

☰ SEARCH

The Salt Lake Tribune

SUBSCRIBE

LOG IN

SUBSCRIBE



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





(Saudi Ministry of Media via AP) Pilgrims walk around the Kabba at the Grand Mosque, in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Friday, July 31, 2020. The global coronavirus pandemic has cast a shadow over every aspect of this year's pilgrimage, which last year drew 2.5 million Muslims from across the world to Mount Arafat, where the Prophet Muhammad delivered his final sermon nearly 1,400 years ago. Only a very limited number of pilgrims were allowed to take part in the hajj amid numerous restrictions to limit the potential spread of the coronavirus.

By Faizan Ali and Cihan Cobanoglu | University of South Florida | Aug. 27, 2020, 12:55 p.m.

Religious tourism is among the oldest forms of planned travel and to this day remains a huge industry.

About 300 million 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 \$18 billion (U.S.) in global revenues. It makes up a sizable 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.

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 contribute to 20% of the kingdom's nonoil gross domestic product 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.

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. 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 \$1.16 billion in 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 \$9.06 million 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 \$2.7 trillion drop in revenue and job losses in excess of 100 million in 2020. The U.N. 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

It isn't just about the financial hit. Uncertainty and anxiety related to COVID-19 also affect 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.



*The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts.
The Conversation is wholly responsible for the content.*

By Faizan Ali and Cihan Cobanoglu | University of South Florida

[Donate to the newsroom now.](#) The Salt Lake Tribune, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) public charity and contributions are tax deductible

 **COMMENTS: (4)**



FEATURED COMMENTS

 **88**
ammon1953

mecca, jerusalem, vatican city, palmyra, nauvoo, comerica park, wrigley field. all sites of worship that i would love to visit.

[View all 4 comments](#)



RELATED STORIES

RELIGION

The Conversation: Freedom of religion doesn't mean freedom from mask mandates

RELIGION

The Conversation: Islam's anti-racist message from the seventh century still resonates today

RELIGION

The Conversation: Black religious leaders are front and center in protests — as they have been for hundreds of years

RELIGION

The Conversation: Trump's use of religion follows playbook of other authoritarian-leaning leaders

RELIGION

The Conversation: When religion sided with science — medieval lessons for surviving COVID-19



RECOMMENDED

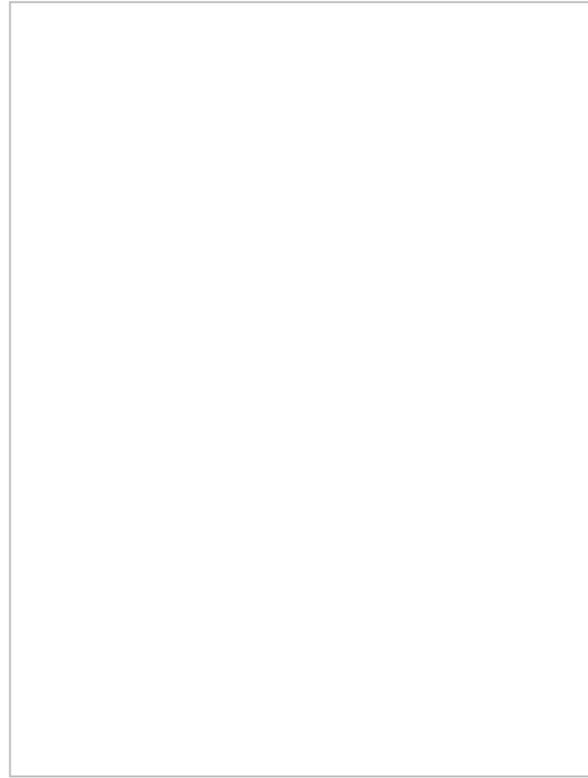


Letter: Ski resort parking problems

Utah dog and his human win \$500,000 on Amazon Prime's 'The Pack'

Violent crime and property crime surge in Salt Lake City, up more than 20% in 2020





FROM THE WEB

Recommended by



**Canceled TV Shows
Announced: The Full List.**

Investing.com | Sponsored

**6 Outrageous Credit Cards
If You Have Good Credit**

NerdWallet | Sponsored

**How To Entirely Empty
Your Bowels Each Morning
(1 Min Routine)**

Your Gut Reboot | Sponsored

**Presidents Ranked By Their
IQs**

Maternity Week | Sponsored

**[Pics] Pole Vaulter Allison
Stokke Years After The
Photo That Made Her**

New Arena | Sponsored

**[Quiz] What american
accent do you have?**

WorldLifeStyle | Sponsored

**Red Carpet Mishaps That
They Tried to Cover Up**

DailyStuff | Sponsored

**[Photos] 29 Times People
Should Have Really
Checked the Background**

History Chronicle | Sponsored



Born Into Billions: Meet America's Richest Heirs

Investing.com | Sponsored

Seniors Under 86 Years Of Age Get Up To \$50000 In Life Ins for \$15/Mth

National Family Assurance | Sponsored



sponsored by **Doggykingdom**
NO PULL Harness for Christmas



If You Are A Dog Owner This No Pull Harness Is A Must-Have

[Shop Now](#)

Dog Owners Watch Out. This Is The Best Dog Harness 2020

[Shop Now](#)

Why This Harness Will Make Your Dog Feel More Comfortable

[Shop N](#)



THE LATEST

Utah State basketball game against Weber State canceled due to COVID-19 cases within Aggies

How Utah's Top Workplaces are determined

Utah's new unemployment claims jump 35% as winter nears and COVID-19 worsens



Here are the sobering stats as Utah surpasses 1,000 COVID-19 deaths

RSL greets Nick Rimando, Kyle Beckerman named to MLS list of 25 greatest players

Where to dine in a tent, igloo or greenhouse in Utah; a new distillery opens; and Super Chix adds more stores

CONNECT

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

[YouTube](#)

[RSS](#)

SUBSCRIBE

[Subscribe to Digital and Print](#)

[Email Newsletters](#)

[Podcasts](#)

[Store](#)

[Story Tip Line](#)

[Archives](#)

[Help and Contact Info](#)

ABOUT US

[History and Mission](#)

[Our Nonprofit Model](#)

[Board and Advisers](#)

[Officers and Staff](#)

[Donors and Tax Filing](#)

[News Literacy Resources](#)

[Donate](#)

TERMS OF SERVICE

[Privacy Policy](#)

[California Privacy](#)

[Editorial Policies and Ethics](#)

[Advertise with Us](#)

[Legal Notices](#)



[ABOUT US](#)
[TERMS OF SERVICE](#)
[PRIVACY POLICY](#)
[EDITORIAL POLICY](#)
[ADVERTISE](#)
[CONTACT US](#)

[SUPPORT](#)
[EMAIL NEWSLETTERS](#)
[PODCASTS](#)
[NEWS TIPS](#)
[APPS](#)
[DONATE](#)

sltrib.com © 1996-2020 The Salt Lake Tribune. All rights reserved.

The Salt Lake Tribune
Independent. Nonprofit. Pulitzer Prize winner.

