

## Tales of COVID avoidance - success and woe



It seemed such a really good idea at the time. Our daughter and family live in Guernsey, and Guernsey is a beautiful island and absolutely COVID free. So why don't we leave England before Christmas for the duration of this awful pandemic? After all we haven't had any holidays this year.

We knew we would have to self-isolate on arrival, but no problem. It would mean renting a small bungalow for a couple of weeks, but surely that wouldn't be too difficult?

### Problem no 1

Everyone has the same idea pre-Christmas. Rentals are like gold dust, expensive, and very hard to find! But eventually we succeed, and by our departure date of 8<sup>th</sup> December we have organised a delightful if expensive bungalow; 9 days with our beloved family; and then a further month in an even more expensive (because too large) granite cottage – ex cowshed, we are informed!

### Problem no 2

We only have a smallish car and by the time we have filled it with food; clothing; Christmas presents; linen; jigsaw puzzles and DVDs; sets of outdoor clothing for all eventualities, and much more, there isn't any room for us – so a fairly major repack is required.

The journey starts at Portsmouth and takes seven hours. We put the house to bed and depart at an ungodly hour in the middle of the night. The ferry journey is uneventful, but I have trouble finding my travel tracker form and we have to go to the back of the queue. On arrival we are given a swab test and drive off the ferry after being warned that if we even so much as step outside the front door it will cost us a £10,000 fine!

### Problem no 3

We know exactly where the bungalow is – located on the coast on the other side of the island. We know the way like the back of our hands of course, having visited Guernsey many times. But in high spirits we decide to use our built-in Satnav, and there is a problem. We were delighted to find out that the Satnav knew all about Guernsey – but too late we discovered that it only knew it to the POSTCODE level, not the ROAD level. And Guernsey is an absolute maze of narrow winding lanes with high granite-edged banks (known as Guernsey grazers); no streetlights, etc. Think Devon lanes in a rush hour! And Satnavs tend to take the shortest path. Oh boy! We were led a merry unlit dance and ended up in pitch darkness on an unlit and busy coastal road, where we needed to reverse – and the car so stacked up that we cannot see anything behind. We had a map of course – on the internet – but we had no mobile internet access. An emergency call to our daughter on our pay as you go phones, with only a few pence left, was our saviour. We were soon ensconced in our bungalow, and there we were, stuck for 14 days. Deeply grateful for jigsaws; DVDs; books and pre-planned food!

On 23<sup>rd</sup> December we were released on presentation of a second negative test and hurtled around to our daughter for those long-overdue and much missed family hugs. Life was completely normal! No masks; no social separation; no hand sanitising. The Christmas and New Year period was great. We sadly took our departure on New Year's Eve and transferred all our chattels yet again to our third place of residence, just a few minutes away. So from 1<sup>st</sup> January all was sweetness and light – but it wasn't to last. Damocles' sword was being honed.

### Problem no 4

We decided that it would be great to stay on for even longer. Why not? Things were awful in the UK. We could negotiate a fourth move to yet another rental hiring. And we could extend our insurance up to 95 days. Great!! But there was a snag - a catch better than Catch 22. If we had wanted to extend our insurance we could of course do so – no problem – just a small extra premium, but we needed to do so BEFORE leaving the UK....(Dohhh!) Try as we might it was impossible to get that extra cover. So we extended up to our current maximum of 65 days allowance – 10<sup>th</sup> February, even though it meant moving to location #4 for ten days. Everything was fine until The States of Guernsey – COVID-clear, so we smugly thought – suddenly detected four cases of completely unknown origin at 16:30 on Day 1. Oh dear!

### Problem no 5

The States of Guernsey reacted with creditable speed. At 06:30 on Day 2 their "COVID ready" contingency plan sprang into action. At 08:00 it was both on BBC Radio Guernsey and a text on everyone's phone. At 12:00 noon the Chief Executive made an announcement. Complete lockdown (again!) with immediate effect. Queues at supermarkets; everyone now having to wear masks, even outdoors. Two hours max exercise. All public venues closed; schools all closed; no pubs, restaurants or shops open and no bubbling. We decided to abandon our hired cottage and move back in with our daughter.

Within 48 hours the number of contacts and positive cases started to escalate. Was 4 and now a few days later up to 160!

### Problem no 6

So far so good. We continue as normal. Got lots of food and happy to go out walking every day for a couple of hours. What's not to like?? Wait for that sword of Damocles, just being carefully positioned above our heads! We had removed all of our belongings from our rented cottage and the car was once again totally stuffed with kit.

## Problem no 7

We are dining after a relaxing day at our daughter's house (it is only 8 minutes on foot away from our rental, via a charming valley and lots of running water.) The phone rings for my daughter – here comes that sword of Damocles. “Hello. It is contact tracing here. Your son was at a choir meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> January, and one of the choir members has tested positive. So he needs to isolate for another six days.....”

Disaster! - Family conference. The little lad is only seven so the whole family will isolate with him. We realise that we too are now also possible contacts. We should either go back to our rented cottage again to socially isolate for six days or stay with our family. No contest! We have enough food so can just hunker down – but this wasn't what we came for. Pride comes before a fall! Still – we can help with the home schooling and there is plenty of time to help organise and run a U3A quiz by Zoom as well.

We decide to cut our Guernsey stay short by a couple of days. The ferry is rebooked for Monday 8<sup>th</sup> February. We manage to secure a cabin for the 12 hour overnight trip to Portsmouth. But a second sword is being carefully positioned above us.

## Problem no 8

We receive a text message from Condor Ferries. “Every traveller using Condor must present proof of a negative swab COVID test taken within the preceding 72 hours”. So we now need to obtain our tests and get them to the Pathology lab at the hospital (and back) within the 72 hour slot. But our ferry departs at 22:00 on Monday 8<sup>th</sup> and 72 hours previously takes us back to 22:00 on Friday 5<sup>th</sup>. The observant will note that there is then a weekend coming up. Requests to the Elizabeth hospital for a test are met with a blank refusal: they are working flat out 18 hours a day testing all arrivals to the island. Three local GPs are approached but tell us to go away because we are not registered with them. Eventually one calls back and tells us that they made a mistake. Of course we can have a test – just walk in, and it will only cost us £97 each (sadly there is no NHS in Guernsey, and no agreement with the UK). But there is yet another snag.

## Problem no 9

The last time we can get a test at the GP's clinic is 11:10 on Friday 5<sup>th</sup>. But this is some hours too early for a valid 72 hour slot. And even if we can swing that one with Condor, what happens if the result doesn't come back inside the targeted 48 hours??

Next day. Success at last! We can now get a test on Saturday morning. But we still need the result back by Monday evening if we aren't to be refused boarding. Might just get there by the skin of our teeth.

## Problem no 10

Here comes that old sword again! Just as we are breathing a sigh of relief, the States of Guernsey advise us that someone who attended the Festival of Dance which ran from 19<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> January has been declared positive. The Festival of Dance is BIG in Guernsey – hundreds of children are involved and is an annual event held at the Beau Sejour Centre. So over the four days many hundreds of children, their parents and friends will have been present in the theatre. Guess what? Our granddaughter and my wife, Judith, were there on 22<sup>nd</sup>....

So – now the whole family has to self-isolate until Friday 5<sup>th</sup> February. As Judith muttered disconsolately – they might as well have put all 62,500 islanders into lockdown and be done with it!! Somehow the prospect of returning to Felbridge on 8<sup>th</sup> February seems increasingly attractive.

Watch this space for a further update.

**John Wells**