

Article

Overseas travel and tourism, provisional: January to March 2020

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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1 . Main points

- Overseas residents made 7.0 million visits to the UK in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2020; this was 16% fewer than Quarter 1 2019 as travel reduced because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- Overseas residents spent £4.3 billion on their visits to the UK in Quarter 1 2020; this was 10% less than in Quarter 1 2019.
- UK residents made 13.9 million visits abroad in Quarter 1 2020; 24% fewer than the corresponding period the previous year, which is attributable to the coronavirus pandemic.
- UK residents spent £9.2 billion on visits abroad in the Quarter 1 2020; this was 20% less than in Quarter 1 2019.
- This release includes the period at the start of the UK lockdown, which meant that data collection was not completed.

2 . International Passenger Survey and the coronavirus (COVID-19)

This article analyses data from the International Passenger Survey (IPS), which collects data from overseas residents leaving the UK and UK residents returning home.

National Statistics status has been suspended for these figures for Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2020. This is because IPS interviewing was suspended on 16 March because of the coronavirus (COVID-19). It is not certain when the survey will resume.

The figures published in this article make best possible use of the available data, and the estimates for March 2020 have been produced using the data collected up to 16 March. However, there is heightened uncertainty around the March estimates. For this reason, the National Statistics status of these statistics for the period January to March 2020 has been temporarily suspended under the [provisions made](#) for exceptional difficulties encountered in compiling statistics because of the coronavirus.

Foreign tourism spending estimates in the UK National Accounts are safeguarded, as these utilise new cutting-edge methods using both Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) data on the numbers of flights arriving, and aggregated and anonymised foreign-issued card spend processed through Barclays Point-of-Sale (POS) and "card-not-present" channels

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. More information is available in [Section 5: Travel and tourism figures affected by the coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).

An improved methodology was introduced to the production of IPS estimates in the [Travel Trends 2019](#) article. This relates to the survey's weighting. The new methodology was used to produce final results for 2019 and revised results for 2009 to 2018; the revised results supersede those published previously. The new method has also been used to produce the estimates presented in this article. See [Section 6: Improved methodology for the estimates](#).

3 . Visits to the UK decreased in January to March 2020

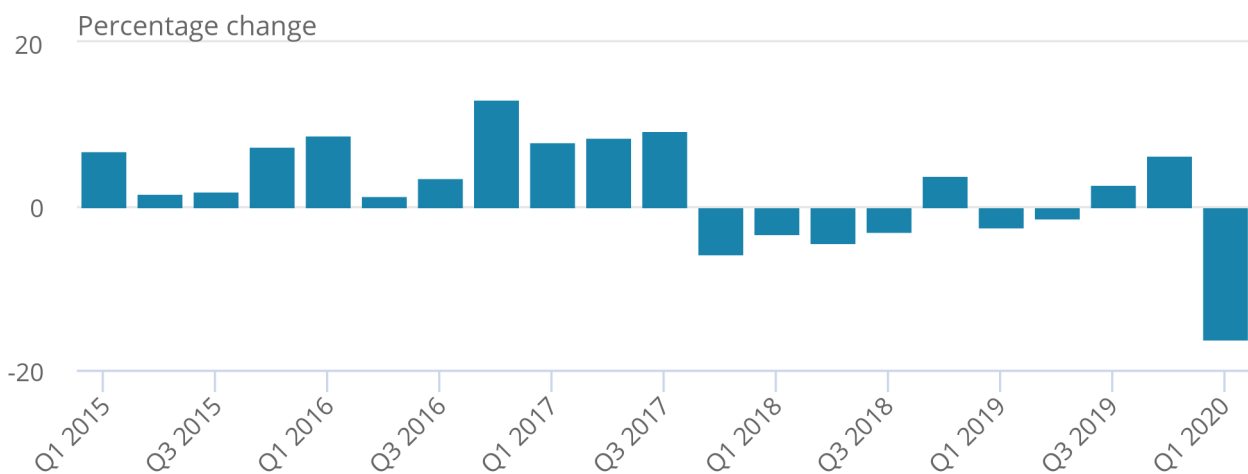
Overseas residents made a total of 7.0 million visits to the UK during Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2020 (mainly in March), a decrease of 16% compared with the same period a year earlier (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Visits to the UK by overseas residents decreased by 16% in Quarter 1 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Quarterly change from a year earlier in visits to the UK from overseas residents, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2015 to Quarter 1 2020

Figure 1: Visits to the UK by overseas residents decreased by 16% in Quarter 1 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Quarterly change from a year earlier in visits to the UK from overseas residents, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2015 to Quarter 1 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – International Passenger Survey

Notes:

1. Q1 means Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar); Q2 for Quarter 2 (Apr to June); Q3 for Quarter 3 (July to Sept); Q4 for Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec).

Taking holidays was the most popular reason for visiting the UK in Quarter 1 2020, with 2.6 million visits. This was a 12% decrease compared with Quarter 1 2019. Business visits decreased to 1.7 million, 22% fewer than in 2019. Visits to friends and relatives decreased by 18% to 2.2 million.

Different trends were observed for different areas of the world. Visits by North American residents decreased by 12% to 0.8 million, and visits by residents of “other countries” (countries outside of Europe and North America) decreased by 8% to 1.3 million. Visits by European residents decreased by 18% to 4.9 million.

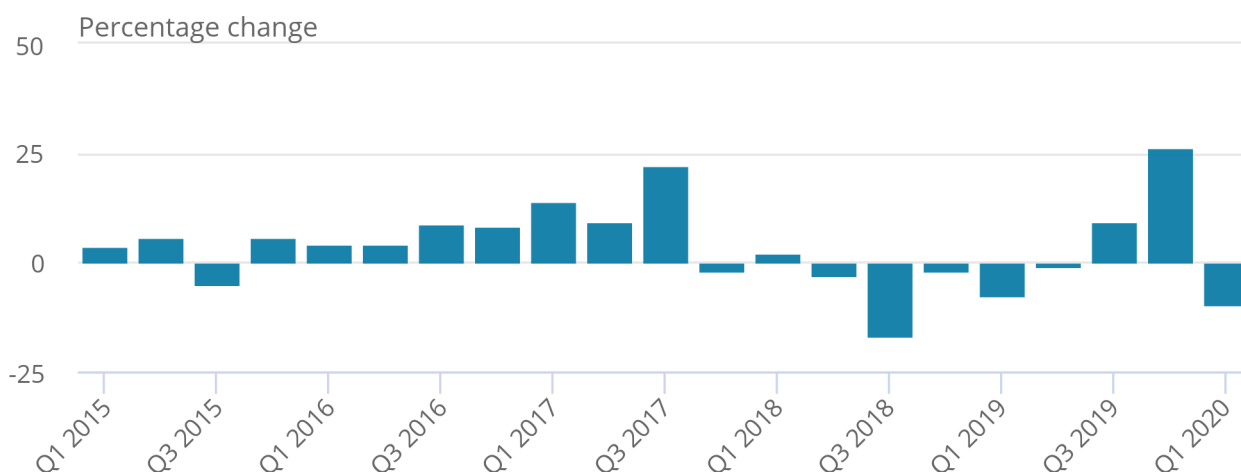
Estimated spending in the UK by overseas visitors decreased by 10% to £4.3 billion in Quarter 1 2020 when compared with Quarter 1 2019. There was a decrease of 25% in spending by residents of North America, while spending by European residents decreased by 8% to £2.1 billion. Spending by residents of “other countries” decreased by 5% to £1.7 billion.

Figure 2: Spending in the UK by overseas residents decreased by 10% in Quarter 1 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Quarterly change from a year earlier in earnings from visits to the UK, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2015 to Quarter 1 2020

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Quarterly change from a year earlier in earnings from visits to the UK, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2015 to Quarter 1 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – International Passenger Survey

Notes:

1. Q1 means Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar); Q2 for Quarter 2 (Apr to June); Q3 for Quarter 3 (July to Sept); Q4 for Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec).

4 . Visits abroad by UK residents

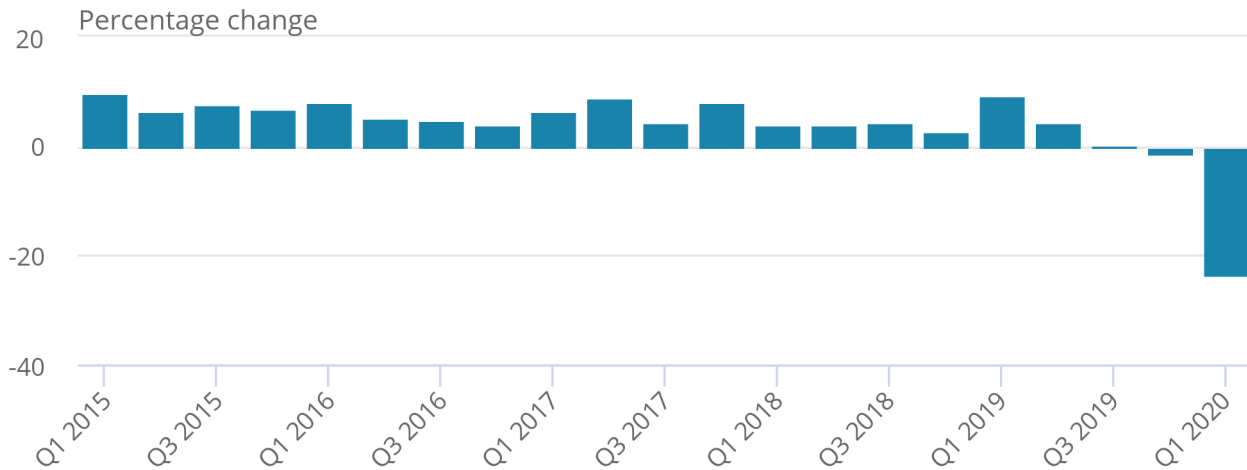
UK residents made 13.9 million visits abroad in Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2020, 24% fewer than the same quarter in 2019. There was a 3% decrease in visits to North America (0.8 million visits), and visits to European countries decreased by 26% (10.0 million visits). Visits to “other countries” decreased by 18% to 3.1 million.

Figure 3: Visits overseas by UK residents decreased by 24% in Quarter 1 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Quarterly change from a year earlier in visits abroad by UK residents, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2015 to Quarter 1 2020

Figure 3: Visits overseas by UK residents decreased by 24% in Quarter 1 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier

Quarterly change from a year earlier in visits abroad by UK residents, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2015 to Quarter 1 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – International Passenger Survey

Notes:

1. Q1 means Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar); Q2 for Quarter 2 (Apr to June); Q3 for Quarter 3 (July to Sept); Q4 for Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec).

Holidays continued to be the most common reason for UK residents' visits abroad. In Quarter 1 2020, there were 7.7 million holidays; this decreased by 21% when compared with the same period in 2019. Visits to friends or relatives decreased by 24% to 4.4 million, while business visits decreased by 30% to 1.6 million. The number of visits for miscellaneous reasons decreased by 32%, although the numbers are smaller.

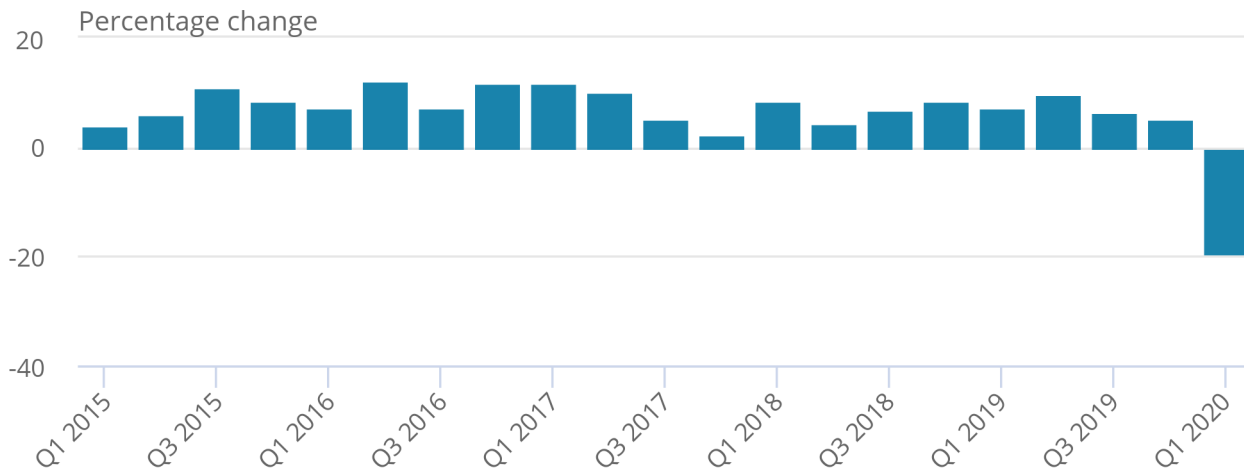
UK residents spent £9.2 billion during visits abroad in Quarter 1 2020; this was a decrease of 20% when compared with the same period in 2019. Expenditure in Europe fell by 24%, and expenditure in "other countries" decreased by 16%, while spending in North America decreased by 10%.

Figure 4: UK spending abroad decreased by 20% when compared with the same period in 2019

Quarterly change from a year earlier in expenditure from UK residents' visits abroad, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2015 to Quarter 1 2020

Figure 4: UK spending abroad decreased by 20% when compared with the same period in 2019

Quarterly change from a year earlier in expenditure from UK residents' visits abroad, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2015 to Quarter 1 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – International Passenger Survey

Notes:

1. Q1 means Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar); Q2 for Quarter 2 (Apr to June); Q3 for Quarter 3 (July to Sept); Q4 for Quarter 4 (Oct to Dec).

5 . Travel and tourism figures affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

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 works 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 fully 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 and hence for Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2020. However, every effort has been made to produce high-quality estimates.

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 total international air traffic was very 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 cutting-edge new methods using 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 (POS) and "card-not-present" channels.

Information about the plans of international migration statistics can be found in the latest [Migration Statistics Quarterly Report \(MSQR\)](#).

6 . Improved methodology for the estimates

We have introduced methodological improvements to the travel and tourism estimates from the International Passenger Survey (IPS). These were introduced in the article [Travel Trends 2019](#) and relate to the survey's weighting process. The improvements are outlined in that article's section [Improved methodology for the estimates](#). A detailed technical report 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 estimates presented in this article were produced using the new estimation method. The new method was also 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 the section [Impacts of the new IPS methodology](#).

This revised methodology will affect estimates of travel services, which feed into the monthly [UK trade publication](#) as well as the [gross domestic product \(GDP\) first quarterly estimate](#) and [GDP quarterly national accounts](#) releases. It will also affect tourism figures within household final consumption expenditure data in quarterly GDP publications. These changes will be introduced during 2021 alongside our annual updates to data and methodology as part of the Blue Book publication; until then, these statistics will continue to be produced under the existing weighting method.

Accuracy of the IPS estimates

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).

Table 1 shows confidence intervals for the main statistics presented in this article. Confidence intervals for purposes for visit, region of the world, regions of the UK visited, and individual country of visit to and from the UK are presented in the separate dataset. The confidence intervals were computed under the assumption that the results obtained for March before interviewing was suspended are representative for the whole month. As detailed, we cannot be certain that this assumption holds, and the confidence intervals should therefore be treated with caution.

Table 1: Sampling errors, Quarter 1 (Jan to Mar) 2020

	Estimate	Relative 95% Confidence Interval (+/- % the estimate)
Overseas visitors to the UK		
Number of visits ('000s)	6,994	5.7%
Total earnings (£million)	4,344	7.0%
Number of visitor nights ('000s)	48,012	9.7%
UK residents going abroad		
Number of visits ('000s)	13,891	3.4%
Total expenditure (£million)	9,215	5.4%
Number of visitor nights ('000s)	143,122	6.2%

Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

7 . 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 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.

8 . Measuring the data

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, onboard vessels leaving or returning to the UK, or onboard 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.

Until recently, responses were initially recorded on paper forms. In September 2017, data collection on tablets started to be phased in, and this implementation was completed in April 2018. Now data are keyed directly into the collection program, which includes a series of electronic checks. The data are then transmitted to Office for National Statistics (ONS) headquarters where a series of further quality and accuracy checks are made on the data before processing and analysis.

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

9 . Strengths and limitations

Strengths

A major strength of the International Passenger Survey (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 is 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.

10 . 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

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: January, February and March 2020 provisional results](#)

Bulletin | Released 24 July 2020

Initial monthly estimates of visits to the UK by overseas residents, visits abroad by UK residents and spending by travellers, using provisional passenger traffic data.