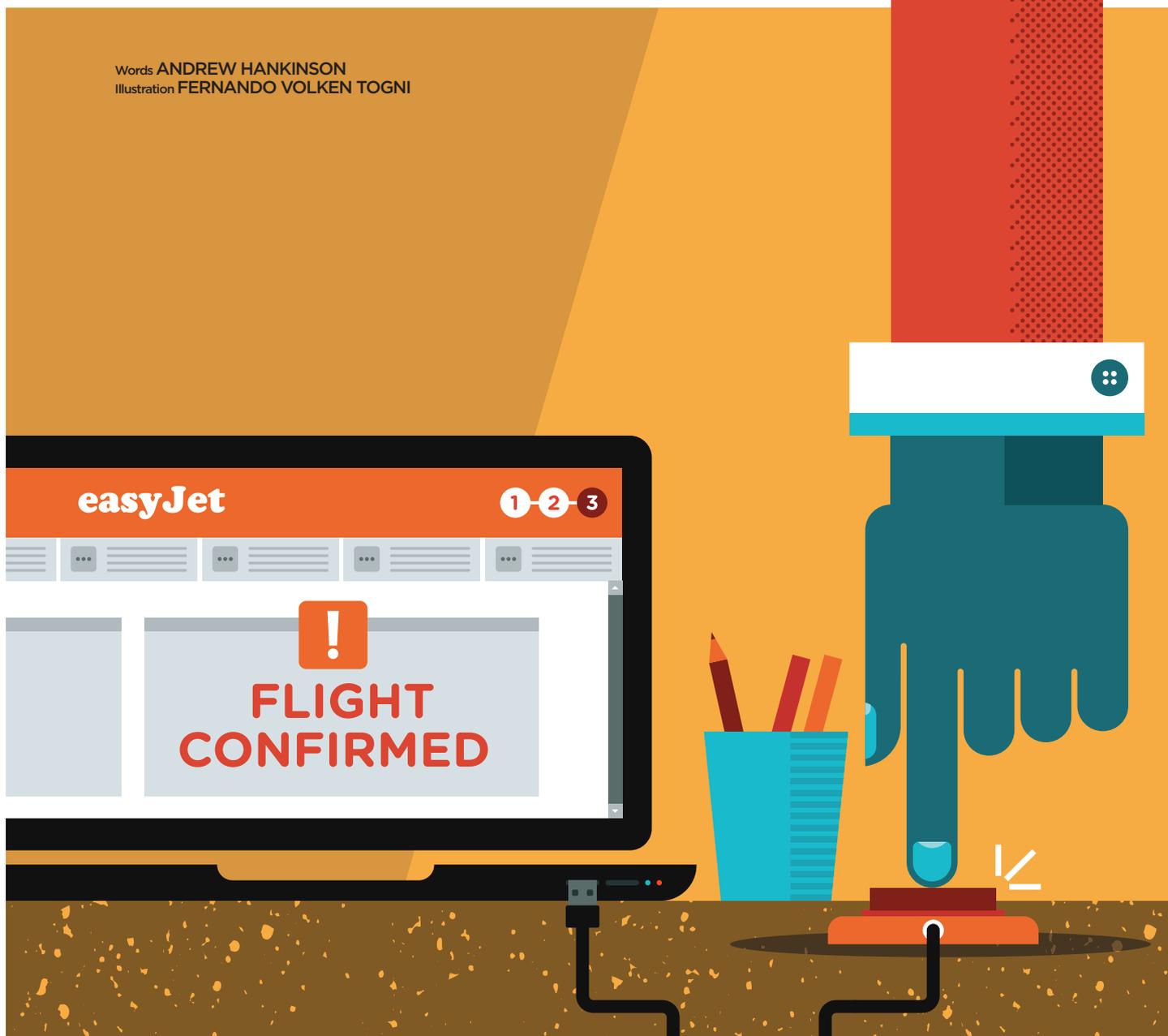


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HOLIDAY 2.0: ARE WE CHANGING THE WAY WE TRAVEL FOREVER?

These days, everyone books accommodation and transport online, but a new raft of web-based services are helping us get closer to the destination – and, crucially, to the people who live there. Question is: are they a permanent fixture? ➤



This is the new way of travelling: I want to visit Slovenia, so I go to the Airbnb website to find someone's home to rent for the weekend. There are 110 listings in the capital, Ljubljana. One of them is "Jane's apartment near city centre", which costs €47 per night. There's a picture of Jane smiling in mirrored sunglasses. She looks trustworthy. There are nine pictures of her apartment. It looks good. There are 15 positive reviews with accompanying profiles. I book it.

Next, I need activities. TripAdvisor has 469 recent reviews of local attractions. Metelkova stands out. It's a former army base that became a squat and is now a counter-culture hub. User Sillyinnervoice says to avoid it, but Elaine1 gives it a top rating. I trust her. Sort of. I check TravBuddy, TripWolf and Wayfaring for more reviews and pictures. It looks great. Where else to go? Maybe a local could show me round? On TripTrotting I find a dozen profiles of Ljubljana residents and click on Neza, who looks friendly and says she likes culture. I wonder if any other visitors have booked activities? I'll check...

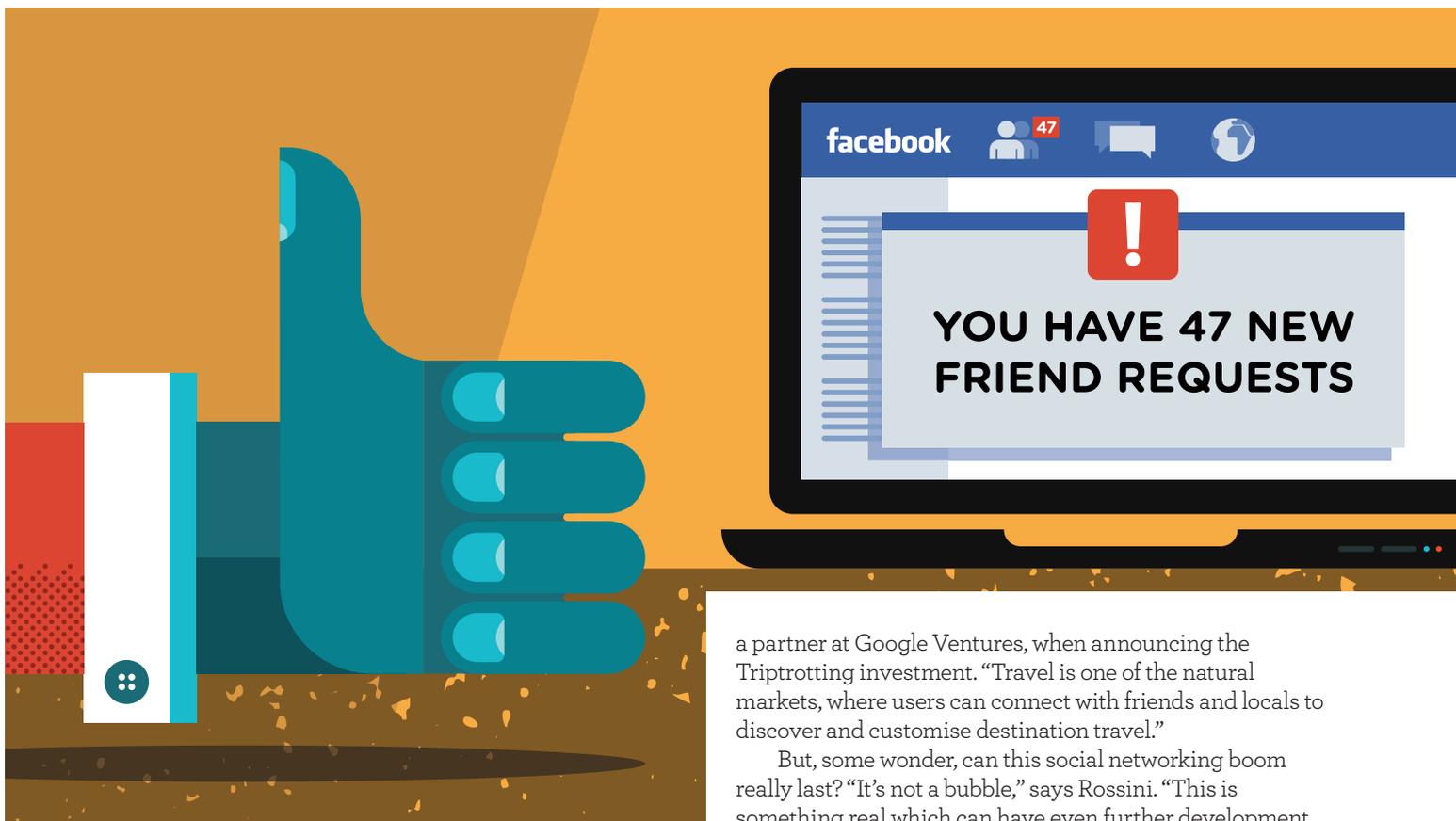
And so on and so on. This is how to create a modern holiday. The travel industry is having a second internet-induced revolution. While the first wave of travel-related

websites mostly centred around hotel and transport bookings, or static 'what-to-see' guides, this time it's personal. More and more of us are rejecting the old hotel-and-guidebook model for our holidays, turning instead to online travel networks where we can connect with fellow travellers, whether that's for advice, companionship or even accommodation. We're calling it 'Holiday 2.0'.

Sparking the trend way back in 2000, TripAdvisor's crowdsourced guidebook, which allowed people to vent about the best and worst of their experience, quickly became a new travel bible. Since then, the sharing has gone from opinions voiced in a virtual environment to actual spaces in the real world. CouchSurfing, which started in 2004, for example, provides over four-million registered users with a platform to offer and find free accommodation; while recent start-up TripTrotting is attracting a lot of attention for using an algorithm designed by the developer behind the eHarmony dating site to match travellers to each other for face to face 'meet-ups'.

“

Users can connect with friends and locals to discover and customise destination travel”



of a country. It's not backpackers, it's young professionals, and I've had a few business people going to conferences.”

The Airbnb idea came from San Francisco, when two young men, Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia, needed to earn some rent money. They created a crude website to rent their three airbeds to visiting delegates of a local design conference and called it Airbed and Breakfast (now Airbnb). They realised it was a good idea, recruited a web developer and from there it went big. Its European success has prompted them to open offices in London, Berlin and Hamburg, and six further European sites are on the cards.

As the coverage and clientele have broadened for social travel websites, they have also started – surprise, surprise – to attract the big bucks. Airbnb has attracted over \$100 million (€805,000) of investment (including some from the actor Ashton Kutcher) and been valued at over \$1 billion (€805,000,000). Meanwhile, despite generating no money from accommodation, CouchSurfing has also seen an influx of millions, while the latest golden boy of the genre, TripTrotting, recently received an investment of \$1 million (€805,000), including some from Google's investment arm.

“Social networking around specific interests and activities is becoming more important,” said Joe Kraus,

a partner at Google Ventures, when announcing the TripTrotting investment. “Travel is one of the natural markets, where users can connect with friends and locals to discover and customise destination travel.”

But, some wonder, can this social networking boom really last? “It's not a bubble,” says Rossini. “This is something real which can have even further development. It is definitely a challenge to the established industry.”

In the future, he believes, all companies will try to have a social aspect to their offerings. “Many important travel companies are recruiting 20 or 30 people just to deal with their Facebook presence and other social media, to try and replicate that local relationship.”

The other concern for investors is that this new model requires trust: from the small amount to act on advice from other travellers, to the sizable portion needed to rent your home to a stranger. This will require input from the websites to shore up responsibility for wrongdoing – from moderators on TravMedia forums removing offensive content, to liability insurance for those offering accommodation. Airbnb is ahead of the game in this area, last year putting a €750,000 guarantee in place, establishing a 24-hour support line and hiring photographers as pictorial inspectors.

“Trust is an incredibly important thing on our site,” says Chesky. “Trust is the currency that allows all our connections to take place.”

As for me, I'm heading to Ljubljana with no guidebook and no hotel booked, but the promise of meeting locals and seeing their way of life. The investors may want guarantees, but I'm willing to take a little risk in order to bring me an exciting, new way to travel.