



zrh-ord-review

4/20/2024

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Cruising Review

Airports are a mess as travel increases to and from Europe



This webpage QR code

Structured Data

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Poor airport planning and huge travel demand results in long lines, lots of waits, and inefficiency by overworked staff.

PDF Version of the webpage (first pages)

4/20/2024

Travel is back. Expect long lines, delays, and overworked airport staff.

This was my first trip back to Europe since 2019, and overall was fantastic. I am vaccinated and had no problem entering France (Paris) showing my passport and Covid vaccination card (no Covid test required). I was able to travel freely in France and to Switzerland. Masks were required on all public transportation, inside restaurants, museums, etc. Now many museums and other venues require some type of QR code covid passport which authenticates your current status (i.e. vaccinated).

The exit from Europe however, was an experience. I have detailed the departure below. This was on a Swiss flight (booked through United and also code-shared with United) departing from Zurich (ZRH), Switzerland.

United Travel Ready

United has a good checklist for flights, including documenting passports and Covid checks. Unfortunately, this stored and verified information doesn't help you much at the airport, where you have to show the same documentation no less than three additional times.

I used the United recommended self-test (proxied) Binax Now which worked well. You are forced to buy a pack of 6 for about \$160. Take two with you (for each person). The test is proxied by a tech online, which requires a webcab (I used my MacBook Pro). The test took about 20 minutes.

Airport Check-in at Swiss

The check-in at Swiss was smooth and efficient. I booked economy and requested an upgrade. For this flight, there were 13 available in Business Class and 30 open seats in Economy Class. So a good load factor. I presented my passport, and Covid test information. My upgrade cost to Business Class was 800CHF (about \$870). I got a window seat (7K) with no adjoining seat on the Airbus 340-300. Overall the seat was comfortable, with lots of leg room and a lay-flat option. The power outlets did not work, which was annoying. Luckily I had my portable charge unit. The internet Wifi also did not work.

Airport Checks

After check-in at Swiss, I proceeded to the Swiss Lounge in another terminal.

Ticket Control: There is a scan entry gate to proceed further for departure.

Main Security Check: Security check for Business Class means you have to remove any electronic devices, and bag of any liquids. I was not asked to remove shoes.

Immigration Check: Passport check and stamped for exit.

Gate Check Prior Boarding

There was a huge line with two agents in front of the gate. Their purpose was to check documents prior to arrive at Chicago ORD immigration and customs.

They checked the same documents as before including passport, Covid check, and for non-residents a visa or documentation stating accepted purpose (i.e. business) for entry into country.

During this check, the SSSS on my ticket indicated that I had to do a random additional security check.

Security Checks

The additional security check was clearly the bottleneck, and ultimately delayed our flight for an hour since there were only two agents manning the control station for two full flights.

During this check, luggage was opened and swabbed, along with shoes inspected and swabbed for chemicals and analysis. The automated machine sampler was fast and efficient.

When I returned to the gate, my ticket did not scan green (to proceed to board flight), and I was instructed to return to the secondary screen station to clear the ticket (so that the automated computer system would green light my boarding). I was sent to a different gate and went back and forth until finally cleared. Clearly there were issues with staffing and poorly designated system of approval and clearing.

Boarding

Once my ticket cleared the secondary screening, I boarded the relatively full flight to Chicago. The flight was delayed over an hour due to the pre-flight documentation and secondary screening process. I inquired with the security agents and they said they were understaffed that day, which led to confusion, computer glitches, and long waits. Getting to the airport much earlier than two hours would have helped.

Arrival at ORD

The flight was delayed, but arrived in a sunny and hot (93F) Chicago. Deplaning was efficient and fast. I was surprised to see the huge lines leading into the immigration and customs. By far the longest I've ever seen at O'hare.

Luckly I had Global Entry, which proved to be a huge time saver. Those who had to wait in line were there at least 2 hours. It was unclear if it was understaffed, or the combination of multiple flights arriving at the same time.

Summary of Travel Experience

Travel is back. Plan ahead with Covid testing to return to the USA. I did the self (proxied) Binax Now test which worked well. You can test at Zurich airport and most large cities up to 72 hours in advance, but I suggest you do not wait and do it departure day.

Get to the airport early, and expect delays. Knowing what to expect is half the challenge. I was really surprised the airport did not have a more efficient system at the gate, which resulted in a delayed flight, overworked and understaffed airport employees. It's not like they've had time to prepare for this. They could easily have had the secondary security checks at the fully staffed primary security check to make things more efficient and reduce wait times (and less stress).
