



Illustration by Andrea Levy, Advance Local

Reflections on a year of restricted travel

From takeout meals to hiking trails, the pandemic upended the way we tour



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Let's start with silver linings: During my pandemic year of travel, I saw more of Ohio than I have in years, from new-to-me state parks, an overnight safari and a bike trail through Amish country.

I didn't get to Ecuador, but the treehouses in Toledo were pretty magical.

I know that I'm lucky I got to travel at all. Many Clevelanders have been hunkered down at home for the past year, traveling not much farther than their neighborhood Heinen's store.

Despite my relative good fortune, it's been a challenging year travel wise, negotiating quarantines and restrictions, mask mandates and takeout meals. I'm very much looking forward to a more normal year of travel in 2021, as the coronavirus continues to wane (fingers crossed).

As much as I'd like to look forward, I can't help but look back and reflect on the past year as a writer and a traveler. It's been a difficult, frustrating 12 months.

A year ago this week, the travel industry came to a screeching halt, in Ohio and across the globe. Millions remain out of work as the industry slowly begins to recover.

For the first two months of the pandemic I stayed home, as instructed by my elected leaders. By May, I was ready to venture out.

Initially I was conflicted about my decision to travel. For more than a year, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has advised Americans against non-essential travel to stem the spread of the disease. State and county health departments in Ohio affirmed that message, issuing stay-at-home advisories for some regions.

I traveled anyway.

Why? Partly because it's my job, but also because the businesses were open



Water fun at Lake Hope State Park in Vinton County. Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com



Sliding at Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.



Communal firepit area at Cannaleay Treehouse Village near Toledo.

— hotels, restaurants, museums and gift shops — and they needed our support.

I also wanted to demonstrate that travel could be done safely and responsibly.

Travel has been targeted during this pandemic as a primary means of virus spread. I don't doubt the science, but I do question whether it has to be that way.

Early this year, I interviewed a local doctor who was advising against leisure travel. I asked her what it was about travel that made it dangerous, because it seemed to me that people who rent a condo on the beach or a cabin in the woods are as safe as I am in my house on any given day. She

said travel seemed to give people license to break the rules — by not wearing masks, drinking in bars, gathering in large groups, etc.

Photos from Miami Beach this past week confirm her fears, with large groups of unmasked spring break revelers gathering in the streets.

It doesn't have to be that way, though. And I set out to prove it.

If people were going to travel, I wanted to give them ideas on places they could go safely and responsibly. With a couple of exceptions, I stayed within a three-hour drive of Cleveland, highlighting primarily

outdoor destinations.

I wrote a series of stories on Ohio state parks, visited a national park in Michigan and pedaled a few dozen miles on the Holmes County Trail in Amish country.

Among the highlights: a first trip to Lake Hope State Park in Southeast Ohio, an overnight at Cannaleay Treehouse Village near Toledo and a ski trip to Michigan with my daughters.

I put thousands of miles on my car, wore down the tread on my hiking boots and ate way too many meals out of cardboard boxes in hotel rooms.

The experiences weren't uniformly positive. Among the irritations: dining outside in frigid temperatures, and strangers who invaded my personal space in hotel hallways and on tight hiking trails.

I paid attention to COVID infection rates, mask mandates and travel restrictions, primarily those in New York, which was essentially closed to Ohioans for much of the past year. (Yes, I know many people didn't abide by the rules, but I figured I should, at least when I was representing the Plain Dealer and cleveland.com).

I missed the serendipity of connecting with fellow travelers at the end of a long day of touring, the casual conversations with locals at a neighborhood bar, the joy of experiencing a new culture for the first time.

But I did not get COVID — at least I don't think I did — and I attribute that as much to good luck as cautious behavior.

A year ago this week, I was supposed to be leaving for Ecuador, where my daughter was studying. It would have been my first trip to South America. That trip, like so many others, was canceled as COVID-19 spread across the globe.

I have a several-thousand-dollar credit for a resort in the Amazon that I don't know if I'll ever use. Yet I tell myself — and I mean it — that if the price of that canceled trip is the biggest cost to me during this deadly pandemic, then I consider myself very lucky.

My younger daughter, too, had a study abroad trip canceled due to COVID. She was scheduled to study in Copenhagen last fall, a trip that has been rescheduled for this summer.

However, Denmark — like most of Europe — remains closed to most visitors, as COVID numbers across the Atlantic surge. Will it be reopened by summer?

I don't know. I'm not sure Denmark knows. But I sure hope so, because I am hoping to travel there, too.

Oh, how I yearn for a return to some kind of normal travel season this summer. If not, there are a few places left in Ohio I have yet to explore.