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Get outta town

Website helps you plan your dream vacation

The sun is shining, the sky is blue and the air is warm. You are sitting in a small grey cubicle, staring at a small screen, wearing long pants and uncomfortable shoes. Something must be done.

For obvious reasons, summertime is also vacation time. The Internet has long been a useful tool for planning vacations. Websites like Google Maps, Orbitz, Kayak, Travelocity and Priceline can help you plan routes, book hotels, buy airline tickets and even make dinner plans.

Wanderfly.com is a relatively new travel site, having launched last October. The site calls itself a "recommendation engine" because it targets people who want to travel but aren't sure where they want to go.

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InSites

Custom recommendations

When using most travel sites, you enter your destination to get information on a particular place. At Wanderfly, you enter criteria such as your budget, interests (art, beach, shopping, nightlife, etc.), when and how long you want to travel, and, if you know, the region you want to explore. The region can be as general as "the world," or as specific as "New York City." Wanderfly's recommendation engine uses your input to generate a list of destinations that should interest you.

For example, I entered the Caribbean as the region; $1,000 per person as my budget; a week in early January as my time; and beach, water sports, outdoors, family and nightlife as my interests. The site recommended eight destinations: Belize City, Trinidad, St. Lucia, Barbados, Punta Gorda, Bathsheba, Nassau and Saint Kitts and Nevis.

Profiles and partnerships

Each recommended destination is represented by a thumbnail photo at the top of the page. Clicking on a thumbnail takes you to a page with specific information on the location. There are photo galleries of the local sights (Wanderfly gets its photos through a partnership with Flickr. The quality of the pictures ranges from very good to poor).

There's also a brief description of what the destination has to offer. A link to Facebook lets you read what people who have been there have to say about their experiences.

An "activities" section lists things to do, complete with reviews, tips and links to more details. This section needs some work based on the destinations I looked at. For instance, while looking for activities in and around Los Angeles, Starbucks was listed as a family activity, but Disneyland wasn't. I don't know about your family, but I'm pretty sure if I hauled mine across the country to visit Starbucks, I'd be spending the rest of my vacation alone.

The "hotels" section lets you generate lists of lodgings based on price, location and star rating. Click on any of the hotels listed to get a photo gallery of the accommodations, plus features and reviews for some locations. Wanderfly gets its hotel information through a partnership with Hotels.com.

Finally, there's a "flights" section for each destination. You can search by departure and arrival times, and you can organize the list by price, airline, etc. The flight information is provided through Wanderfly's partnership with Orbitz.

The website is well-designed and easy to use. The homepage features a large slideshow of exotic destinations in the background. Superimposed over the pictures are the tools to work the recommendation engine. The tools are labeled well and are simple to figure out. The typography and color palette are pleasingly understated. The destination pages follow the same formula of nice, big art and subdued type.

Bells and whistles

While the travel recommendation engine dominates the site, Wanderfly does include some other features. You can create lists of places you've been, places you'd like to go or any other subject you like. These lists can be shared over social networks like Facebook, Twitter or Foursquare to get feedback on your travel plans. There's also a blog, an archive of travel articles, a FAQs section, profiles of the site's team, press information, job listings and more.

Wanderfly's strengths are its ease of use and attractive design. The site has lots of potential, but it needs to grow a little in order to reach it. Currently, it has around 1,300 destinations in its database. That may sound like a lot, but several times I entered specific locations I've visited only to get a message informing me I was trying to go "off the grid." As it adds locations and attractions, the site should improve.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timesshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.