



Free as a bird

For travel flexibility, choice, control and information at our disposal, we've never had it so good, says Ramzi al Qassab of Sabre Travel Network Middle East

by Mark Lazell

IT has often been said that it is the journey, not the destination, that really matters.

While the executive who's missed a flight connection may disagree, we probably all agree that technology is helping simplify the complex art of travel. Once a world run by ticketing agents poring ponderously through reams of schedules to create itineraries, they can today be generated, and altered, in seconds from our phone. For flexibility, choice, control and information at our disposal, we've never had it so good.

But behind the customer-facing booking engines and agents are innovative technology providers, 'unsung heroes' who are simplifying the complexity of travel and transforming the whole experience.

"You can build an itinerary in seconds," says Ramzi al Qassab, the commercial director of Sabre Travel Network Middle East GCC & Global Partners, which is one of the companies behind this travel revolution. Its technology links more than 415,000 travel professionals to over 400 airlines, 175,000 hotels, car rental brands, cruise lines and other global travel suppliers. It puts more than 500 million passengers on aircraft every year.

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Ramzi al Qassab

"You can build one based on when it is cheapest to travel, the price, time, even your carbon emissions. It's fascinating that people are choosing itineraries based on their environmental ideology, for example. Choice really is driving the customer experience."

While most of us today rely on technology, and a decent Internet connection, to assist and inform in

some way or another when we're on the move, it is the millennial generation who demand nothing less than the choice and flexibility it offers. Estimates suggest that in 10 years' time roughly three quarters of corporate travelers will be a millennial, so understanding their behaviours is critical to companies like Sabre.

"It is believed some 80 per cent of millennials are not enrolled in a hotel loyalty program," Al Qassab says to emphasise the point about generational flexibility. "They're using services like Airbnb to find places to stay. They're not going to be dictated by old structures."

If we're more blasé and nonchalant about travel (and the pleasures and pains it conjures up) today, it is because of apps like TripCase, Sabre's free mobile app. Synchronising with wearable technology like Apple Watch, TripCase demonstrates not only the power of Sabre's technology to deliver vast amounts of relevant information to the traveler far quicker than traditional methods, but also the way smart watches are redefining personalised travel.

Global company Sabre sees the Middle East playing an important role in this travel revolution. Not only are the region's people more connected to the Internet than almost anywhere else on earth, its state-of-the-art airports are increasingly smart and its airlines investing heavily in in-flight technology for their modern fleets.

"All the ingredients are here for us," Al Qassab says of the Middle East, where Sabre has 27 offices in 13 countries, employing 170 people directly and which, he insists, is positively affecting lives.

"Take Iraq. We went there at the beginning of last year and experienced great success. We thought adoption [of technology] would be slow there at first, but it has been immediate. In countries like Iraq there are many ways in which technology can make life a lot better."

Making lives better through technology means understanding people's lives.

SABRE FACTS

- Sabre stands for Semi-Automated Business Research Environment
- \$120 billion worth of travel sold through Sabre per year
- 100,000 transactions per second at processed at peak times
- TripCase first travel itinerary app to give travel managers access to travellers' data
- Over 30 million trips per year managed
- More than 110,000 travel companies use TripCase

And in this case, their travel preferences, right down to whether they need an aircraft that has USB ports and WiFi.

Al Qassab says social media, where people check in to cities, hotels and restaurants in the public domain, is a good place from which to gather public data and traveler "footprints". Information is collated, and a picture of travel preferences begins to emerge - the types of place travelers visit, the food enjoyed, even musical tastes. It won't be long before your smart watch will alert you to that jazz gig near your hotel that is on while you're in town, he says.

"There's a lot of data and information that people share which our technology can analyse to better understand a traveler's footprint and personalise their travel experience via an app like TripCase," Al Qassab explains. "Our



The GCC's airports will play an important role in the global 'smart' travel revolution

partners need to ask how they can use these insights and our technology to help them improve the traveler experience.”

Partnerships are therefore a big deal. As well as driving the reservations systems of regional airlines like Gulf Air and Etihad, Sabre's technology also supports regional corporate travel powerhouses such as Kanoo Travel, Dnata, ITL and Dadabhai Travel. Sabre says its Hospitality Solutions' reservations technology, marketing and distribution software, internet marketing and e-business solutions currently generate more than \$5.85 billion in revenue each year for its customers worldwide. Other avenues are opening up too.

SABRE IN FIGURES

\$2.9bn
Company revenues 2015

12.5%
Year-on-year increase

“The personalisation of travel will open so many new revenue streams for our partners beyond just selling an airplane seat or a hotel room. We

are talking about ancillaries which will open new revenue streams. It is a phenomenal opportunity for the travel industry,” says Al Qassab.

Nowhere is Sabre's influence in this “phenomenal opportunity” more evident than in the bespoke technology it is currently developing for Kanoo Travel. Although he remains tight lipped on the details, Al Qassab promises with a confident smile that it will be a “groundbreaking initiative” changing the face of global travel.

“We are the spotlight and we are constantly shining it on the travel and tourism industry and we will transform the traveler experience,” the Sabre executive says. ■