

IF YOU'RE TRAVELLING WITH KIDS -

WE'RE
SORRY!

by Lynn Taylor



Travelling with children is a bit like planning the military invasion of a small African dictatorship. You know it can be done, but you wonder if it's really worth the effort.

While packing, my youngest son again pulled out the never worn down jacket and waterproof boots from his suitcase and crammed in his entire collection of beanie babies - and Pooh Bear.

His older brother, on the other hand, was supremely disinterested in the whole packing process. "Let's just buy everything we need when we get there," was his ten cents worth of teenage advice.

I couldn't wait. Three weeks of blissfully cool weather to counteract the muggy Dar summer. Twinkling Christmas lights on the streets and no TanESCO power cuts to turn them off. Carols by Candlelight where I'd cup my warming candle lovingly, not blow it out after ten minutes and use the cardboard holder as a make-shift fan. Shopping along Oxford Street with a choice of seven shoe shops where the shoes are brand new and come in sizes smaller than 8 wide. Heaven!

The day of departure finally arrived. "How many checking in this morning?" asked the chirpy check-in lady - far too cheerfully for that time of the morning. "Four," I said, pushing across our passports and tickets. "Five," said Nicholas firmly. Raising her eyebrows, the lady counted our family and looked behind us to see if there were any more fair-skinned, fair-haired Caucasians checking in. "Four," I reiterated. "Five," countered Nicholas more firmly. "Me, Mom, Dad, my brother James, and my other brother who's in the suitcase so we don't have to buy him a seat."

I ground my teeth and reached deep for some patience. "No. There are four of us travelling. Four real people," I said. "Pooh is in the suitcase so you won't lose him." "I think we should check," said the check-in lady, indicating for the baggage handler to open our suitcases.

I should probably interject at this point and tell you that Pooh Bear is not just a normal teddy bear. He's not an imaginary

friend either. He is a bona fide member of our family who has a place set for him at the dinner table; who has a Christmas stocking and his own toothbrush. We live in constant fear that we'll be responsible for his college education too.

The check-in lady and the baggage handler finally agreed that we hadn't hidden a stowaway in our bags. I managed to cram the rifled clothing back, but Pooh Bear was resolutely clutched to Nicholas' chest. Without setting off the airline alarms again, I didn't see any way to get him back in the bag.

"Right then," said Ms. Chirpy bird. "How many suitcases are you checking today?" "Four," I answered.

"Right. And did you pack your suitcases yourself?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"No," said Nicholas. "You packed mine for me."

"And did anybody ask you to carry something on the plane for them?" she persisted, her smile wobbling somewhat. "NO!" I almost shouted.

"Yes. You asked James to put your winter coat in his case 'coz yours was full," Nicholas stared at me, daring me to defy the truth. "And I'm not putting Pooh back in the suitcase," he added loudly. "You said the baggage handlers always lose them."

There was a sudden silence and a sharp pause. The baggage handler glared at me and Ms. Chirpy bird lost her smile.

Our suitcases were unceremoniously thumped onto the conveyor belt and I winced, hoping none of the presents for the family were broken. Sensibly, I stayed quiet and herded the family towards customs and the security gates.

Security proved to be warm and smiling until Nicholas insisted on telling them that his dad had a bigger gun than them. As dad is a professional hunter, this was undoubtedly true. But I really didn't think a return to baggage check-in and a second search was altogether necessary under the circumstances, as the gun in question was safely locked in a fire-proof safe at home. However security were no longer bright and friendly.

We eventually boarded the airplane and were greeted by a friendly flight attendant. She too stopped smiling after

she had brought me my fourth glass of wine before midday in hope of having a relaxing flight. (Although, to be fair on the kids, they had been quietly entertained since shortly after take-off. All those movies and the miniature packages of food - never had they embraced foreign flavours so voraciously - even eating the cheese.)

Stumbling off the plane at the other end, we made our way through to customs and immigration. Despite fierce threats against Nicholas's holiday allowance if he even opened his mouth, he insisted that the immigration security camera take Pooh's picture and fingerprint before we could head for the baggage carousel.

Round and round it went with never a personal suitcase in sight. When I'd just about given up three of them tumbled into sight. Mine had clearly burst open while under severe pressure at 30,000 feet and someone had thoughtfully taped it back together with alarmingly sticky duct tape and a bedraggled bra strap hanging out the side. I grabbed it quickly and tried to hide my underwear from general public display.

Looking back to my family I didn't see Nicholas but the other passengers were jumping around in an alarming fashion. I caught sight of the sturdy little boy running alongside the baggage carousel, gripping his suitcase handle like grim death and repeating "Excuse me! Excuse me!" as he trotted along, trying to keep up with his moving luggage. Clearly he couldn't pick it up, but just as clearly he wasn't going to let it go.

As a normal mother I would have dived into the melee to help him, but I found myself instead falling about laughing. Justice was mine! Finally his Dad caught up with him and helped him out. "It's not funny!" he glowered. "No," I agreed, wiping my eyes. "It's not."

Just then James wandered over. "My suitcase hasn't arrived and it's not at baggage claim either," he told me. "I've filled in the forms and we have to come back for it tomorrow."

Where was that baggage handler now, I wondered. But at least one of us got his wish - an excuse to go and buy what he wanted ...