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Travel Overseas with an F

Sometimes our winding journey through life takes us in unexpected directions. A few years back I would never have thought that one day I'd be writing about travelling overseas as a girl. Back then the idea of hopping onto an international flight without having to dress up as a boy was, for me, unthinkable.

I have always been a regular overseas traveller for family duty, work and leisure. As I became more comfortable expressing my femininity in everyday life here in Australia, I became less excited by having to dress "in disguise" to go on holiday. And so I started to push the boundaries and see what happened. Androgenous in Eastern Turkey (surprisingly no issues), so definitely more feminine in Greece (a breeze), and totally female dress in India (some strange looks but lots more smiles).

Whilst I found that generally what I wore didn't greatly affect the way I was treated overseas, there were a few situations where my pulse would rise and I entered a state of heightened alert. One was passing through immigration (the puzzled looks from grumpy officials), another was passing through airport security (body scanners and pat downs), and finally was the perennial dilemma - using public toilets. I should stress that at no time has any of these situations actually resulted in anything worse than some embarrassment but...

..as my gender journey took another bend, I found that I could apply for an Australian passport which stated I was female. The ability to change a primary identification document in this way without having surgery is a big plus for Australia. After a lot of thought I decided that whilst having a "female" passport wouldn't radically change anything overseas, it would provide a legal basis for my appearance if anyone turned feral on me.

And so I have just returned home from a long holiday to Italy, passing through immigration/security 19 times - all the time presenting my brand new passport with an F on it. I'd also taken the precaution of booking my airline tickets with the matching title - Ms.

Did it make any difference other than to my peace of mind?

I certainly felt more comfortable when handing over my passport each night to the hotel we were staying in. And in general there were far fewer puzzled looks from officials...except for one, entering Thailand for the first time.

I fronted up to the immigration in Bangkok with my brand new passport (when you change your gender on a passport they issue you with a new one for free). The stern faced lady on the desk scanned the passport, flicked through the pages, and started asking questions. "Had I been to Thailand before?"..Yes..."When did I last visit?"....2 years ago...and so on. Then her tactics switched and she just flicked through my empty passport, looked at her computer screen, and then stared at me for what seemed like a very long time. I just stared back - two can play at that game! Finally, almost begrudgingly, she stamped the passport and let me through. Then, looking back, I realised what had puzzled her. On her screen were about the last 6 or so pictures taken of me as I passed through Bangkok over the years. And in all those pictures I look particularly boyish. The complete change in look and the clean passport rang alarm bells. But at least I wasn't led away for "secondary processing".

Finally a note of warning. I do choose carefully which countries I visit so as to avoid trouble. Turkey is the most marginal country I passed through this trip, and you wouldn't catch me flying into any more hard line Arab country with my new passport. I put the USA in the same "best to avoid" category for transgender travel. The humourless officials of the TSA would not I feel be amused by my change in appearance, change in documentation, nor some of the countries I have enjoyed visiting. That still leaves plenty of places for the new Adrian to explore as an F - South America is on the list for next year.

Posted by Adrian in Being transgender at 18:40