

Russian outbound travelers turn to Asia and Middle East

Russian outbound tourism, already severely handicapped by pandemic travel restrictions, has fallen even further because of Russia's military operations in Ukraine. But affluent Russian travelers are still flying, turning to Asia and the Middle East instead. These are the findings from travel analyst ForwardKeys, using the latest air ticketing data.

In the week before the outbreak of war (week commencing 18 February), outbound international air tickets from Russia stood at 42% of pre-pandemic levels, but in the week immediately after the invasion (w/c 25 February), issued air tickets fell to just 19%. Since then, flight bookings have been hovering at around 15%.

Owing to war-related sanctions on civil aviation, Russians cannot book flights to many of their favorite destinations in the West, so they are instead booking trips to Asia and the Middle East.

An analysis of flight bookings by ForwardKeys made between 24 February, the start of the invasion, and 27 April, the latest data, reveals that the top five destinations for travel between May and August, in order of resilience, are Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and the UAE.

Bookings to Sri Lanka are 85% ahead of pre-pandemic levels, the Maldives 1% behind, Kyrgyzstan 11% behind, Turkey 36% behind and the UAE, 49% behind.

Olivier Ponti, VP of Insights at ForwardKeys said that Sri Lanka's position at the head of the list was not a true reflection of the island's attractiveness as a destination but more about safety. Rather, it is a consequence of terrorist bombings, which scared away visitors in 2019, the pre-pandemic benchmark year, he said.

An analysis of the recently issued tickets to Turkey and the UAE suggests that a substantial proportion are affluent Russians going on holiday. And premium cabin travel is making a comeback. The number of seats sold in premium cabins has tripled, compared to 2019.

Moreover, the average trip duration for premium travelers is now 12 nights in Turkey and 7 nights in the UAE.