

28 March 2020

Today, I was supposed to be closing my suitcase and taking off to Europe.

Instead, I am staying home.

My trip was a once-in-this-stage-of-my-lifetime five-week highlights tour of Europe. It was designed to introduce my tween- and teen-aged children to the broader world and to have a family adventure before they become too old for such things.

Time has become so rubbery that the three weeks since we made the momentous decision to cancel our trip feels more like three months.

Exactly one month ago, all was well. I celebrated my 50th birthday during a leap-year weekend away in Sydney. Part of the trip was to attend a travel writing event, during which Coronavirus was mentioned only a few times, mainly in a “She’ll be right, mate” tone. My only concern about our Europe trip was discovering that we’d missed the window to pre-book tickets to Anne Frank’s House in Amsterdam. If only I knew how irrelevant this angst would seem in just a few days’ time.

Three weeks ago, we decided to cancel our trip. It was an agonising decision because this was a good week before it became obvious that this was the only option we had.

We spent Friday 6 March pouring over newsfeeds, trying to sort medical-fact from science-fiction, and coming to grips with travel warning levels. We spent Saturday 7 March considering the impact of cancelling from all angles, including how much money we stood to lose (answer: a lot). The tipping point for me came when I realised that the Corona-curve was still on its way up and we would be flying into places where things were getting worse, not better. I spent Sunday practicing saying the words: “We are not going to Europe.” It took all day before I could say it without faltering.

We did not go camping with friends, as was planned. Not because this wasn't allowed – this was still ten days before state borders would start closing and local holidays were also being cancelled. We didn't go camping simply because the decision took all our time and energy.

Two weeks ago, we cancelled my birthday celebration. I wasn't feeling 100 percent well and I had my first corona-contact scare – I'd seen someone who was on the film set with Tom Hanks, who had tested positive. Not quite one degree of separation but definitely less than seven. In the end, we were simply too exhausted to prepare the house for the afternoon tea we had planned.

I did find the energy to go to a friend's 40th that night; a fire-pit and dance extravaganza now dubbed “The Last Party on Earth”. We practiced new greeting techniques (foot taps, jazz hands, namaste-style bows) but the loud music meant that we could not practice what is certain to be a shoo-in for 2020's Word of the Year: ‘social distancing’.

Last weekend, 21 and 22 March, we faced the irony that the worsening of the global situation meant good news for our finances. During the week, COVID-19 was named a

pandemic and Australia finally declared a blanket 'Do Not Travel' warning, prompting refunds of almost all of our bookings.

Worries close to home escalated as my husband became unwell; no fever or respiratory symptoms but significant fatigue. He soldiered through setting up the kids' new laptops – bought as school closures seemed imminent – but then we declared him in self-isolation. We decided that our kids would not return to school just one day before the Prime Minister's confused press conference about how schools were simultaneously safe, unsafe, open and closed. We faced the reality that our 'Plan B' holiday – booked for a fortnight's time just a couple of hours drive away – would also likely not happen.

And so, we have arrived to the day that we were supposed to take flight. Though my husband has left quarantine after totally recovering from what was clearly not Coronavirus, life has narrowed in. We've settled into a relaxed version of school-from-home, assisted by the fact that I work from home anyway.

We are not in full lockdown but are 'snuggling in', fuelled by movies, Zoom and Facetime catch-ups, and lots of games of Mario Kart. We are immensely fortunate that we live a minute's walk from a totally uncrowded beach – well away from the main beaches of Byron Bay where beach closures are imminent - and the weather remains warm enough to swim.

While this option lasts, we will grateful accept the joy it brings along with an opportunity to momentarily escape from life in a pandemic.

Bio: Vivienne Pearson is a freelance writer. Her words live at viviennepearson.com