

● THE DIRECT BOOKING PLAYBOOK

Get recommended, then get **booked direct.**

A practical guide for accommodation providers, tour operators and travel brands that want to be recommended, rely less on third-party booking sites and win more bookings directly.



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Seen. Trusted. Chosen.

Book.

The Direct Booking Playbook

How travellers research, compare and book today, and a practical plan to be the brand they trust, recommend and book with directly.



Brandon Delardes, Founder, Base Digital · Brisbane · Published October 2026

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1. How travellers choose and book

Travel is a trust purchase. Travellers are spending money on something they can't see or try first, often in a place they've never been. So they look for reassurance: reviews, photos, recommendations from friends and family, and advice from sources they consider trustworthy.

AI assistants have quickly become one of those trusted sources. Travellers now ask ChatGPT or Google's AI Overviews for places to stay, things to do and itineraries, and treat the answers much like a recommendation from a well-travelled friend. Those answers are built from your website, your reviews, your listings and what others have written about you.

The short version: most travellers have formed a shortlist before they ever reach your website. Your job is to be on that shortlist, then make booking with you directly the easiest and most rewarding option.

Why direct bookings matter

Third-party booking sites and online travel agents have a place. They bring reach, especially for new or international travellers. But relying on them too heavily has real costs.

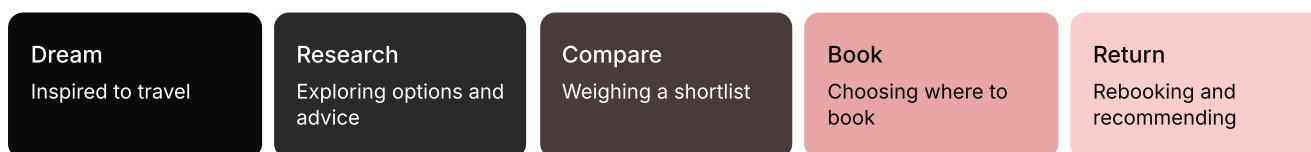
- **Commission on every booking.** Each third-party booking comes with a fee, which adds up quickly across a year.
- **You don't own the relationship.** Guest details and future marketing stay with the booking site, making repeat bookings harder to win.
- **Less control.** Your brand, rates and story are presented the way the platform chooses, alongside your competitors.

The aim isn't to leave booking sites altogether. It's to shift more of your bookings, especially from repeat guests and people who already know your name, to your own website.

Where travellers research

CHANNEL	WHAT TRAVELLERS USE IT FOR
Google search and Maps	Finding options in a destination, comparing prices, checking location and reviews.
AI assistants	Asking for recommendations and itineraries, such as "boutique beachfront stays in Byron Bay".
Booking sites	Comparing availability, rates and guest reviews side by side.
Your website	Confirming the experience, checking details and, ideally, booking direct.
Social media	Inspiration through photos, video and other travellers' posts.
Word of mouth	Trusted recommendations from friends, family and past guests.

2. The booking journey, stage by stage



STAGE	WHAT TRAVELLERS NEED	KEY CHANNELS	MEASURE
Dream	Inspiration and a reason to choose your destination, property or experience.	Meta Ads, social, content	Reach, engaged audiences
Research	Trusted, easy-to-find answers about location, experiences, facilities and price.	SEO, AI search, reviews	Organic visits, AI mentions
Compare	Reassurance from reviews and photos, and a clear reason to book with you rather than a booking site.	Google Ads, remarketing, website	Branded searches, booking engine visits
Book	A fast, simple booking process with clear rates, inclusions and policies.	Website, booking engine	Direct bookings, conversion rate
Return	A great experience, a reason to come back and an easy way to tell friends.	Email, reviews, social	Repeat bookings, new reviews

3. Five foundations of direct booking marketing

Before adding more campaigns or budget, make sure these five foundations are in place. Each one makes every other channel work harder.

01 A website that sells the experience

Great photos, clear room or tour details, location, inclusions and policies, with a booking button on every page. Keep it fast on mobile, where much travel research and many bookings happen.

02 A clear reason to book direct

Give travellers a reason to choose your website over a booking site: your best available rate, a perk such as late checkout or a welcome gift, or more flexible terms. Say it clearly on your site and in your ads.

03 Visibility in search, maps and AI

Rank for the searches travellers use, keep your Google Business Profile complete, and make sure your details are consistent everywhere. Clear answers and schema help AI assistants describe you accurately and recommend you.

04 Reviews and reputation

Reviews are the recommendations travellers trust most, and AI assistants read them too. Ask every guest for a review, respond to all of them, and feature them on your website.

05 A guest list you own

Every direct booking is a chance to build a relationship. Collect guest details with permission, stay in touch with useful, seasonal email, and make it easy for past guests to rebook directly.

4. A seasonal marketing calendar

Travel marketing works best as an always-on presence with planned peaks. Travellers often book weeks or months before they travel, so campaigns need to run ahead of demand. Adapt this outline to your own peak, shoulder and quiet periods.

ALWAYS ON · ALL YEAR

SEO and content updates, AI search visibility, Google Business Profile and review management, brand search ads and remarketing to recent website visitors.

BEFORE EACH PEAK SEASON

Launch campaigns while travellers are planning, not when they arrive. Promote your direct booking offer, refresh seasonal landing pages and email past guests before availability fills.

DURING PEAK SEASON

Lean on brand search and remarketing to win travellers who already know you. Pull back broad spend where you're likely to sell out anyway, and focus on collecting reviews.

AHEAD OF SHOULDER AND QUIET PERIODS

This is where marketing makes the biggest difference. Use packages, midweek and longer-stay offers, local and drive-market audiences, and email to past guests to fill gaps.

EVENTS AND SCHOOL HOLIDAYS

Plan campaigns around local events, festivals, public holidays and school holidays that bring travellers to your area, with dedicated pages and ads for each.

END OF EACH SEASON

Review bookings and revenue by channel, compare direct and third-party share, and set the plan and budget for the next season.

5. Tracking bookings across a separate booking engine

Many accommodation and tour businesses use a booking engine hosted on a different domain from their website. It works well for guests, but it can break your tracking. When a traveller moves from your site to the booking engine, analytics may lose where they came from, and the booking is credited to your own website or to "direct" traffic.

The result is that you can't see which channels actually produce bookings, so it's hard to invest with confidence.

- **Set up cross-domain tracking.** Configure your analytics so a visit is followed from your website to your booking engine as one journey.
- **Track the booking itself.** Record confirmed bookings and their value as conversions, using your booking engine's analytics or tag manager integration where it offers one.
- **Connect your ad platforms.** Send booking conversions to Google Ads and Meta so campaigns can optimise for bookings, not just clicks.
- **Check it regularly.** Make a test booking after any website or booking engine change, and compare analytics with booking engine reports to spot gaps.

Tip: booking engines vary in what they support. Check with your provider which tracking integrations are available before you plan campaigns around them.

6. Measuring what matters

Focus on a small set of metrics that connect marketing activity to bookings and revenue.

METRIC	WHY IT MATTERS
Direct bookings and revenue by source	Shows which channels actually produce bookings on your own website.
Direct versus third-party share	The clearest sign your direct booking strategy is working.
Booking engine conversion rate	Reveals friction in the booking process itself.
Cost per booking and return on ad spend	Compares channels fairly, including against booking site commission.
Repeat bookings	Measures the value of your guest list and email marketing.
Reviews, branded search and AI mentions	Early signs that awareness and trust are growing.

7. The 19-point direct booking checklist

CHECK	AREA
1 A booking button is easy to find on every page	Website
2 Your reason to book direct is clear on the website	Website
3 The website and booking process are fast on mobile	Website
4 Each room, tour or experience has its own clear page	Website
5 You rank for the main searches travellers use for your area	Search
6 Your Google Business Profile is complete, with recent photos	Search
7 Key pages answer common questions in the first few sentences	Search & AI
8 Hotel, local business or FAQ schema is on your key pages	Search & AI
9 You've checked how ChatGPT and Google's AI describe your brand	AI
10 Your details match across booking sites and directories	AI
11 Every guest is asked for a review, and every review gets a reply	Reputation
12 Brand search ads protect your name from booking sites	Campaigns
13 Campaigns launch before each peak, not during it	Campaigns
14 Shoulder and quiet periods have their own offers and campaigns	Campaigns
15 Remarketing reaches recent website visitors	Campaigns
16 Past guests receive regular, seasonal email	Email
17 Cross-domain tracking follows visitors into the booking engine	Measurement
18 Confirmed bookings are tracked and sent to Google Ads and Meta	Measurement
19 Direct and third-party share is reviewed every season	Measurement

WORK WITH BASE DIGITAL

Want to know where your direct bookings stand?

Base Digital is an independent, owner-led Brisbane digital marketing agency. We've helped accommodation and travel brands get found, get recommended and win more bookings directly. We'll review your business against this checklist and show you the biggest opportunities for your next season, with no lock-in contracts and no hard sell.

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