



LOST IN TRANSITION (holiday edition)



CFlisi Just now · 10 min read ★



by C.Flisi

This year's Covid Christmas is the antithesis of a dream vacation, but it won't be as negative as my holiday from hell 10 years ago. That was an unforgettable experience, spent alone,

trapped between crowded airports and empty hotels in a snowstorm, with my family an ocean away.

The nightmare began on December 22. Our far-flung family had decided to vacation in Turks and Caicos for the holidays. My sons and husband — traveling from different locations — were already there, and I was supposed to join them, flying from our home in Milan, Italy, to Zurich, then Miami, then Turks. Long but feasible.

The first premonition came on December 21. I was out doing last minute errands and it started to snow. A lot of snow by mid-afternoon. A LOT. Lombardia isn't prepared for sudden heavy snowstorms, so I checked online. Sites for my carrier, Swiss Airlines, and Malpensa Airport claimed that everything was operating normally. Roads were problematic, but an underground train would be taking me to Malpensa and the train station was a short walk from my home. What could go wrong?

I awoke early on December 23 to a blur of white outside. I decided to take the 7:30 am train instead of the 8 am because, well, with all the snow, the trains *might* be delayed. Mine was, by 20 minutes, and was packed because the previous train had been cancelled, and the next two trains as well. The 10-minute trip took half an hour. When we arrived at the airport, there was a huge line to get up the escalator and an even bigger crowd staring at the departures screen. I headed straight for Swiss Air check-in. Where I saw . . . nobody official. Just passengers sitting around on chairs, on the floor, reading,

sleeping, drinking. But no line and no check-in. An airport employee told me that the airport was closed for the morning and might be open later, but no guarantees. So all the information from websites the previous evening was fake news.

Since there was no one at check-in, I spent two hours trying to call Swiss. When someone finally answered, I was told that all their flights were cancelled today and to come back tomorrow. I wastentatively booked on the same flight next day on standby.

En route back to the train station, I queried an agent walking by. He shrugged that the airport staff didn't know if/when the airport would be open again, and urged me to go to Zurich by train because that airport was open and operating normally. (The Swiss are more prepared for snow and are more prepared period).

When I checked later, turns out the only seats available on the flight from Zurich to Miami next day were standby. I decided there was no point in spending my own money to travel to Zurich and pay for a hotel there only to find that the flight was full. Plus, the Swiss agent said that all hotels in Zurich were fully booked because of the weather.

I returned home to a cold, empty apartment. Set up my computer in the one room where the heating still worked, and saw that Swiss had no guaranteed seats from Zurich to Miami till December 25. Tried calling the airline in Italy but no answer, so I wound up calling their number in Switzerland, which, naturally, was more efficient in responding. After a long

conversation, I was left with standby to Zurich on December 23 and standby to Miami on December 24.

Nothing could be done about the flight from Miami to Turks until (unless) I actually arrived in Miami, and that was no small thing. What would be the point of arriving there and not being able to continue on to Turks? In that case it would be better to request a refund from Swiss and just stay here. At the airport and on the phone, Swiss was encouraging travelers to do just that, showing how optimistic they were.

Meanwhile it snowed all day Tuesday and the forecast called for more snow next day. Trying to decide what to do, I checked online for descriptions of the situation at Malpensa. The write-up in *Corriere della Sera* (Italy's most important daily) might have been describing a parallel universe. The reporter had been nowhere near Malpensa, he had merely regurgitated what the airport public relations officers had fed him, i.e., things were wonderful and under control. More fake news, since the airport had been chaos — understaffed, overcrowded, underserviced, no food — all day.

On Wednesday December 23, I arrived at the airport at 7:30 am, aiming for the 10 am flight to Zurich. That should have given me plenty of time, except for 150 travelers in line ahead of me, some of whom had been at Malpensa for 48 hours straight. You wouldn't call them a "line"; they were a crush of people, with tempers short, exchanges tense, ethnic barbs, and worst of all only ONE agent at the counter trying to cope with this unhappy and murderously-minded mob.

I was caught among three groups of travellers, a single Danish woman trying to get to Copenhagen, and two sets of families of four, one trying to get to New York and the other to Paris, all via Zurich. Snowstorms make for strange routings. The NY-bound family eventually opted for reimbursement and skiing in Italy instead. The family headed for Paris-Euro Disney made it onto the 10 am flight to Zurich. On the one hand, I could empathize: the kids were tiny toddlers. On the other, their itinerary was not as complicated as mine. I was three places behind the father and they filled the plane's last seats.

The beleaguered agent, when I was finally in front of her, offered me a seat on the next available flight. After a moment's hesitation (might I wind up stuck in Zurich? In Miami?), I accepted, and wound up with an evening departure. By 8:30 pm I was checking in at the Zurich Airport Hilton, a quintessential business hotel five minutes by shuttle bus from the airport, which seemed a tabernacle of peace and solitude compared to Malpensa. On the bus from the plane to the terminal, passengers were instructed what luggage line held our bags. At the luggage line an electronic board announced how many minutes before our bags would be coming out. My bag arrived exactly one minute after the first suitcases appeared. That efficiency was the good news.

However, the Swiss agent who gave me my hotel and meal vouchers cautioned me that the Christmas Eve flight to Miami was full in every class. She marked my standby top priority for the waiting list, and she pre-issued me a boarding pass so I wouldn't have to show up at the crack of dawn to better my

chances of making the flight. It all depended on circumstances out of my control: who arrives late, whose documents fail US requisites (this happens at least once a day), who doesn't show. My standby status would not be final until half an hour before flight departure.

Christmas Eve began with a registered wakeup call around 8 am. The robot spoke German so who knows what was said. I looked around the bland, brown boring corporate bedroom and felt grateful. The room was warm. The Internet connection worked. The vouchers weren't questioned. Granted, my shoulders were sore. I'd carried my suitcase over the snowy unplowed road to the train station three times in 30 hours. Plus the escalator at Malpensa had been out of service two times out of three, so I'd carried the bags up two flights of stairs twice. Plus the elevator at home broke once, so I had carried my bags (suitcase and computer carry-on) up and down six flights of stairs.

Now I headed back to Zurich Airport, where elevators, escalators, airport shuttles were all functioning. The line for baggage check-in was very smooth. The line for security was nonexistent. Fact is, no one appears to travel in Switzerland on the day before Christmas. I was hopeful: my chances of boarding the Miami flight looked good. So you can imagine how I felt when five Swissair employees whisked past me at check-in to claim the last five seats available, including the jump seat that I would gladly have accepted. And that was that. Back to the Hilton to celebrate Christmas Eve on my own.

The staff at the Hilton must have taken pity on me. They upgraded my room to their executive suite, just as bland, brown, and boring as my previous room, but much bigger. I would have preferred free unlimited Internet (not offered back then) to having a TV above the bathtub and a swivel chair for the desk, but I appreciated the gesture.

The hotel also invited me to its Christmas Eve buffet dinner. This was sort of a big deal because my meal voucher was valued at 20 Swiss francs and the buffet was priced at 89 Swiss francs. Was it worth the price? Probably not but it beat the average airport meal by a long shot. The dining room was not half full and most of the diners seemed to be locals. The “solitary stranded” like me were very few. There had been about 50 of us in the hotel the night before, but only a handful remained.

On Christmas morning, Santa brought me a viable boarding pass for Miami. I was the very first person to board the plane. Never mind that the food was inedible. I had ordered a low salt meal but realized that the Christmas Day menu might be better than usual so asked to change. No, sorry, that wasn't possible. Probably just as well.

Uncomfortable economy seat. Terrible meal. Mediocre film choices. And then we landed in Miami, where the air slaps you with a warm and humid shock after the freezing temperatures of Europe. Didn't feel like Christmas at all.

I took a taxi to the Sanctuary on South Beach, a trendy hotel chosen by my sons to assuage my holiday blues for two nights.

Yes, two, because the first available flight from Miami to Turks was on December 27. I saw immediately that the hotel's customers and staff were young, tall, skinny, and stylish, while I was none of the above. My suite had free fast Internet but no place for the computer, a great sofa for reading, but no reading light, a kitchen area with stove and fridge but no silverware, pots, pans, or dishes. The room smelled musty and dank. The housekeeping left much to be desired. No gym, because all these tall, skinny people were born fit so they didn't need to work out.

So I went to bed. Merry Christmas.

Next morning, December 26, Santo Stefano in my home country of Italy, Boxing Day for the Brits, and a day signifying absolutely nothing in the US, I dressed, put on my backpack, pulled out a map, and was off to see

SoBe. Not the sights, but the action, window shopping mostly. Walked and browsed for most of the day. Stopped at Jerry's Deli on Collins, where I eyed a bagel with turkey for \$16.95. I didn't have a lot of US cash on hand, so I threw myself on the mercy of the deli counter man. He sold me a bagel and a ¼ lb. of turkey, and threw in coleslaw and a pickle . . . for \$5.95. This was my first encounter with the Christmas spirit, and in a Jewish deli!

The second encounter was along the shopping promenade on Lincoln (Lincoln and Collins are the two main drags of SoBe). I struck up a conversation with an Hispanic woman walking a tiny, friendly Chihuahua-Yorkshire mix. We chatted amiably as

we walked in the sunlight dappled through the palms and parted as friends, though we never exchanged names. Her dog's name was Benny though.

The third holiday encounter was with a 30-something busker selling his straw weavings on Lincoln. I stopped to ask the price of a few items, then decided they were too bulky and fragile to pack in a suitcase. The weaver thrust a small straw bird into my hand "to compensate for my lost Christmas." I treasured that little gift for more than a decade.

Back to the Sanctuary, with its mildew smell. The lobby and pool area were packed, since this was Saturday night, but I retreated to my room: wrong age, wrong attire, wrong mindset. Duh. Turns out there had been an attempted terrorist bombing on Christmas, which fortunately failed but ensured that airport procedures would be even more protracted from now on.

Sunday December 27 was the day of my flight to Turks. Journey's end at last. I didn't sleep the night before, as my mind kept running over everything that could go wrong. Up at 6 am, in the hotel lobby early to check out. I looked for the receptionist who had promised me a cup of coffee despite the early hour. But she didn't show.

The taxi driver instead was on time. He complained that business was slow but Miami Airport was crowded. Long check-in line, long line for bag surrender, long line for security. The flight itself was uneventful, blue skies, calm sea. I took a taxi from the small airport to the hotel, where no one was waiting

for me because my family wasn't sure what flight I would be on. So to say my arrival was anticlimactic would be the ultimate understatement. I was happy to see my husband and sons when we eventually crossed paths at lunchtime, but that didn't erase the preceding six days of limbo.

I vowed that from now, no travel during the holidays unless the destination was one I personally wanted to visit. Turks and Caicos was not on that list. Being there was the fulfillment of an idea, but not an embracing reality. Home always is, regardless of how we define it. So this Covid Christmas, spent with family members — all healthy — in the reality of home, might wind up being one of our best holidays ever.

[Holidays](#)

[Christmas](#)

[Vacations](#)

[Airline Flights](#)

[Covid 19](#)

[About](#)

[Help](#)

[Legal](#)