

EURO NOTES

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TESTING TIMES FOR THE SECOND COVID CHRISTMAS

Those like me inclined to whinge about Europe's reaction to Covid are regularly stopped in our tracks by Australia's much more hysterical response — though that always gets the Twitter reaction 'compare the death tolls, mate'. But it's hard to believe things like the brutal decision by Premier Mark McGowan to deny entry to a Victorian couple whose 20-year-old son died in WA can happen in Australia.

And while we're told Australians overseas are now welcome home, those who try to negotiate the obstacles still face the Western world's most insanely rigid rules. Under NSW's allegedly sensible Perrotet regime you need: a PCR pre-departure test; a second one within 24 hours of arrival; then 72 hours of 'self-isolation'; and then, assuming you've negotiated those hurdles, a third test on day 6 — plus 'don't visit high risk places until you get a negative day 6 test result'. That's the easy-going version, strictly for the fully vaccinated. Even then there are cases of vaccinated, PCR-tested Australians arriving from London who've been directed, against the apparent rules, into hotel quarantine.

The depressing news for Aussies contemplating the return home doesn't end there. There's the fun prospect of compulsory mask-wearing for the whole flight — while airlines have drastically reduced their in-flight service and — surprise, surprise — sent prices sky-high. And those who can't face the prospect of the long-haul back to Oz except at the front of the plane will be dismayed by recent stories about Singapore Airlines' once-famous business class service. Boarding passes for the London-Sydney flight, which include an invitation to the business lounge during the Singapore stopover, have proved dishonest. According to one account, instead of the seven-hour Singapore airport wait offering the prospect of a shower, dumplings and wine, passengers were barked at by officials to walk in single file to a fiercely-policed, roped-off holding area, without any showers or food on offer. Most who paid for this experience will be tak-

ing their business elsewhere next time.

In the absence of greater certainty about how genuine Australia's welcome might be, a few weeks ago we instead set off from Budapest, driving westwards across the EU's unpoliced Schengen borders towards the English Channel. These days, instead of border controls there are vaccine app checks — at hotels, restaurants, and cafés.

Most Europeans don't seem to care too much about such radically freedom-infringing measures. And, if you accept the vaccine 'papers please' regime, travel through Europe is mostly as easy as it was pre-Covid, except for the awful mask requirement for most indoor spaces, including at museums, church services and concerts.

If it's possible to talk of Covid silver linings, one is that places previously choked by tourism are again a pleasure to visit. So we found in Venice, where we stopped en route. Tourists are back but nothing like as many as pre-Covid. Most hotels, restaurants, cafés and businesses were doing well but without the previous queues to get into the Accademia art gallery or the famous Café Florian on St Mark's Square. Venice also restored our faith in human decency: we'd paid the hotel where we stayed, the charming Pensione Accademia, for three nights' stay in February 2020, just before the pandemic broke out, when we had to cancel. It was under no obligation to do so, but fully credited what we'd paid when we rebooked nearly two years' later.

But European travel in the age of coronavirus is not for the faint-hearted. We'd planned to drive direct from France to England but then, in response to Omicron, the UK brought in new rules almost as demanding as Australia's, requiring even fully vaccinated arrivals to take a PCR test after entry and then to quarantine until receiving a negative result. As ever, an exception was made for Ireland. Under Common Travel Area rules, arrivals from Ireland can enter the UK freely once they've been there for ten days. So, we changed plans to go via Ireland, which required only proof of vaccination, with no need for tests or quarantine. Then, a few days before we

were to arrive there, Ireland also tightened the entry rules. Now you needed a certified negative test taken within 48 hours of arrival. How to organise that in sleepy rural France which we'd be driving through on a weekend? Instead of our planned exploration of some of Venice's great baroque churches, we studied the French for lateral flow antigen tests and rang what seemed like every pharmacy in central France trying to arrange a test. We eventually secured one in a town where Covid testing is now rivaling wine production as a major industry: the small pharmacy told us they had several staff conducting over 100 tests a day, each costing €25, booked solid six days a week.

The Covid story continues to dominate in Britain, which we finally reached, and has greatly weakened Boris Johnson's authority. Revelations that his team, having imposed fiercely policed anti-socialising rules, then held multiple boozy knees-ups have rightly caused fury. Johnson's sudden introduction of new restrictions in reaction to Omicron — without proper cabinet consideration and after tiny numbers of Omicron hospitalisations and deaths — looked like an attempt to divert attention. There followed further pre-Christmas disasters for him: the biggest parliamentary Tory revolt of his premiership — leaving him reliant on Labour to pass Covid laws; the Tories' crushing defeat in their formerly safe seat of North Shropshire; and the resignation of his key ally, Brexit minister David Frost, in protest over his Covid policies, eco-zealotry and high taxes.

Johnson in 2022 doesn't show any sign of being less shambolic: having ruled out masks in schools, his government has unleashed further fury by saying, er, this will be required. The Tory party famously has only two settings: complacency and panic. As it moves towards the latter, Johnson and his circle are unlikely to be enjoying a happy New Year. For the rest of us, it is an app-y one.

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