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British Airways and Air Canada halt flights as U.S. warns travelers to avoid China — how airlines are responding to coronavirus

By Meera Jagannathan Published: Jan 29, 2020 3:28 p.m. ET











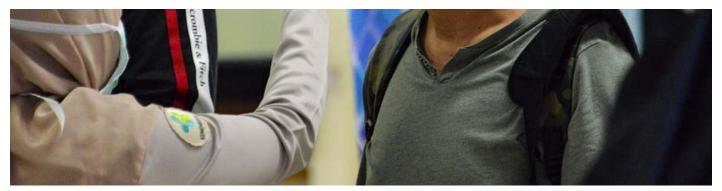
United, Delta and American Airlines are waiving some cancellation fees; some cruise lines are canceling trips



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Airports around the world are screening passengers for coronavirus.

U.S. government officials are warning Americans to avoid unnecessary travel to China as the country grapples with a deadly coronavirus outbreak. A growing number of airlines and cruise lines are responding to travel restrictions, and travelers who choose to go to China should be ready for the possibility that the Chinese government could curtail their movements with little warning, U.S. State Department officials said.

British Airways IAG, -0.07% said Wednesday it would temporarily suspend flights to and from Shanghai and Beijing and reassess the situation on Friday. Air Canada AC, +1.11% said it would halt all fights to Beijing and Shanghai from Jan. 30 to Feb. 29, after the Canadian government cautioned against non-essential travel.

United Airlines UAL, -0.51% suspended some flights between Feb. 1 and Feb. 8, citing a decline in demand for air travel to China. Cathay Pacific 293, -3.24%, Finnair FIA1S, -1.08%, Air France AF, -0.14% and Lufthansa LHA, +1.03% have all either suspended flights or reduced flights to and from China.

While officials' efforts to control the virus's spread will hopefully succeed, it's "too soon to say right now" whether that will be the case, Scott Weisenberg, a clinical associate professor of medicine and director of NYU gone Health's travel medicine program, told MarketWatch.

"Right now it's very early in the course for this, so it's unclear how contagious [this coronavirus] will be with routine public-health measures that China and other countries are applying," Weisenberg said.

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The new coronavirus was first detected in China's Wuhan City, a transportation and manufacturing hub, with cases later reported in the U.S. and several other countries including Thailand, Malaysia, Australia, Vietnam and Singapore. This strain of coronavirus had killed at least 132 people in China as of Wednesday, and Chinese officials said there had been 5,974 confirmed cases. Confirmed cases outside of China total 56, according to the World Health Organization, including at least five in the U.S.

What U.S. government agencies have told American travelers

The U.S. State Department urged travelers to "reconsider travel to China" in a travel advisory Monday, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised travelers to avoid all nonessential travel to China. China had earlier placed Wuhan and several surrounding cities under a travel ban that spanned air, rail and public transport.

Travelers should be aware that China's government could keep them from entering or leaving parts of Hubei province, which includes capital Wuhan, and "be prepared for travel restrictions to be put into effect with little or no advance notice," the department added. China has also suspended all overseas tour group and package flight/hotel vacation packages.

Also see: Mayor of Wuhan, epicenter of coronavirus outbreak, says 5 million people left the city before travel restrictions were imposed

Airlines are responding with flight suspensions and change-fee waivers

Officials are screening travelers for the virus at airports in five major U.S. cities to which flights from Wuhan had been routed, according to the Associated Press: New York's JFK Airport, Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta and San Francisco. The CDC is also increasing its staff at 20 U.S. airports to expand its screening efforts, the Washington Post reported Monday night; those airports receive 90% of air travelers from China, Vice President Mike Pence said.

Several airlines are accommodating travelers who want to reschedule China-related travel plans. American Airlines AAL, -0.37% said it would allow passengers who were traveling to, through or from Beijing or Shanghai and wanted to reschedule their trip to waive a change fee, given certain stipulations. The airline will also waive change fees for passengers who want to delay



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Delta Air Lines DAL, -1.44% said it would waive change fees for passengers traveling to, through or from Beijing or Shanghai who made a one-time change to a different flight. Travelers can also cancel their trip and apply the unused value to a future flight for up to a year.

United Airlines also issued travel waivers in response to the outbreak, including refunds for unflown flights to Wuhan, and is waiving change fees for certain flights related to the Beijing, Chengdu and Shanghai airports, with some restrictions. Hong Kong carrier Cathay Pacific CPCAY, +1.59% said it would waive rebooking, rerouting and refund charges for bookings to and from mainland China on certain conditions; German airline Lufthansa DLAKY, +0.52%, meanwhile, is allowing certain passengers free rebooking or refunds for their flights in and out of mainland China.

Some cruise lines are canceling trips

The cruise lines Costa Cruises, Royal Caribbean RCL, +1.00% and MSC Cruises have collectively canceled at least a dozen trips to and from China in response to the outbreak, according to a Monday roundup by the cruise-review site Cruise Critic, a subsidiary of TripAdvisor TRIP, -1.70%.

Norwegian Cruise Line NCLH, +1.85% is reportedly also denying boarding to people who have traveled from Wuhan or been there in the past month, as well as to people embarking from Chinese ports who display a temperature of at least 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit on a non-touch temperature screening, according to Cruise Critic.

A number of Chinese tourist sites have temporarily closed

Several top historical and tourist attractions in China, including the Forbidden City, a stretch of the Great Wall of China near Beijing, Shanghai Disney Resort DIS, -0.07%, the National Library of China and the National Museum of China, have closed as officials try to stem the spread of coronavirus, The Wall Street Journal reported.

McDonald's MCD, +1.92% had closed its stores in Wuhan as of Friday, the Journal reported, while Starbucks SBUX, -0.14% extended its earlier Wuhan closings to all Hubei province stores.



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U.S. travelers who still must travel to China should "remain alert" and discuss their travel plans with a health-care provider; avoid contact with people who are sick; stay away from dead or live animals, animal markets and animal products like raw meat; and frequently clean hands using soap and water (for at least 20 seconds) or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, the CDC said. Older travelers and those with underlying health problems could be at greater risk for disease, the agency added.

"Person-to-person spread is occurring in China," the CDC said. "The extent of person-to-person spread outside of China is unclear at this time."

The CDC also offered guidance for people who had traveled to Hubei Province in the past two weeks and had symptoms of cough, fever or difficulty breathing: Avoid contact with other people, call ahead to the doctor or emergency room and seek medical attention immediately, avoid travel, cover your nose and mouth area with a sleeve or tissue while sneezing or coughing, and practice frequent hand-washing.

Official recommendations could change at any time

There's a lot that public-health officials still don't know about this virus, and the CDC's recommendations are likely to evolve quickly, Weisenberg told MarketWatch.

With that said, travelers who do still travel to China should take some precautions, he said: "I would wash my hands regularly, and I would try to avoid people who seem to have fever or who are coughing — or at least stay a few feet away from them."

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