

Airlines still avoid SA – but three majors could be flying South Africans before May

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(Getty Images)

- **Most international airlines are still not operating commercial passenger flights to and from South Africa.**

- **This is due to ongoing travel bans implemented since the discovery of the 501Y.V2 variant in December 2020.**
- **But at least three major airlines are hoping to restart flights to and from the country – carrying South African passengers – this month.**
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South Africans have very limited international travel options thanks to extended border closures, concerns around new coronavirus variants, and lack of demand. The reopening of South Africa's borders towards the end of 2020 was supposed to revive travel and tourism. Instead the discovery of a new, more infectious coronavirus variant – 501Y.V2 – which was first identified in samples gathered from the Eastern Cape, led to a wave of fresh restrictions for South Africans. Many international airlines which last departed South Africa in March 2020 have yet to return.

Throughout January and February, countries in Europe, Asia and North America added new restrictions and extended bans on South African travels. With that, major airlines, some of which had tentatively resumed operations in the window of opportunity between South Africa's reopening of borders and the discovery of 501Y.V2, quickly suspended operations.

Today, less than half of the international airlines which operated regular routes to South Africa in pre-pandemic 2020 have resumed operations, according to the Board of Airline Representatives of South Africa (Barsa). This coincides with South Africans being ranked as [the most restricted travellers in the world](#), according data supplied by the International Air Transport Association (IATA).

Most international airlines have indicated tentative return dates but point out that these timelines are intrinsically tied to their respective countries' government-ordered travel restrictions for visitors from South Africa. The plans are more best-case-scenario than any guarantee.

Here is when some of the most important international airlines intend to resume passenger flights to and from South Africa, with South Africans aboard.

Emirates – extended to 15 April 2021 (for South African passengers)

The flag carrier of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) suspended commercial passenger flights to and from South Africa on 16 January 2021. The airline resumed flights into – [but not out of](#) – South Africa in March. The airline initially hoped to reopen passenger flights to South African travellers on Thursday 8 April 2021 but has since

announced an extension of current restrictions until at least 15 April.

“Emirates regrets any inconvenience caused - affected customers should contact their travel agent or Emirates contact centre for re-booking options,” said the airline in a statement issued on Sunday.

“Emirates is committed to serving our customers in South Africa, and we look forward to resuming outbound passenger services when conditions allow.”

KLM – 15 April 2021 (for South African passengers)

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines continues to operate limited passenger flights to and from South Africa but is only carrying Dutch Nationals and EU Residents as outbound passengers.

“KLM is currently operating a daily flight from Johannesburg to Amsterdam, and three flights per week from Cape Town to Amsterdam,” said a representative of the airline.

“KLM has maintained this schedule to South Africa since the international borders were reopened in October 2020. The current Air France schedule between Johannesburg and Paris has increased from three to five flights per week with effect 29 March 2021.”

South African travellers are currently banned from entering The Netherlands, with its Ministry of Foreign affairs expected to [review border restrictions on 15 April](#).

British Airways – 16 April 2021

British Airways, which operated daily flights between London, OR Tambo, and Cape Town prior to the pandemic – and returned with limited services in October – suspended all flights to and from South Africa on 23 December.

This flight ban has since been extended several times, with the airline proposing the earliest return date of 16 April 2021.

“We have not been and are not currently operating passenger flights to or from South Africa due to current restrictions,” said British Airways’ press office, with reference to the ongoing ban on South African travellers into the United Kingdom (UK).

Virgin Atlantic – early June 2021

The British Virgin Atlantic resumed limited passenger services to and from South Africa in October but, like BA, suspended flights on 23 December. The suspension has since been extended several times.

“Plans to resume flights to South Africa are aiming for early June, dependant on travel restrictions allowing,” said Rosie Watts, the PR Executive of Virgin Atlantic.

Cathay Pacific – 30 June 2021

The Hong King airline suspended travel to South Africa in March 2020 and intended to restart its flights to

Johannesburg a year later. This proposed resumption date was recently extended to 30 June 2021.

Qantas – end of October 2021

Australia's flag carrier, Qantas, continues to limit its international operations to flights to and from New Zealand. Qantas' international operations, beyond New Zealand, have been suspended since March 2020.

“Qantas CEO Alan Joyce has spoken publicly about the company's expectations [that] international travel will start again at the end of October [2021], including to South Africa,” said a representative of the airline.

Delta Airlines – “middle of 2021”

Prior to the pandemic, the American Delta Airlines offered non-stop flights between Atlanta in the United States and Johannesburg. The airline suspended this flight on 26 March 2020.

“Currently, we don't have a firm date to restart our Johannesburg flight or launch our Cape Town service and continue to evaluate [the] market situation given the Covid-19 pandemic,” said the airline.

“We are certainly hoping to restart service by the middle of the year but [that's] to be confirmed.”

Singapore Airlines – no return date set

Singapore Airlines continues to operate limited passenger flights to and from South Africa but, like KLM, is only transporting permanent residents and citizens of Singapore until the government relaxes the ban on South African travellers.

Etihad Airways – no return date set

The second flag carrier of the UAE, Etihad Airways, last operated a commercial passenger flight from South Africa on 24 March 2020. The airline [initially aimed to resume operations in March 2021](#) but, owing to ongoing international restrictions, has extended its suspension with no set return date.

“While we can’t commit to an exact date to resume flights to Johannesburg, we remain agile and carefully track market developments including travel advisories and restrictions, with the objective to have the right aircraft in the right place at the right time,” said a spokesperson for the airline.

International airlines already carrying passengers from South Africa

There are several international airlines currently flying to and from South Africa and accommodating passengers beyond only residents or citizens of their respective base countries.

Most of these airlines are based in Africa, and not all offer a lot of onward connections.

Ethiopian Airlines has held a firm position in South Africa's airspace, offering consistent flights since borders opened in October. Air Botswana, Air Mozambique, EgyptAir, Zimbabwe's Fastjet, Kenya Airways, Proflight Zambia are operating flights to and from South Africa with varying degrees of consistency. Angola's TAAG recently reinstated its South African service. Local airline, Airlink, has intensified its flight frequency to several destinations in Africa.

With Emirates and Etihad largely out of the picture, **Qatar Airways has managed to remain as the strongest – and only – contender for passage between South Africa and the Middle East.**

Turkish Airways restarted flights to and from South Africa in October, and while Turkey still maintains fierce restrictions on South African travellers, Istanbul Airport serves as a key transit hub connecting to more than 200 international destinations.

Lufthansa – which includes Swiss, Austrian Airlines and Brussels Airlines – recently restarted commercial passenger flights between Frankfurt, Johannesburg and Cape Town after an extended suspension at the beginning of the year.