

The pandemic forced sweeping changes in travel. Experts argue these should stay.

From extra flexibility to increased sanitation, covid-19 adjustments show us what a more traveler-friendly industry could look like

By [JD Shadel](#)

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At the start of the pandemic last year, passenger rights advocate Adeline Noorderhaven found herself in the most far-reaching dilemma anyone in her field had ever faced: Airlines grounded almost every flight, and virtually every passenger expected a refund.

“This was obviously not possible for airlines considering the scale of cancellations that started in March 2020,” says Noorderhaven, president of the Association of Passenger Rights Advocates, which advocates for the rights of all air travelers entering the European Union. Instead of cash, airlines were handing out vouchers. “We have therefore been focused on passengers fighting to get their money back,” she said.

Airlines don’t have a reputation for being traveler friendly. But as the months have passed, Noorderhaven has witnessed something unexpectedly positive: Major airlines have been making long-overdue improvements to policies that have long irritated frequent fliers.

And these covid-19 improvements haven’t only transpired in air travel. Across sectors, brands have made changes that once might have seemed radical — everything from flexible booking terms and more transparent cancellations to stricter cleaning protocols and even germ-zapping robots.

If it weren’t for the still worsening pandemic, many of these improvements would inarguably make the

As vaccination efforts ramp up, albeit with logistical kinks, some experts say the travel industry would be unwise to return to its old habits. We spoke with travel professionals and analysts, who argue that these temporary changes show a glimmer of what a more traveler-friendly industry could look like once the recovery is in full swing. Here's what they suggest needs to stick around in the long term.

Extra flexibility and no more change fees for fliers

Airlines were never known for flexibility. The most notorious example is [ticket change fees](#), which would often exceed the value of the original flight. "Personally, I never saw how the \$200 change fee was even reasonable for customers," says Jessica Nabongo, a professional traveler and the founder of boutique tourism agency Jet Black. "I am still flying on your airline, so why do I need to pay so much money just to fly on another day or another time on the same day?" Her frustration is near universal.

"Eliminating the change fees has been a very positive move in giving people peace of mind and removing an obstacle to booking a trip," says Henry Harteveltdt, an industry analyst and co-founder of Atmosphere Research Group.

Axing change fees — and [extending that to basic economy](#) and international routes — ranks as the most significant improvement Nabongo hopes to see long term. A close second: "The reduction of price gouging" for last-minute flights, Nabongo says, "ultimately will lead to more flight purchases." The flexibility which the industry advertised at the start of the pandemic — not only in airlines, but also car and RV rentals, cruises and beyond — remains one of the best ways to lure out more leery passengers when they're ready to travel again, she says.

Similarly, Harteveltdt would like travel brands to keep flexibility embedded in their refund policies. "For example, do you want a cash refund? Would you prefer to get a travel credit, perhaps even a larger value?" he says. "Some airlines did that during the depths of the pandemic last year." By extending more freedom to anxious travelers, he believes these terms can help drive the industry's recovery over the next few years.

More long stays, less crowding the same old spots

More than half of travelers say they are now more likely to take outdoor-focused trips, and an unsurprising majority — 65 percent of those surveyed — aim to avoid crowds, per [consumer sentiment research](#) from TripAdvisor and Phocuswright.

It's for the better, according to some experts, if it means we avoid returning to the pre-pandemic status quo of overtourism. "Many of these new travel styles and behaviors are more sustainable," writes Paloma Zapata, chief executive of Sustainable Travel International, in an email.

Because of the rise in working from home, newbie telecommuters are planning [longer-term "workcations"](#) to remote and rural locales. Some call it the rise of the "slowmad," or the slow digital nomad. Hotels and vacation rentals are offering [Netflix-style lodging subscriptions](#) to appeal to this growing demographic.

Compared with cramming a lot into one quick trip, a longer stay in a single destination gives travelers the chance to more respectfully engage the culture and support locally owned businesses. Encouraging this pandemic trend in the future could be particularly helpful for “reducing the negative impacts of compounded foot traffic and intensive resource use in what used to be overloved destinations,” Zapata says. (That is, as long as everyone doesn’t overrun the same [“Zoom towns.”](#))

Slowmad culture could also have some obvious perks for the planet, especially as [coronavirus](#) travel restrictions have underscored the [travel industry’s role in climate change](#). This newfound preference for longer-term and slower-paced vacations “reduces the carbon footprint of travel since there is less transportation involved, be it one less round-trip flight or minimal driving between cities,” Zapata says. She hopes the patterns stick, prompting travelers “to change their own behaviors and demand climate action from the tourism industry.”

Sweeping changes in Airbnb’s policies

It took a global pandemic for Airbnb to finally address some long-standing traveler complaints. But several of their enhancements seem overdue. “Some of the newer experience touch points should have, in my opinion, always been in place,” says Makarand Mody, assistant professor of hospitality marketing at Boston University. He points to the [enhanced cleaning protocols](#), which Airbnb made mandatory in November. Before that, hosts could charge “exorbitant” cleaning fees with little accountability as to what the charge covered, Mody says.

Similarly, the company has recently tweaked its booking system to make cancellation policies clearer to guests before they confirm a reservation. Previously, those terms were not always obvious to guests, as the rules varied greatly from host to host, Mody explains. This caused considerable confusion at the outset of the pandemic as to who qualified for a refund. In this area, Airbnb is even beginning to resemble the hotels it once disrupted. Hosts also have the ability to offer “refundable” or “nonrefundable” options to guests, offering discounts for the latter. It’s a familiar model that mimics the prepay discount traditional lodging brands offer with online reservations.

“I think this has come about after a long battle of customers complaining about lack of transparency in pricing,” says Mody, who is researching how simplified pricing factors into customers’ booking decisions. “Pre-pandemic, companies like Airbnb could set their own rules, but now, I think the pandemic has certainly shifted the balance of power, where they have to try and keep customers traveling.”

Stricter cleanliness standards everywhere we go

The most obvious change in travel over the course of the pandemic seems likely to remain the most visible for years to come — and that’s the strict cleanliness most travelers now seek out.

An overwhelming majority now consider [cleanliness the most important factor](#) when booking trips. This has already led to heightened scrutiny about how, exactly, housekeeping operates. Hotels as well as vacation rentals have [promoted more rigorous sanitation](#) routines since the start of the pandemic. And a growing number of lodging properties, airports and other public travel spaces employ [autonomous UV cleaning robots](#).

“Travelers have been predominantly — and understandably — concerned with cleanliness and hygiene due to the pandemic. And that is a concern we don’t see waning anytime soon,” said Kanika Soni, chief commercial officer of TripAdvisor, in an email.

The increased transparency around cleaning and sanitation is, ultimately, a win for travelers, says Harteveltdt, who predicts it “won’t be considered acceptable” to contract illnesses like the flu on future trips. “Even once we get [covid-19] much more under control, people are not going to go back and say it’s okay for the travel industry to revert to being a pigsty,” he says. This, he expects, will drive the rise in touchless, self-service options across the industry.

After all the hassle and health concerns of the pandemic era, Harteveltdt ultimately hopes we come out of this time with “the sense of gratitude that comes from the ability to travel.”

“Whether it’s visiting a national park, a museum or simply an indulgent lunch that goes on for hours,” he says, “I don’t think we’ll take any of that for granted again.”

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