
You meet (and see) interesting people en route to the Middle East, as well as when you arrive

Contributed by Bill Webb
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It is Tuesday (Sept. 24), and my ecumenical tour group has completed upwards of two days of travel to reach the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. As I write, we are en route to our first stop in the northwestern corner of the nation.

Already, this visit has been a reminder that you see a wide diversity of travelers on such a trip. My friend, colleague and editor (Virginia's Religious Herald) Jim White, a native Missourian and Baptist worker known to many in the Kansas City area for his long years of service there, rendezvoused with me in New York's JFK, where we traveled together via flight sponsor Turkish Air to Istanbul, Turkey, en route to Jordan's capital of Amman.

I left my home in the early hours last Sunday (Sept. 22) and finally lay down my head for a brief night's rest around 3 a.m. on Tuesday. Eastward travel, with its particular change in time zones makes getting there seem like a long time.

Here's a sampling of people we met before we reached our travel destination:

Jim and I were checking in for our nearly-midnight flight out of JFK when he struck up a conversation with a young woman who — having just finished her university degree — was bringing three weeks of travel literally across America to an end. She was on her way back home to Serbia.

She was pleasant and had enjoyed her stay in the States but admitted she had really missed being away from home and particularly missed her mother. Her mother had called her by phone more than once every day while she was traveling. She had particularly liked visiting Las Vegas, she said, in part because she had spotted a marquis featuring shows by one of her favorite recording artists.

She paused to talk with another passenger walking by. After they had talked, she said he, too, was Serbian and she was just meeting him for the first time. How did she know they shared the same home country? She had spotted the red cover of his Serbian passport and inquired.

One thing international travelers enjoy is finding someone from home when they are both in a strange place, in this case the international terminal of a New York City airport, extremely busy even late on a Sunday night.

Jim and I were fortunate to land exit-row/bulkhead seats on our nine-hour flight to Istanbul. We sat next to a tall, quiet person who started out catching a few winks despite the hustle and bustle of the cabin service and a meal within the first two-three hours of our flight. By the time we left the runway, it already was 7 a.m. in Istanbul.

We learned later in the flight that our companion, a 6-9 African-American, was Keyon Carter, a Florida native who secured a degree from Old Dominion University in Virginia just a couple of year earlier. He also, by the way, had starred on the university's basketball team, which had been very successful during his tenure there.

Since then, Keyon has been playing basketball professionally in Europe. Now he plays for the national team in Georgia, the former Soviet republic. An affable young man, he has enjoyed success in Europe and enjoys seeing new places and learning about them in his international career.

Fellow passengers don't necessarily share names in such travel encounters. I asked for his name so that Jim and I might check the European basketball website and follow his team's (and his) progress. Sure enough, I found him online and noted he is a prolific scorer and is well regarded in the league.

I liked this young man, in part because he acknowledged the contribution his alma mater had made in his life by providing him a quality education while he was a scholarship athlete. He seemed pretty well grounded to me.

When we finally boarded our flight from Istanbul to Amman, Jordan, I found myself sitting between Chris Tiegreen, one of the press tour participants, and a young mother from California by way of her native Israel. She was on her way back to Israel to attend her brother's wedding.

Her husband and three children (ages 15, 10 and 5, if I recall correctly) stayed back in California. She wished they could have gone with her — and so do they — so she was very talkative about her young family. Her husband's work had taken them to California, and she said the family, to a person, loved living there.

Periodically, the family visits her husband's family in New York and her kin in Israel. Other extended family members are scattered across the United States and overseas. It sounded like this family worked hard to maintain valued family relationships.

A Serb, an American playing out his dream of international basketball and an Israeli mother raising her family in California were an interesting sample. Diversity, even in getting to important destinations, is interesting, enjoyable and valuable.

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