Accelerating Travel & Tourism Recovery

Global Evidence from Four Decades of Crises

Executive Summary

In partnership with:

MAY 2026

Travel & Tourism at a Glance

USD 11.6TN	366MN	9.8% / 1-in-9
GDP contribution (2025)	Jobs supported (2025)	Of global economy / Of jobs

Central Policy Question

"Does tourism reliably recover from crisis, and what determines the speed and strength of that recovery?"

The evidence, drawn from 100 significant crisis episodes spanning four decades produces an unequivocal answer: tourism is structurally resilient and recovery is determined primarily by the quality and speed of the policy response.

The question for ministers and investors is not whether tourism will recover, but how quickly they will choose to enable it.

Building on:

WTTC / Global Rescue - Crisis Readiness Report (2019)

This report extends the foundational framework of the 2019 WTTC/Global Rescue Crisis Readiness Report (https://researchhub.wttc.org/product/crisis-readiness), widening the evidence base to four decades, with new crisis categories and updated recovery benchmarks; shifting the lens from crisis preparedness to crisis recovery, with a new resilience framework and recommendations for policymakers.

The full report provides detailed case studies tracing the specific policy decisions, market shifts, and structural investments that drove recovery, documenting how, in the majority of cases, the disruption itself became the catalyst for a stronger, more diversified, and more resilient Travel & Tourism sector than existed before the crisis.

Published in May 2026 against a backdrop of active geopolitical risk in the Middle East and Gulf region, with global aviation networks and intercontinental hubs directly affected. The lessons learnt from previous crises have never been more urgent.

Key Findings

> “Four decades of global evidence show that no major destination has experienced permanent collapse due to a crisis; recovery is the norm, and in most cases, the sector emerges stronger than before.”

1

Recovery is universal; timelines are manageable with good policy responses

Recovery time is determined not only by the severity of the shock but primarily by the quality and speed of the policy response. No crisis has produced permanent structural tourism collapse in destinations with a stable political environment.

2

Post-crisis tourism nearly always exceeds pre-crisis baselines

In most documented cases after the crisis ended, the destinations surpassed their pre-crisis peak. For example, Tunisia saw a record 8.3 mn arrivals in 2018, three years after the near-fatal 2015 attacks; Nepal achieved record arrivals by 2017, two years after the earthquake.

3

COVID-19 confirmed sector resilience at scale

Despite a severe 72% collapse in global arrivals in 2020, the sector recovered to 1.47 bn international arrivals in 2024, with international visitor spending recovered to 98.3% of 2019 levels in real terms.

Recovery Timelines by Crisis Type

Duration from peak impact to at least 90% of the previous year's arrivals baseline

Crisis Category	Recovery Time	Key Drivers
Natural disaster	**1 month –7 years**	Infrastructure rebuild + 'rest of destination' messaging
Terrorism — single events / sustained or multiple events	**2 months –4 years**	Security investment + aggressive marketing / source-market diversification + product shift
Health crisis — regional	**10–35 months**	Lifting of travel bans + vaccine rollout
Political upheaval	**10-45 months**	Political stabilisation + security guarantees
Economic crisis / recession	**1-2 years**	Exchange-rate depreciation + demand rebound
Health crisis / pandemic — Global	**3-4 years**	Vaccine rollout + pent-up demand release

Sources: WTTC/Oxford Economics Economic Impact Research; UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer.

Destinations Build Back Stronger

Case evidence: post-crisis tourism usually exceeds pre-crisis baselines

Nepal — 2015 earthquake

Peak Impact	Recovery Time	Outcome
-32% arrivals yoy -32% intl visitor spend	2017–2018 (2 years)	Record intl arrivals by 2017 Record intl visitor spend: $760mn

Global — 2008 financial crisis

Peak Impact	Recovery Time	Outcome
-3.4% arrivals yoy (2009) -5.4% intl visitor spend (2009)	2010 (1-2 years)	Record intl arrivals in 2010 Record intl visitor spend: $1.35tn

Thailand / Phuket — 2004 tsunami

Peak Impact	Recovery Time	Outcome
-53% arrivals yoy in affected provinces	End of 2006 (1.5-2 years)	Rebuilt to higher standards Stronger destination

Tunisia — 2015 terrorism attacks

Peak Impact	Recovery Time	Outcome
-25% arrivals yoy -32% intl visitor spend	2018 (3 years)	Record 8.3mn arrivals Market mix transformed (Russian +420%, Algerian +184%)

Global — COVID-19 (2020-2021)

Peak Impact	Recovery Time	Outcome
-72% arrivals yoy (in 2020)	2024 (4 years)	1.47 bn arrivals (2024) Intl arrivals & visitor spend exceeded 2019 levels by 2025

Sources: WTTC/Oxford Economics Economic Impact Research; UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer; World Bank/United Nations Development Programme.

A Tourism Resilience Framework for Recovery

Four Pillars: Destinations that act decisively across all four pillars recover faster and emerge more competitively.

Demand Confidence

Perception, Safety, and Trust

Tourism is perception-sensitive and recovery is confidence-led. Restore trust and safety via visible security actions, credible communications, travel-trade reassurance, and rapid normalisation of advisories.

Key action: Narrative control. Governments that actively shape their own narrative achieve faster recovery than those reacting to media cycles. Strategic communications, PR campaigns, and trade-partner engagement are core resilience tools.

Supply Continuity

SME Liquidity, Workforce Retention, Market Access

Recovery stalls if businesses fail during the trough, and aviation contraction often precedes demand collapse. **SMEs, the hospitality workforce, and air connectivity are system-critical assets** and so need to be sustained.

Key action: Provide emergency liquidity for SMEs and ensure retention of aviation routes: these are strategic priorities, not optional support measures.

Institutional Response

Speed, Decisiveness, Coordination

The highest-leverage determinant of recovery speed is the speed and decisiveness of the public sector's response. Governments must act as active narrative managers, not passive observers. Tourism investment during the crisis trough generates the highest return. Destinations that commit resources at peak impact recover faster and more completely.

Key action: Act fast. Pre-agreed crisis coordination mechanisms, rapid decision cycles, and credible monitoring/data systems are essential.

Structural Adaptation

Diversification, Building Back Better

Source market and product concentration are the single most consistent amplifiers of crisis impact.

The strongest destinations use disruption to diversify markets and products, upgrade standards and strengthen destination systems.

Key action: Include market diversification across domestic, regional and long-haul segments into resilience strategies. This is the most durable structural investment a destination can make in its own resilience.

Implications for Policymakers and Investors

Five evidence-based principles for ministers, policymakers, and investors, derived from four decades of crisis and recovery data

Invest countercyclically

Tourism investment during a crisis trough, not after recovery has begun, is the highest-return intervention available. Destinations that recovered fastest deployed emergency investment in security, marketing, and SME liquidity within weeks of peak impact. Funds committed immediately generate arrivals at scale during the rebound.

Protect SMEs as the resilience backbone

The sector is structurally dependent on SMEs, which absorb the majority of visitor spending, and are first to fail when cash reserves are exhausted within weeks. **Provide emergency liquidity, payroll support, and deferred tax obligations to preserve the supply infrastructure** that demand returns to.

Maintain air connectivity as a strategic asset

Airlift is the infrastructure of demand recovery. Improve aviation route retention via airport fee waivers, minimum revenue guarantees, and fast-track frameworks as a strategic priority. As well as **route access, airspace rerouting, hub-dependency risk, and global transit connectivity should all be addressed at the policy level.**

Avoid overreaction in messaging and policy

The most consistently documented amplifier of tourism crises is government and media overreaction: broad travel advisories, blanket entry restrictions, and communications that lead with safety concerns rather than operational normality. **Policy overreaction is economically costly** and empirically unjustified.

Use disruption to build forward

In all episodes documented in the full report where post-crisis recovery could be analysed, the destination surpassed its pre-crisis peak. **Crisis periods create conditions for product upgrading, market diversification, and governance reform** that are politically difficult during normal operations. Governments and investors should seize the strategic value of recovery.

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AUTHORS AND EDITORS

Ibrahim Osta
Senior Economic Growth Director
& Global Tourism Lead
Chemonics International
Professor of Management (Adj),
George Washington University School of Business

Christopher Imbsen
Vice President Policy
World Travel & Tourism Council

Nejc Jus
Director of Research
World Travel & Tourism Council

Jonathan Mitcham
Senior Research Analyst
World Travel & Tourism Council

PHOTOS

Cover: EvaL Miko | Shutterstock

DESIGN

Luis Medina
Senior Digital Content & Creative Manager
World Travel & Tourism Council

Simon West
Designer
World Travel & Tourism Council

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