



DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

From supermarket safaris to AI and new-stalgia, Pól Ó Conghaile picks nine trends for year ahead

campaign last summer racked up persuasion scores (which measure ability to change consumer consideration) of over 90pc – among its highest ever. From hikes to concerts, learning Irish to painting or crafts, the options are endless – *booking.com's* research even says 44pc “would consider moth/butterfly watching or insect spotting”. No, really.

Pól's take: Travel has always been an antidote to busy lives; a space to rest, recharge, and reset our sense of ourselves and each other. In a world of AI, cost-of-living issues, and housing unaffordability, however, this is cutting through in a fresh way for Gen Z. Watch this space.

3 May is the new June

Forget extreme heat and sardine-like beach squeezes. Try “comfortable climates” and destinations “unencumbered by crowds”. Those are “the new luxury”, according to global travel network Virtuoso's

You can see why a destination like Vilnius is billing itself as one of Europe's “least anxiety-inducing cities” – as a greener alternative with a fraction of the visitors of crowded capitals.

In an era of ‘destination dupes’ and ‘coolcations’, the European Travel Commission also reports that 28pc of travellers “plan to shift their trips to different months over the next two years, mainly to avoid crowds, save money, and escape extreme heat”.

Pól's take: Travel habits turn like cruise ships, not speed boats. We are seeing more shoulder-season travel, and travellers exploring alternative destinations, but sun-holiday seasons and resorts grown over generations (not to mention school holidays) will take longer to change.

4 Supermarket safaris

No more grocery store guilt. It's officially OK to travel halfway across the world to spend time in... a convenience store.

“To eat like a local now means heading to the snack aisle,” according to Skyscanner's 2026 Trends Report. “From Tokyo vending machines and 7-Eleven Slurpees to Iceland's geothermal baked bread, gastro tourism is changing.”

Hilton says 77pc of travellers hit local grocery stores to try “authentic” local food and drink – and it's no coincidence that hotels like Dublin's new Hoxton are including local goodies in lobby retail shelves. Thoughtful minibars can also be a way to appeal to travellers' tastes, while telling a destination food story (hello, Cashel Palace).

Pól's take: ‘Shelf-discovery’ is nothing new, as anyone who has taken a deep dive into Carrefour on a French camping holiday, raided a CVS in the US, or filled a trolley at Skibbereen's SuperValu will know. But now it's official. “Views of grocery shopping conversations in travel subreddits are up 78pc year on year,” Skyscanner says.

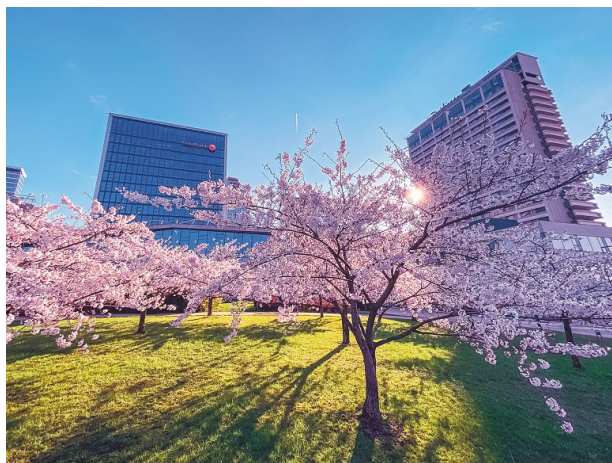
5 Welcome to the United Gates of America

The US has traditionally been Ireland's ‘A’ choice for transatlantic travel. Will 2026 be the year of... erm, USB?

Increased scrutiny of travellers under the Trump administration has coincided with a continuing dip in visitor numbers, and 2026 promises to see a \$100 ‘foreigner fee’ added to 11 national parks (it'll will cost a whopping \$120/€102pp to enter Yosemite), as well as a mandatory trawl of five



Clockwise from far left: hiking in Norway; changing the tide on invisible middle-aged women in travel marketing; a 7-Eleven in California; and Sakura Park in Vilnius



years' social media for Esta visitors, among other changes.

"If we get this policy wrong, millions of travellers could take their business and the billions of dollars they spend elsewhere, only making America weaker," the US Travel Association has said of the possible chilling effect.

Pól's take: The US is also eye-wateringly expensive to visit. However, Irish tourists just love it, and our visitor numbers were flat in 2025. We may yet qualify for something called the World Cup, and 2026 brings Aer Lingus's biggest ever transatlantic schedule. It remains to be seen how this plays out.

6 Find your solo mates

Solo travel has been growing for years, with the industry slowly adding more escorted tours, solo-friendly staterooms and restaurant seats to accommodate – Travel Department says demand for its solo trips were up 32pc last year.

A Hostelworld survey of travellers from Ireland and the UK saw 63pc

say meeting people is the best part of solo travel, followed by 'freedom at back into' rather than leave behind.

59pc and 'discovering new places' at 58pc. Just 1.5pc of women reported low confidence about travelling alone, and the top five dream destinations were Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Italy and Australia.

Belfast-based **Friendship Travel**, meanwhile, says the number of solo holiday bookings is up 12pc year-on-year, with the biggest draw towards those including activities like skiing, painting or walking. "More and more, clients do not want a simple 'fly and flop' beach holiday, it says. "They want activities or interests included in the holiday package."

7 New-stalgia

Nostalgia sounds sepia-tinted. But it's making new waves in our AI-accelerated, light-speed lives. Website booking.com points to 'PastPorts' in its travel trends for 2026, tipping

nostalgia as "something we can step back into" rather than leave behind.

Pól's take: A lot done, more to do. The dreaded single supplement is still a feature of package tours, and most solos would prefer a quicker pace of change.

Think of TikTok's 'throwback travel', foods like baked Alaska or spag bol, or taking holiday snaps on old-school film cameras. Interestingly, though, booking.com also sees tech as an enabler in the nostalgia space – with AI-powered photo mapping or heritage-tracing platforms, for example. In its survey, 62pc of Irish respondents "said they would consider recreating a memory or photo by using technology to identify the exact location it was taken, and then travelling there", it says.

Pól's take: Travelling like this isn't new. But that's partly the point. "Travellers are drawn to trips that echo earlier years," Sunway's Mary Denton told me recently. It emphasises "the heritage and ritual of the holiday experience – the same beach you visited in the 1980s, the cherished festive break with Santa, the generations meeting for cocktails in the same resort".

8 Authenticity and awe

Social search is a huge force in travel, but "travellers are looking for authenticity", says Hannah Pilpel,