TOURISTS FLOCK IN HIMACHAL PRADESH AFTER EASED RESTRICTIONS: STATE GOVERNMENT ISSUES NEW TRAVEL ADVISORY AND INCREASES SECURITY

The Himachal Pradesh Cabinet had [previously decided](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/shimla/no-rt-pcr-test-required-to-enter-himachal-pradesh-cabinet/articleshow/83433717.cms) to allow people to enter the State without the need for any tests done. The tourists entering did not even need to show an RT-PCR test. With this ease in restrictions, a massive increase was seen in the past week. According to [sources,](https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/himachal-pradesh-tourism-guidelines-shimla-covid19-restrictions-coronavirus-tests-lockdown-711787) more than 5000 vehicles entered the State capital of Shimla as the Cabinet had eased COVID restrictions. This is only the number of outstation vehicles, while the number of tourist vehicles from the State itself being used has not been identified.

On the 13th of June 2021, the roads leading to the State saw a massive increase in the number of cars entering the State, which led to congestion, bringing traffic to a standstill. In Parwanoo, a nearly 2-kilometre-long [queue](https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/himachal-pradesh-issues-new-covid-rules-after-tourists-rush-in-101623726017792.html) of vehicles was seen. Similar rushes were seen in other State entry points, including Bilaspur, Mehatpur and Kandwal barrier.

The tourism industry [contributes](https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/himachal-pradesh-issues-new-covid-rules-after-tourists-rush-in-101623726017792.html) to 9 percent of the State’s GDP, and it had taken a huge hit due to the pandemic. However, these eased restrictions were seen as a sigh of relief for the businesses too. Sanjay Sood, the president of Shimla Hotel and Restaurateurs’ Association, had [said](https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/himachal-pradesh-issues-new-covid-rules-after-tourists-rush-in-101623726017792.html), “*the year was terrible for the industry so far as we were unable to meet even capital expenses. We hope that the ‘unlock’ will revive the sector.”*

The surge in tourists could be due to a lot of people being fed up with being stuck at home due to the coronavirus restrictions. As there were lockdowns and travel restrictions, opening up of a State with eased travel restrictions was seen as an opportunity to travel and visit places in Himachal Pradesh. However, as these tourists and many industries in Himachal Pradesh would have been happy, this could potentially increase the COVID chances in the State as well as the tourists. Sources [noted](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/shimla/amid-joy-over-tourist-surge-in-hp-worry-over-case-spread/articleshow/83525208.cms) that many tourists were not adhering to the COVID guidelines as they were not wearing face masks, crowding outside shops and not maintaining physical distance.

A local citizen speaking to the Times of India had [said](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/shimla/amid-joy-over-tourist-surge-in-hp-worry-over-case-spread/articleshow/83525208.cms), “*We are happy that Dalhousie will once again be buzzing with tourists, but at the same time, we are scared of a possible early arrival of the third wave.*”

According to a [study](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/shimla/six-districts-of-himachal-pradesh-have-less-than-5-covid-positivity-rate/articleshow/83401532.cms) during the week of June 3 to June 9, there were six districts in Himachal Pradesh that had less than 5 percent COVID positivity rate while four districts had a rate between 5 to 10 percent and two districts had a rate between 10 to 20 percent. However, there is now a huge potential for these numbers to spike due to the huge influx of citizens into the State. The State recorded 370 cases with 17 deaths on the 13th of June 2021. [According](https://indianexpress.com/article/trending/trending-in-india/tourism-himachal-pradesh-traffic-jam-after-covid-19r-restrictions-ease-7358431/) to the health department, there are 5,402 active cases. The overall death toll is 3,368.

The Himachal Pradesh police have [issued](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/shimla/amid-joy-over-tourist-surge-in-hp-worry-over-case-spread/articleshow/83525208.cms) a statement asking all the tourists to follow the COVID guidelines; otherwise, there will be sanctions. First-time offenders will be fined INR 500, and repeat violators could be fined INR 5000 or face up to 8 days imprisonment, or both.

Now, the State Government has again issued a travel advisory for tourists entering the State and has made COVID-19 e-passes mandatory for entering the State. Tourists will still be able to visit the State, but they will have to register themselves and enter all of their details on an online system so that they can be monitored. Shimla's Superintendent of Police, Mohit Chawla, while [speaking](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/travel-news/himachal-pradesh-updates-travel-guidelines-makes-e-passes-mandatory/as83543045.cms) to the Times of India, added that police reserves had been deployed in Shimla to manage the influx of tourists. Patrolling parties will guide the tourists and make efforts to ensure that visitors follow COVID protocols.

**Harsh Mahaseth** is an Assistant Lecturer at Jindal Global Law School, and a Research Analyst at the Nehginpao Kipgen Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University. He is currently a Fellow at Kathmandu Tribune.