



# TODAY'S VISITORS

## An NTC White Paper



Imagine ... driving along a scenic highway enveloped in majestic trees and suddenly emerging into sunlight. You're overlooking an ancient, broad, lush valley, where on a clear day – it appears you can see forever. A doe and her fawn are quietly grazing, appearing not to notice your presence. You stop for a moment, emerging noiselessly from your car, to take a few minutes to listen to the silence.

Imagine ... horses clopping past your window and a fire crackling in the fireplace, as you relax in an authentic, original house right in the middle of an impeccably restored historic village. This is your residence for the next few days while you explore the oldest plantations on American soil.

Imagine ... watching sunlight shimmering across the bay on a crisp, golden afternoon, waves gently lapping at your feet, while a sailboat glides by. You've settled into chair in a waterside village for a few quiet moments, before having dinner in a restaurant that author James Michener rated the highest of any in the area which has maintained its reputation as the finest for decades.



Imagine a life punctuated with experiences like these on a regular basis. How inspiring it would be. In fact, being able to fill life with this level of inspiring experience from time to time is the foundation of travel. To experience unanticipated “made to order moments” that are very special when they do occur. To be delighted, to relax without a schedule, plus, being able to spend quality time with friends and family. Americans travel to enjoy themselves, somewhere other than at home.

We’ve all seen the VRBO commercials where a family books a vacation rental in a free-standing home where they are playing, cooking, and eating together. And doing all the other things that families do when they take time off. The video shows the family having fun without having to worry about others around, hotel room rules, or any of the other stresses that can come with travel. These commercials hit the mark because they touch on the absolute core reason that most Americans seek leisure experiences. They want to escape life to a place where everything stressing out their lives won’t be weighing as much on their mind. And, they want to be comfortable while doing so, to be able to return home refreshed and ready again to tackle life. Americans travel to places they have not been to before, to experience new activities, and learn new stories, yet these are distractions that enable them to engage their minds in new things, truly disconnect and give their minds as well as their bodies a rest for some period of time.

Some experts believe the quest to explore new places in a relaxed manner is the reason, in their view, that small towns and other “non-metro” areas, as we will call them, have become the new “it” destinations. Perception is that there is less hustle and bustle and less opportunity for stress situations to occur. The resurgence to

explore less populated places began during the pandemic, when Americans looked for smaller locations with no crowds so they could be around fewer people while getting out of the house. This quest was combined with the desire, by those who had been confined to their homes, to get out in nature and enjoy some green space. Both of these factors fed into increased road trips to places not located on interstate highways, where visitors could slow down and enjoy life moving at a slower pace.

As the pandemic wore on, more visitors began choosing these alternative routes and places. Now that scenic routes and less populated rural environments have been rediscovered, even within rising costs for everything, road trips to more rural locations will continue at a robust pace. They have been the core of travel in the United States for more than 100 years, and predicted to increase even more as travel returns to 2019 levels and beyond. Once travelers of all economic strata rediscovered the flexibility and relaxation of these trips, for many, there is no going back.

Of course, there are international visitors who enjoy the byways and backroads of America. Yet by far, visitors to these areas are part of the slightly more than the 80% of American adults who travel, and the slightly more than 90% of these Americans who prefer to travel within the United States, rather than going abroad.

When the Morning Consult interviewed nearly 9,000 US adults about where they planned to travel, there were mentions of all 50 states, plus Washington, DC and Puerto Rico. About eight out of 10 travelers (78%) indicate they will continue traveling domestically, even after worries about Covid have passed. 76% indicated

it gives them a new appreciation for the country and 74% indicated they enjoyed traveling domestically more than they thought they would.

Just as 85% of trips taken throughout America are taken by car and 78% of travelers prefer to travel by car even if they can afford to fly to their destination. While taking road trips, 69% enjoy the scenic drives, 69% love the freedom to stop anywhere, and 57% liked the fact they could pack what they wanted without having to worry about weight. Just over 60% of Americans said they're planning to take more road trips during the next five years, with over half confirming that they already have plans to hop in the car to travel in the summer.

In order to most effectively serve this increasing number of visitors who are traveling to non-metro areas and increase their numbers to specific destinations, it is very important for those leading the charge to understand who these visitors are, how they think, what they do, and why.

### **Motivators for Travel**

There are many reasons why Americans need to get away. They are overworked, suffering from having too many material things and most are stressed out. Answers to survey after survey illustrate Americans are tired of the current chaos in American society, always feeling short on time, annoyed with constantly being bombarded by blaring marketing messages and a stream of bad news day after day, plus bristling about being attached to a never-ending parade of electronic stimulation.

## **Americans are Overworked**

The business press has traditionally admired entrepreneurs who work 70-80 hours a week, and those who became famous for “pulling themselves up by the bootstraps.” Unfortunately, because these myths are so ingrained in the American psyche, less than half of Americans use all their vacation days. According to the Pew Research Center, those who don’t take all their time off say it is because they don’t need it. That’s hard to believe with all the stress floating around. Or they worry about falling behind even further at work since most of us feel like we are never completely caught up. Others don’t take time off because they feel bad about co-workers carrying their load. And, a few even think taking vacations hurt their chances for a promotion or could cost them their job.

Without time off, those who work with their minds, rather than their hands, which is most of us, stay connected to work. When at home, work is always gnawing at the back of the mind and the technology to engage in it, always close at hand. This provides no real “time out”; no ability to experience being completely free of the workplace, even for a few hours.

As a result, 66% of professionals say their stress levels about work in the past year are higher than five years ago. People who skip annual vacations have a 30% greater chance of suffering a heart attack. Those who are under the constant stress of work are less likely to eat healthy, less likely to exercise, more likely to fail at weight loss programs, and get half as much sleep as people reporting less stress.

## **The Way Too Many Things Syndrome**

Paralleled with working too much, Americans are also “stuffed,” working long hours to be able to acquire all the things that were supposed to serve as an outward badge of economic success. Prosperity after World War II gave rise to the Boomers, who after college believed they would and should own all the things their parents did. Since buying all these new things did not bring new levels of satisfaction, acquiring turned into rampant, random consumption.

Today, maintaining these material standards makes Americans feel even more anxious that they may not be able to continue their lifestyle. Scholars have believed for quite some time that when Americans got tired enough of this situation, things would change. Apparently, they are. In 1970, 80% of Americans held the view that owning material goods was very important to their lives and their identity. Fifty years later, only 50% held that view. 73% say life has become too complicated.

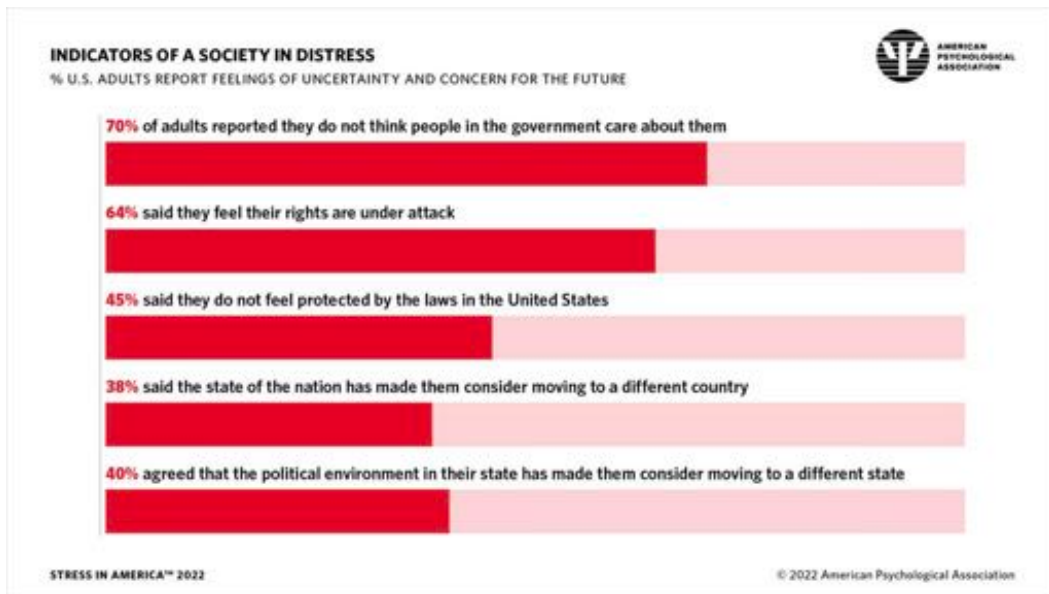
## **Americans are Also Stressed Out By Other Things**

For the first time in polling history five years ago, the American Psychological Association (APA) Harris Poll revealed that stress and anxiety over the state of the country topped the list of stresses, beating out money and jobs. Five years later, things have not gotten any better. In fact, they’re getting worse.

2023 statistics point out that 77% of US adults report feeling stress over the future of the nation, up from 66% in 2019. This factor was not even on the horizon in 2017. 63% of Americans adults also said that the economy is a significant source of stress, as compared to only 46% in 2019. The younger the person, the higher

the stress levels, topping out with Generation Z, who are dealing with gun violence, and Millennials who are dealing with women's health care decisions.

Americans, across all generations, including those who have lived through mass shootings, the Vietnam War and more, now believe this is the lowest point in our nation's history they can remember. Many believe that the organizations that were supposed to be helping us become more prosperous, successful, and healthy, are making things worse. Even though many Americans believed the country was at an inflection point in prior elections, a more pervasive anxiety that gnaws at us each day has crept in, as we are bombarded with the new daily crisis or the prospect of something dangerous occurring on the world stage.



One response would be to become numb to it all and move even more toward the alternative universe created by Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and the other tech giants. Experiences of all types including first rate movies, home delivered ingredients to prepare a gourmet meal, live streamed sports events, high quality



entertainment, and most everything else, are available without leaving the house. That approach including the insular “I don’t have to communicate with anyone” could contribute to a society where Americans don’t believe in the benefit of community and the positive stimulation others bring to our lives.

Yet, recent research illustrates that 80% of Americans adults are traveling, so a retreat to alternative worlds does not appear to be happening. More Americans have realized that getting out of the house is very important, as the systemic stress, chaos, and inherent fear of what might happen next pushes us toward the need for regular respite and re-generation.

### **Travel as a Wellness Product**

Relaxation and rejuvenation have become “medically necessary” for us to keep our wits about us and spending discretionary income and discretionary time on travel has become the antidote of choice. Real relaxation occurs only when people physically remove themselves from their normal surroundings, turn off their electronics, and engage in a new situation to stimulate the mind and displace thoughts of work. Getting out of the house to enjoy a different landscape alleviates having to think about what we do or do not have.

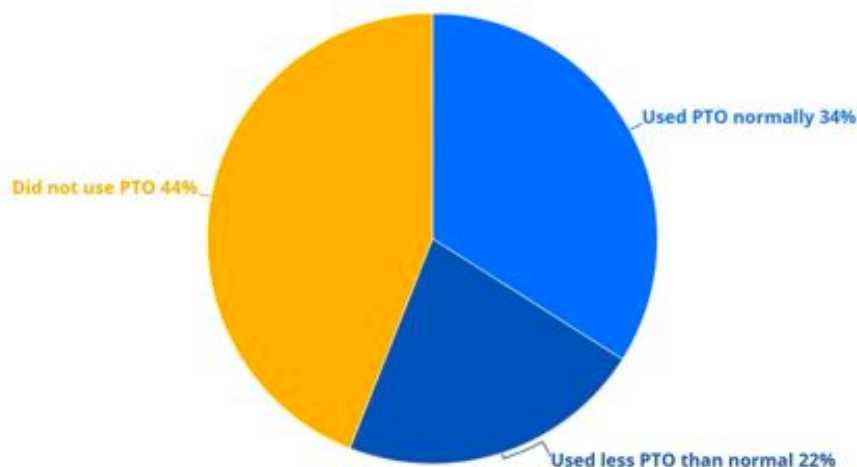
Within this perspective, travel has begun to serve as a wellness product. 73% of travelers say that vacation time should be strictly work free. 79% indicate that travel helps their mental and emotional well being more than other forms of self-care. 63% of couples claim that travel has helped them stay together. 63% of Generation X’ers travel to avoid burn out, while 55% of Baby Boomers and Millennials do so for the same. “Giving myself time to relax” (84%), “taking time to

mentally unwind” (78%), and “boosting my mood” (78%) were the top motivators indicated in Click Magazine’s recent survey as the primary reason for travel.

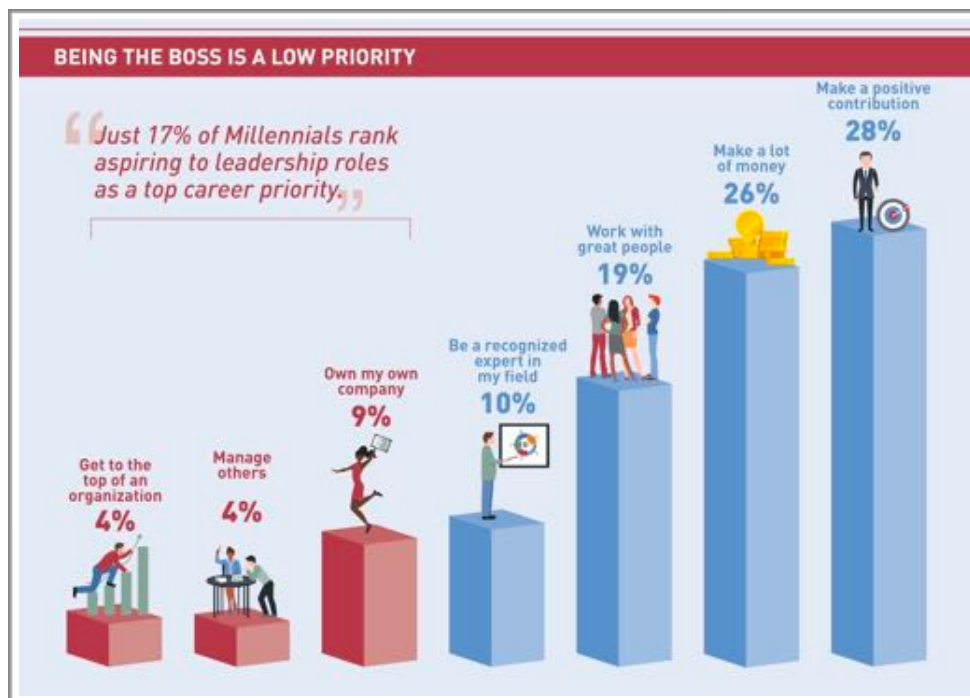
Well-documented studies by Duke University Medical Center proved that exercise programs do not do as good a job in preventing further cardiac events as stress management and reduction programs do. And in fact, participating in experiences that enabled people to get away from their daily lives completely proved to be as good at lowering blood pressure and relieving stress, as formalized stress management programs. Enjoyable experiences that allow people to “live in the moment” and “lose themselves” in the process, are the most effective in doing so.

### **Changing Habits**

Thank heavens for everyone’s mental health, perspectives and habits in America are changing. Millennials and younger workers consider PTO - personal time off—important to balance life and work into a functioning lifestyle. Having recognized that time off reenergizes workers, some companies are even instituting policies that require workers to take a minimum number of days off each year.



Millennials were also the first to begin changing other aspects of life, saying enough is enough. Many have elected to live in center city, in smaller homes that have less space for things, and taking public transportation instead of owning a car.



They express their identities through sharing experiences on social media. More than 80% indicate they have attended events and participated in live experiences over the past year. Over 70% say they will increase spending on experiences in the next year. Nearly 80% believe that experiences help shape their identity and create some of their best memories. This is a total 180-degree change in perspective from previous generations of young people who were admired for their ability to acquire the biggest house, the best furniture, and all the material possessions that supposedly came with success.

As more Americans have adopted a new perspective about what really makes them happy, older generations are consistently moving toward more experiences as well. Respondents to a Click Magazine survey stated “new experiences and human connections in new places (74%) as very important motivators for travel. 76% said they need to find new ways to reduce the stress in life.

A Cornell University study revealed that consumers’ evaluations and impressions of their material goods purchases went down the further they were away from the initial purchase, yet their evaluations of their experiences went up as they continued to share stories and memories about the unique things they had done with others. This is especially true when experiences are shared with friends and family that become the basis of family lore. Apparently, within this framework, experiences are more open to positive reinterpretation, with the bad laughed off as the experience is recalled again and again. These experiences become ingrained as meaningful part of an individual’s identity and work to strengthen social relationships when the experiences are enjoyed together.

The desire for experience also fulfills the quest for social media’s “Instagramable” moments and the social currency of likes that come with them. Experiences produce a constant stream of shareable content that leads to conversations and interactions that extend the reach of one’s network of friends and acquaintances exponentially across the net. Even the experiences that didn’t turn out as anticipated become fodder for sharable stories as we lament with each other about what happened.

One rather surprising factor that experiences also fulfill is FOMO (which has now found its way into the Oxford English Dictionary), the fear of missing out. People feel pressure to keep up, to make sure they look like they are in the know.

## **Experiencing Together**

Within all of these motivations for travel, one of the most important reasons that Americans (72%) travel remains is to have time to reconnect with loved ones and family. Time can be so short and family members, even those in the same house, so busy there is no time for actual conversation. Plus, when friends and family live far away, it can be hard to stay truly connected. We can text, Facetime, and follow each other on social media, but often weeks or months go by without actually talking.

It's one thing to visit friends and family at home, which occurs regularly in many families, but it's another to share new experiences, expressed in statements such as "making memories," "strengthening bonds with friends and family," "seeing my child excited about the experience," and "spending time with extended family."

More than half of today's visitors say that who they are with and what they do together is more important than where they go, with more than 50% of travelers over 65 prioritizing trips to visit family and friends.

Spending leisure time with family and friends tell people in one's life that they are important. Family members remember the time they spend with family and friends more than the time spent at a museum or dinner. These personal connections make us who we are and experiencing new things together makes family bonds stronger. Kids love being together in a new place, getting to bunk with cousins, and doing



fun activities together. Even though many travelers may prefer flying with kids, road trips over the decades to spend time with family and friends have proven to deliver memories that are never forgotten. Twenty years from now, the experiences will be a topic of conversation. Remember when we .....

## **Bleisure**

Blending business and leisure is not new. The new “laptop luggers” now nearly half of America’s workers, who can work from anywhere, while staying at a vacation rental with the comforts of home and a place to prepare meals, are just changing it. Many take vacation time for one week and spend a second week at the destination working remotely. Or they explore at another destination between two business trips.

New research points out that the number of workers who take bleisure trips will be nearly equal to the share who say they will travel solely for business. A Deloitte survey indicates that one-third intend to add three to six days for leisure.

As 2022 approached, experts predicted there would be “a return to the office” and a resurgence of business travel. Not only is the return to the office happening very unevenly, workers are expressing they are more productive not in the office. Some of this has to do with the fact that many Boomers, the original “road warriors” who traveled incessantly, retired during Covid. Plus, many companies no longer see the same value of business travel since they got along without it for two years.

Leisure travel motivations range widely:

- 46% I can bring loved ones with me.
- 46% It makes the trip more fun.
- 44% Travel to places that would otherwise not be visited.
- 44% I can conserve vacation time.
- 44% I feel more in control of my work.
- 43% Fares are less expensive due to flexible timing.
- 43% I can visit family and friends more often.
- 43% Cost savings because employer picks up a portion.
- 43% I can take longer trips.
- 41% I can spend more time traveling.
- 40% I can travel more frequently.
- 37% I can earn more reward points.

## **Where are We Going from Here?**

Surveys conducted recently indicate that 60% of travelers look forward to meeting new people while on vacation in addition to spending time with friends and family. 75% of travelers indicate the journey to their destination is more enjoyable when it feels like part of the trip. Likely, to achieve this, more planning will take place prior to a trip, delivering more opportunities for small towns and rural communities to get their message across that they are a great place to stop and explore along the way. 58% of travelers indicate they want to form an authentic connection with the communities they visit. The trend towards authenticity enables destinations to feature “one of a kind” lodging options and distinctive accommodations. Local food offerings enable visitors to experience new tastes and “savor every bite.”

Nearly 85% of Americans already have trips planned for the upcoming season and the typical American traveler says they expect to take 3-4 leisure trips during the coming months.

## **Responding to Visitor Stress**

According to the Pew Research Center, 80% of Americans have experienced some type of stress incident in the past month, the highest ever recorded in a Pew survey. Let's think about this for a moment. Eight out of every 10 people who will come to your area will have experienced a heavy dose of stress about one thing or another in just the past month. They may be so on edge that when something goes wrong within an experience that is supposed to be leisure, they may overreact. They may not want to deal with others or interact in the community. On the other hand, some may use the experience to engage with the people they meet along the way, as a way to escape reality. It will be important to have those engaged in the visitor services business be aware of these factors so they can respond appropriately to whatever the situation delivers.

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