

Australian travel could be shut down for years despite Covid vaccines with border closed

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Australians now face being trapped for years in what has been dubbed 'prison island' with months of promises to open borders when millions are fully-vaccinated seemingly abandoned.

There's now no guarantee borders will reopen after Australia's Covid vaccine rollout is complete, the federal government has warned, due to the unpredictability of the virus.

Australians have been locked in their own country in all but exceptional circumstances since the international border was slammed shut on March 20, 2020 - and there is no date nor a timeline for reopening.

The situation has been slammed by experts, business leaders and commentators, as well as stranded Australians abroad, who accused the government of 'shifting the goal posts'.

Not only does the closure stop Australians from going abroad for holidays or to visit families, but the ban has also left a multi-billion dollar hole in the economy - not to mention the tens of thousands of citizens unable to return home.

But although the federal government has described vaccines as the 'best hope' to keep Australia's economy 'moving and connected' - it on Tuesday admitted it isn't prepared to hang the nation's global reopening on the job.



© AAPIMAGE

There's no guarantee borders will reopen after Australia's Covid vaccine rollout is complete, the federal government has admitted (pictured, passengers at Sydney Domestic Airport)



The government's cautious approach has been lashed by many business leaders and media commentators who say Australia has turned into a 'prison island' (pictured, arrivals at Ballina Airport)

'Vaccination alone is no guarantee that you can open up,' health minister Greg Hunt said on Tuesday.

'If the whole country were vaccinated, you couldn't just open the borders.

'We still have to look at a series of different factors: transmission, longevity [of vaccine protection] and the global impact - and those are factors which the world is learning about.'

The government's cautious approach was quickly lashed by business leaders and media commentators who said Australia has turned into a 'prison island'.

'It's a terrible message to be sending out because it discourages people from getting the vaccine,' outspoken Sky News host Rita Panahi said.

'It's basically saying we're still going to be closed off from the rest of the world.

'It's a terrible policy. How much longer can we remain a prison island? At some point we have to rejoin the rest of the world.'

Fears Aussies could stay stuck with border closures despite vaccine

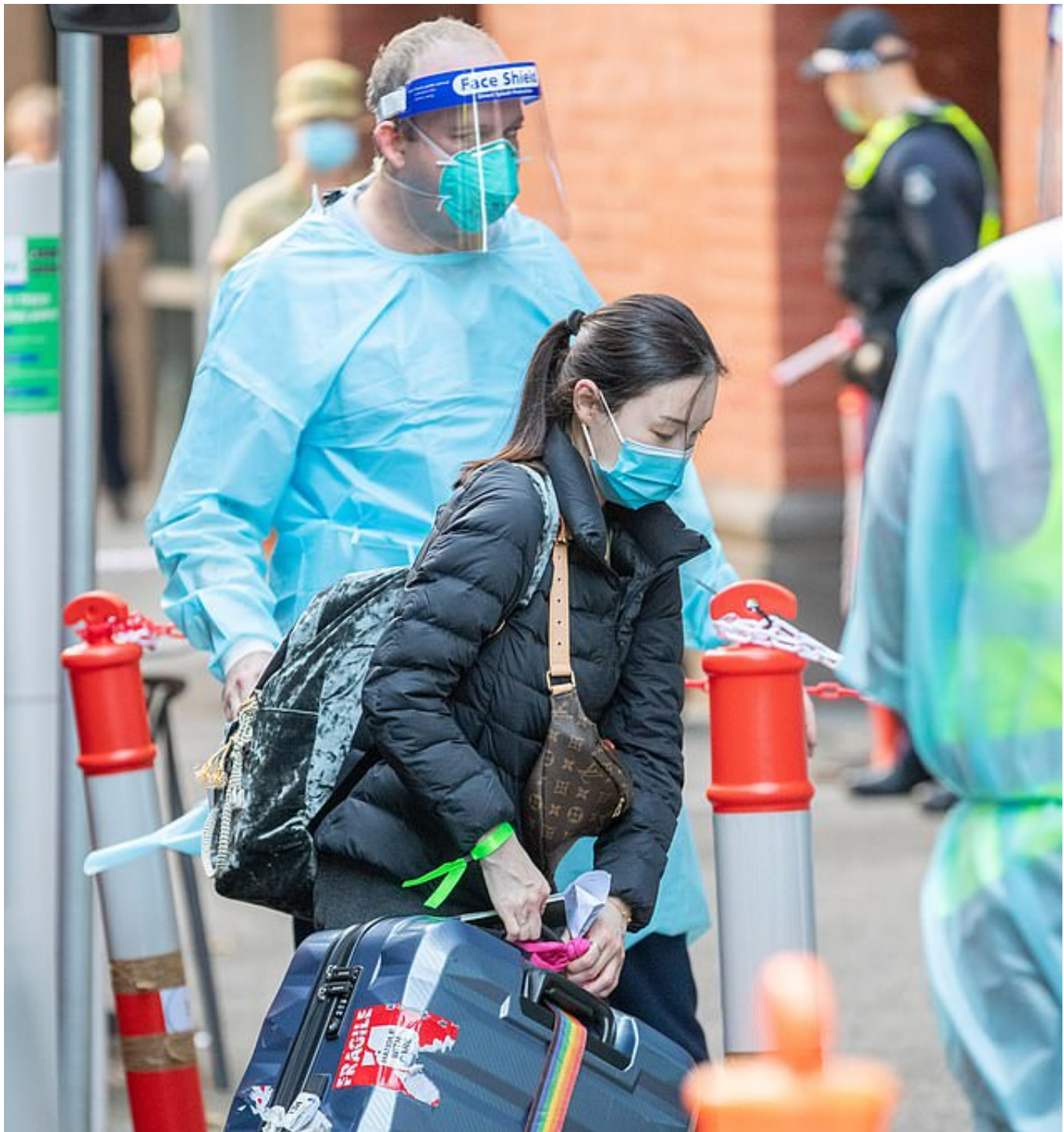


Lawyer Liz Hicks accused the government of 'shifting the goal posts' by previously touting vaccines as Australians' ticket to the outside world.

Fears are growing highly infectious 'mutant strains' seen in the UK, South Africa and Brazil could also make vaccines less effective in years to come, after an Israeli study this week found 'breakthrough infections' are possible after receiving the dose.

Such mutant variants are among the reasons why Mr Hunt and Prime Minister Scott Morrison have warned that widespread use of current vaccines may not be enough to open borders.

No coronavirus vaccines, including the AstraZeneca and Pfizer jabs Australia is relying on, are 100 per cent effective against the deadly virus.





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An international traveler carries their luggage into the Intercontinental Hotel on April 8 in Melbourne (pictured) - with harsh restrictions meaning most Aussies can't head abroad



© Getty Images

A passenger wearing a facemask arrives at Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport from New Zealand (pictured) - the only country in the world Australians can travel to

With over 23million cases still active across the world, Mr Morrison has

made no apologies for playing it safe.

'It's not safe right now to open up our international borders. Around the world, COVID-19 is still rife,' he said on Monday.

'We are still seeing increases in daily cases, particularly in the developing world... but around the world, it is still a very dangerous situation because of Covid.'

Back in January, the prime minister said vaccination in 2021 was 'a key component' in Australia's handling of the pandemic, and previously said it would be as 'mandatory as possible'.

He even said that if the vaccines were effective at preventing transmission, borders could open sooner than expected - but that is no longer the case.

'The key thing I think is going to impact on that decision, is going to be whether the evidence emerges about transmissibility, and how the vaccine protects against that,' Mr Morrison said in February 2021.

Scott Morrison warns that borders could stay SHUT for far longer





© Getty Images

Prime Minister Scott Morrison visits a vaccine manufacturing facility in Melbourne

(pictured) but health minister Greg Hunt has since admitted jabs won't be enough to open borders

Australia's top doctor professor Brendan Murphy also said vaccine efficacy would help relax borders as soon as the second half of 2021.

'In all likelihood they will have a significant effect on transmission,' he said in February.

'If that's the case they should allow progressively over the second half of this year, some relaxation of border measures and other measures.'

Innes Willox, from employer association AI Group, urged Australia to keep soldiering on with its vaccine rollout for the sake of the economy, saying the nation risks being trapped in a 'gilded cage' with indefinitely shut borders.

'Without an effective vaccine program our states would continue their lazy approach of needlessly shutting their borders to cover the inadequacies of their tracking and tracing systems,' Mr Willox told the [Sydney Morning Herald](#).

'Vaccines at least gives us a chance of reconnecting with what will still be a very different world.

'Without it, we risk being trapped in our gilded cage for many years to come.'



Passengers arrive on a Qantas flight from Melbourne at Sydney Airport to be met by health officials taking their temperature (pictured) with domestic travel back on across the country - but there's no end in sight for international border closures

The decision to bunker down for longer comes as stranded Australians accused the government of leaving them at the wayside overseas, with foreign nationals now outnumbering them for new arrivals Down Under.

Foreign nationals can get into Australia, but must still quarantine for the mandatory two weeks in hotels, by getting exemptions - usually for essential work such as doctors and nurses, or for compassionate family reasons.

In February, just 44 per cent of arrivals from overseas were Australian citizens, figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show.

Lucy Morrell from strandedaussies.com - a website set up during the pandemic to advocate for the 36,000 stuck overseas and unable to return home - said Mr Hunt's statements mean citizens and permanent residents will essentially become stateless.

She said as Anzac Day approaches its important to remember we're 'leaving Australians behind' in a crisis.



'If the whole country were vaccinated, you couldn't just open the borders,' Greg Hunt (pictured) said on Tuesday



Nurse Jen Ives receives a Covid-19 vaccination in Tasmania at the North West Regional Hospital (pictured) as the rollout continues slower than planned

Australia has not recorded a single case of community transmission within the last week, with all new infections tucked away in mandatory hotel quarantine.

Deloitte economist Chris Richardson anticipates there will be some sort of quarantine remaining for incoming travellers for some time.

'That keeps international travel - both inbound and outbound - pretty weak in 2022, and it may not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2024,' he said.

Last week health authorities recommended the AstraZeneca vaccine should only be given to people above 50 due to the risk of blood clotting, sending the rollout into chaos.



Registered Nurse Rebecca DeJong receives an injection of COVID-19 vaccine, administered by Registered Nurse Morgan Sleader at Townsville University Hospital on March 5, 2021

It was the vaccine the Australian government was relying heavily on, but it has since ordered an additional 20 million Pfizer vaccine doses that will be shipped from abroad later in the year.

That means Australia's vaccination program may not be complete until well into 2022 - far behind many other developed nations and even worse than the likes of Rwanda, Indonesia and Bermuda.

On Friday, 88,500 new vaccine doses were administered, bringing the total number inoculated to 1.16 million - well short of the four million Mr Morrison originally promised by the end of March.

Mr Morrison dumped the target on Sunday due to 'uncertainties' surrounding vaccine imports.



Passengers at Sydney International Airport arrive after flying in from Auckland, New Zealand on September 18, 2020

Australia has rapidly fallen behind other nations for its Covid-19 vaccine rollout leaving it 102th in the world, as doctors call for state governments to take over.

The federal Government had originally planned to have four million doses administered by April 1, but was 3.4 million doses short of meeting its target.

So far, the rollout has been plagued by delivery delays and complications, with many GP clinics simply unable to give out the desired number of jobs.

The Australian Medical Association slammed the rollout delays as 'unnecessary'.

WHICH CORONAVIRUS VARIANTS COULD WEAKEN VACCINES?

Viruses are constantly evolving, so there are and always will be countless 'variants' of coronavirus.

But not all variants are worrisome. Most are no more dangerous than the most common form. Some are weaker.

In the U.S., there are currently five 'variants of concern.' All appear to be more infectious than the 'wild type' that caused the vast majority of infections in the previous waves of the pandemic. Only some might weaken vaccine effectiveness or evade vaccines.

'UK VARIANT' B117

IS IT MORE INFECTIOUS? Yes, estimated to be 50-70% more infectious

IS IT MORE DEADLY? That isn't well-established. The latest research suggests it may be up to 55% more fatal.

CAN IT 'ESCAPE' VACCINES OR REINFECTION PEOPLE? No. Vaccines appear so far to work just as well against B117 and it does not seem to reinfect people.

'SOUTH AFRICAN' VARIANT B1351

IS IT MORE INFECTIOUS? Yes, estimated to be about 50% more infectious

IS IT MORE DEADLY? No, so far the variant appears to have about the same mortality risks as forms that are more prevalent in the U.S.

CAN IT 'ESCAPE' VACCINES OR REINFECTION PEOPLE? There is early evidence to suggest that vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna are weakened by the variant, but are still protective. Johnson & Johnson's vaccine was 82% effective at preventing severe COVID-19 in trials in South Africa, where the variant is dominant.

'BRAZILIAN' VARIANT P1

IS IT MORE INFECTIOUS? Perhaps. It quickly became dominant in Brazil, and reinfection was common among COVID-19 survivors in Manaus. One study estimated it to be twice as infectious as the older form of the virus.

IS IT MORE DEADLY? Perhaps. One study estimated that the risk of death from COVID-19 increased by 10 to 80% after the variant became dominant in Brazil, but the health care system there collapsed, making cause and effect unclear.

CAN IT 'ESCAPE' VACCINES OR REINFECTION PEOPLE? It's well established that the Brazilian variant reinfects people, suggesting antibodies developed from prior infection or via vaccines based on the original strain don't work as well against it.

'CALIFORNIAN' VARIANTS B1427 AND B1429

IS IT MORE INFECTIOUS? Yes, they are estimated to be 20% more infectious.

IS IT MORE DEADLY? Unclear. There is not enough data to show an increase in mortality risks.

CAN IT 'ESCAPE' VACCINES OR REINFECTION PEOPLE? Both variants make the antibodies triggered by vaccines somewhat weaker in lab tests. A

'monoclonal' antibody therapy from Eli Lilly doesn't appear to work well against them, though combination antibody 'cocktails' from Lilly and Regeneron still seem to work.