

# Travel Trends

## SMAR<sup>i</sup>nsights

Prepared for Visit Williamsburg and the  
Williamsburg Tourism Council

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## America 250 Trends Emerge

America 250 celebrations are beginning to impact domestic travel itineraries, booking behaviors, and consumer decisions regarding *when* and *where* to travel.

The week of July 4<sup>th</sup> is unsurprisingly expected to see a surge in early bookings and hotel occupancy. KEYDATA notes that DMOs should begin capturing traveler enthusiasm now with event-driven messaging and flexible booking-rate strategies.

As of March 2026, data from multiple outlets reports occupancy pacing rising in historically significant regions.

**South Dakota** has seen a lift from 6% to 13% year-over-year.

**Washington, DC** has seen an 8% increase

year-over-year.

**Philadelphia** has seen an overwhelming increase in bookings — an 80% increase over last year.

Several organizations plan to be dynamic partners with the US Semi-quincentennial Commission in order to give more Americans the opportunity to partake in “patriotic” travel that brings history, heritage, and the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary to life.

Announced as a sponsor and partner of the celebration, **American Airlines** will paint two of its planes with official America 250 regalia. It will also serve as the official airline of America Innovates, a celebration of American ingenuity across the nation, offering immersive visitor experiences that highlight the nation’s progress.

The **US Travel Association** is

partnering with the **Great American Road Trip** to encourage travel to various communities and illustrate how domestic travel contributes to the American identity. The road trip will explore diverse cultural and historic sites — some off major highways, some off the backroads.

Travelers have multiple options to experience the country by train.

**Amtrak Vacations** now offers the *Stars and Stripes* collection, promising to showcase “the best of America.” Likewise, **Union Pacific** — the world’s biggest steam train — is touring the US for its 250<sup>th</sup> birthday. Its 10-day *Celebrating America: 250 Years Strong* tour will make stops at cities important to the founding of America and will give travelers the chance to visit Boston Harbor, Independence Hall,

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and the Statue of Liberty, to name a few.

As the year continues, one thing is certain: heritage tourism will shape domestic travel, boosting trips to both well-known and lesser-known historic destinations.

## A Big Year for Heritage Tourism

Heritage tourism will be a key theme for America 250 celebrations. It is important for DMOs to understand the tenets of heritage tourism in order to execute marketing that showcases high-quality, place-based heritage experiences in various types of communities.

Per the National Trust for Historic Preservation, heritage tourism is "...traveling to experience the places, artifacts, and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and

present." In other words, heritage tourism is a personal encounter that cultivates authentic experiences with place and past.

Communities reap a variety of benefits when they integrate cultural heritage with local tourism. The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation reports a high percentage of domestic travelers want to experience heritage activities on their trips. Those same travelers tend to stay longer and spend more, leading to more jobs and other local benefits.

The Texas Historical Commission suggests "...the relationship between [heritage] tourism and preservation is cyclical," explaining that impacts to the economy, sustainable experiences, and historic preservation/restoration solidify community identities

and their place in the larger story of America.

## Heritage Tourism Market Segmentation

Fortune Business Insights has defined heritage tourism market segments by heritage trip type, travel party type, and traveler age.

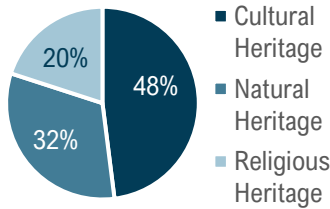
### Heritage trip types:

*Cultural heritage tourism* includes iconic historic elements (monuments, landmarks, etc.), all experienced across generations. *National heritage tourism* emphasizes the historical significance of landscapes, ecosystems, and biodiversity. *Religious heritage trips* — a smaller segment — are driven by faith-based pilgrimages to destinations with historic religious significance.

### Travel party types:

Individual travel leads the way, echoing current travel trends

### Heritage Trip Type

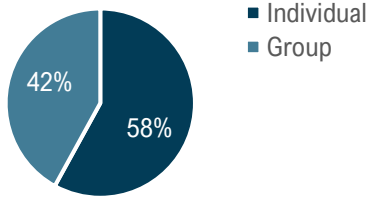


reflecting strong preference for personalized experiences. However, it is important to note that group travel still represents a large portion of travel party types.

### Traveler age:

Those between the ages of 30–50 years-old make up the dominant segment. This group includes professionals and families seeking culturally-immersive educational trips. Travelers above 50 years old represent a slightly bigger heritage tourism market share than travelers under 30, likely because older travelers have more leisure availability.

### Travel Party Type



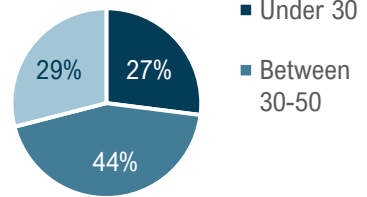
## Opportunities and Barriers

As with all travel trends, there are opportunities and barriers that will impact the way America 250 tourism is realized.

One opportunity the travel and hospitality industry has is to amplify the message that US travel — especially for the semi-quincentennial celebrations — is on-par with travel to iconic global hotspots. This message could help offset declines in inbound international travel, utilizing domestic travel as a sort of “cushion” against booking slumps.

Shifting focus to domestic audiences will require

### Traveler Age



destinations to reframe their approach to standing-out among the global competitive set. For example, tourism boards in California might consider highlighting the first-rate experience travelers can have on a road trip through the state, as compared to other popular scenic drives abroad.

This strategic shift can support a durable, long-term response to global uncertainty.

However, it is important to note Americans are rethinking vacations. In the wake of TSA staffing crises, Americans might be wary of traveling to destinations via flight

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(though demand for tickets has not yet dampened, per the New York Times). In addition, rising gas and oil costs are poised to be a major bottleneck in consumers' travel planning process.

Eric Rosen, director of travel content at The Points Guy, says that "As people have to spend more for gas, that's going to eat into their budget for other things, including discretionary vacation funds... if gas prices remain high, you are going to see a lot of people re-evaluate their road trip plans this summer."

Regarding America 250 travel, cost concerns might be mitigated by shorter trips centered around specific anniversary activities and historical experiences. With that said, the overall average length-of-stay is so far unchanged from 2025, remaining at 7.6 nights.

#### *Sources:*

*[Advisory Council on Historic Preservation](#), [Texas Historical Commission](#), [KEYDATA](#), [Travel Age West](#), [Great American Road Trip](#), [Railbookers](#), [US 250 Tour](#), [American Airlines](#), [New York Times](#), [Recommend.com](#), [The Traveler](#), [Fortune Business Insights](#)*

### **In Summary:**

- America 250 celebrations are beginning to impact domestic travel itineraries and booking behaviors, especially consumer decisions regarding *when* and *where* to travel.
- "Patriotic" travel is inherently connected to heritage tourism. This type of travel will shape domestic trips as the year continues and boost excursions to both well-known and lesser-known historic destinations.
- It is important for DMOs to understand the tenets of heritage tourism in order to execute marketing that showcases high quality, place-based heritage experiences in various types of communities, as communities reap a variety of benefits when they integrate cultural heritage with local tourism.
- Several opportunities and barriers will impact the way heritage tourism trends are realized throughout the duration of the nation's semi-quincentennial.