

Contagion Airlines

So what happens on a corona repatriation flight?

By Christopher Klettermayer

For a start, seeing a huge airport like Barcelona's El Prat so deserted is eerie. Usually so full of life, bustling with travelers of all ages and sizes, it was reduced to a vast, empty hall where every footfall echoed through the terminal.

And every cough, even in the distance, registered in flash of worry. You could hear a pin drop – literally. The “departure” displays were nearly blank. Instead of an endless moving list of blinking lights, numbers and exotic destinations, there were only eight to choose from. The mind game I like to play at the airport – the one where I ask myself, “Where would I like to go most” – was boringly brief. Fantasy needs options.

Over the next hour, the few dozen Austrians to be repatriated gradually gathered in the assigned terminal. As we lined up, we were each given a new facemask, and told we were to keep them on for the entire flight. Everyone was masked, including the military personnel who were everywhere, adding to the menacing feel – like being an extra in a disaster movie, herded about like cattle.

Scanning our boarding passes, a large man in a white hazmat suit, also in a mask, asked every passenger, “Are you Austrian?” – the confirmation was needed, as there were a few Croats with us whose instructions would be different.

A few meters further along the gangway to our plane, the next man in hazmat gear was waiting. “We'll be taking your temperature now.” Bend forward, uncover your forehead (the symbolic bowing gesture, I grimaced), and scan. It was 36,4 degrees – good to go.

The final hurdle was yet another hazmat suit holding a tube of disinfectant; he asked for our hands, and squirted the smelly gel into them.

We took out seats along the side aisles – all middle rows were empty; we were to keep our distance on board as well. There would be no service contact either. A bag was strung over every seat, with packets of snacks, a bottle of water and several papers to fill out and sign.

Confusion ensued: Which forms were meant for whom? There were also instructions about the impending quarantine. Some of the forms were in English, irritated Viennese voices complained. “Our language is German!”

After the usual safety instructions, the soldiers did their best to explain which papers had to be filled out and signed by whom – but their instructions, spoken through the facemasks, were hard to understand, and harder to follow. Everyone was on edge.

Eventually, we all managed – and the flight commenced.

The tension was palpable. Excited and nervous, some were blathering on nonstop, while others were silent, fear drawn across their faces – perhaps most Austrian of all, a few complained loudly about those who were talking. I put in my ear buds and blocked it all out with music.

It was all very strange, and oddly fascinating. Flights all over Europe had been suspended, so the sky was as empty as the airport. I stared outside at the sunset... I was sad to leave my home in Barcelona, but I needed to be back with my family.

Upon landing, the instructions began again. “Due to safety requirements, we will only let ten people disembark every five minutes.” More complaining; still, everyone complied. Thankfully, I was in row 7, and got out very quickly – only to be greeted by a friendly man from the ministry, who had me sign a document consenting to self-quarantine. A herd of policemen and women watched from a distance as I went through passport control, then a final check of temperature. 36,4 degrees – still the same.

As I collected my luggage and walked through another empty airport, the PA system had been reprogrammed to address us, the newly repatriated. Stay distant. Conform to quarantine.

Yes, big brother. I shall.