

Resilience in Tourism through a Safe Corridor **Article for Crisis Response Journal – Hospitality Section**

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Just as the tourism sector is affected more than any others by the current COVID-19 pandemic, international tourism recorded unprecedented 73% drop in 2020 under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Europe and Africa both saw a decline of 85% in arrivals, while the Middle East recorded a drop of 84%.

Due to the worsening of the pandemic with a surge of cases and the emergence of new variants, Turkey and many other countries reintroduced travel restrictions, including mandatory testing, quarantines and domestic lockdowns, all targeting the restarting of international travel.

UNWTO (The World Tourism Organization) expects international tourist arrivals to be down by 85% in the first quarter of 2021 over the same period of 2019. This would represent a loss of approx. 260 million international arrivals when compared to pre-pandemic levels. Now looking ahead for 2021, UNWTO prepared two scenarios. The first scenario points to a rebound in July, with a 66% increase in international arrivals for the year 2021 compared to the historic lows of 2020 with arrivals being 55% below the levels recorded in 2019. The second scenario considers a potential rebound in September, leading to a 22% increase in arrivals compared to 2020 where this would still be 67% below the levels of 2019.

Given UNWTO's projected recovery scenarios, Turkey being one of the popular holiday destinations is now in a tight lockdown period until the 17th of May 2021 in order to significantly lower number of COVID-19 cases down to 100 cases per 100K and restart international tourism again, where in the meanwhile UK made its decision for the same date from a cautious perspective that foreign travel will start again. A traffic light system of rules is introduced with countries classed as green, amber or red. People are still advised not to travel to countries on the amber or red lists for leisure. Among the key factors such as percentage of population vaccinated, rate of infection, the prevalence of variants of concern and Turkey's access to reliable scientific data and genomic sequencing seem to have been considered to determine that Turkey fell into red list.

However, there are more key factors to consider that may render a better view of the health and safety level of the tourism industry Turkey has to offer, all decreasing the risk and increasing the resilience level of the whole industry from end to end.

Safe Tourism Certification Program

A family or a couple, dreams of a holiday in Antalya with luxurious dining, picture-perfect pools, extensive activity line-up, a cabana bed with waiter service, rooftop cocktail bar with fantastic sunset views, luxurious facilities, high-quality service and great entertainment they know and love. That's what made them travel all the way from home to the destination of their choice. Now placing the word COVID-19 somewhere in between the description of this beautiful holiday dream will make it also include the words "*where it is assured that all measures are in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in a pandemic period*". This is how pandemic realities are now blended with the dreams of our guests for rendering a safe and trustworthy holiday experience in pandemic conditions. That's where exactly the Safe Tourism Certification Program comes in place; to open up space for our guests, rest them assured where they don't need to ask questions with "what if" and take their step to realise the holidays they dream of.

A year ago, Turkey introduced the *Safe Tourism Certification Program* (STCP) with unparalleled breadth of measures that does not exist in most of the European Union countries. It defines and advises an extensive series of measures to be taken concerning transportation and accommodation of all guests who will make their holidays in Turkey as well as the well-being and health conditions of passengers and of employees working at touristic facilities. With STCP, pandemic protocols and certification protocols were issued separately in terms of domestic airlines, airports, highways, transportation vehicles and tourism facilities with over 50 beds capacity. In other words, STCP is uniquely configured to ensure the health and safety of the passengers landing at the destination airport, travelling to their hotels with transportation vehicles, making their holidays at their hotels and all the employees that serve them throughout every single point in this process. Similar to transportation of foods through unbroken cold chain from the factory to your shopping car, STCP aims for rigorous discipline in the implementation of pandemic protocols inside a *Safe Corridor* from the airport to the accommodation facility and back with all its service elements.

Safe Tourism Certificates are not valid forever. For every facility that earned the Safe Tourism Certificate, inspections are conducted on monthly basis on site towards 187 criteria with no remote inspection. In addition, monthly secret customer inspections without notice are conducted as part of the STCP. Verification is completed maximum within three days following the field inspection, all leading up to determine quickly whether a touristic facility requalifies for STCP.

Inspections are carried out by institutions accredited by TURKAK (Turkish Accreditation Agency), a full member of the European Co-operation for Accreditation (EA), the International Accreditation Forum (IAF) and the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC). These institutions must comply with the criteria such as being ISO 17020 and ISO 17021 certified, experience in inspection of food hygiene and safety, occupational health and safety, environmental management systems, to be an international and accredited brand and have been operating in at least 5 different countries, min 2 of them must be in Europe (except Turkey) and be a brand that has executed at least 50 international certificates regulated in standard norms in min 5 different countries each (except Turkey).

As of May 2021, 3875 accommodation facilities, 1575 tour and transfer vehicles, 1702 restaurant / cafe facilities, 5 culture-art-congress facilities, 149 marine tourism facilities and vehicles, 6 theme parks, 9 ski lift facilities passed strict inspections and still hold their Safe Tourism Certificates, well prepared to serve their international visitors. The Safe Tourism Certification Program certainly increased the capability to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate risks through strong measures in place inside the Safe Corridor, increasing the resilience of the tourism industry in Turkey.

How to Prevent Exporting COVID-19 Cases to Our Guests' Country of Origin

There have been instances where guests arrived Turkey during incubation period and became symptomatic after arriving at the hotel. In that case our guests are taken to a hospital for a PCR test and if the test is positive, our guests decide whether to be treated in hospital or at the hotel. That's where Safe Tourism Certificate Program comes in, aiming to prevent source markets to import COVID-19 cases back to their own country. As part of the Safe Tourism Certification Program, isolation rooms are mandatory in hotels with over 50 rooms and COVID-19 test can be done by trained healthcare staff or a competent health institution. Our guests with COVID-19 remains isolated in hotels until their PCR test results are negative. Since the majority of hotels are implementing All-Inclusive board, guests do not need to pay for food and beverages during their holidays. Even if the isolation period lasts longer than the planned holiday, the extra accommodation costs are covered by the hotel as part of Turkish hospitality. When the isolation period ends with a negative PCR test result, our guests are recovered and are ready to fly back to their country.

Vaccination of the Entire Tourism Staff

Since March 2021, Turkey started full fledged vaccination of tourism employees, covering the employees of airlines, airports, accommodation facilities, travel agencies as well as professional guides. That covers vaccination of all service employees within the Safe Corridor where the international visitors land at the airport, are transferred to the accommodation facility, make their holidays, transferred back to the airport and board the plane.

Following the opening of the tourism season, in order to ensure that the tourism services in Turkey remain open throughout the year, in the first place employees of all facilities holding a valid Safe Tourism Certificate and are currently operating are all included in the COVID-19 vaccination program. Considering all measures of the Safe Tourism Certification Program is in place, the vaccination of the entire tourism staff is adding an extra armour of resilience to the tourism industry in Turkey, making it a healthier, safer and a more trustworthy destination for safe holiday dreamers and makers.

Currently, the Ministry of Health offers both BioNTech/Pfizer and Sinovac (China) vaccines for tourism employees. They are making their appointments for first dose of vaccination within the same week of their application and their second appointments 4-6 weeks later. Within May, it is expected that the Ministry of Health will start offering Sputnik V (Russian) vaccine as the third option. The European Medicines Agency is currently rolling review of data for both Sinovac BioTech and Sputnik V to file a formal application for authorization.

As a sample, Barut Hotels operates 13 resort hotels in Turkey with four resort hotels, one city hotel and a textile laundry as part of Barut Hospitality Management (BHM). Among the 2.000 employees of BHM, the first dose of vaccination rate on the 6th of May 2021 hit above %70 where in the meanwhile, second doses of vaccination made significant progress.

Steering in coordination, Turkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA), the Ministry of Culture and Tourism as well as the Ministry of Health undertake the vaccination of the entire tourism staff to be completed until the end of May 2021. Therefore, every employee a guest can come across within the safe corridor is aimed to be vaccinated before the summer season starts.

Whether this is an “overly cautious” or “necessarily cautious” opening of the doors of international tourism, certainly there are more critical factors to be considered in assessing the risks, level of resilience and determining the health and safety level of each country every three weeks when it comes to managing international travel through a traffic light system.

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