

RECORD TRAFFIC PUTS LONDON AND PARIS AT THE HEART OF EUROPE'S SKIES



New information on passenger traffic and international arrivals is highlighting the UK and France's efforts to compete strongly for tourism and transit traffic across Europe. Both countries appear to be capitalizing on extensive airport networks centered on London and Paris to attract tens of millions of overseas visitors.

Across Europe, passenger traffic has enjoyed a powerful rebound. Airports have reported that the combined output of European airports exceeded 2.5 billion passengers in 2024, surpassing pre-pandemic levels for the first time. **International traffic growth has been especially strong, far outpacing the domestic demand and reinforcing Europe's status as the world's premier tourism region.**

Within this revival, London and Paris have emerged as the key gateways competing to attract Europe's tourism traffic. London Heathrow handled a record 83.9 million passengers in 2024, beating 2019 totals and finishing the year as the busiest airport in Europe by total passengers. Heathrow remains among the world's foremost centers for international traffic, with nearly 79 million of its 2024 passengers using international routes, reflecting the airport's global reach rather than a domestic focus.

On the other side of the English Channel, France's airport systems have also expanded. Groupe ADP's figures report that Paris Aéroport – the combined total of Charles de Gaulle and Orly airports – handled approximately 103.4 million passengers in 2024, a rise of around 3.7 percent year on year. Charles de Gaulle alone remains among Europe's three busiest airports, handling more than 70 million passengers in 2024, but still lagging behind its 2019 levels.

These figures reflect a general restoration of the UK and France's status as entry-points for visitors both to and through Europe. Both capitals have extensive long-haul networks connecting North America, the Middle East and Asia with secondary destinations across Europe, placing London and Paris at the heart of the world's tourism competition.

Global Airport Networks Drive International Arrivals

The strength of these airport networks helps explain recent changes to tourism statistics for both countries. UK government and parliamentary data report record-breaking visitor numbers in 2024, the first calendar year in which visitor numbers have exceeded 2019 levels. The United States, France, Germany and Ireland are among the top sources of visitors to Great Britain, illustrating the extent to which London's air networks integrate the UK into transatlantic and intra-European travel patterns.

Civil aviation statistics report that London ranks among the world's largest multi-airport metro areas by passenger numbers, with six international airports serving more than 177 million passengers in 2024. This massive concentration of capacity enables airlines to generate extensive long-haul networks that deliver millions of tourists to the UK while also supporting transfer operations for other European destinations and long-haul carriers.

France remains among the world's most popular destinations for international visitors. Data from

UN tourism publications and associated analysis report France as one of the world's most visited countries by international tourist arrivals, benefiting from the popularity of Paris as a global city and the appeal of regional destinations from the Riviera to the Alps. Charles de Gaulle's position as one of the world's busiest airports for international passenger traffic – with more than 64 million international passengers in 2024 – reflects France's tourism appeal.

These multi-airport systems serve a function beyond simple point-to-point traffic, as the long-haul networks also generate substantial volumes of transfer passengers who may not leave the airport but nonetheless enable the high-frequency services required to sustain long-haul visitor numbers. A self-reinforcing cycle is created in which the appeal of global networks to visitors enables airlines to justify long-haul capacity commitments.

Europe's Tourism Rankings Tighten as Demand Surges

At the regional level, Europe remains the world's premier tourism region by some distance. Latest highlights from UN tourism bodies report hundreds of millions of foreign visitors to European destinations in 2024, with Spain, France and Italy among the countries reporting the largest increases in overnight stays and arrivals. Separate analysis based on UN data reports France as one of the world's most visited countries by foreign arrivals, with the United Kingdom among the world's ten most visited countries.

Eurostat-based research on tourism nights reports that France and the UK are part of a small group of countries that account for the majority of Europe's tourism activity. In 2024, Spain, Italy, France and Germany accounted for well over half of all nights spent in tourist accommodation within the European Union, with France alone accounting for more than 450 million nights. Though the UK is not covered in EU statistics, parallel studies report the UK as one of the largest tourism economies by visitor spending and net tourism revenue within Europe.

This competitive positioning puts the UK and France in direct competition with one another – as well as Spain, Italy and other Mediterranean countries – for the attention of long-haul visitors. As airlines increase capacity once more, long-haul visitors arriving in London or Paris are frequently using these gateways as a means of accessing holiday destinations across Europe. This dynamic intersects with wider debates over whether airport networks and tourism networks are following a similar pattern of development.

Analysts report that in the current environment, even relatively small increases in passenger numbers can generate billions of additional tourism revenue. With the European airport network growing passenger traffic by more than 7 percent year on year in 2024 and international traffic rising by nearly 9 percent, the UK and French gateways are well-placed to benefit from further increases.

Policy, Capacity and Competitiveness in the Airport Race

The competition between UK and French airports is also spilling over into discussion of policy and capacity issues. UK government immigration statistics report that approximately 88 percent of all passenger arrivals in 2024 were via air, emphasizing the importance of air travel to the country's interface with the outside world. New initiatives such as electronic travel authorizations for specific nationalities who currently do not require them are being phased in to facilitate new visitor categories.

Debates about the long-term capacity of London's airport network – particularly Heathrow – continue, as passenger numbers have approached historic peaks. Industry reports suggest that

Heathrow is considering expansion options following a series of record-breaking months in 2024 and 2025, though any expansion would need to take account of competing demands for land and environmental concerns.

France faces similar issues at Charles de Gaulle and Orly airports. Air-traffic statistics from the transport ministry and Groupe ADP report steady increases in passenger numbers but also the effects of regulatory or event-driven restrictions. In 2024 and 2025, event-related security measures and logistical restrictions impacted passenger numbers at Charles de Gaulle despite overall growth in the airport system. Environmental policy issues, notably proposals to restrict short-haul flights in favor of rail travel in some circumstances, are also impacting the development of France's long-haul and domestic aviation systems.

Both countries are making significant investments in rail and regional transport to spread tourism opportunities beyond their capital cities, but the dominance of long-haul networks at London and Paris means that their leading airports will continue to be key points of entry for North American, Gulf and Asian visitors in the near term. This will be a crucial factor in the competition for high-spending long-haul tourists and airline partnerships.

Transit Hubs, Tourism Spend and the Next Phase of Growth

While visitor numbers remain a key focus, the relationship between passenger traffic and tourism spend is also of considerable interest. Analyses drawing on international tourism accounts report that in recent years the United Kingdom has ranked among the world's top recipients of tourism export revenue, with spending by foreign visitors comparable to Spain and the United States. France maintains its position as a major tourism economy, with high visitor numbers and strong revenue generation from both leisure and business travel.

The structure of the UK and French networks plays a role in this comparison: London's airport network, dominated by Heathrow, serves as a primary transatlantic gateway, sustaining lucrative business aviation networks that also support tourism traffic. Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport acts as a European hub for several global airline alliances, channeling visitors from Africa, the Middle East and Asia into France and across Europe. **Both systems have a strong incentive to maximize the proportion of transiting passengers who make an extended stay or return visit for leisure purposes.**

Observers of the European tourism industry believe that competition between these gateway systems will intensify as airlines restructure their networks to take advantage of new opportunities. With Europe's overall tourism performance now at or above pre-pandemic levels, the next phase of growth in international visitor numbers may come from attracting higher-spending visitors and encouraging longer stays or visits to non-capital cities.

For now, the statistics suggest that the UK and France are poised to compete strongly for tourism traffic in the years ahead, with their extensive airport networks serving as a vital infrastructure for international travel. Any significant change in international tourism patterns will be apparent in London and Paris.

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