



AUSTRALIAN INTERNATIONAL TRAVELLERS: THE PLACES WE GO

Introduction

Australians are renowned as great travellers, but official Australian statistics are not able to fully pinpoint where Australians actually travel. Research undertaken by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) shows that visitor information collected at the borders of other countries provides a more comprehensive picture of the numbers of countries visited by Australian residents undertaking short-term overseas travel¹. The information in this article is for information purposes only; it is not intended to be an alternative official source of travel statistics.

The first edition of this article, published in May 2018, provided data in respect of Australian travel undertaken in 2016. Data in respect of 2017 have now been added. The results and conclusions are similar to those shown in the May 2017 article.

Sources for traveller numbers and destinations

Data Sources: Australian

The official source for information on the number of overseas trips made by Australian residents is The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) publication *Overseas Arrivals and Departures* (ABS Cat. 3401.0). It contains information on short-term visits to overseas countries by Australian travellers. The numbers and destinations of overseas travel in this publication are based on statistics collected from incoming passenger cards. The cards ask Australian residents returning from overseas which country they spent most time in while overseas. Even if a traveller visits several countries during the one overseas trip, *only the country identified as the main destination is recorded*². There are no other primary sources of information on Australian traveller numbers and destinations.

Data Sources: International

Other countries publish information on international visitors using various sources, including national statistical offices, government tourist organisations and private organisations.

Comparison of source information

Given the known limitations of the passenger card system, DFAT carried out a search of available data from international sources with a view to comparing Australian and overseas data on the number of visits by Australian residents to selected overseas destinations.

We were able to secure the data for 22 countries visited by Australian residents in the calendar year 2017. The countries included comprise most of the major destinations of Australian tourists in that year, accounting for 85 per cent of overseas trips as measured by ABS data.

¹ Short-term travellers are Australian residents returning after a recorded stay of less than 12 months overseas.

² The Australian methodology is in accordance with international recommendations, which state that outbound visits should be classified according to main destination (United Nations: Recommendations for Tourism Statistics 2008).

A comparison of Australian and overseas-sourced data reveals some instances of significant differences in the measured numbers of visits in the two data sets.

Table 1 compares the number of short-term Australian travellers measured by the ABS returned resident travellers series, and the number of Australian travellers to the same countries as measured by the available overseas countries' arrivals data.

Table 1: Numbers of overseas visits by Australian residents – 2017

Destination	Number based on Australian data (ABS)	Number based on data from overseas destinations	Overseas /less Australian data
New Zealand	1,435,900	1,472,160	36,260
Indonesia	1,182,600	1,188,449	5,849
United States	1,074,600	1,324,000	249,400
United Kingdom	628,400	1,092,000	463,600
Thailand	580,300	817,091	236,791
China	541,100	734,300	193,200
Singapore	402,700	1,082,001	679,301
Japan	394,100	495,100	101,000
India	360,800	324,243	-36,557 ³
Fiji	346,800	365,689	18,889
Vietnam	297,200	370,438	73,238
Malaysia	274,400	351,232	76,832
Philippines	231,000	259,433	28,433
Hong Kong	224,900	576,881	351,981
Italy	229,600	978,240	748,640
Canada	176,700	392,364	215,664
France	132,400	900,000	767,600
Germany	111,000	330,494	219,494
Greece	111,200	324,100	212,900
South Africa	89,000	116,257	27,257
Turkey	28,100	77,153	49,053
Mexico	21,800	74,763	52,963

Sources: ABS catalogue no. 3401.0, and various datasets from overseas countries.

Using the arrivals data from overseas countries, the numbers for **New Zealand** and **Indonesia** are broadly equivalent, but there are very large differences in a number of other countries. For example, **Singapore** arrivals are around two and a half times those measured by Australian data; **France** almost seven times as many; **Italy** about four times as many and **Hong Kong** is two and a half times as many. The differences are reflected in the rankings of countries if data from overseas countries are used. **Singapore** moves up from 7th most visited to 5th most visited, while **Hong Kong** moves from 14th to 10th. The biggest movements

³ At the level of total arrivals, Indian tourism statistics identify a category of visitor known as "Non-resident Indians". These visitors are added to the category "Foreign Visitors" to arrive at a figure for "International Tourist Arrivals". This total is only published at the total India level, whereas the country data shown above includes only the foreign tourist arrivals category and therefore appears to exclude non-resident Indians visiting India. This could explain why the ABS data on short-term arrivals to India show larger numbers of visitors than the Indian data.

however are **France**, from 17th to 7th and **Italy** from 15th to 6th. **Table 2** ranks major countries visited by Australian residents, based on data from overseas countries.

This chart compares the same data, arranged by broad regional groups.

Australian visits to overseas, by region – 2017

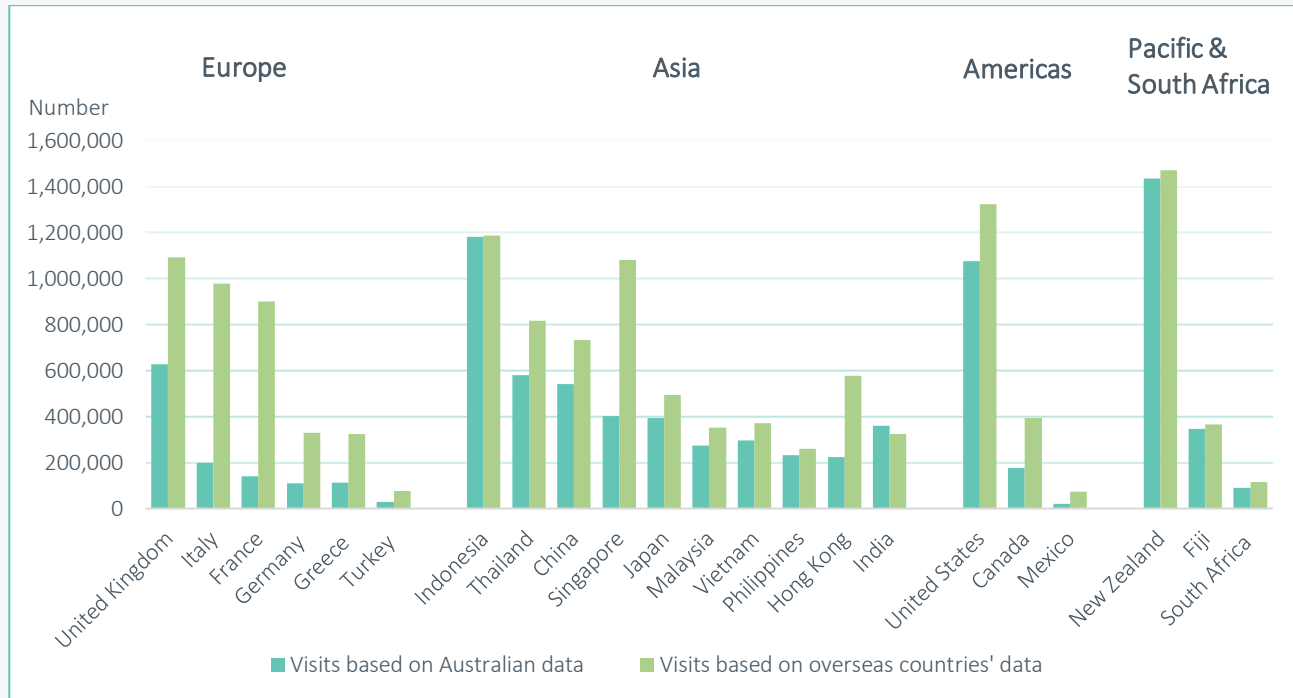
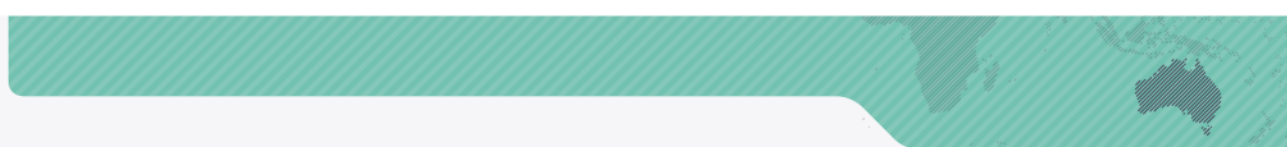


Table 2: Main destinations of Australian travellers in 2017, based on visits measured by overseas countries

Rank	Destination	Number based on data from overseas destinations
1	New Zealand	1,472,160
2	United States	1,324,000
3	Indonesia	1,188,449
4	United Kingdom	1,092,000
5	Singapore	1,082,001
6	Italy	978,421
7	France	900,000
8	Thailand	817,091
9	China	734,300
10	Hong Kong	576,881

The reason for the differences

The major differences occur with countries that are popular stop over destinations, or are geographically close and form parts of package or informal travel plans, as is often the case in Europe. In addition to being destinations in their own right, places such as Singapore and Hong Kong are also widely used as stopovers for longer journeys. As such, they are less likely to be nominated as the main country of destination.



This issue is particularly marked in Europe, where some or all destinations such as the UK, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Turkey and Greece may be on an itinerary for the same trip. In these circumstances, only one of those countries would appear on a returning Australian resident's incoming passenger card. Travellers may also pass through any or all of those countries on both their outwards and return journeys to Australia, so they may be counted as a visitor to those countries more than once. In the same way, the US, Canada and Mexico could feature in the one itinerary but, again, in such cases only one would appear on the returning Australian resident passenger card.

The traveller numbers for those countries which are more often sole destinations tend to be more consistent in the Australian data and the overseas country's own data. This is particularly the case for Indonesia and the Philippines in Asia, and New Zealand and Fiji in the Pacific region.

As shown in **Table 1**, Australian visitors to France, as measured by France, numbered 900,000 in 2017, compared to Australian statistics that show only 132,400 visits to France (as the main destination). Information provided by the French government's tourism office with respect to 2016 data confirmed that the high number of Australian residents recorded as visitors to France is due to them making multiple visits from other countries, especially the United Kingdom. They note that the most common country of destination for Australian travellers leaving France was the United Kingdom. Similarly, the United Kingdom is a very common starting point for Australian visitors to France, which is in turn the starting point for visits to and from other European countries. The ease of transportation between London and Paris would no doubt contribute to the observed multiple visits by Australian travellers between the two countries. This is also consistent with the high number of Australian visitors to the United Kingdom, as measured by the UK, in 2017 (1,092,000), as opposed to the United Kingdom as main destination in the Australian data (628,400).

The example of trips between the UK and France highlights the fact that visits to overseas countries by Australian residents do not necessarily start from Australia. As well as holidays from Australia that entail visits to multiple countries, Australian ex-patriates working abroad often travel to countries in the vicinity of where they are based.

It is possible that differences in the timing of recording Australian residents arriving at overseas destinations and the same visitors arriving back in Australia, especially around December-January, may contribute to differences in the two sets of data. We view this as unlikely, however.

Conclusion

The main purpose of Australian statistics concerning overseas travel by Australian residents is to provide estimates of the number of overseas visits made each year, the main destinations of travellers and expenditure by Australian residents on overseas travel. The statistics are an important input to the Australian balance of payments accounts. However, they provide information only on the country of main destination of travellers (as reported by the travellers) and therefore do not necessarily show the extent of travel undertaken by Australian residents while they are overseas.

Information sourced from countries visited by Australians provides a clearer picture of the extent of travel undertaken.

DFAT intends to continue to update these data on an annual basis, as international data becomes available.

Author: Neil Batty
Investment and Economic Division
Office of Economic Analysis
statssection@dfat.gov.au

Published: May 2019