

Itineraries

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ON THE ROAD
Relishing Tales
Of Troubled Travel

By JOE SHARKEY
TRAVEL wisdom is something to cherish, especially when you consider all you had to go through to acquire it. That seems to be the consensus of readers who responded to last week's column on the subject of bad trips and how we all relish the experience of sharing the stories of what went wrong.

There is, in fact, something of a cottage industry in reader-generated anecdotes of troubled travel. TripAdvisor.com has tens of thousands of them in its reader reviews.

Travel Guard, the trip insurance company, sponsors a monthly contest, called World's Unluckiest Traveler, in which prizes are awarded for the most woeful tales. And a Florida businessman, Gregg Rottler, publishes a Web site called flightsfromhell.com that catalogs readers' travel misadventures and peevish underheadings that range from airlines and airports to odors and "weird people."

"I think it's therapeutic for people to contribute bad stories and vents," Mr. Rottler said. "It's like a bonding experience, especially among frequent business travelers who have endured these experiences and consider them a badge of honor." Look for a couple of my favorites, "Titanic Toddler Creates Tumult" and "The Bulldog Flight Attendant."

Incidentally, the usual deep well for travel woes may be getting a bit shallower these days as flight delays are down.

"People love to tell bad stories when they talk about travel, and for good reason," said Joe Brancatelli, who publishes the subscription business travel Web site Joessentime.com. "But one thing this summer, major delays are probably not going to be part of the narrative" because airline on-time arrival rates have been steadily improving.

"Yes, you're going to be sitting on a crowded, smelly airplane," he said. "But at least you'll probably get there on time."

Still, I'm betting that there will be plenty of new tales of woe, starting this weekend as pent-up travel demand bumps into an airline system already operating with little excess capacity.

In the last 10 years, domestic airlines have removed about 20 percent of total seating capacity from their schedules, mostly by shifting more flights to small regional airfields or by parking airplanes in the desert. And airline officials hope to be able to hold the line on the reduced capacity.

E-mail: jsharkey@nytimes.com

This means that load factors — the percentage of seats occupied by paying customers — will stay at record levels.

Fares have already begun to increase. Last month, according to the Air Transport Association, the average price to fly one domestic mile, a standard measurement, rose 14 percent over April 2009.

Priceline.com said average airfares this summer might be as much as 25 percent higher than last summer.

On the other hand, hotel rates remain fairly cheap. Smith Travel Research said Monday that while domestic hotel occupancy was up about 3 percent in April, average rates were down slightly over April 2009. Last year was, of course, one of the worst in memory for the hotel business.

By the way, ignore those stories you will surely be seeing soon saying that planes will be more full than ever this summer.

As the airline forecaster Michael Boyd notes, you can't fit any more people into full planes. "Unless carriers install subway straps in the coach cabin, there isn't much chance of any peak traffic this summer, let alone a big jump in passengers," he said.

Yet travel demand itself isn't stagnant; it's growing. In a survey released Monday by Deloitte, 31 percent of respondents said they would travel over Memorial Day weekend, up from the 24 percent who did so last year. Much of that is by automobile, of course, but some travel will inevitably be by air.

So I thought it would be a good time to check with Jason Barger, the Ohio business traveler who decided several years ago to start a one-man crusade to persuade all of us put-upon travelers to chill out. He wrote a book called "Step Back from the Baggage Claim," which argued that serenity, good cheer and grace under stress were indispensable travel accessories and, furthermore, were contagious. For research, he spent seven full days in airports or on airplanes observing fellow passengers.

Mr. Barger, who is now a speaker on the corporate circuit, said he was recently on a flight and watched a man in a business suit leap out of his seat when the chime rang as the plane reached the gate. With growing frustration, the man crouched in the aisle muttering unpleasantly about what a hurry he was in. He pushed his way through and darted up the jetway.

When Mr. Barger got into the terminal, "I saw him standing about ninth in line at a Starbucks,"



CHRIS GASH

Just Steps From the Room

Hotels Add Wine-Tastings, Book Readings, Music and Chats

By JULIE WEED

At most hotels, the weak economy of the last year and a half has meant one thing — fewer amenities.

But some hotels have taken a different tack and have been investing in special, even quirky, events to attract and retain business travelers, and maybe even pull in new local business.

It has worked for travelers like Nadine DeKlerk, who oversees nursing home operations in the Northwest for Evergreen Healthcare, based in Vancouver, Wash.

She said she used to choose from a few familiar hotel chains because they offered a predictable experience. Now she looks for hotels like the Sorrento in Seattle that has started to offer cultural and social events, including author readings and current event symposiums. "It's nice to have a reason to come out of my room," she said.

The Sorrento Hotel started programming its "Night School" events, in part, to change the way business travelers thought of the hotel.

The hotel was attracting guests because it is an elegant historic landmark, its co-owner, Barbara Malone, said, but it was not very vibrant.

"We wanted to make the Sorrento a cultural and social epicenter," she said. One offering is "Chamber vs. Chamber," which pairs, for example, an orchestral percussionist and a rock musician.

Among the other events there, Garry Willis has discussed his book, "Bomb Power," and two of the principal dancers of the Pacific Northwest Ballet shared stories of life behind the scenes at the ballet.

About a year ago, the Liberty Hotel in Boston started offering special events every night, including cooking demonstrations by its executive chef, art exhibitions featuring local artists, and fashion shows where models strutted through the lobby and up the escalators.

"We wanted to offer our guests amenities beyond the fruit plate," said Rachel Moritz, the hotel's general manager. "We wanted them to find something special here, and want to come back to it."

The owners at the Liberty and the Sorrento were intended to attract area residents as well as hotel guests. "It's a way for the local community to sample the hotel," Ms. Moritz said.

To the hotel's way of thinking, guests who come for an event may stay for dinner or become familiar with the hotel and recommend it to out-of-town friends or colleagues.

Food and beverage sales at the Sorrento are up 25 percent over the same quarter last year, and room bookings have increased as well, Ms. Malone said.

Standing apart on an attraction other than price is important, said Leonard M. Lodish, vice dean of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. "If competitors continually undercut each other's prices, it's a race to the bottom," he said.

Experimenting with new ideas is critical for the short- and long-term success of any business, he added, and those new ideas should meet the needs of customers and be hard to duplicate.

In the case of hotels, for example, a drop-in event to meet the author of a business strategy book or to get a quick neck massage suits the needs of the business traveler more than a two-hour chocolate-tasting class scheduled at lunchtime.



Garry Willis, author of "Bomb Power," speaking at an event at the Sorrento Hotel in Seattle. The discussion was part of the hotel's "Night School" series.

The Kimpton hotels have always offered their guests a complimentary evening social and wine event, from the time the hotel chain opened in 1981.

The company's philosophy, said its chief operating officer, Niki Leondakis, is that the traveler on the road would like to come to a comfortable living room at the end of the day and meet other travelers, for an experience closer to that of a friend's guest house than a hotel.

The wine hour tradition at nearly all 50 of the boutique Kimpton hotels has proved to be one of its most popular features, according to the company's research.

Last year, as the hotel industry struggled with lost revenue, the chain looked for cost-cutting measures like telling diners of the specials rather than printing up a menu each day.

The wine hour, however, was viewed as sacrosanct. In fact, the company decided to "ramp it up" based on the feedback from guests, Ms. Leondakis said. "It is absolutely worth our investment."

Each Kimpton property chooses its own extras. In San Francisco, travelers may find a masseuse ready to rub their shoulders, while guests can try out Wii bowling in Kimpton's Hotel Monaco in Portland, Ore. The hotels periodically change their offerings.

Daniel Warner, a manager for interactive at Valassis/redplum.com in Costa

Mesa, Calif., said he spends an average of two nights a week traveling for business. He has turned over a floating rubber duck in a tiled pool at the Kimpton's Hotel Triton in San Francisco and won a \$10 "raid" on the mini bar.

"In most places, the hotel experience has been getting thinner and thinner," Mr. Warner said. "At the Kimpton, they don't seem to be cutting back."

Some hotel offerings are more active. Guests at Hotel Teatro in Denver can have an escorted run on the nearby Cherry Creek Trail. (The hotel asks for 24 hours' notice to make sure an outfitted guide will be there.)

Of course, not all new ideas succeed. "Last summer at the Liberty, we showed the Red Sox baseball games in our courtyard on a giant screen," Ms. Moritz said. "But it turned out that our guests from all over the country didn't love the Sox as much as we did."

This summer, the hotel will instead show independent movies with free popcorn in their courtyard. "We're inviting local directors and producers to show and discuss their films in a unique setting," she said.

As a business traveler, Ms. DeKlerk said she works all day, is in her hotel all night and does not have time for sightseeing. "So if something interesting is going on in the lobby," she said, "it makes the trip feel like less of a chore."

FREQUENT FLIER

Lovely Shimmering Fish in Huge Tanks (Pick Your Dinner)

WE have labs throughout the world. And I've had the opportunity to work with some amazing people. Along the way, I've tried to learn the local customs.

It's important so you don't make a fool out of yourself as I did on my first business trip to Hong Kong.

The people I was meeting with didn't speak English, so I had a translator. The meeting was great, and after we were done, they invited me to go to a fancy seafood restaurant. I was really excited.

The first thing I noticed when we entered the restaurant were the beautiful aquariums filled with incredibly gorgeous fish, the kind you would see when you go scuba diving.

The tanks were huge, covering an entire wall. I couldn't contain my excitement and kept talking about how amazing it was. My translator discreetly told me that it wasn't an aquarium and that I should probably shut up. These fish were going to be dinner and I would have to pick one from the tank to eat.

By Lori Besterveld, as told to Joan Raymond. E-mail: joan.raymond@nytimes.com



Dr. Lori Besterveld is senior vice president at NSF International, a health and safety group.

I couldn't bear the thought of eating one of those pretty fish, so I asked if they had anything else on the menu. I was told to follow the server so I could look at other choices.

I finally followed the server outside into a little alley where I saw cages of live fowl like peacocks and pigeons, snakes and other reptiles and some mammals that I couldn't identify.

If I was freaked out before, I was even more freaked out now. I tried not to show how horrified I was, and I trooped back into the restaurant and found a crab in the aquarium. He or she

was going to be my dinner. When it arrived, I tried to break the shell with my chopsticks, which was not one of my smarter ideas. You can't get through a crab shell with chopsticks. It's too hard and too slippery and I was making a complete mess of things. At one point,

the crab went flying across the table.

I also didn't know there was a kind of protocol to the plates being used. When I retrieved my beat-up crab from across the table, I put it on a gold-colored plate. I guess I was supposed to put it on the white plate. My serv-

er had a meltdown and started yelling.

I asked the translator what was being said, and he mentioned something about "ugly American." He was also laughing at me. The night was a total disaster. As bad as that was, it wasn't as awkward as a recent flight to China.

About 20 minutes after takeoff, the guy next to me starts to doze off. No problem. Until he put his head on my shoulder and started to snuggle with me. I kept pushing his head back up, but he wouldn't wake up and within minutes his head would be back on my shoulder.

After about 10 minutes of this, I got up and walked around a bit, hoping he'd come to his senses.

But when I sat back down, the cycle repeated itself for the entire 13-hour flight. The guy was so out of it, nothing short of throwing water on him would wake him up.

Even the flight attendant thought we were together. When it came time for our meal, she asked me if I wanted to order for him. I'm pretty mid-mannered, but at that point I almost bit her head off.

When the plane landed, my seatmate de-boarded as if nothing had ever happened. I feel kind of used since we never even exchanged names.

Q. How often do you fly?

A. Four to five times a month, mostly international.

Q. What's your least favor, if any?

A. Beijing. I have to admit all the armed guards walking around freak me out.

Q. Of all the places you've been, what's the best?

A. Landen, Belgium. It's incredibly gorgeous, with beautiful pastures, Roman tombs, a converted farmhouse straight out of the 1800s. And when I take a run there, I feel I'm transported to a different time.

Q. What's your secret airport vice?

A. Trashy magazines, but I hide them inside scholarly journals.