



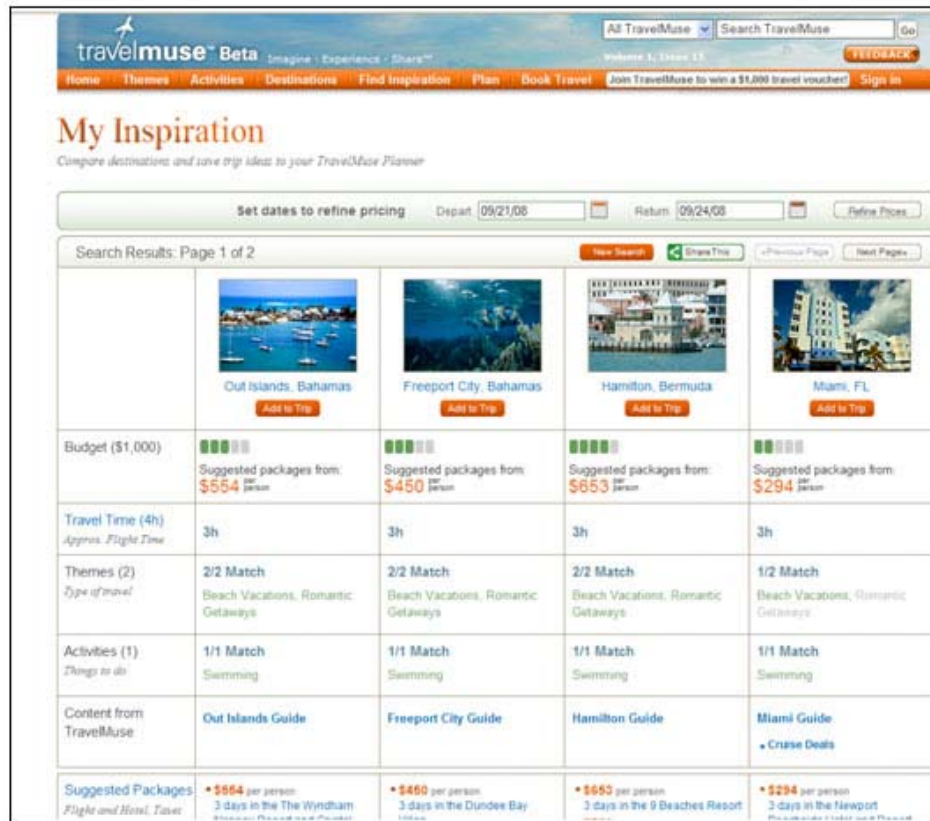
TravelMuse: No Destination, No Problem
July 9, 2008

TravelMuse is a venture-funded startup based in the Bay Area, founded in 2007 by Kevin Fliess and Eric Wood. The company launched its public beta on June 9, 2008 and offers several tools to help with trip planning, most notably its Inspiration Finder, which endeavors to help would-be travelers answer the question: Where should I go on vacation?

TravelMuse is one of the first truly compelling destination-finder Web sites in the travel space, and distinguishes itself from industry incumbents like online travel agencies (OTAs) by beating them to the punch. Instead of forcing consumers to plug in their destination, it invites consumers to discover and compare destination content much earlier in the search-shop-buy process – when they know only that they want to travel. And though products shown on Inspiration Finder connect to booking engines on the TravelMuse site, transactions are not the site’s primary purpose.

Inspiration Finder works like this: Users enter itinerary criteria – price range, possible dates, number and ages of travelers, desired accommodation class and departure airport – and then choose activities or themes (such as “beach” or “spas”) from a tag cloud. They then select how far and for how long (flight time) they’re willing to travel. Using this information, the Inspiration Finder comes up with trip ideas, arranges them in a side-by-side comparison and tells the user how closely the trips match his or her preferences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: TravelMuse’s Inspiration Finder



Source: TravelMuse

The tool also lists packages the user might be interested in and provides links to original editorial content about the destinations via the TravelMuse online magazine.

Once the user selects a trip, he or she (after creating a free account) can save that trip and continue planning with the TravelMuse Planner, which allows users to gather, organize and save trip research, whether from TravelMuse or other Web sites. Users can also invite friends or fellow travelers to share in their plans and bookmark Web research. Thanks to a white label agreement with Travelocity's booking engine, both trip components and packages are bookable through the site, though the focus for booking is primarily on hotels and TravelMuse's aim is to serve as a place to find inspiration rather than deals.

Additionally, the site hosts a large amount of original editorial content and photography, including a weekly online magazine featuring a destination, 10-15 new travel articles posted every week and a newsletter users can subscribe to via email. Comprehensive travel guides covering over 200 domestic and international destinations are also available. While the guides are provided by third party Wcities, most of TravelMuse's editorial content is created by 50-some freelance writers.

Like many travel startups, TravelMuse plans to monetize its traffic through advertising and commissions from booking referrals, so it will be interesting to see how the site negotiates these demands with its emphasis on inspiration/planning and competition with similar products from OTAs. Most OTAs aren't strangers to interest-specific travel offerings, and several even offer niche destination-finder tools (à la Orbitz's Beach Finder). Though none have (as of yet) entered this early phase of the travel planning process so completely, OTAs are keenly aware of the value of doing so. It is only a matter of time before more robust destination selection products become standard on OTA Web sites, whether through partnerships, in-house development or acquisition.

Company name: TravelMuse

Web site: www.travelmuse.com

Founders:

Kevin Fliess, Chief Executive Officer

Eric Wood, Vice President of Products

Funding to date: Over \$3 million from Azure Capital Partners and California Technology Ventures

Company description: TravelMuse is a company that helps travelers find destinations and plan trips that meet their needs. Its three primary tools are the Inspiration Finder, TravelMuse Planner and Editorial Content & Photography.

Target audience: Mid-career professionals with families and yearly incomes of \$75K or more

[By Colie Hoffman](#)

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