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International Travel Requires Flexibility and Patience

Huntsman Post

International Travel Requires Flexibility and Patience



Editor's note: "When Theory Meets Practice - Stories From the Workplace" features professionals who share tales of challenging events that tested them with the unexpected.

By Kathy McConkie, associate MBA director & advisor

Have you ever missed a flight 15 times on the same day?

I had the unique experience of coming up with a Plan B for 15 people when we all missed a flight in Milan, Italy. I was in charge of logistics on an MBA trip on a day when, due to no fault of my own, logistics just plain fell apart.

Fifteen of us had traveled to Italy, and all was going according to plan as we arrived at the airport in Milan to catch our flight to Heathrow Airport in England. There was no running or panic because we arrived with plenty of time to spare so we could catch our evening flight – or so we thought.

When we arrived at the gate we discovered that our flight was long gone. It had taken off that morning, and we were not booked on the evening flight we expected to be on. The people at the travel desk said they would like to help us, but our ship had sailed. They could not rebook us, at least not without charging us for brand-new tickets. Unless we had fistfuls of money, they told us, there was nothing they could do.

It didn't seem to me that just staying and starting a new life in Milan was a very viable option for all 15 of us, so I began the long process of working with our travel agent long-distance to come up with a Plan B that would get us airborne.

It was a frustrating experience, but I realized quite early in the process that hollering at the people behind the desk might help me vent but would not get us seats on the airplane. Back and forth we went, with me stuck in the middle between our travel agent and the powers that be at British Airways, looking for logistical solutions, until we realized that the airplane we hoped to be on was going to fly off into the night without us on it.

Eventually, with the help of our persistent travel agent, we managed to get on a later flight to Heathrow where we knew we had already missed our connecting flight that was to glide us into Manchester for the night. We had to be to Manchester that night, because we were scheduled for a business visit at 7 a.m. the next morning.

This time, the Plan B our travel agent came up with did not involve flying. We were booked on a bus that would take us on a late-night trip to our destination. As it turns out, however, we were not the only people expecting to leave on a bus from Heathrow. There were dozens upon dozens of buses and no one with a friendly sign saying, "Welcome, Aggies."

We finally discovered the right bus and managed to get to our destination after midnight. Thankfully, the students we had in tow did not rebel or grumble at our changing plans but made the best of it each step of the way. Experienced travelers will tell you that being an "Ugly American," to borrow a phrase from the book by the same name, is not an effective way to navigate in foreign lands. Part of international travel often includes figuring out how to get travel plans back on track, and to do that it's important that you pack some diplomacy, a lot of patience, and a fully charged cell phone.