



A Firsthand Experience of Air Travel in a COVID-19 Environment

Article 7 – Travel within and to and from Canada

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Overview

Instead of compiling various reports, studies, and news articles to describe the current and future state of air travel in this COVID-19 environment, this article will simply follow both a recent Canadian domestic flight and a recent international flight from Canada to France and back to Canada from Germany.



Courtesy of Global News - <https://globalnews.ca/news/7826318/canada-covid-vaccine-certificate-hurdles/>

The Travel Experience

As way of background, in Canada, the province of British Columbia has a mandatory electronic vaccination card, labeled “BC Vaccine Card” on a shiny bright green background with a person’s name and the term “vaccinated” with a check mark symbol and a QR code on the face. The electronic card is required to enter such places in British Columbia as licensed restaurants, pubs, bars, gyms, casinos, conferences, and events with more than 50 people. Basically, most places.

Now for those people not familiar with the name British Columbia, it has a history. On the west side of what is now the United States is a river that was explored using a ship called the “Columbia Rediviva” and the captain named this river the Columbia River after his ship. Prior to 1846 both the British and the Americans claimed and occupied the Columbia District that surrounded this river. However, in 1846 an

agreement to move the British lands north of the 49th parallel was made resulting in the current border between Canada and the United States. These new British lands were nowhere near the Columbia River. Nevertheless, in 1858, nine years before Canada became a country, Queen Victoria chose to name the Colony of British Columbia for the British mainland north of the 49th parallel. All very interesting history, but not a story known by many people which is a very important part of this article.

Regarding the BC vaccine card, there are between 195 to 250 countries in the world depending on which organizations recognize these countries, with most of these countries having states, territories, or provinces within them. So, the chances that someone in Europe would know that “BC” is the initials of a province called British Columbia in Canada is slim to nil. Not sure what the bureaucrats were thinking when they came up with this idea, but certainly the printing “British Columbia, Canada” with a nice Canadian flag symbol on the electronic vaccine card would have been a thousand times better.

Canada has one of the world’s highest vaccination rates, but much of this is due to the mixing of vaccination products. We are a country of mixed-vaccinated citizens, which is an issue with other countries, mainly the USA. To get more people vaccinated, life in Canada is getting harder to function in for non-vaccinated people. For example, the news has reported the federal government’s intention to restrict domestic air travel to fully vaccinated passengers. Canada is fortunate to have access to these different types of vaccinations. Colleagues in various Asian countries are reporting complete at home lock downs as these countries await the arrival of enough vaccine dosages of any type to fight the Delta variant of COVID-19.

Now for the flying. The first trip I took was at the end of September that was an out and back day on a domestic flight in Canada. With the September 2021 airport screened passenger levels in Canada only being 45% of the same period in 2019 (peaked at the end of August 2021 at 50%) and with very low airfares, the flight cancellation shell game is at play. As a quick way of determining if your flight is being financially subsidized or not by the airline is to look at the ticket price all in, including baggage and other fees, and divide it per hour. A rough, best-case, break-even rate is \$100.00 for the first hour and then \$50 for every hour after that. So, a four-hour flight would need an average ticket price of \$250 to break even for the airline. If you are paying less than this amount, the airline needs to yield up (increase their ticket price) in the two weeks before the flight to have a fighting chance of making money.

If the yield up doesn’t occur, because there is too much seat capacity in that market, then the flight is not profitable and flight cancellations begin. It can start one or two weeks before the flight with an email stating that a flight has been changed (cancelled) with a new flight being offered at a different time. This will allow the passenger to make changes to their business or personal meetings at the other end of the flight. The real trouble begins when the flight cancellation occurs the day of the intended flight. The choices are to cancel these meetings and events or to pay whatever airline is actually flying on that route five to ten times more than what was originally paid for the airfare. In addition, you now have the pleasure of being on hold for hours as you wait for a call centre customer service agent to hopefully refund your money for the original flight. Even though the recent Canadian Air Passenger Rights regulations give reimbursements to the passenger for these sudden cancellations, if not for weather or an unforeseen mechanical problem, good luck being paid as a passenger. Don’t believe me, just look at the various on-line airline reviews in Canada for this summer. Just tragic. To address these mystery flight cancellations, I selected an airline that was most likely to operate its flights and had multiple flights to my intended city on the day of my travels.



Armed with my brand-new “on the phone” BC vaccine card I headed to the Vancouver International Airport for a Canadian domestic flight. However, no one ever asked about my vaccination status while in the airport/airline system in either direction. Not the airline, not CATSA – no one. I take it that rule is yet to be placed into action. The flights were 60% full, so the airline was losing money, but the airline decided to operate without cancellations. Good for me, not so good for the airline.

My first encounter for a proof of double vaccination came at the destination airport restaurant in another province where I proudly presented my shiny green “on the phone” BC vaccine card and was immediately refused entry into the restaurant. Hmm, didn’t see that coming. Now what?

The only fall back I had was this business card size paper handwritten card I received when I got my two COVID-19 vaccination shots. Really a step up from a 1960’s “book of the month club” card handwritten in pencil. Interestingly, this card is sponsored by “Fraser Health”. It is partially handwritten and again, it is based on the name of a river. The term Fraser relates to a river that runs through British Columbia and is named after an explorer, Simon Fraser (1776 – 1862). I fumbled for this card, produced it, and was promptly allowed into the restaurant.

The next day I was off to Paris with my wife. In preparation we had researched everything we could on travelling to France. Since my wife had received a mixed vaccination, we were not sure if she qualified as vaccinated when we entered France. Therefore, we applied on-line to the France government for entry rights for my wife. We also paid \$523.00 in total for our two PCR tests. The tests came back negative for COVID-19. We did find on-line a form Called the “Sworn Undertaking to Comply with the Rules for Entry into Metropolitan French Territory (From Green Listed Country)”. This form basically stated that we didn’t have any symptoms of COVID-19 in the last 48 hours. The form was to be presented to the “travel company before boarding and to the border control authorities, whether vaccinated or not.”

We approached the airline check in counter in Vancouver with all our documents. The agent looked at, of course, our passports and then the sworn undertaking form. We showed our “on the phone” BC vaccine card, but that was rejected, so again the partially handwritten Fraser Health paper card came out and yes, it did the job – we were on the aircraft.

On approach into Paris, the airline asked that we complete a contact tracing form and return it to them. Strangely the airline passed out the same sworn undertaking form that we showed at check-in. Not sure of the logic in that process. Now on the ground in Paris, France, as we approached the customs officer, we had everything ready for presentation, our passports, our PCR test results, our shiny green “on the phone” BC vaccination card, a British Columbia Government print out of our vaccination dates and vaccine types, as well as our sworn undertaking forms and for backup our Fraser Health cards.

We presented our passports to the French customs officer. He looked at the passports, scanned them, looked at us, stamped the passports and then gave us the international signal that we had passed customs, he looked at the next person in the line. No COVID-19 questions, no request for the sworn undertaking forms, no request for vaccine cards, no request for the PCR test results – nothing. Good, we had passed the first step. What about step two? After picking up our luggage we walked to the secondary customs desks – closed. No one was there. We walked through this secondary customs area and out of the terminal building and into a taxi. Not sure what just happened, but we were now in France and driving to Paris.

Since our hotel was by the famous Louvre Museum, we thought an afternoon visit would be in order. The lineup into the Louvre had a person with a scanner checking everyone's cell phone for COVID-19 vaccination status. We presented our shiny green "on the phone" BC vaccination card QR code. Nope. No good. No entry into the Louvre Museum for us. Rats, what to do now. Yes, the old Fraser Health card. Well, it worked again, and we gained entrance into the Louvre. That old and now tattered Fraser Health card got us into every restaurant, hotel, public event in France and later in Germany. Wasn't expecting that.

What we also saw in France was for those people who didn't have proof of a double vaccination, there were so many quick COVID-19 test stations around events that anyone could enter them after obtaining a rapid test result. The net effect was elbow-to-elbow room only at these public events and locations. Interestingly, the media wasn't reporting on the COVID-19 crisis, but focused on the Germany election, the fuel storages in the UK and the farmer protests in India. Life appeared to be happening despite COVID.

Now for the final test. While in Strasbourg, there was a Hans Zimmer concert. If you don't know him, just think of the music for the movies Pirates of the Caribbean, Batman, Pearl Harbor, Gladiator or Interstellar. Our final goal is to enter this concert based solely on our Fraser Health cards. Again, a lineup of people getting their phones scanned for a double vaccination confirmation. Our turn, and it is the Fraser Health card. Fantastic, we are in the concert. God bless that Fraser Health card.

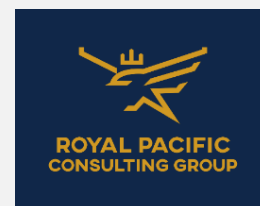
A couple days later and we are getting ready to return to Canada from Germany. First a quick PCR test in France at a randomly selected pharmacy. In and out in 10 minutes with no appointment and this time only \$190.00 in total for the two PCR tests. Time to enter everything into the Canadian CANPASS app required to enter Canada. At the Frankfurt Airport, the airline only wants to see our passports and our CANPASS confirmation code. Done in one minute. Back in the air for the flight back to Canada.

In Canada, it is passports and the CANPASS confirmation code. Less than two minutes and we are through the first stage of customs. Normal walk through the second stage of Canada Customs, we presented our declaration form, and we were done.

Back at home in Canada an email comes in from France. My wife is not classified as vaccinated as I was, but she is listed as inoculated. Her application was rejected. Reason for the reject is that her status is sufficient on its own to enter France. All a mystery to me. However, I am now treating my Fraser Health card as gold. If I lose that card, I am in real trouble for both domestic and international travel. We now know the "on the phone" vaccination card endorsed by "BC", whoever that is, just doesn't make it on an international stage. Maybe it is time for a Canadian national card that is recognized worldwide.

Author

Jim Scott, BGS, MA, ATPL
Managing Partner
Royal Pacific Consulting Group
British Columbia, Canada
E-mail: jim.scott@royal-pacific.ca



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