

SAFE TRAVELS

BY TONY DIEM

A handshake and thank you at curbside, and I was off and rolling toward the terminal entrance. My bike box on rollers and a pull along travel bag clicked their way over the sidewalk. It was a bright early morning, with a light crisp wind that made the walking pace brisk toward the rotating door.

Before me, a lady in quite an eclectic outfit was shouldering a bag and purse and pulling a monstrosity of a bag. One of those you know does not fit in the overhead compartment bag checkers, and the airlines do nothing to lessen their existence. She was walking trying to maintain a grip on all her belongings as well as a talking away on a mobile pressed between her ear and shoulder. Then with utter synchronicity, the shoulder bag slipped its perch. The straps catching on her lower arm—the weight was more than she could hold, pulling her shoulder from her ear—down went the phone. A quick attempt was made to ‘kick’ at the phone, in an attempt to break its fall, though it was slightly late, adding a horizontal vector to the phone’s flight path resulting in a somewhat smooth landing a few feet away. The purse, perched on the other shoulder, was now too, resting on her forearm at her elbow, and the roller bag landed with a smack as she let that go along with a few expletives.

As she leaned to retrieve the phone, her purse lost most (although in hindsight, it prob’ly held a lot more) of its contents, all matter of a whatnot spilled its way on to the cold concrete. Lipstick, coinage, pen, crumpled paper, mascara and a weathered wallet lay ironically rather neatly side by side just outside the automated door of the terminal.

I set my bag down, clasped the chest strap of my backpack and kneeled down to retrieve the phone. She apologetically and thankfully took it from me with a frantic smile as she scooped up her chattel. In no time the phone was back between her shoulder and ear and she rattled on her fluttery conversation.

I made my way through the rotating door and waited for the next available electronic kiosk. As I slid my passport through the slot of the kiosk, the airline attendant signaled for me to roll my bag through to the scale, and the TSA agent I know from outside the airport, came forward and began rolling my bike through for screening. My phone app buzzed as it was updated with my boarding passes, and the agent slapped luggage tags onto my bag and bike.

“Final destination, Mr. Diem?” She said with a warm smile.

I reached out to hand her my passport and shake her hand and replied, “Palma, Mallorca by way of Zurich.”

“Ok, your luggage is checked through to your final destination.” She handed my claim checks and passport back.

"Another work trip?" My TSA friend asked as she was repacking the items contained within my bike bag.

"Yeah, we picked up another team, so it will be a little longer trip than before, hopefully warmer as well."

"Well, I'm sure the Mediterranean beats the temperatures we had this past weekend!" She stated with a little sarcasm. "Last weekend tied for the coldest ever recorded at the airport for wind chill."

No sooner had she said that and there was a loud sound of a bag smacking the ground at one of the other airline counters. "Ma'am, United is just around the corner, I'm sorry for the inconvenience." A Delta agent was escorting my travel compatriot I had helped outside minutes before.

I turned back toward my friend, and the agent, "She's not having a good morning."

They both smiled, wished me safe travels.

Slightly unusual for Rapid City, there was a line, albeit a short one, but a line none the less for the TSA ID checks. It was a local school debate team flying to Washington for a competition; they were half done when I pulled up at the end of the queue.

I took off my watch, my Road ID and placed my phone, wallet and coins in my jacket pocket while I waited, and was prepared when the TSA agent said, "Good morning, where are you off to today?"

"Spain, for business." I replied as I watched him carefully check the UV markings of my passport, as well as using a loop to check the other security devices of my travel document. With a few quick whips of a Sharpie, he marked my boarding pass, and I stepped through to a mess of high school students untying their shoes, removing belts and checking their pockets.

After several minutes, I had some space on the table leading to the conveyor and threw up two trays. In went my laptop, then I kicked up my shoes, placed my folded jacket over them in the second tub and laid my liquid's Ziploc next to the iPad.

Behind me I could hear the TSA agent checking ID's say, "ID and boarding pass, ma'am." And then promptly repeat it again, in a tone more terse and few decibels higher. "ID and boarding pass. Either your driver's license or a passport, please!"

I looked over my shoulder, and sure as shit, it was the same lady. "Ma'am." The agent told her sternly, "your ID, drivers license or passport, and your boarding pass, please." With her phone in her mouth, her shoulder bag over her shoulder, she contorted her body, lifting a thigh to help hold her purse she dug through and found her weathered wallet and handed it to the agent. "Can you please remove it from its sleeve?"

I turned to see the last kid make it through the X-Ray and I patted down my shorts with their numerous accessory pockets to make sure I wasn't missing anything and stepped up to the spinning x-ray device were the last of the kids was being sent through.

I placed my feet on the yellow shoe prints, I smiled as I thought to myself, "Shouldn't they be foot prints, not shoe prints." Per usual, a yellow box appeared around my thigh, always a hit with the number of zippers the shorts have. A TSA agent approached, explained himself, and slowly clasped the area that was highlighted by the machine.

I located my trays, as I heard a barrage a boisterous commands from the TSA agents on the other side. "Please, remove any laptops or tablets from your bags and place them in their own trays, remove belts shoes and make sure you pockets are empty. I couldn't help think that my friend was the intended listening audience.

"Ma'am," said the TSA agent at the entrance of the X-Ray machine, "your shoes?" The TSA agent pointed down and then toward the conveyor belt.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," came the flustered response.

"Ma'am. The phone." She pointed again.

With about an hour to go, I meandered through the short terminal at Rapid, taking the proverbial loop through the gift shop and small cafeteria like bar. I grabbed a vitamin-water at the counter and made my way to the gate at the end of the terminal.

I sat down, thumbed through my phone, texting a few co-workers and friends about the entertainment value of other "savvy travelers" and read some news while I waited for boarding to begin.

I could see the runway from my chosen seat, and was watching a small plane approach for landing when the the plopped down in the seat in front of me just stealing my view of touchdown. Still in shambles from security, she was placing items away, she was carefully placing her boarding pass within her coat inside pocket when the first announcement about our plane was made, its flight and gate numbers, followed by time and order of boarding.

I looked up and out the window as I listened, reached my hand back to confirm my passport was in my back pocket, and then watched humorously as the woman began to frantically look through her purse, stand and search her pockets. Her head rotated in every direction, left, right, up, down and left again.

"Your boarding pass?" I asked.

"Yes."

I could see her face swell with panic. "Inside the breast pocket of your coat." And pointed to her coat sitting on the chair next to her.

An immense sigh and a drop of her shoulders preceded as she sat down grabbing up her coat to check. She had them once again in her hand and this time placed them in the outside pocket of her way-to-large carry-on.

I looked down at my phone and thumbed it as if I had received a text and nodded as I laughed a little bit, inside.

"Ladies and gentleman," the gate agent announced. "Due to the size of the aircraft, larger carry-on luggage will not fit into the overhead compartments. I have some green, plane-side tags for you to use. Just leave your bags at the end of the gangway. These bags will be available at plane-side when you arrive in Denver. Thank you."

The lady looked at her bag, the gate agent, then back at her bag. She stood up and took a few steps toward the gate agent, but then came back and started collecting up all her belongings, as well as her coffee and waddled toward the gate. I was about to offer to watch her belongings, but it was just so entertaining to watch the commotion.

I could hear the agent tell her that she would need to leave the bag at the end of the gangway and not at the gate at this moment. The three different phrasings of the instructions didn't seem to quell any of the confusion as to where the bag would be left. The woman came back and plopped back down shaking her head. She dug around in her purse before finally pulling out a pen and carefully filled out the green tag.

"Ladies and gentlemen we will now begin pre-boarding for our first class passengers, and those passengers that may need a little extra time boarding and those traveling with small children. Please have your boarding pass ready at the gate."

The gate area came to life as everyone began shuffling through their belongings and organizing themselves to board.

A frantic look came across my muse and the search for the boarding passes began again.

"Ma'am. They're in your roller bag." I said softly.

"Thank you." She replied with an embarrassed smirk as she placed her hand on the pocket of the bag. "Do you travel much?" She asked me.

"I don't think it's much, but my co-workers seem to think so." I answered. "Sometimes I take a few extra days for myself."

"What was in that big bag you were rolling?"

"Golf clubs." I answered with my standard canned response, and mustering the straightest face I could.

Not really believing me she responded non-verbally with a scrunched face and shake of her head, "Nuh-uh!"

"Ok, you got me. I work in the bike industry and am very fortunate I can bring my bike on company trips."

"For fun? So what is it you do?"

"Our company sponsors a bicycle team, like those that race in the Tour de France. I'm our team liaison. Basically I make sure everything is functioning and answer any questions the team coaches and riders may have." I replied. "It's not all that glamorous, but I am very thankful for the traveling opportunities."

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are now boarding Premier members. . ." the announcement began.

"Well that's my cue." I stood up, rolling up my earphones.

She began the frantic search again. "Where are you traveling too?" I shoulder my backpack.

"Me, I'm going to Chicago." Her hand reached into each of the pockets of her coat, in yet another nervous search.

"Chicago. Yum, great food!" I pointed to her bag, and made an un-zippering gesture as a reminder.

She looked at me gratefully. "Oh yeah the food!" Her eye lit up. "I go on occasion for work."

Curious...I couldn't help but ask, "What will you be doing there?"

She retrieved the boarding passes and was all smiles. "I'm a consultant. I teach personal organization skills."