

Few vaccinations, even fewer vacations: Kiwis are cooling on Ardern

James Salmon Perth

Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's prime minister, looked relaxed at a vaccination centre in her hometown of Hamilton last week, smiling as a nurse injected her with her second dose of Pfizer.

"Just fine. Really, really easy," was how the 41-year-old summed up the experience. It is not a description that still applies to her country's fight against the pandemic.

"Jacindamania" – the extraordinary popularity of

New Zealand's youngest prime minister in 150 years – reached new heights after her early decision to shut the country's borders helped to keep it almost Covid-free.

More than 16 months later, however, she has yet to set out a plan to reopen New Zealand to visitors.

Non-residents need to show that they have an exceptional reason to travel to New Zealand, such as reuniting with a partner. Anyone allowed in must quarantine in a hotel for two weeks at their own expense. Even securing a spot in

quarantine can take months because of caps on arrivals. Tens of thousands of expats are unable to travel home.

Ardern is also presiding over one of the slowest vaccination rates in the developed world.

Political opponents have accused her of complacency. They say her administration was too slow to order vaccines and failed to order enough, a problem made worse by the pace of approvals by New Zealand's medical regulator, Medsafe.

David Seymour, leader of the right-wing ACT party,

said: "It's difficult to imagine a country with greater natural advantages for dealing with a pandemic. There is nowhere more isolated... But while the rest of the world is going forward we are starting to go backwards."

After a landslide election victory in October Ardern's approval ratings slid 15 points from December to March.

Support for her governing Labour-Green coalition has dropped to the lowest level since the pandemic began, according to a Roy Morgan poll published on Friday,



Jacinda Ardern received her second jab on Wednesday, but vaccination rates remain sluggish in New Zealand

sitting at 49.5 per cent, five points clear of the Nationals, ACT and the Maori party.

Ardern's strategy has kept New Zealanders safe, though. Only 26 people have died after catching the virus and at the last count there were zero cases in the community.

The more infectious Delta strain has not infiltrated New Zealand. Whereas Australia – which has just set out plans for reopening its borders – has been plagued by snap lockdowns for millions of people, New Zealand's last lockdown was in Auckland in February. Ardern has insisted

that the vaccine programme is ahead of schedule yet she is one of just over 700,000 people to have received both doses in a population of five million. Less than 15 per cent of over-16s are fully jabbed.

"They have got themselves in a bit of a knot by failing to vaccinate people quickly enough," Sir Peter Gluckman, the government's former chief science adviser, said.

The Pfizer-BioNTech jab is the sole one on offer in New Zealand. Until recently doses arrived in small batches. AstraZeneca got the green light last week.

Venice calls on Big Brother to control crowds

As tourists return to the city's streets and canals, CCTV and phone-tracking is being used to ease bottlenecks

Tom Kington Venice

From a hidden control room in Venice, officials are tracking every resident, shopkeeper, gondolier and, above all, tourist squeezing into St Mark's Square.

Steeped in centuries of history, the city is looking to the future as it wrestles with a present in which "overtourism" threatens its very survival.

With visitors absent during the pandemic, Venetians were able to venture out of their houses without fear of being crushed, and to marvel at canals turned crystal clear by the absence of motorboats churning up mud. Dolphins have frolicked off St Mark's Square.

Now, as the tourists return, the goal is to avoid sliding back into the recent past.

From today, massive cruise ships have been banned from the Venice lagoon in a move that will change the appearance of the ancient city's principal waterways.

But more far-reaching change is already under way in the shadows.

Visitors arriving by train, bus and smaller boats are now under extraordinary levels of surveillance thanks to a network of 400 CCTV cameras, optical sensors that trace movement and a tracking system that monitors every mobile phone Sim card in the city.

The results are collated on giant screens in the control room, opened last year in a disused cargo warehouse at the edge of Venice.

On a single day this week a total of 95,000 Sim cards were present in the city. The system can also tell in which country the cards were registered: another screen showed 29,000 were likely to belong to tourists – with about a quarter from Germany.

"An integrated system like this doesn't exist anywhere in the world," said Marco Bettini, co-director general of Venis, the tech company that built the system.

Using a mouse to zoom in on St Mark's Square, he noted that it contained 492 mobile-phone owners, of whom 259 were non-Italians.

“If we see where crowds are forming, we can divert them

"If we know where tourist crowds are forming, we can send officers to divert people to other parts of the city," said Venice's deputy police chief, Maria Teresa Maniero. Access to certain streets can also be restricted temporarily and turnstiles on bottleneck bridges closed – a scheme already tested before the pandemic.

What seems to be a radical departure for the ancient city actually has a strong historical resonance. During the Renaissance, the republic's rulers developed a sophisticated intelligence network, housed in the Doge's Palace on St Mark's Square, that spied on residents and gathered information from across Europe, the Middle East and north Africa. In her 2019 book *Venice's Secret Service*, the historian Ioanna Iordanou made the case that it was "the world's earliest centrally organised state-intelligence service".

Five centuries on, officials promise their new system does not identify phone owners but it does allow them for the first time to count the day-trippers arriving in Venice and follow their progress around its streets and canals.

That, they say, is crucial because daily visitors remain far more perilous to the city's future than the giant cruise ships that towered over its fragile palazzos.

Campaigners claimed a victory for sustainable tourism when the ban was announced. Yet while the behemoth ships, some 290 metres long, may have blocked out the light and shaken the foundations of the city, they only disgorged about 450,000 tourists a year into Venice, 1.5 per cent of the 30 million visitors who swarm down alleys and bivouacs by canals every year.

And those visitors are slowly returning. This week, with EU borders open, Venice was filling up again, although the absence of Asian visitors kept the crowds down. "It would be great if it stayed like this – busy but manageable, meaning you can actually get on the water buses," said British novelist Philip Gwynne Jones, who has lived in Venice for nine years.

MANUEL SILVESTRI/REUTERS



Empty tables at a restaurant in St Mark's Square during lockdown. Left, officials examine the flow of tourists on Venice's new tracking system



Assuming the mobs return, mayor Luigi Brugnaro is plotting the launch next year of a scheme he first announced before the pandemic: advance online payment of up to €10 by every visitor before they can enter Venice.

"It will reduce numbers and it means we will know how many people are coming," said tourism chief Simone Venturini, who said that the turnstile scheme to divert crowds over less crowded bridges would also continue. For those who do cough up, the control room will keep a close eye on them once they arrive.

But if herding visitors around Venice using *Truman Show* technology can ease the pain of mass tourism, the city's real challenge is encouraging people to live there again. The population dropped from 170,000 last century to about 50,000 today.

Record flooding caused by the city's

perennial *acqua alta* (high tide) drove out thousands in 1966, and while the Mose flood barrier is now working after years of delays, rising tides threaten to push out the remainder.

That has prompted Carlo Bagnoli, an academic at the city's Ca' Foscari university, to hatch a plan to woo start-ups to the city. In September, seven applicants will be given four months of industry-funded rent and living support to relocate, and another three will get €20,000. "That will bring international residents, who we hope will attract more," Bagnoli said. "We aim to make Venice the oldest city of the future."

Jerome Halbout, an investment manager from France, needed no incentive to move to Venice when Covid-19 struck. "On March 10, 2020, I sent my team home from our office in Paris, got in my car and drove to Venice, and I have been here

“Last century 170,000 people lived in Venice. Now it's 50,000

ever since," he said. "There is no traffic, the fibre internet and services are great, there's an international airport across the lagoon and I have a small boat for getting out to the beaches at the Lido," said Halbout, 62. "I'm living in a 500-year-old palazzo and the rents are much cheaper than Paris – so, no, I will not be getting the team back into the office," he added.

A grassroots fightback against depopulation is under way in the area east of St Mark's Square, near the Arsenal shipyard, where residents have resisted the arrival of Airbnb and where the hairdresser, fruit-and-veg shop and a café serving €12, two-course lunches to builders survive.

Artists have taken over the long-abandoned San Lorenzo church and filled it with video installations. In a nearby back street, an abandoned blacksmith's workshop full of rusting machinery is to be converted into an exhibition space and biodiversity research centre.

"When people talk about Venice, they talk about tourism, but if we can attract students, artists, scientists and entrepreneurs, we can change that," said Hélène Molinari, the head of the Sumus foundation behind the project.

But in Patience, her clothes shop beside the Comenda bridge, Venice-born Daniela Lombardo, 27, warned that those who returned as she did during the pandemic might be on their way again.

"Rents, which dropped during Covid are inching up," she said. "I'll be watching to see if tourism returns to unliveable levels again."

Far-right and gilets jaunes find common cause in France's antivax carnival

Peter Conradi Paris

He has railed against immigration and called for Brexit. Now Florian Philippot, the former right-hand man of Marine Le Pen, is trying to position himself at the head of a wave of protests against restrictions being imposed by the government of President Emmanuel Macron to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

An estimated 150,000 people, chanting "Liberté", "Résistance" and "Macron resign" took part in 200 or so rallies across France yesterday against the introduction of the *pass sanitaire* – a health passport that from August 9 will be compulsory for those wanting to visit a bar, café or restaurant. The protests – some of which turned violent – were joined by health workers angry at being ordered to be fully vaccinated by October 15 or face suspension without pay.

Rallies were also held in Rome and other Italian cities by those opposed to a similar "green pass" due to come

into effect there on August 6, amid signs of a growing divide across Europe over the extent to which the state should restrict the rights of the unvaccinated.

In France the most prominent demonstration was that organised by Philippot, 39, a former vice-president of Le Pen's far right National Rally, who quit in 2017 to set up his own party, Les Patriotes, for which he is running in next April's presidential election.

There was a carnival atmosphere as tens of thousands of people marched from Montparnasse through the Left Bank for a rally at which speakers, headed by Philippot, urged the crowd to resist the "shameful pass" imposed by a "shameful" government contrary to the "sacred principles" of France's freedom-loving past.

"Vive la résistance, vive la liberté, vive la France," Philippot concluded, as the Marseille blared out through a loudspeaker. He urged people to return for a protest next Saturday.

Among the demonstrators

was Mina, 40, a nurse from Georges Pompidou hospital in Paris. "I am not saying the vaccine doesn't work, just that it may have side effects that we don't know about," she said. She was echoed by Laurent, 52, an engineer, marching with a sign that read: "Macron, stick the vaccine up your arse". He said: "The government has mishandled the health crisis and now they are trying to create a kind of apartheid between those who have been vaccinated and the rest."

There was violence at another protest involving thousands of people near Bastille, in the southeast of Paris, where demonstrators built barricades and threw stones and other projectiles at police, who responded with tear gas. More than 3,000 police were on duty, many to prevent protesters spilling on to the Champs-Élysées. In Lyons, protesters gathered outside the Edouard Herriot hospital, where a group of workers went on strike last week in protest at the measures. Nationally, the protesters

appeared to be a mixture of antivaxers – many of them supporters of the far right – and others happy to be immunised but who reject coercion. There were also gilets jaunes, members of the grassroots movement that emerged in late 2018 in protest at Macron's "green" taxes on fuel, causing chaos for almost a year.

The new movement brings together "the same kind of people" as the gilets jaunes, according to Philippe Breton, a sociologist at Strasbourg University. Aged largely 30 to 50, living outside the main cities on modest incomes and suspicious of politicians, media and other public institutions, they consider the *pass sanitaire* an attempt to exclude the non-vaccinated from society. "They have taken it as a declaration of war," Breton told the newspaper *Libération*.

After attracting little attention for months, France's antivax movement has been given a boost by the restrictions, which were announced by Macron in a speech on July 12 in an

attempt to give impetus to the vaccination campaign, which was beginning to slow amid a reluctance among the young.

The president's strategy worked: more than another 4.7 million people have since had their first jab, spurred into action by the prospect of the *pass sanitaire*, which has been compulsory since July 21

for entry to concerts, cinemas, theatres and other places where more than 50 people are gathered. To obtain a pass, those who have not been vaccinated must either provide or produce a negative test or provide proof of having recovered after testing positive for the virus. Yet it has also provoked a

backlash from those who see the restrictions as an assault on individual liberties: the voices have been loudest on the far right and the far left, both of which voted against the measures, which were passed last weekend. The constitutional council is due to rule on or after August 5 on whether it is in accordance with the French constitution.

Macron's government could face a more serious challenge this autumn ahead of the October final deadline for hospital and other health workers to be jabbed. Some appear likely to resist. France's public health agency estimated in June that 72.2 per cent of doctors had had a first vaccination, but only 58.7 per cent of nurses and 50 per cent of assistant nurses. There has also been talk of stoppages by railway workers, who will be required to check for health passes on inner-city trains.

The consequences for the French presidential race are more difficult to predict: although their stand may win them new supporters at the polls, Philippot, and other far-



Demonstrators in Paris yesterday protesting against the pass sanitaire, needed for entry to places where over 50 people are gathered

right figures such as Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, 60, and François Asselineau, 63, also seeking to ride the antivax wave, remain fringe figures, unlikely to win more than a few per cent of the vote.

Yet some of their extra backing may come from erstwhile followers of Le Pen, who voted against the *pass sanitaire* but has kept a distance from the street protests for fear of alienating the mainstream voters she is trying to woo. If she loses too many supporters, this could harm her changes of progressing to the second round runoff, which has been expected to be a rerun of the 2017 election in which she was defeated by Macron.

The heated debate in France is mirrored by one in Italy, where two main leaders on the national conservative right, Matteo Salvini, head of the League, and Giorgia Meloni, head of Brothers of Italy, have both spoken out against restrictions – even though Salvini remains a member of the ruling coalition that imposed them. @Peter.Conradi