

NEW ZEALAND UPDATED

Covid-19 coronavirus: Tearful reunions set as NZ/Australia travel bubble opens

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🕒 10 minutes to read

(Pearse et al., 2021)

Kiwi travellers share their excitement as they prepare to board the first flights to Australia under the Trans-Tasman travel bubble.
Audio / Sophie Trigger

NZ Herald

By: **Adam Pearse**, **Juliette Sivertsen** and **Sophie Trigger**

"We're heading out!" a delighted Angus Crampton declared at Wellington Airport before catching a flight to Sydney to see his family.

Sydney-based Rowan Heath will see her 85-year-old mother Heather in Auckland today, one of many tearful reunions as quarantine-free flights finally begin between New Zealand and Australia.

Heath, a 58-year-old teacher from Manly, will be one of the first Australians to take advantage of the transtasman travel bubble opening when she lands about 4.30pm.

About 400 quarantine-free flights per week will arrive and depart Auckland Airport on transtasman routes operated by Air New Zealand, Jetstar and Qantas by the end of April - a

stark contrast to the 36 flights to and from Australia in the first week of April.

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7.05am: Auckland Airport chief executive Adrian Littlewood

7.10am: NZ Herald Travel writer Juliette Sivertsen - on first Auckland-Sydney flight

As confidence in the bubble grows, experts believe Australian travellers could shoot at least \$1 billion into the national economy - a godsend for struggling local businesses hit by the global pandemic and 12-month border closure.

With her two brothers also in Australia, Heath spoke to the Herald about how hard the separation from her beloved mother had been.

"At the beginning, she was very, very teary saying, 'I'm never going to see you again', and we were like, 'No it's okay', but at 85 you just don't know," she said.

"It has been awful, but thank goodness for digital technology because otherwise it would have been absolutely horrendous."

Normally, Heath crossed the ditch about four times a year. Now her whānau would be spacing out their trips to share time with their mother, who is in a rest home.

Heath expressed her gratitude for how New Zealand handled the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I've been really happy knowing that [mum] has been there, knowing that she's safe."

More than 5000 Air New Zealand passengers are booked to travel between the two countries on Monday aboard 30 flights between Brisbane, Melbourne, Gold Coast, Perth, Sydney, and Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

Annie Kane is on her way to visit her sick brother in Melbourne, who she has not seen for two years.

She already had a flight and MIQ booked prior to the announcement of the trans-Tasman bubble, so she was feeling blessed that she now no longer had to quarantine.

The first flight is due to take off just after 7.30am. Auckland Airport chief executive Adrian Littlewood said it's an important day that has taken a long time to get to.

"It's great to see Tasman going again, something that used to be about as uneventful as going to the supermarket, so it's certainly an exciting thing to get back to normal."

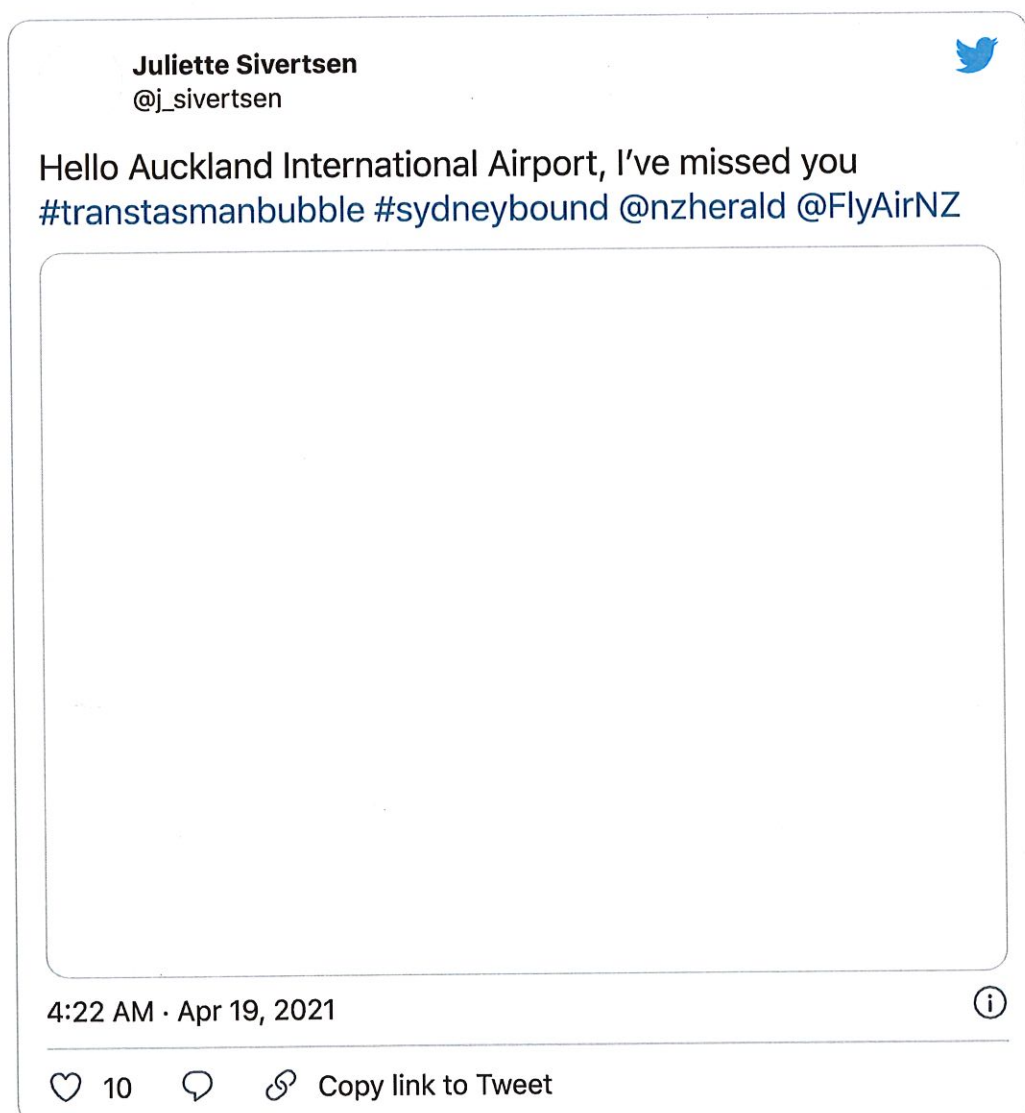
He said the transtasman bubble has taken longer than anticipated. "I think the path has been a bit unclear as we've all lived through the realities of Covid, and there's no straight-shot out of it either, there's always risks of things changing as we look ahead.

"The tourism industry and all travellers will be waiting to see how people feel about travelling again internationally, but I think it will gradually come back."

Littlewood told Newstalk ZB's Mike Yardley there were 32 return flights scheduled today. Last week there were 36 flights to Australia across the entire week.

"We've got a range of ports across Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, as well as Gold Coast coming in. Later this week we'll have Hobart for the first time. So all up, nine ports across Australia."

Littlewood said Australia was Auckland Airport's biggest market and the Tasman connection was critical to the bottom line.



"It's major for us, and for the tourism industry. Trans Tasman was about 40 percent of our international business, so to get that back really is the next step in the slow recovery of our business."

Duty free shops would slowly be reopening at the terminal, along with food and beverage outlets, but Littlewood said the others will take time as the passenger market recovers.

"You've got to remember these shops have been shut for over a year, they've de-stocked, they've let staff go, so to bring that back does take some time."

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After a year of closed borders I'm on the very first quarantine free flight to Australia under the new travel bubble. Never seen Auckland airport so quiet.

6:02 AM · Apr 19, 2021



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He said discussions about a travel bubble with the Cook Islands were ongoing, with many touting "summer in May" as a target date, but that was a decision for the Government.

Littlewood says he's completely confident in the airport's ability to accommodate quarantine-free travel, with multiple checks and audits from the organisations involved, but said there may be some bumps along the way.

"We're bringing a lot of staff back in and they'll have to get used to the new covid routines at the airport if they haven't been around for a year or so."

Cheryl Mackie was departing from Wellington to go see her two daughters and grandson in Melbourne. "It's been 13 months," she said. "I never thought the day would come actually.

"I can't believe I'm here. I always thought there'd be another obstacle."

Angus Crampton was also at Wellington Airport to catch a flight to Sydney to be reunited with his brother Sam.

"My sister won a competition to get four return flights over, which is awesome.

"We're heading out!"

Crampton said his brother would have a box of newborn puppies waiting in the car.

Dan and Jacqui Cottrell, with sons Charlie, Zachary and William, were off to Melbourne to see family who hadn't yet met their youngest boy. "[We're] a bit emotional," Jacqui Cottrell said. "They haven't met this little guy yet."

Dan said they would be driving up through Victoria to Albury, near the border with New South Wales.

"Jacqui is there for six weeks. I've got 10 days, I've got to get back to work."

Air New Zealand chief executive Greg Foran said he relished the ability to bring whānau together again.

"We're humbled to be part of these reunions and reconnecting people who have missed out on so much over the last year."

He anticipated the national carrier would operate more than 300 flights per week during the July school holidays.

Customers should plan to check-in at least three hours prior to departure on trans-tasman flights. Masks are required on board and in the airports.

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The Australian Travel Declaration must be completed at least 72 hours before departure, along with any state declarations. More details can be found at airnz.click/QFT2AU.

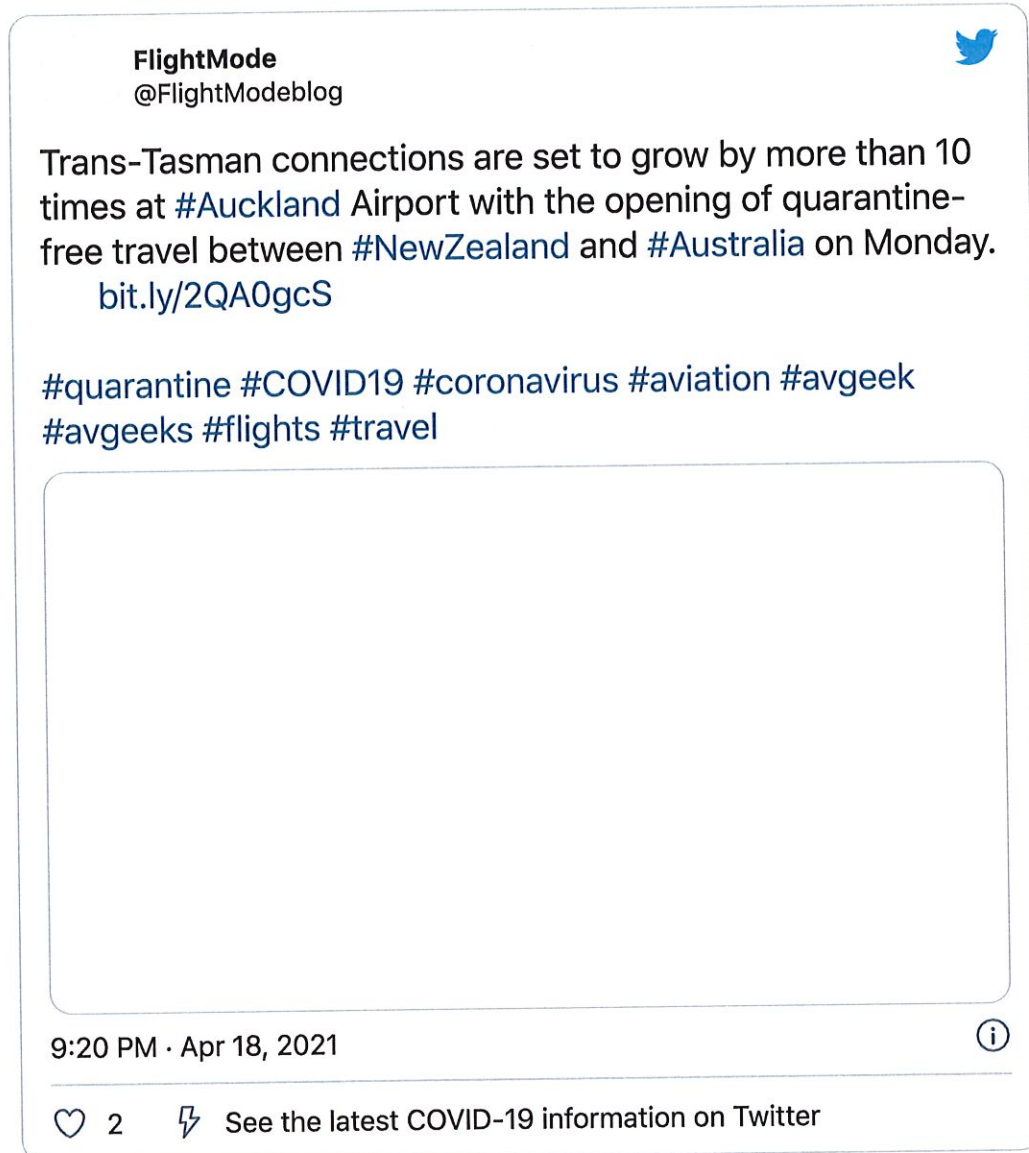
Nineteen-year-old Tyson Kempton was leaving from Auckland, bound for Sydney to visit his girlfriend who moved there a month ago. He's excited to see her and is looking forward to a big hug at the arrivals gate, something that would not have been possible only hours earlier.

Auckland Airport chief executive Adrian Littlewood expected potential travellers to be cautious at first, as confidence in the bubble grew.

"We saw it unfold in the domestic market, where passenger numbers have gradually recovered since New Zealand began moving out of lockdown nearly a year ago."

From Wellington this week, there will be 27 return flights to Australia, increasing to about 40 per week by the end of May. Pre-Covid, Australia and the Cook Islands accounted for 66 per cent of Wellington Airport's international travel.

Tourism New Zealand is predicting Australian travellers could bring in at least \$1b by the end of the year.



In 2019, Australian visitors accounted for 19 per cent of the total international tourism market spend in Auckland with a value of about \$933m.

Money was far from many travellers' minds on Monday morning however, as excited passengers checked in at airports.

Rara Akariri was at Auckland Airport, headed for Melbourne to see her daughter and five grandchildren, who are aged between 7 and 14. She hasn't seen them for two years.

Akariri said she was "over the moon" to hear about the transtasman bubble and expects it will be a tearful reunion on the other side when she arrives.

In a joint statement, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the start of two-way quarantine-free travel reflected the sustained efforts of both countries in managing the virus.

Morrison called today's milestone a "win-win" for Australians and New Zealanders.

"Both countries have done a remarkable job in protecting our communities from Covid and two-way flights are an important step in our road out."

Ardern said it was "truly exciting" to start quarantine-free travel with Australia.

"Be it returning family, friends or holiday makers, New Zealand says welcome and enjoy yourself.

"The bubble marks a significant step in both countries' reconnection with the world and it's one we should all take a moment to be very proud of."

The Tasman leaders said in the statement that Australia and New Zealand were exploring opportunities to expand quarantine-free travel to other countries in the Pacific when it is safe to do so.

Auckland mayor Phil Goff welcomed the bubble's anticipated boost to local business, as well as its social benefits.

"The lockdowns have been tough for everyone on both sides of the Tasman, and I know there will be many people who will be thrilled to be reunited with their loved ones, here and in Australia.

"It will give a much-needed boost to those involved in providing tourism, hospitality and retail services, whose jobs and businesses were badly affected by the border closure caused by the pandemic."

NZ Herald travel writer Juliette Sivertsen is flying Auckland to Sydney and said the terminal is buzzing this morning.

"The airport is full of very very happy, excited travelers, most of them going off to see family they have not seen in a very long time."

She said told Newstalk ZB's Mike Yardley most of the travel seems be people wanting to reconnect with friends and family, and many were keen to book the first flight out. "There are a lot of people who have grandchildren or sisters or other family members or perhaps older parents or sick family members - they're all expecting it to be a very tearful reunion on the other side when they finally see their loved ones.

Sivertsen said going through security was very straight forward and not too busy with other flights heading out to Perth, Brisbane, Gold Coast and Melbourne this morning. She said

there weren't any health checks, most people are wearing masks and passengers have to fill out a declaration before they land in Australia.

For those passengers keen to squeeze in some duty free shopping, Sivertsen said they were greeted by enthusiastic staff. "They were all very excited to greet us as we were walking past, very energetic and happy to see passengers again."