

Travel bans by governments could threaten air travel recovery - IATA

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has announced that the recovery in air travel continued in October 2021 with broad-based improvements in both domestic and international markets. It also warned that the imposition of travel bans by governments, against the advice of the World Health Organisation (WHO), could threaten the sector's recovery.



Source: Andrew Donovan Valdivia via [Unsplash](#)

Comparisons show that between 2021 and 2020 monthly results are distorted by the extraordinary impact of Covid-19, unless otherwise noted all comparisons are to October 2019, which followed a normal demand pattern.

- Total demand for air travel in October 2021 (measured in revenue passenger kilometres or RPKs) was down 49.4% compared to October 2019. This was improved over the 53.3% fall recorded in September 2021, compared to two years earlier.
- Domestic markets were down 21.6% compared to October 2019, bettering the 24.2% decline recorded in September versus September 2019.

- International passenger demand in October was 65.5% below October 2019, compared to a 69.0% decline for September versus the 2019 period, with all regions showing improvement.

"October's traffic performance reinforces that people will travel when they are permitted to. Unfortunately, government responses to the emergence of the Omicron variant are putting at risk the global connectivity it has taken so long to rebuild," said Willie Walsh, IATA's director-general.

International passenger markets

European carriers' October international traffic declined 50.6% versus October 2019, much improved over the 56.5% drop in September compared to September 2019. Capacity dropped by 41.3% and load factor fell 13.7 percentage points to 72.5%.

Asia-Pacific airlines saw their October international traffic fall 92.8% compared to October 2019, fractionally improved over the 93.1% decline recorded for September 2021 compared to two years ago. Capacity dropped 83.8% and the load factor was down by 44.0 percentage points to 35.7%, the lowest among regions by far.

Middle Eastern airlines had a 60.3% demand drop in October compared to October 2019, a huge jump over the 67.1% traffic drop recorded in September against September 2019. Capacity declined 49.1%, and load factor slipped by 16.1 percentage points to 57.5%.

North American carriers experienced a 57.0% traffic drop in October versus the 2019 period, improved from a 61.4% decline in September 2021 compared to the same month in 2019. Capacity dropped 43.2%, and load factor fell 20.0 percentage points to 62.4%.

Latin American airlines saw a 55.1% drop in October traffic, compared to the same month in 2019. In September, traffic was down 61.4% compared to two years ago. October capacity fell 52.5% and load factor dropped by 4.3 percentage points to 76.9%, which was the highest load factor among the regions for the 13th consecutive month.

African airlines' traffic fell 60.2% in October versus two years' ago. Traffic in September was down 62.1% over the corresponding 2019 period. October capacity was down 49.0% and load factor declined by 15.2 percentage points to 54.1%.

Domestic passenger markets

India's domestic market saw a 27.0% decline in October demand compared to October 2019 – greatly improved from a 40.5% fall in September following the easing of some control measures.

Russia's October domestic traffic was up 24% compared to October 2019, which was deceleration from the 29.3% growth recorded in September 2021 over the two-year ago period, attributable to a strong wave of Covid-19 and the start of the winter travel season.

"The lifting of the US restrictions on travel from some 33 countries last month raised hopes that a surge in pent-up travel demand would buoy traffic over the coming Northern Hemisphere winter. But the emergence of the Omicron variant panicked many governments into once again restricting or entirely removing the freedom to travel—even though WHO clearly advised that 'blanket travel bans will not prevent the international spread, and they place a heavy burden on lives and livelihoods. The logic of the WHO advice was evident within days of Omicron's identification in South Africa, with its presence already confirmed in all continents. The ill-advised travel bans are as ineffective as closing the barn door after the horse has bolted," said Walsh.

Last month, IATA released a Blueprint to help guide governments in safely re-opening their borders with data-driven decision-making. Specifically, IATA urged governments to focus on **three key areas**:

- Simplified health protocols
- Digital solutions to process health credentials
- Covid-19 measures proportionate to risk levels with a continuous review process

"Additionally, governments must address the terrible disparity in vaccination rates that has seen the developed world offering boosters at a time when less than 10% of the African continent is fully vaccinated," said Walsh.

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