

Israel to Open Country to Tourists Again. But There's a Catch

Israeli leaders on Thursday recommended reopening the country to fully vaccinated tourists beginning on Nov. 1, a year and a half after closing its borders to most foreign visitors due to the global coronavirus pandemic.

The decision, which still requires formal government approval, comes as Israel emerges from a fourth wave of coronavirus infections. Israel in July began an aggressive booster shot campaign, offering a third dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to virtually anyone over the age of 16. That campaign appears to have brought the outbreak under control.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's office said that foreigners who were fully vaccinated less than six months ago, or who have received a booster shot more recently, will be eligible to enter the country. People who recovered from COVID-19 less than six months ago may also visit.

The rules recognize most internationally recognized vaccines, including Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, AstraZeneca, Sinovac and Sinopharm—but not Russia's Sputnik. Bennett's office said people coming from "red" countries with high outbreaks would not be permitted, while officials will monitor new variants, including a strain identified in Israel this week.

The decision could give a boost to the struggling tourism industry, which has been hit hard by the lack of tourists. It comes just ahead of the busy Christmas season, when tens of thousands of foreigners visit holy sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, in the occupied West Bank.

Senior Cabinet ministers, along with health, tourism, economic and security experts, took part in Thursday's decision.

Some details, including whether foreigners will have to be tested or undergo quarantine upon arrival, were not immediately announced.

Throughout the closure, Israel has allowed some foreigners to visit, including people with close relatives in the country and people coming for work or study. It began allowing organized tour groups in September. Those visitors must take coronavirus tests before their incoming flights, upon arrival and before they fly out of the country. {eo}

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