

TRAVEL

TRAVEL EDITORS NOTE

I always tell everyone I have the second best job in the travel industry; travelling vicariously through our contributors' and reader submissions. This week travel writers Jane Mundy and Joanne Blain tell us it's not all glamour. *Dave Pottinger, Travel Editor, dpottinger@postmedia.com*



Mount Fuji in cherry blossom season is a sight to behold, but not every trip to Japan has been a bed of roses for travel writer Joanne Blain. *GETTY IMAGES*

IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES



Iceland offers a wealth of natural beauty, but be prepared for the hikes — and for the local dining delicacies.

Bad planning and other pitfalls made for some trips these writers would sooner forget

**JOANNE BLAIN
AND JANE MUNDY**

Time to get out the tiny violins.

Last week, we brought you a story about some of the best travel experiences we've had. This time around, we're going to tell you about a few trips that didn't make it onto that list because they were not the best of times. Occasionally, they were downright miserable.

We get it. We're among the privileged few who get to roam the globe, and write about it. No one is going to shed a tear over our travel misadventures. But if a bit of schadenfreude brightens your day, you're welcome.

Joanne Blain:

I adore Japan. I've been there three times, but one trip to the Land of the Rising Sun wasn't all cold sake and cherry blossoms.

It was a press trip with a packed agenda that didn't leave much time for idle pursuits, including sleep. After a long flight across the ocean, we checked into an airport hotel for four whole hours before we had to board another plane. And when we landed, jet-lagged and bleary, we had a full day of sightseeing ahead of us.

And then halfway through the trip, we discovered that we didn't even have a hotel for the night. "You can sleep on the plane," we were told as we were shuttled from a late dinner straight to the airport. I might have dozed fitfully for an hour or so on the six-hour flight.

Painfully bright and early, brains fogged with fatigue, we found ourselves touring a china factory in Nagoya like zombies. The rest of the day was a blur of naps on the bus interrupted by

stops at other points of interest, none of which I remember.

When we finally got to our refuge for the night, we discovered it was a "businessman's hotel" that clearly didn't cater to exhausted western tourists. My room reeked of cigarette smoke and had a hard single bed with one tiny, crunchy pillow filled with buckwheat.

I've never missed my own bed more desperately.

Jane Mundy:

I had an overnight stay in Cambodia that was memorable for all the wrong reasons. After staying for a week with my friend in the sleepy town of Kep, it was time for some nightlife. We packed overnight bags and took a two-hour drive to Sihanoukville, known by local expats as "The Snook."

Chinese investment and an international airport had turned

this beach town into a tacky version of Reno, full of gaudy casinos and hotels packed with tourists. After several attempts to find a room — and cursing ourselves for sending our driver home before we did — we stumbled across some dilapidated wooden structures with a "vacancy" sign.

The proprietor didn't speak English but my friend spoke Khmer. We paid about \$10 for the promise of air conditioning, mosquito netting and clean sheets.

Getting dressed for dinner, I heard an ear-piercing shriek from my friend in the bathroom. In the sink was a scorpion, as wide as the basin. I took off my flip-flop and smashed it to smithereens. Then, just before I sat on the toilet, I looked inside and there was a giant toad staring up at me. It was my turn to scream.

After a boozy dinner and losing

most of our cash in the casinos, we arrived back at our shack. We draped the lumpy bed with mosquito netting and passed out, even though the promised A/C was on the blink. The next morning, covered in mosquito bites because of the huge holes in the netting, we phoned our driver to return pronto and take us back to Kep.

Joanne:

You really need to know what you're getting into when you book an organized tour, like the one Jane and I took to Iceland a few years back. I was excited to see the country, which friends had raved about, but I knew we'd be spending a lot of time hiking and I was not sure my cranky right knee was up to it.

The tour company reassured me, ranking the trip a one out of five on the scale of physical difficulty.



Visitors to Golden can check in on Boo, an orphaned grizzly bear, at his 20-hectare refuge halfway up the hill at Kicking Horse Mountain Resort. *JOANNE BLAIN*

(MIS)ADVENTURES IN ICELAND

WORST FROM C8

Piece of cake. Or so I thought, until our day-one hike turned out to be a 13-kilometre forced march across a volcanic field strewn with boulders and scree, followed by a rope-assisted climb up the side of a dormant volcano. I was limping on the way back to the van.

I bonded with a woman from the U.K. who was on a waiting list for a hip replacement and had booked the trip with the same expectations. We both spent a lot of time at the bottom of cliffs, taking photos of the rest of the group clambering up them to get the best views.

Unfortunately, there was little time to recover because there is not a lot to do in Iceland except hike. I spent evenings icing my knee and popping ibuprofen.

Jane:

I loved our trip to Iceland! With no knee issues, I was happy to hike all day, but I felt wretched on one coastal hike, amid hundreds of puffins — even though I'm a bird lover.

That's because of the meal we had earlier in the trip. The director of the tour company kindly hosted us for dinner at a restaurant in Reykjavik famed for its traditional Icelandic delicacies.

I'll eat anything once, and I felt doubly obliged to try everything because our host was so enthusiastic about introducing me to his native cuisine.



Acquired taste: Smoked puffin, reindeer pate, hakarl (fermented Greenland shark), minke whale sashimi and fin whale cured in herbs make for a memorable meal in Iceland. *JANE MUNDY*

It tasted like stinky old cheese with an ammonia aftertaste. Not even washing it down with Brennivin, the local schnapps, helped.

A platter arrived at our table with smoked puffin, reindeer pate, hakarl (fermented Greenland shark), minke whale sashimi and fin whale cured in herbs.

I recoiled inwardly and wished there was a dog under the table.

The puffin looked like raw liver. The shark — traditionally buried in the ground for about six weeks to ferment, then hung to dry — is an acquired taste, likely acquired only by Icelanders.

It tasted like stinky old cheese with an ammonia aftertaste. Not even washing it down with Brennivin, the local schnapps, helped.

The late food guru Anthony Bourdain called it the “single worst, most disgusting and ter-

rible tasting thing” he had ever eaten. I agree.

And then when I saw the puffins on our hike, I cringed. I apologized for nibbling on one of their cousins while I took their photos.

Joanne:

Golden is a pretty little town in southeastern B.C. with lots to do when the weather co-operates. But when it's early spring and pouring cold rain non-stop, opportunities for fun and adventure dry up.

I had three days in Golden to research a newspaper story that was supposed to include at least five different experiences for

visitors.

My first day there dawned cold and overcast. I crossed my fingers as I headed to the small municipal airport for what I expected to be the highlight of my trip, my first-ever tandem skydive.

Suited up and with my heart pounding, we soared over the countryside until the pilot announced that the cloud cover prevented him from getting up high enough for a tandem jump. My adrenalin evaporated on the flight back down.

Then my bird-watching boat tour was cancelled because it was too cold and wet. Kayaking was also nixed. An ATV trip went ahead, but by the end I was shivering and caked in mud from head to toe.

Desperate for something to write about, I insisted on visiting Boo, an orphaned grizzly bear, at his 20-hectare refuge halfway up the hill at Kicking Horse Mountain Resort. What I didn't realize is that I'd have to take an open chairlift to get there.

I was soaked to the skin by the time I arrived, and then I had to get back on the lift to go to a restaurant at the top of the mountain for lunch with a resort representative. It wasn't raining there — it was snowing.

A waitress took pity on me and brought me towels to wrap myself in while I waited for my dining companion. Lunch was followed by a hot bath back in my room, which I couldn't write about either.

TRAVEL BRIEFS

Woman, 89, gets entire NZ hotel to herself

An elderly Belgian woman is being allowed to stay free of charge in a New Zealand hotel where she is the only guest. Luce Wilsens, who has stayed at the Kamana Lakehouse in Queenstown for all but one of the past 30 years, was meant to fly home to Switzerland last month. But her flight was among hundreds axed as the coronavirus pandemic sent the travel world into a tailspin. So, the inn, located in one of New Zealand's loveliest tourist destinations, decided to let her remain with three staff, including a chef and front-office manager, to see to her needs. “We knew how fragile she is, and we knew moving her would be such a big problem,” general manager Mario Sandulescu told the New Zealand Herald. The hotel is otherwise shut, but Wilsens' complimentary oasis

won't last forever. “We haven't charged her any money,” Sandulescu confirmed. “But after the lockdown we need to — it's a lifeline for us as well.” Wilsens said: “They have really spoiled me.” Immigration officials in New Zealand helped by extending her visitor's visa after a lobbying campaign. It means she will be able to celebrate her 90th birthday there.

Jamaica gears up for 'Generation C' tourists

A new breed of post-pandemic traveller will be central to rebuilding the shattered tourism industry — but only with plenty of hand-holding. Dubbed Generation C, the new breed of explorer will not be of any particular age, but will be scarred by the experience of living through a public-health emergency and will be putting safety first, said Edmund Bartlett, the tourism

minister of Jamaica. Speaking at the annual meeting of the Caribbean Tourism Organization chapter in the U.K., he said: “Generation C will be unsettled by the crisis they have lived through this year. They will need reassurance and evidence that their experience overseas will enhance their lives — not put their loved ones at risk.” He urged tourism operators to respond to the “new sensitivities” of post-pandemic tourists and predicted new standards of hygiene, sanitation and safety would, without doubt, “become the new norm.” In Jamaica, these measures will include protocols for behaviour at swimming pools, on beaches and in restaurants, Bartlett said. He added: “We as an island and as part of the global travel and tourism industry need to adapt swiftly to the requirements of this new type of traveller post-pandemic.”

Alaska now boasts world's busiest airport

It's not called the Last Frontier for nothing. But the state of Alaska suddenly finds itself at the centre of the aviation world. Its largest city, Anchorage, has handled more flights at its international airport than the world's biggest air hubs, including Hartsfield-Jackson in Atlanta, Heathrow in London and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Last weekend Ted Stevens Anchorage International (ANC) made it official, tweeting that it had become the “world's busiest airport for aircraft operations.” The airport — named after a former Alaskan senator — normally sees only a fraction of the passengers most terminals process. But it has become the darling of the cargo world — a title typically claimed by Hong Kong — since the coronavirus swept the globe and grounded most air travel. It

has even welcomed the world's largest aircraft, the Antonov An-225 Mriya, as it brought in much-needed medical gear to battle the novel coronavirus. A spokesman said: “This points to how significantly the global aviation system has changed and highlights the significance of our role in the global economy and fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.” The airport, which is described as being less than 10 hours from 90 per cent of the industrial world, was expected to process 948 arrivals and departures this week, compared to 682 at Heathrow, the Daily Telegraph reported. Freight operators dominate the skies as passenger flights have all but evaporated, data from the website FlightRadar24.com shows. Cargo remains the only “bright spot” for the aviation industry, Alexandre de Juniac, the chief executive of trade body IATA, has stated.

Andre Ramshaw