

TRAVEL TALK: A CANCELLATION STORY

by Chase Binder

Back in early March I wrote a mostly light-hearted column about the effect the corona virus might have on upcoming travel. I detailed some options for canceling or postponing land, air or sea portions of both international and domestic travel. I ended with an upbeat look forward to the trip we had booked to Tuscany in late May, a trip with several other couples to a lovely villa just north of Florence. The trip we should be packing for right at this moment.

Alas, the corona virus has evolved into a global event that has tragically taken many thousands of lives, shuttered world economies and, of course, had an apocalyptic effect on the global travel industry.

At first, we maintained a bit of optimism. Surely Italy will get a firm grip on the problem early on, we thought. When that didn't happen, we started looking at villas in Portugal as a back-up plan. We were flying on TAP Air Portugal, via Lisbon. Perhaps we could just stop there? But within a few short weeks it became apparent that we wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon—even to a local Italian restaurant, let alone stepping on a plane.

As travel came screeching to a halt all over the world in April, I emailed our travel pals and finally admitted it was time to pull the plug on our May trip to Tuscany. This meant putting into practice the advice I outlined in my March column but hoped I wouldn't need.

I started with our villa, which I had booked through an Italian villa rental company not affiliated with VRBO, HomeAway or Airbnb. We had given them a 30% deposit last fall, charged to my JetBlue card, and the final payment was coming due soon. My email was returned promptly, offering me a month's extension on the final payment, and saying that they would work to make sure we were happy should things go on longer than expected. I made sure to save and print the email hard copy, just in case.

Next, I looked at the flights with TAP Air. They were offering no-fee re-booking but weren't including our travel dates—yet. As things got worse and worse, I expected they would extend the re-booking offer for flights through early June. In fact, though it took a couple of weeks of patience on my part, they did even better. They canceled our flights altogether and offered us vouchers which we could use for travel through June of 2022,



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a full two years after our trip. I grabbed them. Again, I saved them on my laptop and printed out hard copies.

Then a friend caught an announcement by the US Department of Transportation that all foreign and domestic airlines would be required to offer monetary refunds for canceled flights, not just vouchers for future travel. TAP Air hadn't offered us cash, only the vouchers. I wrote them, attaching a copy of the US DOT notification and asked for the cash. Two weeks later, I got another offer—I could take vouchers for future travel, good for two years and with a new 20% added value bonus, or I could get cash for the value of the ticket only (about \$1110 pp), excluding the additional fees we paid for baggage and seating (another \$140 pp). I just had to call them.

We pondered the options as a group. The voucher was attractive, but suppose TAP Air goes under? Suppose Italy and Portugal are open for visitors, but suppose things get so bad here that American tourism is restricted? We decided to take the money, about \$2500 per couple, and run, though we were unhappy about the lost fees. It took me another week to get through to a person at TAP Air, during which time the airline decided to include all fees in the refund. OK! This made us happy and gave us many more options—including, of course re-booking with TAP Air.

Now that the flights were canceled, I went back to my villa contact, saying that extra time to make the final payment wouldn't work—our flights were canceled. I was told that we wouldn't get a deposit refund, but they would apply the amount (\$300 per couple) to a future booking of any of their villas if I could document the flights were canceled. No problem.

Lastly, I contacted the Lisbon overnight hotel we were using on the way home and canceled. We booked directly with the hotel and, per custom in much of the world, booking directly allows you to cancel with no penalty until the day of arrival.

The bottom line for us is that we were able to recoup the cost of the flights and hang on to the deposit—all without buying any travel insurance (which would not have covered the pandemic anyway). The keys—booking directly, reaching out personally and being patient.

Will this work in all situations? No. If you have booked through a third-party booking agent (Expedia, etc.), you add another entity and can get stuck between the agent and the airline or the agent and the hotel.

In truth, none of us are booking travel right now. The infrastructure just isn't operational. The world is a scary place. What will travel look like in the future? Who knows? But I will say this...we are not ready to give up on our villa in Tuscany. It may take a year or two, but we fully intend to enjoy some fine Italian wine under the pergola overlooking the city of Florence.



SPELLING BEE

Nearly 200 of the state's top spellers gathered at the Silver Center for the Arts on Saturday, March 7, to compete in the 2020 Union Leader New Hampshire State Spelling Bee. Following the written round, 30 finalists were selected to compete in the oral round.

FINALISTS:

Luke Laflamme
Bow Memorial School
Cassidy Madigan
Dunbarton Elementary School

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