

EasyJet bookings soar as England readies lockdown exit

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EasyJet shares rallied Tuesday on rocketing flight bookings for the British airline, boosted by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's plan to ease England's coronavirus lockdown.

Bookings had soared by 337 percent by late Monday compared with a week earlier, EasyJet said in a statement issued after Johnson's announcement.

EasyJet shares rallied around five percent in late deals on the London stock market—and there were solid gains for European rivals.

Johnson's four-month roadmap to ease COVID-19 lockdown curbs by the northern hemisphere summer has also sparked hopes of easing restrictions elsewhere in Europe.

"The prime minister... has provided a much-needed boost in confidence for so many of our customers in the UK with demand for flights up 337 percent and holidays up 630 percent already compared to last week," said EasyJet chief executive Johan Lundgren.

Shares prices of other major European airlines jumped as well, with Air France KLM gaining 2.8 percent and German giant Lufthansa rising 2.5 percent.

British Airways owner IAG, whose portfolio includes also Ireland's Aer Lingus and Spain's Iberia, won 2.1 percent.

"Airline shares roared higher on the promise of a salvaged summer season," said Markets.com analyst Neil Wilson, noting however that "international travel will remain problematic and subject to restrictions, isolation and testing".

Separately on Tuesday, Britain's InterContinental Hotels Group revealed that it slumped into a net loss of \$260 million (214 million euros) last year as coronavirus decimated the hospitality and tourism sector.

That contrasted sharply with profit after tax of \$385 million in 2019.

However, the group also issued an optimistic outlook in the context of the ongoing global vaccines rollout.

"2020 was clearly the most challenging year in our history, with COVID-19 heavily impacting demand across our industry," said IHG Chief Executive Keith Barr.

"2021 has begun with many of these challenges still in place, with more meaningful progress towards recovery for the industry unlikely until later in the year and dependent on global vaccine rollouts, lifting of restrictions and an acceleration in economic activity."

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