

Aruba, 2021

On March 6th, 2021, my wife and I took a vacation to Aruba. We had intended to visit her homeland of Trinidad and Tobago but the travel and day to day restrictions on the islands had not yet been lifted. However, the Dutch owned island of Aruba nearby did allow tourists to enter with some strict conditions.

To travel, an app was required called Veri-fly, an electric platform to store all the relevant covid related documentation to satisfy air travel regulations as well as immigration policies for the island. The first condition to fulfill was to produce a covid test within 72 hours before travel with a negative result. We did this in a local pharmacy drive-thru, two days before departure. It was a self-administered, nasal sample with a cotton bud. Results were emailed within 72 hours. Without the negative result you could not board a plane. To our relief, we both got emails with the good news the next day. We had received the original two vaccines on a previous trip to California, so we also uploaded these in case they became required viewing at some point.

The Federal Aviation Authority had a mask mandate in place. Social distancing of six feet was being practiced. This was the case inside the airport and on all flights. The Las Vegas airport was far less crowded than usual. The mask mandate was being enforced aggressively. Disinfectant wipes were added to the security protocol rituals as TSA agents cleaned plastic luggage bins. A mask couldn't drop below a nostril, or the offender would be confronted by TSA, law enforcement, or service industry personnel. Bars and restaurants left an empty table or stool between each occupied one. Staff disinfected tables, chairs, stools, and bar tops between checks. Nonetheless, service was far more efficient than normal, no doubt due to the lower volume of consumers.

Check-in required proof of a negative test within 72 hours. At this point the app had crashed. Ceased to function. In our hand luggage, we had hard printed copies of our documents and so we had no problem. Some folks scrolled on their phones to find their emails. Instant testing sites were available in the airport for those less prepared. Masks had to be lowered for facial scans at security but their swift return over the nose and mouth was administered with a zero-tolerance policy. At no point did any of this feel chaotic, as the airport usually is, nor too inconvenient, as the airport usually is. On board the flight, middle seats were kept empty along with Perspex screens to separate travelers. Mask policing was more aggressive in the air. Taking a bite or sip was fine but the mask was to be returned in time for chewing and swallowing. No joke.

On the connecting flight from Charlotte, North Carolina to Aruba the experience was similar. However, we did need to add the proof of Aruban tourists' health insurance to the documentation required for check in. The airport, like Vegas was calm. Food and beverage and the convenience/bookstores were open but many of the retail stores were closed. The airports functioned quicker than we were used to. However, staff and authorities were a little more intrusive. A fair trade off. On approach, out the window, we

could see the turquoise water and white sandy beaches and several cruise ships sitting idle in the harbor.

Immigration was lined only with the folks from our flight and so to our delight, brisk. The small airport felt empty. The same mask mandate applied here. In fact, in all indoor public spaces, mask mandated signs were posted. We rented a car and checked in to our hotel. Hygiene certifications were posted on the doors of the rooms. Overall, on the island, social distancing was more flexibly enforced. The highway was almost empty. The beaches too. It was peaceful and relaxing. The jewelry stores were plentiful but closed. A proprietor told us how the cruise ships, under normal circumstances, would unload tourists almost daily depending on the season and this accounted for well over 90% of his custom. Souvenir stalls were boarded up and street food vendors, likewise. We could certainly enjoy ourselves without these amenities.

Overall, we both agreed it was a brilliant vacation. The snorkeling was, according to the Bostonian regulars, far better without the crowd. It was, clearly, as snorkeling should be. After floating all day, eating was a calmer affair too. Reservations were required. Some eateries, lacking the demand and the staff, only made a portion of their seating available. Customer service, nevertheless, was excellent. The folks in hospitality that enjoyed a little extra time with the customer to share a laugh was never in short supply. The branding of Aruba as "One Happy Island" certainly rang true. The locals were very down to earth and genuinely friendly and swimming in their ocean does wonders for the body and mind. Getting out of that water on the last day was difficult.

Prior to check in to fly back to the U.S., a negative covid test within three calendar days of our flight was required. Clinics on the island were plentiful but small and with several flights a day outbound, the wait was a couple of hours, at least. Ours, thanks to the hotel services, were administered the day before travel in the lobby by two state appointed nurses and the results were available within two hours. This convenience came at a cost. It was not self-administered. The cotton swab was much larger and felt like it scratched the back of an eye. The sinus irritation although soothed by an ocean dip lasted for a few days. This was stressful as a positive test meant no travel and hotel quarantine for two weeks. But all went well and home we went.

Our least favorite thing about travel is the crowds, and the waiting, and the lines, and the chaos. The impersonal nature of being herded like cattle. This trip stands out because these peeves were almost non-existent. We experienced a very popular tropical beach destination, usually bustling with tourists, rather more like a little village with a small-town feel. The extra time and space the locals had to connect with the smaller numbers of tourists offered a more intimate connection to the island. We made some acquaintances that have since become friends and we have returned a couple of times, thankfully with enough guidance to remain outside the hustle and bustle that has slowly returned to this beautiful desert island. We may very well call it home one day. No joke.