



OH, THE HORROR!

WRITERS' TALES OF 12 TRIPS GONE WRONG



BRIAN STAUFFER/ILLUSTRATION

Horrors are relative. Planes can fall from the sky, wildfires burn, beaches flood. But travelers also encounter hardship in simpler ways. That suitcase with clothes for the week in Milan? It's in Minneapolis. The room with a view? Why, yes, that is a prison next door. Such are the little mishaps that can darken any traveler's day. And so we offer tales of travels that turned out to be more trick than treat.

COME FLY WITH ME

I was a flight attendant in the late '70s for a now defunct charter airline. We would leave the galley exit doors open for ventilation while boarding passengers, stringing a seat belt across the opening to keep people from falling out. After all had boarded one day, I shut the door, did my usual safety patter, and sat down near the door as the stretch DC-8 lumbered toward liftoff.

That's when I — and everyone else — heard a loud bang just outside the door, then another, and another, coming in rapid succession as we barreled down the runway. All eyes nearby turned to me with a "What the hell is that?" look as we went airborne and the bangs increased in frequency and volume to a constant, deafening roar.

Then it hit me: I had shut the door with the seat belt outside, the buckle now slamming into the plane in 400-mile-

FLY, Page M8

A RIVER RAN THROUGH US

I planned a nine-day hike through a Malaysian rain forest to climb Gunung Tahan, at 7,174 feet, the region's highest mountain. My hiking partner and I dismissed the idea of a guide. There were no huts along the way and the only people we encountered were two nomadic tribesmen. Did I mention that it was the start of monsoon season?

Three days into the hike, we pitched our tent beside the trail, in a clearing about 30 feet from peninsular Malaysia's largest river. Then the rain came, much welcome after hiking over 27 hilltops in 90-degree heat.

We awoke at 1:30 a.m., half-asleep and dazed, as waves gushed through the door of our tent. The area's tributaries had dumped rainwater into the main river, causing a flash flood. The river was a thundering torrent, carrying logs the size of telephone poles downstream. It had also whisked

HIKE, Page M8

HUSH, LITTLE BABY, DON'T SAY A WORD

It was only a month after the birth of our daughter. Our son was 2. Home, in other words, was a cradle of exhaustion.

Then came a one-night solo trip to Pittsburgh. The plan: I arrive late afternoon, speak on a university panel, grab dinner, then back to the hotel for undisturbed slumber.

The room was standard issue: queen-size bed, view of the parking lot, a numbing selection of repetitive cable channels. Perfect, that is, to sleep long and deep.

Sometime before midnight, I nestled the blankets beneath my chin like Dr. Seuss's little Cindy-Lou Who and sacked out.

5:12 a.m. About the time of the first shriek. That frantic, inimitable cry that can only be uttered by an infant. It grew to a sustained wail.

SLEEP, Page M8

Don't go there: tales of 12 trips gone wrong

ANOTHER ITALIAN ART



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN STAUFFER

I didn't pick up on the obvious when I dragged my luggage into Turin's Porta Nuova train station. The main hall was deserted, the ticket windows closed. It was 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning in March. I figured everyone was either in church or sleeping off a grappa hangover. Italians are not known for punctuality.

This time, though, the train to Nice was leaving at 8:30 and there wasn't a soul in sight. So I went out to the street. "Where is everybody," I asked a yawning bystander. "Sciopero," I was told with a shrug. A strike.

Some scioperi last for an hour, some for days. I could hang around the station indefinitely. Or I could resort to the ancient Italian art of "arrangiarsi," improvising on the fly.

So I took a cab to the airport to see who might be making the 96-mile hop south to the Riviera. Nobody, of course. I could take Air France to Paris then recross the Alps. Or I could fly down to Rome on Alitalia and go over the Ligurian Sea.

The water route was decidedly cheaper than the mountain (although 20 times the train price) with a much shorter layover. "Sorry," I was informed when I got to Rome. "The flight to Nice is delayed by three hours, maybe more."

So I did what any Italian would do when faced with the possibility of an eternal wait in the Eternal City. I dragged my luggage to the airport bar and sipped a Campari, then another.

I arrived in time for a magnificent \$900 sunset over the Riviera.

JOHN POWERS

SUCH RASH DECISIONS



I and my husband, Ken, and sons Ben, 9, and Jonathan, 4, were on a two-week cruise from Istanbul to Venice. We'd been in Athens for two days when Jonathan got sick, with a fever. On a hunch, I checked him, and there it was: the bull's-eye rash of Lyme disease. A dose of antibiotics and all would be well.

But the ship's purser ordered us off the ship — immediately. "A taxi is waiting to take you to the hospital," she said, perhaps fearing an epidemic. No, the ship would not wait. I grabbed our passports — no time to pack a bag — and we were escorted off the ship.

The next two days were hellacious. We waited all night in the hospital for an English-speaking doctor. A strike meant we couldn't fly to meet the ship in Venice. A train would have to do. We arrived in Venice around 1 a.m. and there wasn't a room to be had. Finally, a hotel owner, whose wife was a travel agent, took pity on us. By morning, she had persuaded cruise officials to send a taxi, and we made it back to the ship in time to disembark for home.

Nobody from the crew said a word to us, a final insult. A letter of complaint about our treatment earned a form-letter reply from the corporate office.

We still get brochures from the cruise line touting their fabulous voyages. My only request? Please, please take me off your mailing list.

CLAUDIA McBRIDE

OPPOSITION IS NO PARTY



I was on the first leg of a three-week trip — Logan to London to Lusaka, Zambia. I packed my carry-on to cope if my check-through suitcase didn't make all three hops. Reading material, a change of clothes, my sleeping pills, and prescriptions for surviving in a malaria zone. No bottles of water, no obvious "liquids." Some single-use foil-wrapped samples of face cream and hand lotion. The basics — except for a one-quart, plastic zip-top bag.

I'm not proud of what I did. But the government made me do it.

As I watched the agent decide that lipstick was a gel, eye shadow a potential explosive, hand cream a liquid, my eyeliner pencil a paste, she noted that had I been law-abiding and come with the proper bag, she would have allowed me to keep my contraband. So, lacking the bag but trusting in human kindness, I began asking every passenger who came through security if they had a bag to lend me.

Except that you're not allowed to make announcements to fellow travelers in a security zone. When the state trooper came along, the choice was clear: Shut up or miss the flight.

In London I had to check my carry-on computer bag through to Lusaka; the choice was either a purse or a carry-on. This time, I was meek. One brush with the law per trip is my limit.

LOUISA KASDON

A PRINCE OF TIDES



Several years ago, a travel editor of this very newspaper asked me to explore how electronic conveniences such as MapQuest and global positioning devices were depriving youngsters of basic navigation skills.

Compass? What's a compass?

Doing the research I discovered a nifty little device for mariners called a plotter. Plotters spit out instant information about speed and position. They also display tide cycles in snazzy three-color graphics. There is one hitch. Because those cycles vary widely along the East Coast, the plotter needs to be told the nearest tide station.

So I set sail one Friday afternoon for Provincetown with my pooch, the plotter, and a plan. I would meet my teenage daughter the next morning; she was taking a ferry from Boston. Anchored by sunset inside Wood End Light, I diligently plugged the P-town tide station into the plotter. Then I turned the device off.

Big mistake.

Turning the plotter back on the next morning I checked the tide and determined I had ample time to nuzzle the bow into a nearby beach to walk the dog. What I did not know was that when I had turned off the plotter the previous night, it automatically had reverted to a tide station in North Carolina — leaving me to think that the tide was rising.

More than a few mariners have beached a beloved vessel high, dry, and inclined 45 degrees to expose its privates to all. But I believe I may be first to suffer an ignominious "folks-you're-not-going-to-believe-this!" commentary over the loudspeaker of an incoming ferry — with my child aboard.

As passengers gawked, my daughter called me on her cellphone. I asked her to wave. She said she was hiding. I offered a few details about the plotter's mistake.

"Ah, Da-ad," she said, "like, why didn't you read the directions?"

DAVID ARNOLD

MY MOST CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE



The soldier and the security guy are pointing. What do they want? It's my pen. A Paper Mate soft grip. Also, my wallet. They start emptying the little pockets that hold cards.

"Hey," I say. This brings instant reinforcements. Sullen faces. Khaki turbans. Guns under armpits, nightsticks stuck to hips.

It is late May. I am in Kashmir — that disputed northern region claimed by both India and Pakistan — one of a handful of tourists caught up during a spate of shootings and grenade blasts. Militants are striving for statehood. I'm anxious to escape.

I've been frisked four times, but no one's even glanced at my passport. My suitcase must be radioactive thanks to repeated X-rays: at a checkpoint on the airport road, at the gate to the airport, and at check-in.

A soldier snatches my backpack. "You are a man," he says. "It is forbidden for a man to bring his bag on the plane." This can't be right. He tugs at it. I tug back.

I hear the announcement: My flight to Delhi is closing. I pull out two crumpled 500 rupee notes (roughly \$20). I watch the paper portraits of Gandhi as they pass from my hand to theirs.

The caps and turbans confer. I'm led out through a service entrance where there is no one around.

I am thinking of trying to make a run for it. A soldier grips me by the arm and hauls me behind a pile of suitcases. I'm made to bend down. This may be it. I wait for the shot.

I hear only a voice. It tells me to find my checked-

through suitcase among the bags. I get to take it with me, and the forbidden backpack.

I say a silent thank-you to Gandhi.

PETER MANDEL

I LOVE A RAINY NIGHT



I had hoped to get to Nashville in time for a good night's sleep before my interview last summer with Mary Gauthier, a former Boston singer who has made a name for herself on the country circuit. But first I had a connecting flight to Washington, which was slammed with torrential rains that made national headlines and shut the city down.

My Nashville flight got canceled at midnight, and I ended up in a slow, 100-person-deep line with a single agent trying to rebook flights for a day or two later. I suddenly announced to the people around me that I was going to rent a car to drive to Nashville and would anyone like to join me. They mostly stared at me, but a young Oberlin College student said yes. So I rented an SUV, and we took off.

It was a harrowing journey over wet roads and foggy mountain passes in hellishly nonstop rain. It seemed that besides us only a few trucks were out on the road. We had heart-to-heart talks the whole way, over 600 miles. We stopped only to refuel and for coffee and doughnuts, and somehow made the 12-hour drive intact.

I made the interview on time, on no sleep. I never saw the student again.

STEVE MORSE

TURKISH FLIGHTS AND DELIGHTS



"Goreme? You stop in Goreme?" I asked the bus driver as I pointed to our ticket. "Yes, Goreme. Coming," he replied as he continued to drive like a maniac. Something was wrong. We had passed Nevsehir about an hour before, and, according to my guidebook, Nevsehir is only five miles from Goreme, the heart of Turkey's intriguing Cappadochia region.

"Goreme, we're going to Goreme!" my wife repeated, nearing hysteria. The driver nodded and grinned.

There was nothing wrong with the guidebook. The driver had indeed sped past Goreme to the next city. Frustrated, we arrived at the bus station there, only to learn that the bus to Goreme didn't leave for five hours.

We got there eventually — seven hours later in the middle of the night.

So much for the perfect honeymoon, the one advertised in glossy bridal magazines with couples strolling hand-in-hand in some European capital, locals having been conveniently blotted out.

All we wanted now was a bed on which to lay our weary heads. Surrounded by barking dogs, we walked up a hill and miraculously found our hotel. Rooms were carved out of the soft tufa rock Cappadochia is known for. But, of course, there was nobody at the front desk. Thoroughly exhausted and borderline delirious, we saw that a door to one of the rooms was ajar. We peeked in . . . the bed was empty. Good night!

STEVE JERMANOK

NOW, ABOUT FAMILY TRAVEL



On semester break from college, my sister, brother, and I traveled with our legal guardian for Christmas 1987. Both hopeful and deluded, we thought we might find a 10-day oasis of togetherness in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. But this trip, what would be our last "family vacation," was doomed.

Upon arrival, we were shuttled to resort hell — hotel rooms with mildewed tile and unhinged doors. A poolside mariachi band played incessantly. Outside, waves churned the ocean into an unswimmable brown morass.

Day two food poisoning hit. Still, the next morn-

A seat belt banging in the wind . . .

► FLY
Continued from Page M1

per-hour winds.

I went to the cockpit and asked the captain, "Uh, hypothetically, what would happen if some moron locked a seat belt outside the plane?" To which he responded, "I'd hate to be that moron if it breaks the skin of the aircraft."

About a half hour later, somewhere over Denver, the noise abruptly stopped, the buckle seemingly having snapped off. I checked the plane when we landed in New York. The skin was dented but intact.

So was my job, though why I wasn't fired I'll never know.

PAUL KANDARIAN

. . . a 30-mile slosh in the jungle . . .

► HIKE
Continued from Page M1

away three of our hiking boots. We salvaged as much of our equipment as possible and scrambled barefoot up a muddy slope, where we slept on top of our broken tent. Then it was a three-day, 30-mile hike through the leech-infested jungle back to the trailhead, in socks.

Our feet were sore and swollen by the time we reached civilization, but we were happy to have survived. We're considering a do-over, this time with a guide, extra shoes, and maybe water wings.

KARI J. BODNARCHUK

. . . and a wailing wall

► SLEEP
Continued from Page M1

I spun in the dark. Where? What? In the neighboring room?!!

The baby's scream grew louder. Breath-gulping panic. Then a mother's soft voice. No luck. Bumps and stumbles, sounds of somebody fumbling around in the dark.

How far was all this commotion — on the other side of a wall — from my head? Eight feet? Four feet? Two?

The clock read 5:41. The baby quieted . . . briefly. 6:17. Did I drift off? Toss and turn. 6:32. Deeper tones of adult conversation. Daylight beyond the curtains. 7:07. Too late.

Time to head home.

TOM HAINES

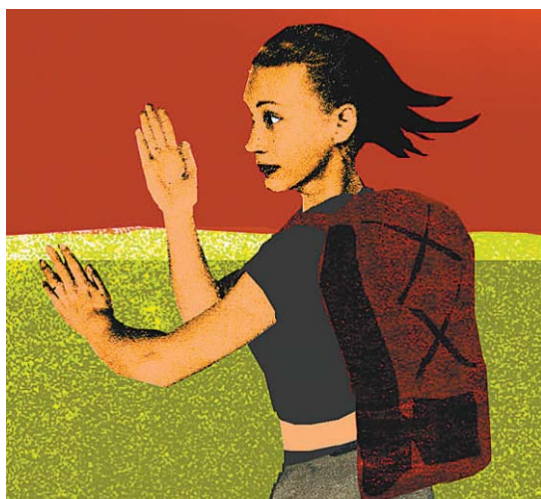
ing, we foolishly rallied for a deep sea fishing expedition. My brother and I became miserably nauseous. Not one bite — fish or otherwise — all day. Back on land I threw up among the rows of sunbathers.

I remember opening presents while drinking margaritas. I remember a scary drive over a mountain pass in a Jeep without doors. I remember not saying very much.

The lesson? Some family units have a shelf life. The forces that hold us together can be tenuous. And when visiting a non-Anglophone country, do not under any circumstances eat at a restaurant named Mr. Fish. Or Mr. Anything.

ETHAN GILSDORF

DISARMING JAVA JIVE



On a trip through Indonesia, I was lured into a "touristic office" by a man posing as a travel agent. It had not been a big challenge for him: I was alone; it was 110 degrees; and I had to wait an hour for a bus. I was on my way to hike Mount Bromo, a volcano, and its towering neighbor, Mount Penanjakan, which sit on a moonscape plain in eastern Java.

The heat must have dulled my judgment because I followed the man into a one-room shack, where three other men sat playing cards. My "travel agent," probably in his mid-20s, sat down at a desk and pulled out maps of the area.

First, he told me about the types of tours available. I wasn't interested, I told him. Then he tried selling me an overpriced bus ticket, insisting that my fictitious friend (I never tell people I'm traveling alone) had already bought hers. When I again refused, he grew enraged. "I hate you, lady — you buy ticket!" he yelled. I got up to leave and he ran around the desk, kicked my backpack, grabbed my shirt, and threw his arm back as if he were going to punch me. His friends didn't move.

It probably helped that I was several inches taller than he and that I had taken a self-defense course before the trip. I stood my ground, looked him in the eye, and screamed, "You watch it!" He let go of my shirt.

I hoisted my 50-pound pack onto my back, spun around, and walked out the door, hoping he and his friends wouldn't come after me. Thankfully, they didn't.

KARI J. BODNARCHUK