

National Travel Survey, first quarter 2021

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Highlights

In the first quarter of 2021, Canadians took over 27.1 million trips both within Canada and abroad. With ongoing travel restrictions and borders closed to non-essential travel, the volume of trips was quantitatively and qualitatively different when compared with the same quarter in 2019, before the pandemic.

The total number of trips made by Canadians from January to March of 2021 was less than half (42.7%) the total made during the same period in 2019. In 2021, almost all (98.4%) of these trips were domestic, while before the pandemic, roughly 15% of trips were to the United States or overseas destinations.

With nearly 9 million fewer trips abroad by Canadians in the first quarter, tourism spending abroad was down 92.7% compared with the same quarter in 2019.

More recent data on international travel by Canadian residents are available from the monthly "[Travel between Canada and other countries](#)."

Advisories continue and restrictions tighten

In 2020, travel and tourism was among the first and hardest-hit sectors of the economy as a result of restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19. The first quarter was stunted by the mid-March pandemic declaration and travel during the second quarter came to a near standstill. While some public health restrictions were eased in the third quarter, travel restrictions remained in effect and were tightened in many provinces, resulting in a lacklustre fourth quarter.

In the first quarter of 2021, new restrictions were introduced by the federal government for international air travellers arriving in Canada—testing upon arrival and a mandatory hotel stopover. This halted nearly all air arrivals into Canada, and international trips made by Canadians were hindered in the first quarter.

On March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization and collection of the National Travel Survey was suspended that same month. Consequently, preliminary data for the first quarter of 2020 represented only January and February. Unless otherwise specified, comparisons in this release will be made with the same quarter of 2019 (called "pre-pandemic"), when Canadian travel behaviour was in line with historical trends (see Note to readers).

Domestic travel curtailed

Canadians made 26.7 million domestic trips in the first quarter, down 50.7% compared with the same quarter in 2019. The number of same-day trips decreased by 46.2% to 20.3 million from the same three months (January to March) of 2019, while overnight trips declined by 61.1% to 6.5 million.

In the first quarter, spending on these trips fell to a total of \$3.6 billion, from \$10.4 billion in 2019. Average spending declined to \$134 per trip from \$191 in 2019, with Canadians spending \$77 per same-day trip and \$314 per overnight trip.

The largest spending component, vehicle operations (such as gasoline), was \$892.1 million during the quarter, down 56.8% compared with 2019. With fewer overnight trips, spending on accommodation—the second largest expense category—declined by 60.3% to \$718.6 million. Spending on entertainment (down 90.3% to \$32.4 million) and on commercial transportation (down 89.0% to \$144.3 million) recorded the largest percentage declines.

With public health restrictions in effect, the \$460.2 million spent in restaurants and bars was also down 75.6% from the first quarter of 2019.



Although down 36.8% from the same quarter of 2019, holidays, leisure or recreation (9.4 million trips) was the main trip purpose for more than one-third of domestic trips in the first quarter.

Visits to friends or relatives, down 66.0% compared with 2019, was next at 8.0 million trips. Finally, domestic travel for personal-related purposes, including shopping, fell 44.3% to 1.8 million trips.

Travel to the United States dwindles

With the land border restricted to essential travel, Canadian residents made 218,700 trips to the United States in the first quarter of 2021, down from 6.0 million trips during 2019. As such, the \$348.6 million Canadian residents spent while in the United States was also down from \$5.6 billion in 2019.

Business-related travel, including attending conferences or regular sales, as well as other non-routine services, fell 84.3% from 2019 to 96,200 trips in the first quarter.

As expected, holidays, leisure or recreation trips dropped by 97.3% to 83,100 during the first quarter, while visits to friends or family were also down 97.0% from 2019 to 40,800 trips.

Canadians spent an average of \$1,594 per trip in the United States during the first quarter, up from \$931 during the same quarter of 2019.

However, despite this increase in average spending, the total spent on accommodation and in restaurants and bars—the two largest expenses for Canadians travelling to the United States—fell sharply during the first quarter. Compared with the same period in 2019, spending declined by 96.7% to \$199.1 million and by 95.7% to \$126.2 million, respectively.

Fewer Canadians travel overseas

Only 207,800 Canadian residents returned from trips to countries other than the United States during the first quarter of 2021, down 93.7% from January to March of 2019.

With fewer trips, the \$455.0 million spent overseas by travellers in the first quarter of 2021 was not even one-tenth the amount spent in 2019 (\$5.4 billion).

Those who did travel spent more, though, as spending on overseas trips averaged \$2,190 per trip in the first quarter of 2021, up from \$1,641 per trip in 2019.

With far fewer travellers, however, total spending fell drastically from the same quarter in 2019. Spending on restaurants and bars fell by 92.5% to \$83.6 million, by 95.2% to \$123.6 million on accommodation, and by 93.3% to \$11.3 million on shopping and clothing during travel.

Despite an advisory against international travel in the first quarter of 2021, 79,700 Canadians (38.4% of the total) made overseas trips for holidays, leisure or recreation, down 96.5% compared with 2019. Canadian residents took only 52,900 trips to visit friends or relatives in the first quarter, down 93.2% compared with 2019.

Table 1
Travel by Canadian residents in Canada and abroad by trip purpose, first quarter 2021

	Trips	Travel expenditures
	thousands	millions of dollars
Trips by Canadian residents in Canada	26,718	3,585
Business	3,120	474
Pleasure	9,450	1,643
Visiting friends or relatives	7,980	715
Other	6,168	753
Trips by Canadian residents abroad	427	804
To the United States	219	349
Business	96	4
Pleasure	83	266
Visiting friends or relatives	15	11
Other	24	68
To other countries	208	455
Business	9	75
Pleasure	80	188
Visiting friends or relatives	53	36
Other	66	156

Source(s): National Travel Survey [5232](#).

Note to readers

The National Travel Survey (NTS) collects information about the domestic and international travel of Canadian residents.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, collection of the NTS was suspended from March to June 2020. As a result, estimates for the first quarter of 2020 exclude March and preliminary data for the second quarter of 2020 will be available at a later date.

In this release, the above analysis is based on a measure of total domestic visit-expenditures that includes commercial air expenditures incurred at the point of origin of the trip.

Target population is the civilian, non-institutionalized population aged 18 years and older in Canada's provinces, excluding persons living on Indian reserves and in the territories. Routine trips taken by commuters and diplomatic or military personnel are out of scope.

Domestic trips are made by travellers residing in Canada who travelled in Canada for a period of less than 12 months before returning to their place of residence.

Same-day trips or visits take place within the same calendar day—that is, the traveller left and returned home on the same day—and must be a distance of 40 km or more away (one way).

Trips abroad are made by travellers residing in Canada who travelled outside the country for a period of less than 12 months before returning to Canada. Foreign citizens who reside in Canada and travel abroad are included as Canadian resident travellers.

A trip abroad for people residing in Canada starts when they cross the border to exit Canada and ends when they first re-enter Canada.

Trips and visits: A trip can consist of one or more visits. A Canadian traveller on a trip abroad may cross into several countries or US states before being recorded as having re-entered Canada. Each of these crossings represents a visit. Similarly, a Canadian resident travelling in Canada may stay in several locations during their trip. Each stay at a Canadian location (for example, a province) within a given trip represents a visit.

Available tables: table [24-10-0045-01](#).

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5232](#).

Data from the first quarter of 2021 from the National Travel Survey are [now available](#). Other tables, including statistical profiles of Canadian travellers, are available upon request.

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).