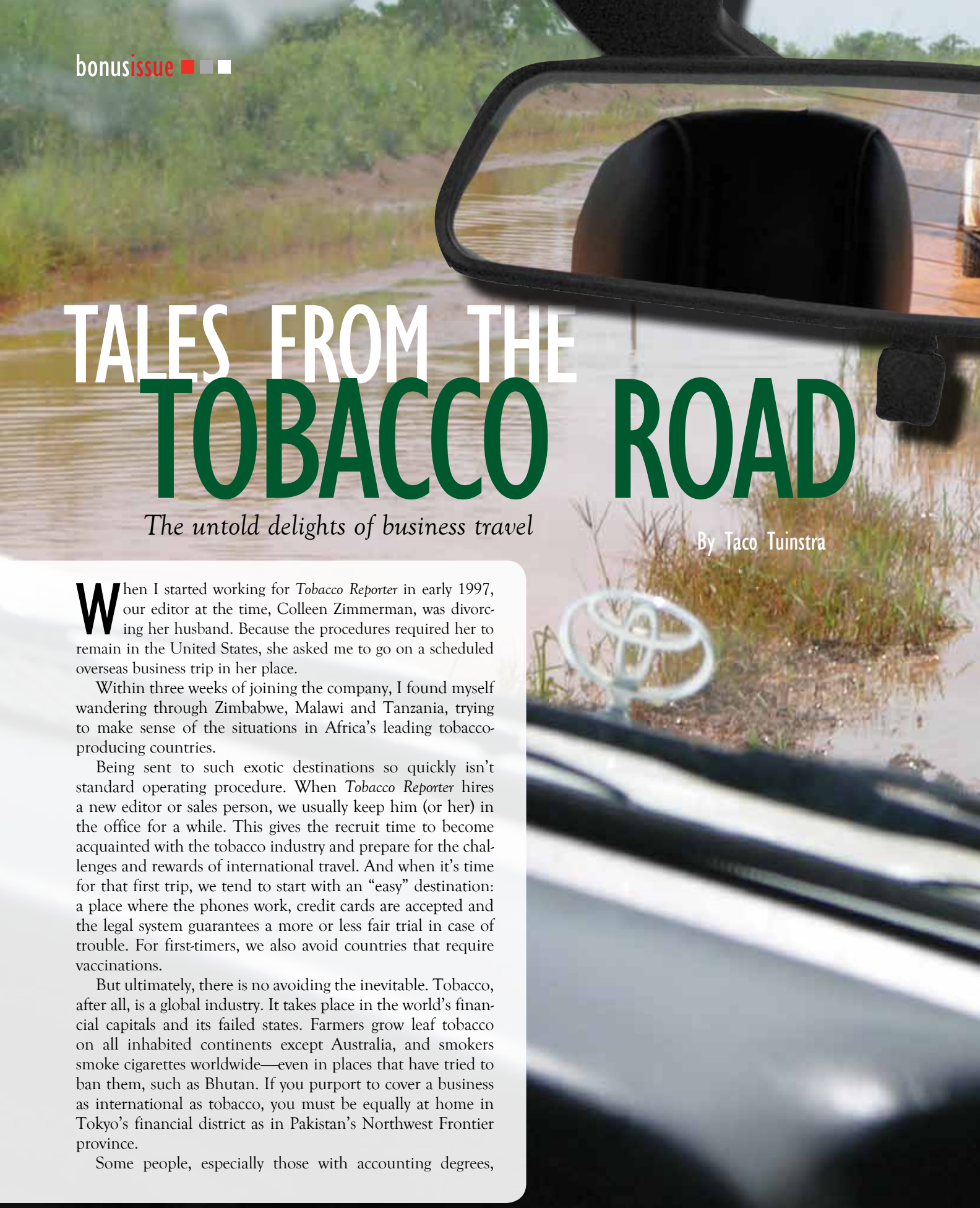


TALES FROM THE TOBACCO ROAD

The untold delights of business travel

By Taco Tuinstra

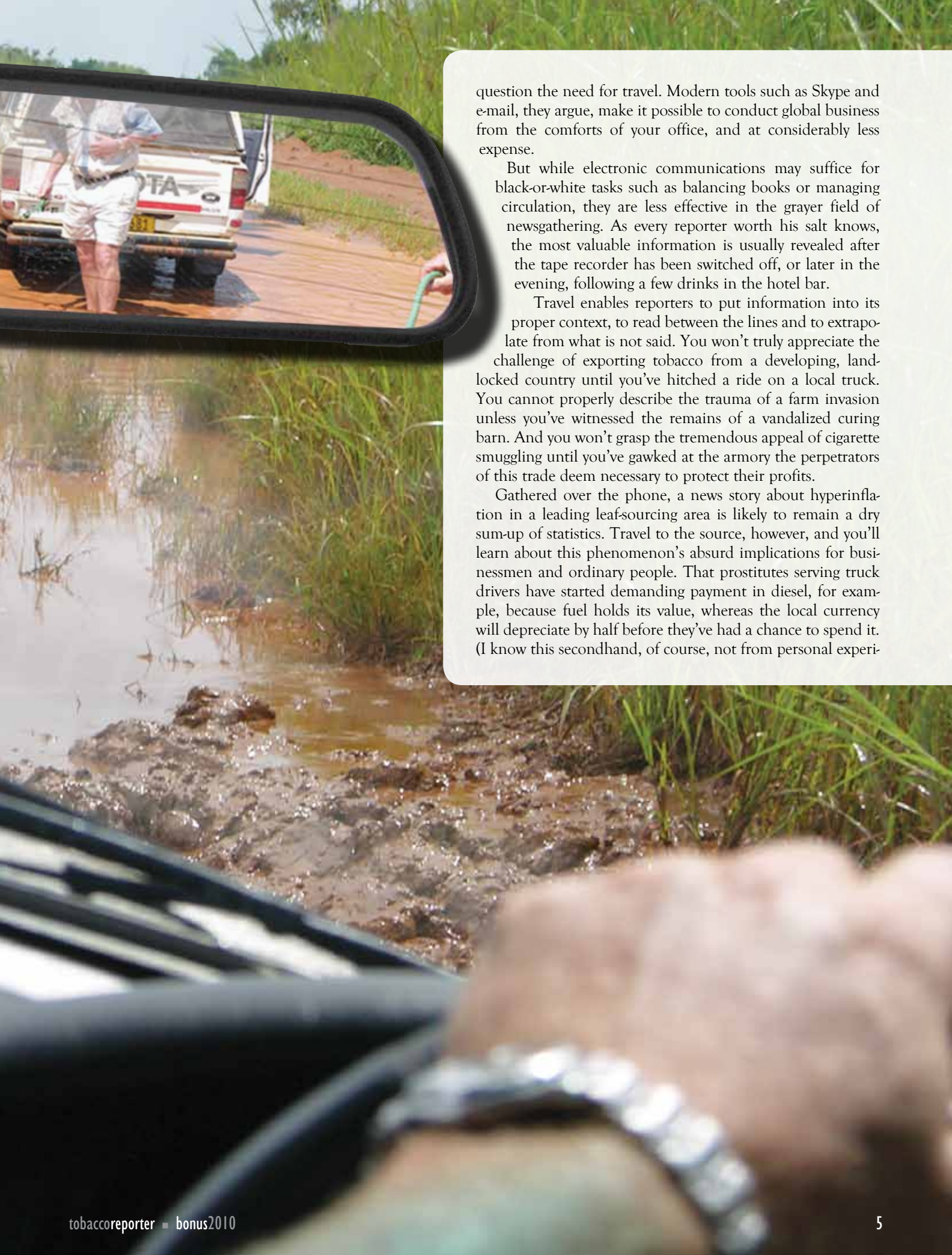
When I started working for *Tobacco Reporter* in early 1997, our editor at the time, Colleen Zimmerman, was divorcing her husband. Because the procedures required her to remain in the United States, she asked me to go on a scheduled overseas business trip in her place.

Within three weeks of joining the company, I found myself wandering through Zimbabwe, Malawi and Tanzania, trying to make sense of the situations in Africa's leading tobacco-producing countries.

Being sent to such exotic destinations so quickly isn't standard operating procedure. When *Tobacco Reporter* hires a new editor or sales person, we usually keep him (or her) in the office for a while. This gives the recruit time to become acquainted with the tobacco industry and prepare for the challenges and rewards of international travel. And when it's time for that first trip, we tend to start with an "easy" destination: a place where the phones work, credit cards are accepted and the legal system guarantees a more or less fair trial in case of trouble. For first-timers, we also avoid countries that require vaccinations.

But ultimately, there is no avoiding the inevitable. Tobacco, after all, is a global industry. It takes place in the world's financial capitals and its failed states. Farmers grow leaf tobacco on all inhabited continents except Australia, and smokers smoke cigarettes worldwide—even in places that have tried to ban them, such as Bhutan. If you purport to cover a business as international as tobacco, you must be equally at home in Tokyo's financial district as in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier province.

Some people, especially those with accounting degrees,



question the need for travel. Modern tools such as Skype and e-mail, they argue, make it possible to conduct global business from the comforts of your office, and at considerably less expense.

But while electronic communications may suffice for black-or-white tasks such as balancing books or managing circulation, they are less effective in the grayer field of newsgathering. As every reporter worth his salt knows, the most valuable information is usually revealed after the tape recorder has been switched off, or later in the evening, following a few drinks in the hotel bar.

Travel enables reporters to put information into its proper context, to read between the lines and to extrapolate from what is not said. You won't truly appreciate the challenge of exporting tobacco from a developing, landlocked country until you've hitched a ride on a local truck. You cannot properly describe the trauma of a farm invasion unless you've witnessed the remains of a vandalized curing barn. And you won't grasp the tremendous appeal of cigarette smuggling until you've gawked at the armory the perpetrators of this trade deem necessary to protect their profits.

Gathered over the phone, a news story about hyperinflation in a leading leaf-sourcing area is likely to remain a dry sum-up of statistics. Travel to the source, however, and you'll learn about this phenomenon's absurd implications for businessmen and ordinary people. That prostitutes serving truck drivers have started demanding payment in diesel, for example, because fuel holds its value, whereas the local currency will depreciate by half before they've had a chance to spend it. (I know this secondhand, of course, not from personal experi-

ence.) Or, in the case of tobacco, that it is cheaper for the farmer to let his leaf rot in the barn than to sell it at auction.

Since joining *Tobacco Reporter*, I've logged more than 1 million miles on American Airlines alone.* That sounds impressive, but it is modest compared with the frequent-flyer program account balances held by some tobacco executives. Due to time and budget constraints, I cross borders perhaps five or six times per year. Many in the industry seem to be clearing immigration formalities almost nonstop.

Still one family

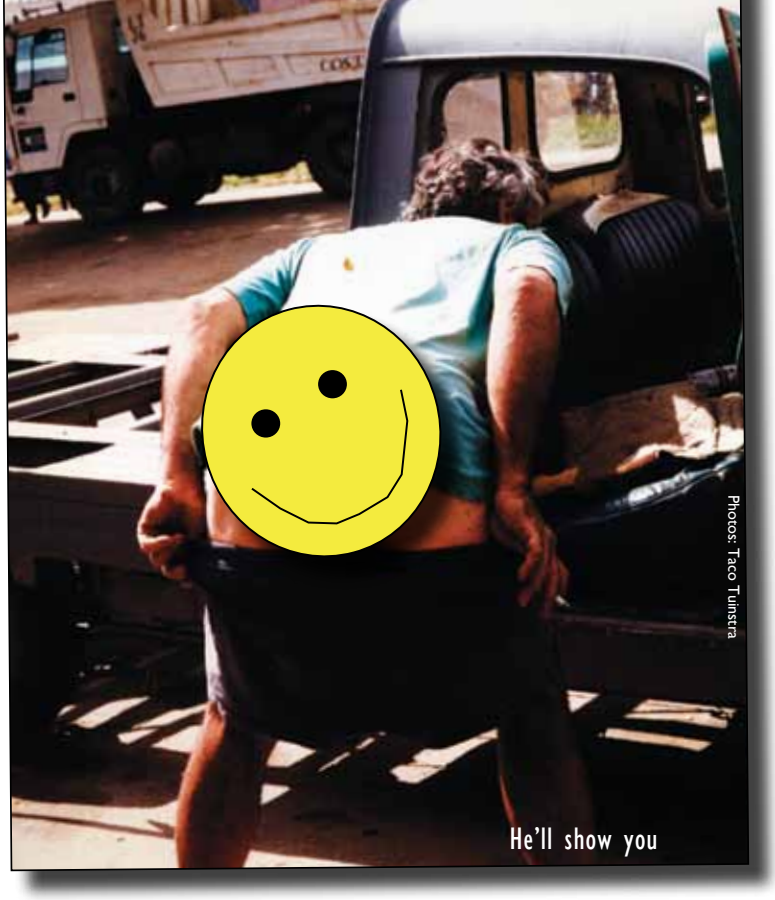
Despite its global reach, the tobacco industry is remarkably small; no matter where you go, you run into the same people. And while mergers and acquisitions have made the industry more "corporate," the tobacco community still feels and acts like an extended family, in which everybody knows everybody. A shared sense of beleaguerdness in an increasingly hostile world only contributes to that community spirit.

The upshot is that tobacco people take care of their own. You can travel to the ends of the earth, to a place you couldn't locate on a blind map, but if you arrive with a good reference, you need not worry about anything. In many cases, you will be picked up from the airport, housed, fed, entertained and, often, generously lubricated. In locations where hotels are substandard or nonexistent, or where the company guesthouse is under construction, you might even be invited to stay in your contact's home, as has happened to me on several occasions.

I couldn't have arrived in Africa with a better reference when I landed in Harare in 1997. During her nine years at *Tobacco Reporter*, Colleen had become a household name in the industry, converting the magazine from an also-ran into the undisputed market leader. Like the business she covered, Colleen's articles were personal but thorough, and readers around the world looked forward to her spirited defenses of tobacco in our columns. She was also one of the few women in a male-dominated industry.

Colleen's introduction opened doors immediately. A local company arranged a driver—a large, muscular man curiously named Precious—and instructed him to stay with me for the duration of my visit. Not only did he pick me up from the airport and drop me off at my host's leaf-processing factory, he also took me to the auction floors, the tobacco research center, various trade associations and to all major players on the market. Best of all, Precious got to keep the car on the weekend, which afforded us the opportunity to go sightseeing.

And sights I saw. Precious insisted on introducing me to his wife and three or four of his girlfriends—all of whom appeared to be aware of each other's existence but showed no signs of jealousy. Everywhere we visited,



Photos: Taco Tuinstra

he appeared to have children.

At one point, we settled into somebody's living room, which turned out to double as a bar—at least we were charged a few Zimbabwean dollars every time the hostess served drinks.

As I understand now, the late 1990s were the tail of the good times in Zimbabwe, before President Robert Mugabe started forcibly expropriating white-owned farmland, including many commercial tobacco plantations. In 1997, one U.S. dollar equaled a civil 10 Zimbabwean dollars; the infrastructure was in good repair and the commercial farming sector was thriving. In 2000, Zimbabwe harvested a record 237 million kg, earning the country some US$600 million from auction sales plus another $150 million from value-added processing.

But after that it was all downhill. During my most recent visit, in 2008, the Reserve Bank introduced a Z$5 billion banknote, the equivalent of about US$4 at the start of the week and less than half of that at the end. As I understand it, the government has since given up supporting its worthless currency and made U.S. dollars legal tender, which has restored a measure of confidence.

But tension was brewing even in 1997. One Sunday, I asked Precious to drive me to the Boka Tobacco Auction, a project by a controversial black-empowerment entrepreneur that was intended to become the world's largest tobacco sales floor despite lacking industry support. As I took in the massive construction site, an unkempt gentleman approached and asked if I was taking photographs of Zimbabwe. "I will show you Zimbabwe," he said. He then turned around, bent over and dropped his pants.

Uncertain whether to be startled or amused, I chuckled and took a picture of his pale behind. But the crowd that had gathered during our exchange was less charmed. Next thing I knew, the exhibitionist was in his pickup truck, tearing out of the parking lot, with seven or eight bystanders in hot pursuit, some of them wielding shovels and pickaxes. Precious and I decided it was a good time to make a move as well.

We wanted to see wildlife, but not before stopping for a few more drinks at another improvised beer hall. I had taken a liking to the local brew, Zambezi, and Precious ordered a beverage that looked like frothy milk but which he insisted was beer too. It was served in big buckets of the type that Americans and Europeans might use when washing their cars, and it turned out to be considerably more potent than Zambezi.

A sign near the park entrance conveyed the usual warnings: Don't feed the animals, keep your windows closed, stay on the beaten tracks and so on. Enforcement proved patchy, however. At the sight of the first giraffe, the people in the cars ahead of us—perhaps also emboldened by a few Zambezis—got out of their vehicles to take pictures, and we foolishly followed their example. Never mind that there were also decidedly less gentle creatures in the area, such as lions.

Of course, it could be that locals are less intimidated by wildlife than tourists are. While staying at the Malawi guest house of a leading tobacco merchant one year, I heard a story about a tobacco man who successfully fought off a crocodile. I heard it from two people on separate occasions, which makes me think it was more than just another happy hour tale.

This gentleman—I think his name was Tom—was fishing or swimming, so the story goes, when a croc grabbed his leg and pulled him two meters under the water. Tom, who is huge, managed to open the crocodile's jaw with his hands, and escaped. Apparently, he still has teeth marks in

his legs, but that part was hard to verify. Tom was wearing long pants when we met.

The outdoors makes one thirsty and we stopped for more drinks on the way back to Harare. When we got back to the car, however, Precious handed me the keys and went to sleep in the passenger's seat, leaving me—only slightly less disoriented—to figure out the way back to my hotel. Fortunately, traffic was light, and Zimbabwean roads in those days were well-maintained, so I only needed to remember to drive on the left-hand side.

The road to Morogoro, 1997

Today, the same journey would probably require a slalom to avoid the many potholes that have appeared, as Zimbabwe's budget for road maintenance has evaporated along with the rest of the economy. A friend commented that it has become easy to spot drunk drivers in Zimbabwe—they're the only ones who drive straight.

But the worst road I've encountered during my tenure at *Tobacco Reporter* was that between Dar es Salaam and Morogoro, Tanzania's biggest port and leading tobacco growing area respectively. I am told it has been paved now, but at the time of my visit, some potholes could have comfortably swallowed an American-size refrigerator or a small car, for that matter.

Fortunately, we didn't drive a small car—real tobacco men drive Toyota Landcruisers—but even our 4x4 struggled on this journey. The drive was made more harrowing by the fact that our fellow motorists—mostly buses and trucks—didn't adjust their speed to the road conditions, charging ahead as if they were on a well-maintained German autobahn.

The distance between Dar es Salaam and Morogoro is less than 200 km, but it must have taken us four or five hours. Along the way, I saw several fresh accidents caused by less patient drivers—not fender benders, but full-sized trucks lying upside down on the side of the road. There was also a bus stranded in the mud, which, according to its driver, had been stuck there for almost a week. Some passengers had hitched rides on passing vehicles, but others were still camped out there, resigned to drinking tea and waiting for who knows what.

Unintended comforts

Years later, I would recall my Tanzanian road trip while enjoying a rather more comfortable ride in China. I had been invited to report on the modernization efforts of a leading cigarette manufacturer in Yunnan Province. As it happened, my visit coincided with that of a high-level Iranian government delegation, which was supposed to attend the signing of a cooperation agreement between my Chinese host and Iran's state tobacco company, ITC. The Iranian ambassador was scheduled to make an appearance as well, but he canceled at the last minute. Perhaps due to the late notice, the cancellation wasn't communicated properly, and the Chinese tobacco company continued to prepare for an ambassadorial visit.

Instead they got me.

Whether the company representatives who greeted me at the airport truly confused me for the Iranian ambassador, or whether they decided they might as well shuttle *somebody* in their motorcade, I still don't know. Fact is that, over the next couple of days, traffic was stopped wherever we went. Police escorted our convoy of luxury vehicles from the front and the back. Cars that didn't move over quickly enough were forced off the road, and when one distracted motorist failed to give way altogether, the police officer in the lead vehicle became so aggravated that he hurled a plastic water bottle in his direction.

Few experiences will inflate your sense of entitlement like riding in a motorcade. Upon return to the United States, It took me a while to get accustomed to opening my own car door, yielding to other drivers and suffering the indignity of waiting at traffic lights. Unfortunately, I have been unable to replicate my Chinese experience during subsequent visits to the country, or anywhere else, for that matter.

It wasn't for lack of trying. One year, while attending a Cuban cigar dinner in Havana, I was standing outside the venue to make arrangements for my ride to the airport the next morning. My flight was scheduled to leave in the wee hours, and because President Fidel Castro would be speaking at the event, I was afraid I might not make it back to my hotel prior to departure. Castro has been known to orate for six hours straight, causing heated discussions among Cuba

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watchers and foreign intelligence agents about his seemingly superhuman bladder control—and anxiety among travelers with early flights.

As I weighed my options for the next day's logistics, a convoy of armored Mercedeses pulled up and security agents cleared the entrance. After Castro and his entourage had entered the building, I approached the lead driver. "Taxi?" I asked, pointing at the vehicle with the flag on its hood.

The driver laughed and slapped me on the shoulder. Thus rebuffed, I later that night made my way to the airport in a vehicle more befitting my status—a ramshackle Russian Lada.

The fact that important people such as the Iranian ambassador and Cuba's president accept invitations to tobacco-related functions hints at the considerable clout tobacco companies enjoy in many countries. Much of this is no doubt due to the industry's significant contributions to state coffers.

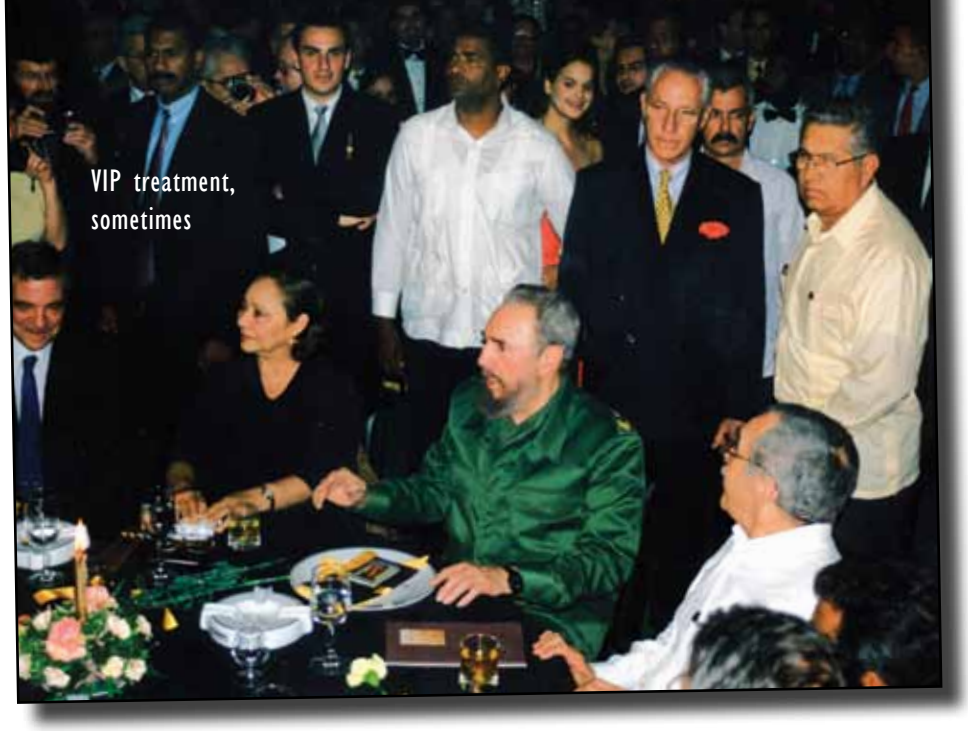
This level of well-connectedness was also apparent during a visit several years ago to a country that I will rename Genovia, for no other reason than this statelet is probably the polar opposite of the idyllic kingdom portrayed in my 9-year-old daughter's DVD *The Princess Diaries*.

Like many nations in its region, Genovia has considerable natural resources, including fossil fuels. But unlike its neighbors, the country's government wasn't content to sit back and collect the revenues. Realizing the bonanza wouldn't last forever, it decided to diversify the economy by blowing new life into its moribund tobacco sector. The rulers reckoned this might also help prevent rebellion in the country's poorer areas, which had not shared in the windfalls of the oil boom.

Because Genovia was not known as a tobacco supplier at the time, the people in charge of the project asked me to help put it on the map by publishing an article in *Tobacco Reporter*.

In the plane I sat next to a Swedish human rights activist who, upon learning it was my first visit to the country, decided I could benefit from the wisdom and experience of a seasoned expatriate. He warned me about Genovian officialdom. In particular, he primed me for a long waits and pointed questioning during immigration procedures. He also advised me to have hard currency ready.

Thus far, I had never experienced serious difficulties with immigration officials. One time, upon leaving the former Soviet republic of Moldova, I was taken aside because my passport was missing a crucial stamp. "Big problems," the officer said. He made me sit in a dimly lit room, and I started worrying about what the American military refers to as "enhanced interrogation techniques." But after a fruitless exchange, the officer let me board the plane anyway. He must have decided that having me sit there was inconvenient for him too. It was the last flight of the day, and I suspect



VIP treatment, sometimes

he wanted to go home just as much as I did.

My biggest run-in with immigration probably was in the United States, upon return from the Cuban cigar festival. Contrary to popular perception, the American government doesn't ban travel to Cuba. However, spending money there is regarded as "trading with the enemy," and since travel requires money, it amounts to a de facto ban.

The law makes an exception for journalists, but because journalism isn't a protected profession—anybody can print a few business cards—exactly who qualifies is open to interpretation. The immigration officers in Atlanta would not believe there was really a magazine called *Tobacco Reporter*. They let me sweat for a good hour while discussing my case. Finally, they allowed me to retrieve a copy of the magazine from my checked luggage. I've never been particularly thrilled about our habit of printing staff members' photographs in our magazine, but I was glad we do so that day.

Of course, I could have attempted to bribe my way out of the situation with a bundle of Cuban cigars, but somehow I think that would also have only worsened my plight. The susceptibility of civil servants to bribery seems to have an inverse relationship to their wages: the poorer the country, the greater the temptation to accept a "gift."

Many years ago, one loyal *Tobacco Reporter* reader managed to bypass a long queue of vehicles waiting at an eastern European border by offering the guard a pack of American cigarettes. But the time gained at immigration was lost again when he was pulled over for speeding later that day. The police officer confiscated his passport and insisted on payment in local currency. Our friend spent the rest of the day trying to find a place that would exchange money outside of business hours.

Mystery lover

Meanwhile, back in Genovia, I had resigned myself to a long night in a dingy airport terminal. When I reached the bottom of the plane's staircase, however, there was a well-dressed gentleman holding a sign with my name on it.

"Mr. Taco from *Tobacco Reporter*?"

As the other passengers were brusquely herded into the arrival hall, I was driven to a quiet lounge with comfortable leather chairs, served coffee and handed a copy of the *International Herald Tribune*. By the time I finished my first cup, the immigration formalities had been completed and I was off to my hotel.

As the Mercedes sped off into the night, I couldn't help but chuckle at the expression on the face of my Swedish fellow passenger.

Air travel is always good for a few anecdotes

Genovia's tobacco growing area is located about a day's drive from the capital. Because we got a late start the next day, we spent the night about halfway through the journey. There were no hotels in this part of the country, but my hosts also operated a construction business, building sports stadiums, among other structures. We stayed in four adjoining bungalows in an athletes' village at one of their projects.

My company consisted of the tobacco firm's project manager, a very fit driver whom I suspect doubled as an agent for the state security services and a stunningly beautiful translator "borrowed" from another corporation. Due to the season, the athletes' village was deserted. After the cooks had left for the night, we were the only ones in the entire compound. So we sat around the table, exchanging stories and raising one toast after another, as is the custom in this part of the world.

Still tired from the flight, and because my tolerance for alcohol turned out to be considerably lower than that of my hosts, I retired early—only to be awakened at around 4 a.m. to the sounds of passionate lovemaking from the bungalow next door.

In the morning, there was an awkward silence during breakfast as I tried to determine whether it was the project manager or the driver who got so lucky last night. Presumably, at least one of my fellow travelers was trying to solve the same puzzle (see chart).

To this day, I am rooting for the project manager. Because if it were the driver, there would have been only one other person who could have "done" the translator—me—and that would have reflected poorly on my employer, the honorable magazine *Tobacco Reporter*.

Flying

International air travel is always good for a few anecdotes, especially in the world's more lightly regulated parts of airspace. Aviation experts have long debated whether it's more efficient to board an aircraft by row number or at random (row by row would seem more intuitive, but I've seen studies supporting the random approach as well). Some authorities ascribe to a total laissez-faire approach. In that case, the boarding process consists of a free-for-all storm of the aircraft and the seat numbers printed on the boarding passes should be taken as mere suggestions. It is a surprisingly swift procedure, albeit one that consistently leaves the weak and infirm with the least desirable seats.

Flying in the former Soviet Union has always been an adventure, although I must admit it's been some time since

Who "did" the translator?

Person trying to solve the puzzle	Suspect	Possible reaction
 Project manager	 Driver	"It's inappropriate to have such relationships with co-workers."
 Project manager	 Taco	"Our foreign visitor is a bold one."
 Driver	 Project manager	"Isn't the boss married? Perhaps a good time to ask for a raise."
 Driver	 Taco	"Good for him!"
 Taco	 Driver	"What if the project manager mistakenly thinks it's me?"
 Taco	 Project manager	"My host is a bold one."
 Translator	N/A	"I know a secret."

I've traveled in that part of the world, and I am told that the situation has improved considerably.

Many years ago, while on a domestic flight in Siberia, I became increasingly unnerved as passengers kept boarding even after the last seat on the plane had been taken. And low and behold, when everybody was on board, the pilot took off with 20 or so people standing in the aisles, holding on to the luggage racks as if riding a bus. Judging by the aircraft's laborious climb, I suspect the cargo hold too carried more weight than it was designed for.

This was in the chaotic period following the breakup of the Soviet Union, and I was later told that many pilots in those days were supplementing their incomes by selling tickets in addition to the ones already sold by the airline. This, together with a lack of funds for maintenance and spare parts, contributed to several plane crashes in the former Soviet Union during the 1990s.

Virtually everything in the cabin was broken. Like their counterparts in the West, the flight attendants urged passengers to put their seats in the upright position for takeoff. In my case, this proved impossible, as the mechanism seemed to have failed a long time ago. I spent most of the journey staring at the ceiling from an uncomfortable angle, with my chair resting on the knees of the poor passenger behind me.

The bathroom lock malfunctioned too. After fighting my way through the crowd camped out in the aisles, I opened the door—only to find somebody sitting on the toilet, doing his business while smoking a cigarette. In my columns, I have frequently argued for the accommodation of smokers, but I wasn't particularly thrilled by the way in which this gentleman chose to exercise his rights that day.

But at least we were protected from the elements. A business contact related how, on one of his flights in Asia, cabin personnel handed each of the passengers a heavy military coat prior to takeoff. Twenty minutes later, he understood why: there was no heat. The aircraft's front door didn't seal properly, and our friend could hear and feel the wind howling through the cracks.

While airlines in developing countries tend to fly older aircraft, this need not be a problem. Properly maintained, the lifespan of planes can be extended significantly. Passengers can only hope that airlines with limited budgets properly prioritize their spending, investing in parts that are essential for the safe operation of the aircraft first.

One time, while flying in Zambia, I was surprised to hear an American-accented voice on the PA system issue the familiar warning, "Federal law prohibits tampering with smoke detectors." Clearly the Zambian airline had purchased a used aircraft from the United States without bothering to replace the taped safety message with a version accounting for the fact that "federal law" does not apply in Zambia. I convinced myself that the money saved by using the old tape would be spent on fixing more mission-critical components, such as the broken altimeter in the cockpit.

Of course flying has become more of a hassle following the Sept. 11 attacks on New York City in 2001. Airports around the world have invested millions of dollars in sophisticated luggage screening technology. We are now required to not just empty our pockets but also remove shoes, laptops and liquids. Despite all this technology, restricted items are bound to occasionally slip through. Perhaps the best way to improve security is by giving screening personnel a stake in the outcome. In this respect, I have never felt better protected against air piracy as I did while boarding a flight in Malawi one time: The person checking my bags also flew the plane.

For tobacco people, safety concerns are not limited to air travel. Many leaf-producing areas are located in lawless places, suffering from political conflict, armed rebellion and plain old banditry. What's more, tobacco executives are generally viewed as wealthy, which makes them attractive kidnapping targets. I know of at least three people who have been held for ransom at one time or another. A leaf merchant operating in Congo told me the tobacco-growing area was so dangerous that his company would hire private military contractors for protection. Whenever it was time to pay its farmers, it would have a helicopter gunship standing by for emergency evacuation.

While working on a tobacco-related engineering project in eastern Turkey, one of our contacts received an unsettling survival tip for in the event somebody were to break into his hotel room: "Pretend to be asleep and let them take everything." I suppose it would have been foolhardy to give chase anyway. Due to a separatist insurgency, a curfew went into effect every night at 5. ▶


Stupid white man

Theft is a more common concern. The engineer who was told to ignore burglars said that, on several occasions, he had to buy back his tools and equipment at the local market. Naturally, the severity of theft increases with the level of poverty. Sometimes it reaches absurd levels. During my most recent visit to Zimbabwe, I noticed the keypad providing entry to our guest house was covered by iron mesh. "To prevent thieves from stealing the buttons," explained my host.

Accommodation

Food and hotels are another fertile source of tobacco travel stories. I have stayed at the world's most luxurious palaces and its biggest dumps, and both categories present their own sets of challenges.

Fortunately, I have fairly basic expectations of my accommodations—they must be safe and clean. In my view, luxury primarily has an entertainment value. Once you've reached a certain level of comfort, everything on top of that is just more of the same. The famous Burj Al Arab in Dubai—supposedly the world's only seven-star hotel—is a case in point. To be sure, the pyrotechnics in the lobby are spectacular, and few people can claim to have arrived at their hotel by submarine. But what is the point of having seven beds and four Jacuzzis in your suite? You can sleep or bathe in only one at a time.

Luxury also seems to mean an abundance of personnel, each of whom has been trained to greet you in the hallway and ask if you are enjoying your stay. But after a busy day of smiling and networking at a tobacco trade fair, the last thing you want is yet another conversation with the bellboy about whether it is your first stay in Bangkok and when you will be visiting again.

Some luxury hotels employ so many people that they don't seem to know what to do with them. Order a soft drink in Shanghai's Sheraton Grand Tai Ping and four waiters will come to your table—one carrying the glass, one holding the bottle, one putting down a coaster and one informing you that the fizzy brown liquid in the bottle with the red-and-white label is called Coca-Cola.

And be careful with the buttons next to your bed at the Oberoi hotel in Agra, India (the one with a view of the Taj Mahal). Press the wrong button, and instead of turning on the light, it will summon a turbaned butler, asking for your wish as if you'd just rubbed an oil lamp.

The good thing about such places is that they are clean. Filth bothers me more than anything, so I am grateful not to have stayed at the hotel described by a longtime acquaintance of *Tobacco Reporter*. The bathroom in this place was so dirty that our friend felt compelled to shower with his shoes on.

Other places may have better standards of hygiene but suffer from slow service. When our friend checked in at a certain hotel some time ago, the front desk clerk enthusiastically handed him a bag of clean laundry. Our man was puzzled until he realized it contained the clothes he had delivered to the in-house laundry service during his previous stay at the hotel—one year ago.

Of course, hotels can be fun too—especially if you are staying with a group of like-minded people. A good friend of *Tobacco Reporter* fondly remembers closing down the hotel bar with a group of colleagues and the members of a British Airways flight crew. It was the type of party where people were jumping into the pool naked toward the end of the evening.

Upon boarding a flight to London several days later, our friend was surprised to be welcomed by members of the same crew. The pilots invited him into the cockpit and together they laughed at the memories of their wild bash. When he suggested he return to his seat for a cigarette—BA still had smoking sections in those days—the pilots urged him to stay and smoke in the cockpit instead. "I flew home in the cockpit of a 747, relaxing and smoking cigarettes," exclaims our friend, as if he still cannot believe it really happened.

It would have been a surreal experience indeed, and one that is unlikely to recur in today's era of heightened security.

But if there were ever a right and proper way to travel on tobacco business, our friend in the cockpit certainly found it. TR

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