

Supporting Users in Organizing their Vacation Before, During, and After the Travel

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Abstract

To embrace the challenges of the mobile communication era and of the personalized travel planning aid, eTourism web portals need to evolve from the simplified perspective of pre-visit organizational tools to the wider perspective of personal travel advisors and companions, featuring useful, usable, accessible and engaging services before, during and after the travel. This paper describes some recent evolution of the Trip@dvice travel recommender system in this direction, to meet the requirements of the next generation of travel advisors. The ultimate goal is to transform a travel plan into a sort of personal trip diary: a canvas on which the practical, emotional, and visual traits of the travel experience are composed by users.

Keywords: Travel Planning; Recommender Systems; Mobile Services

1 Introduction

The difficulty of travellers in finding, selecting, and organizing their preferred tourist items and services while interacting with complex tourist portals is well known by the specialized scientific research community. Tourist portals provide a wide set of services and contents allowing their visitors to acquire rich information on the promoted destinations; but for inexperienced users it can be difficult to discover the specific tourist items of interest and organize them in a well structured travel. To overcome this problem, decision support technologies are adopted by the most advanced tourist portals to provide tools and functions which guide users in planning their vacation (Fesenmaier, Werthner & Wöber, 2006)(Adomavicius & Tuzhilin, 2005). In particular, *recommendation services* are functions that exploit information about travellers' personal characteristics, needs and preferences, information about products characteristics, and possibly the behaviour of the community of other users, to suggest tourist products and services that seem most interesting for the current user. *Travel planning services* comprise, instead, user-friendly functionalities that support users in composing their itineraries by selecting and arranging in a personalized cart the preferred tourism items, i.e. places to visit, attractions, accommodations,.. and also by supporting user generated contents like personal notes, blogs, comments on travel items etc. The possibility of sharing personal itineraries or product evaluations with a community of travellers additionally strengthens users' engagement. Indeed, many of the most successful eTourism web portals exploit personalization and community services to foster: engagement, faster and easier interactions, customer loyalty, likelihood of repeated visits and, ultimately, increase the look-to-buy ratio.

The new opportunities and challenges emerging from the powerful growth in mobile communications open new scenarios for supporting travellers also at the very moment when the need for information occurs (Horozov et al., 2006; van Setten et al. 2004). The user may be allowed to query for recommendations also during the on-trip phase (e.g., about local restaurants), or the system may push suggestions on its own initiative (e.g., when interesting events occur nearby). Adequate support may be provided to the user to manage possible revisions to her current travel plan through the mobile device, i.e., to delete or reschedule travel items and to add new ones, possibly keeping track of all the changes made while on the move for later inspection of the complete travel history when back at home. Or social network functionalities may be integrated to allow travellers to publish their personal travel diaries while on the move.

This paper describes some recent evolution of the commercial version of the Trip@dvice travel recommender system to provide enhanced support to users of eTourism portals in: finding the tourism products that best fit their needs; composing the optimal personal itinerary; get help and support also during the travel itself; collect and share memories for keeping enjoying the travel experience also when back at home.