



ILLUSTRATION TONY GROGAN

# The jet-setter blues

Airports tend to tread a fine line between order and chaos. On a recent Friday-evening flight from Joburg to Cape Town, Richard Asher discovered what happens when everything goes wrong.

Many of my favourite travel anecdotes begin with me getting lost. Like the time I drove into the rear of some poor Australian while trying to decipher a map of Sydney. Or the time my indecisive dithering in the dark along a country road in Spain got me pulled over and searched by suspicious cops. Or the time I got arrested for trespassing in the president of Mongolia's back garden.

My latest tale of travel woe, much closer to home, is no exception. It begins somewhere near Boksburg, where I generally start to feel anxious about taking a wrong turn at OR Tambo Airport. I'm an experienced traveller,

usually capable of following a sign. I've even found my way around Milan before, and that's a city laid out by a madman with a penchant for one-way roads that go round in circles. But Joburg's big, scary airport gets me every time.

My mission is to locate the Engen Skystop. This, for the uninitiated, is that mythical garage in the clouds where Joburg's rental cars end up getting refilled prior to return. The problem is finding it. Although the Skystop is about 17 storeys up, you have to go underground to get to it! There are signs... but you need to know where they are.

I decide to err on the side of caution, taking every possible turn lest I go shooting past the

correct one and end up on a tour of Kempton Park. I eventually find it, refuel, and follow the signs for car rental return. At one point I have to stop in the middle of the road, confused by two arrows saying "Budget Car Rental" but pointing in different directions. I shrug and pick the nearest one: It works. I hand in the car.

Things are going well. It's 4.30 pm and my travel companion and I have a 6.30 pm flight to Cape Town. Too good to be true?

**Finding check-in isn't easy.** I've done OR Tambo many times, but it keeps changing. Getting from the car rental area to the terminal building becomes ever more

higher-grade as the months go by, with about five lifts and seven escalators conspiring to spit you out at the same level at which you started. And that's before you even begin trying to interpret the utterly meaningless "Terminal A" and "Terminal B" signs. I'm sorry, but OR Tambo doesn't have two terminals.

Here's a sign idea: How about "Arrivals" and "Departures"?

Finally we find the familiar sloping conveyor belts, which take us up to the check-in area. We head for the desks of a well-known budget carrier known for its greenness. And I'm not talking about its carbon emissions policy.

There we're told that our departure has been delayed until

7 pm. We can handle that. After all, we can listen to the chanting PA system as it calls passengers Vilikazi, Stevens and Bam for the "last and final time" to board their flight.

Except it's not the last and final time. The resident airport DJ makes another twelve calls for these idiots, who, as far as I'm concerned, should just be left behind. Who gets lost in a departures lounge? How?

You can't have a conversation with these announcements attacking your ears every 20 seconds, but I resist the urge to purchase a wooden giraffe from the gift shop and swing it in the direction of some vital electronic equipment. I calm myself by dreaming of silent airports. I know they're out there...

Now our flight has been "indefinitely delayed". This is announced via the PA system, but suddenly the sound quality is gone and you can't make out what is being said. Then a friendly woman comes round and tells us that they don't know when we're going to take off.

Information is sketchy. The PA system, which might actually have been useful at this point, has become a garbled mess. From now on we have to hang around the gate to find out what's going on.

It appears our plane got diverted on its way from Cape Town. Thanks to bad weather around Joburg, it has wound up at Lanseria and there's no information about when it will be able to make the trip across town to pick us up. All that is fair enough. Safety first and all that. Tough luck on a Friday evening.

It takes a while before the delirium really starts to set in. My companion and I have a long, leisurely dinner at the Irish pub. We try sleeping and reading. I visit the bathroom, only to be accosted by a man desperate to give the toilet seat a hygienic squirt and wipe-down. Presumably his presence is a bid to please visiting Germans, but

the idea of him waiting for people to arrive before performing his sanitary duties is a little off-putting. The things some people will do to fish for a tip.

**By 9.30 pm**, things are getting bad. The airport is desolate. Exclusive Books has closed, the cleaning staff are doing their rounds and the Irish pub is calling last rounds. Even the bloke in the toilet has gone home. The only blessing is that the PA system has finally shut up, although that's only because every other flight has gone on its merry way.

It's dark, it's bucketing down and there's no information. The passengers, gathered in a scrum around the gate, are starting to lose their cool. All the characters are there: the nice, reasonable "I know it's not your fault, lady"; the guy with the gormless smile and the endless supply of wise-cracks; the head-shaking "this country's gone to the dogs" woman; and, of course, a couple of rude, aggressive, cussing idiots. Frothing at the mouth, veins bulging out of their temples, these guys just want to rage. Our plane seems to have been outside for at least an hour, but still we're not allowed to board. Nobody is saying why, much less making any authoritative announcement, which escalates the general fury.

Later we discover – and this is the remarkable part – that the airline has lost the crew. Perhaps they just threw in the towel at Lanseria. Whatever, a new bunch had to be rustled up at short notice from around Gauteng.

So a pilot and a brand-new crew come trotting through the lounge and onto the plane, just in time to prevent one of the ground staff from being decked by the angry mob. Amid the general mayhem, one of the furious ones decides to have a go at the new pilot, waving his finger in PW Botha-style and raving about how our new captain should be "disciplined".

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**It's 10.45 pm and we're** on board at last. Nothing can go wrong now, can it? Everyone is itching to leave. There's a crumpled heap of desperate-to-get-home bitterness buried under a coat at the end of our row. I sympathise completely. A flamboyant chap a few rows forward is loudly making plans on his cellphone for his small-hours entertainment in Sea Point, oblivious, perhaps, to the light entertainment he himself is providing.

We sit, and sit, and sit. And then comes an announcement that nobody expects: "We have a security situation on board."

No screams follow, just a deep collective groan. I survey the utterly passive and resigned faces around me, trying to spot a weapon-wielding tyrant. Right now, nobody could care less if there was a bomb on board; we just want to take off. A few minutes go by, then four serious gentlemen from the SAPS come on board and head right for me...

But it's the guy in the row behind they're after. Mr I'm Going To Discipline You. The police ask to have a word with him. He follows, meek as a mouse. He's not seen again.

There you go: You shouldn't threaten a pilot.

**It's 1.45 am when we land** in Cape Town. Just under 10 hours from the time we'd arrived at OR Tambo and a prize-winning achievement for a two-hour flight. Granted, the airline couldn't control the weather, but it could have held on to its crew and actually communicated with the passengers.

Sinking into bed, I feel as shattered as if I'd just driven from Joburg. We almost could have, in the time our flight took. But all was not lost...

We'd each been given a R400 discount voucher for our next flight on the aforementioned green airline. Now there's a lovely thought! I can't wait. ■

