

Tourism set to return to pre-pandemic levels in key regions in 2023, according to UNWTO



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After stronger than expected recovery in 2022, this year could see international tourist arrivals return to pre-pandemic levels in Europe and the Middle East. According to UNWTO, tourists are expected to “increasingly seek value for money and travel closer to home as a response to the challenging economic climate,” reads the press release.

Based on the organization’s forward-looking scenarios for 2023, international tourist arrivals could reach 80% to 95% of pre-pandemic levels this year. This is dependent on the extent of the economic slowdown, the ongoing recovery of travel in Asia and the Pacific and the evolution of the Russian offensive in Ukraine, among other factors.

All regions bouncing back

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According to new data, more than 900 million tourists traveled internationally in 2022 – double the number recorded in 2021 though still only 63% of pre-pandemic levels. Every global region recorded notable increases in international tourist numbers. The Middle East experienced the strongest relative increase as arrivals climbed to 83% of pre-pandemic numbers.

Europe reached nearly 80% of pre-pandemic levels as it welcomed 585 million arrivals in 2022. Africa and the Americas both recovered about 65% of their pre-pandemic visitors, while Asia and the Pacific reached only 23%, due to stronger pandemic-related restrictions which have started to be removed only in recent months. The first UNWTO World Tourism Barometer of 2023 also analyses performance by region and looks at top performers in 2022, including several destinations which have already recovered 2019 levels.

"A new year brings more reason for optimism for global tourism. UNWTO anticipates a strong year for the sector even in the face of diverse challenges including the economic situation and continued geopolitical uncertainty. Economic factors may influence how people travel in 2023 and UNWTO expects demand for domestic and regional travel to remain strong and help drive the sector's wider recovery," says Zurab Pololikashvili, Secretary General at UNWTO.

Chinese tourists expected to return

UNWTO foresees the recovery to continue throughout 2023 even as the sector faces economic, health and geopolitical challenges. The recent lifting of COVID-19 travel restrictions in China, the world's largest outbound market in 2019, is a significant step for the recovery of the tourism sector in Asia and the Pacific and worldwide.

In the short term, the resumption of travel from China is likely to benefit Asian destinations in particular. However, this will be shaped by the availability and cost of air travel, visa regulations and COVID-19 restrictions in the destinations. By mid-January a total of 32 countries had imposed specific travel restrictions related to travel from China, mostly in Asia and Europe.

At the same time, strong demand from the United States, backed by a strong US dollar, will continue to benefit destinations in the region and beyond. Europe will continue to enjoy strong travel flows from the US, partly due to a weaker euro versus the US dollar.

Notable increases in international tourism receipts have been recorded across most destinations, in several cases higher than their growth in arrivals. This has been supported by the increase in average spending per trip due to longer periods of stay, the willingness by travelers to spend more in their destination and higher travel costs due to inflation. However, economic circumstances could translate into tourists adopting a more cautious attitude in 2023, with reduced spending, shorter trips and travel closer to home.

Furthermore, continued uncertainty caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine and other mounting geopolitical tensions, as well as health challenges related to COVID-19 also represent downside risks and could weigh on tourism's recovery in the months ahead.

The latest UNWTO Confidence Index shows cautious optimism for January-April, higher than the same period in 2022. This optimism is backed by the opening up in Asia and strong spending numbers in 2022 from both traditional and emerging tourism source markets, with France, Germany and Italy, as well as Qatar, India and Saudi Arabia all posting strong results.