

Article

Overseas travel and tourism : 2020

Annual estimates of visits to the UK by overseas residents, visits abroad by UK residents and estimates of spending by travellers, using administrative sources of passenger travel data for the period covering April to December 2020.

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1 . Main points

- Overseas residents made 11.1 million visits to the UK in 2020; this was 73% fewer than in 2019 as travel reduced because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- Overseas residents spent £6.2 billion on their visits to the UK in 2020; this was 78% less than in 2019.
- UK residents made 23.8 million visits abroad in 2020, which was 74% fewer than the previous year because of the coronavirus pandemic.
- UK residents spent £13.8 billion on visits abroad in 2020; this was 78% less than in 2019.
- Data collection by the International Passenger Survey (IPS) was suspended 16 March 2020, for the period April to December 2020 the figures in this release are based on administrative sources and modelling; estimates prior to April 2020 are based on data collected from the International Passenger Survey.

2 . Travel and tourism statistics and the 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 for the period when the survey was not operational.

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. Also, 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.

The range of variables published here are much more limited than in the regular annual publications, and the usual supporting dataset has not been produced.

This article also presents data for the period January to March 2020 in the charts and tables. As IPS survey data were not collected after 16 March 2020, incomplete information was obtained. Every effort was made to ensure the quality of these statistics, but in the circumstances we cannot be confident that they meet the high standards required for designation as [National Statistics](#). For this reason, the National Statistics status of these statistics for the period January to December 2020 was temporarily suspended under the [provisions made for exceptional difficulties encountered in compiling statistics](#) because of the coronavirus pandemic.

3 . Visits to the UK by overseas residents and visits abroad by UK residents: 2020

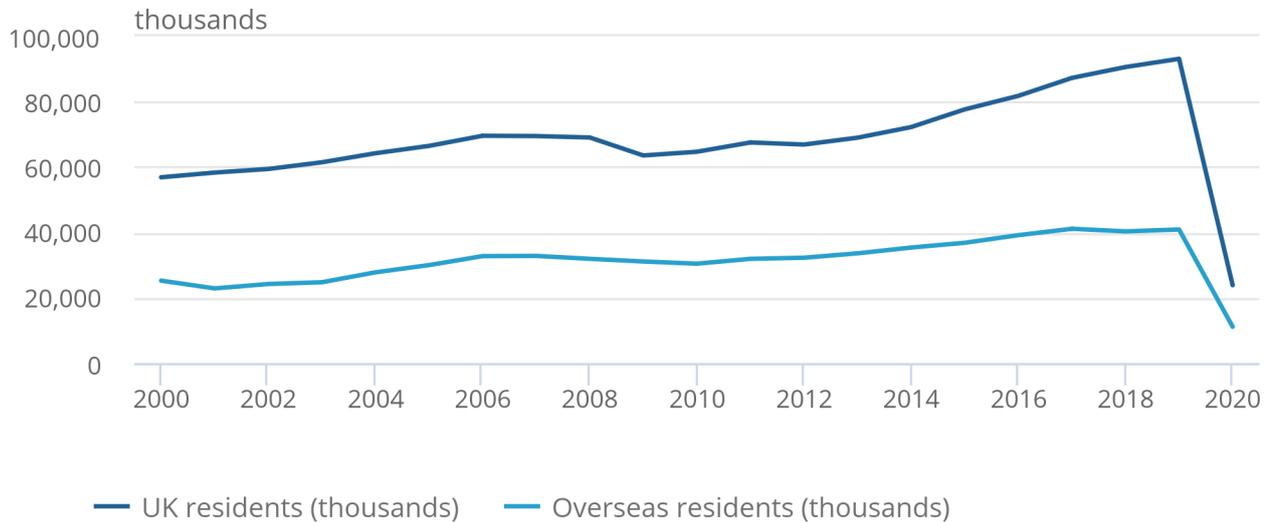
Our modelling indicates that overseas residents made a total of 11.1 million visits to the UK during 2020, a decrease of 73% compared with 2019 (Figure 1). UK residents' visits abroad in 2020 fell by 74% to 23.8 million. These large falls are attributable to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, with travel restrictions and reluctance to travel becoming widespread.

Figure 1: Visits to the UK by overseas residents decreased by 73% in 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Visits to and from the UK 2000 to 2020

Figure 1: Visits to the UK by overseas residents decreased by 73% in 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Visits to and from the UK 2000 to 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – International Travel and Tourism

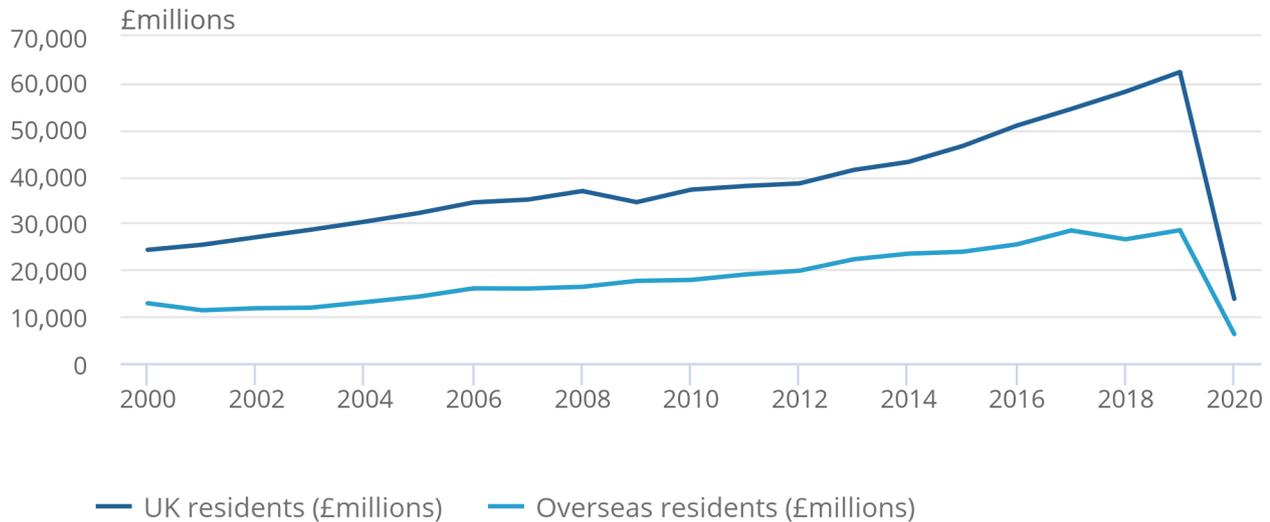
UK residents spent £13.8 billion on visits abroad in 2020, a fall of 78% compared with 2019. The average spend per visit has decreased from £670 in 2019 to £578 in 2020, contributing to the overall decrease in spending. Overseas spending in the UK also fell to £6.2 billion; this was 78% less than in 2019 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Spending in the UK by overseas residents decreased by 78% in 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Spending on visits to and from the UK, 2000 to 2020

Figure 2: Spending in the UK by overseas residents decreased by 78% in 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Spending on visits to and from the UK, 2000 to 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – International Travel and Tourism

4 . Overseas residents’ visits to the UK

In our modelled estimates, which assume that past trends continue, taking holidays was the most popular reason for visiting the UK in 2020, with 4.4 million visits (Figure 3). This was a 74% decrease compared with 2019. Business trips and visits to friends and relatives decreased by 72% compared with 2019 (2.5 million and 3.4 million respectively).

Similar trends were observed for different areas of the world. Visits by North American residents decreased by 78% to 1.2 million, visits by European residents decreased by 71% to 8.0 million and visits by residents of "other countries" (countries outside of Europe and North America) decreased by 76% to 1.9 million (Figure 3).

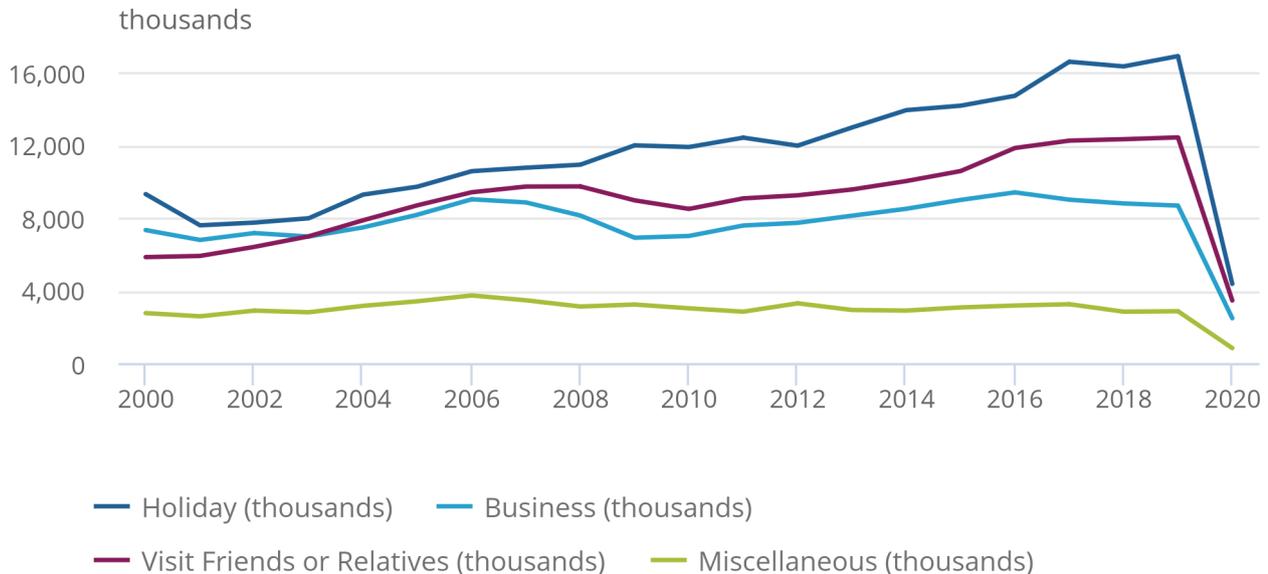
Estimated spending in the UK by overseas visitors decreased by 78% to £6.2 billion in 2020 when compared with 2019.

Figure 3: Overseas residents' holiday visits to the UK decreased by 74% in 2020 when compared with the same period a year earlier

Overseas residents' visits to the UK by purpose, 2000 to 2020

Figure 3: Overseas residents' holiday visits to the UK decreased by 74% in 2020 when compared with the same period a year earlier

Overseas residents' visits to the UK by purpose, 2000 to 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – International Travel and Tourism

5 . Visits abroad by UK residents

Our modelling suggests that there were 23.8 million visits overseas by UK residents in 2020, the lowest figure since 1985. The number of visits in 2020 was 74% fewer than in 2019, when there were 93.1 million visits.

There was an 81% decrease in visits to North America (1.1 million); a smaller fall was seen in visits to European countries, a decrease of 74% (18.7 million). Visits to "other countries" fell by 73% to 4.1 million.

Using modelling to extrapolate from past trends, 60% of UK residents' visits abroad were for holidays. There were 14.2 million holiday visits abroad in 2020, a 76% decrease on the previous year (Figure 4).

Visiting friends or relatives overseas decreased from 23.5 million in 2019 to 6.9 million visits in 2020. The numbers of business trips have varied relatively little over the last 20 years until 2020, where visits of this type fell to 2.3 million in 2020 from 9.0 million in 2019.

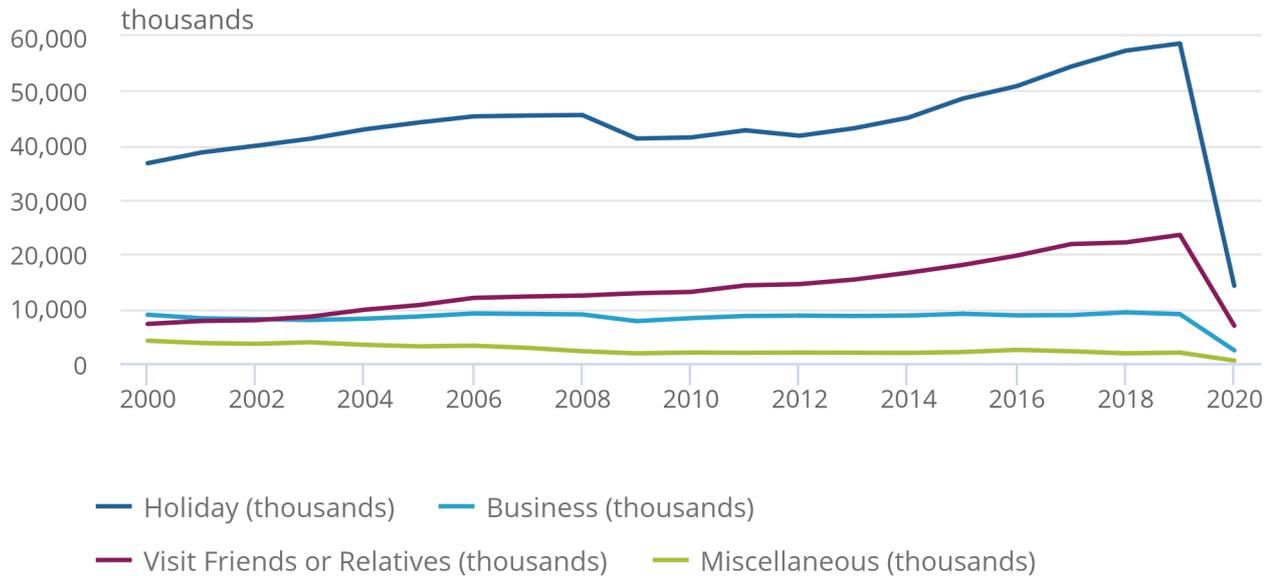
Estimated spending abroad by UK residents decreased by 78% to £13.8 billion in 2020 when compared with 2019.

Figure 4: UK residents holiday visits abroad decreased by 76% in 2020 when compared with the same period a year earlier

UK residents' visits abroad by purpose, 2000 to 2020

Figure 4: UK residents holiday visits abroad decreased by 76% in 2020 when compared with the same period a year earlier

UK residents' visits abroad by purpose, 2000 to 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – International Travel and Tourism

6 . 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, 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.

7 . Data sources and quality

Methods used to produce these estimates

The methods and sources used to produce the estimates presented in this release are primarily the same as what was used to produce [Overseas travel and tourism, provisional: April to June 2020](#) publication in [Section 6: Data sources and quality](#). However, with traffic volumes increasing during Quarter 3 (July to Sep) 2020, and policy changes affecting international travel, these figures are to be treated with caution and are less robust than the previous modelled estimates released.

Accuracy of the International Passenger Survey (IPS) estimates

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.

Confidence intervals have not been provided for these estimates because we would only be able to provide this based on how well the model predicts data already collected by the IPS. The trends observed this year are not like previous years, and therefore stating these confidence intervals would indicate a misleading level of confidence in the predictions, as the assumptions of the model may not be correct.

The usual source of travel and tourism statistics, the IPS, has been suspended since 16 March 2020.

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 methods are new and the results should be treated with caution. It has not been possible to produce the full range of variables normally presented in the quarterly publication.

8 . Future developments

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 data was collected for the period April to December 2020. Interviewing resumed from 18 January 2021 and we plan to release data collected for Quarter 1 2021 in July 2021.

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. 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

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, provisional: April to June 2020](#)

Article | Released 9 November 2020

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