

Winners of the Business Travel Journalism Awards 2020 on the year that caught everyone on the fly

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Emma Woudhouse: Happy New Year, and welcome to Business Travel on the fly, the monthly podcast that dives into issues affecting those of us who spend time up in the air, out of the office and away from home on work trips. I'm Emma Woodhouse, we're now firmly on to 2020. And what a year that was, when business traveler meetings and events almost grind to a halt last year. CWT ran its annual Business Travel Journalism Awards, in partnership with the rather brilliant awards management platform Judgify. For the first time in 17 year history of the BTJAs, we went entirely virtual and casting it globally, we didn't know quite what to expect. But as entries came in from Seattle to Singapore, our panel of judges were reminded of the critical role of our media in framing and shaping our reality at a time of crisis. I think Holly Patrick, winner of Best Newcomer in the Meetings and Incentives category says it better than anyone.

Holly Patrick: As a journalist, I've always wanted to tell other people's stories, and this year especially has been about ensuring nobody is left out, and that everybody's voice is made equally as important. 2020 has also taught me the undeniable need to check in with the audience that we serve, and to ensure that we're producing the content that they want. In a year where the meetings and events industry has been largely neglected. It's essential to give a platform and a voice to those who have an opinion and those who are striving for positive outcomes from what has been a very tragic year.

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Emma Woudhouse: In trying to make sense of the year that was and figure out what on earth to expect next, it's the very basics that matter most. Listening to people and telling their stories. So, as we all reflect on the past and plan for the future, we're kicking off the air in podcast by turning the medium on its makers. In this episode, we asked winners of the Business Travel Journalism Awards 2020 to reflect on the past, and predict how the world will change in 2021. Let's start with what we all need first, though, some good news. With a glimpse of light on issues like sustainability. Hannah Brandler thinks so. Hannah won Features Journalist of the year in the Destination category for her piece in Business Traveller. Let's listen to her.

Hannah Brandler: I think we will definitely be traveling this in the future, but more sustainably each time we go. So rail travel will definitely be more popular with airlines already cutting domestic flights to encourage people to travel by train. And green taxes on aviation are increasingly under discussion, which will be another financial blow to the industry. During the lockdown we saw cities that were suffering from overtourism before the pandemic recover. So

Venice, for instance, so its canals become a lot cleaner. And I think this will have an impact on the way people think and travel with cities like Venice starting to put stricter regulations on the number of tourists allowed, while travelers themselves will also not be as keen to visit areas that are overpopulated because we're so used to the notion of social distancing now, that it might feel somewhat uncomfortable for a while. And so perhaps we'll see a rise in travel to less well known locations instead of the top 10 most famous cities in the world.

Emma Woudhouse: Holly Patrick also agrees she predicts that the rise in online events will be a boon to sustainability.

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Holly Patrick: This year, we've seen a rapid transition to online events. And while the promise of a vaccine, at least in the UK, does spell the return of physical events, the value of having an online option has really been proven this year. I believe in online element will be vital to the success of any meeting in the future. But it needs to be an offering that is as good as the physical event and not just a compromise. In turn, I also think that the rise of online events will propel the sustainability discussion and get delegates asking whether in person attendance is entirely necessary. And what value meeting in person will have over meeting online. The increase in selectivity will decrease the volume of flights taken by delegates and perhaps even give rise to the dawn of slow travel. Ensure attendees will become more selective and planners will have to prove the value of events in order to attract physical audiences, while ensuring the online offering isn't a second priority.

Emma Woudhouse: But what do these changes mean for the recovery of business travel? Let's listen to Ben Slater, of Which? Travel and winner of Scoop of the Year.

Ben Slater: We've seen the impacts that lower emissions have had on things like air quality this year. And the pandemic has also shown that virtual meetings can sometimes be as effective as face to face ones. So I think there's going to be a fine line between balancing those sustainability concerns with a travel industry that's sort of desperate to get back to the way things were and make up for the lost sales from this year.

Emma Woudhouse: It's clear that we're facing massive changes to business travel meetings and events on the world of work. As we get closer to return to some kind of normal, we asked our winners what they hope will become lasting legacies. Jo Rhodes of Which? Travel is winner of Features Journalist of the Year in the Air category.

Jo Rhodes: It's fair to say I have a love hate relationship with Zoom. It's definitely no substitute for normal Human Interaction, but it has given us all a lot more freedom, even if that's just wearing your comfiest joggers from the waist down. I hope that now we've proved we can work remotely and get stuff done, that that flexibility will continue post pandemic, everyone, I think would have a much better work life balance, if we only had to be in the office one or two days a week. And I think in turn that would inspire a lot more creativity and just general happiness. The commute is one of the few casualties of 2020 that I can say with confidence, I haven't missed one bit.

Emma Woudhouse: Trevor Baker, also of Which? Travel, won the gong for Features Journalist of the Year in the Accommodation category. He's also learned his sentiments. Let's listen to Trevor.

Trevor Baker: Next year, I hope that there will be something that we've missed over the last year, which is certainty, just the kind of basic thing of being able to think: if I booked a flight in two months time, will I be able to go if the flight is canceled? Will I have to kind of fight to get my money back? Will there be additional problems? I think in the past we were just yeah, if you book a flight you're going unless something happens to you personally, but the flight will go. Everything will carry on and that hasn't been the case. So I mean, that's my hope that the future that once again that we have some kind of certainty of reliable travel as we've had in the past.

Emma Woudhouse: At the close of last year, Andy Hoskins, editor of Business Travel News Europe, the publication that won both Editor of the year and Editorial team of the year, told us how important it is for governments to work with the industry on recovery at 2021 and beyond.

Andy Hoskins: I think the establishment of an all party parliamentary group for business travel in September has been a bigger theme in this year, giving our sector a dedicated voice in UK Parliament. So I'd extend my congratulations to all those involved in that. Hopefully the group will take on board the views of those it listens to and that it properly understands the acutely challenging situation the industry faces. Unfortunately, the government's latest announcement around business travel, the exemption from quarantine for high value business travelers returning from destinations not on the list of travel corridors, of course came with an abundance of vague terms and conditions as it bids to balance the spread of COVID 19 with economic recovery, which is of course heavily dependent on the return of business travel. With the prospects of widely available vaccines now tantalizingly close, there is at least optimism that our industry couldn't really get going again in 2021.

Emma Woudhouse: As we see light at the end of the tunnel, Hannah Brander is with us on this one.

Hannah: I think for me, both in terms of work and leisure trips, travel has become so much more important and satisfying in the wake of COVID-19. It's so easy to take what you have for granted when you don't realize that the prospect of it will disappear. And so day trips to different parts of the country when it was allowed, eating out at restaurants and cafes, going to museums, all these things felt so much more special. And I think everyone definitely feels more appreciative of these experiences. Now that the nostalgia of winning at zoom quizzes, or losing, or mastering time consuming recipes in lockdown has worn off. It seems to be the same amongst my peers, though I do imagine that as soon as travel becomes the norm again, we'll quickly forget about the trials of 2020 and return to normal. I do hope however, that we make an effort to let the experience sink in, to relax about stressful elements of travel and also above all to take into consideration the enormous amount of thought and work that the staff do to put you at ease and improve your stay.

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Emma Woudhouse: We're not out of the woods yet. But there's hope on the horizon and lasting and positive change to look forward to. Stick with us as we navigate the future. Subscribe to business travel on the fly on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Google Play and wherever you get your podcast. For now, hats off, and one day soon face masks off to the amazing winners of the Business Travel Journalism Awards, who help us make sense of it all.