



AI on the horizon

The ferry operator's guide to
modernising the booking experience



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Introduction

£4.13bn

Maritime AI market value in 2024

Source: Lloyd's Register

23%

Compound annual growth rate
projected by 2029

Ferry operators are facing a critical challenge - preparing their complex commercial systems for this new technological era.

The AI dilemma

Rushing to AI is not the answer

From navigational systems to passenger booking, the maritime sector is shifting towards intelligent automation to optimise voyages, cut fuel consumption, improve safety, and ensure greater reliability. And the market for these tools is growing fast.

According to a Lloyd's Register report, the maritime AI market was valued at £4.13 billion in 2024 and projected to grow at a 23% compound annual growth rate by 2029. All this to say, ferry operators are facing a critical challenge – preparing their complex commercial systems for this new technological era.

Panic and rushed decision-making are rarely fruitful. But the pressures of AI adoption and blanket calls to “use more AI” mean some are forging ahead to purchase or deploy tools without goals, spending precious budgets without defining clear business outcomes first.

‘Rushing to add complexity or tick a tool off your checklist is a recipe for disaster. AI-readiness is about understanding your system today and what you want it to do for you tomorrow. It’s about establishing the data and foundations that support your organisational goals and help you achieve them, more efficiently and more affordably. And, crucially, it’s about getting the basics right so you can capitalise on fast-moving AI developments as soon as they happen.’

- Yiannis Maglaras, Chief Executive Officer at Expian



Fear of uncharted waters

Your booking system is not a simple IT platform. It’s a complex engine, behind your revenue, your passengers’ experience and operational continuity – carefully constructed over many years.

The AI dilemma, continued

Even with clear goals and a strategic approach to AI adoption, the constraints of legacy architecture, including fragmented booking databases and rigid administrative workflows, can feel like insurmountable barriers to innovation. The challenge for most ferry operators is how to transform existing digital infrastructure without disrupting day-to-day operations.

And we get it. Your booking system is not a simple IT platform. It’s the complex engine behind your revenue, your passengers’ experience, and operational continuity – and it's been carefully constructed over many years. Venturing into uncharted waters and disrupting something that functions can be catastrophic. Failed migration, booking outages, and degraded passenger journeys can have very real impacts on revenue and reputation.

“At Expian, we take a route-by-route migration approach. It allows operators to transition gradually, starting with a low-risk line and rolling out as confidence and capabilities build. There’s no big risk on a single go-live moment, so teams can adapt at a pace that makes sense for them.”

- Christopher Kirman, Chief Partnerships Officer at Expian



Introduction

Get ready for AI that makes a real difference

The opportunity

A modern revenue and booking system is where the most opportunities can be realised: from priority boarding and cabin upgrades to onboard experiences, loyalty programmes, and retail and F&B spend. It's how you can capitalise on long-term customer relationships built over years of crossings.

All this depends on data – for demand forecasting, dynamic pricing, operational optimisation, and AI-driven personalisation. What were once future ambitions are fast becoming core competitive capabilities. But these capabilities only work when the underlying digital infrastructure can generate, structure, and activate data in real-time.

Immediate adoption of AI tools is tempting. But AI is not a panacea. To reap the benefits any technology brings, you need foundations in place that enable it to succeed. For your revenue and booking systems, that means starting with one question: is your data clean, centralised, and accessible in real time? If it's not, then AI isn't going to help you.



In this guide

We take a closer look at:

01 Why strong foundations matter in modern revenue and booking systems

02 What AI readiness actually means

03 What passenger experiences will look like in 2030 - and how they compare with today's

AI will change the way you operate. But rushing to deploy it is not the solution. Those operators that will benefit the most are quietly building the right foundations: a modern ticketing core that unifies their data, connects their systems, and gives them a single source of truth. This will make whatever AI brings possible, today and in the future.

Let's explore.



But first, the foundations

1

What does a modern ticketing core actually look like? Most ferry operators have complex digital ecosystems, which they've added to over the years. These include reservation systems, freight platforms, port operations, retail systems and customer databases. And in many cases, they've been integrated with significant effort and ingenuity.

The result is infrastructure that works but is increasingly difficult to evolve to meet changing consumer behaviour. Reservation systems in particular were built to process bookings and departures. They were never designed to maximise the commercial value of every sailing and provide personalised experiences for passengers.

We're starting to see the tide turn, however. And while ferries' systems cannot be compared directly with the simpler demands of attractions and even airlines, there is something to be learned from these industries' innovations too.

Real-time data

Dynamic pricing, live inventory, and demand forecasting

Connected systems

One source of truth across all platforms and channels

AI-ready APIs

Open-standard architecture that plugs into modern tools



How other organisations are using intelligent tools to maximise value

LNER and Eurostar

Rail operators, like LNER and Eurostar, have transformed the rigid train ticket into a highly personalised journey.

They use real-time data pipelines to offer multi-leg smart routing, personalised seat selection, dynamic pricing pilots, and instant automated compensation for delays.

Trainline

Trainline, the world's leading rail ticketing platform, launched an AI-powered assistant in 2025 to support passengers during their journeys – it's a central system with multiple tools, including curated content and real-time train data APIs.

Its capabilities range from train cancellation notifications and automated refunds to understanding whether an animal on the tracks will result in a serious delay for passengers.

Marriott

Major hotel brands are getting in on the action too. Marriott, for example, uses an advanced revenue management system to adjust room rates instantly based on occupancy trends, local events, and customer metrics.

Its AI-driven Group Pricing Optimizer uses price-elasticity modeling to recommend optimal group rates across its portfolio.

Hilton

Hilton's own AI models can identify which guests value breakfast inclusion versus a lower price, offering personalised room rates and promotions. And the results speak for themselves.

Hilton has reported that this segmentation and strategy has increased revenue by 5–8% and improved guest satisfaction.

Time to come aboard

Many ferry operators' systems have deep integrations between reservation systems and other platforms, but in lots of cases, changing a ticket type or updating a seasonal schedule still requires manual data entry. And passenger data is sometimes entirely disconnected from live capacity logs.

What these examples from other travel and hospitality providers emphasise is the fact that a modern, unified booking core is a prerequisite for AI and the benefits it brings. You can't deploy a conversational AI travel assistant or automated upselling algorithms if your underlying ticketing system isn't connected to live data. So you have to start there.



Part two

Are you AI ready?

2

AI-readiness measures an organisation's preparedness to effectively adopt, scale, and manage AI technologies. Essentially, do you have the foundations in place to build from?

Let's be clear: AI-ready organisations don't need to hire a team of data scientists to build complex machine learning algorithms from scratch. They can connect their existing ticketing core to intelligent, modern tools – as long as it has the data, infrastructure, culture, and governance in place to support it.

AI-readiness pillars

Is your organisation prepared? Readiness can be measured across these four interconnected pillars



Data foundations

As we've already mentioned, this is the critical starting point. AI tools can't optimise what they can't see.

All your passenger data, live inventory, timetables, and cabin capacities need to be clean and connected.

That means no restrictive data silos, duplication, or errors.



Infrastructure and platforms

The ticketing core we keep talking about? It needs to be flexible enough to enable commercial agility and operational efficiencies at scale.

With a configurable, API-first architecture, your platform feeds real-time data directly into your decision-making.

True agility is the ability to reason with data across your organisation and act on the insights you produce - at market speed.



Workforce and culture

No technology change matters if your people aren't prepared to handle it.

This culture shift means commercial and customer-facing teams refocus their energy from manual data entry (like processing ticket changes) to managing intelligent systems and automations, and focusing on customer service.



Governance and ethics

Ticketing touches sensitive data – like financial transactions and passenger information.

So your systems will need strict guardrails in place before you implement any AI tools.

Data privacy, like GDPR compliance, needs to be baked into your software beforehand.

*“In an AI-driven world, readiness isn't just about data foundations; it's about **operational agility**. Virtually every vendor claims to be API-first today, but the true differentiator has shifted from connectivity to configurability.*

Having AI generate powerful commercial insights is useless if your underlying systems are too rigid to act on them quickly. True AI-readiness requires both the data to identify an opportunity and the flexible commercial and operational building blocks, such as those offered by Expian, to execute on it instantly. Without both, the value of AI remains entirely theoretical.”

– Yiannis Maglaras, Chief Executive Officer at Expian



Feeling the pressure?

Don't rush to implement AI. Stick to the pillars and get the foundations right.

The risk of bypassing the pillars

Don't bypass these pillars and rush to implement AI on top of legacy systems that just aren't ready. It could have serious compliance and operational implications.

Operational risk

An AI customer assistant that's connected to a slow, cached database could quote incorrect fares or sell tickets for sold-out cabins. This could lead to manual cancellations and reputational damage for your business.

Compliance risk

If you breach compliance by sending unencrypted passenger data or payment details to an external AI model without strict API guardrails, you risk heavy GDPR fines.

Don't put a superyacht engine on your dingy – your underlying framework needs addressing first so it can handle the power of AI tools.



Part three

A tale of two crossings: the ferry passenger experience

3

We've established that the difference between your customers having a frustrating travel experience and a smooth and seamless journey isn't really about AI at all. It's about the quality of the data layer hidden underneath your booking platform. But what difference can modernising your ticketing core make, especially when you start plugging in AI tools?

Let's take a look...

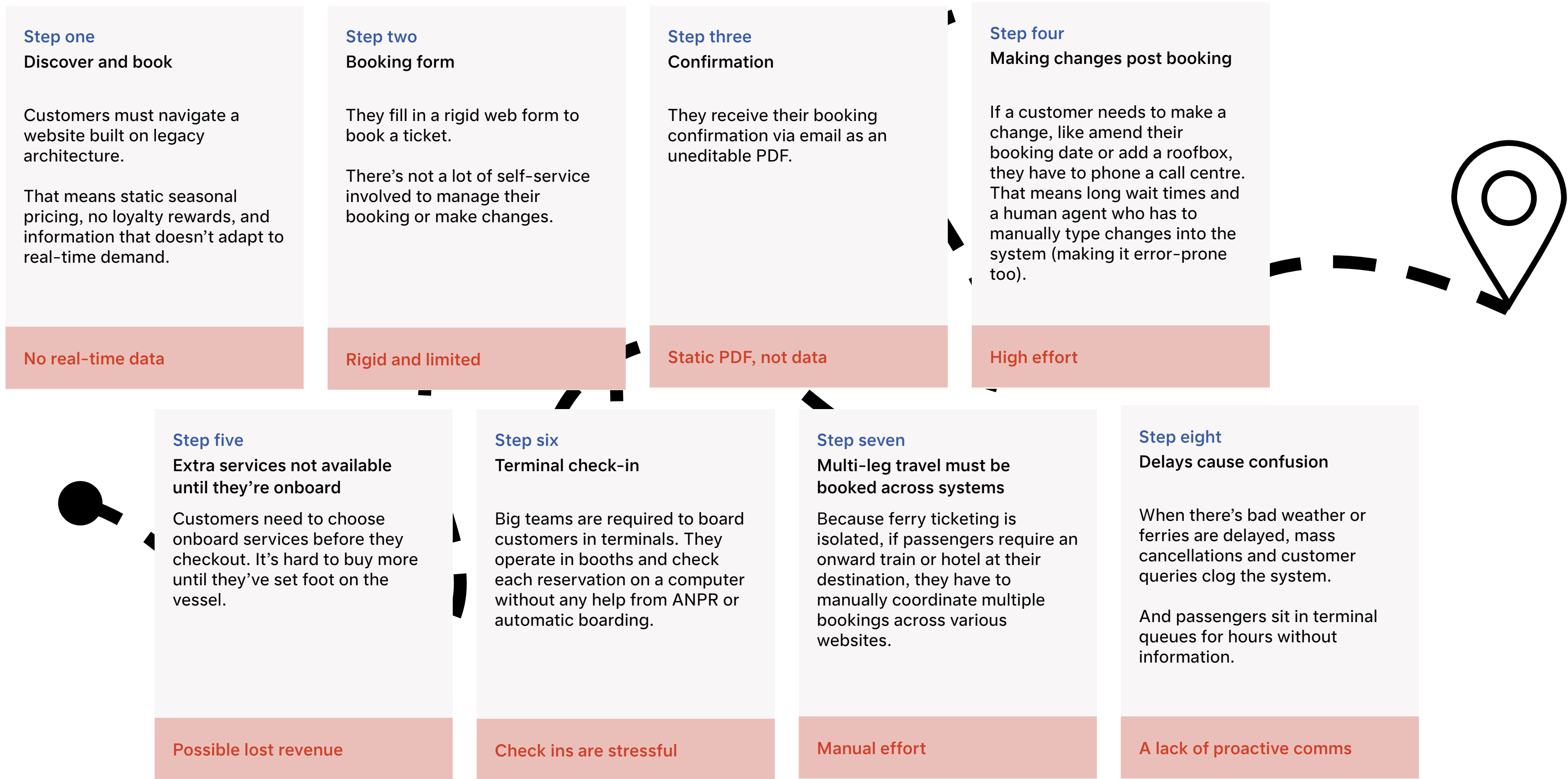
2026 > Today's reality

2030 > Tomorrow's potential



Today's reality: the **fragmented** journey

Customers are forced to navigate legacy systems: static pricing, disconnected data, and manual processes at every step



Tomorrow’s potential: the fluid journey

A unified ticketing core and connected AI tools transform every touchpoint into a seamless, personalised experience.

Step one

Discover and book

In the future, when operators have a unified ticketing system, customers use a conversational travel app to find the best options for their needs.

AI-powered

Step two

Personalised pricing

The app is fed with live data and offers real-time dynamic prices, personalised for the customer’s travel history and preferences.

For example, it remembers if a passenger has travelled with a dog before and suggests a pet-friendly cabin.

Personalised

Step three

Live changes

Before customers travel, they can make changes to their booking, including upgrading their cabin.

Conversational AI reads the live inventory, updates the booking, sends a payment link, and the customer’s ticket is updated.

Fully self-service

Step four

Onboard offers

Onboard offers can happen at any time.

The system pushes intelligent, contextual offers throughout the customer’s journey, including discounted upgrades two hours before they depart.

Revenue unlocked

Step five

Multi-leg journeys

Multi-leg journeys are made easier with one ticket that syncs live timetables with train schedules for a door-to-door itinerary.

One ticket, one experience

Step six

Disruption response

When bad weather or ferry delays happen, the system automatically messages affected passengers so they can rebook another crossing that suits their needs.

This helps eliminate lengthy queues and customer service bottlenecks.

Proactive and automatic



Navigate your way to the future

What separates these two passenger experiences is the cleanliness, speed, and integration of the centralised data layer underneath the AI tools being used.

It means embracing a modern ticketing core that meets your customers’ needs and helps you achieve your goals.

You can build towards the 2030 vision right now with Expian.



Wrap up

Time to rethink ticketing?

When it comes to your booking system and the complexity involved, evolution doesn't have to mean complete chaos.

Working with an expert partner like Expian means removing the risk of disruption – from data preparation, infrastructure management, culture-building, compliance, and tool implementation. And it all starts with a maturity assessment.

Book your maturity
assessment today

What Expian can do for you

Build the right foundations for an AI-ready future.

- 01** Bring all your information together in one place
A modern ticketing core that gives you a single source of truth.
- 02** Connect all your systems for data-driven decision-making
Revenue growth powered by clean, real-time, integrated data.
- 03** Harness AI-powered functionality and best-in-class tools
Personalised customer journeys, automated processes , and seamless third-party integrations.

To find out more about how a flexible booking system built on modern solution architecture can make all the difference, get in touch with our team today.

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