



By Trish Nugent
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The Cost of Escape

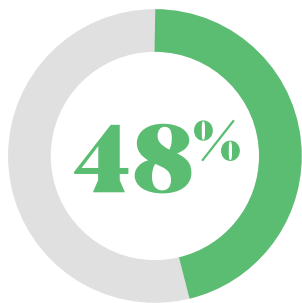
How Emotions and Economics Shape Modern Travel

Drawing on decades of travel marketing expertise, Mower explores how emotion and economics intersect at every stage of the booking journey — and what that means for brands that want to connect.

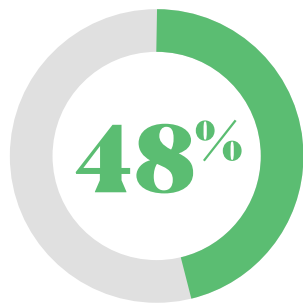
Travel Is No Longer a Luxury—It’s a Lifeline

Nearly half of all travelers (48%) say leisure travel is vital to their mental health. Yet behind that desire lies tension—guilt about spending, the reality of tighter budgets, and the personal math everyone does to decide what feels worth it. These tradeoffs reveal how emotional value and economic value are becoming inseparable.

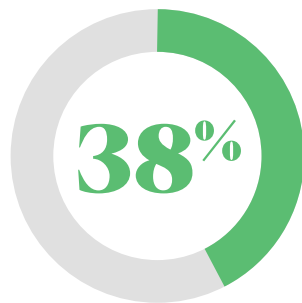
Mower’s 2025 proprietary study, *The Cost of Escape*, reveals how emotions and economics shape the decisions travelers make—and how hotels, resorts and destinations can turn hesitation into bookings.



say leisure travel is essential to wellbeing.



cut back on dining out to afford a trip—the most common tradeoff.



have felt guilty spending on leisure travel—rising to 55% among Gen Z.



of parents and caregivers are most motivated by burnout recovery.



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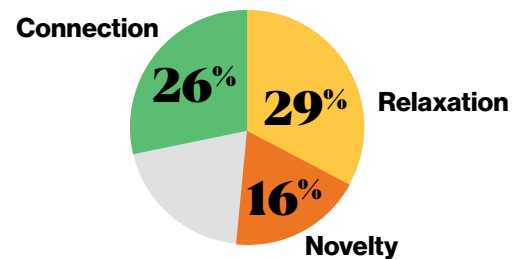
The Emotional Economy of Travel

Guilt, Burnout and the Emotional ROI

Travelers no longer question whether they deserve to get away - but they do wrestle with how to justify it.

- 55% of Gen Z travelers say they feel guilty prioritizing travel, often citing work pressures or professional obligations.
- 29% of parents and caregivers feel overwhelmed by planning or responsibilities, which fuels their hesitation.

But once they go, the payoff is clear: in an open-ended question, 29% say relaxation makes a trip "worth it," followed by connection (26%) and unique or once-in-a-lifetime experiences (16%).



The Cost of Escape

What We're Willing to Give Up to Get Away

When budgets tighten, travelers don't stop dreaming. They recalibrate what they're willing to trade for restoration. To afford leisure travel, Americans are cutting back selectively. Forty-eight percent cut dining out and takeout, 34% reduce visits to coffee shops and other small, daily indulgences, and 34% trim on shopping for clothing, shoes or accessories.



48%
 cut dining out
 to afford a trip

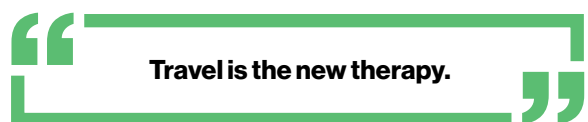
Travelers are trading everyday indulgences for experiences that feel restorative.

Travel as Wellness

The Essential Escape

Nearly half of all travelers (48%) view leisure travel as essential to maintaining their health and happiness. Gen Z (46%) are more likely to view leisure travel as a worthwhile luxury when budget allows. Travelers of all ages with a household income above \$100K are more likely to view leisure travel as essential to wellbeing.

For many, travel isn't indulgence — it's important self-care. Travel brands that tap into this mindset do more than sell trips. They support travelers' mental and emotional wellbeing.





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Feeling Seen

The Missing Piece of Emotional Value

Even for travelers who can afford to go, feeling seen matters, because representation shapes both aspiration and justification.

- A notable 39% say they don't see themselves represented in travel advertising.
- This sense of exclusion is strongest among low-income, diverse and LGBTQ+ travelers.

When travelers don't feel represented, a trip feels a little less rewarding — and a lot harder to justify. Authenticity bridges the gap:



When travelers see themselves in the story, they're more likely to see the trip as worth it.



The Value Shift

What 'Worth It' Means Now

“Luxury” no longer means status. Today, “worth it” means comfort, time and a sense of ease. Across demographics, lodging (68%) and food (61%) are the top spending priorities.



Gen Z leads with food and drink (71%) as their #1 priority



Parents invest in wellness activities (24%) and kids' experiences (36%)



Boomers place the highest value on lodging (79%) and transportation (41%)



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What Finally Makes Us Go From Deals to Feelings

What makes travelers book sooner than planned?

57%
say a great deal or discount

50%
of parents and caregivers say stress or burnout relief

18%
say inspiring travel content



Deals drive decisions, but emotions seal them.

Takeaways for Hoteliers & DMOs Turning Emotions Into Action

To convert “hesitation” into “booked,” marketers should:

Talk about travel as essential self-care— not indulgence.

Show how your travel experience offers relief, not perfection.

Focus your value on comfort and connection, not just cost savings.

Speak to the tradeoffs travelers already make – feeling seen and understood by a brand is powerful.

Celebrate balance, not excess.

When brands meet travelers at the intersection of emotion and economics, they earn both hearts and reservations.

About the Study

Mower conducted an online survey of 1,200 U.S. leisure travelers in August 2025 to explore emotional and economic drivers of travel behavior. Respondents represented a cross-section of ages, income levels and family statuses.

About Mower’s Travel & Tourism Specialty

Mower is one of the nation’s leading independent agencies, offering integrated marketing, PR and creative services. WBENC-certified as a women-owned business, Mower’s Travel & Tourism specialty has helped destinations, resorts and hospitality brands for over 40 years turn insights into guest relationships rooted in emotion and experience.

[Connect with Trish Nugent, SVP – Head of PR & PA to learn more.](#)