

AIn the early '90s my girlfriend and I decided to go from Washington DC to Chicago for Christmas via Amtrak. That's usually about a 12 hour trip. We caught the train in Washington and expected to enjoy the journey. We had books and magazines, and we planned to eat in the restaurant car. The train kept stopping then moving for a bit at a time in the middle of nowhere. We thought this was normal, but eventually we were told the tracks were frozen. The heat went out, the toilets backed up, and the train ran out of food before we finally rolled into Chicago after almost 30 hours. We were cold, starving, exhausted. But then — I know what you're thinking, "Fool me once..." — a couple of years later we tried it again. We thought it was just an exceptional emergency. It couldn't possibly happen again. No way. And you guessed it, same thing. The train was starting and stopping. Frozen tracks, no heat, blocked up toilets, no food (except what we brought this time, and that wasn't very much), and arrival after around 25 hours. There will be no third time. Next time we take the car.

BCounty Clare, Ireland, 1977. The year Elvis died. My husband had used his Macdougall Points (earned for selling their products, he was a sales rep) to book us a fortnight at a farmhouse. The deal included breakfast and evening meal. Forget any romantic images of a windswept bothy near a beach. The interior of this hovel was like something out of a 60's horror film. The evening meal (we ate on two evenings there, attempting to give the bog woman who ran it a chance) consisted of plain boiled potatoes and dry ham. Both nights. Our room was like a cell with a tiny window up near the ceiling, and the shared bathroom next to our bedhead allowed us to hear other 'guests' peeing right next to our faces. After a week of this we came left and drove to my husband's Auntie Bridget in Cork to stay with her. The house was covered in a thick layer of dust. She had a habit of wiping her hands on the tablecloth as we ate. Any hopes of 'romance' gone. As we drove away a wasp flew into our car. On the Cork to Swansea ferry we were seasick. No cabin. Kept awake by singing drunks all way back.

CThis was a personal disaster during the Christmas holidays. When you decide to cook a big Christmas dinner, consider the size of your oven, and buy a turkey large enough to feed your guests, but not so big that you can't cook it completely. Yes, you know what's coming... A few years ago, 12 of my 14 guests got severe food poisoning after my feast. They were really sick and spent the night and most of the next day in their bathrooms. One of them spent a night in hospital. The two who didn't get sick were vegetarians. I had bought a massive turkey and my oven just couldn't cook it. I didn't realise that as I forgot to check the inside with a knife. Since then, I always buy a small turkey so I know I can cook it right, and supplement it with extra turkey breasts, which have the healthier white meat anyway. I always start early, so I'm sure the turkey is completely cooked before I serve it, and I check it with a knife. Plus, I received three meat thermometers as hostess gifts the following year.

DIn 1993 I had to go from the UK to Italy. I had a flight to London and then to Milan. Two days later I had to catch a plane to Sri Lanka. What's the problem, I thought? I forgot that... it was harvest time. The road to the airport was packed with tractors and combine harvesters. They travel at about 20 km per hour. I arrived in time to see my plane take off... I found another flight to London, but not to Italy. I investigated trains from London to France and I got: a train from London to the south coast. A night ferry across the Channel (I slept under a table). A train from the French coast (I slept at the bus stop) to Rouen, then to Paris. I crossed Paris by taxi (Place de la Concorde at dawn was worth it), caught a train to Brig in Switzerland and finally, Milan. Four hours later I was on a plane to Colombo, then another to Mali. On my arrival in Mali I slept for eighteen hours. A "resort host" tried to wake me for a "welcome cocktail". I threatened to kill him.

TEXT A

- 1 When was the trip? Where was the trip from and to? How long does it usually take?
- 2 Who was travelling? What did they plan to do?
- 3 What went wrong?
- 4 What happened the second time the couple took the journey?
- 5 How will they travel next time?

TEXT B

- 1 When was the trip? Who was travelling and where?
- 2 What was included in the trip?
- 3 What went wrong?
- 4 Where did the couple escape to? Was it a success?
- 5 How was the journey home?

TEXT C

- 1 When did this happen? What did the person want to do?
- 2 What happened to her guests after the dinner?
- 3 What did she forget to do?
- 4 What does she always do now?
- 5 What gifts did she receive the next year?

TEXT D

- 1 When did this happen? Where was the start and finish of the journey?
- 2 What was the problem?
- 3 How did the person travel to the destination in Italy?
- 4 Where did the person go after that?
- 5 How did the person react to the "resort host" and why?

TOGETHER....

- 1 What's your worst journey experience? Holiday experience? Dinner experience?
- 2 What do you always check before a journey?
- 3 What advice would you give to someone planning a trip to Italy?
- 4 What advice would you give to an inexperienced cook before a dinner party?