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HVS Monday Musings: International Flight Resumption – A Gradual Return to Normalcy for the Indian Travel Sector

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The resumption of regular international flights in India is the first step towards a gradual return to normalcy for the travel and hospitality sectors. Read on to know more.

After a pandemic-induced two-year hiatus, India resumed all regular international flights with full capacity last week, a much-anticipated welcome update for the hospitality industry. Six Indian airlines have been allowed to operate 1,466 international departures per week, while 60 international carriers have been allowed to operate 1,783 flights to and from India for the summer schedule. The government has also removed certain COVID-19 restrictions for international flights, including the requirement to keep three seats vacant for medical emergencies, as well as the need for the crew to have full PPE kit. As a result, several Indian and international airlines are planning to gradually ramp up their operations in the country to their pre-COVID levels.

The resumption of scheduled international flights is the first step toward a gradual return to normalcy for the Indian travel and hospitality sectors, and it is expected to kickstart the recovery of both outbound and inbound tourism in the country. There is significant pent-up demand for international travel, as is evident by the recent surge in searches and bookings for international flights and holidays. For instance, on the first day of international flight resumption, India's two largest airports – Delhi and Mumbai – handled 282 international flights, and the numbers are expected to rise even further in the coming weeks.





While travel sentiment and pent-up demand for international travel are strong, the demand has been hampered so far by high airfares, which have increased sharply due to rising oil prices, a limited number of flights operating under the air bubbles, and the impact of the Ukraine-Russia conflict. However, as over 3,200 flights per week will now operate to and from India, up from 2,000 a week under the air bubbles, airfares are expected to soften to reasonable levels within a few months. Travelers would also be able to choose cheaper connecting or transit flights, which were not an option under air-bubble agreements.

Lower airfares, combined with India relaxing COVID-related restrictions, including quarantine-free travel for fully vaccinated international arrivals, are expected to boost inbound tourism, including medical and MICE tourism in the country. However, things may not be as rosy as they appear in the case of outbound tourism, as travel protocols that differ from country to country may act as roadblocks in the revival. While some destinations such as Maldives and Dubai have significantly reduced COVID-related restrictions, vaccination guidelines in some places like the EU, make booster shots almost mandatory for travelers entering the region. However, booster or precautionary shots are currently available only for the 60-plus population in India. Moreover, Indian families traveling with children under the age of 12 who have not yet been vaccinated may also face difficulties while traveling abroad due to stringent and complicated rules.

There is no denying that there is a huge appetite for international travel, but travel patterns will remain volatile. COVID cases are once again on the rise in certain parts of the world, including some European countries, Hong Kong, and China, which has imposed strict lockdown rules in key cities. Besides that, the inconsistent protocols across countries continue to be a source of concern for travelers, which may initially result in a surge in outbound travel to less restrictive countries, and these factors will also aid the continued growth of domestic tourism.