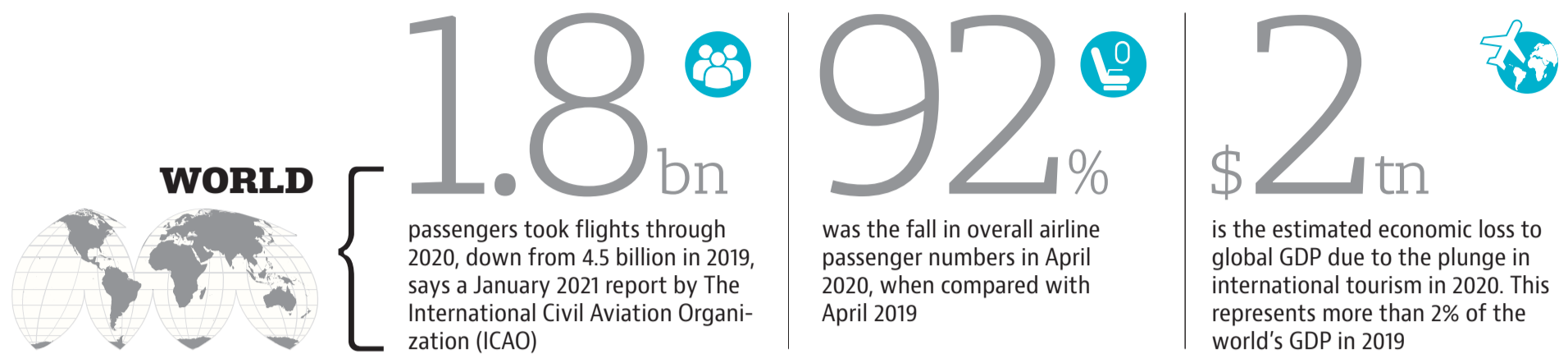


wknd | lifestyle



Up in the air: The future of travel

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It will be years before we jet about again, as we used to. But closer to home, new kinds of experiences are already taking shape

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Staycations. Workcations. Slow travel. These (and not a simulated vacation in Mars; remember We Can Remember It For You Wholesale, the Philip K Dick short story that inspired Total Recall?) look set to be the future of travel — at least till well into 2022.

Another one-and-a-half to three years. That's how long it will be before international travel returns to 2019 levels, say estimates by the UN's World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

This is further indication that the changes to the fields of travel, tourism and hospitality are here to stay, in the short to medium term. And the changes have been many. Business travel has all but entirely halted. International travel has plummeted by 72% globally, according to UNWTO estimates. It's all because of the C-word, of course; these days, everything is. In India, domestic travel began to pick up by end-2020. "We got nine times as many bookings in Q3 (October to December) than in Q2 of this financial year and that's grown since January," says Rajeev Kale, president for holidays and MICE at Thomas Cook India.

But this wasn't travel as it had been before the pandemic. People are opting to drive where they can and fly as little as possible. There's been growing demand for long-term homestays — villas in Goa, Alibaug and Manali, among other beach and mountain destinations, now offer special deals for those staying a month or longer.

With offices shut and work-from-anywhere an option across a wide array of sectors, the hospitality sector has shifted focus to the workcating guest. Once-remote lodges, low-cost hostels and luxury villas that prided themselves on being off the grid are amping up internet speeds and offering

free high-speed wi-fi in all rooms.

Sightseeing has been replaced by explorations of local culture and cuisine. Within the metro cities, for those not keen on travel, leisure activities now include local heritage walks that require no public transport, cuisines and cultures of their city.

The staycation has become a sanity-restorer, allowing harried families and those near burnout to check into Airbnbs in their own city, or take advantage of the slashed rates at five-star hotels. "In 2021, we seem to set to travel again the way we used to 20 years ago, carrying our own food, refilling water bottles, staying in small homestays," says travel writer Raul Dias.

Slow, mindful travel will become the default for 2021 and beyond, adds travel influencer Shivya Nath. That's a big change for people prone to checking off boxes in a blur of packed itineraries that cover multiple countries in less than a week.

"Slow travel is more sustainable too, allowing a traveller to be immersed, contributing economically to smaller destinations and building a stronger connection with nature. I hope, this kind of meaningful slow travel will be a dominant trend for even longer than strictly essential," Nath says.

It's hard to say when normalcy will return to this sphere, says food and travel writer Vir Sanghvi. "Look at how the new variant in the UK sent everything back to square one. Travel from India will likely return to normal sooner; travel to India will be affected longer as Westerners will be afraid to travel too far," he adds. "It would all be much easier, of course, if the vaccination process were done properly."

New flights of fancy

The rediscovery of India

With international travel ruled out for the large part, with long flights and airport stopovers considered too high-risk, Indians are using their travel budgets to explore India, some in new ways and others in ways that are tried and tested.

Goa became even more popular through 2020 and is likely to remain so, with villa homestays, Airbnb accommodation and budget hotels being top picks. Hill stations, from Manali and Darjeeling to Khandala and Mahabaleshwar, have benefited from being a short drive away from large cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Pune.

States newer to the domestic tourism game are wooing this market too. In January, the Madhya Pradesh government even launched an Aas Paas Tourism campaign to advertise its 11 national parks and 24 wildlife sanctuaries, as well as its new homestay, village stay and farm stay options.

Travel companies have increased their domestic offerings and made them more elaborate. Thomas Cook India now offers Hidden Gems holidays for customers seeking to stay away from the more crowded traditional tourist spots. These itineraries focus on forest walks and wildlife safaris, self-driving holidays, camping and adventure trips in relatively remote locations.

"We have also tied up Amar Chitra Katha to introduce Great Indian Journeys, itineraries curated by our holiday experts and creatively illustrated via graphic comic strips in the distinctive Amar Chitra Katha style," says president and country head Rajeev Kale. The focus is on smaller, niche destinations.

The more adventurous are crafting such itineraries for themselves. "I have noticed a lot of people have gone back to their hometowns during the pandemic and started exploring those areas and being more appreciative of them," says chef Thomas Zacharias. He just completed a month-long Chef on the Road tour, which he undertakes annually and this year was focused on Uttarakhand. "The pandemic will make travel about richer, deeper and more meaningful domestic vacations," he says.



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Since July, the Work From Mountains initiative — launched by travel companies Travel The Himalayas and Sunshine Adventures — has been acting as a sort of micro-scale Airbnb for homes in the mountains. During the lockdown, the owners of the two agencies say they realised there would likely be a boom in extended-stay travel to the hill stations. "We knew a lot of people with homestays and small hotels in the mountains who were struggling with falling revenue. So we decided to help connect the two," says Prashant Mathawan, co-founder of WFM and founder of Travel The Himalayas.

The long-term workcation

Work From Home / Work From Anywhere means anyone can be a digital nomad. This lifestyle of working on the move, once possible for people in just a handful of professions (writers, bloggers, adventurous tech freelancers), is now possible for most.

Until offices and schools reopen, people tired of being trapped in their homes, cooking all their own meals, and those that can do so are likely to head out to homestays or one of the growing number of hotels now offering special deals on longer-term stays.

Hotels, homestays, even hostels in popular hill stations and coastal destinations, from Alibaug to Ooty, are altering their infrastructure to meet the new demands. Pools, for instance, are unusable (unless they come with a private villa), but everyone wants to know if the wi-fi is free.

"Earlier, not many of our homes had wi-fi or internet because we wanted people to bond offline," says Devendra Parulekar, founder of SaffronStays. "Now, in keeping with the WFH and e-learning trends, we have made our villas and estates work-friendly and pet-friendly. Some even have ready-made corners designed for Zoom calls."

New flight modes

The pandemic proved that people would do anything to travel — pay for a flight to nowhere, travel with a portable toilet, spend transit time locked in their sleeping bags. In September, Australia's Qantas Airways



WATCH Mayank Austen Soofi aka The Delhiwalla travel within his Delhi




\$370  bn

is the estimated financial loss to the global airline industry in 2020, with airports and air navigation service providers losing a further \$115 billion and \$13 billion respectively

\$120  bn

is the estimated year-on-year loss to the aviation industry in the Asia-Pacific region, according to the ICAO regional breakdown of losses. Europe lost \$100 billion, North America, \$88 billion

49-70  %

passenger numbers are expected to reach a lower and more realistic estimate of 49% of 2019 levels by June 2021. An admittedly optimistic estimate, also presented by ICAO, puts that number at 71%, with consensus that this figure is unlikely to be reached by June

ANOTHER
1.5-3
YEARS

is how long it will take for international arrivals globally to return to 2019 levels, according to estimates by the UNWTO



4



5



INDIA

50-60  mn

people boarded flights in India in 2020, according to estimates by aviation consultancy firm CAPA, down from 205 million in 2019. Of these...

80% flew within the country, up from about 68% in 2019



6



7

\$4  bn

the expected loss to the Indian aviation sector in Financial Year 2020-21, according to estimates by CAPA India

64.83  mn

fliers passed through Indian airports between April and December 2020, according to data from the Airports Authority of India, a drop of 75% over the same period in 2019

87%  %

is the estimated loss in passenger revenue to the Indian Railways. Revenue plummeted from Rs 53,000 crore in 2019 to just Rs 4,600 crore in 2020, according to IR reports



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10

offered a flight to nowhere that made headlines: first, because all it did was fly over some of the country's main tourist sites for seven hours, and then return to the airport; and second, because all tickets were sold out in minutes. "So many of our frequent fliers are used to being on a plane every other week and have been telling us they miss the experience of flying as much as the destinations themselves," Qantas chief executive Alan Joyce said in a statement at the time.

That flight kicked off more, not just by Qantas but by Taiwan's Eva Air, which has a Hello Kitty-themed flight to nowhere, and Singapore Airlines, which offers paid tours around the cockpit of a stationary airline, following which people take their seats, eat an airline meal and return home. Air India has been toying with the idea of a flight to nowhere too, though details have not been finalised yet.

Meanwhile, airport wear has moved from casual chic to spaceman mode — a full protective bodysuit that pulls up over the shoes and extends to headgear with a clear-plastic window for the face.

Sadly, most fliers tend to fall into one of two extremes — the ultra-cautious and the ultra-careless.

"I think, in the country, we are travelling very unsafely," says food and travel writer Vir Sanghvi. "People are eating and drinking throughout the flights, wearing masks below their noses, queues are packed. I just took one flight in the last one year, where I had to go to Mumbai for a wedding. It increased my hatred of airports, and it was scary. We have travelled by road to Agra, Jaipur, anyplace

that can be driven to from Delhi, instead."

In the thin upper crust of the income pie, meanwhile, demand for chartered helicopter and small aircraft services is growing, particularly in Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Udaipur, Kodaikanal and Jaipur, and especially for travel to events considered essential, such as weddings.

The indoor experience

With traffic at an all-time low, travel-centric portals such as Airbnb and Booking.com have found new ways to reach out to travellers. Live, interactive video experiences offer masterclasses by experts from around the world or discussions of culture, food and heritage across global destinations.

Booking.com's #FutureOffTravel features actors, celebrities and influencers bringing the culture of the cities and countries they have travelled to — on Instagram.

On Airbnb.com, masterclasses cover themes ranging from art, music and dance to cooking, wellness and history. There are meditation sessions by a Buddhist monk in Japan, a tour to meet the dogs of Chernobyl in Russia and a cooking session with Michelin-star chefs such as David Chang and Rôze Traore from New York City and Claudette Zepeda from San Diego. Each experience costs between Rs 5,000 and Rs 7,000.

"We also partnered with well-known Indian personalities for online experiences on subjects such as table styling with Devika Narain and the art of fashion illustration with designers Shivan and Narresh," says Simran Kodesia, communications lead for

1) Demand is growing for tree-houses and boat-houses (image 10) as people seek to isolate better while on holiday, says Airbnb. 2 & 3) Stills from virtual tours of the Jaipur City Palace and the Key Monastery in Spiti, part of the new pandemic-era offerings by India's tourism ministry, in partnership with OutsideVR. 4 & 5) Home-stays and eco-retreats are more popular. The new portal Work from Mountains focuses mainly on extended stays in the hills.

India and Southeast Asia with Airbnb. "The idea was to bring people together from across the globe over shared passions."

Hyperlocal tours

For those who didn't want to risk a journey and a new location, travel became even more domestic. The hyperlocal walk — traditionally conducted in the city's heritage areas on weekends — underwent a change. Local food history was explored in virtual sessions conducted by local history and heritage promoters such as Khaki Tours and City Explorers, and scholars such as historian Sohail Hashmi and archaeologist and food anthropologist Kurush Dalal.

Heritage experts such as Alisha Sadikot, who conducts heritage walks in Mumbai, found that the virtual medium allowed her to zoom in on much larger areas and tell a better story. She's now working to incorporate elements on that approach in her relaunched offline walks.

"The virtual world opened up a large number of audiences for me. I had many groups who attended a virtual walk and had never done a physical walk. In one virtual walk, the discussion led to how the history of Bombay was affected by the American Civil War, and participants from the US had no idea about it. Now I'm trying to tell the story of Bombay as a more global city," Sadikot says.

"One of the larger trends that I think will be the outcome of the pandemic is walks happening in the different parts of the city rather than in one area like Old Delhi or South Bombay. Where public transport is not

involved to join a walk. I'm working to focus on new neighbourhoods too and shorter walks in new areas," she adds.

Sachin Bansal, founder of Delhi's City Explorers, made the most of the pandemic year by launching virtual walks, in August, in Jaipur, Indore, Gwalior, Chandigarh, Agra and Varanasi, in addition to Delhi. Since January, the walks went offline as well. "I expect that hyperlocal tours will be in focus in 2021 too," Bansal says. "We hope we can discover and highlight little-known attractions in Indian cities with the help of locals."

The age of slow travel

Even the travel influencers — those whose revenue model depended on their being in a different port each weekend — were forced to slow down. Like the rest of the world, they had to redefine the scope of their travels to whatever was in their own backyards.

Ami Bhat (@ThrillingTravel) says she started posting local content to give her followers a taste of what she was up to and offer them new #travelgoals and advice that might actually be helpful.

She now focuses on road trips and weekend getaways, spending more time in each destination than she'd normally spend on her layovers back home between trips. "I think my years of domestic travel are helping my blogs and social media posts be more relevant," she says.

Shivya Nath, a travel writer and influencer, says she's lived out of two bags since 2013, travelling and working on the go in India and around the world. "This pause has given me the space to build a deeper connection with one place, Goa, and learn to appreciate the biodiversity in my own backyard and to live more consciously," she adds.

She's also turned some of her previous slow travel into a storytelling project called Voices of Rural India, during the pandemic. "It's an effort to build digital storytelling skills, create a source of income [storytellers are paid a fee for each story published] and build a repository of rural culture that is fast disappearing. In a time of no travel, it's a way to explore remote corners of India from the

comfort of our homes," she says.

The virtual experience

You can join a climb to the top of Everest or a hike along China's Great Wall, travel to Helsinki, Transylvania or Antarctica, or hop aboard a rollercoaster in the US.

Virtual travel has picked up in the pandemic. Most service providers tie up with local tour guides or residents. A couple in Amsterdam, Ian and Salome W, for instance, works with Tours by Locals to take travellers through the city's canals (all deserted now) and into its famous Red Light District (also deserted). Their commentary brings sights to life and they offer views one might not get even if one were to take the kind of zip-through-it-all guided tour that aims to cover a city in half a day. Prices for most tours range from 60 Euros (about Rs 5,000) to 90 Euros (about Rs 8,000) for a one-hour experience that can be shared by up to 10 people.

"For my birthday, my friends booked me a Florence, Italy tour," says Piyali Chanda, 37, a sociology professor in Kolkata. "It cost Rs 5,000, but nine of us took the tour, all from our respective homes. I know it's not the same as visiting the place but after the miserable year we'd had, it was so much fun."

India's union tourism ministry has partnered with OutsideVR, a travel tech start-up, to encourage travellers around the world to tour India virtually. The locations on offer in these free tours on outsidevr.com range from treks up the Himalayas to river cruises, tours of palaces and forts, even adventure sports such as ziplining.

There are similar free virtual tours on offer for Peru, Italy and Greece. Museums around the world, including the Louvre in Paris and the British Museum in London, have set up free virtual tours too.

For a simpler, also free, glimpse of the world out there, there's WindowSwap — a website that crowdsources views from windows around the world, and streams them 24x7. One minute you're on a snowy, tree-lined street in Austria, the next, you're in sunlit Australia. That's an easy fix for a literal change of scene.

6) "The pandemic will make travel about more meaningful domestic vacations," says chef Thomas Zacharias, who just completed a month-long Chef on the Road tour in Uttarakhand. 7) SaffronStays is offering luxury villas with private pools and high-speed wifi, designed for the busy workationer. 8 & 9) Simple, slow travel is catching on. Even travel influencers like Ami Bhat, seen here at Shivrampur beach in Gujarat, are now focused on slow and local.