

Adventures (nightmares) in Business Travel

My job requires a great deal of travel. How much travel? For the last six years, I have flown between 110,000 to 165,000 miles per year and spent approximately 100 nights annually in hotel rooms. This year, I qualified for my United MileagePlus 1K status (United's top level frequent flier status) for 2013 in August 2012. No, that is not a typo. Some years I have made it to every continent with the exception of Antarctica.

I thought it would be interesting, and humorous to share some of the good points of all this travel, as well as some of the "interesting experiences" I have had.

One of the best things about the travel is that I have made many friends around the world and have gotten to see many interesting places, some of which I would not have traveled to if not for the business travel. I've learned to appreciate and enjoy sports that I would never have gotten to see here in the USA. I've had the good fortune to attend Rugby League matches in the UK and Australia, an Australia Rules Football (AFL) game in Melbourne and a water polo match in Johannesburg.

What about the food, you ask? I have learned to balance the quest for new cuisine against the fact that my stomach may not be as curious or open-minded as the rest of me. I've found that American coffee is not that good, and is certainly much weaker than the coffee in Brazil. Our beer is pretty weak too, especially compared with Belgian beer. On the other hand, our steaks are the best.

I have a nineteen-year-old son who is now a sophomore at Virginia Tech, and a sixteen-year-old daughter who is a junior in high school. It's been hard being away from them so much, and even harder being away from Melinda, my wife of twenty years. I often ask myself if the reason I resigned my commission as a Navy officer was the lengthy periods of being away from home, so why am I doing this job? On the other hand, two years ago all those frequent flier miles and all of those Hilton points made it seem more worthwhile. The four of us flew first class on a two week vacation to Hawaii, and stayed in the Hilton Hawaiian Village. The airfare would have cost \$12,000 and the hotel \$10,000. Instead, it cost nothing other than points. And our family had a wonderful time and can't wait to get back.

Of course it's not all good adventures. Here are five of the more irritating and memorable things I've experienced:

- 1) TSA screening story: On a trip to Philadelphia I had a TSA employee pull me out of line for special screening because I "looked like an Islamic terrorist". It was summer (I tan easily) and my hair was a little longer. I told the guy I was insulted as I was a Navy veteran and demanded to see his supervisor.
- 2) Customs horror story #1: On a 2003 trip to Toronto, our Canadian immigration friends asked me to come to a room to answer some questions about my military background. I

told them that the Geneva Convention only required me to provide my name, rank and serial number. They were not too amused, but after 30 minutes gave up. I figured that if they were going to be a pain and waste my time, I'd do the same. What's the worst they would do? Send me home?

- 3) Customs horror story #2: London Spring 2012. I was trapped in the immigrations line for 90 minutes at Heathrow. Even worse, I was surrounded in the non-EU line by people who smelled like they had not bathed since the last Olympics. And I had some guy behind me who liked to crowd me and kept touching me. I lost my composure and yelled at the guy, basically telling him that if he touched me again, his arm would hurt. (That is the clean version). Of course this drew the attention of the police, but they took my side.
- 4) Customer data center security story: February 2012. My first time visiting a Chinese bank that will remain nameless. Imagine getting out of the taxi at the gate, and seeing soldiers/security with AK-47 rifles at the ready. Kind of intimidating. Then, the visitors' desk wanted to hold onto my passport during my meeting. I refused which caused a problem. Finally, they relented. Once inside, I was amazed at the layered, highly confusing security process. I had to get a badge in one place, so I could get another badge at another building. Did that twice. Had to go through multiple metal detectors. I was praying that a body cavity search was not going to be required, because if it was, the meeting was not going to happen. Finally, we had our meeting.
- 5) Airline horror story: I have several but this one takes the cake. In early September of this year, I was supposed to fly to Moscow (Russia not Idaho) for a short trip to do a FICON training seminar for IBMers and Brocade customers. I was flying on United. Took off from Columbus on a Saturday afternoon to connect at Washington Dulles. From there I was supposed to fly to Frankfurt where I would connect via Lufthansa to Moscow. Then I learned about Murphy's Law.

While we were enroute from Columbus to Dulles, a storm system popped up at Dulles. It was a really bad storm. Air Traffic Control placed planes in a hold status. After 30 minutes of circling, our pilot informed us that due to low fuel, we were going to have to divert to Norfolk, VA. We get to Norfolk and the pilot tells us we're going to refuel, and be ready to take off when Dulles opened up again. Well, that took a little longer than he thought. Everyone and his brother diverted to Norfolk, including some transatlantic flights. It took us over three hours to get refueled and to take off for Dulles. We finally got to Dulles 6 hours late. I had missed my flight to Frankfurt by four hours.

I went to the United customer service people in the United Club. It was a long line, but not as long as the ones in the terminal. Everyone was in the same boat. Hundreds of people fly through Dulles every Saturday night to connect to flights to Europe for business trips. We were all stranded at Dulles. I finally got to the front of the line, and the customer service representative was very nice and helpful. I was told that Lufthansa had just gone on strike, so my Frankfurt to Moscow flight had been cancelled too. The best they could do would be to put me in a middle

seat with a bulkhead in front of me (I had been upgraded to Business Class for my original Dulles-Frankfurt flight). That was lucky since I was a 1K. Many people were being told they could not get a flight to Europe until Monday or Tuesday (since the airlines book the flights full).

The agent could get me on a flight to London but could not locate my luggage to get it moved. Alarm bells started going off in my brain. Not only were all these people stuck, but all our luggage was stuck and lost in the system too. It seemed quite likely that I would get to Moscow, and have no luggage. The clothes on my back and in my carry-on would not cut it for a formal seminar. I could be stuck with no clothes for a week. And the chances of me finding replacement clothes (shirt size 18-36, suit coat size 48L) were not too good.

I asked if there was a flight home to Columbus that night. Fortunately there still was. I asked the agent to put me on a flight home. I'd try Moscow again at some later date. It proved to be a good call. They did not locate my luggage and get it to me in Columbus until two days later. I would have been stuck as I had feared.

So, what have I learned from these experiences? First, frequent travel does have some upsides to go along with the downside of frequent home absences. Second, patience is a virtue. Third, remember that in a scenario like #5, Ptolemy was wrong: the rest of the universe does not revolve around you. Many people have the same problem, the customer service people are doing the best they can, and treating them nicely is far better than taking out your frustrations on them. Finally, when all else fails listen to the voice inside your head.