

PASSPORT TO HAPPINESS

➤ Why travel is the most powerful reward
for consumers and employees.

MAKING LIFE EASIER FOR AGENCIES
AND BRANDS ➤ SINCE 2011
uponcloudnine.co.uk

CELEBRATING
15
YEARS
2011-2026

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CELEBRATING
15
YEARS
2011-2026

CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF CREATING JOY

As Cloud Nine marks 15 years in 2026, we continue to demonstrate how travel rewards can do more than incentivise: they create genuine emotional connection, deepen loyalty, and drive meaningful engagement.

> Travel is booming...

Each year, we have the privilege of taking more people around the world on extraordinary journeys that spark pure joy and create lifelong memories. In a rapidly growing travel landscape, even amid global uncertainty, one thing remains constant: the profound effect travel has on people's wellbeing.

Drawing on insights from the travel, marketing, and HR industries, this report highlights how travel incentives are becoming one of the most effective ways to motivate, recognise, and engage both customers and employees.

At its core is a simple truth: happiness drives performance, and few rewards deliver happiness like travel.

As you explore this report, we invite you to reimagine the role of reward and recognition, and to consider how travel can elevate not just performance, but the human experience at the heart of your organisation.



**£9-10
trillion**

total global economic contribution of the Travel & Tourism sector in 2025.



**1.5
billion**

international trips per year!

\$1 in \$10!

Approximately one in every ten dollars in the global economy is linked to travel and tourism.



THE HAPPINESS ECONOMY: TRAVEL AS A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Happiness has never been more important. So much so, that there is even a World Happiness Report, which tracks changes in life satisfaction across countries, generations, and time.

The report has become an essential resource as policymakers increasingly recognise the importance of prioritising happiness, or wellbeing, when shaping societies and economies.

Finland ranks as the happiest country in the world for a record ninth consecutive year, with citizens reporting an average life evaluation score of 7.764 out of 10. Out of 147 countries, the UK is still fairly high (6.73 points) at the 29th happiest, but it's dropped six places since last year's report.

Happiness also drives stronger performance, and few rewards create happiness as powerfully as travel. Increasingly, people value meaningful experiences over material possessions because experiences evoke emotion, foster connection, and create lasting memories. Travel begins delivering value long before departure with the anticipation of what's to come. It strengthens relationships through shared moments and continues to resonate long after the journey ends.



Spending on experiences boosts happiness and wellbeing more than purchasing physical items."

Peter Brooks, Barclays

By tapping into people's desire for connection and discovery, travel rewards generate richer emotional engagement than discounts or product prizes alone. They make campaigns more memorable through shareable moments, build loyalty rooted in authentic human needs, and help brands stand out in markets crowded with transactional incentives.

Building loyalty in a highly competitive FMCG space means many brand interactions are quickly forgotten, whereas meaningful travel experiences inspire action, deepen relationships, and create positive associations that last for years.



➤ While rewards like cash, coupons or product prizes are short-lived, travel creates:

- **Build-up** (anticipation before the experience)
- **Connection** (shared moments with others)
- **Transformation** (new perspectives and personal growth)
- **Memory** (lasting emotional impact tied to your brand)





WHY TRAVEL MAKES PEOPLE HAPPIER

Holidays don't just make people happy in the moment; they support longer-term mental wellbeing. At a time when the UK workforce faces rising mental health challenges, with **22.1 million working days lost to stress, depression, or anxiety** in 2024/25, the value of meaningful experiences has never been clearer.

Travel creates joy from the very first spark of anticipation, building excitement, strengthening relationships, and leaving lasting positive memories long after the trip ends. Shared journeys bring people closer, fostering deeper loyalty and stronger emotional connection to the brands that made them possible.

For Millennials and Gen Z in particular, travel feels purposeful, personal, and worth sharing. From family-friendly escapes to adventure trips, wellness retreats, or luxury experiences, travel rewards can be tailored to reflect what motivates each audience.

When designed thoughtfully, travel becomes more than a reward; it becomes a powerful way to support wellbeing, inspire connection, and create lasting impact.

“
According to neuroscientists, when we travel, we rewire our brains. This is because new experiences are the key to building new neural pathways in the brain.

By rewiring your brain, you become more creative and accepting of new ideas. This is why travel makes you happy. It also takes us out of our comfort zones and inspires us to see, taste, and try new things.”

Numa



85%

Studies show that 85% of people think **travel brings long-term happiness**, and 76% feel happier just by planning a trip.



7+ Trips

Taking seven or more trips a year **can significantly boost mental health**, cut depression risk by up to 30%, and reduce stress.



65%

of people say that **holidays are the most important time of year**, and 80% say they are important for their mental health.



The majority of Brits (75%) already engage with promotions. Research shows that **81% of consumers are more likely to engage with brands that offer prizes or rewards**, and 86% of UK adults find promotions appealing.

However, the type of reward matters.

Cash incentives are quickly spent and easily forgotten. Experiences, on the other hand, stay with people long after the promotion ends.

Shared travel experiences create deeper emotional connections than transactional rewards. They transform moments into meaningful stories and position the brand as part of a positive memory.

Travel rewards don't just drive short-term participation; they build affinity, strengthen relationships, and help audiences feel genuinely closer to the brand behind the experience.



> **Case Study:**
Adidas TERREX - Happiness Found at the Summit



The Brief:

Adidas TERREX wanted to reward and immerse consumers in the brand with a travel experience that would create happiness through connection, adventure, and a shared love of the outdoors. The objective was to unite winners from multiple European markets and inspire them through meaningful, joy-filled experiences in nature.

The campaign, Adidas TERREX: United By Summits, hosted on the route-planning app Komoot encouraged hikers to explore curated scenic routes for the chance to win a fully funded, guided adventure.

The Reward:

Cloud Nine designed and delivered two unforgettable wilderness hiking retreats in the Peloponnese region of Greece and Tirol, Austria. Each programme combined scenic, challenging hikes with carefully selected accommodation that encouraged both relaxation and connection. From complex travel logistics to expert-led routes, every detail was managed seamlessly, allowing participants to fully immerse themselves in the experience. Communal spaces and shared activities were intentionally crafted to foster friendships and a strong sense of belonging.

The Result:

The retreats delivered 100% positive feedback, created lasting happiness. Guests experienced a powerful sense of achievement, wellbeing, and connection, forming friendships that extended well beyond the trip itself.

Experience design | Destination & venue sourcing | Winner management | Contract negotiation & management | Flights & transfers | Gift sourcing | Risk assessment | Budget management



INCENTIVE TRAVEL FOR EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION

Employee happiness is a proven driver of engagement and performance. As a result, more organisations are investing in wellbeing, flexibility, and meaningful rewards to unlock productivity.

Yet the gap remains. A recent Edenred report found that **only half of British employees frequently feel happy at work**, highlighting a clear opportunity to strengthen engagement and satisfaction.

Incentive travel stands out as a powerful solution. Research from the Incentive Research Foundation ranks it as the most effective reward for driving engagement, performance, and business results.

The 2026 European Top Performers Study reinforces this shift. Leading organisations across Europe are no longer treating incentive travel as a perk, but as a strategic tool, one that delivers measurable gains in sales, retention, and customer loyalty. In today's landscape, it's not a luxury; it's a business-critical investment.



Happy employees naturally deliver better service, stay loyal longer and actively help grow your business. Prioritising happiness isn't just nice, it's smart business."

Tim Heneveld, country director for PERGOLUX



Incentive Travel for Employee Motivation *cont...*

For 15 years, we've seen travel rewards consistently outperform transactional ones by boosting motivation, increasing loyalty, and inspiring active advocacy. Travel rewards are valued for their positive emotional impact and ability to drive meaningful engagement, even in challenging circumstances.

For organisations, adding travel rewards is simple: identify what inspires your audience, set clear goals, make targets achievable, and communicate rewards often to maintain motivation. Work with experienced partners to ensure a smooth experience and maximise impact.



91%

of employees find incentive travel 'very' or 'extremely' motivating.

48%

of senior leaders consider incentive travel as an 'essential strategic differentiator'.



Case Study: Standard Life - Celebrating Success Through Shared Joy



Standard Life

The Brief:

Standard Life wanted to reward top performers with an incentive that would not only recognise success, but also generate lasting happiness. The experience needed to balance celebration and relaxation, allowing winners and their guests to connect, unwind, and enjoy meaningful moments together.

The Reward:

Cloud Nine curated a luxury three-night experience in Florence, carefully designed to deliver both collective joy and personal fulfilment. The programme blended iconic cultural experiences with opportunities for relaxation and connection. Highlights included a vintage car rally through Tuscany, vineyard wine tastings, exclusive dining experiences, rooftop drinks, and private access to Florence's most celebrated landmarks. Hands-on activities such as perfume making and cookery classes added a personal and memorable dimension, while a gala awards evening provided a shared moment of celebration and recognition.

Every touchpoint, from pre-event communications to on-site delivery, was designed to ensure a seamless and emotionally engaging experience, allowing guests to fully immerse themselves in the joy of the moment.

The Result:

The experience left a lasting emotional impact, with guests returning feeling valued, inspired, and genuinely happy. The combination of shared celebration and personal time created deeper connections between attendees and their guests. The overwhelmingly positive feedback demonstrated how travel incentives can drive both happiness and long-term engagement.

Experience design | Destination & venue sourcing | Supplier management | Contract negotiation & management | Collateral design | Event website | Pre-event communication & launch video | Delegate registration & guest management | Flights & transfers | Gift sourcing | Risk assessment | Budget management | On-site operations



65% of travellers say holidays would be the last expense they would cut.

RESILIENCE OF TRAVEL

Even amid inflation, higher living costs, and global uncertainty, travel remains a top priority for many.

Recent insights from Skyscanner reveal that most people plan to take as many trips in 2026, and UK holiday travel is almost back to pre-pandemic levels. Many say holidays would be the last thing they cut from their budget.

Travel has shifted from a luxury to a core of wellbeing. Even as financial pressures rise, it remains a top priority. People choose meaningful, experience-led travel over material things.



Travel rewards can fit any budget, enabling businesses of any size to create memorable experiences. For example, low-budget options can include local staycations, day trips to the city, or prepaid experiences such as museum visits and wellness workshops. Mid-range budgets might cover weekend breaks, adventure excursions, or group retreats within the UK or nearby destinations.

For higher budgets, rewards could feature international trips or curated, once-in-a-lifetime experiences. By tailoring incentives to available resources, every company can offer travel rewards that feel special and motivating.



83%

of global travellers plan to take **the same number or more trips** in 2026 compared to 2025.



87%

of UK adults took a holiday in the past year, **returning close to pre-pandemic levels.**



TRAVEL TRENDS

Today's travellers are guided less by destination and more by emotion, **with 61% saying how a trip makes them feel matters more than where they go.**

Travel behaviour is shifting towards experiences that offer meaning, restoration, and genuine connection.

Increasingly, people are seeking moments of calm over crowds, authenticity over sightseeing checklists, and opportunities to truly switch off. Tourism bodies such as Japan are responding by encouraging exploration beyond the obvious, highlighting slower destinations like Sapporo and Okinawa as alternatives to Tokyo's fast pace.



Demand is growing for experiences centred on wellbeing, mindfulness, and digital detox, reflecting a deeper desire to step away from routine and rediscover balance.

Travel is no longer just about visiting somewhere new; it's about feeling renewed, inspired, and more connected to the world and the people who share the journey. For brands, this creates a powerful opportunity to align rewards with what people value most: experiences that enrich lives, not just fill itineraries.

Key trends set to define the years ahead include:

GLOWCATIONS

Wellness-led journeys, driven largely by Gen Z, that prioritise self-care, rejuvenation, and feeling good inside and out.



SPORTS TOURISM

Sport tourism is a rapidly growing sector of the travel industry, accounting for roughly **10% of global tourism spending**. With the 2026 FIFA World Cup on the horizon and an exciting new era of F1, travel is increasingly centred on immersive sporting moments, from once-in-a-lifetime spectator access to amateur participation and behind-the-scenes experiences.



THE RAIL REVIVAL

Explore has experienced a **25% year-on-year rise in rail journey bookings**. Bookings for the upcoming year are already 41% higher compared to the same point last year, indicating that the demand for slow, scenic travel remains strong.



QUIETCATIONS

Travellers are choosing calm over crowds, seeking meaningful moments through eco-friendly trips, off-peak travel, scenic rail journeys, and deeper cultural immersion.


















Travel Trends *cont...*

Family miles - Multi-generational travel is gaining momentum as families seek meaningful ways to reconnect amid increasingly busy lives.

The traditional idea of a “family holiday” is evolving beyond parents and children to include grandparents and extended relatives, reflecting a growing emphasis on shared experiences and quality time.



15 BEST PLACES TO TRAVEL IN 2026...

- | | |
|--|---|
| > 01  Marrakech | > 09  Hanoi |
| > 02  Crete | > 10  Bangkok |
| > 03  Bali | > 11  Paris |
| > 04  Tokyo | > 12  Tenerife |
| > 05  Rome | > 13  Amalfi Coast |
| > 06  Istanbul | > 14  Rio de Janeiro |
| > 07  Sicily | > 15  Budapest |
| > 08  Lisbon | |



Source: Rough Guides



> Case Study: Monopoly - Designing a Journey Around Family Happiness



The Brief:

The family-favourite boardgame, Monopoly sought to create a campaign that would capture the excitement and escapism of travel by offering one winner and their loved ones the ultimate prize: a fully bespoke £25,000 “Grand Tour.” The aim was to put happiness and family at the centre of the experience by giving complete freedom to design a dream journey.

The Reward:

For the winner, we designed a fully flexible, tailor-made journey spanning the UK, Europe, and worldwide destinations. Every element was personalised, allowing the winner to choose experiences that would bring the greatest happiness to them and their family, whether through relaxation, adventure, or cultural discovery. We managed the entire experience end-to-end, ensuring a seamless journey that allowed the winner to focus purely on enjoying each moment.

The Result:

The prize delivered extraordinary levels of happiness, from the natural wonder of the Giant’s Causeway to the excitement of Disneyland Tokyo, the journey created unforgettable family memories rooted in joy and connection.

Experience design | Destination & venue sourcing | Winner management | Contract negotiation & management | Flights & transfers | Gift sourcing | Risk assessment | Budget management

CONCLUSION

As this report demonstrates, travel is no longer viewed as an occasional luxury: it is a meaningful investment in happiness, wellbeing, and personal growth.

The right experience sparks excitement from the outset, motivates people to strive further, and leaves a lasting emotional connection long after the journey ends.

The most effective travel reward campaigns share three defining qualities:

- 1 They inspire action
- 2 Feel genuinely achievable
- 3 Create memories that last

Even in uncertain times, people continue to prioritise experiences that enrich their lives and strengthen relationships.

If you want to motivate performance, deepen engagement, and truly stand apart, travel is more than a reward; it is a strategic investment in people, relationships, and long-term brand success.

Dictionary definition:

Happy

[Hap-pee] Adjective

Feeling, showing or causing pleasure or satisfaction.

Sources:

ABTA Holiday Habits 2025-26, Barclays Consumer Spend Research 2025, Edenred Bridging the ROI Gap, Explore Worldwide Travel Trends 2026, G Adventures - Travel Your Heart Out: Happiness List 2026, Health and Safety Executive 24/25, Incentive and Research Foundation 2026 Top Performers Study, Mando What the Brits want from Promotions 3.0, Numa, Rough Guides, Skyscanner's UK Travel Trends 2026, The University of Pittsburgh's Mind-Body Centre, World Happiness Report 2026. University of Oxford: Wellbeing Research Centre, World Travel and Tourism Council.

A leading full-service travel prize agency, Cloud Nine Incentives combines creativity, expertise, and a passion for exceptional experiences to help brands harness the true power of travel.

While the industry continues to evolve, our focus remains constant: delivering seamless, inspiring reward experiences that are as impactful for our clients as they are unforgettable for their audiences.

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