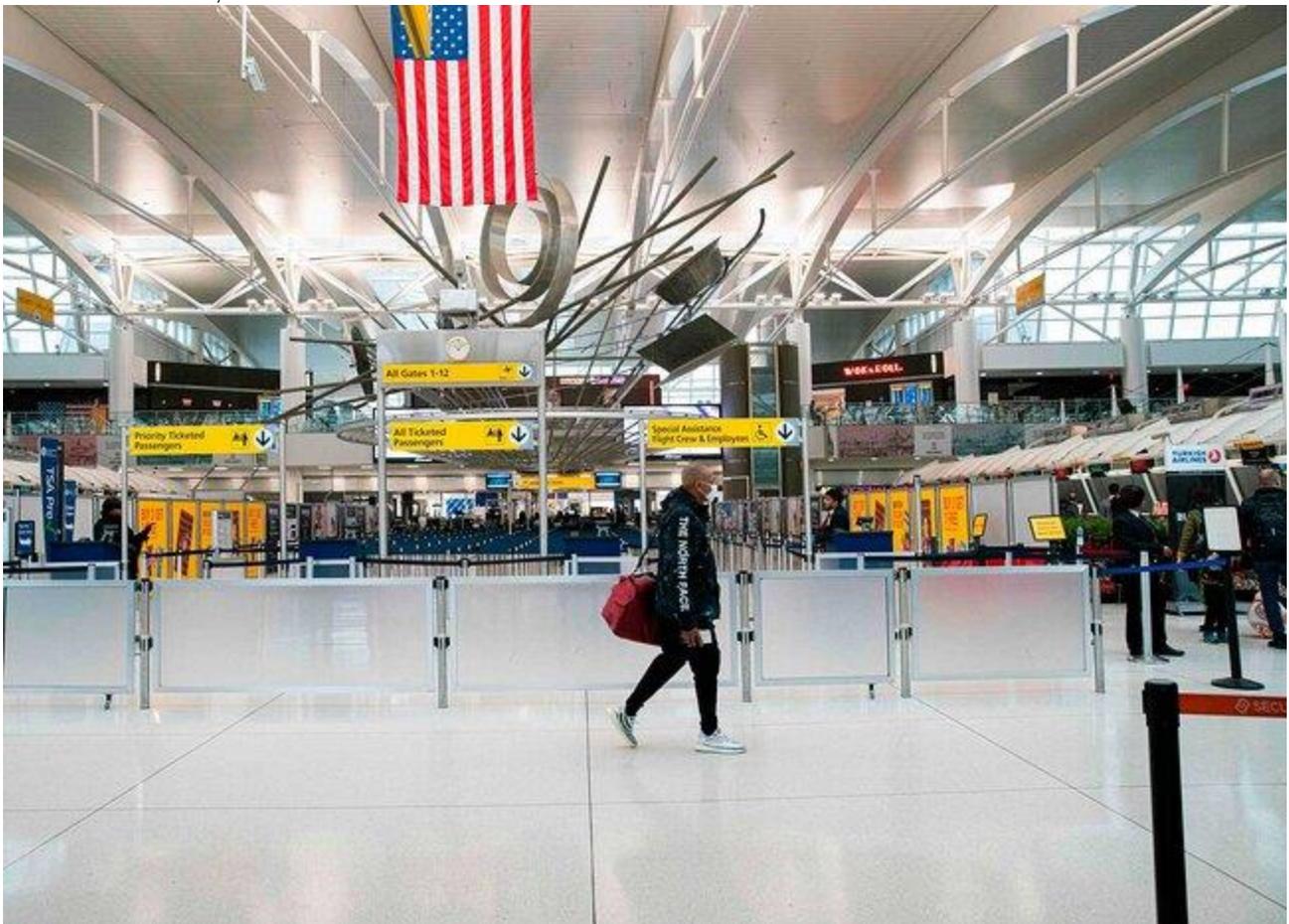


Will Travel Change After Coronavirus?

Here's What Experts Have to Say

The experience might look and feel different once the world begins to reopen, but people still can count on the positive impact of travel.

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TRAVEL & LEISURE MAGAZINE
UPDATED APRIL 20, 2020



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The outbreak of coronavirus and its rapid spread around the world have had an unprecedented impact on the travel industry. Though some airlines are still flying, including rescue flights to repatriate people to their home countries, many carriers have all but shut down for the time being. Hotels are laying off employees by the hundreds of thousands. After several ships

were stuck at sea for weeks, many cruise lines have axed sailings through the summer. Travelers are scrambling to cancel trips and get refunds or salvage future plans. In short, the travel industry has never faced panic, change, and disruption on this scale.

In search of insights about how coronavirus is likely to change the way we travel in the future, we talked to experts in the fields of aviation, hospitality, cruising, finance, and even epidemiology. While some provided predictions and projections, the one thing that almost all of them said to expect is a lot more uncertainty for some time to come.

Travelers will focus on health for themselves and others.

Dr. Nabarun Dasgupta, an infectious disease epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina, says the pandemic will force consumers to factor health concerns into their travel choices even more than before. He recommends checking verified apps like [Outbreaks Near Me](#) to take proper precautions before traveling to a new destination.

“I caution people against heading into active hot zones, even if you’re immune, because you don’t know what kind of lockdown you might be subject to if cases suddenly increase upon your return,” he said. “Many countries, and even some U.S. states, now have mandatory requirements for visitors to isolate for two weeks. This should be factored into travel planning.” Dr. Dasgupta also says, “If a coronavirus vaccine becomes available, depending on the safety profile, it would be worth considering even if you’re not venturing far from home.”

Finally, he says, people should start thinking about how their travel plans might impact the health conditions of the places they visit. “As much as we think about our own health when we travel, we should have compassion through realization that we may inadvertently bring the virus with us,” he said. “For isolated, highlight-reel destinations like Rapa Nui, this could be devastating.”



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Air travel will restart slowly, domestically, and with social distancing.

Aviation expert Henry Hartevelde of Atmosphere Research Group expects the travel industry, much like the rest of the economy, to rebound in a staggered fashion as various cities, states, and regions confront different challenges. “You can expect airlines to begin with flights out of their most important hubs and cities where public health conditions are best and demand is strongest,” he said.

According to John Grant, a senior analyst with British aviation data and analytics firm OAG, “That may mean less choices for passengers as the number of airlines shrink and the number of frequencies operated reduce. Some city pairs, or routes, that have been operated with low frequency — say less than weekly — will perhaps be dropped altogether.” He expects passengers will also opt for more direct routings to avoid having to pass through extra airports on layovers.

“Once we get the proverbial all-clear,” says Hartevelde, “I anticipate public health officials will still encourage social distancing. Airlines might continue blocking middle seats or limiting the

number of people in premium cabins. We may see flight attendants wearing masks and gloves and limiting onboard service.”

Airlines could require proof of good health before allowing passengers to fly, sort of like Etihad's new trial kiosks in Abu Dhabi. “In terms of boarding, airlines might limit the number of people down the jet bridge at any given time,” says Harteveltdt.

Still jittery from fast-moving travel bans and restrictions, mandatory quarantines, and State Department warnings, folks will likely want to stick close to home for a while. That's also due, in part, to the economic impact on travelers' wallets. According to Grant from OAG, “There is a piece of research already in China from Ctrip, a major travel company, claiming that 74 percent of Chinese nationals are keen on taking domestic flights in the very near future. But incomes have been hit and disposable wealth damaged, so how it will play out is another part of the whole ‘what if’ situation we face.”

Don't expect to see major investments in new onboard seats or services from airlines either, said Harteveltdt. “Airlines will focus on essentials. They will do anything that contributes to generating revenue or is a competitive necessity, but they will hold off on retrofitting their fleets with new seats if they have not already ordered them, opening new lounges, or refurbishing existing ones.”

That might have some people considering flying private for the first time, says Alex Wilcox, the CEO of private aviation firm JSX. “I think we are entering a two-year period where travelers won't want to touch anything and will crave space. Crowd-free, hassle-free travel is the way of the future.” Little wonder, then, that private aviation firms like his have seen a dramatic increase in interest from both personal and corporate clients for private plane charters with social distancing measures in effect.

There will be great deals, if you're brave enough to book them.

“In the short term, airlines will extend their fee waivers, making it easier for travelers to make and change their plans,” said Scott Keyes, founder of Scott’s Cheap Flights. “We’ve been living in the golden age of cheap flights, but the pandemic has exerted even more downward pressure on airfares.” He also notes the economic stress on everyday people and says that will make finding deals even more important to folks who hope to travel.

Harteveldt cautions about getting too enthusiastic about some of the deals we’re seeing now, though. “We don’t know how long this virus will manifest itself, or the decisions airlines will make even months from now. Look at [the] airline’s refund and cancellation policies. If the rebooking options are acceptable to you, great. But I would encourage people to wait until we get closer to knowing when the U.S. might reenter more normal conditions before starting to book trips.”

According to Gary Leff, founder of the loyalty blog View From the Wing, “There are going to be great deals – both with miles and cash – for quite some time because there will be empty seats and empty rooms that need to be filled.” Be sure to double check your points and miles accounts, so you can jump on any bargains that crop up. “That will only last until good times return,” said Leff. “When travel demand comes back fully...award seats will become scarce and rooms will be expensive.”

Hotels and rentals face slow reopenings and depressed rates.

“There will be several phases to the rebound, and it is all about adapting to demand,” said Robert Cole, a senior research analyst specializing in lodging and leisure travel for research firm Phocuswright. “In the immediate term, with social distancing and travel restrictions, hoteliers need to focus on the needs of their local community, assisting the medical community and local government to help with housing essential workers.”

President and CEO of the American Hotel & Lodging Association, Chip Rogers, also expects the recovery to come in stages, starting with leisure travelers, followed by business and then group bookings. If all goes well, the AHLA projects the U.S. hotel industry will be back at 70 to 80 percent of what it was before coronavirus by this time next year. However, Roger says,

“There will be fewer hotels in operation, and many fewer hotels in development.” Travelers might also see hotels opening only a fraction of the rooms they have and looking for technological solutions to replace staff and save on cash.

During both 2019 and 2020 to date, hotel occupancy was at a 40-year high, according to Bjorn Hanson, a lodging industry consultant and former dean of NYU’s Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism, and Sports Management. Even so, he says, room rates remained relatively cheap, and he does not expect that to change. “There will be room rate discounting to stimulate travel,” he said. “During economic downturns, it normally takes hotel rates twice as long to recover to pre-downturn levels as it took them to fall to their lowest point,” says Phocuswright’s Cole. So, be on the lookout for deals for several months, if not years, to come.

Cole also says, “Travelers will likely consider staying in someone else’s residence to be riskier than a hotel. Vacation rentals may be less negatively impacted, but hotels will be touting their cleaning standards and the dedication of their staff to ensuring guest safety and security. It will be much more difficult for Airbnb and other short-term rental groups to establish and enforce standards across thousands of independent hosts.”

Rogers also points out that the rental market is made up of millions of individual owners who might decide to reenter the market at times of their own choosing. By contrast, he says, “Hotels will welcome back travelers the moment they are allowed to do so, and probably priced better than people have seen in years.”



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Cruise lines will work hard to clean up their image.

Paul Hackwell is a partner at TPG Capital and leads the firm's consumer investment practice. He says the cruise industry has faced challenges in the past, but always rebounds thanks to a loyal customer base and the value that cruise vacations provide travelers. "This is an industry where things happen — recession, wars, hurricanes, the Costa Concordia disaster — but cruises have always bounced back. It typically takes about a year, but we are going to be in a recession, so I think this will be a multiyear bounce back."

Though many sailings have been canceled for 2020, a lot of customers simply seem to be rebooking for 2021 and beyond at current fares. CruiseCompete.com has even logged a bump in new bookings for next year. Rudi Schreiner, the founder of AmaWaterways, says, "A lot of the people who are canceling cruises for 2020 are rebooking for 2021, so next year is already looking very good, and we just put our 2022 deployment together."

The already stringent hygienic standards aboard cruise ships will become even more rigorous and visible. "Cruise lines will need to make the public very aware of procedures taken

to contain onboard illness,” said Andrew Coggins, Jr., professor of management at Pace University’s Lubin School of Business. “They may also be required to expand their onboard medical capabilities and facilities. This would mean taking revenue space for medical space, but if pandemics become a way of life, that may increase the cruise industry’s resiliency.”

Hackwell says one of the other cruising issues highlighted by coronavirus was not being able to dock and disembark sick passengers. “People have always gotten sick on cruise ships — and planes, too, for that matter — but they are still usually allowed to disembark,” he said. “Cruise lines will have to work in concert with ports to make arrangements for scenarios if they have a passenger with a contagious disease, to get that person off the ship so they don’t become a potential carrier for the rest of the passengers, or put anyone at risk in the port.”

Travel agents will make a comeback.

Travel agents have become more niche in recent years, as the majority of consumers simply book travel themselves online. These days, many agents focus their practice on business and luxury accounts. Given the fast-changing nature of the crisis and the difficulties some travelers encountered getting home, however, more people will likely turn to agents for trip-planning purposes, simply to have an advocate in their corner if and when things go wrong.

Misty Belles, the managing director of global public relations for the Virtuoso network of luxury travel advisors, said, “Even people who didn’t originally book with a travel advisor turned to them for help” during the coronavirus outbreak. The network’s advisors could rely on Virtuoso’s crisis toolkit, which provided real-time updates from operators on the ground as well as the U.S. State Department and CDC. Agents were also able to navigate evolving airline and hotel cancellation policies more fluidly than the average consumer.

“In a post-COVID world, people will value advisors for their connections and guidance that go beyond destination and product expertise. Having a real-life person to assist [you] underscores the significance of human connection and the reassurance of knowing someone has your back,” said Belles.



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But above all, we will travel again.

Despite the tragedy unfolding around the globe, with entire countries closed to the outside world, all the experts we spoke to had confidence that travel will eventually resume and be as rewarding as ever. While the experience might look and feel different once the world begins to reopen, people can count on the transformative and positive impact of travel to change their own lives and the destinations they visit for the better. We just hope that begins to happen again sooner rather than later.