

Whether it's for business or pleasure, travelers seek culture, adventure

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USA TODAY

The new year is shaping up to be a year of uncertainty, with a new administration in the USA and violence in popular destinations abroad.

But people still seem eager to travel for business or leisure, industry experts say. The U.S. Tour Operators Association, which helps millions of travelers arrange trips and packages, projects that sales will reach \$15 billion by the end of the year.

"That projection is a nearly 4% increase in total packages sold in 2016 over 2015, showing remarkable resilience in a challenging year for travel," says Terry Dale, president and CEO of the association. The challenges have been big: Terrorist attacks, political instability and health crises such as the spread of the Zika virus. Still, 82% of tour operators surveyed by PriceWaterhouseCoopers LLP expect a growth in sales in 2017.

"Many people are still open, adventurous and curious about the world around them and are eager to get off the grid and explore," says Travis Katz, co-founder and CEO of travel research tool Trip.com.

So where do the experts expect travelers to go?

Despite being more than a day-long trip for most U.S. residents, Australia appears on many lists of hot destinations. Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, topped Trip.com's list of 2017's Rising Stars. Trip.com considers Rising Stars to be destinations with up-and-coming culinary scenes, active nightlife, uncrowded beaches, creative festivals and historic architecture.

Katz says Adelaide offers a balance of culture and adventure. It has a pristine nature reserve, three national parks, historic

churches and the Barossa Valley wine region. Sydney topped Booking.com's list of best international destinations for its beaches and attractions.

Cuba continues to be a hot spot, ever since President Obama started easing relations with the island nation two years ago. Now, U.S. commercial airlines are allowed to fly there, and cruises can make stops. U.S.-based hotels can also take over or build hotels there, with Starwood Hotels and Resorts being the first to sign deals.

What's unclear is whether President-elect Donald Trump will roll back some of those efforts once he takes office, as he indicated he would during his campaign.

"Concerns that travel to Cuba could again become more restricted or commercial flights could end with the advent of a new administration are continuing to feed travelers' sense of urgency to visit," Katz says.

Despite the uncertainty, Cuba appears high on many top 2017 destination lists. And while Havana has always been a coveted destination, Trip.com has found that many travelers are exploring cities beyond the capital, such as the colonial town of Trinidad and iguana-filled island Cayo Iguana.

Canada has had a strong showing of late. Lonely Planet named the country the best destination for 2017, citing its friendly residents and great tourism infrastructure. A weak Canadian dollar also makes it affordable. Another plus: It will be a festive year in Canada as the country commemorates the 150th anniversary of its Confederation.

Booking.com named Banff, a resort town within Banff National Park in the Rocky Mountains, the third-best international destination, based on an analysis of patterns of growth in searches. It

followed Sydney and Seoul.

TripAdvisor placed Whistler, a ski destination in British Columbia, in the No. 2 spot on its list of rising international destinations for 2017. Its No. 1 rising international destination is laid-back San Jose Cabo in Mexico. TripAdvisor measured the year-over-year increase in positive traveler review ratings, as well as a rise in booking interest.

Colombia is generating more buzz. A peace deal just ended a 52-year-long civil war, and its president recently won the Nobel Peace Prize. Lonely Planet named it the second-best destination of 2017. And Medellin, the capital of Colombia's mountainous Antioquia province, landed in the No. 2 spot on Trip.com's list of Rising Stars.

Other more obscure destinations also gained recognition from some experts.

Tbilisi, Georgia, made TripAdvisor's Top 10 list of global destinations on the rise, as well as Trip.com's Rising Star List, for its sulfur baths, great restaurants and Georgian wine. Trip.com likens it to Prague 20 years ago.

Domestically, large cities such as New York and Los Angeles did not shine as much as places such as Houston, Columbus and Portland, Maine.

Booking.com named Chattanooga, Milwaukee, Mammoth Lakes in California, St. Augustine Beach in Florida, and Dallas its top five best domestic destinations.

TripAdvisor named the beach city of Kihei on Maui's southwest shore in Hawaii its top rising spot in the USA. Rounding out the top five are Park City, Utah; Portland, Maine; Louisville; and Colorado Springs.

South Padre Island was the only U.S. destination that Trip.com named a rising star. Once known for spring break, the island is now attracting more families to explore its beach and Dolphin Research Center.

Tops for 2017: A year of great destinations



TRIP.COM

Adelaide in South Australia was named Trip.com's top Rising Star for 2017. It is home to Kangaroo Island nature reserves and the Barossa Valley wine region. It also boasts three national parks and many historic churches.

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