

## A POSTCARD FROM SLOVENIA

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**Category:** [Essay](#)

**Tags:** [COVID Pass](#), [COVID-19](#), [Slovenia](#), [travel](#)

I have undertaken a Ph.D. *viva*, climbed at the absolute limit of my ability on El Capitan, and been deployed to a war zone. However, none of these endeavours was as stressful as making a short visit this week to the [University of Maribor](#) in Slovenia to pick up a *Doctor Honoris Causa* degree awarded over a year ago, before COVID-related travel restrictions kicked in.

Pre-pandemic, I flew at least one long-haul flight a month and regularly clocked 150,000 air miles annually for the previous twenty years. It was novel for my wife to see me ‘in a flap’ over simple things like checking in online and fretting over the contents of my bags.

The experience of international travel and the concomitant stress is exacerbated by the additional forms to be completed. I had to complete a set of PLFs (Passenger Location Forms). For Slovenia, this had to be completed over 24 hours prior to arrival, but for my return to the UK, it had to be completed within 48 hours. I had to be tested for COVID before returning home and also had to book a PCR test to be taken two days after return. This cost an exorbitant £70, and purchase had to be proved for the return journey. The cost is infuriating, especially given that I live about half a mile from a free testing centre in Hull which, whenever I pass it, is always empty.

I travelled to Manchester Airport and, the evening before my flight, stayed at a very quiet Holiday Inn Express, where they seemed delighted to see me. I guess they were delighted to see anyone. Checking in was easy, and this was the first airing of my National Health Service vaccine passport. The security staff, normally the most rude and illogical in the

UK, also seemed glad to see me. One advantage of pandemics is how short the queues are during them.

I was transiting out via Brussels, and my stress levels nearly diverted the plane when it was announced that we had to have completed not one but two PLFs for transit through Belgium. But the cabin crew then distributed forms that could be completed by hand ... and then I could relax. The final leg to Ljubljana went smoothly. Another advantage of relatively quiet airports and fewer flights is that planes leave punctually and arrive early.

I took off my mask in the UK when we were told we could and decided, even if they are reintroduced, that I would never wear one again in my own country. I was not so sure about foreign destinations, however. I ignored the 'mask up' instructions in Manchester Airport with impunity and even boarded the plane and remained maskless until well after take-off. But at the first polite 'invitation' to wear my mask, I crumbled and put one on. I was worried that the next flight might get a tipoff that one of the awkward squad was on the way and deny me boarding. On the return journey, via Frankfurt, I had to promise during online check-in that I had a mask so there was no getting out of it on the way home. Travellers beware: your mask must be of at least 'surgical grade,' so no flimsy cloth ones are permitted.

My destination, Maribor, is a delightful small Slovenian city near the Austrian border. In winter, it is a skiing resort. There is a local saying that translates roughly as 'babies ski out of the womb.' Everyone skis. In summer, meanwhile, it is just a lovely place to hang out with a picturesque river and an historic town centre with good food and good beer. The local wine is also excellent.

However, Slovenia is a country still in the psychological grip of the pandemic. Masks are prominent and required indoors. I had to show my vaccine passport to stay at my hotel and again to get back into Ljubljana airport. Restaurants are supposed to check your COVID status, and the Slovenian government uses the slogan PCT: *prebolevniki* (patient), *cepljeni* (vaccinated), *testirani* (tested), meaning that to sit in a restaurant you must provide proof of one of these. By 'patient,' they do not mean polite; they mean someone who can prove

he has recovered from COVID. However, in a tussle between restaurateurs and local authorities over whose responsibility it was if a person was found in a restaurant without being PCT—the restaurant or the diner—most restaurants have rebelled. In fact, I was not even asked to wear a mask in any restaurant or bar.

I have been working at the university for years, holding a series of visiting and honorary positions, and was blown away by the offer to make me a Doctor of the University. The ceremony was somewhat attenuated due to COVID restrictions. I was co-presented alongside this year's candidate [Drago Jančar](#), one of Slovenia's greatest living authors who belongs to Maribor. He was swamped after the ceremony by people asking him to sign copies of his books which they had brought along. I got the impression that none of them had read my best-selling *[Anatomy and Physiology for Nurses](#)* (now in its fourteenth edition). I had to wear a mask for the duration of the graduation, so no pictures of the event will ever see the light of day if I have my way. With the graduation gown and mortar board, I looked like Darth Vader.

I was interviewed by Slovenian TV and, of course, asked about the pandemic. I told them that while nurses at the frontline in the UK were busy and had proved their worth, the effort needed to see us through the pandemic would pale into insignificance compared with the effort we will now need to see us through the waiting list for missed investigations and operations already over five million and tipped to grow to more than double that.

Slovenia has shaken off most of its communist past when it was part of Yugoslavia. But there are vestiges such as the impressive array of forms to be signed for expenses, the state regulated system of academic promotions, and a tangible general inflexibility about how things are done. COVID—according to my local colleagues—has had one positive effect, however. Prior to the pandemic, working from home, even for academics, was forbidden. “Not in the legislation,” as one colleague expressed it. Lockdown has ended that, and a more flexible system of working has proved effective. In that regard, it is unlikely they will revert to the old system.