

Could post-COVID-19 tourists become less adventurous?

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Our deep-rooted survival instinct for disease avoidance could make us less willing to embrace strangers and take foreign travel risks.

"We wanted to look beyond the current crisis and consider the future psyche of the post-COVID-19 traveler," says Associate Professor Florian Kock of Marketing and Tourism at Copenhagen Business School.

The research is the first of its kind that goes beyond the surface and finds longer-term psychological consequences; discovering that the [pandemic](#) has affected tourists' attitudes and behaviors in unforeseen ways, often subconsciously.

The research found post-pandemic tourism could curb our motivation for new adventures with people becoming more destination-loyal, returning to places where they have already been, and that we could inadvertently choose these options because we become more xenophobic towards strangers and foreign travel risks.

"We found that a COVID-19 threat also made people overestimate the crowdedness of public spaces and feeling uncomfortable in crowded places like restaurants or shopping malls. Understanding the long-term psychological impact of the pandemic will be a crucial success factor for businesses during and long after the COVID-19 era," adds Florian Kock.

The research is published in the *Annals of Tourism Research*.

Human behavior

The immediate effects of the pandemic on changing behavior (e.g., traveling less) are well known but to understand how the pandemic impacts behavior, the researchers looked back into our evolutionary past and identified those mechanisms that our ancestors used to counter diseases. In order to understand how the pandemic will impact behavior in the future, they needed to understand how it impacted behavior in the past. This approach is called evolutionary psychology.

The researchers explain that dying from a [contagious disease](#) constituted a major threat for our historic and indeed pre-historic ancestors. Consequently, a disease avoidance motive has involved so today we avoid coughing, sneezing, dirtiness, foul smells, or all kinds of pathogen-transmitting objects (e.g., excrement, blood, rotten food).

"Disease avoidance is based on the idea of a behavioral immune system that co-exists with the physiological immune system and enables people to avoid diseases. Thus, it is highly relevant to study the effects of tourists' behavioral immune system in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic," adds Associate Professor Florian Kock.

Travel-related risks

Two survey-based studies were implemented at the start of the pandemic with 960 demographically diverse American travelers to understand the deep-rooted changes of travel attitude and behavior, gathering empirical insights into their perceived anxiety and threats towards strangers, their travel intentions including travel to foreign destinations, crowding perceptions, getting in touch with locals or booking travel insurance, among others.

They found that feeling vulnerable to COVID-19 activates a so-called 'behavioral immune system' that in turn makes people engage in various behaviors that helped our ancestors survive when facing a [disease](#).

In the first study, the authors measured the degree to which individuals perceive a higher infection risk of COVID-19. They found that those who fear COVID-19 are more prone to being nationalistic and xenophobic, meaning that they favor those who are like themselves and avoid foreigners. Also, they perceive situations and public spaces (e.g., a restaurant) to be more crowded than individuals who think they are less at risk.

"All these behaviors helped our ancestors to cope with diseases and are thus still activated in contemporary times: becoming collectivistic (or nationalistic) increased the probability of survival because avoiding foreigners and crowds lowered the probability of contracting unknown diseases", says co-author Professor Alexander Josiassen and director of Center for Tourism and Culture Management, Copenhagen Business School.

In the second study, they found that those tourists who perceive COVID-19 as a big threat, subconsciously engage in behaviors in order to lower their travel-related risk perceptions. As such, tourists found strategies to mitigate the travel risk by, for example, traveling in groups, buying [travel](#) insurance, and visiting the places they had visited before, thereby increasing destination loyalty.

"We are now conducting further studies on the long-term impact of the pandemic on the traveler's mind to see if these deep-rooted negative societal effects could last for years or even generations to come," concludes Professor Alexander Josiassen.

More information: Florian Kock et al, Understanding the COVID-19 tourist psyche: The Evolutionary Tourism Paradigm, *Annals of Tourism Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.annals.2020.103053](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.103053)

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