

Travelling in Style

Vanderbilt and Villeneuve set the standard

August 2000

Villeneuve has been waiting all his life for something just like this. It didn't start out all that well, though: too many trips to the vet, being prodded and poked, but finally mummy had been relieved of sufficient funds that the Travel Papers were issued and all was considered OK for the voyage to proceed.

Because of imaginative bureaucracy somewhere in the EU (no points for guessing where), the travel permit, issued on August 7 could only last to August 9, so no time to dither. The flight was due to depart on August 8.

Only a chance phone call late morning on Aug 7 by JP to the airline (about the cost of excess baggage and how much Australian wine could be brought into the EU at one go) revealed the fact that the August 8 flight had been cancelled. The choice was either that day - time to be announced - or August 10, which was too late for the boys to travel. The news was not well received by an already nervous and fretting mother!

So foregoing what would certainly have been an excellent dinner at the Finger Wharf, the decision was taken to leave as soon as it was known when - and whether - the flight was leaving that afternoon. One small glitch: the airline insisted that the boys travel in the hold. Horreur! Not a chance, JP insisted: there was but one objective of the trip from Paris to Sydney, and that was to bring back the cats. This airline was selected only because they would allow them to travel in the cabin. Oh no, said the airline: the people in Paris who told you that you could travel from Sydney with cats in the cabin were mistaken. There are two solutions insisted JP. One: they travel with us, and you change your rules, or two they travel with us and you refund us the price of two return tickets. But it is illegal, retorted the manager.

Against what law, demanded JP. Australian Quarantine won't allow it. Oh yes they will; ring this person at AQIS who will tell you they have no objections. Oh, but you can't take the cats into Colombo, he said. Then we'll stay on the plane with them. That's illegal. Inconvenient for you, perhaps, but illegal no. Oh alright, then: you can take them on board, but beware, the police will not let you into Sydney airport with animals unless they are guide dogs. Reflecting on Villeneuve's colourings, and his not inconsiderable accomplishments in fetching things, this was considered for a moment, but it seemed worthwhile pulling some strings, just to make sure. The lady at AQIS said she thought it unlikely that the police would object, but couldn't guarantee, as they may have changed the rules recently. It was decided to pull strings if possible, so

apologies to all those of you who received a frantic and garbled phone call last Monday afternoon.

By this time it was 3.00pm, the airline had indicated that the flight would leave sometime between 7.00 and 8.30. In view of the potential obstacles, it was decided to give plenty of time to win whatever battles were presented to us, so we departed immediately. Apologies to Tom and Aynur for leaving the flat in a mess, and not even emptying their litter tray, but it was not worth risking even the remotest possibility that they would be stuck in the hold.

The lady at the AOM check-in was as sweet as. She said the flight was only two thirds full, so she could allocate seats for the cats, and where did we think was best for them. A window? Certainly, so you will have three seats between the four of you. Then to get through passport control. A large family on their way back to Greece presented an excellent potential camouflage for two cat cages, but then a shrill voice called out: "Oh look! Two little cats!" It had to be a police-woman. Everybody turned to stare. "And the airline will let them in the cabin? I must say I'm surprised, but really they'll be a lot less trouble than small children. They're adorable! Have a good flight!"

They were passed around the security scanner, like keys, and everybody was amused. Then of course we had to settle down to a three hour wait for the plane. The only thing that really needs to be said here is that Gate Lounge 56 is now covered in yellow cat hair. Under the seats, then over the seats, and then: oh look - some more seats to climb over! What fun!

Although there was a separate cage for each cat, when it was time to board the plane, both made it clear that they preferred to travel together. The steward on



board asked helpfully if there was anything we would be needing, such as spare bedding, cat food and so on. He made all four of us feel very welcome. About four hours into the first leg of the flight, it became evident that a change of bedding was called for. Having an empty cage made this reasonably simple, but it was impossible to say whose bladder was empty, and whose, therefore, was still full. Parenthood! Don't you just love it?



The crew were insistent that we all disembark at Colombo. This was alright, although Vanderbilt was very distressed at travelling in a crowded bus to the terminal with what could only have been hoi-polloi. And what exactly did we think we were doing in a place that doesn't even have an airbridge! The problem came when the Sri Lankan police informed us that we had broken the law by bringing cats into the country. JP explained in his inimitable way that we had merely followed instructions, and that it would be a lot simpler for them if they just let us back on the plane, which they did. Gasp!



For the second leg, Villeneuve sat quietly on the centre seat, and Vanderbilt sat on mummy's lap. All the children - especially one little girl called Oceanne (feminine of ocean) on the flight were enchanted by *les deux petits chats*, and the other passengers impressed at how obviously well brought up they were (!) Oceanne's mother paid a number of visits, and was curious as to what they were eating (turkey, as it

happened). The man in the seat in front did a double-take when he saw Villeneuve watching the movie over his shoulder, and Vanderbilt at one point decided it was time he checked that everybody had stowed their baggage correctly under the seat in front of them.



The only real drama came about two hours before we reached Paris, and we discovered that it was Villeneuve who still had the full bladder. Pride and modesty were never the two qualities thought most outstanding in Villen, but he Would Not relieve himself in public, or in the cage on the clean bedding. Finally, in desperation, and no doubt quite a lot of pain, he concluded that mummy's lap was the safest place for it. Thank you Villeneuve. Vanderbilt nearly wet himself laughing.

No complications were expected in Paris, and none were encountered. Customs were mildly irritated to have two people come through the Goods To Declare gate. JP explained that we had twelve bottles of Australian wine, and they scoffed appropriately at the idea that these could have an average value of 100 francs (\$25) One of them, of course is a 15 year old Grange, and there was a Pyrus or two and some aged Lindemans vintage reds, but no matter. Oh and two cats. Do you have papers for them? Ah yes, fine *au revoir, bon journée*.

And so into the cab and home....which is a building site still. Vanderbilt thinks the neo-gothic is just dreadful, but Villeneuve is a young cat again in his adventure wonderland, with lots of tradesmen, with interesting toolboxes, and lots of dust to leave paw prints all over everything.

Three days later, it seems as if they've lived here all their lives, and don't even cringe at the new and unfamiliar noises around. The décor will improve with time, and there will even be some stylish rugs, if not the wall-to-wall to which they are accustomed. The cuisine hasn't improved much, but at least mother is there to field complaints...