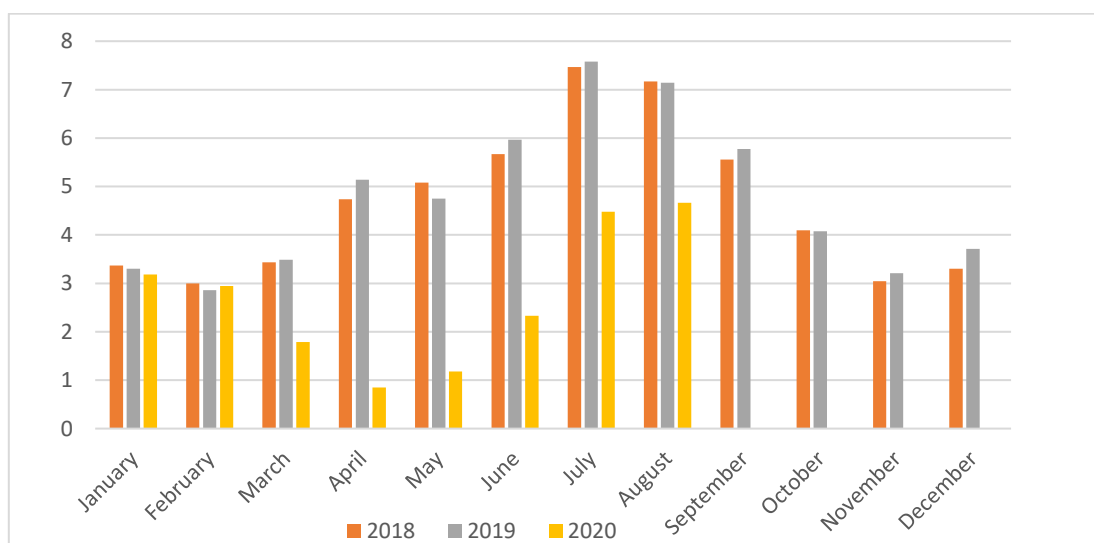


Measuring international travel during the Covid-19 pandemic

By Florian Le Gallo and Kevin Schmitt

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely disrupted international tourism. As foreign traveller surveys are no longer conducted, the Banque de France has brought into play innovative information sources, such as payment card data, to assess the scale of the shock. After a massive drop in receipts since March, European visitors returned to France during the two summer months.

Chart 1: France's international tourism receipts (in EUR billions)



Source: Banque de France.

The measurement of international travel has had to adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic

Covid-19 and related health protection measures have severely disrupted international travel. In this context, governments, tourism professionals and the general public expect official statistics to particularly enlighten them on the immediate consequences of the crisis for the sector – international tourism receipts (travel exports) accounted for 22% of France's

services exports in 2019 – as well as on the first indications of recovery. However, the lockdown has stretched the usual statistical production methods to their limits, in particular due to the cessation of surveys of international travellers.

Banque de France travel statistics

The Banque de France is responsible for measuring France's travel receipts and expenditure as part of its duty to compile balance of payments for France. Travel "receipts" (or exports) cover goods and services purchased by foreigners visiting France, including those acquired during day trips (border crossers, transit passengers, etc.). Conversely, travel "expenditure" (or imports) covers purchases made by French residents during their trips abroad.

Travel receipt statistical production relies primarily on the EVE (*Enquête auprès des Visiteurs Étrangers*) foreign visitors survey, which is carried out at the country's points of exit (airports, harbours, train and bus stations, motorway rest areas, etc.) and questions a sample of non-resident visitors on the nature of their stay in France (spending, duration, types of accommodation, etc.). The findings are combined with information on exit flows from France (air, sea, rail or road passenger flows) to establish travel statistics for France that comply with the IMF's international methodology and with European standards (Eurostat and ECB).

Statistical production during Covid-19

While lockdown put an end to direct questioning of foreign visitors, the public health measures introduced when it was lifted mean that normal survey conditions have not been restored. The Banque de France has therefore mobilised innovative data sources, such as payment cards and mobile networks, to ensure statistical production continues.

Payment card data gathered from banking institutions are traditionally used as auxiliary sources or for advanced estimates. Their collection provides monthly totals for French card transactions abroad, and for foreign card transactions in France that are then fully broken down on the basis of the card's country of origin. Although these amounts do not correspond exactly to tourism receipts (due to French residents using foreign cards, tourists spending cash withdrawn in their country of origin, etc.) and do not provide a breakdown of receipts by type (accommodation, restaurants, etc.), they do allow us to estimate developments on a country-by-country basis. The differences between the card-based estimates and the consolidated findings of the EVE survey are therefore limited, averaging 2% over recent years. Card data have thus been widely used since the beginning of the crisis to estimate non-resident visitor spending in France by country of origin.

Mobile network data, processed as part of a partnership with a national operator, allow us to determine the number of nights spent by foreign visitors in France. The country of origin is established through the nationality of the identified SIM cards, with similar difficulties arising to those encountered using payment card data (residents with SIM cards from another country, for example). These data quickly become available after the end of each month and are thus a valuable tool for monitoring international tourist traffic.

Lastly, regular contacts between central banks and national statistical institutes in the European Union, which have been greatly enhanced since lockdown began, have facilitated the sharing of best practices and data in order to corroborate international visitor "mirror

data". For example, receipts from German residents visiting France measured by the Banque de France should match German residents' expenditure in France measured by the Bundesbank.

Table 1: Statistical production sources for France's international tourism receipts

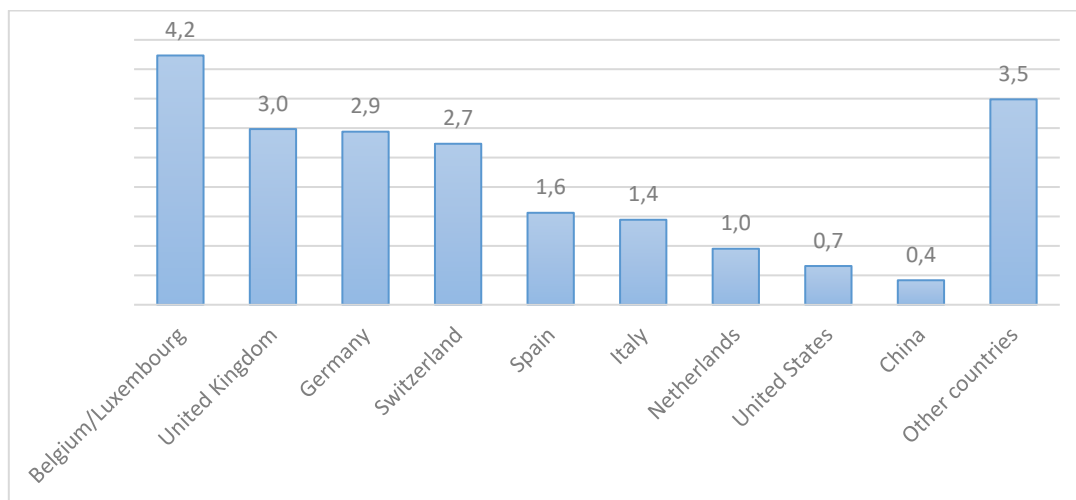
	Main sources	Auxiliary sources
Normal periods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EVE surveys carried out at the country's points of exit (airports, harbours, train, stations, motorway rest areas, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Payment card data Mobile network data Mirror data (European countries)
Lockdown and Covid-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Payment card data Mirror data (European countries) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mobile network data

After the initial shock, travel receipts are starting to recover thanks to European visitors

The innovative sources mobilised - card payment, mobile network and mirror data - allow us to make an initial assessment of international tourism in France in 2020.

Although increased receipts from France's neighbouring countries offset losses due to fewer Chinese visitors in January and February, the crisis had a clear impact from March onwards, halving receipts in comparison with 2019. In April, there was an unprecedented drop in travel receipts of around 83% compared with April 2019, while there continued to be certain residual receipts from non-residents still present in France (international students, seconded workers, patients receiving medical care, second-home owners, business travellers, etc.). The lifting of the lockdown in May and the reopening of borders in Europe brought the first signs of a resumption of international travel.

In total, from January to August 2020, cumulative travel receipts amounted to EUR 21.4 billion (see Chart 2), down 47% against the same prior-year period.

Chart 2: Travel receipts by origin (cumulative January-August 2020 total, in EUR billions)

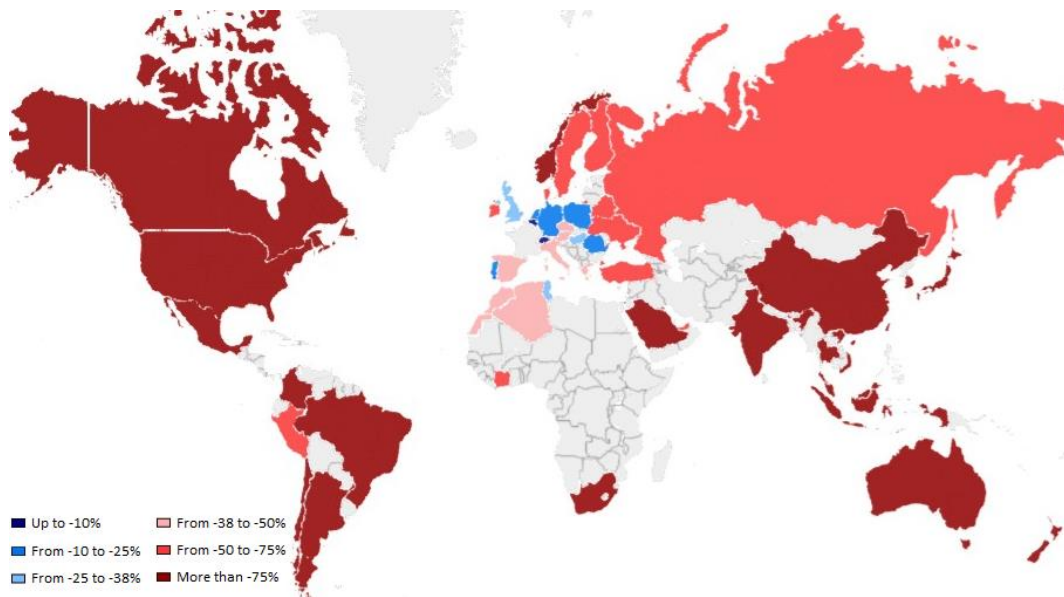
Source: Banque de France.

Assessment of the summer season in France

The recovery seen since May has mainly been driven by European visitors (from the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Germany, Benelux, Spain, Italy and Portugal), who initially arrived in limited numbers in May and June, but then in markedly greater numbers during the summer period of July and August. However, since the crisis began, visitors from distant countries, especially those from the main non-European markets such as the United States, China and Japan, have remained rare.

Travel receipts for July and August 2020 were estimated at EUR 9.1 billion, down 38% on the same period in 2019. The decline in receipts from France's neighbouring European countries is less pronounced at 22%. Furthermore, while visitors from countries close to France accounted for 69% of total receipts for July and August 2019, this proportion rose to 86% during the same period in 2020. Summer 2020 receipts even came close to those of summer 2019 for certain countries of origin (see map): visitors from the Benelux countries spent EUR 2.6 billion in France in July and August 2020, down 9% from 2019. Summer spending by British visitors amounted to EUR 1.4 billion, down 29%, followed closely by visitors from Germany (EUR 1.3 billion, down 21%) and Switzerland (EUR 1.1 billion, down only 6% compared to the previous summer). Conversely, receipts originating from more distant countries, particularly China and the United States, dropped by 80-90% for each of the months from April to August 2020, and fell from 10% of total receipts for July and August 2019 to 3% for the same period in 2020.

Map: Change in travel receipts from July-August 2019 to July-August 2020 (%)



Source: Banque de France.

Note: Only countries whose share exceeds 0.1% of total receipts for July-August 2019 are shown; countries for which the change is more favourable than France's average loss of 38% are shown in blue; countries for which the change is less favourable are shown in red.