

Rural Baja, Mexico Christmas, American Airlines, and Pre-Check

An experience with American Corporate Behavior and the security program known as Pre-Check and how to get stuck in sand which all of Baja is.

So...eventually this little letter will get to the Pre-Check question, but first, a little humor amid the trip description. After all, it is Christmas time.

This was a trip to bring the 3 branches of our family together in one place, the rural village of Los Barriles, north of Cabo on the Sea of Cortez, in Southern Baja.

First the traveling while hungry experience.....Janet and I had rented a home north of Los Barriles, literally right on the sea. We flew in on the 9th of December, beginning in Rochester, NY. I had upgraded on the two longer flights, one from Chicago to Dallas, and Dallas to Cabo. There were no meals served on any of the flights, but it didn't matter much until we left Dallas on the trip across the Sea of Cortez. We noticed immediately that First Class was almost empty and those few sitting in First Class seats were eating complete meals. We were offered peanuts and pretzels. That has been par for the course for some years now. I asked a flight attendant if we could order (and pay for) a meal. He said, "No, we are not prepared for that." Then he sat down and had a complete meal.

Next the vehicle rental experience when you know you are going to be dodging horses, cows, and miles of desert sand which is loosely defined as road....I had made arrangements for an Xterra for two weeks. We picked it up and drove to a hotel nearby. I've had an Xterra. This did not drive like one (I began calling it the "Blue Bomb"). I couldn't find the 4 Wheel Drive button, lever, or magic wand. We drove back to the vehicle rental agency the next morning and I asked the attendant to show me how to operate the 4 Wheel drive on the Xterra. He looked at

me and said, "It does not have 4 Wheel drive." So, we drove away from this place in a 4 Wheel Drive Xterra. The end of the Blue Bomb, right?

No...a week later our youngest son drove up the coast to meet us. Guess what he was driving? Yep....the Blue Bomb. I started to laugh. If they couldn't screw one Gyekis, they would screw the next Gyekis.

So...we took our two 4 Wheelers (older son also had 4 Wheel Dr.) and the Blue Bomb off the macadam to do a day hike several days after they had arrived. Our oldest son drove first, stopped, and decided that going any further off road would not be a good idea. He backed up. He was driving a 4 Wheel Drive. The Blue Bomb began backing up behind him, and within several yards was stuck. We had no tow rope or cable. After all, the plan was to have 4 Wheel Drives. An older Mexican man and his son pulled the Blue Bomb out with their truck and a rope.

You gotta think that most kids as well as most older adults would have been similarly scammed. Right? This kid (younger son) is a former war pilot who had commanded a company of Kiowa Choppers in Iraq, had done Afghanistan and several other Stans., etc., etc. In short, he is a pretty sharp cookie and he had been driving Hummers (I mean real Hummers) around deserts for years. He is usually way ahead of me. This was my once in an old fart's lifetime chance. He was humbled, but he handled it well.

The longest part of this time in southern Baja with kids and grandkids was great. No airplanes. We danced in just about every restaurant and bar in the place. Mexicans working in these places really got into it. They were not used to older Gringos doing ballroom dance steps to their beautiful music in their places...especially with a 3 yr. old, blond, blue-eyed granddaughter who loves to dance. She is beginning to count beat with me...slow, quick, quick (foxtrot), slow, slow, quick, quick, slow (tango), and even waltz (123456). I think everyone enjoyed the dancing. We certainly did.

So, the day came to come home to snowy, cold, northern PA. Janet and I left about 5:50 AM, driving south and literally driving across

the international Tropic of Cancer line heading south, into the tropics. We almost hit a horse on the road; saw many cows just off the road, and a beautiful sunrise beginning to bring light to the road surface.

The flight out of Cabo, in southern Baja, to Phoenix was uneventful. We had Pre-Flight, which we had gone to Rochester (5 hr. round trip) several years ago to apply for, pay for (\$85.00 per person), and be finger printed. We went through the Pre-Flight line with Pre-Flight marked on our boarding passes. No sweat, no shoes off, fast. Again, there were very few seats filled. The flight was probably 60% empty. They did a complete body check on one person. Yes, it was my 73 yr. old, 4 ft. 11, probable terrorist, and 50 year mate...Janet. Was this an omen? Yes, it was.

PHOENIX was the place. We wandered through customs and down to baggage, etc. (because they want to go through everything when borders are crossed, even though we were "in flight"). As we've done many times in the past 3 years or so, we found the Homeland Security lanes and entered the Pre-flight line there. As we got to the end of the line (very short) and entered the body/luggage scans, a Homeland Security gal said, "You do not have Pre-Check on your boarding passes. You must go back and go through the regular lines." I think we both figured they had made a mistake. It was not a mistake. We tried to explain that we did have Pre-Check. We had proof. We had our numbers. It did not matter. We got out of the front of this very short line and wandered through the various mazes and began again in the very long lines of normal security.

Up to this time, the inconveniences we had seen had been pretty much par for the course. In other words, what is normal in the Airline industry in America today. Now it took a turn.

I noticed that my mate of 50 years, possible terrorist, etc. was beginning to steam. I could see fumes coming from her quite appealing head. She was also mumbling various things...although nothing like I hear on logging decks where I work as a forester.

We got back to the beginning of the “big” line and stood in front of a Homeland Security fellow who was very friendly and explained our situation. After some attempts on our and his part to find a suitable answer, he said (and I paraphrase here). “Look folks, American Airlines has a few small print sentences in their contract with the Pre-Check program which permit them to do exactly what they’ve done with you.” With that, my partner became a volcano. We got in line and proceeded through it...very slowly...with everyone taking their shoes off, with explanations of new stuff we should take out of our luggage, etc. etc.

So...by the time we got done with this and were reassembling our belongings with nothing subversive or explosive discovered within, Janet took her plastic suitcase, and slammed it on the counter as she erupted. The nearest Homeland Security person tiptoed around her as the lava spread on the floor. I persuaded her to come with me fast...thinking that the next scene would involve her being handcuffed and sprayed with bear-spray and maybe me too.

When we got to the gate things were already progressing to the boarding process. We sat for a few moments and they began calling priorities. I can’t keep up with the numbers, First class, golden preferred, whatever. Anyway, they got to group 5. I was in group 6. I got up, got in line and tried to get my little volcano to come with me. She was still spouting lava...sitting.

When the American Airline attendant looked at my boarding pass, he smiled and said, “You’re in group 6. You are trying to sneak on.” I said, “Yes, damn right. You guys are playing games. We do not have many options. Two can play that game.”

He asked me to explain. I did. He gave me an emergency exit ticket with plenty of leg room, up in the front. I sat down next to a 6 ft. 4 college basketball player and told him what had just happened. He said, “Don’t give me away, this isn’t my seat, and we both laughed.

Enter Sweet Juanita, otherwise known as Janet. She was looking down the walkway past me, back across the tracks in the poor part of town. I waved at her as she passed. There was a look of confusion and

then recognition. She must have forgiven me because several hours later, I woke from a sleep and found several cookies on my lap.

We got to Chicago late....very late. We ran with all our luggage for 15 minutes through a notoriously crazy Chicago airport. I got out ahead of Sweet Juanita as is our plan and pulled into the Rochester Gate as they were shutting the door to the plane. I yelled, "Open it up," and headed over to open it myself.

A young attendant came over and I gave him my boarding pass and told him my partner was coming (minus the lava) and he processed us, opened the gate, and took us into the plane as they were beginning to shut the plane door.

A bit over an hour later we were in Rochester and then driving home in a snow storm. We ate several sandwiches in the Travel Plaza station at Dansville. It was the first real food since Cabo in southern Baja, 15 hours earlier. It had been pretzels, nuts, and cookies only on the 3 flights with no time in between to eat in any of the airports.

My take: Almost all of the folks we had dealt with from the American Airlines staff and Homeland Security were great.

American Airlines is doing what corporations in America do. Check out Facebook, Google, Twitter, and not just the Airline Industry. Check out our new tax laws and who they favor. The Airlines are a pretty good symptom. You get to see it up front there.

Have a great New Year!!

Kerry and Sweet Juanita

PS. At that door to the plane to Rochester, I gave the attendant an old boarding pass from our trip down with Pre-Check on it. He didn't check it. I just had to do it.