

How to Travel with a Salmon

According to the newspapers, there are two main problems besetting the modern world: the invasion of the computer, and the alarming expansion of the Third World. The newspapers are right, and I know it.

My recent journey was brief: one day in Stockholm and three in London. In Stockholm, taking advantage of a free hour, I bought a smoked salmon, an enormous one, dirt cheap. It was carefully packaged in plastic, but I was told that, if I was traveling, I would be well advised to keep it refrigerated. Ha. Just try.

Happily, in London, my publisher made me a reservation in a deluxe hotel: a room equipped with minibar. But on arriving at the hotel, I had the impression I was entering a foreign legation in Peking during the Boxer rebellion: whole families camping out in the lobby, travelers wrapped in blankets sleeping amid their luggage. I questioned the staff, all of them Indians except for a few Malaysians, and I was told that just the previous day, in this grand hotel, a

computerized system had been installed and, before all the kinks could be eliminated, had broken down for two hours. There was no way of telling which rooms were occupied and which were free. I would have to wait.

Towards evening the system was back up, and I managed to get into my room. Worried about my salmon, I removed it from the suitcase and looked for the minibar.

As a rule, in normal hotels, the minibar is a small refrigerator containing two beers, some miniature bottles of hard liquor, a few cans of fruit juice, and two packets of peanuts. In my hotel, the refrigerator was family size and contained fifty bottles of whisky, gin, Drambuie, Courvoisier, eight large Perriers, two Vitelloises, and two Evians, three half-bottles of champagne, various cans of Guinness, pale ale, Dutch beer, German beer, bottles of white wine both French and Italian, and, besides peanuts, also cocktail crackers, almonds, chocolates, and Alka-Seltzer. There was no room for the salmon. I pulled out two roomy drawers of the dresser and emptied the contents of the bar into them, then refrigerated the salmon, and thought no more about it. The next day, when I came back into the room at four in the afternoon, the salmon was on the desk, and the bar was again crammed almost solid with gourmet products. I opened the drawers, only to discover that everything I had hidden there the day before was still in place. I called the desk and told the clerk to inform the chambermaids that if they found the bar empty it wasn't because I had consumed all its contents, but

because of the salmon. He replied that all such requests had to be entered in the central computer, but—a further complication—because most of the staff spoke no English, verbal instructions were not accepted: Everything had to be translated into Basic. Meanwhile, I pulled out another two drawers and filled them with the new contents of the bar, where I then replaced my salmon.

The next day at 4 P.M., the salmon was back on the desk, and it was already emanating a suspect odor. The bar was crammed with bottles large and small, and the four drawers of the dresser suggested the back room of a speakeasy at the height of Prohibition. I called the desk again and was told that they were having more trouble with the computer. I rang the bell for room service and tried to explain my situation to a youth with a pony tail; he could speak nothing but a dialect that, as an anthropologist colleague explained later, had been current only in Kefiristan at about the time Alexander the Great was wooing Roxana.

The next morning I went down to sign the bill. It was astronomical. It indicated that in two and a half days I had consumed several hectoliters of Veuve Cliquot, ten liters of various whiskies, including some very rare single malts, eight liters of gin, twenty-five liters of mineral water (both Perrier and Evian, plus some bottles of San Pellegrino), enough fruit juice to protect from scurvy all the children in UNICEF's care, and enough almonds, walnuts, and peanuts to induce vomiting in Dr. Kay Scarpetta. I tried to explain, but the clerk, with a betel-blackened smile,

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assured me that this was what the computer said. I asked for a lawyer, and they brought me an avocado.

Now my publisher is furious and thinks I'm a chronic freeloader. The salmon is inedible. My children insist I cut down on my drinking.

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How to Replace a Driver's License

In May of 1981, as I was passing through Amsterdam, I lost my wallet (or it was stolen: there are thieves even in Holland). It contained only a small amount of money, but a number of documents and cards. I didn't become aware of the loss until, at the airport, about to leave the country, I realized my credit card was missing. In the half an hour remaining before takeoff I conducted a desperate search for a place to report the loss (or theft). Within five minutes I was received by an airport police sergeant who, in good English, explained that the matter was not within the airport's jurisdiction, as the wallet had been lost in the city; nevertheless, he agreed to type out a report and assured me that, at nine, when the office opened, he would personally telephone American Express. And so, within ten minutes, the Dutch part of my case was dealt with.

Back in Milan, I telephone American Express and ascertain that my card number has been circulated

worldwide, and the following day a new card arrives. What a great thing civilization is, I say to myself.

Then I tally the other lost documents, and I make a report at the police station. Another ten minutes. How wonderful, I say to myself: our police are just like the Dutch. Among the lost items is my press card; I am able to obtain a duplicate in three days. Better and better.

Alas, I have also lost my driver's license. But this seems the least of my worries. We live in a capital of the automobile industry, there's a Ford in our future, our country's famous superhighways are the envy of the world. I call the Italian Automobile Club and am told that I have only to give them the number of the lost license. I realize I don't have it written it down anywhere, except, of course, on the lost license itself, and I try to find out if they can look up my name in their files and find the number. Apparently this is impossible.

I cannot live without driving: it's a life-or-death matter, and I decide to do what as a rule I don't do: find a shortcut, use connections. As a rule, I say, I don't do this, because I dislike putting friends or acquaintances to any trouble, and I hate it when people use such tactics with me. And besides, I live in Milan, where, if you need a certificate from a city office, you don't have to call the mayor; it's quicker to join the line at the window, where they're fairly efficient. But, the fact is, anything involving our car makes all of us a bit nervous, so I call Rome and speak with a Highly Placed Person at the Automobile Club there, who puts me in touch with a Highly Placed Person at the

Automobile Club of Milan, who tells his secretary to do everything that can be done. Everything, in this case, unfortunately amounts to very little, despite the secretary's politeness.

She teaches me a few tricks; she urges me to track down an old receipt from Avis or Hertz, where the number of my license should appear on the carbon copy. In one day she helps me fill out the preliminary forms, then she tells me where I have to go, namely the license office of the prefecture, an immense hall, teeming with a desperate and malodorous crowd, reminiscent of the station of New Delhi in the movies about the revolt of the sepoys; and here the postulants, telling horrible tales ("I've been here since the first invasion of Libya"), are encamped with thermoses and sandwiches, and when you reach the head of the line—as I personally discover—the window is closing.

In any case, I have to admit, it adds up to a few days of standing in line, during which every time you reach the window you learn that you should have filled out a different form or should have bought a different denomination of tax stamp, and you are sent back to the end of the line. But, as everyone knows, this is the way things are. All is in order, I'm finally told: come back in about two weeks. Meanwhile, I take taxis.

Two weeks later, after climbing over some postulants who have by now gone into irreversible coma, I discover at the window that the number I had copied from the Avis receipt, whether through an error at the source or through defective carbon paper or

through deterioration of the ancient document, is not correct. Nothing can be done if you give them the wrong number. "Very well," I say, "you obviously can't look for a number that I'm unable to tell you, but you can look under Eco and find the number."

No. Maybe it's ill will, or stress, or maybe licenses are listed only by number. In any case, what I ask is beyond their capabilities. Try at the office where you first got the license, they say: the city of Alessandria, many years ago. There they should be able to reveal your number to you.

I don't have time to go to Alessandria, especially now that I can't drive, so I fall back on a second shortcut: I telephone an old school friend, now a Highly Placed Person in local financial circles, and ask him to telephone the city's Bureau of Motor Vehicles. He makes an equally dishonest decision and, instead, privately calls a Highly Placed Person at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, who tells him that data of that sort cannot be given out, except to the police. I'm sure the reader will realize the risks the State would run if my license number were to be given out right and left: Qaddafi and the KGB would desire nothing more. So it must remain Top Secret.

Another stroll down memory lane and I come up with another schoolmate, who is now a Highly Placed Person in a division of the government, but I warn him immediately not to get in touch with any important officials of the Motor Vehicles Bureau, because the matter is dangerous and he could end up being summoned before a parliamentary investigating committee. My suggestion, on the contrary, is to find

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a Lowly Placed Person, perhaps a night watchman, who can be bribed to take a peek at the files under cover of darkness. The Highly Placed Person in government is lucky enough to find a Medium Placed Person at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, who doesn't even have to be bribed, because he is a regular reader of *L'Espresso* and decides, out of his devotion to culture, to risk this dangerous favor for his favorite columnist (me). I don't know exactly what feats this daring figure performs, but the fact is that, the following day, I have the number of the license. My readers will forgive me if I refuse to reveal it: I have a wife and children to consider.

With this number (which I now copy down everywhere and conceal in secret drawers against the next theft or loss) I pass through other lines at the Milan license office. I wave it triumphantly before the suspicious eyes of the clerk—who, with a smile that has nothing human about it, tells me that I must also display the number of the document with which, in the far-off 1950s, the Alessandrian authorities communicated the number of my license to the authorities of Milan.

More telephone calls to old schoolmates, and the hapless middle-rank figure, who had already run such risks, returns to the scene, commits several dozen additional crimes, purloins some information that—apparently—the police would give their lives for, and conveys to me the number of the document, which I also keep well hidden, because, as everyone is aware, even the walls have ears.

I return to the Milan Bureau of Motor Vehicles,