

# MOST FOREIGN AIRLINES STAY AWAY FROM ISRAEL



As the conflict between Israel and Hamas has continued for the third month, life in Israel has somewhat returned to normalcy, with schools, shops, and restaurants being operational. However, the tourism industry, which contributes less than 3% to Israel's GDP, has been severely affected and is unable to recover. Most foreign airlines did not resume their flights to Israel.

Although overall tourism to Israel had increased by 18% throughout 2023, there was a significant decline in October after the terrorist attacks on October 7. **The number of foreign tourists visiting Israel dropped by 73.1% in October compared to last year.** If it weren't for Sukkot, the decline would have been even more significant, as many tourists visited Israel during the first week of the month.

In November 2023, there was an 88.4% reduction in the number of tourists compared to the same period in 2022. Data for December is not yet available, but it is unlikely that tourism will return to the record number of 4.5 million tourists in 2019.

According to the Israel Airports Authority, only Emirati Airlines, China's Hainan Airlines, and Russia's Azimuth are the only foreign airlines currently flying to Israel. Lufthansa is expected to resume its flights to Israel next week, and Tarom, a Romanian airline, plans to start at the end of the month, as per the IAA.

A spokesperson for United Airlines has confirmed that Tel Aviv flights will remain suspended until conditions allow them to resume. Delta has canceled flights through March 29, 2024, while JetBlue is code-sharing with El Al.

Israel's government provided \$5 billion in insurance guarantees to El Al, Arkia, and Israir, allowing them to continue flying.

In early December, Udi Bar-Oz, CEO of Ben Gurion Airport, spoke with 120 international airline representatives to persuade them to restart flights to Israel. In recent days, he has also contacted American carriers individually. An Israeli Airports Authority spokesperson confirmed this.

Bar-Oz reassured the airline representatives that the airport had remained open throughout the conflict and that no rockets had hit or fallen near the airport. He also pointed out that businesses have mostly resumed their operations as usual, with no restrictions in most parts of the country.

Moreover, Bar-Oz pledged to assist any foreign airlines that want to resume their services to Israel during the current situation.

On average, Ben Gurion Airport currently handles around 200 flights per day, which include international, domestic, private, and freight flights. However, some local media reports suggest around 100 flights per day. Before the war, the airport used to handle 500 flights per day.

Yael Ravia Tzadok, who heads the Israeli Foreign Ministry's Economic Diplomacy Division, has said that the division and Israeli embassies are working to ensure continuity in air traffic and the resumption of international airline flights.

The Foreign Ministry has contacted officials from key countries and top airlines to "clarify the updated conditions in Israel that are relevant to civil aviation and to emphasize, where relevant, the importance of direct flights to relations between countries."

An Israeli Ministry of Tourism spokesperson said **there is high demand for Israel in the American market and that they are constantly communicating with the American industry and airlines** to increase the number of flights to Israel. Despite the challenges, the ministry is confident that more flights to Israel will be available soon.

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