

# THE CONNECTION INDEX



2026 TREND REPORT

WHY WE FLY

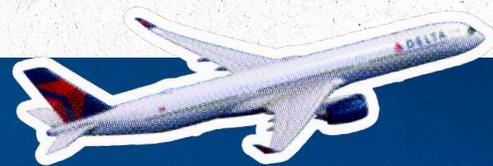


We hold the world in our hands, yet we feel further from the reality of it than ever before. Now travel is emerging as a way to reconnect with the unalterable.

**Historically, the world was something we had to go out and find. Today, it's put in the palm of our hands. Algorithms push a constant stream of places, people and moments to observe or interact with while the rise of AI-generated content makes us question whether any of it is real. As a result, much of our lives now play out on platforms that prioritize performance over presence.**

For all the ways technology has expanded our ability to see and discover the world, Delta's inaugural global survey, The Connection Index, finds that it's also made the physical experience of the world feel newly urgent and necessary.

Travelers crave encounters that remain exhilaratingly offline: A landscape that must be felt, a conversation that can't be simulated, a moment of collective effervescence that exists only if you're there to experience it with others.



79%

of global travelers agree that when so much content can be generated or altered by AI, experiencing something in person feels more meaningful.

**88%**  
SOUTH KOREA

**87%**  
CANADA

**85%**  
US / UK / BRAZIL

**84%**  
SOUTH AFRICA

**74%**  
MEXICO

**70%**  
ITALY

**54%**  
JAPAN

**The chronically online younger generations are more likely than Boomers to feel drawn to in-person experiences.**

**82%**  
MILLENNIALS

**81%**  
GEN Z

**73%**  
BOOMERS

The data shows why we fly: It moves us closer to relationships, perspective and possibility. For more than a century, Delta has raised the bar for what we can expect from an airline, because No One Better Connects the World to the moments where life is lived to the fullest.



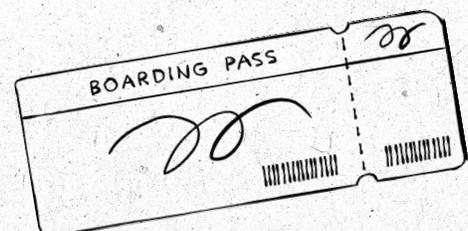
## FLYING TOWARD WHAT MATTERS

The tension between how much of life is experienced digitally and how little of it feels truly lived is creating a sense of distance from the physical world and from one another.

The Connection Index research finds that travel is emerging as a way to close that gap. It offers the chance to surprise our senses, be fully present in a place, meet people outside our usual orbit and remember what it feels like to participate in the world rather than watch it scroll by.

84%

**of global travelers say they feel a strong desire to travel and connect with new places and people regardless of what is happening in the world, a sentiment that is especially strong among Gen Z and Millennials.**



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The research points to four ways travel shapes people today: It helps us belong to something, experience something real, become something new and ultimately change something about our perspective, our priorities, even our futures.

**1. BELONG TO SOMETHING:  
FIND YOURSELF AMONG OTHERS**

Travel brings people into closer proximity with the communities, relationships and shared moments that create a sense of belonging.

**2. EXPERIENCE SOMETHING:  
SENSATION OVER SIMULATION**

Travel offers real experiences the body remembers, replacing screens and simulations with moments that can only be felt in person.



**3. BECOME SOMETHING:  
ONE'S SELF IS THE DESTINATION**

Leaving home often reveals new versions of who we are, as unfamiliar places invite curiosity, confidence and growth.

**4. CHANGE SOMETHING:  
DISTANCE CREATES CLARITY**

Stepping away from daily life creates the distance needed to reflect, reset priorities and return with a clearer perspective.

**BELONG TO SOMETHING:  
FIND YOURSELF  
AMONG OTHERS**

Travel has long played a role in collapsing the distance between humans to foster a deeper sense of belonging, which is especially necessary now given the challenges of forming meaningful relationships. It turns out that the fundamental needs for friendship, partnership and community cannot be met through digital channels without losing that real sense of connection.



**TRAVEL IS HELPING TO COUNTER THE FRIENDSHIP DEFICIT:**

**80%**

**of global travelers say travel is an important way to connect with new people and combat loneliness, which is especially true among men (82%).**

**THE CONNECTIONS PEOPLE MAKE WHILE TRAVELING OFTEN LAST:**

**82%**

**of global travelers say they have connected with someone when traveling, up from 79% when asked in 2025; and 83% say they've kept in contact.**

Travel changes our routines and the rules of interaction. Shared spaces, unfamiliar surroundings and moments of discovery create openings for conversation that everyday life doesn't always leave room for. In that sense, travel is more than movement between destinations, it's a journey toward the possibility of friends and social circles waiting to be formed.

**TRAVEL ISN'T JUST STRENGTHENING EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS, IT'S CREATING NEW ONES:**

**37%** of global travelers say their travels have expanded their circle of friends.



**78%** of parents say travel helps them build meaningful connections with others, compared to 68% of non-parents.

**38%** of global travelers say travel helps them be more present in their relationships.

Travel also has the power to reshape how we embrace the relationships we already have. Outside the routines and distractions of normal life, time together can feel more focused and intentional.

# Traveling with colleagues has a way of accelerating connection.

Through business travel, collaboration and camaraderie move beyond the narrow lanes of scheduled meetings and messages into the unscripted human moments that help coworkers invest in each other.

## WORK TRIPS HAVE THE POWER TO MOVE PROJECTS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS FORWARD:

**32%** of global travelers say traveling with colleagues has strengthened trust and rapport.

|                       |            |             |            |
|-----------------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| <b>45%</b>            | <b>38%</b> | <b>36%</b>  | <b>33%</b> |
| BRAZIL / SOUTH AFRICA | MEXICO     | SOUTH KOREA | JAPAN      |

## TRAVELING WITH COLLEAGUES HELPS YOUNGER GENERATIONS FEEL LIKE THEY'RE PART OF A TEAM:

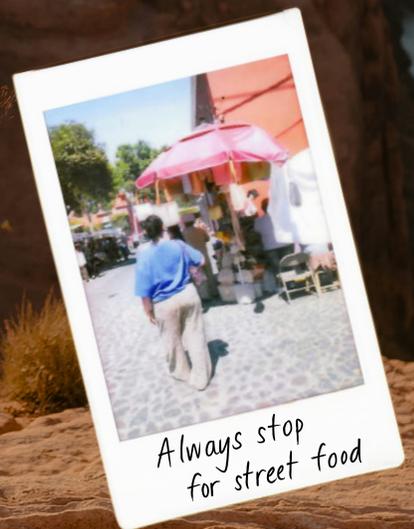
|            |             |            |            |
|------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| <b>32%</b> | <b>31%</b>  | <b>24%</b> | <b>18%</b> |
| GEN Z      | MILLENNIALS | GEN X      | BOOMERS    |



# EXPERIENCE SOMETHING: SENSATION OVER SIMULATION

Curiosity often starts on our screens. A city appears as the backdrop of a must-see series. A new musician surfaces in a playlist. A regional dish makes the rounds on our FYPs. But these moments don't replace the experience. Rather, they are catalysts to find a tangible version of it.

Digital discovery makes the world more visible, but rarely complete. It exposes what can't travel through a screen: The atmosphere of a room, the scale of a landscape, the energy of a crowd. The emotional gap between seeing something and actually experiencing it becomes the reason to go.



73%

**of global travelers went somewhere just to experience, in person, something they first discovered online.**

While this is true for the majority of every generation, it's especially prevalent with younger generations:

**77%**  
MILLENNIALS

**75%**  
GEN Z

**BECOME SOMETHING:**  
**ONE'S SELF IS  
 THE DESTINATION**

Travel does more than introduce us to new places; it introduces us to new versions of ourselves. New cultures, landscapes and ways of living invite us to question assumptions, reconsider perspectives and imagine different possibilities for our own lives.

Part of what makes travel so powerful is its ability to shake up the roles we play every day. At home, routines and expectations tend to define who we are: Parent, employee, caregiver, "the responsible one," "the busy one." But stepping away from that, even for a short time, allows us to see ourselves with a clearer sense of who we are and where we fit in the world.



**38%**

**of global travelers say travel helps bring out a new aspect of their personality.**

Step into a new environment, and a new interest might emerge. **Nearly half of travelers (48%) say a trip introduced them to a new hobby or passion**, proving that unfamiliar places naturally invite experimentation. When routine falls away, curiosity tends to take its place.

# CHANGE SOMETHING: DISTANCE CREATES CLARITY

Stepping away from what's pushed to us through algorithms and screens creates space to reconsider our own priorities, goals and direction. Travel interrupts everyday routines, offering a rare chance to gain perspective. For many travelers, it's an outlook that remains even after the trip ends.

The research suggests travelers often return home with new clarity about the lives they want to build, from career goals to where they live and the relationships they prioritize.



## TRAVEL CAN RESHAPE PROFESSIONAL AMBITIONS:

25%

of global travelers say travel has inspired them to change their career goals or plans, especially among those in the earlier stages of their profession:

31%

GEN Z

29%

MILLENNIALS

29%

say travel inspired them to move to a new place.

35%

GEN Z

33%

MILLENNIALS

Of those who've traveled with a romantic partner, 28% say travel helped them decide to move in together and 22% decided to get engaged, while 14% decided to just be friends.

Something interesting is happening to travel right now. People are craving a deeper connection to what's real.

While screens give us access to everything and everywhere, they don't let us truly belong to it.

Travel, therefore, has begun to represent something different. It's no longer only an escape from routine or a way to see something new. It's a way to verify the world beyond the feed: To hold more than a phone in your hands, witness moments and make memories firsthand, embrace new communities and discover a new version of yourself that's waiting out there.

**THAT IS WHY WE FLY.**





## UNIQUE INSIGHTS BY COUNTRY

### BRAZIL

#### TRAVEL AS EMOTIONAL BONDING

##### Travel is deeply tied to relationships and shared experiences

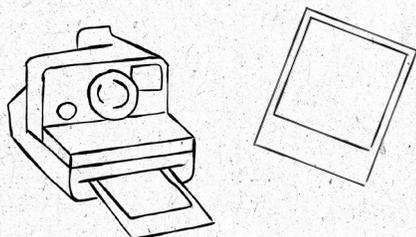
Brazilian travelers place high importance on strengthening bonds with friends, family and romantic partners through travel.

##### Travel is associated with joy and emotional connection

Brazilian respondents frequently describe travel as a way to reconnect emotionally and create memorable shared experiences.

##### Travel inspires major life milestones

Among couples in Brazil, travel is particularly associated with relationship milestones such as becoming official, moving in together or getting engaged.



### CANADA

#### TRAVEL AS REFLECTION AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

##### Travel strengthens relationships through shared experiences

Canadian travelers place strong emphasis on travel as a way to deepen connections with friends, family and partners. Many view travel as an opportunity to spend uninterrupted time together and strengthen relationships through shared experiences.

##### Travel provides space to reset and gain perspective

Canadian travelers frequently associate travel with stepping away from everyday stress and gaining perspective. Travel is often framed as an opportunity to reset, reflect and return home with a clearer sense of priorities.

##### Cultural curiosity motivates exploration

Canadian travelers often describe travel as a way to learn about different cultures and perspectives. Many see trips as an opportunity to broaden their worldview and engage with new places and traditions.

UNIQUE INSIGHTS BY COUNTRY

ITALY

TRAVEL AS CULTURE, AUTHENTICITY AND SHARED MEMORIES

Travel is driven by cultural exploration

Italian travelers place strong emphasis on experiencing history, art, cuisine and culture when traveling. Many view travel as an opportunity to immerse themselves in the traditions and lifestyles of different destinations.

Authentic experiences take priority

Italian travelers frequently highlight the importance of genuine, local experiences over highly curated or digital-first travel moments. Being present and engaging deeply with destinations is a key part of meaningful travel.

Travel creates lasting memories with loved ones

Italian travelers often view travel as a way to create shared memories with friends and family. Experiences such as meals, cultural activities and time spent together help strengthen relationships and define meaningful trips.



JAPAN

TRAVEL AS REFLECTION AND PERSPECTIVE

Travel strengthens relationships through shared experiences

Japanese travelers are particularly likely to say travel increases empathy toward different cultures and ways of life.

Travel encourages reflection and perspective

Japanese travelers often describe travel as an opportunity to gain perspective and better understand their place in the world.

Travel prioritizes meaningful experience over social sharing

Compared to other markets, Japanese travelers place less emphasis on documenting travel online and more on personal experience.





**UNIQUE INSIGHTS BY COUNTRY**

**MEXICO**

TRAVEL AS CONNECTION, CELEBRATION AND SHARED JOY

**Travel centers on family and social connection**

Mexican travelers consistently highlight travel as a way to strengthen family bonds and spend meaningful time with loved ones. Trips are often viewed as shared experiences that bring families and friends closer together.

**Travel is tied to joy and celebration**

Respondents in Mexico frequently frame travel as an opportunity to celebrate life moments and create memorable experiences. Travel is strongly associated with emotional connection, happiness and shared enjoyment.

**Travel encourages cultural discovery and pride**

Mexican travelers often express interest in exploring both international destinations and new places within their own country. Travel is seen as an opportunity to experience culture, history and traditions in meaningful ways.

**SOUTH AFRICA**

TRAVEL AS GROWTH, OPPORTUNITY AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

**Travel expands perspective and opportunity**

South African travelers frequently describe travel as a way to broaden horizons and gain exposure to new cultures and ideas. Many view travel as an opportunity to learn and grow through new experiences.

**Travel builds independence and confidence**

Respondents in South Africa often connect travel with developing confidence and navigating unfamiliar environments. Many see travel as an experience that strengthens independence and personal resilience.

**Travel encourages meaningful cross-cultural connection**

South African travelers value the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds and develop understanding across cultures. Travel is often viewed as a way to build connections that extend beyond geographic boundaries.

**UNIQUE INSIGHTS BY COUNTRY**

**SOUTH KOREA**

**TRAVEL AS CONNECTION AND GROWTH**

**Travel is highly social and connection-driven**

South Korean travelers show strong interest in meeting new people and forming connections while traveling.

**Travel is strongly linked to personal growth**

Respondents frequently associate travel with developing new skills, confidence and independence.

**Digital discovery plays a major role in travel planning**

South Korean travelers are highly likely to seek out destinations they first discovered through digital platforms.

**UNITED STATES**

**TRAVEL AS LIFE-SHAPING AND OPPORTUNITY-DRIVEN**

**Travel as a tool for connection in a disconnected world**

American travelers strongly associate travel with combating loneliness and strengthening relationships. A large majority say travel helps them connect with new people and form deeper friendships.

**Travel drives life decisions and personal ambition**

American travelers are among the most likely to say travel influences major life choices, including career ambitions, learning new skills or even relocating somewhere new.

**Digital inspiration translates directly into travel behavior**

Americans are particularly likely to travel after discovering destinations online, showing a strong link between digital inspiration and real world travel.

**UNITED KINGDOM**

**TRAVEL AS CULTURAL DISCOVERY**

**Travel is closely tied to cultural discovery**

UK travelers place strong value on learning about new cultures and expanding global perspectives through travel experiences.

**Authentic experiences matter more than connectivity**

UK travelers are especially likely to prioritize authentic experiences and being present over connectivity or sharing experiences online.

**Travel reinforces curiosity and exploration**

UK travelers frequently cite discovering new interests, hobbies or perspectives as a key outcome of travel.





# METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

The Delta Air Lines Survey was conducted by Wakefield Research ([www.wakefieldresearch.com](http://www.wakefieldresearch.com)) among 9,000 travelers in the following markets: Brazil, Canada, Italy, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, United Kingdom, and United States, with quotas for 1,000 respondents per market, between February 24 and March 4, 2026, using an email invitation and an online survey. "Travelers" are defined as those who have traveled by air at least once in the past 12 months. Data has been weighted for tracking purposes.

Results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of the variation is measurable and is affected by the number of

interviews and the level of the percentages expressing the results. For the interviews conducted in this particular study, the chances are 95 in 100 that a survey result does not vary, plus or minus, by more than 1 percentage point in the total sample or by 3.1 percentage points in each market from the result that would be obtained if interviews had been conducted with all persons in the universe represented by the sample.

All Polaroid images in this report are sourced from our Delta employees. We would like to thank them for sharing their travel experiences with us.