Off mic with Phil Smith - Getting there is half the fun

Air travel, interpreters and the modern world. Be prepared for any eventuality - pack light, have a good book to hand, drink plenty of water and try to grab a power nap whenever you can.

Philip H. D. SMITH.
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Her Britannic Majesty requests...

My passport says rather grandly that I should be allowed to pass “without let or hindrance”, and this request comes from the Queen. I rather like the idea of her taking an interest in my welfare as I shuffle around a non-descript airport. I really should drop her a line.

Modern air travel now begins with us all in a state of flustered undress, as if escaping from a hastily convened orgy. We tuck in our shirts, re-thread our belts, re-pack our blouses and proceed on our merry way. Of course no two airports are alike: in one you have to take off your shoes, another wants you to unpack your laptop and a third views your bottles of moisturiser suspiciously – vanity seems to be tantamount to wishing the government ill in some jurisdictions.

Taking your queue

The default setting at any airport today is a line, often long and usually stationary. You finally get past the blockage, only to be funnelled into another queue. I wonder if they constitute a let, or at least a hindrance. It would be ironic if my own country were not doing the Queen’s bidding.

We live in a dangerous world so airports have to work hard to keep us safe. But you do sometimes have to wonder. Hands up if you have ever passed through airport security and seen all the machines working. You know, those scanning devices that check your hand luggage. There may be a line as long as the shadow of a giraffe on a ladder in a slowly setting sun, but you will never see all machines working. I have tried asking the harassed security agents why, and they usually say it’s due to staff shortages, but you get the impression they could do with the help.

Considering how much time we spend in airports – at least seven colleagues have claimed their domicile as Lufthansa 4D – you would think one of our working parties would have produced some handy 32-page guidelines.

Just in time delivery

Getting to the airport: there are two schools of thought: a) those who leave in plenty of time because
the train might be late, the traffic snarled up or a visiting dignitary might have closed off half the streets; b) those who leave it until the last possible minute and sail up to the gate just as it’s closing. What you can’t do is act against type. If you’re one of life’s As and try to act all cool by leaving for the airport an hour later than usual there will be problems: the car won’t start, the taxi will get lost, a lorry will shed its load of cooking oil – and your nerves will be frayed. And the Bs, those kings of cool, will leave an hour early and sail through all obstacles, then be bored because they have to kick their heels for a whole hour before the plane leaves. Beware if an A and B travel together. The A will be keen to leave whilst the B will saunter down the corridor saying hallo to friends, and will have friends in every office. B is as cool as a cucumber and A is in bits.

And the kitchen sink

Packing: some colleagues are nothing short of amazing. They pack all they need for a two-week gig in a small bag they can take on board. I am hopeless because however hard I try I cannot reduce the amount of crap I take with me. Sorry, I mean elegant working clothes in line with the professional image and lantern jaw. Besides, the current war on cosmetics means I have to check in my bag containing the latest in rejuvenation technology (there have been some major breakthroughs with essence of ferret – between ourselves this beauty regime’s not for the faint hearted).

Reading material: take a book to pass the hours – there is nothing like it for helping a long flight pass quickly. Pack light, you know, a whodunit or airport bonkbuster to pass the time – leave weighty tomes on the semiotics of morphology for home. And vice versa. Don’t read anything sad. A colleague once told me she’d finished reading Isabel Allende’s “Paula” on a plane and couldn’t stop crying and all the cabin staff came to comfort her. Given their emotional impact it’s probably best to leave AIIC reports for terra firma too.

Retail rules

The thing to remember about a modern airport is that it’s an exciting retail space with some planes landing nearby. Browse the shops for all those last minute souvenirs such as embroidered doilies and antimacassars (although I’ve always been kind of promacassar myself), turnip brandy and whimsical Lochness Monster corkscrews. Buy a shirt or tie or splash out on some fancy luggage. Ah, luggage. I’ve never understood why they sell suitcases in airports because you would think that by the time people get to the airport even the slowest has already done his packing as he collapses in a post queuing haze at the Italo-Japanese Café (espresso and seaweed croissant a mere €45). Of course you may be brought up short when you realise that your tatty bag from 1982 no longer cuts the intercontinental mustard, but I wonder. Has anyone ever bought a case airside at an airport?

They also serve...

But not in the various eateries. You may feel like wiling away the hours with a slap up meal. We are constantly told via the public address system not to let your bags out of our sight for a nanosecond. Nearly all the restaurants in airports are self-service, not a problem when travelling with others, but a challenge for the lone traveller. You cannot leave your bags at the table (for nanosecond rule see above) but you are hard pushed to balance your bags, tray and drinks, find a table and arrive unsathed. There are sometimes sit-down restaurants that solve this problem but they tend to be a bit pricey and, well, there aren’t many of them any more.

...who only stand and wait
Queues. Choose your line carefully. The trick is to get behind people who travel regularly and the knack is to spot them. Frequent travellers know the ropes so they have their boarding card ready, whip off their coat and jacket and sometimes their belt, place bags in the tray and simply walk through. The checks may be a bit of a nuisance, but the frequent traveller has got things sorted. How do you spot these paragons? Well I’m certainly not telling you, you’ll be cluttering up the lines in FRA and MAD to say nothing of DUB and EZE.

Be careful out there

Large families are probably not the best people to be behind in the check-in queue and I speak as a reformed recidivist. A family with 3 or 4 children will constantly be losing one, mum will think dad has the tickets/passports and vaccination certificates and dad will look blank. Crisis averted, they will be checking in 8 suitcases, a cello, bikes and something that looks like a welding kit. By this time the mischievous Kevin will have gone walkabout again with all the passports. At this point dad will ask loudly and not entirely rhetorically if he remembered to switch off the gas.

Of course travelling takes people outside their comfort zone and as we do it so often we’re familiar with the whole set up. Your plane arrives at the gate and you’re in row 40 or so, yet people still leap to their feet, although you know it will take another 20 minutes to disembark. If you’re in an aisle seat and don’t stand up as soon as the plane stops you can feel the tension rising – it’s simply that modern travel puts everyone on edge but the frequent flyer handles it better.

So...

Pack light, have a good book to hand, drink plenty of water and try to grab a power nap whenever you can. Your ever-thoughtful association now produces minutes of all its meetings in several languages and they will soon have your eyelids drooping.

Recommended citation format: