



Travel in the Time of COVID-19

Applying International Travel Risk Management
Principles to the COVID-19 World...
Even if You're Not Traveling Internationally

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As the world continues to ride the wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic, organizations are beginning to evaluate when and where they can begin travel. When, and how, can organizations start to resume travel that we've put on hold? There are no clear or easy answers to those questions, though there are signs that travel is [starting to increase after historic lows](#). Most agree that a phased or incremental approach, starting with essential travel to locations that have "flattened" or reduced their COVID-19 infection curve, is needed but beyond that, where to begin?

In some ways, resuming global operations and travel will resemble the measure taken as COVID-19 emerged. For those organizations evaluating a resumption of travel, the risk management principles used by many organizations for global travel are a great place to start – and should be applied even for domestic US travel.

Steps organizations should consider include:

- **Assess destination-specific risk.** What is the status of the COVID-19 pandemic and related risks in the destination? There's an abundance of information about cases at the state and country level – both the [Johns Hopkins University](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control](#) include interactive maps with state and country-level COVID-19 case data. Many US state health departments provide information about hospitalizations along with medical facility capabilities – important to understand where travelers may have trouble accessing medical care.

Internationally, risks include potential increases in civil unrest, crime and even Xenophobic attacks targeting people perceived to be potentially spreading coronavirus. Good sources of information include medical and security assistance providers, such as [International SOS](#), [Healix International](#) and [AIG Travel Guard](#), as well as the [Overseas Security Advisory Council](#).

TRAVEL RISK MANAGEMENT

Assess risks & challenges, including government restrictions, & communicate to travelers



Mitigate risks through plans, procedures & resources



Respond to incidents & emergencies using established plans & resources



Provide post-travel support, including guidance about need to quarantine, what to do if sick

- **Understand the local decrees, directives, orders and other requirements.** State, local and national governments have put in place a range of measures designed to combat the spread of COVID-19, from stay-at-home orders to restrictions on size of groups that may meet and guidance about mask wearing. Understanding these measures is an essential part of pre-trip planning and risk assessment to evaluate the impact on the proposed business activities. Some states and countries require any incoming travelers to shelter in place for 14 days upon arrival – not especially conducive for a short business trip. Other locations limit size of groups or require masks in public; not necessarily show-stoppers for travel but important to know (and communicate... see below).

In the US, [state health departments](#) are a good starting point to understand restrictions. Outside the US, [International SOS's interactive map](#), as well as the daily [updates by Intelyse](#), provide insight into various restrictions.

- **Evaluate the risk vs the reward.** Initial resumption of travel should focus on “essential” or “mission critical” work. Establish and consistently apply a clear process for determining what constitutes essential travel that balances the risks and challenges with the business imperative or reward. Consider the degree to which the work can be done remotely or through personnel or partners already in the location.
- **Establish a trip approval process.** In the pre-COVID-19 world, trip approvals were largely budgetary for domestic US travel. Now, they should be risk-based as well. Consider whether trips to higher-risk destinations require higher-level approval – similar to procedures typically in place for international travel.
- **Confirm that visitors will be welcome.** If travelers are coming from a location perceived to be a COVID-19 “hot spot” (think New York City or Milan in March), will they be welcome in their destination?
- **Review key resources.** Hotels, airlines, and ground transportation resources play a critical part in business travel and all are adapting their operations in response to COVID-19 with additional cleaning, reduced contact and efforts to provide physical distance. For example, the [American Hotel and Lodging Association](#) has developed enhanced industry cleaning standards. Review what’s in place and, where possible, confirm directly with hotels or transportation resources in the destination. If traveling to a location frequently, consider establishing “go-to” hotels or other resources with strong mitigation measures in place.

Medical and security assistance providers are an essential resource for international travel and operations, providing risk information, guidance about seeking medical care and – when necessary – medical and security evacuation. COVID-19 itself – along with the travel restrictions put in place by some governments – complicates assistance and especially evacuation. Review location-specific capabilities with providers to understand limitations before travel.

- **Update and communicate organizational policies and procedures.** Mask wearing, maintaining physical/social distancing, not traveling while sick, wiping down phones, laptops and other frequently touched items, etc. We're increasingly familiar with these procedures and practices personally, but organizations should communicate them and keep travelers updated as guidance develops over time.
- **Inform and update travelers... and get information from them.** Preparing travelers with destination risk information, along with the plans, procedures and resources in place to manage them, is a fundamental precept of travel risk management. In the COVID-19 environment where situations change quickly, it's essential to provide information before anyone gets on a plane and keep them updated throughout their journey. Similarly, travelers should keep managers and others updated about the situation in the destination to help make informed decisions.

Consider using an [Informed Consent Risk Advisory](#), or something similar, to document the information provided to travelers – long a staple for international travel, but now worth considering domestically. Always run these types of documents by legal counsel for review before use.

- **Adapt and embrace flexibility.** Developments in the risk environment may necessitate changes in travel or planned activities – a sudden re-imposition of restrictions, flare up in cases, etc. Some of these may occur with little or no notice, including right before or even during a trip. Personnel and business partners need to understand that trips and meetings may be cancelled or curtailed with little or no notice.

Many organizations that travel to higher risk environments around the world allow personnel to opt out of trip due to health, safety or security issues without repercussion. Applying a similar approach as travel resumes in the COVID-19 environment will be essential.

As the COVID-19 Pandemic evolves, travel will resume. However, given the dynamic nature of the pandemic, it's essential that organizations take a deliberate, risk-based approach to restarting travel – grounding their decision making in international travel risk management principles whether they're flying to another continent or the state next door.

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