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Planes, Trains and Quarantines: Travelling to Canada in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Alan Whiteside

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Last month, I travelled from Norwich, England, to Waterloo, Ontario, and I served my time in a Canadian ‘quarantine hotel’ to do so. In this article, I set out the processes, as they were enforced in May 2021, for the journey from the UK to Canada. It is a reflection on the past year, the lessons learnt, and the bizarre experience of travelling in a time of plague.

As an academic, it is rare to become the topic—the N—of one's own study. But here I am, having travelled, in May 2021, from Norwich, England, to Waterloo, Ontario, and I served my time in a Canadian 'quarantine hotel' to do so. In this article, I set out the processes, as they were enforced in May, 2021, for the journey from the UK to Canada. It is a reflection on the past year, the lessons learnt, and the bizarre experience of travelling in a time of plague. It traces the hoops I jumped through, rules I followed, and experiences I had. Rules and regulations involving COVID-19 can and do change frequently, so this is a snapshot of just two countries. It falls into the academic category of an autoethnography;¹ not something economists usually do!

The story begins in December, 2019, when I travelled from Waterloo, Ontario, to the UK for what I thought was to be one year's sabbatical. It was a straightforward journey: from busy planes, through packed airports, to the spires and cobblestones of Norwich. After crawling off my overnight flight from Toronto's Pearson Airport, at 1am EST but 7am in Amsterdam, as I had done many times, I spent two hours waiting for the connecting flight home in the new, large, and well-equipped KLM frequent flyer lounge at Schiphol airport. It provided a great breakfast buffet and magnificent coffee. It had, I assumed, been empty for the past year.

I planned a busy sabbatical year. I was negotiating visiting fellowships at the Universities of Freiburg, Heidelberg and Konstanz in Germany and the University of Lincoln in the UK. In addition, I had visiting status with the Universities of East London and East Anglia. It was set to be a full, productive, and fun sabbatical. And then COVID-19 arrived, and everything was put on hold. I did not leave Norwich for over a year.

The public health response to COVID-19 was to restrict possible transmission. When the virus was first identified in January 2020 there were no proven medical interventions. Most patients lost lung function and the desperately ill were placed on ventilators, but nearly 90 percent died.² As the pandemic swept across the world, non-medical interventions were imposed. It was believed that the main routes of transmission were contaminated surfaces (fomites); direct contact between people; and breathing in virus-laden droplets or aerosols released by an infected person. In this situation, isolating the sick in 'quarantine' is a standard procedure. The word quarantine comes from *quarantena*, meaning "forty days", and was the period the Venetians required ships to lie offshore during the plague. The problem with COVID-19 is that people can be symptomless but infective for some days thus unwittingly passing the virus on.

Exactly how and where the virus entered the human population is unknown, but the first government reaction was in Wuhan, China, in January, 2020. Authorities sealed off the city and even welded some people into their apartments. The World Health Organisation (WHO) sent a team to investigate the outbreak, which was spreading rapidly outside China, to Hong Kong, South Korea, and Japan. The first

¹ Sarah Wall, 2008, *Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography*, International Journal of Qualitative Methods, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/160940690800700103>

² <https://www.webmd.com/lung/news/20200422/most-covid-19-patients-placed-on-ventilators-died-new-york-study-shows#1>

positive case was recorded in the USA on 19th March. On January 31st the WHO Issued a Global Health Emergency, and countries began to restrict flights.

We watched in horror as the pandemic spread across the world. Curious and scared onlookers had access to the speed and scope of this spread through international data centres provided on many excellent websites, such as the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> and Our World in Data <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus> . Most countries will have their own websites as well. Yet, information and data were no match for contagion. On 23rd March 2020, the UK went into lockdown with a stay-at-home order banning all non-essential travel and contact with other households. Almost all schools, businesses and gathering places were closed. People were told to keep apart in public and the police were given power to enforce the measures. Initially incoming travelers were not banned or quarantined, although this would have slowed the spread of the virus.

The lockdown was gradually eased in June and July 2020. Indeed, in the month of August, the chancellor in the UK introduced the 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme where restaurants received £10 toward a person's meal. It was a desperate attempt to help the hospitality industry. By September, the numbers were rising rapidly, and local restrictions were gradually re-imposed across the British Isles. England went into a month-long lockdown (excluding schools) during November. The Prime Minister tried 'to save Christmas' but the third lockdown became inevitable and this included draconian restrictions on international travel. However, the UK became the first country to authorize and start using the Pfizer–BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, which was followed by the approval of other vaccines. From the outset of vaccine production and distribution, it has had one of the highest vaccination rates in the world. In late January 2021, testing and quarantine rules were imposed on all incoming travelers.

Over the next few months, the numbers of reported cases, hospitalisations and deaths fell steadily, schools reopened and, gradually, businesses re-opened their doors. Today, masks are still required in shops and numbers are limited. Outdoor dining is permitted and there have been sports events with carefully controlled numbers. The Government aimed to lift most restrictions by 12th June, but the arrival of new variants will probably delay this by a few weeks.

This is the background to my journey as I had to return to Canada in May 2021. Some things in life cannot be 'virtual' or conducted online: they must be done in person, in my case, packing up my apartment.

How to return to Canada in a pandemic? The first step meant getting permission from the UK to leave the country. Although England was slowly exiting the third lockdown, international travel was not allowed before 17th May, unless the traveler had a good reason. There is, of course, a government website with a form. The "Declaration for International Travel" that has a drop-down menu of about 10 reasons, from 'Work' to 'Other reasonable excuse – please specify'. I dutifully completed it and added printouts to a growing document folder. No one asked to see this folder it at any point.

The next move was to book a flight. My preferred route is Norwich, Amsterdam, Toronto; not for the lounge, but for the convenience. The terminal building of our little airport is five minutes away from my home, 15 if I walk. It is a 35-minute flight to Amsterdam and then one can go almost anywhere in the world. The pandemic cancelled or cut flights from our airport dramatically. Instead of four flights a day to Amsterdam, holiday charters and daily flights to domestic destinations there was just one, a flight to Aberdeen,³ which like the helicopters services the North Sea oil industry. With no flights from Norwich to Amsterdam until the end of May, I booked a flight from Heathrow.

There is extensive guidance on travelling to Canada at <https://travel.gc.ca/travel-covid>. Only four airports in Canada accept international flights: Calgary, Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. As with global trends, the number of flights has been cut considerably. There are only two carriers flying directly from London to Toronto: British Airways and Air Canada, each with just one flight a day.

There is currently no recognition in terms of travel and restrictions of one's vaccinated or unvaccinated status. I am fully vaccinated. My first AstraZeneca shot was on 12th March 2021, with the second was scheduled for June. I went with my partner to our vaccine centre when she received her second dose. Her slot was late on a Sunday afternoon and the place was very empty. I asked if I could get my second shot there and then, ahead of schedule. The staff were happy to do this but suggested that I waited a couple of weeks.

I received my second shot on 2nd May and have a small, flimsy record card to prove it. I made photocopies for any officials who might want one. No one asked or even showed an interest and I felt it would be needy to thrust the paper at them. Some colleagues and friends have reported minor adverse effects, I had none (a sore arm is inevitable, so get over that!). On 13th May, US President Biden joyfully removed his facemask and announced that those who were vaccinated would not have to wear them. Despite the symbolism, this announcement indicates that vaccines will be a precondition for various activities we all once took for granted.⁴

In order to enter Canada (and various other countries) a traveler has to prove they had a negative COVID test within three days of boarding the aircraft. In the UK, at any rate, this must be done by a private laboratory that produces a "*Fit to travel Certificate for SARS CoV-2/Covid-19 Testing*".

Also required is a completed arrival form, which can be done in advance. They say: "Speed up your arrival process in Canada and spend less time with border and public health officers. Use *ArriveCAN* to provide mandatory travel information on and after your entry into Canada. Help contain COVID-19 and keep Canadians safe and healthy." <https://arrivecan.cbsa-asfc.cloud-nuage.canada.ca/welcome>. My receipt for this was printed and added to my growing file.

³ If the Scottish Nationalists win the next election, and manage to have a referendum, this could become international.

⁴ That masks are no longer be compulsory in certain settings: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/biden-news-live-white-house-trump-b1847415.html

People entering Canada from outside the US must book three days in a quarantine hotel and have a receipt to confirm this. When I was looking at entry requirements, it was stated that travelers should have a 'Quarantine Plan'. There was no guidance on what this should look like, so I made one up, with details of how I was travelling, who I had seen, and where I was staying. It went into the file with the hotel reservation confirmation, but again: no one ever asked to see it.

Armed with all the documentation, I booked a taxi from Norwich to Heathrow to avoid two train journeys and crossing London on the underground. Colin of Executive Taxis picked me up at noon for a five pm flight. It was a simple journey, with empty roads. The terminal was deserted and checking in was straightforward and quick. I spent a happy hour in the largest bookshop in the departures area, buying half a dozen books to see me through the hotel quarantine.

The first book I read was brand new and was well reviewed in the *Observer* and elsewhere. Michael Lewis', *The Premonition: A Pandemic Story*, (Allen Lane. London, 2021 301 pages) is excellent and absolutely a book for these times. Lewis, an investigative journalist, has written extensively on financial and political malfeasance: *Flash Boys*, *Liar's Poker* and *The Fifth Risk* are among his output. This covers the first year of the pandemic. Its limitation is that it primarily takes a western perspective.

We were taken to the aircraft in a packed bus - so much for social distancing! The aircraft was a Boeing 787, or Dreamliner which seats about 250 people in business, premium economy, and economy. I booked myself in the premium economy section to have a bit more room. This proved to be a waste of money, since there were only 19 passengers on the entire plane! I would have been better off in the economy class section where the armrests can be lifted.

There was a full complement of underutilized cabin crew and, consequently, I received excellent service and engaged in some interesting conversations. One had a degree in biochemistry and is midway through a correspondence degree in psychology. One was from Holland and has been flying with BA for 15 years. John was from Manchester and is into Ska music. Halfway through the journey my new friends suddenly began addressing me as "professor" since, clearly, they had time to check the details on their passenger list!

On arrival, getting through the Canadian formalities was straightforward. Perhaps I play the luddite too much, as when asked to do something with my phone, I simply handed it to the young 'inspector' and let him install whatever was needed. The arrival test system is to use nasal swabs, in both nostrils, but nothing on the back of the throat, as is the practice in the UK. There was no interest in my vaccination status - but there were a few comments on Canada's failure to roll out the vaccine as speedily as others.

The process of getting through the tests and formalities was simple and quick, as there were only a few passengers, and plenty of staff. Having said that, I was on a plane with 19 passengers, and the next scheduled flight was from Manila with 350 passengers. That, I assume, would be a somewhat different

experience to manage. I should mention there were only three scheduled flights shown on the screens as arriving to the terminal. Toronto's Pearson Airport was as deserted as Heathrow had been.

The government requires a three-day quarantine period in a hotel; a source of indignation for some Canadians who see it as an assault on their civil liberties. In April 2021, a federal court judge agreed that the government had the right to require international air travelers to quarantine at specific hotels on arrival until they tested negative for COVID-19. The judge found that: 'Quarantine hotels are a 'rational response' to COVID-19 risk'.⁵ I had no idea of the outcome of my airport test after three days. I must assume that, in the absence of news, it was negative.

My choice of hostelry was the Embassy Suites by Hilton, a bog-standard business hotel. My room overlooked the airport, but there were few aircraft movements to see. The confinement included three meals, chosen from a menu with vegetarian or chicken options, brought to the door in large brown paper packets. I understand Pavlov's dogs better now. Within 24 hours I recognized the rustle of the form the moment the delivery person exited the lift. There was nothing to get excited about in the package; it was a race to the bottom!

I took advantage of the 10-minute fresh air release, a security guard escorted me to the car park and told me to return when I felt like it. The quote when I booked the room was for \$679.47 for 4 nights, the clerk would not give me this rate as it was four nights and was not the 'government rate'. I was only able to stay the standard three nights which cost C\$1,243.98.

At Heathrow's Duty Free shop I purchased a couple of bottles of wine, and when I checked into the hotel, I asked for a third. The clerk said that he was glad I asked before he checked me in. He is not allowed to send alcohol to the quarantine rooms! There was no corkscrew in the room and the desk said they had none. So, for near-future passengers destined for Toronto Pearson Airport, here is a tip: <https://vinepair.com/articles/7-ways-to-open-a-bottle-of-wine-without-a-corkscrew/>.

On Saturday, 15 May, I travelled by taxi to Waterloo to continue quarantining in my apartment. As an aside, ordering a Waterloo taxi to come and collect from the airport proved less costly than using the airport taxi services. These companies also normally have a car near the airport waiting for a trip back. The Waterloo-based quarantine period was for 11 further days to fulfil the 14-day total. At the airport, I was issued with a COVID test kit to use, with the Skype supervision of a nurse on day eight (Thursday 20th). The test had to be picked up by a courier. On Saturday 22 May, I received an email to say that the test was negative! However, there is no parole or time off for good behaviour, or for the fact that I am vaccinated. My freedom only came on day 14 when I was released into the restricted environment of Waterloo.

I am not sure how the government or province check that people are obeying the quarantine. I had a daily email to respond to confirming that I was well and asking that I not be in contact with people. There

⁵ Alyshah Hasham, 'Quarantine hotels are a 'rational response' to COVID-19 risk, federal judge rules', The Toronto Star, Mon., April 26, 2021

were occasional telephone calls, and, in addition, I actually had an ‘inspector’ come to the building. He came to my corridor and checked off four items: are you alone; have you had visitors; have you had a fever; and one other question which now escapes my memory. I asked him if he wanted to check the apartment, but he declined the invitation saying he was not allowed to! In non-COVID times, this gentleman owns a private detective agency.

So, what have been the lessons of this time and the journey? Everyone who worked in infectious diseases expected a global pandemic. The 1918 flu has the most parallels, but no one remembers it. There were recent harbingers; in 1981, AIDS first emerged, and it is still with us; the SARS epidemics from 2002 to 2004; the 2009 to 2010 swine flu epidemic; the 2012 Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus outbreak (MERS); and Ebola outbreaks in Western African from 2013 to 2016.

The current pandemic is caused by a virus known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), shortened to COVID-19. Epidemiologists expected more zoonotic events with disease crossing from animals and humans. A respiratory virus was feared, but what was not anticipated was a period when people would asymptomatic, but able to transmit.

The global shutdown with the lockdown, cancellation of flights, and closure of business has resulted in an economic contraction and massive hardship for hundreds of millions of people as their incomes dried up. The UK implemented a furlough scheme, so people are surviving; but when this ends, it is very unclear as to what will happen.

At a very practical level, the world has changed. First, as academics, the ways (and reasons) we travel will be more complex and expensive. My trip cost £189 for the COVID certificate, the taxi to Heathrow was £220 (it would have been about £70 by train and tube), the one-way air ticket was £550, the journey back, thankfully via Amsterdam to Norwich cost £539. The sterling total was £1 498 or \$2,557. The quarantine hotel cost \$1,243, and the taxi to Waterloo was \$130. The total cost was about \$3,000, if I had bought a return ticket, and not had to test or quarantine the trip would have been less than \$1,000.

Extra money will be needed for all trips whether they are conferences or field work. Insurance is expensive but will be essential. This all needs to be budgeted for. We cannot factor in the stress and bureaucracy that some will simply find too daunting. How will people manage quarantine and the constraints of their freedom? At the moment, when I travel back to the UK, I will be required to undergo a further 14 days of quarantine.

It is also questionable as to how we will be able to deliver courses and engage in seminars. Will we be able to attract students, both domestic and the lucrative foreign ones? How will the massive developments in student housing be funded, now that they stand empty? Zoom and the other online platforms have allowed us to continue many activities, but this is unsatisfactory in the long run. There *must* be face-to-face interaction. We need to host foreign academics and visit other conferences and universities. I can see, over time, a decline in morale and engagement. Graduating students and younger untenured staff are

amongst the worst affected; life might have been uncertain before, but now, no one knows how this situation will evolve. I am not teaching courses so have no idea how my colleagues are managing.

While I don't have answers to these questions, I am of the opinion that the universities in Waterloo are being far too timid. Rather than pushing the boundaries and seeing what we can do, they must look at, and make up, rule books that say what we can and cannot do. In my view, academia should stand for quality, rigor, and risk; the latter of which not referring to just intellectual risk, although we are falling short there as well. Canada, likewise, seems to be taking COVID seriously, but its thinking remains disjointed, and as such, no one is running scenarios for future societies.

I wrote this having had my arm twisted by Scott Hamilton at the BSIA. It was sent to two blinded peer reviewers and colleague Simon Dalby for review. I am extremely grateful for their input and I hope it is a better paper as a result. It has been an interesting exercise.

Editor's Addendum

This paper was written, submitted, and revised prior to June 9, 2021, when the Canadian government announced that, in the near future, fully vaccinated Canadians and permanent residents crossing the border into Canada will no longer be required to remain in quarantine hotels upon entry into Canada.



Alan Whiteside, OBE, was CIGI Chair in Global Health Policy from December 2012-December 2018. He is a Professor at Wilfrid Laurier University's School of International Policy and Governance and at the BSIA. Born in Kenya but raised in Swaziland, Alan's current research program focuses on interrelated areas of global health concerns. These include: shifting burdens of disease, immigrant and migrant health, and the economic and social causes and consequences of HIV and AIDS.