

Attack on Nice deals another blow to European travel

Nancy Trejos, USA TODAY 5:04 p.m. EDT July 15, 2016



Empty hammocks sit on the beach on the Promenade des Anglais on July 15, 2016, in Nice, France (Photo: David Ramos, Getty Images)

The attack in Nice that killed at least 80 people on Bastille Day will likely have a negative impact on tourism to that seaside French town, but experts say it will be short term.

It's too soon to tell whether travelers are canceling trips to Nice in droves, but past incidents in Paris and Brussels have shown a temporary slowdown in tourism.

After the attacks in Paris in November, international air bookings dropped precipitously in the week that followed, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council. In the ensuing three months, bookings remained depressed – down 22% over the same period from a year earlier.

But bookings are back on track now, says Helen Marano, senior vice president at the WTTC.

"It took about six months for them to come back to the level of bookings that they experienced the previous year," she says.

France is one of the top destinations in the world, with 85.4 million visitors in 2015.

"That's a very strong visitation level, and it's the top visited destination for international visitation," Marano says. "With that stronghold, overall France will still hold its own. I don't think it will have a huge downturn from this."

Expedia saw a negative impact of \$10 to \$15 million from its bottom line in the fourth quarter of 2015 as a result of the November attacks in Paris, says Sarah Gavin, a spokesperson for the company.

Bookings not only dropped for France but throughout Europe and even outside, she says.

"People were really gun-shy about traveling to major cities following the Paris attacks," she says. "It affected all of Europe, and to some extent travel in general."

But because Nice is a smaller city, she likens it to what happened in the aftermath of the coordinated attacks to Brussels' airport and Metro station.

There were high cancellation rates after that attack. "We saw some lingering impact on Brussels as a market but we didn't see a broad impact across Europe," she says.

The WTTC says international net air bookings to Brussels virtually disappeared during the first week after that attack, though the prolonged closure of the airport played a major role in that.

Even in Brussels, however, bookings have already begun to tick back up. The WTTC anticipates the time for a full recovery in bookings will take nine months, based on data by travel research firm ForwardKeys.

Marano says tourism tends to bounce back when the destinations do three things: Their leaders show strong communication skills about how they are managing the situation. They show strong governance by keeping security forces on top of the situation. And business and citizens show support of each other.

"In this circumstance as with Paris, the main message is that resiliency is the solution for destinations and travel and tourism," she says.

Jack Ezon, president of Ovation Vacations, says that France bookings have been down 68%, and that Paris in particular has been down 88%.

"Business has been slowly bouncing back," he says.

Still, 85% of his company's European business this summer has been booked in the month of June for July and August. In past years, only 48% of his business was booked in that close in.

"People clearly are taking a 'wait and see' approach," he says.

His company's leisure domestic business in North America is normally between 8 to 10%. Now it has more than doubled to 27.5%.

Scott Hume, director of security operations for travel security firm Global Rescue, says Nice will actually be much safer before because off the heightened police presence.

He does, however, urge travelers to stay away from large crowds or at least assess the situation before going to a big organized event. If they arrive and don't feel there's enough security, they should not feel obligated to stay, he says.

But, he says, "There's a knee-jerk reaction. I will tell you, Europe and France, in particular, are still very safe places to travel. This is a horrible event but it's still a very safe place to travel."

Still, some travelers say they will alter their plans to Europe.

Bob Burns, a director of sales in Orlando, Fla., says he has canceled a trip to see the Tour de France in Paris but will now fly Switzerland instead to see other stages of the event.

"I will no longer fly into Brussels, Paris or any part of France because of these events," he says. "I will continue to travel to Italy as I feel much safer there."

But Brad Montgomery, a marketing director in Janesville, Wisc., says he does not plan to change plans for his family's summer vacation in southern Europe and Turkey.

"We'd never think of canceling that trip, which includes the French Riviera," he says. "Terrorism can happen anywhere, and it does. While I understand people's fears, that's not the way to live."