

When we were given all clear to cross state lines, the first thing we did was take our regular day trip to Vermont.

Let me begin by saying that Vermont, by ferry, is only an hour away. My best friend and I go there regularly to access stores that, where we were to remain in New York, we would have to drive at a minimum of five hours to reach. Burlington is much closer, and more cost effective.

The drive from home to the ferry went as usual- masks around our wrists should we need them on the fly, but otherwise off. We stopped and got coffee from Stewarts- a local gas station chain that has the best milk and ice cream in the state. I got gas outside, my friend put on her mask and went in. All was normal for a typical, immediately after Covid day.

We got on the ferry less than ten minutes later, and after a quick drive through currency exchange, got onto the boat. It was summer, most people got out of their cars to enjoy the Lake Champlain air- but no one talked to anyone they did not know. Everyone maintained their distance, and no one asked others to help them snap commemorate photos.

The drive off was contactless. On a normal visit to Vermont, we would go to this little hole in the wall anime store, Black Knight. Not today though. The store front is too small and if others were there, we would be too close. It would be impossible to stand six feet apart the entire time.

Instead, we head to the University Mall in Burlington. That drive is about thirty minutes from the ferry, and we exit onto Dorset Street as if it is any other day. It is packed with cars, there is graffiti on the signs and highway walls- its normal.

When we get to the mall, I am immediately reminded that it is not.

Just prior to Covid, in February of 2020, our last visit had been unique. There had been a reptile show, and the mall had been packed and open until 9pm every night. Ihop would run on its normal skeleton crew, the Boba shop would be packed, the cursed stall in the food court would have the restaurant of the visit trying to remain open and get by.

This time, the atrium was empty. The boba shop was packed, but everyone stood in clusters rather than a crowd. The cursed stall had a new restaurant in it that was just opening. Ihop was dark. Our stores that we attended were still there, their prices still exorbitant. But everyone, and I mean everyone, was wearing a mask. They varied in color, in style, some were disposable, and others were reusable. Mothers attempted to keep their children from tearing theirs off. It was solemn, and quiet. It was not the mall we were used

to. The biggest shock was that the hours were cut- it was only open till 7 today. From the sign on the door, the hours varied by day now with the earliest closure being 6pm.

After our visit to the mall, we drove back down the road a bit to go to Barnes and Noble. Two stories tall, and full of books and people. This place did not change very much- the escalators were still barely running, the roof in the bathroom was still leaking, and no one talked except with their friends. The only real difference here was the masks. Even the hours were the same.

After Barnes and Noble and spending a considerable chunk of money I really should not have, we went to Olive Garden for dinner. After waiting for an hour when we checked in, we were asked for our phone numbers and names, as well as the town of residence. We were told it was so in the event our server contracted Covid, we could be contacted to quarantine. The host gave us the side eye when we wrote down New York, and we guiltily looked away. Travel restrictions had been rescinded, that did not mean it was encouraged.

After our meal, and getting our tiramisu to go, we headed back to the car and drove home. Covid was considered “over,” but the mini outbreaks were still ongoing, people were still getting sick, and the precautions were still mostly in place to try and keep everyone protected.