

AI Starts the Trip. Trust Closes It.

What 1,000 AI-using U.S. leisure travelers reveal about the new path from discovery to decision

AI hasn't replaced the travel-planning journey. It has become a new starting point.

In Mower's national survey of 1,000 U.S. leisure travelers ages 18–64 who use AI at least occasionally, 28% said they would be most likely to start planning their next leisure trip with an AI tool. That puts AI close behind Google search at 30% and ahead of online travel agencies, social media, official tourism websites and travel advisors as a starting point.

But what happens after AI makes a recommendation may matter even more to travel marketers.

Among respondents who have used AI for travel planning, 59% search Google after getting an AI recommendation. Nearly half — 49% — visit the official website. Others compare prices, read traveler reviews, check social content or even ask another AI tool.

Only 5% say they book exactly what AI suggested.

AI may increasingly create the shortlist. Trust still closes the sale.

For travel marketers, that means success depends on more than being surfaced by AI. The brand also has to hold up when travelers do what they already do next: check Google, visit the official site, compare prices, read reviews and look for other signals that confirm the recommendation.

That creates two priorities: be easy for AI to find and represent accurately, and give travelers enough proof to feel confident choosing you.

AI Has Earned a Place at the Beginning of the Journey

Among the AI-using travelers Mower surveyed, using AI to plan a trip has moved beyond experimentation.

Eighty-six percent have used an AI tool to help plan a trip, and among those users, 97% say AI influenced at least some part of their most recent leisure trip.

Its role is particularly strong where travelers are exploring possibilities and narrowing choices.

More than half have used AI to find restaurants, attractions and local experiences. These are also the discovery tasks travelers trust AI most to handle. That fits naturally with what AI does well in the early stages of travel planning:

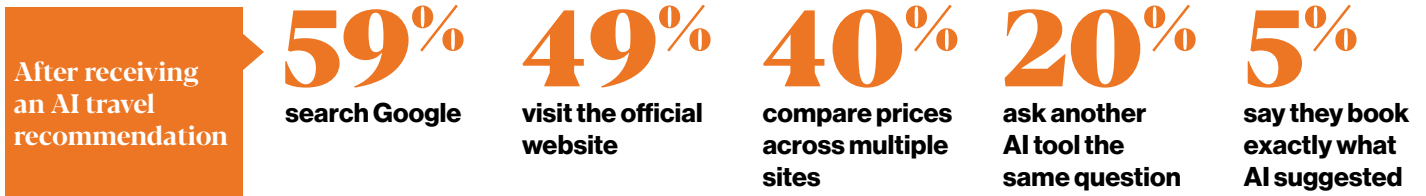
- Give me ideas.
- Help me narrow this down.
- Show me something I might not have found on my own.

One respondent described using AI to find “niche places that were not in the travel guides.”

The challenge is making sure AI has enough clear, current information to understand when a brand belongs in the answer.

What Travel Brands Need to Get Right

Mower's research suggests AI is not replacing the sources travelers have traditionally relied on. Instead, it is changing when these sources enter the decision process.



But Discovery Shouldn't Be Mistaken for Trust

The closer AI gets to making a consequential decision, the more travelers pull back.

Only 28% of respondents mostly or completely trust AI to book a flight on their behalf, and 29% say the same about booking a hotel. Comfort falls even further when the trip itself carries greater financial or emotional weight.

Nearly half of respondents would feel comfortable relying heavily on AI to plan a road trip.

That drops to just 14% for a luxury vacation of \$5,000 or more and 11% for a honeymoon.

Travelers are more comfortable letting AI recommend than letting AI decide.

The AI conversation in travel can easily become focused on what technology can do. Travelers are drawing a different line: just because AI can make a choice or take an action does not mean they are ready to hand over control.

The New Travel-Planning Reflex: Ask AI. Then Check.

An AI recommendation rarely ends the search for travelers.

They verify it.



Confidence falls as the financial or emotional stakes rise.

Among travelers who have used AI for trip planning:

- 59% search Google.
- 49% visit the official website.
- 40% compare prices across multiple sites.
- 20% ask a second AI tool the same question.

That behavior mirrors how respondents describe their relationship with AI. The single largest mindset in the survey — 34% — was:

"I trust AI, but only after I verify its recommendations."

This isn't evidence that AI has failed.

It is evidence that a new travel-planning behavior is taking shape.

AI can create the shortlist. Travelers still look for the proof.

That puts new weight on the sources travelers use to verify a recommendation: brand websites, search results, reviews, pricing, earned media, social content, traveler photos and videos and third-party listings.

They are the evidence travelers use to decide whether an AI recommendation deserves their trust.

The Heaviest AI Users Aren't Necessarily the Least Skeptical

Parents of children under 18 are among the most AI-receptive audiences in the study. They use AI more frequently, are more likely to begin trip planning with it and apply it across a wider range of travel needs. One-third of parents say they would start their next trip with AI, compared with 24% of travelers without children at home.

They also trust AI further into the travel journey.

But they do not simply accept what it tells them.

Travelers with children under 18 at home are more likely than those without to:

- visit an official website after an AI recommendation: 55% vs. 45%
- compare prices across multiple travel sites: 44% vs. 36%
- ask another AI tool the same question: 24% vs. 17%

That challenges the assumption that greater comfort with AI means less scrutiny.

The complexity of family travel — multiple travelers, budgets, schedules, interests and needs — may increase the value of AI as a planning aid. But when more variables matter, so does getting the answer right. Greater reliance can create greater demand for proof. That may be an early signal of how AI-assisted travel planning evolves more broadly: travelers can become more comfortable using AI without becoming less discerning about what they ultimately choose.

What Counts as Proof Depends on the Audience

The study also suggests that travelers do not all look for the same proof.

Gen Z travelers are significantly more likely to consult Reddit or blog discussions after receiving an AI recommendation: 28%, compared with 16% of Millennials and 10% of Gen X. They also look more often to recent traveler photos and videos on social media.

Gen X shows a different pattern.

Four in ten say they trust AI only after verifying its recommendations, significantly more than Gen Z, and they are more sensitive to inaccurate or outdated information.

Know what your audience considers proof.



Know what your audience considers proof.

For some travelers, confidence may come from an official website and current pricing.

For others, it may come from recent traveler reviews, Reddit conversations, social video or credible third-party coverage.

For marketers, the takeaway is to make sure that proof is easy to find.

For Travel Brands, There Are Now Two Jobs

1. Get into the Answer

Travel brands need to think about AI as another discovery environment.

The starting question is simple:



If a traveler asks an AI tool a question relevant to your brand, are you part of the answer?

For a destination: *Where should I take my kids for a three-day fall weekend?*

For an attraction: *What can I do indoors if it rains tomorrow?*

For a resort: *What's a luxury hotel within two hours of New York with a spa and activities for teenagers?*

For a restaurant: *Where can I have a great seafood dinner near my hotel that takes reservations and is open Monday night?*

These are not necessarily brand-name searches. They are questions about needs, occasions, interests, budgets and constraints.

That is why AI discoverability requires more than a well-written homepage.

Travel brands should make it easy for both travelers and AI systems to understand:

- what they offer
- who the experience is best suited for
- what makes it different
- when and how it can be experienced
- what practical considerations matter
- how current the information is

Make your brand easy to understand, represent accurately and recommend.

2. Pass the Fact-Check

Being recommended is only half the job.

The recommendation must hold up when the traveler starts checking.

This is where the brand's broader marketing and reputation ecosystem matters.

If AI says a resort has a particular amenity but the website does not mention it, doubt enters the decision.

If the price AI surfaced bears little resemblance to what the traveler finds when clicking through, trust falls.

If recent reviews consistently contradict the experience being promised, the recommendation loses credibility.

Accuracy is particularly important. When survey respondents were asked what would most damage their trust in AI travel recommendations, the number one answer was being wrong.

For marketers, that means every place a traveler encounters the brand should tell a compatible story.

The official website, listings, rates, reviews, social channels, earned coverage and booking experience do not need to say exactly the same thing.

But they should reinforce rather than undermine one another.

How the Opportunity Shifts by Category

The same discovery-to-verification dynamic applies across travel, but the balance changes depending on the category.

Destinations and attractions: Win discovery

AI is especially well suited to questions about where to go, what to do and how to build an experience around a traveler's interests.

Destinations and attractions should make their experiences easy to surface by audience, season, occasion and need — while ensuring practical information such as hours, closures, accessibility, event schedules and pricing stays current.

Discovery increasingly starts with a need, not a name. That gives destinations an opportunity to show up around the experiences they are best positioned to deliver.

Hotels and resorts: Win verification

Hotel recommendations naturally trigger the behaviors this study identified: checking the official website, comparing rates, reading reviews and looking for reassurance that the experience will match the promise.

Strong photography, accurate amenities, recent reviews, clear policies, current pricing and credible third-party validation can determine whether an AI-generated lead becomes a booking.

For luxury and special-occasion travel, where trust in AI falls sharply, that proof becomes even more important.

Restaurants: Be specific enough to be found

Restaurants are one of the categories in which travelers show relatively high trust in AI recommendations.

Current menus, hours, reservation information, dietary options, location details and distinctive attributes help AI recommend a restaurant for the right occasion. They also make it easier for travelers to verify the recommendation.

Generic information makes a brand harder to recommend. Specific, current information gives AI more reason to surface a restaurant for the right occasion.

Airlines and tour operators: Reduce uncertainty

Travelers show far less willingness to hand AI responsibility for bookings or disruption management.

For brands operating in higher-stakes moments, prioritize clarity: current information, transparent policies, easy-to-understand options and a visible path to human help when something goes wrong.

Five Questions Travel Marketers Should Ask Now

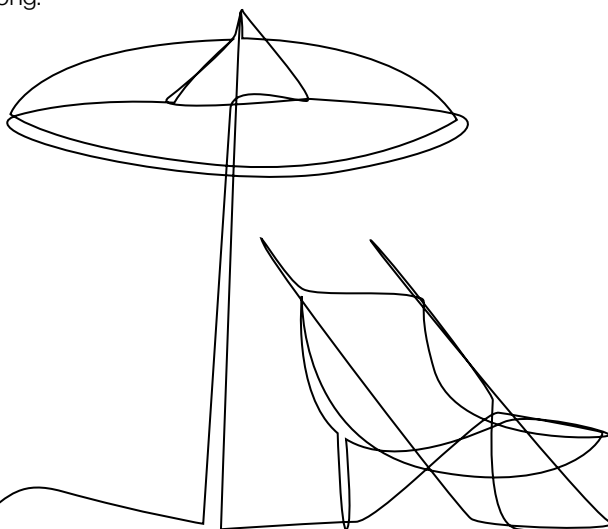
- 1** What questions should AI be able to answer about us?
Think beyond branded search.

Test questions based on audience, trip purpose, season, price point, accessibility, family needs, interests and occasions.

Those are increasingly the questions shaping discovery.
- 2** Is the information AI finds about us accurate today?
Audit the facts most likely to influence a decision: rates, hours, amenities, policies, seasonal offerings, accessibility information, descriptions and booking details.
Look beyond your own website.
- 3** What will travelers find when they verify us?
Follow the journey yourself.

Ask AI for a recommendation, then do what travelers say they do: Google it, visit the site, look at reviews, compare prices, check social content and see whether the story holds together.
- 4** Where could conflicting information create doubt?
Look for gaps between what AI says, what your site says, what booking partners say, what listings say and what recent travelers say.

Small inconsistencies can create outsized uncertainty when a traveler is already checking the answer.



5 Do we have enough proof — not just information?

Travelers are not simply verifying facts. They are looking for confidence.

Recent reviews, traveler imagery, credible media coverage, current social content, clear pricing and useful official information all help move a traveler from “AI recommended it” to “I believe it’s right for me.”

From Recommendation to Decision

AI has already changed travel discovery, but search, websites, reviews, social content, third-party credibility and human judgment still play a critical role in what happens next.

Mower’s research suggests those sources increasingly serve as the proof behind the AI-generated answer.

For travel marketers, that means three things:

- Get into the answer.
- Pass the fact-check.
- Earn the decision.

AI may start the trip.

The brands that give travelers the strongest reasons to trust what they find will be the ones most likely to close it.



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About the Research

Mower conducted a national online survey of 1,000 U.S. leisure travelers ages 18–64 who had personally helped plan or book a leisure trip in the previous 12 months and who use AI tools at least occasionally. The survey was fielded July 7, 2026, through the Pollfish online panel.

Supplemental analyses examined differences by generation and by household composition. Generational comparisons used false discovery rate-adjusted significance testing at $p \leq 0.05$.