

Bob Gilbert (00:08):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales, a podcast series that explores the traveling tourism leaders their take on key issues of today. My name is Bob Gilbert, general manager for the tourism and destination marketing practice at the award-winning strategic marketing agency, Eddy Alexander, who are bringing you this podcast series. I have had the privilege to have worked with iconic global brands, including Disney Choice Hotels, Yosemite and Shenandoah National Parks, Kennedy Space Center visitor center, and Best Western International. Plus, served on the boards of the US Travel Association National Tour Association, and an elected commissioner to Visit California. Looking forward, I will be chatting with those that are helping shape the travel and tourism industry, all with unique tales to share that I know you will find both interesting and educational. So, without further ado, let's get started. Well, here we go with a new episode of Tourism Heads and Their Tales. Today we're talking about the best part of travel, which is all about the magical world of things to see and do. Now, the leading organization whose single focus is to advance and give voice to the in destination experiences industry is arrival. And I am super delighted to welcome Arival co-founder and CEO Douglas Quinby.

Douglas Quinby (01:37):

Bob, thanks so much for having me. It's great to be here.

Bob Gilbert (01:40):

Well, it's a pleasure. I've been involved with this part of the industry for so many years, and even before, um, I knew how valuable the in destination experiences industry was, so I was in it before I knew I was in it. So we, and we can go into that a little bit more in our conversation. So Douglass, please share your career journey with our audience and the genesis of Arival.

Douglas Quinby (02:04):

Well, I've been in travel and tourism for the better part of, well, no more than two decades now. So I <laugh> I think I'll, I think I'll probably just give a few, you know, a few key highlights and, and skip all of the sorted, you know, details and twists and turns that I think, you know, anyone in, in their career will go through. I had a pretty unusual, uh, uh, journey starting actually as a journalist for trade publication covering technology and innovation and also cutting my teeth on the full spectrum of travel and tourism. And then began working in marketing functions and sales functions for technology companies and the world of tourism. And then had a tremendous opportunity to work at Focusrite which is, uh, now part of the North Star, uh, travel, I think it's North Star Travel Media Group or North Star Travel Group, which -

Bob Gilbert (02:54):

Yeah, the Empire, the, the, the North Star Empire

Douglas Quinby (02:57):

<laugh>. Yes. The media and events, um, you know, empire, that's such an iconic, uh, has such an iconic set of brands actually within the global travel industry. And I spent more than 10 years, uh, there I think, or about 10 years in the research group ultimately going up to be a leader in the, the research organization at Focusrite. As well as designing a lot of their programming and being a, I think a voice or a face for the events and, and the research. And one of the sectors of travel and tourism that I had initiated coverage on while I was at, and just for those of you who don't know, I mean Focusrite is a travel industry research and events firm focused on the world of digital and innovation and online. And

one of the very first companies, I think back in the mid nineties to really start to look at the digital shifts that were taking place, track online booking across aviation and hotels and so forth, and the rise of online travel agencies and how all of that was changing.

Douglas Quinby (03:58):

But one of the sectors that, you know, I thought was overlooked and I initiated coverage on was, you know, everything else, right? So in other words, if you think about the world of travel and tourism, you could spend every single day going to, you know, a hotel conference every single day of the year, and you would never get to every hotel industry conference. You, you know, there's a million resources and whether it's, you know, research data events, industry media insights, coverage for airlines, for hotels, even for, you know, for crews and car rental and rail and so forth. But there was, you know, little, or I mean, next to nothing for all of the stuff that travelers did when they get there, the tours, activities, attractions, events, the experiences, all of those reasons why we actually travel in the first place. And it also, it struck me in 2010 when we first initiated this work that we were now, I think about two and a half years into the iPhone.

Douglas Quinby (04:54):

And while everyone was focused on, at that time on hotel booking and flight booking, it really, I just had a hunch that there was going to be some enormous potential impact was in the in destination experience and finding things to do, navigating your experience. So we began coverage there and continued to do that at Focusrite. But even like seven or eight years later, so around 2016 or 2017, there was still, you know, we had, we had sized the market, so we knew there was this incredibly large market of, uh, so what we had Arival called the in destination experiences sector, but there's a, I think a few different industry names for it. So tours and activities or tours, activities and attractions or the travel experiences. But so it was 2016 and there was no, still no event, no dedicated resource or research or place where this industry could go.

Douglas Quinby (05:49):

And by that I mean that industry, that's the operators, the creators of the tours, the, the marketing directors at the attractions who could get together and really talk about travel and tourism related issues regarding technology, innovation, experience design, what consumers wanted. And at the same time that there was no forum, the industry was also undergoing this extraordinary set of changes that had already cascaded through, let's say, aviation 20 years prior. And in hotels an accommodation, you know, maybe 10 to 15 years prior. And, and that cascade of change, of course, was the migration, right? So of businesses moving from kind of manual operations to automated operations, like adopting reservation systems or PMSs or CRSs or, and then getting connected to distribution and getting loaded up on online travel agencies and a dramatic shift of travelers going from calling up their travel agents or calling the hotels or calling the airline to going to the websites or booking on OTAs or finding things through Google or other channels.

Douglas Quinby (06:56):

And so all of that began happening within experiences maybe 10 to 15 years later. So there was explosion of technology companies coming into the sector, small software companies offering booking, uh, technology, which I think Bob, you were pretty involved in, uh, I think at different points mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And yet there was no place for these operators, we call them, you know, the tour operators, the attraction operators. There was no place for them to go and look at what was out there

and see what people were doing and, uh, where the next changes were coming from or, or even just questions like, you know, how to deal with OTAs, <laugh>, which were rising rapidly or yeah. Consumer trends. And so that was the, the impetus for us starting Arival back in late 2016, early 2017, and we launched the first event in 2017, and yeah, just kind of took it, took it from there.

Bob Gilbert (07:45):

Yeah. You know, it's interesting you mentioned the airline industry and the distribution reservation system distributions, connectivity, and the changes they made. And they all worked together, as did several of the hotel chains that got together and created FISCO, you know, which I guess at the time was the ability to work together as hoteliers to have a separate view for travel agencies who were very important, more important than they are today, although they're, they're coming back. But that ability to sell inventory directly to agents that didn't look as if it was an airline seat, you know, but the rest of the industry and specifically toss activities, attractions, experiences, I guess because of the size and scope of the providers, you know, they were mostly small operators and, uh, really didn't have the know-how or were afraid of technology or thought it was too expensive, and so they kind of lagged. But as you said in the opening, at the end of the day, it is the best part of travel because it's the most important part of travel from a leisure, leisure perspective, and not solely from a leisure with that blend between events and folks who wanna stay on for a few days or get through a destination a few days earlier. But, and I remember being at the first event, the, your inaugural event in 2017 in Las Vegas, and there were about, I dunno, about 500 maybe attendees, but I do recall -

Douglas Quinby (09:16):

Yeah, yeah. Something like that.

Bob Gilbert (09:16):

It was about that. And I do recall a slide that you put up that it just kind of made things very clear, very clear clarity, and the bell went off, and that was a slide that you showed that highlighted the deep fragmentation that was in the categories. And I think people were looking at, you know, a helicopter tour, off-road, ATV fishing charters. I'm not sure if foodie tours had started back then. They probably had, but we really didn't know. And there was, I don't know, over a hundred or so distinct categories that a sightseeing tour wouldn't think that they competed with, you know, skydiving mm-hmm. <affirmative>. But the reality is they were all going after the disposable income of the travelers. So, you know, that, that certainly put things into perspective. Um, I don't know. Uh, do you have a count now of how many distinct categories there are in this space?

Douglas Quinby (10:12):

Well, we have a taxonomy that we've developed and we use, but it depends on what you want to consider or include as a, an activity or an experience. So for us, we've identified about 150, you know, or a little under, and every year we come across something new and we add something like, like ax throwing, for example. There's a Right. You know, which is, which is fantastic, where you can go to a bar, you can consume some alcohol, and then throw axes at a wall, which I, the combination of ax throwing and, um, alcohol <laugh>, I have some,

Bob Gilbert (10:48):

Yeah. Some doubts there.

Douglas Quinby (10:50):

Yes, there's some, I have some questions, yes. Uh, some questions about that, but yeah, so roughly 140 or so, I, or 150. But I think also, you know, something to keep in mind is, well, there, I know for example, there are some of the players in the market, uh, that have a much more detailed taxonomy of suppliers. Uh, for example, well, here's one question, right? So think about bowling alleys, like should bowling be an activity that we would include? Like if I take a trip and visit, you know, my, my in-laws and their kids, you know, out in, in Oregon, and we take all the kids bowling, and I'm taking them bowling on a trip, that is a trip. Is that a travel activity? Should it be included? You know, so that's, that's one. And then some marketplaces will say, here's a bowling alley. There could be a bowling alley with an arcade, it could be a bowling alley with a bar, right?

Douglas Quinby (11:40):

So, so you can very quickly have, and I know some platforms actually have several hundred categories. So it's really, I think to a certain degree it is about how you want to define the industry. But I think broadly from a tourism perspective, you know, at a macro level, you know, we think of tours, which are either guided or self-guided experiences. And those could be private, those could be any form of transportation. It could be walking tours, it could be food tours, it could be a tour within an attraction, like you do a museum tour, for example. And then there are, there's the world of activities, which is, this is a really tricky one, but this is basically any type of organized or scheduled activity where you participate. So it could be, uh, like a zip line or going to an adventure or obstacle course, or maybe you're taking some type of, of class, or maybe it's a cooking class or some type of activity, or maybe you decide you're gonna play golf when you're, while you're traveling, or you're gonna play tennis and you get some, some tee times or something like that.

Douglas Quinby (12:37):

And then there's the world of attractions, which is, uh, basically a ticketed experience that's a fixed location or point of interest. But then, you know, there's also, as I said, this world keeps on evolving, and we have all of these new experiences that are emerging. Like, you know, for example, there's a company called Fever that's doing some really interesting co-branded experiences that also travel. So for example, right now here in Atlanta, they have the Stranger Things experience. So if you're a fan of the hit, uh, Netflix TV series, you kind of go in and one of my kids is actually, and so we've gone to the experience, and that's a, it's like an attraction. It's a fixed point of interest. You have timed entry, you go in, you're there for a couple of hours, and you go through this immersive experience, and it's kind of like an interactive experience with actors or guides. And so is that a tour, is that a, is that an attraction? <laugh>, is that an activity? How do you categorize that? Right.

Bob Gilbert (13:35):

You know what, you know, I mean, you raise some very good questions and going bowling as an example, if it's the key reason that you decide, or the group or the family decide to go to a particular destination to do bowling, that it's part of the experience that they're looking for. I, I guess so. I mean, it's a little different than going to Norman, Oklahoma and going to the bowling hall of fame, you know, which is, again, a little, a little different. But you know, golf, certainly fishing charters, I mean, so people are going for sport, yet it comes into the categories. But that was part, I think of the dilemma is putting all of these into one big net, or more clearly into maybe over 150 different nets that will make up the category. But let me ask you this question, and obviously where we are now, we're in full recovery mode.

Bob Gilbert ([14:31](#)):

You as Arival, put on events in Asia. I think your next one is in Bangkok, later on in the year, you've got Berlin coming up in a month mm-hmm. <affirmative> or, so what is the recovery? What does recovery look like in these different parts of the world? Because the infrastructure is different. It has been, you know, what folks in China, maybe not a good example, but it used to be a good example. It just because of, you know, crackdowns in terms of covid and traveling. Where are those strong recovery points that you are seeing in your research on a global basis?

Douglas Quinby ([15:07](#)):

Well, it's been really uneven. In fact, it's been a very strange few years because the fortunes on the impacts of the pandemic have really defied all expectations in and predictions in a, in a number of ways. So just as an example, in 2020, in 2021, when effectively there was little, if any international or across border travel, there was an extraordinary surge in domestic, you know, local and especially outdoor activities and experiences. So, you know, frankly, if you were a small business, if you just were a guy with a couple of jet skis, um, on a lake somewhere in the southeast or off the gulf coast of Florida, I mean, you, you were up 150, 200% in 2020 versus 2019 because no one was going to Paris or New York or London or Italy. They were all going to <laugh>, you know, everyone's going to, uh, to Destin, right, or yeah. Getting outside.

Bob Gilbert ([16:07](#)):

The reinvention of the road trip.

Douglas Quinby ([16:09](#)):

Exactly. Exactly. Um, but then what's been interesting also to see the outdoor and adventure segment, and as it's grown dramatically, but then in 2022 as people could start traveling again, then we really saw a return of experiences, but in a very, you know, in a very different way. So, I mean, first, just stepping back, looking at the, the industry globally broadly, the industry has recovered more or less on par with the rest of travel, and as we might expect, so Asia-Pacific has been very slow. The US was among the first to recover just because we had the kind of least, you know, restrictive domestic, uh, environment for, for travel mm-hmm. <affirmative> versus say, you know, Europe and elsewhere. So if you look at how the industry globally or travel has recovered, I think experiences for the most part has tracked. But we've seen some really important shifts.

Douglas Quinby ([16:57](#)):

I think especially coming out of the pandemic travelers have one, we're seeing a much higher priority placed on experiences versus other parts of travel, and a desire to really make the most of their trips. So while people say in 2022, and even heading into this year, they're not, still not taking as many trips as they did pre pandemic. When they are traveling, they are making the most of it. They taking longer trips, they're doing more. When they do an experience, they want the most out of that experience. And what we're hearing and seeing across the board is, uh, say for, you know, if you're, especially for the mid to large tour operators, you know, if you offer a range of different tours, what we're hearing is okay, the upscale, the private stuff is selling out. And some of the mid to larger group stuff is not doing as well because people just don't want to do the mass market, you know, kind of bus tour.

Douglas Quinby ([17:59](#)):

If they're gonna go and do the thing, they're going to go for it. They wanna spend quality time with their loved ones or their friends, and they wanna make the most of that experience. So a real shift towards small groups, towards private, towards exceptional experiences. And, you know, a great example would be, you know, let's say if you operate an observation deck, what you know we're seeing is, you know, the average, you know, typical excursion up and the ticket that's doing okay in line with expectations, but it's that peak, you know, sunset experience with a glass of champagne that is really selling out. And the opportunity there then for the industry is to really lean in to those experiences and offer something that's a little bit, uh, a little bit extra, a little bit special. And especially too, because in this environment where there's still some economic clouds on the horizon, some uncertainty, we see that it's the more affluent traveler set that are unaffected by that and are as committed to traveling, if not more so than ever. And they want a bit more, and they're prepared to spend.

Bob Gilbert (19:08):

So sometimes it's about the definition. So we use the word experience as part of the glossary of terms for mm-hmm. <affirmative>, you know, tourists, activities, attractions, and experiences. But looking at the other definition of experience, people want to be able to experience something that isn't necessarily an e ticket ride. That, that it is, as you said, glass of champagne, watching the sunset, you know, off the northern California coast just looking at the sunset. And it's that experience with perhaps a lowercase e but it's, it's kind of leaning more to perhaps understanding a little bit more holistically that I'm, I'm looking for something that, uh, it may be a bucket list thing, but it, it's getting a different kind of buzz or experience with a lowercase e again, that is gonna create that memory that will last a lifetime, that might not have a dollar value to it, but most certainly will have a sentimental value.

Bob Gilbert (20:12):

And I guess that leans a little bit more into sustainability. Um, how are you seeing different destinations? And the majority of our audience, uh, probably would say about 70%, you know, are dmo, CVBs mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And how do you see those particular, let's call them all DMOS, managing the different kinds of activities, attractions, tours, experiences that they have? How are they reaching the audience that they're, they're going after? Because obviously there's the local market and there's the regional, national international, depending upon where they are and the size of their destination, are they changing the way they're looking at marketing, the different experiences that they have within their destinations?

Douglas Quinby (21:00):

Uh, I think they definitely have to,

Bob Gilbert (21:04):

Right? They understand the value.

Douglas Quinby (21:06):

Yeah. I, I'd say the general, you know, the general, uh, and I'll with the DMO audience, I, I'll say I, I always, I, I have been historically a bit, you know, honestly kind of frustrated in engaging with the DMO community for the most part mm-hmm. <affirmative>, because I sense that, um, what I see broadly, and I'm, and I'm not speaking in any specifics, and there's certainly, there's extraordinary exceptions of, uh, of some, uh, destination management organizations that are, you know, have really taken a strong leadership position in how they promote experiences. I think, uh, you know, n Y C and CO is fantastic.

Uh, F Ireland has, has made a lot of really interesting investments and some of the things that they're doing. So there's some really great examples out there.

Bob Gilbert (22:04):

Barce, Barcelona, I mean, they, they run, they run their own tours as, you know, as the destination. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, it's a little different, but, uh,

Douglas Quinby (22:13):

Yeah, no, absolutely. And actually, it's great that you brought that up. In fact, we have Jan Luca Ka Maggio from Tourism Barcelona, who has overseen an initiative there to connect all of their suppliers to a channel management platform. And they, he's actually coming to rival Berlin to speak about what they're doing there. Wow. Uh, in a session specifically on channel management, which is a fairly sophisticated distribution practice, multi-channel distribution management practice coming outta the hospitality world that's now making its way into experiences. But I'd say, you know, broadly, I think what I see is Domos, they make a couple of mistakes. One is they don't fully place the value of the, the full breadth of experiences that are in their orbit or say within their, their destination. So in other words, they, they tend to have great relationships and really lean into the top attractions or the big volume drivers, like the, the big drawers I say of his, of tourism historically, but they significantly under not even undervalue, I just don't think they're really paying attention to and haven't thought about how to engage the medium to long tail of experienced providers.

Douglas Quinby (23:28):

And I think it's a huge missed opportunity on, on two levels. One, that's what increasingly we see travelers want. That's been a broad shift that's been happening over the past decade where, yes, okay, if I'm going to Paris for the first time, I have to, to go to the Louv, I have to go to the Eiffel Tower. But, you know, I also want to have a tour of some out of the way around Eastmont where I can, uh, visit, you know, a unusual cheese shop or a bakery, or maybe I like to play soccer, and I'd like to do a pickup game with some locals. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And just because I like to do that after I've, you know, after I bought my beret and had a croissant under the Eiffel Tower, right? Like, I want to do both, right? <laugh>. And we see increasingly travelers want that.

Douglas Quinby (24:15):

They will do multiple things in a destination, not just the top tier attractions or the kind of name brand things, but they want the full diversity of things. They want to connect with locals, they want the kinds of experiences that increasingly a lot of the small local entrepreneurs or part-timers, food tours is a great example. Many are started by women founders. Some of them are, you know, moms who are doing this kind of part-time, which quickly becomes full-time, and they're, they may just be doing two or three departures, you know, on a weekend or on a week overall. And, but it's a nice part-time business. They have a booking system, they're online, and they create a window into a city's cuisine, their culture, their people, some interesting restaurants. And so there's a real missing opportunities on the one hand for the DMO to actually expand their membership for those dmo that have a kind of membership based model in part mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Douglas Quinby (25:14):

Uh, because to really open up the education and bring more of these smaller organizations into their fold. And then also these organizations, they need help. These are small to medium sized businesses,

they get into it, or entrepreneurs really, they get into this because of a passion, right? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, in other words, they've got a passion for the food or culture in their city. And so they, oh, I, and they go on a food tour when they're traveling and they're like, oh, I can do this in my city, and it could be amazing. And they design a food tour and they develop the relationships at the restaurants and the itinerary and so forth, and they do, that's what they're passionate about. Or they're passionate about getting people on the water in kayaks or taking them on a hike up the mountain. What they're not passionate about is managing their Google AdWord campaign, or, uh, choosing a booking system or dealing with the next, you know, marketing channel, right?

Douglas Quinby (26:07):

The next, you know, the next change that Instagram makes or TikTok, or, you know, their accounting system or, but these are all the nuts and bolts of marketing, of awareness, of building a business. Most of these operators have no idea what travel distribution is. They don't know what a contract is. They don't know how contracts are negotiated or of what standard commercial terms are. They don't know terms like, you know, a cutoff window or commission or override or all of these things, right? And there's an enormous need, an opportunity, and I think DMO are perhaps best positioned to step in and deliver education, provide guidance, elevate the stature of these extraordinary experiences. I think it, the outcome one is it would benefit their organizations through more members and frankly, more revenue for those that have that type of model. I know there are different DMO organizational or kind of frameworks or models, so it applies to some, but not to all. But it would certainly elevate the marketing, the, the opportunity for them to drive more visitation, but also in particular, to drive more spam.

Bob Gilbert (27:13):

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