

EXPERIENTIAL TRAVEL – FAST GROWING TOURISM TREND SHAPING THE INDUSTRY

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Abstract

Over the years travelers have significantly changed their perspectives of tourism, with high impact on their purchasing behavior. From mass to niche tourism, from traditional to modern tourism, the changes are becoming more noticeable, from one year to another. More than that, due to the economic and political context, which have majorly affected tourism, the revival initiatives are shifting the image of tourism to new and interesting trends. One of these trends, the experiential travel, also known as immersion travel has had the fastest growing rate, as customers have expressed their request for an entire experience, rather than acquiring products and services. The unique and authentic experience, the connection to the local environment and culture, represent the essence of experience travel. Experiential travel has gained more popularity among tourists, transitioning from mass to tailor made tourism services, supporting sustainable practices for the entire community. This paper tries to underline the importance of tourism trends, focusing on experiential travel, as changes redefine the tourism demand, in this post-pandemic, economically and politically challenged reality.

Keywords: *experience tourism, niche, trends, responsible travel.*

JEL Classification: Z30

1. THE TRAVEL AND TOURISM INDUSTRY - MAJOR TRENDS

The travel and tourism industry has been deeply influenced by the negative events of our current times, affecting the entire activity. This has led to implementing new and strategic initiatives, focusing on the revival of tourism worldwide. The strategic directions and also, the importance of tourism for consumers, have had a significant result, adjusting to the new social, political and economic dynamics. This translates to an increase in the tourists' arrivals and tourism receipts all over the world, as seen below¹.

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¹ <https://static.poder360.com.br/2023/09/relatorio-Organizacao-Mundial-Turismo-ONU-2022.pdf>

Table 1. International tourist arrivals – millions

	2019	2020	2021	2022
World	1465	407	456	963
Europe	743.9	239.6	304.9	594.5
Asia and Pacific	360.1	59.1	24.8	100.5
Americas	219.3	69.9	81.5	155.6
Africa	69.1	18.7	19.6	46.5
Middle East	73	19.8	24.9	65.6

Source:

<https://static.poder360.com.br/2023/09/relatorio-Organizacao-Mundial-Turismo-ONU-2022.pdf>

All of the regions have registered positive results, underlining the growth from one year to another, with a high rate (more than double for some regions), but still not reaching the numbers from 2019.

As numbers show, the international tourist arrivals have considerably increased after the pandemic period, continuing it's ascending during these challenging times, as well. The need for travel has emerged, changing the experience of tourism as it was. Nevertheless, it has created the opportunity for new types of travel and the revival of tourism sector overall.

Table 2. International tourist receipts – USD billions

	2019	2020	2021	2022
World	1494	559	638	1031
Europe	584.3	249.3	327.4	548.6
Asia and Pacific	441.2	126.2	90.6	131.4
Americas	330.6	125.4	140.3	243.9
Africa	38.9	14.9	17.5	31.6
Middle East	99.2	43.5	62.5	75.9

Source:

<https://static.poder360.com.br/2023/09/relatorio-Organizacao-Mundial-Turismo-ONU-2022.pdf>

The numbers reflecting the international tourist receipts are also showcasing the revival of tourism activities, with increasing results, especially at regional level. The information from the second table is consistent to the idea mentioned before, painting an image of the importance of tourism strategies for redefining tourism for all generations.

Over the recent years, the tourism and travel industry has undergone a significant transformation, adjusting to new economic and political challenges. Profoundly affected by Covid 19 pandemic, wars and economic instability,

tourism has shifted towards an important experience, focusing on safety and responsible practice.

Even though sustainable travel has always been the major objective of tourism strategies all over the world, nowadays consumers are aligned with these practices, as their choices are illustrating this. The green traveler is considering new and responsible options for tourism experience, generation new trends in the tourism and travel industry.

According to customers' preferences and habits of consumption, many trends in tourism converge towards²: *bleisure travel- the business and leisure experience, automation, personalization, hi tech travel, sustainable tourism, ecotourism, experience tourism, wellness travel and others*. As technology has become part of everyday activities, tourism experiences have developed a digital-friendly and hi-tech environment, but also underlining the impact of responsible travel.

As studied, tourism tends reveal the niche characteristics of travel, for instance³: *urban tourism, family travel, luxury travel, cooler destinations as result of climate change impact* etc.

Other trends shaping the future of travel are considered to be⁴: *astro tourism – focusing on seeing and experiencing astronomical phenomena, eco-diving, home swapping – as an alternative solution to expensive accommodations, such as hotels or AirBnBs, sports tourism, cool destinations, wellness and longevity tourism practices, private group travel and others*.

In terms of fastest growing travel categories in the world 2023-2024, these are represented by⁵:

- Rail Travel – 35.6%
- Duty Free Shopping – 24.9%
- Museums and Cultural Sites – 17.9%
- Festivals and Leisure Events, Food and Dining, National Park and Nature Reserves, Attractions, Experiences, Guided Tours, Retail Shopping, Theme Parks and Medical Tourism – approx. 10-15%.

As it may be concluded, the future of tourism is focusing on digital and AI elements, transitioning to specific niche travels, experience travel with a purpose, based on tourism sustainable initiatives.

2. REINVENTING TOURISM – THE EXPERIENTIAL TRAVEL

New and emerging trends are shaping the future of travel, from one year to another, defining tourism as one of the most diverse and dynamic industry in

² <https://pro.regiondo.com/blog/tourism-trends-2018-2/>

³ <https://forwardkeys.com/global-travel-trends-2023/>

⁴ <https://www.cntraveler.com/story/travel-trends-2024>

⁵ <https://www.euromonitor.com/article/top-trends-for-travel-in-2024>

the world. Modern and experienced tourists have different requirements, especially in regard to the new generations.

An important trend, which has been consisted over the last years, is represented by *experiential or immersive travel*. The idea of travel experience is not a new one, as tourists have always tried to capture the essence of a destination. Nowadays, the search for authenticity in travel has reached the top preferences for tourism.

Table 3. The experiential tourism-concepts

Growth drivers for experiential tourism	✓ Increase of social media usage and importance ✓ Increasing demand for authentic experience ✓ Increasing awareness of sustainable tourism
Benefits of experiential tourism	✓ Rise in customers satisfaction and loyalty ✓ Unique differentiation from competitors ✓ Promotion of responsible destination development
Challenges in experiential tourism	✓ Insufficient infrastructure/ facilities for unique activities ✓ Deficiency of trained staff for these activities ✓ Resistance to change in the organizations ✓ Diversity of consumers' expectations ✓ Management of environmental and social impact of activities

Source: <https://www.galagents.com/blog/the-rise-of-experiential-travel-how-to-create-unforgettable-experiences-for-your-guests/>

The unique, authentic and memorable experience, the immersion into culture, history and tradition of destinations are deeply appealing to the consumers, connecting guests with the local culture and community. Experiential tourism⁶ has led to important initiatives of hotels to engage in partnerships with local artisans, chefs, performers etc. for showcasing local cuisine, guided tours and excursions to local attractions, or cultural activities. Therefore, hotels are offering authentic and meaningful stay for their guests contributing, as well, to the local economy and promoting sustainable tourism practices.

The 2024 Hilton Trends Report⁷ identifies important segment of travelers that are prioritizing experience (85%), many of them focusing on exploring the unknown (81%), trying the local cuisine (64%) and learning about traditions and customs (48%).⁸

Experiential travel offers the opportunity to create a meaningful stay, providing the guests with unique memories, that determines an increase in attraction as compared to the conventional travel. There are different aspects

⁶ <https://theilha.com/top-travel-trends-in-2023-what-you-need-to-know/>

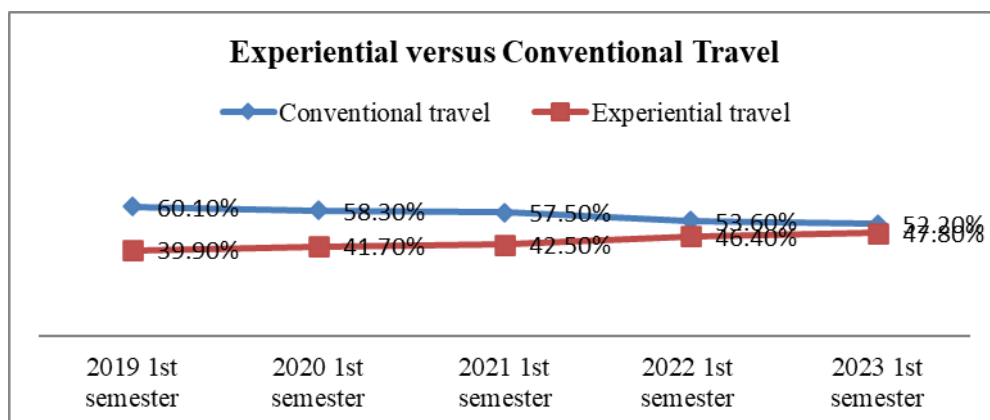
⁷ <https://stories.hilton.com/2024trends>

⁸ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/angelinavillaclarke/2023/11/12/travel-trends-2024-report-part-1-authenticity-and-the-rise-in-ai/>

that are to be found in this concept⁹: *uniqueness, sustainability, authenticity and local culture, volunteering, culinary experience*.

In terms of *uniqueness*, immersive or experiential travel is accentuating the special characteristics of any destination, regardless of its size. This is the case for unknown or small destinations that have a special appeal based on unique trades, rather than its notoriety, as a famous tourist destination.

As for *sustainability*, travelers that are interested in experiential travel, are also defined by responsible travel, as they are supporting the preservation of local culture, traditions, customs and other aspects, by choosing to immerse in the community and contributing to the local economy. Helping the development of communities, socially and economically, is also a result of experiencing the *local culture* and *volunteering*. *Culinary experience* or culinary tourism is more and more appreciated in terms of experiencing a destination. Cooking classes, food tasting, local markets and restaurants and others represent the essence of culinary experience, being one of the best opportunities to learn and embrace a community.



Source:

<https://mabrian.com/blog/evolving-traveller-behaviour-the-rise-of-experiential-travelling/>

The Mabrian study¹⁰ presents the evolution of *conventional* travel in comparison to *experiential* travel, with data from the 1st semester 2019- the 1st semester of 2023. As number shows there is an increase of experiential travel, to reach almost 50% in 2023. In the context of the study, the experiential travel is represented by activities such as: Wellness, Active Lifestyle, Nature, Food and Cuisine and the traditional travel is characterized by: Arts and Culture, Nightlife, Family Activities, Sun bathing and Shopping¹¹.

⁹ <https://heritagehotelsofeurope.com/experiential-tourism-a-rising-trend/>

¹⁰ <https://mabrian.com/blog/evolving-traveller-behaviour-the-rise-of-experiential-travelling/>

¹¹ <https://www.webintravel.com/400-million-online-interactions-point-to-the-rise-of-experiential-travel/>

Table 4. The tourist interest for travel - Conventional travel

	1 st Semester %				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Arts and Culture	29.3	27.2	21.1	24.1	24.9
Nightlife	5.6	5	7.1	4.8	4.6
Family Activities	6.7	8.3	11.1	6.2	6.9
Sunbathing	11.6	9.7	6.6	12.9	9.1
Shopping	6.9	8.2	11.7	6.2	6.7

Source:

<https://mabrian.com/blog/evolving-traveller-behaviour-the-rise-of-experiential-travelling/>

The tourist preferences have suffered changes and mutations, in the previous table Arts and Culture is dominating the charts of Conventional travel – 24.9% followed by Sunbathing and Family Activities – 9.1%, at a considerable distance and so on.

Table 5. The tourist interest for travel - Experiential travel

	1 st Semester %				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Wellness	3.6	4	4	4	4.7
Active Lifestyle	13.6	14.2	12	16	17.2
Nature	9.7	10	8.4	13.6	12
Food and Cuisine	13	13.4	18.1	12.7	13.9

Source:

<https://mabrian.com/blog/evolving-traveller-behaviour-the-rise-of-experiential-travelling/>

The table above present the evolution of tourist interest for experiential travel, Active Lifestyle being ranked first – 17.2%, Food and Cuisine second – 13.9%, followed by Nature - 12% and others.

Analyzing the numbers from both tables, there is blended image of travel intentions, highlighting the rise of experiential travel importance, the Active Lifestyle and Food and Cuisine finding itself on top three of consumers' motivations for travel in 2023.

Engaging in experiential travel has risen in popularity as a result of the connection to different cultures and communities, as opposed to a traditional, impersonal travel and will be on tourist bucket lists, offering them a travel purpose.

Moreover, this meaningful travel is supporting sustainable development, many tourists are trying to decrease the impact on the environment and local communities and also supporting small, locally owned businesses and reducing their carbon footprint¹².

¹²<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-experiential-tourism-one-fastest-growing-sectors-travel-black/>

3. EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM – IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Over the years, tourism development has been determined by various factors, shifting towards new trends, digital technology being one of the strongest influencers. The rise of social media has generated important changes in day-to-day life, having also an impact on travel behavior.

Researching tourism destinations, booking reservations, travel reviews, tips and tricks of locals and others are nowadays, just a click away. Popular social platforms have changed travel trends from mass tourism destinations to niche, to new and adventurous ones, to a different tourism experience.

From the point of view of the consumers, social media provides the opportunity of easy to find information, facilitating not only the research, but also the choice. Major opportunities are also met by companies and destinations' authorities, as they benefit as well from the impact of social media. Tourism companies are using social media data in order to create proper strategies, focusing on their target audience, taking important steps in defining the best marketing campaign online.

These platforms enable the reach of large audiences and build relationships with people all over the world, as well as tracking the impact of their marketing campaigns, monitor customer engagement and conversions, for best results. International Tourist Research Centers shows that 88% of tourism businesses actively employ social media platforms in order to promote travel¹³. According to surveys, around 43% of travellers are only considering a destination, previously based on finding it on social platforms, the hashtag "travel" having over 74.4 billion views on TikTok and Instagram having over 624 million posts regarding travel.¹⁴

If other travel trends are less influenced by social media, experiential tourism is strongly related to these platforms. Influencers are generating travel content of new and emerging destinations, of tourism hidden gems, or even popular ones, but with the focus on connection to the culture and locals and an immersive experience.

The social media information is built around¹⁵: *destination discovery* – Influencers introduce new and exciting destinations, providing the opportunity of every destination to reach the desired audience; *the quest for aesthetic travel* – influencers are operating with an aesthetic content meant to attract more, as travelers are prioritizing this aspect in choosing a destination; *experience-driven travel*- influencers are encouraging experiential travel, by seeking unique and immersive experience to share on social media.

¹³ <https://www.interglobe.com/social-media-and-its-impact-on-travel>

¹⁴ <https://www.interglobe.com/social-media-and-its-impact-on-travel>

¹⁵ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/influencer-effect-how-social-media-6g9kf/>

Social media has helped transitioning from sightseeing to experiencing the culture and communities. Due to the large number of travel bloggers and influencers, there is a constant demand for unique and exciting content and therefore an increase of tourists seeking out different experiences. It has also been influenced by popular culture that encouraged travellers to explore off beat experiences, as well as destinations known for the famous cinematic productions that were filmed in¹⁶.

The difference between traveling and traveling with a purpose is the reflected in the experiential travel that encompasses the activities of cultural immersion, but also sharing their story on social media, gaining a large audience as well. From this online visibility, destinations will benefit, as it plays the role of a catalyst for tourism growth and economic development.¹⁷

Another important aspect is FOMO – the fear of missing out, which can be strongly related to new and exciting images of experiential tourism posted on social media platforms. Seeking unique features of travel experience, more people are attracted to online posts, and based on the FOMO concept are trying to keep up to the novelties in terms of travel and tourism. This also translates to a continuous growth of experiential travel under the influence of social media.

4. CONCLUSION

Needless to say, tourism is facing major transformations, in accordance to different generations of consumers and overall behavior tendencies. Social media and its fast development have also accentuated the changes in tourists' interests worldwide, changes which have defined tourism not only as a means to travel but, more important, to travel with purpose, to have a meaningful and authentic experience, the *experiential travel*.

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¹⁶ <https://travel.earth/the-rise-of-experiential-travel/>

¹⁷ <https://www.financialexpress.com/life/travel-tourism/rise-of-experiential-traveling-and-how-social-media-is-making-it-more-aspirational/2959287/>

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