

Coronavirus in the Maldives:

*The couple trapped on
never-ending honeymoon*



Miss Laure Ponnusawmy

It began with a wedding in Egypt's capital Cairo on 6 March: eight years after they first met, 36-year-old Khaled and Peri, 35, married in front of their friends and families.

A few days later, the Dubai-based couple left for Cancun, Mexico, with barely a worry in the world: coronavirus seemed a distant concern, as it had yet to fully spread across the globe.

So while the couple were careful to avoid crowded places, they say they "never expected" travel restrictions to affect their plans.

But by the time they were returning home to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) via Turkey on 19 March, the full scale was becoming apparent.

"While we were on the plane we had access to internet and then we started getting messages from people 'Are you going to be able to get to Dubai? There's a new law, they're banning expats'"

Still, as they were already in the air, they assumed they would be allowed to travel. But when they tried to board their connecting flight in Istanbul, they were told they could not board.

The new rules had come into place just as they set off from Mexico.

The couple was left stranded at the airport for two days. Restrictions in Turkey meant they were not allowed to leave and enter the city.

Whilst, without a valid boarding pass they struggled to buy toiletries and clothes, and were not even allowed to collect their luggage.

Unable to enter the UAE, and with flights to Egypt suspended, they needed a plan.

"We decided to go on Google and check all the countries that allowed Egyptians without a visa, and then check if they had flights," Peri said. It appeared they only had one option: the Maldives.

A set of islands with clear white sand and turquoise water in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives is renowned as one of the most beautiful places in the world. Khaled and Peri had even considered heading there for their honeymoon instead of Mexico.

However, on this occasion it was not the prospect of the beaches and snorkeling opportunities that excited the couple the most.

"I remember that moment we were allowed to go through immigration," Peri recalled. "We looked at each other and we were very happy that at least we would be sleeping in a bed as opposed to airport seats!"

Khaled, a telecoms engineer, said, laughing: "We were so happy to see our luggage."

But once the immediate stress of finding a place to stay had been resolved, new challenges dawned on them.

“We started realizing that there is a major financial burden, our jobs – we wouldn’t be able to perform them well. We didn’t pack our laptops,” said Peri, who works in media. “When you’re on honeymoon, you don’t expect to be working much.”

On reaching their island resort the couple realized they were amongst only a handful of guests, most of whom were waiting for flights home.

As the others left, the hotel shut down, and the couple were shifted to another island, where the same thing happened.

They spent the last month in a special isolation facility set up by the Maldivian government at a resort on the island of Olhuveli.

They were grateful to the authorities, who were charging at reduced rate, and to the resort staff.

“They’re doing their best to actually make this a nicer experience for us. So, in the evening, they play music, they have a DJ every day, and sometimes we even feel bad because nobody’s dancing,” Khaled said.

There are about 70 others at the resort, many of whom are also honeymooners. The only difference, according to Peri, is that the others “chose the Maldives as their honeymoon destination – we didn’t”

Both are also back at work, but struggle to connect via wi-fi to conference calls.

But getting home is not straightforward. As residents of the UAE, but not citizens, they say they were not allowed onto flights returning others to the Gulf.

And while flying to Egypt on a repatriation flight could have been an option, it would have meant a 14-day quarantine in a government facility – and still being unable to return to their home in Dubai.

They are calling on the UAE authorities to help them and other residents who are stranded. They have applied for approval to travel from the government’s official portal, but are yet to receive permission.

And, in any case, no flights are currently available.

“It gets more stressful every time we read in the news that the airlines are postponing the date of going back into operation. We’ll definitely do whatever we’re asked when it comes to quarantine whether at a hotel or self-quarantining home,” Peri said.

When it comes to the mounting cost of the trip, the couple have decided “not to do the maths until we go back, because we don’t know when it’s going to end”.

Still, they know others around the world are in far more difficult positions. But they emphasize the trip has been far from an extended honeymoon.

“It’s always sad when you’re in a resort and you’re the last guests there, and all the staff are waving bye-bye to you. You feel bad for them too. That happened twice to us,” said Khaled. “Places like this should be full of people and good moments, that’s not the case right now.”

“Every time we tell people we are stuck in the Maldives, they laugh and they’re like ‘it’s not the worst situation, I wish I could be in your position’” Peri added. “It’s not as easy or happy, it’s definitely very stressful. Enjoy being at home with family. I would take that over anything.”