



# COVID-19 PROTOCOLS FOR VENT TOURS

**JANUARY 7, 2022**

As VENT continues to navigate the pandemic, we continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. With this in mind, VENT maintains a **COVID-19 vaccination requirement**. **All tour participants and tour leaders must be fully vaccinated in order to travel with us while we are still in a declared public health emergency.** Until now, VENT's policy has been in accordance with [the latest guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), in which full vaccination is defined as an individual being **14 days** beyond having received the required amount of vaccine for reaching full immunity to the degree CDC-authorized vaccines confer. Given the heightened concern resulting from the high transmissibility of the Omicron variant, we have enhanced the definition of "fully vaccinated" to include a booster shot. Proof of vaccination must be provided to our office at least one week before the start of the tour and kept with you while on the tour.

VENT has determined this approach to be the best one for keeping our tour leaders and tour participants safe during this time. Our decision and policy anchor a regime of protocols firmly rooted in the latest CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID-19. The CDC [recommends](#) booster shots for the three main U.S.-produced vaccines. VENT's decision to [require](#) that all tour participants and tour leaders who are eligible to receive a booster shot do so as a prerequisite for participation is a rare departure from CDC guidance. The [CDC's guidance for boosters](#) varies by vaccine. **VENT will continue to follow the latest information from the CDC and will update our policy accordingly.** Please visit the CDC website for the most up to date information about COVID-19 and associated guidance for proper health and hygiene: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>

The protocols listed here serve as general guidance for the operation of all VENT tours through the duration of the pandemic. The information for "[Before-Tour Protocols](#)" is strongly recommended, while the "[During-Tour Protocols](#)" will be employed and enforced by the tour leader(s) for the sake of collective group health. In addition to these guidelines, travelers must be prepared to adapt to unique regulations or requirements at country, state, and local levels. No matter what steps VENT takes to create a tour atmosphere conducive to good health and hygiene, we cannot fully protect against the possibility of illness; however, the measures and

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protocols we describe here will go a long way toward keeping everyone as safe as possible. Additional protocols and information are [provided below for International Tours](#).

**VENT strongly recommends the purchase of travel insurance.** Good travel insurance policies (such as those offered by Ripcord Rescue Travel Protection) include strong medical expense and trip interruption benefits and 24/7 access to medical professionals. In particular, travel insurance with a strong trip interruption benefit is recommended because such policies will regard Covid-related quarantine (should it occur) as a form of trip interruption and will help cover your losses.

### BEFORE-TOUR PROTOCOLS

Prior to the start of the tour, based on the [latest CDC guidance](#), VENT strongly recommends participants adopt the following protocols to reduce the threat of contracting COVID-19 prior to joining the tour:

- **Booster shots:** The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and CDC have recommended booster shots for those who have been fully vaccinated. **NOTE: VENT now requires booster shots for participation on its tours.** Individuals who received the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine are eligible to receive a booster shot if they are five or six months, respectively, or more beyond their initial series and are 12 or 18, respectively, or older. Those who received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine are eligible to receive a booster shot if they are two months or more beyond their initial shot and are 18 or older. Please visit the website of the CDC for more information about [booster shots](#).
- **Avoid mid- and large-size gatherings:** Avoid mid- and large-size gatherings of people for the 14 days prior to the start of your tour. Environments where such gatherings occur include but are not limited to sporting events, restaurants, bars, and parties.
- **Practice proper social distancing:** For the 14 days before departure, maintain a distance of 6 feet when in the presence of persons who are not members of your household. This is especially important when in proximity to anyone whose vaccination status is unknown. Avoid close contact with any person who has tested positive for COVID-19, is exhibiting symptoms, or has been exposed to the disease within the last 14 days.
- **Masks:** Masks should be worn in all indoor public settings, and in private settings when in close contact (less than 6 feet) with anyone who is not a member of your household and/or whose vaccination status is unknown. In general, masks do not need to be worn in outdoor settings unless you are in close contact with someone whose vaccination status is unknown. Please refer to the section on masks and mask wearing in the “During-Tour Protocols” that follow.

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- **Pre-departure Covid test:** During the current surge, for your own safety and for the safety of your fellow travelers, for domestic and international tours we strongly recommend scheduling a PCR test within three days of traveling to your destination, or at least taking an at-home test on the day before you travel. Some international destinations already require proof of a negative PCR test before boarding flights from the USA, while others require testing upon arrival. We realize there are a multitude of protocols to consider regarding international travel, but rest assured that our staff is up to date on each country's requirements. For at-home testing, a shortage of testing supplies is a problem presently, but this situation is expected to improve in the coming weeks. PCR tests can be scheduled in a variety of ways, including through your doctor, health clinics, public health facilities, or pharmacies. It can take up to 48 hours or more to receive results from standard PCR tests. "Rapid" or "same-day" PCR tests will be preferred by many people. Please note that same-day testing sites may have long lines and extended wait times, unless scheduled in advance.
- **Supplies:** Use the time before a tour to make sure that you have an ample supply of necessary COVID-19-avoidance supplies, such as masks and hand sanitizer liquids or gels (for the latter, products with at least 60% alcohol content are recommended by the CDC).
- **Transportation to the airport:** On the day of departure, if assistance is needed getting to the airport, please try to ride with someone from your household. Whenever possible, avoid ridesharing options or public transportation. If you are unable to travel with someone from your household, always wear your mask regardless of the setting.
- **At the airport:** Being in an airport elevates the risk of contracting the virus that causes COVID-19. Airports are often crowded, and the process of moving through an airport typically includes standing in lines of people in close quarters, such as check-in lines, security lines, and when boarding the aircraft. These are inescapable aspects of air travel. To mitigate the heightened risk, maintain proper social distancing to the extent possible; wash your hands thoroughly as needed; avoid touching sensitive parts of your face such as your eyes, nose, and mouth; and wear your mask. For the airport environment, we recommend following [CDC guidance](#) to wear a medical grade mask (such as N95 or KN95 types) or wear two masks (cloth mask over a surgical mask).
- **On the plane:** Federal rules require that masks be worn at all times when on aircraft or other public transportation.
- **Health check:** If you are exhibiting signs of COVID-19, do not attempt to join the tour. Common symptoms of the illness are listed on the [CDC website](#) and include fever or chills, fatigue, shortness of breath, cough, loss of taste or smell, and more. Please get tested if you are experiencing any of these symptoms.

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## DURING-TOUR PROTOCOLS

A VENT tour is a complex operation with significant logistical components. This may include but is not limited to transportation via different vehicle types such as vans, buses, cars, and safari vehicles; internal flights; multiple accommodation changes; visits to a host of private and public facilities and places of business; and interactions with individuals and service providers not associated with the tour group. During a tour, participants must abide by tour leader(s) directives concerning matters of health and safety so that the tour can operate as planned during this public health emergency.

- **Mask wearing:** Masks must be worn at all times in any enclosed space environments. These include public areas in hotels and lodges, public restrooms, restaurants (except when eating), when riding in vehicles, and any other indoor settings the tour may visit. Outdoors, masks are not required unless the tour group is within 6 feet of persons unassociated with the tour group. Masks will be required in such instances due to the fact that we cannot know the vaccination status of others. The tour leader(s) will direct group members when to don masks and when it is permissible not to. Participants should never go anywhere without masks on their person, and should always have a mask readily available for immediate use.

Second to vaccination (including booster shots), wearing a mask is probably the most important action a person can take to minimize the risk of COVID-19. A well-fitting mask, properly worn over the nose and mouth, forms a barrier that greatly reduces the spreading of respiratory droplets. Therefore, masks are **required** for tour participation.

Masks are not equal in quality.

Please consider fit and filtration when selecting masks. A high-quality mask should be large enough to completely cover your nose and mouth, and should fit snugly against the sides of your face to prevent air (potentially with respiratory droplets containing the virus) from flowing freely around the edges of the mask and instead flow through the mask. Face coverings such as scarves, bandanas, balaclavas, gaiters, and cloth masks alone do not meet these criteria. A mask with good filtration captures more respiratory droplets containing the virus. The medical grade N95 and KN95 masks offer the best protection in terms of fit and filtration. When purchasing either of these masks, look for those that are NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health) approved. The respected company 3M sells these masks through another company, CPAP1000 ([cpap1000.com](http://cpap1000.com)). NOTES: KN-95 masks are produced in China (as are many N95 masks) and not subject to the same regulations as the N-95. If purchasing KN-95s, you should choose masks approved for use by the U.S Food & Drug Administration (FDA) (under Emergency Use Authorization) as they will not carry NIOSH approval. However, good ones (such as those made by 3M and other manufacturers) are just as good as the N95.

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Some N95 and KN95 masks can be purchased on Amazon, but there have been problems with counterfeit masks sold through that site. Amazon is probably fine for simple, surgical style masks, but consumers should be cautious about buying higher quality masks through that site.

For masks other than N95 or KN95 types, such as cloth masks or other materials, the CDC recommends masks with a nose wire and with extra layers of fabric. The nose wire prevents air from leaking out the top of the mask and improves fit and comfort. In lieu of N-95 or KN-95 masks, the CDC recommends wearing two masks: for example, a medical procedure (surgical) mask underneath a cloth mask. A recent study conducted in a laboratory found that this combination provided much better protection to the wearer and to others as compared with a cloth mask by itself or a medical procedure mask by itself. Wearing a high-quality mask—ideally an N95, KN95, or two masks—is especially beneficial when in airports or other elevated risk situations.

Your tour leader(s) will have masks with them for group use; however, we ask that you please bring enough masks to last for the duration of the tour.

- **Social distancing:** One point of departure from CDC guidance is on the matter of social distancing, where on a nature tour, maintaining the recommended 6-foot distance standard within a tour group is often impossible. Time together in a tour van or bus precludes the possibility of group members maintaining the recommended 6 feet of separation. And when in the field, there will be times when the group is clustered together observing birds or around a spotting scope. For all situations where the tour group is in proximity of persons not associated with the group, the proper social distancing protocol will be observed.
- **Ventilation in vehicles:** When riding in tour vans and buses, the central air conditioning or vent will always be on to enhance air flow through the vehicle. Air typically will not be recirculated through the vehicle, but rather will be fresh air drawn in from the outside. Air may be recirculated on occasions when outside air conditions warrant, such as when traveling on dirt or gravel roads could otherwise mean drawing dust inside the vehicle when using the air conditioning or vent. Where weather and travel conditions allow, windows on the vehicles can be opened as another means of improving ventilation.
- **Sanitization of surfaces in a tour van:** Your tour leaders will equip the vehicle(s) with boxes of disinfectant wipes. Participants may use the wipes as desired to wipe surfaces in the vicinity of his or her seating area, including arm rests, dashboard, interior walls, seat belts, air vents, and seat backs.

- **Restaurants and dining:** There is no one-size-fits-all alternative approach to group dining. A host of variables will determine how best to plan group meals. Considerations include weather, dining options, time of day, location, etc. Tour leaders will rely on a range of options throughout the trip, including: visiting restaurants with outdoor seating; visiting restaurants during times of lower occupancy, which means having early breakfasts, early or late lunches, and early dinners; dividing the group into smaller groups to minimize crowding at a table; and ordering take-out or delivery meals.
- **Spotting scopes:** Tour leaders will have their spotting scopes available for group use. The tour leader will periodically wipe the surface area around the viewing lens with a sanitizing cloth or wipe. As always, participants are welcome to bring their own scopes. Participants should refrain from using or asking to use other participants' scopes unless invited to do so.
- **Hand washing and hand sanitizing:** Tour participants should carry a supply of liquid or gel hand sanitizer. Products of 60% alcohol content are recommended by the CDC. Frequent hand washing, to the extent possible, is recommended.
- **Field checklist sessions:** The field checklist session is another important component of a VENT tour. Such sessions are traditionally conducted in hotel lobbies or in restaurants prior to meal service. The tour leader(s) will make determinations about appropriate settings for when such sessions will take place, taking into account variables such as privacy, ability to practice social distancing, outside seating, weather, and timing. Participants need to be flexible as daily checklist sessions may not always be possible.
- **Symptoms of illness and self-isolation:** Common signs of COVID-19 illness include fever or chills, fatigue, shortness of breath, cough, loss of taste or smell, and more. [Please refer to the CDC website for a full list of symptoms](#). If you develop any of these symptoms during the tour, you must self-isolate and notify your tour leader(s) immediately. If this should occur, VENT will work with you to determine the best course of action, which may include communication with your family/emergency contacts and locating resources for access to COVID-19 testing including hospitals, clinics, online resources, and state and county public health departments. Your tour leader(s) and the VENT office staff will provide as much assistance as possible; however, a participant who experiences symptoms of COVID-19, and who requires self-isolation, will be required to discontinue participation in the tour. Also, participants acknowledge that nature tours often involve moving great distances, and that anyone self-isolating in a hotel or lodge will remain behind.
- **VENT strongly recommends the purchase of travel insurance.** Should your tour be interrupted by illness, your insurer will be an important source of information and support. Travelers should be familiar with the benefits of his or her policy.

## INTERNATIONAL TOURS: Additional Protocols and Information

We will operate as many of our scheduled international tours as we can. However, some tours may not operate due to a host of challenges associated with traveling abroad including quarantine requirements, airline travel restrictions, and closed borders. As of this writing, travel to many international destinations is still restricted. VENT will revise or update this information as needed.

Protocols and important information for tours to international destinations:

- VENT will not operate a tour to any destination with a mandatory quarantine requirement upon arrival into the country, even for travelers who have been vaccinated.
- As of January 26, 2021, U.S. law mandates that all air passengers entering the United States (including U.S. citizens and Legal Permanent Residents) must present a negative COVID-19 test, taken within three calendar days of departure for the United States. Airlines must confirm the negative test result for all passengers two years of age and over prior to boarding. **UPDATE: Starting December 6, air travelers aged two and older, regardless of nationality or vaccination status, are required to show documentation of a negative viral test result taken within one day of the flight's departure to the United States before boarding. You must show your negative result to the airline before you board your flight. That includes all travelers—U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (LPRs), and foreign nationals. If you recently recovered from COVID-19, you may instead travel with documentation of recovery from COVID-19 (i.e., your positive COVID-19 viral test result on a sample taken no more than 90 days before the flight's departure from a foreign country, and a letter from a licensed healthcare provider or a public health official stating that you were cleared to travel).**
- Tour itineraries may need to be modified to allow the tour group to meet the requirement. Among the adjustments is ensuring the group has access to a testing facility and/or public health professionals who can administer the test. The testing requirement may also affect tours with itineraries to more than one country.
- In-country testing will be arranged by our ground operator/destination management company, working in concert with VENT. Testing will occur with enough time to ensure that results are received prior to scheduled flight times.
- Some countries provide free testing for COVID-19 while others do not. Because costs of testing, if applicable, will vary among countries, the cost for testing is not included in the tour fee and will be the sole responsibility of the traveler. In some situations, the traveler will pay for the cost of testing at the time, while for other occasions it may be more feasible for VENT to pay for a group testing event, in which case participants will be invoiced after the tour.

- If you develop any symptoms of COVID-19 during the tour, you must self-isolate and notify your tour leader(s) immediately. If this should occur, VENT will work with you and our ground operator to determine the best course of action, which may include communication with your family/emergency contacts and locating resources for access to COVID-19 testing and/or professional medical services. Our primary point of contact will be our ground operator/destination management company, who is best positioned to communicate with local authorities and assist in identifying quality medical care, if needed, and managing logistics such as arranging for self-isolation and quarantine. Your return travel to the United States will be managed by VENT, if you purchased your air ticket through VENT, our ground operator/destination management company, and/or your airline.

VENT strongly recommends the purchase of travel insurance, but please note, **some countries are requiring proof of travel insurance with strong medical expense and trip interruption benefits in order to enter the country.** Please check with the VENT office, your preferred travel insurer, or other online resources to learn whether travel insurance is a requirement for entry into your destination country.

**Note about quarantine:** Inherent to international travel is the risk that you could test positive for Covid-19 after undergoing mandatory testing near the end of the tour. A Covid-positive test result will almost certainly trigger a mandatory quarantine for the infected person regardless of where in the world that person is. The length of the quarantine and associated rules and restrictions regarding the infected person will vary by country, but a realistic timeframe for quarantine is from 5–15 days. As it concerns the other members of the tour group, although not a certainty, it is possible that everyone will be required to quarantine, even if each of the other group members tests negative. Once the quarantine begins, a minimum of three days need to pass before the other group members get tested again (although infection is possible up to 14 days beyond exposure). Meanwhile, for international flights bound for the USA, the airlines will not permit travel for anyone who has been in close proximity to anyone else who tests positive for Covid in the 10 days prior to scheduled departure. For this reason, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance. A good travel insurance policy will provide a robust trip interruption benefit, under which a Covid-related quarantine would be categorized. VENT's travel partner, Ripcord Travel Protection, has affirmed that its Trip Interruption benefit will indeed cover Covid-related quarantine. As always with insurance, some restrictions will apply.

## AFTER-TOUR PROTOCOLS

- If you develop symptoms of, or test positive for, COVID-19 within 14 days of returning from the tour, please notify VENT immediately, as VENT may need to notify other participants on the tour that a fellow group member has developed symptoms or tested positive.

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