

TRAVEL

What to Expect Traveling in a Post-COVID World

As the pandemic recedes, the travel industry is booming. Here's what you should know before booking your trip.



Getty Images

Ronit Austgen and her family love taking lengthy annual summer trips and last year planned to visit Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia. Instead, they went on a five-day biking trip in central California, several hundred miles from their home in San Diego.

This year Austgen, 56, hopes she, her husband, and three children -- all vaccinated -- can travel to the Galapagos Islands. Planning has not been easy, but Austgen is forging ahead, spurred on by a long-time desire to go there, lower costs for some parts of the trip and more flexible cancellation and change policies.

Nancy Scott, 76, has also always been an adventurous traveler, enjoying trips to Bhutan, Croatia, India, Jordan and Morocco. After spending the year at her home in Newport, R.I., she is eagerly anticipating her next foreign destination. But unlike Austgen, she is staying put until 2022. "I have nothing on the books," Scott says. "I'm fully vaccinated, but for this year I'm just kind of waiting. I'm not so concerned about myself, but about what governments are doing." What if a country is open one day and shuts down the next, she says.

With additional outbreaks of the virus likely in some countries, her concerns are valid. In fact, many of her fellow travelers share her hesitation. More Americans than usual plan to travel only within the United States this year, and after a disastrous 2020, the U.S. travel industry is keen to cater to them.

Searches for travel this summer leaned 66% domestic and 34% international, according to research by Hopper, a mobile app that tracks flights and hotels for the best deals. Before COVID-19, this split was typically 52% domestic and 48% international. "Europe has been a moving target, and with relatively low vaccination rates, I see restrictions," says Nick Ewen, senior editor of travel website The Points Guy. Instead, "we're seeing a huge increase in leisure markets such as Colorado, Utah, Florida, Hawaii and national parks."

U.S. airports are certainly getting busier. "The vaccination forced a huge spike in demand in leisure travel, and airlines are ramping up their operations," Ewen says. As of mid-May -- just after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said vaccinated people don't need to wear masks in most places -- 1.7 million travelers had passed through TSA checkpoints this year. That's about seven times higher than for all of 2020, though still a million fewer people than in May 2019.

Fewer Bargains, More Flexibility

Last year, when most people were reluctant to fly or stay in hotels, rates were tantalizingly low. But as the industry bounces back, bargains are getting harder to find. "People shouldn't expect great deals," says Elizabeth Blount McCormick, president of Uniglobe Travel Designers, a travel management company.

Domestic airline prices are largely back to where they were prepandemic with one big exception: Almost all carriers are waiving the fees for canceling or changing a flight.

Those fees sometimes came to hundreds of dollars. That policy should continue at least until the end of the year, predicts Ewen, adding that some airlines are thinking of eliminating the fees permanently.

Because you won't have change fees to consider, book a flight with a reasonable fare as soon as possible, and then set a Google Flights alert to notify you if the price drops. Then you can rebook at the cheaper fare, although you will typically get credit with the airline, not cash, for the difference in cost. If you need to cancel completely, you will most likely get a voucher for that airline that is good for at least a year.

Airlines are still scrambling to figure out how many planes they need to bring back into service and where. Because of that, some flights may be combined or canceled. If your flight is canceled by the airline or a new time no longer works for your schedule, your money should be refunded. With limited demand for international travel, some airlines are flying their widebody jets, typically used for overseas flights, cross-country with their lie-flat seats in business and first class. It might be worth an upgrade to enjoy that perk, especially if you have frequent flyer points to spare.

Hotel rooms may be a little cheaper than prepandemic. Room rates won't hit 2019 levels until 2025, according to Jan Freitag, an analyst specializing in hospitality for the CoStar Group. He warns that in places with high tourist demand, like Miami or Hawaii, hotel rates will recover faster. Several trends in the hotel industry that either began or grew during the pandemic are likely here to stay. Guests should expect to use a smartphone app for just about everything,

from checking in to opening a room door to ordering more towels. Hotels that offered free breakfasts often now provide a "to-go" choice along with the typical buffet. Lower-end hotels may continue to only clean rooms after checkout. "If you have a multinight stay, you may have to request cleaning and be charged for it," Freitag says.

Vacation home and Airbnb rentals are also rebounding. Airbnb reported that its first-quarter revenue this year was higher than in 2019, due mainly to greater interest from those who are at least 60 years old or from families, many of whom have been separated for more than a year and want to combine a reunion with a vacation. "Older people were so cautious last year, they didn't leave their house and so saved money," Freitag says. "Now, as long as they have gotten their shots fairly quickly, they want to see their grandchildren. So they're getting suites with connecting rooms or villas."

Family holiday bookings at Club Med resorts in North America, the Caribbean and Mexico for the 2021-2022 holiday season have increased 47% compared with 2019, according to a Club Med spokeswoman. Through Dec. 16, Club Med is offering full refunds if you cancel up to 15 days before traveling.

Experts warn that one part of travel most people leave until the end of their planning should be moved to the forefront: renting a car. During the pandemic, many companies sold off 30% to 40% of their fleets. A global shortage of computer chips needed to manufacture cars has made it harder to buy new ones, exacerbating the problem with rentals. As a result, prices have skyrocketed and availability has plummeted. Compact cars that once cost \$30 a day can run \$100 per day or more now, Ewen says. "You're seeing huge increases in price and long lines at car rental companies, and I don't see that going away into the fall."

Book the rental car before planning the rest of your trip. You don't want to find out after booking your flight and lodging that rental cars cost too much or are unavailable. You could also use autoslash.com to be notified if the price drops for your car rental. Also, joining a rental car company's free loyalty plan might help you guarantee a car or jump the queue, Ewen says. You may not even need a rental car; you could just Uber or Lyft around, Blount McCormick says.

Freewheeling Tours

Retirees who want to travel domestically at a social distance may prefer exploring destinations off the beaten track in a more freewheeling way. One option is with a recreational vehicle. RVshare offers rentals ranging from \$50 a night to luxury models that top \$1,000. Keep in mind that RV bookings are robust this year.

Traditionally, RV enthusiasts have skewed older, but younger travelers are now jumping on the bandwagon, with some using these spaces as "an office away from home," says Jon Gray, the company's CEO. More renters are requesting Wi-Fi and taking longer trips -- often for two weeks, up from a weekend or a week. He predicts RVshare will rent three times more vehicles this year than in 2019.

One drawback of RVs is finding a place to camp out. "Great campgrounds do fill up fast, but

there are so many out there," Gray says. Look for a place on websites such as HipCamp.com, TheDyrt.com and Campendium.com. Also, book your destination campsite early, but be flexible enroute for spur-of-the moment changes.

You could also try a self-powered mode of transportation: cycling tours. Many of the tours hosted by Senior Cycling, which offers bike trips for those who are at least 50 years old, are already full for the year. The excursions, which take place all over the country, usually last about five to eight days and include a maximum of 13 riders and two leaders.

Mark and Colleen Troy, owners of the Asheville, N.C., company, have made some changes because of COVID- 19. If group dinners on opening and closing night cannot be held outdoors, they are canceled for now. The company also created two new types of tours to avoid driving people from place to place in a crowded van: a vagabond tour, which allows participants to ride from hotel to hotel, and a hub tour, which includes daily bike rides from one hotel or bed and breakfast.

The Vaccination Question

Whether you will need to show proof of vaccination is still an open question. **Although international travelers entering the U.S. may need a vaccine passport, there's no federal mandate for domestic travelers.** In fact, some state governors have banned such passports, while others are still considering them. New York, for example, introduced the Excelsior pass, a free app for showing digital proof of full vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test to attend events at venues such as Madison Square Garden. For travel abroad, you will need to know the vaccine requirements for any country you visit.

The CDC recommends that only people who are fully vaccinated should travel to reduce the chances of contracting and spreading the virus. The agency also requires that all passengers returning to the U.S. -- even fully vaccinated Americans -- show negative COVID-19 results from a test taken within three days of traveling or proof of recovery from COVID-19 in the past three months before boarding.

Each cruise company will have its own vaccination policy, with many mandating a vaccine before you can board. For instance, Royal Caribbean International says guests 18 years and older will have to be vaccinated at least 14 days before departure, while those younger will need to show proof of a negative COVID-19 test. Check the cruise line's policies before booking a ticket and setting sail, says Chris Gray Faust, managing editor of CruiseCritic.com. A number of websites, including travelandleisure.com, post a cruise's requirements.

Some tour companies are worried that requiring the vaccine will drive away customers. Mark Frevert, chief architect and chief relationship officer at Overseas Adventure Travel, understands that concern, but his company stands by the requirement. He is counting on the loyalty of his long-time customers for business; the average age of his clients is 70 years old. The company, which offers small land- and sea-based tours to various countries, now mandates that all guests, staff and coach drivers be vaccinated 14 days before departure. In some countries where vaccines are scarce, one feature of his tours, a home-hosted dinner by a family abroad, has

become more challenging.

So far, more than 75,000 people have paid in full through 2023, Frevert says. The company opened up bookings for 2023 early to accommodate those who were eager to reserve a future trip. One of those customers is Scott, the adventurous traveler who is staying put this year. A loyal Overseas Adventure customer, she is planning excursions to Turkey and Sicily in 2022.

Mark Troy, of Senior Cycling, says he and his wife debated whether to require proof of vaccination. While they do ask their customers to fill out a COVID-19 questionnaire, the Troys decided to encourage, but not mandate, getting the vaccine. "We didn't feel it would be appropriate to require vaccination. It would be infringing on someone's personal choice," he says.

Everything from vaccination requirements to plane seat availability to a country's travel policies will be in turmoil for much of this year, experts predict. So expect the unexpected. "A lot of airline and hotel employees have gone through a lot," Ewen says. "Be patient and flexible."

Those are words Austgen, who is planning the trip with her family to the Galapagos Islands, has taken to heart. "If our plans fall apart, we will probably reschedule the same trip for next year," she says. "A year ago, I would have been really upset to have a trip disrupted, but COVID-19 has put everything in perspective."

NYSUT Note: Don't let the rebound of consumer prices post-pandemic put a dent in your pocketbook. NYSUT Member Benefits offers a wide variety of discounts for its members. Click [here](#) to explore the various member benefits discounts and deals, from online shopping and travel to entertainment and health and safety products.

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