



# THE MICE INDUSTRY REBOUNDS

Post-COVID Surging Demand for Air and Ground Transportation. As businesses recover they are going out to more corporate events and trade shows driving the growth of the transportation industry.

By the drvn research team.

**US MICE SECTOR WAS VALUED ~\$104 BILLION IN 2023, AND IS FORECAST TO BE ~\$198 BILLION BY 2033**



The Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) sector was hit hard by the 2020 pandemic, with an unprecedented collapse of in-person events and corporate travel. Global business travel spending plunged by 53.8% in 2020 compared to 2019, as meetings went virtual and major conferences were canceled. However, by 2023–2024 the industry has staged a robust recovery. In July 2024, the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) reported that worldwide business travel spending would reach about \$1.48 trillion by end of year 2024, slightly exceeding the pre-pandemic high of 2019 (approximately \$1.43 trillion). In real terms (adjusted for inflation), spending is still catching up, but nominal business events and corporate travel budgets have largely returned to pre-COVID levels. In fact, a late-2022 survey of 100 corporate travel managers found many companies' travel budgets were already back to 2019 levels, with nearly half expecting 2023 travel budgets to surpass 2019 by 6–10%. This illustrates the pent-up demand to get teams back on the road and attendees back in conference halls. North America's MICE market has rebounded strongly, mirroring global trends.

## GBTA REPORTED BUSINESS TRAVEL SPENDING WILL REACH \$1.48 TRILLION BY EOY 2024

One industry analysis estimated North American MICE revenues at about \$140.6 billion in 2024. This is roughly 16% of the global MICE market, indicating North America's significant share in the revival of in-person events. In the United States alone, the MICE sector was valued around \$104 billion in 2023, and is forecast to nearly double to ~\$198 billion by 2033 (a ~6.6% CAGR).

Such growth projections underscore long-term confidence that meetings and events will not only return but expand. Key drivers include the renewed emphasis on face-to-face networking, team building, and knowledge sharing that virtual meetings couldn't fully replace. Industry segments are recovering at different paces: corporate meetings remain the largest segment by revenue in North America, while incentive travel (employee reward trips) is expected to be the fastest-growing segment in coming years.

Notably, conferences and trade exhibitions are leading the comeback. These large in-person events are “driving the corporate travel comeback”, according to [hospitality analysts](#). Networking opportunities, trade shows with live demos, and product launch events have roared back because they directly generate business and justify travel expenses. The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry (UFI) reported that by mid-2023, 79% of companies said their exhibition activity was “normal” again, up from 72% at the end of 2022 – and by late 2023, it was 90% back to normal in most markets. In other words, nearly all organizations resumed regular trade show schedules by 2023. This aligns with anecdotal reports of packed convention calendars in 2023–2024, as events that were postponed during COVID rescheduled en masse. (Many corporate events canceled in 2020 were actually deferred to 2022–23, contributing to an unusual spike in event [volume](#) once restrictions lifted.)

Meanwhile, other MICE segments are recovering a bit more deliberately. Some internal meetings and training seminars remain partially virtual or hybrid to save costs. And while incentive travel (reward trips for top employees or clients) paused during the pandemic, it has since surged as a popular tool for engagement and retention. [Industry research](#) calls 2023 a “phenomenal year” for incentive travel, with companies reinstating incentive trips that had been cut earlier. A recent Incentive Research Foundation survey found 53% of corporate leaders now consider incentive travel a “must-have” strategy, not a luxury. This is reflected in budgets: a 2024 analysis shows companies allocating about 22% of incentive program budgets just to airfare (and 25% to hotels), confirming that travel is central to these programs. In fact, the global incentive travel market is projected to grow from \$42 billion in 2021 to over \$216 billion by 2031 (over 12% annual growth) – a remarkable rebound and expansion.

Overall, by 2024 the MICE industry in North America (and much of the world) is approaching or even exceeding its pre-COVID scale in terms of spending and event count. Major convention cities like Las Vegas, Orlando, and Chicago are hosting full-capacity conferences again, and corporate off-sites, client events, and trade fairs are firmly back on the agenda. The rebound is not without its challenges (addressed later), but the demand for in-person connection has proven enduring.

As one [analysis](#) noted, in-person events and meetings are fueling steady growth in business travel now that pandemic restrictions have eased. Simply put, the value of meeting face-to-face, for sales, networking, training, or celebration, has reasserted itself in 2023–2025, and companies are investing accordingly.

### Surging Demand for Travel Transportation (Air & Ground)

The resurgence of MICE events has driven a parallel surge in demand for transportation, both in the air and on the ground. Thousands of attendees traveling to conferences and incentive trips translates directly into packed flights and busy airports, as well as a need for local transit (shuttles, car services, taxis, etc.) upon arrival. After the historic lows of 2020, travel volumes are climbing rapidly to meet this renewed demand:

## BY EOY 2023, AIR PASSENGER VOLUMES WERE ~94% OF WHAT THEY WERE IN 2019

Company Highlight 2023

Air Travel Nears Full Recovery  
Airlines have seen passenger traffic rebound sharply alongside the return of conferences and corporate travel. By the end of 2023, global air passenger volumes were roughly 94% of 2019 levels for the year, and in the fourth quarter of 2023, traffic was within [2% of pre-pandemic levels](#). In fact, domestic air travel has fully recovered; total domestic passenger traffic in 2023 exceeded the 2019 baseline by about 3.9%. International business travel has lagged slightly (full-year 2023 international traffic was ~88.6% of 2019 levels), but even that gap was closing fast by [late 2023](#). The International Air Transport Association notes a “strong post-pandemic rebound” in air travel that gathered steam through 2023, setting airlines up for a return to normal growth patterns in 2024.

Put simply, air travel demand in 2023–24 has boomed in step with MICE and overall travel revival. Moody’s projected that global passenger demand would grow 22% year-over-year in 2023 on top of 2022’s gains and a further 6% in 2024. Many carriers and hotels report that this “post-pandemic travel boom” shows no signs of slowing despite higher ticket prices. For example, U.S. airlines noted robust corporate bookings through 2023, and international travel reached ~90% of pre-COVID volume by mid-2023 – including a surge of Americans flying overseas for business and leisure.

The in-person conference circuit is a major contributor: a recent survey found 84% of business travelers expected to attend a conference or trade show in the next six months, indicating that employees are indeed flying again for meetings. Business travelers make up only about 12% of airline passengers, yet historically account for as much as 60% of airline revenues (due to higher fares and frequency). Thus, the restoration of

MICE travel has been a welcome tailwind for airlines’ financial recovery.

This surge has occasionally strained capacity, airlines faced labor shortages and high fuel costs, which kept fares high and seats at a premium through 2023. Nonetheless, carriers are adding routes (e.g. new long-haul flights by United Airlines to Asia-Pacific) in response to sustained demand. By 2024, global air travel demand is essentially back to pre-pandemic “normal,” with industry projections even expecting record-high passenger counts in some regions. For North America, passenger traffic and corporate travel spending are on a solid upswing. GBTA forecasts North American business travel spending will rise roughly 23% CAGR through 2026 as it rebounds, outpacing Europe’s recovery rate. In short, airplanes are full of business and event travelers once again – and every sold-out convention or incentive trip often means dozens or hundreds of people booking flights to get there.

## GROUND TRANSPORTATION: MEETING THE MICE MOBILITY SURGE

Intense flight activity is only half the story – once those travelers land, they all need to get from the airport to their hotels, conference centers, and meeting venues. This has created a surging need for ground transportation services to support the rebounding MICE sector.

According to data and operational insights from drvn, large-scale events are now driving record demand for coordinated ground mobility.

Enterprises, DMCs, and event planners are increasingly adopting technology-enabled systems to centralize booking, streamline communication with carrier partners, and maintain real-time visibility across multi-city itineraries.

In practice, every large event involves a complex choreography of local transit: airport shuttles, chauffeured cars, ride-share pickups, charter buses for group outings, and more. Industry data shows that ground transportation typically comprises around 10–15% of total business trip expenses on average (for example, one analysis found an average corporate trip spends ~\$181 on air travel and ~\$137 on ground transport). So as business flight bookings climb, so do the car bookings on the ground. Ground transportation providers are indeed experiencing a post-COVID boom in demand. Chauffeured car services and executive transport companies report that business has strongly recovered since 2022, spurring expansions into new cities and markets to keep up. A 2023 survey of corporate travel buyers revealed a striking shift: “So much more demand than supply has come back” in the chauffeured transport sector, according to industry executives, meaning providers are often at capacity. During the worst of the pandemic, many drivers and vehicles were idled or left the industry; now, with events back on, the sudden influx of travelers has at times

outpaced the available fleet and staffing. One limousine service CEO noted they had to go on a “mad dash to hire” once business returned, scrambling to train new chauffeurs and scale up operations to meet the needs of meetings and events planners. By 2023, many limo and bus companies were hiring and purchasing vehicles again – a reversal from the deep freeze of 2020. In North America, ground transport infrastructure has faced pinch points as volumes rise. Car rental agencies, for instance, had fleet shortages in 2021–22 and had to rebuild inventory; by 2023 rental car rates remained elevated (forecast to rise ~2.9% from 2024 to 2025) due to sustained demand. Chauffeured services similarly report little pressure to discount rates – with demand so strong, many operators can charge higher prices and still stay fully booked, a trend confirmed by travel buyers who see far less negotiation leverage now than pre-pandemic.

Essentially, ground transport suppliers are in a seller’s market in popular meeting destinations. This can affect event budgets: transportation line items have grown, and planners must secure vendors earlier. It’s worth noting that for incentive trips and conferences, group ground transport (like charter buses or motor coaches for large delegations) is also in high demand.

Drivers with commercial licenses were in short supply post-COVID, another facet of the labor shortages hitting travel sectors. In response, many destinations and DMCs (destination management companies) are investing in better transit options and partnerships to handle the influx – for example, by improving airport taxi/shuttle capacity and encouraging ride-share integrations for convention attendees. The bottom line is that every surge in air travel for an event creates an equivalent surge in ground transportation needs. Tens of thousands of conference-goers landing in Las Vegas or New York will fuel demand for everything from black car services to public transit. We're seeing that play out now: travel managers report ground transport bookings steadily climbing alongside flights, and they are adopting tools (APIs, booking platforms) to streamline those rides for travelers. Companies like drvn, Uber for Business, and others are vying to fill this niche with tech-enabled solutions for coordinating rides at scale. As MICE travel continues to rebound, air and ground transportation are two sides of the same coin – a full recovery in one necessitates a robust recovery in the other.

## OVERLOOKED INSIGHTS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

While the resurgence of MICE events and travel is clear, there are several nuanced factors and challenges in this rebound that merit attention: Uneven Recovery & Hybrid Trends: Not every meeting has returned to in-person, and not every company is traveling as freely as in 2019. Surveys indicate some firms remain cost-conscious – e.g. 60% of companies scaled back the frequency of trips or number of attendees per trip compared to pre-COVID norms. Many organizations learned to be more selective, sending teams only on high-value trips (for crucial conferences, client meetings, etc.) and handling routine check-ins virtually. Additionally, hybrid event formats (combining in-person and virtual attendance) remain popular. Over half of business leaders still find hybrid meetings valuable and plan to keep virtual components for broader reach. This means the full recovery in volume of travelers might lag behind the spending recovery, as some events permanently adopt a smaller in-person footprint augmented by online participants. Venues and planners are adapting to this by investing in better on-site AV and streaming tech, even as in-person draws the most focus.

# 7/10 TRAVEL SUPPLIERS SAID THEY'RE STRUGGLING WITH STAFFING SHORTAGES IN 2023

## Infrastructure and Staffing Challenges:

The rapid rebound has put strain on travel and hospitality infrastructure. Airports and airlines have faced labor shortages, resulting in sporadic flight disruptions and higher workloads on staff.

Similarly, hotels and transportation companies report difficulties hiring enough workers (drivers, pilots, hotel staff) to meet the surge. In a GBTA poll, 7 in 10 travel suppliers said they were struggling with staffing shortages in 2023. This can impact service quality – for example, slower hotel check-ins, fewer taxi availability at peak hours, or limited housekeeping at hotels. The industry is responding with aggressive recruiting and wage increases, but training new talent takes time. Until labor supply catches up, travelers may continue to encounter some friction (like higher prices and occasional service lapses) even as demand soars. On the bright side, the strong demand is spurring investment in infrastructure: airlines are bringing jets out of storage and ordering new ones, airports are upgrading facilities, and ground transport fleets are being modernized.

## BUSINESS AIRFARE BOOKINGS JUMPED NEARLY 50% IN 2022

IATA's director general has urged governments to support this by providing "cost-efficient infrastructure to meet demand" and not choking the recovery with underinvestment. Rising Costs and Budget Pressure: Another overlooked aspect is the sharp increase in travel costs post-COVID. Airfares, hotel rates, and transport fees have all climbed due to inflation and demand. Corporate travel managers are feeling the pinch: even though budgets are up, high prices mean fewer trips per dollar. For instance, business airfares jumped nearly 50% in 2022 (though still just below 2019 levels) and rose further in 2023.

Hotels in the U.S. saw rates 20%+ higher in 2022 and another ~11% rise in 2023. Ground transportation also became costlier; ride-share shortages and fuel prices kept ground costs elevated.

**AS A RESULT, SOME COMPANIES ARE FOCUSING TRAVEL ON REVENUE-GENERATING ACTIVITIES AND NEGOTIATING HARDER WITH SUPPLIERS.**

The ROI of attending events is under scrutiny, meaning MICE organizers must demonstrate clear value. This could push event professionals to create more impactful experiences to justify the trip – potentially a positive outcome, but a challenge nonetheless. The high cost environment may moderate by 2025–2026 if inflation eases, yet travel buyers are bracing for permanently higher baseline prices. Sustainability and Duty of Care: As events ramp up, there's an emerging trend of trying to balance the benefits of in-person meetings with greener practices. For example, some events are choosing closer locales or regional hubs to shorten flights, coordinating ride-shares to cut duplicate trips, or purchasing carbon offsets for attendee travel.

**A recent industry stat showed 44% of event teams are now considering sustainability when choosing event destinations**, such as minimizing long-haul air travel. Additionally, duty of care remains important – ensuring traveler health and safety. COVID-19 is no longer halting events, but organizers still provide sanitization measures and are prepared with contingency plans in case of health issues. Travel insurance and medical support are being built into corporate travel programs more robustly post-pandemic. These factors, while not derailing the rebound, are certainly shaping how the rebound happens with an eye to responsibility and resilience.

In summary, the MICE industry's post-2020 journey is one of remarkable resurgence coupled with adaptation. North America's meetings and events scene is bustling again, from convention centers to incentive resort trips, driving a correlated boom in both air and ground transportation demand. Planes are full, hotels are booked, and chauffeurs and shuttles are back on the road shuttling eager conference attendees. Importantly, this recovery comes with a fresh perspective on planning and priorities: organizations are more deliberate in justifying travel, more attuned to the logistics behind the scenes, and more mindful of external challenges (costs, staffing, sustainability).

The data validates the optimism – by 2024 the global business travel and MICE spending will likely surpass the pre-pandemic peak, a feat that seemed distant just a couple years ago. If current forecasts hold, the coming years will even set new records (GBTA predicts over \$2 trillion in global business travel spend by 2028). For the transportation sector, this is a welcome surge – but also a call to innovate and scale sustainably.

## THE REBOUND IN TRAVEL UNDERSCORES HOW INTERDEPENDENT THE AIR AND GROUND SYSTEMS ARE IN DELIVERING SUCCESSFUL EVENTS.

A delegate's journey doesn't end at the airport, and the renewed MICE boom is shining light on every leg of that journey. With companies like drvn providing modern solutions for ground mobility and airlines restoring connectivity worldwide, the pieces are in place for the MICE industry to not only rebound but reinvent itself for the future. The "great rebound" of 2023–2025 has proven the enduring value of meeting in person. Now, the task is to support that demand with robust, agile transportation networks and thoughtful planning – ensuring that the next chapter of growth is both efficient and exhilarating for travelers around the globe.



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