

Travel trends and top destinations for 2017

From flexible flight options to new off-the-beaten-track destinations, Cheapflights share their annual travel predictions for 2017 that travellers and the travel industry should keep an eye out for.



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“Despite the uncertain global economic climate, people are still travelling and looking to explore less obvious places,” explained Andrew Shelton, managing director of Cheapflights.

“In addition to these trends, my belief is that portable travel search is set to be the biggest step change in travel. Increasingly, travellers can expect text alerts for airfare sales, to get a price from their favourite voice-based internet device, or find a flight through Facebook Messenger. We’ve launched Facebook chat, emoji, and drag and drop search functions this year, and now 60% of demand comes to us from portable devices. It really is a case of travel planning on the go,” he continued.

The top trends and destinations identified by Cheapflights include:

1. Pack light to take flight

Travellers have voted with their wallets, fuelling the growth of low-cost carriers and their “no-frills approach” and signaling the beginning of the end for all-inclusive airlines. They are becoming increasingly savvy about how to save money and how to choose the “perks” that matter enough to fork out added cash for.

Base airfares, already at a five-year low in 2016, will continue to drop as more airlines, like Delta airlines in the US, offer budget flight options on more and more routes. Locally, FlySafair travellers are offered well-priced flights but are charged for extras such as checking in bags and selecting their preferred seat pre-flight.

While such travel is still not for everyone, nostalgia for the “good old days” when airfares were all-inclusive will largely fade away, as people focus on getting where they want to go for less. Travellers looking to save on flight bookings in 2017 aim to travel with only hand luggage or is open to being allocated a seat on arrival instead of ahead of time, as some low-cost airlines charge to pre-book seats.

2. International travel on the rise

With both domestic and international airlines offering budget options even for overseas flights, international travel will be more accessible than ever.

Airlines such as Norwegian Air have introduced a narrow-body plane which the experts say results in greater fuel efficiency. Lower fuel costs help to keep airline costs low and, paired with concepts such as BYO entertainment, keep airfares in check.

With the help of major currency fluctuations, there is increased purchasing power in many popular markets for South Africans. Of course, there are some potential headwinds for South African travellers, such as the continuing effect of Brexit and uncertain political climates in major markets such as the US.

“Some will find the rise in nationalism in the political world as a reason to stay home. However, others will find travel as the antidote to the politics of the day, realising that there may be no better opportunity than the present to get out there and explore the world. Having said this, local destinations will continue to be attractive to South Africans, as an affordable option,” continued Shelton.

Top tip for South Africans for international travel – check out the non-direct routes to destinations. A few layovers not only allow a chance to explore more destinations on the bucket list but often result in cheaper fares.

3. Increased airport innovation and investment

Airport innovation and investment will continue globally, driven by increased complications at airports. Last year the US saw record-setting security and immigration lines at airports, and this is likely to increase once Donald Trump is inaugurated as president and if he implements further visa restrictions. Globally, much of the short-term improvements is funded by the airlines themselves, with United rolling out automated security screening lanes at hub airports to keep lines moving quicker and British Airways investing millions in its top US airports to refurbish check-in areas and lounges for a better passenger experience.

Other improvements to watch for include the rise in biometric-powered fast-tracked security screenings and personalised services, like food delivery to departure gates or print-your-own luggage tags.

South Africa also saw several air traffic navigation and baggage delivery system issues and increased flight delays at international airports around the country. This will be addressed at Cape Town International and OR Tambo International, both which will be expanding passenger terminals and upgrading facilities.

Locals can also look forward to cheaper local travel after the Airports Company South Africa (ACSA) announced that they will be reducing passenger service charges, landing fees, and aircraft parking from April this year.

4. Portable travel search

Mobile technology has changed the face of travel planning and search. The evolution of online travel has extended well

beyond the desktop and is now moving beyond the travel website. At the most basic, it's the simple step of pulling out a phone for an impromptu vacation planning session over dinner. But increasingly, expect text alerts for fare sales and price drops, or to get a price from a voice-based internet device or through Facebook Messenger.

Coming soon: drag an online article about a team, festival or concert right into a search window and get the flight options for attending upcoming events right away.

5. Decline of the generic holiday

Travel as an experience in itself increasingly eclipses just the basics of getting away. Cheapflights has seen an uptake in people looking to travel with purpose and expects this to continue, including:

Living like a local – thanks to the popularity of homestay service like Airbnb, travellers can easily take up residence in a new city or a remote bit of countryside, whether for a few days, weeks, or months. This is giving rise to the search for a more personalised and “authentic” experience. Paired with services like local tour guide matching and at-home dining with locals, it's far easier to get a full-immersion holiday anywhere in the world. These options add fuel to the growing solo travel market and make it easier to cut the ties to home, which is key to a digital detox experience. For the growing group of travellers motivated to deep dive into a culture, this holiday style is hard to beat.

Working vacation – while total immersion is one increasingly popular option, there is also a trend for combining work and travel in new ways. One is the so-called “bleisure” trip, combining both business and leisure, where extra time is added onto the trip and possibly an added destination or two to the work travel. Done right, this is the ultimate in multitasking – add another outfit or two to a bag and have work pick up the bulk of the travel tab. Another spin is the “have laptop, will travel” habit. For those who can work from anywhere in the world – an increasing phenomenon in today's tech-driven, remote employee world – there's no reason not to take work on the road. Look for more and more people exploring the world by working business hours for their day job and then exploring in their off hours.

Ecotourism – the ticking clocks of climate change and overdevelopment are getting louder and louder for many people, driving a sense of urgency for seeing destinations that are endangered and supporting tourism services that sustain vulnerable lands and species.

The other “green” tourism – with marijuana now legal or at least decriminalised in a growing number of places, expect to see a rise in this kind of “green” travel as well. The boom in pot tourism in Colorado, after the sale of recreational marijuana was legalised in 2012, underscores the pent-up demand. With places like Massachusetts, California, and Maine voting to legalise it later this year, and with Canada eyeing such a law at the national level, we can expect to see travel in this segment light up even more.

6. Hot international destinations on the rise

Cork, Ireland – Cork is a charming spot in Ireland to visit either as an extended layover or as a main destination. The most recent proof of the region's allure is West Cork being claimed as the 2017 Great Town Award, naming it the best town in Britain and Ireland. Whether visitors prefer sights like churches, castles and old-world architecture, a bustling and scenic waterfront, or popping into pubs and fish and chips shops, Cork has everyone covered. A visit to Cork's English Market, which dates back to 1788, is a feast for the senses. Acclaimed as one of the finest covered markets in Europe, Queen Elizabeth insisted on a stop here during her historic visit to Ireland in 2011.

Finland – with saunas, snow, the Northern Lights in winter, hiking, beaches, stunning scenery and cultured cities in the summer, Finland should be on everyone's travel to-do list. This year may be the best year to visit, as it is their 100th birthday celebration, which runs throughout the year. Celebration spots include a giant snow castle, a snow restaurant, snow hotel and even a snow chapel. There's also a wine festival with five 100th anniversary wines and a grand ball to mark the birthday itself.

Polynesia – if “Frozen” is any measure, even an animated movie can turn a remote location into a popular destination. Just as the “The Lord of the Rings” movies spiked interest in New Zealand, which played the role of Middle Earth, visits to Norway increased by 20% after Disney brought the winter wonderland of Scandinavia to life in “Frozen.”

Now the recently released “Moana” shines the spotlight on the incredibly scenic South Pacific, drawing inspiration from places like Hawaii, Tahiti, and the Cook Islands. While this may not be the most accessible destination for travellers, there is expected to be a swelling tide of visits, first from fans and then from those who have learned more about Polynesia from the media attention.

Canada – all of Canada will be taking part in the country’s rolling 150th anniversary this year. Starting from New Year’s Eve, every event will be bigger and better; and every city and town will be getting in on the action with festivities and celebrations. Montreal will be doubling down on its celebrations, as 2017 also marks the city’s 375th anniversary. There will be 102 events throughout the city and the year, to be kicked off by lighting up the Expo 67 Biosphere. Look for everything from pop-up art galleries to seasonal festivals, and from neighbourhood celebrations to a concert featuring three orchestras and hundreds of performers. In a year when Canada is a hot spot for travel, Montreal looks to be a particularly big draw.

Mauritius – South African Airways increased the capacity of flights travelling from South Africa to Mauritius towards the end of last year. Mauritius remains one of the most popular island destinations for locals and internationals, and are refurbishing venues around the island, to meet the needs of the influx of visitors.

Cape Town – with some of the big-name movies filmed in the past in Cape Town, the city can expect to see a further influx of tourists mid-year, with another movie filmed in the Mother City. As the location for the filming of Stephen King’s The Dark Tower, featuring renowned actor Matthew McConaughey, it will be no surprise that tourism numbers increase based on where the set of the movie was shot.

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