

A view on air travel in the COVID-19 era

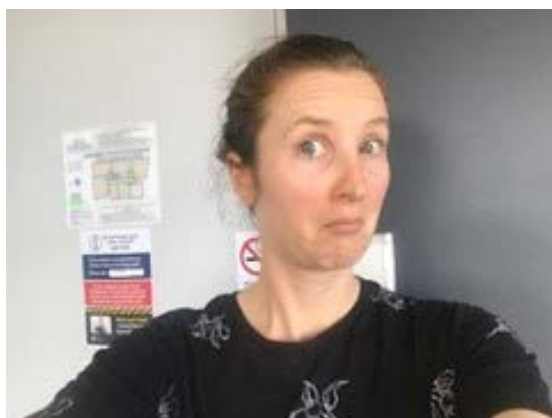


Less than a year ago, international air travel was part of the day-to-day routine of many in the OIE community. After negotiating cancelled and expensive flights, constantly changing travel restrictions and sanitary measures, I've just landed back in Australia. The whole complicated process has reminded me that air travel is not something to take for granted!

It is not just the expense or the difficulty in travelling that has come to the fore during this pandemic, but its relative absence, the effect of international air travel on our climate has been underlined. Taking a return flight from London to New York, for example, generates more carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions than the average person in more than 56 countries does in a whole year. Given that climate change threatens the very animal and human health we aim to protect, it is certainly something worth thinking about. How can we improve this situation? Direct flight paths, more efficient planes, less baggage and, more surprisingly, keeping the window shades down, can reduce the emissions caused by each flight.

But the coronavirus pandemic has also forced us to consider when our presence is really required in-person, and consequently which flights are worthwhile. Particularly, when a [recent study](#) found that 1% of the world's population caused over 50% of passenger air travel CO₂ emissions. Pre-pandemic, the Australian Government was sending officials to Europe for just a few days to inspect and certify export facilities. I wonder will these trips soon be replaced by third-party certification, or a visit by a Europe-based ambassador? For events, meetings and conferences, the global workforce has adapted rapidly to online tools. As a result, we are seeing new technologies and strategies to make them so much more enjoyable and productive than the painful teleconferences of just a few years ago. Virtual reality can even allow you to whisper to the people 'seated' next to you in the middle of an online presentation, although I am not sure that's something we should be encouraging! I am more inspired by the ways that people are using digital platforms to replace some of the role of conference hallway chats and dinners.

I love a chance to dress up and drink free champagne while meeting new people, but there are also benefits to changing how we network. Female leaders Julia Gillard and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala note in their book [*Women and Leadership*](#) that the networking strategies used by male leaders – golf games, for example – are not always easy for women, or non-golfers for that matter, to break into. In online networking, some of our personal differences – like whether we drink alcohol or have a hearing impairment – become less relevant. Could replacing some of our work travel with online collaboration and networking actually connect us to a wider variety of people? That is what I really seek when I travel – the chance to see things from new perspectives.



Quarantined in a hotel room in Sydney.

On my travel experience back to Sydney

Preparing to travel involved making four different bookings, regular calls to airlines to confirm tickets, communicating with the embassy, and checking airline and transiting-country policies. However, the flight itself was easier than usual. In economy, only about 10% of seats were filled, so we could all stretch out. Transiting through Singapore felt a bit like school camp as young staff in visors and masks organised us into groups of 14, gave us wristbands, politely reminded us to keep our distance and walked us from our plane to a separate transit holding area,

where lots of different configurations of chairs were set up and you could order food from throughout the airport to be delivered to you. A golf buggy was sent to personally chauffeur me to my transit hotel. In some ways, the tailored services that business travellers are accustomed to are now extended to everyone.

Arriving in Sydney was more nerve-wracking. Even with only about 50 passengers per flight, it's a complex operation to get everyone through health checks and channelled into government-managed quarantine. And because the quarantine is compulsory, there is a sense of being a prisoner as you are funnelled off to facilities allocated by the health staff after screening. So, it was with much relief that I arrived at the quarantine facility itself. Almost home!

We wish to thank our former colleague Heidi Congdon for writing this article for the OIE In-house Times.