

# How to survive the 2021 holiday travel season

By **Christopher Elliott**

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It isn't too soon to start thinking about the upcoming holiday travel season.

That's what Iahn Gonsenhauser is doing. He's the chief quality and patient safety officer at Ohio State University's [Wexner Medical Center](#), and he's charged with developing [coronavirus](#) procedures for the hospital.

And when he thinks of Thanksgiving and Christmas, he thinks of covid. "Unfortunately, we're still talking about traveling with it," he says. He's urging anyone who will listen to repeat what they did last year: Avoid travel if you're symptomatic, stay away from destinations with high coronavirus transmission rates, wear a mask and practice social distancing.

It's no wonder people are feeling nervous about the upcoming travel season. I've heard from hundreds of readers with "what if?" questions, such as: "What if the delta variant worsens?" "What if the country I'm planning to visit closes to visitors?" "What if I get sick before my trip?"

If the holiday travel period follows the same pattern as the chaotic summer, then you should expect a few surprises. You can't predict them, but you can prepare for them.

"People aren't going to forgo being home for the holidays for a second year in a row," says Narendra Khatri, principal of [Insubuy](#), a travel insurance company. "Expect airports and flights to be more packed than ever around Thanksgiving and Christmas. This means more flight delays, cancellations and long layovers."

"Flexibility is a very important point to keep in mind this holiday travel season," says [Ovation Travel Group](#) adviser Vibha Dania Dhawan. To that end, she says it's a good idea to ensure your hotel or airline offers customer-friendly change policies. Avoid nonrefundable tickets, even if they're cheaper.

How busy will things get this fall and winter? The Internet search engine [Kayak](#) says prices will be higher for the holiday travel season, defined as Nov. 12 to Jan. 7. "Right now, flight prices for the holiday travel season are up across the board compared to both 2019 and 2020," says Giorgos Zacharia, Kayak's president.

For domestic flights, the average fare is \$377, up 13 percent from 2019 and 37 percent from 2020. International flights are flat compared with 2019, averaging about \$968 this year, but up 18 percent from last year.

The fare analysts at Kayak predict prices may decline between now and Nov. 12 if they follow the same patterns as in 2019. But Zacharia cautions that this holiday travel season is more unpredictable than in past years, "so book as soon as you see a good deal."

If you haven't made a reservation for a vacation rental, you may be too late. Domestic reservation volume in November and December is up 377 percent from last year and 91 percent from 2019, according to short-term rental property management platform [Guesty](#). The average rental rate this Thanksgiving is \$415 per night, 19 percent higher than last year.

Rajeev Shrivastava, chief executive of the travel insurance marketplace VisitorsCoverage, says preparation will be more critical than ever. “The smartest traveler is one who stays current with the ever-changing list of health and safety regulations and is prepared to manage travel risks and uncertainties,” he says.

So what strategies will help you survive the upcoming season? Let’s start with travel insurance, which is always worth considering, but is especially so now.

A lot of experts are recommending the more expensive “cancel for any reason” insurance policies. You have to buy one at least 48 hours before departure, and you can cancel for any reason. Jeremy Murchland, president of Seven Corners, a travel insurance company, says some policies reimburse you for up to 75 percent of your prepaid nonrefundable expenses, but many have lowered that percentage.

“Fear of travel is not a covered policy reason,” he says, “so being able to cancel a trip at the last minute if you decide you don’t feel safe traveling for the holidays or contract an illness that prevents you from going is worth the extra money.”

You may also protect yourself with a regular “named perils” insurance policy, such as the Travel Basic policy from Travelex or Generali’s Standard policy, both of which cover covid-19 as if it were any other illness.

Like the holidays themselves, holiday travel can cause a lot of stress. Christina Steinorth-Powell, a psychotherapist based in Nashville, says there are ways to manage the anxiety that comes with the uncertainty.

Careful planning can take some of the edge off an upcoming trip, she says. She starts by making a list two weeks before her vacation that includes all the essentials: masks, antibacterial wipes, disinfectant, test kits and proof of vaccination. “When you make a list early, you’re less stressed and worried about your trip and in a better frame of mind,” she says.

Steinorth-Powell also researches the entry requirements for the country she’s visiting and reviews the information again the day before her trip to ensure she’s still compliant.

Gonsenhauser, the Ohio State safety officer, is keeping an eye on travel protocols, too. He and his wife are vaccinated, and he’s hoping his kids, ages 5 and 8, can get their shots before their planned Thanksgiving trip. They’ll be flying to Las Vegas, renting a car and touring several national parks, including Joshua Tree, Grand Canyon and Zion.

“At least that’s the plan,” he says.

And that’s the thing about traveling during the holiday season. Plans are subject to change if the unforeseen happens, and it just might.

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