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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP | TRAVEL CONNECTIVITY

Who Wins the Roaming Race?

Why not all travel eSIM is equal

PREPARED BY
Collabor8™

PREPARED FOR
Banks, airlines, travel platforms and mobile operators

DATE
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CLASSIFICATION
Thought leadership

Independent analysis based on published research from industry analysts, measurement firms and regulators.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY · SAME STREET, SAME NETWORK

Two travellers land in Tokyo on the same flight, connected to the same local network. One waits ten times longer on every request.

54 ms traffic reaches the internet locally

543 ms traffic is routed via Madrid first

The difference is not the network. It is the eSIM. Roaming is not ending. It is growing, and changing hands: total international roaming activity grew 12% in the year to June 2026, while travel eSIM use grew far faster.[10] Operators, specialist providers and consumer brands now compete for the same traveller, and who wins depends on something most buyers cannot see.

Illustrative scenario based on Ookla's Q2 2026 measurements, as reported by Computer Weekly.[10]

THE 60-SECOND READ

1.52bn
International tourists in 2025, a post-pandemic record
UN TOURISM

2x
Travel eSIM users nearly doubled in a year, largely at the expense of roaming
OPENSIGNAL

$5bn
Travel eSIM retail spend expected in 2026
KALEIDO INTELLIGENCE

$1.8bn
Travel eSIM revenue in 2025, up 85% on 2024
JUNIPER RESEARCH

89%
Would buy travel eSIM from their home operator, against 60% from a specialist
KALEIDO INTELLIGENCE

10x
Gap in response times between travel eSIMs on the same local network
OOKLA

THREE DEFINING CHANGES

1. Roaming is growing, and no one yet owns the traveller: operators, specialists and brands compete for the same trip.
2. The race will be won on experience, not price, and experience depends on choices buyers cannot see.
3. Brands that choose partners on evidence, not on the price list, will win the relationship.

THE PRINCIPLE — **Choose connectivity partners on what travellers experience, with transparency and control behind every offer.**

01

SAME STREET, SAME NETWORK

The same local network can deliver a tenfold difference in experience

50+

Travel eSIM brands mapped to a handful of wholesale networks

OOKLA, Q2 2026

WHAT INDEPENDENT MEASUREMENT SHOWS

Ookla's Q2 2026 study measured more than 50 travel eSIM brands across 190 countries. Response times on the same local network differed by a factor of ten, driven by wholesale and routing decisions the traveller never sees.[10]

- **Routing matters as much as the network.** On the same Japanese network, median latency was 54 ms with local routing and 543 ms via Madrid.
- **Most traffic travels abroad first.** It usually returns through a provider's core network, often in another country. True local breakout remains uncommon.
- **Commercial policy shows up in the data.** Some plans clustered near 6 Mbps, a sign of speed caps.
- **The supply chain keeps moving.** The wholesale relationships behind each brand shift over time.[11]

THE EVIDENCE

Median latency on the same Japanese network



Identical radio conditions. The only difference is where traffic reaches the internet. Source: Ookla via Computer Weekly.[10]

12%

Growth in total international roaming activity, year to June 2026

OOKLA

3.4%

Travel eSIM share of all measured roaming, up from 2.7% a year earlier

OOKLA

WHY THE SAME NETWORK BEHAVES DIFFERENTLY

Traveller in Tokyo	Same local network	Traffic reaches the internet in Japan (local breakout)	Website or app	54 ms
Traveller in Tokyo	Same local network	Traffic travels to Madrid first, then reaches the internet	Website or app	543 ms

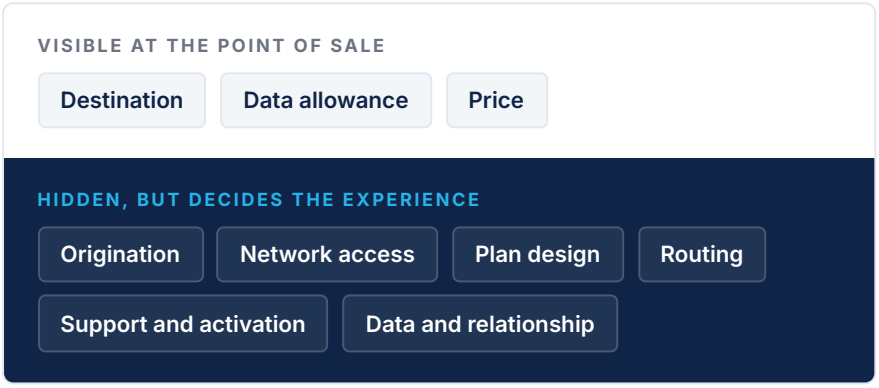
FIVE MYTHS ABOUT ESIM

02 Buyers judge eSIM on what they can see. The experience depends on what they cannot.

60%
How much less often roamers connect to 5G than local users
OPENSIGNAL

VISIBLE VERSUS HIDDEN

Buyers usually compare travel eSIM offers on three attributes: destination, data allowance and price. Everything that decides the traveller's experience sits beneath them.



ASSUMPTION VERSUS EVIDENCE

Myth	Reality
"An eSIM is an eSIM."	Offers differ in origination, network access, plan design, routing, support and data ownership.
"The local network decides the speed."	Routing can matter as much. The same network delivered 54 ms or 543 ms depending on where traffic reached the internet.[10]
"Unlimited means unlimited."	Many plans reduce speed after a fair use threshold. Regulators scrutinise the claim when restrictions are more than moderate.[19]
"A coverage list means coverage."	Roamers connect to 5G around 60% less often than local users, and network access varies by provider and destination.[13]
"Cheaper per gigabyte means better value."	Revenue per gigabyte is falling while wholesale costs are not. The savings can come from throttling, network priority and routing.[4]

WHY THIS MATTERS **Each myth describes something a buyer assumes but cannot check at the point of sale. Together they explain why two offers at the same price can deliver very different trips.**

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU

03 Every brand selling connectivity carries the experience, whether or not it controls it

35%+

International trips expected to involve a pre-bought travel eSIM by 2030

COUNTERPOINT

If you are	What you need to know	Why it matters	Where to start
A bank or card issuer	**Your customer's banking app may think they are in another country.**	Routing decides the location apps see, so payment and security checks can respond differently.[15] Third-party risk rules also apply.[20]	Test routing against your own app; include connectivity in premium tiers; complete third-party due diligence
An airline	**The first hour after landing now reflects on your brand.**	Connectivity sold at booking is judged on arrival, when the traveller is least able to reach support.	Offer at booking and check-in; link to loyalty; set activation and support standards
A travel platform	**You may be acquiring customers for your eSIM supplier.**	In referral and some white-label models, the supplier holds the customer data and marketing rights.	Embed in the booking flow; keep the customer relationship; differentiate on quality, not only price
A mobile operator	**Travellers prefer you, but price and experience decide whether they stay.**	89% would choose their operator for travel eSIM, but that trust will not survive a harder, less transparent experience.[12]	Launch or partner on a travel offer; compete on experience; protect roaming margin deliberately
A creator or community	**Your recommendation carries your audience's trust.**	Followers judge you on a service you cannot see inside.	Choose partners on transparency; describe plans accurately to followers

STAY INFORMED

This paper is the first in a series. We will publish updates as the market develops and welcome the views of decision makers in this space. To receive updates or share your perspective, email lee.purcell@collabor8.solutions.

04

SAME PRICE, DIFFERENT PRODUCT

Two offers at the same price can be two different products

30x

Worst-case latency compared with local users on the same network

OOKLA, Q2 2026

The differences sit in six dimensions, none of which appear on a typical product page.

Origination

TRAVELLER EXPERIENCES

Consistency, or unexplained changes over time

Operators own networks, originators hold operator agreements and issue profiles, and aggregators and resellers package access for consumer brands. Each layer adds margin and distance from the network.[10]

WHY IT MATTERS

A familiar brand name may hide several intermediaries, and those relationships change.

Network access

TRAVELLER EXPERIENCES

Coverage and speed, especially at busy times

A travel eSIM connects as a roaming device. Travel eSIMs outperform roaming on long-haul trips, while roaming keeps the edge on regional travel.[12]

WHY IT MATTERS

Which networks an offer can use, and whether it can switch, varies by market.

Plan design

TRAVELLER EXPERIENCES

Whether "unlimited" feels unlimited

Many "unlimited" plans reduce speed after a fair use threshold, a commercial necessity when data is bought wholesale. Some plans cluster near 6 Mbps.[10]

WHY IT MATTERS

A capped plan suits messaging and maps. It frustrates a traveller on video calls.

Routing

TRAVELLER EXPERIENCES

Latency, video quality and how apps see their location

A peer-reviewed study of a major ecosystem found no local breakout.[14] Travel eSIMs often lead on latency but lag on packet loss.[12]

WHY IT MATTERS

No routing choice is perfect. It should be deliberate and disclosed.

Support and activation

TRAVELLER EXPERIENCES

Getting connected on arrival, or not

The most common failure is setup: a locked device, a failed installation, or a traveller who lands without data to finish activation. Activation still lags awareness.[2]

WHY IT MATTERS

The customer blames whoever sold it, so support ownership must be clear.

Data and relationship

TRAVELLER EXPERIENCES

Who contacts them after the trip

In referral and some white-label models, the provider holds the customer's details and may market to them directly. In embedded models, the brand keeps them.

WHY IT MATTERS

Contract terms decide who owns the customer.

CORE INSIGHT

The quality ceiling of a travel eSIM is set by its wholesale supplier's network footprint, not by the brand on the eSIM.[12]

05

THE PRIZE

The biggest prize is the traveller who still goes offline abroad

1 in 9

Roamers who use no mobile data at all abroad

OPENSIGNAL

THE SILENT ROAMER

Silent roamers avoid mobile data abroad, relying on Wi-Fi or going offline. Around 11% of roamers use no mobile data at all.[13]

- **Cost is the main deterrent.** About 60% of travellers would roam if it were cheaper, and over half look for alternatives at $3 to $5 per day.[7]
- **Experience matters too.** Around half of silent roamers avoid mobile data because of poor experiences.[13]
- **They are willing to switch.** 70% are likely to adopt a travel eSIM if available.[7]
- **The value is material.** Converting them could add $1.5 billion in operator revenue by 2030.[8]

BOARD-LEVEL IMPLICATION

Travellers who went silent because of poor connectivity will not be won back by poor connectivity at a lower price.

A MARKET IN TRANSITION

$28

Travel eSIM spend per trip, **up 133%**

KALEIDO INTELLIGENCE

$42

Roaming spend per trip, **down 9%**

KALEIDO INTELLIGENCE

Where it is winning. Long-haul travellers are 2.5 times more likely to use a travel eSIM.[12] **Devices are removing the alternative:** the iPhone Air is eSIM-only worldwide.[9]

Distribution is moving to brands

Brand	What they launched
LATAM Airlines	eSIM on its website and app from July 2025, earning LATAM Pass miles[16]
Revolut	In-app eSIM and data plans, with data on its top-tier plan[17]
Klook	In-app eSIM for around 60 countries[18]

06

PRICE AND QUALITY

Prices are falling, expectations are rising, and quality absorbs the squeeze

$2.78

Revenue per GB in 2025, down 13% from $3.20 in 2023

JUNIPER RESEARCH

WHERE THE SAVINGS COME FROM

Two trends are colliding. Revenue per gigabyte is falling as new vendors compete on price while wholesale costs stagnate.[4] Meanwhile travel eSIM spend per trip is rising, and 15% of users now buy unlimited plans.[12]



Something has to give, and it is usually what the buyer cannot see: throttling thresholds, network priority, routing and support. Yet travellers now choose on control and transparency, not price alone.[12] **That is where the race will be won or lost.**

Advertising exposure

UK regulators treat speed limits behind "unlimited" claims as likely to mislead unless the restriction is moderate.[19] A brand selling a partner's plan needs to know what sits behind the word.

THE COST OF GETTING IT WRONG

Cost	How it arises	How it shows up for the brand
Experience	Throttled plans, low network priority, long routing paths	Complaints, poor reviews, low repeat purchase
Location and data	Traffic exits in a third country	The brand's own app or payments behave unexpectedly abroad
Relationship	Provider holds customer data and marketing rights	The brand acquires customers for someone else
Support	Unclear ownership of activation and technical issues	Frustrated customers at the worst moment of the trip
Continuity	Several intermediaries between brand and network	Service changes when an upstream party changes terms

Sector obligations. EU banks and payment firms fall under the Digital Operational Resilience Act, and third-party risk rules are widening.[20]

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAY **The cheapest data can become the most expensive outcome, because the poor experience carries the brand's name.**

FIVE DEBATES WORTH HAVING

07

Every open question comes back to one: do sellers know what they are selling?

$8.57

Average roaming cost per GB in 2024, against $5.50 for travel eSIM

JUNIPER RESEARCH

1. Is travel eSIM a commodity?

FOR	Offers look interchangeable and travel eSIM costs about 35% less per GB than roaming.[5]
AGAINST	The same network can deliver a tenfold latency gap, and spend per trip is rising.
OUR VIEW	**Priced like a commodity, but does not perform like one.**

2. Is "unlimited" a feature or a liability?

FOR	Travellers value not monitoring usage. Fair use policies are economically necessary.
AGAINST	A low threshold sets an expectation the service cannot meet, and regulators scrutinise it.
OUR VIEW	**A feature only when the limits are disclosed and suit the traveller.**

3. Will operators win back the silent roamer?

FOR	Operators own the networks and the billing relationship, and travellers trust them.
AGAINST	Matching prices cuts roaming margin, and the trust advantage is not permanent.[12]
OUR VIEW	**Operators and journey owners are more likely to partner than compete.**

4. Should non-telecom brands offer it?

FOR	It solves a real problem at a moment the brand already owns.
AGAINST	It is not a core competence, and failures reflect on the brand.
OUR VIEW	**Yes, when the brand understands exactly what it is selling.**

5. Is low-cost connectivity a problem?

FOR	Cheap plans can rely on caps, throttling and routing that degrade the experience.
AGAINST	Many travellers need only messaging, maps and email, and a clear plan serves them.
OUR VIEW	**Low cost is not the problem. Opacity is.**

THE COMMON THREAD

A capped plan sold transparently to the right traveller is a good product. The same plan sold as full connectivity is not.

08

TWELVE QUESTIONS THAT SEPARATE PROVIDERS

Twelve questions reveal what sits behind any eSIM offer

15%

Travel eSIM users now buying unlimited plans

KALEIDO INTELLIGENCE, 2026

Reselling is not a weakness in itself: what matters is transparency about who controls the product. Treat these questions as a conversation, not a scorecard.

#	Question to ask	What a strong answer looks like
CONTROL		
1	**Are you the originator of the eSIM profiles, or do you resell another provider's?**	Profiles issued under the provider's own operator agreements, with evidence of scale such as eSIMs issued per year and brands supported. A reseller names its upstream provider and states what it controls.
2	**Do you have full control over package design: allowances, validity, fair use and speeds?**	Packages built to our specification, with every limit documented in writing before launch.
3	**How many parties sit between us and the network, and what happens if one changes terms?**	A short, named chain, with contractual notice periods and a continuity plan.
NETWORK		
4	**Do you have more than one network in each key market, and does the eSIM switch automatically?**	At least two networks in priority markets, with automatic switching and 5G where available.
5	**Where does traffic reach the internet in our top destinations, and what latency should we expect?**	Named breakout points by region, supported by measured latency data they will share.
TRAVELLER EXPERIENCE		
6	**For each plan, what is the fair use threshold, the throttled speed and the hotspot policy?**	Published before purchase, in plain language, with no undisclosed limits behind "unlimited".
7	**What is your activation success rate, and what happens when activation fails abroad?**	A measured success rate and a recovery route that works without Wi-Fi.
8	**Who provides support, in which languages and channels, and within what response times?**	24/7 support with defined response times and clear ownership between brand and provider.
COMMERCIAL AND RISK		
9	**Who holds our customers' data, where is it processed, and may you market to them?**	The brand owns the customer. The provider processes data only on the brand's instructions.
10	**Where a country requires identity checks or registration, how do you handle it?**	Handled before travel, in the purchase flow, with the requirement explained by market.
11	**If we change provider, can we keep our customers and move them without starting again?**	A documented exit plan covering data transfer, active eSIMs and a transition period.
12	**What does your API cover, how many brands use it live, and what service levels will you commit to?**	Purchase, activation, top-up, usage and support by API; live references and proven volumes; contractual service levels.

THE STRATEGIC QUESTION

Does your connectivity partner deliver the experience your brand promises?

This paper is the first in an ongoing series. As our engagement grows, we plan to run a short annual survey of decision makers across banks, airlines, travel platforms and mobile operators, and we would welcome you as part of it. Contributions are treated in confidence and reported in aggregate only.

HOW COLLABOR8™ CAN HELP

MARKET INSIGHT

Each update to this series ahead of publication, and in future the survey findings, benchmarked across industries.

PARTNER SELECTION

A structured, independent view of connectivity options, using the twelve questions in this paper.

INDUSTRY EXCHANGE

A confidential conversation about what you are seeing in the market and where the pain points are.

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Include your name, role, organisation and the decisions you oversee. If these sit with a colleague, we welcome an introduction.

09 METHODOLOGY

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ABOUT COLLABOR8™

Collabor8™ is a Ras Al Khaimah based consultancy advising mobile operators, fintechs and their partners on partnerships, market entry, and financial and connectivity services.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

Based on published third-party research. No eSIM provider is named or assessed in the analysis, and brand examples are drawn from public announcements. Ookla findings are cited via press coverage.

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