



COVID-19 PROTOCOLS FOR VENT TOURS

May 2, 2023

The expiration of the federal government's Public Health Emergency declaration means the end of our COVID-19 (hereafter "COVID") protocol regime. As of May 2, VENT will no longer maintain COVID prevention protocols in the operation of its tours. This means mask-wearing is no longer required in any situation, and our two-tier testing schedule is retired. The one general protocol still in effect is the **COVID vaccination requirement. All tour participants and tour leaders must receive the primary series vaccinations in order to travel with us. This requirement will remain in place until December 18, 2023.** Proof of vaccination must be provided to our office at least one week before the start of the tour. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has updated its guidance to recommend people be **Up to Date** with COVID vaccinations. Although the [CDC website](#) defines "Up to Date" as the primary series vaccinations and all recommended boosters, for those eligible, VENT requires the primary series and strongly recommends boosters. VENT has determined this approach is still the best one for keeping our tour leaders and tour participants healthy.

Even without a protocol regime in place, we maintain strong recommendations for avoiding COVID before the start of a tour, which are firmly rooted in CDC guidance. Please visit the [CDC website](#) for the most up to date information about COVID-19 and associated guidance for proper health and hygiene.

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 cover COVID-related illness.

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BEFORE-TOUR PROTOCOLS

VENT strongly recommends participants adopt the following protocols to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 prior to joining the tour. These measures are not to be taken lightly. COVID has been confirmed among a number of tour participants in the earliest stages of our tours, and the anecdotal evidence suggests that the virus was contracted just before the start of the tour.

Booster shots: The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and CDC have recommended booster shots for those who have received primary series vaccinations. With the release of the second booster shot, the CDC updated its guidance to recommend people be **Up to Date** with vaccinations (primary series and boosters, if eligible). Please refer to the first paragraph of page 1 of this document for specific information about VENT's vaccination policy, and visit the website of the CDC for more information about [booster shots](#).

Avoid contact with others whose vaccination status is unknown: Avoid close contact, especially indoors, with others whose vaccination status is unknown for the 14 days prior to the start of your tour. Environments to be avoided include but are not limited to sporting events, restaurants, bars, movie theaters, and parties. 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: For the 14 days before departure, masks should be worn in all indoor public settings, and in private settings when in close contact (less than 6 feet) with anyone whose vaccination status is unknown. Please refer to the section on masks and mask-wearing below.

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. 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 and wear your mask. We recommend high quality filtration masks such as N95 or KN95 types.

On the plane: Please wear your mask at all times on the plane.

IMPORTANT: Approximately 30 cases of COVID were detected on our tours from August 1, 2022–April 1, 2023. None of the people with COVID exhibited symptoms of illness until several days into the tour. We think this pattern serves as strong anecdotal evidence that

some people are contracting COVID while traveling to their tour. We strongly urge you to take mask-wearing seriously when in airports and on airplanes, limiting your exposure as much as possible.

MASKS

With the expiration of all “During-Tour Protocols,” we understand some people may not feel as comfortable being in enclosed space environments, unmasked, with others. We use this opportunity to remind our travelers that mask-wearing remains optional, and that anyone who feels uncomfortable in certain situations should continue to don a mask. The science has consistently shown that outside of vaccination, wearing a mask provides the best protection against the virus that causes COVID. We especially feel it is a mistake to go unmasked in travel environment settings such as airports and airplanes where the risk of exposure is greater. High filtration N-95 or KN-95 masks provide the best protection. Your tour leaders will have a supply with them, but we ask that you bring your own.

A well-fitting mask, properly worn over the nose and mouth, forms a barrier that greatly reduces the spreading of respiratory droplets.

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 it 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). 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.

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.

Symptoms of illness and COVID testing: Inherent to travel these days is the risk that you could contract the virus that causes COVID during a tour and display obvious signs of illness. Common signs of COVID 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](#). Without the Public Health Emergency still in place, the government and the travel insurance industry are treating the threat of COVID no differently than other respiratory or seasonal illnesses. If COVID illness is suspected in a tour participant, we no longer require a Rapid Antigen Test (at-home test) to confirm illness, nor will we enforce isolation. However, a tour leader may speak privately with a participant who shows signs of illness and request that he or she don a mask and, in the case of acute illness, self-isolate.

In the event of acute illness, when isolation or even hospitalization is unavoidable, your tour leader and VENT office staff, and our ground operator (if applicable), will provide as much assistance as possible.* We will work with you to determine the best course of action, which may include communication with your family/emergency contacts and travel insurance company.

VENT strongly recommends the purchase of travel insurance. Some countries are requiring proof of travel insurance with strong medical expense and trip interruption benefits as a prerequisite for entry. Please check with the VENT office, your preferred travel insurer, or other online resources to learn whether such insurance is necessary. 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.

*Participants acknowledge that nature tours often involve moving great distances, and that anyone self-isolating in a hotel or lodge may remain behind. We emphasize participants in such situations will never be without support from our staff. For international tours, 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 (accommodations and meals) for self-isolation and/or hospitalization. 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.

AFTER-TOUR RECOMMENDATIONS

- If you develop symptoms of, or test positive for, COVID 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.