

Spring break travel during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic

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In the weeks leading up to the spring break 2020 the level of panic in the daily, sometimes hourly emails, from the University of Kentucky administrative staff continually rose along with an uncertainty regarding the remainder of the academic semester. Many schools around the country had already announced closing their Universities through the end of the spring semester, forcing all classwork to suddenly go online while a few schools had even announced simply giving the students the grades they currently had and wrapping up the semester right where they stood closing down their schools entirely.

On the Wednesday of the week before spring break, the University of Kentucky administration announced there would be a two week off campus isolation period for all students and staff following their return from spring break. This was thought to give students who may have become infected with the coronavirus a chance to get over it in case they were asymptomatic infectious carriers in hopes of limiting the remainder of the student body's risk of exposure following spring break travel to all parts of the country.

The University administration had made some vain attempts to convince students to cancel their spring break travel plans, another effort to reduce the infection rate of the student body. I myself had made plans, which I had no intentions of cancelling, to travel to New Hampshire several months prior to the Corona virus's infection coming to the United States. I planned to help a good friend of mine who was moving from where he lived in Maryland to New Hampshire to a very large piece of land he had recently purchased. We had plans of snowmobiling and coyote hunting as well as any other kind

of shenanigans we could get ourselves into. One of the main things we hoped to accomplish would be helping him scout out his property for deer, moose and bear hunting later in the fall since the area where he had purchased property was very remote in the mountains and had an abundance of all of those species.

I guess it might be helpful at this time to give some background on myself. You could call me a nontraditional student in the sense that I had gone to the University of Kentucky once before, dropped out and was now trying again. I am 32 years old. I started my civil engineering degree 14 years ago and after two years of struggling and distractions I decided to take a semester off. That semester turned into 24 semesters in the blink of an eye, stay in school, kids, seriously.

I went to a commercial diving trade school after leaving the University of Kentucky the first time and had been working as a commercial diver until my return to UK in the Fall of 2019. As a commercial diver, I have been involved with just about everything you can imagine underwater from structural inspections of bridges, dams, and piers, to salvage, dredging, heavy civil construction, underwater welding, explosive demolition and a few other things that I was told by the US Government not to talk about. Over the span of my 12 year break from college I spent over 3000 hours underwater working but, more important to this narrative, I racked up hundreds of thousands of Sky miles traveling all over the world for work as well as an endless amount of highway miles driving in 42 of the lower 48 US states.

Traveling has simply been a way of life for me for the last 12 years so the idea that the airport operations would be shuttered, with very few people traveling during the pandemic, was quite exciting for me to experience. There were some rumors of state quarantines and some talks from some governors saying that they may close their borders. The thought of getting stuck somewhere and having to find a way back home from a faraway place sparked my sense of adventure and only proved to increase my resolve to continue with my spring break plans. Having traveled as much as I have has made

me a pretty efficient and resourceful navigator and I knew that even if the absolute worst case scenario were to occur while I was away from my home in New Hampshire I would be able to get a vehicle and find my way back to my family in Kentucky, one way or another.

Showing up to Lexington's Bluegrass airport on the Friday morning before spring break I found the place nearly completely empty. From my past experiences flying out of Lexington on the first flight in the morning I knew that typically there is a mad rush of people trying to check their bags and get through the TSA checkpoint to get on those early flights that leave around 6:00 AM. I have had TSA pre-check for several years now, but I knew even the pre-check lines can be a bit backed up on early mornings such as these. The pre-check did not do me any good that day because there was only one other person in line with me. I had planned on skipping calc two that morning which was my only class on Friday so I could get a head start on the spring break travel rush that would surely come that weekend but, as it turns out, I didn't need much of a head start at all since the airport was so empty. My flight left at 6:00 AM for Detroit and since I was bringing firearms with me for the coyote hunting, I had to get there at 4:00 AM to make sure they checked through the required TSA inspection which, to my satisfaction was a breeze.

The terminals at gate A6 were also fairly empty and by the time we were loaded and pushing back from the gate, I think there was only about 6 people onboard. The next leg of the trip from Detroit to Manchester, NH had a similarly small number of passengers onboard. Manchester New Hampshire's airport is significantly smaller than Lexington's airport and after leaving the secure terminal area to the baggage claim area I realized I had the place all to myself. I got my bags and my buddy picked me up shortly thereafter. The outside world didn't seem to be missing much of a beat in New Hampshire at that time. My guess is that not many people go North for spring break, that fact coupled with the fears of pandemic quarantines and being stranded had all but shut down travel to the area, but, the locals didn't seem to notice and it felt very much like business as usual outside the Airport.

We had planned to just be in New Hampshire exploring the property and getting things settled in the whole time but we were just starting to see a real significant rise in the number of cases and deaths in the United States at that time and a very small minority of people were really starting to panic buy certain items at grocery stores. When the non-panicking people started noticing how quickly some of the grocery shelves became empty, they quickly followed suit and started panic buying too. Ground beef, canned foods, dried foods, like rice and beans, and most importantly, toilet paper was nowhere to be found. My buddy's wife and kids were stuck down in Maryland just outside of Baltimore when this panic really started to take off in their area. So, on the first night of my arrival after my buddy got off the phone with a very worried and stressed out wife, we decided to make the overnight drive down to Maryland to pick up his family and relocate them up to the farmhouse in New Hampshire at least until things calmed back down around the Baltimore area.

Driving through the night has its own set of benefits since there are very few people out on the road during those times under normal circumstances but now there was an even greater feeling of desolation this night because of the pandemic. To pass the time during the eight hour trip, of course, we listened to a zombie book on tape which brought a lively imaginative discussion on the state of our current affairs and somewhat disappointment on the lack of zombies so far during our current pandemic.

We arrived shortly after the sun came up the next day and after getting some rest, we had the whole family packed up and were on our way back to New Hampshire, this time during the day. We took extra precautions while we were traveling only stopping for fuel and restroom breaks. Each time we got out and wiped off the gas pump handle and the credit card and then wiped down everything inside the vehicle once we were done pumping gas with Clorox wipes. It turns out your hands will get pretty chapped in the wintertime if you are constantly using a bleach solution to wipe them down after touching things. We always took extra care to use the pump that was farthest away from people at

these gas stops as the coronavirus was said to be primarily an airborne influenza viral strain. After two days and 16 hours of travel we got my buddy and his whole family safely up to their new place in New Hampshire and we all breathed a sigh of relief.

Over the next five days I was able to kick back and relax and just run around the new property while I pretty much ignored everything going on in the outside world. Around Wednesday the University of Kentucky administration announced that all classes would be moving to online delivery through the end of the semester. It was around that time I started having discussions with my friend and my wife about extending my stay in New Hampshire since I technically had everything I needed with me in my laptop and a solid Internet connection to continue my schoolwork online. I tried to make the case to my wife saying that it might be safer for me to stay for a little while longer until things calmed back down. She promptly shot down that idea and said that if I was going to get stranded anywhere during this mess, it had to be with her. Deep down I knew she was right and that I needed to get home, but in reality, I was having a blast and didn't want to leave.

On Friday I headed back to the airport, not much had really changed over the past seven days since I had last flown. The main thing that had changed that was annoying was that none of the bars and restaurants in the airports were allowing customers to sit down in their establishments and were only providing to-go services. With the accumulation of several hundred thousand Sky miles, I've got somewhat of a routine down when it comes to traveling through airports and it usually involves beer, nachos, cheese sticks, maybe a steak and depending on the time of day, maybe even a nice Bloody Mary or some other cocktail. Considering the fact that this was my spring break vacation, I had high expectations in Detroit of getting a good lunch and indulging in some of these pleasures. To my great disappointment, the tyrant governor of Michigan had announced just the previous day the closure of all restaurants and bars in the entire state of Michigan. This would be the first of a very long string of instances where a fearful, power hungry politician will overstep the bounds of their authority to steal

some of my freedoms under the guise of safety before this pandemic and the fear it brought with it leaves us. Thomas Jefferson would probably furiously start punching the roof of his coffin if he heard all the news these days. But I digress...

I ended up eating a very disappointing to-go hamburger from the Max and Erma's in the airport along with some lukewarm, mushy fries and a glass of nasty Michigan tap water. It was an unpleasant ending to an otherwise fantastic spring break vacation. The flight back to Lexington was uneventful and thus concluded my spring break adventure during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. With no zombies to be found and not getting stranded 1,500 miles away from my home and family, it turned out to be my best spring break so far.