

Trapped in Zurich and Waiting for Belgrade. The Invisible JU 373 Air Serbia Flight

On Route to Belgrade

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The stick insect with pale lips, a jaunty manner, and the sense of still being attached to mummy gave a definitive statement of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. "The plane cannot be located." It had a name; it had an identity. It was even registered on the screens of Zurich airport. But everything else was, quite literally, up in the air. In this day and age, a multi-million dollar commercial aircraft doing its rounds is bound to turn up on some scene, to urge itself into commercial and tangible existence. Not so for Herr Stick Insect, who seemed determined to excite and concern his inquirers with dedication.

And what of this ephemeral, invisible flight? Instant fears are fired in the imagination: did the plane vanish into a legend, forever trapped in the gurgling fantasies of a deluded culture? Did it suffer a terrible demise at the end of a faulty missile strike?

Humble flight JU 373 of Air Serbia was not going to disappear into the annals of flight martyrdom or conspiratorial mayhem. There was nothing of the jitteriness of Malaysia Airlines here, the tragic doom, the murderous calamity. No rocket was aimed; no mythological creature had made its presence felt. It was simply being incorrigible.

There were, however, initial reasons of concern. It had rerouted to Stuttgart in a manner that seemed erratic, and had not, as it were, told the personnel at Zurich why. This is the Serbian magic; remaining very much an enthusiast of Europe, it sings the tune from another, eclectic scoresheet. We are happy to play with you, but in *our* way.

Passengers going to Belgrade from London on this flight were left perplexed. Those waiting for JU 373 were huddled, oblivious and even, to some extent, obedient. This was Switzerland, and back home, they knew that queues were as common as smoked grills and rakija.

Queuing in the Serbian psyche has a near military quality to it, far more developed and essential than that of the English. The Englishman, as George Mikes claimed, could form a queue of one. But for the Serbian sense of existence, the queue is the truest of collective affirmations, be it against injustice, infirmity, and plain incompetence. They have seen it all, and they are promised to see more.

Even in these circumstances of technical challenges and weather disruptions, the challenged machines that require tuning in the face of an indignant mother nature, cultural assumptions on the part of the Swiss gate keepers seem to dominate. The Serbs, like bovine subjects awaiting their fate, sit there at a gate that has no flight, and promises

none. "We seriously lost them," comes the stick insect about JU 373. He doesn't seem particularly concerned, and holds the Zurich airport line with stern officialdom. "You simply have to wait."

To get to Belgrade today is proving to be quite a challenge. Having ventured from London via the hub that is Zurich, gnomes and all, the weather has been furious and unrelenting. The Piccadilly line from Hammersmith station was already taking a generous soaking, and the train was filled with glares and perfumed stares. Bulky men sported suitcases a tenth their size. Women, in distinction, had enormous expanses of luggage. No one seemed particularly enticed by the prospect of having to venture through the monster that is Heathrow's Terminal 2, named after the imperishable monarch that is Elizabeth II.

In Zurich, the alternative options on offer for reaching Belgrade do little to inspire. Each suggests terminal boredom, lounge torture, purgatorial torment. Serbia remains an exotic territory, a vantage point of curiosity. But more broadly speaking, if one is stranded, Frankfurt figures. This offers a dreaded and draining option, the sort that you would happily scuttle and convey back to your less impressive acquaintances and enemies.

The devil's option of flying via bustling Frankfurt and losing several hours of your life before the next destination has a certain ominous power to it. The cogs of European travel need oiling, the machines refuelling. When there is a glitch, airport apparatchiks seem to speak in automated statements: "You shall go via Frankfurt." The central nature of the city in the European infrastructure is indispensable in that sense.

It is very much a statement about air traffic on continental Europe and the bumbling confidence Frankfurt is exerting, all dominating and confident. With the issue of Brexit pounding the British government into paltry dust; with companies relocating and readjusting assets, management staff and portfolios; with decisions being made for the new year, this is a city that is being bathed in mercantilist glory. German financiers and planners are planning their raids and relocations, their next triumphant decisions that will lure the funds that have been seen to be the sacred preserve of Britannia.

JU 373 eventually materialises, if only several hours after time. The stewardess, sharp neat uniform, a dream of geometry with a professionalised cut cap and a blue dotted scarf, large lips that seem to dance off her words as they escape to reach their target, and a voice that as smoked as the country's cured meats, tells you to know the instructions well. You are in the exit row, and responsibility is heavy. There is no other option: you are not merely a guest of nature, but a guest of Air Serbia, so behave.

Her countrymen are also there to keep her busy. The Serbian tendency to pounce mid flight, to leap to the storage areas and cabins with a growl and a cheer, and throw off the seat belts with the disdain of a liberated patient from a sanatorium speaks volumes. Signs are there to be avoided; signals exist to be scorned. "Please remain seated with fastened seatbelts!" The bark is greeted with quiet refrain. Everyone is tired. The captain is unintelligible, his words an inscrutable slur. But for those on this flight, the oak tree calls, its ancient message vast and deep; the solemnity of the Orthodox occasion signals and holds its followers. They simply want to go home, and clap with furious delight on touching down.

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