



THE CASE FOR BUILDING YOUTH TRAVEL TO THE UNITED STATES

International youth travelers visit the U.S. for leisure, education and cultural exchange, experiencing all our country has to offer while generating significant spending. A forthcoming report from Hostelling International USA, *Building Youth and Student Travel to the United States*, provides important insights into the market. It includes findings from an exclusive global survey of U.S. inbound international travelers aged 15-29 conducted by the WYSE Travel Confederation for HI USA. The survey explores the motivations, attitudes, spending and travel patterns of these young U.S. visitors. The data-rich 84-page report is scheduled for release in Spring 2025. Key findings include:



HI USA

Hostelling International USA

is an education nonprofit organized to deliver lodging and programs with the larger aim of building cultural understanding through travel. HI USA is sponsoring this report as part of our efforts to promote youth and student travel to the United States.

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1. Young Travelers Often Spend More Than Other Visitors

Inbound youth and student international travelers have a higher average U.S. trip spend than other international visitors. The survey reports the average trip spend by these young travelers visiting the U.S. is \$2,987, compared to \$2,576 for international visitors¹ of all ages. And 68% of their total trip budget is spent within the USA (74% if spending with U.S. carriers is included) compared to 61% of all travelers. Like other travelers, the average U.S. trip spend of inbound youth travelers tends to vary depending on their region or country of residence.²

2. And Stay Longer Than the Average Visitor

The average stay of a young international traveler is nearly 30 days longer than all international visitors to the United States: 50 nights vs. 21 nights. Cultural exchange, study, and temporary work programs enable young travelers to stay longer with specialized visas. And their personal and career commitments at home are fewer during their stage of life.

3. Young Visitors Are More Likely to Visit Less-Traveled Places

Longer visits to the United States, cultural exchange programs, and educational studies in non-urban destinations provide opportunities to explore less-traveled destinations. Although inbound youth and student travelers still visit top U.S. tourist spots such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Orlando, their full itineraries tend to be far more extensive. They report visiting a decidedly diverse mix of U.S. destinations: major cities (43%), smaller cities/towns (34%) and rural areas (22%). This wider travel pattern with the U.S. can boost the economies of smaller, typically less-traveled destinations.

¹ Calculated from Survey of International Air Travelers (SIAT) 2022/2023, average for overseas, Mexico and Canada arrivals. Source data at: U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration (2024). Survey of International Air Travelers. <https://www.trade.gov/survey-international-air-travelers-siat> ² For instance, if the calculation excludes spending of youth travelers originating from neighboring countries Canada and Mexico, the U.S. Inbound Youth Traveler Survey found the average U.S. trip spend for only overseas youth travelers is \$3,665.

4. Young Travelers Embrace Education in its Many Forms

Language learning and study rank among the top five reasons for youth travelers to visit the U.S., with vacation holidays taking the top spot. Other popular education-related pursuits include cultural exchange programs that offer work experience as well as short-term programs like study tours and field trips. International visitors studying in U.S. educational institutions in 2023 generated over \$50 billion of spending, comprising nearly 22% of all travel and tourism related expenditures by international visitors during the period, more than all forms of business travel (17%).³

5. Young Visitors Have Travel Budgets Supported by Multiple Sources of Funding

Inbound youth travelers rarely fund all their international travel costs themselves. The top three funding sources are their own income and savings (43%), parents and family (24%) and scholarships and grants (14%). The younger the traveler, the more likely they are to rely on family, friends and other funding sources. Educational travel is often supported by family and scholarships, while holiday trips are typically funded from personal funds. The BridgeUSA J-1 Work/Travel Program, operated to promote mutual understanding between the U.S. and other countries, allows college-aged students to work while living temporarily in the U.S. during their academic breaks.⁴

6. Young Visitors Travel to the USA for More Than a Vacation

Among motivations cited for visiting the U.S., the most common responses related to exploring the culture (54%), relaxing and avoiding stress (52%), experiencing everyday life (50%) and increasing my knowledge (49%). Having a good time with friends and meeting other travelers tend to be less important (34% and 29%, respectively). Cultural curiosity may explain why young travelers are more likely than other age groups to pursue multicultural trips. An Iolite study⁵ finds inbound travelers under 35-years-old were 9.3% more likely to choose multicultural activities compared to those aged 35 years and older.

7. Young Travelers Are More Likely to Come Back in the Future

Young visitors to the United States are very satisfied with their visit (8.7 on a scale of 10), with no significant differences by sex, race, sexual orientation, or region of origin; nearly 50% of respondents gave a perfect score of 10 out of 10. The elements most strongly associated with the intention to return to a city destination are cultural activities and value for money. Future trips are likely to involve holidays or work experience, and be less focused on developing language skills. A UNWTO study finds young travelers are likely to return and give more value to the destination over time.⁶

8. The Youth Travel Market is More Resilient During Difficult Times

Over 65% of young inbound travelers report terrorism, war, and natural disasters would have “no impact” on their travel plans. Additionally, 58% indicate that public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, would have no impact, although Asian and Black respondents were more likely to have their travel plans affected. During the pandemic, travelers aged 18-34 were the most resilient inbound age segment to the U.S., with its share of all overseas arrivals rising to 33.5% in 2020 (up from 29.0% in 2019), while other age groups declined at a greater pace.⁷

9. Youth Travel to the U.S. is Declining as Global Competition Increases

About 3 million fewer overseas travelers aged 18-34 visited the U.S. in 2023, dropping from 11.7 million in 2019 to 8.7 million,⁸ and resulting in an estimated \$7 billion loss to the U.S. economy. The diplomatic loss of these young people not having the opportunity to experience all the U.S. has to offer is inestimable. At the same time, other countries like Australia and the United Kingdom already have recognized the value of the youth and student segment, and have developed specific plans to attract them.

All data is from the global survey of inbound international travelers aged 15-29 conducted by the WYSE Travel Confederation, except as otherwise cited.



The World Youth Student and Educational (WYSE) Travel Confederation

is the only global not-for-profit membership organization that represents the youth travel industry. WYSE Travel Confederation connects the travel industry through research, education, advocacy and networking activities that focus on youth travel, its benefits and opportunities.

www.wysetc.org

³ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis (June 2024). U.S. International Transactions, 1st Quarter 2024 and Annual Update. <https://www.bea.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/trans124.pdf>
⁴ U.S. State Department, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (2024). BridgeUSA. <https://i1visa.state.gov/> | ⁵ Iolite, Brand USA, Destinations International and Miles Partnership (2022) The Multicultural Multiplier: Cultural Diversity's Impact on Travel Intent. <https://www.iolitegroup.com/multiculturalmultiplier> | ⁶ UNWTO and World Youth Student and Educational Travel Confederation (2011) The power of youth travel, Vol 2, UNWTO, Madrid, p.3. <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/book/10.18111/9789284414574> | ⁷ U.S. International Trade Administration (2024), AIDS/I-94 COR Visitor Arrivals Monitor(downloadable Excel file). <https://www.trade.gov/i-94-arrivals-historical-data> | ⁸ Ibid.