

TRAVEL MISHAPS

If you think adventure is dangerous, try routine: it's lethal. ~ Paulo Coelho



#Egypt #shopping

I let a smooth-talking salesman put samples of spices and teas in my hand.

This led to a pleasant chat about traveling, which led to me paying \$25 for about \$5 worth of fragrant nonsense. I left town more mad at myself than the merchant, which, of course, is ridiculous. Don't be afraid to say no. Forgive yourself for getting ripped off. In fact, I just had a friend tell me he budgets in an extra \$100 as a "foreigner tax" on negotiated purchases abroad. By that metric, I came out ahead!

—Keith S. , Hollywood, CA

#coffeeattack

I was a half-hour into a ten-hour flight home from Europe, trying to nap, when I woke up rather abruptly because a flight attendant had her hand in my shirt.

This could have been a Penthouse letter, but she had spilled a cup of coffee on me, and was trying to soak it up before I got scalded and sued the airline (or worse, made her give me free drinks).

So, she rubbed me down with a damp paper towel (not as fun as it sounds), gave me my coffee and went on her way. Now I was awake and damp, but had coffee.

It was a ten-hour flight. Do you know how long it takes for a shirt to air-dry after a flight attendant puts damp towels all over it? Eleven hours.

—K. Gilhooly, Dallas, TX

The Maltese Tuna

A while back I was asked, via liaison, to consult for a mysterious gentleman in Malta. (Yes, really.) What did I know about this mysterious gentleman, you might ask? Nothing, beyond his name being Damien. Regardless, I found the idea of being summoned to consult a mysterious Maltese gentleman to be highly intriguing. Of course I said yes.



Malta is an island of the Mediterranean betwixt Italy and Tunisia. (50 miles from Sicily, 174 miles from Tunisia.) It had a deep-water port that was both unusually huge and naturally sheltered—thusly highly coveted. Over the millennia it has been ruled by empires ranging from Phoenician to Carthaginian to Roman and the like. There was also a Norman time, a Spanish time, and for a moment what looked to surely be an Ottoman time. A massive invasion was famously (and miraculously) repelled, which allowed the place to remain the pawn of Europe. Thus followed the Sicilians, then the French. At the time of my visit Malta was part of the British Commonwealth. Today, the European Union.

#badweather #OldWest #fail

Recently I spent the night in Colorado Springs, Colorado. A friend and I dined at Jose Muldoon's, a Tex-Mex joint with a fairly nice courtyard. The temperature was in the low 90s, the sun full. It was hot enough that we sought shade to avoid broiling. (And margaritas.) We agreed to next morning visit nearby Cripple Creek, an old mining camp-turned-tourist town in the Rocky Mountains. We retired.

On came the wind. It rattled the hotel.

At 7AM the sky was clouded, dark and purple and wet. The temperature was 44 degrees. Before we left town it was snowing.

We drove further upwards—6000 feet, 8000 feet, more. The snow became a full blizzard, the wind a banshee.

The wriggling road faced a sheer drop-off, curving mile after curving mile. Wind screamed across the road visually, white-streaked and deafening. I saw little of the road and nothing of the shoulder. Beyond the shoulder I could only imagine, so riveted was my attention to avoid, you know, dying and stuff.

This was not a quick-melt oddity. Snow plows were brought forth. They pushed aside at least two inches of snow-topped slush off the highway.

We drove in silence, dumbfounded that we had somehow gone from the height of summer to the depths of winter in just a few hours. I'd experienced a whopping 100 degree temperature change within one day before, but that had been flying from the Caribbean to Iowa. This change occurred in a single place!

On the way down, miles of pines were blanketed in snow like Christmas. By afternoon, all was sunny and hot again.

—Sir Brian, Las Vegas, NV

A driver brought me to Damien's office. There, to wait for the mysterious gentleman himself.

The difference between an office and an *office* can be excellent furniture, extreme views, or excessive spaciousness. Ideally all three. This office had none of those things, and was a paper-filled mess, to boot. His furniture of solid-colored cloth was new, if not particularly nice. His third-floor view of Valetta's stone harbor was unique, if not particularly beautiful. Of space his office had but little.

But the stated criteria could be bought. What was on those Maltese walls could not. Presented was a photograph of Damien with President Jimmy Carter. Beside that, a photo of him with President Ronald Reagan. And beside that, Damien with U.S. President Reagan *and* Soviet President Mikhael Gorbachev. A fourth photograph was of Libyan President Qaddafi, autographed in Arabic with text surely reading, 'to my good friend Damien, love Moamar.'

Yes, Damien had an *office*.

Finally the man himself arrived. He looked ridiculously handsome, with oily black hair slicked back. He looked young, too, except when he smiled. Then his eyes contracted to reveal the secrets of age within. His handshake was that of a self-disciplined as well as a self-made man.

"What is it that I can do for you?" I asked.

"Come!" he said. "I will show you my island and explain."

Damien himself drove me around the island. His car was some sort of Uber-luxurious Mercedes-Benz. (I knew less about cars than I did Damien.) It was large and sleek and had more leather than an entire herd of cows. How he drove that thing through the streets of Valletta was more astonishing than seeing all those office photos.

Valletta is a hyper-dense city jutting into that much sought-after Grand Harbour. About a quarter of a million people lived there, making it one of the most densely populated areas in Europe. And every part of it—every wall, roof, and fortification—was made of the same honey-colored stone. The saturation of color was complete; there was no greenery to be found. Set atop Mediterranean Sea, the buff and blue binary world was only marred by the fuchsia splash of bougainvillea.

Aside from being agonizingly beautiful, though, Valletta is *tight*. The streets were platted most recently during the Crusades; they were the stuff of pedestrians and horse-drawn

carts. Damien drove his magnificent car down twisted streets so narrow that the side mirrors needed pulling inward. How he turned from one such street onto another I never ascertained. It simply defied credulity.

As he drove nonchalantly past ancient stone churches and apartments and battlements, he explained in his British-tinged voice, “I like making unique tours. Tours that are distinctly Maltese, make you remember Malta long after you leave—even for the rest of their lives.”

We pulled out of the warren and onto wider streets. A turn, another, then ten more and we were shooting alongside the harbor. Lazing upon the blue were fleets of fishing boats, each and every prow bearing the ancient eye to ward off evil. Across the harbor rose yet more seawalls, apartments, churches, and battlements of honey stone.

Damien waved out to the placid waters and said, “Tuna, for instance.”

I blinked, said, “I beg your pardon?”

He smiled and explained, “I had an extremely high-ranking Russian coming and was tasked with providing him and his entourage entertainment. Please understand that when I say high-ranking, I'm talking about a man of *incredible* resources. He wanted something nobody else could boast.”

“Tuna?” I asked, confused.

“Tuna,” he repeated. “Malta is a world leader in tuna farming. A couple kilometers offshore you may have seen large rings on the surface. Those are floating cages. The cages are fifty meters in diameter and ninety meters deep. That may sound large, but I assure you it's not as large as you think. Atlantic bluefin tuna are caught in the wild up to 600 kilograms and fattened up in the cages. They are simply huge.

“I rented a yacht and cruised him out to a cage. We could see them circling in the cage, an entire school of three-meter tuna swimming below. They are predatory fish, you know, with rows of serrated fins that look like teeth. Very large, very intimidating. They swam deep, but the water is so clear you feel like you can reach down and touch them. There were about a thousand of them in there, swirling like a silver cyclone of knives.”

Damien flashed a pearly smile. “I told him to jump inside for a swim.”

My eyes widened at the thought. “Did he?” I asked.

“Would you?” he countered.



GOOD LUCK CAT

Lumpini Park in Bangkok is a large, open area in an otherwise hyper urban city. There's a lot of grass, some trees and lakes. Some big ass, six-foot-long monitor lizards, and cats

who taunted them—from a distance, I might add.

Before dawn I woke. (That's because I retired early due to gastronomic distress.) I strolled the park, then sat beneath the giant statue of King Rama VI and smoked a cigar. (I didn't know that was illegal—oops.) I spent the quiet time with half a dozen strays. When dawn came, so did the locals. Old couples did tai chi. Food vendors set up. One middle-aged man quietly fed this lucky little black cat the chicken bones from last night's dinner.



We all need help sometimes. Be an [Alley Cat Ally](#)

I was slow to answer.

“He didn’t,” Damien continued. “But I’ve no doubt he returned to Russia and bragged about having done so. His cronies would corroborate, of course. Ah, here we are!”

The Mercedes pulled off the road, eased onto the honey-colored sidewalk separating the road from a seawall. Twenty feet below lapped gentle blue. Twenty feet ahead, and looming over the wall, rose a massive building. It was several stories tall, rectangular, and stretched far along the coast. It looked less house than warehouse.

“This is why I brought you here,” he said. “Our liaison told me about your ghost book, how you designed it for readers to create their own walking tour. Malta has a special relationship with ghosts because we are so very old. America is not. You can give me an idea of the American mindset. Let me share with you a bit of history.”

“Please,” I said eagerly.

“In World War Two, Malta was of vital strategic importance. The Axis couldn’t take it from the British, so they tried to knock it out of use. It was the heaviest Axis aerial bombardment of the entire war. 3,000 raids dropped almost 7,000 *tons* of bombs on just these three kilometers around Grand Harbor. 30,000 buildings of stone became piles of rubble.

“They came at night, so being on the streets after dark meant death. But shelter was getting harder and harder to find. This house held over a hundred people. Women and children, mostly, because the men were fighting.

“One night—*during* an air raid, *in the middle* of all the bombs and bullets and destruction—everybody fled the house. Everybody. Every mother and her child. A spirit they saw inside scared them out. Now think about it a minute. What could possibly be so terrifying that mothers would carry their children out of shelter during a bombing?”

I blinked, soaked up the magnitude of it all.

“What did they see?”

“Nobody would say,” Damien replied grimly. “Not one person. The house has been abandoned ever since, even during the housing shortage after the war. Nobody’s stayed a single night here since.”

Finished with his tale, he asked suddenly, “Think I should buy it? Think Americans would like to tour it? At night, maybe?”

“Honestly,” I replied sagely, “I think they’d rather swim with razor tuna.”



HARD LUCK CAT

This is a rare obituary, to a great cat. Bob The Cat, the inspirational feline credited with saving the life of former addict James Bowen, died June 15, at the age of 14.

Bowen, then a recovering addict, first met Bob in 2007 when he found him abandoned. They became a team nourishing each other. Bowen’s book *A Street Cat Named Bob*, and its sequels, are global bestsellers selling 8 million copies in 40 languages. Below is a still from one of the two movies, where Bob plays himself. Farewell.

