



# Turizm ve İşletme Bilimleri Dergisi

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## From Crisis to Opportunity: “Vaccine Tourism”\*

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### Abstract

The study aims to examine tourism destinations and businesses’ tourism campaigns involving vaccines. The crisis environment experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected many industries as well as the tourism industry. Tourist destinations and tourism businesses have sought alternatives to reduce the effects of the crisis. In this context, vaccine tourism has come to the fore as an important strategy. Travel companies and touristic destinations integrate the COVID-19 vaccine with their travel activities and offer packages that will allow tourists with high income, who do not have the opportunity to vaccinate or whose vaccination process takes time, to travel. The results of the study have revealed that there are destinations and businesses that determine this application as a strategic goal. However, concern is widespread that implementation may deepen socioeconomic injustice.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Crisis, Opportunity, Vaccine Tourism.

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## 1. Introduction

The new type of coronavirus that emerged at the end of 2019 has deeply affected the whole world in a short time. The virus, which is an upper respiratory infection, first appeared in Wuhan, China (Ashton, 2020; Wu, Leung, & Leung, 2020; Şengel et al., 2020a; Zhou et al., 2020). The epidemic (Jiang, Deng, Zhang, Cai, Cheung, & Xia, 2020), named COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO) in February, 2020, was declared a pandemic by the same organization in March, 2020 due to its rate of spread and global effects (McCartney, 2020). Due to international human mobility, the virus *spread* to the whole world in a short time due to the increase in the rate of spread and death rates. Countries and non-governmental organizations have sought to combat the pandemic. The virus, which is effective in many countries in 2020 (Rothe et al., 2020; To et al., 2020), continues its effect in 2021 (Şengel & Erkan, 2021). Tourism industry is one of the sectors or industries where the effects of the pandemic are felt most clearly.

The fact that some people pass the virus with mild symptoms has caused people participating in international travel movements to unwittingly carry the virus to different parts of the world (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020). For this reason, many countries apply national and international travel restrictions to reduce the effects of the pandemic. There is a contraction in the tourism industry, which naturally depends on human mobility, due to restrictions (Şengel et al., 2020b). It is also known that international arrivals are sensitive to factors such as trust and security (Mao et al., 2010). Tourists tend to visit safe destinations more in their travel activities (Anderson, 2006; Liu et al., 2016). Based on these assessments, a significant portion of tourism demand is delaying travel plans due to health-related safety concerns resulting from COVID-19 (Hoque et al., 2020; Şengel, et al., 2020c). Therefore, with the emergence of the pandemic in the tourism industry, it should be said that there is a demand-driven contraction and naturally a crisis. Destinations apply different practices to eliminate the crisis. Some developed tourism destinations are seeking to turn the COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity by launching campaigns with the slogan “Vaccine Tourism”. Within the scope of this study, it is aimed to examine the tourism campaigns of developed tourism destinations, including vaccines. Since it is the first paper prepared on the subject, it is thought that this study will contribute to the literature and guide the studies to be done on the subject.

## 2. “Vaccine Tourism” Issue and Countries’ Implementation

COVID-19 has negatively impacted the destinations due to its narrowing effects on tourism demand. It has especially affected micro-economic units such as firms and households, causing people to experience employment and income-related problems. Since the destinations cannot predict how long the pandemic will last, some strategies are developing to attract demand during the pandemic process. In this context, some destinations try to gain an advantage in order to get a share in the tourism market by making the vaccine, which is an important element in combating the virus, a part of the touristic product.

Vaccine tourism covers travels made by people who do not have the opportunity to get COVID-19 vaccine in their state or country or do not want to wait for the vaccination rank. These people travel outside of their home to get participate in tourism activities and get the COVID-19 vaccine. It first emerged through the initiatives of a travel agency from India. The business offers a four-day round trip package from Bombay to New York for them to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for \$ 2,000. Later, with similar practices in the USA and the United Arab Emirates, “Vaccine Tourism” has become widespread (Al Sayegh, 2021).

United Nations World Tourism Organizations UNWTO (2021) states that vaccines should be integrated into safe travel to increase confidence in the tourism industry. Lieberman (2021) describes the growing importance of the issue as "If you could get the COVID-19 vaccine right now, how much would you be willing to pay and how far would you be willing to travel?" examines with the question. With this strategy, destinations market the destination to tourists with high spending power at a high price level. The practices of some countries are as follows (Costaneda, 2021; Lendson, 2021).

**Dubai:** It is the country that first started vaccine tourism. In this context, a campaign has been launched. Touristic package products containing vaccines in Dubai are advertised on the Visit Dubai website. BioNTech / Pfizer and Sinovac (China) vaccines are used in Dubai.

**Cuba:** The country is known for its knowledge and positive experiences in the health sector. It has started to integrate Sovereign 02 vaccine, which is its own production for Cuban vaccine tourism, into touristic packages. The authorities of the country regarding vaccine production aim to produce 100 million doses of vaccine that they can apply to tourists visiting the country, after overproduction meets the needs of the citizens.

**Maldives:** Maldives' public authorities are planning to start "Vaccine tourism". Vaccine tourism in the country is promoted as "3V" (Visit, Vaccination, Vacation). Offering passengers two doses of vaccine a few weeks apart, the island country plans to encourage a stay for weeks. Maldives use the Oxford / AstraZeneca vaccine during the pandemic.

**Barbados:** It has started offering "Vaccine tourism" in Barbados in the Caribbean and offering tourist packages including vaccination of tourists. Oxford / AstraZeneca vaccine is used in Barbados.

**Mauritius:** Another Caribbean country like Barbados, Mauritius has also prepared vaccine tourism packages as of March, 2021. Mauritius also uses the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine.

In addition, some private tourism companies offer special packages to tourists who want to vaccinate in the USA. Also, companies outside the USA have started to serve high-income people with tourism packages that they can both travel and vaccinate against the difficulties of obtaining the vaccine in their regions (Englishjagran, 2020). It is known that there is an interstate tourist flow depending on the priority of applying the vaccine in America (Gillespie, 2021; Misra, 2021).

In developed countries such as Germany, practices for vaccine tourism are carried out. Travel companies want to offer German tourists the chance to combine tourist resources such as sun and surf with the COVID-19 vaccine. In this regard, some travel companies have started their marketing activities with the slogan "Impreisen," or "vaccine vacations" (DW, 2021). By campaigning on this issue, Serbia announced that it would give free vaccinations to foreigners visiting the country for a week, so people flocked to the country (Leff, 2021).

### 3. Conclusion and Discussion

In Turkey, a proverb says "There's no smoke without fire". In this proverb it is emphasized that an issue that occupies the shortly agenda is a harbinger of a situation that has come true. Therefore, it is thought that vaccine tourism is implemented as a strategy implemented by destinations and tourism companies and this situation will become widespread depending on the course of the pandemic. Of course, in an environment

where income injustice manifests itself in every aspect of life, it may not be welcomed that the phenomena comes to the fore in an issue where human health is at stake. Lieberman (2021) considers vaccine tourism to be a different and dark business from real travel. Gillespie (2021) takes the issue in terms of its legal status. It is known that destinations have policies towards Health tourism as an alternative tourism type. However, vaccine tourism is a new practice in the context of COVID-19 vaccine. The lack of a legal regulation on the subject is in the weaknesses of this practice. Fernandez (2021) makes similar assessments, raising ethical and legal questions of the “vaccine tourism” issue, raising concerns that the practice might further deepen racial and socioeconomic inequalities in the world.

When the issue is examined in terms of tourism enterprises and destinations that have experienced a serious decrease in tourism activities due to the shrinkage in demand, it can be considered as a search for turning the crisis into an opportunity. It is thought that these strategic initiatives of businesses and destinations based on reducing the effects of the crisis can also provide important opportunities. Al Sayegh (2021) states that the hospitality industry should see these applications as opportunities and develop appropriate strategies. Loss (2021) makes firm-level evaluations and states that private companies have ready demands in case of suitable conditions. There is a great concern in this regard as well. In particular, there is a concern that practices that do not take place in the form of public policy of the destinations, but rather as a result of the initiatives of companies, will trigger an unfair competition among businesses. Because it is known that the pandemic affects Small and Medium Business (SME-level) enterprises the most (Şengel & Erkan, 2021). It can be stated that with its extreme tourism, the crisis can be turned into an opportunity. However, there are concerns about the fair distribution of this opportunity.

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**Ethics Committee Approval:** Ethics committee approval was not received because this study was a compilation type study and no quantitative or qualitative data collection method was used (not experimental).

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**1. Author:** All phases of the study belong to one author.

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