

Travel biz booms under B.C. boss

World leader, Booking.com, has tripled in size since Darren Huston took helm

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AMSTERDAM It feels as if there's a new kid on the block in the competitive travel industry as Canadians get their first peek at the over-the-top new TV commercials from Booking.com.

The campaign is a brazen, hyper-comical celebration of travellers grabbing the brass ring of vacation bliss — to the point of replacing f-bombs with outbursts of “Booking, Yeah!”

Many Canadians have never heard of Booking.com because it only recently began revealing itself to North American markets.

It just may be the best-kept secret on the Internet despite the astounding fact that it's the world's leading online accommodations agent and the third largest e-commerce site on the planet, with more than one million bookings a day.

Booking.com CEO Darren Huston admits he had never heard of the site himself until he became a candidate to head Booking.com and its parent company, the Priceline Group.

“That was partly due to the fact that the historical focus of both the Booking.com business, as well as the brand awareness, has been in Europe,” he says.

After some homework, however, the B.C. native was impressed by Booking.com's growth in Europe and its future potential.

Since the Priceline Group acquired the Dutch company in 2005, Booking.com has grown into a \$60-billion-plus behemoth, with a half million properties available in more than 200 countries, 115 offices in 50 countries (including one in Vancouver) and almost 7,000 employees.

The Priceline Group saw Huston's Canadian roots as an asset.

The low-key, approachable Huston was deemed a better fit than an American for the European corporate culture of Booking.com.

The company has tripled in size since Huston, 48, took the helm three years ago.

Competitors like Expedia and Travelocity are scrambling to keep up.

From hostels to igloos to five-star luxury hotels, Booking.com has become the Amazon of accommodations.

It offers the lowest guaranteed prices, no booking fees and the freedom to cancel or change a booking up to 24 hours before your stay. Once customers reach Booking.com, they're met with 28 million reviews of accommodations by real guests.

Huston's arrival at Booking.com's Amsterdam headquarters, a Euro-hipster conversion of the Amster-



Online travel company Booking.com CEO Darren Huston grew up under humble circumstances in small-town B.C. before becoming head of the third largest e-commerce site in the world.

damsche Bank built in 1926, was a culmination of his passion for technology, travel, consumer-oriented business and leading people.

A graduate of UBC, Trent University and Harvard, the former CEO of Microsoft Japan and senior vice-president of Starbucks has humble beginnings. He was raised in several B.C. towns, including Sooke, Robson and Revelstoke.

As a young farm worker he was always asking school guidance counsellors, “What more do you have?”

Driven by curiosity, he pursued experiences that transcended his small-town life. He was a contestant on the CBC TV quiz show Reach for the Top (“We lost by five points,” he recalls), went to Quebec on an exchange program, and then to the United World College in Italy.

Huston is a user of his own site and its guest reviews.

“I always like independent hotels with really high scores and I use Booking to find them, because often if they have a high score they're say-

ing something about the way that they run the business. There's one in Vancouver, L'Hermitage, which has a very high score and you wouldn't find it otherwise.”

Of Booking.com's future, Huston says there are no plans to become a full-service travel provider.

It's all about accommodations.

The site attracts 30 million monthly visitors and, with a target audience described simply as “air breathers,” it has plans to grow.

“We currently have nine per cent

Notes & quotes

Darren Huston's role models:

His father: “He passed from cancer; gone too soon. Taught me the value and importance of hard work and that nothing in life comes easy.”

Bill Gates: “I spent time with him when I was running Microsoft in Japan. I really respect the fact that he's such a curious person, and how much he reads and he wants to go and solve global health issues.”

Favourite destinations: Shanghai for its transformative nature. Tokyo because it never changes at all.

Guilty pleasure when travelling: Ethnic food, local beer.

Aisle or window?: Window. I converted. Used to be aisle, but window's better for sleeping.

Best travel memory: Istanbul. I had low expectations and was blown away.

Jet lag strategy: Eastbound, sleep. Westbound, hang on as long as you can.

of the world's accommodations. It's not unreasonable to think that we can be 15, 20, 30 per cent of accommodations. If we were 30 per cent, we would be the largest e-commerce company in the world, including everyone, so that's such a big opportunity,” says Huston.

“We have to remain hungry and humble. Success is the biggest challenge we face as a company.

“If you don't deal with that well, or you get lazy or arrogant with your travel-service providers, that would be the beginning of the end.

“When I was at Microsoft, Bill Gates told me once that he's never won a market-share battle; the competitors have only lost because it's about staying steady with your principles, executing well and innovating constantly.”

Last week the company announced its first major launch in nine years: A sister site called villas.com, a booking site for vacation home rentals that has an almost identical model to Booking.com.

Huston's own travel plans include regular trips to B.C., which he says he will always call home.

He recently built a ski hideaway at Sun Peaks with his brother and tries to make it out there about twice a year.