Arctic 5 cities and COVID-19 – Record-breaking summer for domestic tourism


Summary of the report

Domestic tourism has become increasingly attractive, and summer 2021 has been record-breaking. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused overnight stays by foreign visitors to decrease substantially, and they are still close to zero in many regions. Increased travelling and lifting of the restrictions have affected regional economies positively, e.g., by increasing the demand in retail and restaurant services. However, increased mobility and removal of restrictions have also been the reason why the number of new COVID-19 cases have increased in certain regions.

Lifting of the restrictions and increased vaccination coverage have increased mobility, which is visible in the mobility data as well. Our previous report examining the visits to retail and recreation places showed an increase in visits to these places, and this has continued through summer 2021 (see Appendix 1, Page 13 in this report). Based on the increased mobility during summer and early fall 2021 we could assume that also accommodation data, defined as overnight stays, for August would be higher than for last year. Regarding foreign tourism, this kind of turn for the better is not yet visible.

The increase in vaccination coverage against COVID-19 also supports growth in tourism. Even though the number of new COVID-19 cases increased in August in every city, they typically have been managed to turn to a fall quickly. Societies are opening up and lifting restrictions, which could indicate positive development for international tourism, too.
Current COVID-19 situation and vaccination coverage in Arctic 5 cities

Arctic 5 cities

![Graph showing new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in Arctic 5 cities.](image)

Figure 1. New COVID-19 cases, two-week trend per 100,000 inhabitants in Arctic 5 cities. Source: THL, FOHM, covid19data.no.

2020: New COVID-19 cases per 100,000 inhabitants were highly similar among the Arctic 5 cities before September. After that, there was an increase in weekly cases in every city, but the most significant increases occurred in Luleå and Umeå. Elsewhere, the increase in the number of cases was relatively small.

2021: In Luleå and Umeå, new weekly cases started to increase in February, and the highest peak occurred in Luleå in late February. The numbers have decreased since then, but in Luleå and Umeå, the number of cases was clearly higher than in the other Arctic 5 cities. Meanwhile, there have only been occasional spikes in Oulu and Tromsø, and the number of cases in Rovaniemi has been minimal throughout the pandemic. The number of new cases increased during August in every city, especially in Umeå, but typically, the trend appears to be downwards again.
Table 1. Vaccination coverage in Arctic 5 cities, May 25 and September 8, 2021. Sources: THL, FHI, FOHM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>First dose %</th>
<th>Second dose %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May 25, 2021</td>
<td>September 8, 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umeå</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>88.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luleå</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>87.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>66.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oulu</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>71.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tromsø</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>71.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rovaniemi</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vaccination coverage (Table 1) is defined as the share of the total population who have received at least the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. Compared with the situation in May 2021, vaccination coverage has increased remarkably, which supports the opening up of society. Vaccinations are in full swing in Finland, Sweden and Norway, as they are offering vaccines to adolescents, with few differences across nations. Currently, attention is shifting away from COVID-19 cases more towards the reporting of vaccination coverage. For instance, in Finland, the media is giving up on reporting the number of new daily COVID-19 cases.

**Overnight stays by domestic and foreign visitors**

![Figure 2. Overnight stays by domestic visitors in all accommodation establishments in Arctic 5 cities. Source: Statistics Finland, Statistics Sweden, Statistics Norway.](image-url)
Table 2. Overnight stays by domestic visitors in all accommodation establishments in Arctic 5 cities. Difference to last year in parentheses. Source: Statistics Finland, Statistics Sweden, Statistics Norway.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>July 2019</th>
<th>July 2020</th>
<th>July 2021</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lapland</td>
<td>183 005</td>
<td>209 479 (+26 474)</td>
<td>272 800 (+63 321)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Ostrobothnia</td>
<td>242 012</td>
<td>277 302 (+35 290)</td>
<td>352 523 (+75 221)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troms and Finnmark</td>
<td>152 173</td>
<td>217 840 (+65 667)</td>
<td>205 581 (-12 259)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Västerbotten county</td>
<td>233 108</td>
<td>220 271 (-12 837)</td>
<td>278 121 (+57 850)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norrbotten county</td>
<td>317 177</td>
<td>257 225 (-59 952)</td>
<td>356 724 (+99 499)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2019 & 2020: Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the trends for all regions were quite similar. Overnight stays increased during the holiday seasons and were lower while out of season. The COVID-19 pandemic caused overnight stays by domestic visitors to decrease in February 2020, but the numbers began to increase in April 2020. Domestic travelling increased rapidly in all regions, and the highest peak across the cities was reached in North Ostrobothnia, Finland, in July 2020. Towards the end of the year, the number of overnight stays decreased in every region, although regions in Finland attracted visitors during Christmas time and the whole of spring 2021.

2021: Domestic travelling increased significantly in every region starting in May 2021. The summer was record-breaking in Finnish and Swedish regions, and domestic travelling reached the previous year’s level in Troms og Finnmark county. Table 2 shows that in almost every region, there was more domestic travel during summer 2021 than in the previous year. For instance, in Oulu, out of 98 800 overnight stays in July, 93% comprised domestic visitors (source: BusinessOulu).

Increased domestic tourism has a positive impact on regional economies as it stimulates demand in cafes and restaurants. Arranged cultural and sports events have also attracted visitors and partly explained these domestic tourism numbers. Google Mobility Data concerning visits to retail and recreation places (including cafes and restaurants) also supports this conclusion, as the positive development in mobility has continued throughout summer 2021 (see Appendix 1).
2019 & 2020: From October 2019 to February 2020, most overnight stays by foreign visitors were in Lapland, Finland. Norrbotten and Västerbotten counties in Sweden and Troms og Finnmark county in Norway were visited more by foreigners during summer. The decrease in the number of foreign visitors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic began to show in March 2020, and by April 2020, the overnight stays fell to almost zero in all Arctic 5 cities. The development has been modest ever since and far from pre-pandemic figures. Only one clear peak occurred in Troms og Finnmark county in July 2020.

2021: Overnight stays by foreign visitors remain at a low level. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Norrbotten county, located in Sweden, has had higher levels of overnight stays by foreign visitors for almost the entire time. To date, in 2021, the number of overnight stays by foreign visitors in the North Ostrobothnia region in Finland has constantly been closest to zero. Foreign tourism picked up slightly during the summer, with the highest increases in Västerbotten and Troms og Finnmark counties.
Peoples’ mobility - Visits to transit stations

The figures concerning transit stations are based on Google Community Mobility Reports. They show how the number of visits to places categorized as transit stations has changed in the Arctic 5 cities. Transit stations consist of public transport hubs such as subways, buses, and train stations.

Google Community Mobility Reports

In many countries, including Finland, Sweden and Norway, governments have decreed various types of lockdown policies to prevent the spread of COVID-19. These restrictions have affected the way people spend their free time and what places they visit. Google Community Mobility Reports provide interesting data that can be used to evaluate the effect of these restrictions.

Google Community Mobility Reports show how visits and lengths of stay at different places have changed compared with the baseline. The baseline is the median value for the corresponding day of the week during the 5-week period from January 3 to February 6, 2020. This means that the baseline describes the average behaviour of people before the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020.

The reports are created with aggregated, anonymized sets of data from users who have turned on the Location History setting on their mobile phone. Therefore, the reports are based only on a sample of users, and they might not reflect the exact behaviour of a wider population. City-specific figures (Figures 4–9) end on different dates due to data availability. If there are not sufficient visitors to ensure anonymity, there is automatically a gap in the data.
Arctic 5 cities

Figure 4. Change in visits to transit stations compared with the baseline in all Arctic 5 cities. The baseline (dashed line) is the median day value for the corresponding day of the week during the 5-week period from January 3 to February 6, 2020. Source: Google Community Mobility Reports.

2020: The long-term pattern of visits to transit stations appears to be quite similar in all Arctic 5 cities. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visits fell sharply in all cities, with the decrease being most severe in Rovaniemi and Tromsø. After the rise towards the baseline during summer and autumn 2020, visits fell again towards the end of the year.

2021: The development towards baseline began in winter 2021, and this appears to continue. Although the number of visits to transit stations increased in every city during summer, strong growth in domestic tourism is not as clearly visible in transit station data as it is in accommodation data. This is likely due to minimal foreign tourism and that domestic tourists travel with their own cars. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the number of visits to transit stations has not yet reached the baseline in any of the Arctic 5 cities. Currently, cities are approximately 25% below the baseline and at the same level as a year ago.
2020: At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visits to transit stations fell significantly. The spike in mid-March could be due to the announcement of upcoming mobility restrictions. The number of visits hit their lowest point in mid-April, after which the visits began to increase first steadily and then fluctuated starting from June.

2021: The long-term trend of visits to transit stations is directed upwards. In the beginning of July, the number of visits was at the same level as it was in early March. Since mid-May, there have been fewer visits in 2021 than in the year prior.
Figure 6. Change in visits to transit stations compared with the baseline in Rovaniemi. The baseline (dashed line) is the median day value for the corresponding day of the week during the 5-week period from January 3 to February 6, 2020. Source: Google Community Mobility Reports.

2020: At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visits to transit stations fell significantly due to mobility restrictions. From mid-April, the number of visits began to increase again, reaching their highest point in August.

2021: Compared with Oulu, the figure for Rovaniemi is quite similar. The number of visits fell in March and continued downwards until May. Since May, the number of visits began to increase but fell for a moment in late June. Starting in July, the pattern looks highly similar to that in 2020. The rapid increase in mid-August is explained by arranged cultural and sports events.
2020: At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visits to transit stations fell significantly, reaching their lowest point in late March. From April, the development was directed steadily upwards towards the baseline with occasional ups and downs.

2021: The number of visits fell during early March but began to rise again after that. The development is directed strongly upwards, with the number of visits being above the 2020 level but still approximately 25% below the baseline.
2020: At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visits to transit stations fell significantly during March and reached its lowest point in mid-April. After the drop, the number of visits fluctuated, but the overall development was directed upwards towards the baseline until mid-June, when the number of visits began to decrease until mid-July.

2021: The development was directed upwards, with some ups and downs, until June. Summer was quite steady at approximately 25% below the baseline with a rapid increase in August. The number of visits did not cross the baseline level, but they have been above 2020 figures since mid-April.
2020: At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visits to transit stations fell significantly. After being at their lowest in mid-April, the number of visits began to rise. The number of visits reached their highest point, approximately 25% below the baseline, in September.

2021: In March, the number of visits was far below the baseline and 2020 levels. Starting in April, the pattern looks very similar to that in 2020, with 2021 sometimes being above and sometimes below the 2020 numbers. As in Luleå, there was also a rapid increase in August in Umeå.
Appendix 1. Change in visits to retail and recreation places compared with the baseline in Arctic 5 cities. The baseline (dashed line) is the median day value for the corresponding day of the week during the 5-week period from January 3 to February 6, 2020. Source: Google Community Mobility Reports.

**Arctic 5 cities**

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