

UNWTO says tourism up but remains far below 2019

The UNWTO World Tourism Barometer indicates that tourism is up slightly. The association reports that this is because of rising rates of vaccination combined with easing of travel restrictions due to increased cross-border coordination and protocols.

International tourism rebounded somewhat during the second half of 2021. International arrivals were down 62% in both the third and fourth quarters compared to pre-pandemic levels, though December fell off to minus 65%, likely caused by the emergence of the Omicron variant, whose full impact is yet to be seen.

By region

Recovery is apparent but very uneven from region to region.

Europe and the Americas recorded the strongest improvements, at 19% and +17% compared to 2020, but still both 63% below pre-pandemic levels.

As a subregion, the Caribbean saw the best performance (+63% above 2020, though 37% below 2019). Some destinations in the Caribbean came close to or even exceeded pre-pandemic levels.

Africa saw a 12% increase in arrivals in 2021 compared to 2020, though this is still 74% below 2019.

The Middle East and Asia had the worst showings, at a decline of 24% vs 2020 and a decline of 65% vs 2020 consecutively, and down 79% and 94% when compared to 2019.

Outlook for 2022

The majority of UNWTO Panel of Experts predict better prospects for 2022. However, while 58% expect a rebound in 2022, mostly during the third quarter, another 42% believe that rebound won't occur until 2023. Now 64% of experts expect international arrivals to return to 2019 levels in 2024 or later, a number that has crept up considerably since September.

While the vaccine rollout and subsequent border openings increased confidence throughout 2021, the Omicron variant and resultant shutdowns decreased confidence once again. This variant and the rapid increase in cases is expected to disrupt recovery through the first half of 2022 for markets with a good vaccine rollout, but vaccine distribution is not even and many countries, especially in Asia-Pacific, remain completely closed.

Another thing that might put additional pressure on tourism is a potentially challenging economic environment. Instability caused not only by the pandemic itself but also the surge in oil prices, increase in inflation, potential rise in interest rates, high debt volumes and the continued disruption in supply chains is possible.

That being said, the UNWTO states that tourism recovery is ongoing in many markets, mostly in Europe and the Americas. "This, coupled with the widespread vaccination rollout and a major coordinated lifting of travel restrictions — could help to restore consumer confidence and accelerate the recovery of international tourism in 2022." Meanwhile domestic tourism and travel close to home, ¹

as well as open-air activities, nature-based products and rural tourism are among the major travel trends that will continue shaping tourism in 2022.