

'A huge sigh of relief': Tourist businesses cheer the return of international travelers after 600 days

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Dawn Gilbertson, Bailey Schulz and Morgan Hines, USA TODAY



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Sammie and Rich Hill have been married since September but don't take off for their honeymoon until this week.

The British couple didn't want to vacation anywhere but Florida – they were engaged at the Discovery Cove theme park on their first visit to Orlando in 2018 – but that hasn't been an option given the [United States' travel ban](#) on visitors from England and dozens of other countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The travel restrictions [lift Monday](#) for fully vaccinated visitors, and the Hills will be on Virgin Atlantic's morning flight from Manchester to Orlando that day.

It's no budget vacation. The newlyweds splurged on first-class seats with lie-flat beds, rented a Ford Mustang convertible and will stay at a hotel for three weeks, an agenda that includes theme park visits, their first NBA game and side trips to Tampa and Miami. The tab before spending money: about \$10,000.



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"Everybody is just waiting in anticipation to get into America because it's just a special place for a lot of people, especially in the U.K.," Hill said.

The excitement is mutual for the hotels, restaurants, retailers, tourist attractions, car rental car companies and other businesses that depend on international tourists and haven't welcomed any from the United Kingdom, Europe and other markets for about 600 days.

International tourists are coveted because they generally stay longer and spend more than U.S. vacationers traveling at home. In Las Vegas, for example, international travelers spend on average 50% to 60% more than domestic visitors, according to the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority.

The significance of their return, regardless of the pace of the ramp-up in travel to the USA can't be overstated, according to Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics. If visitor volumes simply return to pre-pandemic levels, he said, it would add nearly a point to the country's GDP.

"It's a game changer. It's a big deal," he said.

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Las Vegas wedding chapels: 'A huge sigh of relief'

Brandon Reed, owner of Bliss Wedding Chapel in Las Vegas, said he breathed a "huge sigh of relief" when the news about the United States lifting the travel ban was announced in September. More than a third of Reed's business came from international visitors before the pandemic.

"It's kind of that Americana to them, it's very appealing," he said. "It kind of fits into this whole perception of Vegas, of the southern part of the United States, of John Wayne. It's things that are a part of this idealistic American culture that they want to experience."

The chapel already has 23 weddings on the books for 2022 from couples who live in foreign countries, including France, Germany, Brazil and the U.K.



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"This number might seem dismal to people in the wedding business, but a couple of weeks ago, we had zero," Reed said. "Since the borders have been shut down completely for the last two years, consumer confidence has been very low, which explains why the books aren't peppered with international couples."

New York City hot dog vendor: 'I don't even know how we survived these last two years'

Dan Rossi, the self-proclaimed "Hot Dog King," calls the return of international tourists "lifblood."

Rossi set up a hot dog cart in front of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art more than a dozen years ago. Tourists, not New Yorkers, are his primary customer base.



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Before the pandemic, he sold 400 or 500 hot dogs per day. That fell as low as 10 hot dogs a day during the heights of the pandemic.

"I'll tell you the truth, I don't even know how we survived these last two years," Rossi said. "It just seems like every month we end up finding a few extra dollars to pay the rent and things. It's that bad."

When international tourists return, he expects the struggle to ease.

"We're gonna be back to work full time, we're gonna start, we're not going to worry about paying the rent," Rossi said.

Grand Canyon hotel: 'We are just beyond excited'

Julie Aldaz runs the 225-room Red Feather Lodge near the South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park.

Up to a quarter of the hotel's rooms are filled with international visitors during peak times and they have been missed, especially this past summer.

The hotel was able to make up some but not all of the business from U.S. vacationers who flocked to national parks and other outdoor recreation spots. Their absence was particularly felt in late summer and fall as school resumed.

"That's when we noticed our slowdown," she said. "We were down about probably 25%."

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Winter is rapidly approaching in northern Arizona, so the hotel hasn't seen a surge in near-term bookings, but Aldaz said overall bookings from international tourists are picking up. Many start planning their 2022 U.S. vacations during Christmas break, she said.

"We are just beyond excited that they're coming back," Aldaz said.

New York City hotel: Nov. 8 is 'a turning point'

The pandemic took a bigger toll on the Roger Smith Hotel, a family-owned boutique hotel in the tourist attraction area of midtown Manhattan.

The hotel aggressively wooed international tourists before the pandemic, a move that helped it fill 88% of its rooms in 2019.

When the pandemic hit, it lost more than half of its customers, according to general manager Pere Sanchez Frigola. Domestic travel helped on weekends, but without foreign guests, the Roger Smith was filling less than 30% of its rooms midweek.

"We've been surviving. &mlr; (But) it's not sustainable to keep running a hotel at these levels," Frigola said. "We hope Nov. 8 is a turning point for us and for the industry."

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Will tourists flood back into the US or trickle in?

Beyond the [expected opening week surge](#) in travel from those who haven't seen loved ones in nearly two years or have rescheduled vacations multiple times, Moody's Zandi expects a slow build in travel to most U.S. destinations.

"I don't think foreign travelers are going to come surging into American cities," he said.

"I think it's going to be a slow build over time as people get increasingly comfortable that the pandemic is winding down or increasingly in the rearview mirror."

Zandi ticked off a number of reasons: winter, depressed business travel demand and a fear that U.S. travel restrictions could tighten if COVID-19 cases spike.

"Right now, the border's open," he said. "If infections continue to rise in Europe as they have been in the past few weeks, how long will that continue?"

Zandi said a gradual return is a good thing for tourism businesses struggling to find staffing.

"They're having a hard time providing service to domestic travelers," he said. "It would be overwhelming."

A new report from data intelligence company Morning Consult predicts the biggest wave of inbound foreign travelers won't hit until the summer of 2022.

The survey, which polled nearly 7,000 adults from Oct. 1-18 across 11 international markets, found the highest share of travelers said they plan to wait seven to 12 months before making the trip to the USA. Relatively few intend to visit in the next three months.

Morning Consult analyst Lindsey Roeschke said travelers still have "high levels of concern" about COVID-19 in the USA, especially since the country has a lower vaccination rate than many other nations.

"Even though we are requiring international travelers to be vaccinated to come in, there is still some hesitancy," Roeschke said. "The risk is potentially higher."

International travelers are 'a little gun shy'

Sarah Lester, marketing manager for Vegas Weddings and its sister chapel Viva Las Vegas Weddings, doesn't expect international travel to start building up until 2022.

"I imagine New Year's is going to be a very big boost," Lester said. "I think that they're a little gun shy, so they don't want to pull the trigger just yet."



Wedding chapel operator Reed agrees that it'll take time for his international business to ramp back up, especially since the U.S. reopening takes place during the wedding industry's slow season.

"We don't expect it to be like floodgates opening up from a dam, but we do expect some reservations to be coming in, and they have been," he said.

Just in time for the holidays

The new travel rules may have missed the busy summer travel season, but there's at least one destination that could benefit from the timing: New York City.

At least that's the hope for Christina Hansen, a carriage driver who works for NYC Horse Carriage Rides. She said New York's iconic holiday festivities, including horse-drawn carriage rides through snow-covered Central Park, could help draw the international customers missing for more than a year.

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"Venice has its gondolas. Central Park has the carriages," Hansen said.

She said the business has "definitely missed" its international customers, who made up at least one-third of bookings before the pandemic.

"There were days where every ride was from the U.K., Ireland or Australia," Hansen said. "We're hoping that, with it being on Nov. 8, people are going to jump on it. ... They can see the Rockettes and Broadway and everything, go ice skating. It's the whole Christmas kit and caboodle."

By the numbers: How important are international tourists to US

- **\$141 billion:** The drop in spending by international travelers to the USA from 2019 to 2020, according to [the U.S. Travel Association](#).
- **2.8 million:** The estimated number of international visitors to New York City in 2021. That's down 79% from 13.5 million international visitors in 2019, according to NYC & Co., New York's tourism marketing arm.
- **5.6 million:** The number of international visitors to Las Vegas in 2019, accounting for 15% of overall visitation, according to Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority.
- **151,000:** The number of visitors to Orlando from the U.K. in 2020. Pre-pandemic, more than 1 million visitors from the U.K. arrived annually, [according to Visit Orlando](#).
- **10%+:** The share of all jobs in the USA in 2019 that were related to travel and tourism, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council.



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