

Travels and Coronavirus, 2020

June 2019

Jan and Anne announce that they were taking a trip to Egypt, Jordan and Greece. This had happened before.

Jan (my wife) and Anne (my sister in law) had often travelled together and I did not mind... *much*. Their adventures were to a good variety of locations, primarily in Asia and Europe. Sometimes places that were not high on my bucket list, but very often places that were. There was a jealousy factor here.

During these times, or thereabouts, I developed a liking for “adventure” holidays. The fact of their travels became the allowance for mine. How else was I to go to the Okavango Delta, Madagascar, Greenland, Machu Picchu, the Galapagos – and Antarctica to boot! These were definitely not on Jan and Annes’ radar – but they were on mine.

July 2019

So where to this time? My destination was not long in coming. In fact it was found by Jan in the first week of July. *Luxury Escapes: The 30 Day Morocco, Egypt & Turkey Tour*.

“*You have never been there,*” she said.

I hadn’t, and suddenly I wanted too. True, Morocco, Egypt and Turkey did not crack a mention on the bucket list – but why not? They were all exotic places to visit in their own right.

I am not prone to making quick decisions when it involves significant amounts of money. I was after all a trained economist and a fairly reliable accountant. However, on this occasion, I broke the personal rule. On the night of the announcement that “*You have never been there*” I booked my 30 Day tour. Anyhow at \$7999, it was a “steal”.

We told the “kids” that yet again we would be taking separate trips in the first half of 2020. “*Mum and Auntie Anne will be going to Egypt, Jordan and Greece*”

and I will be going to Morocco, Egypt and Turkey – at roughly the same time in March.”

31 July 2019

A short time later, I paid for the extra “Single Supplement “. Add \$2999. Why not have the luxury of a single room on land and on the River Nile. After all *they* had upgraded *their* trip to Business Class.

July to September 2019

Nobody has heard of Novel Coronavirus – COVID 19

4 September 2019

I was very pleased the day I received my tickets. These covered the major flights from Melbourne to Casablanca, Morocco, via Doha, in early March and my return from Istanbul, Turkey, to Melbourne via Doha in early April. I would have liked to have seen Doha, which was the “hub“ city of my principal airline – Qatar Airlines. I knew nothing of Doha. I imagined it a desert town. It was probably like Dubai, the hub for Emirates airlines, Jan and Anne’s principal carrier. Probably a mega city built on oil and trade.

In our opinion, **Doha** is not quite ready for business, at least not in the “wow, this place is amazing“ tourism sense. That's not to say you won't have an amazing time basking in the abundant sun - but the city of **Doha** is currently a huge construction site.

<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=doha>

My ticketing at this stage did not include the lesser flights between Casablanca and Istanbul that would take me out of Morocco, into Egypt and on to Turkey.

September 2019

Still, nobody has heard of Novel Coronavirus – COVID 19 – 2019-nCoV

Receiving tickets is really the start of a journey. Research begins. Suddenly I had a thirst for learning about my destinations. Not heavy research but piqued interest. I wasn't to know, even at this stage, but my lesser flights would all be variously changed by Egyptair, Nile Air and Turkish Airlines. With each change, and renewed ticket, my interest piqued to an upper level.

12 December 2019

First case of novel coronavirus is detected in Wuhan, China. It is not disclose for several weeks.

31 December 2019

Chinese Health officials inform the WHO about a cluster of 41 patients with a mysterious pneumonia. Most are connected to Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market

December 2019

Christmas is a good time for letting your family and friends learn more of the details of your impending travel. While people, generally speaking, do not say it, you get the feeling that they think "... *Why in the hell aren't they travelling together?*" (Jan and Darrell that is)

January 9

A 61-year-old man from Wuhan is the world's first death linked to the virus.

January 20

Chinese authorities confirm the virus can spread from person-to-person.

"I wonder what all this concern is about for this coronavirus, Jan?"... "Hope it won't affect our travels!"

January 21

Additional proportionate border measures are in place in Australia, with biosecurity and border security staff processing

passengers from three direct flights a week from Wuhan to Sydney.

January 24

The level of travel advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) for Wuhan and Hubei province in China is raised to level four: "do not travel".

Lucky I'm not travelling to China!

DFAT Travel Advice:

This advice is current for Wednesday 29th January 2020.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) currently advises Australians to exercise a high degree of caution in Morocco overall. Pay close attention to your personal security and monitor the media for new risks.

This is the second lowest level of travel advice on a 4 level scale, which reflects the risk for average Australian travellers to this country. At level 2 there are more or higher risks than what you would typically find in a large Australian city. Do your research and take extra precautions.

5 February 2020

I have to give Anne credit for my next financial elevation. I had dithered about the possibility of going Business Class *as well*. Anne said "*Why not ! You can't take your money with you*". I couldn't, so I did. My Business Class upgrade cost \$5954.79, giving a grand total for this trip of \$16,952.79. A handsome sum indeed!

February 5

Two Australians on the Diamond Princess cruise ship contract coronavirus as it's quarantined off Japan.

"Do you think we should be going?"

“Well, it didn’t stop us when the Gulf War was on – remember Anne and I took Mum to Europe? Then Anne and I went to Luang Prabang in Laos in 2003 when SARs was the go? Don’t reckon this one will hurt us much”

February 8

Death toll in China surpasses that of the 2002-2003 SARs epidemic, with 811 deaths recorded

March 1

A Perth man rescued from the Diamond Princess becomes Australia's first fatality

“Wouldn’t go if I was you...” “...oh, come on, I’m going to Africa and the Middle East, not China!”

“Don’t go Darrell” said Andy, my next door Chinese neighbour “... too dangerous.”

March 3

The country records its second fatality after a 96-year-old woman in Sydney aged care dies.

“More people die from influenza each year than this bug”

The decision is made. All systems are “go!” I will go on mine and Jan and Anne will go on theirs’. Intrepid travellers all!

Saturday 7 March 2020

QR905 leaves Melbourne airport for Doha, Qatar, at 10:20 PM.

After a two hour stopover and change of plane in Doha, I am in Casablanca, Morocco. When added altogether, the air flights, the stopover in Doha, getting to the airport three hours before the flight and the single hour to pass through border patrol in Casablanca, the total journey had taken 30 hours and 10 minutes. Sounds like a long time but I always remind myself “...it would take a lot more time by ship – perhaps months in the olden days”.

March 7

Global cases hit 100,000

Of course, Business Class works. I had a sleep of over seven hours on the Melbourne-Doha leg of the journey. And besides that I watched three movies. With splendid food, I did not consume my historical amount of alcohol. That said, I did enjoy some bubbly and a whiskey and coke (they had no rum!).

Sunday March 8

My arrival at Casablanca airport is easy. Customs and baggage collection goes without a hitch. Advice given to me before departure said to look for the man with the “*Gate 1*” sign. I find the man immediately upon exit from Customs. His greeting is perfunctory and I just stand there with my trolley while he plays with his mobile phone. It is not hot – rather balmy with a soft breeze. “We are waiting for two more passengers” he announces. After some time... “Hi! I’m Kathy” she says. “Lindsay” he says. Friendly Aussies both.

From the airport at Casablanca to Rabat is 114 km and the journey takes 90 minutes. Upfront in the minivan I get good views of roadside activities and assets. While there is some evidence of poverty along the road, (as there is along most roads from airports –except Changi), Morocco thus far seems richer than most. From experience, the first measure of the wealth of a country is its motor vehicle fleet. I note along this busy tollway many French cars – Renault and Citroen – most small and with some many years on. But there is more than a small mingling of more modern, expensive German cars. Overall, I think, “middle income economy”.

Monday 9 March

Rabat, the capital of Morocco, is a very impressive city. The fact that I was not even familiar with its name added to the surprise. At other times Fez, Marrakesh and Meknes have been the centre of government. Our guided tour of Rabat is most interesting and our guide “Sninat” (he tells us to pronounce it “*Ss knee nut*”) is terrific. Very knowledgeable, customer centred and infectiously happy.

The streets of Rabat are impressive, as are the mansions that line them. We visit the Royal Palace, the ancient ruins of Chellah and Oudaya Kasbar, which is a total surprise to me. “... *take me to the kasbah*” had always sounded exotic, if not erotic! I always thought a kasbah was a place of bars and brothels. To my surprise, a kasbah (casbah) is actually a fort on the highest hill in any sizeable Moroccan city. This kasbah is very large, with a high surrounding wall and a myriad of streets, buildings and shops inside.

On our drive to Fes, (often written “Fez”), we stop at the ancient ruins of Volubilis with its impressive columns and arches beautifully preserved mosaics – including the swastika the Roman symbol for Jupiter. Of course, we had to visit Roman ruins somewhere in Morocco. Roman ruins are everywhere around the Mediterranean and for that matter anywhere that the Romans conquered. We finish the day with a bus tour around Fes which whets the appetite for the ‘morrow in this ancient city.

Monday 9 March. Darrell to Jan

Hi Darl. Safely in good boutique hotel in robust Rabat. Feel good. Qatar airlines really good. Have met some of our group of 12. Meet rest tonight after a shower. Let me know if you get this. Kisses XX

CNN and BBC World news tells me of the spread of the coronavirus. Infection in Europe is occurring on a grand scale. I hear no news of the virus in Morocco nor the places I am headed – Egypt and Turkey. This provides some assurance. Nevertheless, I am concerned as discussions on the matter of COVID-19 are circulating among my fellow travellers.

Our party of 12 includes 9 from the USA, an Aussie couple from Sydney (Kathy and Lindsay Abbott) and me. There should have been more than 30 of us on this “Gate 1” tour, mostly Yanks. But most have withdrawn because of the uncertainty that prevails.

I had thought that *Gate 1* was the pick-up service that I would be using from airports to hotels. But it is more than that. Gate 1 is the country tour operator itself. It is responsible for two of my tours – Morocco and Turkey. The centre part of my journey – Egypt – is in the hands of another tour operator. So, I eventually work out that *Luxury Escapes* is the marketer of a group of tours

chosen by a coordinating tour operator – *Destination International* – and the individual tours in each country are a third level of operation, such as Gate1.

Funny how you tend to associate with your “own “. I get on particularly well with Kathy and Lindsay – similar knowledge, same sense of humour and values. The yanks are good people. As best I can judge none of them support Trump. Like most of the other Americans I have met, they are embarrassed by his world outlook, language and behaviour. While I share these views of their President there is just something a little different about their knowledge, sense of humour and values.

March 9

Australia records its third coronavirus related death after an elderly Sydney man in another aged care home dies.

Tuesday 10 March

I had never thought of visiting Morocco until Jan chanced upon this trip. Nevertheless, I knew something of Morocco. When I was young, a Sunday night “must” was “*High Adventure with Lowell Thomas*”. On weekends I visited Dad, had the usual Sunday treat of tinned “spaghetti on toast” and turned on Dad’s black-and-white TV to this wonderful adventure series. For whatever reason I remember one episode in particular. I think it was titled “The Blue Men of Morocco”. These men are the Tuareg. The Tuareg are an ancient Berber tribe that ranges from southern Morocco, through Mauritania, south into eastern Mali. The Tuareg had indigo turbans dyed from the ink of Mediterranean Sea urchins and flowing blue robes. Thus, “The Blue Men of Morocco”.

This Sunday night show, also visited the tanneries of Fes. While the picture in Dad’s lounge room was black-and-white, Lowell Thomas’s distinctive voice added colour to the vats. Men were up to their waist in dye for the skins that they were tanning.

And now, here I was at the tanneries of Fes. The leather goods salesmen of the many businesses associated with the tanneries were touting their leather

goods of all types. Jan had warned me ... *Don't you dare buy any leather jacket without me being there.* I did. A beautiful, form fitting black leather jacket that looks really "cool"! My travelling companions had urged me to buy it, assisted in its choice and commended me on the bargain I had struck. Original price US\$450. With gruelling skill I got them down to US\$250, which was the equivalent of AU\$385.

10 March 2020

WHO is providing guidance to help people manage fear, stigma and discrimination during COVID-19.

Besides the tanneries, Fes is best known for its "Medina".

The Medina is a maze. From a distance it looks like a massive collection of small buildings with no roads between – and upon inspection that is exactly what it is. The Medina is a mass of alleyways. In most places, a car would be impossible. In some places the working donkey and cart struggled to fit. In other places, *I* am lucky to fit through! In addition to the narrowness of walkways, most buildings are tipping over. The space at the top is less than the space at the bottom. This adds to the claustrophobia in this historic town which is the most extensive and best conserved medina in the Arab-Muslim world. The Fes Medina also boasts the world's oldest operating university – the University of al-Qarawiyyin, founded in 859, and focusing, not surprisingly, on Islamic religion and legal sciences.

Our local guide, not Sninat, warns us "...do not lose sight of me". Luckily we don't. Even though English is spoken, it would have been a tough job exiting the Medina. Inside, the Medina is a kaleidoscope of colour. Shops selling spices, jewellery, fruit and vegetables, fish and shoes, abound. The occasional butcher adds colour to the mix. Why is it that stalls selling smelly fish and "on the spot "chopped meats" are always fascinating? The merchants, artisans and shoppers in robes of varying colours add to the intrigue and I even enjoy the inevitable visit to the "carpet shop". Beautiful carpets presented in a theatrical fashion.

We do a quick trip to the Jewish cemetery. It is very quiet, very white and very sombre.

The day is rounded off with “a special dinner hosted by a local family”. Here, we are to learn more about Moroccan culture and traditions. The location feels more like a private restaurant owned by an extended family where Mum is the cook. The food is varied and good. The evening offers little in regard to Moroccan culture and traditions, and while we make our way out another group makes its way into a second “front room”. A busy local family indeed!

I’ve loved the Tanneries, the Medina and everything else about Fes.

Fes has not let me down and Lowell Thomas was wise to send me here.

Wednesday 11 March

We start our day-long journey to Marrakash with our 12 spread widely through the bus. We skirt the Atlas Mountains and their many wide, flat valleys which look highly fertile and beautifully sculptured in various shades of green. We see many sheep herders and rural donkey carts. The tranquillity of the journey gives me time to ponder the coronavirus, its possible consequences and the way it can affect me and those close to me. Nonetheless, I “nod off” at regular intervals.

March 11

The WHO declares coronavirus a global pandemic

In Emirates lounge and will go to plane in about a 1/4 hour. Enjoy Marrakesh XX. Jan

Hi Darl. Sorry I missed you today. Tried this morning, but failed. Had a long boring trip to Marrakesh. Tonight at market was great. Will send pics. Travel well X X X.

March 11, 2020

President Trump bans all travel from 26 European countries.

Thursday 12 March

“Marrakesh” is as mystical as the name suggests. Our morning tour includes viewing the Saadian Tombs, the Koutoubia Minaret and the beautiful Bahia Palace. The Palace is a wonderful example of Muslim filigreed marble and stunning inlaid ceilings.

We visit a “house” of hundreds of oils which will fix or change every part of the body – both physical and mental. The women in our party are in heaven. They seem to know many of the varieties offered and buy accordingly. My only contribution to the house’s treasury is to buy three small cakes of soap to give to Jan, Jorja and Georgette.

After leaving the “house” we proceed through this medina to the Central Square. Again, the colour is splendid and a good match for the Medina of Fes. The smell of spices is particularly pronounced.

Kathy is determined to see the Museum of Yves St. Laurent. I have nothing to do on this “free” afternoon and welcome Kathy’s suggestion. Before the Museum, we tour the magnificent Majorelle Botanical Gardens. Art Deco is the period profound in the gardens. The gowns in the Museum are stunning. I can see why Kathy wanted to come here and I’m glad I did.

Hi Darl. Having a great day in Marrakesh. Casbah, Jewish Quarter and this afternoon to Yves St Laurent museum and adjacent gardens. This evening horse-drawn carriage to dinner and then Casablanca tomorrow. Travel well. Call when you can. Love you XXX

Everybody chooses to go on the optional “horse-drawn carriage” tour. (Why is it is not included in the itinerary is beyond me. Perhaps these events are made optional because otherwise the “packaged” deal would become too expensive and put people off.)

We have a fantastic night. With our string of horses and carriages we have a great tour around the inner city and end up in a first class restaurant. Like other Moroccan restaurants it has a large courtyard in the middle and pavilions around the edges. We occupy one of these pavilions. A traditional group entertains us with their music which is loud and authentic, and later accompany our two “belly-dancers”. The dancers are terrific. They are

youngish mature women who are extraordinarily athletic and graceful. How do they do that hip thing? The food almost matches the dancers!

12 March, Jan

*1.30 In Dubai. Good trip but didn't sleep much. Plane very empty as is the airport. We'll be in Cairo around 7 X
X*

Jan and Annes' plane does not arrive in Cairo "around 7". Cairo suffers from its worst deluge in 25 years. The plane cannot land in Cairo and is diverted to Cyprus. There, it refuels without passengers leaving the plane and heads back to Cairo.

March 12

The Morrison government pledges a \$17.6 billion stimulus package as the first roll-on effects of coronavirus are felt on the economy

It is a tossup as to whether the highlight city of my Moroccan tour to date has been Fes or Marrakesh. But why am I picking one above the other? They were both terrific.

The Americans are getting very "towed" about returning home. This Gate1 tour is their only tour. While Kathy and Lindsay are travelling with me to Egypt to complete the same tour as me, they too are then going home. I will venture on with Gate1 to Turkey.

The young American medical student has not shook hands or touched anybody since the tour began. This obvious behaviour is disturbing in itself – especially coming from a medical student.

The Americans are worried that their passage home is through Europe. Perhaps Trump will stop them at the border given yesterday's announcement.

Friday 13 March

(Friday the 13th – that's a bit ominous!)

Hi Darl. Hope you arrived safe and well in Cairo. Planning ahead looks like we might be able to dine together either Saturday 14 (day I arrive) or Sunday 15. Let's try to touch base or leave message at your hotel Cairo Marriott or mine Sonester Hotel Cairo. Kisses XXX.

Our three-hour drive from Marrakesh to Casablanca offers little of note, other than to see more of the countryside which has, perhaps, a little more activity.

My room at the Kenzi Tower Hotel is far more spacious than I anticipated. The bathroom/toilet is probably the largest I have had at a hotel. The bedroom is equally spacious. (I think – *I could stay here a while.*)

The afternoon tour takes us to the exterior of the Hassan II Mosque. This is a very impressive Mosque, apparently the largest in Africa, and the seventh largest in the world. Making it more spectacular is its location. A large part of it is perched over the Atlantic Ocean on the Corniche coast.

We also see Notre Dame de Lourdes Cathedral. *"The Cathedral is known for its modernist architecture and its stained glass windows."* I have a great interest in stained glass. The windows in this Cathedral are truly stunning and unlike the displays of similar windows in other churches and cathedrals I have visited. They are angular, extremely colourful and loom overhead. The elongated "Christ on the Cross" is equally stunning.

The conversation among the 12 focuses increasingly on "getting home". The Americans leave tomorrow for the good old US of A – if Trump will let them in. Tomorrow also, Kathy, Lindsay and I will leave Casablanca for Cairo at 13.50.

Kathy and Lindsay seem a little less concerned about "getting home" than me. I think this is principally because of the time element. They will be flying home from Cairo after our Nile River journey and I will be heading to Turkey for yet another tour and then to home. We discuss at length our existing travel plans and our need for urgency in getting home. They will get home quicker than me.

Other than the Mosque and the Cathedral, Casablanca has little going for it. This is a disappointment. "Casablanca" has always seemed to me to be one of those places that is far away and romantic. It's not. It reminded me of a Sunday morning I spent in Singapore. My hotel on that occasion turned out to be adjacent to the financial district of Singapore. Not surprisingly, my walk that

morning took me past many apparently unoccupied concrete buildings with little attraction and few people. Casablanca feels like that just about everywhere.

Friday 13 March, 5:34 PM (Melbourne time)

Hi Darrell, hope you're enjoying yourself in Morocco so far.

We have been informed that Gate 1 have cancelled all of their tours up until April 30th. This shouldn't affect the tour that you are currently on now, however your tour of Turkey has now been cancelled.

There is the possibility of potentially changing tours to another tour operator, as Turkey hasn't been significantly affected by coronavirus. The other option would be to return home from Cairo, and we would refund the Turkey part of your tour.

Please let me know what you would like to do.

Kind Regards

Dave Backo
International Travel Designer

Due to some imminent departures being affected by the coronavirus situation, there may be a delay with responding to any non-urgent queries. Please accept my apologies for any slow responses, and rest assured I will attend to your email as soon as I can.

Saturday 14 March 7.37AM

Hi Dave

Moroccan trip great. Gate 1 tour guide "Sninat" terrific...even with the current virus crisis.

Think it is best to forget Turkey tour. So I accept your "return home" option.

Would you please arrange airline bookings for me to return from Cairo. I assume this will be after the Egypt trip is over (on 23 March). Is there a chance the Egypt trip itself will be cancelled? If yes please arrange for me to get home ASAP. Tonight I am in Casablanca. Tomorrow I fly to Cairo at 1350.

If possible please call me on +61 439 636 483 to discuss.....Email unpredictable.

Cheers

Darrell

I am now panicking. My mind oscillates between going home now and going to Cairo. Hourly, it seems more dangerous to go on the Egyptian tour and delay my return home for at least another 10 days.

I call Dave at Destination International (...hang the expense!)

We discuss options relating to whether it is best for me to remain in Casablanca or proceed to Cairo on Saturday 14 March as originally planned. Dave indicates that if the "flying to Cairo" option is taken up, it will be more difficult to return to Melbourne than if I remain in Casablanca and use the Qatar airlines fare to fly back to Melbourne. Apparently, Qatar airlines does not fly directly from Cairo and I would have to get another flight from Cairo to Istanbul to return to the Qatar airlines ticket. The downside is that if I stick with the Qatar airlines out of Casablanca, I will have to fly "cattle class" in Economy.

Dave then adds that another possibility is that I fly from Casablanca to Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris and use my Qatar Business Class ticket from there.

I tell Dave that the news reports I have been hearing on *CNN* and on *BBC World* have indicated that France has a big coronavirus problem and no doubt this will spread to Charles de Gaulle airport and the possibility of flying home.

Dave says, "oh yeah..." and he will check out these options! (No brainer as far as I can see.)

Dave calls back later saying that the business class option through Charles de Gaulle airport could be a bad option and agrees that the economy fare Casablanca to Doha, then Melbourne, is a better option.

Without much thinking time... (*who needs it*)... I make my decision...*go for the out of Casablanca in Economy option!*

*Then.....*Dave informs me that Destination International is closing for the weekend and that he will get the ticket for me on *Monday*.

I can't believe it... I will have to wait two more days before I will know whether or not I have a ticket out of Casablanca...couldn't the plane be filled over the weekend and leave me without a ticket?... this seems almost negligent to me

that they would not work over the weekend, given the current world situation...*let alone my plight.*

March 13

(USA) A leaked federal plan warns the new coronavirus pandemic “will last 18 months or longer” and may come in “multiple waves’ of infections.

Saturday 14 March

With sadness, I say “Goodbye” to Kathy and Lindsay – great travelling companions. I regret not going with them, hate the idea of missing the rest of the trip, and again feel something of a wimp.

But, Jan tells me of the filth she has experienced in Cairo. Cairo has a population of 25 million. A very large percentage are poor and living in slums. Typically, rubbish is everywhere. Now they have the worst floods in 25 years. I can visualise the muck floating in the streets. What will happen when the coronavirus reaches there? Couple that with waterborne diseases like cholera and all I can see is chaos and death.

At least Jan and Anne see the Pyramids and the Great Sphinx. I envy them that.

The girls fly to Luxor.

I will send through a WhatsApp when we get back from the welcome reception.

(Later)

Our guide is voicing concerns about Jordan. So we may only be doing the ship. What is your info?.

Sunday 15 March

I wake up Sunday morning immediately thinking about the tickets I need to get home. It’s hard to think of anything else because if I don’t get my tickets I will be stuck in Casablanca. Where will I stay?. Will this hotel still have a room for

me in coming *days -- weeks*? I decide I have to get out of this hotel room and do something.

What is there to do in Casablanca on a Sunday morning?

As it turns out, not very much. I am told of a market that I could visit and I could again visit the Hassan II Mosque, of which I have seen only the external part. I decide to visit both the market and the Mosque.

The market is a disappointment. I have been to many Australian Sunday markets which are more impressive. The one thing that is impressive at the markets are the strawberries. They are enormous and approximate in size a “finger banana”.

After returning to the hotel for a couple of hours I venture again to the Mosque. Luckily, I make the final tour of the day. Our tour group is very large – I suspect most tourists in Casablanca are eagerly seeking something to do, like me. There is no evidence of self-distancing. The inside of the Mosque is extremely impressive. The volume of space, itself, seems to have an aura.

Sunday night and I keep worrying about these bloody tickets that I need to get out of Casablanca tomorrow. I have heard that Casablanca airport will close at midnight tomorrow night. You have to “luck it” to find out pertinent information, like airport closures, as *CNN* and *BBC World* have little interest in Morocco when Europe is in a pandemic crisis.

Frustration and anger are kicking in. I desperately want to talk to Jan about my plans and to find out hers. What becomes increasingly frustrating is that on WhatsApp I can clearly hear Jan when she talks, but she cannot hear me. It is bad enough playing “phone tag” at home when it doesn’t matter, but becomes frantic when in a state of near panic.

It is crazy today.

Will have an early dinner now - 6 PM here and try after

Ok x

Heard you loud and clear.

(4 unconnected calls)

Just won't connect. Email or text.

Hi. Advise if you get this XX

Yes...

Any news?

It looks as if the rest of Egypt is on. Erin contacted someone here in Cairo who said they are expecting 28 Australians on the boat.

Are you going on boat?

Looks like it!

BBC news just said that Australians must self-isolate. Don't know if this is all Australians or just travellers.

Is it anyone returning from overseas as from tonight?

(... After unconnected calls.)

Let's try again in 10 mins

Ok we are in our room for a few hours.

Me too.

Not working well today. What time are you leaving?

Need confirmation tonight that I leave about 2:45 PM tomorrow (Monday) afternoon

OK. We are on that flight to Luxor and have to get up around 3 o'clock. It is pretty exhausting.

(various unconnected calls)

Will try again later. I can hear it wanting to connect.

Still hopeless. Almost made connection that time. Once I could hear you clearly. Will try later X

(5 unconnected calls)

*Could hear **you** clearly. Try later.*

(2 unconnected calls)

Casablanca is nine hours behind Melbourne. I know that *Destination International* must have many customers as equally concerned as me - therefore, I assume that they will be starting work early on Monday. So I decide to ring Dave at 8 AM Melbourne time.

I get Dave's manager in Melbourne. He is clearly *pissed* that I have called at 8 AM. I explain my situation to him, emphasising that I *must* have my ticket in order to make the 2:45 PM flight from Casablanca to Doha.

"There is a *procedure* to follow," he emphasises. "I will tell Dave when he arrives at 9.00 of your call, but it will take several hours talking to the airline before tickets will be issued."

I go to bed and have a fitful sleep. My phone rings at 3 AM.

"Hi Darrell, your tickets have been issued" says Dave.

The relief!

"Unfortunately I was only able to get you an economy ticket. The plane is fully booked and there were no business class seats left." To which I reply "... I don't care. As long as I can get out of here."

March 15

The national death toll hits five

About 5.00 AM

Hi Darrell,

Attached is the updated flight e-ticket. It might be worth enquiring at Qatar Airways check-in desk how they can assist you with business class and with hotel access at Doha airport.

We are having trouble with our phones. I'll call you to confirm as soon as I can.

Kind Regards

Dave Backo

International Travel Designer

Due to some imminent departures being affected by the coronavirus situation, there may be a delay with responding to any non-urgent queries.

YES! I have the bloody ticket!

Hi Jan, Ben and Jorja

Attached FYI my reissued ticket.

All flights from Casablanca banned from tomorrow, so let's hope all works well today.

Only Economy seats left, so I grabbed one.

Will send info on What'sapp/SMS when possible.

Love to you all

D

Xxx

Monday 16 March

I go down for breakfast on the mezzanine floor. There is nobody there. A staff member appears and says breakfast will be served in the restaurant on the top level. I go there. There are very few people having breakfast. I get the impression, and I am sure it is right, that this hotel has very few guests left. This leads me to another concern – why do they have so much food out for so few people? Are they using yesterdays?

Hi Darl. Have talked to Jorj and Ben. They are glad I am coming home. Should you need it. My hotel in Casablanca is Kenzi Tower Hotel + (212) 522 97 8000. Enjoy your day. Kisses XXX D

I start to calculate backwards. If the plane leaves at 2:45 PM I have to be at the airport at 11:45 AM (to meet the three hour prior to international departure rule). I allow an hour to get from the hotel to the airport – 10:45 AM. Given that the plane is fully booked I will make sure I am one of those who are on it. I allow myself an extra hour – 9:45 AM.

Traffic is terrific. I arrive at the airport almost 6 hours before the time of departure. *Ridiculous!* I have never been at an airport as early as this before a flight. But then again ... the stakes have never been so high.

To my surprise, there is probably another 50 people before me in the Qatar queue. At the check-in desk I appeal for a Business Class seat. There are none to be had.

Hi Darl. Got my boarding passes for Doha and Melbourne so looking good. At Casablanca airport until 1:15 PM your time. Will contact you from Doha....Travel well and enjoy. Kisses to you and Anne XX

2.45PM: QR1398 departs *Casablanca Mohammed V International Airport* on time.

Oh no...not that...!!

(On board the “MS Royal Lily” at Luxor docks

... Anne goes down to meet a group going to the jewellers. Quelle horreur! Egypt is stopping all flights after 19th. We are booked for the 20th. It is mass panic. The guide sits there and I ask if she is going to inform the other passengers. (Not everyone was going to the jewellers.)

We all get more and more stressed as the evening progresses. Welsh man brings down a bottle of expensive whisky that he can't take home and we all have shots. It's early morning in Oz so we text Erin and Jorja.

We have been awake since 3.00am. and there's nothing we can do. We don't have much confidence in the guide's advice that "Travelmarvel will sort it all out". We much prefer to rely on Erin and Jorja! Off to bed. Will we sleep?

Shit!

Unbelievably, the moment the plane lifts off, I feel the pain, low in my stomach.
Oh no...not that...!!

I have felt it too often offshore – the dreaded *diarrhoea*.

During the next eight hours I probably go to the *head* at least a dozen times. Of course I get *those* looks from my fellow passengers. Have they travelled sufficiently to know exactly what I have or do they think I have coronavirus? In any event, nature does not allow me to curtail my visits.

At least three large aircraft arrive at the same time at Hammad International Airport, Doha.

The exit area verges on chaotic. The people in the area are obviously very tired. Many, like me, are lining up at the Transfer Desk seeking something – for me it is a business class ride to Melbourne. I have to choose which representative to speak to. Of course I choose the shortest line. I tell her of my problems. She is sympathetic and indicates that business class seats are available on the leg to Melbourne – but she can't issue a new boarding pass – I have to go to the Sales desk to get the upgrade from my economy boarding pass. The Sales desk is two rows to my right and the queue at that desk approaches infinity.

But I am in no hurry – I have an 18 hour layover at this airport. Yep... 18 hours between flights.

I stand in the Sales desk line for at least an hour and a half. People in this line are beyond outrage. Clearly those in front have complex problems, just as they do. Eventually I am at the start of the queue. I explain my dilemma, emphasising that I have already paid for a business class ticket, I offer proof of my cause and indicate I know that business class seats are available. He taps away at his computer for at least five minutes and then says "I cannot upgrade you".

"Why?"

“Because I cannot find the booking information relating to your ticket purchase in Melbourne. You will have to get your travel agent to send me the details “.
“You’re kidding!”

Those behind me in the queue show compassion. They have heard my lament. But equally they show joy that this one before them...me... will no longer be there.

Where will I spent my remaining hours at Doha International?

Generally, upstairs at airports is quieter, closer to restaurants and often possesses relatively private spaces. I head upstairs and notice *Qatar Lounges*.... worth a try.

The polite staff member on the desk listens attentively to my story, examines my documentation and quickly writes a pass of entry into the business class lounge. *Whoopie...!*

Sadly I still fear the tummy bug, so I do not indulge in the feast available to me, nor the bar, bearing many shades of malt whiskey. However, the lounge does have extraordinarily comfortable sitting chairs and I quickly fall asleep.

Sometime later I feel a gentle tap upon the shoulder.

“...urh...” I gurgle.

“Sir” she whispers “we would like to transfer you to the First Class lounge.

(... *am I dreaming?*)

“Sure”

“We have to clean the business class lounge so we are asking passengers to move into the first class lounge” (*coronavirus fumigation, I think ...*)

“You are in room 9 “ she says, as I follow her along many wide passages and become totally disoriented.

(...*why are they putting me in a room?*)

Room 9 is not to be sneezed at. It has a sizeable bed, changing area and its own toilet and shower.

(... *Wow this is the way to do it!*)

“We will call you when the flight requires boarding.”

Not a bad outcome for a boy with an economy ticket!

After a shower and a short nap, I head into the first class dining room. The tables are fully laid with real napkins and silverware. *Damn!* I am still worried about the tummy bug and order a couple of pieces of toast and a cup of black tea. To his credit, the waiter does not bat an eyelid, but takes from me the menu offering me fillet steak and delectable scallops... let alone an even greater variety of *aged* malt whiskeys.

After a thoroughly enjoyable ground based experience, once boarded, I try for the ultimate prize – a business class seat. Upon request, my flight stewardess tells me she will get her supervisor to see me once we are in the air.

I meet “Hibatullor”

She is a beautiful African woman whose wide eyes shout “customer focused” as she kneels in front of me and hears of my plight and lament. All documentation is produced once again. She concedes that I have a case, acknowledges that there are still seats in business class and then says:

“I’m not permitted to upgrade passengers to business class seats.”

“You’re kidding?”

“But you do have sufficient evidence for a claim.”

Shit!

Tuesday 17 March Jan

We are arriving in Luxor soon – 7:40 AM here.

(About eight hours later...)

We are coming home with Etihad. Premium Economy. We arrive around 5 in the morning XX

17th March day 6 (Tuesday)

Luxor- Edfu. MS Royal Lily

Well... a restless night. We have breakfast and get ready to leave for a flight to Cairo - business class! They give us breakfast boxes which we give to the driver to pass out to the porters and fly to Cairo.

Mohammed takes us and takes us to the Intercontinental Hotel - very swish. We only have 4 hours here but they are lovely- nice lunch and room. He picks us up to drive us to the airport (thank goodness). It is a long wait to check in but he finds a mate and rushes us through. Short wait to board the plane. The plane is packed. Not an empty seat. Filled with Asian workers getting out before they are blocked in Egypt.

We arrive in Abu Dhabi around midnight and go to the Premier Inn to sleep. A 6 o'clock call gets us going and back to wait for our flight. A \$ 15 coffee and cinnamon roll sustains us as we send messages home.

Can't believe we have only been away for a week - seems forever.

March 17

A human biosecurity emergency is declared in Australia as national death toll rises to six

Destination International Holidays

Level 4 Advice – Do Not Travel: 18 March

The Australian government now advises 'do not travel overseas as this time'. This is the highest advice level & the duration is yet to be determined.

Wednesday 18 March

Jan and Anne on way from Abu Dhabi!!!

Completely new ticket purchased by Jorja and Erin. (Cairo closed the day before their planned departure day and from where they were booked)

I'm just home!! So all look'in good.

March 18

Government places ban on indoor gatherings of more than 100 people, raises international travel advice to peak level - 'do not travel'

Thursday 19 March 5:07 AM Anne Maitland

We have just landed. Phew!

March 19

Qantas, Jetstar and Virgin announce suspension of all international flights.

All non-citizens and non-residents are banned from entering the country.

Maybe I shouldn't have gone in the first place.....?

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Postscript

Received 18 April 2020 (30 days after last entry) from Kathy Abbot

... Lindsay home from hospital and as of this morning he is officially off the covert19 list... Done and dusted. That's the good news... He came home and I went down! Diagnosed positive after 2 negative swabs!! Holy hell! Today is the first day I have felt a bit better! The good thing is we can't get it again, so they tell us! Hope u and your wife are okay.... Kathy