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# The incidence of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism in the Brazilian Northeast

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# The incidence of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism in the Brazilian Northeast

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## **Abstract**

The tourism-pandemic relationship raises different analyses at all scales given the complexity of the tourist activity, which has its main resource in space, and the spread of Covid-19 which has led to changes in human behavior. Considering that the northeastern region of Brazil has been configured, over the years, as an important reception hub of tourists, the article aims to analyze the impact of the pandemic on the tourist activity of that region. It also discusses the influence of tourism on the spread of the virus in the territory from the flows and massive circulation of tourists. Methodologically, the quantitative-qualitative and exploratory research were used with bibliographic survey, documentary research, and data collection as procedures to support the intended analysis. Finally, the challenges and trends of tourism activity in the region are pointed out, considering the dynamics from the actions of the main public and private agents.

**Keywords:** Covid-19. Tourism. Tourist flows. Northeast region.

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## **Incidência da pandemia da Covid-19 no turismo da região Nordeste do Brasil**

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## **Resumo**

Em todas as escalas, a relação turismo-pandemia suscita diferentes análises frente à complexidade tanto da atividade turística, que tem no espaço seu principal recurso, quanto da propagação da Covid-19, que ensejou mudanças no comportamento humano. Tendo em vista que a região Nordeste do Brasil se configurou ao longo dos anos como um importante polo receptor de turistas, o artigo analisa o impacto da pandemia na atividade turística da região e discute a influência do turismo na disseminação do vírus no território a partir dos fluxos e da circulação massiva de turistas. Metodologicamente, utilizou-se da pesquisa de base quanti-qualitativa e do tipo exploratória, adotando como procedimentos a revisão bibliográfica, a pesquisa documental e o levantamento de dados, a fim de subsidiar a análise pretendida. Ao fim, apontam-se desafios e tendências da atividade turística na região, considerando sua dinâmica a partir das ações dos principais agentes públicos e privados.

## La incidencia de la pandemia de Covid-19 en el turismo de la región Nordeste de Brasil

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### Resumen

En todas las escalas, la relación turismo-pandemia plantea análisis ante a la complejidad tanto de la actividad turística, que tiene en el espacio su principal recurso, como de la diseminación de la Covid-19 que ha cambiado el comportamiento humano. Considerando que la región Nordeste de Brasil se ha convertido, a lo largo de los años, como importante polo turístico, la ponencia objetiva analizar el impacto de la pandemia en la actividad turística de esa región, así como discutir la influencia del turismo en la difusión del virus en el territorio desde los flujos y circulación masiva de turistas. Metodológicamente, se ha utilizado la investigación cuantitativa-cualitativa y exploratoria y ha presentado como procedimientos el levantamiento bibliográfico, la investigación documental y levantamiento de datos, con el fin de subsidiar el análisis pretendido. Finalmente, se señalan los retos y tendencias de la actividad turística en la región, considerando su dinámica desde las acciones de los principales agentes públicos y privados.

**Palabras claves:** Covid-19. Turismo. Fluxos turísticos. Región Nordeste.

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### Introduction

Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020), with the virus spreading rapidly to other countries across the world.

According to international contamination data provided by studies and projections, the main factor of dissemination was the circulation of people across the boundaries via commercial flights (Silveira et. al. 2020; Oliveira Neto; Garcia; Spinussi, 2020; Carneiro; Allis, 2021), following the urban spatial configuration of the major populational arrangements that concentrated the main hubs of transportation, tourism and business.

The fast spread of the virus, the high death rate and the diverse economic and social consequences disruptively marked the globalization process that is immediately expressed in the modern tourism industry, mainly characterized by the decline in travel time to cover large distances, which Harvey (1999) named time-space compression.

In this sense, with the advent of the pandemic, the globalization of tourism and globalized tourism bring some important reflections upon the relationship tourism-pandemic-globalization, imbricated elements that demonstrate how hard the international was affected by the sanitary crisis triggered by Covid-19, which caused the paralysis of the sector facing the measures of social isolation and resulted in trillion-dollar losses; and that, contradictorily, the activities comprised by the sector played a significant role in the worldwide spread of the disease.

Similarly, Silveira et. al. (2020) and Barros (2021) found that the pandemic of Covid-19 accentuated the problems arising from the process of totalitarian or globalitarian globalization, as previously discussed by Milton Santos (2000). Its effects on public services and private health systems in several ultra-neoliberal countries (Davis, 2020), and the commercial dependence on Chinese products to ensure the initial measures to address the spread of the virus (Baidou, 2020) explain the fragility of ideas such as global governance with political and economic-territorial control; state management directed to the interests of the market and the reproduction of capital; responsiveness of neoliberal capitalism to crises and health catastrophes; and the unilateral dependence on global inputs and supplies.

Despite being a global event, the Covid-19 pandemic occurs in unequal time-spaces, so that the difference in the speed of contagion between countries and nearby regions "reflected both the policies adopted by the public authorities to contain the spread of the virus - quarantine, isolation, and social distancing - and the population's adherence to such policies" (Barros, 2021, p. 2).

The limitations set by governments around the world following the discovery of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in China at the end of 2019 caused numerous impacts on tourism, considering that it encompasses a set of activities - which integrate the tourism system - and that are sustained by the inherent flows of human mobility. Measures like the closure of borders, even temporarily, restricted the circulation of travelers and the offer of non-essential services, such as events, lodging and catering businesses, adding to the "psychosocial impact caused by the isolation and by the demands for sanitary care, such as the use of masks" (Santos; Campos; Rodrigues, 2021, p. 114).

The complexity of the new dynamics established for the circulation of people was produced by the uncertainties imposed by the health crisis and, also, by the fact that, conversely, tourism and travel themselves contributed to the spread of the virus (Nicolaides et. al., 2019). Thus, much has been said about how the sector was affected by the pandemic; however, it is also important to highlight how the agents of the activity - including tourists - have acted during this period, because, as remarked by Iaquinto (2020, p. 2), "to understand the role of tourism in the pandemic, it is necessary to understand how mobility is exerted by the tourists".

In this period, the air and road transportation sectors started displaying contradictory behaviors. While the necessary maintenance of basic labor activities and the search for food/pharmacological supplies to support and/or prevent new cases becomes indispensable for the functioning of the biological and economic structure of society, it also suggests the influence of the transport network as a vector of dissemination through the maintenance (even if partial)

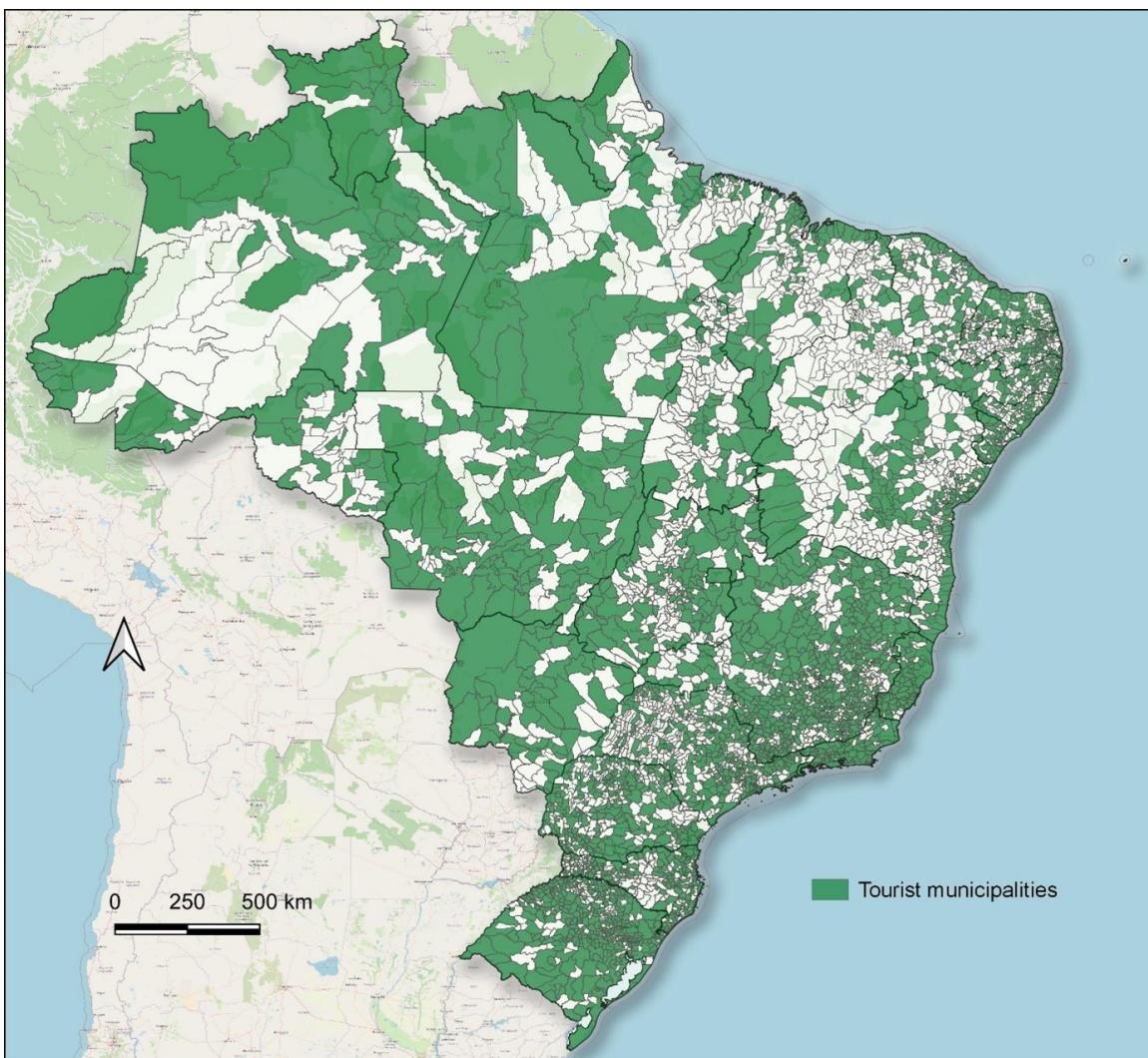
of tourist and leisure travel. The spread of the virus in the West might have been caused by air travels “by middle and high-income passengers, especially on business activities and tourism in the European continent” (Silveira et. al. 2020, p. 4).

The present research followed a quantitative-qualitative and exploratory design, having as procedures the bibliographical survey, documentary research, and data survey that grounded the elaboration of graphs and cartograms. Regarding the Brazilian domestic travels, the data on air transport of passengers and cargo were based on information released by the National Civil Aviation Agency (Anac). For the period between 2019 and the first quarter of 2022, the tourism statistical yearbook was consulted (Mtur, 2021) e o General Register of Employed and Unemployed (Brasil, 2020a). Furthermore, data were also collected from a specific survey conducted in the period from February to May 2021 under the Research Network Tourism in Times of Pandemic: a multi and trans-scalar approach using the Google Forms tool, aiming to measure the impacts, the ongoing strategies and tourism trends. The impacts of the pandemic were found to be different in what regards intraregional and interregional scales. When comparing this information with the special data on Covid-19 published in the profile of Brazilian municipalities (IBGE, 2020a) and the Tourism Bulletin of the Strategic Management Bureau of the Ministry of Tourism for February 2022, the specificities of segments, resources, and attractions stand out. Such information, combined with the actions by municipal and state governments in certain locations to combat the pandemic, mainly in northeastern Brazil, highlight both the weaknesses and challenges imposed by the Covid-19, as well as the need to overcome the economic and social repercussions on the workforce and businesses of / in tourism characteristic activities (TCA).

In the analysis of the domestic tourism scenario, it is worth noting that cities where airports are located assume a relative influence over adjacent urban areas, attracting consumers, business meetings and tourists to their surroundings, thus generating more interactions and, in times of pandemic, increased contagion. These urban agglomerations also concentrate the tourism infrastructure (accommodation facilities, travel agencies - outbound and inbound -, supply of catering services, among others), since they are characterized as central elements in the hierarchy of tourism networks based on the synchronization of goods and services.

According to this agglutinating perspective of services, in the new tourism map (Radar do Turismo, 2022a), the 322 tourist regions comprised by the Brazilian scenario register 2,542 municipalities categorized as A, B, C, D, and E according to their influence in the tourism economy state and nationwide (Map I). Nevertheless, this categorization uses variables that are directly linked to the hierarchy of the state's population arrangements, since the number of lodging facilities and jobs generated, the estimates of domestic and international visitors, and the collection of federal taxes depend on the infrastructure, road/air connections, and on the existing natural and man-made resources.

**Map 1 – Brazil – New tourism map – 2022**



source: Anuário estatístico do turismo (2021).  
elaborated and adapted by the authors, 2022.

Thus, in regional and intra-regional tourism analysis, the particularities of its development or resurgence during the pandemic period, while revealing the otherness in the dynamics of tourism activity, shows the importance of public policies and effective localized actions that fight the expansion of contamination, in favor of the maintenance of the local economy. Far from establishing a causal relationship, tourist circulation in the pandemic expresses the contradictory and strategic character of the production and reproduction of spaces in an unequal society.

Grounded in this contextualization, the objective of the present study is to analyze the impact of the pandemic on the tourist activity in the Northeast region of Brazil, as well as discuss the influence of tourism in the dissemination of the virus in the territory considering the flow and massive circulation of tourists. For this, it is structured in five sections, including this Introduction. The second section presents some considerations about the pandemic in the global scenario and data about the impact on tourism in Brazil. The third section addresses the effects of the pandemic on tourism in the Northeast region. The following section discusses the new challenges for tourism resumption. The last section presents the final considerations.

## **Considerations about the pandemic in tourism and tourism in the pandemic**

As already known and widely discussed by news reports, documentaries and studies, the Covid-19 pandemic, as an event, transformed the projection of the materialization of productive and consumption processes, having direct and indirect repercussions in the spaces (fixed) and, mainly, in the characteristics of the circulation of people (flows) as its final depository, such as “[...] events change things, transform objects, giving them, right there where they are, new characteristics” (Santos, M., 2006, p. 116).

Thus, it is important to consider that the last two years were heavily marked by major obstacles and challenges for many sectors, including tourism worldwide. Social isolation associated with other WHO recommendations influenced people's routine, tourist consumer behavior, and tourism practices as well. According to the World Tourism Organization - WTO (2020), all countries have implemented numerous measures to mitigate the negative impacts of Covid-19 and, above all, to stimulate the recovery of the sector. The pandemic had a relevant impact worldwide, with scalar implications and the emergence of new paradigms in the conception of “everyday tourism” (Nicolas, 2000, p. 98), causing the denial of some of the previous tourist social practices (such as travel to famous and trendy tourist destinations which gather tourists from around the world, overcrowding attractions and, consolidating the phenomenon of overtourism) and the emergence of preferences, criteria and conditions that previously did not exist (such as the search for destinations with fewer tourists, close to home, as well as tourist facilities and services complying with biosecurity standards) consistent with the new limits imposed to the activity.

Also, according to a report by the WTO on the pandemic and associated travel restrictions, in mid-April 2020:

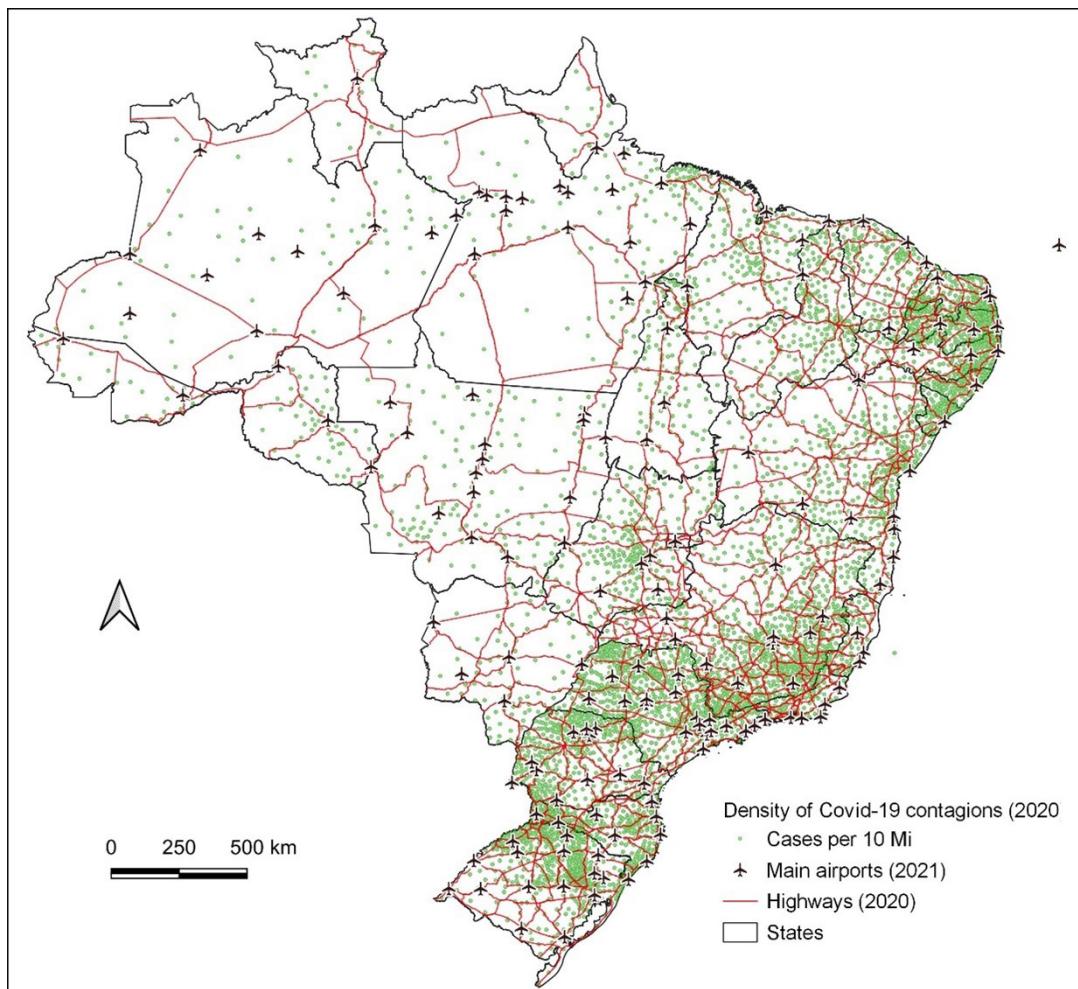
100% of the global destinations introduced travel restrictions in response to the pandemic. 97 destinations (45%) fully or partially closed their borders to tourists. 65 destinations (30%) fully or partially suspended the international flights. 39 destinations (18%) closed their borders to specific countries (OMT, 2020, p. 6).

Overall, 2020 can be regarded the worst year for tourism on a global scale. According to the WTO (2021), international arrivals worldwide fell by 74%, jeopardizing between 100 and 120 million direct jobs in the sector.

In the case of Brazil, the first months of the pandemic were marked by the absence of guidelines about recommendations and sanitary measures to contain the rapid spread of Covid-19. With this, the federative units began to define and adopt their own actions to minimize the damage generated by the virus.

Analyzing the road infrastructures responsible for the largest flows of people in Brazil, as well as the hierarchy and urban centrality of the main population centers, the spatial diffusion of the pandemic followed hierarchical patterns starting in the capital cities, according to the density of the existing transport structure in the country, the measures adopted by each public manager, and the level of centrality of each city (Map 2).

**Map 2 – Density of Covid-19 spread and the main transport infrastructures in Brazil - 2020.**



sources: IBGE (2020a), Brasil (2020b) and Anac (2021).

elaboration and adaptation: The authors, 2022.

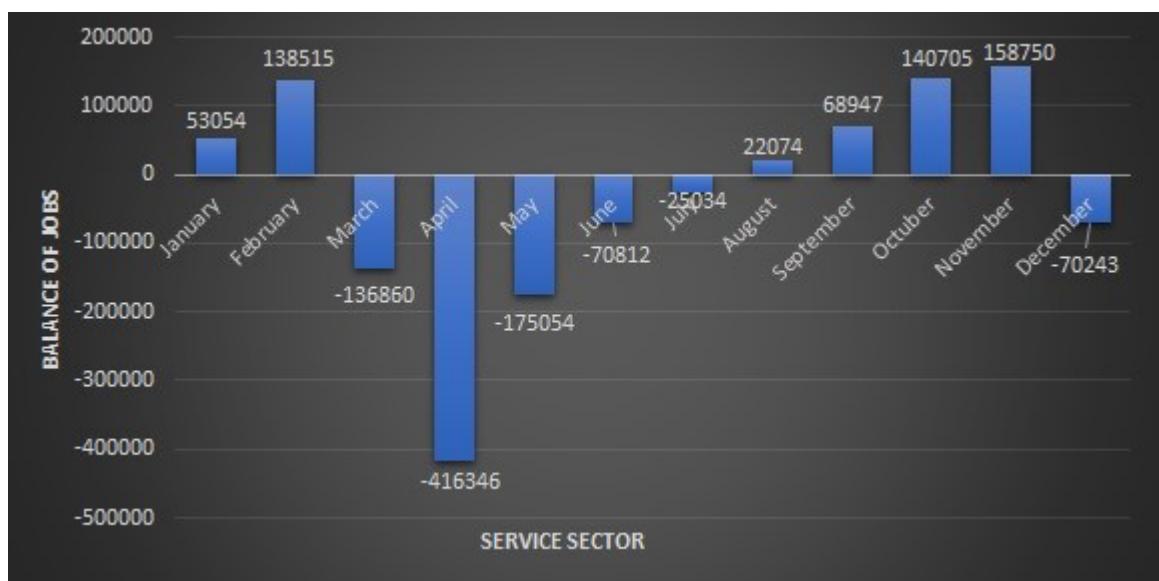
The study on air connections 2019-2020 regarding the networks and flows of the territory (IBGE, 2021) analyzes the configurations and spatial dynamics of the Brazilian urban network, mainly the aspects of air accessibility of people and goods that influence the movement of information, money and management capacity of the cities. Thus, the comparative analysis regarding the period before Covid-19 pandemic and its spread in 2020 reveals the impacts of the event on the sector.

Therefore, the evaluation of the first pandemic moment (2020) reveals the impact on the quantity of passenger transport, since there was an average annual reduction of 53.0% in Brazil. The consequences were the “significant reduction of flow and available destinations, especially in regular service with at least one flight per month, dropping from 96 to 46 served cities” (IBGE, 2021, p. 73). Fact that reveals, at first glance, the disconnection between the main outbound agents of South and Southeast and inbound destinations in North and Northeast, still according to IBGE (2021, p. 71):

[...] Despite having consolidated a regular service and considerable volume of passenger and cargo movement, the cities of the North and Northeast regions - especially the metropolises and regional capitals - have their networks focused on the connectivity with the South-Central portion, establishing a large longitudinal axis, with little articulation among themselves.

This connectivity gap occurred abruptly as from April 2020 at Brazilian airports, as landings dropped by 94.5% when compared to the same period in 2019. This stemmed from the beginning of the first “wave” of contamination and the peak of the average daily Covid-19 deaths in the country. However, the recovery of air flows and, consequently, the tourism economy, showed a resumption of perspective in September; although the service sector started to oscillate due to the following waves of the pandemic (Graph 1).

**Graph 1 – Balance of employment in the service sector – 2020**



source: Brasil (2020a).

With specific regard to the characteristic tourism activities, 18.43% of formal workers were laid off in 2020, with emphasis on the catering industry (restaurants and bars), accommodation (lodging facilities) and transport, which lost 2/3 of the jobs when compared to 2019 (Table 1).

In addition to the inefficient public policies, the strong appeal of the business community, the widespread denialism about the seriousness of the disease by some public administrators and society that delayed the vaccination rollout throughout the country, the variation in the number of travels to domestic destinations, especially coastal locations, caused a turning point in the Brazilian health issue: while it promotes the resumption of economic activities, it contributes to the onset of a second wave of the Covid-19 (Cruz, 2020).

**Table 1 – Job variation in the tourism characteristic activities - 2019–2020**

job variation in tourism characteristic activities				
ACT	2019	2020	variation	%
lodging	336,663	271,902	-64,761	-19,23
catering	1,314,836	1,051,147	-263,689	-20,05
land transport	192,971	165,576	-27,395	-14,19
water transport	8,174	7,452	-722	-8,83
air transport	63,.657	46,389	-17,268	-27,12
transport rent	59,159	54,376	-4,783	-8,08
tour agencies	67,728	46,600	-21,128	-31,19
culture and leisure	61,104	49,632	-11,472	-18,77
<b>total</b>	<b>2,104,292</b>	<b>1,693,074</b>	<b>-411,218</b>	<b>-18,43</b>

source: Anuário estatístico do turismo (2021).

In terms of international flows, for the first quarter of 2021, 180 million fewer tourists traveled, corresponding to a reduction of 83% when compared to the same quarter of the previous year, the pre-pandemic period (ONU, 2021), considering that the WHO only declared the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. At that time, Asia-Pacific and Europe were considered the most affected regions, showing reduction of 94% and 83% in international tourist arrivals, respectively.

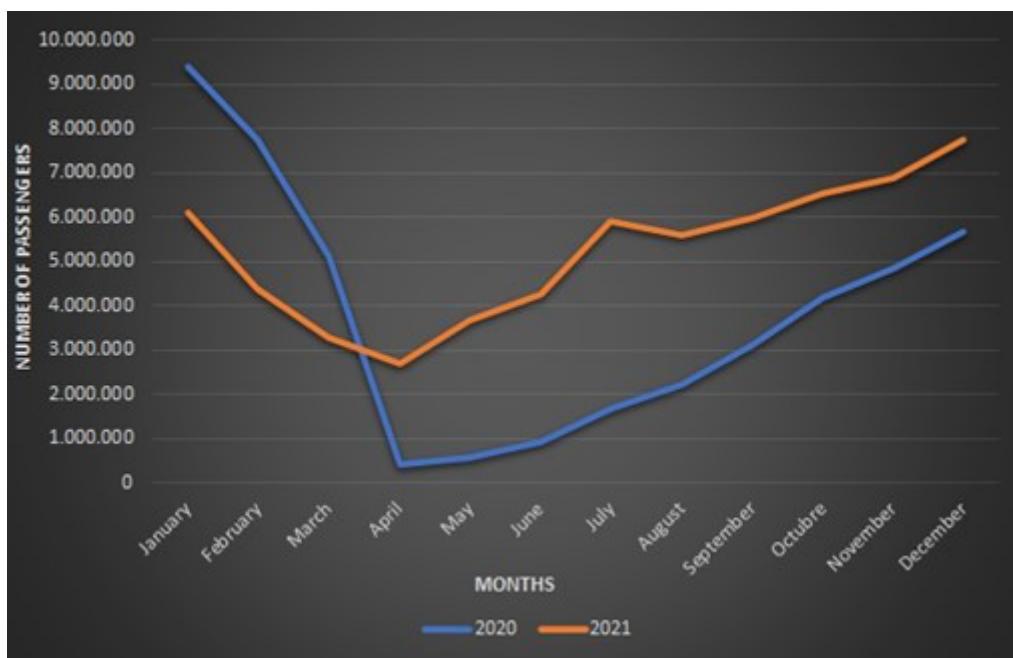
In Brazil, this first quarter was also marked with an 87.7% variation in international arrivals, since a total of 2,723,952 arrivals were reported in 2020, and this number decreased to 333,904 in 2021 (Brasil, 2021).

The year 2021 was marked by uncertainties and great challenges that influenced the process of recovery of the world tourist activity. The new measures introduced throughout the year created a new panorama of tourism around the world. The vaccination rollout in December 2020 in the United Kingdom and Europe was the milestone for the reestablishment of confidence between tourists and destinations; consequently, for the flexibilization of travel restrictions.

Regarding domestic travels, the passenger movement in Brazilian airports per month in 2021, considering scheduled and non-scheduled flights, increased about 37.7%, accounting for 63.1 million passengers, against 45.9 million in 2020 (Graph 2).

The number of road trips also increased, considering that, as of April 2021, the number of domestic passengers exceeded the rate reported for the same period in the previous year. Thus, considering the authorization data for trips by means of chartered collective land transportation, the National Agency for Land Transportation (ANTT) recorded an increase in interstate and intraregional supply. However, the use of owned or rented car by people who traveled on leisure during the pandemic represents 79.6% of the cases surveyed in Google Forms for the period between April 2020 and February 2021.

**Graph 2 – Variation of domestic passenger flow in Brazil - 2020-2021.**



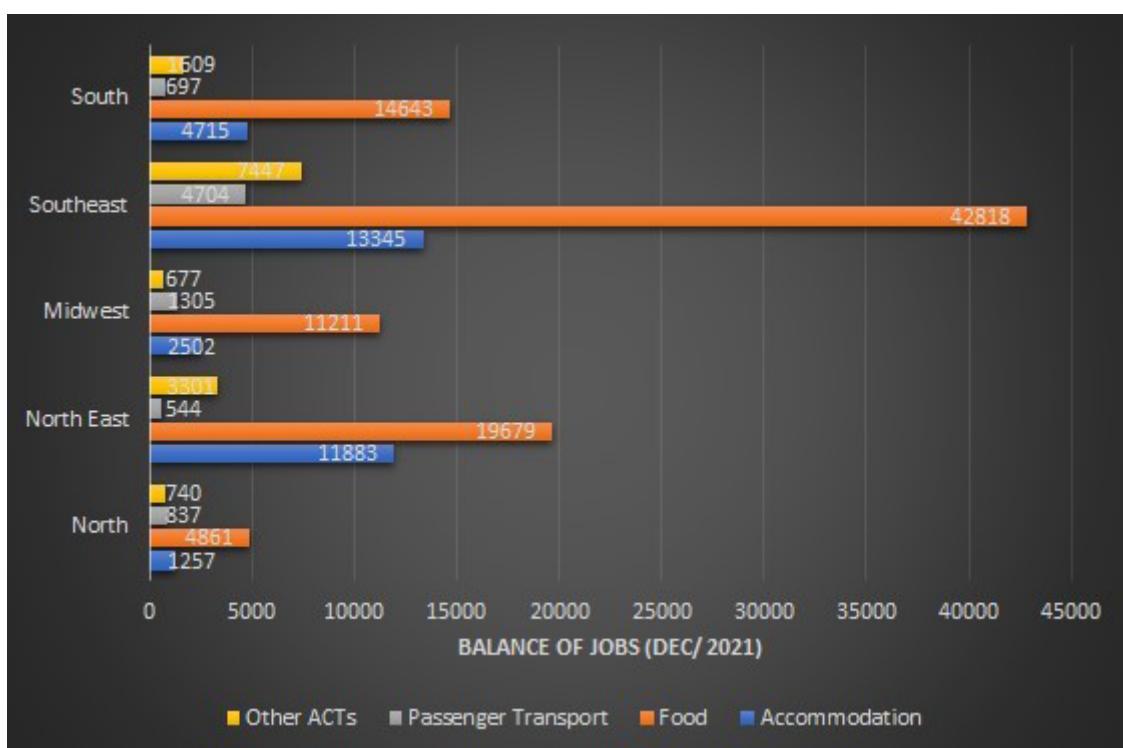
source: Radar do turismo (2022a).

Analyzing the profile and behavior of tourists traveling by own or rented vehicle, it is possible to note a certain sense of security and physical distance with the possibility of expanding the movement between home (private space) and tourist spaces destinations (public) considered “healthier” and distant from metropolitan agglomerations (Carneiro; Allis, 2021).

Such movement promotes the resumption of employment in the tourism characteristic activities. According to the accumulated figures regarding the balance of employment in the tourism sector in Brazil by macro-region in December 2021, the 148,675 jobs formally generated represent only 36.15% of the jobs lost. On the other hand, the regional disparity in the generation of tourism jobs is proportionally related to the outbound and inbound poles of the Southeast and Northeast (Graph 3).

According to the Tourism Monthly Statistical Bulletin published in February 2022, the 2021 data on federal collection of the tourism characteristic activities, corresponding to the taxes - Corporate Income Tax (IRPJ), Social Contribution on Net Income (CSLL), Contribution to Social Security Financing (CONFINS), Social Integration Program (PIS) and Program for the Formation of Assets of Public Servants (PASEP), Withholding Income Tax and Social Security Revenue of the establishments in the tourism sector (regarding both the employee and the company), indicate that the Northeast and Midwest regions stand out with an increase of 71.3% and 68.3%, respectively.

**Graph 3 – Balance of employment in the tourism sector in Brazil per macroregion - Accumulated Dec/2021.**



source: Radar do turismo (2022a).

### Impacts of the pandemic on tourism in northeastern Brazil

With specific regard to the Northeast region of Brazil, the 9 states that comprise the region adopted sanitary measures; however, such measures varied throughout the territory. According to the Brazilian Municipalities Profile of (IBGE, 2020a), all Northeastern capitals adopted social isolation in the first months of the pandemic, presenting a social isolation index of 50.4%, compared to 49.4% in the Midwest region, 49.1% in the Southeast region, 47.6% in the South, and 40.8% in the North region (Tuenia, 2020).

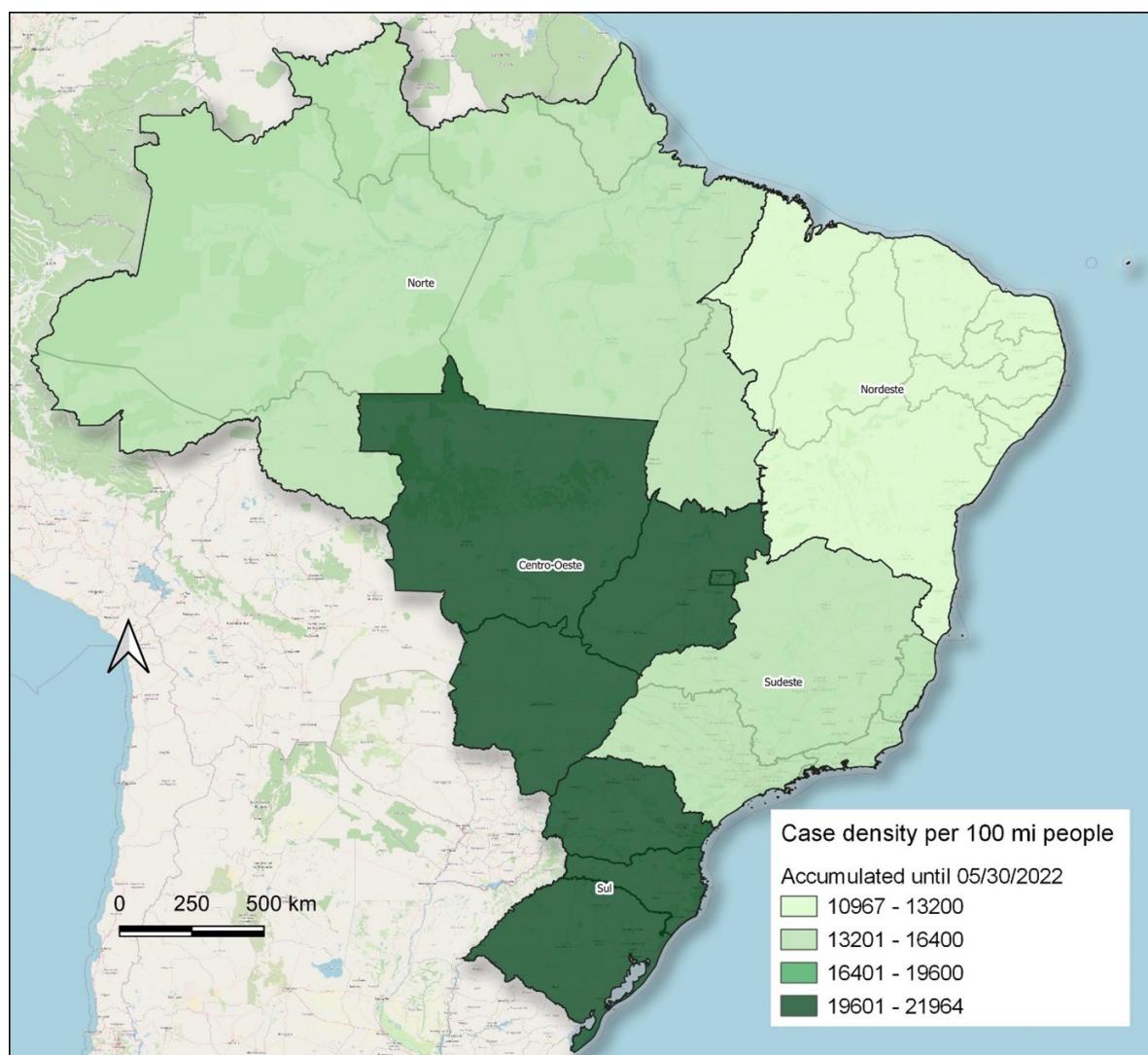
On the other hand, these same data reveal that some municipalities refused or did not adopt specific measures to combat the coronavirus (IBGE, 2020a). In the specific case of social isolation, 19 Northeastern municipalities informed that they did not adhere to this measure, most of them concentrated in the states of Bahia and Rio Grande do Norte, respectively, 31.57% and 21.05%. As for the refusal to adopt measures, 46 Northeastern municipalities were identified, 80.43% located in the state of Maranhão, 10.86% in the state of Bahia, 8.89% in the state of Alagoas, and 2.17% in the state of Ceará. Importantly, Maranhão was the first Brazilian state to adopt lockdown, since it showed a significant increase in the number of Covid-19 cases, which overwhelmed the state health system (Agência Brasil, 2020).

Even with the uncertainties generated by the absence of public policies that could guide tourism practices in the Brazilian territory, considering that “a significant part of the actions taken during the pandemic originated in other portfolios, whose benefits indirectly affect the different segments of the tourism production chain” (Souza, 2021, p. 7), the northeast region

presented a significant representativeness in the national tourism context. According to the study conducted by the Brazilian Association of Tourism Operators - Braztoa (2021), the Brazilian Northeast, even in the pandemic moment of 2020, maintained the trend of previous years and considered the best-selling region “responsible for almost 70% of the sales (69. 96%), followed by the South (13.64%) and the Southeast (12.4%)” (Braztoa, 2021, p. 32), highlighting the cities of Salvador, Maceió and Natal, corroborating the hypothesis by Santos, Campos and Rodrigues (2021) of the strengthening of domestic and regional tourism.

It is worth noting that vaccination rollout throughout the country was not capable of preventing the emergence of coronavirus waves in specific locations and health regions, from the beginning of the pandemic to the first quarter of 2022. Based on data from the state health departments published in the Coronavirus Brazil panel, the number of cumulative cases per 100,000 inhabitants places the Northeast region as the one with the best results, even with a rate of more than 10% for each population arrangement of 100,000 population (Map 3).

**Map 3 – Regional density of cumulative Covid-19 cases, per 100,000 population – 2020-2022**



With the vaccination rollout, despite the negative official denialist marketing inserted in all types of social media, the Brazilian population started to follow bulletins and several indexes regarding infections and deaths in each region, state or specific locality to measure or demand political actions for the flexibilization of work activities and the use of public places so that citizens (especially those with lower incomes) could make decisions about leisure travels.

The survey “Tourism in Pandemic Times” interviewed tourists from all over Brazil, and among the 4,612 answers of the electronic form, 2,406 people made one or more leisure trips in the period 2020-2021, motivated by the desire for rest, leisure and entertainment outside their place of origin (64.4%), followed by the desires to leave the environment and domestic routine. Despite the maintenance of long-distance travels, these occurred in a smaller proportion, if compared to 2019, especially the first quarter of 2020, when the evolution of air passenger movement showed a negative variation of 53.0% (Anac, 2021). According to data obtained from Google Forms Research “Tourism in times of Pandemic”, the circulation of people within the states and the interstate road trips throughout the national territory were the main flows and, consequently, propellants of tourism during a period in which Covid-19 was rapidly spreading.

These factors contributed to the fact that, among the 651 respondents from the Northeast region, 57.7% chose to make trips within the same state or in nearby states (48.8%), while only 19.5% of the northeastern tourists face long distance trips. These data demonstrate that the staycation,<sup>1</sup> a concept popularized in 2008 during the energy crisis in the U.S., became very present in the pandemic moment, since the world population began to opt for short trips (Gössling; Scott; Hall, 2020).

The data cited in the previous paragraph reveal, among other aspects, the potential of proximity relations in search of spaces that do not promote agglomerations (54.6%) and that meet the biosecurity measures implemented for the protection of tourists and residents (53.0%). Thus, the flows of tourists in 2021, from this sample, which used primarily the road structure, as well the number of passenger arrivals at Brazilian airports (Map 4), are consequences of the sanitary measures promoted by different public (municipal or state) and private managers to reduce / slow down the spread of the virus.

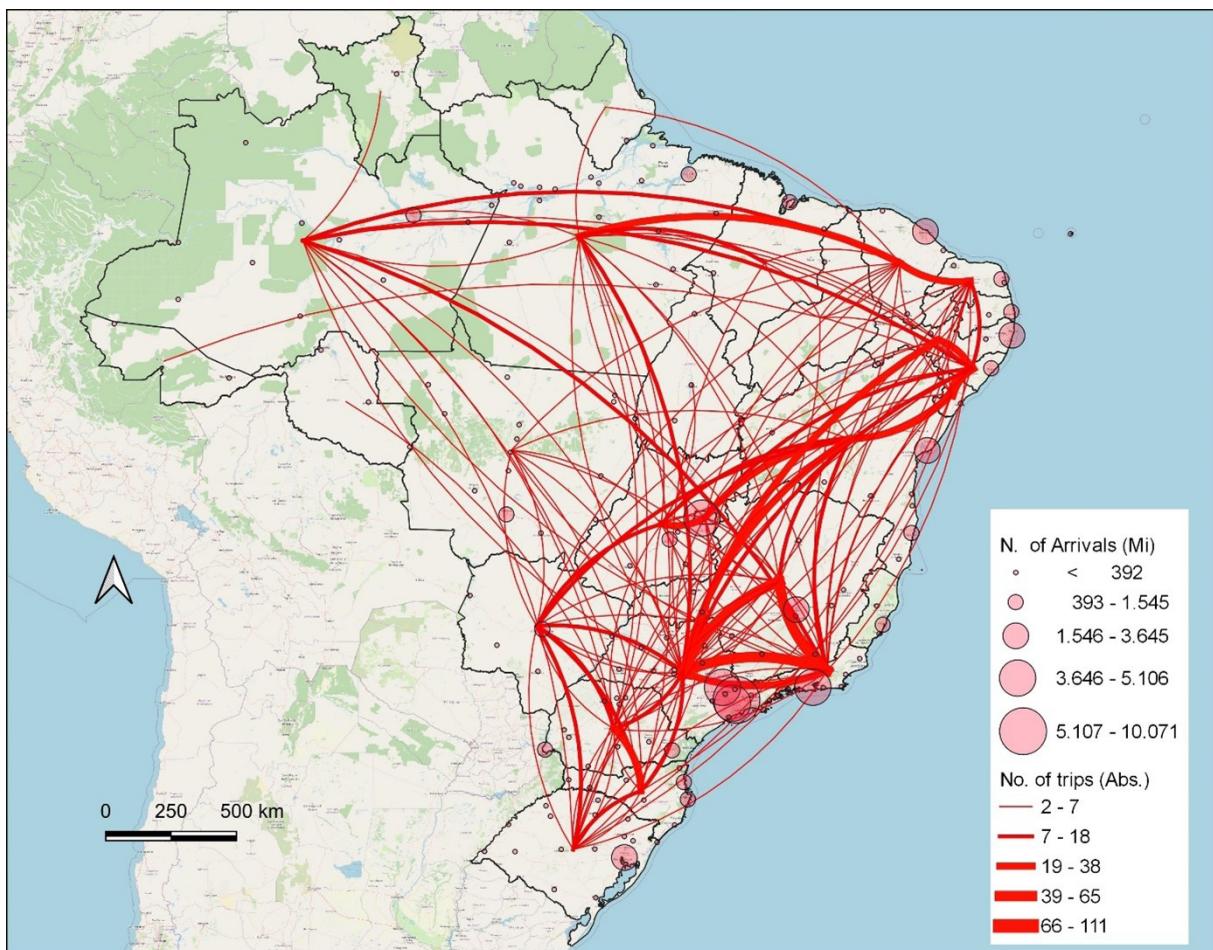
According to the characteristics of the northeastern municipalities, in each population arrangement these biosecurity measures proved to be most effective when sanitary barriers were installed at the municipal borders during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the main tourist municipalities in the Northeast, these measures were fundamental for the lodging facilities and other tourist services offered in the immediate regions with a predominance of destinations that have attractions in rural tourism areas (33.0%), on beaches located in natural areas far from the capital cities (49.5%), and in the main regional centers (35.0%) (Map 5).

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<sup>1</sup> Term that designates proximity tourism, in which the citizen chooses to enjoy nearby touristic destinations.

**Map 4 – Interstate tourist flows and number of arrivals  
at the main Brazilian airports – 2021**



sources: Research on the Tourism in times of pandemic (2020 – 2021) and Anac (2021).

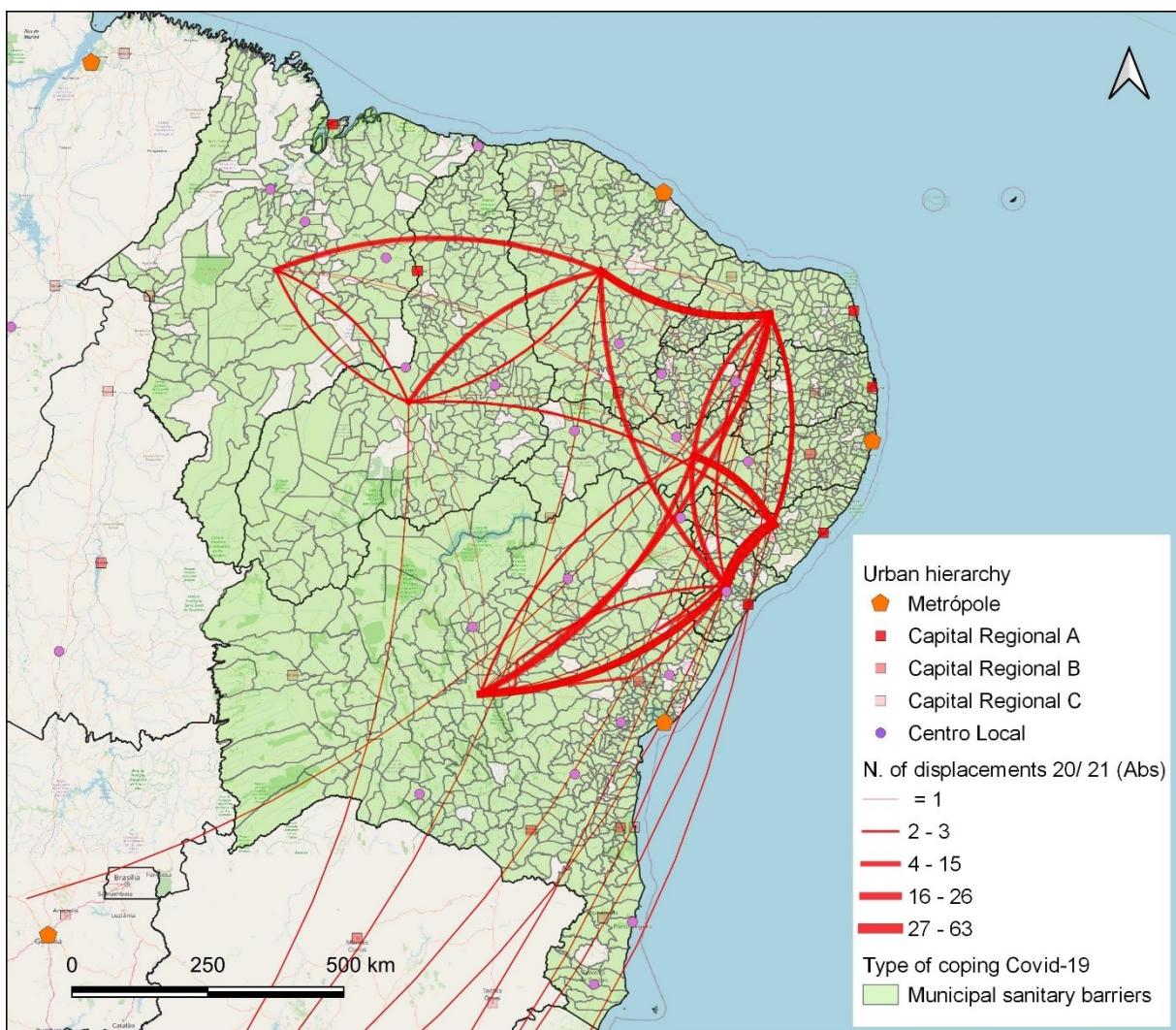
elaboration and adaptation: The authors, 2022.

The intra-regional flows intensified during the pandemic as some destinations became more attractive by combining, in natural areas and specific beaches, the offer of regular lodging and/or apartments for seasonal rent via Booking.com or Airbnb.com applications and catering services essentially aimed at family groups traveling in private or rented cars.

Such advantages, combined with the “convenience and intensification” of remote work also contributed to explain the “escape from everyday life” by people with higher purchasing power (Urry, 2001), who were willing to travel distances between 150 and 700 kilometers to enjoy three to fifteen days of stay at the destinations.

These data corroborate the recovery of the economy, especially in the Northeast, since it is precisely the means of accommodation and food and beverage services that show the largest amounts of revenue collection from tourism.

**Map 5 – Northeast urban hierarchy structure, interstate tourist flows and adoption of sanitary measures – 2021.**



sources: IBGE (2020b), Research on the Tourism in Times of Pandemic (2020 – 2021) and Anac (2021).  
elaboration and adaptation: The authors, 2022.

## New challenges: the impact of tourism on the pandemic in the Brazilian Northeast

The dissemination of a new variant of the Covid-19 virus with a higher transmissibility rate – the omicron, in the beginning of 2022, generated insecurity in world tourism. However, from the flexibilities adopted by state and, consequently, municipal governments associated with the pressures established by the market, summer 21-22 in Brazil was marked by the resumption and revival of tourism with emphasis on the segment of sun and beach tourism. This segment continues to be the main vector of tourist flows to the Brazilian Northeast, since the natural amenities, sun, sea and beach, have been characterized as potentiating elements of local tourist practices.

According to data provided by the UNWTO (2022), international tourist travel around the world increased by 130% in January 2022 in comparison with 2021, a period when the vaccination rollout had not yet started in most countries. In Brazil, the international arrivals of passengers on scheduled and non-scheduled flights showed a significant increase in relation to the first months of 2021, but still far from the volume practiced in the pre-pandemic period in 2020.

Regarding domestic flows, the passenger movement in the country's airports grew in January and February by about 22.3% and 28.1% compared to the same months of 2021, with an average occupancy rate of 73.8% (Anac, 2022). This means that domestic air travel, the main sector that underpins the development of tourism in Brazil, beckons for the increase in travel and, consequently, in business revenues and the entire supply chain.

Tourism in the Northeast region also followed, in early 2022, the trend of world tourism. From research released by the Kayak<sup>2</sup> metasearch the northeastern destinations are the favorite among Brazilian tourists, since the most sought destinations were Recife (Pernambuco), Fortaleza (Ceará), Salvador and Porto Seguro (Bahia), Maceió (Alagoas), Florianópolis (Santa Catarina) and Natal (Rio Grande do Norte), i.e., 6 locations in the region.

In the first months of 2022, according to the tourism bulletins (Radar do Turismo, 2022a, 2022b), the federal collection regarding the TCAs also points to a considerable surplus compared to the months of 2021, with lodging and catering activities standing out. Parallel to this progress, the vaccination map and the rates of infection and deaths from Covid-19 show signs of decline, as the number of new cases and deaths reported in the region showed the lowest levels in recent epidemiological weeks (Table 2).

**Table 2 – Number of Covid-19 cases accumulated per macroregion in Brazil - 2022**

region	population	accumulated cases	new cases	new deaths
<b>North</b>	18,430,980	2,502,823	208	1
<b>Northeast</b>	57,071,654	6,259,792	337	3
<b>Southeast</b>	88,371,433	12,031,750	2.438	41
<b>Center-West</b>	16,297,074	3,306,866	84	2
<b>South</b>	29,975,984	6,587,159	3.229	1

source: Covid-19 in Brazil (2022).

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that, at the beginning of the pandemic, several studies (Soares; Gabriel; Romo, 2020; Neves et al., 2021; Santos, C.; Campos, 2021) pointed to a change in tourist behavior when defining the destination for further experiences. Grimm et. al. (2021, p. 98) stated that "what seems to be assertive is that trips will be to closer destinations, in private cars". In the meantime, discussions are permeated by the new habits of tourists due to the restrictive measures adopted.

<sup>2</sup> Available at IG Turismo ([s.d.])

The first flexibilizations provided a new scenario for local tourist practices, in which some aspects stood out:

- a) Rather than traveling to more distant destinations, some tourists opted for staycation
- b) Sun and beach tourism, understood as a segment with a more massive essence, starts to be considered as an alternative for the development of practices consistent with the scenario designed by Covid-19, since it favors social distance and activities in open spaces/areas
- c) Tourism in natural or rural spaces became the object of consumption because it allows the development of leisure activities in open spaces, but outside the route of traditional or mass tourism products.

The intra-regional tourist flows showed a faster increase in comparison with long distance travel, which may increase again as vaccination rates increase and variants are controlled. Even so, the pandemic has already shaped Brazilian tourist behavior toward preferences for short trips to controlled environments. These are protocols of tourist coexistence that impose new needs both to public managers and entrepreneurs, as well as to tourists and local communities, in view of their permanence in the country's socioeconomic scenario.

## Considerations

Since the beginning of the vaccination rollout in January 2021, the Brazilian tourism market has focused the domestic and regional tourist flow, but also following the demand for international travel, despite the national economic crisis marked by the devaluation of the national currency against the dollar and the euro (currencies of the main destinations of Brazilians travelers). Even with the vaccination rollout in Brazil and in the world, the existence of new variants has caused an increase in the number of cases in the Asian continent, having even caused lockdown in important Chinese cities in April 2022. Europe is again on alert before the beginning of summer 2022 due to the possibility of a new wave of Covid-19.

In Brazil, there has been a gradual resumption of tourism and major events, such as Carnival in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, which for the first time took place in the month of April, and the traditional June festivities that will take place in the northeast region of Brazil and will certainly be responsible for large domestic and international flows.

In this sense, new parameters for tourism management would be of the utmost importance in the fight against the coronavirus in Brazil. Furthermore, the same international control criteria should be adopted in all segments of the economic and social life of the sector in order to create new investment perspectives and, mainly, attract foreign tourists, without missing the possibilities provided by the increment of domestic flows.

Despite all the aspects mentioned hereinbefore, the undeniable influence of the pandemic on tourism brings a unique opportunity for destinations to restructure themselves to face the existing challenges, such as overtourism - which affects several consolidated destinations around the world - and also the emerging ones, such as the proliferation of new viral strains that will require new strategies both from the hospitality industry and from tourists - before, during and after their journeys.

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