



The Roaming Pen: Out and about

Roger Wheeler

There are a few items of good news on the travel front this month.

The new coalition government has made it quite clear that they have no plans to scrap concessionary travel for anyone over 60, there had been a lot of unfounded rumours about this and it's good to know that this great benefit will stay. Much to my surprise I reached that age quite recently – OK not quite that recently – but these days 60 is not regarded as remotely old. Most of us in our 'mid maturity', lead busy active lives and are quite often still in full time employment. This is why I got pretty annoyed when I noticed that the button that bus drivers press when issuing you with your 'free' ticket is labelled 'OAP'. That phrase hasn't been in general use for a long time, the Old Age Pension was rebranded at State Retirement Pension over 20 years ago and frankly I find it mildly insulting to be identified as an OAP. Why, I wonder, does Brighton & Hove Buses even issue tickets, they don't on any buses in London and in many other parts of the country either. All you need is to have your pass with you in the event of an inspector requesting it.

Good news too from Southern Trains who are now offering 15% discount on all off peak fares booked online, the £10 DaySave tickets are still very popular and really are very good value.

But that's about all the good news there is. You may have noticed the news item recently about a couple of train companies selling first class tickets on trains with no first class carriages, this throws into focus the farcical situation that surrounds purchasing train tickets in this Country. Booking online either with a

train company's own site or through National Rail Enquiries is very complex and finding the cheapest fare takes patience that most of us don't possess. This is, of course, quite deliberate as most customers will give up and take the easy route and buy a higher price ticket. Even if you go to the station and talk to a real person, they quite often can't find the best price. I have found the staff at One Stop Travel shops very helpful and so long as you either arrive there by 9.00 am or don't mind standing in a queue they will usually find the best price.

We're off to Amsterdam for a long weekend early next month and I need to remind myself that pick pockets are getting very clever there and in most other major European cities for that matter. One of the oldest scams is for them to operate in small gangs on the trains that run from the airport into the centre of the city. One of the gang will ask you an apparently innocent question, directions for example, and the accomplice simply lifts your wallet or removes your bag. This is not new, last year nearly 2,000 British passports were stolen from tourists in France, most in Paris. You should never carry your passport, but that's difficult when you are travelling from the airport.

Recently there have been several reports about people falling victim to Google's search engine when looking to access free government services. If you are travelling to the US you need to complete the reasonably new ESTA online form. This is free from the US Government but if you just search for US Visas you will initially be offered several sites that appear to be official, they are not, they are commercial companies and they will charge for what

From Old Steine to Boundary Rd; and from Freshfield St to Marine Parade. An interesting market to reach.

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is a free service. The official US website is 11th in the list so read with great care. This also applies to UK government services, for instance when you need to renew your EHIC (European Health Insurance Card) only use a website with the magic 'gov.uk' suffix. Virtually all government services are available free of charge through the internet, always use the basic www.direct.gov.uk website.

The free EHIC card is a govt scheme which entitles you to healthcare in all State-run hospitals in 31 European countries, as if you were a local. So in Spain it means free healthcare, in Cyprus you pay what locals pay. If you've already got one, check it's valid, some only last 3-5 years. And keep it with you, you need present it or you're not covered. Everyone needs their own EHIC card, even children, so ensure you apply for kids too. It is useful especially for emergency treatment, but also for quick trips to a GP, and meaning you needn't pay travel insurance excesses. Yet don't think it's a replacement for travel insurance. Get one through www.ehic.org.uk/Internet/home.do

We're off to beautiful Andalucia, again, so ¡hasta luego. y tomárselo con calma – see you later and take it easy.



Decimal points

Steve Myers

Ten little fingers, ten little toes. Isn't that how the saying goes?

If my mother hadn't drank or smoked or had stopped putting things up her nose or into her veins, I'd probably have been okay. But you have to play the deck life deals you. By the time I went to secondary school, I'd lost her and heard it all: the insults, the pity and most often the jokes.

'Oh that should make piano playing easier.'

'Which pinkie do you raise when you're having tea?'

'Found a pair of gloves yet?'

I like to think of everyone as individual. So having twelve fingers was just something that happened to me. It's not like the extra two could do anything. I'm never going to be able to reach two octaves on a piano, or become the world's best typist. They're kind of useless, like the appendix, or one of those things you buy on a whim from the Ideal Homes Exhibition. In a weird way though they're my best assets. They made me, just as I made them. I grew to take all the abuse, the jibes, the stares and the 'oh you poor thing' remarks from people who thought I needed cheering up. It's like those annoying TV telethons when they have to call all the people who are suffering anything 'so brave'. Bravery's something you do when you're faced with a bullet or a mugger. It's not something you do because of the way your life's turned out. You might need to put up with stuff you'd rather not, but you have to get on with it. I wasn't brave; I cried myself to sleep sometimes, wondered why it happened to me, blamed my mother, blamed nature, God and everything I could.

I used to hide my hands to avoid all those comments, but now I don't. I've stopped bothering whether people notice; in fact I quite like it when I see those discrete looks: the ones that people do to celebrities if they're not quite sure they're really seeing who they think they are. It's especially fun paying in cash for something, because you have to hand over the money and everyone's so politically correct these days it's like they daren't say anything. They just smile like trained trolley-dollies – you know that the rictus grin on their face and the words aren't actually sincere, and you know they're dying to ask you, but they rarely do. I've got used to them putting the change on the counter rather than having to touch my hand again. Children are the best, because they have no such inhibitions. Their mums and dads are always so embarrassed when they ask me about my hands, but I think kids need to know that nature is great, but sometimes has a bit of a laugh on our behalf. I just tell them that something happened to me when I was born and it's the way I am. I think children are fascinating, because it's not until we get older that we lose that sense of wonder. As opposed to the shop assistants who don't even want to go near me, most children seem to want to touch my hands to see if they're real. A few get a bit freaked out, but others say they wish they had the extra two fingers.

It did take me a while to find a wife. I had lots of interest from lots of women who had lots of interest in me for all the wrong reasons. When I met Claire, she obviously noticed, but it was the first time I saw a woman just glance, not glare. And she didn't seem to give it a second thought. We talked about everything that night – except the twelve out of ten I have. And the genes haven't passed on: we have two lovely kids with everything in the right place. They do call

me 'Dozen' sometimes, but it is with affection. And I joke that they shouldn't upset me because a smack from these hands could really hurt.

Of course people still look. I get comments and people turning away as if the two extra fingers suddenly make me contagious. Claire's the first one to come to my defence; I think she's more offended than I am now. She actually slapped a guy who passed us in the street and asked if she was taking me to the circus. To say that both he and I were shocked would be something of an understatement. He was the most surprised, as he probably thought a woman of five-feet seven couldn't knock out his bridgework. I'm not in favour of violence; I had enough bullying at school. But I couldn't help but be impressed by her. If he had a tail he went away with it between his legs. There are so many other things to think about than a little accident of fate. So what if they don't make gloves for me and I don't want to wear mittens? I never put any of my fingers, pinkie or not, up when I'm drinking tea. I don't play the piano, I can type perfectly well, so these little extras are just that. Like the people who appear in the background in films: you see them, but you don't always notice them.

My wife has a way of putting it, which didn't occur to me. She says that people talk about having ten fingers, but they're kidding themselves. What they actually have is eight and two thumbs.

So apart from my two thumbs, I actually have ten fingers.

Maybe I'm a work in progress.