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HELL NIGHT IN MIAMI

This is a tale of a night in Miami, the end of a week long odyssey that resulted in the most totally satisfying cruise experience of my life. But that will come next. For now, I'd like to start at the end of my trip and work backwards.

Angela and I were scheduled to fly from St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands to Miami on American Airlines connecting home to Chicago last Sunday. It was set up as an easy trip with a change of plan, a small line on a computer blip that said "legal connection".

Legalities aside, as Judge Ito often said, it didn't work. We pulled away from the our parked position on the bright tarmac on time. The big Airbus 300 was filled with a wide variety of people including a muscle-bound couple that ran a gym in Boston and exuded so much good health that the entire plane hated them on sight, about 150 cruise passengers, sunburned, chatty, and weighted down by boxes of Amaretto and Kaluha that they had purchased duty free, thereby saving almost three dollars, Ted Dibise, better known as the "Million Dollar Man", a professional wrestler almost as famous as Hulk Hogan, and my band of fellow travelers fresh from the rat race on Tortola and Virgin Gorda.

The plane took sat on the runway for about 25 minutes because "Air Traffic in Chicago" had ordered us to stay put. This was obviously due to their desire that we experience the 90 plus degree temperatures inside the plane as long as we could before heading back to Chicago where thunderstorms were expected.

When we arrived in Miami it appeared that there were far more people waiting at the gate than the flight to Chicago could possibly accommodate. Angela and I were asked to wait and it was explained that, although we had paid for our ticket, we were on a "low priority". We had missed the flight we were scheduled to take because of the delay on the runway in St. Thomas.

We waited that long, tortuous wait, sitting on the side of the counter, trying not to annoy the gate personnel lest they stop trying to get us on. There was a cellist, waiting patiently with his instrument, two airline pilots in uniform, three flight attendants due to fly out of Chicago later in the day, and a family of five that looked like they had just walked off Andy Griffith's farm. The kids were spitting images of Opie. "What will we do if we don't get on" the father kept asking his wife.

Also waiting were two businessmen who explained that they had important appointments in Chicago in the morning. I had explained to the gate agent that I had a business to open. "So does everyone" he replied. Not a good sign.

We waited and watched as four people who spoke Spanish to the Spanish-speaking gate agents got on, along with all of the airline employees. The

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rest of us were out of luck. We were stuck in Miami airport with nowhere to go. We had missed the last flight out. The fellow with the cello looked forlorn.

“Let’s just rent a car and drive around the neighborhoods” I suggested to Angela. She wasn’t amused. We went to find the “reaccommodations” desk. We waited in line for about 30 minutes and finally told our story to a harried agent who had heard it all before. We asked, in our nicest midwest tone, to be put up at the airport hotel at American’s expense. That involved calling in a supervisor who said that our delay was due to “an act of God” and so they wouldn’t put us up. I explained that I would enact the wrath of God if they didn’t.

I won. Sort of. The airport hotel was full and “very expensive. We don’t use it in circumstances like this”. We were instead given a voucher for a shuttle to a hotel called the Park something (I don’t want to list the name because I’m saving that for my lawsuit.)

We walked out into the Miami night and stood at a counter for twenty minutes until the shuttle bus for “our area” came by. It turned out that we were not going to a hotel immediately adjacent to the airport. Instead, we embarked on a journey that took us near the Hialeah racetrack and past streets where men mostly hung around on street corners doing some sort of mail order business out of phone booths. The van driver hit 75 on the highway and changed lanes as though he was auditioning for the TV show Cops, which has found the area around Miami airport as fertile grounds for taping.

We pulled up to our hotel, a cinderblock building that looked acceptable from the outside. Inside we found men with tattoos in tee shirts and bare feet parading through the lobby. Again, lots of young men were doing business over the telephone by the bank of phones in the hallway. I had been unaware that L.L. Bean had so many outlets in Miami.

Check-in was less professional than it might have been at say, the Ritz Carlton. We were asked to put up a \$35 cash deposit “in case, you know, you have to use the phone”. Going up to our room we stepped carefully, because someone had urinated in the elevator. There was a party going on when we got to our floor. Young people in bandannas were carrying paper cups filled with beer across the torn carpeting. Everyone stopped cold when we stepped out of the elevator.

Sometimes a husband and wife can read each other without speaking. This was one of those times. We stepped back on the elevator, walked through the lobby, and begged the bellman to drive us to another hotel for twenty bucks. He had never been to another hotel so this was difficult. We asked him to head for the airport. It was now 11:30 pm. We hadn’t eaten all day and had been up since 4:30 in the morning.

We saw a sign for the airport Ramada. “This is a good one” our driver noted. He dropped us off after we were told that a room was ready. We were given a top floor room at the end of the hall in a hotel that was under construction, filled with signs that proclaimed “pardon our appearance”.

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At this point, it was beginning to feel as though we were walking through a Fellini movie with the same cast we had found in our previous hotel this evening. Several sullen bikers were drinking in the lobby. A frazzled security guard ran up the stairs in response to a frantic call.

Our room, which of course was not paid for by American Airlines, was located at the end of a long, quite dark corridor. An emergency stair exit that led to the outside was jarred open by string. All of the locks had been broken off the inside of our door. We could hear people running down a far off hall. There were screams and it sounded as though they were being chased.

At this point, we were too exhausted to move. We had no toiletries or clothing. Not even a toothbrush. Angela went to bed and I tried to prop a chair up against the door waiting for the inevitable break-in attempt. I determined to stay up all night. This was fairly easy to accomplish given the sounds and the pounding on doors that echoed throughout the hotel.

The next morning, we boarded our flight back to Chicago. The man with the cello was there. During the flight, we hit the worst turbulence I have ever encountered. It was a fitting end to our 24-hour odyssey.

This is the kind of travel experience that makes people opt to stay home. I will, of course, be communicating with American Airlines concerning their choice of hotels. And I will not be traveling again for a long time. Or at least until next week.

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