

Travel Daily

FEBRUARY 2026

FUTURE FORWARD

SPECIAL REPORT



VIEW FROM THE TOP: AGENCY EXECs REVEAL ALL
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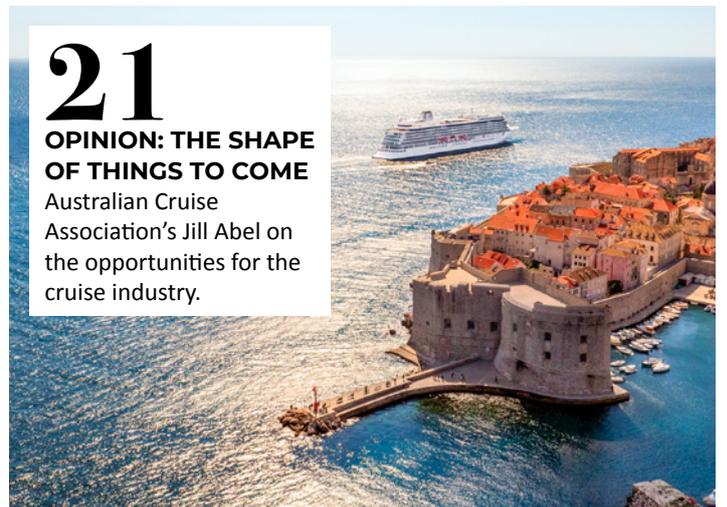
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Travel Daily

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Inside Travel

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*Inside
Asia*



For 2026, think Japan & Korea

2026 is shaping up as the year travellers stop asking, "Where should we go?" and start asking, "How do we do it differently?". Japan and South Korea are the headline acts, but the real opportunity for agents is what sits behind the headlines: under-the-radar regions, smarter combinations, and experiences your clients can't click into a cart. That's where Inside Travel comes in, through the cultural adventure specialist brands of InsideJapan and InsideAsia.

People make the trip. And in 2026, this one starts with you.

Japan's next wave are the places your clients didn't know to ask for

Travellers still want Japan's icons, but they're increasingly keen to avoid the masses that come with them. What they really want are places they didn't know to ask for, where culture feels lived-in and personal, not surface level.

Spotlight on Toyama

Toyama Prefecture sits well away from Japan's usual touring routes. More than a third of the region is protected national park, but its real draw is its living craft culture, workshops open to the street, skills passed down because people still rely on them.

Our team have been there, met the people and their communities. (InsideJapan helped people experience 219 different places across the country last year). Our places-in-between are off the radar but are the highlight of a client's cultural adventure.

As Japan specialists, we've worked with the communities that make these places special, unlocking cultural doors and helping clients meet the local people of these under visited locations. We give them exclusive access to craftsman and workshops, allowing them to be a part of the community and its regeneration through their own cultural adventure.

How do you make Japan better? Add-in Korea!

South Korea is definitely one of the worlds trending destinations right now and InsideAsia's Insiders have been unearthing incredible places and cultural experiences for years now including self-guided bullet train adventures from Gangneung to



Gyeongju, traditional hanok stays in Andong, backstreet K-pop culture tours of Seoul and streetfood tours to die for in Busan.

Although multi-country itineraries can be complex, Japan and Korea are simple to combine. And the cultural adventures are completely different. Think KPop Demon Hunters vs Spirited Away, fiery Korean BBQ vs a perfectly presented Japanese bento box, together with Korea's proud culture and the serene way Japan does things. InsideAsia ties the two destinations together seamlessly and offers its standard 24/7 customer support for extra reassurance.

A well-timed question, "Have you ever thought about adding South Korea?" can be all it takes.

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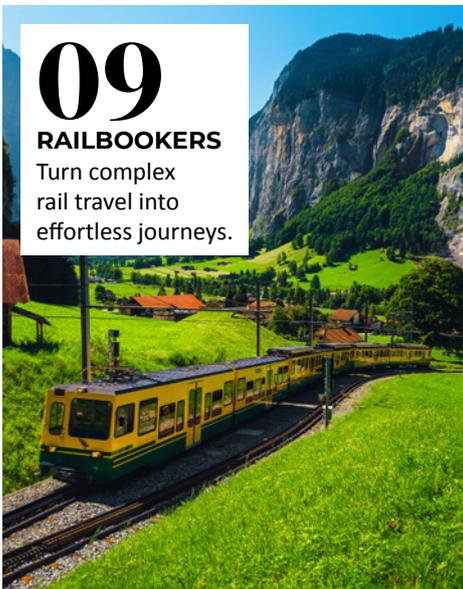
Japan and Korea are the next hottest destinations for 2026.



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Editor's Letter



I have to admit, when I first heard of the rise of set-jetting a couple years ago, I was rather skeptical (despite the fact that almost as soon as I booked our New York honeymoon 10 years ago, I immediately reserved my spot on the *Sex and the City* tour). For some reason, I found it hard to believe that a TV show and pop culture could actually convert viewers into genuine travellers to a destination.

Well, I'm certainly eating those words now - it's almost impossible to ignore the impact of TV shows like *The White Lotus*, *Downton Abbey*, *Emily in Paris* and *Game of Thrones* on the industry.

While it may seem like a relatively new phenomenon, set-jetting has been influencing armchair travellers for decades. Unsurprisingly, Austria is still reaping the benefits of *The Sound of Music*, despite the fact that it came out in 1965.

Meanwhile, however cringeworthy *Crocodile Dundee* may seem, it is actually often recognised as one of the first Australian films to boost international tourism to our shores.

Of course, set-jetting has created many amazing opportunities for the travel sector globally. But in light of the industry's overall awareness of issues like overtourism and sustainability, it has occurred to me that if a destination is not prepared, a little TV show could actually have a detrimental effect on its people and communities.

Last year, I heard some comments from marketing expert Andrés López-Varela about how *The White Lotus* has changed the travel marketing landscape.

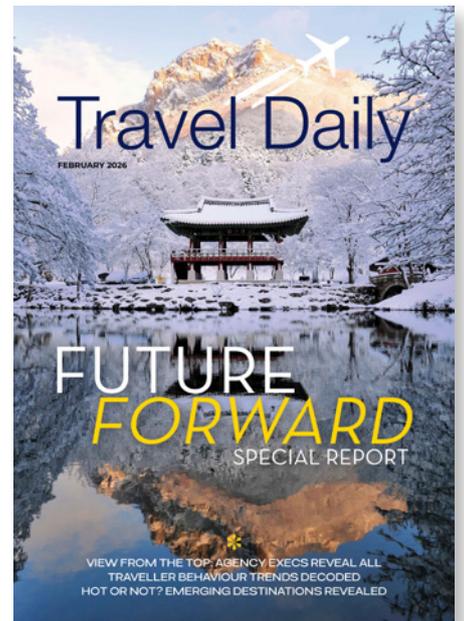
"Travel marketers that have taken advantage of the link between *The White Lotus* and the destinations featured in the show have disconnected products and experiences from the destination itself," he claimed.

"What it's inspired travel marketers to do is actually focus on those things that are more transactional, rather than the destination itself. And perhaps more importantly, sucking a lot of the profits out of local communities and benefitting large corporations rather than the people on the ground."

It reminded me of an interview I did with Tourism Authority of Thailand's marketing manager Sherly Handjojo, as the destination prepared for the launch of the third season of the show.

At the time, the authority was working to shift consumers' misconceptions of the country, particularly those who had never visited. It is a mission that the DMO continues now, as it promotes tourism that supports local communities and highlights lesser-known regions.

"Our goal is to foster more balanced, sustainable tourism practices that showcase the true essence of Thailand," she said.



Baekhakbong Peak in South Korea.

"ALMOST AS SOON AS I BOOKED OUR NEW YORK HONEYMOON 10 YEARS AGO, I IMMEDIATELY RESERVED MY SPOT ON THE SEX AND THE CITY TOUR."

"We work to spread out tourist arrivals more evenly, easing congestion in busy spots and creating new opportunities for local tourism businesses, big and small, all across Thailand."

For López-Varela, it is the responsibility of travel marketers to ensure the connection between a destination and its people and experiences remains intact, whatever pop culture phenomenon may take place.

"Yes, people fly and travel to places to stay in beautiful locations, but they don't necessarily understand the connection to the local economy and what it means to have tourists there," he said.

"So let's keep it in mind, when we're doing travel marketing, it's not just about a hotel and an experience, it's about the entire destination and the benefits that it can bring to the community." ••

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

In the news



AUSSIES SET TO SAVE FOR TRAVEL

Travel will continue to be the biggest savings motivator for Aussies in 2026, according to new research from Money.com.au.

The nationwide survey found that 46% of Australians included saving for a holiday among their financial goals for 2026, making travel the most commonly cited budget priority for a second year in a row.

Squirrelling cash away for a holiday beat out other major saving priorities, including building an emergency fund (42%), saving for retirement (35%) and buying a home (26%).

“Most people can realistically plan for, budget toward and genuinely look forward to an overseas trip within a year, so it’s no wonder it remains a strong priority for Australians, even as cost-of-living pressures continue,” said Money.com.au’s finance expert, Sean Callery.

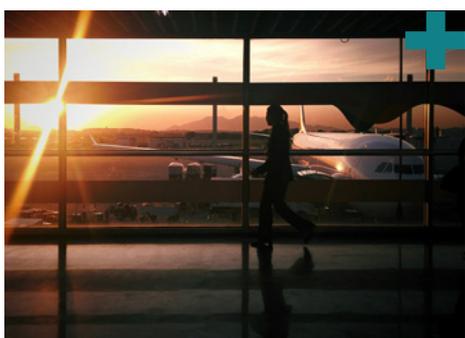
“Our research shows that it takes Aussies, on average, about eight months to save for a holiday, which shows travel is something people are prepared to invest time and planning into.” ••

Under-35s cruise bookings up

Younger Australians are fuelling a growing appetite for cruise holidays over the next 12 months, according to new data from the Tourism & Transport Forum Australia.

Around 44% of Aussies aged under 35 said they plan to book a cruise over the next year, a solid increase on the 35% recorded just two years ago.

The younger demographic spurred the overall rise in cruise sentiment, with one in three Aussies now indicating a desire to take a cruise in 2026. While under 35s showed the biggest growth trajectory, interest also remains strong among 35- to 44-year-olds - a key demographic for families - with 42% mulling a cruise this year. This cohort was also found to be one of the most interested in booking a local cruise. ••



BIZ TRAVEL SHIFTS GEARS

The corporate travel landscape has shifted significantly in recent years, with companies now more focused on their ability to segment, empower, and automate travel bookings, according to a new report published by Singaporean travel management technology company TruTrip.

Companies are no longer just managing travel costs, they are leveraging advanced tools like smart fare visibility and automated advanced approvals to turn potential savings into an actual return on investment.

TruTrip also predicted that 2026 will see a lower emphasis on compliance and a greater attempt to engineer better outcomes by understanding the changing profiles of business travellers. ••



QUICK AND EASY FOR GEN Z

Quick trips are set to be all the rage for Gen Zs this year, with one- to two-day getaways rising over the past three years, claims a new report from Airbnb.

The holiday rental platform, which has released its top five predictions for travel trends in 2026, believes the trend is largely being driven by sporting events and concerts, as well as the desire for destinations that can be easily reached via car.

Australia's regional centres are particularly popular for these shorter trips, including Launceston in Tassie, Victoria's Shepparton, Qld's Southern Downs and Albany in the West.

The report also predicted that more Aussies will ditch city breaks to go off-grid and spend more time in nature, with many heading to areas close to the coast and waterways.

Trending spots included Shoalhaven on NSW's South Coast, Tasmania's Glamorgan Spring Bay, and Busselton in WA.

Abroad, this trend has seen interest in US national parks surge by 35%, and bookings for nature and outdoor experiences outshine all other categories. ••

AUSSIES FLOCK TO HONG KONG

Hong Kong experienced an increased number of Australian arrivals from Jan to Dec last year, with a 27% year-on-year rise compared to the previous year. In 2025, 469,000 Aussies visited Hong Kong, with Dec being the strongest month of the year with 67,789 arrivals - the second highest number of monthly visitors to Hong Kong in 12 years.

According to Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) director for Australia, New Zealand and South Pacific, Karen Macmillan, the growth in numbers was likely due to the destination's bustling events calendar and increased air capacity, such as Hong Kong Airlines' new direct flights from Melbourne and Sydney and the resumption of Cathay Pacific's direct flights from Adelaide.

"With a dedicated local tourism office based in Sydney, our ANZ team managed strategic initiatives throughout 2025 across trade, consumer and cruise sectors to communicate Hong Kong's appeal in terms of travel time, its breadth of attractions, and a high proportion of English speakers," Macmillan said. "Another key marketing and sales focus was Hong Kong as a stopover city of choice." ••



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"Norwegian Cruise Line's decision to permanently eliminate all non-commissionable fares (NCFs) is a welcome and positive initiative for the trade. It delivers greater transparency, stronger earning potential, and reflects a genuine commitment to long-term partnerships. Actions like this make it easier for our PTMs to sell with confidence and reinforce why NCL continues to be such a valued partner."

MICHAEL GAZAL, EXECUTIVE GENERAL MANAGER, TRAVELMANAGERS AUSTRALIA

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Introducing the *2026 traveller*

From disconnection and hotel hopping to the rise of solo travel and sports tourism, here are some of the defining travel trends of 2026.

BY JO-ANNE HUI-MILLER

Going solo

Solo travel continues to gain popularity, whether it is 20-somethings looking to pursue a personal passion like cycling while on holiday, a divorcee enjoying her newfound freedom or an exhausted 40-year-old professional seeking a break from the rat race.

“Solo travellers are very diverse, and there is no one type of traveller, from young professionals taking a career break to retirees embracing new chapters in life,” said Angelo Triandos from Triandos Travel. “What they share is a desire for meaningful experiences, safety, and the chance to connect authentically with people and cultures while still enjoying their independence.”

According to a new Scoot report focusing on the topic, it is expected that solo travel will increase annually by 14.3% between 2025 and 2030. The report also revealed that 81% of survey respondents had embarked on a solo trip this year, with 54% undertaking two or more.

Last year, UK-based tour operator Just You launched in Australia, with the promise of 20-25-guest escorted tours across destinations such as Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, South America, Australia and New Zealand.

Sales director Tom Morgan described the business as “a safety blanket” for solo travellers, offering them peace of mind when they venture overseas on their own.

“Sometimes with touring holidays where there isn’t a solo-specific product, you can be the only solo person in a group of couples, and then you feel like you’re third-wheeling everybody or you feel a little bit awkward,” he said.

“The increase in solo travel is because people feel more empowered to travel on their own than 20 years ago and companies like ourselves actually give people that confidence to take that step.”

Morgan advised agents to keep in mind that this cohort of travellers will continue to rise, especially as the population gets older.

“It’s going to carry on being a growing part of the market and it’s something agents shouldn’t ignore,” he said. »

+

“[SOLO TRAVEL] IS GOING TO CARRY ON BEING A GROWING PART OF THE MARKET.”

“HIGH-VALUE SPORTS TRAVELLERS TEND TO STAY LONGER, SPEND MORE, AND INVEST IN EXPERIENCES BEYOND THE GAME.”



Fans travel from all around the world to watch the F1, perhaps combining it with a cruise around Doha and Abu Dhabi.
Photography: Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism

“From my point of view, it is a group of people who don’t just travel well, but they’re quicker at making booking decisions. Because they don’t have to consult with someone else, we often see our solo travellers book a lot closer to departure than couples do.”

Morgan also suggested that it is important that these guests are aware that they are being well-catered for, especially as in some instances, they can be penalised for travelling without a companion.

“There are a lot of companies that charge quite significant single supplements, and [solo travellers] are almost viewed as afterthoughts, but you can actually take a really big chunk of the market just from solo travellers,” he said.

Sports tourism

Sports tourism has well and truly taken off, as consumers are increasingly travelling the world combining their love of sport with a desire for authentic local experiences and cultural rituals.

In fact, it is now believed to be the fastest-growing segment of the global travel industry, with a projected annual growth rate of 17.5% through to 2030, according to the World Economic Forum. Last year, it made up 10% of global travel expenditure and at the moment, it is a US\$2.3 trillion global sector, with annual revenue projected to reach US\$8.8 trillion by 2050.

From mega events like the Olympics, FIFA World Cup and F1 to events on local soil such as the Ashes and Australian Open, Aussies are willing to travel anywhere around the globe to get a piece of the action.

“Australians just love sport...and we’re moving into a place where connection is so much more important than it ever used to be,” noted travel agent and ATIA member Mandi Forrester-

Jones, a self-confessed diehard Brisbane Lions supporter.

“I went down to the Grand Final in Melbourne last year, and honestly, there were 60,000 to 70,000 Brisbane Lions supporters there. Just the feeling of being with other people in the same shirts just gave you a real sense of pride and connection - people would talk to each other, even if they didn’t know each other.”

Eighty-two percent of Australians are planning a sports-focused trip this year, with half intending to take more than one, revealed data from Expedia last year. Meanwhile, the average trip lasts more than four days, with consumers spending more than \$2,600 on flights and accommodation, plus \$650 on dining, shopping and sightseeing.

According to Darren Karshagen, senior director, hotel market partnerships, APAC at Expedia Group, fans are now thinking beyond the sporting arena when it comes to planning their holidays.

“Three in five sports travellers spend part of their trip outside the host city altogether, with many exploring nearby destinations or tacking on additional leisure travel. This paints a compelling picture of a new kind of traveller: one who’s driven by passion, but motivated by broader experiences and meaningful moments,” he observed.

Karshagen pointed out that sports travellers often begin researching early, booking in advance and organising multi-day itineraries around key events.

“But it’s not just about when travellers book - it’s about how they behave. High-value sports travellers tend to stay longer, spend more, and invest in experiences beyond the game,” he said.

“Beyond the spikes in search behaviour, what we’re seeing is a clear shift in the way fans are approaching travel. Sporting events are no longer just a blip on the calendar - they’re catalysts for broader travel behaviour.” »

Hotel hopping

As more travellers are keen to explore different neighbourhoods within destinations (50%), hotel hopping is on the rise, according to Hotels.com and Expedia.

Fifty-four percent of travellers globally are now interested in booking multiple hotels within a single destination to maximise their holidays.

For example, a client may visit London, but decide to spend the first half of their trip enjoying the nightlife in Soho, then perhaps heading to a tranquil neighbourhood such as Little Venice, Hampstead or Dulwich Village.

Or a tourist may choose to head to Tokyo and stay at a luxurious traditional ryokan home in Asakusa, then enjoy a modern casual hotel in Shibuya.

“[Part] of the appeal [of hotel hopping] for clients is being able to really dig in, experience local neighbourhoods and feel more immersed in the destination,” explained ATIA member and travel advisor Sonia Jones.

“As slow travel is really growing as a way of travelling, people are spending longer than three or four nights in a destination and splitting [their time].”

Jones advised agents to be more flexible and creative when it comes to suggesting accommodation for their clients. Perhaps start by asking about the kinds of different experiences they would like or what is on their wishlist during their holiday - then structure different forms of accommodation based on that.

However, a report from Skyscanner last year also revealed that hotels are becoming the main event for many clients, who are now prioritising unique stays - 45% of Aussie travellers have picked a destination based purely on accommodation.

On the Skyscanner website, hotel bookings using the ‘Unique Stays’ filter are up 60% globally year-on-year, whether it is the Saxon Hotel in Johannesburg, where Nelson Mandela wrote *Long Road to Freedom*, Jules’ Undersea Lodge in Key Largo, Florida where guests need to dive in order to enter the accommodation or Rachamankha Hotel in Chiang Mai, a boutique stay that feels like a peaceful, historic temple.

“From stunning architecture to transportive design to the overall vibe, travellers are prioritising unique stays,” said the report.

“And as younger travellers (and their social feeds) fuel the dupe obsession, unusual accommodation is redefining what it means to ‘travel the world’ without the long-haul flight.”



“FOR THIS COHORT,
2026 TRAVELS WILL BE
ALL ABOUT ‘SIMPLICITY’
AND ‘AUTHENTICITY.’”

Disconnecting from the world

Holidays have become an important tool for many Australians to manage their mental health and according to a new report from Webjet, 48% use it as a chance to rest and recharge, while 30% of working-age Australians said travel is key to their wellbeing.

This is reflected in other micro-trends across the travel industry that reflect consumers’ desire to slow down, such as the rise of readaways, where guests are planning a slow holiday around a reading retreat, visiting a destination mentioned in a book, or a famous bookstore or library. There are even book clubs hitting the road together to serene homes and regional retreats simply to relax and connect over the written word.

In Expedia’s Unpack 26 report, 91% of respondents said they were interested in taking a holiday focused on immersing themselves in a book and enjoying

quality time with loved ones, while 58% in a Skyscanner report said that reading is an important part of their trip.

Other travellers are choosing to disconnect by escaping to quieter parts of the world during off-peak seasons, with 74% of Aussies planning a mountain escape this year, 68% of whom admitted it was for the peace and quiet, while 63% said it was for the “beautiful, remote accommodation”.

“On a travel front, do-less ‘calmcomations’ and slow travel are now being embraced in the mainstream, while wellness-driven and mindfully grounded phone-free experiences like onsens, culinary foraging, and recovery-focused itineraries, are continuing to draw appeal,” explained Andrew Cavallaro, co-founder and director of consultancy Helm.

“For this cohort, 2026 travels will be all about ‘simplicity’ and ‘authenticity’, as well as genuine connection, going back to basics, and soul-enriching experiences.” »

The rise of agentic AI

It is impossible to ignore the impact that artificial intelligence (AI) is having on travellers' ability to plan their holidays, with confidence rising from 47% in 2024 to 54% in 2025, according to Skyscanner.

"We're witnessing a seismic transformation: AI is changing the entire travel journey, from the moment you get inspired to deciding where you want to go, to customer service during the trip itself," said Piera Sierra, chief product officer at Skyscanner.

In November last year, Google in the US launched a series of new AI-powered features in Search to help with trip planning such as Canvas, a tool in AI Mode that helps users build travel plans customised for their specific needs. Flight Deals is designed to help travellers find affordable destinations and AI Mode's agentic capabilities help users make restaurant reservations and book event tickets and experiences.

However, 49% of global respondents in Skyscanner's survey said they were worried about the accuracy of the information delivered through AI, while 24% said there were too many choices and not enough meaningful options for their trips.

"The other change we'll see in 2026 is that we'll step further into Agentic AI. At the moment, we're using language models to solve discrete travellers' tasks, and boost productivity," Sierra predicted.

"But what's coming is the creation of multiple agents that work together to solve travellers' problems. And that's going to change everything."

Meanwhile, Boston Consulting Group last year revealed startling insights into how Australians view AI's role in travel planning, with 56% doubting the importance of the human touch in travel planning, such as a travel agent.

Interestingly, the report proposed that travel agencies create their own AI agents to remain relevant in the face of the rapidly changing landscape. It also found that a hybrid approach may suit evolving travellers' needs.

But according to Australian Travel Industry Association CEO Dean Long, AI is no match for an expert travel agent who has developed a deep understanding of his or her clients' needs.

"Their ability to offer personalised assistance and build lasting relationships sets them apart, making the travel planning process both enjoyable and reliable," Long told *Travel Daily*.

"In essence, while AI can provide efficiency, combining the use of an ATIA-accredited travel agent and tour operator offers a level of care and expertise that transforms travel into a truly memorable experience." ••

"WHAT'S COMING IS THE CREATION OF MULTIPLE AGENTS THAT WORK TOGETHER TO SOLVE TRAVELLERS' PROBLEMS."



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New, now, next

+ Fresh adventures are on the horizon for Aussie travellers, inspired by a desire for immersive cultures, spectacular landscapes, vibrant culinary scenes - and even pop culture.

BY JO-ANNE HUI-MILLER

South Korea

When *Kpop Demon Hunters* hit Netflix last year, it sent consumers into a frenzy for all things Korean, adding to Australians' existing fascination with the East Asian country.

According to data from the Korea Tourism Organisation (KTO), nearly two in three (65%) Aussies said the explosion of Korean pop culture from K-pop and K-beauty to K-drama has made them more likely to travel to the country. This heightened interest has also led to behavioural change, with 35% planning or considering a trip to South Korea because of it.

Before COVID, South Korea's strongest Australian visitor segment skewed older, particularly travellers aged over 60. Today, the most pronounced growth is coming from those aged 21-30, according to the KTO.

"K-pop, K-dramas and Korean films have introduced Korea to a new generation of travellers who feel a strong emotional connection to the destination before they even arrive," a spokesperson from KTO told *Travel Daily*.

"Our research and consumer surveys

show exposure to Korean pop culture and media directly influences travel intent, especially among younger Australians seeking immersive, experience-driven trips."

Overall, more Australians are visiting South Korea than ever before, with visitation from Down Under growing every year since 2018 and last year, 267,157 Aussies landed in the country, a 9.3% year-on-year increase.

Inside Travel Group has seen a 20% increase in bookings for South Korea, making it one of the strongest performing and fastest growing destinations across the company's Asia portfolio.

"We're also seeing that many Australians who have already visited Japan are now looking for a new place in East Asia that offers the same level of ease, safety and cultural richness," Inside Travel's Australia managing director Tim Oakes said.

Culture and culinary wonders

Of course, Korea's diversity from its beautiful landscapes and rich cultural history to its vibrant culinary experiences are all key factors of its broadening appeal. Foodies

will enjoy the outdoor tent bars (pochas) and bustling market streets, as well as its Michelin-starred restaurant scene.

"Seoul's mix of food, culture, history, and modern city life is the main draw, with places like Busan adding contrast. It tends to attract curious travellers and families with older children who enjoy culture and food rather than rushed sightseeing," noted travel agent Simon Wakeford, co-founder of RoamWisely.

There is also much to be enjoyed beyond Seoul - think national parks, coastal walks, hiking trails and traditional villages across destinations such as the seaside town of Busan, UNESCO World Heritage-listed Jeju Island and "the museum without walls" known as Gyeongju, filled with attractions like Bulguksa Temple, Seokguram Grotto, and the Daereungwon Tomb Complex.

Improved accessibility between Australia and South Korea has improved connectivity, with airlines like Jetstar, T'way Air and Asiana Airlines adding routes in recent years. South Korea has also waived its K-ETA tourist visa requirement for Aussies, extending the exemption period to Dec 2026. *JHM/MS* »



Northern Italy

Set across a range of spectacular settings, from the natural beauty and grandeur of the Italian Alps to the stylish energy of Milan, industry pundits are predicting big things for Italy's tourism sector off the back of the recent Winter Olympics.

According to a report from Oxford Economics, Italy is predicted to see a faster increase in international tourists than all of Europe in 2026, set to reach an estimated 66.7 million overseas arrivals, up 9.3% year-on-year, resulting in a €2.9 billion rise in tourism spend.

Julia van Huisstede, owner of italktravel and ATIA member, is preparing for the inevitable increased interest in the European country from her clients.

"We know that Italy will spike, as Paris did as soon as the Olympics finished in the summer. It 100% drives trends. People are just Instagrammable-hungry and they just want what they've seen on television," she said.

A new kind of Olympics

Interestingly, this year's Games are the first to be co-hosted by two cities - Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo - and was intentionally designed as a decentralised, multi-city model to encourage better visitor dispersion, sustain travel gains for a longer period and avoid congestion experienced during previous Olympics, including the 2006 Turin Games.

Surrounding regions will also gain increased visitation and awareness. In fact, Northern Italian cities like Verona and Venice will experience a faster rise in international visits than the national level and Milan will see a 10.7% rise in arrivals, thanks to recent investment in transport and infrastructure, making rail travel more accessible.

Van Huisstede also predicts that areas like the Italian Lakes region will also gain more popularity among tourists, especially those who have "already done Venice, Florence and Rome - the big three - now they want a more regional experience".

Foodies and fashionistas will enjoy Milan, while Cortina d'Ampezzo is all about chic ski resorts. Lake Como offers classic Italian glamour and the Dolomites have plenty of wellness-focused mountain properties.

"WINTER (AND THE SHOULDER SEASONS) ARE GREAT TIMES TO VISIT ITALY."

"The 2026 Winter Olympics is not just shining a light on multiple destinations across Northern Italy... it's also reminding Australians that Italy is not just a summer destination," noted Entire Travel Group sales director Greg McCallum.

"Winter (and the shoulder seasons) are great times to visit Italy, with smaller crowds and more time to engage with Northern Italy's culture, food, natural attractions and festive activities such as Christmas markets."»

"I WANT A WHITE LOTUS HOLIDAY WITHOUT THE DEATHS."

French Riviera

Set-jetting shows no signs of slowing down in 2026, and this year, TV viewers will be transported to the glamorous French Riviera (also known as the Cote d'Azur) in the south of France, where the secrets and lies of the fourth season of hit drama *The White Lotus* will continue.

Past seasons of *The White Lotus* have certainly had an impact on the tourism industry for the previous destinations it has filmed in. According to Expedia, off the back of the second season in Sicily, there was a 300% increase in searches for the region, and after filming ended, the Four Seasons San Domenico Palace in Taormina was booked out for six months when it reopened.

"The decision to film the next season of *The White Lotus* on the French Riviera speaks volumes about the region's enduring pull at the very top end of luxury travel," said chief brand officer at Abercrombie & Kent Peter Chipchase.

As ATIA member and travel agent Sonia Jones explains, one client called her this year after watching the third season of *The White Lotus* in Thailand and declared: "Sonia, I want a *White Lotus* holiday without the deaths."

Located along the Mediterranean, the beautiful French Riviera is famous for its sparkling waters, sun-drenched weather, narrow cobblestone streets and rich artistic and cultural heritage.

Picturesque towns are dotted up and down the coast, from well-known cities such as Nice, Cannes and Monaco to smaller villages including the Lerins Islands and Eze.

While the French Riviera may have a reputation for being the playground of the rich and famous, according to Jones, travellers may be pleasantly surprised to find it does appeal to others with less cash to splash.

"It's one of those places that for many years, a lot of people really only associated it with that ultra luxe, high-end, super glam St-Tropez kind of lifestyle. But there are so many beautiful little villages, both on the coast and also just tucked [away]," she explains, mentioning Antibes and Juan les Pins in particular.

"That's part of the charm - being able to discover these little hidden gems outside of those really big, buzzy, expensive destinations. There's something for everyone. No matter what someone's budget is, you can always find a spot on the French Riviera."

Meanwhile, itravel luxury travel advisor Geoff Currie's all-time favourite destination on the French Riviera is Villefranche-sur-Mer, a small coastal town with harbour views, colourful buildings and lively restaurants, just a 20-minute drive away from Nice.

"It's very understated but with some of the most spectacular views, nice beaches and a very French Riviera way of life," he said.

Looking ahead

Meanwhile, the South of France has shifted its focus to the 2030 Olympic Winter Games, which will be held in the French Alps, offering a unique mix of sea and snow between events held in Nice and the Alpes du Sud.

Atout France director Dominique Maulin hopes St-Tropez in particular will enjoy some increased awareness from around the globe. A favourite destination for the jetset pack, the village is a blend of relaxing summertime vibes with shopping, boutique hotels and live music, she said.

Atout France is also keen to share the tagline of the region with more consumers - 'winter is the new summer'.

"We definitely want to capitalise on the very good weather in the Cote d'Azur, extend summer and stretch it as much as we can to transform the shoulder season," said Maulin. »

“EGYPT’S TRAVEL AND TOURISM SECTOR IS EXPERIENCING A POWERFUL RESURGENCE.”

Egypt

From its rich ancient history and culture to its desert landscapes, Egypt has long entranced travellers, but the destination is making a comeback in a big way, especially now that the long-awaited Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) is open.

In fact, last year, the country recorded a tourism high, welcoming nearly 19 million visitors, a 21% increase compared to 2024, outperforming the global tourism growth average of 5%, according to the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

“Egypt’s travel and tourism sector is experiencing a powerful resurgence, with record-breaking economic contribution and a sustained surge in visitor spending. These numbers reflect a sector on the rise: dynamic, resilient, and vital to the country’s growth,” said former WTTC president and CEO Julia Simpson.

Meanwhile, river cruise lines are also investing in the destination. Viking will expand its presence with the unveiling of two new 82-guest ships, the Viking Ptah and Viking Sekhmet, bringing its fleet of ships to 10. By 2027, that number will grow to 12.

The ancient region is also performing

well for Uniworld, which is now acting as a potential stopover for travellers heading to Europe and Travelmarvel is set to debut its new river ship Travelmarvel Sirius along the Nile from September this year.

“With its rich cultural heritage, world-class attractions, and growing connectivity, Egypt continues to captivate travellers from around the globe. The government’s focus on investment, infrastructure, and sustainable tourism is clearly paying off,” explained Simpson.

Two decades and \$US1 billion later and located by the pyramids of Giza and Cairo, the 500,000sqm GEM opened to much fanfare in November last year, and is considered the world’s largest archaeological facility for a single civilisation.

Highlights include the 3,200-year-old, 11.36-metre statue of King Ramses II, the complete collection of Tutankhamun’s treasures and a 4,500-year-old boat, belonging to the Pharaoh Khufu, who built the Great Pyramid of Giza.

More than meets the eye

However, there is more to Egypt beyond its legendary pharaohs and pyramids, even though that’s the way the destination has

long been promoted, points out Forward Travel’s David Smyth.

“Beyond the iconic sites, it’s a country of incredible depth, a layered history, and vibrant culture,” he pointed out.

“Egypt is a living, evolving destination. If travellers take the time to look beyond the landmarks, they’ll discover a richness and authenticity that stays with them long after they leave.”

Now, guests to Egypt are keen to also experience the country through its community, culture and landscapes, such as lesser-known archaeological sites like the temples of Abydos or the Valley of the Queens. Then there is the rich Islamic and Coptic heritage of Cairo’s old quarters and of course, the food and market experiences in Cairo’s souks.

“Egypt also offers diverse natural landscapes,” Smyth continues. “It has deserts, oases, and the Red Sea coast, providing opportunities for trekking, diving, and wildlife spotting. Adventure and wellness-focused travellers can explore the Western Desert’s sand dunes, relax at the Red Sea resorts, or discover unique eco-lodges. Egypt has so many layers ready to be explored.” ••



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THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME



With consumer confidence in cruising back with a bang, 2026 is set to be a big year for the sector, but what are the challenges that need to be overcome?

BY JILL ABEL, CEO, AUSTRALIAN CRUISE ASSOCIATION

As we look to the year ahead, cruising finds itself in an enviable but complex position. Demand is strong, global capacity continues to expand, and consumer confidence in cruising has not only returned but evolved.

At the same time, expectations around sustainability, destination management and value creation are higher than ever. For Australia, the year ahead is about converting momentum into long-term, responsible growth.

Globally, the cruise industry continues to invest at scale. New ships entering service over the next few years are larger, more efficient and more technologically advanced than anything that has come before. This investment reflects confidence in cruising's future and the enduring appeal of the product. For Australia, it presents a clear opportunity. Our geographic position, seasonal alignment with Northern Hemisphere deployment and reputation for safe, high-quality experiences place us well to attract both returning capacity and new-to-market brands.

Infrastructure is key

However, opportunity alone is not enough. As ships evolve, so too must the destinations that host them. Infrastructure remains a key focus for the year ahead. Berth availability, shore power readiness, passenger transfer solutions and terminal facilities all need to keep pace with modern fleet requirements.

This is particularly important for regional destinations, where cruise delivers outsized economic benefit but infrastructure investment can often lag demand. Ensuring that planning frameworks and funding mechanisms support timely, fit-for-purpose development is central to the Australian Cruise Association's advocacy agenda.

Sustainability speeds up

Sustainability will continue to dominate both public discourse and strategic decision-making. Cruise lines are moving quickly and investing in alternative fuels, energy efficiency, waste reduction and new technologies that reduce environmental impact. The pace of change

is accelerating, not slowing.

For destinations and ports, the challenge is to align with this progress while maintaining realistic pathways for implementation. Shore power, for example, is no longer a future aspiration but an active planning consideration for many of our key ports, and the year ahead will see increased focus on how infrastructure, regulation and operational readiness intersect.

Equally important is social sustainability. Communities are increasingly asking how they maximise the broad range of economic benefits from cruise whilst aligning with community sentiment. This shift requires a more sophisticated conversation about cruise tourism's role within the broader visitor economy. Longer port calls, overnight stays and curated shore experiences are becoming more common, reflecting passenger demand for deeper destination engagement. For Australian destinations, this creates an opportunity to spread economic benefit beyond the wharf and into local businesses, producers and experiences. »



“THE PACE OF CHANGE IS ACCELERATING, NOT SLOWING.”

There are now more conversations taking place about the industry's impact on the communities that it visits.

Be our guest

Changing traveller expectations are another defining theme. Today's cruise guest is not a single demographic. Multi-generational travel, experiential cruising, expedition and luxury segments are all growing, alongside strong demand from first-time cruisers. Passengers are seeking choice, flexibility and authenticity. This diversity plays to Australia's strengths. From iconic urban ports to remote regional and expedition destinations, our offering supports a wide range of cruise styles. The year ahead is about refining those experiences and ensuring destinations are ready to deliver consistently high-quality outcomes.

Smart use of tech

Technology will quietly underpin much of this progress. Digital tools are reshaping how cruise lines manage onboard operations, personalise guest experiences and engage with destinations. At the same time, ports and tourism operators are increasingly using data to manage visitor flows, improve transport logistics and enhance the overall guest journey. In a country as large and decentralised as Australia, smart use of technology will be critical to improving efficiency and resilience across the cruise value chain.

Challenges that lie ahead

Policy and regulation will remain a key pressure point. Around the world, governments are grappling with how to manage cruise growth while responding to environmental and community concerns.

The introduction of new fees, caps or regulatory frameworks in some destinations highlights the importance of evidence-based decision-making. For Australia, the year ahead must focus on balanced policy settings that recognise cruise as a significant contributor to the visitor economy while supporting sustainable destination management. Clear, consistent and nationally aligned approaches will be essential to maintaining competitiveness.

What I am most looking forward to in the year ahead is the continued collaboration across industry, government and destinations. The past few years have demonstrated that cruising works best when partnerships are strong and communication is open. The Australian Cruise Association's role is to support that collaboration - through advocacy, research, industry engagement and practical support for destinations and operators alike.

The cruise industry is not standing still, and neither can we. The year ahead is not about returning to how things were, but about shaping how cruising grows next. With thoughtful planning, investment in infrastructure, commitment to sustainability and a clear focus on destination value, Australia is well placed to play a leading role in the global cruise landscape.

The challenge now is to be deliberate, coordinated and confident in the choices we make. The ACA will release a positioning statement early in the year that will help guide the conversations across multiple stakeholders to achieve this and drive the next decade of cruising in Australia. ••



8 cruising trends

What you need to know right now about cruising in 2026.

BY JANIE MEDBURY AND MYLES STEDMAN

① Slow cruise picks up

Time is the newest luxury, with cruisers increasingly swapping fast-paced, jam-packed itineraries for slower, more immersive journeys.

“The biggest trend for 2026 will be the complete rejection of port-hopping itineraries in favour of immersive, extended-stay luxury cruising,” Luxury Travel Collection’s GM, Nikki Glading told *Cruise Weekly*.

“High-net-worth travellers are pushing back against the performative ‘12 countries in 10 days’ model, demanding itineraries that spend two to three days minimum in each destination, often with overnight stays in port.”

Some of Norwegian Cruise Line’s overnight port stays include 22 hours in Papeete in Tahiti during a 14-day South Pacific sailing.

On a 15-day cruise around Hong Kong and Thailand, guests can spend more than 30 hours in port in Bangkok, while the *Pride of America* trip visits four islands with overnight stays in Maui and Kaua’i, as well as nearly 100 hours ashore.

② Off-peak takes off

The wish to slow down seems to go hand-in-hand with a desire to escape the crowds, prompting more travellers to opt for shoulder season departures.

Norwegian Cruise Line is currently experiencing “strong momentum in cool-climate, culturally rich regions like Northern Europe”, according to Ben Angell, vice president and managing director APAC at NCL.

“There is also a notable rise in demand for Asia’s October-November shoulder season, as travellers take advantage of milder weather, fewer crowds and excellent value - particularly for sailings that combine iconic ports with emerging coastal regions,” he told *Travel Daily*.

Angell also pointed to cool climate destinations such as Northern Europe and the Baltics, which continue to perform strongly, due to their combination of rich architecture and culture with spectacular natural scenery.

“Latvia continues to gain attention, with Riga’s medieval Old Town and Art Nouveau precincts among the highlights,” he said.

“Finland is also trending, with Helsinki offering guests more immersive exploration of the city’s unique sauna culture and urban forests thanks to our 2026-27 home porting.”

At the end of last year, Regent Seven Seas followed sister brand Oceania Cruises into the European off-season, unveiling its first winter sailings in the Mediterranean in the line’s history. These include extended journeys through Rome, Barcelona, Istanbul, Athens and Lisbon.

“I think one of the biggest opportunities for the industry in 2026 is stimulating demand for international travel - especially cruising - outside the traditional high seasons,” Regent Seven Seas Cruises vice president sales and GM Lisa Pile said.

③ No kids allowed

More travellers are leaving the kids behind in search of the blissful peace offered by adults-only cruises. Several major lines recently made moves to help call in this clientele, including Oceania Cruises, which at the beginning of this year became exclusive to guests aged 18 and over. »

**“WE’RE SEEING STRONG
MOMENTUM IN
FLY-CRUISE AND
LONGER ITINERARIES.”**

“We’re seeing strong momentum in fly-cruise and longer itineraries,” Rachel Kingswell, general manager of Travel Associates, recently revealed to *Cruise Weekly*.

The shift is being supported by strong growth in international itineraries.

“Travellers are happy to go further and stay longer, particularly for Europe, Alaska and Asia,” Kingswell added.

Her observation is backed by recent Cruise Guru data, which reflected a 45% increase in demand for Asia in the third quarter of 2025 compared to the same period last year, highlighting the rising role of the fly-cruise segment.

5 Solo travel soars

Solo travel is booming, with a 2025 report from Scoot revealing the segment is projected to grow 14.3% annually until 2030 - and cruise is no exception.

“[This year] will see the rise of ‘going it alone’ to a point where solos are becoming a core customer,” Cruiseabout general manager Brad Kennedy recently told *Cruise Weekly*.

Coral Expeditions CEO Jeff Gilles picked up on the trend last year, telling *Travel Daily* that the line is seeing “an ongoing trend in demand for solo travel and it represents about 10% of our overall business with demand always growing”.

Additionally, HX recently noted that almost 20% of its guests choose to travel solo, leading the line to offer no or low solo supplements on all sailings.

6 Sailing in luxury

More travellers are looking to indulge in premium experiences this year. New data from Cruise Guru shows Australians are booking bigger staterooms, with the platform reporting that more than half of travellers booked at least a balcony stateroom in 2025, while 11% booked a suite.

CCO Michael Betteridge said this reflects a “quality over quantity” mindset, as the Australian cruiser grows more sophisticated – a shift that several cruise lines are now capitalising on.

MSC recently reported a strong year-on-year uptake of its MSC Yacht Club offering,

while Oceania Cruises posted robust sales after transitioning from an upper-premium to a luxury line.

There has also been an influx of luxury hotel brands entering the cruise market, from the The Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection to Four Seasons Yachts and Aman Resorts’ upcoming superyacht, *Amangati*.

7 Destination deep-diving

Reflecting cruisers’ growing desire to slow down, spending more time ashore is emerging as a key priority this year. In fact, Holland America Line (HAL) identified destination immersion as the top trend among its guests in 2025 - momentum the line expects to continue building.

In January, HAL partnered with the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center to launch a new exclusive moose shore excursion, giving guests a behind-the-scenes look at the facility.

That same appetite for deeper destination diving is also influencing river cruise offerings. Recently, Uniworld Boutique River Cruises unveiled new cruise and tour itineraries in partnership with its sister brand Luxury Gold, combining extended land journeys with all-inclusive river cruising. The longer itineraries feature pre- and post-hotel stays alongside exclusive experiences and guided sightseeing.

8 River cruise rises

River cruising was the hot topic of 2025, and it is set to heat up even more this year following Celebrity Cruises’ launch into the segment. Meanwhile, Celebrity’s parent company, Royal Caribbean Group, said it would consider entering its other brands, such as Silversea, into the market.

Established river cruise brands are also experiencing growth, like AmaWaterways, which has increased revenue by over 150% since it launched in Australia two years ago.

“[Travellers] love the more intimate, personalised experience you get with fewer guests, especially compared to ocean cruising,” AmaWaterways’ MD Steve Richards said.

“They also love being right in the heart of destinations by docking in central locations and spending more time on shore. This is what makes river cruising so special.”••

Longer stays in port like Bangkok allow guests to immerse themselves in a destination.

“Our guests have consistently shared that the tranquil environment aboard our ships is one of the primary reasons they return time and time again,” the brand’s head Jason Montague said.

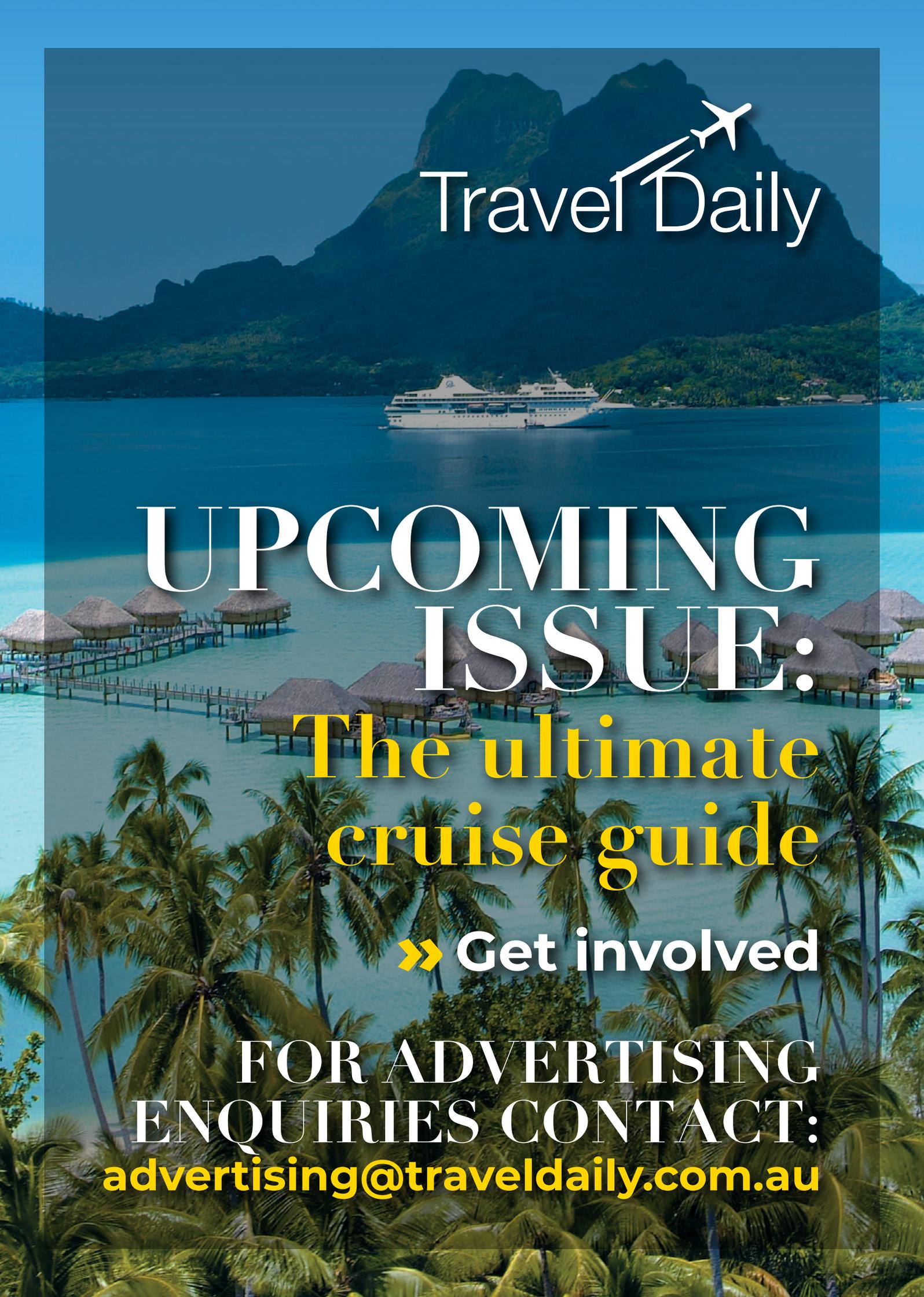
Just several months earlier, Norwegian Cruise Line positioned its Australian-based ship *Norwegian Spirit* as being “curated for adults” and “crafted for calm”. The line also brought its adults-only area to two more ships earlier in the year.

Meanwhile, Ambassador Cruise Line announced it will strictly offer adults-only itineraries in 2027-28.

4 Fly-cruise hits new heights

Appetite continues to grow for all-inclusive fly-cruise packages, making international voyages a more convenient and affordable option for Australians.

Cruise Lines International Association’s Source Market Report, released last year, found that fly-cruise now represents 18.5% of Australian cruise passengers, up 3.3% on the previous year.



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THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

+ We take a look at some of the pivotal changes taking place in the Australian aviation industry.

BY DAMIAN FRANCIS

Last year proved to be a pivotal year for air travel in Australia, although arguably not many saw it coming.

Airlines doubled down on their commitment to the country, revenue passenger movements increased on both the domestic and international fronts, and one of the biggest aviation infrastructure projects in Australia - the construction of Sydney's second international airport, Western Sydney International (WSI) - picked up a significant amount of momentum before its opening for commercial flights in October this year.

There were also the left-field announcements that few saw coming. United Airlines committing to fly directly to Adelaide from San Francisco, Finnair locking in one-stop flights between Helsinki and Melbourne, plus a raft of new services from the likes of Delta, Malaysia Airlines, Turkish Airlines, Qantas (of course), American Airlines, and many, many more.

If global travel data company OAG proves to be correct, this year could be even bigger. "Based on current demand and capacity

trends, 2026 looks set to be a good year with the potential for record levels of profitability for most airline CEOs," OAG chief analyst John Grant wrote.

"Even some of the less efficient national airlines could break even.

"Demand continues to be strong, despite concerns around economic growth and consumer confidence, and a weakening of the US dollar would be a positive for many airlines."

But despite the upbeat suggestion, there were some warning notes as well. AI will continue to alter the aviation industry in ways that are not always obvious, geopolitical events will continue to cost airlines, and sustainability targets will continue to be hard to reach.

Indeed, it was a rocky start to 2026 for New Zealand aviation in particular, when on 12 February, international cabin crew at Air New Zealand commenced a two-day strike over stalled contract negotiations.

The airline cancelled 46 wide-body long-haul flights, affecting approximately 9,500 passengers.

The platform is set for aviation in 2026 to be an absolute rollercoaster ride, depending on what part of the aviation industry you're in, so let's break it up just a little bit.

Here is the outlook for four major areas.

Airlines

As previously mentioned, OAG is suggesting that it could be a winning year for revenue.

Watson Farley & Williams partner and aviation expert Alan Polivnick agrees, but shared some of the turbulence that airlines would have to look out for.

"The key challenges for profitability will be geopolitics, the cost of fuel, supply chain issues affecting fleet and engine renewal and replacement, plus operating and maintaining increasingly older aircraft fleets caused by delivery delays, labour shortages and costs," he said.

When asked what some of the tailwinds would be for airlines, Polivnick suggested "the impact of narrow-body medium and long-haul flights of traditional business models and profitability of low cost and full-service carriers". »

There were unarguably a lot of chess pieces put in place last year, with airlines announcing new routes and new aircraft, but what do they think of the outlook and how are they approaching it?

According to Kelly Clive, country manager ANZ at Delta Airlines, the carrier will continue to focus on customer experience plus people and product investment.

"In financial year 2025, Delta Air Lines generated record revenue of US\$58.3 billion," she told *Travel Daily*, revealing that Delta continues to see strong demand particularly in premium and long-haul travel.

Despite the negative press that the US was often receiving, Clive said that Delta was "confident in the strength of demand for travel to and from the United States and premium international demand".

She doubled down on the fact that Australia was an important part of the Delta Air Lines' network and that it continued "to see healthy two-way demand, with strong leisure, visiting friends and relatives, and premium corporate travel flows between Australia and the United States".

As for Australia though, it could be a slightly different story.

According to CVFR Travel Group CEO Ram Chhabra, "airlines globally are preparing for a strong year, but that momentum may not translate to the Australian market".

"The simple reality is that Australia's economy is not in the same position as Asia, Europe, or the USA," he warned.

Chhabra asserted that while much of the world now had inflation under control and several major economies had already begun easing interest rates as part of their monetary policy cycle, Australia was "in a very different phase".

"Inflation remains stubborn, productivity is low, and the RBA is signalling that further rate increases may still be required," he said.

"While airlines may report record profits driven by strong performance in other regions, I don't believe the same outcome is likely for the Australian market.

"Higher interest rates, reduced discretionary spending, and a slower economic environment will inevitably soften demand and limit the upside for carriers operating here."

Geopolitics

No matter who you speak to, there is no escaping the fact that the world is wading through some particularly challenging times, and that the aviation industry, from a business perspective, is affected by more than many.

Polivnick said he expected geopolitical issues to continue and to be a "significant and powerful factor" affecting airline performance.

Director General of IATA, Willie Walsh, suggested that airlines and the industry as a whole had become used to geopolitical tensions and were able to respond quickly to them.

While he was specifically talking about cargo as opposed to commercial passengers, he said "the industry has adapted very well to moving capacity quickly rather than waiting for things to return to the way they were".

According to aviation analyst Alex Macheras, airlines are responding well to the fast-moving geopolitical landscape.

"What we are seeing is airlines actively managing risk in response to evolving geopolitical conditions," he said.

WSI is a really important step for the aviation landscape, believes Airports Association of Australia CEO Simon Westaway.



"One of the most effective tools carriers have is capacity management, such as reducing frequencies or avoiding operating windows when tensions are assessed to be higher."

Macheras suggested that such moves were about protecting airline operations rather than warning travellers about destinations.

Chhabra got straight to the point when it comes to geopolitics.

"Adding to this complexity is the 'Trump factor', which remains very much in play," he noted.

"Political uncertainty and shifting sentiment around the United States are already influencing travel behaviour, and we're seeing a noticeable slowdown in outbound demand to the US market."

"THE SIMPLE REALITY IS THAT AUSTRALIA'S ECONOMY IS NOT IN THE SAME POSITION AS ASIA, EUROPE, OR THE USA."



Infrastructure

While geopolitics is creating a lasting challenge for the industry, infrastructure, is creating opportunity.

One of the biggest projects in Australian aviation history will be completed this year - Western Sydney International Airport, a brand new international-grade airport at the base of the Blue Mountains.

"Western Sydney International Airport is a really important step for the aviation landscape," Airports Association of Australia (AAA) CEO Simon Westaway told *Travel Daily*.

"Freight flights are set to begin in July, with passenger flights expected from October, so it's a major new piece of capacity coming into the greater Sydney basin." »

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“THE INDUSTRY HAS ADAPTED VERY WELL TO MOVING CAPACITY QUICKLY.”

“The AAA held one of our major industry forums during its late construction phase last year, and even then, you could see the scale of construction, the great technology and innovation unfolding.”

WSI has already convinced Singapore Airlines, Air New Zealand and Qantas Group to fly to it. Others are eyeing it off as well.

“We are closely monitoring developments at WSI as part of our long-term network planning,” Bryan Foong, CEO of airline business at Malaysia Aviation Group, said. “As with any new airport opportunity, we will undertake a thorough commercial and operational evaluation, including demand dynamics, connectivity opportunities, fleet alignment and overall strategic fit within our network.”

For Polivnick, WSI will be one to watch.

“I’m interested to see the impact that WSI has on traffic, yields, and load factors, and to what extent the new airport can attract international airlines given the regulatory restrictions on access to Sydney airports,” he said.

Westaway suggested that infrastructure investment in general would be a major priority for the AAA this year as it continued to push for long-term growth.

“[We will be] continuing to advocate for the key infrastructure investments that airports are delivering, and making sure the broader aviation system is set up to support passengers and communities,” he said.

He revealed that there was around \$44

billion committed by airports over the next decade to ensure that runways, terminals and facilities were in place to meet demand.

The opportunity, Westaway said, was the ability to continue to grow and invest, but the challenge would be “ensuring passenger experience, capacity and connectivity keep improving alongside that growth”.

The workforce and supply chain challenges that the industry had experienced had to be accounted for diligently.

Sustainable aviation fuel

Somewhat connected to infrastructure is sustainable aviation fuel (SAF), a constant in the travel trade headlines largely for all the wrong reasons.

There are increasing concerns that implementation has been too slow, and the resulting cost increases that will be passed on to the consumer will be too high.

Travel Daily reported that a peer-reviewed study by researchers at the University of Sydney found the additional cost to long-haul flying from using SAF could be as much as “hundreds of dollars” per ticket.

Australia has no binding sustainable fuel blend mandate and no large-scale production facilities, although it is considering incentives to spur the industry.

OAG’s Grant described the SAF situation as such: “Progress will be made on many sustainability fronts from SAF through to airport facilities and operational vehicles,

but meeting the industry’s targets remains almost impossible given where we are today.” Awkward.

Australia’s involvement, or lack thereof, has been alarming for some quarters that are not afraid to say so. To add to this, we are new to the fuel game.

As Robert Boyd, Boeing’s regional director (Asia Pacific) Global Sustainability Engagements and Partnerships, said recently at a talk at UNSW, “There are obviously environmental benefits with SAF, but there are also economic benefits for Australia.

“As a nation, we import 100% of our jet fuel, we don’t produce a single drop of it. So, if SAF can become a domestic product, that’s also good for jobs and the economy here.”

Existing and planned SAF projects in advanced stages are predicted to meet just 2-4% of jet fuel demand by 2030, UNSW said.

It has led the International Energy Agency (IEA) to suggest that, “increasing the use of these sustainable aviation fuels to get in line with the Net Zero Scenario will require supportive policies and a significant ramp-up of investments in production capacity”.

In September last year, the Australian Government committed \$1.1 billion to support the production of low carbon liquid fuels (LCLF) in Australia.

The Cleaner Fuels Program will offer grants to domestic producers of LCLF and builds on the government’s support for the development of an Australian LCLF industry, including \$33.5 million under the Sustainable Aviation Fuel Funding Initiative, \$250 million through the Future Made in Australia Innovation Fund, establishment of fuel quality standards to support renewable diesel, and the expansion of the Guarantee of Origin Scheme to track and verify emissions from Australian produced LCLF.

Will it make a difference quickly enough? Local Airbus rep Stephen Forshaw told the *AFR* the funding would see projects under consideration quickly move toward final investment decisions.

“It’s great to see a package being announced that sends a clear signal to proponents that there is support which will be made available for the production of SAF [sustainable aviation fuel],” Forshaw said.

“To date, it’s been about the important studies and design work, but this signal says there is funding to help producers offer fuel to airlines. That’s what counts.” ••

VIEW FROM THE TOP

Three travel leaders discuss how agents can support their clients and the strategies they need to succeed.

INTERVIEW BY JO-ANNE HUI-MILLER



THE EXPERTS



ROBIN LAWTER
VICE PRESIDENT, EXPEDIA TAAP
AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT



CHRISTIAN HUNTER
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
TRAVELLERS CHOICE



MICHELLE ASHCROFT
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER,
PHIL HOFFMANN TRAVEL

Travel Daily: What has your business got on its agenda this year?

Michelle Ashcroft: The key focus for Phil Hoffmann Travel this year is growth. However, growth isn't a goal, it's an outcome, so we focus on engagement and innovation across the business, with key pillars to deliver that outcome, and it's working well.

Robin Lawther: This year, Expedia TAAP is focused on supporting how agents actually work and how travellers are booking today. That includes providing them access to rich content, competitive rates, flexible options and technology that will help agents respond quickly to changing needs. We're also focused on using data and insights to help agents anticipate trends, from event-led demand to evolving accommodation preferences. Ultimately, TAAP is about backing agents with the tools and support they need to grow confidently.

Christian Hunter: Artificial intelligence, training and recruitment and network growth are key issues for Travellers Choice in 2026.

We recently unveiled a groundbreaking project that will use AI to search our group's preferred products and generate complex itineraries, saving our members time, fast-tracking staff training and ensuring we maximise support for our preferred partners.

We are currently digitising our preferred products and work is underway on developing our AI-powered search engine and itinerary builder. Stay tuned.

Finding and training staff continues to be a major

challenge for travel businesses. Last year, we rolled out a free program for our members that accelerates training for new entrants, and that will continue this year. At the same time, we are extending the concept by introducing a dedicated training program for consultants with a little more experience under their belts.

In terms of network growth, we've consistently added a wide range of high-calibre agents over the past two years, enriching our cooperative culture and boosting our shareholders' financial returns. Maintaining that momentum will be a focus over the next 12 months.

TD: What are some of the key challenges for agents in 2026 and how can they be overcome?

CH: The question every agent has to ask themselves is this: 'Do I have the technology, people and network support I need to prosper in an increasingly fluid and unpredictable travel market?'

We are focused on ensuring our members can always answer 'yes' to that question.

RL: One of the biggest challenges for agents right now is keeping pace with travellers who are more intentional and better informed than ever. Expedia TAAP data shows that travel agents are really leveraging the filter function when searching for lodging options, and year-over-year usage of amenity filters jumped nearly 55% - a clear sign that travellers know exactly what they want and agents expect fast, relevant options in return.

At the same time, disruption hasn't gone away, meaning agents are still managing a lot of complexity behind the scenes. »

Agents need to stay one step ahead of their clients, who are more informed than ever.

"THERE'S A REAL OPPORTUNITY IN BUILDING MORE CREATIVE, FLEXIBLE ITINERARIES RATHER THAN SINGLE-STAY TRIPS."



The way forward is having the right technology and partners to reduce friction - tools that surface the best rates, filter-matched properties and flexible options quickly. When agents spend less time navigating admin and more time advising clients, they can deliver the level of personalisation and reassurance travellers now expect.

MA: Many of the challenges agents face are out of our hands - the ever-changing geopolitical environment, economic pressure, technology acceleration, and skills shortages.

I think the most successful businesses and agents remain calm and disciplined, whilst consistently innovating and upskilling, and ensuring that human connection shines through.

TD: What are some of the ways that traveller behaviour is changing and how can agents support them?

MA: Travellers continue to be time-poor and overwhelmed by 'information fatigue' - where hours of research become exhausting and confusing, and an agent able to provide clarity, bring it all together and make it easy, is of high value.

Travellers want to feel special and disconnect from the rat race whilst reconnecting with family, friends, and the world, so an agent able to provide an itinerary and experiences out of the ordinary, to create the extraordinary, is in high demand.

Travellers also want access 24/7, so blending service with technology is the winning formula.

RL: What we're seeing is traveller behaviour becoming more experience-led and culturally influenced. For example, Expedia's *Unpack '26* report highlights the rise of 'set-jetting' - travel inspired by films and TV - with 53% of travellers worldwide saying their interest has grown, jumping to 81% among Gen Z and Millennials.

We're also seeing demand shaped by major events. Following the 2024 Olympic Games, Paris topped Expedia TAAP searches in 2025 with 2.8 million lodging searches (3.8 million including the wider vicinity).

Agents can stay ahead of these shifts by using data to anticipate demand, such as building event calendars, tracking entertainment releases and tailoring recommendations accordingly. When those insights are paired with human expertise,



Finding the time to train the next generation of agents is a constant challenge for many agency owners.

travellers gain the confidence that they're choosing the right destination at the right moment.

TD: Robin, what advice can you offer agents in terms of selling strategies?

RL: Focus on selling value, not just price. Travellers want reassurance, flexibility and someone who understands what matters most to them, especially when things don't go exactly to plan. Using data to personalise options and explain why something is a good fit can be incredibly powerful. When agents clearly communicate their expertise and the support they offer, trust follows naturally.

TD: What are some of the untapped opportunities for travel agents this year?

RL: There's a real opportunity in building more creative, flexible itineraries rather than single-stay trips. Trends like hotel hopping, experience-led stays and event-driven travel open the door for agents to add genuine value. Travellers may not always know how to piece these trips together themselves, and that's where agent expertise really shines. These types of bookings often lead to stronger relationships and repeat business.

The rise of the hotel hopping trend means travellers are intentionally splitting stays for variety and value, such as pairing a boutique hotel with a resort within the same trip.

These types of itineraries are harder for travellers to piece together themselves,

which puts agents in a prime position to curate them. Offering default two-property plans, experience-led stays and event-based itineraries helps agents differentiate their service and deepen client loyalty.

TD: What trends are on your radar at the moment?

MA: Trends we are focusing on are the luxury end of travel, cruising, and multi-generational travel.

We are seeing an appetite for immersion and connection, with small group touring, and cruising with local experiences at the fore.

Destinations shining through continue to be the Mediterranean, Canada and Japan, with Egypt, China and Vietnam rising strongly.

CH: From a geopolitical perspective, these are interesting times. And economically, there are ongoing concerns about cost-of-living pressures.

The good news is that consumer demand for travel appears to be holding up and it seems to be based on a fundamental shift in how people view travel. At last year's Beyond Borders conference, ATIA research suggested that travel has moved off Australians' discretionary spend list and is now part of their 'mandatory' spend list.

That means when financial pressures rise, people no longer ask themselves, 'will we travel?', only 'where will we travel?' That's a trend that our members are experiencing, and it's one that is reflected in our forward bookings. ••



TRAVEL MARKETING TRENDS

Here is what will give smart professionals the edge this year, from using AI strategically to understanding social search and the evolving traditional media landscape.

BY CHRIS FUNDELL, FOUNDER, STRATIVATE MARKETING

Travel marketing has always been complex, but at the beginning of 2026, it also feels full of opportunity. Australian travel agents and tour operators are operating in a landscape shaped by AI, changing consumer search behaviour, rising expectations for personalisation, content that actually means something and, of course, constant pressure to deliver results right now.

The marketers who will win won't be the ones chasing every new platform, tool or trend. They will be the ones focusing on the fundamentals - just applied smarter, faster and with a lot more intent.

Why? Because competition is strong, and in some segments, increasingly saturated. In that environment, chasing share becomes part of the strategy. Speed, agility and using the tools available more intelligently will be what gives brands the edge.

Here is what will really matter in travel marketing in 2026.

Data and personalisation: Still the biggest competitive advantage

Disconnected data remains one of the biggest blockers to growth for travel businesses. That hasn't changed, but the cost of not fixing it will only continue to increase.

In 2026, personalisation is no longer a 'nice to have'. McKinsey has reported that companies leading in personalisation generate up to 40% more revenue from those activities than average performers. In travel, where decisions are emotional, high-value and often infrequent, relevance really matters.

From what can be seen across the industry, most Australian agents and tour operators already have plenty of data. Enquiry history, destinations and products purchased, booking frequency, budgets,

seasonality - the list goes on. The issue is not access to data - it is that it lives in too many places. CRMs, booking systems, email platforms and advertising accounts rarely talk to each other.

The real opportunity in 2026 sits in importable, connected data. When travel brands bring customer data into a single source of truth, they can use it across paid media, search, email, websites and re-marketing. It also strengthens first-party data strategies at a time when third-party tracking continues to decline.

The brands that get this right will not feel like they are marketing harder. They will simply feel more relevant and that relevance will separate the brands that grow from the ones that don't.

How consumers will search for travel in 2026 (and why clicks matter less)

Travel search is no longer owned by one platform, and it is no longer guaranteed to deliver a click.

In 2026, we are firmly in a zero-click and AI-assisted search environment. Recent studies suggest that more than 55-60% of Google searches now end without a click, as users get answers directly from search results, maps, reviews, social platforms or AI summaries.

This is one of the biggest mindset shifts travel brands need to make. Fewer clicks do not mean less influence. Visibility, authority and brand recall matter more than raw traffic, and being the source of trusted information is becoming just as important as being the destination itself.

Social search will also continue to grow. While this started with Gen Z and Millennials, 2026 will see continued growth among Gen X and even Boomers as behaviours change. »

“WE ARE FIRMLY IN A ZERO-CLICK AND AI-ASSISTED SEARCH ENVIRONMENT.”

Search behaviour still varies significantly by demographic. Gen Z and younger Millennials tend to discover travel through social platforms, with TikTok now used by more than 60% of Gen Z as a search engine, particularly for travel inspiration. AI tools are then used to shortlist destinations and structure trips, with visual proof and peer validation playing a big role.

Older Millennials and Gen X still rely heavily on Google, but increasingly blend traditional search with AI-assisted tools to compare itineraries, pricing and reviews. Google has stated that more than 40% of travellers now use multiple digital touch points before booking.

Boomers and retirees remain anchored in Google Search, Maps and direct website visits, with phone enquiries still common. For this group, trust signals and clarity consistently outweigh novelty.

Travel brands in 2026 need to optimise not just for clicks, but for presence, accuracy and authority across the search journey.

Credibility, authority and platform compliance will shape visibility

As Google and other platforms lean further into AI-driven results, credibility is becoming a ranking advantage and compliance is becoming non-negotiable.

Platforms are increasingly rewarding brands that demonstrate real, first-hand experience, consistent and accurate information, transparent business details and strong trust signals. Just as importantly, they are favouring brands that comply with platform guidelines, privacy standards and advertising policies.

For travel businesses, this goes well beyond SEO. Platform compliance from Google Business Profiles and Meta advertising policies through to email consent, reviews and data usage will directly impact visibility, reach and cost efficiency.

Non-compliant or low-trust brands will not just rank lower in 2026. They risk being excluded from AI summaries, paid placements and recommendation engines altogether.

The upside is that this plays to the strengths of good agents and operators. Real itineraries, knowledgeable staff, accurate pricing and honest content will consistently outperform generic, AI-generated travel copy.

AI will reward smart marketers, not lazy ones

AI is now embedded in almost every marketing platform, and by 2026, it will be



unavoidable. However, the advantage does not come from using AI, it comes from how it is used.

The smartest travel marketers are already using AI to speed up content creation and localisation, produce campaign variations at scale, analyse performance and demand trends faster, and support enquiry handling and customer service.

There is a clear balance emerging. AI handles speed and volume, while humans still own strategy, brand, compliance and customer trust. That balance will define successful travel marketing in 2026.

How 2026 will reshape marketing teams

Marketing teams in 2026 will be shaped by one overriding need: agility.

The pace of change combined with ongoing commercial pressure means travel businesses need to move faster, test more and adapt quickly. That does not necessarily mean bigger teams, it means smarter structures.

The most effective marketing teams will be built around speed, flexibility and access to expertise. Internal teams will focus on brand direction and execution, supported by automation and external specialists when needed. The ability to bring in experienced marketers quickly whether for strategy, performance, data or AI, will be critical to driving growth without slowing momentum.

Traditional media is still cool (and still effective)

Despite continued digital acceleration, traditional media still plays an important role in 2026, particularly in Australia.

Print, TV, radio, outdoor and partnerships continue to build trust and authority, especially for high-value or complex trips, older demographics, and regional or local markets. These channels still influence decision-making particularly when paired with digital activity.

Just as important is one-to-one human engagement. Personal service, phone calls, consultations and tailored follow-ups remain powerful differentiators, especially when supported by smart systems.

Short-term pressure isn't going away... but foundations matter more

Finally, the reality: short-term sales pressure isn't disappearing in 2026.

Seasonality, cash flow and uncertainty mean long-term strategy is often sacrificed for immediate results, but the most resilient travel brands will be the ones investing in data, credibility and systems that continue to deliver value even when budgets tighten.

The future of travel marketing is not about choosing between AI or humans, digital or traditional. It is about integration, trust and adaptability and building a marketing engine that can move fast without losing direction. ••

FUTURE FORWARD

IN NUMBERS



44%

AUSSIES UNDER 35 WHO PLAN TO BOOK A CRUISE IN 2026.

— TOURISM & TRANSPORT FORUM (TTF) AUSTRALIA

1.3

THE NUMBER OF TRIPS BABY BOOMERS BOOK A YEAR – NEARLY TWICE THE NATIONAL AVERAGE.

— BUNNIK TOURS



41%

AUSTRALIANS KICK OFF THEIR HOLIDAY PLANNING IN JANUARY.

— SKYSCANNER

+

69%

OVER-55s ENJOY STAYING LONGER IN ONE DESTINATION AND EXPLORING IT.

— WENDY WU TOURS

+



81%



GEN Z TRAVELLERS WHO HAVE BEEN INSPIRED TO TRAVEL BASED ON WHAT THEY HAVE SEEN IN FILM OR TV.

— EXPEDIA

+

64%

PEOPLE WHO CHOOSE TO TRAVEL WITH FAMILY TO MAKE LASTING MEMORIES.

— HILTON

“2026 IS SET TO BE DEFINED BY INTENTIONAL, JOY-DRIVEN ITINERARIES THAT BLEND CULTURAL CACHET, DESIGN-LED STAYS, AND ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME MOMENTS.”

— SMARTFLYER

