



**TOURISM
NORTHERN
IRELAND**

TOURISM 360°

2026 Travel Trends



Insights & Intelligence Service

This Issue

This Special Edition of Tourism 360° explores the key travel and evolving consumer preferences shaping tourism in 2026, with industry takeouts included throughout. Despite ongoing economic pressures and heightened geopolitical uncertainty linked to the current conflict in the Middle East, travel demand is expected to remain resilient, albeit with increased sensitivity to cost, safety and value. For the Northern Ireland (NI) tourism industry, these are the trends that will make an impact in 2026.

03. Maximising Budgets

The heightened cost pressures and uncertainty linked to recent world events has further sharpened traveller focus on value for money, with increased demand for package holidays and flexible booking arrangements that reassure and help manage risk. Expectations around the quality, purpose and overall experience of trips continue to rise, with travellers seeking safe destinations that offer meaningful, well-planned experiences rather than simply the lowest price.

05. AI Integration

As confidence in AI-powered trip planning grows, clear, relevant online content and high-quality video are increasingly essential to ensure NI tourism businesses are visible, discoverable and featured in AI-driven travel inspiration and search.

07. Event Travel

Events are increasingly becoming the primary driver of travel decisions. Event-led travel supports longer stays, higher spend and wider destination exploration, acting as a gateway to food, culture and experiences while strengthening NI's appeal and repeat visitation.

09. Sustainability and “Travel for Good”

Consumers increasingly want travel that supports local economies and leaves a net benefit for communities – “travel for good”. NI's reputation as a less-crowded, nature-rich destination positions it strongly to benefit from conscious travel and is a perfect location for associated trends such as road trips and rural escapes.

11. Cultural Explorations

Many travellers are moving beyond headline attractions, choosing destinations that offer authentic, locally rooted cultural immersion as “cultural fluency” becomes a marker of sophistication. NI's rich cultural landscape, exciting events and renowned sense of welcome position it strongly to meet this demand.

Maximising Budgets

Despite on-going cost-of-living pressures, including oil and gas price inflation, consumers remain committed to travel in 2026. However, they are increasingly focused on maximising value – adjusting or taking fewer, more considered trips and demanding clearer returns on their travel spend. Consumers are adapting how they travel, spending more carefully in-destination, with some choosing to travel outside traditional peak periods – all while maintaining high expectations. Heightened global uncertainty is reinforcing consumers' desire for price certainty, flexibility and clear value, and reassurance that their travel spend will deliver a safe and worthwhile experience.

To get the most out of a trip without the overspend, package holidays are on the rise with bookings set to increase by 5% in 2026 according to the UK Civil Aviation Authority. ABTA research links the popularity of package trips mainly to securing the top value option for price, as well as saving consumers time. NI businesses can make benefit from this trend by showcasing value for their target audiences, both in monetary terms and in the quality of experience that is on offer.

Alongside this, multi-generational trips are growing in popularity: Skyscanner finds more than one in four Gen Z adults cite saving money or sharing costs as their core motivation for travelling with family, while the top-ranking reason for respondents choosing family travel was to create deeper connections by 'making memories', making trips infinitely more valuable.



Credit: Tourism Northern Ireland



Credit: Courtesy of Rob Durston for Tourism Northern Ireland

Maximising Budgets

What it means for the NI industry:

NI is well positioned to benefit from value-driven travel in 2026, with Tourism NI's sentiment research with NI and ROI consumers reporting they view NI as offering better value for money than ROI and GB – reinforcing NI's competitive position at a time when travellers are more deliberate about their spending.

- Businesses should be explicit about what's included in their prices, value-driven consumers are not just price-sensitive - they want to avoid surprises. Promote offers for families travelling together to save costs.
- Operators should provide a range of clear, bookable bundles to meet consumers' desire for simplicity, clarity and value.
- As well as demonstrating value for money, emphasise the authenticity of the offering and the uniqueness of NI. Expectations remain high and value perception, not price alone, will increasingly drive destination choice.

AI Integration

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly shaping how visitors choose destinations, plan trips and make booking decisions, both before travel and while in-destination. Skyscanner's research found that 54% of travellers are confident using AI to help plan and book travel in 2026, up from 2025, and Tourism Ireland report that almost one-third of consumers have experimented with AI to assist them with holiday planning.

AI is now embedded within search engines, and Tourism NI is developing an AI-powered chatbot for its consumer website to ensure inspiration, information and experiences are more seamlessly served up.

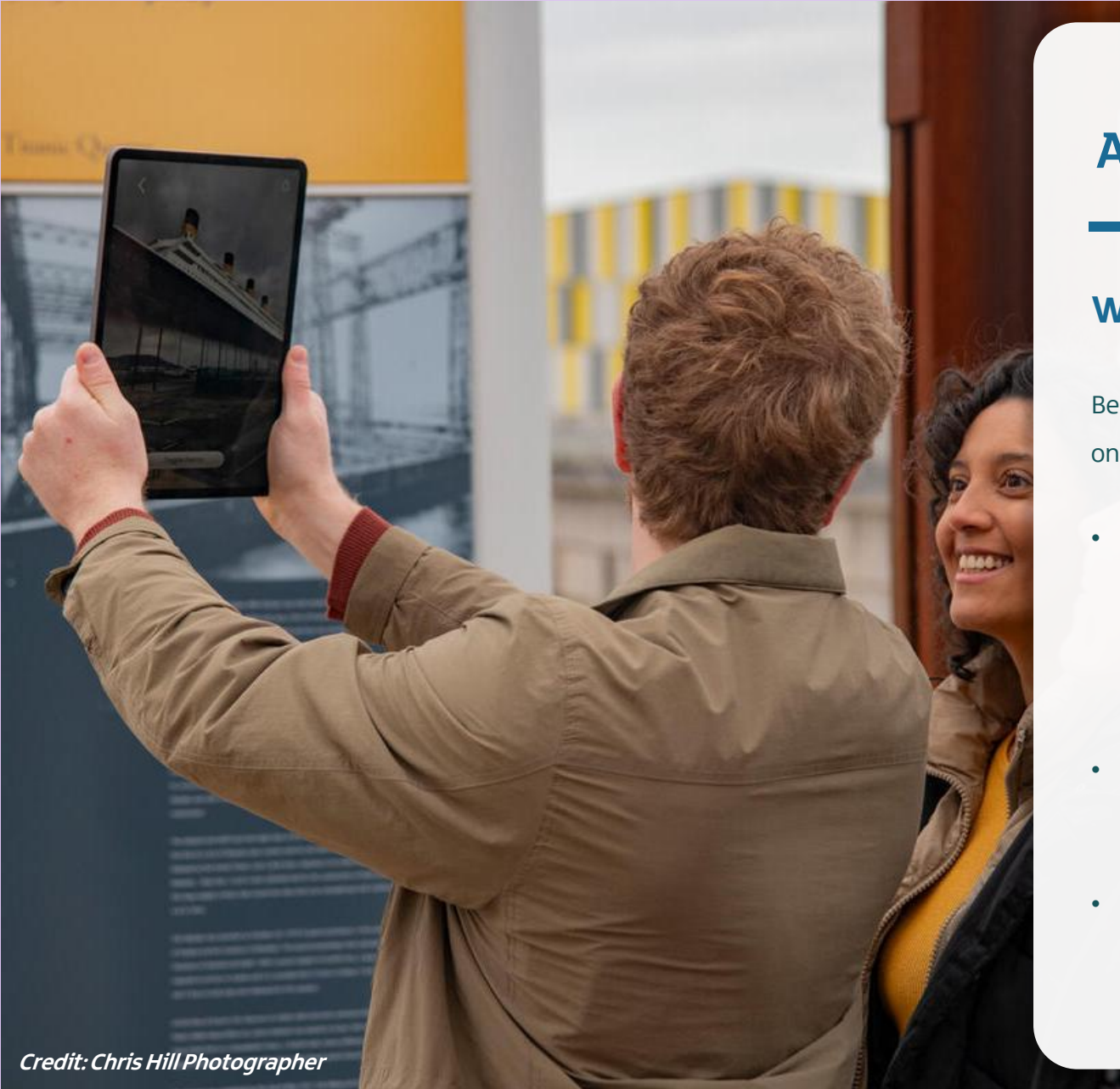
Research from Bain & Company found that consumers increased reliance on AI search results reduced organic web traffic by 15%-25%. Social search engines (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram) that use AI are evolving consumer behaviours, providing tailored inspiration on trends and unique experiences. Creating engaging online content has never been more crucial to attract visitors.



Importantly, AI is influencing spend behaviour. Survey data from the European Travel Commission's Travel Industry Monitor suggests that 30% of respondents expect the use of AI tools for travel planning will result in an **increase in travel spend**. Better-informed travellers are more likely to identify tailored deals, off-peak opportunities and experiences aligned with their interests, supporting longer stays and increased in-destination spend.



Credit: Courtesy of Rob Durston for Tourism Northern Ireland



Credit: Chris Hill Photographer

AI Integration

What it means for the NI industry:

Become part of the AI-powered inspiration travellers seek by improving your online visibility:


- Tailor your online content for AI summaries in search engine results by using clear, concise language and keeping website content up-to-date. Highlight distinctive experiences and simplify offers and packages so that AI tools can easily summarise benefits.
- High-quality video content and social content significantly improve discoverability and inspiration.
- Access recordings of Tourism NI's AI webinars [here](#) and click [here](#) for upcoming events and webinars.

Event Travel

Events are increasingly the primary reason consumers choose when and where to travel, often providing reassurance that the trip will feel worth it, particularly with ongoing cost-of-living pressures. TUI report that more travellers are choosing their holiday based on the sports they love, with bookings for sport-related activities growing by almost 37% in 2025, with expectations for this trend to continue in 2026. Following on from the legacy of The Open 2025, NI is well placed to capitalise on this.

Events bring benefits to businesses across the tourism sector. The 'Live Effect' continues to grow in tourism, as evidenced by research from AEG that found almost half of UK concert goers had booked travel (including flights or trains) to attend a gig, and more than a third had reserved accommodation as part of their live music experience.

Evidence shows that many event visitors spend time exploring the wider destination, engaging in food and drink, sightseeing and cultural experiences alongside the main event. As a result, events act as a gateway into the broader tourism offering, and can drive longer stays, higher spend and greater likelihood of return visits.



NI has a wealth of recurring and new events set for 2026, including [Derry Halloween](#), Europe's largest Halloween festival. The [Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann](#), the world's biggest celebration of Irish music and culture, will be held in Belfast for the first time between 2-9 August 2026, with an anticipated 800,000 visitors expected to attend. It has been confirmed that Belfast will host the event again in 2027.



Credit: Tourism Ireland



Credit: Courtesy of Arts Ekta

Event Travel

What it means for the NI industry:

Events provide opportunities to increase AI discoverability of NI as a destination, stimulate shoulder-season demand, driver regional dispersal, as well as attracting first-time visitors and encouraging repeat visits. NI's compact geography allows event visitors to experience multiple attractions and experiences within a short stay.


- NI tourism businesses that align offers to event timings, promote flexible add-ons and collaborate locally can significantly increase spend, length of stay and repeat visitation.
- Check what's on locally through [Discover NI's](#) dedicated events page, to keep informed and be able to highlight/recommend both large and small events to visitors.

Sustainability and “Travel for Good”

Consumers increasingly want travel that supports local economies, protects landscapes and leaves a net benefit for communities – “travel for good”. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, up to 80% of the tourism’s economic value flows directly to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and local communities, making it among the most inclusive industries globally. NI’s reputation as a less-crowded, nature-rich destination positions it strongly to attract these conscious travellers.

Building on this, research also confirms the return of the road trip. This style of travel allows visitors to see and do more, while naturally supporting regional balance, as the benefits of tourism spread across the wider route (a key priority in the [Tourism Vision & Action Plan](#)).

Similarly, interest in rural escapes has increased in recent years, with Vrbo reporting a 300% spike year-on-year in guest reviews mentioning farms, with desired activities including nature walks, interacting with farm animals, and harvesting produce.



Local offerings such as the sheepherding experience at [Glenshane Country Farm](#) illustrate how NI’s rural landscapes can provide engaging, authentic experiences that resonate strongly with today’s conscious traveller, while benefitting local communities and supporting regional balance.



Credit: Courtesy of Glenshane Country Farm



Credit: Tourism Ireland

Sustainability and “Travel for Good”

What it means for the NI industry:

The rise of *travel for good* and *road-trip tourism* plays directly to NI’s core strengths. Visitors are increasingly prioritising authenticity, local benefit and meaningful experiences over volume, positioning NI strongly for sustainable growth.

- Visitors increasingly expect local sourcing, low-impact practices and visible community benefit. This is now entwined with quality and reputation, not as an optional extra.
- With scenic and interesting walks ranking in the top three activities for NI and ROI consumers, Tourism NI research underlines the value of promoting scenic, rural and lesser-known locations to support authentic experiences and regional dispersal.

Cultural Explorations

Experience-led travel is mainstream in 2026, not niche, with many travellers selecting holiday destinations that offer authentic cultural immersion. According to VisitBritain 'cultural fluency' has become the new badge of sophistication as travellers want to find out where the locals go and immerse themselves in the region's cultural activities.

"Cultural exploration" cuts across many 2026 travel trends – delivering high-value experiences, driving event-led demand, strengthening AI discovery and supporting sustainable, community-based tourism

A vital part of the culture in NI is the warm welcome we give to visitors, allowing those who visit to get immersed in the local culture with ease. Tourism NI's consumer sentiment research highlights that NI's 'welcome and hospitality' is consistently ranked as one of the highest rated aspects of the visitor experience. Tourism Ireland's new global campaign 'Ireland Goes Beyond' celebrates how the island of Ireland goes beyond people's expectations by offering the warmest of welcomes, creating memorable connections with the people and place.

What it means for the NI industry:

In addition to key events previously highlighted, there are several exciting launches happening in NI this year with strong links to local history and culture, including:

- Belfast's acclaimed Lyric Theatre will celebrate its [75th anniversary](#) in 2026 with a programme of timeless classics and innovative new works
- [Derry Halloween](#) celebrates its 40th anniversary
- As the USA gears up to celebrate the 250th anniversary of its Declaration of Independence, NI will also highlight the deep connections between its people and the first colonisers of North America, with a range of [events and exhibitions](#) for visitors to explore.