

2024 travel trends: What's on the horizon for independent consultants

By [Chantal Gouws](#)

27 Feb 2024

In 2024, travel is set to surpass the peaks of 2023, with industry experts highlighting unique traveller demands, from AI-driven itinerary planning to astro travel. Chantal Gouws, GM of Flight Centre Independent, notes a shift away from traditional queries, indicating a move beyond bucket lists and fly-and-flop holidays for independent travel consultants (ITCs).



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Interestingly, she adds that the ITC model positions consultants well for the changes. As they are already familiar to meeting the diverse needs of various clients - from corporate to leisure travellers - they are familiar with adapting their services, she explains.

The travel industry has undergone seismic shifts in recent years. Through it all, independent travel consultants have proven themselves to be highly adaptable entrepreneurs, evolving their businesses to stay ahead of trends and provide bespoke guidance to travellers. They also have their finger on the pulse of emerging destinations and must-try travel products.

While travellers are not requesting astro travel trips (yet), some exciting travel trends are emerging that will affect what South African travellers want in 2024.

The five-day office week is alive and well, but different

How a hunger for flexibility in working hours will change how we work.

The return to office is gaining momentum. According to a recent KPMG survey, 72% of Southern African CEOs support transitioning back to in-person work within the next three years – with hybrid models finding their place in industries where this is workable. What's new? The 9-to-5 schedule is changing. Flexitime is gaining traction, allowing workers to choose their hours based on when they are most productive - typically mornings for early risers and afternoons/evenings for night owls. Quality of work is prioritised over time spent working.

This means travel partners will need to adapt to clients' flexible schedules going forward. Many ITCs move to the independent model because they also want this flexibility, and they shape their working hours about their personal commitments with those of their clients. It's a win-win.

Wellness is on the itinerary

The increasing demand for a healthier travel experience will require more travel choices.

Travellers today are not willing to abandon their health and wellness routines when on the road. With the global wellness tourism market growing over 7% each year, health-focused offerings have infiltrated every type of travel experience.

Travel advisors can provide immense value to clients seeking wellness while away. From proactively recommending slower-paced itineraries that allow for deeper immersion in fewer destinations to reactively providing options to address health concerns during travel - advisors have many tools.

For example, they can suggest hotels with wellness facilities beyond just a spa, such as offsite hiking, sleep-focused amenities like pillow menus, and nutritious gluten-free, vegan, or special diet catering.

Robo-enhanced travel is here

How AI and travel can be the ideal travel partners.

AI is transforming travel planning in exciting new ways. Intelligent assistants like ChatGPT and GPT-4 can now provide customised trip recommendations, support dynamic price tracking, and even help predict flight delays. This technology is here to stay, but for the travel industry, it brings opportunities, not threats.

ITCs should anticipate that clients may have used AI to do initial research before coming to them. They should consider the AI suggestions as the starting point for a conversation to discover what truly resonates with each client. Then offer a tailored travel solution that meets their unique needs.

The human touch remains critical to distinguishing the consultant's services. They should focus on developing expertise around specific types of holidays or destinations and emphasise the personalised guidance they provide. AI may excel at surfacing options, but human travel specialists offer true customisation based on listening to what each client is looking for in their ideal trip.

The ITC of the future will lean into AI tools for efficiency, Gouws suggests but always lead with their human strengths of creativity, emotional intelligence and the ability to design once-in-a-lifetime experiences. The future for travel professionals

is one where AI and human collaboration thrive.

Greener travel takes hold

The time is now to make sustainability part of the travel conversation.

Eco-consciousness is shaping up to be a defining trend in travel this year. According to a World Travel and Tourism Council report, 69% of travellers now actively seek sustainable options when booking trips. Moreover, searches for 'sustainable travel' have risen 226% over the past five years, signalling a major shift toward responsible tourism.

The travel industry is stepping up to meet this demand. Tour operators increasingly offer more eco-friendly lodgings, activities and transport. Corporate travel agencies feature dedicated sections for carbon-neutral trip planning. And agents are becoming sustainability advisers - guiding clients toward planet-friendly choices.

The influence of travel consultants cannot be overstated. As trusted advisors, they play a key role in making sustainable travel easier. By putting eco-friendly options at the forefront, they can nurture the green shoots of change emerging in travel.

Tour tourism enters the stage

How major sporting and music events are driving destinations.

The 2023 Rugby World Cup in France captivated leisure travellers and sparked interest among business travellers - many combined work trips with match attendance or added stopovers to experience the excitement. With the 2024 Paris Olympics on the horizon, a similar blending of business and leisure is expected again.

Music icon Taylor Swift's world tour has also spurred travel spikes wherever she performs. After pandemic lockdowns, fans embody YOLO and FOMO attitudes, eager to attend epic concerts. Though lodging and flights can climb in price when demand surges, early booking by flexible travellers can unlock savings. Travel consultants can help explore options in nearby cities connected by easy transit, potentially offering affordability.

Travel behaviours are shaped by global events, economic shifts (expected drops in interest rates will lead to more disposable income in 2024) and micro-trends influenced by social media. What is exciting for those working in the ITC space is that this means there will always be new opportunities for clients, and being a solo player positions you perfectly to build a diverse portfolio that matches your business goals and specialisation potential.

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