

The Trip Home—An Epic

My journey back to Texas began early Monday morning as we drove to Mt. Hagen. After my two-hour late, but pleasantly uneventful first flight from Mt. Hagen, I arrived in Port Moresby around 12:30pm. I gathered my luggage, and headed outside to find my ride to the Lutheran Guest House for the night. No one was there so I called the number for the Lutheran Transit House and talked to Susie. “Oh, we didn’t realize you wanted a pick-up. We’re on our way.” No worries. I waited. A couple people stopped by to make sure I was ok, and I tell them I’m fine. My ride is on the way. And I waited. 30 minutes passed. Where are they? I’m not entirely sure how far away the guesthouse is so I called again. Susie seemed confused because she had sent the driver out an hour ago. He should be there soon. A fellow named William noticed me standing there and as a university student, took this as an opportunity to practice his English. Nice guy and we just chat for a while.

Another half hour passed. Where *is* my ride? William left, but gave me his number in case my ride didn’t show up and I needed some help. I took it graciously, not really intending to use it, and called Susie again. This time I was told that the driver had returned because I wasn’t there. What do you mean I “wasn’t there?” I clearly was. Thinking maybe because I was talking to someone he just missed me, I moved closer to the arrivals gate and reiterated that I was at the domestic arrivals gate with a green suitcase and black shirt.

Another half hour passed. I was getting irked, tired, hungry as the peanut butter and bread I ate on the plane seems ages ago and thirsty as I’d only had a few sips of water that day and a cup of coffee on the plane. I called again, fully aware that my battery was running low. This time when she said she would call the driver’s cell phone, I asked her to give me the number so we could make sure not to miss each other. However, all I got was his voicemail. Well actually a series of squacks that I was later told is what it sounds like when the connection isn’t good and the phone goes to voice mail. When I tried the guesthouse again, this time I only get voicemail there too. As we reached the two-hour mark, my head was throbbing from car fumes, exhaustion, dehydration, and desperation. I was too afraid to sit down for fear that I might miss him, but too tired to remain standing any longer.

Some people then began to notice my distress and came over to see if they could help. I felt humanity was somewhat redeemed and as I shared my story with these kind on-lookers. One of the young girls took some of my money and returned with some biscuits and a drink for me. Another lady started venting about how the driver should be fired. It’s not fair for me to have to wait so long (a little empathy goes a long way:-) And finally, one of the other hotel drivers who knew where the Lutheran Guest House was offered to take me. I made one more attempt to call the guesthouse and driver, to no avail, and decided to take this fellow up on his offer. We had talked a bit, and none of the protective women around me put up a fight so I took a leap of faith. As we loaded up my suitcases, William arrived back to make sure I found a ride and he had stopped by a local bakery to buy me some lunch. This was all once again a needed reminder of why it is that I love PNG.

As we drove to the guest house, my driver gave me his card so that if I'm ever in Port Moresby again and need a ride, I can let him know. We arrived safely at the guesthouse. He carried my suitcases up and refused my offer to pay him. I went to check in and the person at the desk added a new dimension to my confusion. They didn't have me down for a room. What do you mean you don't have me down for a room? Clearly Dr. Steve booked me somewhere, and clearly I've been talking to someone all day, someone named Susie.

So have you figured out the mystery yet? Yep. When I gave her the number I had been calling it was for...drum roll please...The Lutheran Guest House in *Madang*. Suddenly pieces all came together and the tale was absolutely humorous. Something that I'm sure was in a movie at some point or at least should be. Thankfully, they did have one available room in the basement, especially good since I was the only female guest that night. So I took a long refreshing nap and had a delightful dinner where I got to chat with a Brazilian Public Health Worker, a German church worker, and two Papua New Guineans from different provinces. It's so much fun to hear people's stories and perspectives, especially when you are all from different walks of life.

I'd love to say that the trip went smoothly after that, but it would be a horrible lie and the next critical misstep was my own. When I had asked my LCMS contact what I needed in the way of tickets, all he had sent me was an itinerary, so I assumed everything was e-ticketed. (Stupid me) Thus, before I left Mambis, I took out my used November tickets from my passport holder, not realizing that the ticket originally marked for June were stapled too them. Even if I had, I'm not sure I would have thought anything of it. All I needed for an e-ticket was my passport and itinerary right?

Anyways when I arrived at the Port Moresby airport, I was told I could not board without the physical ticket. I needed that physical ticket even if the dates were changed and the original ticket was marked for June. Long story short, about an hour later, I paid an extra hundred kina "lost ticket fee" and they gave me my three boarding passes for the next three flights. What they didn't give me was a receipt. Again my travel ignorance shows through.

The next few flights were pleasant enough especially since there was no one sitting directly next to me on 13 hour flight from Brisbane to L.A. and everyone else in front, back, and to my side was part of a college baseball team, traveling back from their games in Australia. Not bad company;-)

Anyways, when I arrived in L.A. and had to get my luggage and recheck it, my ignorance once again came back to haunt me. American Airlines, unaware of my bargain with Quantas, would not recheck my luggage, even though I had a boarding pass and my name was in their computer. They told me to get verification of what Quantas did. The problem was no Quantas representatives would be at the L.A. airport until 2pm and my flight was at 10am. So I was sent to literally 10 different places looking for a rep and was finally sent back to American Airlines (at this point I had completely missed my flight). I was then verbally harrassed for my stupidity by a AA representative, a very angry woman that clearly had other issues not related to me. One of the other representatives present later apologized for her behavior and for bringing me to tears. They tried to call my travel agent but the line was busy. Finally I was begrudgingly given a ticket for a 12pm flight. Praise the Good Lord!!

Just as I was settling in to wait for my flight and catching my breath from the last fiasco, L.A. experienced a 5.4 earthquake, the largest one they've experienced in years and the biggest one I've yet experienced. Clearly yet another point in my life somewhere between laughter and tears, and with the earthquake as icing on the cake, I finally found the courage to laugh. And have continued to laugh ever since then.

So there you have it. Yet another chapter in the book I will someday write: "Is this really my life?: Stories and adventures in the land of perpetual confusion."

So I hope you've enjoyed my own comedy of errors and learned a few lessons in the process. Always check that the hotel you are calling is actually in the city where you are. Always carry every piece of paper that might possibly resemble a ticket. Always get a receipt if you work a deal with one airline that another airline might not know about. Always carry tissues in case you end up in tear-inducing travel strife. And always, always, be ready to laugh at yourself and the world when just about everything that could go wrong does:-)