

I am an avid traveler who believes that the best way to get through life is always to have a trip planned (in fact, I'm writing this from Costa Rica). Naturally, given that mindset, I struggled with the travel restrictions implemented because of COVID-19. This is not to say that I didn't understand and agree with them; I did. But when my Google calendar sent me a reminder on August 1, 2020, that I was supposed to be leaving for Vienna, I have to admit that I was demoralized.

Even so, I didn't travel immediately after restrictions began to be lifted, because I was still concerned that I might carry the disease and infect someone with a weakened immune system. By the fall of 2021, however, I was feeling a little more confident, and my husband and I planned a trip to visit a friend of mine in the UAE at the end of November. At the time, the UAE had the lowest travel advisory, and we knew that they were very conservative with vaccines, testing, and social distancing, so it seemed like a relatively safe option.

Because they were conservative, they required us to be vaccinated and take a full PRP test, not just a rapid test. This latter requirement, it turned out, was not cheap if you were traveling for pleasure—we spent about \$300 each for the tests to enter the UAE.

Beyond that expense, from the time we arrived at the Cleveland airport to the moment we closed the door of our hotel room in Dubai, we had to wear masks, and as the UAE government legally required it, whenever we left our room there, we had to don masks again, except at the beach/outdoor pool and when eating.

Aside from that and general social distancing, we didn't face any particular issues in Dubai. In fact, it was quite reassuring that everyone wore masks in public, unlike in the States. However, when we arrived in Abu Dhabi and went to the aquarium with my friend, we discovered that because the omicron variant had started to spread across the globe, Abu Dhabi had changed its requirement for entering public places. Rather than our PRP test being good for two weeks, we now needed a new test every ten days, and ours had passed that mark. Thankfully, since the law had just changed that day, the aquarium employee checking documentation kindly let us go in anyway.

Unfortunately, though, if we wanted to go to the palace and the great mosque, we needed to take PRP tests again. But the U.S. had also changed its reentry requirements while we were in the UAE; instead of having to test within 72 hours of our return flight, we now had to do so within 24 hours. Because we were three days from our return flight, we would have needed to be tested to go into the palace and mosque, then tested again two days later to go back home. Between the hassle of finding a testing location in Abu Dhabi *and* one in Dubai, not to mention the expense, we reluctantly decided to skip the palace and mosque, which I had really been looking forward to seeing.

That was not the last COVID-related struggle we faced, either. When we returned to Dubai the night before our 11 p.m. flight back to the U.S., the hotel informed us that they had a nurse who would be available to do the tests in the morning, which was great ... no need to locate a testing

center ourselves. However, when we went down to meet the nurse around 8:30 a.m., we found a huge line. By the time we got to the nurse, it was already early afternoon, and we were told that they couldn't guarantee our test results before we would have to leave for the airport. We scrambled to find another option and finally managed to get someone who would come to our room, but it cost more than twice what we would have paid the hotel nurse. Counting the original entry tests, we spent nearly \$1000 on tests over the course of the trip.

Even that was not the last struggle, however. Our return flight from Dubai to Toronto itself went smoothly (though wearing a mask for 13.5 hours straight was far from fun). It was in Toronto that we faced our second-to-last struggle: our flight to Cleveland was delayed for several hours because of crew availability issues, and when we managed to get on the plane and in the air, the landing gear didn't retract, so we had to circle until there was an opening for us to return to Toronto. Cue another two hours of sitting in the plane, waiting for a mechanic and then waiting for the mechanic to complete his diagnostics and announce that the gear couldn't be fixed quickly enough. This meant that we needed to find alternative transport back to Cleveland.

That transport turned out to be a flight that went through Dulles. Thus, instead of the hour-whatever Toronto-to-Cleveland flight we should have taken, we had to wait to take a ~4-5 hour detour to D.C.

The icing on the cake was finding out that they had lost our luggage when we finally landed in Cleveland after nearly 40 hours of wearing a mask (thankfully, they did eventually locate our bags, so we managed to get them back two days later).

Ultimately, aside from making me cancel a planned 2020 trip, COVID-19 cost us \$1000 in tests, led to us being unable to see two national landmarks, delayed a flight for *hours*, and had us wearing a mask for an inordinate amount of time. If I learned nothing else from that trip, it's that masks are not meant to be worn for over 38 hours straight ...