



Being released of my COVID fear made me realize how burdened I'd been by it.

“Stay in each position as long as it feels like a gift.”

This was a poignant line uttered by the Westin's yoga instructor during a morning outdoor session overlooking Puerto Vallarta's Banderas Bay, a well-known whale watching spot. This line really resonated with me as it was once my mantra as a digital nomad and avid traveler. That was until I swapped freedom for fear during the pandemic, and I'm certainly not the only one.

An October 2020 study in the *Journal of Air Transport Management* found that there are five factors negatively impacting travelers' willingness to fly for pleasure during the pandemic: the primary purpose of travel before COVID-19, perceived threat from the virus, agreeableness, affect—and fear. We're gripped with fears about catching the disease, getting stuck abroad, and have mounting social anxiety.

My fears about catching COVID-19 meant that I engaged in maniacal sanitization and anything that talked, walked, breathed, or coughed posed a threat to me. I had no qualms about going grocery shopping with unflattering heavy-duty dishwashing gloves, long sleeves, and pants to shield every crevice of my being. Even while watching pre-COVID-era sitcoms, my mind chattered compulsively about cleanliness. Why weren't Rachel and Monica sanitizing their doorknobs for heaven's sake? I felt I could go nowhere because COVID was everywhere.

Nevertheless, I caught the virus this January. Testing positive ushered in extreme lethargy, egregious body pain, and the disappearance of my sense of smell. After thankfully recovering, a wellness vacation was truly what I needed, so I set off for my first real holiday in over a year to Puerto Vallarta, the bougainvillea-covered beach town in the Mexican state of Jalisco.



Sunset at Westin Resort Puerto VallartaBronwyn Knight Photography

In full YOLO mode, I would check into not one, but two fabulous hotels. First up was the Westin Resort & Spa, Puerto Vallarta followed by the Marriott Puerto Vallarta Resort & Spa. After my COVID ordeal, I was intent on indulging in everything my heart desired and I was guaranteed to find it there.



Hitting the piñata at the Westin.Bronwyn Knight Photography

The Westin is a visually sumptuous resort that was once a palm tree plantation. This was the perfect setting for my first trip as historically, I have

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always sought the tropics when in need of replenishment. After being sick, I particularly appreciated the luxury resort's focus on wellness. There were running trails and nutritionist-curated meals for enjoyment at the various beachfront dining locations which I enjoyed with wild abandon before laying my head to rest on their trademark Heavenly beds come nightfall.

With my post-infection immunity, I realized that for the first time in months, I could truly breathe. I luxuriated under the 600-odd palm trees, took my frustrations out on a kaleidoscopic *piñata*, and enjoyed alfresco group yoga at the aforementioned sunrise session. Our local yoga instructor, Michelle, informed us that just the day before, whales had been spotted from right where we practiced, making the session even more magical.

The Westin offered the moon on a stick but most crucially for me, it provided peace of mind. The hotel has invested heavily in protective measures and introduced over 200 cleaning and hygiene protocols. This, of course, included staff wearing gloves, masks as well as face shields, the implementation of sanitizer stations, and social distancing markers. Knowing that so much was being done to safeguard guests helped me let my guard down further.

Over at the Marriott, there was also a catalog of protective measures including temperature checks, mandated mask-wearing in all indoor public areas, and complimentary COVID-19 tests for guests staying three consecutive nights. I adored my stay at the Marriott, where I dipped in the largest infinity pool Puerto Vallarta has to offer and lubricated my sunsets with tropical beverages from the aptly named Coco Station.

Being in Jalisco, Mexico's tequila-producing region, it made perfect sense to taste trickles of tantalizing tequila, so I embarked on an educative tasting session with the resort's on-site tequila sommelier, Audrey. Marriott Puerto Vallarta is one of the only hotels in the world with its own brand of tequila and it's called CasaMagna. Audrey guided me through the history of the drink, pleasant pairings, and even some insider antidotes to hangovers as we sat in the hotel's Herb Garden. To my gustatory delight, the resort had a whopping six restaurants to choose from and some knockout outdoor private dining areas. My favorite was the jetty where I feasted on a whirlwind, round the country food tour of Mexico on my plate. I felt so grateful to be able to rely on all my senses (smell included) to experience the scents, the flavors, the thrashing of the nearby waves, and the riots of color of the sunset.



1. The cuisine at the Marriott. 2. Tequila tasting at the Marriott. Bronwyn Knight Photography

Before my trip was over I was determined to venture to a place I previously wouldn't have dared to go: the spa. Just months ago, the thought of being in an aromatic, low-lit room in close proximity to a stranger would have filled me with dread. Now I simply lay there and let Rosario, the masseuse, pummel me into serenity at Marriott's 22,000 square foot Ohtli spa. I drifted away blissfully as she massaged my fragile, over-sanitized hands. I took deep breaths as she melted the stress off my pores, and this now stands as the best massage of my life. Human contact trumpets seismic shifts in our moods and massages

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are actually said to trigger the release of the happiness hormone serotonin and reduce levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. After my treatment at Ohtli, a Nahuatl word for “path,” I made my way back to my room and cried while sitting on my bougainvillea-bestrewn balcony, thoroughly unburdened.



1. Coco Station at the Marriott. 2. Marriott's infinity pool. 3. The grounds at the Marriott.  
Bronwyn Knight Photography

Travel has always been a big part of my self-care arsenal. As many of us did, during the global lockdown I fantasized about the good old days of fearless discovery. Collectively, we're hungrier than ever for a world without PCR tests and Corona corridors. In fact, a recent survey by The Vacationer showed just how eager Americans are to travel safely without fear. Remarkably, almost 62% of those studied would agree to either give up sex for a year, not see their best friend for a year, not eat their favorite food for a year or spend one night in prison just to be able to travel safely and “normally” without restrictions again.

Being able to take this vacation was a gift and one which I will never again take for granted. This Puerto Vallarta trip enabled restoration, escapism, and liberation from the mental prison I was encased in. Most of all, it was a sweet sample of what life may be like on the other side of this. Over time and with global vaccine rollouts, fear may eventually be replaced with hope, optimism for the future—and freedom.