

long-haul frights

Time is a great healer, but not necessarily a great educator. After 30 years of travelling, Sally Feldman is still puzzling over how she's managed to get away with it for so long

Thirty years is a long time in magazines, but it's an eternity in travel hours, especially when you've spent more than three decades trying to learn how to read a map without turning it upside down. Around the time Charlene was whining 'I've been to paradise, but I've never been to me', I was worrying whether my girlfriend Amanda and I, along with 200 other hapless travellers, would ever get out of the aircraft hangar we were locked in outside New York. Me be damned – the only place I wanted to be was back in suburbia.

Long before the Easyjets and Virgins, there were the bucket shops – grimy little offices up five flights of stairs in dodgy commercial buildings around London's Regent Street, which advertised cut-price airline tickets to callow youths or cash-strapped adventurers. For a saving of \$25 on a regular ticket (a fortune in the 1970s to two girls barely out of their tweens – not that we knew we'd been tweens, those hadn't been invented yet), we booked flights to San Diego to visit Amanda's grown-up and glamorous sister.

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Our bargain deal took us by coach from London to Southend on England's south coast, then by plane to Shannon airport on the west coast of Ireland, Bangor in the US state of Maine, and on to LA, where we had to change planes for San Diego. I'm guessing it took about 30 hours, but that's probably memory playing its gentle, healing game. I'd say it was more like 60.

I gave up counting how many stops we made on the way back, but, at some point in transit, our bucket shop went belly-up, leaving us in New York with no way out (not even from the hangar for some sightseeing). Sans bucket, we had to rely on our parents to start bailing.

Much, much later, I camped with my gay best friend at pre-resort Cable Beach in a hired two-man tent barely big enough for two people who actually *wanted* to have sex together. This was when virtually the only mode of transport into Broome was to thumb a lift on a bicycle, and where, as only first-time English travellers to Australia could, we assumed meat would be more expensive to buy than vegetables. If one could rate humiliation on a scale from one to 10 (and who hasn't, in an idle moment, as one's been waiting to file a report in a Prague police station after a bag-snatch at

one of the most notorious bus stations in Europe...), then standing at a communal barbecue, roasting \$10 pieces of pumpkin as our fellow happy campers cooked up \$2 steaks the size of Akubras, would have to be right up there.

And now I get to travel for a living, which must surely be some sort of cosmic joke. I certainly wouldn't have chosen to freeze (with cold and terror) on a vertical shale mountain slope in New Zealand's Southern Alps if I'd just been on holiday. Mind you, I wouldn't have got drunk with the chief in a traditional longhouse in Sarawak either...

But my finest hour came a couple of years ago in Shanghai. I was travelling with a media group on what is often cynically known as a junket – usually by journalists who don't get out much and who wished they'd been invited. (I've never understood what connection these trips have to a blancmange-like dessert; perhaps it's because people find their justification so hard to swallow.) On this occasion,

we'd been issued paper tickets to travel to Shanghai, then on to a luxurious new Malaysian resort. Yes, really – in these days of e-everything – dear, old-fashioned tickets with all those quaint tear-off layers.

Now, in the spirit of efficient work and travel practice (and from bitter excess baggage experience), I regularly cull my paperwork. And so, during a few tranquil moments in my Shanghai suite, I sifted through my travel paraphernalia and tossed what I didn't need into the hotel's embossed paper bin – including that daft little ticket.

What ensued, VE+T travel sophisticates, exceeded any shame that a Prague bus station or \$10 pumpkin could deliver. No amount of rifling through designer hand luggage could save me from the barely disguised scorn of my fellow professional junkettes, who, frazzled after our whirlwind tour of the sights of Shanghai, were all hanging out to hit the resort spa. The following three hours of uncertainty as our group leader wrangled with the airline authorities will be etched on my memory for all time (or at least until I have to renew my passport).

Suffice to say, we all did eventually get to paradise, but that group leader still hasn't got back to me. **VE+T**

