

To Many Travelers, 2020 Was the Summer of 1965

Driving over flying. Domestic destinations. Though the conditions and causes were different, certain midcentury travel preferences experienced a revival this year.

By Sarah Firshein

Sept. 4, 2020 Updated 10:35 a.m. ET

Last year, Amanda Morgan watched a production of “My Fair Lady” at the Sydney Opera House, drove from Queenstown to Christchurch on New Zealand’s South Island, roamed through lavender fields in Provence and spent a week in Mykonos. She celebrated Christmas in Amsterdam and New Year’s Eve in Paris.

When the coronavirus struck the United States, Ms. Morgan, 40, canceled this year’s big trip, which would have taken her to Jordan and Egypt in early May. She spent her vacation neither floating in the Dead Sea nor wandering around the archaeological site of Petra, but kayaking and watching cotton-candy sunsets at the Inns of Aurora, a resort in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York.

“If I can see something truly beautiful four hours away — as opposed to halfway across the world — then I’m fortunate to be able to have that opportunity,” said Ms. Morgan, who lives in New York City and works in the financial services industry.

This summer, most vacationers followed Ms. Morgan’s playbook. She drove. She spent much of her time outside. And she eschewed splashy international experiences for humbler ones close to home.



Amanda Morgan in front of Cayuga Lake in May.
Amanda Morgan

If that sounds quaint, if not an outright throwback, it is. Certain midcentury preferences — like driving over flying and a focus on domestic exploration — experienced a revival that made summer travel feel like 1965, not 2019.

The conditions and causes were different because of this pandemic, but the trend lines this summer were

clear: What's new is old is new again — just add Google Maps, face masks and curbside pickup.

'Hit the road to vacation fun'

When Ms. Morgan left her Manhattan apartment in May, she steered her rental car northbound on Interstate-81.

More than 50 years ago, that highway was instrumental in turning upstate New York into an easy-to-reach getaway for city residents. As a 1969 Times article put it, “there can no longer be any excuse — as there was years ago — that poor transportation was balking a holiday in the Finger Lakes playground.”

Vacations — as in, traveling for leisure — weren't common for most Americans until the economic boom years following World War II, when incomes rose and paid time off became more widespread.

The popularity and affordability of cars were instrumental in the cultural shift. From 1945 to 1965, the number of private motor vehicle registrations almost tripled, from about 26 million to nearly 75 million, according to Federal Highway Administration data.



The automobile played a significant role in the explosive popularity of leisure travel in the United States after World War II. H. Armstrong Roberts/ClassicStock, via Getty Images

In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, as the Interstate Highway System developed, driving became the norm for family trips. Some 85 percent of Americans vacationed by car in 1963 — or “hit the road to vacation fun,” as the trend was described in a Times article that year. In turn, road trips became a cultural rite of passage for American families.

“Gas stations offered maps highlighting potential destinations. Automobile companies produced all sorts of marketing materials telling parents how to travel,” said Eric G. E. Zuelow, a professor of history at the

University of New England and author of “A History of Modern Tourism.”

This year, Jessica Nabongo, 36, the founder of the travel website The Catch Me If You Can, began a series of drive-and-fly road trips throughout the Lower 48. She hit New England earlier this summer and will tackle California, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona and Utah this month. Virus tests precede each leg.

Ms. Nabongo, who is Black, said one of her concerns besides the coronavirus was confronting anti-Black racism in parts of the country, a country now engaged in a widespread reckoning over race. Yet she has always found joy in traveling by car, which she believes “allows you to explore deeply and on your own time.”

“When you fly, you just get where you want to go and you don’t think at all about what you’re flying over,” said Anthony Harkins, a Western Kentucky University history professor who studies the cultural implications of air travel and transportation. “Driving allows the possibility of better understanding the country — its geography, its culture — and historically it has helped us understand what it means to be an American.”



Jessica Nabongo, at the headquarters of Ben & Jerry's Homemade ice cream in Vermont.
Jessica Nabongo

Ms. Nabongo wasn't the only one on the road. One AAA forecast released in June put summer numbers at nearly 700 million road trips (a decrease of only 3 percent from last year) with driving accounting for 97 percent of all travel. Berkshire Hathaway Travel Protection launched its first-ever road-trip travel insurance. Even New Yorkers bought cars.

From March on, gas prices have been significantly lower per gallon than last year, according to the federal Energy Information Administration, and many travel operators have leaned into the road trip's resurgence.

A partnership between the travel company Black Tomato and Auberge Resorts Collection produced four new drives that visit regions like New England and California wine country; a Mercedes-Benz is available to borrow. Relais & Châteaux, an association of luxury hotels and restaurants, added three new United States road trips to its decades-old “Routes du Bonheur,” or “roads of happiness,” program.



Travel operators have leaned hard into the road trip's resurgence; some offered driving itineraries of California's Napa Valley and other tourist regions. Josh Haner/The New York Times

But the pandemic may belie parts of the glamorous, carefree vintage snapshot — top down, head scarf tied, sunglasses positioned just so. Ms. Morgan packed masks, gloves and sanitizer. On her drive up, she stopped only for drive-through coffee and the bathroom.

“So much of what made a road trip meaningful is serendipitous and unexpected, like chatting with someone next to you at a diner,” said Andrew Wood, a San Jose State University communication studies professor who specializes in Americana. “If we’re all wearing our masks and otherwise social distancing, we’re also cultural distancing.”

‘The centrality of tourism is deeply rooted in us’

During the “golden age of road trips,” as Richard Ratay, author of “Don’t Make Me Pull Over! An Informal History of the Family Road Trip,” described the 50s, 60s and 70s, previously sleepy backwaters near cities transformed into tourist destinations.

“Many people sought to escape the heat and stench of Eastern cities during the summer,” said Peter Liebhold, a curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. “Beaches, lakes, amusement parks and the mountains were all popular destinations.”



A scene from the 1960s of the Jolly House Motel & Resort in the Catskills. The region promised fresh air, sunlight and a change of scenery to vacationing urban dwellers. Aladdin Color Inc, via Getty Images

The pandemic, with its travel restrictions at home and abroad, has forced travelers to look again to their own backyards. From April to June, in three consecutive monthly surveys of about 1,000 respondents, Skift Research found that the top choice for a “first trip,” selected by about 40 percent of respondents, has been consistent since April: driving and staying within 100 miles of home.

But the lure of travel persists.

“We believe we must travel, and we have internalized that need,” Dr. Zuelow said. “The centrality of tourism is deeply rooted in us as modern people because we tie a lot of our identity to the places we go. So when there’s a moment of crisis, we still want to travel, but we fall back on what’s realistic at the time.”

When considering where to go in May, Ms. Morgan researched drive-to regions that promised an escape from what she called her “concrete box” in Manhattan.

“After being in an apartment for the better part of three months, I was searching for the opportunity to be in nature and see such a beautiful setting,” she said.



In August, the Hudson Valley's Mohonk Mountain House had one of its most successful sales weeks in its 151-year history. Credit

Summer vacationers across the country flocked to old-is-new destinations that promised fresh air and sunlight: Angelenos to Palm Springs or Santa Barbara, Chicagoans to the Great Lakes, Washingtonians to Dewey Beach, Del., and New Yorkers to upstate, like the Finger Lakes, the Adirondacks and the Catskills.

“After decades of hearing ‘the Catskills died,’ there has been a renaissance,” said the photographer Marisa Scheinfeld, who has documented the region’s history in the book “The Borscht Belt.” “Covid has added fuel to the growing fire because people are not flying to Paris. They’re going to proximally close places from home.”

As of mid-August, the bed tax collection — also referred to as a “tourist tax” — was up 20 percent this year, compared to last year, according to the Sullivan Catskills Visitors Association.

In the Hudson Valley, Mohonk Mountain House had one of its most successful sales weeks in its 151-year history in August; 87 percent of the resort’s guests this summer arrived from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Most summer visitors at High Peaks Resort, in the Adirondacks, also drove from within the Tristate Area; the resort was almost fully booked in July and August. Finger Lakes Premier Properties, a vacation-rental company, is up 10 percent in bookings compared to 2019; August, in particular, was up more than 40 percent.

‘Satisfactions of an Out-of-Doors Vacation’

“Thousands of Americans each year are discovering the pleasures of camping in the open at vacation time with a minimum of physical trappings,” a 1959 Times article headlined “Satisfactions of an Out-of-Doors Vacation” began. “Thus they join the solid ranks of veteran campers who already know its values.”

Much like station wagons and quirky roadside attractions, camping was an essential part of what comprised the typical American family vacation after World War II. At the time, it was considered an affordable, reliable choice.



Outdoor activities like camping and grilling offer a sense of control, then and now. Photo Media/ClassicStock, via Getty Images

“By being able to bring along their own shelter and gear, families could maintain a degree of control over their accommodations,” said Mr. Ratay, the road-trip expert. “I think that idea of control is also why we’re seeing a return of camping in the age of Covid-19.”

More than 60 percent of the 100,000 campsites listed on the online marketplace Campspot saw 25 percent more bookings this July, compared to last July. R.V. rentals and Airstream sales were up; camper vans were “in” again. LOGE, an outdoorsy hospitality company was nearly sold out across all its five properties over Fourth of July weekend. Collective Retreats, a glamping company, also saw strong numbers; bookings for the locations in Wimberly, Texas, and Vail, Colo., were up 40 percent from last year.

Then there’s the National Park System.

“A trip to Europe in 1968 was a pretty big deal — it gave you some serious social cachet and cultural capital,” Dr. Zuelow said. “But even those who could afford to travel overseas were still supposed to go see the National Parks — they represented a shrine of American-ness.”

Visitation to national parks surged in the 50s, 60s and 70s. Once again, the system — which offers ample open space and privacy — experienced high demand this summer, with some parks and seashores seeing higher numbers in July and August than those months last year. Cabins and campgrounds at Yellowstone National Park, which began a limited reopening in June, were sold out for the summer and saw double-digit increases in early bookings for next summer, compared to last year’s early bookings, according to Xanterra Travel Collection, which operates the park.



Visitors at the Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone National Park, circa 1965. Archive Photos, via Getty Images

Last month, Jeff Miller, 41, rented an R.V. and drove with his girlfriend from Los Angeles to Zion National Park and several other national parks.

“It had been so long since I had been on a hiking and outdoors trip, and it felt so great to be doing something that still felt safe,” said Mr. Miller, 41, the frontman for the band Black Crystal Wolf Kids. “I had forgotten how much I love the beauty of the United States.”

Similarly, after being cooped up for months, Ms. Morgan “felt human again” simply by catching sight of Cayuga Lake.

“The goal was to feel safe but not wear a mask 24/7 on vacation — and the best way to do that was creating a trip where we could do creative things outdoors,” she said.

‘The Motel: Here to Stay’

With reliable cleanliness and security, motels rose in popularity in the 1950s, when the Holiday Inn franchise became an alternative to the independent tourist cabins that were considered dodgy and inconsistent.

“Chain motels were predictable, family oriented and easy to find, and they set motorists’ minds at ease,” said Roger White, the road transportation curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

In a 1957 Times article entitled “The Motel: Here to Stay,” motels were described as “like a family room at home, without housework. Maybe, even, a little luxurious; though, because of the privacy, not disturbing.” The Times reported in 1963 that Howard Johnson’s — described as “one of the most familiar landmarks in the eastern half of the United States” — was set to expand nationwide. In a campaign speech in Pittsburgh in 2012, President Obama painted a nostalgic picture of his childhood vacations: “We’d rent a car — not that often — and stay at Howard Johnson’s. It didn’t matter how big the pool was, if there was a pool I’d jump in. I was 11 years old and I was excited just to go to the vending machine and get the ice bucket and get the ice.”

Data from the Red Roof hotel chain suggests a demand for exterior-corridor properties in the Covid-19 era. Sixty-eight percent of all Red Roofs in the United States have an exterior entrance; in April, May and June, occupancy for those properties was 14 percent higher than interior-only hotels.



With reliable cleanliness and security, motels rose in popularity in the 1950s. Francis Miller/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images

“The classic motor-court-style hotel pairs perfectly with travelers looking for a low-contact — but still a memorable — experience,” said Tenaya Hills, the design director at Bunkhouse Group, an Austin-based hospitality group. “In the time of Covid, the motel model is light touch — you’re not spending time in a lobby and fresh air is just outside your hotel room.”

Whereas motels in the midcentury were meant as a mere place to sleep, in the last few years, a crop of independent motels have opened with the opposite goal: to keep guests on-site as long as possible. Some, like Tourists, in the Berkshires, are revamps of dated midcentury motels with buzzy restaurants and of-the-moment wellness activities. Their retro panache was Instagram catnip before the pandemic; now, operators say, exterior corridors have been just as much of a draw.

“People are thrilled to access their rooms without having to push a button or try to remain socially distant in an elevator,” said Jud Hawk, the general manager at Aspen Meadows Resort, in Colorado, where guest room buildings have no interior hallways or elevators.

‘For me, travel means to leave your home’

Air travel’s high cost made it largely inaccessible to most American vacationers until the late 70s. Then Congress passed the Airline Deregulation Act, a watershed law that made commercial flights cheaper and more plentiful. A Times article published in 1978 proclaimed the Fourth of July holiday “the busiest travel period in American aviation history.”

“Suddenly, families who were never previously able to afford to fly to their vacations were able to afford it. That made it possible to go to much more distant destinations,” Mr. Ratay said.

United States airlines carried more than 205 million passengers in 1975, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. That number ballooned to nearly 382 million a decade later and has risen steadily since (save for a few small dips, including in 2001), culminating in more than 926 million last year. Also last year, a record 93 million Americans traveled abroad.

This summer, by contrast, was about what Ms. Nabongo called “slower, more local travel.” No longer, she said, will “go big or go home” or “do it for the ‘gram” be the focus. That’s the benefit, perhaps, to travel’s retrograde: more attainable expectations, less pressure, more mindfulness in the moment.

“For me, travel means to leave your home — travel isn’t necessarily how far you can get from your home,” Ms. Nabongo said.

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