

ADVICE

Want to steer clear of contracting COVID-19 on your next vacation? Follow these guidelines

Christopher Elliott Special to USA TODAY

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If you need a vacation from the pandemic, talk to Ron Scharman. It turns out there are proven ways you can avoid COVID on your next trip, and he's happy to tell you about them.

For his three-week European getaway in March, he aimed for the countries that took COVID seriously. "I selected countries where the restrictions are the tightest for entry," explains Scharman, the CEO of FlyWithWine, a specialty luggage company based in San Francisco.

That meant spending time in places like Austria, which recently introduced a vaccine requirement for its population, and France, which has locked down during the omicron surge.

"To me, this is about as safe as you can expect," he adds.

A majority of travelers (54%) say that in 2022, they will pick a destination known for strong COVID-19 safety protocols, according to the latest Expedia Travel Outlook. Slightly fewer (48%) are choosing a destination with low COVID-19 case counts.

But how do you do this? To avoid COVID on your next vacation, you have to study the maps, review the destination's COVID policies, and pick the safest accommodations.

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How to find a COVID map

You can find places that are less likely to leave you infected. Jack Plaxe, a senior consultant with Guidepost Solutions, a global security consulting and investigative firm, has a checklist of sites he reviews before making travel plans. He refers to this as gathering 'pre-departure intelligence.'"

They include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Traveler's Health page, which lists 244 international destinations, each with an associated COVID-19 health score. "There is also a color-coded map that shows the COVID-19 risk by country," he says.

Plaxe also checks the State Department's website, which has a page with COVID-19 information, including country-specific requirements for entry, testing, and isolation periods. And if cases are trending upward, Plaxe advises his clients to reconsider the need to travel.

Also, check vaccination rates. The higher the rate, the less likely you'll have a new strain of COVID causing a runaway infection. I visited the United Arab Emirates, one of the most vaccinated countries on the planet, at the peak of the omicron surge. The vaccine and testing requirements were rigid, but I felt safe.

HOW TO SURVIVE A LONG-HAUL FLIGHT DURING COVID: Get the right mask, bring a pillow

Where are the COVID-free destinations?

Joe Cronin recently started planning a warm-weather getaway and was thinking about the Caribbean. He decided on Turks and Caicos after reading their COVID rules, which are quite strict.

"A primary consideration is their policy for international visitors," he says. "All tourists must be fully vaccinated before they arrive in the islands. You need a COVID-19 test, taken no more than three days before arrival, and travel insurance."

Cronin, president of International Citizens Insurance, also has the advantage of seeing the ebb and flow of claims from travelers. "So I'm comfortable with my decision to travel there," he adds.

Stephanie Charboneau, a travel advisor with Travel Creates Memories by Dream Vacations, has been recommending St. Lucia to her clients who want to avoid COVID. She recently traveled to the Caribbean island and found their COVID documentation requirements were high. She had to upload testing and vaccination documents to a St. Lucia travel portal before leaving the U.S.

"Once we arrived, authorities sent all passengers into a special tent where they verified all of their paperwork and issued a plastic wristband to wear at all times while we were there," she

recalls. "The wristband indicated that we were vaccinated and had presented our negative PCR test, so we were allowed to roam the island freely."

HOW TO TELL IF YOUR HOTEL ROOM IS CLEAN: All hotels promise a clean room during the coronavirus pandemic. But are they really?

How to choose the right accommodations for avoiding COVID

Where you stay is as important as where you go. And this holds true for destinations in the United States as well as international ones. Take a place like Chicago, which has had its ups and downs during the pandemic. But at Kishauwau Cabins, about 110 miles southwest of the Windy City, you won't find a lot of COVID. It's just 17 rustic cabins on 65 wooded acres on a bluff above the Vermilion River.

You probably won't see many people here -- or hear from anyone. Cell phone reception is spotty. And that's a selling point for the cabins. "When everything was going really haywire, people wanted to come here because they were tired of hearing all the negativity with everything going on," says Terisa King, the owner.

"Places where the focus is on outdoor excursions like beach destinations or where you can rent private lodging like a lakeside cabin might be part of travelers' COVID-preventative thinking process as they plan vacations." says Dr. Gene Delaune, an emergency room physician and senior medical consultant for Allianz Travel Insurance.

You can have a relatively COVID-free vacation by tracking cases, doing research and choosing the right hotel. But can you get away from it entirely? Experts say probably not.

"Escaping from COVID can be difficult, because new hotspots can pop up quickly," says Narendra Khatri, principal of Insubuy, a travel insurance company. "You're going to be spending time in an airport and on a plane with people from all over the world -- no matter where you go."

Expert tips for managing COVID on your next vacation

Get detailed information about your destination. That's the advice of David Koo, Global Rescue's associate director of operations. "Check the requirements for boarding and country destinations for the airlines, train, and ferry companies you're using," he says.

"Double-check the policies for cancellations, postponements or change of departure date." All these can change at a moment's notice -- and often do.

Get help from a pro. Sarah Morris, general manager for Ker & Downey Africa, a tour operator in South Africa, says travel advisors know the remotest and most COVID-free destinations on the planet. (Many of them happen to be in Africa.) "Although travel professionals cannot guarantee that their clients will not contract COVID-19 while traveling, there are certain destinations and types of vacations that offer a safer and more socially distanced escape," she adds.

Get vaxxed and get boosted. Chances are, COVID will catch up to you eventually. When it does, make sure you're less likely to get serious symptoms. "Anyone who does plan on traveling should have their vaccines and booster," says Tracy Schatz, president of Elite Travel Journeys. "Most foreign countries require those for entry."