

Statistical bulletin

Overseas travel and tourism: January, February and March 2020 provisional results

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

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Release date:
24 July 2020

Next release:
To be announced

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1 . Main points

- There were 1.4 million visits to the UK by overseas visitors in March 2020, 54% fewer than in March 2019, in the first month in which travel was seriously affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19).
- There were more visits to the UK by overseas visitors in January and February 2020, compared with the corresponding periods of the previous year: visits in January increased by 7% to 3.0 million, while visits in February increased by 6% to 2.5 million.
- UK residents made 3.2 million visits overseas in March 2020, which was 50% fewer than in March 2019, in the first month in which travel was seriously affected by the coronavirus.
- UK residents made fewer visits overseas in January and February 2020, compared with the corresponding periods of the previous year: visits in January decreased by 12% to 5.4 million, while visits in February decreased by 6% to 5.2 million.

Data collection was suspended on 16 March 2020 because of the coronavirus (COVID-19). For this reason, [National Statistics](#) status has been suspended for the March results. Results for January and February are unaffected. More detail is available in [Section 7: Strengths and limitations](#).

2 . Trends in visits to the UK by overseas residents

The figures used in the commentary in this section are sourced from the following monthly overseas travel and tourism datasets:

- Overseas residents' visits to the UK by month – Table 1
- Purpose of overseas residents' visits to the UK by month – Table 2
- Earnings in the UK and expenditure abroad by month – Table 5

Overseas residents made an estimated 1.4 million visits to the UK in March 2020, which was 54% fewer than in March 2019 (Figure 1). The large fall is attributable to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, with travel restrictions and reluctance to travel becoming widespread. Overseas residents spent £0.8 billion on visits to the UK in March 2020, which was 58% less than in March 2019.

Overseas residents made an estimated 2.5 million visits to the UK in February 2020, which was 6% more than in February 2019 (Figure 1). Overseas residents spent £1.5 billion on visits to the UK in February 2020, which was 17% more than in February 2019.

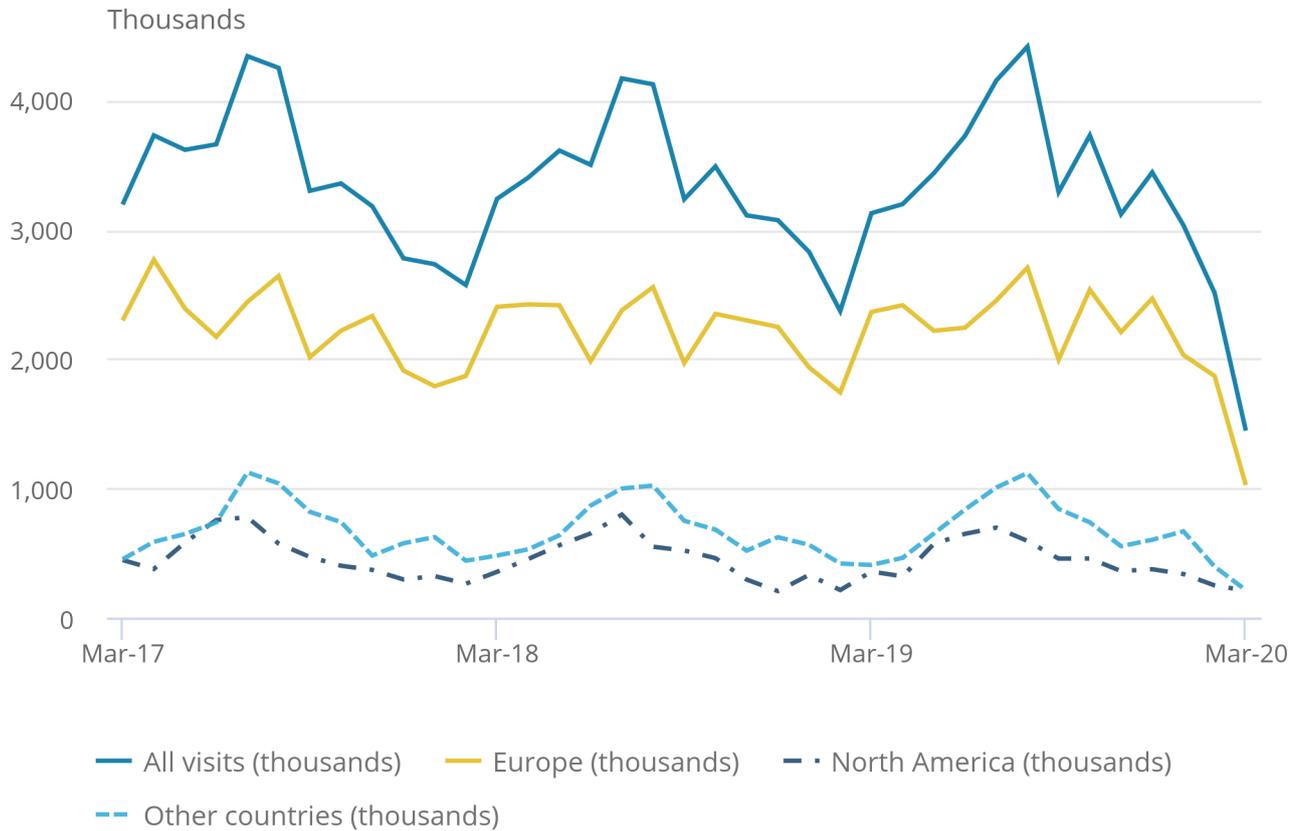
Overseas residents made an estimated 3.0 million visits to the UK in January 2020, which was 7% more than in January 2019 (Figure 1). Overseas residents spent £2.0 billion on visits to the UK in January 2020, which was 23% more than in January 2019.

Figure 1: Visits to the UK by overseas residents dropped off sharply in March 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Overseas residents' visits to the UK by month, March 2017 to March 2020

Figure 1: Visits to the UK by overseas residents dropped off sharply in March 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Overseas residents' visits to the UK by month, March 2017 to March 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – International Passenger Survey

During the period January to March 2020, there were 7.0 million visits to the UK, which was 16% fewer than in the corresponding period a year earlier. Overseas residents spent £4.3 billion in the UK over this period, which was 10% less than in the previous year.

Table 1: Main visit and spending estimates for overseas residents' visits to the UK in March 2020

Overseas residents' visits to UK				
	Visits (Thousands)	% change from year earlier	Earnings (£ million)	% change from year earlier
Non seasonally adjusted				
March 2020	1,446	-54	780	-58
January to March 2020	6,990	-16	4,340	-10
Year to date 2020	6,990	-16	4,340	-10
Latest 12 months	39,520	-1	27,990	+7
Seasonally adjusted				
October 2019	3,530	+7	2,560	+18
November 2019	3,360	+2	2,460	+18
December 2019	3,790	+12	2,980	+42
January 2020	3,480	+7	2,620	+22
February 2020	3,310	+5	2,330	+11
March 2020	1,720	-52	1,020	-57

Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

3 . Trends in overseas visits by UK residents

The figures used in the commentary in this section are sourced from the following monthly overseas travel and tourism datasets:

- UK residents' visits abroad by month – Table 3
- Purpose of UK residents' visits abroad by month – Table 4
- Earnings in the UK and expenditure abroad by month – Table 5

There were an estimated 3.2 million visits overseas by UK residents in March 2020, which was 50% less than in March 2019 (Figure 2). This large fall in visits overseas because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic mirrors the fall in visits to the UK. UK residents spent £2.4 billion on visits overseas in March 2020, which was 41% less than in March 2019.

There were an estimated 5.2 million visits overseas by UK residents in February 2020, which was 6% fewer than in February 2019 (Figure 2). UK residents spent £3.5 billion on visits overseas in February 2020, which was 3% more than in February 2019.

There were an estimated 5.4 million visits overseas by UK residents in January 2020, which was 12% fewer than in January 2019 (Figure 2). UK residents spent £3.3 billion on visits overseas in January 2020, which was 16% less than in January 2019.

During the period January to March 2020, there were 13.9 million visits abroad by UK residents, which was 24% less than in the corresponding period a year earlier. UK residents spent £9.2 billion on these visits, 20% less than in the previous year.

Table 2: Main visit and spending estimates for UK residents' visits abroad in March 2020

	UK residents' visits abroad			
	Visits (Thousands)	% change from year earlier	Expenditure (£ million)	% change from year earlier
Non seasonally adjusted				
March 2020	3,239	-50	2,421	-41
January to March 2020	13,890	-24	9,210	-20
Year to date 2020	13,890	-24	9,210	-20
Latest 12 months	88,820	-4	60,080	+2
Seasonally adjusted				
October 2019	7,520	-3	5,230	+5
November 2019	7,440	-1	5,200	+12
December 2019	7,370	+1	4,990	-2
January 2020	7,050	-10	4,640	-17
February 2020	7,090	-8	4,690	-1
March 2020	5,240	-37	3,200	-40

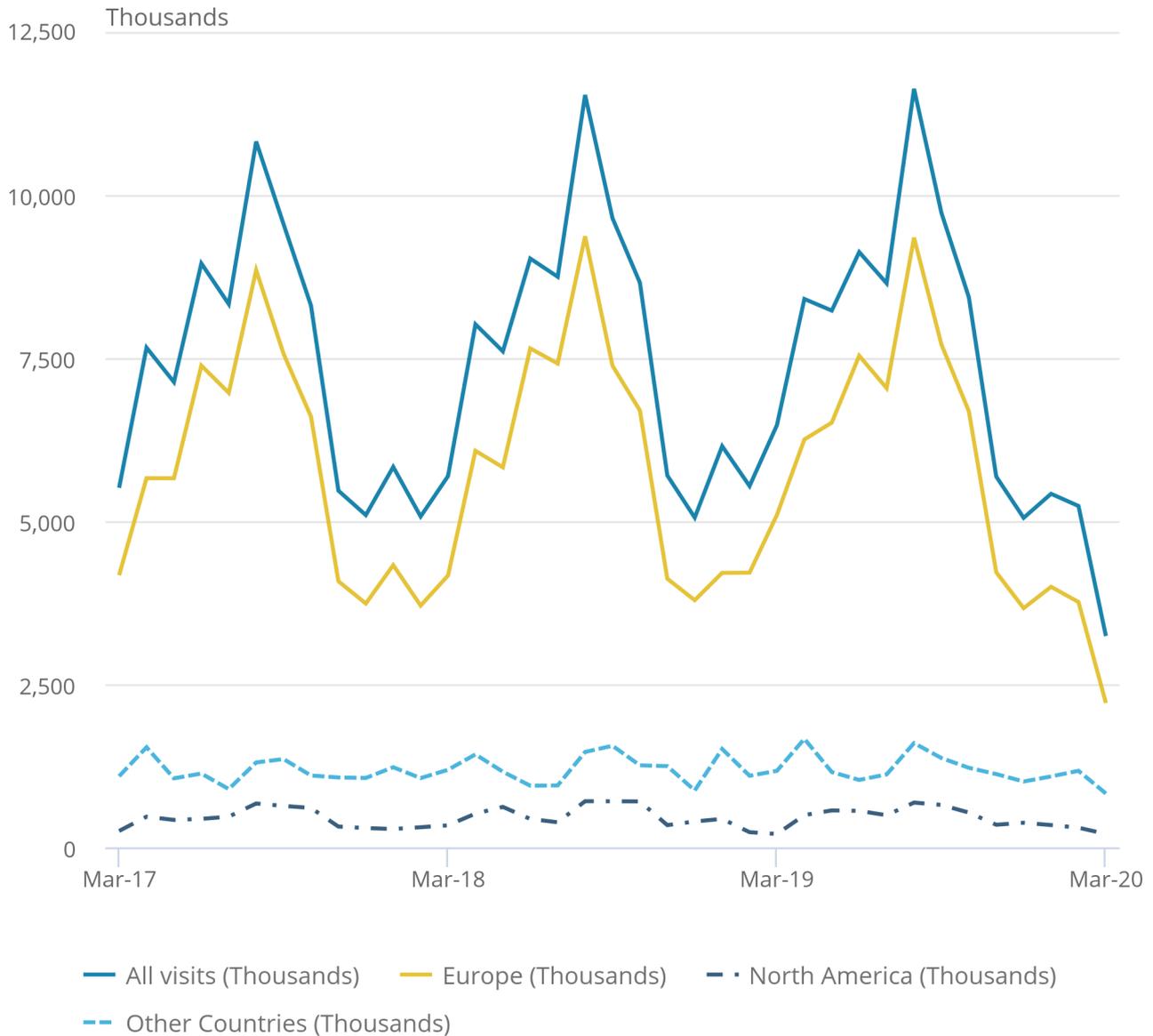
Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

Figure 2: Visits overseas by UK residents also dropped off sharply in March 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

UK residents' visits abroad by month, non-seasonally adjusted, March 2017 to March 2020

Figure 2: Visits overseas by UK residents also dropped off sharply in March 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

UK residents' visits abroad by month, non-seasonally adjusted, March 2017 to March 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – International Passenger Survey

4 . Overseas travel and tourism data

[Overseas travel and tourism, monthly](#)

Dataset | Released 24 July 2020

Seasonally and non-seasonally adjusted estimates of completed international visits to and from the UK.

[Overseas travel and tourism, monthly revision triangles](#)

Dataset | Released 24 July 2020

Revision triangles of estimates for International Passenger Survey (IPS) monthly data.

5 . 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.

Day-visits

Trips that do not involve an overnight stay abroad by UK residents, as well as day trips to the UK by overseas residents, are included in the total figures for visits and expenditure, but figures presented at lower levels of geography relate to overnight stays only.

Overseas visitor

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, for shopping, health, religious, or for 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.

6 . Measuring the data

International Passenger Survey (IPS) data are collected by a team of over 200 interviewers who are recruited and trained specifically to work on the IPS. Interviews are carried out at air and sea ports, on board vessels leaving or returning to the UK, or on board the Eurotunnel trains. Interviews are carried out on all days of the year, apart from Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day.

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the [IPS QMI](#). This will be updated shortly to reflect recent changes to the survey's processes.

We have made methodological improvements to the travel and tourism estimates from the IPS. These relate to the survey's weighting process and were used to produce the data presented in this bulletin. The improvements were introduced in the [Travel Trends 2019](#) article and they are described in [Improved methodology for the estimates](#) in outline. A detailed technical paper will be published in due course, setting out the changes comprehensively. These changes affect only travel and tourism and not estimates of long-term international migration.

The new method was used to produce final results for 2019 and a revised series for 2009 to 2018. The impacts of the new method, and how these differ from the old, are presented in [Impacts of the new IPS methodology](#).

7 . Strengths and limitations

International Passenger Survey (IPS) data collection was suspended on 16 March 2020. This meant that the volume of data collected was lower than usual, and also that the representativeness of the data could not be guaranteed.

The survey's weighting process worked on the assumption that passenger characteristics in the second, unsampled, half of the month were represented by those sampled in the first half. Since this assumption could not be tested, we were not completely confident that the results were fully representative. For this reason, [National Statistics](#) status has been suspended for the March results. However, every effort has been made to produce high-quality estimates. The estimates for January and February are unaffected, since regular data collection was completed, and these figures retain their National Statistics designation.

No IPS data will be collected for the period when the survey is not operational, that is, from April 2020 until interviewing resumes. The usual travel and tourism outputs from the IPS will not be published for this period. Administrative data from the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) show that international air traffic was extremely low in April and May 2020, at around 2 to 3% of the levels recorded in 2019.

We will seek to provide more information on international travel patterns for the period when the survey is not operational. This will use CAA and DfT data, and we will also investigate other potential sources, to provide as complete and helpful a picture of international travel as possible. Under the usual IPS publication schedule, estimates for Quarter 2 (Apr to June) 2020 would be published in October 2020, and we plan to publish at this time. Further publications may also be scheduled.

The IPS is an important input to Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures on international trade. Foreign spending estimates in the national accounts are safeguarded, as these utilise new cutting-edge methods utilising both Civil Aviation Authority data on the numbers of flights arriving and aggregated and anonymised foreign-issued card spend processed through Barclays Point-of-Sale an "card-not-present" channels. Information about the plans for international migration statistics can be found in the latest [Migration Statistics Quarterly Report \(MSQR\)](#).

Strengths

A major strength of the IPS is that it is the main source of information in the UK on international travel and tourism, and associated earnings and expenditure. It has been running since 1961 so provides a comprehensive time series of travel and tourism, which can be useful for identifying long- term trends and patterns or undertaking time series analysis and forecasting. In addition, interviewing at the principal air, sea and tunnel routes and the use of a dedicated field force gives the survey some uniqueness.

Limitations

IPS survey data are subject to both sampling and non-sampling errors. About 90% of passengers entering and leaving the UK have a chance of being sampled in the survey. The remainder are either passengers travelling at night, when interviewing is suspended, or on those routes too small in volume or too expensive to be covered. Furthermore, the number of survey interviews on particular routes or for some main reason for visit such as playing sports and getting married, are sometimes small and consequently attract higher sampling errors. This also applies to visits to or from countries with low visit numbers.

Uncertainty

The accuracy of the estimates is expressed in terms of [confidence intervals](#). For more information on how we measure and communicate uncertainty for our surveys, see our [Uncertainty and how we measure it page](#).

The following guidelines are provided to aid in the interpretation of the estimates, and to enable their reliability to be assessed:

- % confidence interval below 10%: precise
- % confidence interval between 10% and 20%: reasonably precise
- % confidence interval between 20% and 40%: acceptable
- % confidence interval over 40%: unreliable (these estimates should be used with caution for practical purposes).

Tables 3a, 3b and 3c show the 95% confidence intervals for the estimates of the total number of visits and expenditure for both overseas residents visiting the UK and UK residents going abroad. The confidence intervals for March were computed under the assumption that the results obtained before interviewing was suspended are representative for the whole month. As detailed, we cannot be certain that this assumption holds and the confidence intervals for March should therefore be treated with caution.

Table 3a: Confidence intervals relating to overseas travel and tourism estimates, January 2020

January 2020 monthly estimates	Estimate	Relative 95% confidence interval (+/- % of the estimate)
Visits to UK by overseas residents (thousands)	3,036	8.7%
Earnings from visits to UK (£ million)	2,026	7.4%
Visits abroad by UK residents (thousands)	5,419	6.5%
Expenditure on visits abroad (£ million)	3,340	9.1%

Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

Table 3b: Confidence intervals relating to overseas travel and tourism estimates, February 2020

February 2020 monthly estimates	Estimate	Relative 95% confidence interval (+/- % of the estimate)
Visits to UK by overseas residents (thousands)	2,512	11.6%
Earnings from visits to UK (£ million)	1,538	13.0%
Visits abroad by UK residents (thousands)		
Expenditure on visits abroad (£ million)	5,232	7.4%
	3,454	11.6%

Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

Table 3c: Confidence intervals relating to overseas travel and tourism estimates, March 2020

March 2020 monthly estimates	Estimate	Relative 95% confidence interval (+/- % of the estimate)
Visits to UK by overseas residents (thousands)	1,446	15.8%
Earnings from visits to UK (£ million)	780	10.9%
Visits abroad by UK residents (thousands)	3,239	6.7%
Expenditure on visits abroad (£ million)	2,421	12.4%

Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

8 . 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. 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. Travelpac comprises 14 of the most widely used variables, and the data are available for each year from 1993 onwards, in both SPSS and Excel formats.

[Travel trends 2019](#)

Article | Released 22 May 2020

This provides final overseas travel and tourism estimates and more detailed analysis of visits and spending, including analysis by demographics, towns visited in the UK and countries visited by residents of different parts of the UK.

[Overseas travel and tourism quarterly, January to March 2020](#)

Article | Released 24 July 2020

This provides more detailed analysis of visits and spending, including aspects such as countries of visit, mode of travel used, nationality of visitors and regions of the UK visited.