

From Riyadh to Spain

Monday, 31 October 2005

I had a conference in Castellon, Spain on Oct 27-28, 2005. Oct 26 was the last day of classes. I did not want to cancel Wednesday's classes. So I needed to fly Wed night and arrive in Castellon Thursday morning to be able to attend the sessions. (1) I had a hard time finding an airline that leaves Wed night. All airlines leave Oct 26 (Tuesday night). (2) Another problem was that there were no direct flights to Spain, and few connections to Valencia. I had to fly to a City in Europe. I checked flight to London, Frankfurt, Zurich, Paris and the problem was finding a connection flight to Valencia. All connections were either to Madrid or Barcelona. Castellon is about 2:300 hours from Barcelona and I hour from Valencia. (3) I also had trouble finding a return flight on Oct 30 or 31. If I fly to Barcelona, I will arrive in the evening or late afternoon. I would be tired and would want to take a nap as I would be traveling the whole night and changing planes and taking the train during the day. I searched the internet for few days in a row. I found that Alitalia flies from Rome and Milan to Valencia. The flight leaves around 9 a.m. That was perfect timing as the train ride from Valencia is only one hour and I will arrive in Valencia around noon. I checked the internet for flights to Rome from Jedda, Riyadh, Dammam, Bahrain, Dubai, Abu Dhabi , but in vain. I found a flight from Jedda to Rome on Saudi but no return flight. I called Saudia and the agent said there were no return flight from Rome. Saudia makes several stops in Europe and those change from week to week. I went to my travel agent and when he checked, he told me that the return flight can be from Milan to Jeddah rather than Rome. I was so happy. I had to buy the Italy-Spain ticket right away as it was a special fare. However, the return flight from Valencia was 6:30 a.m. and my connection flight from Milan was 2:30 p.m and I arrive in Jeddah 8:45 p.m. but the return flight was November 1 (Ramdan 29). I was a sad because I wanted to be back Ramdan 27 to do Omra. Anyway, I had no other choice. I had another flight to Korea on November 3 (Eid day). My flight on Singapore Airlines was from Jeddah. So I arrange d with my sister who lives in Jeddah to stay with her for 36 hours, after which she can go to Taif to celebrate Eid with her kid. I bought the ticket to Spain and Korea

and was thinking of packing clothes for both trips(warn weather in Spain and cold weather in Korea) as I will not be returning to Riyadh in between flight to re-pack.

Monday, Oct 24, I went to pick up my glasses. When I got home around 12 midnight, I found a message on my answering machine from the travel agent. Saudia has changed the flight departure time from Milan to 7:55 a.m. this means that I will not make it as my flight to Milan from Valencia is 6:30 a.m. I called immediately and asked him to change the Valencia-Milan sector the day before. He did. He told me that I'll arrive in Jedda 8:30 p.m. When I asked why he said that the plane stops in Rome as well. I asked about the other stops but he did not know. I called Saudia for clarification. The agent said the plain stops in Riyadh before it continues to Jedda. He said it stops in Riyadh. This way I will be able to go back to Riyadh to rest and change clothes for my next trip to Korea. I had to make sure I could find a flight from Riyadh to Jedda on November 3. I found one. The following morning, I called my travel agent from work but there was no answer. I needed to re-issue the ticket and get a refund for the Riyadh - Jedda portion.

I went to my uncle's for Ramadan dinner Tuesday instead of Wed evening. Around 8:30p.m. I went home. I visited the travel agent in the evening. He affixed stickers with the new departure dates and said he could not re-issue the ticker as Saudi charges a 200-riyal penalty. He added that Saudia changed the flight departure time from Milan to 8:55 a.m. My ticket remained as is. I called my sister to cancel. I went on the internet to book a hotel in Milan, to check the weather and prayer times. I had to go to bed to be able to wake up for Suhur.

On wed, I taught 3 hrs and finished around noon. I was planning to go home right away to pack, take a nap and cook dinner. As soon as got to my office, students came over and were asking me questions. One student was asking me questions until 1:35 p.m. I missed the bus. I took a taxi and went home. I prayed and took a nap. I was up 4 p.m. and started to pack. I did not have time to cook, so I just fixed some foul medames and made some soup. After maghreb prayer, I finished my packing. At 7 p.m. the driver came to take me to the airport.

Check in and immigration procedures went smoothly. I sat and worked on my laptop sipping my soft drink. Soon we took off and then landed in jedda for our first stop. Around 1 a.m we left jedda for Rome. I took a nap for about an hour. One Saudi guy sitting in the row in front of me was talking and laughing in a loud voice. I could not sleep and did not know what to do. Despite that, everything went fine and soon we landed in Rome. Before we landed I ate some dates for suhur.

I got to the gate around 5 a.m. and my connection was at 9 a.m. Counters (even the transfer counter), shops and restaurant were closed. Very few people were in the airport.

I tried to sleep on one of the benches, but could not. The seats had arm-rests. I found 2 seats forming a right angle. I put my head and upper part on one and my legs and lower part on the other and tried to rest. Soon they were calling people to go to their gates and it was difficult to sleep.

After I got my boarding pass, we boarded and with difficulty I tried to get some sleep. We arrived in Valencia at 11 a.m. I waited for my luggage by the conveyer belt which soon stopped but it did not arrive. I told the luggage agent and he took me to another conveyer belt for international travels where I found my bag.

I went to the information desk and asked her to book a hotel next to the airport and asked how to get to the train station. She said she does not book hotels and asked me to go to the Tourist Info desk. I did. I took a taxi to the train station (15 euros). Went inside the train station bought a ticket for 3:50 euros and was just in time for the train. I got on and we left for Castellon 12:20 p.m. On both sides, orange orchards stretching in straight rows as far as anyone could imagine. They bore more oranges than leave. I was thinking how they would pick that enormous amount of oranges. The train made a stop every 5 or 10 minutes loading and unloading people.

An elderly lady sat next to me. Soon she started to talk to me in Spanish. She asked where I was going to get off, how I could travel without knowing Spanish, whether I was having relatives or friends. I took the Hotel address from my pack and showed it to her. She

told me that I should get off the last stop and that I need to take a taxi. When we got off, she asked me to follow her. Soon she was talking to an elderly man who turned out to be her husband. They asked me to follow them. Soon they opened the car trunk and put my luggage in. We were driving along the streets of the city. They were afraid I was going to get lost as building numbers are not written and thought it will be difficult for me to recognize the hotel. Soon they stopped and unloaded my luggage. The lady kissed me good bye and I gave her my business card. That was a warm welcome to Castellon.

After I checked into the hotel, I had to use the hotel internet (5 euros for 15 minutes) to find the building where the conference was to be held as I forgot the address I had. The receptionist called a taxi that took me to the Jaume I University.

It was not difficult to find the Economics Building. However it was difficult to find the registration area and meeting rooms. When I found the registration desk, nobody was there. The meeting rooms were closed and nobody was in the whole floor. It was 3:00p.m I checked the conference program on the wall and found that the lunch break was from 2-4 p.m. I forgot all about the siesta time that people in Spain take. I made a mistake by not examining the program carefully. I sat on the couch and closed my eyes. Soon they arrived and Sara and Fernando gave me my conference bag. I asked for a complementary proceedings and they gave me one. Soon I took the bus back to the hotel. Although I showed the driver the hotel address, he let me off far away and pointed to the direction where the hotel is. I walked and walked through the narrow alleys and had to ask several people before I could find the hotel.

I was in my room waiting for the sun set. According to the Castellon prayer times that I printed from the Saudi Awkaf Ministry website, sunset time was 6:07. As I looked through the window, it was still sunny. I waited for about an hour before I started to see the twilight. I did not know how to check the iftar time. I went to the Hotel restaurant around 7 p.m. and thought I would order food and by the time they serve it to me it will be 7:30. To my surprise nobody was there, no waiters, and no diners. I asked the receptionist and he told me the restaurant is closed and it re-opens

at 9 p.m. I told her I needed to eat right away, she said I could eat in the coffee shop. The waitress there did not know English. The receptionist told me that they have cold sandwiched. Since I needed something a hot meal, I asked her to recommend a restaurant outside the hotel. She gave me directions to a restaurant and gave me a map. I followed the directions but could not find the restaurant nor any other restaurant. There were coffee shops that served drinks and pastry. As I walked, I came to an avenue with cafes and saw a food sign. I sat down and asked the waitress who could not speak English for the menu. She got me a menu in Spanish and I picked dish by looking at the pictures (shrimp Paella). I asked if they have soup and she said "No". I asked her to bring me coffee after the meal, but soon another waitress brought my coffee. Anyway it was good to drink warm coffee and eat some dates while waiting for the food.

My flight from Valencia to Milan, Italy was 6:30 a.m. Monday October 31. I had to stay over in Valencia the day before. I booked a hotel next to the airport. The information desk told me it was 300 meters away. I thought it would be able to walk to the airport in case there is no taxi. When I arrived at the hotel I found out that it was next to a highway and a bridge. I asked the receptionist how I could get to the airport. He said I had to walk over the pedestrian bridge, cross the highway, and walk through the airport parking lot. I went around the hotel, walked along the pedestrian bridge, found that there is a short wall, jumped over it, crossed the highway but found out it was too long to walk with luggage. I tried to find a way to go over the bridge that leads to the airport directly but the entrance was far. There was a deep dig out and a fence around it. There was no way to walk to the highway from the front of the hotel. I thought the solution is to book a taxi. Another problem was finding a restaurant where I could break my fast. I walked in the streets around the hotel but they were closed. I wanted to go downtown Valencia and waited for the bus until 4:45 p.m., but there seemed to be no bus. So I went to look for a restaurant where I could break my fast but everything was shutdown. So I went back, sat in the garden and read Koran until sunset (6:07). I asked the receptionist to order a pizza for me. He called and they told him the earliest delivery would be 8:15 p.m. I had some dates and water. Then went down the main street where I looked at some souvenir shops (one euro stores). On the way back I had a good dinner at

the Chinese restaurant across the street from the hotel. Before I went to my room I asked the receptionist to give me a wake-up call at 4 a.m. and book a cab for 4:30. I was up on time, took a shower and changed clothes, checked out but the cab was not there. The receptionist booked a cab then (4:25) instead of having it ready. The cab arrived at 4:50 When I got to airport at 5 a.m. there was a long queue.

The check in procedures went smooth and I headed towards immigration and check in. There were few people a head of me. But the X-ray machine was closed and the officers were chatting. We impatiently waited for half an hour until it was finally open. The flight was 30 minutes late and we took off an hour later to scheduled.

Shortly before we arrived at Malpensa Airport, the pilot told us that it is foggy in Milan and asked that we shut off all electronic devices. When we arrived I could not see the planes, trucks and busses. We landed safely but the visibility was very low. The farthest I could see was 20 meters. I could see only shadows of the near planes but could not see the farther ones at all.

At Malpensa Airport, I tried to book a hotel. The agent quickly booked a family hotel near the airport.

I could not confirm my Milan-Jedda flight with Saudia from Spain as Saudia has no Office there. At Malpensa Airport I went to the Saudia office on the 3rd floor to reconfirm my reservation but it was closed. I went to the Tourist Office in the Piazza Duomo and she gave me their address and a telephone number (32 Piazza Republica). I took the metro to Piazza Republica. I followed the numbers on the buildings and the highest was 27. I walked up and down the street and asked several people but in vain. Some people gave me the wrong directions and some did not know. So I went back to Piazza Duomo.

When I went out of the underground in Piazza Duomo, I tried to locate Gritti Hotel where I stayed in May 2004 when I went to the ABC Conference 2004 in Milan. I could not remember in which street it was. I walked up and down 3 or four streets.

I stayed at the family hotel which is 10 minutes away from Malpensa Airport. The room is too small and there is no elevator. The door opens with an old-fashioned key. There is no faucet in the sink. You have to press 2 handles in the floor with your foot for the water to come down. It was difficult to wash for salat. While washing one foot it is difficult to press the handle with the other. I had to put my leg down fill a glass, wash it, put it down again and fill the glass and do the same with left foot.

I took the train to Garibaldi. There was no ticket machine in the train station and nowhere to buy a ticket. I asked some teenagers and they did not know. I went on the train and was planning to get off at the next stop (Gallarti) to buy a ticket. Soon the conductor came and asked me for the ticket. I was expecting him to fine me for not having a ticket. I told him I was new and did not know where to buy a ticket. He sold me a ticket to Milan Garibaldi (like a receipt) a couple of stops later another conductor boarded the train and asked for my ticket. When I handed him the two yellow receipts he stared at them and then gave them back to me. Garibaldi station was a mess. All excavations and remodelling. I could not find the metro stop so I asked and the girl was kind enough to direct me.

I am at Malpensa Airport waiting to depart. It is foggy and wet outside. I hope there will be no delays.