

How And Why I Decided To Travel Internationally During The Pandemic

By Eric Rosen

Like many other frequent travelers, I spent most of 2020 at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic. During the early days of the crisis, global travel came to a near halt, with countries closing their borders, airlines mothballing their fleets, and hotels temporarily shuttering. Despite recent surges in infections in the U.S. as well as abroad, however, both domestic and international travel seem to be picking up again. Against this unsettling backdrop at the beginning of December I was offered the opportunity to travel to Kenya to report firsthand on how the country's tourism industry, as well as the communities and philanthropies it supports, are evolving to cope with the crisis.



The prospect of a trip to Kenya during COVID had me excited but also anxious about whether to go.

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As you might imagine, I was deeply conflicted about taking such a trip. Was it really necessary to give an account from on the ground, or could I tell my story remotely? Was it worth the risk to fly halfway around the world? How likely was it that I would be exposed, or expose others, to Covid along the way? What could I do if I was infected while abroad? Finally, what would it mean for spending time with my family around the holidays?

I set about researching Covid-19 testing requirements and visa conditions for entering Kenya, as well as new rules for returning to California at the end of my itinerary. I also had to track down Covid-19 testing facilities for before, during, and after my trip, and come to some decisions about quarantine and self-isolation times with my personal bubble of loved ones. Along the way, I investigated airline, hotel, and tour operator coronavirus procedures, insurance policies, and even discussed my plans with an epidemiologist. Here's an account of how I tried to come to an informed decision about whether to make this particular journey, and why I eventually opted to go.

Covid-19 Numbers: California Versus Kenya

When the idea for this trip initially surfaced, I checked the U.S. Embassy in Kenya's website for travel information specifically related to Covid-19. Due to a resurgence in cases, the country had instituted an overnight curfew from 10:00pm-4:00am, with bars, restaurants and other establishments required to close by 9:00pm each day. Mask wearing in public was mandatory, and public gatherings were limited. U.S. citizens were allowed to enter Kenya provided their body temperature was within a normal range, they did not exhibit any Covid-19 symptoms, and they could present a negative Covid-19 PCR-based test conducted within 96 hours prior to arrival.

Next, I looked at tallies of coronavirus cases both in California, where I live, and in Kenya. The disparities were shocking. In the weeks leading up to the trip dates, California was approaching two million cases and 20,000 deaths. Kenya, with a population of around 12 million more people, was headed toward 70,000 cases and around 1,400 deaths. Granted, those are all official numbers from government reporting agencies, and the prevalence could actually have been higher, but the contrast between my home and my destination were still stark.



Kenya has strict pandemic masking and distancing protocols in place, as did Micato Safaris, with whom I would be traveling. ERIC ROSEN

The numbers also brought up another concern: I was going from a place where cases were rising dramatically to a country that was experiencing its own much slighter surge. Given those figures, it began to seem more likely that I could be a potential vector of infection rather than a victim of it. From that perspective, was it responsible to travel to a country with a far lower incidence of Covid-19 than my own? As I pondered this point, I turned to the specifics of the trip.

Pandemic Protocols

I had been invited to Kenya by luxury outfitters, Micato Safaris, in partnership with Elewana Collection, a group of high-end wilderness lodges. I would be with a group of other journalists and a Micato safari director, but almost entirely sequestered from other travelers.

With the exception of a night at either end of the trip spent at the upscale Hemingways Nairobi hotel, where rooms are arranged along exterior corridors, and have huge French doors opening onto private balconies for fresh air, we would be out in the bush (and away from other people) the whole time. Our destinations included Elewana Tortilis Camp in Amboseli National Park, Elewana Kifaru House in the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy north of Mt. Kenya, and Elewana Sand River in the Masai Mara National Reserve. All are remote and low-occupancy destinations (not least of all because tourism has been down so much due to Covid-19), and where nearly all activities and interactions take place out of doors, minimizing transmission risk.



Elewana's periodic temperature checks, disinfecting points, and other procedures put me more at ease. ERIC ROSEN

To me, it also made a difference that my fellow travelers and I would be required, per Kenya's current entry rules, to provide proof of a negative PCR test taken within 96 hours prior to arrival in the country. While far from foolproof, it was at least a benchmark with which all of us would be consistent. As they have opened back up to guest bookings, Micato Safaris and Elewana Collection have also instituted a raft of coronavirus-

prevention procedures. Those include the wearing of masks by staff at all times and in all public places by guests, regular staff Covid-19 testing, frequent temperature checks for visitors, always available disinfectant hand sanitizer and wipes, and periodic cleaning of guest vehicles and luggage. I realized none of these measures were a guarantee of safety...but I figured they couldn't hurt.

Fear Of Flying

The final piece of the puzzle would be my flights to and from Nairobi, which were being provided by Qatar Airways. The carrier was recently rated among the best in Covid-compliant passenger safety by [AirlineRatings.com](https://www.airlineratings.com) for a number of reasons. First, the airline requires passengers traveling from nearly all gateways to present a negative Covid-19 PCR medical test result when checking in for flights (the timeframe will vary depending on your destination). Second, Qatar Airways provides all passengers with complimentary protective kits including a single-use face mask, disposable gloves, hand sanitizer gel, and even a face shield that must be worn throughout flights unless seated in business class. Of course, I'd pack my own supply of masks, gloves, sanitizer, and disinfectant wipes to conduct a thorough cleaning of my seat area. I would keep my mask and personal protective goggles on during flight, and only remove the mask briefly for bites of food or sips of beverages. I also planned to take advantage of Qatar Airways' dine-on-demand business-class service to eat at off-times when other passengers were not likely to be partaking themselves and would be masked.



Qatar Airways has a number of COVID-related protocols in place, including outfitting flight attendants in PPE. ERIC ROSEN

My long-haul flights between the U.S. and Doha would be operated with jets that had the airline's famous Qsuites with closing doors for more privacy. While a virus doesn't respect a door that goes halfway to the ceiling, doors do at least prevent other individuals from inadvertently entering one's personal space. The "do

not disturb” indicator lights would also help ensure that I only interacted with others on a strictly necessary basis.

Among its advertised safety measures, Qatar Airways has begun using Honeywell’s Ultraviolet Cabin System to eliminate germs from seats, surfaces and cabins, and, like other airlines, has HEPA filters that remove 99.97% of viral and bacterial pathogens from the air aboard its planes. Qatar Airways crew are outfitted in personal protective equipment that includes disposable protective gowns, gloves, masks and safety goggles. Service has also been modified to reduce crew-passenger contact.



Like other passengers on Qatar Airways, I was given a sanitary kit including a mask, gloves, disinfectant, and a face shield that had to be worn during flight. ERIC ROSEN

As for my layovers at Doha Hamad International Airport, the facility has recently fitted agents with smart screening helmets that take passengers’ temperatures, and uses UV-C disinfectant robots to clean the terminals. Passenger touch points throughout the airport are supposed to be sanitized every 10-15 minutes, and every boarding gate and bus area is thoroughly cleaned between each flight. On the way back, I decided to spend an overnight layover at the Oryx Airport Hotel within the transit area to have some personal space away from others, and it, too, uses virus-killing UV-C light as part of its room-cleaning procedures.

I told myself for the thousandth time that none of this was a failsafe against contracting Covid-19, and that I would have to be constantly vigilant about social distancing (when possible), mask wearing, and disinfecting everything I touched. But reading about the rigorous protocols now in place with Micato Safaris, Elewana Collection, and Qatar Airways made me feel like they were at least shouldering their part of the burden to keep travelers as safe as possible.

An Epidemiologist's Take

At this point, I spoke to Dr. Nabarun Dasgupta, an epidemiologist and the Innovation Fellow for the University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health. He has spent over 20 years studying infectious diseases and has advised the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, local and state authorities, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. I figured if anyone would give me a frank appraisal of the risk I was thinking of taking, it would be him.

After laying out my proposed itinerary, Dr. Dasgupta began, “Kenya’s in-country protocols look good, and in a well-ventilated safari vehicle, the risk of transmission is probably low.” So far so good. But what about the flights and transit times? That was a sticking point, according to him. “It’s all the interstitial steps to worry about – taxis to and from the airport, and being on the plane, where studies about transmission have been mixed.”



Almost all our activities, including visiting the long-legged residents of Nairobi's Giraffe Centre, were outdoors, lowering the risk of transmission. ERIC ROSEN

I would need to take an Uber upon my return to Los Angeles, but at least I could hitch a ride with my partner to the airport. As Dr. Dasgupta mentioned, studies about Covid-19 transmission on planes have been mixed. A U.S. Department of Defense study carried out in partnership with United Airlines in August and released in October found that a passenger would have to be seated next to an infectious person in economy for 54 hours to receive enough of a dose of the virus to become sick themselves. On the other hand, the CDC published a study out of Vietnam that found a woman on a Vietnam Airlines flight from London to Hanoi in March with a duration of about 10 hours might have infected an additional 15 passengers and crew. I came up short when researching other plane-based mass infection incidents, though.

“My biggest concern would be what happens if you get sick there,” continued Dr. Dasgupta. “I’d have a game plan for what you’d do if you start to experience symptoms. Have a plan,” he suggested. “Which hospital could you get to? Is there a hotel where you could quarantine? I always travel with contact information for the U.S. embassy, travel insurance and medevac coverage – all of which would also apply for a car crash, which was no less likely in the pre-pandemic world.”

I carry travel insurance under normal circumstances, but few policies cover pandemics. One exception is the Tripmate insurance offered by Micato Safaris, which extends significant coverage for trip cancellation, interruption, travel delay, medical expenses and emergency evacuation, among other clauses. I pored over the terms to ensure that my medical and travel expenses would be covered in the case that I did somehow contract COVID while traveling.

Even if it didn’t, though, something else could still go wrong. “Consider what a flight lockdown would mean for getting home,” advised Dr. Dasgupta. He wasn’t wrong. A colleague of mine had been visiting family in Kenya in the early days of the pandemic, and the entire country went on lockdown for months, with few international flights arriving or departing. She was left in limbo for weeks as several repatriation flights, including those through other regions like Europe, were cancelled on her.

I did not think that a likely outcome for me, though. For one, Qatar Airways has continued operating one of the most comprehensive schedules of international flights for the past several months. In fact, the airline just launched a new service from Doha to San Francisco in December, and will begin flying to Seattle later in January. It was also unlikely to cancel all U.S. flights before the holidays, so I figured I could still get home somehow. I could also look into other options of airlines operating flights to the U.S. with non-entry transit possibilities in their hubs.

Although Dr. Dasgupta did say he would probably not take this trip himself given the uncertainties surrounding travel—both in terms of health and possible lockdowns—he did leave me with this summation. “Irresponsible? Not what I would call it. Calculated risk with preparations and a response plan? Sure. That’s rational risk-taking, assuming you are a picture of health, but risk nonetheless.”

I took his words to heart. All travel incurs some risk, but were the current concerns just too much to compensate for the reward of being able to report on the experience of travel during COVID, including to a destination that is undertaking so many responsible measures to ensure visitor safety? In the end, I did decide the risk was worth taking. But there were a few more logistics to work out.

Self-Isolation And Safety

My final two considerations were: How would I isolate before my trip, and what would the plan be for post-travel quarantining so as to avoid possibly infecting others? I talked over my plans with my partner, and after reading guidance from the CDC about incubation times and symptom onset, I settled on the following plan.



My trip involved numerous COVID PCR tests, including one conducted out in the bush.

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We spent Thanksgiving with my family, whom we've been exposed to throughout the pandemic. All of us have limited our interactions with others outside our bubble, and did so especially leading up to the holiday. In the following week leading up to the trip, I stayed away from everyone except my partner, whom I enlisted to do any grocery shopping or errands we might need while I kept out of public. My sole outing came two days before my departure, when I went in for a Covid-19 PCR test, which came back negative before I left.

As for my return, California was still in lockdown, but began requiring incoming travelers to fill out an online form acknowledging that they would quarantine for 14 days or face the possibility of being fined. Although no one has asked me about this form or my acknowledgment since, so I'm not sure that threat has teeth.

I wanted to reduce my risk to others when I got back. To that end, I lined up a series of Covid-19 tests. Micato Safaris actually arranged for me to be tested (by a visiting technician out in the bush, no less) the day before I departed. I received a negative result that night. Then I made an appointment for a PCR test upon landing at Los Angeles International Airport. One of the airport's testing locations was right inside Tom Bradley International Terminal, where my flight from Doha would deplane.



I was able to secure a COVID PCR test upon landing back in Los Angeles at one of LAX's testing locations. ERIC ROSEN

Immediately after, I took a Lyft (with face shield and fresh mask on, and windows down) home to my solo apartment, where I could isolate from everyone. My partner had dropped off groceries before my arrival that would see me through at least a week, though I could order more food via Instacart and restaurant takeout services and ask for no-contact deliveries. The following day, I got the negative test result from my airport appointment.

With no symptoms six days after my return, I went to my doctor for another COVID test, which also came back negative two days later. At that point, my partner and I began to quarantine together (only after he had made another trip to the store to tide us over). After another week of isolating, and no symptoms for either of us, I came out of quarantine.

Complex But Worthwhile

I won't lie—I was anxious before, during, and after my trip. We still know so little about Covid-19 and how transmissible it is under various circumstances. I also remain conflicted about traveling in general, not just on long-haul international voyages, but even on short road trips, during this pandemic. I wouldn't call my trip to Kenya strictly necessary. However, I did think there were good reasons to go and report on the Covid-19 travel experience as well as how the tourism industry is coping. After all, it wasn't like I was just taking a jaunt to go clubbing in Cancún. Even now, though, I wonder whether making the trip was worth risking my own health, that of my partner, and the wellbeing of people I came into contact with in Africa.

Talking to an epidemiologist and getting his clear-eyed perspective, as well as attempting to educate myself as fully as possible about the risks and disease prevention felt like they went a certain distance toward keeping me safe. As did all the measures implemented by the organizations I was traveling with—namely, Qatar Airways, Micato Safaris, Elewana Collection—as well as the Kenyan government. My takeaway from

the experience was that it is imperative to research the policies adopted by your destination, and to choose responsible travel partners whenever possible. An insurance plan that covers you even in the event of Covid-19 infection is also vital.

Lest I was lulled into a false sense of security, though, Dr. Dasgupta left me with a profound parting thought. “I expect that individuals’ risk tolerances will shift over time,” he said. “What we judge as a flagrant trip today might be our post-Covid reprieve destination in a few months, even if actual risks have shifted only a little. At some point soon, uncertainty over Covid-era logistics is going to be overcome by the emotional desire to not miss out.”

My trip to Kenya did indeed feel like a reprieve from the pandemic—a chance to do what I love and report on a new place. Rather than relaxing me, though, it has only further convinced me that the key to evaluating travel opportunities going forward will be to invest just as much effort and time into preparations and precautions as I did in this instance, and do my best to keep myself and those around me healthy.

Disclosure: The author traveled as a guest of Micato Safaris, Elewana Collection, and Qatar Airways, but all opinions expressed are entirely his own.

Read the article at Forbes.com [here](#).