

JOURNAL REPORTS: YEAR IN REVIEW

Who's Traveling Now—and Where and Why

Rachel Fu looks at the tourism numbers, and tells us what they reveal

By Dan Weil

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Travel is gradually rebounding, after freezing in March 2020, when the Covid pandemic hit with full force.

Domestic travel and tourism spending is on pace to total \$656.1 billion this year, up 111% from last year, but still down 34% from pre-pandemic 2019, according to the midpoint estimates of the University of Florida's Eric Friedheim Tourism Institute.

For 2022, it predicts travel and tourism spending will rise by 70% from 2021 at the midpoint of its estimate, topping the 2019 total by 15%—though the emergence of the Omicron variant has created new uncertainty.

To make sense of these numbers, we spoke with Rachel Fu, chair of the University of Florida's tourism, hospitality and event management department and director of the Eric Friedheim Tourism Institute.

Here are edited excerpts of our conversation.

WSJ: *What's the general prognosis for travel now, in light of the pandemic?*



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DR. FU: No one would have predicted in March 2020 that we'd be able to travel domestically and internationally by now. Omicron has just become a stressor for this winter. The world is still waiting to learn more about this new variant. Is it less life-threatening but more contagious? How can we travel smarter and safer? Shall I ask my relatives and friends to take rapid Covid tests before our holiday gatherings? We can see the bright side, assuming virus issues are resolved collaboratively and in a timely manner.

Whatever businesses can turn this crisis into opportunity will succeed. Whoever can adapt will gain customers' trust.

WSJ: *What parts of the country are people traveling to?*

DR. FU: Nationally, we can see that travel flows have been increasing in making trips to destinations such as Florida, New York, Colorado and various national parks since summer 2021. One reason for this was that those preferred destinations offer a great choice of combining indoor and outdoor activities. It seems that visitors are trying to

avoid long flights and long waits at crowded airports if they can amid the pandemic. Crowded indoor attractions, entertainment facilities, casinos, theme parks, restaurants and theaters have been identified as areas that people are avoiding, especially in light of reports of Covid surges.



Visitors view Delicate Arch in Arches National Park in Utah. Outdoor activities have been a big draw.

PHOTO: NIKI CHAN WYLIE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Skiing at Jackson Hole, Wyo.

PHOTO: GREG VON DOERSTEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ: What differences are you seeing in international versus domestic travel and business versus leisure?

DR. FU: International travel is rebounding more slowly than domestic. So many countries don't have enough vaccines. And leisure travel is recovering faster than business, which is expected to still be 30% below normal next year.

For business travel, it will be up to organizers to make conferences safe. Some people will feel comfortable coming in person, while others will use Zoom. For conferences that already have taken place, we have seen people take precautions.

In the past, we greeted each other at conferences by shaking hands and hugging. We ate side by side, sharing dishes. Now that's a luxury.

WSJ: Is there any pattern in the demographics of people who are traveling or not traveling?

DR. FU: People are now feeling more comfortable in enjoying their social life. Families that have young kids and elderly members are likely to travel more cautiously than other groups. While more individuals are vaccinated, if cases aren't surging, especially numbers of hospitalized cases and deaths, many destinations and attractions will be back to what they were in 2019 or even stronger when those business units have adopted proper health and safety protocols and have implemented logistical arrangements effectively.

WSJ: Are people going on longer trips? Shorter trips? What kinds of hotels and destinations seem to be attracting more travelers?

DR. FU: People tend to stay in one destination longer to avoid unnecessary risk in moving from one location to another one with added contacts with strangers. Hotels and destinations that are promoting and implementing cutting-edge technology in cleaning their facilities and visualizations of their cleanliness, coupled with consumers' positive reviews, seem to be attracting more travelers.

WSJ: Are people thinking of travel differently? Are their goals in travel the same as before the pandemic?

DR. FU: The demands for both business and leisure trips are rising at an escalated speed. People have been locked down for good public-health reasons. Emotionally, leisure trips will be very needed and therapeutic for people. The word "leisure" implies freedom. It's how we enjoy our leisure time, and during our leisure trips we have pure freedom to choose what we enjoy doing and seeing and whom to be with. Leisure time secures a platform for us to execute our freedom to put emotional distance between ourselves and our stressors. The travel demand will be thriving in 2023 and after.



A guest by a hotel pool in Mykonos, Greece. Leisure trips will be very important for people after the limits of the pandemic, Dr. Fu says.

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