

ForwardKeys reveals top travel trends of 2021

A new report from air ticketing data specialist ForwardKeys reveals the top travel trends of 2021, which are all driven by the Covid-19 pandemic.

They are:

- US leisure travel has led the recovery;
- The paralysis of Asia Pacific continued while Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and much of Africa have proved most resilient;
- The Middle East started to revive;
- Domestic travel has been dominant, particularly in large countries;
- Major European airlines have struggled disproportionately;
- There has been a relative decline in long-haul travel;
- Doha and Amsterdam have advanced in the battle of the hubs;
- New variants have continued to pose a potent threat.

US leisure travel led the recovery

A comparison of the world's top destination cities, before the pandemic in 2019, and throughout 2021, illustrates the strong trend towards leisure travel leading the recovery.

Several major cities have been pushed down or out of the top 20 rankings, whereas major leisure destinations, particularly for US holidaymakers, have climbed high.

While Dubai remains at the top of the list (it is a major leisure destination as well as a substantial travel and commerce hub), the most notable rises include Miami, from 18th to 5th, Madrid from 16th to 10th and new into the list, Cancun (Mexico) 2nd, Cairo (Egypt) 9th, Punta Cana (Dominican Republic) 12th, San Juan (Puerto Rico) 13th, Lisbon 14th, Athens 15th, Mexico City 16th, Palma Mallorca 17th, and Frankfurt 20th.

The two highest risers, Cancun and Miami, are both major leisure destinations popular with US holidaymakers. Most of the new entrants lower down the list are also leading leisure destinations, popular with European holidaymakers. Doha, which entered at 7th, has done particularly well as a hub for transits.

Major pre-pandemic destinations which have fallen out of the top 20 list include 10 major cities: Bangkok, Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, Shanghai, Jeddah, Los Angeles and Osaka.

Top destination cities in 2021 vs 2019

Worldwide international arrivals in January – December 2021 as of 23 November 2021, vs same period in 2019

		% share in 2021
1	Dubai (United Arab Emirates)	5%
2	Cancun (Mexico)	4%
3	Istanbul (Turkey)	3%
4	New York (U.S.A.)	2%
5	Miami (U.S.A.)	2%
6	Paris (France)	2%
7	Doha (Qatar)	2%
8	London (United Kingdom)	2%
9	Cairo (Egypt)	2%
10	Madrid (Spain)	1%
11	Amsterdam (Netherlands)	1%
12	Punta Cana (Dominican Republic)	1%
13	San Juan (Puerto Rico)	1%
14	Lisbon (Portugal)	1%
15	Athens (Greece)	1%
16	Mexico City (Mexico)	1%
17	Palma Mallorca (Spain)	1%
18	Rome (Italy)	1%
19	Barcelona (Spain)	1%
20	Frankfurt (Germany)	1%

		% share in 2019
1	Dubai (United Arab Emirates)	3%
2	London (United Kingdom)	3%
3	Bangkok (Thailand)	2%
4	Paris (France)	2%
5	New York (U.S.A.)	2%
6	Tokyo (Japan)	2%
7	Istanbul (Turkey)	2%
8	Seoul (South Korea)	2%
9	Singapore (Singapore)	2%
10	Hong Kong (Hong Kong)	2%
11	Shanghai (China)	1%
12	Amsterdam (Netherlands)	1%
13	Rome (Italy)	1%
14	Jeddah (Saudi Arabia)	1%
15	Taipei (Taiwan)	1%
16	Madrid (Spain)	1%
17	Los Angeles (U.S.A.)	1%
18	Miami (U.S.A.)	1%
19	Osaka (Japan)	1%
20	Barcelona (Spain)	1%



Source: ForwardKeys Air Ticket Data.

Paralysis of Asia Pacific continued

A review of worldwide travel in 2021, broken down by region, reveals the extent to which international travel was paralyzed. Overall, international air travel was just over a quarter (26%) of its pre-pandemic level. The Asia Pacific region reached just 8%, whereas Europe achieved 30%, Africa & the Middle East 36% and the Americas 40%.

Regional performance in 2021

Worldwide international arrivals in January – December 2021 as of 23 November 2021,
vs same period in 2019

Destination continent	% of 2019 levels
Africa & Middle East	36%
Americas	40%
Asia Pacific	8%
Europe	30%
Grand Total	26%

 Source: ForwardKeys Air Ticket Data.

A comparison of travel between the first and second halves of the year (H1 and H2) shows that global international travel more than doubled from 16% of pre-pandemic levels to 36%.

However, the recovery was extremely uneven. In the Asia Pacific region, flight arrivals grew from 5% of their 2019 level in H1 to 10% in H2. In Europe, they grew from 14% to 45%; in the Middle East & Africa, they grew from 24% to 48%; and in the Americas, from 30% to 52%.

Within the regions, some countries were much more resilient to the impact of Covid-19 on travel than others. The stand-out destinations which best maintained their visitor numbers were Central America, particularly El Salvador and Belize, and the Caribbean – all holiday hotspots for US tourists. Many of them managed to record visitation rates in excess of 60% of 2019 levels throughout the year.

The same degree of travel resilience was true of around two dozen countries in Africa. However, their level of resilience is a little less noteworthy because many of them have economies which are much less dependent on tourism.

The Middle East started to revive

Travel to various Middle East destinations also exceeded the 60% benchmark in H2. Most notably, travel to Turkey climbed from 33% in H1 to 67% in H2 of pre-pandemic levels and travel to Egypt grew from 37% to 72%.

Dubai held its position as the top city destination, and Doha overtook Dubai as an air transit hub.

Domestic travel dominant

While many countries have been able to impose severe restrictions on international travel, citing the need to keep their own populations safe, imposing equally stiff constraints on one's own populations is politically more challenging. Consequently, there has been a relative rise in domestic travel, particularly in geographically large countries such as Brazil, China, Russia and the US, where it is possible to fly for a few hours without crossing the border.

In China, domestic travel volumes returned to pre-pandemic levels as early as September 2020; however, they fell back in January and again in August, owing to a resurgence in cases of Covid-19.

In Brazil, Russia, the US and China, domestic travel rose respectively to 148%, 128%, 87% and 76% of pre-pandemic levels in the second half of 2021, compared to 50%, 28%, 39% and 1% for international travel.

Major European airlines struggled disproportionately

Largely due to the trend towards domestic travel in large countries, airlines in those markets have managed to weather the Covid-19 storm better than carriers whose business has been more oriented towards short haul international travel. This is illustrated by an analysis of the top 20 airlines in 2021 compared to 2019.

The major European carriers have all fallen down or out of the ranking and they have been replaced by airlines which have substantial business in China and the US, which have been better able to maintain capacity.

For example, Ryanair and easyJet, the two largest European carriers, have fallen from 5th and 8th position respectively, to 7th and 16th. Lufthansa, British Airways and Air France, Europe's largest legacy carriers, have fallen out of the top 20 list, as have Emirates and Air Canada. They have been replaced by Shenzhen, JetBlue, Spirit, Hainan and Xiamen.

Top airlines 2021 vs 2019

Top airlines by scheduled capacity for all travel types in January – December 2021 as of 22 November 2021, vs same period in 2019

		% share in 2021	% of 2019 levels			% share in 2019
1	American Airlines	6.0%	82%	1	American Airlines	4.7%
2	Delta Air Lines	5.1%	77%	2	Delta Air Lines	4.3%
3	Southwest Airlines	4.5%	80%	3	Southwest Airlines	3.6%
4	United Airlines	3.9%	75%	4	United Airlines	3.4%
5	China Southern Airlines	3.5%	89%	5	Ryanair	2.7%
6	China Eastern Airlines	3.2%	87%	6	China Southern Airlines	2.5%
7	Ryanair	2.5%	59%	7	China Eastern Airlines	2.4%
8	Air China	2.3%	92%	8	Easyjet	1.9%
9	Indigo	2.0%	83%	9	Turkish Airlines	1.6%
10	Turkish Airlines	1.7%	69%	10	Air China	1.6%
11	Latam Airlines	1.5%	60%	11	Lufthansa	1.6%
12	All Nippon Airways	1.4%	62%	12	Indigo	1.6%
13	Alaska Airlines	1.3%	80%	13	Latam Airlines	1.6%
14	Shenzhen Airlines	1.1%	97%	14	All Nippon Airways	1.4%
15	Jetblue Airways	1.1%	78%	15	Emirates Airline	1.3%
16	Easyjet	1.1%	38%	16	Air Canada	1.1%
17	Aeroflot	1.1%	68%	17	British Airways	1.1%
18	Spirit Airlines	1.1%	99%	18	Alaska Airlines	1.0%
19	Hainan Airlines	1.1%	73%	19	Aeroflot	1.0%
20	Xiamen Airlines	1.1%	91%	20	Air France	1.0%

Source: ForwardKeys Seat Capacity Data.

A relative decline in long-haul travel

A comparison of international travel within the major world regions, intra-regional travel, and between world regions, extra-regional (or long-haul) travel, reveals that there has been a shift away from long-haul travel during the pandemic.

In 2019 the ratio of intra-regional to extra-regional travel was 56%:44%, but in 2021, that had changed to 62%:38%.

The pattern has also changed, with a greater proportion of people within Europe and the Americas traveling intra-regionally rather than long haul.

The trend can be explained by a combination of several factors, including the effective closure of one region of the world, Asia Pacific, the increased cost and difficulty of traveling long haul during the pandemic and frequently changing pandemic travel regulations, which disproportionately deter people from booking long-haul travel, as it is typically booked and planned with much longer lead times.

Doha and Amsterdam advanced in the battle of the hubs

Doha overtook Dubai to become the pre-eminent hub airport in the Middle East, connecting air traffic between South Asia, Middle East, North America and Sub-Saharan Africa. In Europe, Amsterdam closed the gap on Frankfurt for intra-European transits and connections with North America.

Pre-pandemic, the top 10 list of global hub airports was headed by Dubai with 7.7% market share of intercontinental flight connections. It was followed by Frankfurt, Amsterdam, Doha, Istanbul, Paris, Hong Kong, Munich, London and Abu Dhabi.

In 2021, it was headed by Amsterdam, with 8.3% share of intercontinental flight connections. Amsterdam is followed by Frankfurt, 8.2%, Istanbul, 6.8%, Doha, 6.7%, Dubai, 5.9%, Paris, 5.0%, Panama City, 3.5%, Addis Ababa, 3.1%, Munich, 2.9% and Madrid, 2.4%.

Top airport hubs in 2021 vs 2019

Worldwide airports used for international transits in January – December 2021 as of 25 November 2021, vs same period in 2019

		% share in 2021			% share in 2019
1	AMS - Amsterdam (NL)	8.3%	1	DXB - Dubai (AE)	7.7%
2	FRA - Frankfurt (DE)	8.2%	2	FRA - Frankfurt (DE)	5.6%
3	IST - Istanbul (TR)	6.8%	3	AMS - Amsterdam (NL)	4.9%
4	DOH - Doha (QA)	6.7%	4	DOH - Doha (QA)	4.0%
5	DXB - Dubai (AE)	5.9%	5	IST - Istanbul (TR)	3.7%
6	CDG - Paris (FR)	5.0%	6	CDG - Paris (FR)	3.5%
7	PTY - Panama City (PA)	3.5%	7	HKG - Hong Kong (HK)	3.1%
8	ADD - Addis Ababa (ET)	3.1%	8	MUC - Munich (DE)	2.9%
9	MUC - Munich (DE)	2.9%	9	LHR - London (GB)	2.8%
10	MAD - Madrid (ES)	2.4%	10	AUH - Abu Dhabi (AE)	2.6%
11	LIS - Lisbon (PT)	2.0%	11	SIN - Singapore (SG)	2.5%
12	ZRH - Zurich (CH)	1.9%	12	MAD - Madrid (ES)	1.9%
13	VIE - Vienna (AT)	1.9%	13	ZRH - Zurich (CH)	1.7%
14	LHR - London (GB)	1.8%	14	ADD - Addis Ababa (ET)	1.7%
15	MIA - Miami-FL (US)	1.8%	15	SVO - Moscow (RU)	1.5%
16	AUH - Abu Dhabi (AE)	1.8%	16	VIE - Vienna (AT)	1.4%
17	MEX - Mexico City (MX)	1.3%	17	HEL - Helsinki (FI)	1.4%
18	BRU - Brussels (BE)	1.3%	18	MCT - Muscat (OM)	1.3%
19	DFW - Dallas-TX (US)	1.2%	19	ICN - Seoul (KR)	1.3%
20	IAH - Houston-TX (US)	1.2%	20	PTY - Panama City (PA)	1.2%

Source: ForwardKeys Air Ticket Data.

Analysis of monthly traffic in 2021 shows that Amsterdam briefly overtook Frankfurt in September and October; but it fell back in November. In the same month, Dubai recovered its lead over Doha for the first time since February.

New variants continue to pose a threat

A chart plotting the recovery in air travel shows relatively steady growth from the first quarter of 2021, when traffic was less than 20% of 2019 levels to the fourth quarter, when it had climbed to over 50%.

However, there were two setbacks. The first began during the week of March 12, when the growth in weekly bookings turned from +11% to -10%, as the Delta variant began to sweep around the world. The second began in the last week of October, when weekly bookings reached their highest point, 64% of the same week in 2019.

Bookings have been slowing down ever since, and in late November, they were down to 54% of 2019 levels, which was closely correlated with a fresh rise in Covid-19 cases since late October. It is now likely that the emergence of the new Omicron variant, and the travel restrictions introduced in response, will inhibit demand for last-minute travel over the Christmas period.

Olivier Ponti, VP Insights, ForwardKeys, said: "2021 has definitely been a year of travel recovery, but 6

that recovery has been bumpy and patchy, with many established destinations displaced and several tourism-dependent destinations making valiant efforts to retain the patronage of leisure travelers. It has also been a tug-of-war between a strong pent-up demand to travel on the one hand and travel restrictions imposed by governments to inhibit the spread of Covid-19 on the other.”