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## TRENDSPOTTING

# For better or for worse, some pandemic-prompted travel changes are forever

Strict cleaning protocols, flexible cancellation policies, contactless check-ins. 'People have started realizing how many of these things are actually nice.'

By **Jon Marcus** Globe Correspondent, Updated August 11, 2021, 2:00 p.m.



The Vi-Yo-Let UV robot at the Yotel in Boston. For an additional charge, guests can have the robot blast their room with UV light before arrival to kill germs. This kind of new cleaning protocol is likely to stick around post-pandemic. BRIAN SAMUELS

When indoor smoking was banned in her native Istanbul, Irem Onder Neuhofer remembers, restaurants and bars that didn't want to lose customers quickly added outdoor seating.

Meant as a temporary solution 13 years ago, the idea was so well received it became permanent, said Onder Neuhofer, a professor of hospitality and tourism management at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Now, she said, innovations forced by the COVID-19 pandemic are permanently changing travel in the same way.

Technology designed to keep people at a distance is speeding everything from check-in to room service. Cleaning protocols and fee waivers are sticking around. Hotels and resorts that moved dining, gyms, and spa services into the open air during COVID are doubling down on the outdoors.

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Just as happened in Istanbul, "people have started realizing how many of these things are actually nice," Onder Neuhofer said.

Among the most momentous changes: liberalized refund and cancellation policies. Those are "one of the better things that has come out of the pandemic," said David Harris, CEO of the travel adviser network Ensemble Travel Group.

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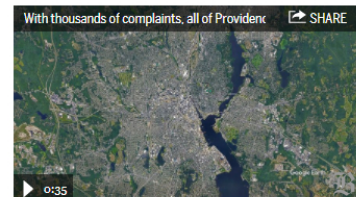
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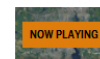


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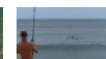
## BOSTON GLOBE VIDEO



Reservoir Avenue in Providence has the highest concentration of complaint calls to police for incidents involving ATV and dirt bike riders in both 2020 and 2021 (Video by John Hancock/Globe Staff)



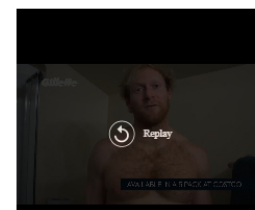
With thousands of complaints, all of Providence has an ATV problem



Cape Cod resident catches great white shark



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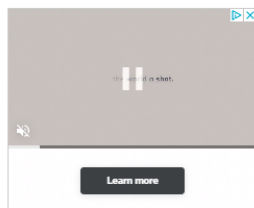
An outdoor yoga class at Hotel X in Toronto last year featured participants inside domes to comply with social distancing measures and to control the spread of COVID-19. COLE BURSTON/GETTY IMAGES/FILE

Even if they wanted to, it will be hard for providers to entirely reverse this trend, said Scott Keyes, founder and chief flight expert of Scott's Cheap Flight. "The airlines really made a big hullabaloo about it being a permanent change as opposed to something that was just for the pandemic," Keyes said.

And consumers really, really like it. A flexible cancellation policy is now second only to cost among the factors they consider when deciding where to travel, a survey by Discover found. More than half said they're making reservations knowing they might have to cancel, according to another survey, by American Express Travel — a "book now, figure it out later" mentality," American Express Travel president Audrey Hendley said.

As planes and hotels fill again, there are signs that some of this flexibility might "evolve," Keyes said. Already, some travel companies have changed their rules — cruise lines, for instance, that were letting guests cancel up until the day of departure, are moving that to 48 hours or more in advance. Langham Hotels & Resorts is ending its free cancellation policy at the end of September, though a spokeswoman said it could be extended.

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"Not that it's unreasonable, but I think we're entering a sort of twilight" on convenient cancellations, said James Ferrara, cofounder and president of the independent travel agents network IntelTravel. "Now it's some date that isn't as far out as it used to be, but not as close in as in the depths of the pandemic."

Still, given consumer sentiment, said Beth Butzlaff, vice president of global partner relations at the travel agency network Virtuoso, it's good business for providers to continue being flexible. "They will find that clients are more attracted to that," Butzlaff said.

The pandemic also vastly speeded up the adoption of technology that reduces lines and wait times. Almost every step of travel can be contactless now, with apps that not only check in and make payments but display room-service menus and property information using QR codes, and wristbands that can unlock doors and make payments.

"These were on the scope before COVID came around, but this has just accelerated it," said Butzlaff. "And more than ever, clients are ready for it. Look at what they've had to do in the last year: My 85-year-old dad learned Zoom." The pandemic, she said, "has forced that demographic that was sort of holding up the technology to now be driving it."

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At the Hotel Concord in New Hampshire, Amazon personal assistants respond to guest requests. Virgin Hotels' Lucy app controls room lights and thermostats. Some cruise lines and several Marriott hotels have installed biometric face scan kiosks for check-in, spa reservations, and payment.

"These are actually long-term improvements to travel," Ferrara said. "If you're allowed to say that there's a silver lining of the last 15 months, that's it."

Hyper-vigilant cleaning protocols will also stay, since cruise ships, airlines, and hotels stocked up on expensive equipment including hand sanitizers and fogging, electrostatic, and ultraviolet filters.

"I didn't see anybody looking to make that investment before the pandemic, and I think it's with us to stay," Ferrara said.

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The impulse to socially distance is changing where people go, too — to so-called second cities and less densely populated areas instead of megalopolises. Airline route maps are shifting, with more service to far-flung destinations and airports near national parks and beach destinations; there's now a record number of nonstops to Reno, for example, which is outpacing Las Vegas in hotel occupancy.

The pandemic, Ferrara said, made people “think more easily about alternative destinations they could visit. I hope that stays with us. It will be kinder to the planet.”

Reservations policies imposed to control crowding at museums, theme parks, and other attractions also will continue in many cases, making travel less anxiety-provoking.

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Some destinations that were drowning in tourists before the pandemic are leveraging this idea. In heavily visited Kyoto, a popular temple is accepting time-specific reservations and the tourism association has put cameras at busy locations that travelers can check before deciding where to go; an app lists wait times for restaurants and stores.



Sixty-seven percent of pandemic travelers who combined vacations with remote work or online schooling want to do it again, a Vrbo survey found. ADOBE STOCK/ALEXBRYLOVHK - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

People also liked the idea of work-cations — so much that at least one company, JayWay Travel, has spun off a division devoted to them. Sixty-seven percent of pandemic travelers who combined vacations with remote work or online schooling want to do it again, a Vrbo survey found.

This has hastened faster Wi-Fi and more business services. The Mandarin Oriental Canouan in the Grenadines, for instance, has upgraded to fiber optic Wi-Fi. Luxury destinations such as Seven Stars Resort & Spa in Turks and Caicos continue to offer extended-stay deals. And while the “work-in-and-work-out” package has ended at the Langham hotels, which offered rooms set up as offices and personal gyms, it will still provide rooms for those purposes if asked, a spokeswoman said. COVID also forced other agreeable changes that will stick around at hotels. Big-city chefs, for instance, shifted to countryside hotels and inns, where a few will stay, including Daniel Boulud’s seasonal pop-up, which he opened with his team from Café Boulud at Blantyre in the Berkshires last summer.

The pandemic reminded some resorts that their guests liked being outside. Inn by the Sea in Maine has built a permanent outdoor spa cabana. The Auberge Saint-Antoine in Quebec City invested in heated greenhouses on its outdoor terraces for private dining; they’ll be back out on the decks come fall. So popular were the outdoor tents and wood-fired oven set up during COVID on the front lawn of the Ocean Edge Resort & Golf Club on Cape Cod, they’re back for good, along with a pop-up outdoor winter “frost bar” for which the hotel not only added igloos during the pandemic, but has bought more.

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Some pandemic necessities have become post-COVID luxuries. Princess Cruises has added a “meditation class” that tracks guests and delivers food, drinks, and sunscreen to them. Logan Airport passengers waiting for flights will continue to be able to order food and sundries brought to them at the gate through the Bos2Go service started by concessionaires in February.

The Ritz Carlton, San Francisco converted a one-time outdoor event space in its courtyard into a private park that will remain for the long term. And when the gym had to close during COVID at Montrose West Hollywood, the boutique hotel permanently transformed its rooftop tennis court into an outdoor running track and fitness space.

Other changes may be less popular. Limited housekeeping and an end to breakfast buffets, both forced by COVID, lowered labor costs for hotels, which seem determined to keep things that way. Major chains have said that they expect to reduce their number of employees; rather than giving guests the option of forgoing regular room cleaning, as before the pandemic, some will now require them to ask for it — possibly, Ferrara speculates, at an additional charge.

More destinations — Aruba, the Bahamas, Bermuda, Costa Rica — are requiring health insurance than before the pandemic, and more travelers are opting for cancellation and evacuation coverage. The average age of people buying travel insurance has fallen from 55 to 38, according to Squaremouth, an insurance comparison website; that suggests insurance is likely to remain a part of more people’s travel spending, Squaremouth travel specialist Megan Moncrief said.

Some providers have started to include travel insurance among their offerings. Sandals Resorts is automatically providing insurance through the end of 2022 and the Viva Wyndham Resorts in the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico are offering free insurance that covers telemedicine, prescriptions, COVID-19 testing, and emergency travel home.

While some of the permanent changes may make travel easier, some will make it harder — health monitoring in some destinations, conflicting rules and regulations, the fine print on all of those insurance policies.

But one other important thing has changed, said Damon Corkin, founder and director of the South American travel company Andean Discovery, which is based in Weston.

“People have a greater appreciation for travel now more than ever, so they are willing to be more tolerant to an unforeseen tweak in their itinerary,” Corkin said. “Because, after all, they still get to travel.”

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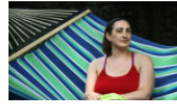


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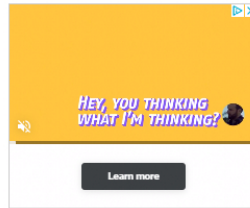
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