



+4%

Global travel
receipts
2024 vs 2019

+13.7%

European travel
spending
2024 vs 2023

Leading payments professionals from large OTAs and travel intermediaries recently convened for a pivotal roundtable hosted by the Financial Times in collaboration with Visa and WEX. ***'The technologies and trends reshaping the travel sector'*** event delved into critical travel industry topics including the evolution of payment technologies, fraud, the transformative potential of AI, and the complexities of regional payment preference.

Global travel recovered quickly after the contraction experienced in 2020 and 2021, with 2024 global receipts exceeding those of 2019 by 4% according to the United Nations World Travel Organisation¹.

European travellers spent an estimated €742.8bn in 2024, a rise of 13.7% on 2023 (European Travel Commission)². Coined 'revenge travel' by industry specialists, high growth through the rebound years of 2023 and 2024 is now settling, meaning travel intermediaries will have to find new ways to remain competitive and efficient.

The roundtable began with a lively debate around how travel intermediaries can maintain both a competitive edge and operational efficiency in a world of normalised travel demand growth but changing preferences. Let's take a look at the insights we uncovered.

¹ UN Tourism, ['International tourism recovers pre-pandemic levels in 2024'](#), 2025

² [European Travel Commission, Quarterly Report Q1/2024](#)

Economic outlook:

Payments maturity and evolving expectations

As revenge travel plateaus, demand for travel is starting to look quite different. One of the earliest callouts in the discussion was that packaged tours are seeing a steeper increase in demand than other options. Additionally, while more trips are blending work and leisure, eco travel and soaring global temperatures are forcing a shift in the most popular destinations.

Alongside an increase in demand for sustainable travel, a rise in demands for seamless payment options was also noted. As a result, travel intermediaries are using data to better understand individual preferences. We discussed the fact that from a business perspective, particularly for intermediaries and TMCs, priorities are shifting towards increased efficiency, risk mitigation and cost-cutting.

Booking behaviours:

Regional nuances and the year of AI

Preferences of consumers in relation to payment methods used in online purchases with travel intermediaries differ depending on market. Companies selling online in any one market need to be able to accept the preferred payment method of consumers in that specific market. It was pointed out that while instalment payments are popular in Latin America, key markets in Europe favour bank transfer based payment options and US consumers often choose to use credit cards for online transactions.

Participants also identified that major social media platform TikTok has overtaken Google as a main travel planning (and sometimes booking) channel in travel.

Amid these shifts, AI is driving personalised recommendation and new payments experiences, from automating the full booking interactions process to being used to identify fraudulent activity.



Evolving payments:

WhatsApp, blockchain, and virtual cards



Participants identified that WhatsApp's in-platform payments option has gained significant popularity across Brazil and India, where travel agencies can handle the whole booking process within a single WhatsApp chat.



On the other hand, while blockchain was once revolutionary within the travel distribution and travel payments space, blockchain related products and solutions have seen limited investment or take-up for several years.



As airlines explore innovations in distribution and payments, many are investing in technology modernisation to aid distribution. Their approach to virtual cards varies — some fully embrace them, partnering with travel intermediaries and virtual card issuers, while others take a more restrictive stance. This diversity in adoption creates an opportunity for informed, strategic discussions on the benefits and challenges of different B2B payment methods within broad distribution agreements.

As a future-ready payments solution, virtual cards can help travel intermediaries achieve their goals for greater efficiency, security and control.

Solving the payments puzzle

As innovation revolutionises the travel industry, intermediaries must continue to overcome significant hurdles. The pace of digitisation across the industry is introducing more complexity, as companies strive to update systems and roll out AI solutions in the least disruptive way. In shaping the future of the industry, travel intermediaries must build a solid foundation for growth and operational efficiency in their payments systems to gain a competitive edge.

This is a topic explored in The Payments Puzzle¹, a WEX and Visa report identifying the key factors

driving change across the industry. Based on the latest WEX and Visa research with 600 Director+ travel payments decision-makers, the top motivators of change are: improving security (34%), enhancing customer experience (31%) and increasing payment visibility (29%).

Read the full report today, where we navigate the complex payments landscape for travel intermediaries, highlighting how virtual cards can provide smoother experiences both for travel intermediaries and their suppliers.

¹ WEX and Visa, 'The Payments Puzzle' report, 2025

Top motivators of change



Learn more about the payments puzzle

Contact us