

The Return of International

By Vikki Moran

Traveling abroad is not without its trials and tribulations. Each week—and sometimes, moment to moment—we learn of changes impacting travel, be it countries opening and closing to travelers, air travel stressed to the max and the risk of becoming ill.

Despite the sour news, there is an upside to testing the waters of foreign travel.

As a travel writer, I am prepared to take chances many may not. In August 2021, when the European COVID-19 numbers looked promising, I decided it was time to get back in the international travel saddle. The trip was well worth the determination and aggravation, which is now synonymous with life during COVID-19.

The ability to walk less-crowded streets, eat in the restaurants I always dreamt of trying and visiting sights typically thronged with tourists with relative ease was wonderful. In Italy, we toured Verona, Rome, the Chianti region and Florence, then made the short hop to Amsterdam for five days.

Travel bargains are out there, but perhaps not as many as you would expect. I found the Euro exchange rate to be a great bargain, having spent many years since the inception of the euro—like all Americans—enduring extremely high exchanges. European prices have always been relatively high, keeping our dollar stretched thinner while traveling the continent.

Current rates may allow you to consider making purchases you have steered away from in the past. Keep a close eye on exchange rates, change your money before you travel and try not



to exchange at airport booths, where you pay dearly.

As we are experiencing throughout the United States, the European Union is changing travel guidelines frequently—sadly, even on a day-to-day basis, depending on the country. The communication is confusing at times. Airlines can only do so much to keep up with ever-changing dynamics and provide information as they receive and understand it.

You may hear a guideline to get a COVID test for entry into a country, and by the time your plane leaves, that information has changed. Luckily for the intrepid traveler, it does sort itself out when you arrive. Once out of the airport, I found a strong willingness to accept our vaccination cards even though they differ from those of the European Union.

The United States has stringent testing rules on reentry. You need to be aware of the rules both when you depart and when you come home. When testing, factor in arrival times to ensure your test is within the requisite time frame. If a negative test is required within 72 hours, you need to provide a negative COVID test within 72 hours of arrival time, not departure time.

Have your vaccination cards ready at all times for entry into restaurants, concerts, spas, larger cathedrals and museums. Some will ask for proof and others will not, but you never know until you are about to enter. I was never turned away upon presenting the proof I carried.

Safe, effective masks are readily available, unlike within



22 JUNE 2022





ADOBE STOCK IMAGE BY CRANACH

the United States. While in a line for an opera in Verona, I was advised the mask I brought from home did not meet the venue's requirements, but they had some available. I stepped from line, my space was held, and I was able to obtain a substantially better mask at an extremely low price.

I found Europeans to be concerned about safety, but also willing to assist me. I was never left out or refused entry into any restaurant or venue.

Travel Insurance: Don't Plan Without It

Different travel companies have their limitations. Familiarizing yourself with rules, regulations and coverages is important for today's travel planning.

Investigate any travel insurance plans an airline, tour company or ship may recommend, but don't stop there. Pick the travel insurance best for you and your companions. Check with your personal insurance company, too.

Travel agents can provide you with coverage options. Ask many questions and make certain you understand what you are told. Will you be able to recover trip costs if you get ill? Will you be eligible for a cash refund, or will the reimbursement be a travel voucher? If the travel provider or airline cancels, can you recoup your costs?

Was it worth it? Heck, yes!

In Florence, Italy, the new Dimora Palanca boutique hotel was a high point of our magical trip. The beautifully restored 18th-century villa has been linked to the arts for many years through private ownership. The villa's vibrant artistic heritage is clearly represented throughout the property today.

The hotel is exceptional, with every element exquisitely designed for both beauty and the guest's comfort. The Dimora Palanca staff was brought together from top luxury properties throughout Italy, with astounding results. From the professional concierge staff to Head Chef Giovanni Cerroni and his team at Mimesi—the exquisite fine-dining establishment on the property—this five-star hotel hits every sensory note.

Try to book a reservation to stay at this amazing villa on your next trip to Florence. If you cannot secure accommodations, at least make a dinner reservation at Mimesi. This splurge is a travel game-changer in the world of luxury.

A daylong drive into the Chianti region—home of the beloved Chianti Classico—was a trip I will never forget. My husband and I hired a driver from a service we have used before and knew we could depend on for a safe and knowledgeable excursion.

Valerio, our well-informed driver and guide, took us through towns, wineries, unforgettable landscapes and even to meet Daria



Cecchini—the kind and outrageous famous butcher seen on televisions throughout the world. Daria greeted us with glasses of Chianti and warm hugs.

Stunning landscape and vineyards completely blanket the views. Vespas hum by around impossibly curved turns, and each stop is a feast of some sort. Be it food, wine or simply living in the moment, we were enthralled.

Verona, Italy—with its seasonal opera season from the completely intact Roman amphitheater—delivered an opera performance that stuns. Sitting outdoors with the ancient walls capturing the voices and the instruments like only this Verona Arena di Verona Festival can do is mesmerizing.

Late in the evening, when the arena lets out, the piazza restaurants come alive. Still-excited spectators enjoy pizza, Aperol spritzes, desserts and pasta. The magic continues as the performers parade by the outdoor restaurants with signs held high by family. Opera staff show their performers' names to thunderous applause.

Leaving Italy on a short hop to Amsterdam was easy, but once again, we checked requirements for entry to see if there were any unique rules as we left one part of the European Union and entered another.

Amsterdam is a city lived outdoors, so it is perfect for social distancing. Watch out for crazy bicyclists, though. That will never change in Amsterdam. It is horror at times if you are not completely focused.

In Amsterdam, we could get into museums that are normally difficult without long-standing reservations, such as the Anne Frank Museum. In the past, the wait for tickets could be upward of three weeks. We were able to walk right in and buy tickets at The Rijksmuseum, with its 800 years of Dutch history presented in one the finest museums I have ever seen.

Before heading home from a different country than you may have flown into, know the travel rules. Flying home from Amsterdam was spelled out impeccably by local health officials, and testing locations are plentiful and inexpensive. The ordinarily busy Amsterdam Airport Schiphol—known informally as Schiphol Airport—is the main international airport of the Netherlands. The international terminal was surprisingly and pleasantly empty.

International travel during COVID-19 is not seamless. I don't want to minimize the added aggravations, but if you are a traveler with an itch to start seeing the world again, give it a try. You won't be disappointed. ■

I'm thinking maybe a group (and generic) caption block for the images here. Something that eludes to making memories, exploring/experiencing different cultures, etc.



