The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Fishy experience at a bar in Istanbul ends up in a $7,853 charge

By Christopher Elliott
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Q. While I was on vacation in Istanbul last year, I fell victim to a scam by some local thugs. They ran a "club" where they persuaded single male tourists to come in. Then, they coerced them into paying thousands of dollars for bogus drinks ("champagne" that was cider and water, for example). They made it impossible to leave without the threat of violence.

Once I was inside, it was clear that the locals I had come with were working with the "club" to lure tourists in and bilk them of their money. I played dumb, realizing I had no choice but to stay. There was one exit down a flight of stairs and a bouncer who made sure no one was leaving until they got their money. Some charges they made me sign for; others they continued to charge to my card now that they had it.

They charged me on two credit cards: one Wells Fargo card and one Chase card. I eventually was able to leave and contacted both credit card companies the next day. I also filed a police report, which I provided to Wells and Chase. The police were aware of this fraudulent establishment and showed me mug shots of the owner, who I recognized. Immediately after I filed my police report, another tourist came in complaining of the same club with the same problem — only he had tried to leave. They threw him down the stairs.

Chase reversed the charges immediately, but Wells Fargo allowed every charge to go through that night. I contacted Wells Fargo's fraud department, told them what happened and sent them the police report. Weeks later, they informed me that this could not be handled as fraud. They then said they had transferred the problem to Disputes. Disputes told me it was being handled by the Fraud department. Fraud sent it back to Disputes.

> Wells Fargo should have quickly refunded your money. Wait, scratch that — it should have never charged your credit card.

Meanwhile, they reinstated the charges without any notice. Wells Fargo has dragged its feet on this issue for almost three months. I've called them several times to see if there was any update. In the most recent call, it became clear that they hadn't read the police report I gave them. They asked me ridiculously basic questions, which indicated they had done nothing whatsoever about the case and had done no research of any kind.

The $7,853 charge has left me extremely stressed out about my finances. I am between jobs and need the money. Can you help?

NICHOLAS BUTLER, *San Francisco*

A. Wells Fargo should have quickly refunded your money. Wait, scratch that — it should have never charged your credit card.

Why? Well, $8,000 at a bar in Istanbul should have triggered its fraud detection algorithms. Wells Fargo's algorithms are highly sensitive in my experience, and it should have flagged a charge of this size quickly. I'm surprised it didn't.

What happened? Wells Fargo has two separate departments — one for fraud and the other for chargebacks. Neither department wanted to handle your charge, so they were going back and forth. Meanwhile, you refused to pay your credit card bill, so the dispute started to affect your credit report.

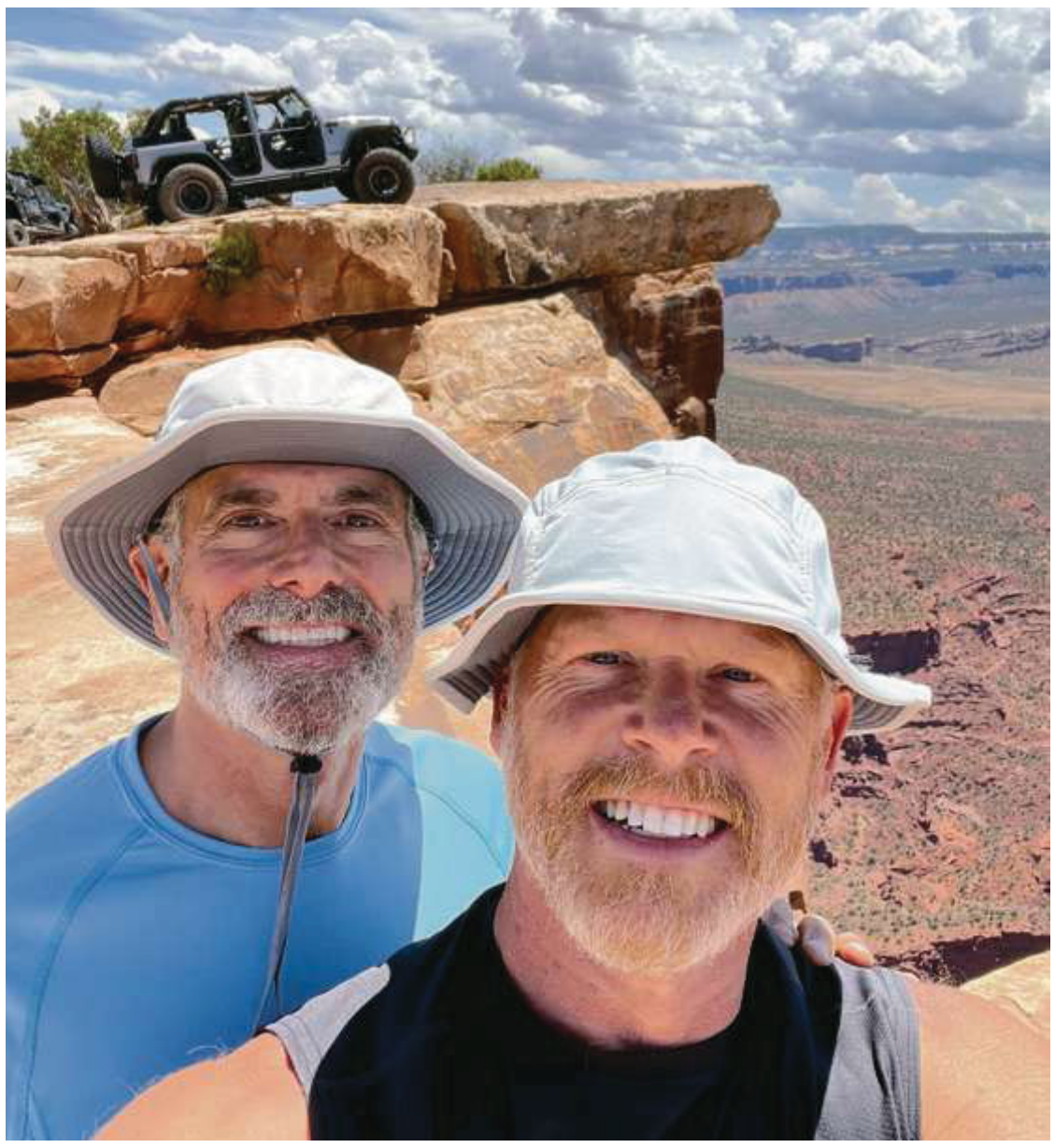
There's a way to break this impasse. You can contact a manager at Wells Fargo. I publish the names, numbers, and e-mail addresses of the Wells Fargo executives on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org. A brief, polite e-mail to one of them might have gotten this fixed.

Wells Fargo's credit cards have a "Zero Liability" protection and say you won't be held responsible for any promptly reported unauthorized card transactions. Clearly, the charges to your card were made without your authorization.

I contacted Wells Fargo on your behalf. It reversed your charges and also helped you clear up the problem with your credit score.

Christopher Elliott is the founder of Elliott Advocacy (elliottadvocacy.org), a nonprofit organization that helps consumers solve their problems. E-mail him at chris@elliott.org or get help by contacting him at elliottadvocacy.org/help.

THE VIP LOUNGE



Steven Skybell (left) and his husband, Michael Cole (right), in Moab, Utah.

Actor Steven Skybell

on Carol Burnett, rediscovering Boston's food scene, and kicking back on vacay

Even though he didn't get a chance to see "The Lehman Trilogy" when it was on Broadway, actor Steven Skybell said he had heard such good things about the three-act play that when he was offered a role in the Tony Award-winning show — coming to the Huntington Theatre June 13-July 16 — he knew he wanted to be a part of it. In the wake of the hugely successful off-Broadway production of "Fiddler on the Roof" performed in Yiddish (and directed by Joel Grey), Skybell, who played Tevya in the musical, said his interest was sparked in "continuing to explore stories of Jewishness in all their different ways … and 'The Lehman Trilogy' seemed to check that box." Written by Italian novelist and playwright Stefano Massini, the story follows the original three Lehman brothers (who migrated to the United States from Bavaria), their sons, and grandsons, as they journey from rags to riches to ruin. "It's such an amazing challenge for an actor because it's sprawling in its history," Skybell, 60, said. "It covers 164 years and the three of us are playing all the characters." The Lubbock, Texas, native said that he is excited to be in Boston rehearsing for "The Lehman Trilogy" since, as a new graduate from Yale drama school, he spent three years (1989–1991) as a company member at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge. "I've been to Cambridge to see friends … and I've been jogging along the Charles River every morning. I love that," he said. "I'm also looking forward to visiting some great museums, and while I don't know the restaurant scene here anymore, I'm eager to investigate and find some great restaurants while I'm here." We caught up with Skybell, who lives in Mahopac, N.Y., with his husband, Michael Cole (a personal assistant/office manager for musical theater lyricist and composer Stephen Schwartz) and their two Australian shepherds, Mackenzie, 11, and Caleb, 9, to talk about all things travel.

If you could travel anywhere right now, and money was no object, where would you go?

I would go to Italy. I've never been, and I long to go. I'd go for the antiquity, the landscapes, and the food.

Where was the first place you traveled to after COVID restrictions were lifted?

First place was a vacation in Moab, Utah: Biking, hiking, paddle boarding, and seeing some national parks.

Do you prefer booking trips through a travel agent or on your own?

I'm a bit of a control freak, [so] I prefer booking my own trips.

Thoughts on an "unplugged" vacation?

I like the sound of it, very much.

Do you use all of your vacation time or leave some on the table?

I do not book every minute of my vacation; I like to have room to make spontaneous changes once I'm on the ground. Also, I need built-in time to "recharge" while on a trip.

What has been your worst vacation experience?

Most recently, the worst aspect of vacationing is sometimes the travel snafus that occur. Last year I was bumped from my original flight and couldn't get home for two days.

Do you vacation to relax, to learn, or for the adventure of it all?

I like a vacation that isn't *too* taxing; however, I do like adventure and learning on a trip, but certainly I like to relax.

What book do you plan on bringing with you to read on your next vacation?

I'm participating in the Daf Yomi cycle of the Talmud, where all over the world the same page of Talmud is being read every day. It's a seven-year cycle, so I will definitely be taking my volume of Talmud with me.

If you could travel with one famous person/celebrity, who would it be?

Carol Burnett, because I'm sure she'd keep the trip amusing!

What is the best gift to give a traveler?

Not sure.

What is your go-to snack for a flight or a road trip?

I've been intermittent fasting for several days a week for the last five years [and] I tend to let a travel day be a fast day. It just makes it easier than having to eat on the go, and then I can reward myself with an arrival meal when I reach my destination.

What is the coolest souvenir you've picked up on a vacation?

I love my Civil War-era quilt that I got when on a trip to Virginia.

What is your favorite app/website for travel?

Don't have one.

What has travel taught you?

I'm basically a homebody, so when I travel, I love to see how others make homes in other places. I love seeing that no matter where people are, we all are basically seeking the same things.

What is your best travel tip?

Pack light.

JULIET PENNINGTON

HERE

CELEBRATING WHOOPIE PIES IN MAINE

Sweet treat aficionados won't want to miss the Maine Whoopie Pie Festival taking place in Dover-Foxcroft on June 24. The one-day event (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.) offers attendees the opportunity to sample "Maine's Official State Treat" in dozens of flavor combinations prepared by more than 20 bakers and vendors, and then to vote for the one they like best. For those who don't know, this delicacy is not a pie at all, but two soft cookies filled with cream. Purists might prefer the classic chocolate cookie with vanilla buttercream; more adventurous fans might try additional combinations: banana/peanut butter, chocolate/almond, cinnamon/maple-bacon or pumpkin/cream cheese, anyone? This largest annual event in Piscataquis County offers more to do than simply ingesting sweet calories. Arrive before the festival opens to participate in or watch the 8:30 a.m. "Earn Your Whoopie Pie 3K Race/Walk" at the regional YMCA; peruse the book sale at the Thompson Free Library, or check out the Dover Cove Farmers Market. Additional activities during the fair include booths with arts and crafts, live music, rides and games for kids of all ages (including pony rides), whoopie pie eating contests, and more. Make a weekend of it by checking out lodging, dining, shopping and regional outdoor activities — fishing. hiking, boating — via links on the festival website. Festival $6; ages 12 and under free. www.mainewhoopiepiefestival.com

THERE

PLANNING AHEAD FOR AN ECLIPSE TRIP

Are you ready for the next total solar eclipse? It's not too early to plan ahead for this event happening on Monday, April 8, 2024. Beginning in the South Pacific Ocean, the eclipse will pass over parts of Mexico, the United States, and Canada, a dramatic phenomenon that darkens the sky as if it were dawn or dusk. According to NASA, the next total solar eclipse won't be seen from the contiguous United States until 2044. Located within the 100-percent totality zone, the Chautauqua Harbor Hotel, a 9-acre lakeside resort in Celoron, N.Y., is offering a Solar Eclipse Package (April 7-9). The two-night minimum package includes deluxe accommodations for two guests; keepsake blankets; eclipse-viewing eyeglasses; and an eclipse-viewing party (noon-5 p.m.) with DJ, hors-d'oeuvres, and a cash bar. While at the resort, guests can also enjoy an outdoor pool, expansive patio with firepits, dining at the Lakehouse Tap & Grille; putting green; and outdoor Carousel Bar serving microbrews and brick oven pizzas. Chautauqua County also offers opportunities for fishing, hiking, biking, golfing, water sports, and wine tasting. Eclipse package rates from $699. 716-489-2800, www.thechautauquaharborhotel.com

EVERYWHERE

A HIGH-PERFORMANCE JACKET FOR ON THE GO

Hiking season is upon us. And though we'd all prefer sunny days and perfect conditions, it's best to be prepared for the inevitable rain, drizzle, and wind. (This is New England, after all.) With harsh weather conditions in mind, performance apparel brand ARTILECT debuts its Darkstart Fusion Jacket that may just become your favorite new rain gear. Designed to keep you dry and comfortable all day long, the high-performance jacket is made with four-way stretch nylon and Lavalan Sport European wool insulation, with chemical-free treatment for a waterproof, yet breathable jacket. Features include two YKK zippered hand pockets with 100-percent recycled lining; one zippered chest pocket; and an adjustable hem and hood. Techies will appreciate the center-front YKK Touchlink Zipper with LifeKey that offers NFC-enabled smartphone connectivity, providing access to digital functionality, sharing experiences, and Lifekey safety features. Simply connect your phone's NFC reader to the zipper puller to allow digital information transfer between two devices when in extremely close contact. Available for women and men in a range of sizes and three colors. $300. www.artilect.studio/us

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