

I left on a trip to South Korea from Marquette on January 20th, the day the Covid virus was first seen in the U.S. and South Korea. By then the virus was already identified in Wuhan, China and both countries had started to refuse people entering the country who had spent any time in Wuhan in the last 14 days. At the time I left my wife and I were pretty apprehensive about the viruses impact of my trip. I was going with the assumption the virus was similar to other types of flu, with a relatively low percentage of deaths, .1% or about 33,000 a year, most of those deaths related to older and at risk populations.

My trip had a layover in Chicago where I decided to buy a mask and glove set at an airport bookstore. This was done more out of respect for the asian countries I planned to visit, including Japan, where I knew wearing a mask in public was pretty common. My next stop was Tokyo. About a quarter of the people in the airport and on my final flight to Busan, South Korea were wearing masks. My son Adam met me at the airport. Adam, along with his girlfriend Jillian, teach english in Daegu, a city about the size of Chicago in south central Korea.

I had spent some time researching some of the cultural differences of South Korea compared to the U.S. The public use of masks was something people do when they are sick but also as a way to limit the amount of pollution they are taking into their lungs. Masks are available for purchase everywhere. Some of the other cultural differences sounded a little odd for a country that seemed so health and flu conscious. For instance eating with your chopsticks or hands out of a shared bowl of food in the middle of a table of family and friends is not uncommon. Another is the open food markets with their apparent lack of refrigeration for meat, fish, and other items sounds problematic at best or flat out dangerous for me at worse. I'd already been through 3 bouts of food poisoning in the U.S., usually with restaurant prepared seafood.

The open food market was one of the first places Adam had me visit. By then, early February, we already knew the Covid virus probably first infected humans in a similar market in Wuhan, China. Adam was hungry so we sat at a small stand that sold soup but primarily meat items. As I sat waiting for Adam at one of the 4 short stools in front of the older woman running the stand, we began a non-verbal 'show and tell' thru gestures of what part of the animal each pile of meat had come from. Heart, brains, liver, kidneys, intestines. She must have sensed my curiosity as a true interest in tasting something and then cut off 2 bite sized pieces of small intestine to offer to Adam and myself. It was hard to say if she thought of them as a true delicacy. At any rate we both looked at each other wondering what to do. Thinking it would be unkind to not try the offered sample, we both tossed them into our mouths and started chewing the cold intestines. I was anticipating I'd have to chew it for several minutes before it broke down but I was able to swallow it pretty quickly. With a smile and a bow I thanked her and then made sure she understood I was not interested in any more samples. At one point she took a big pile of blood sausage in the only warming plate on her stand and rotated the lower sausages from the bottom to the top of the pile. I had to wonder how many times a day she did that, and how many days that same pile was available at the market. Then I noticed the 4 inch thick wooden cutting board where she cut up the intestines for us. It looked more like a carving of waves than the flat cutting boards I was used to using at home. This cutting board was worn smooth by repeated cutting of meat over the weeks, if not years of use. Further down the market were tubs of live fish in water waiting for purchase. I thought of the open piles of meat and tubs of fish. There was no way they could keep all this clean from bugs and falling excrement from the birds and bats in the covered area of the market.

As we toured South Korea during the first half of February I could see more and more people were wearing masks while out in public. I began to notice the use of thermal cameras and thermometers used on the forehead for anyone traveling by bus, train, or plane between cities. At one point Adam and I ran into a group of Chinese tourists in a park in front of us and Adam chose to steer away from them, thinking they possibly might have come from Wuhan before the South Korean restrictions were in place.

Adam wanted to show me Asia so by mid February we flew to Thailand. Most people on the plane wore a mask but the other thing I noticed was the flight was only about half full. In Bangkok, Thailand about a quarter of the people were wearing masks. We were staying on Khaosan Road, a tourist area known internationally where many people who hike southeast Asia start their journeys. It looked and felt like one big continuous, non-stop, spring break party. We literally met people from all over the world there.

After a little over a week we flew on to Kathmandu, Nepal. Adam wanted to experience a Hindu festival he had heard about with usually a million people making the pilgrimage to attend. The plane wasn't even half full. It was becoming apparent Asians weren't traveling.

Kathmandu had all the look and feel of what I expected of a third world country. It honestly looked like some people were living and working under the same conditions as they would have been 500 years ago. It was interesting that all the food was very thoroughly cooked but still tasted good. If you asked for water at your table it came boiling hot from a kettle. Even the cream for the coffee was served hot. If you wanted cold water you had to ask for bottled water. I had read you shouldn't eat the raw vegetables in Kathmandu but 5 days into the trip I couldn't resist the artistic pile of colorful salad on my plate in a restaurant where the chefs all wore uniforms. I paid for succumbing to that temptation over the next 3 days as my digestive system cleared itself from both ends. Adam consulted with a local pharmacist and came back with 3 drugs for me to take and a thermometer. Most of the drugs could only be gotten through a prescription in the U.S. The thermometer was to check if I had a fever. If I did I was supposed to go to the hospital. I verified what the drugs were on the internet and whether taking them was safe with my doctor. I ended up not going to the festival Adam had come to Nepal for. It turned out the million of pilgrims didn't show up, only about 20,000. Between this and the open seats on the return flights to Bangkok and South Korea it was apparent Asians were not traveling as much as they normally would.

During the whole trip we were keeping up to date on the news of the virus. The death rate appeared to be about 3%, that is until Italy, where the medical services were overwhelmed, had hit a death rate to be about 7%. The countries we were in appeared to be faring no worse than the U.S., with the worst of them, South Korea, being about equal to the situation in the U.S. One thing was a real concern though. A woman with the virus in Daegu attended a large funeral as part of a large christian group with 40,000 worldwide followers and was a source for hundreds of infections in the city we were returning to. We knew our travel plans could be disrupted once we landed in Busan, South Korea and took a bus to Daegu.

Once we landed in Busan it was evident the South Koreans had really stepped up their game in preventing the further spread of the virus. Everyone was wearing a mask and we started receiving emergency text messages on our cell phones right after landing and the rest of my stay in South Korea to self isolate, wear masks, and take other precautions. Officials were asking several questions in customs, taking people's temperatures directly and with thermal cameras, and gallons of free hand sanitizer were available for use by anyone. Also the place looked empty. We decided to get on the bus

to Daegu ASAP. Once we arrived in Daegu on February 23rd, the streets and sidewalks were empty except for taxis and they actually had people in hazmat suits power washing sidewalks. We self isolated in the apartment and kept track of the virus situation until we took the bus back to Busan in 4 days for my return flight home. It became evident the government might decide to isolate Daegu and restrict what little travel was left in and out of the city as a way to prevent the spread of the virus, similar to what the Chinese did in Wuhan. In the U.S. it sounded like chaos. They had already started to quarantine groups of travelers but were also getting push back from states that didn't want people quarantined in their state. I knew I might not make it out of Daegu, let alone South Korea, or even out of Dallas. We elected to leave a day early, tour Busan, and get a hotel room. After arriving in Busan it was evident by the empty bus and trains that local people were limiting their travel. Adam decided to leave on the bus back to Daegu that night since the bus might no longer be an option the next day. We verified I had everything arranged to get from the hotel to the airport the next morning and I hugged Adam goodbye.

That night I pondered if I was going to be honest about my travel for any questions I was asked. I thought being honest was the best course to take. If I got stopped anywhere along my journey so be it. I didn't want to be the person who brought Covid-19 to the U.P. I thought the worst that could happen is I was stuck in Korea, probably going back to the apartment in Daegu, for a month or spending 14 days in quarantine somewhere near Dallas.

The next day I was checking in my bags at Japan Airlines and they asked me the usual question of if I had been in Wuhan in the last 14 days and I said no. Then they asked if I had been in Daegu in the last 14 days and I said yes. I was told I could not load my bags. Overnight Japan had restricted anyone who had been to Daegu in the last 14 days from landing in Japan, even if it was only as a layover for my flight to Dallas. They pointed to a sheet of paper written in english indicating the policy but the text only referenced the restriction related to Wuhan and nothing about Daegu. I took a picture of the paper with my cell phone. This is all they told me. They didn't give me any options to resolve my problem other than contacting my ticket agent at American Airlines, where I had booked the flights. Sitting in the airport with my laptop and cell phone I talked with the American Airlines representative and they said they had no indications of the travel restriction from Daegu and I would have to pay for booking new flights. This conversation went on for an hour before I decided to return to the check in counter and get more information. I was then told to visit the Japan Airlines ticket counter. Luckily the woman spoke some english and I tried to explain my situation to her. It took awhile but she ended up calling American Airlines and with her verifying the restriction status with the ticket agent on the phone I was able to get rerouted from Busan to Seoul, and then from Seoul to Dallas, and on to Chicago and Marquette. The flights were 2 days later and there was no extra cost to me but I would need a hotel room. I asked about compensation for the hotel room and was denied. I thought this was the best deal I could get and I took it. Besides, I had previously purchased travel insurance that was supposed to cover situations like this (eventually it didn't). I no longer had Adam to help me communicate with people in Korean. I went online and booked 2 more nights in the same hotel I just came from.

The hotel picked me up and took me back in giving me the same room I had just 3 hours before. They asked if I needed the room cleaned and I said I just needed some clean towels and the usual soap, shampoo, etc. It was still morning and I went down for the continental breakfast. I think they had some idea my travel was delayed related to the Covid virus. When I came back to the room there were bags of towels and a resupply of everything for 2 days, including water and juice for the refrigerator.

I decided to stay primarily in my room, buy some snacks, and limit myself to the continental breakfast and one dinner out each day. My hotel was located in an impressive industrial park, but I could see a convenience store and a few restaurants within walking distance. Eating alone in public in South Korea is taboo. They view anyone out eating alone in public as depressing (you have no friends or family) and are disgusted you would show your depression and shame in public. Kind of a 'no win' situation for me but I could still play the 'culturally ignorant foreigner' card.

Saturday morning I left Busan for Seoul. I would have to collect my bags in Seoul and take a metro train to Seoul's other airport some 15 miles away for the flight to Dallas. Luckily I could research the whole transfer ahead of time and was able to make the flight without incident. At the other airport I found a new friend. A robot about 4 feet tall spouting Covid virus precautions. My new little friend could answer verbal questions and provide directions, even escorting you to your gate if necessary. Pretty impressive.

Unlike the plane on the previous trips to and from Busan, Bangkok, and Kathmandu, the plane to Dallas was packed. You could see in people's eyes that everyone was really afraid someone on the flight might have the Covid virus, possibly the caucasion family with 3 screaming toddlers in the front of our section. Everyone was wearing a mask for the whole trip. I knew I wasn't out of the woods yet and this 22 hour flight might actually be my greatest exposure to the virus.

Once we landed in Dallas the line of passengers was split into 2 lines: a short line of foreigners coming to the U.S. for the first time and a long line of those with work or student visas and Americans returning to the states. Seeing this I felt lucky, like I had possibly taken one of the last flights out of South Korea to the U.S. No thermal cameras or temperature sensors were used by the American customs officials and the only question they asked was if I had been in Wuhan in the last 14 days. Then it was off to the baggage claim and out to the street. I was floored! The only indication of at least some curiosity was a final homeland security official holding a door open and asking "You were on the flight from Seoul, right?"

I took a shuttle bus to the hotel along with 6 flight crew members being dropped off at other hotels. The discussions were about flight changes and restrictions related to a decrease in passengers due to Covid. A couple of members had just come off a flight from England. One who was coughing during the entire ride said she didn't feel well. I thought "Great! All this way and I might Covid in Dallas". The next day, March 1st, I took the shuttle bus back to the airport along with more flight crews. Nobody wore a mask since I left the Dallas airport the night before. The same was true in Chicago and on the final leg of my journey back to Marquette.

Once in Marquette I got a ride home from the airport and put myself in quarantine for 14 days. It was tough. I stayed in an extra bedroom and only came out wearing a mask and gloves to get meals and to use the bathroom. Finally after 14 days I hugged my spouse for the first time after my return.

I haven't gotten sick and to this date I have never been tested for exposure to the virus. My wife needed surgery in May and tested negative at that time. Looking back it was readily apparent how well prepared and unified in purpose the Koreans were in stemming the pandemic. My son and his girlfriend, both teachers, were told to stay home until May. Comparing the infection rates of the U.S. and South Korea, it was apparent how beneficial the Korean's preparations had paid off. By August 1st, Covid deaths in South Korea were 301 out of a population of 51.6 million or about .0006%. Covid deaths in the U.S. were

156,000 out of a population of about 330 million or about 5%. Sources: Wikipedia and The New York Times. Amazing.