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CAN I TRAVEL THIS SUMMER? HOW TO HAVE A SAFE AND SAVVY VACATION

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After a year during which many Americans canceled travel plans and hunkered down amid the pandemic, this summer figures to mark a tentative return to traditional pastimes as more people get Covid-19 vaccines.

It won't look quite like prepandemic travel, however, as many states are still limiting capacity in public venues and once-popular businesses reliant on tourism may have folded. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends against unnecessary travel even though it has eased its mask advisory for vaccinated people in public settings and said in April that fully vaccinated people are less likely to get and spread Covid-19.

But vacation options are growing as more people get inoculated against the virus. For instance, cruising could be back by mid-July as the CDC has reportedly eased its conditional no-sail order to potentially allow cruising based on the levels of guest vaccinations.

For some, taking a vacation has become necessary travel from a mental-health standpoint, said Dr. Emily Landon, an infectious-disease specialist at the University of Chicago Medicine who is also working with Chicago and Illinois officials on safe reopening guidelines. “If you’re just looking to go on vacation, because you need to escape your life...then you want to just be as careful as possible,” she says.

Careful traveling this year means keeping up safety protocols whether someone is vaccinated or not: washing hands, wearing masks in crowded public places, and maintaining social distance to help reduce spreading the virus. Experts say these precautions are particularly important for vulnerable seniors as vaccines aren’t 100% effective.

For now, vaccine passports aren’t likely to be required widely since there is no credential standards, but international travelers may have to provide proof of vaccinations and/or negative tests before boarding, and some industries also are likely to require screening or vaccine documentation.

Check ahead: Jan Jones, professor of hospitality and tourism at the University of New Haven, says her biggest tip for travelers is to start researching now and call ahead for reservations for anything they want to see or do. Don’t just rely on websites, she says, as they might not be updated with the latest information as the pandemic ebbs and flows.

Call again just before hitting the road to reconfirm reservations and know what restrictions are in place, she adds. And be sure to find out what the vaccination requirements are for the places you’re visiting, if there are capacity limits or negative Covid tests required.

Even if vacationers are traveling familiar roads in their own vehicles, Paula Twidale, senior vice president of travel at AAA Travel, says they should plan their stops as much as possible and look at what’s open along the way, including rest stops and gas stations.

The travel association also has an online Covid-19 travel restrictions map that is updated several times a week that includes state and county travel restrictions to help travelers plan.

Ultimately, says Pauline Frommer, editorial director for travel guidebook site Frommers.com, travelers can expect fewer choices and higher demand. Hotel chains closed some locations, airline routes may be different as many cut services to smaller cities, and it may be harder to get a car rental as many companies sold vehicles to stay in business last year.

Vaccines and negative tests: Vaccines aren't required in the U.S. and airlines aren't requiring them as proof to fly. But cruise operators, including Royal Caribbean Cruise Line and Norwegian Cruise Lines Holdings, will be primarily open to adult cruisers who've gotten vaccinations, with tighter restrictions on voyages carrying many unvaccinated customers like children.

The European Union recently said it would allow Americans who have been fully vaccinated to visit this summer, but offered no timeline on when all member countries would be open. A few countries such as Greece and Iceland are welcoming tourists.

Even if travelers are vaccinated, the CDC requires all air passengers, including citizens, coming into the U.S. to show proof of negative Covid tests within three days before traveling. While most states and cities have no restrictions on visitors, Hawaii requires proof of a negative Covid test to enter to avoid a mandatory 10-day self-quarantine.

John Rose, chief risk and security officer at Altour, a travel management company, says some countries may require separate proof of medical insurance coverage. Additionally, the CDC suggests all travelers get tested for Covid when they return from overseas.

As far as "vaccination passports" go, Rose says different countries are mulling how to implement these as there hasn't been an agreement on what digital platforms to use, but he expects there will be a nationally recognized adopted platform since many countries are planning to implement these when allowing in visitors.

"You have the right to not take the vaccine, but that doesn't mean you're going to have permission to enter a certain country."

Social distancing: Most major attractions such as museums, stadiums, and amusement parks have advance reservation systems with timed entry and exits, which help them plan better because most large venues have some sort of capacity limit. Hours may be shortened, too.

"It's going to be harder to have that sense of spontaneity. I think a lot of the vacation experiences will have to be planned in advance for the next couple years," Frommer says.

Landon says families and groups with mixed vaccine status—where some people have their shots and others don't—should practice social distancing to protect the unvaccinated. That means sticking with familiar protocols such as wearing masks in

public, opting for outdoor activities and avoiding crowds, especially indoors where visitors aren't wearing masks.

While some states such as Texas have lifted all restrictions on crowd sizes and mask mandates, that doesn't mean individual businesses and organizations won't have these restrictions in place, says Rose. Just as a business may have a "no shirt, no shoes, no service" policy, they may add a "no mask" policy, denying service to people who aren't wearing masks.

Landon suggests mixed-status groups that are vacationing in areas that are fully open should mind how prevalent Covid is in a community when deciding what activities to do, and suggested sticking to places with occupancy limits to help with social distancing.

"Would you go to a place with a cholera outbreak? Would you vacation there? I think for the good of society, we should avoid hotspots," she says.