

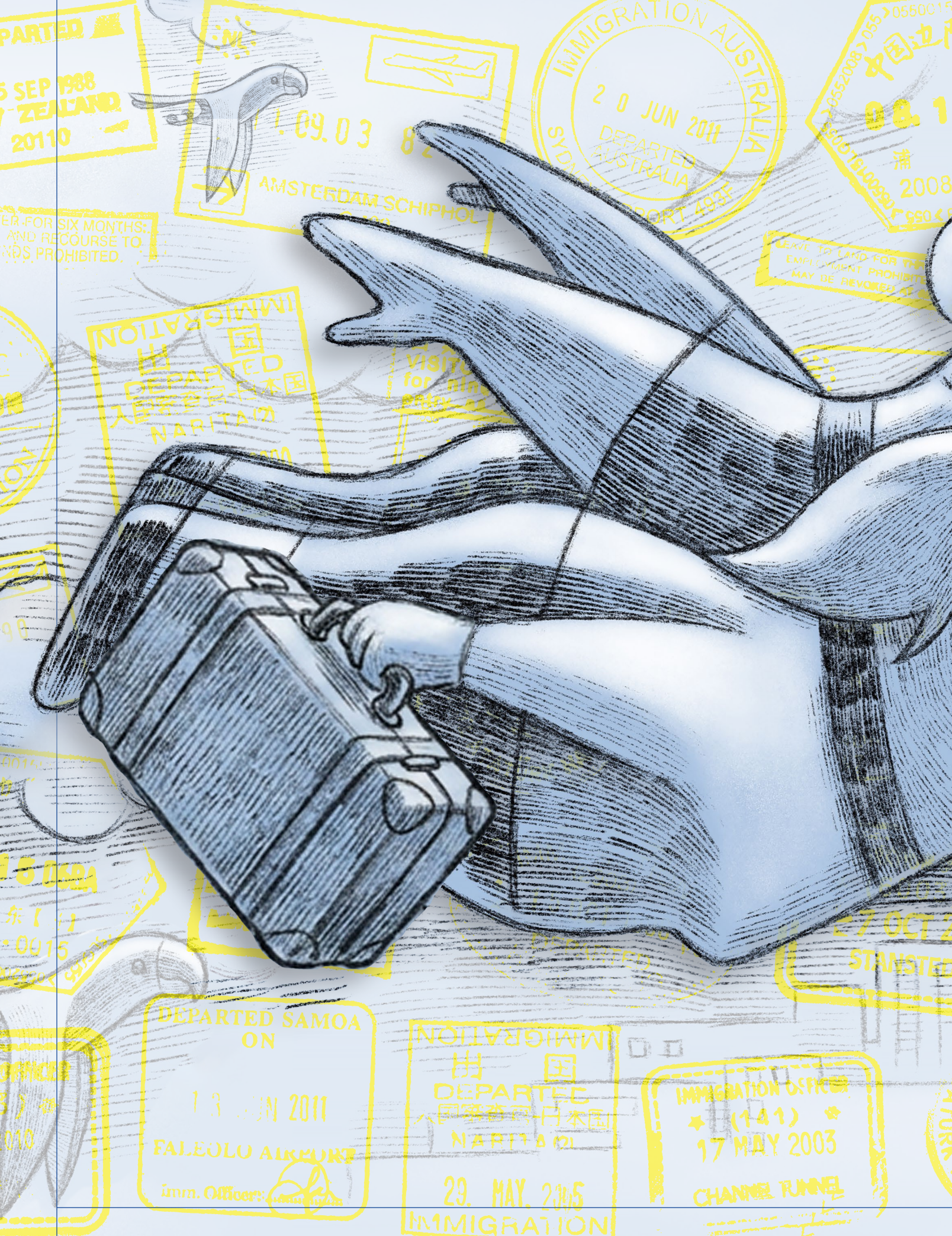
CSA Journal

Designing Travel for Longer Lives

Why hospitality that gets it right wins.

By Soo Kang, Ph.D., CHE, CHIA
and Kelsey Knoedler Perri





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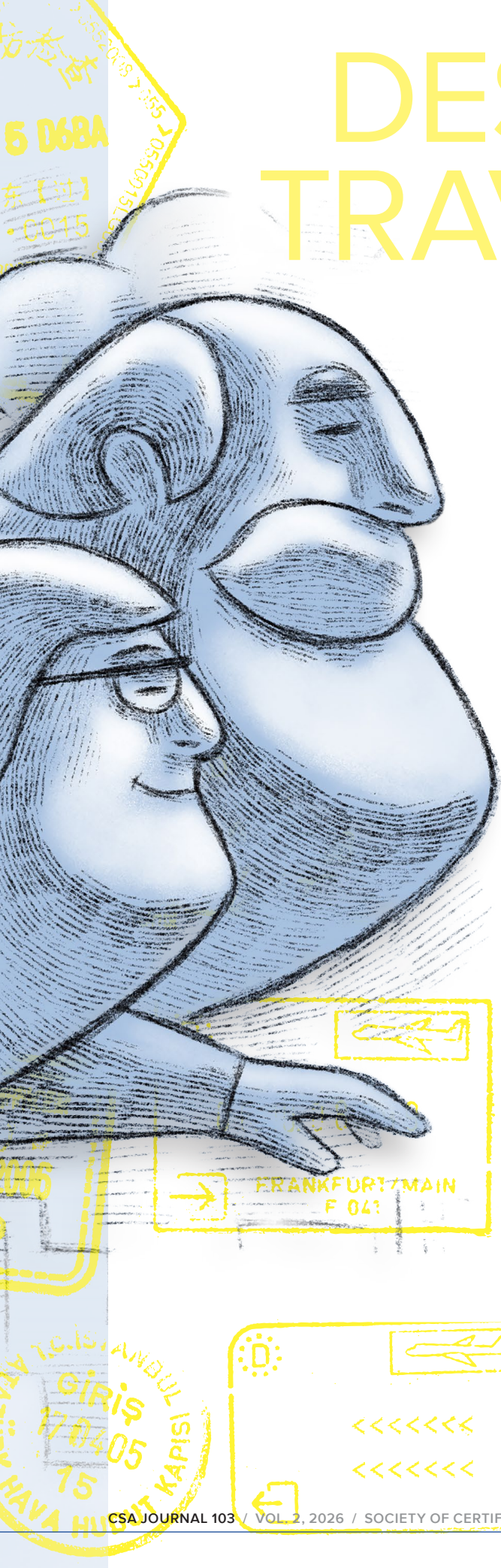
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DESIGNING TRAVEL FOR LONGER LIVES



Why hospitality that gets it right wins.

BY SOO KANG, PH.D., CHE, CHIA
AND KELSEY KNOEDLER PERRI

People are living longer, healthier, and more active lives than any generation before them—and they are traveling accordingly. Adults over sixty are now one of the fastest-growing and most financially powerful segments in global travel (MIT AgeLab, 2019; World Tourism Organization, 2023). They take longer trips, travel more frequently outside peak seasons, spend more per journey, and demonstrate higher brand loyalty than younger cohorts (Patterson & Mair, 2021; Road Scholar, 2024a; Viking Cruises, 2023).

Yet much of the travel and hospitality industry still designs experiences around outdated assumptions: speed over comfort, efficiency over confidence, and accessibility as an afterthought rather than a differentiator. The result is a growing disconnect between what experienced travelers value and what the industry delivers. The opportunity is clear: hospitality brands that design with older travelers—rather than for them—are outperforming competitors on satisfaction, repeat bookings, referrals, and lifetime value. As Rick Steves, founder of Rick Steves' Europe, puts it:

“Travel is a mindset, not a birthdate. It’s my fountain of youth.”

That mindset shift is reshaping the future of travel.

Travel as a Driver of Health, Identity, and Belonging

For many adults in later life, travel is no longer about checking destinations off a list. It is about depth—connection, meaning, curiosity, and joy. Travel becomes a way to stay mentally sharp, physically engaged, and socially connected.

Research consistently shows that movement, novelty, learning, and social interaction are core contributors to health span. Travel naturally weaves these elements together. Navigating new environments stimulates cognition. Cultural immersion supports emotional renewal. Daily movement—walking, exploring, adapting—maintains physical confidence without formal exercise routines.

KEY IMPLICATION FOR INDUSTRY LEADERS:

Travel for this segment is not discretionary indulgence—it is a lifestyle investment. Brands that understand this design for confidence, not limitation.

From Tourism to Belonging: What Experienced Travelers Want Now

Traditional tourism rewards speed: see more, do more, move on. Experienced travelers increasingly prioritize something else entirely.

They choose:

- Slower itineraries with longer stays
- Experiences that feel rooted rather than transactional
- Opportunities for learning, conversation, and local connection.

This shift is fueling growth in:

- Educational travel
- River and expedition cruising
- Extended-stay hospitality
- Small-group, purpose-driven journeys.

When travelers feel respected, capable, and at ease, they don't just return home satisfied. They become loyal, regular travelers.

Where Hospitality, Design, and Technology Create Competitive Advantage

DESIGNING FOR CONFIDENCE (NOT "ACCESSIBILITY")

Accessibility asks, "*Can someone enter the space?*" This is designing for limitation.

Inclusive hospitality asks, "*Once they're here, do they feel confident, comfortable, and welcome?*"

Design choices that matter (more than operators often realize) include:

- Warm, glare-free lighting and readable signage

- Comfortable seating placed where people naturally pause
- Reduced ambient noise to support conversation and cognition
- Intuitive layouts that lower decision fatigue.

These features benefit all guests—but they are essential for older travelers.

THE MISSING MIDDLE: THE DOOR-TO-DESTINATION EXPERIENCE

Many experienced travelers report that the hardest part of travel isn't the destination—it's getting there.

Airports, transfers, luggage handling, security lines, and unclear wayfinding introduce physical and cognitive friction. Ironically, once travelers arrive—on a ship, campus, or resort—they often thrive.

Brands that close this door-to-destination gap gain a powerful advantage by offering:

- Coordinated transfers
- Clear pacing and expectations
- Human support at transition points
- Transparent communication before departure.

Confidence at the start of the journey often determines whether travelers opt in at all.

TECHNOLOGY THAT EXPANDS FREEDOM (WHEN DESIGNED WELL)

People don't typically struggle just with technology. They struggle with poorly designed technology.

When built thoughtfully, digital tools quietly increase independence. These might include:

- Booking platforms with clear fonts and simple navigation
- Accessibility filters that reduce research fatigue
- Translation, navigation, and mobility-support tools
- Wearables and apps that support safety without stigma.

Innovation succeeds when it reduces friction and preserves dignity.

Innovation Spotlight: Expanding Possibility in Travel

Emerging solutions already reshaping travel confidence include:

- Virtual immersion and previewing: Rendever, a company that uses virtual reality (VR headsets) to help older adults experience places and activities they can't easily access; Mynd Immersive, a VR company for older adults focused on health, therapy, and brain stimulation.
- Navigation and translation: Be My Eyes and Aira, mobile-friendly apps that visually impaired



travelers can use for help; Google Maps accessibility tools.

- Sensory-friendly environments: Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, a program designed to help service providers recognize and accommodate individuals with disabilities; airport sensory rooms.
- Supported travel when needed: Elite Cruises & Vacations Travel.

Why This Is Smart Business (Not a Niche Strategy)

Designing for longer lives delivers measurable returns. Older, more experienced travelers return more often, stay longer, and reward brands they trust. They are less price-sensitive and more consistent across economic cycles than other travelers, so designing for them makes sense. In short: hospitality designed for confidence scales better.

Industry Examples: Brands That Get It Right

Viking Cruises has built a loyal following by focusing on culturally rich, calm, destination-driven experiences for travelers over 55. Thoughtful design, enrichment-focused programming, and respectful pacing translate directly into repeat bookings.

Road Scholar, serving nearly 90,000 participants annually, demonstrates that learning, community, and purpose drive travel decisions. Its expansion into online programs sustains engagement even when physical travel pauses—extending brand loyalty beyond the trip itself.

Aging as Expansion

The most successful hospitality brands of the next decade will not market to age. They will design for curiosity, confidence, and connection.

Curiosity is renewable.

Joy is renewable.

Belonging is renewable.

When travel experiences honor those truths, guests don't just travel longer—they travel better.

And the brands that meet them there will win. •CSA



Dr. Soo Kang is Director of the Hospitality and Event Management Program and Professor at Colorado State University. A two-time Semester at Sea Global Teaching Scholar and Associate Editor of *The Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, her research focuses on consumer behavior in tourism, experiential learning, and inclusive travel across the lifespan.



Kelsey Knoedler Perri is a writer and communications professional in the travel and hospitality industry. She has worked at Road Scholar, the global leader in educational travel for older adults, since 2016. She holds a BA and MFA in creative writing and lives in Providence with her husband and two children.

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