

Some COVID-19 Restrictions Are Being Lifted. But Is It Safe to Travel?



A Southwest Airlines flight takes off as United Airlines planes sit parked on a runway at Denver International Airport on April 22, 2020 in Denver, Colorado. Michael Ciaglo—Getty Images

BY **MADELEINE CARLISLE**

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COVID-19 has **undeniably** changed the way we travel. The once **leisurely** past time has become stressful, limited and sometimes dangerous. Yet, despite the constraints, some travel will still be possible this summer.

A **forecast** released on June 25 by the **American Automobile Association (AAA)** predicts that summer travel in the U.S. will decline by 14.6% compared to 2019. So although Americans remain cautious about the prospect of traveling, many still plan to take a trip of some kind.

Every U.S. state has re-opened in some way, although their approaches vary widely. Many states have lifted **stay-at-home orders** and allowed certain non-essential businesses to return to work, meaning many **tourist-oriented** businesses have also reopened or intend to do so soon; even **Walt Disney World** **has announced** plans to fully reopen in mid-July. Travel restrictions are also lessening around the world. For example, Europe's Schengen area started **allowing travelers from certain countries outside** the **bloc** on July 1 (though the U.S. is not included in the list).

But, at the same time, **coronavirus** is still spreading around the world. As of Thursday afternoon ET, some 10.7 million cases and 518,000 deaths had been confirmed worldwide, **according to Johns Hopkins University**. The **death toll** in the U.S. alone has passed 128,000, and cases are **surging** in over half of U.S. states, including Florida, Texas and Arizona, all of which have reopened their economies to a degree.

Is it safe to travel in the U.S.?

The answer's complicated, experts say. "There's no **black and white** answer," explains **Greg Poland**, a professor of medicine and infectious diseases at the Mayo Clinic and the director of the Mayo Vaccine Research Group. "It depends on context."

Even though some U.S. states are reopening, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) **says** the safest way to protect yourself and others is to stay home. But if you want to go somewhere, "short, local trips are best," **Lisa Gralinski**, a professor of epidemiology at the University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health, writes in an email. "Anyone who does travel should first ask if it's really necessary and second consider how they will keep themselves and their **close contacts** as safe as possible."

If you decide to travel somewhere in the U.S. outside of your local community, the CDC **recommends** researching whether or not coronavirus is spreading both in your area and in the area where you're going. Ask yourself: what's the risk that you get infected? What's the risk that you **inadvertently** infect someone else? Right now, many U.S. states, especially in the South and West, are seeing major outbreaks.

The CDC also says you should consider your health risks and the health risks of the people you live with before traveling, as you could **inadvertently** bring COVID-19 back into your home. The agency also recommends determining whether you'll be able to social distance and **stay six feet** away from other people while traveling, as well as whether you'll have to miss work or school if you get sick. It also suggests researching whether the state or local government where you live or where you're visiting requires people to **quarantine for** 14 days after traveling. (You can find the CDC's full travel guidance **here**.)

You need to weigh the possible benefits of a trip **versus** its risks, **Poland** says. Also investigate whether you can reduce any of those elements of risk.

"If you are living in a low-risk area and you're going to travel to see grandma in a low-risk area, and she's three hours away, **I don't really see a problem**," he says. "If you're 60 years old with **hypertension** and **diabetes** and you're going to fly from Iowa to Florida or Texas, I see a big problem."

Coronavirus mainly spreads through person-to-person contact and traveling naturally exposes you to new people. Thus "all travel will involve some risk," **Hilary Godwin**, the dean of the University of Washington School of Public Health, explains in an email. It's **incumbent** on you to research any potential trip and determine how much risk you're willing to take on. Ultimately, it will be a personal decision.

Erika Richter, the senior director of communications at the American Society of Travel Advisors (ASTA), says the trade association always tells travelers to consult **objective** third-party sources like the CDC and the U.S. State Department before determining whether to travel. She also recommends consulting your healthcare provider before taking a trip, as their advice should "be a factor in deciding where and when to travel."

And, importantly, you shouldn't travel if you're experiencing any **symptoms** of COVID-19. You'd risk spreading the virus to others.

Can I travel **internationally?**

Generally speaking, if you're in the U.S., you can't travel internationally yet.

The U.S. State Department has **issued** a Worldwide Level 4 Health Advisory and advised all U.S. citizens to avoid all international travel at this time. Additionally, the U.S., Mexico and Canada have **agreed to limit all nonessential travel** across borders, including **recreational** travel.

The CDC also recommends all U.S. travelers avoid nonessential international travel at this time. If you do go abroad, the CDC says you must **quarantine for 14 days** upon returning to the U.S. and warns that U.S. residents might have difficulty re-entering the U.S. during the pandemic. (**This interactive map** from the CDC shows the U.S.'s travel notices for different countries.)

In a statement to TIME, a State Department spokesperson said that the department continues “to closely monitor health and safety conditions across the globe, and will update our advice to U.S. travelers when it is appropriate to do so, in close coordination with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and other partner agencies.” The spokesperson encouraged U.S. citizens to enroll in the **Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP)** “to receive timely alerts about evolving health and safety conditions in their planned destinations.”

The EU has also announced that while European countries are reopening to non-essential travelers from certain countries, U.S. travelers will not yet be allowed in.

Traveling internationally from the U.S. right now could also be dangerous, experts say. “Going to another country usually means **prolonged** time in a confined space with other people — this is the riskiest type of behavior for spread of [coronavirus] and should be avoided at all costs,” **Gralinski** writes. And keep in mind that the U.S. has the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world, “so you may be an unwelcome visitor,” she warns.

If you had planned an international vacation for this summer, **Richter** recommends **postponing** your trip rather than canceling it. Many hotels, tours and flights have adopted flexible bookings.

Can I travel within the U.S.?

While there's no ban on domestic travel in the U.S., experts tell TIME you need to heavily weigh the risk factors of any trip.

“Unnecessary travel should still be minimized for everyone’s safety,” writes **Gralinski**. “The more people move around and **mingle** the easier it is for the virus to spread.”

If you decide to travel, **Godwin** says you should first check with the **state and local health departments** at your destination, your current location and any places you’ll pass through while traveling to see if there are any local travel restrictions in place. “For instance, if your own state has a stay at home order, you should not travel to another state that has ‘reopened,’ because you risk spreading COVID-19 to that state,” Godwin writes.

Numerous states are requiring visitors to **quarantine** if they’ve come from certain areas; New York, New Jersey and Connecticut recently **announced** that anyone coming from a state with a positive test rate of more than 10 per 100,000 residents over a seven-day rolling average or a testing positivity rate of more than 10% over a seven-day rolling average will be required to **quarantine** for 14 days. **Kansas** has also **mandated** a 14-day **quarantine** for anyone who passed through certain states, including Alabama, Arizona or Arkansas, which all currently have high transmission rates.

Poland notes that there are some **nuances**. While the state of Texas is experiencing a large spike in COVID-19 cases, Poland says he’s “positive there are many little rural isolated communities with no cases.” “So it’s really around the local **epidemiology**,” he explains. “Would I go to an area where there is a **spike of cases**? No I personally would not unless I had an [urgent] reason.”

Reopening measures have varied widely depending on the state, so **Jeanette Casselano**, a spokesperson for AAA, recommends calling ahead to see what businesses will be open, if there are **capacity** limits and whether you’ll need reservations, not just at your destination but also along your route. “Consider all aspects of your journey and how you will stay safe and maintain social distancing,” writes **Gralinski**.

If, after researching, you do decide to travel, the CDC recommends continuing to check state and local health departments while traveling. There’s always the chance that a local government could impose a new stay-at-home order, **mandated** quarantine or other restrictions.

What’s the safest way to travel?

When it comes to reducing risk, traveling by car (driven by yourself or other members of your travelling party) is by far your best option. “You control everything that happens inside that environment,” Poland says. “The moment you’re not in control of the environment, you’re adding risk.”

AAA’s summer travel forecast predicts that 97% of all trips this summer will be via car. It also predicts car travel will only decrease in volume by around 3% compared to last year.

You can’t control who’s in your environment on a plane, train, cruise, or public transportation. Nor can you control their hygiene habits. If you and 300 people are traveling on an airplane — or in any enclosed space with prolonged exposure — “it’s as if you’re living in 300 different geographic locations,” Poland says.

It’s also difficult to social distance while on an airplane, bus or train, and you could come in close contact with other people or frequently touched surfaces, the CDC warns.

However, the CDC also warns that making stops for food, gas or a bathroom break during a road trip can risk putting you in close contact with other people or frequently touched surfaces. To avoid these risks, Godwin says that even when traveling in your own car, going only short distances “is unquestionably the safest way to travel.” If you want to travel to see family or friends, Godwin recommends visiting a nearby household that’s been practicing social distancing to a similar level as you. A vacation rental within a few hours drive of your home could also be a good option, she says.

If I decide to travel, how should I protect myself?

While traveling, the CDC recommends cleaning your hands often — either with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or with hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol — especially if you’ve been to a public place. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth and always keep six feet of physical distance between you and other people. If you take a prescription medication, make sure to pack enough to last your trip, in addition to non-medical face masks to wear in public.

Experts recommend packing your own food and water so you don’t have to stop along the way. The CDC also recommends bringing non-perishable food in case

restaurants and stores are closed when you arrive. Consider bringing groceries so you can avoid eating out or having to go to the store for supplies.

If you're driving and have to stop for gas, Poland recommends wearing gloves — or even just a plastic bag over your hand — when you refill, and immediately using hand sanitizer before getting back into the car. Avoid going into the store or interacting with people.

If you're headed to a hotel or vacation home, Poland recommends taking your own cleaning supplies and cleaning everything once you arrive. (You can find the CDC's guidance on cleaning and disinfecting [here](#).) If you're staying at a hotel, Poland suggests putting the Do Not Disturb sign on your door so no one comes in.

Every year AAA issues a “best of housekeeping badge” to a select number of hotels that meet a standard of cleanliness. Casselano, the AAA spokesperson, recommends choosing a hotel that has been awarded the badge, and/or calling ahead and asking about cleaning protocols before booking. Many are taking extra precautions.

If you choose to fly, Poland recommends calling the airline to ask about which flights are expected to be the least crowded. He also recommends selecting a window seat because it's the least touched, avoiding the bathroom while on the flight, avoiding taking food or drink from a flight attendant and wiping down your luggage as soon as you receive it. Once you arrive at your destination, change your clothes as soon as possible, Polan suggests. And, importantly, wear a mask the entire time you're in transit.

Can I go camping?

While outdoor activities are safer, the CDC says coming into contact with others at public campsite facilities like restrooms or picnic areas could lead to the spread of the virus.

In addition, if you are more likely to get very ill from COVID-19, you probably shouldn't vacation in remote areas without easy access to medical care, the CDC warns. Keep in mind that many camping grounds are temporarily closed because of the pandemic. If you do want to go camping, make sure to check in advance that the campsite is open and has enough room to allow for social

distancing. You should also check what the campsite's cleaning protocols are in advance, **Godwin** says.

Should I cancel my summer vacation?

“No!” **Godwin** writes in an email. “This has been a stressful time for almost everyone and taking a break from work and school can have both physical and mental health benefits.” Even if you determine that it's too risky for you to travel, she suggests planning a “**staycation**” to take a break from work and other **obligations**. She recommends looking into what activities in your community might be allowed per **your local health guidance**. Studies show spending time in nature can be particularly beneficial for your mental and physical health, she says.

“Instead of framing this as ‘I am not allowed to travel,’ try framing it as ‘are there things that I enjoy that I can do right now and measures that I can take to stay safe,’” **Godwin** writes. While this summer is not the time to take your dream trip to Paris, “you still can find ways to spend time safely with people that you love and get some well-deserved rest and relaxation.”

Correction, July 7

The original version of this story misstated Hilary Godwin's last name. It is Godwin, not Goodwin.

WRITE TO MADELEINE CARLISLE AT MADELEINE.CARLISLE@TIME.COM.

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