seogirl

SEO GIRL RESEARCH · AI TRAVEL JOURNEYS

Itinerary First: When Does AI Send Travellers to an Operator?

A Toronto couple plans their first 10-day trip to Peru with ChatGPT and Google AI Mode. Nine questions later, we know exactly where tour operators enter the conversation, and why most of them don't.

0
tour operators named in either platform's itinerary answers

28
hotels and restaurants named in those same itinerary answers

1
operator named by both platforms, out of 16 in total

Ameneh Saeednia
Senior SEO & Generative Search Strategist

November 2026
seogirl.ca

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Travellers ask AI for a trip, not for a tour company

This study was inspired by a LinkedIn post from **Brennen Bliss** making a simple point: travellers ask AI for itineraries, not tour operators. If that's true, the real question for operators is **when** in the journey AI hands the traveller to a business, and what it says about that business when it does.

The question

At which point in a realistic trip-planning conversation does AI name a tour operator or marketplace without being asked? Once asked, who gets named, what capabilities get credited, and which sources does the AI lean on?

The setup

One persona, **9 journey questions**, asked as one continuous conversation in each platform. **ChatGPT** (logged out, temporary chat) and **Google AI Mode** (signed out, US and English forced with `gl=us&hl=en`). Both runs on 1 November 2026.

What we recorded for every answer

FIELD	DEFINITION
Operators, unprompted	Any tour operator, agency or marketplace named in Q1 to Q5, before the traveller asks for one.
Operators, prompted	Businesses named in Q6 to Q9, where the traveller asks for companies, guides, vetting criteria or a booking site.
Capabilities credited	Whether the answer credits an operator with **permits**, **private access**, **named guides**, **guarantees** or **support**.
Sources cited	Domains the AI linked or attributed claims to, classified as government, operator, marketplace/review, ticket reseller, publisher or transport.
Commercial layer	Ads and sponsored units shown alongside the answer. Recorded but not counted as AI recommendations.

THE PERSONA

Meet the planners

A realistic, high-value traveller: experienced enough to want quality, new enough to Peru to need help, and exactly the couple a private tour operator wants to reach.



The Toronto couple

WHO
Couple in their 40s, Toronto

TRIP
First trip to Peru, 10 days on the ground, May

BUDGET
Comfortable mid-range to upscale

LOVES
History, food, scenery

PACE
Balanced. Some adventure, real downtime

STARTING POINT
No operator in mind. They open an AI chat, not a tour site.

How they plan

They don't search "best Peru tour company." They describe their trip and ask what to do. Brand names enter only when the AI brings them up, or when the couple hits a decision they can't make alone.

What they need from an operator, even if they don't know it yet

Permits & tickets

Machu Picchu circuits and Inca Trail permits are timed, capped and passport-bound.

A great guide

Their interest in Inca history makes interpretation the core of the trip.

Seamless logistics

Altitude, trains, transfers and domestic flights between four bases.

Trust

They're sending deposits to a company in another country.

> Both AI tools picked up the persona immediately. ChatGPT called it **"an ideal first trip for you as a couple"** and Google AI Mode said **"May is the absolute sweet spot for Peru."** The personalization was strong. The operator visibility was not.

THE JOURNEY MAP

Where operators show up

Questions 1 to 5 never ask for a company. Questions 6 to 9 do. The heat map shows what each platform named at each step.

	TRAVELLER ASKS	CHATGPT	GOOGLE AI MODE
UNPROMPTED: PLANNING THE TRIP			
1	**Dreaming** Is 10 days enough, and what should we prioritize?	No business named	TourRadar
2	**Itinerary** Build us a day-by-day 10-day plan.	No business named. 12 hotels and restaurants	No business named. 16 hotels and restaurants
3	**Machu Picchu** How do we get tickets, and do we need a guide?	"a reputable Cusco tour operator"	2 ticket agencies
4	**Inca Trail** Hike or train? How do permits work?	"an authorized trekking agency"	Alpaca Expeditions
5	**Tour or DIY** Should we book a tour or do it ourselves?	"a reputable local operator"	Kensington, Kimkim, Coltur, Ventura
PROMPTED: CHOOSING WHO TO BOOK			
6	**Operators** Which tour companies would you recommend?	4 operators	4 operators
7	**Local guide** Can we hire a private guide? Where do we find one?	4 different operators	ToursByLocals, Withlocals, Viator, GetYourGuide + 3 operators
8	**Trust** How do we know an operator is reputable?	No business named (checklist)	Coltur, Explorandes
9	**Booking** What's the best website to actually book this?	Peruvian Path + TourRadar, GetYourGuide, Viator	Kuoda, Aracari, ToursByLocals

No business named · Operator named unprompted or in passing · Operator shortlist · Marketplace named

ChatGPT waits to be asked. It referred to an unnamed "operator" or "agency" four times in Q3 to Q5, then produced names only at Q6.

Google AI Mode names businesses earlier. A marketplace at Q1, an operator at Q4 (the permit question), and four more at Q5.

THE CONVERSATION

Prompts and follow-ups, part 1

The exact prompts the couple typed, and the follow-up each AI offered at the end of its answer. Each platform ran as one continuous conversation, so prompts 2 to 9 are follow-ups.

	USER PROMPT	CHATGPT'S FOLLOW-UP	GOOGLE AI MODE'S FOLLOW-UP
1	**DREAMING** "We're a couple in our 40s from Toronto planning our first trip to Peru, about 10 days. Is that enough time, and what should we prioritize?"	Asked 5 tailoring questions: when are you going, travel style, interests, pace, and whether the 10 days include flights.	"Are you looking to do moderate hiking (like a 1-day Inca Trail segment) or prefer trains and guided cultural tours?" Also offered accommodation styles.
2	**ITINERARY** "We're thinking May, comfortable mid-range to upscale, we love history, food and scenery, balanced pace, and that's 10 days on the ground. Can you build us a day-by-day 10-day itinerary?"	"Are you thinking of travelling in early May or late May?" Offered a hotel-and-restaurant shortlist.	Offered help securing Machu Picchu circuit tickets, or adding a private cooking class.
3	**MACHU PICCHU** "How do we get Machu Picchu tickets, and do we need a guide?"	"Are you looking at May 2027, and do you have approximate dates yet?"	Offered to match entry time slots to train schedules, or compare route difficulty.
4	**INCA TRAIL** "Should we hike the Inca Trail or take the train? How do permits work?"	Asked about hiking experience and which experience sounds more appealing.	Offered to check permit availability or suggest a premium train package (Belmond Hiram Bingham).
5	**TOUR OR DIY** "Should we book a tour or just do it ourselves?"	**POINTS TO OPERATOR** Offered to "put together a shortlist of 2–3 reputable local tour operators in Peru."	**POINTS TO OPERATOR** Offered a DIY booking sequence, or "tips on how to pitch your itinerary to an agency."

In Q1 to Q4, **no follow-up pointed toward an operator**. Both AIs kept the couple focused on dates, hiking ability, tickets and trains. That changed at the tour-or-DIY question.

THE CONVERSATION

Prompts and follow-ups, part 2

From question 5 on, the follow-ups change direction. Both AIs start offering to shortlist, contact or vet operators.

	USER PROMPT	CHATGPT'S FOLLOW-UP	GOOGLE AI MODE'S FOLLOW-UP
6	**OPERATORS** "Which tour companies would you recommend for this trip?"	**POINTS TO OPERATOR** No question. Drafted an email for the couple to send to three operators.	**POINTS TO OPERATOR** Offered "estimated pricing tiers for a private 10-day trip with these companies," or a restaurant list.
7	**LOCAL GUIDE** "Can we hire a private local guide in Cusco and the Sacred Valley? Where do we find one?"	**POINTS TO OPERATOR** No question. Drafted a message for the couple to send to guides.	**POINTS TO OPERATOR** Offered "a day-by-day logistics plan for an independent guide."
8	**TRUST** "How do we know a Peru tour operator is reputable? What should we check?"	**POINTS TO OPERATOR** Asked the couple to "send me the names of the companies, their websites and their proposals" to compare.	**POINTS TO OPERATOR** Asked for operator names to "look up their background or check for common feedback."
9	**BOOKING** "What's the best website to actually book this?"	"Are you hoping to book everything in one transaction... or are you comfortable booking flights and hotels separately?"	**POINTS TO OPERATOR** Offered to match entry hours to trains (DIY), or "compile your notes to send to an operator" (hybrid).

0 of 8
follow-ups in Q1 to Q4 pointed toward an operator (ChatGPT 0 of 4, Google 0 of 4)

9 of 10
follow-ups in Q5 to Q9 pointed toward an operator (ChatGPT 4 of 5, Google 5 of 5)

ChatGPT offered an operator shortlist before it was asked. Its Q5 follow-up proposed "2–3 reputable local tour operators." So the AI was ready to name operators one question before the couple asked.

KEY FINDINGS

Five things every tour operator should know

The short version, before the detail.

1 **The itinerary is a hotel-and-restaurant zone. Guides are recommended but never named.**

In Q2, ChatGPT named **9 hotels and 3 restaurants** and Google AI Mode named **7 hotels and 9 restaurants**. Both told the couple to hire a **private guide** several times (ChatGPT six times), yet neither named a single guide or operator. We call this the **anonymous guide gap**.

2 **Operators enter at the moment of necessity: permits.**

Both platforms stated that the Inca Trail can't be hiked without a licensed operator (Q4). That's where Google AI Mode named its first operator, **Alpaca Expeditions**, whose own permit explainer page was one of the cited sources.

3 **Shortlists are volatile. Being named once isn't being known.**

16 different operators were named across both platforms. Only **one** (Alpaca Expeditions) appeared on both. ChatGPT's company shortlist (Q6) and its guide shortlist (Q7) had **zero overlap**. Google was more consistent: **Coltur Peru** appeared in three answers.

4 **The two platforms trust different sources.**

48% of the domains ChatGPT linked were government or official sites. **0** of Google AI Mode's cited sources were. Instead, **half** of Google's sources were tour operators' own explainer pages. ChatGPT trusts the state. Google trusts operator content.

5 **Marketplaces win the guide question. The commercial layer is moving in.**

When asked where to find a private guide, Google AI Mode ranked guide marketplaces first. When asked where to book, ChatGPT listed TourRadar, GetYourGuide and Viator. Meanwhile ChatGPT showed an **Expedia ad in 7 of 9 answers**, and Google ran sponsored tour packages in 2.

> **Bottom line.** AI doesn't send travellers to operators when they plan. It sends them when they hit something they can't do alone: **permits, guides, logistics and trust**. Operators who own those four moments get named. Everyone else is "a reputable local operator."

RESULTS · WHO GOT NAMED

Unprompted vs. prompted mentions

Every business named, by question. Hotels, restaurants and rail lines are excluded here.

Q	CHATGPT	GOOGLE AI MODE
1	None	TourRadar "platforms like TourRadar"
2	None	None
3	None "a reputable Cusco tour operator"	Machu-Picchu.org, Boleto Peru ticket agencies
4	None "an authorized trekking agency"	Alpaca Expeditions
5	None "a reputable local operator"	Kensington Tours, Kimkim, Coltur Peru, Ventura Travel
6	Peruvian Path, South Adventure Peru Tours, View Signature Travels, Alpaca Expeditions	Kuoda Travel, Aracari Travel, Coltur Peru, Keytours Vacations
7	Cusco Local Friend, Valentin's Pachamama Journeys, Andean Magic Travel, Exclusive Sacred Valley	ToursByLocals, Withlocals, Viator, GetYourGuide, Alpaca Expeditions, Explorandes, Inca Time
8	None checklist only	Coltur Peru, Explorandes as B-Corp examples
9	Peruvian Path, TourRadar, GetYourGuide, Viator	Kuoda Travel, Aracari Travel, ToursByLocals

Operator / agency · Marketplace · None named

0
ChatGPT tour operators named unprompted (Q1 to Q5)

4
Google tour operators named unprompted, plus 2 marketplaces

0/8
overlap between ChatGPT's Q6 and Q7 shortlists

1
operator on both platforms: Alpaca Expeditions

RESULTS · CONSISTENCY & MARKETPLACES

Who the AI comes back to

Being named once is luck. Being named across several questions suggests the AI has a stable picture of who you are.

Operators named in more than one answer



Alpaca Expeditions: Google Q4 and Q7, ChatGPT Q6. The other 10 operators appeared once.

What the repeat winners share

Third-party proof the AI can quote. **Coltur**: "Operating since 1957", "B-Corp certified". **Aracari**: founder named, recognized by Condé Nast Traveler and Travel + Leisure. **Peruvian Path**: "more than 15 years of experience and 4,800+ travellers served." **Alpaca**: a permit explainer cited as a source.

What decided ChatGPT's guide list

Its Q7 guides were small local businesses shown with star ratings and review counts "in the business listing" (731, 692 and 196 reviews) plus phone numbers. Local listing data, not editorial content, drove the guide-level answer.

Marketplaces: where and how they appeared

MARKETPLACE	CHATGPT	GOOGLE AI MODE	ROLE THE AI GAVE IT
TourRadar	Q9	Q1 (+3 cited pages)	Compare packaged multi-day itineraries
GetYourGuide	Q9	Q7 (+1 cited page)	Single experiences, e.g. Lima food tour
Viator	Q9	Q7	Private day tours from local companies
ToursByLocals	Not named	Q7, Q9	"Vetted, Independent Experts", individual guide profiles
Withlocals	Not named	Q7	Same category as ToursByLocals
Kimkim	Not named	Q5	Matches you with local trip designers
Tripadvisor / Google Reviews	Q6, Q8	Q6, Q8	Evidence and vetting, not booking

RESULTS · CAPABILITIES CREDITED

What the AI says operators are *for*

For each of the five capabilities in our brief, did the AI credit an operator with it, and how?

CAPABILITY	CHATGPT	GOOGLE AI MODE
Permits	**Strong, generic.** "You must book through an authorized trekking agency, which arranges the permit, guide and required logistics." Inca Trail options credited to South Adventure and Alpaca.	**Strong, named.** "It is legally impossible to step onto the Inca Trail without a licensed tour operator." Alpaca Expeditions named. Local agencies "handle all train tickets, Machu Picchu permits, flights."
Private access	**Not credited.** "Private" meant private guide and vehicle, never special access.	**Credited to Aracari.** "Private entry to historical sites away from crowds" and relationships with "historians, archaeologists, top-tier chefs."
Named guides	**Asked for, not given.** Tells the couple to request "Full name of the guide" and confirm "they'll personally guide you, rather than sending someone else."	**Surfaced through reviews and profiles.** A cited Tripadvisor snippet named two Kuoda guides. Kuoda credited with "a single, dedicated SUV, driver, and private guide who stay with you."
Guarantees	**Treated as a red flag.** Walk away if an operator "Promises guaranteed entry without explaining ticket arrangements."	**Repeated as a benefit.** Agencies "guarantee premium slots"; booking a guide in advance "guarantees a highly rated, fluid English speaker."
Support	**A decision criterion.** "24-hour assistance during the trip", Peruvian Path's "personal travel advisor", and "What happens if a flight or train is delayed?"	**A differentiator.** Keytours' "24/7 concierge support" that "updates your drivers and train tickets in real-time"; Coltur pre-prints boarding passes.

The guarantee split matters. The same claim reads as reassurance in Google AI Mode and as a scam signal in ChatGPT. Operators need to say exactly what they guarantee (rebooking, support response) and what they can't (entry slots the government controls).

The most credited value is interpretation. "Without a guide, you're essentially walking through a magnificent archaeological site with relatively little interpretation." (ChatGPT) and "an abstract maze of stone walls" (Google AI Mode).

RESULTS · SOURCES & THE COMMERCIAL LAYER

ChatGPT trusts the state. Google trusts operators.

Every external domain linked by ChatGPT (21, ads excluded) and every source Google AI Mode cited (26), classified by who publishes it.

ChatGPT · 21 domains



Machu Picchu and TuBoleto portals, Canada's travel advice, SUNAT, MINCETUR, Indecopi, Cusco Seguro (GERCETUR).

Google AI Mode · 26 sources



Government sources cited: **0**. Sources visible in 5 of 9 answers (Q1, Q3, Q4, Q6, Q9).

Cited, but not recommended

Google AI Mode used the permit and ticket explainers of **13 operators** as evidence: Happy Gringo Travel, Salkantay Trekking, Sam Travel Peru, Setours, Adios Adventure Travel, World Expeditions, Ian Taylor Trekking, Inkayni Peru Tours and others. Only **three** of the 13 (Alpaca Expeditions, Aracari Travel, Keytours Vacations) were also recommended. **Writing the explainer earns a citation. It doesn't automatically earn the recommendation.** Alpaca is the one that connected both: its permit explainer was cited in the same answer that named it.

The commercial layer

7/9

ChatGPT answers carried an **Expedia ad** (Q3 to Q9), all for hotels or trip planning. None for tours.

2/9

Google AI Mode answers carried **sponsored tour packages**: Machu Travel Peru and Wingbuddy (Q1), trexperienceperu.com (Q3).

Q1

Google placed **sponsored tour packages** under the very first answer, three questions before it named any operator organically.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TOUR OPERATORS

How to get named before the traveller asks

Ranked by impact, based on what moved the AI in this study.

1 Own the "moment of necessity" content

Publish the definitive, current explainer for the decisions travellers can't make alone: Inca Trail permits, Machu Picchu circuits, ticket and train sequencing. Date it, update it when rules change, and state what you handle.

Evidence: 13 operator explainers cited by Google; Alpaca cited and named in Q4. **Owner:** content lead. **Next step:** audit your top 3 permit and logistics pages for freshness this month.

2 Close the anonymous guide gap

Both AIs told the couple to hire a private guide without naming one. Give every guide a public profile: full name, licence (carnet) number, languages, specialties, years guiding, and reviews that mention them by name.

Evidence: 0 guides named in itinerary answers; guide profiles and named-guide reviews credited in Google Q6, Q7, Q9. **Owner:** operations + marketing. **Next step:** publish profiles for your 5 most-requested guides.

3 Make your credentials checkable in one click

Show your RUC, MINCETUR registration, Inca Trail authorization and certifications on your site, in text, linked to the official registry. ChatGPT's vetting answer was built entirely on these checks.

Evidence: 10 of 21 ChatGPT domains were government registries and portals. **Owner:** founder / compliance. **Next step:** add a "Verify us" page with registry links.

4 Build itinerary-shaped pages for real personas

Travellers ask for "10 days in Peru for a couple." Google's Q1 cited TourRadar and GetYourGuide itinerary pages, not operators. Publish sample itineraries matched to trip length, travel style and pace, with the guide and logistics built in.

Evidence: 4 of 4 Q1 sources were OTA itinerary pages. **Owner:** content + product. **Next step:** create 7, 10 and 14-day pages for your top two personas.

5 Earn quotable third-party proof

The repeat winners were described with facts the AI could lift: founding year, travellers served, B-Corp, press mentions, review volume. Pursue the listicles and review platforms the AI read (Tripadvisor, Trustpilot, Google Business Profile, roundup articles).

Evidence: Coltur 3 mentions, Aracari and Kuoda 2 each. **Owner:** PR / partnerships. **Next step:** pitch 3 "best Peru operators" roundups this quarter.

6 Spell out support and guarantees precisely

State your 24/7 support, who handles a cancelled train, and your rebooking policy. Never promise what the government controls. "Guaranteed entry" is a red flag in ChatGPT.

Owner: operations. **Next step:** publish a disruption policy page.

CLOSING

Itinerary first, operator second

Brennen Bliss's observation holds up. Neither AI named an operator while building the trip. But the journey doesn't end at the itinerary.

Once the couple asked how to get tickets, whether to hike, and who to trust, both AIs made the case for an operator themselves. They argued that permits require one, that a guide is what makes the ruins make sense, and that someone has to handle the trains when things go wrong. The demand is already there in the AI's own reasoning. **What's missing is the name.**

The operators that filled that gap did it with **specific, checkable, quotable** information: a permit explainer, a founding year, a named guide in a review, a registry number. That's the work.

Platform scorecard

MEASURE	CHATGPT	GOOGLE AI MODE
First business of any kind named	Q6	Q1 (TourRadar)
First tour operator named	Q6	Q4 (Alpaca Expeditions)
Tour operators named unprompted (Q1 to Q5)	0	4
Unique tour operators named overall	8	9
Marketplaces named	3	6
Government share of sources	48%	0%
Tour operator share of sources	14%	50%
Answers with ads or sponsored units	7 of 9	2 of 9

> Both platforms framed **guide marketplaces** around one idea: you can see **who** the guide is before you book. Google AI Mode: "deep, individual profiles of certified Peruvian guides living in Cusco."

seogirl

Ameneh Saeednia · Senior SEO & Generative Search Strategist
Vancouver, BC · ameneh.saeednia@gmail.com · linkedin.com/in/ameneh-saeednia

SEO Girl Research
Independent AI visibility studies

APPENDIX

Method and limitations

Appendix A · Method notes

ChatGPT: chatgpt.com, logged out, temporary chat, single continuous conversation. Google AI Mode: google.com/search?udm=50&hl=en&gl=us, signed out, single continuous conversation using follow-ups. Both runs completed 1 November 2026. Answers were captured as full text with all links and source labels. A business counts as "named" when its brand appears in the answer body; source citations and ads were coded separately. Hotels, restaurants and rail lines were tracked but not counted as operators.

Appendix B · Limitations

- **One run per platform.** AI answers vary between sessions. Treat this as a detailed case study, not a statistical sample.
- **Location.** Google AI Mode was set to US and English by parameter. ChatGPT can't be geo-forced while logged out and ran from a Canadian connection (its ads linked to expedia.ca).
- **Source capture differs.** ChatGPT exposes links in the conversation. Google AI Mode shows source labels and cards. Both were captured in full but aren't identical measures.
- **Facts inside answers** (prices, permit quotas, 2026 rule changes) are reported as the AI stated them and were not independently verified.