

Under The Volcano: communications lessons from air-free travel

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/04/17/under-the-volcano-communications-lessons-from-air-free-travel/

2010-4-17



The news of the UK airspace closure broke for me while I was standing on top of a volcano. It meant I was unable to get back from a short break in Spain to the UK for that other seismic event as Nick Clegg poured a lava of reasonableness over the smouldering peaks of Gordon and Dave. What followed was a lesson in modern communications.

I was able to track the leadership debates through Twitter and the Spanish media as I sought to make my way back from the Catalunyan region of Garrotxa, famous for its weirdly shaped dormant volcanoes. More on the politics in another post, meanwhile, here is the travel news.

My family had just made the lovely climb to the pretty peak of St Julia Del Mont with its kitsch shrine and picturesque ruined Romanesque chapel with the snow-covered Pyrenees in the distance. When I read out the BBC breaking news from my phone that a volcanic eruption in Iceland had grounded all flights over the UK, they assumed I was making a bad geology-saga-related joke. (and if you are a West Ham fan, they just ain't funny any more).

By the time we left the summit my partner's Assistant back in the office (thanks Sam!) was on to the job of finding us an alternative to our Ryanair flight and we were bashing away on our iPhones. Here are the lessons we learnt.

First lesson. Most travel companies – especially car hire companies – have web sites that take an age to load and hide phone numbers in case you try to contact them. Unless you have an app you are screwed. If you are trying to make general searches you soon lose power.

Second lesson. Book whatever you can get immediately. We had no way of getting to the Channel but after trying all other ports we decided to book what seemed to be the last foot passenger tickets showing online (Directferries do have a good website). They cost a mere £63 quid, so now the target was to make it Calais by 0925 on Saturday morning.

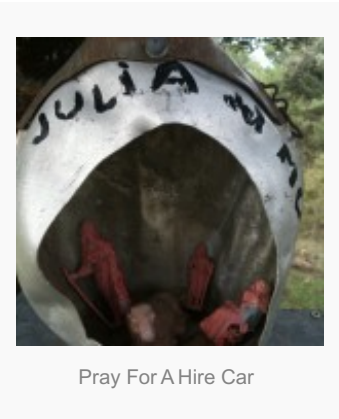
The Third lesson. Think laterally. The trains were full (not helped by a French rail strike). All the other crossings were booked. The car hire company quoted £1500 to drive one of their vehicles from Barcelona to Calais.

My son Isaac then had the clever idea of doing it in stages. Work your way up by local train. Or hop over the border then hire a car in France to avoid incurring the cross-border charges.

This worked eventually, but first we had to find a car in France and a way to get out of Spain.

Again, the car hire companies were useless. Their staff on the ground (yes – you Avis and Hertz and Europcar in Girona and Barcelona and Perpignan) had no interest in doing any research for you.

But we got a taxi from Girona Airport (near Barcelona) over the border for £150 to Perpignan where my partner's secretary had tracked down the last unbooked hire car in France on an industrial estate on the edge of town. This cost us just £115 to drive to Calais.(plus fuel and tolls, of course).



We hit Calais after a 12 hour drive as a stunning blood-red sun set in the ash-laden evening Spring sky while a slender new moon arose over the Pas. Our rising spirits were about to be dashed.

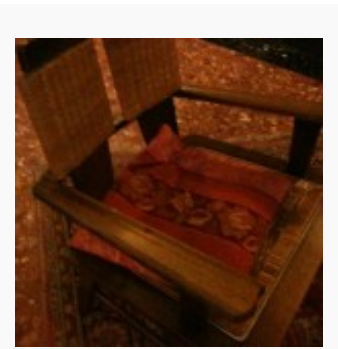
It was 1am and there were no hotel rooms. People with pull-along luggage were roaming the streets like the early scenes of I Am Legend. Could four people sleep in an Opel Astra?



Room At This Inn

Eventually we found the Hotel De Relais just outside St Omer. The owner had two rooms left in a faded establishment with a kind of art nouveau interior and mock Tudor frontage unchanged from the early 70s (?). But we slept.

In the morning we dumped the car and joined the throng of semi-organised chaos in the Calais passenger terminal. What strikes you is how sensible, helpful and thoughtful most people are when left to organise themselves – which we were largely were. Gosh, the Brits know how to queue.



Stylish

This was the most fun we have had travelling for a long time. I realise that for some stranded people it's been a real bummer, losing money, business and valuable time. Me too. But I also rediscovered the power of communication to sort out problems. Yes the Internet is a miracle, but mainly it was down to friends and complete strangers being helpful. That, combined with the rewards of some old-fashioned, traditional improvisation and physical effort. Exactly the sort of qualities we hope our political leaders can bring to the coming challenges we all face perhaps?

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science