

The Palm Beach Post

Palm Beach Post: Canadians Staying away from FL

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Palm Beach Post



Canadian tourists will not be coming down to Palm Beach County this year due to the coronavirus pandemic, and that spells bad news for businesses that rely on the dollars these winter visitors spend on everything from restaurants to real estate.

The land border between the United States and Canada remains closed for all non-emergency travel.

Air travel is permitted, but many Canadian travelers are wary of getting on an airplane. Among them is Mitchell Stein of Montreal. Since Stein was a child, he said he has been making the trek to South Florida during winters.

Now Stein is 56, and he still travels each year to South Florida, except this year. Stein said he used to stay in Jupiter, but in recent years, he has rented a condominium in Hallandale for several months.

This year, however, Stein said he plans to stay put in Montreal, despite the long, dark months ahead and the prospect of brutally cold weather.

"It's a very awkward year. It feels strange we are not going down," Stein said. But among his group of friends who travel south each year, "no one is going down."

The reason?

The response by the United States, and Florida, to the pandemic.

"The perception we have is that Florida is like the Wild West right now, and people are walking around without masks," Stein said.

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Mask-wearing uneven as coronavirus infection numbers rise

He's not entirely wrong. Although Palm Beach County requires that masks be worn in public spaces where social distancing isn't possible, as well as inside businesses, Gov. Ron DeSantis recently prevented local governments from fining individuals who don't wear masks.

Consequently, mask-wearing is a crap shoot, unevenly followed in Palm Beach County. On any given day or night, particularly in hotspots such as downtown Delray Beach, restaurant workers wear masks, but most people stroll the crowded streets without facial coverings.

This is the case even as Florida's infection numbers are on the rise again. Some 4,651 new cases were tallied statewide on Monday, pushing Florida's total case count to 812,063, according to the daily update from the Florida Department of Health.

Palm Beach County also saw a significant jump in the number of new cases. Another 373 people in the county were diagnosed with the highly contagious respiratory disease.

2020 might have been record year for Canadian tourism, before COVID-19

For Palm Beach County tourism officials, the news is all bad when it comes to the Canadian tourist, the county's No. 1 international traveler.

In 2019, Canadian tourists accounted for 300,000 of 8.2 million tourists. These Canadian visitors, some of whom have winter homes here, spent \$321 million last year, according to Discover The Palm Beaches, the county's tourism arm.

During the first quarter of 2020, which was trimmed by a couple of weeks when the pandemic hit in mid-March, some 121,000 Canadians visited, which meant 2020 would have been a record year for visitors from the Great White North, Discover said.

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But these snowbirds will not be driving or flying south, at least at the moment.

"We are all heartbroken about the fact that they can't come right now, but there is some glimmer of positivity," said Jorge Pesquera, president of Discover The Palm Beaches.

Pesquera said Canadians who have delayed flying down to Florida may choose to do so in the first quarter of 2021. Air Canada flights to Palm Beach International Airport start up in December, although flights to Fort Lauderdale International Airport already are running at deeply discounted prices.

As for the land border closure, that restriction is in effect until Nov. 21. Pesquera and other tourism officials hope the border closure might be lifted after that date so Canadians who wish to drive to Florida can do so.

Stein, for one, said driving would be preferable to flying, especially since flights leaving Canada often have to sit on the tarmac for extended periods of time so the planes can be de-iced or the tarmac cleared of snow.

Stein doesn't like the idea of sitting on an airplane in a pandemic for long periods of time. Therefore he said he isn't keen to get on a plane right now.

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But even if he were to arrive safely in South Florida, Stein is worried about something else: Being away from the socialized health-care system in Canada.

"The scary aspect, for a Canadian, is getting sick when you're down there," Stein said. "When you get sick in the United States, the cost is exorbitant."

"A lot of them have delayed their trip"

Real estate agents say they already miss their longtime Canadian customers.

"Canadians are almost another borough of New York, but I haven't had any Canadian leads come in," said Jeff Lichtenstein, founder of Echo Fine Properties in Palm Beach Gardens.

Lichtenstein said other real estate agents confirm that Canadians mostly are going to sit this season out and stay put up North.



For **Bonnie Heatzig** of Bex Realty in Boca Raton, it's the same story.

Heatzig said she sells a lot of property to Canadian buyers who come to Florida in October and November and stay at the Boca Raton Resort & Club while they shop for real estate.

"They're fabulous clients. We love them when they're here," **Heatzig** said.

But due to travel restrictions and fears of COVID, "a lot of them have delayed their trip coming down here," **Heatzig** said.

Stein said he and his family are generous spenders when they come to South Florida each winter, starting around November or December. First stop is Walmart, where Stein said he loads up on \$500 worth of food and supplies. Then it's daytime sunbathing at the beach or shopping at the malls. Dinner is at a different restaurant every night.

This goes on for four months every year, except for this year.

Hy Silverman of Montreal owns a part-time residence in Century Village in Deerfield Beach. He said won't be making the trip down yet, either.

Not only can Silverman not drive his car into the United States right now, he said he's aghast at President Donald Trump's suggestion he would fire Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institutes of Health's Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

"The man's the most brilliant guy when it comes to infectious disease," Silverman said of Fauci. "It's very upsetting for Canadians to watch this. It doesn't make sense."

Pesquera said he knows Canadians are frustrated by the "inconsistent" messaging about the way the United States is dealing with the pandemic.

But Pesquera emphasized that Palm Beach County businesses, including hoteliers and restaurants, are doing everything they can to abide by strict rules on hygiene and cleanliness so Canadians and other tourists feel as safe as they can when they come to the area.

Palm Beach County also is the first destination in the United States to have its airport, convention center and convention center hotel receive accreditation by the Global Biorisk Advisory Council. This is a rigorous program featuring the highest standards of cleaning protocols, disinfection techniques, and employee policies to combat the transmission of infectious diseases.

Once Canadians are ready to return, "we are good to go," Pesquera said.