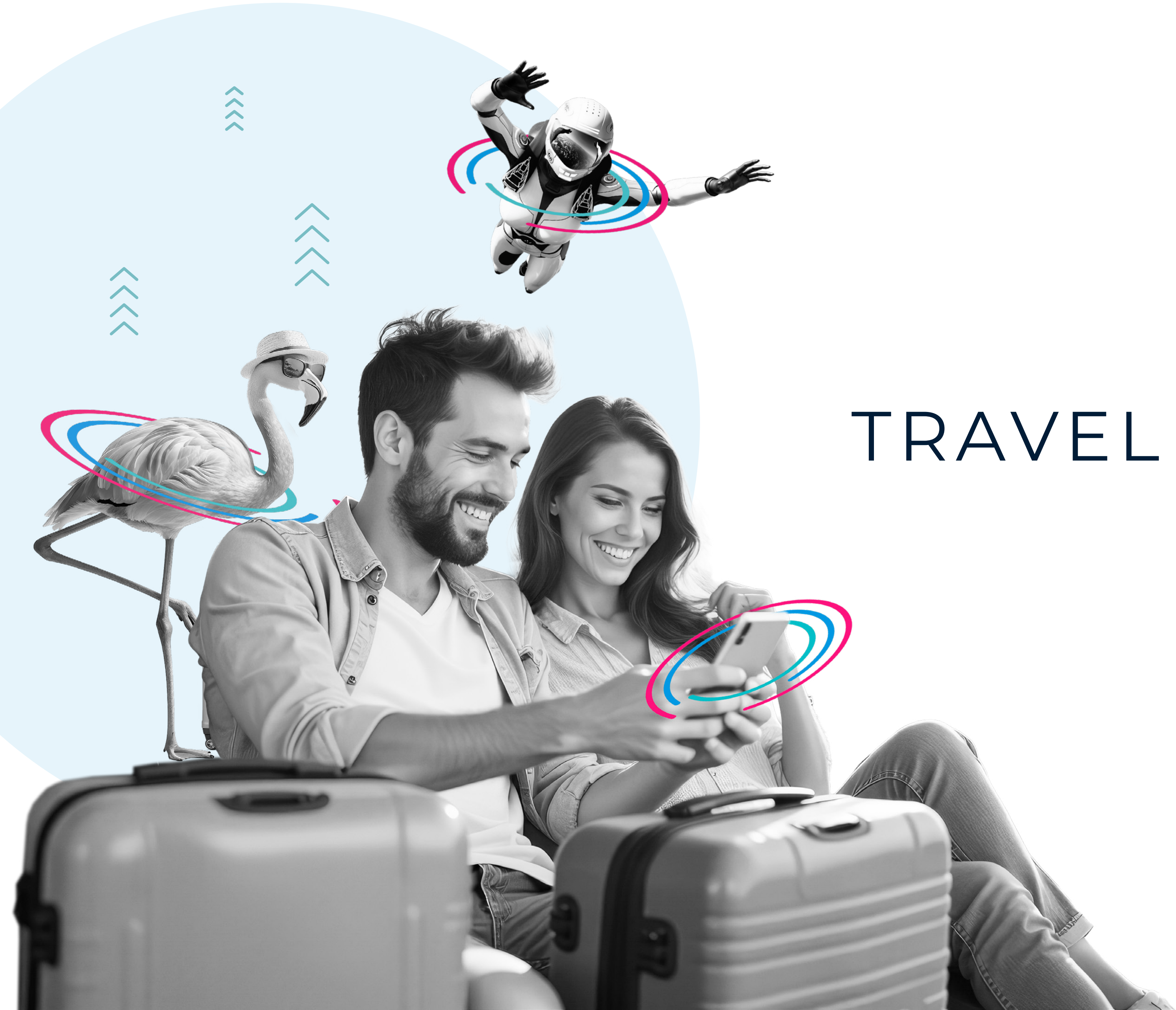

TRAVEL TRENDS 2026

WHAT'S IN STORE FOR THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY IN 2026?

The travel industry is at the dawn of a new era.

'Me-mooning'. Wellness breaks. The digital detox. If 2025's prevalent travel preferences could be distilled into one word, 'mindful' might fit the bill – perhaps even 'minimalistic'.

But for 2026, maximalism is back with a bang.

From spending splurges to pop culture quests, the year ahead will see travellers seize the day across all manner of trips: think luxury stays, cross-continental collectable chases, and creative escapes where passion takes centre stage.

For many, subtlety is so yesterday…but the traveller of today is not a monolith. For some, respite will remain top of mind; for others, authenticity is the hallmark of a truly great adventure.

Meeting the expectations of an increasingly divergent customer base is a challenge that today's travel players must face. With this report, we aim to equip you with the insights you need to craft unforgettable experiences – no matter which part of the travel industry you're in.

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CHAPTERS

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT'S SHAPING TRAVEL CHOICES IN 2026?

SOCIAL MEDIA

'If it isn't online, did it ever really happen?' Those were the words HBX Group's Chief Strategy and Transformation Officer, Javier Cabrerizo, said onstage at the Group's flagship event, the MarketHub. It's a sentiment reflective of **the 76% of travellers who publicise their experiences on social media**: whether snapping photos for Instagram, 'checking-in' via Facebook, or vlogging their experience, today's travellers certainly treat tourism as a communal experience – and as social currency.

So significant is the motivation to brag about one's experiences, that **in 2018, the word 'Instagrammable' made its way into both the Cambridge and Merriam-Webster dictionaries**. The term is closely associated with tourism, and according to one Statista study, **almost 50% of travellers admit to choosing a destination based on this intention alone**.

Nevertheless, one person's gloating moment may well inspire the choices of several others, **with 72% attributing their booking decisions to content created by influencers or bloggers**.

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> "I follow many travel blogger accounts on Instagram, Tiktok and YouTube because they provide a lot of inspiration. At the same time, they share their real opinions and experiences. For me, it's like those people are my friends – every time that I prepare my own trip, I go online, watch those videos, and this way, I know that I can make informed decisions."

– Quote from a Gen Z traveller at the MarketHub 2025

From 'Looking' to 'Booking'

Knowing that social media is where many users' 'dreaming phase' begins, transforming 'looking' into 'booking' ought to be top of mind for savvy brands. One way is to **lean into the power of marketing**: trend-led feeds capture the attention of audiences, whilst targeted advertisements capitalise on interest. While driving traffic from one application to the next is the norm (in-feed call-to-action buttons like 'Book now' or 'Contact' are highly prevalent), **digital natives value immediacy** – enter TikTok.

Announced in August 2025, TikTok Go enables content creators to earn from their uploads: ultimately an affiliate programme, those invited to participate are provided with a list of hotels which have agreed to pay commissions in return for promotion. Users are then given the relevant location tags and information to drive bookings direct from their post (marked with a 'Creator earns commission' disclaimer for transparency).

The programme is both seamless and ingenious, enabling hoteliers to appeal to a dedicated audience for a relatively low price. There are questions around quality and return – how many high-calibre influencers will settle for the commissions offered (available as a flat rate or as an agreed percentage)? **How many hoteliers can afford to part with yet more fees, and how many are willing to rescind control over valuable guest data?** – but on the part of the traveller themselves, the booking journey is certainly more immediate. Rates, reviews and photos are available in-app; coupled with the high levels of trust typically felt between social media users and their favourite creators, the appeal is potent.

TikTok Go is only in available in limited regions as of early 2026, and time will tell how successful the programme may be. Still, it leaves **plenty of food for thought for travel players** – including those who could make a move to mirror the approach, or simply to shape their marketing strategies around evolving customer appetites.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

If you haven't heard someone mention AI in the past week, you're probably living off grid.

The technology has dominated headlines, boardrooms and breakout sessions across every industry imaginable – and travel is no exception. By 2026, the conversation has shifted: we're no longer debating if artificial intelligence belongs in tourism, but rather how to deploy it responsibly, and where humans fit into the equation.

The answer, according to those leading the charge, is surprisingly straightforward: everywhere.

Adoption Accelerates

Approximately **40% of travellers worldwide now use AI-based tools for trip planning**, with **over 60%** expressing openness to trying them. Among younger demographics, adoption rates climb higher: **62% of millennials and Gen Z travellers in key markets** actively use generative AI for travel discovery and planning. Even more striking, **48% of consumers aged 55 and older** used AI for travel for the first time in the past year, proving that enthusiasm extends well beyond digital natives.

On the business side, momentum is building. Whilst **only 4%** of major publicly traded travel companies mentioned AI in their 2022 annual reports, **that figure jumped to 35% by 2024**. Investment follows interest: AI-enabled travel start-ups captured **45% of travel-industry venture capital funding** in the first half of 2025, **up from just 10% in 2023**.

Yet despite growing enthusiasm, deployment remains cautious. **Only 35% of hotel and airline brands currently use AI** to enhance guest interactions, with **just 12.5% ready to scale those efforts** across their organisations. The industry's fragmented infrastructure – cobbled together from countless small to medium-sized businesses, disparate systems and siloed data – makes deeper integration challenging.

What Works in Practice

HBX Group's Chief Sourcing & Operations Officer, Xabier Zabala, offered a useful analogy at the Group's flagship MarketHub events in 2025: 'AI is like an iceberg – everyone sees the shiny top, but most of the weight is below the surface. If you want to win in the AI economy, focus on data and process first.'

> 'We're not looking to replace humans, but to make our amazing teams even more productive and efficient with AI, liberating them from repetitive activities to focus on what really adds value to the customer.' – *Xabier Zabala, HBX Group Chief Sourcing & Operations Officer*

Xabier Zabala - HBX Group's Chief Sourcing & Operations Officer

The most successful implementations solve real problems: sluggish customer service, and time-consuming manual tasks. At HBX Group, AI now handles millions of customer interactions – predicting query types, recognising intent across languages, translating in real-time and automating responses where appropriate. 'We implemented a multichannel query processing solution, including intent recognition, language recognition, real-time translation and response automation,' explained Zabala. 'It has built-in logic for determining the next best action, enabling us to accelerate case resolution and improve customer satisfaction.'

Beyond customer service, AI enables novel training approaches. HBX Group's 'voice twins' – simulated conversations modelled on real interactions – allow new employees to practise hundreds of scenarios across 13 languages, each call unique, building confidence before handling live customers.

The Human Advantage

AI cannot replicate empathy, negotiate nuance, or read between the lines when a frustrated customer needs reassurance rather than a scripted response. As Xavier Godoy Moya, HBX Group's Customer Experience & Automation Director, explained at the World Travel Market in London: 'When AI takes repetitive work, people can focus on empathy, negotiation, strategy, creative problem-solving and critical thinking.'

The principle of 'human on the loop' remains non-negotiable. Humans validate, contextualise and own decisions, while technology should support teams, not sideline them. In all, 71% of tourism experts feel that AI will boost productivity and experiences across the industry, leaving the professionals to continue doing what they do best: connecting with clients and creating unforgettable travel experiences.

Proceed With Caution

For all of the benefits that artificial intelligence may bring, the risks are real. AI without oversight can amplify bias or misinterpret context; it may even prioritise speed over accuracy. At HBX Group, safeguards include transparent implementations, rigorous testing, human supervision at every stage, and ongoing bias audits.

Looking to the wider industry, **44% of UK travellers cite lack of personalisation as their biggest frustration with traditional booking methods**, with that figure **rising to 52% among 25-34 year olds**. Meeting these expectations requires unified data and seamless systems – infrastructure many travel businesses still lack.

The path forward? Start with use cases that drive practical value – often around repetitive activities. Manage risks around inaccuracies and bias. Upskill teams to operate in an AI-augmented environment. Above all, ensure technology enhances human connection rather than diminishes it.

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BRAND PARTNERSHIPS

What does Bruno Mars have in common with a giant, blue penguin in a Santa hat?

The sole answer may be 'marketability' – but for Japanese discount chain Don Quijote, that's more than enough.

At the end of August 2024, the global popstar (Mars) took to social media to drop a 135-second video of himself dancing down aisles stocked with snacks, sodas and plushies. By his side was one of Japan's most iconic mascots: the beloved 'Don Pen'.

Titled 'Donki Ikuyo' ('Let's go to Donki'), the video hard-launched a limited-time collaboration between Mars and the Don Quijote chain. So absurd was this partnership that it felt irresistible: the cuddly Don Pen adopting a new sense of swagger, while the typically exuberant Mars exchanged designer brands for discount attire, including a Don Quijote-exclusive t-shirt blending his likeness with Don Pen's.

THE CAMPAIGN WAS A SMASH HIT, WITH THE VIDEO RACKING UP MILLIONS OF VIEWS AND MERCHANDISE SELLING OUT ALMOST IMMEDIATELY. MORE THAN THIS, IT PUT DON QUIJOTE ON THE MAP.

While Japanophiles were likely already familiar with the brand, those without a vested interest in the country (or its penchant for garish marketing) may well have made their acquaintance because of the video's virality.

Fast forward to today, and Don Quijote (alongside other seemingly average stores, like 7-Eleven and FamilyMart) are **not only bonafide attractions for tourists visiting Japan, but are considered marketing darlings in their own right**: 7-Eleven, on the one hand, have become known for their aesthetics – think Hello Kitty branded stores, or locations at the base of viral photo spots, like Mt Fuji. As for FamilyMart? They've pioneered the term 'Konbini Fashion', **transforming Japan's 50,000 convenience locations into retail tourism hotspots**. In partnership with designer Hiromichi Ochiai, the brand has unveiled a range of wearables, including unisex socks – selling 1.4 million pairs within one year of launch. **The only way to get these fabled fashion items? By travelling to Japan**.

The Power of Unlikely Pairings

Creative partnerships know no bounds – it's simply a matter of being bold enough to think, and act, outside of the box. From **Tourism New Zealand's partnership with YouTuber The Hardest Geezer** (in which he ran a 73-day marathon across some of the country's most dramatic landscapes) to **Airbnb's experience campaign with rapper and 'Otaku Hot Girl' Megan Thee Stallion**, brand partnerships come in all shapes and sizes, with the most successful often being the least obvious.

Certainly, a high budget helps – not only are Mars and Thee Stallion megastars, but their mammoth fanbases enable both artists to name their fee. This, however, was not the cause for either campaign's success: the artists are genuinely fond of Japan, and this sincerity shows in their output, serving as hands-on creatives in their respective campaigns.

Big names aren't always the answer: **affinity-led partnerships** can be incredibly powerful, as can those which **exchange mundanity for absurdity**. Across the spectrum, there's plenty of room (and budget) for travel players to get inventive – all that's required is a willingness to cut through the noise.

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CHAPTER TWO

ENDURING TRENDS

Future forward? Not all trends fade – some evolve to shape the foundations of modern travel.

Sustainability

Has sustainability ever really been a 'trend'? Reducing environmental consciousness to a fleeting movement is not only misguided, but a wild underestimation of the significance of this global issue: according to a 2025 Statista report, **84% of travellers worldwide believe that sustainable travel is important**, up from 80% in the previous year. Similarly, younger travellers - aged 18–34 - place greater emphasis on sustainable tourism practices versus older demographics.

So, what does this mean for the travel industry? As **ecotourism continues rising at a rate of 14% CAGR** (estimated to reach **$760 billion by 2032**), the time to create experiences rooted in environmental ethics is now. Travellers are actively seeking properties **that demonstrate authentic sustainability** rather than surface-level claims, so **hotels should prioritise easy wins**: towel reuse programmes, LED lighting, filtered water stations and zero-plastic amenities. Meanwhile, **travel distributors and experience providers should offer eco-led experiences** like guided cycling tours and reforestation activities. Finally, **mobility providers should add environmentally friendly vehicles to their fleet**, such as fully electric or hybrid models.

Nature Tourism

Somewhat related, nature tourism remains on the rise - at times, with a new face. Whilst safaris and traditional wildlife watching remain popular, niche categories are emerging. Butterfly watching sees growing interest, with winter wildlife experiences on the rise as tourists observe migratory species like the monarch butterfly migration in Mexico. Stargazing and astrotourism have surged too: the 2024 North American solar eclipse **saw searches rise by 1,000%** in the path of totality, drawing millions to smaller towns that would otherwise see little tourism traffic.

The nature tourism market, **estimated at $1.2 trillion in 2026**, is **expected to reach $2.3 trillion by 2033**, growing at **8.6% CAGR**. Travel players should consider curated nature-based experiences which tap into travellers' appetite for wonder, from birdwatching tours to eclipse-chasing packages.

Coolcationing

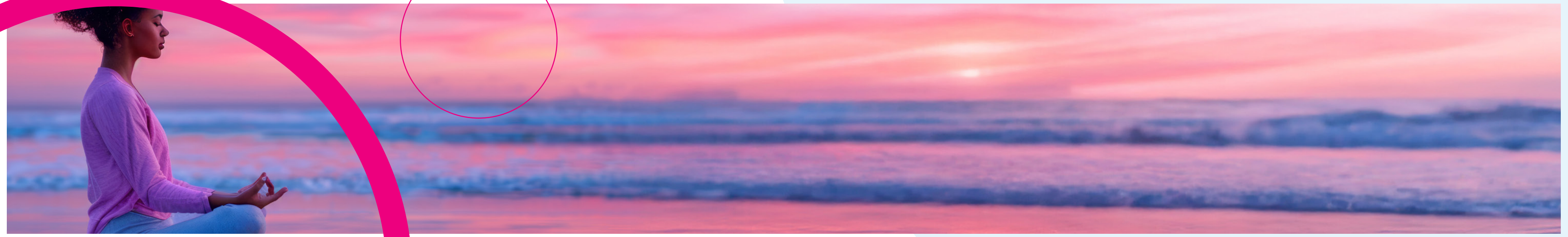
In a warming world, travellers are chasing the chill. Rising temperatures are altering travel patterns, with **22% of European travellers in 2025 said to skip peak seasons to avoid heatwaves**. The Mediterranean and Caribbean – once synonymous with summer escapes – are losing lustre, as extreme heat, wildfires and water shortages make traditional hotspots uncomfortable or even unsafe.

Enter coolcationing: travellers are increasingly seeking milder climates in Scandinavia, the Alps, Canada, Scotland and the Baltics. Eastern Europe is emerging as a hotspot, with the region expected to see **7.5% annual tourism growth over the next five years**. Mountain tourism is benefiting too, as higher altitudes offer relief alongside outdoor activities. The shift is both reactive and adaptive – a symptom of climate change that travel players must acknowledge. Promote **cooler destinations**, develop climate-resilient infrastructure, and invest in **shoulder-season offerings**.

Transformational Travel

Travel is no longer about ticking off destinations – it's about transformation. The wellness tourism market alone is projected to reach **$2100 billion by 2030, growing at a CAGR of 12.42% from 2023 to 2030**, with travellers seeking experiences promising lasting change. One form of wellness can be found in solo trips: driven by self-discovery and mental wellness, **62% of global travellers** intended to go it alone across 2-5 trips in 2025, climbing from 58% in 2024.

Wellness encompasses more than spa treatments: think silent meditation retreats, yoga teacher training in scenic locales, purpose-driven volunteer travel and 'sleep tourism', where guests seek destinations designed for quality rest. Travel players **should offer holistic experiences** such as forest walks, sound healing and breathwork sessions. **Leveraging location** – whether mountains, beaches or cities – **can further deliver on meaningful wellness journeys**.



Entertainment Tourism

Sports tourism is projected to reach **$2.1 trillion by 2030, at an annual growth rate of 17.5%**. Music isn't far behind: the global live music market is projected to swell by more than **$35 billion between 2023 and 2028**, growing by **17% per year**. 'Set jetting' is booming too: **78% of travellers** expressed interest in visiting a destination after seeing it in a film or TV show.

Destinations are no longer chosen for scenery alone, but for the experiences they offer. **Travel players should align with major events**, create curated packages around tours and sporting fixtures, and capitalise on pop culture moments. **For deeper insights on this trend's evolution, see our dedicated chapter, 'The Power of Play'**.

Group Tourism

In 2025, **47% of travellers were said to opt for multigenerational or family trips**, surpassing all other group types and up 17% over 2024. Extended families are pooling resources for shared experiences, **with 74% of parents embracing getaways involving grandparents and children**. Additionally, it's said that **55% of grandparents are the ones to plan and organise multigenerational trips**, with half paying for them outright and 48% sharing costs. The appeal? Strengthening bonds across generations whilst creating lasting memories.

Travel players should offer flexible accommodations, such as interconnected rooms and family suites. **Multi-age activities matter**, too – think nature walks and craft workshops, alongside kids' clubs and child-friendly dining. Finally, providers across the ecosystem should **promote cost-sharing opportunities and inclusive packages**, where possible.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POWER OF PLAY

In 2019, something extraordinary began to emerge from Saudi Arabia's Tuwaiq mountains: metal limbs stretched skyward, while arid veins snaked across the expanse below. A new creature named Qiddiya was born.

Hailed as 'the world's first city for play', Qiddiya City represents a bold gamble. Unveiled as part of Saudi Vision 2030, the project forms a wider economic offensive to diversify revenue away from oil (currently 43% of real GDP). By 2030, organisers project 17 million annual visitors and $36 billion in annual earnings, alongside 325,000 new jobs – a significant addition to the tourism sector's existing 966,000 positions.

But why 'play'?

Entertainment as an Economic Engine

The data is compelling. According to Skift research, **86% of global travellers consider entertainment, sports and cultural experiences crucial to happiness and wellbeing** – a figure that rises to **90% among Millennials and Gen Z**. More tellingly, **92% of travel executives** agree play-focused destinations will prove crucial to tourism, with **84%** excited about investing in the sector.

SPORTS ALONE FUEL 10% OF ALL GLOBAL TOURISM REVENUE, WITH EVENTS LIKE THE OLYMPICS, F1 AND THE WORLD CUP ATTRACTING HIGH FOOTFALL AND OCCUPANCY TO HOST CITIES

The evidence extends beyond travel. Video gaming – valued at **$522.46 billion annually** – dwarfs the music ($33.32 billion) and film ($34.1 billion) industries combined. Given the tourism industry's embrace of 'set-jetting' and 'Swiftonomics', shouldn't professionals turn attention towards this entertainment titan?

eSports: an Entertainment Behemoth

Gaming is a global leisure force, inspiring cross-industry partnerships. The eSports industry alone is anticipated to reach **$12.4 billion by 2030**, exemplifying the massive potential of play. Despite digital origins, eSports have evolved into significant in-person events hosted in Beijing, Rio, Tokyo, New York and London. Qiddiya City, too, will feature its own eSports district, with **73,000 seats** across multiple venues, positioning itself as a premier destination for competitive gaming.

The scale is staggering. Major tournaments attract audiences comparable to traditional sporting events, with prize pools reaching **tens of millions of dollars**. The 2024 League of Legends World Championship, for instance, drew over 6.9 million peak concurrent viewers, rivalling Super Bowl audiences.

Accommodation providers are capitalising. In 2025, **Hilton became the official hotel partner for the eSports World Cup**, providing accommodation and on-site gaming zones for attendees. Meanwhile, **Radisson Hotel Group's 'eSports Ready' programme** offered high-speed internet, private gaming rooms and team-focused spaces tailored to professional gamers' needs, even including blackout curtains for irregular sleep schedules and ergonomic gaming chairs.

Beyond Physical Events: Digital-Cultural Exchange

Opportunities extend beyond IRL (in real life) into virtual worlds, enabling a digital cultural exchange, where destinations and brands can team up to reach global audiences through gaming platforms. Take in-game tourism, for example: players who explore digital recreations of destinations often express interest in visiting the real-world counterparts – a phenomenon destination marketers are learning to harness.

Tourism New Zealand and Minecraft: In partnership with Warner Bros and with active involvement from eleven mana whenua groups, the DMO and game creators launched an explorable virtual recreation of New Zealand's landscapes, allowing players worldwide to discover destinations digitally. The campaign generated millions of impressions and introduced the country to demographics traditionally difficult to reach through conventional marketing.

DMOs in Roblox and Fortnite: Destination marketing organisations are creating immersive virtual experiences. Dubai Tourism's Roblox activation allowed users to explore iconic landmarks, whilst Visit California partnered with gaming influencers to showcase the state's diversity through gameplay.

Pop-up collaborations: Limited-time gaming events tied to real-world destinations create urgency and cross-platform engagement. Japanese cities have partnered with Pokémon GO for location-based events, driving significant footfall to participating businesses.

OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

Hotels: Capture market share through gaming-focused amenities: high-speed internet, private gaming rooms, ergonomic furniture, or even docking stations (for a Nintendo Switch/Steam Deck) in guest rooms. Sponsorships are also ripe for the taking: as eSports surge in popularity, brokering deals with host destinations, stadiums or video game brands can put your property on the map.

Travel distributors: Keep abreast of emerging trends, such as The Power of Play, and create related campaigns accordingly. Similarly, it's worthwhile to establish relationships across the industry: think stadiums (to start selling sporting tickets) or niche experience providers focused on the gaming space. Finally, consider keeping a 'key events' calendar, **like those shared on HBX Group's Resource page** – this way, you'll be kept in the loop.

Experience providers: Develop themed experiences and events centred around popular video games or sports, such as tournaments, cosplay gatherings, or interactive VR adventures. Establish relationships with those in the 'play' space – be that ComicCon for video game fans, or stadiums for more traditional sports experiences.

Destination Marketing Organisations: Consider digital marketing campaigns, not just 'IRL' opportunities – just as social media proves to be a strong platform for reaching engaged audiences, video games offer exploration from afar. Similarly, real destinations inspire in-game worlds: **Assassin's Creed** takes place in Egypt, Italy and France, while **Ghost of Tsushima** brought mass appeal to an otherwise lesser-known island. Finally, the fictional realm of Midgard in God of War is heavily inspired by Scandinavia, leaving plenty of room for tourism advertising.

CHAPTER FOUR

FANDOM TOURISM

To many, fandom tourism may appear trivial – but the concept is driving travellers to far-flung destinations in droves, desperate to engage with their favourite forms of media. And with this, comes significant monetary reward.

In 2018, Tokyo Art Museum hosted 'Munch: A Retrospective', marking the first time Edvard Munch's works were exhibited in Japan. The three-month showcase of iconic pieces like 'The Scream' spawned an unlikely promotional partnership: it was the only place fans of Japan's most famous export, Pokemon, could obtain limited-edition playing cards.

As the world's most lucrative media franchise (valued at **$115 billion**), The Pokémon Company understands its allure. Little surprise, then, that the franchise has so many successful and far-reaching collaborations. After all, who would refuse a slice of Pokémon pie?

The Collectables Gold Rush

The Munch exhibition succeeded in driving healthy footfall, with scarcity fuelling demand. Coveted items – including a Pikachu 'Scream' plushie, acrylic charms and five playing cards based on popular characters – sold out immediately. Some hit the resale market at bewildering prices: one Psyduck card later fetched **$66,000**.

THE GLOBAL POKÉMON CARD COLLECTING MARKET ALONE IS WORTH A STAGGERING $20 MILLION – SO WHY WOULDN'T FANATICS FORK OUT ON FLIGHTS IF IT MEANT GETTING THEIR HANDS ON SUCH SOUGHT-AFTER COMMODITIES? IN SOME CASES, AIRFARE COSTS LESS THAN RESALE.

In 2023, The Pokémon Company repeated the tactic with Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum. The 'Pikachu in a Grey Felt Hat' card – a likeness of Van Gogh's iconic self-portrait – inspired such demand that health and safety concerns arose. On-site sales were eventually prohibited, though the commercial viability remained unquestionable. The partnership generated **enormous global media attention, increased awareness** of the museum among younger generations, and drove **significant merchandise sales**.

The collectables market is growing rapidly, with trading cards representing a substantial portion. For fanatics, the thrill of the chase proves motivating enough – and international travel becomes a justified expense when exclusive items are at stake.

Labubu and the Soft Power Play

In 2024, an altogether less cuddly mascot made waves: Labubu, the monstrous brainchild of Hong Kong artist Kasing Lung. Despite launching in 2015 and enjoying strong sales in China, Labubu hit the limelight when BLACKPINK's Lisa was spotted with one dangling from her handbag.

Lisa's native Thailand quickly leveraged this attention, **striking a deal with Labubu's parent company**, POPMART, and orchestrating a **four-day Bangkok tour**. A life-size Labubu visited iconic landmarks like Wat Arun and the Grand Palace whilst participating in Muay Thai and traditional cooking classes.

The results were staggering: an estimated **20,000 Labubu-inspired travel packages sold**, with promotional videos generating over **500 million in online reach**. Targeting Chinese tourists proved particularly fruitful: consequent partnerships with Chinese-owned travel platforms emerged, whilst a limited-edition collectable (LABUBU X Amazing Thailand Special Edition) commemorated 50 years of diplomatic ties, spawning further significant tourism campaigns.

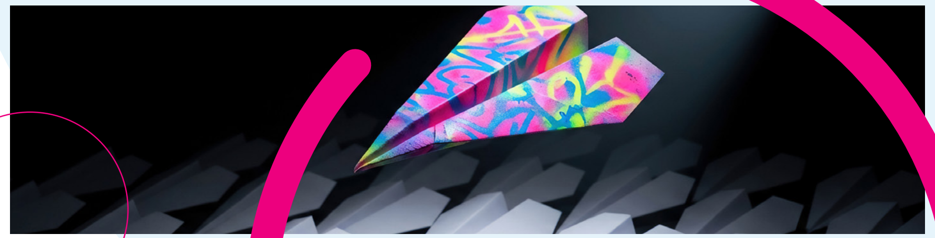
Thailand's strategy demonstrates how destination marketing organisations can harness pop culture phenomena to drive **tangible tourism outcomes**, particularly when targeting specific high-value demographics.

Taking Fandom to New Heights

Themed flights represent another lucrative avenue. Recent years have seen BLACKPINK, Pokémon, Star Wars and Hello Kitty-branded aircraft capture travellers' imaginations. While booking data remains scarce, the growing prevalence of themed liveries suggests high profitability.

The advantages are multifaceted: co-branded marketing campaigns **raise mutual awareness** and encourage **media coverage; positive brand perception** leads to perceived improved in-flight service; and merchandise opportunities open further revenue streams. For airlines navigating competitive markets, these partnerships offer differentiation whilst tapping into passionate, loyal fanbases willing to pay premium prices for unique experiences.

EVA Air's Hello Kitty jets, for instance, have operated since 2005, featuring character-themed cabins, meal services and amenities. The longevity suggests **sustained demand**: passengers actively seek these flights, even building entire trips around the experience.



OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

Hotels: Offer themed rooms based on popular franchises, like Hello Kitty. Another option is to host fandom events and meet-ups – make use of conference spaces, run limited-time menus in onsite restaurants, and hold table-top gaming nights.

Travel distributors: Lean into cultural zeitgeist through marketing – craft social posts, blogs or campaigns around trending properties. Be sure to partner with experience providers offering fandom-led activities, too!

Experience providers: Consider creative partnerships, like Pokémon x Van Gogh Museum; organise character meet-and-greets or cosplay events.

Destination Marketing Organisations: Launch limited-time pop-ups (like Akihabara's Monster Hunter café takeover), character tours of landmarks, and co-branded tourism campaigns targeting specific fanbases.

Airlines: Run themed flights, liveries and in-flight experiences that transform ordinary journeys into bucket-list moments. Look into brand partnerships, too: exclusive merchandise can be an excellent revenue booster!

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CREATIVITY BOOM

Across the world in Australia, grunge-meets-pop-art creations adorn the walls of boutique stays – an homage to one of the country's favourite contemporary sons.

Welcome to the Creativity Boom: a growing wave within travel, buoyed by burgeoning global interest in the arts.

Living Life in Full Colour

Reversing the trend of minimalism, the Creativity Boom sees tourists leaning towards maximalism, perhaps seeking to recapture the sense of freedom felt during COVID-19 lockdowns. Despite uncertainty and financial insecurity, several studies revealed increased productivity and creativity across the period, largely driven by reduced responsibility and the opportunity to reconnect with one's inner self. Whether tapping into passions for fashion, baking, crochet or watercolours, communities worldwide delighted in expressive endeavours.

With windows to the world flung back open, channelling this newfound energy quickly became top of mind – not only for individuals themselves, but for industries seeking to reignite revenue.

THE GLOBAL ART TOURISM MARKET IS EXPECTED TO REACH JUST SHY OF **£55 BILLION BY 2030** – A COMPOUND ANNUAL GROWTH RATE OF **3.1%**.

Several trends emerged: '**revenge travel**', where tourists sought to make up for lost time; **JOMO, wellness** and **slow travel**, where travellers carefully re-entered the world with greater consideration for planet and self. The Creativity Boom merges this full spectrum through passion, curiosity and thoughtful self-expression.

Art captures such feelings beautifully – a catalyst for inspiration and a way to see oneself reflected. Above all, art serves to 'feel' the world: its many cultures and unique perspectives within.

Hotels as Living Galleries

Hotels have gotten wise to the trend. In Scotland, **The Fife Arms Hotel** in Braemar invites guests to choose rooms inspired by everything from nature to poetry, whilst its Artist's Residence creates an arrival akin to stepping into a living gallery. In Berlin, **the Michelberger Hotel** pairs communal workspaces with artist residencies, turning spaces into opportunities to meet and collaborate with other creatives.

Boutique and design-focused accommodation is now projected to reach **$40.26 billion in global value by 2030**, driven by travellers who prioritise artistry and innovation over standardised comfort. These properties understand that guests increasingly seek environments that stimulate rather than simply shelter – spaces that tell stories, provoke thought and inspire social sharing.

Beyond Aesthetics: Participation Over Observation

The Creativity Boom extends beyond Instagrammable design features. UNESCO calculates that the cultural and creative industries contribute **$4.3 trillion globally each year**, a portion of which comes from interactive exhibitions, workshops and pop-up labs.

Consider an evening in Bali, learning batik printing from a local artisan; a furniture upcycling class in Los Angeles; or Copenhagen's workshops on sustainable design. These are experiences that linger, encouraging thought, skill and conversation – transforming passive tourists into active participants.

Creativity as Currency

The cities, properties and attractions embracing this trend are turning travel into an act of participation – a chance to make the journey resonate on a deeper level. The Creativity Boom isn't simply about observing beauty; it's about co-creating it, and this comes in many forms.

Lisbon's LX Factory: A sprawling former industrial site where today's visitors explore independent stores, photograph artisanal coffees and participate in workshops rather than passively observe. The space exemplifies how urban regeneration can prioritise creativity whilst driving tourism.

Hong Kong's PMQ: Transformed historic police married quarters into a vibrant hub for design, craft and innovation, attracting over one million visitors annually. Many choose to 'support small' by purchasing unique artworks or fashion items lovingly made by hand.

Berlin's Street Art Scene: Guided tours of ever-evolving murals, graffiti workshops and artist meet-and-greets turn the city into an open-air gallery where tourists become part of the creative ecosystem.

OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

Hotels: Commission local artists for room designs; host rotating exhibitions; offer creative workshops or artist-in-residence programmes. Properties that blur the line between accommodation and cultural experience can command premium rates as a result.

Travel distributors: Have a booking engine? Think about implementing filters for art-focused accommodation and experiences. How about a blog, newsletter or social media channel? Develop thematic content around cultural tourism – marketing campaigns celebrating local flair resonate powerfully.

Experience providers: Develop hands-on creative workshops that connect tourists with local artisans. From pottery classes in Kyoto to textile workshops in Morocco, these experiences foster deeper cultural understanding whilst supporting local economies.

Destination Marketing Organisations: Position destinations around creative scenes – art districts, maker spaces, craft markets. You can also market workshop experiences alongside traditional attractions or collaborate with local artists to create destination-specific merchandise or limited-edition collaborations.

CHAPTER SIX

LIVE LIKE A LOCAL

What do late-night convenience stores, neighbourhood festivals and chefs who cook like your friend's endlessly talented aunt have in common?

To the modern traveller, they're all shorthand for the same thing: authenticity – packaged, plated and increasingly, a reason to book a flight.

For years, 'live like a local' was little more than a catchy tourism slogan. Now, it's a movement. **Travellers want immersion, not observation**; they want to understand a place not through its landmarks, but through its habits – the more specific, the better.

Food as a Cultural Gateway

Food is, unsurprisingly, the quickest route in. Hotels are cottoning on, shaping broad restaurant concepts towards something far more intimate: local chefs with local ideas. Some join permanently, composing menus around regional ingredients and family recipes. Others appear for short, fiery stints – limited-run residencies, weekend takeovers or seasonal pop-ups that feel more like cultural events than hotel dinners. Either way, the idea isn't to please all with international cuisine topped with local garnish – today's travellers are seeking local cuisine, full stop.

TRAVELLERS WANT THE ORDINARY – BECAUSE, PACKAGED CORRECTLY, IT FEELS EXTRAORDINARY.

The real gastronomic revolution, however, is happening in more surprising places altogether: the fluorescent aisles of convenience stores.

Konbini Culture: Everyday Life as Attraction

Once an errand for locals, Japan's convenience stores (or 'konbini') have become full-blown attractions, **transforming snack shopping into cultural anthropology.** Tourists film their late-night hauls like treasure reveals, displaying limited-edition puddings, region-specific crisps and seasonal drinks with the reverence usually reserved for fine wine.

Convenience store tourism sounds absurd…until you realise it's the closest visitors can get to living everyday Japanese life, one microwave bento at a time. The stats back it up: entire excursions are now planned around FamilyMart chicken bites (FamiChicki), Lawson egg sandwiches (egg sando) or Don Quijote's chaotic, irresistible shelves. **TikTok views regularly reach the millions**.

This phenomenon extends beyond Japan. South Korea's CU and GS25 stores attract tourists seeking K-beauty products and limited-edition snacks. Taiwan's 7-Elevens offer tea eggs and oden that locals swear by. In each case, the appeal is identical: these spaces represent unfiltered daily life, accessible to outsiders willing to look.

Festivals as Cultural Immersion

Forget polished, global megafestivals: local celebrations are where authenticity is delivered in spades. Think lantern parades winding through small streets; harvest celebrations, where grandmothers ladle soup into paper bowls; and music gatherings that double as family reunions.

These events aren't created for tourists – and this is precisely why tourists love them. For a few hours, they embed themselves in moments that the community has been living for generations. The atmosphere is unscripted; the participation, genuine.

Celebrations and Festivities with Local Appeal

La Tomatina, Buñol, Spain: A week-long food fight attracting thousands annually. What began as a local tradition has become a bucket-list event whilst maintaining its chaotic, unpretentious spirit.

Scotland's Loony Dook: Part of Hogmanay (New Year) celebrations, where locals take icy-cold plunges into safe bodies of water. Visitors who participate gain instant camaraderie with Scots and unforgettable stories.

Holi, India: Now familiar to the world stage, the festival of colours draws travellers seeking immersive cultural experiences. Smaller village celebrations offer more authentic participation than major city events.

Beyond Food and Festivals: Daily Rituals as Itinerary

The appetite for immersion extends further. **Travellers want daily rituals, not itineraries**: morning markets, neighbourhood bakeries, casual craft workshops, the bus route locals take without thinking.

Home-style cooking classes, family-run walking tours and hyper-local experience providers (the kind who know every shopkeeper by name) are becoming the new currency of cultural connection. Unlike polished tours that maintain distance between visitor and visited, these experiences blur boundaries – guests become temporary community members, rather than observers.

For travel players, this is the blueprint. Authenticity is key; this much is clear. What better way to deliver on this emotional driver than by involving those who truly make the destination what it is?

OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

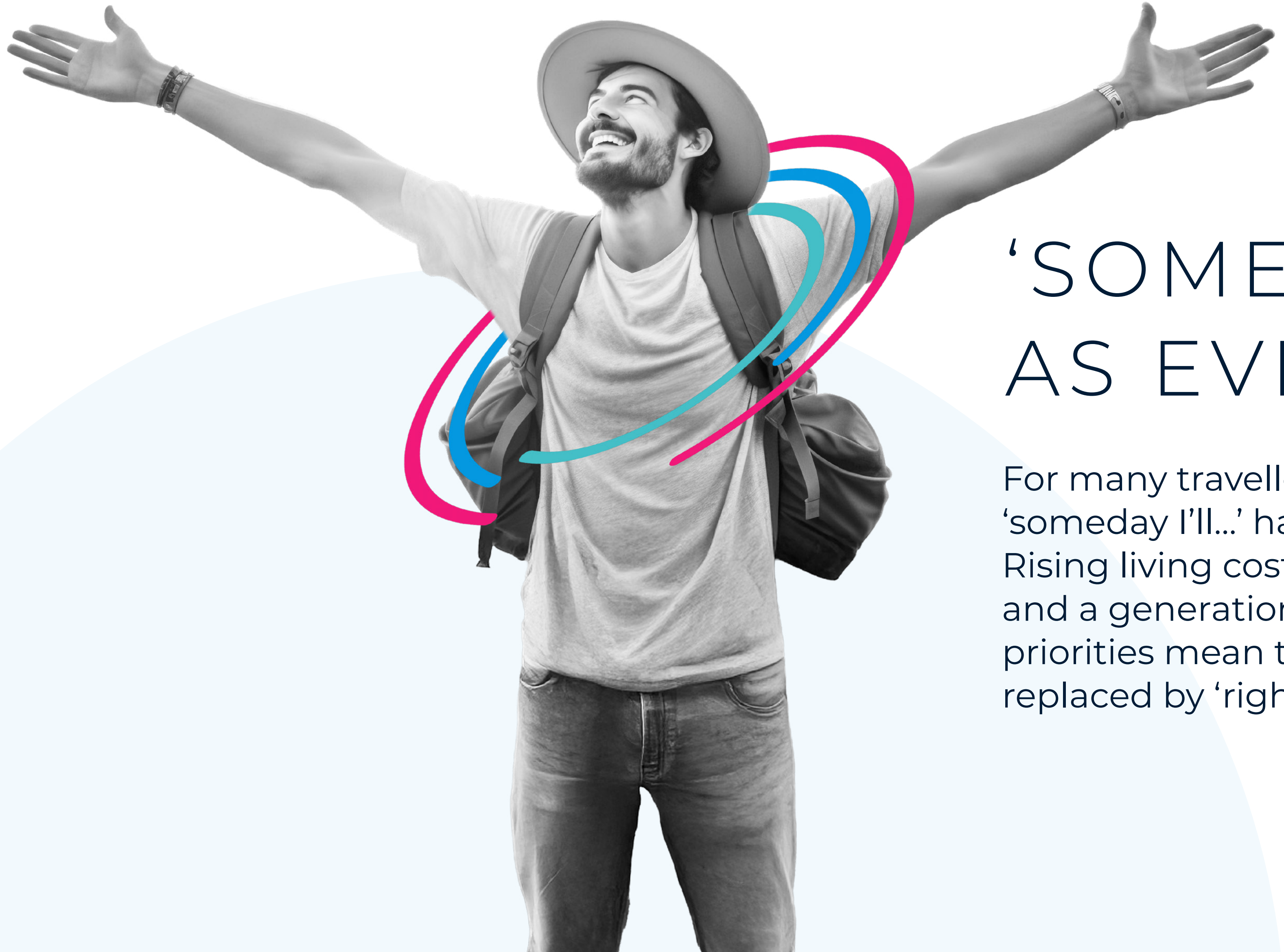
Hotels: Tap into local networks: host weekly chef residencies, partner with neighbourhood artisans for lobby pop-ups, or hand guests pocket-sized 'live here for a day' guides that send them to corner spots locals actually use. Consider staff recommendations over curated concierge lists – authenticity resonates.

Travel distributors: Build itineraries around 'life-as-it's-lived' rather than 'life-as-it's-advertised'. Replace generic city tours with market visits, cooking classes and neighbourhood walks. Position agents as cultural interpreters, not just booking facilitators.

Experience providers: Partner with grandmothers, guides and independent creatives: all strokes of society, each with their own lens on what a destination – their backyard – has to offer. The most compelling experiences come from those who live the culture daily, not those trained to perform it.

Destination Marketing Organisations: Spotlight regional festivals in their efforts, encouraging genuine cultural exchange and insight to destinations not necessarily situated on the oft-beaten path. Market the mundane as extraordinary: promote neighbourhood markets, local transit experiences, and seasonal traditions.

CHAPTER SEVEN



'SOMEDAY' AS EVERYDAY

For many travellers, the phrase 'someday I'll...' has lost its potency. Rising living costs, shifting career paths and a generational recalibration of priorities mean that 'someday' has been replaced by 'right now'.

Across age groups – from young adults delaying home ownership to early retireescashing in their freedom – travel is being treated as a life-defining experience rather than a once-a-year treat.

In practice, this has given rise to trips that combine luxury and exploration, intensity and leisure, in ways that were rare just a decade ago.

Blended Trips and the 'Mixed Travel' Experience: Why Not Have It All?

Consider the modular itinerary. A family might spend three days exploring the historic streets of Florence, three days relaxing at a five-star coastal resort on the Amalfi Coast, then two days back in the city to wander markets, galleries and trattorias. Similarly, solo travellers may seek a week in Tokyo with structured cultural experiences, interspersed with boutique hotel stays offering cooking classes or traditional workshops.

In all cases, the objective is clear: **maximise every moment**, across both city and resort, adventure and relaxation.

The appeal is as much psychological as experiential. Skift research indicates that **86% of travellers consider engaging experiences essential to trip satisfaction**, with figures rising to **90% among Millennials and Gen Z**. Facing record rents and historically low home ownership, the younger cohort is more likely to prioritise experiences over possessions: surveys show that almost **60% actively choose to spend on immersive travel rather than material goods**.

THE ECONOMIC WEIGHT OF THIS TREND IS SIGNIFICANT ACROSS AGE AND INCOME DEMOGRAPHICS: **TWO-THIRDS** OF UK RETIREES HAVE SET ASIDE FUNDS ASIDE FOR 'GOLDEN YEARS' TRAVEL, WHILST GLOBAL LUXURY TOURISM IS EXPECTED TO SURPASS **$2.15 TRILLION BY 2035**.

Life Insurance for Happiness

Travel has become a form of life insurance for happiness: each journey is an opportunity to capture meaning, create memories and share stories that last far beyond the booking confirmation.

In many ways, this trend is the modern 'seize the day', shaped by broader cultural changes: from the YOLO (you only live once) mentality, to a more calculated approach where experiences are viewed as investments in personal fulfilment.

The trend also reflects changing attitudes towards delayed gratification. Previous generations saved for retirement travel; current generations recognise that health, energy and circumstances may change. The philosophy is less about recklessness and more about intentionality – choosing experiences now, with philosophies built around action rather than routine. The traveller who adopts this mindset seeks variety without compromise, and memories without delay.

For the travel industry, the opportunity lies in crafting immersive, multi-layered journeys that acknowledge this shift. It's a clear call to rethink traditional models and embrace the experiential economy in its fullest sense – where travel isn't about escaping life, but about living it more fully.

OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

Hotels: Offer 'taster' packages to guests (whether overnight or day-trippers), where they can sample a new way of travel in the middle of their trip – think high tea for all, or spa day passes (if you have one). Mixed accommodation packages are another opportunity: 3 nights in an entry-rate room, with an upgrade to a luxury suite for the end of the stay.

Travel distributors: Craft itineraries which blend boutique stays, premium resorts and experiential elements such as art workshops or gastronomy tours, positioning travel as a curated narrative rather than a series of bookings. Agents who understand the 'someday as everyday' philosophy can command higher commissions by delivering layered, meaningful experiences.

Experience providers: Integrate hands-on local encounters – from pottery classes to guided culinary treks –, transforming short stays into layered, memorable adventures. The focus should be on high-impact experiences that deliver story-worthy moments within compressed timeframes.

Destination Marketing Organisations: Advertise cross-regional packages or marketing campaigns, combining city culture, wellness escapes and local experiences into cohesive stories. Rather than competing with neighbouring cities.

Airlines and transportation operators: Offer bespoke add-ons, such as curated transfers or guided excursions, to make every segment feel deliberate. Premium services that acknowledge time as the ultimate luxury mesh well with this trend.

Insurance providers: Highlight coverage tailored to high-investment, multi-stage trips, reinforcing confidence in travellers seeking once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Flexible policies that accommodate itinerary changes appeal to modular travellers who may adjust plans mid-journey.

HOTELS AS THE DESTINATION

Some trips are measured by ticking yet another country off the list – a quest to see the most, and to be seen doing so. Others are measured in intention. Increasingly, travellers are choosing the latter. For many holidaymakers, hotels aren't simply a place to sleep – they're the reason to travel.

One Property, a Constellation of Experiences

Take the Datai in Langkawi. Tucked into a rainforest 10 million years in the making, this five-star resort boasts remarkable natural appeal: hornbills wheel overhead, limestone cliffs rise above the canopy, and dusky langur monkeys take leisurely strolls across stretches of sand. Yes, the Datai is a hotel – though its respect for nature, from the presence of on-site ecologists to sustainable architecture that minimises environmental impact, is what sets it apart.

The appeal is immediate. Guests linger beachside for hours, luxuriating by pristine white sands. They book guided forest walks, marvelling at species that call this space home. They join cooking classes, conjuring creations with produce sourced on-site. To admire the resort itself – from its architecture down to its tableware – is to experience design that reinforces a sense of place. The property is a destination in its own right.

PROPERTIES WITH UNIQUE, EXPERIENTIAL OFFERINGS CAN **COMMAND HIGHER RATES** THAN SIMILAR-STARRED COMPETITORS.

In recent years, the argument that travellers choose experience ahead of accommodation has rung clear. To a degree, this remains true: what stands to be gained from a getaway is often found outside the hotel. But for properties that understand how to utilise their unique value proposition, they can capture guests' imagination, keeping them on-site…and spending.

The Economics of Destination Hotels

According to recent hospitality reports, properties with an experiential edge (such as celebrity chef-associated restaurants) can earn almost **20% more revenue per room** than the average of their peers. Revenue extends beyond room rates: on-site dining, spa treatments, curated experiences and retail all benefit when guests remain engaged within the property.

One survey found that **around three-quarters of luxury travellers would not pay for 'generic' accommodations**, demonstrating a preference for hotels that function as both accommodation and activity hubs. The singularity of the guest experience translates into storytelling: an Instagrammed sunrise from the balcony; a snapshot of cuisine that could exist nowhere else but here; the blissful retelling of an enviable spa experience, unfolding alongside jungle sounds that no city can replicate.

The appeal is powerful – and marketable.

Signature Experiences Define Properties

Marketability shouldn't be left to chance. Hotels have the greatest opportunity to tell their own tales, whether through **independent campaigns** or **well-selected partnerships with destination marketing organisations, travel distributors or content creators**. In developing signature experiences, one should ask: what does my property have that others – at least within the vicinity – do not?

Aurea Hotel, Lisbon: Built on the site of a 2nd-century Roman house, with original mosaics and frescoes preserved and on display. History becomes immersive experience.

Bvlgari Hotel, London & Ixian Grande, Rhodes: Famous mixologists and chefs take up residencies, creating limited-time culinary events that attract guests specifically for the experience.

Aman Resorts: Pioneering the concept of properties as sanctuaries – guests often spend entire stays without venturing beyond the grounds, magnetised by architecture, wellness programming and sense of place.

Soneva Fushi, Maldives: Offering an open-air cinema, observatory experiences and coral restoration programmes – activities that transform the resort into a self-contained world.

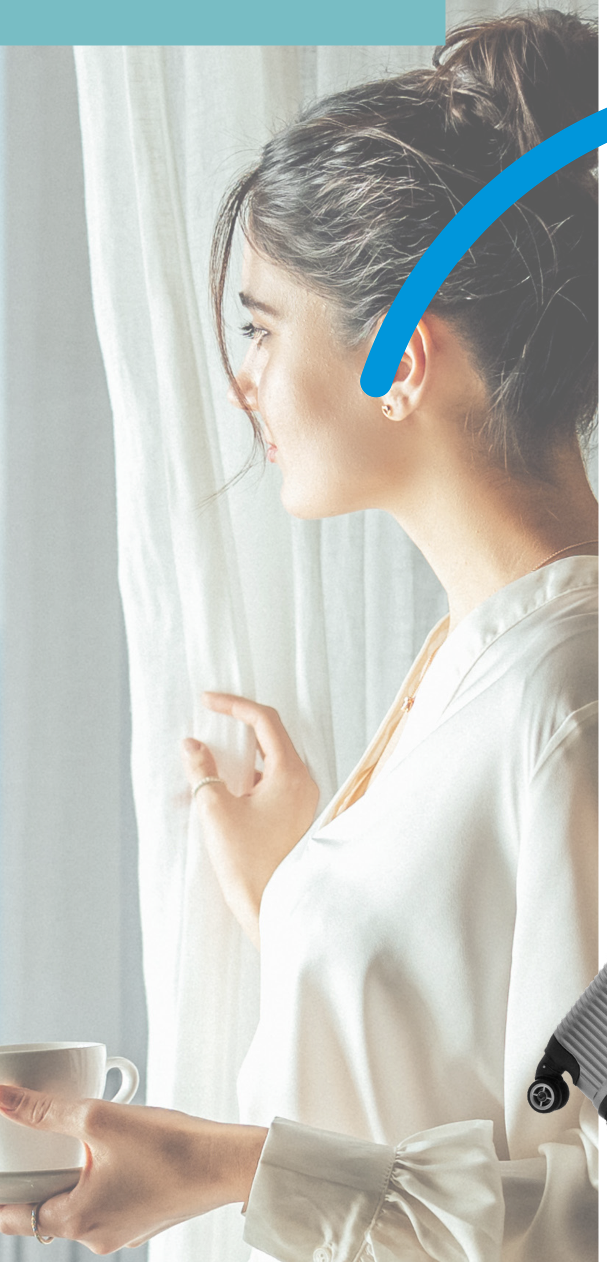
OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

Hotels: Identify and amplify your unique selling points. Whether blending ancient history with modernity, offering exclusive culinary residencies or providing unparalleled natural access, the key lies in developing signature experiences that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Invest in storytelling – through social media, partnerships and guest-generated content.

Travel distributors: Translate the trend into irresistible packages. Multi-night stays that highlight the property itself, rather than the city around it, can be bundled with exclusive experiences or insider access. Agents should sell the narrative of the hotel – the rainforest hike, the starlit poolside dinner, the meditation session at dawn – rather than simply room and board. It's storytelling as salesmanship.

Experience providers: Forge partnerships with properties, externally marketing exemplary on-site activities or adding depth to guests' time in-destination by offering related tours. A resort with forest walks might partner with a wildlife conservation organisation; a beachfront property could collaborate with marine biologists for snorkelling experiences.

Destination Marketing Organisations: Spotlight flagship properties within regional campaigns to attract travellers seeking singular experiences. In many cases, the hotel itself becomes the anchor – so distinctive that it provides reason to visit the destination. Rather than competing with properties, DMOs can position them as crown jewels that elevate the entire region's appeal.



CHAPTER NINE

THE JOURNEY AS THE EXPERIENCE

Some travellers move to the rhythm of the destination. Others move to the rhythm of the journey itself.

Trains snaking through alpine valleys, ferries hopping between sun-drenched islands, road trips along coastlines that refuse to be rushed – these are not merely transfers from A to B. They are the trip.

Take the Glacier Express in Switzerland for instance. Eight hours, 291 bridges, 91 tunnels and a panorama that refuses to be captured in a single photo. Travellers don't endure this journey to arrive; they book it to be immersed. Windows become frames for the world outside, and every mountain, lake and chalet is a moment to linger over.

Or consider the Greek islands, where island-hopping isn't about checking Santorini and Mykonos off a list. It's about the swell of the ferry, the sea-spray smell, the half-hour of anticipation as new beaches appear on the horizon.

TRAVELLERS INCREASINGLY FAVOUR LONGER, LESS FRENETIC ITINERARIES: MULTI-DAY TRAIN TRIPS ACROSS CONTINENTS, MULTI-ISLAND SAILINGS, ROAD TRIPS WITH MULTIPLE OVERNIGHT STOPS.

Pre- and post-trip accommodation becomes critical. Boutique hotels in small towns, inns near scenic rail stations, resorts tucked away on private islands – these are the touchpoints that anchor each stage of a journey, providing both rest and a stage for local discovery.

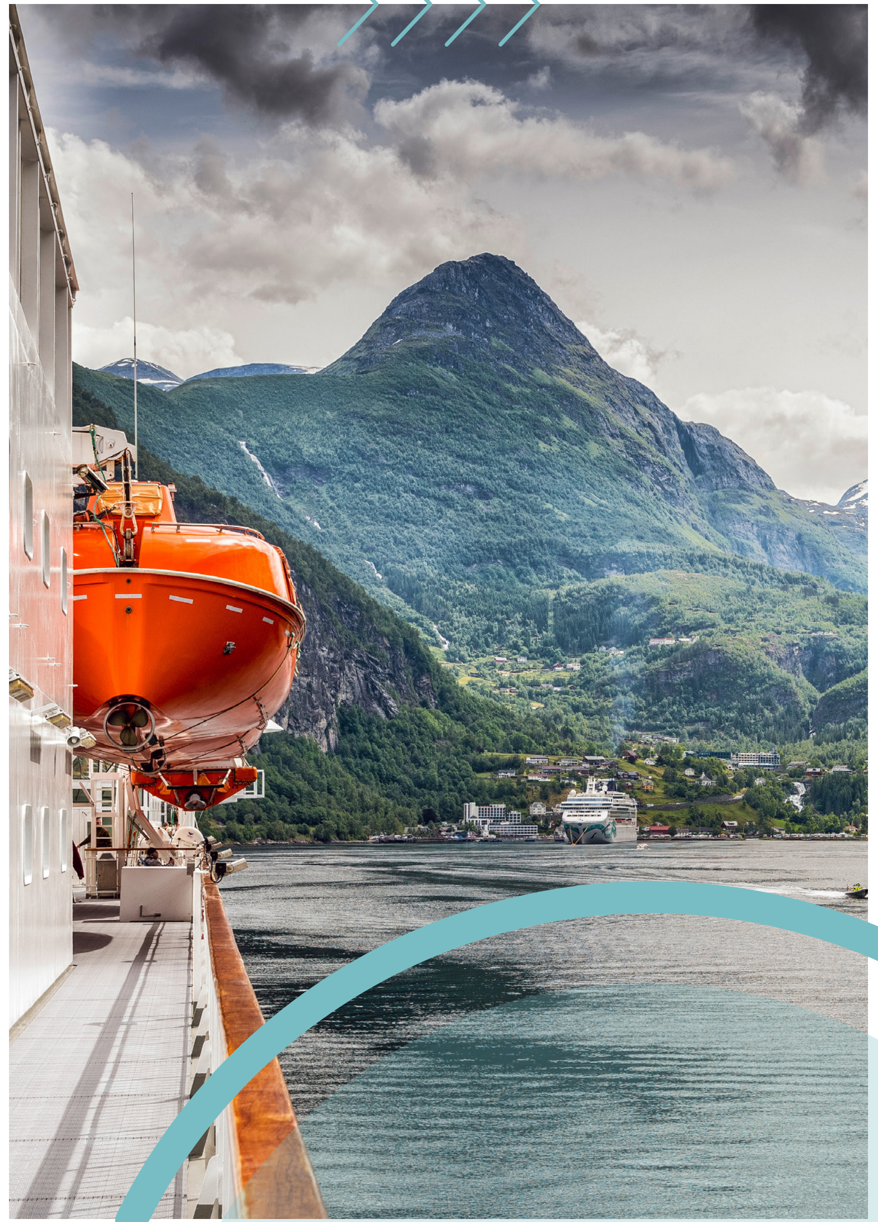
Selling Stories, Not Just Transport

The rise of experiential journeys reflects a broader desire for travel that is felt rather than just ticked off. Travellers want to see the world unfold gradually, to savour each leg of a trip as carefully as the destination itself. By creating memorable touchpoints before, during and after the journey, travel players ensure that the trip is no longer about arriving, but about experiencing every mile along the way. Additionally, for routes that demonstrate unique perspectives, travellers are willing to extend their trip durations and budgets.

Norwegian Coastal Voyage: Multi-day ferry journeys along Norway's coastline, passing fjords, Arctic wildlife and remote villages. Passengers book cabins for the entire voyage.

The Ghan: A weeks-long journey across Australia, from Adelaide to Darwin and Sydney to Perth, experiencing the vast, varied landscapes of the continent.

Greek Island Ferries: Inter-island travel becomes ritualistic – locals and tourists alike embrace the journey as essential island-hopping experience.



OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

Hotels: Become essential cogs in the journeying experience: offer early-morning coffee for train watchers, luggage storage and curated local excursions for ferry travellers, or overnight cooking classes for road-trippers between towns. Even small touches – breakfast baskets delivered for early departures, curated maps highlighting hidden sights en-route – elevate the experience and encourage positive reviews.

Travel distributors: Package journeys as multi-leg experiences, with each stop designed to offer immersion: a night at a vineyard on the way to the mountains; a beachfront bungalow before a ferry hops to the next island. Position agents as journey architects rather than booking facilitators – curating routes that balance movement with meaningful pauses.

Experience providers: Tap into the momentum by scheduling activities that complement travel segments: guided hikes accessible from train stations, cycling tours connecting coastal towns, or short boat trips during ferry layovers. Market these as 'journey enhancements' rather than standalone experiences.

Destination Marketing Organisation: Run marketing campaigns that embrace the journey as a draw – highlighting scenic train lines, coastal drives or inter-island ferry networks can transform perception. Suddenly, a region isn't just a set of endpoints: it's a route, a narrative, a series of moments to live and linger in. Scotland's 'North Coast 500' driving route exemplifies this perfectly, generating £33 million annually by marketing the journey itself.

Airlines and transport providers: Develop onboard programming that acknowledges the journey's value – think regional cuisine, or cultural in-flight entertainment. On land or water, transfer providers (including coaches and ferries) can lean into the trend by selling premium seating for the perfect view, local-inspired meals, or regional guidebooks. For car hire companies, curate scenic route guides, advertise vehicles fit for journey-focused travel (think roof racks for bikes, or coolers for picnics), or suggest overnight stops with partner properties.

Insurance providers: Offer policies tailored for multi-leg itineraries, offering peace of mind for every connection or segment. Flexible coverage for trip interruptions becomes particularly valuable for complex journeys.

CONCLUSION

The travel landscape of 2026 is defined by a fundamental shift in how experiences are valued and consumed. What unites these trends is a common thread: authenticity. Travellers no longer settle for surface-level encounters – they seek immersion, whether through konbini culture in Japan, creative workshops in Lisbon, or multi-day train journeys through the Swiss Alps.

For travel players, the opportunity is substantial. Global luxury tourism is projected to surpass **$2.15 trillion by 2035** whilst art tourism alone is expected to **reach £55 billion by 2030**. eSports, fandom tourism and gaming partnerships represent **entirely new revenue streams** with audiences numbering in the hundreds of millions.

Success demands adaptability. **Hotels must evolve into destination experiences. Travel agents should position themselves as journey architects**, crafting narratives rather than itineraries. **DMOs benefit from embracing the quirky and local**, marketing regions as routes rather than endpoints. Every player – from experience providers to insurance companies – has a role in creating seamless, story-driven travel.

The message is clear: travellers are investing in memories, not just holidays. They're choosing properties for what they offer, not where they're located. They're booking flights for the journey, not the arrival. And they're willing to pay premiums for experiences that feel genuine, immersive and intentional.

The brands that thrive will recognise travel is no longer transactional – it's transformational. **The question isn't whether these trends will shape the industry. It's whether your business is ready to shape them in return.**

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