

A: Hello, I'm Sam Brown, and welcome to today's Travel Show. With me is Amy Seder, who is a travel influencer. So, first question, Amy - what is a travel influencer?

B: My job is to work with tourism brands that pay for sponsored Instagram and blog posts. I go to a destination, take good pictures of the places for people to see on social media, write interesting pieces to accompany them, and encourage people to go and take a holiday there. It's basically a modern form of advertising.

A: But don't you have a problem? You said to me before the program that when you recently contacted one hotel in Italy, hoping for a free stay in exchange for social media exposure, you were rejected. The hotel was quite angry, and replied "Blogger infestation. Not interested".

B: That's just part of the business. Since that reply I've done a deal with a different hotel. The fact is that nowadays many people choose their holiday based on what they've seen on social media. I try to build up a group of followers on my Instagram or blog spots, recommend good places to them, then they visit.

A: Does the industry really benefit from travel influencers? Surely it must be very hard to prove there are really any benefits?

B: A PR specialist at the Japan National Tourism Organization said that they monitor the comments that people make on their posts, or when they tag other accounts. This suggests they are adding the destination to their list of places to visit. He says their calculation is that if more than 3.5% of readers engage with the blog in some way, it is influential. I have a friend in San Francisco who is an influencer, and he has more than half a million followers! I have 50,000 followers, so if 3.5% are influenced, that's about 2000 people. I think that's pretty good.

A: Isn't this approach now reaching saturation point? There are now so many wannabe bloggers and influencers, that hotels and other travel industry organizations are getting weary of constant demands for free food, free drinks, and free accommodation. Don't you feel you are something of a parasite, feeding a wonderful travelling lifestyle of smart hotels and beautiful places, on the generosity of the hotel and restaurant owners?

B: You're forgetting that this is a commercial exchange, not a freebie. Often bloggers can promote products that might be overlooked by more conventional means.

A: And what about the problem of fraudsters? There was recently a company in the Maldives which rented luxury properties; but they have terminated all their influencer marketing programs after getting countless requests from fraudulent influencers. Some influencers also get very aggressive, demanding free food, and so on, in a very unpleasant way. I even read about an ice cream truck owner in Los Angeles who was furious about constant demands for handouts. Earlier this year he announced he intended to charge influencers double!

B: Well, of course every profession has these kinds of problems. It's disappointing to hear this is happening, because it has extremely negative effects on the whole tourism industry. We have to try to prevent unethical work practices, and the kind of self-entitlement attitude some influencers have. But when the influencer and a tourism board develop a real partnership, the results can be excellent for everyone. Influencers bring new perspectives and reach an international audience.

A: All sounds a bit too super-optimistic for me.

B: Here's another specific example. The US manager for the Qatar National Tourism Council says influencers have been an asset in promoting his destination: with social media on the rise for planning travel, influencer partnerships are positive. Influencers can be also be beneficial when they promote lesser known destinations. We don't need more mass tourism!

A: Still, for me, trying to persuade other people to give me a free holiday isn't a great way to earn a living - but it's your choice, Amy!

#### Summary

The discussion concerns the role of travel influencers on social media. These are people who persuade a hotel, restaurant or other travel organization to provide them with free food and hospitality. The influencer then writes a positive blog, Instagram post, or other social media outlet, to encourage people to visit. The interviewer in this radio program is skeptical about the value and the ethics of such a profession. The travel influencer points out the many advantages that tourism organizations see in a good partnership with them. More and more people use social media in their choice of travel destinations.

#### Questions

1. Could you see 'travel influencer' as a possible career yourself?
2. Is it your experience, or that of any of your friends, that social media has influenced your choice of a travel destination - or perhaps the purchase of another product?
3. Do you feel this job is ethical - being given something for free to promote it to others?
4. What kind of threats are posed by mass tourism?