

The Washington Post  
**TRAVEL**

SUNDAY, AUGUST 23, 2020 · SECTION E

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ANNELIEN SMET FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

# Traveling by err

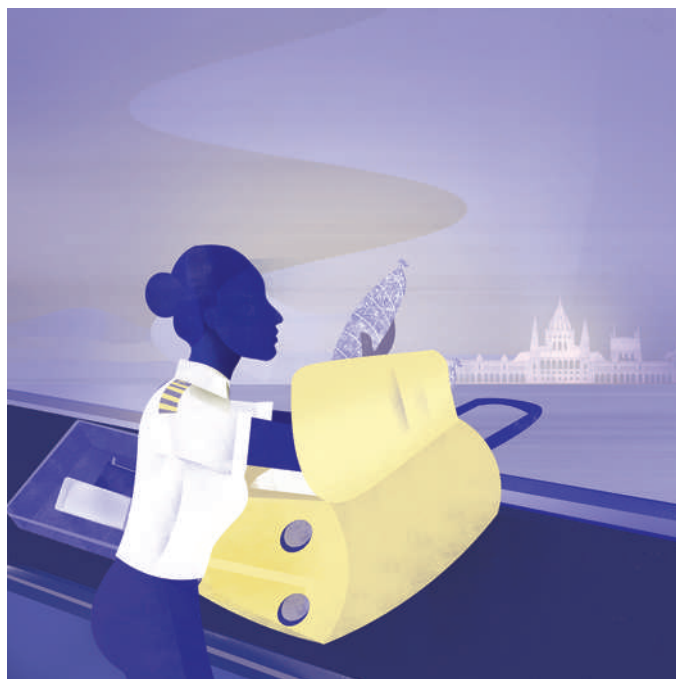
Not all trips go smoothly, and even the most seasoned globe-trotters make mistakes along the way

That sinking feeling. It's as much a part of travel as returning your tray table to the upright, locked position. We explore unfamiliar cities, revel in foreign cultures and savor the beauty of faraway places. But we also let our passports expire, lock ourselves out of our hotel rooms and miss our connecting flights. Experienced travelers are no exception. They can't believe this is happening — *to them!* But it is. It turns out rookie mistakes aren't just for rookies.¶ Though

it's not much consolation when you've just checked into the worst hotel in town or you find yourself on an eastbound train when you were headed west, mishaps can make us better, stronger and nimbler travelers. From bad times, they say, come good stories. And, if we're lucky, a little wisdom as well. With that in mind, we asked a group of seasoned travel writers to own up to their less-than-stellar moments on the road. Here's what they had to say. **SEE MISTAKES ON E14**

# Even the savviest travelers can take wrong turns

MISTAKES FROM E11



## Dangerous links

My last night in Budapest was dedicated to sausage shopping. My then-husband was hard to shop for and in a serious meat phase at the time; sausages were the best gift I could come up with. (This should have clued me in that the marriage was doomed.) Other family and friends were getting paprika, porcelain and Tokaji wine.

It took five minutes at a food market to fill my messenger bag with different styles of sausages seasoned with different spices. Hungarian sausages are heavier than you'd think and the walk back to the hotel was hard, especially since it was early December and Budapest's streets and sidewalks were icy and the divinely distracting smell of kürt skalács — cinnamon-covered dough cooked over a spit and popular during the Christmas season — haunted nearly every street corner.

Salivating in the direction of one of these spits rather than paying attention to my footing, I slipped and fell on a patch of ice. Landing squarely on the messenger bag, I hoped the crack I heard was the ice (or a sausage). It was not.

Every breath I took felt like a

sharp stab.

Laughing felt like shards of glass exploding in my back. I know this because I spent much of the flight home wondering if I was the first person in the world to have broken her ribs on sausages. I've always had a tendency toward awkwardness, but this was a new level. An hour into the trans-Atlantic flight home in a middle seat in economy though, the Great Sausage Attack of 2010 had ceased to be funny.

Back on U.S. soil, I shuffled slowly through customs, stopping only when a dog started sniffing at my cart. The paprika I brought home for Aunt Elaine was quite pungent. "If they take Aunt Elaine's paprika, I'm going to scream."

I wish they had taken Aunt Elaine's paprika.

The last I saw of my sausages was a customs officer carrying them off to join a pile of meat products confiscated from other travelers as clueless as I was about what foods could be brought into the country. I called a warning to the retreating officer, "Be careful. Those sausages are more dangerous than they look."

—Dina Mishev



## Mother's a helper

My plan seemed flawless: Fly to Chicago to join my in-laws for Thanksgiving 2018, then cut out pre-dawn Friday for a flight to the Bahamas for a four-day dive trip, allowing me to check the family holiday and self-indulgent travel boxes without vaporizing too many vacation days.

But on Thanksgiving morning, as I rearranged dive gear in my suitcase, I stopped cold: I'd left my passport at home in Takoma Park.

As my heart sank, a microscopic version of me tore through the clutter of my mind, overturning every action of the prior three days in the faint hope that, just maybe, I'd slipped the passport into my luggage. Nothing.

Next thought: I was flying through Miami, where I'd meet my friend Bill, who was coming from D.C. Could he bring my passport so I'd have it for the international leg of the trip? No, said American Airlines; you can't check in at O'Hare International

Airport without that hallowed document.

Could I fly back through D.C. instead? Sure, for an additional \$1,000.

I finally landed — at age 52 — where I should have started: I called my mom, who raced three miles from her house to mine, grabbed the passport and passed it like a baton to FedEx for same-day delivery to my in-laws' house. Cost? \$480. And yes, I shopped around. Most carriers I reached couldn't even get a package from Washington to Chicago in the dwindling hours left before my departure.

I later read (though never verified) that Americans had boarded international flights without passports after extended vetting at the airport, a risk I didn't want to take for such a short trip. My stress didn't fully dissolve until a courier handed me the envelope at 9 p.m. on my in-laws' porch. He did a double take when I looked skyward and said, "Thanks, mom."

—John Briley



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNELIEN SMET FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

## Dialed in after lost phone

I've long believed each day that ends with me in possession of my keys, phone and wallet is a victory. Once, I nearly missed that victory. Well, a few times, admittedly. But six other times — yes, six — ended with someone finding my credit card and alerting me through Facebook. Such are the advantages of having an uncommon name.

I was heading to JFK Airport in Queens to catch a morning flight to San Francisco. I arrived with minutes to spare (per usual), reached into my bag for my identification and a groundswell of dread surged through every nerve ending. My phone was AWOL. I approached the most relaxed person I spotted, who was rattled by my panic, but was kind enough to let me use her phone to call my own. The young woman who answered had found it on her way to work, at the Jamaica Center train station, where airport-bound passengers get off. Two key things to know: to say Jamaica Center is "busy" is a

gross understatement. Also, she worked at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan, about 17 miles away as the crow flies. Translation: 95 minutes by train and foot.

This is the part where I almost hugged the JetBlue agent, who switched my 9 a.m. ticket to a 9 p.m. ticket, and at no cost because I had arrived at the airport so close to boarding, he said. (Also, tears helped.) I recall the next sequence of events in time-elapse: I used another Samaritan's phone to notify my blessed phone-finder I was on my way. I darted, heavy bag in tow, to the monorail to the train. My apartment, joyfully, is en route to Manhattan, so I dropped off my bag, grabbed a bottle of bourbon, got to Sloan Kettering to exchange the whiskey for my phone, elicited applause from the security guards and relished a relaxing day at home before my 9 p.m. flight. Biggest victory ever.

—Liza Weisstuch



## No time for island time

I put on my best happy face when my presence was requested on a Carnival cruise to the Caribbean. But, as a longtime travel writer, I had to draw the line at canned shore excursions. No way would my husband and I swim with sad captive dolphins or drink watered-down umbrella drinks on an overcrowded beach.

Instead, I devoted hours to researching the perfect outings. The pinnacle would be visiting a nature reserve on Caye Caulker, a small island off the coast of Belize. I visualized a few hours of isolated bliss, hiking through bird-rich forest far from the crowded cruise ship.

The fantasy started going sideways when I noticed clocks along the waterfront at 8 a.m., when my watch said 9. At the ferry ticket counter, the clerk shook her head, saying, "Cruises don't usually change clocks to Caribbean time." How did I not know that? Belize is in the Central time zone, while Florida is in the Eastern

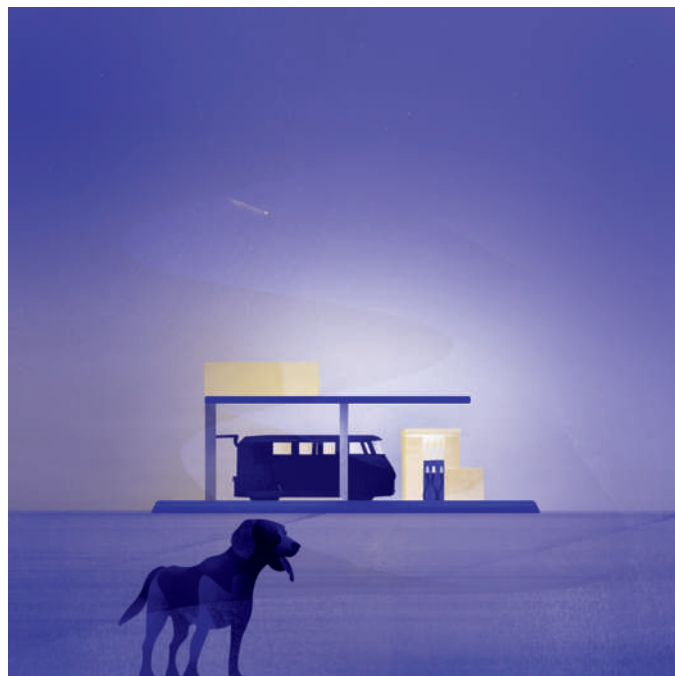
time zone. Thankfully, we weren't in daylight saving time: It would have been two hours earlier, as Belize stays on standard time.

But we could still do this! We could sit in the hot ferry terminal for 75 minutes and get to Caye Caulker, take a short hike and forgo lunch. Thirty minutes late, we took off on the cheek-to-jowl ferry, more crowded than the Lido Deck at high noon. At one point, a tiny paw poked its way out of the backpack next to me and grabbed at my hand. Don't worry, the owner told me, it's just my pet coati-mundi.

The trip was billed as a 45-minute ride. Ninety minutes later, after several unadvertised stops, we arrived, stared at the return schedule and realized we had time for maybe a 20-minute stroll.

But I can say I've been to Caye Caulker. And I did get to shake paws with a coati-mundi.

—Carol Sottili



## That empty feeling

The fuel light comes on, and I shift into survival mode: Slow down. Breathe deep. Turn the air conditioner off and radio down. I'm in the middle of Montana, God only knows how far from the nearest gas station.

It's not the first time I find myself far from fuel, surprised by a low fuel light. It happened once in Wyoming. I called my dad, who I believe can fix anything, from anywhere. And it happened in the mountains of Arizona at dusk. I panicked, imagining myself walking 20 miles in the dark with a beagle. When I drive across the country, I drink in the landscape and forget to look at the fuel gauge. I take a perverse pride in pushing through long stretches, often waiting until I see the light before I consider filling up. That's reasonable in the Eastern half of the country, the land of turnpikes and truck stops. But in the West — where distances be-

tween exits are great, the speed limit may be 80, and the mountains show no pity in tapping your tank — waiting for the indicator means playing with fire.

In Montana, the GPS searches for my salvation, fore and aft. I follow its directions to a shuttered Sinclair station — last open, it appears, in the Jurassic period. Slow and steady, I keep driving, knowing from previous close calls that the tank will grant me at least 35 bonus miles after its warning; I've used 30. My heart hammers under the seat belt. This time, I'm certain, I won't make it.

When I pull into the gas station, I turn off the car and close my eyes. After refueling, I start the engine and watch the gas needle rise from the dead. I relax my foot on the accelerator and turn up the radio, lesson unlearned.

—Melanie D.G. Kaplan



## Picturesque yaks, talking back

It was June 2018, and we coming down from Shika Mountain, a 14,500-foot-high peak in western China whose top is draped with strings of Tibetan prayer flags. My husband, two 20-something kids and I were touring Yunnan province, where our younger daughter had just finished a semester abroad, and we were a bit giddy: The exhilaration of Shika's stunning views had been amplified by our slightly oxygen-deprived brains. As our tour guide drove us back toward town, we spotted yaks grazing in the green pastures encircled by sharp gray peaks under loose, cotton-boll clouds. Could we stop to take pictures, we clamored.

The driver obliged, turning onto a rutted field road. The yaks were accommodating, too; the younger ones put on a delightful show of running around. Yaks are basically bigger, hairier cattle, and we'd been dining on their meat. Still, we were charmed.

Suddenly, a Tibetan couple drove up on a motorcycle, yelling and gesticulating and demanding

500 yuan — then close to \$100. For taking photos of yaks? We asked, astonished (remember, oxygen-deprivation). For being on their land, the couple said. There was a sign, they insisted. We hadn't seen one, we protested. (Later, farther down the road, we'd pass a sign facing the other direction.)

Then our younger daughter started arguing with the couple in such rapid and intense Mandarin that her father and I were stunned into silence. Wow, she really had progressed in her language skills, we thought admiringly. We were enjoying watching her so much that it wasn't until the man started wagging his finger threateningly in her face that I shook myself out of my daze and gave the couple about \$20.

Hopefully, we'll never again neglect to consider property rights. But that memory of our daughter speaking Chinese so freely and confidently lives in my mind even more vividly than the image of those iconic, shaggy yaks.

—Elizabeth Chang