

The UK's hotels are struggling – but where might they bounce back first post-Covid?



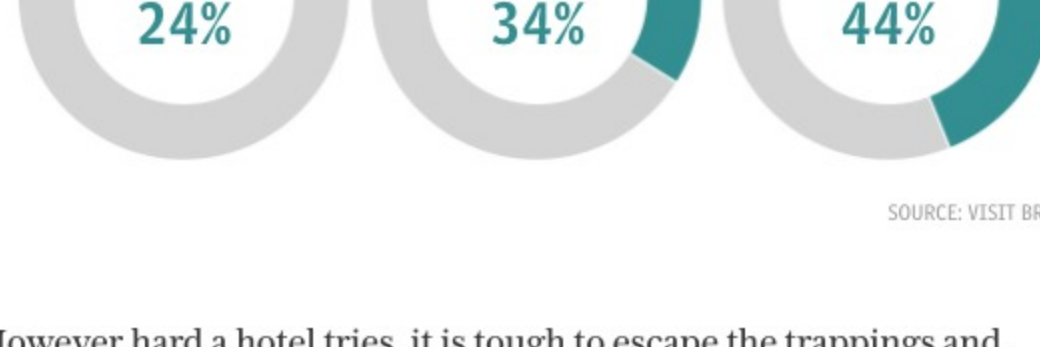
Coastal and luxury hotels are in this summer, as city-centre options suffer

Follow By Emma Beaumont, ASSISTANT CONTENT EDITOR 21 JULY 2020 - 12:27PM

On Saturday July 4, or 'Independence Day', as it was neatly dubbed, images of punters queuing for pints at 6am and families loading up their cars for a seaside holiday clogged up news feeds across the country. Pubs, restaurants and hotels had reopened and, if you squinted, life almost looked normal.

But behind the sunny confidence of some lies a silent majority traumatised by the upending of life during the past few months. Visit Britain's most recent findings suggest only 24 per cent of Britons felt confident in taking a domestic holiday in July, rising to a still lowly 34 per cent in August. Slicing those fearful figures further, how many people are actually planning a hotel break? The self-catering sector has exploded this summer, with its promise of relative isolation and, crucially, a sense of normality. Asking people to share a space with strangers – even at a distance – is a more difficult sell.

Consumer confidence in taking a domestic holiday this summer



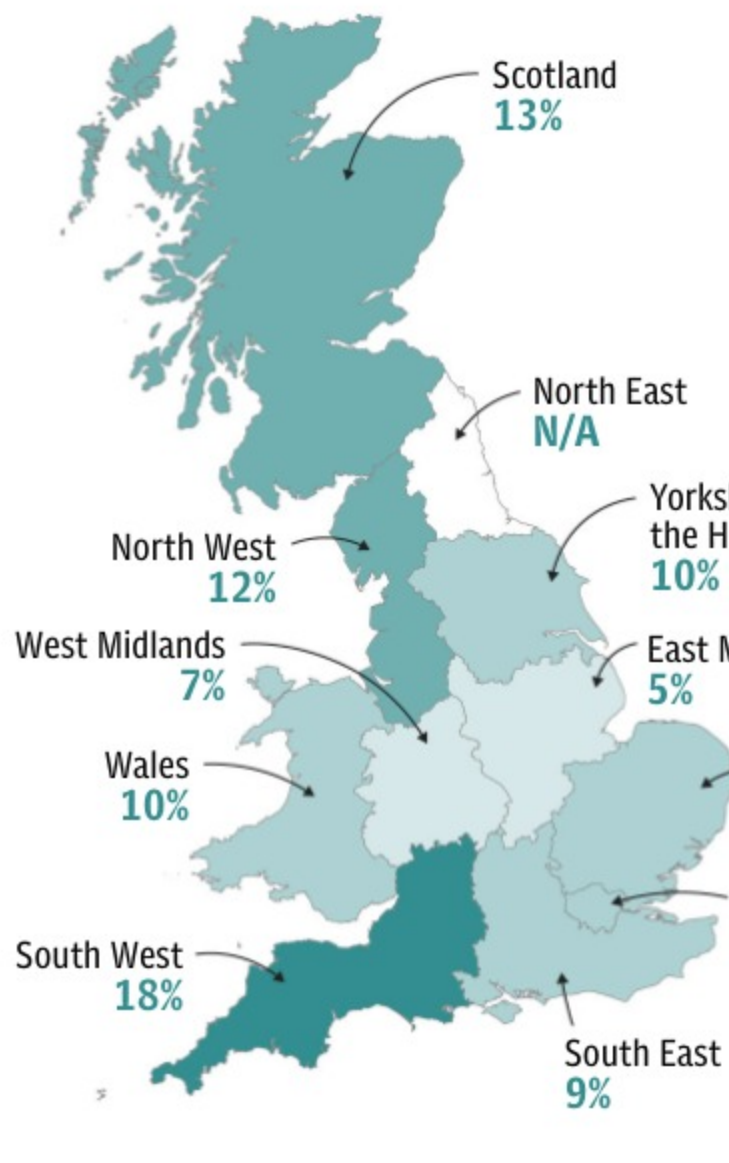
SOURCE: VISIT BRITAIN

However hard a hotel tries, it is tough to escape the trappings and reminders of the 'new normal'. Temperature-checking guns, hand sanitisers, digital menus and staff in masks and visors – these measures are there to make guests feel safe, but hardly promote relaxation. Newly reopened **Rockcliffe Hall** in Darlington reports that its guests want the hotel to do away with some of the new measures.

"We'd chosen to remove the tasting menu option to reduce touchpoints, but feedback on the first day was that our guests just want things to go back to as normal as they can be. So, it was reintroduced on day two." Of course the key social-distancing rules and hygiene protocols remain in place.

It is an uneven picture across the country. Seemingly, it takes more than a pandemic to keep visitors away from perennially popular Cornish hotels. Indeed, the brand-new Pig at Harlyn Bay has only three rooms left to sell in August, and it's a similar story in September. We can expect more images of busy beaches as, according to research from Visit Britain, holidaymakers are twice as likely to visit the south-west of England than London this summer. Jane Pendlebury, CEO of HOSPA (The Hospitality Professionals Association), confirms this: "Hotels that are coastal-based are booming, while those in city centres are seeing a complete dearth in bookings by contrast."

Regions of the UK likely to be visited between now and September



SOURCE: VISIT BRITAIN

With urban hotels, this trend is expected – there is no doubt that the city break has certainly lost its lustre in the age of social distancing. Jane Pendlebury adds: "Many of the attractions that usually draw guests in are either closed or running at reduced capacity, which puts many people off as they fail to recognise the value of a city break if they can't experience its full offering."

In York, a city which appears to be faring better than some according to Booking.com figures, Visit York has reported that actualised occupancy at the city's hotels was only 27.6 per cent in the middle of July. One of York's best hotels, **The Grange**, is running at around 50 per cent occupancy for the rest of the month, as opposed to the usual 90 per cent, but Managing Director Jeremy Cassel says: "It's rather more than we thought it would be."

More surprisingly, HOSPA members' feedback indicates that country house hotels are also experiencing an unexpected lack of demand. Jane Pendlebury is interested by the findings: "On the face of it, they provide the perfect setting for a socially distant getaway with access to a wealth of outdoor activities, as well as ample parking."

Samantha Williams of Profitroom, a software company that runs online booking systems for hotels, has also noted that country house hotels are struggling. She suggests this is: "Primarily down to some of the experiences being restricted, such as spas being closed, or the dining experience being greatly altered". However, she anticipates that bookings will pick up now "spas have been given the green light".

There is a split, too, between the luxury and budget markets, with four- or five-star hotels appearing to recover more quickly. Jane Pendlebury thinks this may be indicative of a "wealthier demographic treating themselves post-lockdown."

There could also be a psychological factor at play. It's hard to believe that anything bad could ever happen at **Claridge's**, say. Potential guests might also be more likely to trust that proper sanitation procedures are in place at high-end hotels. People seem happier to spend more money on stays too, perhaps due to a crisis-induced live-for-the-moment attitude. Samantha Williams notes: "Ordinarily, standard rooms are the first to get booked up. Post-lockdown, we're seeing the opposite. Suites and the higher-end rooms are getting booked first, with the entry-level rooms left empty until the others are full."

Whichever way it is analysed, these are fraught times for the hotel industry. Even if occupancy levels increase over the coming months, there will likely be few international visitors and hardly any business trips to keep things ticking over during the winter months. The 15 per cent VAT cut is significant, but as much of the other Government support tails off in autumn, filling beds will be crucial.

Visit Britain is lobbying for a longer summer season and an October bank holiday to keep businesses afloat and tourist towns are thinking up ways to encourage guests to visit later in the year. In Blackpool, the illuminations will stay on for two extra months, until January. The move could well pay off as Booking.com research suggests that the Lancashire town is one of the most sought-after coastal destinations this year, along with other seaside spots such as Whitby and Brighton.

Domestic holiday wish list destinations

10 rural/coastal and city destinations on Brits wish lists



SOURCE: BOOKING.COM

StayBlackpool President and B&B owner Claire Smith is pinning her hopes on the extended season saying: "Usually in winter most properties in Blackpool only make enough to cover the bills – this year it will need to be different".

Her own two properties have reopened but she says that July takings will be "more like a normal March". She has noticed an uptick in day-trippers, but suggests that people remain "cautious about taking the next step and staying overnight".

Ultimately, if the virus is kept under control this winter, the real issue to wrestle with will be people's state of mind. After being locked up at home for months, with danger seeming to lurk in every trip to the supermarket, it is difficult to simply click back into normality. Could the residual fear stop some of us booking that special break we have been dreaming about since March? For sadly, it is now more than ever that we need the freedom, the pampering and the mind-emptying power of holidays and hotels.

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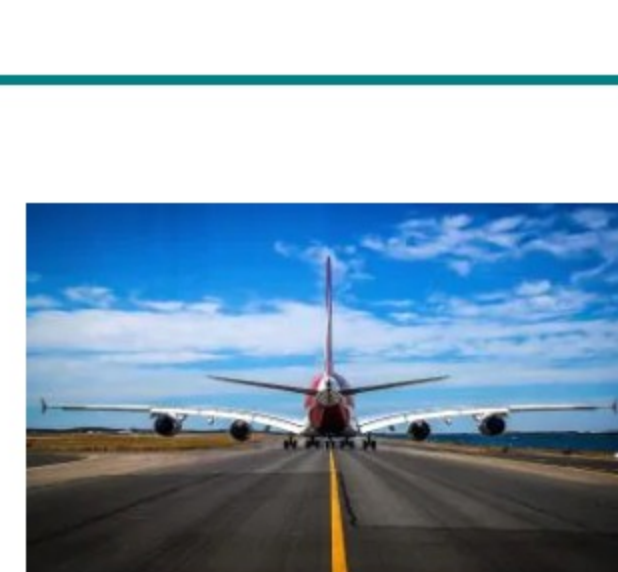
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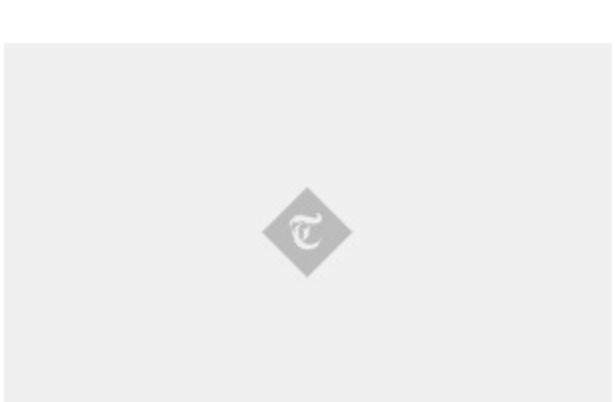
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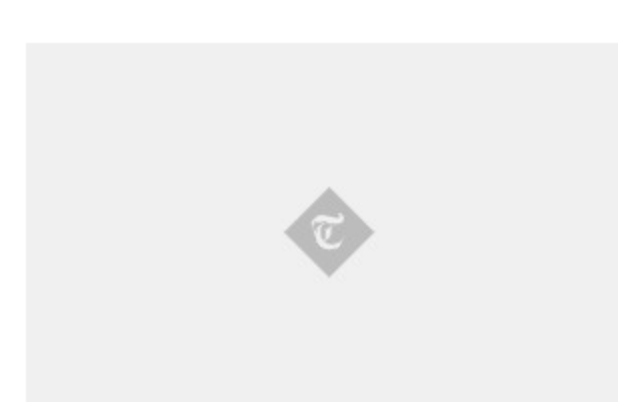
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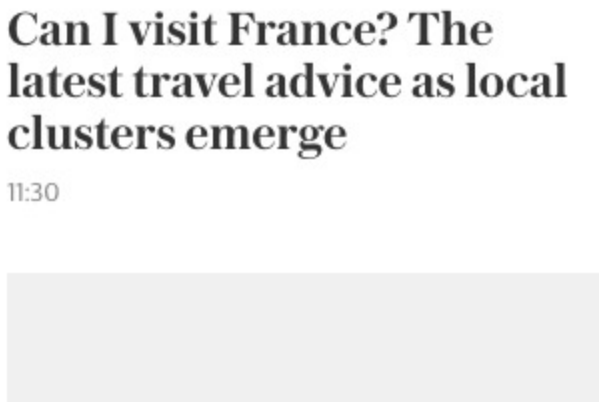
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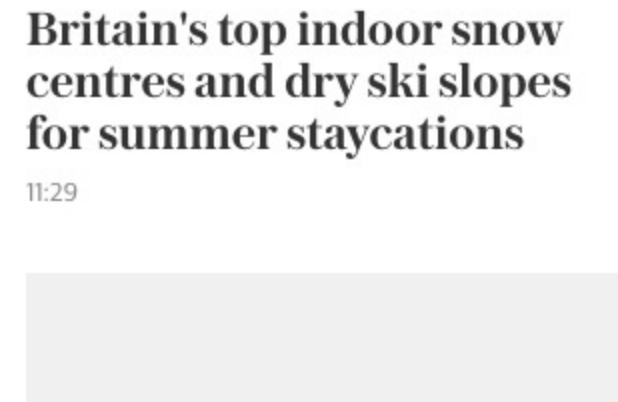
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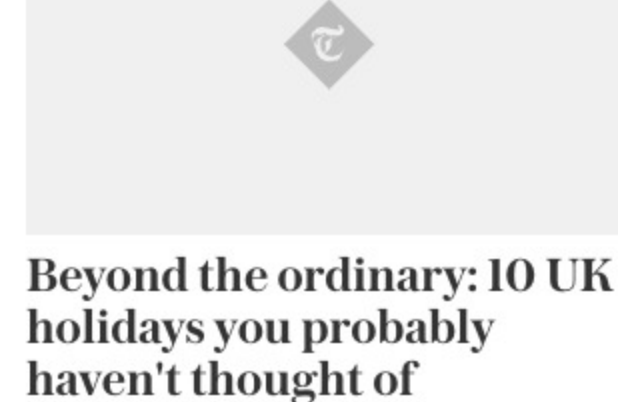
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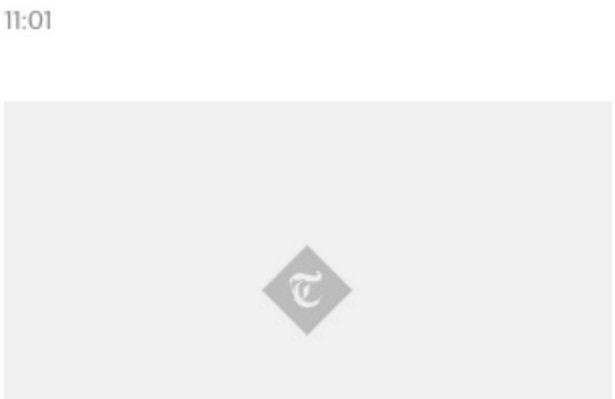
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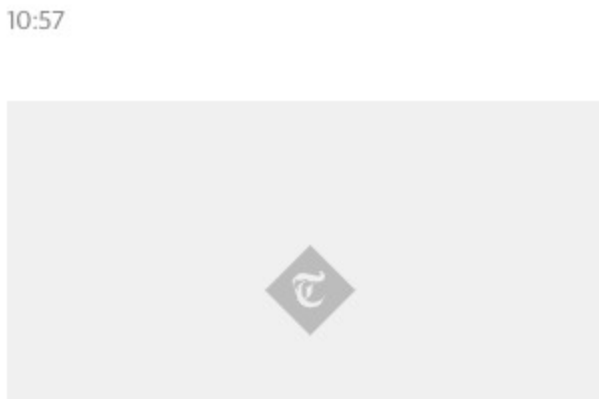
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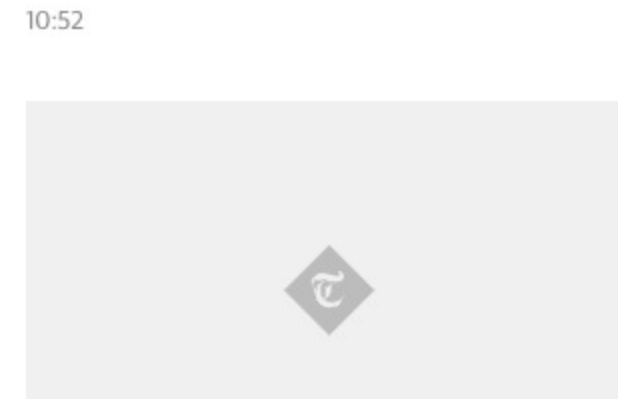
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JANE ARCHER

20 Jul 2020



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