

The privilege of travel

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Six months grounded and I'd forgotten how to fly. I was due to take my first COVID-era flight, a brief flip from my home in Sydney to Ballina on the NSW mid-north coast for a meeting a few weeks ago. But I wasn't ready.



It felt anathema to me, the idea of leaving my house with overnight bag in hand and mask pulled tight against my face, occupying confined spaces on public transport and then on the plane, where microbes circulate with indiscriminate ferocity. How strange, to have been transmogrified so swiftly into the opposite of the footloose, easy-going adventurer I once was: a person with a phobia of germs and people and exotic places.

Though my social media feeds were filling with friends' stories and images of road trips and picnics and fishing jaunts in regional areas as lockdowns eased, I wasn't yet ready to venture beyond my neighbourhood. It had become my safe place, my own 'travel bubble' in which I would wander around my garden and take my usual walk through my suburb's streets and occasionally set out for the shops a few kilometres away.

But now that bubble was about to burst; in the days leading up to my flight, I'd been waking in the early hours to find a herd of horses stampeding across my chest. The pandemic had made of me a hermit. Travel's muscle memory had grown flabby through lack of use.

The airport, when I reached it, was a mausoleum, a capacious, polished space echoing with the ghosts of harried travellers.

'Keep a safe distance,' warned large stickers glued to the floor.

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'To help maintain social distancing this kiosk is currently unavailable,' announced a sign affixed to a shuttered self-service check-in booth.

'Welcome back!' chimed a billboard. 'This place hasn't been the same without you.'

But this place — which I'd passed through perhaps eight times last year — wasn't the same now that I was back, either. I felt strangely deflated sailing through security without a minute's wait; in ordinary times I would have killed for such speed and tranquillity. I felt oddly gloomy seeing the shuttered boutiques I would have once passed by without a second thought.

Boarding the plane and pulling on my mask, I was filled with the trepidation one encounters when entering a space from which there is no escape. The fear was not one of flying, but of being within potential proximity to contagion. And what was this? Every last seat was occupied, the aircraft a tin crammed with sardines and not all of them shielding their mouths or bodies from fellow passengers. Apprehension rose like floodwater in my chest.

But the rumble of wheels and the plane's upward thrust soothed me; the muscle memory was firming up. I peered out the window at mountainous clouds; for months I'd stared up at them from below, forgetting as I did so this exceptional top-down view.

But the cumulus, sun-lit and heavenly from high altitude, became menacing as we descended, morphing into grey nimbostratus and refusing to budge. Down we went, down, down, until a smudge of green showed through the miasma; bracing myself for the grating of wheel against tarmac I felt instead another upward thrust, saw the wheels retract into their housing. My first landing in the age of COVID had just been aborted.

The second landing was aborted, too. The third was successful — but only because we'd been diverted now to Brisbane, away from the storm cell which had reduced visibility at Ballina and prevented us from landing. But we might as well have arrived in a foreign country, for we were breaching Queensland's strict border closures and wouldn't be allowed off the plane under any circumstances.

'This is really kind of like an international flight — you'll need your passports,' announced the captain.

'Only joking, you won't need them. We're not really in Queensland, so long as you don't put your toe on the ground.'

I laughed. Here I was on my first COVID-era flight, trapped in a plane in a quarantined state with cantankerous, mask-less passengers, lurching on tiny packets of soy rice crackers and choc-chip cookies and raspberry slice handed out by beleaguered flight attendants, wondering how the day would end.

It dawned on me now that I hadn't forgotten how to fly. It was quite simple, really: board the plane and trust you will arrive at your destination. And if you don't, accept that sometimes things go wrong. We returned to Ballina and attempted another landing, but it, too, was aborted. Our touchdown in Sydney, six hours after we'd taken off from the city, was faultless.

Disembarking into the twilight, I thanked the captain, who had emerged from the cockpit to apologise to his sullen passengers. It was an instructive farewell: don't ever take travel for granted, his presence suggested, for it's an immense privilege, and you never know when you'll be able to do it again.



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Main image: (Photo by Catherine Marshall)

Taken from Eureka Street