

A Family Summer Getaway

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image credits

“**D**O YOU REMEMBER THE LAST time we were there?” I asked, looking at my muscular nephew Thomas, and laughing.

He had just told me that he was planning a surprise celebratory weekend in San Diego for his wife for their upcoming wedding anniversary.

“Sure do,” he replied, putting down his Wedgwood mug of English tea and pausing from taking a bite of chocolate cheesecake, as a big grin spread across his neatly bearded face.

“How could I forget it?”



It was an early evening in June 1991 when we arrived at the hostel in Pacific Beach in San Diego. We were a tired bunch of travelers arriving from San Francisco. My sister Anne and her husband, Greg, were landscape gardeners who had had a busy day gardening. I was somewhat jet-lagged, having arrived in California from the UK just two days earlier. And my teenage nephews Daniel and Thomas were hungry for pizzas.

We were all looking forward to a relaxing four-day vacation that had been carefully planned a few months in advance of my visit to the US. My sister had found a hostel with a private family room, quickly securing it with advance payment and informing the hostel that

we would be checking in as soon as our flight landed around 7.00 pm. She had confirmed all these details, as requested, the day before our arrival.

It was 7.30 pm when we tossed our backpacks on the floor and sank into the chairs in the reception area as Anne went to check us in, expecting it to take just a few minutes. An earnest conversation seemed to be taking place between my sister and the receptionist, and to our surprise, Anne seemed to be getting annoyed. A few minutes later she came and angrily said, “They have given the family room we reserved and paid for two months ago to another family and are offering us five bunkbeds in a corridor room instead. It’s all they have left, and as it’s now nearly 8:00 pm, there’s really no alternative but to take it and find some where else to stay tomorrow. I’m furious and going to complain and ask for a refund, but meanwhile, let’s put our backpacks on the beds and go and get something to eat, as we are all starving.”

As we threw our bags onto bunkbeds, we noticed that the room they had allocated us was a connecting room with several doors leading off it, including doors to the restrooms and showers.

Walking out of the hostel, we quickly found a diner and tucked into the comfort food of pizzas, french fries, and ice cream. Though still upset about what had happened, we all agreed that it was fine for just one

night and that we would find and move to a hotel the next day.

Greg had found a local newspaper, and we started searching for affordable hotels. One in particular caught our eye, called Pacific View Hotel. It appeared to be located almost on the beach. It would be our first stop in the morning. We returned to the hostel feeling much calmer.

However, such calmness was not to last for long. There was nobody in the reception area, and there appeared to be some kind of commotion. As we entered our allocated lodging space, we noticed we were standing in a pool of water, and two people were frantically using brooms to stop a sludgy flow of water seeping from the restrooms.

Someone was yelling, “Quick, call the plumber, the toilets are overflowing again!”

Greg and Anne looked at each other in horror.

“Grab your bags, everyone,” Greg yelled. “Let’s get out of here. We are not staying in this unhygienic dump a moment more.”

The receptionist was back on the front desk as we were leaving, and Anne told her that there was no way we could stay in such conditions and that she expected a refund immediately or she would complain both to the city and the credit card company.

Back in the 24-hour diner, we ordered coffees and sat there in dejected silence. It was now 9.15 pm.



“Are we going to sit here all night?” asked Daniel.

Greg picked up the newspaper and walked toward a telephone on the wall near our table.

“I’ll call the Pacific View Hotel and see if I can make a reservation.”

A few minutes later we saw him take out his credit card. Returning to our table, he said, “Okay, we have a reservation for the rest of our stay starting tomorrow. I explained the situation to the receptionist and he very helpfully said that he would give us the key tonight if we can get there before he closes at 10.00 pm. We were correct—it was located on the beach, but the problem was that the receptionist estimated it would be about a 25-minute walk from where

we were. There were no buses, and at this time of night, it might take thirty minutes to order a taxi.”

“We can do it,” said Thomas, my chubby twelve-year-old nephew jumping up with sudden energy. “Come on Danny and Vivv. Let’s go. I know we can make it.”

I looked at my watch. It was 9.30 pm. Greg and Anne sat there looking exhausted.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s give it a try. Come on, Daniel, let’s go!”

The two of us rushed out of the diner and caught up with Thomas. We walked quickly down the long road, noticing the lights in the shops going out as they closed. There were very few people around and only the occasional car. I kept looking at my



watch, noticing the hands getting closer and closer to ten o'clock, and the road seemed to be getting longer and longer. It seemed as if we were not going to make it in time. It was five to ten when we saw the cluster of hotel lights ahead of us.

"I don't think we are going to get there in time," I said to the boys.

"I'll run ahead and ask the man to wait," said Thomas, and dashed off, running fast.

Ten minutes later, Daniel and I arrived at the entrance to the hotel to see a small chubby figure wedged in the door. "See, I said they would be here soon," he said to a man standing and holding a room key.

The man handed me the key, saying, "You have a very determined youngster here. Another two minutes and the hotel reception would have been closed and locked. Your suite is paid for, so let me show you where it is, and you can move in tonight if you want."

The walk back to the diner with the boys seemed much shorter. This time we ordered a taxi and waited the forty minutes for it to arrive and take us to the hotel. At 11:30 pm five exhausted travelers walked into Pacific View Hotel, into our suite comprising a comfortable lounge area, two bedrooms, a luxurious bathroom and shower, and best of all, a breakfast nook on a balcony located right above the beach from which we could hear the soft murmur of the waves.

We all slept really well that night.

"So what made you decide now to go to San Diego for your wedding anniversary?" I asked Thomas, smiling at the memory that had come to mind from that long-ago family holiday.

"I really enjoyed that vacation and that great hotel on the beach, the golden sand and swimming in the ocean. It was lucky that the toilets at the hostel overflowed so we didn't have to stay there," replied my nephew. It was such a cool trip. Do you remember when we took a bus to the border and just walked into Mexico?"

Did I remember? I have traveled the world and crossed many international borders with long lines and customs officials, but how could I possibly forget the bizarre experience of getting off the bus from San Diego, the two of us then meandering up a long winding concrete ramp with barely a glance from a customs official, and then casually strolling across the bridge into Mexico. We spent the day in Tijuana, a glitzy touristy place that was a novelty and fine to experience for a couple of hours, but not the stuff of enduring memories.

What stood out, however, was the contrast of how easy it was to leave the US and how difficult it was to get back in. It took a couple of hours in a slow-moving line to bring us to the point where we were closely scrutinized by customs officials. Fortunately, I had reminded Thomas to bring his American ID with him and I had my British passport, so we were waved through after a few minutes. Arriving back at our beach hotel an hour or so later, two tired international travelers enjoyed recounting the day's adventures to the rest of the family.

As Thomas stood up to leave, I thought how interesting that after a time lapse of nearly thirty years, the two of us should have such vivid and enduring memories of that casual family summer getaway so long ago.