

# Global restrictions nudge tourists to embark on a discovery of India

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Stringent lockdowns, closed borders and changing testing rules set the travel industry back by three decades in 2020, according to The World Tourism Organization, which estimates the cost to international travel at over a trillion dollars. But 2021 was the year of the domestic tourist.

Although there is no data available on domestic tourists for 2021, an estimated 2.3 billion tourist visits were recorded in 2019, a figure that fell to just 610 million in 2020, as per analysis firm Statista.

The year 2021 definitely saw a big uptick in domestic travel, according to travel sites and hotels. Domestic tourism all around the world saw a boom. India, too, witnessed an encouraging revival following

the second covid wave.

Pent-up desire encouraged travellers to capitalize on long weekends, festive holidays, winter breaks and every other opportunity to get away from home—as long as it was a short drive or flight away.

“Our customers pursued weekend retreats, extended getaways, staycations, drivecations, sea-cations and spa-cations. We also saw the emergence of new concepts like reunion travel and responsible travel. To cater to the requirements, we introduced customized concepts like private journeys for small groups and ‘create your own tour’,” said Daniel Dsouza president and country head, SOTC Travel, a subsidiary of Fairfax Financial Holdings Group.

Following the easing of restrictions on domestic airline operations, the company saw an uptick in demand for air-inclusive travel packages of



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extended holidays from an average period of four days to 7-10 days this year.

The demand for domestic travel shot up by 3x as compared with 2020 for SOTC.

To be sure, trips to nearby leisure destinations, weekend stays at resorts and even city

hotels generated demand. For many travel companies and hospitality firms, the average rates and occupancies are higher than same-time performance in pre-covid years.

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throughout the country and companies used this to their advantage. Glenn Fogel, CEO of Booking.com, said some countries did much better because their citizens rediscovered great things to do in their domestic market.

“This helped mitigate some of the impact on the tourism sector as several countries saw that the travel industry was doing okay because of pure domestic demand. And with international travel not coming back yet at all and certainly with a new variant out there, there could be a benefit for domestic travel companies,” he added.

Online travel aggregator MakeMyTrip did an ad campaign around ‘MyIndia’, nudging travellers to explore Indian locations. Deep Kalra, founder of MakeMyTrip, said the pandemic is said to have doubled the number of internet shoppers and while travel hadn’t

received the full impact of that yet, the company touched about 88% of pre-pandemic levels of travel in domestic occupancies in October.

“The big benefit has been that people have discovered our own country. That has been awesome. I know so many people who say they went to Kashmir after a couple of decades or more,” Kalra said.

Kalra added that hopefully people will continue with a good mix of international and domestic trips.

“When covid is behind us or at least when the big fear is away, people are going to start ticking off their bucket list like never before,” he added.

Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa, Rajasthan, Andamans and

Kerala remained the preferred destinations. Larger hotel chains, too, noticed a complete overhaul in how their businesses worked.

The Radisson Hotel Group, for instance, saw its India domestic demand spike 99% in 2021 versus 60% in 2019.

Zubin Saxena, the company’s managing director and vice-president, South Asia, said once international travel borders start to open up and as more and more countries

vaccinate their citizens, there will be additional demand from domestic consumers.

“This is coming from the trends we have seen in the last 12-18 months. We have seen the power of domestic demand. We have seen the domestic traveller, having a

mindset to travel around to consume the lodging product that’s available in the country. What that’s meant for us is that at this point in time there is tremendous growth and opportunity in India in the tier-3, 4 and 5 markets in the coming years,” he said.

In the past two years, since the imposition of international travel restrictions, hotels have been primarily dependent on domestic business.

Akhil Arora, chief operating officer at Espire Hospitality that owns brands like Six Senses Fort Bawara and Country Inn Hotels and Resorts, said domestic tourism has flourished in the intervals when there have been no covid-related lockdowns.

But this comes with one downside: The domestic consumer is very demanding and only those who are able to provide quality will do well in the future, he added.

**The demand for domestic travel shot up by three times as compared with 2020 figures for SOTC Travel**