Destination Decisions 2026

Analysis by

miles
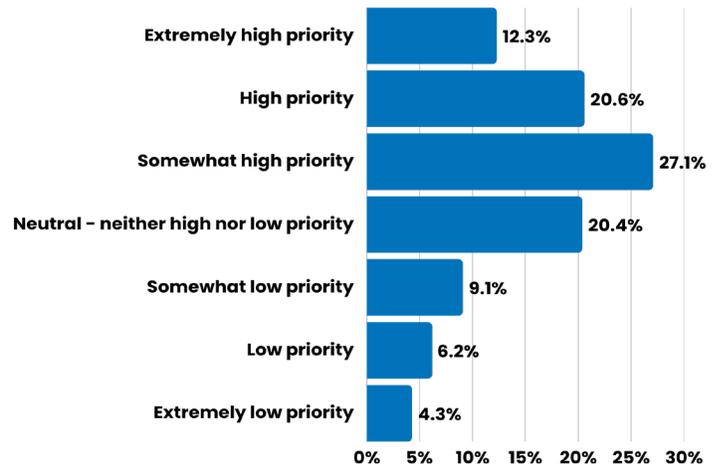### PARTNERSHIP

Research by

Future Partners

Future Partners and Miles Partnership are pleased to present the first 2026 installment of The State of the American Traveler study, where we share the latest insights on U.S.–based travelers as part of our continued partnership to keep the travel industry informed on trends and new developments within the travel and media landscapes.

In this year's Destination Decisions Edition of Future Partners' The State of the American Traveler Study, we will explore the role of off-season travel and dispersal in impacting travelers' decisions about where they go. As the definition of "shoulder seasons" shifts and concerns over overcrowding in certain destinations persist, this edition will uncover the nuances in what motivates and what deters travelers when deciding where they want to go, as well as what channels they turn to when seeking destination information.

POSITIVE TRAVEL SPEND SENTIMENT

Thinking carefully about how you expect to spend your income in the next three months, please use the scale below to describe your spending priorities. (Select one) Leisure travel will be a(n) _____.
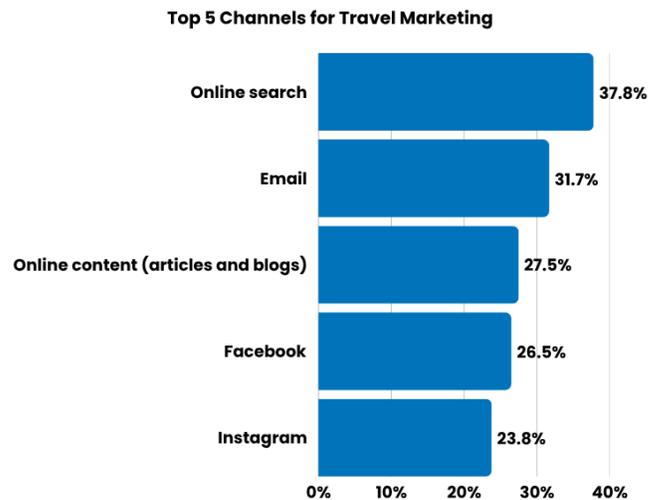
The bottom line: 60% of Americans are prioritizing leisure travel in the next three months, a figure that has rebounded since late last year. With the majority of travelers actively budgeting for leisure trips, destinations have a strong window to capture demand, especially through channels that align with traveler receptivity.

Extremely high priority	12.3%
High priority	20.6%
Somewhat high priority	27.1%
Neutral - neither high nor low priority	20.4%
Somewhat low priority	9.1%
Low priority	6.2%
Extremely low priority	4.3%

TOP TRAVEL MARKETING CHANNELS

Please think about how travel destinations could best reach you with their messages right now. Where would you generally be MOST RECEPTIVE to learning about new destinations to visit?
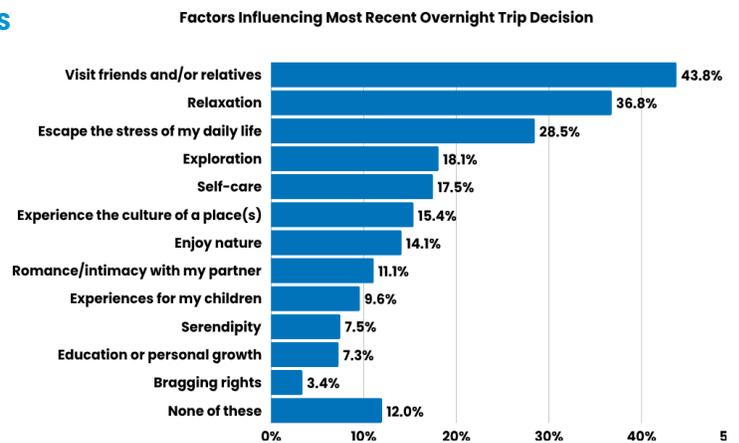
The bottom line: Online search (37.8%) ranks as the top channel where travelers would be open to learning about new destinations, followed by email, online articles and blogs, Facebook and Instagram. However, there are key differences in travel marketing channels by traveler type, so consider a more targeted media strategy to effectively reach your most valuable audiences. For example, Gen Z is particularly receptive to Instagram, whereas Boomers prefer online search.

Top 5 Channels for Travel Marketing

Online search	37.8%
Email	31.7%
Online content (articles and blogs)	27.5%
Facebook	26.5%
Instagram	23.8%

## FACTORS INFLUENCING OVERNIGHT TRIP DECISIONS

Please think about why you took your most recent overnight trip. Which of the following played a role in your decision to take this trip?

The bottom line: Visiting friends and family is the leading reason for overnight trips, followed by relaxation (36.8%) and escaping day-to-day stress (28.5%), underscoring the growing role of wellness in shaping travel decisions.

Factors Influencing Most Recent Overnight Trip Decision

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Visit friends and/or relatives	43.8%
Relaxation	36.8%
Escape the stress of my daily life	28.5%
Exploration	18.1%
Self-care	17.5%
Experience the culture of a place(s)	15.4%
Enjoy nature	14.1%
Romance/intimacy with my partner	11.1%
Experiences for my children	9.6%
Serendipity	7.5%
Education or personal growth	7.3%
Bragging rights	3.4%
None of these	12.0%

AI USAGE AMONG OFF-SEASON AND OFF-THE-BEATEN-TRACK TRAVELERS

In the past 12 months, have you used any AI tools specifically to help you plan (or prepare for) your trips?

% Used AI to Plan Trips in the Past Year
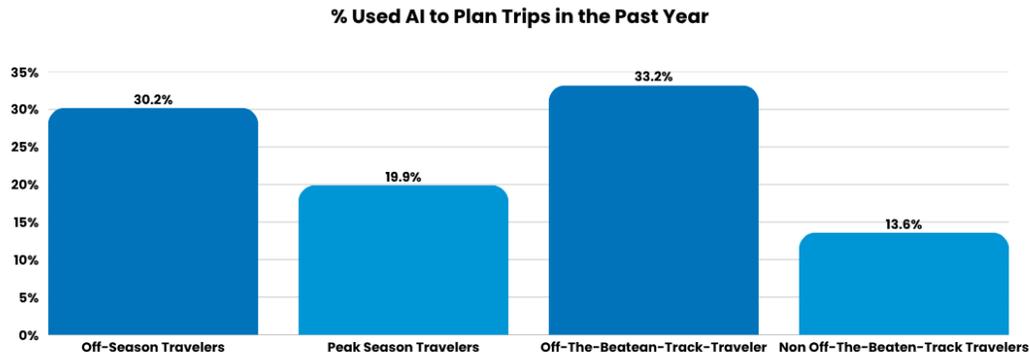
The bottom line: As AI usage continues to accelerate, American travelers are increasingly turning to these tools for trip planning, with 26.3% reporting use in the past year. Adoption of AI tools in travel planning is even higher among off the beaten track (33.2%) and off-season (30.2%) travelers, signaling an opportunity to reach these audiences through AI-driven discovery.

SPONTANEITY IN OFF-THE-BEATEN-TRACK AND OFF-SEASON TRAVELERS

How often do you take spontaneous leisure trips (i.e., trips sparked by impulse that begin soon after the idea arises)?

% Very Frequently or Frequently Take Spontaneous Leisure Trips
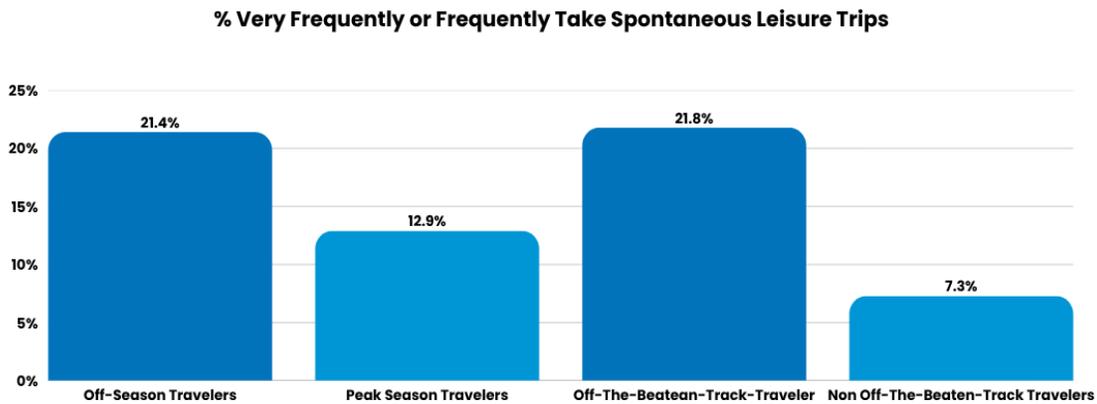
The bottom line: Off the beaten track and off-season travelers are more likely than peak-season travelers to say that they frequently take spontaneous leisure trips. They are also more likely to say that they regularly plan trips around supporting their well-being. An always-on approach for getaways, with upcoming special events peppered in, could help capture market share for these travelers who are less beholden to time constraints and more open to visiting lesser-known places.

5 Essential Insights

1

Travel spending sentiment has rebounded, with most Americans prioritizing leisure trips in the near term. That momentum creates a strong window for destinations to connect with travelers while they're planning.

2

While online search leads as the top channel for destination discovery, receptiveness varies by traveler type. A one-size-fits-all media strategy risks missing your most valuable audiences.

3

Wellness is a core travel motivator. Relaxation and stress relief rank just behind visiting friends and family as reasons for overnight trips, creating an opportunity for destinations to lead with well-being in their messaging.

4
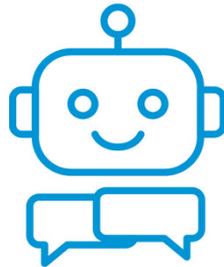
Off-the-beaten-track and off-season travelers are among the strongest adopters of AI for trip planning, making them a high-value audience for destinations investing in AI visibility and discovery.

5

Off-season and off-the-beaten-track travelers are less beholden to fixed schedules and more likely to travel on impulse, suggesting that seasonal campaigns alone may not be enough to reach them. Year-round visibility matters for this audience.

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Additional Resources:

Webinar: Destination Decisions