

ALIGNED REGION WIDE COVID-19 HEALTH PROTOCOLS FOR TRAVEL

The global pandemic has crippled the growth of the travel industry as governments introduce strict border closures and travel bans worldwide resulting in a plunge in travel demand to near non-existent levels. Revised OECD estimates on the COVID-19 impact point to 60% decline in international tourism in 2020. This could rise to 80% if recovery is delayed until December¹. Although governments around the world have been making moves to reopen borders and stimulate air travel, a greater coordinated effort is required to revive the ailing tourism economy.

The Asia Pacific Travel Retail Association (APTRA) supports the safe return to travel, particularly in line with *consistent* guidelines across the region, and calls for a coordinated approach by governments in the region to establish such guidelines, in order to support a return to travel in the Asia Pacific region.

This paper outlines our position on the need for aligned protocols and humbly puts forward an idea of how those protocols might be framed, in the context of the two travel-related health safety measures – testing and quarantine.

Supporting the recovery of the Asia Pacific travel industry

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) estimates 100 million jobs related to global travel and tourism to be at risk, with a majority of 63.4 million jobs being across Asia Pacific².

Asia Pacific was also a key driver for the global duty free and travel retail industry, a cornerstone of the global travel economy, with the region recording 45% of global duty free sales in 2018. Although the original forecast for 2020 had expected the region to hit US\$43.4 billion in sales, new calculations show the outbreak is set to cost the industry \$8.3 billion, 19.1 per cent lower than the original forecast³. Duty Major duty free operators also face cost incurring measures due to the massive volume of perishable goods items that have been idling in warehouses since the start of the outbreak.

To help support the recovery of the Duty Free and Travel Retail industry, the Asia Pacific Travel Retail Association (APTRA) developed a COVID-19 recovery framework protocol together with the Duty Free World Council (DFWC) to demonstrate the industry's commitment to deliver a safe experience at travel retail touchpoints. While the COVID-19 recovery framework protocol is aimed at driving sales recovery, the framework also serves as an industry guide to ensure consistency in the implementation of health and safety measures by travel retail operators worldwide. This is in tandem with guidelines for operations across the travel ecosystem, led by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) which outlined measures that are necessary to minimise health risks while enabling the resumption of aviation-related operations.

APTRA believes these common protocols can serve as guidance on ways in which the relevant authorities in Asia Pacific can achieve a harmonised approach on travel guidelines. And while we acknowledge that travel safety is a far more complex matter on a regional level, we would like to humbly reiterate our position on the urgency for consistency as the cornerstone of the recovery of the industry.

Need for consistency in health safety protocols for cross border travel

Restarting travel in the region is contingent on first, the reopening of borders between destinations and second, the development of robust health protocols at departure and arrival points – this is especially crucial to restore international confidence in travel. While these factors have been considered and implemented domestically in each market, the travel landscape has become extremely fragmented, reflecting varying risk appetite of different Asia Pacific markets.

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/tourism-policy-responses-to-the-coronavirus-covid-19-6466aa20/>

² <https://wttc.org/News-Article/WTTC-now-estimates-over-100-million-jobs-losses-in-the-Travel-&-Tourism-sector-and-alerts-G20-countries-to-the-scale-of-the-crisis>

³ <https://insideretail.asia/2020/03/06/coronavirus-to-wipe-us8-3bn-off-asia-pacific-duty-free-sales/>

There is now an urgent need to set clear guidelines to align covid-19 health protocols for cross border travel in Asia Pacific. Policymakers and the travel industry will need to work together to find fair solutions that protect public health interests while securing the survival of the travel and tourism industry. We believe this can best be achieved primarily through regional consensus on testing requirements and quarantine timeframes.

Industry recommendations

The industry recommends policymakers to consider setting out clear guidelines for a coordinated reopening of borders and a harmonized implementation of health protocols for cross border travel between markets.

Presently, the industry observes the emergence of safe travel corridors which are carved out and negotiated between low-risk markets in the region. Although this points to an existing appetite for travel despite being currently limited to essential purposes, most markets continue to exercise caution through robust health protocols at their borders. This reflects their respective risk appetite towards imported COVID-19 infections.

A minimum level of harmonization in travel and health protocols at the border can help expedite negotiations to reopen borders between countries in Asia Pacific, as well as between the region and the rest of the world too. These potentially include standardized testing at arrival and departure points, as well as agreement on a standard mandatory quarantine period across the region. We defer to the health authorities on the exact form of these protocols. APTRA merely reiterates the positive impact that aligned protocols will create.

A brave, and safe new world for travel

Safe travel corridors are part of the transition towards a new way to travel in a post-COVID 19 world. As with all disruptive forces, the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing industries to evolve, and the travel industry is now tasked with the need to rethink and redesign the way people travel in order to survive and grow from this crisis.

The reality of comprehensive health checks and quarantine measures will be part of the travel experience, now and in the future. As such, it is imperative that policymakers consider developing a standard set of health protocols in the Asia Pacific region to stimulate cross border travel for the mid to long-term, given uncertainties around the pandemic.

APTRA supports and advocates for greater dialogue on this front, and the eventual alignment of region-wide protocols including uniform testing requirements at points of departure and arrival as well as minimum quarantine periods of 24 hours for travelers who have tested negative at departure and arrival points.

While we defer to the authorities on the specifics of the measures, APTRA reiterates our call for urgent regional steps towards the development of aligned protocols across Asia Pacific, with the aim that a harmonized approach will lower the barriers to the reinvigoration of the regional travel industry.
