

Vaccinated passengers essential for long-haul travel : United CEO

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Chicago : United Airlines is eager for long-haul international travel to return following the coronavirus pandemic. But the Chicago-based carrier's CEO Scott Kirby said it requires vaccinated flyers.

"For anybody who wants to travel long-haul - go to Europe this summer, or go to New Zealand or Australia [during] the North American winter, I expect you're going to have to have a vaccine," United CEO Scott Kirby said during an event recently.

Kirby's rationale that travellers will need vaccines is based on firm logic. The first European countries to reopen to visitors, including Croatia, Iceland and Greece, all require proof of vaccination from travellers.

And, recently, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the EU was considering reopening to vaccinated travellers this summer. Similar rules are expected for the proposed US-UK travel corridor.

Earlier in April, United unveiled plans for new nonstop flights to Croatia, Iceland and Greece this summer. And, despite concerns about vaccine hesitancy in the US, bookings for the new flights are "through the roof," said Kirby.

Beyond those select countries, Kirby said the news of the EU and maybe the UK reopening to vaccinated Americans this summer is "encouraging."

United needs 65 per cent of business and long-haul international travel to resume

before it can return to profitability. Both were mainstays of its business before the crisis with US domestic leisure travel - the only segment that has significantly recovered to date - amounting to only about a third of the airline's revenues. United expects business travellers to begin returning in earnest from September.

United plans to fly roughly 55 per cent of its 2019 passenger capacity in the second quarter. That is split heavily in favour of domestic where 64 per cent will fly compared to just 36 per cent internationally, according to reports. Schedules for the rest of the summer, including July and August, are not yet finalised.

In addition, United will have more opportunities to generate revenue this summer than it has in recent months. The airline is reinstalling six seats to each of its 190 Embraer E175 jets - the most common aircraft in the United Express fleet - after removing them last year, and launching more than 20 new seasonal routes targeting beach-bound vacationers.