

Why does it feel like covid requirements for travel are more confusing than ever?

By [Christopher Elliott](#)

Columnist

January 26, 2022 at 12:00 p.m. EST



Now more than ever, travelers have to cross an ocean of red tape when they want to go abroad. But did you know that pandemic requirements for travelers are even confusing to the people enforcing them?

Neither did I — until I visited several countries with extensive testing and contact tracing requirements.

My story is a cautionary tale for anyone headed overseas this year. It can be chaos out there, and some officials seem to be making up the rules as they go along. But with a little creativity and determination, you can navigate the ever-changing regulatory landscape.

“Red tape is the new reality for travelers,” says Stephanie Goldberg-Glazer, owner of Live Well, Travel Often, a boutique travel agency. “It used to be visas and passport expiration dates. Now it is coronavirus testing requirements, vaccinations and contact tracing.”

Here’s my red-tape misadventure: A few weeks ago, my sons and I traveled from Doha, Qatar, to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. Both countries have strict testing and vaccine requirements and mandate that visitors use contact tracing apps in most public places.

Normally, travelers would take PCR tests no more than 48 hours before departing Qatar, download the Alhosn app (the UAE’s version of the European Union’s digital green certificate), then take another PCR test after landing. But our trip took place just as the omicron surge started, and confusion reigned.

Al-Ahli Hospital in Doha, where we took our PCR tests, had a backlog of tests. Our results took more than 48 hours, so we couldn’t board our flight to Abu Dhabi.

To get into Abu Dhabi, I needed to take a PCR test within 48 hours, and ours were about to expire. Another stranded passenger shared a workaround: Fly to Dubai, which has a 72-hour testing window. Then drive to Abu Dhabi, which is about 90 miles away.

So that’s what we planned. But when we arrived in Dubai, we discovered one small problem. Although Dubai and Abu Dhabi are part of the United Arab Emirates, they each set their own health regulations and have an internal border.

No one would take us to Abu Dhabi. Not Uber, not a taxi. The drivers said they couldn’t cross the border without a PCR test. One driver said he refused to take a test, because “half of the time, the results come back positive, and I can’t afford to quarantine.”

And one more issue: We had each taken another PCR test when we arrived in Dubai, but we couldn’t activate our new accounts on the Alhosn app. A customs official told me I needed a local SIM card to do that.

Finally, I phoned the Park Hyatt Abu Dhabi Hotel, where I was supposed to stay. I told the concierge that we were stuck in Dubai. He called a car, which picked us up from the terminal. We showed our expired PCR tests at the border, and they waved us through. Our smartphone apps started working a few hours later, displaying our negative test results.

There are a few takeaways from my covid odyssey in the Persian Gulf. Pandemic requirements for travel are confusing. And if you’re confused, chances are that you’re not alone. As I sat in Terminal 3 at the Dubai airport, researching current travel restrictions, I found multiple sources offering conflicting information online. The people you ask for help may also be getting their (mis)information from the same sources.

I spoke with taxi drivers, customs officials and a guy at the information booth at the Dubai airport, all of whom said I could never enter Abu Dhabi without a working contact tracing app, a local SIM card or a 48-hour PCR test.

“Do lots of research and from multiple sources,” advises Jeff Antonucci, a regional manager for a German medical device company who has traveled extensively during the pandemic. “The quality and accuracy of information online can be inconsistent. Even the information listed on the embassy and consulate pages can vary per location. Check the sites frequently, and follow up with a phone call if anything is unclear.”

During the pandemic, the rules shift like desert sand. Allison Scola, owner of the tour operator [Experience Sicily](#), visited Italy three times last year. “Each time I have gone, the regulations have changed,” she told me.

Deanna Ford, who writes a travel planning blog called [the Detailed Traveler](#), says the requirements within Europe are particularly confusing. “Some countries have really locked down the border and require a negative coronavirus test, full vaccination status and a registration on their covid app,” she says. “If you can’t comply, you’re required to quarantine on arrival.”

How do you ensure you aren’t confused by the pandemic requirements and ensnared by red tape? Phyllis Stoller, president of tour operator [the Women’s Travel Group](#), says you have to focus on the details. Read everything and click through to the definitions. Type all the information carefully. “One typo can cause a rejection,” she says.

Stoller says airlines are super strict about vaccine and testing requirements for entry to a country. A few months ago, she got a test at a clinic in England that wasn’t on the approved list, and authorities turned her away at the airport.

Once you’re on the ground, the rules are a little less rigidly enforced. For example, you might be able to get into a mall without your contact tracing app or cross a land border without all the necessary paperwork. So worry more about getting there than getting around once you’re there.

The confusing pandemic requirements may seem like too much, but experts say they’re necessary.

“The industry needs to take measures to protect travelers,” says Daniel Finkel, chief travel officer for [TripActions](#), a travel management site. “And like we’ve adapted to safety measures in other situations, we’re now adapting to new measures for travelers.”

I agree. Travelers want to be safe but not confused. But with a little persistence, you can cut through the red tape. Getting past those obstacles is part of the adventure.

