

Local

# Kuwait-based Filipino expats stranded in Georgia for months

## The four-day visit is now 75 days and counting

By Ben Garcia

**KUWAIT:** At the start of the coronavirus outbreak in Kuwait, three Filipinos left the country for a trip to Georgia from March 8 to March 13. At that time, commercial flights were still operational, although there were many clear indications that Kuwait airport might lock down and foreigners would not be allowed to enter. The trio pushed through anyway with their trip and enjoyed every part of Georgia they visited.

Traveling at the start of the global pandemic seemed to be the craziest thing to do, but they went ahead because the tickets they had booked were non-refundable, they were assured by the airline that they could come back, and they also signed a document at Kuwait airport saying that when they returned, they would be subjected to a 14-day quarantine.

The trio believed they could return just in time, but they were wrong. On March 11, Kuwait announced the closure of Kuwait International Airport from March 13, halting commercial flights. Speaking from Tbilisi through Facebook Messenger, Dan said if only they had been given a sign they couldn't return as planned, probably they would've had changed their minds.

### Return in time

"We believed them! We thought we could still catch up, plus the airline reassured us that we could return just in time before the closure of the airport. We believed them even as we were a bit hesitant to fly out of Kuwait," he said. "When we heard about the closure decision, we immediately coordinated with the airline if we could still leave Georgia prior to the lockdown. Again, they said we could complete our vacation and come back, so we did not resched-

ule our vacation," he said.

"Because of the sudden closure of the airport, the airline advised us to leave Tbilisi on March 14 instead of March 13. They said it was due to the changes in the flight schedule of several airlines. They told us to stand by, because we would be allowed to return to Kuwait since we were not citizens of Georgia and had work permits in Kuwait. On March 14, we were allowed to leave Georgia for Kuwait. Our flight had a stopover in Sharjah, but when we landed in Sharjah, we got the bad news that we couldn't proceed to Kuwait, as the country only permitted the entry of Kuwaitis. The airline flew us back to Georgia on the same day," Dan said.

"A very stressful journey - of course we were disappointed. We waited until morning at Tbilisi airport to go back to the city proper and get temporary shelter. Georgian people are very hospitable and understood the situation we were in. They accompanied us to several apartments in the city where we could stay while waiting for the airport

to reopen. We saw some very expensive apartments, but we needed to be very practical and realistic, as we did not know how long we were going to stay in Tbilisi. We selected a very cool but inexpensive apartment in the capital. We are paying only KD 92 per month for a 2-bedroom flat with a wide living room, kitchen and bathroom," Dan said.

"At first we were okay with it since we still had enough money to survive for another week or so. But as the days went by, we were afraid of depleting our savings in the bank, so we decided to look for our consulate in Tbilisi. We found it and reported our predicament to them. They said they will try to do whatever it takes to help us. True enough, after a few days, we received some food packs with groceries good for a month, and they told us if we needed



Food packs given to the group by the Philippines consulate in Tbilisi.

more, they are ready to assist. They said they got the food packs from the Georgian Red Cross. Our prayers every night is for us to be able to leave soon for Kuwait, since we work there and our belongings are all in our apartment. We thought of going back to the Philippines, but even Manila airport is closed, so we only have one choice - to stay and wait until everything normalizes," he said.

### 75 days

Their vacation of four days is now 75 days and counting. "We are waiting here at the apartment in Tbilisi. We stroll every day - we are allowed to move here. They also have a curfew here, but it starts only after 9 pm and ends at 6 am, so we have lots of free time to visit more places and get to know about Georgia and its people," Dan said.

Tbilisi airport is also closed. "The lockdown here is more relaxed - public transport was only suspended for two weeks. People can come out but they were told to wear facemasks at all times. Now they are back to business - it's normal now, although people are cautious. They continue to observe social distancing too," he said.

"I describe this journey as 'bittersweet'. Bitter because of the unplanned extended vacation, and sweet because we've got to enjoy Georgia for a longer period and gotten to know more about the country and people. We are praying for the normalization of Kuwait and the world. We want to go back to Kuwait and start working; we've learned lessons from this long journey and we hope this would be the end of it. We do not want another lockdown and remain stranded in a foreign land," Dan said.



**KUWAIT:** A team from the Kuwait Fire Protection Association visited a number of shelters and quarantine sites to inspect fire safety measures and equipment, in order to help government efforts in fighting the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). — By Hanan Al-Saadoun



### News in brief

#### Co-op Eid appointments changed

**KUWAIT:** The Ministry of Commerce announced that all appointments to co-ops and central markets will be canceled on the first day of Eid Al-Fitr while Tamween (ration supply) branches will be closed for the first two days of Eid. The appointments will be changed to be from 8 am until 12 am. Meanwhile, the ministry of commerce announced that all expired commercial licenses will be extended for six months starting from June 23.

#### Staff infected

**KUWAIT:** Mishref Co-op Society announced that 35 out of its 250 employees tested positive for coronavirus. The central market in block 4 was closed and will re-open tomorrow.

#### Two flights

**KUWAIT:** Directorate General of Civil Aviation announced that two flights, one to Ghana and another to Qatar, departed from Kuwait International Airport yesterday. A total of 534 passengers are expected to leave the country as of May 23.

#### Interior workers

**KUWAIT:** The Ministry of Interior called on its employees who are infected with coronavirus to communicate with the ministry by WhatsApp (65912803) to provide their needs or to follow up with their health condition, affirming that the ministry is keen on the safety of its workers.

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