

Stop me if you've heard this one

So there's this woman who arrives at the Pearly Gates to be met by St Peter. She has led an ordinary, human sort of life, some good stuff, some bad. St. P says to her, 'You can choose, which would you rather go to, Heaven or Hell?' She says, 'Can I have look first?' She checks out Heaven and all is sweetness and light, harps on fluffy clouds, choir music day and night.

Hmmm.... Then she goes down stairs and Hell is just one big party, flowing wine, wonderful food and chocolate everywhere, and lots of her friends playing non-stop bridge – great stuff! She tells St P that she chooses Hell. The next moment she is back in Hell, but this time it is all hellfire, brimstone, sulphur and pitchforks. She calls up to St P, 'Hey, wait a minute! This isn't what I saw last time!' 'I know,' says St P, 'but last time you went as a tourist.'

Which just goes to show that tourists see only the best and it isn't necessarily what the place is really like. But that is what being a tourist is all about, isn't it? At least, it is to me. I'm not there to suffer, to be stressed, to wish I wasn't there, after all, I spent a lot of money getting to my destination so I intend to enjoy it in my own way. I've picked up a few helpful hints along the way. Stop me if you've also heard this one.

#1: If you are going to be truly adventurous and go to a country where they don't speak your home language, then try to learn a little of theirs. Yes, I know, that's asking a bit much if you are just flitting through Romania for two and a half days but it might just help in getting you to the right b&b and not the taxi-driver's mother-in-law's brother's youngest son, who would like to earn a little foreign currency today – a friend of mine only discovered that she was in the wrong house/village/section of the coast near Dubrovnik after two days of a delightful stay during which all communication was exclusively in sign language. That's a hint, too. Learning a bit of Cyrillic alphabet was helpful in Russia, but you can't trust the 'B's' and backwards 'Ns' and getting your vocal chords around sounds like 'zhch' and 'vodzsk'. But if you haven't caught a cold on the aeroplane then you can have some fun with it.

#2: Trying the local food is good but if you don't actually like chilli then don't expect much from New Delhi. Even the potato bread is nicely infused before you even get it because it's cooked on the same hot plate and the chef has chilli in his blood-stream anyway. In desperation I ate salad and I got the mean tummy bug. I think it's inevitable, even if you don't eat from street vendors or drink their bottled water which is just tap water resealed in the appropriate bottle. The label of which you can't read, of course, because you haven't spent time learning the language, see #1 above, or skip to the next.

#3: It is *always* 2:30 am in Dubai (they're stuck in a time-warp, I swear) and every seat is occupied by comatose, mummy-like bodies. They are wrapped up because the air conditioning in the kilometres-long terminal is freezing. Even if you do find a seat, you may fall asleep like the man at Departures. We were shuffling towards the big metal cigar with wings that we were about to be locked into, but he dreamed on, oblivious. We considered waking him, then, in time-honoured tourist fashion, passed by on the other side.

#4: Don't be fooled by those cute beagles that sniff at your luggage, they are actually Rottweilers in disguise if they think they've sniffed anything interesting and have to be dragged away (the dog, that is, not me). Fortunately, the only time a cute doggie decided I must have brought biltong into Perth I was totally innocent and he gave up. Anyway, there are far worse things than biltong, I maintain.

#5: Don't be surprised if your luggage has been opened by someone other than the customs people. And don't bother with plastic wrapping unless you have packed your clothes in Pick'n'Pay packets. I once waited patiently for my (plastic wrapped) suitcase until there was only one (unwrapped) left. Innocent little me. Probably better to wear that glittery stuff you bought in Dubai and eat the fancy sweets. You paid, after all.

I hope I haven't put you off just because I've trudged around Changi for five hours straight and bought chocolate called Red October in Moscow. I didn't ride a camel in Alice Springs or see the terracotta army yet but I've always made it back home safely, toothbrush intact and souvenirs unbroken. And happily full of memories.