

News & Notes

TRAVEL • MANUFACTURER • RETAIL

TRAVEL

United States Passports Weakening



A country's passport is considered powerful if it allows travel abroad with no visa required. According to London-based consulting firm Henley & Partners and the International Air Transport Association, which maintains the world's

largest database of travel information, the U.S. passport is getting weaker. On the list of nearly 200 countries surveyed, the U.S. passport ranks sixth, tied with the United Kingdom permitting travel to 185 countries visa-free.

The U.S. passport has slipped consistently since 2015, when it shared the top spot with the U.K. The American focus on border tightening and an unwillingness to revise visa policies, as well as other countries' openness to visa-waiver agreements with diplomatic allies, is cited as the reason for the passport's slide. Atop the 2019 list is Japan, signaling its positive diplomatic relationships with many countries.

SOURCE: CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER



Airlines Struggle to Court Millennials

Little more than a year since the airline debuted, the millennial-focused Joon, an airline brand from Air France, will close. Meanwhile, in an effort to court the same young audience, Indonesia's Garuda Airlines is adding live in-flight music to its routes. The airline began the 10- to 15-minute "mini concerts" in January for up-and-coming talent to provide acoustic concerts to the captive audience – barring turbulence of course. Southwest Airlines tested a similar concert in 2017 in partnership with Warner Music Nashville, but suspended the project after receiving passengers' mixed reviews. SOURCES: USA TODAY, FORTUNE

Hotels are Increasingly Calling Standard Rooms Suites

Writing for The Points Guy, travel expert Richard Kerr says an increasing number of hoteliers are rebranding standard rooms as suites. The issue causes travelers surprise when they book what they believe to be a traditional suite – a single guest room with a "solid separation" between bedroom and living area – and find instead a standard hotel room with a couple of chairs adjacent to the bed. "It's time for hotels to recalibrate on what they deem a suite," Kerr says. The separation between bedroom and living

room is critical for traveling families in particular, Kerr says, and properties are making it harder to select appropriate rooms by throwing around the term "suite" too easily.



Until hotels develop an actual standard for suites, Kerr suggests travelers take care to examine the floor plans of various room types or call a property's front desk to inquire about the nature of the rooms. Some chains, such as Hyatt House, Residence Inn and many vacation properties, make finding true suites a snap.

SOURCE: THE POINTS GUY

Google Offers Hotel Discounts

Members of Google One, a cloud storage subscription service, can now receive hotel discounts worth hundreds of dollars – discounts that are only available via Google. The search giant has partnered directly with hotels to offer special rates up to 40% off. To see the discount rates simply search for hotels via Google on a mobile device and look for the exclusive Google One member prices that appear in a multicolored box atop participating hotel listings.

Google One membership starts at \$2.99/month, though users with massive storage needs can find plans in excess of \$300/month and hotel discounts remain the same at every level. While airfare discounts aren't included, Google One service can also help travelers compare airfare to determine if they're getting a good deal. SOURCE: TRAVEL + LEISURE

Cloudz Partners with GNC

SNI, the owner of travel accessory brand Cloudz, recently announced its exclusive agreement to distribute GNC products to travel retail. Cloudz is working with GNC to bring daily packs of its best-selling travel supplements to the market with custom displays in a variety of options. Cloudz will focus on GNC's proven, best-selling supplements which provide solutions for people on the go.



Cloudz will be bringing GNC health and wellness products to its travelling customers.

SOURCE: SNI

LiteGear Luggage Getting Love

LiteGear's luggage has been getting lots of love. The Rolling Mobile Pro Underseater was recently a featured product on *The Doctors*, a syndicated television show produced by Dr. Phil McGraw. The versatile, well-designed carry-on was provided to every audience member in attendance at a December taping of the show. Featuring RFID blocking pockets and a hybrid backpack/briefcase/rolling style, the Rolling Mobile Pro Underseater was designed to fit easily into airline overhead bins or under a seat. Recipients of the bag are sure to appreciate the flexibility of its design.

In early December, influencer Ramsey Qubein gave a shout-out to the Mobile Pro's low weight, generous storage and impressive composition in a



review for *Practical Travel Gear*. "What really impresses me (besides the eco-friendly focus)," Qubein wrote, "is that they offer a satisfaction guarantee that is rather simple. If there is ever a problem with the bag, you can email the company so that they can repair or replace the bag. There are no complicated forms or receipts you have to mail in, which tells me something about the faith they have in the durability of their products."

SOURCE: LITEGEAR

Carlton Coming to the U.S.

For four decades Carlton Luggage has produced premium, well-crafted luggage for sale in more than 60 countries, and the brand is now poised to enter the U.S. market. With its roots in Great Britain, the brand today includes a full collection of premium soft- and hard-sided luggage, each with Carlton's unique styling, wide range of colors, textures and fabrics.

SOURCE: CARLTON

Hontus Milano News

Luggage maker Hontus Milano Group has opened its new global sales headquarters in the heart of New York's Fifth Avenue.

The company has also launched new brands and is expanding into additional categories, including umbrellas and soft bags. Its Mia Toro brand has produced a new collaboration with French-American painter Duaiv, best known for his brightly colored depictions of sailboats, horse races and bustling markets in France and America.

SOURCE: HONTUS MILANO GROUP



Mia Toro has launched a new collection in collaboration with Duaiv, a French-American painter best known for his brightly-colored depictions of sailboats, horse races, and bustling markets in France and America.

VoyagerBlue Ups Its Patent Protection

After receiving skeptical feedback on the strength of the patent for its line of smart wallets, smart purses and travel accessories, VoyagerBlue – acting on the advice of its patent attorney – made the difficult decision to submit its patent to the United States Patent Office for re-examination. This risky move could have resulted in the patent being rendered invalid, however one year later the patent office reissued VoyagerBlue's patent, providing tighter coverage and what amounts to greater patent protection for its RFID shielding and transmission capabilities as deployed in wallets, bags and clothing. The company is seeking well-established distributors to deliver its smart wallets to global markets.

SOURCE: VOYAGERBLUE

Eagle Creek Wants You to Quit Your Job

Studies show that American workers fail to use more than 700-million paid vacation days each year. Travel brand Eagle Creek wants to encourage more people to take advantage of those available hours and then some. "Why not quit your job?" the company suggests with its new promotion that offers an all-expenses paid two- to three-week adventure to five lucky quitters (who, according to the contest's fine print, are not required to leave their jobs but do need the flexibility to take at least two weeks off).



On January 30th, Eagle Creek launched its nationwide search for five young working professionals who will be judged by their answers to

one simple question: "If you could quit your job tomorrow and travel anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?" A panel of travel experts will choose the five lucky winners after auditions in eight U.S. cities and via Instagram submissions. Eagle Creek will also provide winners with the tools to quit: a pre-made PowerPoint presentation for the boss, a pre-written letter of resignation and some fun out-of-office email responses. For more information visit eaglecreek.com/quityourjob.

SOURCE: EAGLE CREEK

Retailers Can Put Unwanted Merchandise to Good Use

Corporate social responsibility programs are increasingly popular among companies that want to do good for their communities. Commonly, these programs are built around fundraisers and volunteerism, but in-kind product donations can also be beneficial – putting products to good use as well as helping retailers to move unwanted overstock, obsolete products and discontinued merchandise, and free up valuable warehouse space.

These donations are tax deductible, and C corporations can actually deduct up to twice the cost of donated merchandise thanks to little known IRS tax code 170(3) (3) that provides for deducting the cost of the donated inventory plus half the difference between that cost and its fair market price.

Gary C. Smith, president and CEO of the National Association for the Exchange of Industrial Resources, suggests retailers look to join a gifts-in-kind organization – licensed 501c3 nonprofits that collect a variety of merchandise and redistribute it to charities, churches and schools. To find a quality gifts-in-kind organization, look for one that does not charge membership or donation fees, accepts a variety of donations at almost any time, provides proper tax documentation and shares its annual results publicly.

SOURCE: NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE EXCHANGE OF INDUSTRIAL RESOURCES

Retail Trends to Watch in 2019

Retailers are getting better, faster and smarter – particularly brick and mortar stores in their fight against the domination of Amazon. That’s the message from Coresight Research, which has outlined ways retailers will continue to leverage technology to reinvent the retail experience in 2019. A new approach to the fundamentals of physical stores is central to surviving this unfamiliar landscape, and it will begin in major American cities as big box retailers refurbish stores and add technology to urban flagships.

Other trends include: “fast retail,”

which will have shorter leases, shared spaces and short-term stores to offer flexibility and resilience; the continued integration of online and offline retail; artificial intelligence will help stores make better decisions regarding pricing and inventory, as well as to provide more personalized offerings; consumers will continue to embrace conscientious consumption, choosing retailers who are ethical, sustainable and socially engaged; and shoppers will favor inclusive offerings such as plus-sized fashions and casual styles over goods that are particularly exclusive and aspirational.

SOURCE: CHAIN STORE AGE

Welcome to Paid Loyalty Programs

In an effort to add an air of distinction and exclusivity to their brands, as well as to compete with the success of Amazon’s Prime membership service, an increasing number of North American retailers are introducing paid rewards programs. Lululemon, CVS and Loblaw are among the brands testing out pay-to-play loyalty programs in an aim to make cus-



tomers feel special with perks such as direct telephone access to a pharmacist (CVS), free clothing (Lululemon) and free grocery pickup and delivery (Loblaw). Because once-special incentives such as birthday gifts and free upgrades are now considered standard, more retailers will likely begin implementing fee-based loyalty programs this year.

SOURCE: FORBES

Retailers Relying on Mobile Storage

An increasing number of U.S. retailers are relying on mobile storage – truck trailers that are rented for inventory warehousing. Transportation equipment lessor Milestone Equipment Holdings launched a dedicated mobile warehousing and storage business in 2018 to accommodate the increasing inventory of major American retailers. The service parks trailers on warehouse lots or behind storefronts until the glut of imported goods is cleared from distribution centers.

Retailers typically fill up warehouse space annually to stock up for holiday sales but the issue was aggravated during the recent holiday season as many companies boosted imports in advance of Chinese tariffs that were originally expected in January. U.S. warehouse vacancy stands at 4.3%, the lowest level in nearly four decades. Mobile storage offers a less permanent, less expensive solution to a temporary challenge, which could help offset the hit retailers are likely to take if they discount goods in order to reduce inventory quickly in the first quarter of 2019.

SOURCE: WALL STREET JOURNAL

Retailers See Returns as a Growing Concern

Customers return just 5% to 10% of in-store purchases but up to 40% of online purchases – and that’s a growing concern for retailers as they struggle against the mounting trillion-dollar problem of expensive returns. Many retailers throw away more than one quarter of their returns; more than 5 billion pounds of goods each year end up in landfills. That could double as online sales increase.

Companies are springing up to help retailers address the issue, such as Happy Returns, Optoro and B-Stock solutions, which help retailers to inspect, restock or liquidate the three-quarters of returned goods that can be resold. The return process has gotten more complicated as well, and the technologies of these support companies are becoming ever more crucial in addressing the growing problem that stems from not being able to touch and try on products before purchasing online. These companies aim to reduce retailers’ return costs by more than 25%.

SOURCE: CNBC