

IRMA 2000 Conference – Anchorage Alaska

Day 1: Friday 19 May 2000

Today's the day to set off on a new adventure, travel to Anchorage Alaska to present my first ever presentation at an international conference titled 'Challenging Students to Live eBusiness'.

Before setting off the Brisbane International Airport there were several course coordinator tasks to complete at the University of the Sunshine Coast, ensuring all the guest lecturers were set, emails to all the tutors about the next weeks tutorial activities, making sure the exams are ready to run next week, sort out pay claims, sign my next 12 month employment contract, attend to some questions related to my PhD application such selecting a co-supervisor and printing out of my OHP slides for the conference. After answering phone calls, marking outstanding assignments it was time to rush back home for lunch, finish packing, get dressed pick up Nan and Robyn, Nan and myself were off to the airport.

We arrived at the Brisbane International Airport with plenty of time to spare so we sat for a chat over coffee before heading through customs and into the departure hall. I must admit I had a lump in my throat and tear or two as I waved goodbye to Robyn as she stood upon the upper observation deck, last time we were at the airport we were both heading off to the USA for an extended holiday, hard to believe that was just 5 months ago. Robyn deserves these trips just as much as I do after watching the back of my head over all these years of study.

The trip to Auckland started out with a heater having to be brought out to the cargo bay in the plane for a dog and then one of the generators for an engine had to be repaired, great start. This is the same 747 that underwent a refit due to an accident in Bangkok and two faulty generators out of Hong Kong.

Once we had taken off and reached cruising altitude of 35,000 ft the 2.5 hour flight went quickly. I was sitting at the rear of the plane with a middle aged couple from a dairy farm north of Auckland and we ended up having a great conversation before and after the movie 'Diamonds'. During the 1 hour stopover in Auckland I went for a walk to stretch my legs but as there was nothing new in the duty free stores since February I headed back to the assembly area.

Leaving Auckland on time we headed for Los Angeles at 35,000 feet with movies running continuously throughout the night. Not long out of Auckland all the shutters had to be closed as we were heading into daylight and passengers still need to sleep, thus the dark cabin. Once again cattle class is not good for sleeping but I did manage to cat nap along the way and view several movies, read eCommerce published papers and articles, eat meals and chat with an elderly British and Scottish ladies in my row. The aisle seat on a long distance haul is good to view the screen as well as get out of the seat every now and again and go for a walk to stretch my legs and have the odd toilet relief as well.

On our arrival at Los Angeles at 3:45pm Friday it took until 5:00pm to clear customs and immigration as the queues were so long and they only had 3 gates open with 6 officers to process 3 jumbo jets loaded with passengers. Still, I was able to chat with people in the lines to pass the time away.

The short walk to Alaska Airlines terminal allowed me to suck in the smog, no it's not smog it's the sea layer rolling in like fog. As there was not not enough time to head out to Santa Monica or Venice Beach I checked in my luggage then went straight to the departure lounge for a Starbucks coffee and choc chip cookie.

Alaska Airlines Flight 105 arrived late so we didn't start boarding until 9:00pm and eventually took off at 9:35pm, 1 hour late but the view from out of the window was spectacular with the lights of LA, Venice Beach, Santa Monica and then up along the coastline gave the impression of a carpet of fairy lights. As we headed further north the clusters of lights thinned out until all you could see were small towns dotted alongside the railway line from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

On this flight I am sitting in row 7F, a window seat and just as well as there are no movies or screen to tell you information, outside temperature, distance travelled, ETA, ground speed or moving map as this is a long cigar shaped jet with 2 engines low on the tail and one up on the top of the tail. My entertainment is looking out the window and watching the coastline on the east or right.

The near full moon is so bright its showing up the marine layer (fog) over the dark countryside and every now and again the plane does a small band to the left (over the ocean) and then back (right) toward the coastline and all the time the lights of the towns and cities along the way look magnificent.

About 45 minutes into the flight the captain informed us that we are flying at an altitude of 32,000 feet and currently 100 miles south of San Francisco (on the left) and we should arrive in Anchorage at 2am local time.

The lights of the towns and cities give way to open spaces but as we fly north the horizon lights up as this time of the year Alaska is getting closer to the longest day of the year when the sun doesn't set. It really is an incredible feeling inside the cabin as it gets lighter and lighter even though the hour is getting later and later. Never experienced this before and soon the cabin is as bright as it would be during daylight hours, yet, down on the ground it is dark and every now and again the lights of towns come into view.

As the plane descends into Anchorage we pass through various layers of grey clouds until all of a sudden as though someone turned off the lights we were in pitch black, rain and snow thank God the captain uses instruments as you would not be able to see a thing outside let alone the lights of Anchorage and the landing strip until the last minute.

At around 100 feet off the tarmac we get our first glimpse as lights and the land through the driving rain. We pulled up at the gate at 1:55am Saturday morning, it's cold and wet but here I am in Anchorage Alaska.

As it is late there is no time to muck around so quickly claim me baggage and a chat with the local dentist who was very informative about things to do and see in Anchorage. Caught a taxi \$14.85USD plus tip (big tipper gave him \$20USD) and inside the 8th Avenue Hotel. Once all the check in formalities was completed I picked up my envelope from 26 Glacier Cruise, requested an early morning wakeup call, up the steps to room 303 and unpack.

It was good to have a talk to Robyn on the phone to let her know I had arrived 28 hours after taking off in Brisbane and it was good to hear the latest news from home. Time for a few hours sleep in my king size bed in this 2 bedroom self-contained unit complete with its own kitchen as tomorrow is a big day and I have to be down at the railway station by 10am.

Day 2: Saturday 20 May 2000

Ring – ring; ring – ring; what on earth is that, oh yeah early it's my early morning wake-up call and time to get moving. Breakfast then a short walk to the railway station about 10 minutes walk through the down town section all the time looking at the Magnificat snow capped Chugach Mountains (peaks that rise as high as 13,176 feet) to the east of the city and Mount McKinley (the tallest mountain on the continent climbing to 20,320 feet) and the Alaska Range to the north, close your mouth Tony you're drooling.

My walk took me through the Saturday markets and spent a bit of time looking at the local art and crafts and fresh fruit so I bought a tray of cherries (absolutely huge to the ones back home – supersized) that were so sweet and juicy as well as a punnet of apricots to finish off my breakfast.

The train departed at 10:00am for Whittier and wound its way down Cook Inlet that stretches 180 miles and has a maximum rise and fall of 39 feet during the tidal change that takes around 5 hours and as it was heading toward low tide the mud flats were being exposed all along Turnagain Arm that use to be a glacial fjord from the late Holocene. As we wind our way along the track the commentary fills us in on the history of the area mostly associated with the Indians and Eskimo fishing areas and the capturing of whales.

The train stopped in Girdwood to let some people off who were heading to the year round skiing community. Unfortunately for them the chair lifts have been turned off until next ski season proper but imagine being able to ski year round whenever you felt like it and the weather was good? Certainly beats the long drive to Perisher Blue or Thredbo every couple of years.

Whittier was established in WW2 as an alternative deep water port to Seward as these two ports are not ice bound in the winter unlike Anchorage. The 300 people residents are housed in 6 multi-story buildings as Whittier receives around 40 foot of snow each year and 1 ½ inches of rain every day. The people who live here support the Alaska State Ferry, the Alaska Railroad, freight barge, commercial fishing, the Small Boat Harbor, recreation and tourism with an annual visiting population of over 700,000. Today the weather is good, low cloud but no rain, just cold, very cold but I like it.

The cruise from the Port of Whittier is with Alaska Glacier Cruises on the Klondike Express and traverses 145 miles through the pristine passageways of Alaska's Prince William Sound. The boat is a very fast catamaran cruising at 38 Knots and is so smooth and relaxing. During the cruise they served a hot meal, I had the halibut (the largest flat fish living in the North Pacific and North Atlantic oceans) but was told by the local Eskimo and native Indian couple sharing the table that the fresh fish is much better than the processed fish I was eating today.

The boat entered Esther Passage which opened into College Fjord and there was the most magnificent panoramic view of all the glaciers named after the Eastern Colleges during the Harriman Expedition. As we got closer to Surprise Glacier and Barry Arm located in Harriman Fjord the boat made its way through the ice filled waters up to the front of the glacier so we can watch for house

size chunks of ice cracking off the glacier and splashing into the sea. The sound of cracking ice sheets echoing in the still fjord is too hard to describe, you have to be there and if only all the tourists kept quiet as this happened (difficulty to do I realise) it would be even more spectacular. The boat passed Downer, Yale, Baby glaciers and at each one the blue colours and ice walls were just as spectacular as was the sound each time an ice sheet cracked off the surface and slid into the water sending out a small tidal wave. The captain manoeuvred the boat through ice flows to get as close as he could to the face of each glacier first on the port side and then the starboard side, bow and then the stern so everyone could get a good view without people rushing for an advantage point. Sometimes he would have to put it into reverse as the ice was too thick for the boat to push aside. Having experienced this I would love to go to the Antarctic for one of their expeditions.

You would stand casting your eyes along the wall of ice trying to guess where the next sheet would break off and think oh well it won't happen again then all of a sudden like a crack of lightning another huge chunk of ice would break off and splash into the water. Having a cold face and hands standing out on the deck for as long as you could is worth it, but rug up and your body will remain warm.

At different times along the return journey we saw otters lying on ice flows or swimming nearby, black bears on the shore, eagles swooping into the water for fish, mountain goats and wild sheep and passengers were invited up onto the bridge to have their photo taken while sitting in the captains chair, too good to pass up that invitation.

Docking in Whittier we had about 45 minutes to wait for the train however not to many people took the opportunity to brave the weather (light rain and freezing temperature)and take a walk along the wharf and nosy around in the tourist shops.

During the train trip back (same way we came) the inlet was now at low tide and only 1 foot of water exposing the mud flats, would like to see it again at high tide to see the difference in water levels but as we got closer to Anchorage you could see the water rushing back into the inlet at a very fast rate. We saw a moose in the bush and the day light makes viewing easy even at 11pm while writing the diary entry it is still daylight and back at home this much light would signal 5:00pm. I can see a sign telling us the outside temperature is 3 degrees centigrade.

Tonight I had a meal in a local café and the cod, corn, salad and potatoes really went down well after such a long day. Returning to the hotel I went over my slides one more time as I my presentation is in the afternoon and as there is no iron in the room I will have to wear my shirts in the crumpled state they are in, too bad they want to hear my words of wisdom, not there for a fashion show. Do I sound convincing?

Better draw the blackout curtains or I will never get to sleep as it is hard to adjust to the time with all this light outside.

Day 3: Sunday 21 May 2000

Another glorious morning in Anchorage, clear skies, low cloud hanging over the snow capped mountains, 3 degrees centigrade and crisp clear air, beautiful. The short walk from my hotel to the IRMA conference at the Hilton is invigorating and refreshing and once inside the conference hall and

registration completed it was time to sort out which room (multiple sessions going on at the same time in different rooms) I will be going to for the first session.

For lunch I decided to go to the park where it has warmed up to 12 degrees centigrade and had a reindeer hot dog which was very tasty before heading back inside to deliver my presentation. The audience showed their interest throughout the presentation and asked plenty of questions, especially the University of Sacramento (California) who wanted to learn more so we set up a meeting for alter on. Interest about the course I have developed for eCommerce students helping businesses develop their eBusiness plan and create a website also came from Scotland, Italy and Victoria University in Melbourne.

After the sessions had completed for the day I went for a walk around the city again as it is so beautiful and well laid out before heading back inside the Hilton (seems stuffy compared with outside) for drinks and nibbles hosted by the University of Anchorage. During their speech they let us all know they were on a recruiting drive and boy would I love to be a lecturer in Anchorage during their summer when most of the USA lecturers and their families head down south.

From the 15th floor of the Hilton the view of the snow capped mountains and Cook Inlet is even more spectacular. Had a long talk with a lecturer from Scotland and heard all about the life, events and temperatures which is comparable as Anchorage. At this time of the year daylight is from 5am to 1pm the next day and my body clock worked out it was around 11pm and time to head back to the hotel for a rest before the next full day of presentations.

The television stations are full of the upcoming USA presidential elections a continuation from the same dribble from the same political analysts, announcers, families, business and anyone else they can shove a microphone in their face as we went through during our 7 week holiday in December, January and February earlier in the year. To me it appears Alaska is a forgotten state of the USA as there is little news and weather about Alaska on the television but the locals tell me this is they way they want it.

On reflection of the first day of presentations I feel the quality and standard leaves much to be desired and some of the audience, particularly the USA participants are loud, rude in their comments to presenters about their research methodology, findings and interpretation. I get a clear picture of the antagonism between lecturers from North America and South America as each try to outdo each other and big note their own field of research and methodology.

Tomorrow morning there is a keynote speaker at a conference breakfast which should be interesting and besides I don't have to get breakfast myself. Better write on some postcards to send back home before turning out the light.

Day 4: Monday 22 May 2000

Another day in paradise with cloudless skies and full sun and perfect weather to stroll over to the Hilton for the IRMA breakfast where around 500 delegates tucked into scrambled eggs, bacon, reindeer sausages, orange juice, ice water, coffee and an assortment of sweet pastries to satisfy the USA contingent.

Morning session over once again I headed outside for lunch and to post the postcards to Jon and Susan and back home but I bet I beat the cards home, time will tell. Like a naughty schoolboy I have

skipped the afternoon session and continued a stroll around the city before heading back to the my hotel for a nap before returning to the Hilton in the evening for nibbles and drinks put on by IDEA Publishing Group. Glad I bought that Alaska raincoat as the rain has set in and you can feel the temperature falling but still loved the walk back to the Hilton.

At the reception tonight I had a good talk to a number of department heads, professors and lecturers who all urged me to continue with my research and eCommerce/eBusiness course development and they look forward to future research papers at conferences and in journals. That made me feel inspired as this is the very first research paper and conference. I was also invited to Victoria University later in the year if Stephen Burgess (one of their senior lecturers) can arrange it with his head of department.

When I got back to my hotel I rang Mike Presley at his home in Anchorage as he works as an FAA contractor and owns a Marlin and Zenith ultralight aircraft and has invited me to go flying with him. Thanks to the Internet and emails the ultralight community is worldwide and always want to keep in contact with each other and learn from experiences in building aircraft and flying them. We agreed to meet at 5pm outside my hotel and head out to the airport tomorrow if the weather is okay for flying.

It is strange to see leads and plugs coming out from under the bonnet of cars so they can plug the lead into 110 volts to power the heaters under the battery and the blanket over the engine to stop it from freezing.

Day 5: Tuesday 23 May 2000

Another clod day but when you look outside and see the snow capped mountains what do you expect. I really like my 10 minute walk to the Hilton hotel and taking a different route each time to do window shopping and see what life is like in Anchorage. Most of the shops have the same tourists souvenirs and bits and pieces and you have to walk out of the centre of the city to Kmart, Wal-Mart, Woolworths and other large department stores.

Today's sessions were broken with the IRMA Presidents lunch a nice meal of salmon or halibut but on the plate I can't tell the difference. After the first afternoon session I left to meet Mike to go out to Palmer about 40 miles on the main road to Fairbanks to have a close look at the Merlin aircraft and hopefully go for a flight.

The Palmer airfield is surrounded on the far side with high mountains all covered in snow view but ran out of film for the camera. Didn't realise it was only a 24 frame roll and not the 40 frames I normally buy, bugger.

The Merlin itself is so wide inside with high seats and plenty of leg room, clear and open vision from the cockpit, large cargo bay behind, big wheels, hydraulic breaks, with the fuel tanks in the overhead wings. Unfortunately the low cloud and rain prevented us from taking to the air but sitting inside you could get a feel for the flight characteristics of the Merlin. A 3.3 litre Jabiru engine would go well in this aircraft rather than the Rotax.

After leaving Palmer we headed for a few more airfields where there are hundreds of planes either with wheels or floats to slip onto the lakes for takeoff and landing. I have never seen so many airfields so close together and so many aircraft, imaging listening to radio calls and looking out for

aircraft during good flying conditions. Hardly any of the aircraft are in hangers, all out in the open even the cloth aircraft and they pay between \$80 to \$100 or \$150 to \$180 for a hanger a month for this privilege. The reason why the cloth aircraft don't degrade in the open sunlight is due to the low UV rating in Alaska. They wouldn't survive in the open back home as they would fade in quick time and then the fabric would rot.

Mike drove out to Hilltop a district of Anchorage to see a Merlin kit under construction. A trip around the lake to see around 1,000 aircraft with floats attached and then back to the hotel. The temperature at 11:00pm is 6 centigrade and still plenty of daylight. Mike explained that at this time of the year there is a 10pm curfew for all flying, imagine that, first light 5:00am until 10:00pm 17 hours of flight time in one day.

Have you all noticed I haven't spent much time reflecting on the presentations and research findings from the presenters at the IRMA conference? Funny that but I chose this conference because of its locality not what goes on during the presentations. There are not many ICT conferences held in Alaska so when I saw this one I just had to pull out all stops to have the university fund this one. Thanks Andy (the Dean of the Faculty of Business at the University of the Sunshine Coast).

Day 6: Wednesday 24 May 2000

What a pity, last day of presentations at the IRMA conference and since it finishes at 12 noon, plenty of time to go sightseeing, bummer the networking. This morning is a little chilly, just 4 degrees centigrade but the walk is worth it and inside the Hilton you wouldn't know what the temperature is like outside. Inside the foyer of the Hilton there is a huge stuffed bear in a glass cabinet and while it is a magnificent species I feel sorry that it had to give up its life just for tourists.

Oh yeah there is a conference going on but you can see the attendance is poor, some of the session chairs didn't bother to attend and I feel sorry for those who have been scheduled to present this morning so I will do my best to give them support.

After the conference I walked to the trolley bus and went for a one hour sightseeing tour of Anchorage and the history about earthquakes, permafrost, and how the government in Alaska invest rates and taxes and return the profits to the locals through reduced rates, perfect. Explanations about employment, industry, early settlers, the Bering Strait, the role of the military and the air force base in Anchorage just kept coming and I couldn't take it all in.

When I got back to the hotel Robyn was on the phone and it was really good to hear her voice and catch up with what was going on at home and here in Anchorage.

This evening I walked down to a restaurant and had the king crab legs/claws, a bowl of chowder and two beers but I must say the flavour of the crab isn't as good as back home in Australia. But the king crab is huge and they give you a nut cracker to break the shell of the legs/claws as they are as thick as your thumb. Sitting on the back deck in the sun at 9:00pm looking at Captain Cook inlet, Mt McKinley and snow capped mountains to the north, south, east and west while watching the military jet aircraft taking off and landing at the nearby air force base was something to experience.

Not long into my meal an elderly couple of Sydney sat down at the next table and a young woman from Melbourne heard us talking and also joined in the conversation. She works for a tour company during the summer and goes to university in Utah studying tourism the rest of the year.

After a very pleasant dinner I walked back through Anchorage for the last time to make arrangements to catch the 6:15am for Los Angeles, pack my bags, arrange for a 5:00am wake-up call and taxi to the airport. Hope I get there early enough to get a window seat so I can look at the coast line again on the way back as I bet there will be no movies or in-flight entertainment once again. With everything sorted out, sleep time.

Day 7: Thursday 25 May 2000

After a restless night not being able to settle into a deep sleep I was up well before the wake-up call and was already prepared for the taxi. This morning it is 4 degrees centigrade and at that time of the morning there are very few vehicles on the road so the taxi ride was quick.

For the first time I had my camera bag open so security could look through the lenses etc but no they wanted me to unlock and go through my backpack. So there I was taken to one side while they wiped looking for drugs. Of course they didn't find anything so after the all clear I made my way to the departure lounge where our flight this morning will make a top over at Seattle. I got my window seat and after the all clear and take-off soon we were flying over snow covered mountain ranges, glaciers, lakes, forests, open spaces and clear skies all the way, magic and better than any in-flight entertainment even if it was available on the aircraft. We flew over Whistler and Vancouver in Canada on our approach to Seattle.

Seattle is a huge city full of industry, housing, farming and timber forests. After a walk around the airport and a chat with other IRMA presenters from Victoria University who are on the same flight we were back on board and heading above the clouds to LAX. I thought I might have been able to see San Francisco but the cloud cover was too heavy and all I could see was farms, snow ranges, Lake Tahoe, Sacramento and desert.

On our approach to LAX the cloud was thick as we descended from 29,000 feet until finally at around 3,000 feet we broke through the cloud cover and there was Los Angeles, touchdown. After a short wait we picked up our bags and headed to the QANTAS desk in the Bradley Building. Unfortunately we couldn't check in our bags so early so over to a baggage handling service who took my \$10 and bag and the four of us (3 lecturers from Victoria University) headed out to catch the Blue Bus for Santa Monica.

I had hoped to show them Venice Beach before heading up the beach to Santa Monica but it was already 4:00pm and I had to be back to catch the 9:30pm flight. The others didn't have to be back until later as their flight was direct to Melbourne and was leaving around midnight.

We hopped off the bus on the corner of Lincoln and Pacific Shore and walked down to the beach past those grand hotels built right on the shore line. We walked around the pier taking tourist shots, touching the Pacific ocean etc. before heading over to Starbucks for coffee and purchase a couple of mugs. All the activity was in the mall and outside there were people begging for money, they should really do something about that especially if they want the tourists to feel safe.

As the time was running out I left them to it and headed back to 4th and Santa Monica to catch the blue bus back to LAX but there on the corner was this beautiful red Chrysler 2 door convertible, the one I was looking for since our last visit to the USA. After drooling over the convertible and taking a

couple of photos the Blue Bus arrived and so that was my last look at Santa Monica as we headed back to the airport.

Checking in with QANTAS they found my bag needed a 'Heavy' sticker oh well best to protect the baggage handlers from injuring their backs throwing it from one spot to another. With the formalities over it was a 1hour 30 minute wait to boarding as there were not that many passengers lined up which was great for me as I had three seats up against the window all to myself. After the meal was served I lifted the arm rests, grabbed a couple of pillows and blankets, stretched out and slipped into dream land, no movies, just sleep as I was tired being awake from 4:00am.

Day 8: Saturday 27 May 2000

No you haven't missed anything as we lost a day crossing the International Date Line at 39,000 feet heading to Auckland. The lights of Auckland were beautiful but the most striking thing I notice was how dim the street lights were compared to those in the USA.

As we pulled into the terminal we were informed we were going to leave the plane as one engine had developed a problem and we were being transferred to another flight. After getting new boarding passes for an Air New Zealand flight there was still plenty of time to check out the duty free shops and buy Robyn this beautiful plate to match the other ornament we bought on our way back from the USA in February.

Before taking off I thought about ringing Robyn to let her know we had switched carriers but since it was 4:50am on the Sunshine coast I didn't think she would appreciate a call that early in the morning.

This time I had an isle seat in the centre row 40D with no one sitting next to me so once again I can stretch out and relax for the three hour flight to Brisbane. I wonder how many passengers would have boarded the QANTAS flight had it continued.

Was great to get back to Brisbane and there was Robyn, she had checked the QANTAS website and read the switch and the new ETA so delayed her trip to pick me up. And so ended my first conference with the University of the Sunshine Coast and will plan to make the next IRMA conference that is to be held in Toronto in May the following year.