



AITO'S 2026 Travel Insights Report Reveals That Human Expertise Trumps AI as Brits Shield Holiday Budgets from Economic Pressure

- 60% of travellers say they are unlikely to use AI for holiday planning, preferring human expertise for high-value trips.
- 70% of holidaymakers say the last government budget has had little effect on their 2026 travel plans.
- Over a third of travellers now find rail travel very appealing signalling a massive shift toward slower, more scenic journeys.
- 41% now researching holidays six to twelve months in advance.
- 93% willing to pay more for a better holiday experience, viewing it as an essential lifestyle investment.

LONDON, 4th March 2026 – New data from the 2026 AITO, The Specialist Travel Association, Travel Insights Report reveals a defiant trend among the UK's specialist travel bookers, who are shunning AI in favour of human expertise and refusing to let government budget announcements dampen their holiday plans. Drawing on over 8,300 responses, from the databases of Specialist Travel companies consisting of AITO Tour Operators, AITO Travel Agents and Tourist Board Partners the comprehensive survey uncovers the standout travel trends for 2026, highlighting how specialist bookers are refining their priorities for the year ahead.

Over 93 % of respondents were above the age of 50, with 43% describing themselves as fortunate enough to be financially well off. The typical AITO traveller is motivated by meaningful experiences, which can take many forms, from cultural discovery and adventure to relaxation and indulgence. The age profile clearly highlights the strength of the over-50s market. Just over 93% of AITO travellers are aged 50 and above, with the largest segments being those aged 60–69 (36.2%) and 70–79 (34.4%).

Booking Behaviour and Holiday Planning Insights

Despite a challenging UK economy, 85% of respondents now categorise holidays as an essential part of their lifestyle, with nearly 80% willing to pay more to guarantee a high-quality experience. While late booking has dominated in recent years as travellers sought value for money, AITO data reveals that 41% are now researching their holidays at least six



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to twelve months in advance. This forward planning signals strong intent and reinforces that travel is being prioritised, not treated as a discretionary, last-minute spend.

While Artificial Intelligence (AI) dominates global headlines, it is failing to capture the trust of the specialist travel market. 60% of travellers have not used AI for holiday planning and indicate they are unlikely to in the future. Only 10% of travellers have turned to AI for planning, with the vast majority citing a clear preference for the reassurance and personalised service of a professional travel organiser.

Climate change dominating the headlines has evidently had some impact on travellers with 80% viewing travel as a force for good and preferring brands with strong sustainability credentials. While booking habits don't always reflect these values, there is a growing intent to prioritise responsible choices and local community support. A say-do gap persists, yet anecdotal evidence shows travellers are increasingly taking sustainability seriously once they reach their destination.

Stable Spending Power and Travelling Better

Despite 18% of respondents admitting that they expect their financial position to get a little worse over the next twelve months, many travellers are still choosing to invest more in the right holiday, prioritising quality and experience over cost. 80% of respondents are willing to pay more for a better holiday experience while 85% of respondents agreed that holidays are an essential part of their lifestyles. Choosing to spend more despite economic pressures shows confidence in the perceived value of travel as people see holidays as worthwhile investments in their wellbeing.

70% percent of respondents indicated that the recent government budget has had little to no effect on their holiday plans underscoring the enduring resilience of travel demand. Despite rising costs, many people remain committed to taking the holidays they want, prioritising experiences over external financial pressures. It also reflects a willingness to plan ahead and invest in trips that deliver satisfaction, comfort, and memorable experiences, even in the face of broader economic uncertainty.

Travellers are prepared to allocate higher budgets to secure the right experience, showing that today's travel decisions are guided by quality and personalised options rather than purely cost. Understanding these priorities highlights the growing market for premium and curated holidays, and the importance of catering to an experience focused audience.



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Popular Destinations and Travel Trends for the Year Ahead

The 2026 travel landscape is defined by a move towards more engaged travel as travellers trade beach loungers for more active exploration. While over half of respondents are still drawn to the familiar comfort of Western Europe, their itineraries are becoming far more diverse. Nearly 35% are now opting for city breaks, while another 30% are prioritising deep cultural immersion and wildlife encounters. Travellers increasingly view their time away as an opportunity for personal growth and activity, such as the 27% now planning dedicated walking or trekking expeditions.

This specialist audience is also looking for cool-cation destinations to avoid extreme heat. Although destinations such as France, Spain, and Portugal are still highly popular a combined 21% are pushing further into the temperate landscapes of Norway, Finland, and Iceland or the cultural heartlands of Germany and Switzerland.

This evolution is also transforming how people travel, sparking a significant rail renaissance with over a third of travellers finding the rails very appealing, a clear signal that the journey itself has become a centrepiece of the holiday experience. This preference for slower, more scenic travel goes in hand with the rising interest in Northern and Central Europe, regions where world-class infrastructure allows for a more sustainable and slower approach to touring.

The long-haul market is also proving strong in 2026 where travellers are seeking local immersion. North and Central America (including Canada and the Caribbean) remains one of the most popular regions for travellers, closely followed by Southeast and East Asia as the leading destinations in 2026. Africa is continuing to rise in popularity, while the Indian Subcontinent remains strongly represented. South America is close behind, while Australia and New Zealand remain broadly stable within the midrange of destinations. The Polar regions are also growing in popularity although numbers remain low in comparison.

The data highlights a new era of solo travel, 14% of travellers indicated that they will be taking solo trips this year which competes with the 15% of those planning to travel with family suggesting that specialist bookers are no longer waiting for a companion to tick off bucket list items. This group is leveraging specialist operators to provide a safety net for their solo adventures, ensuring that even when travelling alone they have access to the insider knowledge and local experiences they need.



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Martyn Sumners, Executive Director of AITO, commented: “The data from our 2026 Travel Insights report sends a resounding message, the British Traveller is prioritising peace of mind and personal connection. In an era where AI is often presented as the future of travel, it’s safe to say that those booking specialist travel are looking the other way valuing the nuanced experience and insight that only a specialist professional can provide.

“What is also striking is the sheer resilience of the specialist market. Despite the economic pressures of the recent government budget, and the persistent cost-of-living crisis in the UK, holidays have shifted from being a discretionary luxury to a non-negotiable lifestyle essential. People aren't just looking for a trip, they are investing in quality, whether that’s a long-haul trip for deep cultural immersion or a slow travel rail adventure across Europe. For 2026, the value of a holiday is being measured by the depth of the experience, not just the price on the tag.”

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