

Holiday Travel in the Era of Omicron



Shoppers bedecked in holiday sweaters and colorful scarves peruse packed mall parking lots for a space to squeeze in their sedan. Some hunker down in bed for online shopping or hop on the train across town to complete last-minute holiday errands. Others are at home recovering from their booster, their sore arm scrolling for last-minute flight deals. With the holidays on the horizon, how will people be traveling—and how will their travel be affected by the transportation industry's

pandemic status?

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, [2.3 million](#) Americans flew, and surveys indicate that [63%](#) of all American adults will travel during this 2021 holiday season—including [122 million](#) for Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa. Although new cases of Covid are occurring—still about [80,000](#) each day—more and more American adults and children are fully vaccinated and even boosted ([68.6%](#) of eligible Americans have received at least one dose). Individuals and families have adapted to living in the pandemic and have—in large part—learned how to adjust behavior to make traveling as [safe](#) as possible.

The discovery of the Omicron variant necessitated new travel [restrictions](#) weeks ago, just as U.S. international travel rules had begun to stabilize. Meanwhile, the [Transportation Security Administration](#) (TSA) has [requested](#) holiday travelers “plan ahead, remain vigilant and practice kindness” as the agency deals with staffing shortages and increasing numbers of passengers (many of whom have proven [disruptive](#)). [Data](#) shows that the approximately two million people who passed through TSA screening for Thanksgiving is almost up to pre-pandemic numbers (2.6 million in 2019) and a massive change from the 982,000 who flew for the holiday in 2020.

The pandemic disrupted the progress of many busy airports, including those in the Bay Area. Before the pandemic, San Francisco International Airport (SFO) consistently [ranked](#) among the top 10 busiest airports in the nation. Now, even after 18 months of pandemic life, Bay Area airports are lagging [well behind](#) other major U.S. airports struggling to return to their height of success. As of December 2021, SFO is serving about [60-65%](#) as many passengers as before the pandemic began.

While airports in the Bay and nationwide are adapting to mercurial shifts in pandemic-era travel, passengers with a little patience will likely find air travel relatively normal and even affordable. The cost of domestic air travel is up [about 23%](#)—according to the travel booking app [Hopper](#)—but still down 11% from 2019.

Back on land, public transit use nationwide is still [down](#) compared to pre-pandemic levels and some regions are combating low ridership with unique incentives: New Jersey Transit is enticing riders with promotional [discounts](#) around the holidays. Other cities—including [Santa Cruz](#) and [Sacramento](#)—have special holiday trains to make transit part of the magical season. Many transit agencies (e.g. [King County](#) in WA) regularly offer free fares to increase safety and fun for revelers celebrating New Year's Eve, and some—including LA Metro—still operate free due to the pandemic (but will begin [charging fares](#) again in early 2022, with discounts).

Meanwhile, many Americans remain undeterred by relatively high gas prices and will be taking to their personal vehicles or renting one for the road. Over [48.3 million](#) people—only 3% less than in 2019—are estimated to have traveled by automobile on Thanksgiving, according to [AAA](#). However, families should be sure to plan ahead for a rental car since the industry is still [struggling](#) to recover from their pandemic-induced sell-off of vehicle inventory and other issues caused by the lagging supply chain, including a global microchip [shortage](#).

Whether and however you choose to travel this holiday season, the most important factors to consider are the ones that keep your family and community safe. All adults are eligible for their booster, according to the [Center for Disease Control](#). Remember, data shows that vaccinations save lives, and the risk of being hospitalized from COVID-19 after vaccination is extremely small: about [5 in 100,000](#).

It is possible to travel safely for the holidays by making smart, informed choices. The nation has already taken enormous strides in overcoming the challenges of living while combating a pandemic—traveling safely and enjoying this holiday season will be one more.