

Having Lots of Fun with Airport Security and Customs

Shôn Ellerton, March 18, 2022

Oh, did I have fun with immigration, security, and customs at airports during my travels!



It's fun to travel. Dashing to the airport, anticipating the experience of going overseas to another country. That peculiarly exciting smell of jet fuel and the spooling white noise of jet engines whilst walking across the air bridge to claim your miniature world of a seat armed with a book and headphones for the next few hours.

The not quite so fun part is running through the gauntlet of air security, immigration, and customs. This represents of the world of the solemn and the very serious; not a shred of humour to be shared between the glassy-eyed passengers, many who instantly develop increased pulsed rates, uncontrollable perspiration, and harbour an irrational feeling of guilt even though there's nothing to be guilty of, and the scary looking unsmiling officious overlords. The quietness of it all. Warning signs plastered all around you reminding you not to take out your mobile phone in case you have the sudden urge that you need to take detailed pictures of the eye in the sky or of that beady-eyed airport cop armed, no doubt, with some kind of assault weapon. And that strange feeling when you've got to the head of the queue and then summoned up by an unsmiling immigration official only to act all nice and polite in the mistaken belief that somehow this will absolve you of all your sins for having dared got this far. And then once you've successfully been stamped and ushered through without a Columbo-style *'and just one more thing'* getting thrown in the mix, you daren't rush out as fast as you can because that will only cast further suspicion whilst all eyes are bored into the back of your head. Instead, you walk out calmly in a sort of serendipitous manner and, oh, I forgot to zip up my bag

and do so in a rather forgetful manner as to make you look innocent and carefree. Admit it. It's happened to you.

Now I've travelled since I've been very young. Back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean with my younger sister, to visit relatives abroad in the UK from the US. We normally travelled TWA, a now-defunct airline infamously known for its horrible fish dish option, which highly likely inspired parts of the 1980s movie *Airplane!*, a funny take on those *Airport* disaster movies, in which anyone who ate the fish dish got terribly sick, including the two pilots of course. Never opted for the fish on any aircraft since.

I was fiercely independent and hated to be chaperoned even at the age of 12, so when we were assigned to one of those assistants to keep an eye on us from departure to arrival, I tried to the best of my ability to lose her—chaperones were most usually attractive young women I was to later realise--at the next transit airport, usually, in the case of TWA being St Louis or Chicago, or with Braniff Airlines (yes, they did exist!), Dallas-Fort Worth, a massive sprawling airport boasting its own transit rail system, to which I tried to hop onto a train to get to my connecting terminal before my assigned assistant could catch up with me. In later years, I was mildly disappointed that I no longer qualified for having an assistant when I got old enough which was a pity on two accounts. I didn't get to skip all the queues anymore *and* neither did I get escorted by an attractive young woman. Such is puberty.

Getting back to the subject of airport security or more specifically, immigration, there was a moment I remember so well while travelling with a sister who must have been around eight or so. It was on arrival at Washington DC airport as the first point of entry into the United States from the UK. Unlike those normally vast echoey chambers typical of immigration halls, this was one of those carpeted low-ceiling, airless, and strangely sound-muffled sort of affairs filled with too many human beings, most of them sweating profusely accompanied by that lingering and nauseating acrid smell associated with usually larger men. The first thing my sister blurted out at the top of her voice was, 'Why do all Americans sweat so much?' noticing the wet armpits amongst most of the men, many of which, had clearly eaten their way through too many Dunkin Donuts. One guy in a faded tight-fitting blue shirt turned to our direction and pierced us with the evil eye. Nope! Nothing to do with me. That is *not* my sister!

Another memorable moment came in much later years while travelling to Moscow with a friend of mine during the mid-2000s. We were going to catch up to do some high-level business with the Kremlin to conduct negotiations with the Iranians. No. Just kidding. We just took advantage of going on one of those cheap long weekend flights from the UK to check out the Russian culture. We later found out from our learnings that smiling to a passing Russian is not at all recommended. My friend did this as a nice and polite gesture to a passer-by, a rather largish rough-looking bloke, whilst going through one of the turnstiles into the Moscow Metro, an impressive underground train system that also serves as an incredible art museum thanks to Stalin and forced prison labour I suspect. Anyway, I digress. The passer-by gave him a foul look, muttered something probably terribly rude in Russian and gave him quite a hard shove. I've done a lot of world-travelling and the two countries I found, in general, kind of unfriendly were Russia and, oddly, Spain. Poland being the friendliest I've visited.

But getting into Russia was the hardest part. This meant standing in long queues of people trying to get into the Russian embassy in London hoping that the visa desk doesn't close for the day. There was an abundance of clocks inside the foyer of the embassy to remind you that Russians are punctual and don't mess around with latecomers. Not sure why, but Russians seem to love clocks. As famously phrased in the James Bond movie, *From Russia with Love*, when Bond asks a rather unfriendly clerk in a Russian embassy if he's sure that the clock on the wall is correct, he barked out the answer, 'Russian clocks are *always* correct!'.

Now armed with a visa, flying to Russia was no great deal but when the aircraft landed at Sheremetyevo Airport, and after we all got out and walked in procession to what felt like an unfinished hangar in which we had to present our papers to gain admittance to the Russian Motherland, we stood in a queue which moved slower than continental tectonic plates. There were the privileged few who got preferential treatment who went straight out the door to the vodka bars owned by the Politburo, but ahead of us was a bunch of unruly Americans in their late teens or early twenties. The kind of people who would so easily get into trouble in a foreign nation. They were obnoxiously loud and started to play out Soviet-style soldier theatrics while doing that odd sort of military walk that the Russians and the Chinese like doing so much. In most other immigration halls around the world, the officials would either ignore such behaviour or at

least ask them to pipe it down, but not in Russia. A highly official looking person in an unfeasibly high hat pointed viciously to each of them and shouted that they all need to move to the back of the queue. The silence in the hall was deafening—apart from the sound of passports being stamped by the *one* immigration officer.

Going through customs can be ‘fun’ as well, and as expected, there is no sense of humour to be had *except* for possibly one country, but not always. And that country is, of course, the UK. It wasn’t an airport, but after arriving in Dover from France and driving off the ferry, I was asked by the customs dude if I had anything to declare. I’m not sure why I said it, but I quipped that I had a couple of stowaways in the boot of the car, to which he merely replied, ‘Along with that consignment of illegal drugs, sir? Off you go then!’. Without needing to open the boot, he chuckled, and ushered me through. On a serious note, these guys probably have some sort of a sixth sense and can read the signs of someone who’s *really* guilty.

However, this is not a game one can play in the United States. Generally speaking, Americans are not that hot on satire, especially those in security roles. Making a quip like the one above will most certainly raise an eyebrow or two along with a firm request to stand aside for further questioning. However, if there was a master of playing this game, it is that of my late English grandfather who served his lifetime in the field of sugar beet research. Being a frequent business traveller to the US, he had, in his possession a quite substantial assortment of sugar beet seeds. Well-renowned plant breeding scientists in their specific field often have many connections worldwide in which to share the fruits of research. But what many people may not know is that such scientists often smuggle seeds without official declaration, an activity which is highly punishable in some countries like Australia, a country in which smuggling a small piece of beef jerky could give you a stiff fine and a warning that a ‘drop bear’ will come to haunt you on your travels. Scientists may be intelligent in their field of expertise but can become outlandishly oblivious to laws that are in place to prevent the unwanted spread of an invasive species of plant or animal.

Anyhow, he was caught out on one of his American excursions when a customs official sighted a largish bag of seeds in his opened suitcase for inspection at Los Angeles International Airport. The customs official, a youngish man if I remember his story correctly, asked him what he was doing with all these plant seeds. My grandfather, knowing full well that his little bag of treasure was

about to be confiscated, used all his poise and gravitas to explain in a most forthright but kind manner that these seeds have been properly sterilised in accordance with strict guidelines set by his British sugar beet society. He was, after all, a tall and graceful looking man with white hair, wearing spectacles and spoke in a very English manner. Most Americans take kindly to the English accent, although they take pride in mocking them to buggery which can become a little tiring at times. During this little interchange, he started to open his other bag and said that he had some documentation in there to confirm his claim that the seeds have been, in fact, properly sterilised, to which the official gave him the bag of seeds back and said that they should be okay taking his words that, surely, if the seeds have been sterilised, they can do no harm. So, he was let off and ushered through.

My sister tried a similar tactic many years later when trying to 'smuggle' a little potted plant travelling from the UK back to California. Needless to say, her powers of conviction and persuasion were somewhat lacking when she adamantly replied, when questioned by customs, that she was transporting an 'air plant', as clearly described on the label. She never saw that 'air plant' again.

To cap my little story off, I travelled to North Korea back in 2003, the reasons for which were purely out of curiosity and adventure. I was a single man at the time! I had the vision of travelling in every one of the five countries of the Axis of Evil as listed by President Bush after 9/11. North Korea was one of them and still is I gather. And no. I am not a spy as some may believe me to be! For the curious, I do have a photo journal of this little adventure on my website [here](#).

Now when one travels to North Korea, or more appropriately, the Democratic Republic Peoples of Korea because everyone should be suspicious of any country which has its name beginning with the '*democratic people of*', the curious souvenir-collecting of us will be tempted to fully load up their suitcases with books with titles like *How The Japanese and the Imperialistic United States Started the War* or *Atrocities Committed by the Capitalistic West* and loads of other memorabilia like propaganda posters cluttered with hammers and sickles and soldiers with red flags stomping on the heads of American soldiers. I know communism is evil and doesn't work and any sane individual should think the same, but I thought it would be fun to bring a load of this stuff back home. Moreover, I had in possession a bottle of Korean soju (a strong rice liquor) with a complete snake immersed in it which I bought back to the UK to give to my boss at T-Mobile as a souvenir. I gave my sister the propaganda posters which

she proudly hung up in one of her bathrooms in her house in the US, which she now calls the 'communist bathroom'. I kept the books which I still have in my bookshelf here in Australia. Little did I think what would have happened if the customs inspected my luggage on my return to Heathrow Airport. Moreover, I remember paying Lufthansa a small excess charge on the additional weight at Beijing Airport, and the thought of customs at the other end never flashed across my mind. A few months later, I rolled up the propaganda posters and flew to the US to visit my sister, and only while midway across the Atlantic did I realise that perhaps all may not go down too well should they find a guy speaking with an English accent carrying a bundle of North Korean propaganda posters at Dallas International Airport.

Thankfully, they never opened my suitcase!