

An Alien in America, Part 2: LA to Florida.
By Andrew Vuong

“Perhaps the best trip is an uneventful one” were my final words in Part 1. If that adage were to hold true, then my trip five days later from Los Angeles to the University of North Florida (UNF) in Jacksonville was hellish – plagued by delays, loneliness and a tropical cyclone named after your aunt.

This mammoth journey from the west to the east coast of the United States was – without hyperbole – one of the worst days of my life and a true test of patience, mental-strength and fortitude.

So join me, readers, as I take you through the pitfalls of airline travel. Let this be a lesson to those foolhardy enough to say that flying is enjoyable.

Los Angeles International Airport (LAX)

The signs were ominous early on. Having woken up at the ungodly hour of 5:00am to catch my flight out of LA to a stopover in Houston, Texas, I was more than a little peeved upon discovering that it had been delayed an hour due to a “mechanical problem”.

Nevertheless, I checked-in my bags and headed over to the departure gate, where I was greeted with the notorious LAX border control. Having dodged them last time flying in here, they made sure that I wasn't left with the impression that LAX was lax in security (I couldn't resist).

A tip: when putting items on to the conveyer belt and the x-ray machine, send through everything bar the most essential of clothing on your body, even your shoes. Remember, your goal is to get the hell out of there as quick as possible – something that setting off the metal detector complicates. I foolishly didn't learn my lesson at Auckland Airport and wore that big slab of metal I called a belt around my waist again. Not surprisingly, the metal detector went nuts and I had to put the thing through the x-ray machine.

Having gone through okay the second time, I was surprised to be informed that my airline had selected me for an extra screening test. Aww, how sweet of them. This one involved a machine that sent radiation through my body, while I stood there like an idiot with my hands behind my head, wondering how much I'd sue them for if I got cancer.

With their second act of violation complete, I was free to go, if only I could walk without holding my pants up. Whist I had been subjected to the cancerous rays, a staff member had gathered my belongings on the other side of the x-ray machine. The only thing was, she didn't retrieve my belt as it was apart from my other possessions (hence my tip of putting everything through together).

When I quizzed her about its location, the official boldly questioned the rest of the room: “Has anyone seen this young man's belt?” Thankfully, her impudence paid off and I was soon on my way to the departure gate, feeling stupid for making the same mistake twice.

Once at the gate, I realised that Continental Airlines – the team entrusted to get me to Jacksonville – had put me on “standby” for other flights out to Houston. The term “standby passenger” is something you don't want to hear on your travels, as it basically means you get the leftover seats when people don't turn up for their flight.

Houston International Airport

Four hours after my original flight was due to leave and after three unsuccessful attempts at getting aboard an aircraft, I finally made it to Houston. The (relatively) short two-and-a-half hour journey was quite pleasant, and I was even more pleased upon arrival to learn that my original flight out to Jacksonville from Houston was delayed as well. After assuming that I would miss my connection flight due to the delay at LAX, I walked through the connector bridge thinking that luck was finally on my side.

Tallahassee Regional Airport

My first thought when told that we were landing in Tallahassee was, "Where the hell is Tallahassee?" As it turns out, it's the capital of Florida and about 180 miles west of Jacksonville. Why am I here? Well, due to Tropical Cyclone Fay presently ravaging my destination, our plane couldn't land and we were stranded here indefinitely.

After initial plans by the airline to put us all in a hotel until morning, Continental decided to call a bus to take us to Jacksonville Airport instead.

On the plus side, my luggage – miraculously – didn't get lost, despite the delays, so full credit to the ground-staff on the tarmac.

Jacksonville International Airport

I initially wasn't too fazed about the bus-ride because of my assumption that the trip would be short, seeing as how we were travelling there by land. Fatigued, my mind was too tired to do any arithmetic (converting miles to km), so imagine my surprise when the trip took three hours. 180 miles is actually around 290km – slightly longer than the distance from Auckland to Taupo.

Needless to say, the journey was horrendous but I finally arrived at a virtually deserted Jacksonville Airport at 3:30am local time – a mere five hours behind schedule. The university rep that was to pick me up was long gone and I'd have to find my own way to UNF. As it was so early, I figured no one was at the university anyway, so I decided to stay at the airport until sunrise and catch a cab then.

After walking around the desolate airport for three hours, waiting for Burger King to open for breakfast, I caught a shuttle to UNF for around \$US50. The taxi stands were empty, save for a couple of cabs and the shuttle bus, so I don't recommend my approach to the ladies reading this. Your valiant reporter was alone in the shuttle with the driver, so I was lucky he was a nice guy..

University of North Florida

Half an hour later, and with the assurance that my feet would stay firmly on the ground for the next few months, I finally had a chance to reflect upon the past 24 hours. It was a traumatising experience to be stuck in a foreign airport with no one to talk to, and it's a miracle that I didn't burst into tears along the way.

It wasn't the actual flying that was stressful, it was the uncertainty of not knowing what was going to happen next. The important thing to remember if you're in a similar situation to mine (God forbid), is to keep it together and to ask for help (after careful scrutiny) whenever you need it.

I stated in Part 1 that two of my reasons for undertaking this exchange was to increase my independence and self-confidence. This distressing experience is undoubtedly a boon for both, and can only make me stronger as a result.

I'm also convinced that this whole trip was an act of retribution by the Airline-Gods who were angered by my previous assumption that travelling was enjoyable, so don't make the same mistake. I got lucky the first time.