

TRAVEL



The Northern Lights briefly appear on May 10 in Kildeer. Mackinaw City, Michigan, and Bayfield, Wisconsin, are “trending destinations” for aurora borealis viewing. **JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

BOOKING AHEAD

Astro tourism, cooler destinations and a passion for pickleball are trending for travel in 2025

By Lori Rackl

For the Chicago Tribune

Escaping the heat. Chasing the northern lights. Setting sail in record numbers.

These are a few of the travel trends predicted for 2025, when FOMO (fear of missing out) may finally give way to JOMO (joy of missing out).

“We’re seeing a desire to slow down,” said travel adviser Cathy Holler, CEO of Momenti Travel.

Holler shared her insights as a panelist at Virtuoso Travel Week. The annual event in Las Vegas draws nearly 5,000 members from Virtuoso’s global network of advisers and affiliated resorts, cruise lines and other travel providers. Much of the conference focuses on where and how people will travel in the coming year.

“The amount of business we’re seeing going to Africa is crazy,” Holler said, noting that her safari customers are choosing to book longer stays at fewer camps and lodges than in the past.

It’s not just safaris that are slowing down. A shift from the frenetic, pack-it-all-in vacation to more of a relaxed pace led tour operator Intrepid Travel to tack on an extra day to more than 50 of its itineraries this year.

Here’s a closer look at some of the other forces shaping travel in 2025 — and some inspo to help you plan for the year ahead.

COOLING IT

Travelers have been feeling the heat. And fleeing from it.

“The really hot summers in Spain, Italy and Greece are giving people pause,” said Karen Stang Hanley, a Virtuoso travel adviser with Chicago-based Q Cruise + Travel.

Hanley’s clients haven’t given up on those European mainstays. But they’re more inclined to go during off-peak and shoulder seasons. Warmer months are when they want to explore Nordic countries and Baltic states. She said she’s seeing interest spike in Scotland and Ireland as well, “places that aren’t perceived as being sweltering hot and at risk for wildfires.”

Virtuoso’s “destinations on the rise” list saw Antarctica climb from fifth place last year to No. 2, trailing Portugal. Norway and Iceland also made the short list.

Greenland is gearing up for a big year, too. A new international airport opened in its capital city, Nuuk, in November.

Expedition cruise line HX launched a trio of Grand Greenland voyages from Nuuk for 2025. One of those sailings will attempt to reach the seldom-visited Kane Basin on Greenland’s remote northwest coast.

Cruising in general continues to make a remarkable rebound after the height of the pandemic. Trade group Cruise Lines International Association projects an unprecedented 37.1 million passengers on ocean-going vessels this year.

Closer to home, the number of



Geographic Expeditions kicked off its Women of the World collection last year with a trip in Namibia. The travel company added more women-only trips to other destinations this year. **GEOGRAPHIC EXPEDITIONS**



Amateurs compete in pickleball matches at Danny Cuniff Park in Highland Park. The pickleball craze is making waves in the travel industry. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE 2022**

people cruising the Great Lakes is expected to be 10% higher than in 2024.

EYES TO THE SKIES

The world will have to wait until Aug. 12, 2026, to catch the next total solar eclipse.

But NASA predicts 2025 will be another bang-up year to spot the northern lights, which ranked as the top natural phenomena people want to experience in a recent survey by travel tech company Expedia Group.

Mackinaw City, Michigan, and Bayfield, Wisconsin, are “trending destinations” for aurora borealis viewing in the Midwest, according to the “Where to Next?” report by online travel agency Priceline.

For astro tourists aiming to go farther afield, small-group adventure specialist Explore Worldwide has a new trip that ventures north of the Arctic Circle. The six-day Finnish Lapland Winter Adventure kicks off in a remote village in Finland, where dark winter skies make for optimal conditions.

Cruise line Hurtigruten has a northern lights promise: If the aurora borealis doesn’t appear during select voyages along the Norwegian coast, passengers get a free future cruise.

SCREEN TIME

Traveling to the IRL locations

of a favorite TV show or movie isn’t a new concept. Just ask any Kiwi about “The Lord of the Rings” effect on New Zealand. Or talk to the denizens of Dubrovnik, Croatia, who’ve watched countless “Game of Thrones” fans reenact Cersei’s walk of shame.

Expedia’s “Unpack ’25” report says two-thirds of travelers credit movies, streaming services and television shows with influencing their travel choices, a 16% jump from 2023 to 2024. The roster of “set-jetting” destinations is only growing as Hollywood dishes up more temptation on screens big and small.

Travel company Zicasso has several customizable tours pegged to new releases, including a family-friendly safari inspired by the East African landscape featured in Disney’s “Mufasa: The Lion King.” Zicasso also offers an island adventure for “Moana 2” enthusiasts and a “Gladiator II” journey showcasing the Roman Colosseum and historic forts in Malta, where much of the filming took place.

Anticipating that this year’s installment of “The White Lotus” will turn more eyes toward Thailand, Zicasso curated a spirituality-focused escape tied to the HBO series, complete with a stay at the photogenic Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui.



Women-only trips are booming in popularity. Intrepid Travel offers several of these tours, including a 12-day itinerary in Turkey. **INTREPID TRAVEL**



Uniworld’s first women-only cruise will take place this summer aboard the 158-passenger S.S. Catherine. **UNIWORLD**

‘FEMININOMENON’

Women make up a whopping 71% of Virtuoso’s solo travel clients. Roughly half of them are divorced, separated or widowed.

“Many are hitting the road after being tied to a partner or raising a family,” reads a recent report from Virtuoso and travel forecasting agency Globetrender.

And many are opting for trips tailored exclusively to women, prompting vacation providers to beef up their female-centric offerings at a rapid clip.

The number of guests booking Intrepid Travel’s women’s expeditions, all led by local female guides, shot up 37% in 2024. Intrepid’s U.S. hiking partner, Wildland Trekking, rolled out 10 new women’s adventure trips this year to keep up with demand.

Adventure travel company Backroads expanded its lineup last year to include sojourns specifically for women — solo travelers, friends, relatives. They were such a hit that Backroads doubled down for 2025. The tour operator now sells 43 walking and hiking trips for women, including new excursions in Ireland, Sicily and Nepal.

Geographic Expeditions introduced its Women of the World collection last September with a journey to Namibia. It added

Cuba and Turkey to the mix this year.

In August, boutique river cruise line Uniworld will launch its inaugural women-only cruise in France with an eight-day sailing in Burgundy and Provence.

PICKLE CRAVING

The fastest-growing sport in the U.S. has devotees packing their pickleball paddles. Millennials are especially eager to hit the court. That generation is 87% more likely than other travelers to plan a pickleball vacation, according to Priceline.

The pickleball craze has appealed to plenty of older adults, too. Road Scholar, a not-for-profit that caters its group trips to the 50-and-older set, keeps adding to its pickleball portfolio. Road Scholar’s new Learn Pickleball: Born in the Pacific Northwest program is a six-day trip near the Seattle region, where the sport started in the 1960s.

Reservations are on the upswing for pickleball courts at places like Aspen Meadows Resort, which hosted an ESPN-televised pickleball tournament last summer. The Colorado property boasts half a dozen pickleball courts and offers lessons and clinics for kids and adults.

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