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Covid-19 In Europe: New Restrictions And Restraint In Portugal



Christopher Elliott Senior Contributor

Travel

I'm a consumer advocate. I write about customer service.

A new Covid-19 variant may be sweeping across Europe, but in Portugal, omicron is being met with new restrictions — and restraint.

From the olive orchards of [Alentejo](#) to the suburbs of [Lisbon](#), reaction to the new variant has been characteristically low-key. The Portuguese tourism industry, slammed by the Covid outbreak two years ago, is operating as you would expect during a pandemic off-season. Visitors are few and far between, for now. But that's about to change.



A line in front of a testing center in Lisbon. People have started to wear masks outdoors after new ... [+] CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

On Dec. 1, [Portugal announced new Covid restrictions](#), including a requirement to show proof of a negative coronavirus test to enter bars, large events and nursing homes. Portugal also requires visitors to have a EU digital certificate to stay in a hotel or eat in an indoor restaurant. Masks are mandatory in closed spaces.

These European countries are on lockdown

This stands in sharp contrast to the list of European countries closing again because of coronavirus. For example, Austria, which is experiencing a seasonal surge in Covid cases, [imposed a full lockdown in late November](#). Travel to Austria for tourism purposes isn't permitted until December 13, at the earliest.

Slovakia [followed suit](#) with a two-week lockdown in late November. Germany has added new Covid restrictions. Ireland [yesterday announced plans](#) to close nightclubs and re-establish social distancing requirements in pubs, restaurants and hotels starting Dec. 7. Other European countries are reportedly considering similar measures. It's unknown whether the omicron variant could extend those lockdowns — or tighten them.

Visitors to Europe are on edge, says Narendra Khatri, principal at [Insubuy](#), a travel insurance company. He predicts more lockdowns, particularly in northern Europe.

“It’s like the delta variant all over again,” he says. “People have been calling in the last week, asking about the lockdowns in Austria and Germany. They want to know if they will be able to go. What if travel is delayed? What if they get stuck?”

A “cancel for any reason” travel insurance policy would cover a cancellation for a European trip, he notes. “A regular policy would only cover you if something happens to you — if you get sick or you get injured,” he adds.

I've been in Portugal since early November. It's my first stop on an around-the-world trip to explore how the world is emerging from the Covid crisis. Last week, [I checked in from the Portuguese islands of the Azores](#) and noted its extreme caution when it came to testing requirements. But on the mainland, the response to Covid and the emerging threat of the omicron variant has been more restrained.

In my last report, I predicted that the division between locked-down Northern Europe and less restrictive southern European countries like Portugal and Spain might deepen. And in one respect, that has already happened. Attitudes toward Covid, particularly the omicron variant, are noticeably different. Portugal has a quiet confidence you might

expect of a country where 86% of the population is vaccinated. The extra protective measure is just for safety.



Margarida Barradas, director of operations at the Torre de Palma Wine Hotel in Monforte, Portugal. ... [+] CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

"No cancellations" in Monforte

A two-hour drive east of Lisbon near the Spanish border, you'll find the [Torre de Palma Wine Hotel](#). It's built next to the well-preserved ruins of Vila Cardílio, a Roman villa dating back to the first century A.D. November is a quiet month at the hotel, according to Margarida Barradas, the resort's director of operations. Workers were using the downtime to do maintenance on the historic buildings.

"We haven't had any cancellations because of omicron," she told me earlier this week.

Of course, a vacation at a place like the Wine Hotel isn't the kind of thing you would want to cancel even during a worsening pandemic. There are plenty of opportunities to stay Covid-free, from the appointment-only indoor swimming pool to the socially distanced dinner. The staff wears masks religiously, indoors and outdoors. And the guest rooms, most of which are refurbished staff quarters on the estate, offer plenty of privacy.

You get a sense out here, among the olive groves and vineyards, that this is the type of hotel tourists might want to visit if omicron gets as bad as some fear. Which would probably be just find with the property owners. But even in less remote places, there's a lot of optimism.



The author with Seema Lodi, general manager at Martinhal Cascais, a family resort near Lisbon. Masks ... [+] AREN ELLIOTT

In Cascais, "everything" is sanitized

Even in a hotel with more rooms and guests, the incoming omicron variant has caused hardly a ripple.

"Here in Portugal, even when you had the first wave or the second or the third wave, I must say there is a lot of respect for what the government tells people to do," says Seema Lodi, general manager at [Martinhal Cascais](#), a family resort just outside of Lisbon.

At the resort, which is just a short walk from the cliffs of the Atlantic coast, Lodi explains that everything is sanitized — tables, chairs, pretty much any surface you can come into contact with. Masks are required for the staff at all times. They even require

weekly on-site tests for their staff. That rigid adherence to the rules has made people comfortable taking their families to Portugal, even in uncertain times.

"We want to be able to give our guests that sense of confidence that they can come here, enjoy their holidays and know that they're going to be looked after and not have to worry," she says.

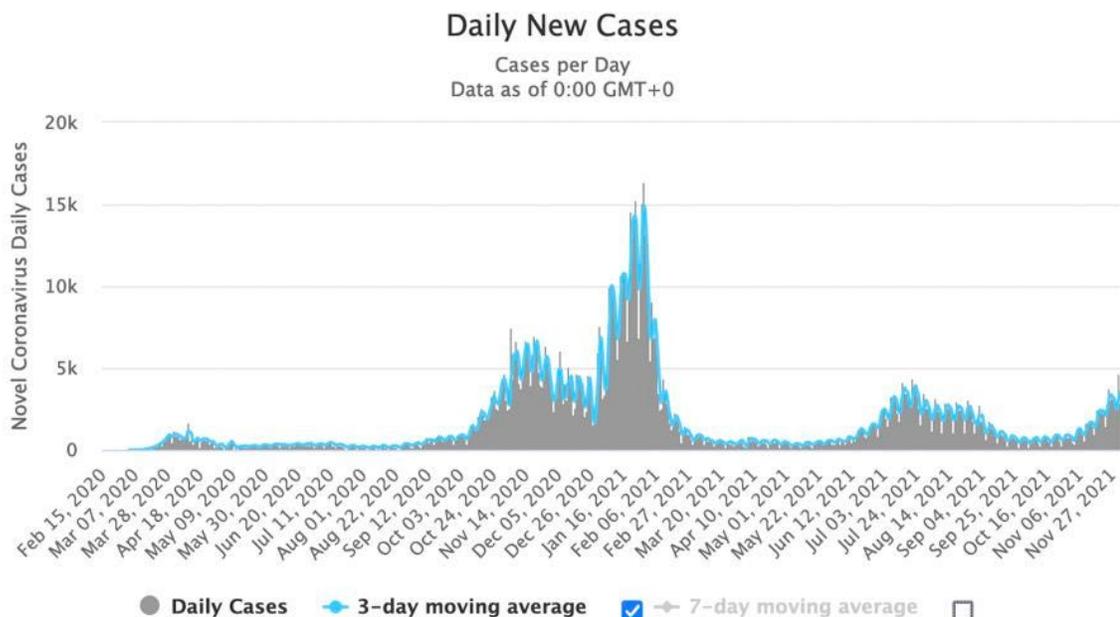
Lodi says 2021 was "way better" than the previous year, "and next year is going to be even better."

Portugal can probably afford that kind of optimism because of its high vaccination rates. And the real proof that all of this works will come later this month, when hotels and resorts will fill up for the holidays. Properties like Martinhal report they are already booked solid during the Christmas and New Year period.

But how will this end?

Still, Portugal is officially in the middle of another Covid surge. There's no telling how severe it will be or how omicron will factor into it.

Daily New Cases in Portugal



Daily new Covid-19 cases through early December, 2021. WHO

The question for American travelers monitoring the latest Covid news in Europe is: How will this affect their upcoming trips this spring and summer? Most predictions call for a record summer for European travel, and many of those trips start in Portugal. In the

coming months, Americans may repeatedly click on the Europe lockdown map to see what is — and isn't — open. But as of now, there's no way of knowing what the situation will look like in late spring or early summer.

As one of the most vaccinated countries in Europe, Portugal seems well prepared for a new variant or a seasonal surge. But there is one thing we know about the pandemic: It is unpredictable.



Christopher Elliott