

HALFWAY THROUGH A day of cycling across the Austrian Alps, Shakib Ahmed stopped outside a local's house to ask for water.

Instead of simply pointing him to a tap, the elderly resident invited him to stay. They spoke about mountain roads that rarely appeared on maps, family-run cafes tucked into nearby villages, and the rhythms of life in a part of Austria few visitors ever saw.

"The bike slowed everything down," the endurance athlete and film-maker shares. "Some of my favourite memories have nothing to do with cycling itself—they're the conversations that happened only because I arrived on a bicycle."

It's a sentiment shared by a growing number of travellers. Marathons, surf breaks, dive sites, and even Formula One races have become reasons to book the tickets. The destination comes next.

The Numbers Behind the Shift

According to Collinson International's Sports & Wellness Report 2026, 51 per cent of Indian travellers have travelled to attend a live sporting event, with their biggest motivation being the opportunity to explore a new city. Rom Remy, managing director for South and Southeast Asia at Collinson International, describes these journeys as "passion pursuits", where personal interests increasingly determine where people travel.

For Ahmed, that change happened gradually. His earliest overseas trips revolved around competitive tennis. Now he plans his calendar around IRONMAN races, bikepacking expeditions, open-water swims, and acroyoga retreats. His next race in Cervia, Italy, is only part of the itinerary.

More Than the Event

For New Jersey-based travel storyteller Rosa Castillo, it was basketball that changed the way her family plans holidays. Living close to New York gave them access to major sporting events, but soaring ticket prices encouraged them to look elsewhere. A long weekend in Chicago built around a Chicago Bulls game turned into one of their favourite trips, with neighbourhood bars and the city's architecture becoming just as memorable as the game itself.

"The energy inside the stadium, the local traditions, and the sense of community provided a cultural experience that was every bit as memorable as the city's landmarks," she says.

Since then, sports fixtures have become part of the family's travel planning. Instead of squeezing a game into a holiday, they now build the holiday around the game.

Freelance travel journalist Sky Lott is preparing for a different kind of sporting journey later this month. Drawn to Senegal's surfing culture, she'll be staying at a Black-owned surf village outside Dakar and is learning basic Wolof before she arrives. For Lott, surfing offers something package holidays cannot: access.

Returning to the same beach each day, learning from local instructors, and sharing routines with other surfers creates a different relationship with the destination, Lott



imagines. As a plus-size Black traveller trying the sport for the first time, she also hopes the trip challenges assumptions about who belongs in adventure travel.

The same sense of immersion drew veteran diver Federica Carr into scuba diving years ago. Watching a dive boat leave the shores of Grand Cayman convinced her to give the sport a try. Today, almost every long-haul holiday begins with a map of reefs rather than landmarks.

"I can't just dive and leave," she says. "I always try to spend time topside, eating local food and exploring the heritage and culture of a place."

This may be the biggest shift in movement-led travel today. The race, the ride, or the dive is rarely the whole story. Instead, it becomes a way into a destination, shaping not only where people go, but also how they spend their time once they get there. They leave with a medal or a finish time, certainly, but they also leave knowing which neighbourhood bakery opens before sunrise, where runners gather on a Sunday morning, or which stretch of the coastline the locals return to after work.

The Industry Catches Up

According to DreamSetGo co-founder Daniel DSouza, luxury sports travel has moved far beyond buying tickets. Around 72 per cent of the company's customers now choose premium hospitality packages, pairing events with dining experiences, exclusive access, and longer holidays. Formula One has emerged as its fastest-growing category, while interest continues to grow across tennis and participatory experiences such as padel retreats.

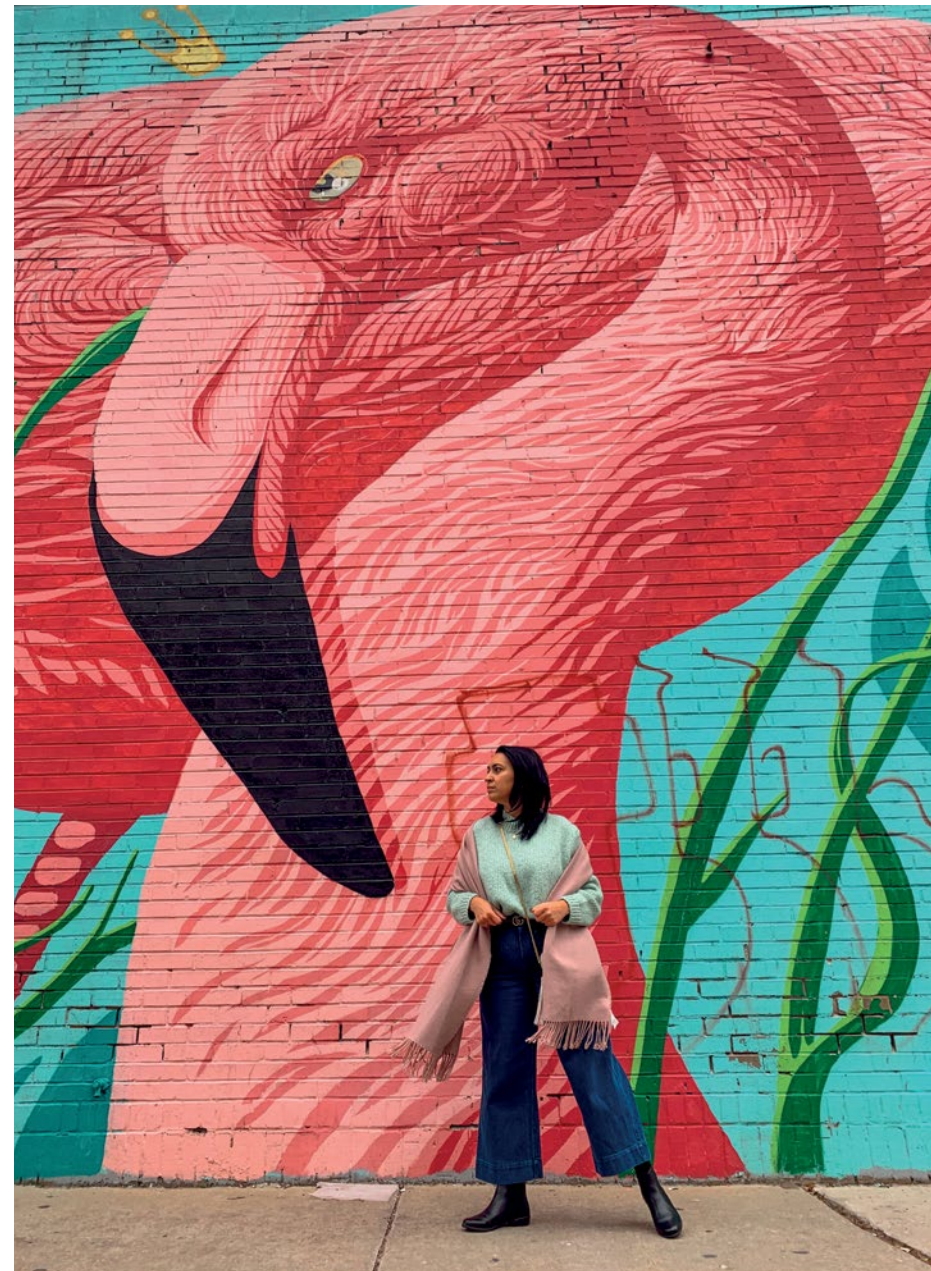
The same evolution is visible at FanCode Travel, where demand has shifted towards complete itineraries that combine tickets with accommodation, hospitality, and local experiences. Sporting events are increasingly becoming the starting point for a longer holiday rather than a quick weekend away.

At Airbnb, the trend is playing out across cities that might never have been on many travellers' radar. Amanpreet Bajaj, country manager for India and Southeast Asia, says sporting events are encouraging people to stay longer and travel together. Research by the platform found that nearly 60 per cent of respondents planned to travel for a live cricket match and 70 per cent preferred doing so with family or friends. More than half of younger

▲ Clockwise from above: Bikepacking offers a closer look at the villages and landscapes that lie beyond the usual tourist trail; exploring Chicago's neighbourhoods adds another layer to a trip planned around basketball; a visit to the Bulls' home offers a window into Chicago's basketball culture; alpine pastures and mountain trails become part of the experience on a cycling journey through Austria.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SHAKIB AHMED (2); ROSA CASTILLO (2)



travellers extended their trips beyond match day to explore local food, neighbourhoods, and culture.

That behaviour has translated into demand for destinations outside the usual leisure circuit. According to Airbnb’s internal search data, Indian travellers increasingly combined cricket trips with short breaks during the 2026 cricket season, driving higher interest in cities beyond the usual tourism hotspots. Searches for Ranchi nearly doubled year on year, while Thiruvananthapuram recorded more than 110 per cent growth. Jaipur and Lucknow also saw search volumes rise by more than 70 and 60 per cent, respectively.

Hotels are adapting too. At JW Marriott Bengaluru Prestige Golfshire Resort & Spa, guests planning golf holidays often stay longer, combining tournaments with spa treatments, destination dining, and time at the resort.

At JOALI BEING in the Maldives, sport and wellness have become part of the same journey. Football legends, including Dimitar Berbatov, Diego Simeone, and Clarence Seedorf, along with tennis professionals Sascha and Mischa Zverev, have hosted guest programmes that attract travellers from around the world. Coaching sessions often flow into recovery treatments, nutrition consultations, and personalised wellness programmes.



Destinations Place Their Bets

Singapore has spent years building an events calendar that extends beyond its Formula One Grand Prix to include the Singapore Marathon, HYROX Open Asian Championships, the HSBC Women’s World Championship, and the World Aquatics Championships. For Serene Woon, area director, India, Middle East and South Asia at the Singapore Tourism Board, these events introduce visitors to the city in ways conventional sightseeing cannot.

The Formula One weekend spills well beyond the Marina Bay Street Circuit, with concerts, dining events, nightlife, and shopping drawing visitors into different parts of the city. More than 40 per cent of race spectators arrive from overseas, many extending their stay beyond race weekend.

The Seychelles is making a similar play. While its beaches remain its biggest draw, the island nation is increasingly promoting hiking, cycling, kayaking, sailing, diving, and trail running. Events such as the Seychelles Nature Trail attract visitors who often spend additional days exploring the archipelago, says Vesna Rakić, CEO, Seychelles Tourism Board.

Travellers Lead the Way

When Aditya Sharma founded Miles & Maps, the idea wasn’t to simply organise marathon trips. It was to help runners experience destinations through the rhythm of race weekends.

“There are post-race parties, local run-club events, and organiser-led tourism activities that you won’t see in other seasons,” he says.

Many runners stay on after the finish line, joining walking tours, seeking out neighbourhood restaurants, or travelling onwards independently. Sharma has also seen interest spread beyond the world’s major marathons to smaller races in cities such as Barcelona and Hanoi, where visitors often find it easier to connect with local running communities.

For Divya Tate, founder of Inspire India Ultra Races, that connection begins the moment a cyclist gets on the road. The routes she designs across Ladakh, Goa, and the Western Ghats are chosen as carefully as the race itself because the landscape is part of the experience.

Unlike travelling by car, cycling forces people to notice gradual changes in terrain, weather, food, and local life. Villages become rest stops instead of passing scenery, and conversations happen because riders are moving at a human pace.

That idea runs through almost every sports-driven journey today. Though sport has become a powerful way to attract visitors, for travellers it offers something less measurable but far more lasting: a different way of knowing a place. The race, the match, or the dive may be the reason they arrive. The memories they carry home are usually made somewhere beyond the finish line. 🌐



▲ Clockwise from above: The Singapore Grand Prix turns the city into a sporting arena; hiking trails offer another way to explore the Seychelles; Golf takes centre stage at JW Marriott Bengaluru Prestige Golfshire Resort & Spa; football programmes bring professional sporting expertise to the wellness experience at JOALI BEING; tennis programmes at JOALI BEING pair sport with a restorative Maldivian escape.

