This Little Piggy Went to Paris

Since moving to North Carolina 40 years ago I have, over the years, gotten more and more tired of traveling or having friends or relatives travel to visit over the Thanksgiving holidays. So this year, when I got an invitation to give some lectures in Paris during Thanksgiving week, I jumped at the opportunity since it meant that I could leave the week before Thanksgiving and come back the week after. Not only would this mean my wife and I could spend 10 days in Paris, and there celebrate our 20th wedding anniversary, but it meant that I’d get paid nicely in Euros, always a good way to visit European capitals.

Early on the day we’re supposed to leave around dinnertime for Paris from RDU, flying to Philadelphia and then on to Paris’s Charles de Gaulle airport, I checked the flight arrival/departure times and saw that our flight from RDU to Philadelphia had been canceled. I called my airline and they explained that the entire air traffic control (flight plan) system in the Eastern United States had self destructed that morning and that there were a lot of problems. Nevertheless, I was told that if we could get to the airport within 45 minutes, (instead of 5 hours later which was the original plan), we could catch a plane to DC’s Reagan airport and then make connections to Philadelphia in time to get on the Paris outbound flight.

You frequent travelers probably know what happened next. We get on the flight to DC, get to Reagan airport, go to the gate for our connecting flight and find out that it too has been canceled. After at least an hour of confusion, during which time we were rebooked on yet another cancelled flight, we found out that we could get on still another flight to Philadelphia, one which had been scheduled to leave three hours earlier but which had been long delayed.

So we get on that flight and get to Philadelphia with an hour to spare to make our Paris connection. But we can’t dock at the gate. Finally with just twelve minutes to make the connection, we sprint off the plane, sprint to an electric cart, and then motor like crazy to the other end of the airport where we find the door to our Paris flight had closed ten minutes before the scheduled departure. Much wailing and gnashing of teeth, but an obstinate passive-aggressive gate attendant. OK, we’ll go get our bags and our airline will put us up in Philadelphia overnight. Go to baggage to get the bags, and learn that they never made it out of Washington DC. It’s not just that we don’t have any clothes or many toiletries for overnight, but the bags sitting in Washington, not in fact on their way to Paris, created another problem.
For a number of years, since I often host foreign visitors – speakers, post docs, visiting folk of all sorts – in order to help them understand a bit better why I choose to call North Carolina home I take them out to lunch. Lunch however is not at one of the Triangle’s renowned multicultural international experiences, but involves a short ride out to Allen & Son Barbecue on Airport Road. That’s right, that Allen & Son. In recent years, I seem to have been deluged with French visitors, most of them Parisian. The most culinarily sophisticated of them all, my most recent post doc, fell in love with Keith Allen’s chopped platters. He made quite a pest of himself to his fellow Parisians back home as he kept insisting that the food scene in the Triangle area was significantly better than, for the normal person’s price point, anything to be found in Paris, where bistro cooking had descended to frozen pommes frites. The barbecue itself he proclaimed reflected a care and concern and serious involvement with the local agricultural product – pigs – real imagination and a real history, not a history of cuisine but one of family. He became a devotee and took all of his own visitors out to Allen & Sons during the course of the year.

Because he helped secure my invitation to Paris, it seemed only fitting that he be rewarded with barbecue. This wasn’t the first time of course I had traveled with cue, because our children up and down the East coast have been requesting care packages from Allen & Son for years and in our trips we’ve always flown with a couple of pounds of the best chopped cue frozen in vacuum sealed bags wrapped in newspapers. The usual trips to Philadelphia or Washington have never been a problem whether by car or air. The Paris trip would only have been a few hours longer. But the cue was in DC and we were in Philadelphia.

So the next day our airline tells us that it’s putting us on another of their planes back to DC where we’ll catch that another airline’s flight to Paris, out of Dulles airport. OK, we thought, we’ll reunite with our bags in DC somehow, retrieve the cue and get it into a refrigerator on board the plane for the trip. So we get back to Dulles, and find out that our bags have gone on to Philadelphia. After all, they were carrying a perfectly sensible ticket which said ‘Go to Philadelphia from RDU and then go to Paris’. The bags couldn’t say, “Hey now.”

In DC we had been booked on another airline, in order to get out that day. Now it’s tricky post 9/11 to travel on one airline with bags checked on another airline. Basically you have to lie a lot. The only way we could get onto the other flight was to deny that we were flying with baggage because we would have been prevented from flying out of DC until our bags had come back from Philadelphia in, perhaps, several days. So we lied. We were concerned about the cue. Barbecue is a higher truth.

That trip turned out OK, and we were able to arrive in Paris only 24 hours late. The problem was the cue. Would it be able to fly to Paris without us? Finally, late on our day of arrival in Paris, we learned that our baggage had come in, with no one asking questions, and
would be delivered to us at 10:00 p.m., 16 hours after we had ourselves arrived. And so we were reunited with the cue. We were very tired and it was very thawed.

So here’s the problem. We get the cue out of the suitcase, and I’m relieved to find out that my one suit has not in fact been marinating, and that the cue smells just fine. In fact, it smells just like it’s supposed to smell, smoky and beyond magnificent. It tasted ok too. So I could lie (again!), and when we met my post doc and his wife the next night for dinner take them a gift of refrozen Allen & Son’s barbecue. Or, I could just toss it in the garbage in the belief, not necessarily unfounded, that even great cue can grow really bad bacteria if left unrefrigerated for very long periods of time. Worst case would be if the French equivalent of the CDC started asking my friends questions about swine flu following a hospitalization, since my friend is perfectly able to down two pounds of cue at a sitting. What to do?

As a former game theorist, I’m afraid the answer was obvious. Worst cases are to be avoided. Alas. So my friend had to make do with my spare NC BBQ Society decal. He told me this week he has it posted on his fridge, next to his “Meat is Murder” magnet from some vegan hangout he visited in Carrboro. Go figure.

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