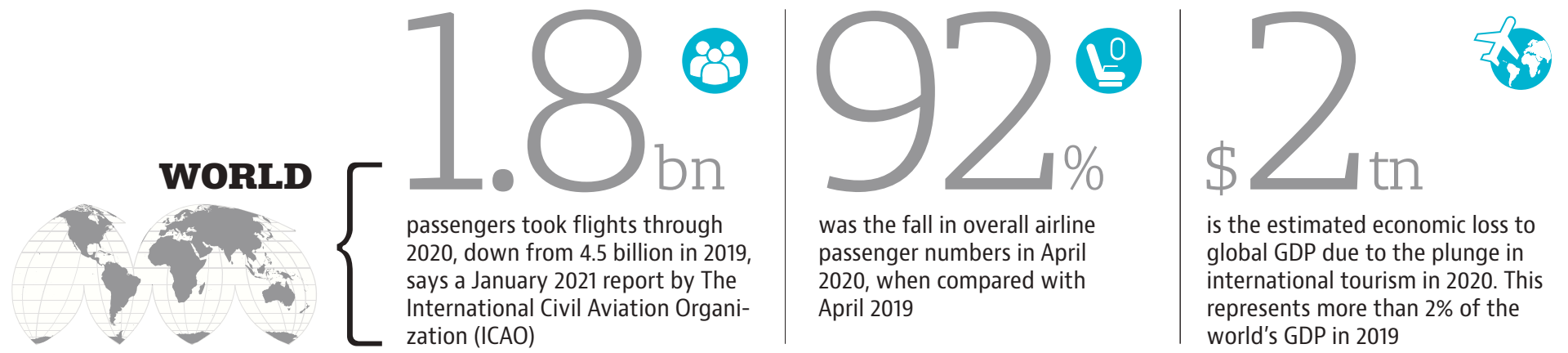


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Up in the air: The future of travel

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Sightseeing has been replaced by explorations of local culture and cuisine.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.



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."

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.

Currently, their website lists a dozen properties in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, with plans to expand to Kashmir and Ladakh once the weather improves there in April. "Our target is not the budget traveller or the groups looking to party, but rather people and families who want to live and work in a beautiful place," Mathawan says. Prices are generally fixed per month, starting at Rs 25,000 for a cottage. Response has been good and their longest stay has been a family that spent seven months in a home in Uttarakhand. "Our biggest challenge is the internet connection but the general response has been fantastic," Mathawan says.

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



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