# International Travel and Tourism Restrictions, Impacts and The First Steps Towards Recovery From COVID-19

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**By Dr Paul Singh**, Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business.

*"There has never been a better time to work on our businesses! Getting ready for people to start travelling again is key to ensuring your business is set up for future success"* (ATEC, 2020)

The COVID-19 Pandemic has caused an unprecedented near global shutdown of the International Travel Tourism Sector in less than three months. It needs to be stated here that this article in no way is intended to diminish the human cost of COVID-19; the author believes first and foremost COVID-19 is a humanity crisis, and protecting lives comes before protecting livelihoods and the ability to take part in tourism experiences. However, while governments, business, and community are still dealing with the health impacts of COVID-19, the purpose of this article is to outline the initial global travel and tourism response to the outbreak of COVID-19, then identify direct impacts on the travel and tourism sector as well as the indirect 'domino effect' of curtailed tourism activity.

Originally COVID-19 was perceived as contained within Wuhan, Hubei Province in China with little direct impact on the flows of people outside of the original containment attempts. For example, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) early travel and trade advice in the first half of January 2020 was for international travellers to practice usual precautions and "be prudent to reduce the general risk of acute respiratory infection while travelling in or from affected areas (currently Wuhan City)". However, as was seen with previous virus-based contagions (For example SARS; H1N1-influenza, MERS; Ebola) tourism's socio-economic benefits can quickly be 'turned-off' as the need to protect the affected community's health becomes paramount. The speed with which this happened with COVID-19 responses can be traced through the World Health Organization (WHO) and other International travel and tourism institutions and associations: see Table 1.

*Table 1 Timeline: WHO Travel and Tourism related responses to COVID-19*

**10 January 2020:** Travel Advisory: International travellers to practice usual precautions "while travelling in or from affected areas (currently Wuhan City)"

**24 January 2020:** Travel Advisory: COVID-19 has been transmitted via travel-related cases linked to Wuhan City to several countries.

"International travellers were advised to practice usual precautions".

**30 January 2020:** Travel Advisory and Operational Advisory: COVID-19 declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern: "WHO did not recommend any travel or trade restrictions, based on the current information available"

**11 February 2020:** Operational and Government Advisory: Measures to be adopted, for air travel only, before embarkation, during transit (on aircraft) and upon arrival, with quarantine of inbound international travellers a possibility.

**29 February 2020:** Operation and Government Advisory: Continued to "advise against the application of travel or trade restrictions to countries experiencing COVID-19 outbreaks" as evidence showed such measures to be largely ineffective during public health emergencies.

Countries with few international connections and limited health response capacities might consider short term temporary restrictions on international traveller movements at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak "to gain time at the beginning of an outbreak...even if only a few days, to rapidly implement effective preparedness measures."

**8 March 2020:** The Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) advise cruise operator members, effectively immediately, deny boarding to travellers from selected countries

**14 March 2020:** Joint statement from WHO and International Civil Aviation Authority: Contains much the same reminders as previously issued on 29th February by WHO.

It should be noted that WHO has no International Legal mandate and can only make recommendations; sovereign states have control of their borders and internal movement within their jurisdictions. However, a relevant role WHO undertakes is to coordinate the International Health Regulations, or IHR (2005).

> IHR (2005) is an agreement of 196 countries to work together for global health security... IHR also includes specific measures at ports, airports and ground crossings to limit the spread of health risks to neighboring (SIC) countries, and to prevent unwarranted travel and trade restrictions so that traffic and trade disruption is kept to a minimum.

Meanwhile other private sector international travel and tourism institutions such as the World Travel and Tourism Council, and the International Air Transport Association (IATA), representing 293-member airlines, referenced the WHO's central role and maintained the WHO guidelines were sufficient to continue a 'business as usual' approach while noting a likely contraction the Asia-Pacific airline sector with predominantly Chinese Airlines affected. However, National Governments were starting to act unilaterally as the increasing numbers of international travellers bringing COVID-19 via air travel and cruise travel started to grow.

The Australian Government started placing increased restrictions on travel and tourism throughout March 2020. Restrictions were not just limited to International Travel and Tourism sectors, but included restrictions affecting events and hospitality sectors. March also saw State and Territory Government restrictions on interstate travel and tourism being implemented: see Table 2.

*Table 2 Australian Timeline of Travel and Tourism Related Restrictions in March 2020:*

**2 March 2020:** Public gathering reduced to a maximum of two people except for organised gatherings. Stay home unless travel is essential, for work, or education.

**5 March 2020:** Ban of travel for non-Australians from China & South Korea

**13 March 2020:** Limit of non-essential organised gatherings to fewer than 500 people

**15 March 2020:** All travellers to Australia must self-isolate for 14 days. Cruise liners from foreign ports banned from Australian ports for 30 days. Foreigners arriving from mainland China, Iran, South Korea & Italy banned.

**18 March 2020:** Travel advice raised for first time to the highest level: Do not travel.

**19 March 2020:** All inbound travellers must self-isolate for 14 days upon arrival, in either a hotel or at home.

**20 March 2020:** Borders are closed except for Australian citizens, residents and immediate family members. Four metres floor space or more per person is required indoors. Non-essential gatherings of more than 100 people banned. Tasmanian government requires all non-essential inbound travellers to quarantine for 14 days

**25 March 2020:** Australian citizens and Australian permanent residents are restricted from travelling overseas.

**28 March 2020:** All inbound travellers arriving are required to undertake a mandatory 14-day quarantine at designated facilities in their port of arrival.

**29 March 2020:** South Australia inbound traveller must spend 14 days in isolation in a place nominated by S.A. Health.

**3 April 2020:** Queensland Borders closed. Northern Territory Borders closed and restrictions on travel within the Territory begin.

**5 April 2020:** Western Australian state borders closed, inter-regional state travel banned and restricted.

Due to the restrictions on travel and tourism by 5 April just about all Australian inbound and outbound travel had ceased, and this was far from unusual for many tourism markets. Around 96% of countries have a full or partial shutdown of their borders or other types of restrictions that are having a profound effect on the global sector.

The impacts of this COVID-19 has been like no other Natural Disaster or human caused tourism crisis in memory and the full impacts are yet to be identified as the length of the travel and tourism sector shutdown is still to be determined. However, some impacts are starting to be estimated or become more evident. For example, an updated OECD report states: "Preliminary OECD estimates on the COVID-19 impact point to 45% decline in international tourism in 2020. This could rise to 70% if recovery is delayed until September.
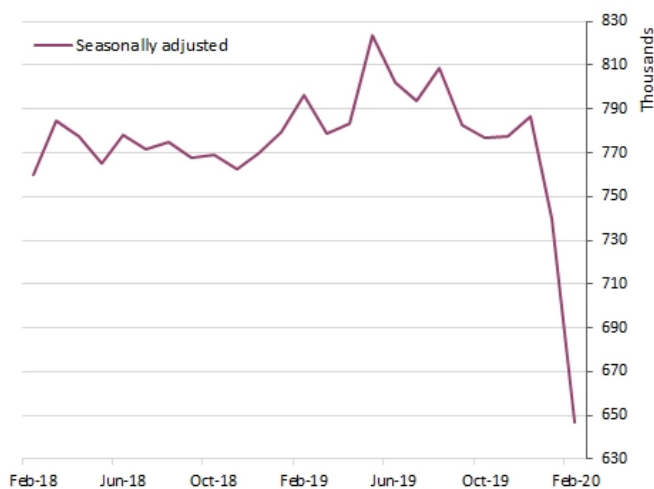


Figure 1 Visitor arrivals – short-term trips International Visitors to February 2020.

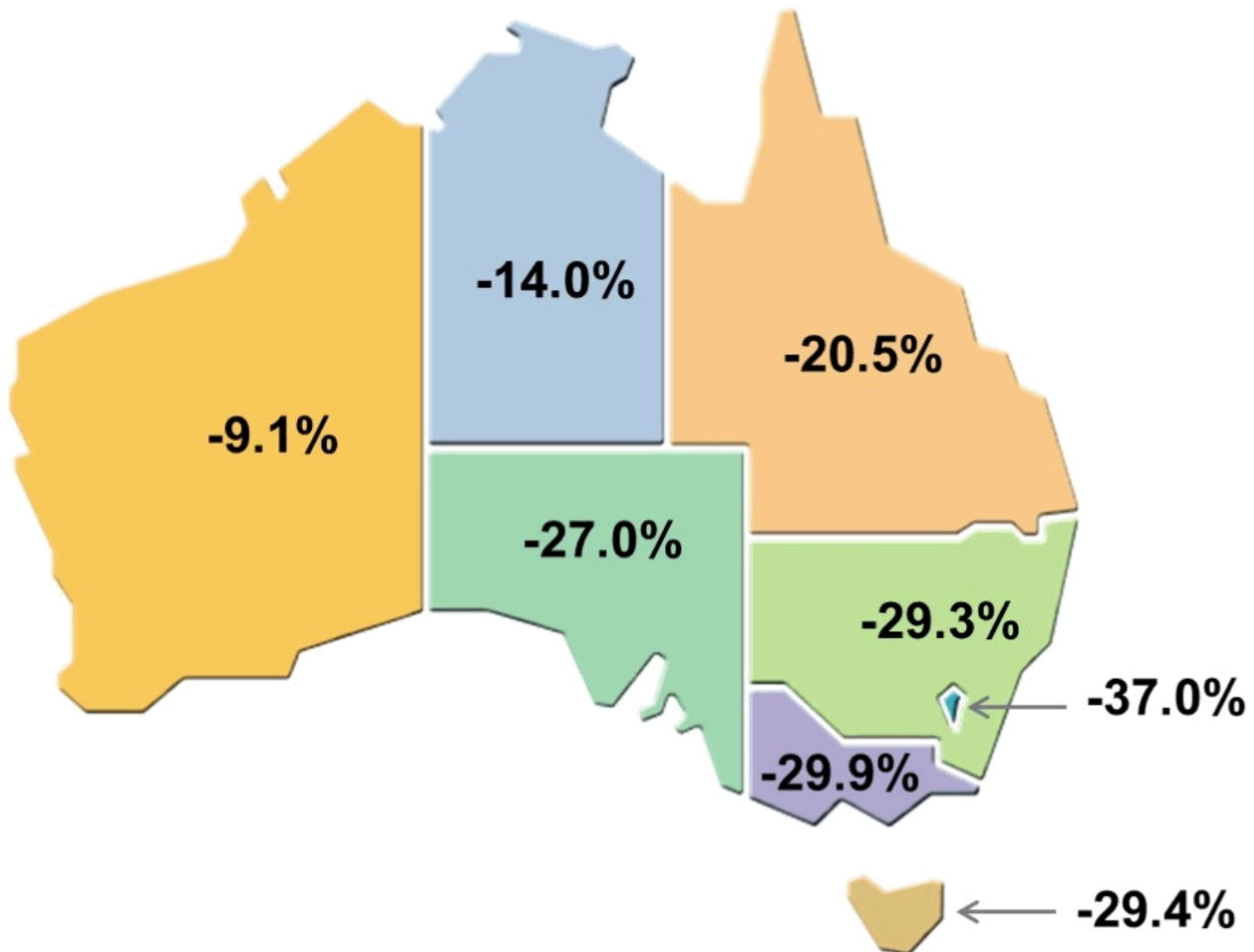Source: Australian Bureau of Statistic: 3401.0 – Overseas Arrivals and Departures, Australia, Feb 2020

Figure 3 Visitor arrivals, State or territory of stay – Annual change to February 2020 (original estimates)

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistic: 3401.0 – Overseas Arrivals and Departures, Australia, Feb 2020

While Tourism Australia, State Tourism Offices, and Some Regional Tourism Offices all have websites linking to current Australian and State Government support for the industry for the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 decline in International and Domestic Tourism activity it has only been in the last week of April that more long-term recovery plans and information are starting to be disseminated. For example, Tourism Australia and Australian Tourism Export Council (ATEC) are each producing at least weekly webinars with the latest information. With the webinar from Tourism Australia giving a six-step action plan for Australia's future destination marketing and a list of free resources that should interest tourism operators and destination marketers:

1. Hope for the best scenario, plan for the worst.
2. Lay down a plan (even if it's going to change).
3. Just the right data, just the right time.
4. Listen to a broad range of sources.
5. Fish where (and when) the fish are.
6. Think consumer first.

As the ATEC site says: "There has never been a better time to work on our businesses! Getting ready for people to start travelling again is key to ensuring your business is set up for future success."

This article started by stating the COVID-19 Pandemic has caused an unprecedented near global shutdown of the International Travel Tourism Sector in less than three months. However long it takes though, working on your tourism business, destination marketing, or your next journey, it is one of the best actions you can take now to prepare for the future.

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Paul has tourism industry experience in New Zealand, a PhD in Tourism Management, and academic experience in Tourism Management and business-related disciplines in Australia, New Zealand, China, and the United Kingdom. He was a regional tourism manager for one of New Zealand's Regional Tourism Organisations during a previous virus-related crisis.