FASTER,
BIGGER,
SMARTER, **BOLDER**

High-end homestays, vacations that get to the point, radically new transportation, and, yes, the rise of the machines. The future of travel is one hell of a trip. We. Can't. Wait.   BY MICHAEL BEHAR, MARIKA CAIN, AND JUSTIN PAUL

THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ONLINE

Artificial intelligence will transform the way we travel.

The future is about to get personal. While artificial intelligence already permeates industries such as finance and health care, it currently tackles fairly rudimentary tasks in the travel industry. For example, airlines and hotels use the technology in "conversational chatbots" that understand written language to help customers resolve basic travel queries. That's starting to change: Google Maps can now help us find parking. Siri predicts (with varying accuracy) where we're headed at certain times of the day, makes real-time traffic assessments, and plans the quickest route. And numerous new travel-oriented firms are applying artificial intelligence and machine-learning algorithms (dynamic equations that do things like recommend movies on Netflix based on your viewing habits) to create seamless and more pleasurable vacations.

Travel is AI's next big leap, believes Craig Webster, a professor of hospitality management at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. Webster studies how the technology will eventually advance

beyond mere apps and websites and inhabit **sophisticated robots** that populate hotels, airports, restaurants, museums, event venues – just about anywhere tourists go. "Soon we'll see general-service robots that are like a personal valet or concierge," Webster says. "You'll ask it something and it'll understand you."

A handful of prototypes are already on the job. At a McLean, Virginia, property, Hilton Worldwide has tested a three-foot-tall robotic concierge named Connie that looks like a *Star Wars* droid and can answer common questions typically posed to staff at a reception desk. Pepper, a humanoid robot, recently joined the **Mandarin Oriental, Las Vegas** to help field guest requests and provide directions (and pose for selfies).

Virtually all our travel choices – window or aisle, higher-floor hotel rooms, vegetarian – get recorded, and more and more of that data will follow us in the real world. "AI algorithms will know the people you usually travel with, how much money you spend on different

things, even which Instagram photos you recently liked – the fancy meal in Paris versus relaxing in the Maldives," says Gilad Berenstein, whose company, Utrip, uses AI to plan highly customized itineraries. "So when you show up at a hotel, they'll meet you in the lobby with your favorite drink or set the music in your room to your favorite artist – the possibilities are endless."

None of this is to say that AI will replace human travel advisors. A skilled online AI assistant can locate the perfect craft brew in San Francisco. Savvy hotelbots might someday access your medical records to check for food allergies before delivering room service. But no amount of cutting-edge gadgetry or smart software can solve some real-world issues. Travel can be chaotic and unpredictable: Hurricanes strike; volcanoes explode. That's exactly when you need the clout and industry connections of a living, breathing professional advisor to make things right. Or sometimes, to introduce you to something completely new and out of character. "People will always need that personalized touch," Berenstein says.

— *Michael Behar*

The Mandarin Oriental, Las Vegas has bet on Pepper to entertain and assist guests. Below: Dubai airport's Terminal 3.