

Two Concordes and a Blizzard

Tea Break Travels, No 8

Some trips stand out in your memory and this one, my first trip to The States certainly fits that bill. Unmemorable as a business trip the return journey included a dead body, a blizzard and the sight of two Concordes doing what they did best – fly like arrows into the sky.

(approx 2,400 words)

It is from a collection of travel related stories called “Tea Break Travels”. They are designed to be read in a short break from work or whatever, and cost around the same as a biscuit! Some are true, some embellished, and some fictional. Some are from near 20 years of too much business travel, or our holidays, others are relayed from friends and acquaintances, yet others are just plain made up!

Enjoy.

It was the late 80's and I was on the last day of my first trip to The States, and my first visit to New York, New York. Wow! Had that seemed an adventure at the time! I was even looking forward to experiencing jet lag for the first time – how sad is that? Businesswise the trip had been mediocre to say the least so less said about that the better. But I got to drive across Brooklyn Bridge and see the Empire State Building and the Twin Towers. And low Atlantic clouds sweep into the city and remove the tops of the buildings – a strange sight indeed.

Throughout the stay there had been talk on the TV news programmes of an approaching blizzard. It was going to hit Wednesday when I first arrived, then it was Thursday, but nothing appeared except low grey cloud. Friday dawned a light grey colour and I had two things to do: go to a short meeting in an office off Broadway and go home! Once again the morning news was all talk of blizzards.

As the Broadway Office was not that far and I still felt I had a lot of New York to see I decided to walk. It was not that cold but the wind was starting to gust a little and felt on the sharp side. The meeting started and my host looked, well nervous. Around 10 am a snow flake landed on the window sill outside his office window and the nervousness increased. When the second one landed, he cut the conversation and stood up. “I’m going to send the staff home,” he announced, adding, “I live in Manhattan, so I can stay a little longer.” With that he left the office for a while.

He returned some five minutes later and by now there were at least 5 flakes on the window sill. The meeting continued for thirty minutes more by which time there were snowflakes blowing against the glass but it still did not look like a blizzard. Even so the meeting was stopped and my host said he was heading home. I took the opportunity to make a few much needed phone calls and then headed out to walk back to the hotel, thinking I’ll take time to pack and then go off to JFK and thence home.

Outside there was about an inch or two at most of snow, but it covered not just the pavement, sorry sidewalk, but the road as well. In London such a light snow fall would

have been crushed to slush and water by now, but not here. What cars there were left in town were starting to have difficulty going over junctions, where the rise in camber meant they came to a wheel spinning halt. Still it was still not biting cold and it was still possible to make reasonable progress. Another block and the snow had increased and now it was unpleasant, and the idea of getting a taxi back came to the foremost of my mind.

Taxi. There were precious few cars let alone taxis. Then a yellow cab came into sight. No light on, but hell I thought I'll try hailing it in any case. To my delight it stopped and I bent down to talk to the driver through the passenger door window. It turned out he was giving up on the day and going home, but as the hotel was on his way he offered me a lift. Yes, that's right, a lift, not a fare, he did not want to be paid! Back at the hotel the foyer resembled a scene from some city being evacuated ahead of an invasion. Groups of people stood around their cases, people shouting in all directions, children cried and were comforted by their parents. Concerning I thought.

I finished my packing, went downstairs and asked the concierge for a taxi to the airport. He kind of laughed in reply and then his face turned to one of pity for this luckless foreigner.

"All the taxis are long gone," he told me. "We have the courtesy bus still running so you could try the Carey's bus service. They are the last to stay running."

I took that option and arrived at the Carey's depot about a mile away. There was a bus to the airport, so I paid and boarded. No problem I thought. Then the driver got on and made an announcement. Apparently JFK was closed, but Carey's buses were not going to be put off by a few snowflakes and they were going to depart. He was basically giving us the option of being snowbound in airport rather than central New York. Still feeling the whole thing was something of an overreaction I took the airport option, after all the driver was game to go. It later transpired that he lived next to the airport so this was probably his only way home in the blizzard!

We started off and drove through down town New York. Although there was still little snow, just a couple of inches at most, it was now all but deserted. No pedestrians, virtually no cars and just a few other trucks and buses. We made good progress into the suburbs to the east of New York. Outside the city things took a different turn. There was more traffic and individual cars were having difficulties making headway, bringing everything to a crawl. It was about an hour into the journey that the first disturbance happened at the back of the bus. Someone had gone to use the loo, found it occupied, waited and then returned to find it still occupied. Knocking on the door asking them to hurry produced no answer so hammering on the door was tried to the same effect. Shouting abuse at the occupant followed, but the people around the frustrated passenger managed to calm him and get him to sit down and wait longer.

He did quite well for it was at least thirty minutes before he came to ask the driver if the "john" was locked and not just occupied. The driver found a place to pull in and went to the back. His attempts to talk with the occupant got the same lack of response, so he

resorted to the special key that unlocks the door. There were gasps, a person pushed forward to help. Eventually the driver returned to his seat and made an announcement. "Sorry folks the restroom is out of use for the rest of journey. Somebody has died in there," he said casually, put the bus into drive and rejoined the crawling traffic.

About six hours after leaving central New York, including taking a few alternative routes, one through somebody's driveway, the Carey's bus made JFK and the terminal for British Caledonian (known as B.Cal and now defunct, not surprisingly!). He could not get up the ramp to the terminal entrance due to the snow, but with some difficulty I could. Inside the terminal there was B.Cal to the left and United to the right. Except that the B.Cal desk was deserted. Not a single sole, just a notice put there by the United staff to say they did not know anything about B.Cal operations, or why the desk was unmanned and to please not bother asking them. Ah well, the airport was closed in any case.

I found a cafe that was open, stemmed my thirst and hunger and started to plan what to do next. It was around 7 pm by now and I scanned the Arrivals / Departure screen with rapidly sinking hope. Just about every arrival was cancelled regardless of where it was from. Then suddenly my eyes alighted on a single line. It was BA flight, delayed and not cancelled, now expected to arrive at 10 pm. I waited anxiously for the departures list. There! It showed a BA flight to London delayed until 11. I phoned British Airways and they said as long as the airport opened by 10, they would have a flight to London, they had available seats and, yes, they could transfer my ticket. I did the deal.

The first obstacle was getting to the BA terminal. The inter terminal transfer bus had long stopped, but looking outside there was still only 6 inches or so of snow on the ramp, and even less had so far accumulated on the ring road. So off I set, with suitcase, and found with the wet snow it was not so bad. Once on the ring road the going got easier and soon I arrived at the BA terminal, cold and little wet around the feet but otherwise OK. I checked in and then came disappointment. The airport was not going to open before midnight and that meant the incoming flight would have to land elsewhere. I was not going home tonight.

There was no chance of returning to downtown New York and an enquiry about airport hotels was met with a "you can try if you like but you are wasting your time" response so it was the departures lounge for me. Initially it was not too bad, but soon the cafe closed down and people started to look for a place to sleep. The seats were an obvious choice, but the benches had arm rest loops aside each seat, like those on park benches to prevent tramps sleeping on them. I wondered why BA had such troubles with tramps in its lounge! Short of threading your body through a series of armrests you either sat up to sleep or found a space on the floor.

I tried, but it just did not work. So I sat for a while, stared out of the window at the snow for a while, read, and finally went walkabout. Most people were somewhere in the same cycle of activities as me, with a few lucky ones that had managed to get to sleep, some snoring loudly. On one walkabout I'm sure I saw Lord King, then chairman of BA, heading back into the first class lounge. Lucky man I thought!

Slowly the hours passed and a pale light appeared over the Atlantic. Eventually the sun rose in a peerless blue sky over a white airport landscape. As the blizzard had passed the snow clearing was well underway, with runways, taxiways and even some apron space already cleared. Trucks were ferrying away loads of snow. Then it was announced that the airport would reopen at 8 am. That news felt really good, but it did not mean that my flight would arrive then. Still spirits rose.

It cannot have been more than a few minutes after 8 am that the roar of aircraft engines pulled people to windows. Juggling for position with everybody else I managed to see what was the centre of attention. A gleaming Concorde with the British Airways' tailfin design was already taxing off the runway, past the banks of cleared snow and towards the terminal. People were just starting to drift away when a second roar pulled them back. A second Concorde touched down and hit reverse thrust sending a cloud of snow off each side of the runway. It followed its sister to terminal and parked up alongside her.

My admiration of the technology and form of Concorde, the sheer engineering brilliance that it represented had always outweighed the facts of its noise levels with me, so I was very happy to see two of these birds being centre of attention in a foreign, and very snowy field. And as far as I could tell most others had also forgiven her noisy manner on this occasion.

With the distraction provided by the landing Concordes over the minutes ticked by more slowly. Nothing else landed at JFK and nothing took off either. The skies turned a little bluer and snow started to melt off the roof and balconies. A few folks braved the cold and took to balconies and terraces of the terminals all around the airport, but basically it was back to wandering around or reading.

Shortly before 9 am engine noise returned, this time from the apron just outside our terminal. Both Concordes had been turned round by the ground crews and were running up their engines. Again people took to the windows and few more ventured outside to watch, but this time it was not just the BA terminal, but the entire airport. You could feel the jealousy as first one then the other plane pushed back and taxied off to the runway. "Why not me!" could have been shouted from any corner of the place! The best was yet to come however.

The first Concorde took position on the runway, revved its Olympus engines to full throttle and shot down the runway with the entire place reverberating to thunderous roar. She left the tarmac and climbed off at something around forty degrees. Now I've never seen a Concorde leave JFK before but I had heard they need to 'restrain' themselves until they cleared Long Island. Well if that was restraint I'd like to experience full power! The plane just climbed up in straight line, marked by a swirling vapour trail with a shining tip. The noise and vibration of the ground were incredible and were only just starting to die away when the second plane took over, blasting down the runway with a repeat of the thunder created by the first. She took off and went straight as an arrow into

the cloudless sky. The two climbed endlessly into the heavens, finally disappearing into the distance some way over the Atlantic.

If BA management had ordered a show they could not have done better. And the audience was very appreciative as well, with unrestrained cheers coming from every terminal at JFK. The first four plane movements following the reopening of the airport had all been supersonic jets. It was an amazing sight.

And my journey home? Well far from supersonic I'm afraid! The BA 747 landed at 2 pm and took off for Heathrow around 4 pm. By that time it was queuing for the runway for around 30 minutes and finally landed at Heathrow in the early hours of the next day. Ah well another weekend wrecked; the joys of international travel ...