

Inside Stories: Moving from Staycation...to Vacation Transcript

Scott Simmie: Hi there. I've got a quick question for you. Are you thinking about traveling somewhere? And if so, are you less likely to hop on a jet than before, back in those better times we all took for granted? I certainly feel that way, but today's guest just might have some suggestions that will get people out of their cities while remaining in their comfort zone. Joining me today is Jim Byers. He's a travel journalist who, like the rest of us, has adapted to the current reality. Jim, welcome.

Jim Byers: Thanks Scott.

Scott Simmie: Can you give us some background? How long have you been working in the travel field?

Jim Byers: Well, I mean, I dabbled a little bit when I was in the sports department at the Toronto Star, and then I became the travel editor in 2008. So that was full time starting then. And I left the star in 2013. So the last seven years have been freelancing for various publications, working for a number of websites, TravelPulse Canada, Canadian Travel News, LA times. Anybody who will pay me, I'll write for them. I don't care.

Scott Simmie: Now, it's worth mentioning that you're based in Toronto, but you have dual Canada, US citizenship. What's the US connection for you?

Jim Byers: Yeah, born and raised in the States in, California, actually, Northern California. So 25 years, not quite half of my life, but pretty close. And probably if you added up all the time I've been back between covering sporting events for the Star, and time that I go home, I try to go home. It's a little tougher right now, of course, with quarantines for Canadians returning home and such. But I spent a lot of time in California, a great deal of time in Florida, in New York, Arizona, Hawaii, all over the place. So I'm sure I spent at least six or eight weeks out of the year in the US, so pretty much all my life, I'd say.

Scott Simmie: Now, normally, how often would you be traveling during the year? Obviously this year is very different, but what would a regular year look like for you?

Jim Byers: Yeah, normally Scott, I would say is probably, I guess like a lot of Canadians, I try to concentrate a lot of my traveled in the winter to get to sunny or warmer climate. So I would say in the winter, it's probably a third to half the time that I'm away, and in the summer, maybe one week a month at most, I try to be home as much as I can, and enjoy the summers here in Toronto. And spring and fall are fairly busy. Fall, especially, I find a lot of Canadian publications and US publications are kind of turned their eyes southward in the fall. So tend to do a lot of Caribbean stuff kind of from August, September through that period. And then again in the spring. So the Caribbean is a really big part of things in the fall and the spring. So I'd say roughly anywhere from a quarter to a third of the year, I'm on the road.

Scott Simmie: What was it like for you when the pandemic hit? Did you have some travel plans that you had to scrap?

Jim Byers: Four trips to California, thank you very much, to see my dad. He's turning 89 in a couple months. I miss him very badly. My sister, my niece, I have one a month. I had it lined up so perfectly. I couldn't believe it. They were all trips. Air Canada had a couple of flights for me, and I think a cruise company had a flight. So I had four trips to San Francisco where, half an hour from my dad's place, all got canceled, and a number of other ones as well to some Caribbean place. I don't really care about those. And it's been a really nice summer here in Toronto. So I don't really miss the traveling. I just miss my family.

Scott Simmie: What was that like for you though, given that you're so used to traveling?

Jim Byers: Yeah, it was an adjustment, I got to admit. You have to keep it in perspective, I think, Scott. I mean, sure. Poor me. I didn't get to travel. I didn't get to go to the Dominican Republic or Mexico or San Francisco. Yes, I miss my father, but my goodness, there were hundreds of thousands of jobs lost. California alone has lost 600,000 jobs just in hospitality, let alone maybe airlines and other areas. So it was strange, it was a little weird, and I'm a little restless right now, but I did a couple of smaller trips. I haven't left Canada, but I've done a number of trips to Muskoka Lake District, North of Toronto. I was in Montreal for a couple of days last weekend and got a one day trip coming up to a winery.

Jim Byers: So I'm doing a little bit, trying to keep it going, and then also was kind of busy. I mean, I was doing a lot of work for TravelPulse Canada. For a while there, if we remember back to March and April, there was a lot of news coming out every day and airlines were canceling and people were being laid off and government programs were being announced. So I was working sometimes 10, 12 hours a day, just trying to keep up with all of the news of the day. So it left, I didn't really have time to be lonely or to miss traveling too much.

Scott Simmie: I mean, you just threw out some numbers from California. Do we have a sense globally on the impact of the pandemic on the travel industry?

Jim Byers: I've seen number, Scott, up around a couple hundred million even of jobs around the world. I haven't looked at the latest world travel and tourism council numbers. But last I saw, it was creeping up into the hundreds of millions. I mean, somebody asked me to describe it. And I said, "It's SARS, the 9/11, the financial crisis of 2008, 2009, all rolled into one and multiplied by 10." Nobody has ever seen anything like this. It's interesting. This week I was on a conference call with the us travel association as a new program that they're launching called Let's go Travel, or something along. Let's Share Travel. I can't remember the exact name. And they were talking about somebody that does a happiness index, which I'd never heard of, but it's quite interesting. A woman, a researcher in New York named Michelle Gielan. And she said they do a study every year. And the American people are less happy now than any time in the last 50 years.

Scott Simmie: Wow. Now there could be a lot of factors behind that, just as someone who keeps an eye on what's happening in the United States.

Jim Byers: There could be any number of factors at play.

Scott Simmie: With all of us locked down during that initial phase where we couldn't really go anywhere and even just a trip to the grocery store for some of us was kind of like, "Yikes," I think a lot of people are really desperate to get out and go somewhere again. Is the way that people travel changing? Because I'm guessing a lot of people don't want to hop on a plane and travel halfway around the world right now.

Jim Byers: Yeah. Very much so, Scott. You look at the numbers and it's pretty similar for the US and for Canada. TripAdvisor did a study again this week and it said something like three out of four people say they really only want to take a road trip. Some people are willing to fly. Generally, it's kind of shorter distance. Maybe they want to go see family. For the most part, people are looking for, no surprise, outdoor experiences, camping, beaches, things along those lines, a lot of road trips, goodness sakes. I did a story for AARP magazine, Association of Retired People in March talking about RVs are going to be in big demand, and goodness, by the end of April, I think they were all sold out. So all of these companies RV Easy and all these different companies around North America that were renting RVs just went crazy.

Jim Byers: A friend of mine was working at a radio station, and quit his job at a radio station to go sell ATVs and boats because everybody wants to be out on the water, or out in the mountains, or out in the desert somewhere where there're not a lot of other people around. So the way we have traveled has

definitely changed. And the TripAdvisor study looked at I think the 10 most popular spots in the US for fall travel, and see if I can remember them, but four were in Florida. So that kind of makes sense, beach sort of destinations, including the Keys. Two were in Arizona. Then there was Savannah and Myrtle Beach in South Carolina. So there's six or eight kind of sun and sand kind of destinations, and then San Diego. And I think Atlantic City, probably just because it's close to New York. So it is interesting. People are looking definitely for outdoors, socially distanced kind of places. The RVs are great because you're in charge of the lifestyle, right? You decide how clean your environment is going to be. And there's nobody barging into your room to make the bed.

Scott Simmie: Right. And it's somewhere where you have total control.

Jim Byers: Total control. Exactly. And you go where you want to go and you don't like that campground, or it's a little bit too crowded, you can go on to the next one or pull over into a Walmart if that's what you want to do.

Scott Simmie: It's interesting that you raise the RVs and the campers, because I was thinking there are probably, despite the overall way that this has hammered the travel industry, but there would be little pockets within that industry that are probably on the upswing as a result, and the RV rental would be one of them.

Jim Byers: Yeah, for sure. Those have done well. I've read other studies that claim that, which makes a lot of sense when you think about it, motels have done very well during the pandemic because people don't have to walk through a crowded lobby. They just open the door and they walk right into their room. So motels are kind of the older style, two or three star, maybe a Quality Inn or Comfort Inn and suites, places like that, that aren't as big, aren't as crowded. Of course what's really getting hammered, Scott, is the business hotels. I've talked to hotel owners in big cities in North America, they're barely getting 10% occupancy, and it's not business people. It's mostly local travelers, maybe people taking their kids to start college or university, but the business travel, I have no idea when it's going to recover, but it is so bad right now.

Jim Byers: People are all on Zoom. They're all on whatever other social media sharing situation they can find. Nobody wants to get on a plane, no executive wants to send one of their juniors 12 or 14 hours. And it's a cost thing as well. People don't have any money. So you can do so much of your business now on programs like Zoom, that the business travel is really going to take a long time. And that is really bad news for some of the Fairmonts and Four Seasons of the world. Now, Four Seasons has got a number of resorts. So they're probably a little bit better off. Resorts and beachy places that are high end can do pretty well. But if you're running a business hotel and you're counting on people, boom, boom, boom, coming in day after day on that flight from London to New York, or Vancouver to Los Angeles, you've got a lot of problems.

Scott Simmie: Is it too early to assess how some of these resorts are adapting? I mean, obviously they want to be in business, they're losing money. So they've tried to figure out ways to invite and encourage people to come back. But when you're at a resort, people tend to go to buffets. They tend to gather closely together. So how do they handle those sorts of things?

Jim Byers: Yeah. I've been on a number of calls and talked to a number of people in Jamaica, Barbados, and hotel groups around the world. And they've all brought in pretty strict social distancing. You go into a hotel nowadays, there's sanitizer immediately. All the hotels I've been in, maybe six or seven in the last two or three months, there's usually been a plastic shield. So you're not directly interacting with the person. Sometimes it's all arranged in advance and you've got your room key even on your phone. There's signs on the floor, social distancing, two people per elevator. You can't get on an elevator with somebody you don't know that it's not staying in your own room was the case of one hotel I was at. That

was very strict. And when you talk about buffets, almost every resort that I've talked to has eliminated the buffet.

Jim Byers: If they haven't eliminated it, what they've done is you can point and someone will serve you from behind the plexiglass, but you're not standing over the baked potatoes breathing and whatever else you might be doing on the food or the macaroni or whatever it is. So that has changed a lot. They've reduced the number, just like they have at restaurants and patios, at least in some cases, not all that I've seen have been that strong about it. But hotels in general have reduced their capacity. They've reduced the number of people, of course, it's easier to say, "We only will take 50% capacity," if you're only going to get 10 or 15 to begin with, but they have reduced capacity generally. Restaurants have done the same thing. The nice thing about our resort is generally, most people are eating outside. So if you're going to a place in Mexico, it's probably a little bit easier, or Dominican Republic. It's a lot easier to socially distance than it might be at a four-star restaurant in Manhattan.

Scott Simmie: I'm guessing too, often these resorts, they'll bundle people up in a minivan and take them on an excursion to a nearby town or to something in the jungle. Is that changing as well? Because certainly if I were at a resort, I would be probably a bit leery about jumping in a vehicle with a bunch of people I don't know.

Jim Byers: Yeah. I think all the places, again, that I've heard talk about this have said they're really reduced the number of people in those little minivans taking folks. It's four, six at a time, or just your immediate family. So you're not crowding in there with Joe and Dorothy from Pittsburgh, or Fred and his wife from San Diego. You're getting in and you're being taken care of in your own way. But of course, these things are not cheap, and hotels and resorts, it's a double whammy for them because they're being asked to do things that cost them money at a time when they're earning less. So it's very difficult, and there's different rules in place.

Jim Byers: Jamaica, for example, you can go into the country, but you have to stay within this hotel corridor. So there's different rules around the world. There's different ways, but yeah, by and large, a lot of those minivan excursion sort of things have been canceled and people are just kind of either arranging things on their own. If you run a car, again, you're in charge of the environment and you can drive down the road or people are just staying at their own hotels. I think The Bahamas this week said they're going to start a VIP plan, and it's vacation in place. So anyone that comes has to stay at the resort for 14 days.

Scott Simmie: When you spoke a moment ago about business hotels, it dawned on me the number of conventions that have been canceled since this began.

Jim Byers: Convention, and what they called? The MICE, meetings and incentives conventions events, just dead, dead, dead. It's awful for those people. And if you've got a big convention space, meeting rooms, it's going to be a long, long, long time before you get anywhere. I've talked to a few companies who've done some very small meetings, maybe 10 people in a room that fits 40 or 50 normally. And again, it's just not sustainable, Scott. You can't run a hotel on 10 or 20, or even 30% occupancy. You're probably going to need 50 or 60. And you also are going to need that extra spending from the restaurants, from the bars. A hotel bar is a wonderful thing, and I've been at a few in my time and I'm not going to your bar anytime. I'll travel. Sure. I'll go on an airplane. I'm not going in a hotel bar or any kind of a bar in the next couple of years, as far as I'm concerned.

Jim Byers: So those conventions spaces are just getting hammered, all the big conventions. And the sad thing is, I've talked to some people that every once in a while, somebody will say, "Well, that's too bad. It's just a bunch of rich guys. The guy who owns Marriott's not making any money." I'm like, "Yeah, but my goodness, there's thousands and thousands of workers, and hundreds of workers." The New York Hilton, Times Square closed just a couple of days ago, permanently closing, they said. Well, there's

several hundred workers. There's cleaners, there's plumbers, there's electricians, there's painters, there's front desk people, there's bellmen, there's valets. All of these people. And a lot of these are minimum wage jobs that are disappearing, and it's a really terrible, terrible situation. So it's not just some rich guy in upstate New York who's not making any money on his stock dividends. It's everyday people that are just getting hammered all across the country and all across the world.

Scott Simmie: A moment ago, you mentioned that you would get back on an airplane. It's obviously a personal decision for everyone, but why are you confident that getting on a plane would be safe?

Jim Byers: Well, maybe it's just because I love to travel so much that I'm willing to overlook it, but I have been on a couple of one flight, actually. Two flights to and from Montreal. The airlines have, how accurate their numbers are, I don't know, Scott, but all of the airline executives that I've talked to, and I've talked to a lot, they've got these or HEPA filters taking out anywhere from 99 to 99.5% of particulates that are in the air. When I went on Air Canada, they had a clean care plus program with wipes and sanitizers and gloves and masks. They're very strict about social distancing. I had my temperature taken before I got on board the plane. I know that's not completely accurate, but they're all things that airlines are doing. I would be more comfortable, as you mentioned, getting into that minivan with 12 other people than going to the resort. That would make me personally much more uncomfortable than being on an airplane. Now, would I want to go on a really crowded plane for 12 hours? Probably not. Would I do a four hour flight to go see my dad? Yes, I would.

Scott Simmie: When I think back to the beginning of all this, we had several cruise ships at sea and a couple of those ships had terrible numbers of infections. And every time I turned on the news, it would be another 50, another 70 people have tested positive. What do you think this will do to the cruise sector going forward?

Jim Byers: I mean, most cruises have been canceled pretty much around the world through the end of this year. So you're looking at nine months virtually, almost three quarters of the year gone for the cruise industry, just wiped out. A couple of small ones were operating, I think in Norway, and entirely within Germany, but very, very small. The CDC in the US has pretty much banned all cruises leaving the United States. And that's where most of them do tend to leave from. Texas, and especially Florida, as well as New York and California. So those are all gone. The cruise industry, the one thing I will say. The average person looks at the cruise industry and says, "Oh my goodness, no, no, no, no, no. I'm not going anywhere near that."

Jim Byers: But you got to remember, cruise lovers are a different breed. They are a very loyal, very dedicated. They go on the same cruise ships. They stay with the same line because they get their loyalty points and they get the captain's dinners and all the other little goodies and the upgrades and everything. I think cruise people who really love to cruise will cruise if they feel that the health and safety regulations are being looked at. Again, the cruise ship people that I've talked to, the buffets are gone, they are limiting the number of people. They're not doing the crowded nightclub acts and Broadway shows that they used to. And you can distance yourself fairly easily on a large cruise ship if it's not terribly crowded. I don't know what the numbers are.

Jim Byers: I think I saw the other day, Scott, that Disney told someone from the port of Galveston, Texas, that they were going to limit their numbers to 70% of normal capacity. For some people, that might be too much. That's not a terribly low number. And it really varies too. It was really interesting. I was in Niagara Falls recently and on the US side, they had about, I think they were at about 50% of capacity on the ships that go to the base of Niagara Falls. The Canadian ships were about 15%. So I think if the cruise ships in general reduce their capacity and bring in lots of social distancing and health cleaning measures, and they will have tons and tons of people wiping down every surface you can find, and even some you

can't, I think there will be a reasonable number of cruisers that return just because they're so passionate about it.

Scott Simmie: Now, obviously any country that relies on tourism has been hit by this, but I'm guessing that the impact might be even greater for poorer countries or countries that don't have robust economies in other sectors and rely so heavily on tourism. Are there any countries you've heard of that are particularly hurting as a result of this?

Jim Byers: Well, I mean, certainly, there are certain States, like Hawaii has been completely just devastated. I actually have relatives who have a place on the Island of Lanai, which is owned by Larry Ellison of Oracle. And Mr. Ellison had been paying his employees up until I think August 1st and finally decided even he didn't have enough money to pay everybody on the island. So tourism is almost the entire industry on the island of Lanai. And it's certainly the largest industry in the state of Hawaii. In the Caribbean, it's often sometimes 50 or 60% of an island's gross domestic product comes from tourism. The Caribbean is known generally to be the most tourism dependent country in the world.

Jim Byers: But even, I think something like 10% of the jobs in North America or Canada are tourism related. So it's not insignificant even for places like Idaho or Arkansas. And if you're in New York City, you're losing tourism business, you're losing leisure business, you're losing all of that convention business. And in the big cities, the Miamis, the New Yorks. But I would say if there's one region that's been hit the hardest, for sure it would be the Caribbean, Australia, and New Zealand, very badly hit. They pretty much closed their borders, but even France and Germany and a lot of places in Europe, they rely very heavily on tourism in the summer, and the numbers have been minuscule.

Scott Simmie: Now, many of us might just think, "You know what, I'm not going to travel anywhere until this is all over," but I'm guessing by the same token, since many of these resorts want to attract people back right now, that there are probably some deals out there. Is that right?

Jim Byers: Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, I saw a couple of airline deals pop up in my email this week. This call that I was on, this US Travel call this week. One of the heads of Marriott international was saying, "Guys, is a great time to book. There's great deals to be had from the airlines, great deals from the resorts, vacation packagers have great deals to the sun." And it's also a very flexible time. United Delta and American, just even in the last week or so, all eliminated change fees for, if not all of their flights, got most of their flights. So you don't have the change fees that you used to. So it's a lot more flexible and the hotels are allowing people sometimes do to cancel up until 4:00 or even later on the day of a hotel stay.

Jim Byers: So yeah, there are great deals right now, even if you're not comfortable with getting on a plane or a cruise ship, I understand that, and there are cruise deals too, of course. But even if it's just driving a couple hours to a city or a small town that doesn't usually get a lot of tourism, that's not a bad thing to do. The head of Visit California on this call I was at was saying, "It's an act of patriotism," kind of strong, but, "an act of patriotism to get out there and travel and support people." And she's right from her standpoint with the number of jobs that have been lost, I think I said 600,000 just in hospitality in California alone. So anything you can do to go out there and support a restaurant or a mom and pop kind of motel, those are the people that I really feel sorry for.

Jim Byers: Maybe I should feel sorry more for the big change of the world. But to me, it breaks my heart when I see a little mom and pop place in Vermont, or the maritime provinces of Canada, and especially places where the weather's not great year round, and they really need to pack everything into a summer, virtually a total write off the entire year for just hundreds and hundreds of small operations all around North America. And it's nothing short of heartbreaking. It's just awful.

Scott Simmie: I can totally picture that when I think of all the restaurants and small businesses that I've seen close in my own neighborhood, and then realize that, of course, for many people, this is their small business. Jim, this sound you have not heard before, unless you've listened to one of my other podcasts, and I certainly hope you have, but this sound means we are at the final phase of our chat. And I'm going to ask you a few quick questions and I am just looking for a few quick answers. What country have you not visited that's high on your list?

Jim Byers: Cambodia.

Scott Simmie: What country that you have visited, would you say has been the most memorable for you?

Jim Byers: I would say Tahiti, although technically it's part of France, but I'll say France//Tahiti because I'm a big beach guy, and I love the water.

Scott Simmie: I don't want to get you in trouble here, but I would like to know, what's your favorite airline?

Jim Byers: I'm a pretty loyal Air Canada guy. I've had a lot of membership with them with their Aeroplan over the years. And they do fly from Toronto to San Francisco direct. So that's my cop out. It's only because of my dad.

Scott Simmie: What's it like holding US citizenship, having US family members? And this has been clearly a remarkable year, but what's it been like to watch all of these events unfold from here in Canada?

Jim Byers: It's sad. The only word I can say is it's very hard to take, regardless of whether you're a Democrat or Republican, to see the country divided the way it is, Scott, and to see the acrimony and the bitterness and the division. People can't even agree on whether to play football for gosh shakes. It's completely crazy. And it's so disappointing to see. And I try to avoid politics. Every once in a while, I'll say something on my Facebook page, and I immediately regret it because it doesn't help. So if we could somehow get past all of this, and get to a little bit better time in the US, it would make a lot of us around the world a lot happier.

Scott Simmie: What are you really looking forward to doing when this is all over that you can't do now?

Jim Byers: Just the mere act of getting off a plane and not knowing exactly what I'm going to do. It's fun to plan things. It's fun to have an idea, "I'm going to go on this hike," but I missed that spontaneity of driving down the road in Ireland and thinking, "Where does that road go?" And then finding this cool castle and these beautiful horses parading in the fog. And just that. I think the spontaneity more than anything else, of just being able to get up and go. And one of the things heard in this happiness report was that even the mere act of planning travel makes people substantially happier. They're thinking about things, they're comparing notes, they're talking to their relatives and it just, whether it's endorphins or something, but it just makes people happy to have something to plan for. And it brings a certain level of certainty in a very uncertain world. So that's what I'm looking forward to.

Scott Simmie: Jim Byers. Thank you so much for sharing your inside story today.

Jim Byers: My pleasure. Thanks, Scott.

Scott Simmie: If you'd like to read more by Jim, and actually you probably haven't read anything by Jim, unless you've been to his website before, you'll find his work at <https://CanadianTravelNews.ca>. And if you're in the US, don't worry, Jim is often writing about US and international destinations. If you're one of the many whose livelihood has been negatively affected by the travel downturn, we feel for you, and we trust things will turn around soon. It's still a beautiful world and one worth exploring when this is all wrapped up. I'm Scott Simmie, and you've been listening to Inside Stories.

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