**‘‘Conversations On Turning 20’‘: Rod Cuthbert on Simplicity, Rocket Boosters and Serendipity**

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 11: Rod Cuthbert, Founder, Viator**

In 1995, long before “experiences” became the holy grail of travel, Rod Cuthbert had a simple idea: travellers should be able to book tours and activities online, just like they could (eventually) book flights and hotels.  
  
That simple idea became Viator and Rod, a Tasmanian-born entrepreneur, became the unwitting “godfather” of a sector now valued in the billions.

Reflecting nearly 30 years after founding Viator, Cuthbert shares with WiT the serendipity, seismic shifts, and enduring beauty of the travel industry.

Here’s a taste of what you’ll hear:

### • How Viator Was Born: Solving a Simple but Painful Problem

* Cuthbert shares how Viator created a **global marketplace for tours and experiences** — and why it took off so quickly.
* **Quote:** "Operators loved that we actually paid them, on time, every month. That news spread like wildfire."

### • 9/11: A Tragic Catalyst for Online Travel

* How the chaos of 9/11 exposed the limitations of call centers — and accelerated the public's shift toward **booking travel online**.
* **Quote:** "It was incredibly sad — but for online travel, it was like a rocket booster."

### • The Mindset Shift: From "Stuff" to "Experiences"

* Cuthbert discusses the early 2000s cultural shift where people realized **memories meant more than material possessions** — fueling explosive growth for experiences.
* **Quote:** "Society moved from collecting snow globes to collecting memories — and our industry took off."

### • The Pandemic: Travel as a Human Need, Not Just a Want

* Why COVID-19 revealed just how essential travel is to human well-being — and how **revenge travel** was a symptom of something deeper.
* **Quote:** "People realized they had a hole in their heart. Travel wasn't just a want — it was a need."

### • Breaking Free from Google's Grip

* Cuthbert criticizes the dominance of Google in travel advertising and hopes for a **more diverse, healthier digital ecosystem**.
* **Quote:** "No monopoly is good for an industry. It’s time for broader choices."

### • The Next 20 Years: Smarter, Faster, But Not Predictable

* Cuthbert expects **AI, speech technology, and smarter interfaces** to reshape online travel — but warns against trying to predict specifics.
* **Quote:** "It's going to look very different — and it’s foolish to think we know exactly how."

### • Travel 2045: The Rise of Virtual Tourism?

* A provocative take: more people might **choose to explore the world virtually** from their living rooms — especially as over-tourism grows.
* **Quote:** "It’s upsetting, but with crowds and polarization, some will prefer to 'visit' places virtually."

### • The Beauty of Travel: Lifelong Relationships

* Cuthbert reflects on what makes the travel industry unique: **a spirit of camaraderie and enduring partnerships**across decades.
* **Quote:** "In travel, you build relationships that last a lifetime. That’s rare — and beautiful."

**Want to hear more about the untold challenges of building Viator, the true impact of 9/11 on travel, and why Rod believes experiences will only grow in importance?** **Watch the full interview for a journey through travel’s past and a thoughtful glimpse into its future.**

THE BEGINNING

00:11.29

rod

So when Viator first launched as a site that would offer customers experiences in the destination they were traveling to, ah we were creating a marketplace and we really had no idea how easy or hard that would be.

00:30.83

rod

And it turned out to be incredibly easy and there were a couple of reasons for that ah first of all tour operators experience operators people who were in the sightseeing business were intensely frustrated by the fact that when they got bookings in advance which they liked ah they often didn't get paid for them and the reason was that you know if somebody walked into a travel agency and say

01:02.27

rod

Liverpool in the UK and said, look, I'm going to be in Sydney, Australia, and I really want to book a tour to the wine growing district there, the Barossa Valley. The travel agent would look that up and they'd make the booking for them, but it would be a one-off thing.

01:18.80

rod

And when the tour company eventually sent the invoice to the travel agency in Liverpool, it wasn't really a priority for them to pay it because they're never going to send anybody there again.

01:30.79

rod

um And that's not to say that all travel agents were like that. Of course they weren't. But, enough of them were like that, that it was very frustrating for experience operators. They, they wanted those advanced bookings. They wanted the international customers, but it seemed the only way they could get them was from a hotel concierge the day before the people wanted to do the experience.

THEY ACTUALLY PAY!

02:21.67

rod

Viator found it relatively easy to put together a wide range of operators in a large number of destinations around the world. So, know, before we knew it, we had 20 or 30,000 experiences on our platform, ah which was terrific.

02:39.51

rod

One of the really simple things we did was we paid everybody on the 15th of the month. So if somebody, if if we got a booking and the person travelled March, then to the operator knew they were going to get paid on the 15th of April without any shadow of a doubt.

02:58.95

rod

And that that news sort of spread like wildfire through the industry. And people said, hey, you know, this internet thing is really good. We work with this company Viator. They market your product on the internet and they actually pay.

03:14.46

rod

And these were really simple things. The operators were like looking at the internet and saying, how do I even do that? You know, who do I get to do a website for me? We came along and said, well, you don't need a website. Just give us all your information. We'll take your brochure. We'll turn it into...

03:31.51

rod

a listing on our website and if we get bookings we'll pay you for them so it was honestly it was a relatively simple process to get the business up and going and to build really strong and positive relationships with with operators around the world

THE IMPACT OF 911

03:50.57

rod

you just want me to segue into ah defining moment okay So, you know, things were going along ah pretty well. We were growing, albeit slowly. And then this, this event happened that had a you know, dramatic impact on the world. And that was the 9 11 terrorist bombings of the world trade center and the bombings, but well, you know what it was.

04:17.72

rod

And. and you might be thinking why I raised that. And the reason is that, um, at that time, a number of the, uh, uh, particularly us airlines and hotel groups had gone in pretty deep with websites. They were pretty well invested.

04:37.25

rod

ah not all of them though, And what happened after 9-11 was that everybody in the US who had travel plans, they were all disrupted, all flights stopped, nobody could move.

04:49.24

rod

you know If you wanted to get from A to B, you had to rent a car, the car rentals were flooded, but more importantly, the telephone lines just melted down. So if you were trying to call Delta or United or Marriott or Hilton or whatever, you were waiting for hours.

05:05.10

rod

And then people realized that with some of those carriers, And some of those hotel groups, you could actually go on their website. And they went on their website and they found, oh, I can find my booking on here and I can actually change my booking or get a refund or whatever it was they wanted to do, make a new booking.

05:25.27

rod

They could do it on the web and people like that a lot more than sitting on the phone, talking to a customer service agent. So, you know, nine 11 was an incredibly, um, uh, sad and negative event, but for the online travel industry, it was like a rocket booster because it opened people's eyes up to the fact that there is an alternative to visiting a travel agency or getting on the phone to ah a travel agency.

05:56.84

rod

And the alternative is Expedia, Travelocity, Marriott.com, Unitedairlines.com, et cetera, et cetera. It really was fabulous for our industry.

THE OTHER ROCKET BOOSTER

06:16.12

rod

Well, ah not so much a moment, but a shift, a really significant shift happens. And it began in the early 2000s. And, you know, I guess it was, you know, psychologists and sort of social analysts just looking at the way people were thinking about the world.

06:36.12

rod

And we started to see all these things. articles appearing about, you know, things are not so important, but experiences are. There had been this sort of mantra in the 80s and 90s that you could summarize almost as, he who dies with the most stuff wins or the most toys.

07:00.53

rod

ah In other words, collect things. ah That's what's going to bring you joy and happiness. And people, I guess, over time realize that that actually isn't the case.

07:12.08

rod

um You know, material possessions have, they they they don't have the hold over you that perhaps um the the vendors of those possessions might think.

07:24.94

rod

But experiences, on the other hand, often which are either either totally free, you know taking a walk in a beautiful park or taking a guided tour of the Vatican Museum or or the Sydney Harbour Bridge Climb or whatever it is, those things provide the opportunity for lasting memories, educational experiences, sort of mind expanding opportunities that can live forever in your mind.

07:59.34

rod

Uh, and society grabbed onto that, uh, and shifted from spending their money on, um, snow globes and t-shirts when they went to San Francisco and instead taking a trip out to Mule woods, taking a trip up to Napa or the Sonoma Valley, uh, doing a walking tour of, uh, of the city and learning about its cultural history, et cetera, et cetera.

08:26.58

rod

Uh, and people were coming home from, from those trips without the snow globe, without the t-shirt, but with a really terrific experience that, uh, that was, was much more valuable to them.

08:40.73

rod

So that shift totally, um, supported the growth of the experiences industry.

THEN CAME THE PANDEMIC

09:17.22

rod

well i think what the pandemic did more more sort of specifically was it it really brought home to a lot of people that for them travel is ah a need rather than just a want you know so economists divide things into you need housing you need food etc etc you want um other things you know you want a new stereo player you want you know a new jacket or whatever

09:49.50

rod

ah And people realized at the end of COVID that they had this hole in their heart. And that hole was, I need to travel. you know Not only do I need to get away from where I am, but I need to get to somewhere.

10:04.96

rod

I need to learn about something new. I need to experience something new because That's just a part of who I am, you know, a part of us as earthlings, whatever we call ourselves, humans.

10:17.39

rod

We just, for many of us anyway, we we want to get out and explore. And the pandemic took that away from us. And that revenge travel surge that we saw afterwards was, it was a symptom of the fact that for many of us, it's a need.

THE SEARCH MONOPOLY: ARE THOSE DAYS NUMBERED?

12:22.36

rod

Well, I think it's been bad for not just tours and activities, but for the whole industry that we've had the Google monopoly for so long. I mean, you know no monopolies are really good for an industry.

12:35.91

rod

and And that's 98% of all the traffic or some incredibly large percentage. has been coming via Google and we've had to pay their toll.

12:46.92

rod

And, know, I don't think they've given a lot back to the industry. I don't think they've really, they certainly didn't support, um you know, advertising platforms, you know, like the the likes of Viator and Get Your Guide and Kluke, et cetera, when they were blindsided by the pandemic.

13:03.45

rod

You know, Google didn't step up and say, well, we going to look after you here. They basically, continued to profit while I was suffered. Uh, so I, you know, I, I do think it'll be good when we get away from that and people have a much broader and more diverse set of choices for how they spend their advertising dollars.

13:28.06

rod

What that looks like exactly. I don't know. I don't think anybody knows what the answer that is, but it's certainly going to be more diverse.

THE NEXT 20

10:46.44

rod

Well, ah yeah i'm I'm always laughing when I go along to the conference, whether it's WIT or Focusrite, and somebody says, online travel is broken. um you know We're going to fix it with our new website or whatever.

11:00.54

rod

It's clearly not broken. It works really well as people. As Steve Hafner would say, um you know when he looks at his website, it's great, but we can improve it, right?

11:11.47

rod

And that's the same for all of the systems out there. um Clearly, it's gonna look different in in five, 10 years time. it's going to be There's gonna be a lot more involvement of AI technology. There's gonna be more speech rather than rather than interaction with the screen, et cetera, et cetera.

11:29.09

rod

I think you'd be foolish to try and predict exactly where that's going to go. ah But I'm absolutely certain we're going to see a lot of changes, a lot more efficiency and a lot more profitable businesses because of of ah the introduction of AI tech.

TRAVEL 2045

15:57.93

rod

and um ah yeah What I want to say is that I do think we'll see, you know, Travel 45. I mean, obviously, who knows? But I do think we're going to see, and people might be surprised to hear me say this, that because of over-tourism and because of the the way the world seems to be going right now, where we're becoming so much more polarized.

16:24.51

rod

I just think there are gonna be a lot more people who wanna stay home and who are going to take advantage of technology, whether it's some sort of VR or AI or whatever technology to two visit in inverted quotes and learn about foreign destinations without leaving their lounge room.

16:43.80

rod

Now, course, I find that kind of ridiculous and upsetting um and I'd be wanting to give them a good shake and say, no man, come on, get a passport, get on that flight and go visit. And they're gonna say, have you seen how many people there are in Barcelona this summer?

17:01.30

rod

And they're right, there are too many. um So I think more people are gonna look for that opportunity ah to or that option and they're going to take it. And um I'm not saying that's a good thing, I just think that's a trend that we're going to see.

THE BEAUTY OF TRAVEL

14:12.85

rod

ah Travel is the one industry where we, as the participants, we get together regularly. we we we We meet, we talk, we build relationships that often turn into commercial relationships as well.

14:29.57

rod

And these ten these these relationships and partnerships tend to be maintained and sustained over many, many years. ah you know I'm not certain that's unique. If we define unique as There's only one, perhaps there is another industry like this. I just don't know what it is, but, but so you know, in in my knowledge, travel is unique in the way that you can build and sustain relationships with people across the industry ah over a lifetime in that industry. And I think that's, for those of us lucky enough to be in the in the travel space and specifically in online travel, that's an incredibly beautiful thing.