MYTHOS GROUP

POST-COVID-19,
REIMAGINING TRAVEL AND TOURISM

BY AMIT PATEL

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ABSTRACT

Most of us have experienced disrupted travel plans due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While strides have been made in the past year to bring travel and tourism back to its pre-pandemic state, complications remain as conditions continually change. Despite an uncertain future, some trends have emerged that seem to be here to stay for the time being. This article explores factors and trends within the travel and tourism sector as it continues to be affected by COVID.

"The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page."

Saint Augustine

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it many things — sickness, disease, financial loss, anxiety, fear — and it completely transformed life as we once knew it. Although the pandemic has impacted virtually every industry, it hit one particularly hard. According to the World Tourism Organization, "global tourism suffered its worst year on record in 2020, with [international arrivals dropping by 74%.](#)"

This pandemic-related travel shock cost the tourism industry a [1.3 trillion dollar loss in export revenues](#). The travel industry consists largely of airlines, cruise ships and tourism destinations, and not one of these sectors was left unaffected by the novel coronavirus. With the pandemic still ongoing, it has become obvious that these industries must learn how to adapt.

As I write this article, the laws and regulations surrounding masking and other precautions are changing rapidly. Many governors have announced their intention to relax masking mandates. The federal transportation mask mandate in the U.S. is still extended through March 18, 2022, but the situation on the ground is very fluid.

Taking all of this uncertainty into account, let's take a closer look at how these three travel sectors might move forward in the face of this pandemic and other similar disruptions that are possible in the future.

"Travel isn't always pretty. It isn't always comfortable. Sometimes it hurts, it even breaks your heart. But that's okay. The journey changes you; it should change you. It leaves marks on your memory, on your consciousness, on your heart, and on your body. You take something with you. Hopefully, you leave something good behind."

Anthony Bourdain

THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY

Pre-pandemic, the airline industry was experiencing consistent growth in world passenger traffic. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, airlines saw an overall reduction of 2,703 million passengers (-60%). [See chart below.]

World passenger traffic evolution 1945 – 2022
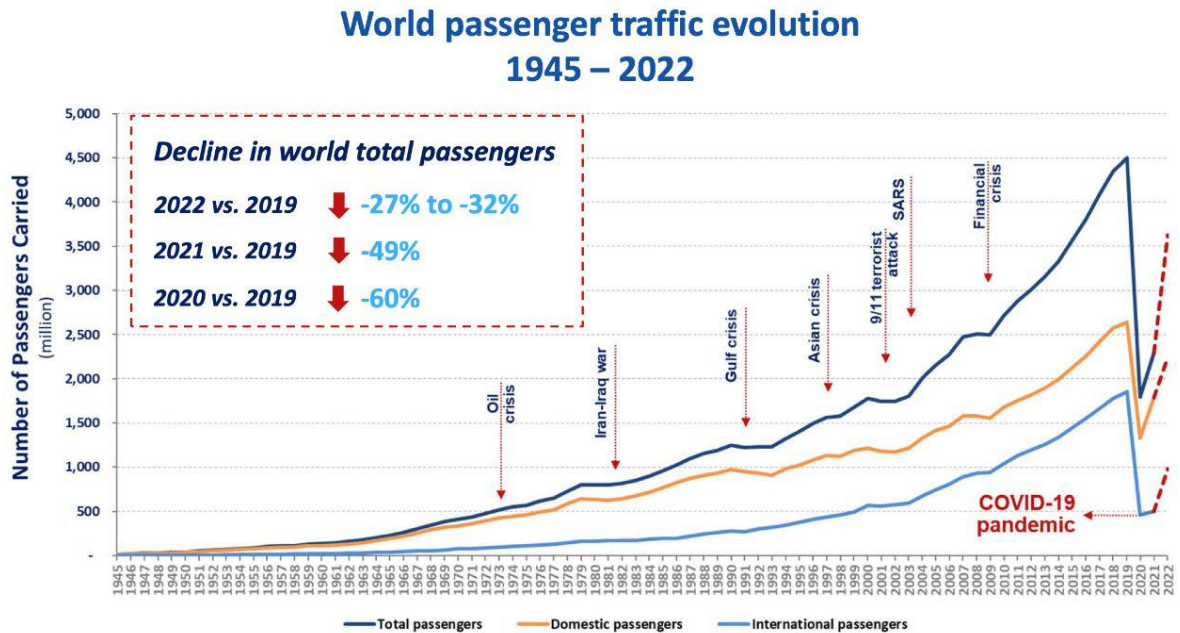
Source: ICAO Air Transport Reporting Form A and A-S

Due to social distancing requirements, airlines were unable to sell 50% of their seats. This, combined with the organic loss of passengers, resulted in a 372 billion-dollar loss of operating revenues for airlines, dwarfing the hits the industry took in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and in 2008 during the global financial crisis. When the Harvard Business Review interviewed airline experts, they all agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic was "the biggest crisis the aviation industry has ever faced."

Emergency Masking

As part of an emergency response, airlines began elevating their hygiene and safety standards, and many turned to digitization to streamline the travel experience. Major U.S. airlines, including JetBlue, American, Delta and Southwest, issued a mask mandate that required air travelers to wear masks inside airports and on airplanes to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Both the CEOs of Southwest Airlines and American Airlines claimed that masks on airlines served no purpose, considering the airplanes' advanced filtration systems sufficiently reduced the risk of COVID-19 transmission. However, Linsey Marr, an aerosol scientist at