

On a flight from the UK in September 2019, I laid out the details of a road trip across Iceland on a napkin. My partner, Jim, has taken me on so many adventures (UK the most recent), it was now my turn. Emails to his boss and team were sent to secure his time off. Plane tickets, rental car, and route finalized; a combination of guest houses and hotels along the southern coast. For Christmas, I presented him with a photo book outlining all of our past adventures. The final pages were stock photos and the phrase, “Verið velkomin til Íslands“(Welcome to Iceland). From March 10 through the 17th, we would be traveling to somewhere neither of us had been.

The initial reports of a virus in China quickly became lead story news by mid-late February. The media treatment was excessive; our fears became daily discussions. The airline was not offering refunds, changes were allowed if you wanted to pay. There were hiking sticks, foul weather gear and other items you would not expect to purchase for a vacation. Waterproof everything was a must. We took turns who was not OK; one day me, the next day Jim. The week before, the airline began allowing changes without penalty.

“Go?”

“Don’t go?”

The back and forth continued. So unsure of going, we checked our bags at JFK. In an airport restaurant, still uneasy; there was “something” very real in the air. Our boarding group called, there was no turning back. I half expected we would be turned around once we landed.

Was the trip going to be a bust? No idea. Were we worrying about our girls and home? Yes. Did I try to stand in a waterfall? Of course I did; there are pictures. Thanks to a rented hotspot, we were in contact with home constantly. On the 13th, my daughter, Tori, called via Facetime:

“He is banning all international travel for 30 days”.

Her voice sounded different; not panicked, more of a controlled concern. She just wanted to make sure we knew what was going on. Tori is a nursing student at Adelphi University; her immediate concern was college was closing after break. She had to go back and empty her dorm room. She had that all under control; including daily trips to stores to get house essentials. I started to worry. Jim was certain we should let the initial panic subside at home. We swam in a glacier hot spring in a snowstorm that afternoon. After dinner, the Northern Lights in the -10 degree cold overhead. The trip was not a bust.

The news over the weekend showed insane delays and crowds at O'Hare in Chicago; six hours to get through customs. Jim was right; we let it pass. We had met more than a few people during our trip; the virus and how to get home seemed to be the only topics. A couple from Holland leaving that day to make their re-entry window before their town closed. Another couple from New Jersey trying to fly back on one of the reduced flights; now leaving on the 17th as we were. Icelandic residents were vigilant; hand sanitizer was everywhere. Our final evening, the grocery store offered gloves and hand sanitizer for shopping; masks were still not a required or frequent sight. We considered buying toilet paper.

The terminal was mostly passenger free; lots of employees directed the few of us through check in. Descended to the departure gates, people were everywhere; crowded in the gate area for the few flights departing. One of them, a single Canadian destination. The departure board displayed more cancelled than boarding/on-time flights. Newark and Chicago on-time earlier that day, now cancelled. Our JFK flight, still on time and at the gate next to the Canadian exodus. We were each re-screened;

“Why were you in Iceland?”

“Where is your final destination in the United States?”

Each of us were handed a health pre-screen and contact form. Our flight, half full and very quiet; the New Jersey couple were not passengers. The captain descended so we could see Greenland. All white; definitely the wrong name for that country. We arrived early to JFK; the captain announced the following, more or less:

“Good evening folks, this is your captain. Before we arrive at the gate, we want to make you aware that we do not know if we will be allowed to deplane on the jet way or the tarmac. We will be met by health officials in hazmat suits who will take your temperature and retrieve the form you must have filled out prior to deplaning.”

My stomach sank. I shed a tear.

“What the hell did I do?”

“What the hell is a Schenzen country?”

Iceland is a Schenzen country, a travel agreement between the EU and China; made sure to check that on the form. “Hazmat suits” turned into face shields and gloves, like at the dentist. In exchange for our temperature and the completely filled out form, a quarantine card. More souvenirs.

The trip from airplane seat to baggage claim and through customs, was 15 minutes. Turns out, an empty JFK is a very efficient airport. Our luggage took longer. My daughter picked us up; still unsure of how bad it was.

“Most stores are closed, restaurants are takeout/delivery only. I tried to get as much toilet paper and towels as I could”.

We stopped at Target; pre hurricane picked over. No crowds. We grabbed whatever paper products we could find. We did not find much. Grabbed food staples; canned soup, crackers, pasta, sauce, and of course, cookies. The next morning, BJ's Club for more. One pallet each of paper towels and toilet paper available, limit one package per family. A full house used a lot of stuff we learned quickly.

There we were, two adults working from home and two college students attending online classes with a fifth who worked at a cancer facility. For the next 14 days, neither of us could leave the house except for essentials. No going into work, no store to wander around; nothing. Remote work, remote school, home cooking, baking, pizza and a daily intake of TV and Netflix. Our Iceland trip quickly faded into memory as this new reality took hold. Quarantine ended on April 2nd. Jim worked from home, I became the only other family member leaving for work. When I got home, stripped in the laundry room and ran to shower.

This was short lived arrangement. On the 6th, I left work early; short of breath and cold. I was required to call for a COVID test. I spiked a fever close to 100 degrees; achy and cold, the shortness of breath was horrible. The 7th, I drove myself (no passengers allowed) to P lot to get tested. An epidemic movie set filled our campus lot; tents, military. Armed military. I could not roll my window down. I shouted to co-workers in hazmat gear. I showed my badge, my license. Swabbed through the window of the car. Felt like when you use a Q-tip and someone pushes your hand.

I do not remember the next couple of days, only foggy bits here and there. More exhausted and weaker than I have ever felt; picking up a glass was excruciating. Struggling to breath, Jim hooked me to my CPAP machine. My daughter checked my temp and pulse ox regularly. I have heart problems as underlying issues; bonus. I hovered 1-2 degrees above normal, my O2 levels mid to low 90s sporadically. I was told I watched a lot of TV and slept; I do not remember. I did, however, remember pizza. By the 10th I was somewhat alert, my breathing was still an issue. Talk of the hospital came up; I

argued. My underlying issues treated me to many visit/stays in the past. My daughter took me to the ER and dropped me off; no one other than patients allowed inside. For 12 hours monitored in a closed room. Too quiet; all doors closed, little person to person interaction. The usual, noisy and busy atmosphere was replaced with a library like silence. I was too aware of being there;

“Was I going to the ICU?”

“Did I need a respirator?”

With no diagnosis, I was discharged 10 hours later. I was given an inhaler; this allowed me to catch my breath. This was a much appreciated token of the visit.

The 11th. COVID negative. Great news, what the hell was it then? I felt a little better; I needed primary doctor clearance to return to work. Another 100 degree fever, late on the 13th. Had to be 72 hours fever free; that week back to work shot to hell. I returned to my laptop work routine. The walls began to close in on me and my family. There was too much life going on during business hours. My strength slowly returned. On the far side of 72 hours, a video call with my primary; she told me of her numerous patients who tested negative that were in the hospital with COVID. My symptoms; all COVID indicators. “You had it” she confirmed, though glad to see me alert and breathing better. Of all the medical professionals I have encountered in life, my trust in her is implicit. Finally cleared to return to work; I cannot fathom what COVID could be like.

Jim starts to not feel well; he recovers faster. His immune system is strong. He has underlying conditions too. We both still experience periods of extreme exhaustion and fogginess. And weird joint pain. Is it COVID? We don't know. Antibody testing would only answer the “if we had it” question. We cannot donate even if we have antibodies.

We follow the general narrative: restrictions ease. We work; sometimes from home, sometimes at our place of business. We go to school online. We spend a lot of time at home. The internet wavers. Weekend trips to stores for essentials. Cannot find yeast or disinfectant. Tensions rise; disagreements become more common. Home improvements become weekend plans. Weekends begin to feel like they actually last again. The house transforms; new fencing and lawn. A driveway. We hold our psyches and home life as gently as possible. Travel plans fade; visiting becomes a distance game. Driving to the store five towns over fills in for road trips. People are vigilant, people are not. Some see COVID as a threat; some see a political stunt. Angers flare, sadness becomes a common theme. We are all safe and healthy at home. It's hard to feel happy at times. It scares me that we may not overcome this.

It feels gratuitous or selfish writing this down; that my experience was something more important than anyone else's. It was going to be just like any other new year; daughters going back to school, the post-holiday work schedule and a road trip or two to see friends and family. And Iceland. There are so many people who were and are way sicker than I was; so many people lost their lives and so many lives saved but with debilitating after effects. I did not think in 2020 we would have to alter the way we do practically everything just to live.