**“Conversations On Turning 20”: Timothy Hughes, the “Cranky Optimist” on Travel, Tragedy and Comedy**

When you get to the ripe young age of 20, you’re bound to collect lots of stories – not only about the past but lessons for the future.

As WiT marks its 20th year in 2025, we turn the spotlight on our community, our tribe pioneers and leaders, to tell their stories and share their views on the evolution of online travel and technology.

We ask them to look back on the past and their early days, reflect on the present and why this moment is pivotal for online travel and get them to imagine the future, the next 20.

This special WiT Studio series, “Conversations On Turning 20”, is the collective story of WiT.

As a Chinese saying goes, 以古为鉴，可以知兴替

“By using history as a mirror, one can understand the rise and fall of things.”

**Episode 10: Timothy Hughes, Vice President, Corporate Development, Agoda**

Timothy Hughes, Vice President of Corporate Development at Agoda, likes to call himself a "cranky optimist."  It’s a fitting description for someone who has spent nearly 25 years in online travel, witnessing its ups, downs, and constant reinvention.

Trained as a lawyer, Hughes stumbled into travel by accident in 2000, landing at Expedia in London just as the dot-com bubble burst. But perhaps it wasn’t entirely by chance. With a stepfather who worked at Qantas for 40 years, travel was in his blood.

Here, Hughes reflects on the journey of online travel, from its humble beginnings to the technological and societal shifts shaping its future, with a blend of admiration, realism, and a relentless belief in what’s still possible.

Here’s a snapshot of the key moments you’ll want to hear:

**• How It All Started: Accidental Beginnings in Online Travel**

* From **lawyer to Expedia London** employee just before the 2000 dot-com crash.
* Early online travel? Just **"putting a UI skin over the old GDS systems."**
* **Quote:** *"We’ve come a long way — but even 25 years later, much of online travel is still a skin over old tech."*

**• Lessons from Mobile: It Took Longer Than You Think**

* The early hype around **WAP mobile tech** — and why true mobile travel took **seven painful years** to become reality.
* **Quote:** *"What can seem overnight — like mobile — actually took seven years. Real change is slower (and messier) than we think."*

**• Tragedy as Catalyst: 9/11, COVID, and Step Changes**

* How crises like **9/11 and COVID** **accelerated travel’s digital shift**, especially in accommodation and mobile usage.
* **Quote:** *"Travel and tragedy are linked — every big disruption creates a step-change toward online."*

**• The Asian Century: Beyond Just China**

* Hughes reflects on Asia’s rise: today, **every market — from Japan to Indonesia — has its own digital ecosystem and local champions**.
* **Quote:** *"Asia’s story is now everyone’s story. It's local, powerful, and impossible to generalize."*

**• The Broken Model: Content, Discovery, and the New AI Disruption**

* How **online travel shattered the traditional model** of advice + booking coming from the same source — and why **discovery is still an unsolved problem**.
* With **AI rewriting content rules again**, the challenge is even bigger.
* **Quote:** *"Even after 25 years, people still text me personally for Bangkok tips. Discovery is broken — and still up for grabs."*

**• The Role of Money: Building the Giants**

* How **capital markets and acquisitions** — Booking, Agoda, Kayak, and beyond — fueled the **rise of global OTAs**.
* **Quote:** *"Travel’s global scale is powered by money — and smart consolidation."*

**• The Next 20 Years: Travel Will Be Unbreakable, But Rules Will Change**

* **Transport will evolve** (faster flights, deeper ocean travel, easier immersion).
* **AI will transform in-destination experiences**, blending physical and digital.
* **New rules** will emerge about **who can go where and when**, driven by overpopulation and overtourism.
* **Quote:** *"The way we move, experience, and even qualify for travel will change dramatically by 2045."*

**• Cranky Optimism: Why There’s So Much Left to Fix (and Celebrate)**

* Hughes embraces being a **“cranky optimist”**: celebrating progress while pushing harder for better discovery, content, tech, and customer experiences.
* **Quote:** *"Travel today is amazing — but there’s a long list of things we should fix. And that’s exciting."*

**Want to hear why discovery remains travel’s biggest unsolved puzzle, why mobile was an epic seven-year journey, and why Tim Hughes thinks drones and authenticity will define the next era?** **Watch the full interview for a candid, funny, and sharply insightful journey through the past, present, and next future of travel.**

**THE FIRST STUMBLE**

09:06.72

Timothy Hughes

I stumbled in into travel by accident in March 2000 on the eve of the dot-com bust that happened in April 2000. I previously was a lawyer and I ended up working at Expedia by sheer chance.

09:21.37

Timothy Hughes

Though technically the travel industry is the family business for me.

09:23.75

Siew Hoon

Yeah. All right.

09:25.10

Timothy Hughes

My my stepfather worked for Qantas for 40 years. So travel was a constant industry in my house, but my journey to it was an accident, a very joyous accident, March 2000. And I was working out of Expedia in London, where it was the truly the earliest days of travel. It was also the end of this dot com madness period that people were over investing all sorts of things. And the early travel, online travel, was very simply putting a skin on the existing technical infrastructure. So let's put a booking engine on top of the GDS.the early travel, online travel, was very simply putting a skin on the existing technical infrastructure. So let's put a booking engine on top of the GDS.

09:58.46

Timothy Hughes

And let's just let's just use the GDS and because it's already age-old technology. The connectivity is there for flights. Let's put a skin on that and make a search engine that people can use. Hotels were afterthought, car rental and afterthought. Metasearch didn't exist. It was about putting a you know UI yeah search interface. And of course, we've come a little bit since then.

10:18.60

Timothy Hughes

But still, and really, if you look at it, 25 years later, out a lot of what we got is a skin on the existing yeah backend technology, which shows the great amounts of leaps and bounds that are still to come.

**THE MOBILE SHIFT**

10:18.60

Timothy Hughes

(DELETE) But still, and really, if you look at it, 25 years later, out a lot of what we got is a skin on the existing yeah backend technology, which shows the great amounts of leaps and bounds that are still to come. I remember a couple of very interesting things from that time, because these early days of online travel were also ah coincided with the early days of mobile.

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Timothy Hughes

And there was a type of technology lovingly referred to as WAP, which had a different meaning in 2000 to what I think it means culturally now. It had a meaning of wireless application protocol. And it was the very early instances of mobile on feature phones. So how do you do the mobile internet on a phone that is just text based?

10:58.92

Timothy Hughes

And it took the world by storm for about six months until everyone could see that it was completely unusable. And we had to wait another seven years, eight years until the birth of the iPhone before we truly got a shot at mobile. But those early days of mobile, I suppose those early days of mobile proved something for us in travel. That what can seem seem like overnight, i.e. mobile, can take seven years to happen.

11:21.43

Timothy Hughes

So there is a learning there about how the speed of technology is not necessarily as fast as we think it is because a lot of mistakes and errors and issues can happen along the way as we're still building a knowledge base. Now there's a question mark where things are faster now and we could talk about AI in other parts of this discussion, but I think that's a big one. wireless took seven years Mobile took seven years from the wireless application protocol to the iPhone and the app before we truly saw that change.

**THE GREAT TRAGEDIES OF TRAVEL**

11:49.95

Timothy Hughes

um The other thing that sticks into my mind, interestingly, once you get old and you you watch things, is the turning points of tragedy in an industry. you know on On reflection, we can look, for instance, to 9-11 and the attacks on America as a turning point in online travel. What happened, and I think it's well known during that time, travel was grounded across America and most of the Northern Hemisphere and other parts of the world as a result. There was a panic that you know the world had changed, and it did, and that caused a ripple effect in accommodation. And the ripple effect in accommodation is a lot of hoteliers were seeking channels to expand and they lent into the mobile channel.

12:31.02

Timothy Hughes

Now, I think that would have happened by itself anyway, but I think there's clear evidence that 9-11 accelerated the leaning in of hotels to the online channel, which accelerated online travel.

12:44.19

Timothy Hughes

And of course, here we are in 2025 and we know the impacts of tragedy again. we yeah know Here in Asia, we did three years of COVID from 2020 through to most of 2023. And we know the accelerant effect it had on online shift. It caused a step change in people's use of the phone and a step change in people's use of online travel. So travel and tragedy have a constant linking because travel's so linked to the rest of the world. There are clear parts in the history of online travel where we can um where we can link tragedy to step changes in online travel.

**THE ASIA STORY**

12:44.19

Timothy Hughes

DELETE And of course, here we are in 2025 and we know the impacts of tragedy again. we yeah know Here in Asia, we did three years of COVID from 2020 through to most of 2023. And we know the accelerant effect it had on online shift. It caused a step change in people's use of the phone and a step change in people's use of online travel. So travel and tragedy have a constant linking because travel's so linked to the rest of the world. There are clear parts in the history of online travel where we can um where we can link tragedy to step changes in online travel. Personally, I also changed my sort of focus during these 20 years. My early days in travel were working directly for American companies. You can guess their names. One was headquartered in Seattle, the other was headquartered in Chicago. And so I spent my time living in Asia, but working under the rules of ah companies based in America.

13:37.45

Timothy Hughes

Because now I find myself, surely my parent company is is is based at a Norwalk slash Amsterdam, but everything a go-to needs to do is run out of Bangkok. And so the heart of how I think about online travel has changed dramatically because I'm right here in Asia talking about Asia. And those early days of Asia were all talk about China. China, China, China was going to be the big you know success story. and That was the big powerhouse. And of course, that's true.

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Timothy Hughes

But now we find ourselves you know in this 25th year into the century and Japan, Korea, Taiwan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, everywhere's got a story. Everywhere's got a local ecosystem.

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Timothy Hughes

in terms of the digital economy. Everyone's got local players that are strong and powerful in their own regard, and everyone's got international challenges trying to make a goal of it. So the online travel story has become a very global story. I often say about Agoda, for example, our online story is um a global company with an Asian heart. You can say that a lot about what's going on in Asia in online travel.

**THE ONLINE DISRUPTION TO TRAVEL**

14:42.65

Timothy Hughes

I think if we think a little bit about travel itself, and the online travel, I think, is a couple of interesting elements that happened that online travel did to travel. One of the ones was we unexpectedly, in online travel, broke the rules of how content and advice would work. And what I mean by that is pre-online travel, you got content, advice, and booking from the same source.

15:13.44

Timothy Hughes

You went to an offline travel agency, they handed you a brochure, you asked them questions, they gave you the answers, and those answers led to you booking with that offline travel agent. ah like I like to go to Disneyland, I'd like to go to the Maldives, whatever it was. The person giving the advice, the person with the content was the same as the booker.

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Timothy Hughes

The online world broke that model, changed that model, and it put content a little bit to the left, places where you could find advice, be they individual blogs or aggregator sites like a TripAdvisor, and you put bookings on the right at OTAs like us, my brothers and sisters in Amsterdam and so forth. And in the middle, you stuck Google.

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Timothy Hughes

in the middle between content and booking your stuck search. And that was very different to offline. And that caused a lot of issues in content, not just in travel, we see this in the whole world, the media world, content rules had to change, newspapers, news, ah books, everything had to change. And in travel, that required a whole different way of thinking about the rules of content.

**THE AI DISRUPTION TO CONTENT**

16:15.55

Timothy Hughes

And were as we're still trying to grasp it, 25 years later, we're still trying to understand the role that content can play in travel in a technological era. We're about to break the rules again with generative and agentic AI, where we're going to change completely how content can be consumed, how it can be displayed, how it can be rewritten, how can it can be generated, how it can be pushed.

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Timothy Hughes

And we still didn't have to figure out the old rules. We understood the rules for content offline. You'd go to a person, you'd ask them questions, they'd give you the answer in your book. We started to figure out in the middle. We still hadn't figured out in the middle how content was going to work. And now we're going to go into a ah new age where content is going to be completely rewritten and revamped by a machine. And we're still going to figure out how that that content story yeah is going to work.

**DISCOVERY YET TO BE SOLVED**

16:58.70

Timothy Hughes

yeah One of the other things we learned during this history is that travel is unbreakable. You can't break it. I've talked in my other comments about how tragedy is linked to travel. You can't break it. It doesn't matter how many times you blow up Bali, Australians will keep on going. It doesn't matter how many times you get sick, people will keep traveling. It doesn't matter how many times you attack a place, people keep traveling. And that is unbreakable. But what hasn't been solved in that is helping people figure out when they are concerned or

17:30.34

Timothy Hughes

lost or looking for the new, help them figure out the new. So discovery is still not solved in travel. Advice is still not solved in travel. Recommendations are still not solved in travel. When someone comes to Bangkok that's a friend of mine, they don't Google where to go in Bangkok, they write to me personally and say, Tim, where should I go in Bangkok? Because we haven't cracked the code on discovery and advice. And that's a story and a lesson for us to work on as we go to the next parts of travel.

**THE ROLE OF MONEY**

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Timothy Hughes

you know Travel is one of the largest industries in the world. It's an industry that has you know attracted money and financing from across the spectrum. The Booking Holdings group is famously built together.

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Timothy Hughes

by the acquisition of some incredible companies, Bookie.com itself, Kayak and of course Agoda. So there's a huge role that capital markets have played in constructing very powerful and and and global ah travel companies. We've seen the acquisition activities of Trip dot.com group, of Expedia group, all of them have spent a lot of time trying to compile very powerful machines in travel, very large global machines. And so we have to we have to acknowledge the role that the capital markets and have played in building this industry.

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Timothy Hughes

I think back to you know the days when I was working for ah the Orbits Group and first heard of the name Bookings NL, for example, you know as they were back then, and first heard of the names of active hotels, first heard of the names of Agoda, and now finding myself inside that organization. And the brands have changed or merged, but the the the determination to build ah very creative and and scale travel products continues.

**THE NEXT 20**

19:38.56

Timothy Hughes

When we look about think about what's next in the 21st century, one of the interesting things about technology is, I've heard a number of futurists say, technology is a great creator of the need for legal protection. But another way, you don't think you need a certain law until you've got a technology that allows you to do something you didn't think you could do. The obvious example is we didn't need road rules until we had cars, because we didn't really have a problem.

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Timothy Hughes

And now with technology, we're creating more and more needs for the law to catch up. Data privacy, for example, is going to be a huge part about the way in which we manage the future of the world. We need to get a balance, right? There's a balance we have to get here. Human beings want to share parts about them so that the industries at Wile can service them at the same time there are protections needed. So I think a lot of the future of travel and all commerce is going to be getting that balance right and trying to figure out how to get that to work. um And now we're entering an era, my famous prediction, where at some point drones are going to be ubiquitous.

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Timothy Hughes

At some point, drones are going to be as common as a mobile phone. ah What happens then? What happens where everybody's got a camera flying above their head? What does the world look like? How do we how do we manage people's content and privacy in that time? How do we and do we help consumers protect themselves when that's going on? um And as a result, we can also you know that means we've started at that point, people will be collecting more data about themselves and others than are imaginable.

21:15.27

Timothy Hughes

And now we see with the age of AI, we've also got a question of authenticity. You know, it's possible that you're actually talking to me, you're talking to an AI version of me. And it's possible that you could adjust this video and make me look like Brad Pitt. And it would be Brad Pitt giving this. And no one would know, no one would have any way of knowing, whether it was the real me or Brad Pitt or whoever was giving this present this discussion. And how are we going to manage authenticity? That there's one thing we know about consumers and travel is the desire for authenticity, the desire for the experience to be real.

**CRANKY OPTIMISM**

22:17.51

Timothy Hughes

I can tell you generally, I would consider myself about the world, travel or not, I consider myself an annoyed optimist, a cranky optimist. What I mean by that is I'm an optimist because legitimately, right now is the best time to be alive. Every point in the future it past had something probably worse than right now.

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Timothy Hughes

There's something that's just improved recently in some part of the world that makes it a little bit better on the whole than right now. Obviously there'll be plenty of people who that's not not true for. I'm talking about across the board. For an example, tolerance is better now than it was before. ah Thailand, about a month ago, there we're at February 2025 and I'm discussing Thailand a month ago had its first marriage equality marriages. People got married for the first time in Thailand. That is better than it was a year ago.

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Timothy Hughes

ah But I'm annoyed. The optimist of me celebrates that, but I'm annoyed and I'm cranky because every every one of us can sit around and see things that could be better, faster, ah could be improved. There'd be where the respect, tolerance and equality could have a role to play or we could be nicer. So I think when I look to the world and I think 25 years into the 21st century, there's a lot of great things. I get annoyed, that's optimist, but the annoyed person in me sees the things that can change faster. And that's a little bit like travel.

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Timothy Hughes

And the optimists in me believe that travel is unstoppable and travel is unbreakable and looks at the things that can now be done in travel 25 years later after I started and 20 years after WIT and sees incredible things that have improved. But I see the list of things we can do.

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Timothy Hughes

I see the list of opportunities that could be worked on. the The link between discovery, content and booking that can be worked on. The plumbing so that we can see better inventory and more of it. So we can provide consumers with more information before they arrive, during their trip and after their trip. We can make check-in. Check-in should disappear.

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Timothy Hughes

Checking should be gone. um The constraints in the world that you have to check in at three o'clock and check out by 10 o'clock, that should be gone. The fact that you can't book in a connecting room should be gone. The fact that youre that that that flights get overbooked and get cancelled should be there's so many things.

24:33.84

Timothy Hughes

that the annoyed part of the optimist in me thinks we can still go work on. But the optimist is thrilled that travel now is as good or as as it as it's ever been. But the ah the the annoyed part of me says, I'm i'm excited a little bit that we've got things we can work on um to to build more in the travel history. yeah If I think about what I think travel looks like 2045, 20 years from now, again, it's impossible. But I know some things will be different.

**SO WHAT WILL BE DIFFERENT?**

25:00.65

Timothy Hughes

I know, actually no, the first thing that won't be different, travel. Unstoppable, unbreakable, humans will always do it. Transport rules that we think of now will be broken in 2045. I don't know what that means. I mean, um we're gonna be flying places faster. We're gonna be getting to places quicker. And there'll be places we can't get to right now that we can get to deeper in the ocean, further up in the sky.

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Timothy Hughes

So the rules of transport that we think we know will be changed in 20 years, because we've seen how much they've changed in the previous 20 years. Anyone told you you could do a nonstop flight commercially from Australia to to England would have called you an idiot 20 years ago, but now Qantas does it every day. So we know that the rules of transport are going to be changed. um And we know that technology and travel will create different immersive experiences. The the historical tour of a place is gonna be different in 2045. What you can see sitting in Venice, sitting in Egypt, sitting in Siem Reap, what you can see and learn historically about the place that you are in will be changed. So the in-destination experience

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Timothy Hughes

will be very different as we combine technology and the location together. And then I suppose that's the secret is it's the combination of those two things that will create an incredibly immersive, I don't know if it's gonna be headsets or whatever, but I imagine me sitting there in Siem Reap looking at Angkor Wat and something will be very different about my experience. I'll be dramatically more immersed in a combination of human and technology and location. There's something I can't imagine exactly what it'll look looks like, but i but i we can sort of ah hope and think.

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Timothy Hughes

So the rules of how we get there and where we can go will be different. ah The rules of technology and the immersive experience will be different. And I think there's going to be new rules on who can go where, when.

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Timothy Hughes

You know, as we get beyond eight billion people, we're going to have to manage the way the world works and travels and migrates. So I think there's going to be some new rules on who can go where, when and how. and As we strive to manage the ability for this huge amount of humans to go to the places we want to go to.