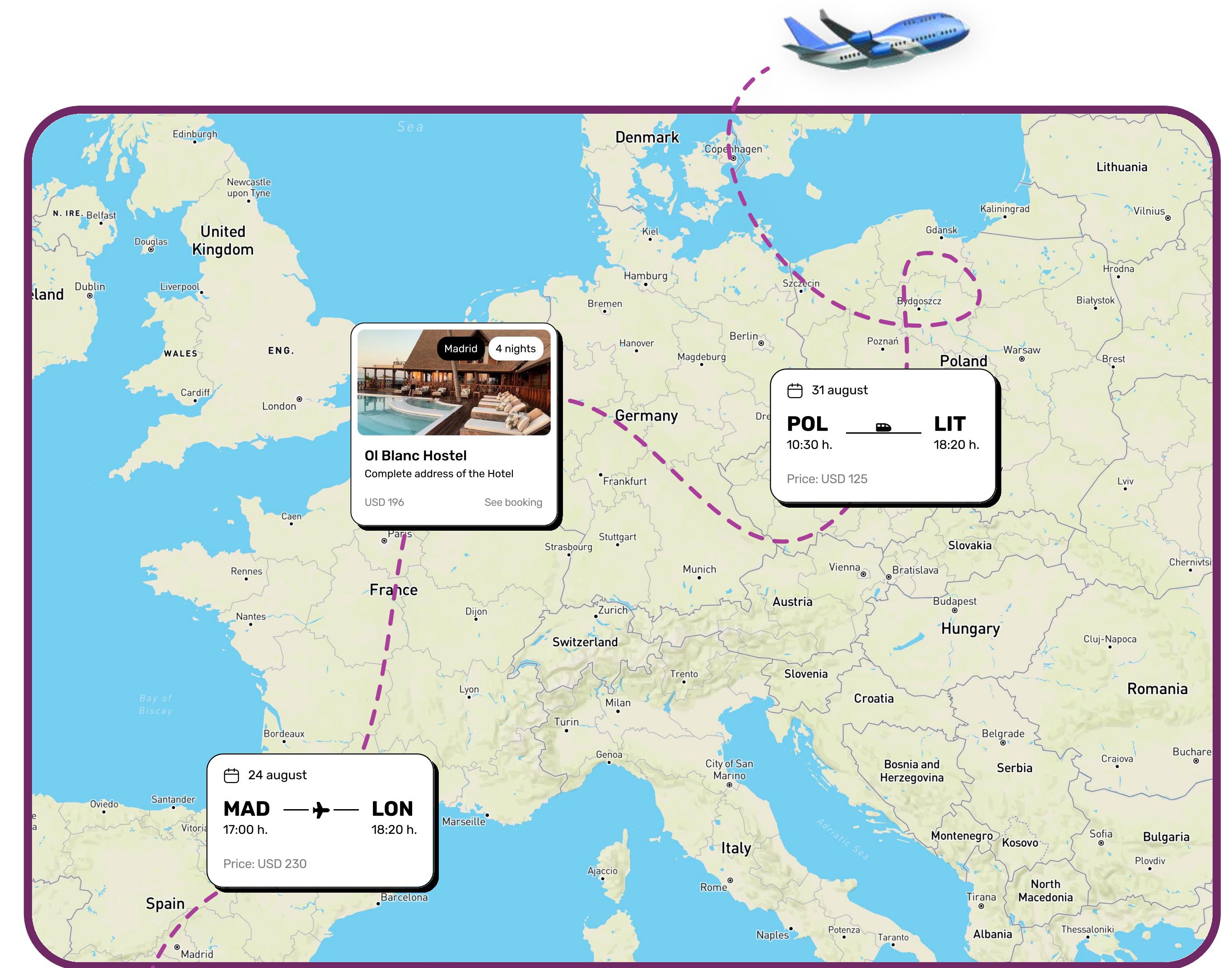


Off The Beaten Path

Uncovering perceptions & discovery
of off-beat experiences in the travel
planning process

Michael Kwok, Ali Askari, Sophia Syed, Kashvi Goel



Executive Summary

Background

A majority of travelers aged 20-40 we interviewed describe authentic off-beat experiences as the most memorable part of their trips. They discovered these experiences via spontaneous exploration nearby popular destinations, word of mouth, and social media rather than during initial planning.

Our prototype aimed to consolidate the planning process into an interactive map and itinerary emphasizing major tourist attractions while alerting users to nearby local experiences. We ran concept tests to discover if this design improved travelers' preparation and feelings of excitement, and clarity.



What we did

Desk Research:

Literature review and SWOT analysis on travel experiences through the lens of local vs big businesses

Generative Research:

Qualitative interviews and ethnography to uncover user needs and their relationships with authentic, off-beat experiences when traveling.

Evaluative research:

Concept testing with mid-fidelity paper prototypes testing that our design matched user's mental planning models.



What we learned

- How travelers prioritize their plans and divide their schedule between local and popular destinations
- How individual travel preferences play into their choices
- How they discover local experiences
- Their emotions, behavior, likes and dislikes around travel planning



What we're going to do next

- Incorporate recommendations in the design
- Create a full journey map and testing plan for "Generate Plan" module of the tool
- Iterate on and test enhanced filtering for customisable exploration
- Once these are complete, move into hi-fi and moderated usability testing

Methods Overview

Desk Research

GOAL

To learn more about how off-beat and popular destinations in an area interact economically

METHODS

Literature Review

Skimmed and synthesised one article per team member

SWOT analysis

Conducted SWOT between corporations vs local businesses

RATIONALE/ SCREENING

SWOT was selected to study the differences between local business and corporate effects on economy. But we pivoted to focus on user travel experiences by updating our Literature Review.

Generative Research Phase 1

To learn about travel preferences, planning, and perception about local experiences.

Qualitative Interviews

30 min interviews with travellers, conducted virtually. Participants were screened to include a range of ages, genders, and nationalities - but all were active decision makers in the travelling process.



n=6, to be able to map trends in behaviour by gathering a wide enough range of data in the given time frame.

Methods Overview

Generative Research Phase 2

GOAL

To observe how tourists use authentic local experiences to connect with the community at their destination

METHODS

Ethnography Study

2 ethnographic studies by visiting local experiences in Seattle (Olympia Coffee & REI Co-op)

Observation, note-taking and contextual inquiry at each site for about 1hr



RATIONALE/ SCREENING

Olympia Coffee & REI Co-op were chosen for their inherently local and community-based offerings. We chose to conduct an ethnography to include the perspective of local business owners

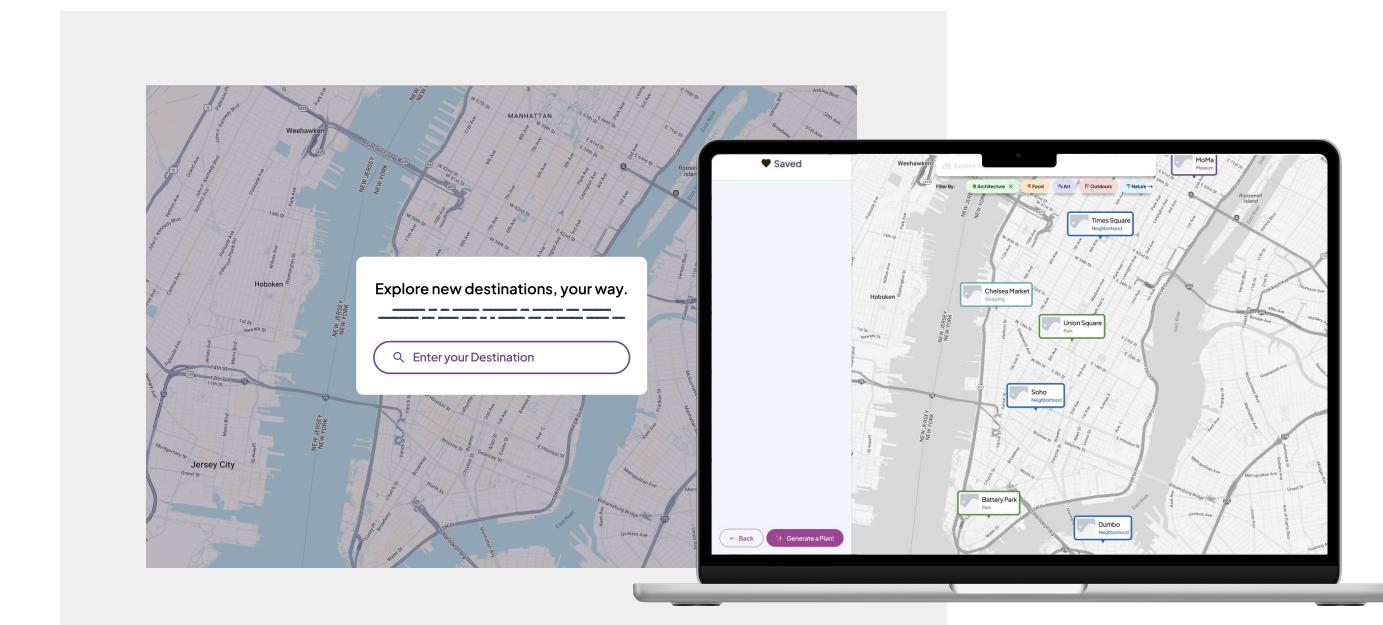
Evaluative Research

To test the concept for a potential solution and gauge its value to users

Concept Testing

In-person evaluation with paper prototypes of medium fidelity screens

Participants were screened to choose active travel planners, male and female in the age group 20-40



n=5, as per the ideal recommendation for concept testing. It allowed us to gather enough data to draw reliable insights in the given timeframe

Our Prototype

Our prototype emphasized exploration around major tourist attractions with a “Generate a Plan” feature organizing around neighborhoods. We ran concept tests to discover if this improved travelers’ feelings of preparation, excitement, and clarity.

Explore Soho Neighborhood

Kith (1Hr)

4 Hours

Back Generate a Plan!

Itinerary

+ Add to calendar Regenerate

Day 1 Day 2 Day 3 Day 4

8 AM 10 AM 12 PM 2 PM

“On my Bali trip, it was just going to be these **three top places**, but I added Gilit after [doing some research]...The good thing about Google is that it **recommends you other smaller places** so you can actually just be drawn to them.”

Participant P2

INSIGHT 1

People are drawn to off-beat experiences that cater to their individual preferences, often finding them through word of mouth

“There’s one really good dessert place that [my cousins] knew about. And so that was the destination.

I was really into that type of vibe, like really aesthetic dessert shops.”

Participant G3

4/5 Concept testing participants desired more control over exploration



INSIGHT 1

People are drawn to offbeat experiences that cater to their individual preferences, often finding them through word of mouth

GENERATIVE FINDING

Travelers want personalized recommendations since they want to make educated decisions about how they spend their time. They value recommendations from those who know them and their preferences most.

EVALUATIVE FINDING

Participants wanted to see more filters for events, activities and novelty

"We came across this guy who has a rickshaw in Lake District!...he said, I'll take you all around to all of my fav spots, food places also....it ended up being so good - he took us in a rick on a mountain, the most offbeat places I did not even think existed!"

Participant G2

"So I think one concern is the **authenticity**. [Having] reviews or [shaping it around] people with **similar interests to me**. Or maybe [showing places] my friends recommended..Some kind of way to just ascertain if **this is what I would like**."

Participant E4 during concept testing

INSIGHT 2

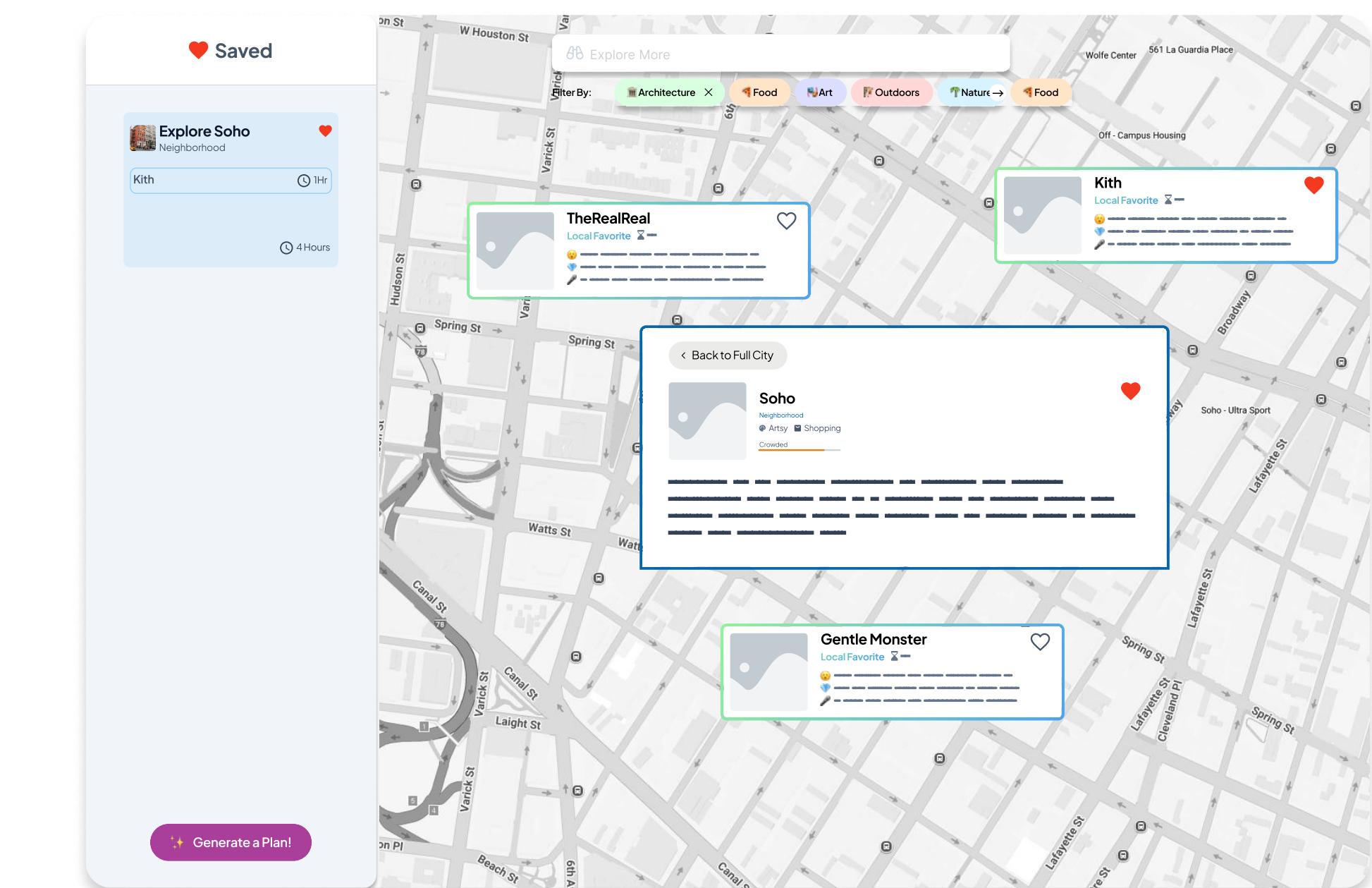
Travelers going to a destination for the first time are likely to prioritize top tourist destinations, while return visitors focus on finding off-beat experiences

3/5

Participants were return visitors to our test destination and wanted to focus on off-beat experiences during concept testing

“Given the amount of time I've been to New York...I guess my **concern** is [this tool] would just give me Times Square or the Statue of Liberty or more **generic touristy options**.”

Participant E2 during concept testing



INSIGHT 2

Travelers going to a destination for the first time are likely to prioritize top tourist destinations, while return visitors focus on finding off-beat experiences

DESK FINDING

A study by Fakye and Crompton (1991)¹ found that first-time visitors rely on the destination's image formed by promotional materials, which typically highlight major attractions. Repeat visitors have already experienced these and are more likely to seek unique, local experiences.

GENERATIVE FINDING

Participants shared that travel time in new locations is constrained, often lead them to prioritize popular destinations, while avoiding the risk of spending their time on less familiar options they might not enjoy.

EVALUATIVE FINDING

Famous tourist destinations tend to lose their appeal after a few visits, prompting people to seek out new and unexplored places instead.

But then after that, I went to Barcelona with my family. We didn't know what to do so it was a lot more centered around like sightseeing. My parents booked us one of those organized tours.

Participant G3

"And I think this local stuff is just for specific people...If I'm going to New York **just for five days** I would **rather do the touristy stuff**. And what that location is famous for."

Participant E5 during concept testing

1: Fakye, P.C. and Crompton, J.L. (1991) Image Differences between Prospective, First-Time, and Repeat Visitors to the Lower Rio Grande Valley. *Journal of Travel Research*, 30, 10-16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004728759103000202>

INSIGHT 3

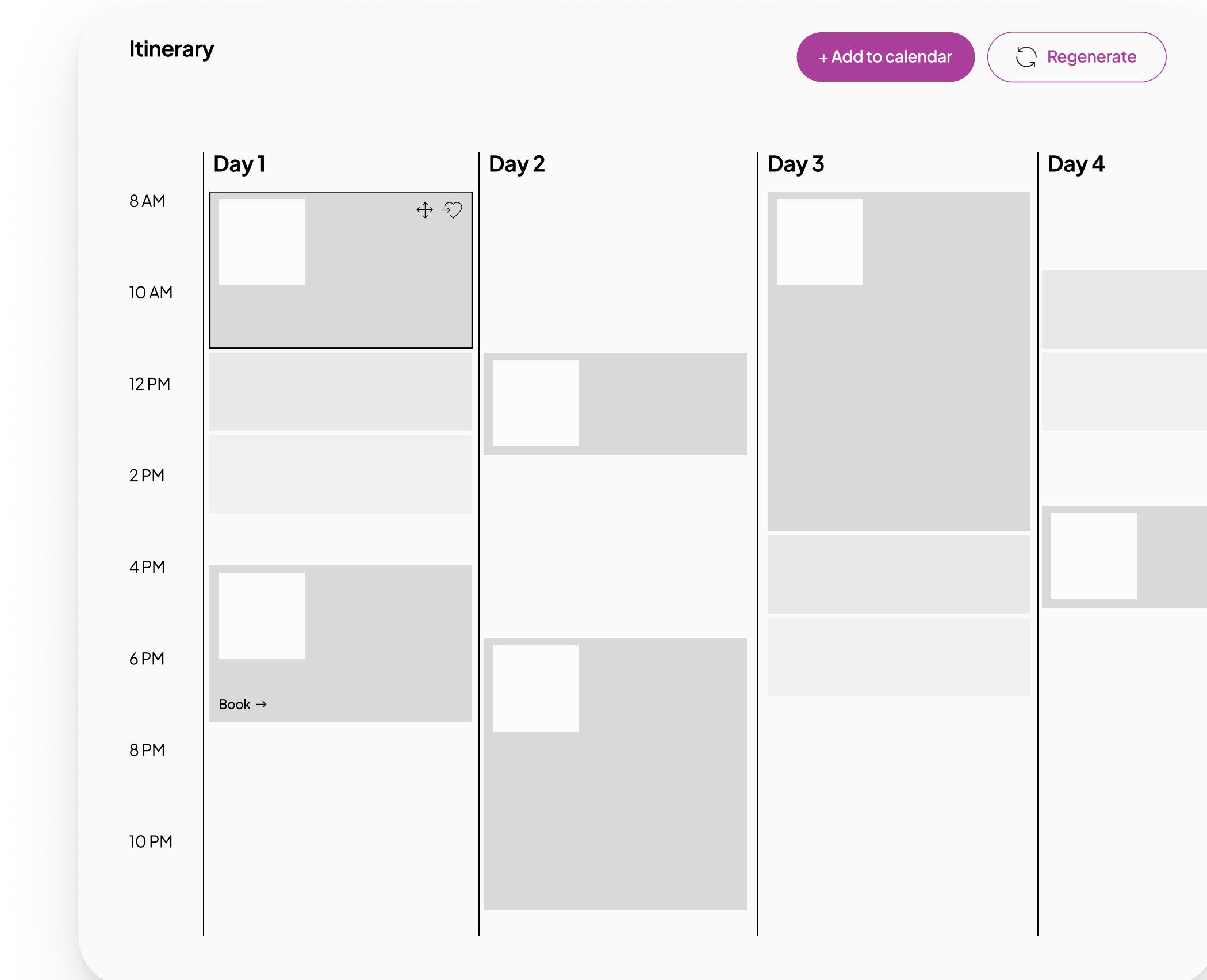
Travelers feel a sense of comfort when they have a **flexible outline** that is logically sound and includes time for exploration and rest

5/5

Participants approved of the generated plan's schedule density

I try to keep a little bit of **room for unexpected stuff** that you want to do. Find a place and keep a 2 hour buffer there. See if you find something interesting, take a walk - I've found a lot of interesting things just walking around."

Participant G2



INSIGHT 3

Travelers feel a sense of comfort when they have a **flexible outline** that is logically sound and includes time for exploration and rest

DESK FINDING

Travel experts² often suggest a 2:1 ratio of activity to rest. This can include breaks for meals, short naps, or leisurely activities such as sitting in a park or a café.

“Some of the best parts of a trip come from just wandering around and discovering new places by accident.”

Participant G5

GENERATIVE FINDING

People enjoy having a well-structured trip plan with the flexibility to adjust it as needed.

“Like I just feel accomplished when I feel I have planned out some days.”

Participant E4 during concept testing

EVALUATIVE FINDING

Plans can sometimes feel limiting, as they may prevent spontaneous discoveries that come from wandering without a set agenda.

“I think usually for my family we started early so after dinner was time to chill out...there was a lot of use of Google Maps and seeing what was around us ”

Participant E2 during concept testing

Recommendations

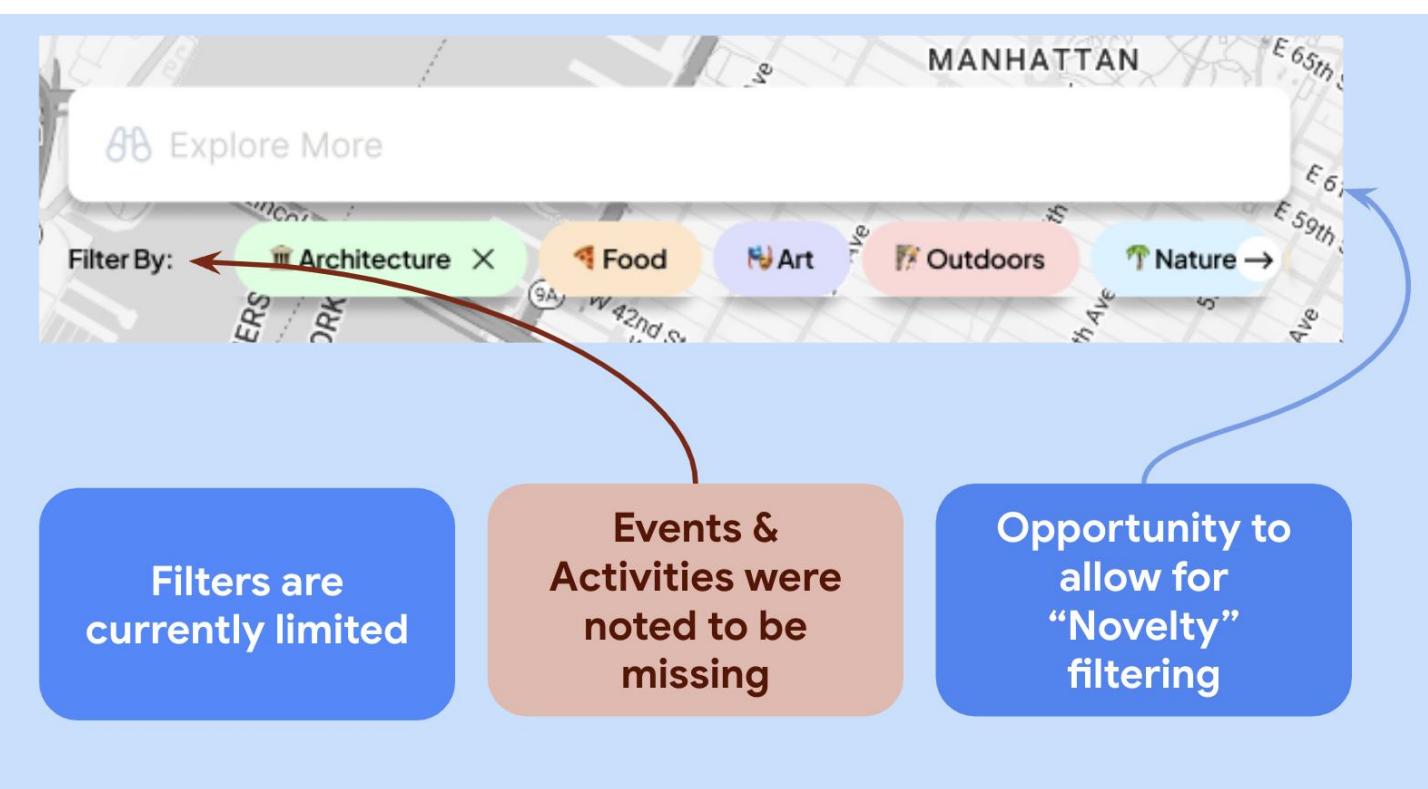
FLESH OUT

Generate a plan clarity

Creating a plan can reduce stress for travel planners. Ensure clear and intuitive editing options to allow users to easily modify their plans.

Strong Filtering capabilities

Users want to explore based on personal preferences. Enhance this with better tagging and filtering. Add filters: Events, Activities, Novelty.



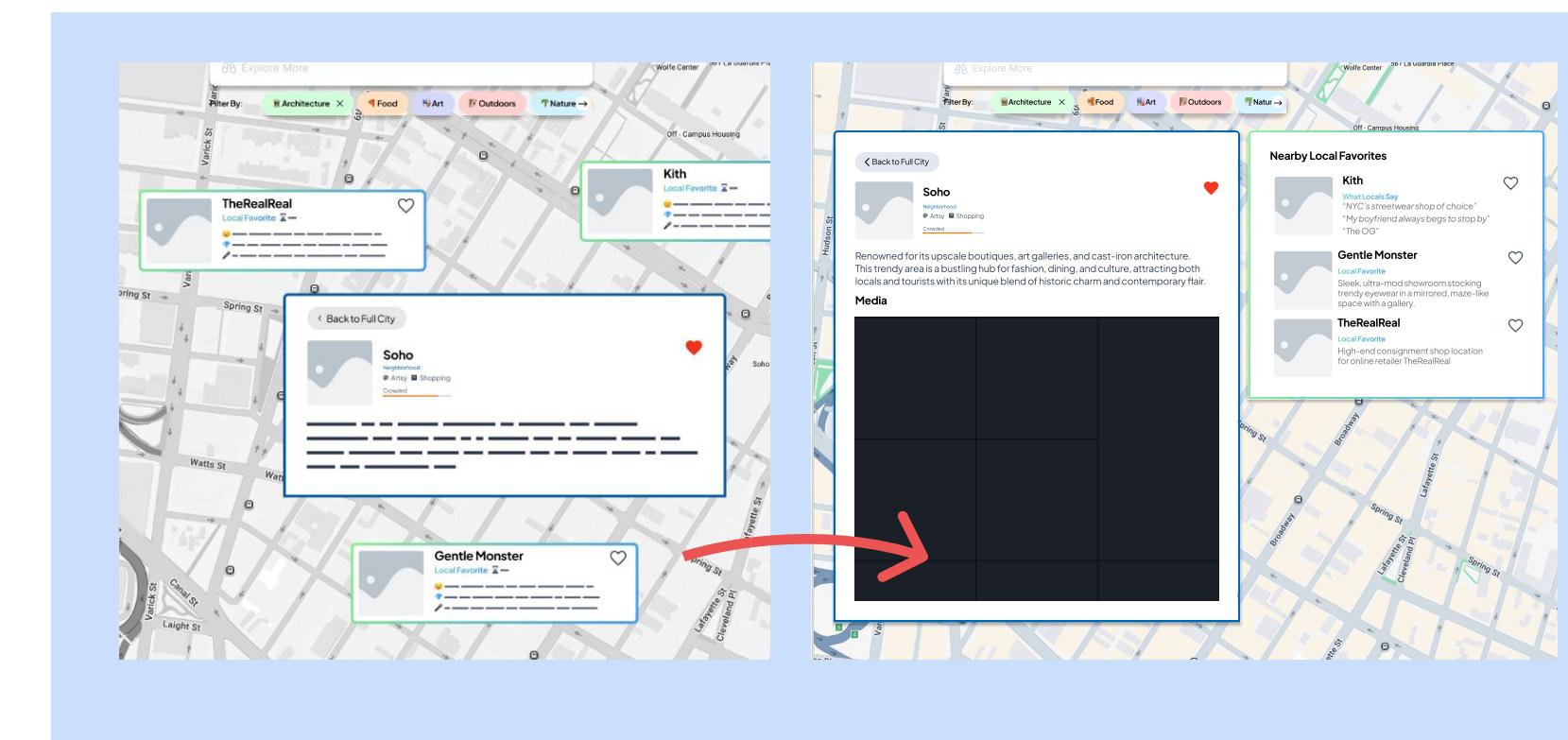
REWORK

Popular Destination focus may not fit all travel styles

Design should de-emphasize reliance on solely on popular spots. Highlight local experiences separately in map and saved tabs.

Local Favorites Display

Floating boxes received mediocre feedback. Making it more organised for users to perceive it without confusion



Recommendations

RETAIN

Neighborhood mapping

Research showed travellers prefer exploring by areas and use maps. They value proximity and logistics while leaving room in their itineraries for discovery of authentic local experiences and neighbourhood vibes

Schedule Density

Users trust the plan and appreciate its density. However, present it as a soft recommendation rather than a rigid schedule by adjusting time boxing and nested durations

Exploring vs Planning

The design balances exploration and planning, matching user expectations. They want open-ended exploration through visual aids - make it practical

EXPLORE

Onboarding

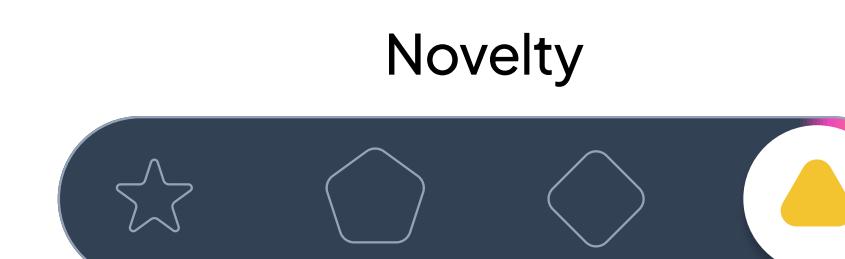
Our research points towards tailoring the onboarding process to take number of previous visits into account

Word of Mouth

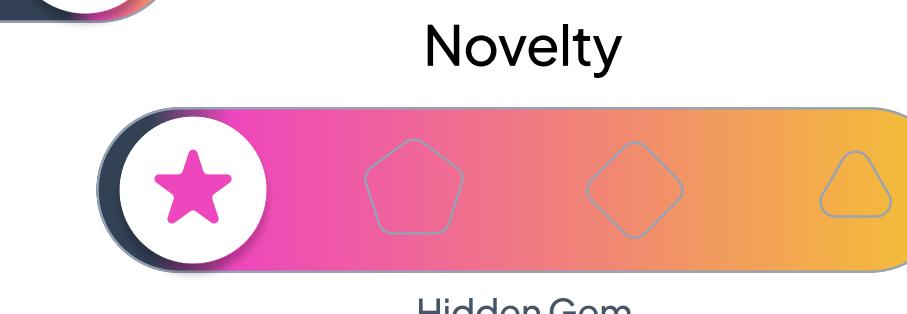
Addressing social solution aspect: involving friends recommendations

Novelty aspect

Adding reward mechanics (potentially through use of colours) for incorporating novelty/ local experiences



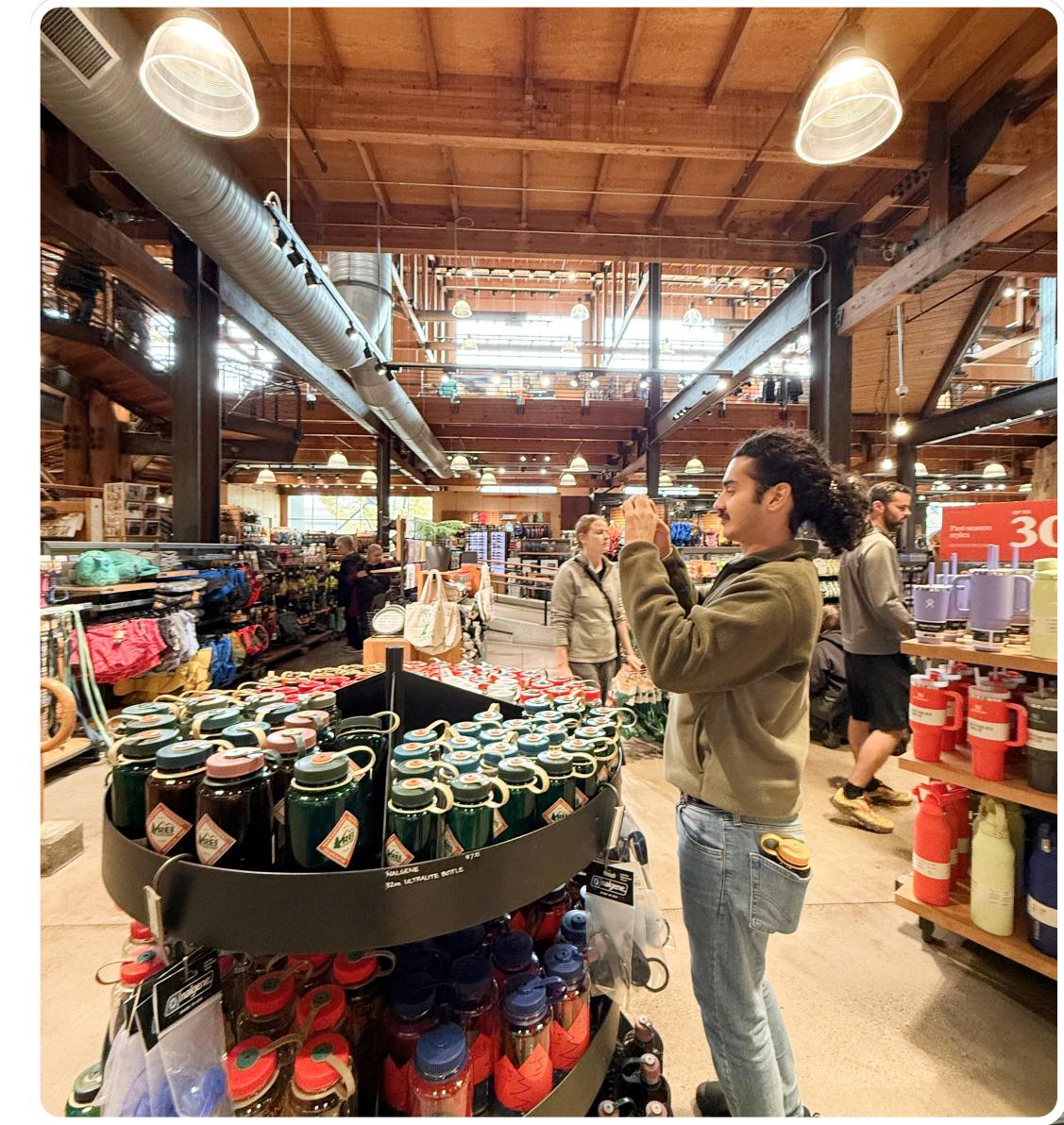
Novelty



Novelty

Appendix

- Desk Research + SWOT
 - Generative research study plan
 - Raw Data - Generative
 - Findings Report 1
 - Evaluative research study plan
 - Prototype wireframes
 - Raw Data - Evaluative
 - Data Analysis
 - Findings report 2
-
- SAWATSUK, B., DARMAWIJAYA, I. G., RATCHUSANTI, S., & PHAOKRUENG, A. (2018). Factors Determining the Sustainable Success of Community-Based Tourism (1)
 - Tourism and Sustainable Community Development, edited by Derek Hall, and Greg Richards, Taylor & Francis Group, 2000. ProQuest Ebook Central
 - United Nations Tourism Statistics Database. Retrieved September 27, 2024
 - Vanhove, N. (2018). The Economics of Tourism Destinations: Theory and Practice (Third edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group
 - Fakye, P.C. and Crompton, J.L. (1991) Image Differences between Prospective, First-Time, and Repeat Visitors to the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Journal of Travel Research, 30, 10-16 (1)
 - 1: Activity levels. Adventures In Good Company. (n.d.). (2)



Appendix

Concept Testing - Task Coding

	Main Screen	Major Site	Neighborhood Sorting	Scheduling Screen	Sentiment Scale					
P1	Map is helpful to know about the neighborhoods, especially with figuring out where you want to stay	really like, how you showed that it was like crowded - I kind of like how it picked places for me - Images are the best way for me to feel out a place - Would like to see some type of like heart/ thumbs up emoji or something to show how many people like the place or would recommend it maybe	Did not give detailed feedback	"When it comes to traveling, I'm not much of a planner, but I do really like the idea of planning it out. I feel like it would make traveling a lot less stressful for me. I really like how you can like add an energy to have like a quick plan to like what it is you're doing or going." would I be adding everything myself in the itinerary?	Excitement registered - no confusion or questions 5					
P2	So I think having a way where I can kind of input some very generic information about what I want to get out of the trip and how I like to travel, I think would be helpful. Wants to generate a plan. Likes the filters	I think for me, I would like to be able to select certain activities that I might be more interested in over others. Does not trust pre-populated local destinations	Overall very positive, excited about being able to map the distance between places. Not sure about needing to leave time for exploration. May be more useful in supporting a pre-generated plan	I'm more excited. I feel like it'd be easier to like navigate things that maybe I haven't seen yet. It's nice that this is like it's so easy to add things and put into like a customized calendar.	Excitement registered - 1-3 clarifications requested 4					
P3	I would click explore first Probably check out all of them and see what's there. I have been to NY a bunch of times but I am down to check out what I haven't seen before. Generally enjoys, may need it to be more niche	I like the sub categories below the s able to sort by type of site	Very positive. Would also like to be	Neutral to negative on AI-powered planning but likes the schedule density and customization	Excitement registered - major or many clarifications requested 3					
P4	Notices parks, neighborhoods, and	Enjoys the crowded bar - wants to know if local destinations balance out the main destination	Thinks neighborhood sorting would greatly improve planning, especially if importing pins from friends. Confusion around neighborhood size / limits	Looks good. Like not too cramped. I was concerned that they would just, you know, jam pack everything. Just because that's how I assume machines work. But yeah, this seems to consider that people are not always on the move and they want more time for certain things.	Neutral 2					
P5	So I would like to see probably wha / visibility on sub-options	Enjoys that local is being surfaced but wants more clarity	This seems to be fair. I mean I can see it right next to Soho and I can see it underneath it. So it definitely makes it easier for me to better figure out. Like where I'll be able to find it and where exactly it is. But I don't understand why it's just saved for one hour or like four hours. What does the time mean? (after explaining) Oh then that makes sense, but I'd prefer having it underneath there only. I don't understand why four hours is also there and one hour is also there. So either if I can do either of the things then it doesn't make sense to the duration here. Because like people can just hang around. Why would you want a like time limit?	I mean it's (Generate Plan) for sure helpful. The most fun. I'm a very good planner. So I would go for this because I like to plan my day entirely. And if the app or the website is advising me to go to the specific place. I would like that suggestion because I don't think like people know about like a lot about these places. They just prefer going at any time. So suggesting a definite time	Negative or neutral w/ major confusion 1					
Average	3.8	2.6	4	4						
Findings										
Main page reception slightly positive (3.8) - many different actions were most prioritized.										
Positive response to scheduling screen and schedule density (4)										
Positive response to key functionality of sorting and planning by neighborhood (4)										
Lukewarm response to main destination screen (2.6) - local favorite information was unclear and users wanted more granularity on sorting, ranking, and discovering										

Participant List - Active Travelers

Generative Research

Participant G1 - 28, Female

Participant G2 - 23, Female

Participant G3 - 28, Male

Participant G4 - 30, Female

Participant G5 - 37, Male

Participant G6 - 42, Female

Evaluative Research

Participant E1 - 22, Female

Participant E2 - 25, Female

Participant E3 - 24, Male

Participant E4 - 29, Male

Participant E5 - 22, Female