the governor to drive compliance.

Cut to 2020: The state needed emergency lodging to house healthcare workers and the homeless during the Covid-19 crisis. Amaral took the reins.

The state of California doesn't have a managed hotel program, though establishing a formal program has been on Amaral's drawing board for several years. Instead, the state currently relies on courtesy rates extended by hotels to government travelers.

The Covid-19 crisis called for more control. "The pur-

pose of the program was to keep healthcare workers safe and allow them to self-isolate from their families to make sure they weren't exposing anyone to infection," said Amaral. The program also needed to support healthcare worker mobility, allowing California to house medical staff traveling to Covid-19 hotspots from other counties or even other states. Providing shelter for homeless individuals exposed to Covid-19 also was a priority, to help prevent spread among that vulnerable population.

To meet the need, Amaral knew California needed a formal program and fast. "I had gotten the assignment to look for 18,000 to 22,000 room nights in 21 counties. We didn't have the resources to source something like that. It had to be done immediately and the pandemic was expanding," said Amaral. He reached out to hotel solutions provider HRS for help. "I had not worked with them before but was familiar with HRS through the Global Business Travel Association, BTN and other industry events," he said.

Within days he had a proposal that he "pushed up the food chain," and the path was set. HRS would conduct a flash sourcing exercise, load rates and integrate content to California's TravelStore agency booking tool, integrate payment and deliver streamlined reporting.

What the team didn't know as they embarked, however, was that Covid-19 would not be so easily contained. What started as an order for 22,000 room nights in fewer than half of California's counties within weeks exploded to a need for 434,000 room nights across all 58 counties.

"We initially were looking at a smaller footprint," said HRS director of sourcing for the Americas Lexi Benakis. "We stood up the RFP and got everything into the tool. As we were going through the process, it expanded. We sourced about 2,000 properties in a week's time."

At first, the team was concerned. "The response rate wasn't as high as we had hoped in the first day or two," said Benakis. HRS got more creative with its outreach, going direct to hotels and to hotel management companies with the RFP. With layoffs and furloughs in the hospitality industry, much has been made during the Covid-19 crisis of the potential that hotels simply won't be able to respond to RFP requests. For this project, at least, that theory didn't prove out. HRS tracked an 85 percent response rate. "In the end, the 2,000 hotels were excited to have the business and they really worked with us through an intense process to make it happen," said Benakis.

And it wasn't the case that California accepted whatever bids came through. Location—often around hospitals and medical centers—was a critical component as was hotel health and safety protocol and a realistic minimum expectation for available amenities and services.

"[We looked at] cleaning routines and new protocols, contactless housekeeping, contactless food delivery. We looked at whether linen refresh could be contactless, elevator cleanliness; and how HVAC systems were configured. Were they shared throughout the entire hotel or controlled in each room? We went through a lot of containment questions. We also asked about virtual payment; or contactless check-in." Confirming the virtual payment capability was a critical element for California.

"We have a responsibility to do everything we can to keep all parties safe, including the staff of our hotel partners, so all these elements were important."

STATE OF CALIFORNIA'S BILL
AMARAL

As the scope of the program expanded, sourcing exercises grew in turn, with HRS loading rates and incorporating new hotels on a rolling basis. "Within two weeks we had the first round of properties loaded and bookable," said Benakis. It helped that the hotel solutions company had asked willing hotels to give their best and final offers in the first bid. With cratering demand throughout the hotel industry, market dynamics clearly favored the buyer.

"The state told me to get the best deal," said Amaral, who fully leans into the responsibility of squeezing value from taxpayer dollars and who estimated the program would reach \$40 million in hotel spend before it was done.

On the other hand, the deal had to be fair. "Our goal wasn't to go out and say, drop this to nothing," said Benakis. Benchmarked against the pre-Covid-19 market, hotel rates were down 40 percent for this sourcing exercise, giving California the ability to house that many more healthcare workers, aid the homeless and help prevent infection.

RESPONSIBILITY IS A TWO-WAY STREET

While HRS took the lead on the sourcing exercise, Amaral worked on the program parameters and implementing with TravelStore, the state of California's agency of record. Anyone reaching out for housing had to qualify to participate. That meant pulling agents back from leave and training them quickly, since self-booking was not a part of the program.

"We reallocated staff to vet the guests, based on how they answered the questions from

the agent script,” said Amaral. For example, they had to be working in a location where there were Covid-positive patients. Once they were booked, Amaral made sure all guests were educated about their end of the bargain: All participants had to follow the rules to prevent infection as well.

“We took some of [the hotel safety protocol] and converted it into a guidance document for the guests,” he said. “We outlined what type of contact the guests could have with the hotel staff; no additional guests were allowed; and down to that level of detail. We have a responsibility to do everything we can to keep all parties safe, including the staff of our hotel partners, so all these elements were important.”

As for auditing the hotel, Amaral is relying on the guests for feedback. “We are sending them surveys throughout their stay—upon check-in, at the midpoint, and on check-out—to ensure the hotel is doing its part,” said Amaral.

With all the new and previously unvetted program participants, auditing payment and spend information was also critical to reduce risk for the state of California.

“We audit every single folio,” said Amaral.

To that end, the virtual card program that Amaral set up two years ago served the state well, allowing detailed spend management and expediting reconciliation processes.

“One of the benefits of the HRS program was that the state of California was able to leverage the existing Citibank virtual card program that was already established,” said Amaral. “The state of California then worked with HRS to coordinate payment integration.”

“In the end, the 2,000 hotels were excited to have the business and they really worked with us through an intense process to make it happen.”

**HRS'S
LEXI
BENAKIS**

HRS provides a daily booking report that the state of California matches to its monthly Citi statement. The program uses five virtual card number accounts to rotate based on available credit. HRS provides each hotel with the payment instructions at the time of reservation. After check-out, HRS chases the folios. The state audits each folio for accuracy and to ensure only room and tax are charged. It is then matched to the charge on the Citi statement. VCN account data is provided to Citi so the reconciliation process is seamless. Finally, the state uses the data to create a “claim schedule” through the state’s financial system to generate payment.

This is the reason every participating hotel was required to accept virtual payment. “It wouldn’t work any other way,” said Amaral. “We couldn’t expect people to put these charges on their personal cards and wait for reimbursement,” especially since healthcare workers could be staying for extended time periods. Amaral was quick to note that all incidentals were put on personal cards.

MANAGING STATE FINANCES

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed many financial weaknesses as it has torn across the U.S., including the fragility of state budgets to deal with emergencies of this magnitude. Shepherding taxpayer funds, reducing risk exposure and protecting state finances always has been a priority for Amaral. This emergency lodging program was not an exception.

The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency was committed to reimbursing 75 percent of the \$40 million program. But the state needed to present detailed data on every stay, with taxes broken out, to qualify for reimbursement.

“The federal requirements are strict,” said Amaral. “We have to match to the booked data, and it goes to comptroller to get paid. Then we send reporting to FEMA to get [reimbursed].”

HRS said it was in talks with several states to power similar programs, but a spokesperson for the company said California proved a great partner because of Amaral’s foundational work with virtual cards and his comprehensive understanding of payment and reporting.

For Benakis, the process was eye-opening for a different reason and shows what is possible when industry partners can break down barriers and really come together: “We did what would traditionally be a 16-week sourcing project in two weeks, with rates loaded and available,” she said, adding that the experience changed her expectations going forward. “We don’t need to get so bogged down in, ‘we’ve always done it this way.’”

For Amaral, establishing a hotel program and shining a spotlight on what a formal program can achieve has laid a path to creating a bona fide hotel program for the entire state of California.

“We have the attention of upper management now. California has \$100 million in transient lodging [annually]. We need to manage it well and we need the technology to support it,” said Amaral. “Setting up this program in a crisis, brought everything into alignment. Everyone now sees what the end result could be. There are always pains to kick off something this large, but I know myself and my management. They couldn’t be happier.” ■

Technology Can't Supplant Face-to-Face Business Meetings

I went on a business trip last week. In normal times, that wouldn't be worth mentioning. But these are hardly normal times.

I'm in the travel industry. As CEO of Pittsburgh International Airport, it's my job to promote our airport and the magnificent, thriving region it serves to airline executives, travel industry colleagues and business leaders around the world, from Dallas to Dublin to Doha.

I spend a lot of time on the road. But like everyone else, I've been grounded by the coronavirus pandemic. In March and April, Covid-19 brought airports and airlines to a virtual standstill across the globe. In Pittsburgh, we watched our passenger numbers plummet by 95 percent.

Are business travelers coming back? There's much talk in my industry that business travel has changed, possibly for good. Zoom, WebEx, Skype, GoTo-Meeting and other videoconferencing tools have enabled face-to-face communication among people, groups and teams.

Are these improved technologies better than a phone call? Yes. But are they robust enough to fully enable the world's work? I don't think so.

That's why I took the business trip.

A colleague and I asked for a dinner meeting to check in with leaders at one of our airline partners. They accepted. We flew there. We wore masks for the entire journey: in our own airport, on the flight, in our destination airport, in the rental

car we shared to the hotel, in the hotel's public areas and in the restaurant until we were seated at an outdoor table 15 feet from any other table and attended by a server who also wore a mask.

I'm happy to report the airports were exceedingly clean and the airplanes were sanitized and ready to fly. Everyone wore masks and observed social distancing. My industry has really stepped up, and I was proud to see it for myself.

One of our airline colleagues said it was the first in-person business meeting he had attended in four months. "Same!" we said.

With that, we exchanged our stories—personal, professional and organizational. We talked about how much we miss travel, how our kids are faring, and who is thinking what about schools in the fall.

Then, one airline executive said he had a hard stop in one hour. "So, what is it you came here for?" he asked. And because I love direct, transparent questions, I dove in. We spent the next hour talking about the issue at hand. They asked questions; we agreed on some points and disagreed on others.

As we prepared to leave, everyone remarked about how refreshing it was to meet in person, and how our discussion would not have carried the same expediency and trust had we met over Zoom or one of the other platforms.

Video calls work well when relationships are established and when communication styles are known. They can even help to grow and deepen relationships.

CHRISTINA CASSOTIS
CEO, PITTSBURGH INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT



Today's video meeting capabilities are impressive, but they remain the next best thing. Face to face, when possible, is still best.

What did the old commercial say about the telephone? "The next best thing to being there."

That's true. Today's video meeting capabilities are impressive, but they remain the next best thing. Face to face, when possible, is still best.

Calling my family from the other side of the world to say good night will never be as good as being there to hear about the day, help with homework and give a kiss goodnight.

I'm under no illusions. People have bigger things on their minds right now, and rightly so. Hit hard by the pandemic, businesses will work to keep their people safe and, given the state of economy, to save on travel expenses for as long as they can. Many road warriors aren't ready to get back out there yet.

But make no mistake, business travel will come back, sooner for some than for others. Technology helps, but it will never be enough to satisfy the need to pick up the live visual cues that make for the most effective communication, for getting deals done, and for solidifying relationships that lead to long-term value.

My industry—the travel industry—is working hard to make people who need to travel now feel safe and secure, confident to walk through an airport, get on a plane, rent a car and stay in a hotel.

We're going to figure this out. And when we do, the country will get back to business, and business travelers will start flying again. At my airport, and at all the other airports around the country, we'll be ready to welcome them back. ■

BTN

BUSINESS TRAVEL NEWS

CORPORATE TRAVEL INDEX CALCULATOR

BTN's free online tool customizes our Corporate Travel Index data for your travel program. Now includes quarterly updates and risk scores for each city.

Presented By: **BTNGROUP**

Summary | Hotel | Car | Meal | Risk

U.S. Index | Non U.S. Index | Reset Filters

Data Partners: ADVITO | DVI | geosura | PRIME NUMBERS

Search Cities: Select all, Akron, OH, Albany, NY, Albuquerque, NM, Allentown, PA, Anaheim, CA, Allentown, PA, Annapolis, MD, Atlanta, GA

Hotel Tier: Luxury, Upper-Upscale, Upscale, Midscale, Economy

Car Rental Class: Full Size, Intermediate, Compact

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Select Quarter: 2018/Q4, 2019/Q1

All Cities Selected: Avg Risk Score **43** | Hotel **\$176.36** + Car Rental **\$46.97** + Meal **\$98.09** = Total Cost **\$321.41** | QoQ Change **2.99%**

City	Risk Score	Avg Hotel Cost Across Selected Tiers	Avg Car Rental Cost Across Selected Classes	Total Cost for Selected Meals	Total Daily Cost	QoQ Change
Akron, OH	48	\$140.39	\$43.23	\$86.53	\$270.13	-2.45%
Albany, NY	44	\$167.76	\$44.18	\$94.73	\$307.67	4.00%
Albuquerque, NM	37	\$127.31	\$42.48	\$89.59	\$259.32	-9.24%
Allentown, PA	54	\$145.84	\$42.54	\$89.66	\$278.04	1.58%
Anaheim, CA	81	\$215.59	\$45.81	\$109.23	\$364.73	1.34%
Atlanta, GA	65	\$198.36	\$46.36	\$106.37	\$351.09	-7.69%
Austin, TX	40	\$253.58	\$45.90	\$102.12	\$399.60	8.64%
Bakersfield, CA	42	\$143.12	\$40.58	\$81.67	\$265.37	-14.88%
Baltimore, MD	52	\$171.86	\$47.27	\$109.59	\$328.72	-9.21%
Baton Rouge, LA	50	\$141.09	\$50.98	\$90.81	\$282.88	3.70%
Biloxi, MS	54	\$136.30	\$55.23	\$87.78	\$279.31	14.54%
Birmingham, AL	36	\$154.79	\$40.79	\$89.78	\$285.36	-3.30%
Boston, MA	31	\$225.70	\$47.12	\$113.62	\$386.44	-18.89%
Buffalo, NY	44	\$162.30	\$43.83	\$88.67	\$294.80	11.83%

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