

## Flying the friendly skies to an estranged friend

by BROCK WEIR

Before I went away to work abroad for a couple of months shortly after I graduated from university, my grandmother had one sage piece of advice.

She wasn't a big fan of the idea of my going to my destination country as it had been torn apart by civil war about a decade-and-a-half before and was still in the process of healing, but if I was determined to go ? and I was ? she said I had to keep a travel diary and gave me the money to get one.

It was advice that she followed herself, as her expansive diaries she left behind from trips from such locales as Austria, Switzerland, and Tunisia demonstrated in exacting detail, and she was determined I was going to follow her lead.

I should have. Alas.

As I've written in this space previously, I closely immortalized just about every experience I had over the first few days of the trip, but eventually found going above and beyond was taking up no small chunk of time from making new memories, and thought my time would be better spent living the day-to-day.

Great idea? Missed opportunity.

While the broad strokes of the experience are as fresh in my mind today as they've ever been, I've lost some of the finer details over the years, and that's a big regret.

Maybe to atone for this lapse in judgement, whenever I'm away on vacation, as I am now, I try my best to make up for it ? perhaps not in as formal a volume as a trip diary, but through notes to myself, snapshots of just about everything, and gathering a memento, no matter how tiny or inconsequential, to keep the memories sharp.

I also like to use the time on the plane productively by writing my column based on what I'm experiencing during the flight.

Chatting with your fellow passengers at the gate before you depart can yield a goldmine of things to write about. Everybody is travelling for a different reason and those reasons vary as wildly as the destinations available from Pearson.

Sometimes, particularly in our current climate, you can see people making political statements with their attire ? particularly their t-shirts and hats. These t-shirts and hats are, of course, no more and no less comfortable than other non-political options; one can only assume the fun is to observe people's reactions to whatever inappropriate or hotly-charged slogan you've chosen to sport.

I can't say for certain ? I, for one, flew in a t-shirt picked up at and promoting the 2025 Lucille Ball Comedy Festival. Any potential controversy or the odd eyebrow-raise could only come from people who frown on laughter, and I can only hope those people are few and far between.

Sometimes inspiration comes from etiquette ? or lack thereof ? displayed by fellow passengers in line or on board ? like those who think their children screaming at the tops of their lungs in a confined space is the cutest thing ever.

(Spoiler Alert: It's not. Don't get me wrong, I don't begrudge parents travelling with children that cry from time to time, but don't let's pretend it's supposed to be music to our ears or take it as a personal attack when we would rather listen to anything else)

So, ahead of this trip I thought there would be no end to the potential fodder at the airport.

This was set to be my first time flying into the United States since, well, circumstances drastically changed, and going through security, customs, and the whole process would surely provide enough inspiration for three or four columns alone.

Would the customary third degree from customs officials be ramped up to the fourth, fifth, or sixth?

Would officials demand my phone to go through several years' worth of my social media to try and gauge my personal political leanings before letting me in?

After a few quick questions about destination, purpose of trip, and the amount of cash I was bringing into the country, I was waved through ? grateful for a brief process, but kind of annoyed they gave me nothing to write about.

A similar experience happened at the gate. That is to say not much.

Again, the same thing on the plane. There was not a screaming child to be found.

Instead, almost the entirety of my very economical section of the plane was filled by dozens and dozens of seniors headed to Panama. So far, so nothing ? except for one verbal brouhaha from one of the cruise-goers towards a mother and son sitting next to her which illustrated no generation has a monopoly on empathy.

For a writer, it wasn't the most fruitful of missions but I was glad that even though the final destination was California, a state that is generally pretty stable at the present time, nothing of the travel experience had changed too dramatically since the last time we were out here.

Despite any selfish disappointment I may have felt as a writer, I was surely relieved as a visitor.

As we settled in with the friends hosting us for the first few days of the trip, the point was underscored.

The friends in question are amongst my oldest and dearest, with one of the most enduring friendships being with one who settled in the United States nearly 20 years ago after meeting an American and starting a family.

Over the years, she has apparently become a go-to person for the media in her native country to get the inside scoop on what living in the United States is ?really? like, particularly from the expatriate perspective.

Wildfires raging out of control? They give her a call for perspective.

Something goes down between her home country and her adoptive country? A phone call or a video link usually aren't too far away.

Thoughts on the overall political situation in the country? Dial ?er up!

Some of the questions she's fielded, particularly as mercury in the United States' political thermometer is practically shooting through the tube, have become increasingly negative, dour, and not necessarily reflective of her day-to-day reality.

People aren't tapped into the news cycle or their favourite social media pundits 24 hours a day, seven days a week? They're shocked. Kids are still walking to school as normal? Wow. You don't think of one specific man and his antic du jour at every waking moment of your life? Colour them stunned.

One question ? a statement, really ? really stuck out: ?We didn't think you could still go and enjoy a picnic and listen to music in the park.? Huh?

I'm not sure what vision they had in mind, but it apparently it was wide off the mark.

So were mine.

And I'm glad I experienced it for myself.

I can't say I'll ever resume being a regular visitor to the United States again until relations between our countries are repaired or significant changes unfold that allow another healing process to truly begin, but I'm glad to have had an authentic experience ? even if it might be an experience limited to this more small-L liberal state ? and see it for myself.