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**Mike Phipps. 0448 813 090**  
mike@mikehippsfinance.com.au

**Paul Grant. 0448 417 754**  
paul@mikehippsfinance.com.au

**Cameron Wicking. 0477 776 859**  
cameron@mikehippsfinance.com.au

**Joshua Haylen. 0435 032 467**  
joshua@mikehippsfinance.com.au

**Head Office**  
4/31 Mary Street  
NOOSAVILLE QLD 4566

**Office. 07 5470 2194**  
**Fax. 07 5455 6626**  
[www.mikehippsfinance.com.au](http://www.mikehippsfinance.com.au)



The Managing Director and I recently returned from a sojourn to Canada and Alaska. Our mission, as I'm sure some of you will appreciate, was to use some Covid cancellation credits and continue our plan to spend every last cent before we fall off the twig.

Hmmm, Covid credits. Whatever happened to Covid? We seem to have gone from being locked in our houses clinging to our last square of toilet paper with the stormtroopers outside to no longer being too worried about the dreaded plague. Talk about mass hysteria. Might be lessons in all that for the current wailing over other expected catastrophic crises, but I digress.

Our trip was a combo of rail, coach and boat with The Rocky Mountaineer train ride and bear spotting top of the list. There was some initial disappointment when the MD discovered The Rocky Mountaineer was a rail journey and not a well buffed young climber. Thankfully, all was forgiven when she realized my desire for a bit of danger might get me eaten at some point.

We flew Air Canada and while the pointy end is not up to some more expensive standards the crew are cheerful and they provide enough sleeping elixir to take advantage of the bed. The attitudes of the flight crew were generally really positive and a pretty good example of adding some value to the experience. Given a choice, I'll take attitude over aptitude every time.

The train ride leaves from Vancouver. The first day provides insights into what Canadians in outer Vancouver do when something breaks down. That is, they leave everything exactly in situ. And so, from what is a very comfortable rail carriage, one gets to witness mile after mile of car bodies, broken machinery, and back yards in various states of repair. The views do improve but I suspect the traveller would see just as much from the highway which follows the train line for most of the 2-day journey. What the car driver would not experience is the superb service offered aboard the train. The professionalism of the staff became apparent late on day one when, after numerous delays to allow freight trains through, they found themselves still on their feet after a 14-hour day. Not a sign of unhappiness or any negative attitude. The demeanour of the crew under trying circumstances left no room for moaning from the passengers and so we endured together. Well, I endured with a few scotches which seemed to make the whole endeavour worthwhile.

Off the train and on to the coach. I'd call it a bus but apparently that's a term that offends coach captains, so lesson learned. Our captain was a lady of magnificent girth who we feared might not fit behind the steering wheel. Elizabeth turned out to be a highly experienced heavy machinery operator, a woman of great warmth and man, could she drive! Anyone who can stop a 50-seat bus from 100 km/h to zero in 3 metres without hurting anyone is alright with me. Said emergency stops announced the sighting of wildlife, of which there was lots. Turns out September in Canada is the perfect time to witness a range of magnificent creatures fuelling up for the winter ahead.

Back to Vancouver and on to the boat. Here's the thing. The MD arranges most of our travel and I tag along. It's only a matter of time before she sends me to some godforsaken destination from which I won't return.....

But, I had it in mind that we were going to Alaska on a small boat which would inch its way up the inside passage and reveal vistas unavailable to those mega size cruise liners you see on the travel shows. Imagine my horror to discover that the Koningsdam is bloody huge, with 2650 passengers and 1036 crew. No turning back now, so we queue for 4 hours at Vancouver Harbour as we navigate the usual checkpoints and endure the dubious pleasure of interacting with US Customs. If the service providers we had encountered to date engaged in positive and welcoming attitudes the US Customs people managed to display the opposite. Our travel companions assured us that this is a consistent trait and under no circumstances should we smile or demonstrate any positive human qualities. Advice heeded we eventually got to our cabin and wow, I think I might like big ships! The crew is largely Filipino and they understand service. Sure, they have one eye on tips but at least they are prepared to make an effort to earn the reward. Certainly beats having a grocery store attendant who doesn't give you the time of day add an 18% tip to a bar of chocolate. Travel tip (no pun intended): Most EFTPOS terminals have a button marked 'other' that you can use to reduce the tip or cancel it. I don't tip people who don't say hello.

If Covid has achieved one positive, it appears to be the death of the open smorgasbord cruise dining room. Food on this trip was prepared behind counters and served by staff on an individual basis. Much more civilised than the melee I've heard about in pre-Covid times.

We disembarked at a few ports in Alaska where it became clear that we weren't the only game around. These tiny towns were simply overrun by cruise liners, sometimes 4 at a time. The impact has been to turn what would have been authentic frontier settlements into tourist traps replete with jewellery stores, souvenir outlets and tour spruikers. Think Surfers Paradise with glaciers and killer whales, not too big a stretch I suspect. Don't get me wrong, like Surfers, it's still an amazing place where much fun can be had, it's just not that authentic.

We did go on a bear spotting tour into the wild and that is most definitely authentic. The pre-tour briefing is a sobering experience wherein the risks of a too close bear encounter are made clear for all participants. I asked the guide how best to guard against an unpleasant bear experience. Apparently, the trick is to have a bell which will alert the bear to your approach and some pepper spray should the bell fail. "How best to know if a bear is near", I asked. "Well, you will know if a grizzly is around by their droppings, which are generally neatly piled". "And how best to identify said droppings?" "Well, those will be the ones full of bells and pepper", our guide helpfully advised.

We saw plenty of bears, some up very close, and met a wonderful group of fellow travellers. I must be getting old 'cause I think this group travel, being taken care of gig, might be for me.

Hmmm.... Just saw an inbox alert about a one way fully guided trip to Kazakhstan... wonder what that's about?

Mike Phipps F Fin  
Director | Phippsfin Pty Ltd



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