

"Why did I come to Miami? I came here because I wanted to be here for history. The trouble is, the readers of the Birmingham Mail are gunna get my version of history, and I'm just a little bit pissed."

Adam Smith, aka Steve Zacharanda, November 5, 2008

Going Places - Eventually

Manchester Airport international departures lounge was deserted. I breathed a sigh of relief. 'Great, no queues,' I thought. The middle-aged receptionist at the American Airlines counter looked bored. I could help her with that. "Hi. Do you know when the flight to Miami is boarding?" She looked at me as if I was mad.

"Miami? Have you got the right time? There are no afternoon flights to America from this airport, so either you've missed it or it's tomorrow morning. Let's have a look at your ticket, love." I pulled a screwed up e-mail confirmation out of my pocket and handed it to her. She looked at it. Looked at it again. Then looked at me, at the ticket, and then at me again: "Wrong airport, love."

"What do you mean, wrong airport?" I replied as a sick feeling rose from my stomach into my throat. "You're out by about 2,000 miles, this flight is booked from Manchester, New England, not England," she said with an amused smile.

I couldn't help but yelp "for fuck's sake," as I completed a kind of deflated, backwards pirouette. I was going to apologise for my bad language but I had more important things to worry about. She added: "Perhaps you didn't look properly when you booked online. I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do. Can you leave the desk please?" Then with no sympathy or trace of human feeling she did an about turn and walked into the back office.

How could I have been so stupid? Booking the wrong bloody Manchester. What an idiot. Everyone I knew would think I was the biggest fool to walk the earth; I thought the dream was over. Barack Obama would have to become the 44th President of the United States of America without my help.

I sat down and thought about how I'd got into this situation. Helping Obama become the first Afro-Caribbean President of America was my dream, my obsession. I'd seen his electrifying speech in 2004 after the Democrats lost to George Bush and followed his progress ever since. After reading his autobiography *Notes from my Father* I became mesmerised at the thought of him mounting a successful campaign - if he won it would be without doubt one of the biggest historical moments of my lifetime.

I was delighted when he announced his candidacy in 2007, and over the next year stories about his campaign grew and grew in the British media. One night when I was drunk on a bus in Smethwick, reading one of many articles on his campaign, I had a brilliant idea. Why don't I go over and volunteer for him? The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. I knew it would be a generation defining moment and I wanted to be part of it. Britain's biggest political moment happened when I was 21 and I totally missed it, as I was mostly stoned for Blair's 1997 landslide. This time I was determined to have a front row to history.

All of this was before Obama had even beaten Hilary Clinton in the Primaries, of course. I knew that it'd be hard to save the money up to go to America as well, as I'd never saved up any respectable amount of money in my life. However, like many people from Perry Barr I was more engaged in this American election than any British one. Having grown up in inner city Birmingham I've always reviled racism, so when I saw Obama's unbelievable speech on race I became even more determined to volunteer for him.

I told everyone I was going over to help, to put pressure on myself and prevent me from doing the sensible thing and staying at home. I booked the time off work months before, and even the prospect of redundancy from The Birmingham Mail didn't deter me from preparing to spend a load of cash during three weeks in America. No faceless, corporate decision would stop me having a life-changing experience!

More importantly, I was 'dialled in' with the Obama campaign and had been for nearly eight months. I'd given a Goggle-eye (my ill-fated lads magazine that folded after one edition) 'You're Officially Fit' card to Erika Dunlap, Miss America 2004, during a press trip to Nashville in December 2007. Less than two months later I received an e-mail from her asking if I'd show her around London. My first feeling was elation, but this was soon replaced by terror. How could a penniless hack like me entertain an international A-grade lady like her?

Nonetheless, the big day arrived and I borrowed £150 off a mate - thanks Doug - and blagged two gold tourist cards from the London Tourist Board, saying I was doing a travel feature for the Birmingham Mail ('How many London Tourist Attractions can two Brummies see within 48 Hours?'). After jumping on the train to London I decided to phone the MP Tom Watson, an old mate of mine, from the station:

"Alright Tom, I need a favour."

"Money?"

"Nah, I'm meeting Miss America 2004 and wondered if you could take us round the Commons?"

"Ok, when? What date? I'll put it in the diary."

"In about half an hour"

"Fucking hell Adam, you do realise I'm a Cabinet minister and running the country?!"

"Go on mate, you know you want to."

I asked her to pretend she was on a mercy mission to talk about women's rights in Afghanistan and the great man got her and a friend VIP access to the House of Commons, to the Cabinet Office and even a lift in a ministerial car. We ended up drinking champagne in Soho, an interesting contrast with the holes in my shoes and the shrapnel in my pocket. Meanwhile Tom had spent much of the day telling the two American beauties what a sharp political mind I had.

It's probably safe to say that Miss America had an amazing time in London. Sadly I never got a chance to try it on with her, but maybe that was just as well. It turned out she was happily married, as was her mate, but I was just happy I'd done a good turn for a fellow traveller - despite loads of texts from friends asking 'Have you got the ride yet?'. In a beautiful twist of karma, however, one of her best friends from Florida - Nate Jenkins - was a big cheese in Obama's campaign. And after Miss America explained that I was a political player with a bit of clout in Westminster, we corresponded on Facebook and I sent him a CV. He told me to keep an eye on the Florida election races and promised to get me 'dialled in' to the campaign when I made it over...

A month before polling day I had no money and had all but given up on my dream. That was, until the bank forced my hand by giving me 24 hours notice that my £500 overdraft would be withdrawn. Naturally I hotfooted down to HSBC, withdraw everything I could, and booked my flight.

Then, whilst admonishing myself in a deserted international departures lounge, pulling at my hair and looking deranged, I remembered I hadn't booked the ticket online. I'd walked across the road from the bank to the Going Places travel agency in Sutton Coldfield and paid cash.

The nice but dim assistant looked through several flights to Miami and was amazed to find a flight from Manchester for £250. I remember being surprised by how cheap it was - everywhere else I'd tried was over £500 - and so I handed over the cash there and then.

That meant it couldn't have been my fault, it had to be 'Going Places'. My spirits rose. I looked for their sign in the airport, but to no avail, so I sat down and gave it some thought. I realised I had to get them to give me a replacement flight, and for no extra cost. I had less than £5 credit on my pay-as-you-go mobile so I couldn't afford to spend ages on hold on a customer services line. Luckily I had my works laptop with me and managed to track down a cheap landline to phone. I wanted to get through to Sutton Coldfield office. I wanted to speak to the idiot who had got me into this trouble.

Needless to say that was impossible and I had a nervous five minutes wasting credit on hold on a national Going Places number. I explained the situation to a woman in a call centre and she promised to get someone to phone me back. All I could do is sit and wait it out; after counting my money three times, I decided not to buy a coffee. Stuck for something to do, I phoned my friend Bod. Hearing him laugh down the phone made me feel a lot better. In fact, I wouldn't even have made it to Manchester without Bod. He'd lent me £100 and dropped me at New Street train station earlier that day.

Matthew Boddington, old friend, Birmingham.

When the phone rang I knew it would be Adam asking for money. He wanted £100 to go to America with. When I asked him how much he'd raised himself he said £100. I said: "You'll have £200 when I give you my £100?" He hesitated and said, nope, he'd only have £100. My £100. I thought he was fucking nuts to go to America with £100 but he seemed desperate so I gave it to him. I dropped him off at New Street and he ran into the station and waved me goodbye. I had to beep him to remind him he'd left his piece of shit suitcase in my car.

(Facebook status: Steve Zacharanda is sitting in the airport seeing the funny side of how going places booked him a flight from the wrong MANCHESTER!! He is about to get EVIL!!)

After ten minutes the phone rang. I was calm; I knew I couldn't blow my top because I'd worked in a call centre myself and knew how to speak to people bored out of their brains. I decided to go for the confused and worried customer approach, but I had an ace up my sleeve: my profession.

"Is that Adam? I'm from Going Places. What's the problem?"

"Oh thank God you've phoned, I'm worried sick! I've just been told I'm 2,000 miles away from the correct airport because your operative booked me a flight from the wrong place. Your employee booked me to fly from Manchester, New England, not our England, the England where I'm standing now. I think it's only fair to lay my cards on the table - I'm a travel journalist for the Birmingham Mail, in fact if you look at today's paper I've just done a big piece on Toronto. I also work for the Sutton News and have friends at the Sutton Observer and if I don't get a flight to America I'll be writing lots and lots of stories about how rubbish Going Places is, and in a credit crunch I'm sure that is the last thing you need."

There was silence.

"Ahh, I see. OK. I will get back to you, Mr Smith."

Twenty minutes later he was back on the phone.

"I'm so sorry about this Mr Smith, it appears there was a mistake with the booking of your

flight. We've got you on a flight to Miami via Philadelphia from Manchester tomorrow morning. If you stay at a hotel we'll repay you."

"Brilliant, but I don't have any money for a hotel," I replied.

"What about a Visa card?" he said, the first of about 100 occasions on which I would hear this over the next three weeks.

"That boat, I'm afraid, sailed in the 1990s. Is the flight first class because of all the trouble I've been put through?" I asked. It was worth a try.

"Err... no Mr Smith, there's no chance of that. Look on the bright side; you got a flight cheaper to Miami than anyone else this year! Have a good a trip".

The funny thing was, I could never have afforded to go to Miami if that lovely woman in Sutton Coldfield hadn't ballsed the booking up. If she'd said £500 I'd never have been able to afford it. I laughed to myself - someone up there was looking after me, and Mr Obama would be getting the Perry Barr cavalry after all.

Then I did a quick inventory. I had about £60 in cash. There was no way I was going back to Birmingham and I had nowhere to stay. It was Tuesday, and there was no prospect of any cash until payday on Friday. Even then I didn't have a cash card to withdraw anything with, so it would be a nervous visit to a foreign HSBC...

(Facebook status: Steve Zacharanda knows the best threats are said politely, and is flying out tomorrow, £250 did seem too good to be true :))

I phoned Graham, a former flat mate and great friend dating back 20 years, who lives in Manchester. Hearing him call me a twat and then laughing at me made me feel better. Then it dawned on him. "Hold on, you're not staying at my place!"

"Go on, I can't afford to get back to Birmingham and come back again," I pleaded.

"You'll mess my place up and leave socks everywhere - I lived with you before, you smelly bastard - and you owe me £25."

Sensing an opportunity, I said: "Brilliant, want to make it £50? I'll give it you back on Friday."

"No chance. Absolutely no chance, and anyway you'll be in America on Friday you lying twat, but make your way to Manchester Piccadilly and I'll meet you there," he said, putting the phone down before I could say thank you.

I found a pub, drank some Strongbow, waited for Graham and then drank some more Strongbow. He came in for one pint which turned in to seven and then a few more back at his house. Thankfully in my stupor I remembered to phone the hotel in America my dad had booked for five days after a begging phone call the night before. I explained I wouldn't be there for the first night but would still need it reserved for the next few days.

I was woken up at 7am by Graham's fat rabbit running around the cage. I looked in my pocket and I had £30 - I'd spent half my budget in the pub. Graham told me I'd be OK on the bus to Manchester airport because I had hours to spare, but after freezing my arse off in Eccles I decided to get a cab. I made it to the airport with minutes to spare.

By the skin of my unbrushed teeth

(Facebook status: Steve Zacharanda had a great night with his old mate in m'chestah and has a cheeky old skool house cd to listen to on the way to Miami!!)

"Where do I have to board?" I asked the pretty mixed-race woman at the American Airlines desk.

A security guard said: "Over here sir, just some security first". My passport was taken from me and I was left on my own.

I looked at the officials and they were clearly discussing me. Then one came over. "Who booked your ticket sir?" he said.

My heart sank. I explained in detail what had happened, but had a nagging thought in the back of my mind. I didn't have a journalist visa for America and even though I was going on holiday it could present massive problems. However, my confused idiot routine worked and they said I was good to go. I went outside and had my last cigarette for what would be over 10 hours.

Whilst I waited to be called for boarding I considered phoning Mr Mensa, my landlord, to tell him he wouldn't be getting his rent for the month because I was trying to change the world. Shamefully, I didn't have the balls and didn't make the call; I knew that decision would come back and haunt me. Instead I phoned my girlfriend Nicole, told her that I loved her with all my heart, and boarded the plane. I looked in my pocket. I had £22.

I slept most the way from Manchester to Philadelphia. My hair looked like a loose afro and I smelt rather bad. I got off the plane knowing the next ten minutes would decide whether the dream of helping Obama win would become reality. The last time I entered America, immigration at Chicago airport subjected me to a full search, almost making me miss my connecting flight to Nashville. I was on a press trip and the immigration officer advised me to get a US journalist visa for the next time I came back, or I wouldn't get in. Needless to say I never got round to paying the £90 fee and taking the trip to the American embassy in London.

However, going to Miami was always going to be a holiday. I wondered if journalists could just go on holiday, or are they somehow always working? Considering I'd be leaving my job in two weeks anyway, the optimist in me thought I'd sail through.

With each step closer to the immigration desk I became weaker and weaker.

"What is the purpose of your visit to America Sir?" the Latin immigration officer asked sternly. "I've come to see some friends in Miami and enjoy the sun," I replied with a carefree smile.

"How much money have you got sir?" the immigration officer asked, wrongfooting me totally. My response was more a nervous stutter than a reply.

"Err, £22 Sterling"

"What credit cards do you have sir?"

"Credit cards?"

"Debit cards?"

"Nope, none of those. I don't really trust myself with credit - neither lender nor borrower be! I'm getting a money transfer on Friday."

I didn't want to say wages were going in because it could trigger the whole job situation and admitting being a journalist was the last thing I wanted to do.

He gave me back my passport. Unstamped. "There is a problem, go to the end of the room to the immigration office," the officer said without looking up.

I felt sick. I knew I'd be in trouble now. What would happen if they wouldn't let me in? I had £22 and no phone credit. Everyone was right, it was madness to go abroad with no money. How

much of a dickhead would I look not even getting in the country because I couldn't be bothered to pay for a visa? I got my case and wandered in to the immigration office. I watched as a Manchester student was grilled for not having a visa and accused of trying to work in America illegally. I walked to the desk and bile rose to the back of my throat. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. The perfectly groomed officer just stared at me. I managed to rasp: "I've been told to come here, mate." He pointed at the seat and that was it.

My mind was racing. My story did sound totally daft - I was on my own, with no money, and I didn't even know the rules about helping out politically in America.

Did I need a visa to do volunteer work? I knew if I played the Obama card all it would take would be for a McCain fanatic to be in charge of my fate and I'd be stuck in an airport without a flight. I decided to appeal to the immigration officer's romantic side; I was coming to America to get a girl back. My ex. The One. Yes, that should just about do it.

After 45 minutes stewing I was called up to the desk.

"Why are you going to Miami?" the same immigration officer asked.

"I'm going on my holidays, my missus, err I mean my ex missus, is in Miami. Well, I hope she will become my missus again," I said.

"But why are you going now?"

"Because I've lost my job and thought it was the perfect time. I need to get her back, I've been going out of my mind since we split up."

"You are a journalist, are you not?"

I felt weak, sick.

"Yes. No...err, yes. Erm, well, I've lost my job - the credit crunch has hit British papers, me and 65 others were sacked from the Birmingham Mail, so I'm not a journalist anymore."

His poker face betrayed no thoughts, but his eyes felt like they were boring into my very soul.

"So you are not here to do any work for your paper? Because that would be illegal," he said.

"Nope, I write about dogs up trees and wedding anniversaries in North Birmingham. The Mail isn't like a national paper, it just does what's going on in Birmingham. I just want to meet my missus. Ex-missus."

There was a brief pause.

"How much money do you have?"

"£22"

"And you have no credit cards?"

"Nope"

"So you're trying to tell me that you're coming to America with £22 and no credit cards. Are you totally mad, or are you mentally ill?" he said with no trace of irony.

"What about if something goes wrong, what will you do?"

I pulled my HSBC chequebook out and told him I'd be visiting the global bank on Friday. 'Right, here goes' I thought. I was getting more confident now.

"I'm just in love mate. Perhaps it is a form of mental illness, all I know is if I don't get into America, my missus, my ex-missus, won't believe me, she'll think I didn't want her back. I'm getting a bank transfer on Friday. I will have money then."

His silence was doing nothing to help me out. 'Probably time to stop talking', I thought, as he looked through paperwork, looked at my passport, looked at the computer, shook his head then disappeared in to the back of the office.

Five minutes later he came back and said: "Go and take your case to that table over there and

wait for my colleague.” I dragged my case to the desk. Another officer came over. Again, he was immaculately turned out, and he looked more senior than the others.

There was no ‘Hello’, ‘How do you do?’, no pleasantries. Just straight to the point.

“So you’re coming here to work as a journalist without a journalist visa.”

Fuck.

“No, I’m not coming to work as a journalist. I am here to get my missus – err, I mean ex missus - back. I took voluntary redundancy as a journalist, and everyone who knows me knows I am leaving the job I love. Not to get in to your country for being a journalist when I’ve just taken redundancy will be a real kick in the teeth.”

He unzipped my case and threw it open. We both looked at the contents and then in perfect symmetry recoiled backwards, overcome with the smell. I’d just thrown everything into a case from my bedsit when I packed. Nothing was folded and a packet of biscuits had broken open and covered everything in crumbs. There were a few rogue pairs of dirty socks which stunk. The officer put his rubber gloves on before picking up a piece of clothing.

“Do you normally travel like this sir?”

“No,” I replied. “This was a bit of last minute decision. I got a cheap flight and decided to come and find my missus. Ex-missus. I’m not being funny mate, but does it look like I’m coming here on business? No journalist would travel on assignment like this.”

He looked at the case and then at me and then back at the case again. His face said it all. He looked constantly as if he was smelling shit.

“You are extremely unorganised” he said to himself as much as to me. “Why did your girlfriend split up with you?”

This was getting surreal, but I thought I’d bite. “She said she couldn’t live with me because I was smelly, unhygienic and like a child”.

He just looked at me. He said nothing. For the next 10 minutes he fished pieces of paper out of the case, including Birmingham City Council meeting minutes, crumpled bookies coupons and other assorted rubbish I’d never seen before.

Then he picked up an Obama badge.

“Obama, are you a fan?” he said with absolute contempt.

“Err...my dad gave me the badge for good luck.”

He sent me back to the desk. The original officer looked at me with even more disdain, if that was possible.

“Good luck”

“Have you let me in?”

“Yeah, you can go now. Enjoy your trip to the United States sir, I suggest you get a credit card for your next visit.”

He stamped my passport. I was in. I felt ten feet tall. I was back in the USA, and it was one of the best moments of my life. I’d gone from sheer terror to priceless elation within a single hour – an hour that had cost me several months’ worth of sweat and tears.

Back in the USA

Thursday, October 24

(Facebook status: Steve Zacharanda is BACK IN THE USA! Two hours being searched and questioned after 'there is a problem sir, go to immigration')

I changed my £22 into dollars, bought a packet of cigarettes and wandered out of the airport for a wonderful, life affirming fag. It took an hour to get back in after all the checks, after which I unpacked my laptop to listen Aston Villa play Ajax in the Europa League. I bought a beer and nursed it; the flight to Miami wasn't for another hour. I looked at my money. I had \$30, and I was desperately hungry. I looked on the internet for the price of a bus ticket from Miami airport to my hotel. It was \$45. Bugger, I didn't even have enough money to get out of the airport.

It was about 3pm and I'd be arriving in Miami about 10pm. I logged into Facebook desperately hoping to see one name under the 'Online Friends' section: Samantha Lawton. Sam's an amazing woman and, some time after sharing a very enjoyable fling with me at journalism college, she'd landed the job as Caribbean correspondent for Splash News, based in Miami.

Her name popped up. I instant messaged her with: 'THEY LET ME IN!'. She asked when the flight got to Miami and agreed to pick me up. I thanked her profusely, in the knowledge that I could at last buy some food. I got a beer, burger and a few magazines. I had \$10 left. Job done, result.

And the Villa won.

(Facebook status: Steve Zacharanda is BACK in the USA, and the 1st thing he did after getting through immigration hell was listen to the Villa win in Philly airport!! go on the lads!!) I slept all the way to Miami and looked like a disorientated tramp when I got to Miami International. I washed and wandered around the airport before I saw Sam, and I honestly don't think I'll ever be as happy to see a friendly face again. Looking every inch the Miami woman she now was, Sam gave me the first beaming smile I'd gotten

since arriving in America hours before. We hugged. I smelt her hair and goose pimples ran up my neck. I felt on top of the world.

During the long drive to Miami Sam kept saying "\$10?! You're unbelievable!", and also "You've come to Miami with \$10, what would have you done if I wasn't here?". It was obviously the time to ask if I could borrow some money until Friday, and my angel from Stoke agreed. A little later we found the shit hotel I was staying in and after an argument about my lack of a credit card to pay for a deposit (this time I said I'd lost my wallet) I threw my stuff on the room's floor and we hit the bars of Miami South Beach. It was a great night, made all the sweeter because of all the shit I'd gone through to get there. We downed drinks, we laughed and danced the night away; it was pure bliss. I couldn't have wished for a better first night in America. The adventure had begun.

Samantha Lawton, journalist, Miami

An instant message came through from Adam asking if I could pick him up from Miami airport because he only had \$10. I thought he was joking until he asked to borrow some money a few hours after. He looked like he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards when I picked him up. I've no idea what he would have done if I hadn't happened to live in his choice of holiday destination and hadn't been on Facebook that day. Anyway, we hit the bars of South Beach straight away. I woke up the next day with a bad head, an aching back because we'd fallen over trying to do the Lambada, and I'd lost my credit card. "Adam's in Miami," I thought.