

Traveling to Cuba in the time of COVID-19

written by Cheryl LaBash
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The Plaza de la Revolución in Havana.

Of course, by the time this small story is read, the conditions and procedures giving rise to these experiences will likely have changed.

We hope that one thing will change and be no more: COVID-19, now spreading silently where people gather, especially inside, in enclosed spaces, where people are in close, extended contact. Airlines say the air on planes is filtered. Passengers respected the marked-off, socially distanced seating at the gate, but, as Cuba travelers know, the U.S. economic, financial and commercial blockade makes our travel experience from the U.S. special.

Unable to travel to Cuba since March and with remittance transfers via Western Union newly blocked by the U.S., my co-fliers had plenty of luggage. Personal check-in required. The airline is required to ask, record and keep the category each passenger declares for the privilege of a general license to travel. A privilege only for travelers from the U.S. and those under U.S. jurisdiction. Cuban tourist visa? General license category? Surcharge for COVID-19 health screening? The line was long, slow and closely packed although with proper face coverings.

I drove from Detroit to Tampa, my direct flight to Havana departure point. The 17 hours in my coronavirus safe car seemed to be a wise decision to minimize airport time, especially when I heard that a recent traveler to Cuba tested positive in her second test. She traveled through three airports and planes.

My traveling outfit included an N95 mask donated by my scientist brother, a cloth mask over that plus a face shield. The airline notified us in advance that the center seats would not be reserved on this flight, offering to reschedule if we objected. I arrived at the airport at 8:30 a.m. My flight took off at 1 p.m. and landed about 50 minutes later. We were told to stay seated when the doors opened.

The first 12 rows were called to stand. In groups of 10, we deplaned down the steps, walking a short way to the terminal. Usually, the reception area is a wide-open space

with passport control booths at the other side. Not this day. A barrier channeled us all to the left where our health certificate — with our passport number added to it — was collected by a nurse who gave me a small box with a number written on the top. I was number 51.

The testing stations, each with two seats, made short work of the line, opening the way for the next 10. The little box had a vial for my test. A little swab in each nostril and I was on my way to the familiar passport control. Then carry-on x-ray and metal detectors. Collect bags with nothing to declare and off to the taxi stand. Oh, I thought maybe I'd go to an etecsa store [the government telecommunications service provider] and get a Cuban SIM card for my phone. Nope — directly to your place of accommodation and stay there until your test result.

Or so I thought. I arrived on Wednesday. On Thursday, a nice doctor came by to check on my health. She impressed on the person I am renting from, who lives just down the hall, that there are stiff fines for both of us if I violate the quarantine. The fine is not what keeps me in the apartment. Every day, I watch the COVID-19 report. Eighty-six new cases, most in Havana, many from visitors. Respect for the Cuban medical system that has controlled the virus and avoided most deaths, without a vaccine, keeps me inside.

Cuba, too, is testing vaccines — four of them. But they didn't wait to save lives. The Cubans know what they are doing. Then, on Friday, another nice doctor came by, but with a paper for me to sign that says to stay inside for 10 days! Friday is only day two or three. And I am only here for 14 days!

The person I am renting from is intersecting with the Consultorio to explain the situation. Hopefully, I will get my second test on Monday — 5 days after arriving, then a day or two for results, and it will be seven or eight days not ten.

The process for people staying in hotels — by the way, people from the U.S. are

forbidden to stay in Cuban hotels by the U.S. government — or people staying with their families isn't part of my experience

It is in the interest of all of us on both sides of the Florida straits to #unblockCuba2021. Please support the Saving Lives Campaign (on Facebook or at SavingLivesCampaign.org) to get your union, city council or state legislature to pass a resolution to speak out against this 60-year injustice.

Nine U.S. cities and three labor councils have done this since May 5. Together we can make 2021 the year to end the blockade of Cuba.

