

3-31-2021

Isolated Destination: Life in Western Australia in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Cecilia Leong-Salobir
cleongsalobir@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions>

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Recommended Citation

Leong-Salobir, Cecilia (2021) "Isolated Destination: Life in Western Australia in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 24: No. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25035/visions.24.01.09>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol24/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Visions in Leisure and Business* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

**ISOLATED DESTINATION: LIFE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA IN THE TIME OF
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Cecilia Leong-Salobir, PhD

Honorary Research Fellow

University of Western Australia

Crawley, Australia

cleongsalobir@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Western Australia, the largest state covering a third of the landmass of Australia has escaped much of the morbidity and deaths of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was made possible due to its draconian measures in keeping the virus at bay through interstate and border closures and high vaccination rates. Domestic tourism has flourished as West Australians, unable to travel outside the state spend their dollars on visiting local attractions. Restaurants, cafes, bars and fast food outlets also do a roaring trade for the same reason.

KEY WORDS: Western Australia, COVID-19, domestic tourism, dining out, border closures

INTRODUCTION

As we live through the pandemic with restrictions of global movements of people in commerce and leisure, the economy of the entire world has been hit hard. Australia, with its controls stricter than other countries, was not spared. The tourism industry and international student higher education are the two sectors most severely impacted by the pandemic. At the state level, one state, Western Australia, has, to date, escaped much of the ravages of COVID-19. In the first two years of the pandemic, a healthy workforce and with no restrictions on dining out meant that many restaurateurs and café owners did a roaring trade.

Australia's harsh border restrictions dating from the early decades of nationhood against the Chinese to the current ban on boat arrivals of asylum seekers became the hallmark of controlling COVID-19. Families and loved ones faced long periods of separation when caught outside state and national borders. Through various governments of the two major political parties, the nation has put in place draconian asylum seeker policies. Historically, the ideology is informed by notions of protecting the "white" nation and protecting the continent's pristine environment against contagion and disease (Carrington, 2006).

Australia, together with New Zealand, are the only nations during the pandemic that has disallowed their own citizens from coming home. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced on 27 April 2021 that Australian citizens in India were refused entry into the country. Penalty for "illegal" arrivals faced a five-year jail sentence and a US\$35,000

(A\$50,000) fine.¹ National borders were clamped down at both federal and state levels, with the latter opening and shutting as the number of COVID-19 cases fluctuated.

While national border controls are administered by the federal government, the six states and two territories have jurisdiction on interstate travel. Even before the pandemic was declared on 11 March 2020 by the World Health Organization, Australia denied entry to foreign visitors who had been in China. The United States, Russia, Japan, Pakistan and Italy other countries took similar stances.²

The differences in handling the pandemic exercised by each state premier are stark; some measures are in direct contradiction to the federal government's (a conservative coalition government). In the main, the state conservative governments are more likely to subscribe to the strategy of less restrictions and of "living with the crisis", guided by neo-liberal principles. Western Australia, seen by most as a renegade state has adopted the most stringent initiatives to control the spread of the virus.

From the start, Premier Mark McGowan of the left-leaning Australian Labor Party, has enforced uncompromising restrictions in keeping COVID-19 out of the state. At the time of writing, in the third year of the pandemic, Western Australia is closed to every other Australian state. Western Australia, with a population of 2.6 million, is the size of Western Europe, at 2.5 million sq km. A measure of the "go hard, go early" approach when COVID-19 cases are confirmed was on 23 December 2021 when a single case was detected, mandatory mask wearing kicked in. Mask wearing until then was largely unseen in the state.

¹(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/01/australias-ban-on-travellers-returning-from-india-due-to-covid-crisis-may-be-unlawful>, accessed 30 January 2022).

² (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51338899>, accessed 29 January 2022)

The previously planned opening of the state for 5 February 2021 was rescinded with the outbreak of the Omicron variant of COVID-19. Currently there are 509 cases in the community. Vaccination rates are high, 99 percent for first dose and 95 percent for second dose and 51 percent for the third dose (Figures at the time of writing).³ As elsewhere the cohort of antivaxxers, though small in numbers, exists in the state. They are variously represented among the “mung bean people” (a derogatory term to describe those who opt for a back to nature alternative lifestyle) in the south west of the state as well as Fremantle and in small pockets among the general population. Their street protests are generally shouted down by the majority who back vaccination.

Disparagingly called the hermit kingdom or North Korea by other Australians for its tough interstate borders, the state has had minimal number of cases of the virus. It helps that its capital, Perth, after Honolulu, is the most isolated city in the world. The state, with its huge area, remoteness from other metropolises and a rich mineral resource industry has been compared to the US state of Texas or to the Canadian province of Alberta.

TOURISM

The state’s tourism sector supports 30,000 tourism-related businesses and 100,900 jobs generating US\$ 7671279193 (A\$11 billion) from tourists in 2019).⁴ The main tourist spots are in Margaret River and the south west; Exmouth and the Coral Coast; Broome & the North West; Esperance & the Golden Outback.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/MarkMcGowanMP> (accessed 14 February 2022).

⁴ (<https://www.tourism.wa.gov.au/About-us/Our-organisation/Pages/Our-role.aspx#/>), accessed 29 January 2022.

While the hospitality industry on the eastern seaboard endured declining patronage and even closures, most eateries are packed with domestic tourists from within Western Australia.

With no opportunity for interstate or international travel, West Australians spend their tourist dollars in local destinations and dine out more. A case in point is Cape Lavender Teahouse, (<https://lavenderonline.com.au>) located in Yallingup, a coastal town famous for its beaches, world-class surf and ancient caves. In the two years of the pandemic the teahouse has not missed a beat. As Cape Lavender Teahouse owner, Bev Ainsworth, puts it:

“The locked borders have provided an ideal and safe environment, free from community transmission. This has allowed for constant domestic state-wide tourism. People have had very little interruption from ongoing lockdowns as in the eastern states. Business here in the southwest has totally benefited from the political choices that have been made. Our business has seen ongoing success during this time. People have frequented Cape Lavender repeatedly with the reassurance that they were safe and in a COVID-free environment. It has seen bumper numbers time and again for the past two years. This has not been the case in the eastern states. We have felt so much for the businesses that have not been able to trade and operate on the east coast. A terrible situation for them. Fortunately we have not had to endure the same emotional and financial pain (author’s conversation with Bev Ainsworth, 30 January 2022)”

Still, the falling numbers of backpackers and international students due to the pandemic have affected staffing levels in restaurants and other food outlets. These two groups traditionally work in in the food industry and fruit picking. Some restaurants have had to reduce opening

hours. As well, there have been tensions from the tourism industry in the other states as well as from the aviation sector.

Margy Osmond, the chief executive officer of the Tourism and Transport Forum (a national organisation) points out those state governments should commit to open borders soon. She explains that in order to attract international tourists again, those tourists need to plan not only visiting one state but other states too. She states that for those in-bound tourists to Australia, “we need certainty around those borders for people to be planning those long-distance trips and for airlines to make those capacities possible”.⁵ She notes that while domestic tourism is doing well in Western Australia, localised tourists do not spend as much as international visitors. Osmond adds that “uncertainty is death” (as in when borders will open), adding that the state’s closed borders affects other sectors too, including the movement of agricultural produce and aviation capacity.⁶

Indeed, Alan Joyce, chief executive of the national carrier, Qantas, has been critical of the Western Australian government for keeping borders shut. Last year, in agitating for the state borders to open he said, “I think it would be a terrible shame that, when we got to Christmas in New South Wales, you could go visit your relatives in London but not your relatives in Perth”⁷ When the planned-for opening of borders for the fifth February was scrapped, Joyce stated that the airline had 20,000 people booked to fly in the first week of the border reopening, who then had their flights cancelled.⁸

⁵ (<https://www.hit.com.au/story/tourism-industry-p pressures-states-to-follow-nsw-and-victoria-s-example-on-border-reopening-186835>, accessed 29 January 2022).

⁶ (“The Drum”, ABC TV, 21 January 2022)

⁷ <https://www.afr.com/companies/transport/alan-joyce-warns-wa-on-travel-plan-20210826-p58m2p>, accessed 30 January 2022)

⁸ (<https://www.perthnow.com.au/travel/senior-health-experts-qantas-join-line-of-critics-to-controversial-wa-hard-border-c-5424753>, accessed 30 January 2022).

Australia as an international tourist destination brings in US\$ 106,003,130,674 (A\$152 billion) to the economy, supporting 300,000 businesses and 600,000 jobs.⁹ Across the country state tourism bureaus were granted government funding for aiding businesses affected by the pandemic. In Western Australia, A\$16.8 million was offered by the WA Tourism and Travel Agent Support Fund and the Federal Government in August 2021. Each business impacted by COVID-19 received between US\$1403 (A\$2000) to US\$7013 (A\$10,000). The funding program distributed to businesses operating in accommodation, tourism attraction and experience, tour and transport.¹⁰

In terms of freedom of movement, mask wearing and other restrictions, the almost COVID-free state meant that for two years West Australians only endured twelve days of lockdown. In comparison, the state of Victorian went through six lockdowns, numbering 262 days.¹¹

MY EXPERIENCE

At a personal level, life for my husband and I by a coastal suburb in West Australia has been safe and unencumbered in this pandemic. I have dined out much more during the pandemic than previous years. Being unable to travel overseas and forming closer relationships with family and friends at such a troubling time for the whole world are likely explanations. Even when my husband had to self-isolate for fourteen days at home, having rushed home from Europe at the beginning of the pandemic, it was no hardship. A self-contained studio for him

⁹ (<https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/services-and-digital-trade/international-tourism-engagement>, accessed 29 January 2022).

¹⁰ <https://www.tourism.wa.gov.au/industry-support-and-events/resources-for-businesses-and-operators/coronavirus/pages/wa-tourism-funding-programs.aspx#/>, (accessed 29 January 2022).

¹¹ (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/17/australias-melbourne-set-to-end-worlds-longest-lockdowns>, accessed 29 January 2022).

and a large garden ensured minimal deprivation. As much as the closed borders have yielded us a huge bubble of “normalcy,” it has also kept us from seeing our 35-year old daughter who lives in Sydney. It is with mixed feelings whether the “sacrifice” of being isolated from the rest of the world is worth it. Ultimately the choice is clear – living in a state that is ravaged by COVID-19 or living as we did pre-pandemic. This is very pertinent to my husband and myself, since he is in his early 70s and I am in my late 60s, a vulnerable age group for the virus. The majority of West Australians support closed borders as evidenced by the overwhelming popularity of premier McGowan, with more than 90 percent approval ratings in the first year of the pandemic. His popularity has since waned somewhat as he is increasingly seen as too heavy-handed.

REFERENCES

Carrington, see K. (2006) Law and Order on the Border in the Neo-colonial Antipodes. In: Pickering S., Weber L. (eds) Borders, mobility and technologies of control. Springer, Dordrecht. (<https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-4899-8> 10)