

# OMICRON VARIANT DISCOURAGES GLOBAL TOURISM RECOVERY

Tourism businesses that were just beginning to breathe after two catastrophic years of pandemic are once again gasping for air as measures are introduced to contain the spread of the Omicron variant.

From shopping districts in Japan to tour guides in the Holy Land, ski resorts in the Alps and airlines around the world, the new restrictions are causing all too familiar concern.

Many countries have decided to close their borders to travelers arriving from eight African countries. **In Canada, travelers arriving by air will be tested and placed in isolation pending the results.**

While it is not clear where the variant originated, researchers in South Africa recently identified it. That said, little is known at present about the Omicron variant, including whether it is more contagious, whether it makes patients sicker and whether it can evade vaccines.

Still, governments criticized for their slow response to the first wave of COVID-19 do not want to repeat the same mistakes. The World Health Organization warns, however, that travel bans are of modest use and will be "a heavy burden" for people trying to make a living.

Such bans won't stop the variants from circulating, other experts say, but they could give governments more time to vaccinate more people.

London-based airline easyJet said last week that the new restrictions already appear to be having an impact on its winter bookings, although CEO Johan Lundgren concedes that the damage is not as severe as in previous waves.

The boss of Scandinavian carrier SAS said that winter demand is up, but that we "now need to understand the impact that the new variants will have."

"Over the past year, each new variant has resulted in a drop in bookings, then an increase once the wave has passed," said analyst Helene Becker of the Cowen firm. "We expect the same thing this time around."

The U.S. administration announced new restrictions starting on Dec 6. All inbound foreign visitors traveling by air will be required to test for Covid within one day of departure for the United States. The new testing requirement will apply to everyone, regardless of nationality or vaccination status. Documentation of having recovered from Covid-19 in the past 90 days is also accepted.

Moreover, USA bans entry into the U.S. of noncitizens coming from eight countries in southern Africa. They are Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

International travel bans of 70 countries imposed on South Africa following the discovery of a new Covid-19 variant Omicron have decimated the country's hopes of a busy summer season. More than R1 billion worth of summer holiday bookings were cancelled within 48 hours after announcing the discovery. The effects of the swift global response are likely to dissuade holidaymakers for much longer. The travel recovery has been postponed by several months according to experts.

Israel's decision to close its borders to foreign visitors comes as the country's tourism industry was

preparing for the Christmas and Hanukkah vacations. The country had only reopened its doors to tourists in November, after refusing foreign visitors since early last year. Just over 30,000 tourists arrived in Israel during the first half of November, compared to 421,000 in November 2019, according to government data.

In Bethlehem in the West Bank, a city considered the birthplace of Jesus by Christians, businesses were looking forward to Christmas tourism. One of the city's largest hotels, the Hotel Bethlehem, has been operating at a fraction of its capacity for 18 months. "Everyone who had reservations for the next two weeks has canceled, and others are waiting to see what happens," said facility manager Michael Mufdi. "I don't know how much longer we can survive, but we're doing the best we can."

In Japan, the pandemic saw tourist numbers drop from 32 million visitors in 2019 to four million last year, a slide that has continued this year. Japan tightened a ban on foreign travelers, asking airlines to stop taking new bookings for flights scheduled to land on its soil by the end of December. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida wants to avoid "the worst possible scenario" and reversed the easing of travel restrictions announced just three weeks ago.

The crowds of Chinese tourists who used to flock to Tokyo's popular Ginza district in search of luxury goods are now a distant memory. Bars and restaurants have been forced to shorten their opening hours.

In Europe, ski resorts are wondering how they will be able to comply with all the guidelines, such as ensuring that skiers are properly vaccinated or cured and that they have tested negative for the virus.

Matthias Stauch of the German trade union VDS says that many stations are small, family-run businesses that do not have enough staff to do all these checks. The association fears "massive" economic damage if further containment is imposed.

**Travel industry officials are asking governments to wait until they know more about the Omicron variant before making any decisions, but they admit that the situation is difficult.**

"If you wait, by the time you have all the data, it's probably going to be too late to prevent the community spread because (the virus) would have already arrived," said new Southwest Airlines boss Robert Jordan. But if you move too fast, the measures could have a bigger impact than the infection itself."

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