

Meet Byway, the slow travel startup making holidays flight free

Launching a travel business in the midst of the pandemic wasn't on most people's to-do lists in 2020, but that didn't phase Cat Jones, CEO and founder of slow travel holiday company Byway.

What was your professional background before founding Byway?

Before Byway, I was managing director at Founders Factory, where I led investments in fourteen startups a year and coached founders across a portfolio of forty companies. Before that, I was global SVP, data at video ad tech company Unruly, which was acquired by News Corp for £114M. At Unruly, I created Unruly EQ, a set of brand tools to evaluate and optimise the emotional impact of video content.

At Byway, I'm joined by an amazing team with a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. Rich Levy, our CTO, has over 20 years of experience building award-winning travel systems including Orient Express, Intravel and P&O Cruises. Our tech and marketing teams include Jordan Digby, formerly founding CTO at Viator, and Holly Clarke, formerly global marketing at Airbnb. Our customer centricity is in large part thanks to the rich hospitality backgrounds of many of the people in our sales, operations and marketing teams.

What is Byway?

At Byway, our holidays are joyful journeys by train, bus, boat and bike. Our trips help travellers love their journey as much as the destinations they visit, and all are 100% flight free.

We help people savour the experience of travelling slowly through a region, with none of the hassle of planning and booking it all themselves. We arrange travel and accommodation, suggest personalised activities for every day, and are at their side via WhatsApp throughout.

We take holidaymakers away from the crowds, hosting them overnight with our locally-owned accommodation partners or on sleeper trains and boats where they can travel while dreaming, awakening to a whole new landscape.

Our mission is to make slow travel mainstream, and our technology creates dynamic slow travel itineraries based on customer preferences and live availability of train, ferry or buses and accommodation.

It's the first technology of its kind and it optimises for enjoyment, rather than speed.

Instead of getting you from A to B to C as quickly as possible, we build slower trips full of rich experiences. We take time upfront to understand what sort of holiday you're going to enjoy (either by speaking to you or by having you fill in a quick quiz on our website) then build a trip full of stops, experiences and journeys you're going to love.

We believe that when people truly love their journeys, and take slow travel holidays because they want to, not because they ought to, slow travel will become mainstream - and leisure travel will be sustainable at last. That's our mission, and it's why our 85 five star Trustpilot reviews mean so much to us.

We also optimise for positive impact - for the environment and for local communities. We're not just thinking about how to avoid flying, but considering the impact of every aspect of our trips, prioritising destinations that are looking to increase tourism, rather than those already heaving with tourists.

We offer a 100% COVID refund guarantee and our holidays are protected as packages with our ABTA bond. We offer trips to customers directly via our

website (our growth until now has been entirely organic) and are now starting to partner with mission-aligned agencies to help them offer slow travel trips to their customers, too

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Why did you decide to launch a travel business during a pandemic?

COVID was our catalyst. The day after Boris Johnson announced that we'd be going into lockdown, I resigned from my job and incorporated the company. Many people have laughed at me for setting up a travel business going into a global travel lockdown (*the Guardian* covered our launch under the headline 'Travel firm bucks trend by launching no-fly startup during lockdown'), but actually, the timing couldn't have been better.

Going into lockdown, I bet that leisure travel would never return to the way it was pre-COVID. I bet that post-lockdown travel would be both more locally-oriented - with people choosing more connected, mindful experiences away from the crowds, and more grounded - and with people choosing trains, boats and buses over planes.

I bet that there'd be more regulation to limit short haul flights in favour of rail across Europe and that we'd see new rail routes, especially for sleeper trains, blossoming across the continent. So far, all of my predictions seem to be coming true, and our business model at Byway is the stronger for it!

What was the process to receiving £100,000 from Innovate UK?

Receiving government funding from Innovate UK has been game-changing for us. The first grant we won was £100k in 2020, and we won a subsequent grant for £175k in 2021 for the further development of our technology. Winning the grant was far from easy: there's a lot of work involved in putting together the application, and the grants are hugely competitive, so we were absolutely delighted to win!

The first grant allowed us to bring in the first members of our tech team, and the second grant allowed us to double the size of that team, which has helped us run even faster, bringing more European regions into development at quite a pace!

What are your aspirations for Byway in 2022 and beyond?

Ultimately, our mission is to make slow travel mainstream. We've just been certified as a B Corp and launched 100% vegan flight-free holidays, and in 2022 we'll be releasing new regions across the UK and Europe making use of new rail routes and sleeper trains. You can read more about our plans and expectations for 2022 in our [2022 predictions](#).

Cat Jones is CEO and founder at [Byway](#).

Article by KIRSTIE PICKERING