

Article

Travel trends: 2018

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.



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Release date:
24 May 2019

Next release:
30 May 2019

Notice

8 July 2020

New methods were introduced to improve travel and tourism estimates for 2019 and the estimates for 2009 to 2018 were revised. The revised figures can be accessed in [Travel trends: 2019](#).

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1 . Main points

- There were fewer overseas residents' visits to the UK in 2018 than in 2017 and also a fall in the number of visits abroad by UK residents.
- A total of 37.9 million visits were made by overseas residents to the UK in 2018, which was 3% fewer than in 2017.
- There were 71.7 million visits overseas by UK residents in 2018, a decrease of 1% when compared with 2017.
- UK residents spent £45.4 billion on visits overseas in 2018, which was 1% more than in 2017.
- Overseas residents spent £22.9 billion on visits to the UK in 2018, a decrease of 7% compared with 2017.
- The most frequent reason for visits was for holidays, both for UK residents visiting abroad and overseas residents visiting the UK.

2 . Things you need to know about this release

Travel trends is an annual article that provides estimates and profiles of travel and tourism visits (those of less than 12 months' duration) and associated earnings and expenditure between the UK and the rest of the world. The [International Passenger Survey \(IPS\)](#) has been providing the source data for travel and tourism since 1961.

This article presents estimates of overseas visits to and from the UK. An overseas visitor means 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).

The International Passenger Survey (IPS) has recently transferred outputs from data collected on paper forms to an improved method using tablet computers. Tablet data collection was phased in gradually from September 2017 to April 2018. More [background information about the rollout](#) is available.

The new tablets enable us to improve the quality of the IPS data collected, so discontinuities (that is, step changes in the time series) arising from the introduction of tablet data collection in the IPS are possible. We have worked with academic experts and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Methodology team to produce a method for detecting any such discontinuities.

We have continued to monitor the results as more data have become available. Further analysis using a longer series of data is required to determine whether there are any discontinuities, so some caution is still advised in the interpretation of data in this release.

Further methodological changes are planned to the estimates on international visitors in the IPS. These are weighting adjustments to address concerns about the imbalance (that is, large differences in numbers) in the IPS between the estimates of numbers of visitors arriving and departing for some nationalities. The new method has been developed in consultation with users and methodological experts. We plan to implement the new method in October 2019, when the results for the second quarter of 2019 are published. A revised back series will also be published at this time. More information about the planned changes will be published as soon as possible.

The changes in data collection methods and planned methodological changes were described in the [Travel trends 2017: recent data collection changes and planned methodological changes](#) article, in July 2018.

Please note that while the imbalance work is unlikely to affect long-term migrants in the IPS, we have committed to exploring whether the survey processes that cause the imbalance in international visitor estimates also impact on long-term migration further, as part of ONS Migration Statistics' [workplan](#) to understand different migration data sources.

The information provided in this article is used in a number of ways, including:

- to track earnings and expenditure, as an important input to measuring balance of payments
- to understand how the volume of visits and earnings to the UK develops, which can be compared with statistics from other countries to assess how effective the UK is in attracting visits from main parts of the world, for different purposes and among different demographic groups
- to help understand how particular events held in the UK (for example, the London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympics and Royal Weddings) link to visits and spending, which can aid future decision making
- to provide insights into how effective different parts of the UK are in attracting visits and earnings, in total and from different parts of the world and for different purposes
- to provide profiles of UK residents travelling to different parts of the world, to aid government and industry in developing policy and strategy

Estimates contained in this article are produced from responses provided by international passengers arriving in and departing from the UK, sampled on our IPS.

Responses to the survey are scaled up to represent all passengers using information on total international passenger traffic for the reporting period.

The reported spend for visits includes any spending associated with the visit (excluding fares), which may occur before, during or after the trip.

Parts of the article refer to countries visited abroad. It should be noted that if a UK resident visited more than one country on a trip abroad, the country recorded as visited in this article is the country that was visited for the longest period.

Estimates are subject to sampling error and confidence intervals are provided to help you interpret the estimates (see Section 7: Quality and methodology). Further guidance is available about the quality of overseas travel and tourism estimates.

Overseas travel and tourism [monthly estimates](#) are revised during the processing of the [quarterly dataset](#) and again during the processing of the [annual dataset](#). This article contains final estimates for 2018.

3 . Both UK trips abroad and visits to the UK have decreased in 2018

There were 71.7 million visits overseas by UK residents in 2018 (Figure 1), a decrease of 1% compared with 2017.

Overall, visits have increased over the last 20 years, although notable falls were observed in 2009 and 2010. Since then, numbers have increased again and, in each of the years from 2016 to 2018, UK visits abroad have exceeded the numbers seen in 2008 (before the decrease).

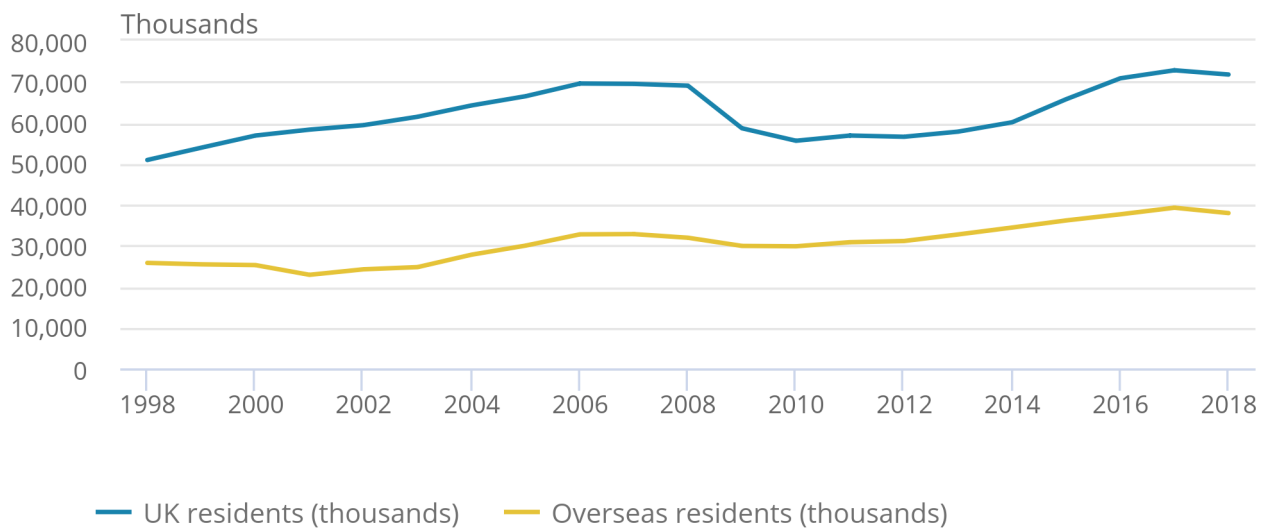
There were 37.9 million visits by overseas residents to the UK in 2017 (Figure 1), 3% less than in 2017. This is the first time overseas visits have fallen since 2010.

Figure 1: Visits to the UK by overseas residents and visits overseas by UK residents both fell in 2018 compared with 2017

Visits to and from the UK, 1998 to 2018

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Visits to and from the UK, 1998 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

UK residents spent £45.4 billion on visits abroad in 2018, which was 1% more than in 2017 (Figure 2). Although UK residents spent more money abroad in 2018, this is a much smaller increase than in previous years. UK residents also spent fewer nights away when compared with 2017 and this may be one reason for the smaller increase.

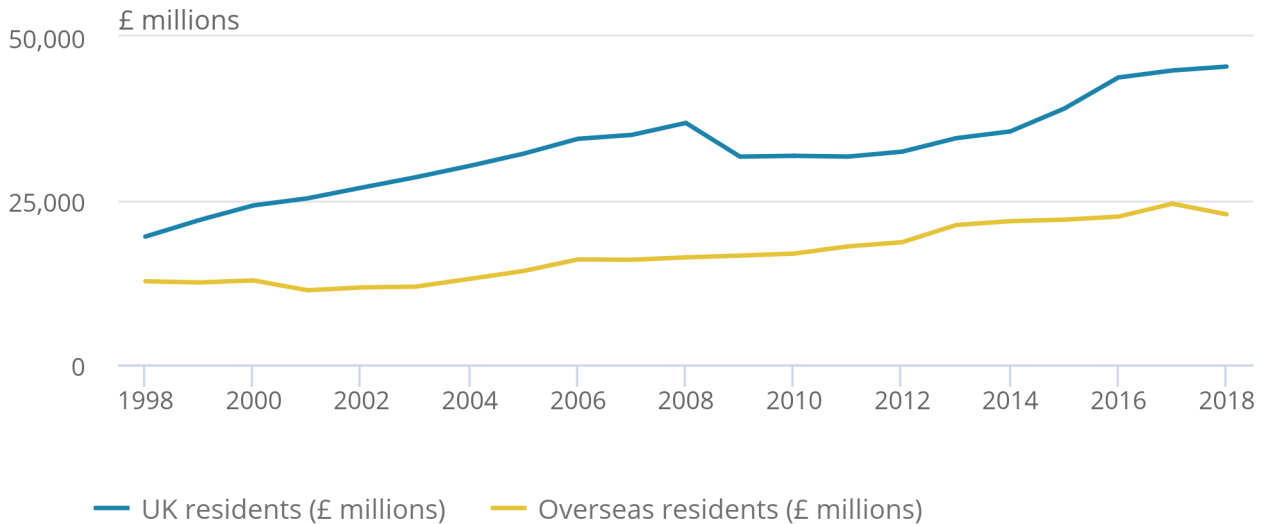
Overseas residents spent £22.9 billion on visits to the UK in 2018, a decrease of 7% compared with 2017 (Figure 2). The decrease in spending was larger than the decrease in the number of visits (3%). One possible factor in the larger fall in spending is average length of visit, which decreased from 7.3 nights in 2017 to 7.0 nights in 2018.

Figure 2: Spending on visits to the UK fell by 7% in 2018, but spending abroad by UK residents increased by 1%

Spending on visits to and from the UK, 1998 to 2018

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Spending on visits to and from the UK, 1998 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

Holidays are still the most common reason for visiting the UK

The fall in visits to the UK was seen across all types of trips (Figure 3). There were 15.1 million holiday visits to the UK in 2018, a decrease of 2% when compared with 2017 (15.4 million). However, the number of holiday visits in 2017 was the highest recorded and the 2018 figure is in keeping with the general trend observed in recent years. Holiday visits remained the most common reason for visiting the UK and accounted for 40% of the total.

Visits to friends and family fell for the first time since 2013 (by 2% to 11.8 million).

Miscellaneous visits decreased by 16% to 2.6 million.

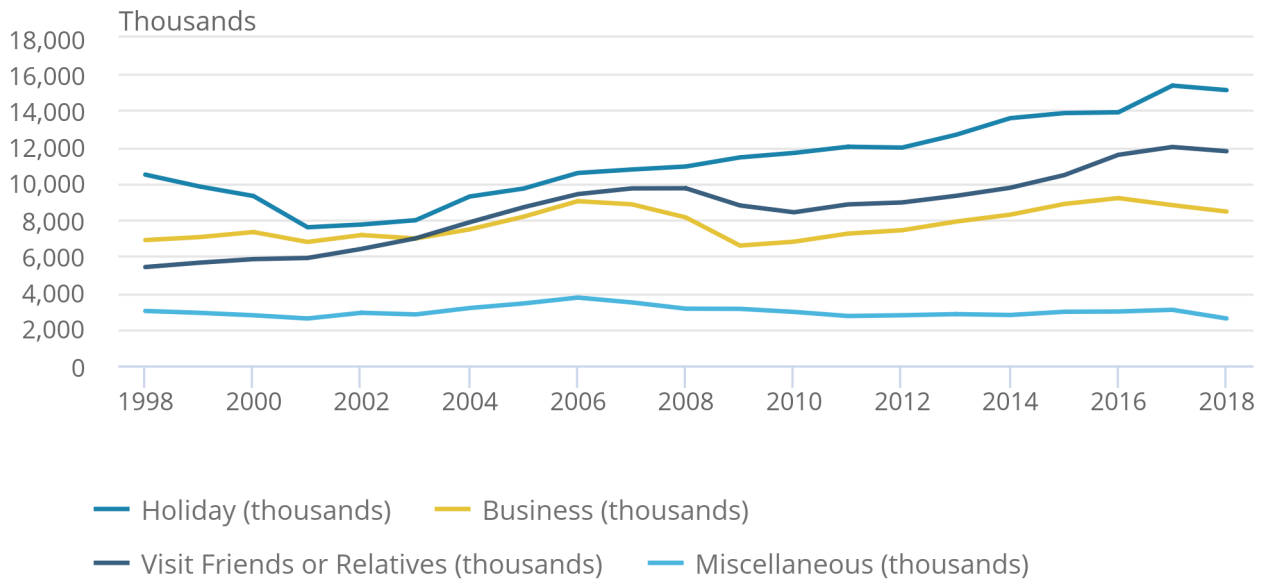
Business trips fell from 8.8 million in 2017 to 8.4 million in 2018, a decrease of 4%.

Figure 3: Holidays were the most frequent reason for visiting the UK between 1998 and 2018

Overseas residents' visits to the UK by purpose, 1998 to 2018

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Overseas residents' visits to the UK by purpose, 1998 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

There were 3.9 million visits to the UK by residents of the USA in 2018, more than any other country. This was the same as the number of visits in 2017 although US residents were then the second-most frequent visitors to the UK. This is because visits by French residents fell from 4.0 million in 2017 to 3.7 million in 2018. In 2018, French residents were the second-most likely to visit the UK.

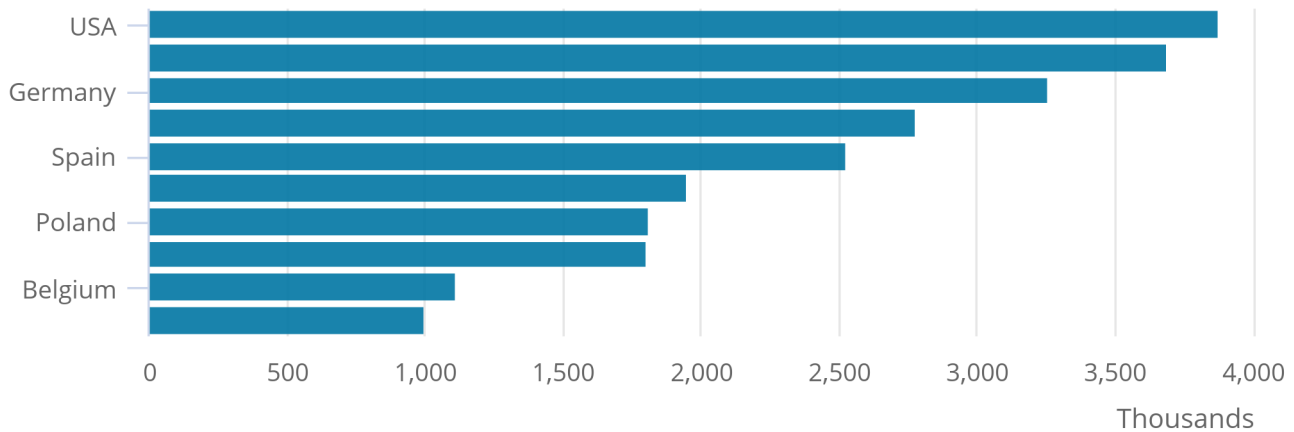
Of the 10 countries whose residents visited the UK the most frequently in 2018, eight were EU countries (Figure 4). The non-EU countries were the USA and Australia (1.0 million visits, the 10th-highest total). The top 10 list was unchanged from 2017, apart from France and the USA swapping between first and second place. The list of top 10 countries whose residents visit the UK has remained largely stable over recent years.

Figure 4: Residents of the USA visited the UK most in 2018, ahead of France and Germany

Top 10 visiting countries: number of visits, 2018

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Top 10 visiting countries: number of visits, 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

London, Edinburgh, Manchester and Birmingham each attracted over 1 million stays from overseas visitors

London attracted 19.1 million overnight visits in 2018, far more than any other town or city. More than half of visits to the UK included a trip to London.

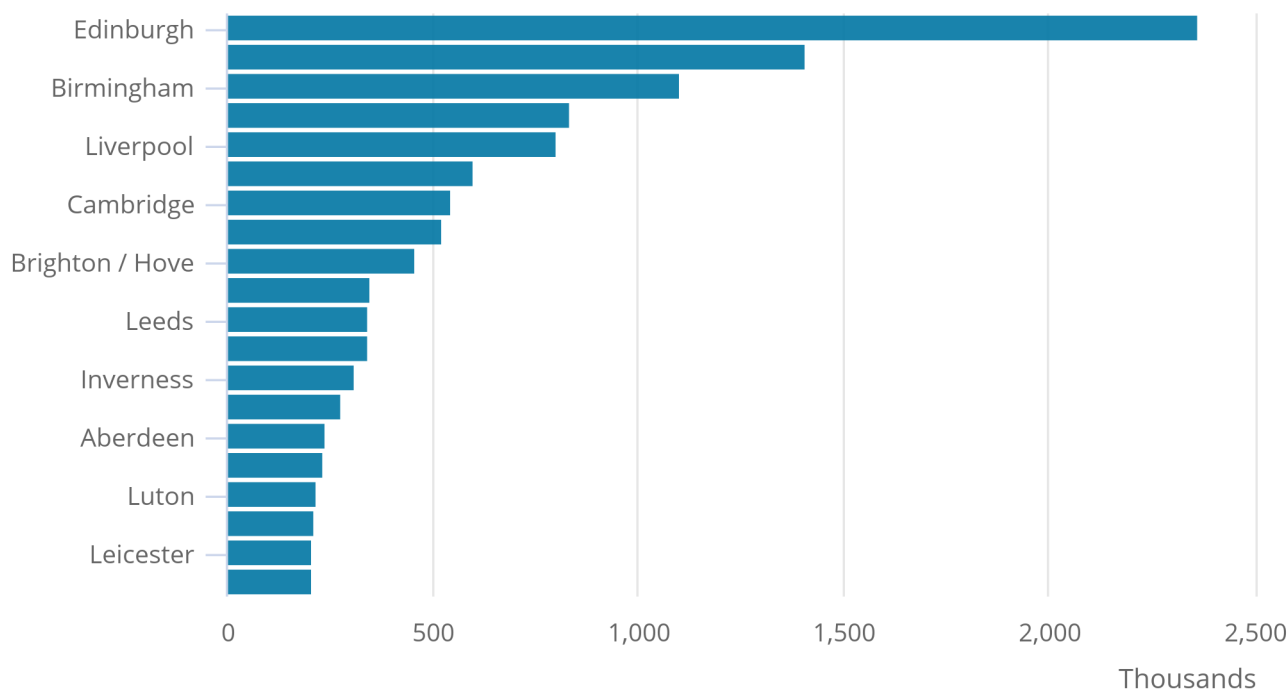
Overnight visits to cities other than London are shown in Figure 5. Edinburgh (2.4 million), Manchester (1.4 million) and Birmingham (1.1 million) each received more than 1 million overnight visits.

Figure 5: Outside London, the towns most visited from overseas in 2018 were Edinburgh, Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow

Top 20 UK towns visited for at least one night, 2018 (excluding London)

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Top 20 UK towns visited for at least one night, 2018 (excluding London)



Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

UK residents' visits abroad decreased in 2018, to the second-highest total recorded

There were 71.7 million visits overseas by UK residents in 2018, the second-highest figure recorded by the International Passenger Survey (IPS). The number of visits in 2018 was 1% fewer than in 2017, when there were 72.8 million visits.

The most common reason for travelling abroad was for holidays. There were 47.0 million holiday visits abroad by UK residents, 1% more than in 2017 and accounting for almost two-thirds (66%) of visits. By comparison, there were 32.3 million holiday visits abroad 20 years earlier, in 1998 (Figure 6).

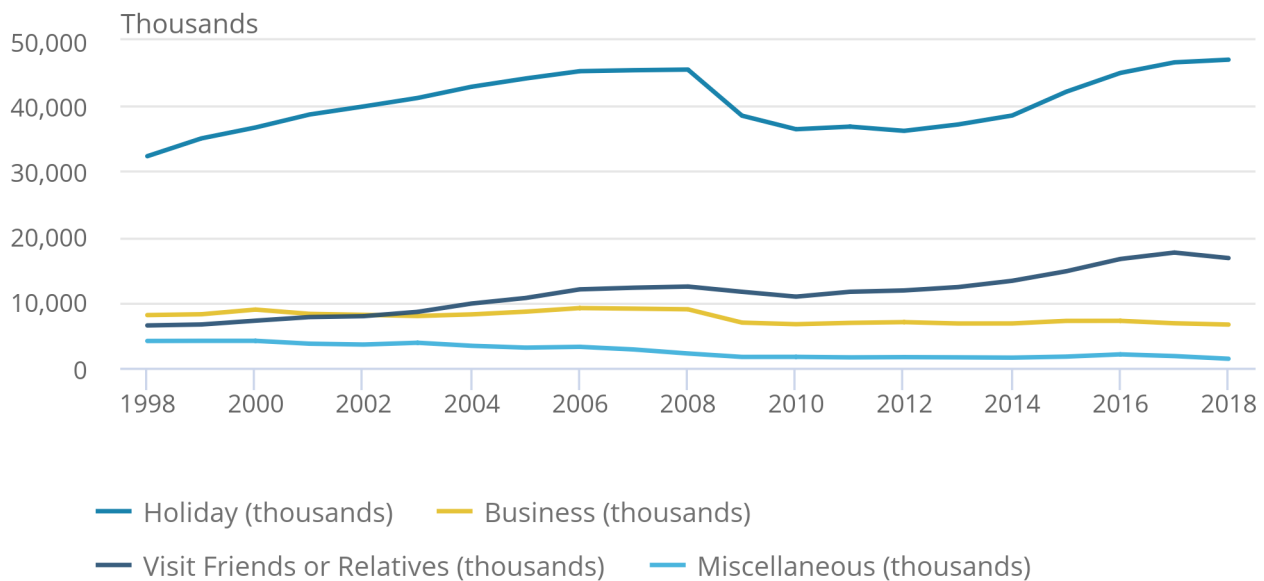
There were 16.7 million visits overseas to visit friends and family in 2018 (5% fewer than in 2017) and 6.6 million business visits (3% fewer than in 2017). The fall in business visits abroad by UK residents mirrors the fall in business visits to the UK made by overseas residents.

Figure 6: Holidays were easily the most frequent reason for visits abroad between 1998 and 2018

UK residents' visits abroad by purpose, 1998 to 2018

Figure 6: Holidays were easily the most frequent reason for visits abroad between 1998 and 2018

UK residents' visits abroad by purpose, 1998 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

Spain is still the most visited country by UK residents

There were 15.6 million visits to Spain by UK residents in 2018, a decrease of 2% from 2017 and the first time this number has fallen since 2009. Visits to Spain were mainly for holidays (89% of the total).

Spain, France, Italy, the USA and the Republic of Ireland, in that order, remain the top five most popular countries for UK residents to visit (Figure 7), accounting for 49% of all visits abroad and approximately 41% of total spend abroad. Overall, 75% of visits were to EU countries, the same as in 2017.

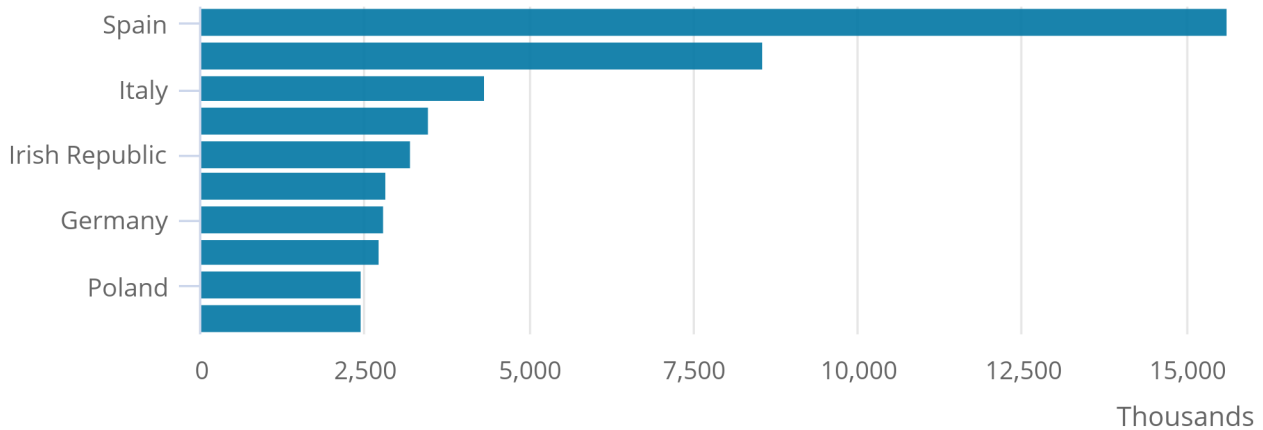
Among the top 10 most visited countries, Poland saw the biggest percentage change between 2017 and 2018, decreasing by 7% from 2.7 million to 2.5 million, of these, 66% were to visit friends and family. Other changes included increases in visits to Turkey (up from 1.2 million in 2017 to 1.4 million in 2018) and in visits to Tunisia (although the numbers remain small, at 170,000). There was a decrease in visits to Australia of 21%, from 450,000 to 360,000.

Figure 7: UK residents visited Spain the most in 2018, followed by France, Italy and the USA

Top 10 countries visited by UK residents, 2018

Figure 7: UK residents visited Spain the most in 2018, followed by France, Italy and the USA

Top 10 countries visited by UK residents, 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

4 . What's changed in this release?

This edition of Travel trends includes data collected by tablet, rather than the previous paper-based collection. Rollout of tablet data collection was completed in April 2018 when Heathrow interviewers moved to using tablets. Most data in 2018 were therefore collected by tablet, with only a small proportion collected using paper forms. More information can be found in the linked article on [recent data collection changes and planned methodological changes](#).

5 . Quality and methodology

The [International Passenger Survey \(IPS\) Quality and Methodology Information](#) report contains important information on:

- the strengths and limitations of the data and how it compares with related data
- uses and users of the data
- how the output was created
- the quality of the output including the accuracy of the data

The estimates contained in Travel trends (as well as our other [Overseas travel and tourism statistics](#)) are subject to sampling errors, which are driven by the fact that IPS is a survey. It is important to understand the factors that dictate the [quality of the estimates](#). Confidence intervals relating to a wide range of estimates are provided under the 'Accuracy of overseas travel and tourism estimates' section.

The collection of the IPS data

The key to producing reliable results from the IPS lies initially in the way the data are collected. Great emphasis is therefore placed upon the IPS interviewers to ensure they are able to capture data efficiently and accurately.

Nationally, 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 on all days of the year, apart from Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day.

IPS interviews take place on a face-to-face basis. Until recently, responses were initially recorded on paper forms. In September 2018, 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 ONS headquarters where a series of further quality and accuracy checks are made on the data before processing and analysis.

Due to the layout and facilities at some seaports it is not always possible to interview passengers as they arrive. In such cases, IPS staff interview on board vessels leaving or returning to the UK, or on board the Eurotunnel Trains.

More information about the collection of IPS data can be found in the [IPS Overseas Travel and Tourism User Guide \(Volume 1\): Background and Methodology \(PDF, 423KB\)](#).

IPS response rates

Sample surveys such as the IPS depend on achieving high levels of response from the public. Non-respondents often have different characteristics of travel and expenditure compared with those who do respond and this can lead to biases being introduced into the results.

The response rates for the air, sea and the Channel Tunnel samples are shown in Table 1. These response rates relate to complete and partial interviews. The overall response rate in 2018 was 74.5%. Information about the construction of the IPS overseas travel and tourism response rates can be found in the [IPS Overseas Travel and Tourism User Guide \(Volume 1\): Background and Methodology \(PDF, 423KB\)](#). For information about the 2018 response rates contact socialsurveys@ons.gov.uk.

Table 1: International Passenger Survey response rates for 2017 and 2018 estimates: percentages of complete and partial responses

		2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018
		Q1	Q1	Q2	Q2	Q3	Q3	Q4	Q4	2017	2018
Total IPS Response Rate	Arrivals	68.7	74.5	71.2	70.0	70.1	70.8	74.7	71.5	69.3	71.6
	Departures	75.8	79.8	76.4	75.3	73.9	75.3	76.6	77.8	77.4	76.5
	Total	72.9	77.6	74.3	73.1	72.3	73.4	75.9	75.5	74.1	74.5
IPS Response Rate (Air)	Arrivals	66.7	72.9	68.3	67.8	68.2	69.3	72.6	69.9	68.3	69.8
	Departures	74.7	79.1	74.9	74.4	72.2	74.7	75.2	77.4	76.1	75.8
	Total	71.5	76.5	72.3	71.8	70.5	72.5	74.2	74.8	73.0	73.4
IPS Response Rate (Sea)	Arrivals	84.0	86.8	89.6	83.1	86.3	80.6	88.7	87.4	88.0	82.7
	Departures	88.0	86.9	89.4	81.4	86.0	80.7	88.8	89.1	88.4	82.2
	Total	86.0	86.9	89.5	82.2	86.0	80.7	88.8	88.3	88.2	82.4
IPS Response Rate (Tunnel)	Arrivals	80.0	82.3	83.9	82.8	71.6	75.9	83.3	75.2	63.8	80.5
	Departures	85.8	86.6	90.6	84.4	88.4	78.2	89.2	75.3	89.5	83.2
	Total	82.4	84.3	86.4	83.6	79.8	77.0	86.3	75.2	74.9	81.8

Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

Accuracy of overseas travel and tourism estimates

Annual figures shown in this publication are final estimates, previous estimates provided in the monthly and quarterly publications are provisional and subject to revision in light of additional passenger data obtained at the end of each year.

IPS estimates are revised in line with the IPS revisions policy. The revisions policy is available in the [IPS Quality and Methodology Information report](#) to assist users in the understanding of the cycle and frequency of data revisions. Users of this report are strongly advised to read this policy before using these data for research or policy-related purposes.

Planned revisions usually arise from either the receipt of revised passenger traffic data or the correction of errors to existing data identified later in the annual processing cycle. Those of significant magnitude will be highlighted and explained.

Revisions to published quarterly IPS estimates can be expected in the publication of the annual overseas travel and tourism report (Travel trends).

All other revisions will be regarded as unplanned and will be dealt with by non-standard releases. All revisions will be released in compliance with the same principles as other new information. Please refer to the [ONS guide to statistical revisions](#).

Some of the series presented are seasonally adjusted. This aids interpretation by identifying seasonal patterns and calendar effects and removing them from the unadjusted data. The resulting figures give a more accurate indication of underlying movements in the series.

The estimates produced from the IPS are subject to sampling errors that result because not every traveller to or from the UK is interviewed on the survey. Sampling errors are determined both by the sample design and by the sample size – generally speaking, the larger the sample supporting a particular estimate, the proportionately smaller is its sampling error. The survey sample size is approximately 70,000 per quarter.

Table 2 shows the 95% confidence intervals for the 2018 estimates of the total number of visits, nights and expenditure for both overseas residents visiting the UK and UK residents going abroad. These represent the interval into which there are 19 chances out of 20 that the true figure (had all travellers been surveyed) would lie.

If, for example, the relative 95% confidence interval relating to an estimate of 10,000 was 5.0% there would be 19 chances out of 20 that the true figure (if all travellers had been surveyed) would lie in the range 9,500 to 10,500.

Table 2: International Passenger Survey confidence Intervals for 2018 estimates

		Estimate	Relative 95% confidence interval (+/- % of the estimate)
Overseas visitors to the UK	Number of visits ('000s)	37,905	2.7%
	Total earnings (£million)	22,897	3.2%
	Number of visitor nights ('000s)	266,122	4.5%
UK residents going abroad	Number of visits ('000s)	71,733	1.9%
	Total expenditure (£million)	45,435	2.8%
	Number of visitor nights ('000s)	703,373	2.9%

Source: Office for National Statistics - International Passenger Survey

The [confidence intervals dataset](#) for 2018 shows estimates relating to various purposes for visit and region of the world, together with regions of the UK visited. Relative confidence intervals are also shown for estimates relating to individual country of visit to and from the UK.

Further guidance for readers is provided about the [quality of overseas travel and tourism estimates](#).

One indication of the reliability of the main indicators in this release can be obtained by monitoring the size of revisions. The [monthly statistical bulletin](#) provides information about the size and pattern of revisions to the quarterly IPS data, which have occurred over the last five years to the following main seasonally adjusted estimates:

- the number of visits by overseas residents to the UK (GMAT)
- the number of visits abroad by UK residents (GMAX)
- earnings made from overseas residents in the UK (GMAZ)
- expenditure abroad by UK residents (GMBB)

Access to IPS data and analysis

IPS results published by the ONS

In addition to Travel trends, we also publish provisional [monthly](#) and [quarterly](#) results from the IPS that are available free of charge from our website.

The website also provides more information about the [International Passenger Survey methodology](#) including the current IPS questionnaire and interviewer instructions.

Accessing datasets

To enable easier examination of the IPS data, a simplified version of the IPS dataset called [Travelpac](#), comprising 14 of the most widely used variables, is available. Data are available online for each year from 1993 onwards, in both SPSS and Excel formats.

Larger IPS datasets are available through the Data Archive at Essex University. Contact details are as follows:

Telephone: +44 (0) 1206 872143

Web: [Data Archive Homepage](#)