

How to Travel with a Salmon

According to the newspapers, there are two main problems besetting the modern world: the invasion of the computer, and the alarming expansion of the Third World. The newspapers are right, and I know it.

My recent journey was brief: one day in Stockholm and three in London. In Stockholm, taking advantage of a free hour, I bought a smoked salmon, an enormous one, dirt cheap. It was carefully packaged in plastic, but I was told that, if I was traveling, I would be well advised to keep it refrigerated. Ha. Just try.

Happily, in London, my publisher made me a reservation in a deluxe hotel: a room equipped with minibar. But on arriving at the hotel, I had the impression I was entering a foreign legation in Peking during the Boxer rebellion: whole families camping out in the lobby, travelers wrapped in blankets sleeping amid their luggage. I questioned the staff, all of them Indians except for a few Malaysians, and I was told that just the previous day, in this grand hotel, a

computerized system had been installed and, before all the kinks could be eliminated, had broken down for two hours. There was no way of telling which rooms were occupied and which were free. I would have to wait.

Towards evening the system was back up, and I managed to get into my room. Worried about my salmon, I removed it from the suitcase and looked for the minibar.

As a rule, in normal hotels, the minibar is a small refrigerator containing two beers, some miniature bottles of hard liquor, a few cans of fruit juice, and two packets of peanuts. In my hotel, the refrigerator was family size and contained fifty bottles of whisky, gin, Drambuie, Courvoisier, eight large Perriers, two Vitelloises, and two Evians, three half-bottles of champagne, various cans of Guinness, pale ale, Dutch beer, German beer, bottles of white wine both French and Italian, and, besides peanuts, also cocktail crackers, almonds, chocolates, and Alka-Seltzer. There was no room for the salmon. I pulled out two roomy drawers of the dresser and emptied the contents of the bar into them, then refrigerated the salmon, and thought no more about it. The next day, when I came back into the room at four in the afternoon, the salmon was on the desk, and the bar was again crammed almost solid with gourmet products. I opened the drawers, only to discover that everything I had hidden there the day before was still in place. I called the desk and told the clerk to inform the chambermaids that if they found the bar empty it wasn't because I had consumed all its contents, but

because of the salmon. He replied that all such requests had to be entered in the central computer, but—a further complication—because most of the staff spoke no English, verbal instructions were not accepted: Everything had to be translated into Basic. Meanwhile, I pulled out another two drawers and filled them with the new contents of the bar, where I then replaced my salmon.

The next day at 4 P.M., the salmon was back on the desk, and it was already emanating a suspect odor. The bar was crammed with bottles large and small, and the four drawers of the dresser suggested the back room of a speakeasy at the height of Prohibition. I called the desk again and was told that they were having more trouble with the computer. I rang the bell for room service and tried to explain my situation to a youth with a pony tail; he could speak nothing but a dialect that, as an anthropologist colleague explained later, had been current only in Kefiristan at about the time Alexander the Great was wooing Roxana.

The next morning I went down to sign the bill. It was astronomical. It indicated that in two and a half days I had consumed several hectoliters of Veuve Clicquot, ten liters of various whiskies, including some very rare single malts, eight liters of gin, twenty-five liters of mineral water (both Perrier and Evian, plus some bottles of San Pellegrino), enough fruit juice to protect from scurvy all the children in UNICEF's care, and enough almonds, walnuts, and peanuts to induce vomiting in Dr. Kay Scarpetta. I tried to explain, but the clerk, with a betel-blackened smile,

assured me that this was what the computer said. I asked for a lawyer, and they brought me an avocado.

Now my publisher is furious and thinks I'm a chronic freeloader. The salmon is inedible. My children insist I cut down on my drinking.

1986

How to Replace a Driver's License

In May of 1981, as I was passing through Amsterdam, I lost my wallet (or it was stolen: there are thieves even in Holland). It contained only a small amount of money, but a number of documents and cards. I didn't become aware of the loss until, at the airport, about to leave the country, I realized my credit card was missing. In the half an hour remaining before takeoff I conducted a desperate search for a place to report the loss (or theft). Within five minutes I was received by an airport police sergeant who, in good English, explained that the matter was not within the airport's jurisdiction, as the wallet had been lost in the city; nevertheless, he agreed to type out a report and assured me that, at nine, when the office opened, he would personally telephone American Express. And so, within ten minutes, the Dutch part of my case was dealt with.

Back in Milan, I telephone American Express and ascertain that my card number has been circulated