

INTERNATIONAL TOURISM IN 2023 AT 88% OF PRE-PANDEMIC LEVEL



in 2019.

According to the first World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) World Tourism Barometer of the year, international tourism is predicted to be back to pre-pandemic levels by 2024. In 2023, international tourism reached 88% of pre-pandemic levels, generating 1.3 billion international trips. Additionally, international tourism receipts amounted to \$1.4 trillion, equivalent to 93% of the amount recorded

The expected recovery is attributed to the release of pent-up demand, increased air connectivity, and the further recovery of Asian markets and destinations. **UNWTO believes these factors could lead to a full tourism recovery by the end of 2024.**

According to the UNWTO, outbound markets in Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East will continue to lead in driving tourism flows and spending worldwide through 2024. 2023 saw a better-than-expected performance in international tourism thanks to pent-up solid demand and the relaxation of travel restrictions in many countries. The Middle East, Europe, and Africa regions performed best last year. In relative terms, the Middle East emerged as the top performer by exceeding the pre-pandemic levels with 22% more arrivals than in 2019.

European Destinations Are the Most Popular

In 2023, Europe became the most visited region in the world. It recovered 94% of its pre-pandemic visitors due to intraregional demand and travel from the United States. Africa also showed a promising recovery, with 96% of its pre-pandemic visitors returning. The Americas reached 90% of its pre-pandemic visitors.

However, Asia and the Pacific were the worst-performing regions, with only 65% of pre-pandemic levels. While some markets and destinations reopened, the results were mixed. South Asia, on the other hand, has already recovered 87% of its 2019 visitors, while Northeast Asia is still at around 55%.

Compared to 2019, four sub-regions, including Southern Mediterranean Europe, the Caribbean, Central America, and North Africa, saw double-digit growth in international arrivals in 2023, exceeding the pre-pandemic levels.

International Tourism Revenue

According to the UNWTO, international tourism receipts reached \$1.4 trillion in 2023, 93% of the \$1.5 trillion in 2019. Additionally, total tourism export earnings, including passenger transport, are estimated to be \$1.6 trillion in 2023, almost 95% of the figures recorded in 2019.

Preliminary estimates by UNWTO on the economic contribution of tourism, which is measured in direct gross domestic product from tourism, indicate that it was \$3.3 trillion in 2023, or 3% of global GDP.

2024 Forecast

According to the UNWTO, international tourism is expected to recover fully to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2024. Initial estimates suggest a growth rate of 2% above the 2019 levels, which saw 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals worldwide.

The UNWTO forecast is based on the pace of recovery in Asia and a decrease in current economic and geopolitical risks. The latest confidence survey by UNWTO shows that 67% of tourism professionals are optimistic that 2024 will see better results than 2023. Another 28% expect similar results, while only 6% anticipate a decline in tourism performance in 2024 compared to last year.

The tourism industry still has much potential for recovery in Asia. Reopening several outbound markets and destinations is expected to help drive the recovery locally and globally. Chinese outbound and inbound tourism will increase in 2024 due to visa facilitation and improved air capacity. For one year, China is implementing a visa waiver for six countries, namely France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Malaysia.

The tourism organization believes visa and travel facilitation measures will encourage travel to the Middle East and Africa. These regions have announced their intention to implement a unified tourist visa, similar to the Schengen visa. They have also taken various measures to facilitate intra-African travel, particularly in Kenya and Rwanda.

The UNWTO is confident that Europe will perform well in 2024. In March, Romania and Bulgaria will join the Schengen area of free movement, and Paris in France will host the Olympic Games this summer.

Furthermore, the strong dollar will continue to support travel from the United States to destinations in the Americas and other continents.

Persisting Risks

However, experts assure that despite the continued recovery of international tourism, economic and geopolitical headwinds continue to pose significant challenges. **The report states that persistent inflation, high interest rates, volatile oil prices, and trade disruptions may continue to impact transport and accommodation costs worldwide in 2024.**

As a result, tourists are expected to seek value for money and travel closer to home while opting for more sustainable travel. However, staff shortages are critical, as tourism businesses face a labor shortage to cope with high demand.

Furthermore, the ongoing conflict between Hamas and Israel may disrupt travel in the Middle East by affecting travelers confidence. The report concludes that the uncertainty stemming from Russian aggression against Ukraine and other rising geopolitical tensions will continue to weigh on traveler confidence this year.

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