

Religious tourism has been hit hard in the pandemic as sites close and pilgrimages are put on hold

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28 Aug 2020

Religious tourism is among the [oldest forms of planned travel](#) and to this day remains a huge industry.



Only a handful of tourists at the usually busy St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. [Vincenzo Pinto/AFP via Getty Images](#)

About [300 to 330 million tourists](#) visit the world's key religious sites every year, according to a 2017 estimate. Some 600 million national and international religious trips are made around the world, generating around [US\\$18 billion in global revenues](#). It makes up a sizeable chunk of an overall tourism sector that has been significantly affected by the spread of the coronavirus, with [63.8% of travelers reducing their travel plans](#) as a result.

A concern of all faiths

As Covid-19 evolved to become a global pandemic, [governments across the globe closed sacred sites](#) and [temporarily banned religious travel](#).

It has affected popular destinations of all faiths. [Jerusalem](#), [Vatican City](#) and [Mecca](#) – which attract millions of Jewish, Christian and Muslim visitors annually – are among the worst affected.

Likewise, Buddhist sites such as Nepal's [Lumbini Temple](#) and India's [Mahabodhi Temple](#), as well as the Hindu temple of [Kashi Vishwanath](#), have seen a slump in visitors.



The Mahabodhi temple in India. [Agostini Editorial/ Getty Images](#)

This has had huge financial implications for the host countries.

For example, [last year approximately 2.5 million Muslims](#) from around the world [performed the hajj](#), [one of the five pillars of Islam](#), with nearly 2 million coming from outside of Saudi Arabia.

However, [this year only around 10,000 people](#) were expected to do the pilgrimage while [observing social distancing measures](#).

The Saudi Kingdom usually earns \$12 billion per year from the hajj and the Umrah – [a minor pilgrimage](#) that can be done anytime during the year.

The pilgrimages are seen as a way to diversify the economy from being reliant on the oil sector. Year-round religious visits contributes to [20% of the kingdom's nonoil GDP](#) and around 7% of the total GDP.

The Saudi Kingdom's economy is already [reeling from the impact of low oil prices](#), which have led to a budget deficit. It is [expected to shrink by 6.8%](#) in 2020.

Religion and revenues

Saudi Arabia is far from alone. Jordan, which hosts [35 Islamic sites and shrines and 34 Christian holy sites](#), has closed its borders because of COVID-19. Tourism accounts for about [15% of the country's GDP](#) and sustains an estimated 55,000 jobs.

Last year more than 1 million travelers visited Wadi Musa, the Jordanian Valley of Moses – an important site where Moses is said to have produced water from a rock. Up to [80% of people's income in the area relies on tourism](#).

Tourism revenues in Jordan dropped by [10.7% to \\$1.1 billion in the first quarter of 2020](#) as the pandemic spread.



Social distancing around the Kaaba in Mecca during this year's hajj. [STR/AFP via Getty Images](#)

It is a similar story across the Middle East.

In Iran, only [20,000 domestic tourists and 66 foreign tourists visited Yazd](#) – a UNESCO world heritage site that dates back to A.D. 224 – between March and June 2020. The site is a holy place for followers of Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. The number of tourists this year represents [just 1% of the figure for the previous year](#).

In June, just 5,800 people visited Israel, a religiously important destination for Christians, Muslims and Jews alike, [compared to 365,000 for the same month in 2019](#). It is expected that the pandemic will result in a [\\$1.16bn damage to the country's tourism industry](#), according to the Israel Hotel Association.

For some prominent individual sites of pilgrimage, the loss of revenue has been devastating – and it is an experience shared across the globe.

Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in France usually welcomes up to 5 million visitors every year. But in order to curtail the spread in France, the shrine closed, [offering only virtual pilgrimages](#). It has reportedly resulted in a deficit of [\\$9.06m](#) for the sanctuary.

Many places of pilgrimage support a whole industry in travel, transport and accommodation, and all that has taken a hit.

For the entire travel industry, this unprecedented crisis has resulted in [a \\$2.7t drop in revenue and job losses in excess of 100 million](#) in 2020. The United Nations World Tourism Organization estimates that for the year, international arrivals will be [down by between 850 million to 1.1 billion](#), depending on when borders fully reopen.

Spiritual well-being

And it isn't just about the financial hit. Uncertainty and anxiety related to COVID-19 also affects people's [psychological and mental health](#). Many people indulge in religious tourism for reasons of spiritual comfort or to pray for forgiveness or salvation.

For others it is a way to [demonstrate their devotion to a faith](#). In some religions, there is a belief that all individuals who are healthy and financially able should undertake a journey to their respective holy sites at least once in their lifetime. This is true, for example, for Muslims and participation in the hajj.

As such, people may have put away savings their entire life and planned for years for such a trip. Having to abandon these plans due to travel restrictions or the closure of religious sites can be particularly distressing.

Government [subsidies and relief packages](#), along with the implementation of comprehensive safety and recovery measures, can help [revive customer trust](#) and lead to increased travel.

But as scholars of the travel industry, we do believe that due to the ongoing travel restrictions and a slump in confidence in travel amid the pandemic, countries with a heavy reliance on tourism will likely continue to face challenges. And the uncertainty and possibility of newer waves of virus may further dent the tourism industry, including religious travel.

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