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QUARTERLY INSIGHTS MAGAZINE

RECREATION & ENTERTAINMENT

Can you finally book that long-awaited vacation?

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With borders opening, now may be the time. But plan your trip early, and look out for changing conditions.

Even under the best of circumstances, the logistics of travel planning have never been fun. The pandemic made them downright maddening, with virus-related measures around the globe adding layers of complexity, ever-changing restrictions and enough aggravation to make a getaway feel like anything other than a vacation.

As the Omicron variant eases, countries are loosening many of those strictures, sparking hope among would-be globe-trotters that it's finally possible to take a long-delayed sojourn.

"Most of the world's opening up," says Eric Hrubant, founder of luxury travel agency CIRE Travel. "[Activity in] 2022 is probably going to be close to 2019."

Of course, these newfound freedoms can disappear with a whipsaw turn through the Greek alphabet. If the pandemic worsens or another serious variant flares, conditions could shift drastically between the moment you

schedule a trip and the time you depart — or return. Thus, it's advisable to check reputable sources early and often, even during your vacation.

Update your passport well in advance.

For international destinations, start by making sure your passport is up-to-date. If it's expired or anywhere close to expiring, be aware that passport issuance and renewal is beset with delays. Last year, the State Department extended its official processing time to eight to 11 weeks for routine applications and five to seven weeks for expedited requests. The clock starts when a passport office receives your application, not when you mail it.

However, even those elongated processing times are not guaranteed; the State Department suggests submitting applications four to six months before departure. A limited number of passport office appointments are available for people traveling internationally within five business days. Those with life-or-death emergencies get priority.

Plan ahead for COVID-19 tests.

To make sure the travel bug is the only one visitors have, many countries require either a negative COVID-19 test or proof of recovery before entry. Some countries waive this for those who are fully vaccinated, while others have jettisoned testing and vaccine entry requirements altogether.

As for the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control requires all incoming international air travelers — including Americans returning home, aged 2 and up, vaccinated or not — to supply either a negative COVID-19 viral test taken within 24 hours of travel to the airline before boarding or, for those recently recovered from an infection, documentation of recovery. The latter consists of a positive viral test taken within 90 days of departure and a letter from either a licensed health care provider or a public health official clearing the passenger to travel. Before flying to the U.S., nonimmigrant, non-U.S. citizens also must

provide proof of full vaccination with an approved COVID-19 vaccine. Acceptable vaccines and vaccination documentation are listed on the CDC's website.

As anyone who's scrambled to schedule a test or purchase an at-home kit knows, this can be an arduous task. Therefore, it may be wise to pack at least one test (or more, to measure exposure during the trip itself).

As of April, 119 destinations — almost half of those the State Department covers — were on a "do not travel" list due to high coronavirus counts. The department slaps a Level 4 "do not travel" advisory on countries with very high COVID-19 caseloads. At the moment, only 18 countries have low enough case levels to qualify as Level 1.

The country information pages on the State Department website, travel.state.gov, list specifics and restrictions for each country, including entry and exit requirements, vaccination rules, COVID-19 test information and other alerts.

Because the advisory list and individual country rules can quickly change, the Staying Connected page on the State Department website provides regularly updated information. If you sign up for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) and provide details of your trip, the department will email advisories and alerts during your getaway.

Vaccinations are not required for domestic U.S. air travel. However, the CDC recommends testing within three days of travel and becoming familiar with state or local requirements at your destination.

Proper masking can help you stay safe.

It's understandable to worry about becoming infected on a plane or in a crowded airport. After all, it's hard enough to get an extra six inches of legroom on a flight, let alone six feet of separation from other passengers.

There's encouraging news on this front. The Georgia Department of Health and the Mayo Clinic, in conjunction with Delta Air Lines, studied potential infection risk. They examined travel corridors between New York, Atlanta and Rome and found that when all passengers tested negative 72 hours before a flight, the chance of COVID-19 exposure on the flight was less than 0.1%. Masking and hospital-grade filtration systems were essential contributors to that low rate.

Prepare for the unexpected.

Even the most carefully executed trip can be derailed by an unexpected souvenir: a breakthrough infection.

Consider the potential disruption of being quarantined and unable to return home as scheduled. You may need to seek medical care at a time when the local health care system is overburdened. You may need to stay at your hotel for longer than planned and order in food or other essentials. Travel insurance could alleviate some financial strain, but read policies carefully, as pandemic-related issues may be excluded or have limitations.

"There's no coverage that covers fear of COVID," says Hrubant. "Most insurance companies that I know have some kind of COVID waiver, especially if you get sick while you're traveling."

Traveling today requires a lot more spadework. But after living through a pandemic, you probably deserve a vacation.