

Tired, Tried And True: My Adventures In Travel

by Rebekah Postupak, PassPorter Guest Contributor

It is a mistake to think you can solve any major problems just with potatoes. --Douglas Adams

You have to be pretty special to get kicked out of Westminster Cathedral, or so I like to think. Over the years I've stumbled into trouble in many extraordinary places around the world--Westminster Cathedral was neither my first nor last. While traveling, I've missed planes, taken wrong buses, been stranded at a washed-out bridge, had my purse stolen, suffered food poisoning, had my luggage broken into, and weathered a national revolution. And, because I am somewhat sick in the head, I've loved just about every minute of it.

The difference between travel plans and a trip, you see, is that one is predictable and safe, with the same lifeless, flawless details staring back at you blankly each time. The other is a living, breathing thing, pulsating with personality and adventure. No matter how many times you visit Epcot or Paris or Bangkok, your experience is new each time. Places change, and so do you.

But the desperate need for common sense and the tried-but-true rules of traveling don't change, as I have learned over and over again.

Don't panic. A few years ago I joined a young professionals group leading a business conference in central Russia. I followed my host's directions carefully but somehow found my bus heading away from the city into the hills. Severe, barbed-wire fencing surrounding what was clearly a remote military facility offered the most significant indication something was wrong. Even though I had no idea where I was or where I was supposed to be, had no way to contact anyone for help, and did not speak Russian, after a brief flash of terror a thought occurred to me; surely all buses work the same. If one bus heads north, another bus must head south.

I exited the bus, crossed the street, and waited. At long last a bus appeared on the horizon which dutifully returned me to my original stop. My host, apologizing profusely, explained she had inadvertently given me the right bus for the wrong day. My team was in a panic over my half-day disappearance (especially the cute guy I'd had my eye on who, two years later, decided he'd had enough of my adventuring on my own and married me), but I made it in time for my presentation. All was

well.

Although racing around in circles screaming can feel quite satisfying when a trip goes wrong, resist the urge and stay calm instead. Panic inevitably leads to mistakes and will only make the problem worse. Repeat to yourself as many times as needed, "It's going to be okay."

Check your checklist. There was the time I spent a perfect week in Paris with a close friend. We were merrily frittering away our last hour before the final train to Zurich for our flight home. The apartment was a scant 15-minute walk from the train station; the train was at 11:38 pm, but it was only 10:30 pm now and all was well.

Until I casually glanced down at the train ticket again..."22:38," it reminded me gaily. 22:38... let's see, that means 11:38, right? But there are 24 hours in a day... 22:38 must mean.... I shrieked, "IT'S 10:38!" at the top of my lungs, seized my bags, and flew--almost literally--out the door, my friend staring in confusion after me. To this day I suspect that is the fastest we have ever run. Like escaped convicts in a movie, we flung ourselves onto the train just as it began to pull away from the station.

A simple rechecking of my checklist and its details would have completely re-paced and de-stressed the way we left Paris, though of course it would also have deprived us of one of our favorite jokes. Even today one of us has only to whisper, "It's 10:38!" for the other to dissolve in giggles.

Do your homework. I knelt reverently at the famous composer's grave to make a rubbing, overwhelmed at the thought of his bones lying a few feet beneath me. Suddenly I heard a loud cry of rage from a docent, who tore the pencil and paper from my hands. A moment later I found myself staring, mouth agape, at the back side of the great door of Westminster Cathedral. It had not occurred to me, because I had not checked, that my innocent action could be considered vandalism.

Be nice. It doesn't matter which part of the world you are in; nobody responds well to rudeness or ignorance. Marching up to a hotel clerk or airline gate agent in great frustration and demanding your problem be fixed never helps. Smiling just might, as would remembering to say please and thank you. While I've experienced my share of woes, I've also seen fees erased and my mistakes corrected simply because I presented my case calmly and respectfully. And batting my eyelashes never hurts either--it's how we ended up on the front row at the London Symphony, despite being abominably dressed in sweatshirts and jeans. And how we wound up Christmas Eve with armfuls of free Greek pastries. And alone in the VIP line to meet Cinderella.

A friend in need. My toddler and I headed toward Baltimore airport, on our way to Walt Disney World with time to spare. But as we whipped around the Capital Beltway, traffic suddenly slammed to a dead halt. Three hours, dozens of police cars and helicopters, and a missed flight later, we limped on our way again. In the meantime I'd called a dear friend who knew my flights and managed to help me find a later one. She was even able to pull up the news and fill me in on what I was seeing!

I always assemble a detailed itinerary with confirmation numbers, addresses, and phone numbers, and leave a copy behind with someone reliable. A friend at home who has your itinerary can provide crucial information if something happens to your own copy. Friends at home might also be better equipped to tell you where you are on a map and how close you are to where you are supposed to be. They can also laugh at you when you've forgotten what day it is or which day you're coming home. (Not that that's ever happened to me...).

Stay cheerful. Travel is fun. Really, it is. Even when a trip goes horribly wrong, remember to keep everything in perspective. Remind yourself of the crazy stories you'll have to tell others when you get home, and never let one day's problems sour the entire trip. Think of it like a roller coaster; your heart may be in your belly and you may feel certain the ride will never end... but it always does. Let the adventure weave itself into your trip, enjoy the story of it all, and spare yourself some agony by laughing upside down on this crazy, whirling, topsy-turvy ride. Even when getting kicked out of Westminster Cathedral.

About The Author: The Postupak family lives in Virginia, always within a few months of a Disney visit and never more than ten minutes away from the nearest adventure. Rebekah is an intrepid traveler who prefers learning lessons the hard way and never lets looking ridiculous stand in the way of a good story.

Article last updated: 7/24/2008

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