Travel Daily

2025 YEAR IN REVIEW

FEATURING

THE YEAR THAT WAS: ALL THE HIGHS AND THE LOWS

VIEW FROM THE TOP: 3 EXECS ON THE STATE OF PLAY

SIX FOR 2026: TRENDS YOU NEED TO KNOW

*T&Cs apply. Some food and beverage and activities incur an additional cost. Height, age and weight restrictions apply for some activities. Amenities vary by ship.

Editor's Letter

Sal Salis, Ningaloo Reef.

I've noticed the word 'transformational' being used to describe travel trends a lot lately. It's the kind of 'go big or go home' travel that more consumers are embracing these days and to me, it's a confluence of different things happening at the moment.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, revenge travel has simmered down, but for many, their approach to planning holidays has permanently changed. Why wait until retirement or a major life event to finally embark on that bucket list trip when you could cash in your annual leave today and just book that Antarctica expedition?

As Smartflyer identified, "there is no more 'someday'". Six-figure bookings by Smartflyer travel advisors have increased 26% year-on-year, with safari itineraries increasing by 22%.

At the same time, more consumers are making travel plans to celebrate new events beyond typical milestones, like the mums of post-HSC teens booking their own 'moolies' trips to mark the end of 12 years of schooling.

As the dream of owning a home becomes far less attainable for many in this economic environment, consumers are instead choosing to save up for those major holidays.

Of course, those of us in the travel industry are all aware of the lifechanging nature of an escape, but when I spoke with Accenture's Head of Cultural Intelligence Michelle Newton for this report, we also discussed the opportunity for the industry to help ease the loneliness epidemic the world finds itself in. Turn to page 15 to read more about what Newton thinks.

Loneliness is a challenge for older people in particular, especially when dementia is the leading cause of death in Australia.

I apologise, this piece has suddenly taken a sombre turn, but one of the most significant ways people can protect themselves from dementia is by building social connections, being active and of course, embracing new experiences like travel.

Some of the most heartwarming moments I've observed while cruising are watching older guests have a big ol' belly laugh with their friends by the pool, doing cha-cha lessons in the piazza or being extremely emotionally invested in bingo at the bar.

As a tired, middle-aged working mother, I've always taken great pleasure in watching retirees relax and connect with one another on cruises and I can only hope that when I'm that age, I too will be having the time of my life with a ship full of new and old friends.

At a time when it feels like we're permanently in crisis mode (see page 9), bringing people together and facilitating what could be a real lifechanging, transformational experience is truly a wonderful opportunity for the travel industry.

Cheers to a great year in travel.
See you in 2026. ••

> *"WHY WAIT UNTIL RETIREMENT OR A MAJOR LIFE EVENT* ***TO FINALLY EMBARK ON THAT BUCKET LIST TRIP?"***

Jo-Anne Hui-Miller
Special Report Editor/
Associate Publisher
Travel Daily & Cruise Weekly

2025 YEAR IN REVIEW

2025 has been a record-breaking year for Viking across Australia and New Zealand, and it's all thanks to you, our incredible travel trade community.

This year brought many proud milestones, from the launch of our 100th ship to making history at the National Travel Industry Awards as the first cruise line ever to win both **Most Popular Ocean Cruise Operator** and **Most Popular River Cruise Operator** in the same year.

The future is bright, and your partnership has been essential to this year's success. Merry Christmas to all, and we look forward to achieving even more together in 2026!

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SHIP INSPECTIONS

More than **600 travel advisors** across AUS & NZ stepped onboard to inspect a Viking ocean ship, gaining firsthand insight into the Viking experience.

VIKING

Contents

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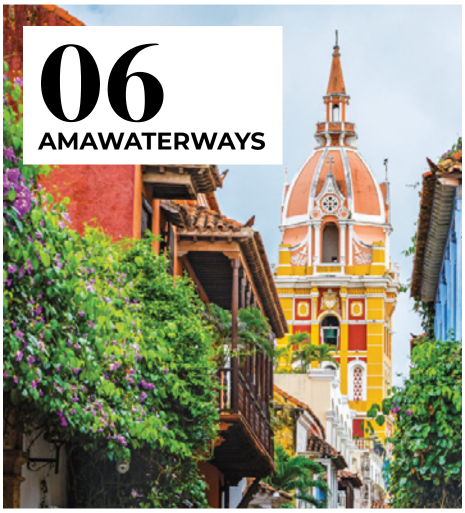

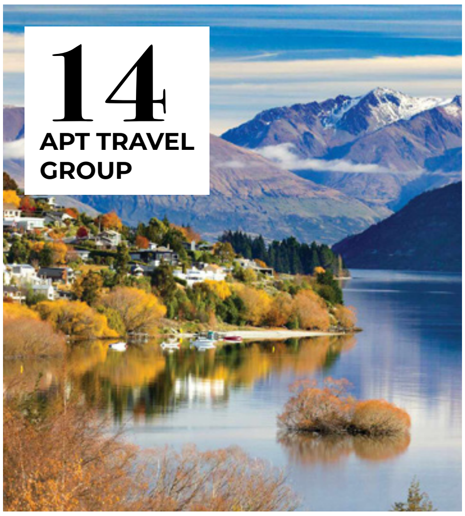

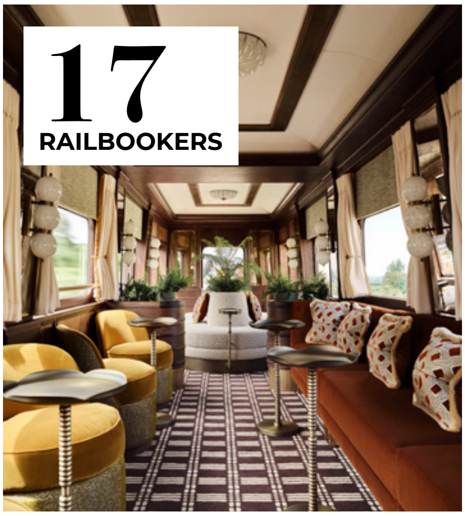

The year *that was*

From an ever-changing turbulent geopolitical landscape to the challenges of the local cruise market, this year experienced some surprising highs and lows.

BY ADAM BISHOP AND MYLES STEDMAN

While speaking to many stakeholders in travel over the last couple of years, the utterances of the sector "returning to normal" following the pandemic have been a common theme.

However, as 2025 wore on and the geopolitical climate continued to lurch chaotically from one crisis to the next, the concept of 'normal' started to feel a touch debased. Some have attempted to explain the ongoing state of flux as a 'new normal', but that too fails to accurately capture the volatility and hyper dynamic changes impacting global economies like travel.

Whether it is the exponential change and disruption caused by AI, the proliferation of hot wars, or the rising temperature and polarisation of public debates, the unvarnished truth is that there is nothing 'normal' about what is happening around the globe.

I really feel for travel businesses attempting to scramble and adapt their models to such a frantic pace of change, but it is a testament to the Australian business community that the throwing down of that gauntlet has done little to deter their ingenuity or optimism.

This year has seen a flurry of change - some good and some bad - and here is a small tasting platter of what the last 12 months looked like for travel in the crucible of those external forces of change.

The US pulls up the welcome mat

Visitation to the US is rockier than the country's famous mountain range. The World Travel and Tourism Council predicted that by the year's end, it would haemorrhage US$12.5 billion in overseas visitor spend. The body blasted the US Government for "putting up the closed sign" while other nations were rolling out the welcome mat.

It's hard to disagree when you examine the list of travel policy changes undertaken by the Trump administration, such as hollowing out Brand USA's budget, hiking up the fees for tourists to enter the country, and a seemingly sporadic approach to border security.

Under the umbrella of keeping Americans safe, Trump has approved programs for travellers to pay large bonds to visit from select countries, a total ban on tourist visas for other nations, and tougher screening and border controls. While most of those factors are yet to impact Aussie visitors, Dec saw a proposal to interrogate the social media history of ESTA visitors for any anti-US commentary.

Then there is Trump's cryptic tariff program, and while it does not currently apply to tourism services, the protectionist economic stance has contributed to a wider perception that the US is closed for business. This has shown in the numbers, with outbound trips from Aussies down on previous years. »

*“BOTH (BGH AND HLO) LODGED ACQUISITION BIDS IN NOVEMBER, **WITH WEBJET’S BOARD STILL MULLING THE PROPOSALS.”***

The fight for Webjet

Since its demerger from the WebBeds business, the Webjet OTA has been the subject of intense acquisition interest this year.

Under the leadership of former Contiki and Trafalgar chief Katrina Barry, the aim has been to refocus the business to capture more of the traveller wallet by pivoting from a domestic flight-led model to one that takes a more packaged approach to travel, mainly involving hotels at this stage.

Despite the changes and a recent rebrand, the company has struggled to get the financial engines moving strongly in the right direction just yet. One can also forgive the executives for being slightly distracted by a flurry of takeover offers from BGH Capital and Helloworld. Both lodged acquisition bids in November, with Webjet’s board still mulling the proposals.

It had been an open secret that Helloworld was keen to make a play for the OTA, with the company snapping up as much equity as it could in 2025 to prime itself for an acquisition move. Meanwhile, BGH Capital - in lockstep with corporate raider Gary Weiss - had also been plotting to steal Helloworld’s thunder and make its own play. Pundits are tipping Helloworld to win this one, but personally, I wouldn’t want to stake my house on it. »

Webjet’s Katrina Barry led the business’ brand transformation this year.

CTM's fall from grace

What initially sounded like a mild accounting error has spiralled to become an existential threat for Corporate Travel Management (CTM). While we were keen to keep tabs on the story, CTM was not keen to comment.

In fact, very few details about the magnitude and nature of the errors were made public until a seismic admission in November that the company had been overcharging European clients - including the UK Government - to the tune of $157 million. And that figure is a minimum number as more accounts are still being audited.

The discrepancies relate to accounts between 2021-23 and has seen its CEO of UK and Europe Michael Healy temporarily stood down as the audit continues. Healy only assumed the position less than a year ago after Debbie Carling retired. The sheer scale of the overcharging has many holding their breath about what a full audit of all accounts will yield. An irate UK Government has launched an inquiry into the matter, while the Australian Government has also demanded a re-auditing of its own accounts.

The details of how these errors were made remains murky, but if the full extent of them turn out to be even larger and across other areas of the business, it could apply major pressure to CTM's viability.

Rex finds a suitor

In what was a relief for regional travel, the embattled Rex finally found a company willing to take ownership. The airline had been subsisting at a skeletal level on the back of emergency government funding since last year until the US-based Air T agreed to acquire it.

Ironically, Rex had no shortage of potential suitors, but the high watermark the Federal Government put in place had scuttled all other bids for being either undesirable or unrealistic. Part of the government's criteria was a business that had the capacity to get Rex's full fleet back in the air and a commitment to retain and expand upon its regional air links.

Air T appears to be perfectly positioned to achieve this, with easy access to the type of parts needed to quickly get Rex's ageing aircraft operational.

Australia's wider travel ecosystem relies on a key player servicing regional areas, especially with a duopoly dynamic at play with Qantas and Virgin Australia.

ACCC reports have shown that since Rex's demise, domestic air tickets in the regions have gone up and large swathes of the country remain underserviced, mitigating the growth prospects of overseas outbound travel from rural source markets. »

"AUSTRALIA'S WIDER TRAVEL ECOSYSTEM IS ***HEAVILY RELIANT ON A KEY PLAYER SERVICING REGIONAL AREAS."***

“CRUISE LINES TOOK ACTION ON THE LONG-SIMMERING TENSIONS **BETWEEN THEMSELVES AND PORTS AROUND THE WORLD.”**

Touring brand Trafalgar is entering the river waters.

River cruise boom

This may be the year river cruising began to rival its ocean counterparts, with two new entrants from around the travel industry. Celebrity announced in January its order of 10 river ships, hitting Europe in 2027.

The fleet will mimic a miniature version of its highly popular Edge-class ocean-going vessels, with highlights including unique cantilevered ‘Magic Edge’ dining pods, similar to its popular ‘Magic Carpet’ concept

They will also feature expansive open decks with infinity pools for 360° views, as well as familiar venues like the Martini Bar and Sunset Bar. Celebrity had perhaps even underestimated the pent-up demand for river, with its initial allotment selling out in just over five minutes.

Later in the year, The Travel Corporation’s Trafalgar touring brand announced it too will enter the river sector, albeit 12 months earlier than Celebrity.

This will be possible through a charter arrangement with its sister brand, Uniworld, which will send down two of its ships: *River Queen* (becoming *Trafalgar Reverie*) and *River Princess* (becoming *Trafalgar Verity*). The two vessels will offer signature Trafalgar experiences on the Rhine and Danube, with future plans for the tour operator to introduce its own ships from 2028, confirming investment in the river sector is at an all-time high.

Cruise gets more private

Cruise lines took action on the long-simmering tensions between themselves and ports around the world, with the announcement of new private destinations to make their debut over the next few years.

For example, Royal Caribbean Group’s new Lelepa Beach Destination announced to make its debut in 2027.

The first private cruise destination in the Southern Hemisphere will offer serene beaches, nature trails, water activities, local cultural experiences, and dining, in what Royal Caribbean said will be a lower footprint destination than its Royal Beach Club Santorini and Royal Beach Club Cozumel, both soon set to debut.

What caught many off guard was Royal Caribbean’s announcement of its upcoming Royal Beach Club Santorini - the first private cruise destination in the sector’s mecca of the Mediterranean. The new destination will offer an exclusive black sand beach, gourmet dining, drinks, loungers, wi-fi, and a ferry ride, combined with tours of towns Oia and Fira, as the company attempts to blend local authenticity with managed tourism.

What many thought to be a development due far further off into the future was suddenly set to make its debut in summer 2026, serving as a warning shot to European destinations - many of which have become harder to work with over the past few years.

Australia’s cruise struggles

The Australian cruise industry knew a hefty bill would be due for the country’s failure to invest over the past few years, and in October, that failure was laid bare, with $1 billion worth of value wiped off the sector.

A report from Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) and the Australian Cruise Association (ACA) found the sector delivered a $7.32 billion economic impact for Australia during the 2024-25 season, which, while among the highest-ever results cruise has delivered, is an alarming 13.2% decline on last year’s record contribution.

While passengers are still spending high across the country, previously flagged warnings by the industry of the leakage to other countries had seemingly finally been realised.

CLIA and the ACA in response called for a national action plan across federal, state, and territory governments to support cruise tourism, improve Australia’s competitiveness, attract more ships, safeguard jobs, and create greater economic opportunities around the country.

ACA Chief Executive Officer Jill Abel warned that if no action was taken, the sector’s recovery could take as much as two years.

“We need to act and be proactive right now and not rest on our laurels and think it’s all going to come back on its own,” she told *Travel Daily*. »

Coolcations and connection

Although the local cruise sector has sagged this year, there has been no shortage of product for travel advisors to book, as cruising trends skewed more niche and more personalised than in years past. Rather than one or two destinations proving hot, colder climes as a whole surged in popularity, with the word "coolcation" even being added to the Collins Dictionary.

Viking Managing Director Michelle Black told *Travel Daily* her cruise line had taken more bookings in Scandinavia, the Arctic, and Antarctica, as travellers seek space, calm, and a deeper connection to nature. Oceania Cruises doubled down on this trend too, dedicating a whole winter collection to the Mediterranean's colder, quieter season in 2027-28, when the crowds have gone home and the locals reemerge.

Also boosting bottom lines in 2025 was multigenerational travel - a style of vacation almost purpose-built for cruising. Black observed this through Viking's booking patterns, with grandparents taking their adult children on the trip of a lifetime, or even sometimes grown children taking their own parents.

These journeys are less about ticking off destinations and more about taking time to reconnect and share something meaningful together, Black added.

Many other cruise lines embraced this trend through reinvesting in their "ship-within-a-ship" concepts, particularly contemporary brands. MSC Cruises announced heavy investment in its Yacht Club experience, committing to its roll-out on older ships such as *MSC Magnifica* and *MSC Poesia*, and ensuring its presence in key markets such as Australia and the Persian Gulf. ••

Cruise lines are responding to consumer demand for cooler climates.


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FEATURE

From shifting the value paradigm to harnessing travel as an antidote to loneliness, Accenture's Head of Cultural Intelligence **Michelle Newton** shares the upcoming trends for the year ahead.

BY JO-ANNE HUI-MILLER

1 Travel as the antidote to loneliness

Last year, the World Economic Forum declared a global loneliness crisis, as more people spend time online than they do offline, offering travel a big opportunity to bridge that gap, suggested Newton.

"There is this other movement, where people are increasingly using AI as a companion, friend and therapist. That's only ever been the domain of humans before," she added, noting consumers' increasing reliance on AI for emotional support.

To counter that, the travel industry has the ability to focus on delivering genuine, real-life experiences for people, Newton said.

Earlier this year, Topdeck underwent a relaunch, which was formed off the back of research that the brand conducted, revealing that plenty of Gen Z travellers are suffering from loneliness, especially as many spent their formative years isolated during COVID. This led to the brand's return to small group touring to give young travellers the opportunity to develop deeper and more intimate connections with others while on holiday.

Another example of brands tapping into consumers' need for connection was EasyJet's 'grans go for free' deal on trips to Europe, after research found half of families had never holidayed abroad with their grandparents.

2 A shift towards ethical tourism

Travellers' growing awareness of climate change and overtourism continue to drive a shift towards ethical tourism, said Newton, pointing to the closure of the L ouvre this year when staff walked out during overcrowding.

And of course, this year was Amazon boss Jeff Bezos' controversial wedding in Venice, which was forced to move elsewhere following protests from locals such as the 'No space for Bezos' group.

"People are getting really up in arms about the protection of the planet and the societies and communities that we leave behind after we've travelled. There's more of a consciousness or an ethical trajectory [for travellers]," Newton observed.

"I see that happening more and more over the next three to five years."

In an effort to avoid the crowds, more travellers are opting to holiday during cooler temperatures and during shoulder seasons - and brands are responding. In November, Oceania released its first-ever full winter season in the Mediterranean.

"We saw a unique opportunity to reimagine how travellers experience this iconic region - free from summer crowds, extreme heat, and peak-season pricing," Sales Director James Sitters said, describing it as tapping into the growing 'quiet Mediterranean' trend.

3 Growth in domestic travel

Geopolitical tensions continue to rock consumer sentiment, driving more Australian travellers closer to home like the country.

According to research from Austrade, visitor spend in Australia last year reached $211 billion over a period of 12 months, $80 billion of which was spent in regional areas. That came off the back of the federal and state governments implementing the THRIVE 2030 recovery program, which aims to boost that number to $100 million in five years' time. »

"WHAT'S THE NEW VALUE PARADIGM AROUND TRAVEL THAT ISN'T JUST ABOUT COST?"

4 A nation of burnt out consumers

"Seventy-three per cent of consumers expect a health and wellbeing proposition to be built into any sector or industry experience, particularly travel. Everyone's playing in the health and wellbeing game now - it's huge business," explained Newton.

Unsurprisingly, many around the globe are burnt out and exhausted. A report from Traveloka found that 34% of Australians surveyed said that rest and recharge is their main reason to travel.

Southeast Asia was identified as a top wellness region, with Bali, Bangkok and Hanoi as the most researched wellness destinations for Australian travellers, while onsens, reflexology and medical aesthetic treatments are gaining traction.

The research also identified lesser-known markets like Yogyakarta in Indonesia and Da Nang in Vietnam on the rise for immersive cultural and sleep-focused getaways.

However, consumers are also overwhelmed with information around wellness right now, Newton warned.

"It's a funny paradox that we are so obsessed with wellbeing, it's ironically making us sick [and] we have wellbeing fatigue," she noted.

5 What cost-of-living crisis?

Australians may be struggling with a cost-of-living crisis, but reports show that consumers are not willing to easily give up on going away to take a break.

A Skyscanner survey found that three in five (57%) are cutting back on non-essential shopping, with two in five (40%) even going as far as to ditch their daily coffee runs in order to put more money aside for their next holiday.

Additionally, more than one-third (32%) are timing big purchases, including home upgrades and new cars, around their travel goals.

The research also found that Aussies are planning ahead when it comes to booking travel, with 53% booking flights early and 52% pre-paying major expenses to manage costs.

"Above all else, we will scrimp and save so that we can travel. 71% of consumers under 30 would rather travel than buy a house in the next 12 months," said Newton.

"This need to escape is kicking in as a response to the permacrisis that we find ourselves in."

Meanwhile, travellers are seeking to maximise value in their trips and are using points to hack the system as much as they can.

Rather than fight against this, Newton challenges businesses to think differently about how they can offer value to this generation of travellers.

"What's the new value paradigm around travel that isn't just about cost? Where are you layering in added value? Maybe it's loyalty programs that actually deliver a better kind of value travel experience," she pondered.

6 Tensions in AI

Skyscanner released a report this year that found 54% of travellers are confident using AI to help them plan and book travel in 2026, up from 47% the year before.

"We're at this point now where we're accepting co-intelligence and we're seeing AI built in all the travel apps that we have," observed Newton.

"I think most of us would love one big super app for travel. We are jumping all over the place with all these different platforms...it's kind of the industry nirvana [for a super app] to help simplify [that] for consumers."

Newton pointed to FareBear, an app that describes itself as "a 24/7 airfare watchdog, ready to track and alert you when prices take a nosedive".

"It's like having a superhero travel agent!" exclaims the website.

Of course, the flipside to that is there is pushback from consumers who do value human connection and expertise - and this is where travel agents can wield their ability to cultivate relationships with customers.

"In an age where you can book a holiday package at Aldi or get a detailed itinerary in seconds from AI, if you aren't evolving with the needs of consumers - listening, creating a human connection and building a relationship, and personalising your recommendations for the client - you've already been left behind," Travel Agent Finder owner Anna Shannon said bluntly.

Technology can help create efficiencies and reduce complexity, where customers will lean in, said Newton, although real-life experiences are still important.

"I think those two things can be true at once, which is always the case with trends full of tension." ••

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WELCOME *to the future*

On the cusp of a new calendar year, several travel leaders share their hopes and observations for the travel industry in 2026.

INTERVIEWS BY JO-ANNE HUI-MILLER

BRETT JARDINE
MANAGING DIRECTOR
COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN TOUR OPERATORS

CATO executive Brett Jardine discusses how the touring industry can shift from recovery to strategic advancement in 2026 and the opportunities that lie ahead for operators.

Travel Daily: What has the past year been like for the touring sector?

Brett Jardine: 2025 has been a defining year for the touring sector. Demand has matured beyond the initial post-pandemic rebound and is now characterised by purposeful, experience-driven travel. Travellers are seeking more depth and connection, whether that is through small-group cultural programs, active adventures, or touring styles that offer a strong sense of place.

CATO members have reported strong, stable growth in premium and small-group segments, with a noticeable shift towards longer itineraries and multi-destination journeys. Travellers are planning further ahead, booking earlier, and showing heightened interest in guided expertise, which is where touring excels. The professionalism and product innovation from tour operators this year has elevated the entire category.

TD: What are your thoughts on what the industry will be like in 2026?

BJ: I'm optimistic about 2026. We are entering a period where the industry can shift from recovery to strategic advancement. Operators are investing more heavily in digital capability, dynamic content, and customer-facing tools that will personalise and simplify the touring experience.

We will also see stronger collaboration across the sector, with operators, agents, DMCs, and suppliers working together to lift standards, improve sustainability outcomes, and deliver more distinctive experiences. 2026 will be a year where touring continues to assert itself as a high-value and culturally enriching segment of the broader travel ecosystem.

TD: What are some of the challenges for touring?

BJ: The biggest ongoing challenge is operational complexity. Tour operators manage a chain of interconnected suppliers, and global instability, from weather events to geopolitical tensions, which can disrupt itineraries and add cost pressure. Ensuring supply chain resilience requires constant agility.

Staffing and skill shortages remain a concern, particularly for specialist tour leaders and guides. Traveller expectations are also rising: people want more flexibility, more transparency, and more personalised service. Meeting those expectations while maintaining responsible margins continues to be a delicate balance.

Finally, sustainability requirements are growing, and while that is positive, operators need support to adapt at scale. »

FEATURE

"SUSTAINABILITY REQUIREMENTS ARE GROWING, AND WHILE THAT IS POSITIVE, OPERATORS NEED SUPPORT TO ADAPT AT SCALE."

TD: What are some of the untapped opportunities for the touring industry?

BJ: There is significant opportunity in education and understanding, particularly in helping both consumers and agents fully appreciate the value of a professionally curated tour. Clearer storytelling around safety, enrichment, local impact, and the expertise behind the scenes would unlock more growth.

Niches such as micro-groups, women-only programs, culinary immersion, wellness touring, and low-impact nature travel remain underdeveloped relative to demand.

There is also strong potential for diversification into regional dispersal experiences, in partnership with state and regional tourism bodies, and for leveraging technology to create new pre-tour engagement models such as digital briefings, personalised content streams, and community-building tools for guests.

TD: What touring trends are you interested in for 2026?

BJ: Here is what I've got my eye on:

- High-engagement itineraries that focus on hands-on learning and direct community interaction
- Regenerative and responsible travel with operators embedding measurable environmental and social outcomes
- Hybrid touring that blends structured components with free days and optional modules
- Tech-enhanced touring with better mobile tools, on-tour communication, and enriched digital content; and
- Longer international journeys, especially across Europe, Japan, South America, and multi-country safari or archaeological routes.

TD: What should be on agents' radars for touring in 2026?

BJ: Agents should keep a close eye on inventory scarcity in popular destinations, encouraging clients to book earlier.

There is also a growing divide between operators delivering genuine expertise and those offering commoditised products.

Meanwhile, there are new touring demographics, including younger travellers moving into small-group and adventure styles, and multi-generational families seeking curated itineraries.

Lastly, client education tools are available to help agents articulate value and manage expectations - keep an eye on the CATO Touring Academy as the industry focuses on elevated knowledge and professionalism. »

Emerging niche options are on the rise, such as women-only tours and culinary immersion experiences, while multigen travel is still popular.

In order to remain competitive, Australia must face its regulatory hurdles, says Katz.

JOEL KATZ
MANAGING DIRECTOR
CRUISE LINES INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION AUSTRALASIA

Next year promises even bigger cruise passenger numbers than before, although there are still challenges facing the industry that need to be faced head-on, says CLIA's Joel Katz.

Travel Daily: How would you describe the cruising landscape of 2025?

Joel Katz: The past year has been a phenomenal time for cruising and we now see even greater levels of variety and choice in the cruise options available to Australian travellers.

At least a dozen new international cruise ships have been launched during 2025, representing billions of dollars' worth of creativity in an industry that is already a clear leader in innovation.

Cruise passenger numbers worldwide have been forecast to reach new records in 2025, building on the previous records set in 2023 and 2024.

In Australia, we continue to see enormous enthusiasm for cruising in what has always been one of the world's most passionate cruise markets. Well over a million Australians take a cruise holiday each year, and we're seeing this develop further with new generations heading to sea and more first-time cruisers than ever.

All indicators suggest cruising will remain incredibly popular among Australians, and so we're working to ensure the opportunities continue in this region.

We do face significant regulatory difficulties and cost issues in this part of the world, which reduces Australia's competitiveness.

CLIA is bringing this to the attention of governments and calling for a National Cruise Plan to help attract more ships to our region and increase the value of cruise tourism to Australian communities.

TD: What are you looking forward to for the sector in 2026?

JK: The new year is going to bring a huge amount of opportunity in cruising, for travellers and travel agents alike. Global cruise passenger numbers are forecast to hit a new high of 39.6 million in 2026, which means agents will have more opportunities to increase their cruise business and more opportunities to introduce new clients to cruising.

We will see another 14 spectacular new ships join the world fleet during 2026, which helps create more excitement and anticipation around cruising. Each of these new ships brings new innovations, new features, and new experiences, all of which make this an exciting time for cruising. »

Expedition cruising from lines like National Geographic are showing growth in the sector.

In all, there are around 80 new ships on the world's orderbook with launch dates through to 2036, which means we will continue to elevate and innovate well into the future. These ships represent an investment of more than $100 billion, which is a big show of confidence in cruising.

I'm looking forward to seeing more first-time cruisers heading to sea - continuing a trend we've seen for several years - and to increasing the numbers of younger travellers taking cruises. The diversity of cruise lines and ships today means there's a cruise to suit virtually any taste, and we can see that in the increasing numbers of travellers who are looking beyond stereotypes to recognise just how rewarding a cruise holiday can be.

At the political level, I would like 2026 to bring even greater recognition of the economic importance of cruising in Australia. Our industry is worth more than $7 billion a year to the Australian economy and supports tens of thousands of jobs, and so CLIA's key focus in this region is on supporting and growing this economic contribution. Through our advocacy efforts and political engagement, we want to achieve a better regulatory environment for cruising, so we can attract more ships to Australia and boost the positive impact of cruise tourism.

TD: What are some of the untapped opportunities for the cruising industry?

JK: Cruising really is leading the travel sector in its strength and growth, and we expect to see record figures well into the future.

A huge driver of this growth will be the new-to-cruise guest. Aussies love to cruise and we have always had one of the highest market penetration rates in the world, but that still leaves many millions of Australians who have yet to take their first cruise.

The number of first timers is increasing globally, as 31% of cruisers over the past two years have been new-to-cruise guests, up from 24% in 2019. That means it's a great time to suggest a cruise to travellers who haven't sailed before, and there are plenty of new developments in cruising to help entice them.

At the same time, we are seeing increasing numbers of young people heading to sea. The average age of an Australian cruise passenger is now just 48.4, down from 50.4 in 2019, and almost a third of cruisers are aged under 40.

The old stereotype that cruising is for older travellers is well and truly out of date - Gen X and Millennials are now the most enthusiastic cruisers, and we're seeing increasing development in the Gen Z market.

So much has evolved in cruising over recent years as cruise lines develop a greater focus on experiences, dining, interior design, technology and other elements that appeal to younger travellers, making new generations a huge opportunity.

TD: What cruising trends are you interested in for 2026?

JK: The year ahead will certainly bring more development in some of the specialist areas of cruising that have been thriving over recent years.

Luxury cruising has been growing rapidly and the number of ships in the world's luxury fleet has more than tripled since the start of last decade.

Cruise specialist travel agents often tell us luxury lines are in demand and the higher cabin grades sell out first, which is an indicator of the potential in this segment.

Expedition cruising has been showing similar development, and I think the extraordinary experiences it offers in remote destinations worldwide will continue to attract high demand. River cruising is another area to watch - we're seeing considerable investment in new ships, new brands and new destinations, all in response to a very enthusiastic market for this style of travel.

Fly-cruise itineraries are likely to show higher growth this year, as more Australians look to explore new destinations further afield. This continues a trend we've seen for several years, and it means greater potential and booking value for travel agents.

TD: What should travel agents look out for in 2026?

JK: The year ahead will bring new ships, new experiences and new cruise opportunities all over the world, so education and training will be very important. The key to success is in matching the right client to the right style of cruise, and so CLIA always encourages agents to soak up as many education opportunities as possible. Staying on top of the latest product developments and keeping a good understanding of the product differential between cruise lines is essential.

Opportunities like CLIA LIVE events and the annual Cruise360 Australasia conference are a great way to develop knowledge and they always sell-out. There are also many other education options available through the year, including cruise line webinars and training programs. »

FEATURE

> "THE WORD 'LUXURY' IS MISSTATED AND OVERUSED."

DAVID COX
CEO
APT TRAVEL GROUP

As APT Travel Group comes off its biggest year since COVID, CEO David Cox discusses innovation and unique onboard experiences for the year ahead.

Travel Daily: What was the year like for the luxury cruise sector?

David Cox: It's been the biggest year since COVID for the luxury cruise industry with consumers continuing to enter the category and demand surges, particularly river and small ship cruising. At the APT Travel Group, we have seen record numbers and our utilisation is the highest it has been.

Whilst the classical European rivers are always popular, other destinations have also risen in demand as consumers look to different parts of the world to experience high-end cruising.

Vietnam and Egypt have seen river cruising demand grow, whilst small ship cruising, particularly the Mediterranean, has also been a hot travel destination and style.

TD: What are some of the roadblocks for luxury cruise operators?

DC: With customers' increased access to information and reviews, their expectations and savviness is growing, which is a good challenge. Brands that can meet, and exceed, their needs are well placed for growth. We are seeing customers prioritising 'expertise' in the five-star segment and 'value' at the four-star level.

Innovation also plays a critical role with the ever-changing customer needs. APT Travel Group invests heavily in market research and insights and actively works with consumers to look at how we evolve the products we offer and the markets we serve.

The other challenge is what I've referred to many times this year as 'luxe-washing'. The word 'luxury' is misstated and overused and pleasingly, consumers are starting to realise this. Consumers are gravitating to the brands that credibly can deliver five-star luxury experiences, every time.

TD: What have been highlights of the year for the business?

DC: The APT Travel Group has just come off our best two months ever. This year we launched our new European river ships that we have transformed and set a new standard for river cruising, and customers are certainly voting with their feet. The experience onboard is so unique, culminating with the Gruner Bar experience, and guests' feedback has been amazing. These ships were fully sold out for 2025 and will repeat this for 2026. We are already selling heavily for 2027.

It's not just these new ships that are stimulating growth - we have seen strong results everywhere. The Kimberley is setting new records, Canada will have its best year next year, Vietnam is strong as always and our new Egypt offering with Travelmarvel has surprised us with its popularity.

Of course, our strong and ongoing partnerships with trade (with our large on-road sales team) is a key driver to our ongoing performance and success.

TD: What do you see on the horizon for luxury cruising and APT in 2026?

DC: We are well sold for 2026 and ahead of forecast, so we feel the market is responding to our product portfolio. Consumers will continue the trend of looking for new destinations and experiences and our new products and unique value propositions are resonating with both trade partners and customers.

Our successful partnership with Seabourn is going from strength to strength, our Kimberely lodges offer such a unique and loved experience and our Mediterranean products have taken off.

We are happy with where we are placed and believe it will be our biggest ever year. ••

Off the back of its unique offerings, next year is set to be APT Travel Group's biggest ever, says Cox.

2025 IN REVIEW

A LOOK BACK AT THE BIGGEST STORIES OF THE YEAR

COMPILED BY DAMIAN FRANCIS, JO-ANNE HUI-MILLER, MATT LENNON AND MYLES STEDMAN

JANUARY NEWS

NEWS

CELEBRITY JUMPS INTO RIVERS

Celebrity Cruises kicked off 2025 with news it will expand into river cruising, announcing plans for a fleet of 10 new ships, with sailings to begin in Europe in 2027.

The cruise line eventually revealed details of its ships, described as elevated versions of its Edge-class vessels - the newly named *Celebrity Compass* and *Celebrity Seeker* - with gamechanging open decks, infinity-edge plunge pools and the first-ever cantilevered dining pods on a river cruise ship.

By Sep, the line was "overwhelmed" with unprecedented interest and sold out its priority allocation in just six minutes, while the remaining inventory on its 2027 sailings sold out in under five hours.

Itineraries for 2028 are set to be unveiled next year. ••

Big deals to start the year

Journey Beyond and Ponant looked to start the year off with a bang, announcing big deals before the year began rolling.

Journey Beyond announced that Monarto Safari Park in South Australia would join its portfolio under a newly signed management agreement.

The site received a $60 million investment, with the 78-room Monarto Safari Resort offering a premium hotel, animal encounters, and eventually a 20-tent luxury safari lodge.

At a similar time, Ponant Explorations Group confirmed the acquisition of small-ship expedition and river cruise company Aqua Expeditions.

The deal was backed by Ponant's parent firm, the Pinault family's investment company Artemis Group, which is also the owner of fashion brands such as Gucci and Balenciaga as well as auction house Christie's. ••

VIRTUOSO RIDES THE WAVES

It was an up-and-down month for Virtuoso. The collective launched a new ultra-high net worth division, led by GM and former agency owner Shelby Donley.

Virtuoso said the move underscored its commitment to further integrate the savviest and most discerning consumers, as well as those sellers who cater to their needs.

Virtuoso added that it intended to leverage its reputation in global luxury travel and the expertise of Donley to foster more collaborations with world-renowned luxury brands across jewellery, watches, fashion, art, and more.

Meanwhile, *Travel Daily* broke the news that more than 80% of Travel Associates members had left the Virtuoso network, with the intent to join Flight Centre Travel Group's Luxury Travel Collection.

Almost 50 members of the division left the luxury travel network at the beginning of the year, sources with knowledge of the situation confirmed. ••

Government takes on Rex debt

January well and truly kicked 2025 off with a bang, when the Australian Government was forced to come to the aid of the troubled Rex Airlines.

The Government committed its support to the continued operation of the carrier, announcing it would acquire $50 million of debt from the carrier's largest creditor, PAGAC Regulus Holdings.

The acquisition meant the Government became Rex's principal secured creditor, and continued to work closely with the airline's administrators, Ernst & Young, through the extended convening period, after the initial sale process did not find a suitable buyer.

At that stage, the Government also sought to become a voting member on Rex's Committee of Inspection. ••

TYRELL LEAVES GFOB

Just two days into January, *Travel Daily* had its first breaker.

Globus family of brands (GFOB) confirmed the resignation of its Managing Director Asia Pacific, Gai Tyrrell, with the move effective immediately.

GFOB President and CEO Scott Nisbet thanked Tyrrell for her "energy and contributions leading GFOB through a particularly challenging era in Asia Pacific".

"During her tenure, our profile in Asia Pacific elevated markedly, she strengthened our Australasian headquarters in Sydney and Auckland, led key commercial projects designed to better meet the needs of our partners and customers, and shepherded our operations through the tumultuous COVID pandemic," he said.

"We wish her the best of success with future endeavours." ••

FEBRUARY NEWS

VIRGIN GOES INTO BATTLE

As if January wasn't already busy enough, February included some hectic news, with some of the bigger items revolving around a refreshed Virgin Australia.

One of the biggest talking points was the mooted tie-up between the airline and Gulf-based friend Qatar Airways.

February provided the green light when Treasurer Jim Chalmers confirmed the news.

"On the advice of the Foreign Investment Review Board, I have approved this proposal, subject to legally enforceable conditions that ensure Australian representation on VA's board and protection of its customer data," Chalmers said.

The announcement followed the ACCC giving preliminary approval earlier in the month for more flights to Doha from June.

It didn't end there for VA, with the airline inadvertently getting tangled up in serious foreign politics when it alerted authorities to Chinese warships in the Tasman Sea playing wargames.

According to Nine News, Virgin pilots first spotted Chinese Navy live fire exercises off the Australian coast, alerting Air Services Australia and causing passenger jets to divert.

It also signed a codeshare with Air India. February. No biggie for VA. ••

QANTAS TAKES OFF

Not to be outdone by its sole true competitor, Qantas announced major profits in February.

The national carrier posted an 11.2% underlying profit jump.

Profit for the six months ending 31 December 2024 climbed $140 million compared to the prior corresponding period.

It meant Qantas had recorded a $1.38 billion Underlying Profit Before Tax and a $140 million increase on last year - but it was still slightly down on two years earlier.

After tax, the result saw the carrier bank $923 million, which it said was impacted by a $65 million increase in legal provisions relating to its failed Federal Court case involving 1,700 illegally sacked ground handling staff from Oct 2024.

Flying operations performed well, with group domestic posting an underlying EBIT of $647 million, led chiefly by a strong return of corporate and SME business, albeit offset by fleet renewal activity.

Group international (inclusive of freight) recorded an underlying EBIT of $327 million. ••

LEADERSHIP MUSICAL CHAIRS

The cruise industry saw a wave of leadership changes across major brands in February, beginning with Carnival Corporation veteran Jan Swartz, known for her senior roles at Princess Cruises and Holland America Group, announcing her departure after 25 years.

Meanwhile, AmaWaterways appointed Catherine Powell as its first President, marking a new chapter for the brand. Also, Frank Del Rio Jr stepped down as President of Oceania Cruises, to be ultimately replaced by the returning Jason Montegue.

These shifts highlighted a period of transition in the cruise sector as companies refined strategy and leadership for future growth. ••

Helloworld not so happy with the world

February was a tough month for Helloworld, which posted losses on a number of key fiscal metrics.

HLO's financial results for the first half of the fiscal year, ended 31 December 2024, were down across the board.

CEO Andrew Burnes said the results reflected a "challenging fiscal environment in Australia", which saw HLO's underlying EBITDA plummet by more than 20% to $27.2 million, as well as a 7.6% drop in revenue to $103.8 million, and a 6.9% decline in TTV to $2.1 billion.

Burnes said cost-of-living increases were severely impacting demand for leisure travel, with reductions in airfares also pushing flight TTV downwards across the period. ••

INTREPID GOES BIG... REALLY BIG

Intrepid Travel put pen to paper on its purchase of Dutch experiential travel company Sawadee Reizen from British company Travelopia, adding 20,000 customers a year.

The acquisition by the Australian tour operator meant the Netherlands became its fourth-largest market, and signalled Intrepid's intention to further grow its style of touring in Europe.

"This is a landmark deal for Intrepid, adding 20,000 customers per year and $100 million in revenue," CEO James Thornton said. ••

MARCHNEWS

NEWS

VIRGIN AUSTRALIA WELCOMES NEW CEO

Former Chief Commercial Officer Dave Emerson was appointed CEO of Virgin Australia this month, stepping in the shoes of Jayne Hrdlicka.

"I'm humbled by the opportunity to lead the airline and its 8,000-strong team on its next exciting chapter, and I have experienced first-hand the remarkable journey over the past four years as we have reinvented VA," Emerson said. ••

EXPEDIA'S STUART UDY RETIRES

Expedia Travel Agent Affiliate Program (TAAP) Director of ANZ Stuart Udy announced his retirement this month.

Udy, who was instrumental in the launch of the Expedia TAAP program in 2010, reflected on his time leading the brand with a sense of "deep pride and gratitude".

"It has been such an honour and wonderful journey leading the development of Expedia TAAP in our region," he said. ••

CLIAS CELEBRATE THE BEST OF THE BEST

Not even Tropical Cyclone Alfred could dampen the spirits of the cruise industry, which celebrated its 22nd CLIA Awards at The Star in Sydney.

There were many highlights on the night, but perhaps none more memorable than Stuart Allison being inducted into the industry's Hall of Fame.

CLIA Australasia Chair Peter Little described the cruise exec as a "visionary leader with an analytical mind and unwavering passion for the sector".

Allison recently moved to the UK where he now serves as P&O Cruises Chief Commercial Officer, and previously led Princess Cruises locally as Senior VP, Asia Pacific, UK & Europe. ••

Globus family of brands appoints new MD

Former Ponant local chief Chris Hall began a new role as Globus family of brands' Managing Director for Asia Pacific, starting on 31 Mar.

Hall has 30 years of experience in the travel industry, and was previously CEO at APT and Group Managing Director at Australian Pacific Holdings.

"With an established portfolio of brands and product, I'm looking forward to reconnecting with trade partners and working side by side with them to grow the business and achieve mutual success," Hall said.

Hall took over from Gai Tyrell, who exited the business in January. ••

Farewell P&O Australia

After 92 years, P&O Cruises Australia was formally folded into Carnival Cruise Line, now operating four ships locally. *Pacific Encounter* and *Pacific Adventure* became *Carnival Encounter* and *Carnival Adventure*, homeported in Brisbane and Sydney.

Carnival marked the transition with a harbour celebration and ribbon-cutting led by Carnival President Christine Duffy.

Popular P&O features like Byron Beach Club and Luke's Bar remain, alongside Carnival favourites such as Dr Seuss at Sea and Build-A-Bear events.

The brand expects to carry 500,000 Australians annually post-integration, contributing $2 billion to the economy, with ships sailing year-round from the NSW and Queensland capitals. ••

APRIL NEWS

BRATTON LAUNCHES A PEARLER

Paspaley Pearl launched Pearl Expeditions, a new Australian-owned luxury expedition cruise brand led by expedition doyenne Sarina Bratton, with its 30-passenger vessel *Paspaley Pearl* featuring 21 crew and four expedition guides.

Despite a slight regulatory delay which forced the cancellation of its maiden voyage, *Pearl* entered service in early August in the Kimberley, sailing from Broome to Wyndham.

The ship will venture to Papua New Guinea, East Indonesia, Raja Ampat to conclude its first year. Guests will visit landmarks such as King George Falls and Montgomery Reef, plus Paspaley's own pearl farms. The project reunites Paspaley with Bratton, co-founder of Orion Expeditions, with the two boasting an extensive history of partnership.

Mick Fogg joined as General Manager and Head of Sustainability and in June, Bratton announced its first land partnership with tour operator Crooked Compass. ••

Virgin reveals *five-year-glitch*

Virgin Australia in April revealed more than 60,000 of its passengers had been overcharged, over a five-year period, thanks to a system glitch affecting customers who had changed their itinerary.

The airline identified the bug internally, with customers affected between April 2020 and March 2025, a spokesperson told *Travel Daily*.

"Some bookings were repriced in a way that does not align with our policy, and we are refunding all impacted guests for that amount," said the spokesperson.

The glitch affected approximately 0.1% of all bookings made during this period, with an average refund per guest of $55. Any amounts guests elected not to claim were donated to charity. ••

Viking eyes first hydrogen-powered ship

Viking and Fincantieri unveiled plans to launch the world's first hydrogen-powered cruise ship, *Viking Libra*, in 2026, followed by *Viking Astrea* in 2027. Each will carry 998 guests and feature hybrid propulsion using liquefied hydrogen and fuel cells, enabling zero-emission sailing and access to protected areas like Norway's fjords.

Viking CEO Torstein Hagen said hydrogen is a "true zero-emission solution", reinforcing the line's sustainability commitment. Fincantieri CEO Pierroberto Folgiero hailed the project as a milestone for green shipbuilding.

At the same time, Viking also ordered two more ocean ships for 2031, with options for 2033, alongside 26 new river and 11 ocean ships that it will add to its fleet by 2031. ••

TRUMP UNLEASHES TARIFFS

US President Donald Trump imposed sweeping 10% tariffs on all imports in the first week of the month, although according to an update from the Australian Travel Industry Association (ATIA) and Federal Trade Minister Don Farrell, short- term travel to the US would be exempt from the tariffs.

However, the impacts of those taxes were felt at Flight Centre Travel Group this month, which downgraded its underlying profit forecast for the financial year.

Market volatility in FCTG's particularly busy trading months of May and June affected all of its core brands, which hampered the company's ability to deliver the 14-26.5% year-on-year growth it had initially predicted.

FCTG later in the year posted a total transaction value of $24.5 billion, an increase of just 3% from the prior financial year, as well as underlying profit before tax of $289.1 million (down nearly 10%), and statutory profit before tax of $213 million (down 3%). ••

MAYNEWS

Helloworld *weathers US storm*

Helloworld Travel may have surprised a few when it revealed how well it had managed to weather the well-documented impacts the United States had thus far dealt the travel industry.

The fallout delivered only marginal effects on the company's earnings, with Helloworld revising its EBITDA projection to \$52m-\$56m, down only slightly from between \$56m-\$62m. The company later in the year posted a \$60.6m result, down from \$66.3m the prior year.

Outbound volumes to the United States broadly held in line with expectations, Helloworld noted, with air sales only marginally down on the previous year. The US also remained the company's number one destination for land sales, piling on 4% in year-on-year growth.

By the end of the year, HLO had a 17.25% stake in the business. At the time of publication, the two proposals were still being considered by the Webjet board. ••

TRAFALGAR ENTERS RIVER

Following Celebrity Cruises' news in January, Trafalgar became the second major brand in 2025 to expand into river cruising, with the travel business revealing two new European itineraries launching in spring 2026.

The 128-passenger *Trafalgar Reverie* will sail an eight-day Danube journey, while *Trafalgar Verity* will offer a 10-day Rhine itinerary, both ships chartered from sister brand Uniworld.

Both cruises will showcase signature 'Trafalgar Moments' including local encounters, 'Be My Guest' experiences, and at least one 'Make Travel Matter' initiative supporting UN sustainability goals. Guests can also expect regional dining, entertainment, yoga, and cycling options. ••

HELLO TO WEBJET

A major late 2025 development was foreshadowed by *Travel Daily* in May, when Helloworld Travel Group acquired a more than 5% stake in Webjet Group Limited.

The first step to the now-proposed takeover saw Helloworld acquire almost 19.7 million shares, gained in 18 separate transactions over the prior month.

The equity grab coincided with BGH Capital, Ariadne Australia Limited, and Gary Hilton Weiss combining efforts to become substantial holders in the company as well, with the bloc at that point boasting a combined 10.76% stake.

Travel Daily at the time reported on industry speculation the acquisition of shares may form the basis for a future bid to buy Webjet.

A day later, BGH Capital made a binding offer to buy the online travel agency, through the form of an unbinding offer.

The proposition offered an acquisition value of \$0.80 a share – 10c less than the stock's market value price at the time.

The Webjet board later in the month rejected the offer, which it said "materially undervalued" the company, and would create "significant uncertainty".

Fast forward to November and BGH went back to Webjet, proposing an off-market takeover at an all-cash price of \$0.91 per share, two days after HLO tabled a bid to purchase all remaining shares in Webjet Group at \$0.90 a share.

In December, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission gave Helloworld clearance for a potential acquisition.

By the end of the year, HLO had a 17.25% stake in the business.

At the time of publication, the two proposals were still being considered by the Webjet board. ••

JUNE NEWS

Qatar *closes* airspace

Airlines were caught in the midst of Qatar's closure of airspace, due to Iran launching missiles into the region, with Emirates, British Airways and Singapore Airlines and others cancelling flights.

Virgin's newly launched Doha flights were also impacted, with VA1 diverted to Bangalore in India, while a number of Qantas' flights were also diverted to ensure safety.

ATIA CEO Dean Long suggested travellers prepare for delays, but urged them to remain calm and to trust in airlines' global systems that were in place to manage disruptions.

"We've seen this before, and the travel ecosystem is built to respond," he said. ••

TTC CHANGES SALES STRUCTURE

The Travel Corporation (TTC) announced major changes across its global touring and river cruise sales structure as part of a push to invest in travel agents.

Six brands were spread across three market tiers, with Contiki in youth and Trafalgar, Insight Vacations and Costsaver sharing the mainstream tier. Meanwhile, luxury features the Uniworld and Luxury Gold labels.

Each brand's sales teams were significantly expanded, with 16 new roles created and a further eight filled internally. On-road sales teams also grew, while an inside sales team and a dedicated sales marketing role were established.

The new structure was overseen by TTC MD Toni Ambler, while Scott Cleaver transitioned into the new global position of Senior Vice President Sales Operations, and Andrew Young retained his role as SVP Sales.

The new local structure is now overseen globally by TTC Deputy CEO & Chief Sales Officer, Melissa Da Silva. ••

Newcastle links with Bali

Jetstar Airways in June announced it will launch a direct route between Newcastle and Bali in October, marking the NSW airport's first international route outside of New Zealand. The service was set to operate three times a week between Newcastle and Denpasar, utilising the budget carrier's A321LR fleet. The route was secured with the help of the NSW Aviation Attraction Fund, in what was a milestone for Newcastle Airport, which opened its expanded terminal and runways ahead of the services' commencement - part of the facility's effort to become a major international gateway.

"This route reflects what's possible when industry and government work together to back regional growth," Newcastle Airport Chief Executive Officer Linc Horton said. ••

VALE GEOFF MCGEARY

Geoff McGeary OAM, the visionary behind APT Travel Group, passed away peacefully at home, just shy of his 84th birthday on 18 June. Transforming his father's small bus business into a global travel empire, McGeary pioneered luxury touring and river cruising, including APT's long-running AmaWaterways partnership and recent European ship launches.

Remembered for his humility, generosity, and innovation, he was awarded the Order of Australia in 2014 and named an Australian Tourism Legend in 2015. His children, Rob McGeary and Lou Tandy, now lead APT. Tributes poured in across the industry, with donations to APT's OneTomorrow foundation requested in his memory. ••

VIRGIN TO RELIST ON THE ASX

Virgin Australia's parent company Bain Capital gave the airline the green light to relist on the Australian Stock Exchange from 24 June, in a move which at the time anticipated a market capitalisation of around \$2.3 billion – a number which proved accurate. The latest development was first reported by *The Australian Financial Review*, with the masthead revealing a \$685 million raising which saw Bain's stake reduced to around 40%.

An offer price was set at \$2.90 per share, or circa seven times the earnings forecast for the financial year. The relisting proved successful, marking a return to public trading for the airline – with the new ticker code 'VGN' - after being rescued from administration by Bain in 2020. ••

JULYNEWS

Oceania welcomes *Allura*

This month, Oceania Cruises welcomed its eighth ship, the 1,200-guest *Allura*, built by Fincantieri in Genoa. The second in the Allura-class after Vista in 2023, the ship introduced new dining concepts, including a creperie and the return of Jacques, the line's signature French restaurant.

Chief Luxury Officer Jason Montague hailed *Allura* as Oceania's "most innovative and luxurious ship to date," reinforcing its culinary-focused legacy.

At delivery, Oceania confirmed two additional Sonata-class ships for 2032 and 2035, joining *Sonata* (2027) and *Arietta* (2029). Each will carry around 1,390 guests.

Cruise Weekly attended *Allura*'s christening ceremony in Florida in November, when she set sail on a three-day celebratory roundtrip voyage. ••

MOVERS, SHAKERS AND MONEY MAKERS

July turned out to be one of the pivotal months of the year for the industry in terms of people moves and deals done, led by the renowned Phil Hoffmann who stepped down from the business after 35 years.

CEO and MD Peter Williams continued in his role leading the agency group.

Power couple Mike and Mandy Dwyer of Main Beach Travel also joined in when Goldman Travel Group acquired their luxury agency for an initial 50% stake, which will increase each year until Goldman assumes full ownership after three years.

Meanwhile, Helloworld's Kate Cameron moved across to join Penny Spencer.

She was recruited by Spencer Travel Holdings to lead its independent contractor model as Head of Spencer Affiliates.

And GFOB local marketing boss Chris Fundell departed after 10 years in the role, starting his own business offering fractional marketing services to the industry.

Across the ditch, Air NZ revealed its new CEO, Nikhil Ravishankar. ••

QANTAS SURVIVES CYBER ATTACK

Up to six million customers were impacted when the national airline was hit by a serious cyber attack that took place at one of Qantas' contact centres at the beginning of the month.

According to a statement, a cyber criminal targeted one of the centres and gained access to customer data through a third-party customer service platform.

There were six million customers with service records on the platform.

Qantas eventually confirmed a "significant" number had their data stolen, including names, email addresses, phone numbers, birth dates and frequent flyer numbers.

"Importantly, credit card details, personal financial information and passport details are not held in this system," Qantas said at the time.

"No frequent flyer accounts were compromised nor have passwords, PIN numbers or login details been accessed."

Later in the year, Qantas Chairman John Mullen announced a reduction in the short-term bonuses of CEO Vanessa Hudson and executive management by 15 percentage points in light of the incident. ••

Webjet forced to spend big

It wasn't a great month for Webjet.

The Federal Court handed down a $9 million fine after the OTA was found to have misled customers about the price of flights.

Webjet was given the fine after it admitted to making false or misleading statements between 2018-2023, when it advertised airfares that excluded compulsory fees. The statements were made on its website, and in promotional emails and social media posts.

The company also owned up to providing false or misleading booking confirmations to 118 consumers for flight bookings which had not actually been confirmed, between 2019 and 2024.

"We took this case because we considered that Webjet used misleading pricing by excluding or not adequately disclosing compulsory fees in its ads," ACCC Chair Gina Cass-Gottlieb said at the time.

"Seeking to lure in customers with prices that don't tell the whole story is a serious breach of the Australian Consumer Law." ••

AUGUST NEWS

NEWS

The magic **departs**

Disney Cruise Line confirmed in August the speculation that this coming season would be its last in Australia, with *Disney Wonder* set to be redeployed elsewhere.

It was not welcome news for the local cruise industry, which had already seen three cruise lines pull out of Australia since the pandemic, including Cunard, Virgin Voyages and P&O Cruises.

It wasn't a particularly long stay for Disney, departing Australian shores just three years after it arrived.

The cruise line did leave the door ajar to return in the future, saying sailings from Australia "remain on our list for future consideration". ••

TOUGH TIMES **FOR BIG NAMES**

Both Helloworld and Flight Centre Travel Group (FCTG) announced tough trading conditions.

The performance of Helloworld's agency and ticketing business declined in the 12 months to 30 June 2025, with CEO Andrew Burnes citing agency closures and transfers as one of the reasons.

Burnes also pointed to challenging economic conditions, a drop in average airfares, and a trend towards short- and medium-haul travel.

That challenging trading environment saw Helloworld's TTV decline from $4.15 billion to $3.8 billion, and total profit after tax slide by 7.3% to $28.48 million.

Meanwhile, FCTG achieved $24.5 billion in total transaction value, up 3% year-on-year.

The business also achieved $289.1 million underlying profit before tax in line with revised expectations and $213 million statutory PBT, 3% down on FY24.

"After two years of strong recovery post-COVID, FY24 proved to be a more challenging trading period," said Managing Director Graham 'Skroo' Turner.

"The challenges we encountered should not, however, prove to be long-term headwinds for our business given they were generally cyclical and potentially short-term in nature, or within our control and therefore, able to be addressed internally." ••

JOURNEYING **BEYOND AUSTRALIA**

Journey Beyond made its first acquisition outside of Australia, acquiring New Zealand coach touring company Grand Pacific Tours for an undisclosed sum.

The Kiwi business offers 'Ultimate Small Group Tours' on its exclusive business class coaches, as well as signature mid-size group tours, delivering premium economy trips on board custom-designed 32-seat coaches.

"Get ready for an exciting new chapter in experiential travel as Journey Beyond invites explorers to discover New Zealand like never before," Journey Beyond CEO Chris Tallent said.

The expansion to NZ followed a flurry of acquisition activity in recent years for the business, including Western Australian marine tourist attraction Exmouth Dive & Whalesharks Ningaloo in July.

Grand Pacific Tours officially joined Journey Beyond's portfolio in September. ••

AUGUST NEWS

A NEW STAR OF THE SEAS

Royal Caribbean officially named its newest ship, *Star of the Seas*, hailed as "the ultimate family vacation." At the Florida ceremony, astronaut and social media influencer Kellie Gerardi served as godmother, calling the role an honour that unites her passions for exploration and family.

The ship, which debuted with a preview voyage from Port Canaveral, has now begun seven-night Caribbean sailings, including stops at Perfect Day at CocoCay. Royal Caribbean CEO Jason Liberty said *Star of the Seas* embodies the line's bold innovation, blending signature experiences with top destinations to deliver responsible, unforgettable holidays for guests of all ages. ••

ROAMING FOR A BUYER

Travel booking platform eRoam entered into voluntary administration in August, with a marketing campaign launched to encourage investors to take a close look at investing in the business.

Chair Martin Cowley confirmed the news to *Travel Daily*, saying that he and board were gauging interest from their contacts about the prospect of an acquisition.

The development saw multiple departures, with the majority of staff no longer formally employed, including General Manager Commercial and Operations Paul Hole, Product Lead David Hunter, IT and Business Manager Graeme Meacock, Global Head of Commercial Maxine Wiggs, and Regional Sales Manager Issy Limn. ••

NZ under the microscope

New Zealand Cruise Association (NZCA) Chair Tansy Tompkins issued a clear warning that the country's cruise outlook is "deeply concerning," with ship calls for the 2025/26 season projected to fall more than 40% compared to 2023/24.

In her Chairman's Report launching the NZCA 2025 conference, Tompkins outlined a four-pronged plan: stronger regulatory advocacy, global promotion, partnerships with Tourism New Zealand, and a review of the Cruise Aotearoa 2040 strategy.

She cited inconsistent biofouling rules, rising costs, and unpredictability as driving ships away, but highlighted Auckland's in-water cleaning trials as a "game-changer" and welcomed government commitment to more transparent engagement. ••

SEPTEMBER NEWS

Koalas *can't fly*

Without doubt, one of the most interesting stories of the year was the emergence of Koala Airlines as a domestic oddity.

The carrier still hasn't launched, but it was one of the biggest talking points in the aviation industry.

In September, the rollercoaster ride that was Koala Airlines took another swift turn, with reports suggesting the carrier did not have regulatory permission to fly its newly leased trio of Boeing 737 MAX aircraft.

While founder Bill Astling had told *Australian Aviation* he had his ducks in a row regarding a viable Air Operator's Certificate (AOC), the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) clarified to *The Australian* that the Desert Air AOC held by Astling remained subject to "a direction not to operate".

"This direction was issued because the previous operations conducted under the AOC were considerably different to those which Koala is now proposing – air transport operations in large jet aircraft," a spokesperson for the government body said. ••

A DIFFERENT **SUSPENSION OF SERVICE**

'S' is for September, it's also for 'securities', and funnily enough, 'suspension'.

CTM knocked down all three when news filtered through that its securities would remain suspended until at least November 2025, due to unresolved issues regarding its European accounts for FY25 and previous years.

In an update provided to the market, the company informed shareholders that auditors poring over its European revenues and costs had identified potential adjustments required that related to the timing of transactions recorded across multiple financial years.

Matters related to when transactions were to be recognised across FY25 and prior comparative reporting periods, with CTM saying the matter "remains unresolved".

Global financial services firm KPMG was engaged to conduct a thorough review of CTM's 2023-2025 statements for the Europe region.

By Nov, the CEO of UK and Europe was temporarily stood down, as the business attempts to manage audit contract issues.

The business confirmed that it will need to reverse more than $157 million in revenue after irregularities were spotted in contracts, which also include other revenue reversal adjustments in FY25 of up to $40 million. For more analysis, turn to page 11. ••

TOPDECK ENTERS NEW ERA

Gen Z touring brand Topdeck unveiled its relaunch, swapping its 50-seater coaches for a return to small group touring, with fresh itineraries and experiences.

"This new chapter for Topdeck goes big by going small, offering more meals, more inclusions, more choice and more time to explore," General Manager Anna Fawcett declared.

The brand repositioning followed 12 months of research about youth travellers, with Topdeck finding that 68% prefer to travel in groups of 20 or fewer, while 64% believe small group touring to be less stressful.

Group sizes are now capped at 18 and guests will enjoy longer stays in key cities ranging from seven to 47 days, while transport will include a mix of trains, minicoaches and local transport.

Itineraries feature culinary experiences, including cooking classes and insider-led food tours

Meanwhile, the age bracket for travellers has dropped from 18-39 to 18-32, allowing people to make meaningful connections with others in similar life stages. ••

SEPTEMBERNEWS

NEWS

PILING ON THE ***RESPONSIBILITY***

Cruise industry stalwart Lisa Pile had a good September, taking on significant additional responsibility.

The Regent Seven Seas Cruises Vice President and General Manager added Oceania Cruises to her remit following an organisational restructure at Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings in Australia.

Pile became Vice President Sales Asia for Oceania Cruises, as well as her existing duties with Regent.

The revised structure saw sales professional Constance Seck return to the company in the role of Director of Sales, Southeast Asia for Oceania Cruises and Regent Seven Seas Cruises, based in Singapore.

James Sitter remained in his role of Director of Sales, Australia & New Zealand at Oceania Cruises. ••

WALKING INTO A NEW INVESTMENT FUND

APT Travel Group co-owner (and avid hiker) Lou Tandy debuted this month a new private investment fund with her husband Rob, targeting founder-led businesses in the high-end travel segment.

The first acquisition made by the fund was a 50% stake in premium nature-based tour operator, Walk into Luxury, which will now expand its destination mix within the next year, thanks to the Tandys' investment. ••

Eight for *AmaWaterways*

AmaWaterways went big this month, ordering eight new river cruise ships which will be progressively delivered over the next five years.

Once all ships are operational, the order will take AmaWaterways' global fleet to more than 40 ships - double what it offered in 2020.

"Our expanding fleet is a direct response to the strong demand from guests eager to discover river cruising and Europe's beautiful rivers," said AmaWaterways Chief Executive Officer, Catherine Powell. More details on the ship names, designs and itineraries followed as the year progressed. ••

LOYALTY REVAMP

Carnival Cruise Line and Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings (NCLH) unveiled major loyalty changes in response to guest feedback.

CCL revamped its upcoming Carnival Rewards, granting lifetime Diamond status to members reaching the tier by May 2026, while Platinum guests will receive bonus points ensuring they remain at least Gold for life. Meanwhile, NCLH introduced a Loyalty Status Honouring Program across Norwegian, Oceania, and Regent Seven Seas Cruises, recognising equivalent tiers across all brands. ••

OCTOBER NEWS

US SHUTDOWN IS UNLEASHED

The 43-day US Government shutdown began this month, the longest in its history, a saga that would eventually leave behind more than US$11 billion in economic damage.

Prior to the shutdown, the US Travel Association warned US President Trump that the shutdown could cost the total travel industry around $US 1billion a week.

Trump's directive caused major upheaval across the country, from flight delays, reductions and cancellations to job shortages and hundreds of thousands of government workers who were furloughed.

With US visitation plummeting this year, Brand USA has also struggled, as its annual budget was slashed from $100 million to just $20 million in Sep, but by Nov, the *Visit USA Act* was introduced to restore those funds and welcome back tourists.

For the reporting period in Sep, travel to the US was shown to be down against almost every historical metric, including coming up short by 37,000 visits on the same month before the pandemic, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The 58,610 trips taken in Sep this year was also around 9,000 trips lower than Sep 2024.

However, *Travel Daily* spoke to several travel leaders, who were unperturbed by the shutdown and its impact on Australian tourists in the country.

Complex Travel Group's Mark Trim said "future booking intent remains strong and seemingly unimpacted".

"The majority of Australians adopt the 'she'll be right' approach of 'it won't happen to me'. This can be a risk in terms of where they book and whether they take appropriate precautions, with many learning lessons the hard way when they go it alone," he warned.

"The challenge for agents is to communicate their value to customers going through these disruptions and to drive the point home for future trips that where you book matters." ••

LUXURY ESCAPE'S OPENS "SPECTACULAR" STORE

Luxury Escapes opened its second physical store at Westfield Bondi, Sydney to much fanfare - including long lines of customers from 4am.

Inspired by a premium airline lounge and some of the operator's most popular tropical destinations, the store features immersive LCD screens, an in-store bar, and a palm tree oasis feature. The space is staffed by 15 fulltime consultants.

"It's a pretty spectacular space, it feels like you're going on holiday when you walk in the store," founder Adam Schwab told *Travel Daily*, who described it as "the ultimate travel retail experience".

According to a recent Luxury Escapes survey, 80% of travellers book through the website, but 15% prefer to book in person and 5% over the phone.

That personal level of service seems to have paid off for Luxury Escapes, with Schwab noting that while an online customer may spend $2,000 on average when buying a holiday, over the phone that can go up to $3,500 and in-store, it is almost $8,000. ••

WEBJET UNDERGOES MAJOR RELAUNCH

Webjet lifted the lid off its biggest transformation ever in its 27-year-history, embarking on a mission to increase relevance and double total transaction value by 2030.

The major piece of work saw the business double down on hotels, release new static packages and launch tours, supporting the company's goal of shifting consumer perception from a flight-centric OTA to a go-to local travel companion.

In addition, the strategy included an enhanced website that uses AI tech to help travellers create cheaper international flight itineraries, and a cross-channel creative campaign showcasing the brand's new Go Somewhere platform.

Webjet research found that while almost 75% of Australian consumers know and trust the brand, only one in five were familiar with its offerings. ••

NOVEMBERNEWS

FCTG LAUNCHES INTO LOYALTY

Flight Centre Travel Group launched its World360 Rewards loyalty program, a free-to-join initiative that lets members earn points across aviation, cruise, land touring, hotels, and more.

Members can redeem those points as either full or partial payment for holidays, as well as to access deals through a new custom-built rewards store.

There is also an optional member-plus tier that Aussies can opt in to at a cost of $249 a year, which unlocks perks like airport lounge access, delay protection and 15,000 bonus points. Flight Centre, Travel Associates and Cruiseabout are the initial participating brands, with the program boasting more than 300 partners, including outside of travel such as ANZ and Bupa. ••

AIRBUS RECALL CAUSES GLOBAL UPHEAVAL

Much of the world went into meltdown when Airbus issued a sweeping global A320 recall, ordering immediate repairs to 6,000 aircraft, more than half of its fleet.

At the time, some 3,000 jets were in the air, and airlines from Australia, the US and South America to Europe, India and New Zealand warned the repairs could cause delays or cancellations.

While Qantas' aircraft were unaffected, more than 90 of Jetstar's flights were cancelled, with the carrier offering refunds or rebookings without extra charges. ••

UK's Brendan *lands in Australia*

This month, *Travel Daily* exclusively revealed that The Travel Corporation's (TTC) Brendan Vacations brand rolled out the green carpet for Australians this month, with the Celtic travel specialist launching its small group and tailored experiences in the local market.

The Dublin-based luxury tour operator offers itineraries in Ireland and Scotland, with the Australian roll-out to be led by Brendan's small group tours, which travel with a maximum of 24 guests.

Fully independent private driver itineraries, as well as self-drive and rail programs, will also be pushed in the Australian market. Brendan falls under TTC's Specialist and Adventure division, aligning it closely with Adventure World, which will act as a general sales agent for the brand in Australia. ••

TC'S NEW GAMECHANGING SOLUTION

At the annual Travellers Choice conference, Managing Director Christian Hunter announced the details of a new AI initiative that will boost the productivity of its members, allowing them to easily search preferred products and generate complex itineraries.

"Imagine a system that...only shopped from within our preferred product range, had in-built guardrails to prevent hallucinations, and produced amazing output in a fraction of the time," Hunter said.

"The efficiency will amplify member businesses massively and address one of - if not the biggest challenge members face today - a shortage of time." ••


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