

Travel Nightmare, Version XI

The plot of Dan Brown's latest book, "Inferno" revolves around modern day implications of Dante's 1300-era "poem" – known as the "Divine Comedy" and the painting that it inspired by Sandro Botticelli. Botticelli's depiction of hell is a "map" showing 91 illustrations of what consisted of hell, that, according to Brown's book, had the effect of doubling church attendance. One expert described the painting this way: "Botticelli's Chart of Hell furnishes a panoptic display of the descent made by Dante and Virgil through the "abysmal valley of pain."

But had Botticelli been alive today, his painting of hell would have had a much different appearance.

It would be the Rome airport. I know this – two weeks ago I spent a year there one day. It was awful. In fact, Satan may be insulted by the comparison. And you think this is another Keenan attempt at hyperbole, reserve judgment until you've finished reading.

The misadventure started out innocently enough, when I traveled to Rome to retrieve, kidnap, remove or, more charitably, meet and return home with my daughter Maggie, who was studying in an art class in a town north of Rome, Civita Castellana.

Our departure date was Friday, July 31, and we climbed in our cab three hours, 30 minutes before our departure. We arrived without any traffic delays, which for Rome, is quite a statement. The driver dropped us off at terminal 1. When I asked the driver to confirm that "this is Delta," he nodded in a way that, in hindsight, told me – "please leave." We obliged. As we wandered around looking for anything that said "Delta," things were complicated by some rather LARGE BAGS I was dragging with clothes that did not belong to me. I finally found an English-speaking man who said "you need to go outside and wait for the terminal 5 shuttle."

Outside, standing in the sun, I felt my sweat glands open and began to function at a high level. What happened next was a parade of buses that zoomed past us. Like the road crew for a 200 piece band. A group of Japanese tourists eventually joined us and decided they could walk to the next terminal. (More on this later).

We saw one bus drive by with the number "5" – and when we waved, he pointed a distance down the sidewalk where another army was gathered. We ran down the sidewalk as that bus pulled to a stop. When we made it there, it was so full, people were standing half in, half out, and not budging. An airport employee was there and said "Another bus is coming!" She was correct.

Another bus pulled up. We pushed our way in. By now my Gillette Cool Wave Gel deodorant was failing, my shirt was pasted to my chest wall and the notion of missing the flight



The Eternal City, on this day, lived up to its name.

and spending another day where it was quite warm – literally and otherwise – crossed my mind. Never mind we still had two hours before takeoff. Panic mode was setting in.

The bus drove miles – it seemed so – and as we kept plowing ahead I considered the plight of those Japanese tourists. Breaking news – they are still walking.

Terminal 5 was in front of us. We exited and someone in bad English ordered everyone to "stand here" – a space with no signage, outside, no lanes. I looked around at the building we were about to enter. This terminal was very modest, poorly marked, and doing nothing to inspire confidence. The Romans built buildings that still stand today. This was at a different level. We stood outside in a holding pen. I walked up to the gentleman giving us orders. I said to him – "Delta?"

"Yes – come here." I was in front of everyone – maybe 75 people – he waived me ahead of everyone but I had to signal to Maggie we had a special passage. This required some delicate messaging. She moved ahead of the crowd, walking slowly as if we wouldn't be noticed. We were noticed. The crowd followed. Quickly. You remember that scene in "War of the Worlds" where Tom Cruise is trying to get on a boat and thousands die? It was sort of like that.

Inside it was chaos, with long lines and with one short one – the one that said "Delta Medallion." That was me. Our fortunes were turning.

Bags were checked, but then came another line. One to have your passport reviewed and stamped. Then came a bus to another terminal. At this point I noticed the guy behind me speaking English. We became instant friends. "Does this seem like a nightmare to you?" I asked him. He became very animated. "I've attended rock concerts more organized." We exchanged observations that lightened the mood. Turns out he is a cruise ship comedian – Russ Rivas – and he entertained Maggie and me at a time we needed humor.

And if it seems like this column is running long – you might appreciate how hell felt that day.

So we arrived at the boarding gate, more chaos. They changed the gate. More people moving quickly. At the new gate, I used the men’s room. The bathroom lacked, well, essentials, and when I searched to find what I needed, and started to get, well, comfortable, someone started pounding on the bathroom door. Do you know how to say “get lost” in Italian? I don’t either.

Finally we had our tickets scanned and seemingly were about to board the plane. Wrong. They led us down some stairs and we then climbed into another bus. For those keeping score at home – that’s three bus rides; two while in the terminal, a billion sweat glands in overdrive.

The official flight time was 9 hours 45 minutes but if you add the time we sat on the runway before departure, it was closer to 12 hours. We landed in Atlanta, our connecting flight was canceled, and Maggie and I spent the night sleeping on Hartsfield Jackson airport carpet. Other than that, the flight home was delightful.

I wondered if my experience was unique. Apparently not, based on the website dedicated to travelers reviewing airports: www.airlinequality.com/airport-reviews/rome-fiumicino-airport. Each of these reviews was made in the last 30 days:

- “This airport was a confusing, unpleasant experience.”
- “This airport is the most disorganized and unprofessional airport I’ve been in.”
- “Complete and utter chaos is the best word to describe this airport. Arrived at least two hours early and we waited for the departure gate in section D. Right at the scheduled boarding time, my partner checked the screen only to find that our 16.05 flight to Geneva has disappeared from the screen! No one around to help us at all, so we checked the information computer only to have the operator hang up on us!”
- “Our flight was supposed to leave at 11.20 but we only got on the plane at around 11.40 because the ticket scanning machines were broken at the front. Bus to the plane was packed. Overall, the worst airport I have been to and wouldn’t recommend it.”

- “How can one airport be so bad! I know many airports in many parts of the world and I have felt frustration more than once. Today a flight from Marseille to FCO took less than an hour, after being delayed for an hour. Arrival at FCO was chaos.”
- “Beverages and food really expensive, staff rude, and indifferent to the customer. The air conditioner machines were dripping liquid, delays for the transit when we arrived here.”
- “This is possibly the worst airport in Europe. We passed through yesterday returning from holiday and were treated with disrespect and indifference. Due to flight cancellations we were forced to spend over seven hours here. Firstly upon arrival we were very rudely told to sit outside in what could best be described as cattle pens exposed to constant traffic noise and fumes, and cigarette smoke from airport staff.”
- “This is by far the worst airport experience I have ever had. The staff is rude, impolite and arrogant. They seem to go out of their way to avoid eye contact and therefore having to respond to any questions.”
- “Simply the worst. I require mobility assistance and when I arrived at what I can only describe as an animal pen airside in T1 I was horrified. We were all herded into a box/pen about 3 meters by 1.5 – it was full, smelly and not fit for humans. Avoid at all costs. Do not go unless absolutely necessary.”

When father and daughter arrived in Leawood some 36 hours after our trip had begun, hell no longer mattered; only heaven did. n

About the Author



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