

Traveling Companion: Clouded, friendly skies

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Usually, when I inform friends that I am going on vacation, their usual remark is: "Have a wonderful flight." In an age of crowded airports, skies and short-fuses; it can be a frustrating experience to begin one's vacation with trials, troubles and tempers.

Recently, I had an interesting and challenging experience on my way to vacation. It began with a flight, scheduled to leave Gulfport airport at 3:30 p.m. On a Sunday afternoon the short flight to Atlanta would deliver me through the nigh skies to Ireland and cooler temperatures.

Arriving at the airport with lots of time to relax and wait and wait and wait. I sat with an Air-Tran captain who waited to get back to his home in Atlanta in time for his scheduled flight next day. I picked his brain about the inner workings of the aviation industry. I found his answers both informative and fascinating.

The incoming flight from Atlanta was delayed by forty-five minutes because of weather. On arriving at Gulfport, thunderstorms in the Atlanta area created a backlog of flight delays. My outgoing flight would be delayed by at least thirty minutes.

As I listened to the impending news, I pondered if I would make my connection in Atlanta. Provisionally, I booked, as a standby, on another international flight which was due to leave later. Also, I wondered how I might contact my folks in Ireland who were preparing to meet me early the next morning, given the six hour time difference.

Finally, some good news arrived. We could board the plane and get ready for our departure. Settling into my window seat, I prayed I would make my connection in Atlanta. Time passed slowly and, ten minutes later, we heard the dreaded announcement from the captain. The flight was being delayed for four and a half hours due to thunderstorms in the Atlanta area. Everyone was asked to leave the plane and make alternative arrangements.

I rushed to the check-in desk and rescheduled my flight for the next afternoon. Then, I had to wait until I could retrieve my luggage.

At this stage, I began to notice an interesting development. People began to talk to each other. They shared their frustrations at their inability to fly home or on vacation. People scurried to make alternative arrangements, some, knowing they had to be at work in Atlanta early the next morning, decided to rent a car and drive home instead. Cell phones became active as people scurried to inform family of their predicaments. Some people talked about their past travel horror experiences. Others vowed not to travel with that particular airline ever again.

The weather creating havoc was seen as an act of God and not the responsibility of the airlines. Yet, this act of God started a chain of communication and a loose bond among the inconvenienced travelers.

The next day, armed with a healthy dose of hope, I headed for the airport again to try my luck. I checked in, got my boarding passes and sat in the waiting area before going through the security screening area. I glanced at my boarding passes. They didn't seem right. First of all, I was listed as a woman. Secondly, the final leg of my flight was from Atlanta to Baltimore. I checked my baggage tickets and the tags seemed correct. I wondered if I was jinxed again. I approached the check-in counter again. They dismissed my changed identity and issued me the correct boarding passes.

Finally, arriving in Atlanta, I waited for my final flight. Then, I discovered another silver lining in the clouded skies. I was bumped up to business class to enjoy the sparse thrills of a roomy leather recliner, lots of leg room and one's own video monitor. Later, out of curiosity, I checked the cost of a business class ticket and discovered it was \$2,800. Obviously, it was not worth it. The meal choice was the same as in cabin class. Still, I thanked the Lord for a small blessing of comfort, realizing that some acts of God can have clouds with silver linings.