

Article

Travel trends: 2021

Visits to the UK by overseas residents, visits abroad by UK residents and spending estimates by travellers.



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Notice

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The estimates provided for 2021 should be treated with caution as the numbers are much smaller than pre-coronavirus pandemic years, especially for the first six months of the year, resulting in some cases with larger confidence intervals. The data exclude the EuroTunnel completely and the Dover ferries until August 2021 as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was unable to interview at these sites. No estimates are included for any travel across the Irish border.

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1 . Main points

- Overseas residents made 6.2 million visits to the UK in 2021; this was 44% less than in 2020 as travel continued to be reduced because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- Overseas residents spent £5.8 billion on their visits to the UK in 2021; this was 7% less than in 2020.
- UK residents made 19.1 million visits abroad in 2021, which was 20% less than the previous year and was because of the continued travel restrictions.
- UK residents spent £15.5 billion on visits abroad in 2021; this was an 12% increase on 2020.
- The average length of stay for both overseas residents' and UK residents' visits was much longer than in previous years and resulted in a higher spend per visit.
- Some visits and spend are lower in 2021 than 2020; this is because travel in the first quarter of 2020 (January to March) was unrestricted.
- Following the suspension of data collection on 16 March 2020, data collection by the International Passenger Survey (IPS) was restarted on 18 January 2021 after travel restrictions were relaxed; estimates for the period April to December 2020 in this release are based on administrative sources and modelling.

The estimates provided for 2021 should be treated with caution as the numbers are much smaller than pre-coronavirus pandemic years, especially for the first six months of the year, resulting in some cases with larger confidence intervals. The data exclude the EuroTunnel completely and the Dover ferries until August 2021 as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was unable to interview at these sites. No estimates are included for any travel across the Irish border.

2 . Travel and tourism statistics and coronavirus (COVID-19)

Travel and tourism statistics are usually based on the results of the International Passenger Survey (IPS), but the survey was suspended on 16 March 2020 because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. No IPS data were collected from this date until the survey restarted on 18 January 2021.

The figures published in this article, for April to December 2020, are based on administrative sources and modelling, and the methods used are described in [Section 6: Data sources and quality](#). The statistics have been produced to the highest quality possible, but the methods used have not been subject to full review and scrutiny.

Furthermore, we have made assumptions that some previous trends have continued; for example, the proportions of passengers travelling for business or holidays. The results are indicative and should therefore be viewed with caution. We have produced these estimates to provide users with as much information as possible about international travel over this period.

A limited number of visits to and from different countries means the data collected for 2021 are not as complete as in other years and some tables are not available. Within the tables, some data are grouped as the numbers are too small to show separately. As a result of the inability to collect data at the EuroTunnel and the late starting of Dover Seaport data collection (in August 2021), no separate mode of travel tables are shown.

3 . Overseas visits to the UK and UK visits abroad: 2021

Normal seasonal trends in visits were not seen in data for 2021 as both visits to and from the UK continued to increase all year after the easing of travel restrictions because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The difference in travel patterns for 2021 compared with pre-coronavirus pandemic trends can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Seasonal trend for visits to and from the UK in the pre-coronavirus pandemic period from 2015 to 2019

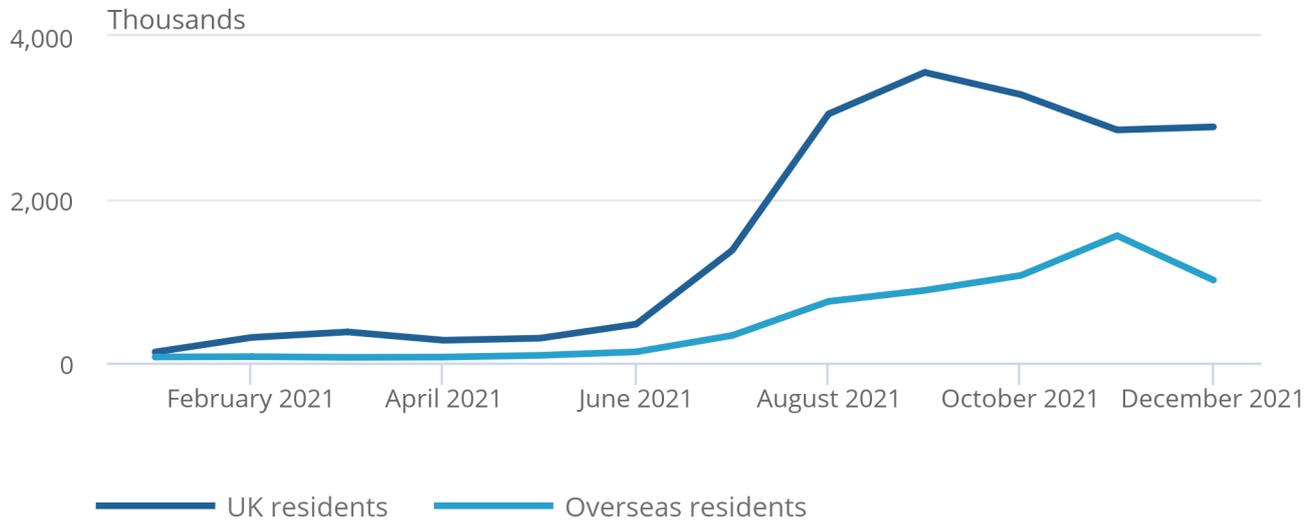
Figure 1: Seasonal trend for visits to and from the UK in the pre-coronavirus pandemic period from 2015 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey 2021

Figure 2: Current trend for visits to and from the UK 2021

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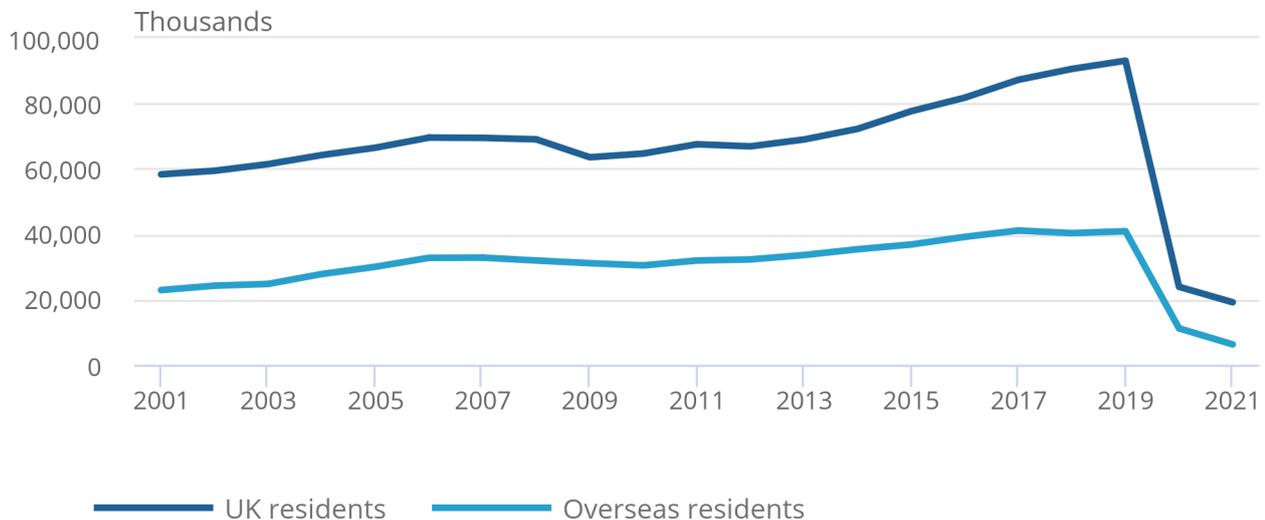


Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey 2021

There were 6.2 million visits to the UK during 2021, a decrease of 44% compared with modelled data for 2020 (Figure 3). UK residents' visits abroad in 2021 decreased by 20% to 19.1 million.

Figure 3: Visits to and from the UK from 2001 to 2021

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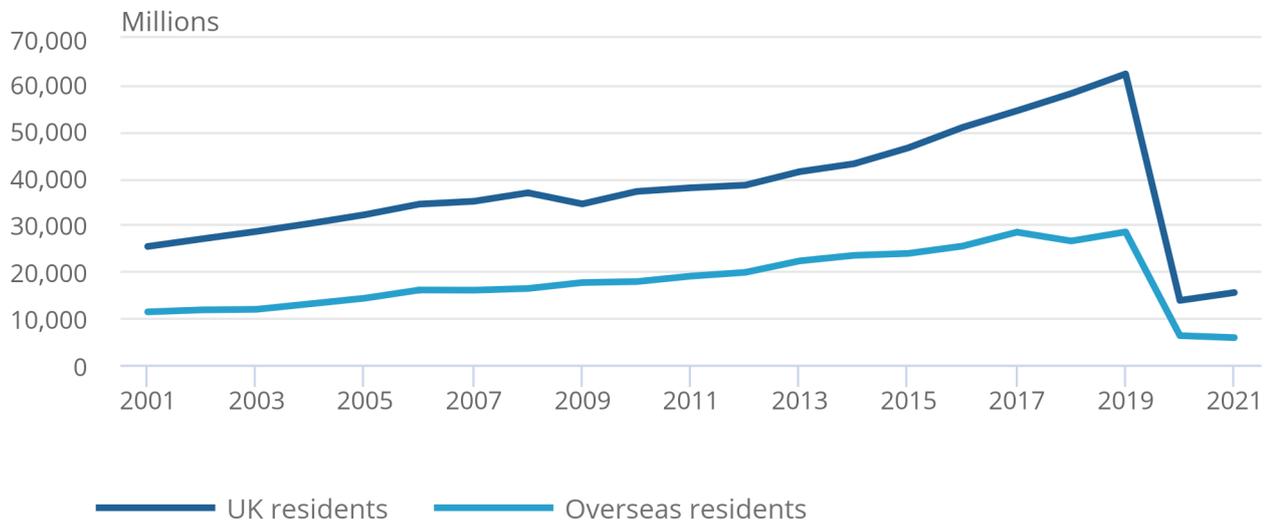
Source: Office for National Statistics - International Travel and Tourism

Overseas spending in the UK fell from a modelled amount of £6.2 billion in 2020 to £5.8 billion 2021, a decrease of 7% (Figure 4). This was an 80% decrease when compared with 2019. Overseas residents spent longer in the UK and spent less money per day – an average of 16 nights and an average spend of £58 per day. This compares with 2019 where the average stay was just seven nights with an average spend of £98 per day.

UK residents spent £15.5 billion on visits abroad in 2021, an increase of 12% compared with modelled data for 2020. The average spend per visit was £809 in 2021. Values for 2020 are not known, but this was an increase from £670 in 2019. Some of this increase is because of the longer time spent abroad. As with overseas residents' visits, the number of nights away increased compared with previous years to an average of 18 days. This is likely to be because of the restrictions on travel during the coronavirus pandemic and visitors not being able to return home. The average spend per day fell from £69 in 2019 to £46 in 2021 as more visits were to visit friends and family rather than the usual holidays.

Figure 4: Spending on visits to and from the UK from 2001 to 2021

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Source: Office for National Statistics - International Travel and Tourism

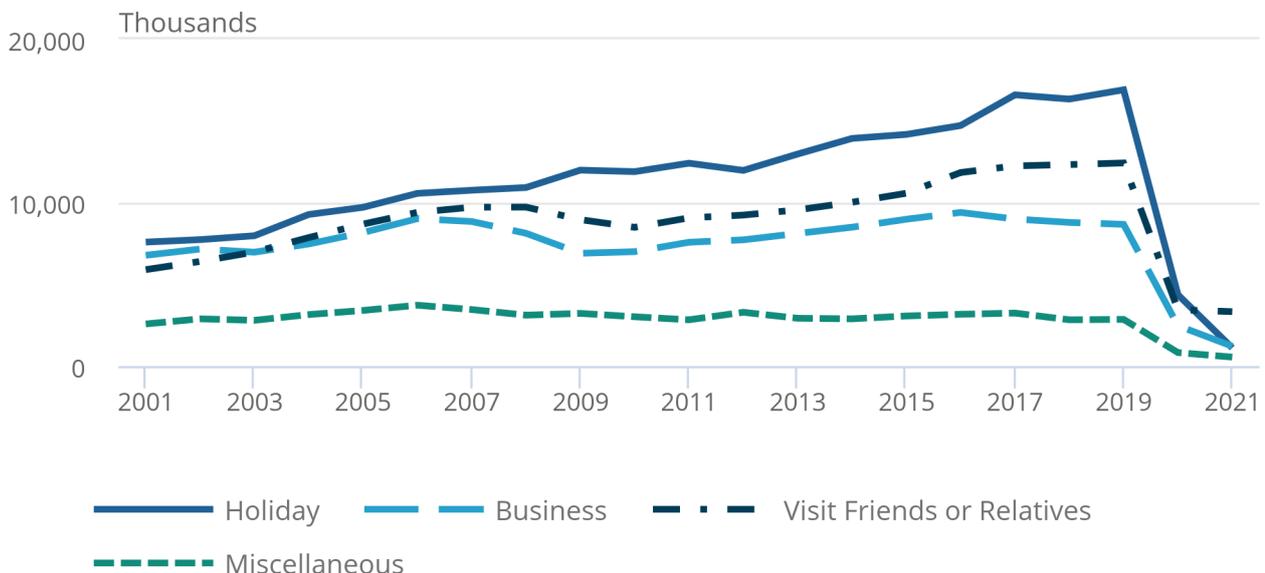
4 . Overseas residents' visits to the UK

Visiting friends and relatives was the most popular reason for visiting the UK in 2021, with 3.3 million visits (Figure 5). For the first time, this type of visit overtook holidays because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. There were 1.1 million holidays in the UK and 1.2 million business trips to the UK in 2021.

Similar trends were observed for different areas of the world. Most visits by North American residents were to visit friends and relatives – 453,000 out of a total of 813,000 visits. Holidays made up just 166,000 visits from residents of this region. Visits by European residents totalled 4.6 million, with visiting friends and relatives topping the list of reasons with 2.4 million visits. Business trips were 1 million and holidays were 0.8 million. Visits by residents of “other countries” (countries outside of Europe and North America) were 817,000 with more than half, 433,000, to see friends and relatives.

Figure 5: Overseas residents' visits to the UK by purpose, from 2001 to 2021

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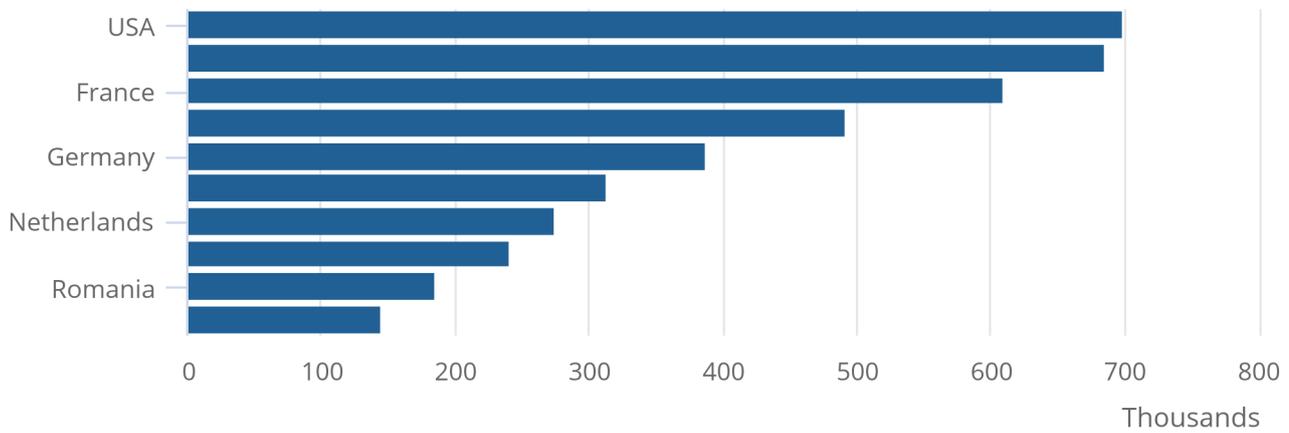


Source: Office for National Statistics - International Travel and Tourism

As in previous years, residents from the US made the most visits to the UK in 2021 – a total of 699,000. Residents from the Republic of Ireland visited a similar number of times (685,000) and French residents made 610,000 visits. In previous years, residents from Australia appeared in the top 10, but as this country was locked down for most of 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic, they have slipped down the rankings.

Figure 6: Top 10 countries for number of visits to the UK in 2021

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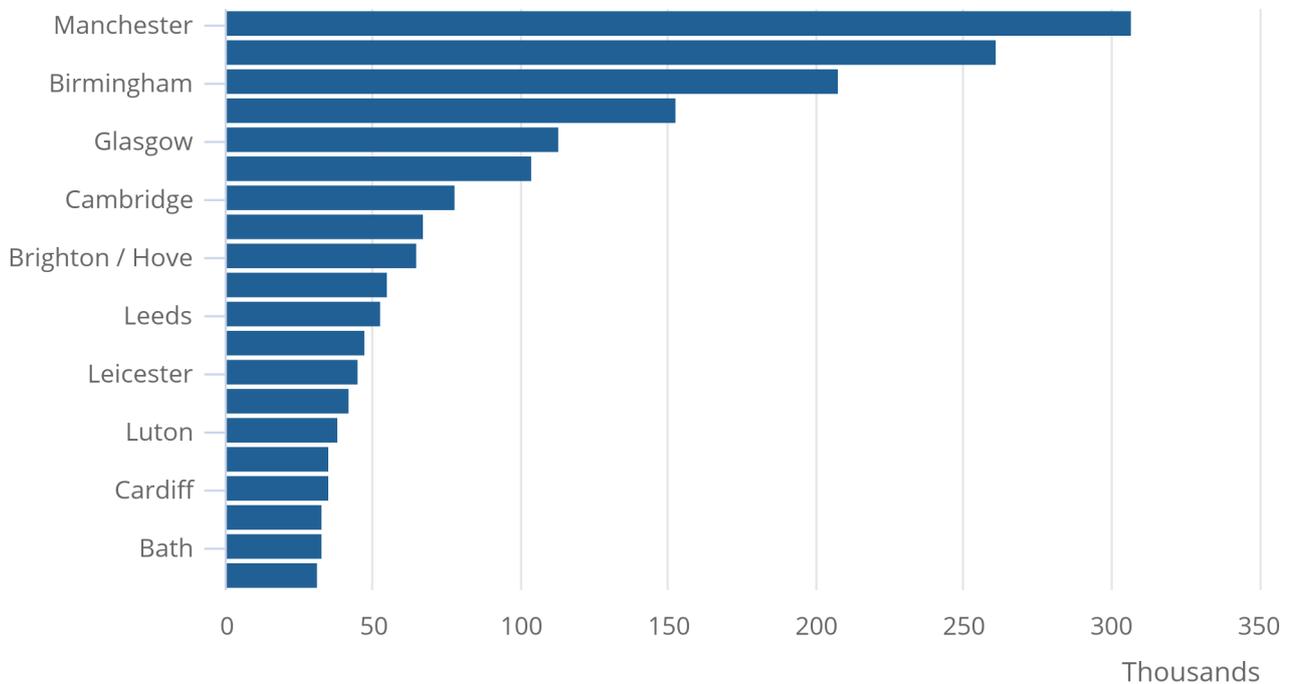


Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey 2021

As in previous years, London attracted the most visits although the numbers were much smaller than in previous years – 2.6 million in 2021 compared with 21.7 million visits in 2019. Overnight visits to cities outside London are shown in Figure 7. For the first time, Manchester (307,000 visits) overtook Edinburgh (261,000 visits). This difference is likely to be because of the reason for visiting changing in 2021 with holidays being less popular than visiting friends and family.

Figure 7: Top 20 towns visited for at least one night in 2021, excluding London

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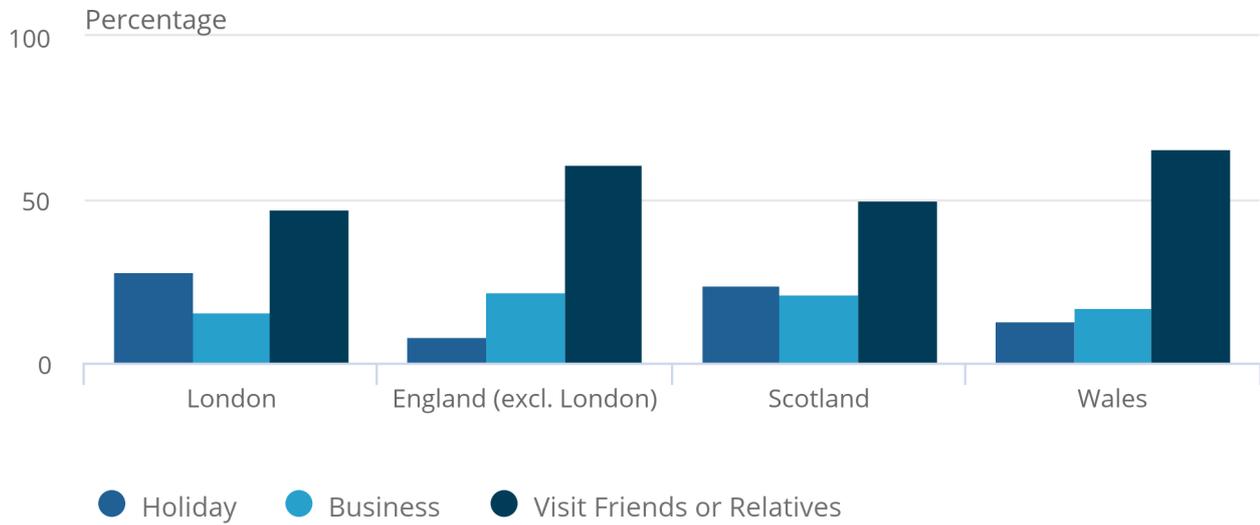


Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey 2021

Overseas residents made 536,000 overnight visits to Scotland in 2021, of which 50% were to visit friends and relatives and 24% were for holidays (see Figure 8). There were 116,000 overnight visits to Wales, of which 66% were to visit friends and relatives and 13% were for holidays, while 47% of overnight visits to London were to visit friends and relatives and 28% were for holidays.

Figure 8: Proportion of visits by purpose, by regions of the UK, for overnight visits in 2021

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Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey 2021

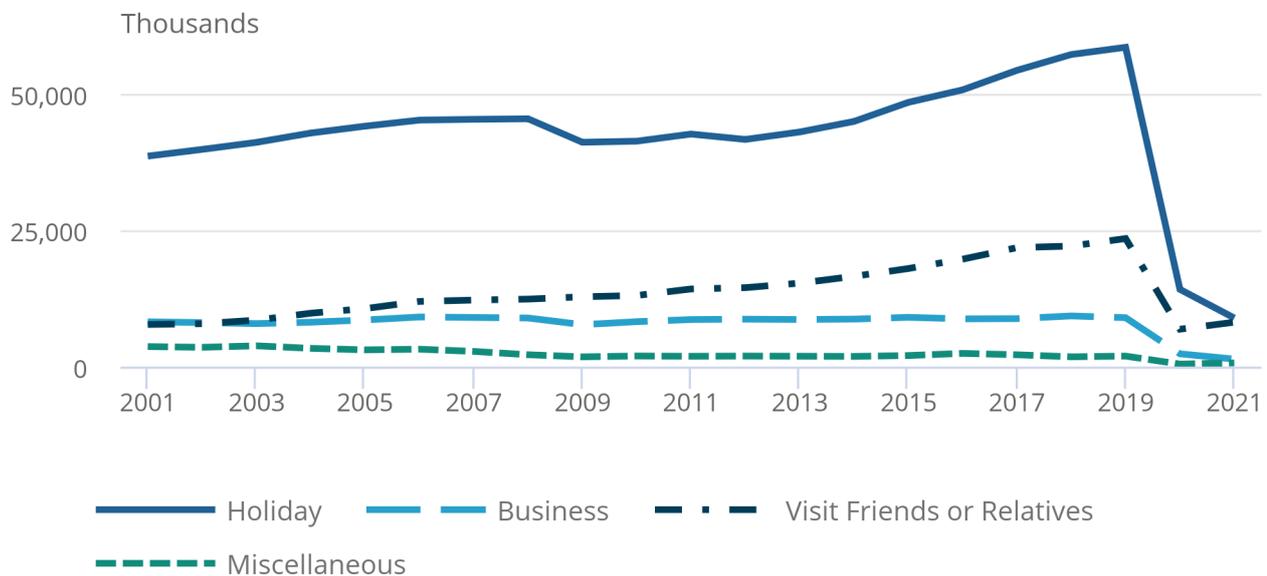
5 . Visits abroad by UK residents

There were 19.1 million visits overseas by UK residents in 2021; the same as in 1981. The number of visits in 2021 was 80% less than the peak in 2019, when there were 93.1 million visits.

Holidays were still the most popular reason (47%) for travelling abroad in 2021. However, this was driven by an increase in the second half of the year when travel restrictions started to lift. During January to June 2021, only 13% of visits, 242,000 out of 2.1 million, were for holidays; between July and December 2021, this percentage rose to 51% (8.7 million out of a total of 17.0 million). The overall proportion of visits to see friends and relatives was 43%, which was much higher than the 25% in 2019.

Figure 9: UK residents' visits abroad by purpose from 2001 to 2021

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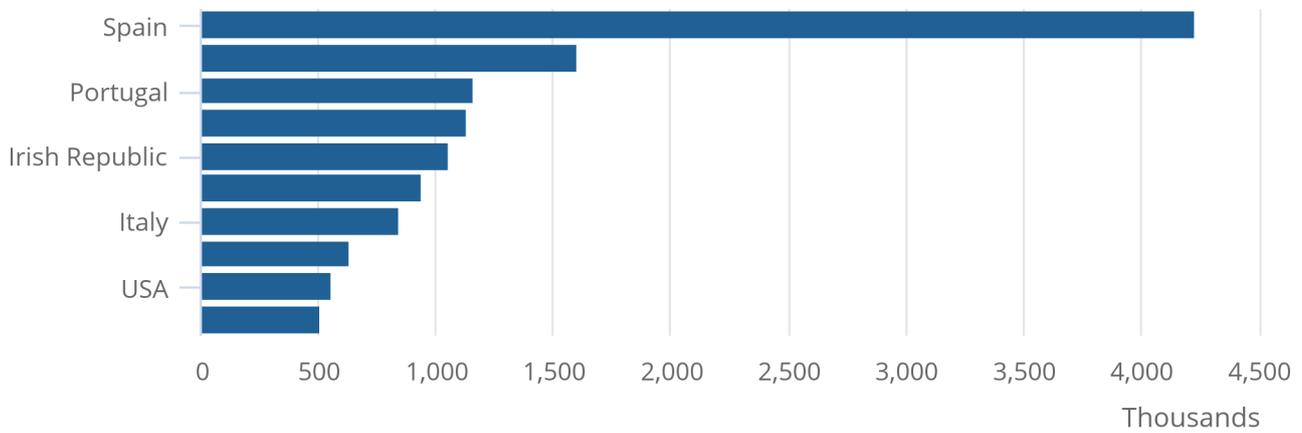
Source: Office for National Statistics - International Travel and Tourism

The number of visits to North America fell by 88% to 668,000 compared with 2019 when there were 5.6 million visits to this region. Visits to Europe also fell by a large proportion, when compared with 2019, to 78% from 72.5 million to 15.7 million visits. Visits to “other countries” (countries outside of Europe and North America) fell over the same period by 82% to 2.7 million (Figure 10).

Estimated spending abroad by UK residents decreased by 75% to £15.5 billion in 2021 when compared with 2019. Over half of the total spend was on holidays (£8.0 billion) with an additional £5.1 billion spent on visiting friends and relatives.

Figure 10: Top 10 countries visited by UK residents for at least one night in 2021

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Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey 2021

As would be expected, spending abroad since 2019 has decreased for all purposes; the largest fall was seen for holidays, which was 82% lower than in 2019. Business also saw a large decrease of 76% over the same time. The overall percentage decrease was 75%, from £62.3 billion in 2019 to just £15.5 billion in 2021.

Spain and France remained the most popular destination for UK visits abroad, but the United States dropped from 4th in 2019 to 9th in 2021 because of coronavirus (COVID-19) travel restrictions. Over a fifth of all visits abroad were to Spain (22%) with the second most popular country, France, only seeing 8% of the total visits abroad.

6 . Travel trends data

[Travel trends estimates: UK residents' visits abroad](#)

Dataset | Released 15 June 2022

Annual estimates on visits and spending by UK residents abroad, by purpose and region of visit. New methods were introduced for producing the 2021 estimates. The datasets presented for 2021, and for 2017 to 2021, contain estimates produced using the new method. The other datasets presented on this page were produced using the previous method and are now superseded.

[Travel trends estimates: overseas residents in the UK](#)

Dataset | Released 15 June 2022

Annual estimates on visits and spending in the UK by overseas residents, by purpose and region of visit. New methods were introduced for producing the 2021 estimates. The datasets presented for 2021, and for 2017 to 2021, contain estimates produced using the new method. The other datasets presented on this page were produced using the previous method and are now superseded.

[Travel trends estimates: overseas residents in the UK and UK residents abroad](#)

Dataset | Released 15 June 2022

Annual estimates on visits and spending of UK residents abroad and for overseas residents visiting the UK.

[Overseas travel and tourism, quarterly](#)

Dataset | Released 15 June 2022

Seasonally adjusted and non-seasonally adjusted estimates of completed international visits to and from the UK and earnings and expenditure associated with these visits.

[UK residents visits and expenditure abroad, quarterly](#)

Dataset | Released 15 June 2022

Seasonally adjusted and non-seasonally adjusted estimates of completed international visits and spending abroad by UK residents.

7 . Glossary

Visits

The figures relate to the number of completed visits, not the number of visitors. Anyone entering or leaving more than once in the same period is counted on each visit.

Overseas visitor

An overseas visitor is a person who, being permanently resident in a country outside the UK, visits the UK for a period of less than 12 months. UK citizens resident overseas for 12 months or more coming home on leave are included in this category. Visits abroad are visits for a period of less than 12 months by people permanently resident in the UK (who may be of foreign nationality).

Visiting multiple countries

When a resident of the UK has visited more than one country, expenditure and stay are allocated to the country stayed in for the longest time.

Miscellaneous visits

Visits for miscellaneous purposes include those for study, to attend sporting events, and for shopping, health, religious or other purposes, together with visits for more than one purpose when none predominates (for example, visits both on business and on holiday). Overseas visitors staying overnight in the UK on their way to other destinations are also included in miscellaneous purposes.

Earnings and expenditure

Earnings refer to spending in the UK by overseas residents, whereas expenditure refers to spending abroad by UK residents.

8 . Data sources and quality

Methods used to produce these estimates

Apart from the time when the International Passenger Survey (IPS) was not running (16 March 2020 to 18 January 2021), figures shown are produced from results of the IPS. These results do not include any travel via the Channel Tunnel vehicle trains as the trains were isolated and no interviewing could take place. It was also not possible to obtain any survey results from Dover to France until August 2021. It should be noted that there was very little travel-related traffic at that time. Results for when the IPS was not operating were limited to totals, and the method used can be found in [Section 6 of our Overseas travel and tourism, provisional: April to June 2020 publication](#). Although traffic volumes have increased during 2021, figures should be treated with caution as the numbers are much smaller than in the past and are subject to higher sampling errors than previous estimates released.

Accuracy of the IPS estimates

Estimates produced from the IPS are subject to sampling errors that result because not every traveller to or from the UK is interviewed on the survey. Sampling errors are determined both by the sample design and by the sample size - generally speaking, the larger the sample supporting a particular estimate, the proportionately smaller is its sampling error. The survey sample size in 2021 is much smaller than in previous years because of the travel restrictions resulting from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The estimates presented in this article for the whole of 2020 must be treated with particular caution, since the methods used have not been fully scrutinised or tested.

The estimates presented in this article make the best use of the available data and methods to produce estimates of international visits and spending. However, as noted, the numbers are small and the results should be treated with caution.

9 . Related links

[Travelpac: travel to and from the UK](#)

Dataset | Released 24 July 2020

Quarterly data on travel to and from the UK, taken from the International Passenger Survey (IPS). Includes detail on age and sex of travellers, purpose and length of trip, and spending. These data are in a form suitable for small businesses and students. National Statistics designation applies to the data for all periods up to 2019. Designation has been temporarily withdrawn for Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2020 because of incomplete data collection as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19).

[Travel trends: 2019](#)

Article | Released 22 May 2020

Annual estimates of travel and tourism visits to the UK (of less than 12 months' duration) and associated earnings and expenditure between the UK and the rest of the world.

[Overseas travel and tourism, UK, provisional: July to September 2021](#)

Article | Released 7 February 2022

Visits to the UK by overseas residents, visits abroad by UK residents and spending estimates by travellers, using administrative sources of passenger travel data.

[Overseas travel and tourism: January, February and March 2020 provisional results](#)

Bulletin | Released 24 July 2020

Visits to the UK by overseas residents, visits abroad by UK residents and spending by travellers, using provisional passenger traffic data.