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# Venezuela's Detention of American Reflects Wider Risks for Travelers

By KEJAL VYAS

Florida resident Joey Cristella ignored warnings from his family and traveled to Venezuela in September 2022 to see his fiancée and get baptized, so the two of them could tie the knot in a Catholic church.

Instead, he was arrested shortly after crossing the bridge into Venezuela from Colombia, and within weeks his charge escalated from an immigration infraction—entering Venezuela without a visa, as required for U.S. citizens—to conspiracy to commit terrorism. That led to a 15-month detention that ended Dec. 20, when he was freed in a prisoner swap between the Biden administration and the regime of President Nicolás Maduro. He was never tried or convicted.

Cristella's turn from tourist to eventual pawn in a geopolitical deal illustrates the new risks for American travelers in countries adversarial to the U.S. and how autocratic regimes increasingly use American prisoners as bargaining chips.

In Cristella's case, he was one of six Americans in Venezuela the U.S. State Department had deemed "wrongfully detained" and who were at the center of the trade that saw Maduro release 11 prisoners in exchange for Alex Saab, a close business partner of Maduro who had helped Caracas skirt Washington's economic sanctions until he was nabbed to face federal money-laundering charges in Miami. Saab, who has said he is innocent, had been awaiting trial when he was granted clemency.

The swap came after the Biden and Maduro governments reached a deal in October to restart deporting Venezuelan migrants who don't qualify for asylum or parole back to Venezuela. The U.S. also lifted some of its economic sanctions against Venezuela in exchange for commitments to free political detainees and hold fair elections this year. But the release of Saab has



Joey Cristella was welcomed back to the U.S. last month after being detained in Venezuela.

drawn a rebuke from some U.S. senators, who said the trade only emboldens Maduro to lock up more Americans.

Senior U.S. officials responded that releasing Saab for American detainees was a difficult choice. The officials said they secured commitments from Venezuela that additional Americans wouldn't be detained, but they warn U.S. citizens against travel there.

Saab was exchanged for a Malaysian businessman who had pleaded guilty to paying bribes to U.S. Navy officials in a sprawling graft case, and who was awaiting sentencing when he escaped in 2022 to Venezuela and was arrested again. In addition, 10 Americans went home, including Cristella.

In an interview with The Wall Street Journal, Cristella, a former manager for a solar-panel company, said he believes flimsy evidence, repeatedly postponed court hearings and other delay tactics allowed Venezuela to hold him until it got what it wanted.

"I'm not bitter about my detention, but I am a little upset that this is the way that busi-

ness is done," Cristella said by phone from Boise, Idaho. "If there was no Alex Saab in the picture, I'm sure [the Venezuelan government] would've just tossed me back out."

Venezuela's Information Ministry didn't respond to calls and emails seeking comment.

Cristella said that after his stressful job at the solar company ended in 2021, he spent months traveling the Caribbean to be closer to his fiancée, Agni Castellano, a Caracas native working as an event planner in the Dominican Republic.

Castellano said she warned Cristella not to follow her when she urgently needed to fly home after her grandfather died.

Cristella decided to go anyway, thinking that showing up and getting baptized in Venezuela would make a good impression with the Castellanos.

But Cristella said he made the mistake of trying to get a Venezuelan stamp in his U.S. passport, which tipped off officials that he had entered without the requisite visa. He was soon arrested.

He said officers from the General Directorate for Military

Counterintelligence, or DGCIM, rummaged through his backpack. What piqued intelligence officers' interest, Cristella said, were the photos he had on his phone of the residential solar equipment he used to install in the Orlando, Fla., area. He said he was told by officials interrogating him that those photos were evidence that he was planning to spy.

He was flown on a jet to the DGCIM's headquarters in Caracas, where other American detainees were held.

Cristella said he wasn't subjected to physical abuse and, in what he described as one of the more surprising moments of his detention, DGCIM prison directors arranged a jailhouse baptism for him.

Now home, Cristella said he is eager to restart Castellano's stalled U.S. visa application. He hopes the two of them will settle down somewhere near the Caribbean, but for now they will be outside Venezuela.

"I told him don't even think about stepping foot there for many, many years," she said.

—Patricia Garip contributed to this article.

## Immigration Passport Entry Stamp on Arrival

Failure to receive an immigration entry stamp in your passport has the potential of seriously disrupting or terminating a business trip. When clearing immigration and before leaving customs, you should always be 100% certain that the immigration officer has clearly entered the visa entry stamp in your passport. If you do not witness your passport's stamping, ask the officer to point to the stamp.

Sometimes agents become distracted and do not stamp the passport, or the stamped seal is unclear. In some parts of the world, the failure to stamp the passport may be intentional and is a means to penalize you when you depart the country if the passport has not been legibly stamped. In that case, customs will note the omission when leaving the country and you may be detained until acceptable evidence is produced supporting your legal entry into the country. Alternatively, you may have to pay a hefty fine. This process can be extremely time-consuming, expensive and may prohibit your departure on the scheduled flight, affecting meetings for the remainder of the trip. Lastly, note the visa stamp's passport page location. You may need to point it out to the agent on departure, as stamps are often difficult to locate in a nearly full passport.

Interestingly, as I wrote this chapter while traveling on holiday, my hotel requested a copy of my passport visa entry stamp to waive a hotel tax, but I could not find the visa entry stamp in the passport. Before leaving the country, I spent a full day at the customs office resolving the issue that would have been avoided had I noticed at the airport that customs had not stamped the passport when I entered the country. Additionally, I paid another fee to process the new visa at a bank remotely located from the customs office. Fortunately, this was a personal trip and I did not lose a full business day managing the issue.

Several years ago, our travel team of three arrived in Uruguay, and our boss was sitting in the front of the plane and was the first person

to deboard. He raced out the plane door to immigration. There was no immigration agent present and he continued out of customs and waited at a bar for my colleague and me to clear customs. When we joined him at the bar, he bragged about how fast he flew through immigration and customs. Three days later, as we left the country, the customs agent could not find the entry stamp in his passport – because there was none. He was apprehended and taken into custody. My colleague and I could do nothing. We assumed that was the last time we would see him on the trip, so we boarded the plane to Miami for a meeting scheduled for the following day. Fortunately, Uruguayan customs released our colleague and the plane kindly waited 10 minutes for him at the gate.

The bottom line is always to ensure that the customs agent stamps your passport when entering any country. Never 'run' past an immigration checkpoint, even if no agent is present. Hopefully, these stories will serve as potent reminders of the importance of passport visa entry stamps.

### **Security Delays Resulting from Multiple Visas**

In the early 2000s, I often traveled with a South African colleague who traveled extensively throughout Africa, the Middle East, the Far East, Russia and the ex-Soviet countries. His passport was extraordinarily thick from continually adding pages for new visas. After September 11, 2001, when international security was highly elevated, we made several trips together. Because of all the Middle Eastern visa stamps in his passport, when clearing US immigration and customs, it was a certainty that he would be pulled aside and his luggage would be thoroughly searched. He would then be escorted to a separate room and questioned. The process always took 30 minutes or more. We can now laugh about those experiences. I always jokingly told him that the problem was his full beard and worn suitcase, which looked like it had also traveled the world. He did have a moment of