

People living longer and having fewer kids are transforming the travel industry

Family vacations aren't what they used to be, thanks to changing family dynamics and money spent in surprising new ways

By [Joseph Coughlin](#) Published: Nov. 3, 2025 at 12:00 p.m. ET



Family vacations have grown up, as people are having fewer children and living longer. Photo: Getty Images/iStock

The resort in Crete was just as I remembered. The same ocean-view rooms, the same long stretch of beach, and the same oversized pink rabbit commanding the playground. Years ago, that rabbit was the symbol of family vacations. My own kids jumping between

activities, other parents chasing children across sandy play spaces scattered with buckets, shovels, and sun-bleached toys.

This time, in late September, the rabbit was still there, but it had no playmates. The playground stood silent. Yet the resort itself was anything but empty: the restaurants were packed, the spa was fully booked, and couples lingered over drinks on the terraces.



The lone pink rabbit: An empty playground may be a leading indicator of where travel and leisure, and many other industries, are heading. Photo: Joseph Coughlin

The rise of broader shoulders

For decades, weather and school calendars have dictated when families travel. July and August, along with holiday breaks, were peak periods. May-June and September-October were the “shoulder seasons,” quieter months between the rush. Now those shoulders are broadening. Tour operators and hotels report rising demand outside traditional windows, a trend partly driven by climate, cost and crowd avoidance but also by demographics.

[Fertility rates](#) are at historic lows worldwide. The two largest sources of international travel, the United States and China, according to the [World Bank](#), now hover around 1.6 and 1.0, respectively, well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. The decline is forecast to deepen in the decades ahead. Yes, in late September the playground looks empty because school is back in session, but given these long-term trends, that pink rabbit in a quiet playground is less a seasonal snapshot than a glimpse into the future of travel and leisure markets.

Unlike dodging heat waves, crowds or airfare spikes, this is a structural shift. Fewer families with school-age children mean fewer playgrounds filled, regardless of weather or price. The pink rabbit stands in the middle of that demographic ripple. It is a monument to what the past looked like and a signal of what the future will be.

The little-adult vacation

While there will be fewer children on future holidays, the ones who do travel are treated less like kids and more like little adults by parents, grandparents, and increasingly by the hospitality industry itself. The trend isn't new. Decades ago, China's one-child policy gave rise to what sociologists referred to as the “[little emperor](#)” phenomenon. A generation of only-children who became the singular focus of family attention and a reminder that when children are few, they are often treated differently. They are often invested in more deeply, their experiences curated and elevated to adult standards.

“Parents traveling with children today no longer take a ‘seen and not heard’ attitude. They want their children with them at all times, sharing their adventures and curated experiences — especially at luxury destinations,” Glyn Aeppel, CEO of [Glencove Capital](#), a lifestyle hotel investment firm, observes. That expectation, she notes, makes demands on hotels that are “significant and difficult,” requiring experiences that engage children without alienating older travelers who prefer tranquility.

In other words, even the family vacation has grown up. Playgrounds may remain as nostalgic landmarks, but the new measure of family fun looks more like a tasting menu than a sandbox.

From rabbits to wellness retreats

The empty playground may be a leading indicator of where travel and leisure, and many other industries, are heading. Once the crown jewel of family-friendly resorts, children’s zones risk becoming relics as investment shifts toward amenities that cater to adults: wellness programs, fine dining, cultural excursions and curated experiences.

Wellness tourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments of global travel. The Global Wellness Institute [reports](#) that wellness tourism in 2012 was approximately \$439 billion, but today it is closing in on \$1 trillion. As a result, spas and health programs are now competing with kids’ clubs as core revenue centers. Vineyard tastings, chef-led classes and farm-to-table experiences have become the new playgrounds for grownups. Yoga decks, meditation gardens and longevity-themed retreats now anchor resort brochures where the pink rabbit once was the cover shot.

A longevity economy ripple

This isn’t only about younger adults delaying parenthood or choosing not to have children. It’s also about the fastest-growing market in travel: older adults. Living longer, healthier and with more discretionary income, they are driving growth across the travel ecosystem.

Today's "family trip" often means boomers traveling with their adult children, many of whom do not have children of their own. It's family travel without the family playground, shaped by new demographics and different expectations.

This is another ripple in the longevity economy. As populations age and fertility declines, industries that once revolved around the rhythms of childhood are reorienting toward the desires, and wallets, of adults. Travel is simply one of the most visible examples.

The pink rabbit as investment symbol

The silent pink rabbit isn't just a quirky resort relic. It's an investment signal. The shift from family-centered to adult-focused travel is already underway. Adults-only resorts are expanding, wellness tourism is booming, and tour operators increasingly market September and October as the smart months to travel. But so far, these are described as trends, as though wellness were a passing fad or off-peak, a savvy bargain.

What's rarely acknowledged is that these shifts are demographic at their core. Fewer families traveling with children means different buildings, staffing models and brand identities. The pink rabbit signals a structural change and the arrival of broader shoulder seasons, where demand is distributed more evenly across the calendar, rather than being concentrated around a few school holidays.

For investors and operators, this ripple suggests three growth paths. First, reposition and remodel aging, family-focused resorts that are experiencing underutilization, transforming play areas and kids' clubs into wellness decks, dining hubs or cultural immersion spaces. For those resorts that attract families with younger, albeit fewer, children, they will have to invest in developing and delivering premium, little-adult experiences, rather than traditional kids' camps and daycare playgrounds.

Second, extend the season through subscription-style travel clubs and curated "fall escapes" that attract retirees, remote workers and couples free from the school calendar.

And third, integrate elements of global longevity and wellness: a [market](#) projected to grow from \$5.5 trillion in 2022 to \$8.5 trillion by 2027. Clearly, it is one of hospitality's highest-margin frontiers.

Empty playgrounds, new markets

The pink rabbit still stands, but it stands watch over an empty playground. Once a symbol of family vacations, it now marks how travel is being remade by demographics, not just by weather or price.

An empty playground might look like a loss, but it is really a compass. It points to a future of broader shoulders, longer calendars and a travel economy evolving in response to demographic change.