TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

Just four countries remain on green list: Where do we stand with travel now?

As countries enter and leave the travel green list and airlines call for less restrictions, some passengers are still awaiting flight refunds

Groups representing Irish and EU aviation and tourism – including Ryanair and Aer Lingus – have called for the European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen to introduce an EU-wide testing protocol to avoid qurantines and reopen borders.

Groups representing Irish and EU aviation and tourism – including Ryanair and Aer Lingus – have called for the European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen to introduce an EU-wide testing protocol to avoid qurantines and reopen borders. Photograph: Tobias Schwarz / AFP

Travel to and from Ireland remains shrouded in a fog of unprecedented uncertainty. With the list of countries Irish people can visit without restrictions set to shrink to just four from next Monday, and the increased incidence of Covid-19 here making overseas travel more difficult, it is unlikely there will be any clarity for weeks if not months ahead.

What countries are off the green list?

Under the new Covid-19 travel rules, which were implemented in this country earlier this month, the so-called green list of countries people can visit free of restrictions will get smaller from next Monday.

Just four countries remain on the list of countries, which Irish people can travel to without having to restrict their movements upon their return with Germany, Lithuania, Poland and Iceland to be removed from the list.

With rates of Covid-19 rising in most countries across Europe, the incidence in Germany, Lithuania, Poland and Iceland has risen above the threshold of 25 cases per 100,000 of population applied by the Irish authorities when establishing the current make-up of the list only last week.

Germany’s 14-day incidence of Covid-19 is now at 27 cases per 100,000 of population, Lithuania has 27.5 and Poland 25.6, while Iceland’s figure is over 90, according to the latest data from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

The Republic’s 14-day incidence of the disease stood at 68.2 cases per 100,000 people on Wednesday, according to the European figures – the Irish health authorities put it at over 70 – so it would not be even close to making it on to the list in any other country in the EU if they applied they same rules as here.

So, who is left on the green list?

While the Government also takes into account other factors when deciding which countries go on the green list, the four countries left are Cyprus, Finland, Latvia and a new addition, Lichtenstein.

But can we travel to those countries?

Well, Germany has declared the Dublin a Covid-19 risk area which means anyone arriving from Dublin has to take a Covid-19 test before they will be allowed in.

Berlin defines a risk area as anywhere with a new infection rate above 50 per 100,000 of population in the last seven day, and as of today, all arrivals from Dublin to Germany will be required to take a test either on arrival or within 10 days.

They must self-isolate until they receive a negative test result.

What about this new traffic light system?

Life under Level 5: What will the next six weeks look like for the State?

Fintan O'Toole: State bumbling along with ad hoc decision-making as Covid crisis worsens

Garda staff association concerned about implementation of Covid-19 enforcement measures

There may be EU-wide rules introduced within weeks if a new traffic light system is confirmed at an EU Council of Ministers meeting on October 15th.

That could see Irish people able to travel more widely, as long as the rate of infection here can be brought under control.

The new system would see a colour-coded system based on data provided by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control implemented. Under the new rules, green-coloured countries will cover territories where the number of cases is low (less than 25 per 100,000 people in a 14-day period) and the percentage of positive tests is less than 3 per cent.

Countries will be coloured orange where there is less than 50 cases per 100,000 people, while countries will be coloured red if there are more than 50 cases per 100,000.

People travelling from countries designated as red will continue to have to qurantine for 14 days or will have to have a Covid-19 test to show they are negative.

Under those rules – and based on figures from Wednesday – Germany, Italy, Sweden, Bulgaria, Greece, Norway, Slovakia, Lithuania, Estonia – would also be opened up to EU-wide travel. The Republic would not, however, be on the list.

And what about the rest of the world?

While much of the focus continues to be on travel within the EU, the European Economic Area and the UK, the new rules also envision a gradual lifting of restrictions for other countries, with Australia, Canada, Japan New Zealand, South Korea and Thailand among those that could see restrictions eased early, although much of Africa and Asia are also faring considerably better than Europe – and although a lot can happen in three weeks.

So does that mean we’re returning to how we used to travel?

No. The outgoing chief executive of International Airlines’ Group (IAG), which owns Aer Lingus, British Airways and Spain’s Iberia Willie Walsh warned this week that air travel may never return to the way it was pre-Covid.

Speaking as part of an Webinar hosted by Eurocontrol, the organisation of European air traffic control agencies, Walsh said the current crisis, which grounded airlines between March and June and left most flying at around half their capacity since then, was the worst the industry has experienced.

What are the airlines doing about restrictions?

Groups representing Irish and EU aviation and tourism have called for the European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen to introduced new Covid testing protocols.

In a letter sent to Ms Von der Leyen this week the groups, which represent both IAG and Ryanair among others, said the current “chaotic situation requires your immediate personal involvement, as president of the European Commission. We are thus urging you make this issue a top priority and calling on you to address this issue directly with the heads of state and government.”

It has called for an EU-wide testing protocol to avoid qurantines and reopen borders.

And what about refunds?

Passengers closer to home say they are still waiting for refunds for flights cancelled months ago at the height of the crisis, although both Ryanair and Aer Lingus have told The Irish Times they have processed the vast majority of refunds due.

In a statement, Aer Lingus said it had “received in excess of two million refund and voucher requests since the COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented level of flight cancellations”.

It said 1.8 million vouchers and refunds, or 90 per cent of the requests received have been processed. “The remaining 10 per cent of requests are more complex in nature, however we acknowledge that some customers have been waiting for too long and we have expanded our teams to address these older cases”.

Ryanair said that more than 90 per cent of its customers had been “accommodated with free flight moves, flight vouchers or cash refunds by the end of July”.

A spokesman said the airline was “working our way through the small remaining balance”.

He suggested that “the vast majority of remaining customers booked through unlicensed screenscrapers who made bookings using false passengers contact and payment details. Without an accurate contact email or credit card detail, Ryanair cannot refund these passengers. To assist them, Ryanair has developed a “Customer Verification” process accessible on Ryanair.com that allows these passengers to apply directly for and receive their flight refund.”

He also reiterated the airline’s frequently made calls for regulators here and in the UK “to issue regulations to compel screenscrapers such as Kiwi, LastMinute, EDreams On The Beach, Love Holidays. To pass on accurate customer credit card details and emails addresses at time of booking which would enable refunds to be processed directly to passengers in the event of cancellation.”