

# The Telegraph

## Transatlantic COVID-19 travel rules are totally crazy – and the international elite know it

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Everyone has made huge sacrifices over the past 15 months. So nobody pretends that those people and airlines clamouring to rescind Covid-19 transatlantic travel restrictions are uniquely deserving of attention or sympathy. Border control and screening, as we learnt the hard way, are potentially powerful public health tools in a pandemic.

Yet it's now clear that current travel rules between the US and UK make little sense in a world of mass vaccinations. The apparent can-kicking until September on revising restrictions that separate families and deter business across the Atlantic is therefore infuriating. Especially so, because as elites exempting themselves from the rules shows, they know most of these restrictions are nonsense.

Since March 2020, the US has prohibited entry for those travelling from the UK, adding us to a list now including the Schengen EU, Iran, China, South Africa, Brazil and India. Conveniently, US citizens, permanent US residents, spouses of Americans, children of Americans, and student visa holders, are exempt from these rules, only requiring a negative test result up to three days prior to US entry. Apparently, the virus is selective in its transmission risk – affecting Europeans and Indians more than Yanks. “America First” indeed.

Non-immigrant working visa holders in the US are hard hit by this nationalism. If Britons on H-1B visas, for example, visit home, we cannot currently return stateside except if we obtain a “national interest exemption”. None of these rules have changed despite 57pc of America's adult population, and most adult Britons, now having been double-jabbed.

We are therefore left with the absurd spectacle of a porous US border for Americans arriving from high prevalence Colombia or unvaccinated parts of Africa. Yet Britons who pay taxes, live, and have valid high-skilled visas in the US cannot re-enter after visiting the vaccine-rich UK, but can return following a two-week jaunt to Mexico. How does that make sense?

Not that the UK's rules are much better. The English traffic-light system might bring with it the veneer of a regime reflecting country-specific Covid-19 risks, but, as the airlines have said, the designations and requirements seem pretty arbitrary here too.

The US, for example, finds itself on England's “amber list,” meaning travellers arriving from there must “quarantine at home or in the place you are staying for 10 days”, or five days if they

shell out on a private Covid-19 test with a negative result. High-quality vaccines, again, have been available to any adult in the US since mid-April, yet no carve-out exists for those travelling from the States already double-dosed.

That means vaccinated travellers still require a negative test result before quarantining, having to search American PCR testing sites for one recognised in the UK. An inconclusive result or a false positive kills travel plans stone dead. At every stage, hurdles and uncertainties make travelling more difficult, expensive, or time-consuming, deterring family reunions and killing economic activity.

This would perhaps make sense if the US was an unvaccinated Covid hotbed. But new US daily cases stood at just 3.5 per 100,000 earlier this week, compared with the UK's 26. What level would lead to America making the "green list", removing the mandatory 10-day quarantine? That, too, is as clear as mud. Israel is "green" with 2.2 new cases per 100,000 people per day right now, but Canada is "amber" with just 1.7, as are Italy (1.1) and Germany (0.7).

These UK rules, then, have little public health coherence. Exemptions also allow travellers to escape quarantine for time working in industries from elite football to bus driving. Implicitly, they act as if someone vaccinated entering the UK from the US to visit family is a higher Covid-19 transmission risk than someone unvaccinated arriving from Spain and working on buses every day.

The UK Government would argue that it must balance Covid risks with economic concerns. That chimes with the recent corporatist decision to allow exemptions to quarantine rules for businesspeople who show that travel to the UK for work will preserve existing businesses with more than 500 staff.

But this economic argument makes no sense more generally. By failing to recognise vaccinations, current rules deter travel among people who really could engage in low-risk business. That not only hits the airline and travel sectors needlessly, but brings incalculable damage in relationships not made, contracts not signed, or tourism not pursued.

Governments should not determine for us what's important activity and what's not. The subjective value of reuniting with family across borders should not be assumed less worthy than bus travel because the latter is measured in GDP. And yet, current restrictions, by raising the cost of travel, introducing uncertainty, or, on the US side, preventing entry entirely, lead to important life events being missed and fully vaccinated lovers being separated.

Throughout this pandemic, politicians and public health officials have adjusted guidance or rules too slowly as circumstances change. Travel is now "exhibit A" of this tardiness. The craziness of double-vaccinated people with negative test results quarantining for 10 days when arriving in Britain from low-prevalence America is perhaps juxtaposed best by observing how the Government quickly exempted UEFA VIPs from quarantine rules for the European Championships.

It showed politicians know these rules are bankrupt and superfluous when most people are vaccinated. Matt Hancock, the former health secretary, meekly defended them by saying it was "not fair" to offer freedoms to travellers when some Britons hadn't had the opportunity to be vaccinated.

In that explanation was an admission: even as they exempt dignitaries or themselves for football or international summits, our governments are perfectly content for disruption in our lives to continue, even when they know it is unnecessary.

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