A PC (post-Covid) flight across the Atlantic

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What is it like to fly between Europe and the US this summer, in the era PC (post Covid)? Is it even possible? The US just

loosened its travel ban from Global Level 4 Health Advisory (*avoid all international travel*) to Level 3 (*reconsider travel abroad),* bu tneither one offers reassurance. More threatening, the US is weighing new rules to temporarily bar US citizens and legal residents from entering the US "to control a surge in coronavirus cases."

Europe doesn't want Americans because it's clear that the US **cannot** control the virus.

I managed to slip across the Atlantic in July, before these latest rules were announced. I hadn't seen close family members in 18 months and wanted to do so this summer. My reservations were cancelled twice between January and July, but finally British Airways had a viable opening. I hoped to fudge both government bans as a dual passport holder, fully aware that my danger of exposure to the virus in airports, on people movers, in airplanes remained.

For weeks before my scheduled departure, I checked the BA website daily for alerts or announcements that might indicate flight cancellation. Everything seemed normal (*nouvel* normal) but I was still apprehensive about the contradictions between what BA said on their site, what they told me online, and what they informed me by phone.

The night before my flight I had a nightmare that Donald Trump was chasing me to try and kill me — through henchmen since he couldn't do it personally. I was trying to work out my escape but found no logical exit, so woke up instead.

On departure day, July 14, I took an early train from my home in Italy to Malpensa Airport. There were only eight other people on board, including a woman with a baby carriage, for the eight-minute ride. Social distancing was easy, and all of us wore masks except the baby.

Upon arrival, I tugged my luggage through an eerily empty airport. It 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 BA counter, so I had time to chat with the flight representative. She assured me that there was zero risk of quarantine in London, provided I stayed in the transit area. Since I was using my US passport, she didn't question why I might be traveling to a Covid hot spot. I was "going home."
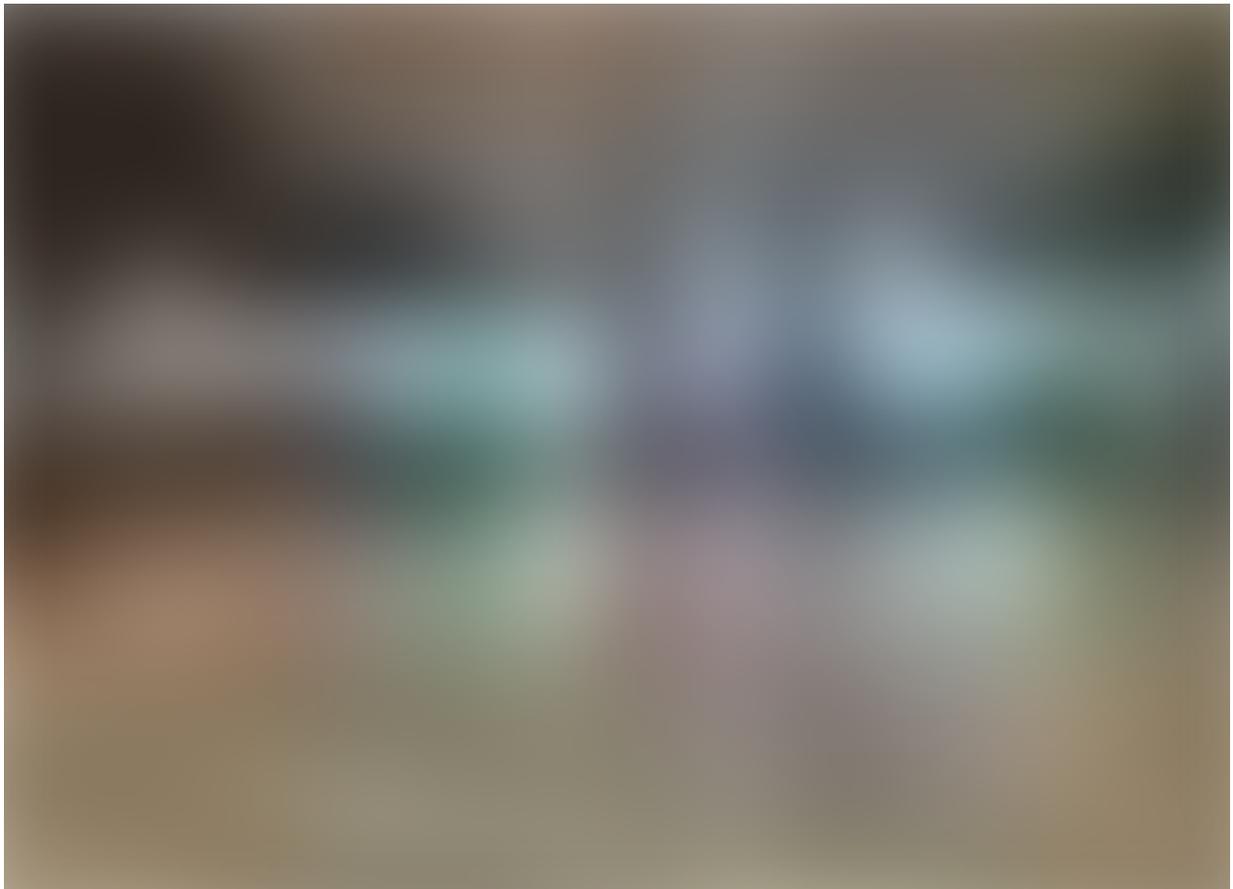
The flight from Malpensa to Heathrow had 39 passengers in economy, little more than 1/3 of its 106-seat capacity. The greatest concentration was at the front of the plane so I chose a seat near the back, and had no one in front of me, behind me, or anywhere in my row. Refreshments consisted of a pre-packaged sandwich, which I ignored, and a cuppa, which I drank.

Deplaning was done by row, and the (mostly British) passengers were respectful of their turn to be called.

Terminal Five at normally beehive Heathrow was also ghostly. So many shuttered stores, so few passengers. Almost more hand sanitizers than people. No problem finding a place to sit far from others, since there were almost no "others." The bathrooms were spotless because no one was using them. The few open shops had delineated traffic flow signs. Prices of many items were aggressively slashed, but UK prices are so high to begin with that I found no bargains even at 50% off.

I was the only person in line for security. Two of the staff jumped to attention, saying, "Look, we have one." They were friendly and chatty with me; they must be bored to tears. Weird anomalies about security: at Malpensa I had to take out my computer but my shoes stayed on. At Heathrow the computer could stay 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. Passport control was partly automated, and the human part consisted of a young official peeking at my US passport and then waving me through.

I had booked premium economy on a squeaky-clean Airbus A350, less than a year old. Only nine of the section's 56 seats were occupied. I went to my assigned seat and 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 US 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 am going to visit my sons. I am going to enjoy my grandchildren."

"Madame (this was British Airways so he was formal), 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." Looking around at all the empty seats, I decided that being the first person to fly this route "as a tourist" conferred little distinction.
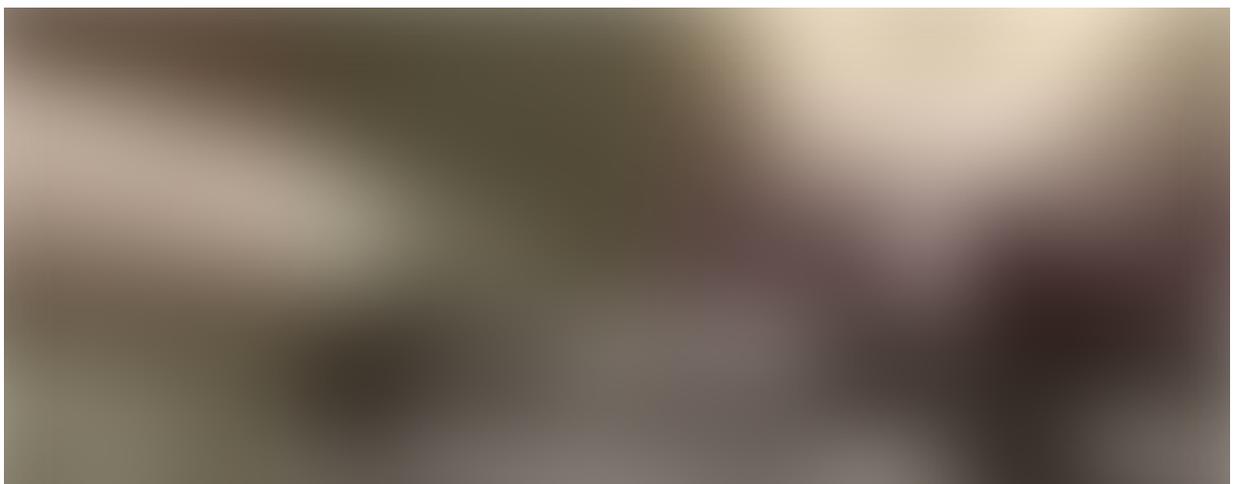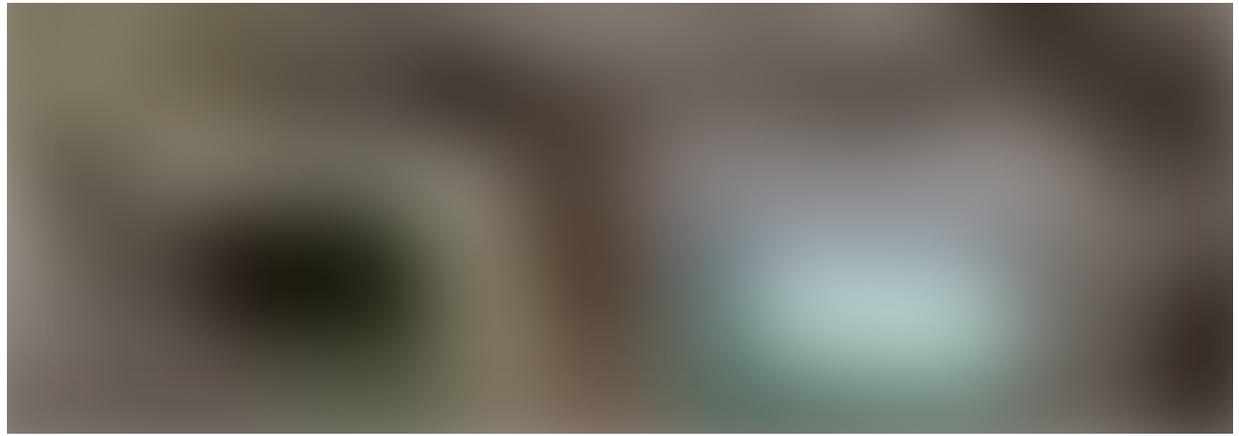
Out of curiosity, I made my way to the large economy cabin in the back of the plane, and saw ONE passenger among 162 seats. That was spooky. So I asked Friendly Flight Attendant how the airline could survive with so few customers. He confessed that BA cancels flights "frequently," including the route I was on. One was cancelled yesterday, he admitted. So my fears of flight cancellation had not been unfounded.

Then he shared pictures of British Airways filling up its planes during a pandemic. They strap cargo into the passenger seats, or they remove the seats entirely and replace them with crates of gold, jewelry, refrigerators, appliances, and exotic animals. I guess I was the exotic animal on my flight.
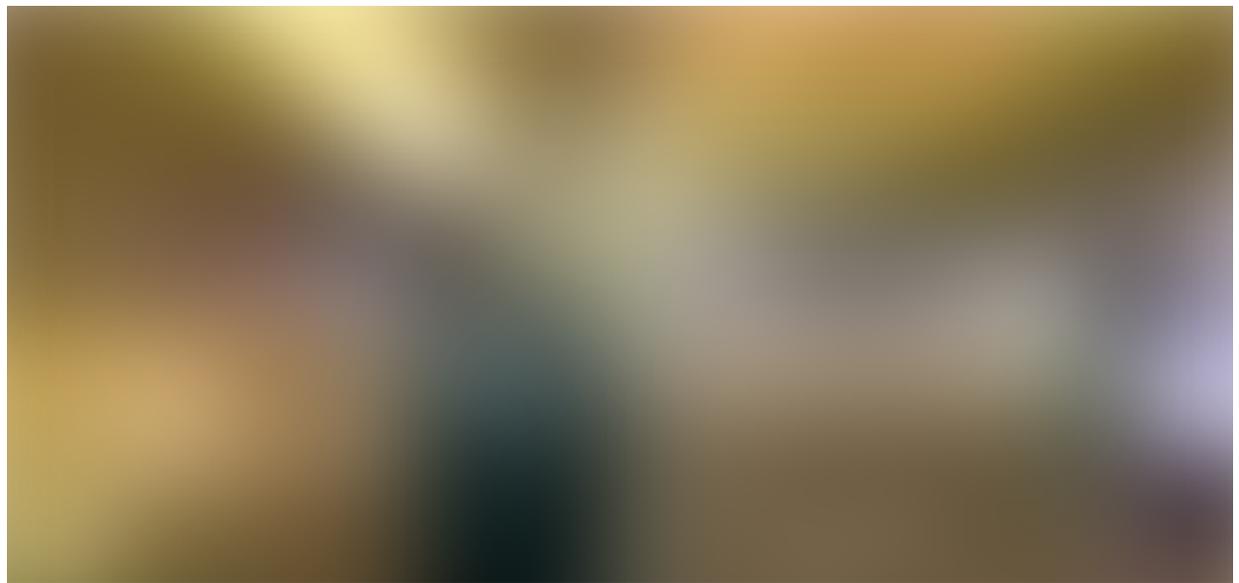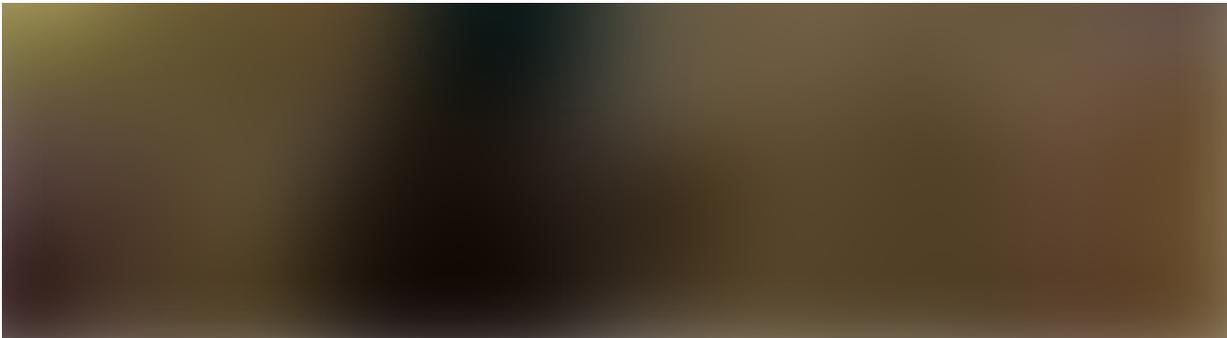
The social distance, attentive service, and ultra-comfortable seating erased my remaining concerns about accidental infection, and the time passed quickly. By the time we arrived at Dulles Airport in Virginia, the flight seemed almost normal, aside the lack of travelers and lines. We deplaned by class rather than by row, and shuffled toward passport control and baggage claim. Before we arrived at that brightly-lit glass-encased hall, we had to pass single file through a corridor in front of a series of 20 tables, four of which were manned by personnel with stacks of papers and digital thermometers. My turn brought me before a pleasant-looking woman in her 50s, who asked me to fill out a form stating where I had come from, where I was going, where I was staying.

No problem with my temperature. She studied my responses. "You are coming from Italy? How long did you stay? What were you doing there?"

"Oh, I LIVE there. I am just here visiting family."

"How lucky you are. I lived in Naples for four years, serving in the military. It was great, but a little bit disorganized."

"Yes, it can be crazy, but our prime minister has done a better

job than the US of dealing with the pandemic."

She nodded vigorously in agreement. "You are so right. If things don't change with the election in November, *torno in Italia.*" She winked and waved me toward baggage claim.

Two weeks later when I flew back to Italy, my experience was different. My departure from Dulles was on a late-night flight, so an almost-empty airport was not surprising.

No line for check-in to London, but the attendant at the BA counter paused when she saw "Italy" as my final destination. "You realize you have to stay 14 days in quarantine when you arrive," she pointed out. "No problem," I said. "I live there."

"Oh, are you an Italian citizen too?" {I was still traveling on my US passport).

"Yes I am."

"May I see your Italian passport?"

"Yes but it's a different name." {One is in my maiden name, the other my married name}.

"Let me see it anyway."

So I showed her the Italian passport, she compared the two pictures, she looked at me without my mask, she nodded — probably with relief — and handed me my boarding passes.

No line at security but I was asked to go through the scanner twice. Security staff must be bored here too. Very few shops open because of the late hour, so I spent time wandering up and down the departure lounge.
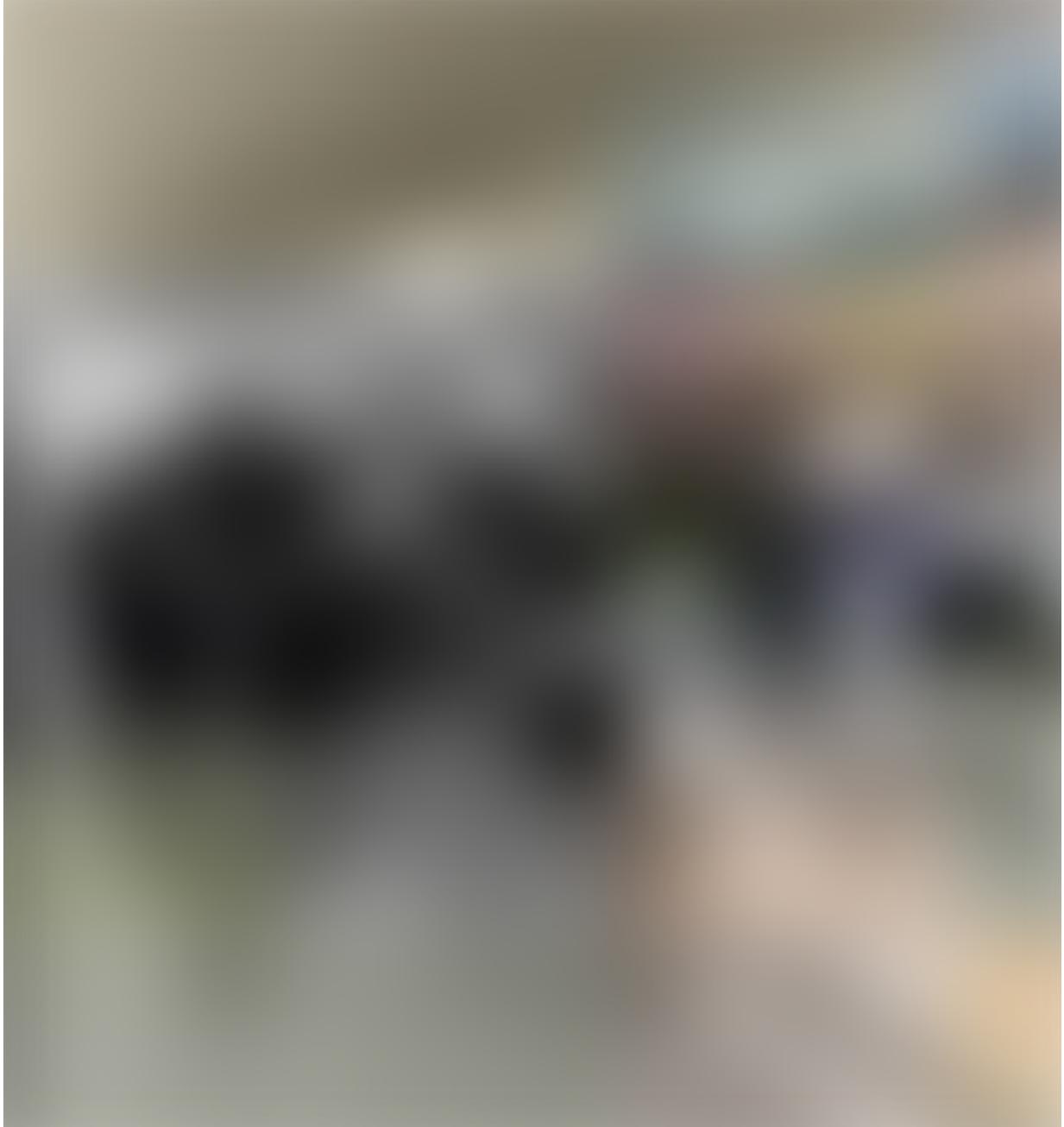

Most gates were empty. The only crowd was for a Turkish Airline flight to Istanbul. That flight was packed and I later learned that Turkey is one of two European countries accepting Americans tourists (the other is Croatia).

Premium economy on BA to London was half full. This plane was also a shiny new Airbus A350, but I didn't have quite as much distance from other passengers as I'd had outbound. When the doors closed, I found myself between two rows with screaming babies. So I shifted my seat to one farther away from them without anyone else on my row. One baby screamed for a good part of the trip but the noise-blocking headphones provided by BA did their job. My seat was comfortable, blankets were thick, pillows were large, and I had an abundance of all three.

Food was forgettable, all pre-wrapped to reduce handling, but the service was solicitous because of the small number of passengers. I asked one flight attendant whether they were flying with full staff. "No, 90% of our employees are currently on furlough and the other 10%, that's us, are working overtime." She noted that business seemed to be picking up and August was expected to be much busier.

Heathrow had changed in two weeks. No line when I passed through security for transit passengers, but I was stopped anyway, and asked to walk through the line again. Then a security officer insisted that I open every zipper and flap of both my backpack and handbag. That has never happened before and I pictured a Ghostbuster-type virus jumping out of one of the compartments and yelling, "Boo."
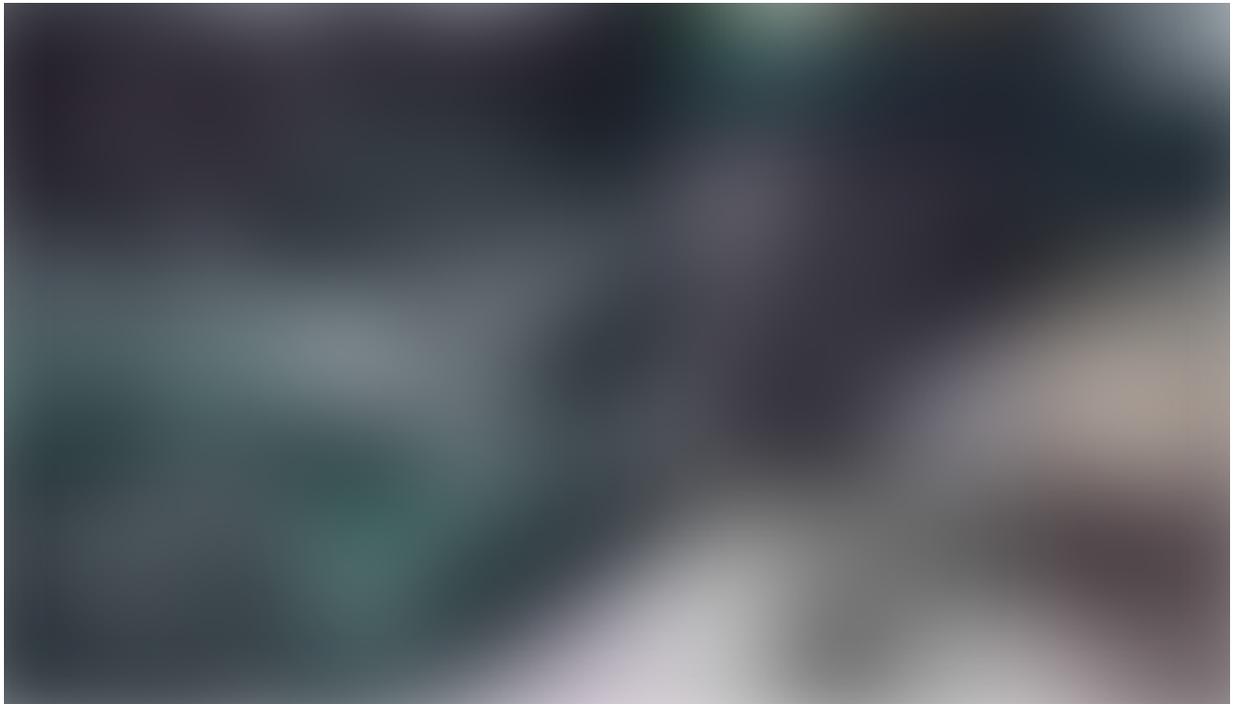
I spent most of my layover time wandering Terminal Five, never lingering in one place. Plenty of seating, but little distance between occupants. No availability for the seats beside charger stations. More shops open and more foot traffic in them.

The flight from London to Milan was packed. There wasn't a spare seat and social distancing was physically impossible.
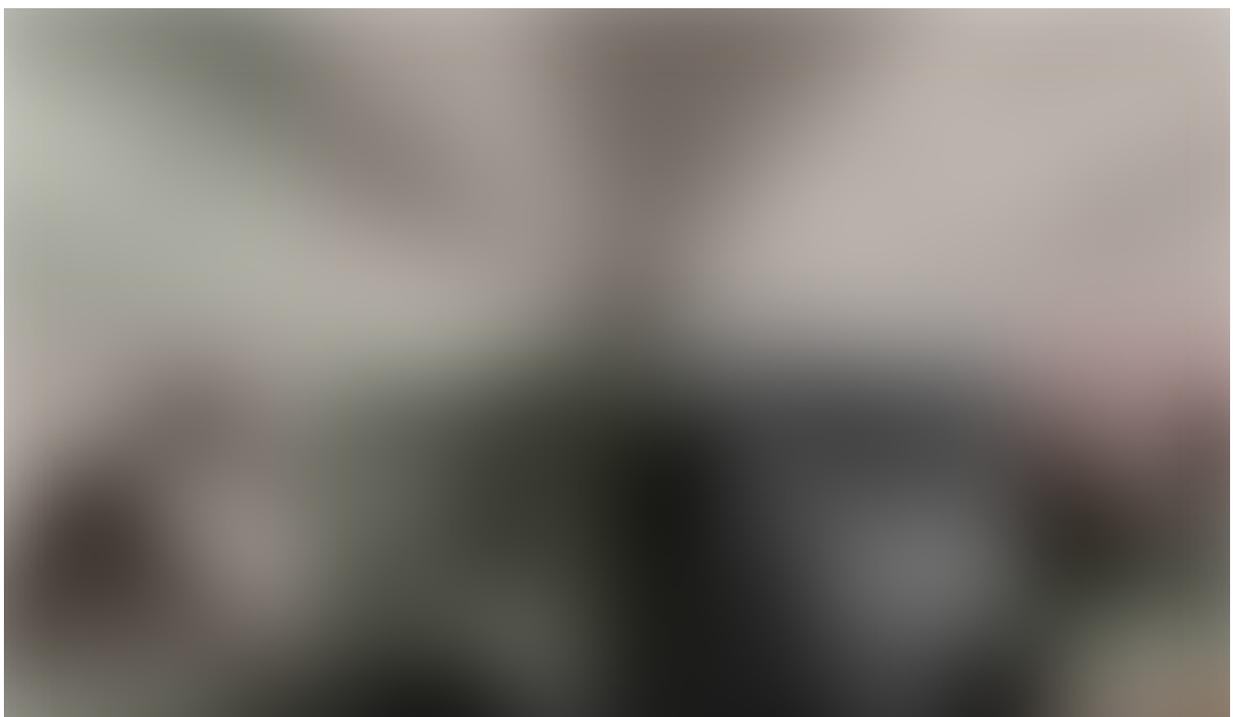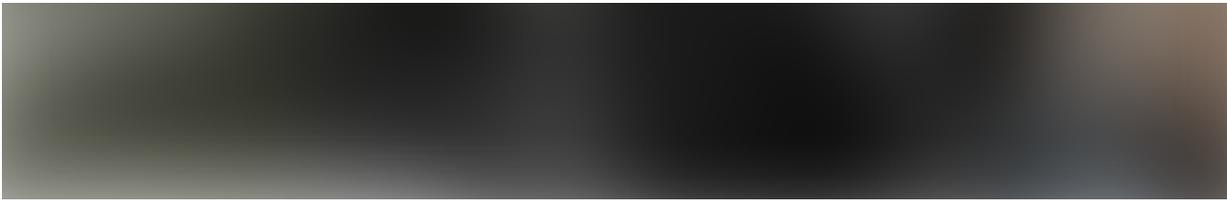
Shortly before landing, the flight attendants handed out forms that we were to fill out and return to them before exiting the plane. On this form I used my Italian name and passport details, hoping the crew wouldn't check them against their passenger roster. Apparently not, since no one stopped me when I disembarked.

At passport control in Malpensa we were given a similar form to fill out. I requested it in Italian but they gave me one in English, and the translation wasn't clear. "Where did your movement start?" Did they mean the flight I just took or my entire trip? I gave my Italian address. "What is your destination address?" Home, obviously, so I wrote down my Italian address again. "Have you tested positive for Covid?" No. "Do you declare not to be subject to quarantine measures?" Yes. "Is your movement due to working needs, absolute necessity, health, study reasons, and/or are you a resident of Italy?" Yes.

No temperature taking. Maybe some hidden thermal scanners were sussing our temperatures as we walked from the gate to baggage claim, but I didn't see them. The official at passport control saw my Italian passport, took the paper I waved at him, asked me nothing, didn't say boo. Customs control was totally absent, not even the drug-sniffing dogs sometimes seen at Malpensa.

By now I have been home for two weeks without any symptoms of viral infection. So far so good: I traveled far (4,230 miles) and my visit was good. But the uncertainties that bracketed this trip have taken a heavy psychological toll. For every departure, up until the plane took off I had no guarantees that it would. For every arrival, I had no certainty of admittance. For the entire trip, the imponderables of government policy buzzed around me like mosquitos in a swamp, as well as the physical risk to myself and others. Who knows when I will be up, up, and away for such flightiness again?

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