

Life in the

VICKIE COYLE '84, director of Meals on Wheels in the Greater Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania, has produced more than 1,000 hot meals a day delivered daily. They expanded their program to supply 250 free meals each week to homeless centers.

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Pandemic or not, a mother wants to see her adult children periodically.

So I, a dual citizen living in Milan, Italy, booked a flight to the U.S. in July 2020. It wasn't easy to find an airline to make the trip, and my first two bookings were canceled. But British Airways augured well, so I headed to Malpensa Airport on July 14.

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MXP felt like a ghost town with masked phantoms flitting here and there. Shops not open, counters not manned, information booths unattended, business lounges shuttered. No other passengers in line at the British Airways counter, so I had time to chat with the flight representative. I was using my U.S. passport, so she didn't question why I might be traveling to a COVID-19 hot spot. I was “going home.”

The flight from Malpensa to London's Heathrow was two-thirds empty. Refreshments consisted of a pre-packaged sandwich, which I ignored, and a cuppa, which I drank.

Normally beehive Heathrow was also ghostly. Many shuttered stores, few passengers. More hand sanitizers than people. Spotless bathrooms because, well, empty.

I was the only person in line for security. The staff was friendly and seemed bored to tears. Weird security anomalies: at Malpensa I had to take out my computer, but my shoes stayed on. At Heathrow the computer stayed in its case, but my shoes had to come off. In Milan, the belt had to come off. In London, the belt stayed on. In Italy, my tiny hand gel could stay in my bag. In the UK, the bottle had to come out.

In British Airways' premium economy, only nine of the section's 56 seats were occupied. I chatted with a friendly flight attendant before take-off. He told me that I was the first and only passenger he had encountered on this route who was flying not for business reasons or necessity. “You mean you are flying to the U.S. for a VACATION? You don't live there? You don't have to go?”

“I wouldn't call this trip a ‘vacation,’” I protested.

“I want to see my family.”

“Madame, you are the first person I have met on this route who is flying across the Atlantic voluntarily, and I have been doing this for the last four months.”

The large economy section in the back of the plane held one passenger among 162 seats. I asked the flight attendant how the airline could survive. He confessed that flights are canceled “frequently,” including the route I was on. One was canceled the day before, he admitted. So my fears of flight cancellation were not unfounded.

Then he shared pictures of British Airways filling up its planes during a pandemic. They strapped cargo into the passenger seats, or they removed the seats entirely and replaced them with crates of gold, jewelry, refrigerators, appliances and exotic animals. I guess I was the exotic animal on my flight.

Fortunately, I remained a healthy one. I got to see my family and returned home unscathed. A paucity of passengers but an overload of anxiety.

— **CLAUDIA ENGELMAN FLISI '69** is a writer based in Milan, Italy. Learn more about her travels and publications, including her children's book “Crystal and Jade,” at paroleanima.com.