



POWERING TRAVEL | SEASON 5 | EPISODE 7

## Navigating the future of travel with CEO Ariane Gorin

### What to listen for:

Travel demands resilience and leadership in the travel industry requires even more. Ariane Gorin, Chief Executive Officer of Expedia Group, sits down with Elisabeth to share her personal journey, leadership philosophy, and perspectives on the future of travel.

Ariane's path was sparked by a formative childhood trip that ended with her sleeping in a car on the side of a road in Italy, an experience that inspired a career dedicated to making travel more seamless for others. Drawing on her experience, she discusses her perspective on change management and how maintaining authenticity under pressure is one of the most important things a leader can do.

From navigating a worldwide upheaval in 2020 to finding a passion for innovation, Ariane provides a roadmap for navigating what's ahead in the industry. **Tune in to the full interview** for essential leadership advice and insights for any travel lover.

### Introduction:

[00:00:03] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Welcome to the Powering Travel Podcast, brought to you by Expedia Group. I'm your host, Elisabeth Goodridge. Travel is complex. Reservations get lost, bad storms roll in, flights get canceled. That's what happened to me one time, a couple years ago, when I was flying cross-country with three kids, all under the age of 10. My flight got canceled. I almost lost my mind. Now imagine running one of the largest travel businesses in the world. Now that's complex. And that's the responsibility of Ariane Gorin, the CEO of Expedia Group and our guest on this week's episode of Powering Travel. We'll talk about the experiences that shaped Ariane as a leader and how she oversees the complex work of making sure Expedia Group travelers get the best travel memories. And finally, we'll talk about what she thinks travelers and travel professionals need to know now. I'm gonna learn so much about what's happening currently, right now, in the travel industry and get to know one of the most influential leaders in the business, and you will, too. So, let's get started. All right, we're just gonna go ahead and have a great conversation. Okay.

[00:01:19] **Ariane Gorin** We are.

[00:01:19] **Elisabeth Goodridge** We're gonna be talking about travel, we're gonna be talking about your career, we're gonna be talking about some hardships that you had, and then we're gonna talk about leadership qualities. I am so excited to be here. I love travel, and I imagine so do you.

### The best way to make memories:

[00:01:32] **Ariane Gorin** I love travel as well.

[00:01:33] **Elisabeth Goodridge** But tell me why.

[00:01:36] **Ariane Gorin** Well to me, travel is the best way to make memories. Travel's all about memories and experiences. Whether you're traveling on your own, traveling with families or loved ones, it's just...it's a way to explore.

[00:01:49] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Do you have a particular "wow, I really love travel" story from your childhood? Did you travel a lot as a kid?

[00:01:55] **Ariane Gorin** Yeah, I grew up in the U.S., and we would take road trips over the summer. But I think the trip that stands out the most for me from my childhood was the summer that I was 13 years old and my mom took me to travel to Europe. So, we went to France and to Italy. And we rented a car. You know, we drove around to visit, you know, castles in France, and we'd go visit all the museums. And you have to remember, this was back before there were online travel agents. And one day we were driving from France to Italy, and we got through, you know, the tunnel in the Mont Blanc. And it was raining. It was the evening. We arrived on the other side in Italy. And at the time we hadn't made reservations at a hotel. So, we stopped in the first town. All the hotels were sold out. And you know, we had a guide at the time. And so, you know, I was the 13-year-old passenger in the car. And when we realized in the first place that there weren't enough hotel or there weren't any hotel rooms available, I was then calling the hotels in the next city ahead of us. None available. Well anyways, we ended up sleeping on the side of the road in the car. It was pouring rain. And that was the only night during that trip that we had to sleep in the car. And I wish I had thought back then, oh, wait, we should invent, you know, an online travel agent. But every once in a while, when I open our app of hotels.com or Expedia, I think someone around the world is not having to have the same situation that I had back as a 13-year old.

[00:03:24] **Elisabeth Goodridge** And you had that memory.

[00:03:24] **Ariane Gorin** Oh, yeah.

[00:03:25] **Elisabeth Goodridge** And what an extraordinary experience also to share with your mother.

[00:03:28] **Ariane Gorin** Oh, yes. Yes. That was quite a trip of experiences.

[00:03:32] **Elisabeth Goodridge** And you don't have to have the luxury to just I mean, you literally couldn't find a hotel room, much less spend any money, and you still have a distinct, wonderful memory.

[00:03:40] **Ariane Gorin** Yes. It was not a comfortable car, but you know, we were fine.

## The journey to Expedia and tech:

[00:03:44] **Elisabeth Goodridge** So, you grew up in the U.S., and then you also went to graduate school in the U.S. And I don't know if you know this, but I also went to Northwestern. I got my graduate degree there.

[00:03:52] **Ariane Gorin** Northwestern?

[00:03:53] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Yeah, right. Northwestern, Evanston, Chicago, great places, great places to live and learn. Because you got a business degree there, an MBA. What were some of the big takeaways you learned from your education there? And maybe even in your earlier career? What were key to your success now?

[00:04:09] **Ariane Gorin** So, when I went to business school. I was 24 and 25 years old. And I thought, oh, I'm gonna go take accounting and finance and sort of harder skilled classes. And when I think back to my time there, actually a lot that sticks with me is organizational behavior classes. You know, the class on negotiation or the class on there was something on the congruence theory, which was about, you know, when you're leading a team or you're putting incentives in place, how do you make sure you're rewarding people with the things that matter to them? So, there were just a lot of things like that.

[00:04:42] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Human behavior that was collaboration tactics.

[00:04:44] **Ariane Gorin** Exactly. Collaboration. How do you engage people? How do you inspire them? And so I often will tell people if I could go back to business school, I take more OB classes. I'd probably appreciate them much more, also twenty-five years later.

[00:04:58] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Right. Oh, okay. But after business school, you went to some of the bigger names: BCG, Boston Consulting Group, Microsoft, Microsoft to Expedia. You could have gone anywhere with this pedigree. Why Expedia?

[00:05:12] **Ariane Gorin** So, I joined Expedia in 2013. And there were a couple of reasons. One was, you know, it was travel and technology. And I'd always worked in technology, but the idea that we could use technology to help people travel to do something, that to me was really meaningful, you know, that was attractive. I also at the time thought it's a big market, it's growing, it's still quite fragmented, it's going to be disrupted with technology. So, you know, there's definitely going to be growth opportunities. And then finally, you know, I was living in Europe at the time. And a lot of the tech companies I talked to were quite centralized in the U.S. So, if I wanted to be in a role that had real decision-making power, I would need to move to the U.S. And Expedia at that time had a number of leaders on the global leadership team that were based in Europe. So, I thought, you know, it's an American tech company but with real centers of power and decision-making outside of the U.S. And because at the time I wanted to stay in Europe, that was really attractive.

[00:06:16] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Well, and also the company was like, you know what, we might be based in America but our breadth...

[00:06:20] **Ariane Gorin** Everything is global. And then finally, and I think this is probably what most people will say, is it then becomes the people you meet in the interviews. And I loved everyone I met. They were generous, they were driven, they had ambition. And I really could see myself as part of the team.

[00:06:38] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Another reason why you might want to work for a travel company is what you say.

[00:06:42] **Ariane Gorin** I do think travel is the happiness business. Because as I said, travel is where you make memories, where you connect with people. You know, whether it's work travel or whether it's travel for business. You know, when you...actually asked ChatGPT the other day, I said, what is, what are people, what photos do they put on their end-of-year holiday cards? Because I had a theory, which was most people will put some kind of travel picture. And ChatGPT said, number one was family portraits, number two is portraits, number two has been kids, and number three is travel photos. Because I suspect at the end of the year, when you ask people what was your strongest memory of the year, they'll often talk about something that was related to travel.

[00:07:28] **Elisabeth Goodridge** This is your career that you're providing these memories. You know, you worked at Microsoft and you worked at BCG, worked at Expedia, and you had a lot of reorgs. It was a tech company. Things are changing, the companies have to react. How do you handle those changes?

[00:07:44] **Ariane Gorin** Well, first, I would say change is constant. And I remember when I took a role running what we'd call the Expedia Affiliate Network back in 2014. I was the third leader of the business in about a 14-month period. And I would hear from the team, oh, everything is changing, it's constantly changing. And at a certain point, I just said, look, if you want to be in an environment that's not changing, you're in the wrong company. And it's true of tech companies, it's probably true of others as well, which is, you know, if the environment around you is moving fast, the company needs to move faster. So, I'd start with that. And then in terms of sort of what, how did I respond to all of that? I've been very fortunate in the couple of decades at Microsoft and at Expedia that every two years I was able to take on a new role or a new responsibility. Whether it was moving from a marketing role to a sales role, a sales role to, you know, leading a P&L. And every time I was able to take learnings that I'd had from my previous roles, and then in the new role, figure out how

am I stretching myself? What are the skills that I'm learning? So, I always saw change as an opportunity to learn and grow and take on new things and take on risks. And then if it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out.

[00:08:59] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Through all that opportunity, what underrated trait or quality do you think that a good leader has to have?

[00:09:06] **Ariane Gorin** Well, I don't know that I would say it's underrated, but I think an important quality is being organized. I have two children. And for many years, I was working, my husband was working, we had two young children in school. We were both traveling. And we had to be ultra organized, because we never wanted to have a night where both of us were traveling at the same time. And so every Sunday we'd sit down and spend 45 minutes looking at our agenda for the next six to nine months. And because we were so organized in our personal lives and making sure that that was all set up, it sort of it allowed me when I was at work to just be fully present there because I didn't need to worry about, you know, okay, somebody picking my kids up from school, you know, is I didn't have to worry about all of that. So, I think really being organized and having a great support network outside of work is critical. I would say also having a sort of having a support network around you that's not simply your family but also sort of friends and friends who don't know you from your job, and also friends who know you from your job, but just having that support network who people who are there to pick you up when things are not going well, who are there to cheer you on where they are going well, because inevitably there are going to be ups and downs and curves in the road.

## The power of authenticity:

[00:10:22] **Elisabeth Goodridge** So, that's a great segue. Was there a risky gamble that you made or a failure you're willing to share about your career? Maybe you didn't have that support network in place?

[00:10:35] **Ariane Gorin** I would say probably the time that I moved into a sales role. So, I had always been in sort of strategy or in marketing roles. And I had a great mentor who once told me, Ariane, if you want a job running a division or running a big business, you have to go do sales. You have to prove to yourself and to others that you can own a number and deliver a number. So, I sort of begrudgingly thought, okay, fine, I'm gonna go do a sales job. And the advice I was given was, you've got to have sharp elbows. Like, be careful, have sharp elbows. You know, sales is a different thing. And the first few months when I was doing that job, I was failing. We weren't hitting our numbers. I wasn't approaching things in as collaborative a way as I always had. I was tired, the team wasn't engaged, it was not going well. No, it was not going well. And then one night I went home and I thought, Ariane, if you're going to fail at this, you're going to fail at it being yourself, not trying to be someone who you're not. And I went into the office the next day, and I sort of changed my mindset and my approach. I listened more, I was more collaborative. And fortunately, over the months to come, our numbers turned around, engagement turned around, and it turned around. And it was a great lesson for me, not only in learning to deliver numbers and own a commercial number but also in really just embracing the importance of being authentic to myself.

[00:12:06] **Elisabeth Goodridge** That's exactly the word I was thinking is about being authentic to yourself and whether or not you're at home or while you're working, but being authentic, because that you can rely on yourself to go forward, particularly when things are not going well. Tell me a little bit, because I am fascinated. I was a travel editor during the pandemic. Could you tell me, like put me in the room of what it was like?

## Leading through the pandemic:

[00:12:28] **Ariane Gorin** Huge question. Yeah, exactly. I would say the only, like, the analogy is think of taking a car that's meant to go in forward gear at a certain rate and move it into reverse five times faster.

[00:12:43] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Okay. So, you're driving six.

[00:12:44] **Ariane Gorin** So, we're driving six miles an hour and now we got the reverse. And this feeling of you're trying to keep up with all of the, you know, the borders that are closing, the travel restrictions that are changing. The travelers you're taking care of who are trying to figure out can they travel. Are we providing them refunds? Especially if the hotels, you know, it's then dependent on the hotels. Like there was just so much going on. And for me, I also took on our corporate travel business just a couple months before the pandemic. So, reassuring our corporate customers, helping them, I remember we innovated, like, we very quickly built this capability for our customers to know where are their travelers now. Where have their travelers been? Because previously, if you were a corporate customer, you wanted to know where your people were traveling now and where they're traveling in the future. But when you started doing contact tracing, you had to actually know, hey, who has traveled to this place in the last month or so. Oddly, though, it was really energizing because the whole company was lined up behind, you know, figuring out what we needed to do during the pandemic. So, not that I would like to go back to it again, but I think there were some really good lessons in the power of focus and purpose.

[00:13:57] **Elisabeth Goodridge** It sounds like it was a turning point.

[00:13:59] **Ariane Gorin** But certainly for me as a leader, it taught me a lot. And I think for our company, it was also a turning point in really appreciating the importance of having automation, of having self-service. You know, I think before that, we would sometimes, you know, it would be okay if people were calling our call center for things that could have been done in a self-service way. And by the way, that was true across the travel industry. You know, with a lot of airline partners we work with, hotel partners we work with, we all came to this realization of there's a lot more that we can do to automate, which is great for travelers and also takes a lot of cost out for us.

[00:14:38] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Do you think right now we're going through an uncertain time? You have to admit? Do you think that automation, you're leaning into that?

## Strategic bets and advice:

[00:14:46] **Ariane Gorin** Well, certainly, yeah. Having smaller mission-based teams with purposes. But you know, another learning we had is I was running our corporate travel business at the time. And obviously, corporate was probably the hardest hit in travel. And there was a lot more uncertainty about how long it would take. Because it bounced back later. Bounced back a bit later. And, you know, we had to plan for sort of this multi-year journey of not knowing exactly how much was going to come back when. And as part of that, like many companies in the travel industry, we had to downsize. And as we thought about, you know, where are we going to downsize, but where and where are we going to continue to invest? You know, I think the team and I made a smart call about protecting some of the new business growth we were going after. So, there were certain geographies where we said, you know what, we think they're going to open sooner. And so let's keep our investment in new business and in fact do more. And a couple of years and a couple of years later, business we were able to sign during that period ended up being one of the big drivers of that part of our company. So, I think it was also to me a lesson in you have to make tough choices but be strategic about the bets that you think are going to pay off a couple of years down the road. I always think of, is my future self gonna thank me for having made that decision?

[00:16:02] **Elisabeth Goodridge** I kinda love it 'cause, I'm thinking of, you know, planting the seeds over here and making sure you're watering and feeding those plants because in a couple of years they will grow.

[00:16:12] **Ariane Gorin** It's gotta be a portfolio of businesses. I mean, sort of the, you know, the old management, you know, saying of like, what's your cash cow, what's your so, but it's thinking about what's gonna produce in the next couple of years, sort of to get me 24 months down the road, but then also what are the things that I know will then be my future stars.

[00:16:31] **Elisabeth Goodridge** What advice would you offer to a travel professional? Whether or not they're a tour operator or they're an airline exec, is there any kind of words of advice that you would offer a professional in the travel industry about what's happening now and to prepare themselves?

[00:16:50] **Ariane Gorin** I would just say customer. Know your customer and make sure that what you're offering them is differentiated. You know the value of it, and you're communicating it to them. Because as you say, it's a huge industry. I mean, one of the beauties of the travel industry is how big it is and how many different ways people shop for travel and people book travel. It's part of why we have such a big B2B business where we power corporate travel companies, offline retail travel companies, financial institution, loyalty rewards programs, because people travel in a lot of different ways. And so there's always room for people to have a niche and know your customer, know what it is that you're doing that differentiates you and put your investment behind those.

## Final thoughts and travel rituals:

[00:17:37] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Okay, one last question. When you check in to a destination, whether or not it's a vacation rental or a hotel, what is the very first thing you do?

[00:17:46] **Ariane Gorin** After I get into my room, I open my suitcase, put on my sneakers, and I go for a little walk. I like to know what's around me. One of my favorite things to do when I travel, especially in Rome, is to get up early in the morning and go walk around before anyone else is out. It's just magic.

[00:18:03] **Elisabeth Goodridge** All right, what do you see in Rome that particularly, because there are all these things?

[00:18:07] **Ariane Gorin** You know what, I'm gonna bring it back full circle, which is that trip when I was 13 years old with my mom. You know, there are certain memories that jump out. The Piazza Navona, the Trevi Fountain. And so Rome is just, it's such a walkable city that whenever I have to go there for work, I do that. I get up early in the morning, I walk around the city. It's just magic.

[00:18:26] **Elisabeth Goodridge** It's pretty. It sparkles. I have a wonderful memory of being in Rome with my father and us just looking around at the Vatican and the Colosseum. And just, is this real?

[00:18:39] **Ariane Gorin** Exactly. It's amazing.

[00:18:41] **Elisabeth Goodridge** Ariane, thank you so much for joining us.

[00:18:43] **Ariane Gorin** Thank you, Elisabeth.

[00:18:43] **Elisabeth Goodridge** This was so nice to chat with you, and thank you for sharing all of your leadership ideas and skills and the background of how you got here.

[00:18:51] **Ariane Gorin** Thank you, Elisabeth, and thank you for choosing Expedia Group.

[00:18:54] **Elisabeth Goodridge** No problem. I'm thrilled to be here. I am so glad I could share my conversation with Ariane Gorin with you. It was inspiring. She's one of the most important leaders in the travel space, and her insight gave me so much to think about, and I think you, too. If you like this as much as I did, then listen to more powering travel episodes. It's season five, and we have lots to share. So, stay tuned. Be sure to follow us on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, anywhere you listen to or watch your favorite podcasts. Thanks for listening. I'm your host, Elisabeth Goodridge, and I can't wait to see where you go to next.