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Has your travel bucket list changed during the pandemic? You're not alone.



Woody Harrington/For The Washington Post

By Natalie B. Compton
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We didn't get a heads-up that the coronavirus would shut the world down. There was no opportunity to steal away one last time before locking down indefinitely. We had to be grateful for the travel we already had enjoyed, and maybe start planning escapes for the distant future.

“The appetite for travel has not gone down; it’s in our DNA to travel,” said Stephen McGillivray, chief marketing officer for Travel Leaders Group, one of the largest networks of travel agents. “The interest is just as robust ... but it’s for ’21 and beyond.”

What will those trips in the beyond look like?

The pandemic, and the contemplation that’s followed, has led me to retool my travel bucket list. I’ve spent some downtime looking at old travel photos, reliving the memories and reflecting on the experiences worth repeating — and the new experiences worth trying. And it seems I’m not alone.

With most international travel off-limits to Americans, McGillivray says travelers right now are much more interested than before in trips to Mexico and the Caribbean, as well as in domestic vacations, and less interested in cruising. Data from Hopper, a flight- and hotel-booking app, show a similar pattern: The app’s most-booked recent destinations for the next six months are primarily in the United States, led by Miami, Puerto Rico and Hawaii.

For trips that are a year out, however, there’s a noticeable shift.

For that time frame, Hopper’s most-booked destinations are almost entirely international, with France, Brazil, Aruba, the Netherlands and Japan making up the top five. Customers of travel-booking company Porter & Sail, meanwhile, are predominantly interested in long-haul and resort-based trips to destinations such as Namibia, Bhutan, Indonesia and Mexico for 2021, according to co-founder and chief executive Caitlin Zaino von Doring.

These specific destination trends might not last; Zaino von Doring says customer interest has been shifting “wildly” throughout the pandemic. But the broader trend is telling.

“That future-thinking planning is focused on wide open spaces, beautiful jungles, being pampered in resorts, amazing, bucket-list kind of travel that delivers that serotonin hit of excitement, just knowing you’ll be there soon,” Zaino von Doring said.



(Woody Harrington/For The Washington Post)

I can sympathize. After being holed up in my studio apartment for half the year now (and counting), disappearing into a jungle sounds more appealing than ever. And now that we know travel is not guaranteed, there's a stronger incentive to take advantage of every future opportunity.

"Because [the pandemic] has put people's mortality way more into focus ... it causes people to want to value each day a lot more. Patients have mentioned that to me," said Robert Reiner, a licensed psychologist and the executive director at the Behavioral Associates clinic in New York. "It's kind of inviting them to be reminded to not take things for granted."

With that notion in mind, I asked travelers the other week on social media how the pandemic had changed their outlooks.



Many who responded said they couldn't imagine getting on a plane again. Others were holding on to their same travel wish lists. But another group said they were refocusing their travel goals on more meaningful opportunities.

On Twitter, a man named Omars captured the sentiment I've been feeling. He wrote that he was realizing how both time and the remaining opportunities to travel to his bucket-list destinations were limited. Going forward, he wants to focus more on what matters: "Try harder to get to the 'I always wanted to...' and less on the resource & energy draining diversions along the way."

Wrote another respondent, Doug Jackson: "I think it's probably made me more likely to pull the trigger and actually book trips rather than just say 'some day.' "

Time will tell whether this newfound thoughtfulness will endure once the pandemic is over. For now, it can be healthy to dream about and plan your next great adventure: Not only can trip-planning be a coping strategy, it can also breed optimism for the future, which Reiner says is one key to staying happy during this challenging time.

“Positive people will take the opportunity to do the things that seem to make them happier,” he said. “If you think that your life is limited, some people are so consumed by it, they fall by the wayside, they’re demoralized, they lack energy and enthusiasm.”

So, yes: For many, the pandemic has amplified the reminder that all our bucket lists, travel and otherwise, come with a countdown clock.

But that doesn’t have to be a bad thing.

“This has really caused people to live more for today. It kind of forces you to come to terms with the fact that we’re all just here for a limited amount of time and you might as well make the best of it,” Reiner said. “You know, my grandmother used to say, ‘Robert, you only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.’ ”