

‘My god what are those fumes?’ gasped my wife, just before she nearly passed out. We were driving across Norfolk after returning from buying a ferocious instrument for shearing sheep (as one does in this household). She noticed it first. It

was like driving with your nose against the exhaust pipe of an elderly lorry.

With all the windows open we just managed to get home before dying of carbon monoxide poisoning. That was only days before we were due to drive to Gatwick for a brief holiday in Egypt.

The friendly local garage soon found the cause – a fuel injector leak. Because my car is old and cranky, they had to spend several days attacking it with WD40 to free it. The date for our departure drew closer and closer. Each day I checked and each day I was told that they could not be sure that the patient would be fit to travel.

I was dreading the prospect of buying another car. Cars do not excite me and even when I do replace a car, its interior soon resembles a wheelie bin and I have to be careful not to park it outside on dustbin days for fear that the whole car will be emptied into the refuse lorry.

Happily, just before closing time on the day before our departure the garage rang to say they had wrenched off the fuel injector, stemmed the leak and now my car smelt sweet again.

The following morning we set off slightly late and made good progress until we reached the M25. It is a characteristic of our country that the convenience of members of the public is always secondary to the whims of those who dabble in digging up roads.

For mile after mile we travelled at no more than 5mph with no hope of finding an alternative route (and no warning of the problems till we got into them). We took a good look at the intense activity involved in improving this major road. This mainly consisted of stationary vehicles with their lights flashing, or two men working, closely supervised by four or five others who were doing nothing. As we crawled along we calculated how many hours in total were going to be lost by people affected by this delay. We concluded that it would undoubtedly be many people years.

Our time of arrival crept back minute by minute until it looked as though we would be late for our check-in, but still the traffic crawled. Just when we seemed doomed to miss the flight, the cones vanished without warning, and we sped to the long-term car park, raced to the bus stop and urged the driver to do a wheelie to get us to the terminal in record time.

We then nearly broke the international record for suitcase sprinting as we careered towards the check-in desks where – no one was in a hurry at all. In contrast to our earlier sprinting, the local racing snails would have checked in faster than we did.

Then there was the further wait to go through security, spiced by a gratuitous body search (I had removed everything metal but I was gently groped anyway). Then it

was onto the plane where we squeezed into our seats and poked around in the pocket in front of us for something interesting to read – and failed.

We waited, and waited. Eventually the pilot broke the news that there was ‘a technical issue’. This prompted many people with clipboards in day-glow jackets to board the plane, walk to the flight deck and return with frowns on their faces.

After more than an hour of further delay we were told that the plane was broken and would fly nowhere.

Eventually another plane was found and our luggage, the complete crew and we transferred to it.

More than three hours behind schedule we arrived at our holiday destination. If only we had known, we could have relaxed and enjoyed the sights on the M25.

The journey back a week later was not much better. The plane ran out of food (at least of our first four choices). When we arrived at Gatwick we were introduced to the Gatwick passenger marathon (future Olympic organisers please note). Passengers are required to cover vast distances, including at one stage going up a very long escalator, only a few steps later to come down the other side. What was all that about? Did we go over a runway?

Exhausted we made it to the finishing line – otherwise known as passport control. At 3am you would have thought that not much would be happening here, but instead we were penned into rows: back and forth we went, passing the same faces at each back and each forth. Nearly half an hour later we presented our passports to an unsmiling officer who eyed us with great suspicion before letting us through (with the unspoken suggestion that next time we might not be so lucky).

Surely nothing more could go wrong now?

Wrong. We were dropped at the incorrect bus stop (and no I had not forgotten the zone and row). Have you tried to find a nondescript car in a field of cars? If only it had kept up its fumes we might have been able to find it with our noses. With tempers frayed, we scoured the car park until we found it crouching between two large four-by-fours.

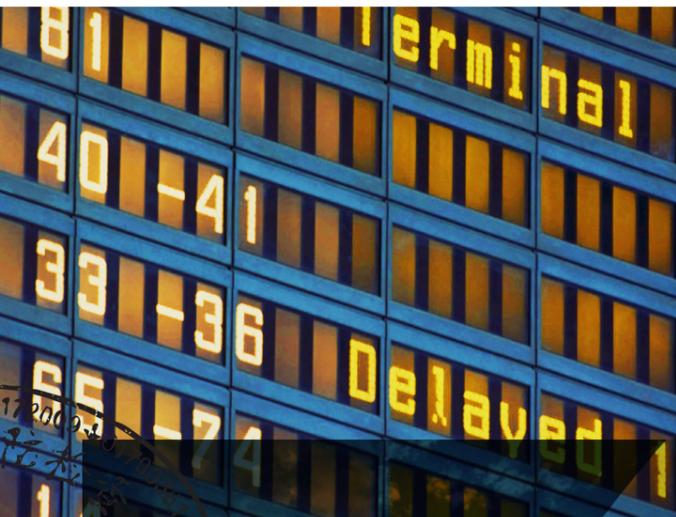
On the way back to Norfolk, my car thought it needed a holiday. Without warning it diverted to Stansted and took us an extra 20 miles before I could find a way back. I was, of course, blamed for this, but I had nothing to do with that error. My car has a mind of its own.

It was daylight by the time we eventually rolled in exhausted from our holiday.

Sandwiched between the nightmare of going and returning, there was an oasis – literally.

While the terrible riots were taking place a few hundred miles north of us, the Taba Heights resort, on the edge of the Red Sea was the epitome of peace, calm, rest and hospitality. Our package was all-inclusive – which meant that from the moment of our arrival, to the day of our departure we did not need to spend any money: all accommodation, food, drinks, even beach towels were provided. We were pampered – and the Egyptian staff were wonderful. It was delicious and delightfully restful – almost, but not quite offsetting the trauma of the outward and return journeys.

Roll on Star Trek technology: Oh, to be beamed out and back painlessly.



SEEING RED

THIS MONTH OUR RICHARD LEAVES NORFOLK FOR A RED SEA SOJOURN WHICH, AS YOU MIGHT IMAGINE WITH HIM, IS NOT WITHOUT DIFFICULTY