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The State of International Travel in 2021

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

Seattle University students preparing to travel abroad in 2020 found their plans upended by COVID-19, and those who are planning to travel this year are still unsure what traveling internationally will look like. The U.S. began the long road to a post-pandemic era when it began implementing vaccinations at the end of the year. Now that several nations are attempting to create immunity to the virus within their citizenry, those who are excited to experience something new are wondering what the world will look like as the struggle against COVID-19 reaches a new phase.

Ben Green, a travel advisor for the guided travel company Rick Steves' Europe, like many others, had his travel plans interrupted by the ongoing pandemic.

"Normally my primary role is advising travelers on how to have great informative educational experiences in Europe," Green said. "I teach travel classes on a few primary destinations, which I have the most experience with which is Germany, Poland and central eastern Europe."

Rick Steves' Europe has not been able to host tours since the pandemic began. However, Green hopes that vaccination efforts will begin to open up global movement.

"I think we're cautiously optimistic, we're not quite sure how it's going to turn out of course, but I think we're hoping that late summer or fall we can start having tours again," Green added.

While the vast majority of students have been stuck home since March, some chose to remain abroad for the duration of the crisis.

Sanya Cowal, a fourth-year environmental science student and musician at Seattle U, was in Barcelona when the pandemic spread throughout the international community. She decided to remain there rather than ending her travel abroad experience prematurely.

"There were these two weeks where I would come to class every day there would be a new student missing, because their university in the states had called back their students," Cowal said.

Seattle U made the decision to ultimately cancel all study abroad programs.

"I wasn't ready to leave and I decided to stay and take advantage of this time," Cowal said. "These past months we have been experiencing a cycle of lifted COVID restrictions and then worsening cases, which leads to more restrictions and so on."

In the interest of re-opening the economy, Spain began lifting international travel restrictions on June 21. By September, Spain was in the midst of a second wave. Political and economic pressure to reopen society has been a persistent international debate in the effort to contain the virus.



Now that vaccination efforts have begun, professionals who work in the travel industry are encouraging students and consumers to consider travel as an opportunity for inner-growth and expansion after a stressful lockdown, rather than as an expensive excursion.

“I always look at what people’s obstacles for studying abroad are and whether a specific location or set of locations will remove those obstacles,” Green said.

He emphasized that once a student makes the leap to study outside the U.S., it is often not as financially or physically taxing as they may have anticipated.

“I went to Poland, and my rent went from \$900 to \$200 a month, and I had an apartment in the city center—and this is Europe, it was a nice place, good transportation and good healthcare. So studying abroad doesn’t have to be more expensive,” Green said.

Cowal also emphasized the value in overcoming mental and logistical barriers to explore internationally.

“Building a local community takes time, but it’s so worth it to really get to know the city you’re in and to immerse yourself in the local language and culture,” Cowal said.

However, before any student can travel abroad, the pandemic has to be effectively suppressed by global vaccination efforts. How countries abroad handle the pandemic is influenced by the various regime types and cultural attitudes that inform policy.

Professor of Psychology and Human Development, Randall Horton, anticipates that countries with a greater sense of collectivism will be better positioned to administer vaccine programs efficiently.

“In many societies, there’s a more communal universalist orientation towards health services,” Horton said.

Countries with larger socialized medicine systems are already equipped to administer basic medical procedures on a broad level. However, Horton underscored that variances in cultural attitudes toward medical administration abroad will likely be mitigated by other concerns.

“I think it will end up being mediated by politics, economic structures and the way that value cultural commitments end up being reflected in institutions and frameworks of power,” Horton said.

While many Seattle U students are simply excited to travel to class, let alone travel abroad, the future depends on the ability of federal and state authorities to distribute COVID-19 vaccines.