

The evolution of traveller apps

XL Travel rolls out
unified platform

How EZ Shuttle supports
the modern travel agent

AI hotel bookings still
need the human touch

New toolkit for Envoyage ITCs

Helping TCs market smarter

Travel technology

AI is transforming travel operations – discovery, air ticket distribution, booking, payment, communications and carbon tracking. Savvy agents are genning up, taking it on board and enjoying the benefits.

Traveller apps become smart travel companions

ABIGAIL KENT

IN THE hyper-connected, always-on market, traveller apps have transitioned from a luxury to an everyday expectation. Nowadays, travel agencies are investing in proprietary traveller apps with more functionality. Beyond storing itineraries and travel documents, many of these apps now incorporate AI, real-time travel updates and direct communication with clients.

Travel News spoke to industry players to find out how their apps are changing the way agencies support travellers.



Marc de Jager

Digital companion

Launched in 2017, Travel Counsellors' myTC app brings together the most important elements of a traveller's journey in one place, while helping agents stay connected with clients.

"From receiving quotes and making payments to accessing itineraries, travel documents and real-time travel alerts, the app keeps travellers informed, organised and connected to their dedicated Travel Counsellor throughout their journey," said **Marc de Jager**, Business Development Manager at Travel Counsellors.

The app sends real-time notifications for flight delays, schedule changes and boarding gate updates, while allowing

travellers to manage their personal details and travel preferences.

While AI currently only supports Travel Counsellors' advisers through its proprietary TC Co-Pilot assistant, De Jager said the company planned to expand its use to myTC. Future updates will focus on personalised recommendations, travel inspiration and trip-planning tools.

Business and leisure

XLGO is XL Travel's traveller app designed for both business and leisure travellers. It combines itinerary management with corporate travel tools such as duty-of-care features, travel policy management and expense tracking.

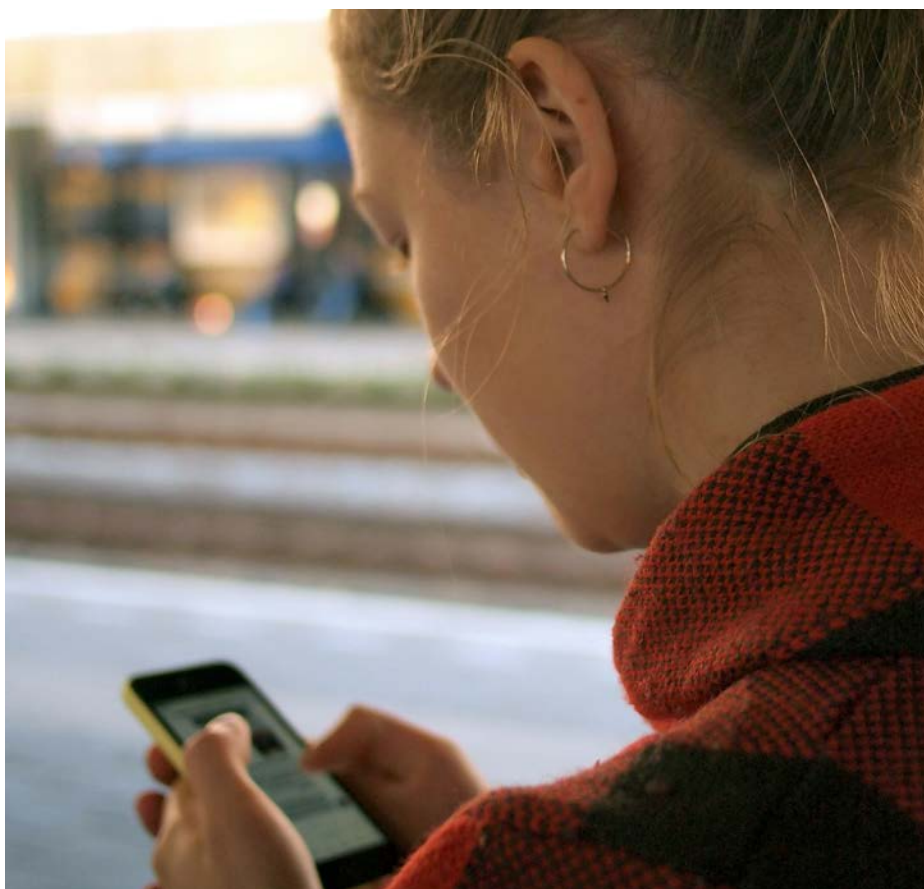
"XLGO covers the full trip lifecycle," said **Franz von Wielligh**, Head of Innovation and Member Support at XL Travel.

Travellers can access flight information, online check-in, airport maps, accommodation details and real-time alerts for delays, cancellations and gate changes.

"It is not an 'AI app' outright, but several features are intelligence-driven rather than static," said Von Wielligh. He pointed to Trip Genius, which generates suggested itineraries based on traveller preferences, available activities, their popularity and location.

The app can also predict flight delays, import booking confirmations automatically and send personalised notifications based on a traveller's location, itinerary or travel stage.

For agencies and corporate clients, XLGO consolidates GDS and off-GDS bookings into a single itinerary, regardless of booking source, while also supporting trip approvals, expense tracking, travel policy compliance and visa requirements. Duty-of-care features include GPS



Traveller apps have changed the way agents support clients during travel. Photo: Unsplash

traveller tracking and real-time risk alerts.

"It works offline, supports 10 languages, and can be white-labelled with each client's or member agency's branding," said Von Wielligh. He said the white-labelled branding helped agencies maintain an ongoing presence with travellers, as clients continue to see the agency's branding whenever they use the app.

Agencies can also communicate directly with travellers through personalised push notifications. Von Wielligh said XL Travel recently integrated the SARS Traveller Declaration link into the app, allowing agencies to remind travellers to complete the form before departure.

AI-powered

FCM has embedded its AI assistant, Sam, throughout its travel

platform rather than offering it as a standalone chatbot.

"Sam is the intelligence layer running through everything FCM does," said **Mummy Mafojane**, GM at FCM South Africa.



Mummy Mafojane

"Sam knows each company's travel policy, traveller profiles and past trips, which means a traveller not entitled to business class will simply never see a premium fare

recommended."

Through the FCM mobile app, travellers can book and manage trips, change flights, request upgrades, extend hotel stays, and access travel policy and visa information.

"If human expertise or after-hours travel support is needed, the traveller can connect with an FCM expert through the app, with full context intact," she said, allowing travellers to continue their conversation without having to repeat themselves.

Mafojane said information from each trip was fed back into the traveller's profile, helping to inform future booking decisions.

Travel managers can also generate custom reports on spending, policy compliance and carbon emissions, while real-time risk intelligence helps organisations respond quickly to incidents affecting travellers.

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XL Travel rolls out unified platform

XL TRAVEL has rolled out a unified workflow platform that brings multiple booking and operational functions into a single environment as the consortium steps up its investment in technology for its members.

Franz von Wielligh, Head of Innovation and Member Support at XL Travel Head Office, told *Travel News* that the past year had been the group's busiest yet on the technology front.

"The headline development is a newly launched unified workflow platform that brings agent workspace, corporate booking, mid-back office, OTA and marketplace functionality into a single environment, drawing on GDS, NDC, LCC, and aggregator content simultaneously," said Von Wielligh.

He said this was a significant shift from agents having to jump between systems depending on the content type they needed.

The new platform forms part of a wider series of upgrades



Franz von Wielligh

introduced over the past year. XL Travel has also expanded access to out-of-point-of-sale fare sourcing for international routes, introduced a virtual card payments solution designed to reduce IATA guarantee exposure, and added a real-time GDS error-checking tool that prompts consultants before tickets are issued.

Booking data and workflow automation tools have also been made available across the membership.

Von Wielligh said the consortium's approach was to use technology to reduce the administrative burden without weakening the consultant's role.

"The philosophy is simple: technology should handle the admin so the agent can focus on the client."

He added that XL Travel's error-checking tool was designed to catch compliance issues before they became problems, while its client-facing mobile platform helps keep travellers connected to itineraries and check-in processes through the agency rather than via airline apps.

"A centralised communications hub gives every consultant real-time access to private fares, supplier contacts and market alerts. A lead management system connects our central marketing spend directly to member revenue opportunities," he said.

"None of this replaces the consultant. It just means they spend less time on

screens and more time on relationships."

Von Wielligh said Travolution, XL Travel's primary booking platform, remained central to members' day-to-day operations, with its role now expanding.

"The key development is how it now bridges content types, sitting across traditional GDS content, NDC fares and hotel aggregator content in a single workflow. Agents are no longer limited to what their GDS surfaces on a given route.

"NDC content, which is increasingly where airlines are placing their best pricing and ancillaries, is accessible in the same environment. We have also been running dedicated NDC and fares training through our academy to make sure consultants can actually take advantage of what the platform offers, because the technology is only as useful as the people using it."

He added that XL Travel's virtual card solution was a practical response to

growing compliance pressure around how GDS ticketing interacted with modern card authentication requirements.

Pace

Von Wielligh pointed to the pace of the change in AI-driven booking behaviour following the group's visit to the Travel Technology Show in London.

"From the show the direction is clear – agentic AI and the shift in how travellers discover and book is moving faster than most people expected. Our job is to make sure members are positioned for it."

He said the stack of technology tools that XL Travel had built was strong and ever evolving but it only delivered value when members actually engaged with it.

"Most of what we offer costs members nothing to access. The gap is usually fear of change, not cost. Our training academy, our communications hub, our leisure booking tools, our lead management system – they're all there and free to use."



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How EZ Shuttle supports the modern travel agent

THE travel industry continues to change quickly but one thing stays the same: travel agents need partners they can rely on and tools that make their work easier.

“At EZ Shuttle we build technology with a clear purpose – to solve real, everyday challenges for agents,” **Jaqi van Vuren**, EZ Shuttle Sales Director, told *Travel News*.

One of EZ Shuttle’s biggest recent developments is the full roll-out of its Agent Dashboard.

“This gives travel partners one simple place to manage their bookings from start to finish. Agents can quote, book and track transfers in real time, with clear visibility of trip progress. This reduces the need for email follow-ups and helps agents respond to clients faster and with more confidence,” said Van Vuren.



Jaqi van Vuren

The company has also expanded its real-time booking capability into the inbound tourism space through OneAfrica, its dedicated B2B transport solution designed specifically for the travel trade.

Digitisation

“High-demand lodge-to-airport routes are now being digitised, including the automatic calculation of gate fees and other

route-specific costs. What was previously a manual process can now be done online in minutes within a trade-only booking environment, ensuring agents keep full control over pricing, packaging and their client relationships,” said Van Vuren.

Behind the scenes, EZ Shuttle continues to invest in its operational systems.

“These improvements support better route planning, fleet management and driver communication, helping us deliver a more consistent and reliable service.”

Agent commission

From a commercial perspective, EZ Shuttle’s automated commission system remains a strong benefit.

“Agents receive their commission payments and reports automatically each month – no need to invoice or follow up,” said Van Vuren.



EZ Shuttle’s systems are all supported by a 24/7 reservations team.Photo: Magnific

Looking ahead, EZ Shuttle is developing a voucher management system to reduce manual work and improve processing speed and accuracy.

“While technology is key, we know that travel is still a people-driven industry. That is why all

our systems are supported by a 24/7 reservations team. By combining practical technology with human support, we aim to give travel agents better control, clear visibility and the confidence to deliver excellent service to their clients.”



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Prelene Abrahams
Travel Counsellor since 2008

AI hotel bookings still need the human touch

KIRAN MOLLOY

MORE and more hotel brands and OTAs are looking to establish direct integrations with popular AI search engines. However, the realisation of end-to-end agentic commerce for hotel bookings is being delayed by a trust deficit from users and limited AI-optimised product content.

Hotels, OTAs and e-commerce platforms have been working towards seeing agentic technology enact all parts of the travel booking process, from search to autonomous payments.

For example, in 2023 Google's Gemini integrated its Google Travel suite, including Google Flights and Google Hotels. In the same year, Expedia and Booking.com also initiated limited direct integration with ChatGPT.

Unmatched ability

Right now, AI search engines can provide live pricing and availability data and accommodation product breakdowns.

Lasse Vinther, MD of Automation Architects, told *Travel News* that AI's improving search engine capabilities

were a valuable tool for travel agents.

"AI agents' ability to research complex purchases is unmatched, especially with the inroads of direct integration from certain e-commerce platforms," said Vinther.

"Agentic tools can automate the search-compare-enter-checkout drudgery, freeing advisers for high-value curated trips."

So, while AI searches were already driving up suppliers' site visits in the planning phase, it currently directed users to the supplier website for them to make the final decision and booking transaction, he explained,



Lasse Vinther

noting that this was unlikely to change any time soon.

"While AI will initially be seen as a product information source, actual conversions will be lacking due to trust and compliance issues when completing the actual transaction," noted Vinther.

The lack of trust in agentic search engines and agentic commerce stems from consumer concerns about inaccurate and biased search results, as well as those about having an AI entity to manage the payment process.

Real-time data

Vinther said many suppliers, OTAs and e-commerce sites were not being set up for agentic searches – their products and services were not being placed in data structures that were readable to AI.

"In the hotel and accommodation industry particularly, hotels' property management systems, central reservation systems and customer relationship management data is displayed in inconsistent formats, making it difficult for large language models (LLMs) to aggregate the data for searches."



Users are not yet switching to agentic AI bookings and payments due to a trust deficit. Photo: Pexels

He explained that this could result in the LLMs producing very limited search results for the user's prompt, potentially limiting their options.

Additionally, LLMs rely heavily on real-time data to ensure that they can provide accurate information about a hotel's occupancy and room availability, but this information is not always readable to AI without in-depth integrations.

"AI booking assistants need up-to-the-second accuracy on what rooms are available. If an AI relies on older, saved data, it might tell a customer a room is available when it is actually sold out, which is a mistake travel agents cannot tolerate," he said.

Biased

Another big concern among users is that LLMs will provide biased search results based on paid partnerships and more extensive integrations with particular hotel brands.

"Ranking bias and transparency are unresolved, but it is being increasingly regulated, particularly in the EU. AI answers can narrow choice to a handful of options, raising concerns about paid placement and hidden kickbacks. Research shows that the same OTAs that already dominate SEO will dominate LLM search results. Direct integration deals are mostly with those dominant OTAs which can offer commissions between 15% and 30% (to the LLMs directing traffic)," said Vinther.

"Without transparency rules, AI answers could embed paid placement or preferred-partner bias."

However, Vinther emphasised that if the travel agent user had experience with AI they could curate prompts that instructed the AI according to their preferred partners and booking rules.

"Agents can direct which brands they want to search and, if the brand is not blocking AI, then these rules created in their prompts will

be adhered to. For B2B sales, this is where custom AI agents are particularly useful," said Vinther, noting that more consortiums were developing this kind of tool.

Autonomous payments

LLMs have not successfully implemented systems that enable users to finalise travel product payments autonomously, partly due to user distrust and because of complex supply chains in the industry.

Visa's *Stay Secure* study, conducted by Wakefield Research and published in June this year, found that while more consumers were embracing AI to assist them with comparing products and prices, only 23% of South African consumers surveyed would trust an agentic AI to complete a financial transaction.

Vinther said most LLMs were only now finalising some of the very first standards for AI to manage transactions, with Google in the lead. In late 2025, Google announced a massive project to let AI handle bookings, which saw major hotel groups like Marriott, IHG, Wyndham, Choice Hotels and certain OTAs join. And, as of mid-2026, Google has started testing fully autonomous bookings in small pilots.

Other LLMs have had to pull back on scaled direct AI booking programmes. In March this year, OpenAI admitted to *Skift* that travel booking was simply too complex for an AI to handle. This instance set a precedent in the LLM industry, seeing providers set their focus on enabling improved search-and-compare results for travel products first.

"Most of the LLMs have decided to focus on supporting travel planning and inspiration. Almost all the LLMs still hand the actual booking back to the supplier's or the OTA's own checkout systems," said Vinther.

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Envoyage brings new tech tools to SA

FOR South Africa's growing community of ITCs, the gap between what clients expect and what a one-person operation can realistically deliver has always been central to the model.

Envoyage, the global network of independent travel advisers backed by Flight Centre Travel Group, is narrowing that gap and two recent additions to its technology ecosystem are doing much of the heavy lifting.

Product Showroom

Fragmentation is the most significant productivity killer of independent agency life. With supplier sites, cross-referencing tools, browser tabs multiplying by the hour – time that belongs with clients ends up lost in logistics.

Product Showroom, accessible through Envoyage's Home platform, consolidates the network's preferred supplier deals, exclusive offers and recommended products into a live, curated feed, validated directly with Envoyage's preferred partners.

Members can search, filter, and compare through a consistent page structure,



Chantal Gouws

surfacing high-value opportunities and matching the right product to the right client without the usual legwork.

"An independent model has no foundation without preferred partners," says **Chantal Gouws**, GM of Envoyage South Africa. "Product Showroom is where that foundation becomes immediately usable – every day in every booking."

Travefy

Alongside Product Showroom, Envoyage has formalised a global partnership with Travefy, now available to South African

members as the network's preferred itinerary and proposal platform.

Travefy's drag-and-drop builder allows advisers to produce polished, branded itineraries and proposals with destination content, AI-assisted writing and smart import from PDFs and emails. Clients receive a branded companion app with real-time flight notifications, in-app messaging and day-by-day documentation – the kind of experience that typically requires a far larger operation to produce.

Both platforms are accessible via single sign-on through Home, keeping the toolkit centralised and logins to a minimum.

A full toolkit

Product Showroom and Travefy are the newest additions to an ecosystem that has been built deliberately over time.

Envoyage's Home platform already gives South African ITCs access to HELiO, a one-stop leisure booking tool spanning over one million hotels and thousands of activities worldwide – alongside TPCconnects, the NDC-powered



Envoyage's latest technology additions are designed to help ITCs work more efficiently, giving South African advisers easier access to supplier content, streamlined booking tools and polished client-facing itineraries. Photo: Magnific

air distribution platform that unlocks exclusive fares and richer airline content.

For back-office operations, Tramada automates itinerary management, accounting and reporting, turning what is typically a resource drain into a genuine growth enabler.

"Together, these tools don't just support the independent model; they make a compelling case for it," says Gouws.

She adds that new technology only delivers value

when advisers actually know how to use it.

"Envoyage's structured onboarding programme, covering everything from mid-office operations in Tramada to marketing through iReach, ensures members are operational from day one, with ongoing support available as their business evolves.

South African ITCs have never had more reason to back themselves – or better tools to do it with," says Gouws.

Helping TCs market smarter

RUNNING a successful travel business has never been more exciting or more demanding, according to Travel Counsellors. Today's travel professionals are expected to be travel experts, content creators, marketers, customer service specialists and business owners.

For many aspiring business owners, marketing is one of the biggest concerns. Questions like "Where will I find the time?", "What do I post on social media?" or "Do I need to become a marketing expert?" are common.

"At Travel Counsellors, we've built an integrated technology platform and an expert support network that takes the hard work out of marketing, so our Travel Counsellors can focus on what they do best – building relationships, creating unforgettable travel experiences and growing thriving businesses," **Bianca Jones**, Recruitment Manager,

Franchise Sales, told *Travel News*.

She said the company's investment in technology wasn't about replacing the human touch – it was about enhancing it.

"Travel Counsellors invests heavily in technology designed specifically for TCs. At the heart of this ecosystem is Phenix, our award-winning proprietary platform that brings together CRM, booking, customer communications and marketing in one seamless experience. Rather than juggling multiple systems, TCs have everything they need to manage and grow their business in one place."

AI assistant

One of Travel Counsellors' latest innovations is TC Co-Pilot, an AI-powered assistant developed in-house specifically for TCs and fully integrated into Phenix.

Jones said that, unlike generic AI tools, TC Co-Pilot

understood the travel industry and the way TCs worked.

"Need inspiration for a social media post? Looking for help creating marketing content? Want to research a destination or build an itinerary more efficiently? TC Co-Pilot helps with the time-consuming tasks, enabling TCs to respond faster, market more consistently and spend more time delivering exceptional personal service."

Marketing hub

Jones explained that technology was only part of the story, and that all TCs also had access to a comprehensive Marketing Hub packed with professionally designed, customisable marketing assets, branded templates and ready-to-use campaigns.

"Whether it's social media graphics, promotional material or customer communications, everything is designed to help business owners present a polished, professional



Bianca Jones

brand without needing graphic design or copywriting expertise.

"Marketing doesn't stop once you've found a client, either. Through Phenix, TCs can nurture customer relationships using professionally produced digital brochures, inspirational email campaigns and competitive offers that keep them front of mind and encourage repeat business."

Backed

Jones believes that aside from industry-leading tech, what truly sets Travel Counsellors apart is the people behind it.

"Business owners receive ongoing support from an experienced marketing team that provide training, practical guidance and strategic advice. Whether it's learning how to build a stronger personal brand, improving social media engagement or making the most of the latest AI tools, support is always available."

The result is a business model where technology handles repetitive tasks, expert support provides confidence and direction, and TCs have more time to focus on the relationships that drive long-term success.

"Because the future of travel isn't about choosing between technology and people. It's about having technology that helps people do what they do best." ■