

Corona Chronicles
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Orono Public Library Writing Circle

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Planes, Trains and Automobiles

Due to Corona virus I spent more than six months in Spain. It was June, our taxes had not been paid, and the family in Maine needed me, so it was time to go home. I was scheduled to fly on July 15, 2020, on a direct flight to Boston. Under ideal circumstances I would land in Boston at around 2 pm, clear passport control and customs, remove the Spanish SIM card from my iPhone and install the American one, exit Terminal E, hop on a Concord Trailways bus and be in Bangor in four and a half hours. I was aware that Concord Trailways was not operating but was convinced that by mid-July they would be back in full swing.

Then reality hit. My travel agent sent me an email. I rely on travel agents rather than on my own skills to find a flight. I figure they have more experience, can find a better deal and give me good advice. The travel agent informed me that the Madrid – Boston flight was canceled, and she awaited my instructions. I knew there was a direct Madrid – Philadelphia flight through American Airlines. In Philly I could catch a plane to Bangor and bypass the bus. The travel agent totally ignored this suggestion and continued ignoring me for almost a week while my daughter made fun of me for depending on such an obsolete profession.

Eventually the travel agent responded and suggested three choices, never mentioning Philadelphia. Has American Airlines stopped this route? There were three options: Madrid – Miami - Washington DC – Bangor; Madrid – London – Boston; or Madrid - Lisbon - Boston. The first two cost more than a \$1,000 one way. The third option was only around \$400 which with fees and other niceties came up to \$700. My unused British Airways ticket was eventually refunded.

I chose the third option which was with TAP, Air Portugal. It was the cheapest and fastest route, so I thought. I was warned that the flight to Boston would arrive at 10:30 pm and my choices to make it to Bangor on the same day were very limited. Given that my husband doesn't drive much at night and that I didn't want to bother friends who live in Boston after coming from a dangerous Covid-19 infected country, I asked the travel agent to find me a hotel with shuttle service from Logan. She did that and I was confident that everything would work out swimmingly.

Anna, my daughter, was planning to come with me. She even bought the ticket, but changed her mind considering that returning to Spain might be problematic with closed borders and all. The ticket was non-refundable, and TAP demonstrated their generosity by not charging her the 150 euros cancellation fee.

My flight was now scheduled for July 16. I kept checking the TAP webpage every day to make sure the flight was still on and noticed a troubling advisory. It stated that all travelers to Portugal, even those in transit, had to provide proof that they were not infected with Covid-19. The test had to be performed 72 hours prior to the flight. No passenger without a negative test would be allowed to board the plane.

Thinking back, Anna and I realized that we probably had had the virus sometime in March and had survived it without major complications. The symptoms coincided with most of the symptoms described by experts. A serology test we took showed that we had plenty of antibodies, but that test had been performed one month earlier.

We found a lab not far from our apartment. No appointment necessary, first come, first served. The waiting room was the street. Several dozen people, middle aged and older, all wearing masks, were standing crowded in a disorderly manner with little social distancing under a punishing sun. There was nevertheless the suggestion of a line alongside the building. We found out that we first had to register for the test we needed as they performed several different ones. So, we went inside, coughed up 140 euros, returned to the street and waited for the nurse to come out and call our name.

This business was aggravated by a deafening jackhammer operating nonstop across the street. We could not hear the nurse yelling our names and had to congregate around her thus compromising our attempt at social distancing even more. The sun was so merciless that Anna ran to a “chino” (inexpensive store owned and operated by Chinese nationals) to buy an umbrella. The test was a very brief and painful nose swipe. After two days I downloaded the negative test, printed it and held it close to my heart like the most precious possession.

The ticket stated that I was to depart from Terminal 2 in Barajas, but Terminal 2 was closed, so we had to walk to Terminal 1 through creepy deserted corridors and climb spectral stairways. Anna and I finally said goodbye and I boarded the plane without anyone asking me for the Covid -19 test result. The short flight to Lisbon was full. Every passenger had to fill a form with contact information in case somebody became infected.

The Lisbon airport was empty. I spent more than five hours awaiting my flight to Boston and looking at mostly closed stores. Aren't we lucky that globalization has made it possible to find the same stores everywhere! There was Sunglass Hut, Victoria's Secret, Michael Kors, Lacoste. The majority were closed, even Starbucks and KFC.

Two souvenir shops were open, and I purchased a magnet with the picture of St. Anthony of Padua, the saint who finds things. He was born in Lisbon, but spent his life in Padua, so both Italy and Portugal claim him as their own. My father was called “My Saint Anthony” at home by my mother because he was good at finding lost things, using common sense and his logical mind. My grandmother was Antonia and so is my middle name and for this reason I like St. Anthony.

The luxury stores Montblanc, Zegna and some others were closed, but not to disappoint their customers, they displayed signs stating that if you were interested in something, the personnel at the Duty-Free shop would help you by opening the stores, etc. All is well if we can buy a \$1,000 Montblanc pen and a \$3,000 Zegna suit in the middle of a pandemic. Surprisingly, Benfica, the store of the famed Portuguese soccer team, was closed. Oh well, I'll buy the Benfica t-shirt next time I'm in Lisbon.

The boarding area had no air-conditioning. Fewer than 100 people were waiting, and a young woman was weeping. We finally boarded the plane. I had my Covid test certificate at the ready, and again nobody asked for it. I went to my assigned seat in the last row. When I wanted to place my hand luggage in the overhead bin and asked for help, the attendant said he was not allowed to touch my luggage, but that I could sit anywhere I wanted and keep the bag next to me or in front of me or behind me. Space was not a problem. It looked like flight attendants were more numerous than passengers. I watched movies, ate dinner and slept a little enjoying the overabundant space. The contact information form had to be filed and then we landed in Boston. Again, nobody asked for my Covid certificate; 140 euros down the drain.

Logan was eerie. A few uniformed employees behind the passport and customs counters attended the few dozen arriving passengers. The whole business was done in minutes. It was after 10 pm. I updated my iPhone with the SIM card and walked outside looking for my shuttle bus. No buses, no taxis, just a

few city buses driving lazily with few passengers. I walked around the perimeter of the terminal hoping to find a means of transportation to get to the hotel. No luck. I saw the flight attendants who were waiting for the TAP bus that would take them to their hotel. I asked them if they could help me. They apologized and said that they knew nothing since they were not stationed in Boston. I felt like that bag nobody wanted to touch.

I returned to the terminal, sat down and recognized a woman who had been on the plane. She happened to be Spanish and her phone had run out of juice. I loaned her my charger and we commiserated about our prospects, especially since she traveled with her old and feeble husband. Her daughter was sending her an Uber to take her to New Hampshire. I had no Uber account. She told me that Real Madrid had just won the soccer League for the year, so we said *Hala Madrid* and then *adios*.

Then I called the hotel, told them I had a reservation and asked them to send me a taxi, since there was no shuttle. The receptionist said they didn't do that. Then after a while he felt responsible for a stranded guest and gave me a phone number. I had to ask for Gerry. He sometimes drives guests to the hotel. So, I called Gerry. He was near Logan picking up other folks and said he would be at my terminal in 15 minutes. Gerry then asked where I was – arrivals or departures. I said arrivals. He instructed me to go to departures upstairs and wait in front of Door 22. His car was green.

By this time, I was the only person at Terminal E. The place looked like Steven King's airport in *The Langoliers* that was filmed at the Bangor Airport, a bare, dark and desolate space. I was again the only person waiting outside. No traffic whatsoever. One car approached, but stopped at another door, not the 22. Gerry called again to make sure I was still waiting. Of course I was. Where was I going to go? He reminded me that his car was green. At 11 pm with little light all cars looked green unless they were sweet pea green. When my gypsy cab finally arrived more than half an hour later the color was hunter green or any unidentifiable dark color. A female flight attendant was in the car. She had just landed from California and Gerry was driving her home. Then it was my turn. Gerry, who looked like a retired boxer, was a cheerful fellow and happy to hear I was coming from Lisbon because his family was Portuguese.

The hotel was not in a garden spot of Boston. I could see ugly parking lots and abandoned warehouses where mafia characters could have their gatherings to settle accounts. The price was almost \$200 a night, and when I asked if they served breakfast in the morning the answer was that the restaurant was not operating. I could walk to Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks in the neighboring strip malls. Next morning, I saw three shuttle buses in the hotel parking lot resting comfortably. I walked to Starbucks, picked up something and brought it back to the hotel. It was raining so it was not pleasant to eat breakfast outdoors.

Since Concord Trailways was not working the options to reach Maine were the Greyhound bus or the train. I went for the Downeaster which would take me all the way to Brunswick, so I would save my husband from driving to Portland. The Downeaster would leave North Station at 5 pm and arrive in Brunswick at 8:15 pm.

I checked out of the hotel at noon and requested a taxi that deposited me at North Station in 5 minutes flat. What to do until 5 pm? I wanted to explore the neighborhood which looked interesting. In spite of having a large suitcase and hand luggage with wheels it was difficult to walk around getting on and off sidewalks. All I wanted was to leave my luggage with a reliable person, cross the street, walk around and spend some time at CVS, maybe even buy some make-up. Was that too much to ask? But there was no place to leave your luggage. Folks in Europe are not so paranoid.

The day before I had received an email from Amtrak telling me that I should not spend more than one hour at the station. There were signs saying that given the limited space in the waiting area one should

reserve a waiting space on-line. I did not do that. There were not enough people to warrant such rules. I spent the following three and half hours sitting on old-fashioned beautifully designed wooden benches breaking the law and observing wildlife.

North Station is part of The Garden – proud home of the Celtics and the Bruins. The waiting area was painted submarine grey and the pigeons who lived there matched perfectly the color and added life and movement to the ghostly space that every so often would fill with people depending on the arrivals and departures of trains, and then empty again. The pubs were closed. Dunkin' Donuts was the only eating establishment open, and the crumbs they generated found their way to the floor and the pigeons who incessantly patrolled the space, although the pickings were slim. A nimble sparrow noticed a large crumb, stole it swiftly and disappeared in the rafters. A white and grey pigeon thought he had found food, but it turned out to be a piece of paper. That didn't discourage him. He started playing with it, throwing it in the air and chasing it. Soon two other pigeons joined in the fun. They probably had learned some moves from the Celtics and the Bruins.

The humans all wearing masks were not different from the pigeons. When not wearing masks, we could identify each other with ease. Now it was more difficult. I could not identify the pigeons either. Color, plumage, ease of movement, feet colored red or pale pink may be different, but their faces are as similar to me as those of the innumerable humans wearing masks.

Finally, the train to Brunswick was announced and I boarded it with relief. The attendant was very polite. The cafeteria that occupied the other half of the car was closed, of course. Only five people were traveling in the car. I enjoyed the ride immensely because, thankfully, I was not in a hurry. Otherwise, it was much slower than the bus, and it turned out we arrived in Brunswick half an hour late, so in total three hours and forty-five minutes. It was like nineteenth century travel. We passed through areas one doesn't see from a car or a bus. Old Orchard Beach was memorable. It felt like I was participating in the happy gatherings of individuals crowded in cafés not wearing masks.

It was almost dark when the Downeaster reached Brunswick. My husband and daughter were at the station. My daughter brought me home cooked food which I ate with pleasure on the ride home. We made it to Bangor after 11 pm. I had spent two days traveling on planes, trains and automobiles.

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