



UNLOCKING THE WORLD

A tale of two Mexico trips during the pandemic

Joe Yogerst, CNN • Published 24th January 2022

Editor's Note — Sign up for [Unlocking the World](#), CNN Travel's weekly newsletter. Get news about destinations opening and closing, inspiration for future adventures, plus the latest in aviation, food and drink, where to stay and other travel developments.

(CNN) — With some of the least restrictive Covid-19 travel policies in the world, [Mexico](#) has been open to international travelers throughout the pandemic. What you'll find when

you get there seems to depend a lot on where you travel and when your trip takes place.

Two recent trips to the country -- one to sun-soaked Tulum and another to the big city of Guadalajara -- exposed contrasting attitudes and approaches to Covid-19.

More by chance than design, the two trips were very different.

One involved flying directly from the United States on an American airline; the other crossing the border on foot and traveling domestically on a Mexican airline. These differences meant the Covid protocols for getting back into the States varied a lot, too.

Tulum: A free-wheeling beach vacation

With much of the rest of the globe closed off to nonessential travel or tangled in their own Covid restrictions, south of the border emerged early in the pandemic as a viable international destination for many Americans.

Cancún also became one of the top destinations globally during the pandemic. Cancún and Tulum were some of the most searched spots by American travelers.



Tulum's archaeological ruins are a big draw for tourists. So is the whole surrounding coastal area.

Joe Yogerst

But I wasn't prepared for just how much travel has boomed until we set off for a family vacation to Tulum in December. We opted to try the Cross-Border Express (CBX) for the

first time. It's a check-in terminal in San Diego on the US side with a pedestrian bridge across the border to Tijuana International Airport.

It took two hours just to cross the transborder bridge -- a narrow enclosed space with no social distancing -- along with hundreds of other people catching the 18 red-eye flights departing Tijuana after midnight.

That tortuous two hours on the CBX bridge was the only time I was really worried about Covid during our vacation.

Among the advantages of using CBX were much cheaper flights out of Tijuana (we're talking half the cost of flights from the United States) and direct, nonstop flights rather than the hassle and unpredictability of connecting airports.

We had to fill out an online health form for the Mexican government before going through immigration on the Tijuana side of the bridge, but nobody asked to see our vaccination cards at any point during the entire 10-day trip. And no Covid testing was required to get into Mexico.

With its yoga studios, vegan restaurants and full-moon beach parties, Tulum is said to have a "hippie chic" vibe. But almost at once, it was glaringly obvious that many visitors were in total denial when it came to the pandemic.



Liefs vegan eatery is one of many open-air restaurants in "hippie chic" Tulum.

Joe Yogerst

Even though shops, bars and restaurants asked patrons to wear masks and keep their distance, most of the tourists I witnessed blatantly ignored the pleas even as the Omicron variant of the coronavirus started to gain momentum.

The saving grace was the fact that so much of Tulum is outdoors, including top-shelf attractions such as the drop-dead gorgeous beaches, cenote swimming holes, bike and hiking paths, bars, restaurants and the Mayan ruins.

Getting back into the US

It's not until the day you travel home from Tulum that Covid rears its ugly head again. Anyone flying directly to the United States needs to take a Covid test within one day of travel -- no matter what your vaccination status.

Otherwise, you're not allowed to board your flight. Those who test positive must quarantine in Mexico -- usually at their own expense. Some resorts have baked free or reduced-rate quarantines into their offerings.

Re-entry testing requirements have generated a cottage industry of Covid-testing trailers and vans along Avenida Coba, the main drag between the beaches and downtown Tulum.

I asked a visitor from New York City what the streetside testing entailed. She told me that it was "quick and easy," cost \$35 and took around an hour to get the result.

Those of us flying domestic back to Tijuana didn't need a Covid test. But that doesn't mean we were home free. On our flight from Cancun to Tijuana, many of the English-speaking passengers simply refused to wear masks despite reminders from the flight attendants.



While Covid precautions are not strictly followed in the area around Tulum, many of the top attractions, such as cenote Choo-Ha, are exposed to the outdoors.

The epilogue to this story is the fact that Covid began to spike in Cancun and Tulum around Christmas -- the day we flew home. Cabo San Lucas, another popular Mexican beach destination -- experienced a similar surge.

Mexico has a four-tier traffic light system showing the risk level in each state. Earlier in January, the state of Quintana Roo, where Tulum is located, was moved back up from lowest-risk green to yellow as Covid cases spiked after the holidays. On January 24, it moved another level to orange.

Baja California Sur, where Cabo San Lucas is located, was listed as orange on January 24. Red is the highest risk level.

Guadalajara: A Covid-cautious city stay

The Covid precautions in Guadalajara -- a metropolis about 120 miles inland from Puerto Vallarta in Jalisco state on the Pacific Coast -- couldn't have been more different than free-wheeling Tulum along the Caribbean.

I traveled to Guadalajara on a writing research trip about a month before my vacation in Quintana Roo, just before Omicron's discovery was announced.



Workers make traditional Mexican candies at Nuestros Dulces in Tlaquepaque just outside Guadalajara.

Joe Yogerst

As Mexico's second-largest city (population 5 million), you would have figured that Covid has been a huge problem. But until recently, charts have showed consistently low infection and hospitalization rates.

Like much of Mexico, Jalisco has seen a steep rise in cases in January, although the rate of cases per 100,000 residents in the state is still about a third of that in Quintana Roo. Jalisco moved from green to yellow on January 24 in the country's traffic light system.

Before flying down, I asked a colleague in the local tourism business how the city had managed to dodge the worst of Covid. She detailed three primary reasons:

1. The governor of Jalisco State took the pandemic seriously from day one and immediately introduced mask mandates and other measures.
2. Jalisco has what many consider Mexico's best health-care system.
3. The pandemic was not politicized in the state, meaning that residents of all persuasions followed the Covid rules and recommendations.

Strict rules in the city

Serious Covid measures were obvious from the moment I stepped out of my hotel that first morning. Everyone was masked up, both indoors and out. Entrance to all shops, restaurants, churches and museums -- as well as pedestrian entrance to the historic city center -- required a mask, hand sanitizer and a digital temperature check.

Instead of closing down, the city's leading attractions had adapted new rules and procedures. For instance, the Instituto Cultural Cabañas, which preserves more than a hundred priceless José Clemente Orozco murals, was transformed into a one-way route with docents making sure that visitors kept at least 2 meters (6 feet) apart.



Lunch is served here at Casa Luna in Tlaquepaque. Covid precautions are more closely followed in Jalisco state than in some other parts of Mexico.

In Guadalajara, Covid rules were much stricter than any place I've traveled in the States since the pandemic started, including the states of Washington, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona and Texas.

And as of January 14, the state of Jalisco has a vaccination -- or a negative Covid test-- requirement for indoor areas such as bars and casinos.

I did have to get a Covid test before flying home via Houston, but it was a breeze.

An entire floor of the big parking garage at Guadalajara International Airport had been transformed into a testing facility. I paid the \$25 fee with a credit card, got my nose swabbed and 20 minutes later had my negative result -- both on paper and via email attachment.

As with most trips abroad these days, you have to be prepared to quarantine at your own expense if you test positive before flying back to your home country.

Bottom line: If you're really feeling the need to travel internationally, Mexico remains one of the easiest places to navigate -- as long as you're prepared to manage your own possible exposure to the virus.
