

Travel Trends

SMARInsights

Prepared for Visit Williamsburg and the
Williamsburg Tourism Council

February 2026

Trading Souvenirs for Soft Skills

In October 2025, Hilton reported on the “rise of the whycation,” highlighting a new traveler tendency to ask *why* to travel instead of *where*.

Other industry reports indicated travelers would craft more intentional itineraries in 2026.

A subset of the whycation, “skillcations” are a growing travel trend that focus more on experiences gained and lessons learned, and less on the destination itself. These trips offer unique, transformative opportunities that weave together on-the-ground experience, local culture, and adventure.

Skillcations combine learning and travel. They are structured but flexible, anchoring

traveler experiences around one or two learning activities while allowing them time to explore nearby treasures. This approach is far less about ground covered, and far more about a personal sense of accomplishment.

Skillcations require proper planning—learning schedules are established in advance, and travelers must arrive prepared to actively participate rather than passively observe.

According to GetYourGuide, around 31% of current travelers prefer learning something new rather than buying a keepsake. 76% of travelers indicate learning a new skill on a trip is more appealing than ever, and nearly a third of Gen Z respondents said they would rather return from a trip with a skill than a souvenir.

No matter the craft—from baking to woodworking—skill workshops are booming, as evidenced by GetYourGuide recording large increases in skill-learning bookings in 2025.

When travelers take the time to learn a skill while on vacation, they ultimately end up taking that skill home with them. The stories gained in those experiences don’t make it into guidebooks; rather, they become their own sort of private souvenir.

“[The] emphasis on time—slowing down, staying longer, learning deliberately—sits at the heart of what is increasingly being called maker travel, or ‘skillcation’ travel. Travelers are seeking participation rather than passive consumption.”

—Teja Lee for The National

Behind Skillcations: Consumer and Brand Insights

Insight Trends World (ITW) has documented the shift away from maximized checklists while in-destination towards narrowed-down itineraries that focus on depth of experience. They note that, structurally, it makes sense that checklist-based travel has fallen out of favor—overtourism, media saturation, and post-pandemic rebound has exhausted travelers. Culturally, travel has become affiliated with wellness and self-improvement, and is therefore much more compatible with learning-driven itineraries.

What makes an itinerary “learning-driven” is its ability resonate with who the consumer is or wants to be while traveling.

They make their decisions on activities based on how those activities align with their identities, allowing them to create stronger personal narratives on the trip while also enhancing their trip satisfaction.

Tourism boards and destinations should react accordingly. A wealth of data suggests that niche experiences such as skillcations are becoming great stabilizers, often supporting year-round visitation and more consistent revenue as compared to seasonal volume spikes. Brands should tap into purpose as a differentiator, rather than breadth of offerings. Additionally, destinations should design experiences for immersion rather than visitor volume to lay the groundwork for longer-term success and customer loyalty.

Per ITW, “Travel

succeeds in 2026 when it reduces cognitive load instead of adding stimulation, integrates into personal identity rather than interrupting it, [and] produces emotional residue rather than momentary highs.”

Booking Platforms Promoting Experiences, Skillcations

Airbnb, GetYourGuide, and Viator are a few examples of platforms that have upped their efforts in advertising more personalized, culturally immersive offerings to trip planners, balancing innovation with authenticity in the booking space. However, Airbnb leads the competition with its integrated accommodations and experiences booking, as well as its emphasis on host authenticity.

Airbnb is well-positioned for the rise of skillcations. In 2016, it launched Airbnb Experiences, which has now grown to offer thousands of unique experiences across thousands of cities globally. The experiences lead to a winning combination: travelers get to experience a destination on a deeper level, while local entrepreneurs and artisans build a supplemental income off a diverse customer base.

Citing an Oxford Economics study, AMW reports that “Local economic impact extends beyond individual host earnings....direct payments to hosts, spending at local businesses during experiences, and additional purchases guests make...” generate billions in economic activity for host communities.

Other Companies Leaning Into the Trend

Hilton has embraced integrating skillcations into their package offerings. Some initiatives they’ve taken to capitalize on this trend include:

Hilton Goa Resort offers the “Mapusa Market Experience,” offering travelers the opportunity to visit the market and learn negotiation skills, among other lessons.

Hilton Singapore Orchard offers “Chef’s Showcase,” a hands-on, three-course cooking class with recipes by MICHELIN-starred chef Nancy Silverton. Guests are given a recipe card as a souvenir to practice their new skills after their stay.

At **Baker’s Cay Resort Key Largo**, customers are offered a more advanced culinary experience with the

“Dock to Dish” program, where guests catch fish alongside skilled captains and learn to cook their catch alongside professional chefs.

Other hotel chains actively leaning into the “skillcation” trend include Marriott International, Hyatt, Waldorf Astoria, and Conrad. The goal is to position hotels as potential “learning hubs” offering appealing masterclasses, workshops, and other educational opportunities to travelers.

As for broader tourism organizations, below are a few skills initiatives various companies have invested in as of December 2025, as well as program types, target segments, and learning formats.

MSC Cruises: Programs are structured and relate

to sports, robotics, and wellness activities. The target segment is multigenerational families.

National Geographic Expeditions:

Programs are expert-led and educate on photography, science, and conservation. Affluent, eager-to-learn guests are the target segment.

Club Med: Programs relate to building skills in niche sports and arts. The target segments are active travelers and families.

Road Scholar:

Programs are academic-adjacent, especially in regard to arts and history. The target segment is retirees.

Sources:

[MATEIN](#), [Family Vacationist](#), [Men's Journal](#), [Life is Suite](#), [Vacayou](#), [Benchmark Resorts & Hotels](#),

[Teja Lee for The National](#), [Hilton](#), [Newser](#), [AAA Connect](#), [Chelsea Dickenson for Get Your Guide](#), [GetYourGuide](#), [AMW](#), [Insight Trends World](#), [TravelPulse](#), [National Geographic Expeditions](#), [Club Med](#), [Road Scholar](#)

In Summary

- “Skillcations” are a growing travel trend that focus more on experiences gained and lessons learned, and less on the destination itself.
- Niche experiences such as skillcations are becoming great stabilizers, often supporting year-round visitation and more consistent revenue as compared to seasonal volume spikes.
- Brands should tap into purpose as a differentiator, rather than breadth of offerings.
- Local economic impact of skillcations and other structured learning classes for travelers generate billions in economic activity for host communities.
- Tourism boards and destinations should embrace integrating skillcations into their package offerings.