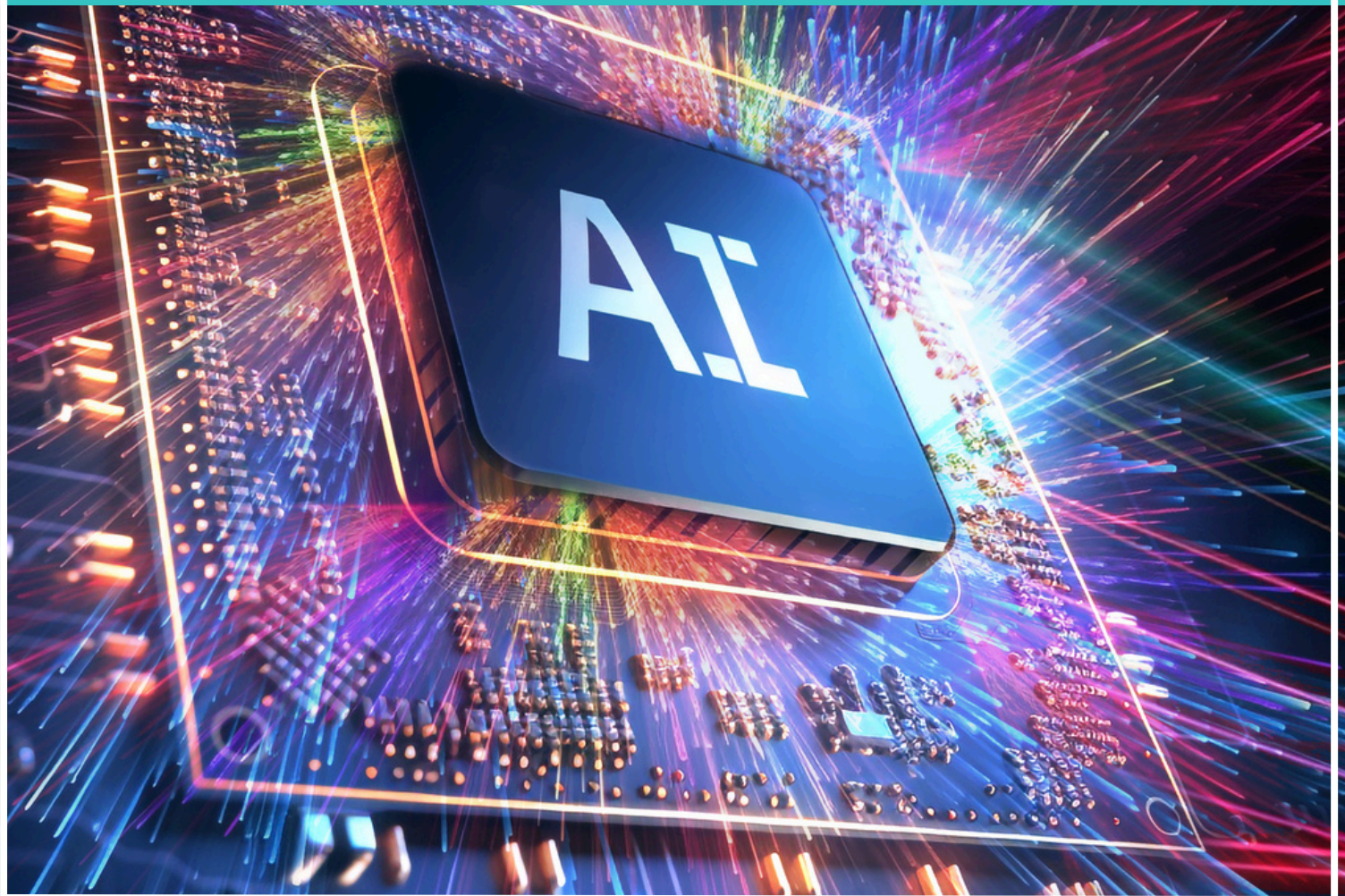




YOUR GUIDE TO
**SEO FOR
AI SEARCH**
FOR TOURISM

Your hands-on guide to get your content
visible to AI Search platforms





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THE WAY TRAVELLERS SEARCH HAS CHANGED

Imagine a visitor planning a day out in your destination. Instead of scrolling through Google, they open ChatGPT and ask: “What are the best things to do here this weekend?” In seconds, it suggests a handful of experiences, complete with short descriptions and recommendations. They pick one and book. You weren’t mentioned. You didn’t even know if you were in the mix.

Traditionally, being visible online meant showing up on page 1 of Google search results. Today, “search” happens on a much broader scale. And for tourism businesses, that means you need to know where your potential guests are looking, and whether your business is being recommended, or ignored.

What is AI Search?

Travellers are increasingly turning to AI-powered tools like ChatGPT, Google AI Overviews, Gemini and Perplexity AI to ask questions and plan their trips. These tools act as digital travel agents by cross-referencing reviews, maps, and travel times to provide tailor-made information and even suggested itineraries.

According to an Adobe survey in 2025, 77% of people in the US have used ChatGPT as a search engine with 23% of people using it for travel planning. And because these tools pull from multiple sources (including your website content), having structured, accurate, and helpful information online is more vital than ever.



In the US, 56% of travellers used AI for planning, booking or in-destination assistance for at least one trip in the past 12 months (March 2026), and it’s a fast growing trend - up from 43% in the second half 2025 and 33% in the first half 2025. Among travellers who have used AI, 94% have used it for travel.

Source: [Phocuswright, March 2026](#)



Think of it as “Conversational Search”

Search on AI platforms will involve more in-depth search questions, known as “conversational search”, and are typical in both **AEO (Answer Engine Optimisation)** and **GEO (Generative Engine Optimisation)** - more on these terms later!

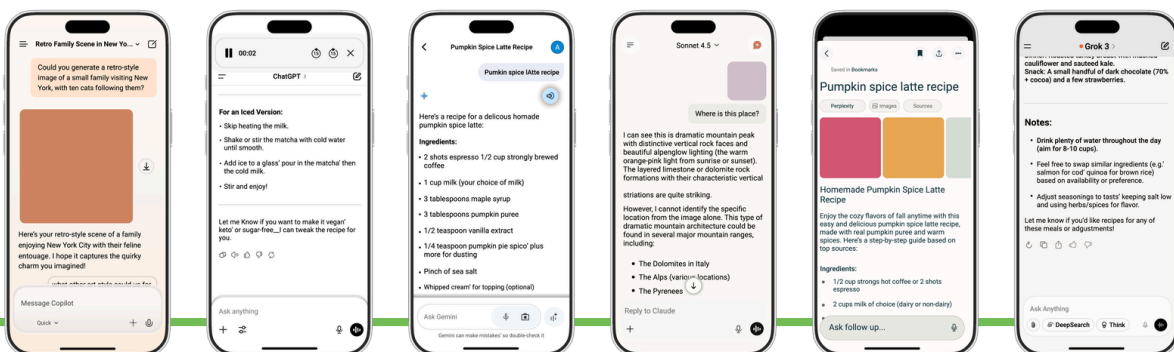
Conversational search is when users interact with AI tools in natural, back-and-forth language, often with context carried across multiple queries. It typically includes:

- Full questions, not fragments or just keywords
- Follow-up questions to carry on the conversation - “what about in winter?”
- Personal context like budget, preferences, timing are often included
- Expectation of a direct, tailored answer, not a list of links

So instead of typing short keywords like “Queenstown tours”, they’re asking full questions:

- “What’s the best way to experience Queenstown in 3 days during summer?”
- “Is a Milford Sound cruise worth it?”
- “What are some unique things to do in Rotorua?”

And instead of a list of links, they’re getting full direct answers. The conversation thread can continue to glean more specific answers, just like chatting with a human. This shift means you’re no longer just competing to rank highly on page results, you’re competing to be recommended.



DECISION DELEGATION

Travellers are delegating the "comparison" or research phase to AI. They trust AI summaries more than browsing 15 different tabs, and it’s a lot quicker! This guide will show you how to give your tourism business more chance at showing up in this new world of AI search.



HOW AI SEARCH ENGINES WORK

AI Search Tools Are Different

Traditional search was about being found.

AI search is about being chosen.

AI search tools don't behave like traditional search engines, the key differences include:

- They understand natural language questions, even if they are long and complex
- They pull information from multiple sources - your website, traveller reviews, social mentions, reliable and independent sources (e.g Reddit, Wikipedia)
- They will generate a single, detailed answer
- They will offer recommendations based on your preferences

You might not get clicks, but you can be recommended

This all means that your business might not be clicked on, but it can still be featured, referenced, or recommended.

- Visibility is no longer just about your website
- Content needs to answer real traveller questions
- Trust and authority matter





SEO, AEO & GEO - WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Search Engine Optimisation: The Foundation

SEO ensures your website is fast, mobile-friendly, and indexable, with the goal of being found by Google. SEO will continue to matter for your website performance and also support how your content appears in AI Search.

Answer Engine Optimisation: The Fact-Checker

AEO uses structured, concise content to provide a direct answer. Structuring data (like FAQs and Schema) so AI can give direct answers (e.g., "Yes, they have free Wi-Fi"). Your goal is to be the source of the answer.

Generative Engine Optimisation: The Reputation

GEO optimises long-form, contextual content for AI-driven generative search engines to create comprehensive responses. GEO uses clear, authoritative, and rich content for AI to reference and cite as a trusted source. Your goal is to be referenced.

You don't need three separate strategies, you just need to adapt how you create and structure your content.

AI SEARCH	SEO: Gets you seen	AEO: Gets you used	GEO: Gets you recommended
FOCUS	Ranking in search engines	Answering specific questions	Included in AI summaries
INPUT	Keywords	Natural language queries	Context & multiple queries
OUTPUT	A list of links	Direct answers	Synthesised recommendations
GOAL	Clicks to your website	Be the source of the answer	Be referenced, even if not clicked



HOW AI DECIDES WHO TO RECOMMEND

AI tools don't "rank" websites in the traditional sense, they prioritise content they trust. Here are the four key signals that matter:

1. Clarity & Extractability

Is your content easy to read and understand? Can AI crawlers easily access your site?

- Simple language & clear headings
- Well-structured pages
- FAQs and schema markup
- If a human can skim it, AI can use it.

2. Relevance

Do you directly answer real traveller questions? Generic content won't cut it anymore, it needs to be specific and detailed. Aim to clearly address things like:

- What the experience is like
- Who it's for
- Whether it's worth it

3. Authority

Is your business mentioned elsewhere? If no one else is talking about you, AI is less likely to so it's important to have an online presence beyond your website:

- Reviews
- Tourism platforms
- Media mentions
- Blog features

4. Consistency

Does your information match across platforms?

- Your website, Google Business Profile, and listings should all align
- Mixed signals reduce trust

Key takeaway: AI finds information AND filters for confidence.





How AI Decides What to Cite

The three signals that determine whether AI cites your brand.



The 5 Rules of AI Citation

01

Prioritise third-party validation

AI trusts what others say about you more than what you say about yourself.

02

Be specific, not broad

Precise answers to precise questions get cited. General overviews get skipped.

03

Structure for machines

AI extracts from well-organised content. Dense prose gets ignored.

04

Stay current

76.4% of ChatGPT's top-cited pages were updated in the last 30 days.

05

Track your citations

You can't improve what you don't measure. Monitor where your brand appears monthly.

Source: Emilia Moller, LinkedIn



PRACTICAL WAYS TO SHOW UP IN AI SEARCH

Start With Your Website

Your website is still your most important asset. Let's look at key ways to make it AI-friendly.

Add FAQ sections

FAQs on key pages will provide content for AEO. This is your opportunity to provide detailed answers to specific questions that your target customers are likely to ask.

Use structure that AI can understand and digest easily

Clear descriptive headings and subheadings (H2s and H3s), writing in plain English, bulleted lists, short paragraphs with one idea each.

Create content around experiences, not just products

Create a cluster of content (like blogs) around your main topic to ensure you can show the breadth of what you offer.

Keep your content up to date and accurate

AI doesn't like out-of-date answers. If your opening hours, prices, or seasonal info change, update your site regularly. Blogs and FAQs are perfect for this, they signal to AI that your content is current and reliable.

Blend facts with storytelling.

AI is drawn to content that is both factual and engaging. So while you need to answer directly, don't forget the colour:

"Yes, dolphin swims in the Bay of Islands year-round, but summer offers the warmest water and calmer seas - plus, the sunsets are unbeatable."

This mix of practical detail and storytelling makes your content more quotable.

Prepare your site for AI-crawlers

Get your web designer to prepare your site for AI-crawlers with technical steps like an updated robots.txt file, WACP (Website AI Content Policy) file, and schema markup.



Here's an example of how a Tomahawk blog titled "How to write content for AI Search" surfaced in Google's AI Overviews:

The screenshot shows an AI Overview for the query "How to write content for AI Search". The overview text states: "Yes, AI search platforms (like Google AI Overviews, Perplexity, and others) extensively use social media content to answer questions and provide information. Rather than relying solely on traditional websites, modern AI models analyze user-generated content from social platforms to surface real-time, authentic, and conversational insights, particularly for topics requiring human perspective or recent information." A green arrow points from this text to a source link: "Tomahawk Tourism Marketing +2".

Key Aspects of Social Media in AI Search:

- **Primary Sources:** Reddit is a dominant source, with some engines leveraging its threads heavily for product reviews and forum-style discussions. LinkedIn has also emerged as a key authority source for professional commentary and B2B-related queries.
- **Content Types:** AI models process public YouTube transcripts, Instagram captions, TikTok descriptions, and Twitter/X posts to understand trends and answer "how-to" questions.
- **Real-Time Data & Social Signals:** AI engines use social media as a real-time signal to identify trending topics and gauge how users feel about products or businesses.
- **How Content is Used:**

The source list on the right includes:

- How AI Overviews Is Pulling From Social Posts - SEO Sherpa (9 Jan 2026)
- Does Social Media Influence Google and AI Search Results? (14 Jul 2025)
- How to Write Content for AI Search - Tomahawk (19 Sept 2025)

A green arrow points from the Tomahawk source in the list to the source link in the overview text. A "Show all" button is visible at the bottom of the source list.

Your Social Media Content Counts

Text content from your social media captions can just as easily be quoted in AI-generated results. So your content strategy should cover all your online channels, not just your website.

TIP: Make sure you are also across your "social mentions" - platforms like Reddit are an important source for AI search engines, particularly in relation to reviews or questions about your product or destination.

[See more about Reddit and why it's important for tourism.](#)





Answer Real Traveller Questions

Think like your customer and create content that answers their questions directly, like:

- “Is this worth it?”
- “What should I expect?”
- “Who is this best for?”
- “What’s the difference between options?”

Example: Instead of “Enjoy a world-class guided kayak experience”, write “What it’s like to go kayaking in Abel Tasman (and whether it’s right for you)”

Build Content Around Intent

High-performing content will be how people talk to AI tools, and often includes phrases like:

- “Best time to visit...”
- “Top things to do in...”
- “How to choose...”
- “What to expect...”

Strengthen Your Authority

Make sure your business exists beyond your website. Focus on:

- Getting more detailed customer reviews (Google, Tripadvisor etc)
- Being listed on trusted tourism and destination platforms
- Earning mentions in trusted media through PR or partnerships
- Have a presence on platforms AI uses as reliable sources (Platforms like Reddit & Wikipedia)





Keep It Human & Conversational

Ironically, the more AI grows, the more human your content needs to feel. Your content should have a conversational style. Use natural, question-based headings, and write like you're answering your typical customer in person. What information would they be looking at to find your site? People don't ask AI the way they type into Google.

Avoid:

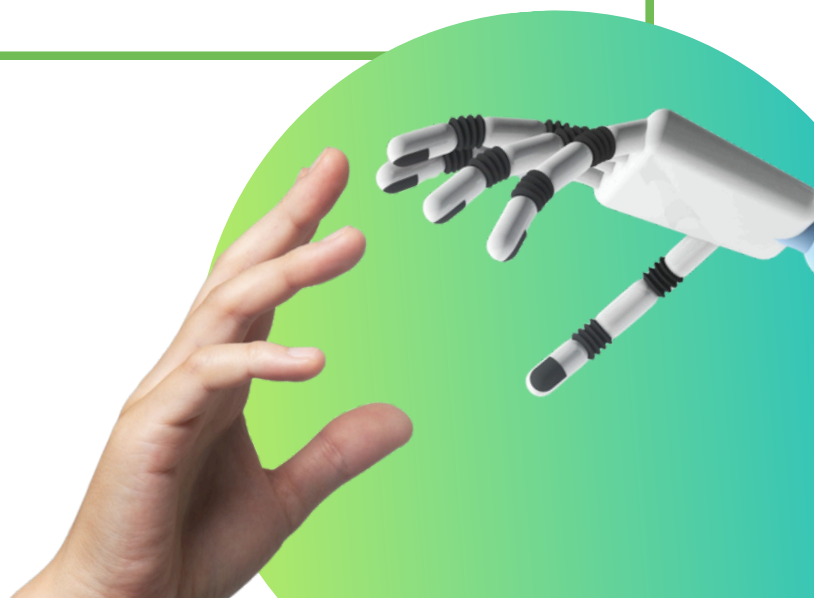
- Overly generic descriptions
- Keyword stuffing
- Copy-paste AI content with no personality
- Authenticity is a competitive advantage.

TIP TO GET STARTED: Not sure if your website content is structured for AI search? Not sure where to start to gain more visibility in AI Search? Our team can help with an AI Search Audit to assess where you are at currently, and next steps.

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TOURISM EXAMPLES: BEFORE & AFTER

Let's bring this to life with examples of how you would change your approach with content.

OLD APPROACH: Sell the experience
NEW APPROACH: Help the traveller decide

Example: Milford Sound Cruise

Before (Traditional Website Copy)

"Join our unforgettable Milford Sound cruise and experience breathtaking scenery and wildlife."

After (AI-Friendly Content)

"Is a Milford Sound cruise worth it? Here's what to expect."

A cruise is the most popular way to experience Milford Sound, especially if you want to see waterfalls, wildlife, and the full length of the fiord without hiking. Most cruises last 1.5 to 2 hours and include commentary.

It's ideal for first-time visitors or those short on time, but less suited if you're looking for a more active or off-the-beaten-track experience."

Why this works:

It mirrors a real question, gives a clear, helpful answer, and it positions the operator as a trusted source.





Example: Accommodation (Boutique Lodge)

Before (Traditional Website Copy)

“Relax in luxury at our boutique lodge, offering premium amenities and stunning views.”

After (AI-Friendly Content)

“Is a boutique lodge worth it over a hotel?”

Boutique lodges typically offer a more personalised and quieter experience than larger hotels, often with fewer rooms, hosted service, and unique design features.

They're ideal for couples or travellers looking for a more intimate stay. If you prefer facilities like gyms, restaurants, or 24/7 reception, a hotel may be a better fit.”

Why this works:

Frames the decision, not just the product.



Example: Abel Tasman Kayaking

Before (Traditional Website Copy)

“Explore the stunning Abel Tasman coastline with our guided kayaking tours.”

After (AI-Friendly Content)

“Is kayaking in Abel Tasman suitable for beginners?”

Yes, most guided kayaking tours in Abel Tasman are designed for beginners, with calm waters and full instruction provided.

Half-day tours are a good introduction, while full-day options allow you to explore more remote beaches. If you prefer less physical activity, water taxis and walking tracks are alternative ways to experience the park.”

Why this works:

Removes uncertainty and answers a key barrier question.





THE PAID SIDE: AI SEARCH ADS

Can you bypass all the AEO & GEO work and just do paid ads in AI Search platforms?

No, there's no short cuts. Just like with traditional SEO you do have to invest in doing the basics well for AEO and GEO with ongoing optimisation. You can however, treat paid ads within AI Search as a complementary strategy.

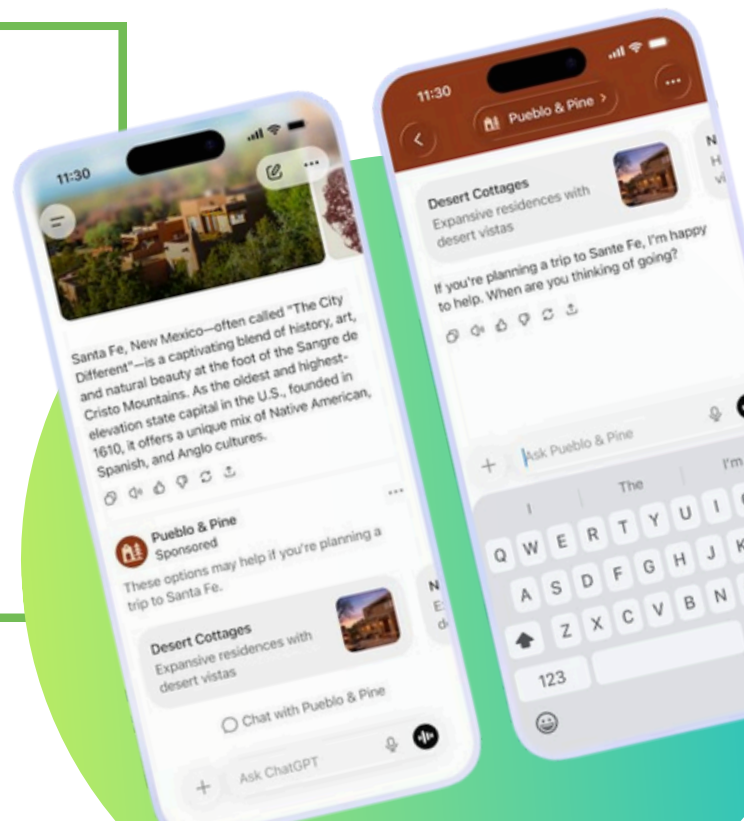
AI platforms are beginning to monetise through paid ads, but it's still early days. In January 2026, OpenAI began testing the use of paid ads within ChatGPT (US market). The ads are clearly labelled as "sponsored" and won't appear as part of a response but will sit around the conversation.

Performance of these ads for advertisers is still very much in a testing phase, and it will be something to keep an eye on as we had little to go on when this guide was published – something for the next update!

While the AI Search platforms are experimenting, traditional platforms like Google and Meta Ads are shifting with smarter automation in ad targeting, AI-generated ad creative, and a greater focus on intent over keywords.

WHAT DO TO NOW:

- **Keep investing in creating high-quality content**
- **Build strong organic visibility first**
- **Stay informed on how paid ads in AI search are performing**





CAN YOU MEASURE SUCCESS WITH AI SEARCH?

You can't measure AI search visibility as cleanly as traditional SEO yet.

There's no equivalent of "average position #3" inside tools like Google Analytics 4 or Google Search Console. But that doesn't mean it's not measurable at all. You just need to shift from direct measurement to directional signals.

THE REALITY

AI search measurement today is a bit like early social media analytics was with limited visibility, no clear attribution, and lots of "we think this is working". But the businesses that leaned in early are the ones who benefited most later.

Here's how to do it in a way that still gives you confidence you're moving in the right direction.

1. Track "AI-Influenced" Traffic (Not Just Organic)

You won't always see "AI" as a channel, but you will see its impact. AI often removes the click, but increases awareness. People remember you and come back later.

Look for:

- Increases in direct traffic (people skipping search and going straight to you)
- Growth in branded search (people searching your business name)
- Traffic from tools like ChatGPT and Perplexity AI (this is starting to show in referral data)





2. Ask AI Tools the Same Questions Your Customers Do

In the same way you'd use a Google Search to check where your website ranks for key terms, you can test platforms (like ChatGPT, Google AI Overviews, and Perplexity AI) to assess whether your brand is mentioned, which competitors appear instead, and what sources are being referenced. This is your "share of voice" in AI environments.

Search for:

- "Best things to do in [your destination]"
- "Is [your experience] worth it?"
- "Top [category] in [location]"

3. Monitor Branded Mentions Across the Web

AI pulls from multiple sources, not just your website. If your presence is growing across the web, your likelihood of being picked up by AI increases. AI pulls from multiple sources, not just your website.

4. Measure Content Performance Differently

Your AI-optimised content may not behave like traditional SEO pages.

Look for:

- Time on page (are people actually reading it?)
- Engagement with FAQ sections
- Assisted conversions (content that contributes, not just converts)





5. Track Conversion Quality, Not Just Volume

AI-informed travellers often arrive further down the decision funnel.

Look for:

- Are leads more informed?
- Are customers referencing things they've "already read"?
- Are enquiries more specific?

Focus on creating genuinely helpful content and building authority beyond your website. We can't track AI visibility like rankings yet, but we can track the signals that lead to being recommended, and the outcomes that follow.





YOU AI SEARCH READINESS CHECKLIST

Use this as a quick self-assessment, if you're ticking most of these, you're on the right track.



Website

- Clear headings and structure
- FAQ sections
- Content written in plain English
- Blog topic clusters
- AI-crawler ready

Authority

- Strong review presence
- Listed on key tourism platforms
- Mentions beyond your own website

Content

- Answers real traveller questions
- Covers "what to expect" and "is it worth it"
- Focused on experiences, not just features

Consistency

- Information aligned across all platforms
- Up-to-date details everywhere



AI Search is an opportunity

For years, large brands have had the advantage in traditional search. In AI search, helpful, clear, trustworthy content wins. That levels the playing field.

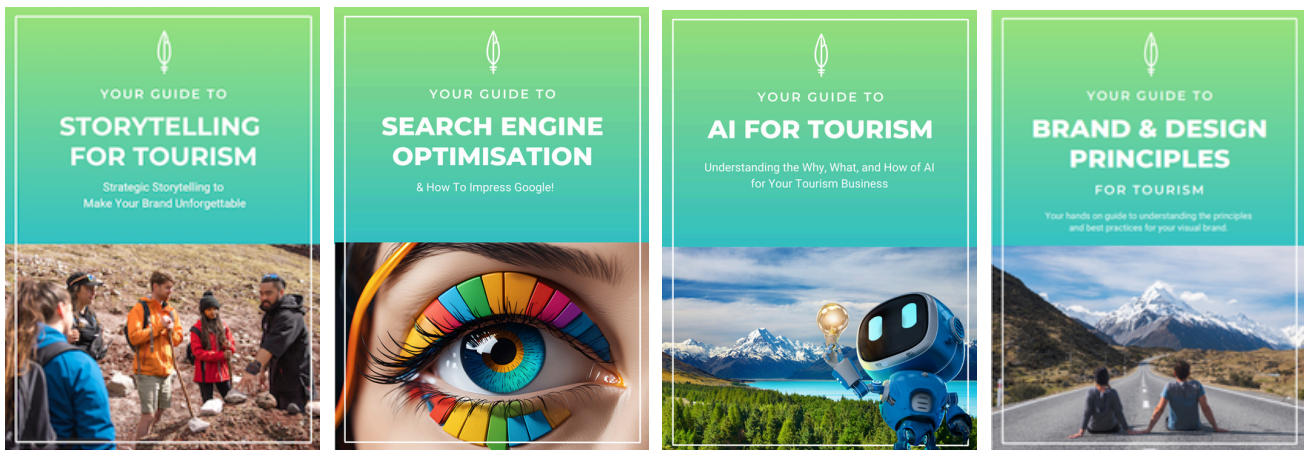
Tourism operators who take the time to genuinely answer traveller questions and showcase their experience clearly will be the ones that get recommended.



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TOMAHAWK 

P: +64 (0) 9 522 2333

E: getintouch@tomahawk.co.nz

www.tomahawk.co.nz



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