

Road to recovery: 5 things to expect from business travel beyond the third wave

On Sunday, 25 July, President Cyril Ramaphosa eased South Africa's lockdown restrictions, opening travel in and out of Gauteng and placing South Africa under adjusted Alert Level 3.



Image source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

Under Level 3 children can return to school; gatherings are allowed (limited to 50 indoor and 100 outdoor); off-site alcohol sales return from Monday to Thursday; on-consumption alcohol sales have returned (but closing at 20:00); and curfew adjusted (10pm to 4am) in a much-needed step forward for the hospitality sector.

But what does it mean for business travel's recovery, and what does local, regional and international travel look like beyond the third wave? Especially as post-Covid recovery, vaccination programmes and travel restrictions still look very different around the world.

New Zealand, for example, has suspended its quarantine-free travel bubble with Australia until at least September, with new lockdowns in place in both Sydney and Melbourne. The United States' land borders with Mexico and Canada will remain closed to non-essential travel through to the 21st of August. While on the other side of the pond, England's 'Freedom Day' on the 19th of July saw all lockdown restrictions lifted – with significant changes to their 'traffic light' system expected.

According to Bonnie Smith, general manager of FCM, while red lists and quarantine remain the biggest barriers to business travel, we can expect the following:

1. It's time to reconnect – even if it's mask to mask

While all indications are that South Africa has passed the peak of its third wave, it is not the time to be complacent – either here or around the world.

Covid-19 protocols will remain in place for months to come, so expect to take a PCR test prior to travel, don your mask, pack flight-regulation-sized sanitiser and chat to your travel management company (TMC) about both your airline's requirements – as well as the up-to-date protocols and restrictions in your destination.

The good news, says Smith, is that according to Bloomberg, business trips are coming back faster than expected in the US.

"This is in part to Zoom fatigue," says Smith. "But the reality is that decision-makers are keen to connect through in-person meetings once again. More is accomplished with the right people around a boardroom table than meetings via a virtual platforms could ever accomplish."

On the whole, people miss the warmth, spontaneity and connection of face-to-face meetings.

"But more than that," continues Smith. "For many companies in the mining, energy, engineering and pharmaceutical sectors, business travel is essential travel. Think of rotational teams, research and development, meeting suppliers, connecting with prospects, or visiting projects.

"Multinational companies are desperate to reconnect and kickstart their travel programmes. TMCs can make it happen – safely and seamlessly."

2. Europe will continue to open up to vaccinated travellers

Last week saw France join Switzerland as the latest European country to accept fully vaccinated travellers, without restrictions, from across the globe, including South Africa.

And this is just the start. According to Sherpa, who powers the Flight Centre Travel Group's interactive Covid-19 Travel Map, at least 13 European countries are now open to vaccinated South Africans, with rumours that Croatia, Greece, Spain and Portugal might follow soon.

"Unfortunately," says Smith. "South Africa remains on the UK's red list. But things will shift. And by the time it does many of our 35+ cohorts, with the 18+ age groups following shortly, will be fully vaccinated and ready to fly."

3. Questions around vaccinated travellers – and vaccine certificates – need to be resolved

This does, of course, lead to questions around what 'fully vaccinated actually means; which vaccines are most widely accepted for international travel; and how travellers apply for Covid Vaccination certification.

According to the latest French regulations, proof of vaccination is only valid if it can attest to the completion of a complete vaccination schedule, i.e. 2 weeks after the 2nd injection for double injection vaccines (like Pfizer) and 4 weeks after the injection for single-injection vaccines (Johnson & Johnson). Significantly for South Africans, both Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson are approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA).

For Smith though, the biggest question remains around vaccination certificates.

"Travellers will require a digital vaccine status certificate to prove that they are fully vaccinated in order to travel

internationally. Unfortunately, until such time as there is a standardised system, different countries will have different requirements, apps, and digital health passports. You'll need to discuss your destination's requirements with your travel expert, so they can help guide you through the process."

4. Tech will boost traveller confidence

Challenging. Difficult. Uncertain. According to Smith, these are some of the words travel managers used in FCM's State of the Market (September 2020) survey to describe corporate travel since the Covid-19 outbreak.

This means traveller confidence is – and will remain – a key focus for travel managers in the years to come. The question is, how can TMCs do their part to restore and nurture traveller confidence? For Smith, the answer lies in technology.

TMCs are also turning to tech to maximise traveller safety. "FCM's travel management platform, for example, allows for customised safety dashboards and traveller tracking, so you know exactly where your travellers are in case you need to bring them home," says Smith. "Although the world is focused on Covid-19, duty of care still takes into account things like adverse weather events, civil unrest, strikes and other incidents – when bringing your team home quickly, and safely, is key."

5. Sustainability will become increasingly important

Post-pandemic business travel will see sustainability firmly back on the table. Expect companies to build their overall sustainability goals into their travel policies, looking to airlines, hotel programmes and travel suppliers to help them reduce their carbon footprint.

There are a number of different tools that companies can use today. These include carbon calculators to measure your climate footprint and carbon offsetting programmes to mitigate the impact of those emissions that you can't reduce.

According to Smith, soon you'll be able to add filters to your online booking platform that allows you to book flights in a more sustainable way, or choose greener accommodation options. Bookers will even be able to choose the most environmentally-friendly route, calculated on the distance between two locations and how many layovers are required.

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