European Tourism Had One of Its Best Years While U.S. Had One of Its Worst

Dan Peltier, Skift
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Europe’s 2017 tourism story is nearly the opposite of its 2016 downward twists and turns. It wasn’t a perfect year and some destinations on the continent are still struggling, but it’s also a sign that many Europeans are choosing to travel closer to home to stick to their budgets.
— Dan Peltier

After economic shocks and terrorist attacks roiled Europe in 2016, international visitor arrivals made a notable comeback in 2017, making it the strongest year for the region’s tourism in seven years.

By contrast, according to the latest international tourism data from the the United Nations World Tourism Organization, the number of international visitors to the U.S. is expected to drop compared to 2016.

Asia-Pacific has had some of the highest growth rates in tourism arrivals for the past few years, with regions like South Asia (10 percent) and Southeast Asia (8 percent) showing high growth rates. Southern and Mediterranean Europe (13 percent) was the region with the highest growth rate and raw numbers in the world last year, increasing from more than 228 million to more than 258 million visitors. North Africa also saw 13 percent growth, but its increase was from a much smaller number — 18.5 million to nearly 21 million.

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Western Europe, which includes some of the world's most visited countries such as Spain and France, had 7 percent growth in arrivals after having virtually no growth in 2016.

Europe, the world's most visited region, had about 51 million more tourists last year than it did in 2016 (671 million compared to 620 million, respectively), and the region as a whole grew 8 percent year-over-year.

The Americas was the weakest world region for tourism growth last year at 3 percent. South America led the way with 7 percent growth, but North American only saw 2 percent growth. That resulted from strong demand in Mexico and Canada but a decrease in arrivals in the United States, historically one of the world's most visited countries (see chart below). Some travel industry organizations like the U.S. Travel Association feel that President Donald Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies are partly to blame for the poor performance but that a stronger U.S. dollar is also at play.

The U.S. Department of Commerce has said that international visitor arrivals were down 4 percent through July of 2017, the latest month for which it has released information. The UNWTO said its results are based on preliminary data as reported by destinations and estimates for figures not yet reported.

Overall, some 1.32 billion people crossed international borders and made overnight trips to destinations in 2017, a 7 percent increase over 2016. That growth is above the 4 percent growth rate for each year since 2010 and a sign that any downturn from Brexit or terrorism, for example, wasn't long-lived. That means that of the 89 million additional people who traveled internationally in 2017, more than half (57.3 percent) of those arrivals went to Europe. And many European destinations appear to not only have recovered from losses that marked the past two years, but also exceeded previous visitor records.

U.S. Travel Association CEO Roger Dow said in an interview last month that one reason for the general growth in European tourism could be the rise of European low-cost carriers incentivizing travelers with low fares to regional destinations they feel they can't pass up.

UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili, who took office earlier this month for the 2018-2021 term, said in a statement that results were partly shaped by more positive global economic trends and strong outbound demand from many traditional and recovering source markets such as Brazil and Russia.

After a year filled with examples of citizens, particularly in Europe, protesting against overtourism and crowded city centers and infrastructure, Pololikashvili also acknowledged that tourism shouldn't be a zero-sum game. "Yet as we continue to grow we must work closer together to ensure this growth benefits every member of every host community, and is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals," he said.

The goals were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and include three tourism-specific measures such as ensuring that tourism growth leads to job creation and to take steps to protect the environment from any negative impacts from tourism. The UNWTO projects that international tourism arrivals will grow by 4 to 5 percent in 2018 and that the momentum from last year will continue. But if recent history has been any guide, there are too many factors such as currency or security concerns that could either inflate those numbers or cause them to spiral down.

INTERNATIONAL TOURIST ARRIVALS BY REGION IN 2017

Numbers are in millions

Region	Arrivals in 2016	Arrivals in 2017	Percent Growth
Europe	**620**	**671**	**8.00%**
Northern Europe	79.7	83.6	5.00%
Western Europe	179.6	192.1	7.00%
Central/Eastern Europe	131.8	138.3	5.00%
Southern Europe	228.6	258.3	13.00%
Asia-Pacific	**302.9**	**324**	**6.00%**
Northeast Asia	153.9	158.5	3.00%
Southeast Asia	113.3	122.3	8.00%
Oceania/Australia	15.6	16.6	7.00%
South Asia	20	22	10.00%
Americas	**200.9**	**207**	**3.00%**
North America	132.2	134.8	2.00%
Caribbean	25.1	26.1	4.00%
Central America	10.9	11.3	4.00%
South America	32.7	34.9	7.00%
Africa	**58.2**	**62**	**8.00%**
North Africa	18.5	20.9	13.00%
Sub-Saharan Africa	39.6	41.5	5.00%
Middle East	**53.6**	**58**	**5.00%**

Source: UNWTO

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U.S. Tourism Confronting Its Worst Year Since the Financial Crisis

Dan Peltier, Skift
- Jan 10, 2018 4:00 pm

It's becoming clearer that 2017 has gone down as one of the worst and most challenging years for U.S. tourism in recent memory. In 2018, many destinations will likely step up their marketing of discounted options to get more foreign feet and spending power through their doors.
— Dan Peltier

Fewer international travelers visited the United States during the first seven months of 2017 and with that decline, foreign visitors also spent less across the country, according to U.S. Department of Commerce data released this week. The commerce department data also show that for January through November, international travelers spent $187.6 billion, 3.3 percent less at U.S. destinations than the same period in 2016. The decrease has amounted to a $4.6 billion loss in spending for U.S. businesses last year. All of the data isn't in yet but 2017 is shaping up to be the second year in a row that international visitor spending declined.

The U.S. Travel Association, in a statement, said that international travel spending had been growing each year since the global financial crisis in 2009, but that a slowdown in spending started in 2015.

"After almost a decade and a half of relatively sustained post-9/11 recovery, since 2015 there's been evidence that the country has gotten complacent with the policies needed to support this vital economic engine and job creator," said Roger Dow, president and CEO of U.S. Travel, in a statement.

Data also show that travelers spent more each month year-over-year from January through April and that spending began to drop off in May.

U.S. Travel plans to launch a Visit U.S. Coalition next week that will represent multiple industries and will try to break through to the Trump Administration on how to solve the tourism spending slump.

“Flourishing international travel is vital to President Trump’s economic goal of sustained three percent GDP growth, and the Visit U.S. coalition is being founded for the express purpose of helping him achieve it,” said Dow.

Many U.S. destinations are likely wondering how they’ve been impacted by this slump. Los Angeles Tourism, for example, told Skift that it won’t have its tourism spending data finalized until April and it doesn’t track monthly spending data throughout the year.

December spending data is still outstanding, but it’s apparent that many destinations took a hit last year from economic and political woes impacting travel to the U.S.