

Cannabis tourism: How a new travel trend is taking off

By [Michael O'Regan](#)

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Legal cannabis consumption [rose](#) in the [US](#) and [Europe](#) during the COVID pandemic, with some people turning to marijuana to help them [cope](#) with lockdowns and [broken routines](#). Meanwhile, fewer people today view the drug as [harmful](#) compared to previous decades.



Source: Jan Zwartoed via [Unsplash](#)

These factors may have contributed to a trend towards cannabis-related tourism, with destinations developing new holiday products to tempt customers and rising travel bookings to destinations where cannabis is [legal](#). But there are risks for both destinations and tourists in embracing this trend.

Work by [MMGY Travel Intelligence](#) found [29% of leisure travellers](#) are interested in cannabis-related tourism. A study by the Dutch government revealed that [58%](#) of international tourists choose Amsterdam in order to consume drugs. And business in Dutch coffee shops has [increased](#) since the start of the pandemic.

Nine months after Illinois legalised recreational cannabis in January 2020, nearly [30% of purchases](#) were by non-residents. Thailand has [just announced](#) it has legalised cannabis and is hoping this will boost tourism.

The tourism sector and [specific destinations](#) have reacted quickly to the demand for cannabis, hemp and CBD-related products by designing experiences that include those elements. They are also responding to the [expected](#) economic potential related to increased [hotel occupancy](#), tax revenues, increased land values, business expansion, jobs and [public health and safety benefits](#) that could be connected to cannabis sales.

Yet although tourism to other destinations with legalised cannabis is growing in [popularity](#), [data](#) is only [beginning](#) to be collected. And so far no destination is ready to be labelled as the "[next Amsterdam](#)".

Big potential

While cannabis-related travellers are believed to be [high spending and well educated](#), authorities [don't want](#) to replicate the Dutch model, which led to massive concentration of cannabis coffee shops in Amsterdam and raised concerns over [hard](#)

[drug use and criminality](#).

New business models are focusing on agri-tourism (meet-the-farmer sessions) and culinary tourism and events such as cannabis [festivals](#). Tourists can choose from [farm tours](#), “[bud and breakfast](#)” hotels, [city tours](#), [cannabis festivals](#), [cannabis trails](#), [food, wine and marijuana pairings](#), “[ganja yoga](#)”, and packages that combine [accommodation](#) and [cannabis experiences](#).

The potential for cannabis tourism is widespread around the world. More than 19 US states and [Washington DC](#) have now legalised recreational cannabis, along with [Canada](#), [Mexico](#), [Uruguay](#) and [others](#). In Europe, Luxembourg allows the consumption of personally cultivated cannabis, while [Switzerland](#) is trialling cannabis sales from pharmacies for recreational purposes.

[Malaysia](#) and [Thailand](#) have made initial steps towards legalising recreational use. [Costa Rica](#) and [Morocco](#) have also approved legalisation for medicinal purposes.

Risks for tourists

However, few countries have clarified the legality of cannabis use by tourists with legislation directed at recreational use by residents. This means tourists risk breaking the law [unintentionally](#), by interacting with [street dealers and police](#) as well as the health implications of consuming real and [fake drugs](#).

There is some evidence cannabis can [improve some mental health conditions and provide pain relief](#). But tourists with pre-existing mental health disorders, for example, may risk their [physical and psychological wellbeing](#). Cannabis-related mental health events including [depression](#) can also occur among those who have [not been diagnosed](#) with mental health issues.

A patchwork of [complicated laws and regulations](#) regarding recreational cannabis use by [overseas tourists](#) means questions remain about the legality of consumption, the transport of cannabis vape pens overseas as well as issues of insurance cover and health care, during and after travel.



Source: Damian Barczak via [Unsplash](#)



While Uruguay is planning to [allow](#) consumption by tourists, countries like Portugal, where cannabis has been decriminalised since 2001, still doesn't allow them to buy it legally. In Spain, [cannabis clubs](#) allow visitors to donate to the club instead of purchasing a product. But [Spain](#) and other large markets [like South Africa](#) are focused on [domestic cannabis tourism](#) rather than international visitors.

Few countries have carried out a [cost-benefit analysis](#) around legal cannabis and tourism, or fully discussed issues of land and water use, police powers and benefits to local communities. While cannabis tourism can generate tourism and jobs, and reduce the power of organised crime, the goal of sustainable development is threatened by theft, racism, and a market stacked [against](#) small local operators who often can not secure funding or insurance. There are also possible increases in pollution and public health and [safety concerns](#).

[Mexico](#) and [Canada](#) have promised funding for indigenously owned businesses to aid social and racial equality, while [New York](#) plans to create a US\$200 million (£162 million) public-private fund to support social equity goals. [Resident support](#), and [continual conversations](#) with communities on how to plan the sustainable development of cannabis tourism should be a vital part of development of the sector.

While it appears that the Covid pandemic helped [stimulate](#) and [legitimise](#) the use of marijuana, with dispensaries declared [an essential service](#) in parts of the US during the pandemic, tourism could expand and [normalise acceptance](#) of its use.

Perceived risks may fade and and tourist [guilt](#) may dissipate. Cannabis tourism is likely to become just another [segment](#) of the holiday industry.

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