

Quarantine Stories: Felipe Pichardo & Matteo Amarante

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There are no shortage of stories about how the global pandemic has turned our world upside down. But for two analysts in El Salvador, their quarantine story proved to be an extended adventure. While the rest of the company adjusted to working from home, Felipe Pichardo and Matteo Amarante found themselves working anywhere BUT home. We sat down with them to hear their story in their own words.

Felipe: As part of the Central American team, we typically have management meetings with issuers once or twice a month, sometimes requiring travel. At the beginning of the year, Matteo and I were assigned to cover additional entities in Mexico to support the team there, so in the second week of March, we flew to Mexico to visit a number of entities over three days, from Monday, March 9, through Wednesday, March 11.



Landing in Mexico

Matteo: When we left for the trip, the coronavirus was not yet declared a pandemic; it was present in Europe and Asia, but not as widely in the Americas. Then on Wednesday, March 11, Felipe was supposed to fly home to El Salvador, while I headed to Panama to cover an additional entity, to return the night of Thursday, March 12. However, in the middle of our trip, the World Health Organization declared a pandemic. By 4:00 PM, Wednesday, the President of El Salvador declared a state of emergency, closing the airports to international travel, allowing only Salvadoran residents, who then had to submit to a 30-day quarantine in government-designated facilities.

Felipe: When the government declared the state of emergency, I had just arrived at Mexico DF International Airport to head home. My wife and supervisor both called me to let me know about the situation. By the time I landed in El Salvador around 9:00 PM, there was much confusion about what should happen with us and who could enter. No one knew anything. If you asked the police, they said Immigration would tell you what to do; if you asked Immigration, they said the Health Authority would give you the information.

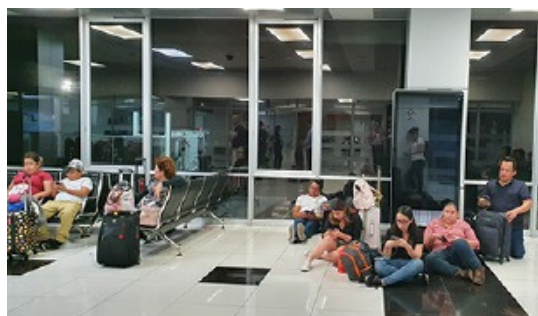


Confusion at El Salvador Airport

Matteo: Meanwhile, I landed in Panama and called my wife to let her know I had arrived. She let me know that the President had closed the country, and when I got back I would likely be held in quarantine. This was especially concerning, since the government's quarantine centers had awful and unhealthy conditions. We could see this on social media — these locations were overcrowded with no chance of social distancing.

Felipe: In one center, you might have hundreds of people coming from ten different countries, with no way of isolating healthy people from unhealthy people, without medical conditions, without any Covid testing. Some hours later, authorities confirmed that all of us must move into a quarantine center.

Matteo: In some places, they put four people in each tiny room, sleeping on bunk beds. They had no water, everything was dirty and disgusting — it was just very unhealthy. The risk of contagion was high, not just for the Coronavirus, but other diseases as well. When I got back to my hotel after my meeting, I talked to my supervisors and with our local Administration team. They all recommended that we not return to El Salvador until appropriate conditions could be guaranteed. However, they said the final decision would be up to us and the company would support it.



Stranded travelers try to get comfortable at the airport.

Felipe: In my case, I was still at the airport in El Salvador at midnight on Wednesday with people from my flight, and the authorities were directing us to these quarantine centers. At this moment, it was not clear what would happen at these centers. The information filtered in, and we saw how disorganized they were. Some even speculated that people were being held illegally. Several people, including me, decided just to stay at the airport to wait for more information. I tried to sleep in a chair, hoping the situation would soon resolve, but by the next morning things were still just as confusing. I ultimately spent the whole day Thursday at the airport. Finally, the authorities told us we only had two possibilities: go to the quarantine centers, or take a flight out of the country. I talked with my wife, Fitch administrative staff, and my supervisor, and they all gave me the go-ahead to leave. Since Matteo was in Panama, I decided to join him there. I figured it would be easier to take action if we both were in the same place. So 24 hours after my arrival in El Salvador, I was in Panama with Matteo.

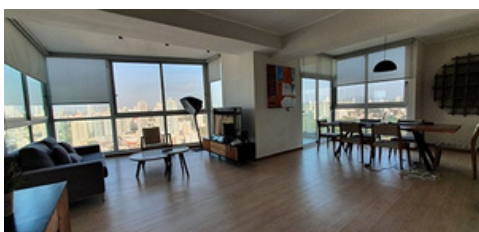
Matteo: On Thursday morning I went to the meeting with the entity and by night Felipe and I were both in Panama at the same hotel but in different rooms. We decided not to return; our strategy was just to wait and see what Salvadoran Authorities would do to improve the quarantine centers. We thought it would take no more than a week. But as days went by and no actions were taken, it was clear it would be much longer. Fitch's local administration and HR decided it was better to move us from a hotel to an apartment.

Felipe: Some days later, we got the news that the airport in El Salvador ceased all commercial operations — only cargo and humanitarian flights. So it was clear that any chances of returning to El Salvador soon were gone. And then a few days later, the Panamanian airports closed as well.

Matteo: We started to consider any possible way of returning, including by sea or terrestrial travel. But travel by ground presented more obstacles, including four international borders between us and El Salvador. We also would be faced with going to quarantine each time we crossed a border, whether arriving by air, sea or ground. So we really had no viable option other than to wait and see.

We have to thank Fitch and our local Administration — the apartment was amazing and allowed us to focus on doing our work. It was also strategically located to restaurants and supermarkets. We were on the 30th floor, and you can imagine the view of the city and the ocean as well. But as comfortable as we were, I fluctuated between despair and being calm throughout our time there. While it was concerning to not know when we could come back, considering the conditions we could be in at a facility in El Salvador, I was content to wait and see what happens. Everyday my thoughts were this will be over soon.

Felipe: For me, the not knowing was even more stressful because, what I didn't mention was that my wife was pregnant and home alone with our 2 ½ year old son. I ultimately spent half of her pregnancy in Panama. I even had to find out via video call that my future baby would be a boy.



Felipe and Matteo's home away from home



Views from the apartment

Matteo: We still expected that at the very worst we would be there a few weeks, and then we could go home. But weeks turned into months, with still no hope of returning. Then, three months in, I got some news from the Salvadoran embassy in Panama confirming a flight with Copa, the airline I originally traveled with. A cruise company had managed to arrange a repatriation flight for some of its Salvadoran employees stranded in Brazil and the Salvadoran government requested to pick up some of us stuck in Panama as well. Unfortunately, it was only for people who flew to Panama on Copa.

Felipe: When I booked my travel from El Salvador to Panama, Avianca was the best option — so I did not qualify for this flight.

Matteo: The day of my return was very difficult because my friend was not able to return with me. Once again, I felt I was in a very grey situation; I had this happiness to go home with my wife, but I had to leave my friend. It was a difficult situation to emotionally handle.

But in the end I had to return. The flight was scheduled to leave at 2:00 or 3:00 PM on June 14 and I had to be at the airport by 11:00 AM. I don't think I slept the night before for fear of missing it. Everyone on the flight was anxious and eager to return, and when the plane landed, people clapped and whistled. It was a very emotional moment — and also exhausting. But it is not comparable with being home finally, so you had to go through it.

Once I landed, I had to go into quarantine at a hotel for another week. They finally gave me a swab test, and I tested negative, so on June 21 I was able to leave the hotel and go home. It took more than three months, but finally my journey had come to an end.



Matteo arrives in El Salvador

Felipe: I stayed in Panama one additional month. For me there were few possibilities to get back, with many false starts. Once, the Salvadoran embassy had organized a bus trip with 50 other Salvadorans. We would have to cross Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Honduras with time in quarantine at each border — not great, but it looked like it was my only opportunity since my wife was close to birth.

We drove across Panama for about eight hours to the Costa Rica border. There, we had to wait inside the bus for 16 hours — only getting out to eat or stretch our legs — while the embassy tried to arrange our authorization. In the end, the Costa Rican government prohibited our entry, and we drove the bus back eight hours to Panama City. In total I spent 32 hours on the bus.

Fortunately, the apartment in Panama City was still available. I stayed there another two weeks before I had another opportunity to return home: Banco Cuscatlán decided to sponsor a flight for 150 Salvadorans to come back. We didn't have to pay anything.

Like Matteo, I could not sleep for two days prior to travel, I was so nervous, and I was too excited to relax on the flight. When we landed, everybody applauded and cried. It was an amazing moment. Finally, more than four months after my original travel date (March 9 to July 14) I was back in my country, and in a few more days I would be at home with my family.

In the time since Matteo got home, the government stopped quarantining in hotels, and instead had everybody do a home quarantine. Since I couldn't be home with my pregnant wife if I had Covid, I decided to quarantine at my father's home.



On the tarmac in El Salvador

There, I spent my entire time isolated in the bedroom, only leaving to eat and take a shower. One week later, on July 19, they notified me that I was free from the Covid, and I was finally able to go back home with my wife and child...and my future child! I was not supposed to leave for another week, but believe me, I was not going to leave home for ANYTHING! The first time I left my house was July 29, and my son was born 5 days later, on August 3.



Baby Felipe Diego and his proud papa!

Matteo: One thing this experience taught us is that changes and difficulties can emerge out of nowhere and without any notice. At times like this we need to embrace the concept of resilience. We need to be willing to adapt to changes and stay buoyant, and try to stay mentally and emotionally strong in order to successfully identify the opportunities and benefits these changes may bring for our personal and professional lives.

With the situation behind us, I can say it was difficult, challenging and full of uncertainty. However, the support from Fitch was absolute and unhesitating. We are aware it required a lot of time, organization and coordination through several teams for making all the arrangements. We want to truly thank the Administrative, HR, BRM, and other non-analytical teams, as well as our colleagues and supervisors on the analytical team. That's something we will always be thankful for.

Felipe: The day-to-day experience of this situation was very difficult and impossible to understand unless you lived through it, specifically the uncertainty about our return, our families, the conditions in our country. It was the love of our families, the friendship of our friends and all the support of our colleagues and company that allowed us to endure. Every day I received phone calls and texts with encouraging messages. From the very first day we received support from Fitch. Particularly, I want to thank the company, local and regional administration staff, my local supervisor, HR, analytical and BRM heads, and definitely my colleagues for all the support and efforts looking for a solution for our return to El Salvador. We are hugely grateful.