

# In and out – A travelling experience to remember under the new normal

By

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*A nightmare turned into ‘dream-come-true’... or perhaps vice versa. Here is a narrative of a Dutch man, married to a Thai, had two Thai kids and wanted to return to Thailand to be with his family. And so the story goes...*

***My experience flying back to The Netherlands to arrange a new visa, and then staying in an Alternative State Quarantine Hotel in Bangkok.***

My name is “Theo” from the Netherlands, I am 44 years old, married to my Thai wife for over 5 years and we have 2 children together. I have lived permanently in Thailand since June 26, 2014.

When I gave up my shares in my Chiang Rai business I founded in 2014 because of a “burn out” last October, I ended up – since my arrival 6 years ago – on a tourist visa. I decided to have a short break before doing anything about the situation and I visited South Africa for 10 weeks to get my energy back.

When I returned to Thailand in February, I started the process of getting a NON-O visa because I was married and had a Thai family. The plan was, and still is, that I would open a new rehab centre in Phuket in July – [The Diamond Rehab Thailand](#) – and eventually would apply a NON-B visa.

I was in the process of getting my NON-O visa then Thailand went into lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak – I was still on a tourist visa. Luckily for me and many others the Thai Government provided an amnesty on visas until the end of July (it has since been extended to September 26).

I read in the news somewhere around the third week of June that some foreigners were then being allowed to re-enter The Kingdom under specific categories and restrictions – having family in Thailand, medical tourism etc. I took my chances and left the Kingdom on July 2 to fly to Holland. I thought “let’s do it now, maybe they will change it again in the nearby future”

The plan was to go directly to the Thai Embassy in The Hague, spend 10 days with my family in Holland, before returning with my new NON-O visa. The plan was that I’d return to Thailand at the start of August to be with my family in Thailand.

I flew with KLM directly and noticed that 95% of the flights that evening had been cancelled. I was the lucky one, KLM was still flying. *(Most previously scheduled flights were still being listed on the arrivals and departures screens, just being listed as ‘cancelled’)*

I flew Economy class and had to wear my face mask for the entire 11 hours. In front of me was a plastic bag with some water and cookies, cheese and a sandwich. There was no other food or drinks being served. I was flying on a repatriation flight without even knowing it! It wasn’t the most pleasant flight I had, but I thought “it is what it is...”

I arrived on Schiphol airport and rented a car, drove straight to the Thai Embassy in The Hague and there they told me I couldn’t enter the Embassy without an appointment... “these are the new rules since the coronavirus”. To make an appointment I had to email them and wait.

I went back to my car and emailed the Embassy with my request to go return to Thailand ASAP on a NON-O visa. That same Friday afternoon they emailed me back with a list of documentation and procedures I needed to follow to be able to fly back to Thailand, – Step 1, Step 2 and Step 3. The appointment at the Embassy was set for the following Tuesday.

The first step was to gather the following documents:

1. A cover letter I have to write indicates the necessity and urgency for me to enter the Kingdom of Thailand.
2. A copy of my marriage certificate.
3. A copy of my passport.
4. A copy of the birth certificates of my two kids together with a copy of their passports.
5. A valid health insurance policy covering all expenditures of medical treatment, including Covid-19, worth at least 100,000 USD (a statement in English).
6. A filled in declaration form that was attached.

I had all of these documents luckily well prepared in Thailand knowing I would apply for a NON-O visa, including a bank statement of showing more than 400,000 baht in the account, if the account is on my name only, otherwise 800.000 baht if the account was in my wife’s name together with my name on it.

Tuesday, July 7, I went to The Thai Embassy, gave them all my paperwork and Step 1 was officially finished. I now went to Step 2 which meant that all my paperwork would then be considered... I could not do anything at this stage besides wait. I left my passport behind and was told it could take up to 2-3 weeks and they would contact me.

I was already a bit shocked with the 2-3 week timeframe because I was planning to only stay 10 days maximum... that turned out a bit differently from my plans in the end.

2 weeks and 2 days later the Embassy called me and asked if I would be available for a flight with KLM back to Bangkok on the August 7. There was also a possible alternative flight on August 14 with EVA air but they weren't sure at that stage. They would let me know later. That same day I got an email that the August 7 flight was confirmed and I now went to Step 3 and needed to gather some more documents in preparation for the flight.

The ASQ (Alternative State Quarantine) hotel reservation was already booked on August 8. They also told me in the email that they would contact me later about the ticket, visa, 'fit to fly' documentation and covid-19 test.

I emailed all 26 ASQ-qualified (at that time, now there are more) Hotels immediately and 24 of them were already full, only 2 of them had 1 room left. By the time I was ready to book my first option was already sold, so I quickly called the second option – Anantara Riverside Bangkok – and paid the 77.000 baht fee to make sure I had that room confirmed.

I knew before I left that I had to stay in an ASQ hotel. I expected that, and was actually looking forward to two weeks of ME time.

I emailed the embassy that I had an ASQ booked and confirmed, and again I had to wait.

I spent time with my family and I started to get a bit nervous, thoughts like: "what if I have Covid, that means I can't fly back?"

Around this time I also heard that the Government in Thailand had already given foreigners a longer time in Thailand with an extension to the visa amnesty, until September 26, and I started to doubt my decision to fly all the way to Holland for a NON-O visa and all the money that this was costing me.... I could have stayed in Thailand until the end of September and who knows what plan would pop up to renew my visa?

Step 3 required the following documents...

1. A proof of confirmation that ASQ (Alternative State Quarantine) has been arranged.
2. A confirmed plane ticket (if your flight is cancelled, you will need a new COE – Certificate Of Entrance – you may need a new fit-to-fly health certificate if the one you have no longer meet the 72 hours requirement.)
3. A fit-to-fly health certificate issued no longer than 72 hours before departure.
4. A Covid-Free Health Certificate issued no longer than 72 hours before departure.

This is where it all got a bit tricky in my head. First of all I already paid the ASQ hotel but they would not refund me if I cancelled less than 72 hours before arrival. The Covid test and Fit-to-fly test needed to be done within 72 hours before departure, so if I came back positive, I would have lost my money that I paid to the ASQ and have to go through ALL the same processes again, with all the additional cost.

I called the Dutch Government for a free Covid-19 test, but they wouldn't give me the result through email, only through the phone, this meant I had to do the test at KLM Health services for Euro 149 (4,545 baht). Secondly, I did not have a doctor in Holland that could give me a Fit-to-Fly document so I called my parents' doctor and she was so friendly to sign off on the document for free!

The 72 hours before departure were hectic, I had to go to Amsterdam to get a Covid test, I had to go to The Hague to get my passport back with my new NON-O stamp – they would only do single entry at the time

instead of multiple entries, and I had to visit the doctor for the fit-to-fly document as well. Besides that I had to book my ticket through a travel agent approved by the Thai Embassy.

It was stressing, waiting for the result of the KLM Covid test, and the next day. 36 hours before departure, they called me and told me they lost my test somewhere.

I got totally stressed and I could hear the woman on the other end of the phone was stressed as well. She told me she would call me back and hung up the phone without telling me when she would call. I waited nearly 2 hours in the car but it felt like a day and she called back and reported... "I have double good news; we found your test and you are negative"

I sent all the documents to the Thai Embassy and they replied with a last email with an attachment "Certificate Of Entrance" and that I needed to take the following documents to the airport:

- Certificate of Entry
- Covid-19 test result (English)
- Fit to fly document from the doctor (English)
- Insurance letter indicating that Covid-19 is also covered
- My ASQ (accommodation in Bangkok) confirmation

I printed out everything and on August 7, my father brought me to Schiphol Airport to catch the flight back to Bangkok, and knowing I wouldn't return to Holland for at least 6 months, maybe longer, I felt a bit emotional.

The plane arrived at Suvarnabhumi Airport around noon on August 8. I was lucky enough to be able to get off the plane in the first group.

I walked out of the plane and what I saw was surrealistic, like being in on the set of a Hollywood disaster movie. Men and women in fully-covered white hazmat suits. Over 300 chairs lined up for the passengers to sit on whilst they waited for arrival processing.

I was sitting in the front row and immediately a woman (I think it was a woman, difficult to tell with the full white suit and PPE gear) came to me and asked me for all my printed documents. The next step was to go to the next hall where we had to sit in lines of 5 people to get the next check.

Then we had to go to Immigration and 2 officers were doing passport checks. I then ended up at the arrival hall to collect my suitcase and 8 minutes later I was in a hospital van again with drivers, also fully covered in white suits and PPE, that took me to my hotel.

When we arrived at the hotel, it was the same story. Everything was like I was in a movie... nurses checking my temperature, the reception taking my credit card, the doorman cleaning my suitcase. I had to put on a plastic cover over my shoes and they took me to my room.

I first took a LONG shower to wash away all the stress from the trip and arrival, and then lay on my bed overlooking the Chao Phraya River realising the impact of the "new normal" and the total cost of my endeavour to return to Thailand with a new visa – over 300.000 baht. Besides that, I had now been away for a total of almost 8 weeks, instead of the planned 4 weeks. I miss my kids and my wife.

On the third day I received a Covid test in the hotel and that was negative. From that moment they gave me 1.5 hour per day to go to the relaxation area of the hotel. I walk for an hour to get the blood flowing and drank lots of soda water. I hadn't been drinking any alcohol for many years already, but according to the Thai law, its forbidden to drink alcohol in an ASQ hotel.

I received 3 meals a day and can order additional room service if I want to. My room was cleaned every 3 days by a cleaning lady, again in a full white hazmat suit which looks like she is cleaning an ICU room.

I read books, watched a bit of Netflix and called with my wife and family to keep me busy. It was challenging, but I noticed that once I accepted the fact that there was no other way, it became easier being in a 35 square-metre room 22,5 hours per day.

I also had a lot of time to think about the future... on one side I am very proud of Thailand keeping Covid outside the country. On the other side I had been planning to open my rehab centre in July, then it became September, now it will definitely not be before January next year, or maybe even later. I am completely depending on foreign patients that travel to Thailand to stay in my facility.

What is the future going to look like even when they open the borders again? I noticed that as a frequent flyer, flying wasn't fun anymore. We can't ask tourist to go through the same process as I did to enter Thailand. I don't think they will come if we ask them to go through all the paperwork, hassles and the "shite suit welcome". I certainly couldn't ask my patients to do so, they would already have the personal fears of confronting their detox and rehabilitation as well.

Then I think to myself... I am still lucky to have my wife, my kids, some money in the bank to survive, a new visa, a new business that opens in the future, being healthy and I am certain that at the end everything will always be OK.

"Everything will be alright in the end so if it is not alright it is not the end" – The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel.

Theo

By The Thaiger

Source: The Thaiger