

Taking a flight for the first time since the pandemic, our writer finds carriers being careful. Passengers, not so much.



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# A wary return to the air

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Fortunately, there was an empty seat between us, but I still couldn't stop stressing about the passenger to my left with an extra-large beverage in his hand.

For what seemed like half the flight, the traveler wore his face mask around his chin while he took repeated sips from his giant Auntie Anne's cup. I stared at him from my window seat, willing him to finish his drink and hoist his face covering.

This is what air travel in 2020 has become, at least for me. Instead of fretting about missed connections and lost baggage, I worried about ill-fitting masks and crowded plane aisles.

Last week, I flew for the first time since February, and it was an eye-opening experience. I haven't been that close to strangers since the middle of March, when the coronavirus pandemic made us all fearful about standing next to people we don't know.

That said, the experience felt relatively safe. Most passengers were responsible and respectful of the new rules. Airline employees were concerned, polite enforcers.

Even so, I think I'll wait a while before

I book a ticket for my 80-year-old mother.

## COMPARING FRONTIER, UNITED

I flew to Orlando and back on two different airlines — Frontier headed south and United on my return flight to Cleveland. The experiences were largely comparable, although there were some differences.

Frontier took my temperature before I got on the plane, and United had a more orderly deboarding process. Both allowed passengers to remove mandatory masks for prolonged periods while eating and drinking.

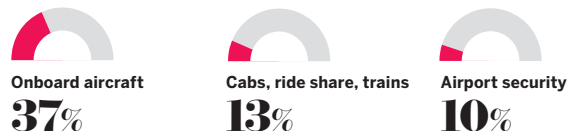
In recent months, U.S. airlines — financially devastated by the pandemic — have been touting studies that show how safe air travel is. On my United flight, the carrier even summarized the results from a recent (airline-funded) Defense Department study on its seat-back screens, which showed minimal risk from flying, primarily due to the advanced air filtration systems on modern aircraft.

The problem with some of these studies — they seem to assume perfect behavior from passengers.

SEE AIR. K2

J.D. Power recently surveyed more than 50,000 travelers while they were at a major U.S. airport. Respondents were asked two questions: These were the top three responses.

### Where they were most concerned about catching COVID-19



### What safety measures for airports do you consider to be most important?



# A wary return to the air

Continues from K1

And as any frequent flyer knows, air travelers are far from perfectly behaved.

Before my flight, I purchased a package of higher-quality KN95 masks for my journey. I put one on in the parking lot at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport and didn't remove it until I was in my rental car in Orlando. (I did pull it down once, at the request of a Transportation Security Administration agent.)

I didn't take a single sip of water on my 2½-hour flight. Plenty of my fellow passengers, however, both ate and drank on the flight, including my Frontier neighbor, who brought what seemed like a pantry full of snacks aboard.

While food and drink purchases on Frontier remain suspended (with the exception of \$2.99 bottled water), United flight attendants passed out a snack pack to every passenger, which included bottled water, pretzels and Biscoff cookies, plus a sanitizer wipe. The carrier also offered beverage service from its drink cart.

The young man sitting across the aisle from me on my return flight to Cleveland brought additional food — a doughnut and some chips — and had his mask off for a full 20 minutes (yes, I timed him). Fortunately, there were several seats between us.

Both Delta and Southwest airlines are continuing to keep middle seats on their planes empty (although Southwest is ending the practice next month). Alas, neither of those carriers flies nonstop to Orlando from Cleveland or I might have chosen one of them.

When we boarded our Frontier flight, my husband grumbled: "This is why I didn't want to fly." He was assigned a middle seat next to a rather large man at the window. I had the aisle.

Though the flight was perhaps 80% full. I spotted a bank of empty seats a few

rows ahead of us and asked a flight attendant if the two of us could move. No, I was told, as those rows, closer to the front of the plane, are more expensive to reserve. He offered me instead a seat a few behind my assigned row, where both the window and aisle seat were empty. So I relocated to seat 33F, separated from the Auntie Anne's drinker by an 18-inch-wide middle seat.

Our United flight home was perhaps two-thirds full, and my husband and I had a full row to ourselves near the back of the plane.

My guess is flights likely will be fuller through the holiday season. United announced last week that it was adding 1,400 flights to its Thanksgiving-week roster because of last-minute demand. The carrier is anticipating its busiest week of travel since March.

Regardless of how many people are on board, the deplaning process needs to be improved. On the Frontier flight in particular, passengers immediately stood up upon landing, and gathered shoulder to shoulder in the aisle, even before the door had opened.

The United deboarding process was better — flight attendants called passengers by row to exit, but there was still a line of passengers in the aisle, although that may be impossible to completely eliminate. All the more reason to keep those masks on tight.

A few other observations:

I traveled with hand sanitizer and wipes, and wiped down the arm rests, tray table, seat back and other communal areas after I boarded. This despite assurances from both United and Frontier that they frequently clean their planes with virus-killing disinfectant.

The TSA process was relatively painless, although social distancing was a challenge. Markings on the floor — in both Cleveland and Orlando — encouraged pas-



A United Orlando-to-Cleveland flight was two-thirds full. Susan Glaser, cleveland.com

sengers to stay 6 feet apart. I was so out of practice booking air travel, I forgot to add my TSA PreCheck number to my flight reservation. I figured the TSA lines would be short, but we waited nearly a half hour in Cleveland.

I opted for a carry-on bag instead of checked luggage to hasten my exit from the airport and limit gathering time around a baggage carousel.

The airports were busier than I expected, given what I'd been reading about the state of air travel, still down more than 60% from a year ago. They weren't crowded, but they weren't empty either.

Boarding areas seemed to have plenty of space to spread out.

The only place at either airport that alarmed me was a bar in Orlando's Terminal B, where passengers were seated close together drinking. The state of Florida, by the way, does not have a mask mandate, but Orange County and the Orlando airport do.

Mask mandate or not, I had no intention of taking mine off in the airport or on the plane. I know masks aren't foolproof, but I wanted to feel as if I was doing everything I could to ensure my safety.

I just wish everyone on my flight was doing the same.