

‘We risk falling behind’: Travel titans reveal what’s holding nation back

Some of the nation’s biggest travel industry names have spoken frankly about what needs to be done to get Australia back firmly on the map, as they reveal the places you really should try to visit this year.



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QWeekend



‘Beach bums’. Lucky Bay Kangaroos, Esperance Western Australia. Picture taken by travel photographer Jaimen Hudson.

QWeekend

When the ability to travel was taken away from the world throughout the depths of the pandemic, it changed everything.

It took away freedoms, jobs, decimated companies and battered an entire global industry.

Now, years on, as tourism begins to recover and rebuild, the industry navigates the long-lasting impacts of Covid.

The nation's top travel bosses, pioneers and trailblazers share what the future of travel looks like, the new trends post-pandemic and why there's an overwhelming shift towards more sustainable and meaningful travel.

But despite it all, Covid, they say, did prompt a positive trend with more Australians opting to travel closer to home and discover their own backyard.

As the world opens up and confidence to travel returns, the leaders share their favourite holidays, travel tips and their must-visit destinations for 2023.



Flight Centre founder Graham 'Skroo' Turner. Picture: David Kelly

GRAHAM 'SKROO' TURNER, FLIGHT CENTRE CEO

In what ways has the travel industry changed since you started?

The biggest change has been the accessibility and affordability of travel. When I was in my early 20s, the cost of my airfare to Europe was the approximate equivalent of 10 weeks' pay as a Vet. Now it would be about one to two weeks depending on how good a deal you get, seasonality etc.

What are the latest travel trends?

Cruising is coming back very strongly post-Covid. Disney will bring its cruise experience to Australian waters in 2023 and this will see cruising grow in the family segment again.

Favourite destinations?

Having lived in London for the 1970s and spent a lot of time there ever since, it is my favourite overseas city by a long shot. Our family also love holidaying on Paros Island in Greece.

Favourite travel experience?

For the last 10 years, our daughter Jo has been running activewear business, LNDR from London and this has been a great excuse to visit here regularly as well as our London headquartered EMEA businesses. This has become even more exciting with now a four-year-old granddaughter Luca based in London.



Ryan Thomas, CEO of Ignite Travel

RYAN THOMAS, CEO IGNITE TRAVEL

In what ways has the travel industry changed since you started?

I can attest that the travel industry has undergone significant changes since I started. Some of these changes include: technological advancements, increased competition, increased demand for sustainable and eco-friendly travel options, changes in consumer behaviour, increased emphasis on experience-based travel and the rise of cruising.

What are the latest travel trends?

Lately, we have seen a big uptick in the length and standard of holiday that customers are taking. Customers are making the most of their holiday by staying for longer and treating themselves to upgrades, such as business class flights and upgraded cruise cabins. We have also seen a big increase in multi-generational bookings, with grandparents, parents and

the kids all going away together to make up for the lost time and milestone events that were missed during the pandemic.

Favourite destinations?

I do have a soft spot for my own backyard of Queensland. Queenstown in New Zealand is another favourite that's close to home, as is the amazing Fiji, which always spoils visitors with its warm Bula spirit.

Favourite travel experience?

One of the most bizarre travel experiences happened when I was a young lad, as my travel mates and I were given a personal armed escort through the islands controlled by the head of the Phuket Mafia!

Top travel tips/hacks?

Despite my frequent travel, I do struggle to sleep on planes, so whenever I have a long-haul flight, I always pack small noise-cancelling earbuds, a good eye mask and a natural sleeping tablet. For another tip, my mum recently gifted me some clothes travel storage bags, which has been a game changer for me in terms of being able to easily pack and unpack when staying at multiple hotels during a trip.

Must-visit destinations for 2023?

My top tip is to go out and experience what you want in life, by either visiting somewhere new or going back to an old favourite.



Rich Johnston is a co-founder of TripaDeal

RICHARD JOHNSTON, TRIPADEAL CO-FOUNDER

In what ways has the travel industry changed since you started?

Travel has seen a lot of changes in recent times, which has primarily been driven by technology. Gone are the days of Lonely Planet guides, travellers cheques and paper tickets. Tech takes care of all of that now and for the most part everyone is a beneficiary of that.

What lasting impact has Covid had on the travel industry?

The early signs are that the customer will emerge the winner out of it all. The industry as a whole has developed a renewed appreciation for our customers and are looking at ways to improve the end-user experience in every way possible. From flexible booking and payment terms, to new products like small group touring, and a greater emphasis on health and safety.

What are the latest travel trends and predictions for 2023?

Covid has changed the way in which we like to travel. In our case it has been a trend towards smaller group touring as well as an emphasis on quality. Value for money is a key driver and this is something that really is in our sweet spot. Our love affair with Europe

continues as does our unbreakable bond with Bali. Japan has experienced a big resurgence alongside perennial favourites like the US and Vietnam. 2023 will see a reconnection with all the old favourites as Australians put Covid in the rear view mirror and make up for lost time. Italy and Greece will be back on top of the charts as will our Asian staples like Bali, Vietnam and Japan. Cruising will make a big resurgence with the exceptional value for money this product offers a major driver.

Favourite destinations?

I was recently in Austria and just loved the 'old fashioned' approach. There is nothing flashy about Austria but you sort of feel you have stepped back in time to a more elegant and slow paced world. Not far behind is Greece for all the same reasons.

Top travel tips?

Making the travel experience as seamless as possible. This involves parking at the terminal to make departures/returns as easy as possible (valet is never as expensive as you think), using arrival concierge services for places like Bali where the queues in the arrival halls can be painful (for \$100 you can skip the line-ups and be in a taxi heading to your hotel in record time) and paying a bit extra for your seat on the low cost carriers (for a small amount extra you can significantly upgrade your in-flight experience). Plan your meals, drink lots of water and make sure you move your body wherever the opportunity arises. If you do this you'll arrive in good shape and be ready for action from day one.

Must-visit destinations this year?

I am looking forward to some long hot days on the island of Paros with my family and perhaps a quick surf trip to Sumba or somewhere equally exotic.



Hayley and James Baillie. Picture: Supplied

HAYLEY AND JAMES BAILLIE, CO-FOUNDERS BAILLIE LODGES

Most difficult challenge you've experienced in the industry? Chronic labour shortages created by the lack of Australians seeking a career in hospitality and onerous restrictive access to foreign workers, it's an ongoing critical situation.

Biggest success you've experienced? The dream to reality of Southern Ocean Lodge and more recently the sale of the Baillie Lodges portfolio (ex-Capella Lodge) to KSL Capital who have since grown the Baillie Lodges brand internationally with a number of acclaimed new properties.

What lasting impact has Covid had on the travel industry? Good: Many travel systems have been streamlined, allowing for more efficient automation. Bad: the list is huge, ranging from the normalisation of lesser services and standards, congestion, even more staff shortages and the seemingly perennial excuse of blaming product shortcomings on Covid.

Latest travel trends and predictions for 2023? Travelling mindfully with a focus on environmental and social responsibility is on the rise among many seasoned travellers, certainly at the higher end of the market. We are looking forward to our international

markets returning while continuing to enjoy the patronage of the many Australians who discovered the amazing destinations in their own backyard during the last few years.

Favourite destination? Lord Howe Island with extended family and friends. It's the most spectacular unspoilt destination on the planet that literally has something for everyone that appreciates natural over man-made.

Top travel hack? We are just back from the US and a friend put us onto Revolut, a fantastic system for multi-currency expenses for the entire family without being robbed blind by your own bank!

Must-visit destinations this year? We may be biased but Kangaroo Island to celebrate the reopening of the newly reincarnated Southern Ocean Lodge.



Managing director of Lady Elliott Island Peter Gash. Picture: Vanessa Hunter

PETER GASH, MANAGING DIRECTOR AND CUSTODIAN OF LADY ELLIOT ISLAND

In what ways has the travel industry changed since you started?

20 to 30 years ago, few people knew the importance of eco-tourism. Climate change wasn't as well understood as it is today. Now in 2023, our Back of House Eco Tour is one of the most popular on the island. It's exciting that so many people care so much about the environment.

What lasting impact has Covid had on the travel industry?

Aussie travellers want to experience their bucket list items here in Australia. To see their big smiles when they experience the beauty of the Southern Great Barrier Reef and a scenic flight over some of the most beautiful spots in Queensland is priceless.

What trends do you predict for 2023?

People are getting more and more savvy. Travellers have higher expectations. They want to see that you're doing the right thing by your patch, your place. Looking after your crew, guests and most importantly the environment. Doing good for the planet and for the people. Travellers care that you're being fair and just. They want educational experiences and storytelling in a fun way.

Favourite destinations?

It's hard to not love the reef. I also love the outback, the Kimberley, and Tasmania. Internationally, I'd have to say Nepal. Hiking to Everest base camp on two separate occasions with my two daughters was fantastic.

Top travel tips?

It's great to have a plan, but it's also good to roll with the punches. Be up before the sun. Get up and walk around the destination you are exploring, exercise, breath in the air.

Must-visit destinations for 2023?

I've never been to Europe before, so my wife and I are hoping to travel there soon, to explore new places like Italy and France. We would also love to visit Northern Africa, Western Africa, the Congo, the Galapagos, Patagonia, Peru and Chile. Travel is so inspiring.



TravMedia founder Nick Wayland.

NICK WAYLAND, TRAVMEDIA FOUNDER

In what ways has the travel industry changed since you started?

Travel is within reach to so many more people since my career began over 30 years ago. While flights have increased in price, they are still relatively cheap compared to decades ago. The consumer also has access to so much more information. Social media has exploded, and online publications are everywhere.

What lasting impact has Covid had on the travel industry?

Millions of people have left the industry. Airline pilots, aircrew and even baggage handlers through to bar tenders have left the industry for more reliable jobs. Our industry has been disseminated.

What are the latest trends and predictions for 2023?

Domestic travel is still super strong. There just isn't the airlift for long distance travel. Hopefully more flights will come back online making it more affordable to travel.

Favourite destinations?

I love coming home. Sydney is my favourite destination. However, there is no summer holiday like a Mediterranean holiday. I love the Med for in Summer. Greece, Croatia, Ibiza, South of France and in winter, Courchevel, Whistler and Vail.

Favourite travel experience?

The French Alps skiing and cruising the Mediterranean.

Top travel tips?

Using frequent flyer points to upgrade. If you book early enough and use your FF you can often upgrade to business from premium economy saving thousands.

Must-visit destinations this year?

Egypt is on one of my favourite destinations. I never had an appreciation for history until I visited Egypt, but I'd also like to visit the Galapagos islands at some stage.



Desmond Campbell, CEO Welcome to Country

DESMOND CAMPBELL, WELCOME TO COUNTRY CEO

Most difficult challenge you've experienced in the industry? The industry being too slow to support more ethical and purpose driven practices. The travel industry is hesitating to engage and include First Nations tourism operators. No matter where you go on this continent, you are standing on the lands of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and it should be every traveller's expectation that this is recognised no matter what activities we choose to engage with. First Nations peoples in Australia and the world can lead tourism ventures, showcase their country and cultures. It allows cultures not to be glorified for the sake of the tourist dollar but presented in a way that protects culture and country.

Latest travel trends and predictions for 2023?

Over the past six months we've seen a lot of interest in wellness. This encompasses multi-day mindfulness retreats, bush medicine experiences and Wayapa Wuurrk, which is an internationally-accredited earth connection practice that implements the wisdoms of First Nations cultures to promote spiritual and emotional wellbeing. I predict a significant focus on holistic wellness; experiences that offer lessons for continued health of mind, body and soul, all inclusive experiences (meals, transport, accom. packages), boutique weekend trips away and international travel to very secluded and remote locations.

Favourite destination/travel experience?

Vanuatu. The culture, the people, the history and the landscape was all such an amazing experience. My favourite travel experience would have to be travelling to Uluru and spending time with an Anangu Elder from Mutitjulu. I was invited to participate in a sunrise ceremony, welcoming in the new day with Uluru as the backdrop. The distinctive energy radiating from the rock and that country is something I've never ever felt since.

Top travel tip?

Book a unique First Nations experience with Welcome to Country, whether you would like to do something in your local area, or any destination around Australia.

Must-visit destinations this year?

South Australia. The Flinders Rangers, cultural walks such as the Yundi Nature Trail, Sacred Canyon – Yura Mulka cultural walks, there's also Coorong Adventure Cruise and the Port River Culture Cruise that will connect you with Elders and cultural leaders and be immersed in their accent knowledge.



Justine Simpson founder of I'm Free Walking Tours

JUSTINE SIMPSON, I'M FREE WALKING TOURS FOUNDER

What are the latest travel trends and predictions for 2023?

Authentic and unique place-based experiences. Increasingly, the visitor economy is seeking small-scale meaningful experiences and activities delivered by local experts. These are primarily younger visitors who reject large-scale mainstream tourism in favour of authentic experiences.

Favourite destinations?

Hidden gems right under your nose within one hour of Brisbane you have the Daisy Hill Koala Centre, Logan's Global Food Markets, countless distilleries and breweries, endless tracks and trails for walking and cycling and beaches. My favourite travel experience has been hiking Acatenango, a volcano in Guatemala with a local guide. A very hard hike and involves a vertical climb at 3am in the morning to watch the sunrise with an erupting volcano in the foreground.

Top travel tips?

Seek out locals by heading on a free walking tour or food tour when you arrive in a city, don't over plan, research a few top bars, places or restaurants and chat with the bartenders about where to go next.

Must-visit destinations this year?

I'm all about food, culture and nature so I'm off to Georgia, Morocco and Malta with friends.

Please visit local, whether it be Darwin Festival in the Northern Territory or World Pride in Sydney. Support, see and appreciate all that is our deep and rich Aboriginal and diverse culture of Australia.



Photographer Jaimen Hudson. Picture Jaimen Hudson

JAIMEN HUDSON, TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHER/TOUR OPERATOR

Biggest challenge you've experienced in the industry?

After a motorbike accident left me a quadriplegic, I thought I'd never travel again. I'm so glad I was wrong. But as a disabled traveller, the biggest issues I face are trying to find

accessible accommodation and accessible tourism offerings. Seeing how difficult it is for people with a disability to travel first-hand has driven me to want to make all our tourism offerings accessible. An example for this is our four-wheel-drive tour bus has a wheelchair lift fitted in the back. Our vessel is wheelchair accessible for our Island Cruises and our accommodation is currently in the process of having two wheelchair accessible apartments added that will give people the chance to travel here, knowing that when they get to Esperance they have world-class accessible facilities, operated by someone in a wheelchair.

What are the latest travel trends?

I think during Covid people had such travel “FOMO” (Fear Of Missing Out) that they spent the majority of the time researching where they were going to go as soon as the restrictions were lifted. We are seeing people visiting from so many destinations abroad and they say they learnt about Esperance through social media.

Favourite travel experience?

When I visited the Grand Canyon and got to sit right on the edge of it. The other would be when we were filming my documentary “Jaimen Hudson: From Sky to Sea”. We visited Exmouth and I got to swim with the whale sharks as Wellers humpback whales. This was my first time back in the ocean for nearly 13 years. I can’t really put into words how amazing it was.

Top travel tips?

If you find a place you want to go, don’t be afraid to reach out to people on Instagram or via email. I’ve sent message asking if they knew if the location was accessible. I’ve always had people get back to me and be really kind with the information they provide.

Must-visit destinations?

Lake Hillier on Middle Island off Esperance.



Penny Rafferty, chair of Luxury Lodges and head of sustainability at Tourism Australia.

PENNY RAFFERTY, EXECUTIVE CHAIR AT LUXURY LODGES OF AUSTRALIA AND HEAD OF SUSTAINABILITY AT TOURISM AUSTRALIA

What are the latest travel trends? In terms of destinations, anywhere in nature. The natural isolation and small scale of the lodges certainly seems to be resonating with the sorts of places people want to travel to. When it comes to habits, it's about taking our wellbeing and sustainability practises with us when we travel. Globally there is a far better understanding of what that means: buy local, carry a water bottle, respect local culture, leave nothing but footprints, recycle, awareness of wastefulness, water use.

What trends do you predict for 2023?

Regenerative travel, experiences that proactively engage in adding value to the environment or community they travel to as part of the experience. The rise and rise of active travel like guided walks and the seeking out of travel that provides opportunity for self-improvement, wellbeing, self-transformation.

Top travel tips?

Travel light and with eyes open and follow your instincts to go off track. I Google "Aussie barista in" to find decent coffee wherever I go. I also never wear a watch or look at the time when I fly just try to put my head in destination time.

Must-visit destinations this year?

Kangaroo Island for the reopening of Southern Ocean Lodge, South-Western Australia and anywhere in Australia that has been impacted by fire or flood in the last two years and is open for much-needed business.



Chair Ecotourism Australia Claire Ellis

CLAIRE ELLIS, CHAIR ECOTOURISM AUSTRALIA

In what ways has the travel industry changed since you started? We are so much more aware of what we should be doing, and sustainability is certainly the buzz word across the world right now. We have so much to offer in Australia, but we are also at risk of falling behind key global markets in this space. We have a once in a generational opportunity right now to embrace sustainable and responsible tourism and we need to take it.

What are the latest travel trends? Sustainability; environmental, social and cultural. Our visitors care. They want a great trip but also want to feel good about where and how they spend their money and their travel decisions leave the place better off not worse. The interest in cultural impacts and embracing the stories and history of the destination is also a strong, and positive trend.

What trends do you predict for 2023?

Demand for sustainability. Many good businesses in Australia are doing some great things and we are seeing tourism operators large and small embracing sustainable change. Increasingly our visitors want to know it isn't greenwashing, they want real independent verification that is simple for them to see and understand.

Top travel tips?

Create conversations, seek out local indigenous businesses, make the most of every trip, slow down and give yourself time to soak it all in; head out to lesser known areas; take a small group tour to maximise your time; travel in the off season and enjoy the differences in nature our seasons bring. Give back.

Must visit destinations for this year?

Over Covid we all rediscovered how amazing our own backyards were, we had to, and while many people are taking off on big trips again, loving my local places and taking regular breaks is really important to me, for me its east coast Tasmania.



Gareth Phillips, CEO of the Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators

GARETH PHILLIPS, CEO ASSOCIATION OF MARINE PARK TOURISM OPERATORS

Biggest challenges you've experienced in the industry? Covid has been the largest challenge. But there are many other that are pre-existing and persisting. Other challengers include the messaging of the Great Barrier Reef health. Trying to share with travellers that the Great Barrier Reef is not dead and that it is absolutely amazing to see at the same time expressing the climate change is the largest threat facing the reef and that by visiting the Great Barrier Reef tourist are actually contributing to its continued protection. This is a very complex and nuanced message which is hard to get out with the way social media as well as mainstream media work.

What lasting impact has Covid had on the travel industry? Covid's effect for us is still not over. Visitation is still low. At the end of the last financial year GBR visitation from the EMC data showed visitation was still down up to 60 per cent in some areas. As an industry dominated by international travel we still have not seen the return of that market to pre-Covid levels. Domestic market did increase and was very welcome and well received however the domestic market did not fill the gap left by the lack of internationals.

Favourite destinations? I most love visiting other reef areas, however my wife has a Swiss family we do love snow skiing. We did visit Falls Creeks a few years back and that was amazing.

Top travel tips?

Be flexible and open minded.

Must-visit destinations for 2023?

The Great Barrier Reef.



Distiller Cameron McKenzie from Four Pillars. Picture: Jake Nowakowski

CAMERON MCKENZIE, FOUR PILLARS DISTILLERY FOUNDER/DISTILLER

In what ways has the travel industry changed since you started?

In many respects it has become easier. We recently visited Vietnam on our way back from France. In France as long as you attempt a conversation in French the locals will smile (or laugh in my case) at your attempt and then reply in English! In Vietnam the translation apps really came in handy. I have no idea how we would have coped 20 years ago. I also find that the experience of travel is much more personal. At Four Pillars we are aware that our guests have a great experience which is approachable, informative and fun. It's not just a visit to a venue and then move on.

What lasting impact has Covid had on the travel industry?

The good side of Covid is that no one should take travel for granted because we missed it for two years! I appreciate it so much more now. The bad side is the teething phase of travel coming back. There needs to be some heightened patience because staffing levels are still struggling. Our distillery is fine, we have the most incredible team that stuck with us throughout Covid. But the delays at security and the likelihood of misplaced luggage is higher than normal. It won't be forever so download a relaxation app and go with the flow.

What trends do you predict for 2023?

Hopefully we will just see people jump on a plane back to Australia!

Favourite travel experience?

Our most recent experience included a vesper trip through Ho Chi Minh. Chaotic, vibrant, funny just madness but I would do it again in a heartbeat.

Top travel tips/hacks?

Tylenol PM tablets and red wine. What can I say, I'm old school.

Must-visit destinations for 2023?

Four Pillars in Healesville, obviously, otherwise Ho Chi Minh and I will always love Edinburgh.



Ben Angell, Cruise Lines International Association Australasia chairman and vice president and managing director of Norwegian Cruise Lines.

BEN ANGELL, CRUISE LINES INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION AUSTRALASIA (CLIA) CHAIRMAN AND VICE PRESIDENT AND MANAGING DIRECTOR OF NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINES

In what ways has the travel industry changed since you started?

From the demise of the humble postcard to the rise low-cost airline carriers, which opened up travel to an incredible number of people, change is constant in our industry. There's no doubt technology has triggered the most impressive, inspirational changes, from digital booking platforms to influential travel advice, online reviews and forums where experiences are shared by travellers from all corners of the globe, it's hard to imagine our industry without the technology that's so pervasive today.

What are latest travel trends and predictions for 2023?

The mindful travel trend is here to stay, as travellers seek to live in the moment and immerse

themselves fully in the experiences they've saved hard for. I also expect multi-generational travel will continue to be popular with travellers keen to spend time with their children and/or grandchildren in an environment where everyone can have their own space and indulge their own interests, then come together for family meals or shore excursions. Australians are sure to flock to Asia now that the borders are open, my top picks would be Japan, the Philippines and South Korea for 2023.

Top travel tips?

Book as early as possible to secure the best possible fares for both cruise itineraries and airline travel and to secure your first choice when it comes to accommodation, destination and departure date. I shake off jet lag with an early morning walk by the water and always make time to 'take 3 for the sea' to help keep plastic pollution out of our oceans and waterways.