

U.S. ends international travel ban, opening the door to vaccinated tourists

Posted on November 8, 2021 by Business Editor



The United States on Monday ended a pandemic travel ban that was in place for more than a year and a half, a relief for the tourism industry and for families that have been separated by the rules since the crisis began.

At New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, passengers who arrived from London on British Airways Flight 1, the same number used for the Concorde, were greeted by applause of airline employees and balloons.

Some business travelers said they are ready to ditch the video calls for in-person meetings and work.

"We've been desperate for two years to get out and see our staff," said Giles English, co-founder of luxury watchmaker Bremont, which has a store in Midtown Manhattan.

English told CNBC shortly after arriving at JFK on British Airways Flight 1 that video technology is "amazing but I think face-to-face is so important."

Katherine Donnelly, 52, of London, who flew in on that flight said she hasn't been in New York for more than

two years and that she's eager to visit her aunt, who has been ill.

"I can't wait to see her," she said.

The ban, put in place by then-President Donald Trump in early 2020 and later expanded by President Joe Biden early this year, prohibited visitors from 33 countries, including the U.K., much of Europe, China, Brazil and South Africa.

Now, visitors can fly into the U.S. with proof of full Covid-19 vaccination, though there are exemptions for travelers under age 18 and passengers from countries with low vaccination availability.

European countries had relaxed rules for international visitors, including for U.S. citizens, starting in the spring. U.S. officials didn't reciprocate, however, though airlines and other travel industry companies on both sides of the Atlantic urged the Biden administration to reopen borders.

"It's a day that we wished would come sooner but after 604 days of not being able to travel to the U.S. we're delighted to be back," said British Airways CEO Sean Doyle, who was on the carrier's first flight to the U.S. after the restrictions lifted Monday.

Airline executives have said bookings have surged since the Biden administration said it would lift the restrictions.

American Airlines' bookings from Brazil and the U.K. are up about 70% over the past week, much of them for flights in the fourth quarter, the carrier's chief revenue officer Vasu Raja, told CNBC in an interview at John F. Kennedy Airport. The airline jointly offers U.K. service with British Airways.

Raja said American and British Airways are ramping up London service and that they expect to get closer to a pre-pandemic schedule in early 2022.

The airline, as well as rival United, are among the customers affected by manufacturing issues of Boeing's 787, which has suspended deliveries for much of the past year.

"It's a pretty meaningful impact to how fast we can build back internationally," Raja said.

Boeing didn't provide a timeline for when deliveries could resume as it works through its review with federal officials.

"While we never want to disappoint or cause delays for our customers, quality and safety always come first," it said in a statement. "We are proud of our team for the detailed and rigorous work they're completing to ensure we meet the highest standards."

Shares of United and Delta Air Lines each added 0.8% to end the day at \$53.11 and \$44.65, respectively. American Airlines rose 2% to end at \$22.25, while the S&P 500 rose less than 0.1%. Those carriers have the most international service of the U.S. airlines and stand to benefit from the resumption of U.S.-bound travel.

Airline staff at London's Heathrow Airport carried U.S. and British flags to celebrate the end of the travel restrictions.

A Virgin Atlantic spokeswoman said its U.S. flights today are 98% full. British Airways Flight 1 departed Heathrow along with Virgin Atlantic Flight 3, shortly before 8:30 a.m. GMT for New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport in a synchronized takeoff on parallel runways. British Airways said the flight was full.

Leslie Josephs www.cnbc.com

