

Duff on Hospitality Law

## **A Defining Start to 2026 for Online Travel: China Probes Trip.com, Airbnb Expands Its Hotel Ambitions and Google Unveils Its Agentic Booking Protocol**

By Greg Duff on 1.18.26 | Posted in Online Travel Update

Good Sunday evening from a sunny Seattle . . . Our first Online Travel Update for 2026 is below. This week's Update features new stories on China's possible crack down on Trip.com, an update on Airbnb and its plans for hotels and the latest from Google and its rapidly evolving agentic platform. I hope you enjoy.

- **Trip.com Under Investigation for Alleged Monopolistic Practices.** Trip.com announced this past week that it had received a notice of investigation from the State Administration for Market Regulations of the People's Republic of China ("SAMR"). According to the notice, the investigation stems from Trip.com's alleged abuse of its dominant market position through coercive contract terms, arbitrary increases in commission fees and the blocking of internet traffic. If found guilty of violating China's Anti-Monopoly Law, Trip.com can be fined between 1% and 10% of its total annual revenue from the previous year (a similar investigation into the practices of Alibaba resulted in record \$2.5 billion fine).
- **Changes Afoot at Airbnb.** Last week, Airbnb announced that it had hired Meta's former head of generative AI, Ahmad Al-Dahle, as its new CTO. According to CEO Brian Chesky's letter to employees introducing Ahmad, Ahmad "connects big ideas with technical depth, highly values design, and believes engineering should be a true strategic partner." Perhaps more important for my readers, our friend and industry colleague, Lou Zameryka, announced this week on LinkedIn that he is joining Airbnb to lead its hotel efforts (Lou's announcement was confirmed by an announcement yesterday from Airbnb where it announced Lou as its new Global Head – Hotel Enterprises and Connectivity Partnerships). Congratulations to Lou. If anyone still doubts Airbnb's intentions with regard to AI or its move (again) into hotels, it may be time to re-consider. There was a reason why we included an Airbnb story on its re-entry into hotels as one of seven featured stories in our 2025 year-end review.
- **Google's Latest Agentic Announcement Presents New Opportunities for Travelers and Suppliers.** At last week's National Retail Federation annual conference, Google

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introduced its Universal Commerce Protocol (UCP), which is designed to allow AI agents to complete purchases (or bookings) within a conversational user interface. Although UCP was developed with retail product purchases in mind (and the announcement featured some of the country's largest retailers – including Target and Walmart (though, interestingly, not Amazon)), the protocol was developed to handle more complex transactions (i.e., travel). In theory, the newly announced protocol should allow travelers to discover, search, select and book (the entire sales funnel) travel within a single platform without the need to jump from platform to platform (which we've noted in multiple previous posts as being one of the biggest challenges to currently available AI platforms). For suppliers, the new protocol allows them to remain the merchant of record and “own” the customer relationship, fulfillment and post-purchase relationship.

Have a great week.

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### **China Opens Antitrust Probe into Trip.com**

*January 15, 2026 via PhocusWire*

Online travel giant Trip.com Group is facing an antitrust probe in China due to alleged monopolistic practices and abuse of its dominant market position. According to a translation of a statement from the State Administration for Market Regulation, the case ...

### **Trip.com Group Under Investigation Over Alleged Monopolistic Practices**

*January 15, 2026 via WebinTravel*

Trip.com Group Limited, a leading global one-stop travel service provider of accommodation reservation, transportation ticketing, packaged tours, and corporate travel management, announced that it has received a notice of investigation from the State Administration for Market Regulations of the People's Republic of China (the “SAMR”).

### **Mamdani Takes on Junk Fees in NYC: Where it Stands and What it Could Mean for Travel**

*January 15, 2026 via Skift*

The war on junk fees is far from over, and New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani says he's ready to crack down. On January 5, he signed an executive order creating a new “Citywide Junk Fee Task Force.” Overseen by the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection, the task force will develop new rules, investigate violations, and ...

### **Airbnb Hires Former Meta AI Chief Ahmad Al-Dahle as CTO**

*January 14, 2026 via Skift*

By hiring Meta's former generative AI chief as CTO, Airbnb showed that AI is no longer a side project — and underscored online travel's competition for Big Tech talent.

### **Google Makes a Big Move into Agentic Commerce, Raising Questions About Amazon's**

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### **Retail Dominance**

*January 12, 2026 via GeekWire*

Google is making a key push into AI-powered shopping with the unveiling of Universal Commerce Protocol (UCP), a new open technical standard aimed at letting shoppers buy products directly through AI chatbots and search interfaces. The protocol has backing from major retailers and payment players including Walmart, Target, Shopify, and ...

### **Google's New Tech Lets AI Agents Handle Checkout**

*January 11, 2026 via Skift*

Google is laying new groundwork for AI-driven checkout. The underlying architecture can also handle more complex transactions, it says, putting travel squarely in its sights. Google wants AI agents to do more than answer questions. It wants them to complete purchases as well. On Sunday, the company unveiled ...