

Life without Travel: Postcard from Lawrence, Kansas

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I've been a freelance travel writer pretty much my entire adult life. Traveling has shaped who I am more than anything else (along with motherhood), yet if forced to choose between traveling and writing I would choose writing. Writing gives me focus, clarity and purpose. In fact, I can't imagine traveling without writing, because I learn so much more when I observe and try to put what I see, think and experience into words. I travel because I can. I write because I must. I've kept a journal since I was 12 years old.

I wrote *Frommer's Hong Kong* for decades and witnessed first-hand how the 2003 SARS epidemic devastated Hong Kong and its economy. Since then, I've read enough articles to know that for the scientific community, it was never an "if" about a future pandemic but a "when."

After COVID-19 came to light in Wuhan in January, I told friends I had a bad feeling about this one. Not only were infections increasing alarmingly fast, but also we are so much more global than we were 17 years ago. But never in my worst nightmares could I have imagined what is happening now, and what I fear most is that people I love will die. My parents, who

live only a five-minute drive away, are in their 80s. So are many of their friends. I also miss my two sons, now in their 20s at different ends of the country. They never seemed so far away.

Life Without Travel is a series of first-person accounts from the Getting On Travel team. Each post offers a personal glimpse into the lives of our travel writers and bloggers apropos of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

COVID-19 in my hometown: Lawrence, Kansas

I live in Lawrence, a small Kansas town that's home to the University of Kansas. Luckily, the powers that be were proactive, closing down the university and public schools during spring break, thereby heading off thousands of returning university students who may have been in close quarters on beaches and elsewhere. Then the governor closed classes throughout the state for the rest of the semester. That was followed March 17 by the closure of all nonessential businesses in Lawrence, followed later by the rest of the state. Since then, as elsewhere, an unprecedented number of people have applied for unemployment. Meanwhile, "essential" businesses, it turns out, such as grocery stores, hardware stores and liquor stores, are where I do most of my shopping anyway. How could I get through this without wine?

Of course, things are escalating so quickly, last week's news seems like it happened months ago. We still have fewer than 30 people in my county who have tested positive for COVID-19, more than half of them in their twenties and thirties. Of course, we all know the real number is higher. Most of the people I know have taken sheltering in place and social distancing very seriously. Because I've always shopped for groceries once a week, limiting my forays for food has not been difficult. I am, however, shopping also for my friend, who returned from Spain and is self-quarantined in his apartment, and for my parents, which makes my shopping trips longer.



In Kurashiki, Japan, far from her Lawrence, Kansas home, updating Frommer's EasyGuide to Tokyo, Kyoto, and Western Honshu

Not used to so much isolation

What surprised me during the first week of sheltering in place, especially in light of the solitude and self-discipline freelance writing requires, was how much I floundered. I felt isolated, unmotivated and nonproductive. Instead of a busy social calendar that included exercise classes (and coffee afterward), book clubs, a standing Friday night meet-up with friends, dinners out, and getting together with family and friends, I had no one to see, nowhere I had to be, and nothing I had to do.

Suddenly, it didn't matter what time I got up (though my dog and cat have different opinions). Travel writing seemed so beyond the point. I'd always fantasized about having unfettered free time for house projects, but even those seemed like too much effort. It didn't help that I was supposed to leave March 19 for Spain to spend a month in Granada with my friend (I feel for him—what a lousy semester to have sabbatical!), followed in June with a trip to Argentina.

Of course, stories abound of cancelled plans, lost jobs, businesses shut down, and wedding and birthday celebrations uncelebrated. But even those seem trivial compared to losing loved ones and the horror of not being able to say goodbye. And knowing that my personal

situation is privileged compared to much of the world, my heart goes out to those without resources, confined to a crowded one-room home, a refugee camp, or maybe no home at all. And we know it's going to get worse.

Adjusting to a new normal in Lawrence

Now more than a few weeks in, I'm adapting to a new routine in Lawrence. I sleep as long as my pets allow me, have my customary coffee while I read the newspaper about the latest coronavirus horrors, let out the chickens, answer and write emails, call a friend or family member (I try to do that every day), do yoga, spend a few hours writing, walk the dog, do something around the house or in the garden, lock up the chickens, crack open a beer or wine while I watch the evening news, cook dinner (aren't we all cooking more these days?) and then read or watch more Netflix or PBS than I ever have. I'm zooming with friends. I've ridden bikes and walked with a neighbor, keeping our proper distance. When my friend is out of quarantine, we can have dates at home. This is the new normal.

Eventually I will clean out those closets and drawers, paint the bathroom, plant my garden, and tackle my Wizard-of-Oz basement (yes, you have to access it from the outside, but I've always claimed I wouldn't go there even during a tornado, which by the way, this Kansas gal has never seen). Maybe warmer weather will energize me.

Traveling in place

Japan is my specialty, and with the Tokyo Olympics originally planned for this summer, this was going to be my year. After two trips to Japan in autumn, I wrote a flurry of stories, some that are out (like this one on [Fukushima](#)), but I also have six assignments turned in but not yet published. The announcement that the Olympics have been postponed until 2021 came as a relief. But we can only guess where we'll be a year from now.

In the meantime, I'm writing more in my journal. I have a few more travel articles I'd like to write even without assignments or deadlines (people will want to travel again, won't they?). On my website, I recently wrote about ways we can travel without actually going anywhere, [Traveling in Place during Coronavirus](#), suggesting we can dust off those old photo albums, read books or watch movies that bring the world to us, experiment with ethnic cuisine, listen to music that ties us to other times and places, and even sit in different places in our homes for a new perspective. It was fun for me just walking around my house gathering my thoughts and objects for photos, and while writing, I completely forgot about time.

I'm also wondering whether this break from traveling might prompt me to write something entirely different, like fiction, essays or memoirs. What I do know is that writing has always been my salvation. It's what takes me out of my existence, melts the walls around me, and transports me as far as my mind will go.

GOT Contributor Beth Reiber

Beth Reiber has been a full-time freelance travel writer for more than three decades, including seven years based in Germany and Japan. She caught the travel bug at age 16 after being chosen as one of a dozen U.S. Girl Scouts to spend a month in Sweden, where, to her delight, she discovered scouting was co-ed. She's the author of nine guidebooks, including Frommer's guides to Japan for more than 30 years. Her work has appeared in National Geographic Traveler, USA Today, The Washington Post, Global Traveler, bindumedia.com, bbc.com/travel and many more. She now lives in Lawrence, Kansas.
