

night when the Air New Zealand jet landed in Auckland shortly after 6 a.m. Saturday, January 4, teaching me my first big lesson in international travel.

Never arrive anywhere at six in the morning unless there's no way to avoid it, or there's a good-looking member of the right sex involved. I've yet to meet anyone that attractive.

Getting up at 6 a.m. Saturday is kid's play next to arriving into a new country, clearing customs, and trying to find a place to stay at that hour. My guide listed a few hostels, but some were out of business, others weren't answering the phone and the ones that were wouldn't know if they had beds for until later. After much waiting, calling, conning and cajoling I finally convinced a backpacker hotel called the Ivanhoe to take me early.

All I had to do was get there.

After spending an hour wandering the airport trying to find the city bus stop, I got there just in time to see the bus leave. Fortunately, an airport shuttle driver offered to take me to town for the same rate as the bus so I wouldn't have to wait an additional 15 minutes for the next one. The shuttle van was so crowded the driver told me to ride in the front seat so I ran around the van, stood outside the front door and waited for the driver to open it.

And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

All the while wondering why everyone in the van was laughing.

Then I realized I had run around to the driver's side of the van and I was going to have to continue waiting for him to unlock the door until I went around to the passenger side.

How embarrassing.

By the time I finally got to the Ivanhoe, I was so tired all I wanted to do was sleep and dream about a trip filled with cultural experiences. I could hardly wait to hear all the great music that would be playing on the radio now that I'd finally escaped the evil influence of American pop, a type of music so vile a few hours of it being played really loud was enough to prompt Manuel Noriega to leave his hideout and beg for mercy (or at least a few hours of Gilligan's Island reruns "to take the edge off").

I set the alarm on my clock radio and was lulled to sleep by a local radio station having a mini-concert weekend featuring sets of five songs by the same artist. I tuned in just in time to hear "Coward of the County," "The Gambler" and "You Picked a Fine Time to Leave Me, Lucille."

I didn't know Kenny Rogers was from New Zealand, too.

I had heard American culture was everywhere, but I had no idea it was so pervasive. It may have been the first time I experienced culture shock in reverse but it wasn't the last.

The next great shock came later in the day when I was in a nearby grocery store and had to go to the bathroom. Since it wasn't plainly marked, I found a clerk and asked directions.

"Excuse me, do you have a water closet?" I asked a woman whose obvious bafflement made me wonder if I had asked the question in Swahili.

"A what?" she asked loudly.

"A men's room," I said.

More stunned silence.

"You know. A W.C., a restroom, a bathroom...."

"We don't have a bath here," she said.

As an afterthought, she added, "But we do have a toilet."