

## Israelis Travelling to USA – A Comedy of Situations

Ian Wise – Rehovot



To give a little bit of a background:

Nitza and I and 6 friends, 1 couple from Israel and another 2 couples from Capetown, South Africa, all decided to meet up in Fort Lauderdale (USA) and take a Transatlantic cruise together on the Emerald Princess, back to Europe. We had done this 2 or 3 times already and had great fun together. I was the main organizer of the cruise tickets and other details which included the visas for all of us to allow us to get off and visit Casablanca.



I had booked a hotel for 3 nights, for all of us in Fort Lauderdale. Had a rental car waiting in Miami and the Moroccan visas for all of us in my file. "After weeks of planning everything was ready and double-checked and "was green to go".

Nitza and I decided not to take a direct flight from TLV to USA but as it is a long flight with a connection in Lisbon, we decided to make an overnight stop as the flight

arrived at Lisbon early enough for us to have lunch and to stroll around a city that we both love. Nitza loves to shop and there is a particular store that Nitza likes to visit.

By the way, our friends, the Israeli couple also took the same flight the next day from Tel Aviv to Lisbon and connected to the Lisbon Miami flight that we were also booked on, but as you will see, we didn't make it.

The date of our Tel Aviv flight to Lisbon was April 30, 2019, with TAP (Air Portugal) but this was amended to 05.00 and not as originally planned for 17.00...This suited us as it gave us the gift of our day in Lisbon.

### Day 1

- April 30, 2019. The early flight was nice and we landed on time, took a taxi to the Holiday Inn Airport hotel (5 minutes by taxi) from the airport and continued with our plans. We decided to take a bus to Lisbon as we like to see the people and the city and arrived in the city center. We had such a lovely day, walking around, shopping, sightseeing and eating the Belem cake and drinking the Port wine.

In the evening, we walked till we found a local fish restaurant near the hotel and had a nice quiet meal. Returned to the hotel, retired and slept well.

### Day 2

- May 1, 2019: Our flight Lisbon to Miami was scheduled for 10.35, which gave us time for an easy breakfast and a quick taxi journey to the airport to reach our flight.

We arrive at the airport and proceed to the check in area together with our bags.

As we are waiting in line at the pre check, a nice young smiling security person comes to us to go through the normal security formalities and questions.



Of course, as seasoned travelers, we think nothing of this and he asks me for my passport which I present to him and of course no problems whatsoever.

Now is Nitza's turn. Nitza presents her passport, he checks the passport photograph and then he checks the pages of the passport and then rechecks. He turns to me and asks where is Nitza's USA entry visa.

That is when my mouth dried up, I feel the blood draining from my face, I want to speak but the words don't come out of my mouth. I just say "Water."

At the same time, my mind is running backward in replay and I see myself taking out all our travel documentation from the drawer where the passports and other travel documents are kept. I take out Nitza's old passport and I say to myself that we don't need this as it's a cancelled passport. Why take it? Without a further thought that Nitza's USA entry visa is in that old passport. I deliberately return the passport to the drawer and close it. I put all the other required travel documents in my travel file and that's it. Ready for the early morning taxi to the airport, I'm relaxed, everything is ok. No further thoughts on this matter. Why should I have any doubts, I have done this already tens of times, if not more.

I feel like dying!

The security guy calls his supervisor to whom I present Nitza's current passport showing past entries to the USA stamped on it. I ask her if it would be acceptable to receive immediately a copy of the old passports' pages including the copy of the required valid entry visa. She says she will check. The very kind supervisor picks up the phone and calls on her direct HOMELAND Security line to the USA. She explains to the officer on the USA side, with a lot of empathy, our situation, and the reply is that he will only allow us on the aircraft if I produce an original, current, valid USA entry visa in the name of Nitza. Then he promptly closes the phone. That's it, finished. Nothing can be done at the check in. We cannot pass this point. Only return and somehow work this out and get on a plane to the USA before time runs out.

The ship will sail without us, if I don't arrive at the Fort Lauderdale port by May 3, before 12.00

I still want to die, even more!

What can be done? I must sit down and gather my thoughts, I must start to think rationally, and write down the order of things that **MUST** be done in order to rectify this dire situation that I have caused.

We leave the check-in and find a seat at a café table and take pen and paper and start with our plan of action.

I called Oriane, our daughter, and explained to her what happened and asked her to go to our house and immediately send by overnight FedEx the passport to the Hotel in Lisbon. We tried to call Oriane from our phones but for some technical issue our phones could not make outgoing calls. We asked a gentleman next to us if we could

use his phone and he allowed us to make the very important call. We must have appeared to be in shock as he gave us his phone without any question.

List of things to do NOW :

Orienne to send Tracking No for FedEx package

Call airport hotel and rebook for tonight

Cancel our booking for Fort Lauderdale hotel

Cancel hire car

Check with TAP ticket office next flights

Look for the best way to get to Fort Lauderdale with TAP or any other airline

Forward Moroccan visas to Baruch

Check with all other airline desks when they have flights to the USA from Lisbon via anywhere in Europe.

Phone friends in USA if they can give advice.

Seeing that there was no further use, at that point, to stay at the airport, we picked up our bags, got into a taxi and went back to the hotel to wait for information regarding the FedEx package, which hopefully was being sent to us.

We were hopeful that the FedEx package would arrive by tomorrow morning early and that we could put this travel catastrophe behind us and get back on the road to the USA, our friends and the ship waiting for us.

But it was not to be.

Prior to leaving the airport we went up to the TAP ticket office to try to understand what our options were and we were informed that the following day there was the same flight at 10.30 for Miami and the next alternative was a flight to New York at 13.30 which was relevant to us. Somehow, we had to get on one of these flights to make it on time to the USA, in Miami or New York on May 1, and somehow get to Fort Lauderdale in time to meet up with our friends and salvage most of the pre-cruise activities (shopping) that was planned. We had planned two full shopping days at the massively huge "Seagrass Shopping Mall" in Fort Lauderdale - a shopper's heaven.

Back at the hotel we started making phone calls to friends in the States, as they were much more experienced with the American systems and possible alternatives.

Our alternatives were very limited as without the old passport with the visa in our hand we could not do anything. We could not now take a flight somewhere else as the address that was given to FedEx was that of the Airport hotel in Lisbon, so to wait and worry were our only alternatives.

Back at the hotel we would receive a further bit of new knowledge, we would then rush by taxi to the airport and check with Ana Carmona, the lovely patient lady in the ticket office which had an almost permanently long and slow queue. She was so sympathetic towards us that she told us not to go the end of the queue but just to stand there and she would call us to the desk. What a lady and what service.

We received a phone call from the States and one of our American friends had her travel agent call us to hear the full situation from our lips.

He realized that before we could do anything we had to have the visa. Nothing else could be done. This was the fulcrum, crux and pivot point of the whole disaster.

As a last minute parting piece of advice, he suggested that we call the US Embassy in Lisbon and try to get a new entry visa put into Nitza's new passport.

Suddenly a glimmer of light. We found the phone number and proceeded to call the embassy. The telephone rang and rang and rang. Nobody was answering, then young man – he said he was a Marine Guard - answered stating that the Embassy was closed today as it was the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. Workers of the World Unite!

After explaining our demise, he advised us to come to the embassy early tomorrow morning and someone will help us.

A straw to clutch. This was to be our saviour. Tomorrow, early, we go to the embassy and walk out with a new visa.

We went to bed exhausted and full of trepidation but with a glimmer of hope for what the new morning would bring. The embassy held the answer!

Having worked for many years with global courier services, I was somewhat hesitant about their efficiency and being dependent on them.

At about 20.00 I was tracking my FedEx package for the 10<sup>th</sup> time from the internet via my phone and saw that the envelope has arrived in Madrid. So, I called the help line and asked when the estimated distribution time for the Lisbon airport area is.

"We are sorry to tell you that due to the fact that today is the 1<sup>st</sup> of May there is a delay in the transfer of packages from Madrid. The package will arrive sometime tomorrow to Lisbon (May2) but they cannot guarantee distribution before the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May."

All is lost. We are sunk. The only remaining hope is the US Embassy.

Sleep came hard but it did come.....

### Day 3



- May 2: At 06.00 we are already in the breakfast room having a coffee and light breakfast. Leaving our packed and closed bags in the room, at 07.15 we arrive at the

Embassy gates to find that the Embassy staff opens at 08.00 and they are the first filter, who can enter to the embassy consular offices and speak with someone.

We stand outside the gates and we are waiting in the freezing cold. We did not expect that Lisbon was really so cold in the mornings. Nitza was wearing only the thinnest of blouses and was physically shivering from cold, nerves, and probably from lack of sleep. Nitza took shelter from the biting cold and stood next to the wall of the embassy to reduce the cold from the wind and was told by an armed marine in uniform, in a deep practiced voice that left nothing to chance, to stand away from the wall. Go stand over there, in the open.

At 08.00 precisely, the shutter of the bullet-proof gate opens and we (as we are 1<sup>st</sup> in the queue) are able to give our heart-tearing rendering version of the super urgent visa problem. We explain to the young lady, who is actually a Portuguese local and is a contract worker, that the old passport will be delivered by FedEx. We show her a copy of the USA entry visa page we received from Oriane. We show her Nitza's new passport with past and recent USA entry visas, explain and almost plead that we must get on a flight today, to the States to meet the ship with our friends on it, who are not only waiting for us but also for the Visas to Morocco that I have arranged for all the group. She calls the particular staffer, who apparently calls her to the inner office. We even explain to her that even we get on tomorrow's flight to Miami, it lands at 14.30 in Miami and that we would never make it on time to Fort Lauderdale to catch the ship as the latest boarding time is 15.00...

After about 10 minutes she returns with the official answer of the embassy staffer which is that we should send them an email asking for an appointment, describing the problem, with documented evidence etc., and we shall receive an answer within 3 days.

We are dumbfounded and horrified by the reply. We insist on seeing someone. We are Israeli passport holders, "friends and allies of America". This would never happen to an American in Israel in a similar demise. Something has to be done. Someone must see us.

After 10 minutes she returns to us with confirmation of the previous answer. Send an email. I see the sadness in her eyes. But there is simply nothing she can do.

Although we are in shock and see all our plans for a wonderful holiday, just crumble before our eyes, we hold our ground and demand to speak to the manager of the Gate house. We see the young staffer relating our story to an older lady who is obviously her senior. She takes the unusual step of coming outside to talk to us.

In no way will we be allowed to enter. She relates to us how an old lady came every day for 10 days to ask for a visa as her son was dying in the USA. She wanted to see him for the last time and her request was rejected. Only after she brought a copy of her son's death certificate, was she granted a visa.

They are bad, unfeeling people here, she said to us.

Please, just one favour, please call us a taxi. (The embassy is on the outskirts of Lisbon, directly on the highway) not easy to find and stop a taxi there, especially at 08.45 in the morning.

As we left the gatehouse, we saw inside through the window, the young lady, who wanted to help us, (Marsela, if I remember correctly) being hugged by the supervisor who had spoken to us. She was obviously crying and upset. Just as shattered as we were.

The taxi arrives and we get in, depressed and forlorn. What is to be done? Where to go? No point in writing an email as by then the old passport will have arrived.

The only sensible plan I could come up with was to fly to the Azores, which was the first stop for the ship after leaving Fort Lauderdale. We could pick up the ship and continue on the cruise. At least half a holiday.

We are in the taxi on the way to the Airport hotel. After a few depressingly quiet kilometres, I ask the driver if he knew the FedEx offices at the airport, let's go there.

We arrive at the airport industrial area and the driver tries to find the FedEx warehouse. He drives round in circles. Eventually I spot the sign. Ah, ah, the driver says, you meant Fedeex – the way he pronounced it.

We drove directly inside and went to the warehouse office.

To give a little bit of background. We entered this building and what we saw was a 25 metre long, very wide table surrounded by big silver bins and about 30 people working on the massive pile of thousands of FedEx packages. They would pick up a small package, quickly read the label and expertly throw the package into a specific bin. Whilst all this somewhat confused and frenzied work was going on, another huge bin arrived, was upended by a small crane and its contents were spilled onto this table. Literally thousands of parcels and packages everywhere.

We explained to the manager the dire situation we were in, and we could see that he was very sympathetic. He asks if we have the Air Way Bill No, which I am able to produce.

Please wait here, he says. Nitza and I take a seat. At least we were not thrown out.

I ask where the toilet is, as the cold of Lisbon has affected me and so both Nitza and I find the toilet which is 2 floors above. On the way back we pass the coffee corner. I ask Nitza if she wants a hot drink. Nitza's reply: "I want my f\*\*king passport... not coffee." I took coffee.

We return to the warehouse where the workers and even the manager standing around this table sorting, with envelopes and packages flying through the air into bins.

Nitza goes and stands next to the manager and every time he picks up a package she asks him if this is hers. He picks an envelope, looks at it and asks Nitza for the copy of the Air Way Bill she is holding. A miracle has happened. This is our envelope that was sent and it is now in our hands. We tear it open and out pops the old useless passport with the precious visa stamped inside. Against all odds! Halleluyah!

We sign for this wonderful manager a document of receipt. Profusely thank him from the bottom of our hearts and run out.

Where?? We are at the far end of the airport in the industrial area. No buses, few taxis. We are desperate again but now for different reasons. It is 09.30. The whole scene at the FedEx warehouse did not take more than 25 minutes. I know there is a flight to Miami at 10.35, exactly 24 hours after our missed flight. But there is no

chance to make it. Our next possibility is the 13.00 flight to New York and from there to connect to Miami. We must get back to the hotel, pickup our bags and get to the airport ASAP and purchase new tickets to get on this flight. – We have no booking. No reservations.

One good thing. I am blessed with built-in GPS in my brain.

I absorb my geographical surroundings. From our 3 or 4 taxi trips from the hotel to the airport and back, I have a good idea where we are. I think we are about 2 kilometres from the hotel and it will be much quicker to walk / run to the hotel than to call a taxi.

I say to Nitza: Follow me (and for one of the only times) this is what she does. I see an exit gate and we start to walk (very fast) along the side of the highway with cars racing by. I take Nitza by the hand and we cross the 3 or 4 traffic lanes at a huge roundabout. To go around will take time and it will be much faster to make a diagonal crossing. I take a chance and we cross over. I see a fence running all the way along the grass in the middle of the bush lined separation of the highway. Suddenly, I see a shortcut in the fence. Others before us have made a dip under the fence and so without hesitation both Nitza and I (like small children) are under the fence and out the other side and we are about 500 metres from the hotel.

We reach the hotel in record time. I run upstairs to get the cases and bags. Nitza books out and we ask for the hotel shuttle to take us to the airport. The shuttle has gone and will return in 20 minutes. We dash outside and get a taxi to the airport.

Now begins a new ordeal.

I say to the driver: 'arrivals please' (that's where the ticket office is)... he takes us to departures – he saw we had suitcases. Clever driver.

We arrive at arrivals and up we go to the ticket office where our Ana is behind the counter. The queue is long and obviously slow. As instructed by her we stand to the side and catch her eye. After a short wait, we go through the formalities of buying new tickets, as we missed the earlier Lisbon - Miami flight, our only alternative is to fly to New York and connect to a New York - Miami flight. Costs don't come into our thoughts (for now). I hand over the plastic, receive the new tickets, again thanking Ana so much for her help.

It's about 11.00 and we are exhausted physically and mentally. But who would have imagined that here we are at the airport in the process of flying to the USA, with the correct and complete documentation.

Who would believe that just 2.5 hours ago we were dejected, rejected and on the brink of the total collapse of our plans and hopes, with no idea how to continue, except for the Azores for 7 days, or to return home.

We proceed with the check-in, all is ok.

We go through scanner and security – all is ok. Normal.

We start to walk to the gate through the Duty Free – no shopping this time. The security let Nitza through but they ask me to go to a separate area for a stricter body search and they want to check our hand luggage. No problem. Do whatever you want.



As they go through the carry-on luggage, I catch Nitza's eye and ask her where is the grey trolley. She tells me that I had it at security. I run back and search all this area but nothing. I had left Nitza's trolley at the security inspection.

The security calls the inspection area and to our joy there is our case standing there all alone. He tells us that he has requested someone to bring it to the gate for us.

I must say that ALL the Portuguese people we met, throughout this difficult time were polite, tried to be helpful and were very nice. They were all lovely people.

After a long 20-minute wait the grey trolley arrived in the capable hands of a policewoman. Thank you!

At last, our flight was called and we took our seats at the back of the aircraft and just held on to each other and could not believe that we were in the air, on our way to the USA.

Now begins a whole new additional experience.

We land at Newark airport and begin the immigration procedure.

Our United connecting flight to Miami leaves at 18.00 to arrive in Miami at 21.00. Now it is after 15.30.

On arrival at Newark all the passengers from the plane are line guided in the direction of the immigration where you join a long, long snake-shaped line. People are waiting to go through a short interview at the immigration desk. Meantime all those waiting are being herded down these lines. After a short time I see some persons with a printout in their hands. What is this? I am told that I firstly have to fill in my details into the computer, which nobody told me about. So I leave Nitza and off I go to be interviewed firstly by a computer.

I fill in all the requested details and receive my printout with a big red 'X' on it. I go to the steward who is governing the queues and he tells me to stand in this specific queue. So I call Nitza to stand with me. I realize that this is a much slower line. I time the progress of the people going to the immigration desk and I realize that it will take at least another 2 hours to get into America. This means that we will miss our connecting flight. Nitza tells this to the steward, but he shouts at her to stand in the line. If you are late then get a later flight! He doesn't give a damn.

Slowly, slowly we advance and finally get our passports stamped with the entry visa at around 18.00, and run to pick up our luggage from the carousel. We exit the luggage area and I go to the nearby United Airlines desk. The lady directs me to another desk in a different terminal telling me that the flight leaves from there but has been delayed and that I can still make it. I grab my luggage and start to go towards the elevator that will take me to the robot trains. She shouts after me to leave my luggage there which I don't understand, but I do as I am told and proceed to the train and the next terminal.

This train is overcrowded and when we reach our terminal the passageway is just blocked with hundreds if not thousands of fellow passengers going for flights in this terminal. Slowly we are funnelled toward the security barrier and slowly we are reduced by the narrowing of the lane to one or two across. Nitza goes first. There is this Afro American lady at the desk and next to her is a huge Afro American security guard. Nitza shows her documents and passes through. She looks at my documents

and says to me to wait on the side. I ask her what's up and she says to just wait. She has called a special team to examine me, my carry-on trolley and check my security.

We are late for our flight. What is to be done? I have the gate number and the boarding card. I give Nitza hers and I say to Nitza to go ahead to the gate C81 and I will follow but not to move from the gate till I get there.

I am waiting for this special team and after about 10 minute-wait they arrive – 2 guys and a girl – she is the boss. Anyway, they open a special door and take me into the security area and one of the guys takes my jacket, shoes and belt and asks me if I am willing to make the security check here (in public) or to go to a private room. I tell him I am happy to do it here but just be quick as I am late for my flight and my wife has gone ahead to the gate. He starts with his procedure of explaining to me what and how he is going to conduct this physical body check. I make some frivolous comment and he then says to me if I interrupt him again, he will start from the beginning.

I have never gone through such a thorough check in my life. He started with going through my hair at the top of my head and went all the way down. He even stuck his hand into my trousers to check the inside of my trouser waistband. When he told me to lean forward with my back towards him I thought that I was going to have a new life changing experience. (he was wearing rubber gloves) Anyway, he just checked the soles of my feet. I am dismissed.

Now, I am in a panic. I am separated from Nitza. I don't know what is happening to my flight. I put on my shoes but I don't take time to lace them up. I start to run through the throngs of people, all of whom are going in the opposite direction, towards me!

I am running and cursing myself for not taking the time to lace up my shoes as now they are falling off my feet making me walk but I don't want to stop, so I carry on in this fashion.

I get to the gate C81 and there is Nitza waiting for me. The desk clerk would not hold the flight for her / me any longer and closed the flight. What happened to my luggage? I go the United desk.

There are 3 ladies behind the desk. The first is on the phone, the second isn't receiving customers and the third is with another traveller. There are about 4 persons in front of me and at this rate, I will miss the next flight to Miami, too. So I do something that I almost never do, I loudly say that I am in a desperate rush to get on my flight, so please forgive me if I jump ahead. The lady behind the desk says to quickly go to another gate - C88 - as there was a change of gates and my flight (which was delayed) has still not left. We run to the new gate and are told to sit down, relax and wait. Apparently United doesn't have a pilot for this flight. They are waiting for the pilot to arrive from another plane, which is also delayed. That was at about 19.00.

At about 20.00, we boarded the flight to Miami – apparently the pilot had arrived, only to be told that due to the delay, one of the flight attendants had clocked out and was unable to continue with the flight and that the company was looking for a replacement flight attendant... Further delays.

Eventually, at 21.00, with a delay of 3 hours, the plane took off for Miami. Just to make sure that we would never forget this experience, when the pilot started to taxi towards

the runway, he must have pushed to gas all the way in one go, because the water that we were given was on Nitza's table and then it was all over Nitza.

Welcome to America.

We arrived at Miami at midnight.

At about 12.00 on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2019 we boarded The Emerald Princess, met our friends, and had the most wonderful Transatlantic cruise.

*All's well that ends well - but YOU make it happen – Your fate is in YOUR hands*