Held Up in Athens  
By Bill Williamson

In parts of 1999 and 2000, I lived in Jerusalem and listened to American State Department warnings not to travel during certain periods where violence was anticipated toward Americans. I was comfortable, and surrounded by peaceful circumstances during my nine-month stay.

In May of 2000, my new bride, of South African citizenship, and I moved to Boulder City, Nevada at the urging of our Lord Jesus. At heart we are Missionaries and travel the world at the beckon call of our Lord.

During our time in Boulder City, we served at Boulder City Assembly of God Church, led by Pastor Duane Jordan. We had no idea where we might be called to go to next. In fact, when we felt called to Cyprus in April of 2001, we were delightfully surprised.

Since September 2000, Israel and the Middle East has been one particular spot on the globe considered unsafe for travel by most, especially for Americans because of our support for Israel. We neither fear traveling, nor living in the Middle East. We know of personal friends who have traveled to Israel and had their accommodations upgraded to suites because they chose to come at a time when Israel’s tourism business is off more than 50 percent.

We arrived in Cyprus on November 7, 2001 to live until directed otherwise. September 11 changed many people’s ideas on travel, particularly to the Middle East. And many of our friends around the world asked after September 11, “are you still planning to go to Cyprus.” Since the attack on the World Trade Building in New York City, 9/11 has become a term known worldwide, and it triggers pictures in our minds of Boeing passenger planes slamming into skyscrapers.

That attack so affected America, and its flying habits, that for three days, Maureen and I would walk to a nice grassy lawn at our public library and lay down on our backs in the cool of the evening, and see no aircraft in the air. Boulder City is a few seconds flight time from Las Vegas. Normally, planes are stacked up in every direction in approach patterns to the airport. We would watch them each time we come to the library and lay on our backs.

For three days, there was not one plane in the air. Not one! The US airspace had been shut down, unlike any other day in our history since the advent of aircraft.

Now here we were, checking in at Las Vegas’s, McCarren International Airport, for our 6:00 A.M. flight to Atlanta. We would connect there in only one hour after landing, and be on to JFK International in New York, to make our connection with Greece’s Olympic Airways. There too, we had only one hour of separation between flights. Very tight, but praying we could make it.

At McCarren we had two of our four seventy-pound bags disarranged terribly by security, looking for whatever they look for. Our carry-on luggage zipped right through without being opened
except to take my laptop out for x-ray.

Atlanta was fine, but New York was a different story. We ran between terminals in fear of missing our connection. At security Maureen’s carry-on showed a pair of scissors during x-ray. We hadn’t packed any, so proclaimed our innocence and reminded them of rapidly approaching departure time. The bag was searched, x-rayed, searched and x-rayed again. Finally in a small zipper pocket of a handbag the scissors were found. The bag had been in the check-in luggage and at the last minute moved to the carry-on. We had forgotten the scissors were in the bag. We donated the scissors to security at JFK and dashed off to our gate.

We just did make our connection, but our check-in luggage did not. It was to catch up with us four days later in Larnaca, Cyprus.

We rested comfortably with great service on the Olympic Airways Airbus that was nearly empty, another evidence of the impact of 9/11. We faced a seven-hour lay over in Athens, giving us ample time to get our luggage and make our connecting flight to Larnaca. We knew the worst was over. At least we thought the toughest was behind us.

Athens proved to be a problem for Maureen with her South African Passport. We had booked one-way flights to Cyprus knowing we were going to stay as long as we would be permitted. We knew too, that many countries expect tourists to arrive with return fare to their home country.

We did not have connecting flights to Larnaca, and we tried to move through immigration to get to our checked luggage at Baggage Claim. The officer in charge would not hear of it. I, as an American, was cleared to come through, but Maureen was not. With all our explanations, he would have none of it. So, back to the Transit Passengers’ desk we went. The officer there proclaimed that we would not be allowed to leave the airport in Cyprus without a round-trip ticket back to New York. We ask her to let us go to Cyprus and we would take our chances there. We would even buy a return ticket there if necessary. The officer agreed.

It was at this point I went to Baggage Claim only to discover our luggage had been left behind in New York. I was relieved at this point, because Olympic Airways would have it brought to our door, wherever we wished in Cyprus, a blessing.

We did finally arrive in Cyprus very much behind schedule because of the step up in security measures in Athens. September 11 had impacted more than just the US we were learning. We waited in line at Immigration in Larnaca wondering what questions awaited us. Would they require a round-trip ticket that ensured a way back to the states? Would we have enough financial resources to purchase one, if required? Would we be sent back to New York?

Eventually, Maureen and I stood alone before a Cypriot Immigration Officer. He had a nice face and was friendly. He stamped my American Passport with a three-month Visa, and picked up Maureen’s South African Passport. He looked at her and said, “you’ll have to fill out the form for a thirty-day Visa.” I spoke, “she’ll need to be here three months like me.” He reached for the form pad and started to hand it to us, then retracted it and began filling it out and stating South Africans could only have thirty days. He informed us that a five Cypriot Pound fee, ($8.00 U.S.), would be required.

I had only American money at this point and had to pass on through his gate to find a money changer. It took some time but I was able to do so. Upon returning I found the officer and Maureen laughing and discussing something unrelated to the Visa. Maureen looked at me, smiled and said, “he’s given me three months.” Another blessing.

We passed through his gate to the waiting taxis. We noted that nothing had been said about our one-way airline tickets. No one had asked to see them. (A note to our integrity.) I had called
the Cyprus Embassy in Washington, D.C. before leaving the U.S. and asked specifically if a round-trip ticket was required. The answer was, “no, one-way is fine.”

Our time in route, and our entire time in Cyprus was wonderful. The people treated us very nicely. Cyprus sees very few Americans and South Africans, but they embrace us so nicely. We’ve been fed in their homes, given things for our home, and no one is offended that we are who we are. In fact, there is much sympathy for America and her suffering on 9/11.

We welcome the opportunity to show them what Americans, and South Africans, can be, patient, loving, caring, considerate, and thankful. The ‘Ugly American’ has brought shame to us in many lands, we hope to show the Middle East that we’re not all so ‘ugly.’ We plan to move about the Middle East, not in fear, but as models for our respective countries. Our dear friends, there is nothing to fear, but fear itself. Our American skies, and the skies of the world are safe. The Middle East, and the rest of the world, is safe to travel in.

‘Wouldn’t you love to try it?’