

International Travel - I'm Cured



As regular readers of this column will know the managing director and I don't mind a bit of travel, preferably of the comfortable variety. As such I write this month's missive from the Matild Palace hotel in Budapest, as one does. The hotel is every bit as pleasant as the name suggests and I find myself ensconced in the breakfast room, looking out over a winter wonderland of historic buildings and snow.

I should be happy, but I'm not. In fact, I suspect this will be our last such journey with future adventures confined to our native land and perhaps the occasional foray to the Land of the Long White Cloud. On a positive note, our experience has shone a very bright light on the positives of travelling at home or across the ditch.

Where to start?

The MD had wanted to do a European river cruise for some time, so we booked the classic Amsterdam to Budapest route and added a few weeks after to explore places we hadn't been before. Christmas in Europe seemed a good idea, not least to escape the heat and humidity at home. Our flights with Emirates were ok, if you set aside being stuck on a taxi way for an hour waiting to leave Dubai or finding another aircraft parked in your bay upon arrival in Amsterdam, leading to another hour watching the seatbelt signs and praying the toilet would become available. While on the subject of airlines, beware the quality differences. Emirates flew a newly refurbished aircraft out of Brisbane but a very tired one out of Dubai on the connecting flight. All of this turned out to be an omen of what was to come.

Amsterdam is a very interesting city with much charm and history. It is also a city of smokers who seem quite happy to dump their cigarette butts on the ground. We forget how much smoking has become socially unacceptable in Oz, not so in The Netherlands it seems. The city feels safe enough albeit I wouldn't go out at night around the main railway and dock area unless you are interested in the less appealing aspects of failed immigration policies.

Even before we boarded our floating home for the next two weeks signs of things to come emerged. We would not be meeting the ship at the main downtown port as planned, but instead in a rather unattractive industrial dock area. Upon entering our cabin, we discovered that the tour company have an incredibly gifted marketing photographer. You could swing a cat I guess but the poor feline would definitely end up with concussion.

Within a few days the softening up process commenced. River levels were falling and we would need to speed up and bypass some of the main onshore attractions. The lock system is dependent on water levels we are told and we don't want to get stuck. As it turned out it didn't matter. While moored at the lovely medieval town of Passau we were informed that a lock had broken and our journey via boat had come to an end. We would remain onboard until the end of the tour and then be bused to Budapest. So much for the historic tour of Nuremberg or New Year's Eve in Vienna.

The bus ride turned out to be some 8 hours inside a mobile virus incubator. Within 24 hours of our arrival in Budapest the MD had been flattened by a very nasty bug and I soon followed suit. Of course, being a bloke, I was far crookier as I'm sure you will appreciate. With deteriorating health and doctors' orders not to fly we reluctantly cancelled the last three weeks of our journey and have made the Matild home for the time being.

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So far, we've learnt some lessons we maybe should have already known. Overall airline reputations don't necessarily guarantee you will be riding in a nice new plane. Tour companies should know of possible impending dramas but just seem to assume that guests will take major problems in their stride. My suspicion is that the company did know that water levels were falling before we embarked and that the trip would be impacted. They chose to keep our money and go anyway.

And here's the big one.

Travel insurance companies seem ill-prepared to assist customers in medical crisis. Our previous provider failed that test spectacularly a few years back, so we moved to another insurer. They answer the phone at least but that's about all. They seem very keen to explain the claims process but unable to manage even basic medical support. The lady we spoke to was pleasant enough but admitted she was unfamiliar with Hungary and that the company had no one on deck who was. This is a major travel insurer! The hotel staff did a way better job so if you are going to Budapest stay at the Matild. Even if you are crook, it's still a wonderful experience with lovely people to look after you.

As you can imagine this whole experience isn't cheap and given the debacle it has turned into one might ask..... what the hell, why not holiday at home?

Let's start with convenience. With the exception of the wonderful Margaret River region, most appealing domestic locations are less than a four-hour plane ride from pretty much anywhere on the east coast. No international transfers, no passport controls and limited opportunity for loss of luggage. Hell, even Queenstown is only 3 hours away and the Kiwi attitude to the arrivals process is pretty relaxed. Dodging the need to sit in a 14-hour recycled germ factory also has its merits of course.

Travel is expensive and the further you go the higher the bill. The problem is that unlike Australia many countries feel no need to have transparent pricing. In Hungary for example prices are displayed as what one might describe as retail. This means the 27% VAT and 15% automatic service charge are added on only when the bill hits your table. That's an extra 42% on top of the price displayed. Incredibly there is also an expectation that the poor hapless punter will provide a tip on top of this. For hotels in many countries the tariff is quoted before city taxes, green compliance levies, water surcharges and anything else the local authorities can dream up. Many hotels also have horrible cancellation policies which pretty much guarantee you've done your dough regardless of how much notice you give. Add in a weak \$AUD and the holiday at home bang for buck argument makes even more sense.

Here's the thing though. We are not getting any younger (the MD says she is, but I await proof) and health considerations must now form part of our travel planning. Becoming ill a long way from home in a country whose health system you don't understand and with no practical travel insurer support is no fun. The financial and emotional impact of cancelling a long-planned trip of a lifetime while being marooned in a foreign land is significant. Is it worth it? As of now the answer is a resounding No.

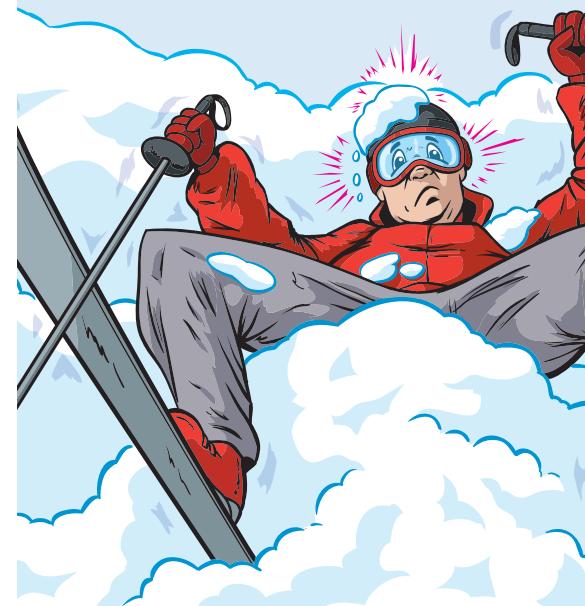
Next time.... Tassie here we come.

Postscript:

I reserve the right to go skiing and I promise not to complain if things go sideways.

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