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### One year in, these grounded frequent fliers want back up in the air

By Jena McGregor

*IdeaWorksCompany contributed information to this article - - see italics.*

*Zoom calls replace seat 1A, international cuisine and the quiet productivity of being at 40,000 feet. Some hardened road warriors fear business travel will never return to its platinum era.*

In the 2009 movie “Up in the Air,” George Clooney plays a downsizing expert who jets around the country firing people before he gets called off the road for a cost-cutting alternative: terminating clients’ employees by videoconference.

Now, as the pandemic lumbers toward its one-year milestone, Hollywood’s eerie preview of our Zoom-driven lives has become a distinct reality for the business world’s army of grounded road warriors, even if their day-to-day work isn’t the brutal task of firing people.

Gone are the quiet, uninterrupted hours flying transcontinental first class. Put on hold are the celebrations of reaching mileage milestones at 40,000 feet. Over — at least for now — are the trade show parties and winter visits to warm locales.

Business travelers will return to the skies — but whether the market ever quite recovers to 2019 levels is in doubt. Industry groups predict business travel will bounce back after four years — but some experts believe the market could face a permanent 20 to 30 percent drop as workplaces grow habituated to ever-improving video meeting technology and CFOs grow accustomed to the cost savings.

***“We are now going on a year where many corporations have cut business travel almost completely,” said Jay Sorensen, president of IdeaWorks, an aviation industry consulting firm. “That’s never happened before. Any time you reduce travel for that length of time, it has staying power.”***

***International business travel is most at risk, Sorensen said, as outbreaks have made border-shutting more common. “I sense this is an end of an era in terms of the ease and cheapness of long-haul travel,” he said.***

What that means for the road warrior’s experience isn’t yet clear. Some worry, for instance, that a structural shift in business travel could reduce airline networks, making it harder to manage canceled flights and find nonstop routes. “You’re not going to have as much point-to-point traffic,” said aviation consultant Michael Boyd.

But travelers who counted themselves as road warriors say Zoom will never fully replace all the travel they once did, and they're still eager to get back up in the air. Below, what four road warriors miss most about life on the road, how they've adjusted to their lives at home, and what they believe will be different if they return full-time to the skies.

### **Jeffrey Miller, Atlanta, 60**

It was somewhere over Boston around the holidays in 2016 that Jeffrey Miller hit 2 million miles on Delta Air Lines. The supply chain consultant was returning to Atlanta from Düsseldorf with the same flight crew from his outbound flight, and he was touched they'd remembered the milestone. "They get on the PA, and they say we want to celebrate, and people applaud," he recalled.

The crew had even bought him gifts from the German Christmas markets they had visited during their layover. "These folks had purchased a little bag of cookies for me and a tube of hand cream for my wife because she's been a partner in all this," said Miller, who before the pandemic said he was on the road at least half the time, often flying back and forth to Europe and Asia.

The son of a Pan American pilot and a flight attendant, Miller worries business travel will never return to the same levels. "You wonder, will it ever get back to the ease of movement that we had of coming in and out of countries? The idea that you literally could walk up to a map and just get on the airplane and go someplace without much of care? This feels different."

Miller has already seen some of the manufacturers he works with on supply chain logistics replace site visits with augmented reality technology. And Zoom, of course, has replaced many business meetings — Miller hasn't flown for work in a year. While he and others are getting more skilled at picking up cultural cues across a screen, he said, it can be more challenging to make out accents over video calls, gauge body language and build connections without simultaneous eye contact.

"There's no such thing as mutual, bidirectional eye contact in a Web meeting — full stop. There's no way that works unless the camera was a dot in the middle of the monitor."

Much to his family's chagrin, he's also had to shift his bedtime to 8 or 9 p.m., he said, for sporadic 2 or 3 a.m. wake-up calls to make virtual meetings in Europe. "The meeting you would have flown into Paris for is still going to happen at 9 a.m." in Europe

For Miller, the biggest loss is no longer getting to experience the world — the side trip to tour a historic library in Rio de Janeiro, returning to Sentosa Island in Singapore and seeing how much it had changed, visits to old churches in Latvia that had survived World War II.

“This is life-changing, and it is a loss. I don’t want to overstate it — it certainly has no bearing at all on the tragedy that has caused it,” Miller said, noting he doesn’t miss the exhaustion of business travel. But it’s also been a big adjustment. “I’m trying to avoid going through Kübler-Ross’s stages [of grief]. Sadly, I don’t see how this returns.”

### **Denise Cushman, Chicago, 48**

It’s the time to herself that Denise Cushman misses most. The Chicago-based single mom of two teens, Cushman’s travel was not usually glamorous — she flew Southwest to state capitals such as Indianapolis for her job as an account executive selling software to state governments and stayed in Marriott chains.

But it carved out time for her to read self-help books at 40,000 feet, have a quiet glass of wine in the hotel bath, and catch up on mindless Netflix shows and work email.

“Before, if I had a night or two at the hotel, I don’t have to clean up, I don’t have to cook, and now it’s like, ‘Oh, my God, I have not had a full 24-hour period alone in a year,’ ” said Cushman, who would travel a couple nights a week for three weeks of the month (her mom stayed with her teens). “It all just came to a screeching halt.”

She still has her roller bag in her closet packed with a spare bag of toiletries, travel pajamas and her favorite dress shoes. It remained packed to help smooth her weekends, which meant prepping for the week ahead — all the grocery shopping and meal planning, writing out kids’ activities on the kitchen whiteboard, coordinating everyone’s schedules.

“I had everything ready to go because I was always on the go. It was who I was. It was what I did,” said Cushman. “It was my normal routine. And honestly, a year later, I don’t have a normal routine.”

Cushman says “prospecting” and cold-calling new clients has been hard because people are rarely available at their office numbers, and some clients in state governments were not accustomed to video conferencing early in the pandemic.

Selling over video chats makes it harder to get people’s complete attention and eliminates the time spent getting to know people while waiting for the elevator or standing in line to buy a cup of coffee. “There isn’t really time on the Zoom call for those side conversations,” she said. Cushman switched companies early this year, after feeling more distant from her previous company, whose employees are all based in Vancouver.

She didn't realize how much she missed the road until after she got sick with covid-19 in December and was sequestered from family and friends for days. "I started thinking, like a month or so ago, what is wrong with me?" she said. "I was just in a fog. I'm a super-outgoing person and I am always down for fun. But I was like, 'I don't want to do anything, leave me alone.' "

### **Shaun Bagai, Half Moon Bay, Calif., 43**

When Shaun Bagai was in his 30s, he set a goal: Fly a million miles by age 40. He ended up doing it by 35, and by 2019 he was flying more than 250,000 miles a year and had reached an invite-only, unpublished frequent-flier status on United Airlines known as "Global Services."

"It's kind of a secret society in that sense," said Bagai, the CEO of RenovoRX, which develops cancer treatments.

One of the perks Bagai misses most is early boarding, "because I can get in, kick my shoes off and get about a half-hour of work done in my seat before the plane even takes off." That laser focus on productivity — whether on the ground waiting for a flight to take off, in the air for uninterrupted hours on end, or working late nights in hotel lounges reserved for loyalty members — is much harder to come by now.

"One of the things I love about travel is being up in the plane, getting four to 12 hours without emails bouncing in and without my phone ringing," he said.

Early on in the pandemic, Bagai worked mostly remotely, glad he could spend more time with his 4-year-old twins. But he began going into the office by himself once allowed, or even worked on the patio of the Ritz Carlton at Half Moon Bay near his home. "You get distracted by the house; it's harder to get that creative space to think strategically," Bagai said.

He's also begun traveling a little again, flying twice to Belgium and making a few domestic trips since last March. A new challenge, he said, is getting meals on the road with many airport restaurants closed and less meal service on flights.

But that's not stopping him. "I've never hesitated to jump on a plane across the world for a half-an-hour meeting if I need to," he said, comparing his past mileage aspirations to Clooney's character in "Up in the Air."

"The whole premise of the movie was trying to change the face-to-face firing of people to video calls, and it didn't work," Bagai said. "I think we're trying the same thing. As soon as they open the air up again, people like me who see the value of flying will jump back in the plane very quickly."

## **Brian Cail, Louisville, 48**

The last international flight Brian Cail took was a flight home from Barcelona in February, when he spent over an hour in customs getting questioned by a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention representative after his passport showed he had just been to China. That trip to Shanghai, he said, “went from operating normally when I landed three days earlier to everybody wearing Tyvek suits” at the airport and starting to wear masks “overnight.”

Since then, Cail said, the last year has marked “the most days in a row I’ve ever been home since I’ve been married.” A vice president of sales and marketing for a Japanese chemical company, Cail spent at least 60 percent of the year on the road before the pandemic, often traveling overseas and racking up a quarter-million miles a year.

While it’s been nice to be home, Cail says — it’s his daughter’s senior year — he’s also craving getting back on the road, writing on a frequent flier chat board in February that “I cannot wait for restart of business travel even if I have to sit in seat 42B for 15 hours.”

Not being in the same room as his global colleagues and customers just isn’t the same, he said: Relationships get built “when you walk down the hallway to the conference room ... or you pass a room and there’s a poster hanging on the wall of some new project,” he said. “In a Zoom meeting, the conversation tends to be confined.”

In video calls, he said, people can be more relaxed, and you might get a glimpse of their home that reveals a hobby or interest that could help with making connections. But those benefits are outweighed by the challenges of building new relationships, the lack of nonverbal communication that happens at the table, and the elimination of side conversations had over five-minute breaks during which clients share their real needs.

Another risk with overseas clients can be misreading the hierarchy of a client’s team, which is more apparent when meetings are in person, and the difficulty of getting truly comprehensive translations. “What I find often is there’s a five-minute conversation and you get a 30-second translation back to English. The nuance is missed.”

He also misses the restaurants in Asia — the dumplings in Shanghai, or the sushi in Japan — and prefers not to eat those cuisines at home. “Once you’ve had it from the best — the original place — everything else just doesn’t taste the same,” he said.

Cail, who is also a member of Global Services, was hesitant to talk about the perks the program offers (“none of us want it ruined”), but he said he was grateful for the assistance with connections and getting through security fast when it counted most. While his status has been extended, he does question whether airlines might cut back on direct international flights or cater more to leisure travelers if they make up a greater share of profits.

But even if that balance shifts, he'll be back on the road as soon as possible. "Do I miss the days of 2019 and before? Absolutely. But if the choice was all those perks go away, but you can still travel and see people face to face and go places, sign me up."