

AITO Specialist Travel Agents and Tour Operators Celebrate the 25th Annual KickStart Conference



L-R: All winners gathered on stage at the AITO All Stars & Excellence Awards

12th January 2026: AITO - The Specialist Travel Association launched a historic year this past weekend, hosting its 25th annual domestic Kick-Start conference at the Leonardo Hotel, Hinckley Island with AITO Specialist Travel Agents. The event marked a poignant beginning to 2026 in which AITO celebrates its 50th Anniversary.

Over 100 members, including 45 independent travel agents, 57 specialist operators, and five affiliate partners, gathered to network and set the strategic tone for this milestone year.

The conference opened with a warm welcome from **Agents Chair, Gemma Antrobus**. Reflecting on five decades of specialist travel excellence. A headline discussion titled **"Gold Standard Partnerships: A Manifesto for the Future of Specialist Travel Agents"** was moderated by Antrobus and Sarah Turner.

The evening transition from business to celebration began with a gala reception, followed by the highly anticipated **All Stars & Excellence Awards**. These awards specifically recognise AITO Agents for their outstanding sales performance of AITO tour operator holidays and their proactive engagement with the association's core values.

In a nod to the association's founding decade, the night concluded with a "Sensational 70s" themed Gala Dinner and a silent disco, allowing members to "turn back time" and celebrate the decade AITO was born.

Well-deserved winners of the Awards included:

Gold Excellence Awards: Andara Travel, Full Circle Travel, Haslemere Travel, Oasis Travel, Off Broadway Travel, Travel Stop, Travelwise

Silver Excellence Awards: Beaver Travel, Designer Travel, Peakes Travel Elite, RB Collection, Select World Travel, Journeys a La Carte

Bronze Excellence Awards: Billington Travel, Butterfly Travel, Create Your Escape Travel, Inspire Travel, Marco Polo Travel, Swords Travel, The Travel Concept, Travel by Hannah, Luxury Dream Holidays

Tour Operator of the Year: Distinctive World Travel

All Star Agent - Highest Average Booking: Worldwide Escape

Most Improved Travel Agent: Luxury Dream Holidays

All Star Agent – Most Branch Bookings 2025: Traveller's World (Salisbury)

Travel Agency of the Year: RB Collection

All Star Agent 2025 – North, Scotland and Northern Ireland: Designer Travel

All Star Agent 2025 - Central and East England: RB Collection

All Star Agent 2025 - South: Travelwise

All Star Agent 2025 - National: Designer Travel

Tour Operator Shining Star of the Year: Julie Gough, Africa & Beyond

New AITO Agent Shining Star: Janey Berry, Berry Travel

Agent Shining Star of the Year: Jacqui Cole, Bakewell Travel

AITO Specialist Agent Chair's Award: Bridget Keevil, Travel Stop

The second day of the event focused on high-energy networking through the AITO Marketplace. Agents and operators engaged in a series of "quick-fire" sessions designed to foster closer working relationships and explore new business opportunities. The MarketPlace saw a total of 37 rapid-fire appointments, each lasting six minutes, ensuring maximum engagement and collaboration across the association. The KickStart conference concluded as an extremely successful launchpad for what promises to be a momentous 50th Anniversary year.



L-R: Hayley Smith (Premier Travel), Rajeev Manral (Novaturient), Hannah (Travel by Hannah), Matt Purser (C The World), Matthew O’Sullivan (Archipelago Choice), Gemma Antrobus (Haslemere Travel and Agent Chair), Justin Wateridge (Steppes Travel), Jake Cardigan (Archipelago Choice), Shaun Taylor (Inspire Travel)

Martyn Sumners, Executive Director at AITO said: “Starting our 50th year with such a high level of engagement from both agents and operators is a testament to the enduring power of the AITO family. This conference wasn’t just about looking back at our history but about building on the work we’ve done to help carry our specialist partnerships through the next 50 years.”

Ends