

image conscious

It's no wonder that some cultures think photographs steal your soul; they can certainly sap your patience, says Sally Feldman, and worse, lead to unwanted conversations



Now I don't know about you, but I'm not someone who carries pictures of my kith, kin and kittens on my person. More often than not, I can actually remember what they look like – and even their names and ages – and am more than happy to describe them and their various attributes should anyone express interest.

The current trend of photographing anything and everything using one's mobile phone and sending it to everyone in one's address book is another exercise I find tiresome in the extreme. You may well be having a wild old time at that engagement party/movie premiere/deglustation, but I'm happy to wait for the photo album/web link/social pages, thanks all the same.

This unholy passion for carrying these secular icons with us, particularly when we travel, was brought to my attention recently on a flight to New Zealand.

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I was joining a small group heading to Martinborough to partake of the annual Toast Martinborough wine and food festival. I admit to having my camera with me, but it was a token gesture – I planned to be far more focused on the pinot noir than the polarising filter.

So I was happily settling into my aisle seat, good book at the ready, when I happened to glance across at my window-seat neighbour, who, unnervingly, was gazing directly at me. The usual polite smiles were exchanged, before I did what every self-respecting frequent traveller would do under the circumstances – jammed on my headphones and attempted to bury myself in the inflight magazine.

But there was something in the corner of my eye that I couldn't shake. Glancing furtively sideways, I saw what it was – a photograph, in a frame with ornate scrolled details, on the seat between us, face up and, like my neighbour had been, staring straight at me. It was of a baby, perfectly presentable and obviously only newly born, almost begging me to make conversation with its owner. Guiltily, I averted my eyes and continued with the task in hand – ungluing magazine pages that had been stuck together with the meal of the previous tenant of my seat. (I must confess that used inflight magazines have about the same appeal as over-thumbed library books – call me squeamish, but I like to know where my reading material's been.)

Peace prevailed, my neighbour stared out the window and we took off, with emergency exits dutifully noted and the soothing aroma of bad coffee filling the cabin. I finally gave up my tussle with the magazine pages and settled into some thought-provoking contemporary Australian literature. Bliss – two hours of no computer, no mobile phone and definitely no eye contact.

Still, that framed photograph lay between us, an unblinking invitation nudging at my peripheral vision. Had she booked the seat especially for it, I wondered fleetingly...

"He's my grandson." The voice cut into chapter three. "He was born a week ago."

I put down my book and cup of unidentifiable hot beverage and turned towards the voice. An hour into the flight and this was the first time I'd looked at its owner properly. She was a sweet-faced, middle-aged woman encased in taupe polyester and frosted with a fine dusting

of face powder. It was a very American voice: "I'm from Illinois, on my way to a weekend seminar in Wellington. I've been travelling for two days... I think," she continued.

Rearranging my jaw (which had dropped several metres at the thought of how many hours this woman had been travelling on an airline in airtight clothing, only to spend a weekend at the other end of the earth with a like-minded group of, what – a bunch of photo-wielding strangers?), I engaged in the inevitable conversation. "Very nice," I said. "Is it... *he* your first?"

And so it was that I watched my precious hour of solitude sift like sand through the hourglass – bye-bye gritty family novel, hello apple-pie days of our lives.

Thus followed an hour or so of suitably admiring noises about beauty and uniqueness of said framed physiognomy, interested expression as birthing details were elaborated and sympathetic murmurings at length of separation from first grandchild.

As we talked, I started to yearn for simpler times, before the dawn of photography, when a picture painted a thousand words – preferably in oil, on canvas, in a frame hanging on a drawing-room wall.

And it was then that I started planning my own pictorial revenge, or at least a tactic to use in future to deter unwanted conversation on trains, planes and at the hairdresser – a fiendishly simple plan that required nought but a small gilded frame on a neck chain and a photograph of my dog. **VE+T**