A PANDEMIC ✈ WORK TRIP TO EUROPE

Text and photos by A/Prof Andrew Chin

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have always taken for granted how easy it was to apply for overseas leave, pack our suitcase and take a flight out. As holders of one of the world's most powerful passports, pretty much anywhere on Earth is within reach. However, this privilege and convenience came crashing down when borders started to shut in March 2020, with subsequent travel restrictions making easy international travel a thing of the past.

Embracing the VTL

Before the pandemic, I had regular commitments to a few places for conferences and courses internationally. Certainly, it has been a pretty disappointing one year and eight months where such meetings were downgraded to online ones. When Europe and the US started opening their borders during summer of 2021, the rest of us were envious as they were relaxing most of the restrictions, and physical conferences and meetings were already taking place.

When the Vaccinated Travel Lane (VTL) initiative started on 8 September 2021 for quarantine-free overseas travel, we in the healthcare industry could only watch with envy and frustration as we were still not allowed to apply for overseas leave, let alone travel overseas. At that time, I had an open invitation to attend a professional course/workshop physically in France at the end of November 2021, and if that was not possible, it would have to be online participation.

The crucial day came on 19 October 2021 when the Ministry of Health released a memo to all public healthcare institutions allowing healthcare workers to take overseas leave. We had to read the conditions attached carefully as well. Certainly, at the back of my mind, I was entertaining the possibility of finally going overseas after almost two years. Fortunately, my Head of Department was supportive and approved my overseas leave request.

The first thing I did was to plan my travel dates and check the Singapore Airlines (SIA) website to look for available VTL flights. To my dismay, VTL flights from Paris, Frankfurt and Munich, the three international airports closest to my course venue, were already full. As I was planning to leave during the school holiday period and since the green light for overseas travel only came more than five weeks after VTLs were announced, most of the VTL flights to choice destinations had been booked out. The only destination left with available VTL flights was Amsterdam, which I promptly booked. It was also important to book flexible flights so as to allow subsequent changing of dates and itineraries if needed.

My next step was to plan my itinerary. This was essentially a ten-day work trip. Besides the two-day course in Strasbourg, France, I also planned to visit Geneva and Munich where I had made prior arrangements to visit offices, factories and laboratories. As for accommodation, I am a fan of using Booking.com to get overseas properties to stay at in different cities. Always choose the refundable booking option which allows for cancellations up to a few days prior to arrival, especially in these pandemic times where changes to travel restrictions can happen at the drop of a hat.

At that time, it was important to also book and pre-pay for a post-arrival PCR swab test at Changi Airport upon returning home, which was duly done when I purchased my ticket. It is recommended to purchase a comprehensive travel insurance with COVID-19 coverage in case you get infected during your travels. Provisions will have to be made for an extended travel period to factor in isolation and medical treatment if necessary.

Leading up to the trip

The final factor in the planning of the trip was transportation. Looking at my itinerary which spanned four countries, I had to choose a main mode of transportation that would allow me to travel safely and conveniently. In Europe, commercial flights and trains are extremely convenient and relatively hassle free.
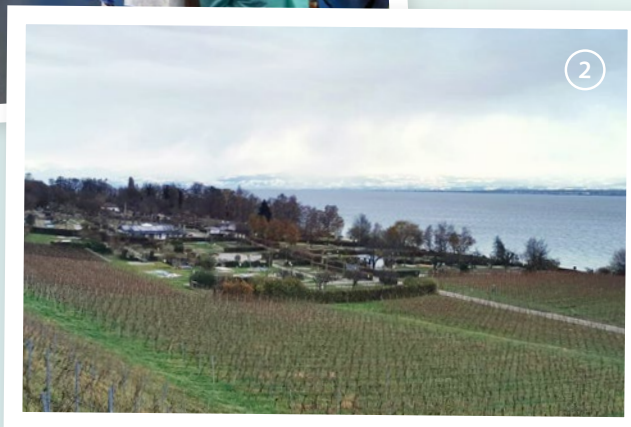
Immigration and customs clearance are virtually non-existent within these Schengen Area countries which have abolished border controls at their borders, so it was tempting for me to actually book such options; but winter was fast approaching and the Delta variant was still the dominant strain.

Across Europe, a worrying rise in cases was reported, prompting some countries like Denmark to reimpose restrictions on arrivals from Singapore, and other countries to go into semi-lockdown, like the Netherlands where restaurants and attractions were closed, and in Germany where Christmas markets were shut. I was getting a bit concerned and worried that the trip might not happen in view of the grim daily news. I made the decision to rent a car and planned my epic drive from Schiphol airport straight to Strasbourg via Germany. I was careful to avoid Belgium as most GPS systems would have planned routes through the country since it was the shortest distance to Strasbourg; but that would mean having entered a non-VTL country and rendered my trip non-VTL compliant, resulting in a ten-day mandatory quarantine when I got back home. It was a six-hour drive covering roughly 700 km. Self-driving would also allow me to be by myself, minimising contact and exposure with the public in trains and aircrafts.

For the week leading up to my departure, I was constantly checking the SIA website and COVID-19 updates of each country that I would be visiting in Europe in case there were new rules and regulations pertaining to travels into and within them. Fortunately, there were no significant changes in travel restrictions right up to the time of departure from Singapore.

The day came for me to leave on a red-eye flight to Amsterdam and I slept the whole flight sans alcohol to prepare myself for the long drive ahead when I landed. Some of the best motorways in the world, in my opinion, are in Western Europe, in particular the four countries I was visiting. The best is still the Autobahn in Germany: no speed limit in most parts, no tolls and the drivers have the best etiquette when it comes to driving along the motorway. I did not witness a single accident or traffic snarl due to accidents in my entire driving trip.

It was mandatory then to obtain an EU Digital COVID Certificate, much like our HealthHub vaccination certificate, to prove your vaccination status. I was fortunate that when I arrived in France, the European Union (EU) had just officially recognised our Singapore COVID-19 vaccination certificate in Notarise.sg. But as that news had not percolated through the ground yet, I still had to head to a designated French pharmacy and I paid €36 (S$54) to get my vaccination certificate converted to the French "Pass Sanitaire" which was recognised by the EU. This "Pass Sanitaire" app in my mobile phone was a necessary document that enabled me to access restaurants, shops and tourist attractions in France as well as other countries within the EU. It is very much like our TraceTogether app with our proof of vaccination status.

Enjoying the EU

I travelled by foot within Strasbourg, a very historic and quaint city in the Alsace region, and an area conquered and ruled by both Germans and the French. The rich cultural heritage and influence these two countries have had on this city and the region is profound. Christmas markets were still open then, so I made a nice visit to them in the evening after the course and indulged in the festivities and Christmas spirit. There is nothing more apt to do in Strasbourg, which is considered one of the capital cities for Christmas markets in Europe.

I also managed to squeeze in a couple of fine dining opportunities during my stay there, thanks to recommendations and bookings by my hosts, and also a quick sightseeing stop at the medieval town of Bourg enroute to Geneva.

My visits to Geneva and Munich were rather dull and unremarkable since they were work-related, with no time for sightseeing or indulging in long meals. Visits to offices for meetings and laboratories for experimental techniques were held at the industrial outskirts of the two beautiful cities. However, thanks to choosing to drive myself, I managed to take a quick driving tour of the city centres before heading off to Amsterdam on another epic ten-hour drive covering almost 900 km along the Autobahn and the Dutch highway. Obtaining a pre-departure COVID-19 swab test was so convenient and freely available in Germany, with numerous public test centres opened. This was done within 48 hours of departure back to Singapore. I also filled up the Electronic Health Declaration mandated by the Singapore Government for all travelling into Singapore.

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With frequent scenic rest stops enroute to various destinations and my trusty Spotify playlist with more than 48 hours' worth of music, the driving trip of more than 2,500 km was a rather enjoyable and hassle-free experience. I am grateful for the very unique and first-of-its-kind opportunity, as right after I returned to Singapore, Europe began to tighten travel restrictions again and some of the countries imposed further lockdowns due to the relentless Delta wave and the emergence of the Omicron variant, and further new waves on the horizon. On hindsight, it was a right decision to exploit the small window of opportunity to travel overseas and reminisce the freedom of movement and life in the pre-pandemic era. ◆

This article was prepared before the simplified Vaccinated Travel Framework announced on 24 March 2022.

Legend

1. Course in progress

2. Lake Constance with Swiss Alps across, and a rest stop on the German side

3. Christmas Market in Strasbourg

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