

KILROY

**GAP YEAR
TRAVEL REPORT**

2024



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WELCOME FROM THE AUTHORS

Most often sandwiched between A-levels and the beginning of university, the gap year has traditionally been a formative time for young people to explore the wider world, learn about themselves and let off steam before continuing with their studies.

But Covid forced many secondary school and college leavers to consider a gap year for other reasons. 2020 and 2021 saw record numbers of young people deferring entry to university, and figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS) show that the popularity of the gap year increased again in 2023. There were 2,430 more 18-19-year-olds deferring their university places compared to the previous year. That's an increase of 10.24%.

Admissions data for 2024 won't be complete until early September, so it's too early to know whether we'll see another record number of deferred entries this year. But there's no doubt that the gap year is here to stay, and that travel will continue to be a key element of this extended time out of work or study.

With the pandemic now behind us, what intrigues is what gap years look like to Gen Z. How do 18-27-year-olds view the traditional gap year? What are their attitudes and preferences? How do they approach their gap year travel planning?

Those are just some of the questions we wanted to answer. And this study aims to shed light on what Gen Z gap year takers want from their time out, what concerns they have, and how new technologies and current crises are influencing their decisions.

We hope you enjoy the read.



**HOLLIE
YOULDEN**

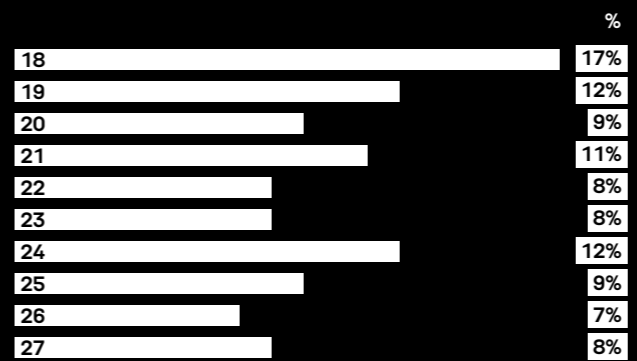
UK Marketing Manager
KILROY



WHO WE SURVEYED

TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS: 1000 PEOPLE

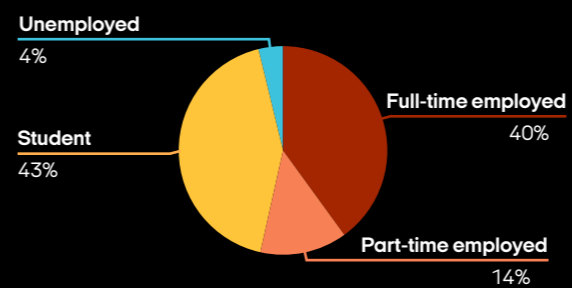
HOW OLD ARE YOU?



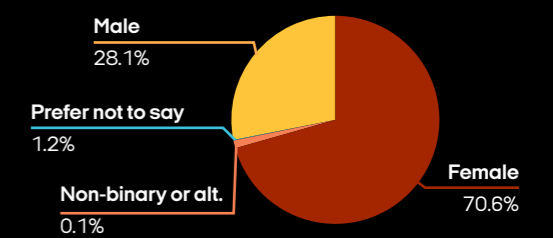
WHICH REGION DO YOU LIVE IN?



WHAT IS YOUR EMPLOYMENT STATUS?



WHICH GENDER DO YOU IDENTIFY WITH?



How the gap year is changing among Gen Z

Gap years were once associated with care-free young travellers exploring cheap destinations like Southeast Asia and India until the money ran out and forced them back home. Iconic experiences like Thailand's Full Moon Party were a rite of passage for many gap year takers, and partying with new friends formed at your hostel was part and parcel of the gap year experience.

But today's young traveller is looking for purpose. And much more than just a fun time abroad. In fact, only **6%** of 18-to-27-year-olds in the UK would consider taking a gap year with a desire to party, while only **18%** are interested in clubbing or partying when thinking about what they'd want to do during their gap year.

If that wasn't a stark enough sign that gap year travel is no longer all about letting your hair down, **64%** of young travellers would consider a sober gap year, renouncing alcohol as drinking is not important to their gap year experience.

It's a statistic that echoes the growing trend in sober travel – a wellness movement that favours sobriety over alcohol consumption while travelling. Gen Z is often credited with spearheading this trend and reversing drinking habits seen during the pandemic when alcohol consumption soared.

For 21-year-old student Cristina, life since quitting alcohol has been eye-opening.

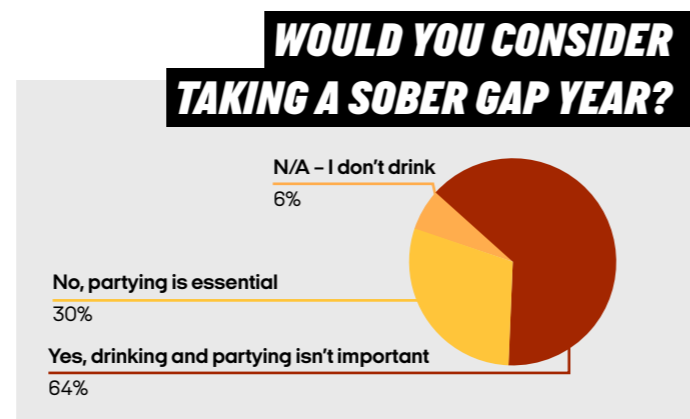
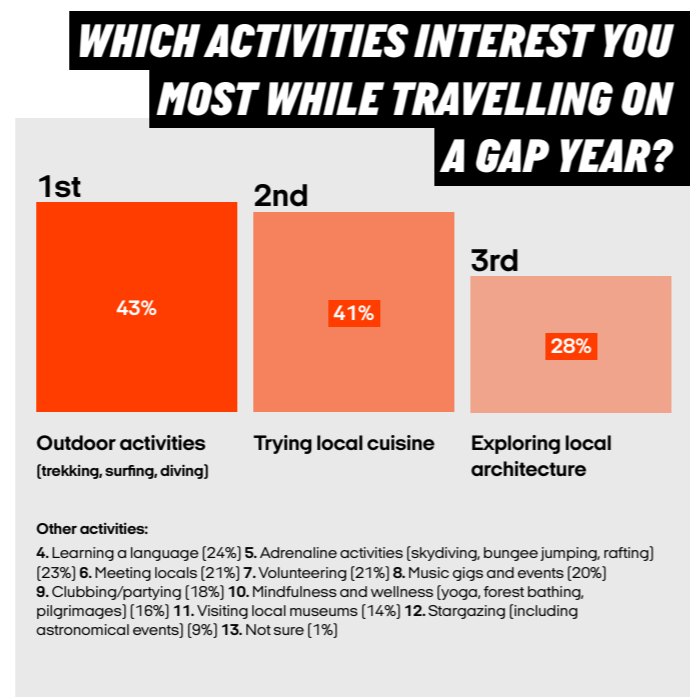
"I think a lot of the time alcohol is used as a social lubricant. But I've learnt to be a lot more engaging with people since giving it up. I'd never say no to a night out, but I'll just get a Pepsi Max or a squash, or something like that."

It's this attitude towards alcohol that young travellers would take with them abroad on their gap year. Experimenting with sober clubbing and socialising without alcohol at home gives

them the confidence to stay sober while travelling. As Cristina says:

"I think society in general is changing the attitude towards drinking and that's making it easier for us".

But if it's not partying that most appeals to Gen Z about taking a gap year, what is?



70.6%

of young travellers would consider a sober gap year, choosing to forgo alcohol because it's not essential to their gap year experience

What motivates Gen Z to take a gap year?

The number one reason for 18-27-year-olds to consider taking a gap year is the wish to grow as a person with **50%** choosing this as their top priority. This is followed closely by a desire to explore more of the world and to challenge yourself.

But what does that mean to Gen Z?

For 22-year-old part-time worker Rabiah this means getting out of her comfort zone. **"On my gap year I want to get out there, get out of my comfort zone and try new things – say 'yes' to things".**

And there's something about travelling that makes this easier to do for young travellers. **"When you're at home, in a city you've been in your whole life, it's quite hard to grow as a person"**, says Rabiah. Spending time in a new part of the world, especially as a solo traveller, gives young people the chance to reinvent themselves and break away from the expectations they face back home. It's perhaps why over a third of those surveyed picked personal growth and self-development as being one of the most appealing aspects of taking a gap year.

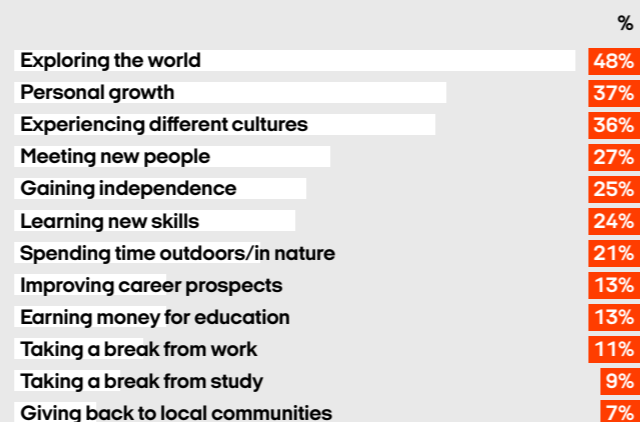
However, the appeal of a gap year goes beyond the self with **36%** of 18-27-year-olds wishing to experience different cultures and **27%** seeking to meet new people.

Cultural immersion and contact with people from different walks of life allows young travellers to see the world from a different perspective. It also gives them a greater appreciation and empathy for others.

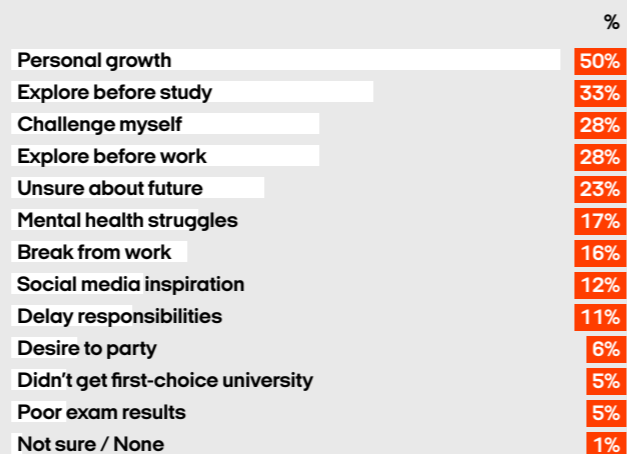
Demand for more authentic, holistic travel experiences has never been higher. Whether it goes by the name of 'experiential' or

'transformational' travel – both trends that have emerged over the past decade – it's clear that a gap year is so much more than simply having a good time in another part of the world.

WHAT APPEALS TO YOU MOST ABOUT GAP YEAR TRAVEL?



FOR WHAT REASON WOULD YOU CONSIDER A GAP YEAR?



36%

of 18-27-year-olds want to experience different cultures

The financial squeeze on young gap year takers

With international flight tickets at a premium since the pandemic, and with recent annual inflation in the UK at record highs, it's perhaps not as cheap as it once was for young people to take a gap year.

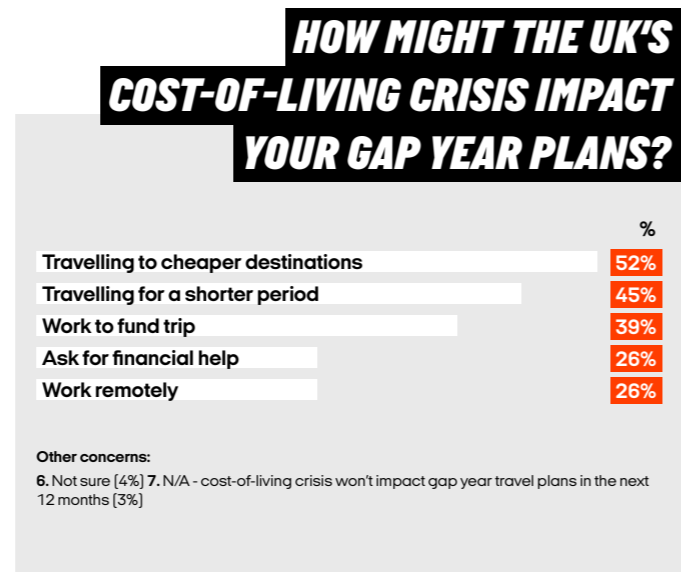
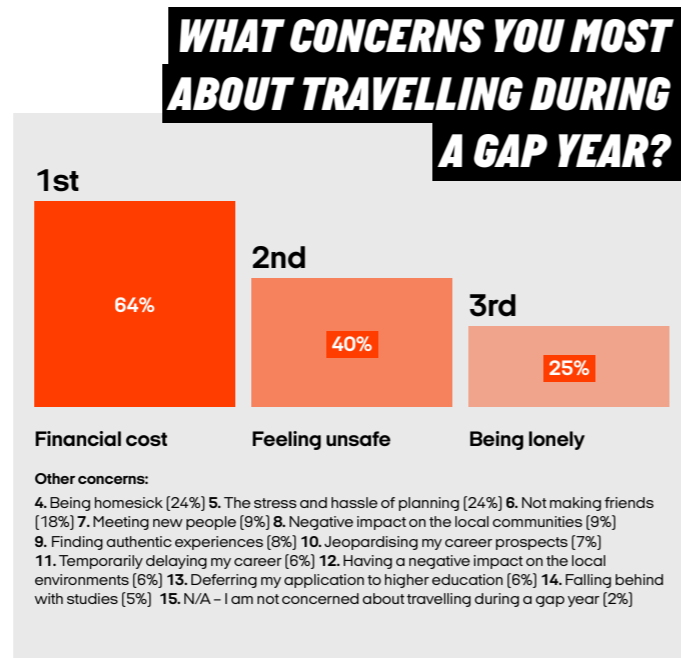
Almost two thirds of 18-27-year-olds listed financial cost as their number one concern when considering a gap year, while only 3% said that the UK's cost-of-living crisis would have no impact on their gap year travel plans.

However, the financial cost is not enough to put young people off taking a gap year and travelling abroad. But it does mean that they will need to adapt their travel plans. For 52% of those surveyed this would mean choosing cheaper destinations, while 45% of young gap year takers will travel for a shorter period.

Another way young travellers can reduce the financial strain of taking a gap year is to include paid work as part of their plans. Over a third of the people surveyed plan to find work in their chosen destination while travelling to help fund their trip, and over a quarter plan to work remotely while travelling. For 17% of students considering a gap year, part of the appeal is having the chance to earn money to pay for higher education. But for many gap year takers, the budget to take a gap year comes from forward planning and years of saving.

"I've saved up throughout uni because I knew I was going to take a gap year", says 21-year-old student Cristina.

This proactive approach is echoed by 19-year-old apprentice Evie, who added: **"I've been budgeting and putting specific amounts into my ISA to reduce the temptation to spend that money because I know I want to go on a gap year in the future"**.



Travel to escape stress and improve mental health

It's little surprise that after years of hard work at school, university or a job, the prospect of taking time out to explore the world is appealing to Gen Z. And according to our survey, part of that appeal is in how travel influences wellbeing, with 87% of 18-27-year-olds agreeing that travel has a positive impact on mental health.

Similarly, 84% of those surveyed agree that travel helps you to escape the stresses of life, as contextualised by 19-year-old apprentice Evie, who says: **"I hope my gap year is stress-free as much as it can be compared to my normal life. Because my aim is to take a gap year, relax, see different cultures and leave all my worries behind"**.

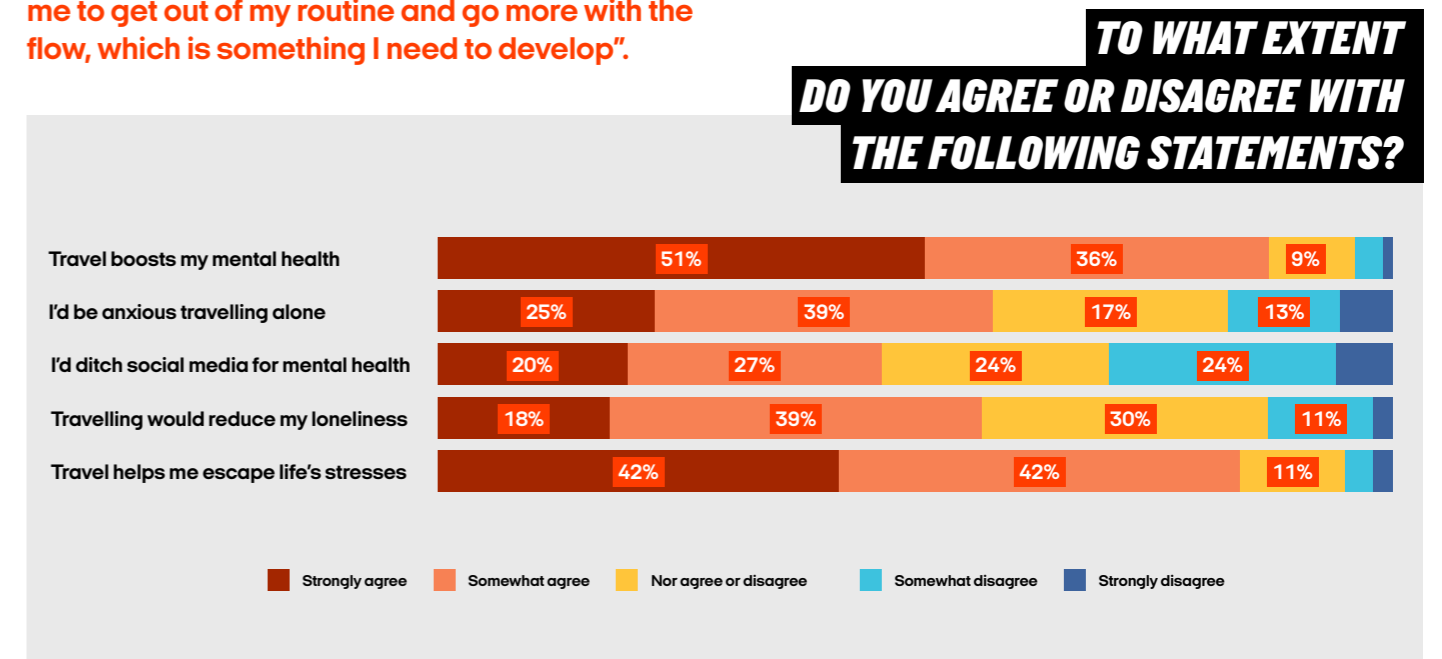
For Gen Z, there's a sense of becoming a different version of yourself during your gap year - using the time away to think differently and approach life differently. For Evie, that means **"... focusing on the present moment and making memories that I can cherish forever and tell as stories to my kids, if I ever have kids"**.

21-year-old student Cristina agrees, adding that: **"I think taking a gap year is going to force me to get out of my routine and go more with the flow, which is something I need to develop"**.

One way in which young travellers might actively improve their mental health while travelling during their gap year is to limit time spent online. Almost half [47%] of 18-27-year-olds would consider ditching social media while travelling to improve their mental health.

Despite anxieties around travelling solo, 57% of those surveyed agreed that travelling would make them feel less lonely. For those who have recently left school or university, the change from seeing friends every day to seeing them far less often can be a challenge. And the workplace isn't a guarantee of new friends. Finding yourself at a different stage in life compared to your closest friends can create a sense of loneliness. And it's this sense of loneliness and other mental health struggles that would prompt 17% of 18-27-year-olds to consider a gap year in the first place.

But travel holds the promise of making new friends, and it's the chance to meet new people that most appeals to over a quarter [27%] of those surveyed.





Slow travel and the promise of cultural immersion

Slow travel focuses on exploring destinations at a relaxed pace, allowing for deeper connections with local cultures and reducing the negative impact on local environments. In the context of a gap year, it's a style of travel that encompasses everything from Interrailing journeys across Europe to overland backpacking adventures that spend more time in one country rather than racing through multiple countries in one region.

It's another travel trend that has gained in popularity in recent years, perhaps as a response to the pandemic that forced us all to slow down and appreciate time more. It's felt in the numbers of travellers opting to take fewer but longer trips each year, and in preferences for trips that swap frantic, jam-packed itineraries for more leisurely plans.

What Gen Z finds most appealing about the concept varies. The biggest appeal is in the lower travel stress, with a quarter of 18-27-year-olds finding this the most alluring. By spending more time in one place, you reduce the number of transport connections and logistic planning that a more jam-packed itinerary would require. As 22-year-old Rabiah says:

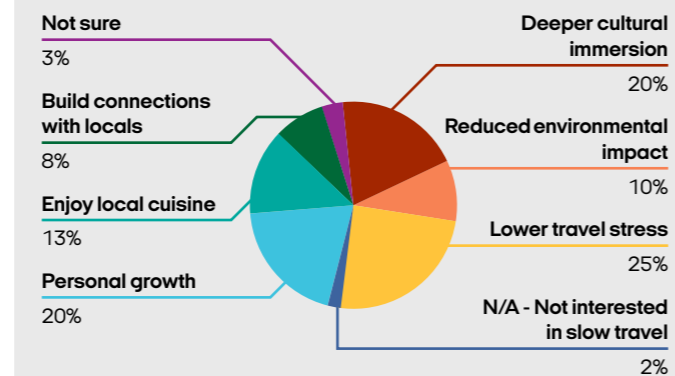
"If you're travelling from one place to another really quickly that can become overwhelming and stressful. So slow travel is a good option as you can relax and get to know places and immerse yourself in the culture".

Equally as popular is the time slow travel allows for personal growth and self-reflection, as well as deeper cultural immersion.

What young travellers also find appealing about slow travel is having the time to enjoy local cuisine. For 19-year-old Evie, food is a huge part of her gap year experience. **"I want to try authentic food, like from street vendors, and try the different types of food".**

And she's not alone – **41%** of 18-27-year-olds rate trying local cuisine as their most popular activity while travelling on a gap year. That's followed by **28%** who want to explore local architecture and **24%** who would be interested in learning the local language.

WHAT ASPECT OF SLOW TRAVEL APPEALS TO YOU MOST?



Gen Z, travel and sustainability

There's no getting away from the fact that travel has an undesirable impact on local communities and environments. Whether it's the effects of overtourism or air travel, there's an environmental cost to taking a gap year abroad.

But for Gen Z, sustainability is a key issue. And there are many ways in which young travellers would consider sustainability while exploring the world. Over a third (**36%**) of those we surveyed would be willing to use alternative methods of transport to reduce carbon emissions. For 23-year-old student Laura, this is why train travel is appealing, having spent a summer Interrailing around Europe.

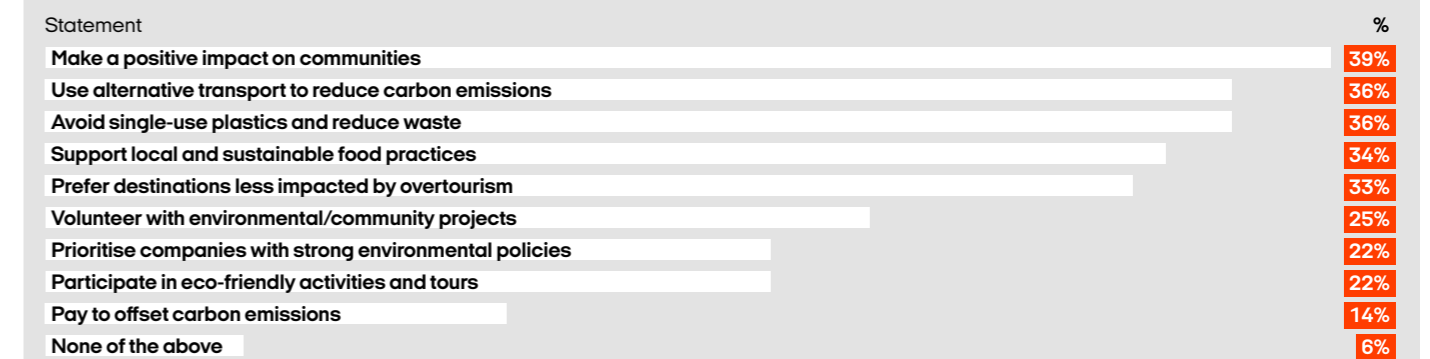
"Getting the train has less of a carbon footprint compared to flights. But you've got to balance the time restrictions because sometimes

getting a train takes longer than getting a flight. And sometimes flights can be cheaper."

Despite a young person's desire to travel more sustainably, cost will always be a barrier. And perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that with the financial worries Gen Z faces, spending hard earned cash on reducing the environmental impact of global travel is not so appealing. Only **14%** of 18-27-year-olds would consider paying to offset their carbon emissions during their gap year travels.

However, these young travellers would look for other ways to travel more sustainably, opting instead to reduce their waste, support local sustainable food practices, and visiting destinations less impacted by over-tourism.

CONSIDERING THE ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY, WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS DO YOU AGREE WITH OR APPLY TO YOU?



Gap years closer to home

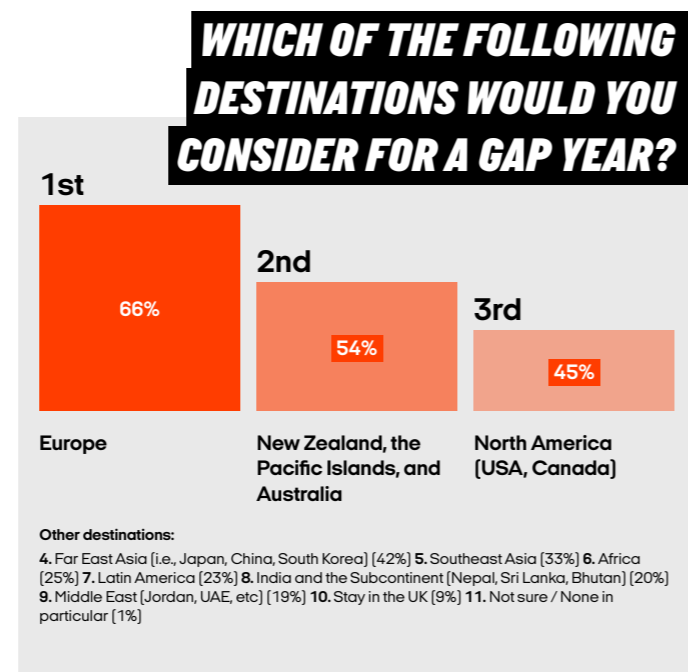
If you had to describe the quintessential gap year, many would picture young travellers backpacking around Southeast Asia, the Indian Subcontinent and Australia. But the appetite for adventures closer to home is a surprising feature of Gen Z gap years compared to the typical gap year destinations of their parents' generation.

Nearly two thirds [65%] of 18-27-year-olds would feature Europe in their gap year itinerary. And Brexit might have something to do with that. For the younger segment of Gen Z who are only now gaining the independence to travel without their parents, Europe has loomed large in the national psyche. Mainland Europe may still be just as accessible in terms of transport options, but with recent visa restrictions and the loss of free movement for young Brits, Europe has become more elusive. And therefore, more alluring.

But it's not just accessibility that attracts young travellers to a certain destination. The promise of a better quality of life might explain why Australia and New Zealand were the second-most popular destinations for Gen Z gap year takers.

As 23-year-old student Laura explains: **"There seems to be a better work/life balance in Australia compared to here".**

19-year-old apprentice Evie also added: **"Australia seems to have so many interesting things going on, the weather is good and it's a good place to do adventure activities, like skydiving".**



The rise of AI in Gen Z's gap year planning

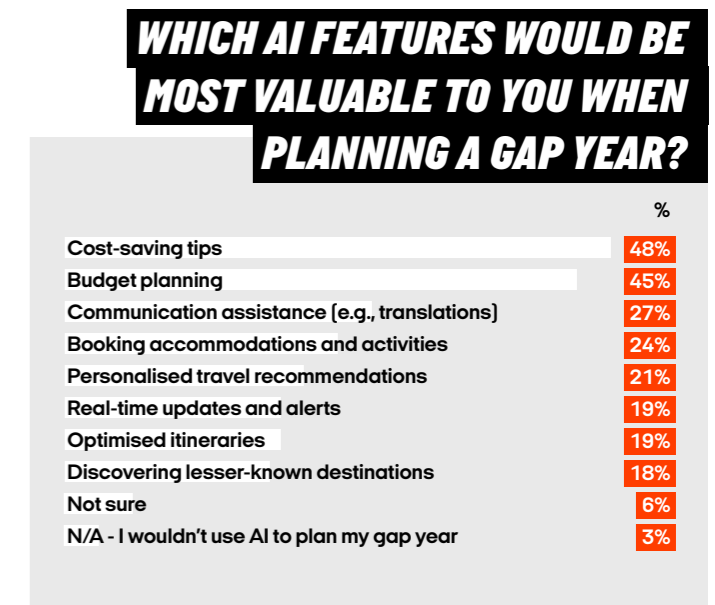
Since its release in November 2022, ChatGPT and similar AI tools have been reshaping how we all go about using the internet to do our jobs and plan our lives. When it comes to gap years and travel planning, for Gen Z, the biggest appeal of AI is how it can be used to save money on travel with 48% and 45% of those surveyed finding cost-saving tips and budget planning the most valuable features of AI.

With financial cost a top concern among 18-27-year-old gap year takers, it's no wonder that any tool that promises to save money would be considered valuable.

But for 21-year-old Cristina, AI tools like ChatGPT are now a standard part of her trip-planning process.

"I've used AI to make all the itineraries for every single holiday that I've planned." Combining AI recommendations with her own additional research, Cristina ends up with an itinerary that's **"...probably better than what I could have designed myself".**

And this goes some way to explaining why 21% of her fellow Gen Z cohorts would find personalised travel recommendations one of the most valuable features of AI when it comes to planning a gap year, with 19% finding AI-optimised travel itineraries valuable.



TikTok reigns supreme in the role of travel inspiration

Social media has long been a source of inspiration, whether it's providing ideas on where to travel to and where to stay, or what to eat while you're there. But there's one channel that's a clear winner among Gen Z. For the 18-27-year-olds that turn to social media when looking for travel inspiration, **80%** would use TikTok. That's followed by **73%** who would use Instagram.

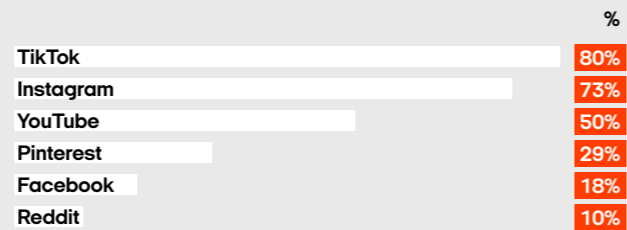
And while older generations might default to Google when looking for answers to their questions, it's these two visual channels that are the default for Gen Z. As 19-year-old apprentice Evie explains, when planning a trip:

"I use TikTok frequently while researching travel. If I'm at the stage where I'm planning on booking a flight, I'd go to TikTok to look for things to do".

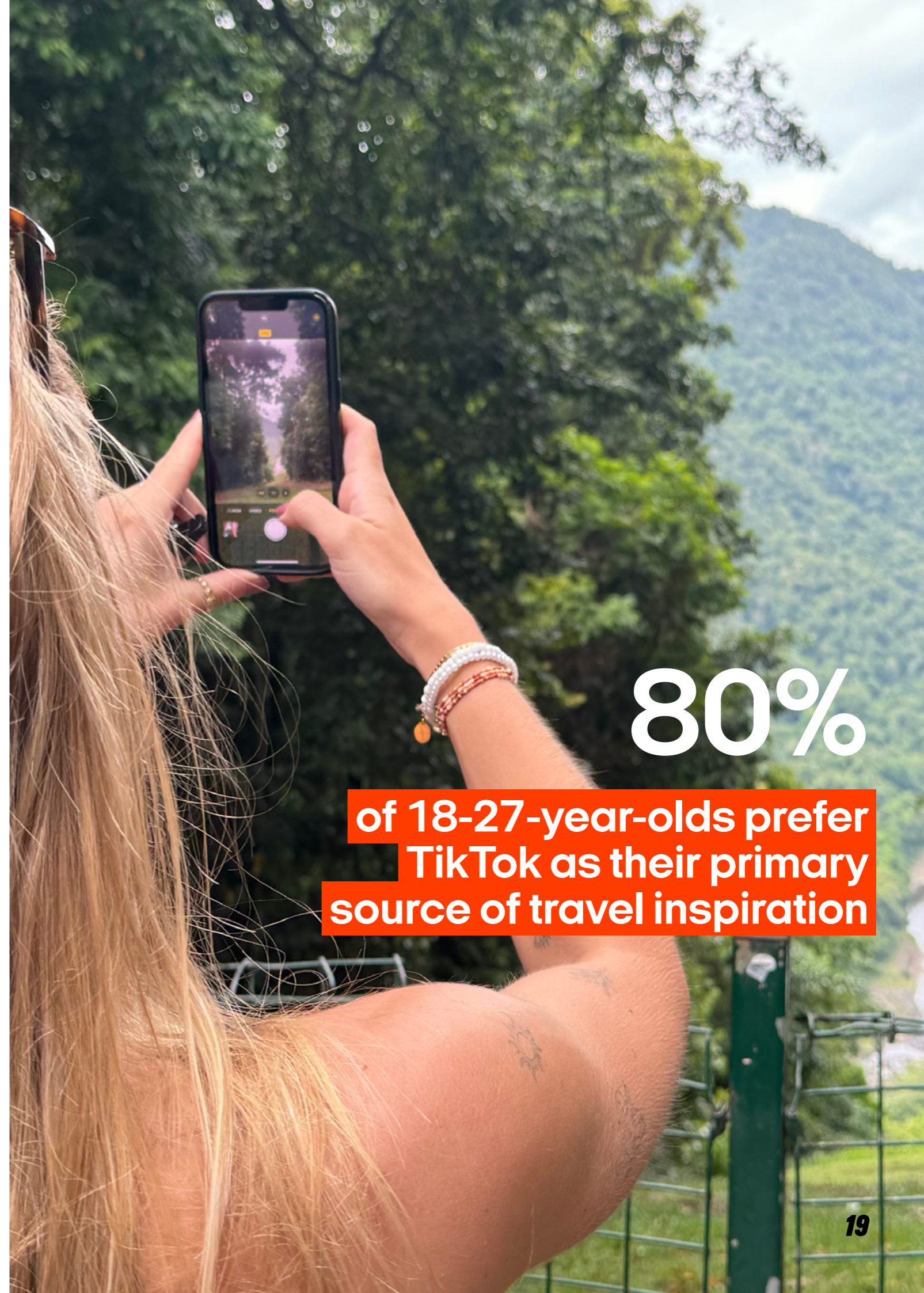
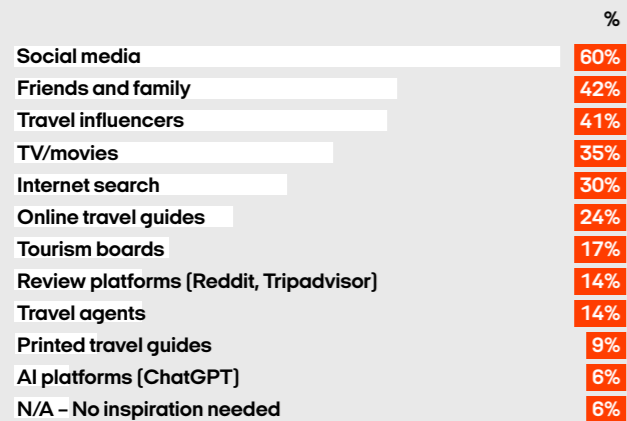
For young travellers, part of the appeal of these social media channels is the opportunity to discover lesser-known spots to visit in a destination. As 23-year-old student Laura explains: **"Instagram Reels have a lot of less visited places and it's easier to find these places on Instagram compared to Google."**

With Google, you need to know what you're looking for before typing in a search. Whereas Instagram can surprise you with content that could introduce you to a new part of the world you'd never have either wise considered.

WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS DO YOU USE FOR GAP YEAR TRAVEL INSPIRATION?



WHAT INSPIRES YOUR GAP YEAR TRAVEL PLANS?



80%

of 18-27-year-olds prefer TikTok as their primary source of travel inspiration



THE GEN Z GAP YEAR AT A GLANCE

Purpose over Pleasure

Gone are the days when a gap year was all about partying. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z prioritises personal growth and cultural immersion over partying during their gap years. Few nowadays are interested in partying, with a significant number considering a sober gap year. Stereotypes of young gap year takers drinking buckets of vodka Red Bull on a beach in Thailand are being replaced with a new image of health-conscious young travellers wanting to be clear-headed and able to enjoy the perks that come with going alcohol-free.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Perhaps one thing that hasn't changed since the inception of the gap year is the chance to escape the stresses of daily life. And with a recent pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis and the ever-present threat of climate change, it's no wonder that Gen Z wants to use their gap year as a chance to improve their mental wellbeing. Travel is key to that, with 87% agreeing that it positively impacts their wellbeing. Many are also considering reducing social media use to enhance their travel experience.

Sustainability and Slow Travel

Gen Z is conscious of the environmental impact of travel. They prefer slow travel, which allows for deeper cultural immersion and reduces stress. Sustainability is key, with many opting for eco-friendly travel practices.

Financial Considerations

The rising cost of living and travel has made financial planning crucial. Many young people are choosing cheaper destinations, shorter trips, or incorporating paid work into their gap year plans to manage costs.

Technology and Social Media

While their parents might have relied on Lonely Planet to help plan their gap year abroad, Gen Z is turning to technology. AI tools like ChatGPT, and social media, especially TikTok and Instagram, play a significant role in travel planning and inspiration. These platforms help young travellers discover unique destinations and plan cost-effective trips.

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If you would like to schedule a media interview about the study and its findings, please contact Hollie Youlden at hyou@kilroy.co.uk

Research Methodology

KILROY led this research study. The survey was administered to 1,000 adults in the United Kingdom aged 18-27 who would consider travelling on a gap year. The survey was conducted online between 21st to 28th June 2024 and has a margin of error of 3%.

Focus Group

The quotes in this report were gathered from a KILROY-led focus group with four young people interested in taking a gap year and based in England.

About *KILROY*

KILROY is an international travel agency specialising in products and services tailor made for youths and students. We are passionate about helping 18-to-30-somethings explore life through adventure and education, making travel dreams come true.

Whether it's a working holiday in Australia or a backpacking adventure through Southeast Asia, a month of Spanish school in Latin America or an overland camping safari across Africa, we help young, curious minds embark on life-defining adventures all over the world.

Established in Denmark in 1991, we are today the largest youth and student travel agency across seven markets in the Nordic region, with the UK becoming our eighth market in the spring of 2023. Learn more at kilroy.co.uk

KⁱLROY

