



Media Release

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International border reopening

Airlines will today return some 1,500 Australians home to their family and loved ones on the 20 international flights arriving into Sydney and Melbourne airports. With almost 50,000 seats a week currently scheduled into these airports, there will be more than enough for the reported 47,000 Australians overseas seeking to return home.

With sufficient seat capacity for returning Australians, international aviation can also support the return of international students and economic visa holders, and finally international tourists, when the government permits it.

Only 460 places are available each week across Sydney and Melbourne for Australians who will still need to undergo hotel quarantine, which will be allocated in tiny numbers flight by flight. A coordinated plan to make the most of available managed quarantine across the country would best support the return of these Australians as quickly as possible.

International airline operations over the pandemic

Entry bans to and from Australia, together with mandatory hotel quarantine for arriving passengers, were imposed in late March 2020. Based on the requirements of state governments, the Australian Government then introduced tight arrival caps for international passenger flights from 4 July 2020.

Over 485 days to 31 October 2021, international airlines operated 10,000 capped commercial passenger flights into the major capital city airports serving over 300,000 arriving passengers, most of whom were returning Australians.¹ The average number of passengers on a flight was just 30, which over the last two months has been driven down to 10 or less per flight.

These capped flights did not qualify for any Australian Government assistance to offset the cost of security and air navigation services for which international airlines are estimated to have paid over \$70 million in fees, mostly to the Australian Government-owned Airservices Australia (air navigation services provider).

“Throughout the pandemic international airlines operated capped passenger flights into the major capital city airports under the most challenging commercial and operating conditions. Each arriving flight carried an average of just 30 passengers. The numerous cuts to the per flight caps made by government, unilaterally and often with little notice, caused considerable stress and problems for Australians overseas and for international airlines.

¹ International airlines operated 1,200 passenger flights for 57,000 arriving passengers from April–June 2020. Capped flights and passengers exclude those operated between Australia and New Zealand during quarantine-free travel.



“International aircrews also complied with extensive infection control procedures and strict quarantine arrangements on layover between flights. Differing requirements across state jurisdictions added to the difficulties and costs faced by international airlines. Operating 10,000 flights for 300,000 passengers under such challenging circumstances is a remarkable contribution by international airlines in supporting Australia and its people,” Barry Abrams, Executive Director of BARA said.²

International air freight

A mix of freighter and cargo-only passenger services by airlines continued to ensure Australian trade channels remained open, supporting the movement of essential medical supplies and Australian producer and exporter deliveries around the globe. A number of these flights qualified for financial assistance through the International Freight Assistance Mechanism (IFAM), which helped cover airline operating costs.

“Airlines maintained overall air freight tonnage to about 80% pre-pandemic levels at some 77,000 tonnes on average per month. This air freight, especially in the early days of the pandemic, ensured Australia’s vital supplies of medical and personal protective equipment,” Mr Abrams said.

What next for international aviation?

International airlines have advised that aircraft load factors into Australia are likely to increase over the coming days as Australians prepare to return home and confidence in the border reopening increases. With almost 50,000 available scheduled seats into Sydney and Melbourne airports each week, this is more than the reported 47,000 Australians overseas seeking to return home.

“The situation for Australians overseas to return home will become clearer over the coming days but the scheduled seat capacity is more than sufficient. Subject to approval by government, flights and seats are available to support the return of international students and economic visa holders, and then international tourists, as envisaged under the National Plan.

“International airlines do continue to note that three days before they arrive into Australia, passengers require a negative COVID-19 test in their country of departure. This requirement can be expected to dampen demand, especially discretionary travel. International airlines report a number of ‘no show’ passengers, or late booking cancellations, for arriving flights into Australia. It is reasonable to assume they are mainly passengers that returned a positive COVID-19 test or were the close contact of a positive case. In countries such as the United Kingdom there is testing on arrival rather than pre-departure, so passengers can be more certain they are able to return home,” Mr Abrams said.

A coordinated plan for available managed quarantine is needed

Because availability varies, not all Australians overseas have had the opportunity to be fully vaccinated, with vaccination rates only 10–20% in some overseas countries (eg many countries throughout Africa). Fortunately, a pragmatic approach has prevailed for 12–17 year olds, so they will not require hotel quarantine into Sydney and Melbourne if they are not fully vaccinated but accompanied by a fully vaccinated parent or guardian.

² The flight and passenger data are derived from BITRE and internal statistics. The Board of Airline Representatives of Australia (BARA) represents 33 airlines, which provide 90% of international passenger flights and carry most air freight to and from Australia.



The 460 hotel quarantine rooms now available in Sydney and Melbourne each week, which are allocated in tiny numbers flight by flight, are unlikely to be a good fit with the needs of Australians overseas and remain an operational challenge for international airlines.

“The present approach of offering international airlines on average a few places per flight for passengers still requiring hotel quarantine is not an effective way of managing the situation, even with some flexibility in their use across each week. Targeted capacity, coordinated between passengers and airlines through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), would deliver better outcomes for Australians overseas needing to undergo hotel quarantine,” Mr Abrams said. **[ENDS]**