

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

DIGITAL TIPPING IS COMING TO A HOTEL NEAR YOU

By Nikki Ekstein
BLOOMBERG

It’s the universal travel faux pas: You arrive at a hotel, receive your luggage from the bellboy, reach into your pockets, scour your wallet, and turn up ... nothing. Or, perhaps worse, a large-denomination bill you’re too embarrassed to ask them to break.

Bashar Wali, president of Provenance Hotels, lamented the sorry state of hotel tipping in a post on LinkedIn this past July, in which he argued around the idea of tipping as fair compensation, and that it’s more like an expression of gratitude, a “personal acknowledgment” to those who “are exposed to the worst parts of us [piles of dirty laundry, hangovers, room service leftovers] and get the least appreciation.”

An increasingly cashless society, digital checkout features, the mad dash to the airport, they all make tipping harder, but they aren’t good enough excuses.

The comments piled in. “If only there was an app for that ...” multiple people said.

Now there is. TipYo debuted on Apple’s App Store in November, promising to streamline the tipping experience for travelers everywhere. Except that right now, it’s only available at Wali’s Hotel Murano, in Tacoma, Wash., where it’s been in a soft launch. (An Android version is coming in the first quarter of this year.)

The premise is simple: Once you receive your hotel room number, you can enter it in the app and have gratuities sent to a particular staffer or a general department (housekeeping, bell service, concierge, valet). Amounts can be selected from presets or customized, and the money is funded by Apple Pay (if you’ve set that up on your phone), or you can add a credit or debit card as a payment method. To ensure tips go to the correct person, even when you don’t remember their names, hotel managers upload employees’ shift schedules and can set rules around when tips

should be pooled.

TipYo founder Brian Walsh isn’t a hospitality guy, but he had grown frustrated with the tipping experience. “I rarely carried cash — even less so than usual in the last five years, since now we live in an era where we can order an Uber, check our bank accounts, order food, and pay people directly from our phones,” Walsh tells Bloomberg. He wondered why tipping wasn’t the same.

But he knew the answer: “The payments world is not for the fainthearted,” he says.

His previous company helped churches process electronic donations, so he had experience clearing the regulatory hurdles that a tipping app would require. “We understand the space, its federal regulations, what’s expected from the IRS,” he says, making it easier for him to securely untangle a complicated money flow. The beauty of it, he says, “is you can confidently leave a gratuity and know that money is going into the right employees’ paychecks.” (Although unlike off-the-books cash, it can be taxed.)

So far, adoption is slow but encouraging, Walsh says. The app was quietly deployed at Wali’s 300-room Hotel Murano late last November; in the two months that followed, 80 guests tipped through the app. This is with low-season occupancy rates and almost zero promotion, Walsh says, adding that those early numbers exceeded expectations.

To encourage app downloads, the hotel’s first approach was to leave a little bit of marketing material on hotel room desks, but even Wali admits that “people don’t look at anything in the room.” So in the past month, the property has starting plugging TipYo in its pre-arrival e-mails.

“My concern was always the issue of adoption, because of the idea that you have to download an app and put your info in, but so far it looks like people are inclined to do it,” Wali says. “We’ve taken the pain out of the



MARK LENNIHAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

cash thing.”

Walsh knows that the market for TipYo could be enormous. “There are 5 million hotel rooms in the US alone, and the independent luxury market [which is TipYo’s sweet spot] is roughly 800 to 1,000 hotels,” he says. TipYo signs monthly agreements with hotels, which pay a flat fee for the service; there’s no cost to the consumer or employees receiving tips.

“Beyond that, you have everybody from Marriott to Hilton and all the brands they own,” says Walsh, who’s hoping that once one big brand commits to the technology, pressure will mount for others to jump on the bandwagon. Ultimately these larger brands could also incorporate TipYo’s tech into their own digital platforms.

“After all, one of the greatest challenges in hospitality right now is employee retention, and we’re helping to increase the take-home pay of staff

who could otherwise go down the street and work for Amazon for an extra \$3 an hour,” he says.

Yet even for committed operators like Wali, syncing each hotel’s back-end system with TipYo’s platform can be a barrier — uploading those shift schedules and linking to payroll can seem like an encumbrance for managers already spread thin. And then there’s the fact that not every hotel uses the same back-end technology; getting the second Provenance property (out of 14 total) up and running will take another six months, give or take.

Add complex labor union legislation to that — which is preventing Walsh from partnering with hotels in certain parts of the country, like New York City — and the complications of regulations in different countries, and the road ahead is a long one. For now, TipYo is focusing on the domestic

market, which makes the app less relevant for high-tipping Americans who may not carry foreign currency abroad.

“I’m not sure why I need it,” says Jack Ezon, founder and managing partner of Embark Beyond, a high-end travel agency that works equally in business and leisure bookings. But necessity isn’t the mother of all invention — see how Uber has generated millions in gratuities for drivers, despite serious initial reluctance from passengers.

Most of Ezon’s guests, he says, would be more likely to tip at checkout for easy expense itemization back at work. The potential he sees is largely outside the hotel. “If it could tell me how much to tip my driver, my guide, my head concierge, and give me both functionality and guidance that I could turn on and off, that would be a dream.”

HERE

EPIC FILMS OF CYCLING ADVENTURES Witness human-powered bike adventures from Alaska to Africa during a film festival that rolls through New England, New York, Wisconsin, and California. The 11th Annual Ciclismo Classico Bike Travel Film Festival, sponsored by Wheelworks, showcases dozens of short films from around the world. Watch a woman’s mountain bike trek to Kilimanjaro’s summit, a cycling journey from the Netherlands to the Ivory Coast via the Sahara Desert, a group ride from Montana to Alaska’s Denali National Park, and a 450-mile rolling party across Iowa. Also learn the story about the 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps, an Black regiment of “Buffalo Soldiers” that rode from Montana to St. Louis in the summer of 1897. Catch the film fest in Arlington March 19; Keene, N.H., March 21; Northampton April 16; and Portland Dec. 3. Dates coming soon for Sarasota Springs, Hayward, Wisc., and Berkeley, Calif. The Arlington festival includes a performance by country blues band Slow Boat Home and an all-cookie buffet, while the Northampton event includes a VIP tasting. 800-866-7314, www.ciclismoclassico.com/filmfest.

EMBRACE THESE CUBAN BRUNCHES Enjoy classic Cuban breakfast fare and music by a Cuban and Latin jazz band at Mariel in Boston’s Post Office Square. The restaurant’s new Cuban jazz brunches run Sundays 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., featuring live performances by Clave & Blues. Listen to a mix of Afro-Cuban rhythm and blues and world music while enjoying classic Cuban



dishes, such as huevos habaneros, huevos rotos, and mozzarella waffle sticks with spicy guava maple dip and a Cuban sweet toast. Mariel also offers brunch cocktails, including Café Cubano with homemade coffee liquor, a sparking Boho Royale, and a Coco Lime. Brunch: \$14-\$20; cocktails \$14-\$16. 617-333-8776, www.marielofficial.com.

BOSTON’S THREE-DAY MUSIC FEST Don’t forget to snag single-day tickets for Boston Calling in May before they sell out. The festival welcomes Foo Fighters (May 22), Rage Against the Machine (May 23), and Red Hot Chili Peppers (May 24) as headliners, and more than 60 other artists over three days at the Harvard Athletic Complex in Allston. Also see performances by Jason Isbell and The 400 Unit, The 1975, Run the Jewels, Brittany Howard, Liam Gallagher, and many more. Tickets range from \$149.99 (Tier 1 single-day general admission) to \$799.99 (Tier 2 platinum). If you miss out, you can still buy 3-day tickets for \$399. www.bostoncalling.com.

THERE

LOUISVILLE’S LANTERN FESTIVAL Kentucky hosts one of the nation’s largest Chinese lantern festivals this week at the Louisville Zoo. Wild Lights: Asian Lantern Festival runs March 5 through April 25. More than 50,000 LED lights will be used to create 65 larger-than-life illuminated displays, including a 131-foot-long dragon, a color-changing panda tree, and an African savanna display. Interact with some of the displays as you stroll through a two-story shark tunnel or sway on illuminated swings. Artisans



JOSHUA BLANCHARD/GETTY IMAGES

from Zigong, China—where lantern festivals originated more than 2,000 years ago—have been creating the displays using traditional techniques over the past month. The wheelchair- and stroller-friendly event runs Thursdays through Sundays, 6:30 p.m.-10 p.m., and every night between March 30 and April 3. It also features live Asian performances including the rolling lamp, hula hoop, and rotating dishes, handmade Chinese crafts, and Asian cuisine. Admission for non-members, purchased online up until 5 p.m. the day of the event: \$18.50 all ages, \$20.50 at admission window anytime; \$60 for family of four in advance and online only; \$5 parking. 502-459-2181, www.wildlightslouisville.com.

GRAND EUROPEAN CYCLING Bike across Morocco, Portugal, and Spain on an epic journey that covers 925 miles over 23 days. Ride & Seek’s new Conquest of the Moors cycling tour runs Sept. 28 through Oct. 20 and takes part in two stages. Explore the history of the Moors during stage one, as you bike from Fez to Tangiers, Morocco. Then cross the Mediterranean Sea to the Iberian Peninsula for stage two, during which you’ll pedal from Silves, Portugal, to Cordoba, Spain. Explore vibrant souks, medieval architecture, Roman ruins, national parks, and a path through a narrow gorge in Spain’s El Caminito del Rey. Also opt to pedal the highest paved road in Europe, a 25-mile challenging climb up Pico del Veleta (or

spend that day exploring Granada). Rates per person start at \$3,874, including accommodations, most meals, guides, ground transportation, and more. www.rideandseek.com.

EVERYWHERE

A LIGHTNING-FAST CHARGER Charge your phone at least 50 percent in 30 minutes and keep your laptop running for a few extra hours with Elecjet’s new PowerPie 20000mAh power bank. This sleek and portable device can charge the latest Galaxy S10+ smartphone up to 69 percent and the iPhone 11 up to 50 percent in one-half an hour, so you can refuel your phone even when making tight connections at the airport. It can also power an Apple Macbook (regular, Air, or Pro), a Dell Inspiron, a Lenovo Yoga, and other USB-C laptops for several hours, and recharge itself within 2.5 hours. The handy pass-through capability means you can charge the PowerPie while it recharges other devices. The PowerPie measures just 6.1-by-2.1 inches so it easily fits in a pocket, purse, or other travel bag. It’s a bit weighty — 13.75 ounces — and not drop-proof or waterproof, but it works great for everyday travel and use. \$88. www.elecjet.com.



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