

4 Liddle Numbers...

Credit is King, but cash still rules. Mental Note to self :

- When planning an Overseas trip, make sure the Credit card PIN is known B E F O R E leaving for a far off destination where the mail delivery is unreliable, and fluent knowledge of the language is Non-Existent !

It appears that I underestimated exactly how much of a cash economy South America really is. After all, most advice from back home was that Visa can be used everywhere. Plus I never really used my Credit Card PIN anyway. So when they came - Pffff ! Into the circular filing cabinet. I thought I was set, but Man, What a surprise... Like Sands through the Hour Glass, so were the levels of my cash reserves. Don't get me wrong, I was never in trouble of actually starving, not having a place to stay, or not being able to visit places or do funky activities. It's just that cash can be REALLY useful from time to time.

Like I said, I was still able to do stuff like : Go to a musical of The Adventures of The Beagle illustrating Darwin's emotional struggle with Fitzroy as he began his journal documenting The Origin of Species when Fitzroy wanted definitive proof of the scriptures. I was also able to do a 4x4 trek to The Hidden Lake 30-40 kilometres out of town along the R3 and even Scuba Dive in Ushuaia Bay and go Horse Riding for the first time in plenty of years (The horse I had was really good too until I spooked it trying to remove my day pack for photographs). I was able to eat a funky restaurant, go to supermarkets (where you have to pack your own bags and get the price of fruit and vegies from the guys at the fruit section - I got some interesting looks and sighs of frustrations from the check-out people) I was even able to my get digital images converted to CD. All those were possible as long as the vendor accepted VISA.

Having NO cash could have meant I was not able to do some things like – Go to the National Park and walk to the border of Chile and, fingers crossed, get a photo standing BEHIND the no trespassing sign. I would not have been able to enjoy those Ushuaia Theme Park Rides, check out the 'Night Life' (and they have short nights here) or even do something fairly useful like, Leave The Country. Airport taxes, if not included in the air ticket, ALL require cash ! They don't take credit cards. Doh ! Double Doh !

I never really ran out of cash money, but it was getting close there for a while and a liddle bit worrisome over this way. On a comparative scale, I was about two 3 letter words away using a Boggle Timer from starting to look for work. There seems to be plenty here (for me ??) as maybe an English Teacher. How ironic would THAT have been ?? But like Macguiver, it came just in the nick of time... It's amazing the relief you get when you know you have a renewable source of funds.

But before that feeling finally came, it took quite a while to organize it.

BEFORE I left Quito – which seems like an AGE ago now, I rang up the National Bank Hotline in Australia to order a NEW credit Card to get a new PIN for my current credit card. As I was talking to the fella in Australia, the cost of the call was ticking over like the 'speedo of death' of a parachuting altimeter as you descend. I'm sure I could have used the meter as a cooling fan – if it wasn't a digital indicator. Try waiting through the numerous voice prompts of the IVR's when all you want is someone to talk to. The first \$1-30 – 2-00 is : "if you would like account balances press 1... If you would like ... Press 2 etc. etc" It takes an age and a half before you eventually get through to the option where they say "If you would like to talk to an operator, please hold the line ..." Grrr !

So after about \$12-00, the new PIN was on it's way. I could get the folks to e-mail it to me and all would be set. But then a thought struck me (don't be too surprised back there) a new PIN probably ONLY works on a NEW card; Not the current card. Faaaarr Out Brussel Sprout ! A new PIN needs a new card. For me to use the new PIN, I'd also need the new card with me. In South America !!! Fruit ! There's ALWAYS something else !

But really, that shouldn't be too difficult (he says with tongue planted firmly in cheek after the fact...)

After I arrived in Ushuaia and just BEFORE I left for Antarctica (like about 20minutes) I got in touch with the bank in Australia via their secure e-mail. (Lucky I set THAT up before leaving home) I asked if they could send me a new card and PIN to The Hostel I was staying at in Ushuaia so it could be ready when I returned. They needed a permanent address and I figured that would be a good one and I had booked a couple of extra nights on my return anyway. 2 weeks to order a new card and get it to me with all the banks official grunt and processes and channels to push things through and get it here so I could choof to my next destination Pffft ! Don't count on it. The bank wasn't all that helpful at all. They replied to my e-mail on the 29th (prompt I give that) while I was in Antarctica saying they couldn't do it and to get in touch with the handy toll free help line back in Australia. They just didn't seem to get the point. I was going to Antarctica, so was un-contactable. If the cash reserves were getting low now, NO toll free number anywhere (especially from South America to Australia) was going to be free if you had to go to a Telefonica café to make the call. Geez ! So much for an International Bank, eh !

So Good Onya ! I needed another method of getting some cash.

I was able to bounce an e-mail to the folks back home saying that when the new card arrived, to send it secure express post to Ushuaia. Well, it was secure alright. So secure that even I couldn't get access to it. It took about 14 – 16 days to get to The Hostel. So the card arrived here in Ushuaia around the 18th of December. 10 or so days after I arrived back from Antarctica. But, the PIN was corrupted so another one had to be ordered and sent. The second one was meant to be delivered 'Door – To – Door' to the Hostel in South America within 4 working days. Who knows what days they work in South America but waiting for a letter in Ushuaia is a bit like watching a kettle boil – you know, it never seems to happen. And no comments that they were using 'Brendan Working Days' as their delivery timetable either ! That one took about 8 days to get here.

A few people had also mentioned I should be able to go into ANY bank and just grab some cash from the teller without using a PIN. After trying pretty much all three or four banks here in Ushuaia, all of them suggested that I talk to Buenos Aires or The National Bank. Fat chance considering the help – or lack of it – they'd already given me. On top of that, many if not all suggested I use the ATM down the street. That would have been fine; if I had a PIN to use in the machine in the first place! Doh ! Talk about frustrating.

So apart from the Banks being little or NO help in the matter (blood suckers) and the South American mail system seeming to be just as unreliable (but at least they delivered) I expect you'll get your post cards etc. maybe this time 2007, or 9.

I really have to put in a pretty big thanks to the folks, The Harpers and Darren back home for helping to get the new card and PIN to me. I'm sure it stressed them a bit. Over here, it was beginning to become a pain in the bum. But then again, maybe I should have had all that PIN stuff sorted out PRIOR to travelling. I never seemed to have the need at home, and so figured the same here. Nada ! It's just not the same as going to Portsea anymore...

So, there has been quite a bit of waiting in Ushuaia to make sure I can get access to cash to continue the trip. But I have been fairly fortunate to have been able to spend time here and get to know some people and places a bit better than to use it as a standard drop off point for other things. I think I managed to do most touristy adventure things while I was here and was beginning to know the folks in All Patagonia – The booking agents for all these gigs. I was running out of things to do but Ushuaia was revealing itself a bit each day. And that was a good thing. I was able to mix it with the locals for The Rugby 7's Fin Del Mundo and have a bit of Cultural Exchange. Some of the locals can now fluently use the term 'white maggot', but not always in reference to the umpire. Context is important in ALL languages I've discovered. On top of that, I was invited to share Christmas with the family in The Hostel. That was pretty special too.

During this trip I really wanted to see how people in South America lived in their day-to-day lives. So by spending a week or several in Ushuaia, waiting for that bloody card and PIN, I got that opportunity. I think I just expected that part of the trip to be while travelling from one place to another, not necessarily by being stationary in one town - At The End of The World.

Take it easy, eh !

See Ya !

Brendan