

# What effect is Donald Trump really having on American tourism?

*Initially conflicting reports now seem to be in agreement*  
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WHEN Donald Trump was inaugurated in January, he wasted no time in trying to bar people from certain Muslim-majority countries entering America. He swiftly, too, promised to make good on his pledge to build a wall along the Mexican border. The nation's travel industry shuddered. It did not feel like the actions of a man keen to woo visitors from abroad.

The predicted "Trump slump" quickly appeared to materialize. Within months, several online travel firms, including Kayak and Hopper, reported that fewer people were searching for flights to America. That seemed plausible. The country was getting terrible press abroad and the firms that sell flights online seemed the best placed to monitor demand for travel in real time. Come July, however, the U.S. Travel Association revealed that everything was rosy. Instead of a Trump slump, the country was in fact enjoying a Trump bump. The organization's Travel Trends Index, which tracks flight and hotel bookings, plane boarding and other data, suggested that the number of international visitors had grown for the 13th straight month in May. Previously gloomy commentators (including this one) were left to wonder how they had got it so wrong.

In fact, they had not. On September 5th, the U.S. Travel Association revised its July numbers following the inclusion of new data sources. The amended results are more in line with the naysayers. The association has gone from trumpeting the "astounding resilience" of the American travel market to lamenting the "major storm clouds" hovering over it. Rather than unbroken growth, it now says that visitor numbers dropped in four of the first seven months of 2017 compared with the year before. Its index declined most in February and March, just as the furor over Mr. Trump's attempted travel ban was at its height. There was better news in April, which registered a healthy increase in visitors, but that was mostly because the Easter holiday fell during that month. The association's figures are now more in line with official data released last month, which cover the quarter up to March, and which show a 4.2% year-on-year drop in international arrivals, with travel from Europe particularly depressed.

The U.S. Travel Association says that there are still levers the president can pull to woo foreigners, such as backing "Brand USA", the country's tourism marketing organization, and trumpeting open-skies agreements and the visa-waiver program, which allows certain nationalities to enter the country without first obtaining a visa. That would no doubt help. But up until now the administration's actions have tended to be more hindrance than help. The laptop ban was a good example. Leaving aside its security merits, the implementation was handled clumsily. Not only was there almost daily flip-flopping on whether it would be extended to flights from Europe and perhaps the world but, as one source recently told Gulliver, even the TSA—the body on the frontline of enforcing security—was kept in the dark about the plans until the last minute. Such things do not encourage people to travel to America. Given that foreign visitors contributed \$212bn to the country's economy in 2016, or 9.5% of total exports, that must be a worry.