

These COVID-19 Analytical Snapshots are designed to capture the latest research, information and analysis in a fast-moving environment. Topics will be repeated from time to time as research and analysis develops. If you have an item to include, please email us at research@iom.int.



New research & analysis on travel bubbles and COVID

[Re-open EU](#), by the European Union

[Remember the 'Travel Bubble'? Here's How It Burst](#), by Julie Weed

[CommonPass](#), by the World Economic Forum

[The scientific and ethical feasibility of immunity passports](#), by Brown et al.

What is a travel bubble?

Travel bubbles, also referred to as travel corridors or air bridges, are formal [partnerships](#) between states to open borders by permitting individuals to travel freely within the zone without the requirement to undergo quarantine upon arrival. They are considered a temporary measure until an effective vaccine can be rolled out. The idea first emerged in April when Australia and Zealand announced a plan to create a “trans-Tasman bubble”, but it was pioneered by the [Baltic States](#) – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – who initially established a bubble across the 3 countries (now ceased).

Has the travel bubble burst?

When the concept of travel bubbles first emerged, it was seen as the best chance of [continuing travel](#) and enabling industries shut down by the pandemic to restart. In the [European Union](#), where mobility restrictions were eased over the summer, extensive [quarantine lists](#) have been reintroduced as cases have spiked across the continent.

Elsewhere, establishing travel bubbles has proved difficult. In the [Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China](#), officials are in discussion in relation to at least 11 possible bubbles—with countries from France and Germany to Japan and Thailand—but only one, with Singapore, has yet to materialize.

After failing to strike agreements with Viet Nam, New Zealand and Australia, [Singapore](#) opted to create unilateral bubbles, with the 14-day quarantine for travelers from these countries waived as a “standing offer”, despite Australians being unable to travel overseas without first applying for an [exemption](#).

On September 8, [Japan](#) announced agreements with five countries in Asia. Meanwhile [Australia](#) is in talks with several countries about quarantine-free travel, and [Thailand](#) is seeking to reach an agreement with China, subject to the success of a limited reopening of its tourism industry to foreign travelers this month.

Opening safe travel bubbles

With some bubbles proving to be short-lived, the focus has been on sustainability. According to public health [experts](#), countries should only establish travel bubbles once they have built a large diagnostic capacity which enables them to run large, fast, and accurate testing services.

Until this capacity is in place, travelers should be required to enter a period of enforced isolation until two negative tests are completed at least five days apart, otherwise cross-border infections will continue to occur.

The resumption of business travel

A number of fast-track mobility options have opened for cross-border business travel. [Japan and South Korea](#) have struck an agreement where those travelling for work can skip quarantine upon arrival, but they must be tested before and after arrival in both countries and are unable to use public transport during the visit. Restrictions also apply to Japanese business travelers to [Singapore](#), who must be sponsored by a company in the city-state, get tested both upon departure and arrival, and submit an itinerary beforehand.

Business travelers visiting [the Netherlands](#) can also forgo quarantine upon arrival, but only if the Dutch-based organization they are visiting has at least 10 full-time employees or an annual turnover of €2 million.



“Safe and Sealed”

Thailand is considering proposals for an inbound tourism plan called [Safe and Sealed](#) to revive the tourism industry, which contributed almost 20% of the country's [GDP](#) in 2019.

Under the [plan](#), tourists will be permitted to fly into the island of Phuket, where they will need to quarantine in a designated travel resort for 14 days that would include a one kilometer zone on the beach. Travelers would be tested for COVID-19 at the beginning and end of the quarantine period, and then would be free to travel on the island. However, tourists who wish to travel beyond Phuket would be required to quarantine for a further seven days, when they would have a third COVID-19 test.

CommonPass

The World Economic Forum is supporting the launch of [CommonPass](#), a digital “health passport” that aims to develop a global framework to safely restore cross-border travel to pre-pandemic levels by allowing individuals to document their COVID-19 status and present this when they cross a border. However, the scheme, which was [trialed](#) on a flight from the UK to the USA on October 20, has been criticized in a [paper](#) published in The Lancet as it could enable the monitoring of people's movements and health statuses.

This COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot has been produced by IOM Research (research@iom.int).

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