Good times ahead for Australia's Tourism Industry:
Proceed with Caution

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In this study members of the Australian population were surveyed in relation to their response to COVID-19 and their future domestic travel intentions. The data has revealed insight into the sentiment of the Australian population towards travel and how COVID-19 has and will impact domestic travel behaviour. The findings present important implications for Australia's tourism industry in terms of what they can expect once restrictions are lifted and what tourists expect of them.

Who took part in this study?

The sample comprised 528 Australians. Males and females were equally represented in the study. Age segments were identified by generation with 40% of those surveyed representing millennials, close to a third representing Generation X, and 23% were baby boomers. Seniors represented just 10% of respondents. A third of respondents had dependent children. A third of respondents reside in New South Wales, 26% in Victoria and 20% in Queensland. A smaller number of respondents resided in Western Australia (10%) and South Australia (7%) while Tasmania and the Northern Territory residents represented only 3 % of responses. 70% of respondents travel within Australia at least once or twice a year for leisure purposes.

How has Australia's Domestic Tourist Market responded to COVID-19?

Emotionally, Australian tourists are not surprisingly feeling uncertain and worried about life at the present time. Over a third of those surveyed do not feel they are in control of their lives right now. This latter finding suggests they are more likely to search for and accept direction from others and less likely to take matters into their own hands. This is possibly due to the fact that this health crisis is a great unknown as most Australians have not experienced a pandemic before. Their dependence on trusted sources for advice would be more significant than past crises and disasters that are more common place, such as bushfires, floods or cyclones.

Future Travel Behaviours

Of those surveyed, 58% are keen to travel domestically as soon as it perceived as acceptable to do so. Half of these tourists will travel as soon as the government lifts domestic travel restrictions while others will make the call depending on when they feel it is safe (post restrictions being lifted). A third of tourists will wait for 12 months – while 15% claimed they will not be in a financial position to travel for at least 12 months. Generation X represented close to half of those who indicated they are unlikely to have the funds.

58% of Australians are keen to travel domestically

The data indicates that family status is an important factor with those who have children at home representing just 27% of those likely to travel as soon as it is possible.

When comparing these results with past travel behaviour, frequent travellers (those who travel 3 times or more a year) are more likely to travel once restrictions are lifted. While infrequent travellers are more likely to wait at least 12 months or be financially restricted.

Focusing on those that will travel, the following information presents some insight into their reasons for travel, their risk reduction strategies and their planning behaviours.

"People are now starting to have a whole new appreciation for the assets and destinations their own countries have to offer."

Reasons for travel

58% of those who will travel will do so for leisure while 40% will travel to visit or catch up with friends and relatives. Other 'open ended' options suggested that reunions with loved ones and friends will be a key driver behind the desire to travel, with Millennials feeling this the most.

Looking more closely at motivations for travel, respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements that have defined people's post crises travel motivations in past studies. This study identifies the need to support Australian tourism as the number one motivation behind the Australian tourist's desire to travel once able to do so. Helping not only Australia's tourism industry but also the Australian economy plays an important role in the tourists' travel decision post COVID-19. This was strong across all generations. This is closely followed by the need for a change of scenery or simply escape the confines of their home after an extensive isolation period. Millennials appear to be the most restless, while baby boomers and seniors did not reflect this need as strongly. Government restrictions around isolation may have indeed provided the tourism industry with the boost it will need to get back on track.

Again the need to re-connect with family and friends rated highly amongst millennials in response to this motivational choice set. The results indicate that domestic tourists will not be driven by the opportunity for a better deal with discounted travel options.

65% of Australians trust Australia's tourism industry to keep them safe and well when traveling. 25% were unsure but less than 20% did not trust the industry to protect them from COVID-19.

Tourists' current information requirements

It is dangerous to assume that while tourists can't travel at the current time that they are not actively exploring options for when they can. Of those planning to travel in the near future, 46% are searching for information to plan their trip. This includes accommodation options, and destination related information such as attractions and local restaurants and cafes.

How will tourists manage or minimise the risks of contracting COVID-19 while traveling?

The risk, however large, of contracting COVID-19 will undoubtedly be factored into the Australian tourist's decision-making process when considering future travel. This study therefore explored the risk reduction strategies Australians will take to protect themselves against the virus. Some of following actions will need to be facilitated by the government and /or tourism providers. These are signified by an asterix.

Table 1: COVID-19 Risk Reduction Strategies of Australian Tourists

Action	Yes (%)	No (%)	Maybe (%)
Monitor Government Health Warnings*	89	7	4
Practice social distancing*	86	7	7
Monitor the mainstream media for updates*	83	10	7
Avoid crowded areas*	81	9	10
Carry and use hand sanitiser and/ or wash my hands regularly	78	12	10
Avoid physical contact with others not in immediate travel party	72	11	17
Only book with providers that provide a full refund on cancellation*	70	11	19
Monitor social media for updates*	54	33	13
Only book with providers that provide a credit for future use on cancellation*	52	18	30
Wait until the last minute to pay for the trip*	51	28	21
Drive as opposed to fly or use public transport	50	27	23
Seek advice from health professional	47	31	22
Choose self-catering accommodation so can control level of cleanliness during stay	40	31	29
Consult World Health Organisation Website	37	42	21
Travel for less time – shorter trip	33	40	27
Only stay in 5 Star or High Quality Hotels	19	57	23

The top four preventative actions tourists will take to mitigate the risk of contracting COVID-19 rely on the combined effort of industry, government and the media. The results indicate that in the current circumstances the Australian public is highly reliant on their government to relay important information regarding COVID-19. Their travel behaviours will also be somewhat reliant on what they hear in the mainstream media.

Tourists will continue to practice social distancing and see avoiding crowded areas as a means to do so.

Cancellation policies will also play an important role in the tourist's decision process. This data suggests that travellers will prefer policies that offer a full refund, although a credit for future use was also seen as acceptable by 50% of future travellers. While tourists may look to book in the near future a number will plan to pay at the last minute to minimise the financial loss they may incur if they are unable to travel.

This data also shows that 50% of tourists are going to prefer to drive as opposed to fly or take some other form of public transport. Exploring the data further, there was no difference in transport preferences between the different states and territories. While some may mitigate the risk by choosing self-catering accommodation they can self-manage in terms of cleaning standards, high end hotels are certainly not seen as being able to offer any form of enhanced protection. Shortened itineraries are also seen as less likely to mitigate any risks Australians associate with domestic travel in the near future.

What sources of information are Australian tourists relying on for COVID-19 information?

The mainstream media whether that be radio, television, newspaper, or online is by far the most utilised information source with 61% of respondents accessing this source. The Australian government is the second most common source at 20%. Social media is not playing a significant role in terms of the public's information needs, with only 7% citing this as their most common information source.

Importantly however, when it comes to travel specific information, a large proportion (67%) of respondents indicated that the Australian government will be their most trusted source. Only 10% of Australian tourists will turn to the mainstream media for travel specific information. Tourism operators such as airlines, accommodation providers, travel agents and visitor information centres are not likely to be approached for information relating to travel restrictions and regulatory guidelines.

How has COVID-19 impacted generally on Australian's Attitudes towards travel?

Preferred domestic holiday destinations

All respondents regardless of their future travel intentions were asked to choose their preferred destination type once they are ready to travel. Coastal destinations proved to be most popular with 50% of respondents selecting this option. Country and regional destinations were also favoured (33%) over cities (17%).

Current sentiment towards travel

Currently, 81% of all respondents believe that it is not safe to travel within Australia and 85% think capital cities hold the greatest risk. 62% believe that traveling domestically is just as risky as traveling overseas. This current sentiment is indicative of the effectiveness of the messaging Australians are being exposed to via the government and mainstream media. The stay home message is clearly getting through. Social distancing rules are also having an impact with 87% of respondents claiming they will avoid situations where they will are likely to be in close proximity to others. Messaging regarding protection from COVID-19 being everyone's responsibility is also resonating with 94% of respondents agreeing to this statement and 73% believing that they have a responsibility to the community to not travel at the current time. 86% of respondents will not consider non-essential travel until they are told it is safe to do so.

While these messages are crucial for the national control of COVID-19, there will come a time when this messaging needs to be reversed. There is likely to be some psychological aversions to travel – in this study 54% of respondents stated they were 'scared' to travel too far from home. The reversal of these persuasive, yet necessary messaging tactics will take time, and those responsible for tourism marketing campaigns need to remain mindful of this. Such agencies will benefit from the advice of consumer psychologists to assist with the design of messages that are likely to regain the confidence of some domestic tourists.

Looking forward

Hygiene standards are going to be a critical choice factor for tourists when evaluating different options across all components of the tourism experience. The data has revealed that 84% of tourists care more about hygiene standards of accommodation facilities, 86% the hygiene standards of airlines and public transport and 88% will play closer attention to the hygiene standards of public facilities and recreational sites than they did prior to this pandemic.

Regarding the future outlook of Australian tourists, 76% believe that COVID-19 will not end anytime soon with 59% of tourists believing that they will have to learn to live with the health crisis indefinitely. Just 45% expressed some optimism claiming they expect life to return to normal within six months. Regardless, over two thirds of those surveyed will be prepared to travel as soon as the government relaxes current travel restrictions.

"Importantly we need to understand that host communities will not want to be inundated with people from outside their regions in the short term. When we think about the messages we have been hearing for the past 3 months around keeping away from others, not being allowed to socialise outside our homes – a sudden influx of people may be overwhelming for communities."

Recommendations for Government and Industry

- Australian tourists will travel domestically to help the tourism industry recover. Messages that inspire the altruistic motivations of Australians will be effective when targeting those who are ready and willing to travel. Discounting is not encouraged and will not entice prospective tourists. While discounting may appeal to those who are not in a financial position to travel – this cohort are unlikely to travel until their circumstances change.

- Marketing communication should also depict scenarios that represent the reuniting of friends and loved ones. Destinations, food and beverage outlets, and attractions should aim to position themselves as facilitating social reunions. This will appeal to those who place significant emphasis on the need to reconnect with family and friends. Millennials in particular will respond well to this messaging.

- Frequent travellers may reflect loyal visitor segments hence businesses are encouraged to reach out to these tourists citing messages that welcome them back to their destination / business.

- Keep websites and booking functions active. Tourists are exploring options for future holidays now in the midst of the pandemic, and destinations need to assume they have an audience despite there being no visitors. If the business is non-operational, avoid negative announcements but instead reassure prospective tourists that the closure is temporary or if making improvements communicate a 'building back better' style of message. Ensure booking functions are active and cancellation policies are easy to find. Imagery that represents a pre or post COVID-19 world will help prospective visitors envisage their future holiday with confidence and minimise risk perceptions.

- The government and mainstream media need to work together to ensure tourists are kept up to date with COVID-19 information that relates to domestic travel. Rules and restrictions that apply to domestic travel should also come from formal government agencies and be reinforced by the mainstream media. Messaging from State governments needs to be united and in alignment with the federal government to avoid confusion.

- Destinations and tourism operators may need to revisit their crowd management and carrying capacity regulations to allow tourists to continue to social distance from those outside their own travel party. Regional and off the beaten track destinations should see the open spaces they provide as a competitive advantage and position themselves as being able to facilitate a safe holiday away from the crowds. Social media may be a good option to promote this information given this online source may be used to further minimise travel related risk perceptions once official government information has been noted.

- Coastal destinations are going to be popular once travel restrictions are lifted and while this is good news for operators in our coastal regions, care must be taken to ensure these regions do not become overcrowded. This will inevitably affect the visitor experience and place Australian coastal communities at risk. Tensions may also arise between hosts and tourists should communities feel overwhelmed by an influx of people from outside the region. Communities need to be ready to welcome tourists back and it is recommended that destination managers and their operators 'ease' back in to the welcoming and management of visitor numbers through carefully planned and staggered promotional strategies and caps on occupancy rates for accommodation providers and restaurants.

- Regional destinations will also be favoured over cities. The fact that Australian tourists will not be averse to driving holidays is good news for regional tourism destinations that are not easily accessed. Again, care to needs to be taken to avoid overwhelming host communities as tourism activities resume at potentially unprecedented levels.

- Cities will need to work to convince the Australian tourist market that they have measures put in place to allow visitors to undertake the normal tourism activities (shopping, site seeing, nightlife and food and beverage) safely. In the short term, cities may need to encourage local residents to make use of local attractions and shopping and entertainment precincts until they are able to, or perceived as able to, safely cater for visitors.

- The messaging over the COVID-19 period has been effective with the majority of Australians complying with the temporary regulations. Once these are lifted, some may struggle with the prospect of themselves and/or others traveling freely. Tourism campaigns targeting reluctant travellers need to factor this in to their messaging strategies.

- Expectations around hygiene standards have changed. Some form of accreditation or certification for accommodation providers, restaurants, airlines and the cruise industry to reassure tourists that optimal hygiene practices have been put in place may alleviate concerns and those that comply will be preferred. Public transport and recreational facilities need to also provide some confidence that hygiene and safety of visitors are a key priority.

- Australian tourists are waiting for, and will adhere to direction from trusted sources about when they can travel. The most trusted source being the government. It will be up to official government spokespeople to reassure the public when it becomes safe to travel.

- Viable segments to target in the first instance will be Millennials with no dependent children as well as frequent visitors. This study has revealed that these segments are the most likely to respond to messages that suggest their travel activities will be of great assistance to the tourism industry and the Australian economy.

- Bushfire affected regions, particularly those located in coastal areas will benefit from the Australian tourism markets' regained sense of patriotism post COVID-19 and the realisation that holidaying domestically is the safer option.

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