

CHAPTER TWO

Adventures in Culture Shock

"They say they're speaking English, but you can't prove it by me."
-- David Volk, in an international phone call back to the States.

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My ticket to ride

Everything I ever learned about New Zealand was a complete and utter lie. And, the sad part is, I hadn't learned that much to begin with.

Kenny Loggins and Jim Messina are not from New Zealand, the song "Brighter Days" is not the national anthem, and "Mali Ama Neva Zeland" is not Maori for "We love New Zealand, hey!" This may not be news to natives, but it came as a great shock to me -- because it meant one of my high school teachers had made it all up, and duped an unsuspecting class of ninth graders into believing it just so they could win Field Day, my high school's annual version of the Olympics.

In keeping with the Olympic theme, each class in the small, cross-shaped, white-flight school I attended in Southwest Florida picked a country to represent, and then dressed in native costumes, marched around a track shouting clever slogans during the opening ceremonies, and sang a song from the chosen country. In 1979 my class chose New Zealand, even though no one knew anything about the island nation. At least my little sister's class was smart enough to pick Israel, so they could rely on her supposed expertise as class Jew. Unfortunately, we did not have a single Maori or Kiwi in our class. This may have worked to our benefit, however, because no one else in the school knew anything about New Zealand, either. So my teacher simply made it up as he went along.

A former friend of mine told me this just months before I left the country. I call him a former friend because I did not want this piece of information, but he told me anyway. He also told me one of our fellow classmates was the son of the director of an infamous X-rated movie, but that's another story.

As a result of his insisting on telling me about the 17 year-old deception, I found myself worrying I would really, really like the country but wouldn't know how to tell any of the locals how much I enjoyed it.

Sure, I knew New Zealanders supposedly spoke English and liked bland food, but that was it. Although I'd spent three weeks reading my guidebook from cover-to-cover, I didn't have any idea where I was going to stay my first night, or how I was going to get around. And I was still thinking about where I was going to spend the

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."